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Bush path to the baton track

Natalie Murray Beale talks about her journey ahead of her Australian conducting debut. By **Cameron Pegg**

It was Sister Gonzaga who first spotted the musician that Natalie Murray Beale would one day become. “She pulled my mum aside and said, ‘She’s got it,’” the conductor recalls.

Murray Beale was eight years old and had successfully lobbied her parents for piano lessons. Sister Gonzaga was the music teacher at her primary school in Wingham (population 5374) in regional NSW, and had agreed to instruct the budding pianist during lunch breaks.

The dedicated young pupil stayed with Sister Gonzaga until high school, when she was ready to attack more challenging repertoire. The Sydney Conservatorium of Music called, followed by postgraduate studies at the Guildhall School of Music and Drama in London.

Some years later, Murray Beale has returned from Europe to make her Australian conducting debut. Up first is the Opera Queensland production of *A Flowering Tree* by John Adams, followed by an outdoor performance of the beloved Verdi Requiem for the Bleach Festival on the Gold Coast. (In between, for good measure, she will have her debut at the Barbican Centre in London.)

Joining the music staff at the Welsh National Opera was an important early break for Murray Beale. The young repetiteur was exposed to the many moving parts of opera production, including working with orchestral scores, rather than piano reductions. That experience led to her next assignment — as a conductor of the London Symphony Chorus.

“That was fantastic because I was working with their chorus, but I had to prepare them and collaborate with people like Valery Gergiev, Sir Colin Davis, Marin Alsop, Daniele Gatti. The list goes on.”

A change in musical perspective had occurred, but a physical transformation was required, too — Murray Beale had to completely change the way she used her arms and hands.

“You have to be legato, and hitting a keyboard is normally a really quick attack. But the work I’d done with singers was really vital because it just taught me about breathing. Breathing with every instrument, giving the trombones enough time, things like that.”

Murray Beale is a quiet, focused presence in the rehearsal room. While working with the Opera Queensland chorus on a bright, ringing piece of music from *A Flowering Tree*, she focuses on a particular word in the libretto, encouraging the singers to find a joyful quality in its sound. “A little less Wednesday night,” she quips.

The conductor knows the work of Adams well, having led the staged premiere of another of his operas, *The Gospel According to the Other Mary*, in Bonn. Librettist Peter Sellars (who also collaborated on *A Flowering Tree*) invited the Australian to sit in on rehearsals with Sir Simon Rattle and the Berlin Philharmonic, who were presenting a concert version of the work a month earlier.

Following the production, Rattle handed her his orchestral parts, complete with notations from Adams and himself.

Murray Beale is comfortable working alongside the best in the business, and used a BBC performing arts fellowship to secure Finnish maestro Esa-Pekka Salonen as her mentor.

Murray Beale holds Adams in high regard, and credits his work with reinvigorating opera at the end of the 20th century. “People were rejecting Wagner, Strauss, anything that represented pre-World War II, and John, growing up in America and being in California, was writing kind of a fresh sound, but also he was writing political drama. He was writing lyric drama.

“So *Nixon in China* kind of got the musical world interested in



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opera again.”

A Flowering Tree is one of his lesser-known works. It premiered in 2006 in Vienna, and was commissioned to celebrate the 250th anniversary of Mozart’s birth. (It won a Helpmann Award in 2009 for its Australian premiere at the Perth Festival.) Like *The Magic Flute*, it is based on folk tales, albeit very different ones. The source material is drawn from Indian writer and scholar AK Ramanujan.

In the story, a young woman named Kumudha discovers that she can transform into a tree, producing beautiful flowers that can be sold at

the local market. A prince witnesses her magic and falls in love with her, but their union is tested when the jealousy of others invades the court.

“There’s a kind of exotic nature to some of the music, particularly with the percussion instruments, glockenspiel, and gongs and the maracas and rain sounds. Part of the opera is like we’re walking through the forest, and it’s kind of humid and sensual,” Murray Beale explains.

In both *A Flowering Tree* and *The Gospel According to the Other Mary*, the soloists sing in English while the chorus performs in Spanish. It’s a most Californian touch (both Adams and Sellars live in the state), and also an astute commentary on class and the politics of language, Murray Beale says.

Although there are exceptions (Simone Young being one), women conductors remain an uncommon sight on the world’s major stages. It was celebrated British theatre director Katie Mitchell who encouraged Murray Beale to embrace the challenge.

“I was working on one of her productions and she did come up and whisper to me. She just said, ‘When are you going to conduct?’ It’s really easy I think as a woman in the early stages to maybe not get picked for those first few opportunities. It was nice to have someone say, you know, ‘Come on’.”

What would Murray Beale’s advice to emerging women conductors be?

“Talk to people. Don’t keep it to yourself. Once it becomes an idea and you start speaking about it, then the next step is to look at how you can gain the skills,” she says.

“I would also say get out and work at whatever brings you closer to the orchestra or to singers, wherever you want to conduct. Studying scores is really brilliant, but this whole profession is about people.”

A Flowering Tree is presented by Opera Queensland from Tuesday to April 6 at the Queensland Performing Arts Centre; ***Verdi’s Requiem*** is presented by Opera Queensland, featuring the Queensland Conservatorium Symphony Orchestra, on April 27 as part of Bleach Festival at Home of the Arts, Gold Coast.



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