

A portrait of Sara Botkin, a young woman with long, wavy, light brown hair, looking directly at the camera with a slight smile. She is wearing a light-colored, textured fur stole over a dark top. The background is a warm, golden-brown color with vertical stripes.

CLASSICAL WEALTH

A talented classical singer and pianist, Sara Botkin is right at home as a certified financial planner

By Jennifer Gill Kissel

Photos by Tom Altany



The layers of Sara Botkin are as numerous as the layers of fabric on one of her gowns.

There's a taffeta layer, crisp and sturdy. As a Certified Financial Planner and vice president of Wealth Management at Smith Barney in Upper St. Clair, the 30-year-old Botkin orchestrates other people's financial futures, and frequently writes and lectures about financial planning.

Then there's a chiffon layer, airy and delicate. As a classical singer and pianist, she blends the many layers of her own voice to create almost ethereal music. "Voice layering," or multi-tracking, is a technique made possible by digital sound technology. Only singers with an extremely broad range can accomplish it, and Botkin is blessed with such a gift.

At a recent recording session at Audible Images Studio for her upcoming CD, "Breath of Heaven: A Christmas Collection" (due out November 6), Botkin demonstrated her rare ability. For the session, she's chosen to record "Christmastime Is Here," the theme in "A Charlie Brown Christmas." It seems quirky, a cartoon theme, being that the repertoires on her past two CDs include "Edelweiss," "Adagio for Strings," and "Pachelbel's Canon." But that's Botkin, a little quirky, a little innocent, but still sophisticated.



Splaying her fingers as if grasping an imaginary mug, Botkin stretches to full height and takes a deep breath. Notes in pure, clear soprano rise to the ceiling. Then, making a gently clenched fist, she sings the same bars, down, down, down, until a rich bass bounces off the gleaming maple acoustic panels. The sound is almost unbelievable in its incongruity, this tall, thin-boned woman,

money to choose and train a choir. And layering is fun," she says, munching on animal crackers. "It gives me control over the choral sound."

She produces a small gift bag and begins pulling out an unlikely number of items—car keys with her Shop 'n Save Gas Perks card attached, bottled water, a bag of animal crackers, a Subway wrapper, various sheets of music. "I



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a natural alto trained as a soprano, belting out tenor and bass tones usually emitted by men the size of well-fed truckers.

An impressive feat in itself, but it is the handiwork of audio engineer Skip Sanders that provides the layering effect. With Botkin's chords digitalized on his computer screen, Sanders superimposes the bars with a few turns of knobs and some keyboard strokes. "Ready?" he asks, pressing a button so Botkin can hear him through the soundproof glass. "Here we go, Charlie Brown."

The strains of a boy's choir seem to harmonize beneath Botkin's soprano. But listen closer. The "voices" of the choir are really one, and it belongs to Botkin.

Sanders grins. "It's cool," he says. "She's good."

Layering isn't unusual in pop music, but it's uncommon in classical music, Botkin says. "I think that not a lot of classical singers use it because they like to sing solo. I have always enjoyed singing with a choir. But it takes time and

brought CDs! And here are some photos for the next CD jacket. I need an objective opinion."

In real life, she is quite pretty. In the photos, she is exquisite. "I feel like Cinderella after those photo shoots," she says. "Dressing up is my favorite part. That and the hair extensions."

Unlike artists depicted on television who breeze through a song and call it a wrap, Botkin makes tedious work of recording every note, spending a whole day on one song. She sings each lyric, over and over, until her practiced ear is content. Sanders, who engineered her first two CDs ("An Angel's Christmas" (2003) and "The Spirit's Quartet" (2005)) at a different studio, never sighs or rolls his eyes. "I got too churchy!" Botkin says, after putting too broad an "a" on a word. "Oh, I got too breathy!" Sanders just smiles, edits, and peppers her performance with comments like "Beautiful!" "Sweet!" and "Cool."

