

Mountain climbing

Soprano Lesley Garrett is wowing audiences as the Mother Superior in the West End production of the Sound of Music and has released a new CD dedicated to the people of Yorkshire. Tony Greenway talks to her

THERE were, last time we looked, only seven days in the week. And a limited number of things you can cram into them. Unless, you're Lesley Garrett CBE of course.

The Doncaster-born opera star has recently recorded a new album (her 13th) and gone down a storm in a big, splashy West End hit. She also has a TV project in the planning stages (which, she apologises, is top secret at present), hosts her own radio programme on Classic FM, is a regular panellist on ITV's all-female chat show, Loose Women, and has a CD recording of Mozart's *Così fan tutte* waiting in the wings. 'It's a bit like being on a fantastic merry-go-round,' she admits. 'I keep expecting it to stop and being asked to get off but, so far, it keeps going faster.'

Garrett, a celebrated soprano who trained at the Royal Academy of Music, reacts with 100mph enthusiasm to everything. Lob a question at her and she doesn't just tap it away into the slips. She knocks it for six. She can talk, this girl. Twenty-five minutes into the interview, I realise we've only covered two subjects (and pretty soon she's off to collect her daughter from school).

Lesley is passionate about three things: her family, singing and Yorkshire. Actually, make that four things. Recently she found another love in the shape of the new West End stage production of *The Sound of Music*, in which she plays the singing Mother Superior.

'I feel born to play this role,' she says. 'I was terribly nervous about taking it, mind. I didn't for a minute think I'd be able to sustain so much work because two shows a week is a lot for an opera singer - and here I am doing seven. But my voice is much better for it.' The critics seem to think so too. She's been called 'phenomenal' by *The Independent* and 'that operatic atomic kitten' by *The Liverpool Echo*. *The Daily Telegraph* thought she 'sings up a holy storm'.

Lesley has always sung; at least, she can't remember a time when she didn't. Her dad - a Doncaster signalman who became a teacher and then a headmaster - had a rich tenor voice and they would sing classical and folk music together. This memory, in part, has inspired her new album, *When I Fall in Love*, a collection of her favourite songs: not opera this time, but pop standards that have great personal significance in her life. She's even dedicated the CD to the people of Yorkshire.

'I had a fantastic musical upbringing in Yorkshire,' explains Lesley, 'and without that I wouldn't be the singer I am today.'



Lesley Garrett

I heard wonderful songs in my family home or in clubs... or my aunty sang them. My aunty was Audrey Graham who was a very well-known singer in the 1960s and appeared with Hughie Green on *Opportunity Knocks*. She was an enormous inspiration to me when I was a child.'

He Was Beautiful is one favourite track on the album, which Lesley danced to when she was a contestant on *Strictly Come Dancing* (a song put forward by her husband, Peter). Another is Edith Piaf's *Non, Je Ne Regrette Rien*. 'Piaf is my great heroine,' says Lesley. 'I don't get bad write-ups very often, but if I ever do I put that record on and sing along with Edith at the top of my voice. *Je Ne Regrette Rien*, mate - because I DON'T regret a single thing. I've had a wonderful life, I belong to a wonderful world and I'm completely blessed.'

There is one song, though, that must make her heart sink to her boots: *Climb Ev'ry Mountain*, her big showstopper in *The Sound of Music*. She must have sung it hundreds of times by now - although if anyone can hit that high note at the end, it's her.

'I'm climbing twice nightly, darling!' she hoots. 'I'm hitting that note hard and long!'

So isn't she exhausted by it - and with it? 'No! I love it. And the stage show is different from the film, remember, so I also have some extras. I open the production with the *Holy Vespers*, which isn't in the film. Then I sing *How Do You Solve a Problem Like Maria?* After that I perform *My Favourite Things* (which Maria sings in the movie). Then I nip



off and let Connie work her magic.'

And by 'Connie' (if you've been living in a cave somewhere), Lesley means Connie Fisher who was voted into the central role of Maria Von Trapp by viewers of a BBC television talent series.

The critics were sniffy from the outset, wondering if a reality TV show was the best way to find a leading lady with West End star quality. 'We all did,' admits Lesley. 'Even me.'

But the more I watched, the more convinced I became that Connie was truly born to play the role. And I have to say that working with her has been a pure delight. If I make a little mistake she doesn't get thrown... because I can do the odd mad thing. She's perfect as Maria. She's charming, delightful, and professional - always on time, always well-prepared, and she's never lost her temper.'

Not that Lesley loses her temper either. She doesn't like



'starry nonsense', and famously 'doesn't do diva'. 'I wouldn't know how to, really,' she says. 'I do get angry if I think I'm not being allowed to rehearse when I need to. And I might get cross if someone did something that interfered with my build-up to a performance. But people don't. I find if you're generous, open and thoughtful, then you get that back, multiplied.'

Audiences have always responded to Lesley, ever since she began her career at the Welsh National Opera, Opera North and Glyndebourne Festival Opera. 'Performing is a two way street,' she says. 'And what I receive from audiences is beyond words. There's a fantastic transfer or energy when it's going well. I can feel the audience willing me on in *Climb Ev'ry Mountain* to reach that top note. It's a number which gives them release and reminds them about the mountains they've had to climb and the troubles they've had to overcome. That's what that song is about: finding your way through life.'

Maybe that's why the *Mother Superior* role appeals to her so much. 'I haven't thought of that before... but now you're making me think. I had to climb the biggest mountain ever to become an opera singer.'

Why? Because girls from Doncaster didn't become

sopranos? 'Yes, it was a class thing and an education thing. There's a line I say to Maria: "You have to find the life you were born to live." That could have been written for me.'

'I wanted to train and see how far this would go. My father wasn't in favour at all, so I had to persuade my mum and she talked him round. He just couldn't see how I could make a living from it.'

Lesley has kept a house in Yorkshire for 20 years and misses the county when she's away. She's a big fan of the Dales and the Moors and she also finds enormous beauty and nostalgia in the industrial architecture of South Yorkshire. 'I can't get back at the moment because of *The Sound of Music*, and there's no point in simply returning for a day. But I love the place. I think there's a very particular spirit that only people from Yorkshire really understand. It's a doggedness, it's a stubbornness, it's a refusal to give in and a determination to overcome. Yorkshire is in my roots. It's where I go to recharge my batteries.'

Lesley Garrett's new album, *When I Fall in Love*, is out now on Universal Classics and Jazz.

She appears in the *Sound of Music* at The London Palladium until April (except Thursday performances).