

NICOLAI FIGNER & MEDEA MEI FIGNER



For many people there is an added warmth when romantic attachment on stage extends beyond it into private life. The story of Nikolai Nikolayevich Figner and Medea Mei has such extra romance in great measure. For twenty years in both their private and public lives they were inseparable, as indeed they remain in their posthumous reputations. But there is also great poignancy, as for each of them their domestic partnership, which coincided with the finest years of their careers, both followed and was followed by other relationships. Mei had been recognized as an important mezzo-soprano in Italy, Spain, Romania and South America in the early 1880s, but the major part of her career was in Russia, where she achieved even greater fame as Mei-Figner.

This aura of romance has in some respects been intensified by paucity of detail concerning their backgrounds and their early careers. All known sources agree that Nikolai was born in St. Petersburg in 1857 of a reasonably well to do Russian family and intended

to follow a naval career. It seems that he developed a belief in his ability to become an operatic artist and that a romance led to a marriage with an Italian governess named Luisa at about the same time. The Russian establishment disapproved and he was dismissed. Nikolai and Luisa went off to Italy and had two children. He took singing lessons, from Lamperti amongst others, and started a new career. Dates are vague, but all of this, in effect the official history, seems to have happened in the years 1880-1883.

However, there was also a sister, Vera Nikolayevna, born in 1852 at Khristoforovka, Kazan Province. After medical studies and marriage, she became interested in education of peasants in rural areas, including political enlightenment, which was incompatible with belief in the paternalistic, all-protecting Tsar. In 1879, in consequence of a major split within the Party of Land and Freedom, of which she was a member, she went with the terrorist faction, which formed itself into the Party of the People's Will. As a member of the executive of that party, she helped plan the assassination of leading politicians and of Tsar Alexander II, which took place in 1881. After contriving to avoid arrest she continued her revolutionary activities in the south. However, in 1883 she was arrested, and the following year she was sentenced by military tribunal to capital punishment. This was commuted to life imprisonment. She served 20 years in solitary confinement, followed by a further two years exiled to Archangelsky. In 1906 she was released and allowed to emigrate. Abroad she was a member of the Party of Russian Socialist Revolution. In 1915 she was able to return home, where, until her death in Moscow in 1942, she occupied herself with social work and writing. It is believed that the lessening of her punishment and her eventual release were not unconnected with her brother; certainly they occurred when he was at the height of his popularity. (Such influence was sometimes possible; it is reported that the Italian baritone, Battistini was on sufficiently close terms at the Imperial Court to secure a pardon for a condemned person.) He may have been dismissed from the navy on account of his marriage; he may have been told that his sister's activities barred him from any official career; it may be that, on the advice of a friendly senior officer, he realised he would be better off abroad for a while; or his departure for Italy may have been pure co-incidence. These, and other possible explanations, are entirely speculative; quite possibly several factors decided him.

It is unclear precisely when Nikolai Figner first appeared on the operatic stage. It seems likely that his first significant engagement was as Faust in May 1883 at the Teatro Tosi-Borghesi in Ferrara. He was praised for both his vocal and acting abilities. The following September he appeared in Donizetti's *La Favorita* in a minor theatre on the outskirts of Milan with Medea Mei as Leonora; this, presumably, was their first appearance together.

The beginnings of Medea's career are seemingly well-charted in an autobiography written in 1912. Whilst she identifies a considerable number of early performances, very few dates are given. Her family was relatively poor, she gives 1859 as the year of her birth, her mother died young, her father disapproved of a singing career. It seems that Medea began her studies at the Florence Conservatory in the hope and expectation of becoming a lyric soprano, but her first teacher, Professor Bianchi, propelled her towards a lower repertoire. She made her *début* in Sinalunga, not far from Florence, as Azucena in *Il*