Botkin credits her mother, Barbara Botkin, with instilling in her the drive for perfection. "Mom sat beside me at every piano lesson from age three,"

she says. "It usually takes the commitment of a parent to get a child to stay with it. Oh, there were screaming matches," she remembers. "There were days I cried, 'I won't go!' and days she probably wanted to give up. But neither of us quit." These days, Mom works out side by side with Botkin in a twice-weekly Pilates class.



Botkin studied music her entire life, from those early lessons, when her mother would entice her by lining up M&Ms across the piano in their McKeesport home. But it is her financial planning career that allows her the luxury to record CDs and perform with such locally renowned groups as Bach and Baroque, and Chatham Baroque.

Botkin once had a teacher who advised her students, "If you can be happy doing anything other than music for a living, then do it." But beneath Botkin's beauty, brains and talent is another layer: persistence. So for two years after graduating in 1999 from the University of Virginia with highest distinction in voice and piano, she tried to make it in the Big Apple.

It wasn't your "starving artist waiting tables till the big break comes" scenario, but it was close. She performed at several New York venues, including Carnegie Hall and Lincoln Center, and was a member of an award-winning a cappella group. "I had this hole-in-the-wall, \$1,000-a-month apartment," she recalls. "Although I knew

lots of people who had regular work, who had made it, they were twice my age, with no car, house, no pension, no 401K. Some people like that kind of challenge. I really didn't."

She had already been mugged twice, the first time only six months after moving to New York. "Like a moron, I held the elevator door for this huge guy," she says. In an instant, he had her against the wall, demanding money and jewelry.

Something her dad always said kept coming back to her. "If you'd ever like to join me . . ." A former golf pro, Les Botkin was a financial planner at Hefren-Tillotson.

"I began thinking maybe I would be happier doing something else, perhaps in Pittsburgh." She "casually" began studying for her Series 7 licensing. She was working as an assistant at AON Corporation, on the 105th floor of the World Trade Center, Tower Two. A new Mariah Carey CD had just gone on sale at the Sam Goody store in the WTC lobby. Botkin's desire for it delayed her ascent to work. She was in line for the elevator when the first plane hit. Two hundred of her coworkers died.

"I didn't leave my apartment from September 11 until the following Sunday," she recalls. She went with her church choir to sing at a crisis center for family members of Cantor-Fitzgerald employees. "I got off the subway, and everywhere, on every pole and wall, were those photos of missing people." Her large brown eyes darken with the memory. "They were all dead. It was so awful. It changed the feel of the city."

A month later, she was home in Pittsburgh. "It took me being away from here to appreciate it, the cost of things, the friendliness of the place," she says. With post-9/11 life offering a new perspective, it didn't take Botkin long to marry her fiancé, Ovi Manciu, a native of Romania.

She soon joined her dad at Hefren-Tillotson to coach people through the delicate process of planning for their financial futures. "People like the idea that we, as a father-daughter team—as a family—are taking care of them," says Les Botkin. "Often people will leave their financial planner because the planner doesn't pay enough attention to them. But Sara's personality lends itself to this work. We hope that people know we care about them." Eventually, the pair transitioned to Smith Barney, and Les points out that his daughter, who is too modest to say so, is a full vice president, a rare accomplishment for one so young.



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Les encouraged his daughter to pursue her license as a Certified Financial Planner (CFP), a difficult endeavor, which, while not required in the industry, shows a true dedication. “I told her, ‘Sara, you have to go through with this; it’s a very difficult course, but people need to see that you are dedicated,’” Les remembers. “She said, ‘Hey, then you have to do this with me.’”

Duquesne University has a 10-month accelerated program that prepares students to sit for the CFP exam. “Most people in the industry don’t have this certification,” Les says. “She hounded me. We may be the only father-daughter team (in Pittsburgh) who are CFPs.” There’s more than a hint of fatherly pride in his voice.

“She has patience. Music has given her the discipline to succeed in this business. People like the fact that when I’m gone, someone will be here to take care of them,” Les says, then laughs. “And it’ll be good for me, down the road when dear old dad is ready to retire, someone will take over the business.” (Actually, the business should be well protected; his son, Lester, recently signed on with Smith Barney, too.)

