

The wheel of fortune turns for new opera

The ROH's latest 'everyday' tale revolves around a lottery, its star and composer tell Jessica Duchen

By Jessica Duchen

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If there is one thing more scary than giving the world premiere of a brand new opera, it is doing so from a fair distance above the stage when you suffer vertigo. Any anxieties the soprano Emma Bell may have had about her role in Judith Weir's *Miss Fortune* at the Bregenz Festival last year were blown out of the water by the time she was in place.

"[My character is] supposed to be on top of a building," Bell says, "but I am absolutely paralysed by my fear of heights. When the curtain goes up I am not worried about my music, because I'm on this thing that's wobbling." Bell has reached heights of a different kind as she takes the lead in this latest work by the doyenne of British composers – its UK premiere is at the Royal Opera House (a co-production with Bregenz) next week. Bell is an exceptionally versatile soprano who excels in repertoire ranging from Handel to the present day, and her career has been growing incrementally ever since she won the Kathleen Ferrier Prize in 1998. This, though, is the first time a composer has created a new role especially for her.

Miss Fortune is probably the first opera ever to finish with the heroine winning not only her man, but also the lottery. Based on a Sicilian folk legend updated to the present day, it depicts a world polarised between rich and poor, in which the wheel of fortune spins to extremes according to chance.

Judith Weir likewise faced a new challenge with *Miss Fortune*. At 57, she is one of Britain's most respected opera composers; her *A Night at the Chinese Opera* created a sensation back in 1987 and subsequent offerings *Blond Eckbert* and *The Vanishing Bridegroom* drew commensurate acclaim. But this time she received a brief from David Pountney, director of the Bregenz Festival, requesting "an opera for an entirely normal audience". The result is the latest in an ongoing rush of "relevant" operas.

"I've never known a time before when people have been so interested in new opera," Weir says. "It's fantastic, even though it's not easy to find the finance."

Last year British audiences experienced Mark-Anthony Turnage's take on tabloid culture in *Anna Nicole*, Nico Muhly's detective story *Two Boys*, Damon Albarn's celebration of the Elizabethan astrologer, courtier, alchemist and spy Dr Dee at the Manchester International Festival and John Adams's *Dr Atomic*, which explored the creation of the nuclear bomb. This year has already seen the first London staging of Adams's more-than-relevant *The Death of Klinghoffer* at English National Opera. So there is much for *Miss Fortune* to live up to.

"The story is about people losing all their money and somebody having to live in ways she just didn't expect," says Weir. "The original folk tale involved a complicated twist, so I looked for the present-day equivalent: a chance that would mean you have a fortune forever. Obviously that was a lottery ticket. Many people now feel that the only way their future could improve is if they were to win the lottery. The whole country, more or less, functions like this and perhaps one could link that with the world of stocks and shares. It's all working on a lucky ticket."

The opera could be widely approachable, too, thanks to its straightforward structure. "Some strange things happen," says Weir, "but it's a flowing, operatic story told from A to Z."

It's crucial to a new opera's success that the singers should be at one with the creative concept. According to Weir, both Pountney and Covent Garden's own casting director, Peter Katona, suggested early in the opera's developmental process that Bell should be the heroine, Tina.

"We needed someone with the freshness and agility to sing interesting music," she says, "but also someone who can 'colour' the music right through the vocal registers: an unusual singer who could keep the audience's interest both vocally and as an actress for an extremely long sing – Tina is on stage almost all the way through. Knowing what sort of person I was writing for, both vocally and visually, was valuable."

"It was exciting to be part of that creative process," says Bell, "and to feel that my input was really valued. Everyone's searching, so you're not sidelined if you make a suggestion. And I like the freedom of singing something for which there is no benchmark: a new work is yours for the taking. It's a wonderful privilege because it's not every day this happens."

"It's a very contemporary story about things absolutely as they are at this moment," Weir emphasises. "Things are in a huge state of flux, rich versus poor; what will happen to everybody? It has a very bright, attractive cast, and it really has had a chance to bed down since Bregenz, so it will be an extremely well-prepared production of a new work." Bell adds: "And we've got break-dancers. We are the all-singing, all-dancing *Miss Fortune*."

'Miss Fortune' is at the Royal Opera House, London WC2 (020 7304 4000) 12 to 28 March