

Mozart's *The Marriage of Figaro*



NZ OPERA



Tēnā koutou katoa,

and thank you for joining us for this long-delayed Wellington season of *The Marriage of Figaro*.

We debuted this superb production in Auckland and Christchurch in 2021 before world events intervened; we are delighted to finally bring it to Wellington, completing our three-city tour as originally intended... just a few years late. You may recall that the Wellington run was cancelled due to a Covid case occurring on the day of opening night.

There is a nostrum which holds that "classics are timeless". I think that's not only lazy wording, it misses the point – which is that classics often connect the representation of a very specific moment in time with our present.

For this production, Lindy Hume and Tracy Grant Lord have created a *Figaro* with the teeth put back in – it is a masterpiece in comedy and slapstick, but it also confronts imbalances of power in many forms. Scenes of power and manipulation, offset by mischief, ingenuity and chaos, at last fall away to enshrine a message of compassion and forgiveness. This day-long, headlong rush, which ends in a moment of pellucid clarity and reconciliation, ensures that *The Marriage of Figaro* is always timely, always fresh.

We hope you enjoy the performance. Tēnā koutou katoa, and thank you for joining us.

BRAD COHEN

Brad Cohen
Tumu Whakarae
General Director of New Zealand Opera

**Tuia ki te rangi, tuia ki te whenua,
tuia ki te moana.**

Ka rongo te pō, ka rongo te ao.

Ko te mauri o nuku,

ko te mauri o rangi,

ko te mauri ka puta ki te whaiao,

ki te ao mārama.

Tihei mauri ora!

Bind the sky, bind the earth, bind the sea.

The night hears, the day hears.

This is the life force of the earth,

this is the life force of the heavens.

It is the life force that emerges

from the darkness and the unknown,

into the light and understanding.

Thus, the breath of life!

New Zealand Opera presents

Mozart's *The Marriage of Figaro*

Composer
Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart
Librettist
Lorenzo Da Ponte

Sung in Italian with English and Italian surtitles
Duration approximately 3 hours including a 20 minute interval

NGĀ KAIWHAKAARI | CAST

Count Almaviva
Julien Van Mellaerts
Susanna
Sophie Sparrow
Countess Almaviva
Felicity Tomkins
Figaro
James Clayton
Cherubino
Cecilia Zhang
Marcellina
Kristin Darragh
Doctor Bartolo
Andrew Collis
Don Basilio / Don Curzio
Andrew Grenon
Barbarina
Sarah Mileham
Antonio
Joel Aмоса
Bridesmaids
Barbara Graham, Charlotte Secker

TE RŌPŪ AUHA | CREATIVE TEAM

Conductor
James Judd
Director
Lindy Hume
Set & Costume Designer
Tracy Grant Lord

Lighting Designer
Matthew Marshall
Choreographer
Taiaroa Royal
Assistant Director
Eleanor Bishop
Intimacy Coordinator
Megan Adams

TE RŌPŪ PUORO | MUSIC TEAM

Chorus Master Laureate
Michael Vinten
Principal Répétiteur & Continuo
David Kelly
Chorus Répétiteur
Bruce Greenfield
Orchestra Wellington
And the Freemasons Foundation
New Zealand Opera Chorus

TE RŌPŪ WHAKAATURANGA | PRODUCTION TEAM

Touring Production Manager
Vicki Cooksley – Entertainment Production Services Ltd
Company Manager
Matthew Kereama
Stage Manager
Ashley Mardon
Deputy Stage Manager
Debs Thomas
Assistant Stage Manager
Jenna Kelly
Wellington Chorus ASM
Paige Johns
Set Construction Manager
Andrew Gibson – Entertainment Production Services Ltd
Props Master Builder
Grant Reynolds
Scenic Finisher
Sarah Cowie

Head of Lighting
Zachary Howells
Second LX & LX Board Operator
Ella Madsen Brough
Head Mechanist
James Kearney
Head of Wigs & Makeup
Karina Sanasaryan
Deputy Wigs & Makeup
Andrea Yuan
Wigs & Makeup Assistants
Natalie Young, Lola Graham-Wiggins, Grainne McBrearty
Wigs & Makeup Intern
Amanda Kisona
Head of Wardrobe
Sophie Ham
Wardrobe Supervisors
Bridget Brian, Sara Taylor
Pattern Making & Costume Construction
Natalie Miskin, Bridget Brian, Rosalind Sinel
Dressers
Khrissie Rhodes, Maxence Benoist
AV Technician
Abe Fisher – Illuminati NZ
Flyman
Tahi Scott
Surtitles Operator
Jacqueline Coats

SPECIAL THANKS

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New Zealand Opera would like to acknowledge the New Zealand School of Music | Te Kōkī for the use of the Viennese fortepiano, Derek Adlam 1991.

Programme imagery from NZ Opera's 2021 production of *The Marriage of Figaro*. Photo credit: David Rowland

For information on how to access English, Braille, Simplified Chinese and Audio Described surtitles, turn to page 25

Ngā Tuhinga A Te Kaihautū | *Director's Notes*

Seeking common ground with Mozart's *The Marriage of Figaro*

This is my 9th visit to New Zealand Opera. I could not be more grateful for my long association with this wonderful company, this beautiful place, Aotearoa New Zealand, nor the opportunity to direct Mozart's extraordinary masterpiece of perfect music and imperfect humanity, *Le Nozze di Figaro*.

The well-deserved fame of *The Marriage of Figaro* is both a blessing and a curse – artists and audiences bring prior knowledge to their experience of this masterpiece. The work has layers of patina and it's our job to decide which to retain or remove to really see the work afresh, to respond to it anew for contemporary audiences in this part of the

world. We can't just make this production as if the last 200 years haven't happened, we need to engage with this work with a perspective that connects Mozart's world of 1784, Beaumarchais' characters* and 18th century society, and our own. We are looking for common ground.

One way of doing this is to focus on the alternative title: *La Folle Journée – The Mad Day*. There is a momentum, madness and chaos that imbues the opera's music and action with a particular feeling that things are spinning out of control, not just within the marriage plans but everywhere around the house, and beyond the house, across the countryside,

There is a momentum, madness and chaos that imbues the opera's music and action

across the world. Driving this sense of chaos are concepts of upheaval – the winds of change, radicalism, modernity and a revolutionary mindset. The work was written in a period in which European explorers were 'discovering' new worlds (colonising Australia, New Zealand and the Pacific), embracing new technologies and sciences, within the philosophical framework of the Enlightenment; and revolution was in the air. The project was nothing less than the redesign of society and the removal of the *ancien régime*, and these ideas were sweeping the world. This is common ground between Mozart and Beaumarchais' world and our own. Our world is changing before our eyes, as it was before theirs.