Trovatore. According to *Unvergängliche Stimmen* (Kutsch and Riemens) this was in January 1874, before her fifteenth birthday. This seems highly improbable. Medea herself claimed to have been sixteen when she appeared at Sinaluga and says that the performances took place during summer, but she gives no year. It is not unusual for singers to modify their dates of birth to seem younger, but as Medea survived to an apparent age of 93, this seems less probable. Interestingly, when she met the French representative of the Gramophone Company in Paris in 1933 he thought that “she must be getting on for 60 years of age”, although she was then seemingly 74. In the autobiography Medea suggests that as a result of her success at Sinaluga she was engaged by the Teatro Pagliano in Florence, immediately after which she appeared as the Queen in Thomas’ *Hamlet* at the Teatro Pergola in the same city, with the great Victor Maurel in the title role. Given that this performance, in fact, took place on 17 December 1880, there seem to be four or five ‘missing’ years.

The performance of *Hamlet* brought recognition. Whilst most attention was focused on Maurel, the young Medea was warmly applauded. She felt she owed a great deal to the help, encouragement and instruction of Maurel. A month later when she again sang the Queen at the Teatro Reggion in Turin, music critics were already predicting a great future for her. During this Turin season she was also heard as Mercedes in *Carmen* and in a single performance of Grammann’s *Melusine*. Medea’s career in the Italian-speaking operatic world, which at the time included Spain and South America, developed apace over the next few years. During the 1882-1883 season at the Teatro Reale in Madrid she appeared in *Il Trovatore*, *Hamlet* and *La Favorita*, the latter opposite Battistini. Medea had already appeared in Barcelona; now, following her success in Madrid, she joined a company organized by Maurice Strakosch to tour Spain during the summer of 1883. The tour ended back in Milan where, as already mentioned, she sang for the first time with Nikolai Figner.

Although we do not know precisely when the romantic relationship developed, Medea and Nikolai seem to have been inseparable after the Milan *La Favorita*. Whilst for obvious reasons, they could not always sing in the same works, they seem almost invariably to have been in the same place, with the same company at the same time. Both were widening their repertoires, Nikolai as a lyric tenor, making some forays into bel canto, Medea still unquestionably concentrating on mezzo roles. At the National Theatre in Bucharest in the winter of 1883-1884, they were the tenor and mezzo-soprano principals in *La Favorita* and *Carmen*. As a mezzo-soprano, she was restricted to lesser parts in the other operas in which they appeared together, *Rigoletto*, *Martha* and *Faust*. Medea also appeared as Amneris and Azucena, whilst Nikolai took the tenor leads in *La Sonnambula*, *I Puritani*, *Il Barbiere di Siviglia* and *La Traviata*.

Shortly after the Bucharest season the couple joined a company bound for Buenos Aires and Montevideo. Medea had previously sung with Maurel, but this was really the first occasion on which she and Nikolai were in a company dominated by top international artists; it included Tamagno, Theodorini and the Ravogli sisters. Medea and Nikolai again sang in *La Favorita*. Her other roles included Amneris, Azucena, and Laura in *La Gioconda*, all in casts led by Tamagno. Nikolai repeated his *Faust*, and also appeared as Leopold in *La Juive*, sung in Italian with Tamagno as Eleazar. For

aficionados of early recordings, the notion of Tamagno and Figner singing together in the same work almost defies belief. It also offers some perspective on the early part of Figner's career. The role of Leopold is important and it contains a good many high notes, but the opera revolves around Eleazar.

In the summer of 1885 Medea and Nikolai were both in Seville. The great Spanish tenor, Gayarre was the centre of attraction; indeed the leading Spanish musical periodical of the time devoted its reviews entirely to his performances. Medea appeared in *Aïda*, *La Favorita*, and *Lucrezia Borgia*, all with Gayarre. She claims that she was now a dramatic soprano, but it would seem that she still sang Amneris. It is not clear which role she sang in *Lucrezia Borgia*.

