

Ute Lemper sings in Santa Rosa

Santa Rosa Symphony ends season on high note with German singer-actress Ute Lemper



German singer and actress Ute Lemper performs at the Wells Fargo Center this weekend.

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German chanteuse and actress Ute Lemper inhabits that gray area at the edges, where the borders of jazz and classical, music and theater, the past and the present tend to blur.

As a vocalist, she has taken on repertoire as wide-ranging as the cabaret songs of Kurt Weill and Jacques Brel, the alternative rock tunes of Tom Waits and Elvis Costello, and the passionate tangos of Astor Piazzolla.

“I’m so in love with the tango Argentinian,” she said in a phone interview from her home in New York. “I love that Spanish soul. There is such gusto to it ... and passion and drama.”

But the sultry singer is best known as an interpreter of the political, post-World War I music of dramatist Bertolt Brecht and composer Kurt Weill. As a young artist, she discovered “The Threepenny Opera,” and that theatrical gem led her on a lifelong exploration of her native country's dark, complex and powerful past.

“I really enjoyed interpreting these songs and characters, and finding out who they were and the background of what the Nazis had done,” Lemper said. “It was a dialogue with the past, for me as a young German.”

For the final concerts of the Santa Rosa Symphony season this weekend, the international diva will wrap her versatile voice around Weill's “The Seven Deadly Sins,” a hybrid work that is not quite an opera, not quite a ballet, but imbued with Brecht and Weill. The combative collaborators wrote it in Paris in 1933, then went their separate ways.

“It's one of my favorite pieces,” Lemper said. “This arrangement is for large orchestra and has beautiful, expressionist movement in the strings.”

The symphony will be led by Music Director Bruno Ferrandis, who first conducted “The Seven Deadly Sins” in 1990 as a resident conductor with the Juilliard Opera Center in New York.

Ferrandis said the work represents a challenge to himself and the orchestra because the parts are demanding and they need to be played crisply, in the right style.

“There's a lot of jazz, but it's very classical,” he said. “There's a swing and an easiness to it, and it has a lot of rhythm.”

During the first half of the program, the orchestra will give a nod to the worlds of opera and dance with Mozart's Overture to “Don Giovanni” and Tchaikovsky's “Swan Lake: Ballet Suite.”

Dance, music and theater have always been a big part of Lemper's life. She was born into a musical family in Munster, Germany, on July 4, 1963.

“My mom was a singer for a while. ... My father played violin, flute and guitar,” she said. “But he was a banker. During the times that he grew up in post-war Germany, there was no way to become an artist.”

Lemper started to play piano and dance at age 9. After high school, she studied theater in Vienna and finished her musical studies in Salzburg, Cologne and Berlin.

“I was very passionate about music,” she said. “I went to Salzburg for summer music programs, and I studied Weill and Brecht pretty early on.”

To launch her career, Lemper stepped onto the musical theater stage, snagging roles as Velma Kelly in “Chicago” in London and New York; Lola in “The Blue Angel” in Berlin; and the Viennese production of “Cats.”

She won a Moliere award for her portrayal of Sally Bowles in a European revival of “Cabaret,” then turned to film, appearing in Robert Altman's “Ready to Wear.”

Meanwhile, the tall, Teutonic blond continued to record and sing all over the world, picking up several languages along the way.

“I'm very fluent in French, German, English, Italian, Spanish and Yiddish,” she said. “It comes rather naturally to me, because I lived in Paris, toured in Italy and Spain and South America.”

Over the years, the vampish singer has earned a reputation for edginess, which has been honed by her continued passion for politics and history.

“I am a very diplomatic person,” she said. “But I do like to be a little edgy, which means you're not mainstream and you can just be yourself.”

While broadening her repertoire, Lemper has aligned herself stylistically with the French tradition of “chanson realiste,” a la Edith Piaf.

“It's all repertoire from a very dark area, the big cities, and the loneliness and the loss,” she said. “It's very philosophical and existentialistic, like the French love it.”

The fearless singer, who has started to write and record her own songs, constantly provokes her audience, both with her repertoire and her commentary.

“The concert always has to be a journey through different stages of life ... and political awareness, to tell the true stories of people through tears,” she said. “It's not all about love.”

Even the timbre of her voice -- the plaintive beauty of its earthy chest tones and raspy top notes — conjures up pain and sorrow.

“Her voice has the sharp sourness of cigarette smoke, and like smoke she sometimes rolls it around in her mouth, savoring it, sometimes exhales it fiercely,” New York Times reviewer Anne Midgette wrote in 2007. “At the bottom, it opens up like a vast dark chasm, glinting with barely seen crystals. At the top there is a wistful sweetness, as if an ingenue were, after all, trapped inside her fierce body, trying to get out.”

In “The Seven Deadly Sins,” Lemper will sing the part of two women named Anna, representing two sides of one person.

“Anna 1 is the strong authoritarian and the capitalist, who wants to go out in the world to make money,” Lemper said. “Anna 2 is full of doubts, and following her emotions. Psychologically, you have to play the broken one and the strong one at the same time.”

The sisters are sent by their Louisiana family on a journey to several cities across the U.S., each one representing one of the seven sins (Sloth, Pride, Anger, Gluttony, Lust, Avarice, and Envy). Their goal is to earn enough money to buy a home for the family.

The male vocal quartet, Hudson Shad, will sing the role of the sisters' family, adding commentary as the sisters lie, scam and sleep their way across the country.

When it was written, "The Seven Deadly Sins" served as a scathing critique of capitalism. Although the lyrics are a little dated, the message still hits home for Lemper, who has lived in New York for the past 10 years with her three children.

"I just saw Michael Moore's movie, 'Capitalism: A Love Story,'" Lemper said. "And it reminds me of the Weill work, with its satirical lyrics."

Although she doesn't like to speak German, Lemper said she enjoys singing in her native tongue.

"German can be very hard and scary, but it can be very sensual and poetic at the same time," she said. "Singing in German is a whole different thing."

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IN CONCERT

What: The Santa Rosa Symphony under Bruno Ferrandis performs with vocalist Ute Lemper in season finale.

When: 8 p.m. Saturday, May 8, 3 p.m. Sunday, May 9 and 8 p.m. Monday, May 10

Where: Wells Fargo Center for the Arts, 50 Mark West Springs Road, Santa Rosa

Tickets: \$28-\$55, with seniors and student discounts available

To reserve: 546-8742 or santarosasympphony.com