

Photography by STEPHEN BACCON



Movie-star looks, acting talent and a voice to pierce the heart ... Standards may be sky-high and competition fierce for admittance to the fickle world of opera, but there's no shortage of hopefuls. **Amanda Hooton** sits in on a quest to find the stars of the future.

OPERA IS A WEIRD ART FORM. AS THE ART historian Kenneth Clark put it: "Next to Gothic architecture, [it] is one of the strangest inventions of Western man. It could not have been foreseen by any logical process." And it's not made any more explicable when it's performed by 140 kids, after only five days of rehearsal, with broadcaster Alan Jones speaking on opening night.

But after a week at A Mid-Summer Opera, I can tell you one thing. Opera is dangerous. In a single day of rehearsals, one of the assistant stage managers faints twice. A security guard collapses and has to be taken to hospital. The producer slips a disc. And someone falls over a large fibreglass rock. It's possible that she and the security guard ended up at the same hospital as the director's husband, who had a heart attack at the start of the week.

Nevertheless, when producer Nicole Alexander advertised her third Mid-Summer Opera late last year, plenty of young people from around the country were prepared to pay

\$425 and risk life and limb in pursuit of art. More than 800 students from Australia and New Zealand auditioned, travelling to Sydney and Melbourne from places like Gunnedah and Ballarat; sending recordings from Orange and Kyabram. In the end, 165 of them (140 singers, 25 musicians) were selected for a production that includes 25 baroque and classical pieces and a world premiere one-act opera called *Love's Lessons Learned*. Along the way there will be three unfeasibly enormous, 140-person choruses. Even Opera Australia can manage only a 90-man chorus for Wagner's *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg*; Mid-Summer is the unwieldy opera juggernaut at its best. "This is really as many singers as it's possible to have," Alexander admits. "You can't have more than we've got."

The week in Sydney has been billed as a "mentored development opportunity for the stars of the next generation" – the only one of its kind, for this age group, in the country. Finding a luminous new talent is an

eternally seductive idea: it's the reason, at least in part, that director Jenny Laing-Peach has flown in from Shanghai, that conductor Simon Kenway has returned from rehearsing the Hong Kong Philharmonic Orchestra, that the Sydney Conservatorium of Music staff and the PR consultant and the documentary film crew and I myself are here. But it almost never happens. During the introductory talk, I can see two albino girls like slim columns of white light, and a boy who looks (appropriately enough) like a cast member of *The Sopranos* – and no incandescent talent at all.

Still, hope springs eternal. On Monday morning I am confronted by a bewildering array of one-on-one rehearsals, ensemble classes and acting run-throughs. I enter a small room with a pleasant-seeming 14-year-old in it. She's listening politely to Nicole Dorigo, a Conservatorium language coach. "So what do you think the phrase you've just sung means?" Dorigo asks.

"Let ... me ... die?" says the girl hesitantly, in her Australian teenager voice.

"That's right," says Dorigo, who comes from an Italian opera-loving background and often mouths the words along with her students. "It's incredibly sad. Here she is, and she just wants to die. Let's see if you can change the colour of your voice just there."

The pianist begins again, Rochelle Dew takes a big breath, and out pours a sudden,

golden sound, pure as a bell across a valley. At first I can't believe it's actually coming from her: like all special voices, it sounds oddly independent of the body it's coming from. Later I will discover from her mother that Dew has always liked singing; that she has lessons; and that no one else in the family can hold a tune. But sitting in the rehearsal room, all I'm conscious of is the sound, and the feeling of a cynic caught out. The first kid I hear, and a voice that pierces the heart. It's almost ridiculous.

When her time is up, Dew wanders off, and the PR and I blow our noses and pretend our eyes aren't filled with tears. This is all quite normal, says Alexander. "During the Sydney auditions this young tenor came on stage and started singing, and Simon [Kenway] just burst into tears. He said afterwards that you only hear a couple of voices like that in a lifetime. Like a young Domingo."

Simon Kenway is not easily moved to tears, but even a musical life spent at places like London's Royal College of Music and the Paris Opera doesn't inure you to the spark of potential genius. "Tenors are rare," he explains, "and they almost always have issues with their voices; problems with certain notes. That's what made that moment so amazing – just to hear that strength and power: a voice with no issues. In all my years, I've never heard a boy's voice at that age so well set up.

