

Dame Malvina Major ONZ GNZM DBE

'I was expected to make up for everything that had ever gone wrong in Mama's life. She became obsessed with me and it's been heavy on my shoulders ever since, resulting in a nervous breakdown at age nine plus a suicide attempt and alcoholism at 12.' Tuesday Weld



Her mother had named her after Malvina Thompson (1893 – 1953) Eleanor Roosevelt's secretary and confidant. **Malvina Lorraine Major** arrived screaming on 28 January 1943 in Hamilton and 5 years later she started school at *Hamilton East Primary*, moving to *Te Kowhai School* in 1951 when her parents purchased a 28-acre dairy farm 16 kms west of Hamilton. Later she studied at *Hamilton Technical College*, excelling at practical subjects such as sewing; she soon became the fastest sprinter and marathon runner in the district, possibly helped by the fact that she was tall and had developed early. She was also hot tempered, assertive and disobedient. Malvina loved playing in the school band and performing in the end-of-year pantomimes and revues. Painting was another interest.

Malvina was born into a large Presbyterian family. Her parents Vincent Major and Eva (b. McCaw) married in Christchurch in 1919. Vincent had a sporting goods store in Manchester Street, selling and repairing guns, but found himself underinsured after a fire destroyed the shop. His next business was doing well until his partner embezzled the takings, forcing them into foreclosure. The family struggled through the Depression, relocating numerous times as work ran out; Dunedin, where Eva ran a home bakery with the help of the children and a boarding house for medical students, then to a TB hospital in Otago. Again they moved up the West Coast to Nelson and Blenheim until finally in 1942 the Majors settled in Hamilton where Vincent and his 17 year old son found work at the *Colonial Ammunition Company* doing essential wartime work. The whole trip saw the children into 14 different schools.

Eva had been told that pregnancy would be dangerous as she had experienced both rheumatic fever and scarlet fever as a child, so the Majors adopted a girl baby which they named Jane. A bureaucratic bungle saw the child returned; at that time adoptive parents had to be of the same faith as the baby. Eva gave birth to Jean in 1923 and seven more children were born with a average space of 3 years between them: Jean, John, Betty, Beverly, Gordon, Donald, Malvina and Daryl. Jean was 19 years older than Malvina, and Daryl was 5 years younger.



The family was very musical; Eva had a beautiful singing voice and studied Scottish folk music and Celtic dance for many years; in Malvina's opinion her mother could have been a great artist had she not been forbidden by her parents on joining a travelling vaudeville show. Vincent played the piano by ear in a number of local bands. By the time she was two, Malvina was accustomed to appearing in front of an audience; the family often performed for charity.

Her earliest musical training came from her older sister Betty who could sing and play guitar, banjo and ukulele. Because Betty suffered severely from asthma she was often at home and used her enforced leisure to pass on her skills. Malvina recalls, 'My sister Betty taught me how to yodel and that helped strengthen my voice.' The children all played an instrument or sang; they competed in local competitions and performed at community events, hospitals and retirement homes, usually as the *Major Trio* with 6 year old Malvina on ukulele, Betty on guitar and Donald on banjo. Later Malvina liked to say that she had sung in every country district hall in the Waikato. Their repertoire was diverse; show tunes, Māori melodies, country and folk songs, hit singles, classical numbers and ballads. Their favourite composer was Irving Berlin.



The Majors took the opportunity to attend other shows and concerts, eager to pick up any new ideas. They especially enjoyed the Kiwi Concert Party on their post-war visits. There was no money for music so the family would go into a music shop, pick out a new song and each child would memorise a verse each until they reached home where they wrote it down. Usually it was something from the British or American hit parade. They had a monthly spot on *Radio 1XH* where, in order to reach the microphone, Malvina had to stand on a chair. Local dance band pianist Dick Hunt arranged lessons for 7 year old Malvina and bought her a piano; it was then that

she discovered that she could play by ear. Dick also purchased her first accordion and arranged tuition, so when the *Major Trio* broke up in 1953 the 10 year old was able to continue on her own with Dick Hunt and Eva managing her bookings.

Her earliest passion was ballet, partly because of the beautiful dresses, but her mother refused to let her take lessons and made her learn tap and highland instead. Vincent wanted his daughter to become a country and western singer or perhaps another Gracie Fields but her mother encouraged her to study classical music. Malvina's biographer Father David Jillett noted, 'She recognised her daughter's obsessive attraction to melody and rhythm and decided that singing would be Malvina's vocation in life.' Malvina agreed, 'My mother explained to me that my voice was a gift from God. A gift to be shared. I found that easy because my home was a happy place.'



