

THE MELBA

MAGAZINE OF MELBA OPERA TRUST

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INSIDE THE MELBA PROGRAM

STUART SKELTON: OLD AND NEW PARADIGMS

PASSING THE BATON: FROM ONE AJIOA TO THE NEXT

Contents

Note from the Chief Executive Officer 2

An update ... Dame Heather Begg Memorial Award 2

In conversation with Emily Edmonds 3

Inside the Melba Program 4–6

Launching a year of performance 6

Suitcase Aria 7

Passing the baton 8

Two years on ... 9

Passing on the gift of music 10

Stuart Skelton: Old and new paradigms 11

Home, Sweet Home 12

Melba Opera Trust is a legacy of the visionary soprano Dame Nellie Melba

Nellie once said, ‘in order to succeed in opera, you have to engage in the business of singing. A beautiful voice is not enough.’

This is at the heart of our philosophy: our artists are trained to be *more than a voice*, and are equipped with the skills they need to build sustainable careers. It begins with the Melba Program, our year-long, scholarship-funded training program which supports artists from around Australia with a bespoke course of artistic development, mentoring in business, professional and personal skill development, and performance experience.

Our pathways then extend to support artists at different stages of their careers through the Alastair Jackson International Opera Award, the Dame Heather Begg Memorial Award and the Alumni Grant Program.

Following in Nellie’s footsteps, many of our talented alumni are realising their dreams and performing in opera houses around the world.

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Melba Opera Trust acknowledges the Traditional Owners and peoples of the many lands on which we work, learn and perform, and recognise their enduring connection to Country. We pay our respects to Elders past, present and emerging, and to their song men and song women as the original storytellers.

Note from the Chief Executive Officer

Welcome to our autumn edition of *The Melba*, the bi-annual magazine of Melba Opera Trust.

For over 15 years Melba has been at the forefront of identifying, nurturing and developing Australian artists for careers in opera. For those reading this publication for the first time, our flagship initiative is the Melba Program, a unique approach to operatic development that we are extremely proud of. Through a national audition process, we select up to eight exceptional artists and invite them to undertake a year-long scholarship-funded development program. This year we welcomed two new singers and five returning artists into the program.

Our approach is bespoke: each Melba Artist follows a unique development plan based on their individual goals. No two plans are the same, and you can learn more about this on page 6. Then, several times throughout the year, the artists come together as a group for week-long intensives, working with experts in all areas. The program syllabus is comprehensive, and you can read more about this on pages 4 and 5.

A key tenet of the Melba Program is encouraging artists to think of themselves as their own small business. During a masterclass last year, American mezzo-soprano Raehann Bryce-Davis shared a valuable piece of advice, which continues to resonate: ‘be the CEO of their own business’, a modern take on Dame Nellie’s own conviction that ‘to succeed in opera you have to engage in the business of singing’.

Fundamentally, our aim is to help our artists build a steadfast foundation for long and sustainable careers. We equip them with a toolkit of skills that they can carry with confidence into *any* rehearsal room, in *any* opera company around the world.

The impact is clear. As I write, two of our illustrious alumnae are making major debuts: Lauren Fagan as Tatyana in *Eugene Onegin* with the Canadian Opera Company and Stacey Alleaume as Beatrice in *Beatrice di Tenda* with Deutsche Oper am Rhein in Düsseldorf. This latest debut marks Stacey’s seventh role debut this season in Europe.

Meanwhile, Samuel Sakker has been impressing German audiences in the role of *Parsifal* with Staatsoper Stuttgart. Nathan Bryon recently made his professional debut in *Parsifal* for the Vienna State Opera and on page 9, two years on from our inaugural international study tour, you’ll read that participant alumni are now performing in houses they first visited as part of the tour.

Closer to home, Emily Edmonds discusses the incredible year she is having, and we’re looking forward to hearing both Emily and Siobhan Stagg in Opera Australia’s production of *The Marriage of Figaro*. Cleo Lee-McGowan and Katherine Allen will be returning to Australia for *Abduction* with Victorian Opera, Nina Korbe and Samuel Dale Johnson recently performed in Jonathan Dove’s *Flight* with State Opera South Australia, and in June we’ll see a trio of Melbas in Pinchgut Opera’s *The Fairy Queen*: Eden Shifroni, Morgan Balfour and Louis Hurley. The list of alumni performances is long, and you can look forward to more updates in the next edition or via socials.

It’s gratifying to see these talented young people forge the careers they have worked so tirelessly to build over many years. The sheer geographic spread of the accolades also reminds me how far-reaching the impact of our work is. What may have been nurtured at Melba, now influences opera companies and audiences around Australia and the world.

Through the program, awards and grants that we offer across the year, we are extremely proud of the support and pathways that we are able to provide to Australian artists, and, in turn, to the opera community as a whole. At a time when support for the arts is shrinking, costs are rising and the competitive landscape has never been fiercer, these opportunities are more necessary than ever.

We’re keenly aware that the reason we can do what we do is because of the extraordinary generosity of our donors. Every gift, regardless of the amount, helps us to provide artists with the training, experiences and opportunities that their talent deserves. It takes a village, and we remain deeply grateful for ours.



Amy Black, Chief Executive Officer

Image: Phoebe Powell

An update ... Dame Heather Begg Memorial Award



Since receiving the 2024 Dame Heather Begg Memorial Award, soprano Anna-Louise Cole has embraced a new chapter, settling into life in the city of Bielefeld, Germany.

Bielefeld has proven to be the perfect base. ‘I’ve found that with auditions, flexibility is really key ... being able to get just about anywhere in Europe quickly has been a real advantage.’

Anna-Louise already has an impressive list of achievements back home: performing the title role in *Macbeth* for Opera Queensland and Sieglinde and Brünnhilde in Wagner’s *Ring* with Opera Australia. Now she has her eyes firmly set on establishing her career in Europe. The Award has been instrumental in helping her to fund important audition opportunities, vocal coaching and expand her professional network in Germany.

She also continues her work with longstanding vocal coaches in Berlin, London and Melbourne. Offering sound counsel for any young artist, she says, ‘a big part of building a career as a singer is learning what advice to take, when and from whom. Having trusted coaches and teachers, people who’ve known me and my voice for a long time, is absolutely vital.’

Anna-Louise has some exciting works on the horizon including ‘a return to a favourite, and an absolutely wonderful role debut’ which must, for the moment, remain confidential. As Anna-Louise explains, ‘If you’re not jumping in for someone, opera is usually planned years and years ahead, so long lead times (and keeping things secret) is a big part of this business.’

We look forward to sharing this ‘secret’ with readers soon.

We were deeply saddened to learn of the passing of Joseph Diflo earlier this year. The devoted, longtime partner of Dame Heather Begg DNZM OBE, Joe was a steadfast champion of her career. As well as being a Trustee of her estate, Joe personally played an important role in establishing the Dame Heather Begg Memorial Award, ensuring that Heather’s legacy will live on through the artists it supports. Our thoughts are with Joe’s family and friends during this time.

Past recipients of the Award:

- 2013 – Samuel Dundas
- 2014 – Janet Szepei-Todd
- 2015 – Amina Edris
- 2016 – Jeremy Kleeman
- 2017 – Emily Edmonds
- 2018 – Lauren Fagan
- 2019 – Nicholas Jones
- 2021 – Fleuranne Brockway
- 2022 – Filipe Manu
- 2023 – Nathan Bryon
- 2024 – Anna-Louise Cole

In conversation with Emily Edmonds

If there's a Melba alumna who embodies the principle of 'more than a voice', it's mezzo-soprano Emily Edmonds. In fact she describes herself as a 'singer-actor' before she gives her voice type.

