

## Life with my Voice

# DEBORAH HUMBLE

The Welsh-born, Australian mezzo-soprano Deborah Humble is notable for the concentrated brilliance of her voice and her dramatic, absorbing stage presence in a wide variety of roles. As Erda and Waltraute in Australia's Melbourne *Ring*, *Opera Now* praised her for her 'intense, fulminating' singing. As an all-round performer, she leaves a big impression even in small roles.



### Can you remember who or what first switched you on to opera?

I always wanted to be an opera singer. I never considered being anything else. As early as primary school when friends were writing stories about being princesses and mermaids and

mummies when they grew up, I was dreaming of singing at the Sydney Opera House. I didn't go to my first opera until I was 16 and there were no operatic recordings at home, so I have no idea where this idea stemmed from. There are opera singers on my father's side of the family and his aunt began her career as an understudy of Dame Nellie Melba, so I like to think it could be genetic and just 'meant to be'. Others like the idea that it is because of my Welsh heritage, as I was born in Bangor in North Wales.

### You're now living in Hamburg in Germany. How important is it for you to stay connected to your roots in Australia?

I've lived in the UK or Europe for over 17 years now, so I feel very European in my way of thinking and in my approach to my singing and my career. I really appreciate the way culture occupies a place of importance in general life here, and the sheer volume of classical music on offer still continues to amaze me after all this time.

I love returning to sing in Australia once or twice a year. The work environment is very organised, the theatres are fantastic spaces, audiences are generous and enthusiastic and there is the luxury of long rehearsal periods. The standard of operatic performance is very high and there is a huge amount of vocal talent. It's wonderful to return under such circumstances and at the same time reconnect with family, old friends and colleagues. I am also very interested and involved with the next generation of Australian singers via teaching, masterclasses, mentorship and competition adjudication. I believe it is important to be able to share some of the knowledge and experience I have been so fortunate to acquire abroad.

**What is your attitude to *Regietheater*, given that you must experience quite a lot of this style of production working in Germany?**

The term *Regietheater* mostly conjures up negative images of grossly modern productions; confrontational stagings often using costumes, sets, props and actions that could be considered far removed from the composers' or librettists' original direction. In general I don't have a problem with a director who tries to add a contemporary slant on something historical. I do believe that opera is about voices first and foremost, so I have a problem when staging is so 'out there' that it prevents an artist doing what they have been employed to do to the very best of their ability. A lot of people don't realise how little say a singer sometimes gets in what they do on stage and how they interpret the music, often to their detriment. I believe in teamwork to produce a good end product. Considering that this type of theatre is very often applied to Wagner's works, I have encountered very few productions that I really disliked.

**Your repertoire is extremely diverse, encompassing everything from Baroque opera to Wagner. In what music do you feel most at home?**

After nine years in Germany, I'm very at home now with Wagner, Strauss, Mahler and anything in the German language. It has involved years of language study and analysis of style and it has often been a steep learning curve, but this repertoire affords me great pleasure now, as well as providing welcome ongoing challenges. I don't believe in being 'boxed' into a particular repertoire at this stage, so I also sing Verdi and Italian repertoire and have spent time in the last three years in Italy studying with specialists in that field. Handel keeps the voice fresh and flexible which is important.

**What roles appeal to you in particular?**

Carmen, Delilah and Charlotte in *Werther* are favourite roles of mine. As a result of my voice type, I'm used to playing fairly strong ladies on stage. A recent favourite was definitely Amneris in *Aida*. All the Verdi mezzo roles offer great dramatic scope. I love playing Suzuki in *Madama Butterfly* too. She's not just the subservient type people often mistake her for. Purcell's Dido is a wonderful role. In Wagner, I love Fricka; and in the future I would love to interpret Kundry in *Parsifal*, who is probably the most complex of Wagner's female characters. For a pretty dress and a bit of ballroom dancing, I happily inhabit the character of Olga in *Eugene Onegin*.

**Erda doesn't spend much time on stage during the *Ring*, but her music, personality and prophecies cast a long shadow over proceedings. How do you get yourself into the right mindset to portray her effectively?**

Erda is actually quite difficult precisely because of the brevity of the role. In *Das Rheingold* her warning is a pivotal moment: four-and-a-half minutes where Wagner basically stops the action and everyone on stage and in the auditorium is focused on her and what she is saying. There is no on-stage warm-up, and no time

JEFF BUSBY



▲ Strong lady: as Amneris in Opera Australia's *Aida*

to get comfortable. It's over before you even realise you're out there. Nonetheless there is no other role I sing that creates such attention when it's well done.

**What are the challenges that you face, personally, as an opera singer?**

The challenges never stop; they only change. For an Australian there is always the challenge of foreign languages. I've learnt three European languages and lived in London, Paris, Hamburg and Bologna since moving overseas. Since becoming a freelancer, the challenges are often more to do with lifestyle: travelling constantly is tiring and basically disruptive to any chance of a life most people think of as 'normal'. Changing cities, apartments and colleagues every few weeks, constantly trying to be in good vocal health and maintaining friendships and relationships are all constant challenges.

Much of this job is about psychological strength, I think. Can you self-motivate and self-promote? Can you deal with criticism and get along with managements and agents? One definitely needs to be the type of person who can embrace all these demands. On the other hand, I get to see the world, meet incredibly talented and interesting people and I get to do what I love best. It's a well-worn cliché but it's true: if you do what you love you never feel like it's work. I am still excited by my work and I know how incredibly lucky I am to do it. 📺

Deborah Humble sings Erda in *Das Rheingold* on 22 and 24 January with the Hong Kong Philharmonic Orchestra under maestro Jaap van Sweden. A live recording of these performances is planned as part of a complete new *Ring* cycle on the Naxos label.

[www.deborahhumble.com](http://www.deborahhumble.com)