

## DRAMATIC MOVE

Despite a career that has met with international acclaim, only fitful attention has been paid to Adrienne Pieczonka in American opera houses. There was her debut as Elsa at Los Angeles Opera during the harrowing week of 9/11, and her three subsequent engagements in that city. Her 2004 Met bow as Lisa in *The Queen of Spades* preceded several well-received Sieglindes with the company (under three different conductors), the most recent in 2009. At the time of our interview last June, she was appearing in *Tosca* with San Francisco Opera, her debut engagement with the company. Still, for a forty-six-year-old singer boasting a two-decade career, she hasn't quite entered the mainstream American operatic consciousness. "I'm doing catch-up," she confesses.

This, indeed, may be Pieczonka's season. First, in October and November, she graced Houston Grand Opera's *Lohengrin*. This month, there's the Met revival of *Simon Boccanegra*, which brings Plácido Domingo's assumption of the title role to New York. "Gee," Pieczonka muses, "Plácido has been my artistic director, my conductor and, in *Queen of Spades* and *Die Walküre*, my lover. Now, I'll play his daughter, and I feel that doing the Amelia-Boccanegra duet with an artist whom I have come to know with so much affection over the years will be an emotional highlight for me. It's like completing a circle."

Pieczonka believes the engagement will be crucial in extending her career in this country, which, despite those *Toscas*, does not generally associate her with the Italian repertoire.

"The role of Amelia is a challenge — a transition as I move slowly into more dramatic assignments," she says. "It's still a lyric role. It begins tentatively and then grows in strength and passion. It sits higher than Desdemona, but it has more heft and weight. I need to keep these roles in my repertoire. They act as a balance and a tonic after singing some of the heavier roles. I would not attempt Amelia in a small house in Europe, but I feel that the Met is so large it can accommodate a full lyric voice." The character appeals, too. "Amelia's strength of conviction is striking. Her passionate loyalty to Gabriele Adorno and her willingness to fight unto the death to protect him make her much more than the standard romantic heroine."

Pieczonka admits that she's anticipating the HD simulcast of *Boccanegra* with mixed emotions. "Of course, everybody at home in Canada will get to see it — a real big deal," she says. "But I'm nervous, too." The day we talked, she hadn't quite recovered from the idea of seeing herself on the big screen when her San Francisco *Tosca* was transmitted live to 27,000 alfresco operaphiles in the Giants' baseball stadium, AT&T Park.

"I got a taste of what it's like to have those cameras fixed on my jowls," she says. "You do forget about it after a while, but let's face it — twenty years ago, when I was starting, the emphasis wasn't on the body beautiful. Before the *Boccanegra*," says Pieczonka, "I've got to get to the gym and lose those ten pounds. I gotta get fit. You'll see the difference."

Such confessions on first meeting are not what one expects from a *Kammersängerin* at the Vienna State Opera. But the candor may derive from the years in the trenches. (Six years in Vienna and eleven years in London have a way of doing that.) Pieczonka, who hails from "a not particularly musical" family in Burlington, Ontario, credits her career trajectory to the Canada

Council for the Arts — and to Carol Burnett. It was the comedienne's television show, and the television specials she did with Beverly Sills and Julie Andrews, that persuaded Pieczonka to switch from piano to voice studies, and it was the Council that sent her to Europe on a career grant in 1988. She went with a degree from the University of Western Ontario and training from the University of Toronto Opera Division; she had made her debut in a minor assignment the previous year at Canadian Opera Company. The European experience hardened her.

"A young singer must have that wanderlust, even though my first years in Vienna were tough going," Pieczonka recalls. "I was told, 'Your German is terrible,' 'You can't move,' 'You can't waltz.' I was discombobulated after a day's work. I was lonely. I often went home in tears."

But she did audition at the Volksoper for intendant Eberhard Wächter, who rewarded her with a contract. An invitation from the Staatsoper came two years later. And it was in Vienna that she met soprano Hilde Zadek, now ninety-three, whose Met roles in the early 1950s included *Eva* and *Donna Anna*. "She is still my mentor," says Pieczonka. "She coached me through my first *Tosca*. Hilde had sung all my parts. She found my top and gave me a great piece of advice — never push."

