

Interview Iliska Crossley

# MARION ROBERTS

## Queen of the High Notes



For lyrical and coloratura soprano Marion Roberts, the famous Queen of the Night Aria as it has become popularly known, is something she is intimately familiar with. Her crystal clear, soaring voice is the perfect vehicle to execute the fiendishly difficult passage work. And, she admits, that 'when I sing this kind of repertoire it is as if something inside of me is unleashed, as if my voice is given wings.'



In 2006 audiences in Gauteng could sample Marion's sparkling soprano when she gave an inspired performance of this aria at Rand Merchant Bank's annual Starlight Classics. And this year, in the landmark production by William Kentridge, Marion will be featured in the role of the villainous Queen of the Night when *The Magic Flute* is staged in Johannesburg and Cape Town in early October.

*The Magic Flute* was the last opera completed by Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart and it received its premiere some two months before his death at the age of thirty-five. Mozart is known to have written specifically for the voices available to him in the cast, and the role of the Queen of the Night was written for Mozart's sister-in-law Josepha Hofer (nee Weber), who had an extraordinary high range and agility of voice. It therefore is not within every soprano's reach to interpret this role, and Marion, who will be sharing the role with fellow South African soprano Angela Gilbert, was an obvious choice when selectors began scouting around to cast vocalists for the South African production.

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Marion describes her debut in the role as Queen of the Night as nightmarish – and this had very little to do with executing the high notes in the aria. 'It was in a production with Cape Town Opera and it was the physical setting and placing of props that made performing the aria so precarious. I had to deliver the song hoisted up in the air at the height of a floor and a half, with only about five males securing the mechanism with their body weight on the other side. For someone with an acute fear of heights it was absolute anguish. However, I managed to overcome the sheer

terror and I think the only thing that could now be worse is if somebody asked me to sing the aria while hanging from my toes!'

Every director has his or her individual vision of the character, says Marion, and she is especially looking forward to working with Kentridge. 'I find that a good director challenges you as an artist. They must be able to unleash something creatively from within you, otherwise, in my opinion, he or she is not worth his salt. The director must help you to delve a little deeper into the character – and this is what I am sure Kentridge will be able to extract from the cast.'

Although many view the Queen of Night as quite diabolical, Marion finds that she has a lot of empathy for the character. 'Anybody who is filled with so much evil must have had something truly bad happen to her during her life.' She also senses a certain amount of vulnerability in the character. 'There is a desperation in her overwhelming desire for power, so much so that she is even prepared to sacrifice her daughter. I think this is what leaves her exposed to a certain extent, what almost gives one a sense of pity for the character.'

Marion believes that looking at the socio-economic conditions of the time sheds further light on the Queen's actions and motives. 'In my opinion she was quite a revolutionary character for her day. If one considers that society of the time was very male-dominated, it could signal a desperate cry for freedom and sense of control. Remember that during the late eighteenth century the feminist movement had already begun taking



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the age of six, in the small Karoo town of Prieska where she grew up, there has never been an instance when she didn't dream of following a career as a soloist. 'I think singing becomes part of your blood. It becomes entrenched in your DNA and becomes something you absolutely need to do in order to carry on living.'

Her dedication and commitment has paid off, as the name of Marion Roberts is increasingly on the lips of those scouting for South Africa's most prominent emerging young artists. And if she shares even the quarter of the determination of the character of the Queen of the Night she loves portraying, Marion will undoubtedly become one of South Africa's most exciting voices. Don't miss her in William Kentridge's *The Magic Flute* from 8 September to 21 October 2007! **CF**

shape and women began lobbying in earnest for equal rights. The Queen of the Night may well reflect this underlying search for power that was projected by females' psyche.'

With a clear idea about the character firmly in place, preparing to sing the demanding role of the Queen of the Night is something Marion takes very seriously and executes with almost scientific precision. 'Starting a month prior to opening night, it takes five kilometres a day,' she laughingly admits. 'Whether this is achieved through walking, cycling, or whatever other means, the idea is to do enough cardiovascular exercise to expand the lungs.' This is complemented with a series of muscle toning exercises to ensure that the muscle groups that support the voice are also functioning optimally.

Training for the voice, on the other hand, is kept light, with the focus on agility, and taking care that the voice is never forced or strained. 'My approach is like a mathematical calculation. By working systematically I ensure that I am in control of both the physical, as well as the emotional demands of the role. Knowing that you've done thorough preparation gives one confidence to walk on stage to deliver at the best of your ability.'

But even the best preparation doesn't guarantee immunity to physical ailments. 'A teacher used to say that you need to be 110% prepared to deliver 85% on stage. It is often the case that you walk on stage and suddenly experience some back pain, or some phlegm on the chest, but despite this all the other cylinders need to be firing at optimum level to ensure that you still give a quality performance.'

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