



person







# Estonia's young soprano Kristel Pärtna fills the opera with charm

It is said that an opera singer's first major premiere is like a wedding day. Kristel Pärtna, 32, soprano for the National Opera of Estonia, agrees. "Everything happens very fast and you may not remember all the details, but the feeling will stay with you forever."

**K**ristel's career in the National Opera was a dream come true – her premiere role was as Violetta in Verdi's "La Traviata". Kristel recalls that she rehearsed for the role with such intensity, there were times when she forgot she was not Violetta in real life.

"Normally Violetta is not the first role for a young singer and perhaps it was my youth and inexperience that helped me to be so natural and open," Kristel says of her 15 performances as Violetta. "I was trying to sense Violetta's feelings in parallel with my own life and emotions."

Opera manager Mart Mikk agrees that Kristel's fragility benefited her in the first performances. "Youthfulness is attractive and makes you believe in the viability of the 400-year-old history of opera. The audience was feeling for the unhappy fate of a young woman in love, instead of the lavish and egotistic attitude of the courtesan."

At the end of the premiere the new star got a standing ovation and received not only a huge bouquet of flowers, but also champagne and a fruit basket backstage.

## When she sang, the chandelier jingled

Mart Mikk recalls that when Kristel sang Gilda's aria for the first time in the empty theatre, the glass in the large chandelier started to jingle.

Pille Lill, a singer and supporter of young Estonian musicians, remembers that when one young tenor heard Kristel sing for the first time, he shouted: "She sounds like Maria Callas!"

"Kristel already stood out during her studies in Rostislav Gurjev's singing class at the Music Academy," says Pille Lill. "I was already impressed by the extraordinary depth and sound of her voice when I heard her at the first exam." Kristel was one of the first two graduates of the Opera Academy to be employed as a soloist after two years of study.

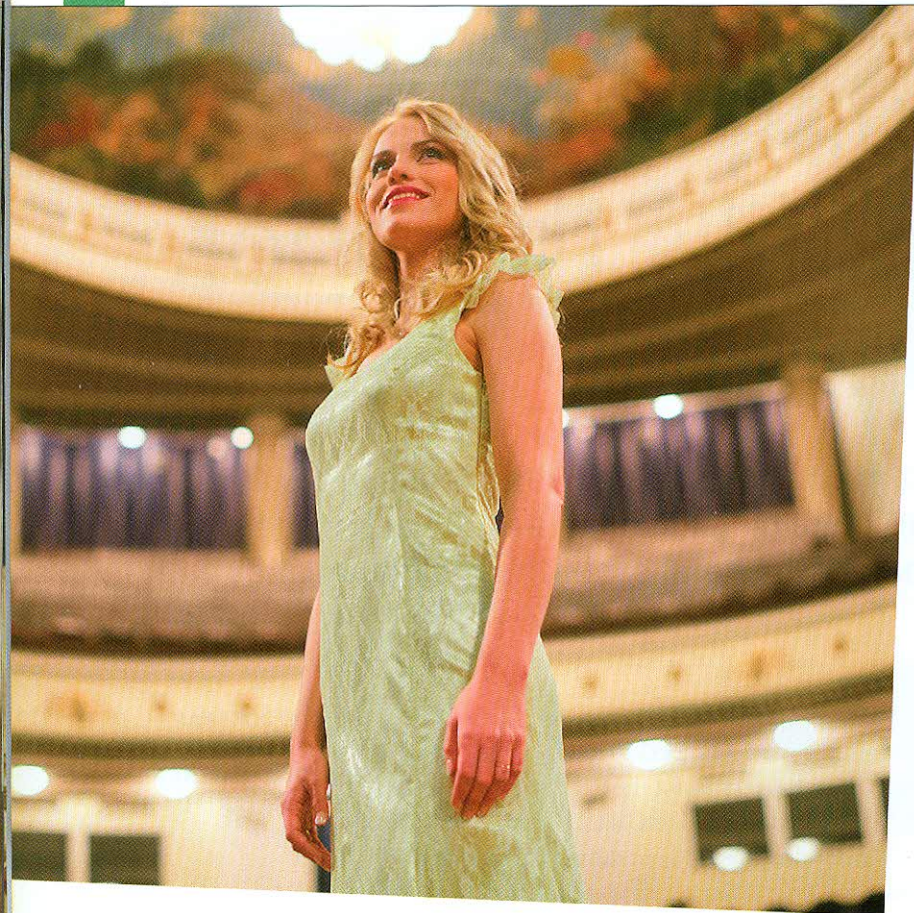
Pille Lill says that Kristel is actually a coloratura soprano. She praises the keen eye of opera directors who suggested that young tenor Oliver Kuusik could debut in La Traviata together with