More common ground is to be found between our societies in relation to women. Especially in the last few years we have been witnessing an *ancien régime* being deconstructed and replaced with a design for a new, more equal social infrastructure. I'm far from the first to note that the female characters drive this opera. In creating this production in 2021, I was strongly influenced by Martha Nussbaum's 2010 essay *Equality and Love at the End of Marriage of Figaro – Forging Democratic Emotions*.

Nussbaum argues that the opera is as radical as the play, but in different ways. It proposes "a new political culture ... sustained by new sentiments." In this new emotional world, the values of humanity, love and optimism are all expressed by women and are free to flourish. Mozart, she says:

"Understood that a political culture requires a new shaping of human attitudes in the realm of love, ... (he) envisages this new public love as something gentler, more reciprocal, more feminine... connected more to Cherubino's horror of war-like exploits than to Rousseauesque ideas of valor. In the process, Mozart also emphasizes that the new fraternity must protect spaces for the free play of mischief, craziness, humor, and individuality – all of which are connected, in the opera, to the women's world."

* The original play *The Marriage of Figaro*, which the opera is based on, was written by Pierre-Augustin de Beaumarchais in 1778.



NZ Opera's 2021 production of *The Marriage of Figaro*



NZ Opera's 2021 production of *The Marriage of Figaro*

When the Countess forgives the Count, what is she agreeing to? What has she negotiated?

Nussbaum parallels the Count's, Figaro's and Bartolo's obsession with violence and revenge against the actions of the women – the Countess, Susanna and even Cherubino 'the big butterfly', who balances out the extreme aggression of the alpha males with his sexual ambiguity and his palpitating, sensual, eroticised love. These characters operate humanely, collaboratively; they succeed in their designs not through combat but through cooperation. Yet these women are treated appallingly, even by the men who love them in this opera.

While I take a theatrical rather than an academic approach to this opera, so full of life and all the human messiness and shades of grey in between extremes, my central premise overlaps with Nussbaum's. Let's speculate on the end of the opera, to which all roads lead: When the Countess forgives the Count, what is she agreeing to? What has she negotiated? She knows she cannot expect fidelity, from her husband or, if she's honest, even of herself. Nor a happy ending, nor even happiness. Like women in our generation, the Countess

knows that the personal is political. This is a settlement of sorts. She has hope for the future – and so do we. More common ground. As Nussbaum says:

"So, when she says "yes," she is agreeing to love, and even trust, in a world of inconstancy and imperfection. And what she agrees to, here, is also what the ensemble also agrees to. One will not stop loving (people) because they are (no doubt like oneself) a mess. That, suggests the pause within the music, is a more hopeful direction, if not the only possible direction, for a workable conception of democratic political love."

Forgiveness, as a new day breaks, clears the slate. It allows the Almaviva marriage to continue peacefully – for a while at least, and for everyone to breathe again, to reflect upon *"This day of torment, of craziness, of foolishness – only love can make it end in happiness and joy."*

But that is not the end of the story. These events sit in the middle of the Beaumarchais trilogy. *The Barber of Seville* is the backstory, and *La Mère Coupable* is the sequel. We know what happens before the opera begins and after it finishes. Existing tensions and character traits between characters from the *Barber of Seville* are in play; and already present here is the beginning of a real love affair between the Countess and Cherubino in *La Mère Coupable*, the source of so much guilt and shame, so many secrets and tensions. It's only beginning to take root, but definitely part of the subtext in this opera too.

"Why is it a crazy day? It's a wedding!"

Liberty, fraternity, equality

Finally, *The Marriage of Figaro* is a work about striving for the social ideals that changed the world order 200 years ago and still resonate today: Liberty, fraternity (sorority) and equality. Nussbaum nails the idea of freedom with a lovely un-academic reference to the movie *The Shawshank Redemption*, in which Tim Robbins character hijacks the prisoner's PA system and plays the Countess and Susanna's duet across the prison yard.

What do the prisoners hear in the duet? Freedom, they say. But why, and how? ... as the voices soar out over the squalor of the prison yard... the idea of a kind of internal freedom, a freedom of the spirit that consists precisely in not caring about hierarchy, neither seeking to avoid being controlled by others nor seeking to control them.

Order to chaos

Freedom, yes, but also love, humanity, forgiveness and ultimately the journey from order – certainty, hierarchy and rationality in the male domain – to chaos – irrationality, ambiguity, sensuality and playfulness of the female domain. This journey from order to chaos flows in quite the opposite direction of the patriarchal resolutions of so many operas, even those by Mozart. This subversive celebration of emotional messiness, of an only partial vision of the structures of society being remade, is one of the defining features of the Enlightenment, our own contemporary world, this extraordinary work and, I hope, this production.

About the production, design and light

Why is it a crazy day? It's a wedding! Over the course of 24 hours Figaro and Susanna's wedding plans are brought forward twice and changed into a double wedding. When plans change, everything is thrown into chaos for people who have to arrange the logistics. Those people, the chorus who play the Almaviva's house staff and servants are hugely important to the story, but usually only appear occasionally – in this production they are onstage the whole time, their participation adding a further choreographic complexity to this already complex work.

Tracy Grant Lord's beautiful design for scenery and costumes finds ways of embodying both the *ancien régime* and the contemporary world. There is a lot of paper in this work:

letters, notes, music for songs, contracts, legal documents, room measurements, conscription papers... and to expand, the architectural detail of the Almaviva's huge house and the gardens upon which the play depends, the manuscripts for both Beaumarchais' play and Mozart's opera.

We have invented a way of suggesting the interior architecture of the Count's grand house without presenting a literal structure: Tracy's ingenious design creates ephemeral spaces that are simultaneously tangible and psychological; suggestive of both *ancien régime* and contemporary art. At the heart of the design is the way the walls glide and emanate light, suggesting the arc of the sun from dawn to dawn, the ephemeral and translucent character of paper, and Mozart's music. These luminous qualities will find playful expression in Matthew Marshall's lighting design.

