

DECLASSIFY

Episode 11: Staging Agency

Guest: Megan Steller

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SUMMARY

For this episode of Declassify we are joined by one of the most passionate people I know, Megan Steller. Megan is an artist manager, writer, speaker, and producer based in Melbourne. She is passionate about working with emerging artists and seasoned performers alike to help create fulfilling, diverse and creatively empowering careers in the classical music sector. As an artist manager, Megan has worked at Intermusica (UK) and Patrick Togher Artists' Management (AUS). As a journalist, she has been published in Limelight Magazine, The Age, and The Music, and has worked in a freelance capacity for Melbourne Recital Centre, Melbourne Conservatorium of Music, Musica Viva, Melbourne Youth Orchestras, and Orchestra Victoria. With such an incredibly broad range of skills and experiences, this episode is all about the significance of community and resource-sharing across the classical music industry, the sometimes-unknown world of being an artist manager (or agent) and us asking, what about opera?

TRANSCRIPT

VP: Hello hello! Welcome to another episode of Declassify, in fact, it's already the second-last one for this year. I'm so excited for our guest today so I'm just going to jump straight into it because I'm joined by one of the most passionate people I know and I'm sure some of you out there know, Megan Steller. Megan is an artist manager, writer, speaker, and producer based in Melbourne. She is passionate about working with emerging artists and seasoned performers alike to help create fulfilling, diverse and creatively empowering careers in the classical music sector. As an artist manager, Megan has worked at Intermusica (UK) and Patrick Togher Artists' Management (AUS). As a journalist, she has been published in Limelight Magazine, The Age, and The Music – and notably starting something that had a great impact on my undergrad self – Rehearsal Magazine - as well as working with so many other organisations that I know I'll get it wrong. So welcome onboard Megan!

Megan Steller (MS): Thank you! How are you?

VP: Oh you're welcome! As my intro suggests, I can't even begin to list all the groups you've worked with or started up yourself. I really have to ask, what was it that drew you into this complex, vibrant world of classical music?

MS: Absolutely. It's a bit curly, I guess. When I think about it laid out. I started playing piano when I was really little, about 4, and I was really bad. And my dad was taking me, he's the musician of the family, and we got to this point where I wasn't doing well and the teacher said, "This might not be for her," so my mum the accountant stepped in and said "I'm taking over now and I'll take you to lessons now," and it kicked off from then. And then I played pretty solidly from then until 5 years ago, so I went to university and played piano and I was still pretty bad then to be perfectly honest, and I persisted quite hard and I was really, really passionate about music and being part of the industry. I started exploring opera in 2nd year Uni and got really, really invested in that. I marched up to the repetiteur at Uni who ran the Opera Ensemble and said 'I want to be a part of it. You don't have a pianist and I could be that pianist.' And I think she was probably shocked and went 'ok,' but luckily, I didn't have to audition otherwise it may not have gone so well. But I basically spent the rest of my time at university playing with singers and immersing myself into the repertoire of Opera, and kind of around the

same time, I suppose, I started to discover Opera, I started really wanting to write and some of that stemmed from needing to figure out a back=up plan, I was becoming very aware that playing was not for me – for many reasons, I suppose – serious performance anxiety, inability to sit at the keyboard long enough to practice efficiently – and so writing was something I was always interested in. I've always been a book lover, and I e-mailed Limelight and asked for an internship and got one which was so fortunate, I was extremely lucky, and I worked with Maxim Boon, who has since become a colleague and friend and I wrote MUSE for him for the website for about 6 months, and that kind of lead to be getting a job in Communications at the Opera Trust just out of Uni, which was, again, really, really lucky. And that was the beginning of my admin career and it's kind of gone from there.

VP: And then was there something when you were working at the Opera Trust that compelled you to start your own publication, *Rehearsal Magazine*?

MS: I think I started Rehearsal before I started at Melba, you might have to fact check me, but I'm sure Rehearsal came first. It was just a fabulous space for me to just throw ideas around, throw the spaghetti at the walls and see what sticks. It was supposed to be a blog that I could just write my feelings on and have a few friends join me and talk about their own experiences and it grew in a way that I really didn't expect, and it was just really exciting. And I think the editing experience I got from there, from running Rehearsal Magazine, that really helped with Melba where I was producing the magazine – they do a really wonderful broadsheet magazine, 12 pages front-and-back and it's big because it's a broadsheet – and that's a lot of space to fill.

VP: I think remember submitting something into Rehearsal back when it was first starting where I submitted a question and you had a panel of people from the industry answer, I thought that was really cool, particularly for young musicians to engage through the platform you created.

MS: Yeah, it seemed really important and I think it is still really important. That idea of being to access knowledge and share resources with people who've done it or who are slightly further ahead than you, or years and years or decades further than you in career building. I don't think there's enough of that and that was my first attempt at trying to bring people together in that way.

