

Patricia Rozario: Indian summer

The Mumbai-born soprano Patricia Rozario tells Jessica Duchén how she rediscovered her heritage – and why she's bringing Eastern folk songs to a London music festival

Wednesday, 18 June 2008

For a while, Patricia Rozario would only sing in a sari. She wanted, she says, to make sure that her Indian identity was obvious. Her name originates in the Portuguese influence in Goa and she'd found that many people assumed she was South American or Spanish. Today no celebration of Indian culture in a UK classical music festival would be complete without her. The Mumbai-born soprano started out singing operatic music in India; now she's bringing Indian folk songs to her recital as part of a beautifully calibrated programme of music from West and East at this year's City of London Festival.

Some of the music is brand new, too: Rozario is well established at the forefront of the contemporary music scene. Her pure and versatile voice, which possesses astonishing beauty at the very top and adapts itself effortlessly to ancient and modern works alike, has been an inspiration to composers such as Sir John Tavener and Arvo Pärt. Her forays into Indian musical techniques have added another dimension.

"I have some regrets that I didn't learn Indian classical music as a small child," she says. "As I grew up in a Christian family, there was more of a focus on Western influences and we didn't know anyone who could have taught me Indian classical music. A lot of Indian classical singers began at the age of four at their mothers' knees, learning the scale patterns. These have to be so deeply ingrained that they become second nature; then you use the material to improvise."

It was Tavener's passion for Indian music that first led her to explore its vocal techniques for herself. "He was creating a piece for me that had Indian influences, and the only way I could sing it was to start taking lessons. I did that for about six months. It was a wonderful experience, very different from the Western tradition, involving constant repetition until you become fluent. I didn't reach that stage, though: I copied out all those scale patterns and worked on them, but because I didn't grow up with it, it was very difficult."

She was brought up in a musical family in the suburbs of Mumbai. "In the evenings my four brothers and I would play in the garden, and our mother taught us a whole range of music," she says. At first she was in the shadow of her eldest brother. "We started to enter competitive music festivals and he kept winning! Then when we reached our teens, my voice began to develop, while his broke." Their father was a vital influence. "Those festivals were great for the experience of getting up and performing on stage. I remember

my father saying: 'It's not just the notes – you've got to communicate and put some emotion into it'."

She came to London as a student, intending to return to India later; the development of her voice took everyone by surprise, not least Rozario herself. After winning a variety of scholarships plus the prestigious Gold Medal at the Guildhall School of Music and Drama, her career quickly took off. Tavener first heard her sing when she auditioned for his opera *Mary of Egypt* and won the leading role; since then, Rozario has effectively been his muse. Meanwhile, composers including Pärt, Simon Holt, Param Vir and Roxanna Panufnik have written for her.

Her involvement in contemporary music – like singing itself – took Rozario rather by surprise. And, she says, it's by no means easy. The first contemporary opera she tackled was John Casken's *The Golem*: "At the first rehearsal they wanted us to sing straight through the piece, and I didn't utter a sound the entire time. I'd learnt my whole part but I didn't hear any notes that gave me my cues. It was only later that I learnt to ask the pianist to pick out particular moments to help cue me in."

Her programme at the City of London Festival is entitled *A West-Eastern Divan*, after the work by Goethe. As well as music by Schumann and Mendelssohn, there are the powerful *Akhmatova Songs* by Tavener, and the UK premiere of Vir's new work for soprano, cello and piano, *Wheeling Past the Stars*.

The programme is symbolic on a bigger scale, as Rozario says she dreams of seeing Indian and Western culture meeting and mixing even more. If Rozario is right, we haven't seen the half of it yet. Her exquisite voice should be enough to convince everyone on its own.

Visit [here](#) to watch Edward Seckerson's interview with Patricia Rozario

Patricia Rozario performs at Drapers' Hall as part of the City of London Festival on 3 July; the festival opens on Friday (0845 120 7502; www.colf.org)