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Dragon is fired up by her fear as she steps out on Strictly

Hidden musical talent may help star who never learnt to dance, writes **Ruth Gledhill**

The multi-millionaire entrepreneur Deborah Meaden, 54, knows how to put the fear of failure into the men and women who quake before her fire-breathing television persona on *BBC2's Dragons' Den*.

Now she's switched over to the other side, in every sense.

As she moves from judging to being judged on BBC1's *Strictly Come Dancing*, she admits: "I don't know whether I can dance or not. I'm scared."

"I have this thing in life. If something scares me I have got to do it, I have to get over it. I realised that if I said no, I would regret it for the rest of my life."

She insists that she is not afraid of criticism. "I am robust. I know I am. Sometimes because I am so robust people do not challenge me. But I like being challenged. I can take constructive criticism." Meaden is one of the

most inexperienced dancers the show has ever had.

Nor has she ever acted. In spite of growing up in an era when many schools were still teaching ballroom dancing, she never learnt because she

was "more interested in boys".

However, where she could surprise the judges and viewers, who have until now seen her steely side, is in her innate musicality, a gift that could prove invaluable on the sprung maple floors of *Strictly*.

As a child she was marked down as a prodigy on the piano, and at the age of 7 she became the youngest person ever to win a Trinity music scholarship.

Her interest in horses took over from the piano and it is now widely assumed that she does not have a musical bone in her body.

Her catchphrase on *Dragons' Den* is: "You're wasting my time." In ballroom dancing, the biggest sin is not so much wasting time as being off time.

On *Strictly*, her natural musicality means she could understand instinctively how to use time to maximum effect, the secret of all the best dancing.

Women must also learn to appear

light, even when they are not. During the first day and a half of training for the show, one of the new professional dancers tried a lift on her. A rib from an old riding accident "popped" and her

partner feared he might have broken it. She and others came out of that first session sporting bruises as trophies.

In the first dress rehearsal, Meaden found herself wearing more make-up in one session than she had in her entire life. And that's not to mention the thousands of shiny crystals, the dresses, the shoes and all the rest.

She is naturally sun-kissed already, from riding in the Somerset countryside, but is looking forward nonetheless to the necessity of her first ever spray-on tan.

Meaden declared herself happy to have moved to the other side of the judges' bench, and to having to play a completely new part: the lady in dance who has to follow, not lead. "I have had one and a half days of practice and for

'If something scares me I have to do it. If I said no I'd regret it forever'

the first time in my life I have been completely led. Oh God, it is lovely."

Although she no longer works day-to-day in a business, she has 19 invest-

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ments of which 12 have come from *Dragons' Den*. "By the time something gets to me it is usually an issue, so I am usually dealing with the tough stuff and they are looking to me for support.

"To be in a room where I am not the expert, completely out of my comfort zone, and just doing what someone is telling me to, is like being on holiday. I have never ever experienced that before."

A *Strictly* insider said that many were hoping that one day an older woman would win the show.

Meaden says: "For viewers who think that all I do is stand there and bark at people, *Strictly* will give me the chance to show the other side.

"The good news is, people are not expecting that much from me."

RAY BURMISTON / BBC / PA



Deborah Meaden was a prodigy on the piano and won a musical scholarship at 7