

The Arts

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The Voice Of an Angel Takes Flight

A Teenager's Album Tops Britain's Classical Charts

By ALAN RIDING

DERBY, England — Hayley Westenra is the stuff of dreams for record companies gloomy over falling sales of classical music. A bright-eyed 16-year-old with an angelic voice, she is close enough to womanhood to secure ample coverage in the girl-obsessed British press. Add to that, her warm soprano voice has just turned her new CD, "Pure," into one of the fastest-selling classical debut albums ever.

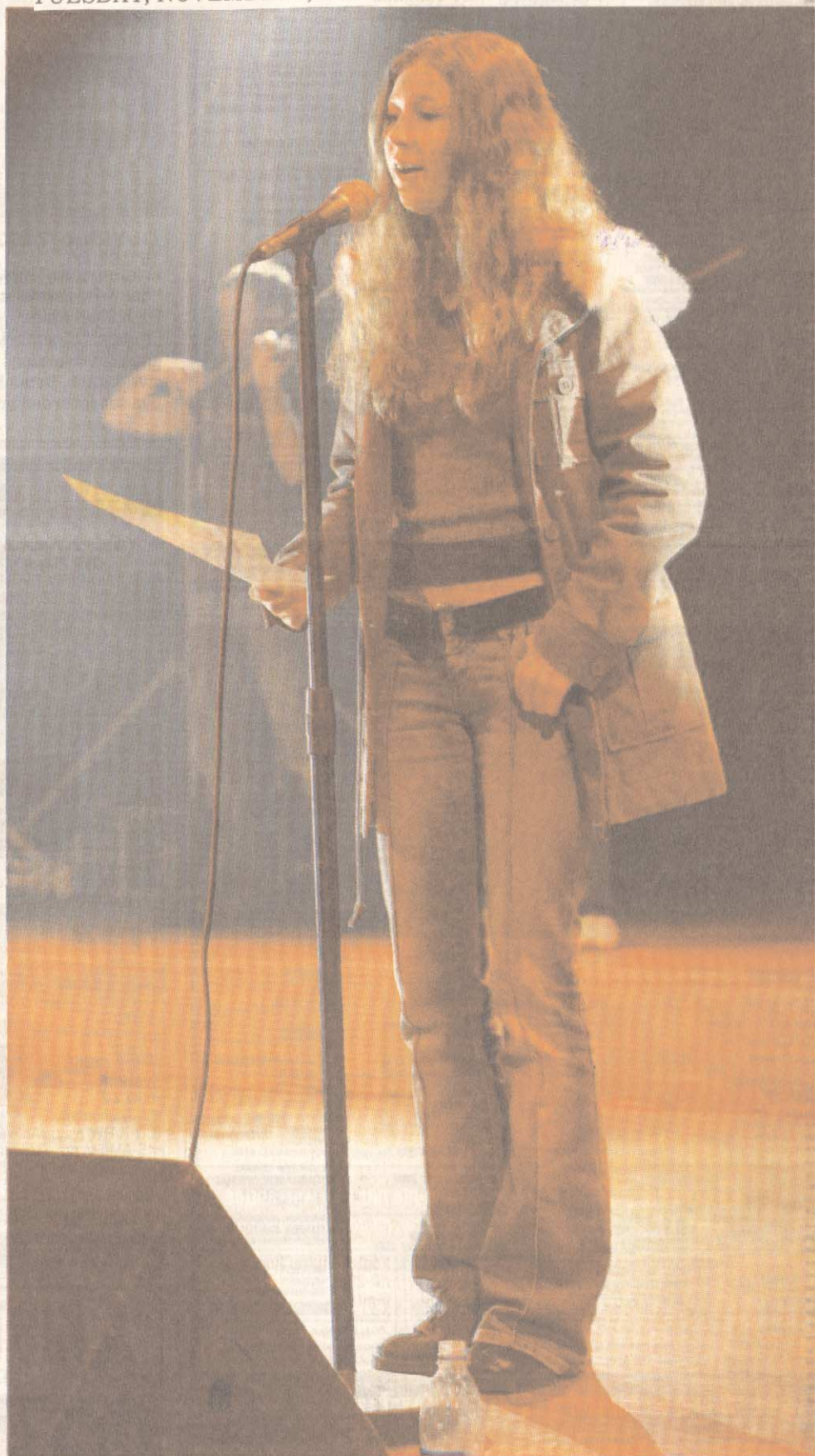
Decca Music Group, a British label owned by the Universal Music Group, is almost breathless with excitement. "When you're in the presence of beauty, it's not something you have to think about," its publicity pamphlet proclaims. "Whether it's aural or visual, or in Hayley Westenra's case both, you tingle with the feeling that your soul has been touched."

Those words were written *before* her 13-song medley of ballads sold more than 290,000 copies here in seven weeks, installing "Pure" at the top of Britain's classical music charts. (The album will be released in the United States on April 9.) Now, with Ms. Westenra signed up for a \$4.5 million five-album contract, Decca may well be tingling with the feeling that salvation is nigh.

