

DAME EMMA KIRKBY

Mr Chancellor

Cast your mind to a desolate airport serving a distant European city. Dusk is falling, and a welcoming party eagerly awaits the arrival of a foreign Diva - a celebrated soprano. Nearly thirty years ago she laid the foundations for a new musical genre, and has commanded the international stage ever since. Due to sing at a prestigious concert that evening, the success of the event rests on her shoulders. She is the star-billing.

Her chauffeur watches the passengers filing by. Ordinary travellers, on business or vacation, struggling with their luggage across an otherwise deserted Arrivals Hall. The stragglers pass through a short while later, and then.....no sound. Where was their celebrity guest? Surely she was waiting air-side until the paparazzi lost interest? Soon she *must* whisk through the revolving doors in a voluptuous fur coat and Gucci shades?

But the Diva does not appear. Half an hour passes and panic sets in. What was the reason for her absence? Why the no-show? Had the early signs of a possible virus led to a cancellation? Or perhaps a tantrum over the luggage allowance at Heathrow? After checking that all the London passengers had arrived, the welcome party immediately

returned to concert venue to report on the pending disaster.

Meanwhile, one unassuming passenger, probably dressed in her usual dungarees, slipped past the welcome committee with her nap-sack on her back, hopped on a local bus, and made her way into town. She hadn't engaged the welcome party, because she had assumed it was not for her. And the welcome party hadn't noticed her, because she was indistinguishable from the other 200 passengers. As usual, no need for a warm up – she was ready for the performance immediately on arrival – and as for the concert – well, as usual, she did not disappoint the discerning audience.

Mr Chancellor, this story tells us a great deal about Dame Emma Kirby. Yes, she is a music star of international repute; and yes, she is hotly sought after by the most prestigious opera and concert halls on both sides of the Atlantic. Yes, she is a Diva – but only in the true Latin sense of the word. She is certainly a *musical goddess*, but without the unpleasant trappings evoked by images of the great sopranos of the Italian stage. Both friends and colleagues alike comment on her modesty, and down-to-earth approach. Emma Kirby is a consummate professional and loves to perform, but she is not a frightening drama queen, and her personal attributes are expressed in her unique singing voice.

Emma Kirkby is widely regarded as being *the* finest interpreter of the Baroque voice. Her singing has precision, clarity, and yet great warmth. It is not “showy”, “brassy” or “in-your-face”, rather it is gently alluring, engaging, and above all, her intonation is intimately connected to the underlying lyric. Despite its subtlety, her voice has a powerful dramatic effect. With over 100 recordings to her name, it is perhaps not surprising that she was recently voted one of the 10 best sopranos *of all time*.

This may appear to be an unusual accolade, Mr Chancellor, given that Emma has focussed on music from the ancient past. But her work extends from Hildegarde of Bingen, through the madrigals of the Italian and English renaissance, cantatas and oratorios of the Baroque, and touching on early classical music of Mozart and Haydn. This breadth results in a huge variety of styles, exploring over 200 years of musical history.....so, Mr Chancellor, this is even a little longer than your personal favourite Dire Straits, and (dare I say it) includes just a little more variety than the Beatles, or The Rolling Stones.

Emma’s interest in early music began at school aged 14, when she first realised that she was (in her own words) “a bit of a renaissance freak”. However, although unknown to her at the time, for her the word “renaissance” was to

have two meanings. From the outset, Emma has always felt more comfortable singing music of the 16th century Renaissance, but by applying her unique talent in this area, she was instrumental in the re-birth of interest in this rich musical period. With others, Mr Chancellor, she led the *re*-naissance of the renaissance, as a key performer on the early music scene. It is therefore all the more remarkable that her professional career began almost by accident.

Having read classics at Somerville College, Oxford, she began her career as a comprehensive school teacher near Reading. Singing for pleasure, she had no expectations of becoming a professional. However, it was clear from the outset that Emma had a very special vocal and was destined for great things. Spotted by Andrew Parrott and Anthony Rooley whilst performing on the amateur scene, she joined the Taverner Choir in 1971 and her recording career promptly followed, linked to a long association with the Consort of Musicke. Helped by Jessica Cash, Emma used her academic classical background to good effect, studying descriptions of the 16th century voice, and most importantly, taking an academic approach to understanding the way singers were actually taught and learnt music in the Renaissance period. Moreover, unlike many singers, Emma also placed equal emphasis on the underlying text, thus enabling her to re-capture moments of musical drama from four centuries ago.

But Emma is no Elizabethan dinosaur. Despite her many years experience, her style is refreshingly youthful, and her acute intelligence leads to challenging interpretations of often stultified musical dogma. To put it simply, she brings ancient music to life...a real resurrection. And through her interpretation, we can all appreciate the timelessness of true great composers such as John Dowland, William Bird, Bach and Handel – who, without the power and flexibility of a modern symphony orchestra, used the human voice as the pinnacle of emotive expression. This pinnacle is scaled by Dame Emma Kirkby whenever she sings.

Emma Kirkby has performed and recorded with many world-class chamber groups and orchestras, including London Baroque, L'Orfeo of Linz, and the Orchestra of the Age of Enlightenment. In 1999 she was voted *Artist of the Year* by Classic FM listeners, in 2000 she received the *Order of the British Empire*, and in 2007 she was made *Dame Commander of the Order of the British Empire*. Despite her many accolades, she still prefers live concerts, especially touring with close colleagues, a number of whom have contributed to this oration.

Mr Chancellor, traditionally the “prima donna” is often regarded as egotistical, unreasonable and irritable, with a rather high opinion of themselves not always shared by

others. However, despite two decades at the top of the soprano premier league, Emma Kirkby has not developed even the slightest mannerism of Callas and Schwartzkopf. She produces celestial tones on a daily basis, but somehow remains “down to earth” in her approach. She has been an ardent supporter of our Music department here in Newcastle University, has coached aspiring singers through master-classes, and has inspired all through her regular appearances at the Newcastle Early Music Festival.

She is not a drama queen, but the queen of musical drama. A dungareed-diva, guaranteed to deliver art, not artifice.

Mr Chancellor, in recognition of her unique musical contribution on the international stage, making ancient music sound as if it had only been written yesterday; and also for her commitment to inspiring the next generation of singers here at Newcastle University, I ask that you bestow upon her the degree of Doctor of Music, *honoris causa*.

Citation by Professor Patrick Chinnery