

A close-up portrait of Adrienne Pieczonka, a woman with dark, wavy hair, looking slightly to the right with a gentle smile. She is wearing a grey scarf.

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ADRIANNE

Vissi d'arte

PIECZONKA

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ADRIANNE PIECZONKA

Vissi d'arte

The reigning Canadian prima donna speaks openly about her art and her life.

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Vissi
d'arte

ADRIANNE PIECZONKA

by JOSEPH K. SO

“I am like the tortoise in ‘The Tortoise and the Hare’—slow and steady!” quips soprano Adrienne Pieczonka with a touch of self-effacing humour. Maybe so, but it is the textbook case of “slow and steady wins the race.” Since her debut in 1987 as the female convict in the COC *Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk*, Pieczonka’s career has been approaching the quarter-century mark, which many of her diva colleagues fail to reach. Her calendar is booked well in advance, with plum assignments in some of the most prestigious venues in Europe and North America—Vienna, Munich, Berlin, Bayreuth, the Met, the COC, to name a few. Celebrated for her Wagner and Strauss, Pieczonka has also won acclaim in the Italian repertoire in recent years, as Amelia in *Simon Boccanegra*, Elisabetta in *Don Carlos*, and in the title role of *Tosca*, which she sang in San Francisco Opera and was simulcast to thousands at the AT&T Park. Last season, she had her first Met in HD exposure, as Amelia opposite the great Plácido Domingo. Her newest role, Senta in Wagner’s *Die fliegende Holländer* at the Paris and Vienna operas garnered rave reviews. A sign of her increasing stature, Pieczonka received the title of *Kammersängerin* at the Vienna State Opera, as well as the Order of Canada. Last fall, she received her first honorary doctorate bestowed upon her by McMaster University in Hamilton, a stone’s throw from Burlington, where the soprano grew up. Five years ago, after living in Europe for eighteen years, Pieczonka returned to Canada and bought a home in Toronto, which she shares with her partner in life and in art, mezzo-soprano Laura Tucker and their five-year old daughter Grace. Recently the singer was able to spend some time at home between gigs. During this brief hiatus, she attended the opening of *The Art of Canadian Music*, an exhibition of thirty paintings of famous Canadian musicians at the John B. Aird Gallery in Queen’s Park. Portraitist Tadeusz Biernot has created a strikingly original work on the soprano, at 60 x 78 cm, easily the largest canvas in the exhibition. Taking time out from preparing for her upcoming *Desdemona* for Deutsche Oper Berlin, Pieczonka graciously agreed to meet for a long, wide-ranging conversation about her life and her art:



CANADIAN PAINTER TADEUSZ BIERNOT unveils his portrait of Adriaane Pieczonka

Congratulations on your success as Senta.

Tell us about your experience of singing this role in Vienna...

You know it's funny—Senta was never a role I was dying to sing. Vocally it's a real challenge—very dramatic and very high. It requires youthfulness in the voice and a ringing top. This was the second time I did it, the first was in Paris, and I'll do it again next year in Bayreuth with Thielemann. I'm conscious of not filling my calendar with too many Sentas. Just like Sieglinde, it has been a very rewarding part for me—I got fantastic reviews in the Willy Decker production in Paris. It's surprising that the roles you don't think are going to be so great turn out to be so rewarding.

You are known for your Wagner and Strauss, but you've been adding more and more Italian roles. You're singing Tosca all over, including the COC next season. How do you manage to switch back and forth between the Italian and the German repertoires?

The answer may disappoint you—I approach them the same way! I worked on Desdemona a little bit this morning... Of course you have to think of the difference in the language, a bit more *legato* and more *portamenti* in Italian and not so much in the German rep, although I use it in Senta—and in Elsa totally! I'll be doing Amelia in *Ballo* and *Aïda*, both big roles. I try to sing lyrically, and to use *piano* whenever I can and to keep the lightness in my voice.

When you prepare a role, do you listen to recordings? Who do you listen to?

When I was preparing Amelia in *Simon Boccanegra*, I listened to Tebaldi. For Tosca, I watched Callas and Gobbi video from Covent Garden... just to watch her intensity, her gestures and her eyes! When I was preparing Senta, I tried to find who could be the ideal Senta for me. You've got Varady and Studer; and then there's Anja Silja who did it at twenty—crazy!

Let's talk a little about your upcoming COC *Ariadne*, one of your signature roles. *Ariadne* is a woman who can only be fulfilled by having a man in her life. Given the 21st century post-feminist critique, isn't she a little old-fashioned? Why do you love her so much?

It's not fair! (laughs) Look at Senta and Elsa—a lot of Wagner is misogynistic. You know I don't have an issue with *Ariadne*, if you think of her as a Greek goddess and you put yourself back in her time. Maybe she's a bit mad; [...] maybe she has lost touch with reality. You have this polarization—in the Prologue she's the diva, and then in the Opera itself you have this forlorn, bereft woman. I am married to a woman, so why am I even doing this role? Because the music is glorious! The duet between Zerbinetta and the Composer is so beautiful. I just sang *Ariadne* in Munich with Alice (Coote) and Jane (Archibald). It was wonderful. I hope the Toronto audience will love it.



IT'S SURPRISING THAT THE ROLES YOU DON'T THINK ARE GOING TO BE SO GREAT TURN OUT TO BE SO REWARDING...

