

# Pretty Woman of Lammermoor



Fresh from winning the coveted Joan Sutherland and Richard Bonyngel Bel Canto award, the impossibly beautiful [Marlena Devoe](#) speaks to **The 13<sup>th</sup> Floor's** Kathryn Van Beek about how she learned to sing opera and why she's looking forward to performing **Lucia di Lammermoor** at Auckland's Mercury Theatre.

"Do you know the movie *Pretty Woman*?" Marlena Devoe asks. She sips tea at Alleluya Café, looking as glamorous as her name sounds. "Richard Gere takes Julia Roberts to the opera, and he says when you listen to opera for the first time you will love it or hate it – and if you love it, you will always love it. That's so true. My mum loves opera, she loves it. But my dad – not so much. He's into jazz.

"In primary school the music teacher told my mum to send me to singing lessons. I've also sung at Saint Patrick's Cathedral since I was 14. It's been a way for me to get over any nerves about performing in front of people. Young singers who go to church learn how to read music and harmonise with other singers so their voices blend. It's preparation for a solo career because they're the things you need when you branch out.

"In high school I fell into musical theatre. My music teacher at Baradene was so great – Delysse Glynn. In form five we did *Jesus Christ Super Star* and I was Mary Magdalene. In sixth form we did *Les Misérables* and I played Eponine. I wanted to die onstage and she has this great song – the duet she sings is so dramatic. In seventh form we did *The Sound of Music* and I was Maria – Samoan Maria.

"I was trying to decide what to do at uni when I met Francis Wilson, the director of [Auckland Opera Studio](#). When I auditioned for her I was 17 and I had never sung opera before. I took the aria from *Carmen* as my audition piece. She said "Firstly, you shouldn't be singing that piece – you're a soprano, not a mezzo." She said to stay in Auckland, focus on languages and that she'd teach me privately. For the next three years we went back to basics and I started learning classical technique. It was brutal. It's a completely different way of singing, but Francis always brings out the absolute best in my voice so I kept coming back for more.

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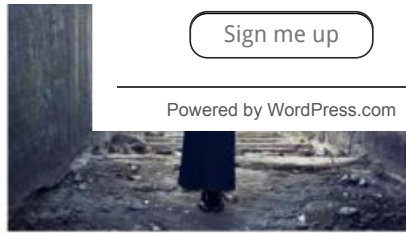
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"I studied languages at Auckland University. I did German at school but I struggle with it the most. I get French, I get Italian, I get Spanish – they're the romantic languages and they're very similar. I went and studied in Italy for three months. The Italian men are so forward! They'll come up to you and say "will you come home with me?" Um, no, thank you.

"While I was at uni I was just singing in church and having my private lessons. I didn't want to go out and sing in public until I was solid in my technique. Later Francis put on *La Clemenza di Tito* by Mozart and I had a small soprano role. Raymond Hawthorne directed it and there was an orchestra – that was my first big performance.

"Now The Opera Studio is doing *Lucia di Lammermoor* which is another favourite of mine. It's a take on the *Romeo and Juliet* story. There are two feuding families and the girl from one family and the boy from the other family fall in love. Her family is in trouble and her brother causes a ruckus by faking a letter from the boy saying he's moved on. She agrees to marry another guy to help her family, but the boy bursts in during the wedding. She goes insane because she was desperately in love with him and she never meant to hurt him. She has an incredible mad scene where she kills her husband and herself. I love that we get to play these characters – you wouldn't normally be able to express these emotions in real life.

"The people I'm working with are amazing. The baritone who's playing my brother is one of the most incredible voices in New Zealand. Philip Rhodes. His voice is magic. We all sit there in rehearsal and stare at him with our mouths open.

"Working with Raymond in the first opera I did was scary. This time I've just grown up a bit more. He's amazing and his vision is exactly how I see my character – stubborn and a bit fierce. Tracey Grant designed the costumes and my wedding dress looks amazing.

"Opera is a whole experience. You have the music, you have the costumes, you have the set design and you have the acting. I think opera is so beautiful, especially belle canto singing – beautiful singing. It's a technique, a style of singing that I love. It's very exposed and very scary but if you can sing it, it's an amazing feeling."

Watch Marlena in action [here](#).

*Lucia di Lammermoor* is on for two nights only – 10 and 12 October 2014. Find more information and buy tickets [here](#).

Kathryn van Beek

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