Lindy Hume
Director



Designing Figaro: the canvas of storytelling

When Lindy and I first met in 2019 to discuss the design for the original production of *The Marriage of Figaro* she spoke of the way that papers, letters and contracts are the world of this opera and that the qualities of paper could become the unifying theme. She described the beauty and permanence of draughtsmanship and suggested that documentation, both architectural and legal, could literally become the parchment canvas of the storytelling. We spoke of the hand that scribes, writes or plans a story on paper as the motivation for the language of the design. All presented in a minimal yet gilded period style to showcase a modernity of characters and their views within. As if we were re-imagining an old building and overlaying it with digital plan.

Several years later, in 2026 and about to head into a new season for this charming production, I am absolutely grateful for not only my vast amount of paperwork notation but the entire team's collection of note-taking. We would have literally been lost without it.

This story unfolds in one whole day of action. Starting at dawn in a natural and ordered world, Figaro is counting out the measurements of his new life with Susanna and we swiftly descend into a crazy series of chaotic events as all plans are torn apart, contracts blown away by lunchtime and, over the course of the following night and into dawn, a new order for a new day emerges with spectacular excitement. The flexibility of a scenic world that is drawn in an order and effortlessly dissembles to a deconstructed disorder was determined. Together with Matthew Marshall we also identified the support that could be achieved by harnessing each piece of scenery with light – glowing like a lantern and programmed to then explode into performance.

Tracey Grant Lord
Set and Costume Designer



Servants at the Centre: Shifting power in *The Marriage of Figaro*

When *The Marriage of Figaro* premiered in Vienna in 1786, servants were the lowest rung of the social ladder, yet in the opera they triumph. Social hierarchy, wealth, privilege, power – and its disruption, lies at the centre of *The Marriage of Figaro* – and this production from creative duo Lindy Hume and Tracy Grant Lord leans into this with relish. Mozart's interest in upending power dynamics is perhaps not so surprising, when we consider what was happening in Austria at the time the opera was being written.

Looking back a bit further to 1780, revolution was brewing in France and across borders in Austria, where the democratically-minded Joseph II initiated many reforms with the seeds of democracy, such as ending serfdom (tenant farmers being legally tied to a landowner's estate, required to work the land for the right to live there) and transforming his private hunting grounds into a public park (the *Prater* in Vienna) for all to enjoy.

Power structures were also changing in the world of music composition. In 1781, Mozart quit the employ of the Archbishop of Salzburg and became one of the first composers to support himself independently of a single employer, court or patron. *Figaro* was written as a speculative collaboration between Mozart and the librettist Da Ponte, without any guarantee of performance. The Emperor was initially dismissive, saying, "What! Don't you know that Mozart, though excellent at instrumental music, has only written one opera, and that nothing very great?" However after hearing some of the opera's arias the Emperor was thrilled and *Figaro* won the bid to be staged in Vienna's imperial theatre.

The Marriage of Figaro reflects a shifting of power towards more egalitarian models not just in theme but in structure. The opera has an unusually high proportion of ensemble numbers – only half of its 28 numbers are for solo voice, and even the opening number is a duet. The majority of the

Social hierarchy, wealth, privilege, power – and its disruption, lies at the centre of The Marriage of Figaro

roles are lower class, either in domestic service or practicing a profession, and these characters are portrayed as humans with their own individual goals and aspirations, not objects that function to serve the goals of their masters.

Also upending expected character stereotypes, Figaro – a manservant who in any other opera would be the side-kick and comic relief – is presented as the romantic lead. Count Almaviva, Figaro's master, holds all of the obvious power in the household being male, titled and wealthy, but functions as the antagonist. In his pursuit of Susanna (the Countess' maid and Figaro's intended bride) the Count goes so far as to attempt to re-institute the practice of *droit du seigneur*, or the ruling lord's right to bed any woman in his household on her wedding night.

Although Figaro is the title character, it is the women of this opera that stand together to give the comeuppance to their male counterparts. Women in this time were still unable to hold property and were largely at the mercy of their husbands and fathers, and yet the Opera's heroine Susanna is a woman who earns her own wages, and conspires with her mistress to exploit the Count's jealousy and pride to fend off his advances. The Count's attempted seduction is thwarted and his attention re-directed back to his wife, the women's solidarity triumphing.

Amber Read



The original Burgtheater, before redesign in 1888.
Photography by Michael Frankenstein



Joseph II driving in the Prater, with the Lusthaus in the background

Te Rōpū Auaha | *Creative Team*



James Judd
CONDUCTOR

British conductor James Judd is internationally celebrated for his consummate musicianship and deep commitment to the orchestras and musicians with whom he works. Music Director Emeritus of South Korea's Daejeon Philharmonic and the New Zealand Symphony Orchestra, he has also held artistic positions with the Slovak Philharmonic, Israel Symphony, Orchestre National de Lille, Adelaide Symphony and Florida Philharmonic.

James maintains a busy schedule of guest conducting, including appearances with the Berlin Philharmonic, Orchestre National de France, Leipzig Gewandhaus and London Symphony Orchestra. Opera highlights include performances with Glyndebourne, Wexford Festival and the Florida Grand Opera. He has recorded extensively with Naxos, and features on Decca, EMI and Philips labels.

Proudly supported by Bill Falconer.



Lindy Hume
DIRECTOR

Lindy Hume AM PhD is one of Australia's leading Opera, Theatre and Festival Directors, internationally recognised for her fresh interpretations of a wide variety of repertoire.

Lindy Hume has served as Festival Director for Perth Festival 2004–2007, Sydney Festival 2010–2012, and more recently, Ten Days on the Island 2019–2023. Equally at home in opera, Lindy is the former Artistic Director of West Australian Opera, Victoria State Opera, OzOpera, and Opera Queensland. In 2021 she was awarded the Order of Australia (AM) for significant service to the performing arts.

Lindy Hume was Guest Creative Director for Opera Australia's 2024 Sydney Summer Season. Directing credits include: *Idomeneo* for San Francisco Opera; *Idomeneo*, *Carmen*, *Fledermaus*, *Batavia* (world premiere) for Opera Australia; *The Marriage Of Figaro*, *Così fan tutte* for New Zealand Opera; *Cinderella* for Leipzig Opera, Royal Opera Stockholm; *Madama Butterfly* for Welsh National Opera; *A Winter's Journey* for Musica Viva; *Rigoletto* for Seattle Opera and Opera Philadelphia; *The Barber of Seville* for Houston Grand Opera, Opera Queensland, New Zealand Opera, Seattle Opera and Des Moines Metro Opera. She is currently Creative Director of Crimson Rosella Creative Adventures and Hot House Theatre.



