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Visiting opera star Genaux enthalls Pioneers' Home audience

by Dermot Cole, Fairbanks Daily News-Miner

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FAIRBANKS — It's not every day an international opera star performs in Fairbanks.

But Vivica Genaux makes it a point to go to the Pioneers' Home on her trips home to Fairbanks. She visits her mother at the home and sings in the dining room.

Genaux travels about 300 days per year to perform to enthusiastic crowds in the world's leading concert halls and theaters.

But she couldn't have found a more appreciative audience than the one gathered in the dining hall after lunch and before bingo Friday afternoon. Dozens of residents, some in wheelchairs, gathered with staff members and guests to hear a rich assortment of songs.

Accompanied on piano by Paul Krejci, another outstanding musician from Fairbanks, I could follow the words when she sang "Isn't This a Lovely Day" by Irving Berlin and "The Physician" by Cole Porter. When she ventured into some of the world's other great languages, I didn't have to understand the words to appreciate the beauty she brought to every line.

As most of the audience was not French or Italian, she introduced each song and its background, explaining why she enjoys each composition. Genaux speaks English, Italian, German and French and knows some Spanish.

Before singing "La Captive" by Berlioz, she talked about how the character in the song imagines she returns home through singing and by recalling scenes of her childhood.

"But then there's that moment when the breeze touches her cheek and she remembers the stars," Genaux said.

Genaux said she never performs that song without recalling how she fed the family dogs in Fairbanks in January or February when a Chinook was blowing and the northern lights were ablaze. As someone who is on the road almost all the time, she said she carries such memories wherever she goes.

"Fairbanks is still my home," she said.

Near the end of her recital, she singled out Jo Scott, a member of the audience, as her mentor when she was a young child.

“I don’t know if I would be doing what I’m doing now if it weren’t for the training I had in camps that you made available for young kids growing up,” Genaux said. She said she is a “Jo and Dick Scott product.”

Genaux had her start as a singer in a Fairbanks Summer Fine Arts Camp production of “My Fair Lady” at age 13. She attended the Fairbanks Summer Arts Festival, which was founded by Scott in 1983.

This is the third year Genaux has given a summer concert at the Pioneers Home. As she concluded the performance, she said she would be back next year.

In an interview earlier this year with the Handel Festival Magazine, she said she had a vacation for the first time in about seven years.

“I think planning a few more vacations in the future will play a big part in my new ‘master plan.’ It felt very good to have a bit of a break in my hectic schedule. Other than that, I continue being very happy with the opportunities life and my friends have given me; I enjoy living each day as it comes without needing to know what’s around the corner,” she told the interviewer.

For the immediate future, Genaux and her husband, Massimo Patella, are headed back to Italy where she will prepare three new operas and resume a busy touring schedule in Europe, with two trips planned to the U.S. in the next year.

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