

Angelika Kirchschrager - An Austrian great arrives in Britten

Angelika Kirchschrager is one of the world's most celebrated and versatile opera singers. Now she's setting out to conquer Aldeburgh, she tells Jessica Duchon

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As this year's Aldeburgh Festival gears up for action, one of Austria's most celebrated musicians is preparing for her first-ever appearance there. The great mezzo-soprano Angelika Kirchschrager will sing the title role in a concert version of Benjamin Britten's opera *The Rape of Lucretia*. There's a delicious hint of cultural exchange about this: just as the domes and mountains of Kirchschrager's native Salzburg are forever associated with Mozart, so the bleak Suffolk coast at Aldeburgh has become indivisible from Britten's haunting sound-world.

Aldeburgh must be one of few corners of the musical globe that Kirchschrager, 45, has yet to conquer. She first shot to fame, aged 26, after she was offered her first company contract at the Graz Opera House on condition that she perform the demanding "trouser role" of Octavian in Strauss's *Der Rosenkavalier*. She took her audience by storm and her path to stardom was sealed on the spot.

Kirchschrager is ferociously intelligent and has an irrepressible sense of humour; it's no wonder she excels at roles that require intense character development, the more intellectually challenging, the better. Her malleable, persuasive voice is so versatile that she has sung almost everything from the richest baroque opera to cutting-edge contemporary work: from Sesto in Glyndebourne's award-winning production of Handel's *Giulio Cesare* to the title role in the late Nicholas Maw's *Sophie's Choice* at its premiere at the Royal Opera House (ROH), Covent Garden, in 2002. She was equally unforgettable in Debussy's *Pelléas et Mélisande*, also at the ROH, transforming its elusive heroine into a complex woman as strong as she is. And *Lucretia*, she says, is as strong as any of them.

Britten's intimate chamber-opera is a masterpiece of psychological and musical acuity. It relates the Roman history of *Lucretia*, virtuous but frustrated wife of the absent *Collatinus*: raped by the prince *Tarquinius*, she takes her

own life. But Kirchschrager's view of the character is far more complex than that outline suggests.

"There is absolutely a subtext," she says. "Lucretia is not happy where she is; both she and Tarquinius are longing for something more. People are not black and white: we long for things we don't allow ourselves. Perhaps these two should be a real couple, but circumstances have determined that they can't be together. You have to look carefully at the words and at every nuance Britten wrote, and it makes sense. They are both incredibly passionate people and Lucretia is a strong woman. I never see her as a victim."

She's excited about her first trip to Aldeburgh: "I heard amazing things – everyone is crazy about it," she enthuses. "I can't wait to see it. I'm so much looking forward to the place, the opera and the people." Those people include her co-stars, some of Britain's leading operatic performers – among them Ian Bostridge, Christopher Purves and Susan Gritton. Bostridge, especially, is a frequent and favourite colleague for Kirchschrager; she'll be appearing with him again at London's Wigmore Hall in September.

"I love his dry sense of humour, and how he deals with the music in completely his own way: direct, simple and not influenced by anything. I like to work with people who are direct," she says. She's direct, too. As a single mum in Vienna with a teenage son (from her marriage to baritone Hans Peter Kammerer), she has no time or patience for diva-esque frills, furbelows and fits of temperament. "My voice has to live with me, not vice-versa," she declares. "I'm careful about my repertoire – I prefer not to sing anything too dramatic that pushes my voice too far. But when you speak, when you live, you use your voice and it works; when you sing, it should work, too. I try not to get colds, but that's for financial reasons" she adds, with much laughter.

Kirchschrager has been singing for as long as she can remember. "There's a recording on this huge reel-to-reel machine of me singing aged three, with my grandmother," she says. "My mother and grandmother always sang with me when we were out hiking or in the car. I was in school choirs, church choirs and children's choirs. Then, while I was at school, I performed in an opera for children and thought maybe I should have a try at this." She auditioned to study at the Mozarteum in Salzburg: "They only just took me. That was destiny, because if they hadn't accepted me the first time I wouldn't have tried again – I wasn't sure it was such a good idea." Alongside her operatic triumphs, it is lieder, the great art-song repertoire, that remains her personal mission.

"I want to show as many people as possible the greatness of lieder," she says. "I sing them as I would sing folk songs and I want people to listen to them straight from one heart to the other. These songs are very intimate and I can paint my colours with a fine brush. Singing lieder is so good for the voice – it's like a walk in a green meadow with flowers."

Declining audiences for lieder have made Kirchschrager determined to revive it at grass-roots level: "I have organised a tour around parts of the Austrian

countryside where there's no access to a concert series or festival. I want to reach an audience that has never been to a recital before." She begins with "classical songs that have almost become folksongs – like the Brahms Lullaby or certain songs by Schubert. People recognise them, but don't always know they are by Schubert and Brahms. It shows people they already know classical songs; they just didn't know that they did. Then I add Mahler and Richard Strauss songs which are unfamiliar to them. I recently sang a concert of Strauss and Mahler for 300 farmers and they were crazy about it."

And Mozart? Just because she's originally from Salzburg, it doesn't mean she "owns" him, she declares. "These great composers transcend any nationality: they talk about the humanity that connects all of us, wherever we are born. But sometimes it is just fun to think that I'm speaking the same dialect as Mozart."

'The Rape of Lucretia', Aldeburgh Festival (01728 687110;
www.aldeburgh.co.uk) 11 and 13 June