STORY YVONNE FRINDLE

Australian audiences have seen her in everything from roles with Opera Australia (most recently Cinderella) to contemporary projects with Sydney Chamber Opera. A background in theatre has seen her take on directorial roles as well, forging relationships with theatre-makers and composers – 'the kind of people who are pulling apart what opera is and how it's made'. But there's more: she also emphasises the experience of motherhood as central to who she is as an artist and how she feels about her career.

That career is still relatively young – Emily entered the Melba Program in 2013, straight out of the Sydney Conservatorium of Music – but it has already seen exciting opportunities, creative triumphs and some daunting challenges.

Emily admits to being 'very bad at the flute' as a child. Her gateway to opera came via the Australian Theatre for Young People. 'That's where I found my people,' she explains, 'and something I loved: theatre and performance, and the rigorous interrogation of characters and storytelling.' And the music?

A singing teacher asked her if she knew what opera was (she had no idea) and gave her *The Marriage of Figaro* to watch. 'It was a revelation: theatre mixed with this amazing sound.' Her teacher was relieved to hear that she'd loved it. 'She said, "Thank goodness, because this is the kind of voice you have."'

Figaro has since become a personal favourite. She sang Cherubino in 2023 for State Opera South Australia, and will reprise the role with OA in Sydney in July–August. The State Opera production, which positioned the opera in the context of Australian politics (Cherubino was an intern), was 'a real hoot' but also a thoughtful treatment of one of opera's many 'problematic' storylines. The singer-actor who interrogates her characters and thinks deeply about storytelling was in her element.

Emily regards her Melba year as crucial to her career in that period between formal study and life as a professional artist. 'It's so well rounded, and as I move through the industry I've seen how important that is.' And the fact that Melba doesn't stage productions, frees the program to focus on the holistic aspect and to prepare singers for the demands of the next step: the young artist program in an opera company.

For Emily, that was the Jette Parker Artists Programme at Royal Ballet and Opera in London. 'When you walk into those big international houses as a young artist,' she says, 'you're performing, you're covering roles. Yes, you have access to coaching, but you're working for the company full time and the learning curve is thrillingly steep. You want to be prepared for that, and Melba bridges the gap.'

The Jette Parker program opened doors: a European agent, roles, and relationships with directors, and conductors and coaches. Soon Emily was singing

key roles from the standard repertoire with leading companies in Europe and the UK, as well as returning to Australia to perform with Pinchgut and Sydney Chamber Opera. She mentions a vocal injury that temporarily stalled things while she 'rebuilt and rehabbed', but which also saw her come back and do 'all of the best work of my life'.

That work included Varvara in a new Royal Opera production of Janáček's *Katya Kabanova* and Philip Venables and Ted Huffman's *Denis & Katya* – singing in the premiere in Philadelphia followed by a UK tour in early 2020. Emily was all set to head to Rome to rehearse *Katya Kabanova* when the COVID-19 pandemic struck.

'There were some big leaps happening in my career, and I'd gotten myself back after this enormous setback, and the pandemic just felt like the biggest blow. It was annihilating. It was so destructive for everyone within our industry.' It wasn't just the loss of work, Emily points out, but the uncertainty, the fear, and the pressure to make crucial decisions very quickly.

Nothing about an opera singer's career is easy. But Emily has bounced back again, with a healthy calendar of engagements in Australia and overseas. A Melba Alumni Grant was key to her post-pandemic career recovery, allowing her to travel, do auditions, perform and re-establish the relationships she'd built during her years in Europe.

Emily knows the vulnerability of being an artist, and while there are certain things she won't share (she doesn't put her daughter's face on social media, for instance), she also believes it's important to show some of that vulnerability. 'When it comes to things like mental health, and vocal health and psychological wellbeing, as well as women's health and reproduction – all of those things are fundamental to who we are,' she says. 'I do think it's really important to be open about them.'

And so the conversation pivots to unexplained fertility, endometriosis and motherhood, with the arrival of a 'beautiful baby'. Emily came up through the ranks at a time when women were being told they couldn't expect to have a baby and enjoy a flourishing career ('I think it's still happening, to be honest') and she's proud to belong to a generation that's challenging this assumption.

We talk of the challenges of being an artist with strong ties to Australia but a wealth of opportunities abroad – 'we're glorified nomads'. She reflects on what it was like to be 21 and unencumbered, able to 'fly off to Berlin and live in London', but also very lonely. And we return to the Melba principle of the whole person. 'If the quality of our relationships determines the quality of our lives, which is scientifically and psychologically proven,' she says, 'then I want to fight for those relationships – with children, or a partner, or friends, or family – and to lean on community. It takes a lot of courage and a lot of creativity.'



Emily received the Dame Nellie Melba Scholarship and Patrick & Vivian Gordon Award in 2013.

She was recipient of the 2017 Dame Heather Begg Memorial Award, and received the John & Elizabeth Wright-Smith Alumni Grant in 2022.



Main image: Victoria Cadisch. Inset image: Emily as Cinderella, Opera Australia. Image: Rhannon Hopley

Inside the Melba Program

STORY YVONNE FRINDLE



The View from the Inside

A year in the Melba Program begins with individual artistic plans – shaping the year’s activities to the goals and needs of each artist, and providing the framework for independent learning. Everything comes together through the Ryman Healthcare Performance Program – salons and concerts in which Melba Artists showcase their skills. The year is punctuated by seven week-long intensives, when the artists gather in Melbourne to work together in seminars and workshops from five core streams: Languages, Artistic Development, Wellness, Presentation and Business. Yvonne Frindle spoke with the 2025 cohort of artists to get the inside scoop on Melba’s intensives and the distinctive planning process.



Growth

Artistic Development with Aidan Hodder

John Wegner AO Opera Scholarship
Max & Jill Schultz Opera Society Scholarship

At Melba, ‘artistic development’ covers a wealth of skills, including virtually everything, beyond the actual singing, that’s required to present a compelling performance. Many of the workshops are related to stagecraft; others develop a contextual knowledge of the art form. Some are specific to certain corners of the repertoire; others, such as mock auditions, can be broadly applied. These sit alongside masterclasses and vocal coaching. Needless to say, what follows is a very selective account from a long conversation with baritone Aidan Hodder.

‘Movement and stagecraft is important,’ says Aidan, ‘because directors now expect you to do many more physical things, some totally ridiculous, while you sing.’ Melba Artists work on stagecraft with director-choreographer-singer Lois Redman, and Aidan sums up her approach: ‘The most important thing you can bring with you on stage, apart from your singing technique, is the ability to stand, to sit down, to move your arms, to do anything, in a way that does not impede your singing – it should flow like water.’ Redman has a gift, says Aidan, for delving into a character, finding what’s comedic, what’s dramatic, what’s compelling, and bringing that out without overplaying it.

Tracie Morley (dance) ‘is like a lightning bolt in the room – we’re pushed to our limits and at the end we’re aching and sore, but it’s nice to just use our bodies for a bit and not worry how we sound.’

Studying intimate stage work with actor-singer and director Brendan Hanson allows artists to explore a long-overdue topic. Glenn Winslade and Brian Castles-Onion turn the focus to singers of the past, the art of listening, understanding how style changes and the development of personal taste. Specialists such as harpsichordist Erin Helyard (ornamentation) and conductor Brett Weymark (oratorio) can only offer a taste of their topics, but provide a ‘ramp’ to further exploration. Fresh perspectives come from an invigorating series of masterclasses, and coaching sessions with visiting mentors also provide valuable connections and insights into the different stages and paths of a singer’s journey.