On the farm gatherings were always a fun alcohol-free community event. Eva and the girls did the catering; Gordon played drums with Donald on guitar and John singing George Formby hits. Malvina accompanied herself on piano singing popular songs from the 30s to the 50s, following that up with country favourites playing along on her ukulele.

Malvina's first singing lessons began in 1955 with Sister Mary Magdalen and Sister Febronie at the *Ngaruawahia Catholic Convent*. Under their guidance Malvina entered a vocal competition in Hamilton singing *Have You Seen But A White Lily Grow*. She recalls, 'I won the competition and at that moment it suddenly dawned on me that I really could sing.' In 1959, at age 16, she won a regional scholarship for the competitor most worthy of competition, worth 12 guineas. 'Sister entered me in the *Waikato Aria Competition* and the song that she gave me was from *La Traviata*. The pianist stopped because I shouldn't have been given an aria

like that until my voice had matured.' Because of this incident Malvina refused roles from *La Traviata* for many years.

She was getting the notes right but not producing them properly, so Hamilton music teachers insisted that she should be sent for more expert tuition. As a result when she reached 18 she was sent to Dame Sister Mary Leo at *St Mary's College Music School* in Auckland. Sister's students were dominating all the national competitions; she taught a technique based on listening and repetition, encouraging her pupils to hear the sounds and remember how her body felt. Her main teaching was the basic technique of breathing; students were taught to stand correctly, how to breathe, how to produce the sound and control it, and how to pronounce the words correctly. The school had 17 teaching rooms with 18 pianos and a staff of 30. Malvina continued to live at Te Kowhai and because neither Malvina or Eva had licences, Vincent drove the 6 hour round trip for lessons every week. Her studies were financed by teaching piano at the *Hamilton Convent*. Later local cheese maker Winston Fleming was allowed to be her chauffeur and they soon became close friends.



Five months before her Melbourne trip, Winston asked Eva if he could take 21-year-old Malvina to a dance. Eva told him nobody was going to stand in the way of her daughter's musical career and he was not to go near her. She shrieked at him, 'Don't ring her or wait for her at the bus stop. Don't drive her in your car. Don't ever come near any of us again and don't come for breakfast!' Nevertheless there was chemistry between the two lovers and they met secretly until Eva found out and Malvina moved out to live with her brother Gordon. Eventually matters were patched up with Malvina getting her own way.

The farm was sold and Eva and Vincent moved into Hamilton and Malvina took a part-time job at the Commercial Hotel as a waitress. In 1963 she moved to Auckland and for a short while boarded with Kiri Te Kanawa's family in Blockhouse Bay while she worked in a sewing factory during the day. Even so, Kiri's mother forbade the two from singing together in competitions. Malvina began to win prizes at regional competitions festivals.

In 1963 she made her first major stage appearance for the *Hamilton Operatic Society* in *The Belle of New York* and later that year she won the *Mobil Song Quest* in Hamilton; the runner-up was Kiri Te Kanawa, one year younger than Malvina. A judge at the completion was Oswald Cheeseman, 1970 VAC *Benny* recipient. Later that week Malvina entered the Auckland competitions and took out 7 classes including the *Lewis Eady Scholarship*, a total earnings of £620.



A year later Malvina took a working holiday to compete in the Sydney Sun Aria; she was placed second. She then won the *Courier Ballad Contest* in Ballarat which qualified her as a semi-finalist in the *Melbourne Sun Aria* competition. By now Malvina was suffering badly from homesickness and contemplated flying back to New Zealand but when Sister Mary Leo heard of her state of mind she flew over and made Malvina's life a misery, bullying and criticising her unmercifully. By the evening of the contest Malvina was spitting tacks she was so angry. 'I went on the stage that night and I said to myself, 'I'll never sing for her again. I'll sing for everyone out there in that audience but I'll never sing for Sister Leo!' And of course I sang with this vengeance in my blood!' She was placed first and received a scholarship at the London *Opera Centre*. Malvina was the first woman to win the competition in 5 years and the first ever New Zealander.



On 16 January 1965 Malvina and Winston Fleming were married in Hamilton's *Church of Our Lady of the Rosary*. Malvina had decided to convert to Catholicism when she was 17. Eva refused to attend the wedding and Vincent stayed away out of loyalty although he did give the couple his blessing. Kiri te Kanawa was bridesmaid and sang at the reception. The Te Kowhai community gave the young couple the use of the local hall and supplied the banquet; then the newlyweds took their honeymoon on Waiheke Island.

