

# The mighty Sampson

As soprano Carolyn Sampson turns 50, she tells **Ashutosh Khandekar** about the development of her voice through a remarkable catalogue of recordings

**T**hey're such nice numbers! It's an unusual observation from a singer – but then Carolyn Sampson is the daughter of two maths teachers, so perhaps she appreciates more than most the beauty of the numerical coincidence that has taken place in her life. Sampson will turn 50 on 18 May. Meanwhile, she has celebrated the release of her 100th album, *but I like to sing...* And crowning a career of accolades, this January she was awarded an OBE for services to music.

Her new album, released on BIS, takes its title from a line in Leonard Bernstein's song 'I Hate Music!', a tongue-in-cheek commentary on concert going and the snobbery that exists around it ('...A lot of chairs with a lot of airs'). The sentiment suits Sampson's quietly irreverent, down-to-earth nature. Launched at a recital at Wigmore Hall in London last December, *but I like to sing...* shows off her extraordinary range, inventiveness and stylistic versatility, from classic German lieder to unfamiliar (but stunningly beautiful) French chanson and contemporary song. It all feels very personal, but with a forward-looking thrust. 'There are songs that have meant a lot to me through my life, but it isn't intended as a "career retrospective". There are new discoveries and some fresh thinking that I hope will point the way for my future.'

Included is a piece Sampson commissioned from Deborah Pritchard: 'Everyone Sang' is a setting of a poem by Siegfried Sassoon which celebrates the power of song. 'I'm very keen to commission new songs – and I'm lucky to have a platform to do it,' Sampson says. 'It's really important that classical music doesn't get trapped in a bubble. We have to keep

communicating the wonderful thing we do, without apologising for it. My question is, how do we commission new stuff that doesn't clash with tradition? That's the beauty of a song recital: you can have new compositional voices working within a familiar context.'

Pushing the envelope without spilling its contents has been a feature of Sampson's career. Her first study at Birmingham University was piano, 'but I soon discovered that the world was full of amazing pianists, who were far, far, better than me – so I started concentrating on my voice.

**'We have to keep communicating the wonderful thing we do, without apologising'**

At that point I had an ambitious teacher who wanted me to sing Verdi, which definitely wasn't where my voice was at that point. So, I worked on regaining my natural sound, which had become overlain by a "manufactured" vibrato.' She demonstrates with a pseudo-operatic wobble.

Having restored her voice to its exquisite, unaffected state, the 19-year-old Carolyn bounded into the early music scene that was burgeoning in Birmingham thanks to Jeffrey Skidmore and his ensemble Ex Cathedra. He encouraged her to make her first solo recording, *Règne Amour*, a collection of love songs from operas by Rameau. There was some scepticism as to whether a British group would be able to grasp Rameau's quintessentially Gallic style, but





The brighter side: Sampson's voice is known for its light and radiance; (top) performing Handel with the Gabrieli Consort and Players at Alice Tully Hall, NY, 2002; her first solo album, *Régne Amour*



Sampson and Skidmore nailed it. *BBC Music Magazine's* reviewer judged Sampson's voice to be 'well-nigh ideal' in this repertoire.

Ex Cathedra provided a complete training ground for Sampson. Building on the musicianship she'd developed in Bedfordshire's strong youth and music tradition, she learnt how to sing on the job and was soon in demand with the leading early music ensembles of the day: Harry Christophers and The Sixteen, Robert King and The King's Consort (where she got her first big break as a Bach soloist), Trevor Pinnock and the English Concert and, most significantly, with Masaaki Suzuki and the Bach Collegium Japan, whose complete Bach Cantatas project sealed her reputation in the first decade of the new millennium as the go-to Bach soprano of her generation.

Her twenties, Sampson recalls, were a blast as her international career flourished and she made her first forays into opera. Her debut came in the cameo role of Amore in English National Opera's production of Monteverdi's *The Coronation of Poppea*. This led to bigger roles in Purcell's *The Fairy Queen*, as Susanna in Mozart's *The Marriage of Figaro*, and in Handel's *Semele*, where she merrily stripped off as she skipped into the wings, consolidating her reputation as a cheeky, fun-loving party girl – 'The Soprano who Dares to Bare', as the headlines put it.

It wasn't, she insists, representative of her true nature. 'I'm not an extrovert person,' she says. 'I'm actually quite shy. But, if I see any sort of performance, even something I can't do, I want to be a part of it. I'm still being me on stage, but it's a different bit of me that I'd be too self-conscious to access just chilling out in the pub.'

