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CULTURE

## I Want Your Job: Adrienne Pieczonka

We chatted with one of Canada's biggest opera stars to find out more about her special line of work.

By Kelli Korducki • Photos by Lodoe-Laura Haines-Wangda

*I Want Your Job finds Torontonians who make a living doing exactly what they love to do, in any field, and for any salary, and asks them how they did it.*



The singer, preparing for dress rehearsal.

**Name:** Adrienne Pieczonka

**Job:** Opera singer

There's a certain stereotype associated with female opera singers—particularly soprano leads—that conjurs up a particular four-letter word that starts with 'D,' ends with -va, and comes accompanied with a nose wrinkled in distaste. It's a convention that internationally renowned opera soloist Adrienne Pieczonka graciously debunks.

Set to play the title role in the Canadian Opera Company's forthcoming production of *Tosca*, Pieczonka has headlined at all the world's major opera houses, but is soft-spoken and measured when it comes to her celebrated and nearly 25-year-long career. "There are singers that burst onto the scene and in five years they're sort of burned out," she says carefully, avoiding humblebraggy soundbite baiting. "But I've had a fairly long career, which I'm happy about, and I plan to keep going for hopefully some more years." It's also clear that Pieczonka is excited to be singing the coveted role of Floria Tosca, Puccini's love-crazed singer, driven by lust to murder, on her home stage. "I love *Tosca* and it's a real thrill to sing it here in

Toronto. It's probably one of my favourite roles. I've sung it a lot in Europe and the States, but to do it in Toronto is really great."

We recently spoke with Pieczonka to find out more about her special line of work.



**Torontoist: What does a day in the life of an opera singer look like?**

Pieczonka: It sort of varies. If it's the day of a performance, that's different than a rehearsal day. A typical day would be a rehearsal day. I'd get up, have breakfast, try to do some stretching or yoga, then warm up my voice. The voice needs to be warmed up just like a car in the winter, or any kind of athlete that wants to stretch out. So you do some vocal warmups and attend the rehearsal.

As a singer, you can't sing for hours and hours. The voice is sort of specific. You have to be very careful about the pacing. It's a lot of concentration, many hours of study looking at music learning scores, attending rehearsals. So it's intense, but fun.

**How did you get interested in opera?**

I've always been a stage animal. I was a ham in elementary school and I loved to be on the stage, and it didn't really matter how. It could be skits, it could be comedy sketches, it could be choir things. I loved musical theatre—my first love was really more popular music. I loved pop music and rock music; I loved Carol Burnett and the Sonny and Cher Show. This was my era. I didn't really wake up one day and think "I'm going to be an opera singer." It was more, "I'd love to be on the stage." But I didn't really know how it'd come about.

I started taking voice lessons at about 14, which is kind of on the early side; a voice doesn't really mature until you hit your late teens or early twenties. Anyway, with this teacher it kind of unfolded that I was being pointed more in the classical lane. Then I decided to study music in university. I studied voice at the University of Western Ontario.

As a young person, you don't know if you've got the vocal chops—you know, the vocal material—that it takes to be an opera singer. It takes quite a while for the voice to develop. It wasn't until I was maybe 21 that I realized, "yeah, maybe I do have a voice that could be suited for opera." It's very different from someone who becomes a violin prodigy at the age of seven.



**What would you consider the most challenging part of your job?**

Well, I've been doing this for more than two decades, and I guess the hardest part is to keep up the high level. I've sung in every leading opera house around the world, with great conductors and wonderful colleagues, and it's one thing to achieve—to get to Covent Garden and La Scala—and another thing to maintain that level over many, many years. And that's what I'm trying to do, is sing at a really high level and keep my artistry. It's a lot of discipline, and hard work.

**Do you think that takes people by surprise?**

I think most people tend to think that it's very glamorous, and a very extravagant or exciting lifestyle. And yes, there are aspects—getting into costume and wig, doing a performance, and taking your bows and getting all that applause, yes that's thrilling. But what the audience doesn't see is the travel, and the long-haul flights, and going from hotel to hotel. That maybe sounds glamorous to people, but after 10 or 20 years it's hard. It's hard being separated from your family—though my family is now here in Toronto. Those kinds of aspects are challenging.