

“I wouldn't say we were complacent,” says Keisha Buchanan, attempting to describe the torpor that descended on the Sugababes around the time of their last album.

“But I'd walk off stage and I wouldn't even have broken a sweat. It was like I'd just walked to the bottom of my road.”

The fact that the pop trio she formed in 1998 have survived long enough for torpor to set is improbable enough in itself. What's even harder to believe is that Buchanan, compact and cherubic across a London hotel-room table, is still two months short of her 25th birthday. She's had six No. 1 singles (seven, if you include Sugababes' participation in the 2004 remake of *Do They Know It's Christmas?*) and six albums (five of them Top 10s) under her belt, and her London/Liverpool trio has outlived virtually all its pop rivals of

the last decade (save Girls Aloud, with whom relations seem to be distant but mutually respectful) — yet she's too young to remember life before mobile phones.

So are Amelle Berrabah, 25, who still has the faint fragrance of new girl about her despite having replaced original Babe Mutya Buena in 2005, and Heidi Range, 26, the Liverpudlian of the group, whose white Chanel handbag and killingly high heels say “noughties girl group” loud and clear. All three are chatty and fresh-faced, and teenish enough to post Twitter messages like this recent Berrabah tweet: “Hay people!!!! Me and heidi and r hair stylist on r way 2 durham baby!!! O yeah!! We decided 2 get the train coz will b quicker!xxx.”

These deceptively young women are about to release their seventh studio album (as yet untitled) and they're sitting here, talking like old pros about complacency and how they're now, as Buchanan says, “Oh my God, so reinvigorated.” It was their last album, 2008's *Catfights and Spotlights*, that made them doubt themselves for the first time. Long accustomed to praise for their ultra-sharp urban pop, they were

shocked by the lukewarm reviews and sales. The *Guardian* called it “a general transition from crisp modernity to self-consciously grown-up, Duffyesque soul,” and even the usually adulatory Popjustice.com complained that there were “no decent” uptempo numbers — this from a band renowned for the brilliance of hits such as *Freak Like Me* and *Hole in the Head*.

“We're still really proud of [*Catfights*], even though it wasn't our most successful album,” says Buchanan, who's invariably first to answer questions. “I was surprised — I think *Change* should've got those bad reviews, because that was a lot poppier. With *Catfights*, we decided to go a bit old-school and stripped-back. But if we stayed in the place we were in, we'd never move on.” But she finally admits they did become complacent, and that must be a difficult thing to own up to, coming from someone who's otherwise unwaveringly on-message about how great it is to be a Sugababe. “When I say complacent, I mean we had put ourselves in boxes and said we were just singers.”

“We took our eye off the ball and didn't

concentrate on the performance and styling side,” says Range. Though presentation is a critical factor in a chart-pop band's continuing success these days, the trio confess they'd neglected it because, crazily, they assumed fans would want to hear them sing no matter how they looked. Buchanan sighs. “The industry is changing. We used to say in interviews that we could put bin-bags over our heads and people would still come to see us. But they wouldn't now. People want to see the whole package. They want to know all about you.”

“That's why my boyfriend [Xfm presenter Dave Berry] and I did *OK!*” says Range. While it shouldn't seem remarkable that a girl-group member has taken the *OK!* magazine money, the Sugababes aren't just any girl group. They made their name by being just that little bit cooler than the rest. “We were moving into a new house and we thought the money would be useful,” says Range. Hmm. But if she were to get married, would she sell her wedding? That provokes a debate, with Buchanan shaking her head — no, no — and Range

saying she'd consider it, because the financial contribution would be helpful. “We've been invited to some random weddings, of people we've only met once,” says Berrabah, and the others break into laughter. It's standard these days for celebrities to be invited to other celebrities' nuptials, no matter how tenuous the connection between them, to increase the number of famous faces at the event and make the photos more saleable. “People we don't even know ...” Berrabah muses, rolling her eyes sadly at the folly of it.

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Candy girls

After a brush with self-doubt, the Sugababes are back on fiercely catchy R 'n' B form. So what went right?

