

# Toi Toi Opera's Official Launch

On the evening of Saturday 30 January, 2021 the company held their official company launch event at The Piano Centre for Music and the Arts in central Christchurch.

Managing Director Alex Robinson, talked about their desire to rekindle grassroots opera in Canterbury, in order to develop and showcase local talent, on and off the stage, and to expand the appreciation of opera here.

He also spoke about how **Toi Toi Opera** came to be, and the journey they have been on so far. "It has been 10 years since Canterbury has had its own opera company, and from the local singers' perspective, whilst we have valued the chance to participate as chorus members in **NZ Opera's** productions, and in **The Opera Club's** concert activities, we have not had the stepping stone required to learn about operatic role development, singing as soloists with an orchestra, and presenting a story through music."

With three co-directors of a similar mindset, and passion for the art form, but quite diverse professional skill-sets to bring to the party, the **Toi Toi Opera Trust** was founded and registered as a charity in August 2019.

Critical to their confidence in moving forward was securing the support of the **Canterbury Opera Foundation**, and that of their patron, the well-known and respected tenor **Patrick Power, ONZM**. Alex stressed that "we have no qualms about being considered a 'community' opera company, because it takes the engagement of the community to succeed. Indeed, we are deeply indebted to the people and groups who



Alex Robinson, Managing Director, speaks at Toi Toi Opera's Official Launch – January 2021.



are contributing – our artists on and off the stage, and the immense generosity shown to us by grant organisations and individual donors. Plus, as far as we are concerned, professionalism is less about the pay-cheques and more about a state of mind – one that we are all committed to embracing; aspiring to world class performances and production values, produced on a bare bones budget, with careful financial and managerial governance at the core of all of our activities."

**Margot Button**, their **Artistic Director**, introduced the creatives, and her overarching artistic vision for the future of the company. She particularly stressed the importance of

the company helping to rebuild the spirit of generational interchange in the art form, whereby “experienced creatives, singers, and musicians foster those up and coming. In return, the younger company members inject their enthusiasm and energy, reigniting the spark for those more seasoned in the art form.”

Indeed, Margot emphasised just how important it is to the company that in addition to singers and musicians, “we are able to help foster and restore the elaborate creative machinery that is at the

heart of all good opera, which has lain dormant for 10 years in Canterbury, undeservedly given the wealth of theatrical expertise based here.”

To end the formalities, **Sara Brodie** introduced the inaugural production *Suor Angelica & Elegies*, and **Katherine Doig**, their **Creative Director**, introduced **Patrick Power** and expressed their joy, and gratitude for his agreeing to lend them his mana as their patron. Patrick spoke about the importance of the community backing its local entrepreneurs both in spirit, and financially.



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## Martinborough Fundraising Concert 2021



### Enjoy an afternoon of operatic treats at the home of Winifred Bull

The New Zealand School of Music presents their senior students in a variety of well-known solos and ensembles. With vocal music ranging from Verdi's *Nabucco* and *Macbeth* to rare Donizetti duets, this concert features singers Jennifer Huckle, Shaunagh Chambers, Morgan-Andrew King, Samuel McKeever and introduces Matilda Wickbom.

They will be joined by Head of Classical Voice Dr Margaret Medlyn, Dr Jenny Wollerman and Wade Kernot, and be accompanied by the School's Head Accompanist, David Barnard.

The funds raised at this concert go towards staging the School's 2021 opera production. Light refreshments by Medici will conclude the concert.

**2.00-4.30pm Sunday 16 May 2021, 52 Kitchener Street, Martinborough**

**Tickets \$60. To book: email Winifred at [Winifred.Bull@xtra.co.nz](mailto:Winifred.Bull@xtra.co.nz), tel (06) 306 8178**

in the second script) thought she'd given it up. While Gil the father/husband is out, and the two grownup children 'upstairs', a relaxed aria shows Susanna revelling in her sweet 'enchantment', the obsession that keeps her in thrall. Following the other homecomings, Gil also returns, shocked to smell the 'truly pernicious' odour of Turkish tobacco, and suspicious that his young wife has (a) gone out without his knowledge and/or (b) taken a lover. Gil's old-fashioned bluster and bother over his wife's questionable actions, well- conveyed by Frederico Freschi, comes together with Olivia Pike's pose of semi-innocence (since Susanna's 'secret' is only a cigarette, not a lover) in a promising duet remembering the 'blissful moments when first we loved'. This is a comedy, however, and laughter

erupts when Gil recoils: 'Ah! That detestable smell even in her clothes'. A song-fight results in him throwing stuff about before flouncing out – only to return again, to find there is no lover, and his wife's not untrue.

