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MAGAZINE

JESSICA PRATT

*The acclaimed
coloratura soprano*

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INTELLECTUAL
AND WRITER**

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BALLADEER**

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PRINCIPAL CELLIST**

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**RE-BIRTH OF AN
OPERATIC CAREER**

Göknur Şanal

JESSICA PRATT

THE WORLD AT HER FEET

Some 11 years ago Jessica Pratt was one of the aspiring talents who gained broadcast exposure through the 2MBS (now Fine Music 102.5) youth development programs. Now the much lauded young coloratura soprano performs in Europe's most important theatres and festivals – often accompanied by a lucky dog called “Federico” – and it seems, that for Jessica, the sky is the limit. Randolph Magri-Overend talks with the young star in the wake of her recent prestigious *Siolo d'Oro* win.

On Monday November 20, 2002 Veronica Crowe, Young Performers' Competition co-ordinator at 2MBS, announced from Studio C: “Today I am pleased to present soprano Jessica Pratt who will sing a selection of lieder, arias and songs from around the world. Jessica's associate artist in this recital is Tahu Matheson.”

Jessica went on to sing *Brown Pansies* by Ann Carr-Boyd, *Die Lotosblume*, Opus 25 No 7 by Robert Schumann, *Gretchen am Spinnrade* by Franz Schubert, *La maja y el ruiseñor* from Granados's opera “*Goyescas*”, *Donde Lieta* from Puccini's “*La Boheme*”, *Dove sono i bei momenti* from Mozart's “*The Marriage of Figaro*”, *The Embroidery aria* from Britten's “*Peter Grimes*” and finally *Pleurez mes yeux* from Massenet's “*Le Cid*”. Jessica reached the semi-finals of the competition.

The following year, Jessica Louise Pratt won the Australian Singing competition; in 2007 she won the Vienna State Opera Award, the Rome Opera Award and in May of this year was awarded the prestigious *Siolo d'Oro*, a prize bestowed every two years for outstanding coloratura sopranos commemorating the memory of Lina Pagliughi, the Italian soprano.

“...a career that threatens to equal the feats of Dame Joan Sutherland.”

Today Jessica is one of the most sought-after sopranos in Europe and on the threshold of a career that threatens to equal the musical feats of the great, late Dame Joan Sutherland. The New York Times recently hailed her as a soprano of “...gleaming sound, free and easy high notes, agile coloratura runs and lyrical grace.” And all in 11 or so years.

Jessica was born in Bristol, England in 1979 to Phil and Ronnie Pratt. At the time Phil was a tenor at the Welsh National Opera company but the



Jessica Pratt as Lucia di Lammermoor at Genova. Photo - Marcello Orselli

family emigrated to Brisbane when Jessica was 11. Phil is currently a singing teacher but finds that most of his time is taken up managing a staff of 18 full-time teachers who cater to the musical needs of 800 students at Summer Hill's Trinity Grammar School in suburban Sydney.

“Jessica was a wonderful child,” he recalls. “She was the type of toddler that you could leave playing with her toys and hours later, when you looked in on her, she was still playing with them.” In addition, as a six-year-old she would do singing exercises that some adults would have difficulty with. She and her brother (who now sings with a rock band called “*Drawn from Bees*”) would compete with each other to be the first to guess the notes in a chord, would harmonise a song endlessly and “drive me crazy with their singing while I was driving.”

Jessica's other interests have included the welfare of animals and at one time she flirted with the idea of becoming a vet. As part of a work experience she helped out as a vet's assistant but soon gave up any thoughts of going beyond that when she realised that part of her duties would be putting down animals. At 14 she went through a phase of working at McDonalds, a fish and chip shop and at Officeworks in Sydney (where the manager

promised to keep her job open after she left for her first trip to Europe). She later worked “...as a secretary for the English and Maths department at Trinity Grammar School [dads can be handy - my words not hers!] in the David Jones department store and as a clown on weekends painting children's faces at parties.”