Up to this time, most of the couple's triumphs had been outside Italy. This changed with the 1885-1886 season at the Teatro Comunale in Bologna. The season, lasting less than three months, consisted of thirty-eight performances of four operas, *La Gioconda*, *Aïda*, *Faust* and Ponchielli's newest work, *Marion Delorme*, which had received its première at La Scala in March 1885. Nikolai was in all four works and appeared thirty-four times in all (missing only four performances of *Aïda*). Medea was scarcely less active, appearing seventeen times as Laura and ten as La Gioconda.

In the summer of 1886 Medea and Nikolai travelled to Brazil, to perform in São Paulo and Rio. That they were reaching towards new repertory is demonstrated by their performances in *Les Huguenots* as Raoul and Valentine, the first clearly the province of a dramatic rather than a lyric tenor and the second for a dramatic soprano, not a mezzo-soprano. They also appeared together in the lead roles of Ponchielli's *Marion Delorme*.

The tour is remembered today, however, for the extraordinary start of Toscanini's career as a conductor. The sequence of events is well chronicled in *Toscanini* (Harvey Sachs). It was with the encouragement of Nikolai Figner, singing Radames that evening, another heroic tenor role, that Toscanini leapt on to the podium to conduct *Aïda*.

There was an interesting sequel. After the return from South America, Nikolai was due to sing in a new work, *Edmea*, by the young composer Catalani. It had only recently received its La Scala première and was now to be performed at the Teatro Carignano in Turin. Through Nikolai's good offices, and perhaps Medea's too, Toscanini received the right introductions. Thus on 4th November 1886 Toscanini conducted in Italy for the first time and his abilities were confirmed. "I owe him my career" was Toscanini's tribute to Figner. In return the conductor later helped the tenor learn the role of Lenski in *Eugene Onegin* and also coached Medea in some of her new soprano parts, including that of Tatiana in the same work. In April 1887 Nikolai and Medea sang for the first time at the theatre which was to become their home base, the Marinsky in St. Petersburg. Nikolai's first appearance was as Radames. One critic described him as having a powerful tenor voice with a ringing quality to the upper register, but felt nonetheless that he was (still) a 'tenore di grazia'. Medea's début was as Valentine with Nikolai as Raoul in *Les Huguenots*. According to Medea's autobiography she sang in Italian, the rest of the cast in Russian.

From St. Petersburg the couple went to Covent Garden. On 24th May, the opening night of the season, Medea appeared in *La Favorita* opposite Gayarre and d'Andrade. She showed a 'rich voice of considerable compass' according to one critic.

Later, Nikolai took over the tenor role. He also appeared in *Ernani*, *Faust*, *Linda di Chamounix*, *Rigoletto*, *La Sonnambula* and, possibly, *Guillaume Tell*. As far as can be ascertained these performances brought down the curtain on Nikolai Figner's international career. From then until their marriage was breaking up 1903, and Medea went on a further trip to South America, their operatic activities were entirely in Russia.

It is, of course, difficult to place in proper perspective singers of an earlier period than our own, but it is certainly worth the effort in the case of the Figners from the time when they determined to base their lives and careers in St. Petersburg. There is a tendency amongst record collectors to assume that the quality of performance on disc, even the colour of the label, is a safe indication of status in the opera house. Obviously, there are no recordings of either Medea or Nikolai prior to their St. Petersburg days, and, indeed, those there are of that period are exceedingly rare in their original form. They include fascinating performances and, in her case, a fine, rich voice. This may explain some of the exaggeration of the importance of their careers in pre-St. Petersburg days. Medea was widely recognized as an up and coming (mezzo)-soprano, but she left Italy without quite rising to the top of her profession. Suggestions that Nikolai had a major career in the leading Italian houses are largely fantasy. Clearly he 'carried' the 1883-1884 season at Bucharest, but this was hardly a major international centre of opera. Nikolai and Medea equally dominated the 1885-1886 season at Bologna's Teatro Comunale, but this is hardly a counter-balance to the fact that neither of them sang at La Scala or at the San Carlo in Naples. In those early years Medea's appearances with Gayarre and Tamagno would certainly have seemed much more significant than those with Nikolai. There is no evidence that either was invited back to Covent Garden and neither ever sang in North America.

