

It's not easy to impress TV judges and be a

Sound of Music singing star

So long, farewell to West End

Pictures: KENNY SMITH

■ JULIA HORTON

FOR a long time now I have secretly fancied that I might have the voice of an angel. Admittedly, it's been a long time since I was picked to sing *Away in a Manger* solo at the school nativity play.

But although I shy away from singing in front of all but my closest friends, over the years I've turned in many a fine performance in the shower and at the wheel of my car.

So when I was asked to go along to an open audition for a TV talent series looking for girls to play Maria in a West End production of *The Sound of Music* I seized the chance to find out once and for all if I really can sing.

Standing under the glare of several spotlights facing a TV camera and three of the country's top casting directors however the answer is painfully clear.

Walking along a line of tape on the floor to a "T" as directed, I tell the camera my name, where I'm from and my "interesting fact". (Which was that I once tried to join

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ELAINE CATRINA GRACIE

the circus. It should have been that I can't actually sing to save myself, but I didn't know that then).

Opening my mouth I start, as directed, with the second of my two chosen songs, *The Beatles'* classic *Yesterday*. I chose that, and *Bridge over Troubled Water* by Simon and Garfunkel.

However, it is not long before my feeble-sounding voice starts to wobble a little. Incredibly they want more, and ask me to sing a few lines from the song I was given to prepare when I arrived.

But as I struggle to remember the start of *Abba's* *Take a Chance*



ORIGINAL: Julie Andrews

on *Me* I quickly see that never in a million years will they gamble on turning me into a West End star.

I spy a mixture of amusement and sympathy, although thankfully no apparent pain, passing across the face of the main judge.

And that's when the realisation finally hits me. Not only have I discovered that I can't really sing, I have done so in the most public fashion possible.

I have just become one of those poor, deluded fools whose diabolical caterwauling is played back time and again on national TV to be laughed at by millions of viewers forever more.

As executive producer Gigi Eligoloff tactfully says to me afterwards: "You were very brave to do that."

She adds that this being a BBC show, they will not be showing the kind of X-Factor out-takes which I fear. But then she spoils it by asking if I mind if they do decide to use footage of me in the series "to show how difficult it is".

The destruction of my dream all began a few hours ago when I arrived at Edinburgh's Radisson Hotel for the auditions expecting a vast queue of Julie Andrews wannabes lining the street.

No-one. Great, maybe I could



HILLS ALIVE WITH THE SOUND OF GROANING: Julia Horton

get the audition by default. But inside I find an army of black-clothed BBC bods co-ordinating proceedings and around 90 girls all waiting to be seen.

Each one is hoping to get through today's audition to make it on to the BBC show, called *How do you solve a problem like . . . Maria?* To be presented by Graham Norton, the TV show will

follow the trials and tribulations of the chosen girls as they bid for the chance to perform the leading role in a production of the famous musical directed by the legendary Andrew Lloyd Webber.

Given the size of the prize, the atmosphere at the Radisson is incredibly relaxed and friendly.

Groups of girls, many just 17 – the minimum age for participants – talk excitedly as they wait to be assigned an audition group.

Without warning and in the manner in which your average person might turn to say "How's it going?", a girl in a red top blasts the first line of "There's no business like show business" to no-one in particular.

I, meanwhile, am noticing how appropriate my choice of song is as I gingerly mumbling "When you're weary, feeling small . . ." under my breath.

A member of staff asks me to fill in an application form, which should have given me a clue about the humiliation to come. All the questions relating to previous singing experience and training get a firm no.

I can't even think of ten words to describe myself, although I do remember to put musical in there somewhere.

Waiting in line in front of me to hand over her form is 22-year-old Elaine Catrina Gracie, who jokingly starts doing mock warm-up

singing exercises: "Me me me me me!"

The bubbly drama student at Queen Margaret University College, on Leith Walk, says: "My teacher said I should have a go so here I am but looking around I'm wondering what I'm doing here."

"I'm an actress and you have to take every opportunity. I'm hoping my acting skills will get me through. I'm not nervous about performing, I'm just nervous of making an idiot of myself on TV."

Fellow Queen Margaret drama student Fiona Mitchell, 21, oozes enthusiasm, saying: "I'd love to get the part. I've done musical theatre since I was seven. I thought the auditions would be much more strict but everyone is having a real laugh."

By now growing numbers of hopefuls are huddled in groups around the room.

They all sound brilliant to me – and to Gigi, who says the panel has been very impressed by the "energy" of the girls in Edinburgh.

After handing over

my form I am given a large white sticker with my name and a long number on it and ushered to one of the numerous rows of seats to sit next to Elaine.

While she powders her nose, I read the first few lines of *Take a Chance on Me*, before mistakenly deciding I know it anyway and turning to see who else is here.

Alison Hamilton, 28, a surveyor from Falkirk, says she was inspired to come along by singing in her local Young Farmers charity concerts.

"I've never been to an audition like this before but I've always fancied it. The atmosphere is really good, the people I've been queuing with have kept me entertained for the past hour and half."

Other girls have come from Glasgow and even Sunderland, all desperate for the chance to make it big in the bright lights of London.

Before I can make a tentative attempt to join the impromptu singing practices I am ushered off to the main event.

Now it seems real and I am nervous. There are ten girls in each group and one by one they go through the

end of the corridor where we are waiting. Their voices sound fantastic through the wall, but most are still turned down.

Classically trained music student Linda Robertson, 20, of West Nicolson Street, is one of the lucky few to make it though the first stage. She says: "I'm really pleased. I have been singing since I was 12 and I played Maria in a school production of *The Sound of Music*, it would be amazing to do it in the West End."

I feel better when I hear how experienced girls like Linda are. Surely that means there's still hope that with training I too could be Julie Andrews one day.

But then another girl comes out with the news that she was not successful and I am reminded again of my future unwanted fame.

Staring in horror she says: "They asked me to sing everything, they even made me do aerobics and I didn't get through. That means I'm bound to be on the TV doesn't it?" "Fraid so, but you won't be alone."

■ *It's not too late to audition. Just turn up at the Radisson Hotel Niddry Street entrance today. The auditions close at 6pm. Alternatively there are also open auditions in Manchester and London. For details visit www.bbc.co.uk/maria.*

jhorton@edinburghnews.com



HOPING TO LAND THE POST: A whole host of hopefuls posed for cameras between auditions