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Student Composition Wows Audience in *Big Top Opera*

Clarisse Tobia

Oct. 20, 2011

BLOOMINGTON, Ill. - For most aspiring artists, receiving their first big "break" is a highly anticipated moment at the start of their career. Clarisse Tobia '14, a sophomore vocal performance and composition major, never expected she would receive her greatest opportunity from a routine vocal lesson near home in Madison, Wis.

This past summer as Tobia was composing an operatic musical piece, titled *Stella*, she sought the assistance of her voice teacher, Melanie Cain, in styling its vocal performance. After reviewing Tobia's music, Cain, who is also the cofounder and artistic director of the non- profit Fresco Opera Theatre, made Tobia a tremendous offer.

Founded in 2009, the Fresco Opera Theatre located in Madison, aims to modernize the presentation of opera. The theatre produces creative adaptations of operas, new works, condensed versions of larger works, and fully-staged productions.

"Melanie asked to feature my piece in a show at the Fresco Opera Theatre. She wanted to highlight an up-and-coming composer, and I knew that for me, the recognition would be huge," said Tobia.

Impressed by the four-part piece, which Cain characterized as reminiscent of the music in *Cirque du Soleil*, she was eager to include Tobia's composition in the circus-themed *Big Top Opera*. Performed at the Overture Center in Madison on Sept. 30 and Oct. 1, the Fresco Opera Theatre production attracted 200-member audiences for each of the three shows. The opera featured a combination of musical and circus acts, including fire breathers and acrobats, along with Tobia's arrangement.

Identifying her style as "fantasy-like," Tobia drew inspiration in composing *Stella* by listening to video game battle music. She sought to reproduce the synthesized sounds with piano and voice, describing the resulting work as "very dark and epic."

Spending about three months writing the piece, Tobia first established the piano music and later added violin, vocals and strings. To provide the lyrics and title for her composition, she searched through hundreds of poems before selecting the Italian piece "Stella" by Giuseppe Ungaretti. In the poem, the speaker describes a single star in the night sky to save him from his despair. Tobia found this tone to best suit the dark mood of her piece.

When composing, Tobia's overall writing process involves both practice and improvisation. "My work continues to evolve as I practice. I don't write from beginning to end; I have an idea and then another idea, and I put them together like a puzzle until they eventually form a complete song," she said.

The world of music is not new to Tobia. Having composed since childhood, she recounts her early days sitting at the piano as a toddler, creating her first three-note songs. "When I was younger, I don't think I actually knew I was composing, but I always wanted to play what I created myself. I knew where I wanted to go on the piano."

Big Top not only provided Tobia the opportunity for her originally-created work to be showcased, but the opportunity to participate in the show as well. Playing the piano for her own piece, Tobia expressed some performance jitters, although she insists her passion for performing and onstage training at Illinois Wesleyan kept her calm.

The opera provided a range of invaluable experience for Tobia, most notably by working with performers in a professional setting. “The performers brought so much energy to the piece onstage. Knowing they were singing and dancing to the music I was playing was exhilarating. I really want to take this experience and use it to boost my skills and raise the bar for myself,” she said.

When offering advice to other aspiring artists, Tobia has one rule: “You have to be yourself. Your passion is a part of you, and showing people yourself is the first step to being noticed.”

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