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JESSICA PRATT

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THE
AUSSIE
GIRL IN
ITALY

Jessica Pratt is a top-ranking soprano who has mastered the demands of great bel canto singing 'in situ', making Italy her home and immersing herself in Italian style and manners. She talks to *Opera Now's* Milan correspondent Courtney Smith about her conquest of a new culture and how it has shaped her as an artist.

English by birth, Australian by temperament and Italian by adoption, Jessica Pratt is one of a new, cosmopolitan breed of singers whose international careers have been shaped and nurtured in Italy's sacrosanct opera theatres.

Since her professional debut in 2007, Pratt has imbued more than 28 roles with her pure, penetrating bel canto singing, characterised by an arsenal of brilliant vocal fireworks that sweep her around treacherous coloratura hairpin bends and into the blood-and-thunder gravitas of 19th-century Italian opera.

The singer's baptism by fire in Europe has turned her into a self-possessed woman – polite, but not too polite – with a hint of toughness and detachment, and a sense of humour that's drier than James Bond's Martini. She appears on stage like a young lioness with a distinct prowl, but there's nothing terrifying or diva-like about her when we meet. She sits, poised, without a trace of make-up on her English rose complexion, and we chat easily over espresso at the Milan Park Hyatt, as she prepares to travel to Peru for *Lucia di Lammermoor* in Lima.

Not all her stories made the cut, such as cooking lessons with Renata Scotto ('no garlic!'); her rock star brother (lead vocalist for 'Drawn from Bees'); Italian dating adventures (sacred and profane); Australian internet memes (such as the mythical 'drop bear'); and the merits of a proper English breakfast, as opposed to Italian brioche and cappuccino.

Pratt's Australian childhood (she moved Down Under aged 11), the middle child of three musical siblings in an intensely cultured household, runs riot with anecdotes: 'We're like the Von Trapps. When we get together for family gatherings, it's loud!'

Her mother is a visual artist who painted her children's bedrooms

with fairytale landscapes of birds and beasts. 'My mum wanted us to think conceptually – she had lots of ways of expressing herself and she demanded it from us, too.' Meanwhile, her father, a tenor and music school director in Sydney, imposed a vigorous musical regime: 'Our childhood games with him were about ear-training. He'd sit us all down and we'd pick out the notes of a chord, or who could repeat the longest melody or rhythm.'

The Pratt children were required to master an instrument, with wind and brass as the preferred options. Her younger sister chose clarinet, her older brother picked the trombone, while she plumped for the trumpet. Why? She smiles. 'To be completely honest – I had a massive crush on this gorgeous boy with blond hair who played the trumpet and I wanted to sit next to him in the orchestra!'

This musical provenance was tapped into during a year spent at the Sydney Conservatorium of Music, after which Pratt took odd jobs to cover singing lessons and vocal competitions. While singing solos in her conductor-boyfriend's community choir, she became friends with a singer whose husband was particularly fond of her voice, and was invited frequently to entertain at the couple's Sydney mansion soirées.

Meanwhile, she'd entered an opera competition and was noticed by the Roman maestro Gianluigi Gelmetti, chief conductor of Teatro dell'Opera di Roma between 2001 and 2008, and a protégé of the Romanian maestro Sergiu Celibidache. Gelmetti encouraged Pratt to pursue her training in Rome, partly funded by a scholarship; Pratt's Sydney soirée friends generously stumped up the remaining funds she needed to speed her on her way.

'From morning to night, I observed, recorded and took copious notes,' she says of the six months spent under Gelmetti's tutelage. 'It proved very useful. For example, in March this year, I sang a role debut, Amenaide in Rossini's *Tancredi*, at the Opéra de Lausanne – the first opera that I'd watched him conduct. I took out my score, and everything he'd said was right there.'

Despite being in his orbit for six-months, Pratt never actually performed in an opera with Gelmetti. 'Once, at Teatro Carlo Felice in Genoa, I was singing Lucia and he was rehearsing a Wagner opera. He sent for me – "Bring the kangaroo downstairs!" – so I went, and we had a nice chat.'

The soprano adds Nello Santi and Daniel Oren to the list of conductors who have been influential in her career. She has sung with the latter in Tel Aviv and Salerno. She deeply admires Riccardo Muti for his steely commitment to long and thorough musical rehearsals, which are increasingly under threat from deep cuts in arts funding.