Every now and then, one just falls out of the tree ready-made. And he did."

THE YOUNG DOMINGO'S NAME IS CLAUDIO Sgaramella. I find him the following day, wearing a mauve T-shirt and leather jacket and black trousers with a single enormous turn-up to mid-calf. When I sit down in his rehearsal (he's playing the cleaner in love with the schoolteacher in *Love's Lessons Learned*), he is cheerfully forgetting his lines and struggling with his entries. His voice, which seems to be barely getting off the ground, sounds totally unremarkable: quiet, tentative, even thin.

Later in the day, in a different rehearsal, I sit and watch him make a blonde girl laugh, while a barefoot Jenny Laing-Peach tries to direct an increasingly distracted chorus. "If you find," she says gently, as the noise level rises and rises, "as part of a process of self-examination, that you cannot stop sounds coming out of your mouth, now is the time to practise."

Most of the chorus, it must be said, are uninterested in any form of self-examination –

"Yes, but I'm going to make it": (this page, clockwise from top left) petal-equipped older students prepare to bloom; Claudio Sgaramella, one-time *Australian Idol* hopeful, waits in the wings; assistant director Gemma Tamock takes a rehearsal; cowslips, bumblebees, bats and owls all have their part to play in the opera juggernaut; the ethereal presence of sisters Marina, seated on her fibreglass rock, and Astrid Connelly.

they are here, after all, to make sounds come out of their mouths, and if they can't be operatic ones, cries of excitement and smothered giggling and mobile-phone whispers will do.

Not everyone is talking, however. Naomi Johns, who moved from Western Australia to study at the Con and make it as an opera singer, has the steely-eyed determination of a street fighter or a chess champion. And nothing – not the arrival of her boyfriend mid-rehearsal from Italy, nor the fact that her part, as the trashy friend in *Love's Lessons Learned*, is too low for her voice – is going to stand in her way.

"It's an extraordinarily tough environment these young singers go into," explains Jan Cullis, a counsellor who specialises in the effects of emotions on the voice. "It operates on a system of critical feedback, and competition. To make it, you have to have a sense of yourself that can stand up to 15 people telling you what to do, how to do it, that they can do it better."

Johns certainly seems to have a rock-solid sense of herself: if she has to shout backstage at other students to "shut the fuck up" so she can concentrate, so be it. "It's about learning the work I have to put in," she says. "Learning the determination and discipline. Not just learning to sing." She pauses. "I have to make it," she says. "This is the only option for me. There is no contingency plan."

If Johns is all guts and glory in pursuit of the dream, 16-year-old Marina Connelly is the dream itself. The elder of the two albino sisters, Connelly is fine-boned and funny, quoting Shakespeare on cuckolds and Voltaire's *Candide*. Looking into her face – she has only 4 per cent vision, so is classified as legally blind – is like gazing into the centre of a white flower: the air around her seems infused with

light. "If I had my way, I'd spend my entire life studying and singing early music," she says, clasping her hands. "I'd never do anything else." For her, singing is the most profound embodiment of the artistic life she longs for – and because it's oral, and aural, it gives her a form of expression in which she's at no disadvantage.

Claudio Sgaramella is also seeking advantage, though of a different kind. A former student at Sydney's St Andrew's Cathedral School, he has just learnt he's been accepted into the Conservatorium – arguably the country's best training institute for opera – to study voice. "I actually went on *Australian Idol*, but they told me my voice was too big for pop," he recalls. "So I thought I'd try something different. That's when I tried opera and I really liked it. And since then, that's what I've wanted. Opera. Nothing else. No pop, no contemporary, no nothing."

He sang *O Solo Mio* for his Mid-Summer audition. "That's my best song," he explains. So is he pursuing opera for the artistic life? Because he loves the art form? He laughs. "Not really. I'm doing it for the girls."

