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MUSIC: CONCERT REVIEW

Adrienne Pieczonka soars with a voice of velvet and steel

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Adrienne Pieczonka
At Koerner Hall
In Toronto on Saturday

Canadian soprano Adrienne Pieczonka has called Vienna and London home, and has sung on stages all over the world. But she didn't have to travel very far for her recital on Saturday night. These days, she lives in Toronto – within walking distance of the Royal Conservatory of Music's Koerner Hall.

As 48, she's an international star who's also well known in this country, so it's not surprising that her recital attracted a near-capacity crowd. But there was also a sense of apprehension in the hall: Pieczonka recently cancelled her opening-night performance in the Canadian Opera Company's *Ariadne auf Naxos* due to laryngitis. The audience at Koerner Hall wasn't quite sure what to expect.

Fortunately, Pieczonka and pianist Brian Zeger prepared a program of German-language songs that suited her voice to a tee: Lieder by Schubert, Wagner and Richard Strauss. And from first song – Schubert's *Ganymed* – the soprano's clear and unaffected delivery banished all fears that she might be singing under any kind of stress or strain.

Pieczonka's set of Schubert songs also included *Das Rosenband*, *Du liebst mich nicht* and *Verklarung* – as well as the famous *Die Forelle* and *Gretchen am Spinnrade*. These two well-known selections were especially successful: *Die Forelle* (*The Trout*) sparkled with fluid vocal agility; and *Gretchen am Spinnrade* (*Gretchen at the Spinning Wheel*) gradually built up to a frantic climax. Throughout the set, the soprano's voice was like velvet.

There were two groups of Strauss songs. With the first – an assortment consisting of *Traum durch die Dämmerung*, *Das Rosenband* (a setting of the same poem Schubert used), *Die Nacht*, *Ruhe, meine Seele*, *Mein Auge* and *Wie sollten wir geheim* – Pieczonka revealed a layer of steel beneath the velvet. She has the kind of powerful voice that can readily (or even inadvertently) be “weaponized,” with harsh consequences for listeners. But this she did not do; rather, she tempered her tone with an endearing warmth.

Inserted between the Strauss sets was Wagner's *Wesendonck Lieder*. Pieczonka prefaced her performance with comments from the stage: She explained that Wagner wrote the songs while living on the estate of Otto Wesendonck, a wealthy merchant in Zurich. There, the composer and Wesendonck's wife, Mathilde, “hit it off” (as Pieczonka delicately put it), and Wagner set five of her poems to music.

Wesendonck's poetry delves deeply into themes of love and death – and Pieczonka embraced the emotional texts in ways that were both profound and subtle. Changes in dynamics and texture were skillfully handled – especially in the songs *Stehe Still!* (*Stand Still!*) and *Schmerzen* (*Sorrows*). She also seemed entirely comfortable with Wagner's unsettled, chromatic musical language. (He was writing his opera *Tristan und Isolde* at the time, and the style of the songs is quite similar.) The twists and turns of Wagner's score in no way inhibited her capacity to endow each song with a strong sense of direction.

Similarly, in the second set of Strauss songs – *Du meines herzens Kronelein*, *Morgen*, *Wir beide wollen springen*, and *Zueignung* – Pieczonka was committed to the poetry and the musical line. She concluded the last song, *Zueignung* (*Dedication*) with a dramatic flourish that called for, and received, a spontaneous standing ovation.

Of course, there were encores. And when Pieczonka trotted out *An die Musik* (Schubert's homage to the powers of music) a woman in the balcony with a Mittel-European accent shouted, “Adrienne, you are the music!”

Indeed, she was.

Throughout the recital, Zeger's performance at the keyboard was elegant and refined. However, sometimes his playing tended toward understatement.