

THE MELBA

MAGAZINE OF MELBA OPERA TRUST

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AUSTRALIA'S GREAT SINGERS OF THE PAST
EMILIA BERTOLINI IN CONVERSATION
HONOURING NANCE GRANT AM MBE

Contents

Note from the Chief Executive Officer	2
The year so far ...	2
A masterclass to remember	3
What's in a word? – Lyric Diction	3
The person behind the artist	4–5
Exceptional humans	6
Great Australian singers of the past	7
The energy in the room	8
Letter from abroad	9
An update ... Dame Heather Begg Memorial Award	9
Nance Grant: A tribute	10
Peter Reilly: A lasting contribution	11
Jane Hemstritch: Investing in the future	11
The strength of many streams	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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Chloe James with Joyce DiDonato in masterclass
Photograph by David Ng

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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

We often speak about legacy at Melba. It is a word that suggests something long-term, often intangible – something built carefully over time that endures. It is our foundation, shaping our thinking and quietly propelling us forward.

Alongside this is impact – more immediate, more visible. If legacy is what we build to last, impact is what we see and feel today; together they drive our work.

Nowhere is this more evident than in our artists: the skills they are building, the professionalism, and the confidence they are gaining both on and off stage. For the 2026 artists, it has been a busy and encouraging start to the year. You can learn more about each of them on page 4.

For management, the first months of the year have been a period of transition. After 18 years with the organisation, our Finance Manager and friend, Simon Suen, has retired. Simon played a significant role in laying the financial foundations that have allowed Melba to grow into the organisation it is today. His loyal and steadfast contribution forms an important part of our institutional history, and I offer him my deepest thanks and best wishes for his retirement.

We are also delighted to welcome two new members to our philanthropy team: Joelle Kross in Melbourne and Liz Nield OAM in Sydney. Their work will help shape the next chapter of Melba's development, ensuring that the support around our artists continues to evolve and strengthen. I hope you have the opportunity to welcome them at an event soon.

Understanding the past is a vital cornerstone of our work at Melba. Not least Dame Nellie Melba GBE, but also Dame Heather Begg DNZM OBE, John Wegner AO and the many other talented Australian artists of generations gone by. One of the ways we ensure our artists have a sense of the lineage they are continuing is through a seminar on great singers of the past with Brian Castles-Onion AM. In this edition, we include a taste of Brian's vast knowledge, reminding us of the depth and richness of the tradition we inherit.

Among those artists is soprano Nance Grant AM MBE, who we celebrate in this edition. Together with her husband, Ian Harris, Nance has ensured that future generations will be nurtured in her name. In recognition of their profound contribution, Nance and Ian have been awarded the Melba Medal, our highest honour.

In recent changes to the Melba Board, we farewell Peter Reilly OAM and extend our sincerest appreciation for his many years of thoughtful and committed service to the organisation. Fortunately, Peter remains close to Melba through our newly formed Investment Advisory Group, alongside Andrew Sisson AO.

We are equally pleased to welcome Jane Hemstritch AO as a director to the Board. Her breadth of expertise across business, finance, philanthropy and the arts will be of great value to Melba's future.

As we look ahead, we are very aware of the challenging times we are living through. Costs are rising and there is more uncertainty than we have experienced in a very long time. Nonetheless, to our talented artists this program is a lifeline, and we are committed to delivering the quality of learning that they most need so that they, in turn, can build their own sustainable careers. As Siobhan Stagg so beautifully articulates in her letter, the impact of receiving the support cannot be overstated. Our donors, bequestors and philanthropic partners make that possible, and we remain deeply thankful.

If you are in a position to make a tax-deductible donation, please know that every gift, no matter the amount, is helping us to strengthen both our legacy and impact – building something that will endure, and contributing to something that is already being felt in the lives and careers of our artists.

If you would like to find out how you can become more involved, please do get in touch – I look forward to hearing from you. I hope you enjoy this Autumn edition of *The Melba*.



Amy Black, Chief Executive Officer

Image: Phoebe Powell

The year so far ...



Graham Abbott, Zac Hamilton-Russell and Jack Bolton
Meet the Artists, Melbourne



Vocal coach Laurent Philippe and Aylish Ryan



L-R David Belkovski, Xenia Puskarz Thomas and Sophie Hamer
Celebration of The Amelia Joscelyne Memorial Scholarship



Sophie Blades and Jack Bolton
Awarding of the Melba Medal



Sophie Hamer, Sophie Blades and Guy Noble
Meet the Artists, Sydney



2026 Melba Artists with vocal coach Laurent Philippe



Devon Lake
Meet the Artists, Sydney



2026 Melba Artists with Greta Bradman AM
Meet the Artists, Melbourne

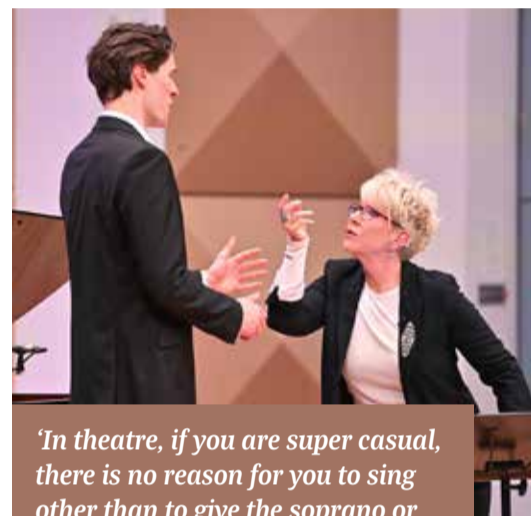
A masterclass to remember

When Joyce DiDonato arrived in Australia last November, Melba Artists were given the opportunity to step into her world, experiencing first-hand the artistry and insight of one of opera's most compelling voices.

STORY KATELYN BANNISTER

Celebrated for her luminous '24-carat gold' tone, magnetic stage presence and passionate advocacy for the art form, Joyce DiDonato is equally revered as a teacher. *The Observer* once hailed her as the 'reigning mistress of the masterclass' – a title to which we can attest.

In partnership with the Melbourne Symphony Orchestra, Joyce led a captivating masterclass with Chloe James, Jack Bolton and Syrah Torii, accompanied by Sharolyn Kimmorley AM.



'In theatre, if you are super casual, there is no reason for you to sing other than to give the soprano or the mezzo a rest ... this should be the most compelling moment.' Joyce

In the masterclass, that meant shifting my intention.

Jack Bolton

What unfolded was something special. With generosity, radiant energy and humour, Joyce guided each artist to deepen their characterisation and refine their technique.

The following extracts capture Joyce's reflections on masterclasses – on artistry, risk and the ongoing process of learning.

'I think masterclasses *can be* important; I don't think they're automatically important. Although, every time you stand up in front of an audience, or anybody, as a singer, you're learning – so in that regard for sure, it's always important.

'I have a love-hate relationship with them (masterclasses) because singing is so personal and singers have so many facets and idiosyncrasies that in 25 minutes it's a little tricky. I'm super cautious of not trying to upset the apple cart. If you're trying for a different technique or a deeper understanding sometimes you need time to integrate, to let osmosis work ... to take risks and experiment in front of people live (it's one thing in the privacy of a studio) but here it's very scary.

'I love performing, but I love the process of learning more ... in a masterclass I'm *not* interested in performance, I'm *not* interested in final product, I'm interested in process.

'So, what I ask of the singers, and the audience, is to roll up the sleeves, let this be a playground, a safe space. You guys have to let us do weird stuff, and the singers, the sooner we go with it, the faster we can get the spark going.'



'Don't just sing what's on the page – bring it to life for us!' Joyce

It sounds so simple, but it requires a lot of homework, trial and error ...

Syrah Torii



'If you let it go for one second, we don't believe you. You've gotta be in it.' Joyce

In that moment, it was a bit nerve wracking challenging myself to make an 'imperfect sound'.

Chloe James

What's in a word? – Lyric Diction

Welcome to a new regular feature in *The Melba*, where we'll explore a commonly employed but perhaps commonly misunderstood or unknown musical word. Looking at its origins and how its meaning has developed from the earliest days of opera – and even before – to our own time, we'll link this evolving linguistic and musical story to how Melba Opera Trust uses and 'responds' to this word today. Our first word – actually two! – is: Lyric Diction.

STORY BRUCE RAGGATT

We have to return to Ancient Greece to discover the origin of the word 'lyric', which comes from 'lyrikos', meaning 'singing to the lyre'. A 'lyric' was a poem composed to be sung, rather than merely recited, with lyre accompaniment. The performer would sing melliflously and melodiously to express the deepest emotions. Effectively, 'lyrikos' was a prototype of what would become opera several millennia later.

The most famous 'singer to the lyre' was the Greek mythological musician and poet Orpheus. He was said to sing and play his instrument so beautifully he could sway the gods. And the character of Orpheus, with his lyre always to hand, of course, stars in many operas, from Monteverdi to Offenbach, but perhaps most memorably in Gluck's *Orfeo ed Euridice*.

