

# Mezzo on the Run

Rick MacMillan catches up with **Allyson McHardy**

“ I always say that mezzos get to do everything: Baroque, modern, Rossini, a lot of coloratura, *Carmen*. We cover a wide range,” says Allyson McHardy, a singer who really has, it seems, done just about everything in her still-short career, having appeared with the San Francisco Opera, New York City Opera and Cincinnati Opera, at the Glyndebourne and Tanglewood festivals, at the Théâtre du Capitole de Toulouse and with most of Canada’s major opera companies. She’s an alumna of both the San Francisco’s Merola program and the Ensemble Studio of the Canadian Opera Company in Toronto. And she’s about to do much more: both here in Canada and in a series of stage and concert performances in the U.S. and Europe.

As we spoke in a downtown Toronto coffee shop, she had just returned from a stint as Isabella in *L’Italiana in Algeri* at l’Opéra-Théâtre de Limoges in France. “Like *Tancredi*, it’s in the lower Rossini vein,” she says. “At the moment, I’m working on Berlioz’s *La damnation de Faust*, which is an entirely different tessitura, for the Vancouver Bach Choir.” (She sang it in April.) “I like the stuff I call ‘second soprano.’ It’s like singing Mozart. There are really no mezzos in Mozart, at least in the popular repertoire:



(Top right) As Jo in Calgary Opera's production of Mark Adamo's *Little Women*, (bottom) as Angelina in the Glyndebourne on Tour production of Rossini's *La cenerentola*

Despina, Dorabella, Annio in *La clemenza di Tito*, all are 'second soprano' or 'central soprano' roles."

And speaking of Annio, she makes her Paris Opera debut in that celebrated trouser role on Sept. 10, under conductor Adam Fischer, with a cast that includes Klaus Florian Vogt as the Roman emperor, Tito, and Stéphanie D'Oustrac as the emotionally torn Sesto. The Palais Garnier is a long way from Oshawa, just east of Toronto, where McHardy was born and grew up. Perhaps she was destined to become a singer. She never considered another career and admits she has few interests outside music. She saw her future unfold through the early influence of Elsie Drygala, "the lady in the church choir" who also led her own girls' choir.

"My mum said she noticed I knew all the words to the jingles on TV and all the TV shows' theme songs, and she thought I would enjoy singing in the girls' choir," McHardy recalls. "So after having crashed and burned at guitar, I said, 'Yeah, let's do it.' I was nine. Mrs. Drygala wouldn't stand for certain things. She was big on diction, standing up straight and not moving around. You had to behave appropriately 'on the concert platform.' She was a very important mentor for me."

Among other influences, McHardy cites David Falk, who was her voice teacher at Wilfrid Laurier University in Waterloo, Ont., where she completed her undergraduate degree in performance, and Laurier's Leslie O'Delle, who was a longtime text consultant at the Stratford Shakespeare Festival. "She taught an acting course at Laurier that really opened my eyes to that craft," says McHardy. "And the importance of text analysis, digging into characters, exploring relationships. I often reference her in my thinking about roles. And then there is, of course, my husband. He is Mr. Shakespeare and he's great at identifying structure. If I'm having a bit of a block, he's really good."

McHardy met her husband, director Graham Cozzubbo, when the two were working at The Banff Centre in 1995. His early experience was in the world of drama, but he has many opera productions under his belt, including work for the companies of Calgary, Quebec, Edmonton, Victoria and Houston and Toronto's COC. The two have had several opportunities to work together, including a *Nabucco* at Pacific Opera Victoria in 2001 and in Brian Macdonald's acclaimed COC production of *Madama Butterfly*, where McHardy was a riveting Suzuki in 2009.

PHOTO: (LEFT) DAVID LEVES; (TOP RIGHT) TRUDE LEE; (BOTTOM RIGHT) ROBBIE JACK

In Banff, says McHardy with a laugh, “my husband was converted to what I call the church of the music of our time. If the ink was still wet, it was already a little too old for him. He wanted it to be really current.” Contemporary music has featured prominently in McHardy’s repertoire list, too: She sang the role of Jo in Mark Adamo’s *Little Women* with Calgary Opera, has appeared with Toronto’s adventurous Queen of Puddings Music Theatre and is featured on recordings of Harry Somers’ *Seriette* and *A Midwinter’s Night’s Dream* on the Centrediscs label, after live performances with Toronto’s Canadian Children’s Opera Company and Soundstreams Canada.

