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Shaping the next generation of artists

August 17, 2017

By Louise Crossen

After six decades of music education, Queensland Conservatorium Griffith University graduates are making their mark in the performing arts industry, both in Australia and abroad. Its alumni include players in leading positions in every Australian state orchestra, and a host of Grammy and ARIA award winners and many internationally recognised musicians including Dami Im, Jayson Gillham, Katie Noonan, Piers Lane, Megan Washington, Kate Miller-Heidke, Lisa Gasteen and Brett Dean have all passed through the Queensland Conservatorium.

opera lecturer Joseph Ward OBE. . . ' is the main reason that I decided to switch from being a computer programmer to a singer,' he says. " . . . he gave me a lot of insights into the industry and supported me many years after I left the Con - he always believed in me, even during my most difficult times."

Queensland Conservatorium Director Professor Scott Harrison, himself a graduate of the 'Con', confirms that the Queensland Conservatorium has carved out a place as one of Queensland's major cultural institutions. "Thousands of talented students have graduated from the Queensland Conservatorium which remains the dream destination for aspiring young musicians," he said. "This institution has made an enormous contribution to Australia's musical landscape

across a variety of genres, from classical and jazz to musical theatre and popular music.

A selection of 'Con' graduates and alumni share how their careers have taken off and their advice for aspiring professional musicians .

Kang Wang, Masters of Music Studies (Opera Performance)

Since graduating, tenor Kang Wang has taken the opera world by storm. He represented Australia at the BBC Cardiff Singer of the World competition earlier this year and made it to the finals with a bravura performance of blockbuster arias from famous works including Roméo et Juliette, La Bohème and La Traviata. “I was very happy to be selected,” he says. “This is one of the most important singing competitions in the world and it was great exposure for me - many of the people I'll be auditioning for from around Europe were watching.”

Dubbed the Olympics of the opera world, the international showcase is held every two years and features just 20 young singers from around the world. It has launched the careers of major opera stars, including fellow Queensland Conservatorium alumnus and faculty member Lisa Gasteen – the only Australian to have ever won the competition.

Despite the fact that both his parents were professional opera singers, a singing career wasn't Kang's first choice. “Until I left high school, I didn't like opera – I loved rock and roll, and I still love to listen to industrial/heavy metal!” he says.

He initially studied IT and worked as a web developer for a couple of years in Darwin before embarking on a Masters of Music Studies in Opera Performance at the Queensland Conservatorium. He credits Queensland Conservatorium opera lecturer Joseph Ward OBE with starting him on the path to singing stardom. “Joseph is the main reason that I decided to switch from being a computer programmer to a singer,” he says. “I had already been studying with him for a year, flying from Darwin to Brisbane every month, before I started at the Con and he really helped me made the transition from an amateur to a professional singer. Both technically and mentally, he gave me a lot of insights into the industry and supported me many years after I left the Con - he always believed in me, even during my most difficult times.”

After graduating from the Queensland Conservatorium in 2012 Kang undertook further studies at the Royal Northern College of Music in Manchester and did a season at OperAvenir at Theatre Basel in Switzerland.

In 2015, he was selected to join New York's famed Metropolitan Opera, as part of the Lindemann Artist Development Program. “The Lindemann program at the Met has the training of the highest level, and it

has given me the opportunity to meet and work with the most important people in the industry,” he says. “We receive very intense coaching on interpretation, languages, acting and vocal technique during the season six days a week and get to sing roles at the Met mainstage too which is an invaluable experience.”

He made his Met debut last year in Strauss’s Salome – an experience he describes as “unreal”. “It was quite a significant role as a debut for a young artist in the program, and I felt honoured to be trusted with it,” he says. “I received a lot of very nice reviews and it really helped put my name on the radar of people within the opera world.”

“Eventually I’d like to sing in all the major opera houses and when the timing is right I’d love to sing roles like Canio from Pagliacci and Cavaradossi from Tosca.”