Over time, the meaning of 'lyric' shifted. In 16th century in England it came to mean a short expressive poem, which didn't necessarily involve music at all. But today, in common parlance, we're perhaps most likely to use 'lyric' or 'lyrics' to mean the words of a song. And an interesting sidestep is the adjective 'lyrical', which is still used to describe singing but is often used to describe smooth movement and expressiveness, such as in ballet dancing, where no words are used at all.

'Diction' comes from the Latin verb 'dicere', meaning 'to say' or 'to speak'. Over time this evolved into the word 'dictio', meaning a 'saying' or 'expression'. 'Diction' came into English, via

French, in the 16th century, settling with two broad meanings: choice of words and pronunciation with clarity. 'Diction', at its heart, is not so much *what* you say, but *how* you say it.

The specific pairing of 'lyric diction' appeared in English during the Romantic period and was first used in the title of a book, *Lyric Diction: For Singers, Actors and Public Speakers* by the American elocutionist Dora Duty Jones, in 1913.

Today, according to longtime Melba mentor in French and Italian, Teresa Desmarchelier, 'lyric diction is the artistic, musical extension of well-spoken language, which, when set to music, allows singers to convey the full range of human emotions'. For this reason, 'lyric diction' continues to be an essential element of artistic training in the Mentor Program. Melba Artists have regular coaching to improve their ability to sing in the main operatic languages: French, German and of course Italian.

For fellow Melba mentor in Italian, Dr Matteo Dalle Fratte, it's vital singers master lyric diction because 'a printed poem and a musical score are not enough ... a performer needs the specific expertise and skill of lyric diction to take what is written and transform it into something meaningful and moving. Without this mastery, the beauty and emotional power behind the words never fully reach the audience or achieve opera's aim to *'muovere gli affetti'* – to stir the emotions – a concept considered fundamental when opera was born in the early 17th century.'

Matteo says the number one mistake singers make in Italian is 'not differentiating between short and long consonants. In Italian, unlike in English and many other languages, consonants have distinctive duration, which means that their length can change the meaning of words.' A favourite example of Matteo's is '*la nona di Beethoven*', Beethoven's Ninth, with a short 'n' sound, vs '*la nonna di Beethoven*', with a longer 'n' sound that actually means Beethoven's grandmother!

Matteo's Melofonetica Method, in which he coaches the Melba Artists, is 'based on the phonetics of sung rather than spoken Italian ... it demonstrates how the natural phonetic structure of the Italian language actually inspired the composer's musical choices.' This helps singers enhance their 'vocal quality and breath support through the correct use of consonants, strengthen dramatic expression and deliver more powerful acoustic projection in a performance space.'

Whilst Teresa contends that lyric diction training 'is meticulous and rigorous because it aims to reach the standard of a native speaker's linguistic facility when singing' and might sound like 'hard labour' for out artists, in her experience it is incredible to observe 'the pleasure that they get from incremental improvements along the way'.

So, the next time you attend a performance by Melba Artists, we invite you to listen out for and take pleasure in their lyric diction, as they sing text with precision, beauty and meaning, fully conveying the drama that makes opera truly special.

The person behind the artist

The public face of a performing artist is just one aspect of their life. In this article Melba mentor Graham Abbott delves into the backgrounds of the 2026 Melba Artists and learns some fascinating facts about the artists we see on stage. How did opera come into their lives? Who are their inspirations? Be prepared for some surprises!

STORY GRAHAM ABBOTT



Chloe James

Mezzo-soprano

Jo Horgan & Peter Wetenhall Opera Scholarship
Valma Allaway Opera Society Scholarship

For a woman whose career focus is definitely on opera, Chloe's early musical inspirations were much broader. She cites Robbie Williams, Ricky Martin and the Scissor Sisters as early loves, and she formed her own rock funk band in her teens. This band was no small deal; they once even opened for You Am I!

Chloe admits to having been a curious and adventurous child, and her early musical experiences ranged from ballet lessons (although a tendency to make up her own choreography was an issue!) to playing piano, flute, guitar and drums. Creativity had a real outlet in a love of songwriting, and, like many professional singers today, Chloe can cite her membership of the Australian Girls Choir as an important training ground.

Formal vocal training, and an introduction to opera, came later. Singing lessons started in Year 8 but these at first focused on pop ballads. Classical repertoire was suggested later as a means of strengthening her voice and over time this became her vocal niche. The transition to fully committing to classical singing, though, wasn't immediate as she continued her band commitments and songwriting until she was 21.

Chloe vividly remembers her first experience of seeing an opera live. For many of us it's *The Magic Flute* or G and S, but the first opera Chloe saw was *Salome!* At the Melbourne Palais, with Vida Miknevičiūtė in the title role, the experience, unsurprisingly, left her 'in a kind of shocked awe'. From then on, the die was cast.

There are two women Chloe cites as inspirations. One is Australian soprano, actress and cabaret performer Ali McGregor. Initially admired from a distance, Chloe has had the opportunity more recently to work with McGregor on a couple of projects. In Chloe's words: 'She inspires me to be hardworking and ambitious, and also to prioritise joy and creativity in everything I do.'

The other inspiration is American mezzo Joyce DiDonato. Obviously, this great singer's artistry is an inspiration, but Chloe particularly admires DiDonato's championing of new works and ideas. Getting to meet her last year was a real highlight.

And Chloe's surprising revelation? Her decision to follow a career in opera was a loss to the sciences. A love of maths and chemistry equalled her love of music at school but when the crunch came, music won out. We're glad about that.



Lachlan Higgins

Baritone

Paulette Bisley Opera Scholarship
Max & Jill Schultz Opera Society Scholarship

An opera singer's career path can start in – and cross into – some unexpected places and Lachlan Higgins' life has already taken him in some fascinating directions.

He was born in Melbourne but moved to Perth at an early age and even spent two years living in the US as a child. Outdoor activities such as hiking, camping and football featured strongly in his early life, and a love of the outdoors has stayed with him, in part in his fascination with identifying birds when he's out in nature.

But music wasn't far away, either. A couple of years as a treble in the St George's Cathedral choir in Perth led to a singing scholarship at Christ Church Grammar School. This in turn led Lachlan to consider a career in music theatre, but despite completing a one year certificate course in this field at WAAPA, his application to the Bachelor of Musical Theatre program was unsuccessful. Happily, he turned his attention to the Classical Voice program and after about a year he found – in his words – that more 'ringy' space and vertical sound in his voice. Music theatre's loss became opera's gain.

Still, even then, Lachlan's working life was as different from opera as one could imagine. At various points he's worked as a dockhand in Fremantle taking care of expensive boats, as a pressure cleaner on roofs and sealing driveways, as a kids' party entertainer and as a mental health peer worker.

Lachlan's first experience of a staged opera was seeing WA Opera's *Tosca* in 2017, and Teddy Tahu Rhodes as *Scarpia* made a big impression. Lachlan confesses today that he easily gets lost in that endless resource called YouTube. Listening to recordings of great baritones past and present helps him in understanding how other singers have used their voices, even if those voices are essentially different from his. No one baritone stands out as a constant favourite, but at the time of writing he was focused on recordings of Piero Cappuccilli, Lucas Meachem and Dmitri Hvorostovsky.

Lachlan's 'surprising fact' is his love of anything mechanical. At one point he bought a Harley Davidson and restored it to raise money for his UK studies. Getting to actually drive it on stage as part of a Freeze Frame Opera production – followed by dancing and singing Frank Sinatra numbers – is perhaps the ultimate example of crossover!



Jack Bolton

Bass

Ryman Healthcare Opera Scholarship
Annie McFarling Opera Scholarship
John & Elizabeth Wright-Smith Scholarship

Growing up in Canberra, Jack Bolton's early musical experiences were anchored firmly in family and school. Family impetus came from his two older siblings, a brother who played trombone and a sister who played saxophone. Both played in bands and sang in choirs so that by the time it was Jack's turn he rather naturally fell into the same involvements. Learning the saxophone gave him valuable ensemble experience playing in bands, while singing training from the age of 11 saw him in choirs and working his way through the AMEB syllabus.

An early memory from those years was one many of us can relate to. Forgetting the words of 'Puff, the Magic Dragon' at a junior school soirée, 11-year-old Jack was aided by his singing teacher, Theresa Rayner, who helped by mouthing the words for him.

Opera came into Jack's life via his AMEB exam requirements. Grade 8 and A.Mus.A. exams required him to sing opera arias for the first time. Thereafter, he was hooked.

Actually experiencing a live opera performance came later in Brisbane, during Jack's time at University. Opera Queensland's production of *The Marriage of Figaro* featured a number of fine Australian singers, including José Carbo and Melba alumnus Jeremy Kleeman.

