

## THIS GLOSSY LIFE

**T**ry to conjure up the image of an opera singer and, almost guaranteed, you will find yourself reaching for a clutch of extravagant clichés: big voices with even bigger personalities, divas full of *sturm und drang* on-stage and off, leaving adoring audiences and shattered glasses in their wake. And as she strides into London's St Pancras Hotel, mezzo soprano Jessica Costelloe certainly seems to embody all the drama and glamour of her profession: six-foot-one (that's not including the rather high heels) with a pre-Raphaelite mane and the perfect posture of a one-time ballet dancer, she is dressed all in black, save for a scarlet coat. What one might not expect is self-effacing charm, combined with warmth and a composure beyond her years - but then, this 26-year-old has already led quite a life.

Growing up in Dublin, the daughter of fashion designer Paul Costelloe and his wife, Anne, Jessica was the only girl among six brothers. "It's probably why I'm in this business - it definitely gave me the strength to fight," she says with a wry smile. "I think I had to find a voice at a very early age in a family like mine." She had "the best childhood", living in Monkstown and going to school at Mount Anville, until the family moved to London when she was twelve. "It was the beginning of secondary school, at that time when you're making friends, and it was hard," she admits. As a teen she often felt more of an affinity with her teachers than her classmates: "I was the annoying one who would sing too loud in choir - I had this big booming voice - and I was listening to classical music and not Britney Spears, so people didn't really understand me. I think that's why I felt more of a connection with the older generation."

She was also distraught when, aged 16, she had to leave the Royal Academy of Dance, her height thwarting her childhood dream of becoming a ballerina. "I was a six-foot-one 16-year-old trying to dance ... can you imagine? But now when I'm performing on stage, I know how to stand, I know how to walk depending on what character I'm playing, and that's all thanks to the ballet."

By that point, music had become a huge part of her life and ever since seeing a production of *The Magic Flute* as a child in The Olympia Theatre, she knew she wanted to do something that combined singing and theatre. She credits her "incredibly supportive" parents with giving her the confidence and drive to turn the ambition into a reality, remembering all the mornings when her mother would wait for her in the car outside singing classes and auditions. And luckily, that drive was matched by a talent outstanding enough to earn her a place at New York's world-renowned Juilliard School. (To get an idea of the competition there, consider these numbers: 2,000 singers apply each year, 500 audition - ten get places.)

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Her face still lights up when she talks about Juilliard, with a hint of New York in her accent. Her six years there have left their mark and she clearly thrived on the six-day week and twelve-hour days of classes and rehearsals. "I loved it - to be constantly active every day is something that I need because I'm quite a highly-strung person. But you have to be in this world." And while she has only praise for anyone who makes a living from singing (although the mention of *The X Factor* does elicit a "don't get me started ..."), she's also proud of what sets opera singers apart from other entertainers. "Opera is quite an elitist world, but so it should be. We spend years training, we learn to sing in ten different languages; we focus our whole lives on this." Has she ever thought about throwing in the towel? "So many times!" she laughs, but goes on to say, "It is incredible. Eighty per cent of it is stressful and hard work, but that 20 per cent of standing on stage, not being yourself for those few hours, and making people feel a certain way, or cry, or laugh - it's an addiction."

And what does she make of all the dressing up and costume that go hand-in-hand with opera - does it feel familiar, given her family background? "Growing up in fashion world - I think I always slightly reacted against it," she admits. "From the age of 14 to 16 I wore this red beret and a leather jacket of my mother's from the 1960s, and she would say, 'Take off that red beret - I'm going to burn it!' And my reaction was no, no, no - I wanted to be different, I wanted to look different. Though I found a photo recently of me in that beret and I thought 'Oh my god - teenage girls, always listen to your mother!'" These days her look is elegant and understated: "I tend to wear a lot of black, and punch it up with a bright coat or bag. Less is more with me - that's definitely one of the lessons my father taught me."

Since graduating last year and returning to London, she has also been facing the realities of working in such a competitive industry on her own, beyond the nurturing environment of Juilliard. "It has been a very humbling experience," she admits. "But I learned so much from doing unsuccessful auditions. You walk out going, 'OK I didn't get that - but why didn't I?'"



Jessica Costelloe, photographed in the David Tang suite at the Boundary hotel, Shoreditch, London. Styled by Rachel Caulfield at Jackie Gibbs. Green dress, Viktor & Rolf. Bracelet and shoes, Chanel. Make-up by George Pelosi for Bobbi Brown.

# This Glossy Life

*Opera singer Jessica Costelloe grew up in Dublin and London, then trained at New York's Juilliard School. Now she's back in London to take on a new role.*

CATHERINE HEANEY met her

PHOTOGRAPHED BY ABIGAIL ZOE MARTIN



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Pink stretch dress,  
Diane Von Furstenberg.  
Shoes, Marni. Pink  
leather clutch bag,  
Saint Laurent.

And you sit back and you analyse and you think, who am I as a performer? You have to offer something different – you can't just sing the *Carmen* aria at every audition. So it's been good – in spite of all the tears!" She's also relishing being back in Europe, with its rich opera tradition, and did a series of masterclasses in Vienna over the summer, as well as spending time in Saxony and auditioning in Paris.

At the moment, happily, things are decidedly busy. She has just spent two weeks in a "very experimental" production, *Finding Butterfly*, using Puccini's original score and performed in Japanese, Italian and English for London's Soho Theatre. And she's even more excited about her upcoming performance at Duiske Abbey in Kilkenny,

where she will sing everything from arias to Gershwin to Irish folk songs. The concert is also of special significance: "It will be the first time I've ever performed in Ireland and I am so nervous!" Maintaining a connection with home is something she feels strongly about and she still spends a lot of time in Dublin with her family, saying, "I never laugh more than when I'm in Ireland."

Next up, she'll be heading back to New York to rehearse a series of recitals with a friend from Juilliard, baritone Timothy McDevitt, and beyond that, who knows? She is modest when asked, saying she's happy to stick to smaller parts and productions for the time being, though with her combination of talent, grit and passion, there's every

reason to believe that she could make it on a grand scale.

As we finish up, I ask her what her dream role would be, and after a moment's consideration she says maybe Charlotte in *Werther*, or indeed *Carmen*, at her beloved Met in New York. Then she stops, and in a slightly conspiratorial tone adds, "you know what I'd really love to do some time? It's always been my dream – to sing the Irish national anthem at the Six Nations!" And no doubt when that day comes, those six brothers and two very proud parents will be cheering her on.

*Jessica Costelloe performs at Duiske Abbey, Graiguenamanagh, Co Kilkenny, on Sunday November 4, at 8pm. Tickets €15; [www.duiskeconcerts.ie](http://www.duiskeconcerts.ie).*