EVEN IF YOU ARE YOUNG AND PASSIONATE – ABOUT opera or girls – there are no guarantees that you'll ever be employed as an opera singer in this country. Last year, Bruce Martin, one of Australia's senior bass singers, published a lengthy article pointing out just how few jobs are available. "You need to realise," he wrote, "that no one can earn a living singing opera in Perth, Adelaide, Melbourne, Hobart or Brisbane, let alone the regional centres." Even at Sydney-based Opera Australia, the only place in the country with the budget to employ singers on staff, there are, at most, 70 full-time positions, including both principals and chorus members. Even the newly founded Victorian

Opera, with its \$7.6 million budget, will offer only contract work on a project-by-project basis.

"The first thing I say to students is, 'Do not expect to earn a living as an opera singer,'" says Linda Thompson, voice co-ordinator at Monash University's School of Music Conservatorium, which has 42 students studying classical singing. Thompson was a principal with Opera Australia for three years. "Most students teach," she explains, "or get involved with children's choirs, or small ensembles doing corporate work." Some move into research or speech therapy; some move away from music altogether. But however many times you spell out the reality, she admits, "you can still see them up the back thinking, 'Yes, but *I'm* going to make it.'"

In contrast to the shrinking professional market, the number of classical voice students is at least as big as it's ever been. There are more than 90 voice and opera students at the Sydney Con, and 26 at the Melbourne VCA, while Monash's Opera Ensemble has grown each year for the past three years, with half of the 30 students participating "just for interest. Even though," Thompson points out, "there's nowhere for them to go."

One can't help wondering, with such limited chances for the future, why student numbers are so high. When you get right down to it – and I say this as an opera enthusiast – isn't opera the last refuge of the music nerd?

Certainly not, says Nicole Alexander. "You have to be a movie-star package these days. You've got to sing well, of course. But you've also got to look fantastic, and be able to perform and be convincing in the role. I don't think you can have a fat lady singing a 16-year-old role any more. The audience just won't accept it."

Singers like Angela Gheorghiu and Teddy Tahu Rhodes bear this theory out, and woe betide anyone

who falls short of the mark. Last year, English soprano Deborah Voigt was not saved by her voice (acknowledged to be one of the most beautiful in international opera) from being sacked from the Royal Opera House production of *Ariadne auf Naxos*. Why? Because she was too fat for her costume. And in response, did she throw a diva-like tantrum and demand reinstatement? Did she decry the false priorities of the industry in the 21st century? No. She went and got her stomach stapled.

Fortunately, nobody here has to worry about stomach staples. At least not yet. Sgaramella has stopped chatting to the blonde girl, but he's still missing his entries. Vivien Conacher, the lovely tall girl playing Miss Bell, the teacher he falls in love with, looks worried.

"Are you sure about your part?" Nicole Dorigo asks him kindly. "I think you are."

"I think it's because it's syncopated," he replies.

"I keep waiting and then it's gone."

"He freaks out," adds Conacher, "and then I freak out."

"Yes," sympathises Dorigo. She consults the score.

"Okay. So you have your duet, then you fall in love."

"Yeah," says Sgaramella. "After one waltz. Just like real life."

Opera, of course, is not like real life at all. Which may be exactly the point. Regardless of movie-star requirements or limited job opportunities, most of these students genuinely believe that unspecified but thrilling success lies just around the corner. And in the short term – i.e., this Friday night – they have no doubts that despite their endless chat and 70 pages of new music and a litany of illness and misfortune that puts one in mind of a late-season injury list, things are going to be brilliant. "Yeah, it's a bit disorganised at the moment," says Naomi Johns. "But it'll be great." She pauses. "Well, it has to be."

THE ADULTS ARE NOT SO CERTAIN. THERE IS A convention in opera, as in theatre, that the last days before opening night are always disastrous, and a bad dress rehearsal heralds a great show. But by Thursday morning, you can see the adults beginning to wonder if they might be cutting things just a little fine.

The problems are general – a lack of rehearsal time, significant and almost daily changes to the music, too many performers, not enough space – and specific: the director's husband's heart attack, Sgaramella's battle with his music, and Marina Connelly's difficulty in negotiating the ever-changing stage furniture are just three of many. Connelly is part of the central tableau in the first act: not being able to find her spot will spell disaster. "The best way for me to learn where things are on stage is to run round and round, getting it set in my head," she explains cheerfully. "When they change the rocks around, I have to start all over again."

