



Features

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The Good Life

At sixty, Kiri Te Kanawa is enjoying her place out of the sun. BARRY SINGER catches up with the soprano, who makes her Los Angeles Opera debut this month in Samuel Barber's *Vanessa*.



The diva photographed by Martin Gram at Shelley's Hotel, East Sussex, England

(<http://www.operanews.org/uploaded/image/article/kiriportrait.jpg>)

The diva photographed by Martin Gram at Shelley's Hotel, East Sussex, England

all," she maintains, settled for the afternoon in a suite at Shelley's, her favorite local spot, a venerable village hotel close by her energy-challenged home. "Am I retired? No, I am not. Are there ambitions left to achieve in my performing career? Not really."

Was Kiri Te Kanawa the greatest diva of her generation? Many would say yes. Is she still? Certainly, Renée Fleming has assumed

The electricity went out last summer at Kiri Te Kanawa's place, deep in the East Sussex countryside. "I didn't have water, either," she proclaims with something of a backwoodsman's noblesse oblige. "The house is very near farmland. There are so many dead flies, I have to make daily passes with a vacuum cleaner to deal with them. I'm at the very end of the line - top of the hill. If everyone else 'round me has water, I don't. They take all my water. Same with the power lines, the phone lines. It's absolutely horrendous. Water-wise, I've got my own little reservoir supply socked away now, but that's not the point. I want the services I pay for!"

Kiri Te Kanawa, at age sixty, has almost, if not entirely, removed herself from the spotlight. "I don't think I'm missed at

"I never needed to have an audience the way many of my colleagues do."

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Arabella at the Met, 1994

(<http://www.operanews.org/uploaded/image/article/kiri2.jpg>)

the telegenic Te Kanawa mantle of populist vocal celebrity and demure operatic eroticism. Does the supplanted diva care? Seemingly not.

"Oh, I do wonder where I will be in ten years, when I'm seventy," she admits blithely. "Will I be in a wheelchair or out fly-fishing? My voice is fine, though. I literally go from six months to six months now. If I decide to quit, I'll just do it like *that*. My main ambition is to develop my new foundation, devoted entirely to New Zealand singers and musicians. We've raised 500 to 800,000 New Zealand dollars, and 150,000 pounds here in England. I will continue to sing for the moment, because I want to keep a bit of a profile for the foundation."

For the most part, this diva doesn't do opera anymore, although she is making a notable exception late this month when she performs Samuel Barber's *Vanessa* for Los Angeles Opera. It's a role she has played two or three times before. "I haven't been at the Met or at Covent Garden in six, seven years," Te Kanawa says without regret. (Her last Met appearance was in *Capriccio*, in January 1998.) "I don't want to be away from home, I don't want to work for six weeks in one town. Those rehearsal periods! You're dying, you're so homesick."

In fact, ambivalence has always underscored the inviolable self-assurance of the Te Kanawa mystique. "My heart was really quite sad sometimes," she admits. "This was actually true during my entire career. I loved it, I loved every minute of it. But I must say, when I didn't have to do it anymore, it was a relief. It isn't such a big loss for anyone. There are so many other singers who are dying to do this. I never needed to have an audience the way many of my colleagues do. They have to have the applause, they have to have the acclaim. All I could think was, 'When can I get home to the children? When can I get home to my own bed? When can I get home and cook a dinner for some friends and be normal?' I was constantly trying to find my ground, my middle earth, so to speak. Now I prefer doing concerts. I can do a concert and just go home."

Of course, it took titanic ambition for Kiri Te Kanawa to leave home in the first place. The out-of-wedlock child of a Maori father and an Anglo-Saxon mother, adopted in infancy by another Maori man and another Anglo-Saxon woman, she rose to become New Zealand's biggest music celebrity in the latter-1960s - a twentysomething, semi-classical pop-singing phenom relentlessly pushed into show business by her adoptive mother.