VP: I think it did work because before – I was in my undergrad when Rehearsal became a thing – and I remember feeling like the community as a whole wasn't that connected, particularly between states because it felt like a really defined community set in Sydney or Melbourne et cetera, but because of Rehearsal I felt like there was an avenue to talk to people working down in Melbourne and a little bit further. And that seemed for someone who was just starting out in the first and second year at a Conservatorium as something that was inaccessible until you had provided that, so Thank you.

MS: Oh wow, that's so lovely and so heartening. It was something that was a really massive part of my life that I'm proud of and want to get back to, and it's one of those things where work gets in the way and life gets in the way and it sort of fell to the bottom of the pile. It definitely solidified my values and it made me realise, well, it made me realise how much I need and value community in any facet of life, but especially in the arts which can feel so fragmented, and continues to be fragmented by a whole suite of things, right now, the virus that has... really it's taken a lot of inbuilt community, rehearsals, periods, and just the feeling of family in a space. And I think that's what people are really craving right now, other than missing the fact that they can't be on stage, the loss of community is one of the hardest things to deal with right now and Rehearsal, and the process behind building it taught me it in a much more solid way.

VP: That's really beautiful. Because it's true, musicians make music together. Even if you're a soloist you're going to be making music (generally) with a group of people.

MS: Or you're making music for a group of people. *It's bodies in a room that make the experience what we all love, on every kind of, whenever you sit – backstage or you do the lighting or the sound – it's being part of that sitting in the dark and feeling something, to borrow that phrase. There's something, even if you are alone on stage, you're not alone. And in some ways, Zoom allows us a little bit of that. If you put your performance in your lounge on Facebook or Youtube. We are able to create community on-line but it's never going to feel the same. There's something about the feeling of sitting in a crowd, and as you know, I haven't been on stage for a very long time, I've never felt comfortable on stage but I miss sitting in the hall or, hall is not the right word, but I miss sitting anywhere in a room full of people and experiencing something together.*

VP: Yes, it's very different when you're alone experiencing a concert at home in your pyjamas. Somehow, I feel rude, even though I'm totally comfortable, I feel like I'm being disrespectful that I'm just in my bed watching these musicians livestream a performance...

MS: And they're in a tux [laughs]

VP: Yes! And they're all in proper blacks.

MS: Yeah, it's weird isn't it. *I think that's part of something we'll be grappling with for a long-time now, because of everything that's happened, but also because of accessibility. I think this has opened up the opportunity to make performances accessible to larger groups of people, and within that context, building experiences that aren't pretending to be live when they're not live. We're not quite there yet but it's beginning to be something that's on people's minds, and something I'm really interested in, just from an audience perspective. I'm so excited to see what's going to happen in our space because I think there is real value in being able to watch something from your home, wherever you may be, it'll be interesting to see what comes of this.*

VP: It does increase the accessibility, as you say, you worry a little bit less about being able to make it to a physical venue, if it's a big concert hall it'll always be in the city, Or, you know, sometimes just being able to afford a ticket.

MS: Absolutely. I think there are so many things that are prohibitive about putting on a performance of any sort, and opera more than many because it is expensive and it does require, or the way we think about it in many contexts, it requires – there are real parameters about what it means to put on an opera, that means that there are so many people excluding without realising it or purposefully doing it from that experience. I do think that there is real value in carrying on exploring the possibilities of remote performances, I guess, well into the future when we can go back to full capacity to a theatre.

VP: I think it'll be so valuable. And now, it'll give people time to think about how to approach these different aspects of music and sharing experiences, so I hope that digital platforms kind of become a permanent thing. They have, in the sense that, Met Opera has that huge on-line archive that people can access with subscription services or big orchestras like the Berlin

Philharmonic, so I think it's beginning to become part of the culture – for example, Melbourne has its own Digital Concert Hall.

MS: Yeah, it is. *I think both experiences can work side-by-side the digital experience and the in-person live experience and I think that's a big question of how can both exist together without either one taking over, you know, from the art. That's a really tricky question because you don't want to lose audiences from a live perspective to a digital experience, but in the same token you don't want to have handed people who can't get into a theatre generally – this extraordinary artistic experience – to suddenly take that away, because all of us who have the privilege who can get into those spaces can again. It's something I've been thinking about a lot, and there are probably people smarter than me who even know the answers, but it is something that's really interesting and worth talking about. There's a really good dialogue to be had there.*

VP: Definitely. So, kind of tying all of this together and all of your experience on and backstage from Rehearsal through to your love of Opera, how did that lead to you becoming an agent both in Australian and here in the UK for the world of opera?

