

Music

Down-to-earth diva

Anne Sofie Von Otter is a musical voice of reason

By John von Rhein

Music critic

Because the world of opera is so full of prima donnas (of both sexes), it is refreshing to meet a singer seemingly devoid of pretensions or airs, one who actually values the projection of words and music above the projection of ego.

Such a down-to-earth diva is Anne Sofie von Otter, currently delighting audiences at Lyric Opera in her company debut as the amorous, impetuous, if fickle count Octavian in Strauss' "Der Rosenkavalier."

Being young, tall and slender would appear to make the Swedish mezzo-soprano a natural for the trouser role, which calls for her to swagger about in knee britches and powdered wig, like a Viennese Cherubino.

But Octavian, as Von Otter well knows, also demands an artist of exceptional vocal flexibility, musical refinement and dramatic finesse. Although critics have noted all three qualities in her performances, it is interesting to hear her admit to feeling insecure in a part she only recently added to her repertory.

"Octavian is such a huge, difficult role, and I had so much trouble learning it," Von Otter said during a recent rehearsal break at the Civic Opera House.

Her punkish blonde coif and faded blue jeans lent an intriguing touch of '80s casualness to the opera's formal, 18th-Century setting. The singer settled into a chair in a vacant office and continued her confession.

"I was already pregnant with my first child when I sang Octavian for the first time last year in Stockholm. Even though I'm quite good at sightreading music and all that, I kept thinking, 'How did anyone ever learn this before me?' I still feel I won't be able to make it my role for a long time yet. It is a favorite role of mine, but it will be even more so when I know it well."

Such frankness is typical of Anne Sofie von Otter—a direct, unassuming, girl-next-door type offstage, a committed and conscientious artist behind the footlights. Although she is in demand for opera and concerts all over the world, the Stockholm-born singer appears to be in no hurry to push her career very far beyond its present boundaries.

Her marriage two years ago to the Swedish actor Benny Fredrickson and the newfound responsibilities of motherhood (Von Otter, her husband and their one-year-old son make their home in Stockholm) have altered her



Mezzo-soprano Anne Sofie von Otter is an unassuming, girl-next-door type offstage, a committed artist behind the footlights. Tribune photo by Don Casper

perspective on being a performer, the singer says.

"When I was single, I worked more, hopping from engagement to engagement, country to country. Now I try to turn off singing every so often, to make sure that I have enough free time to spend at home," Von Otter smiles. "Unlike a lot of performers who say they maintain an apartment somewhere, but who never actually live there."

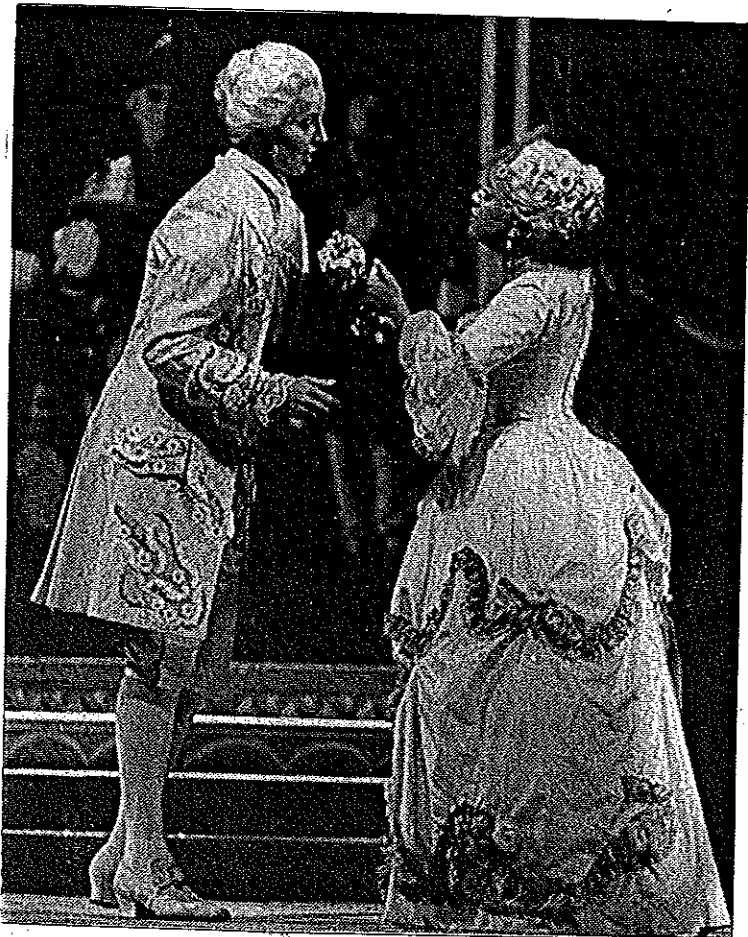
"It's also important for me that I don't jump from one thing to another too quickly as I get older. These days, I find I need more time to adjust from the big opera and concert roles I do to the more contained singing that is required for the baroque and lieder repertory that I adore.

