

## Magdalena Kozena's motherly love

Her new CD has a maternal theme – just right for Magdalena Kozena's new role as a family woman

By Jessica Duchon  
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With her dazzling looks, Magdalena Kozena is surely one of the most glamorous women on the operatic stage. That's even before she opens her mouth. And when she does – well, you can't argue with that voice. Yet traditionally, it's the sopranos who enjoy the most glitzy operatic roles, with the image to match; Kozena is a mezzo-soprano, a "fach" (voice type) that composers all too often relegate to the roles of sisters, young boys and mothers-in-law. "Of course, if I were a dramatic soprano there would be some wonderful roles to sing and I'm a bit jealous," the Czech singer, 35, admits. "But one should be happy with what one's got." In her case, that's not bad: Kozena, who gives a recital in the Barbican's Great Performers series this weekend, has got everything.

Four years ago, though, she hit the headlines in another way when it emerged that she and the conductor Sir Simon Rattle were leaving their respective spouses to set up home together. Now, though, scandal has subsided into domestic bliss. The pair have settled just outside Berlin (Rattle is the chief conductor and artistic director of the Berlin Philharmonic), and have two sons, Jonas, aged three and a half, and Milos, four months. And Kozena, happy with the quieter schedule she has adopted for the sake of her family, seems as warm as her voice, relaxed and ready to laugh.

Those high spirits illuminate much of the repertoire she's bringing to the Barbican, which also features in her new album: Czech songs from Dvorak and Janacek to Petr Eben, entitled *Songs My Mother Taught Me*. The music also contains a gentle but deep vein of pathos. "Some of these songs are very witty yet sad at the same time," she says. "The melancholy is very Slavic – we have some heartbreaking melodies."

Motherhood has made a difference, physically as well as emotionally. "Going through those hormonal changes, the voice becomes a bit richer, rounder maybe, and stronger too," she says. "It's not been as great a difference for me as it can be for others, though. Some women go through huge changes after giving birth, they even change their fach. Unfortunately," she jokes, "this didn't happen to me. I thought that maybe when I had kids I'd become a dramatic soprano! But no..."

There's no doubt as to who the most important conductor in Kozena's life is. "Some people don't like to work with their spouses," she remarks. "They prefer to separate professional from personal life. But I think that if you know someone so well, then working with them becomes even easier because you don't have to discuss things: you just have this knowledge of the person and their music-making and things happen naturally. It's easier than working with anyone else." Rattle has also led her towards repertoire she had hesitated to tackle before. "Simon encouraged me to sing Mahler, and I think that was a good choice. I always wanted to, but I was scared that it wasn't quite the right time. Now I'm singing this repertoire more and more and I feel very happy in it."

Magdalena Kozena sings at the Barbican, London EC2 (020-7638 8891) on 9 November; *'Songs My Mother Taught Me'* is out on Deutsche Grammophon

## JESSICA's ORIGINAL

### MAGDALENA KOZENÁ INTERVIEW

With her dazzling looks and a career trajectory second to none, Magdalena Kozená is surely one of the most glamorous women on the operatic stage. That's even before she opens her mouth. And when she does – well, you can't argue with that voice. Melt down an ingot of 40-carat gold, then filter it through a finely trained larynx and the result may resemble her focused, pure, flexible and shining tone.

Yet traditionally, it's the sopranos who enjoy the most glitzy operatic roles, with the image to match; Kozená is a mezzo-soprano, a 'fach' [voice type] that composers all too often relegate to the roles of sisters, young boys and mothers-in-law. Perhaps inside every mezzo-soprano there is a dramatic soprano longing to get out. "Of course, if I were a dramatic soprano there would be some wonderful roles to sing and I'm a bit jealous," the Czech singer, 35, admits. "But one should be happy with what one's got." In her case, that's not bad: Kozená, who gives a recital in the Barbican's Great Performers series next week, has got everything.

Four years ago, though, she hit the headlines in another way when it emerged that she and the conductor Sir Simon Rattle were leaving their respective spouses to set up home together. A frenzy of unwelcome media attention followed. Now, though, scandal has subsided into domestic bliss. The pair have settled just outside Berlin (Rattle is the chief conductor and artistic director of the Berlin Philharmonic) and have two sons, Jonas, aged three and a half, and Milos, four months. And Kozená, happy with the quieter schedule she has adopted for the sake of her family, seems as warm as her voice, relaxed and very ready to laugh.

Maybe that's why it's the national sense of humour that she misses most about her native Czech Republic. "Even if you translate it into another language, it's never the same, because people abroad don't have that way of thinking," she says. "Every time I go back, I feel we laugh at things that nobody would laugh at in Germany where I live, or in England, or anywhere else. Sometimes I laugh and everybody thinks I'm crazy!"

