

THE MELBA

MAGAZINE OF MELBA OPERA TRUST

Edition 18 Autumn 2018

ON THE MELBA TRAIL
RYMAN HEALTHCARE – FORGING A LEGACY
PROOF IS IN THE MAGIC PUDDING

Melba

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NOTE FROM THE GENERAL MANAGER



Amy Black

I'm pleased to be presenting the 18th edition of *The Melba*. As we rapidly approach the middle of the year, our scholars have been working intensively on their personal and artistic development and are already reaping the rewards with professional engagements and competition successes.

As I consider the readers of our Melba magazine, I am reminded how fortunate we are to have such a committed community underpinning our activities. We have our donors from Melbourne, Sydney and around Australia, some who have recently joined our Melba journey, others who have been with us since our launch in 2008, and there are those whose support reaches back to the Conservatorium. Then there are the members of our Melba's Will bequest circle who have pledged their support into the future. And not to forget our philanthropic and professional partners, mentors, alumni, our scholars' families, singing teachers and our colleagues from the industry who are involved in some of the very many important organisations supporting opera and young singers in this country.

What this represents to me is a rich tapestry of support, woven together so that Australia's best young singers are given the chance to shine. Collectively, we all have our role to play and I hope that as you read our magazine it is clear how important that role is.

When Dame Nellie Melba established her scholarship in 1931, I doubt whether she could have anticipated the effect and momentum that her foresight would gain in the coming decades. Eighty-seven years later, we have alumni performing together on stages all over the world and a committed development program to nurture promising singers here in Australia.

Her actions have also fostered a culture of vision within Melba Opera Trust – a far-reaching focus on the future thanks to a powerful endowment. We learned from the best and we're grateful that others have been inspired to follow Melba's lead in endowing their own perpetual funds. I'm very proud that in addition to naming their latest village the Dame Nellie Melba Village, Ryman Healthcare Australia has decided to establish its own perpetual scholarship with Melba Opera Trust, the Ryman Healthcare Opera Scholarship.

We've said before, it takes a village to raise an opera singer... and the same can be said about building an endowment. Valuable support has come through single and annual donations, the establishment of named endowments, bequests and – in a new model being pioneered through the Annie McFarling Opera Scholarship – through a structure of annual cash donations underpinned by a bequest. We are grateful for every contribution we receive on our mission to reach \$16 million and the good news is, we are over half way there. Melba's bequest speaks volumes to the impact that legacy giving can make on our organisation. Our hope is that others in our community will continue that tradition.

If you would like to speak with me about becoming more involved in our fundraising journey I look forward to hearing from you on 03 9944 2100. In the meantime, I invite you to cosy up with a cup of something warm and enjoy reading our latest edition of *The Melba*.

REFLECTIONS FROM THE 2018 SCHOLARS



Fleuranne Brockway , mezzo-soprano

Annie McFarling Opera Scholarship & Ruskin Opera Scholarship

While meeting the other 2018 Melba scholars, doing Mentor Blocks and, in particular, going on the Melba pilgrimage (see page 5) have been highlights of the year, Fleuranne is excited about making her debut in July with her first main stage role in *Carmen*, with West Australian Opera.

"Not only do I get to perform the role of Mercédès, I also get to cover the title role of Carmen, one of my dream roles," she says. "I've been working so hard with Sharolyn Kimmorley and other mentors from the Melba program to prepare me for this experience. The jet-setting and intensive training haven't been easy, but I know I'm being coached in the role with the best in Australia, thanks to my scholarship, and I can't wait to put this work into practice."

Fleuranne says the other Melba scholars are not only talented but genuinely supportive, friendly and caring individuals. "It is a truth universally known that it is a good thing to be around people who inspire you and that's exactly what the Melba program is to me. I feel I have progressed much faster and pushed myself further than I otherwise would have done because of the support of my peers."



Jessica Harper, soprano

Dame Nellie Melba Scholarship & Patrick & Vivian Gordon Award

Playing the title role in *Miss Brill*, a new Omega Ensemble opera composed by Ben Hoadley, with libretto by Craig Brush, has been a highlight of a busy few months for Jessica. This February event was at the Art Gallery of New South Wales which, she says, was "easily one of the most exquisite venues I have ever had the pleasure to sing in".

In March, Jessica was awarded first place in the inaugural Limestone Coast Opera/Opera Lucca Aria Awards in Mount Gambier and she will go to Italy this month to participate in the acclaimed Accademia di Bel Canto 'Rodolfo Celletti' in Martina Franca as part of her prize. "Studying bel canto technique with Italian teachers is an absolute dream come true. And of course I will be based in Italy for an entire month, so my Italian will improve dramatically (I hope!)," she says.

Jessica says she has been observing a lift in her sense of self-worth as an opera singer. "For the rest of the year, I'm excited about the opportunities we have coming up to work with opera professionals from Australia and overseas. We are so lucky to meet and work with all these walking encyclopaedias!"

ABOUT MELBA OPERA TRUST

Melba Opera Trust is Australia's premier scholarship program for promising young opera singers. Driven by Dame Nellie Melba's conviction "a beautiful voice is not enough", the program nurtures artistic development alongside business training, mentoring and performance experience. We are the next step for singers preparing to become professionals on the world stage.

Inspiring Excellence – Realising Potential – Forging Careers



Fleuranne Brockway, Adam McMillan, Cleo Lee-McGowan, Paull-Anthony Keightley, Jessica Harper and Stephen Marsh.
(Samuel Piper, pictured right, was unable to attend the photo-shoot.)



Samuel Piper.



Samuel Piper, baritone

John & Elizabeth Wright-Smith Scholarship

The past few months have been busy and rewarding for Sam who, thanks to work commitments in Sydney, was not able to attend the first two Mentor Blocks – which is why he was disappointed to miss out on being in the group photograph on this page! Yet his singing opportunities so far this year have been wonderful. He was especially pleased to step on stage at Sydney Opera House for the first time, in Opera Australia's *The Nose* and *La bohème*.

"Having the chance to live, work and study in Sydney for the past few months has exposed me to aspects of the profession I was not previously aware of," says Samuel, whose John & Elizabeth Wright-Smith Scholarship has enabled him to undertake intensive coaching with Sydney-based experts. "It has been illuminating to see the way people deal with the ins-and-outs of singing and performing every day. Being in Sydney has also given me the opportunity to work consistently with my singing teacher, Glenn Winslade, and to connect with new colleagues and supporters."

Sam is anticipating his debut as Masetto in *Don Giovanni* for Opera Queensland later in the year. "I'm looking forward to singing this masterpiece with Maestro Johannes Fritzsche, bringing his wealth of knowledge and experience as conductor."