Tracy Grant Lord
SET & COSTUME DESIGNER

Tracy Grant Lord is described as a leader of her industry for her scenographic skills as designer for ballet, opera and theatre, and her work has toured internationally to critical acclaim.

Recent opera and ballet design highlights include Thomas de Mallet Burgess' *The Unruly Tourists* and Lindy Hume's *Così fan tutte* for New Zealand Opera, also Ty King Wall's new production of *The Nutcracker* for RNZB and Liam Scarlett's *Dangerous Liaisons* for Queensland Ballet.

Tracy is a Winston Churchill Fellow and a Bachelor of Spatial Design and her work has received several international award nominations and been shown at both the Prague Quadrennial and World Stage Design exhibitions.



Matthew Marshall
LIGHTING DESIGNER

Born and raised in Perth Western Australia, Matthew Marshall is a graduate of the West Australian Academy of Performing Arts (WAAPA) Production & Design course in 2000. With 25 years of experience his work has been seen on the international stage and throughout Australia, and he is in demand for his lighting designs for theatre, opera, events and dance.

Recent design credits include *The Fairy Queen* for Pinchgut Opera, *Dido & Aeneas* for Opera Queensland, *The Barber of Seville* for Seattle Opera and Des Moines Metro Opera, *Carmen* for Oper Leipzig, *The Ring Cycle* for Opera Australia, *Velvet Rewired* for Organised Pandemonium, *Ballet at The Quarry* and *Goldberg Variations* for West Australian Ballet, *A Winters Journey* with Musica Viva, *Dark Mofo Night Mass* for Darklab, James Galea's *Best Trick Ever* for Sydney Opera House, *City of Lights* at Perth Festival, Tim Minchin's *The Absence of You* music video, *Cinderella* for Seattle Opera, a new full length ballet *Tchaikovsky* for Tulsa Ballet, *La bohème* the outdoor Handa Opera on Sydney Harbour for Opera Australia, American Idiot's Australian National Tour for Shake & Stir/Qpac and *La Cenerentola* for Oper Leipzig and San Diego Opera.

Matt has been a judge for the Australian Production & Design Guild Awards from 2017–2025.



Taiaroa Royal
CHOREOGRAPHER

Te Arawa, Kai Tahu, Ngāti Raukawa, Uenukukōpako.

Taiaroa graduated from the New Zealand School of Dance in 1984. A founding member of Black Grace, he has performed with many celebrated dance companies including Royal New Zealand Ballet and Atamira Dance Company among others.

Tai was awarded the Te Tohu Toi Ke – Making A Difference Award for his contribution to Māori Contemporary Dance, becoming the first dancer to receive this award. He was honoured at Tempo Dance Festival's 'Honouring a Dancer', where the industry celebrated his long outstanding career in Aotearoa, and in 2011 he accepted the Kowhiri Lifetime Achievement Award for outstanding Maori Dancer and Choreographer. In 2007 Tai formed Ōkāreka Dance Company with Taane Mete, and 2019 became the Company's sole director.

Tai has choreographed and performed for many different arts organisations including Christmas in the Park, New Zealand Opera (where he has also been an Associate Director), and the World of Wearable Art. He was a recent Guest Artist with the Royal New Zealand Ballet for their 2025 season of *The Nutcracker*. In 2023, Tai was awarded the Toi Kō Iriiri Queer Arts Laureate for his contribution to the LGBTQI+ Arts community of New Zealand.

Tai lives at Lake Ōkāreka, Rotorua.



Eleanor Bishop
ASSISTANT DIRECTOR

Eleanor Bishop is a director and writer working across theatre, opera and film. She is a former Friedlander Foundation Associate Artist for New Zealand Opera, for whom she directed her first opera in 2022, *The Strangest of Angels*, a new work about the life of celebrated author Janet Frame by Anna Leese and Kenneth Young.

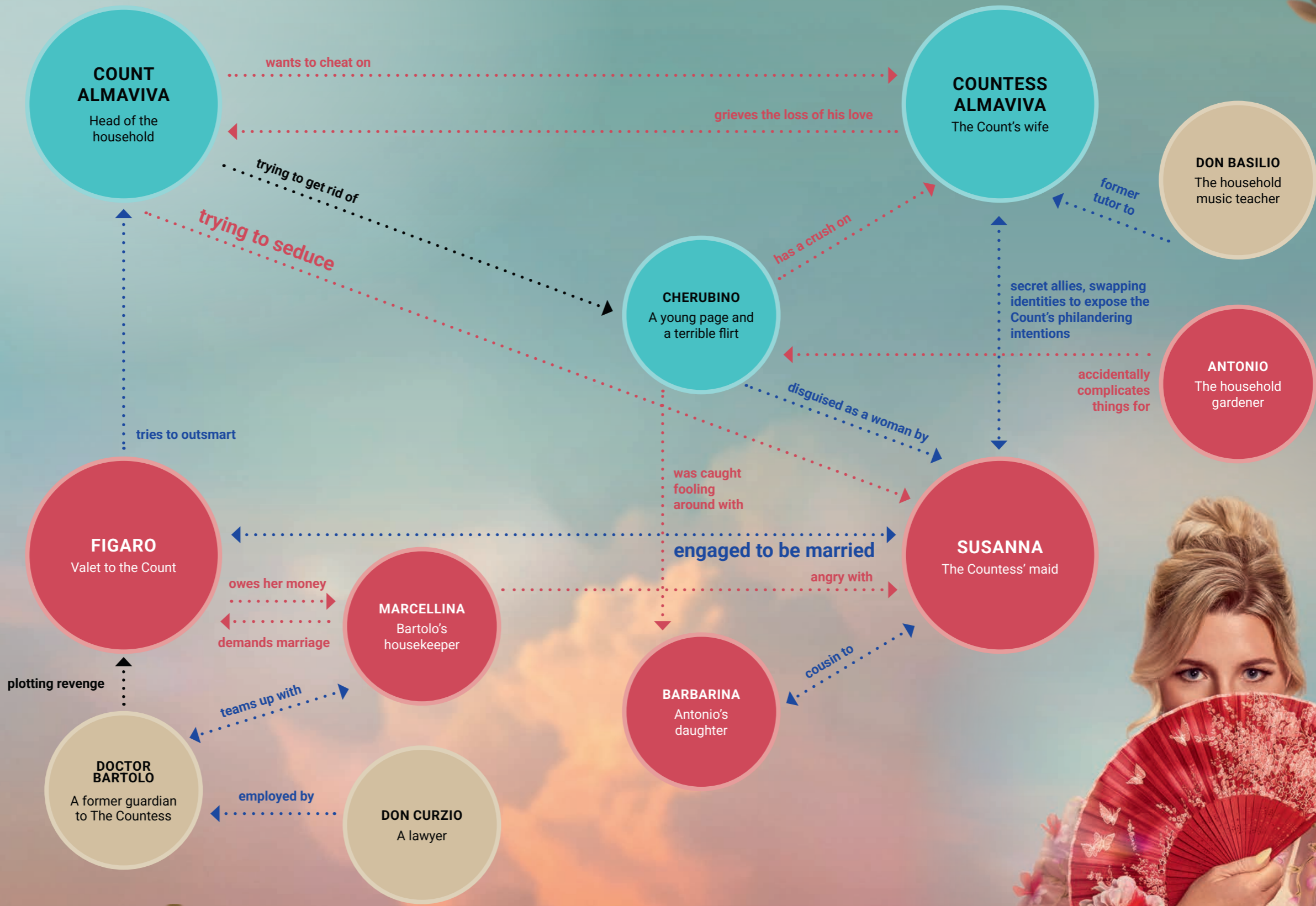
In partnership with writer/performer Karin McCracken as EBKM they have created the works *Gravity & Grace*, *Heartbreak Hotel* and *Yes Yes Yes* which have toured to Australia, North America & Europe. EBKM were the winners of the Bruce Mason Playwriting Award in 2022, the first time in the awards history it has been given to a partnership. She was a member of Jane Campion's inaugural pop-up film intensive *A Wave in the Ocean* supported by Netflix and her first short film *GIRL TIME* recently premiered in official selection at the 82nd Venice Film Festival.