Text: **ANU JÕESAAR**  
Photos: **STINA KASE, LIINA VIRU JA HARRI ROSPU, NATIONAL OPERA OF ESTONIA**

Kristel Pärtna ja Merūnas Vitulskis ooperis „La traviata”  
Kristel Pärtna and Merūnas Vitulskis in opera "La Traviata"







Kristel. “The on-stage chemistry of Kristel and Oliver was simply magical,” she says. “They were in perfect synch, and the audience felt that. With every performance, her role became richer and more colourful. For instance, the soloists of the Finnish National Opera who were watching her perform had nothing but praise for her. It was a sincere and notable appreciation of a young colleague.”

At the Gala Concert of Generations the audience practically erupted after Kristel's performance.

“The Estonian National Opera takes good care of its young singers and supports their development and studies in every way,” says Kristel. In her first day on the job she was handed the keys to her dressing room and the keyholder said: “My Second Home.”

“This is all true – theatre is my home away from home. I always come here with good feelings and probably spend more time here than in my real home. I mostly get good, positive energy from work.”

Kristel is now in her second season at the National Opera. In addition to Violetta she has

played Cleopatra in Händel's “Giulio Cesare” and Gilda in Verdi's “Rigoletto”.

On 15 May, Kristel will star in Donizetti's opera “The Elixir of Love”. “Adina is a big character that offers an entirely new challenge,” she says during a break in rehearsal. “It's the first time I've done such a role.” In addition to complex vocals she's had to face a very demanding and punctual director, Georg Malvius.

Says opera manager Mart Mikk: “If you ask me whether I am worried about Kristel, the answer is definitely not. I believe Adina will become a major breakthrough that can open new doors in her career.”

### As a child in Vallimäe

Kristel remembers only vaguely her first performance as a soloist, in Vallimäe, in her home town of Rakvere. She was three or four at the time and singing in the toddlers' music group Piilu. “I was not a local child star. I was a child who really liked to sing and who had an interest in music,” she says, recalling her kindergarten parties and school performances.

“I have always been able to make the high notes, but I had no singing training because I was taking piano lessons at a children's music school. One day the school's music teacher suggested I focus my time on singing.” Kristel participated in a children's TV singing competition, which has been a springboard for many future prominent soloists. But she only made it to the county round.

By the time she graduated from school, Kristel had two options: to become a fashion designer or a singer. Art and music have been her two big passions – at home she was always sewing and attending art classes. She chose singing only because the entrance exams for the Music Academy came first, and she passed with flying colours. As a result, the National Opera got a soloist who not only sings well, but also dresses beautifully – though with very little time for sewing.

### Italy gave her wings

People study to become a singer for a long time, often their whole life. Kristel earned her master's degree at the Estonian Theatre of Music and, for a year and a half, attended the singing class of Anssi Hirvonen at Sibelius Academy in Finland.

In 2012 she was chosen from among many

### Roles

■ Adina (Donicetti's “The Elixir of Love”), Violetta (Verdi's “La Traviata”), Gilda (Verdi's “Rigoletto”), Cleopatra (Händel's “Giulio Cesare”), Mercédes (Bizet' “Carmen”), Arminda (Mozart's “La Finta Giardiniera”), Euridice (Rossi/Terranova's „Orpheus. Images of Distance”), First Boy (Mozart's “Die Zauberflöte”), First flower-maiden (Wagner's “Parsifal”) and Page (Wagner's “Lohengrin”), Mari's voice (A. Hirv „Tuleloitsija”), Clotilde (Bellini's “Norma”).





### Kristel Pärtna

- 2011 - graduated from the master's programme at the Estonian Academy of Music and Theatre.
- 2009-2010 completed the exchange programme Erasmus in the singing class of Anssi Hirvonen at the Sibelius Academy.
- 2010-2012 - grantee of the Mati Palm Foundation and grantee of Opera Academy of the National Opera Estonia.
- 2012 - Studied in Italy at the Accademia del Belcanto „Rodolfo Celletti”, in the Young Talent programme of the Pille Lill Foundation of Musicians.
- autumn 2012 - soloist, National Opera Estonia.
- Winner of the Young Singer 2012 Award of Marje and Kuldar Sing.

young Estonian, Latvian and Finnish singers to study at the Accademia del Belcanto “Rodolfo Celletti” in Italy. Speaking of the academy, she says: “It had cycle study, which was well suited to me.” The special feature of the school was the masterclass model. “I had three singing teachers: Stefania Bonfadelli taught coloratura technique and Sherman Lowe and Paola Pittaluga general vocal technique. The three teachers were actually completing one another and the study was very systematic.”

