

[Back to The DIVA returns](#)

The DIVA returns

October 12, 2009

John Terauds

There's one Toronto musician who has a lot to be thankful for this year.

It's only been four months since soprano Measha Brueggergosman was rushed to hospital with a split aorta on the eve of a solo appearance with the Toronto Symphony Orchestra. But the dynamic 32-year-old expat Maritimer is already back at the top of her game.

It's remarkable that someone who has had her sternum sawed in two and chest cavity pulled apart for emergency open-heart surgery could pick up a rising international career and hectic social calendar in a matter of weeks.

Look past Brueggergosman's crazy hair, designer gowns, ready smile and hey-girlfriend manner. Here is an artist charged with a steely determination. She isn't about to let anything – not even open-heart surgery – get in her way.

Nine days ago, the sequined diva was onstage at the Hollywood Bowl, facing a boisterous audience of 18,000, singing the "Ode to Joy" in Beethoven's *Symphony No. 9* with the Los Angeles Philharmonic and its red-hot new music director, Gustavo Dudamel.

Tomorrow, Brueggergosman is onstage at the Royal Opera House in Stockholm, Sweden, at the behest of tenor Placido Domingo. He asked that she share in a gala concert to mark him receiving the inaugural Birgit Nilsson Prize.

The \$1 million award, funded by the estate of Sweden's prima donna assoluta, makes it the richest accolade that any opera singer or conductor can receive.

In August, people on Prince Edward Island heard Brueggergosman at the Indian River Festival (its two co-artistic directors are Torontonians Peter Tiefenbach and Robert Kortgaard). She also sang at the Verbier Festival in Switzerland that month.

She was supposed to be at home, recuperating from surgery.

Despite a teaser appearance at Yonge-Dundas Square to open the Toronto International Film Festival last month, Ontarians have to wait a bit longer to hear Brueggergosman in full flight.

Saturday afternoon, at St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church, across the street from Roy Thomson Hall, she presents a song recital to benefit the African Medical and Research Foundation.

Neither Brueggergosman nor her German piano accompanist, Andreas Kern, are getting paid for this. But there's no cutting artistic corners. This is vintage concert-hall fare of art songs and spirituals.

"We have a lot of people who have donated a lot so that we can make as much money as we possibly can," says Brueggergosman of the goodwill wrapped up in spurring people in Kenya and Uganda to rebuild lives, skills and communities in the aftermath of political unrest and civil war.

It's hard to imagine where Brueggergosman finds the time and energy to maintain a full concert calendar, keep up with charitable work, pop up in full regalia at the city's hippest parties – and advance in her mastery of Bikram yoga.

Then again, would any other young diva have dub-reggae band Fat Freddy's Drop playing in the background while talking about the emotional



Soprano Measha Brueggergosman, 32, has resumed a busy schedule of performances, parties and charity work. (Sept. 10, 2009)

TONY BOCK/TORONTO STAR

merits of a Benjamin Britten chamber cantata and digress on her desire to go see Hollywood flick *The Hangover*?

"I'm a huge fan of cleansing the palate, figuratively, of doing something that keeps you fresh, that keeps you humble and aware of your power or influence outside of what you do," says the soprano of her eclectic palate. "We can be good at so many things, but we're programmed to focus on one thing. As people, we have the capacity to do so much."

For Brueggergosman, Bikram yoga is the most important of her sidelines. It helped her shed something like 150 pounds three years ago. And it was key to helping her retrain her rib muscles and her breathing in record time over the last few weeks.

There are psychological benefits, too.

"It's rotating tires, or being able to flex a different muscle, and also to find joy and accomplishment in something else so that your esteem doesn't get all wrapped up in what you get paid for, because that's fleeting. Performers have to be wary of that, in particular," says the singer.

In the spring, Brueggergosman begins the next step in her yoga apprenticeship: teacher training. She put it on her to-do list back in 2006.

"It's going to be so hard because you practise twice a day for nine weeks. I've heard over and over again that week six is anger week," she laughs. Fortunately, her management encouraged her to take the time off work.

The singer's charity work gets the same intense attention. She did her research and approached the African Medical and Research Foundation, not the other way around.

"I was looking for someone who was providing sustainable community development solutions," Brueggergosman explains. "They had never had a celebrity endorsement. It had never occurred to them."

She has been to northern Uganda three times now, enough to be able to see progress among the displaced women and children who are learning new life skills. She even has six dresses made for her by women who have learned to sew under one of the foundation's education programs.

"Some of them are better skilled than others," the soprano smiles. "But bringing them back to Africa to ask for repairs to a dress is a great excuse to see how the women are doing."

In the end, Brueggergosman's life – and success – comes down to keeping high standards.

"It's not good enough to be kind of good," she says quietly. "We're the keepers of the kingdom, the guarders of the Grail. You can't fool around with it. I'm not a purist, but I want to be the best. I don't do the best of everything but, in what I choose to do, I want people to come to me and say, 'We've heard you're the best at this, tell us more.' That's what I do. When I find out who the best is, I go to them and I say, 'Teach me your wily ways,' because I'm a sponge.

"I get that from my dad: Always be teachable, humble yourself."

And be thankful.

Measha Brueggergosman sings at St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church, King and Simcoe Sts., on Saturday at 5 p.m. Tickets are \$60-\$175 (50 per cent off for students) at 416-961-6981.