

Dame Kiri Te Kanawa

A Life of Music

Presented by Margaret Marsh 13-11-2025

Images removed for copyright reasons

6 March 1944

Kiri Te Kanawa is born in Gisborne.

Her birth name was Claire Mary Teresa Rawstron. Her father was Jack Wawatai, a butcher and her mother was Mary Rawstron, the daughter of Irish immigrants. As Jack was already married, Mary's mother insisted the baby be given up for adoption.

She was adopted by Thomas and Nell Te Kanawa, the owners of a successful trucking business. They named their daughter Kiri, the Maori word for “bell”. She was their only child.

She first sang in public on Gisborne's radio station when she was six years old. From there, she would go on to perform at weddings and funerals. The money she earned helped pay for her singing lessons.



1956 – The move to Auckland

Wanting to do whatever they could for their daughter's talent, the Tom and Nell moved to Auckland so Kiri could study with Catholic nun, music and singing teacher **Sister Mary Leo**, at St. Mary's College for Girls. After leaving school, she took a job as a night telephone operator so she could study singing during the day.

Out of necessity, she sang everything from classical music to pop songs in pubs and clubs. Her talent came to the attention of Tony Vercoe at Kiwi Records, who was a graduate of the Royal College of Music. She recorded over 50 records for the label from 1964 to 1970. Their popularity was extraordinary, earning her **New Zealand's first Gold Disc** for record sales.

1965: Winner of the Mobil Song Quest

She appeared on radio and television and entered and won many major competitions in the Pacific, including the **Mobil Song Quest** on a bitterly cold evening in July wearing woollen trousers under her evening gown to keep warm during her performance in the Dunedin Town Hall.

From the 1966 NZ film “Don't Let it Get You” starring Sir Howard Morrison, [4.17]: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8PuUk-Qbf3o>

1966 – The move to London

Kiri is 21: having banked her prize money and earnings, not to mention a scholarship from the New Zealand government, she set off across the globe to England where she would finally sing in her first opera.

Enrolling at the **London Opera Centre**, she began her formal instruction in earnest. After a master class at the Centre, it was the celebrated Australian conductor, **Richard Bonyng**e, who told her that she was a lyric soprano, not a mezzo soprano.

Her first milestone was finding former Hungarian opera star **Vera Rozsa**, who became her singing coach. Rozsa systematically schooled her in interpretation and stage acting, as well as the technical aspects of operatic singing.

1971 - The Harry Secombe TV Show singing "Chi il bel sogno di Doretta" from La Rondine by Puccini, [2.39]:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O_OGwQnwl-o

1971 – The Marriage of Figaro

By 1970, fulfilling her mother's dream, Kiri made her debut at the famed Royal Opera House in Covent Garden, singing the role of **Xenia** in Mussorgsky's **Boris Godunov**. She also appeared that season as a flower maiden in **Wagner's Parsifal**.

But the performance that began her stratospheric rise was as the **Countess** in Mozart's **The Marriage of Figaro** at the Royal Opera House, a role she had previously sung at the Santa Fe Opera, New Mexico.

She was earning £100 per week (about £1,500 today), a salary that remained unchanged for the rest of her five-year contract.

Kiri & Ileana Cotrubas sing "Sull'aria". [2.43]:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gaVlwwNhocg>

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Full opera: The Marriage of Figaro, Glyndebourne, 1973. [3 hrs]:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lugFH6PxeMQ>

Kiri Te Kanawa & Frederica Von Stade - Being A Diva. [5.32]

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-E9ULoplLyl>

Repertoire

Her sensational London debut in Figaro gained her legendary status almost overnight and rapidly moved her into the front ranks of international opera.

She became one of the most famous sopranos in the world, a familiar figure in leading opera houses - including Covent Garden, the New York Metropolitan, Chicago Lyric Opera, Paris Opera, Sydney Opera, Vienna State Opera, La Scala Milan, San Francisco, Munich, and Cologne.

Her operatic repertoire included eighteen leading roles: Mozart's Fiordiligi, Donna Elvira, Pamina, and Countess Almaviva, Verdi's Violetta, Amelia Boccanegra, and Desdemona, Richard Strauss's Arabella, The Marschallin, and the Capriccio Countess, Puccini's Tosca, Mimi and Manon Lescaut, Johann Strauss's Rosalinde, Tchaikovsky's Tatiana, Bizet's Micaela, Gounod's Marguerite, and Barber's Vanessa.

Full concert: Kiri Te Kanawa - 'Kiri Sings Mozart' 1990. [57.30]

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ihIJ8G6ibqQ>

Kiri wearing Versace for Richard Strauss' Capriccio

Legends of Opera

Kiri Te Kanawa

Opera's Shining Star.

(Documentary). 43 mins.