Her studies in Italy were possible thanks to Pille Lill’s foundation, which supports the development of young talent. The founder recalls that the Italians were enchanted by Kristel’s special timbre. The training she received in Italy helped Kristel to fully open up as an artist.

After graduating, the soprano was invited to participate in two festival performances. “In “Artaserse”, a baroque opera by Johann Adolf Hasse, I was an understudy, but since a member of the main cast had recently given birth, I replaced her

and was able to sing with such stars as Sonia Prina and Franco Fagioli,” recalls Kristel.

In the second opera, “Orpheus: Images of Distance”, by Rossi and Terranova, the fragile blonde played Euridice. On YouTube, there there is a video clip from a DVD featuring Kristel performing it. For her achievements in Italy and her first roles in the National Opera, Kristel won the Young Singer of 2012 Award, issued by the Pille Lill Foundation of Musicians.

### Back to school

Kristel Pärtna began the current season feeling as if she had started school again. In fact, the one who was going into the first grade was Eliis, her seven-year-old daughter with her husband, who plays contrabass. Kristel often takes her daughter to rehearsals; Eliis was sleeping in her mother’s singing classes as an infant, and also comes along when Kristel travels to Finland for training courses.





“Over the years she’s learned everything there is to know about singing,” she laughs. “Right now she is playing violin, but if she were to become interested in singing, she could do it easily.”

Sometimes her daughter has given her important feedback, saying, for instance, “You had a different voice today at rehearsal.”

“Then you need to think what it was that was different,” says Kristel. “Once I noticed she was crying, although she was trying to hide it from me. Later, when we were driving home, she told me that I had sung so beautifully.” Although her days are filled with song, Kristel still always sings lullabies to her daughter – though, of course, sometimes Eliis prefers other music.

### Long road to Night Queen

According to Pille Lill, Kristel is a singer whose charm and glow light up even the darkest corners of the opera house, and who has all the necessary qualifications to become a real prima donna at the Opera Theatre Estonia.

“As you know, there are seven types of sopranos. And as a lyrical soprano, Kristel can offer the audience enjoyment for another 10 years. After that, her voice could acquire additional colour and drama.” Lill says the national opera plays a huge part in shaping the future of young, talented singers because the opera has been entrusted with such excellent material.

It’s the same in sports as in music, says Mart Mikk. In a small country with limited human resources, it offers both risks and challenges that may be more suited to a different type of voice. Home theatres may never stage operas that soloists dream about, “but today’s world of music is without borders,” says Mart, “so one can surely make her dreams come true.”

Kristel is confident that she has a long future ahead of her as a singer and actor. “I would like to feel that I am in total control of my instrument, that I can do anything, no matter how demanding the role. I don’t know if I will ever be perfect, but I know that you can learn to know your body so well that even on a bad day you have the tools at your disposal that put the body to work in the right way.”

She is ready to work towards perfection and learn, so that one day she can pass her knowledge and experience on to new generations of singers

– as a vocal teacher, for instance. Before that happens, Kristel hopes to sing the roles of her dreams: Lucia in Donizetti’s “Lucia di Lammermoor” and the Night Queen in Mozart’s “Die Zauberflöte”.

### Enjoys every flight

It may be surprising to hear that Estonia’s future prima donna is not a frequent flier. She was 25 when she boarded a plane for the first time. “I was very much looking forward to it, and I always enjoy the opportunity to fly. When I was studying in Italy there were more opportunities. My most recent flight was a year ago to Venice.”

What is her favourite pastime? The answer may amaze you: “There are times when I forget all my daily chores, my daughter’s school issues and work. I spend these moments at home, looking at plants and fish in my aquarium.” So the favourite activity of the National Opera’s charming soprano is listening to silence. ✨

### Kristel Pärtna travel recommendations:

■ I also recommend visiting the Valle D’Itria opera festival, held every summer in Martina Franca, a small town in Southern Italy.

[www.festivaldellavalleditria.it](http://www.festivaldellavalleditria.it)

■ Milano Teatro alla Scala, one of the world’s leading opera houses, hosts performances by the world’s top singers.