She holds an MFA in Directing from Carnegie Mellon University in Pittsburgh, PA, USA where she studied as a John Wells Fellow and a Fulbright Scholar.

A single 'day of madness'

in the palace of Count Almaviva near Seville, Spain

- Nobility
- Working professionals
- Servants
- .-> Love / Seduction
- .-> Conflict
- .-> Relationship



Ngā Tuhinga A Te Kaikōtūi | *Conductor's Notes*

The Mozart effect; What is it about *Figaro* that keeps it at number one?

"I remember at the first rehearsal of the full band, Mozart was on stage... giving the time of the music to the orchestra. I shall never forget his little animated countenance, when lighted up with the glowing rays of genius – it is as impossible to describe as it would be to paint sunbeams." So wrote tenor Michael Kelly, who sang Don Curzio and Don Basilio at the 1786 premiere and thus was our valuable eyewitness.

Being asked to conduct *The Marriage of Figaro* is a gift of sheer joyful challenge for a conductor. Mozart and his librettist Lorenzo Da Ponte fashioned from Beaumarchais' once scandalous play a chaotic romp that conceals an unsettling examination of power, class and desire. Its comedy sparkles, but there is a cutting edge beneath the wit.

Michael Kelly recalled that the excitement surrounding the first performances was extraordinary, writing that 'almost every piece was encoired' – a tribute not merely to Mozart's melodic invention but to the sense that audiences were encountering something unprecedented. Yet this triumph was not uncomplicated. The opera emerged from a political atmosphere wary of Beaumarchais' social satire. The rehearsal period appears to have been relatively brief by modern standards. Mozart worked under considerable pressure, however what resulted transcended circumstance.

Today when it comes to thinking about, interpreting and performing *Figaro*, the opera feels so modern perhaps because its comedy is inseparable from social observation. Count Almaviva's entitlement, Figaro's ingenuity and Susanna's intelligence create a world we can all recognise.

Transposed into contemporary politics, the Count becomes instantly recognisable: a charismatic figure accustomed to privilege and convinced that the rules do not apply to him. The opera's servants, meanwhile, navigate systems of influence with wit rather than authority. One need not force modern global parallels to hear their resonance but in an age fascinated by celebrity, hierarchy and public performance, *Figaro* can feel remarkably close to today's political theatre (here I am sorely tempted, but will resist).

Yet Mozart never lectures, instead revealing characters with human comedy. In this, perhaps Figaro shares kinship with the finest contemporary entertainments, e.g. *Fawlty Towers*, *Flight of the Conchords*, *Curb Your Enthusiasm*, where we find ourselves endeared to slightly exaggerated characters and their absurd circumstances.

The climax of the opera conveys such touching forgiveness we are left astonished by Mozart's sensitive understanding of human feelings.

Like great satire in any age, the opera delights first and unsettles second. Chaos erupts through misunderstandings, disguises and concealed identities, but beneath the farce lies the uncomfortable and eternal truth that power often behaves foolishly while intelligence often flourishes among those denied authority (again, don't get me started).

Great conductors have recognised this duality. John Eliot Gardiner speaks of Mozart's capacity to reveal the 'human condition' with incomparable directness; *Figaro* is not merely elegant 18th century entertainment but an opera of psychological truth. Claudio Abbado admired the miraculous balance between musical perfection and emotional spontaneity, where ensembles unfold with inevitability yet never lose conversational life. Sir Charles Mackerras, whose devotion to Mozart transformed generations of performances, emphasised rhythmic vitality and dramatic pace, understanding that *Figaro* succeeds not through refinement alone but through theatrical momentum.

The opera's later reception in Prague confirmed its unique power. There, audiences embraced it with fervour, prompting Mozart's delighted observation that "here they talk of nothing but *Figaro*."

An astonishing feat – to give the audience the feeling of witnessing art that reflects society while rising above it.

That sensation remains the conductor's greatest challenge: not simply to recreate 18th century style, but to make today's audience feel something of the astonishment, laughter and recognition that greeted *The Marriage of Figaro* at its birth. Conducting *Figaro* remains a privilege precisely because the work still confronts us with ourselves – our hierarchies, vanities and desires – while persuading us, through Mozart's incomparable generosity, to regard them with laughter and compassion.

Mozart's comedy still holds up the mirror – and still persuades us to smile at what we see.

James Judd
Conductor

This article was first published in The Post in June 2026.

