

High



Notes

From the church gospel choir to the Grand Prize at the Metropolitan Opera Council

*By Susan Seligson
Photographs by Cydney Scott*

IF SOPRANO MICHELLE JOHNSON achieves the international stardom some critics predict for her, her first major role and how she came by it will likely become part of opera lore.

Johnson was just 28 and finishing up a stint with a small opera company in her hometown of Houston when she got a call: the soprano in the title role in an impending Opera Philadelphia production of Giacomo Puccini's *Manon Lescaut* needed emergency surgery. Was Johnson available to take her place? Johnson ran out to buy the DVD and a score of Puccini's breakthrough opera, one she'd never seen or even listened to in its entirety. Opening night, April 20, 2012, was three weeks away.

"I was in the right place at the right time," says Johnson (CFA'07), who sang *Manon* when she was nearing the end of a four-year residency at



Michelle Johnson, in rehearsal for *La Bohème*, this summer's PORTopera production. Johnson played Mimi, whom she describes as "swept up by a very chaotic love."

Philadelphia's Academy of Vocal Arts (AVA), which grooms a select few to sing on the world's great opera stages. "I loved the music; it fit. I would wake up, coach, then go to rehearsals, every day, around the clock." A famously demanding role usually sung by older, seasoned performers, *Manon* was written for a *lirico-spinto* soprano—a versatile voice that can swell from sweetly limpid phrases to dramatic climaxes without strain. The opera world, known for its finicky critics, was watching Johnson closely.

She blew them away. Johnson "soars," declared www.theoperacritic.com. Her singing has "a magnetic immediacy," crooned the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, which went on to pronounce her voice "a dulcet dream."

Since *Manon*, Johnson, now 30, has sung the title role in Giuseppe Verdi's *Aida* at the 2012 Glimmerglass



"Opera is traditional," says Johnson, "but you can change it. You can modernize it, but you have to claim the role for yourself."

Festival in Cooperstown, N.Y., and won the coveted role of Mimi in a PORTopera Company, of Portland, Maine, production of *La Bohème* in July 2013.

Johnson first drew national attention when she landed the Grand Prize at the 2011 Metropolitan Opera Council Auditions in New York, one of her many first prize or finalist distinctions in a string of national and international competitions since 2006. Writing about the Met competition in the *New York Times*, chief classical music critic Anthony Tommasini (CFA'82) lauded Johnson's rendition of "Io son l'umile ancella" from Francesco

Cilea's *Adriana Lecouvreur*, observing that Johnson possessed "the vocal goods as well as star power."

The Met competition "was like a debut into the opera," says Johnson. "It was time to say, 'Hello world, I'm a new soprano on the scene. I'm Michelle.'" If Johnson had any doubts about the accolade's impact, they disappeared when her Facebook page suddenly filled with requests for appearances.

When she's not in costume, with an updo and a dramatic décolletage, the earthy, playful Johnson could be mistaken for a teenager. She lives in South Philly with her husband,

baritone Brian Major (CFA'10), and their Yorkshire terrier, Jasper, who often joins Johnson on the road. The pair met when Major, who grew up in New Jersey, was beginning a master's program at the College of Fine Arts and Johnson was at the Opera Institute. They married in May 2012 in a music-flooded ceremony in Houston.

These days, their performance schedules (Major's most recent role was in a June Concert Operetta production of the light opera *The Gypsy Princess* in Philadelphia) often leave the couple with a ships-passing-in-the-night existence. "Thank God for

Skype," says Johnson, who sometimes goes months without seeing her husband, but thrives on their shared passions and ability "to help each other in a way that we don't step on each other's toes." Before either goes on stage, the other always calls, and they intone a prayer: "Lord, please don't let either of us fall on our faces."

On a soggy day in May, Johnson was at the AVA, which occupies a historic brownstone near Rittenhouse Square, waiting to work on *Bohème* arias with master vocal coach David Lofton, her mentor at the academy, at the piano. For hours that afternoon they parsed phrases from

two arias, their exchanges punctuated by easy laughter. It takes a family, if not a village, to groom an opera star, and Johnson likes to refer to her “opera father”—Lofton—and her “opera mom”—BU voice coach Penelope Bitzas, a CFA associate professor of music.