In Vienna, Pieczonka built the repertoire — Mozart and the lighter Wagner and Strauss assignments — on which she has based her career. What Pieczonka describes as her breakthrough came in Munich, with her Tatiana in Harry Kupfer's production of *Eugene Onegin*. The public and press noticed. There followed a decade's residence in London, debuts at Glyndebourne and the Royal Opera, bows (and follow-up appearances) in Bayreuth and Salzburg, and regular engagements at many of the major European houses.

A fortuitous cancellation by another soprano led to Pieczonka's *Mistress Ford* in the DG recording of *Falstaff* with Claudio Abbado, which introduced her to an international audience. Two Orfeo CDs — a Wagner-Strauss recital and a program of Puccini arias, released last summer — reveal a fully mature artist, with a voice even throughout its range, and stylistically capable of effecting the transition from Ariadne to Angelica.

In fact, the excerpt from *La Fanciulla del West* on her Puccini disc suggests that Pieczonka wields both the heft and temperament to replenish the world's never abundant supply of Minnies. Still, the soprano's most impressive recording to date is the recent Cologne studio production of *Lohengrin* under Semyon Bychkov (Profil). Made after two concert presentations, the performance finds Pieczonka capturing Elsa's lyrical effusions with dreamy allure, while mustering the *hochdramatische* authority to challenge *Lohengrin* in the bridal chamber scene.

Because of frequent visits, Pieczonka came to call Munich her second home, but over the years, she remained loyal to Canada, even to the point of singing her first Sieglinde during COC's 2004 *Ring*. The following year, she moved back to Toronto. She was motivated neither by patriotism nor by the imminent opening of the Four Seasons Opera House. During *Die Walküre* rehearsals, Pieczonka had met mezzo-soprano Laura Tucker (the Schwertleite of that production), and a year later they were wed. Tucker gave birth to their daughter, Grace, in 2005. Pieczonka has not perceived any negative reactions to the relationship. "I am really

happy that, in the matter of same-sex marriage, Canada has progressed this far," she says. "I hope the States catch up one of these years."

The pair now resides in the Annex district of Toronto, while Tucker puts her career on hold. Their union may somewhat curb Pieczonka's globetrotting in the future. "Now that I have a wife and child, we have to travel as a family," she says. "When Grace was younger, it was easier to spend much of the summer at Bayreuth. She's growing, and it's hard to figure out what a kid will do all that time."

Nevertheless, Pieczonka will explore new projects in the coming years. She's anticipating her first Kaiserin in the *Frau ohne Schatten* that Zubin Mehta will lead in Florence in April and May. ("Oh, I sure hope I have the D!") Next fall, Paris Opera will hear Pieczonka's initial Senta. She plans to repeat the assignment at Bayreuth in 2012 in a new *Holländer* production conducted by Christian Thielemann, who has previously collaborated with her there on the *Ring*; she pronounces him "a genius." But if Wagnerites are wondering, there are no Isolde or Brünnhildes in Pieczonka's future. "I'm leaving those big honker ladies to my valiant colleagues," she says with unambiguous finality.

Pieczonka is firm about drawing career lines, too. Despite attractive offers, she restricts her performances to sixty a year and insists on five weeks' holiday every summer with her family at their Georgian Bay cottage north of Toronto. "Why not?" she asks. "Mirella Freni took two months off a year, and she sang until she was seventy. How can the body rejuvenate itself in seven days? Besides, when you say no, better things come along."

All this may mean that Pieczonka will never inhabit that pantheon reserved for international superstar sopranos. "I could never pay the price those gals pay," she declares. "Celebrity comes at a cost. This diva, I am afraid, is a tortoise, plodding along, refining my craft, doing what I hope is good work." □



The gifted soprano  
**Adrienne Pieczonka**,  
who sings *Amelia* in the Met's  
*Simon Boccanegra* this month,  
is taking on heavier  
Italian repertoire.

By Allan Ulrich

PHOTOGRAPHED BY  
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