With her easy laugh, fresh face and chic garb, Botkin debunks any stereotype of financial planners as stiff-necked number crunchers. She doesn’t strive to be serious or reserved. “I’m just me,” she says, smiling. “It’s not all about sitting around reading the Wall Street Journal. You get involved in people’s lives. You build nice relationships with them.”

chosen music,” Botkin says. “But now, well, I’m glad I don’t have to choose. I’ve gotten so close to my dad. I care so much about my clients.” She pauses. “But I guess, in essence, I have chosen. I’ve chosen finance. But ironically, I couldn’t make CDs, I couldn’t hire the principal harpist from the Pittsburgh Symphony, if I didn’t have finance. Now that music is not my career, it’s a lot more fun.”

Botkin’s financial freedom has allowed her to employ for her upcoming CD such respected musicians as violinist Mark Huggins (Associate Concert Master of the Pittsburgh Symphony), Gretchen van Hoesen (the symphony’s principal harpist), and Andy Reamer (the symphony’s associate principal percussionist).

Without the stress of always needing a next gig, Botkin can relax at home in Canonsburg and enjoy time with her husband and their two dogs, Taffy and Daisy, “the girls.” When not at work (Manciu is a title policy representative with a real estate information service), the couple challenges each other to wicked backgammon matches. They enjoy cruising West Virginia’s Cheat Lake in their 22-foot Wellcraft Cruiser (detailed and refurbished by Manciu). Botkin loves Scrabble, and especially Balderdash. “But with Ovi’s second language as English,” she says, laughing, “we stick with backgammon.”

For all of the time she devotes to her music (one CD requires 160 studio hours alone, plus countless hours of rehearsal and arrangement), Botkin takes no payment. Proceeds from concerts and CD sales have gone to such good works as the WASHArts (an educational program for underprivileged children), WQED-

“Five years ago, if you had made me choose between music and this work, I would have

FM Listener Pledge Drive, the North Hills Food Bank, and (coming up) the Washington Area Humane Society. In tribute to her brother, Lester, a marine and Iraq War veteran, she sends signed, complimentary CDs to soldiers upon request.

"It's not about selling CDs," she says. "It's about the joy music can bring. When I record, I love to think about people enjoying what I've done. I really like to do good for someone." She adds, "If someone approached me every month to do a benefit, I'd do it. In fact, I'd love that!"

Botkin's voice coach, Claudia Benack, who has coached such well-known singers as Josh Groban, says Botkin's voice range is quite unusual. "It enables Sara to do more than an ordinary singer," says Benack, who is Lecturer of Singing Voice at Carnegie Mellon University. "But aside from having an amazing voice, she has such an amazing presence. That empathy and kindness come out when she sings. She's able to share very easily."

Pittsburgh has been kind to Botkin's music career in ways New York never could have been. Pittsburgh Symphony's Curtain Call carries her CDs. At local Borders Books & Music stores, "An Angel's Christmas" was a best-seller. She's

had e-mails from around the world, and fans occasionally recognize her. "A lady approached me at the Fish Market and said, 'I listen to you every Christmas.' I couldn't believe it!"

At the studio, she and Sanders joke about recording a special 'Burgh song for the end of her upcoming CD. "We'll call it, 'God Rest Yinz Merry Gentlemen,'" she says, and busts into a trilling soprano. Sanders laughs and adds, "'N save yinz all from Satan's pahr when we're dahn at the Sahth Sahd Crawl." Botkin wonders aloud, seriously, if it could get play time on WDVE's morning show.

For all her achievements, Botkin is still coming to grips with her success. One of the "most exciting moments" of her life occurred recently in the North Hills Borders. "I had approached Borders and asked them to sell my CD," she explains. At first, they would only take five at a time. But they soon ordered more and more. One day when she walked in, her CD was playing over the sound system. "I looked around at some customers and said, 'That's me singing! That's me!' Of course no one else cared," she says, laughing. "But I did!" 🗨