With all the resources available to us on the internet, it's not surprising that Jack, like many of his Melba colleagues, makes the most of the wealth of recordings available featuring acclaimed singers of the past. He cites four international stars whose work he is currently enjoying. Top of the list is the outstanding bass Cesare Siepi whose career spanned 1947 to 1989 and who, in Jack's words, had a 'consistently breathtaking cavernous tone and mellifluous technique'. Jack also hugely admires two renowned tenors of the past – Nicolai Gedda and Mario del Monaco – and the American baritone Robert Merrill.

Among current mentors, Jack without hesitation cites his current teacher, Glenn Winslade. And like virtually all the current Melba Artists, Jack names our own Sharolyn Kimmorley AM as a pivotal influence and guide in all professional matters.

Away from music, Jack is an avid reader. He's currently working on *The Brothers Karamazov* and plans to follow this with some sci-fi for contrast. He also enjoys exercise, including resistance training at the gym and stretching and yoga elsewhere. Jack finds that a prerequisite for a good night's rest is exertion during the day.



Sophie Hamer

Soprano

The Amelia Joscelyne Memorial Scholarship

It's probably true to say that Sophie Hamer's life has been leading to opera almost from the start. Hailing – like many Melba Artists – from Perth, Sophie had strong musical encouragement from her mother, a music teacher and organist. It was the violin, though, that was her early focus, and it was as a violinist that Sophie gave her first public performance, in the hallowed surrounds of the Richard Gill Auditorium at WAAPA. Playing 'Bessie Cow', she was accompanied by her mum.

Sophie also played flute and euphonium, giving her a strong instrumental and ensemble background at an early age. Singing wasn't far behind, though. She recalls performing 'Time to say goodbye', accompanied by a talented school friend, at an assembly in primary school. In retrospect it could be said that working on the song's Italian text with a teacher was a precursor of the operatic world which lay ahead.

The first live opera performance that Sophie witnessed was Gale Edwards' production of *La bohème*, given by Opera Australia in Sydney. Not surprisingly, Lorina Gore's star turn as Musetta is a stand-out memory from that experience.

Sophie discovered her own opera voice in high school. Assuming that she was auditioning for the chorus in a production of *The Pirates of Penzance* she was shocked to be cast as Mabel, one of Sullivan's more flamboyant leading ladies. The experience was a turning point for Sophie, and Mabel was a role she reprised during her tertiary studies at WAAPA. That later production of *Pirates* had a very strong Melba connection too. The cast included current artists Lachlan Higgins and Devon Lake, as well as alumni Jesse Linke, Caitlin Forrest and Nathan Breeze. The production was even directed by Melba Mentor Brendan Hanson.

Sophie cites two singers as important influences on her work. One is her teacher, Glenn Winslade, whom she describes as having – on top of his international career – an unmatched knowledge of vocal pedagogy and repertoire. The other singer is soprano Samantha Clarke, also hailing from Perth and now working internationally. Sophie particularly admires her versatility – singing repertoire from Handel to Verdi – and her commitment to the characters she plays.

And yet there's a surprise: Sophie is an avowed *Star Wars* fan, a love happily shared with her grandfather. And you can't go wrong with those scores by John Williams.



Images: Hilary Walker



Devon Lake

Baritone

Joseph Sambrook Opera Scholarship

There must be something in the water in Western Australia because a high proportion of this year's Melba Artists come from Perth. Devon Lake is one of those artists, and his childhood home was a very musical one. His mum was a music teacher and had trained as an opera singer herself. Singing was, perhaps not surprisingly then, an integral part of Devon's life. He sang in choirs throughout primary and high school, and he began formal voice lessons at the age of 14.

It was when he started singing lessons that Devon realised opera was for him. It wasn't long before he started singing solo parts and entering competitions, so the die was cast early.

In tandem with his singing experiences, Devon also learnt, at various times, piano, clarinet and saxophone. He claims he wasn't very good at these instruments, but any instrumental experience is good for a budding singer, whether the instrumental playing continues or not. It can strengthen music reading skills, provide ensemble experiences and create a more well-rounded vocal musician.

Devon's earliest musical memory is of being taken by his parents to concerts by the West Australian Symphony Orchestra. He credits this exposure with nourishing his love of classical music. His first experience of a staged opera performance was at WA Opera, and seeing the company perform *The Barber of Seville* left an indelible mark. In particular, he remembers the power of seeing all the disparate elements of our artform – singing, staging, the set – come together to create the impact only opera can give.

Like his Melba colleagues, Devon looks back to great singers of the past for inspiration. In particular he singles out the Italian baritone Ettore Bastianini, who died in 1967. The singer's timbre and style make his recordings very special to Devon. In the present day, he cites his teacher Michael Lewis as a true mentor and role model, helping him understand the art of singing in general, and his own voice above all.

Both these baritones have a special connection with the operas of Verdi, and this might go part of the way to explaining Devon's own love of Verdi, whose operas contain some of the greatest baritone roles in the repertoire. He hopes that at some stage in the future he might be able to take on some of these magnificent roles himself.



Aylish Ryan

Mezzo-soprano

Dame Nellie Melba Scholarship
Patrick & Vivian Gordon Award
John Wegner AO Opera Scholarship

Aylish Ryan grew up on her family's property just outside Toowoomba in Queensland. Right from the start music was special to her, if her reaction to seeing André Rieu DVDs at age 3 was anything to go by. Dancing around to the music and pretending to play the violin, she begged for violin lessons of her own. She started the violin at the age of 5 and continued these lessons right to the end of her school years.

Singing in the home was also a powerful presence, mainly due to the influence of her beloved grandmother. Singing together in church and in the kitchen are special memories and to this day her grandmother remains an admired role model.

Formal singing lessons came later, at the age of 13, and classical repertoire was included from the outset. English art song and some music theatre at first, but by age 15 it was clear that Aylish's voice was revealing its operatic potential. Shortly thereafter she was awarded the Opera Australia Regional Vocal Scholarship, and she was on her way.

This award provided Aylish with her first opportunity to see a staged opera, in this case Gale Edwards' production of *La bohème* at the Sydney Opera House. The experience was moving and life-changing, and it helped confirm her decision to follow an operatic career.

Aylish is keen to point out the importance of her training as a violinist, which lasted well over a decade during her school years. She credits her instrumental training with making her a better musician, and she still enjoys playing when she can.

When it comes to naming a favourite piece of music, most musicians – and music lovers! – find it hard to name just one. Aylish is no exception but if pressed she would mention *L'île inconnue*, the sublime final movement of Berlioz's *Les Nuits d'été*.

Aylish is far less hesitant, though, when asked about singers she admires; two mezzos are immediately mentioned. Agnes Baltsa is invoked for the apparent ease of her singing, even in extremely difficult repertoire, and she admires Teresa Berganza for her vocal colour and expression.

Outside of music, Aylish is a self-confessed 'horse girl' and loves nothing more than to spend time riding with her dad at home in Queensland. She grew up around horses – and many other animals – and they clearly help keep her grounded and refreshed.



Zachary Hamilton-Russell

Repetiteur

Margaret Schofield Opera Scholarship
Southey Shelmerdine Repetiteur Scholarship

For a man who is in the Melba Program as a pianist, Zachary Hamilton-Russell has a strong background as a singer as well. Hailing from Newcastle, both his parents played the piano and sang, and Zac was enrolled in the early childhood program at the Newcastle Conservatorium. His first music teacher, Kay Lane, noted Zac's excellent ear and singing voice as a small child, so his gifts were recognised early.

As a child, Zac took part in a production of *Oliver!* and loved the experience. He was also a member of one of Australia's finest youth choirs, The Hunter Singers. This gave him excellent musical training, singing challenging repertoire and touring extensively within Australia and overseas.

Zac's keyboard training started at home on his parents' laps and continued throughout his school years. He's now regarded highly as both a pianist and an organist, as well as a choral conductor.

The first time Zac saw a staged opera was when the Newcastle Gilbert and Sullivan Players performed their own version of *Patience*. The setting was altered to a chocolaterie, which is intriguing to say the least!

Zac moved to Melbourne more than a decade ago and cites baritone, composer and conductor Lachlan McDonald as both his closest friend and the most significant and inspiring musician he's encountered in that time. He credits Lachlan with much of his recent development as a musician, and counts the many opportunities they've had to work alongside one another among his career highlights.

It's unsurprising that someone who works as a pianist and in choral music, Zac names a piano work and a choral work as among his favourites. For his third year piano recital he played *El Puerto* from Book 1 of *Iberia* by Albéniz. This was Zac's first exposure to Albéniz and led to a deeper immersion in Spanish music. In the world of choral music he lists Gerald Finzi's Eucharist anthem *Lo, the full, final sacrifice*. Zac has sung in the piece and also played the organ part, and it is, in his words, 'packed with juicy moments'.

Zac enjoys a huge range of activities – cultural, social, sporting – which help him relax, but perhaps surprisingly his favourite musical genre to listen to is hip hop. He loves hip hop's clever wordplay, production styles and the themes behind albums. Kendrick Lamar's *To Pimp a Butterfly* is his favourite album of all time.



