

Natural born diva

At 35, Juliette Lewis has already had two careers — as a celebrated actor and a barnstorming singer. She talks about Scientology, Sarah Palin and substance abuse

BY KIRA COCHRANE
THE GUARDIAN, LONDON

As a kid growing up in outer Los Angeles, Juliette Lake Lewis had a happy life. She spent hours riding her pony, playing with her many siblings and half-siblings, and was once spirited from school by her dad on the premise of seeing the dentist — only to end up at the cinema watching *Star Wars*. Her father, Geoffrey Lewis, was an actor, and her mother, Glenis Batley, was a graphic designer, and although the couple divorced when Lewis was 2, she lived with them both, on and off. Her parents helped cultivate “that sense of belief in one’s artistic abilities,” and before she had even hit her teens, she had narrowed down her career choices. When she grew up, she decided, she would either be a performance artist, a musician or an actor.

Now in her mid-30s, the all-singing, all-acting Lewis is two ambitions down — with one still to go. Sprawled before me in a London hotel, she has recently flown in from New York, and her body clock is out of whack; she has been up since 3am, and describes herself as “delirious.” Tired or not, she looks as she always has — both ordinary and extraordinary. She is only wearing light makeup, and her face is softer than on screen, but her eyes and lips pop with cartoon intensity.

She’s here to host the Vodafone Live Music Awards, and is vague about the prospect.

Her Valley-girl drawl makes every statement sound chewed-over and spat-out, and when I ask whether she was attracted by the chance to celebrate live acts, she looks at the PR women in the room, and says wide-eyed: “Is the event live?” A second later she understands the question, and talks excitedly about the Ting Tings and Primal Scream, who are both performing.

Over the past six years, Lewis has been establishing her band Juliette and the Licks; she says that music is “100 percent” her biggest love. The band has released two albums and an EP, and toured extensively, but the jury is still out on their work. There’s no doubting Lewis’ commitment. When she started, she wanted “to do everything that any young band would be doing”; her first UK gig was in a 100-capacity club. She kept coming back, “until I sold out the Astoria, and there’s something really gratifying about that, to work for it. Because the music had to stand on its own merit. I’m only good for about 100 tickets off the curiosity factor, and if you suck no one’s going to come back.” She is currently at work on the band’s third album, on which she plays keyboards “like a caveman.”

Lewis is certainly more respected for her music than actor-dilettantes such as Russell Crowe, but suspicions persist. Her songs are an angry mix of guitars and expletives (typical titles: *Death of a Whore*, *Bullshit King*), and the effect can seem like theatrical posturing. In many ways, this is unfair; if Lewis hadn’t started out as an actor, her musical career would probably be taken on face value, and judged pretty good. But she’s so strong on screen that people sometimes seem to feel cheated by her alternative career.

Lewis initially took up acting in her teens, and quickly realized that she was a natural. While “some people can’t connect with their own emotions,” she says, “that’s the thing that I started with from out of the womb. When I feel something, I feel it to the ninth power.” In her early TV roles, this skill wasn’t exactly appreciated. She was cast as a teenage daughter in the world’s most bizarre-sounding sitcom — the star was the ageing film-noir actor, Robert Mitchum — and the studio quickly “hired an acting teacher to essentially teach me how to act bad ... Whether I was slouching, or putting my hair behind my ear, they’d have an acting teacher saying, ‘Don’t do that. Stand up straight. More energy. Smile.’”

She was seriously disillusioned until Martin Scorsese flew to the rescue, casting her opposite Robert De Niro in *Cape Fear*; aged 18, she received an Oscar nomination for the role. Over the next few years, she bounced from one prestigious part to another, with directors including Woody Allen, Lasse Hallstrom, Kathryn Bigelow and Oliver Stone.

In 1996, she hit a wall. Lewis says that, while she was a happy kid, “as a teenager I was severely, crippling dramatic and in search of self.” She felt that her emotions were too big for her, and had developed a serious drug problem by her early 20s. “I had too much energy, so I was actually trying to sedate it.” She ended up following the drug rehabilitation program, Narconon, run by the Church of Scientology.

