

# Why the future's lo

The Canadian mezzo-soprano playing the lead in *La Cenerentola* tells **David Kettle** why singing Rossini is a joy – though it didn't come naturally

**T**he brilliant success of the Opera de Lyon production of Rossini's *La Cenerentola* last year – his sparkling operatic account of the Cinderella fairy tale – came as something of a surprise to its star, the Canadian-born mezzo-soprano Michèle Losier. “For me it was very unexpected,” she remembers. “It’s a great show, very funny, and mixing together fantasy, reality and comedy – but I wasn’t expecting that reaction at all.”

When you see Norwegian director Stefan Herheim’s dazzling, inventive, somewhat hyperactive production – all video projections, magically transforming scenery and a gaggle of Rossini lookalikes jostling alongside Losier’s charwoman Cinderella – it’s perhaps not such a shock that the show drew such adoring crowds. And it’s sure to delight audiences at its Edinburgh International Festival outings next month. For Losier, however, the biggest surprise was being able to sing the title role at all.

“For me, singing Rossini was a challenge,” she explains. She’s spoken previously of putting off tackling Rossini, even wondering whether her voice was the right fit for his music. “I’m a very high lyric mezzo. Today we have specialists who sing Rossini so easily and fluidly, whereas for me it required more work. But I needed to give it a chance, to see the extent of my capabilities. And actually I’m proud of myself. I think I was a bit black and white about it, but now I can see the grey zone – and being in the grey zone can also be good.”

Losier is at a pivotal moment in her career. Her rise to stardom has been



**Above: Michèle Losier. Right and far right: Losier in *La Cenerentola* with Cyrille Dubois as Don Ramiro**



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steady rather than meteoric, but she’s earned recognition worldwide through her remarkably focused, thoughtful performances, as well as for her light, lyrical, equally focused voice. Her clutch of previous roles, both big and small – among them Dorabella in *Così fan tutte*, Cherubino in *The Marriage of Figaro* and the title role in Charpentier’s *Medea* – have taken her all round the world. “I would never have thought I’d sing at Covent Garden, the Met, Paris, Milan’s La Scala. If I was 20 again and could see myself now, I’d be astonished at how much I’ve achieved,” she admits.

But she’s aware, too, that she may have been overly prescriptive in the past about her voice and her repertoire. “When we start singing, we have the tendency to categorise our voices. For example, I’d say I’m going to sing Cherubino and other roles that are not too high, not too low. But as the years pass, there’s the danger that you get stuck.” Hence, no doubt, her pride in triumphing over Rossini. The solution, Losier thinks, is to be honest with yourself about your own capabilities. “It comes with singing with your own voice. I don’t have a big, Wagnerian voice, for example, but that’s nothing to be afraid of. Once you sing with your own voice, with your own qualities and your own flaws – yes, actually embrace your flaws – then everything helps out, and those flaws can even become qualities.”

Losier talks with disarming – and refreshing – honesty about her singing, and the same goes for her activities away from the opera and concert stages. “I have the most wonderful, spoiled life right now,” she



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admits, somewhat self-consciously. "I travel with my son, and I feel like I'm just being – let's put this in quote marks – 'selfish,' because I can do whatever I want as he's still very young."

Life for a busy opera singer with a three-year-old isn't without its own challenges, however. "My son still wakes me up pretty much every night. Yesterday he was sick – he had a fever and vomiting, which is normal because he's just a little kid. I had a friend with me, who told me I'd better not catch anything from him. But I replied, 'Do you know how many times this kid has been ill?' I don't have time to worry about whether I'll catch anything myself – I just have to take care of him, and then we'll see what the outcome is."

Losier performed into the sixth month of her pregnancy, and was back on stage just two months after the birth. "Every woman who gives birth would like to spend a whole year or more being with their baby," she says. "But now I have a wonderful life on the road with him, and things have worked out."

And Losier is on the road plenty, taking up temporary residence where she's called on to rehearse and perform. "I'm basically a French resident – I pay my taxes in France, and I have a partner who I met last year in Lyon, so I might base myself there for a while." She returns to Canada as often as she can, but admits that maintaining a relationship with the land of her birth has been a struggle. "It's hard to work across the whole market worldwide – you usually have one area that develops, and you tend to stick there. I often get interesting projects in Europe, so I tend to pick those."

When we speak, Losier is singing Concepción in Ravel's



*L'heure espagnole* at Paris's Opéra Bastille, and she returns to Paris in Berlioz's *The Trojans* in January, following Giovanna Seymour in Donizetti's *Anna Bolena* in Bordeaux – another bel canto role that she feels Rossini has prepared her for. What does she see herself singing in the future? "There are some Wagner roles I'd love to do – Brangäne in *Tristan and Isolde*, for example – and Strauss roles I'd like to get under my belt. I'd love to sing *Carmen*, of course, and I want to continue singing Mozart. My voice is still young – I haven't yet embarked on Verdi or heavier repertoire – so it's still sounding fresh for Mozart."

Another new composer for Losier is Bernstein, whose *Songfest* she performs with the BBC Scottish Symphony Orchestra in September. "I haven't sung any English repertoire in so long, and this is an interesting piece from the 1960s mixing serialism

and Romantic lyricism. But of course it's all essentially lyric singing."

She's fast becoming a regular visitor to Scotland. This year's *Cenerentola* in fact marks her second Edinburgh International Festival appearance: she sang Marguerite in Berlioz's *Damnation of Faust* last year. "It was like a dream come true. I only had three days last time – I flew in, did the show, then left quickly again. This time I'm there for a week, so I'll have more time to look around – even though I know it's super crowded at that time of year."

Nor are these Losier's first visits to the Scottish capital. "I came 20 years ago, on a summer scholarship, so I was able to do some of the tourist things then. But I can't wait to be back – this time with my little family." ▲

**La Cenerentola, Festival Theatre, 24-26 August, 0131-473 2000/  
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