

MEDIA RELEASE

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FOUR ARTISTS SET TO THRILL WHEN OPERA QUEENSLAND'S YOUNG ARTIST PROGRAM RETURNS IN 2021

Opera Queensland continues its long history of nurturing emerging talent by expanding its **Young Artist Program** to welcome four exceptional singers in 2021.

The emerging talents selected this year are sopranos **Rebecca Cassidy** and **Sofia Troncoso**, mezzo-soprano **Xenia Puskarz Thomas** and bass-baritone **Timothy Newton**.

Opera Queensland **Artistic Director & CEO Patrick Nolan** said the company's Young Artist Program had helped countless singers forge long and successful careers.

"Opera Queensland is passionate about nurturing Queensland artists, investing in their myriad of talents and providing them with opportunities to progress their careers on the world stage," Mr Nolan said.

"Many participants of our Young Artist Program have gone on to enjoy prolific careers and achieve international recognition including **Kate Miller-Heidke**, **Kiandra Howarth**, **Jacqui Dark**, **Kanen Breen**, **Virgilio Marino** and conductor **Dane Lam**, who was appointed Resident Conductor and Associate Music Director for Opera Queensland's 40th anniversary year."

The Young Artist Program is overseen by Opera Queensland's Head of Music, **Narelle French**, one of Australia's most respected pianists and vocal coach.

"Working with our emerging artists and seeing them flourish and move into roles is incredibly rewarding," Ms French said.

"The future of opera in Queensland looks very bright and I am extremely proud to have worked with so many talented performers."

Ms French said the training and development opportunities in the program were suited to each participant.

"Because each artist is unique and because they have such different experiences in their development so far, we create a program tailored to each artist."

Rebecca Cassidy returns to the Young Artist Program this year after her 2020 participation was interrupted by Covid-19.

The Townsville-raised singer recorded several digital performances during lockdown before making her main stage debut in **ENCORE: Opera Queensland Returns to the Stage**, in October 2020.

"2020 was a terrible year in so many ways for a lot of people but it was also a breakout year for me," Ms Cassidy said.

"I still pinch myself at the opportunities the Young Artist Program provided me last year, including understudying my first ever major principal role of Isolde in Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde* and other opportunities such as performing a thrilling Puccini duet with **Rosario La Spina** in **ENCORE**."

"This year I hope the program will continue to bridge the gap between young artist and professional principal artist with a greater knowledge of what it takes to be a working freelance artist in the global arts landscape."

Brisbane-born mezzo-soprano **Xenia Puskarz Thomas** graduated from Queensland Conservatorium Griffith University in 2018 and is currently a Kovner Fellow at The Juilliard School, New York. Due to international travel restrictions, Xenia is studying virtually, enabling her to perform as Cherubino in Opera Queensland's production of *The Marriage of Figaro* from **15 – 31 July**.

"With some education under my belt, I have been hoping to test out what I know in a supportive, professional environment," Ms Puskarz Thomas said.

"I am looking forward to exploring my performance capabilities and seeing how I will grow with the support of the wonderful musical mentors in this Young Artist Program."

American-born soprano **Sofia Troncoso** is a new addition to the Australian arts scene. Since settling in Brisbane in September 2020, Sofia performed in **Opera Queensland Under the Stars** in November and will perform the very demanding role of Susanna in *The Marriage of Figaro*.

"Over the past 12 months, Opera Queensland has been the light at the end of the tunnel for many artists, myself included, by really embracing local talent," she said.

"I hope all the musical, theatrical and industry experience the Opera Queensland team has to offer will help me forge a career in my new home in Australia."

Gold Coast-raised **Timothy Newton** also returned to Australia last year, having spent the 2019-20 season singing at Deutsche Oper Berlin. Timothy will play Figaro in *The Marriage of Figaro* in July.

"Many fine singers have gone through the Opera Queensland Young Artist Program so it's a great honour, in that sense," Mr Newton said.

"It's a remarkable opportunity to develop my career, taking advantage of the opportunities to perform and work on the many facets of technique and interpretation."

Opera Queensland's 2021 Annual Appeal will again support the Young Artist Program, among other key company initiatives.

For more information about the Young Artist Program, visit oq.com.au

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ARTIST BIOGRAPHIES

Rebecca Cassidy

Hailing from Townsville, soprano **Rebecca Cassidy** completed her Bachelor of Music at Queensland Conservatorium Griffith University (QCGU).

Rebecca's performances include the title role in Puccini's *Suor Angelica*, Anne Trulove in Stravinsky's *The Rake's Progress* and Rosalinde in *Die Fledermaus* by Johann Strauss Jnr. In addition to these operatic roles, Rebecca's concert, oratorio and symphonic repertoire as a soprano soloist include Beethoven's Ninth Symphony, Mozart's Mass in C minor, Handel's *Saul*, Britten's *War Requiem* and Richard Strauss' Four Last Songs.