In contrast, Ms. Westenra herself has her feet planted solidly on planet earth. This may be the high point of her career, but she has been singing in public — on the street, in musicals, in concerts, in talent contests — for about as long as she can remember. Indeed, while she is new to Britain, in her native New Zealand her first two CD's sold 90,000 copies between them, with "Pure" selling another 50,000 before its release here.

So even the limelight is a little old hat for this high-spirited teenager. "I guess in some ways I'm used to it, and I don't think about it too much," she said in a twangy Down Under accent. "I just deal with each thing as it comes. I've been invited to do the Royal Variety Show. I don't go, 'Gosh, what am I going to wear?' I just think, 'Right, I'll do it.'"

Her youth forms part of her appeal, but her sweet-sounding soprano voice is her real asset. Although it lacks the color of a mature voice, it is bolstered by good pitch, broad range and considerable strength. It is also a voice in transition, one that she is learning to care for. "I know it can be



Jonathan Player for The New York Times

The singer Hayley Westenra, a 16-year-old New Zealander, at a rehearsal in England.

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Jonathan Player for The New York Times

Hayley Westenra

damaging to push it too much," she said during the intermission of a concert appearance in this industrial city of the English Midlands. "I want to be sure I can project it without damaging it. Perhaps I'll wait a couple of more years before I start belting out arias."

For "Pure," in which she is backed by the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra, she said she had picked songs that suited her voice. These include two traditional Maori songs, an excerpt from Carl Orff's "Carmina Burana," "Amazing Grace" and several sentimental ballads. "I'd say it's more of a crossover between classical and pop," she said. "I have a bit of light classical music on it and a bit of easy listening," she said. "It's funny when people say, 'opera singer.' I'm not an opera singer."

Ms. Westenra is appearing as a special guest on a concert tour organized for Aled Jones, a former boy soprano sensation who, now 32 and a light baritone, is still immensely popular with older audiences. And it was Mr. Jones who drew crowds of senior citizens to the Assembly Rooms in Derby one recent evening.

But Ms. Westenra's four songs and two duets with Mr. Jones were warmly received, a reminder that the over 50's are for the moment her natural public. After the concert, she signed copies of "Pure" in the lobby. Then she, her father, Gerald, and her new manager, Steve Abbott, readied themselves for traveling to Wales for the next day's concert.

"We're not being paid for this," Mr. Westenra said. "It's entirely promotional. But it's also a 'learn your craft' tour. After four months of recording, it's good experience for Hayley to do concerts, to get practice onstage."

Mr. Westenra, 43, a gemologist by profession, is accompanying his daughter during the second half of 2003. Earlier in the year, it was the turn of his wife, Jill, who is now at home in Christchurch with their oth-

er two children, Sophie, 13, and Isaac, 19, both also musicians.

Music runs in the family, but it was always Hayley who led the way. When she sang at age 6 in a Christmas show at her school, her teacher announced to her parents that she had perfect pitch and should have music lessons. She chose piano, violin and recorder, but it was soon apparent that her voice was her best instrument. A first place in a talent contest won her free lessons in voice, dance and drama. She and her siblings then took to performing on the street. At 12, with the money she earned, she rented a studio to record some songs for friends. She sent copies of the CD to record companies to see what might happen. In 2000 Universal New Zealand signed her on and two hit albums followed.

Then, as now, though, she seemed to take it all in her stride.

Her success led her to take singing lessons with New Zealand's former opera star Malvina Major, a crucial step since she learned, as she put it, "to keep my voice in the right place." Since then, she has toured with the popular English tenor Russell Watson and performed at a festival in Wales this summer alongside the tenor José Carreras and the bass-baritone Bryn Terfel.

Her schedule before Christmas is still busier, with a spot on the Royal Variety show in Edinburgh, an Amnesty International concert in Trafalgar Square and no fewer than four appearances in the Royal Albert Hall, two with Mr. Carreras and Mr. Terfel. Then in April, the Westenra family is planning to move to New York for six months to coincide with the American release of "Pure."

Inevitably, at least in Britain, she has been compared to Charlotte Church, another young soprano, now 17, who made her name here four years ago with a similar repertory. So far at least, there is a difference. Ms. Church's aura of innocence was duly shattered earlier this year when London tabloids concluded she had an unsuitable boyfriend. Further, her publicity shots now show her as a grown woman with a seductive flash in her eyes. In contrast, Ms. Westenra, exhibiting none of the street savvy of many British girls of 16, seems happy enough to embrace the double meaning implicit in "Pure."

"I guess the word seemed to fit the album," she said cheerfully. "I see myself as pretty pure. I know that's a lot to live up to. They thought my voice was quite pure, and it is. It's natural. It's not like I'm trying to force it to sound like anything different. Yeah, I do see myself as pure."