

Rupert Christiansen talks to four ambitious young classical singers about the tough challenges facing them, and reports on a new talent-nurturing summer school in Italy

Loneliness of the long-distance singer

Focus: the Solfi summer school offers 'total immersion in Italian culture'



‘There’s so much you just have to do for yourself. Nobody told me about the history of opera’

Life is tough for today’s young classical singer. The training can take longer than a doctor’s or lawyer’s – only the most outstanding will be established enough to earn a decent living at 30, and even then there’s no reliable career ladder, let alone job security.

The expansion of higher education conflicts exponentially with the contraction of the classical music business, leaving more aspirants chasing fewer opportunities and smaller budgets. Fees have barely shifted in the past decade, and what might look quite good on paper – £500–£1,000 per performance – is pitiful when you’ve deducted all the expenses, including 15 per cent agent’s commission. And even if you do make it big, time is short: if you manage 20 years, you’re doing better than most.

Yet, with our conservatoires and musical standards being the envy of the world, Britain still nurtures a wealth of

young vocal talent – much of it passionately dedicated and determined to make the best of a tricky market situation. I talked to four hugely talented up-and-comings – all of them feeling profoundly lucky to be where they are, but still anxious about what’s going to come next.

The highest flyer is the lyric soprano Kate Royal, 27, winner of the prestigious

Ferrier Award last year and already establishing herself at Glyndebourne and as a recitalist. Her first CD will be issued next March by EMI.

Katie van Kooten, a 26-year-old evangelical Christian from the American West Coast, is one of many non-British young singers basing themselves here. As a member of the Royal Opera’s excellent two-year package of training and performing opportunities, the Jelta Parker Young Artists programme, she has already sung to great acclaim at

Covent Garden.

Tenor Mark Wilde, a youthful 35, is an elegant singer of Mozart, bel canto and Britten, steeped in our great Anglican choral tradition (Dundee Cathedral and St George's, Windsor), now also in decline.

The warm and sensitive bass-baritone Andrew Foster-Williams, 31, hails from Wigan and a totally unmusical background. He only discovered he could sing through participating in yet another threatened institution, the school Gilbert and Sullivan production.

All of them agree that their colleges didn't give them nearly enough training in the nuts and bolts of the profession – how to present yourself for audition, how to manage your career, how to cope with tax (American training is much stronger in this respect). Royal, a graduate of the Guildhall, wishes that more time had been spent on stagecraft, too – “Acting is something I'm having to learn on the job.”

“There's so much you just have to do for yourself – self-motivation is vital,” says van Kooten, another Guildhall alumna. “Nobody ever told me anything about the history of opera, for example, so I ended up reading the entire way

through *Kobbe's Opera Guide*. You also have to learn who to listen to and who to ignore, my agent, my teacher, my family – I try to keep everyone else out of it.”

“Your own gut instinct is important, too,” adds Royal. “People love telling you what you should and shouldn't do. You have to remember that you know your own voice better than anyone. That takes a lot of nerve.”

Sacrifices have to be made; a singer can't hope for normal family life. Foster-Williams has been homeless for two years, travelling so persistently that he lives out of a couple of suitcases. “Logistically, I really need to own two places, one in Britain, one in Europe. That's financially impossible. But I have to go where the work is!” Royal is thrilled to have bought a flat in Dulwich, but with a three-month tour for Glyndebourne coming up, she doesn't quite know when she'll have the time to settle in. For Wilde, the travel is even more agonising as

his wife has just given birth to their first baby.

None of them are in it for the money, which is

probably just as well. It's the joy that matters. Van Kooten claims she was “a Whitney Houston sort of a girl” until she sang opera for the first time at college in California. “I was Susanna in *Le nozze di Figaro*, and I just ate and drank it and couldn't imagine having more fun. I still feel like that.” In their way, they are all high-minded, though none of them are musical snobs – at home, Royal listens to Stevie Wonder and Wilde is a connoisseur of heavy metal. But they are all deeply in love with the beauty of what they sing, and the cheap tat of amplified crossover is what they really despise.

Talents such as these only bubble to the top because of the infrastructure of musical education and a culture that values the school show and the church choir. With so many children now slaves to the primitivism of hip-hop, what hope is there for another generation?

A chance to eat, drink and sing Italian

As part of the decade-long, multi-faceted training that slowly nurtures a classical singer, finishing school often comes in the form of one of the summer courses, usually held in idyllic rural surroundings that aim to relax as much as to stimulate.

Many of these are attached to festivals – Aix, Aldeburgh, Bayreuth, Salzburg and Tanglewood, for example, all have student programmes – but some go it heroically alone. To this list one must now add the Solti Accademia di Bel Canto, held in the cheerful seaside resort of Castiglione in the Maremma region of Tuscany.

It takes its name from the association with the town's most celebrated inhabitant, the great conductor Sir Georg Solti, who built a beach house here in the 1960s and spent every summer in it with his family, learning scores as well as indulging in his various sporting passions, until his death in 1997.

To set up the Accademia, the young musicians' foundation established in Solti's memory by his widow Valerie has joined forces with the local *comune*, events organiser Candice Wood, the Elsa Peretti Foundation, and staff from the Royal Academy of Music. The result is a two-week course focused exclusively on Italian opera, for 17 young singers, the great majority of them studying full-time in the UK but embracing a rainbow of

nationalities and personalities.

Organising the syllabus and controlling activities is the much respected London-based vocal coach Jonathan Papp, himself trained in Milan and previously the director of a similar summer school in the Abruzzi. "The point is not just an excuse for a nice sunny holiday," he explains. "During term time at music college, students are pulled in every direction and end up chasing their own tails. This is a chance to concentrate on one thing: total immersion in Italian culture. Not just Italian music and the Italian language, but the food, scenery and style too."

Next year, money permitting, auditions will be held internationally and the operation will be expanded to three weeks. Juan Diego Florez and Mirella Freni are slated for the master classes, and there are plans to use the town's orchestra to work on scenes from Italian opera as well as its arias.

This year, coaching has been provided by Pepe Ferrari, Maria Giallombardo and Paolo Specca, alongside master classes from one of Solti's favourite sopranos, Kiri Te Kanawa. Much to the delight of local residents and tourists, the fruits of their labours were presented in a final open-air concert in Castiglione's Piazza Solti. It could hardly have been

more Italian if it had been smothered in spaghetti.

Although she is not the most intellectually cogent of coaches, Te Kanawa came up with the sharp idea of putting the Italian emphasis temporarily on hold and asking each student to sing her an unaccompanied folk song in their own language – "the most simple thing, but also the most difficult", she told them. "See if you can make me cry." Well, they did – once or twice with laughter.

For the observers, the talent-spotting is the real fun – everyone who drifted in and out of the classes had their own favourite. The elfin Romanian Eliana Pretorian, as pretty as a ballerina with a dark melancholy timbre reminiscent of her compatriots Ileana Cotrubas and Angela Gheorghiu, is one clear winner, though the Spanish coloratura mezzo Clara Mouriz is probably the most polished performer. Among the men, a 29-year-old British baritone, George von Bergen, also impressed with his focused, poised intelligence: he has given up a career in newspapers to pursue his studies, and is hungry to learn everything he can – "I'm incredibly ambitious," he admits. And, as the teachers at the Accademia keep making clear, without that extra shot of ambition, you won't get anywhere in classical music today. **RC**

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