

## INTERVIEW

## WITH TRACY DAHL

## Short but sweet: Dahl scales opera heights

By Stuart Slayen  
For The Financial Post

## WINNIPEG

There's Mozart sheet music draped on a chair and a Handel score on the coffee table. Income tax papers and photos from past performances litter the carpet; blue and silver "welcome home" balloons sag in a corner.

Hurricane Tracy has blown into town. Coloratura soprano Tracy Dahl returned home to Winnipeg to appear with the Manitoba Opera before performing with the Canadian Opera Company next week in Toronto, and the city's opera patrons bought tickets by the score.

The 31-year-old Dahl — whose breathtaking voice and superb acting skills are propelling her toward the upper reaches of the international opera scene — was in Winnipeg to star as Susanna in Manitoba Opera's production of the Marriage of Figaro. Not surprisingly, the hometown crowd greeted Dahl's energetic and expressive performance with cheers.

Winnipeggers aren't alone in appreciating Dahl's skills. The tiny, ebullient singer has won over audiences from New York to San Francisco and from Montreal to Calgary.

"Tracy's presence instills a heightened urgency" among ticket buyers, says Jeannie Dubberly, Manitoba Opera's director of marketing.

"You can't blame them if they want to be excited," Dahl says of the fuss, "but then you feel like 'Oh, boy! I'd better not mess up.' The pressure is not something they inflict on me. It's something I put on myself."

That's Dahl. No prima donna hysterics, no monstrous ego waiting to be unleashed; only a down-to-earth sense that the onus is on her to perform. So far, she's done so brilliantly in increasingly important venues, from the San Francisco Opera to New York's Metropolitan Opera. Yet the top ranks of opera stardom — the heady heights occupied by a Kathleen Battle or an Aprile Milo — continue to elude her, much to the puzzlement of her fans.

Dahl, however, insists she harbors no real ambitions. Her career has been a series of "highlighter pen strokes," she says. No breakthroughs, just a steady climb of increasingly important roles and concerts.

Of course, she charmingly confesses, she would like to perform in Vienna, or at La Scala, or any of the other great European houses that gave birth to opera.

"It's inevitable that in three or four years, she'll be an international star," says Irving Guttman, artistic director of the Edmonton and Manitoba operas. "She was born with a natural gift and has double the personality of the average singer."

That's evident just talking to Dahl. Out of sheer mischievousness during an interview she doesn't hesitate to scrunch up her lunch bag over the microphone of a tape recorder, gleefully chuckling. Nor can she sit still for long. During conversation, she'll frequently jump out of her chair to make a point, gesticulating wildly, trying out silly voices and animated facial expressions.

Funny and warm, her personality shines across the footlights, a fact that has contributed to her success. That stardom is within her grasp is something of an anomaly: this is one opera singer who wasn't exactly fond of opera, at least in her youth.

"Never listened to it!" she shouts, her voice characteristically emphatic. "Are you kidding? Who?!"

Her first love was musical theatre. In high school (where her yearbook write-up was: "Ambition — Broadway star; Fate — Munchkin in The Wizard of Oz"), she organized school productions and cabarets.

As a high school graduation present, Dahl's parents sent her to the musical theatre program at the Banff School of Fine Arts. She returned to study education at the University of Manitoba, but left to join the cast of Grease at the Manitoba Theatre Centre in 1981.

A second summer at Banff, however, brought home a hard truth: there would be few parts for a four-foot-10, 110-pound, red-haired actress.



Winnipegger Dahl: breathtaking voice propels her toward stardom.

"I didn't have the look," Dahl says wryly. "[Director] Alan Lund once said to me that it was a shame that [this] voice was in my body."

Prompted by colleagues and a voice teacher, she pursued a different career, spending her third and fourth summers at Banff studying opera.

"All of a sudden, my height didn't matter and opera fit like a glove," she says. "It was like I was going along a railroad track and there came a fork, and God pulled a lever to select the track. I didn't derail. The ride has never been bumpy or uncomfortable."

Still, she occasionally wonders what might have happened if she'd stayed on her original course. "Every once in a while, I feel a loss for what was on that other road," she admits. "But very rarely."

Much of her confidence stems from her faith. A devout Baptist, Dahl feels that God has guided her career.

"I see His hand in it all over the place," she says. "If your confidence is set in God, it's a lot more sturdy than when it's set on yourself. When you know there's someone up there who loves you whether you sing like a cow or sing like an angel, it helps you do well."

Certainly, Dahl's singing has been closer to the angels in the 10 years since she first appeared in an opera role, in an earlier Manitoba Opera production of Figaro. And though she refuses to pinpoint breakthrough moments in her career, there have been highlights.

In the fall of 1987, for example, she played Olympia opposite Plácido Domingo in Les Contes

d'Hoffmann for the San Francisco Opera. She was rewarded for her performance with an enthusiastic ovation and warm reviews. The San Francisco Examiner called her "a tremendous audience favorite" and said "she picked out the notes as if they were tweezers, the high E flat, the stratospheric thrills and all."

But it was in January 1991 that she faced her most nerve-racking experience while a Met understudy for the role of Adele in Die Fledermaus.

On opening night, Dahl returned to her apartment after doing her laundry and found an urgent message on her answering machine. The singer who was supposed to play Adele was ill. Dahl appeared on stage with three hours' notice and, according to reports from those present, performed beautifully.

"It was like a dream sequence," Dahl recalls. "The only way I knew it happened is because my body hurt so badly the next morning. I felt like I'd been hit by a Mack truck."

Her "official" debut at the Met came last December when she sang in the world premiere of The Ghosts of Versailles, by composer John Corigliano, with legendary mezzo-soprano Marilyn Horne.

Metropolitan Opera press officer Peter Clark described audience reaction to Dahl as "enthusiastic and favorable." The New York Post singled her out for having displayed "incredible clarity."

Dahl's colleagues are among her biggest fans.

"She's a phenomenal singer and

a terrific actress, which is rare," says Canadian contralto Maureen Forrester.

Forrester, who has twice performed with Dahl, says that because of her size, Dahl won't get a chance to do all of the great opera roles. "She won't do Tosca and she won't likely be cast with a six-foot-two-inch tenor. People would snicker," Forrester says.

Guttman, however, believes that shouldn't prevent Dahl from becoming a top-ranked star. There are simply not that many coloratura sopranos who combine voice, personality and stage presence.

"Acting is becoming a bigger part of opera," Dahl says. "Singers are no longer these big, fat people with horns on their heads that we know from Bugs Bunny."

"Tracy has a very high register," adds Mary Morrison, Dahl's Toronto voice coach. "As she gets into her 50s, she may not have the same high notes. But she should still be able to perform into her 60s."

Still, there's a piece missing from her career, the final step to becoming a singer of international stature: a record deal. Dahl only has one recording to her credit — a salute to Disney with the Cincinnati Pops — and that's not enough to gain her widespread fame.

"A record deal can be very important," says Guttman. "It really does help a lot."

Dahl, of course, appears content to let whatever happens come in its own sweet time.

More than the projects, though, she's looking forward to spending the summer with her family and her boyfriend in Winnipeg. Even her father, though, has wondered whether she'll eventually have to move to Toronto or New York.

Not Dahl. Basing herself in Winnipeg "simply hasn't been a problem up to now. Where you are really doesn't make that much difference. I don't see anywhere else as home," she says.

'Singers are no longer these big fat people with horns on their heads'