SYMPOSIUM RECORDS CD 1136

Opera in Chicago – Volume 1

Beginnings

Chicago ranks as the second most important operatic centre in the United States of America. Its first opera house was opened by John Rice on 29 July 1850 with Bellini's *La Sonnambula*. At a repeat performance the following night, the theatre suffered the fate of so many others - destruction by fire. Within three years Rice was opening a second theatre. Meanwhile, Adelina Patti made her first visit to the town: a concert in the Tremont Hall. She was just ten years old.

Chicago relied for its opera on touring companies and the unfailing optimism of impresarios. James McVicker built a new opera house in 1857 with a capacity of 1,000, but of much greater importance was Crosby's Opera House which opened in 1865 with *Il Trovatore* given by a company organized by Maurice Grau, later to manage the Metropolitan Opera, New York. The second night brought *Lucia di Lammermoor* with Clara Louis Kellog, the first American singer to have a major international career. She seems to have dominated this first season at Crosby's, singing Elvira in *I Puritani*, Zerlina in *Don Giovanni*, Marguérite in *Faust* and Marie in *Daughter of the Regiment*. In these years Chicago also enjoyed its first performances of *La Forza del Destino*, *Lucrezia Borgia* and *L'Africaine*. By 1871 the great Christine Nilsson had appeared at the house, but only in concert. The same year, Crosby's was destroyed in the great fire which destroyed much of Chicago. For the next eighteen years opera had no single home in the city.

Nonetheless, visiting companies continued to arrive. In 1878 Colonel Mapleson brought two prima donnas: Marie Roze, to whom he was married, and Minnie Hauk. Their rivalry helped his publicity machine more than operatic art; a performance of *Il Nozze di Figaro*, in which both were to sing, started without a Cherubino (Hauk). Early in 1884 two companies, organized respectively by Henry Abbey and the good Colonel, were in town at the same time. Abbey boasted Nilsson and Sembrich, whilst Mapleson responded with Patti and Gerster. On the first night of open competition Chicago could choose between *La Gioconda* with Nilsson and *Crispino e la Comare* (L. & F. Ricci) with Patti. Singers aside, Mapleson was stronger on scenery and production. His victory was clear by the third night of open competition when he gave *Les Huguenots* with both Patti and Gerster.

The 1880s in New York were characterized by German opera. The Damrosch Company first visited Chicago in 1885 when Materna appeared in *Tannhäuser*. Three years later the city heard its first complete Ring Cycle. Lilli Lehmann actually sang the three Brünnhilde roles on three successive nights. This was just before the construction of what was to be the first major opera house in Chicago. Great artists had appeared in much of the repertoire, but Chicago did not have a purpose built opera house. In 1885 Ferdinand Peck paid for and Dankmar Adler designed a huge temporary theatre inside an old exhibition hall on the lake front. It

held no less than 6,200 people. The inevitable, no longer youthful, Mapleson brought an opera company including Patti in *Aïda*! The experiment worked and Peck determined to construct a permanent home for opera.

The Chicago Auditorium opened on December 9th, although the first opera performance was the following day. The new house ranked amongst the world's largest, with a capacity of 4,250. The entire structure also included offices and a hotel. It was to be the principal home of opera in Chicago for nearly forty years. The very first performance, on December 10th, was of *Roméo et Juliette* with Patti and Ravelli. The last nearly forty years later was the same work with Edith Mason and Charles Hackett.

The history of the Chicago Auditorium as centre for opera falls neatly into two phases. From 1889 until 1910 it received a variety of visiting companies. Most of the grand opera was through the auspices of the Metropolitan Opera on tour, although Chicago became a more nearly equal partner than some other centres. In exchange for around 25% of the receipts Chicago supplied scenery, costumes (except those for the stars) and a fine local orchestra organized by Theodore Thomas. In the first seasons Nordica and Tamagno appeared in *Les Huguenots*, Albani in *Faust*, Patti in *Lucia di Lammermoor*, *Semiramide*, *Martha* and *La Sonnambula*. The peerless Lilli Lehmann returned in the spring of 1890. Between April 21st and May 2nd she appeared in *Tannhäuser* (twice), *La Juive*, *Un Ballo in Maschera*, *Fidelio*, *Die Königin von Saba* and *Norma*. The last three were on successive nights. The following night she appeared again in *Die Königin von Saba* after which there were three days rest before Donna Anna in *Don Giovanni.* All these works were sung in German. The Metropolitan Opera's 1891-2 season actually began in Chicago and the very first night saw the North American débuts of the de Reszke brothers, joined in *Lohengrin* by Emma Eames and Giulia Ravogli. Melba and Ca1vé appeared in 1895 and Maure1 and de Lussan in *Falstaff* in 1896. That same year a *Don Giovanni* offered Nordica, de Lussan, Eames, Édouard de Reszke and Maurel. The cast for *Les Huguenots* included both the de Reszkes, Nordica, Melba, Ancona and Plançon! 1902 offered Schumann-Heink, van Dyck and Ternina. In 1905 Caruso sang in *Lucia di Lammermoor* with Sembrich as well as in *I Pagliacci* and *La Gioconda.*

