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## **TOP 10 OF 2006: ADRIANNE PIECZONKA**

*The Ontario-born soprano has earned accolades for her Sieglinde -- a role that added high lustre to the COC's Ring -- and now the world's stages are opening to her*

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It took Adrienne Pieczonka at least 18 years to become an overnight success. That's the span of time the Ontario-born soprano spent honing her craft in European opera houses before becoming the talk of the Wagner Festival at Bayreuth, Germany, last summer.

The Bayreuth theatre, which Wagner built to his own specifications, is the kind of place where reputations are made and unmade. The latest festival featured an all-new production of the four-part cycle *Der Ring des Nibelungen*, and the large international posse of critics sang a chorus of praise for Pieczonka's performances. "The Sieglinde of our time," said a critic for the German paper *Die Zeit*.

Thanks, *mein Herr*, but we already knew that. Pieczonka aced *Die Walkure's* romantic lead, one of the great lyric-dramatic roles of German opera, during performances with the Canadian Opera Company in 2004, and returned in even better form in September, adding her own high lustre to the opening shows at the COC's spanking new opera house. By that time, the international music press had fixed on her to such an extent that even an ankle sprain, suffered after the first round of *Ring* performances, was treated as news by *The New York Times*. Pieczonka had to stand down for one show, but, ever the trouper, she still sang from the side of the stage as another singer mimed the part.

Pieczonka is a fine, intelligent singer in any situation, with a creamy tone and lustrous colour throughout her range. But she's especially potent in an opera setting, with a character and a narrative to dig into. Her Sieglinde this fall was a desperately estranged, violently needy creation that was almost scary to behold. People emerged from the hall after her big first act looking stunned and elated by what they had witnessed.

She's now in her prime, and the world's leading stages are opening to her. She has just starred in a new production of Richard Strauss's *Arabella* at the Vienna State Opera.

In January she'll be at Barcelona's Teatro del Liceu, singing Elisabetta in Verdi's *Don Carlo*, a work she'll also perform next fall with the COC. She has more Strauss in Munich (the Marschallin, in *Der Rosenkavalier*) and then a return to Bayreuth for more of the *Ring*. Her marvellous recent disc of arias and songs by Strauss and Wagner should act both as a calling card and as a sampler of what she can do in the repertoire for which she is best suited.

Pieczonka returned to Canada last summer to set up house in Toronto's Annex district. "I think it was an auspicious time to move back," she said. "I wish I'd done it sooner, to be honest." The city where she did her major vocal training has become her base for the best years of her career, and a haven for her new life as a parent and married person, with partner Laura Tucker.

Canada has a tradition of exporting great voices, that extends back to the time of Emma Albani and Edward Johnson. With Pieczonka, we have a soprano of rare gifts and high dedication who has decided that living in her own country is no impediment to scaling the peaks of the opera world. 2006 was her year, and she deserved all the acclaim she got.