But when asked for a highlight, Aidan immediately turns to the heart of the Melba Program, Sharolyn Kimmorley. ‘She has a razor wit, and incredible memory and she’ll call a spade a spade. And every time you see her, you’ll know if you’ve improved, because you’re back under that same precise scrutiny – it’s an amazing litmus test for your progression, like measuring your height on the door frame when you’re young.’

Connection

Languages with Syrah Torii

Paulette Bisley Opera Scholarship
Eleanor Blakemore Opera Society Scholarship

Australians with English as their mother tongue are lucky if they master one other language in a lifetime. Most opera singers will become polyglots – fluent in three or four languages, able to ‘fake it’ in a few more.

Singers arrive at Melba from diverse linguistic backgrounds. Mezzo-soprano Syrah Torii had studied German for years but was weaker in French, and her language program was tailored with this in mind, ranging from private tuition online to the sessions of the Melba Program. These include Italian conversation with Giuseppe D’Orazzi, Italian diction with Matteo Dalle Fratte, creator of the Melo fonetica Method, and French diction with Marie-France Lefebvre.

Conversation, explains Syrah, is the kind of language study familiar to most: communicating with fluency, developing vocabulary, refining grammar. Diction is more specialised. ‘We look at the detail of the language,’ she says, ‘the production of vowels and consonants, the placement of stress, and how to produce the sounds in a performance space.’ The Melo fonetica Method, for example, ‘helps singers deliver expressive and idiomatic Italian that will carry in an auditorium’ and includes detailed analysis of the metrics and rhythms of a text and its music. ‘This detailed work empowers singers to use their language with conviction and to fill the space.’ The method also brings an appreciation of how a good composer writes with the natural stress of a language in mind, while sometimes shifting or distorting the natural stresses to create tension or dissonance.

Fluency in a language frees a singer from relying on rote imitation or International Phonetic Alphabet transcriptions. ‘With every language I learn, it enhances my performance because an understanding of the text becomes ingrained.’ But even more exciting: ‘It also opens up my ability to connect with people, both on and off the stage.’



Image: Phoebe Powell



Image: Phoebe Powell

Success

Business with Eden Shifroni

Dame Nellie Melba Scholarship
Patrick & Vivian Gordon Award
Ryman Healthcare Opera Scholarship

It's standard procedure to visit an artist's website before interviewing them. Soprano Eden Shifroni's site is an exemplar for Nellie Melba's belief that 'in order to succeed in opera, you have to engage in the business of singing'. The business seminars in the Melba Program are wide-ranging, taking in time management and conflict resolution; financial planning, tax and legal contracts; fundraising and grant writing; digital marketing; and relationship building; as well as industry specific topics such as finding and working with an agent and networking opportunities.

A second-year artist, Eden has now completed some sessions such as conflict resolution twice, and observes that it's not at all repetitive. 'Conflict resolution was one of the things I struggled with the most,' she says, 'and it was interesting to compare one year to the next and reflect on the clear improvement.' Eden had always tried to avoid conflict and the workshop taught her how to approach difficult conversations in a way that would align with her values of respect, curiosity and freedom. She subsequently worked with strengths coach Susie Edmonds in a private session ahead of a crucial conversation she'd been dreading. 'We laid it out from my perspective, from the other person's perspective, and then from an impartial fly-on-the-wall's perspective. And the conversation could not have gone better.'

These and other skills needed in the business of singing are rarely taught at university, says Eden, yet 'they are as important as an impressive musical performance. So much takes place long before an artist even steps on the stage and it's a fiercely competitive industry. It's not enough now just to be a singer. You have to be a singer *and* a graphic designer, a public speaker, a grant writer, proficient with financial and legal language, great with social media – there are so many things you have to be.'

At the same time, Susie Edmonds has impressed on the artists that they don't have to do everything by themselves – they can outsource. 'And the great thing about the Melba Program,' says Eden, 'is that we now have a network of professionals we can consult if we get stuck.'

Communication

Presentation with Jack Bolton

John & Elizabeth Wright-Smith Scholarship
Annie McFarling Opera Scholarship

Musicians speaking from the stage is a relatively new phenomenon. Musicians speaking from the stage with the same level of skill and preparation they bring to their performances is even newer. Melba ensures its artists are ahead of the game with a series of workshops on concert introductions led by public speaking coach Judith Field and broadcaster and conductor Graham Abbott, followed by a masterclass before an audience of donors.

'It's not easy to speak about a piece you're about to perform, and it's the death of many musicians,' says bass Jack Bolton, 'it's important to do it in such a way that's not only practised, but simple, effective and in keeping with the theme of the concert, so it enhances your performance instead of detracting from it.' Concert presentation leads naturally to media and interview skills, another Graham Abbott session, and the conversation briefly turns 'meta'.

The workshops recognise that presentation continues offstage and into even seemingly casual moments. Some sessions, explains Jack, cover 'presentation of you as a person – after performances when you're chatting with donors and concert-goers, and how you carry yourself at work'. They also cover topics that people in their 20s rarely have to worry about, such as etiquette and protocol, and surviving a cocktail event. A recent men's styling session with Suzanne Dekyvere revealed details often overlooked, especially in Australia's relaxed culture. 'I had a tux,' says Jack, 'but now I have the right bow tie, and I'm on the lookout for patent leather shoes.'

Jack emphasises that the skills taught in the presentation seminars 'aren't just a part of this career but a part of life' – applicable in many different situations. 'The Melba Program is so well-rounded,' he adds. 'People come out of the program way more confident than they came in.'



Image: Phoebe Powell

Juggling

Wellness with Caitlin Forrest

Joseph Sambrook Opera Scholarship

It might sound like a platitude, but a healthy mind and a healthy body really does equal a healthy voice, and mezzo-soprano Caitlin Forrest is deeply grateful for Melba's focus on wellness – a crucial aspect of a singer's career but something rarely found in similar programs. The sessions encompass overall wellbeing, health and nutrition, performance psychology, vocal health and Alexander technique. They're taught by specialists with first-hand experience of performers' needs, and 'they understand singers' becomes a refrain in the conversation.

For example, Susie Edmonds is the mother of an opera singer (Emily Edmonds, see page 3) as well as a strengths coach, and Caitlin credits Susie with helping her build confidence and the mental skills needed to become the best artist possible. 'She knows what we're going through,' says Caitlin, as she talks about a holistic approach that recognises that singers must also be jugglers, making time

not just for the art form but for personal relationships, hobbies and physical wellbeing.

Caitlin credits performance psychology coach Dr Andrew Waterson with giving her the strategies to overcome anxiety about French repertoire (stemming from a concert memory lapse as a student), and shares an insight worthy of a spot on the fridge door: 'Negative experiences are "banked" automatically in the brain, so we need to make a point of manually banking the positives.'

You could fill the fridge door with Melba Wellness insights, from warm-up strategies for activating the voice in the morning to the vexed matter of high heels and posture. 'It's been revelatory for me,' says Caitlin, 'and I've learned so much about myself.'



The skills taught in the presentation seminars 'aren't just a part of this career but a part of life'

Jack Bolton

continued ...



Inside the Melba Program

STORY YVONNE FRINDLE

Vision

Individual Development Plans with Chloe James and Sophie Hamer

'it pushes you to become an independent artist'

Chloe James

Mezzo-soprano Chloe James confesses that she was a little mystified coming into the Melba Program, and observes that many outsiders don't really know what the Melba Program involves. In her case, she'd recently completed a master's degree in opera in Melbourne. 'It was fantastic for my growth as a singer, but it had limitations because it was a generalised program. But the Melba Program allows you to focus on your own development.' Chloe has had lots of dance training, for example, and is confident with that aspect of stagecraft, but she knew she wanted to focus on languages and, in particular, improve her fluency in German and Italian to match her French.

