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THE POWER OF POSITIVITY

Nadine Benjamin's route into opera was hardly typical – but then, she is far from your typical soprano. She tells **Claire Jackson** about opening up the art form, founding her own company and unconscious bias

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 currently singing the role of the Countess in English Touring Opera (ETO)'s production of *The Marriage of Figaro*. It's a role she's 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 is performed in English (the Jeremy Sans translation), and is currently touring alongside Puccini (*Il tabarro* and *Gianni Schicchi*) and Rossini (*Fireworks!* – a concert of arias from Rossini's opera seria). Benjamin has a close relationship with the company. '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

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. 'I wasn't getting the opportunities to speak in the operas that I wanted to, so I decided to do something about it.' In 2015 Everybody Can! put on *Otello*: 'We didn't focus on what people expected, colour; we focused on post-traumatic stress disorder and mental illness.'

“ I wasn't getting the opportunities to speak in the operas that I wanted to, so I decided to do something about it ”

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 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

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.'

Benjamin is committed to the fledgling operation. 'I finance and produce the stage shows,' she says. 'At the start it was very challenging, but I have a wonderful team now.' Semantics are important; the name betrays the group philosophy. 'It's *everybody's* project. I can't abide gossip so there's no bitching, and everyone has a part to play.' And what about leadership? 'We're all leaders, there's no "boss".' She smiles.

Benjamin 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 the 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 asked: "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 ►

"I can't abide gossip so there's no bitching"

▼ Even by her own reckoning, Benjamin is not like other sopranos




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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 lessons for three years, and recently someone has made it possible for the soprano to make her first recording.

Despite this support, there have been setbacks, too. 'A famous teacher once said to me that I'll never sing opera, only jazz,' says Benjamin, but she won't reveal any names. 'We need to re-educate people about unconscious bias.' We touch on the thorny topic of colour-blind casting in the singing world, which Benjamin thinks is 'definitely something that we could be exploring – it seems to work for instrumentalists.'

Like so many people, the soprano has weathered some significant storms in her life, which have imbued her with a sense of self-awareness and a determination for mental resilience. She meditates on a daily basis and likes to say thank you. It's a far cry from the traditional image of the soprano who cultivates a reputation for diva behaviour. But then, even by her own reckoning, Benjamin is not like other sopranos. 'Someone pointed out that I have lots of soprano friends,' she muses, 'apparently that's quite unusual.' It's not that Benjamin is not competitive – quite the opposite – but more that, coming to the industry later in life, she hasn't learned all the 'rules'. Thank goodness for that.

Benjamin is also a trained coach and high-performance mentor who uses neuro-linguistic programming ('I renew my qualifications every two years; a business has a stock take every year, we need that too'). She has just co-written a book with John Byrne from *The Stage* about artistic careers, to be published in 2018. And there's no chance of slowing down. 'I want what every other singer would want: to sing at the Proms, La Scala, the Met and have a concert at Carnegie Hall. I don't think that's unrealistic.' 

Nadine Benjamin is singing the role of the Countess in English Touring Opera's production of *The Marriage of Figaro*, which runs until 9 June bit.ly/2C4F424

► Benjamin left the trading floor for the operatic stage



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