A celebratory look at the career of Kiri Te Kanawa, who shot to stardom in the 1970's with appearances at London's Royal Opera House.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RpXrKRT3mTs>

Kiri's Recordings

Dame Kiri's recordings include 16 full operas, plus oratorios, song cycles, lieder*, and three recordings of all-Maori music.

She also joined Nelson Riddle for '*Blue Skies*', an album of American popular songs; entered the popular charts with her recording of a Rugby World Cup theme song '*The World in Union*'; followed by albums of Gershwin, Porter and Kern songs and three classics of the light music stage: *My Fair Lady*, *South Pacific*, and Leonard Bernstein's only recording of *West Side Story*.

* **Lieder:** *a song performed in German by a solo singer with piano accompaniment. Great 18th-century composers like Haydn, Mozart, and Beethoven have written lieder songs, but it was the young Franz Schubert who became the Shakespeare of Lieder.*

September - Lieder - Richard Strauss. [4.32]

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5lTw4Acfa6c>

Blue Skies – Nelson Riddle and his Orchestra. [3.22]

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5AFqhbOhDH8>

World In Union - Rugby World Cu -1991. [3.36]

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EJgZ5zcjSbA>

It Never Was You - Kiri & Andre Previn. [3.24]

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uN3uk4dq2x0>

I Feel Pretty - West Side Story. [4.24]

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3b8wiRFVUO0>

70th birthday at Covent Garden. [4-05]

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=txa6k-5RDBc>

Rossini's Cat Duet - Kiri and Norma Burrows. [2-54]

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QNyR6rsGDyg>

Noteable Dates

1973: *Officer of the Order of the British Empire.*

1981: The soloist at the wedding of Prince Charles and Lady Diana Spencer, and watched by an estimated audience of over 750 million people, her largest audience to date. [3.53] <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tM66inkJW1k>

1982: Made a *Dame Commander of the Order of the British Empire* (DBE).

1983: Sings the title role of *Manon Lescaut* with Plácido Domingo at The Royal Opera House.

1987: The Royal Albert Hall Concert.

Full concert, [53.00] <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=B2upbWWgBy0>

1988: Awarded the *Officer of the Order of Arts and Letters of France.*

1990: Invested *Honorary Companion of the Order of Australia.*

1990: Kiri gives a series of 'Homecoming' concerts in New Zealand to mark the 150th anniversary of the signing of the *Treaty of Waitangi* on 6 February 1840.

Full concert, [1h 13m]: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lxvV-yu67cE>

Noteable Dates

1995: Invested *Order of New Zealand*.

1st January 2000: The *Millennium Concert*, Gisborne was broadcast live to over 80 countries, and was watched by an estimated audience of over 1 billion people. [3.00]
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qPvyZfH8OZM>

2005: *Honorary Doctor of Music* degree from the University of Bath.

2014: Kiri celebrated her 70th birthday in March 2014 with a performance at the Royal Opera House, Covent Garden, where she appeared in the role of the Duchesse de Crackentorp in Gaetano Donizetti's opera *La Fille du Régiment*.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kSn910l6x08>

2017: *Gramophone Lifetime Achievement Award*
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ASLqyyE1qcY&t=4s>

2018: *Member of the Order of the Companions of Honour*.

2019: The ASB Theatre in the Aotea Centre was renamed *The Kiri Te Kanawa Theatre*.

The Foundation, Home Coming, and Retirement

The Kiri Te Kanawa Foundation was created in 2003 to assist outstanding young New Zealand opera singers and musicians with their international careers. It is a legally registered charitable trust, established to realise the vision of Dame Kiri to provide financial support, career assistance and guidance to singers and musicians with exceptional potential to support their aspirations to develop international careers at the highest level.

Website: <http://www.kiritekanawa.org>

Link to newsletter: <http://www.kiritekanawa.org/news/>

2017: Retirement

At 73 Kiri announced her retirement from public performance primarily because she felt her voice was in the past and she no longer wanted to compare it to the "beautiful young fresh voices" of the new generation of singers she was mentoring.

Kiri's new husband is **Kevin Foulcer**. She moved back to New Zealand with him in 2021, and they live in the Bay of Islands.

Celebrating 80 years of artistry. [1.00]

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1Ha8ZMwiZEI>

Dame Kiri Te Kanawa sings in public for first time since retirement. [2.21]

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8CUrurXwbQc>

A MERRY CHRISTMAS TO YOU ALL
From Kiri ... and me

O Holy Night, with the St Paul's Cathedral Choir, Christmas Concert in 1997. 4.26

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iYV0Ykx2Y_g

A group member has sent me the following very interesting link:

The Irish Independent - 16 Nov 1998

<https://www.independent.ie/irish-news/kiri-the-unsung-story/26168479.html>

Kiri: the unsung story

Myles McWeeney reads a new book in which Dame Kiri Te Kanawa is exposed as a complex and capricious character. New Zealand is a remote country, and in the 1940s the little community of Tokomaru Bay, 50 miles from Gisborne on the eastern Pacific coast, was about as remote as you could get without falling off the edge of the world.