Stephen Marsh, baritone

Paulette Bisley Opera Scholarship & Eleanor Blakemore Opera Society Scholarship

A wonderful start to the year for Stephen was taking out second place in the inaugural Limestone Coast Opera/Opera Lucca Aria Awards. He will be joining Jessica Harper (first prize) on the study trip to Lucca and also to take part in the Puccini Festival, held in July/August. "Competitions are such a different beast compared to performing on stage," he says of the Limestone Coast award. "It may just be me, but even from entering just one competition I have learnt that one must mentally prepare in a completely different way as opposed to performing on stage."

Beginning the Melba program this year has been Stephen's other highlight. "We have already had such amazing experiences with so many incredible mentors. It has been such a nurturing environment. Dame Nellie Melba believed that a singer needed to be 'more than just the voice' and now I do understand this a lot more."

The remainder of Stephen's year is very busy. "I have the opportunity to work with Thomas Hampson and I also have the privilege of doing a scene workshop with Sir Thomas Allen. I will be performing in several operas with Victorian Opera, plus also very much looking forward to the following Melba Blocks."



Adam McMillan, repetiteur

Margaret Schofield Opera Scholarship & Mel and Nina Waters Award

Like other scholars, Adam was inspired by the pilgrimage during the first Mentor Block. "It was a great end to a week in which I learnt much more about Melba's incredible character, ethos and reputation," he says. "Another highlight from our first Block would have to be the public speaking class given by Judith Field. She gave us loads of tips and tricks on how to structure a speech and deliver it with flair and confidence, making the whole process much less daunting."

Adam says he also benefitted enormously from the master classes given by Simon O'Neill in the second Mentor Block. "He inspired all of us with his passion, leading us all towards the next step in bringing style and conviction to the repertoire."

Adam is looking forward to becoming more familiar with a vast amount of operatic repertoire he wants to learn, improving his pianistic ability. "To evoke the nuances of the orchestra in my playing, growing my language skills and, most importantly, continuing to learn from and be inspired by my fellow scholars and our brilliant coaches," he says. "My experiences so far at Melba have shown me the importance of being very well-rounded as an artist (and human) and to fully embrace every new challenge that comes my way."



Cleo Lee-McGowan, soprano

Joseph Sambrook Opera Scholarship

Getting to know the other scholars over the past couple of months has been one of Cleo's highlights this year, as has working with Simon O'Neill and Andrew Sinclair in the March Mentor Block (see page 11).

"When you have the opportunity to work with such high-calibre professionals, you just try to soak up as much as you can," she says. "I love working with Andrew as his style is so universal, meaning that he gives you the skills to make decisions about your character and apply it to other roles. So, rather than telling you what to do and where to stand, he guides you in making your own choices."

Cleo, who made her exciting debut with the Tasmanian Symphony Orchestra in April in Mendelssohn's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, says she hopes these experiences and other skills she is learning as a Melba scholar will hold her in good stead in a professional context, as well as informing the musical choices she makes. "It also makes me more independent and not completely reliant on the director giving step-by-step instructions."



Paull-Anthony Keightley, bass

Amelia Joscelyne Memorial Scholarship

At the end of July, Paull-Anthony will leave Melba for an exciting prior arrangement: a year-long contract with Deutsche Oper Berlin. There, after an intensive German language course, his first performance will quickly follow in August. "It will be thrilling and terrifying," Paull-Anthony says.

The Melba, he says, has been wonderfully supportive, tailoring his scholarship around this rare opportunity. "I knew I was going to Berlin prior to auditioning for the Melba scholarship," he says. "The Trust understood that what I was going to do was pretty great. I have felt the personalisation of the scholarship to be so well aligned with what I want and what I need right now."

While he has recently been rehearsing for *The Cunning Little Vixen* with West Australian Opera, he has also been fitting in German language lessons and a rigorous schedule of learning parts for Berlin. German-born conductor Johannes Fritzsche has helped Paull-Anthony construct a schedule for learning his many roles. "It has been a matter of making a very long list of the pages I need to learn and then I just set a goal for each day and cross off the pages I've learnt," he says. "It may seem a little overwhelming, but nothing unachievable."



Alumnus Nathan Lay & current scholar Stephen Marsh. Courtesy Victorian Opera.

PROOF IS IN THE MAGIC PUDDING

When Victorian Opera made plans to bring back *The Magic Pudding – The Opera* to mark the centenary of Norman Lindsay’s original book, a classic of Australian literature, it wanted to fill the stage with emerging local talent, as well as using local community choruses. As it turns out, five of the ten soloists chosen for the production are Melba Opera Trust alumni: Jeremy Kleeman, Nathan Lay, Stephen Marsh, Brenton Spiteri and Shakira Tsindos.

The production’s Melba-strong cast is a great example of how alumni move into the world of performance after (and sometimes during) their scholarships.

2018 Melba scholar Stephen Marsh says he has greatly enjoyed the opportunity to be part of this very fun and lively production alongside four other Melba scholars. “It has been a fantastic experience as we have not only had the opportunity to perform this work in Melbourne, but also tour it to regional areas (Bendigo and Wodonga),” he says.

Noted as a “true-blue Australian classic” with its irreverent characters and high-energy storyline, the music for the stage production was composed by Calvin Bowman.

Stephen has played the character Benjamin Brandysnap, a baset hound who becomes one of the four part-owners of Albert the magic pudding.

“Benjamin also has the quite unique skill of being able to view the world in a completely different way than the other characters do,” Stephen says. “For example, he can communicate with all the vegetables in his garden, as if this is a completely normal thing for anyone to be able to do. I have greatly enjoyed my time working on this piece as it is one of the few operas that I have worked on in the English language. Having the opportunity to work with fellow Melba alumni and also make some new friends along the way has been fantastic.”

Shakira Tsindos says that each time she gets the full cast list for her next opera, she is always excited to see the name of a Melba alumni. “Even if it’s the first time that we have met and worked with each other, we feel as though we are part of the Melba history and its family,” she says. “Working with familiar faces, Brenton, Jeremy, Nathan and Stephen, on one of Victorian Opera’s most hilarious productions was no different!”

“It’s not every day that you have the opportunity to dress up as an Australian possum in a fat suit and tail in one of our most iconic Australian children stories. Celebrating 100 years, this production is a beautiful representation of the original

sketches, reflected in the costuming and set design. It is such a joy to hear laughter from not only the children in the audience, but people of all ages.”

Nathan Lay says that it has been five years since VO’s world premiere of *The Magic Pudding – The Opera* and it was great to return to the role of Bunyip Bluegum after so long. “A few of the other original cast members also returned to their roles, including my good friend (and fellow Melba alumni) Jeremy Kleeman as the Pudding. The show had a number of new cast members too – and it was great to work with Brenton Spiteri, who happens to be a former John & Elizabeth Wright-Smith Scholar like me.”