Like Muti, Pratt feels passionately about Italy's volatile arts landscape in the aftermath of the 2008 economic crisis; but unlike many of her Italian colleagues, she remains optimistic, inured to hand-wringing melodrama. 'Italian opera houses are figuring out how to survive, how to increase production and decrease costs without quality suffering, how to find sustainable resources and sponsorships. Right now there are growing pains, but they'll figure it out.'

While many top-ranking Italian singers abscond abroad to theatres with deeper pockets, Pratt remains loyal to the country that nurtured her budding career; and she maintains a unique relationship with Italy's opera houses, as well as to her fiercely proprietary Italian fan base. ➤



MAIN STAGE | Jessica Pratt



PIETRO PAOLINI/ TERRAPROJECT/ CONTRASTO

▲ As Elvira in *I puritani* at the Opera di Firenze

▼ Lucia di Lammermoor's mad scene at the Dutch National Opera:
'My muscles ache and my legs are covered in bruises'



PHOTO WERKSTATT ESSERBAUS

'I love Rossini because he asks you for everything – he asks you to take out all of your toys and play with them – trills, staccati and all the different styles of coloratura.'

◀ • In choosing a European headquarters to make her career, Pratt had never intended to marginalise her native country. In 2014, her Australian 'homecoming' consisted of her role debut as Violetta in Verdi's *La traviata* at the Victorian Opera in Melbourne. 'I don't feel like I've abandoned my home country – there was just nothing on offer for me. There's one full-time opera company and a couple that have two shows a year. You can't live on that.'

Following the Gelmetti apprenticeship, Pratt stayed in Rome to attend the Accademia Nazionale di Santa Cecilia under the auspices of the legendary soprano Renata Scotto – 'a very clever, intelligent, strong woman' – where she polished up her stage experience and met influential figures such as Giovanna Lomazzi, a close friend and confidant of Maria Callas. 'The Accademia promised me nothing and gave me everything,' she says of this chapter in her life.

Afterwards, she moved to Como in the Italian Lake District, close to her Milan-based teacher, the American soprano Lella Cuberli, who she counts (along with her father and her pianist) among her truest advocates and critics.

Almost a decade on, and her soft Australian lilt is peppered with Italian words and phrases ('anzi', 'infatti'), while the daily hurdles of life in Italy have toughened up her ambition and grit. 'Our nature as Australians is to be nice, helpful and generous, but here it's taken as a weakness and you have to stand up to things. I'm less judgmental and more understanding than when I was younger, but I won't put up with unnecessary conflict. You have to find a way to survive, without compromising too much of yourself, within the Italian framework.' It is this philosophy that she taps into when she sings some of opera's most challenging roles, such as Elvira in *I puritani*, Amina in *La sonnambula* and Lucia in *Lucia di Lammermoor*.

Since her European stage debut as Lucia in 2007 at the Teatro Sociale di Como, Donizetti's half-crazed protagonist has become a signature role for Pratt. Over the past eight years, she has sung in 17 different productions of the opera. As Pratt matures, the tragic role of Lucia evolves vocally and artistically, and remains demanding despite her mastery of brightly lit coloratura, pure pianissimo and swift legato: 'When I sing Rossini operas – which are immense in terms of volume of what you sing in one night – I'm fine. But after Lucia, I'm often exhausted. I'm portraying a character who's tight,

tense and scared – my muscles ache and my legs are covered in bruises from being thrown on the floor!'

She'd like to tweak the reckless, tormented cadenza of Lucia's famous mad scene, but firm Italian tradition supersedes: 'When I'd first arrived in Italy and had my first audition, I brought Joan Sutherland's cadenza – because I'm Australian, and in Australia, you do whatever cadenza you want. There's really no tradition. The pianist looked at me and was like, "What the hell is this?" I sang my cadenza anyway, got the job, and then they said, "Now you learn the right cadenza!"'

Pratt thrives on challenge, which she regards as a panacea for creative inertia, and revels in the freedom she has when she can take in uncharted, idiosyncratic Rossini rarities such as *Adelaide di Borgogna* and *Ciro in Babilonia* (which she premiered at the Pesaro Rossini Opera Festival), *Demetrio e Polibio* and *Aureliano in Palmira* – as well as Meyerbeer's *L'Africaine* and Verdi's *Giovanna d'Arco*.

