

ENTERTAINMENT

Singing for their supper - NZ Opera's radical make-over for 2020

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The Marriage of Figaro will be NZ Opera's one big show of 2020; the others are smaller scale including one to be performed in hotel rooms throughout the country.

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If necessity is the mother of invention, so too is poverty.

It's an open secret that NZ Opera has suffered losses in recent times. Productions like 2017's artistically brave but financially disastrous staging of Janáček's *Katya Kábanová* pushed the company to the brink, and in 2018 a new general director, Thomas de Mallet Burgess, was appointed to keep the organisation afloat.

The traditional way opera companies escape a financial hole is to play the classics. This year it didn't work. NZ Opera's production of *The Barber of Seville* – programmed before de Mallet Burgess's arrival – missed its budgetary target by \$100,000.

It's a problem for opera companies around the world, where audiences who are increasingly resistant to the top 10 hits make the staging of grand opera less and less viable. De Mallet Burgess went into his first full year in charge at NZ Opera having to reimagine what it means to be an opera company in the 21st century.

What he came up with is the most exciting – and challenging – programme a national performing arts body is likely to have produced in New Zealand.

Opera-goers get one concession to the usual big hitters, Mozart's *Marriage of Figaro*, directed by Lindy Hume with an orchestra under respected Greek conductor Zoe Zeniodi. That things have taken a turn shows early in the year, at the New Zealand and Auckland arts festivals, with Peter Maxwell Davies's *Eight Songs for a Mad King*, which is every bit as crazy as the title suggests.

Baritone Robert Tucker will employ numerous vocal tics and tricks in this unapologetically atonal work, while Hamish McKeich conducts his own contemporary music group, Stroma. It plays in the Ellen Melville Centre in Auckland.

Eight Songs is - *Figaro* aside - a template for NZ Opera's 2020 season: a rarely performed work played in a non-traditional space using small musical forces. De Mallet Burgess accepts that the audiences won't be large but the company will live within its means.

However, there are consequences for some of NZ Opera's traditional collaborators. Next year the company will employ a full symphony orchestra only once, and a moderately sized one at that, for *Figaro*. That's unfortunate for Auckland Philharmonia, Orchestra Wellington and the Christchurch Symphony, which all count, to some extent, on being hired by organisations like NZ Opera and the RNZ Ballet to meet their own financial targets.



NZ Opera's new general director Thomas de Mallet Burgess: "My remit was to ensure we still had a national opera company."

De Mallet Burgess says it's nothing personal, and that his organisation's orchestra bill has risen by more than 40 per cent in recent years, so cuts needed to be made. When asked, APO director of operations Paul Christ didn't confirm a figure or say why costs might have increased so sharply.

However, he noted that the orchestra doesn't have a standard rate, and instead charges based on items including the number of players and rehearsals required, how many trucks and roadies are needed to move gear (yes, orchestras have roadies) and whether it needs to pay a conductor.

Whatever's causing the increase, NZ Opera has looked for cheaper alternatives, one of which is to form its own group of players, the New Zealand Opera Baroque Orchestra. The new orchestra will play in NZ Opera's production of Handel's *Semele*. Among the artists are the Australia soprano Celeste Lazarenko and Sol3 Mio's Amitai Pati, along with Kiwis Sarah Castle and Paul Whelan. They'll be under the capable baton of Peter Walls, former CEO of the NZSO and Chamber Music New Zealand, who really knows his Handel.

Even more radical than forming your own orchestra is getting rid of it altogether, replacing it with just a piano, and then staging the reduced work in a hotel room, as the company does in November with Poulenc's *La voix humaine*/The Human Voice.

Shrinking the opera's scale means it can travel to Taupo, Nelson and Dunedin, as well as Auckland, Wellington and Christchurch. Whether the atmosphere created by sitting eyeball to eyeball with one singer and a pianist makes up for the absence of Poulenc's orchestration remains to be seen. De Mallet Burgess admits the production's risky – will it work artistically? Will people come? – but reasons that the risk is managed because even in the worst-case scenario, NZ Opera will not lose its shirt. Besides, he's done this before in Australia, with his previous organisation, Lost and Found Opera.

Was his remit when he was appointed, then, simply to transport Lost and Found's model across the ditch?

"No," he says. "My remit was to ensure we still had a national opera company."