Sophie Blades

Soprano

Nance Grant AM MBE Opera Scholarship
Eleanor Blakemore Opera Society Scholarship

For many opera singers, the sound of music is their language and their world, but for Sophie Blades it was *The Sound of Music* that played a pivotal role in her decision to follow an operatic career.

Coming from a music-loving family, Sophie was lucky to have attended a school that treated music seriously and encouraged musical development. Learning the piano and singing in choirs, she started her musical journey early, gaining vital experience and training and – above all – confidence on stage. It was during her school years she fell in love with music theatre.

When it was discovered that she had 'a decent voice', Sophie's parents encouraged her to pursue singing. She sang Maria in *The Sound of Music* in her final year of school, and she maintains a special love for this wonderful show. 'The lyrics remind me of how music has and always will be there and is something I can always find comfort in. Music truly is all around us and gives even more meaning and beauty to everything we experience.'

It was only during her tertiary studies at the Sydney Conservatorium that Sophie started to explore the possibilities of singing opera. Small roles in *Hansel and Gretel* and *Dido and Aeneas* gave her the chance to test the waters and to discover her voice's potential.

While on exchange in New York, Sophie attended her first staged opera at the Met, no less. The Zeffirelli production of *La bohème* occasioned a major discovery for her and she admits that until then she didn't know music could be so powerful.

Sophie names two Australian sopranos as inspirations at this point in her development. One is Nance Grant AM MBE – a committed supporter of Melba Opera Trust – and the other is one of Melba's mentors, Yvonne Kenny AM. Both of these women showed that through long and successful international careers it was possible to remain gracious, generous and grounded, quite apart from possessing glorious voices.

Sophie also cites Simon Burke as a formative influence when he directed that school production of *The Sound of Music*.

As for life outside of music Sophie loves to keep active. She was once a competitive swimmer and now finds swimming helps her relax. Her parents' property in the Hunter Valley is a welcome haven, with chickens, bees, her dog and a beautiful vegetable garden. Sounds like bliss.

Exceptional humans

Mindset and wellness mentor, Susie Edmonds, has been empowering Melba Artists for three years –nurturing skills in time management, wellness and conflict resolution that will not only help them become better performers but better human beings. She spoke to Yvonne Frindle.

STORY YVONNE FRINDLE

Susie Edmonds might not be an opera singer, but she understands performers better than most. She's the mother of mezzo-soprano Emily Edmonds, who was a Melba Artist in 2013. 'I've lived it for the past 20 years,' she says, 'watching my daughter go through the Melba Program, then as a young artist at Covent Garden, and now with an international career.' Her other children have pursued sport to a high level. Susie herself grew up in a musical family and played piano, but her commitment and energy went into sport and academics. She knows what it's like to work hard for something, to pursue mastery.

Susie has worked with Melba Artists as a mentor for the past three years, bringing to her role a rich background in education and coaching, as well as positive psychology, working with clients of all ages and from diverse situations. And, she explains, the reality is the same for anyone who's making their way to mastery – Melba Artists may have extraordinary vocal and musical gifts, but 'they're not alone in the things they struggle with.'

Certain ideas weave through the conversation like recurring musical themes: our deep need for connection and balance, the importance of self-awareness, how we respond to pressure, confronting expectations (our own and others'), the pitfalls of comparison and labelling, fear and courage, vulnerability and compassion. Continuing the musical analogy, there's a foundational 'ground bass' to Susie's approach: being *human*.

In fact, of all the Melba mentors, it could be argued that Susie's work comes closest to the spirit of 'more than a voice' – the knowledge, skills and insights she nurtures in the Melba Artists can be taken into every area and stage of life. Expressed another way: 'I'm working with humans who just happen to have this exceptional skill.'

Those exceptional humans meet Susie in half-day workshops on Wellbeing, Conflict Resolution and Time Management. There's a lot of personal reflection, seeking clarity, establishing personal values and boundaries, and 'understanding what's in their control and what might be getting in the way'. There's openness and vulnerability and much work building trust. This is complemented by practical skill development: different systems of time management, learning how to escape from a spiral of negative thinking, breathing exercises for calming the amygdala, memory games, and 'all the tricks and tools you can use to get control of your brain'.

Melba Artists typically have a clear idea as to what they need to do to achieve mastery as singers. Susie's workshops help them discover the (often tiny) obstacles that might be holding them back and acquire the (often pragmatic) tools for dealing



with those obstacles. 'It might be something in their mindset, in their beliefs,' she says, 'or that niggling little voice that asks: "What if I'm not good enough? What if I haven't done enough?"'

'Mastery takes a lot of courage,' she says, 'and it's important for the artists to be seeking mastery, not perfection, because perfectionism is just a shield, a way of saying: "If everything is perfect, then I won't embarrass myself, I won't disappoint anybody. So let me be perfect; nothing will go wrong, and then I will be enough." But the reality is, if you're brave and trying new things, then things are going to go "wrong". I try to teach them that right now they're "enough". Even though they're going to improve, they can enjoy being fabulous right now.'

'Perfectionism creates this unreachable standard they can't even name, that they think they have to reach before they'll be successful. But what's success? I believe the art form is about telling stories that connect to other people and make us think. That's what I mean when I say, first and foremost, they're *humans* who just happen to have an exceptional skill.'

Following the introductory workshops, artists can work with Susie individually, exploring specific issues in a confidential environment. These might include dealing with pressure, coping with the need to be open and vulnerable in front of others, and handling feedback from myriad sources. 'When they're constantly trying to make an impression, and constantly getting feedback, they need to be able to filter and decide what's useful for them.'

Many young performers, she continues 'tend to believe that just because somebody says it, it must be true'; or if they receive a critique they must have disappointed the coach. So the artists learn to ask for what they need: staying in a conversation long enough to find clarity, turning something like a vocal coaching into a two-way conversation. 'Conflict management isn't just about difficult conversations,' she says. 'It's also about how we respond when something feels uncertain or uncomfortable, or high stakes.'

Perhaps appropriately for musicians, listening is key to the process: listening to self, listening to others. And for Susie herself, mentoring involves listening deeply – nothing is 'cookie cutter' or prescriptive. 'I may have a general idea of where a person might be stuck,' she says, 'but the true art is in the moment when the process becomes deeply personal and deeply connected. That's the power of the work.'

Later she returns to this idea. 'The artists aren't there for me to mould them. My job is to help them work out who they are and what's their greatest potential so they can contribute to the world using their art form or in whatever direction they choose.'



Great Australian singers of the past

As the old adage goes, the past informs the future. In a new addition to the Mentor Program, renowned conductor and singing aficionado Brian Castles-Onion AM draws on the great voices of the past to inspire the next generation – now sharing those insights with us too.

STORY BRIAN CASTLES-ONION AM

In an age when social-media influences almost every aspect of our lives, when today's superstars are literally forgotten overnight, where fame shoots like a comet to be snuffed out within hours, it's not surprising that previous generations of great Australian singers remain faded names in a dusty old book. This should not be so.

We all learn from the past. How can we know where we're going if we don't know where we've come from? It's logical that creative artists study the work of their predecessors. Why then do young singers choose to listen only to a handful of artists who are working now on the world stages? Do they even know the names of acclaimed singers who paved the way for artists today, to enable them to be accepted on the international scene? A knowledge of what they sang, how they sang particular styles and understanding why that repertoire suited their voices, is a lesson in itself.

Of course, Australia has enjoyed a very long history of fine singers. Our two greatest sopranos – Dame Nellie Melba GBE and Dame Joan Sutherland OM AC DBE – should need no introduction. Their careers each spanned several decades. Melba's major international debut came in 1888, and she sang publicly until 1930 (a year before her death). Sutherland hit the international headlines in 1959 and retired in 1990. Their voices were captured on many recordings and, hence, their fame remains.

Before, between and after these two prominent ladies there have been hundreds – yes hundreds! – of fine, or even great, singers. Melba herself mentored dozens of singers and a few enjoyed good careers. She even supported Australia's 'Queen of Song' Gladys Moncrieff OBE, who quickly became a major star of operetta and musicals, from 1921, and whose voice, like Melba's, remained strong and without any sign of decay over a forty-year career. Melba promoted a handful of wonderful singers. Of these, the tenor Browning Mummery and baritones Horace Stevens and John Brownlee were standouts. Mummery appeared alongside Melba in *La bohème* in London and during her Australian tours throughout the 1920s. He was a favourite Leading Man. The mighty voiced Horace Stevens, whose career lasted two solid decades from 1920, was dubbed by Sir Edward Elgar as the 'best Elijah' of the period. John Brownlee had major successes throughout the UK and US. Melba convinced him to go to Paris for serious study and, on 8 June 1926, he made his Covent Garden debut in the performance of *La bohème* in which Melba made her farewell appearance.