MS: It's again a little curly. Everything has been curly in my very short time as a professional something in the sector, whatever that is I haven't really figured that out. From Melba, that's where I can start things off, from there I got a job in administration for Orchestra Victoria who are also connected to opera in a really significant way as they're Melbourne's, well Victoria's, collaborator with Opera Australia. So that was a really exciting opportunity to get into the theatre and experience some of that behind the scenes. I'd never walked through the art centre and seen where the Banda performed from before I worked for Orchestra Victoria, because then you see all the odd bits and bobs that make the set that is extraordinary from the Front-of-House. These incredible people who work behind the scenes building this world, and it all starts out as planks and all kinds of bizarre contraptions, so when you walk through that stage darkened at the back of the stage, it was a really extraordinary experience and there was something magical about that. I'm a romantic so I loved that and that was really wonderful, I got a lot out of that, and it taught me lots of useful administration skills... scheduling, how to use excel, how to be on time and all those things that you don't know until you have to do it, so that was really wonderful.

While I was on education tour with OV, I got a call from Patrick Togher – the wonderful artist manager – and he said, I've put a job ad up on Facebook and I'd like you to think about it. And I thought about it for 2 minutes probably and then I decided I'd say yes. I think I drew it out and played a bit hard to get, but I knew that it was a really wonderful offer and went up to Sydney to meet him and to figure out what it meant to be an artist manager because it wasn't something I had considered at all. And then I dove in head-first and a really fabulous year, it was hard and really hard. There are a lot of things about being an artist manager that you don't know until you start and you don't know how to solve problems until you're thrust into them and you have to figure your way out, it's a bit of a puzzle and it is quite tricky, and you have to be very calm in situations that would usually drive you a bit wild. So, it teaches you a lot of lessons very quickly and certainly did for me. I did that for a year and a half, and happened to go to the UK on holiday, and met with the wonderful people at *Intermusica*, and they offered me a job, so I moved over to the UK quite quickly which was also never part of the plan and turned out to be a really exciting part of the plan and I was there for 4 months before I came home because of coronavirus.

VP: Oh dear. It's rather depressing how this has put a stop on everything, but I suppose it's a great equaliser to put a stop on every single person's plans.

MS: Absolutely. And lots of lessons learnt out of... it's one of those things, you can't expect everything to go how you want it or how you plan it to go. I certainly learnt it the hard way this year, being resilient and bouncing back is what proves your strength and how well you will be in the future, and it took me quite a long time this time round. I've had a lot of... I've failed a lot, but this felt hard because you can't point at yourself and say 'Aha, you did this!' you know, which is easier, I think. And certainly, been easier for me and say 'that was you, so fix it.' Much easier! But this time it was, wrong place, wrong time, you're in this with absolutely everybody else so puzzle your way out.

VP: That's an excellent message for people to hear. We're all getting fatigued and somewhat disheartened, but we are in it with everybody. I should ask, with both the agencies, in Australia and the UK, were you working predominantly with opera in terms of the artists you were representing?

MS: Yes. Australia, I was working with some instrumentalist and some conductors as well and I suppose that's the difference between the two with how the industry works more generally. There are less agents in Australia which makes the work broader, which is fantastic, I really missed working with conductors when I moved to the UK. And then in the UK, it's more segmented, they're just in charge of *x*, *y*, *z*, and I moved into the vocal and opera division of Intermusica, and everything in my portfolio was very focused on singers.

VP: I do have to ask this because there are people listening who don't actually realise that in the classical music world, we have agents, and it's something we associate with modelling, or acting, or the film industry. So what does a classical music agent do?

MS: Good question! It varies I think depending on what the artist needs. Predominately it's the things you would expect, some contract negotiation, looking after the financial side of things and the business administrative sides of things is the easiest way to explain it. Or may have variations on this, but I guess a day looks like managing a diary so making sure the artist knows where they need to be, how they need to get there, all of the train tickets and the plane tickets and the scheduling, so I'm really making sure that I am equipping the artist as best as I possibly can with what they need for a project. Of course, opera contracts are slightly different to an instrumentalist or a conductor's performance, because they're much longer. You have a much longer rehearsal and performance period, and they will be huge like filming a television pilot. You might have a 2-week rehearsal and then performances might stretch over a month. And that's completely different from a violin soloist who turns up the day before, has 2 calls in a day, a soundcheck the day after and then performs, and that's one project over.

So, a bit of difference in terms of managing a diary. Working with a conductor who does a bit of a mix, symphonic, opera and a bit of other additional things. The diary looks a bit trickier, because there are things that overlap, often more flights and trains and buses, and the logistics are a bit more challenging. When it's a singer, it's about getting them to the place that they need to be and they stay there for 2-months and you go, "I'll go work on something else." A lot of diary management and scheduling, and then the contract side of things is a big and challenging part for freelancers, and for all artists, you're up against a lot when you read a contract, when you negotiate a contract. There are lots of different factors you need to think about, not least the financial side of things, and what it means for a company to be offering a certain dollar amount to take in and consider when you're negotiating a contract. It feels more challenging,

I suppose, to be a freelance artist so that's something an agent can do and alleviate. And then there's the total side of things, the more artistic side of things, it really depends on the artists specifically, but in opera there are lots of things that agents do with assisting with future repertoire choices, and the person doing the singing has an instrument inside them and they know best. I really believe that, and I always defer back to the artist and how they feel and whether they feel comfortable in a role or singing in a certain way, or participating in a certain production. But there are things, you learn about, repertoire I suppose, to assist them like asking them we're here now, where do you want to be in 5 or 10 years, what are the steps we can be taking to get you singing Wagner in a decade, or that's a random example. Or there are things you can do and steps you can take. It's about getting all the puzzle pieces I suppose.

