



Danielle de Niese in make-up for a Proms in the Park in England; during rehearsals with the Metropolitan Opera in New York, bottom

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STAR ON THE RISE

It has been a huge journey from *Young Talent Time* to the world's opera houses: Danielle de Niese tells **Jane Cornwell** she couldn't have done it without Australia

Danielle de Niese isn't quite ready for her close-up. A security guard is still on the way with the diamond necklace she left behind in rural Glyndebourne, a good two-hour drive from this luxury Knightsbridge hotel with its thick shagpile, edgy modern art and sweeping views of one of London's most privileged postcodes.

She had been busy getting ready when she locked the bling in a safe, out of reach of her two-year-old, whose eager little hands had been grabbing at everything shiny. Then she promptly forgot to bring it: "I really wanted to wear it with this dress for our photo shoot," says the internationally acclaimed Australian-American soprano in her sunny Californian twang. "Never mind; we can do the interview first. Cake?"

A silver high-tea stand filled with pastries, biscuits and other colourful, calorific treats sits on the table between us, the legacy of an Instagram session that de Niese, 38, has just done for the hotel. Like the maker of the jewels and the designer of her dress, a fabulous clingy number festooned with psychedelic swirls, the high-end establishment is one of several purveyors of luxury with whom the international singing star has, well, a special arrangement.

Brand ambassadors are nothing new, but they tend to be cherry-picked from the worlds of sport (David Beckham), film (George Clooney) and pop (Beyonce). Try as it may, opera has never been viewed as a bastion of cool. Or at least not until the genre-hopping, coloratura-wielding de Niese came along, blowing back the hair of audiences at top houses everywhere from London and New York to Vienna and Munich with her silvery lyric voice and nimble dance manoeuvres.

Now, finally, Australia will be privy to the fuss when the Melbourne-born diva makes her antipodean opera debut in a lively new Opera Australia production of *The Merry Widow*. As homecomings go, this one has been a long time coming.

"I've always made it clear to Opera Australia that I would move whatever I could to find a way to work with them," says de Niese, whose diary is booked a staggering five years ahead. "But going to Australia is not like popping over to Europe or even to New York. You need a couple of months or more. Plus I'm a mum now; I can't flit about like I used to."

De Niese was 19 when she made her debut at the Metropolitan Opera in New York as Barbara in a production of Mozart's *Le nozze di Figaro* directed by English auteur Jonathan Miller. A series of increasingly starry appearances across Europe were followed, at the Glyndebourne Festival in 2005, by the role that

would make her a household name among opera fans: an all-singing, all-dancing Cleopatra in David McVicar's production of Handel's *Giulio Cesare*.

De Niese's skimpily dressed portrayal (for which she trained, singing and running, on a treadmill) had critics waxing ecstatic. One drooled that she had put the sex into Sussex, a reference to the English home county where the annual opera soiree takes place. Oh, and indirectly, the Glyndebourne estate, in whose 17th-century manor house adjoining the auditorium de Niese happens to live.

Having reprised Cleopatra at the privately run Glyndebourne in 2006, and become involved with Gus Christie, third-generation owner and Eton-educated chairman of the Glyndebourne Festival Opera, she married him in 2009. The couple have reigned victorious over British opera ever since.

Switched on and savvy, more Markle than Middleton, de Niese has worked hard to make opera more accessible. The covers of her albums — recordings that range from her trademark Handel and Mozart arias to new pieces including a vocal arrangement of Karl Jenkins's *Palladium Suite* — capture a modern diva with fashion nous and a knowing gaze. A woman who centres herself by listening to top 40 hits through headphones before she steps onstage. Baroque and roll, indeed.

"Being an opera singer today goes far beyond opera sing-

ing," de Niese has said. Promotional tie-ins aside, her forays into other mediums variously include performing a song in Ridley Scott's 2001 thriller *Hannibal*, singing a duet with Mika on British TV show *From Popstar to Opera Star*, and collaborating with rapper LL Cool J at Carnegie Hall. Genre-crossing comes naturally to a woman who, as a teen, won an Emmy for her hosting skills on television talent program *LA Kids* — and who, aged nine, was the youngest winner of Australia's Ten Network series *Young Talent Time*, more of which later.

Going far beyond opera singing is all part of de Niese's cunning plan to lure non-opera lovers over to her art and challenge the purists, the fusty old guard who were appalled by, say, her role as kidnapped diva Roxanne Coss in *Bel Canto*, a 2015 adaptation of the best-selling Anne Patchett novel staged by the Lyric Opera of Chicago, and had conniptions over the LL Cool J hip-opera thing.

De Niese nods as she chooses a couple of pastries and pours from a white china teapot. "If there is going to be a classical singer in something that's not classical," she says, "then it should be a legitimate one who can represent. I'll take the knock for the benefit of reaching a different audience. You've got to put your money where your mouth is.

"I have lots of friends outside of opera who, after seeing me in something for the first time, say: 'Oh my god, I

never knew classical music was like this!' Honestly, if opera is done well it can be a life-enhancing experience."

She bites into a strawberry tart. "I would say to Australians that *The Merry Widow* is the perfect opera for those who still have those old stereotypes and mental barriers about opera. It's frothy, fun and beautiful but at its heart lies this universal story of the one that got away."

Ah yes, *The Merry Widow*. Penned by 19th-century Austro-Hungarian composer Franz Lehar, this Paris-set tale of a rich dowager and the attempts to find her a husband was the runaway hit of its day. Opera Australia's production of the operetta (think a lighter, more bite-sized opera) looks set to be similarly popular, what with choreography and direction from Graeme Murphy (late of the Sydney Dance Company), an English translation by Justin Fleming and more glitter, ballads, waltzes, silky fishtail gowns and dapper dress suits than you can shake a champagne flute at.

Opening in Melbourne next month, and heading to Sydney in the new year, it's a work with the feel-good vibe of a dance musical and the perfect, if unusually youthful, star to bring the title role to life.

"It is a really big deal for me to be coming back to Australia," says de Niese, who last visited our shores in 2012 as part of a national concert recital tour with the Australian Chamber Orchestra. "As a performer you give everything onstage and often you don't know what you're going to get in return, but when you go home you can feel the energy, people going: 'She's our girl, she's one of us.'"

"Because I have a mixed background I can sometimes feel like I belong nowhere," she continues, "but then I can also feel like I belong everywhere. I go to these places and they open their arms like this ..." De Niese mimics a hug, her dark eyes sparkling with tears.

"Australia gave me this huge chance, which makes me emotional because if I hadn't been given that chance ..." She shrugs, as if to say it doesn't bear thinking about.

One of two children born to Sri Lankan Burghers ("people of mixed descent from the island's colonial days") who arrived in Australia as teenagers, de Niese spent her early life in Glen Waverley in Melbourne's southeastern suburbs, singing before she could walk. Not just the usual coos, either: "My mother tells me I used to be able to sing back to her exactly what she'd sung, with perfect intonation."

Recognising their daughter's preternatural talent (and, later, the sporting prowess of her younger brother, who had tennis lessons with Peter McNamara), they enrolled her in Satur-