Amid all this brilliance, the system remained star opera in set pieces. There was no resident company and no concept of fostering local or even national talent. From the opening of the Auditorium until 1910 the Metropolitan Opera gave 318 performances. Other companies, including those concentrating on lighter opera, offered perhaps another 100 performances. Over the period Chicago heard some 80 different works in all operatic genres, but in truth it was beginning to fall behind. Opera madness was to hit New York with the mortal rivalry between the Metropolitan Opera and Hammerstein. New York had some 250 performances of grand opera during the 1908-9 season. At the same time Henry Russell established a resident company in Boston. It was time for a new development.

The Chicago Grand Opera Company was founded late in 1909 just one month after the first performance by the Boston Opera Company. It immediately obtained a year round lease on the Auditorium to start the following autumn. At

last Peck's intentions could be fulfilled. Words were one thing, but there was no company, no stock of productions or scenery and there were no contracted artists. These were acquired in the wake of the collapse of the Manhattan Opera. Its assets were purchased by the Metropolitan Opera and (apart from the theatre) largely transferred to the new Chicago company which was too far away to be a rival. The appointment of Cleofonte Campanini as its music director underlined the notion of the **Chicago Grand Opera Co.** as continuation of the Manhattan. Its first performance was on November 3rd 1910 - *Aïda* with Korolewicz-Wayda, Bassi, Sammarco and de Angelis. Even more significantly, for the greatness of the Manhattan lay essentially in the French repertoire, this was followed by *Pélleas et Mélisande* with Mary Garden. By the end of November the repertoire had extended to include *Il Trovatore*, *Cavalleria Rusticana*, *I Pagliacci*, *La Bohème*, *Louise*, *Tosca*, *Carmen*, *La Traviata*, *Faust*, *Aïda*, *Salome* and *Madama Butterfly*. Some singers - Farrar and Melba for example - were loaned by the Metropolitan Opera, but as part of its own company Chicago had already introduced McCormack, Dalmorès and Armand Crabbé, who was to be a stalwart of the early years. By the end of this first season there had been over sixty performances. Throughout its history there was to be an emphasis on the French repertoire, particularly the works of Massenet. Great singers visited for guest performances - Caruso, Nordica, Schumann-Heink. Others - Teyte, Raïsa and, later, Claudia Muzio - stayed for longer periods. Galli-Curci's début was the sensation of the 1916-7 season; after just two performances the fee for the hitherto unknown soprano was raised to $1,000 per appearance.

There have been two histories of opera in Chicago during this 'golden age'· and these indicate the wealth of artistic talent. The company metamorphosed into the Chicago Opera Association and later the Chicago Civic Opera with the financial backing of tycoon Samuel Insull. Meanwhile opera had extended away from its autumn and winter base in Chicago to include regular open air summer seasons at Ravinia Park. Performers and operas included old and new favourites. Schipa appeared in *La Traviata* and Muzio in Massenet's *Manon*. Rabaud's *Marouf* and de Falla's *La Vida Breve* were in the repertoire. Chicago's status as the USA's second city for opera seemed secure.

The Civic Opera House Insull was the key financial backer for the move away from the Auditorium to the new Civic Opera House. It cost some 20 million dollars and opened on November 4th, 1929 with Charles Marshall and Rosa Raïsa in 'Aïda'. But just a few days before, the stock market had crashed and the great depression had begun. Early in 1932 the Chicago Civic Opera followed Insull into bankruptcy; it was the end of an era.

Opera resumed in Chicago from December 1933, but it was now on a shoe-string and dependent on borrowing artists from the Metropolitan Opera. Seasons lasted no more than a few weeks. Even so artists such as Jeritza, Rethberg, and Pinza could be heard. Galli-Curci returned in the twilight of her career. Martinelli sang his first Otello and his only Tristan, the latter opposite Flagstad. For several years after the second world war there were only visits by the San Carlo company; almost a throwback to Chicago's early opera history. It was not until 1954 that a

new company was to emerge - **The Chicago Lyric Opera** - to seek, successfully, to regain the city's operatic prestige. But that is another era and another story.

