

Weekender

Songs of love and exile

By MAXIM REIDER

In 1870, during the war between France and Prussia, French composer Charles Gounod, escaping the advancing enemy armies, fled to England. He did not know then that a war of another kind, not bloody but personally no less devastating, lay before him.

In London he met a young, charming, yet eccentric and dominant, mezzo-soprano named Georgina Weldon. Weldon not only provided the Frenchmen with first rate English poetry for his songs – Byron and Longfellow to name but a few – she was also his business manager. However, she ran his finances in such an illogical manner, that four years later the almost ruined Gounod was forced to escape to France.

All that was left of Gounod's tumultuous and mysterious London period are a few beautiful melodies entitled "London Melodies: Love and Exile Songs." It is these, mostly unreleased, works that Israeli soprano Varda Kotler has used as the focus for her recently released second album, produced on the French REM label.

For Kotler, the melodies have brought her a lot more success than Gounod. The disc, Kotler's second to date, has already won critical acclaim in France, being entered into the prestigious *Victoire de la musique* professional year book, together with other successful French and international recordings. Quite an accomplishment for such a young performer especially one who grew up in Israel.

"I am very lucky that in France they like my voice," states the Tel Aviv-born Kotler. "Many artists dream of recording, but not everybody manages to make it."

Talking about Gounod as if he was her personal friend, Kotler, who shares her time between Europe, where most of her artistic life transpires, and Tel Aviv, where her loving family lives, says: "At first, Gounod was accepted with open arms in England, but later there were intrigues. He felt rather isolated and was not really happy there."

Although born in a city, Kotler spent her childhood on a kibbutz. And even now one can feel that this refined lady, with an almost



Israeli soprano Varda Kotler, whose career has really taken off in France, recently released an album featuring previously unheard material by French composer Charles Gounod.

audible French accent in her native Hebrew, had a very healthy kibbutz upbringing.

However, curiously it was not agriculture, but piano that she studied as a child. "This was my

first acquaintance with classical music," recalls the singer, who later entered the Tel Aviv

Academy of Music where she studied voice with Netania Dovrat, and continued her education abroad with Rita Patane in Italy and New York and then with Vera Roza in London.

"My initial piano training was of great importance for me," she says. "I owe instrumentalists a lot. If I want to learn how to make pure music, without any gimmicks, I listen to Glenn Gould who is regarded as one of the best Bach interpreters. And from violinists, especially from Perlman, I learn how to sing and to produce a beautiful balanced sound."

AFTER debuting at home, both in the New Israeli Opera and on the concert stage, Kotler traveled abroad, performing in France, Switzerland and Austria. "My light soprano suits liturgical music, and also so-called 'trousers' operatic roles, such as Cherubino from *Le Nozze di Figaro*, and others," explains Kotler.

She adds with a smile. "Siebel, a youth in love with Marguerita from Gounod's *Faust*, is among my favourite roles. He brings her flowers every day and never gives up."

Kotler says that she easily identifies with the French music featured on her new disc, especially lieder: "First of all, my light soprano voice suits it. And second, I like the French music because it is full of grace, its melodic line is so elegant."

The singer believes that the genre demands a certain amount of maturity from a performer, both a professionally and emotionally. It attracts her far more than that opera. "This finesse, this attention to small details, these amazing touching texts, which are full of meaning, as opposed to most opera libretti. I am not sure that I was able to reach this understanding in the beginning of my career."

"Of course, the human message is just as important as the vocal qualities," finishes the singer. "To be precise, when music making it is important to do exactly what the composer demanded but you must also try and give your own personal interpretation. I think that if I would not have been able to succeed in that then I would have chosen another profession."