

Music

'THAT IS IMPORTANT TO ME'

STEWART CAMERON

Stewart Cameron was born in Auckland, New Zealand where he gained a Bachelor of Arts Degree from Auckland University, majoring in Italian Literature and Language. Two years after graduating, at the age of 22, he won his country's biggest opera competition, the N.Z. Herald Aria, performing two Verdi baritone arias.

He then moved to Sydney to take up a place at The Opera School at the N.S.W. Conservatorium of Music, where he studied under the direction of Myer Fredman. This period enabled him to work for three years in an environment more like that of a small professional opera company than a tertiary study institution, and enabled him to study more than a dozen major baritone roles and to take leads in operas such as "La Clemenza di Tito" and "Pelleas and Melisande".

After graduating, Stewart moved to London to study voice with David Harper and later studied repertoire with (now famous) conductor Simone Young in Cologne. During this time Stewart performed regularly on the opera and concert stage, including taking the title role in Mozart's "Le Nozze di Figaro" for the Cornwall Festival.

Since making Brisbane his home, Stewart has performed with Wellington City Opera (NZ) as Papageno in "The Magic Flute", as well as performing as a soloist with Q.S.O., Q.P.O., Operatifi!, Qld Pops and Lyric Opera of Qld. Stewart performed the role of John Sorrel in Brisbane City Opera's highly successful production of "The Consul" for the Brisbane Festival, as well as the part of the consul, Sharpless, in "Madama Butterfly" for last year's 4MBS Coorparoo Festival of Fine Music.

For the last two years, Stewart has concentrated his energies on performing with OPERATIFI!, enjoying the wonderful opportunities to regularly perform such a diverse range of repertoire, from Broadway musicals to Lieder, French art song, 20th Century opera, and everything in between. He continues to be one of the driving forces behind the planning

and expansion of Brisbane's intimate opera company, OPERATIFI!. Stewart has two sons, Andrew, aged 11 and Matthew, aged 7.

I am sure our friends at the Money Markets would disagree, but I believe the arts are the very foundation of modern culture and civilisation. As mankind (sorry, personkind), has spread to the wide corners of the Earth and learnt to further develop the "artistic" part of the brain, we now have a wonderful



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diversity of arts. The wonderful thing about music and other facets of the performing and visual arts is that you can expose a group of people to the same piece, and they will all have their own reaction to that piece, based upon a number of factors such as their upbringing and life experiences. None of those reactions is "right" or "wrong", but an emotion that is purely theirs. In terms of music, I tend to rely upon my first reaction without going into a deep analysis of the music on the page. If I don't like it from the outset, I see little point in working to like it. This means some pieces (including some vocal music) are always given a wide berth by me, but I have the freedom to enjoy the most unlikely (or maybe most unfashionable) things. Many would say my taste in music is very much in the

"meat and three veg" department. I like that. My mother always used to tell me to only sing things that "move the audience". While I can't claim to have always adhered to it, this simple bit of advice is always with me, and helps remind me of why I perform and for whom.

My first exposure to classical music was through children's stories on record and radio. These gave me my first taste of the Peer Gynt Suite (accompanying the heroic stories of Peer Gynt), Chopin Nocturnes (Sparky and his Magic Piano), and Peter and the Wolf. Grieg, Tchaikovsky and, especially, Chopin remain great favourites. My years of learning the piano were mostly spent on the rugby or cricket fields, rather than at the piano, but my love of this, the greatest of instruments, remains. Chopin Nocturnes and Ballades, Beethoven Sonatas and his Emperor Concerto and even Satie are generally the first things I reach for to play on the stereo when vocal music is not on the menu (which is often).

