



Gothic powerhouse

Kitchener singer who blends classical and metal music more popular in Europe than at home . . . for now

BY BARBARA AGGERHOLM
PHOTOGRAPHY BY CRESTINA MARTINS

Like a magnet, the charismatic singer, her long, red hair flowing over a black corset, draws her audience closer to the stage at the Starlight Social Club in downtown Waterloo.

This is not your typical gothic rock/symphonic metal crowd. Long hair, big beards and dark T-shirts with metal band logos aren't in abundance.

But it's noticeable that members of the diverse crowd here – friends, neighbours, family and fans, young and old – are wearing black clothes as Cecile Monique

requested, and they've come to celebrate her first full gothic symphonic metal album, "Genesis."

Monique, a University of Waterloo music graduate who trained in opera, wrote the music and lyrics, provided all the vocals, orchestration, arranging and programming and co-produced the album.

With one foot in classical music and the other in modern rock and metal, the independent artist says her album release party is "kind of like my goth wedding."

It's clear some of the audience members can't quite believe the powerful, operatic sound that comes out of the corseted figure



Along with bandmates Sammy Duke, Daniel Corrigan and Robert Crowder, Cecile Monique played an album-release show at Waterloo's Starlight Social Club.

gothic metal cover of "Reise, Reise" by German industrial metal band, Rammstein, had almost 320,000 views on YouTube and the number keeps climbing.

"I love it," Sexton says of her music. "It's a little heavy; it's attitude, the mystique, the fashion."

Glancing at the crowd at the Starlight, Sexton adds: "This is a lot classier than the metal shows I usually go to. Everybody actually listened and dressed in black like she asked them to."

Classy is the right word for Monique, who was born and raised in Kitchener, attended Catholic school, went to the University of Waterloo on scholarship and has been in love with opera since she was a teen.

She can't say enough about her supportive friends and family, including her mother who made her corset with chains, her "metal grandma" and her grandfather who used to give out her flyers at the mall. A song on the album is dedicated to her beloved grandfather, Joe Garmendez, who died in 2017.

"I wanted him to have his own song," she tells the audience. "I actually had a dream that he heard it."

She takes pains to introduce her band members, guitarist Sammy Duke, bass guitarist Daniel Corrigan and drummer Robert Crowder, as well as thank the Region of Waterloo Arts Fund for its financial support of her album.

Monique is described by friends as a blend of charismatic, smart, hard-driving goth rocker with a "dark, opulent signature style," as one reviewer called it, and a sweet, modest young woman who confesses to being a nerd in high school and a fan of opera singers such as tenor Luciano Pavarotti and legendary soprano Maria Callas.

Monique has been performing since she

was a child, involved in charity events with her multicultural family – her mother was born in El Salvador and her father in Poland – and doing cantor duties at her church. She began formal voice lessons at 15.

Her Hispanic-Polish family is behind her music 100 per cent. "My grandfather was always advocating (that) if people get a chance to listen, I think everybody would like it. He inspired me to keep going," she says.

"We hope to make her dreams come true," her grandmother, Carmen Garmendez, said at the album release celebration. "It is very hard, working in that music. She deserves it."

Monique speaks four languages – English, French, Spanish and Italian, as well as a bit of German – and is aiming to learn four more. Some of her musical recordings are in other languages.

"I've always been an overachiever and a nerd," Monique says with a laugh during an interview at a Waterloo café, where she stands out among coffee patrons with her fiery red hair, lacy black top and "sugar skull" necklace that has a design reminiscent of Mexico's Day of the Dead holiday. She chose the weekend in early November for her album release because of its proximity to the Day of the Dead and Halloween, she says.

Monique says she feels fortunate she found gothic or goth rock/symphonic metal music at a time when she was starting to feel bored two years into her honours bachelor of arts program.

She had started training her voice outside school as well, with an aim to push toward a career in opera. She experimented with writing music.

She thought about quitting. At 18 years of age, she knew it would be a "waiting game" before a career in opera was possible.

She was feeling musically rebellious. There is room for interpretation in traditional classical music, but not so much for innovation, she says. "I was struggling to find my place. Where can I fit in best?"

Then she found German composer Ludwig van Beethoven, a composer who

as her classically trained soprano voice soars to the accompaniment of her band, three experienced rockers with an explosive energy.

"Come closer; I won't bite," Monique says, and tosses her head as she rips into another song.

Those who have been following Monique's career, however, know what the powerhouse vocalist, composer and arranger can do, and they believe she is destined for big things, especially in Europe where gothic or goth rock/symphonic metal is most popular.

"I think she's going places," says fan Sherida Schaus, who dressed in a gothic/punk/vampire outfit and drove 100 kilometres to attend the album release celebration. "She's got the look, the sound; she's very talented and a beautiful soul inside and out."

The 12 original songs in "Genesis" relate to themes of post-apocalyptic rebirth, loss and survival.

"It's definitely her best work yet," says

Kevin Dietz, recording engineer, mixing engineer and music producer who co-produced "Genesis" with Monique.

"It's a big undertaking and it sounds huge," Dietz says. "The level of songwriting, the arrangements, performances, everything is at a higher level. She's very adept at the ways of music production beyond the composition."

