



The Return of the Musical Native

International opera star Kate Royal is returning to her native Dorset to work with upcoming young classical singers. Here she shares thoughts on growing up by the sea, singing and family life

WORDS: Rosie Clay





'Opera is such a high-wire act... We're supposed to make it look effortless...but in reality it requires a unique connection between mind and body'

From New York's Metropolitan Opera to the Royal Opera House Covent Garden, Kate Royal has had international star billing. The renowned soprano has performed around the world with prestigious orchestras and acclaimed pianists, and has an impressive discography. It's less known that she grew up in Dorset. Soon she will be reconnecting with those Dorset roots to support young singers through Bournemouth-based charity Hurn Court Opera (HCO) and her alma mater, Talbot Heath School in Bournemouth.

On June 12, Kate will lead the John Seldon Masterclass for HCO at Merley House, Wimborne. As part of its mission to support emerging singers, HCO runs an annual public masterclass led by a distinguished operatic artist. Kate will share her expertise, giving individual feedback to young vocalists nearing the end of conservatoire studies, as well as performing some of her favourite repertoire.

'Young singers need to get a taste for how to prepare things to a high standard,' she says. 'And, in addition, working in a Hurn Court Opera production is a great opportunity for them to see what goes into an opera production.'

In a similar vein, later in the year Kate will be at Bournemouth University to chair the judging panel at HCO's national Singer of the Year Competition for vocalists aged 20-28.

Focusing on a younger age group, Kate has become a patron the new interdisciplinary STEAM hub (Science, Technology, Engineering, the Arts and Mathematics) at her old school, Talbot Heath, where she also supports a singing scholarship in her name.

Born in London in 1979,



Picture: Ken Howard

'When I dipped my toe into classical repertoire, I knew this was where I wanted to be'

during her early years Kate lived in south east London, visiting her grandparents in Swanage at the weekends. In 1989 the family moved permanently to Poole. 'Compared to Forest Hill, Branksome Park felt like Florida,' she laughs. 'And the novelty of being close to the sea never wore off. As children, we spent our summers pootling around Swanage Bay on pedalos, crabbing on the quay and watching Punch and Judy on the beach. It's been a huge pleasure to relive those memories with my own children. Once we were teenagers, Swanage New Year's celebrations became a big deal, and many unrepeatable memories linger from that time!'

OPENING PAGE: Internationally acclaimed soprano Kate Royal

ABOVE: Kate Royal playing Micaela in the Metropolitan Opera's production of *Carmen* in 2012

LEFT: Kate will chair the judging panel at the finals of the Hurn Court Opera Singer of the Year Competition at Bournemouth University in November

The arts figured strongly in Kate's upbringing. Her mum Carolyn was a dancer, and dad Steve was a songwriter. 'When I was little there was a lot of music at home,' she recalls. 'While I was at Talbot Heath, the new Music School was built, with its wonderful facilities. I was taught violin there by Channa Clein.' Channa is mother of internationally renowned cellist Natalie Clein, and actor Louisa Clein (*Judge John Deed*, *Emmerdale*). 'My sister Bonnie and I discovered our love of singing through the school chamber choir. Mum had a knack for seeking out good local music teachers, and I studied piano with the brilliant Marion Martin in Broadstone.'

Kate also became heavily involved with the Big Little Theatre Company, performing musical theatre and jazz around the area. 'Though it never felt quite right,' she confesses. 'However, when I dipped my toe into classical repertoire, I knew this was where I wanted to be.'

Through a local connection, Kate met the operatic tenor Jon Andrew, who lives in Bournemouth. 'He suggested I looked at some Mozart. It was pretty much love at first sing,' she smiles. 'I was enthralled by opera, so I borrowed records from Bournemouth Music Library. I pored over the texts, finding hidden fantasy worlds that as a teenager seemed incredibly appealing.'

After A-levels at Brockenhurst College, Kate studied at the Guildhall School of Music and Drama in London. In 2004, the year of her graduation, she won two prestigious music prizes: the Kathleen Ferrier Award and the John Christie Award. And the work started to pour in.

