

# Women of Coast 2020: Milena Kitic

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“When I decided that I was going to withdraw for a while to raise my son, that was my conscious decision. It was very difficult, because you lose yourself; you ask, ‘Who am I now?’ Performance was a big part of me and that style of life and everything. Then, all of a sudden, there is no more of that side of you. But you learn to be OK with that because you have a different goal in life: to raise a child. There is no one who can do it better than you because you are their mother.” – Milena Kitic, Champion of Classical Music. Kitic was selected as a Women of Coast 2020. She was photographed at The Resort at Pelican Hill dressed in Finesse Crepe Elliana Blouse, Leopold Linen Virginia Blazer and Dalton Wide-leg Pant by Lafayette 148 New York.

**Why her, why now:** Milena Kitic is an internationally celebrated mezzo-soprano best known for her signature role as Carmen in major opera productions throughout Europe and America. An artist-in-residence at [Chapman University](#) who has also taught at [USC](#), among other top universities, she is also a well-known vocal coach and instructor.

In sum: She's a real diva. In the best way.

"I always knew what I wanted. And I just worked," she says. Work she did: As a little girl in Belgrade – what was then Yugoslavia, now Serbia – Kitic was taking music lessons before she could read. Her parents must have seen something special in their youngest daughter, even though they were not artistic by inclination themselves.

"My mother held a Ph.D in forestry, dendrology, and my father was an agricultural engineer. He died when I was 9. My older sister wanted to become a ballerina, but it wasn't allowed by my parents. But, somehow, by the time the second child happened, they had matured as parents as well," she tells. "So, I started playing piano. My mother actually pushed me into piano even more than my wish was to play."

She started singing in a children's chorus that performed for radio and television. "That was fun, and it is how I developed my love for singing. Then they discovered that I actually sing ... pretty well," she says with a wink. "It comes naturally – a natural talent that of course has to be polished and worked on."

Even though she attended a music conservatory while going to school, she still didn't really believe being a professional musician could be possible, so when it came time for university she decided to study philosophy. But after two years the pull of music was too great and she switched to the conservatory in Novi Sad, Serbia.

While still a student she was being frequently booked for guest performances throughout concert halls in Europe. Then by age 22 she landed an eight-year engagement with the National Theater in Belgrade. "At that point there was no way back, I knew I would be a professional singer," says Kitic.

We tend to think of success as arriving fully formed, but Kitic cautions that success is a practice: "You just have to keep working on yourself, being with the right teachers, the right coaches, the right stage directors, then success comes, gradually. It is not always a brilliant performance. It is important not to give up."

That's why opera fans were surprised in 2007 when she quit touring to be a full-time mom to her son, Spencer, who was just starting school. "When I decided that I was going to withdraw for a while to raise my son, that was my conscious decision. It was very difficult, because you lose yourself; you ask, 'Who am I now?' Performance was a big part of me and that style of life and everything. Then, all of a sudden, there is no more of that side of you. But you learn to be OK with that because you have a

different goal in life: to raise a child. There is no one who can do it better than you because you are their mother.”

Now Spencer is off to college, and Kitic is melding her love of performing with her maternal side: She has also moved into the role of passionate advocate for classical music as a founding board member of the Parnassus Society. The nonprofit aims to nurture the professional careers of promising young musicians throughout California while developing a more robust audience for opera and classical music right here in Orange County.

**What women inspired you?** “My teacher, Biserka Cvejic, inspired me a lot. She was our Serbian – well, Yugoslav back then – opera star, and she was very dedicated not only as a singer but also as a teacher. She raised a lot of singers and all of us succeeded to a certain extent, at least. She became our second mother, my mentor in the true meaning of the word. To this day I am still in touch with her; she’s 97. My own mother died, but I refer to her as my second mother and my son calls her Grandma Biserka. None of our mentors are perfect, but that has pluses too. The praise works only so far I think, but if someone scolds you and gives you a really hard time, and makes your life just a little bit miserable, it is not always a bad thing. It makes you work harder, especially if you have spite in you, in your personality. Even if you fall and hit the ground, you pick back up and work even harder to prove them wrong. This profession, as any other after all, isn’t so easy. You get that a lot on a daily basis pretty much and you are in the public eye, so you have to be able to cope with that. Good training from the very start helped me a lot.

“And another influence in my life was, of course, my mother. Later on in your life you realize what a sacrifice that was. Because my father died when I was young, she put everything into the two of us, my sister and I.”

**What do you wish you’d known sooner?** “I don’t even know if that would be good to know sooner. We are not supposed to know when we are young. If I had known what I know now, I would have given up, maybe, on certain things because I would have been afraid. Cluelessness – or how do you say, ignorance? – is bliss.”

**What do you wish for other women?** “I wish for a woman to become the president – or at least the vice president! That’s number one. Then I think it is time for women to start taking over in general. I think we are peacemakers, we are more reasonable – even despite the hormones that hit us throughout our lifetime. We are raising all these children, we are caring for them, so we appreciate life much more. We work very hard, all the time!”

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