



BLOCKHOUSE BAY
HISTORICAL SOCIETY
INCORPORATED

NEWSLETTER

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NEXT MEETING -

Please note the community centre is still unavailable due to ongoing construction.

**THE BLOCKHOUSE BAY HISTORICAL SOCIETY MEETING IS
ON WEDNESDAY 3RD APRIL at 1.15pm at ARMANASCO HOUSE**

SPEAKER - GIUSEPPE GALLINA whose talk entitled: ALLA FINE DEL MONDO (To the End of the World) continues our celebration of the Armanasco family by giving us a wider context of the history of the Italian community in New Zealand. Join us to hear Giuseppe and see his powerpoint display on our brand new 42in television, followed by a Q & A and complimentary afternoon tea with our heritage china.



MESSAGE FROM THE CHAIR

Ciao everyone!

As I look out the window at the grey sky this morning, I can't help but be grateful for the amazing summer we've had. Bright sunny days and mild balmy nights. All a welcome change from the relentless rain, storms and flooding of the year before. The glorious weather reminded me of one of my favourite countries to visit: Italy. A place my family has been drawn to, time and time again, by the people, food, architecture, history and culture. Many aspects of these, now woven into the fabric of New Zealand society thanks to those brave early settlers like Stefano and Maria Armanasco and the many others who followed.

The arrival of autumn also marked a big birthday celebration for a much loved and world renowned former Blockhouse Bay resident: Dame Kiri Te Kanawa, who celebrated her 80th birthday on the 6th March.

Happy Birthday Kiri!



July 1998: Dame Kiri Te Kanawa and Rodney Gilfry in Richard Strauss's *Capriccio* in London. (Credit: Robbie Jack/Corbis)

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Visit our website; www.blockhousebayhistoricalsociety.com

The little girl on Mitchell Street with the wonderful voice



Kiri Te Kanawa with her parents, Tom and Nell Te Kanawa, at a party in their garden at Blockhouse Bay, New Zealand, on the eve of Kiri's departure for the opera stages of London in 1966. (Credit: Dame Kiri Te Kanawa)

Kiri Te Kanawa was born Claire Mary Teresa Rawstron on 6th March 1944 in Gisborne, NZ. She was adopted at five weeks of age by a local couple: Tom and Nell Te Kanawa. Her adoptive family is Ngāti Maniapoto. The Te Kanawa's named their new daughter Kiri, the Maori word for bell. Tom Te Kanawa ran a truck contracting business. Her Mum Nell took in borders in their large family home, to bring in a little bit of extra income, but also because she enjoyed great company. One of their borders was the young Kīngi Īhaka, Te Aupōuri iwi, who would later become Sir Kīngi Īhaka - clerk, interpreter, Anglican priest, broadcaster, Maori language commissioner; along with many other young Maori students. Kiri remembers the household being a wonderful atmosphere of friendship and fun.

Some of Kiri's earliest recollections are of blissfully swimming in the sea with her father and of fishing. And for almost as long as she can remember, she sang. Her first performances were on a little stage jerry-rigged in the Te Kanawas' house, complete with a curtain; "the curtains would come back,"

she recalled, "and I'd get up and sing." Without a television in the home, music and singing quickly became the primary entertainment. But although her mum played piano, from early on, Kiri eschewed command performances: "I was rather sort of miffy about it even then. I'd only sing when I felt like it."

Yet where Te Kanawa had a breezy indifference to her own voice, her mother heard something magical: the raw beauty and talent of her dulcet tones. She told her daughter one morning that she had seen a wondrous vision of Kiri singing at London's Royal Opera House in Covent Garden. Soon, for Te Kanawa's mother, transforming that vision into reality became her own life's dream. But the journey from the languid, peaceful New Zealand coast to top billing in London and New York, and then super-stardom literally around the globe, was a long and arduous one. Te Kanawa says simply that it would take "years and years" to detail how much her parents sacrificed for her, adding with genuine emotion, "the reasons that I'm here today is because of the sacrifice of my parents."

In 1956, when Kiri was 12 years old, her family moved to Blockhouse Bay. Kiri's mother Nell wanted to give her daughter the opportunity to train under the highly regarded former opera singer turned nun, Sister Mary Leo, at St. Mary's College for Girls. Once here, Kiri initially attended a convent school in Avondale. Then in 1959, her mother's wish was granted, Kiri was accepted into St Mary's College in Ponsonby.

Peter Hanson, one of the boys who lived next door to her in Mitchell St, recalled sliding down the clay banks on Nikau



Gisborne 1950: Kiri Te Kanawa (birth name: Claire Mary Teresa Rawstron), age six. (Source: Academy of Achievement website)

palms with Kiri, when he was a guest on 'Kiri Te Kanawa This is Your Life NZ', in 1992. During the programme, when asked what it was like growing up in Blockhouse Bay with Peter, Kiri replied: "Well I was in love with him, he was definitely a hero and I really adored him, thinking this is the man for me. But it didn't work out. It was a fabulous family of six boys and one girl. A wonderful family for me to grow up with, so many boys, they all took great care of me. Even today, we have a wonderful relationship." Peter added: "Often her Ma would shout out, Kiri come and do your singing lessons, and Kiri would say: Gotta go." He and his wife regularly catching up with Kiri and her then husband Desmond Park over the years.

For Kiri, the schedule at St. Mary's College was brutal and the schooling, more often than not, a disaster. She was routinely plucked from class in the middle of her lessons to work on her singing whenever Sister Mary was free, and as a consequence, her grades suffered. Within two years, Te Kanawa was asked to leave St. Mary's.