Those high spirits illuminate much of the repertoire she's bringing to the Barbican, which also features in her new album: Czech songs from Dvorák and Janáček to Petr Eben, entitled *Songs My Mother Taught Me*. The music also contains a gentle but deep vein of pathos. "Some of these songs are very witty yet sad at the same time," she says. "I think the melancholy is very Slavic – we have some heartbreaking melodies."

Much of this can be attributed to the music's folk roots. In the album's opening number, an unaccompanied traditional folk song, Kozená adopts a raw-edged, back-to-the-earth timbre rarely heard from her. Is this a new direction, or something that has been lurking all along under her usual refinement? "I think that if you sing this music with too much vibrato or too prettily, it doesn't sound authentic," she explains. "I tried to sing it in the way that a folk singer would; you can allow yourself a bit more roughness in your tone, with colours that you couldn't possibly use in Mozart. Still, there's not too much repertoire in which you can afford to experiment this way. I wouldn't do it every day because it can interfere with your technique, but from time to time it's fun."

The title, Kozená says, is more than appropriate: "I used to sing this repertoire as a student and some of the songs even as a kid." Born in Brno, which was the home city of Janáček, she was singing before she could talk: "I don't remember it, but my mother told me I used to imitate every sound I heard on the television or around me in the street. It was always a big passion."

Music could have taken her in a different direction: "When I was three, I fell in love with the piano because my kindergarten teacher played extremely well. I decided at once that I was going to be a pianist, and I was very stubborn about it." Fate intervened when Kozená broke her hand just before her entrance exam for the Brno Conservatory: "I had always sung in children's choirs, so I decided to enter as a singer instead." Eventually she studied both, which was

unusual. "But singing won, and I am very glad," she says, twinkling. "I think it was the right decision!"

By that time, she was virtually a professional already. Aged 16, she and a lute-playing friend began to give concerts of renaissance and early baroque music in the historic castles of the Czech Republic. "Sometimes I was criticised by teachers who thought I should just study and not be distracted by giving concerts so young," she recalls, "but I learned so much from doing this – and that was the moment I decided I wanted to be a singer, not a pianist, and when I began to think I can actually earn my living this way."

She first steamed up the hearts and minds of music fans internationally when Deutsche Grammophon brought out her album of Bach arias in 1997; she was only 23. After that, she says, "A lot of things seemed to happen at the same time." The Bach CD went down a storm and as well as winning her an exclusive DG contract it helped her to find a manager. A rewarding creative partnership with the baroque specialist conductor Marc Minkowski was a highlight of those early years: "He's a very 'alive' musician, and passionate about theatre," she enthuses. "He gave me a lot of work and some extremely interesting projects."

Today, though, there's no doubt as to who the most important conductor in Kozená's life is. "Some people don't like to work with their spouses," she remarks. "They prefer to separate professional from personal life. But I think that if you know someone so well, then working with them becomes even easier because you don't have to discuss things: you just have this knowledge of the person and their music-making and things happen naturally. It's easier than working with anyone else." Rattle has also led her towards repertoire she had hesitated to tackle before. "Simon encouraged me to sing Mahler, and I think that was a good choice. I always wanted to, but I was scared that it wasn't quite the right time. Now I'm singing this repertoire more and more and I feel very happy in it."

Home life in Berlin is proving more than satisfactory too. "I love Berlin because there is so much green and you can easily be with nature," she says, "but at the same time you have all the advantages of a big modern city with its culture and concerts. I love nature, and if I had the choice between living in the centre of a city or living on a farm, I would choose the farm every time. But that isn't practical if you have children who need to go to school, so Berlin is a good compromise."

With the centenary of Mahler's death approaching in 2011, there should be much to look forward to from her in this direction, and around the same time there looms the possibility of her debut in the most celebrated of all mezzo roles: Carmen. Meanwhile, next year she will sing the greatest of the 'trouser' roles for the first time – Oktavian in Strauss's *Der Rosenkavalier*, at the Berlin Staatsoper.

This rich, romantic repertoire is some distance from the baroque and classical sphere where she made her name. Not that she's abandoned it – her next album will be of operatic arias by Vivaldi – but inevitably over time, she says, the voice moves on. Motherhood has made a difference, physically as well as emotionally. "Going through those hormonal changes, the voice becomes a bit richer, rounder maybe, and stronger too," she says. "It's not been as great a difference for me as it can be for others, though. Some women go through huge changes after giving birth, they even change their fach [voice type]. Unfortunately," she jokes, "this didn't happen to me. I thought that maybe when I had kids I'd become a dramatic soprano! But no..."

She need not worry: her fans love her just as she is, and next year contains innumerable highlights including an artist-in-residence slot at the Lucerne Festival and a project involving staged cantatas at the Aix-en-Provence Festival. And meanwhile, the songs her mother taught her are ready to pass on to the next generation.

Magdalena Kozená sings at the Barbican on 9 November. Box office: 020 7638 8891. Songs My Mother Taught Me is out now on Deutsche Grammophon