

PRODIGY'S DEBUT

17-year-old will conduct
opera she composed — at 10

DATEBOOK, B7



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Photos by Salgu Wissmath/The Chronicle

Alma Deutscher, a 17-year-old composer, conducts the Opera San José orchestra during rehearsal for her opera "Cinderella."

Composer takes up baton at 17 to lead Opera San José

Alma Deutscher will debut as a conductor with her 'Cinderella'

By Joshua Kosman

For most of her 17 years, Alma Deutscher has been a musical triple threat. She's a skilled pianist and violinist, and she's been composing since she was 5, beginning with simple piano pieces before moving on to full-scale concertos and operas.

Now she's added conducting to her portfolio of accomplishments — because where classical music is concerned, it seems as if there's nothing Deutscher can't put her hand to.

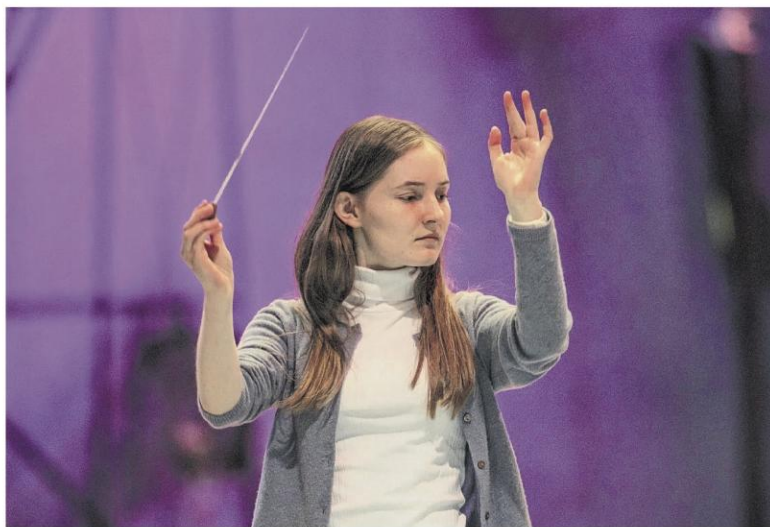
When her opera "Cinderella" returns to Opera San José on Saturday, Nov. 12, Deutscher plans to be in the pit, doing everything a conductor does. She'll be setting tempos, cuing the singers, balancing the volume of the orchestra and ensuring that the score sounds as close as possible to what she's envisioned.

After all, as Deutscher pointed out in a recent interview with *The Chronicle*, she has one distinct advantage as an interpreter: "I know the music extremely well."

The version of "Cinderella" that is expected to take the stage at San Jose's California Theatre is the latest and most fully realized iteration of a work that Deutscher first composed at 10. A further revision had its U.S. premiere at Opera San José in 2017, with the renowned British conductor Jane Glover leading the performance and the 12-year-old composer playing solo interludes on the violin, piano and organ.

But in the five years since then, Deutscher has expanded and rethought the piece as her musical understanding has grown. She's redone the orchestration, switched some of the vocal writing around, and even added a children's chorus (the Bay Area's Ragazzi Boys Chorus).

"The melodies are the same, but I tried to bring out the drama and the humor more," she said. "I have much more experience now, and when one looks at music with fresh eyes, one sees a lot of things that one could do bet-



Deutscher will make her operatic conducting debut with the Opera San José orchestra when "Cinderella," which she wrote at age 10 and has since revised, opens in November.

ter."

Deutscher speaks with an uncanny blend of childlike whimsy and extraordinary sophistication. She's so articulate, and has thought so deeply about music and its aesthetic demands, that one can get pulled right into the conversation.

Then she lets loose an irresistible giggle, or flashes a dimpled grin, and the truth comes back into focus: This is someone who is operating at a level far beyond her years.

Andrew Whitfield, the assistant conductor and chorus master, remembered feeling a certain skepticism about Deutscher in advance of the 2017 production.

"We learned we were doing the piece just four months in advance," he recalled. "I didn't know who Alma was, and I just thought, 'She's 12 years old?'"

"But we were all won over by the piece. She operates with such sincerity and skill, and there's such a childlike innocence about her. She's not trying to be anything other than who she is in this moment, and expressing herself with skill."

