

STAGE

JANE CORNWELL

A bold and beautiful voice

Bryn Terfel brings his bass-baritone to Australia once again

During one memorable week in mid-September, Welsh opera star Bryn Terfel went from performing for King Charles III and UK Prime Minister Andy Burnham at a small church in the Scottish Highlands to singing in a cathedral at the North Wales International Music Festival, where his parents sat, self-conscious VIP guests, in the front row. Somewhere between a Mozart aria and a traditional Welsh song, it hit him.

"I'm looking at my mum and dad, who always like to be in the back, and it was so beautiful to see them there," he tells Culture a week later, speaking with a gentle singsong accent. "It put me in the mindset of, 'Wow, who dropped this bucket of talent on my head?'"

He's speaking from his dressing room in Oxfordshire, where he is rehearsing for his final UK-staged performances as the villainous, black boot-wearing Baron Scarpia in Puccini's *Tosca*, the debut production of Oxford International Opera – a newly launched company of which Terfel is artistic director. It's his final European engagement before departing for a major tour of Australia.

This will be Terfel's seventh visit to our shores. He has mostly performed recitals here, making this his second appearance with orchestras. His acclaimed bass-baritone has

inevitably evolved since the virile power that blew everyone's hair back at his 1999 debut with Opera Australia. Since that youthful rendition of Verdi's *Falstaff* – one of his signature roles – at the Sydney Opera House, "the Bryn of today has thousands of performances under his belt. The emotion still comes flooding through, especially when I sing in Welsh."

At 60, he is a Grammy winner, British knight and a father of five, including two children with his second wife and long-time collaborator, Welsh-born harpist Hannah Stone, with whom he'll perform in a Sydney recital. He will also sing the title role in Mendelssohn's *Elijah* under Sydney Symphony chief conductor Simone Young, and perform Vaughan Williams' *Songs of Travel* with the Adelaide Symphony Orchestra.

To close out the Melbourne Symphony Orchestra's Brahms Festival with conductor Jaime Martin, Terfel will headline its Spring Gala, opening the concert with spirituals and Welsh songs before performing *Ein Deutsches Requiem* (A German Requiem), Brahms' longest composition. Masterclasses in Sydney and Melbourne will round out his stay.

"I have special memories of Australia," he says, "starting off with that first *Falstaff* with Simone Young conducting. It was a great vehicle for the rest of my *Falstaff* career, and I loved everything Simone put on the table musically as I built the character. She is passionate about the music. I have subsequently sung many concerts with her."

The dream of every performer, he adds, is to find a conductor who asks to work with you again. Having specialised in

intense, heavyweight roles – particularly the operas of Mozart, Verdi and Wagner – over his decades-long career, Terfel has forged enduring artistic relationships with some of the world's most legendary conductors: Antonio Pappano at Covent Garden; great Australian conductor Charles Mackerras; A-listers Riccardo Muti and Claudio Abbado, and; Georg Solti, who helped to launch him on the global stage.

"I was terrified of Sir Georg," he says cheerfully. "I'd sung in an *eisteddfod* (a Welsh festival of music and poetry) in 1988 that was adjudicated by Sir Geraint Evans, one of my Welsh musical heroes. He rang Solti and asked him to listen to this young Welsh singer, and I went up to Swiss Cottage in London, to this room filled with Grammys and Emmys, the sort of thing you strive for, and sang him a couple of arias. He gave me the role of the gardener in *The Marriage of Figaro*, and people noticed."

When he fumbled a recitative in rehearsals, Solti promptly told him to learn it for the next day or be replaced. "It is good to be terrified," Terfel says. "It puts you on the balls of your feet. When you think of the other singers they've conducted" – he widens his eyes – "when you were still a kid driving a Massey Ferguson tractor on a farm."

Terfel grew up, the younger of two brothers, on a remote sheep farm in Pant Glas, North Wales, in a house filled with music. His parents and grandparents sang in choirs. The young Bryn, a natural show-off, would sing Elvis Presley songs for fun, enter *eisteddfod* competitions on weekends and



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