AN ENCORE FOR ROSEMONT

It was a balmy Sydney evening as guests entered the picturesque gardens of Rosemont for our first soiree of the year. This being Melba’s third visit to Rosemont,

we considered ourselves especially fortunate to be welcomed into Margot, Lady Burrell’s home for the encore performance.

As guests enjoyed a glass of De Bortoli’s La Bohème Cuvée Blanc on the terrace, scholars were preparing their performance under the watchful eye of Artistic Advisor Sharolyn Kimmorley AM.

For Sydney audiences, it was the first time they had heard new scholars Fleuranne Brockway and Stephen Marsh. Jessica Harper, whilst being new to the Melba program, is Sydney-based and had the pleasure of performing for

friends who have loyally followed her career to date. Returning scholar Samuel Piper was looking forward to reconnecting with donors whom he had met at *Meet The Scholars*, Kirribilli House, last year. “Singing at Rosemont was a gorgeous



Sharolyn Kimmorley AM and Jessica Harper.



Fleuranne Brockway.

ON THE MELBA TRAIL

Jessica Harper, the 2018 Dame Nellie Melba Scholar, has always had a strong connection with the famed singer, but it was not until she visited Dame Nellie’s graveside during this year’s Melba pilgrimage that she really felt the full force of that extraordinary life and career, and her own part in the continuing story.

“It was tremendous to be in the ‘presence’ of such a spectacular woman,” she says of the visit to the memorial, part of the February tour organised each year for scholars on their first Mentor Block. It is considered a crucial milestone for scholars, with the Melba taking very seriously the legacy bestowed by Dame Nellie’s memory. “The pilgrimage was really special and because I have her scholarship I feel very attached to her memory. I am immensely grateful to be there – to be part of the program in general – but it is so special to follow in her footsteps in particular.”

Jessica says Dame Nellie has long been a great source of inspiration, but when the day-long pilgrimage took her not only to the grave at Lilydale Memorial Park, but also to Coombe Cottage, the Yarra Ranges Museum and De Bortoli Winery, she began to really feel the full depth of her growing interest.

“On the pilgrimage we really got a sense of just how extraordinarily famous she was – she was quite



Leanne De Bortoli, Stephen Marsh, Jessica Harper, Paull-Anthony Keightley, Cleo Lee-McGowan, Fleuranne Brockway and Adam McMillan.

phenomenal,” she says. “I am three quarters of the way through her biography *I Am Melba* [by Ann Blainey] and I am finding that absolutely enthralling. The way she handled herself was so gutsy. There was so much fire in her, which I really admire. Sometimes in certain situations I think ‘What would Nellie do?’ ”

The connections were felt strongly at Coombe, which was Dame Nellie Melba’s estate and continues to be owned by the family. There, the scholars were guided through Melba’s house and the wing that has been preserved exactly as Melba left it when she died.

Likewise, being hosted at the gorgeous vineyard of longtime Melba sponsor De Bortoli at the day’s end was significant and exciting for the scholars, joined by their scholarship donors for an exclusive wine tasting hosted by Leanne De Bortoli.

“Our relationship with the Melba Opera Trust goes back many years and we were so delighted to host the recent Melba Scholars to our

vineyard for a tasting of some of our wines inspired by Australia’s first diva,” says Leanne. “They were all delightful and obviously delighted to be on this pilgrimage to the region that Dame Nellie Melba so fondly called home.

“Some weeks later, we were thrilled to also host two of the scholars at our Melba Wine Club Opera night where they left many of the audience in raptures over their singing...and in the process introduced some new fans to the joys of opera.”

Little wonder that the six scholars on the pilgrimage report the entire event as having been an especially bonding experience and a highlight of their time at Melba so far.

Fleuranne Brockway was deeply moved. “Seeing her grave and walking through her home and gardens have helped me feel connected to Melba and her legacy,” Fleuranne says. “This pilgrimage made me feel like I was lifted by her support, her story and what she achieved.

“I feel more confident, inspired, and I have a desire to gain all these skills so that one day I can give back the same way she did.”

At the Yarra Ranges Museum, the scholars were given a tour by Museum Program Director Patrick Watt, who says it was fantastic to have the chance to bring the young singers into close contact with the many personal items that once belonged to Dame Nellie. These included an evening dress belonging to Melba and a silver cigarette box from 1895 engraved with signatures of Dame Nellie and other notable performers/composers including Charles Haddon Chambers, Sarah Bernhardt, Enrico Caruso and Luigi Mancinelli. There was also a fan given by Dame Nellie to her pianist Emmy Smith-Palmer and – one of Patrick’s favourites – a letter from Giacomo Puccini to Dame Nellie.

“This is an Italian god who made contact with a woman in Lilydale,” he says. “So, to see some of her items like this really makes her real. For the scholars, these become not

just names from the past, but living history.”

Patrick says one aspect of Dame Nellie’s life that impressed the scholars was the extent to which she performed charitable work, working for the war effort and using her excellent connections to get things done on this front. There were also many other parts of her history that helped underpin the thrust of their own careers.

“There is such a deep and rich history in opera,” Patrick says. “If they can see opera has strong roots alive and well in Lilydale then that helps validate what they do.”

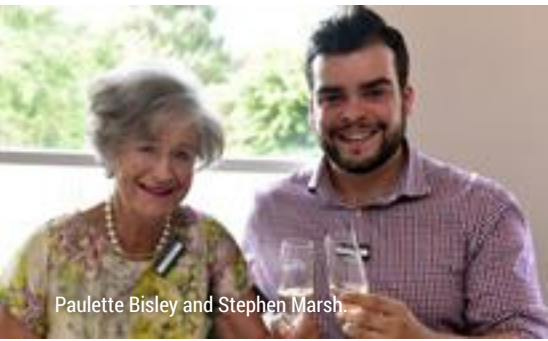
This was particularly so for Jessica, whose connections with Dame Nellie Melba extend back as far as a decade when, in year 12, she did her monologue for her drama subject on the singer, writing it and performing it with a focus on her life and career “from the perspective of a mature, established Melba”.

Then, last year, Jessica was asked to cover Emma Matthews in the production *Melba: A New Musical* and ended up standing in for Emma in the musical for two days.

“It is such an incredible story because it was to all intents and purposes my professional debut,” she says. “I wasn’t even an understudy. I learnt the blocking of the show and the script, flying by the seat of my pants. I was riding exclusively on hope.” She rose to the occasion and describes it as a huge success – she even received a standing ovation.

“I’ll never forget that performance. It was the most electric of my life.”

ESTD 1928
De BORTOLI
FAMILY WINEMAKERS



Paulette Bisley and Stephen Marsh



Sue and Rob Logie-Smith AM with Cleo Lee-McGowan.



