

## MUSIC

## I'd love to bring opera to new audiences



Soprano Abigail Kelly leads the Summertime Gala Concert on Saturday

Soprano Abigail Kelly is a rising star in the classical musical scene. She talks to Christopher Morley about her career

**T**HE prestigious St John's Smith Square in central London is the venue for a Summertime Gala Concert on Saturday, promoted to raise awareness of diabetes among the country's ethnic minorities.

And starring in the programme is Abigail Kelly, the Birmingham-born soprano who is creating a huge presence on the musical scene. Whether appearing with English Touring Opera in critically-acclaimed productions, or performing for charitable causes, Abigail has a busy programme of events ahead of her.

I catch up with her as she returns from three days of four daily performances in Luxembourg for people with special educational needs.

"In these kinds of projects I get to connect with the audience in a way that you can't when you're performing an opera on stage," she explains. "To be able to sing and interact so closely with people with such profound disabilities is a very special thing."

Abigail first realised she had a voice when her piano teacher encouraged her to join the choir at her local church.

"I sang there about three times a week, and the detail that was put into our choir rehearsals was truly inspiring. We sounded pretty good as amateur choirs go! I was given the opportunities to sing plenty of solos which cured my initial nerves about singing alone in public too. I try and get back to sing with them when I can and it's always a pleasure to do so."

Abigail has moved into a singing career which has taken her all over the world, but particularly close to her heart are the opportunities to perform in her West Indies ancestral homeland.

"The performances in the Caribbean are great as I get a real sense of homecoming when I'm there, very much so in Jamaica as that is where my family is from but also I get such a warm sense of belonging by the people that I meet in the other Caribbean islands. I feel adopted in those countries in some ways as much as I do when I perform in Jamaica.

"My favourite Caribbean performance experience has been so far in Montserrat. Feeling such appreciation for being there to perform came in all guises from hugs to gifts of coconuts and mangoes. Also seeing a huge poster for a concert featuring me pinned on to a palm tree was a very novel experience.

Touring in the UK is wonderful also. I go to so many UK cities that I otherwise probably wouldn't get to see if it weren't for my job. I find that every city has its own unique history, architecture, culture to experience and foods to try.

"I've been inspired to visit a lot of the cities that I tour for mini breaks as there is never usually enough time to see everything while you're working. Travelling around the countryside in the UK is also wonderful. The views are sometimes just breathtaking and on some journeys I don't even mind too much if the train's delayed, especially when travelling along the southwest coast down to Truro. Simply stunning!"

Opera is such a moving and versatile genre of music which can be used in so many ways to fantastic effect.

Abigail has many hopes for the development of her performing career, but has other plans as well.

"As well as performing, I would love to devise projects that bring opera to the attention of people who have never seen one before or to those who may have preconceived ideas about the art form which have stopped them from wanting to experience it.

"Opera is such a moving and versatile genre of music which can be used in so many ways to fantastic effect, for example in special educational needs projects, children's opera and interactive community opera. Fun and inclusive projects like these are the way to ensure a thriving future audience of opera-goers which is diverse in age, culture and ethnicity."

For all her worldwide presence, Abigail still remains devoted to her home city, and grateful for her tuition at its Conservatoire.

"Birmingham Conservatoire was a great time for me. I learned so much about vocal technique from my tutor Maureen Brathwaite, and I gained so much confidence, especially from my fantastic drama teacher Michael Barry."

And she is passionate about Birmingham.

"I'm still based in Birmingham. I've been fortunate enough to perform on stage at Symphony Hall a few times, in fact, I remember being involved in the opening of it as a girl.

"I've often thought about making a move to London, and it may indeed be a better city in which to live to take fuller advantage of the work opportunities there. However I'm so tied to and proud of Birmingham that I'd find a permanent move to anywhere else very difficult. Even though most of my performing work is in London, for now I'm quite content to commute, especially from our brand new New Street Station."

Abigail Kelly will lead the Summertime Gala Concert at St John's Smith Square on Saturday at 7.30pm. Tickets cost £10/£15/£20. Tel: 02072221061 or visit [www.sjss.org.uk](http://www.sjss.org.uk)