The fact that these are minor works, and probably quite obscure, does not stop The Little Box of Operas coming at them with professional purpose and drawing every ounce of worth out of them that they can. Much of that worth is expressed in the musical enthusiasm they find in the Bach, but also – differently – in the Wolf-Ferrari score, a light and varied twentieth-century work respectfully conveyed by David Burchell at the piano.

**Toi Toi Opera – *Suor Angelica & Elegies*  
The Great Hall, The Arts Centre, Christchurch  
Reviewed by Garth Wilshire**

**T**oi Toi Opera is a new small Christchurch company set up by the enterprising **Margot Button**, and husband and wife **Alex Robinson** and **Kathrine Doig**. This was their first venture, an interesting combination of Puccini's one-act opera *Suor Angelica* with various bits and pieces of English music, **Butterworth's** *A Shropshire Lad* (1912), sections from **Vaughan William's** 1936 *Dona nobis pacem*, and a scene from **Britten's** *The Rape of Lucretia* (1946). Pulling all these strands together was director **Sara Brodie**. As we know from the **New Zealand Opera School** Brodie is a master at staging diverse things coherently. Here the over-riding theme was World War One. Puccini's nuns were transformed into WWI nursing sisters, and this worked very well. The opera was sung in Italian, but the conceit was that this was a

story being told by a recuperating soldier (**Philip Nordt**). He popped up in the scene every now and then to tell us what was happening, and this device worked very well and although it could have been intrusive it wasn't. The performance began with the opening movement of Vaughan Williams' *Dona nobis pacem* movingly sung by Margot Button, before we were introduced to the wounded soldier, who then introduced us to the opera. The star of the opera was **Sarah-Jane Rennie** as Angelica. Although a little tentative to begin with her performance grew to a huge emotional and musical climax. It was the most moving production of the opera I've experienced. **Lisa Falconer** made an imposing and impressive Princess. All the smaller roles were well taken, with the Monitress of Tara Martin, Sister Genevieve (**Katherine Doig**), Mistress of the Novices (**Louisa Pilkington**), and the Abbess of **Raemon Greenwood** making important contributions. The chorus singing was excellent throughout.



Sarah-Jane Rennie (left)

Photo: Wei Li Jiang



Raemon Greenwood

Photo: Wei Li Jiang



Lisa Falconer

Photo: Wei Li Jiang



Katherine Doig & Rory Sweeney

Photo: Wei Li Jiang



Mathila Wickbom & Alex Robinson

Photo: Wei Li Jiang



Malcolm Leitch & Chorus

Photo: Wei Li Jiang

Often placed around the central stage, they often sang in 'surround sound' and given their wide pacing, the ensemble remained remarkably coherent.

The second half was the Elegies. The Butterworth songs, the *Rape of Lucretia* scene, **Wilfred Owen's** poem *Anthem for a Doomed Youth* (later set by Britten in his *War Requiem*), and the final movement from Vaughan Williams' *Dona nobis pacem* were woven together by extracts from letters written by WWI Soldiers. The songs were movingly sung by **Malcolm Leitch**, **Rory Sweeney**, and **Alex Robinson**. The Rape of Lucretia scene from Act One focused on women waiting at home or news of their men, and was

totally appropriate for the scenario. **Margot Button**, **Elizabeth Emeleus**, **Emma Gillkison**, and **Matilda Wickbom** made a fine quartet of women. Wickbom in particular made a fine impression as Lucretia. The only criticism I have is that sometimes the spoken words didn't project enough.

The Puccini was accompanied by a small band of eight players and ably conducted by **Mark Hodgkinson**. **Alison Holden** and **Jeremy Woodside**, both of whom played in the orchestra, also accompanied the Elegies second half. They both brought character to their playing which caught the various moods.

Bravo Toi Toi Opera – an auspicious debut season!