'That was very important when I was putting together my artistic development plan for the year – identifying my strengths and weakness, and discussing with Sharolyn Kimmorley and Amy Black the areas where growth needs to happen.'

Soprano Sophie Hamer had a similar discussion. 'It's about reflecting on yourself as an artist and



Chloe James

Ruskin Opera Scholarship
Jo Horgan & Peter Wetenhall Opera Scholarship

figuring out where you'd like additional help or training and using your scholarship funds to enable that. No two plans will be the same – it's completely tailored to the artist as an individual.'

Sophie explains that each plan covers four categories: vocal development, language, movement and stage craft, and professional activities. Like Chloe, Sophie identified languages as a priority, having studied only Italian in any depth. Vocally, she wanted to expand her repertoire, adding operatic roles to the concert and oratorio works she'd sung when starting out, and trying new styles.

Underpinning each plan are the scholarship funds that will support it, and budgeting is a key part of the process. Both Chloe and Sophie talk about allocating funds for tickets, so they can attend concerts and opera productions. Sophie recalls the memorable experience from her student days when she was able to see *The Marriage of Figaro* at the Wiener Staatsoper, and how witnessing



Sophie Hamer

The Amelia Joscelyne Memorial Scholarship

this opera in Mozart's home city changed her perceptions. Chloe talks about the benefits of being able to see the same production more than once and observe different performances, as well as 'the magic of seeing a role you've studied by yourself come to life on stage'.

As a young singer, just turned 23, Chloe recognises that much of her own development will come from her vocal lessons and coaching sessions. 'An important aspect of the planning process is that it pushes you to become an independent artist with autonomy over your development. So not just identifying "vocal coaching" but researching different coaches and finding out what works for me.' The planning process, she explains, doesn't just shape the Melba scholarship year, but nurtures a mindset for the future, coaching artists in how to plan for lifelong artistic development. 'It sets you up to be self-reflective, to be honest with yourself, aware of your strengths and weaknesses as an artist, and to plan your time and energy accordingly.'



Launching a year of performance

STORY BRUCE RAGGATT

Backstage was abuzz at Gasworks Theatre (Melbourne), with a mixture of nervous energy and anticipation as 2025 Melba Artists readied themselves for their first series of concerts together. Final touches of makeup, another pouf of the hair as voices warmed up ... *Meet the Artists* was about to begin.

The Ryman Healthcare Performance Program provides the opportunity for singers to put their behind-the-scenes learning into practice, whilst also entertaining appreciative audiences. Concerts may include events staged by Melba Opera Trust, performances for our partners and private engagements for external clients. *Meet the Artists*, the annual Melbourne and Sydney concerts introducing the artists to the Melba community, are effectively the launch for the twelve months of performing ahead.

Director Lois Redman, who has directed these concerts several times, says 'working with each singer in preparation for *Meet the Artists* was so rewarding. Every artist grew in their understanding of the whole body as the instrument'. Lois adds that the singers 'want to tell stories clearly and meaningfully, with a refined and polished technique. This is very demanding and requires much practice and experience. Performance opportunities are essential.'

First-year mezzo-soprano Chloe James believes that 'the only way to get better at adapting to different audiences, singing acoustics and of course, covering unexpected mistakes (the joys of live theatre!) is to get out there and do it.' She says, 'the Melba community is filled with some of the warmest, most supportive people, so singing for them for our first performance of the year was truly special.'

Performances don't just take place in concert venues and theatres. Some of the places where



Images: David Ng and Anna Kucera

Melba Artists have sung in the last twelve months have included stately homes, restaurants, churches, racecourses, even Pentridge Prison.

One regular venue is Beleura House & Garden, former home of composer John Tallis. Just as he sought to foster new talent, Beleura's manager Martin Green continues Tallis' legacy, passionately supporting the next generation of Australian singers.

'After the COVID lockdowns our patrons know that there is no substitute for the magical feeling one experiences listening to Melba Artists perform on stage just metres away. That we get to see these artists before they go off overseas to enjoy stellar careers is our great good fortune.' Martin notes with a smile that 'Dame Nellie Melba was a regular visitor at Beleura as well.'

Another annual performance, *Opera in the Mansion*, takes place at Mandeville Hall, on the Loreto Toorak campus. Heritage Collections and Records Manager Steve Stefanopoulos has welcomed audiences for over ten years into the mansion's intimate Oak Parlour to these sellout concerts. He has proudly fostered 'a public keen to experience such talented musicians' in these magnificent surroundings. And the chance to mingle with the Melba Artists after the show, with a glass of sparkling and gourmet chicken sandwiches, is an additional thrill for singers and audience members alike.



Ryman Healthcare Performance Program

Find out more about where you can hear Melba Artists perform – melbaoperatrust.com.au

To feature Melba Artists at your next special occasion, please contact Artistic Manager Sharolyn Kimmorley at skimmorley@melbaoperatrust.com.au



Suitcase Aria

An important part of the Melba Program is ensuring our artists are industry-ready. In many cases, that means preparing for life overseas. One regular presenter is Kathleen Parker who advises Melba Artists on how to create a professional life in opera in Germany, and how to navigate German bureaucracy.

Yvonne Frindle spoke to Kathleen about her distinctive portfolio career, the challenges that face young singers looking to establish themselves in her adopted country, and the importance of faxes.

STORY YVONNE FRINDLE

The portfolio career is common in opera. Even singers who enjoy the luxury of a salaried job with an opera house may still take on short-term contracts to build their repertoire and gain experience. Others combine freelance singing with complementary work, wearing several hats to better balance their income or their creative lives, or both. Google Kathleen Parker and you'll find the Australian soprano and vocal coach; you'll also find a managing director, the founder of Red Tape Translation.

From her base in Berlin, Kathleen offers a valuable service that helps young English-speaking singers navigate the inevitable bureaucracy of an expat career in Germany. That service is supported by first-hand experience as an opera singer; she knows as well as anyone that 'a beautiful voice is not enough'. But a beautiful voice was how it began.

Kathleen Parker grew up in Brisbane, where she graduated with honours from the University of Queensland. She was in the final cohort at the Australian Opera Studio, an intensive training program that ran in Perth under the direction of Gregory Yurisich. The following year, in 2009, she won the Opera Foundation of Australia/Audi German–Australia Opera Competition, with a prize that included a year-long ensemble contract at Opera Cologne. But she'd already decided that Germany would be the next step in her career. 'So I booked the ticket, thinking the chances of me actually winning the competition were slim.' Departing just two weeks after the competition may have meant forgoing the delights of driving around in an Audi convertible for nine months, but it saw her arriving in Berlin, where she met her future husband, a very willing participant in her German language immersion strategy.

Cologne was 'an insane year' (in a good way), with many roles to suit her dramatic soprano voice. Germany, she explains, is one of the few countries with an opera house system 'where you can have a full-time job with one theatre'. So long as you have

a supportive theatre and you don't burn out, 'it's an incredible platform for gathering experience'. Cologne proved an excellent foundation for the decade of freelance singing that followed.

Red Tape Translation began as a side project, a complementary business she could do while she was 'sitting around waiting for work'. It fulfilled a real need, but she quickly discovered that this growing business had its own ebbs and flows, and the busy times didn't always coordinate neatly with those in her singing career, which was also flourishing. The additional demands of motherhood, travel, and the pressure of being constantly at the top of her game, eventually began to affect her mental health. 'I began having anxiety and panic attacks,' she says. 'I was just trying to be too many things at once.'

