

Ode To Joyce

Prairie Village's own Joyce DiDonato returns home to sing with the Kansas City Symphony this month.

words ALEX HOFFMAN

No offense to the Prince-penned Sheila E. tune from her teenage days, but Joyce DiDonato really *is* leading the glamorous life as one of the world's finest mezzo-sopranos.

Her 2012 schedule kicked off with a dream scenario of a month-long engagement at New York's Metropolitan Opera House, the world premiere of *The Enchanted Island*. Arias and other snippets from composers like Handel and Vivaldi are meshed together in a rousing Baroque collage for the production, which also featured esteemed tenor Plácido Domingo.

From there, DiDonato switched coasts for another world premiere in San Francisco on Feb. 4, this time Jake Heggie's song cycle *Camille Claudel: Into the Fire*, inspired by the French sculptor. Then, she made her way to southern California so she could attend the Grammys as a two-time nominee: Best Classical Vocal Solo (winning for her album *Diva/Divo*) and Best Opera Recording (taking part in Vivaldi's re-assembled *Ercole sul Termodonte*).

And after a string of concerts in Europe, the homegrown DiDonato will be back in Kansas City March 23-25 to sing Heggie's *The Deepest Desire* and Rossini's *Giovanna d'Arco*. It will be her second time with the Kansas City Symphony, and her first at the Kauffman Center for the Performing Arts.

Frenzied as her life is, DiDonato used her flight back from San Francisco as an opportunity to cool down and gather more thoughts about music, growing up in Johnson County and why her weekend in Kansas City is the one she's looking forward to the most this year.

435 South: First of all, how was New York for the entire month of January? Could you tell us more about *The Enchanted Island* and the role you played?

Joyce DiDonato: New York was sublime. I love that city and the energy it gives me. It also, however, requires a lot of energy, so after two months there, I'm usually ready to move on and recover!

I was playing the role of Sycorax, an island sorceress who has lost her power, but works to regain it throughout the opera. It's a fascinating role, because part of *The Enchanted Island* is pulled from Shakespeare's *The Tempest* and my character is only ever referred to, but never appears. So we had a completely blank slate on which to create her, and that freedom was wonderful.

435: In terms of history and tradition, what significance does performing at the Metropolitan Opera House hold for you?

JD: As an American singer, it is certainly the pinnacle of companies in my country, so it feels like reaching the top of Mount Everest. Today, with the HD movie broadcasts, we can reach hundreds of thousands of people in over 50 countries with one live performance, and that is certainly an incredible thing for this art form.

435: Is this the first time you've been able to sing with Plácido Domingo? What was it like working with him this much?

JD: I was a winner in his vocal competition, Operalia, in 1998, and we performed a duet from [Bellini's opera] *Norma* together on the winner's concert. He is a consummate professional, always eager and curious to learn more, and truly one of the most generous colleagues and performers I have ever met. I was pinching myself during every single performance that I shared with him!

435: How would you describe your childhood in Prairie Village?

JD: It was a very typical Midwest suburban upbringing, with summers spent at the Prairie Village swimming pool, babysitting, piano lessons and a wonderful education via Bishop Miege High School, where I was a choir geek and theater nut! I consider myself supremely fortunate to have grown up where I did.



photo: Nick Heavican

435: What kind of music did you own and listen to during that time?

JD: Billy Joel! He was my favorite. But all the typical 80s rock and a bit of classic rock as well through my older siblings. My dad also had a great big band collection, and those were a great source of inspiration to me growing up as well.

435: You did not immediately embark on opera as your calling; music education was where you thought you were headed. How did opera begin to effectively claim you while you were a student at Wichita State University?

JD: I joined the opera chorus and fell in love with it. It was the culmination of the theater, which I already loved so much from high school, and the highest of musical values. I was hooked immediately the first time I stepped on the operatic stage at WSU.

435: What was your first production? How did that help assimilate you into the world of opera?

JD: I was in the chorus of *Die Fledermaus* at WSU, and it was the most wonderful time! I understood then the sense of community, which was wonderful, but also the sheer level of perfection and excellence that was required. That really got my blood pumping, because the challenge was HUGE to succeed. I still am daunted by it, but the challenge excites me continuously.

435: What pitfalls or doubts did you encounter once you committed to singing? At what crossroads did you find yourself, if at all, with your time at the Houston Grand Opera Studio?

JD: There were numerous, constant pitfalls, primarily not believing I had a good enough voice. I always trusted my musical instincts and my theatrical impulses, but the voice never quite worked as easily as I thought it should—and therefore I never liked the way I actually sounded. Arriving in Houston at the age of 26, I finally found a teacher who helped me iron out some of the basic flaws of my technique, and then the “natural” voice started to emerge.

435: What levels of perseverance and determination did you require of yourself so that you weren't going to be denied?

JD: Well, I suppose it was blind determination more than anything, not really knowing if I could make it or not. I simply made a promise to myself that I would continue to try and make it for as long as I felt I wanted to. It meant believing in myself—deeply—when few other people did.

435: You sang Ernest Chausson's *Poème de l'amour et de la mer* at the Lyric the last time you performed with the Kansas City Symphony. What was special to you about those performances?

JD: They were my first with the Symphony and with Maestro Stern, and

it felt as if my hometown was truly welcoming me into the heart of their artistic community. It was something I had long hoped for, and just as when I debuted with the Lyric Opera, this sense of singing for family and friends overwhelmed me. I sing for strangers the vast majority of the time, so to be given the chance to sing for my family and friends? Well, that's golden.

435: How excited are you to make your debut at the Kauffman Center for the Performing Arts? In your estimation, how has Michael Stern revitalized the Kansas City Symphony to match the beautiful aesthetic of Helzberg Hall?

JD: This will be the highlight of a very full and rich season for me. The statement that Kansas City made by seeing this dream through to the finish line defies description. The enormity of it resounds internationally, and it gives me the greatest bragging rights when I travel to the music capitals of the world.

Kansas City made a bold declaration that the arts are invaluable to a community and that we treasure them. This makes me more proud than I can say. And Maestro Stern's contribution, along with Frank Byrne, the executive director, has been monumental. I could not be more proud of this city.

435: Which composers captivate you most in any classical form, whether it's orchestral, choral or operatic?

JD: I will always come back to Handel as being the most supremely emotional and theatrical composer—not always easily accessible, but to invest in his operas fully, the payoff is enormous. I find it to be the painfully truthful writing. But don't ask me to discount Mozart or Rossini or Massenet or Strauss or...or...or! It's endless!

435: How often do you study other mezzos like Dame Janet Baker or Marilyn Horne, and do you still learn from other singers' respective craft?

JD: I hope I will always keep learning. There is never, ever an end point to this world of music and theater, so I continually look to the legends of the past, as well as to my brilliant colleagues who support and teach me in numerous ways.

435: You are definitely spanning the globe *Wide World of Sports*-style this year. Does it exhaust you or embolden you each year?

JD: It is equal parts exhausting and invigorating. I do have to be careful not to get run down, because my instrument is my body, and there is no margin for ill-health. So I'm trying to be smart with getting the rest that I need. But I do love what I do, and there is only so much time!

435: What about Johnson County and Kansas City appeals to you after traveling the world?

JD: That's easy: It's home. It's real. It's beautiful. And it's home. ❖
For more on Joyce DiDonato, visit joycedidonato.com.



Left to Right: As Idamante in *Idomeneo* at the Teatro Real in 2008. photo: javierdelreal.com; In rehearsal at the Milan Opera House in 2011;

As Elena in *La Donna del Lago* at the Teatro alla Scala in 2011. photo: Brescia e Amisano © Teatro alla Scala