

Published in The Weekender, a Times of Malta Weekly Supplement

July 24, 2004.



Focus on Louisselle Pace Gouder, prodigious opera singer who shuns the limelight and her mentor Antoinette Miggiani

Unedited full length version:

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 Louisselle Pace Gouder. Humble, intelligent, inquisitive and philosophical. This shy, sparkling blue-eyed, petite protégé has taken 34 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, Louisselle 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 Louisselle 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 Miss Antoinette Miggiani her mentor and Dr Romina Morrow her pianist, Louisselle 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 Louisselle takes lightly. "I'm my worst critic a bit of a 'fitta', a perfectionist, *jeqirdu nies bhali*. Whatever I do in my life, I try to think about it, why I'm doing it, I don't want to do things just for the sake of them. That would be meaningless."

Is she too good for the industry?

"I think I have to be myself. I don't want to become someone else just because I'm in this you know. And then what happens, happens. If you are wise enough and there's enough awareness in you as a person you can learn how to protect yourself. I think you have to focus on your path and your journey. As long as you do things to the best of your ability, I don't think you have to think too much of what people can do to you." In fact she laughs, "I don't think I know too much about what other people in this field are doing."

“When I do something, I wouldn’t do it if I thought I wasn’t good enough. I wouldn’t present myself. I have to feel I can do something *mhux biex nidher*.”

Louiselle was exposed to opera from a very early age. Her mum’s womb to be exact. A very unexpected addition to the family, Louiselle is the youngest of six children. Her Mum, Lillian was 47 years old when she found herself pregnant with Louiselle. A lyrical (higher register, more agile voice) soprano in her own right, Lillian with the full support of her husband, had sung locally with Maestros Nani and Bizazza as well as abroad. Although older than herself, Miggiani remembers Lillian singing. They now hold hands at Louiselle’s recitals.

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

*“Kanta min qalbek Lou, ghax ghandek biex.. toqghodx lura.”*

“My mum is my main supporter, I remember her always telling me that I had a voice and that I should do something with it.” “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” . “If I’m singing at a mass, she will sit on the very last row” invariably, recounting to her daughter that she had heard her singing “as if you were next to me.”

“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 Pace Gouder, now sadly 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.”

“I think that I always knew there was this voice, I just never thought of studying it.”

Louiselle played to the waftings of arias grinding on old long plays. Giuseppe di Stefano, Maria Callas, all the great tenors and operas. “I would just be there and learn whole acts of opera by heart. Aged eleven, Louiselle recalls memorizing the whole of act four of Rigoletto, “I had learnt all the parts, not just the soprano but the tenor and chorus too. I remember liking the tenor arias most.”

Louiselle was more oriented towards academic subjects. A diligent student she eventually graduated from University, chose a profession and now works as an auditor for Deloitte and Touche. “It’s true that music is based on mathematical principals but singing has nothing to do with auditing. Singing is an expression, it’s an art”, she laughs.

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 to believe this.”

“Until a few months ago even people who were quite close to me didn’t even know that I sung. I didn’t think that it was something that had to come up in a conversation.”

Enter Aerios Jones, a Welsh mezzo soprano, then, one of the principal teachers in Malta at The Johann Strauss School of Music. She instantly encouraged Louiselle to study vocal technique at the school which Louiselle did for four years, continually surprised by the positive feedback

she received. "For a long time the people around me believed in me more than I did." In school productions she was always given soloist parts concentrating mostly on light Italian operas and the chorals of Bach. "You don't do all the heavy material first, you have to progress slowly to protect your voice. I read somewhere that singing is like a sport and uses your voice in the same way an athlete uses his body. It's very biological, all your body comes into play, the abdomen, throat, diaphragm, face and mind. There is this expression I once read in Italian which roughly translates to 'singing on the breath is like dancing on your toes'."

Appearances with the Orchestra at the school of Music were soon followed by invitations to sing at weddings, various masses, University, The Chamber of Commerce, Lija Church, St Patrick's and just prior to Caraffa, at Sedqa. 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."

