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Anthony Dean Griffey, the tenor from High Point

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Carolyn Cole, Los Angeles Times

UP NEXT: Tenor Anthony Dean Griffey will be singing with the Los Angeles Philharmonic the week of May 4, 2008.

The North Carolina native is lyrical and mild-mannered -- not what you might have expected.

By David Mermelstein, Special to The Times
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NEW YORK -- WE expect tenors to be heroic, their virile voices ringing. But not every such singer need be a Rodolfo or Radamès, Siegfried or Lohengrin. Tenors can enjoy garlanded careers in more lyric repertory, and Anthony Dean Griffey is proving it.

A native of High Point, N.C. -- population 105,000 -- Griffey, a boyish-looking 41, is as American as sweet corn or peach cobbler, with a voice just as toothsome: light in timbre yet focused, sturdy and suffused with warmth.

He is scheduled to appear at Walt Disney Concert Hall starting Friday in Gustav Mahler's epic symphonic song cycle "Das Lied von der Erde" (The Song of the Earth) with mezzo-soprano Lilli Paasikivi and the Los Angeles Philharmonic conducted by Esa-Pekka Salonen. But local audiences may already know him from Kurt Weill's "Rise and Fall of the City of Mahagonny" at L.A. Opera last season and from appearances with the Philharmonic in Beethoven's Ninth Symphony in 2000 and Schoenberg's "Gurrelieder" in 2005.

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Griffey's were excellent.

Writing in New York magazine, Justin Davidson found his Grimes "one of the most textured and subtle characters to dominate the Met's vast stage in a long time." Jeremy Eichler of the Boston Globe called it "the kind of astute and deeply considered performance one encounters all too rarely."

Griffey's return to Los Angeles comes on the heels of a personal triumph as the unstable title character in Benjamin Britten's "Peter Grimes" at New York's Metropolitan Opera in February and March. The new production, directed by John Doyle, who also staged L.A. Opera's "Mahagonny," earned mixed reviews, but

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Soprano Patricia Racette, who first worked with Griffey in San Francisco in 1997, sang the role of Ellen Orford, Grimes' love interest, and she is no less enthusiastic. "He has a very sweet sound," she says, "and he sings with a lot of color. He's also very generous and not caught up in the pomp and circumstance of our profession. He's lovely and funny and sweet."

During the "Grimes" run, Griffey lived in the Manhattan studio of L.A. Opera music director James Conlon, who conducted the "Mahagonny" performances, and it was there that the tenor, reputedly shy despite being 6-feet-4 and burly, sat down to discuss his career. He seemed relaxed, answering the door in stocking feet, and soon made himself comfortable on a small sofa.

Griffey is reluctant to characterize his voice, even as he acknowledges its special properties. "I would say I'm a lyric tenor if I had to classify myself," he said, "but I think people get too caught up in that. I don't even like to call myself an opera singer to the general population, because they think of Viking helmets."

He prefers just plain singer, or tenor, and was quick to point out that he values solo recitals and concert performances such as the upcoming Philharmonic dates just as much as elaborate opera productions. "Das Lied von der Erde," he said, is "storytelling at its best."

"I like the balance of being a three-pronged singer," he said. "It's a very healthy approach to my own singing and my own sanity. I couldn't have just an opera career. Recital work also combines my love of acting and singing -- it's like singing 20 mini-operas. And concert work is theater too."

He called himself "an actor who happens to sing and vice versa," noting, "If I could have said it, I wouldn't have sung it." It was an allusion to the withdrawn boy that he said remains inside his large frame. That boy's lingering presence has marked his interpretations almost as much as the color of his voice.

Indeed, his portrayal of Grimes, a part he first sang 12 years ago, in many ways inverted expectations of the troubled character, a role generally sung with less vulnerability and greater fierceness. Griffey's approach placed Grimes in complicated company alongside some of his other signature operatic roles, such as Lennie, the simple-minded killer, in Carlisle Floyd's "Of Mice and Men" (based on John Steinbeck's novel) and Mitch, Blanche DuBois' jilted suitor, in André Previn's "A Streetcar Named Desire" (based on Tennessee Williams' play).

"I've always felt like my career has been that of an outsider," he said, linking his own life to the characters he regularly portrays.

Solace in music

GRIFFEY grew up poor in an abusive family and found solace in music early, primarily in the Baptist church. He had his first solo in church at age 5 and sang Kaspar, one of the three magi in Gian Carlo Menotti's "Amahl and the Night Visitors," as a high school senior. The public schools did their part as well: He played trombone in a marching band for seven years.

"Had it not been for music education in the schools," he said, "who knows if my gift would have been cultivated and nurtured?"

By the time he finished high school, he had decided to study music as a profession, anticipating a church job. But things changed once he left North Carolina's Wingate University for the highly regarded Eastman School in Rochester, N.Y. There, he earned a master's in vocal performance and literature and elevated his job expectations to teaching at a small college.

What gave him the final push toward a life in the spotlight, besides advanced studies at Juilliard and a place in the Metropolitan Opera's young artists program, was private instruction from Beverley Johnson, a singing teacher who also mentored soprano Renée Fleming.

"She was 88 when I met her, but she was like a 16-year-old girl," recalled Griffey, who worked with Johnson until her death at 96. "When she first heard me, she said, 'You have a hell of a lot of talent and a hell of a lot to learn.' I still feel I have a hell of a lot to learn. But she changed my life forever by validating me as an artist."

Johnson encouraged Griffey to retain his individuality as a singer, urging him to avoid mimicking other talented vocalists. "That's what made the great artists great artists," he said, recalling his teacher's words. Johnson left Griffey her 1929 Steinway, which accompanied him as he honed his craft and now stands in the living room of his town house in High Point. He returned to his hometown nearly five years ago after a dozen years in Manhattan.

With his first full-fledged Met triumph behind him, Griffey is again looking ahead. Although he'll continue to sing Grimes -- including at San Diego Opera next April -- he does not want the role, a physical and emotional strain, to become "a steady diet."

He says he'd love to portray the benighted Tom Rakewell in Stravinsky's "The Rake's Progress," although he's had no offers yet. But in October, he'll appear as the noble Florestan in Beethoven's "Fidelio" with the Opera Company of Philadelphia. And in early February, he'll play the spectral Peter Quint in Britten's "The Turn of the Screw" at Portland Opera.

Conlon, who has worked regularly with Griffey since 2006, says he'd like the tenor to sing "everything I know of Britten" but also music by Mozart and Elgar. "The Dream of Gerontius,"