It was here that deserted mother-of-six Thelma Rawstron, the daughter of Irish emigrants living on the wrong side of the tracks in the town's Maori shanty-town, struggled as a cleaner to bring up her family.

Her daughter Noeleen, copper-haired and steely-willed, hadn't helped matters by giving birth to an illegitimate son, James Patrick, several years before, and when in 1943 she became pregnant a second time, her situation was desperate. The father was a married Maori butcher called Tieki 'Jack' Wawatai, who had returned to his wife and family unaware of Noeleen's pregnancy.

Several weeks before she was due to have her baby, Noeleen Rawstron made the difficult journey to Gisborne where, on March 6 1944, she gave birth to a baby girl whom she called Claire Mary Teresa. She left the name of the girl's father blank on the birth certificate. A few weeks later, Noeleen gave Claire up for adoption and returned to pick up her life with her mother and her son Jimmy in Tokomaru Bay. She maintained a steadfast silence about the drama of that year for the rest of her life.

Baby Claire did not remain an orphan very long. She was adopted by a middle-aged couple, Maori small businessman Atama 'Tom' Te Kanawa and his wife Nell. She was re-named Kiri, a Maori word meaning 'bell' or 'skin of the tree' according to dialect, after Tom's father.

Although the newly-named Kiri Jeanette Claire Te Kanawa couldn't have known it yet, she had gained a redoubtable new mother. In the course of a colourful and eventful life, the part-Irish Mrs Tom Te Kanawa had found herself addressed by any number of names, not all of them charitable. She had been christened Hellena Janet Leece, but had subsequently been addressed at different times and with varying degrees of happiness as Mrs John Green and Mrs Stephen Whitehead. She ran a successful boarding house in Gisborne, and some say she may have also conducted illegal backstreet abortions.

The baby's new father Tom Te Kanawa, while soft-spoken and deeply reserved, could trace his bloodline directly back to a legendary and aggressive Maori figure, Chief Te Kanawa of the Maniopoto tribe.

Although he gave his newly adopted daughter, soon to become the apple of his eye, a Maori name, Tom Te Kanawa had always refused to speak Maori or let her have anything to do with his native culture. Kiri was brought up as a white girl. But being brought up white did not protect her from racial prejudice, and Kiri was frequently deeply hurt by the then current perception that Maoris were second-class and dirty citizens.

Left to her own devices it is doubtful if Dame Kiri Te Kanawa would have become the glamorous and most instantly recognisable female face in classical music. She was a solitary, reserved and shy young girl and academically very lazy. Something of a tomboy, she preferred to spend her time with her quiet father who taught her golf and archery. But if young Kiri lacked ambition and drive, her doting mother Nell Te Kanawa possessed these qualities on behalf of her daughter in spades. She was the original stage mother from hell, cajoling, blustering and bullying anyone whom she thought could advance her talented daughter's nascent career as a singer.

Kiri was born with an outstanding gift. Her voice was truly remarkable and her mother Nell was determined she was going to make the very most of it. Nell's ambition was to see her daughter sing opera in Covent Garden, an unthinkable aspiration for a half-caste Kiwi back then. But Nell was nothing if not shrewd and she targeted the one woman in New Zealand who could help her achieve this ambition, a nun called Sister Mary Leo, a member of the Sisters of Mercy community in Auckland, widely regarded as the best singing teacher in New Zealand.

Not at all put off by the fact that Sister Mary Leo had refused to take on her daughter as a pupil, Nell persuaded her husband to sell his business, put their house on the market and dragged a reluctant Kiri to a new life in the throbbing metropolis of Auckland.

Naturally Nell's perseverance paid off, and soon a deeply unhappy Kiri had become one of Sister Mary Leo's 200 private pupils.

Kiri Te Kanawa's rise to the top of the operatic world has been well documented by the age of 30 she had the musical world eating out of her hand as one of the supreme sopranos of her generation. What has been less well documented is her complex and often capricious personality forged by her unconventional adoptive background and the demands made by her domineering mother.

The general public might well have taken Kiri Te Kanawa to their collective heart, but she was not by any means universally loved within the music business. Fellow singers found her ungenerous and very scathing of their own talents. She was downright lazy about studying scores and could be stubborn as a mule if she didn't want to do something. For one thing, success had come very easily to her.

Her wonderful voice had won many competitions and substantial prize money. Early recordings of songs from musicals had earned her a lot of cash and, thanks to her mother playing the native New Zealand card for all its worth, the Maori community had emptied its coffers to provide her with a substantial sum to fund her studies in Britain.

