

MUSIC

Inside a small practice room at Portland Opera's offices, soprano Diane Syrcle is rehearsing for her upcoming recital. Her voice is emotionally evocative and appealing, and she seems very exposed, as all singers are as they put their very breath and talent on the line. After just a few minutes listening, it's clear how articulate a singer she is.

Syrcle is also director of education and outreach for Portland Opera and obviously wears many hats. Back in her office, the conversation moves seamlessly from her love of music to teaching, spirituality, politics and her startling coming-out story.

She grew up in Clovis, N.M., "not a hotbed of cultural activity," she confirms. Because her father was in the military, Syrcle attended high school in Germany—although she's quick to add she didn't live the typical army brat's life, constantly on the move.

Syrcle was raised in the Pentecostal Church by deeply religious parents. "When I came out, I became a very disenfranchised Christian and went through demon counseling to be healed." She was told that as a homosexual, "The only thing that could be wrong is a demon has entered you and we're going to pray for your healing."

Searching for something to fulfill her spiritually, she dabbled in Buddhism, Catholicism, channeling and other New Age ideas that she'd been taught were occult practices. At 21, she says, "I came to that real crisis point where I said, 'I don't feel like I believe anything, and so I'm going to kill myself.'"

An accident she had while trying to accomplish that goal actually saved her life. Syrcle believes it was "divine intervention" that jolted her awareness and allowed her to "slow down and listen."

Spending three years teaching in Texas, she says she perfected the craft of the double life: being totally closeted at work and completely out in her personal life.

During this time she saw a therapist, something she highly recommends for everyone. "It's the best thing I ever did because I put into perspective, 'What are my needs, and who am I?'"

Syrcle came to Oregon as a resident artist at Portland Opera in the 1995-96 season. Arriving here, she says she went into a "what's next crisis." She was singing professionally but didn't necessarily feel ful-



Diane Syrcle sings about life and love

filled. About that time she met her partner, Susan Leo.

Although she and her parents had arrived at what amounted to a truce, she says the shit really hit the fan when she and Leo decided to get married. "When I sent her the fabric for my wedding dress, she went into a mother meltdown," Syrcle explains. Her mother then proceeded to send her a letter stating, "I pray every day for your misery." No surprise, Syrcle says it was "the most painful day of my life."

Unhappily, she severed ties to her parents until a week before the wedding, when she received a remarkable card from her mother acknowledging that she needed to try. "Thank God for Hallmark," Syrcle remarks.

She is very involved in Bridgeport Community Church, where her partner is the pastor. She serves as choir director, plays host to socials as the "preacher's wife," manages the ladies softball team and is a member of the church council.

Noting her difficult balancing act, being married to the pastor of the church she's so active in, Syrcle explains she's had to compartmentalize her life. "Susan is my spouse, but she

Full Syrcle

From army brat to preacher's wife, soprano finds fulfillment

BY RICH BRAY

will never be my pastor. Bridgeport is my spiritual home and the foundation of my community life, but for spiritual direction, I look elsewhere when I need it." For that, she calls her Presbyterian friend in San Francisco who married them.

Both singing and teaching have engaged Syrcle. "When I was in college, I knew very distinctly that my calling was to teach and to be an educator; exploring singing as a career option just happened." She enjoys the circular energy and response she gets from teaching and conducting, adding that she found professional singing "lonely and isolating."

"For me, when I'm performing, the energy is going out but is not coming back to me. There are places in the music world where you are totally vulnerable and totally decimated."

Now, she sings mostly for pleasure and enjoys the perfect balance between teaching and singing. She still performs with the opera occasionally, most recently in *Dialogues of the Carmelites*.

Syrcle seems just as passionate about politics and personal ethics. "It is a responsibility that we have, those of us who choose to be out, and that's not a choice for everybody."

She also believes that the Clinton years led to complacency, probably because we thought he was our friend, but that much of the progress during the past four years was achieved because of the media and Hollywood. "It gives those of us 30 and younger an opportunity to step up and be activists, in positive and constructive ways, to take risks and say, 'Look, I am part of the third wave.'"

Then she adds, "There's a responsibility for me, when the rubber meets the road, to say, 'These are my rights, and I expect that wherever I live, work, spend my money, that it's my right as a citizen, just as it's my right as a woman, and that you can't separate those two things.'"

Syrcle's next recital benefits both Portland Opera's International Vocal Arts Institute, for which she is staff administrator, and Bridgeport Community Church. She will sing classical pieces including four songs by Bellini plus five cabaret pieces by Kurt Weill and a selection from Mozart's *Così fan Tutte*. Syrcle will be accompanied by Carol Lucas, Portland Opera chorus master.

The centerpiece of the program will be an eight-part German song cycle by Schumann roughly translated as "The Life and Love of a Woman." Although structured around a woman's cycle of love and death with a man, it's obvious Syrcle's take on this is that it's much more universal—and personal.

She recalls an earlier performance of the song when the emotion of it really hit home: "For me, the most beautiful moment was looking down at my hand and looking at my wedding ring and seeing my partner—we were in a very intimate space—and thinking, 'OK, not lookin' at the ring anymore.'"

Syrcle says recitals almost have become a thing of the past, and she's hopeful they'll make a comeback because she enjoys the possibilities and variety they provide. Given the scope of her interests and talent, that's certainly in character. **JB**

DIANE SYRCLE teams up with pianist Carol Lucas for an Afternoon Musicale 4 p.m. April 7 at First Congregational Church, 1126 S.W. Park Ave. Tickets are \$10 and available from 503-321-5260.

Portlander RICH BRAY writes part time, loves Wagner and thinks readers everywhere should be glad he didn't take up singing.

Dharma Rain
zen center

2539 SE Madison Portland, Oregon 97214
503-239-4846 Fax: 503-239-5217
E-mail: Staff@Dharma-Rain.Org
www.Dharma-Rain.Org

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