"The beginning of my career was more than unconventional," she acknowledges. "It was strange. I was always geared to sing, and classical music at that, but when I came to England to study at the London Opera Centre, in 1966, I'd never sung opera in a full production. How did opera enter into my life in New Zealand? It was unobtainable, so I wanted it. We had a local opera company,

Arabella at the Met, 1994



As Vanessa, at Washington National Opera, in 2002
(<http://www.operanews.org/uploaded/image/article/kiri3.jpg>)

As Vanessa, at Washington National Opera, in 2002

and I used to go and be absolutely fascinated by the costumes. I never got exposed to the actual music, though - not 'til London. I'd never even heard an opera recording. My family didn't play opera around the house. My mum played piano, and I sang with her, but it was mostly show tunes. I'd studied a lot, but in reality I came to London with not very much - no proper operatic training at all, no languages. I look at myself sometimes and think, 'Oh, my God, I came over here with absolutely nothing. All these songs in my head and some potential.' It's so hit-and-miss, isn't it?"

Her rise, of course, was meteoric - an opera unto itself, really. By 1971, she was on her way to Covent Garden, cast as Mozart's Countess by Colin Davis, in his inaugural production as the Royal Opera's new artistic director, *Le Nozze di Figaro*. "Colin took a chance," she remembers. "Out of the blue, he decided I should star as the Countess. And I took it. I've always wanted to write a book called *I've Never Missed a Green Light*. I don't believe that I have ever missed an opportunity. I took a lot of good opportunities and ran with them."

To be sure, bounteous natural gifts didn't hurt either. Right from the beginning, Te Kanawa possessed a lustrous soprano voice and exotic physical beauty. Still, she was never an opera natural. Her early studies were arduous, with frequent onstage losses of concentration. What she did have in abundance, though, was a fiercely competitive spirit.

"I was sitting in the Covent Garden canteen with two colleagues just after I was cast in *Figaro*, and one of them said, 'You! Singing the Countess in *Figaro*. How bloody ridiculous!' That was my intro to the Covent Garden canteen. And I thought, well, I'm not going to sit with *those* people again. I'm going to run out of this room and learn that bloody part. I was only twenty-seven at the time. It was a heavy responsibility. I don't think I had the maturity at all. But don't tell anybody that."

In time, she mastered many of opera's most glamorous soprano roles, from Mozart's Donna Elvira in *Don Giovanni*, Pamina in *Die Zauberflöte* and Fiordiligi in *Così Fan Tutte* to the Marschallin in Richard Strauss's *Der Rosenkavalier*, Marguerite in Gounod's *Faust*, and a good number of Verdi's juiciest heroines - Elisabetta (*Don Carlo*), Amelia (*Simon Boccanegra*) and Desdemona (*Otello*). She also grappled with Mimì in Puccini's *La Bohème* and Violetta in Verdi's *La Traviata*.

"The sheer madness of Elvira appealed to me most," she reflects now, with a wry smile. "She and the Countess were probably my favorites. Once, playing Elvira in Paris, I got so carried away, I came on at the wrong place. My Don Giovanni, Ruggiero Raimondi, just looked at me. And I thought, 'Wrong! Wrong! I'm wrong, aren't I? I don't care!' And I just kept on walking - right through, straight across. Oh, well. At least nobody died."

Te Kanawa seems to take all manner of stage crises in stride, at least in retrospect. "I was singing *Bohème* with Plácido, and his pants came off. He was going through one of his weightier periods, not one of his thin periods, and the pants just split. Finally, he stepped out of them offstage, wrapped his coat around his waist and went on. Plácido was a great colleague. Of the three tenors, I think, he was the best, though I always loved Pavarotti - the sheer quality of his voice. But Plácido could do it all. And he was very kind - once you got him to the theater, that is. Plácido was always *delayed*. 'When is he coming?!' 'Oh. Tomorrow ... no! We just got a call, not until the

following day.' And we'd be nearing dress rehearsal. Oh, dear."

Kiri Te Kanawa's stardom transcended the opera world beginning in 1981, when she sang at the royal wedding of Charles and Diana in St. Paul's Cathedral before one of the largest live television audiences for any singer in history (estimated at 750 million). The following year, she was made a Dame Commander of the British Empire. The two events worked wonders for her recording career, boosting the name "Te Kanawa" onto the crossover charts with a variety of projects, including albums of Kern, Gershwin, Porter and Berlin, plus the world premiere of Paul McCartney's *Liverpool Oratorio*. "Those were mainly record-company choices," she shrugs now, dismissively. "They thought albums of standards would sell. It wasn't a dying wish of mine to do any of them, no."