INTERMISSION I

VP: For our first intermission, is a work chosen by Megan and is performed by wonderful Australian singer, song-writer and composer Kate Miller-Heidke and composer Iain Grandage. This is an excerpt the acoustic version of *Where?* From the opera *The Rabbits*, by Miller-Heidke, Grandage and Lally Katz.

Follows a 4-minute excerpt from Where?

VP: That's really interesting that you have a say, a big say, in the repertoire choice. I've always wondered how that works

MS: Yeah, definitely. I think it's really important. It's something I'm still at the beginning of my career as a manager and I have a really good understanding of repertoire, but you constantly have to be learning. And I'm constantly upskilling, listening to recordings and using the Wikipedia pages to figure out who sings what, what kind of voice is it? What colour is it/ Who sang in the original cast? And what as their trajectory? And doing all of this kind of personal development work, and it just gives you this really nice overview where you can say, maybe this might work for this person. There's no one path because if there is one path, then I would be redundant. And then casting directors would be redundant, because

you'd know exactly who would be able to sing this at this point. Because that's not the case, it makes the job really fun.

VP: Yeah, and then there's diversity with each of the artists you get to work with and their different career paths, and so I've always wondered. How does the casting side of things work in Opera? Like a lot of other things, we're similarly accustomed to seeing really large names so I often wonder how young people get casted into new roles, particularly with bigger companies.

MS: Yeah, it's really tricky to be perfectly honest. It's really quickly. And again, there's no prescription. A lot of it comes down to the casting director or the artistic director, and that's one of the huge challenges of being a freelance singer, because you're one person and you're going up against the whim of another. You're very aware of panels and things, from all kinds of perspectives... not just auditioning but sending in a grant application. That person on the other side might adore your work but, I don't know, got their hand caught in the car window on their way in and now they're angry and they couldn't care less about what you do, doesn't matter how good you are. It's really tricky.

I guess there are ways of moving forward as a young artist that are very well known like auditioning and getting into a young artists program and there are lots of versions of young artist programs. There are really huge ones that feed into companies, like the Metropolitan Opera has a really huge program as do Royal Opera House in the UK, London, and they allow young artists stage time on what is a world-class stage. And there are small programs like in-house across Germany. Most have a young artist program and often people go over to Germany and sing as part of the young artists program and then become full-time singers there. You know, that's a path. Here in Australia there are young artist programs with the state companies. There is a young artist program at Opera Australia, but it's... it exists in principle but it's not necessarily, the progression is not that clear or as clear in Australia generally by virtue of the fact that there aren't as many stages as there are in Europe, which is a challenge for young singers, it really is. Ok, so that's one possibility, getting through young artist programs.

And the other is going down the competition route. And that's challenging across the board for all young performers, and it's not something I feel super passionately about to be

perfectly honest, but it is a good way of getting yourself known in the circuits because often the people who sit on the panel are the ones doing the hiring in companies, so it's a good way to get your face or your voice in front of some interesting people who might keep you in mind for future roles.

And the other way is doing the audition circuit, which is another challenge. It's hard to get auditions, and once you're in there it's hard to, because Opera is planned so far in advance, it's tricky to time it and you've got to time it quite well. A lot of singers go through choruses of companies, it's another way. It's one of those things where singers go, am I going to get stuck in a chorus? And sometimes the answer is, yes.

VP: Yes and it's difficult to shift from these spots or to avoid getting somewhat pigeon-holed. And as you said, there are very few stages and in general across the world, there are very few roles, and a few companies that can afford to have a rich environment that can even begin to support young people come up through this industry.

MS: Absolutely and part of it as well is the fact that, and we were going to come to this anyway, is the fact that so many of the operas that are put on are the same ones, year on year. And so they usually require very similar casts, year on year. So, if your voice isn't exactly what the person who sang it last year was, you know, there are real challenge around, fitting into a pre-existing mould in Opera which are similar across the board in many forms, but year, it's really prevalent in Opera. Because it's this old, old thing that we've been doing for bloody ages and some casting directors remember this recording from the 60s and they want everything to sound like that, you know. So, yeah, it's really challenging. And then you might have a really unusual voice – you might be a contralto or a countertenor – you know, voices that are extraordinary and so useable in the right opera, but that opera might never be put on. So you're up against a lot as a young singer, and you're up against a lot as an any age singer but it is hard to break through that the beginning. Really hard.