It's a subtle opera—the Composer's ode to music is so beautiful, and Zerbinetta's aria is always a showstopper. My music is more cerebral—sometimes I must say you sing and sing, and.... (more laughs)

If you had to choose between "Ein schönes war" and "Es gibt ein Reich," which would you pick?

"Ein Schönes war"—it's so beautiful! And it's more difficult, more exposed...those B-flats have to be floated. "Es gibt" doesn't move me as much. Do you know one of my first professional jobs was as Naiad in *Ariadne*? In Vancouver, Jean Stilwell, Martha Collins and I were the nymphs! Judy Forst was the Composer, Mary Jane Johnson was Ariadne and Barbara Kilduff was Zerbinetta.

You also have concerts coming up in Toronto—your recital at Koerner Hall and Beethoven's 9th at the Black Creek Festival. Have you sung in Koerner Hall before? What's on the recital program?

No I haven't even heard a classical concert there yet—only Barbara Cook! It's a very impressive facility... world class, really. I'm so pleased they asked me, even though it's a bit challenging for me as it's during the run of *Ariadne*. It's an all-German program—Schubert, Strauss, and Wagner's *Wesendonck Lieder*. My pianist is Brian Zeger. And I'm going to sing some show tunes at the end as homage to Barbara Cook. She is 83 but she still has that youthful quality—she sounds like a young girl! As to Black Creek, I've only been there for tennis! When I look at the line-up, with Domingo and Maazel—wow, it's right for Toronto. Bravo!

You've mentioned that you enjoy teaching. What draws you to teaching? What makes a good teacher?

I think teaching for me is a combination of passing on my knowledge and experience as well as continuing to delve into the mystery of singing. It's a never-ending process and I am amazed at how much I learn from working with each singer. I am still very much evolving as a voice teacher and feel that there are still several years until I can dedicate myself wholly to teaching. I don't think there is a certain recipe that makes a good teacher—some famous singers were not good teachers. So to be a good teacher it's not necessary to have had a big career as a professional singer. I think empathy and excellent listening skills are imperative. A young singer is often on an emotional journey and there can be tears and frustration along the way. A good teacher will approach each pupil as an individual and be sensitive to the student's needs.

You are now in the 24th year of your career, a very good length by any standard. To what do you attribute your longevity? How do you keep your voice healthy and in good condition?

I make sure there are breaks in my calendar, not just going from one job to the next, taking summer vacations. I keep working with my teachers—Mary Morrison here in Toronto, and Hilde Zadek when I'm in Europe. I've been working hard to keep the lyricism in my voice as much as possible. It's easy to get on a wrong track vocally and start singing too heavily. I've discovered that sometimes 'less is more' and the ability to float and sing pianissimo is imperative to my technique and approach. I often feel that singing pianissimo is a dying art now-

adays. I'm proud that my career is in its 3rd decade while so many singers today often don't end up singing more than 10 years professionally. Like I mentioned, my "tortoise mentality" has been good in that I have been patient and never been keen to be an overnight star. The pressure has been taken off and I am content to sing wonderful roles in wonderful houses, and not be a media darling or megastar.

What (and who) are the most important things (and people) in your life now? If you were to draw your career to a close tomorrow, how do you want to be remembered? Of course we all know that you have many years ahead of you career-wise, but it is nice once in awhile to reflect and take stock...

My family is the most important thing in my life. That being said, I feel I have recently developed a new level of devotion and commitment to my singing and to my career—it's very interesting! But my family grounds me and brings me such joy and pleasure. Singing does this as well but, alas, it is fleeting! If I were to quit singing tomorrow, I'd like to be remembered as an artist who has brought joy to many people and who was a generous person who enjoyed nurturing young singers.

Speaking of young singers, what advice do you have for these aspiring artists ready to step into the opera world?

Enjoy your lives! Enjoy the journey you are on, and be thankful you are able to sing glorious music. Be passionate about your art... embrace it and go for it!

TMS

• April 30, May 3 - 29: Strauss's *Ariadne auf Naxos*, title role, Canadian Opera Company coc.ca
• May 7: Recital, Koerner Hall rcmusic.ca



AT HOME

When I am home, I'm usually not performing so I tend to focus on my family. Need I say I'm a morning person—I get up early, around 7 a.m. and make breakfast for our daughter Grace and take her to school by 8:15. Then I practice for about an hour and a half—I enjoy doing this in the morning, so that the day is then free for other things. I like taking power walks or working out at the gym. School pick up for Grace is 3 p.m., and often we will have a play date at our house. Dinner is about 5:30 p.m. and both Laura and I enjoy cooking. I enjoy reading stories to Grace at bedtime. Then I like to relax by watching a bit of television, reading or soaking in the tub! I'm often in bed by 10 p.m. I've never been a night owl but I do enjoy going out for dinner with friends or to the theatre or a concert.

A Day in the Life of a Prima Donna

ON THE ROAD

When I'm on the road I still wake up early, often before 8 a.m., even on the day of a performance—strange but true! I like to go for a power walk or do some yoga in the morning after breakfast, then vocalize around 11 a.m. or noon if it's a performance day. I eat at around 2 or 3 p.m. and then I don't eat until after the performance. I try to eat things like fish or chicken with some rice or potatoes and I also try to avoid heavy meals after a show. I take a catnap after lunch. I try to skype my family at breakfast (Toronto time), as this is a wonderful way to stay connected to my family. What did we ever do before skype—it's the most marvelous invention and it's free! It's hard on the road when I'm separated from my family for weeks at a time but I just try to make the most of each day and keep positive!