McHardy’s voice is dusky, but velvet smooth and transparent, and her impressive flexibility makes her an ideal candidate for Baroque opera and those driving Rossini mezzo rôles. But she is equally comfortable as Flosshilde in Wagner’s *Das Rheingold* (she

this world. The house is an absolute jewel. At the school shows, we came out for our bows and there was all this screaming. Kids don’t lie; they’ll tell you just what they think. One tiny girl came up to me afterwards and said [here McHardy conjures her mock little-British-girl accent], ‘You were very good.’”

The critics thought she was very good, too. *The Telegraph* noted the “warmth and grace” of her performance and *MusicOMH* remarked, “...the stunning firework spectacular of her final aria in the last act demonstrated mastery of the full mezzo range.”

On the horizon for McHardy are Arcabonne in Johann Christian Bach’s *Amadis de Gaule*, in January 2012 with L’Opéra-Comique in Paris (her debut with that company), under conductor Jérémie Rhorer and stage director Marcel Bozonnet; Dejanira in a staged version of Handel’s *Hercules* (which was presented as a concert work in Handel’s time) with Toronto’s Tafelmusik, also in January; her first *Carmen*, with Pacific Opera Victoria in February; a Mozart *Requiem* with the Quebec Symphony in April; and the dual roles of Juno/Ino in Handel’s *Semele*, next May with the COC.

“I was supposed to do the *Carmen* before, but I got pregnant,” McHardy says in reference to her now four-year-old daughter. “An eight-month pregnant *Carmen*? I don’t think so. I’d have to



As Rosina in a Minnesota Opera production of *Il barbiere di Siviglia*

debuted the role in the COC’s premiere production in 2006, and revisited it this past May in a concert performance with the Montreal Symphony under Kent Nagano); in Mahler’s *Das Lied von der Erde* (which she sang in June with the Vancouver Symphony under Bramwell Tovey, partnering tenor John Mac Master); or in Elgar’s *Dream of Gerontius*, which she took on in 2009 at the Grant Park Music Festival in Illinois.

She gushes about her first Glyndebourne experience last November and December, where she sang the lead role of Angelina in the English company’s touring production of *La cenerentola*. “My gosh, it’s so beautiful. The first day I showed up for work, I took the bus in from Lewes. I decided to find a coffee shop and ended up looking out on this field of green, with sheep literally a stone’s throw away. It was a great experience. We did something like 17 shows on the tour. The orchestra was just out of

“Well, of course I still have singing lessons. I’m learning new repertoire all the time.”

be sitting in a chair,” she says, letting out a raucous laugh. “Then sing for a few minutes and go sit down again. So I’m really excited to get the chance to do it now.”

McHardy says she enjoys the process of “learning how to sing things. I just read Renée Fleming’s book, *The Inner Voice: The Making of a Singer*. It’s a great book for young singers to read. She’s got the career and then some, but yet she says, ‘Every time I do it, I want to do it better, I want to make this part or that part better.’ Sometimes when we’re younger, we have the idea that we will arrive and then we’ll be done. But singers have teachers and coaches all their lives. People say to me, ‘You still have singing lessons?’ Well, of course I still have singing lessons. I’m learning new repertoire all the time. It’s like, do you go to the gym and then say, ‘OK, I have the perfect body, I can stop now?’”

When she does stop, teaching might be a future career move, but, she says, “the time for that is not right now. If I turn to teaching, I want to be really committed to it. Maybe when I retire. If not, I might do something else, but still stay in the professional world: working with an opera company in some other capacity, maybe casting. That fascinates me so much: different takes on characters, thinking about singers in a new way, in ways you’d never think of hearing them. You know, ‘Let’s shake it up.’” **OC**