"I used to give very little thought to that sort of thing. In August I sang some Handel, which lies rather low for me, at a baroque festival in Sweden. Then I went straight

to London to sing the part of Marguerite in Berlioz's "Damnation of Faust" with Georg Solti and the Chicago Symphony. That role is very high and, in fact, stretches my voice to the limit. It felt very strange.

"The experience taught me a lot. Not only does the voice need time to recover between engagements, so, too, does the mind. Because you concentrate so much when you do a concert that you must have several days, even weeks, in which to unwind, to get your bearings before the process begins all over again."

When a performer's repertory is as unusual and diverse as Von Otter's, maintaining a proper balance assumes primary importance. The singer limits herself to only two opera productions a year, she says, not only because she wants to spend as much time as possible with her family, but also to guard against the



Tribune photo by Charles Osgood

As Octavian, Von Otter (left) gives a silver rose to Kathleen Battle in the Lyric Opera production of Strauss' "Der Rosenkavalier."

her stage repertory.

Clearly Von Otter is not only a smart singer, but she also is a prudent singer.

"I guess because some people find the color of my voice very light, they ask me if I intend to move eventually into the soprano repertory," she says. "Well, I am very comfortable singing mezzo parts. I don't adore singing high stuff very much. And because of the way I'm built, being very tall, it's much more convenient singing the trouser roles."

What, then, of moving down the vocal scale into some of the lower mezzo and contralto parts of opera?

"Sometimes I wish I could do some roles with a bit more teeth in them. Dalila [in Saint-Saens' "Samson et Dalila"] is exciting, of course, even if it is a bit too dramatic for my voice. So is Eboli [in Verdi's "Don Carlo"]."

"Mozart's Elvira is one I'd like to have a go at one day, but it's maybe on the high side. They are roles I have in the back of my head. Maybe one day."

It was conductor Georg Solti who introduced her to Chicago in 1985, as one of the soloists in his Chicago Symphony performances of Mozart's Mass in C Minor. Two years later the maestro invited her back to Orchestra Hall to perform and record Bach's St. Matthew Passion with him, and she is returning here next January for CSO subscription concerts of Bach's B-Minor

Mass, which also is due to be recorded.

"I admire Solti immensely," says Von Otter. "He has this incredibly contagious enthusiasm for the music and he fills you with the will to work. Maybe it's his age and experience, but I respect him more than any other conductor I have worked with."

The daughter of a diplomat and a piano-playing mother, Von Otter came from a reasonably musical household but did not think of singing professionally until her final two years in high school.

"When I started to study singing, I wanted to sound like Julie Andrews," she recalls. "I really thought I was destined to be a coloratura soprano; that shows you what I knew about singing!"

"I began singing a lot of baroque music, first as a member of a church choir, later a soloist. Back then I didn't know a single opera, except maybe 'Carmen,' which I sang even though it didn't really suit me temperamentally, because it was low enough for my voice."

"When I began studying with Anna Rosza at the Guildhall School in London, she made me sing all sorts of things I never dared to touch

before, like the Rossini repertory, Mozart's Cherubino and Sesto. So then I sort of found my voice."

"One of the things that started me liking opera was the late Jean-Pierre Ponnelle's film of 'Madama Butterfly,' with Mirella Freni, Placido Domingo and Herbert von Karajan conducting. I can't remember many details, only that I was absolutely stunned. Mirella sounded *divine*." Von Otter draws a quick breath, savoring the memory.

"For a while I was a coward, never daring to sing the high stuff," she continues. "I thought I would never be an opera singer, partly because the repertory was all so difficult and out of my range."

"I was deadly scared of showing myself on stage; just moving my arms terrified me. Sometimes I still get the jumps when working with a director—my self-confidence gets very low and I think I look ridiculous."

A brief look of exasperation crosses the singer's face. Von Otter reflects a bit, then contentment returns to her features.

"Fortunately, once I am into the performance, and the adrenalin starts flowing and my concentration is higher, the feeling goes away."

literature growing stale for her. The bulk of her professional time she devotes to giving concerts and recitals, and to making recordings.

Her opera and concert repertory varies widely, including the Bach passions and oratorios, Monteverdi, Gluck and Handel, Mozart's Dora-

bella, Idamante and Sesto in "La Clemenza di Tito" (her favorite operatic role), Berlioz, Tchaikovsky and the Composer in Strauss' "Ariadne auf Naxos." Next year she will add two Rossini roles, Tancredi and Cenerentola, to her list of specialities, bringing to eight the number of operas in