Miss 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." Miggiani 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 Miss Miggiani and a strong bond was formed.

Miss 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!"

The compliment is reciprocated. Louiselle's encounter with Miss Miggiani was a very important milestone for her. "Through Miss Miggiani, I feel I'm beginning to mature as a singer. . Everyone knows how good she is but when I leave from being with her I feel enriched. She's a person who adds on to you . She had made me believe even more in myself."

A friend, an inspiration, Miss 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."

At present Louiselle attends lessons twice weekly with Miss Miggiani. There she studies singing technique, expression and repertoire. The technique, Miggiani explains depends entirely on the individual. "Everybody has a different mask and stature." The given voice is placed differently and the teacher has to adapt themselves to the voice whether it be soprano, contralto, collatura mezzo-soprano and so on. This may involve correcting a nasal voice or a pupil who sings on the throat.

Right now Miggiani and Louiselle are working on material for upcoming concerts scheduled for October, December and January. Miggiani is trying as much as possible to help Louiselle expose her voice to the general public.

"We have been working on easy arias, some Bellini and I have been introducing sacred works to Louiselle". "Everytime I studied a role it became my favourite role", Miggiani says, Louiselle nods agreeing, "but I have always loved singing sacred works. I always sing in a sacred way and Louiselle does too." Miggiani is a regular fixture at the 12 o'clock Sunday mass at Stella Maris

where she tries to taper and tone down the dramatic timbre of her voice, not always successfully to the sombre of the Maltese hymns she hardly chants. At mass haloed by a black veil, now slightly stooping but nevertheless majestic and distant she seems to cry back from a bygone era. Her eyes light up. "When you see me at mass on Sundays, you have no idea how much I sing those hymns from my heart."

Louiselle can sing in Italian, English, French and Maltese. She is currently taking a refresher course in French at the Alliance Francaise, and will do "whatever needs to be done" to learn a song. "If I need to learn a song in German, I'll go to lessons, learn the pronunciation, learn the words in German and learn their meaning."

Up till now she has sung mainly in Latin but likes singing old Italian Arias. Singing "even just one opera in my life", preferably Santuzza's role in 'Cavaliere Rusticana', would be Louiselle's "ultimate dream." However Louiselle is happy with whatever she is offered to do. "It's already so much of a surprise to be doing it (singing) that every small thing I do is already something very big for me

But at 34 has Louiselle already missed the boat? "It's never too late "when Louiselle came to me there weren't too many defects in her voice, she sings naturally." A singer is born a singer, It's a God given gift. No one can give you a voice. A teacher can show you how to sing, give you technique, breath control and discipline on stage." At the age of 66, Antoinette's voice is still going strong. Teaching means constant practice. "My breath control is even better than ever." If you don't constantly sing and practice the throat muscles slacken and the vocal chords "go berserk". "You won't be able then, to reach your high notes." It goes without saying that the singer must abstain from smoking, drinking, and "lead a healthy, honest life", if they want to preserve their voice.

Antoinette's voice matured at the age of 10 and it has "the same quality now as it did then. Most probably Louiselle's did too as her voice is very much like mine."

The problem it seems is not taking singing up at a later age but too soon. Miggiani is refuses to accept students under 16 years old and then only maybe at 15 "If the voice is very exceptional." Because of the maturity of the vocal chords and diaphragm,"You can ruin a voice if it is undeveloped" and has not reached full puberty. "It can break, lose either the top and middle register." The results are catastrophic. So Louiselle is safe there but does Louiselle have what it takes to make it internationally?

"If you want to take singing up seriously you have to leave everything, the choirs the day job everything. It's hard for today's emergents as they have to hold down a job so all of them take a very long time to study and reach international standard.." "The only thing I can say for Louiselle is that with her beautiful voice, she can go a long way if she works hard, if she studies. She already is good enough to sing in public."

