



## The Passion of Jazmine Saunders

Jazmine Saunders, who will perform Gilda in Verdi's *Rigoletto* with the Finger Lakes Opera in August, was always a singer. Even before she was three, when her mother enrolled her in music class at the Hochstein School, she sang, especially in church. At eight, she saw *High School Musical 3*, a Disney channel original movie, and was thrilled to learn that, with its mention of the Julliard School, it was possible to go to college for music. In elementary school, it was on to Rochester Academy for the Performing Arts (RAPA), where she learned to love musical theater. Of course, she has always been in every choir, and played the clarinet with the school band from the fourth grade, where she was first introduced to classical music. Jazmine shares that it was a very exciting prospect for her when she reached ninth grade and was able to take private singing lessons with Joseph Borrelli, the Chorus Director at Greece Odyssey Academy. There she was introduced to both opera and a crucial relationship with her teacher that has had lasting influence. She understood early that opera would be her passion for the rest of her life.

To the question, "Why opera?" Jazmine responded, "It was the sensation of the singing." She loved feeling what her voice could do, the high notes, the realization of what training and discipline could accomplish in terms of breath support and expressiveness. Talent and medium were happily joined.

The Eastman School of Music followed, and Jazmine mentioned the particular value of the intensive language study required there. In the discussions of their likes and dislikes with her fellow students, many found their future preferences, and Jazmine's was Italian. It was not only a beautiful language, but "perfect for singing." With the lead in *La Calisto* for Eastman Opera Theatre, Jazmine discovered she liked baroque opera, but she has not had a subsequent opportunity to enlarge this interest. In addition to attending *Si Canta, Si Parla* in Italy, she has participated in several Young Artist's Programs before coming to Lindemann at the Met, including as an Apprentice Artist with the Santa Fe Opera in 2024, a Studio Artist with Wolf Trap Opera in 2023, as an Emerging Artist at the Seagle Festival, and in the Houston Grand Opera's Young Artist's Vocal Academy.



*Jazmine Sauders, soprano in the Met's Lindemann Young Artist's Program, who will sing Gilda in Verdi's Rigoletto this summer with Finger Lakes Opera.*

During her recently completed master's study at the Julliard School, as well as in other programs, she has had the pleasure of working with Donald Palumbo, world-renowned Director of the Metropolitan Opera Chorus (now retired from that position).

At Lindemann, Jazmine has faced challenges. She feels a large responsibility to represent the program well; the amount of coaching and singing on a daily basis was an adjustment, and her voice is still developing (she transitioned some time ago from mezzo to soprano). She feels that her intensive experience in the program has helped her be more versatile. She has learned to pace herself, not to exhaust her voice at every singing practice, and to avoid unrealistic expectations of herself.

Jazmine will be making her Met debut in May as Barbarina in *Le nozze di Figaro*. Asked how she prepares for a role, Jazmine emphasized the thorough support of the Lindemann staff. Myra Huang, Head of Music, will schedule coachings for the Young Artists even before their contracts begin, and will do so even for roles they undertake outside the Met. In these coachings, they practice language and diction, inflexion, and dramatic work. Cover casts attend almost every rehearsal, as well as having their own rehearsal to practice staging. Free tickets to Met performances gave Jazmine an opportunity she described as “priceless,” – to hear both Nadine Sierra and Erin Morley sing Gilda from *Rigoletto*, the role she performs in Rochester this summer with the Finger Lakes Opera. This past year, Jazmine has covered the role of Pip in *Moby Dick*, and the voices of two of the Unborn Children in *Die Frau ohne Schatten*; next season she will cover the role of Lisa in *La sonambula*, as well as making her role debut as Clara in *Porgy and Bess*.

Jazmine cites covering Pip, the cabin boy in *Moby Dick*, as her most difficult role so far. Contemporary music is a different experience for singers. Jazmine says that getting those vocal lines “into my mouth and throat” was different work. And the staging for Pip required her to be suspended in harness above the stage and to sing, poised there. Those maneuverings took a lot of practice!

To date, Jazmine’s favorite role is *Rigoletto*’s Gilda. She is enthusiastic about Italian romantic works, the “Golden Century” of Italian Opera; singing Violetta in Verdi’s *La traviata* is a future goal. She also aspires to Mozart’s Donna Anna in *Don Giovanni*. “Light” lyric roles are perfect for her voice right now, but the next step would be including more dramatic ones.

The singers Jazmine admires from the past are Leontyne Price, Maria Callas, Kathleen Battle, and particularly Dame Joan Sutherland, who had certain roles she made her own and sang throughout her career. This is what Jazmine sees as a perfect career model: to master a handful of roles, such as those in her current repertoire, but including more dramatic ones such as Bellini's *Norma* and Donizetti's *Lucia*, and to make them her own: taking on the challenge of performing them again and again, with fresh inspiration and maturing interpretation, would be her ideal path. She has mastered every opportunity on her journey so far – if past performance is a guide, she will achieve it.

What does a Lindemann Young Artist do in her meagre spare time? Jazmine gave an unusual answer to this question: she doesn't take a walk or pursue a hobby, but enjoys singing on the worship team for the children's ministry at The Brooklyn Tabernacle and leading worship and creating worship music at her home church, Faith Church Roc in Brighton (a terrific church for gospel music, with great musicians). This means, of course, being in Rochester, and Jazmine misses home and family. It also reveals her dedication to her own faith, and her conviction that God has called her to singing: her mission is to glorify Him, and to share the love of Christ with the people around her, through the impact her artistry can have.

Jazmine says that her summer will be just about perfect. Being in Rochester with family, participating in worship with her church family, and singing her favorite role in her home town, what could be better? Her joy at the prospect is infectious, and we will be the beneficiaries with *Rigoletto* in August.

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