As her thirties got into their stride, life became more settled for Sampson. She married and went to live with her husband in Germany. Then came children (a son, now aged 15, and a daughter, 12) and with them, the need to make some serious decisions. 'The reason I haven't done all that much opera was because I decided I didn't want to be away from home for months at a time. That wasn't an artistic choice; it was a life choice. It's worked for me but it's not for everyone. I'm





## Music and maths A beautiful symmetry

'People talk about the relationship between music and maths, and I wonder if that's to do with patterns.' As the daughter of maths teachers, Carolyn Sampson has the facility to absorb patterns in music which, she tells me, makes learning complex works fairly easy.

It's an ability she shows off to brilliant effect in Cheryl Frances-Hoad's *Something More than Mortal*, a centrepiece of *but I like to sing...* The unaccompanied tour de force sets excerpts from letters between Ada Lovelace (pictured above) and Charles Babbage, two great 19th-century mathematicians. Lovelace's feverish words are rhythmic and repetitive but also passionate, embracing the nature of the infinite.

Music and maths seem to bring together the symmetry found in the logical left hemisphere of the brain and the more instinctual right side. And perhaps this explains Sampson's expressive ease in the music of Bach, that most mathematical of composers.

On the other hand, the singer is keen to point out that when she performed *Something More than Mortal* in a Wigmore Hall concert, she forgot her words and had to start again. The momentary lapse endeared her to her audience: 'It's good to be reminded that we're only human!'



Letting her hair down: (left) performing in *Pelléas et Mélisande* for Scottish Opera, 2017; Sampson's 100th album, *but I like to sing...*

keen to tell young singers who are starting out that there are so many paths to a good career.'

At a time when gender equality has come to the fore, how supportive is the opera world for women who want a better life/work balance? 'Of course, it's amazing if you can have a crèche at an opera house – but that's still a luxury that most opera companies can't afford. However, there are simple steps that opera houses ought to take, like getting schedules out in advance so that you can plan childcare. The truth is, though, that once your kids are in school, it's very hard to juggle everything. But then, if you're expecting an easy path in life, don't choose singing as a career!'

With opera largely off the menu, Sampson focused on her thriving concert career and slowly built on her considerable strengths as a recitalist. She was in her forties when she made her first recital disc, *Fleurs*, with pianist Joseph Middleton, who has become a regular partner in the concert hall and on recordings (his virtuosic skills are much in evidence in *but I like to sing...*). Like many good friendships, theirs was forged over a drink in a pub. 'We chatted away (not just about music!) and it was an easy step to start working together. Joe suggested the flower theme – because there are so many songs about flowers in such a variety of languages and styles. We had great fun putting together a shortlist. We talked about colours, and about the poems. I'll often read out a poem before we perform the song for the first time, so we've got the overall shape of the piece in our heads and the music has an arc.'

The pair's next disc, *A Verlaine Songbook*, came a year later, exploring settings of 25

works by the iconic French Symbolist poet. It's a sensual, sensory world of light and colour which particularly suits Sampson's limpid, expressive singing, and it was fascinating to learn how she and Middleton assimilated the style. 'Oh, we really got into it! We read *Madame Bovary* and we went to the Wallace Collection to see Watteau's *Fêtes galantes*. Verlaine's poems were, of course, at the core, but the wider ideas and imagery that we absorbed really inform the way we presented the songs.'

Approaching 50, says Sampson, seems like a much bigger milestone than 40. Life has moved on. These days she lives as a single parent back in her home town of Bedford, near her mother and stepfather, though with her children still at the heart of everything. Meanwhile, her voice has certainly moved on from the treble-like purity of her Bach years, developing into something a little less tidy, showing its 'life experience' with a sprinkling of wisdom added to its natural wit. The light and radiance are still all there, however. Sampson has never been one for exploring the dark side: 'I have to make a conscious effort if I need to produce a dark or ugly sound,' she says. 'We have to embrace the instrument we are given, so I accept my natural brightness rather than longing for a mezzo-y richness.'

Opera has come into the mix again. A superb *Mélisande* in David McVicar's production of Debussy's *Pelléas et Mélisande* for Scottish Opera in 2017 showed Sampson heading for her operatic prime until Covid nipped that in the bud. She picked up the thread again last year when she made her triumphant debut at the Berlin Staatsoper in Charpentier's *Médée*, conducted by Simon Rattle.

The next steps are tantalising. 'If you are a woman turning 50, you know you're heading towards some serious changes in life. Singers talk about the voice "thickening" and becoming less agile through the menopause. I haven't noticed anything quite like that yet, but I'm finding that there's just a little more steel creeping into the tone. That's interesting because it gives me another dimension to play with. I was able to cut through an orchestra before, because of the focus in my voice, and now there's something that one reviewer referred to as "metallic" – and I want to know whether I'll be able to use this effectively in the future, maybe in Strauss and Mahler. On the other hand, I don't want to lose the warmth and the lightness, so I'll be treading carefully as I go. I still want to sing the songs I love.' 🎤