

THE HAMILTON SPECTATOR

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Another great opportunity for Adrianne to lose her head

Leonard Turnevicius



Adrianne Pieczonka plays the doomed Madame Madeleine Lidoine in the Canadian Opera Company's Poulenc's *Dialogues des carmélites*

Adrianne Pieczonka

What: Poulenc's *Dialogues des carmélites*

Where: Four Seasons Centre, 145 Queen St. W., Toronto

When: May 8 to 25

Cost: \$12 to \$325

Call: 1-800-250-4653

Pieczonka was a student at the University of Toronto in 1988 when she first saw *Carmélites* staged by the COC at the O'Keefe Centre with Maureen Forrester as the old Prioress, Madame de Croissy, and her classmates as nuns in the COC chorus. You could say that Pieczonka almost lost her head just watching the proceedings.

"To see my friends (the nuns) walk off one by one to be beheaded in the final scene while singing the *Salve Regina* was hugely emotional for me," wrote Pieczonka in an email to *The Hamilton Spectator*. "I remember it very vividly."

So vividly that when the COC's general director Alexander Neef offered Pieczonka the role of Lidoine a few years ago, she jumped at the opportunity.

"The role had not come my way though it is staged a fair bit in Europe," wrote Pieczonka. "I probably should have started singing the role about 10 years ago, but I find I can now bring a certain maturity to the role. My character even speaks about 'being old enough to know what's what.' The character feels right on many levels to me."

Feeling right with a character is, of course, a boon. But in opera, there's also the vocal dimension. Though Pieczonka has loved to sing many of Poulenc's song cycles since her student days, Lidoine poses some vocal challenges for her, particularly where the voice transitions into a different register.

"Vocally, the role lies in the 'passaggio' or passage of the soprano voice," wrote Pieczonka. "One could say it often lies 'in the cracks' of the voice. It poses a challenge technically, but I am really enjoying the challenge."

And just how does she solve these challenges, particularly in her character's lengthy Act 2 and 3 monologues, the former in which Lidoine cautions the nuns against voluntary martyrdom? Now, of course with a top-flight opera singer such as Pieczonka you're not going to hear the kind of register breaks that are commonplace with amateur singers where the voice awkwardly changes in tone quality and/or volume. Yet, one of the solutions in Pieczonka's arsenal is to use the language, its vowels, sounds, and colours to her advantage.

"The French language and pronunciation help guide me vocally/technically," wrote Pieczonka. "I don't often sing in French, but I love to do so."

Singing alongside Pieczonka are Judith Forst as de Croissy, and Isabel Bayrakdarian as Blanche. A legion of supers will form a revolutionary mob. This will be the 12th revival of Canadian stage director Robert Carsen's production which has already played cities as far flung as Madrid, Nice, Vienna, and Chicago. For more info, log on to coc.ca.

Yet again, it's going to be curtains for Adrianne Pieczonka.

No, this time she's not Verdi's Desdemona getting strangled by her jealous husband, Otello. And she's not Puccini's Tosca jumping off a parapet of Rome's Castel Sant'Angelo, or Wagner's Senta throwing herself into the frigid Norwegian Sea.

Alas, this time around, the Burlington-raised soprano will be losing her head at the guillotine as Madame Madeleine Lidoine, the second Prioress, in eight performances of Francis Poulenc's 1956 opera, *Dialogues des carmélites* at the Canadian Opera Company's Four Seasons Centre in Toronto from May 5 to 28.

Carmélites takes place against the backdrop of The Terror in late 18th century France. Its storyline, partly based on a true account of 16 Carmelite nuns who were guillotined in Compiègne in 1794, revolves around a fictional young woman named Blanche de la Force, her decision to enter a convent, her dialogues with her fellow sisters, the whole culminating in their martyrdom.