The only criticism Miggiani levels at Louiselle is that she underestimates herself, "There's no need or her to be like that." "Louiselle is very shy but not on stage, I was surprised in fact, but I would like her to take up drama ". Louiselle needs to extend her repertoire and build upon her technique

Musicianship may be taught but the world of opera is no stranger to the cut-throat machinations of the media promotion machine. Competition is fierce and it is no longer acceptable for singers to shuffle their weight about woodenly on stage, belting their guts out Modern opera going audiences demand acting talent and attractive appearances although a top notch voice can still according to Miggiani, get away with both. Yet, personality and drive are essential to making it on the international scene. What did Mick Jagger say of Madonna? "A drop of talent in an ocean of ambition." Having said that in opera unlike pop, you can't get away with having no voice, "*xeba tadam*".

Miss Miggiani's demeanour is regal and tall. She reminds me of a stately oak tree and with a greying bouffant hairdo that has hardly changed from the framed 60's portraiture that greets me in her parlour she towers over Louiselle who in her calm self-possessed way still manages to hold her ground. Louiselle is deceptively meek. But this young lady has roots and an outlook on life as firmly earthed as Miss Miggiani's.

You might be forgiven for mistaking her polished grace for haughtiness and I'm sure that Miggiani remains misunderstood but for the people who actually meet her. Yes she may be dramatic. I suppose an Opera singer is by their very nature flamboyant in gesture. It is sort of an entitlement. In the flesh Miss Miggiani is faultlessly courteous, assertive not bossy, genuine, warm and unexpectedly she possesses a strong sense of humour. She laughs often throughout the interview.

International success was snatched away twice from Miss Miggiani, even before her tasting of it. She was barely 17, already something of an operatic protegee with 70 arias under her belt when she began studying with Cantoni. Immediately, recognising her talent, he introduced her to Toscanini who wanted Miggiani to be Maria Callas' understudy. Heady stuff for an unworldly 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. Miggiani survived her disappointment, in fact wasn't given much time to dwell on it, because soon after leaving Malta in 1958, attending the Royal Academy and winning first prize in competition in Liverpool she was snapped up under contract to Covent Garden. There her nickname was "Midget", given that most of her contemporaries were over a decade older than her. In fact she wasn't allowed to drink wine or champagne but given coca cola or coffee to drink at glamorous premiere parties. A whirlwind of events and concerts later – "I didn't know what was happening to me" she enthuses. "If my father hadn't asked friends of his abroad for copies of reviews and press cuttings, I would have no record of that time" - including engagements in Germany, a sojourn in Paris studying roles with Anne Howard and Robert Bickerstaff, and a stint understudying at La Scala. Antoinette hit the big apple. Intending to stay for six weeks, her reception was so enthusiastic, she stayed for nine months, concert following concert and performing 'Andrea Chenier' with Frank Corelli at the Seattle Opera house. She was soon taken up by Jenny Tourel and Leonard Bernstein who forwarded her to the Metropolitan Opera House. There she successfully sat for two auditions. At the time the Metropolitan was undergoing refurbishment intending to open seven months later with a new company and new singers. Miggiani was hotly tipped to be one of them replacing Zinka Milanov. She was to sit for her last and final audition "which was going to be the IT!", a mere formality on her return. Miggiani, an only child, decided to wait out the interim back home in Malta where she was eager to return to see her mum (who had had two strokes) and her doting dad (who was blind). But Lady Luck's smile chose to wane just as her star was shining so brightly. On the 17th of April 1970, on the brink of her debut, just as she was exiting her taxi on the way to the airport and onto America, her Mother suffered a stroke that left her bedridden and in a coma. Antoinette got the taxi back home, phoned up the Metropolitan cancelling 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 Antoinette 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." This elusive yoyo-ing with destiny, almost there but not, features in Miggiani's personal life too. "I had never thought of getting married, it didn't have any place in my vocation but I was going to get married on three occasions", once indeed precariously close "everything was ready." The wedding was called off just three months before the date.

