

“ I think it's a classic example of an Annex Victorian, looking tall and spacious outside, but with narrow passages and lots of little rooms inside. It's been a challenge to bring in natural light. We've changed all the outside doors and windows - Laura Tucker, homeowner



This house was love at first sight, says Laura Tucker, left, with daughter Grace and Adrienne Pieczonka.

OPERA HOUSE

Ariadne auf Naxos soprano Adrienne Pieczonka
sings the praises of her family's Annex home By Jack Kohane

Singing with such stars as Plácido Domingo and Canadian tenor Richard Margison are high points for Adrienne Pieczonka, who grew up in Burlington, never dreaming she would perform duets alongside such luminaries. Though there's always an adrenalin rush performing at the world's operatic centres, the greatest joy the acclaimed Canadian artist says she now gets is coming home and unwinding with family in her Annex Victorian.

Departing Canada in 1988 as a promising young soprano, she toured Europe, Asia and North America building her career. After almost two decades living abroad, she returned to Canada with her wife, Laura Tucker, in 2006 to raise their daughter.

"It's almost impossible to take the Canada out of the girl," Ms. Pieczonka laughs. Sipping on a glass of sparkling mineral water, she settles beside six-year-old Grace at the kitchen banquette. It's a cozy spot where the family gathers in this grand 5,000-square-foot home that is more than a century old. "I take great pleasure being with my kid and just being a regular mom," she says.

Indeed, the fortysomething soprano, made an Officer of the Order of Canada in 2007 and named a "Kammersängerin" by the Austrian government for her contribution to the arts in that country, is the picture of a grounded, kind person. (Quite un-diva-like.)

"I lived in Vienna for six years, but wanted a change, choosing to move to London [England] because I had a lot of friends there and it is an exciting city," Ms. Pieczonka (pronounced pyeh-chon-kuh) recalls. The pull to return to Canada became powerful, and in 2006 after scouting dozens of open houses in such established neighbourhoods as Riverdale and Bloor West Village, the Annex property was the one that proved irresistible. Though a brutal bidding war ballooned the final price to \$200,000 over asking, Ms. Pieczonka states firmly that there are no regrets.

"It's been worth it," says Ms. Tucker, a mezzo soprano from California who is on sabbatical. "This house was love at first sight. It has warmth, quirkiness and a family feel — all the right vibes."

With a dramatic sweep of her arm, Ms. Tucker points out the airiness



of the 13-foot-high ceilings of the kitchen and adjoining dining room, contrasted by the more confined living room at the front of the house and tight foyer. "I think it's a classic example of an Annex Victorian, looking tall and spacious outside,

modern chandelier that hangs like teardrops above the kitchen island in orange, white and blue glass.

Creating a play space for Grace and her friends was a priority. "The basement was unfinished, so that

room is still clad in original floral motif Victorian tiles. The stained glass window facing the street has been restored and the oak pocket door shuts to separate the living room that doubles as a rehearsal space complete with Steinway piano.

A quaint fireplace provides the visual anchor to the master bedroom on the second floor. The room is accessorized with a hand-made chest of drawers, magnolia-patterned wallpaper, and a genuine Hans Wegner Danish chair salvaged from the garbage. "With a little teak oil, some sand paper and new cushions I had made, it is one of my favourite pieces of furniture," Ms. Tucker says.

The guest room on the top floor is a mix of new and old, including a vintage gold standing lamp, 1920s side tables from England, as well as an Ikea bed and chairs. "We wanted that room to be a step back in time, in keeping with the attic's angles — not too slick," Ms. Pieczonka says.

Opting to keep the original floor plan intact, the couple believes the home's footprint is strongly reminiscent of what it must have been. "A lot of these Victorian houses have been opened up completely," Ms. Tucker says.

"It's almost impossible to take the Canada out of the girl,"

but with narrow passages and lots of little rooms inside," she says. "It's been a challenge to bring in natural light. We've changed all the outside doors and windows, enlarging many of them."

The exterior of the heritage home, built in 1892, is red brick and brownstone. Purchased in 2005 by a neighbour, the former women's shelter was converted to a single-family dwelling. "Because most of the house was extensively renovated, there hasn't been much for us to do," Ms. Pieczonka says.

The kitchen features glass-panelled white cabinetry, stainless steel appliances, dark oak flooring and Carrara marble countertops. The homeowners adore their Danish

was our choice location," says Ms. Tucker, who has a knack for design and sketched out the changes to be made. The basement was transformed into the ultimate kid space — 1,200 sq. ft. feet of kid heaven filled with a large dollhouse, puppet theatre, bed, side tables, storage space galore and recycled couches for playing on. With the future in mind, the homeowners installed a bathroom in the basement, along with a nanny suite. "It's not 'high design' but famous in the neighbourhood as an oasis for the kids," she says.

In tweaking some interior details, the couple kept the old architectural details wherever possible. Three working wood-burning fireplaces remain — the one in the dining



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“We have defined rooms: entrance, living room, dining room and eat-in kitchen in the back spilling out through French doors to the backyard lined with cedars, lilacs and hydrangeas.”

The Annex neighbourhood hits all the high notes, says Ms. Pieczonka, who teams up with Richard Margison in her return to the Canadian Opera Company to sing the title role in Richard Strauss’s opera-within-an-opera’s madcap melodrama, *Ariadne auf Naxos*, performing April 30 to May 29.

“It’s a nice part of the city,” she says. “Everything’s close at hand — family-run fruit and vegetable stores, bistros and cafés, and cheese shops. I really am a tomboy at heart, so I like to ride a bike whenever I can. In every way, this location is ideal for us.”



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Photos by Brett Gundlock/National Post:
a. The front room b. Kitchen c. Guest room
d. Basement playroom e. The dining room
f. Painting studio