The tension expresses itself in different ways. In the course of Thursday morning, I see three soloists in tears on their mobile phones, and a pianist collapse in the doorway to the theatre. I listen to Jenny Laing-Peach recalling how she woke at 3am worrying about the second act, and spent most of Wednesday nearly in tears "cutting and cutting and cutting". I hear Nicole Alexander explaining, through her developing laryngitis, how she's had to hire a different backdrop and buy a blue carpet and take the money for both out of her wages because the production is over budget. And I spend a lot of time with Tony and Garth.

Despite sounding like a hair salon team, production designer Tony Asness and costume guru Garth Fleton operate like small sovereign states: each resolutely going his own way, despite constant skirmishes over border territory.

Fleton has made 80 ball gowns for *Love's Lessons*

Learned. "And it's not just the dresses," he points out, hand to fevered brow. "I've got fat suits, too. And I know this sounds terrible, but if you miss a note, you can just hide it behind other people. But if you don't have a costume..." He spreads his arms wide.

In order to stave off this unspeakable disaster, Fleton has gathered a small sweatshop of mothers in the bowels of the Conservatorium. They sew until their fingers bleed, and he counts off the boob-tube dresses as he completes them, one by one.

Back upstairs, Asness lines up the boys, then the girls, and fits them for the first act with old costumes lent by Opera Australia. He makes a reluctant Dew wear a strange hooded anorak, and Sgaramella a blue boiler suit, and a young girl stiletto heels. "But I have to climb onto a rock," she protests. "You should be able to get on a moving boat in heels," says Asness inexorably. "Without looking down."

He looks in despair at Johns's ball dress. "This is terrible," he tells her.

"I know," she says. "It's the colour of a very well-hydrated person's wee."

Asness blinks. "You don't have boobs," he tells her baldly. "Do you have hot legs?"

"Yes," she says, equally bald.

"Right. Tell Garth you want it cut to upper thigh."

During the dress rehearsal, he sits peering at the stage. "What *are* those costumes?" he keeps asking, every time a group of nine-year-olds dressed by Fleton as cowslips and bumblebees (and bats and owls) appear. "Do you think the children actually *like* wearing them? They look like Ninja Turtles." I'm more worried about the large wire petals some of the older students are holding, which are supposed to look, sequentially, like flowers, and waves, and trees. To me they look terrible, like pulsing, science-fiction triffids.

They need more practice with the petals, I whisper to Asness. He doesn't take his eyes off the stage. "I think if we tried to make them do anything else," he says, "they'd rise up like *Lord of the Flies* and kill someone."

Everyone, however, makes it alive to performance time. Listening to Alan Jones and taking deep breaths of the PR's stress-relieving aromatherapy stick, I find myself hoping not for incandescent talent, or proof of stardom – or even co-ordinated flower movement. Just let everyone get through their songs, I find myself thinking; and let no one plunge to their death into the orchestra pit, and no one make a fool of themselves.

And then the curtain goes up. And the triffid flower pulsing is gone, and the incessant talking is replaced by the silence of 140 minds concentrating hard. The stiletto girl ascends her rock like a pro; Dew's voice pours into the auditorium, a soul above her anorak. Connelly finds her rock, sits like marble and sings like an angel; Johns's dress barely covers her backside and she forges on despite it. Then Sgaramella comes on stage in his blue overalls, sweeps the floor, and forgets his music.

There is an agonisingly long pause. Down in the pit, Simon Kenway keeps conducting and lifts his head, singing softly to prompt him. Sgaramella stares blankly into space. Vivien Conacher stands transfixed opposite him. There is a huge, collective holding of breath.

And then he remembers, and begins to sing again. And right then, his voice suddenly changes, as if during the silence it had fought a battle with his other, lesser voice, and won. And this is the voice of *O Solo Mio* – the voice too big for pop; the kind of voice that opera celebrates like nothing else – rolling, rich, effortlessly powerful, ringing and building into its own echo.

A heartbeat later, it's gone again, and Sgaramella is just a 19-year-old in a boiler suit with a precarious future. Around him, the opera juggernaut rolls on. ■