

## DCist Interview: *Cristina Nassif*

October 20, 2006

Soprano [Cristina Nassif](#) is a 20-something native of the Maryland suburbs. The daughter of an opera singer mother and a pianist father, Nassif received a music degree at the University of Maryland and got her start on the stage in the Virginia Opera Young Artist Program. Last season, she triumphed with [Virginia Opera](#) as Violetta in *La Traviata*, which brought her to the attention of the hungry eye of Plácido Domingo, ever watchful for new talent.

After a lauded [second-cast appearance](#) with Washington National Opera last season (as Vitellia in *La Clemenza di Tito*, replacing Tatiana Pavlovskaya), Nassif returned to Virginia Opera in a much-anticipated starring role as the title character in [Bizet's \*Carmen\*](#). After playing in two other halls in Virginia, according to the company's itinerant tradition of spreading opera around the Commonwealth, the opera came to the [George Mason University Center for the Arts](#) last weekend, for two performances. I spoke on the phone with Cristina Nassif in Richmond, where she is preparing the final two performances of *Carmen*, at the Landmark Theater.

### How long have you lived in Washington?

All my life. I was born at Andrews Air Force Base, because my father was a colonel in the Air Force. He met my mother while he was stationed in Spain. They had five children, and we eventually moved to the house where they live now, in Fort Washington, Md. It is very helpful to me to have such supportive parents. While I do the whole starving artist thing, I am living with them.

### Some people think that classical music and opera are only for the over-70 crowd. What can you and other young classical performers do to change that perception?

Wednesday night, Virginia Opera gave an extra performance in Richmond, an event they called student night. Kids came from schools from all over Virginia to watch *Carmen*. We felt like rock stars, because here was this intense appreciation of opera from a group you would not think would like it. Schools here are doing great work to promote opera in that age group. Either the schools prepared these kids or it was just the effect of seeing young singers on the stage, people close to their age, giving everything they had.

We all took risks, knowing that there were no critics in the audience. I decided to push my own performance, too, just to see how much further I could go in the role. The students were so happy that Don Jose killed me at the end, I thought they were going to boo me. It just shows you that you don't need to dumb opera down for a younger audience. Just give it to them as it is. They are capable of understanding it and appreciating it.

### What kinds of music do you listen to in your free time?

Whatever is on the radio. Obviously as a classical musician, my focus is mainly on classical music. I love Coldplay, but I got into them late. I have a lot of Frank Sinatra and would love to get more into jazz.

### Did your parents take you to the opera when you were young?

I have very fond memories of seeing a performance of *Rigoletto* at Wolf Trap. My mother sang on the stage with [Juan Pons](#) in Spain. Every time he came to Washington Opera to sing, we went to hear him. He came to our house for dinner, too. It was an advantage to be born into a musical family. I grew up playing the piano, which my dad, who is a doctor, plays. He accompanied me for all my auditions and competitions.

### What was it like to sing on the stage of the Kennedy Center Opera House for the first time?

Oh, my God, I can't even tell you. It was thrilling, the opportunity of a lifetime for me. All kinds of thoughts were going through my brain. I only had one performance, so all of my family and friends were there, giving so much



support in the audience. I could feel it. I was nervous before I stepped on stage, but once I got there I knew all I had to do was relax and do what I loved.

### What is the strangest singing gig you have ever done?

Recently, I was approached by Virginia Opera, because they had received an unusual request from a funk band in Richmond, an incredible group called [The Fuzz Band](#). They were going to receive an award, the Ninevolt music award, and wanted to have an operatic soprano sing "Bohemian Rhapsody" with them at the ceremony. So there I was trying to fill Freddie Mercury's shoes. When I got all opera on them, they went nuts. We were head-banging together. It was incredible.

### How often do you read DCist?

*(Laughs)* From now on, I am going to be reading every day. I'm going into the archives.

\* \* \*



[Cristina Nassif](#) has apparently become the darling of the Washington critics. Of her *Carmen*, [wrote](#) Mark J. Estren in the Post this week, Nassif mixed "sultry anomie with a hint of menace in the 'Habanera'. [Her] voice has range and power, and the positions from which she can project it are amazing -- stretching, sitting, even lying down." Not to be outdone in lathering praise on Nassif, T. L. Ponick [wrote](#) in the Times: "Wisely, this production was built around the impressive talent of Miss Nassif, a darkly beautiful young soprano who handled this mezzo role with aplomb."

In the near future, Nassif will be revisiting her Violetta, for a *Traviata* with [Wichita Grand Opera](#) in December. "It's my dream role," she says, "I want to sing it as many times as possible." Next year, she will be back in the area for [I Pagliacci with Virginia Opera](#), as well as a concert *Carmen* with the Charleston Symphony in West Virginia. Her final two performances of [Carmen with Virginia Opera](#) are this Friday (October 20, 8 p.m.) and Sunday (October 22, 2:30 p.m.), at the Landmark Theater in Richmond.