



Features

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A Quiet Girl

In these marketing-driven times, Elizabeth Futral is a rarity - a glamorous singer who is adamant about staying just this side of the spotlight. BARRY SINGER talks to the soprano, who sings Princess Yueyang in this month's broadcast of Tan Dun's *The First Emperor*.



Photographed at home in Roanoke, Virginia, by Douglas Miller

There probably isn't a little black cocktail dress in all of opera that Elizabeth Futral couldn't comfortably slip into. Blessed with a shapely coloratura soprano that she regularly wraps around an impressive variety of roles - most recently the Emperor's Daughter, Princess Yueyang, in last month's Metropolitan Opera world premiere of Tan Dun's *The First Emperor* - Futral continues to tackle an admirable mix of the very new (Philip Glass, André Previn, Ricky Ian Gordon), the traditionally old (Mozart, Donizetti, Rossini, Bellini, Verdi) and the veritably prehistoric, freshly excavated (Vivaldi, Handel). She also has quite a figure. Moreover, she can act.

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(<http://www.operanews.org/uploaded/image/article/futraltofchdl11107.jpg>)

This rare combination of vocal and dramatic ability, an adventuress's spirit and, oh yes, looks, would seem to qualify her for a spot on opera's glamour team of telegenic, heavily-hyped, pin-up divas.

So why isn't she better known?

"I think one can be too much known. They say any publicity is good publicity, but exposure puts a lot of pressure on the person being exposed. I'm not interested in putting myself out there so much that I'm worn out by it."

It is September. Elizabeth Futral is laughing. The picture of demure offstage informality, in jeans, pullover and schoolgirl mary-janes, she sits sipping bottled water in the dim corner of a midtown-Manhattan bar and grill, fresh from a last-minute rehearsal of Handel's *Semele*, in which she stars as Marilyn Monroe incarnate. The role marks her return to New York City Opera, where she last performed as Strauss's Daphne in 2004. An updated reimagining by director Stephen Lawless of Handel and librettist William Congreve's mythic fable, NYCO's *Semele* tells the cautionary tale of one mortal's overreaching ambition among the gods.

"I do hope audiences don't Marilyn-ize *everything* about it," the forty-three-year-old Futral groans, rolling her eyes. "Then again, it's pretty hard to avoid, with me up there in a big blonde wig. Plus, we do present Jupiter as an American president - yes, like JFK. Jupiter is married to Juno, the Goddess of Marriage, but philanders all the time. Semele is his latest conquest. Semele's looking for more, though - Semele wants to become immortal, like Jupiter. Of course, she dies trying.

"*Semele* is a secular oratorio," continues Futral, "which means we're meant to just stand and sing it. But *Semele* really is extremely dramatic, the libretto is just fantastic, so it's not a stretch to play it all out. I say go for it. To me, what makes opera such a powerful art form is the acting. And the opportunity is there every night, every time. Either we seize that opportunity and make things dramatic, or we don't. I can't just stand there and sing. Well I can, but why? I love the challenge of trying to create drama. That's what I'm about."

Offstage too?

"God no," she yelps. "I'm very placid in my private life."

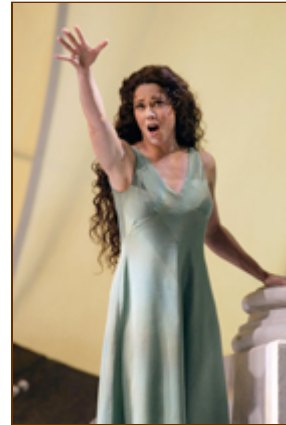
Raised in Louisiana, Futral studied at Alabama's Samford University before moving on to Indiana



The title role in Semele at NYCO, 2006

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The title role in Semele at NYCO, 2006



Richard Strauss's Daphne at NYCO, 2004

<http://www.operanews.org/uploaded/image/article/nycodaphnelg1107.jpg>

Richard Strauss's Daphne at NYCO, 2004

University's highly regarded music school. She entered Lyric Opera of Chicago's young-artist training program upon graduation from IU, and in 1991 won the Metropolitan Opera's National Council Auditions.

"I've never been based in New York," Futral points out. "I lived in Chicago until about a year ago, when my husband and I built a home in Southwestern Virginia, kind of in the middle of nowhere. Isolation? Well, we do have neighbors, but the closest grocery store is twenty-five miles away. I don't think not being in New York has had any impact at all, though, on my career. It was a choice I made. When I signed with my manager, I said, 'I do not want to move here. Can you live with that?' And he said, 'Yes, so long as you come whenever I need you to sing an audition.' 'I'll be there,' I said. And I have been."

In 1994, Futral grabbed a lot of attention in a widely praised City Opera production of Delibes's *Lakmé*. Over the next three years, she burnished her reputation as a singer of rarities, starring in Rossini's *Matilde di Shabran* at the Rossini Opera Festival in the composer's birthplace of Pesaro - the first production of the work in 175 years - and in Meyerbeer's *L'Etoile du Nord* at the Wexford Festival. Then, in 1998, André Previn chose her to be his Stella in *A Streetcar Named Desire*.

