



Love story

Antonia Couling previews a stunning new DVD, *Twin Spirits*, from the Royal Opera House of a concert performance of the lives of Robert and Clara Schumann, played by Sting and Trudie Styler

CATHERINE ASHMORE



The boundaries between classical and popular music seem to be finally moving in the right direction. After years of interchangeable 'classical' vocalists producing CD after CD of watered-down versions of classical 'greats', there seems to be a palpable shift towards non-classical singers and songwriters making discerning decisions to involve themselves in projects of merit. One leading figure in this respect is Sting, long hailed as one of rock music's top-quality songwriters. Four years ago he recorded an album of Dowland songs (to mixed reviews it has to be said – but the approach to the project was nothing if not thorough on his part, from research and choice of songs, to production). A year ago, he starred in an opera which premiered at the Théâtre du Châtelet in Paris, written by Elvis Costello's keyboard-player Steve Nieve. In *Welcome to the Voice* the singer was challenging himself once again, with a leading role which left him on stage for almost the entire opera and required vocal elements which were outside his comfort zone and for which he undertook some training. He met the challenge, however, with success – thanks in part to the adept writing of Nieve – maintaining the essence of his instantly recognisable vocals, while stretching himself at the same time.

And now a further foray, and in an area of classical music that might be considered by some to be 'less accessible' than most: German *Lieder*. More specifically, the songs of Robert and Clara Schumann in a filmed concert called *Twin Spirits*. No, he's not singing them – a stretch too far perhaps – but joins forces with singers Simon Keenlyside and Rebecca Evans, narrator Derek Jacobi, violinist Sergej Krylov, cellist Natalie Clein, pianists Iain Burnside and Natasha Paremiski and, most importantly, wife Trudie Styler, to read the letters that this famous pair wrote to each other, accompanied by interludes of their music, thereby telling the story of their life together. This concert has been performed a number of times over the last couple of years and has now been recorded on DVD by Opus Arte in a performance at the Royal Opera House.

Ardent admirer as I am of Sting's work – his music has meant as much to me as Mozart in my life – I attended a preview screening of this film at the Hay Festival last May, not sure what to expect and fearing for my hero's reputation. What unfolded before the eyes of an audience made up of a mixture of Sting fans, classical music aficionados and random Hay Festival visitors, was a piece of work so powerful that it had most of us in pieces at the end. The fact that Sting and Styler share a relationship similar to the Schumanns in terms of our collective knowledge of their partnership, created a palpable force behind the texts they were reading, combined with total engagement in their parts. This force extended to all concerned, with shots of the reactions of those involved when music was being played or sung by one of their colleagues – a clever device as it will help those uninitiated in this art form to see the impact this kind of music can have.

Combined artistry:
I-r – Simon Keenlyside,
Sting, Natasha Paremiski,
soprano Rebecca Evans
and Trudie Styler

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The story of Robert and Clara Schumann lends itself perfectly to a performance of this kind, with their initial letter-writing, due to distance, turning into the keeping of a joint diary once they moved into the matrimonial home. Thus the story unfolds in a unique way, with every word being written by them. Their story is, in the words of Trudie Styler, 'searing and agonising – and wonderful to play'. Their intimacy, both romantically and artistically, is revealed in a very dramatic way, with Robert's later decline into madness put across very sensitively – with Clara's own diary becoming, finally, a solitary voice. As Sting states: 'A performance like this is a personal journey. You're forced to share very private thoughts and make them public, and that creates a tension. This love story – the relationship and the tragedy – provides a great introduction for people who don't normally listen to classical music. Hearing the Schumanns' music at the same time as telling their story was for us a very intimate, engaging and emotional experience.' Both Sting and Styler play their parts extremely well. Their research into the history and characters is clearly thorough, and with such consummate musicians playing their parts as well, I would rate this project as successful to a very high degree. The fact that this concert has been performed several times means it has worked itself into an ensemble piece – with focus and limelight equally shared.

The aim of the project is to broaden the appeal of opera and classical music and make the House more approachable to the general public. For those in their late teens onwards, I would say that this project has the power to do just that and I hope that teachers, uncles, aunts, parents everywhere take the opportunity to present the young people they know with the opportunity to receive a gift. They may take to the music, or not take to it at all, or it may be stored in their minds as something to return to in a few years. But the chance has been given. As Sting said in the post-screening interview, 'It is vitally important that our kids are exposed to music. We are cutting music programmes [in schools] as not important – when they are absolutely vital. England doesn't produce very much at the moment but we make art and music. That's what we should concentrate on.' ■



Twin Spirits is released by Opus Arte on DVD and Blu-ray 1 October. Additional features include a photo gallery and a documentary 'One heart one soul' www.twin-spirits.com You can read Antonia Couling's review of the opera *Welcome to the Voice* in the Live Reviews section of Opera Now's web pages at: www.rhinegold.co.uk/opernow