Nothing illustrates Kiri's unbending capriciousness as the story of a special memorial service held at Westminster Abbey in London for New Zealand's popular left-wing Prime Minister Norman Kirk, who had died suddenly of a heart attack at the age of 51. All over New Zealand countless thousands had tuned into the BBC's broadcast of the service, the highlight of which was to be 'If I Know My Redeemed Liveth' from the Messiah, sung by Kiri Te Kanawa.

As the conductor raised his baton, radios everywhere fell silent and to listeners' astonishment and deep anger, BBC announcer Godfrey Talbot said: "Miss Te Kanawa says she does not wish her voice to be broadcast outside the confines of Westminster Abbey." The singer had decided her voice was tired and in a blazing row the night before had downfaced her country's High Commissioner and his seething staff and simply refused to permit the broadcast.

Kiri's ability to stick to her guns, no matter how hurtful it might be to others, is legendary. In January 1985 her adored father Tom died of a heart attack at the age of 83. She refused to fly from her home in Britain to be at the funeral, and then entered into protracted litigation with her adoptive family over his will. He had left everything to Kiri, but Kiri's elder step-sister believed she had a right to some of her late mother's property and determined to fight Kiri for it. Kiri only relented when her step-sister threatened to go public with the row, which would mean negative publicity for the superstar of opera. She never spoke to Nola again.

In a similar breakdown of family relations she abruptly cut her brother out of her life. This was a particularly poignant event as Kiri and Jimmy Rawstron, her blood-mother Noeleen's son, had only very recently established a relationship.

In 30 years of marriage Kiri Te Kanawa's husband, Des Park, had gradually assumed almost total control of access to Dame Kiri, and kept from her any correspondence he thought might distress her. In a bitter row the marriage was by then on the skids thanks to Park's adultery he revealed that her brother had written to her, but he had had her solicitor reply that she was "not emotionally ready to meet him".

In 1996, in the throes of the bitter divorce negotiations with Park, Kiri began corresponding with Jimmy Rawstron, who had lived the first 40 years of his life in total ignorance of his relationship with the world's favourite soprano. After three months of correspondence they met in the Summer of 1996 in Sydney. It was an emotional meeting, and both cried. Kiri asked Jimmy to keep their meetings secret to avoid a media circus, and he, anxious that he not be thought to exploiting his rich and famous sister, agreed.

But in November 1997 New Zealand's most downmarket tabloid newspaper, The New Zealand Truth, ran a story headlined "Kiri Turns to Lost Brother", which contained a number of direct quotes attributed to Jimmy Rawstron. Jimmy denies he spoke to the reporter concerned, but when he tried to reach Kiri on a number of occasions to explain, he was told by her aides, in no uncertain terms, that she never wanted to speak to him again.

Not so very long before this all happened, respected producer Stephen Dee remarked of Kiri Te Kanawa: "She's a bloody-minded woman ... no-one has ever had the guts to say no to her ... She's always just had people saying, 'you're gorgeous, you're wonderful, you're lovely', so she's never had any expectations of having to be intellectually responsible." Her treatment of her brother Jimmy is part and parcel of this inability to form genuinely close relationships based on mutual trust and respect.

And her isolation as she approaches her 60th birthday is growing. "Being an opera singer is a desperately lonely life" she once said, blaming her husband's fiercely protective personality for isolating her from friends. It is all the lonelier now. In May this year she told an interviewer: "Now I just don't ever let anyone that's new in my life come in".

She has never really rid herself of the ruthless and relentless drive to prove herself, and rise above her humble and illegitimate beginnings.

Kiri Her Unsung Story by Garry Jenkins and Stephen d'Antal, is published by Harper Collins and is priced at £17.99 sterling. Here is the link, <https://www.harpercollins.co.nz/9780008219345/kiri-her-unsung-story-text-only/>

About the Book

The biography of Kiri Te Kanawa, one of the most well-known and well-loved personalities in music, revealing for the first time the dramatic story of her origins, career and marital life.

Dame Kiri Te Kanawa exudes an exoticism, glamour and appeal unmatched by any other diva of her generation. She is the most widely recorded and most instantly recognisable female face in the world of classical music. Yet there are few among her followers who really know the amazing story behind the public figure.

Kiri has brought opera's most passionate and powerful roles to memorable life. More than any other woman she has been responsible for broadening the appeal of opera and serious music. Kiri: Her Unsung Story charts her remarkable rise from unwanted baby and raw prodigy to polished performer; from national celebrity when, at just twenty-two, she left her homeland, to international icon. Sydney, La Scala, Covent Garden, the New York Met and her scene-stealing performance at the Prince and Princess of Wales's wedding in 1981 – Kiri has risen to the pinnacle of her profession.