VP: And do you think that this idea of programming the same things, for example I would say the most common things are the Mozart, Puccini and the Verdi Operas are quite popular in general, do you think that narrows the public perception of what opera has to offer because we constantly recycle the same set of pieces? Which, I don't know if the musicians want to be performing this same set of pieces of music either over a 20-year period of their career.

MS: I think absolutely. *It stifles creativity, it puts singers in a box. And I mean there are some singers who would happily sing Violetta for the rest of their lives and that's completely fine, and there are some musicians who would happily play Beethoven 1 for the rest of their lives. That's fine and that's useful and great, but I think we shoot ourselves in our foot a little bit getting stuck in this cycle of, if we only do Puccini and Mozart every year, it means young singers are only being taught to sing Puccini and Mozart, and we feed this toxic -is the wrong word – but this really boring cycle of just creating the same thing over and over again. And telling ourselves that this is what audiences want to hear, and I think that's really want to hear.*

VP: And I don't think that's necessarily true that audiences want to hear that. [MS: No!]. Because for example Opera Australia for the first time in a decade, they commissioned that new work by Elena Kat-Chernin and they did really well in terms of ticket sales, lots of people wanted to see this new work.

MS: Absolutely, and that's a big problem and without wanting to speak out of turn to opera Australia. *This is tricky, they have a lot of boxes to tick but something that has become obvious recently is the fact that there is no – well, there may be a loyal fan-base but it's small – but so much of the ticket sales relied upon tourists coming in and it was the best thing ever to see Traviata on the harbour which is a fabulous experience, but you only want it once. And I think something that we can learn from is from smaller companies, is that if you take the audience with you on a journey and really look after a group of people, they'll go with you and I think that's going to be the real saving grace of our state companies, the fact that they have people who really want to turn up, who want to support the arts, who want to support the form and are willing to be taken on a journey. They want to hear something new, they want to experience something new. And so, Opera doesn't have to be this static artform, because it shouldn't be you see it once and you never one to see it again. I'm happy to see Carmen seven times but not if it's going to be the same. Do you know what I mean?*

VP: Yeah, definitely. Sometimes the staging is reused and they use the same costumes and I kind of understand why because the financial burden of making all of that is substantial. So, I know why, but when you see Carmen back to back in the same way over a 5-year period, it's a bit much.

MS: And it's Carmen doing the same thing back-to-back. It's just, I don't.... About, how long ago? Many 5 or 6 years ago, the Royal Opera House did this performance of Lucia de la Amore, and it kind of showed there's an extraordinary mad scene, whatever you think of opera or of this opera, you can't question how extraordinary it is to be in a theatre and to hear a singer who just totally nails that aria, there's nothing better than that. Take or leave the rest of it but wow, that moment is just amazing. It can be quite boring that opera, it's quite long and you can do it in a traditional setting, but in London, a female director flipped it and made it about Lucia herself which makes a lot of sense because Lucia is the title role, as many operas are, they're very much about the male perspective. But this director showed you Lucia's story all the way through and that's good operatic story-telling because it's taking something we know and can be a bit tired and isn't necessarily facing up to 21st century values and understandings, and if you put 2020 googles on Lucia right now, it's not passing any tests, but if you make it so that it does, you've suddenly got this living, breathing piece of theatre that makes sense right now, and that's the point right?

VP: Exactly, and in context with having a female director changing the perspectives of story-telling, it's quite topical. In Australia, they just commissioned a report headed by Cat Hope, Sally Blackwood and Liza Lim, all about female narratives in Opera and because we're in the habit of recycling the same works, we see the same narratives in regard to how women are treated and how their narratives are displayed, including some very recent, questionable costume design regarding people of colour on stage. Because Opera has made it acceptable for that to be put on stage, and they've created this sense of it being lavish and this experience that audiences want, but *I think if they keep persisting in that direction, there will be a point where they no longer feel relevant.*

MS: *Oh Absolutely! And that point was way back there – we passed that point 20 years ago. A lot of what has happened in Opera should never have happened and there's no excuse for it. And if you're struggling to see how to update an Opera, you're bad at your job or you need additional help. Call someone who is able to speak with empathy and eloquence on the topics you need help with. Like if you're a male director and you're struggling to see how this scene should work with a 2020 lens, call a women. Call a female director that you like or admire or know, or whatever, it doesn't matter. This kind of reminds me of what we were talking about before that resource sharing, it just isn't enough. I think that's a big failing of*

the sector, we feel very siloed within our productions or companies or whatever kind of setting we're in wherein fact it should be normal to jump on the phone, especially now, on zoom. Just talk to people, engage in dialogue, or put something else on.

VP: Yes, something different.

MS: Yes, I really struggle with this idea of Oh there's nothing we can do, and we do it how it as done when it first premiered in 1874.