Fleuranne Brockway, Warwick Bisley and Jessica Harper.



Jessica Harper and Paull-Anthony Keightley

opportunity – I’ve been unable to attend several Melba activities this year due to engagements with Opera Australia and so I was so glad to be reunited with my fellow Melba scholars and entertain donors for an evening of music.” And as fate would

have it, our repetiteur scholar Adam McMillan was in Sydney working intensively with Sharolyn Kimmorley AM and so was also available to perform.

With the Hutchins piano centre stage, it was a setting reminiscent of times gone by, when feted opera singers were regularly engaged to

perform at private soirees in the salons of impressive homes such as Rosemont. Indeed, Margot, Lady Burrell confirmed that Dame Nellie Melba had visited the home, which was built in 1857. Scholars performed a fitting finale of Tosti’s ‘Goodbye’ which Sam says “received rapturous applause. Many of the audience commented how beautiful

and nostalgic the piece is – they were delighted to discover it was one that Dame Nellie Melba’s own audiences enjoyed many times.”

Following the performance, the celebrations continued with audience and scholars mingling together over a glass of De Bortoli’s finest.

It was an intimate and inspiring evening of music making to celebrate the wonderful community of Sydney donors who support Melba Opera Trust and, of course, the scholars who are benefiting so greatly from their generosity.



Samuel Piper, Penelope Seidler AM and Adam McMillan



Sydney supporters enjoying the occasion.



Fleuranne Brockway, Dorothy Blair and Robin Cox.

My Melba to-do list

Being a Melba scholar brings with it an extraordinary array of opportunities and responsibilities. Here, we explore the breadth of items young singers might have on their to-do list for the year.

My Mentor Program.

Master class & Coaching

- Simon O'Neill ✓
- Thomas Hampson
- Stuart Skelton
- Yvonne Kenny
- Erin Helyard (Baroque coaching) ✓
- Sharolyn Kimmorley (all the time!!!) ✓
- Jennifer Marten-Smith

Stage & Artistic workshops

- Artistic preparation - learning how it should be done with Sharolyn
- Improvisation - building spontaneity into performance
- Drama coaching - Andrew Sinclair (Director at Covent Garden)
- Dance - the opera favourites; waltz, etc etc...
- Scene staging - Stuart Maunder
- Movement & drama coaching - Chuck Hudson
- Recitative Project - Teresa Desmarchelier & Sharolyn
- 2 day character workshop - NIDA. How the actors do it!

Languages

- Italian conversation - every block! ✓
- Italian diction - Teresa Desmarchelier ✓
- French diction - Marie-Claire Szekely ✓
- German diction - Tanja Bingseli

Taking care of me

- Wellness workshop & consultations ✓
- Vocal health ✓
- Nutrition ✓
- Alexander technique
- Performance psychology workshop

Preparing for auditions...eek!

- Drama master class for auditions
- CV & biography preparation
- How to work with an agent with Graham Pushee (Artist Manager)
- Mock audition process - industry panel, simulated audition with feedback
- Producing an audition CD with Virginia Read

Working on my presentation

- Public speaking ✓
- Concert introduction master class with Mairi Nicolson ✓
- Media coaching ✓
- Hair & make-up workshop ✓
- Style advice and individual consult ✓
- Suit shopping! ✓
- Etiquette workshop ✓
- Theatre make-up with OA's Andrew Keshan

Getting my business in order

- Time management ✓
- Budgeting for success ✓
- Knowing and living your brand ✓
- Nurturing relationships ✓
- Accounting for freelance artists ✓
- Legal for musicians

- Digital marketing
- Financial planning
- Negotiation
- Grant application writing
- Visas & preparing to go overseas
- Conflict resolution

Getting to know the industry

- Lunch with Sir Andrew Davis ✓
- Coffee with Siobhan Stagg
- Lunch with Fiona Jopson
- Lunch with Jeremy Kleeman
- Lunch with Stuart Skelton

My Personal Artistic Development Program.

- Weekly singing lesson (& daily practice!)
- Weekly vocal coaching
- Weekly language lesson and/or diction
- Use my 'languages' app to consolidate daily
- Role & repertoire preparation/learning
- Drama class
- Movement class
- Business cards?
- Professional Facebook page?
- Website
- Attend performances
- Buy scores
- Get new headshots!

My Performance Program.

- Work with Sharolyn on the repertoire
- Learn the music!!!!
- Lock in the rehearsals
- Go shopping for performance clothes!



ALUMNI UPDATE

We now have 45 alumni entertaining audiences around the world...

Did you hear...

- **Stacey Alleaume** as Violetta in Opera Australia's production of *La traviata* (Sydney season – March)
- **Bronwyn Douglass** as Rosina in Co-Opera's production of *The Barber of Seville* (February - April)
- **Lauren Fagan** as Violetta in Holland Park's *La traviata* (29 May into June)
- **Alexandra Flood** as Norina in *Don Pasquale* with Vorarlberger Landestheatre in Bregenz (February)
- **Samuel Dale Johnson** in the title role of *Eugene Onegin* for Scottish National Opera (opened 24 April and tours until June)
- **Fiona Jopson** as Kammerfrau in Verdi's *Macbeth* for Vienna State Opera (28 February - March)
- **Jeremy Kleeman, Nathan Lay, Brenton Spiteri, Shakira Tsindos and Stephen Marsh** in Victorian Opera's *The Magic Pudding* (March)
- **Jacqueline Porter** in *The Enamoured Soul: The glory of Handel* (March) and *La Pellegrina: A Medici Extravaganza* (June)
- **Samuel Sakker** as Laertes in *Hamlet* for the Adelaide Festival (2-6 March) and Eric in *The Flying Dutchman* with Netherlands Opera (opened 20 April)
- **Nicholas Tolputt** as soloist with New Zealand Dance Company's production of *Orpheus* (March)

Listen out for...

