

## ARTIST OF THE MONTH

# NADINE BENJAMIN

Sheer determination, positive thinking and a passion for singing have enabled Nadine Benjamin to make the transition from the world of high finance to a rapidly developing career as an opera singer. She talks to *Claire Jackson* about her forthcoming tour with ETO and her plans to conquer the opera world, whatever it takes

The fireplace roars as loudly as the colourful, pleasantly mismatched artwork that fills the cosy room. Nadine Benjamin, wearing a cherry-red trilby and oversized silver earrings, nibbles some gluten-free toast: a morning rehearsal prevented her from having breakfast. Although this feels like Benjamin's personal lounge, it is, in fact, the Groucho Club's Mary Lou bar, a place the lyric soprano visits often. London clubs, pre-singing fasting – so far, so soprano.

But like the glittery paintings on the walls, things aren't always what they seem. Benjamin is not like every other soprano: during concert intervals, she can be seen chatting to audience members. She journals daily things that have made her grateful. Her language is thick with infectious positivity, and her sheer determination cuts through conversation.

Benjamin is preparing to sing the role of the Countess in English Touring Opera (ETO)'s production of the *The Marriage of Figaro*. It's a role she has sung informally, at Dartington, and is now looking forward to putting her own stamp on the character. 'Last time, everyone kept telling me to listen to Kiri Te Kanawa!' she says, 'I want to explore the playful, quirky side of the Countess. I'm not there for the Count's status or money; I'm in it for the love. It's a love story.'

*Figaro* will be performed in English (in Jeremy Sams' translation), and will tour alongside Puccini (*Il tabarro*, *Gianni Schicchi*) and Rossini (*Fireworks!* – a concert of arias from Rossini's opera seria) from February onwards. Benjamin has a close relationship with ETO. 'James Conway was instrumental in how I've managed to get to this space,' she reflects, becoming a little teary. 'I covered Tosca [in 2017] which was an amazing experience. Everyone asked why I was there every day, but I wanted to know that if I was needed I could deliver. On this occasion, during the first two weeks I got the call! When I came off that stage I felt like my whole world had filled up.'

ETO's raison d'être – taking opera to places that may not traditionally have access to stage productions – is important to Benjamin, even in the age of live streaming. 'I love going to watch



DEVON CASS

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the Met at the cinema, but the experience of seeing singers on stage is life-changing – opera is an extreme art form.’

The soprano’s belief in opening up opera extends to performers, too. Benjamin recently formed Everybody Can!, an opera company that gives singers a chance to perform roles they may not ordinarily have access to. ‘Every opera house has an educational outreach programme, which is great. But there’s a forgotten age group – people in their thirties and forties,’ Benjamin explains. In 2015 Everybody Can! performed Verdi’s epic *Otello*: ‘We didn’t focus on what people expected – colour – we focused on post-traumatic stress disorder and mental illness. Next year we’re doing *La traviata* and that’s going to look at gender. It’s about making traditional opera relevant to today’s circumstances.’

**B**enjamin took an unusual route to opera – via the world of corporate finance. ‘When I was leaving school my teacher spoke to me about getting a scholarship to study music. She played me what I later found out was Mozart’s Queen of the Night aria and said that one day I could sing like that. I told my mum, and she said I needed to go out to work. I started as a junior secretary and eventually worked my way to the trading floor.’ However, the seed the teacher had planted had taken root. Recognising Benjamin’s ability, her company offered to leave her job open for two months while she found her voice. The soprano never went back.

‘I got a chorus role with one solo line,’ she recalls. ‘While I was there someone suggested I auditioned for *Porgy and Bess* – I said: “What’s *Porgy and Bess*?” He got me an application form and I took a coach to France. I got seven solo lines that time and stayed in Lille for three months.’

As many of her peers are decades ahead, Benjamin has had an uphill journey to catch up. ‘I work every single day. But when you’re doing what you love it doesn’t matter. Don’t get me wrong, there was a time when I thought, “What am I doing? I’ve got no money and I can’t afford this”. I sent 150 letters asking for sponsorship.’ An anonymous private donor offered to pay for Benjamin’s singing



▲ Preparing for ETO’s *Figaro*. ‘I want to the playful, quirky side of the Co

lessons for three years, and recently another benefactor has made it possible for the soprano to make her first recording in January.

Benjamin is also a trained coach and high-performance manager who uses Neuro-Linguistic Programming in her work (‘I refresh my qualifications every two years; a business has a stock take every year, we need that too’). She’s just co-written a book with Byrne from *The Stage* about artistic careers, to be published in 2018. Meanwhile, there’s no chance of slowing down: ‘I want what every other singer would want: to sing at the Proms, La Scala, The Royal Opera House and have a concert at Carnegie Hall. I don’t think that’s unrealistic. With her positive outlook, talent and unfailing charisma, Benjamin is inclined to agree. 