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Notes on a scandal, Neil Fisher

She was Baby Jane in *Jerry Springer*, and now Lore Lixenberg is taking operatic liberties with British television. Neil Fisher meets a diva of the funny side.

An opera singer shouldn't really have to dither when I ask her which of her performances included a banana and a safety helmet. But Lore Lixenberg hesitates.

"That's easy it's John Cage's *Aria* isn't it? Oh, but wasn't that also *Belfast Breakfast Songs*?"

Out-foxed, I confess my ignorance and we move on. I'm none the wiser about either piece - except being 100 per cent certain that Lixenberg must be the best possible person to sing them. Because Lixenberg thrives on the unexpected and the unorthodox, and the wackier her part, the more she seems to get out of it.

"Traditional opera is fantastically amazing," she concedes. "But the female roles are pretty limited. In contemporary music there are so many more archetypes to play with - you don't even have to be a woman if you don't want to be. You can be object, you can be all kinds of things." She ponders for a while, before concluding, almost regretfully: "Traditional's just not the way things went for me."

To which any of the thousands, of people who saw *Jerry Springer: The Opera!* would give a loud hurrah. It was the two heroines the British mezzo-soprano created in Richard Thomas's musical comedy - Peaches (betrayed by boyfriend for best friend and pre-op tranny) and Baby Jane (mistress of a coprophiliac nymphomaniac) - that were probably her greatest triumphs. That, and the deliciously beguiling way in which she exhorted us to dip her in chocolate and, as Stewart Lee's libretto told it, throw her to the lesbians.

Lixenberg took the show all the way from its hazy beginnings as a sketch at the Battersea Arts Centre to its run at the National Theatre, and still can't quite believe it. "I go from being a contemporary music singer, where quite often the world premiere is the world derniere, to eight shows a week of the same? Get outta here!" The good news is that long-term colleagues (and friends) Lixenberg and Thomas are reuniting once more for a Springeresque follow-up series, *Kombat Opera Presents*, on BBC Two. Spoofing such TV stalwarts as *Question time* and *Wife Swap*, Lixenberg stars in all five - playing anything from a contestant on *The Apprentice* to "a skimpy Vicky Pollard type" in the final episode, titled *Drinking in Nottingham*.

But, true to form, she hasn't shirked the part of her musical personality that finds her belting John Cage or Karlheinz Stockhausen to a more specialised kind of audience. Tonight and tomorrow she's the main attraction in *Riot*, a collection of works loosely grouped around the idea of protest, and presented by Rolf Hind and the Society for the promotion of New Music. Hence when we meet in a snatched hour between classes at the Royal Academy - Lixenberg runs workshops with young composers - she's clutching the music for Ligeti's song cycle, *Sippal, dobbal, nadihegeduval* - "a fantastic piece", apparently, despite the Hungarian vowels. "It's hard, but the way I approach everything is via the text. You get the text really tight and then you work it into your voice".

The same approach goes into *Jerry Springer*; Lixenberg never divides what she performs into categories. "But as you get older you realise that people don't think like you. It took me a while to realise that there are people who really see contemporary music as a distinct part of 'classical music' and I really don't." But doesn't she regret just a little how narrowly cerebral some of those atonal "classics" can be, particularly in comparison with the absolute irreverence of *Jerry Springer* or *Kombat Opera Presents*? "It is very much music for other musicians," she admits. "Even now when I go to contemporary music festivals I do want to run around shouting 'it's music!' because it does seem a little like a conference of the atomic agency. But these composers are like the pure physicists of the music world, doing something

to an extreme. You have to be in the mood. "

Lixenberg, thankfully, is always in the mood and has been since she was a child growing up in Brighton. "I had a music teacher who really loved classical music," she recalls. "Listening to it there was no mystery - it wasn't any different listening to Beethoven or pop, it was all the same world. And she was fascinated by world music, so that featured very heavily, too." Her career choice was made with the same fluid ease with which her mezzo soprano floats through babbling Ligeti. "I always assumed that that was what I would do. I never questioned that I would be anything else or do anything else. I started and just carried on." Unusually, she did without college. "There's loads of different paths. To go to music college you need to be a package, but that's not for everybody."

So she went her own way. Then at the Edinburgh Festival she first encountered Thomas. "I went there as a serious improvising musician," she recalls, "and it was one of those shows where there were four people in the audience and one of them was Richard. And he just laughed his tits off because he thought it was really funny." The result was that Lixenberg was fired by her pretentious co-stars for disrespect and a partnership was born. "We were on the Student Network Tour, which was what comedians do. I was the opera device - I'd shoot audiences down with lines like: 'How do you solve a problem like Maria?/ Give her a slap and kick her in the beaver.' Audiences would either laugh their heads off or turn nasty, and then it was dangerous."

Lixenberg's future - both with and without Thomas - seems fairly certain, and unhappily for Covent Garden it probably won't include the tried and tested. "I've always been attracted to the more experimental side of things. Ninety per cent of what I'm doing between now and 2008 will be contemporary. None of it is traditional opera."

Most of all she wants to work with composers, creating roles with them as much as performing. Next up? "A composer asked me what kind of thing I wanted him to write for me, and I said, oh i quite fancy doing something about plastic surgery, because I'm really interested in that. So I'm playing this woman who is somehow forced into having cosmetic surgery, and the doctor decides that she's died and she gets buried alive." She gives me a disarming grin. "Yes," she says. "it's an extreme story."