Rebecca's awards and scholarships include QCGU Wagner Prize, Trinity College London Exhibition Award and the Alton Budd Memorial Scholarship.

Rebecca featured in Opera Queensland's 2019 touring production *Songs to Die For*, directed by Patrick Nolan. As Opera Queensland's 2020 Young Artist, Rebecca received specialised music, language and stagecraft tuition. She performed in live and online concerts, at community and corporate engagement events, and is well known to Opera Queensland audiences from An Aria A Day. In 2020, Rebecca made her recital debut in *Songs at Sunset* in partnership with West Village, performed with Southern Cross Soloists and made her Concert Hall debut at QPAC in ENCORE – Opera Queensland Returns to the Stage.

Xenia Puskarz Thomas

Brisbane-born mezzo-soprano **Xenia Puskarz Thomas** is a Kovner Fellow at The Juilliard School, New York, where she commenced her studies online last October under Professor Edith Wiens. She will relocate to New York in September this year.

Xenia was awarded a Bachelor of Music from Queensland Conservatorium Griffith University in 2018 with first class honours and the University Medal for Academic Achievement. In 2019, Xenia was a scholar of the Melba Opera Trust program supported by the Amelia Joscelyne Scholarship. Later in the year, Xenia studied with teachers from the Metropolitan Opera House and The Juilliard School as part of the prestigious Opera Foundation for young Australians' Lady Fairfax New York Scholarship she won in 2018. This year, she participated in the Carnegie Hall *SongStudio 2020* program and undertook masterclasses with Renée Fleming and Elina Garanča.

Recent performance engagements include: Opera Queensland Ensemble; Brisbane Racing Club Members' Evening; Opera at Jimbour with Opera Queensland; Bangalow Festival with the Southern Cross Soloists; and Camerata – Queensland's Chamber Orchestra's Helpmann nominated 'Home' concert. Xenia's operatic roles include: Dorabella (*Così fan tutte*); L'Enfant (*L'Enfant et les sortilèges*); Mrs Gladys Callaway (*Dry River Run*) and Ramiro (*La Finta Giardiniera*).

Sofia Troncoso

Soprano **Sofia Troncoso** is an accomplished singer in a spectrum of styles ranging from early music to new music with and especially for her interpretation of Mozart. Australian debuts include Ruth Bader Ginsburg in *Scalia/Ginsburg* with Orchestra Victoria and in concert with Camerata for Musica Viva praised as "impressive on all counts" by Limelight for her "excellent technique but delicate phrasing and breath control, as well as fiendish agility in the higher register."

Sofia has also sung in concert with RSNO and Xi'an Symphony Orchestra. In the UK, Sofia "...nearly stole the show" (Opera Magazine) as Papagena in *The Magic Flute* for Scottish Opera, preceded by a "stunning" debut with Longborough Festival Opera as Poppea in *L'incoronazione de Poppea*.

Sofia has played many roles including: Giannetta in *The Elixir of Love*, Adele in *Die Fledermaus*, Zerlina in *Don Giovanni*, Susanna in *Le nozze di Figaro*, Vixen in *The Cunning Little Vixen*, and Nannetta in *Falstaff*. Sofia is a graduate of the Royal Academy of Music, the National Opera Studio in London, and was recently an Emerging Artist for Scottish Opera where she returned as Tytania in a new production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Amongst her numerous successes, Sofia is a former Karaviotis & Salter Prize holder (Les Azuriales), Central City Opera Young Artist, and holds an Exceptional Talent Visa in the UK.

This year, Sofia will debut with Opera Queensland as one of her favourite heroines in the repertoire, Susanna in *Le nozze di Figaro*.

Timothy Newton

Timothy Newton is a bass-baritone from Queensland, having grown up on the Gold Coast. He returned to Australia last year, after singing in the 2019-20 season singing at the Deutsche Oper in Berlin. He has performed Colline in *La bohème* (Deutsche Oper, New Zealand Opera), Quince in Britten's *Midsummer Night's Dream* (Deutsche Oper), Ribbing, Ballo in *Maschera* (Deutsche Oper), Sarstro (Opera Australia School's Company), and roles for other companies such as Victorian Opera, including Alessio in *La Sonnambula*.

He will sing Figaro for Opera Queensland this year. An experienced oratorio singer, he has performed Handel's *Messiah*, the St John and St Matthew Passions of Bach, and Haydn's Creation, in Melbourne and elsewhere. He studied at the University of Melbourne and spent six years with the Choir of Trinity College. He is a former scholar with the Melba Opera Trust, a Lisa Gasteen National Opera Studio alumnus, and studied singing in Melbourne, Italy, and Germany. Timothy also studied law and commerce, and for a time, practised as a solicitor in Melbourne.