

Artists **on** Stage

At the Salzburg Festival's Young Conductors Award

last August, the pressure was not just on the competing maestros. Soprano Claire de Sévigné, a participant in the festival's Young Singers Project, was performing Mozart's virtuosic concert aria, "Vorrei spiegarvi, O Dio," for the first time. Not that any listener would have guessed it from her ripe timbre, firework ornamentation and poised stage presence.

Sitting on a rooftop terrace behind the Festspielhaus a few days later, the 28-year-old coloratura admits to having been nervous about a piece that extends across her entire range, but can now look back on the concert as a highlight during her time in Salzburg. "Performing with orchestra gives you a whole other kind of support," she says of the Camerata Salzburg, which was led by Jiri Rozen. "Not only did they play beautifully, but were also one of the nicest orchestras I've ever met. They were really rooting for me."

De Sévigné was one of 13 young resident singers and one of only three selected to sing during the Award Concert Weekend. Meanwhile, she was singing the role of Modistin in a Harry Kupfer production of *Der Rosenkavalier*, taking masterclasses with Bejun Mehta and preparing for a concert in Mallorca. Above all, she says, the program has facilitated the transition toward artistic independence. "They really give you space to figure things out on your own. You're getting a lot of critique, and you have to know what is helpful and what is not. Learning to trust my instincts can be harder than I thought."

Observing Günther Grössboick, who sang Baron von Ochs in

Rosenkavalier, and the rising star soprano Christiane Karg in recital also made De Sévigné aware of the need to take risks. "Young singers are always concerned about the voice sounding its best. It's not about that. At a certain point, you have to trust that your technique will be there and start adding layers of ideas."

When the program ended, de Sévigné moved to Switzerland for a yearlong residency at the studio of the Opernhaus Zurich (one of Europe's best), singing in everything from Donizetti's *Le Comte Ory*, alongside Cecilia Bartoli, to Wolfgang Rihm's *Die Hamletmaschine*. While she has yet to juggle so many different roles at once, she praises her training at the Canadian Opera Company as a top-notch foundation. "Everyone there is so supportive and encouraging," she says, with particular mention of her current teacher, Wendy Nielsen. "It has only been two months, and I miss it already!"

A native of Hudson, Quebec, de Sévigné went to the COC from the Master's program at the University of Toronto, which she describes as so performance-based as to emulate the experience of being in an ensemble. It was in Toronto, where she studied with Daryll Edwards, that she was first cast in coloratura roles, taking on Cunegonde in Bernstein's *Candide* and Flaminia in Haydn's *Il mondo della luna*. "I thought, 'Oh my God, do they think I can do this?'" she recalls.

De Sévigné discovered her talent for opera relatively late in life, describing her childhood home as a "flourish of different musical styles"—from her father's *a capella* music to her brother's heavy metal. As a six-year-old, she was already writing and performing her own songs. She continued the hobby as a rock band singer in high school, while also playing bass clarinet and baritone saxophone. It wasn't until she arrived at Marianopolis College and McGill University in Montreal that she began her classical training, learning theory and singing in foreign languages for the first time.

Now perched above Salzburg's Baroque skyline, the soprano reflects that she has come to the "land of opera" at the right time. "I'm being coached in Italian by Italians, in German by Germans. My knowledge of language is at a different level." Living in Europe has at the same time reinforced the importance of family and friends. She cites her mother as a consultant for dress shopping (via FaceTime) and her boyfriend, a pianist, who "helps put things in perspective."

Next July, de Sévigné will be back in Ontario, when she and soprano Aviva Fortunata, who represented Canada at this year's Cardiff Singer of the World, will present "Best Friends, Deal with It," a recital at the Waterside Summer Series on Amherst Island, near Kingston. Accompanying them will be Toronto-based pianist Jenna Douglas, founder of the *Schmopera* blog. And keep an eye out for de Sévigné's album of Vivaldi Cantatas with the Aradia Ensemble, slated for release this November on the Naxos label.

—Rebecca Schmid



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