Te Kōrihi A NZ Opera |

The Freemasons Foundation NZ Opera Chorus

Te Whanganui-a-Tara
Wellington

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Helen Lear
Karyn Andreassend
Matilda Wickbom
Rowena Simpson
Samantha Warhurst

MEZZO-SOPRANOS

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Geneviève Gates-Panneton
Helene Page
Ruth Armishaw

TENORS

Chris Anderson
Elias Nguyen
Jesse Stratford
Patrick Coelho
Patrick Geddes

BASSES

Brent Allcock
Charle Rainey
Joe Haddow
Matt Painter
Matthew Landreth

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Orchestra Wellington

With support from New Zealand Community Trust

Orchestra Wellington is the most accessible orchestra in the Wellington region, dedicated to bringing the thrill of live orchestral music to as many people as possible. Their mission is to perform the most inspiring works in the orchestral repertoire while actively removing barriers to attendance. They believe that music has the power to strengthen communities, foster pride, and create meaningful cultural experiences that reflect the diversity of their region.

Founded in 1948, Orchestra Wellington has evolved into one of Aotearoa New Zealand's most dynamic and forward-thinking orchestras. They have grown one of the most loyal and consistently well-attended audiences in the country – a testament to their unique blend of artistic excellence, innovation, and deep community connection.

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Peter Clark

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Lucas Baker
Sarah Marten
Rupa Maitra
Emma Colligan

SECOND VIOLINS

Estefania Viloria #
Konstanze Artmann ^
Oscar Bullock *
Linden Barton
Clare Macfarlane
Alex Vaatstra

VIOLAS

Chris van der Zee #
Susan Fullerton-Smith ^
David Pucher *
Anita Gude
Elliot Vaughan

CELLOS
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Imogen Granwal ^
Jane Dalley *
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BASSES

Paul Altomari #
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Steve Taylor *

FLUTES

Karen Batten #
Jen Vaughan ^

OBOES

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Finn Bodkin-Oien ^

CLARINETS

Nick Walshe #
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Ngā Kaiwhakaari | *Cast*



Julien Van Mellaerts COUNT ALMAVIVA

Praised for his “charisma and vocal elegance” by Das Opernmagazin, multi-award winning New Zealand baritone Julien Van Mellaerts is highly sought after as both a recitalist and on the operatic stage.

A graduate of the Royal College of Music International Opera School, and recipient of the coveted Tagore Gold Medal, he won first prize in both the prestigious Wigmore Hall International Song Competition and the Kathleen Ferrier Awards. In 2024 he was awarded the Kiri Te Kanawa Foundation Laureate, recognising his enterprise and success both on and off the stage.

Julien has had great success in recent role and house debuts at the Verbier Festival, Salzburg Mozartwoche, Opéra National de Lorraine, Opera Holland Park and New Zealand Opera. Further recent debuts include Renato in *Un Ballo in Maschera* with Wellington Opera; Figaro in *The Marriage of Figaro* at the Palermo Classica International Festival; Petrucci in *Lucrezia Borgia* at Teatro de la Maestranza in Seville; Baritone soloist in *Carmina Burana* at the Royal Festival Hall in London and a recital of Schubert at Salle Bourgie in Montreal. This summer marks the sixth season of *Opera in Song* at Opera Holland Park, a series of operatically themed recitals, co-directed with Dylan Perez.

Proudly supported by the Turnovsky Endowment Trust



Sophie Sparrow SUSANNA

New Zealand soprano Sophie Sparrow is a freelance singer based in the UK. Sophie made her debut as Barbarina in *The Marriage of Figaro* during the 2025 Glyndebourne Festival, where she also performed as the First Bridesmaid, covered one of the Blumenmädchen in *Parsifal*, and appeared in the festival chorus.

Recent operatic roles include Phyllis (cover) in Mark-Anthony Turnage’s *The Railway Children*, Frasquita (cover) in *Carmen*, Barbarina (cover) in *The Marriage of Figaro* at Glyndebourne, Sarah/Sun Witch in Freya Waley-Cohen’s *WITCH*, the title role in Monteverdi’s *Lamento d’Arianna*, Tytania in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, Nella in *Gianni Schicchi*, Belinda in *Dido and Aeneas*, and Despina (cover) in *Così fan tutte* at Royal Academy Opera.

Sophie was awarded the 2021 ROSL Tait Memorial Prize and was a 2022/23 Resident Artist with the Mascarade Opera Foundation in Florence, Italy. She graduated from Royal Academy Opera in 2022 and holds a Master of Performance (Distinction) from the Guildhall School of Music & Drama and degrees in Music and Commerce from the University of Otago.

During her studies, she received support from the Fishmongers’ Company, Help Musicians, the Countess of Munster Musical Trust, the Dame Malvina Major Foundation, the New Zealand Opera Foundation Trust, and the Kiwi Music Trust.

Proudly supported by Dame Jenny Gibbs



Felicity Tomkins COUNTESS ALMAVIVA

Felicity Tomkins is an award-winning New Zealand soprano, internationally based between Australasia and the United Kingdom. She was the winner of the 100th Melbourne Opera Herald Sun Aria in 2024, the 2024 Sydney Eisteddfod Opera Scholarship, and 2023 Lockwood NZ Aria.

Felicity completed her young artist training in America in the Artist Diploma opera programme at the prestigious University of Cincinnati College-Conservatory of Music (CCM 2023). She was a 2021 New Zealand Opera Studio Artist, a 2023 AIMSGraz Opera Studio Artist and was the Dame Malvina Major Foundation Runner-Up at the 2022 Lexus Song Quest.

Other recent accolades include the 2025 International Hans Gabor Belvedere Singing Competition Semi-Finalist, 2023 Elizabeth Connell Prize Finalist, 2023 JSRB Bel Canto Award Third Prize, 2023 International Opera Awards Scholar and 2022/23 Metropolitan Opera Laffont Competition Kentucky District Winner/Central Region Finalist. Felicity’s recent performance highlights include appearances with the Auckland Philharmonia Opera in Concert as Annina in *La traviata*; Handel’s *Messiah* with Auckland Choral, Bacalov’s *Misa Tango* with Bach Musica; Cio-Cio-San in *Madama Butterfly* with Auckland Opera Studio and Manukau Symphony Orchestra, Military Wife/Soprano 1 in *The Knock* with Cincinnati Opera, and Mahler Symphony No. 4, Jeannette in *L’amant Anonyme* and Madame Lidoinein in *Dialogues des Carmélites* with CCM Opera.