Winston was tone deaf but totally supportive of his wife's career. The couple set off for England a month after their wedding without any *Arts Council* support, so their survival depended on Winston finding work, which he quickly did with the *Dairy Commission*. There were times when the couple felt desperate as they struggled to make ends meet. Malvina found that she was poorly prepared, knowing only two or three arias, but she quickly built up a repertoire including the Countess in Mozart's *The Marriage of Figaro* (1966), Richard Strauss's *Ariadne in Naxos* and Michaela in Bizet's *Carmen* (1968).

In 1967 she and Winston flew back for a role in the *Hamilton Opera's* season of *The Sound of Music* then visited Eva, who was terminally ill. Back in England Malvina won a *Kathleen Ferrier Scholarship* worth £500 and began to gain good reviews and references for commercial and radio work. She went on to win other competitions. The *Opera Centre* chose Ruth Packer to oversee her training. 'She has a voice that has no vibrato, a perfect Mozart instrument! The bass of the voice is too heavy and the top is too thin but I'll even that out for her.'

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Part 2



Malvina's role in Rossini's opera *Elizabeth, Queen of England* at the *1968 Camden Festival* sent the critics into raptures although *Sadler's Wells* and *Covent Garden* showed little interest. *La Scala* in Milan were looking for a mezzo-soprano and offered her the lead role in Rossini's *The Barber of Seville* after their original vocalist became pregnant. The production was a great success and was repeated at the *1969 Salzburg Festival*.

Back in London things were far from perfect. The *Melbourne Sun* initially withheld its scholarship because Malvina was married but the *London Opera Centre* backed her up. The couple now had a young son Andrew, born in 1965. Should she be singing at such a high international level so early in her career and should she be allowing herself to sing as a mezzo? Although Malvina Major possessed two fine voices she soon became aware that her mezzo was not natural. 'To continue would have ruined my voice', she said at the time. She turned down a number of mezzo parts but accepted an invitation to repeat her Rosina at *Covent Garden*; but then management changed their mind and reassigned the role to an in-house singer. To top it all, Winston's mother came for a short visit and stayed on for 2 years; she was a great chef but a lousy baby sitter. Then her friend Bert moved into the tiny flat.

Malvina became disillusioned and in 1969 the family returned to New Zealand where her father was unwell. Malvina joined the *New Zealand Opera Company* and she and Winston did a season of sharemilking then bought a dairy farm at Pihama near Opunake. Things went well for two years with roles in Mozart's *Il Seraglio* (1969) with Inia Te Wiata, and Rossini's *The Barber of Seville*. In 1971 *Arts Council* funding for the *NZOC* was withdrawn and the company folded. 'During the tour I found myself pregnant with Alethea (born 1971) then Lorraine arrived 15 months later.' Over the next few years Malvina sang with the *New Zealand Symphony Orchestra* then performed with the *National Opera*. Most of her time was spent raising three young children and co-managing the farm.



In 1975 she auditioned for *Covent Garden*, but due to top internal politics they were unable to offer her a contract and she returned home – furious. Her health deteriorated; her weight dropped to 44 kilograms and she was permanently tired. At last a doctor diagnosed an allergy to dairy products and a new diet, which restored her health. The break improved her voice and Winston continued nagging her to resume her career until finally she took a title role in *Madame Butterfly* for Auckland's *Mercury Opera* in 1983.

With her children now old enough to cope without her, she embarked on a series of international auditions in 1985 and was offered a role with the *Belgian National Opera*. Malvina's role allowed full scope for her comic talents and she, 'sailed into the part', as she says, 'like a great battleship'. The production toured Vienna, East Berlin, Antwerp and Amsterdam. In 1987 she appeared with the *Drottningholm Royal Theatre Company* at the *Brighton Festival* where reviews were uniformly excellent. She was then invited to perform in *Don Giovanni* for the *Australian Opera* as part of the *Bicentennial Celebrations*.

She joined *Wellington City Opera* to sing in a production of Mozart's *Il Seraglio* at the *1988 NZ International Festival of the Arts* then performed in Donizetti's *Lucia di Lammermoor* with the same company. She sang in the *Queensland Lyric Opera* in 1989 and debuted in *Australian Opera* on 3 May 1990 as a possible replacement for Joan Sutherland who had developed spinal arthritis.

In between professional engagements and family commitments Malvina found time for charity work. She began with fund-raising concerts for *Rotary* in gratitude for the financial support they had given her to study overseas, then assisted her husband's *Lions Club*. With her regular accompanist Gladys Armstrong she has given hundreds of charity concerts all over the country.



