

Upshaw signals a new Dawn for opera singers

By Michael Giltz

DAWN Upshaw, the Grammy-winning opera superstar, finished her first of two sold-out shows Thursday night at Joe's Pub with a moving encore of "I Wish It So." The crowd was rapt, the performance, triumphant. The night, somewhat... typical, actually, for the woman whose stunning talent regularly entrances audiences around the world, and whose career is a series of bold ventures and fairytale-like accolades.

Upshaw is the rare classically trained singer who can sing the music of Broadway without sounding stilted or foolish. Her two performances at Joe's Pub come from her new (Nonesuch) album, "Dawn Upshaw Sings Vernon Duke."

"Vernon who?" laughs Upshaw, recalling her reaction to the idea of devoting a CD to the composer of standards like "Autumn in New York" and "April in Paris." Chatting between rehearsals earlier this week, the pretty, unassuming 38-year-old is as engaging and direct as her light

but authoritative singing.

She talks easily about the songs her collaborator and producer Tommy Krasker unearthed, some of which had never before been recorded. Upshaw's tender version of one such number — "Water Under the Bridge" — all but guarantees that song's permanent rescue from obscurity.

Obscurity, however, has never been a danger for Upshaw herself. Her debut at the Metropolitan Opera may have been modest ("I sang about seven words in Rigoletto," she remembers), but in a twist worthy of Hollywood, she later substituted for an ailing Kathleen Battle and, as they say, never looked back.

Upshaw's debut album, "Knoxville: Summer of 1915" (Nonesuch, 1989), was a daring survey of modern art songs by the likes of Barber and Stravinsky and won the Grammy for best classical vocal album. Three years later, she was the featured soprano on a recording of Gorecki's Symphony No. 3 ("Symphony of Sorrowful Songs"), a phenomenally successful CD that topped the pop charts in Great Britain and sold more than a million copies worldwide.

Offers poured in from everywhere, and now — like only a

handful of opera stars who can sell tickets just by their presence in a cast — Upshaw is booked solid for the next three years. "The really big opera stars," Upshaw modestly observes, "are probably booked for the next five years."

In her own estimation, Upshaw's boldest foray was into the realm of Broadway, which began in 1994 with her critically acclaimed, best-selling album, "I Wish It So." Yet she simply cannot remember the first musical she saw. "Fiddler on the Roof?" she offers. "Mame?" Then again, perhaps it was "The Sound of Music."

She was born in Nashville and raised near Chicago. Her father was a minister at an interdenominational church, where the entire family performed as the Upshaw Family Singers, delivering folk songs and civil rights tunes to appreciative crowds.

Her childhood gave her a lifelong appreciation of all types of music, she says, while college opened up for her the possibility of pursuing a career in classical music. While that pursuit continues on its remarkable, flourishing course — Upshaw balances an equally rewarding personal life. The Westchester resident is the mother of two.



Dawn Upshaw breathes life into lost Vernon Duke tunes.