

Sophie Bevan - Born to sing

Fast-rising soprano Sophie Bevan comes from a family of eight musical children and an extended musical family of 60. Ahead of her landmark solo recital tonight, she talks to Jessica Duchen



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Across the table from me sit a quarter of the singing Bevan siblings. Sophie Bevan, at 27 one of the most sought-after young sopranos in the UK, has brought along one of her younger sisters, Daisy, a philosophy student who also sings. Sophie is the eldest of eight, all of whom are musically gifted. Through this outsized family runs an astonishing vein of talent that is already bearing professional dividends for Sophie and another sister, Mary. And their father's generation could rival the Von Trapp Family Singers.

"My dad was one of 14 siblings," Sophie says. "They were all brought up musically because my grandfather was head of music at a school in Somerset. They formed the Bevan Family

Choir, made records and toured. Now we're about 60 cousins and we're all musical – as if there's a gene in the family that keeps on growing stronger."

There's no sense of competition between them, she adds: "I think large families often become very close, and we certainly are. I teach Daisy and I'm happy to show her everything I know because she has a wonderful talent. And when Mary and I were in Figaro together at Garsington last year it was great fun – we'd go off for lunch together every day. We do duet concerts together sometimes, too. It's wonderful to work with someone who knows you so well." At heart, she says, they are outdoor girls, relaxing together by going for long walks, playing tennis and swimming in lakes and rivers.

Sophie Bevan is dizzyingly busy at the moment. And it's no wonder. She is the proud owner of a powerful lyric-soprano voice, with a rounded, rich tone that belies her youth, and a flowing musicality that seeps through every phrase. Last summer she took the role of Susanna in *Le nozze di Figaro* at Garsington – her sister Mary was Barbarina – and has more recently appeared in Handel's *Radamisto* at ENO, where critics lauded her star quality.

The maturity evident in her tone has been there for a while: she started to sing solos with the Berkshire Youth Choir when 13. Given that she was an exceptionally gifted teenager, and photogenic too, weren't there temptations to attempt too much too young in career terms?

"People did say, 'are you going to be the next Charlotte Church?'" Bevan admits (Church, three years her junior, hit the airwaves when Bevan was about 14). "A couple of companies made some suggestions, I don't remember which ones." But she wasn't interested. "I loved the music that I sang and I didn't particularly want to do "Ave Maria" in lots of different ways to make pots of money. I wanted to succeed in the classical music and opera business. I wanted to feel that musically I'd done the best that I could, rather than just making money from something that's easy. I want to sing at the Royal Opera House and the Met in New York – and I didn't want to make lots of recordings and not be taken seriously." It wasn't Charlotte Church who inspired her, but Maria Callas, Mirella Freni and, above all, Luciano Pavarotti: "I think he's the greatest singer that ever lived."

Instead of a premature entry to the recording studio, she enrolled at the Royal College of Music. There she met her accompanist, Sebastian Wybrew, on the very first day: "We clicked right away and we've been working together ever since." Their Wigmore Hall recital tonight, Bevan's solo recital debut in London's premier lieder venue, features favourite songs by Schubert, Richard Strauss, Mendelssohn, Debussy and Poulenc.

Doing well at music college is one thing, but making the transition from talented student to successful professional is quite another. This, says Bevan, is where the Classical Opera Company (COC) comes into the picture.

"Ian Page, its director, seems to have a knack for picking the top singers in the conservatoires and using them; when I saw this, the company became something I aspired to be in," she says. So when Page invited her to become an associate artist of the company, she jumped at the chance: "Thanks to them I was able to give concerts and be noticed by people who were looking for the new up-and-coming singers." On 12 January she joins the COC again at the Wigmore Hall for an evening devoted to the operatic arias of Haydn.

Companies that employ young singers are a welcome alternative, she adds, to what she sees as the iniquities of music competitions. She won a bursary from the Kathleen Ferrier Society in 2003, but found the experience less than happy: "I love singing, but that was the first time I'd ever hated it. At other competitions I'd sat in the audience and saw people not enjoying the music or the singing, but instead looking for errors and marking the contestants out of ten. It's soul-destroying; it goes against everything singing is all about."

The ENO Young Singers programme, on which she is currently one of ten featured artists, is a scheme that she loves because it gives her the chance to "learn on the job". It is helping to establish her as a force to be reckoned with: roles looming ahead include Yum-Yum in *The Mikado* by Gilbert and Sullivan, singing with Alfie Boe and Donald Maxwell. Later there's to be Strauss's *Der Rosenkavalier*, her favourite opera. "I can't wait," she enthuses. "The role could have been written for me – and it's my name, Sophie!"

In summer she's also singing Pamina in Mozart's *The Magic Flute* at Garsington Opera's brand-new home at the Wormsley Estate. It all adds up to a huge workload, but she seems positively unstoppable. "It's been amazing," she declares. "Even if I die now I'll be happy with what I've done. I've had many wonderful opportunities and I've loved every second of it. I'm never going to regret anything. It's a fantastic time: everything is beginning."

She's right: she has nothing to lose and everything to play for. And, best of all, she has a voice that should carry her to the very top.

Sophie Bevan sings a recital tonight, and with the Classical Opera Company on 12 January, at the Wigmore Hall (020-7935 2141; www.wigmore-hall.org.uk)