In July 1990 Malvina appeared in the first opera performed at Auckland's new *Aotea Centre*; Strauss's *Die Fledermaus* with Max Cryer playing Prince Orlovsky to her Rosalinda, presented by the *Metropolitan Opera*. She had performed this part before in Hamilton and her contract stipulated that the Auckland show would be the same version, but when she arrived for rehearsals she discovered that the cast were learning a totally different translation. To anyone but Malvina this would have been a disaster. Then the director was replaced 2 weeks before opening night!

Earlier that year she'd gone to Waitangi on 6 February to sing for the Queen and a security guard wouldn't let her in. Malvina calmly told him, 'In two minutes that band will be playing the National Anthem and if there are no words being sung, it's on your head'. He let her in and she sang — then they forgot to provide her with any lunch.

Malvina had signed a contract with *Covent Gardens* and was planning the trip to London when Winston suddenly passed away in September after returning from the milking shed with pains in his chest. Although Malvina quickly phoned the doctor and got him into bed, he died right after telling her, 'I love you'. Three months later two of her sisters died of cancer. She replaced Joan Sutherland in *Covent Garden's* production of *Die Fledermaus* then returned to New Zealand to sing the leading role in *Canterbury Opera's* 1991 production of *Madame Butterfly*; then quickly flew to Brussels to sing in *The Marriage of Figaro*.

That year she was presented with the NZ Government's *Sesquicentennial Queen's Medal* and a *Citizen's Award for Excellence in Music* from *Hamilton City Council*.



Malvina buried herself in her work to cope with Winston's death. He and Eve had been her anchors and without them Malvina felt disorientated. 'I lost my voice. Your voice is part of your emotional system and mine just jammed up. Nothing would come out. I realised I hadn't dealt with my grief, I hadn't sat on the beach and cried.' It was the darkest period in Malvina's life. She sought counselling and worked with vocal coach Bruce Greenfield, experimenting with new breathing techniques. 'Before going on stage I learned how to sit quietly and meditate. It's about getting in tune with yourself.'

Over the next few years she pushed herself to exhaustion with another string of sold out *Rotary* concerts followed by a profile screened on the television series *Magic Kiwis*. She bought a house on a small deer farm in New Plymouth where her daughter Alethea and husband Greg Watt stayed with her for a year. After they left Malvina realised that she needed to be closer to an international airport and moved to Wellington where she bought a large house close to the Botanical Gardens; perfect for entertaining and coaching.

Malvina received an *OBE for Services to Music* in 1985 and in 14 October 1991 she became a *Dame Commander of the British Empire (DBE)*, invested by the Queen at *Buckingham Palace* in a private ceremony with 50 family and friends. She became a *Foundation Trustee* of the *Dame Malvina Major Foundation* in 1992, providing financial assistance, performance opportunities and professional guidance to talented young performers. One such recipient is Hayley Westenra.

Early in 1992 she was named *New Zealander of the Year*, then in October NEBOA voted her *New Zealand Entertainer of the Year* and also presented her with the *International Achievement Award*. That year she performed at *World Expo '92* in Seville after arriving with only the clothes she was wearing. Luckily her costumes turned up just in time for her recital.



Her voice was still not right. 'I had lost the tone and I was sort of choking. I managed to hide it from the audience but the quality of the sound had died.' She was uncertain if the cause was her breathing or using the wrong muscles.

Outdoor concerts became popular in the early 1990s with the *Three Tenors*, and Kiri te Kanawa's 1990 *Return Home* tour. Malvina joined *Classical Sparks* in Christchurch's Hagley Park in 1993 and followed that with open-air concerts in Invercargill then *Symphony Under the Stars* at Auckland's Domain before an audience of 200,000. Brian Law conducted the *Auckland Philharmonia Orchestra* and a 1000-voice choir.

The following summer she sang at Wellington's first *Opera at the Basin Reserve*, then at Dunedin's *Carisbrook Rugby Grounds* and returned to Auckland's *Domain* to a crowd of 250,000. Her first vineyard venue was for *Canterbury Opera* at *Pegasus Bay Winery* in 1995. Auckland's *Symphony Under the Stars* continued to break attendance records; in

1996 the audience exceeded 300,000. This was also the year that she performed her first *Last Night Of The Proms* at the *Auckland Town Hall*.

Malvina moved from Wellington late in 1997 and found a two story house beside the Avon River in Fendalton, Christchurch but when her relationship with Brian Law developed she sold it in 2000 and joined him in his 1890 homestead on a lifestyle block surrounded by farmland. Here she created a huge garden.

