

E2 | TORONTO STAR SATURDAY, FEBRUARY 2, 2013

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» ENTERTAINMENT

# A king on the Canadian opera stage

La clemenza di Tito star creates legacy on stage and beyond

**TRISH CRAWFORD**  
ENTERTAINMENT REPORTER

Tenor Michael Schade pokes his head out of the front door of his sturdy Oakville brick home and says, "I don't have a thing to wear."

He's not kidding. The Canadian opera singer, who is a "rock star" in Europe, has just dropped 30 pounds in a diet over the Christmas holidays.

The weight loss is just one sign of the changes about to come.

Schade is a hockey fan, father to eight children in a yours-mine-and-ours union with Dee McKee, bon vivant and lover of good food and conversation, a former choir boy, stalwart friend, an almost-doctor and a man pondering his legacy.

"I want to give back and help," says Schade, who raised 100,000 euros last year for former U.S. president Bill Clinton's Health Access Initiative. He has also raised money for cancer research (his mother is a leukemia survivor) and is looking for ways to help return the recital to local prominence.

"I have a passion for helping young people at the level of the Canadian Opera Company's Ensemble Studio: young professionals who need a break at the right time to get them going," he says.

Schade acknowledges the wonderful breaks in his career, including the support of his family, winning early prizes, conductors and symphonies giving him a chance, welcoming European audiences that flock to hear him sing and a standout reputation at home.

As he prepares to star in the Canadian Opera Company production of Mozart's *La clemenza di Tito*, which opens Sunday, Schade, who just turned 48, is aware of the passage of time.

"I've gone from playing a prince to a king," says Schade of his role as an emperor who forgives, rather than punishes, those who betray him.

"I am having a physical and personal renewal," he adds, pointing to the stationary bike and weights he uses when the family sits down to watch hockey games.

A rabid Leafs fan, he is scheduled to sing "O Canada" at a Toronto home game against the Buffalo Sabres on Feb. 22 and will bring his own jersey. Sporting a new moustache for his role as Tito, Schade says he thinks he looks like Leafs forward Mike Brown.

In a recent interview, he gloated about a recent Leaf win over the Sabres, although he didn't see the game because he was watching Canadian tenor Ben Heppner sing the lead in *Tristan and Isolde* at the COC.

"It was such a high. Ben was terrific," says Schade, driving home from the grocery store after seeing 6-year-old Stella make an announcement at her school assembly. The world doesn't stop just because he has a rehearsal that night and an opening on the weekend.



Canadian tenor Michael Schade gives lessons to his kids, from left, Stella Schade-McKee, Lisbet Schade, Sophie Schade and Niki Schade.

CARLOS OSORIO/TORONTO STAR



"I couldn't spend my life going doo wop."

**MICHAEL SCHADE**  
TENOR

"Just parent stuff," says Schade, who gets the kids up in the morning and prepares a hot lunch for them. "I do more by 9 a.m. than most people do in a day," says Schade.

Schade says he was able to achieve the weight loss because he was home while performing in two COC operas back to back (*Die Fledermaus* and *La clemenza di Tito*). It calms him to be with family in his own house and not on the road, where he spends a lot of time aching to be with them.

McKee travels with him if possible and they have a second home in Vienna.

"He's a great artist," says conduc-

tor Howard Dyck, who adds, "He is one of the greatest, if not the greatest, Mozart tenors of our time."

Walking down the street in Vienna with Schade is a lesson in hero worship, says Dyck. "He is constantly being stopped by people. The guy is a rock star in Vienna; in a restaurant, talk about getting the best table in the place."

Dyck hired the "wide-eyed" Schade back in the 1980s to sing with the Grand Philharmonic Choir. Schade, who was still a student at the University of Western Ontario where he studied sciences, heard the other tenor sing and asked Dyck, "Do you think I am ever going to be able to do that?" Dyck's answer, "Sooner than you think."

When Schade won a \$3,000 performance prize against music majors, he switched his loyalties from medicine to music and went on to study at the prestigious Curtis Institute of Music in Philadelphia.

Schade's parents, German immigrants Liesel and Hans, were members of the Mendelssohn Choir that performed the *Messiah* yearly with the Toronto Symphony Orchestra. One year, they asked TSO artistic administrator Loie Fallis to listen to him sing.

"I cast him immediately," says Fallis, noting Schade was 23 when he made his TSO debut in Handel's *Messiah*. "I remember goose bumps."

Since then, he has been a regular with the TSO, performing more than 30 times over the years, reports Fallis. Many of those times he shared the stage with Canadian

baritone and friend Russell Braun, who lives nearby in Georgetown with his family.

As busy as he is, Schade makes time for friends, even those from his childhood at St. Michael's Choir School. Michael Winkler, a financial portfolio manager who first met Schade in Grade 6, says they still get together with their families.

"There were so many Michaels in our class that we all had a different name," laughs Winkler. "He was Shady and I was Henry, after Henry Winkler (the Fonz)."

Together with other classmates, they formed an a cappella group fashioned after The Nylons. They called themselves The Odd Socks and even played a couple of gigs.

Ultimately, Schade pulled the plug. He says, "I couldn't spend my life going doo wop. The text was so insanely shallow."

As McKee gasps, he asserts, "There is more to life than dumb-ass entertainment."

But he's not a snob, enjoying people from all walks of life even if they can't tell a tenor from a ten spot. Oakville restaurateur Julia Hannah remembers Schade and his daughter Sophie, now 16, coming into one of her restaurants when the girl was

a toddler. Hannah thought, "He just fills the room. He's such a nice guy and he's always going to the Met, La Scala. What does he do, build sets or something?"

The next time he dined there, Schade brought her some CDs and said, "This is what I do." After that, says Hannah, "We became good friends."

She saw Schade performing in *The Magic Flute* at New York's Metropolitan Opera as his guest — a scene she says was out of the movie *Moonstruck*; she was so awed.

"I was transformed. Oh my God, that is a special place."

Hannah sums up the Schade effect: "He is a human being with a passionate talent. People relate to him."

As Schade mulls over his looming "contribution to the arts, arts management and companies in general," he allows his mind to wander into the distant future.

"Down the road, I can see myself running a company at some point."

But right now, the role of Tito beckons.

*La clemenza di Tito* is at the Four Seasons Centre for the Performing Arts Feb. 3 to 22.

## CORRECTIONS

» Tenor Michael Schade is scheduled to sing the Canadian anthem at a Toronto Maple Leafs home game against the Buffalo Sabres on Feb. 21. A Feb. 2 article about the tenor misstated the date. As well, the article also misspelled the surname of Oakville restaurateur Julia Hannah.