Eventually, Kathleen made Red Tape her main job. 'The most practical thing I offer,' she says, 'is help with immigration and bureaucracy.' For a newly arrived singer, especially one without fluent German, figuring out what kind of visa or residence permit is needed, understanding contracts, and making important decisions about which offers to take up so as to ensure their stay in the country, can be overwhelming.

To stay in Germany, for example, the immigrant must nominate a purpose – study, employment, or self-employment – and there's no visa that covers a combination of these. So it was a particular triumph when one client, a prominent singer, arrived with a six-figure mix of employment contracts with theatres and freelance contracts for major tours. 'I prepared them for the different scenarios, then we went to the immigration office together and asked to speak to the head. And they did actually make an exception to allow this singer to take up both employment and self-employment, which is very rare.'

German bureaucracy has, if anything, become more complicated with COVID-19 and the invasion of Ukraine. 'Every immigration office in Germany is

overworked and understaffed, and the waiting times have gotten much worse. They do have solutions to deal with the backlog, but they don't publish them and no one knows about them.' One trend that went viral was known as the 'fax hack'. It might be the 21st century, but, Kathleen explains, 'sending a fax provided the best tangible proof you could get, not only that you sent something, but exactly what you sent'. She noticed that faxed correspondence received a reply within a few days, whereas an email took months. This was quite effective until the German authorities responded to the viral #faxhack trend by switching off their fax machines.

Kathleen has become a well-known advocate in Germany for freelance artists and creatives in particular. She speaks in webinars on the artists' social insurance scheme in Germany and recently launched a video training program to help freelance creatives apply for the highly sought-after 'artists' visa' in Berlin.

Kathleen also has what she calls a 'geeky bureaucracy checklist' of things to pack. Most young singers, for example, would not think to bring their original degree certificate, leaving it framed on the wall of the family home. But it will be essential to the process of having academic credentials recognised in Germany. She talks about strategies for finding an agent, how to plan audition trips, the benefits of the new Deutschland train ticket, and more.

Then, as our conversation draws to a close, she brings it back to music, and singing. Kathleen might be the queen of 'geeky checklists', but she's still a musician at heart. In 2023, she was invited to sing with the professional Vocalconsort Berlin in a performance of Mahler's Third Symphony at the Philharmonie, with Teodor Currentzis conducting his Utopia orchestra. Having not sung since 2019, she almost said no. It turned out to be incredible: 'The passion they poured into the music was like nothing I'd experienced before. It was life-changing. I was very nervous, but it was phenomenal. And I was there.'



image: Delphine Kermorant

'The most practical thing I offer,' says Kathleen, 'is help with immigration and bureaucracy.'

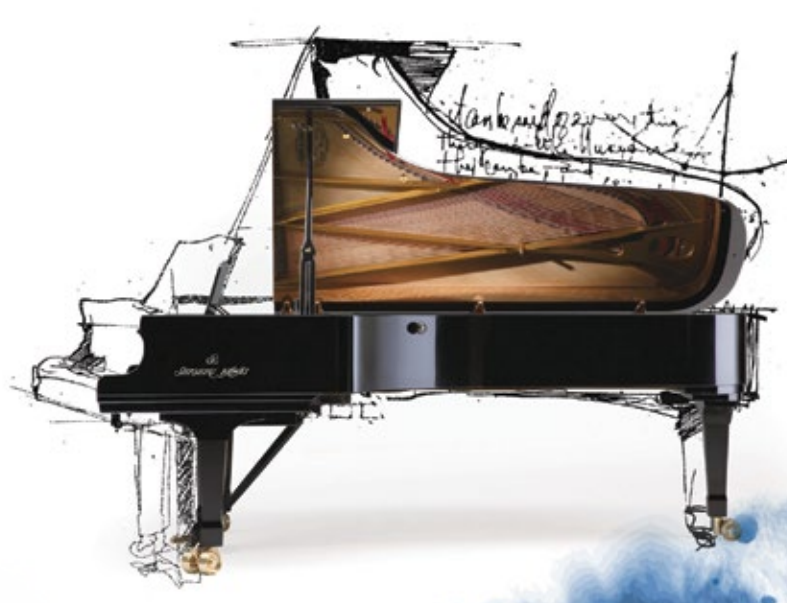


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Passing the baton



Georgia performing in RCM's production of *Les Illuminations*.
Image: Chris Christodoulou.

Earlier this year Eden Shifroni was announced as the next recipient of the Alastair Jackson International Opera Award (AJIOA). The Award provides Eden with a full-tuition scholarship, plus a travel and living allowance, to complete a two-year postgraduate Artist Diploma in Opera at the Royal College of Music (RCM). In preparation for her move to London in September, Eden met with current AJIOA recipient Georgia Melville to learn more about the course, the Award and life in London. An exchange of information and a symbolic passing of the baton from one AJIOA recipient to the next.

Our appreciation goes to Alastair Jackson AM, the Tait Memorial Trust and the loyal donors whose tax-deductible gifts support this important Award.

E: Looking back on your time at the Royal College of Music so far, what has been the most exciting or unexpected part of your journey – both musically and personally?

G: One of the more exciting and surreal experiences I had during my time at the Royal College of Music was finishing my day at College, then walking over the road to rehearse at the Royal Albert Hall for my first professional performance there! Every year Glyndebourne takes one of its summer productions and presents it as a semi-staged performance as part of the BBC Proms – in this case, Poulenc's masterpiece *Dialogues of the Carmelites*. That walk felt symbolic of the progress I had made since studying at the RCM and how much further I still wanted to go!

Moving from Australia to London is a big transition! What were some of the challenges in settling into life here, and was there anything that helped you feel at home?

I think that first move can feel so daunting. When I moved to London, I went from Sydney lockdown straight into the hustle and bustle of the big city. That in itself was a shock to the system, never mind a new course and lots of new people! Luckily, I moved over at the same time as my boyfriend and some friends, many of whom are fellow Melbas, so having that strong community of fellow Aussies really grounded me in those first few months.

Melba Opera Trust has been such a big part of both our journeys. How did your time with Melba prepare you for the RCM, and have any lessons from that time stuck with you?

The Melba Program offers so much more than a typical young artist's program, in that it is holistic in its approach to helping singers prepare for the next step – such as moving overseas for further study. The excellent musical and artistic training we received meant that I was in a good position to hit the ground running with my new teacher and audition for projects as soon as I arrived. But it was the additional 'life lessons' I picked up that really helped my confidence when I started at the RCM and helped me to adjust to life in London. For example, the sessions on self-promotion and public speaking came in handy when introducing myself and building connections in a new city. Melba also put me in touch with alumna Zoe Drummond, who knew about the ins and outs of UK visas, and previous AJIOA winner Jeremy Kleeman, who gave me practical tips such as how to get free Alexander Technique lessons at the RCM and where to lock up my bike! I am so grateful to be part of this supportive community and continue the cycle of Melbas helping each other.

While in London, have you had the chance to work on any exciting projects outside of the RCM, such as with Glyndebourne or other companies? What has it been like balancing study with professional opportunities?

While the Opera course at the RCM is intensive, there is time to pursue certain professional opportunities that help you to establish yourself as an early-career artist. Glyndebourne and other UK summer festivals are a brilliant way to gain professional stage experience and work with the best of the best. When I worked there, I had to miss the summer term, but it was such an invaluable opportunity that the RCM actively encouraged me to do so! As for other opportunities, you must be selective because the RCM stages three operas a year, and there are lots of coachings, lessons and masterclasses to keep you busy. I have done external concerts through the Josephine Baker Trust scheme and some Education/Outreach work with The Mozartists and Opera Holland Park, which I found to be extremely worthwhile.

