



Princess Constance Magogo kaDinuzulu left behind a legacy not only as a leader of her people but also as one of Africa's foremost composers and musicians

After touring the world to great success, Opera Africa's *Princess Magogo* is coming home. CLASSICFEEL applauds the opera's inspired blend of African and European traditions and the foundations it has created for a new, uniquely South African genre.

Opera Africa's ROYAL SUCCESS

Images Opera Africa



| Sibongile Khumalo as Princess Magogo and Ntsikelelo Mali as Ndwandwe at Het Muziektheater, Amsterdam, in 2006

Princess Constance Magogo kaDinuzulu was born in 1900, the daughter of the Zulu King, Dinuzulu kaCetshwayo, and Queen Silomo. The princess would become one of Africa's foremost composers, in addition to being a profound presence among her people as a leader, teacher and political activist. Today, her spirit lives on as a royal legend. Although the princess did not live to see a free South Africa, her legacy is immortalised in a historic opera titled *Princess Magogo* and commissioned and produced by Opera Africa.

Princess Magogo, the opera, was the brainchild of Sandra de Villiers, founder and chief executive of Opera Africa. De Villiers wanted to add an African opera to the European repertoire, extending the notion of a representative South Africa to the arts. Professor Mzilikazi Khumalo, who has researched Zulu music for more than 50 years, was commissioned to compose the music, the historian Professor Themba Msimang wrote the libretto and the opera was orchestrated by the well-known musician Michael Hankinson.

The opera about the Zulu nation's first female composer, fittingly, became the first opera written in an African language.

'Princess Constance Magogo was one of the greatest women in South African history,' says Msimang. 'She was a devoted

Zulu patriot and an indefatigable ambassador of peace and reconciliation in Zulu national affairs. In her phenomenal life, she became an exceptional composer and exponent of Zulu folksongs. She was a living storehouse of Zulu history and culture, most of which is epitomised in her music, which is a worthy contribution to the Zulu heritage.'

The opera tells the princess's story using flashbacks, both historical and personal. Through this plot device we learn of the hardships of the Zulu nation during the 20th century, the return of King Dinuzulu from exile on St Helena and the Bambatha rebellion; as well as the extent of the princess's religious faith and her great love affair, which she sacrificed for the good of the Zulu nation. And, most convincingly, Princess Magogo conveys the beauty of the princess's musical work, for which she was posthumously recognised with the National Order of Ikhamanga in Gold in 2003.

The importance of the opera is therefore not confined to history, but allows the princess to exert her influence on the present and future. By marrying European operatic conventions with the Zulu traditional music composed by Princess Magogo herself – or, in more poetic terms, by allowing the traditions of Europe and Africa to take hands and step into the new South Africa – *Princess Magogo*



| *Princess Magogo* tells the story of the Zulu princess from both a historical and personal perspective by combining the musical traditions of Europe and Africa

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has paved the way for an opera tradition unique to South Africa and Africa.. The result is a truly grand opera. As Prof. Khumalo asserts, ‘When you listen to the *Princess Magogo* music, you know that it can compare to the best music in the world – full stop.’

With a narrative, solos, ensembles, choruses, dancers and an orchestra, *Princess Magogo* conforms convincingly to the operatic conventions that have governed the genre since its first manifestations 400 years ago. Integrating an African flair, the music erupts frequently into the rhythmic chanting so characteristic of Zulu songs. As noted, the songs have been taken from the repertoire of *Princess Magogo* herself. ‘Many of the songs I used in the opera I learned at my mother’s knee,’ explains Prof. Khumalo.

Opera Africa’s *Princess Magogo* premiered on 4 May 2002 in Durban. In an extraordinary feat of global cooperation, Chicago-based classical music station WFMT Radio joined forces with Opera Africa to broadcast the premiere to the US, Europe, New Zealand and Australia. After its first run before appreciative South African audiences, *Princess Magogo* travelled to Den Norske Opera Oslo, Het Muziektheater Amsterdam and the Ravinia Festival

Chicago to great acclaim. Michael Cameron of the *Chicago Tribune* wrote that the blend of African and European tradition creates a ‘genre with limitless potential’, while the Ravinia Festival lauded it as an ‘emotionally powerful, life-affirming story’.

In 2009, *Princess Magogo* returns home with dates at the State Theatre in Pretoria and the Civic Theatre in Johannesburg. Tina Mene and Thembisile Twala alternate in the title role first made famous by South Africa diva, Sibongile Kumalo. Otto Maidi sings the role of King Dinuzulu, Ayanda Hlongwa that of Induna Mankulumana and Kelebogile Boikanyo the role of Queen Silomo, while Khotso Tsekeletsa appears as King Solomon. Behind the scenes, director Themis Venturas teams up with acclaimed artist Andrew Verster as set and costume designer and Declan Randall as lighting designer. The team is joined by Dutch star conductor Vincent de Kort, who conducted Opera Africa’s 2008 season, and the Johannesburg Philharmonic Orchestra (JPO).

South African stages will in 2009 once again play host to a magnificent array of vocal talent, mesmerising costumes, soaring choral performances and pulsating Zulu dances, all harnessed in the telling of a story of glorious Zulu patriotism, love found and lost, undying loyalty and heart-wrenching human pathos.

Opera Africa’s Princess Magogo opens at the SA State Theatre in Pretoria on 28 March 2009 before it moves to the Johannesburg Civic Theatre on 26 April. Bookings at Computicket. For more information, please visit www.operaafrica.co.za. CF