But Jessica's ambitions were always focussed on achieving a career in singing. Except for a year at the Sydney Conservatorium's Opera School where, according to Phil “they tried to pigeon-hole her into the type of singer *they* wanted her to become”. Jessica spent most of her time either being tutored by her father or, according to her, “taking private lessons in anything that would help me as an artist, for example languages, stage work, dance, movement, the Alexander Technique and so on.”

Before allowing her to take singing lessons, Jessica's father insisted she play the trumpet mainly to help her with her breathing and later, when she joined an orchestra, to help her in working closely with other musicians. The latter has proved an invaluable grounding especially now she has “to sing accurately with other singers.” However, after 10 years of tooting, the trumpet was forsaken following “a lot of tension in my throat.” ▶

JESSICA PRATT: THE WORLD AT HER FEET

◀ Jessica's big break came when she caught the eyes (and ears) of Gianluigi Gelmetti, then artistic director of the Sydney Symphony Orchestra. At the time he was adjudicating a singing competition which, oddly enough, Jessica didn't win. According to Phil Pratt, Gelmetti disagreed with the judges' choice of winner and invited Jessica to join him at the Rome opera. Money was a problem because the invitation did not carry a bursary. Fortunately, a couple who belonged to a choir that Jessica sang with as a soloist offered to fund her studies with a contribution of \$40,000!

"I moved to Rome and have lived in Italy ever since," Jessica continues. "I studied for about six months and then undertook master-classes with Renata Scotto at the Academia di Santa Cecilia for a few years." What Jessica doesn't mention is that she lived in Italy for five years without work. The money ran out and all she had left was the return plane ticket to Australia. She spent months sleeping on friends' couches, but was determined to stick it out. "I wanted to make myself known in one country and then go to other countries," she explains.

Eventually, in 2007 she was awarded the Vienna State Opera Award by Opera Foundation Australia and after living in Vienna for a year moved back to Italy, to Milan this time where she started studying with Lella Cuberli with whom she still prepares for various roles. Seduced by its beauty, Jessica now lives on Lake Como. But, alas, she only enjoys the lakeside home "for about two months (of the year) ... I feel like I am on holiday. It is only half an hour by train to Milan."

Jessica made her professional debut in "Lucia di Lammermoor" in 2007 at the Teatro Sociale in Como and says she cried for a week after it was over. She has since sung Lucia in Berlin, Tel Aviv, Naples, Venice, Genoa, Florence, Skopje, Zurich, Bologna and will sing the role in a new production at La Scala next year.

Currently Jessica is in Seville singing Gilda in Verdi's "Rigoletto" with Leo Nucci in the eponymous role. She has also sung the Queen of the Night in Mozart's "Magic Flute" at Covent Garden and in May next year will be appear in Melbourne as Violetta in the Victorian Opera production of Verdi's "La Traviata". However, she feels more at home singing Donizetti and Rossini and has recently sung the role of Matilde in Rossini's "William Tell" with Juan Diego Florez in his native Lima, Peru. The conductors she has worked with include Kent Nagano, Christian Thielemann, Daniel Oren, David Parry, Donato Renzetti and the late Sir Colin Davis.

