

# Delightful diva

Yvonne Kenny AM is one of Australia's, and the world's, great opera singers. During a 30-year career her light lyric soprano voice has enthralled audiences packed into the great opera houses and concert halls – Covent Garden (London), La Scala (Milan), the Bolshoi (Moscow), Carnegie Hall (New York), and the Sydney Opera House. She is internationally renowned for her dazzling interpretations of the soprano roles in the operas by Handel. She has recorded more than 70 CDs and is Australia's highest-selling classical artist. Yvonne performed the Olympic Hymn at the Sydney 2000 Games closing ceremony, and was the voice of Dame Nellie Melba in the TV mini-series. Hers has been, and still is, a brilliant career.

Melbourne audiences have the increasingly rare opportunity to see Yvonne perform live in Opera Australia's new production of *The Merry Widow* (sung in English), where she will play the title role of the recently widowed Hanna Glawari. There will be nine performances of *The Merry Widow* in the Arts Centre's State Theatre between 10 November and 11 December. *Event Guide* spoke with Yvonne in the lead-up to the production.

**Are there any roles you haven't done that you would still like to do?**

I think for my voice type, the roles that I have been aspiring to are the Strauss roles, and I've managed to achieve most of those over the last few years. I'd love to explore more of the operetta repertoire such as *The Merry Widow*. I think there is a lot of wonderful repertoire there which is very suitable for me vocally.

Perhaps some of the Gluck operas. Things like *Iphigénie en Tauride*. I enjoy the early period of music because I've sung a lot of Handel roles. I've always had a yearning to sing *Tosca*, but I just haven't got the right type of voice for it. But I have no burning passion to move in a different direction. I'm very content with where I am and what I am actually singing.

**In the 2005 Opera Australia season you are going to be featuring in Poulenc's *La Voix Humaine* (The Human Voice). Have you sung that before?**

No, and this will be a very interesting new challenge for me because I am the only person on stage. It's a single hander, a one-act opera, and so it's up to me to totally engage the audience's attention for the entire piece, unaided by anybody except the orchestra. (*La Voix Humaine* will be performed only in Melbourne and will be Yvonne's only opera in Australia during the 2005 season.)

**What do you enjoy most about your work now?**

The exploration of new repertoire, learning it, and the preparation and the rehearsals. I don't feel quite as pressured as I used to be when I was really in the thick of it, say 15 years ago.

I have settled into a much calmer schedule now, which is absolutely perfect because I have time to

enjoy each engagement. Most people don't realise the amount of study it requires to be an opera singer, the amount of memorising, the level of language skills.

I have to sing in German, Italian and French constantly. If I'm doing an opera and preparing a libretto, for example, before I do anything I have to go right through the entire thing and make sure it's all translated, I understand every word, every grammatical construction, and then I set about getting it into my memory bank.

**What you enjoy in your work, has that changed over your career?**

Yes, I think it has. As a young singer, I was really challenged by the vocal gymnastics of difficult coloratura arias, things like that, and that was my focus. But as my voice has matured and become richer in colour and I have a greater palette of colours to work with now, I'm more interested in the characterisation and the acting side of it as well as the vocals.

**What do you love most about being a singer and performer?**

I love the music most. I think I'm a really lucky person that all of these incredibly brilliant composers and librettists have created magnificent work that I have the privilege of reinterpreting. Thinking back to your question before, what I love most is the work that I do on a new role.

If it's a great role, looking into it and exploring it and thinking about it – that's the great challenge and that's what I love. I also love the actual performing experience.

I love being on stage and communicating that body of work, or that beautiful aria, or whatever it be, to the people actually feeling that I'm a vehicle for that to be presented. It's very moving sometimes. On those rare

occasions where you really feel it's 100% and you've really got it right, it's very, very rewarding.

**What is the most interesting costume you have worn?**

I've had a lot of wonderful costumes over the years. My favourite costumes were the Cleopatra costumes in *Julius Caesar*. I've been lucky because I've nearly always had really lovely dresses. I love all the corsetted gowns. I find it really great because it's very firm and very flattering. I'm the sort of singer who enjoys having a firm bodice to spread into and use as support.

**What has been the most memorable audience reaction to a performance?**

*Julius Caesar* in Sydney. There was a scene where as Cleopatra I took a milk bath, and the audience just absolutely went mad. They just couldn't believe their eyes and it drew a huge response.

**Are there some times when everything is perfect on the night and the audience just ignites?**

Yes. I think people in the audience don't realise that we pick up a lot of energy from them. On some occasions you'll be on stage, the curtain will go up, and you'll feel this tremendous energy and excitement in the atmosphere because the audience are all alive and interested and focusing on you and you can feel that, and it's very uplifting, exciting.

Other nights the curtain will go up and you will feel like it's a black hole and it sucks the life out of you because there is nothing coming back at all. Why either happens with a random group of people I'm not sure, but it certainly does and it certainly affects how we feel on stage.

**How do you decide which roles to choose each year?**

It depends on the voice that God gave you. It depends on the size of your voice, the amount of power, what is the suitable repertoire for your voice and to sustain a long career, as I'm doing.

I've been singing since 1975, and the thing I'm most proud of is that my voice is still in very good shape and is not showing any signs of that length of career. So I've always been very careful about the roles I've chosen.

With a voice like mine, it's a warm lyric, but if I try to sing, say, *Tosca*, then people just wouldn't hear me enough or it wouldn't be suitable, and they'd be disappointed because it wouldn't be enough voice to bring the drama through.

**Do you have a favorite opera role?**

Yes I do. It's the the Feldmarschallin from *Der Rosenkavalier*.

**Do you prefer a dramatic or comedic role?**

I love both equally, and I think I have a feel for both. I've had a mixture along the way. There have

been a lot of the Mozart roles that have been very comedic. The dramatic heroines, I love too. *Mary Stuart*, for example, *Maria Stuarda*, which I did down in Melbourne with Joan Cardin quite a few years ago now. I love each challenge for what it is and I love the range of it.

**Who is your favourite Handel heroine to sing?**

That's a choice between Semele (*Semele*) and Cleopatra (*Julius Caesar*).

**What is the most difficult role you have sung in opera?**

Constanza in *The Abduction from the Seraglio*. It's actually called *Die Entführung aus dem Serail* in German.

**Was it weird being the voice of Nellie Melba in the TV series?**

It was great! I learnt so much about her, and it was such a challenge because she did an incredible variety of repertoire right from her early years, singing all the Victorian bird songs through to snippets of all the operas she ever sung. It was at a stage of my life and my career where I was still singing the high coloratura roles and could do all of that so it was fantastic.

THE MERRY WIDOW

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