



Dame -100% Opera Star-Kiri

New Zealander Lee Suckling was honoured to speak with one of his homeland's greatest exports, Dame Kiri Te Kanawa, for this Harbourview exclusive.

Not many Kiwi girls get their big break performing in London's Covent Garden, but for Kiri Te Kanawa (or Dame Kiri, as we now know her) it was the launch of an international opera career that has now spanned 40 years.

Kiri Te Kanawa first performed an outdoor concert in 1970, "when the concept seemed a little unusual", a year before her Covent Garden debut. She has taken stage in the open air innumerable times since then and this October she is back in Australia to perform at Wyndham Estate Winery in Hunter Valley on October 15. "One of my most memorable [outdoor concerts] was in the Yalkarinha Gorge in Australia, and wonderful experience though it was, the vineyard concerts are a quite different ball game," said Te Kanawa from her home in London. "Hunter Valley is such an attractive area and vineyards make a picturesque setting with a wonderful friendly ambience for the audience. I'm looking forward to it immensely."

Born in Gisborne, New Zealand, in 1944, Kiri Jeanette Te Kanawa's parents moved to Auckland when she was 12 years old to put the budding singer close to a good teacher, as she'd already been performing in public for more than two years. "When [my mother] found out I could sing, [she] spoke about opera quite a lot, but the first kind of singing I did was cabaret and theatre musicals," Te Kanawa said. "New Zealand has produced many fine singers, but in those days actual opera was quite rare." Sister Mary Leo, young Te Kanawa's singing teacher, introduced her voice into the opera repertoire. "By the time I was 20 I was growing more and more interested," she added. "But I didn't actually see a really grand opera until I went to London in 1966. And then I was hooked."

It was during that year Te Kanawa enrolled at the London Opera Centre to study under renowned vocal teacher Vera Rózsa. Five years later her voice was first heard on a major stage. "I first stepped onto that [Covent Garden] stage in early 1971, as one of six 'flower maidens' in Wagner's Parsifal," she said. "But the big one came at the end of that year, when I sang Countess Almaviva in Marriage of Figaro. It was a daunting prospect – London audiences are very discerning and at that time I had very little track record. But the preparation had been careful – weeks

of rehearsal and coaching and I felt confident my voice was in the 'right place'.

"The theatre was packed and it was impossible not to feel the expectation. When the performance was over, I had difficulty taking in the fuss which followed, but it became clear that I wasn't a student anymore, and now had to concentrate on the realities of a professional career."

From La Scala in Milan to the Sydney Opera House, the wedding of Charles and Diana to New York's The Met, Te Kanawa spent the next ten years becoming an opera star of monumental scale. She was created a Commander of the Order of the British Empire in 1982 and later, invested as an Honorary Companion of the Order of Australia (1990) and awarded the Order of New Zealand (1995).

The first thing required to reach such great heights is the right kind of voice, Te Kanawa confirmed, but "that is only the beginning". "There has to be musical reliability, a command of languages, and the physical fitness to survive what is, in essence, a profession which is a branch of athletics," she explained.

"Apart from all those things, there are some factors that simply can't be organised and are hard to define. Luck, being in the right place at the right time, [and] having a shade of personality that an audience finds appealing ... the list goes on."

Te Kanawa was inspired by her parents in her early years. "My parents developed a firm belief that I could eventually make a profession of singing. I recognise now more than I did then, that they were inspiring me – to be confident but never self-important," she recalled. "Fortunately both my parents lived long enough to see that when success did come, everything they'd hoped for had succeeded in inspiring me."

Now, Te Kanawa looks to those making their first waves in the opera industry for motivation, by supporting young singers starting out. "Many have a marked talent – but little knowledge of how they must deal with the professional world ahead of them. I have a very big focus on sharing my own experience with young ones to help them – they are what inspire me now."

Inevitably, Te Kanawa explained, inspiration works both ways. "I 'inspire' other singers not by dwelling on the glories of stardom - but on the habits they're going to have to develop if they want to succeed."

The opening night of *Figaro* still stands in Te Kanawa's mind as her most memorable performance. However her first show at The Metropolitan Opera in New York is an equally important career landmark that forever influenced her future.

"I was due to take over the role of Desdemona in *Otello* when another soprano ended her run, so I arrived a couple of weeks beforehand, to prepare. [One day] the phone rang at 11 am to say that the other soprano was ill - and I was to go onstage to sing the role at the two o'clock matinee that day," Te Kanawa exclaimed. "I'd never set foot on The Met's stage, I had no rehearsal with the orchestra, hadn't even met the leading man, and that particular performance was going to be a live broadcast on radio to all of America. In a word, it was scary."

"Somehow, with a lot of co-operation from everyone involved, we got through it unscathed. And the reaction was very positive. That scary afternoon was the beginning of my long relationship with the Metropolitan Opera – and the rest of America."

In subsequent decades, Te Kanawa has become a familiar figure in major opera houses on four continents, performing a large repertoire of lyric soprano heroines by Strauss, Verdi, Gounod, Mozart, Puccini, Tchaikovsky and Bizet. In addition to complete operas, Te Kanawa's studio recordings include French and Italian selections, song cycles by Berlioz, DuParc and Ravel, the *Songs of the Auvergne* albums, aria collections from Bizet, and the critically acclaimed album *Maori Songs*, which returned Te Kanawa to her native roots.

This year marks Te Kanawa's 40th year on the international stage. With 78 albums and hundreds (if not thousands) of performances under her belt, she believes opera is as relevant in today's world as it ever has been.

"Opera is flourishing. There's been a subtle embrace going on between opera and technology," she acknowledged. "So, as well as real opera in real theatres, there are now 'streaming' performances on Internet, dozens if not hundreds of CDs and DVDs bringing first-class opera right into the house, and the 'live cinema' broadcasts which are proving a huge success."

"For many people the real excitement is being there in a theatre - but for those who can't, there are far more alternatives now than before."



Dame Kiri Te Kanawa will be under the stars at Opera in the Vineyards 2011 at Wyndham Estate Winery, Hunter Valley Saturday 15 October.
For more information www.operainthevineyards.com.au