

Amanda Majeski
PHOTO: FAY FOX

Prepared for Her Moment

Soprano Amanda Majeski (Opera '09) makes every experience count.

BY HEIDI WALESON

In March 2010, Amanda Majeski got the call every understudy awaits: The soprano singing the Countess in *Le nozze di Figaro* at Lyric Opera of Chicago was ill, and she would be going on.

Ms. Majeski, then in her first year as a member of Lyric's Ryan Opera Center, had sung the role once, during the covers' run-through in the rehearsal room, but never onstage. She barely remembers this trial-by-fire debut. "‘Fight or flight’ kind of kicks in, and you're not even thinking about it," she says. "It's almost an out-of-body experience. You don't know what happened other than, ‘gosh, I *think* that went well.’" It did—critics praised her voice, technical control, and complete *sangfroid*.

Ms. Majeski was thoroughly prepared for her moment, having spent the previous three years in the real-life training crucible of the Curtis opera program, under the direction of Mikael Eliassen. She had performed at least a dozen roles onstage, and was ready for anything the professional world could throw at her. "It was very scary to go on as the Countess, but it was it was not scarier than other things I had done before," she says. "Mikael has this thing called studio class, where you have to get up and sing in front of your colleagues. Sometimes



When her moment arrived, she had performed at least a dozen roles onstage in the real-life training crucible of the Curtis opera program, where “you’re trained to get over the ‘scary’ and get the job done.”



that’s scarier than singing for an audience of people you don’t know—to try something out in front of colleagues and have it not work. I had that experience every week. You’re trained to get over the ‘scary’ and get the job done.”

Today, Ms. Majeski’s busy schedule takes her to the Metropolitan Opera (where her 2014 debut was another high-profile *Figaro* Countess replacement, this time in a new production on the season’s opening night), as well as Paris, Zurich, Frankfurt, Madrid, Buenos Aires, Hong Kong, Beijing, and the Glyndebourne Festival. Her principal repertoire focus is Mozart and Strauss, and her current season reflects that, with *Vitellia* in Paris, *Fiordiligi* at the Met (a new Phelim McDermott production set in 1950s Coney Island), and Strauss’s *Four Last Songs* on April 29 with the Curtis Symphony Orchestra in Verizon Hall. The Composer in *Ariadne auf Naxos*, which she will essay in Santa Fe this summer, is slightly off the beaten path since it is usually sung by mezzos, but as she points out, the part was premiered by a soprano, and at 5’ 10” she’s a natural for pants roles.

HANDS-ON EXPERIENCE

Ms. Majeski grew up in a suburb of Chicago, where her mother encouraged her to try every extracurricular activity that interested her—sports, dance, figure skating, piano, cello. When she auditioned for the high school musical and didn’t get a part, she asked for voice lessons. “We happened to find a teacher who taught classically. She brought out the 24 Italian art songs, and I said, ‘What is this? I want to sing *Rent* and *Les Miz*. But the more I studied it, the more

Top left: Amanda Majeski as Donna Elvira and Ildar Abdrazakov as Don Giovanni in the Metropolitan Opera’s *Don Giovanni* PHOTO: MARTY SOHL/METROPOLITAN OPERA

Above left: Ms. Majeski and Matthew Rose in *Der Rosenkavalier* at Lyric Opera of Chicago PHOTO: CORY WEAVER/LYRIC OPERA OF CHICAGO

Above: Ms. Majeski as the Countess in *Le nozze di Figaro* at Lyric Opera of Chicago PHOTO: TODD ROSENBERG/LYRIC OPERA OF CHICAGO

AMANDA MAJESKI WITH THE CURTIS SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA

The orchestra’s April 29 concert in Verizon Hall features Amanda Majeski in Strauss’s *Four Last Songs*, with Karina Canellakis (Violin '04) on the podium. www.curtis.edu/Orchestra

“I was so impressed by her preparation, her complete confidence,” says bass Matthew Rose, Baron Ochs in the Lyric’s *Der Rosenkavalier*. “She was a brilliant colleague, with no fuss, always in the right place, never diva-ish.”

