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Soprano's anonymous: Jessica Pratt at home in the madness of signature role

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Australian soprano Jessica Pratt is well used to being recognised in the street or at the supermarket checkout in her adopted home of Italy, where she is a superstar.

"It's usually when I have no make-up on and I just look really crappy!" says the 39-year-old, who moved to Europe after winning the Australian Singing Competition in 2003.



Jessica Pratt will make her Sydney Opera House debut this week.

Photo: Dominic Lorrimer

So it comes as some relief to enjoy the relative anonymity of being back in Australia – despite the best efforts of her proud mother.

"It is really cool coming here," she says. "Except my mum keeps telling everybody. I go to a coffee shop and we're sitting there having a calm cup and she's like: 'Oh, do you know she's going to sing at the Opera House?'"

As well as the mounting – and justifiable – maternal excitement, there is also much anticipation in the opera world around Pratt's Sydney Opera House debut tonight when she will sing the title role in Donizetti's *Lucia di Lammermoor*.

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The bel canto showpiece is Pratt's signature role. She has sung it more than 100 times, even making her 2007 professional debut as Lucia in Lake Como's Teatro Sociale in 2007.

She describes playing Lucia as her "home" base, despite the role's enormous technical and emotional demands, particularly in the pivotal "mad scene".

"It's in my body and muscle memory," she says. "If I'm feeling a little off centre in some other piece, often I'll just sing the mad scene from Lucia and it sort of resets me."

Yet for all her familiarity with it, the role, which culminates in Lucia losing her mind and killing her bridegroom takes its toll on Pratt every night, and even the next day.

"It's very painful, because I'm moving a lot on stage, and I have a lot of tension in my body throughout the opera," she says. "You have to find a balance so that it doesn't disrupt the sound, but you're still portraying the fear and then the next thing I'm exhausted."

She's even been known to faint the day after a performance as a result of a sort of emotional aftershock.

It's an indication of the depth of emotion Lucia conjures within her and of her passion for the tragic character.

"I'm very protective of her," she says. "I don't like it when sopranos make her into a silly little, I don't know, mad thing."

Pratt has been frequently routinely compared to Dame Joan Sutherland and even with the greatest of all, Maria Callas.

Of course, she is hugely flattered by the references but also takes it in her stride.

"I think it's human nature to put people in boxes," she says. "Everybody wants to see the next of someone. Unfortunately they are not programmed to think of the next new thing. But that's fine."

It's a busy year for Pratt with a full schedule of professional engagements as well as making plans for her upcoming wedding outside Florence in August.

On her first date with her husband-to-be she invited him to hear her sing Elvira in Bellini's *I Puritani*. It was an uncomfortable experience for both, especially as he at the time he knew nothing about opera or Pratt's day job. "I remember going out on stage singing, and thinking, 'I'm a virgin in a white wedding dress!'" she says. "And I thought what the hell is he going to think of me. I felt like such a dick. And he apparently was in the audience going, uh, so she's not in the chorus."