

KEEP AN EAR OUT

Sea Change

A former Wagnerian finds Puccini.

By Brian Wise

AN OPERA SINGER who turns to Puccini after years of singing Wagner is a bit like a baseball infielder who switches from shortstop to third base: the job descriptions are similar but countless little differences separate the two. Adrienne Pieczonka knows about this first-hand. The statuesque Canadian soprano is known for her thrilling portrayals of Wagner roles like Sieglinde and Elsa, at houses from Bayreuth to the Metropolitan Opera.

But it was her debut as Tosca that won Pieczonka over to Puccini. For its 2008 revival of the work, Los Angeles Opera obtained a rare stage artifact: the jewelry worn by Maria Callas in 1956 for her Met debut as the tragic heroine. Pieczonka wore the tiara, earrings and necklace, worth about \$85,000, in the opera's second act. Whether or not the stunt brought good luck, her performance won glowing reviews and led to further Toscas in San Francisco, Hamburg and Berlin. Last year came an all-Puccini solo recording, and other Puccini roles are in the works.

"People ask me if you're singing Wagner and switch to Puccini if you do it any differently," Pieczonka says. "My singing approach is really the same. When I'm singing Wagner, yes, of course, the German language brings some different challenges — more consonants, more hard glottal attacks — but I don't approach it in a dramatic style. And when I'm singing Puccini I try and sing as legato as I can, using those wonderful open vowels to color it."

Do Wagner fans ever accuse you of slumming in Italian melodrama? Pieczonka admits it's hard to resist Puccini's appeal. "I don't think there's anything wrong with great melodies," she says. "Maybe I'm a softy. Pure Wagnerites will pooh-pooh the over-dramatic Puccini, but I love it." ■



A timely decision. Adrienne Pieczonka's album of Puccini arias (*Orfeo*) won a Juno Award for Best Classical Album of the Year.