I fell in love with it.” She went on to Northwestern University, to Marlena Malas’s summer workshop at the Chautauqua Institution, and then on to Curtis, where Ms. Malas is on the faculty. Initially she planned to spend two years, but stayed for a third.

The value of the intensive, hands-on Curtis experience was clear to Ms. Majeski from her first year, when she took on Magda in *La rondine*. “Mikael put Danielle Orlando basically at my disposal to coach it, and to work on the Italian and the style. I had Marlena sometimes three times a week, to make sure that it was never too much for me—never pushed beyond my limits, but learning how to sing that role in a safe, helpful way for my voice. Consequently it was one of my favorite stage experiences ever.”

Another formative experience was performing Poulenc’s solo opera *La voix humaine*, with Mr. Eliassen playing the piano. During that project, he got to know Ms. Majeski well. “She had a mysterious, enigmatic quality about her, which I always thought was intriguing,” he says. “Some people thought of her as very unassuming—not a typical soprano personality. Then she would get onstage, and change to be not so unassuming, which I think is a wonderful gift.”

ALWAYS IN THE RIGHT PLACE

Graduating from Curtis in 2009, Ms. Majeski continued to the Ryan Center, and then spent a year as a contract artist at the Semperoper Dresden, which, she says, was rather like Curtis: “You’re in one place, and you have assignments; it’s just in German.” Offers started to come in from opera houses around the world, and the soprano embarked on the freelance life from a home base in the Chicago area, where she lives with her husband, bass-baritone Sam Handley, and her stepdaughter.

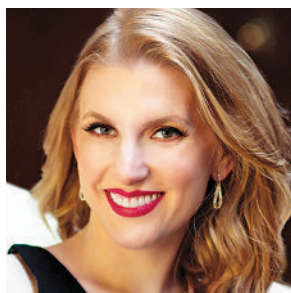
She has been back to Lyric Opera of Chicago several times, including her second outing as the Marschallin in *Der Rosenkavalier* in 2016. Bass Matthew Rose, also a Curtis alumnus, was singing his first-ever Baron Ochs, and was challenged by the role’s acres of text and Austrian dialect. For him, Ms. Majeski was a rock. “I was so impressed by her preparation, her complete confidence,” he says. “She had such a grasp of the character, the role, and the music, and she nailed it from Day 1. Doing a piece like that, you have enough to worry about, and she was a brilliant colleague, with no fuss, always in the right place, never diva-ish.” When the two were together again several months later, as Leporello and Donna Elvira in the Met’s *Don Giovanni*, Mr. Rose says, “I trusted her every second we were onstage.”

Looking into the future, Ms. Majeski would love to do more Marschallins. “I’m pretty sure I’ll never get sick of it. It’s one of those roles that grows with you the older you get, the more life you live.” She has her eye on Britten operas like *Peter Grimes* and *Turn of the Screw*, and she’d love to do more contemporary pieces.

Her overall goal? “Continue making good music with good people and hoping that I make people who come to hear me happy along the way.” ♦

Heidi Waleson is the opera critic for the *Wall Street Journal* and a regular contributor to *Overtones*, *Symphony*, *Opera News*, and other national publications. Her book *Mad Scenes and Exit Arias: The Death of the New York City Opera and the Future of Opera in America* will be published by Metropolitan Books in Fall 2018.

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WHY CHOOSE CURTIS?

—AMANDA MAJESKI

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“Curtis is the best place for real-life vocal training. It’s hands-on learning by doing—weekly lessons, and working with brilliant pianists and diction coaches two, three times a day. The program is so small that Mikael Eliassen can tailor the opera season to the students he has, as opposed to the other way around. Curtis taught me everything about how to pace myself vocally, about stamina, how to work with directors and how to be a good colleague. When I left Curtis, I felt like I knew what I was doing, that I was absolutely prepared for everything vocally that lies ahead.”