

An anti-opera opera singer

Although Allyson McHardy makes her living belting out arias, as a music fan she'd rather listen to other genres

By Amy Smart



Photo : Bruce Stotesbury

She has committed her life to it, but mezzo-soprano Allyson McHardy says she would rather listen to Leonard Cohen and the Beatles than opera music.

"Do I dare say this in an interview?" said the star of Pacific Opera Victoria's *Carmen*, pausing for a moment. "I'm not really a classical music opera fan." It's not that she actively dislikes it, she'd just rather be singing it than listening to it. Besides, it's more important for her to be a good singer than a good fan, she says.

The anti-opera opera star was raised by "a family of business people" on Scottish folk music in Oshawa, Ont. Her mother was a

banker, her father was an Eaton's store manager and her brother is now an accountant. Of course, there was music - her grandparents played piano and her uncle played the fiddle - but it certainly wasn't like the music she's performing now.

She makes one exception. "I'll always listen to Handel. Handel is God's music," she said.

McHardy has been featured in opera houses throughout North America and Europe. Her recording of Caldara's *La Conversione di Clodoveo* with Le Nouvel Opéra recently received a Juno nomination for best classical album of the year of a vocal or choral performance - her first.

This will be her first POV performance since 2001's *Nabucco*. She comes fresh off a European run that included a role at the Opéra-Comique in Paris, where she climbed the same stairs and shared the same stage as those who first performed *Carmen* in 1875. This will be her debut in the role. "*Carmen* is such a huge mantle to put on, in a way. For me, it's been important not to get too much into the idea of *Carmen*," she said. Instead she focuses on the action in the story, the rich, earthy music and *Carmen*'s apparent life philosophy: "Fate is fate, you can't escape it. Is there morality? Mmm, I don't think so. Maybe."

Given her unstuffy view of the traditional art form, it should come as no surprise that she appreciates Dennis Garnhum's stage direction, which artistic director Timothy Vernon says makes the treatment "thoroughly theatrical." Garnhum is artistic director of Theatre Calgary and studied at the University of Victoria. "I'm hoping that soon we can get past the idea that those two places are different, opera and theatre," said McHardy, who calls her home with director Graham Cozzubbo a "theatrical house."

Cozzubbo and McHardy have a four-year-old daughter who is already showing some flair, singing McHardy's arias. "The text that comes out of her little mouth is pretty fun," said McHardy. For example: "One song I was singing when I was in France - the text was: Love, what do you want of me? I was not made for you."

This will be POV's fourth presentation of *Carmen*, the tragic story centring on a fiery heroine and the volatile young soldier Don José who falls in love with her, set in Seville, Spain. "It's an indispensable piece," said

Vernon. "At the peak of the repertoire, it vies with *La Bohème* and *La Traviata* for favourite and most performed opera in the world."

It features a young nearly-all-Canadian cast, including five members of POV's resident program. All of whom - aside from McHardy and Andrew Greenwood in the role of Zuniga - will be making their POV debuts. While others have involved significant departures from the original, like the 1984 run that set the story in Nicaragua, this one is very loyal to Georges Bizet's original, with spoken dialogue transitions in French with English surtitles. "It's an evergreen piece," said Vernon. "When you come back to it, you rediscover the wonderful invention in it and the beauty and the naturalness of the melody. The way it's sort of like a very contoured, beautifully tailored gown."