During a recent orchestral rehearsal, Deutscher guided the musicians through several scenes with a clarity that could only have been a boon to the performers. Standing straight and tall on the podium, she helped disentangle some difficult string passages,

"Cinderella": Opera San José. 7:30 p.m. Saturday, Nov. 12. Through Nov. 27. \$55-\$195. California Theatre, 345 S. First St., San Jose. 408-437-4450. www.operasj.org

and pointed the instrumental players toward the emotional subtext that would become more overt later, with the arrival of the singers.

For anyone who watched the HBO series "Game of Thrones," it was hard not to think of Lyanna Mormont, the tween clan chief (played by Bella Ramsey) who carried herself with a similar air of improbable self-confidence. The difference, perhaps, is that Deutscher is more of a collaborator than an autocrat.

"She's doing extremely well as a conductor," said Cynthia Baehr-Williams, the company's longtime concertmaster. "She's very clear and expressive in her movements, and, of course, she has a thorough understanding of the score. We can be playing and she'll stop and say, 'Second horn, that's a B-flat, not a B.'"

Deutscher grew up in Surrey, southwest of London, the elder of two daughters in a scholarly family. She began displaying her musical gifts by the age of 3, and was soon composing at the piano. The music of Mozart and Strauss were early favorites that continue to shape her creative thinking.

Many Americans became aware of her in 2017 — shortly before "Cinderella" premiered in San Jose — through a segment on "60 Minutes," in which she dazzled interviewer Scott Pelley with her musical facility and natural charm. Those qualities have only increased over time.

Two years ago, the family moved from the U.K. to Vienna, where Deutscher now studies conducting at the University of Music and Performing Arts Vienna. That in turn, she says, brought her into a more social phase of her life.

"I have lots of friends now, which is so nice," she said. "It's so nice to have people who speak the same language."

Deutscher was referring not to German — although she's become a fluent speaker of that language as well — but to music, which remains her deepest mother tongue. In England, she was homeschooled and solitary, at the time believing that social relationships might not be for her.

"I always thought I just preferred to be alone, and that it was more interesting just to imagine things by myself," she said. "But when I came to Vienna, I discovered that I love being with people and having good friends."

For "Cinderella," Deutscher — who also wrote the libretto

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— transmuted the familiar fairy tale into a fable about the artistic process. In her version, Cinderella is a composer, and the Prince a poet; their love is based not on shoe size, but on the perfect way their respective creations mesh together. The step-sisters are opera singers, which makes them easy to lampoon.

"When we first did the piece, I was so touched by the presence of this girl who loved music and was immersed in it," said soprano Stacey Tappan, who returns to San Jose



Alma Deutscher, 17, is now studying at a Vienna university after being homeschooled in Britain.

as Griselda, one of Cinderella's stepsisters.

"My goal in all the rehearsals was just to make her laugh. There was a lot of high jinks and diva jokes, and any time I could do something that made her

laugh, it would go in the show."

Deutscher's writing is lush and tuneful, built around a profusion of graceful melodies and elegant tonal harmonies. It proceeds, in other words, as though nothing

notable had happened in music since around 1890 other than Strauss' operatic career.

That taste for skillful anachronism is what draws in some listeners and perplexes or even alienates others. But Deutscher is adamant in her avoidance of modernism (her next opera, "The Emperor's New Waltz," is a trenchant satire about musical style). She also rejects the notion that her music is imitative of that of past masters.

"I'm not trying to write in anybody else's style," she said. "I'm just writing the music that naturally comes from my heart and that I find beautiful, in-

spired by the great composers of the past.

"You see, for me, it's not important when a piece of music was written. I don't really mind whether it was written 5,000 years ago or five minutes ago, I always just wanted to write music that I find beautiful myself."

Deutscher insists she's not alone, either. She says she hears often from young musicians who find inspiration in her work, and who want to write tonal music like hers. But they are "squashed," she says, by their teachers and those in power in the musical world.

This is what motivates one of Deutscher's goals for the future, which is to found a music school where composers can be taught in the way she thinks is important: with a solid grounding in harmony, lots of practice in improvisation, and an openness to melody, tonality and beauty.

It's a tall order. But at this point, betting against Deutscher in anything music-related would probably be a chump's game.

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