

The future Olympians of the opera stage

by [Howard Shepherdson](#) on October 8, 2015 (October 8, 2015) filed under [Classical Music | Opera](#) | [Comment Now](#)

Three young artists discuss their drive to succeed ahead of ROH's staging of *The Lighthouse*.

"My father was raised on a farm in rural Australia and here am I one generation away working at Covent Garden in London, one of the world's leading opera houses."

Greg Eldridge is one of three talented young Australians currently part of the Jette Parker Young Artists Scheme at the Royal Opera House Covent Garden. One of the press officers leads me through a maze of corridors over several floors and into a small meeting room to say my first hello to this remarkable trio. Greg is working as a director and Emily Edmonds and Lauren Fagan as singers.

Their journey to Covent Garden has had as many twists and turns as my short route from the stage door and you soon realise how much each has sacrificed in time and effort to be there and given complete dedication to their work. They are a long way from home but all are driven by a desire to succeed.

It is remarkable how many talented people Australia exports to the international opera world. The level of training and the work ethic instilled into them is impressive. These are the future Olympians of the arts world and deserve more recognition by the state. In conversation I am impressed by the discipline and dedication each has shown.

All three are hungry for the opportunities Covent Garden can provide but they also show a marked level of maturity when discussing career progress. Each is measured and hardworking, ready for any opportunity that may come their way.

For Emily and Lauren this can start from understudying small and medium-sized roles and eventually being cast in their own right. "Everything must be learnt to perfection as you cannot let standards slip," says Lauren. "You also have to be a good team player as there is definitely no room for prima donnas. To be able to take and learn you have to give in equal measure."

As a director Greg is as much in love with the libretto as he is with the music. "I like telling stories through any media and in opera the libretto is right at the heart. This is what comes first and it is the framework for often wonderful musical moments which heighten the meaning and emotion." Greg cites directors such as David McVicar and Richard Eyre as people he admires. He appreciates the work of concept directors such as fellow Australian Barry Kosky but recognises he will take a different path.



Greg Eldridge

Emily has only been at Covent Garden for a few weeks. Her heroes are singers such as Sarah Connolly and she feels her career is leading her to specialise in trouser roles such as Cherubino in *Marriage of Figaro*. Her preferences do not lie in the dizzy confection of coloratura, instead she likes roles that reflect stronger women learning to deal with life and love. “I want roles that give freedom and clarity of voice and I look forward one day to being able to sing Octavian in *Rosenkavalier*.”

Readers may have seen Emily several years ago on national television in Schools’ Spectacular from New South Wales. She was a product of the Talent Develop Programme run by the education department and it is interesting to see how far this has propelled her. Investing in talented people always brings rewards. Sydney Conservatorium of Music must be really proud of her.

Lauren has a preference for lighter lyric soprano roles and sees herself as a Suzanna rather than a Countess. “I can see myself being ready to perform Mimi in *La Bohème* in a few years but you have to pace yourself and let the voice mature. The Royal Opera will never push you which is great.” A treasured memory was a coaching session with Antonio Pappano. “He helped me understand where my vocal strengths lay and told me not to push too early.”



Lauren Fagan as Leila © Clive Barda

An opera from composer Peter Maxwell Davies called *The Lighthouse* opens in October and Greg is directing. “It is a challenging work musically, but essentially a ghost story and it is great to have a production of my own. Jette Parker young artists make up the cast and it is an import opportunity to showcase our work.”

I ask all three what message they would like to send to the artistic establishment back home in Australia. Greg would love to split his time working in Europe and back home. He already has over forty productions of opera, music theatre and drama under his belt. “I would love to go back and direct anything. I love Australia and feel I have a lot to offer now.”

Emily is more reflective and then comes out with advice for other singers. “We do a brilliant job in Australia, be proud! The best thing I did was to travel and learn languages. Find out what you are passionate about then pursue it.”



Emily Edmonds © Keith Saunders

Lauren is impressed with schemes in the UK which try and develop new audiences, particularly marketing opera to you people. “That is where the future of the art form lies and Australia needs to do more about this to secure a future. What is the point of producing world-class singers when there is not enough opportunity for us to perform at home?”

As I make my farewells I feel energised by these remarkable Australians. There is no wonder Covent Garden want them on the Jette Parker scheme. All three will have future work permit and visa issues and I am disappointed that the UK government has failed to get this right. London could soon lose their talent to more enlightened countries like Germany where opera thrives and international singers truly welcomed. Let’s also hope they have the chance to work back home in Australia.

***The Lighthouse* is part of Meet The Young Artists Week and is one of a series of public events this October which will feature artists from the Jette Parker programme which was established in 2004 to provide intensive training for young international artists.**