James Clayton FIGARO

James Clayton is one of Australia’s most versatile baritones, acclaimed for his rich vocal colour and commanding stage presence. A former professional French horn player, he has built a distinguished career on both operatic and concert stages.

A long-standing principal artist with West Australian Opera, he has sung the title roles in *The Barber of Seville*, *The Marriage of Figaro*, *Falstaff*, *Macbeth* and *The Mikado*, as well as Conte di Luna in *Il trovatore*, Marcello in *La bohème*, Escamillo in *Carmen*, Leporello in *Don Giovanni*, Germont in *La traviata*, Sharpless in *Madama Butterfly*, Iago in *Otello*, the Four Villains in *The Tales of Hoffmann* and the Forrester in *The Cunning Little Vixen* among others.

Elsewhere, he has performed the Forrester and *Macbeth* for State Opera South Australia and Demetrius in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* at the Adelaide Festival. For New Zealand Opera, he has performed Angelotti in *Tosca*, Escamillo in *Carmen* and the title roles in *Rigoletto* and *The Mikado*.

On the concert platform, James’ many appearances have included performances with the West Australian, Sydney, Melbourne, Tasmanian and New Zealand Symphony orchestras. His repertoire features Verdi’s Requiem, Beethoven’s Symphony No. 9 and Missa solemnis, Orff’s *Carmina Burana*, Mozart’s *Requiem*, Handel’s *Messiah* and Berlioz’s *La damnation de Faust*.



Cecilia Zhang CHERUBINO

Described by Opera Magazine as a “lambent mezzo-soprano” and possessing a “confident, fearless stage presence,” New Zealand mezzo-soprano Cecilia Yufan Zhang is an H F Music Award holder studying at the Royal College of Music Opera Studio.

In the 2025/26 season, Cecilia performs the roles of Lapák / Woodpecker in Janáček’s *The Cunning Little Vixen* and Il Cavalier Ramiro in Mozart’s *La Finta Giardiniera* with the Royal College of Music. Other recent roles include the title role in Britten’s *The Rape of Lucretia* (British Youth Opera), Prince Orlofsky in *Die Fledermaus* (Westminster Opera) and Julia Bertram in *Mansfield Park* (New Zealand Opera).

Cecilia recently made her Wigmore Hall debut in a programme of French mélodie by Mel Bonis. She has also undertaken workshops and artist residencies with Glyndebourne Opera’s Contemporary Opera Lab and the Britten Pears Programme.

Cecilia holds conjoint degrees in Commerce and Music from the University of Auckland and was a former artist of the Te Pae Kōkako Opera Studio, supported by the Freemasons Foundation and Circle100.

Proudly supported by the Friedlander Foundation



Kristin Darragh MARCELLINA

Kristin Darragh is a New Zealand born operatic contralto. Her voice has been described by Opernglas as one of “breathtakingly beautiful depth and formidable penetrating power.” Performance highlights in recent seasons have included *The Angel* in Elgar’s *Dream of Gerontius* with Auckland Choral, Alto soloist in the Brahms *Alto Rhapsody* with Orchestra Wellington and Marc Taddei, Lady Bertram in Jonathan Dove’s *Mansfield Park* with New Zealand Opera, Grimgerde in *Die Walküre* with the Sydney Symphony Orchestra under Simone Young and Ulrica in Verdi’s *Ballo in Maschera* for Wellington Opera.

Kristin was engaged as a full-time soloist at Theater Lüneburg, Germany and has been a regular principal artist with New Zealand Opera. Operatic appearances include Suzuki in *Madame Butterfly*, Olga in *Eugene Onegin*, Amastre in *Xerxes*, Maddalena in *Rigoletto*, Marcellina in *Le Nozze di Figaro*, Mercedes in *Carmen*, Erda in *Das Rheingold*, La Zia Principessa in *Suor Angelica*, Madame de la Haltiere in *Cendrillon*, Charlotte in *Werther*, Florence Pike in *Albert Herring* and the title role in Britten’s *Rape of Lucretia*.

Kristin trained at the Royal Academy of Music in London. She is now involved in the mentoring and training of New Zealand’s young aspiring singers and is the Director of Vocal Performance at the University of Waikato.



Andrew Collis DOCTOR BARTOLO

Andrew Collis has sung around the world, particularly in Australia and New Zealand, since 1990. He was a member of the ensemble of the Cologne Opera in Germany from 1993–2007. During his years in Germany, he also sang with many opera companies in cities such as Mannheim, Dortmund, Frankfurt, Düsseldorf, Essen and Berlin, and appeared in concert in Bonn, Strasbourg, Stuttgart and more.

Further performance highlights include The Vienna Festival production of Nono's *Intolleranza*, The Hong Kong Festival productions of *Tosca*, *Salome*, and *Un Ballo in Maschera*, and appearances with San Diego Opera in *La bohème* and *Peter Grimes*.

He has performed with all the major Australian opera companies, such as Opera Australia, Opera Queensland, West Australian Opera, Victorian Opera and State Opera of South Australia. In addition, Andrew has sung with all the symphony orchestras and major arts festivals.

Andrew has had the good fortune to perform frequently in New Zealand – not only with New Zealand Opera, but also with Auckland and Wellington Festivals and with the New Zealand Symphony Orchestra. Roles with NZ Opera include Don Magnifico in *La Cenerentola*, Don Bartolo in *The Barber of Seville* and Pooh-Bah in *The Mikado*.



Andrew Grenon DON BASILIO / DON CURZIO

Andrew is a regular soloist with orchestras, opera companies, and choirs throughout New Zealand. He recently sang the role of James Rushworth in Johnathan Dove's operatic adaptation of Jane Austen's *Mansfield Park* with New Zealand Opera.

Other notable recent performances include Graf Albert in the Auckland Philharmonia's national premiere of Korngold's seminal masterpiece *Die tote Stadt*, tenor soloist in Bach's St Matthew's Passion for Auckland Choral, Don Basilio / Don Curzio in New Zealand Opera's production of Mozart's *The Marriage of Figaro*, and Sailor in the Christchurch Symphony Orchestra's concert performance of Purcell's *Dido & Aeneas*. Other roles Andrew has performed include Acis in Handel's *Acis & Galatea*, Gastone in Verdi's *La traviata*, both with New Zealand Opera, and Elvino in *La Sonnambula* with Days Bay Opera.