The outstanding bass-baritone, Peter Dawson, was listed in the 1984 *Guinness Book of Recorded Sound* as one of the world's Top Ten singers of all time alongside Enrico Caruso and Elvis Presley!! Dawson recorded over 2,000 songs between 1904 and 1955



top Dame Nellie Melba
above (L–R): Dame Joan Sutherland,
Peter Dawson, John Shaw,
Robert Allman, Glenda Raymond

– including some with Melba. Other singers, mainly sopranos, of the first three decades of last century included Stella Power and Gertrude Johnson OBE (both Melba protégées), Amy Castles, Elsa Stralia and Florence Austral (two of a number of singers who changed their name to be branded 'Australian').

Years after her retirement from performing, Gertrude Johnson returned to Australia and was intent on forming an Opera Studio in Melbourne in the late 1940s. The National Opera Movement boasted a troupe of youngsters eager to fill the void of a national company. 'Gertie' selected singers in their late-teens and gave them opportunities to perform in 'professional' productions. The singers were unpaid and performed for 'experience'. That practice is fully alive in the present day, but Johnson's 'chickens' included names who would soon become celebrities, some internationally renowned, others adored by audiences locally and, surprisingly, maintained strong and long careers. Elizabeth Fretwell, Lance Ingram (later changing his name to Albert Lance), John Shaw, Robert Allman and Marie Collier are names still heralded in the operatic world. Others, Barbara Wilson, Justine Rettick, Lauris Elms and Robert Simmons were local favourites.

Whether or not Gertrude Johnson was a good voice teacher, she guided the stars of her stable with a knowledge unknown elsewhere in the country. The fact that both *Aida* and *Amneris* in Gertrude Johnson's production of *Aida* celebrated their twenty-first birthdays during the season testifies to her mentorship as well as vocal gamble. Most teachers would be horrified that such young voices would sing major Verdi roles. Surely disaster would ensue along with premature vocal death. Still, Justine Rettick, the *Amneris* in this production, enjoyed a further thirty-year career!

Radio singing competitions were plentiful in the late 1940s. These ranged from the popular Australia's *Amateur Hour*, where all types of 'acts' could be heard on a single episode – a whistler, a comedian, reciter, popular vocalist, opera singer – to the highly competitive *Mobil Quest*, which formed a launching pad for a plethora of soon-to-be singers of international repute between 1949 and 1957. Unlike the television reality shows of today, the

competitors were judged on talent and technique – not just audience popularity, back stories or gimmickry. For young singers, the *Mobil Quest* was the quest of a lifetime. The top prize of £1,000 gave the opportunity to pursue studies overseas and the honour of being heard by an attentive, massive, listening audience. Conductor and (future) television producer Hector Crawford created the *Mobil Quest* in 1949. It seems unlikely that any other country in the world had a serious singing competition on radio, solely concerned with 'bringing to the attention of the public, the best vocal talent available in the Commonwealth', and requiring each competitor to sing an operatic aria. Almost two thousand singers entered the first *Mobil Quest*, and the First Prize winner was baritone Ronal Jackson. The 1950 winner was Joan Sutherland and, seven years later, the £1,000 was awarded to another worthy soprano – Nance Grant AM MBE. Following the Grand Final Concert, recitals were given by 'Stars of *Mobil Quest*' in the capital cities. The interest in the competition was so high that more than ten thousand people attended these concerts.

For over two decades, Glenda Raymond was the most loved of all Australian coloratura sopranos. In 1946 she was chosen to portray the singing voice of the early adult Nellie Melba in the 50-episode radio serial *Melba*. Glenda's stage performances were limited, as were her operatic roles, but she sang like an angel with the sweetest tone. Her perfect singing and musicianship secured the adoration of her radio audience for more than two decades.

A handful of Australian-born singers had already commenced their international journeys during the war years. Sylvia Fischer, Kenneth Neate, Rosina Raisbeck and Elsie Morison were performing at the Royal Opera House, Covent Garden, which was seen as the highest achievement for an Australian opera singer. Each of these artists eventually returned to perform in Australia after years abroad. From these humble and quite naïve beginnings, professional opera in Australia was born.

In fact, Australia was riddled with stellar voices and performers – even in the 1950s and early 1960s. Ronald Dowd, John Cameron, June Bronhill, John Lanigan, Margaret Nisbett, Neil Easton, Gregory

Dempsey, Neil Warren-Smith, Rosalind Keene, Geoffrey Chard, Marjorie Conley, Althea Bridges, Jenifer Eddy, Nance Grant, Una Hale, Raymond Myers, Maurine London, Robert Bickerstaff, Maureen Howard, Jon Weaving, Raymond McDonald, Valda Bagnall and Alan Light. Many of these singers became very well known, some of them household names, from their appearances at the Sydney Opera House. They enjoyed notable careers, but they left no commercial recordings of their work. It is not difficult to seek out quite a few performances of our great singers of the past. With a little search, their performances can be found on YouTube, and I strongly suggest all aspiring singers spend time listening to, being inspired by and influenced by the lessons they teach us. After all, these acclaimed artists were inspired by their own former singing stars from their past. We must not allow this tradition to disappear.

One might ask where is the next Fretwell, Collier, Stevens, Howard, Dowd, Warren-Smith, Shaw, Raisbeck, Morison, Fisher, Allman, Grant, Keene or Smith? Let alone Melba! The truth is, we don't want replacements for these names, we hope that new voices emerge in the future with a similar authority, presence, sound and artistry – but with their own sensibility, gravitas and excellence.



MELBA'S WILL

LEAVING A LEGACY

A legacy gift to Melba Opera Trust represents a timeless gesture of support.

It is a commitment to sustaining world-class training and precious pathways for exceptional young opera singers.

To find out about including a gift in your will, or to receive information about our Melba's Will Bequest Circle, please contact Joelle Kross on (03) 9944 2100 or jkross@melbaoperatrust.com.au

The energy in the room

Melba alumna Emilia Bertolini has found joy and energy as a Baroque music specialist, filling her London diary with a giddy array of ensemble and solo projects. Yvonne Frindle spoke to her just after Easter.

STORY YVONNE FRINDLE

Emilia was a recipient of the John & Elizabeth Wright-Smith Scholarship and the Paulette Bisley Opera Scholarship in 2020 and 2021.

She was a recipient of the John & Elizabeth Wright-Smith Alumni Grant in 2023.



‘It’s kind of cutthroat ... You really can’t afford to do a bad job.’

Emilia Bertolini

Most people take a break at Easter. Workplaces close; long weekend getaways are planned. If we go to church it’s for spiritual refreshment. But for London-based soprano Emilia Bertolini, Easter is one of the busiest times of the year. There’s a high concentration of ensembles performing Bach passions, and all those people going to church want to hear full choral masses. On Saturday, a singer might have an 8pm rehearsal for a 9:30pm Vigil service that finishes after midnight. Then they’re fronting up for an Easter Sunday service at 5am! ‘It’s just a bit crazy,’ says Emilia. ‘You really just have to fill the schedule with as much as you can over that period.’

This snapshot of life on the freelance rollercoaster will be familiar to anyone in the gig economy, regardless of profession. It’s equal parts exhilarating and precarious, but it can also be tremendously fulfilling, and it’s clear from the energy in her voice that Emilia loves what she does.

What is it that Emilia does? Much of the time, when you read about Melba alumni in these pages you’re reading about careers on the opera stage. Emilia’s résumé does include opera roles, but these are in historically informed productions of Baroque opera, and they form just part of her richly diverse portfolio career as a specialist ensemble singer and soloist.

That career has its foundation in the choral programs of Young Voices of Melbourne and Gondwana National Choirs, resulting in exemplary sightreading skills. At Melbourne University, a

St Patrick’s Cathedral choral scholarship and the influence of Erin Helyard (Head of Historical Performance) made for a natural continuation from high-level choral singing to Baroque and Renaissance polyphony – the kind of music in which individual voices weave together as equals. She recalls university performances of Pergolesi’s *Stabat Mater* and Vivaldi’s *Gloria*, as well as solo works such as Couperin’s *Leçons de ténèbres*. The latter introduced her to the idea of researching performance practices and the ‘need to make your own decisions’. It’s not like a Puccini aria where everything is written on the page, she explains, ‘there’s a lot more room for interpretation and you can get into very heated arguments about pronunciation, tempos, metrical changes ... it’s quite a can of worms!’

This approach to music-making appealed. ‘I found it really fun – Baroque music is so playful. You get to bounce ideas off other people, not just through discussion but literally as you’re singing and as you’re creating the music. There’s an amazing degree of communication, and an energy in the room.’

On joining the Melba Program in 2020, Emilia wasn’t sure at first where her background in early music and choral singing would fit. ‘I thought, okay, that’s my past, I want to be an opera singer now, and I tried very hard to fit into this operatic mould. But I often felt like “Oh, why is this so hard for me, when it seems so easy for other people?” And conversely, there were things that came much more easily to me.’

