

Four years ago, Pacific Symphony brought opera back to Orange County in an innovative and captivating way after the loss of Opera Pacific in 2008. Inspired by Music Director Carl St.Clair's successful career as an opera conductor in Europe, the Symphony made music the centerpiece by bringing the orchestra on stage, while also adding costumes, props, lighting and projection to give it the same glamour and excitement of a full opera production. Now, for St.Clair's 25th-anniversary season, Bizet's *Carmen*, with its intoxicating melodies and seductive leading lady, should exceed expectations as the Symphony invites Milena Kitić, Orange County's own diva, to perform the title role. In this interview, Kitić reveals her thoughts about *Carmen* and how she came to sing and teach voice in Orange County after growing up in Serbia.

How would you describe the character of Carmen?

Carmen is a free spirit, who values her freedom—and whatever she considers happiness—the most. In the end of the fourth act she clearly says: "I am born free and will die free, if to die is my destiny. I know you will kill me, so go ahead." Carmen is a Gypsy, extremely superstitious, a woman with no real home. There are a good number of Gypsies in Serbia, where I grew up, and I observed them most of my life. I think I learned to understand Carmen well.

What are some of your favorite musical moments in *Carmen*?

I'd say that the whole score is my favorite. It's truly phenomenal music and with good reason the most popular opera work. For me, as Carmen, it's especially interesting to illustrate the transformation of the first two acts that are so seductive and playful, and the last two acts that are the opposite, dramatic and fatalistic. I also appreciate the way Bizet captured the flavor of Spain.

Why do you think Bizet chose the mezzo-soprano voice for the character of Carmen?

From what I heard from my 91-year-old teacher (who is much closer to Bizet's time than us!), supposedly *Carmen* was originally composed for a soprano and in the music score there are actually some music lines/options for Carmen as a soprano or a mezzo. Anyhow, if Carmen was meant to be for a mezzo, as it is sung more often today, it makes perfect sense as mezzo is a female voice generally considered more sexy and fatalistic, being darker, deeper and duskier than a soprano.

What are you looking forward to about working with Carl St.Clair?

This is my first time working with Maestro St.Clair, whose experience, musicality and dedication to Pacific Symphony I respect immensely. I truly look forward to this collaboration.

How did you end up living and working in Orange County?

I left Belgrade, Serbia, in 1996 after I had signed a three-year contract with Aalto Theater in Essen, Germany. In 1999, I sang a role of Eboli in *Don Carlo* with West Palm Beach Opera, Florida, where I met my new manager from New York. I started working more and more in the USA, (mostly Carnegie Hall and Florida). In 2001, because of my family life, I decided to move first to Pasadena, and later in 2005, here, to Orange County, where I performed with Opera Pacific from 2003 to 2007.

How have you balanced the international jet-setting life of an opera star with the role of being a mother?

Being an opera singer is not as glamorous of a life as it may appear.

Bizet's *Carmen*

Feb. 19, 21 & 24 • 8 p.m.

Carl St.Clair, conductor
Dean Anthony, stage director
Milena Kitić, Carmen
Andrew Richards, Don José
Elizabeth Caballero, Miceala
Kostas Smoriginas, Escamillo
Pacific Chorale — John Alexander,
artistic director
Southern California
Children's Chorus



Yes, it does include a lot of travel, but even that becomes too much if it's done too often. Singing is hard work and only the final product, what the audience sees on stage, seems glamorous. We are practically "slaves" of our own instrument, a human voice which behaves one day well and the next one not so much. However, we forget all that the moment we step onstage to deliver the role, and pleasing the audience is all that matters.

As for being a mother, no role can replace that feeling. All those who are mothers understand that, I am quite sure. For that reason, I decided to "pause" my performing and be on hiatus for five years in order to raise my son, Spencer. As he is bigger now, I returned to the stage in 2012, and it feels as if I had never stopped.

You are artist-in-residence at Chapman University and teach master classes throughout the area. What do you enjoy most about teaching voice, and how does teaching inform your work as a singer?

I am very grateful to my students, as I think that not only are they learning about the vocal technique and interpretation from me, but also that I, too, am learning from them, a younger generation with many different views on music and interests for different repertoire. Above all, I absolutely love seeing my students' success and growth and as much as I get excited about it, so do they. I am happy that they don't feel lonely in this hard endeavor of building the path toward becoming an opera singer.

What benefits have you seen for your students, and other students at Chapman, from participating in Pacific Symphony concerts and education programs?

Pacific Symphony's Family Musical Mornings program gives a wonderful and rare opportunity to all our students to develop experience and build their repertoire. In my view, we should try to do more productions of that type, as unfortunately, most of the music institutions get nervous to assign roles to young, inexperienced artists, which results in them leaving to look for work somewhere else, mostly smaller opera theaters in Europe.

Why do you believe opera is important for this community?

I think opera is important for every community, as an art form, a piece of general history and music history and development. It would be as if we'd say, "OK, I'll study history, though I'll omit World War I because it has nothing to do with me and my life currently." We have students who study opera and human voice for years here, so it is important to have opera, especially if we like to keep young and enthusiastic people here in this area.