MEET THE MAESTRO
Natalie Murray Beale

A chance opportunity attracted the Australia-born conductor to London – and she's never looked back. **Toby Deller** finds out more

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▲ Confident communicator: Natalie Murray Beale

It was by chance that Australia-born conductor Natalie Murray Beale found herself living in London. 'I always thought I would go to Italy because I was studying Italian and I spent a summer in Siena doing music and language and I thought: that's the place for me.

'Then the next year, one of the professors from the Guildhall who had heard me play called me up and said, "There's a postgrad position for a pianist repetiteur: would you like it? You need to be here in three weeks." So I came over, and actually the level of teaching was extraordinary.'

She went straight to the National Opera Studio as a repetiteur in 2002, and then took up a post on the music staff at Welsh National Opera. It was there that the idea of moving into conducting proper took hold.

'I started playing orchestral music and reading full scores, and realised that after that I didn't want to go back to only two lines,' she laughs. 'But there was another thing: doing that job allowed you to explore the music fully but it didn't give me direct contact with the group of musicians. Then in 2007 I received a scholarship from the London Symphony Chorus and started working as their guest director. So I suddenly had over 100 singers to work with. I felt I could make more of a difference and that my skill was in that kind of communication.'

That led her to seek technical guidance from Jorma Panula while building up experience as an assistant conductor, particularly in France at the Théâtre des Champs-Elysées and Aix Festival. She also began her association with Independent Opera, the mentoring programme based at Sadler's Wells, initially as artistic advisor. With Murray Beale now its creative director, its plans include a commission, to be performed in 2019, of a choral work by Joby Talbot prompted by the V&A Museum's acquisition of Queen Victoria's coronet and marking her bicentenary.

Murray Beale has herself benefited from similar support schemes, notably the Women's Conducting Institute at Dallas Opera, where she was an inaugural fellow in 2015, and a BBC Performing Arts Fund fellowship, awarded the same year. 'Any initiative for helping artists reach the next level is a good thing and so that's why when I saw this I was interested,' she says of the Dallas residency. 'And it was in America, which I thought was really interesting for me. There was a practical side in terms of looking at skills and working with their orchestra and singers. But there was a massive emphasis put on advice about the industry itself and progressing in it. That's a thing that isn't really discussed very often at all.'

The BBC award identified Esa-Pekka Salonen as a potential mentor for her. 'We met, we got on really well, and over the past two years I have intermittently worked as his assistant. One was for the Philharmonia's Stravinsky project at the Royal Festival Hall, another at the Paris Opera for *Bluebeard's Castle*, *La voix humaine* and *Totenhaus*. That's been fantastic; working with him at that level has made me realise that's the level I can hit, and it keeps me on my game.'

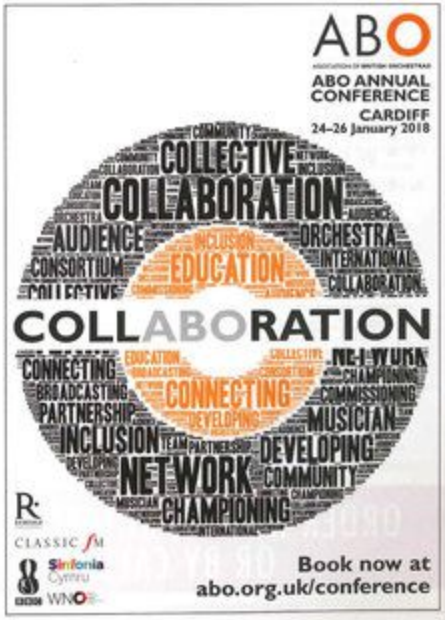
She points to her recent work conducting the European staged premiere of John Adams's *The Gospel According to the Other Mary* at Theater Bonn in 2017 as an example of having reached a new level in her own right.

'Technically it's like having to conduct the *Rite of Spring* mixed with Strauss. That technical challenge was a really important experience for me, but you've got to surpass that and make it a musical one. John's music is so musical, it's so well crafted, it's so well balanced that actually you have to go much further than the technical demands: you have to be human, it has to be lyrical, it has to have shape, it has to have life.'

If she had not planned to move to the UK, it was also chance that got her into playing the piano in the first place: there was only a piano teacher teaching music where she grew up, nor was there much of a family history of music.

'I was the only musician, but my cousin is the poet Les Murray. So in my family there was this amazing creative person. [His poetry] is a companion for me because he writes so clearly about my family and life in Australia and the specific challenges.'

She recalls an occasion when they met up, shortly after she moved to the UK, while he was at a speaking engagement. 'He said that my grandfather was a very good violinist – Scottish, self-taught. No one had told me that before. It was nice, particularly when very much alone in a new country, to hear such things.'

BIOGRAPHY

- **1975** Born Australia
- **2001** Graduates as a pianist from the Guildhall School of Music & Drama
- **2003-4** Music staff position at Welsh National Opera
- **2008-10** Guest conductor, London Symphony Chorus
- **2015** Awarded BBC Performing Arts Fund fellowship
- **2015** Residency at Dallas Opera Women's Conducting Institute
- **2017** Conducts European premiere of *The Gospel According to the Other Mary*
- **2017** Appointed creative director, Independent Opera