Emilia’s ease in oratorio repertoire and Baroque and early Classical music was partly the result of her training; partly her voice type, which is light and agile; and partly personal inclination: ‘I’m not a natural actor, I have to do quite a lot of mental gymnastics in order to feel comfortable playing a character on stage.’ Eventually Sharolyn Kimmerley AM encouraged her to focus on what she was good at, to embrace her natural niche – a demonstration of how Melba’s highly personalised approach supports young artists in identifying their strengths.

That niche led Emilia to the Royal Academy of Music, where she had the opportunity to work with many of the UK’s leading Baroque specialists and forge connections. And in London, one of the busiest centres for Western music in the world, she also witnessed many singers who were making a success of hybrid careers that combined choral work, solo work and opera contracts.

It took Emilia a couple of years to build her own network, but then she was offered a tour with the

choir of the Orchestra of the Age of Enlightenment and ‘from there it snowballed’. Maintaining a busy career like this, especially without the support of a manager or agent, requires supreme organisation. Work is secured through word of mouth via fixers, and a reputation for reliability and being a quick study is paramount, especially in the London scene where rehearsal time is expensive. ‘It’s kind of cutthroat,’ she says. ‘You really can’t afford to do a bad job.’

To make it work, explains Emilia, you have to be versatile and you have to be flexible. ‘There’s always really cool stuff happening.’ In April, for example, she toured Poland with the French group she was excited to work with, Ensemble Correspondances performing early Bach cantatas – ‘that was so fulfilling!’ Meanwhile, work in London can range from singing with the Orchestra of the Age of Enlightenment or the Gabrieli Consort, to session recordings for a film or an ad, to working as a deputy with the BBC Singers, singing anything from Bach’s B minor mass to ‘wacky modern stuff’. In addition many churches have a resident choir with regular services, funerals and weddings, providing work that’s low pressure but enjoyable, and ensuring balance, ‘because you can’t really be doing back-to-back touring’.

Balance is important. As a freelancer, it’s tempting to fill the diary – to ‘make hay while the sun’s shining’ – and it’s easy to feel pressured into taking on projects ‘just because someone needs you or it will solve someone else’s problem’. That in turn can lead to overwork and illness when there isn’t enough time for recovery. ‘One of the most valuable things about the Melba Program,’ says Emilia, ‘was learning to take the time to keep my voice healthy and how to set boundaries.’

‘Especially in the past nine months to a year, I’ve found a bit more of a rhythm in London; I feel like I’m in more of a position to take on the work I really want to and that I have capacity and bandwidth for.’ The ideal diary, she says, includes working with established groups alongside musicians she’s long admired, taking part in a ‘music-making tradition and legacy’. It also includes working with groups that aren’t so rushed, that allow the rehearsal time to dig into the repertoire and find the subtleties. ‘I don’t mind being a small cog in a big project that I’m very proud of, as opposed to having a more prominent role in something that might not be as fulfilling,’ she says. ‘I’ve realised over the past two years I don’t always need to be the soloist; I don’t need to be the centre of attention all the time.’



Letter from abroad

Eden Shifroni

There are moments, even now, where I find myself sitting in a practice room in London and thinking, 'How did I get here?' I grew up in Australia, surrounded by music, drawn to the way it brings people together and says the things words alone cannot. Singing has never felt like something I simply do; it is deeply tied to how I experience the world.



Eden performing as Serpeta in Mozart's *La finta giardiniera* at the Royal College of Music.

I spent two formative years with Melba Opera Trust across 2024 and 2025, a period that profoundly shaped my artistry and my sense of direction. As my time in Australia was drawing to a close and I began looking ahead to the next stage of my training, I was incredibly honoured to be named the recipient of the Alastair Jackson International Opera Award. What stayed with me most was not just the recognition itself, but the whole audition experience. The panel met me with such generosity and genuine curiosity, and it was clear that they cared deeply about whether the opportunity was truly the right fit. We spoke at length about my artistic goals, my dream roles and how this step might shape me – not only as a singer, but as a person. To be seen and supported in that way gave me a profound sense of confidence and clarity at a pivotal moment. It felt like a vote of belief, an encouragement to take the next step, even when that step felt uncertain.

That step, ultimately, was London.

Moving to London was, in many ways, a leap into the unknown. It is a city that can feel vast and overwhelming, yet what has grounded me most so far has been the people. The Melba community here has welcomed me with such openness that it has softened the edges of the transition. There is something incredibly reassuring in arriving somewhere new and still feeling connected to a familiar thread.

At the Royal College of Music, I have found an environment that both challenges and nurtures me in equal measure. Working with my teacher Russell

Smythe, whose insight and precision continually push me to refine not only my technique but my artistic choices, has been central to this period of growth. There is a shared understanding here that, in addition to developing voices, we are shaping complete artists. Alongside musical and vocal training, we engage with performance psychology, professional development and the broader realities of the industry, perspectives that feel essential in building a sustainable career.

In my first week, I experienced one of those rare, quietly extraordinary moments that seem to suspend time. In a masterclass with Ann Murray DBE, I had the privilege of singing the 'Presentation of the Rose' from *Der Rosenkavalier*, in front of one of the great Octavians. It was an absolutely surreal experience, and it felt, in that moment, like stepping not just into a role, but into a lineage.

Artistically, this period has been one of significant growth. I feel myself building on the technical foundations I developed in Australia, while also being gently pushed into new territory. Exploring a broader range of repertoire (particularly song and oratorio alongside my operatic work) has opened up new colours and ways of communicating. There is something both humbling and exhilarating about feeling your voice evolve in real time. Performance continues to be the greatest teacher. This year at the RCM, I had the joy of being part of *The Cunning Little Vixen* by Janáček, singing a number of smaller roles, each requiring its own character and energy. More recently, I completed performances of Serpeta in Mozart's *La finta giardiniera*, a role that demanded precision and playfulness.

Looking ahead, I am especially excited to be part of a contemporary opera project in collaboration with Tête à Tête (producer of Britain's largest festival of new opera), where we will perform newly written works by student composers. There is something thrilling about working on music that is still being shaped, still finding its voice. I am also preparing for my recital debut at Wigmore Hall in June as part of the RCM Vocal Showcase, an experience that feels quiet surreal. It is a hall I have sat in many times since arriving in London, listening, learning, imagining ... and now, somehow, I will step onto that stage myself.

Living and studying abroad has deepened my understanding of what it means to sustain a career in this industry. It requires a clarity of direction and an ability to organise, to prioritise, to adapt. I am learning how to manage multiple projects at once, how to prepare music efficiently and how to recognise when something is not the right fit. Perhaps most importantly, I am continuing to learn when to ask for help. That is something Melba gave me early on: the understanding that reaching out for guidance, perspective or support is not a sign of weakness, but of commitment to growth.

There are, of course, moments of challenge. Being far from home, navigating a new environment, holding yourself to a high standard ... it can feel like a lot. But there is also a deep sense of purpose that carries me through.

I carry my time with Melba with me every day. Not only in the technique and training, but in the values it instilled: curiosity, generosity and a willingness to keep growing. To be living and studying in London now, surrounded by such a vibrant artistic community, feels like an extraordinary continuation of that journey. I am deeply grateful to be here, and equally grateful to remain connected to the community that helped me take this step.

Warm wishes,

Eden Shifroni

Eden is the current recipient of The Alastair Jackson International Opera Award.

She was the recipient of the Dame Nellie Melba Scholarship, Patrick & Vivian Gordon Award and the Ryman Healthcare Opera Scholarship in 2024 and 2025.

An update ... Dame Heather Begg Memorial Award



Madison Nonoa. Image: Steven Godbee

New Zealand soprano Madison Nonoa, recipient of the 2025 Dame Heather Begg Memorial Award, has much to look forward to – a homecoming, significant debuts and a European tour.

Her year began on a high note, performing in Opéra de Monte-Carlo's restaging of *Orfeo ed Euridice* alongside Cecilia Bartoli. At the time of writing, Madison is in Australia ahead of her much-anticipated debut with Pinchgut Opera as Abel in *The First Murder*. 'This is particularly exciting for me, as I have long been a fan of Erin Helyard and his company', says Madison.

The Award has been instrumental as Madison navigates a critical stage in her career. Alongside artistic development, it has helped ease the financial demands of the profession. 'The lifestyle of a travelling professional singer is demanding and can, at times, be lonely and costly. I have been able to invest in professional recordings, performance psychology and coaching.'

After Pinchgut, Madison returns home to New Zealand where she will debut as Leïla in *The Pearl Fishers* with NZ Opera. She remains tight-lipped about an upcoming tour with a prestigious

European ensemble, and we look forward to sharing more soon.

It has also been a standout year for many past recipients of the Dame Heather Begg Memorial Award, marked by a series of high-profile debuts and celebrated returns. Anna-Louise Cole, 'with a big, bright, voluptuous sound' commanded the stage in the title role of Opera Australia's *Turandot*, while Lauren Fagan, 'a revelation', and 'exceptional' Nicholas Jones shared the spotlight in *Eugene Onegin* as Tatyana and Lensky. Filipe Manu made a welcome return to Australia to perform Alfredo in *La traviata* with Opera Australia and headline Opera Queensland's Festival of Outback Opera. On the international stage, Amina Edris achieved a major milestone with her Metropolitan Opera debut as Musetta in *La bohème*; meanwhile, in Germany, Nathan Bryon continues to make his mark, having been invited back for a second year at the Hessisches Staatstheater Wiesbaden.