You performed at the Klosters Christmas Festival in Switzerland. What was that experience like? Any advice for me as I prepare for my own performance there?

I had a wonderful experience at the Klosters Christmas Festival! We performed a festive

program of opera, operetta and Christmas carols with chamber orchestra and choir. A highlight for me was singing Hahn's *Venezia* songs with harp on the first night. It was an intimate concert venue, so we could really lean into the sonorities of the voice and harp and enjoy the acoustic. To wow your Swiss audience, I would recommend programming your 'showstopper' aria and some repertoire in German, which they will appreciate! Klosters is covered in picturesque snow in December, so bring a warm coat!

London is an incredibly vibrant city for classical music. Have you had any standout moments seeing great singers at places like the Royal Opera House or Albert Hall? Any performances that really inspired you?

The first production I saw in London was a huge 'pinch-me' moment, I remember it so vividly! It was a revival of the classic McVicar production of *The Magic Flute* at the Royal Opera House, with a fantastic role debut from RCM alumnus Huw Montague-Rendall as Papageno and strong performances all round. I'll never forget the feeling of inspiration and awe I felt walking into the theatre for the first time, after not having seen a live performance for so long due to the pandemic. I was blown away by *Festen* recently, also at the Royal Opera House. This was new opera at its finest – gripping and disturbing. Allan Clayton's pianissimi were daring and heartbreakingly beautiful. I felt very lucky to see it!

As you get ready for the next stage of your career, what's on the horizon?

In June I'll perform in my final production at the RCM: *Love, Conflict, Renaissance* directed by Sir Thomas Allen. I'm excited to sink my teeth into some Monteverdi madrigals and Barbara Strozzi songs. After that, I will be joining the Young Artists' Programme at the National Opera Studio (NOS) in London and starting the next phase of my artistic journey. I am excited to participate in residencies with Opera North, Scottish Opera and Welsh National Opera and continue to audition here and abroad for the following season.

Is there any advice you'd give to someone just beginning their own RCM journey?

Be well prepared, and trust yourself! You never know what opportunity may come along, so have four or five arias that showcase not only your beautiful voice but also your personality, ready to go in your audition package. Put yourself out there and be hungry to learn more, and to improve as an artist!



Image: Anna Kucera

Two years on ...

In July 2023 four Melba Artists – Samantha Hargreaves, Natalie Grimmett, James Emerson and Tom Nicholson – travelled to London for the inaugural Prior Family Foundation International Study Tour. They then journeyed separately in Europe for language study and cultural immersion. Now, nearly two years later, they share their memories of that trip and how it shaped what they are doing today.

STORY BRUCE RAGGATT



James Emerson as Bogdanowitsch in *The Merry Widow*.
Image: Chris Christodoulou

The tour started auspiciously with private access to The Royal Opera House, Covent Garden. Melba alumna Siobhan Stagg, who was singing Susanna in *The Marriage of Figaro* there at the time, ushered the Melbas backstage for a glimpse of the iconic venue. The singers coached with David Gowland and Elaine Kidd from the Jette Parker Artists Programme. Samantha credits the resulting connection with David for giving her ‘an edge’ when she successfully auditioned to cover Vesperta in Telemann’s *Pimpinone*, which will be performed at the Royal Opera House’s Linbury Theatre in May.

Before the trip, Samantha Hargreaves, like Natalie and Tom, had never been to London. Indeed, she had never been anywhere other than the Philippines to visit family. But Samantha quickly stepped into the rhythm of this busy and exciting musical city where she would end up making her home for the next two years, studying at Guildhall School of Music and Drama. Now, as Samantha contemplates her move to Germany in October, she has greater perspective on her vocal growth during her time studying in the UK.

Having worked extremely hard on her high notes and coloratura with her teacher, Janice Chapman, Samantha is gratified that her work is paying off. Her singing in Jonathan Dove’s *Manfield Park* – based on the Jane Austen novel – garnered several fine reviews, including one in *The Times* ‘the soprano Samantha Hargreaves ... spread her wings with some very nicely produced featherlight high notes and coloratura’. Samantha is excited that her ease on high has opened a new door to other repertoire.

James’s highlight was the journey to Glyndebourne. As James recalls, it was incredible to see people ‘getting all dressed up to go out to this opera house in the middle of nowhere’. Following tradition, the Melba Artists also dressed in their finery and picnicked on the lawns before seeing *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, with two Melba alumni, Lauren Fagan and Samuel Dale Johnson, in principal roles. James remembers sitting in the audience thinking, ‘I would really like to sing on this stage one day.’ And two years later, he has come ‘full circle’, appearing in this year’s festival as a member of the men’s chorus for *Parsifal*.

James will soon finish his Master of Performance (Vocal) at the Royal College of Music and will start an Artist Diploma in Opera at Guildhall in September. On a full scholarship, he will stay in the UK for another two years to get more roles under

his belt and take his artistry ‘to another level’. He reflects that for him the tour highlighted that ‘unless you have gone overseas and ... met people who are doing this at a very elite level, you don’t really know what the expectations are.’

After their time in the UK, the artists each embarked on study in Europe. For Tom, the opportunity to do some self-determined travel and study was his highlight. Although already committed to going to Germany, the tour enabled him to spend three weeks there, ‘a huge chance for me to see what I had gotten myself into!’ He undertook an intensive German course, maintaining ‘there’s a difference between learning at home and going to the country and trying to speak it. If you are going to sing German in Germany well, you probably need to be quite good at it!’ he adds with a wry smile. Because of the tour Tom felt much better prepared. ‘I felt excited to make the jump. If I didn’t have that chance I would have been scared, really nervous.’

But why Germany? For Tom, there were two reasons: his love of Lieder and the fact there are so many opera houses. Now settled in Leipzig, Tom has been excited to work with his teacher, Roland Schubert, a stalwart at the Oper Leipzig. Tom says his teacher has helped him ‘secure a very solid technique’, ‘found more colour, more beauty, more power’ and helped him find work and connections on the busy concert and Lieder scene in Germany.

Soon to finish his Master in Opera Singing at the Hochschule für Musik und Theater Felix Mendelssohn Bartholdy Leipzig, Tom will focus on auditions for Young Artist programs, Fest positions and an agent. Tom is currently making his professional debut in the role of Antonio in Rossini’s *Il viaggio a Reims* at Opera Leipzig and there are exciting projects on the horizon, too, which, tantalisingly, Tom cannot announce yet!

For Natalie ‘the biggest takeaway from the international study tour was hearing the standard of singing. I got to hear some really good singing and ... I also heard some singing that I didn’t like as



Tom, Samantha, Natalie and James singing in the concert *In Melba's Footsteps* for the Tait Foundation in London.



Samantha Hargreaves as Mary Crawford in *Mansfield Park*.
Image: David Monteith-Hodge from Photographise.

much, and I feel that was the start of me discerning what is good singing and what I would like to aspire to with my singing.’

After Paris and Italy, Natalie finally stopped in Nice where she undertook French lessons in the mornings before catching the afternoon bus to Monaco, along the spectacular coastal road, for singing lessons. She focused on French, preparing her to study a Master of Music (Opera and Voice) at McGill University in French-speaking Montreal. Initially drawn to McGill by the technical focus of training in North America, Natalie believes her technique has also ‘come a long way’.

McGill’s latest production was the classically inspired musical *The Light in the Piazza*. ‘It is actually my favourite musical ever’ exclaims Natalie, ‘so I was really happy to be involved in it.’ The role of Franca showcased ‘the whole extremes of (my) range’. Natalie’s current project is *Svadba* (Wedding), a small student-lead opera, which has given her the chance to work with the composer, Ana Soloklovic.

