



A voice of great beauty

ASHLEY FRASER, THE OTTAWA CITIZEN

Adrienne Pieczonka, shown at the Opera Lyra Black & White ball in Ottawa in February, has released a powerful CD of Strauss and Wagner.

Adrienne Pieczonka ★★★★★
Adrienne Pieczonka, soprano; Munich Radio Orchestra; Ulf Schirmer, conductor (Orfeo)

BY RICHARD TODD

Adrienne Pieczonka, who impressed Ottawa with her performance at the Opera Lyra Black & White Ball in February, has an extensive repertoire. The Burlington Ontario-born soprano has sung roles as different as the Contessa in Mozart's *Mariage of Figaro*, Tatiana in Tchaikovsky's *Eugene Onegin* and Micaela in Bizet's *Carmen*.

But there's no doubt that she's best known for her Richard Strauss and Richard Wagner, and therein may lie the reason why this very established singer is only now releasing her first recital CD.

Neither composer's operas are made up of tuneful and easily extractable, four-minute arias — you know, the sort that one hears on light classical radio programs. The average music lover will instantly recognize titles like *La donna e mobile* or *Nessun dorma*, but what about the solemnly moving *Der Männer Sippe* from Wagner's *Die Walküre*, or *Es gibt ein Reich, wo alles rein ist*, one of the most beautiful of all operas, Strauss's *Ariadne auf Naxos*.

Those are two of the offerings in this Wagner-and-Strauss collection, and you're unlikely to hear them sung better anywhere. Excerpts from Wagner's *Tannhäuser* and *Lohengrin* and from Strauss's *Arabella* and *Capriccio* are hardly less satisfying.

Pieczonka uses the power and clarity of her voice to render the melodic line keenly affecting and her sense of

the deeper emotions behind the words makes each offering uniquely affecting.

The nicest part of this collection doesn't come from opera at all. It's Wagner's *Wesendonk Lieder*, one of the greatest of all orchestral song cycles, and the one whose genesis is perhaps the most notorious. It consists of settings of five poems by Mathilde Wesendonk, a minor poet of the mid-19th century. So far, so good, and the fact that there was a mutual and intense infatuation between the poet and composer doubtless accounts for the some of the songs' greatness.

Unfortunately, there was a Mr. Wesendonk in the picture, and Wagner was living on the Wesendonk estate enjoying Wesendonk's patronage. History is left to wonder about Mathilde and Richard: Did they or didn't they?

History will be in little doubt as to

the greatness of Pieczonka's interpretation, however. Happily, Ulf Schirmer and the Munich Radio Orchestra hold up their side of things admirably.

Not to be outdone, Orfeo's engineers provide a clear and detailed sound. Pieczonka's voice is a bit forward, but not so much as to seem unnatural.

If there is one complaint with this CD, it's that the program booklet limits itself to a track list and writeups on the performers. There are no explanations of the contexts of individual pieces, let alone texts or translations. Pieczonka's diction is fairly good, and that will be a help for those who understand German. But she has a large potential audience that doesn't speak the language and knows little of German opera. It's too bad the producers at Orfeo didn't extend them a little consideration.