For me, music is so very special when associated with a fond moment in my past and these started when I was quite young. My mother had a glorious contralto voice and sang in the (very fine) Auckland Choral Society for years, singing the occasional little solo bits. I'm sure my earliest memories of live performances were the rousing choral works such as The Messiah, St. John's Passion, and the Brahms and Verdi Requiems. I must have been 6 or 7. Maybe the experience and the grandeur of these works pushed me toward this "over-the-top" world that is Opera. These days I simply can't listen to the 'Dies Irae' (from the Verdi Requiem) without closing all the windows and turning the volume right up! As my ears have matured, it has been very exciting to discover some glorious contemporary choral and vocal works with the orchestra, particularly Gorecki's Symphony No. 3, and Philip Glass' Itaipu (a wonderfully uplifting spiritual piece). My first opera was by Puccini, and Puccini has been my great operatic love ever since. It was Tosca, and all I remember now is the start of Act 3, with the long prelude to 'E lucevan le stelle' and the aria itself. It was sung by a

wonderful local (back in the days when imported 'stars' could not be afforded). The tenor, Anthony Benfell, was a star to me (and he had a glorious voice, I was to learn later in life), and this aria along with the soldiers, the execution, the sets, orchestra and the tragedy had me hooked. Puccini's ability to create such wonderful drama through his music, whether the setting is Nagasaki, Rome or Paris, makes his operas so compelling. At the same time, they are so Italian! When you consider that Verdi said he loved the baritone voice above all others, and wrote such wonderful roles and music for baritones, my bias to Puccini is rather ungrateful.

Having an older brother who was a very promising baritone on the local scene, I knew what was in store for me when I started singing lessons at 17. Competitions (or Eisteddfods!). Every class in the under-21-years section. (Sadly not an opportunity available to young singers here in Brisbane.) I very quickly built up a repertoire and appreciation of almost every style of song. Having little or no inherent understanding of the different requirements of French song, classical arias, ballads, art songs, national songs, and (my favourite) musical comedy, I just imitated my teacher in every way. So, at 17 years old and thin enough to be blown over by a small puff of wind, I strode out into the world of competitions imitating Leo Barnett, the owner of a remarkably huge barrel chest, who had a stage presence and baritone voice to match. A good friend of our family tells me now (thank God) that my Rigoletto at age 22 looked remarkably like a bull-frog on two legs.

My love of German lieder came after this period. Leo's German was terrible, as he admitted, so we avoided lieder whenever possible. When I arrived in Sydney and started lessons in German, a whole new world opened up to me. There had been very few recitals of lieder in Auckland, so much of this music I was hearing for the first time. Being taught the nuances and the flow of the poetry was a

great joy. My preference in poetry up until then had been Banjo Patterson and Kipling, and now I was reading Goethe. Off I rushed to the Record Collector in Bondi Junction to fill my cabinet with Fischer-Dieskau CDs of Schubert, Schumann, Mahler and Strauss. Having never publicly performed Schubert's Swansong, or many of the Mahler and Strauss pieces for orchestral accompaniment, I hope the day will come when I have the opportunity. How I mourn the lack of opportunity for singers in Brisbane to perform this repertoire with our two major orchestras.

