

April 29, 2011

John Terauds, Music Critic

A home date at last for our Pieczonka



"Soaring." "Luminous." "Clear, shimmering, pitch-perfect sound and lovely phrasing." Opera critics and audiences in New York, Paris, Vienna, Munich, Houston, Bayreuth and beyond have been raving about Adrienne Pieczonka.

In the prime of her career, Pieczonka is widely regarded as one of the world's finest interpreters of Strauss and Wagner's grand operas.

Meanwhile, we Torontonians have had to ration our enjoyment of this great soprano, though she was born and raised in Burlington, and is based in Toronto's Annex.

Fortunately, after a two-year absence from the Canadian Opera Company stage, our luck has just changed, with a guaranteed annual dose for the next four seasons.

On Saturday afternoon, the curtain rises on Pieczonka in the COC's presentation of the Richard Strauss opera *Ariadne auf Naxos*. The funny and bittersweet play-within-an-opera is popular in Europe, but hasn't been done by the COC since 1995. This Welsh National Opera co-production at the Four Seasons Centre runs to the end of May.

As a special bonus, on May 7, the soprano presents an all-German song recital at Koerner Hall with master piano accompanist, Brian Zeger. There's plenty more Strauss on that program, as well as Richard Wagner's *Wesendonck-Lieder*, which Pieczonka recorded beautifully five years ago.

There are two people to thank for this Toronto time: COC general director Alexander Neef and Pieczonka's daughter Grace. Neef has sought many of the Canadians who went abroad to build their careers. "He is also booking people four and five years in advance, which is essential if you want to get the best singers," Pieczonka says.

This production of *Ariadne auf Naxos*, conducted by Sir Andrew Davis, also features the notable COC debut of Nova Scotia-born soprano Jane Archibald as Zerbinetta. Archibald went off to Vienna a few years ago a promising young talent. Now she returns with a full-fledged European career. Pieczonka sang alongside Archibald in a recent Vienna State Opera production of *Ariadne*, and looks forward to repeating the experience. "I'm a big fan," she smiles.

Pieczonka and spouse Laura Tucker's daughter is now 5 ½ years old and in senior kindergarten; the days when she could join Mommy wherever she happened to be working are drawing to an end. Grace missed the first 10 days of school last fall because the family was in France for Pieczonka's Paris Opéra debut.

"Here we were in Paris, the City of Light, and, after about a week, Grace said, 'I'd like to go home; I miss home,'" the soprano says. "I get that. She hasn't chosen Paris; we take her to the Louvre or the Eiffel Tower and the Seine — it's interesting, but she likes to be home."

Pieczonka attended her girl's fifth birthday party via Skype. It's not the same, but she says that Grace takes the separations more easily than either of her mommies. "For her, it's normal that I go off."

The soprano's next local gig is a Women's Musical Club recital with pianist Stephen Ralls in December. Next January, she has the title role in a COC production of *Tosca*. There's more travel in between.

Pieczonka sings *Tosca* in Hamburg, Berlin and then Munich this summer before taking a seaside busman's holiday with wife and child in Prince Edward Island. She and Tucker are booked for three July nights at the Indian River Festival, founded by Toronto's Peter Tiefenbach and Robert Kortgaard.

One program is opera duets with Tucker, an accomplished mezzo-soprano, and it's a sure bet that Strauss will be on the bill. Pieczonka admits that the German composer's music is closest to her heart and best suited to her voice.

Strauss's wife Paulina was a soprano, and he wrote for her, says Pieczonka. "He wrote these long, spun phrases — and that's what my voice does. Long, legato lines of swelling and coming down," the singer says.

It's a lot like Pieczonka's life, soaring around the world's opera stages, then touching down in Toronto.

"Normally, over the past two years, being at home has meant being off work, so it was a time to relax. But, when I'm working at home, I'm a partner and doing our life together, and I'm also performing, so it's almost more balls to juggle," the singer admits.

"But it is very nice."