

# THE RICHARD DIVALL PROGRAM

NEWSLETTER 2025



The Richard Divall Program focuses on providing opportunities for emerging opera singers to experience the pressure of intensive role preparation, rehearsal and performance in a professional setting whilst continuing artistic development with tailored high-quality coaching, workshops, master classes and mentoring.

It is incredible to think the program is nearing ten years of operations. We have supported so many outstanding singers who have gone on to have wonderful careers and opportunities both here and overseas. The program continues to develop award winners and finalists but most importantly, many of our past program members are sustaining careers as singers, largely because our program’s focus squarely on creating performance-ready singers.

This performance ready capability of our singers was never more on show than when soprano Emily Szabo stepped in to sing the role of Mimi in Melbourne Opera’s second performance of *La bohème* in September 2024 due to the indisposition of the principal artist. The audience were transfixed by her magnificent preparation and command of the role as well as her composure. This included high praise from critics from *Limelight* and *Classic Melbourne* who were attending the performance. So many program members were covers for this production that we are planning a performance featuring the program members later in 2025. As part of the Melbourne Opera Puccini Festival, we also presented two concert performances of *Suor Angelica*, featuring Helena Dix and Deborah Humble, with all the smaller ‘sister’ roles being played by program members past and present (see details below).



*Music call on the left and production photo of the concert performance of Suor Angelica featuring Helena Dix (centre). Left to right Leah Phillips, Lily Ward, Caitlin Weal, Emily Szabo, Breanna Stuart, Belinda Dalton, Livia Brash, Shakira Dugan and Amanda Windred. Production photo by Robin Halls.*

Melbourne Opera's epic production of Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg provided many opportunities for our emerging and developing artists to shine. Henry Shaw sang the role of the Nightwatchman (and covered Hans Schwartz), Asher Reichman sang the role of Augustus Moser (and covered Konrad Nachtigall), Livia Brash covered the major role of Eva Pogner and our wonderful team of Apprentices largely comprised of members of the emerging and developing artists program: Daniel Felton, Joshua Erdelyi-Gotz, Breanna Stuart, James Penn, Lily Ward, Amanda Windred and past program members Finn Gilheany and Leah Phillips. This provided an incredible opportunity to learn some of the most challenging ensemble singing there is with detailed German language coaching, plus choreography!



*Meistersinger photo (left) featuring Asher Reichman as Augustin Moser and behind him, past program member Darcy Carroll as Konrad Nachtigall. Photo by Robin Halls*

*The Apprentices in rehearsal (right). Front line left to right: Timothy Daly (chorus member), Amanda Windred (Richard Divall Program), Lily Ward (Richard Divall Program) Middle: James Penn (Richard Divall Program), Hartley Trusler (chorus member), Breanna Stuart (Richard Divall Program), Kimberley Colman (guest artist), Leah Phillips (past Richard Divall Program member) Rear: Josh Erdelyi-Gotz (Richard Divall Program), Finn Gilheany (past past Richard Divall Program member), Daniel Felton (Richard Divall Program).*

*(Right) Asher Reichman, Rachel Joyce, Emily Szabo and Henry Shaw in the 2024 Sylvie Paladino Christmas Concert at the Athenaeum Theatre*

We have also performed our annual Mozart by Moonlight concert at the Royal Botanical Gardens with selections from Le nozze di Figaro, Die Entführung aus dem Serail, Die Zauberflöte, Don Giovanni and Così fan tutte sung by program members Breanna Stuart, Lily Ward, Daniel Felton, Asher Reichman and Henry Shaw.



## 2024-2025 EMERGING & DEVELOPING ARTISTS NEWS



*Livia Brash and Asher Reichman at the MCG Long Room Gala Dinner*

**Livia Brash (soprano)** has been in high demand for all Melbourne Opera concert events. She sang the role of La Zelatrice in *Suor Angelica* and covered the role of Musetta in *La bohème* for Melbourne Opera's Puccini festival. Livia covered the principal role of Eva in *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg*. Livia was cast in the lead role in *Rusalka* for Boroondara Opera in the Park and has many exciting projects in the pipeline for the rest of 2025.