In the late nineteenth century St. Petersburg and other major Russian centres were enjoying two distinctive operatic experiences. The 'native school', which focused on performances in Russian by Russian artists, and international seasons, with imported companies of western or 'westernized' singers, such as Caruso, Tamagno, Tetrizzini, Battistini, Sembrich and Kruszelnicka. These, barring rare exceptions, were entirely separate, personnel of the international touring groups and the quintessentially Russian companies did not sing together. Sergei Levik in his *Memoirs: An Opera Singer's Notes* offers detailed evaluations of all those who sang in Russia from 1900. Whilst he gives fascinating insights into some of the particular characteristics of Russian singers, he assesses them in exactly the same terms as the non-Russian artists, and he does not find them wanting as a group. It is quite clear that this was indeed a golden age for Russian singers, many of whom had little or no career outside their own country.

Levik devotes a great deal of space to Nikolai Figner and he is worth quoting in some detail: "He appeared to be one of those unusual artists who have achieved pre-eminence on the stage not so much as the result of their innate qualities as of an exceptional knowledge of how to make use of these gifts, a knowledge acquired through enormous and unremitting labour. There cannot be a more contradictory figure in the whole history of vocal art... the possessor of an average voice, he became an outstanding singer (and) vocalist... The thing that distinguished Figner right from the beginning was his presentation of recitative... There was not a single word that didn't have maximum

bearing on the musical line and not a single note that was not linked with the word... The second characteristic... was his accurate gauging of light and shade, of the difference between a rich sound on a note and a covered tone... Figner knew how to captivate an audience by means of the delight in a word uttered as though for the first time". Levik felt that it was in the role of Otello that Figner particularly excelled "eclipsing all contemporary rivals: Italian, French and Russians". He devotes eight pages to a fascinating analysis of an artist totally identified with his role. (It should be added that there is no evidence that Levik ever heard Tamagno.)

Levik is equally interesting on Medea: "Her voice was rich, even and full, with free top notes and velvety low ones... (which) were rich, but a mezzo's not a contralto's. She worked hard and made great efforts to master every aspect of the Russian realistic school of singing... she wanted to become a genuine Russian singer. Within a couple of years she was already singing Tatiana in Russian... the very fact of her wishing to enter the world of Russian vocal art is significant". Levik first heard the Figners at a concert in 1900, and his assessment may well shed wider light on the phenomenon of operatic partnership. "What impressed me most were the duets. These items opened my eyes for the first time to the fact that the greatest beauty does not lie in the basic potential of the voice. The marvellously rendered duets impressed through voices which I had not heard before (but which) were perfectly in accord till their last intake of breath. For the first time I heard voices trying to melt into each other, trying to find a common colouring to embody the qualities of both in a single sound. The Figners were masters of vocal unity".

From the very beginning of her St. Petersburg career Medea began to concentrate on the dramatic soprano repertoire. Early performances included *Otello* and *Mefistofele*, in both of which she sang in Italian. Her first performance in Russian was as Tatiana with Nikolai as Lenski in 1889. It was also about this time that they finally married, for which she became converted to the Russian Orthodox Church. The following year they created the lead roles in Tchaikovsky's *Queen of Spades*. Tchaikovsky and Nikolai Figner were close friends, and the role of Hermann was clearly written with him in mind. Northrop Moore quotes Tchaikovsky, "I know already that Figner will be superb. What a rare artist is this Figner – and what a brilliant exception to the old saying that all tenors are stupid!" According to Medea the part of Lisa was modified by Tchaikovsky to suit her vocal qualities. Medea and Nikolai also created the main roles in Tchaikovsky's *Iolanthe* and Napravnik's *Dubrovsky*. The couple certainly did not neglect Italian opera during the St. Petersburg years. Medea's autobiography refers to performances of *Cavalleria Rusticana*, *I Pagliacci* and *Aïda* (now singing the title role rather than Amneris). It seems likely that Nikolai appeared with her in all these works, and also in *La Bohème*, and that they were performed in Russian.

