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Interview

Opera's rising star: Lise Davidsen on learning to handle the high life

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Hailed as one of the greatest voices of her generation, the Norwegian soprano is taking on Beethoven's freedom-loving heroine at Covent Garden. She talks about family, friends and facing her fears



'I'm starting to see how this will be my life' ... Lise Davidsen. Photograph: Jill Mead/The Guardian

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I'm pretty sure the man who's very politely shunting Lise Davidsen out of our Royal Opera House interview room to make way for an audit meeting doesn't recognise her, but perhaps that's not so surprising. Davidsen is simultaneously one of the company's biggest draws this season and a relatively new face on the international stage. It may be that the casting of Jonas Kaufmann as Florestan ensured the ROH's new production of *Fidelio*, staged by Tobias Kratzer, sold out within 24 hours, but for many it's the prospect of Davidsen as Leonore - Beethoven's courageous, cross-dressing, husband-rescuing heroine - that's generating the real excitement.

Davidsen was virtually unknown in 2015 when she swept the board at Operalia, the competition that has helped launch the careers of Nina Stemme, Sonya Yoncheva and many others. Her performance in the final was a sensation: here was a fully fledged, radiant voice big enough to soar over a Wagnerian orchestra, coming out of the mouth of a singer aged only 28. Yet while her voice and her height - she is nearly 6 foot 2 - might have led some to imagine her as the Valkyrie incarnate, she has chosen her roles more wisely than that, saving Brünnhilde and Isolde and the other big, potentially voice-destroying roles for later, and instead choosing either supporting roles in big houses or leading roles in small ones. Her UK stage debut, as Strauss's *Ariadne* at Glyndebourne in 2017, was, according to the *Times*'s Neil Fisher, "one of those 'I was there' moments"; in the *Observer*, Fiona Maddocks wrote that hers was "one of the greatest voices I have heard". Leonore will be her first starring role in London.

In interview, Davidsen is unassuming, direct and straightforward: not so different, you imagine, from the handball-playing girl she was in the small town of Stokke in rural Norway. She started singing with any seriousness only when she was 15, went to music college in Bergen, and was all set for a career in baroque music as a mezzo-soprano when, as a postgraduate in Copenhagen, her teacher spotted her potential as an operatic soprano. "I knew I had those high notes, but they were there in a very childish, undeveloped way. I thought, OK, I'll have to work for this, I'll put in whatever it takes."



UK stage debut ... Davidsen in *Ariadne auf Naxos* at Glyndebourne in 2017. Photograph: Robbie Jack/Corbis/Getty Images

Success followed rapidly, but her new lifestyle took some getting used to. "My brother and

sister have normal jobs and families, and I thought I was going to do that too - to live in one place and just sing. I really wanted what I do now, but it took me time to get here, to include myself in it, in a way." Last year saw the release of her first solo disc, a garlanded debut at the Met in New York and her first role at Bayreuth, the hallowed festival that takes place in Wagner's own opera house. It was, she says, "the first year where I actually enjoyed some of it, some of the circus. Until then I had been so afraid. Everything had been so new: the constant travelling, never being at home, but trying to find a way to be a normal person, to still be with friends and family."

The fact that she's now returning to places rather than going from debut to debut makes things a little easier, she says, and she has learned to trust the people she works with. Before, she felt uncomfortable accepting engagements years in advance - what if her voice changed and she had to let people down? "My agent told me, 'say yes to what you think you will do, and everyone will understand that life and the voice will develop. It's a two-way communication.' Now I trust that communication much more. I trust that a conductor is there to actually help me. The pressure from the audience gets higher and higher, but you feel more comfortable with the people you work with. I'm now starting to see how this will be my life."

This morning they have been rehearsing Kratzer's staging of the overture, in which the shadow of the guillotine looms large - Beethoven's only opera is highly political, with *liberté, égalité, fraternité* themes, and a heroine whose music expresses her fears as vividly as her resolve. Leonore is quite a different role to Davidsen's Wagnerian heroines, who have integrity and depth but little agency. "She's so unselfish, which I like, so determined. So many female roles have this compassion, this determination for love, but in terms of actions it's quite different. It's nice to play a really good woman!"

Kratzer's Bayreuth production of *Tannhäuser*, which began with Venus (on screen) in a Citroën driving her entourage to Burger King, was provocative but mostly enthusiastically received. Not that Davidsen read the reviews. "I don't believe reviews are written for me, nor do I believe they're giving me anything. I know exactly when I leave the stage what I did right and what I did wrong. No matter what's written, I'll have to go back on stage in a couple of days anyway, and I want to make sure that performance number two, three, four is just as important as number one."

After Leonore she will be going back into the recording studio for her second solo disc - the repertoire is still under wraps - and then back to Bayreuth for more Wagner: Elisabeth in *Tannhäuser* again, and Sieglinde in the Ring. The next few years are set to bring more Strauss and some Verdi - Don Carlo, *La forza del destino* and *Un ballo in maschera*. But one date that is always in her diary is the next concert back in Stokke, where she has a loyal following. "They support me in this unconditional way," she says. "I love it! It's like a team." Twenty-five of them, she says, came over to New York to see her debut there. Will they be in the audience for *Fidelio* too? "No, it sold out too quickly! But they will watch it at the cinema in Sandefjord."



'Previously, I could never see myself on stage.' Davidsen's recital at London's Barbican in February 2020. Photograph: Graeme Robertson/The Guardian

A few days after we speak, Davidsen is on stage at the Barbican, giving a recital with the pianist James Baillieu, in which she speaks several times to the audience about what she's going to sing. She doesn't yet own the stage, but she looks as though she knows she's among friends, and the audience loves her for it. "It's a huge irony that I'm an opera singer because I could never see myself on stage. I was so insecure." Previously she's talked about having something resembling impostor syndrome - "but I do now feel I have a reason to be there. In many ways I'm still a private person, but the stage has become this space of mine where I can be someone else or tell a story or communicate something. What I was so afraid of has become my safe space - it's interesting how it turned out to be the complete opposite of what I feared."

● **Fidelio** opens at the Royal Opera House, London, on 1 March. The 17 March performance will be shown live in cinemas in Europe and the US.

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