**Rachael Joyce (soprano)** was the winner of the 2024 NGSE German exchange scholarship (see report below), performed in the Sylvie Paladino Christmas Concert for Melbourne Opera, *English Eccentrics* and *Mansfield Park* for Victorian Opera and is a recipient of the 2025 Victorian Opera prize.



*Pianist Konrad Olszewski with Emily Szabo, Livia Brash, Bailey Montgomerie and Asher Reichman at the Recital Series, St John's Flinders.*

**Bailey Montgomerie (baritone)** Bailey was a Herald Sun Aria finalist and winner of the 3 MBS The Voice award and is a recipient of the 2025 Victorian Opera Emerging Artists prize. Bailey appeared in *English Eccentrics* and *Mansfield Park* for Victorian Opera. Bailey was study cover of Marcello in *La bohème* for Melbourne Opera and made a number of concert appearances.

**Asher Reichman (tenor)** is winner of 2025 NGSE German exchange scholarship, winner of the Richard Divall award in the 2024 Herald Sun Aria and overall winner of the AIMS award. For Melbourne Opera Asher sang the role of Parpignol and covered Rodolfo in the production of *La bohème* sang the role of Moser and covered the role of Vogelgesang in *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg*, was a guest artist in the Sylvie Paladino Christmas Concert, a soloist in ECS People's Messiah and was a featured artist in *Mozart by Moonlight 2025* in the Royal Botanic Gardens. Asher also made his Opera Australia principal role debut in *Breaking the Waves* at Hamer Hall.

**Henry Shaw (bass-baritone)** was winner of the John Fulford award in the 2024 Herald Sun Aria, Henry toured with the production of *Eucalyptus* as a principal role cover, was in the ensemble of

Sweeney Todd in Victoria and Dubai was a guest artist in the Sylvie Paladino Christmas Concert and sang the role of The Nightwatchman, as well as covering Schwartz in Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg for Melbourne Opera. Henry was a soloist in ECS People's Messiah and a featured artist in Mozart by Moonlight 2025 in the Royal Botanic Gardens.

**Emily Szabo (soprano)** Emily sang and covered the role of Mimi in Melbourne Opera's La bohème and sang the role of Suor Genovieffa in Suor Angelica in Melbourne Opera's Puccini Festival. Emily was a guest artist in the Sylvie Paladino Christmas Concert.

**Lily Ward (soprano)** was a participant in the 2024 Lisa Gasteen Summer School. She was an Apprentice in Meistersinger von Nürnberg, sang chorus in La bohème, and sang the roles of Suor Osmina and the Novice in Suor Angelica. Lily was a featured artist in Mozart by Moonlight 2025 in the Royal Botanic Gardens.



**Caitlin Weal (soprano)** Caitlin was the recipient of the Opera Foundation for Young Australians 2024 Sundell American Institute of Musical Studies Award and participated in the AIMS Summer School in Graz appearing in several high-profile concerts and masterclasses including with Rolando Villazón (pictured above). Caitlin also won the Margaret Baker Genovesi travel scholarship and was runner up in the German Australian Opera Grant. Caitlin sang the roles of Prima Cercatrice and una Conversa in Suor Angelica for Melbourne Opera.

**Amanda Windred (dramatic soprano)** was selected to sing the role of Elektra in the Dramatic Voices Program, Berlin. Amanda sang the role of La Badessa in Suor Angelica and was an Apprentice in Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg.

**Daniel Felton (developing artist – baritone)** Daniel covered the role of Schaunard and sang Un Doganiere in La bohème. Daniel was an apprentice and covered the roles of Folz and Nachtigall in Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg. Daniel was a featured artist in Mozart by Moonlight 2025 in the Royal Botanic Gardens.

**Joshua Erdelyi-Götz (developing artist – tenor)** Josh was in the chorus of La bohème and was an Apprentice in Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg.

**James Penn (developing artist – tenor)** James sang in the chorus of La bohème, was an apprentice in Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg and covered the role of Balthasar Zorn.