VP: Well, UI don't think they can even do that because we don't know exactly what it would've been like in 1874.

MS: Exactly and we have amazing comfortable chairs now. And you know, we can put on stuff like the background is all digital, so why do you also put on something that is incredibly... if you can put a digital background on your opera, and you have that skill and that level of resource to do something as technologically skilled as that, then there's no excuse for perpetuating a problematic storyline or a problematic costume. Get with the program!

INTERMISSION II

VP: For our second intermission is another selection by Megan, this one being one of her favourites and is performed by opera extraordinaire Rhiannon Giddens. This piece, *Trees on the Mountains*, if from the opera *Susannah* composed by Carlisle Floyd.

Follows a 4-minute excerpt of Trees on the Mountains

VP: It's weird, it's like Operas are trying to maintain this idea of a lavish opera houses so I think they do want to uphold that image. But very recently, if you just take a quick look into the news, the companies that are suffering a lot in the arts and in classical music, due to the pandemic and likely post-pandemic, are the Met Opera and Opera Australia, unfortunately both of them letting their orchestra go which orchestras that are only orchestras haven't necessarily had to do yet, and they both need to sell property, and they're really struggling –

with the tourism – and struggling to maintain a large enough local audience because they're not in touch with them.

MS: It's heartbreaking – not because here's an institution we should protect until our dying breath – but for me personally (and I can only speak to myself) – is this idea that we won't learn from this experience. And we'll go back to, try to recuperate the money that we've lost and build back what was there rather than saying, what can we do differently? What can we do that's new? What can we do to shake things up? This is the problem with a lot of institutional places and people that are really imbedded in places that have massive government support, is the fact that it's more or less working, and so if it ain't broke, you know? But it is broke, but not in the financial sense, though it may be that too.

I think Opera needs a real shakeup because we're ready for something new and there are young people that value the form, and that want to see it break boundaries. We want to see new stuff and interesting people making work. I want to see people my age, composing and directing and performing – it's a big mind frame shift that is going to be slow but I really, really hope that it's on the path.

VP: I hope so too, because you mentioned 1874, those young composers were writing the operas we're still performing today. So, if they really do want to go back to the roots of traditional opera then that's definitely available as an option to work with local living people.

MS: Hilarious, that's so true. That's so true. Wouldn't it nice to have the composer in the room to say, that's weird, let's do that again. Extraordinary.

VP: I mean I have seen recently brand-new operas from Australian composers but the burden falls on really small companies, experimental groups or ensembles that get together for the commission and then disband.

MS: Totally, but more power to those companies. I'm so grateful for companies like Sydney Chamber Opera, I wish I could get up there more often to see what they're doing, because it's so important. And we take it for granted, I think. Somebody's gotta do it and it takes a lot for resources from those small companies to put something on at the scale that they put it on. I hope people will come out of this and support the local, and experimental and new works,

because they don't survive if we don't, and that's what we need. That's really what we need right now.

VP: I love them because they tell stories we don't expect, for example the last time I saw was Oscar and Lucinda by Elliot Gyger and he was there, but it was this great intricate Australian story and lots of people who weren't classical musicians who showed up. It was lot of people who had read the book 20-30 years ago for their HSC, it was Carriageworks and the tickets weren't that expensive I think \$35 which is super affordable to go see a brand-new opera, and there was this sense of amazement that you could actually meet the man who wrote the music afterwards.

MS: It's amazing that the vibe in the room was so electric, but it's kind of like when we're still firsts of people in leadership positions and you think, really? But that's the 107th – old news – it shouldn't be taken for granted that sometimes you go and hear something and the composer will be in the bar afterwards and you can go up and say “wow, that moved me.” It's something that I think theatre does really well, and you can feel there's something very electric about that. And that's what I want to see in opera. I want to cry and I want to belly laugh, and there are so few opportunities to do those sorts of things when you sit in the dark and fall asleep during the 4th massive aria, and I love Opera, and I'll go to Opera 6 times a week some weeks, and I crave that. I keep going because I want someone to just punch me in the gut and feel, make me feel anything to be honest. Just make me feel, I don't want to sit and just think about dinner later or taxes or doom, I want to feel.

VP: That's the real experience of art. Feel something. Even if you hate some of it and sometimes you feel rage, it's better than sometimes me going to an orchestral performance – and I love orchestral music – my mind wandering through Sibelius Symphony no. 3 because it's the 3rd time it's been programmed that year. And to make a bit of weird Segway back to agency, think what's really important and you mentioned it earlier is that you mentioned the word freelancer before. And I think a lot of people don't realise that by the point you actually have an agent, you're still a freelancer. And a lot of the time if you're a performing musician, the chances are is that you're always going to be a freelancer, and the people I know that aren't freelancers are full-time orchestral members. So, I thought it was so important that you mentioned them because freelancers are most classical musicians.