These achievements represent just a snapshot of the remarkable progress past recipients have made this year, underscoring the vital role the Dame Heather Begg Memorial Award plays in supporting artists at pivotal moments in their careers.

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

Nance Grant:

A tribute

National treasure Nance Grant AM MBE, one of Australia's celebrated sopranos, has long championed emerging Now, together with her husband, Ian Harris, that enduring will become a lasting legacy through the establishment of Nance Grant AM MBE Opera Scholarship.

In recognition of their remarkable generosity, Nance and Ian were honoured with a Melba Medal at a special ceremony held at Ryman Healthcare's Nellie Melba Retirement Village. First established at the Melba Conservatorium of Music in 1993, the medal remains one of our highest honours, with only 19 awarded since its inception. Nance and Ian now join a much-admired group of past recipients. Entrusted with this extraordinary gift, Melba will carry forward Nance's legacy through a perpetual scholarship supporting generations of singers, beginning with soprano Sophie Blades as the inaugural recipient.

We asked longtime friend Brian Castles-Onion AM to write a personal tribute in honour of Nance.



above:
Brian Castles-Onion and Nance Grant

below:
Sophie Blades and Nance Grant



'Thanks to her rock-solid technique, musicianship, determination and humility, Nance Grant became, and remains, an inspiration to this and future generations of aspiring singers.'

Brian Castles-Onion AM

TRIBUTE BRIAN CASTLES-ONION AM

Sustaining a career in opera and concert over a period of four decades is a rare thing. Even rarer is when the performer is celebrated at the highest level in the industry. Few sopranos worldwide have been successful in encompassing the full range of repertoire, covering every vocal weight. Thanks to her rock-solid technique, musicianship, determination and humility, Nance Grant became, and remains, an inspiration to this and future generations of aspiring singers. Like Dame Nellie Melba, there were never any signs of vocal wear. Like the great Florence Austral, Nance was able to move effortlessly from the music of Mozart and Donizetti to Wagner and Richard Strauss. Her triumphant, shining tone and theatrical energy resemble Marjorie Lawrence at her peak. Her singing set a standard of delivery by which all would – and should – be measured.

Nance was born 12 December 1931, in the Victorian country border town of Wodonga. Her parents encouraged her musical interests from an early age. The family moved several times during her childhood due to her father's work as a policeman. She studied pianoforte from the age of eight and later decided that she wished to pursue vocal studies. Her mother, who possessed an attractive contralto voice and could play popular songs on the piano by ear, taught the young Nance her first song, 'We'll Gather Lilacs', on a round trip from Melbourne to Myrtleford – the lyrics to the first verse going up and the lyrics to the second verse coming home! Nance's serious voice lessons commenced at the age of seventeen.

She started work as an apprentice milliner whilst gaining stage experience in local Moonee Ponds Town Hall musical productions under Cid Ellwood. Nance was accepted into productions at Gertrude Johnson's National Theatre Opera School in 1953 and appeared in the chorus of a Royal Command Performance of *The Tales of Hoffmann* – appearing as a lamp post in the *Giulietta* Act. The role wasn't glamorous, but the company was. This landmark production in Australia's operatic history featured Lance Ingram (soon to become Albert Lance – a great exponent of French repertoire in France), Elizabeth Fretwell, Marie Collier and John Shaw.

Vocal studies with Henry Portnoj set her on track for competitions and concert work, and Nance was a Finalist in the 1955 Sun Aria, 'outright winner' in the 1957 Mobil Quest in Melbourne and, three years later, won the ABC Instrumental and Vocal Competition. The next decade was filled with concert, radio and television work including several of the now-historic ABC television broadcasts of Verdi's *Simon Boccanegra*, Debussy's *The Prodigal Son*, Wolf-Ferrari's *School for Fathers* and Poulenc's *Dialogues of the Carmelites*.

The British conductor Edward Downes, then Music Director of The Australian Opera, brought a new



Nance Grant and Ian Harris

chapter to Nance's career when he offered her a Principal Artist contract. Her first assignment was Amelia in *A Masked Ball* in Tasmania. Nance referred to this as a 'try-out' before her main-stage debut as the Marschallin in *Der Rosenkavalier*. Richard Strauss's long and complex work was performed without benefit of a stage rehearsal. For the single orchestral rehearsal, Edward Downes organised one prop – the Act One bed – to be placed behind the orchestra during the *Sitzprobe* so Nance and her Octavian (Yvonne Minton) could rehearse before the actual performance. This extraordinary feat shows the depth of trust Downes had in his protégé. Nance's Marschallin was a tour de force.

The title role in *Suor Angelica*, the Countess in *The Marriage of Figaro* and Elisabeth in *Tannhäuser* followed. These roles fitted Nance like a glove and presented her voice and stage presence perfectly. The Downes/Grant relationship led to other important roles with that company: Donna Anna in *Don Giovanni*, Senta in *The Flying Dutchman*, Leonora in *Fidelio*, Lady Billows in *Albert Herring*, the Female Chorus (her least favourite role) in *The Rape of Lucretia* and Alice Ford in *Falstaff*. In concert, audiences were treated to her Sieglinde in *Die Walküre* though, sadly, not in the theatre. Guttrune in *Götterdämmerung* was another of her Wagner roles heard only in concert.

In the early 1970s Professor Clemens Kaiser-Breme was a respected guest music coach at The Australian Opera and had been a coach at the Bayreuth Wagner Festival. Naturally, his attention was drawn to the talents of Nance Grant. Her artistry blossomed under his guidance and her specific affinity with Mozart, Wagner and Richard Strauss was polished to a point where Kaiser-Breme arranged an audition in the hallowed

theatre at Bayreuth. She was offered a contract for two roles in their coming *Ring* cycle but because of a clash with performances for her contracted obligations in Sydney for a production of *Ariadne auf Naxos*, she didn't accept. For the Victoria State Opera, Nance performed Elisabetta in Donizetti's *Mary Stuart*, Elettra in *Idomeneo* and Ortrud in *Lohengrin*. Ortrud was her final stage opera role and one she learnt in a short three weeks as a replacement for another colleague.

Her voice and artistry refused to be pigeon-holed. In concert, Nance was heard in a cornucopia of the soprano oeuvre. From the great Requiems of Verdi, Mozart and Britten, through sacred masses, oratorio, art song and Lieder – Nance sang them all ... and with distinction.

Nance Grant's final public appearance as a singer was in the Concert Hall at Arts Centre Melbourne accompanied by the Melbourne Pops Orchestra in 1991. A recording of that evening displays a voice and talent undiminished. For five years she was a respected teacher of voice at the Victorian College of the Arts. Her teaching method was strong, honest, direct and commonsense – exactly reflecting her personal approach to her art. She received an MBE in 1976 for Services to Music and Opera and an AM in the 2013 Queen's Birthday Honours.

My own relationship with Nance stretches back to seeing her as the Mozart Countess and Donna Anna when I was a child. Those two performances remain clear in my memory. For almost forty years, Nance has been an inspiration, not only in musical matters, but in life! To this day, she is eager to hear news of the singers of the current generation and is a regular audience member at performances. Her generosity of spirit is reflected in her words of encouragement to young singers and her ongoing support of the Melba Artists.



Peter Reilly, Linton Soderholm, Lauren Fagan, Stephen Marsh, Lady Potter AC and Sharolyn Kimmorley AM



Kate Shelmerdine and Peter Reilly



Peter Reilly: A lasting contribution

Peter Reilly OAM has helped shape Melba in more ways than one and, as he concludes his time on the Board, leaves a legacy that will be felt for years to come.

STORY KATELYN BANNISTER

When I ask Peter Reilly what has been keeping him busy, he talks about the many arts boards he is involved with (and there are quite a few). His deep passion for the performing arts is clear. 'I like to give back and impact the things I love', he says, 'but I also want to support organisations that are dynamic and have good direction.'

That same spirit has shaped his long association with Melba. Over more than fourteen years on the Board, Peter has been a constant – thoughtful, generous and quietly influential in guiding the organisation we know today. His connection with Melba began in 2010, shortly after its transition from the Melba Conservatorium of Music, when he received a 'tap on the shoulder' from former Chair Rob Logie-Smith AM. Rob reflects, 'Peter made an immediate impact with his substantial financial and business acumen – a major benefit to a small, dynamic and growing organisation.' Peter's expertise has been shaped by his successful career working across the finance, healthcare and wine industries.

Peter has been 'an invaluable member of the Board, contributing enormously in ways that were both visible and invisible', says Chair

Kate Shelmerdine. Much of that quieter contribution came through his work on the Finance & Risk Sub-Committee, where he did the 'important work of preserving, maximising and increasing the precious funds so generously provided by our supporters, of which he was one to a significant degree.'