**Breanna Stuart (developing artist – soprano)** participated in the master course “Das Lied von Schubert bis Berg” at the Franz-Schubert-Institut in Austria. She won the OSA 2024 Art Song and Aria Competitions. Breanna sang the role of La Suora Inferiera in Suor Angelica, a soloist in ECS People's Messiah, an Apprentice in Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg and a featured artist in Mozart by Moonlight 2025 in the Royal Botanic Gardens.

Bailey Montgomerie in masterclass with Professor Guido Rumstadt



### **MASTERCLASSES & WORKSHOPS**

International singer Elena Xanthoudakis

International singer Helena Dix

International singer Bradley Daley

Conductor Professor Guido Rumstadt

Conductor Alice Farnham

Director Greg Eldridge

Director Iain Sinclair (16<sup>th</sup> Street)

Agents Patrick Togher and Amelia Berry



### **SPECIAL EVENTS**

Friends of Melbourne Opera at the Alexandra Club

Flinders Recital Series Figaro and Friends

Flinders Recital Series Opera Stars of Tomorrow

Kelvin Club Opera Stars of Tomorrow

Gala fundraising event – The Long Room MCG

Mozart by Moonlight at the Royal Botanic Gardens

Valentines Day Concert at Beleura

Above - Emily Szabo and Asher Reichman at Beleura for the annual Valentine's Day Concert

## **MELBOURNE OPERA/ROTARY GERMAN TRAVEL SCHOLARSHIP**

Melbourne Opera continues to partner with Rotary Melbourne Central to offer a scholarship to Nuremberg in Germany. This opportunity is open to past and current program members who are within the age limit (30 years and under). Rachael Joyce was selected from an ever-strengthening pool of candidates to travel to Germany in July/August 2024. Asher Reichman is the 2025 recipient.

Rachael on her scholarship:

*I would like to begin this report by expressing my utmost gratitude to Melbourne Opera and Melbourne Central Rotary Club for this incredible experience. The amazing performance opportunities and industry connections that I was provided with were only furthered by being genuinely immersed in German culture and being able to develop my language skills in situ.*

*Over my nine weeks in Germany, I performed in ten concerts and two open masterclasses around the country, including in the historic town of Bayreuth, and in some spectacular venues. I participated in three week-long masterclasses with renowned educators and industry professionals and was hosted by over eight German families. I also had the opportunity to complete two auditions for two different opera companies, which was an invaluable insight into the processes of the German opera industry.*

*My German language was limited when I first arrived, but I was so grateful to Melbourne Opera for their support with my lessons through the Goethe Institut to prepare me for this trip. I was determined to make the most of this opportunity and requested that my host families and teachers speak to me in German so that I might improve. The people around me were so patient and willing to help me learn, and I was thrilled to reach a proficiency level by the end of my time, that I was living, working, and even directing a choir rehearsal in German!*

*This trip has absolutely solidified my ambition to move to Germany and try to find work in the opera world there. The opportunity to not only perform in Germany, but also to experience the culture in which music plays such an integral part, was absolutely inspiring, and being in the audience for many wonderful productions gave me a taste of what is possible for the future. I truly believe that this dream will only be made possible through the connections I made and the things I learnt on this exchange. Everywhere I went I was met with support, encouragement and generosity, from the teachers, and particularly from the Rotarians who were hosting me.*

*Once again, I am so grateful to Melbourne Opera and Melbourne Central Rotary Club for the support and championing of young musicians to provide opportunities that are not available anywhere else.*

Rachel Joyce (far left) following a successful masterclass performance in Nuremberg with past program member Esther Gresswell (far right) and fellow Australian, James Young in the centre.



### CORE ACTIVITIES

We continue to provide funds for singing lessons, with the artists teacher of choice and coaching and role preparation. The singers have their choice of studying German or Italian by the Goethe Institute or Italian Institute of Culture and we provide regular lyric diction coaching opportunities. We have shifted most of the singers over to one-to-one teaching as we find they learn at a more accelerated level than in group classes.

