

“Singing contemporary music can be liberating because there is no precedent set on how it should sound”

PHOTO: YUKIKO ONLEY



Jennie Such

Soprano Jennie Such epitomizes the new generation of opera singers: a winning combination of beautiful voice, innate musicality, solid preparation and, last but not least, an attractive stage presence. Her statuesque posture, fluid movements, luminous eyes and exuberant mane of curls atop the swan neck of a ballerina give her a certain patrician quality on stage.

The London, Ont., native grew up taking dance lessons and singing summer stock—“Gershwin and lots of old standards”—before moving to the classical repertoire. A graduate of the University of Western Ontario, Such earned postgraduate diplomas at the Royal College of Music in England. Stints with the Banff Centre for the Arts, the Canadian Opera Company Ensemble Studio, the Vancouver Opera Touring Ensemble and the Britten-Pears School gave her valuable stage experience.

In the crowded field of lyric sopranos, Such is making a name for herself as a Baroque and Mozart specialist. Critics and audience alike have praised her Susanna and Cherubino, commenting on her vibrant sound and vivid acting. She has also shown an affinity for 20th-century repertoire, a rather unexpected gift, given her early-music background. She has two important new music assignments this season: as the soprano soloist in the National Ballet of

Canada’s revival of James Kudelka’s *The Contract*, set to music by Michael Torke, and the small but important role of Janine in the Canadian premiere of *The Handmaid’s Tale* for the Canadian Opera Company.

Such is also stretching her wings on the other side of the Atlantic. She spent a month this summer singing in Halle, Germany, in the European premiere of the newly discovered re-orchestration by Mozart of Handel’s *Judas Maccabeus*. It was a thoroughly enjoyable experience for the soprano, who finds the rich musical tradition and the opportunity of singing to packed houses full of musical cognoscenti rewarding. “It is a very quiet and focused audience,” she says. “You can tell they are concentrating, really taking it in. They showed their appreciation in the call back afterwards.”

A major challenge for North American singers in Europe is the language. Such is working hard on her German, taking lessons in Berlin after the conclusion of her engagements, with an eye towards a European audition tour next year. “I find their house system quite appealing—in a short time, you get a lot of roles under your belt. A city of 500,000 can have hundreds of concerts a year—there is the potential for learning lots of repertoire.”

Returning to Canada for the start of a busy season, Such wound down the summer in rehearsal for *The Handmaid’s Tale*, an important production given that it is the Canadian premiere of an opera based on the celebrated Margaret Atwood novel. Such relishes the dramatic possibilities of Janine: “It’s a great role. Her music is less about lyricism than about conveying the drama of the text. The challenge is to find lyricism in the musical line.” The presence of composer Poul Ruders also adds an extra dimension to the creative process. Unlike some singers, who are wary of contemporary music, Such has an interesting take on the vocal and dramatic demands of this opera and of new music in general: “Singing [contemporary music] can be very liberating because there is no precedent set on how the music should sound.” It helps that the soprano is sensible enough to know the limitations of her instrument and is careful not to overextend it. “I work closely with my teacher, Darryl Edwards. If the basic technique is solid, one should have the freedom to explore all the colors the voice has to offer and sing a wide spectrum of repertoire, be it Handel or *The Handmaid’s Tale*.” —Joseph So ★