



Pretty wears jewellery Graff Wild Flower white-gold necklace with pear-cut and round white diamonds (20.81ctw) and Wild Flower white-gold ring with round white diamonds (2.63ctw), prices on request; fashion Dior dress £3,800

PERFECT PITCH

A small-town girl from South Africa who had never even heard opera until she was 16, Pretty Yende is now one of the world's foremost sopranos. GRACE CAIN discovers her remarkable journey

PHOTOGRAPHY TRISHA WARD STYLING CHARLOTTE TORODE

GIVEN THAT EVERYTHING I KNOW ABOUT OPERA comes from *Frasier* reruns and the beginner's guide on the English National Opera website, I'm feeling slightly apprehensive ahead of my chat with Pretty Yende. The world-leading soprano's voice has filled the sort of auditoriums that most singers can only dream about: La Scala, the Met and the Royal Opera House among them. But it's Yende herself who unwittingly puts my nerves at ease with some words of wisdom.

"I used to be terrified before a performance," she says. "But then I understood that emotions don't have a body; I have a body. And as I grew older, I would tell myself that what I was feeling was not a negative thing, but an awareness that this task was very important. I now think of my mind as a garden; I am in charge of what I plant there, and I have the right to take out any thorns that don't belong. I really have to thank my '#PrettyArmy' for that."

That's the term Yende uses to describe her seemingly devout social media following – scroll through her Instagram and you'll find comments sections that are refreshingly free of the usual keyboard bile. Then again, it's hard to imagine that anyone would want to come for Yende, demure and surprisingly softly spoken for someone with such a powerful singing voice, her face always a nanosecond away from opening into a smile. And her

signature beam is hard to miss: you've no doubt already spotted it, the perfect match for these equally sparkling jewels by British jeweller Graff (for whom she is an ambassador). "One of the nice things about technology is that it allows us to connect with people from all walks of life," says Yende. "I view them as my family, not just strangers who are following me. When they see that I am down, they encourage me."

Yende originally started her Insta account as a way of encouraging herself. "After growing up in South Africa, it was very hard for me to adjust to this big, impossible dream that I had dreamed," she says, her eyes wide. "Suddenly, I was in a world that was very critical. I would look for uplifting quotes on the internet and then I would share them, and people really responded to it. It's incredible how you can be trying to inspire yourself, and not realising that somebody else might need that same light."

It's all part of the #PrettyJourney (you'll notice a theme with these hashtags), which started in the small South African town of Piet Retief. Although Yende grew up in a musical family where hymn-singing after supper was the norm, she didn't even learn what opera was until she was 16. The moment that changed it all? Hearing the 'Flower Duet' from *Lakmé* on an advertisement for British Airways.

"My heart knew what it was, but my intellect at the time did not," she remembers with a smile. "It felt like more than the joy that I knew, more than everything that is good. My first instinct was that it was something divine, because to me, it didn't sound human at all. It sounded supernatural." By this point, Yende already knew she could sing – her grandmother had taught her on their walks to and from church. "So when I was told that this was opera and that it was humanly possible, I said to myself, surely if somebody can teach me, I can do this too."

Part of her motivation was to share her new discovery with as many people as possible. "My first thought when I heard that music was, 'How can I make other people feel this?'" she says. "It is an absolute gift to humanity." The word 'gift' appears frequently in Yende's lexicon: opera is a 'gift', and so is her own voice. "If you think of yourself as a performer, it means putting yourself in a very small box," she explains. "But a gift is a bounty. It's just a better word for me. More than anything, my journey is one of connection. Opera is very personal; although there might be a thousand people in the audience all listening together, they will each have an individual experience. That's what is so special about opera – it is soul to soul."

Of course, that philosophy applies to even bigger audiences, too. Yende believes that giving opera more exposure on prime-time TV is key to opening it up to new audiences, with King Charles III's coronation last year clearly a good place to start – and even those who are not opera aficionados might recognise her from that particular performance.

"It was a mind-blowing experience >



Pretty wears, this page, top, jewellery Graff white-gold necklace with round and emerald-cut white diamonds (50.26ctw), and white-gold earrings with round and emerald-cut white diamonds (11.15ctw), prices on request; fashion Dior top £3,200; bottom, jewellery Graff white-gold earrings with oval, pear-cut and round white diamonds (11.56ctw), (from left) platinum ring with white diamonds (12.99ctw) and platinum ring with round and tapered baguette-cut white diamonds (11.52ctw), prices on request; fashion Dior dress £3,200. Opposite page, jewellery Graff Wild Flower white-gold necklace with pavé white diamonds (13.62ctw), platinum ring with 12.02ct pear-cut central white diamond and two tapered-baguette white diamonds (0.97ctw), and Wild Flower white-gold earrings with round white diamonds (3.43ctw), prices on request; fashion Dior shirt £1,500 and skirt £2,250

Fine Jewellery, Ground Floor; Womenswear, First Floor; and harrods.com

Make-up Liz Daxauer at Caren using Sisley; Hair Zateesha Barbour at LMC; Nails Simone Cummings; Digital Operator Clare Chong; Lighting Assistant Eliza Bourner

Shot on location at The Whiteley London; apartment designed by Kelly Behun Studio

that I will treasure for generations,” she says. “And not only me, but anyone who looks like me and comes from my background.” Yende smiles as she recalls FaceTiming her parents to tell them every detail as the event took shape (her mother sadly passed away less than three months later). “And I was so, so proud to share that moment,” she says. “I’m so grateful for such a dream-come-true experience, because I’ve always wished that I could share my gift with as many individuals as possible. Although most people may not come to the opera house or the concert hall, many could watch that occasion on the internet from anywhere in the world.”

Anyone watching would surely have also spotted the suite of jewellery that framed Yende’s face, lit up with occasional sparks of light reflecting off the gems. Designed by British jewellery house Graff, the necklace and corresponding earrings totalled more than 170 carats of yellow and white diamonds. “I have to be honest,” says Yende, “I’m a simple person. I never used to like glamorous jewellery because I always felt my voice was the jewel.” She laughs, shaking her head. “Until I met Graff.” So what won her round? “I’m very, *very* wary of necklaces because everything is kind of here,” she explains, indicating her throat. “The whole body is the instrument, but the vocal cords are here, and the power comes from this area where the voice is. Anything I wear round my neck cannot hinder that. But when I first wore Graff jewels, I felt they didn’t overpower my gift; instead, they enveloped it.”

Yende attributes this to the exceptional craftsmanship that goes into the creation of every Graff piece. “I grew up with the understanding that jewels and diamonds are heavy,” she explains. “But with Graff, they don’t feel heavy or static at all – they feel alive in a way I can’t explain. It’s supernatural.”

There’s that word again: supernatural. Indeed, it’s not hard to draw similarities between the dreamland of high jewellery and opera’s sumptuous fantasies. “With both, you can have these incredibly transcendent, emotional experiences that stay with you forever,” says Yende. “And with high jewellery, there’s an element of perfectionism that absolutely coincides with my world of opera – a level of excellence in trying to portray something unique. For Graff, it’s diamonds; for us, it’s sound. But for both, it’s limitless.” □



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