

Milena Kitic, Orange County's own opera star, to perform 'Carmen' with Pacific Symphony

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The last time we talked to Milena Kitic she was walking out on her career.

The Serbian mezzo-soprano and resident in Orange County, once a popular fixture with the now defunct Opera Pacific, had a small child to care for and a life singing opera both in this country and abroad. She found that those two things didn't go well together.

"It was just impossible for me to keep (singing) on that level and raise my little boy," Kitic said the other day, on the phone from her home in Newport Beach. She speaks with a rich, Slavic accent, and laughs easily. She decided to put her singing career on hold, she explained, "not knowing how long it was going to last." That was eight years ago.

More recently, though, she has started to make a gradual return to opera. In late 2012, she sang the role of Suzuki in Los Angeles Opera's production of "Madame Butterfly." She was back with the company in 2013 for a single performance in the title role of "Carmen," then again in 2014, as Albine in Massenet's "Thaïs," sharing the stage with Plácido Domingo and Nino Machaidze.

"He grew up," she says of her boy, Spencer, now 13 1/2.

"Then things changed, times have changed and life just showed me the right path. So I decided to start performing again as much as I can – here locally at least and as much as there are opportunities."

This week she's back with her signature role, Carmen, performing Bizet's opera in a semi-staged production with conductor Carl St.Clair and the Pacific Symphony in Segerstrom Concert Hall.

"If we want to call it a comeback that probably is a good term, my English is limited so I guess it's a comeback," Kitic says, sounding happy to call it anything you want. At any rate, she added, "I am back and we'll see to which extent and how long *this* return is going to last."

Single mom

Born in Belgrade in what was then Yugoslavia, Kitic (pronounced KIT-tich) made her operatic debut in 1989 as Olga in "Eugene Onegin" at the National Theater of her hometown. Her career quickly spread to the main part of Europe and then the U.S. At one time, she was married to Milan Panic, an O.C.-based multimillionaire businessman, former prime minister of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia and supporter of local opera. The two divorced several years ago. She's a single mom now.

Kitic has performed Carmen more than any other role.

"I've been singing it for a long, long time, probably over 200 times, throughout Europe, and of course in Germany. At the Aalto Theater in Essen, alone I sang over 40 performances within two seasons. Of course many, many more in my native country, in Belgrade; and I sang it at The Met, and in Baltimore and in Washington, D.C., and L.A. Opera," she said. Not to mention Opera Pacific.

When asked why she thinks it became her signature part, her answer is modest.

"The reason is by accident, by God or by nature – I prefer saying by nature – I was given this voice. So it is a mezzo-soprano and it works for this role. It happened that I had a nice figure, pretty much all my life, especially before, now hopefully it's going to last."

Over the years, though, she has added many details to her interpretation of the role, both musically and physically. She has studied flamenco dance, bringing graceful movement and authenticity to the part. None of these details, however, has turned Kitic's Carmen into the scene-chewing vamp she can be in lesser hands.

“Well, in my view we are all different and we all with every role bring out our personalities. I cannot be much different from what I am and what I show on that stage. I understand that in some cultures, vulgar is a plus. But in my view Carmen doesn’t need to be vulgar. She could be sexy, she could be seductive, but she doesn’t necessarily need to be vulgar.”

These days, Kitic reveals a genuine poise onstage, and her voice – evenly gauged, rich, clear – is used with discipline, taste, subtle musicality.

The upcoming “Carmen” (there are three performances) marks the first time she will be working with St.Clair. She had just spent three productive hours with the conductor earlier in the day ironing out “cuts and dynamics and some liberties we will take here and there, and tempi, mostly that.”

The Pacific Symphony’s opera productions must be put together quickly, more or less on the orchestra’s normal rehearsal schedule. Kitic says she and St.Clair saved a lot of time meeting together first.

“It actually cuts time during the rehearsals with others with what we did today because this way he will know exactly what my habits are. I know what his ideas are within my arias and my solos, so we don’t need to do that later on and in front of everybody and keep everybody waiting with something that we’ve done.”

Staying close

Teaching helped her bide the time through the years of not performing, and she found it agreed with her. She is an adjunct professor at Chapman University’s Hall-Musco Conservatory of Music, teaches at the Orange County Ars Vocalis Academy in Rome during the summer and runs her own vocal studio as well. “I actually learn from teaching my own students,” she says. Analyzing vocal technique, roles and moods “from a different perspective,” from that of a teacher, helps her own singing.

Kitic’s voice changed during her time off – it matured, it’s fuller, she says. That happens to most singers in their 40s. But more than that, Kitic feels the hiatus itself was beneficial.

“I think I rested. I think for every singer it’s good to rest the voice. It’s more productive sometimes. Not that I was tired or anything but it’s just that after you rest you get back to your job with more élan, with more will.”

Kitic was a regular at Opera Pacific, Orange County’s own company, in roles such as Carmen, Amneris and Delilah, before it shut down in 2008. She’d like to see it come back.

“I am hoping. I don’t hear anything concrete being talked about but here and there how that would be nice, how they should look for funds and different donors – and so one never knows.

Everything is possible. As we see, we are recovering economically gradually and maybe we get to that point where we do find enough donors who would eventually help that cause out.”

For now, she’s getting plenty of work from L.A. Opera. Next month, she’ll take the role of Mrs. Noye in community performances of Britten’s “Noye’s Fludde,” and next season sees her reprise Suzuki in “Madame Butterfly” with the company.

For now, this is fine. Kitic wants to stay close to home. “Responsibilities of us parents grow as children grow,” she says, and she’s not ready to leave the boy for the extended periods an opera production in another state or country would require.

“So this is my goal for a certain amount of time and then we’ll see after my son goes to college. If my voice still listens to me and if they still want me in this business I hopefully will be still around and then, you know, life is good.”

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