In fact, even as the Te Kanawa pop-cultural quotient climbed, opera remained her calling card. She offered herself up as opera's premium diva, and opera, in turn, cosseted her, giving her a home away from home. "You either had a home to go to or you didn't," she observes. "It wasn't the money. It was never the money. It was how welcome you were by the individual opera houses. Management either did or didn't make you welcome, and those places that didn't, you stayed away from. San Francisco always was wonderful - when my friend Sally Billingham ran things, there was this great personal touch. They were so giving, and even after she left, that has remained so. I never, ever felt Chicago was warm and giving. They think they are, but they're not. I always liked the Met, particularly after Sally came over. There was something about the Met, as big as it was, that *I* enjoyed. I can't speak for anybody else. Paris, at one stage, was excellent. Covent Garden, at one stage, early in my career, was excellent. Covent Garden was like a stable full of fledglings, everyone so eager to do their best - not necessarily be better than everyone but just be jolly good. Now, it's all changed there, and at the Met and in Paris, too.

"I think I can say that I never got a bad conductor," the diva suddenly announces, beaming with an ingenuousness that cries out for substantiation. "I've actually worked with relatively few throughout my career. There were just fewer then, it seemed, and regardless of their approach, there was always a way to negotiate. I find that conductors today seem more concerned with how fast they can make the orchestra go, or how precious they can be with certain phrasing. Obviously they think they've got command, but if you listen, they really don't. More often than not, I'd see the concertmaster actually run most of the opera. 'Where's the conductor?' Uhp! Just watch the concertmaster and we're off. The concertmaster would look up at me when I was feeling a bit lost and nod, 'Don't worry. I'm with you. It's O.K. We're together.' And I'd know who was *really* in charge."

The gleaming Te Kanawa smile grows devilish. "There's a huge insecurity in conductors. I'm allowed to say that now, because I'm out of it. No fear. Conductors are the most insecure men in the orchestra. They have to enforce their personality to control that mass of sixty, eighty players and keep that beat. It's terrifying. I mean, I've worked with the best of them, and I can assure you, they are all ... worried. About what? About keeping it all together."

Thoughts about "keeping it all together" provoke an inescapable, though jarring, segue. In 1997, Te Kanawa's thirty-year marriage to Desmond Park ended very publicly in divorce. Park had been

the central figure in Te Kanawa's private life almost from the moment she first landed in London, and the controlling figure in her professional life, as her manager since the 1980s.

"My marriage?" she snaps, as the subject surfaces. "Just say, it ended. What ended it? I don't know. He didn't want to do what I wanted to do anymore. I wanted to continue singing. He didn't want me to. He was tired of it. I think Des felt this way for a long time, and I just didn't notice," she allows, stoically sidestepping the subject of her husband's at-the-time widely publicized extra-marital affairs. "His part of the conversation essentially ran, 'I don't want you to sing anymore. I want to go back to Australia.' And that was it. It was devastating, because I had two young children who loved him, and I didn't want them to lose their father."

She stares off at the expansive hotel suite for a moment. "Rejection is the terrible thing in adoption. Both my children are adopted. Rejection is a major part of all our problems. I didn't want them to feel rejected. And they're alright now, they're fine. They love Des. That's the most important thing. And they love me. They used to often cry, 'You were never there, mum.' Now that they're older, they tell me, 'Oh, we're so sorry we said that.' And I tell them, no, you have to say it, if you felt it. I was there as much as I could be. When I wasn't, my husband always tried to be.

"Are they musical?" she laughs. "My kids? No. But they love music. I see in them sometimes exactly what I feel myself."

And what does that mean exactly?

"Just the sensitivities."

BARRY SINGER *is the author of* *Ever After: The Last Years of Musical Theater and Beyond* (*Applause Books*).

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