- **Stacey Alleaume & Jeremy Kleeman** as soloists in the Mid-Season Gala for MSO (23 June)
- **Daniel Carison** in his Wiesbaden debut (two operas in the first week!), Hermann Ortel in *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg* (opens 29 September) and Masetto in Mozart's *Don Giovanni* (opens 6 October).
- **Emily Edmonds** as Semira in Hasse's *Artaserse* with Pinchgut Opera (29 Nov-5 Dec) and L'Enfant in Ravel's *L'Enfant et les Sortilèges* at Komische Oper Berlin (April - June 2019)
- **Lauren Fagan** as Woglinde in Wagners *Das Rheingold* and *Götterdämmerung* at Royal Opera House (opens 24 September)
- **Alexandra Flood** as Jemmy in Victorian Opera production of *William Tell* (14-19 July)
- **Siobhan Stagg** as featured soloist at the Australian Festival of Chamber Music (opens 27 July), as soloist in the TSO performances of Clair de Lune & Strauss Orchestral Songs (August & September), in her company and role debut as Mélisande in Debussy's *Pelléas et Mélisande* with Victorian Opera (11-13 October) and her company debut with Lyric Opera of Chicago in the title role of Massenet's *Cendrillon* (November & December)
- **Samuel Dale Johnson** at Deutsche Oper Berlin for their 2018/2019 season playing Figaro in *Il barbiere di Siviglia*, the title role of *Don Giovanni* and Escamillo in *Carmen* among other productions.
- **Nicholas Tolputt** as soloist in *Bernstein Classics* with MSO (15 August)
- **Samuel Sakker** as David in *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg* in Adelaide (4 August) and making his role debut as Don José in *Carmen* with Den Jyske Oper (opens 5 October)
- **Brenton Spiteri** as Mathan in *Athalia* with Pinchgut Opera (opens 21 June), soloist in *Bernstein on Broadway* with MSO (18 August), soloist in *Operativo IV* in Adelaide (23 September) and Benvolio in TSO's *Roméo et Juliette* (20 October)

JEWELS IN THE CROWN OF HER CAREER

Lauren Fagan may run the gamut of emotions when performing, but off-stage she is also admired for her steadfast qualities, and strong ability to focus on her work – all of which have been assets during a recent period of busy activity for the successful young soprano.

Lauren, who was awarded the Dame Nellie Melba Scholarship in 2011 and 2012, has been experiencing many achievements. In January, she was nominated as 'Young Singer' of the year in the International Opera Awards, an annual red-carpet event, whose winners were announced in April.

Then, last month, she made her much-anticipated debut as Violetta in Verdi's *La traviata* for London's Opera Holland Park, with her performances continuing this month. And earlier in the year she found herself gracing the newspapers, photographed in glorious radiance wearing Cartier jewellery for *Cartier: The Exhibition* at the National Gallery of Australia in Canberra.

"Joy and excitement is definitely a big part of the opera journey," Lauren says. "It is always an incredible feeling being cast in a new role, and Violetta was no exception. So far, the learning process has taken me on an incredible emotional journey and this is before I have even stepped onto the stage! Of course, there is always pressure – mainly from myself – to improve and sing to the best of my ability. I think I enjoy this pressure and can use it to motivate and express vulnerability when performing."

Before Violetta, Lauren last year sang Donna Anna for Opera Holland Park. "[I] actually auditioned for Violetta before *Don Giovanni* had even started rehearsing," she explains. "It was an incredible amount of trust to put in someone who was yet to work for their company. OHP is renowned for its positive culture and working environment, so it's the perfect place to debut what I hope will be a very important role in my repertoire."

Later this year Lauren, who joined The Royal Opera's Jette Parker Young Artists Programme in 2015,

will return to the Royal Opera House for the first time as a guest artist, singing Woglinde in *Der Ring des Nibelungen* under Maestro Pappano. She will then make her German debut in the title role of *Alcina*, as part of the Handel Festival in Karlsruhe.

Lauren says she was happily surprised at her 'Young Singer' nomination. "I believe there is a panel of people from all realms of the opera world who vote and create the shortlists. Unfortunately, I didn't win, but it is still a great honour to be recognised as a young singer to watch out for."

As if all this hasn't been enough, Lauren took the time earlier in the year when she was back in Sydney, her hometown, to perform at a Melba event, hosted by Penelope Seidler AM at the Seidler Penthouse. She performed several arias, and also did duets with 2013-2014 alumnus Matthew Reardon, accompanied by Sharolyn Kimmorley. "The Sydney concert was a wonderful opportunity to perform again for lots of the Melba supporters," she says.

The Melba has been crucial to her career trajectory: "The Melba enabled me to gain the training I needed to be accepted into the Opera Course at the Guildhall School of Music and Drama. Having come from a business background, my ability to sing was on par with other people my age, but the other skills such as language, acting, movement and my presentation were much less developed as I had not been immersed in the music world."

Sharolyn Kimmorley AM has worked with Lauren since she was a teenager, before she studied business at university and then decided to follow her heart with singing. "I always knew that she had a really amazing instrument, that it was of superior quality, but because she didn't go through the normal pathway – not that it guarantees anything – she had a huge amount of catching up to do with her languages and stagecraft and those other aspects," Sharolyn says. "On the other hand, she was fresh vocally, she wasn't tired, jaded or bored. Music was exciting to her."

Sharolyn says that while Lauren has been blessed with "a really unique instrument", what sets her apart from other singers is her extraordinary work ethic. "I think probably a better work ethic than any singer I know," she says. "I think

that comes from her background, her family, her business studies. She prepares things well, and well in advance. And she is not constantly looking for reassurance, she is happy to take criticism and grow from that. This is a really good quality."

Lauren is equally admiring, recalling that Sharolyn seemed to recognise Lauren had "a voice somewhere deep inside". "When she could see that I was serious about pursuing opera she has been beside me, supporting

me every step of the way," she says. "She knows my voice incredibly well, so since moving to the UK I don't think much more than a week goes by without me asking her advice – whether it be about a potential role or an opportunity."

An opportunity of a different kind presented itself recently with Lauren being asked to model some Cartier jewellery for the recent Cartier exhibition in Canberra.

Cartier designed several pieces for Dame Nellie and Lauren's connection through the scholarship was a natural fit. The necklace Lauren wore for the photographers belongs to Lady Vestey. It was the second time the jewels glittered for Lauren: the first was when she was presented the necklace to wear as a surprise from Lady Vestey ahead of a special Melba Opera Trust performance at Stowell Park, Lord and Lady Vestey's estate.



Lauren Fagan.



Supporters of the Trust enjoying the event.

A LOVE OF THE ART

Fleuranne Brockway at Meet the Scholars at Deakin Edge: Fleuranne is supported by the Annie McFarling Opera Scholarship and the Ruskin Opera Scholarship.

While Annie McFarling's strong connection with Melba Opera Trust extends back many years, it is the present and future that have become especially meaningful for her in the past year, thanks to the establishment of a scholarship in her name.

The Annie McFarling Opera Scholarship pioneers a new structure of giving which enables Melba patrons to see and enjoy the fruits of their support during their lifetime. The majority of Melba endowments have in the past been established with a donation or bequest of \$500,000. The new structure underpinning the Annie McFarling Opera Scholarship includes an annual cash donation, supplemented by a bequest.

Annie says that while she had for a long time been keen on a straightforward bequest to the Melba, it was a source of regret that a bequest meant she would not have been able to witness the scholarship's positive effects. "But the Melba looked into it," she says. "They came back with the really good news that I could start mine now. This is the first year, and the first recipient, and she is absolutely delightful."