In an age when every intimate detail of the lives of great artists is in the public domain, it is fascinating to reflect how little we known about Mary Garden, who, despite her Scottish parentage and United States upbringing, was one of the greatest quintessentially French sopranos of the early part of the twentieth century. There is a charming clue in a private letter dated 15 May 1948, "If there is one thing I detest it is to talk about myself - my work always talked for me - that is what the public paid for not my private existence . . . . the book I wrote for the USA needs 50,000 more words and mostly about myself, so I have put it away for the time being and they may publish it anyway".

We have to assume those words were never added to *Mary Garden's Story* and we remain in blissful ignorance about most of her private life. She was born in Aberdeen in 1874, but her family moved to the United States of America six years later. The Chicago connection and her singing began in 1888. Her main learning period began, as did her career, in Paris. She had a number of teachers, but always considered Fugère as the most important - "I studied with him in Paris before my début in *Louise* . . . he sang and created the father . . . he was great".

Between 1900 and 1906 Mary Garden appeared at both the Opéra and Opéra Comique and created a string of new operas. Most are now forgotten, but not *Pelléas et Mélisande*, her greatest triumph. With some hyperbole she claims, "I was the first singer to create Modern Opera where the drama is as important as the singing - that is why they called me in the USA a singing actress". By her own reckoning Garden sang in 36 operas. She was the first to sing ten of these in France and seventeen of them in the United States.

This first phase of Mary Garden's career ended in 1907 when she joined that "great man Oscar Hammerstein at his Manhattan Opera House in New York". So deep was her affection for the impresario that forty years later Garden remained convinced that only illness had driven him from the operatic scene. She was one of the major stars of the short-lived Manhattan Company with its strong concentration on French opera. Indeed Hammerstein had exclusive rights in the United States for the production of works such as *Thaïs*, *Louise* and *Le Jongleur de Notre-Dame* - all supreme vehicles for Garden's art. The terms under which Hammerstein left the operatic scene are extant. Garden's contract was for 20 performances at $1400 each. Tetrazzini was on $1500 per performance and at the Metropolitan Opera Caruso received $2000.

From the inception of the Chicago Grand Opera Co. in 1910 Garden was to remain the town's supreme prima donna for twenty years, appearing in more than 220 performances of 24 different operas. The French repertoire predominated; *Carmen*, *Thaïs* and *Le Jongleur de Notre-Dame* were the most frequently performed. Indeed six performances of *Tosca* were about the only nod in the direction of the standard Italian repertoire. Amongst composers, Massenet's works were much the most frequently performed, but Chicago's operatic public could also see and hear their heroine in a clutch of works now long since forgotten.

In 1921 Mary Garden was named as Director of the company; an intriguing example of the 'player manager'. No expense was spared. New singers were introduced - Muratore, Johnson, Dux, Ivogün and Edith Mason. With so many artists to hand, some had few opportunities to sing. Schipa stalked out when given only one performance in the first three weeks; Muratore objected to sharing the role of Samson with Marshall; Gadski, hired to sing Isolde, never appeared; Cavalieri's début simply did not happen. No expense was spared in production; the world première of Prokofiev's *The Love of Three Oranges* cost $100,000, there were just two performances. By the end of the season the company had lost over one million dollars. The loss was covered by Mr. and Mrs. Harold McCormick. Mary Garden felt sure "it was worth it", but nonetheless her days as an impresario were over.

During her Chicago years, Mary still found time for visits to Europe and she remained a major attraction in Alfano's *Risurrezione* in 1934. She was then aged 60. In 1939 she returned to her native Aberdeen where she lived until 1967.

Garden's recorded legacy is both small and problematic. Her Paris recordings of Debussy are part of the priceless historic legacy of the gramophone, but it requires some act of faith in the listener if the artistry of the singer is to emerge through the technical limitations of the recording. The Columbias are much more accessible, but the recording is still somewhat backward. Technically, the later Victor recordings are much the most successful, but by then Mary Garden was already in her mid- to late 50s. Even so in all her records something of the magic that was Garden comes through. The voice is instantly recognizable, the production is fluid and, apparently, effortless. The three items from Massenet's operas and the aria from *Louise* must be considered as 'central' interpretations, whilst her late recording of the card scene from *Carmen* is unrivalled in its sense of foreboding. Significantly she sings Violetta's scena in French rather than Italian.

