

The female Pavarotti who sings Mbaqanga

Sibongile Khumalo would surely have your mind freeze-framing her as one of those opera house divas. But you'd be wrong! And that's not the only misconception about this great singer, whose bewitching voice has seduced discerning musical audiences across the cultural divide.

A closer look at her background suggests high class art. She's the daughter of that renowned musicologist Professor Khabi Mngoma. She's a musical intellectual in her own right as an Honours graduate in music from Wits University. But fancy, elitist tags don't sit well with Sibongile, whose diverse musical interests take in such sneered-at musical styles as "maskandi", "mgqashiyo", "amahubo" and even "bubblegum".

Recently she collaborated with her friends in music such as Hugh Masekela, Sophie Mgcina, Sippo Mabuse, Khaya Mahlangu, Tshepo Tshola, Wendy Mseleku and a host of other bright musical lights to embark on "a journey through song". It was a musical jaunt that harked back to the '20s and embraced such disparate musical styles as African folk, choral, jazz, mbaqanga and pop.

In the show Sibongile was a simple country woman singing such rootsy stuff as amahubo one minute, and the next she was a cultured opera singer. Then she was a zestful mgqashiyo star and then she was a soul-driven Mahalia Jackson, followed by a hip Brenda Fassie. The sellout multi-racial and obviously high-brow audience at the Wits Theatre was enraptured.

"I guess the opera tag has to do with my father who trained choirs to sing oratorios and arias, but I'm definitely not an opera singer. I prefer to call myself a singer or performer — period," smiles Sibongile, whose first love is teaching.

"My father, who was trained in Western classical music, was into such things as concertos and symphonies and listened to German and Italian musical masters. Yet he was certainly not a snob. He encouraged us to listen to all types of

music," says Sibongile who talks as much with her hands as she does with her mouth.

Growing up in Soweto meant the musical influences on her were many and varied. "I grew up during a period when brass bands used to march up and down the streets every Sunday and like other kids I would follow these bands in fascination. At the same time I was charmed by the members of the Shembe Church who worshipped every weekend at the Dube hostel next to Maponya's supermarket.

"I couldn't wait to be sent to Maponya's shop on Saturdays just to have a glimpse of these people as they went through their rituals. And all the while I was imbibing the sounds of Letta Mbulu, Izintombi Zesi Manje

Princess Magogo sitting on the verandah. And I tell you Chief Buthelezi has a vast store of knowledge of that part of the music — amahubo.

"I couldn't ignore all those influences and they kind of come back because a child is like a sponge," Sibongile points out. "But I guess all this has to do with my father's attitude. He wasn't the kind who would say 'Why do you listen to this junk?' He was a cool dude who was more liberal than most fathers of the day. I always regard him as the first pro feminist because he had no hang-ups about this sexist thing that certain jobs had to be performed by men and others by women. My father would insist that I change a flat tyre while he didn't mind ironing his shirt while my mother knitted.

Sensational Sibongile!

Like the Soweto String Quartet, Sibongile Khumalo stands out as a symbol of unity in South African music

BY JOE KHUMALO ● PHOTOGRAPH BY COSTA ECONOMIDES

Manje, Mahlathini and others," reveals Sibongile, who was introduced to the music of Princess Magogo — Chief Buthelezi's mother — at an early age.

"I was exposed to Princess Magogo's music, amahubo, through my father as he worked with David Raycroft who did a lot of research in that genre of music. Raycroft is the composer of Swaziland's national anthem.

"As a child I would visit Chief Buthelezi's home with my father and I have a vague recollection of the late

"My father will definitely be a hard act to follow. When he retired he took all his pension money and built a studio behind his house for the kids he's working with at the Khongisa Youth Centre For The Performing Arts," she says with pride. "But I'm grateful that he taught me something very valuable — that I should make a habit of being a success and I usually make it a point that I succeed in whatever I'm doing."

"The turning point in my career was definitely the 1993 Grahamstown Arts Festival, but there is an amusing spin to



it," says Sibongile striving to suppress a giggle. "According to the media 'I emerged in 1993' — good gracious! By then I had been around for a long time and what's amusing is that each time the white media interviews me

I'm usually asked: 'Where were you trained? Were you in exile?' And I often say, yes, I was in exile in Soweto," she quips.

"It's about time Soweto was brought

into the mainstream. Remember those good old days when venues like Mofolo Hall, Naledi Hall and Uncle Tom's were focal points of entertainment? I mean the days when bands like the Beaters who later became Harari, The Movers, Teenage Lovers and many others were really big as in BIG," she reminisces fondly.

"I know critics will be quick to talk about Soweto being the crime capital of South Africa. But isn't the famous Apollo Theatre situated in crime-infested Harlem? But what makes me angry is to hear people talk about inferior this and inferior that when they refer to South African music. That makes South African artists feel insecure," she says, punching the air with her right fist.

"At the height of the cultural boycott in the '80s were these same critics not the ones who went to the music festivals to lap up the 'inferior' music of Brenda Fassie, Blondie Makhene, Condry Ziqubu and many other artists? Yes I agree that in terms of quality the music of the '60s and '70s was way ahead, but weren't the musos of the '80s serving the interests of the people?" she asks.

"It's about time the SA public was given an opportunity to hear local music and decide on their own what works and what doesn't. If it is local stuff, so what? What's the difference between Shabba Ranks' rap and our maskandi?" asks Sibongile as she strums an invisible guitar and does indlamu like a maskandi artist.

"And what's this I hear about American music being better than ours? Give me a break! Recently I was a judge at the ASAMI Music Awards and the quality of the music was so good that it could be played on any station. The only difference is that the Americans are very clever — they wrap their music in a nice package," Sibongile adds.

She folds her arms and tilts her head as a faint smile creases her face. "Umuntu uyazenzela into yakhe," she counsels. "It's about time we rolled up our sleeves, knuckled down to serious business and took care of our own." 