Fleuranne Brockway, this year's inaugural recipient of the Annie McFarling Scholarship, says it is an immense honour. "I'm at the start of a legacy and I hope I can do her proud," she says. "Annie is such a fabulous woman with a great love for the arts and of sport – something which plays a huge role in my life outside opera. She has been incredibly supportive of both my

singing career and sporting pursuits, which I greatly appreciate."

Fleuranne, a champion croquet player for Western Australia, says that for some time she had believed she would have to give up her chosen sport to succeed as a singer, but that Annie has encouraged her to understand that both are necessary for a good work/life balance. "Even though singing is my passion and borderline obsession, I believe it is important to have a life outside one's career – even if it is only so that I don't burn myself out!"

Annie says she had mentioned to Melba staff her preference, if possible, for the scholarship to go to a scholar who was also a sportsperson. "And they matched us up in that way. That is a very exciting start...someone so wonderful whose career I can follow."



Annie says her interest was initially stimulated by the Joscelyne family when the Amelia Joscelyne Memorial Scholarship was formed, thanks to Annie's long friendship with Mary-Jane Joscelyne, a founding patron of the Melba. This led to Annie and her husband becoming donors to the Melba and then attending many Melba concerts

and soirees. "It has been interesting to follow the careers and the paths of development of all the scholars," she says. "The Melba is a family and it keeps you very involved, and that is one of the wonderful things about it."

OPERA TAKES A VILLAGE...AND A SOCIETY!

For several years now, Melba Opera Trust has shared an important relationship with The Opera Society Inc. We thought it was time our readers learned a little more about what this generous and passionate group of individuals is all about!

A like-minded group of opera lovers came together many years ago with a view to combining their resources to support opera in Australia. With a membership of over 300 opera enthusiasts, members enjoy lunches, outings and special opera-related

events such as full-dress rehearsals of Opera Australia productions. The profits of any activities then provide support for a range of important initiatives.

The Society is particularly passionate about helping young opera singers access the development opportunities their talent deserves and regularly engages up and coming opera singers to perform at their luncheons. Eleanor Blakemore was a long-standing member of Opera Society and, through her estate, bequeathed a generous fund to grow Opera Society's support. It was as a result of this bequest that the

Eleanor Blakemore Opera Society Scholarship with Melba Opera Trust was made possible.

Stephen Marsh is the current recipient of this valuable scholarship and alumni from past years include Damian Arnold (tenor), Daniel Carison (baritone) and Robert Barbaro (tenor). The Opera Society have also provided support to underwrite the master classes of Melba Opera Trust's Mentor Program.

Amy Black, General Manager says "I have been fortunate to have been included in several of the Opera Society lunches and I always find it inspiring to see so many like-minded

people sharing friendships and their love for opera. They clearly enjoy their association and they work very hard to generate the important support the Society provides. It really is a privilege to be associated and the success of the singers they have supported speaks volumes as to the impact the Society has on opera in Australia."

Run entirely by volunteers, their commitment, professionalism and generosity are boundless. Should you wish to investigate membership with Opera Society Inc, please contact their office on 9685 3757 10.30am to 1.30pm Monday to Friday.



Stephen Marsh.

RYMAN HEALTHCARE: FORGING A LEGACY



Melba General Manager Amy Black (second from left) with Ryman Healthcare representatives Robert Taylor, Debbie McClure, Michelle Shaw and Dale Singleton.

Many years ago, when New Zealand retirement village provider Ryman Healthcare started naming its facilities after exceptional people, some of that country's most recognisable stars were on the list: Sir Edmund Hillary, Dame Kiri Te Kanawa and Dame Malvina Major.

Rather than just naming buildings after someone outstanding, the aim has always been to do much more: to somehow imbue each individual village with something of the identity of the named person and often to establish a philanthropic component as part of the arrangement.

Building and operating 31 villages throughout New Zealand since 1984, Ryman Healthcare has now expanded into Australia and its first village in Wheelers Hill was named after Sir Weary Dunlop, the surgeon, soldier and sportsman. For its next village, opening later this year at Brandon Park, the name of Dame Nellie Melba has been chosen. Five more villages are planned in Geelong, Mount Eliza, Coburg, Burwood East and Mount Martha.

Preparations for the Melba village are now well-advanced and anticipation is mounting ahead of the first residents moving in from the end of July. Adding to this excitement and as a result of

working with Melba Opera Trust to significantly deepen the connection between the two organisations, Ryman Healthcare has announced the endowment of a scholarship with Melba Opera Trust. Celebrated at the recent *Meet The Scholars* concert at Deakin Edge, Federation Square, the Ryman Healthcare Opera Scholarship will be offered for the first time in 2019.

Melba Opera Trust's General Manager Amy Black says Ryman Healthcare's philanthropic activities have been inspiring. For many years they have supported New Zealand Opera, the New Zealand Ballet, as well as various charities, and have offered the annual Ryman Prize valued at \$250,000 for the world's best development, advance or achievement that enhances the quality of life for older people. "It is a company whose culture is one of community, relationships, caring and integrity and it is a great honour to be launching the Ryman Healthcare Opera Scholarship next year," she says.

David King, Ryman Healthcare's Corporate Affairs Manager, says the careful and thoughtful naming of villages has been a crucial part of the company's ethos, helping to give village communities a strong sense of character. Walking into the Sir Edmund Hillary village, for example, visitors can expect to find photographs and artefacts

relating to his life of exploration and discovery. "It sets a tone. It is much better than naming a village 'Ryman Geelong' or 'Ryman Brandon Park'," David says. "It gives the village an identity."

David says another point of difference with Ryman Healthcare is having what he describes as a continuum of care in its many villages. Responding to the challenges of an ageing population in Australia and New Zealand, each village has services across the spectrum of needs, from completely independent living, to serviced apartments, to much higher-level care, all set around a central care-centre that is effectively a hospital.

For the new Dame Nellie Melba Village, Ryman Healthcare first canvassed the local community for a suitable name. Among the options offered, Dame Nellie Melba was a standout.

Working with Melba Opera Trust, Ryman Healthcare was then able to approach Dame Nellie Melba's descendants, the Vestey family in England, to seek their blessing for use of the name and they agreed. The official opening is expected to be held early next year with Lord Samuel Vestey, the third Baron Vestey and great-grandson of Dame Nellie Melba, together with his eldest daughter and Melba Opera Trust Patron, The Hon. Saffron Foster, in attendance.

The Hon. Saffron Foster, says she was delighted to give her blessing to naming the village after Dame Nellie. Having looked into Ryman's history and other homes it was "a very easy decision to make". Her mother Kathryn, Lady Vestey, had been ill for a long time before she died last year and "to know that she could have had a facility like this would have been tremendous".

"The support that they will give to the Melba is exceptionally beneficial for our students and one that I hope will be reciprocated with performances. It would also be lovely to welcome them to Coombe Cottage. I very much look forward to a long-lasting relationship."