Miggiani does have one compunction though. Although she feels proud to have sang as a soloist for the works of local Maestros such as Nani, Pace, Sammut, Joe Vella and Dion Buhagiar, she feels she was not given the local opportunities to showcase her talent. Round the clock caring for her parents prevented Miggiani from travelling abroad between 1971 and 1991, so she was dependent on local promotion.

"I never sang anything that I would have liked to and was capable of singing, like Tosca, Trovator or Aida, which I had studied for overseas. They didn't give me suitable parts, I was only given difficult pieces to sing and prepare for within 10 days, when a foreign singer couldn't come over. That really hurt. I had proven I was of international standard." But not good enough to sing locally apparently, a dilemma our national inferiority complex leads us to believe that foreign is always better.

"The disappointment wasn't mine but I wanted my blind father to hear me singing locally, so that he wouldn't think I had left my career go to waste to look after him".

"The Maltese (musical presumably) Authorities have murdered your talent". That's what some of my foreign friends always say to me. "I expected them -the authorities- to come knowing *x'insarra* . I would never have applied to sing for an audition at The Manoel. I wasn't of that calibre, as they engaged foreign artistes they could have engaged me."

Rubbing salt into already sore wounds is the allegation by a well known personage in the opera scene, who Miggiani refuses to mention, that her appointments at Convent Garden and the Metropolitan were pure fabrications. Miss Miggiani, understandably given the sacrifice entailed in her career, wags her forefinger indignantly high in the air. "They are trying to make me out to be a liar, but I have nothing to lose now, the truth has to come out, this is an assault on my reputation." Via a third person, Miss Miggiani genteelly invited the person concerned to tea at her house "so that they could see the original contracts for themselves, but they declined to attend." she postulates. I feel admonished.

Although teaching is Miggiani's full-time job nowadays, her voice is still very much appreciated in certain circles. Two years ago she was asked to give a two hour recital at the German Embassy and recently on a pilgrimage to Lourdes with the Knights of St. John she was invited to sing the 'Ave Maria' in the Au Flambeaux and later to sing again in the Latin Mass much to her pleasure. Highlights in her career include singing for the Queen in 1967 and later for her son Prince Charles in 1971. She has also given recitals for the Duchess of Gloucester and the Earl of Harwood.

When she is not trilling some arietta, Antoinette spends her time cooking, gardening, reading and going out for walks. Unusually, she lists doing her housework as a hobby. She also collects medals. Local recognition albeit belated, came when she was awarded the 'Medal of the Republic' in 2001, 'The Culture Award' bestowed by the Ministry of Culture and a 'Medal of Merit' by the confederation of councils. Earlier, in 1994 she was made an associate of the Royal Academy of Music.

Louiselle's time management is dizzying. In addition to all her commitments and we've mentioned a lot, she found extra time to follow a volunteer course with the social work agency, Appogg this year besides signing up to join a future committee with the National Council of Women. She also took a course in Philosophy, a subject she adores at the Practical Philosophy School in Valletta. How does the girl do it?

"I'm interested a lot in learning. I feel enthusiasm when I'm learning new things and I never want to stop learning in my life whatever it is. It's what keeps me happy she says". "I'm one of those people for whom happiness does not just come from getting married and having children. I don't think that is the most a person could hope to achieve for." she continues. "Self actualization is what gives you the most happiness and I really feel it's a pity we are not all oriented towards that when we are growing. "Maybe for many people" though Louiselle concedes, "it is loving their family that is self-actualisation." "Loving their children is what gives them greatest person."

Occasionally throughout the interview, Louiselle worries that maybe she is too feeling oriented, she mentions "thinking too much.", "Perhaps it's because I have older parents or you are born like that", she muses. "I don't know, though even when I was a teenager, all the other girls were

interested in going to pubs. With me if there was a political issue, I would get right into it, deeply involved.”

