

'Music is one of the main things that has kept me going – my lifesaver and inspiration'



THIS LIFE BLIND SINCE BIRTH, ELENA PIRAS IS A 29-YEAR-OLD OPERA, JAZZ AND FOLK SINGER FROM SASSERI IN SARDINIA WHO MOVED TO ENGLAND AGED 18. SHE WENT ON TO WORK AT THE ROYAL SCOTTISH ACADEMY OF ART IN EDINBURGH, WHERE SHE NOW LIVES

"WHEN I get up in the morning, I don't really know what I look like – scruffy, messy, hair all over the place – not a clue. I've been blind since birth and had a hard time in childhood in my hometown of Sassari, Sardinia, especially at the non-specialist secondary school I attended, where I was often bullied. Lack of tolerance is a problem in Italy, where the general attitude is that the shortcut to anywhere is the best approach.

Yet being blind hasn't stopped me from spotting many things around me, things that surprise other people as they don't expect it. I had to grow up quite quickly, because I needed to learn some things before anyone else. I had to choose the subjects I wanted to do at school very much in advance of the other pupils. For example, and there was no room for changing my mind as the books had to be prepared for me in Braille from an early stage.

I have now been living in Edinburgh for a year, since moving from London, and I am looking forward to getting into a steady routine here. These days, after getting up, I listen to Radio 4 to find out what's going on in the world, while I eat breakfast, which is usually a bowl of porridge. I don't know what I'd do without my digital radio – it is my one contact

with the outside world. I don't watch television, as there's no place in my new Edinburgh flat that I can get a good signal without standing in some uncomfortable position with my hands in the air!

At the moment, I devote some of the day to searching the career sections in the newspapers. Between January and March, I was working as a research assistant at the Royal Scottish Academy of Art and through this I began to network with people and get to know a lot about the musical events happening in Scotland.

Television only gives you one point of view, and isolates you to an extent – and lots of information is on websites, which is difficult for me to access. It was at events such as the opening of the annual exhibition in Edinburgh that I met people, including art gallery owners and people in the music business. All I had to do was stand there, and people would come up and speak to me, and one conversation led to another.

Although I have been doing temporary jobs such as voluntary work for the RNIB and even waitressing at Dans le Noir – the new London restaurant where people eat in the dark – my real goal is to sing professionally. I love music. It is one of the main things that has kept me going – my

lifesaver and my inspiration. My father used to sing in the village choir in Sardinia and was passionate about folk music, which I was introduced to from an early age. People say folk music is easy, but it is actually one of the hardest types of music as it evokes the culture and enthusiasm of a whole country, embodied within a song. But I also have classical music ingrained in me and I love to sing opera – no doubt influenced partly by my Italian roots. It is a field that truly doesn't make any distinctions between people. Puccini, for me, is the most inspiring, and the most challenging to sing.

I joined the church choir at the age of seven and by the time I was 10, I was appearing on a local Italian TV station every Saturday afternoon. At 14, I joined a professional choir. I decided to come to Hereford to attend the Royal National College for the Blind, because I wanted to learn how to use a white cane, and there was only one school in Italy which taught this. A lady who volunteered there got in touch with me in London a few years later to ask if I was interested in forming a Bulgarian choir with her. We set up the only London Bulgarian Choir and I went on tour with them in Bulgaria. I still sing with them, and it is actually doing very well –

making it to the final of the Choir of the Year competition in Cardiff last November.

Despite such public performances, my visual impairment still prevents me from doing a lot of things. My boyfriend, a dentist from Gourock, finds it amusing I have no problems getting on a train from London all the way to Edinburgh, yet I still have to muster the courage to walk into a bar alone to sing. I have performed various gigs, including at Tom Fidelo's No 80 jazz club.

I would love to show that people are people and they don't need to be treated a different way because of how they appear. I couldn't count how many times people talk to me as though I were an idiot, and yet, when people ask if I need help, I always say yes, because to be honest, I do.

Before I go to bed at night, I try to read. Which takes me months. I have contact lenses, which allow me to see to an extent, as long as I have the page stuck to my nose! Or I listen to *Book of the Week* on the radio. In these respects, I am just like any ordinary person."

Elena Piras will be singing at the Opal Lounge, 51 George Street, Edinburgh, 8pm, August 28, 29, 30. Call 0131 226 2275 for details

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