A more annoying aspect of fame was acquiring a female stalker in 1998 who took to dressing like her, copying her mannerisms and even sometimes claiming to be her. Seeing her in the audience began to mar Malvina's performances and stopped making public visits. She now has a personal assistant to keep a watchful eye out. She also has a manager after decades of letting her mother or Winston answer the phone and take bookings. Chris Klaassen has helped Malvina manage her time, finances and bookings. He also increased her earnings while reducing her workload by 40%. Work smart, not hard!



In 1998 she was profiled by Paul Holmes on *TVNZ's This Is Your Life* and received the *VAC Benny Award*. To mark the new millennium, Malvina sang to welcome a 100-man ceremonial waka to Okahu Bay, with a 2000-strong haka group. In 2008 she was made a *Principal Companion of the New Zealand Order of Merit (PCNZM)*, which was exchanged in 2009 for a *Dame Grand Companion of the New Zealand Order of Merit*. In 2012 Dame Malvina Major was appointed to the *Order of New Zealand (ONZ)*, New Zealand's highest

honour. *Waikato University* conferred her an *Honorary Doctorate of Literature* in 1993 and, not to be outdone, *Massey University* granted her the same degree and quickly presented it to her first.

She accepted a teaching Professorship in vocal studies at *Canterbury University* in 2001 and was working in her studio on the day of the *February 2011 Earthquake*. On 18 March she performed in the national *Christchurch Earthquake Memorial Service* in *Hagley Park*. In 2013 she had the nation in tears when she sang a moving aria at Sir Paul Holmes' funeral. Since then she has been *Professor of Voice* at *University of Waikato* in Hamilton, where she now lives. Dame Malvina retired from professional singing in 2015.



As an international traveller, she has performed in many unusual venues including; a celebration event in the wetlands of South Australia where 550,000 acres had been recovered from invasion by sea water and returned to a natural bird sanctuary, *Zion Canyon* in Arizona, the Pyramids in Cairo, ancient amphitheatres in Jordan and Petra, and the *Cervantino Festival* in Guanajuato, Mexico. She has sung at concerts in the *Auckland Domain*, *Rotorua Lakeside*, *Wellington Westpac Stadium*, Dunedin's *Carisbrook Stadium*, *Christchurch in the Park*, Dunedin and Queenstown *Rose Gardens*, and performed in *Carmen* at Auckland's *North Harbour Stadium*.

In 2007 Dame Malvina was the guest soloist with the *Mormon Tabernacle Choir* and gave concerts to open and close the *Rotary International Conference* in Salt Lake City, Utah. In 2008 she performed in London's *St James Church* with Hayley Westenra, Will Martin and the *Boys and Men's Choir* of the *Christchurch Cathedral*. In 2009 Dame Malvina did a *Heartland Tour* called *My Life in Song* to

10 venues in the North Island. This was repeated the next year in the South Island.

In 2009 Dame Malvina inherited the position of Patron of *Victim Support New Zealand* when former patron and dear friend Sir Howard Morrison passed away. Add to this, Patron of 12 other organisations including *The St James Theatre*, *Canterbury Opera*, *Multiple Sclerosis Society*, *Pregnancy Counselling Service* and the *National Singing School*.

Since 1965 Malvina has released 11 albums. Her album *Casta Diva* was awarded *Best Classical Disc* at the *1994 NZ Music Awards* and *Dame Malvina and friends present the music of David Jillett* was released in 1998 with support from pianist Royce Creamer and *VAC Benny Award* recipient Paul Bennett. They recorded at *Holy Trinity Cathedral* and *Stebbing's Studio*. Composer and musician Father David Jillett MNZM was Malvina's friend until his death in 2006 and published her biography *Malvina* in 1995.



In 2020 *Sol3 Mio* member Amitai Pati won the inaugural *Dame Malvina Major Foundation Award* and its \$50,000 prize, celebrating the Foundation's 30th anniversary. Malvina has supported *Sol3 Mio* since 2013 and has been the Patron of the *Graduate Choir* since 2015; of which Amitai and his brother Pene are past members.



An Australian company once considered naming its new wine range after her but put the project on hold after discovering that 'Mal-vina' means 'bad wine' in Spanish. Nevertheless Malvina has had a racehorse, a retirement village and two award winning flowers named after her, and a yummy desert!

Dame Malvina Major has 3 children, Alethia, Lorraine and Andrew and 10 grandchildren; the most recent addition is a great-granddaughter Alexa Aria. None of the children took up music but they all excell at sports; Andrew at cricket and rugby and the girls in netball. Andrew played with Counties and toured the USA with a youth team. He took an apprenticeship in

building and later made a career out of farming.