

Grande Dame



Dame Kiri Te Kanawa,
one of the world's
leading opera singers,
is in concert at the
Norwich Theatre Royal
in December.

As **Piers Ford** discovers,
she lacks any pretension
and delights in her
audiences

It seems incredible, but more than 30 years have passed since Dame Kiri Te Kanawa made her Covent Garden debut, taking the opera world by storm with her fresh, vibrant portrayal of the Countess of Almaviva in *The Marriage of Figaro*.

It has been a career notable for its sheer richness and diversity. Blessed with a molten soprano voice which has glided the greatest and most complex roles created by Strauss, Puccini and Mozart, Dame Kiri has also been a hugely successful recording artist with a repertoire that makes nonsense of the perceived gap between classical and popular music. Equally at home on the concert platform, she will delight the audience at the Norwich Theatre Royal on Saturday 9th December with a festive programme of Vivaldi, Brahms and Christmas carols.

Throughout it all, she has always commanded and maintained the highest possible professional standards. She's worked with the best - Solti, Bernstein, Bonyngue and Nelson Riddle to name but a few - and performed for a wide variety of audiences across the globe. At 59 she has developed the authoritative, patrician elegance which comes to those who have scaled all the peaks in their field and have come to gracious terms with the accompanying recognition. Dame Kiri is undeniably opera royalty. But there is also a jauntiness which suggests that a hearty wink, a slap on the back and, quite possibly - as befits a loyal Kiwi, she's a staunch All Blacks supporter - a risqué remark, are never far away.

Perhaps it's that undiluted New Zealand accent. Perhaps it's the touching story of a childhood, the part-Maori, part-European baby adopted by parents with a similar background, which gave her much, including the foundation of an operatic career courtesy of her ambitious mother, but which also set her apart and threw her back on her own resources. Or perhaps it's just the combination of that famously wide smile and the fluidity of the voice. But Dame Kiri remains the most down-to-earth prima donna. Although she's lived in England for most of her professional life, she's a citizen of the world who appeals across the board.

"If you asked all the audience who came to one of my concerts where they were from, you'd find they were from every corner of the world," she says. "I don't think there's such a thing as a typically British audience. It's always a group of amazing, unlikely people! In fact, you'd be more likely to find one in New Zealand, because they're all originally from Scotland or Ireland. They all came from here in the first place."

She's partly joking, of course. Dame Kiri's roots have become increasingly important to her over the years. In 1999, she released an album, *Maori Songs*, an ethereally beautiful testament to her distinctive heritage which defines perhaps for the first time the qualities that heritage has contributed to her voice.

"I think my voice and my heritage run hand in hand," she says. "What I am, who I am, never having known my natural parents or some of my natural family. Never having had any of that, I feel sometimes like a bit of an island. I suppose that comes with my upbringing and it's a strange feeling. My roots are in New Zealand, of course, but you don't feel grounded unless you've got some family around, and I don't have any, apart from my immediate family."

Dame Kiri was one of the first opera singers to diversify into popular music, as if the rigours and constraints of the great roles were too restrictive. She once said that opera itself wasn't liberating to her, and that she'd really rather be strutting her stuff like Tina Turner. Predictably, the purists frowned on her work with Nelson Riddle, her creamy interpretations of Gershwin standards, even her studio recordings of *South Pacific*, *My Fair Lady* and *West Side Story*, and they barely let her get away with her *Moor Songs*. You suspect she couldn't care less.

"I loved doing *Blue Skies*. It was such fun and I think it really worked," she says, remembering her time with Nelson Riddle. "I mean an awful lot of people thought it was a load of rubbish but I enjoyed it very much. I tried to select what was good for me, and my type of voice. And I was dying to do different things but they didn't suit me. So I chose things I could do with conviction which wouldn't shock people."

In any case, good popular music was as much a part of her young professional life as opera. Urged on by her mother and her singing teacher, Dame Kiri spent much of her school day practising and rehearsing, and she went on the road early, singing standards and show songs for her supper in nightclubs. She was soon recording and winning prizes in the South Pacific, but wider recognition took longer. A scholarship was raised to send her to study at the London Opera Centre during the late 1960s and she began to be noticed by people of influence, including Sir Colin Davis, then conductor at Covent Garden.

By her own admission, Dame Kiri took some time to galvanise her own commitment to the hard work required to fulfil her early promise. But when she did, the rewards came thick and fast through the 1970s and 1980s, from Mozart's *Donna Elvira* and *Pamina*, to Verdi's *Violetta* and *Desdemona*, and on to roles in *Tosca* and *Manon Lescaut*. But her desire to get something more from a role than just singing it propelled her towards the parts created by Richard Strauss which would become the signatures of her career. One by one, she set the definitive standards of the modern era by which subsequent lyric sopranos will be judged for years to come.

"I always wanted the challenge," she says. "Other people sing lots of Verdi and Puccini and I think that's very nice. But I really need something that makes my brain twist. And *Arabella*, the *Countess in Capriccio* and *The Marchallin in Der Rosenkavalier* were the three roles which did

that, getting me into the story and getting my brain going. The only trouble was that it would never rest, so that was exhausting in itself!"

In recent years, she's reduced her operatic appearances, preferring to enjoy the legacy these roles have left her personally rather than pursuing the grind of finding new parts that actually suit her and then learning them. "Above everything else, they've given me a great deal of satisfaction, I think," she says. Having performed and done them with some of the greatest people in the world, the greatest singers, conductors and orchestras, in some of the greatest opera houses. Stages she has graced include La Scala, Paris Opera, Sydney Opera House, the Met in New York and of course, Covent Garden. "It's just been so classy, stuff of the very highest quality, and I think everyone tries to achieve that."

She expects to be involved with one further production: "I keep saying it's my last, because there's all that standing for six hours a day, breaking your back, when you're working on a new one." But you feel her love of the dramatic element of opera will keep enticing her back as long as she can sing well enough to meet her own high expectations. Her voice has lasted well thanks to her professional discipline. "I'm more regimented now than I've ever been," she declares. "Getting older you have to be more careful. And that's fine. But it's also good for me: I like being regimented, it's part of what I do."

In the meantime, however, there is a steady progression around the world's concert stages. Recitals and programmes like the one she will bring to the Theatre Royal give her the chance to shake loose a little and enjoy the reactions of the audiences that continually delight her. She recently returned from Japan and was surprised to find the normally reserved audiences were more vociferously appreciative than ever before.

"It was absolutely wonderful," she enthuses. "They were marvellous and I thought, gosh, this is what it's all about, what I do. It's where I get my enjoyment. People often ask me how I think the performance went. And I tell them to ask the audience. If they didn't like it, I'm in trouble!" She's unlikely to find herself in any such difficulty in Norwich this month. oe



Dame Kiri Te Kanawa:
*Christmas Concert,
Norwich Theatre
Royal, Saturday
9th December,
Box Office 01603
630000.*