

A bizarre contradiction

Mira conquers the Flemish music scene – and the world



An Gydé

Mira's contagious debut album was released a year ago but is still lingering on the radio and in many a Flemish living room. *In de daluren (In the Quiet Hours)* is a contemporary album filled with authentic, often tragi-comic songs. Randy Newman is an inspiration, and it shows. The singer-songwriter's wayward lyrics are powerfully driven by her piano and delivered in a cosy kind of Flemish with a distinct Antwerp accent. "For me, it is the most natural way to sing," she says. "The language I use is very close to home. My lyrics are also often very homey – about ordinary people, people you meet on the street. My kind of language is better suited to that than the official Dutch language, I think."

The 25-year-old singer-songwriter has experience well beyond her years. When she was eight, she started a classical education on the piano. At 12, she wrote her first song. After studying arts and performance at Antwerp's legendary Studio Herman Teirlinck, she made her live debut in 2002.

Still coasting on the success of the record, Mira is currently touring all over Flanders – and thoroughly enjoying it. Sometimes she plays solo (*uitgekleed* shows, she calls them), sometimes with a band (*Mira en de maten*). Mostly she plays theatre-style venues

because her music is so at home there. Even today she's still reveling in the success of her debut and the variety of people who are attracted to it. "The CD did what it had to do: reached a large audience and got a lot of airplay," she says. "I have discovered that my audience is really diverse, people from all walks of life. During the last year, I was asked to perform at a very posh private party but also to play at a benefit for the homeless in Brussels. That's a bizarre contradiction."

She sings in Dutch and is surprised by a question about whether non-Dutch speakers will like her. She claims those who don't speak Dutch are actually the ones who get the point. "I get a lot of reactions via MySpace and the website – from Croatians and Bosnians to English and Americans. Often along the lines of 'I don't understand a word, but it sounds great!' Of course, I consider that a compliment."

It's encouraging to know that the Flemish voice is being heard round the world – despite the language barriers. "I am trying to find my own personal sound apart from the lyrics. In Flanders, people tend to focus on the lyrics if they are in Dutch – as if lyrics are suddenly all-important if you sing in your own language. That's one thing that doesn't influence people

who speak a different language, and that's why their comments are very important to me."

Mira's album mirrors the daily clash of the poetic and the prosaic: drag queens as well as roofers, blasé celebrities as well as schoolboys on mopeds spinning out of control. The tone is a daring combination of deep emotion and dark humour. "Things like that just tend to creep in, and I find it's a nice little gadget to throw people just a bit off balance. Making people laugh is one of the most tangible ways of getting to them; their reactions instantly tell you if it works."

You can plan to see and hear a lot more of Mira: she's working on a new album she hopes to release next year and has been asked to write a song for the music compilation *Tē Gek*, an initiative to challenge the taboo revolving around mental illness. "I really support that cause," she says.

But for now, she's packing a punch in her live shows. "I don't want to protect people from too much emotion. I want them to hurt when they hear music, just like I do."

Mira plays in Rudedervoorde on 23 November, in Maaseik on 29 November and in Heusden-Zolder on 30 November, as well as many dates in December. For ticket information, visit www.mira-online.be.

FILM FREAK

The Gold Rush

A delightful day awaits you and your children at Bozar on December 2. The Brussels venue screens Charlie Chaplin's *The Gold Rush*, which is certainly good enough but just might be overshadowed by a visit from Sinterklaas the same morning.

Easily Chaplin's masterpiece, *The Gold Rush* find his little tramp alter ego heading to the wintry mountains of Alaska in search of

gold. True to form, chaos ensues, with the silent film star getting stranded in a remote cabin with a prospector and an escaped convict. Voted one of the Best 100 American Films ever made by the American Film Institute, *The Gold Rush* includes two of Chaplin's signature scenes: in one, he is so hungry he tries to eat his boot; in the other, he makes those little dinner rolls dance.

Later in December, Brussels' venue Flagey begins a Chaplin retrospective with many new prints of his best work.

Lisa Bradshaw



Alone and cold in Alaska: *The Gold Rush*

CLASSICAL NOTES

Europe at their feet

A Brussels' festival celebrates the great Franco-Flemish composers

If a scene by Bruegel, a portrait by Memling or a *pietà* by Petrus Christus could sing, what music would we hear? A chanson by Clément Jannequin, a motet by Johannes Ockeghem, or perhaps a lament by Gilles Binchois. These and many others formed the so-called Franco-Flemish school, a group of composers that flourished in the Low Countries during the Renaissance and had Europe at their feet.

Both Ockeghem and Binchois but also Guillaume Dufay, Adriaan Willaert, Nicolas Gombert, Josquin des Prez and Roland de Lassus started out as choir boys in the cathedrals of Mons, Antwerp, Ghent, Cambrai and other cities in northern France and what is now Belgium in the 15th and early 16th centuries. They then set out on the roads of Europe to work in the most powerful courts and churches of their time.

Their presence was felt most strongly in Italy, where local composers complained that the Franco-Flemish hoarded the most desirable posts. They were genuine proto-Europeans who could speak five or six languages, and their music was equally international, blending the complicated ornaments of Italy's *ars subtilior* with the counterpoint and new harmonies favoured by English composers into a rich and haunting polyphony. Some claim that their use of superimposed voices and motifs created an impression of space and mirrored the invention of perspective that was happening in the visual arts at the same time. Although they fell out of favour towards the end of the 16th century, when Italy ousted Flanders as Europe's new musical centre, their legacy lived on, and echoes of it can be traced in Bach, Stravinsky and through to contemporary composers like Arvo Pärt.

Today, this repertoire is all the rage, and an ever-growing contingent of early-music specialists continues to chart new expanses of it. Their latest discoveries can be heard in Brussels' Miniemen Church over the next few months as part of Musica Universalis, a festival organised jointly by Bozar and Europalia and whose mission is to highlight the central role of Flanders in the shaping of the western musical tradition.



The distinctly unique Spanish-Flemish ensemble La Hispanoflamenca plays on 29 November as part of Musica Universalis

The first concert of the series took place this week, but there are four more to come: on 29 November is a performance by La Hispanoflamenca, made up, as its name indicates, of six musicians from Spain and Flanders, which explains its peculiar, idiosyncratic sound. The programme focuses on the works of Pedro Rimonte, a late 16th-century Spanish composer who travelled up to Brussels from his native Aragon to work for the governors of the southern Netherlands, then under Spanish rule.

December will bring the exciting Belgian ensemble Graindelavoix and its founder, Björn Schmelzer, in works by Ockeghem and Binchois, which they have recently recorded for the Spanish label Glossa. Binchois, whom Schmelzer regards as "one of the greatest songwriters of all time", was a native of Mons who worked in the Burgundian court and crafted beautiful, bittersweet songs in old French. Ockeghem's masses and motets, by comparison, are dense, intricate affairs, and the concert includes a lament he penned after the death of Binchois.

Also in December are Italian sonatas, songs and motets by Belgian wind ensemble Oltremontano and soprano Dorothee Miels. Specialising in early brass and reed instruments, the group takes its name from the moniker these northern polyphonists received in Italy – "Oltremontani" means "those from over the mountains". Bringing the cycle to a close in January, the celebrated Paul Van Nevel and his Huelgas Ensemble traces the Franco-Flemings' legacy in the achingly beautiful music of Portugal's João Lourenço Rebelo – or what is left of it; most of it perished in the 1755 earthquake that destroyed Lisbon.

Marie Dumont

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