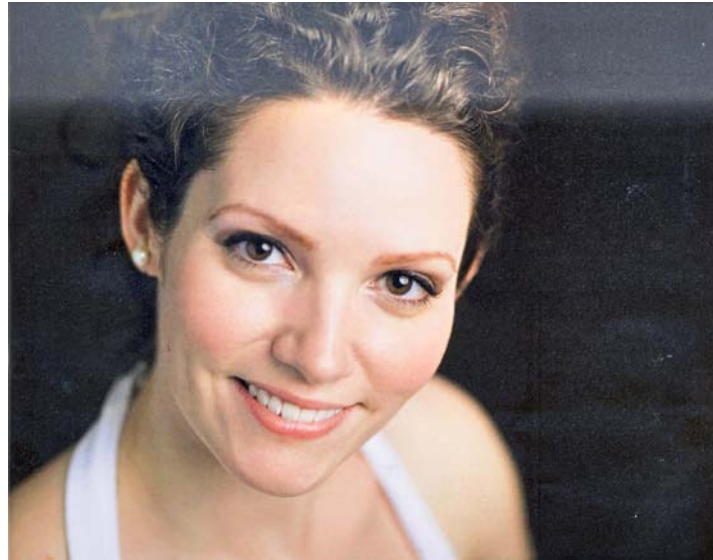


Artists on Stage



Mireille Asselin

Given her gorgeous light lyric soprano, alabaster complexion, movie-star looks and delightful stage persona, one would think Canadian soprano Mireille Asselin is a “natural” in the music business. But her success in a still-young career is the result of a lot of hard work. Growing up, Asselin seriously contemplated a career in science: “My whole life, I thought I was going into microbiology.”

But the lure of the arts proved too strong. Asselin admits to being rather stubborn by nature and relishes the challenge. “School was easy for me and I did well, but the discipline of learning to be a singer was so much more of a challenge. I was a shy kid, and singing forced me to address some fundamental insecurities and made me grow as a person.”

Those who saw her Servilia and Galatea for Toronto-based Opera Atelier praised her sweet lyric sound and affecting characterization. Now completing her first year as a member of the Canadian Opera Company Ensemble Studio, she is receiving important assignments. She shared the role of Semele with fellow Ensemble soprano Ambur

Braid in a special performance in May, and for the 2012/13 season has been given two plum assignments, the saucy maid, Adele, in *Die Fledermaus* and the virtuous Servilia in Mozart’s *La clemenza di Tito*.

Ottawa-born Asselin spent her childhood in the small Acadian town of Quispamsis, just outside Saint John, New Brunswick. The daughter of a Québécois father and American mother, she was drawn to singing very early. “I was three, and my parents gave me a tape recorder. I would record and sing along with every ditty and jingle I heard, mostly Disney songs. I was a very loud toddler.” Showing an affinity for the arts, she was given piano lessons, sang in the school choir and had her first voice lesson in Grade 5. After moving back to Ottawa, Asselin attended an arts high school there and got her first real taste of the stage. “We did *Roméo et Juliette* and *Carmen*,” she recalls. “What’s really funny is that Philippe Sly [a fellow COC Ensemble member last year] was in that show as well, the only thing we did together before both showing up at the COC.” Asselin continued her studies at the Royal Conservatory of Music in Toronto, first with Donna Sherman and later with soprano Monica Whicher. Asselin expresses much gratitude to Whicher, who took on the all-important role of teacher/mentor/therapist/best friend. Whicher, for her part, also thought highly of her student. When Asselin performed Handel’s *Nine German Arias with Continuo* for her RCM graduation recital

before entering the Master’s program at Yale, Whicher gave her a precious score in a touchingly symbolic passing of the torch; the score had been autographed and given to Whicher years ago by her own teacher, Lois Marshall.

Asselin has given a lot of thought already about her upcoming assignments. Vocally, Adele and Servilia fit her voice like a glove. More of a challenge is how to make these characters come alive. Asselin doesn’t see Adele as empty-headed: “I’d like to portray her as someone who’s smart and talented. In “Mein Herr Marquis,” she manages to manipulate Eisenstein and not blow her cover. I’d like to think of her that way. It makes her more interesting to play.” As for Servilia, Asselin says: “she’s a good girl, virtuous, the woman on the pedestal, the porcelain doll. But when you think of how calm and elegant she is under pressure, in the aria she sings to Vitellia to convince her to save Sesto, Servilia has so much strength of character. She’s got all the elegance and class that Vitellia doesn’t have, even though Vitellia is more powerful. You see in Servilia the woman who would be empress because she’s graceful and strong.” As Asselin’s voice continues to develop, a few dream roles beckon: “Semele—absolutely! I would love to do *Le nozze di Figaro* Susanna again, and Dorinda in Handel’s *Orlando* and Morgana in *Alcina*. I’d love to do Anne Trulove, and I absolutely adore Manon. Maybe many years from now.” —Joseph So