

New Productions New Roles

Going Back to Her Roots

Winnipeg soprano Lara Ciekiewicz draws on her Slavic heritage for two major role debuts

By HOLLY HARRIS

Lara Ciekiewicz is waxing poetic in the wake of her recent role debut this past fall as Leoš Janáček's *Jenůfa* at Pacific Opera Victoria, co-produced with Opéra de Montréal and directed by Canadian film icon Atom Egoyan (see review p. 45).

"There are often these post-show blues, but this time when I got home, I felt very serene," reveals the Winnipeg-based artist. "I just felt gloriously humbled by what we all accomplished together, and realized that this production will always have a little piece of my heart."

Ciekiewicz, who self-describes her soaring, three-octave plus lyric soprano voice as "steel wrapped in velvet," is becoming one of Canada's most highly sought after singing-actresses.

This season, she makes two significant role debuts, including Janáček's portrait of an ill-fated village girl who is forced to grapple with infanticide and ultimately, forgiveness.

"It's been a huge pleasure working with Lara," said director Egoyan over the phone just prior to the show's mid-October opening—notably the first production he has directed in his hometown in 40 years. "She's incredibly inventive. She not only has a lovely voice, but she's a very astute actress and is able to give all sorts of inflections and contours to a really complex role. It's constantly alive for her."

Born to Polish-Ukrainian parents, Ciekiewicz drew on those roots for *Jenůfa*, her first Slavic role sung in the original Czech, featuring Janáček's idiosyncratic speech-directed melodies. Egoyan's artistic vision, inspired by an Apr. 2017 trip to Armenia as an election observer, blurred traditional, folkloric lines with a contemporary

setting. Ciekiewicz was dressed in a modern day skirt and blouse, juxtaposed with an 'old world' *babushka*.

"When I put that on for the first time, I almost cried. It felt deeply personal," says the singer, who also dusted off her Ukrainian folk dancing skills for the Act III's wedding day scene, and jokes about her ongoing Eastern European-flavoured love affair with "melancholic minor keys." "I also remember seeing these same characters in *Jenůfa* as people I grew up with in my Ukrainian-Catholic church family. When I first listened to Janáček's gorgeous choruses, it sounded like the folksongs I heard as a child."

And did anything surprise her working with Egoyan—Canadian arts royalty; two-time Academy Award nominee who first garnered international fame with his 1994 film *Exotica*? "He's incredibly humble," Ciekiewicz replies with palpable reverence, calling their working relationship "*simpatico*." "This is a guy who's at the top of his game, but at his very core, he's still, 'Let's just do the work.' He made us feel completely free to try new things," she explains.

"Atom had very clear pictures in mind of how he wanted to tell the story, and wanted us to really focus on the human relationships" the singer adds. "He was also very open to what we had to offer, and whenever he saw something that rang as 'truth,' he would give a little giggle, and I would say, 'Oh, he liked that.' Seeing something purely authentic became more important to him than keeping to whatever original plan was there. We also laughed a lot during rehearsals, and knew that we had to keep our spirits up on a personal level so that we could be vulnerable and explore the intensity of this very dark show."

Born in Winnipeg but raised in Springfield, MB—located approximately 40 kilometres east of the provincial capital—Ciekiewicz's love for music began organically when her mother would lull her to sleep playing not gentle lullabies, but grand orchestral classics like Tchaikovsky's *Swan Lake* and Dvořák's *New World Symphony* ("If you want to want your kid to be an opera singer, play them some romantic Russian music as a baby," she quips).

Fully intent on realizing her youthful dream of becoming a chiropractor, one of her two elder brothers posed a fateful question to his then 16-year-old sibling, asking if money were no object, what would she be?

"Without thinking, I blurted out that I would be a singer," Ciekiewicz recalls of that life-altering, 'aha' moment, realizing with a jolt that her passion lay not in manipulating bones and sinew, but expressing herself through song. Despite never having studied voice up to that point, she embarked on a Bachelor of Music degree



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PHOTO: DAVID COOPER

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through the University of Winnipeg's then-affiliated Concord College, first studying with vocal coach Ruth Ens before transferring two years later to soprano Henriette Schellenberg at the Canadian Mennonite University.

