

Section: SoundLife

Song of a Wayfarer

ROSEMARY PONNEKANTI; The News Tribune

It's a long way from midtown Manhattan to Fox Island. And that's exactly the way Charles Robert Stephens likes it.

The operatic baritone, who will sing Mahler's "Songs of a Wayfarer" in an upcoming Second City Chamber Series concert, had a flourishing 20-year career in New York, a cozy midtown apartment, family, community – and then came the planes on Sept. 11, 2001. In search of normality, Stephens and his family packed up and moved to Fox Island, about as far as you can go from the New York arts scene. Does he miss it? Yes. Was it worth it? Definitely.

"I was singing a concert in Carnegie Hall in 2002 when the New York pianist Benton Hess asked me if I would like to come to Tacoma to sing in a production of 'La Traviata' that he was conducting for Tacoma Opera," says Stephens, who, with stocky build and grayish hair and beard, is the image of a Verdi baritone.

"I said I would love to. At the time, my wife and I were considering moving out. We had three young children in a two-bedroom apartment at 43rd and 10th, and wanted the kids to have fresh air, green grass, a more normal life," he says. "We also were traumatized by the events of 9/11, having witnessed the falling towers from our balcony on the 44th floor, only a mile or so away from the World Trade Center."

"We had a great life there," says Stephens' wife, operatic soprano Deborah Stephens. "It was an affordable, subsidized complex with a lot of artists and musicians. There was a preschool in the building, an outdoor cafe on the street – a wonderful community. But after 9/11, we were all in shock. A lot of our friends left. Our son, who was four, kept building Lego towers with his friends and ramming planes into them."

After Charles sang in the Tacoma Opera production, the couple decided to relocate to the Pacific Northwest. Gig Harbor appealed, because it was close to both Seattle and an international airport (essential for a solo singing career), but when the Realtor took them around Fox Island, they were sold. They bought land, built a house and moved in July 2003.

From the couple's home, it's easy to see why the island appealed physically. A high-ceilinged living room with a baby grand ("built for acoustics") with three rows of huge windows gets oceans of sunlight and views to Steilacoom and Mount Rainier. The road is so quiet neighbors glance up from yard work when a car goes past. Fresh air and green grass abound.

In back is a studio and playroom, converted from the three-car garage originally on the plans – a far cry from practicing in a New York apartment. And when Stephens has a gig, it's about an hour's drive to Seattle-Tacoma International Airport.

The family has also found community. "Our kids are really happy here," Stephens says. "They have

friends, Scouts, sports. And we've also found friends who are into art and share our viewpoint on things."

Best of all, the couple's singing careers continue. Since moving to Fox Island, Stephens has landed roles up and down the West Coast as well as around the country: Portland Chamber Orchestra, Portland Baroque, Tacoma Opera (Sharpless in 2004's "Madama Butterfly"), Tacoma Symphony ("Sea Symphony" in 2006), New Orleans Opera and Bellevue Opera, to name a few.

"It's opened me up to more things over here," says Stephens, who teaches voice in his home and Seattle studios.

Deborah Stephens also is singing, with roles in Seattle and Portland. The couple has fun recording soundtracks for video games and started their own Fox Island concert series in the Chapel at Echo Bay.

But does the new life come at a price? Yes, say Charles and Deborah. To be considered for major opera companies, Charles has to make regular New York audition trips and admits that "maybe there's an element of 'Well, he's over there now, we can't afford his hotel and travel costs.'" When working, he's away from home up to three or four weeks at a stretch.

And the couple misses New York. "You really get to know people there, just walking around," says Stephens. "Here everyone drives, you have to make an effort to make friends."

So it's appropriate that Stephens is singing Gustav Mahler's "Songs of a Wayfarer." Mahler wrote the piece in 1884, during a conducting spell in Kassel, Germany, during which he fell unrequitedly in love before moving on to his next job. The melodies leap from happiness to nostalgia to heartbreak, while the instrumentation dances like the poetry between sublime joy in nature and intense sorrow at being alone – exactly the bittersweet feeling of leaving those you love for a beautiful place.

Though the four songs, with text by Mahler (and the inspiration for his first symphony), were originally scored for voice and piano and later orchestra, Friday night's concert will see an original premiere arrangement for chamber group by SCCS director Jerry Kracht.

"I'm delighted Charles could sing with us again," says Kracht. "He's sung the Mahler many times, in both piano and orchestral versions, and he sings it absolutely beautifully. He's a first-rate musician."

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Leader Leaves on a High Note

It's called "Viennese Farewell" for a reason.

Friday night's end-of-season concert for Second City Chamber Series also marks the end of an era: the artistic directorship of Jerry Kracht.

Taking over from co-founders Willa and William Doppmann in 1982, Kracht brought not only impressive clarinet playing but sound business leadership to the organization, expanding it to include a four-concert Masterpiece series, two solo Spotlight concerts, two summer concerts in Lakewold Gardens and a young players' workshop/performance program. Next season, the artistic direction will be in the hands of violinist Svend Ronning.

Kracht chose the concert's program – Mahler's "Songs of a Wayfarer," Johann Strauss' "Wine, Women and Song" and Schubert's Trio in Bb minor for piano and strings – as a "nostalgic farewell."

"Mahler is one of my very favorite composers, yet I have not been able to share his music with the SCCS

audience simply because he wrote virtually no chamber music,” says Kracht. “I love the “Songs of a Wayfarer” and decided to make a chamber music reduction especially for this concert. Their sentiment – bittersweet with a wayfarer’s nostalgia – seemed appropriate for my farewell.”

Also arranged by Kracht is the Strauss waltz (originally for orchestra) whose lilting tunes will be familiar to many. The Schubert will provide a warm, optimistic close.

Kracht will no longer play clarinet with the chamber group. “I’ve had my turn, and it’s time for others,” he says. “What a privilege it has been to have served SCCS, and what a bright future it has under the leadership and musicianship of Svend Ronning. Let the music continue.”

What: Viennese Farewell

Who: Second City Chamber Series, with Charles Robert Stephens (baritone), Lisa Bergman (piano), Maria Sampen (violin), Jerry Kracht (clarinet) and Sally Singer (cello)

When: 8 p.m. May 11

Where: Great Hall, Annie Wright School, 827 N. Tacoma Ave., Tacoma

Tickets: \$15-\$30

Information: 253-572-8863 or www.scchamberseries.org

Inside: Friday will be the final Second City Chamber Series under the artistic direction of Jerry Kracht. He has filled that position since 1982.

Charles Robert Stephens

Born: New London, Conn.

Vocal studies: University of Connecticut, also privately in Boston and with Jerome Hines in New York

Debut: Marcello in “La Bohme” with New York City Opera, 1995

Favorite music: “I like everything! What would life be like without Edith Piaf or Bob Dylan or ‘Rigoletto’? And you can’t leave out Mozart and Bach.”

Teaches: Privately on Fox Island and in Seattle; for lessons, call 253-549-2782.

Practices: An hour a day; learns roles for two months before performances.

Hobbies: Gardening, walking, swimming, cooking

Best advice ever received: “Never compare yourself with other people. Some careers go quickly, some take many years.”