

SIU ALUMNI

WINTER 2016

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OPERATIC AMBITION

Emily Fons '08 is called one of the best singing
actresses of her generation

A RISING SOUTHERN STAR



The Southern graduate as
Zerlina in "Don Giovanni" at
the San Diego Opera.



BY GENE GREEN

SIU Graduate Emerging As One The Top Young Actresses In The Opera World.

Emily Fons, M.M. '08, describes herself as a driven person who clearly understands the type of environment she thrives in. That internal perception guided the classical vocalist to Southern Illinois University more than a decade ago.

Now hailed by publications such as *Opera News* Magazine as one of the rising opera stars in the country, she also has been lauded as one the best singing actresses of her generation.

Before coming to Carbondale, Fons earned her undergraduate degree at Luther College in Decorah, Iowa, a private liberal arts institution widely known for its international musical heritage.

"I received great voice training at Luther College, but knew I wanted to perform onstage and realized that was the type of experience I still needed the most," Fons says. "Being the motivated person I am, most faculty at Luther figured I would want to find a nationally known setting for such training."

But the Milwaukee native had other plans.

THE ROAD TO SIU

Although she respected the reputation of several high-profile performing arts conservatories, Fons felt strongly that such settings would not be a good fit for her. When trying to decide where to go to graduate school, she discussed the situation with Luther College music professor Jessica Paul.

Paul had worked with Margaret Simmons, who was now at SIU as a vocal coach and coordinator of the School of Music's vocal area.

"She had recommended Margaret as a respected colleague who I would enjoy working with," Fons says. "With that endorsement, I decided to come to Carbondale for a visit."

When she arrived at SIU to audition as a soprano in 2006, Fons met Simmons and her fellow department staff members Jeanine Wagner and Timothy Fink. Trusting her instincts, Fons soon knew that SIU was going to be the positive environment she needed for her talent to flourish.

Simmons quickly sensed this new student was going to be someone special.

"We all recognized Emily's talent, fantastic mind and enviable work ethic from the first day she arrived at



Last year *Opera News* Magazine named Fons one of the rising stars of the opera world.



Fons as L'Enfant in "L'Enfant et les Sortilèges" at the Ongaku-Juku Festival.

SIU," Simmons notes. "She became a joy to work with on every level, and it's been gratifying to watch her continue to grow and hold her own with other major artists in a demanding and competitive profession."

Wagner, now director emeritus of the School of Music, agrees.

"Emily was a dream student with focus and drive mixed with obvious talent," she recalls. "Those

qualities both challenged and inspired me as a teacher. She brought out the best of anyone who worked with her, because she is just a genuinely nice person."

So the stage appeared set for Fons to begin tackling challenging soprano roles at SIU – until an eventual suggestion would turn her musical focus in a slightly different direction.

“I embraced the mezzo-soprano roles immediately,” the SIU graduate says. “When I look back on it, I think I always had a sneaking suspicion that I would be happier in those roles.”

RANGE AND VERSATILITY

Fink, a professor of opera and musical theater at SIU, remembers those early days listening to Fons sing.

“I thought at the time that she would be perfect for mezzo-soprano roles,” Fink says.

Mezzo-sopranos usually have a heavier, darker tone than sopranos. These female performers often play “pants roles” (a woman who plays boys and adolescent males, as well as feminine characters), making it a part where fewer performers can succeed.

“Emily was physically perfect for the pants roles (such as Cherubino in “The Marriage of Figaro”), and her voice had enough color and warmth to make her a natural,” Fink recalls. “The only thing was, I had no idea if she would be comfortable with that.”

Fons continued to study as a soprano during her first year at SIU, until Fink decided to cast her in a mezzo role for “Hansel and Gretel.”

“And I only did it then because I didn’t have another mezzo to turn to,” he now says, laughing. “In fact, I wanted to make it up to her the next year with a major soprano part.”

There would be nothing to make up; instead, he had helped Fons find her true niche.

“I embraced the mezzo-soprano roles immediately,” the SIU graduate says. “When I look back on it, I think I always had a sneaking suspicion that I would be happier in those roles. When you are first starting out, it’s hard to know the right place for you, so you can’t place your given ability in a box and not be open to new things.”

With SIU providing Fons the opportunity to also explore the theater department (her graduate elective courses came from theater), she obtained a double



A LITTLE PIECE OF HOME

When interviewed this summer, Emily Fons was finishing a role as Angelina in “La Cenerentola” at Opéra De Lille in Lille, France. She admits that dealing with such travel commitments can be a daunting process.

