

# The Remarkable Legacy of Veronica Dunne

A role model for everyone involved in education

This short account pays tribute to the life and legacy of Veronica Dunne, singer and singing teacher, who passed away in 2021. It outlines her career and the International Singing Competition that bears her name, and it describes the influence she has had on the world of singing both in Ireland and around the world.

The remarkable legacy of Veronica Dunne – often described as an Irish national treasure – lives on through the International Singing Competition which is named after her. The competition continues to attract top opera singers and rising young tenors, baritones, sopranos, and mezzos from all over the world. This year was no exception.

When Veronica passed away in April 2021, President Michael D. Higgins said she had ‘captivated millions with her singing’. As a teacher and mentor she had unlocked the talents of many others with her enthusiasm, energy, and commitment.

Her former students include Suzanne Murphy, Celine Byrne, Imelda Drumm, Tara Erraught, Anthony Kearns, Ronan Tynan, Finbar Wright, Frank Patterson, Angela Feeney, Howard Reddy, and hundreds of others. Dana (Rosemary Scallon) also used her as a voice coach. Before she died, Veronica proudly admitted that she had taught the grandchildren of her first students.

The triennial Veronica Dunne International Singing Competition, established by the Friends of the Vocal Arts in Ireland in 1995, awards prizes to the last six finalists in each competition. Recipients have included Orla Boylan, Sarah-Jane Brandon, Tara Erraught, Pumeza Matshikiza, and Nadine Sierra, among many others.

The final in 2022 was staged with the National Symphony Orchestra at the National Concert Hall and was broadcast worldwide by RTÉ Lyric FM. Ronnie, as she was known to her many friends, had received the National Concert Hall Lifetime Achievement Award in 2014.

This year's first prize of €10,000 went to 24-year-old Armenian baritone Grisha Martirosyan. Second prize of €5,000 went to 25-year-old Irish mezzo-soprano Aebh Kelly, while the third prize of €4,000 went to 27-year-old British tenor Aaron Godfrey-Mayes. Latvian soprano Laura Lolita Perešivana (27) won the fourth prize of €3,000, while the fifth prize of €2,000 was won by 24-year-old Polish



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mezzo-soprano Zuzanna Nalewajek. The sixth prize of €1,000 went to bass-baritone Changdai Park (29) from South Korea.

The jury members were Jane Carty (chair); conductor Richard Bonyng; mezzo-soprano Tara Erraught; Christina Scheppelmann, general director of Seattle Opera; David Gowland, artistic director of the Jette Parker Young Artists Programme at the Royal Opera House; Isla Mundell-Perkins, casting director of Staatsoper Hamburg; and Jonathan Friend, artistic advisor of the Metropolitan Opera House.

The Friends of the Vocal Arts is chaired by Professor Diarmuid Hegarty, who is best known as the founder and president of Griffith College – Ireland's largest independent higher education college, with campuses in Dublin, Cork, and Limerick. He spends considerable time and energy raising funds every year to support young opera singers worldwide.

'Ronnie devoted her long life to the training and mentoring of young voices,' Professor Hegarty says. 'I was delighted to join the Friends of the Vocal Arts to help her administer and fund opera students in Ireland.' In 1995, when Veronica donated €25,000 from her retirement testimonial concert to the competition, it went international.

'Ronnie's thinking was to give young Irish opera singers the opportunity to perform on a world stage at leading opera

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American Baritone Grisha Martirosyan, winner of the Veronica Dunne International Singing Competition (VDISC) 2022, with Dearbhla Collins, Artistic Administrator of VDISC, and Professor Diarmuid Hegarty, Founder and President of Griffith College and chair of Friends of the Vocal Arts.

houses and conservatories and get them training placements,' Professor Hegarty continues. 'We at Griffith College agreed to become lead sponsor – and I am so happy to say that it has been responsible for the advancement of so many young Irish singers.'

'She was an extraordinary woman – her charisma was larger than life. She was a singing teacher par excellence for years and years. Hers was a name synonymous with good teaching. She was mother, father, mentor, and general minder to her students.' On one occasion, she even bought a tuxedo for one of her students so that he could perform in concert.

Veronica herself won her first prize at her debut as Mimi in *La Bohème* at the Teatro Nuovo in Milan in the early 1950s. She sang at Covent Garden with Kathleen Ferrier and Joan Sutherland, with whom she had a long friendship. Joan's widower, Richard Bonyngue, became one of the greatest supporters of the International Singing Competition.

Veronica Dunne also befriended the legendary Monsignor Hugh O'Flaherty, who was rightly revered for saving thousands of Jewish and Allied lives during the Second World War. Not for nothing was he dubbed the 'Scarlet Pimpernel of the Vatican', having evaded capture despite constant attempts to arrest him. After the war, in spring 1947, Ronnie accompanied him, at his request, to the Ardeatine Caves outside Rome. Here, just three years earlier, 332 Italians had been executed and buried by the SS in reprisal for the death of 33 SS troopers. Ronnie was overwhelmed by the scene. As her tears began to flow she noticed that the Monsignor was also crying.

This was the unusually brave man who had a huge price on his head during the war and who was later honoured by both the UK and the US with a CBE and a Medal of Freedom. 'My measuring tape for heroism has always been and will always remain a good priest from Kerry who during extraordinary times was, quite simply, an extraordinary man,' she recalled later. He became an inspiration for her, and she in turn became a gifted and inspiring educator whose name became synonymous with great teaching.

Over the years, Veronica Dunne had numerous broadcasts on RTÉ and the BBC; she visited the US and appeared on the *Ed Sullivan Show* on television. She sang oratorios in England, Belgium, and Germany, touring with Sir John Barbirolli and the Hallé Orchestra.

In 1961, Ronnie moved into teaching and joined the staff of the Dublin Institute of Technology College of Music as its only voice teacher. Since that time, she has taught nearly every major Irish singer. She built a successful vocal department and developed the Repetiteur system, teaching and training vocal coaches and accompanists to vocalists. In addition to teaching at the College of Music, she was on staff at the Leinster School of Music and the Royal Irish Academy of Music.

'She was a unique person, totally dedicated and committed to her teaching and to her students,' Professor Hegarty recalls. 'She is a role model to us all in education.'