All of the artists are keen to share how grateful they are for their time in the Melba Program and for the impact the study tour has made on their careers. Tom says, ‘honestly, the most important thing I want to say is thank you ... the fact that I was ready to come (to Germany), I was ready to grow and ready to learn ... that was thanks to Melba.’

‘unless you have gone overseas and ... met people who are doing this at a very elite level, you don’t really know what the expectations are.’



Above: Tom Nicholson, as Herr Fluth, during a break in *The Merry Wives of Windsor*
Left: Natalie Grimmett as Franca in *The Light in the Piazza* Image: Stephanie Sedlbauer.



The inaugural International Study Tour was made possible thanks to the Prior Family Foundation. Their gift is still yielding benefits for our artists and their audiences today.



Passing on the gift of music

For more than a decade John Edward Smith has been part of the Melba community, enjoying performances from over 50 aspiring artists, seeing their careers evolve and providing generous support towards the annual program. An accomplished pianist in his own right, Bruce Raggatt met with John, to learn more about his musical journey, his influences over the years and his lasting gift that that will help others continue on their own musical paths.

STORY BRUCE RAGGATT



'I owe my mother a lot. I owe her probably all my knowledge of music'

John Edward Smith

'I owe my mother a lot. I owe her probably all my knowledge of music', says John, as he recalls his mother, Marie Therese, who, despite unpromising circumstances, imbued her son with a lifelong passion. John intends to honour his mother and her influence upon his musical life with a bequest to establish The Marie Therese and John E Smith Scholarship for promising young singers.

Marie Therese was born in 1891, growing up in Albert Park. It was here at the local convent that she first had piano lessons with one of the nuns, Mother St Thomas. Then, after leaving school and while working as a seamstress at Buckley & Nunn, she pursued musical studies at the Conservatorium of Music, Melbourne, the same institution at which Dame Nellie Melba taught singing. Informed that her hands were too small to continue with piano as her first study, Marie Therese chose to make singing her main subject instead.

Several years later Marie Therese followed her husband, Leonard Smith, to a remote valley in Papua New Guinea, where he worked for a gold mining company. In the town of Wau, in 1932, John was born. Despite the remoteness of the Australian administered territory in the 1930s, Marie Therese was determined to pass on her own love of music to her son. Somehow, when he was five, she managed to acquire an upright piano and taught him to play. John recalls that he took to it, 'like a duck to water'.

Life was relatively untroubled in Papua New Guinea until the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbour changed everything for everyone. The news travelled around the world, even to remote Wau, and, because the town lay almost exactly on the route that Japan was expected to follow to attack Australia, the call to evacuate women and children went out. In no time at all, Marie Therese and John boarded a plane with wooden benches, no seatbelts and next to no luggage to fly to Port Moresby, then on to Cairns. From there they took a fourteen-day train journey until, at last, mother and son arrived in Melbourne.

John was enrolled at the Christian Brothers College in East St Kilda, resuming piano lessons with a new teacher, Mr Leo Collins, having not had the chance to play for some years. John also started to sing and, while still a boy soprano, made it into the finals for his age group of the intercollege eisteddfod. John recalls singing 'a ditty about

Robinson Crusoe' most beautifully before forgetting the words.

Underwhelmed by her son's lack of improvement with Mr Collins, Marie Therese decided that it was time for a new piano teacher. St Euphrasie, one of the Good Shepherd nuns in Albert Park where his mother herself had learnt, helped John attain his A MusA. And Marie Therese purchased a Gors and Kallmann upright piano for John to practise at home.

John had contemplated joining a religious order for some time and in 1953 he went to a Ballarat seminary to begin his studies for ordination to the priesthood. Thanks to his musical training he became the church organist there and even produced all-male cast versions of *HMS Pinafore* and *The Mikado*, accompanying the shows on a piano from the wings. John eventually decided to leave the order to pursue the law and it was towards the end of his studies at The University of Melbourne that he decided to take up music studies again, this time with Nancy Weir, an outstanding Australian pianist who had learnt from the legendary Artur Schnabel in Germany.

John enjoyed his lessons with Nancy. She lived in Hawthorn with a nine-foot grand piano of a fair age. Her ramshackle worker's cottage was a warren of little rooms. At the back, she knocked the wall down between two of these and put the piano across the centre. The only problem was the floors of the former rooms were uneven, and the piano developed a perilous lean of four inches!

In 1971 John was duly admitted a Licentiate in Music. For his examination he had chosen the most

difficult piece that Bach wrote: the Toccata and Fugue from his Partita No. 6. 'Fiendish' is John's verdict on its playability. Another work he included was Beethoven's *Eroica* Variations. Nancy would begin his lessons with this. John remembers her saying, when he enquired about the 13th variation, 'Oh, don't worry about that. Artur Schnabel always came unstuck on that one!'

While the piano has always been John's primary musical passion, he came around to loving the voice, too. John has an abiding affection for the American soprano Arleen Auger, her recording of 'Lascia ch'io pianga' from Handel's *Rinaldo* being a particular favourite. He remembers hearing Elisabeth Schwarzkopf when he was young, in recital, in Melbourne. 'She was always here.' He also fondly recalls Schubert's *Winterreise* sung by the British bass-baritone John Shirley-Quirk.

John still has a beautiful grand piano in his Hawthorn home where he used to give piano recitals. Board member Peter Reilly OAM attended many of these occasions, and it was through their friendship that John was introduced to the work of Melba Opera Trust.

These days, at 93 years young, John still enjoys playing the piano – he is wrestling successfully with Beethoven's piano sonata Op. 10 No. 1 on one of my visits to his home – and music will always enrich his life. One recent joy of that life is hearing Melba Artists perform at Melba events. Thanks to his generosity through his tribute to his mother, John's gift will enrich the musical life of Melba Artists for many years to come.



Above: Marie Therese Smith
Left top: John Smith as a young boy
Left: John Smith (5th from left) directing *The Mikado* in the seminary
Far left top: Peter Reilly OAM, Katherine Allen and John Smith.
Far left: John Smith as a teenager.

Images: provided by John Smith

MELBA'S WILL

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Old and new paradigms

Australia's favourite Heldentenor, Stuart Skelton, brings three decades of experience to his work as a mentor for the Melba Program. He spoke with Yvonne Frindle about how Melba 'covers all the bases' for young opera singers navigating a timeless art form in a rapidly changing world.

STORY YVONNE FRINDLE

'Opera isn't what it used to be,' says Stuart Skelton, 'The business is changing.' He points to how opera has changed dramatically for audiences – largely because of COVID-19 – and by extension for artists. The pandemic saw many opera houses send their choruses and orchestras home, tear up contracts and stream productions from their archives. For opera tragics, it was an unexpected boon – a chance to see productions from all over the world, often for free. But even after theatres reopened, the streaming deluge would leave its mark.

'It's terrific for the viewer,' says Stuart, until the viewer begins to expect the screen experience (polished and in HD), and the screen convenience, and stops coming to the theatre. 'By making streaming so easily available, they were cutting their own lunch.' For artists, there's the new artistic challenge of performing for both the auditorium and the camera, and a minefield of new contractual issues to navigate.

Add to this dwindling support, private and public, for the performing arts generally, and the singer embarking on an operatic career in 2025 is facing a different set of challenges to those faced by Stuart in the 1990s. And this is where the Melba Program comes into its own. Stuart isn't a Melba alumnus: he won the McDonald's Aria prize in 1993 and headed overseas to the University of Cincinnati, followed by a two-year San Francisco Opera Adler Fellowship. His connection to Melba Opera Trust is as a mentor. One of the first singers he worked with was Samuel Sakker (2011–12), who is now based in the UK, enjoying a flourishing career as a Heldentenor.

