

# Sardinian-born singer moves to isles as her *Journey* is released

Award winning folk, opera and jazz singer Elena Piras's new CD, *Journey*, is an eclectic collection of folk songs from different countries including Scotland, Sardinia, Bulgaria and Ireland.

Sardinian born, Elena recently moved to Lerwick, drawn here by the lively folk music scene and has already performed at a few venues including the Shetland Spring Concert at The Reel in Orkney a few weeks ago.

The first thing that struck me about the pretty and very vivacious young woman was how fluent and articulate her English is. Furthermore, intriguingly, she has a Scottish accent.

Elena explained, as if it was of little significance, that she moved to the UK as a teenager to study music with virtually no English and she now speaks six different languages including Gaelic. Her accomplishments since leaving Italy are all the more startling as not only is Elena visually impaired but she's also lost some of her hearing. One of the other reasons given for her moving to Shetland is to enjoy a quieter atmosphere for the sake of her ears.

We sat in the half-empty, sunlit bar, chatting about her history and the songs on her CD, as she enjoyed her lunch of toasted goats cheese and green tea.

There are twelve tracks on *Journey*, some with very little in the way of background accompaniment, three of them, i.e. the Gaelic songs, have no backing at all. This kind

of Spartan simplicity may be a challenge for those used to high production values; however, Ms Piras's voice has honesty and skill. It soon becomes obvious why this particular Sardinian was able to win third place in the Ladies Silver Pendant Competition at the Royal National Mod last year. Her

Gaelic is very convincing, moreover, it's pitch perfect, rhythmic and emotive. It sounds like a blue print for how Gaelic should always be sung.

Elena co-founded and toured with the London Bulgarian Choir and there are two Bulgarian choir pieces on the CD. If you've never

heard Bulgarian choral music then you're in for a treat. It's an oratory collision of east and west.

Each part in the all-female choir is in fact, sung by Elena. It's very much a feminine sound with overtones of Gregorian monastery music in as much as the effect seems spiritual and mathematically

controlled; however, it's also fused with an Arabian-style open-throated, across-note-harmony, asymmetrical rhythm and the occasional surprising note. If you enjoy the sound of Elena's Bulgarian folk songs and perhaps are interested in trying something similar but a bit more contemporary and alternative, you might like also to try out Lisa Gerrard and Dead Can Dance.

My personal favourite from *Journey* is the twelfth track *Jock of Hazeldean*. It's a slow romantic Scottish ballad, sweet and deceptively simple but hauntingly beautiful. Elena's voice hovers like a hawk over violin and flute, occasionally climbing high and dropping suddenly. Her precision is a delight.

The late singer songwriter Alistair Hulett taught Elena guitar and seems to have filled the role as mentor to her, particularly regarding interpreting Scottish folk music.

Elena lists her other inspirational artists or groups as Karine Polwart, Julie Fowlis, Dougie Maclean and Capercaillie and Karen Mathieson as the singer who most sounds like her own voice. To me her voice has similar qualities to Dido.

During our interview, each song we covered, Elena related them to times, places and people she'd met.

I couldn't help thinking that *Journey* the CD is named after Elena's own expedition through life; each song a memory she's collected on the way.



Elena Piras who was drawn to Shetland by the lively folk scene.

Photo: Dave Donaldson

Angela Sutherland