

The SYMPOSIUM OPERA COLLECTION – Volume 4

EMMA EAMES (1865-1952)

Much innocent pleasure can be obtained from autobiographies of singers. For example, we learn from Emma Eames' *Some Memories and Reflections* that her teacher, Mathilde Marchesi, sought to teach her inappropriate heavy roles such as Valentine in *Les Huguenots*. But according to her teacher, in her grandly named *Marchesi and Music*, Emma Eames penned a note to her after her successful début proclaiming, "What I am you made me". However, Mathilde's daughter, Blanche, in *Singer's Pilgrimage*, states that from the day of her début, Eames maintained that she owed little or nothing to her teacher, and thus almost broke her heart. Since this compact disc is devoted to Eames, she should perhaps have the last word: Evidently it was intrigue by another singer (Melba) which so prejudiced Madame. And that is the last word, for in Melba's *Melodies and Memories*, (which Melba did not actually write) Eames is not mentioned.

Eames, born in Shanghai of American parents, studied in Paris with Mathilde Marchesi. Marchesi is generally considered to have been one of the finest teachers of the late nineteenth century, and Eames' voice exhibits all the qualities of the 'Marchesi method', perfect line, a strong, well supported middle register and beautiful even singing. Vocally there is much similarity between Eames and Melba, perhaps the single most famous Marchesi pupil. It seems likely that each had some respect for the other, and equally likely that each detested the other. Eames' autobiography suggests that intrigue prevented early appearances at both the Théâtre de la Monnaie in Brussels and at the Opéra Comique in Paris. She made her début at the Paris Opéra on March 13th 1889 in Gounod's *Roméo et Juliette* opposite none other than Jean de Reszke. In her own words, "it was a curious experience to go to the Opéra a nobody, and find oneself the next day the talk of two continents". Harold Bruder has undertaken substantial research into Eames' career, and he quotes at some length a most favourable review in the French newspaper *Le Figaro*. However, its author seems more concerned with Eames' exceedingly good looks, her face, hair, expression, arms, shoulders. The review in *Les Annales du Théâtre et de la Musique* is somewhat more circumspect. The writer felt that at her début Eames was somewhat nervous, even intimidated, and her chromatic scales and her trills left something to be desired. However, she was praised for the charm and ease of her voice and her sense of theatre.

Later that season Eames sang Marguérite in *Faust* and the following year she created the role of Colombe in Saint-Saëns' *Ascanio*, opposite Lassalle and Plançon. This was followed by her creating the title role in *Zaire* by Veronge de la Nux. Interestingly the *Annales* applauded her personification of Colombe, but detected a certain lack of warmth in her portrayal of Zaire. Eames described her second season in Paris as a nightmare, mainly on account of intrigue by others. Once again the finger seems to be pointed at Melba. At the end of the season Eames left Paris for London. Her career thereafter was almost exclusively in Britain and the United States of America. The only chronicled exceptions suggest performances of *Lohengrin* in Madrid in 1893, and *Otello* and Theirry's *Ghiselle* at Monte Carlo in 1896.

In his history of opera at Covent Garden, Rosenthal comments on the difficulties which faced any singer with a repertoire similar to Melba's. However, Eames "managed more than to hold her own". Herman Klein found her to be "a pure and refined vocalist".

In that first Covent Garden season in the summer of 1891 she was also an "exquisite Elsa" in *Lohengrin*, before renewing her partnership with Jean de Reszke in *Roméo et Juliette* "singing splendidly throughout and looking the most beautiful and youthful exponent of Shakespeare's heroine ever seen on the operatic stage". We may sometimes think there is a genteel kindness in the words of some of the classical critics. This quality was never much in evidence with George Bernard Shaw. He devoted a major article to Gounod's *Mireille*, the title role of which was Eames next assignment. "Why *Mireille* was performed I do not know. . . still more inscrutable is the casting of Miss Eames. . . the requirements are great range and great flexibility, enabling the singer to shake on high D at her ease. . . even with her chief numbers transposed and cut to pieces. . . (she) only got through by the skin of her teeth. . . As to any attempt she made to place before us the ideal *Mireille*, I can only add that she never in her life was more emphatically that very attractive and ladylike person Miss Eames of the Royal Italian Opera".

