

INSIDE OUT

A song for Wales

Ottawa soprano returns to her roots

BY STEVEN MAZEY

Arising Ottawa soprano credits the duets she used to sing as a girl with her father and a trip to Wales as a teenager for her first non-classical CD, a beautiful collection of Welsh folk songs.

Shannon Mercer, a Canterbury High School grad, has been called one of Canada's most promising young sopranos. Richard Bradshaw, the late director of the Canadian Opera Company, described her as "one of the most intelligent and musical artists I've seen anywhere."

She has two recordings nominated for Juno Awards this year and she will star as Pamina in Opera Lyra Ottawa's production of Mozart's *The Magic Flute* next season at the National Arts Centre.

But Mercer, 31, says she wouldn't be enjoying that success if it hadn't been for her late father's passion for his Welsh heritage and his involvement with the Ottawa Welsh Society. The organization provided Mercer with some of her initial singing experiences and her

What: Shannon Mercer and Skye Consort, performing Welsh folk songs from her new CD

When & where: Sunday, 3 p.m., St. Andrew's Church, Kent at Wellington streets.

Tickets & info: \$20, at the door. 613-292-4775.

first encouragement, when she was still in elementary school.

Kenneth Mercer, who died in 1995 of a heart attack, was an amateur tenor who loved to sing. His daughter says she has fond memories of performing duets with him at Welsh Society talent nights. She also sang in the organization's choir, the Gwalia Singers.

When Mercer was 15, she travelled with her family to Wales to compete in the high-profile Llangollen International Musical Eisteddfod. In the vocal solo category for singers under 16, she won first prize over 31 competitors. Mercer's winning performance was broadcast on BBC Television. She hasn't looked back since.

"I learned to sing in the Ottawa Welsh Society from the time I was six or seven. I would prepare a Welsh folk song and sing it in front of people, and that's how I got over stage fright and became comfortable with singing," says Mercer, who now lives in Toronto.

"The members of the Welsh Society supported and encouraged me all along, and they continue to do that. That's one of the reasons I'm so thrilled about the new CD. It's a way of giving something back to the community."

Mercer is talking about Wales: *The Land of Song*, her fourth CD for the Analekta label.



JULIE OLIVER, THE OTTAWA CITIZEN

See MERCER on PAGE J4 Canterbury High School grad Shannon Mercer is one of Canada's most promising young sopranos.

Dedicated to her father, it's a beautifully sung collection of the folk tunes that Mercer sang while she was growing up. She performs with seven musicians from Montreal's Skye Consort, who will join her to launch the recording with a concert Sunday at Ottawa's St. Andrew's Church.

"To those who know me as a classical vocalist, this Welsh folk song album may seem odd," she writes in the CD booklet.

"But this music, this Welsh culture and heritage, is the reason I became a singer. ... This is the culture that shaped my path in life and fills me with so much love for music and song."

Accordianist Seán Dagher arranged the tunes for the CD, and his group performs some lively instrumental selections between the songs.

Mercer's singing on the disc is a pleasure — light and natural and never sounding like an opera singer trying to go folk. Though all the tunes are sung in the Welsh language (Mercer took lessons while growing up), you don't need to understand a word to enjoy them and feel the emotion behind them.

The musicians, on instruments that include harp, flute, violins and percussion, accompany Mercer sensitively, and Dagher's effective arrangements weave beautifully around Mercer's silvery voice.

Mercer says she sang all of the tunes as a girl, including the haunting lullaby *Suo Gân*, the tune that director Steven Spielberg used memorably in his 1987 film *Empire of the Sun*.

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SHANNON MERCER

The concert will include all 15 tunes from the disc.

Mercer says her mother Muriel, her sister and three brothers, who have all been hugely supportive of her singing, will be there, as will many longtime friends from the Welsh Society.

It's Mercer's first non-classical disc. She says the project started when officials from Analekta were asking her about what kind of recording she would like to make next.

Two of her recordings for the label are nominated in the "Classical Album of the Year: Vocal or Choral Performance" category for this year's Juno Awards: *Bach and the Liturgical Year*, with Mercer and organist Luc Beauséjour, and *Gloria Vivaldi's Angels*, involving Mercer and other singers with Montreal's Ensemble Caprice. Mercer will be in Vancouver later this month for the awards ceremonies.

She says she was thrilled when the company agreed to her proposal for a disc of Welsh songs.

"In North America, people tend to hear a lot of Irish and Scottish music but not so much of the Welsh, so I was thrilled to share this beautiful music with the musicians from Skye Consort and with listeners. Seán did an amazing job on the arrangements."

"I think the CD will reach people who might not buy my classical recordings."

Growing up, Mercer studied voice in Ottawa with Joan Burnside and Joan Maxwell-Rempel. After high school, she studied at McGill University and went on to land spots in the prestigious training programs for young singers at the Canadian Opera Company and San Francisco Opera.

She says she wondered initially if she should try to change her classically-trained sound and approach for a disc of folk music, but says "this is the only way I've ever done it, and so I just approached it in my way."

"I can't pretend to be another kind of singer."

With her light, lyrical voice, Mercer didn't need to worry.

Unlike what can happen when a heavier-voiced dramatic soprano tries to do pop or folk tunes, Mercer never overwhelms the light music. She sounds perfectly at home, because she's been singing the songs all her life.

"I hope," she says, "that it just sounds like a singer who's performing music that she loves."