

# Meow Meow brings cabaret intensity to songs by Schubert and Schumann



David Kettle

I must warn you that I've only partially finished a biscuit." Melissa Madden Gray, better known as Meow Meow, is taking a nightcap when we speak over the phone – it's morning in Scotland, but late evening Down Under. "Don't worry – I'm used to working with time differences," she explains. "I'm usually awake and over-excited at any time of the day or night."

What the Australian singer, actor, cabaret chanteuse and all-round diva has stayed up to enthuse about on this occasion is her new collaboration with the Hebrides Ensemble, which she brings to Glasgow and Edinburgh later this week. She's been roundly adored at two Edinburgh International Festivals in recent years – first for provocative Berlin cabaret with Barry Humphries and the Australian Chamber Orchestra, then for her own postmodern take on *The Little Mermaid*. But this show is – well, very different.

"It's not funny," she explains. "It's none of the comedy that Edinburgh audiences might be used to seeing me in. But it's deeply passionate – the agony and ecstasy of love and loss, and a sense of existential crisis."

*Restless Love* is the more user-friendly title that the Hebrides Ensemble has bestowed on *Im wunderschönen Monat Mai*, a wholesale recomposition of Schubert and Schumann songs by Dutch composer, pianist and conductor Reinbert de Leeuw. He recasts the songs' original piano accompaniments across the broad canvas of a mini-orchestra, and merges them together in a show that's closer to theatre or cabaret than it is to a traditional song recital.

And these are songs – including such treasured creations as Schubert's *Ständchen* and *Gretchen am Spinnrade*, or Schumann's *Ich grolle nicht* and the song that gives the work its title – that, in their original versions, are close to Gray's heart. "One of my favourite ever pieces is Schubert's *Nacht und Träume* sung by Kiri Te Kanawa. I'd bash away at that as a little girl – can you imagine, little Meow howling away at that at the piano?"

Does she feel a sense of



Photographs: Karl Giant

Melissa Madden Gray, aka Meow Meow, returns to Scotland this week

responsibility to the originals? "Because I'm such a fan, I think I can only be loving in my research and performance. This certainly doesn't feel like a trashing. For a classical audience, everything is recognisable, but it's genius how Reinbert has pulled the entrails out of these songs and created such an intense journey."

Out of *Gretchen am Spinnrade*, for example, de Leeuw has created something far more raw and uncompromising than the original.

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"It's really wild, the way he's written it," Gray explains. "I'm almost vomiting with the obsession of it all." And Schubert's famous shocker *Erkönig* gets even scarier in de Leeuw's ensemble rethink, she says. "It's kind of like a jump-cut version, skipping beats and bars all over the place, where you get an even more frenetic ride to save the child."

The conception, she explains, requires a singing actor rather than simply a singer. "Sometimes I play it as though I've just murdered by lover – that's how I walk on stage, consumed by horror and remorse and at the same time such passion

that I'm overwhelmed by it. Your voice is at its most extreme – it growls and rages and roars, and then there are these moments of intense beauty. I have a ridiculous voice, but it goes to lots of places."

Indeed, Gray points to connections with repertoire that we're perhaps more familiar hearing her sing. "Obviously I've performed lots of Brecht and Weill, and I do feel these songs mark the origins of all those 20th-century songs. There are stories within each of these songs, and you can feel the lineage right through cabaret and even into contemporary pop songs."

She's becoming a frequent visitor to Scotland, both to Edinburgh at festival time and now outside the August mayhem period. How does she feel about returning? "Tell Mr Bonnar at the antique shop that I'm on my way!" she says. "I think I'll really enjoy coming outside the festival, to be honest – you're so bonkers when you're performing in August. It'll be nice to walk calmly to the venue – although I'm expecting that I'll be collected and carried there, won't I?" ■

**Meow Meow performs *Restless Love* with the Hebrides Ensemble at Glasgow's Old Fruitmarket, 20 November, and Edinburgh's Queen's Hall, 22 November, [www.meowmeowrevolution.com](http://www.meowmeowrevolution.com); [www.hebridesensemble.com](http://www.hebridesensemble.com)**