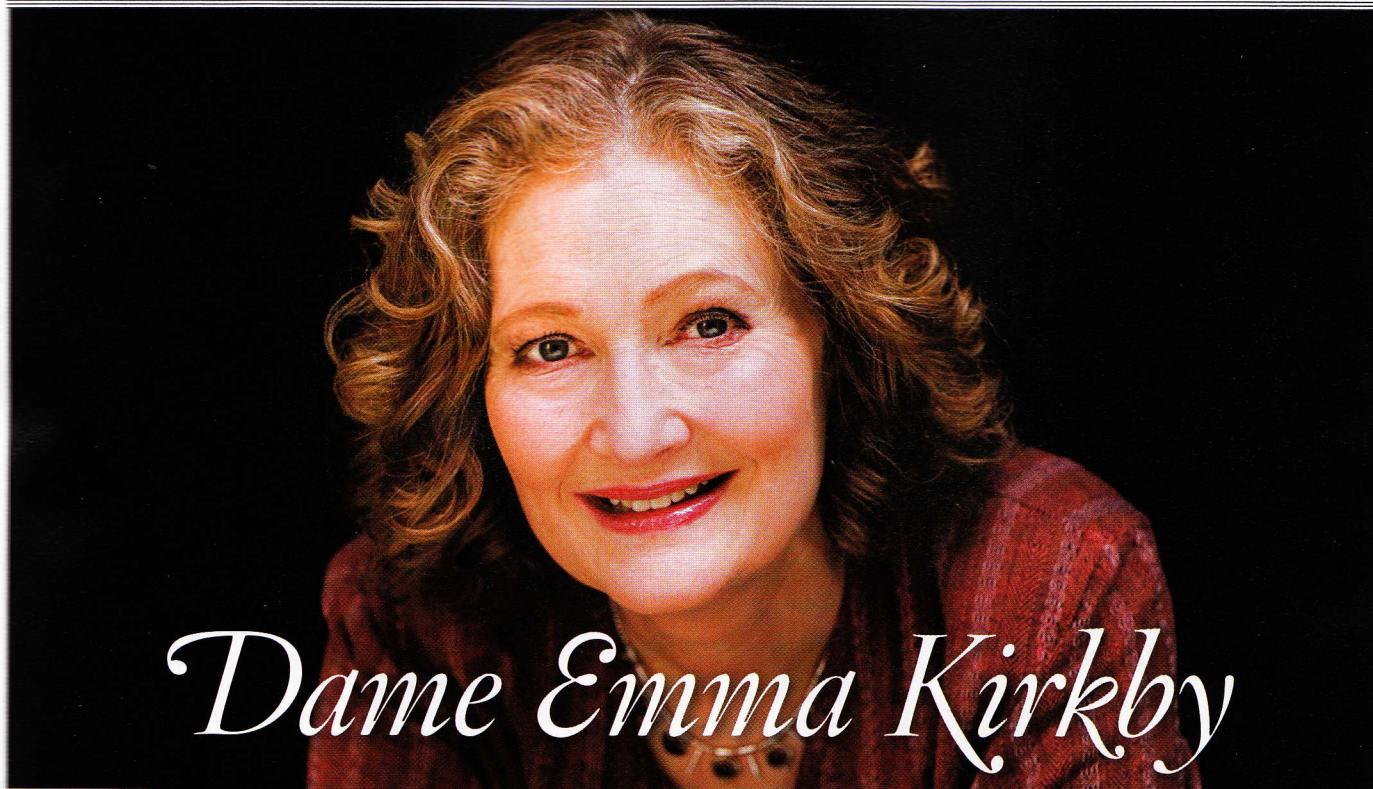


A CONVERSATION WITH...



Dame Emma Kirkby

With three recording projects recently coming to fruition, the English soprano reveals to **Emma Baker** that careful choice of repertoire is to thank for her astonishing vocal longevity

With a career that has spanned nigh on 40 years, Emma Kirkby – probably the world's best-known early-music soprano and, since 2007, officially Dame Emma – is as busy as ever. When we meet at her north London home, she has just performed in *Love Freed from Ignorance and Folly* – a 1611 masque by Ben Jonson with music by Ferrabosco – at Wilton's Music Hall (see page 123), where, dressed in full Jacobean finery, she portrayed an allegorical Queen Bess. "My hair's still full of spray," she sighs, patting down her trademark halo of curls. At the other end of the musical timeline, she is about to fly to Italy to perform Stravinsky's *Three Shakespeare Songs*. She's busy as a recording artist too, with three diverse new discs just released, and another, of French Baroque music by Montéclair, due out in August. For a "niche" early musician, the variety of her repertoire far exceeds many mainstream opera singers' handful of roles a year.

