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UCT opera star to sing at King Charles III's coronation



Pretty Yende will sing at the royal coronation on 6 May.

Photo: UCT News

She has the voice of an angel, and it will grace the coronation of a king and his queen in Westminster Abbey on 6 May. University of Cape Town (UCT) alumnus Pretty Yende's story is a triumph of talent over adversity – and the transformation of the Eurocentric, elitist world of opera.

Yende (37) will sing a solo at the coronation of Charles and his wife, Camilla, as king and queen of the United Kingdom (UK) and the other Commonwealth realms. Charles will be crowned King Charles III.

Sharing the news on social media, the UCT-trained soprano said: "It's hard to put into words how honoured and blessed I feel to receive an invitation to perform at the coronation."

The coronation will showcase talent, chosen by the regent, from across the UK and the Commonwealth.

The invitation adds to Yende's growing repertory of international performances and awards. The most recent is the Ceremonial Badge of Honour that recognises her contribution to the arts and letters in France and worldwide.

"To be chosen to represent oneself on a stage as big as this, from among thousands of talented performers, is testament to her world-class talent and mesmerising voice," said Associate Professor Shose Kessi, the dean of UCT's Faculty of Humanities, in which Opera UCT is based. "Pretty is a credit to herself and to Opera UCT, where she refined her art and launched her impressive career. The faculty is so proud to call her our own. Opera UCT can take a bow, and then another!"

South African College of Music director, Professor Andrew Lilley, added: "The College of Music is incredibly proud of Pretty Yende's achievements. Her long list of international competition wins, along with her performances at some of the most prestigious opera houses around the world, is a testament to her exceptional talent and hard work.

"As a graduate of the UCT Opera School, Pretty is a shining example of the level of excellence that the music college strives to achieve. It's fantastic to see her representing South Africa and being recognised with such high honours, including the Order of Ikhamanga. Her upcoming performances in leading roles at the Vienna State Opera, Berlin State Opera, Hamburg and Paris Opera are a testament to her continued success and talent."

Emeritus Professor Angelo Gobbato, the former director of Opera UCT, said: "It's a well-deserved honour of which we all can be deservedly proud."

He remembers well Yende's early emergence.

In 2003 Gobbato held the double post of chief executive officer of the Cape Performing Arts Board Opera and director of the UCT Opera School. In that year he directed the UCT Opera Studio production of Smetana's comic opera *The Bartered Bride*.

"It was in this production that we first came across the name of a brilliant young student (barely 16 at the time) called Pretty Yende," he recounted.

"When Yende came to Cape Town to audition for the UCT Opera Studio, the head of vocal studies Virginia Davids was also on the audition committee. When Pretty began to sing, we both knew that she was singing for a place in the wrong organisation – the Opera Studio only admitted singers who already possessed a voice degree – but we also realised that we were listening to an exceptional voice. We immediately offered her a place in the UCT Opera School."

There she was immediately given singing opportunities in opera school productions. Yende also swept the board at the annual Belvedere Competition, where she won all the prizes.

In 2009 she was awarded a bursary for the opera school at La Scala in Milan, where she began her studies under Mirella Freni, Gobbato said.

"Her success at the school led to a contract for La Scala, where she appeared as Norina in Donizetti's *Don Pasquale* and Susanna in Mozart's *Le nozze di Figaro*."

But Yende's big break came with her 2013 debut at the Metropolitan Opera House in New York.

“While fulfilling a concert obligation in Russia (part of the prize won at the Belvedere Competition) Pretty received an emergency call from the Metropolitan to replace the leading soprano in Rossini’s *Le Comte Ory*,” said Gobbato.

The billed soprano, Nino Machaidze, was ill and unable to perform.

At just 27 then, Yende had barely a month to prepare for the part of Countess Adèle, a role new to her, in the [revival](#) of Bartlett Sher’s production of Rossini’s *Le Comte Ory*.

But her huge success led to international offers pouring in for major bel canto roles such as Lucia in Donizetti’s *Lucia di Lammermoor*, Adina in Donizetti’s *L’elisir d’amore*, Marie in Donizetti’s *La fille du regiment*, Elvira in Bellini’s *I puritani*, Amina in Bellini’s *La sonnambula*, and many lesser-known Rossini operas at the Pesaro Festival, said Gobbato.

“She has also received several official honours, such as the Stella d’Italia, only awarded to those who are at least 35 years old, but awarded to her when she was still 34 years old (by special dispensation).”

Yende is not a ‘one off’ from Opera UCT. Others such as Levy Sekgapane, Fikile Mvinjelwa, Pumeza Matshikiza, Musa Ngqungwana and Noluvuyiso Mpofu have also led the change.

Opera UCT has been working on transformation for nearly 20 years, in collaboration with UCT’s Development and Alumni Department (DAD), to secure Opera UCT’s sustainability. Part of this is offering bursaries and scholarships to talented, historically disadvantaged opera students.

DAD executive director, Sarah Archer, said: “Pretty Yende is a shining example of the talent and innovation of UCT alumni who are amongst the world’s most employable and successful graduates. She serves as an outstanding role model to existing students both within Opera UCT and across the university more broadly.

“Overall, it’s a great source of pride to know that Pretty Yende is a product of Opera UCT, and her success strengthens the music college’s international profile and reputation.”

Story by Helen Swingler, UCT News

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