

on song

Supermodel looks
and incredible talent,
Tony Greenway is
enchanted by
Katherine Jenkins

Katherine Jenkins is feeling poorly. The fastest-selling female opera singer since Maria Callas has, her management warns, a chest infection and an ear infection; so I go into this interview expecting her to be a bit subdued. Instead, Jenkins is bubbly and chatty and answers all my questions as though it's the first time anyone in the Press has taken an interest in her. If this is what she's like when she's down in the dumps, what on earth is she like when she's elated?

It's been a busy time for Jenkins. Her summer 2006 programme has included the Llangollen International Eisteddfod, the Humber Bridge Silver Jubilee, Leeds: Opera in the Park and the London Motor Show at Excel Arena. Her winter dates are no less intensive, with a series of concerts around the UK keeping her busy until Christmas. Those gigs just keep on coming.

And so do the awards. In May, she won her second consecutive Brit Award at the Classical Brits 2006. Her third CD, *Living A Dream*, was voted best album of 2006 by Classic FM listeners.

Neath-born Jenkins – a former student at the Royal College of Music, a sometime model and an ex-secondary school teacher – was encouraged but not cajoled to sing by her mother and late father. Upon graduation at the age of 23, Katherine was signed to Universal Classics in a deal reputed to be worth over £1 million – the largest record deal in UK classical recording history, while her debut album, *Premiere*, out-sold

Jenkins' operatic contemporaries such as Kiri te Kanawa and Lesley Garrett.

In 2005, Jenkins became a mainstream phenomenon. Apart from a Classical Brit award for her second album, *Second Nature*, she sang at the VE Day celebration in Trafalgar Square; opened the Berlin leg of Live8 with an a cappella rendition of *Amazing Grace*, and then appeared at the G8 Concert in Edinburgh singing *Nessun Dorma*.

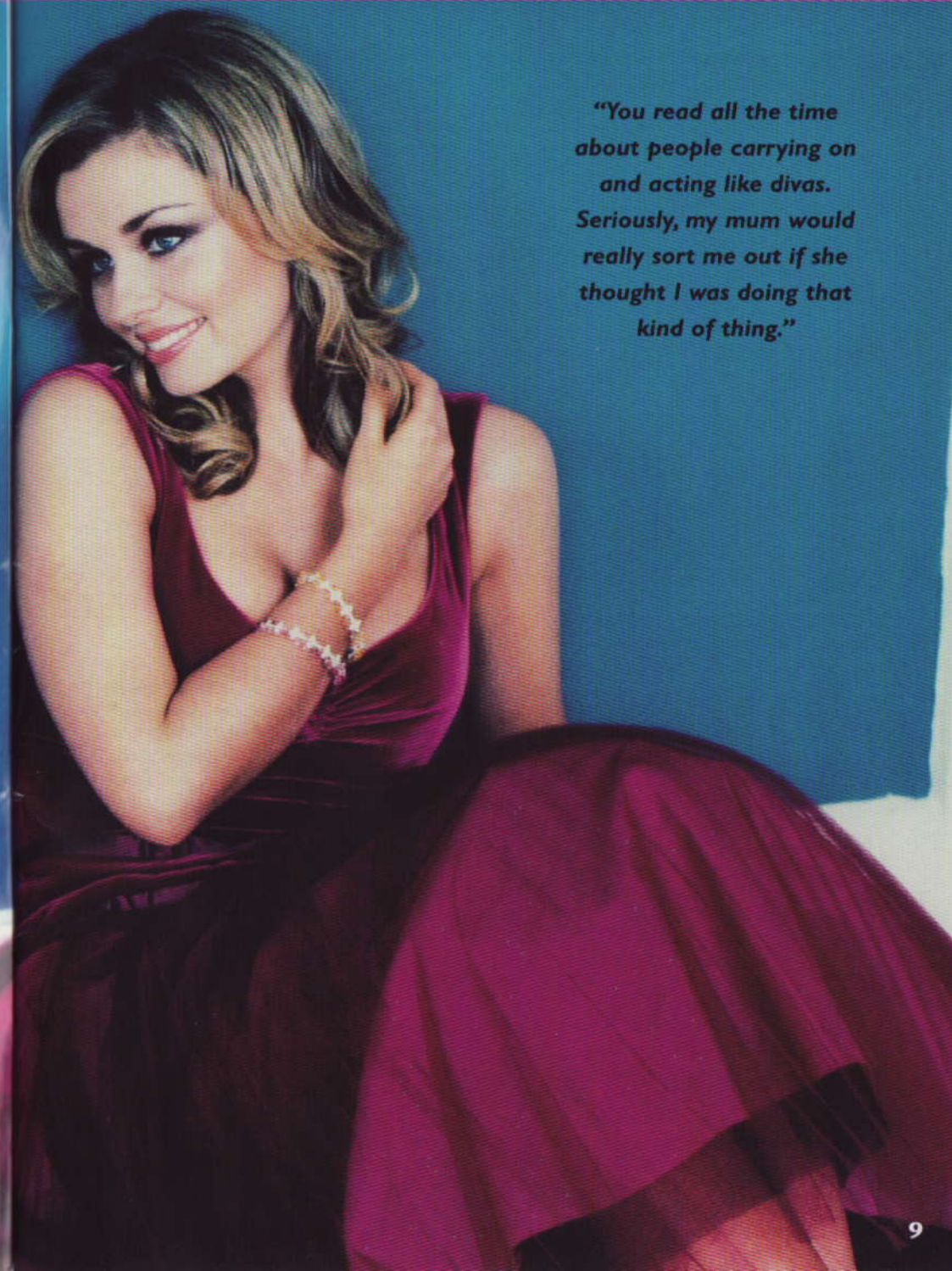
Oh, and the fact that Katherine makes Cindy Crawford look like Nora Batty certainly hasn't hindered her popularity. The men's mags are circling.