BY CAROLINE SULLIVAN
THE GUARDIAN, LONDON



PHOTOS: AFP AND AP

[CLASSICAL DVD REVIEW]

BY BRADLEY WINTERTON
CONTRIBUTING REPORTER

Bellini's *I Puritani* (The Puritans) is probably most widely known from the final scene of Werner Herzog's 1982 film *Fitzcarraldo* in which a traveling opera company performs the Act One love duet on a boat steaming up the Amazon. *A te, o cara, amor talora* (To you, my dear, love led me) sings the tenor, while Klaus Kinsky expresses his delight and pride in the spectacle, and Claudia Cardinale and her entourage of charmingly ingenuous call-girls applaud wildly from the shore.

It was Bellini's last opera. It's set near Plymouth, England, and is about a girl, Elvira, from a Roundhead family who's in love with a Cavalier officer. It's no coincidence that Bellini had earlier written an operatic version of *Romeo and Juliet*, called *I Capuleti e I Montecchi*, also featuring love in the face of family hostility. Now, in his final re-telling of an old story, the heroine goes mad when she comes to believe, wrongly, that her man has gone off with someone else; but this time the couple is re-united in an unexpectedly happy ending. The plot also involves the figure of the executed King Charles I's fugitive widow, Henrietta Maria (Enrichetta), in disguise. Anna Netrebko is currently the opera

world's favorite and sexiest soprano, and I hope to review her new film of *La Bohème* with Mexican tenor Rolando Villazon shortly. But she also stars in a DVD of *I Puritani* from New York's Metropolitan Opera that's issued in both HD and Blu-ray as part of the Met's ongoing series of live opera recordings.

The essence of the problem when assessing this live recording lies in the need to decide what you want most from an opera performance, and from the main singer in particular. Is it the unamplified voice, and that only, or is it also good looks, and acting ability? It's an old dilemma, of course, but most enthusiasts over the years have opted for the voice, whatever the singer happens to look like, with looks an added plus if you happen to be lucky enough to get them.

Anna Netrebko has looks in spades, an acting ability following not far behind, and a soprano voice that's exceptionally pure in all registers, high and low. But she lacks just that edge of manic vocal attack and fury that so many of the greatest opera roles require.

OK, you can argue, but that's perfect for the bel canto [beautiful singing] style that Bellini specialized in. However, with their dramatic plots, and the frenzied states of the lovelorn heroines, these operas are in essence

no different from any others. Elvira needs to bring the house down with her mad hysterics and crazed absorption with her wedding dress, just as much as Puccini's Tosca does when she sobs in anguish at her impossible situation or Strauss' Elektra screams in her manic earth-scratching desperation. This is opera, after all, an over-the-top entertainment or it's nothing.

But Netrebko just fails to catch fire. Her supporting male singers don't help, either. All are to some degree adequate to their roles, but none of them stops the heart. Eric Cutler sometimes appears tested as Elvira's beloved Arturo, while Franco Vassallo as Riccardo, the man her family wants her to marry, is just about strong enough. John Relyea displays sterling qualities as Giorgio, Elvira's sympathetic uncle, however.

All in all, though, this *I Puritani* stops far short of being in the first rank.

You have only to compare it with the 2001 version from Barcelona with Edita Gruberova (issued by Jingo and reviewed in *Taipei Times* on Nov. 15, 2007). There Gruberova sees off all comers, and the audience's near-hysteria after the great mad scene is entirely justified. This is bel canto singing as it should be, and as far as DVDs are concerned — and there are several fine CDs of this opera — that version remains the one to beat.

An unusual feature of this New York pair of DVDs is that parts of some scenes are filmed from the side of the stage, showing both singers and, beyond them, the conductor and orchestra. Also unusual, and this time in poor taste, is the use of a clip of Netrebko being interviewed backstage, inserted on the DVD between the second and third acts. The reason for this may be that the performance was relayed live to cinemas around the US, so something was needed to fill in intermission times. But there was no need for it to be placed there in the DVD edition.

For the rest, the sets (by no means new) and costumes are adequate, if conventional. Patrick Summers conducts in a way that's both firm and neat. And the sound quality is outstanding — even during the big ensembles, details of the orchestral playing can be very clearly heard. But then the sound on the Barcelona set was excellent as well.

This New York version, then, is not a classic performance. I can watch the Gruberova version over and over again, and indeed it's hard not to. This newer one, by contrast, is svelte but not joyous, suave but not passionate. So I'll end by giving the product details of the incomparably finer older version: the catalogue number is JDV311072 on Taiwan's Jingo label.



I PURITANI
Bellini
Netrebko, Cutler, Vassallo, Relyea
DGM 073 4421 and Blu-ray
60i 000440 073 4489