The program has monthly 'get-togethers' of all artists to improve the quality of whole group engagement and to supply an opportunity to try out new repertoire in a safe environment.

Plus, ongoing mentorship and guidance about repertoire, competitions preparation, and grant writing and repertoire choice and performance with program leaders Suzanne Chaundy and Raymond Lawrence.

The program is rewarding, successful and costly to run! The core of the support comes from the Sylvia Fisher Fund through the Australian Communities Foundation and the Ian Potter Foundation for which we are enormously grateful. The program is also supported by Friends of Melbourne Opera, the Mietta Foundation and private donors. If you wish to become a donor please contact [info@melbourneopera.com](mailto:info@melbourneopera.com)





## Celebrating Sylvia Fisher

The bequest of Sylvia Fisher (1910–1996), a much-loved Australian dramatic soprano provided funds to start Melbourne Opera's Richard Divall Program. Maestro Divall was a trustee of this fund and with his guidance before his passing in 2017, the Richard Divall Program was created.

Fisher was born in Melbourne and studied at the Albert Street Conservatorium with Mary Campbell. While a student she sang Hermione in Lully's *Cadmus et Hermione* at the Comedy Theatre, her only stage appearance until her arrival in Britain. After winning the Melbourne Sun Aria Contest, in which she sang "Elisabeth's Greeting" from *Tannhäuser*, she embarked on a career as a concert singer, while studying further with Adolf Spivakowsky, to whom she attributed her later success.

After farewell concerts in Melbourne and Sydney, she left for London in November 1947. Fisher auditioned five times before the Covent Garden Opera Company accepted her for the role of Leonora in Beethoven's *Fidelio*. Following her debut on 9 December 1948, a critic described her as 'an outstanding singer with a true Covent Garden voice, sustained and thrilling in its resonance' (Mackenzie and Mackenzie 1967, 175). The performance earned her membership of the permanent company, but it was her Wagnerian repertoire that brought her critical acclaim: Elsa in *Lohengrin*, Guttrune in *Götterdämmerung*, Sieglinde in *Die Walküre*, Isolde in *Tristan und Isolde*, Elisabeth in *Tannhäuser*, and Senta in *The Flying Dutchman*.

Fisher's most famous role was her much repeated Marschallin in *Der Rosenkavalier* by Strauss. After her first performance in 1949, a critic in *The Times* remarked that 'by sheer beauty of singing she makes the dramatic point of youth and age in pure lyrical terms' (Mackenzie and Mackenzie 1967, 176). She performed Wagnerian roles in Italy and appeared as the Marschallin at the Frankfurt Opera House in 1957, but her career was mainly in Britain. Appearing as a concert soloist under the batons of Sir Thomas Beecham, Sir John Barbirolli, and Sir Malcolm Sargent, she performed the works of Bach, Beethoven, Verdi, Delius, Rossini, Schönberg, and Hindemith. She featured often in BBC Proms broadcasts and toured Australia in 1955 as a

From 1962 Fisher performed frequently with the Sadler's Wells Opera Company, notably in operas by Britten. She appeared as Lady Billows in *Albert Herring*, the Female Chorus in *The Rape of Lucretia*, and Mrs Grose in *The Turn of the Screw*. When *Gloriana* was revived in 1966, she was commanding and dignified as Elizabeth I. Britten also created for Fisher the role of Miss Wingrave in *Owen Wingrave*, which premiered on BBC television in 1971. Her final appearance with Sadler's Wells was in 1973 as Marfa Kabanicha in Janáček's *Kát'a Kabanová*.

Fisher had 'a shy, almost recessive, personality, but one that ... switched on like electricity when she began to perform' (Divall 1996). Returning to live in Melbourne in 1987, she was appointed AM in 1994. She died on 25 August 1996 at Toorak and was buried in the Melbourne general cemetery. Part of her estate was bequeathed to the Sylvia Fisher Fund, to support emerging opera singers in her home state.

(extracts from the ANU Dictionary of Biography, written by [Thérèse Radic](#))