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Adina Aaron headlines St Prex Festival

## American diva interprets spirituals for St Prex festival

 by Michèle Laird  
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**Hailed as one of the most gifted young sopranos to have emerged in the last few years, versatile American diva Adina Aaron trades opera for negro spirituals and jazz at the upcoming Saint Prex Festival. In an exclusive interview, Aaron tells Swisster how she became a professional singer and how she decided to present a programme that marks a new adventure for her, with jazz highlights and an accompanying dancer.**

Unusual artistic partnerships are the hallmark of the summer festival founded five years ago by Dutch expat Hazeline Van Swaay in Saint Prex, a medieval village on the shores of Lake Geneva, west of Lausanne.

Aiming to foster high-level and innovative collaborations in opera, ballet and chamber music, the **St Prex Festival** is adding a jazzy flourish to its programme this year.

Van Swaay has invited international opera star **Adina Aaron** to perform her Swiss debut in a programme of "negro spirituals" and jazz, one of the seven evenings of the festival that runs from August 21 to 26.

"We needed a singer who would have the right mindset for our festival, who would be willing to collaborate with other artists and innovate," the festival director said.

"Adina could not be more perfect."

The soprano is currently preparing to sing the title role of Verdi's 'Aida' before an audience of 50,000 at the **Stade de France** in Paris in October.

Her performance at the St Prex Festival on August 25 and 26 will be in a more intimate setting in a Romanesque church.

The second concert includes a sit-down dinner for members of the audience.

"I didn't take much convincing, but it's taken a lot of work to find the music," Aaron told Swisster in a telephone interview from New York when asked about her decision to come to the Swiss festival.

"Hazeline contacted me on the recommendation of a common friend, Renée Auphan, whom I have known since when she directed Marseilles Opera" she said, explaining how she came to be invited.

Auphan also directed the Lausanne and Geneva operas before Marseilles and now advises the St Prex Festival.

"But Hazeline wanted to showcase me in a different light than opera," Aaron said.

"She also wanted to associate dance to the performance and suggested a collaboration with Julio Arozarena."

Arozarena is a talented choreographer and dancer and former member of the Béjart Ballet and Zingaro.

"Negro spirituals, unlike gospels, were used less for religious reasons than as an expression of freedom from slavery," Aaron said.

The famous spiritual "Wade in the water" is now viewed as a coded instruction for the slaves who wanted to escape to shake off the trail of tracking dogs by wading in the water, she said.

"But the problem I came up against in my research is that a lot of the music is copyrighted and brick-walled in libraries, so I called some composers I know to get some ideas."

Aaron agreed she has doubled up as a musicologist to plan this programme.

But all singers have to do so when they "come up with a theme and have to make it work," she said.

"Whatever we do as a singer, we want *meaning*. It's more work, but also more fulfilling."

Aaron's programme starts with spirituals and slides to jazz to highlight the links between the two, with a tribute to Ella Fitzgerald and pieces by Margaret Bonds, Cy Coleman and George Gershwin.

A former competitive athlete, Aaron said the discipline of her training served her well as a singer. She excelled in track, volleyball and basketball in high school.

"My father told me that if I did a sport, I had to do it well, or not at all," she said.

"I learned from sports to train systematically and be analytical in my approach. This has contributed to the mental strength that you need as a singer to take on a vast repertoire."






Aaron is one of the few sopranos on the opera circuit who can sing Mozart, Puccini, Bizet and Strauss with equal ease.

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And yet, when still at school, she was convinced that her voice was "bad".

It was not until a teacher asked her to sing a classical piece that she understood that her voice was not bad, but simply naturally operatic.

Originally planning to major in piano at college (because her basketball scholarship would have led to a dead end), she switched to voice at the last minute.

"One of my teachers made me promise to never stop training (because) every year he sees a 'digression' in young singers who make it to the top too quickly and stop studying," Aaron said.

"As I continue to train, I'm actually discovering a new potential to my voice that will open up my repertoire even further, allowing me at last to sing La Traviata," she said.

"In this profession you always have to learn a new role while you are singing another, which means that singers are multitasking all the time."

While Aaron loves her job she dislikes travelling with heavy luggage.

"It's tedious," she said, reminding us that divas in the past took two to three weeks to travel between engagements, arriving relaxed and rested.

"Now, the time between gigs is much shorter."

At Saint Prex, Aaron will be accompanied by the pianist David Zobel and dancer Arozarena.

She said that she has "some pretty good ideas" on how well they will click.

"We will bring the spiritual feeling right into the audience."

This year's edition of the St Prex festival includes a number of other events, all built around the concept of "doing things differently."

Among the other attractions:

Soprano Brigitte Hool, accompanied by cellists Delphine and Gauthier Capuçon; Astor Piazzolla's tango opera "Maria from Bueno Aires" with Argentine mezzo-soprano Silvana Deluigi; two light operas by the Lausanne Opera's Route Lyrique (see Swisster article); and a concert by Pierre Amoyal, the Swiss violinist of international stature.

Sit-down dinners accompany three of the seven evenings, including the second concert by Adina Aaron, giving Saint Prex a touch of glamour rarely found in festival environments.

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