He was a Dame Malvina Major Foundation Emerging Artist with New Zealand Opera and a winner of the Circle 100 scholarship. Andrew completed his undergraduate study at the University of Canterbury in Christchurch and later studied at the Wales International Academy of Voice in Cardiff with Dennis O'Neill and Nuccia Focile.



Sarah Mileham BARBARINA

Sarah Mileham is a 22-year-old soprano from Tauranga and is now based in Hamilton. In 2023, she finished her Bachelor of Music in Classical Performance at the New Zealand School of Music, Victoria University of Wellington under the tuition of Jenny Wollerman. She has recently completed her Bachelor of Music with Honours at Waikato University with Soprano Anna Leese. Sarah is currently studying under Nikki Li Hartliep at Te Pae Kōkako – The Aotearoa New Zealand Opera Studio (TANZOS).

In 2024, Sarah made her debut with NZ Opera singing Maria Bertram, a principal role in Jonathan Dove's *Mansfield Park*, and Countess Ceprano in Verdi's *Rigoletto*. She also sang the role of Adina in Donizetti's *The Elixir of Love* NZ Opera's Schools Tour, which travelled throughout Aotearoa. She has been awarded first at the Ōtautahi Christchurch Aria, Wellington Aria, Southland Aria, the Nicholas Tarling Aria and the Dame Malvina Major Foundation Waikato Aria. In 2024, she received the Merle Higgie Opera Prize for Potential at the New Zealand Opera School.

Proudly supported by Anna Gibbons



Joel Amosa ANTONIO

Joel Amosa is a Samoan bass-baritone from South Auckland. He was named New Zealand Opera's 2019 Dame Malvina Major Young Artist and debuted as Fiorello in that year's season of *The Barber of Seville*.

Winner of the 2018 Lexus Song Quest, Joel's prize led to performances and study abroad, including engagements in San Diego, masterclasses in Italy, and a portrayal of Sir John Falstaff in *The Merry Wives of Windsor* with the Lisa Gasteen National Opera Program in Brisbane. His roles include Fiorello in *The Barber of Seville* and Antonio in *The Marriage of Figaro* with New Zealand Opera, Masetto in *Don Giovanni* with Wellington Opera, and most recently Edmund Bertram in *Mansfield Park* and Daedalus in *The Monster in the Maze* for New Zealand Opera's 2025 season.

Offstage, Joel is the Community Engagement Manager at ASB Bank, leading a national team that builds connections between communities, schools, and accessible banking services.



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Bill Falconer CNZM*
The Friedlander Foundation*
Dame Jenny Gibbs DNZM*

Aria

Anna Gibbons
Wilson McGechan Trust*

Duet

Anonymous 1
Dr Raewyn Dalziel
Sir Roderick & Gillian, Lady Deane*
Alfons & Susie des Tombe*
Chanelle & Dean Farmer
Trevor & Jan Farmer*
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Mrs Linda Webb MNZM & Mr Warwick Webb
Gael Webster & Tim Brown

Trio

Anonymous 1
Alison Buchanan & Eric Johnston
Rosslyn Caughey
Susan Doig
Steph Dyhrberg & Murray Bell
Cathy Ferguson & Mike During*
Nick Francis & Stephanie van Leuven
Helen Gaeta
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Quartet

Anonymous 3
Sally & Euan Abernethy
Paul & Sheryl Baines
Frances Bell
Robert Birks
Mr Joe Blackmore & Dr Kevin Sanderson
Richard Braae & Andrea Gray
Je Lan Brash
Virginia Breen
Dame Silvia & Peter Cartwright
Dorothy Coup
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Cushla R Fisher
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Jane Fox
Kent Gardner & Ngaere Duff
Sandra Greenfield*
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Jenny Harper
Joanna Heslop
Joanna Hickman
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Chorus

Anonymous 3
Jocelyn Afford & Stephen Kos
Richard & Heather Armishaw
Christina & Barry Cairns
Christina & David Clee*
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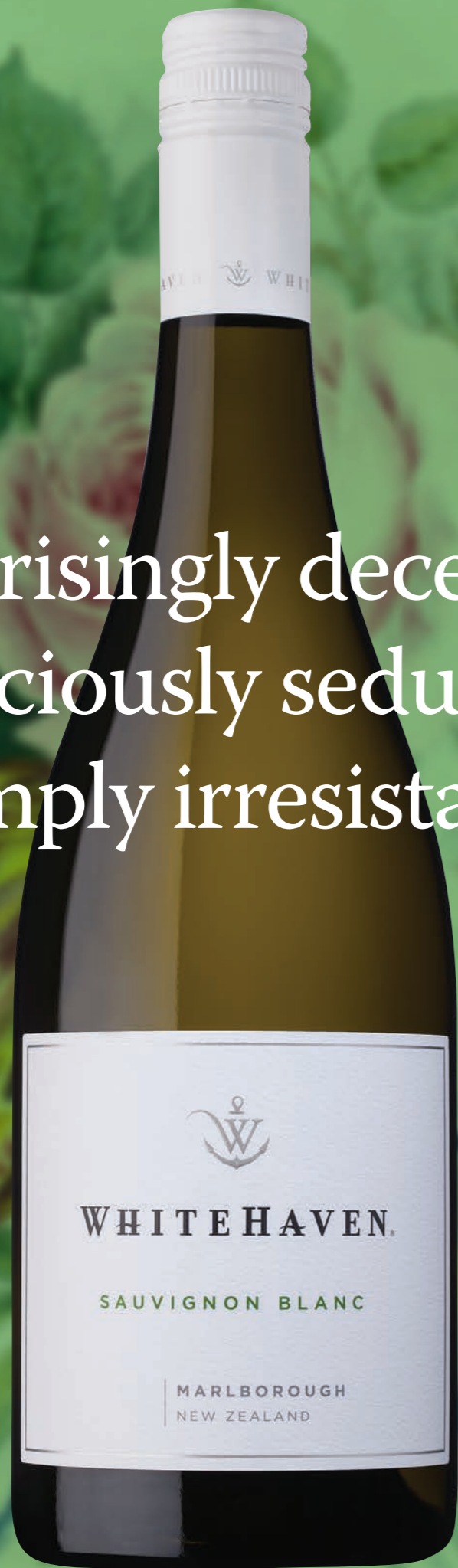
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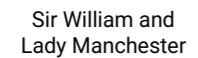
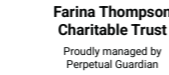
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