And, listening to her latest recordings, her voice is still fresh, limpid and focused, her response to text as intelligent and nuanced as ever. Careful choice of repertoire is behind her vocal longevity, helped by the fact that her musical tastes and personality marry perfectly with the instrument she was born with; she's never felt the need to push her voice into areas physically unsuitable for her. Much of this, she says, is down to the colleagues she works with. "I've been lucky," she explains. "If you want to give your imagination free rein you have to be physically comfortable, not striving or fighting for your place in the acoustic. And the vast majority of the accompaniments I've had over the years have been on a kind, human scale: inspiring, not obliterating."

The lute has always been central to her career as a collaborative musician and, on her Dowland and Purcell recording, she is joined by

Swedish lutenist Jakob Lindberg. "It is a wonderful instrument to sing with and Jakob is one of my best colleagues. He likens it to a speaking level, not a shouting level; he loves singers who 'speak' with him." They recorded the album, for BIS, in a 1000-year old church in Länna, near Stockholm. "It might seem a bit resonant at first but it's just gorgeous working there," she says of the venue. "It's a peaceful, purposeful atmosphere, by a lake, with no extraneous noise, so it's practical, too."

There she also recorded "The Queen's Music", another BIS project, realised by Swedish soprano Susanne Rydén. It's based on a manuscript of Italian duets and trios presented by Queen Christina of Sweden to Bulstrode Whitelocke, the English ambassador to her court, in 1654.

"Susanne found the manuscript in Oxford and had the idea of continuing a Swedish-British collaboration for the recording. The music has such variety and character, although you wouldn't

think it at first, as most of the pieces are in triple time!"

Kirkby has also turned her attention to the Classical period, recording Haydn songs and cantatas with fortepianist Marcia Hadjimarkos. There was no question of using a modern piano. "It's good to know you're working with an instrument similar to one the composer might have known. I might use a very sympathetic piano in concert," she says, "but it had to be a fortepiano for the recording. I wish we'd had space to include a Haydn sonata too, which Marcia plays beautifully."

So Emma Kirkby continues along her path of quiet, collaborative musical revolution. "What you learn from working with early musicians is how pitches can vary, how much flexibility there is in the sound. It's like Shakespeare's stage direction 'still music within': something can be beautiful because it's quiet. A still, small voice is not a bad thing – in fact it's very desirable." ●

Emma Kirkby's new recordings are reviewed on page 107

'My accompaniments have been on a human scale: inspiring, not obliterating'

and modern is well integrated, the trio of world premieres fitting in with ease.

The opening Marian antiphon, attributed to the 11th-century scholar Hermann Contractus, calms even the most troubled spirit and provides a beautiful appetiser to the first sublime moment of the disc, Christopher Monks's new take on Tallis's famous theme. Kelly McCusker's violin obbligato (worthy of Jan Garbarek himself) is topped off by Anna Sandström's effortless soprano solo. Another soprano soloist, Kirsteen Rogers, excels in the second of two Hildegard of Bingen pieces, *O virtus sapientiae*.

Barber's Adagio reworking and Taverner's *Funeral Ikos* are expertly paced with climaxes beautifully judged. Another pair of modern gems are David Buckley's setting from Isaiah, *Strengthen ye*, and Jonathan Roberts's miniature *Never seek to tell thy love*. Another Blake classic, Taverner's *The Lamb*, is sung with great affection and brings this disc of unending delight to a fine close.

Malcolm Riley

'Orpheus in England'

Dowland Disdain me still. Lend your ears to my sorrow. Come, heavy sleep. Preludium. The Earl of Essex, his Galliard. A shepherd in a shade. By a fountain where I lay. Away with these self-loving lads. Lachrimae. Tarleton's Riserrectione. If that a sinner's sighs. A Fantasie. Toss not my soul. In darkness let me dwell **Purcell** She loves and she confesses too. They tell us that you mighty powers above. Trumpet Tune called the Cibell. Echo Dance of the Furies. Ritornello, 'The Grove'. Fly swift, ye hours. Oh lead me to some peaceful gloom. What a sad fate is mine. Lilliburlero – A New Irish Tune. A New Scotch Tune. Hornpipe. A New Ground. From silent shades or Bess of Bedlam. Music for a while

Emma Kirkby sop

Jakob Lindberg lte

BIS © BIS-CD1725 (75' • DDD • T/D)

'The Queen's Music'

Anonymous Parlate per me. Pian piano mio core. Partitevi da me. Occhi belli. E' di ragion **Rossi** Tu sarai sempre. Dite o cieli. O cieli pietà. Lasso benché mi fugga. Pene che volete. Pietà, spietati lumi. Vorrei scoprirvi **Cesti** Già son morto **Frescobaldi** Il primo libro di Toccate d'intavolatura di cimbalo – Toccata ottava; Toccata nona. Il secondo libro di Toccate d'intavolatura di cimbalo – Toccata seconda. Canzona settima detta La Superba (o Tuccina). **Carissimi** I Naviganti ('Sciolti havean...')