Lewis has now been clean for 13 years, and her stint in rehab seems to have soldered her relationship with Scientology. She first encountered it as a child, through her parents, and I have been asked not to prepare questions on the subject, on the basis that it is “tired”; asking Lewis about another topic entirely, though, she jumps in.

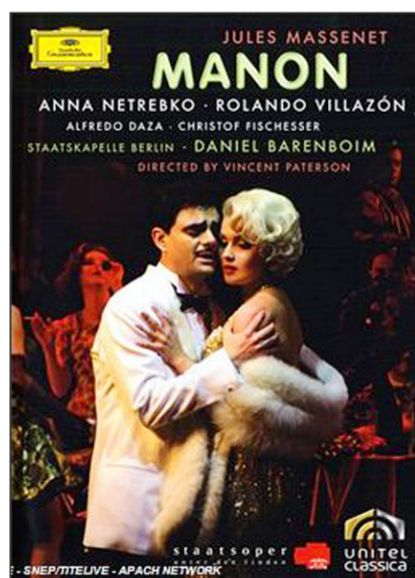
“Oh, I thought you were going to go into Scientology and Tom Cruise. Which I don’t mind. I want you to know that he is not the representation of all things Scientology — I feel so bad for him, because that’s the responsibility that’s put on him.” Lewis says that she has never read a true word in the media about Scientology and that “it’s just really practical, applied religious philosophy. And you’ll get lost in the media with these fantastic, fantastical — is that a word? — stories of, like, aliens and, you know, gay cover-ups ... The rumors, they’re astonishing. And they would be funny, if they weren’t so hurtful.”

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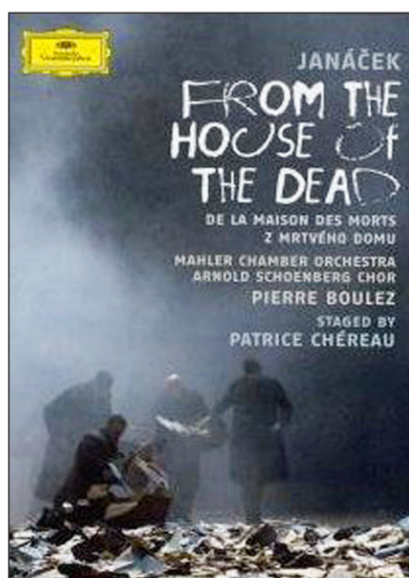


PHOTO: AP

[CLASSICAL DVD REVIEWS]



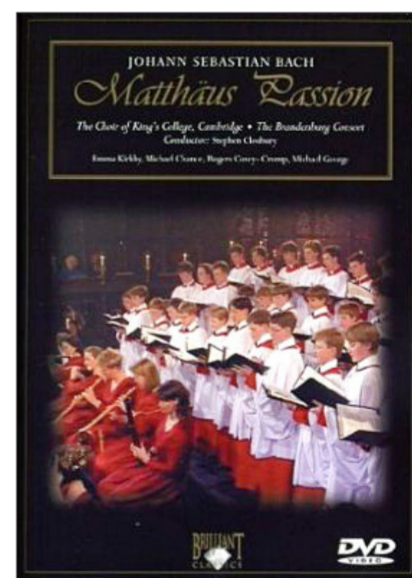
MANON
Massenet
Netrebko, Villazon
DGM 073 4431



FROM THE HOUSE OF THE DEAD
Janacek
Boulez, Chereau
DGM 073 4426



THE FULL MONTEVERDI
I Fagiolini
Boulez, Chereau
NAXOS 2.110224



MATTHAUS PASSION
Bach
King's College, Cambridge
BRILLIANT CLASSICS 99929

If the answer to revitalizing old operas is to stage updated productions with charismatic, not to say sexy, soloists in the main roles, then the new *Manon* from Deutsche Grammophon is a model of exactly how it should be done.

Massenet’s five-act opera, though famous in its day, has been out of fashion even among operagoers for years. But this stunning 2007 production starring Anna Netrebko and Rolando Villazon, with Daniel Barenboim conducting, could scarcely be bettered. It sizzles, soars and then goes on to make you laugh and cry at all the right moments.