From 1900 onwards representatives of recording companies were seeking to attract major artists on to their rosters. Russia was an important territory for the Gramophone and Typewriter Company as much as for others. The Figners were amongst the first leading Russian artists to make records, and theirs were amongst the very first records to be accorded the new red-label celebrity status. Their pre-eminence in St. Petersburg's musical life is sufficient in itself to lend historic importance to all these early recordings, with added significance and value in their creator records from *The Queen of Spades* and

Dubrovsky.

At the end of 1902 the Figners created another new work by Napravnik, *Francesca da Rimini*. However, their partnership was drawing to a close. As with the beginning of their romance, so also in its end, much is shrouded in mystery. There are suggestions from the family that the split was occasioned by Medea falling in love with another musician and seeking a divorce. Russian sources assert that publicly Nikolai took responsibility for the split. The couple followed their usual schedule in St. Petersburg from mid-September until the beginning of Lent, after which they toured the provinces. In the spring of 1903 they sang in Odessa. These were their last performances together. Medea had already agreed to join a company heading for South America for the 1903 summer season. Her autobiography reveals little by way of personal detail, other than a claim that she did not know that she would never again sing with Nikolai, and the sad reflection that no one from the family was present at the quayside to see her off.

The company, which visited Buenos Aires and Montevideo, was strong. It included Caruso, Constantino, Zenatello, Giraltoni, de Luca, Farneti and Darclée. Medea sang in the first South American performances of *Adriana Lecouvreur*, together with Caruso and de Luca, who had some months earlier participated in the première. She also sang Tosca opposite Caruso and Giraltoni, and took the title role in *La Gioconda*. After returning from South America, Medea added Donna Anna and Gorislava in *Ruslan and Ludmilla* to her repertoire. In 1908 she sang five performances of Russian Opera at Berlin's Kroll Theatre, whilst in 1910 she returned to one of her earliest successes, appearing in the St. Petersburg conservatoire in two Italian performances of *La Favorita* with Battistini. Her farewell to St. Petersburg, and indeed to her operatic career, was as Carmen early in 1912.

By that time Nikolai, his voice well past its best, had retired from the Marinsky, and had married again. His new wife was the soprano Renée Efimovna Radina (1872-1944). He was appointed Director of the Narodni Dom in St. Petersburg, a post which he occupied from 1910 to 1915. He performed there occasionally, too, and Levik mentions appearances as Otello. He put on new productions of established Russian masterpieces and sought, generally in vain, to promote new Russian works. To Levik should go the last word on Nikolai, "In spite of his failings and inconsistencies, Figner should be remembered as an outstanding Russian artist and human being".

In retirement Medea settled in Paris, but she continued to visit Russia until well after the revolution, and there, about 1929, she made her last records, but there is an interesting postscript. In 1933 she apparently visited the French headquarters of the Gramophone Company to explore the possibility of making further records. Alas, the company's representative could "not imagine that her voice was worth anything from a recording point of view", and his excessively harsh verdict on one of the records recently made by Medea in Russia was that it was "simply awful". [Mei-Figner's Russian records run at an uncommonly high speed. If the official was listening to them at the then standard speed, the result would indeed have been "simply awful".] In his letter to head office in London he indicates that Medea was still giving occasional recitals, but there is no confirmation of this.

She lived on in Paris for a further twenty years, a more or less forgotten figure.

Once again Levik offers the most appropriate comment with which to close, “Medea’s voice was much warmer and more beautiful than that of her husband, it was an endless source of pleasure to hear how her voice enveloped the sound of his with a sort of nimbus”.

