

ONSTAGE

Shannon Mercer

Last fall, soprano Shannon Mercer's performance as Rosina in the Opera Ontario production of *Il barbiere di Siviglia* delighted audiences and critics alike. It was another triumph for one of Canada's most sparkling young talents, her silver-streaked voice and lively personality shining in a role normally taken by mezzos. In the previous season, she had sung Oscar in the Canadian Opera Company's *Un ballo in maschera*, and despite the robust Verdian voices surrounding her, Mercer's impish and amusing Page still shone through. Little wonder *Maclean's* magazine included her on its roster of Leaders of Tomorrow.

Music has always been part of Mercer's life. Her late father was a tenor with the Gwalia Singers in Ottawa, and her ability manifested itself at a young age. "It came easily to me," says the Ottawa-born singer. "The Ottawa Welsh Society would have family talent nights, and, as a little girl, I would go up and sing a tune. I still have a recording of my father and I singing 'Somewhere Out There' from *An American Tail*."

In 1994, Mercer enrolled as a voice major at McGill University in Montreal, where she took a degree in opera and early music. "I quickly learned to approach opera and early music in the same way," she says. "The tools and style may be different, but you still need to support with your breath and sing with your full instrument. I learned a lot about period performance: how to ornament, read chant notation, the subtleties of French style."

Mercer's ties to early music remain strong. In addition to taking on the role of Nérine in Opera Atelier's 2002 production of *Médée*, she has sung the title role in Purcell's *Dido and Aeneas* for the Studio de Musique Ancienne de Montréal. She recently completed a Western Canadian tour with Les Voix Baroques and soon records her first CD with the group Masques, a Montreal-based early-music ensemble. The Spring of 2004 saw her in *Alcina* under Bernard Labadie and Les Violons du Roy.

In fact, Mercer easily traverses the worlds of opera, early music and song. Her voice is light, but possesses a sweet, crystalline quality that shines over an orchestra with ease. Her middle and bottom are unusually comfortable, allowing her to deliver the low-



DATELINE

Early English Repertoire with Masques
Recording for Analekta
July

Ottawa Chamber Music Festival
August

A program of French Baroque music
Hervé Niquet, conductor
October 27, 28, 29; Montreal

Off Centre Music Salon
Recital of French repertoire
October 17; Toronto

Handel
Messiah
Oregon Symphony,
Bernard Labadie, conductor
December 11, 12

Menotti
*The Telephone (Lucy)/The Old Maid
and the Thief (Laetitia)*
Opera Lyra Ottawa, Tyrone Paterson,
conductor
Jan 15, 17, 19, 22

lying passages of Rosina's tricky ensembles with clarity. Like Dawn Upshaw, Barbara Bonney and Sylvia McNair, Mercer is the quintessential light soprano: not a coloratura, but with excellent coloratura facility and with no pretensions to being a full lyric. In addition to her gorgeous looks and personal style, Mercer wins with beauty of tone, musical intelligence and a keen dramatic instinct.

Mercer spent a year at the University of Toronto Opera School after leaving McGill, and, in 2000, was invited to join the COC Ensemble Studio, where she was able to focus on opera. "It was a great time," she recalls. "It came just at the right point in my development. I had enough schooling and was already getting professional work. The experience and pace were incredible. It took over my life, and I got to watch the pros and learn basic things like how to rehearse." The COC employed her for two years, and, in addition to Oscar, two of her other roles included Xenia in *Boris Godonov* and Elvira in *L'Italiana in Algeri*.

She spent the summer of 2002—her first summer off from the COC—at the prestigious Merola Opera Program at the San Francisco Opera, and was invited to return for the Schwabacher Recital series. The following summer, she travelled to Santa Barbara to sing Susanna in Music Academy of the West's *Le nozze di Figaro*. "I worked with Marilyn Horne, who is an incredible artist. Singing Susanna was a dream. The role suited me better than anything I have ever sung, and I would love to sing a million more of them." Another dream role is Sophie in *Der Rosenkavalier*, and she also hopes to return to Cleopatra in Handel's *Giulio Cesare*.

Highlights of her upcoming engagements include more work with Labadie in a *Messiah* in

Oregon. There's also Bach with Ensemble Arion, concerts with Grammy Award-winning Hervé Niquet and another evening with Les Voix Baroques. But perhaps she is most excited about singing in Opera Lyra's Menotti double bill next season. "For many years I have wanted to sing for the opera in my home town," she says, "and this engagement is a dream come true. I look forward to singing for those who watched me develop and who mean so very much to me." ★