Georgie Hopson, Bachelor of Musical Theatre

Since its establishment in 2011, the Bachelor of Musical Theatre degree at the Queensland Conservatorium has turned out the country’s finest triple threat talent, with graduates cast in high profile productions like *Les Misérables*, *My Fair Lady*, *Aladdin*, *Beautiful* and *Mamma Mia!* Georgina Hopson was one of its first graduates: .

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“I chose the Con because it was an amazing training ground for musical theatre – my time there was such a dream,” she said. “The head of the musical theatre program, Associate Professor Paul Sabey, is a genius. He has trained many of the performers working in London’s West End and was like a father to us all.”

She was recently cast in Opera Australia’s acclaimed production of *My Fair Lady*, and was handpicked by Dame Julie Andrews to understudy the lead role. “It was definitely one of the highlights of my career to date,” she said. “It was hands down my best audition experience ever.”

“Music is the centre of my life - the ability to share stories and convey emotion through music is an amazing gift.”

Since graduating in 2014, Georgie has become one of the breakout stars on the Australian musical theatre scene and has also branched into television. In 2015, she was one of six finalists for the prestigious Rob Guest Endowment Award, and received a Matilda

Theatre Award for Best Emerging Artist, for her work in Queensland theatre.

Her advice for those pursuing a career in the performing arts is to be proactive. “It’s all about keeping up the momentum. You might be successful at one in every ten auditions, so you have to learn how to cope with the ups and downs. Sometimes you feel like you’ve hit rock bottom, and other times you are soaring.”

Despite the ups and downs of life on the stage, the young star said she couldn’t imagine doing anything else. “It is an amazing career, and the highs are euphoric,” she said.

Sophie Min, Bachelor of Music (Jazz Performance) / Master of Music Studies

Jazz pianist and composer Sophie Min moved from Seoul to Brisbane to complete her studies.

Since graduating, she has made her mark on the international stage, earning a place in the coveted JM Jazz World Orchestra where she joined 19 other young musicians from all over the world after an open global audition. She has also

attended the Centrum Jazz Port Townsend Workshop in Washington and Barry Harris Jazz Workshop in New York, and undertaken further studies with jazz legends like Kevin Hays and Randy Ingram.

As a performer, she has established her own trio and made a name for herself on the local jazz scene, playing regular gigs and recording several albums and collaborating with local jazz musicians like Kristin Berardi, John Hoffman, Rafael Karlen and Sharny Russell.

“It can be a tough industry, and you have to make your own opportunities,” she said.

“My dream is to keep playing, learn from other musicians and eventually create my own festivals and events – I would love to connect musicians from Korea with jazz players here in Australia.”



SOPHIE MIN. IMAGE COURTESY OF GRIFFITH UNIVERSITY; PHOTOGRAPHER: MICHAEL CRANFIELD.



Tetsuya Lawson, Bachelor of Music (Performance)

The young trumpeter has already shared his talents alongside the world’s best after being selected to play at the Pacific Music Festival in Japan, the International Trumpet Guild in the US, and perform with orchestras in South Korea and Switzerland. After graduating from his



TETSUYA LAWSON. IMAGE
COURTESY OF GRIFFITH
UNIVERSITY; PHOTOGRAPHER:
MICHAEL CRANFIELD.

undergraduate degree, Tetsuya is set to undertake further studies at the renowned Shepherd School of Music at Rice University in the US.

He said that undertaking a degree in the performing arts had provided him with “wonderful opportunities”. Tetsuya said his mentors at the

Conservatorium had helped him navigate the transition from student to performer. “I’ve been fortunate to have amazing teachers that have guided me over the past couple of years, including Sarah Butler, Richard Madden, and Mark Bremner. “These fantastic teachers have provided their wealth of knowledge and experience to me as an aspiring musician.”

After finishing his studies, he hopes to perform in one of the world’s great symphony orchestras and pass on his knowledge and experience to the next generation of performers. “Music is the centre of my life - the ability to share stories and convey emotion through music is an amazing gift.”

Louise Crossen is the arts communications officer at Griffith University, working across the Queensland Conservatorium, Queensland College of Art and Griffith Film School. A former journalist with *The Courier-Mail* and editor of *The List* magazine, she has specialised in arts coverage.

👤 Louise Crossen

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