

Interview with Julia Sporsén on being awarded the 2023 Opera Prize by Svenska Dagbladet

Sensational, fabulous, outstanding – words of praise have been showered on the soprano Julia Sporsén. On Thursday evening, she will receive SvD's opera prize 2023 for her bold portrayal of Norma at Folkoperan.

In recent years, Julia Sporsén has had a series of successes in Stockholm, all at the Folkoperan, and with Vincenzo Bellini's "Norma" she had a major breakthrough that also attracted many outside the usual opera audience.

When Julia Sporsén hears that she has been awarded the SvD's opera prize, she bursts into happy howls in Gothenburg-sounding accent. Gothenburg, that's where she is based when she's not singing on Hornsgatan in Stockholm.

She was born into a distinctly musical family. Both mother and father were opera singers at the Stora Teatern in Gothenburg. Her grandfather was the legendary conductor Gunnar Staern and composer Benjamin Staern is her uncle. Cousin Stefan Sporsén has, among other things, worked with Håkan Hellström and regularly participated in SVT's "På spåret". Julia Sporsén's upbringing was impregnated in music:

“The big theater was my childhood, the minimal boxes, the special smell of old powder. As soon as I enter such an old theatre anywhere in the world, I immediately feel as if I am back there.”

But that singing would become Julia Sporsén's professional life was still far from a given.

“I hesitated for quite a while. And in any case, it was not obvious that it would be in opera. I played the piano early and did a lot of theatre. So the choice was soon between becoming an actor or an opera singer.”

Vadstena Folk College and Opera Studio 67 in Stockholm meant the first steps towards an opera career, but instead of one of the Swedish opera colleges, it then became the Royal Academy of Music in London.

“What I learned in London is very different from Sweden. It is a large international school that is significantly less characterized by academic study. And you have a completely different contact with music life, with teachers who work in the profession. As it was, they had to sing a concert aria with Colin Davis and the academy's orchestra.

We did two big productions every year, and both agents and reviewers came there. But there was a transition period when I moved home. My agent and I had much more developed contacts in England.”

In 2015, Julia Sporsén returned to Gothenburg, where she appeared in John Adams' *A flowering tree*, and then followed a series of acclaimed lead roles at the Folkopera: *La traviata*, *Tristan and Isolde*, *Bluebeard's Castle*, and *Norma*.

“Yes, the Folkoperan has become like a home in Stockholm. Every project there has been incredibly interesting. It is not old productions where you have to blend in, but everything is done from scratch.”

Julia Sporsén sees many advantages in life as a freelancer, something that today is the norm for most opera singers. But there are also disadvantages.

“It is creative to end up in new fantastic contexts and fun to work with new people every time. But when you start a family, you start thinking about things like sickness benefits and housing loans. Now most singers are freelancers. I have seen for myself how it has changed since my parents' generation, when there were still large fixed ensembles.”

For a few years, Julia Sporsén has been involved in the trade union Scen & film (formerly the Theatre Union), where she is now the chairman of the singers' department, an important commitment:

“Now that we are such a large freelance collective, we have an even greater need to come together. When there were larger permanent ensembles, the local chapters and soloist clubs had more say.”

And what about your own voice? Which roles are best for you?

“My voice is everything. Almost everything! I will never be a high drama soprano singing Brünnhilde and Turandot, but I have acquired a technique that works for many areas. And actually, I'm pretty much against this pigeon-hole thing. The only one I would like to compare myself to is Elisabeth Söderström, who had an extremely varied repertoire.”

Julia Sporsén is always driven by acting, which can also be helpful for singing technique. Norma is both a dramatic and lyrical role with difficult coloratura. Director Eirik Stubø helped her find the key, even though he had never done opera before:

“Eirik's method is very much about relaxation in the scenic expression. It helped me get all the coloratura in place. I was a little worried that he would want to use a microphone - as he often does on stage - but I didn't! He comes from a family of jazz musicians and has enormous respect for the score.”

The next big role for Julia Sporsén will be in the spring at the Malmö Opera in Jonas Forssell's *Death and the Maiden* from 2008. It is based on Ariel Dorfman's thriller-like play and the film of the same name, and the author wrote the libretto himself. (Incidentally, composer Jonas Forssell received SvD's opera prize in 1991 and conductor Patrik Ringborg in 2014.) Folkoperan's director Tobias Theorell directs. It is very unusual for a contemporary Swedish opera to be staged again so soon.

“This is how a work is kept alive, by being reinterpreted. The opera deals with a very complex subject around a national, political trauma – should one forgive, hold accountable or move on? And it's a great role, with a woman driving the plot forward and not dying at the end!”

Jonas Forssell has rewritten one of the arias and added a bit of Bellini coloratura, says Julia Sporsén, who always finds it edifying to work with music by living composers, when there is an opportunity to discuss the music and come up with views and suggestions.

Another composer with whom she has worked directly is Tebogo Monnakgotla, who wrote an entire song cycle for her this year, when they were both employed as artist and composer-in-residence respectively at Jönköping's Sinfonietta.

And SvD's opera prize is awarded on Thursday evening, September 28, when a completely new work is premiered in Västerås's concert hall. It was written for Julia Sporsén by the composer Maria Lithell Flyg, with text by the poet Jonas Gren. The title is *Anthropocene* and it is part of a so-called adjustment week with a focus on climate issues that discusses the role of humans in nature.

Read the original interview in Swedish here: [Julia Sporsén får SvD:s operapris 2023 för Norma | SvD](#)