The family will continue to be involved with activities from the village, there will be engagement with Coombe, musical performances and the village will be styled in tribute to Dame Nellie Melba. Through the partnership with Melba Opera Trust, they will also be supporting the living embodiment of Nellie and all that her legacy represents.

"We have been incredibly impressed with the sensitivity and consideration that David and his team at Ryman have demonstrated throughout the process of naming of their latest village," says Amy. "From the outset they showed great respect in approaching the family for their blessing and they have actively

sought meaningful interactions to ensure the naming of the village is underpinned by a deep respect and engagement with Melba's history and legacy. We were confident Dame Nellie's name was in safe hands.

"And, of course, by establishing the perpetual Ryman Healthcare Opera Scholarship they are creating their own history and legacy, much as Melba did herself when she endowed our first scholarship in 1931."

David says this excellent relationship with the Melba has its roots in the naming of the Dame Malvina Major village in New Zealand, when Ryman worked with the Dame Malvina Major Foundation, which does very similar work to Melba Opera Trust. That relationship has been going strong for 15 years. Thus, on approaching Melba, Ryman was well aware of the possibilities.

In New Zealand, as a result of its deep connection with the Dame Malvina Major Foundation, dozens of concerts have been held at Ryman villages over the years and David is excited at the prospect of the same thing happening at the Melbourne villages. "Each village [here and in NZ] has a grand piano tuned and ready to go for whenever we need it," David says. "Obviously we support Melba Opera Trust and, in return, the Melba gets the opportunity for its young scholars to perform in our villages. So, our residents get great operatic performances out of it, which they really adore."

AN INSPIRING JOURNEY TO SUSTAINABILITY —

When Melba Opera Trust was forged out of the legacy of the Melba Memorial Conservatorium of Music, it brought with it the wisdom and ability to build a sustainable financial model that would support the work of Melba Opera Trust in perpetuity.

Non-profit organisations of Melba's scale are rarely in a position to focus on sustainability, but the Melba has become a leader thanks to its forward-thinking board, its legacy and the wonderful supporters who have become part of an inspiring journey towards making sure young Australian opera singers will always be nurtured.

Indeed, the Melba's people are another of its strongest assets: the many scholars who benefit so richly from the programs, the donors and supporters who see the rewards of advancing young singing careers and the staff who design and instigate the various scholarships and programs.

The Melba's Managing Director, Peter Garnick, says the financial structure of endowments is embedded in the organisation's history and encourages a view towards long-term success. The idea of perpetuity is in the DNA of the organisation. When Dame Nellie Melba bequeathed a generous amount of money to

the original Conservatorium as a perpetual scholarship for young opera singers, she also inspired a way forward to establish a durable model for the future. "Dame Nellie's foresight gave us the security of having a scholarship today," says General Manager, Amy Black. "We are working hard to create an endowment so that there will always be a program of excellence dedicated to our most exceptional young singers."

Melba supporters get such pleasure and satisfaction in seeing how their involvement can give young opera singers pathways to exceptional careers through scholarship,

mentoring and more general professional knowledge. At the same time, their support is part of the broader and longer-term journey for operatic development in Australia. Donors can also take comfort knowing that whilst they are giving today, the endowment structure means the impact will be felt far into the future.

So much has already been done, but there is a way to go: the ultimate goal is to establish an endowment of \$16 million. So far, Melba has successfully raised over \$8 million through a mixture of establishing endowed named funds, valuable and generous bequests, and the great success of annual giving.

This money is invested and managed by J.B. Were, with the interest and dividends from the portfolio allocated to fund the annual programs. "Until the \$16million is achieved, the programs and operations are partially underwritten by annual grants from a suite of philanthropic trusts and foundations and from annual donations from individuals," Peter says.

Reaching the \$16 million would make the Melba entirely self-sustaining, without needing to seek government funding, which is always prone to shifting priorities. "A \$16 million endowment would guarantee our programs for future generations of Australia singers," Peter says.



At the master class: Simon O'Neill, Paul-Anthony Keightley, Jessica Harper, Stephen Marsh, Cleo Lee-McGowan, Adam McMillan and Fleuranne Brockway.



Paul-Anthony Keightley and Mary-Jane Joscelyne.

BEYOND EXPECTATIONS

When he began a master class with the renowned tenor Simon O'Neill ONZM in March, Melba Opera Trust scholar Adam McMillan was not sure what to expect, but he knew there would be a level of intensity at play, with private one-to-one classes during the day and a public master class on one of the evenings. Intense it was, but Adam and his fellow scholars also encountered a welcome sense of informality that helped them absorb guidance from this extraordinarily experienced and gifted mentor.

"I thought that was a nice way to do it because we all got to know him a bit," Adam says. "He was very kind and very down to earth, and he made everyone feel right at home."

Adam, the repetiteur on the Margaret Schofield Opera Scholarship and the Mel & Nina Waters Award, found a central theme to the classes was "to reach past the score and grab the character of the piece". He says: "I think that was definitely something to take forward."

Adam says that while he has had many other coaching sessions, there was a unique texture to the master class. "It was great that Simon kept me as involved as the singers, I wasn't just playing along in the background," he says. "He had lots of tips for me as well as the singers. He talked to me about creating the right orchestral colours and how to maintain the musical

tension throughout the pieces. A lot of repertoire is quite new for me this year. He recognised that, but he was quite demanding as well in asking me to get that orchestral sound. I thought that was really good."

Adam says the chance to examine ways of striving for musical character was challenging but exciting. "The first thing is knowing your notes really well and knowing the score really well," he says. "But then you can look to the text to really connect with what is being portrayed and keeping that mood in mind. It is adding that polish to the top that makes all the difference."

Ian and Dale Johnson, who have given strong support to the Amelia Joscelyne Memorial Scholarship, agree. They attended the evening master class. "Ian and I enjoy the master classes very much," Dale says. "It is a sharing experience with

the master and his or her young singers, and we the audience can all learn by being reminded of elocution and breathing. If only [that had been the case] in my day in the early 1960s in Sydney when I was having singing lessons. Oh! How good that would have been."

Paul-Anthony Keightley, bass on the Amelia Joscelyne Memorial Scholarship, says he found the few days with Simon O'Neill "enlightening to say the least".

"Simon discussed every element of what it takes to be a singer on the international stage," he says. "Simon shared his wealth of technical knowledge in such an approachable and practical way, we were all able to make changes instantly."

"But what I found most interesting and insightful was Simon's view on the profession. He stressed that

work is never complete: we are always learning, experimenting, growing and changing. He championed this with a childlike sense of eagerness, which was infectious. I'm very much looking forward to seeing Simon sing Calaf in *Turandot* at Deutsche Oper Berlin while fellow Melba alumnus Samuel Dale Johnson and I will be singing in *Eugene Onegin* with Nicole Car."