“She’s hyperfocused, and really coming into her own as an artist,” says Bitzas, whom Johnson trusts never to humor her. She and Johnson go back to before

Johnson came to the Opera Institute, to her summer as a Tanglewood Vocal Arts Fellow. Bitzas says she knew almost instantly that “this girl is the real deal.” She also saw that Johnson

had the drive to excel in a business that has defeated so many, a business “that’s hit or miss.” Some students “only want to hear the good news,” she says. But Johnson embraces criticism with an attitude of “I’ve got to fix this; let’s go,” Bitzas adds. “She’s warm and delightful, but she’s also a tough cookie who really knows who she is and what she wants. I don’t want to jinx her—but she could be the next big star.”

Johnson knows it, too; her early success has been both exhilarating and terrifying. What scares her most, she says, is the possibility of having to get a day job that “just takes over” and gobbles up youthful ambition.

“I feel like a seasoned performer, yet I’m a baby compared to the professional world,” she says. “The deal is, I love to work.

I don’t necessarily need to be the queen of opera, but I would like to have a solid living doing what I love to do. This is what I’m made for.”

MUSICALLY OMNIVOROUS

It’s not all opera, all the time for Johnson, who is musically omnivorous and listens to everything from jazz to R&B to hip-hop. But she is captivated by what she calls “old-sound voices,” like those of legendary opera divas Maria

Callas and Leontyne Price, to whom she is often compared. “I respect singers with long careers,” she says. “And yes, we all have ups and

downs. We’re human.” When she attends operas, Johnson is able, to the astonishment of some of her fellow singers, to be far more forgiving than she is with herself. “I don’t go to performances to judge; I go to be entertained,” she says. “And you know, it doesn’t have to be perfect. Because perfection can sound boring to me.”

Johnson came to Boston University after earning a bachelor’s degree from the New England Conservatory, where she initially felt out of her league. Although she grew up singing gospel at her father’s church and sang in her high school chorus, she came late to classical music, and says that at the conservatory she was “always in the listening library, educating myself.” She recalls seeing a video of *Madama Butterfly* at

age eight, but it was the film version of *The Sound of Music* that “lit the fire.” Even though she loved musical theater, Johnson was focused more on acting. Performances in a string of high school plays have served her well on the opera stage, she says, but “to this day I always have to remember to put my singing cap on a little bit before my acting cap. Sometimes I have to rein in my emotions, because if I’m showing too much emotion it won’t work with the singing.”

Beyond the chance to sing classical opera’s most achingly beautiful arias, the *La Bohème* role is particularly near and dear to Johnson at this point in her life and career. “We’re all artists,” like the libretto’s young Bohemians of Paris’ Latin Quarter in the 1840s, she says. “The characters are so relatable. I understand what it’s like to do a job just because you need to keep your lights on. That’s the artist life—you love life, but you also love the art. That’s where your passion is. Mimi’s entire role is just full of gorgeous, lush singing, but at the same time there’s an innocence to her, and the voice has to be really flexible at times.”

For singers performing such a frequently staged classic, comparisons are inevitable. Johnson tries to be unfazed by them. “You’re dealing with people’s tastes and preferences,” she says. “You’re singing the same repertoire people have been singing for 100 years. So people will complain that it’s not like, oh, the way Leontyne Price sang

it in 1967. Opera is very traditional, but you can change it. You can modernize it. You have to claim the role for yourself. You can change word inflection, you can change attitude. But the music is what it is.”

At the close of the first performance of *La Bohème*, Johnson is exhausted but exuberant as an assistant gently rubs the layers of stage makeup from her face. She admits to a fleeting case of nerves in the opening act, but it went undetected by the audience at Portland’s Merrill Auditorium, who at the opera’s tragic conclusion rose to their feet in a resounding and sustained ovation.

Johnson’s was a soulful, complicated Mimi, whom she describes as being “swept up by a very chaotic love.” In its review the *Portland Press Herald* lauded Johnson’s “superb” voice and “nuanced emotion,” describing her “O soave fanciulla” duet with Rodolfo (tenor Jeff Gwaltney) as “rapturous.”

You would think that first performances get easier, Johnson says, but they don’t. “The pressure is there to maintain your success....I want to work, but I also want to take my time and condition myself for the long haul. You’re born with your instrument, but you have to train it, hone it. With age you continue to add layer on top of layer on top of layer. So I think that I won’t ever be satisfied, and I will never feel that I don’t have anything else to learn. You think you conquer one thing, and then there’s something else.” ■

WEB EXTRA
Watch a video of Michelle Johnson in rehearsal with the PORTopera Company at bu.edu/bostonia.