She furthered her studies at Edmonton's young artists training program, Opera NUOVA, where she first met vocal coach Michael McMahon, and later through summer programs at Banff, North Carolina's Brevard Music Center, San Francisco's Merola Opera Program, and at the Atelier Lyrique de l'Opéra de Montréal. She subsequently completed her Master's at McGill in 2008, where she studied with soprano Joanne Kolomyjec, McMahon and Opera McGill program head Patrick Hansen, who also directed her in three productions during her graduate years.

Ciekiewicz made her Manitoba Opera (MO) debut as the saucy chambermaid Paquette in their 2008 concert performance of Leonard Bernstein's *Candide*. Other MO roles have included Papagena in Mozart's *Die Zauberflöte* (2011); Contessa in *Le nozze di Figaro* (2015), as well as her searing portrayal of the slave girl Liù in Puccini's *Turandot* (2015). Whenever in town, she continues her opera advocacy work on behalf of MO through Winnipeg's arts-friendly Seven Oaks School Division's B.E.E.P. (Balanced Experiential Education Program).

Her second notable role debut this year will be Tatyana in Calgary Opera's February production of Tchaikovsky's *Eugene Onegin* directed by Tom Diamond. Also her company debut, the singer will tackle its knotty Russian libretto based on Pushkin's verse novel with her customary verve and ironclad work ethic.

"I'm a balls-to-the-wall singer," the singer jokes, bursting into peals of laughter. "My teacher Joanne Kolomyjec would always say, 'Baby steps, do the work and have a plan,' and so I try to live that every day."

"Tatyana sits slightly lower than *Jenůfa*, so pacing that in my voice and riding the wave of the orchestra will be a challenge," the singer reveals of the role's musical perils, including Act I, Scene 2's long, 12-minute 'Letter Scene.' "But I feel that I have enough tools to

do whatever's asked of me, and know that any role will teach me something new both as an actor and singer—alone or with a colleague," she says confidently.

The versatile artist also adores musical-theatre, returning to Opera on the Avalon in St. John's this past November as Cinderella in Stephen Sondheim's *Into the Woods*, directed by another Winnipegger, Donna Fletcher. In fact, that company's Jun. 2016 world premiere of *Ours* by Canadian composer John Estacio, with Robert Chafé's libretto based on the 100th anniversary of the WWI battle at Beaumont Hamel, remains a career highlight.

Asked about her personal 'bucket list' of roles, the charismatic artist doesn't miss a beat. "I love *bel canto*, so I'd love to sing more Verdi. It would be nice to do a Violetta or Desdemona one day, and to have a go at Mimi. There are many roles that I'd love to perform, but ultimately I just want to sing. Do I want to perform in the biggest houses? Yes, of course, but ultimately making good art is what is most important. And good art can be made anywhere in all shapes and sizes."

One of her staunchest fans is her "biggest rock and supporter," husband Sheldon Johnson, MO's longtime production director whom she met in 2003 when performing in *H.M.S. Pinafore* for the Gilbert and Sullivan Society of Winnipeg—he was the stage manager and she, a chorus member.

"He keeps my heart full, my feet on the ground, and my perspective level," she says of Johnson. "I am so fortunate to have a partner who is there for me at every turn of this crazy life. That kind of love and support is a priceless gift."

As her star continues to rise, this homegrown artist's feet remain firmly planted in Prairie soil, with no imminent plans to move to a larger urban centre. When not onstage, Ciekiewicz enjoys gardening, long walks, "coffee and wine" and writing. Her ode to 'Winterpeg's' legendary, sub-Arctic cold snaps appeared in the Winnipeg Free Press in 2014: "Winnipeg, you are good for my artist's soul, and wherever my journeys may take me, your Prairie spirit will follow," she wrote with heartfelt sentiment. **OC**