

## Australian opera Singers abroad

Australia is producing more and better opera singers than ever before. But how do these young singers stand up in the competitive international market? And just how much harder is it to make it in Europe than at home? Alexandra Coghlan explores a uniquely challenging career in which visas can be every bit as important as voices.

Australia is synonymous internationally with sunshine, koala bears, surfing and laid-back cool. Oh, and opera. Yes, really. What country in the world boasts a more iconic opera house than Australia, a more celebrated diva than Nellie Melba or a more successful operatic team than [Joan Sutherland](#) and her conductor husband Richard Bonyngé? Who won the highly competitive Male Singer category at the 2014 Opera Awards but Australian tenor [Stuart Skelton](#) – or staged a more ambitious operatic spectacle than the 2013 Melbourne *Ring* Cycle?

'Australian opera singers really do seem to be taking over the world...' The Royal Opera House's David Gowland might be smiling, but he's absolutely serious. During recent years the artistic director of the company's Jette Parker Young Artists Programme has seen an ever-growing number of talented Australians coming through his door, currently comprising almost half the members of the scheme, including three out of this year's intake of five.

'The Australians have always been a major presence in opera, and judging by the level at which their young artists arrive in the UK, the conservatoires over there are doing something very right,' says Gowland. 'The standard is just getting higher and higher.'

It's a phenomenon mirrored across Europe, as JPYA member Samuel Dale-Johnson explains. 'No matter which opera house you're in, wherever you go there's always an Australian contingent – it took me by surprise.'

### **The Melba Trust offer not only scholarships to singers, but also the chance to learn from international performers**

But it's a surprise that is rapidly becoming the norm, a phenomenon too marked to be ignored. The work of institutions like the Queensland Conservatorium of Music and the West Australian Performing Arts Academy – producing singers not only with the vocal technique to pursue a career but also the physical, dramatic and entrepreneurial skills now demanded by an increasingly competitive marketplace – is supplemented by organisations like the Dame Nellie Melba Opera Trust, who offer not only crucial scholarships to young singers, but also the chance to learn from major international performers. It's surely no coincidence that all three of this year's Australian JPYAs are alumni of the programme.

But, despite a significant pool of talent, it's not all smooth sailing for Australians abroad, as New Zealand's [Kiri Te Kanawa](#) pointed out in an impassioned [interview with the Guardian](#) last month. Kanawa claimed that while she and her contemporaries were able to take advantage of an 'open door' to the UK, today's young singers are blighted by ever-stricter immigration policies that see them unable to stay on after their training. It's an issue very familiar to Gowland.

'I sometimes wonder whether we really are doing overseas students a service by taking them on. We can get them work permits or visas as long as they are with us, but it does make it hard for agents to take them on in the long term if there are visa restrictions. The system seems to be getting tougher and tougher, and it doesn't help that the rules keep changing.'

### **Both Germany and France have historically placed greater value on culture**

The problem doesn't extend to mainland Europe, however, as Stuart Skelton explains. 'Germany doesn't really have any restrictions at all. If a Germany opera company wants to hire you then that's the end of it. It's partly because they have so many more companies over there, and there is more work available.'

It's also partly a question of broader national attitudes towards the arts. Both Germany and France have historically placed greater value on culture, with France offering government pension schemes to support unemployed artists, and company singers at Germany's opera houses gaining the status of civil servants, along with the equivalent salary and job security. For Skelton, the system was a passport to an international career he might not otherwise have had. 'At every audition UK companies would ask if you had patriality. If you said no, that was it. I couldn't work in Britain till 2003, and only began to come more regularly from 2006, once I was more established.'

Which begs the question of why, with so many barriers to career advancement, so many young Australian singers still try their luck abroad, and in the UK in particular. For JPYA member Greg Eldridge, the answer is simple. 'For Australian directors like me, going overseas is the only option because there's nothing for us in Australia. After I finished my initial training I wrote to almost every opera house in the Commonwealth and asked them to include directors in their young artists programmes, but no one would. It's a very closed shop – Opera Australia, for example, have only one staff director. There really aren't many opportunities.'

Lack of opportunities are one thing – there have always been more graduates emerging from Australia's conservatoires than jobs available – but lack of national confidence is quite another. Do the ghosts of Australian 'cultural cringe' still linger? Is opera still perceived as inherently better and more sophisticated in Europe?

'There's definitely still a culture in Australia that believes that everything is done better in Europe,' says Dale-Johnson. 'The standard is automatically higher because there's a greater pool of talent available. While Europe is the cultural epicentre for opera, in Australia we're on the other side of the world, and there's an understandable insecurity that comes with that.'

### **There are hopeful signs of a broadening operatic point of view in Australia**

But it's a situation improving with every year. Gowland has nothing but praise for the 'artistry and stamina' of Australian performers, as well as the 'openness of attitude' of their national opera scene. With Opera Australia working increasingly with international directors such as [David McVicar](#) and Elijah Moshinsky, there are hopeful signs of a broadening operatic point of view, while projects like the Melbourne *Ring* or State Opera South Australia's [Philip Glass Trilogy](#) show a degree of artistic ambition unthinkable even 15 years ago.

So, what should the next generation of Australian conservatoire graduates do to give themselves the best possible chance of a career? While most singers agree that there are still careers to be had within Australia itself, all are emphatic about the value overseas training and experience can bring, as JPYA Kiandra Howarth explains.

'In the current economic climate there are fewer and fewer jobs available for graduates, so it's very important to give yourself the best possible opportunity by travelling to different countries and learning from different schools of teaching and performing. Have as many experiences as possible – it will only enhance what you do, whether you end up staying abroad or whether your career takes you back to Australia.'

*Find out more about the Royal Opera House's [Jette Parker Young Artists Programme](#)*