

Danielle de Niese: The slim lady sings

She's playing Poppea at Glyndebourne – and she's dating the boss. Danielle de Niese has the talent and looks to turn heads, says Jessica Duchon

Wednesday, 16 April 2008

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Watch Danielle de Niese performing Julius Ceaser

Anyone who thinks that a diva is a heavyweight in a winged helmet would be startled when confronted with De Niese, 29. She shot to fame here in 2005, singing Cleopatra in Handel's *Giulio Cesare* at Glyndebourne in David McVicar's award-winning production: her exotic beauty and star-quality stage presence created shock waves as she was instantly acclaimed as one of the sexiest sopranos ever to set foot on stage. Moreover, there's a charisma that seems to emanate from her voice itself – a notably young but still extraordinarily powerful and bell-like soprano. Her debut CD of Handel arias is just out on Decca, and this summer she's back at Glyndebourne to sing the title role in Monteverdi's *L'incoronazione di Poppea*.

But now there's a twist to the Glyndebourne tale: De Niese's name is being linked with that of Gus Christie, the chairman of the Glyndebourne family package. The legend goes that when Gus's grandfather John Christie fell in love with the young soprano Audrey Mildmay, he promised to build her an opera house at the family home in Sussex if she would marry him. She accepted; he kept his word, and Glyndebourne's operatic activities duly began in 1934. The opera house is still very much a family matter; Gus took over after his father George's retirement in 2000. But when Gus broke up in 2004 with his wife of 11 years, Imogen, who took their four young sons with her, the future of Glyndebourne was thought to hang in the balance.

"We are together," De Niese confirms, "and we're having a wonderful time!" She met Gus for the first time at her audition in 2004. "And in 2005 I was working here, but we didn't get together until two years later. It's a surprising but wonderful thing."

Her astonishing looks derive from a background as international as her career. "Both my parents were born in Sri Lanka," she explains, "but they are Sri Lankan Burghers – people of mixed descent from the island's colonial days." Her father had Dutch roots and her mother's family was partly Scottish; they both left Sri Lanka as teenagers and moved to Australia. Danielle was born in Melbourne, where she started classical voice lessons at the age of eight.

When she was 10, the family moved to Los Angeles, not least so that she could study at the Colburn School, which specialises in educating talented children. There she studied more than just classical music – jazz and tap-dancing were also on the agenda. "I was there often at evenings and weekends, and performing a lot – I made my recital debut when I was 12. But at the same time I was very much a normal kid. Though what is normal? I don't know!"

She insists she was never pushed beyond her capabilities and that her parents were supportive. "My dad's in banking, my mum manages the American branch of a Swiss vitamin company; they're really busy, but they still come to all my premieres." She tried her hand at television as a teenager: after she was featured on a programme called LA Kids, she presented the show for several years and won an Emmy. At 18, she became the youngest singer ever accepted on to the Lindemann Young Artists Programme at the Metropolitan Opera, where she made her debut as Barbarina in *Le nozze di Figaro*. "I wasn't even of a legal age to have a glass of champagne afterwards!"

Her role in Glyndebourne's new production of *L'incoronazione di Poppea* is, like Cleopatra, that of a powerful, sexy and self-aware woman embroiled with a Roman ruler: Poppea is the mistress of the emperor Nerone. Written in 1642, the work's sophistication and psychological complexity hasn't dimmed with time. The story appears simple: Poppea and Nerone do away with anyone who stands in the way of their love and their power, from their former spouses to the philosopher Seneca. They can come across as ruthless, power-crazed individuals – but when the pair finally marry, Monteverdi presents one of the most beautiful love duets ever composed; we promptly forgive them everything.

With her Covent Garden debut in Handel's *Acis and Galatea* next season, another Cleopatra at Glyndebourne in 2009 and a dream coming true when she works with her heroine, Dame Kiri Te Kanawa, later this summer, it doesn't look as if De Niese will be off the stage at all for quite some time. As for her off-stage association with Glyndebourne, she wisely refuses to speculate on what the future may hold.

L'incoronazione di Poppea is at Glyndebourne from 18 May (01273 815 000)

... and here is the uncut version from Jessica's Blog

... but it had to be cut (*mea culpa*, it was too long - and more was requested on some topics, so less appeared on others), therefore I'm pasting the original below in its entirety. The story of her Glyndebourne audition, the inspiration of Dame Kiri and her insights into the character of Poppea should be worth a read. Indy website includes a clip of her as Cleo, so do take a look there too.

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But now there's a twist to the Glyndebourne tale: de Niese's name is being linked with that of Gus Christie, the chairman of the whole Glyndebourne family package, which functions in a way not dissimilar to royalty. The legend goes that when Gus's grandfather, John Christie, fell in love with the young soprano Audrey Mildmay, he promised to build her an opera house at the family home in Sussex if she would marry him. She accepted; he kept his word, and Glyndebourne's operatic activities duly began in 1934. The opera house is still very much a family matter; Gus took over after his father George's retirement in 2000. But when Gus broke up in 2004 with his wife of 11 years, Imogen, who took their four young sons with her, the future of Glyndebourne was thought to hang in the balance, so vital is the Christies' participation in the opera house's relationship with its patrons and the media.

It looks an unlikely combination - a glamorous, streetwise Australian-American in the land of English country picnics and sheep peering over the ha-ha; yet on one level, the romance is potentially a little like Glyndebourne's history repeating itself.

