

## British soprano Rachel Nicholls interview: How my local school helped me rise to the top

Nicholls explains how she was schooled to become an  
opera star

by Jessica Duchon

Sunday 07 June 2015

The shining sonic arc of a soprano voice in full flight cuts through the air in a Tower Hamlets backstreet. The Cotswolds-based Longborough Festival Opera team has come here to rehearse its new production of *Tristan und Isolde*, which opens on 12 June. Anthony Negus, Longborough's expert Wagnerian music director, is conducting, ratcheting up the intensity; and in a sunny studio with seated cast and piano accompaniment, the sound is overwhelming as *Isolde* – Rachel Nicholls – lets rip.

The British dramatic soprano is performing this marathon role for the first time, and it's fitting that it should be at Longborough, where her rise to fame in Wagnerian spheres began. The country-house opera offered a complete, staged Ring cycle during the composer's bicentenary year, 2013; Nicholls starred as *Brünnhilde*. Turning 40 this year, she is blessed with a bright-edged, flexible and voluminous voice that has an uplifting sense of release and freedom, combined with precision and control – a near-ideal mix. But *Isolde*, as Nicholls points out, is a huge challenge, with more music to sing than *Brünnhilde* has in all of her Ring operas put together. *Isolde* – the Irish princess who comes to Cornwall to marry King Marke, only to fall in love en route with his emissary, *Tristan* – experiences deep inner conflicts, which are often expressed intimately. "While bits of the role are as muscular as *Brünnhilde*, there's more quiet singing, more passages of light and shade, which makes it more interesting to sing," Nicholls says. "Probably there's nothing in it that's quite so much fun as the Ring, charging about with a spear – as *Brünnhilde* I got very good at swords, spears and battles. But *Isolde*'s language is subtler; it is all about feelings, rather than action."

Nicholls, a down-to-earth personality with ready sense of humour, cropped hair and sensible shoes, hails originally from Bedford. She attended a local comprehensive school whose excellent music department, together with the county's free music provision, offered her ample opportunities to test her wings. "My school happened to be fabulous for music," she says. "Quite a few of us have made fantastic careers in the music world thanks to our teacher there."

On Saturdays she attended London's Trinity College of Music's junior department, learning the piano and the violin: "The county paid for me to go there and paid for my travel too." Bedfordshire offered not only a county youth choir, in which she sang, but also a youth opera group for the 15 to 25s: "Every year it would put on a fully staged opera with orchestra. I joined it when I was 15 – and I knew straight away that that's what I wanted to do."

But after taking a degree in languages, plus postgraduate study at the Royal College of Music, it was in baroque music that she began her singing career. Changing from its light, somewhat constrained purity of tone to the full-blooded dramatic soprano repertoire did follow the needs of her voice, she says, but it also required immense determination.

It all began at Longborough. She first arrived there to sing Fiordiligi in Mozart's *Così fan tutte*. "I loved it," she says, "but at that point Wagner wasn't really on my radar." Longborough was planning its Ring cycle at the time, and Nicholls's agent persuaded her to audition for a small role in *Die Walküre*. "I was seduced by the music," says Nicholls. "My friend Lee Bisset was singing Sieglinde. I listened to her and thought: I want to be able to sing like that. And I listened to the role of Brünnhilde and realised that that was what I wanted to sing. I knew I had the necessary weight in the middle range of my voice, and that the soprano Alwyn Mellor wasn't available for the role at that time, so I volunteered to do *Götterdämmerung*." It was a huge leap – both of repertoire and of faith – but she would not be dissuaded.

"I did wonder if I'd bitten off more than I could chew," she admits, "but I prepared it thoroughly – and I had the chance to study with Anne Evans. That's the thing that's made the biggest difference to my life." Evans was one of the preeminent sopranos of her day, especially celebrated for Wagner: "She can take me through every note and word and suggest different ways to think about it and the emotion behind it."

She and her husband, the baritone Andrew Slater, who sings Tristan's friend Kurwenal at Longborough, live in the Peak District and, she says, help one another maintain a healthy perspective. "As a baritone, Andrew usually has to play a king, a murderer, or somebody's dad – often mine!" she remarks. "Singing's very important to us both, but it's not the whole story. If you put all of yourself into whether or not people like you and your singing on stage – which is entirely subjective – it's a recipe for disaster. Sometimes you'll get horrible reviews, or maybe someone's going to decide you look fat in your costume and they'll say something mean. And if everything about you is poured into that little public space, you could end up a very unhappy person."

'Tristan und Isolde' is at Longborough Festival Opera, nr Moreton-in-Marsh,  
Gloucestershire (01451 830292; [lfo.org.uk](http://lfo.org.uk)) from 12 June