



Young NZ soprano Perth's best secret



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When Aivale Cole received the phone call from the WA Opera company she was asked if she was sitting down. She was then offered two title roles for this year's opera season. The young New Zealand soprano responded with her typical self-effacing humour: "Wow, that's amazing, you sure you've rung the right person?"

Cole has been living largely unnoticed in Perth for four years but that is about to change.

The soprano, who WA Opera artistic director Richard Mills describes as "extraordinary", will launch her career singing *Madama Butterfly* to more than 10,000 people at the annual free Opera in the Park event on Friday. In October, she will play *Aida* in the Australian premiere of a new production by Graeme Murphy.

Cole also will be performing as soloist with the Melbourne and WA symphony orchestras, clocking up experience in what could be a career defining year for Perth's best-kept secret.

Mills compares Cole's voice to that of the great African-American soprano Jessye Norman. He says: "Cole is a lyric soprano of immense potential. She has an extraordinary voice that can also sing the roles of dramatic sopranos."

Cole's lyric spinto soprano is a voice type treasured by composers for its ability to combine brightness and agility with the force and depth of a dramatic soprano. Think Christina Aguilera or Leontyne

Price and you'll understand the range and flexibility on offer.

During a photo shoot at His Majesty's Theatre, Cole appears warm and laid-back but her easy smile and candid interview manner belie an iron self-discipline.

The Samoan-born Cole, 32, arrived in Perth from Wellington four years ago with her husband, a computer analyst, and son, both of whom she hardly saw during the following two years studying at the Australian Opera Studio in Midland. Her voice was recognised by Gregory Yurisich at the studio when she auditioned originally as a mezzo-soprano. Yurisich was convinced she was a soprano and began helping Cole find her voice.

"He saw the potential and that's the reason I'm here today," she says. "That was the hardest two years of my life. I was a part-time mother, I never saw my son, the work required was 110 per cent."

Cole graduated from the notoriously demanding course with the dux prize in 2005, her third degree in music. Since then the attention has returned to her beloved family, which now includes a daughter, Rowena.

"I'm definitely one that wants to have my cake and eat it," Cole says with a wide smile. "I want to have my family and I want to have a career. It's great — it's really hard but it's worth it."

With the support of husband Nicholas, she manages to run a

tight household, work a day job in East Perth, and have voice sessions with coaches around Australia.

"I have to literally put my hands on my eyelids to open them up," Cole says, demonstrating the technique, with laughter. "My family is pretty average I think, two funny kids that tend to have tantrums now and again. But I'm a pretty strict mum; I don't really take crap from any of them. (Nicholas) is a great father and a great support for me in terms of, 'OK what are you going to do next and where are we going to go'. I'm very lucky, very blessed."

Cole grew up singing in church choirs as part of the culture of her large Samoan family. She remains close to her family and continues to attend church in Perth, participating in the worship team at her church in Landsdale — ironically on the keyboard rather than singing.

Cole's love affair with opera began after being wowed by a performance of Bizet's *The Pearl Fishers* at the Wellington National Opera.

"I was like, 'Where are the microphones?' I was overwhelmed by everything, particularly the way the human voice was able to carry. That was one of those defining



moments for me. There were these amazing voices and then there were these amazing costumes, sets and lighting. I thought to myself, "That is what I want to do." Cole pursued her passion at the National Academy of Singing and Dramatic Art and the University of Auckland, meeting and marrying her husband along the way. The next step will be Britain next year but first there are roles to learn and rehearsals to attend in Perth.

"This career ain't glamorous, that's all I can say," Cole says vehemently. "This process is a lot of work. People think you just waltz in and go la-di-da. Still, this is my job and I love it. I love creating a different character, I love doing the

funny ones, like in Magic Flute, and I love challenging myself with a character like Madama Butterfly."

The heroine in Madama Butterfly begins as a love-struck teenager and grows up fast trying to acquire the culture of her new husband, the American sailor Pinkerton. Their relationship is doomed from the start and ends in her tragic suicide. "It's pretty full-on, I mean teenage love, man, you see these young kids, they commit suicide over their boyfriends and girlfriends. It's real. And having to convey that, trying to make it seem real without being pretentious, that's the hard thing."

With her expressive eyes, unique voice and steely resolve, it seems Cole has just what it takes. And soon

it will no longer be a secret.

Madama Butterfly is at Supreme Court Gardens on Friday at 8.30pm.

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Debut: Aivale Cole will launch her career on Friday. Picture: Kerry Edwards