

Dame Kiri Te Kanawa: The voice is less than perfect but the singer still shines

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Reviewer rating:

Joan Sutherland Theatre, May 20

Young sopranos can breathe easy. They don't need to grease the stairs. Dame Kiri Te Kanawa is finally beginning to sound slightly less than perfect. She is no longer able to meet the impossible standards of beauty which she once brought to operatic roles such as the Countess Almaviva or Liu. Her pitch is ever so slightly under at times, her colouratura is fuzzy around the edges, and while she still has astounding breath control, there is not so much of it.

That said, I doubt any other 70-year-old opera singer could do what she did on Tuesday night. She not only sold out the 1500-seater Opera Theatre, including all the standing room. She also filled the cavernous auditorium with her clear, unamplified voice and radiant charisma, leaving the audience howling for more.

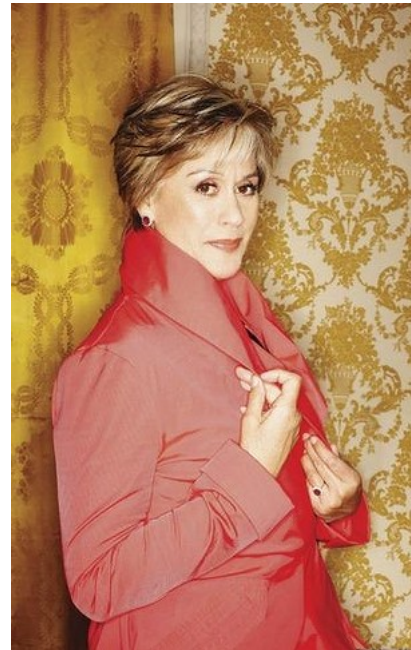
Their response was not simply diva worship: Dame Kiri is still a magnificent musician, with an unrivalled technique and the ability to deliver a fiendishly difficult vocal line and make it sound easy. She makes various wise choices, avoiding cliches, introducing the audience to some off-the-beaten-track repertoire, and judiciously ducking some high notes and sustained phrases in the operatic repertoire. She is at her best in the second half: her performance of Canteloube's *Bailero* is as achingly lovely as ever and she floats a high pianissimo like a boss.

As with her previous concert tour, she finishes with Jake Heggie's setting of the final monologue from Terrence McNally's *Master Class*. It could have been written for Dame Kiri. Her stage presence changes as she performs, taking on a character so you are in no doubt that it is not her, personally, we are talking about, but the words ring true, nevertheless.

"The sun will not fall down from the sky if there are no more Traviatas. The world can and will go on without us, but I have to think that we have made this world a better place. That we have left it richer, wiser than had we not chosen the way of art."

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Dame Kiri Te Kanawa. Photo: Supplied

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