

# Dame Kiri Te Kanawa welcomed home

The applause scattered and died among the packed, plush red seats of the Royal Opera House, Covent Garden. Soprano Kiri Te Kanawa stood at the front of the stage acknowledging the applause, and quieting the audience with her hands held up.

"Thank you, thank you. I would like to sing you another piece" — Conductor Kenneth Montgomery looked up from the orchestra pit knowing that they had not rehearsed any more music, and was startled.

"But the conductor need not feel alarmed as I will sing it without the orchestra. It's a piece from home, a love song some of you may know called 'Pokare kare ana'."

There were murmurs of approval from the large audience, and a few quiet cheers from homesick New Zealanders.

The lovely soprano voice lifted gently with the lilt of the song, the soft exotic language echoing through the tall, gilt opera house.

It was her first international solo recital, to raise funds for New Zealand students to attend the United World Colleges, given in October 1976 nearly five years after her amazing "takeoff" into the higher reaches of operatic stardom from the same opera stage.

In January, 1983, the same words and song "Pokare kare ana" echoed across the lawn of Auckland's Government House. Dame Kiri Te Kanawa had been invested with the award of Dame Commander in the presence of such other illustrious knights as Sir John Bennett, Sir James Henare, Sir Hepi Te Heu Heu, Sir Charles Bennett and Dame Whina Cooper.

The citation read "an opera singer of world acclaim who throughout her excellent career has retained a deep affection for and close association with New Zealand."

But it was "Pokare kare ana" which was the link that seemed to bind together the diverse events, music that

echoed the Maoritanga which Dame Kiri has so often referred to in her life as an international opera star.

And what is the famous singer's own view of origins? She revealed in a television interview with Bernard Levin for the BBC in December, 1975 that she was adopted. She told her biographer Trevor Fingleton in the recently released book "Kiri" that her birth parents were the same racial mix as the Te Kanawas — her mother of European origin, her father Maori.

## Non-conformist

Her mother had been a non conformist minister's daughter and never married, hence the disgrace and ostracism. Her parents were very poor and had a son, but to Kiri's knowledge she never met her older brother. Her father died of tuberculosis at the age of 35, her mother a few years ago in Australia, and Kiri never met either of them.

"She has never really tried to find any of her original family," writes Fingleton, "though she thinks she may have met some of them unwittingly in New Zealand. 'Nobody's ever said a word. When a Maori child is given away you're not meant to say anything or ever try to retrieve it. That's rather beautiful, really'."

"I'm extremely proud of being a Maori," is a feeling the singer has often expressed in interviews overseas. She was always grateful for the encouragement she received from Johnny Waititi and the Maori Foundation, and gave \$5000 to the Hoani Waititi memorial marae at a special dinner in 1978.

"My mother always told me it was the Maori part of me that would be important," she revealed to the New York Times in August, 1975, although she did tell the same newspaper a year earlier that "it wasn't so hot to be a Maori at (St Mary's) convent school in Auckland."

"The children were cruel to me because I was different. 'That Maori girl' they would say. I was the only one in the school and they picked me to pieces."



## Heritage

When she won the Melbourne Sun Aria as a 21-year-old in 1965 she was wearing greenstone for good luck. The Auckland Maori Catholic Society haka group welcomed her back from her Melbourne triumph, as the Waihirere Maori Club farewelled her on her overseas career in February 1966. A traditional welcome and challenges were part of her wedding day, when the marriage ceremony was conducted by Father Tate.

Her uncle "went miles into the bush to get special flax and barks" for her aunt Digger Te Kanawa to weave into a cloak and headband which she took overseas in 1966 when launched into her international career.

As her career blossomed, she was referred to constantly in the newspapers as "the golden-voiced, Maori soprano". Time magazine underlined her pride in her heritage, and Newsweek in December, 1971. Following her acclaimed Countess in Covent Garden's "Marriage of Figaro", headlined an article "Maori Mozart".

When she was one of 50 guests flown from London to Paris as the guest of high-fashion star Pierre Cardin at Maxim's 15 months ago, the evening finished with Dame Kiri singing "a Maori lullaby".

The thorny question of politics and race has once been raised with the internationally known singer, and her reply sums up her approach to her public life.

"When you mention racial politics, I know what you are talking about," she told an interviewer in Sydney. I read all the papers and listen to the news.

"There's enough politics in the music world for me. I'm not into any other politics. I'm aware of my upbringing but it's never been a hindrance in my life to be a Maori, or to be married to a white man."

"I'm only interested in my art form and what I do in it. I am proud of my art, and proud that my people look at me and my country through it."

Terry Snow

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Maori news will be an entry point for young Maoris into television. If there are young Maoris who say want to be a journalist and their taha Maori is OK, then we are able to take on a trainee. After a time of training that person is able to be transferred to one of the other news or current affairs programmes."

TT: Is TVNZ aware of the spinoffs in presenting news in the Maori language on prime time television?

"Well let me put it this way. I don't think they were aware of the clamour that would ensue from putting on a trial programme of Maori news last year, and indeed the response from the Maori community wanting regular television news in Maori. I'm picking that the response will continue."

"I hope that people don't just say 'we've got five minutes of news now'. Part of my job here is to make sure it grows and that the Maori people get what they're entitled to in terms of being 12.1% of the population, according to last census. Twelve cents in every advertising dollar is spent trying to attract our custom. Twelve percent of the licence fee is paid by our people. We aren't getting twelve percent of the resources."