"She's a very intelligent and thoughtful person. It's reflected in her music, which I think is more accepted and popular in Europe."

Shawn Sexton, host of the Reverend Radio Show, a Hamilton-based metal show on 101.5 FM The Hawk, hears from fans when he plays Monique's music, especially after she was chosen in 2016 as one of only five finalists – and the only North American – to perform in Germany at the largest gothic music festival in the world.

As a rare female-fronted act, Monique has had other international accomplishments. And at last count, her music video of the



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persevered to write brilliant music despite progressive deafness. He became her “personal hero” after she researched his life and music.

“I had to read his letters and personal diaries,” she says. “It was heartbreaking to read; for him to start losing his most important tool, his ear. He struggled with sadness and depression. I read a suicide note.

“But he found the will and he was a man of faith. He really kind of put his foot down and said ‘No, I will decide what comes of this and continue . . . to do music that will leave some kind of mark. I will find a new way.’

“It was exactly what I needed to learn,” Monique says. “We got to know each other pretty well, me and Ludwig.

“It was like someone from beyond the grave giving you life lessons.”

When her 20-something aunt introduced her to the music of Apocalyptica, it was like an explosion went off in her head. Members of the Finnish cello metal band are classically trained.

“It was electric, amplified with covers of Metallica and they were doing things that you wouldn’t think possible with symphonic instruments and classical techniques of cello. It was stylistically interesting and melancholy. It resonated with me at the time,” Monique says.

“I credit them in particular with my shift to metal and symphonic metal.”

There are three things Monique loves to talk about – Beethoven, Apocalyptica and gothic rock.

“Goth is rooted in art and architecture,” particularly in the Middle Ages with the period’s gargoyles and ornate buildings, Monique says. “It influenced music, literature and art. It’s considered a subculture; some people consider it a lifestyle.”

Monique connects to the gothic style, music, art and narrative in literature, such as the 18th-century gothic novel, “The Mysteries of Udolpho” by Ann Radcliffe, which features a female orphan and terror

in a medieval castle. The work plays a role in Jane Austen’s novel, “Northanger Abbey.”

A gothic perspective examines darkness and light, death and life, Monique says. Gothic fashion, of which there are subgenres, is surprisingly modest, contrary to some people’s misconception that it’s “fleshy and risqué,” she says. Its ingredients are black lace, corsets, gloves, fishnets, heels, silver jewelry, possibly with a religious theme.

“I was raised Catholic and I don’t find a conflict between being Catholic and goth; a Christian faith or goth,” Monique says. (Along with her metal songs on YouTube, you’ll find a beautiful acoustic version of “What Child Is This,” performed by Monique and her band.)

“The melancholy nature and supernatural, spiritual themes and examination of life and death can sound depressing,” she says.

“But on the flip side, gothic architecture is rooted in Catholicism and the early church. Gothic music and my music are influenced

by sacred music.

“Goth for me is a state of mind, a perspective that shapes style and interaction with people,” she says. “When you get past the gloom and doom, then there are universal and relatable themes, existential questions, pain, loss and bereavement in goth music. There’s a narrative; there are love stories.”

Monique began identifying herself as goth in her second or third year of university. Increasingly, she wore black clothing and darker makeup. These days, her style is a bit Victorian-inspired. She is a vegetarian, almost a vegan, and doesn’t wear leather or fur.

She had a sense in university that she was a bit of an “oddball vocalist,” an expressive performer who liked to throw herself dramatically into the part.

She posted her music on Myspace, then a popular social networking website, and heard from listeners who liked it. It gave her confidence.

“When you feel you are the most

authentic version of yourself, then it kind of commands respect and people will get it or not. There’s something empowering in that.”

She learned about computer-based music production and software for orchestration and recording. She had a small keyboard at home and bought three guitars to practise riffs using a metal rock style. She watched metal drummers’ feet and hand techniques.

She sang in the university choir and the chamber choir. She loved church music.

It was all good research material, she says. “My project at the time was to learn as much as I could in as many different ways as possible. That’s what goth music is like; it takes influences and makes something new out of them.”

She finished school in 2009 and headed to the studio. In 2010, she won a New Talent Award from FACTOR, a foundation helping Canadian talent, in support of her release of three original songs.

Monique met guitarist Sammy Duke at a music store where she was teaching voice

lessons. He was a fan of her style and they performed live together with other session musicians.

Armed with an \$8,000 grant from the Region of Waterloo Arts Fund, a not-for-profit corporation established by the Region of Waterloo, Monique worked on “Genesis” with Duke, Corrigan and Crowder in Dietz’s home studio in Mississauga.

She hopes people will give her music a try. “Genesis” may not be everyone’s cup of tea, she says, but if they’d listen to a song, it would be a “huge honour.”

“Music allows you to be in someone’s life for four minutes and that’s fantastic.”

She believes Beethoven, a rebel himself, would understand and enjoy her music if he were alive.

“I like to think if Beethoven were here today, he’d be the most metal musician you ever heard. He’d be avant-garde and ahead of the game.

“I’d like to think he’d say, ‘I get you. I get what you are trying to do.’”

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