

FEATURE

WAITING in the wings

WARREN BUGEJA interviews **Louiselle Pace Gouder**, an opera singer with prodigious talent who has only just been 'discovered'

ONE her mother, the other her mentor. The lives of two strong, altruistic women, both operatic singers, both having sacrificed their art for love, cross paths in the ascending talent of Louiselle Pace Gouder. Humble, intelligent, inquisitive and philosophical, this shy, sparkling-eyed, petite debutante has taken more than 30 years to finally acknowledge her talent. Now it's time for the rest of Malta to sit up and take note.

Fresh from her first solo recital last June at the Caraffa Stores in conjunction with the Caravaggio exhibition, Louiselle is still reeling from the overwhelming emotional response of the audience.

"I'll remember it all my life. After the performance some people asked for my autograph. I couldn't believe it. I kept on asking if they were sure they wanted it."

In shock and incredulous, that night Louiselle wasn't able to sleep, but the next day she "felt a deep sense of well-being, that this was what I was meant to be doing".

The recital came totally out of the blue after someone heard her singing an Ave Maria at a wedding. Together with Antoinette Miggiani, her mentor, and Romina Morrow, her pianist, Louiselle worked hard for months perfecting her pieces, not going out, paranoid that she would catch cold or that cigarette smoke would affect her voice.

Audience adulation isn't something she takes lightly. "I'm my worst critic, a bit of a *fitta*, a perfectionist. When I do something, I wouldn't do it if I thought I wasn't good enough. I wouldn't present myself."

She was exposed to opera from a very early age. In her mum's womb to be exact. A very unexpected addition to the family, she is the youngest of six children. Her mum, Lillian, "my main supporter", was 47 years old when she found herself pregnant with Louiselle. A lyrical soprano in her own right, Lillian had sung locally with maestros Pace, Nani and Bizazza as well as abroad. Miggiani remembers her singing. They now hold hands at her daughter's recitals.

Lillian had even been offered a role in *Caterina Desguanez*, an opera which Maestro Pace had just written, but she refused to do it feeling that it would be more than she could take on. She decided instead to leave the stage and dedicate the rest of her life to Louiselle.

Louiselle remembers her mum telling her she had a good voice and should do something with it. "Don't hold back", she would tell her. "She follows me around to all I do, and cries at every performance." For this mother who gave up her own art, Louiselle's voice is her own "joy of living".

"What I have is due to my parents. I wasn't spoilt, I had a lot of discipline, but my parents always praised me, they brought me up to be who I was meant to be."

Louiselle isn't short on praise either, for dad Frank, now deceased: "My father was a man who never uttered a word of criticism, I never ever heard him swear, he never hurt anyone, never raised his voice. He had a lot of tolerance for everyone. He was a good man."

As a child, Louiselle played to the wafings of arias grinding on old long plays. Giuseppe di Stefano, Maria Callas, all the great tenors and operas. "I would



HIGH NOTE: Louiselle Pace Gouder, seen here rehearsing, was extremely well received in her first solo recital recently.

just be there and learn whole acts of opera by heart."

An excellent student, she eventually graduated from university and now works as an auditor for Deloitte and Touche.

Finally, after completing her studies, she listened to her mum and joined the *Amadeus Chamber Choir*, modestly occupying the back row. Only upon the repeated insistence of a girl sitting next to her in the choir, pointing out that she had the voice of a soloist, was Louiselle even made aware of her talent.

"I will always be grateful to that girl. She made me set out to see if it was true and to do something about it. I wanted people to discover me; I don't find it natural to promote myself. I was even hesitant, as you know, about this interview. Now I understand that if you have a talent you should tell people about it. It's a sort of duty you have, but it took me a long time to believe this."

Enter Aerios Jones, a Welsh mezzo soprano, at the time one of the main teachers in Malta at The Johann Strauss School of Music, who encouraged Louiselle to study vocal technique. Appearances with the orchestra at the school were soon followed by invitations to sing at weddings, Masses and other events. Louiselle, furthermore, sings as a soloist with the New Choral Singers choir.

"When I started to appear in public my heart used to beat really fast, but now that has already gone. You really need to perform in front of people. Each time you perform you are growing as a person and learning more about your art."

Miggiani echoes this train of thought ardently. "The Manoel Theatre needs to give a lot more prominence to Maltese talent," she says. "They do this with drama; look at all the local talent. But why

don't they do this with opera. It's always the same people."

Budding singers, she stresses, need to have experience on stage. "How long can they go on studying and singing between four walls?"

She blames the prevalent Maltese tradition of homing in on one singer, elevating them way beyond their talent to the high heavens and sticking to them like mud. "This is not honesty to me. There's place and a chance for everybody and students can work together", not isolated by the piques of their tutors.

Two years ago Louiselle decided to pursue her musical odyssey privately. She contacted Miggiani and a strong bond was formed.

Miggiani was immediately struck by Louiselle's voice. "She has a very dramatic, beautiful voice with a most outstanding quality. There are no breaks in her voice and the quality never varies or changes. It's very rich with an extensive range. She will eventually be a very good dramatic soprano. Definitely!"

A friend, an inspiration, Miggiani is more than a teacher to Louiselle. "She's a second mum, I respect her a lot, I really feel she wants the best for me."

International success was snatched away twice from Miggiani, even before her tasting of it. She was barely 17, already something of an operatic protege with 70 arias under her belt when she began studying with Cantoni. Immediately, recognising her talent, he introduced her to Toscanini who wanted her to be Maria Callas's understudy. Heady stuff for an unworlly teenager.

Sadly this was not to be. Before formal arrangements could be set into motion,

both Cantoni and Toscanini died within a short time of each other. Later, in 1970, on the brink of her debut at the Metropolitan in New York, just as she was exiting her taxi at the airport, her mother suffered a stroke that left her bedridden and in a coma. Antoinette caught the taxi back home, phoned up the Metropolitan to cancel her future, and against the pleading of her father decided to devote herself full time to looking after her parents, insisting that they would be cared for in their own home until they died.

Fate can be cruel, but Miggiani has no regrets. "I had always had this vocation to be a missionary, so I decided that instead of ministering to foreigners I would be a nurse to my parents. I did it out of love for my parents, who had always supported me not out of sacrifice."

Right now the two are working on material for upcoming concerts scheduled for October, December and April.

Does Louiselle see herself taking up music full time?

"I think I will see what it brings. Wherever this road takes me I'm ready to accept it with open arms. My heart is there for sure. Until now I've met with a lot of positivity, both from fellow musicians and from audiences. If my singing gives joy to others it's enough. That is the scope of it all."

Ms Pace Gouder will be singing tonight and tomorrow at 6.15 p.m. at Balluta church. She will be performing three of Fr Daniel Sammut's compositions, an Ave Maria, a Lauda Sion and a Flos Carmeli, commemorating the Feast of Our Lady.