Garden mesmerized many critics and there is a need to cut through the hyperbole. Perhaps Oscar Thompson does this the best, "During the best years of her career she was praised chiefly for her acting and criticized liberally for her singing. In the estimation of this writer she was a much better singer than she usually got credit for being, and often she could have sung much better than she did . . . her work was disturbingly irregular . . . her Mélisande stood alone ... her Jean, the Juggler, was enthralling ... of Marguérite and some other traditional parts, it is enough to say they were for others. Out of these contradictions arose an imperious something to dwarf them all. Mary Garden was Mary Garden"

Reconstruction of the careers of singers of the past is not easy. Despite a major article in a recent issue of the specialist magazine *The Record Collector* (Vol.36 No.2) there remains a good deal of confusion about the first performances by **Edith Mason**. She was born in St. Louis in 1894 and she followed Mary Garden in seeking to learn her art in Paris. Male teachers were again the major influence - this time the great baritone Victor Maurel and the tenor Édmond Clement. She made her début at home rather than in Europe, unexpectedly substituting for Carmen Melis as Nedda in *I Pagliacci* with the Boston Opera in 1912. It seems she was given a contract for the following season, but it is unclear

how often she performed. Impresario Henry Russell packed her off to Europe to resume her training.

Shortly before the outbreak of the first world war Mason appeared in both Nice and Marseilles before returning to the United States, where she joined the Metropolitan Opera and made her début as Sophie in *Der Rosenkavalier*. Her Metropolitan career was to be four seasons spread over some twenty years in all 93 performances of 17 roles, of which Sophie and Micaëla in *Carmen* were given the most frequently.

Edith Mason's connection with Chicago really begins with the summer seasons at Ravinia Park. Full documentation of these seasons is lacking but in 1917, her first year, Mason appeared in *Faust*, *Madama Butterfly*, *La Bohème*, and *I Pagliacci*. For the next two or three years much of her time was spent with various companies touring Latin America and she clearly made a considerable impact in Mexico. In 1920 she returned to France, appearing in *Faust* and *Roméo et Juliette* at both the Monte Carlo and Paris Operas. She also sang both soprano roles in Boito's *Mefistofele*.

It seems almost certain that such performances in Paris were instrumental in Mary Garden's decision to add Edith Mason to the growing roster of artists for her 1921-2 season in Chicago. She was already known from her Ravinia Park days, but now she was an established star. She made her début on the third night of the season in *Madama Butterfly*. It was a triumph. According to critic Edward Moore, "The chief duty in considering the performance is to sort out a set of superlatives and put them in their proper places . . . her voice is entrancingly lovely . . . all the way up and down her full range, which means extraordinary gifts by nature and acquisition by study and development. "

For the next twenty years Chicago was to be Mason's artistic home. She gave some 130 performances of 21 operas. Most frequent were *Madama Butterfly*, *Faust* and *Martha.* Mason concentrated on the lighter lyrical roles and there is not a great deal of overlap between her repertoire and that of Garden. Each sang in a couple of performances of *Manon*, and Garden did essay *Faust*. As far as can be ascertained they only appeared together in two performances of *Carmen* in the 1926-7 season; Garden as Carmen and Mason as Micaëla.

There are few extant descriptions of Mason's singing and her recorded legacy is very thin. Three tests for Victor were never published, so our knowledge of her voice is based on discs made for Brunswick between 1924 and 1928. All are rare, some extremely so, and they do not represent the best recorded technology then available. The aria from *Louise* remained unpublished, so opera is represented by arias from just the three major Chicago roles. Apart from some lovely singing, the outstanding characteristic of all her recordings is the ease of production and apparent effortlessness. According to her biographer in *The Record Collector*, Mason practised scales and vocalised with Melba in Monte Carlo (probably in 1921). From the evidence of her records this is very credible. What marks off so many of the great singers of the past from their successors is this ease and fluency and lack of forcing. Such a technique could sustain a long and active career. We have no direct knowledge of Mason's voice in the period after her recordings, but

when she retired slightly unexpectedly after a concert in 1942, Claudia Cassidy wrote, "The seasons have been kind to Edith Mason".

Stanley Henig

Edith Mason's very beautiful records for the Brunswick Company fall into two groups. The first, made probably in 1924, became almost immediately obsolete due to the arrival of electrical recording. The second, made probably in 1926, largely duplicated the group it replaced, but itself lasted only until the company collapsed in 1929. Thus all her records are rare and Mr. Westwood's set in mint condition may well be unique. From this set one version of each selection has been transferred to this Compact Disc.

Mary Garden's records span over a quarter of a century and some are of extreme rarity. Each group has its importance and its failings. The first were very dimly recorded, but can now be made to sound much clearer than was once thought. Apart from representing her at the outset of her career they are also the only records of Debussy. The recordings for Pathé and Edison are largely of uninspired material, but on Columbia she sings parts for which she was famous, and they were made in her best years. We must treasure those moments when the voice flashes out but regret that the sound is seldom good for its time. The Victor records have the advantage of being made electrically. She is still magnificent though the voice has occasionally a trace of tiredness.

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