



Opera star coming in from the cold

SARAH McNEILL

"It's 35 degrees here – fahrenheit!" wailed soprano Rachelle Durkin from her New York apartment.

Braving a freezing New York winter, Rachelle is in the middle of the usual round of auditions – not that she's worried because since she joined New York's Metropolitan Opera Company as a Young Artist in 2001, the Perth-born soprano has become one of the busiest touring artists and is booked up until 2011.

She said New York was not so much "home" as a base for her mail – "although my parents still get most of it in Perth," she admitted.

Heading home, via Hawaii, to perform in the Perth International Arts Festival, Rachelle is juggling productions with her tenor husband, Mat Morgan.

They met in a production

of Don Giovanni when they made real the betrothal between their characters, Don Ottavio and Donna Anna.

Married in September 2006, they were separated on opposite continents for three months and vowed never to be apart that long again.

Now they chase each other around the world, with Mat following her to Adelaide earlier this year, Rachelle flying back to California and Mat accompanying her to Hawaii and then Perth, but leaving before opening night for rehearsals back in New York.

"I know people say there's never a good time to have a baby, but I can't really think of when I'll find the time right now," Rachelle said.

The little time she has had in New York has been spent studying her role in the festival's musical

centrepiece, John Adams' *A Flowering Tree*.

Rachelle is singing the role for the first time – "a complicated exercise as in every bar there is a signature change".

Looking for a singing coach to help her through the learning process, she was thrilled to find one living just two floors down in her New York brownstone.

A Flowering Tree is a co-production between WA's three flagship arts companies – Perth International Arts Festival, the WA Symphony Orchestra and WA Opera – and will be exclusive to the Perth Festival.

Artistic director Shelagh Magazda said the festival had been trying to get a John Adams opera for several years but she was particularly thrilled that this one, which premiered in Vienna in 2006, was coming to Perth.

"It is the most beautiful lush music," Shelagh said.

Rachelle agreed, describing the opera based on a folktale from southern India as "poetic, dreamlike, lyrical and erotic".

Rachelle sings the role of Kumudha, a poor and beautiful young woman with the power to change at will into a tree. At first she uses this magical gift to help support her ageing mother, selling the tree's flowers in the marketplace to supplement the family's meagre income.

An ardent, arrogant young prince, enchanted both by Kumudha's beauty and her supernatural abilities, woos and wins her. But after Kumudha suffers disfigurement at the hands of the prince's jealous sister, both lovers are condemned to years of solitary wandering before their final reconciliation.

The opera will be performed at the Perth Concert Hall on March 6 and 7.



■ John Adams' poetic opera *The Flowering Tree* opened in Vienna. Picture: Ruth Walz



■ Rachelle Durkin