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CHRIS DUNLOP



day classes at Tony Bartuccio's Dance School in Prahran ("tap, ballet, modern dance, jazz dance, everything") and found her a classical singing teacher willing to take on such a tiny charge. Aged seven, she got down to the final two for the role of Little Cosette in *Les Miserables* ("The other girl was at least nine or 10"). By age eight she was attending the Johnny Young Talent School and, a year later, pint-sized in buttercup yellow, belting out a Whitney Houston medley on Young's eponymous TV variety show.

It's all there, on YouTube: Young announcing de Niese as the winner, and presenting her with a baby grand piano. "Can you play? Play something, quick," he says as she scoots around to sit on the stool, then hesitates, fingers poised, thinking. But she's not fast enough, and the show has to end. Which is a shame, since de Niese had been studying piano, and was a dab hand at that as well.

But it was classical singing that appealed the most. Among the folk music albums and ABBA records in her parents' CD collection were discs by Luciano Pavarotti, Joan Sutherland and Kiri Te Kanawa (with whom de Niese would later do vocal training); her mother still has the picture the young Danni drew of herself dressed in a puffy ball gown, standing alone under a proscenium arch.

"By the age of eight, when it seemed like I could do just about anything, I already knew I wanted to be an opera singer," she says. "I was hooked from that first lesson with a classical voice teacher. Of all the things I could do, this was the most special and organic way of using my voice."

De Niese's almost superhuman ability wowed the judges of Australia's eisteddfods, the classical music competitions that offer children of all age groups a rare opportunity to perform

Now and then: de Niese, above, and on stage in Hyde Park during Proms in the Park, above left; appearing on *Young Talent Time* in 1988, inset

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DANIELLE DE NIESE

in public. Again and again de Niese won every singing category she entered: "Twelve and under, 13 and under, 15 and under, 18 and under." She counts them off on manicured fingers. "The judges kept having to get up and explain why they'd chosen this nine-year-old."

Back then there was nowhere in Australia that a kid of this calibre could train between the ages of ten and 18 ("I'd won all the eisteddfods up to adult age, I'd done commercials for Singapore Airlines and the Christian Television Association; I was like a celebrity at my school").

After her parents, who worked in the travel and health industries, put out feelers, a clutch of top US schools offered the Aussie prodigy a place. "They all said they could place me with a host family but there was no way that was going to happen."

When little Danni went to Los Angeles to attend the city's distinguished Colburn School of Performing Arts on a full scholarship, her family moved with her. "My mum always said to me: 'Dare to dream.' It's still my motto."

She shone from the get-go: there was a Disney ad, a slot on *LA Kids* as an "LA Kid of the Week", then that Emmy-winning stint as a presenter of the show. Aged 15, she made her operatic debut with the Los Angeles Opera. She was in her first year at the prestigious Mannes College of Music in New York when she was talent-spotted by a representative from the Met as she sang Susanna in *Le Nozze di Figaro*; she accepted a place in the Met Young Artists Studio, becoming the youngest singer to participate.

Precedents, then, have informed de Niese's life, which to outsiders, to this writer, as we sit in a luxury hotel sipping tea, eating cake and waiting for her jewels to turn up from the country pile in which she lives with her handsome older

Etonian husband and their son, Bacchus, might seem cosseted, blessed.

Which isn't to say that she hasn't worked her butt off; you don't get to speak French, Italian and German fluently, all before the age of 21, without fierce dedication. Or that she hasn't been hurt by adverse criticism: she has previously spoken about the times she cried in the lap of her mother (who she says is equally proud of her brother, who has a doctorate in pharmacy and lives in Beverly Hills) after being on the receiving end of rejections and brickbats.

With all de Niese's "first ever" achievements, most of them ticked off in childhood, it is easy to understand why critics sometimes expect a lot of her. And why she reasonably might think this unfair, given that an opera singer's voice continues to mature and develop into their fourth and even fifth decades.

De Niese's pregnancy changed hers: "It was heading that way anyway but I've spent two years dealing with this huge growth. Sometimes it feels like my voice is so big I can't move it like I used to. It's as if I'm running at a wall with this extra weight that won't let me get over it. Then at other times I recalibrate my air and understand the sensations I'm feeling and ..." Boom? "Boom!" she grins.

All of which means she can now tackle richer, heftier roles, such as Donna Elvira from Mozart's *Don Giovanni*, an aria she only began performing this year ("I'm mad about her, I want to sing it everywhere"), and Bizet's *Carmen*, which she debuted in October in Dubai. She's getting there, too, with Massenet's *Manon*, her dream role: "Very, very complex and demanding," she says. "But there's no rush. I'm waiting patiently. I'm on a long journey."

It won't be long, I say, before she has a dessert named after her, a la the peach Melba dish inspired by another Australian opera star, Dame Nellie Melba.

She pauses, smiles. "Hmm, maybe a banoffee pie. Toffee is in loads of Sri Lankan desserts and Gus and I shared a banoffee pie on our first date. Maybe they could call it Danoffee pie," she quips, looking pleased.

Interview over, and with the photographer setting up, there is still no security guard, no pricey necklace. "Oh I texted and cancelled," says de Niese, whose own sparkle more than compensates.

I'm on the way out when she stops me. "Coming back to Australia is a big deal for me, will you write that? The reason I am here is because Australia gave me those goes." She sweeps an arm around the room, taking in the view, the skyline and, by implication, her brilliant career. "Without Australia, this would all have been a different story."

De Niese as Cleopatra in Handel's *Giulio Cesare*, left and far left, at the Glynbourne Opera House

