

Amanda Roocroft - A singer with faith in her own approach

Amanda Roocroft was close to giving up till she found God, she tells Jessica Duchén

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After a long rehearsal for Benjamin Britten's Peter Grimes, Amanda Roocroft seems to have enough energy to start the day over again. At 45, she is the UK's top lyric-dramatic soprano; and she's a sassy Northerner and mother of three enthusiastic football fans. You take her as you find her: with a practical black jacket, killer heels and a crucifix glittering at her throat, all topped with a radiant smile. Not everything is simple straightforward, though. Several years ago, she nearly gave up singing.

"I wasn't enjoying it any more," she says. "I was too afraid and too self-critical." She kept going, "because I had to earn money and fulfil contracts", but at one point her performance as Janacek's Jenufa at English National Opera looked as if it might be her last role – even though her interpretation won her an Olivier Award. "Being a perfectionist can be a curse," she admits. "You beat yourself up constantly over the one or two notes you missed and that can wipe out the rewards of the whole evening."

Working through some challenging years has left her stronger and happier. "I changed my singing teacher, I sorted my home life out and I believe my baptism was a big part of it," she says. "I found a church that offered a loving, safe and accepting environment for me beyond my job." Feeling nurtured and comforted by her faith made all the difference, she says. "It had felt literally as if my voice, my ability to communicate, had been taken away from me. But then, because I felt more relaxed, I could sing – and feeling comfortable with my singing, I started enjoying it again." Eventually she decided: "I'm lucky! I'm not going to start wishing for what I've not got; I'm going to celebrate what I have."

Roocroft fell in love with singing and acting when she was a child in Coppull, Lancashire. "In those days everyone sang: there were choirs, competitions and festivals, so she played for them and I always heard her. I learnt the piano and the cornet and I played in a brass band." But it was singing that attracted her most: "I never stopped wanting to do it and it was always classical music – I didn't want to be the next Britney."

She hit the headlines in her early twenties after graduating from the Royal Northern College of Music. She won a slew of important prizes and countless critical plaudits. The Royal Opera House booked her to sing Pamina in *The Magic Flute* when she was only 25 and engaged her every season for more than a decade; and she made a high-profile debut CD with the London Philharmonic under Franz Welser-Möst, released in 1995.

After the adulation came a backlash. "There was a huge furore those first few years," Roocroft agrees. "There was this attitude: 'Who does she think she is, when there are singers around with 20 years more experience?' I don't understand the youngsters on *The X Factor* who want to be famous and want to be in *Hello!* magazine. That wasn't my intention. I wanted to be respected within my peer group. I didn't want to be famous, I didn't want to be rich, I just wanted to sing and I wanted people to think it was great to work with me."

Last year she made a triumphant return to ENO, playing the extraordinary role of Emilia Marty in Janacek's *The Makropoulos Case* – a heroine who has cheated death for three centuries. "It was great – I got to be bad!" Roocroft grins (as a blonde lyric soprano, she used to find herself singing too many "good girl" heroines). Her role as Ellen Orford in *Peter Grimes* is utterly different. The story, based on the poem by George Crabbe and set on the Suffolk coast where Britten lived, describes the hounding to death of a fisherman whom locals suspect of abusing apprentices.

A few months ago Roocroft took the apparently modest step – though in classical terms it's still rather radical – of talking to the audience during her recital at the hallowed Wigmore Hall, bastion of the highest-level chamber music and Lieder. "I was so anxious to do my best," she says. "I'd done the same recital in Wigan and because they wanted me to talk – it's a different set-up there – they loved it. I loved it too and I thought: seriously, why should this be different because it's in London at the Wigmore Hall? Why can't I talk to the audience?"

Autumn will bring her back to Janacek at Welsh National Opera. There's a CD, too: Roocroft has woven songs by composers as diverse as Schubert, Schoenberg and Kurt Weill into an operatic-style story. Meanwhile she's looking forward to Marschallin in Strauss's *Der Rosenkavalier* at ENO. The character is an unhappily married aristocrat who gracefully gives up her much younger lover to a girl his own age – but Roocroft has other ideas. "Maybe at the end she should run off with the guy that cleans the pool!" she laughs. "That's the Marschallin I see: a feisty woman who likes sex."

Finding God certainly hasn't diminished the twinkle in Roocroft's eye: "It seems to be in my nature to swim against the tide," she admits. "Come the revolution I'm going to do the Marschallin in a different way – and I'm going to talk at the Wigmore Hall."

'Peter Grimes', Royal Opera House, Covent Garden, from 21 June (020-7304 4000)