MS: There are a lot of things that are great about being a freelancer and there are a lot of really really tough things. And to again, press on resource-sharing. I think that is the most valuable thing to nurture, even if it's just within your set of friends and to be able to call someone and go 'I got this contract, can you read it?' or 'I need help with this part.' I think you need to be quite stoic, or this feeling that you have to be this unbreakable music, not necessarily your life outside of playing to never present as injured or never say, 'I'm not feeling it today,' because you feel slightly under the weather, and can I play this for you? *Think we get out of the "emerging phase"* once you leave that and become emerged, if you will, you suddenly don't need help, and the truth is that you'll always should be improving and it's ok to need help in every single facet of your professional life. And that's again a big mind-frame shift that I hope that that's something we can aim for, or at least I hope that with the change in attitudes around mental health in young people, that the current university students, my hope is that bleeds into every aspect in their professional lives. This is hard and you can't pretend otherwise, and without support, professionally or personally, it's almost impossible to make this kind of career work. I don't have a solution for that, I wish I did, but I guess, that people know that they can ask for help unless you ask someone super mean, you're not going to be met with derision or bugger off, I'm not going to help you. You're most likely going to be met with empathy and if you're not then, that says more about them than you. It should be normal to say, "I'm having a tough time, whatever this may be."

VP: Perhaps there's that desire in classical music to always, I mean I don't know what it means, but to be perfect all the time or at least present in that way so it's unrealistically demanding on individuals on and backstage. I'm so glad we're having this conversation though, also in light of this ongoing pandemic, I really hope, as you say, that companies and institutions take this time to think about what they mean and what they can be moving forwards. So, coming from all this experience and your observations, and in a sense being an agent has an important term kind mixed into it, that being agency, are you planning on doing something or developing something in response to this?

MS: Yeah, I think artists and artists management has huge responsibilities anyways, but particularly in light of what is happening in the world, there is an additional responsibility to work ethically and keep the future in mind, which I think most artist managers are thinking about anyways in an everyday sense but I think there's a real need right now to think about the longevity of the industry and how we're looking to the future, and ensuring that artists

won't just be working next week, next month or next year or 50 years into the future or 100 years down the track, and ensuring that we are the best possible outcome for our artists going forward, and for this industry as a whole going forward, and I think working in a really holistic way and looking at how does this artist fit into a broader sector that they belong to and not just thinking about this particular soprano needs x y and z to get to this international house, thinking more laterally and creatively. And thinking as person very much of being in an international scenes, not necessarily in the sense of this person has to be singing in Europe by 2024, but thinking about the responsibility we each individually have to the broader framework. I think that's become very apparent and important, because of the pandemic and because this past year has made us think about what the future looks like for all of us, artist managers included. If there is no Opera, then there is no work for opera agents. So what I am conscious right now about setting something up where I can work with creatives, artists, presenters and producers in a really expansively lateral way and so I've been working on setting up my own space, I suppose. I'm nervous about calling it an agency because I don't think that's what I want it to be labelled as. Maybe 5 years down the track. But what I am focusing on right now it to provide a space for artists to work with me at building their careers but also creating a space that is really a part of the fabric of the community both here in Australia and internationally. And so, I will be starting *Steller* which is that space for me, in the next couple of months.

VP: Oh my god. That is so, so super exciting! So what is the gist of this inclusive space for classical music that will be *Steller*?

MS: A lot of it has to do with where I am right now and coming off the back of the pandemic and moving back to Melbourne from London, and feeling a real pull to do something meaningful with my time and with my energy, and really taking the learnings that were cut short but were still significant from my time in Europe, and putting them into practice here in Australia, and also a real gratitude for a lot of people and artists that I work with, or have worked with in the past here. And wanting to do something that really honours how I feel about artists and Opera, and classical music more generally. I'd really like to create a space that is incredibly comfortable and special and accessible for people, artists and for presenters, and I want to build it on a real level of trust where people can call me and we can have open conversations about what's working and what's not and how I can help, and how the people in my network can help, and looking,, as I said, to a more holistic way of managing and

planning and of looking after people. And not, looking after in the sense of looking down on or that I am in some sort of mother role, but looking in the sense that the whole industry needs to be doing more of. We all need to be looking after each other right now, I really believe that, and the artists need to look after the people they rely on – the coaches, the agents, the people that help them with costuming, and the people that work backstage – this has been an increasingly challenging time and we're not at the point yet where we've figured out what the short-term or long-term future looks like. So, I think looking after one another is one of the things we can do, and is one of the things I feel as if I can hopefully offer to people whether they are long-term artists with me or just people in the industry. And I feel it as a responsibility that I want to take on to nurture my own personal practice, which involves a real sense of looking after the sector and the artists. I feel extremely passionate about both the livelihoods of artists in Australia and elsewhere, and the long-term survival of the industry, and I think this is a perfect opportunity for me to combine those two passions and make something worthwhile. At least, that is my hope. So that is the next phase, I hope, and I have no kind of greater plan than taking on a number of artists and really nurturing their careers and seeing where that leads down the track and I'm really excited by it and I think there's a lot of possibility there.

