

Pumeza Matshikiza - From the townships to the Royal Opera

Poverty, crime and violence dominated Pumeza Matshikiza's early life. Now she is a soprano in demand. By Jessica Duchon

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Pumeza Matshikiza

Hailed by critics as a star in the making, Pumeza Matshikiza has come a long way from the townships of South Africa. She's one of today's most exciting new operatic voices: a generous lyric soprano with a distinctive blend of dedication to detail, sense of humour and a sheer, radiant love for music. Next week at London's Wigmore Hall she will perform in a "showcase" concert of the Classical Opera Company, with which she wowed audiences last year in the title role of Mozart's *Zaide*. Yet this extraordinary 32-year-old performer was fortunate to find this music at all.

Matshikiza's first dozen or so years were apartheid's last. "My parents separated when I was very small and my mother moved with my brothers and me from the Eastern Cape to the Cape Town area," she says, "so I grew up in many different townships around there." These areas, such as Khayelitsha, Langa and Nyanga, were polluted sprawls, much of them "informal" housing – shacks cobbled together out of wood and tin – and poverty, crime and violence were part of daily life. "We kept on moving because my mother was always looking for somewhere that might be a slightly better place to live."

There was much to escape from. She recalls *toi-tois* (demonstrations for freedom) in the last years of apartheid; children would join in without really understanding what was going on. But the police would break up the marches

with tear gas, and the children, at the front of the crowd, would be the first to receive its blasts. Worse still was "necklacing" – a tyre filled with petrol would be slung over the victim's body and set alight. The young Matshikiza witnessed it all: "People were burned to death in front of me."

Her mother sang in church choirs; there Matshikiza, too, found her voice. But she first stumbled across opera by accident, she says, channel-surfing on the radio as a young teenager.

"I didn't know anything about opera, but when I found that channel I started to listen to it because it was so beautiful," she says. "After that I listened to that station almost every evening." She saw her first opera in 1999.

Apartheid might have been swept away, but arts perceived as European and white were sidelined, especially classical music and opera. Matshikiza's school tried to persuade her that there could be no future in music; she nearly became a surveyor instead.

"Opera is a luxury in a South African context, when people have no clean water, people live without sanitation – these are basic needs. That's why South African opera singers have to leave. We have some fantastic voices, but there is not enough work for singers to make a living."

After studying singing at the University of Cape Town, she won a part in *The Confessions of Zeno*, written by Kevin Volans for the Handspring Puppet Theatre, and toured with it. Volans was so impressed by her voice that he organised an audition at the Royal College of Music in London and paid for her flight. She won a scholarship.

Matshikiza has lived in London ever since, though she is about to begin a three-year contract with the Stuttgart Opera. After college she joined the Royal Opera House (ROH)'s Jette Parker Young Artists Programme, which brought her the chance to sing alongside operatic luminaries at their peak. One day she gave a recital in the ROH's Crush Room, ending with a Xhosa folksong from South Africa. "Some friends from home were in London," she says, "and came to hear me. When I started that song, they all stood up and joined in. The British audience was very surprised! But it was a wonderful moment."

The sense of joy in Matshikiza's singing comes very much from the South African choirs in which she started. At college in 2004 she sang in a masterclass with the tenor Philip Langridge; at Covent Garden a few years later, she consulted him again. "He said: 'Pumeza, your singing has improved, but that joy you had is a little bit gone.' You do all this work and build up the technique, but then you have to get back to what it is really all about! And it's about expression, it's about joy."

She's homesick for South Africa, but moving back wouldn't be practical for now: "I have too much to learn, to be really in charge of what I'm doing as a singer, and for that I need to be in Europe. If I was in a different profession I would go back. Later I will definitely join in.

"I don't think the politicians are doing much for people at a grass-roots level in South Africa," she adds. "And I think people will get sick and tired of it – things will go a bit skewed if they're not careful, unless there are some changes. No one thought the situation in Zimbabwe would happen, but I think people should have seen it coming 20 years before. I don't like acting shocked when the signs are there in front of me. I think the government needs to do much more for the people."

In the Wigmore Hall concert she'll sing with a white South African soprano, Sarah-Jane Brandon; the two won respectively first and second prizes at the Veronica Dunne International Singing Competition in Dublin last year. In the old South Africa they would never have met, let alone worked together. It's a sign, we hope, that change can last, and succeed.

Pumeza Matshikiza sings in the Classical Opera Company's showcase at Wigmore Hall, London W1 (020-7935 2141) 19 May