She keeps fit by walking and always makes time for her friends. “I like being with people” She has had boyfriends but doesn’t look for a man to validate her life. Probably because of her lack of neediness in that department she is not short of admirers who are attracted to her very approachable ‘goodly’ nature but maybe fearful of her independence. I ask her if her musical preferences place her apart from her peers but she is quick to point out that abroad “you find a trendier younger age group following classical music.” Whilst locally she has seen a transition from attending the opera as a youth with its stigmata of mothballs and old fur coats to younger faces in the boxes and more relaxed tailoring in the stalls. “I think I’ve created a strong sense of awareness amongst my friends about classical music.” Louiselle grins “I’m brainwashing them a bit. At first they just come to support and encourage me but then they find they find, they actually like what they hear.” “I think sometimes we don’t give ourselves a chance. We don’t like something until we expose ourselves to it.”

It’s not all opera for Louiselle. She likes pop music when it’s melodious and when the lyrics are sentimental. She has always listened to Italian pop music and was thrilled to see Eros Ramazzotti in concert recently. Would she be persuaded to do Eurovision? “I don’t think so, my voice isn’t really suited to it, unless *forsì* a really nice ballad. hmmm.” Not convinced despite the operatic inclinations of this year’s offering.

“You know these people who write books on self-development and what they say about believing in your dreams, trusting life, doing your bit -then the door opens and things really happen. It’s not just in the books, it’s true! I’m living it’s reality. You open the door, you give your best, you work very hard. Of course you have to be disciplined and determined. Things don’t happen on their own but in the end Life gives you a lot back. People when they see true passion and love for what you are doing, are very receptive. I have found that they are ready to give you an opportunity.”

“In the end singing is not about yourself so much, it’s about giving what you have inside to others. That’s what makes me do it. Now I’ve realised it’s a passion in my life.

I’m sure that each person has talents. It could be simple like being kind to others or loving others. Each one of us has been given a lot, and I’m sure that not everyone lives their life in a manner that they are open to discovering what’s inside them. I think that unfortunately, in the main, we are all brought up to be stereotypes, we are all conditioned by the world around us, by society. You have to be a bit bold to be different. Maybe some people don’t even wish for this.”

“I feel I’ve found out my passion in life. Not everyone manages to discover that. I don’t think I would do it just for myself. I’m not that type of person, just for my ego. It’s been given to you free of charge. You don’t really have to work to get it your natural voice obviously. There’s a lot of hard work and discipline to maintain it in its proper state which I’m very determined to do. And then there’s the musicianship to sing the pieces properly the way they were meant to be sung by the composer. I really think that singing and whatever performing you are doing comes from respect towards yourself, towards this gift that you’ve been given, towards the composer who has written the pieces. You have to really respect him and try to perform the pieces in the best way possible, according to how he meant them to be performed, and above all to the audience who are listening to you.”

One composer Louiselle has tremendous respect for is Fr.. Daniel Sammut a Carmelite priest with whom she studies ‘Solfeggio’ and musical harmony, also on a twice weekly basis. She met Fr.. Sammut two years ago, introduced by her brother, an active parishioner within the Balluta church. Besides being coached in theory of Music by Fr.. Daniel, guides Louiselle as a soloist with the Balluta St. Jude Choir.”

“Fr.. Daniel is one of the most humble and docile men I know. He has never made himself known. He gives so much and expects nothing in return.” His music, including several masses and an oratorio; the ‘Song of Esther’, most of it, never previously played in public can be found at The Cathedral Museum in Mdina and at the Wignacourt Museum in Rabat. This unassuming man has Licenciates from Trinity College and The Guilford School of Music and an Associate from the London School of music. Shunning the limelight (he didn’t want to be interviewed, but encouraged Louiselle) Fr.. Sammut wants to spend the remainder of his old age “tranquilly composing.”

That is if Louiselle will let him, “I think it’s really important to promote Maltese composers and I would like to sing more of Fr.. Daniel’s work.” You can catch Louiselle singing three of Fr.. Sammut’s composition’s, an Ave Maria, A Lauda Scion and a Flos Carmeli, tomorrow and Sunday the 24th and 25th of July at 18.15 at Ballutta Church commemorating the Feast of Our Lady.

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.”

“In a way I’ve been lucky. 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.”