

'I've always kept close to Yorkshire' - Lesley Garrett

A personal touch

Unlike many other crossover artists, soprano Lesley Garrett has managed to maintain a successful operatic career alongside being a popular household name. Marking her 21st year as a recording artist, a new CD of folk songs has been released paying tribute to her Yorkshire roots. Interview by **Antonia Couling**

Lesley Garrett's recording career reaches its 21st anniversary this year and is being marked with the release of her fourteenth solo CD, featuring traditional British folk songs and entitled, appropriately enough, *A North Country Lass*. One of the UK's most successful ambassadors for opera, Garrett has managed to maintain a solid operatic career alongside her celebrity status, and her popularity has also meant that she has been able to wield a strong influence on the material which she records.

A North Country Lass, she says, is a project which has been some years in the making: 'Producer James Fitzpatrick and I have talked about this

project for 20 years. He's from Lancashire, I'm from Yorkshire and it's something we've always wanted to do. We wanted to take our time over it, think about each individual track, and most importantly, get the arrangements right.'

Garrett's memories of childhood are heavily embedded with recollections of singing folk music – something she brings to bear on the album: 'I sang so much folk music as a young person growing up in South Yorkshire, and I wanted to revisit these songs with all that I now am. Because I think that's what people do with folk music, take it on and develop it for the future. It can also be a vehicle for each individual's expression of

experience, and my experience is that of a classically trained opera singer and general music-lover. In a way, I was scared of making this album, because I thought, am I too far away from this music now through my experience? But my instinct said no, because I've always kept close to it. I've always kept close to Yorkshire.'

The personal nature of the CD is evident, both in the flavour of the arrangements, which seem to reflect Garrett's character, but also in the choice of songs: 'Some of the songs on the album are songs from my childhood which I wanted to do, but others are new like *The Colliers Lad*, for example, which James introduced me to, because it's a Lancashire song. I wanted to do a version of the Welsh song *Suo Gan* [Lullaby], but I wanted to try and make each piece special. And that's a good example because it was used in the film *Empire of the Sun* and so we gave it a Japanese flavour by introducing Japanese instruments [koto, santur and shamisen]. And we went a long way to find the performers that we wanted to perform with, like Bradley [Creswick, folk fiddle], Terl Bryant [Irish Bodhrans] and flautist Troy Donockly. And then, of course the Black Dyke Band, who I've worked with before.'

The team of arrangers and composers is headed by music director Paul Bateman, along with seven others. 'What I like about it is that some of the tracks are so simple and Celtic and quite authentic in a folk way – like *My Love is Like a Red, Red Rose*, which is just heartrending in its arrangement, in its sparseness,' says Garrett. 'There is nothing jolly and bagpipey about it – it's heartfelt, which is how I've always felt about that piece of music. And then you've got this wonderful *Blow the Wind Southerly*, which Paul Hart has done. To me, it's very much like Benjamin Britten *Sea Interludes* – very operatic. But I often think that a lot of folk music is very operatic in that it's telling a very powerful and passionate story involving enormous – sometimes quite terrible – emotions. When I was a child, we always sang folk music with great heart and power – we didn't sing it in a little namby-pamby, incy-wincy way ever. It was powerful music of the earth, the land, and the people, and I wanted to bring all that to this as well.'

Delving into music that is so familiar to so many has offered Garrett a different performing experience: 'It's a very different feeling performing a song which you know has been sung by thousands of ordinary people, to singing a piece of opera which you know has only been sung by a very few people professionally and probably heard by a far smaller audience. I think that the listener is immediately secure in that they know this music and therefore will be empowered to develop their perception of the song through the new interpretation that I'm presenting. And it's not radical. I'm not making this music into something it was never meant to be. I'm just bringing my own experience and that of my team of arrangers to it in order to give it a rebirth. It's a bit like when you redecorate a room, you bring the room to life again. I want the listener to walk into each one of these songs and inhabit it and look around them and say, I never realised this room was quite as beautiful as this.'

A North Country Lass (Music Infinity INS 500) is available now