VP: And I'm really excited by it. Gosh, there's so much hope and energy from you, I can't wait to see everything that comes out of your work and the things we've spoken about today, although I'm sure we'll continue to do so. I just want to say thank you so much for taking the time and having this super cool conversation with me!

MS: It's such a pleasure. I love what you're doing with this podcast, I think it's an amazing platform and I value it highly and the conversations you have.

VP: No it's been my pleasure to talk to you. You've seen so much of the behind the scenes of this world, and I haven't really seen that other than going to see an Opera so it's been really great learning about it!

MS: Oh, it's a whirlwind. I'll take you back next time Vickie.

VP: Yay!! So once again, a massive, massive thank you to Megan for joining me today. As usual all the information about Megan's work - and do remember to keep an eye out for the

launch of Steller in the coming months – will be popped below. Megan has also been super kind in putting together an expansive list of resources about the world of opera, critiques of opera and the future of the artform of opera which I've popped below and in the transcription for all of you to check out. I'd just like to take this moment so say thank you to all of you who are listening and who have been incredibly supportive. The next episode will be the last one of 2020 before we head into the holiday season, so looking forward to sharing that final 2020 conversation with you all next time. Catch you all then!

DECLASSIFY is a podcast available for listening and subscription on Spotify and Apple Podcasts. It is hosted and produced by Victoria Pham.

RESOURCES

Megan Steller

<http://www.megansteller.com/>

Rehearsal Magazine

https://www.instagram.com/rehearsal_magazine/?hl=en

Resources about the Future of Opera (selected by Megan Steller):

Opera Australia at a crossroads

<https://musicaustralia.org.au/2020/09/opera-australia-at-a-crossroads/>

As COVID wreaks havoc in the performing arts, do we still need a national opera company?

<https://theconversation.com/as-covid-wreaks-havoc-in-the-performing-arts-do-we-still-need-a-national-opera-company-145461>

British Youth Opera: training tomorrow's stars amid the reality of today's pandemic

<https://bachtrack.com/interview-nicola-candlish-british-youth-opera-october-2020>

Anne Midgette on The Everything Will Be Okay Podcast (*there are many useful episodes on this podcast!*)

<https://anchor.fm/tewbop/episodes/Anne-Midgette-Art-Is-Not-the-Institutions-eiur6g>

We are arts administrators of color. We are ready.

<https://medium.com/@SPHINXLEAD/we-are-arts-administrators-of-color-we-are-ready-d34cd0d591f1>

Furloughed Musicians and A New Digital Frontier: Performing Arts in the COVID-19 Shutdown

<https://www.vanityfair.com/style/2020/04/performing-arts-in-the-covid-19-shutdown>

How to be an online musician and work from home (*This is not strictly related, but it gave me food for thought*)

<https://david-taylor.org/blog/how-to-be-an-online-musician-and-work-from-home>

Discrimination in Casting Black Singers at the Metropolitan Opera

<https://www.middleclassartist.com/post/discrimination-in-casting-black-singers-at-the-metropolitan-opera>

The Symmetrical Accusations Against Enrico Caruso and Plácido Domingo

<https://van-us.atavist.com/engineered-consent>

Opera is Racist (*An Instagram page that I follow*)

<https://www.instagram.com/operairacist/?hl=en>

Opera Australia Redundancies

<https://www.limelightmagazine.com.au/news/opera-australia-redundancies-the-musicians-speak/>

The Met Opera Post-Pandemic

<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/09/29/arts/music/met-opera-coronavirus-pandemic.html>

The Opera Backstage (*Slightly out of date, but a piece I have returned to recently for some useful language about opera*)

<https://www.theparisreview.org/blog/2019/10/28/the-opera-backstage/>

Opera in a post-Weinstein World (*Another old but useful piece*)

<https://www.theparisreview.org/blog/2017/12/05/opera-post-weinstein-world/>

Opera is stuck in a racist, sexist past, while many in the audience have moved on (*Author is interesting and works at UniMelb - I have asked her to do a research interview ahead of our conversation!*)

<https://theconversation.com/opera-is-stuck-in-a-racist-sexist-past-while-many-in-the-audience-have-moved-on-120073>

Showing Up and Creating Community (*Not opera/classical music-related, but gave me pause for thought about how these teachings could be useful in the post-Covid arts sector*)

<https://www.aspeninstitute.org/podcasts/showing-up-and-creating-community/>

Tracy Cox: Dismantling Fatphobia in Opera (*I find this whole podcast extremely helpful, but this episode in particular. I think it is the most recent one?*)

<https://anchor.fm/disruptive-stages/episodes/Tracy-Cox-Dismantling-Fatphobia-in-Opera-eijm11>