Eames' final role that season was Desdemona in *Otello*, but before then she sang at a concert at Buckingham Palace together with the Ravogli sisters, Albani, Henschel, Ben Davies and Maurel. Eames' contributions were the aria 'Inflammatus' from Rossini's *Stabat Mater*, and a duet from *Mireille* with Ben Davies. On July 8th there was a command performance at Covent Garden to mark a state visit by the Kaiser. Such an event could bring even Eames and Melba into the house on the same night. Eames sang in the first act of *Lohengrin* with the de Reszkes and Giulia Ravogli, whilst Melba teamed up with the brothers for act four of *Roméo et Juliette*.

New roles in 1892 included the Countess in *Le Nozze di Figaro* and the creation of Yasodhara in Isidore de Lara's *The Light of Asia*. Eames states in her autobiography that the part of the Buddha was taken by Maurel, but all other authorities agree that it was sung by Lassalle. In 1894, her next Covent Garden season, she added Elsa in *Lohengrin*, Eva in *Die Meistersinger* and Charlotte in *Werther* to her London repertoire. The last assumption occasioned further demolition by Shaw; he repeated Thackeray's quip concerning Charlotte's reaction to the corpse of her lover, "borne before her on a shutter, like a well conducted person, (she) went on cutting bread and butter". In the same review the critic was, however, fulsome in praise for Eames' middle register "enabling her to fill the huge theatre without an effort". In 1895 there was another Wagnerian role, Elizabeth in *Tannhäuser*. In 1898 came Micaëla in *Carmen* and Sieglinde in *Die Walküre*, and she also appeared in Mancinelli's *Ero e Leandro*. Finally, in her last Covent Garden season, in 1901, she also sang *Aïda*.

There are additional reviews of some of Eames' 1897 Covent Garden performances in a short-lived and virtually unknown monthly publication *The Musician*. In *Tannhäuser*, "(she) redeemed the performance. . . the effect her voice made in the great ensemble. . . in the Hall of Song made me forget, at any rate for a few moments, the efforts of M. Dupeyron" (who was evidently a last minute substitution for van Dyck). Her singing in *Lohengrin* invoked a defence of her acting: "if any fellow critic. . . had afterwards ventured to enlarge on. . . the lack of passion in Madame Eames. . . I should have wished to trample him to the carpet". In *Roméo et Juliette* Eames "sang as beautifully as ever", whilst in *Le Nozze di Figaro* she "found her happiest opportunity". This review by Robert Hughes is worth quoting further: "Her voice is fresh, cool, dove-like, crystalline. She knows not at all how to declaim, but she knows very well how to

sing, and on Friday she sang deliciously, never defaming her composer with exaggeration or insulting him with artfulness. She understands the glorious artlessness of this divine genius.”

Eames made her début with the Metropolitan Opera House in the same year as she had at Covent Garden. As one of the earliest American singers to gain an international reputation, she received the immediate honour of opening the 1891-1892 season in *Roméo et Juliette* with the de Reszkes, although she had already appeared with the company on tour in Chicago. Writing in the *New York Tribune*, Krehbiel was circumspect, “Miss Eames, not yet a ripe artist, is a singer of good intentions and fine gifts. Her voice is scarcely large enough for a room like that in which she sang last night, but it has an individuality which marks her acting. It is a thoroughly musical voice, and its effect is lovely whenever she uses it dramatically and not merely for display. . . the arietta in waltz time. . . in the first act. . . was heartless singing and technically imperfect. Infinitely better from every point of view was the duet in the second act”. The reviewer of *The New York Times* does differ in one respect: “her chromatic scale in the waltz song was one of the cleanest and most finished bits of coloratura singing lately heard in this city”.

By the time of her final Metropolitan appearance in February 1909 Eames had given 439 performances, of which 276 were in house and the rest on tour. Fitzgerald's *Annals* note twenty-four roles in twenty-three different operas. Most frequent was Marguérite in *Faust*, followed by Elsa, Tosca, Aïda, the Countess, Juliette and Micaëla. Indeed these seven accounted for two thirds of the total performances. There was an upward trajectory in the reviews. In December 1894 Maurel made his first visit to New York for some twenty years to join his co-creator, Tamagno in *Otello*. Eames was, according to Henderson in *The New York Times*, as quoted in Seltsam's *Metropolitan Opera Annals*, “a Desdemona, who, for vocal charm, could not have been excelled. . . she sings the music with a cool and polished excellence. . . her performance a fit companion piece to the two men”. In context there could scarcely be higher praise.”