“It can be both exciting and a grind, and you have to somehow find a midpoint emotionally on how to handle it,” she says. “I’m not sure I have that figured out yet. This kind of career can take its toll on personal relationships, and I hope to get a better grasp on that in the coming years.”

While international travel can sometimes be lonely, Fons’ trips in the United States now include a companion she can’t imagine being without.

“In 2009, when I was in Santa Fe, I rescued an Australian Kelpie,” the SIU graduate says. “Lupita is now my baby and goes with me everywhere when I perform in the country.”

Fons initially was just fostering the dog – but one day, while she was warming up her vocal cords, Lupita ran into the room and started singing along.

“I knew then she was my dog,” she says, laughing. “Lu sings with me, runs with me and keeps me on track. My love of animals is on the same level as my love of music, so if I wasn’t in this business, I would be doing something to help animals.”

Since Fons doesn’t take Lupita overseas, her parents in Milwaukee step in and enjoy watching the dog while she is away. That process is now even easier with a recent move back to her hometown.

“It’s the first time in 12 years that I’ve made Milwaukee my home base,” she says. “I decided it’s important that, when I have a week or two off, I’m able to be close to my family.”

And when she has to leave her home for a performance, the dog she rescued will be with her as a bit of a savior herself.

“I can’t really explain how important Lu is to me,” Fons says. “She really came along when we needed one another. Just having that little piece of home with me when I go on the road makes all the difference.”



Fons performs as Hansel in a "Hansel and Gretel" production at SIU in 2006.

major in opera and musical theater and added the stage training she longed for.

"Opera and theater are quite different, yet complimentary in approach," she says. "Both demand a technical understanding of yourself and your body, and my days at SIU gave me the experience and confidence I needed."

MAKING THE TRANSITION

Following her graduation from SIU, Fons says a big break occurred with her acceptance into the Apprentice Singer Program at New Mexico's Santa Fe Opera. The program is for young singers who are in transition from academic to professional life, and it was once again a perfect place for her to thrive.

"The Santa Fe Opera has a huge and impressive legacy of training American singers, and I can't say enough about what they did for me," Fons says. "It gave me an idea of what the business was going to be like."

Soon after this apprenticeship, professional roles began to appear. To say her career has stayed at a feverish pace ever since would be an understatement, as Fons performs across the globe at various high-profile venues.

Her characterizations have ranged from a sharp-elbowed, drily witty Rosina at Opera Theatre of St. Louis, to an endearingly gawky Cherubino in Santa Fe, and a bespectacled, man-hungry Peep-Bo in "The Mikado" at Lyric Opera of Chicago.

In 2015 the 33-year-old Fons created one of her favorite roles, gaining rave reviews as the strong-willed, resourceful Ruby in Santa Fe Opera's world premiere of Jennifer Higdon's "Cold Mountain."

"I felt an affinity to Ruby immediately, she says. "She is self-sufficient, proactive, tireless, direct and confident, but not standoffish or harsh. I get to let a lot of myself out when I'm up there embodying her physically and vocally."

Fons offered *Opera News* this response when asked what she thought about her own acting ability: "I don't think anything can replace the skills gained by just getting up there and doing it. Every audition, every chance to step out onstage, will teach you something about yourself. You just have to be honest and vulnerable enough to accept those lessons, take things in stride and always strive for improvement."

"One of the great things about the young artist programs at the country's top opera houses is the chance young singers get to watch so many people onstage. You really begin to see what works and what doesn't."

A CHANCE TO GIVE BACK

Although Fons travels the world performing, she hopes to eventually get back to SIU and share what she has learned.

"I don't claim to be the world's leading expert on anything, but in the last 10 years I have had many experiences that could be valuable to students who just want to know what it's like to start doing this kind of thing for a living. I think I could offer encouragement and advice that might make a difference."

Wagner knows that the former Saluki has learned several life lessons that can inspire students to stay the course and continue to chase their dreams.

"It's been amazing to watch the performance world discover Emily Fons in the relatively short time she has been singing," Wagner says. "It's a competitive business, and certainly not for the faint of heart. That being said, Emily has it all: a beautiful instrument, terrific intelligence, innate musicianship, wonderful stage savvy and the necessary business sense to be successful."

"SIU should be extremely proud to have its name associated with her."