

A celebration of song

Uno on December 20, 2011

Australian Stacey Alleaume, winner of the main section of this year's New Zealand Aria, has spent the past few years taking the opera world by storm. Her burgeoning career is littered with accolades and she looks forward to a promising future.

The rising young opera star, who grew up in Melbourne, discovered a passion for music when she began performing as a chorister in the National Children's Choir of Australia in 1994. She remained with the choir until 2001. In 2008 she completed a Bachelor of Music at The University of Melbourne.

Since then the up-and-coming soprano has added a string of awards and performances to her name. She won the Elms vocal recital scholarship in 2008 and 2009 and the Australian Youth Aria award in 2009. In 2010 she received the Dame Nellie Melba Opera Trust Scholarship, and was a runner-up in the 86th annual Herald Sun Aria competition and a finalist in the 2010 Acclaim Italian Opera Fellowship Awards, which aim to raise the profiles of young and emerging opera singers.

Earlier this year Stacey played Gretel in Opera Australia's Oz Opera's production of Hansel and Gretel. Her past operatic experience also includes roles in Noye's Fludde, the Victorian Youth Opera's performance of Snow Queen, and Eurydice in Orpheus in the Underworld, put on by Melbourne's prestigious Monash University. As part of The Opera Studio Melbourne she has appeared as Pamina in Die Zauberflöte, Laetitia in The Old Maid and the Thief, Gretel in Humperdinck's Hansel and Gretel, Zerlina in Don Giovanni, and Silly Goat in Figatroll, a children's opera by Denise Page Caraher.

Stacey's win in the NZ Aria competition, held in Rotorua in October, was quite an achievement. Competition was fierce, with budding opera stars from around Australia and NZ participating. The prestigious event, sponsored by Waiariki Institute of Technology, is the largest competition of its kind in the country. It is well known throughout the Australian opera world and advertises itself as one of Australasia's most prestigious singing competitions. Five of the past eight McDonald Aria competitions in Sydney - the southern hemisphere's biggest such competition - have been won by New Zealanders and this has led Australian performers to cross the Tasman. The calibre of singers this year was particularly outstanding.

"The competitors who enter the Aria are of a higher standard each year, with this year being the best yet," NZ Aria chairperson Jo-Anne La Grouw says. So the 2011 judges – Belgium's Conal Coad and Beverley Bergen from Sydney in the main aria section, Leon Wharekura from Auckland and Rotorua's Timua Te Kowhai for the Maori song classes, and Susan Hayday from Warkworth and Beatrice Hofer from

Otorohanga for the under-21 classes – had a tough job.

Local singer Elisha Fai-Hulton placed third in the main over-18 class, behind 20-year-old Kiwi Amina Edris, the 2011 Sir Howard Morrison vocal scholar. Kawiti Waetford won the over-18 Maori song section, followed by Daniela Young of Hawke's Bay and Hamilton's Amber Every in second and third respectively. Kawiti's performance went down so well with the audience that he received a standing ovation.

Formerly known as the Rotorua Lockwood Aria, the event is held annually and has been running in its current format for 18 years. Categories include folk or traditional, duet, light entertainment and baroque classical aria. The competition offers life-changing opportunities to entrants and has launched the careers of some fine young singers. "I am neither a singer nor a musician but find it really rewarding to see the young singers move up through the ranks and become professional opera singers," Jo-Anne says.

Stacey and the nine other finalists were accompanied by the Auckland Philharmonia Orchestra, led by conductor Tom Wood. This year the orchestra also performed the event's finale, replacing the usual guest singer. It became involved 14 years ago and gives the NZ Aria Awards a unique point of difference; it's the only event of its kind in the world that gives upcoming opera stars a chance to compete with the backing of a full orchestra.

"Finals night is a world-class evening," Jo-Anne says.

Clearly Rotorua locals agree. The venue, Rotorua's Civic Theatre, was nearly full, with just 50 seats unsold. "The event appeals to anyone who has a love of music," Jo-Anne says.

www.nzaria.org

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