'I left college a term early to take a job in the Glyndebourne Chorus. I had a one-line solo in *Idomeneo*, which Simon Rattle was conducting. He invited me to audition and from there I was offered solo work at the BBC Proms.'

Around the same time, Kate was understudying Pamina (*The Magic Flute*) at Glyndebourne. 'I went on at short notice,' she says. 'Some major critics were in the audience, which led to some big

KATE SINGS IN DORSET

You can hear Kate perform at Hurn Court Opera's John Seldon Masterclass at Merley House, Wimborne on Sunday June 12 at 3pm. Kate will conduct a masterclass with three emerging singers and

perform some of her favourite repertoire.

Tickets: £18, under-18s and those in full-time education free, order at ticketsource.co.uk/hurn-court-opera. More from hurncourtopera.org

offers coming my way. Critics hailed it as an overnight success but by that stage I had already been studying for eight years.'

Kate is married to actor, singer and *Bridgerton* star Julian Ovenden (he also played the dashing Spitfire pilot Andrew Foyle in the ITV series *Foyle's War*). Kate admits that combining their busy international careers with a family, their children are aged 12 and 10, hasn't always been easy. 'At the start I tried to do it all, moving around constantly with the children and my mum or a nanny. But ultimately, it's not sustainable. I've been determined not to miss out on their childhoods and while I had to give up some wonderful singing opportunities due to pregnancy and post-birth issues, I've no regrets.'

Renowned for a wide range of operatic roles, particularly Pamina in *The Magic Flute*, the Countess in *The Marriage of Figaro* and the Marschallin in *Der Rosenkavalier*, Kate also has a strong love of the song recital. 'It's so simple,' she observes, 'and you don't have to rely on sets or costumes – just music and text in its purest form.'

Above all though, she sees her greatest achievement as having stuck with the profession when things were tough. 'Opera is such a high-wire act, so much travelling and so little room



Picture: Steve Arnett

Kate performing at the opening of the STEAM hub at her old school, Talbot Heath, in 2019. Sitting behind her are fellow STEAM Patrons: Emily Harris, Louisa Clein, Jess Wells, Rosalind Preston OBE and Heidi Doughty OBE

for being anything but perfect. We're supposed to make it look effortless, but in reality it's a hugely athletic activity that requires a unique connection between mind and body. Behind most long-lasting careers in opera there's a lot of grit and determination.'

It's clear that this world class

opera star enjoys coming back to her beloved Dorset: 'I return once a year with Talbot Heath friends and our combined troupe of nine children!' she says. 'We love re-tracing our steps on the Sandbanks ferry, long walks on Studland beach, and catching a sneaky pint of Ringwood Ale at the Bankes Arms.' ♦

Picture: Marty Solt/Metropolitan Opera



Kate Royal as Euridice in Gluck's *Orfeo ed Euridice* at the Metropolitan Opera in New York City in 2011

KATE ROYAL'S TOP TEN TRACKS

Kate loves music of all genres. Her son is a budding songwriter and she enjoys swapping music discoveries with him. Her family are also great fans of a kitchen disco.

Top 5: Pop Songs

David Bowie: *Young Americans*

Stevie Wonder: *Knocks Me Off My Feet*

James Brown: *Make it Funky*

Prince: *I Would Die 4 U*

The Beatles: *Mother Nature's Son*

Top 5: Classical Tracks

J.S. Bach: *Mache dich, mein Herze Rein* (Purify yourself, my heart) from *St Matthew Passion*

Wolfgang Mozart: *Piu docile io sono* (I am more mild), from *The Marriage of Figaro*

Robert Schumann: *Der Einsiedler* (The Hermit), sung by Christian Gerhaher

Gustav Mahler: *Symphony No. 2 in C minor, The Resurrection Symphony*

Richard Strauss: *Und du wirst mein Gebieter sein* (And you will be my lord), from *Arabella*