

Burn baby burn

When you've played Pooping Man's sex-mad mistress in Jerry Springer: the Opera, what do you do next? Simple, Loré Lixenberg tells Tom Service. You go to hell



Tom Service
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A date with Dante ... Lixenberg. Photo: Frank Baron

Singer Loré Lixenberg has a unique claim to fame. Without her inspiration, Jerry Springer: the Opera would not exist. In a double act with composer Richard Thomas, she developed the musical and dramatic foundations for the opera's riotous, high-octane obscenity with a fabulously foul-mouthed coloratura soprano. "Richard called me the Opera Device," she says, "and we had these anti-heckle lines for the student union audiences we played to, like, 'Fuck, fuck you cunt!'" Lixenberg sings me these indelicate words, sotto voce, with her velvety mezzo-soprano; in the genteel surroundings of a London restaurant, her voice has a dark, clandestine thrill.

Lixenberg appeared in Jerry Springer for three years, from its Battersea Arts Centre beginnings to its triumphant transfer to the National and the West End. But when I meet her, she has just flown in from Lisbon, after singing the world premiere of a piece by young Scottish composer Stuart MacRae, Two Scenes from the Death of Count Ugolino, which she performs tonight in Birmingham with the Birmingham Contemporary Music Group. MacRae's serious-minded contemporary classical idiom is a world away from the high camp of Thomas's score for Jerry Springer. But it is typical of her career that one week she is singing the world premiere of a new opera in Denmark, and the next tap-dancing in a pink dress for Jerry Springer devotees. How does she encompass the apparently unconnected worlds of high comedy and hardcore modernist music? "I don't see any difference between them," she says. "I know that sounds completely crazy, but I feel that everything from John Cage to Jerry Springer is equally relevant to us today."

Lixenberg's first musical inspiration was a visit to the opera at Glyndebourne, near her childhood home in Brighton. "I saw Strauss's Capriccio, with the legendary soprano Elisabeth Soderstrom," she says. "I was five, and I remember loving the music vividly, but I didn't know what the hell was going on in the story. I couldn't work out why this woman was so caught up with these two men. It was obvious to me that she should be with the composer, not the poet, because I thought then that music was so much more interesting. But I also had my first experience of alcohol that night. I know it's incredibly young, but my mother gave me some Pimm's. I fell asleep in the second half."

The idea of an operatically obsessed infant alcoholic could have come straight from Jerry Springer, but Lixenberg managed to stay off the booze long enough to realise she wanted to be a singer. "We had this wonderful music teacher at school who introduced

us to contemporary music. We performed Britten's children's operas, like Noye's Fludde and Let's Make an Opera, and when I was 10, I heard Peter Maxwell Davies's Eight Songs for a Mad King. I thought it was wonderful. Right from the start, contemporary music wasn't something to be scared of."

It also gave Lixenberg a taste for musical experimentation, which would lead her to her first encounter with Richard Thomas. "One of the ideas I wanted to try just after I graduated was free improvisation. I was in a group that toured to the Edinburgh Fringe one year, and Richard was one of the four people in the audience one night. He screamed with uncontrollable laughter all the way through my pieces - which resulted in me getting the sack. With free improvisation, you're meant to be very serious. It's meant to have a lot of integrity, and not to be funny, so the group sacked me."

However, Thomas was so taken with Lixenberg's performance that he asked her for singing lessons - "He sounded like a cement mixer," she says - and after resolving that Thomas should play the piano instead, their duo was born. "Richard and I were exploring the relationship between the vernacular, shall we say, and high opera," she says. It all led, years later, to the delicious satire of Jerry Springer, and the characters that Lixenberg created for the show. "I was Peaches," she says, "who's very uptight, very religious and completely in love with this man who tells her that he's been having affairs with her best friend and a pre-op tranny. And I was Baby Jane, who is the coprophiliac, nymphomaniac mistress to Pooping Man, the one who tells his girlfriend that he wants to poop his pants and that he wants to be treated like a baby."

But after three years working with Jerry's gallery of grotesques, both Lixenberg and Thomas have moved on. In fact, Lixenberg has just performed Thomas's new opera in Hanover. "It's called Stand Up, and is based on this phrase that comedians use: 'dying on your arse'," she says, "which is the idea that a comedian dies on his or her arse if they don't make the audience laugh." In a typical Thomas twist, the comic is combined with the mythic, as Death appears as a character alongside the comedy routines. "It's very dark," Lixenberg says, "but very beautiful and really funny."

It is another adventure in musical theatre. But maybe the worlds of contemporary classical music and savagely satirical musicals aren't as far apart as they seem. MacRae wrote his new piece for Lixenberg after hearing her perform music by John Cage, and singer and composer first met backstage at the Cambridge Theatre during a performance of Jerry Springer.

"It was quite bizarre, because he's a very serious young man, and here he was at this rather wild show." But MacRae's piece has turned out to be no less wild. It is based on Dante's Inferno, the passage that describes Count Ugolino in the ninth circle of hell. "The Count ends up eating his son's skull," Lixenberg says. "He staves off hunger for as long as he can, but eventually he can't last any longer, and the piece finishes with his mandibles crunching into this skull. Stuart has used the full palette of my voice, its range and colours, and the effect is absolutely fantastic." From the burning conflagration in the second act of Jerry Springer to Dante's vision of the final circle of hell: Lixenberg's vocal talents have inspired it all.

• Loré Lixenberg performs music by Stuart MacRae and Gyorgy Kurtag with the Birmingham Contemporary Music Group tonight at the CBSO Centre, Birmingham.
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