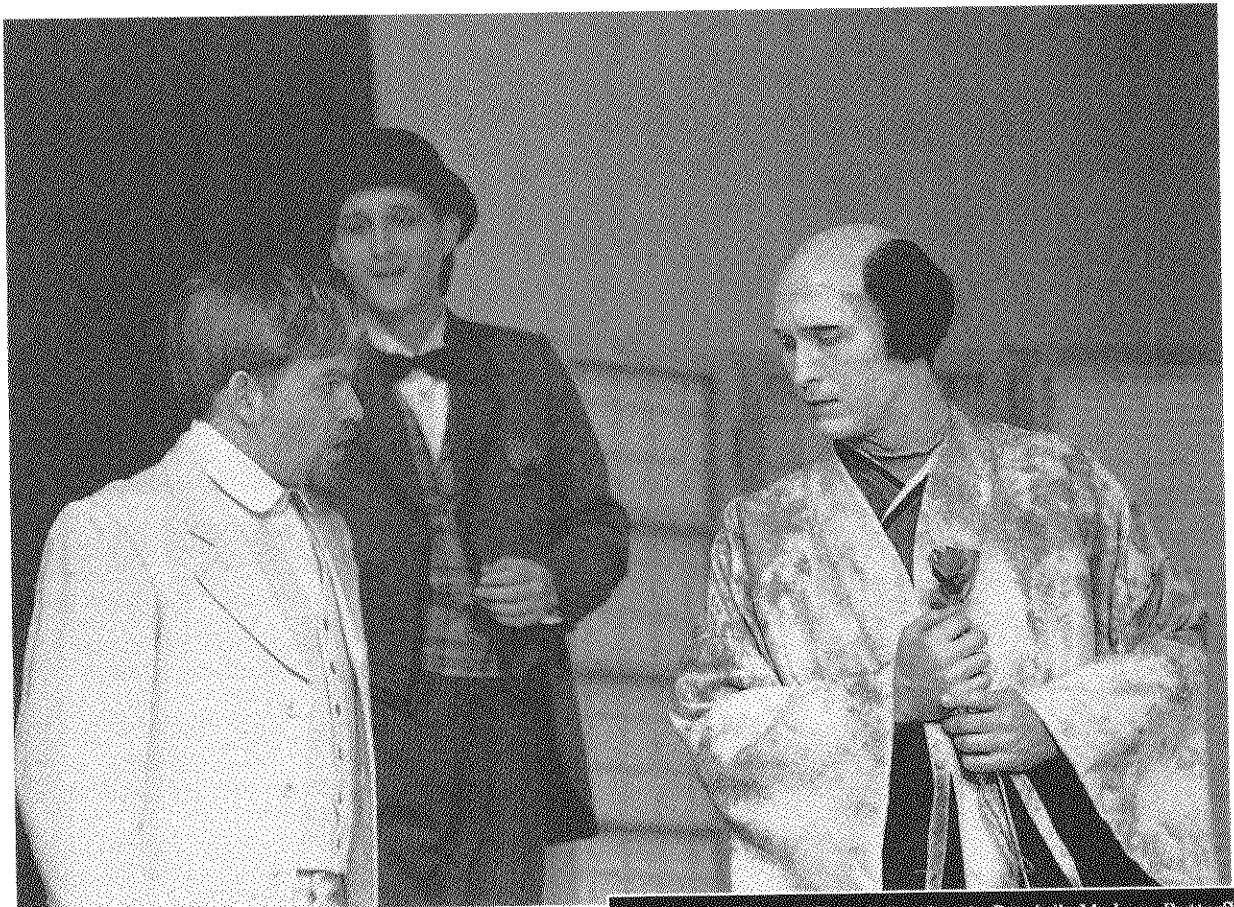
Despite my love of lieder and the French song of Duparc, if I had to nominate my favourite composer of song it may well be Tosti. There's the "meat and three veg" taste again, but that man could write a tune. He offers a wonderful refinement to what is often Italian folk music. His more sophisticated songs such as Ideale, L'Ultima Canzone and Non t'amo piu, are rarely heard, and I hope that will be fixed next year in the course of OPERATIF's subscription concerts. (In fact I know it will!)

When writing this, I couldn't leave out some very favourite specifics, such as Canteloube's Bailer, Rachmaninoff's Vocalise, and everything on my old scratchy LP of Cantanapoli. I bought this in Como when I was 17, and it features an old Neapolitan folk singer on his

guitar. No Pavarottiesque bravura here, but just simple songs sung in the most sincere and authentic way.

Of course, no singer can go through their career just wanting to perform La Boheme, Tosca, Il Tabarro and Madama Butterfly (more's the pity!), and my love of opera naturally extends beyond Puccini. I cut my teeth on the Mozart operas, and have been fortunate to take the title role a number of times in the most perfect opera ever written, The Marriage of Figaro. Space dictates that I can't outline my reasons, but my list of "Non-Puccini Operas that are Important to Me" would be: Stravinsky's The Rake's Progress, Janacek's Jenufa, Beethoven's Fidelio, Verdi's Rigoletto, Wagner's The Flying Dutchman and Menotti's The Consul. All dark and brooding pieces! Oh, I can't forget to mention that fine piece of modern music theatre, Les Miserables, which I was fortunate to see in an intimate theatre in London. Not knowing the music beforehand gave me a rare, deeply moving and memorable evening.

So, Music that is Important To Me comes in many shapes and sizes. As a singer and performer, I constantly remind myself that the music must be given freely to the audience, and not held onto selfishly by the performer. I only wish I had more time to attend live performances that don't involve me performing!



Stewart singing the role of Sharpless in Puccini's Madame Butterfly at last year's 4MBS Coorparoo Festival of Fine Music