Emma Kirkby, Susanne Rydén soprs

Mikael Bellini counterten

Peter Harvey bass

Mime Yamahiro Brinkmann vc

Lars Ulrik Mortensen bpd

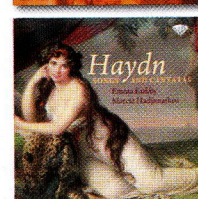
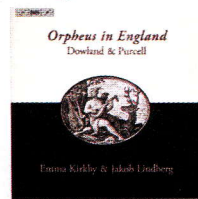
BIS © BIS-CD1715 (68' • DDD • T/D)

Haydn

The Wanderer, HobXXVIa/32. Piercing Eyes, HobXXVIa/35. The Spirit's Song, HobXXVIa/41. Fidelity, HobXXVIa/30. O Tuneful Voice, HobXXVIa/42. Arianna a Naxos, HobXXVIb/2. A Pastoral Song, HobXXVIa/26. Recollection, HobXXVIa/25. The Battle of the Nile, HobXXVIb/4. She never told her love, HobXXVIa/34. The Lady's Looking Glass, HobXXVIc/17

Emma Kirkby sop Marcia Hadjimarkos pf
Brilliant Classics © 94204 (57' • DDD)

Early music's Dame shows no sign of slowing down



Emma Kirkby's enormous and diverse discography as consort member, soloist or recitalist ranges from Hildegard to Haydn and, just having passed her 62nd birthday, there is little sign of the celebrated soprano slowing down. Three new discs each present distinctly different styles: "Orpheus in England" presents lute songs accompanied by Jakob Lindberg, "The Queen's Music" consists of chamber duets and trios drawn from a manuscript dated March 21, 1654, which originated from the Italian musicians working at the court of Queen Christina of Sweden (who a few months afterwards abdicated and went to live in Rome), and Kirkby's skilful dabbling in later Viennese classical masters is manifest in an assortment of Haydn's English songs.

"Orpheus in England" is devoted to Dowland and Purcell. Sensibly divided into two separate portions, each consists of some comparatively seldom-heard songs, a few solo lute interludes, and concludes with a much-loved favourite ("In darkness let me dwell" for Dowland, "Music for a while" for Purcell). Few singers are quite as compelling with only a lute for company: Kirkby's phrasing has impeccable light and shade, and her authoritative articulation of melancholic sentiments is simply first-class. She must have sung "In darkness let me dwell" thousands of times but her gripping interpretation is devoid of complacency; moreover, her intonation and technique in florid music has lost none of its sparkle and precision (Dowland's "Toss not my soul"), and she continues to throw off high passages with relaxed nonchalance (Purcell's "She loves and she confesses too"). Lindberg's lute was built in about 1590 and still has its original soundboard; his playing is both

technically dazzling and poetic in Dowland's famous *Lachrimae* and his own beguiling arrangements of short Purcellian orchestral and keyboard pieces.

For a survey of Italian music in "The Queen's Music", Kirkby is joined by fellow singers Susanne Rydén and Peter Harvey, and expert continuo accompaniment is provided by cellist Mime Yamahiro Brinkmann and harpsichordist Lars Ulrik Mortensen; his captivating harpsichord accompaniments also play a vital part in helping to share the appealing merits of refined miniatures such as Antonio Cesti's duet "Già son morto", and he provides a few Frescobaldi toccatas as interludes between sequences of vocal numbers. Luigi Rossi's "Dite o cieli" is sung by Kirkby and Harvey with marvellous lightness and I particularly admired Carissimi's trio *I Naviganti* – not only is it by far the longest piece on the disc but it is also full of evocative and beautifully crafted word-painting to illustrate the tragic drowning of two cursed lovers in a sea-storm (although one imagines that the simile-laden poetry is allegorical of the violence of falling in love). In the soprano duets Rydén and Kirkby occasionally sound pinched and tight but, even so, their capability at chiaroscuro (ie the idiomatic shading between light and shadow in their expressive musical phrasing) is excellent.

The recital of English songs by Haydn also includes two cantatas not composed in England, but both were sung by Lady Hamilton and accompanied by Haydn for the entertainment of a small party of British guests (including Lord Nelson) at Eisenstadt in September 1800. Kirkby's intelligent mastery with words and gift for intimate story-telling are tailor-made for these Haydn miniatures. Songs such as "The Wanderer" and "The Spirit's Song" have a hint of rasping where once upon a time her voice might have soared angelically but such hints of sobriety suit the dark hue of Haydn's moody responses to the poetry of his friend Anne Hunter (although the sunnier songs are perhaps less memorable). Fortepianist Marcia Hadjimarkos plays a copy of a late-18th-century Anton Walter fortepiano and skilfully conveys the range of colours and intricacies in Haydn's piano accompaniments; moreover, the instrument features levers operated by the hand or knee to provide distinctive special sonorities, such as the "bassoon" stop which buzzes a paper roll against the bass strings (an effect used sparingly to fine effect in "The Battle of the Nile"). Kirkby and Hadjimarkos conclude thoughtfully with "The Lady's Looking Glass" – a lovely short song philosophising that beauty is nothing more than a short-lived charm. Let's hope that the ever-discerning Kirkby continues to make vocal hay while the sun continues to shine.

David Vickers