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Adrienne Pieczonka comes full circle in Hamilton Philharmonic Orchestra fundraiser

Leonard Turnevicius

Hard to believe, but it's been almost a quarter of a century since Adrienne Pieczonka last sang with the Hamilton Philharmonic Orchestra.

That would have been back on Feb. 18 and 20, 1988, the dates of Opera Hamilton's gala Popera, Too which had Daniel Lipton leading the HPO on a bill that also included, among others, John Fanning, Lyne Fortin, and Ben Heppner, all of whom would carve out distinguished careers on the operatic stage.

This Saturday, Pieczonka returns to the Hamilton Place stage to sing in a gala fundraiser for the HPO who will be led by music director Jamie Sommerville. And wouldn't you know it, her first aria of the evening will be Ebben? Ne andrò lontana from Catalani's La Wally, the very same aria she sang at Popera, Too all those years ago.

"I do love that aria," said Pieczonka from her home in Toronto's The Annex. "I thought I'll do it, and I didn't actually consciously think about that, but maybe my subconscious was at work."

While she didn't consciously program that aria to bridge the years, Pieczonka certainly remembers her 1988 Popera appearance.

"It was a big thing for me, my parents, in Hamilton on that stage that I had gone to as a kid," recalled Pieczonka who at that time was in her final year in the University of Toronto's Opera Diploma program. "We had a subscription to the (Hamilton) Philharmonic. I went as a youngster and as a teenager."

And who would have thought that years later this Burlington-raised singer would one day bow on opera stages the world over — in London, Paris, Milan, Vienna, Berlin, Munich, Frankfurt, Bayreuth, Salzburg, New York, Los Angeles, Houston, and Toronto, and now, use her celebrity and talent to fundraise for the orchestra whose concerts she attended as a kid?

It was her father, Wally, who got the ball rolling for this fundraiser.



Adrienne Pieczonka will perform with the Hamilton Philharmonic Orchestra for the first time since 1988 this Saturday at Hamilton Place.
Andreas Klingberg photo

"My father is a real supporter of the HPO," said Pieczonka. "He's been telling me for years now about James Sommerville and really singing his praises."

So, Sommerville contacted Pieczonka about doing a benefit, and they initially decided on Richard Strauss's Four Last Songs. However, early this past summer Sommerville put the kibosh on Strauss when he got to thinking that these songs might not be the best thing before Christmastime. So, he floated the idea of a night of favourite opera arias. Pieczonka was game.

So, if you missed Pieczonka in any of the above mentioned cities, you'll now get to hear her in Wagner's *Dich, teure Halle*, Puccini's *Vissi d'arte*, and *Un bel dì*. And she'll also briefly tap into Broadway rep with Lerner & Loewe's *I Could Have Danced All Night*, a number belted out by Emily Rozek at the HPO's recent *Wicked Divas* pops concert. Rest assured Pieczonka will be doing it differently.

"I do it like an opera singer. I do use my technique. I'm not planning on using a mike. I hope my operatic pipes could just get me through," chuckled Pieczonka.

Mezzo Laura Tucker, Pieczonka's wife, will be the special guest. Among Tucker's solo arias will be *Parto, ma tu ben mio* from Mozart's *La Clemenza di Tito* which will feature HPO principal clarinetist Stephen Pierre playing his custom-made basset clarinet, which incidentally was the instrument Mozart specifically had in mind for this aria.

Tucker and Pieczonka will also team on a handful of duets. Two of them will be sung in German and English, the Evening Prayer from Humperdinck's *Hänsel und Gretel*, and Silent Night, one of two nods to the Christmas season.

Pieczonka is all for helping out in these recession-like times.

"If I can do my bit, I am from Burlington, and it's a real pleasure to come out and sing and help out the arts groups," said Pieczonka. "My mother (Mavis) passed a year and a half ago and I know that she would just be pleased as punch and very proud. She lived for Opera Hamilton, and lived for the Hamilton Philharmonic as did her father before that, my grandfather. So, I feel like it's got some family ties to it."

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Adrienne Pieczonka

With: Laura Tucker, Jamie Sommerville & the HPO

When: Saturday, Dec. 15, at 7:30 p.m.

Where: Hamilton Place

Cost: \$47, special reception with artists, \$225

Call: 905-526-7756