

Wednesday, July 21, 2010

Westben: Rural recitals a vocal luxury for Toronto opera stars

Adrienne Pieczonka and Brett Polegato play recitals at Campbellford's Westben

By John Terauds Entertainment Reporter

Like many of us, two Toronto singers known to for critical raves on international opera stages are going to be breathing in some Canadian country air over the next few days. Just don't call these outings a holiday.

Soprano Adrienne Pieczonka and baritone Brett Polegato are both honouring the 10th anniversary of the Westben festival, outside Campbellford, with recitals.

On Saturday, Pieczonka takes to the timbered stage in the concert barn with her wife, mezzo Laura Tucker, accompanist (and Westben co-artistic director) Brian Finley and Toronto's Mr. Opera, Iain Scott, for an evening of favourite operatic duets and solos.

Included on a program made for a pastoral setting are the Flower Duets from Puccini's *Madama Butterfly* and Delibes' *Lakmé*. Both singers will also get solo turns, including the aria "Mon coeur s'ouvre à ta voix," from Saint-Saëns' *Samson et Dalilah* for Tucker, and "Dich teure Halle" from Wagner's *Tannhäuser* for Pieczonka.

On Tuesday, Polegato arrives with pianist Robert Kortgaard for an evening of English-language art song — plus a little music of music-hall master Ivor Novello, in honour of the informal setting. Both Polegato and Pieczonka can fill an opera house, so a summer festival recital in a concert barn with swing-out walls is a major change of setting. Both admit that they have never been to Westben before.

"Laura and I are going down on Friday to have a run-through," says Pieczonka, freshly back in town after some time at a cottage up north, where she and Tucker have been teaching their daughter, Grace, to swim. Grace's birthday is coming up in the fall, "So she tells everyone she is 4-and-three-quarters," Pieczonka adds.

The soprano got an email invitation from Finley a couple of years ago, asking if she might be free to give a recital with Tucker. They were able to oblige this year. "Other summers, I've been singing in Munich or Bayreuth in Germany, so I wasn't able to make it," says Pieczonka.

In 2008, the couple gave their first concert together, in Hamilton, and Tucker sounds eager to repeat the experience. "I was nervous about it the first time," she admits, "but it's become very enjoyable now." Tucker describes singing with her spouse in glowing terms. "It's a major form of intimacy to be able to perform with your partner. There's something vibrational to be in perfect synch with someone else."

There's another form of intimate joy in these events for Polegato, who enjoys being able to get close to an audience at a smaller festival venue — most of which do not provide song texts in their printed programs. "Because there are no texts or translations, I've had to speak at concerts about why I chose the songs and what I think is important about them," Polegato explains. "This way, the audience gets to see more of the artist and who he or she is."

Unlike Pieczonka's one-off outing, the baritone's summer calendar is a flurry of festival gigs. His Westben concert on July 27 is one of 10 packed into July and early August in Ontario and Prince Edward Island.

"I have all this music in different suitcases in my bedroom, and I have to remember which is which," laughs Polegato, who sings with mezzo Krisztina Szabó at Music Niagara on Friday and the Waterside festival on Amherst Island on Saturday, before taking off for the Indian River Festival in Prince Edward Island to headline three Midsummer Magic concerts with soprano Kimberly Barber the following week.

"Even after 18 years, I don't think of myself as an opera singer, but a recitalist who sings opera to pay the bills," the baritone says.

As he describes the English-and-American program for Westben, largely drawn from the 20th century and accompanied by Kortgaard, Polegato says that organizing several concerts has given him the extra satisfaction of growing into the evening, helping it flow smoothly from beginning to end.

"That's a luxury few singers get to experience," he says. "It's starting to feel really comfortable."

WHO: Adrienne Pieczonka and Laura Tucker

WHEN: July 24 @ 7 p.m.

WHO: Brett Polegato

WHEN: July 27 @ 7 p.m.

WHERE: Westben Concerts at the Barn, 6698 County Road 30, Campbellford

TICKETS & INFO: \$5.65-\$48.59 @ 1-877-883-5777 or www.westben.ca