

Dazzling Divas

Women Who Will **Live** and **Create** at the Long Center

Edited by Julie Tereshchuk

We salute the opening of the Long Center for the Performing Arts this month with profiles of four dazzling Austin-based artistes. Each is graced with a talent matching the superb new surroundings that each of their respective organizations – the Austin Lyric Opera, Austin Symphony, Ballet Austin and Conspirare – will soon enjoy. Go and see them perform. But, take heed. Your senses may never be the same again.



Ken Howard

Liz Cass



Katherine O'Brien Photography

Jessica Mathaes



Tony Spielberg

Allisyn Paino



Korey Howell Photography

Nina Revering

A black and white close-up portrait of Liz Cass, a woman with short dark hair, smiling warmly at the camera. She is wearing a dark jacket and a necklace. The background is softly blurred.

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Liz Cass of Austin Lyric Opera

This songbird transforms notes into art, and young singers into artists.

Story by Sue Durio
Photo Courtesy of Liz Cass

Rising Austin Lyric Opera star Liz Cass has her own pre-performance routine: “I do some stretching, eat a banana, do a few warm-ups about three hours before the performance and just try not to get too mental.”

“**R**IDE THAT HIGH END OF THE PALETTE,” COAXES the voice instructor to the aspiring 16-year-old vocal performer before her. “Did you feel how you were spinning that top note?...You have five notes there, really embrace that.”

Tucked away in a small rehearsal room at Armstrong Community Music School on this Thursday morning, the two tweak every vocal nuance, breath and vowel just as they have weekly for the past three years. It’s that intense commitment to perfecting the details that has turned the young woman at the piano, Elizabeth (she goes by Liz) Cass, into an Austin Lyric Opera phenom and a sought-after vocal coach.

The 32-year-old mezzo-soprano arrived on the Austin classical music scene three years ago, bringing an impressive resume of stage performances and training. The daughter of concert pianist Richard Cass, Cass said music was an integral part of her Kansas City childhood. “At age five, I started taking violin lessons, and my mom tried to teach me piano, which I wouldn’t have,” she laughed. But while listening to a singer perform one day, Cass said, “I thought, now I could do that.”

And do that, she has. At 14, she began voice lessons with Rebecca Folsom, now at the Boston Conservatory. “I knew I wanted to sing, and that kept me centered growing up,” she said. However,

instead of pursuing a music degree in college, she opted initially to study psychology at the University of Missouri, Kansas City. What she thought was a casual audition for the university choir turned out to be a life-changing moment. Cass landed a spot in the UMKC Conservatory of Music’s top choir – no easy feat for even a seasoned music major. The accomplishment opened eyes around campus – including her own – to her talent.

After her first year of college, Cass transferred to the Conservatory’s vocal performance school where she sought out the best training available, eventually graduating with a bachelor’s in vocal performance. “I chose a professor in college who

was an excellent technician, Inci Bashar, whom I had heard about growing up,” said Cass, who quickly learned how demanding the field would be. “One day in class, I hadn’t translated my German, and she called me out on it,” she said with a smile now. “It was a turning point for me.”

Early performances with the Aspen Music Festival, Seagle Music Colony (“my first big performance”) and in the role of Hermia in the Kansas City production of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* – helped prepare her for the stress of auditioning and rigor of performing. “Hermia was a big audition for me, and I was able to get past my fear,” said Cass, who recently auditioned for the New York Metropolitan Opera. “I’ve learned to just concentrate on my love of singing. I try not to

rock band, She Craves. Meeting Brown was the catalyst for Cass to move to Austin.

As she has since arriving here, Cass juggles ALO rehearsals and performances with her job as education program coordinator and voice instructor at the Armstrong School. In addition to planning the school’s events and coordinating space usage, she teaches a dozen students, many who’ve studied with her since she moved to Austin. One of her favorite things to do in her limited free time is to attend performances by her students. She can also be found relaxing with yoga and taking the occasional long walk.

“Here, I’m doing a lot of things I really care about,” said Cass of her day job. “The more I teach, it makes me a

“I’ve learned to just concentrate on my love of singing. I try not to get too mental. I get plenty of rest and let the adrenaline do the rest.”

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It is a formula that evidently works, as Cass has landed performing roles in cities across the country. She began her career singing and teaching voice with the Kansas City Lyric Opera. She soon was invited to the young artist programs in Shreveport and later, Fort Worth. “We traveled the entire state to privileged and not-so-privileged schools doing performances,” said Cass, a strong proponent of introducing children early on to the performing arts. “It was eye-opening.”

It’s unlikely that Cass could be criticized for her lack of preparation today. For her upcoming role as *Carmen’s* Mercedes in the Austin Lyric Opera’s premiere Long Center performance in April, Cass began intense preparation in January. “I’ve done the role of Mercedes before, so I’m going back to learn the notes, translate the entire thing and study Flamenco dance,” she said. Though fluent in multiple languages including French, no doubt Cass will brush up on her French diction as well.

Cass is part of an all-music household. Husband of three years Tim Brown plays bass in the high-energy

better singer because I have to go back to the ABCs. I have to hearken back to things my teachers said to me.”

Among those things are words of wisdom from her father. “This can be a very competitive business. One thing my Dad told me is to remember it is about the journey, not the destination. Enjoy every step,” she said.

For audiences experiencing Liz Cass’ operatic talent, it’s clear she is enjoying these steps. “When I sing any other type of music, I don’t feel like I’m using my full potential,” she said. “With opera, I achieve these sounds and let it be not just about the sounds but this artistic expression.

“For me, the biggest compliment is for the audience member to be touched so deeply they felt they were transformed,” she said. ★

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