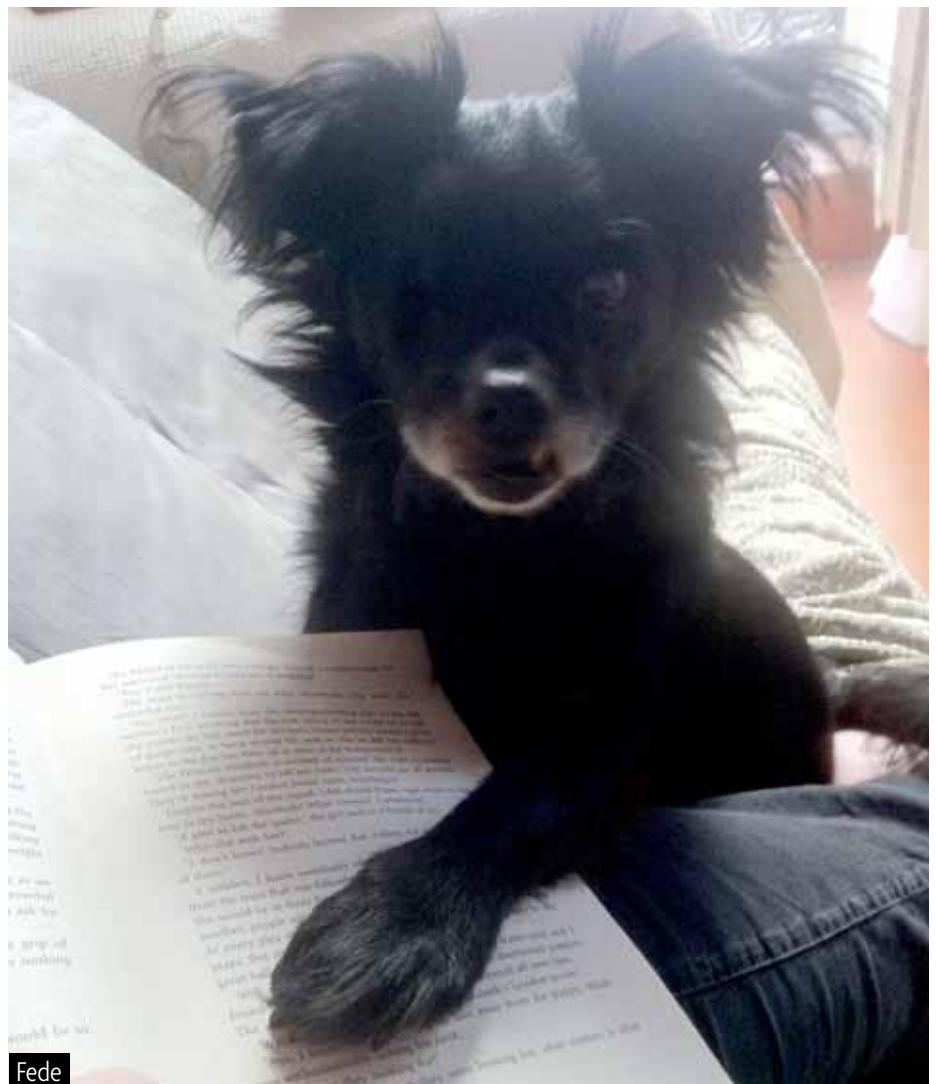
Her favourite non-classical singers are Ella Fitzgerald and Frank Sinatra. "I don't often listen to opera as I can't relax while listening to it. I either become too technical or cry because it is so emotional. So if I want to relax I put on some jazz and Ella and Frank have a daily presence in my life."

“A dog called “Federico””

Besides singing, Jessica's other great love is a handicapped dog named Fede (short for Federico). "Fede comes touring with me in Italy. In certain cities like Venice and Naples we always stay in the same houses so that it feels familiar to him. However when I sing outside of Italy he has another family in Como with whom he stays, as he is quite old and has lived most of his life in a dog kennel before I adopted him two years ago. The family in Como have been there from the beginning and are wonderful to him. Fede is quite a character - he was physically abused and abandoned, so in the beginning he was not well and took a while to come out of his shell, but he is fine now - he has even grown a lovely coat of fur. When I got him he was bald from stress and missing most of his

teeth. He has only one eye, is cardiopathic, anaemic, partially deaf and has a smashed leg which just hangs there, but he uses it in an odd way to walk as the injury happened many years ago and was never treated. In Italy he is well known, has free access to the theatres and comes in my dressing room with me when I rehearse and sing. He doesn't cope with being left alone so he is either with me all the time at home, or in the theatre. Last year I remember a performance of Lucia where we had four dogs in the theatre! There was Fede who slept through the whole show in my dressing room, a little puppy in the makeup department, a big puppy with the stage hands and the maestro's dog in the dressing room next to mine! Italy has a very dog-friendly culture."

And in case you're wondering what type of music Fede enjoys, Jessica adds: "Bruce Springsteen was starting his world tour in Naples in Italy when I was singing there last month and the piazza he was performing in was just opposite my balcony so I sat outside for the evening and enjoyed the show!" However, Fede went to bed early "he only seems to like opera!" - **Randolph Magri-Overend**



Fede