Stuart speaks admiringly of the Melba Program and what it has achieved. The program is extremely demanding, 'which it needs to be,' but most important, 'it covers all the bases.' Melba, he

continues, 'has seminars on networking, social media, and all sorts of things that, when I was studying in the US, weren't part of the process, because they didn't need to be. If you sang well and had the repertoire the house needed, you were going to get hired. Now it's much more difficult. So any program that embraces the new paradigm will give their graduates a significant advantage. And I think Melba does that better than anyone right now.'

But the 'old' paradigm – vocal artistry, musicality and stagecraft – remains as relevant as always, which is where mentors like Stuart play such an important role. Stuart loves teaching, and he talks at length of collaborating with regular teachers, finding ways to tailor a coaching session or masterclass to the needs of the individual singer, and creating a space where exploration is welcome. Something he loves to do is to engage the audience of a masterclass. As a teacher, he may be meeting a student for the first time, but their peers will know them well. 'You ask the student to make a little change, it's different, and you see the faces of the audience light up – they start to nod at the improvement. That's much better feedback than anything I can tell them.'

A singer's body is their instrument; it will shift and change and develop, and with it their repertoire. 'My advice for all younger singers,' says Stuart, 'particularly those who are headed towards more dramatic repertoire, is always the same: sing with *your* voice as beautifully as you can for as long as you can. That way, the chances of you blowing anything up as the repertoire gets more demanding, are significantly reduced because you're still concentrating on making it pretty rather than louder.'

Blowing everything up? 'I spent a long time avoiding the "Heldentenor" label,' he explains, 'even after

coming out of graduate school, because there was a graveyard, in the US at least, of young singers with bigger voices who'd blown it up because someone had tagged them as "heroic" and they thought they had some volume criterion to live up to.' When asked whether the 'Helden' label isn't as much about character and style as it is about sheer decibels, he replies: 'I wish that were the case, I really do.' Everything from the work in question to the size of the theatre plays a part. 'But the most important thing is, "Can you do it?" Can you sing for four-and-a-half hours? If you can sing louder than everyone else, but for only two of the four, what's the point? And if you can sing loudly for the four hours but it's so gratingly unattractive that people don't want to listen to it – again, what's the point? If you want longevity, then sing it beautifully.'

Which leads to a question that's been relevant since the 17th century: When is it right to make an 'ugly noise', through choice, for dramatic and expressive reasons? After a long pause, Stuart gives some examples, including Tristan's 'last four-page gasp'. 'It's not that I'm deliberately making an ugly sound,' he continues. 'It's interesting: as Tristan's physical condition degrades, his spiritual condition goes in the opposite direction. It's a weird thing to play that when you're physically at the end of your rope, but you need to sound transcendent at the same time.'

Earlier, Stuart has joked about being 'on the downhill slope to 60'. Later, more seriously, he will talk about 'natural progression', new generations and timing one's retirement: 'I would much rather go out two or three years too early than have that tap on the shoulder. I'd much rather drink burgundy five years too early than 20 minutes too late.'

'One of the things I strive to do as a mentor, is to be really honest about the expectations of a career, and to be honest about the things that a singer does really well, and where they can add an arrow to their quiver. If you can go into a career with your quiver full of arrows, you're in better shape than having just one. To avail yourself of every opportunity you can to be better at all the parts. And I can't help but think that that makes you a better human in the long run.'

Those opportunities include pursuing the old-fashioned liberal education – history, visual art, languages, rhetoric – that helps create context for musical works. Stuart describes it as curiosity and being eager to explore things, and says it's one of the things that has kept him singing for so long, despite the frustrations of travel, time zones, distance from loved ones, or – his current gripe – being much too tall for Japanese furniture. 'What keeps me coming back,' he says, 'is the fact that there's always something new to discover and explore musically and dramatically, and it's exciting to make music with different conductors and different colleagues.' In short, he's describing the well-rounded artist – a quiver full of arrows, more than a voice.



'My advice for all younger singers,' says Stuart, 'particularly those who are headed towards more dramatic repertoire, is always the same: sing with *your* voice as beautifully as you can for as long as you can...'



Main image: Gudmundur Ingólfsson. Inset images: Anna Kucera

Home, Sweet Home

As a leading industry figure, a Melba alumna and a Board member, Siobhan Stagg has a unique lens on the work of Melba Opera Trust. It’s for all these reasons that Siobhan has agreed to headline a new initiative that Melba will launch later this year.

The *Home, Sweet Home* performance dinner will be the first that Melba has hosted in 16 years and, in a full circle moment, it was Siobhan who performed at the only other gala dinner (2009), as one of the first scholarship recipients of the newly formed organisation.

It’s been a concept that CEO Amy Black and Siobhan have been discussing for some time, ‘It’s a very difficult climate for fundraising at the moment’, says Amy, ‘and we’re looking for ways to help generate much needed additional funding for the annual program. But we wanted the concept to represent more than your regular gala dinner experience.’

So, as with all things Melba-related, the thinking became artist-centred. ‘Our best initiatives have our artists at the heart. Achieving this financial imperative, but also making it count for something deeper within the artist community, was our goal.’

The idea of an annual alumni concert series was born. Siobhan explains, ‘we hope the first instalment of *Home, Sweet Home* will plant a

seed for a unique event series that will grow with anticipation each year – who will we get to hear next year? With so many Melba alumni having success overseas, it’s also a chance for alumni to reconnect with their Australian audiences, back where it all began.’

The intention is to invite different alumni to perform an exclusive and intimate evening of superb music, with fine dining, in interesting venues. But there is more to the story. The initiative will also launch an alumni giving circle. Funds that are raised at the dinner will go towards supporting an area of the program that the featured alumni are most passionate about, and there will be an opportunity for other alumni to also show their support.

‘Hopefully, it will be a welcome opportunity for alumni to become involved in a new way’, Amy explains. ‘We’ve always strived to foster a strong spirit of reciprocity amongst our artists. Many alumni are already giving back in a variety of ways – providing industry seminars in the program, mentoring current artists, sometimes

performing on behalf of Melba – and Melba has started supporting artists at different chapters of their careers, such as through the Alumni Grant Program.

Siobhan is leading the way as the first alumna to make a tax-deductible gift. ‘For me personally, being involved and making a gift shows how much I value and respect Melba’s mission. I believe in establishing habits of philanthropy at any age . . . why wait? When we start practising habits of giving earlier in life, the experience grows with our means — and worlds can open up in beautiful, unexpected ways through the social element. It feels good to invest in causes which reflect your societal values.’

Siobhan believes it’s not always the size of the gift that matters, but the timing. ‘The first “donation” I received was \$100, slipped into my hand by a distant cousin after I sang “Amazing Grace” (completely untrained) at my grandfather’s funeral, aged 11. It came with a note which read, “this is for your first singing lessons, and please invite me when you sing at the Sydney Opera



House.” It’s fair to say this gesture changed the course of my life.’

‘It’s an enormous vote of confidence to have someone outside your immediate circle say “we think your talent is worth investing in.” And that’s exactly what the Melba does, at a really significant level. I hope my modest opening gesture (transferred without ceremony on a weekday morning from Berlin) will embolden other alumni to consider contributing something back for the next generation of Australian talent development.’

The details of the dinner are still in development, but ‘it promises to be very special indeed’, says Siobhan.

With its very name a nod to Dame Nellie Melba’s own favourite encore – a piece that she always featured in her many performances in her beloved Australia – we hope this series marks the beginning of many more home visits for Melba alumni and all for a particularly good cause.

To register your interest:
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