As for the master himself, he says he was thrilled to be invited back to do another Melba master class. "I loved being in Melbourne for it and we had a fantastic group of singers."

While he had various suggestions for the singers and the repetiteur during the private classes and the evening performance, his feeling overall was extremely enthusiastic and positive. "What I love about Melba is it is a top-level young artist program. I have been lucky to work with it a few times, and it is so well run," he says.

"The students are not just learning a few arias, but also learning about many important aspects of the career. It is not all about the performance, but getting your act together on many facets – being a good colleague, being professional, learning about how and where you are going to submit your tax – all of which is wonderful. I do quite a lot of teaching at universities and schools where we have a massive amount of young people studying classical voice and it frustrates me a little that the universities are getting big fees but I don't know if they are teaching all of that."

During the classes, a recurring note was encouragement to the singers to simply embrace their voices – all of which he said are extraordinary instruments, describing them variously as "beautiful", "glorious", "utterly surprising", and "the real deal".

Melba Opera Trust would like to thank De Bortoli, our wine sponsor, for supporting this successful master class. The Mentor Program is made possible thanks to support from John and Elizabeth Wright-Smith, the Reilly & Logie-Smith Mentor Endowment, Lady Southey AC, Opera Society of Victoria, Hamer Family Fund, Stuart Leslie Foundation and the Tallis Foundation.



Cleo Lee-McGowan and Mary-Jane Gething.



Geoff Hergt, Stephen Marsh, Valma Allaway and Deborah Saban.



Simon O'Neill, Andrew Sinclair and Rob Logie-Smith AM.

A MOMENT WITH A MENTOR

While he is well-used to regularly taking the stage internationally for long stretches, Simon O'Neill ONZM keeps his base in New Zealand. "I commute from Auckland for my engagements, but I want to live in paradise with my kids and my wife," he says. "So I am living the dream. I pinch my arm often."

Simon's recent master class with the 2018 Melba scholars brought back to him memories of some of the highlights of his own illustrious career so far, including a master class he once did with a man he describes as "the master himself", Luciano Pavarotti, at New York's Juilliard Opera Centre. "It was just

great working with him," he says. "I was really spoilt in New York to work with the best and most famous people out."

It all started in his homeland, though, where he studied at the University of Otago and the Victoria University of Wellington. One of his most momentous experiences was learning under the legendary Madame Virginia Zeani, a founding tutor at the New Zealand Opera School in Whanganui.

"She is one of the greatest and she was on faculty when I was changing from baritone to tenor," Simon recalls. "She was someone who could tell me all about my

idols, such as Pavarotti. When I got to the US and started my masters degree [at the Manhattan School of Music] I was well prepared." There, he received much sage advice from mezzo-soprano Marilyn Horne. "She was a great mentor. She really supports young singers, not just on the singing side."

Simon's stellar career has led him to being ranked as one of the world's top helden-tenors, having performed with the Metropolitan Opera, the Royal Opera House (Covent Garden), the Berlin, Hamburg and Bayerische Staatsopern, and Teatro alla Scala among others. His performances as Siegmund in *Die Walküre* at the Royal Opera House (Covent Garden), Teatro alla Scala, Berlin Staatsoper

and the Metropolitan Opera have brought him much acclaim and he is often described as "the" Wagnerian of his generation.

Simon is rightly proud of the Oceanic contribution to the global opera stage. "Both our countries, Australia and New Zealand, really do punch above their weight when it comes to the arts, and with opera singers in particular." But what he is often struck by on meeting some of the great young singers – many of whom have passed through the Melba – is "not just the singing but the modesty".

"It is phenomenal."

LESSONS IN LANGUAGE

When Melba Opera Trust alumni Georgia Hall (2017) and Shauntai Batzke (2015-16) sang together for the first time in a public performance, they did so in Amsterdam in February, using the Kurna language. They had to learn about this language from scratch, for both these young women have Wiradjuri heritage, hailing from central New South Wales, while Kurna belongs to the first peoples of the Adelaide plains.

Both women have been past recipients of the Harold Blair Opera Scholarship. For the trip to the Netherlands, the pair was central to the Australian Dance Theatre's *The Beginning of Nature*, a dance and music performance based on the idea of rhythms in nature. First staged at WOMAdelaide in 2016, the score's incorporation of the Kurna language was a new challenge to the sopranos, but they are both grateful it was overseen by consulting Kurna elders, one of whom coached them

with diction and interpretation. Georgia says that while she has been trying to teach herself Wiradjuri, Kurna was quite a different challenge, with only a few similarities in the vowels and consonants. And while singers are used to learning new languages for a part, incorporating an Aboriginal language – a rarity in the profession – was both progressive and an honour. Both women took it in their stride, grateful to have the tutelage of elder Jack Buckskin, a Kurna language teacher and dancer. After Shauntai became involved in *The Beginning of Nature*, she recommended Georgia to the directors. It was while the two young singers were working on the project that they realised family ties probably link them to the same tribe within the Wiradjuri. “It was really beautiful to find that connection,” Georgia says. “I never expected to find another Wiradjuri opera singer!” For the five days of rehearsals and ten-day Netherlands tour, Georgia and Shauntai learnt about the translation of the Kurna section of the libretto and

its connections with the dance component. “The vocals are written for a soprano and a mezzo, but Shauntai and I are both sopranos so she took the bottom and I took the top,” Georgia says. “And it is amazing music, very modern, but we still sang it in an operatic style.” Shauntai says their voices “really locked in as if we had sung together before”. The women agree the Harold Blair Opera Scholarship through Melba Opera Trust has provided an exceptional pathway into forging their careers. “It has been an overwhelming and extraordinary experience the last few years, discovering my voice through the scholarship,” Shauntai says. “It has been a really strong foundation for my growth and my artistry in terms of classical technique and also in the professional side of things and my confidence. And my desire to continually want to master my skill and my gift. It has been a huge part of my life.” Harold Blair’s daughter Nerida says her father – the renowned singer and activist – had visited



Australian Dance Theatre's *The Beginning of Nature* in which Melba alumni Shauntai Batzke and Georgia Hall performed in Amsterdam. Photography: Chris Herzfeld/Camlight Productions.

the Netherlands in the 1950s when he was singing overseas and living in Europe. He would have been extraordinarily proud of Georgia and Shauntai, Nerida says. Through the Blair scholarship, “these two amazing young people are able to develop and grow to the point where they can not only travel overseas to

perform, but get a lot of benefit from everything they see and hear and experience,” she says. Nerida sees their work as a continuing legacy, carrying forward a new chapter in the Blair story. “To know that others have gone forward: it is powerful.”

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