

Jessica Duchen: Talking Classical

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What is it about the Welsh and singing? There's Bryn Terfel, striding across the world's operatic stages like Wotan himself; there's Kathryn Jenkins atop the classical charts. Now Universal Classics has signed a young soprano from Swansea who might just be their new secret weapon.

Elin Manahan Thomas, 29, is a baroque specialist with immaculate credentials, but it is her huge blue eyes dominating the pages of music magazines and her first solo CD, *Eternal Light*, entered those classical charts at No 2. The disc offers a delicious selection of arias including "Ombra mai fu", "Bist Du Bei Mir" and a Vivaldi cantata that recycles music from *The Four Seasons*. It's a "core classical" disc, on Universal's Heliodor label, with Thomas accompanied by the Orchestra of the Age of Enlightenment, led by Harry Christophers. But the slick packaging and arty photographs make Universal's ambitions for Thomas abundantly clear.

Among Thomas's many assets are a bubbly personality, a well-balanced attitude and an MPhil from Cambridge. She describes herself as "a bit of a purist", and says she wouldn't want to record Mozart and Handel on the same CD, since they each require a different basic pitch. Best of all, though, is her voice: a high soprano as clear as a laser beam, unusual, distinctive and breathtakingly lovely.

So is there a link between the Welsh and singing? "Our culture definitely encourages people to sing," Thomas says. "I think because we're proud of our male voice choirs, and because of the tradition of the Eisteddfods, it's not something kids are embarrassed to do at school. Perhaps we all have music in our souls!"

Thomas began singing lessons aged six. Competing in Eisteddfods, she went on to join both local and national choirs, "and before I knew it I'd got into Cambridge and spent three years singing there". She was a choral scholar at Clare College, with five services a week and international tours. "That was where I learned all my professional skills – I couldn't sight-read before I got to Cambridge. I still didn't think I would do it professionally but eventually I found I just loved my singing too much. I was loving the lifestyle as well, the travel, the people and so much music. In the end – well, I'm still here!"

After postgraduate study at the Royal College of Music, she worked her way up through the ranks of choirs such as The Sixteen, Polyphony and the Gabrieli Consort. In 1999, she auditioned for John Eliot Gardiner, who was about to embark on a year of performing and recording all the Bach cantatas.

"I kicked off in Weimar at Christmas and did 146 cantatas throughout the year. John Eliot was very insistent that we had to know the background to the music; every week we learned a bit about Bach's biography, what was happening in that week of his life, why he chose to set these texts. Straight away I was into the human story behind the music. It made for a wonderful year."

Eventually, a meeting with Mark Wilkinson, marketing director of Universal Classics and Jazz, led to an audition. "I'd joked for ages with my husband about 'Well, when I get that Universal deal...'" she recalls, "and I almost didn't take it seriously until I turned up to the appointed place, and these three big bods from Universal were sitting on tiny plastic chairs in a children's dance studio. I sang, and they told me I wouldn't hear anything for a week." The call came the very next day.

Thomas's vocal quality may be extraordinary, but it's also inborn; there's no alternative to that, she says. "More than anything else, it's important to have a healthy voice. Pushing your voice in a different direction – trying to do Puccini when you're a Bach singer, or Handel when you should be a Wagnerian – is just not sensible. There are all sorts of things I'd love to sing, but unless my voice takes me there, I'm not going to do it. I guard my voice quite carefully and I decide when's the right moment for me to move up a notch from the Papagenas to the Paminas."

She has just made that move, singing the lyric soprano role of Pamina in *The Magic Flute*, rather than the soubrettish Papagena, on tour with the Armonico Consort this summer.

Juggling "normal work" like touring opera and choirs with imminent CD stardom, Thomas has also branched out into TV – she was a presenter for the Cardiff Singer of the World in June. "It's great," she says. "They pay me to talk." But will she be under pressure to head next for full-blown "crossover"? Thomas insists she won't do it. "I'm not very good at that sort of thing; my voice isn't trained in that way."

"Nobody would, and nobody should, buy an album of me singing anything crossover, because it just isn't me. I'm a huge fan of John Rutter and Howard Goodall, I'm singing John Tavener's music next year, I'm singing Judith Weir's music at a festival at the Barbican. Modern music can sometimes be seen as crossover, but I don't think it is. I don't believe that just because John Rutter writes good tunes, it's the same as setting pop music into Italian. I know what I believe I can sing, and whatever people want to class it as, I'm just going to do what I do."

If her CD sells well, Thomas says, "then I'll have to get used to it and take things as they come. Equally well, if it bombs, so be it; I'll have a CD I'm proud of that I can give my grandchildren."

And if people who hear this disc find that they enjoy baroque music more than they expected to? "In that case, my job is done – and that's good enough for me!" The chances are that we'll be hearing much more of her, very soon indeed.

Elin Manahan Thomas's CD 'Eternal Light' is out now on Heliodor