It’s directed by Vincent Paterson, previously a Hollywood director more used to working with Madonna than with French 19th-century opera. But the result is stupendous. He updates the story of the tragic love of a serious young man (Des Grieux) and a slightly sluttish but highly characterful girl (Manon) to the 1950s, and the costume and set designers, clearly allowed a

generous budget, have a whale of a time as a result.

There are bedroom scenes (clearly not envisaged when the opera was premiered in 1884, based on the Abbe Prevost’s 18th-century story) and street scenes, with party scenes to link them. But most important of all, musically this is really glorious. Anna Netrebko has fought hard to persuade the more serious-minded critics that her glamorous style also goes with a top-ranking voice, and these days she’s succeeded. She’s an ideal Manon, dazzling both visually and musically. Her opposite, the Mexican tenor Rolando Villazon, is hardly less exciting.

These two DVDs are consequently very highly recommended. They could convert you to opera, and if you’re already converted, they might just convert you to Massenet’s music as well.

Dostoyevsky wrote *From the House of the Dead* about his prison experiences in Siberia, where he’d been sent as an

imagined revolutionary. The fact that he came back an ardent monarchist didn’t blunt his frank portrayal of prison conditions, however. But what he did most memorably was provide insights into the personalities and psychology of his fellow inmates, albeit in a series of rather fragmentary sketches.

Janacek used this book as the basis of his final opera, first performed in 1930, two years after his death. He wrote the libretto himself, using almost exclusively words and phrases from Dostoyevsky’s original. His music is repetitive, rhythmic and insistent, and brilliantly colored as played on a new DVD by the small Mahler Chamber Orchestra.

What attracted critics was that the project marked the collaboration, 30 years after their ground-breaking centenary *Ring* at Bayreuth, of conductor Pierre Boulez and director Patrice Chereau. The result is intensely memorable, a piece of clownishly violent sung theater accompanied by

this unstoppably destabilizing music. In the last analysis it’s not Chereau’s direction (less radical than for his famous *Ring*) nor the performances of the soloists, strong though they frequently are, but the music itself that proves so unforgettable.

If *Manon* might convert you to opera if you enjoy glitz and glamour, this might do so if you think opera is bound to be overemotional and old-fashioned. Nothing could be less of either than this stark, brutal, primitive and curiously unnerving work.

No one is ever totally naked in *The Full Monteverdi*, though the title is an obvious pun on *The Full Monty* and some of the singers and actors involved do get pretty close. It’s a film in which the UK six-member vocal ensemble I Fagiolini pair up with an identical number of actors and actresses and lip-synch through their recording of Monteverdi’s *Fourth Book of Madrigals*, dating from 1604. The

lyrics of these ancient songs focus on the pains of love, and filmmaker John La Bouchardiere has concocted a series of interlinked modern stories of broken hearts and shattered relationships to go with them.

The setting is contemporary London, and the participants are yuppie business types, mostly in their 30s. They’re first seen drinking white wine in a bleakly chic restaurant, then in various stages of splitting up, already well-advanced when the hour-long film begins. The result is beautiful to listen to but depressing to watch. Even so, it’s an important first — making Renaissance madrigals accessible through dramatizing them in a sleek contemporary setting.

Last month I praised Nikolaus Harnoncourt’s 1985 version of Bach’s *Johannes Passion* [Taipei Times, Aug. 27, 2008, Page 14]. So I thought I’d look at a DVD version of the *Matthaus Passion*, universally considered the

greater work. The one I got hold of was by the Choir of King’s College Chapel, Cambridge, UK, issued in Taiwan on the Brilliant Classics label. What a disappointment it has proved!

Firstly, there are no subtitles at all. Instead, a booklet provides the original German text, without translation — as good as useless as far as I’m concerned. Second, the performance is tweely androgynous, to an extent beyond belief. I was well aware of how fey English Anglicanism can be, but nothing prepared me for this pious letdown. Harnoncourt’s strong, extrovert rendering couldn’t be further removed from this self-approving display from England’s academic elite and their minions.

Paradoxically, only soprano Emma Kirby strives to save something of Bach’s native masculine vigor, but the combined efforts of the English epicenes proves too much even for her.

— BRADLEY WINTERTON