

Classical & Opera

Sister act

Kristofer Barber speaks with soprano **Roberta Alexander** about the challenges of programming all black, American, women composers for the Vrouwenmuziekmarathon

With public performances becoming increasingly rare, Amsterdam-based American soprano Roberta Alexander's appearance in the Kleine Zaal of the Concertgebouw as part of the 'Vrouwenmuziekmarathon' (Women's Music Marathon) on 8 March is a unique opportunity to see a world-class artist working her signature mojo in the flesh.

Joined by a feisty handful of sirens, including celebrated songstress Irene Maessen, rising Dutch star Tania Kross and Karin Strobos, whom Amsterdam audiences will remember from her last-minute debut as Octavian in De Nederlandse Opera's 2011 production of 'Der Rosenkavalier', Alexander is spicing up the concert devoted solely to the repertoire of women composers with a giant dose of authentic American flavour.

'American song has played an important role in my career and it seems fitting to finally get to include some of these ladies' under-performed compositions in concert,' Alexander muses. 'I'm proud to perform this music that resonates so deeply within me. All these songs have such strong connections to my youth in what was then segregated America.'

Not one to shy away from a challenge, Alexander is performing works by black American women composers – all but completely unknown in the United States, not to mention in

None of these composers get an easy pass just because of their gender or cultural background

Europe – including songs by Undine Smith Moore, Julia Perry, Florence Price and selections from a cycle by Margaret Bonds based on the poetry of Langston Hughes, entitled 'Three



Feminine classique: Irene Maessen, Tania Kross, Roberta Alexander, Reinild Mees, Karin Strobos

Dream Portraits'.

An early champion of the songs of Samuel Barber, Charles Ives and Leonard Bernstein, Alexander has been introducing audiences to works by American composers since the early 1970s. Her professional debut (after leaving the Netherlands Opera Studio) as Maria in a German-language version of the popular 'West Side Story' was a fitting prequel to a rich jambalaya of a career that has struck a careful balance between standard repertoire and lesser-known works, selected to showcase a unique temperament and talent.

Settling on a programme for a concert devoted to female composers is no small feat, much less one focusing on African-American women. Yet, Alexander is unabashedly critical of the uneven quality of the representative compositions and still surprisingly egalitarian in her repertoire selection process. None of these composers get an easy pass just because of their

gender or cultural background.

'Music is either good or it's not,' she says. 'It doesn't matter who wrote it. I suppose that either makes me a bad feminist or a radical one.'

Introducing Dutch audiences to the works of black American composers is a logical extension to Alexander's boundary-shattering career. Inspired by a fearless commitment to upholding the highest musical and dramatic standards, Alexander has never let the colour of her skin determine the course of her impressive career, having delivered iconic and definitive performances of some of the repertoire's most challenging roles, including the fiendishly demanding title role of Janáček's 'Jenůfa' at both Glyndebourne and New York's Metropolitan Opera. This concert is, in many ways, a tribute to some of the influential individuals who contributed to her education and upbringing.

Though Alexander knew her

simply as Aunt Undine, the woman who loaned her parents the money to buy their first car (a Studebaker) and forbade her to touch any of the precious knickknacks in her living room, Undine Smith Moore was a prolific composer and one of the early champions of black American art music in the United States.

Alexander has programmed a small set of songs around Moore's arrangement of the classic spiritual 'Is There Anybody Here That Loves My Jesus' for this month's concert and remembers her fondly, yet with a tinge of regret.

'This is a woman who used to make me sandwiches when I was a small girl,' recalls Alexander. 'I knew her as this ordinary, normal person. And now... if only I'd been up to speed back then. The questions I would have asked her...'

Vrouwenmuziekmarathon takes place in the Concertgebouw's Kleine Zaal, Thur 8. See listings for details.