In December 1907 Eames was the first to sing *Iris* at the Metropolitan Opera. “Eames conceived *Iris* in the poetic base of the story. . . vocally it was all that could be desired”. Henderson went on to assert, “Her *Iris* will never make the lines in the memory that her *Tosca* has made”. This is more than a little curious because it is not that easy to find reviews of Eames' *Tosca*, other than one by the same Henderson as quoted in the very final edition of Kolodin's *The Metropolitan Opera*. Eames herself was in no doubt about its quality: “few believed I had it in me to give a convincing (portrayal) of so emotional a role. . . because I had sung restrained roles with restraint. . . my potential passion was not suspected”. It is quite clear that Eames long wanted to sing *Tosca*, and she received a first opportunity during the absence of Ternina in December 1902. She appeared with de Marchi and Scotti, and Henderson is nothing if not blunt: “There is no blood in her performance. It was impeccable in design, icy in execution. . . lyric sweetness. . . elements in a portrait of surpassing beauty, but not of tortured womanhood”. Kolodin suggests that “Toscalitis” caused Eames to miss performances that season, and to be absent for the whole of the following season. Nevertheless, she sang the role thereafter quite frequently, and in casts which included Caruso as well as Scotti. Indeed, it was the role she chose for her, perhaps premature, farewell in February 1909, after which she actually returned to the stage to give one performance each of *Otello* and *Tosca* with the Chicago company in 1911.

Eames lived to a ripe old age. Her first marriage, to Julian Story, ended in 1907, but in 1911 she married the baritone Emilio de Gogorza. This too ended in divorce. Her

autobiography, an indispensable and delightful work of operatic lore and romance, containing much of the fire said to be lacking in stage performance, and not always wholly accurate, was published in 1927.

In many ways Emma Eames was a model prima donna. She was clearly temperamental and sometimes capricious, but well able to look after her own interests. Her successive departures from Paris, London, and New York were attributed to the machinations and personalities of others. Whatever the different views on her acting abilities, her records leave no doubt as to her sheer vocal quality. It is an excellent voice, well-schooled, and with a beautifully produced line. She would certainly have hated the thought, but, as suggested at the beginning of this article, there is much similarity between her singing and that of Melba. Both have a moving, silvery, ethereal quality, and the drama in the music is often under-played to considerable effect. It is a style of singing that perhaps went out of fashion with the last of the Marchesi pupils. This may well explain why listeners, unused to artists of the Golden Age, sometimes find recordings of singers such as Eames and Melba inaccessible. However, the effort will yield its own reward. It is just this ethereal quality, which no modern singer is able to produce, which makes performances songs such as those of 'Dopo' and 'Gretchen am Spinnrade' unique.

Stanley Henig

This album contains all of the operatic music recorded by Emma Eames except for the final trio from *Faust*, and a selection of songs. The trio is included with records of Pol Plançon on Symposium 1264.

Excerpts from a broadcast by Eames preface the pieces to which she refers. She speaks of the inadequacies of the recording process. Had she heard her records today, reproduced with the benefits of modern technology, she would surely have been less unhappy with them.

'Still wie die Nacht' is given a sugary orchestral studio accompaniment, typical of the period, which does not enhance the music, but it is a wonderful record of the singer. Mercifully, however, Schubert's song is allowed to keep the accompaniment he provided for it. The enunciation is excellent, but it is a very operatic performance, to the extent even of a sob at the end. Rythm and changes of tempo abound. Those who wish to see the spinning wheel are recommended to hear Paula Hegner's accompaniment on Elena Gerhardt's record.

'Dopo' and 'Goodbye' will be included in Symposium 1276, a Compact Disc of Music by Tosti to be issued shortly.

A recital by pupils of Marchesi can be heard on Symposium 1188.

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