Stanley Henig

I acknowledge gratefully assistance from Edward Morgan who allowed me access to a private translation of the memoirs of Medea Mei-Figner; Tom Kaufman for supplying details of the 1883-1884 Bucharest season and the 1884 visit to South America; and Ruth Edge, Head of EMI Archive, for making available the 1933 letter from the French office. Sources consulted include the booklet on Medea Mei-Figner issued by Rubini Records with their boxed LP set of her records; *Record Collector* (Volume 35 Nos.1 & 2, devoted to Nikolai Figner); and *The Levik Memoirs: An Opera Singer’s Notes* translated by Edward Morgan and published by Symposium Records.

Notes: Much more research is needed into the lives and careers of both Medea Mei and Nikolai Figner. Extremely little is known of Medea's family. Both Medea and Nikolai are reported to have had previous marriages, but virtually nothing is known about their spouses. The circumstances of Nikolai's departure from Russia for Italy remain unclear. The standard works refer to many alleged early performances by both artists, but places and dates are vague. Figner is said to have had lessons at the St. Petersburg Conservatoire from Pryanichnikov and Everadi before leaving Russia, and, on arriving in Italy, from de Roxas in Naples; Medea Mei, sometimes Mey, may at one time have been Amedea Mei Zovaide.

Interest in family details and relationships is not to uncover what should be afforded decent obscurity, but for matters affecting artistic development. Only in recent years, for example, has it become clear how much of Enrico Caruso's career was built on foundations laid by the Giachetti sisters.

Professor Henig and Symposium Records will be glad to hear from any readers with access to original sources, so that new information can be included as an appendix to a future booklet in the series.

All tracks are sung in Russian except as indicated.

All but tracks 23-29 on the second disc, were originally recorded by the *Gramophone and Typewriter Co.* and its successor, the *Gramophone Company*. The piano in these sessions is further back than was usual, and, where heard clearly, often gives the impression of a grand rather than of an upright.

All of the records reproduced in this collection are rare; some exist, almost certainly, in only one or two copies and few, if any, of them appeared outside Russia. Thus the listener will be the more grateful to those who have made them available, and understanding when listening to examples which have not survived in pristine state. A considerable number of titles were remade very quickly, perhaps to exploit advances in recording techniques, perhaps to replace worn or damaged metal parts. Whatever the reason, the effect is to add yet further to the rarity of individual items. Medea's records

disappeared first from the catalogue and are, consequently, of even greater rarity than those of Nikolai. As his career waned, such of his records as remained available were reduced to black-label status, and his later records were issued in the even cheaper "Zonophone" series, where he was joined by Renée.

CD 1255

Tracks 1 and 2 carry the legend "RED SEAL". It is strange to find in Russia in 1902 a text normally associated with American "Victor", until it is recalled that the red label actually originated in Russia, instituted at the request of a dealer to match the décor of his shop.

Track 11 is from a Neographon record, pressed from a misappropriated plate, the label, in red and gold, printed to resemble the owner's label.

Tracks 12, 14, 19 and 24 are creator records.

CD 1256

Track 7 is a creator record.

Track 16 The violin accompaniment is by N. T. Menasavich.

Track 25 Two folk songs, the first familiar from its appearance in *Hänsel und Gretel*, in which, beyond reasonable doubt, the singer never appeared; the second unidentified. From a single-sided test pressing, the plain white label bearing only the artist's name.

Matrix details have been included as fully as possible, and as closely as modern typefaces permit. Some of the minute, hand-written suffices are difficult to decipher; in particular, whether z and 2 is intended.

Acknowledgements: Symposium Records is most grateful to Sir Paul Getty K.B.E. for making available the records for tracks 1 to 3, 6 to 16, 18, 20, 23 and 28 on CD 1255, and for tracks 3 to 7, 12 and 23 to 25 on CD 1256.

Thanks are due to Syd Gray for providing tracks 17, 19, 22, 25 and 26 on CD 1255, and for tracks 26 to 29 on CD 1256, and for material from the booklet of his pioneering LP issue of Mei-Figner.

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