"*Streetcar* was big for so many reasons," marvels Futral. "The play, of course, is so well known, and André Previn's a pretty important guy, and Rodney Gilfry was in it, and that was important, and Renée Fleming was in it too, and *that* was important. You cannot imagine how much media there was swirling around. I was just kind of along for the ride. 'You want *me* to do an interview? Sure, I'll do an interview. You don't know who I am, but sure, I'll do one.' Until I found myself thinking, 'Golly! What if I had my *own* press agent taking advantage of all this?' Everybody in *Streetcar* seemed to have somebody or several somebodies handling them. 'Maybe you're not making the most of this,' I thought. So I tried it for a little while - signing with a New York-based, high-level PR person, whose name I won't mention. And things did come from that, like an article in *W* magazine, a daylong photo shoot - dress, hair, makeup, the whole deal. What was objectionable about that? Nothing, really. But I didn't like the article at all. It was frothy. Ultimately, for the money I was paying, I didn't think the publicity enhanced my career all *that* much - in fact, I didn't think it impacted my opera career at all. It made me a little more visible, a little more known in the non-operatic realm. But so what?"



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Futral's disinterest in the world of pop-culture is palpable - aside from a secret sweet-tooth for *Law and Order*-style cop shows that she guiltily admits to. ("I even auditioned for them once. They were looking for an opera singer to sing Lucia's mad scene and then murder her own daughter backstage. I didn't get it." Futral did play Lucia for real in her Met debut in 1999, and again at Washington National Opera in 2002.)

Futral's husband of seven years, Steven White, is an opera conductor (and former singer) with whom she regularly works. "Some opera singers are married to aliens," Futral smiles. "I chose not to be. I need to have people around who get what I do. Do I have any close friends outside the opera world? Yeah. Some. Do I have any friends who don't care about opera at all? Yeah. But they're not *close* friends" - she laughs - "probably. I do have some family members for whom opera is not the be-all - and I still love them."

Futral seems to define her future entirely in operatic terms. "How do I see the next ten years? I want to do Marguerite in *Faust*. I would love to do Anne Trulove in *The Rake's Progress*. There are several other Handels I'd love to do - *Alcina*, *Rodelinda* maybe. And some of the big Mozart parts - Donna Anna, for one." She pauses. "I'd also really love to sing Lulu. It's mesmerizing music to me, as a listener. It might just kill me as a singer. Part of the thing I love about my career is that I've gotten to do all styles and all periods - but with caution. I've tried not to sing anything that was too heavy or too complicated for me at that moment. Lulu is a good example. I've always wanted to sing Lulu, but I only believe I *can* sing Lulu now.

She shrugs. "I don't know if I ever will. If it's gonna happen, it's got to happen today, or yesterday, because it's really rangy, and I'm not going to have all those notes forever. But it's not up to me.

Generally, operas have been chosen for me by companies, by composers or by conductors. It's a combination. And they don't always come to me first. Lately it's been lovely to hear people actually say, 'What do you want to do?' I'm scheduled to do three things with New York City Opera over the next few years - *Semele*, which was brought to me, is the first. We haven't picked the others yet, but it will be a collaborative decision. I've got input."

This notion of controlling her own destiny is central for Futral. "I think that's the biggest thing singers are not taught, that there is a certain amount of control one has over one's career," she maintains. "When you're starting out, it just seems like everything is totally out of your control. 'Does anybody want me? Oh, *you* want me? Great! What do you want me for? Sure, I'll do that!' It seems like all the decisions are made for you, and you have no choice in the matter. Which is not exactly true. Because you *can* say no. If you only say yes to roles that are appropriate for you, then you're effectively stating, 'This is what I do. Call me for *this*.' You're typing yourself instead of letting them type you.



"What have I said no to? *Traviata* - several times over a period of years, before I finally did Violetta at Los Angeles Opera and Opera Colorado. It was a role that I knew and loved. 'I'm going to sing that one day,' I said. But I felt, 'I'm not smart enough yet. It's too big. Everybody knows it too well. I can't go out there and pretend I know what I'm doing - that worldly-wise, world-weary character she becomes - until I'm *ready* to pretend.'"

So there are times when Elizabeth Futral is, in fact, ready to pretend?

"Onstage, always. Offstage, I don't want to be presented as something that I'm not. I don't want things written about me that are not true. And it's very hard to control this once you get on that path."

Violetta in Los Angeles Opera's *La*Granted. But even after all the demurrals, doesn't every contemporary diva still silently aspire to Renée Fleming's career?
 © Robert Millard 2006

Elizabeth Futral laughs one last time. "No. Not me. I think that it's possible to have too much - too much at once, too much too soon. As an observer, as a colleague, I've seen them come, I've seen them go. I've seen them rule at the top, and I've seen them rule not at all. Can I give you names? Yes. But you can think of them too, I'm sure. I really am happy with how much I've gotten in my career and when I've gotten it. Crossover? I'm not averse to crossing over into certain areas. But only where I'm really comfortable. I don't want to put myself in the position of doing something that I won't be good at. I don't want to sound like an opera singer trying to be a musical-theater singer. And I don't want to make a jazz album. Others do. That's fine." □

BARRY SINGER's *new book*, *Alive at the Village Vanguard*, *has just been published by Hal Leonard Books.*

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