What age were you when you realised you had the voice?

The first time I sang was when I was four. They were having a talent show at school and I remember running back home and saying: "Mum, you have to teach me a song". It wasn't that I thought I could sing or that I had a good voice: I just knew I wanted to be involved. That planted the seed.

Then I joined a church choir and won the Welsh Choirgirl of the Year when I was 10. When I won that I thought there might be something there... but ▶

"You read all the time about people carrying on and acting like divas. Seriously, my mum would really sort me out if she thought I was doing that kind of thing."



INTERVIEW



when I was accepted for the Royal Academy of Music, I knew I might have a chance to make it as a professional singer.

Was Live8 a special moment for you?

As a classical artist, I never thought I could be involved in that. It was very rock 'n' roll. I got off the stage in Berlin and there was a car waiting for me. I basically legged it to the airport, and they kept the BA flight waiting for a few minutes because they knew I'd be stretched for time. I flew straight back to London, jumped into a car and got backstage at Hyde Park. Luckily for me, the show was running late so I got to see Madonna performing. Everywhere you looked, there were huge stars – people you never thought would be in the same place at the same time.

You must be aware of your pin-up status. I know I am. Do you hate it when people talk about your looks?

I don't know. I'd be naive to say that I didn't think it helps. Because I think it does. But I'd worry if looks became overly important for classical artists. You know: like in pop, where looks are more important than the music. I just think "this is me. This is how I am."

Are you worried that interest in your looks could overshadow the music?

I don't think it's done that at the moment. I like to incorporate a lot of dress changes into my shows and add some glamour. I think that's all part of what I do, so I try to embrace it. I'm a girly girl, and I always have been.

When talking about your success, you've said "my mum won't let this go to my head". So does this mean you can guarantee us that you will never measure the diameter of the fruit in your dressing room...?

(Laughs)... and ask for the walls to be painted in different colours... Yeah? You read all the time about people carrying on and acting like divas. Seriously, my mum would really sort me out if she thought I was doing that kind of thing. And also my family are really important to me; so if I went home and couldn't relate to them, that would break my heart. My life is changing, but it's important that I don't.

Your dad would have loved every minute of your success, wouldn't he?

I hope so. It's such a shame he's not here to see it. He took early retirement and he'd pick me and my sister up from school and spend every night of the week taking me from choir practice to piano lessons to dance lessons. Basically, my parents didn't have lives because they were running us both around. They never pushed me – they encouraged me. And my dad made me believe that if I worked hard enough then success would happen and my dreams would come true. I really can't say strongly enough just how important that is to a child.

I read that one time you were singing at some gig or other, hit a top C and the chandelier exploded. Is that a true story?

It's true! I was singing as a soloist with my college choir, and I hit a high note and there was a massive bang, like a gun shot. The people in the front few rows actually ducked... I looked up and there were all these tiny bits of glass raining down on us from the ceiling. I haven't managed to do it since, so I'll have to practise and make it my party piece... ●