'I love Rossini because he asks you for everything – he asks you to take out all of your toys and play with them – trills, staccati and all the different styles of coloratura. If you told me that I had five days to learn a new Rossini role, I know I could do it because it's just a question of decoding the patterns – it's all very mathematical. A lot of the composers of that time wrote for the voice, as opposed to writing for the emotions. Take Verdi: when he wrote *Traviata*, it was one emotion after another – and you can see that he doesn't take into account the vocal line in the sense of trying to protect the singer's voice. But Rossini does – he writes for a specific type of singer in a way that simply functions. There's no disjunction between the ranges or strange jumps.' ▶

▼ Homecoming: back in Australia, making her debut as Violetta in Victorian Opera's *La traviata* in Melbourne



JEFF BUSBY



◀ Going up in life: taking a break from the 19th-century as Cunégonde in Bernstein's *Candide* at Rome Opera

Pratt's schedule is booked up with Rossini heroines through to the autumn. She'll sing the *Messa di Gloria* (with Juan Diego Flórez) and *La morte di Didone* at the Rossini Opera Festival in Pesaro, and then appears in *Semiramide* at the Opéra de Marseille and Washington Concert Opera.

Between performances, she'll recharge at her lakeside home with her two young rescue dogs, Daisy and Buddy. 'When I first adopted them, they didn't even know how to go on a lead, and they'd throw themselves on the floor, terrified, if even the phone rang, so it's beautiful to see them coming out of their shells.'

Pratt is deeply committed to animal rights advocacy as a longstanding supporter of the Rome-based foundation, Progetto Quasi, which rescues and rehabilitates abused, elderly and often disabled dogs from poorly organised Italian kennels by placing them in loving homes with caring owners.

In 2011, the foundation paired her with Fede, a little black mutt named after Federico da Montefeltro, the one-eyed, Renaissance-era Lord of Urbino. The one-eyed, three-legged Fede had been abandoned and abused for 10 years on the streets of Rome. Suffering from separation anxiety, he became Pratt's loyal travel companion and shadowed her through master classes, rehearsals, dressing rooms and hotels.

Though Fede died last year, his legacy lives on: a book, written by Mauro Neri and illustrated by Pia Valentinis, chronicles the bittersweet story and strong bond forged between Pratt and Fede in the opera house. *Un Paloscenico Per Due* ('A Stage for Two') teaches youngsters about the responsibilities of owning a pet while introducing them to the world of opera.

Pratt moves swiftly onto the next career milestone – the classical music recording industry – which she believes is thriving: 'There's great enthusiasm for CDs in classical music – opera fans are attached to the idea of having a physical discs.'

Despite featuring on several opera DVDs filmed during live performances, the solo recording process can leave her feeling somewhat bereft, since she is an artist who thrives on pure, living theatre: 'For Opus Arte, I recorded some Rossini arias in a little city near Pesaro for three days. I had piano accompaniment, but on the first day, I found it disorienting to sing without an audience.' The solution? Mind over matter: 'I just imagined the audience!'

What if that audience ever gets grizzly and turns into a Roman Colosseum mob? 'I'm really hard on myself. I have a good idea of how I'm singing, and I although I don't like listening to recordings, I force myself to listen. I read my reviews. There's nobody who can say anything that I haven't already thought of myself, you know? I'm not going to lose sleep over it.'

Shaken, not stirred. **EW**

JESSICA PRATT'S DIARY

2015

Jul 2

MELBOURNE, AUSTRALIA

I puritani/ Elvira
Victorian Opera

Aug 15, 18

PESARO, ITALY

Rossini *Messa di Gloria* &
La morte di Didone
Rossini Opera Festival

Aug 21

MONTISI, ITALY

'Tribute to Jenny Lind'
Recital of arias by Rossini,
Bellini, Mendelssohn, Donizetti
and Arditi
Teatro della Grancia di Montisi

Aug 25

VERONA, ITALY

Orff *Carmina Burana*
Arena di Verona

Oct 18 to 27

MARSEILLE, FRANCE

Semiramide/ title role
Opéra de Marseille

Oct 18 to 27

PARMA, ITALY

Recital of arias by Meyerbeer,
Rossini, Mercadante, Donizetti
and Bellini
Teatro Regio di Parma

Nov 22

WASHINGTON, US

Semiramide/ title role
Washington Concert Opera

2016

Jan 23 to Feb 1

BILBAO, SPAIN

La sonnambula/ Amina
Bilbao Ópera

May 11 to 18

TURIN, ITALY

Lucia di Lammermoor/ title role
Teatro Regio

www.jessicapratt.org



A diva's best friend: Jessica Pratt with the faithful Fede

LUIS CONDRIO