"We are together," de Niese confirms, "and we're having a wonderful time!" She met Gus for the first time at her audition in 2004. "And in 2005 I was working here, but we didn't actually get together until two years later. It's a very surprising but wonderful thing." She's eager to emphasize that business and private life stay separate - "All the roles I've been doing

were planned by Glyndebourne's casting team, who obviously didn't know what was going to happen with me and Gus. But I think everyone is very tickled - they're all very happy for us. So far, so great!" But she's not about to become the hostess of Glyndebourne corporate sponsorship functions; she makes it clear that she's lodging elsewhere throughout her stay this summer.

De Niese's first glimpse of Glyndebourne seemed less auspicious. She'd missed a plane after being directed to the wrong terminal in Paris and, following a nightmare journey, arrived just twenty minutes before she was due to sing. "The receptionist said 'Do you want to go the long way or the short way?' I went for the short way, which I didn't know was over the lawns. It was grey and wet, I was in high heels and holding my pants off the grass, looking at the sheep and thinking 'Where am I?' But the gods must have been with me that day..."

Her astonishing looks derive from a background as international as her career. "Both my parents were born in Sri Lanka," she explains, "but they are Sri Lankan Burghers - people of mixed descent from the island's colonial days." Her father had Dutch roots and her mother's family was partly Scottish; they both left Sri Lanka as teenagers and moved to Australia. Danielle was born in Melbourne, where she started classical voice lessons at the age of eight.

"My great heroine was Dame Kiri te Kanawa," she says. "It wasn't only that she's an incredible artist, but also she's from New Zealand and I was growing up in Australia; besides, she was of mixed background. And for me, being of mixed background, that was such an inspiration. I thought: she's made it, so I can do something in this field and make an artistic statement as well."

When she was ten, the family moved to Los Angeles, not least so that she could study at the Colburn School, which specialises in educating talented children. There she studied more than just classical music - jazz and tap-dancing were also on the agenda. "I was there often at evenings and weekends, and performing a lot - I made my recital debut when I was 12. But at the same time I was very much a normal kid. Though what is normal? I don't know!"

She insists that she was never pushed beyond her capabilities and that her parents were endlessly supportive. "My dad's in banking, my mum manages the American branch of a Swiss vitamin company; they're really busy, but they still come to all my premieres." She tried her hand at TV as a teenager: after she was featured on a programme called LA Kids, she was invited to present the show, did so for several years and won an Emmy. Then, at 18, she became the youngest singer ever accepted onto the Lindemann Young Artists Programme at the Metropolitan Opera, where she made her debut as Barbarina in *Le nozze di Figaro*. "I wasn't even of a legal age to have a glass of champagne afterwards!"

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So is Poppea driven by love or by ambition? "For me, it's both," de Niese declares. "She happens to have fallen genuinely in love with someone who can help her ambition. She doesn't only want power; she loves Nerone and cares about his interests. What's so challenging is that it's easy to go for the one-dimensional, superbitch character, cold and icy, or warm, seducing but manipulative and not fully engaged. But Monteverdi gave her some incredible music and therefore there's a warmth, a sincerity to her that's absolutely transparent. It's much harder, yet much more natural, to go with that.

"She can be seen as a bad person. But bad people also fall in love, get married, have children and protect their interests. When Poppea betrays Seneca to Nerone, people think she wants to kill him so that he won't get in her way; he doesn't like her, so it wouldn't be a bad thing for her if he died. But also he's been undermining Nerone's power - if someone is betraying you behind your back, of course you're going to tell someone you love about that person. She's completely justified in her own conscience. And how often does a woman fall in love with a man who says he's trapped in a loveless marriage? It happens all the time. That's what makes Poppea so relevant and timeless: it's about human nature. I don't think the audience should look at Poppea and judge her. It's important to understand what makes her tick."

There's one danger with playing Cleopatra and Poppea in quick succession, plus a host of other Handel and Rameau heroines: de Niese could easily be landed with the label of Baroque Babe. "I won't let myself be pigeon-holed," she insists. Nor should she be - she's sung Adele in Johann Strauss's Die Fledermaus and Lauretta in Puccini's Gianni Schicchi, amongst other roles, and she longs to sing Anne Truelove in Stravinsky's The Rake's Progress. For her next album, she says, "I would like to do Mozart".

Top dream role? "Massenet's Manon. I was completely bitten by the bug for that role when I first saw it at the Met. But for now I'm looking at some Donizetti, which is a good way to broaden from the early and classical repertoire, just to take another step into bel canto." Naturally her voice is still developing and changing. "I'm a puppy growing into my skin," she admits. "But even if I am a puppy, I still have a lot to say as an artist, and I want to do that to the best of my ability."

She's nothing if not committed to her life in opera; it's not as if temptation hasn't come her way. When she moved to New York, offers arrived from the directors of soap operas as well as opera houses. "My manager said, 'If you leave opera for three years and become a famous actress, then come back, you'll still be younger than anyone else.' And I just said, 'Are you kidding? I can't be off the stage for three years.' I'll die if I'm not on stage! The itch is stronger than me. And I'm glad. I hope it never dies."

*She needn't worry. With her Covent Garden debut in Handel's *Acis and Galatea* next season, another *Cleopatra* at Glyndebourne in 2009 and a dream coming true when she works with her heroine Dame Kiri te Kanawa later this summer, it doesn't look as if de Niese will be off the stage at all for quite some time. As for her off-stage association with Glyndebourne, she wisely refuses to speculate on what the future may hold.*

L'incoronazione di Poppea is at Glyndebourne from 18 May. Box office: 01273 815000