

Special place for sacred space

Lori Anna Reid likes to sing in intimate surroundings

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ROB ANTLE

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The glow of candles supplants the fading evening light that filters through stained-glass windows into the tiny church.

The woman on stage addresses the 100 people who sit in pews on the floor and in the balcony above.

She is telling them stories about the songs she sings, a variety of genre-defying numbers that span traditional Newfoundland arias to war laments to jazz-inspired pieces.

The concert is a fundraiser for the homeless breakfast program run at the church, St. Stephen-in-the-Fields near College and Spadina, and the Kensington Market area of Toronto.

It is a cause that is close to singer Lori Anna Reid.

The Newfoundland native was out for a walk in her Toronto neighbourhood two years ago when she first stepped into the church, on a whim.

That impromptu visit led to years of involvement with homeless programs run through the church, and last weekend's concert.

And that concert has given her new energy for a future idea and direction for her music career.

Pure quiet

It is the morning after her show at St. Stephen's.

Reid is buoyant at how the night went. Her mother even flew up from St. John's for a surprise visit. It was, she says, "a bit of a dream come true."

She says she has a penchant for going into empty churches, to escape the city sounds and city hustle. "In a big noisy city like Toronto, you very rarely get the pure quiet," Reid says.

When she first tried the church door, two years ago, it was open. That was rare for the city.

She immediately told a friend she wanted to do a concert there, and began to sing.

A documentary filmmaker named Robin Bengier appeared out of the woodwork. Bengier was preparing a film on the fate of St. Stephen's, which was in danger of being closed by the local diocese.

At the time, St. Stephen's served three congregations - Hispanic, Afro-Caribbean francophone and anglophone, according to Reid. It also served breakfasts to homeless people, three times a week.

"It served as a beacon of community service and right action, if you will," she says.

A 2006 benefit concert to save the church attracted luminaries like Jane Siberry, Bruce Cockburn and author Michael Ondaatje. Reid was asked to sing, and convinced Canadian music icon Daniel Lanois, with whom she had previously toured, to attend as a personal favour.

In the end, the church stayed open, and there are plans to get it off the ground as a concert venue. Two congregations have since left, according to Reid, but breakfast and dinner programs for the homeless have expanded.

Reid has become a staple in helping out with the homeless program on Sundays.

Her recent show raised \$1,200 for breakfasts - enough to last three months of Sundays, she notes proudly.

It was her first self-produced show. She enjoyed it, but learned that promoting is a full-time job that can be "all-consuming."

In fact, if she hadn't had such a good time, she wouldn't do it again.

"It's kind of like giving birth - you forget about the pain when you have that baby in your arms."

The experience also put "fire in the belly" for a career idea that has been simmering away in the back of her mind. She calls it her "Sacred Spaces" tour.

She would like to appear in "little places that maybe others wouldn't think of as a concert venue."

Reid already has already had interest in Ontario - such as a pending gig at the Aylmer opera house later this year - for shows that fit the description.

She was recently chosen for an Ontario Contact showcase, and will this fall sing a 15-minute set for all the theatre bookers in the province.

But she would really like to come home to perform. She rarely gets that opportunity.

"If somebody wants me to come and sing, just invite me, I'll come," Reid says.

The venue possibilities, she says, are endless. Lighthouses. Barns. Art galleries. A fishing stage. That "hauntingly beautiful" little church in Brigus she has always wanted to sing in.

Drawn home

Reid moved to Toronto from Newfoundland in 1990. She grew up in St. John's, but her family was from New Harbour, Trinity Bay, where she spent a lot of time on weekends. "I'm a hybrid; I'm not a townie or a bayman, I'm both," she says with a laugh.

Her music career has taken her a long way from St. John's, where she listened to traditional music and her father singing country songs and protest songs.

In recent years, Reid's performances have spanned from Carnegie Hall (with Daniel Lanois and Emmylou Harris) to Kandahar (where she sang for Canadian troops).

She has made three appearances at the Montreal Jazz Festival, and sang with the National Arts Centre orchestra.

She has performed on a Dublin stage with Bono and The Edge, toured with Michelle Wright, Lennie Gallant and Lanois, and sang professionally with the Elmer Isler classical ensemble for years.

"They're all musicians that have integrity, and there's something bigger going on than just 'let's make money' and 'let's get me known,'" Reid says.

"So I think that is the connecting dots, actually, in all of the music that I choose ... if it speaks to me, and it has integrity, and it will lift, elevate, you somehow, I'm usually drawn to it."

And she continues to be drawn to the music of home.

"My heart went back to traditional song - songs that my father used to sing to me as a child," she says.

Reid also works as a consultant for World Vision's artist associate program, acting as a liaison between the charity and East Coast musicians who promote its programs to sponsor children.

She has completed recording a CD, but is still cobbling together the \$3,000 required to manufacture it.

It will feature the same eclectic mix of last weekend's Toronto show - traditional tunes, a cappella, some Newfoundland songs, hymns, bluegrass, war laments.

She acknowledges that it can be perceived as an odd combination, but she chooses to perform the music that moves her.

"I know that it's not about me. And that's one of the things that growing up in Newfoundland did, I think, to serve me well. You know, when you're surrounded by the kind of beauty that you're surrounded by - on the edge of a cliff in Torbay or wherever - you know the universe doesn't revolve around you. It's way bigger."