Undaunted, she enrolled in a business school, where she learned to type and write in shorthand. But she never gave up on her singing. She took a job as a receptionist and then as a telephone operator so she could work at night and study singing during the day. And with pluck and daring, she began to enter competitions. Her breakthrough started in 1960, when she won the Auckland Competition. From there, it was on to voice competitions in Australia. By 1965, she had won most of the South Pacific's major vocal prizes. She also sang in music show choruses and nightclubs — during one memorable performance, Te Kanawa, dressed all in white, serenaded a drunken club crowd with "Ave Maria."

Among Kiri's musical associations here in the Bay at the time were Johnny & Millie Bradfield, acclaimed local jazz musician and singer respectively and their friend Tuhi Timoti. Tuhi was considered the 'go-to' guitarist to accompany major performers on stage, both local and international for over 20 years.

After being granted a Queen Elizabeth Arts Council Bursary in 1966 she travelled with her mother to England. Here she studied at the London Opera Centre while her mother returned home to New Zealand. By this stage Kiri was already well-known in her home country, but there was yet no inkling of the success she was to become overseas as well. There, she would finally sing in her first opera.

As a soprano, Te Kanawa shot to stardom in the 1970s with a series of appearances at the Royal Opera House, Covent Garden, London, and the enthusiastic support of conductors such as Colin Davis and Georg Solti. Her first big success was as the Countess in Mozart's *The Marriage of Figaro* in 1971. Sadly, her mother Nell died not long after this debut at Covent Garden. A run of Mozart operas followed and, among others, a production of Giacomo Puccini's *La Bohème* in which she

sang Mimi. Her debut at New York's Metropolitan Opera in 1974 as Desdemona in Giuseppe Verdi's *Otello* was widely acclaimed. In 1981 she sang at the wedding of Prince Charles and Lady Diana Spencer, and her rendering of George Frideric Handel's "Let the Bright Seraphim" reached a worldwide television audience of more than 600 million.



Portrait of Kiri Te Kanawa in (modernised) traditional Maori attire, taken for Mobil Oil New Zealand Ltd by K E Niven and Co, commercial photographers of Wellington, 1977.

In addition to singing in a great number of opera recordings, Te Kanawa produced a number of popular recordings, including such works as *Kiri Sings Gershwin* (1987), *Kiri Sings Porter* (1994), *Kiri Sings Berlin* (1998), and *Maori Songs* (1999).

Although in 2002 when Dame Kiri began to scale back her appearances on the opera stage, she actively continued to perform concerts and recitals in connection with the Kiri Te Kanawa Foundation (2004), whose mission it is to provide mentoring, coaching and financial aid to struggling singers and musicians of New Zealand. Dame Kiri hopes to open doors for them, something she lacked early in her own career. She shares her simple formula for her own success, that she "never ever missed a green light." She adds that, walking down the street, she would not stop for a red light. "I'm sort of criss-crossing to get to the green light all the time. And that's been my aim in life: to never miss an opportunity."

In August 2009 Dame Kiri Te Kanawa announced that she would fully retire from opera the following year.

However, she continued to sing in public until 2016, when she performed her last concert. During this time she played Australian opera singer Nellie Melba in an episode (2013) of the TV series *Downton Abbey*. She moved back permanently to New Zealand in 2021 and now lives in Northland. In 2022 she was part of the official New Zealand delegation to the state funeral of Queen Elizabeth II.

Ironically, the diva who made her mark singing the roles of royalty in elaborate costumes on ornate stages, is a self-described tomboy, who enthusiastically fishes, hikes, boats, plays golf and tennis, and even shoots clay pigeons.



*Kiri Te Kanawa plays another Countess, the title role in the Royal Opera production of *Arabella* by Richard Strauss. (Source: Academy of Achievement website)*



Dame Kiri after being appointed a member of the Order of the Companions of Honour, outside Buckingham Palace, London 2018 (Credit: Dame Kiri Te Kanawa)

In conversation with Susie Ferguson on 'RNZ Saturday Morning' on 2 March 2024, Dame Kiri shared the following...

On celebrating her 80th birthday:

"I'm hoping to go fishing on my day. But the Governor General's putting on a cocktail party for me, about 70 guests, which will be very, very nice. There are lots of celebrations going on. And in London, there's Classic FM doing a big interview with me. I'm going to enjoy it because I mean, I never thought I'd be 80. So I'm busy thinking about what's going to happen in the next 10 years, I just got a new puppy. She's going to last for 10 years so I have to last 10 years."

On Māori culture:

"When I left New Zealand in 1966 I was Kiri Te Kanawa and I went overseas and I was known as a New Zealander and I was Māori, which was sort of unique. I've come back to New Zealand to find that I am a Māori and Māori is being spoken when it was not spoken before I left. I'm thrilled that Māori is spoken on a regular basis."

On the upsides of getting older:

"You can say what you want. You can do what you want. And if you don't like it, you tell them you don't like it. I think there's no grey area anymore. There's no time for it."



June 2006: Dame Kiri Te Kanawa receiving the Gold Medal of the Academy of Achievement from Awards Council member Dame Julie Andrews at 20th Century Fox Studios during the 45th International Achievement Summit. (Source: Academy of Achievement website)

With grateful thanks and full acknowledgement to the following sources of information and images:

<https://achievement.org/achiever/dame-kiri-te-kanawa/>
<https://womanmagazine.co.nz/dame-kiri-te-kanawa-on-life-lockdown-and-why-aotearoa-is-never-far-from-her-mind/>
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