

CITATION FOR SIBONGILE KHUMALO**Honorary Graduand, Rhodes University, 18 April 2009**

By Professor Paul Maylam

Almost sixteen years ago, here in Grahamstown, the Standard Bank Young Artist of the Year dazzled and enthralled packed audiences in a series of stunning concerts at the 1993 National Arts Festival. The concerts were followed by standing ovations and torrents of applause that went on and on. The performer was Sibongile Khumalo, acclaimed with near unanimity by reviewers as the "volcanic talent" of the Festival. At the end of her concert she had sung "Nkosi Sikelele Africa", prompting one reviewer to write that God had indeed blessed Africa by sending us a talent like Sibongile Khumalo.

This festival marked the take-off of her glittering career – as she herself has said, "Grahamstown provided the turnaround". In the past sixteen years she has performed in numerous concerts across the world: in London at the Royal Albert Hall, the Royal Festival Hall, the Barbican Centre, and Ronnie Scott's; concerts in the Netherlands, France and Norway, and a major European tour in 2007; performing with the Western Australian Symphony Orchestra in Perth; concerts in Chicago and Brooklyn, and a full US tour with Hugh Masekela last year; not to mention the numerous South African performances. There might have been even greater stardom had she based herself in Europe or the US, but Sibongile is wholly committed to living in South Africa.

There have been other highlights in these remarkable past sixteen years: singing at Nelson Mandela's 75th birthday celebration in 1993, and at his inauguration as president the following year; leading the South African and New Zealand national anthems at the 1995 rugby world cup final. In 2000 she was specially flown to Barcelona to welcome in song Archbishop Tutu on the occasion of his being awarded an honorary doctorate.

The 1993 Grahamstown Festival may have been the turning-point in her career, but the foundations of Sibongile's success were laid much earlier. Born in Orlando West she grew up in a family steeped in music. Her father, Khabi Mngoma, was a school teacher, choir master, and later the founding professor of music at the University of Zululand. He too was awarded an honorary doctorate, by Wits University. Sibongile's mother, Grace, had a fine voice and sang in choirs. So before the age of ten Sibongile was singing, playing the piano and violin, attending concerts organised by her father, and listening to pop music on the radio – Jimi Hendrix and Roberta Flack two of her favourites. Later came more formal qualifications: a BA degree in music from the University of Zululand, specialising in West African and classical music; and an honours degree from Wits, involving a research project on South African choral music.

Evident in these formative years was a remarkably diverse range of musical influences. This diversity would characterise her own musical career. Sibongile has this extraordinary ability to straddle many different musical genres. As one observer has noted, "she interprets classical music with integrity and poise" – this has been the case whether it be performing with the London Symphony Orchestra, being the soloist in Verdi's *Requiem*, singing Brahms' *Alto Rhapsody*, or Handel's *Messiah* under Lord Yehudi Menuhin. Then, too, writes another, "her jazz voice performs wondrous, wordless duets with trumpets and saxophones" – whether performing with Hugh Masekela, or touring Europe with the 'Intercontinental' jazz group.

Always present in her work is a commitment to South African music, an openness to indigenous musical influences, and a pride in her Zulu heritage. This has gained expression in two particular performances: first, her lead role in Mzilikazi Khumalo's musical, *Princess Magogo*, which opened in Durban in 2002 and has since been staged in the US, the Netherlands, and other South African centres. And second, as the featured soloist in another Khumalo musical, *Ushaka KaSenzangakhona*, about the life of Shaka – a show that has been staged in Europe and the US.

In the post-apartheid era there has been a quest to build a new national culture that is syncretic, that transcends or bridges cultural divides. Perhaps more than any person Sibongile Khumalo embodies the fulfilment of that quest. Indeed, that quest has been very much a part of her own purpose. She sees herself as a cultural activist – and practised as such long before her rise to fame. Back in the 1980s, at the height of the hostel violence in Johannesburg, she organised a festival to bring together the warring parties. And for a while there was peaceful coexistence as the antagonists together enjoyed the rich traditional music and songs of Venda, Transkei and Zululand – a folk music, she says, that “captures the soul of the nation”.

Honours have been showered upon Sibongile – four South African Music Awards for her popular music and jazz recordings, and three FNB Vita Awards for her opera and concert work. And last year the President bestowed upon her the Order of Ikhamanga Silver for her contribution to South African music.

Nor must one forget her other roles – as actor, musical director, chairperson of the Grahamstown Arts Festival Committee, and not least as a mother and grandmother.

Admirers have heaped accolades upon Sibongile Khumalo: writes one, “it is the warmth, thoughtfulness and spirituality that Sibongile brings to all her projects that have made her one of our most endearing cultural figures”. Another critic views her as “one of the greatest mezzo soprano voices of all time”. She has been called “South Africa's first lady of song”. But the last word goes to Nelson Mandela, who has said this of Sibongile: “You are indeed our national treasure. Your achievement is the achievement of our country as a whole. Let your music be the ambassador that will shape the hearts and minds of people all over the world in a quest for peace, love and harmony”.

Mr Chancellor, I have the honour to request you to confer on Sibongile Khumalo the degree of Doctor of Music, *honoris causa*.