It's a role he understands from both sides – as a careful steward of funds and as one of our most generous benefactors. 'His commitment to Melba was there for all to see when he established the \$500,000 Reilly Logie-Smith Fund to underwrite the Trust's unique and world-class Mentor Program', says Rob. That investment continues to shape the program today, supporting generations of artists as they develop their skills and careers.

When Peter reflects on the evolution of the Melba Program, he sees the alumni as the clearest measure of its success. As with much of his own contribution, the most visible outcomes are on stage, but the deeper impact is often found off stage. 'It's really the collegiality of the artists', he says. 'The alumni look after each other, they empower and support one another. Any new alumnus is welcomed into the club, and as they

go on their journey, they've got a whole network around them.'

Peter's extraordinary philanthropic support of the arts was recognised in 2021 when he was awarded the Medal of the Order of Australia (OAM), followed the next year by a Melba Medal for the significant role he has played in the organisation. But beyond these honours, it is his personal generosity that has left a lasting impression on the community.

'Perhaps most importantly', Kate reflects, 'is Peter's passion for the work we do and for the organisation as a whole. Peter loves Melba.' She continues, 'This is evident not only in the generosity of his time, experience and financial support, but in the way he and his partner, Linton, have so often opened the doors of Astolat, their historic 1880s home and garden, for Melba's use.'

Although Peter's time on the Board is coming to an end, this is far from a farewell. He will continue to contribute through the newly established Investment Advisory Group and remains very much part of the Melba community.

As we are fond of saying, *Once a Melba, always a Melba.*

'Peter has contributed enormously in ways that were both visible and invisible.'

Kate Shelmerdine

Jane Hemstritch: Investing in the future

Melba's newest Board member, Jane Hemstritch AO, brings a wealth of experience from singing at school and watching opera from the slips, to a background in science, business and serving on the boards of major companies. She spoke to Yvonne Frindle.

STORY YVONNE FRINDLE

Not many Australians have experienced singing as a house sport, but Jane Hemstritch has. Born and raised in Kenya (her father was in the tea and coffee business) she was sent to a UK boarding school that emphasised music, especially choral singing. 'Every spring term there was an inter-house singing competition and I was also in the school choir,' she recalls. 'A lot of singing!'

Jane's interest in opera developed when she met Philip, the man who would become her husband. 'One of our first dates was *Norma* at the Royal Opera House. We were sitting way up in the slips, but it was an amazing experience.' Bellini was followed by Wagner in the form of *Götterdämmerung* – 'and if you can survive that I think you can survive anything.'

Meanwhile, Jane completed an honours degree in Biochemistry and Physiology at King's College, London, and embarked on a career as an accountant. 'Science was a great preparation for the world of business,' she says. 'It taught you to be very analytical, it taught you to write up your findings in a careful and unbiased way, it taught you to test hypotheses.' Things would come 'full circle' when she joined the board of the Walter and Eliza Hall Institute of Medical Research in 2013.

As it happened, the London firm she joined in 1974 was part of an international group (now PKF Global), comprising accountancy firms from the UK, the US, Canada and Australia, and in 1981, Jane and Philip

moved to Melbourne, where she became Assistant Manager of the Australian firm. Within 18 months, she'd joined the business consulting division of Arthur Andersen, embarking on a 25-year career that would culminate in her role as Asia Pacific Managing Director for Accenture.

Just as science had provided a 'terrific grounding' for business, so business became the foundation for Jane's next career as a board member, which took off in 2006, when she joined the board of the Commonwealth Bank. There was a time when she had four Australian Stock Exchange listed boards on the go – Commonwealth Bank, Tabcorp, Santos and Lend Lease – 'that was pretty much a full-time job.' Jane is currently on the board of KPMG Australia.

'I think what draws people to work on boards is the opportunity to share some of what they've learned in a business career, and to contribute in a different way,' she says. 'One of the things you learn very early on in your career as a board member is that you're not management. You're in a governance role, overseeing all the processes and checks and balances.'

In an arts board, that oversight includes fundraising. 'The first and most obvious difference between business and arts boards,' she explains, 'is that most arts organisations are operating on the smell of an oily rag. What they manage to do with very little money is nothing short of remarkable – most traditional business would regard the

financial situation of arts organisations with fear and trepidation.'

On arriving in Melbourne, Jane became a subscriber to Victoria State Opera as well as supporting Opera Australia and now Victorian Opera. So it was perhaps inevitable that in 2010 she would join the Victorian Opera board, later serving as Chair for five years. More recently, in 2021, she joined the Ensemble Board of the Australian Brandenburg Orchestra, where she is currently Chair.

Joining the Melba Board could also be described as an inevitable move for a Melbourne-based opera lover like Jane. 'I can't pinpoint when I first became aware of Melba Opera Trust,' she says, 'but it's a great story, with Dame Nellie Melba being such a superstar in her time, and a Melbourne girl too.' Above all, Jane was attracted by clarity of the Melba vision: more than a voice.

'You've got to know so much more than just how to sing and how to audition,' she says. 'There's the whole business side of it, managing finances, managing a career, marketing yourself – all of that produces a more rounded individual who's more likely to succeed in what is a very difficult career. And what Melba offers is impressive. I think it's about the best preparation you could give a young Australian singer.'

Translating that into business terms: 'It's an investment, not only in the future of the individuals, but in the future of the art form.'



When asked if she still sings in a choir, Jane replies: 'No, I don't and I should, because singing is tremendously good for you: not only for the soul but for your physical health as well.'

The strength of many streams

The Mentor Program offers holistic preparation for a career in opera, and some donors are choosing to direct their support toward unique areas of the training program that are most meaningful to them.

At the heart of the Melba Program sits the Mentor Program: a series of immersive, week-long intensives when artists come together to develop the skills required for a sustainable and successful operatic career. It is here that the breadth of the program is most clearly felt – where artistic refinement meets practical preparation and talent is shaped into professional readiness.

Within the artistic stream, visiting artists and specialists are invited to lead coaching sessions and workshops, offering insight drawn from international stages and diverse professional experience. Alongside this, the stagecraft and movement stream brings directors and practitioners into the room to focus on performance skills – exploring movement, improvisation, physical awareness and the demands of the stage.

Language is a constant thread throughout the program. The languages stream encompasses both conversational work and lyric diction, ensuring that artists develop not only technical accuracy but a deeper connection to text and meaning. Equally important is the presentation stream, which considers how an artist communicates beyond the voice – through delivery, public speaking, media engagement and personal presentation, including hair, make-up and style.

The program also recognises that a career in opera extends far beyond performance. The business stream equips artists with

the skills required to navigate freelance life: from accounting and legal literacy to branding and professional networking. Complementing this is the wellbeing stream, which provides strategies for managing stress, performance pressure and the realities of a demanding, often transient profession.

In recent years, some donors have chosen to align their giving with specific streams within the program, supporting areas that resonate most strongly with them. For long-term Melba supporters, Lorraine Weiner and Geoffrey Blick, this has meant a particular focus on the presentation stream.

‘As with any performer, their presentation, appearance and personal attire matters – to be shown at their best with self-confidence. Melba makes sure that this is an important part of their learning experience. The difference is noticed.’

Their support reflects a conviction that artistic development is not only about the voice, but about the complete performer. They believe that ‘pride and self-awareness in personal appearance gives them a head start, because that’s what audiences see before these potential stars open their mouths to sing.’

From time to time, Melba invites small groups of donors to observe the program in action. During the fourth intensive Lorraine and Geoffrey sat in on the men’s style session led by Suzanne Dekyvere from The Dressing Coach. Lorraine and Geoffrey watched on as Devon Lake, Lachlan Higgins and



L–R: Suzanne Dekyvere, Lorraine Weiner, Zachary Hamilton-Russell, Devon Lake, Geoffrey Blick and Lachlan Higgins

Zachary Hamilton-Russell learnt about the importance of presentation, dress codes, fabrics and even received their own colour wheels. These opportunities offer a rare glimpse into the learning environment, allowing supporters to witness firsthand the transformation that takes place.

Across the course of the program, this investment in the whole artist becomes visible. Lorraine and Geoffrey said, ‘from their stage presence, voice development and self-assurance, they are ready to face the world of opera . . . evolving to become edgy, dynamic and sophisticated towards the end of their tenure within the Melba Program.’

The structure of the Mentor Program allows for this kind of meaningful connection, where support can be both targeted and deeply felt. Each stream contributes to the whole, and each offers an opportunity for donors to engage with a specific aspect of an artist’s development.

For those interested in exploring this approach, opportunities remain across a number of streams, including languages, wellbeing, artistic coaching, business sessions and stagecraft. Aligning support in this way offers a clear and tangible connection to the program, while contributing to the broader legacy of artist development that defines Melba’s work.

To find out more please contact Joelle Kross on (03) 9944 2100 or jkross@melbaoperatrust.com.au.

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