

The SYMPOSIUM OPERA COLLECTION – Volume 6

EMMY DESTINN (1878-1930)

It seems particularly appropriate to start in London, even though Emmy Destinn was Czech and built her early career in Berlin. She appeared in every Covent Garden season from 1904 until the outbreak of the First World War and subsequently returned for the first post-war season in 1919. These were the years in which Melba reigned, but I have always doubted the legend that she systematically sought to exclude rivals. As it happened, there was, in any case, hardly any overlap between the repertoires of the two great singers; Destinn being regarded as supreme in dramatic and spinto roles.

Herman Klein devoted his life of nearly eighty years to music criticism and might well have laid claim to have heard everyone of significance. He was present when Tietjens sang Valentine in 1875. In an article for the Gramophone in 1924 he claimed to have realized the importance of the gramophone record at least twenty years previously. He was in no doubt about Destinn's very first London performance as Donna Anna in *Don Giovanni*, "Covent Garden had once again drawn to its historic aviary one of those rare song birds who enchant the ear with their liquid notes and glorious singing.... another rich soprano.... an actress of consummate ability". P. G. Hurst, one of the pioneers of record collecting, recalled her Donna Anna as "a rôle in which she has never been approached". He also considered Destinn as "the last great exponent of the exacting role of Valentine in *Les Huguenots*, in which her physical beauty showed to great advantage and her impassioned singing with Caruso in the final act left an unforgettable memory". Further testimony to Destinn's supremacy in the opinion of contemporary opera-goers comes from the then youthful Victor Gollancz, "I could not keep away from *Aida*. Destinn was always the *Aida* – anyone else would have been unthinkable. The apogee was, I suppose, the Nile scene interpreted by Destinn, Caruso and Dinh Gilly.... the beauty and drama came to life in note after note and phrase after phrase".

During Destinn's London years the three masterworks of Puccini's middle years established themselves in the standard repertoire. If the role of Mimi was unquestionably Melba's territory, Tosca and Butterfly were undoubtedly Destinn's. In the words of Gollancz, "She accomplished the change of register in 'Vissi d'arte' with almost inconceivable mastery. But best of all were her soft high notes. They were like exquisitely rounded pearls, suddenly appearing, perfectly poised, out of nowhere; and were especially breath-taking when they opened a phrase, as with 'Un bel di' in *Butterfly*". Destinn in fact created the part of Butterfly at Covent Garden. According to Rosenthal it was "her greatest triumph". Interestingly, at the Metropolitan Opera Farrar was the normal first choice for these three Puccini heroines.

Emmy Destinn, born Emilie Pavlina Kittlová in Prague in 1878, adopted the name of her teacher, Mme. Loewe-Destinn, but after the restoration of Czech independence she preferred Ema Destinnová. Her stage début was at Berlin's Kroll Theatre in *Cavalleria Rusticana* in July 1898. She soon transferred to the more prestigious Hofoper, there laying the foundations of her career, remained for a decade in the course of which she

may have given as many as 700 performances. Clearly Berlin liked to keep its contracted artists reasonably busy. Nevertheless, from 1904 onwards Destinn found the time and energy to perform each summer in London, to appear at Bayreuth and elsewhere, and to make frequent visits to the recording studios.

Destinn's Berlin repertoire ranged from Gluck through Meyerbeer and Verdi to Puccini and Strauss. There is no full chronology of her career, but it seems that she appeared in 70 different roles; 53 were in Berlin and of these 27 were never repeated anywhere else. A high point of those early years was probably Destinn's appearance in the name part of *Salome* in the work's Berlin première late in 1905. Her compatriot, Karl Burrian sang Herod. Later the two also appeared in the Paris première. Strauss himself described her as an "unforgettable, unsurpassable Salome", but Destinn felt the part was too heavy for her voice and dropped it after twelve performances. Geraldine Farrar, also a member of the Hofoper at the time, claims in her autobiography *Such Sweet Compulsion* that Strauss had wanted her to sing the part in Berlin, apparently offering to change the vocal line on the grounds that "You, Farrar, have such dramatic possibilities, can act and dance half-naked, so no one will care whether you sing or not". Farrar felt that "acceptance would not endanger my virtue.... but certainly would have cost me a precious vocal possession". She declined and "the indefatigable Destinn sang it superbly". Farrar adds that Destinn looked "like a misplaced Walküre", a description not inconsistent with Destinn, removing no veils, and claiming, "I am a singer, not a dancer". Destinn was also well received in the world première of Leoncavallo's *Der Roland von Berlin*, written as a tribute to the German imperial family. The opera was a failure and the efforts of the Fonotipia and the Gramophone companies in rushing out recordings of various excerpts, with Destinn and Farrar respectively, were not rewarded by corresponding sales. Even so, these collector items are much less rare than subsequent performances of the opera.

Destinn's early years at Covent Garden were almost certainly critical in shaping her future career. After an initial success as Donna Anna, Klein assumed that she would develop as a classical or Wagnerian artist. Indeed, in 1901 she had sung Senta in *Der Fliegende Holländer* at Bayreuth. According to Oscar Bie, her "silver toned instrument, full of sensuous charm throughout its entire compass, was allied to an impeccable technique in attack, and, with its wide dynamic range, was a perfect foil in the duets for the bass voice of van Rooy". During her Berlin years she also appeared as Elsa in *Lohengrin*, and as both Elizabeth and Venus in *Tannhäuser*, and she studied the parts of Isolde and Guttrune. In her first Covent Garden season she appeared as Aïda, Santuzza, Elsa and Nedda. The following year she added Valentine, Butterfly and Carmen. It was at Covent Garden that Destinn sang both Tosca and La Gioconda for the first time. She also gave what were possibly her only performances of Madeleine in *Andrea Chénier*, Tatiana in *Eugene Onegin* and Tess in d'Erlanger's opera. In total she gave nearly 200 performances of 16 operas in 12 seasons at the house.

Covent Garden helped to whet Destinn's appetite for Italian opera; she certainly complained about the lack of opportunity for such work in Berlin. The short London seasons were in the summer, and Destinn could participate without cutting links with Berlin. At Covent Garden she worked with major international artists and would have commanded higher fees than in Berlin. Many of those artists were also on the roster of the Metropolitan Opera in New York, where the season normally began in November and continued through until late spring. Thus, when, as was inevitable, Destinn was offered an engagement, it was incompatible with her continuation as a regular member of the Hofoper.

Destinn's début at the Metropolitan Opera was on the opening night of the 1908-1909 season as *Aïda*, opposite the Radames of Caruso. It was also the occasion of Toscanini's début. Richard Aldrich in *The New York Times* described her as having "a voice of great power, body and vibrant quality, dramatic in expression, flexible and wholly subservient to her intentions which are those of a singer of keen musical feeling and intelligence". She was soon adding to her repertoire d'Albert's *Tiefland* and Catalani's *La Wally*. Neither work survived into another season. On 19th February 1909 Destinn appeared in a Czech opera, albeit sung in German, as Marenka in Smetana's *Prodaná Nevesta (The Bartered Bride)*. This was much more successful and Destinn, who had previously sung the part in Berlin and Prague, gave 23 performances with the Metropolitan company. The première was conducted by Gustav Mahler, presumably the first time the two worked together.

In May and June 1910 the Metropolitan Opera presented a short season at the Théâtre du Châtelet in Paris with a locally recruited orchestra. Destinn's involvement was constrained by her Covent Garden commitments, but included the *Aïda* on the opening night with Caruso, Homer, Amato and Toscanini. In a lengthy review of the entire season in *Le Théâtre*, Louis Schneider, a leading French writer on music, gave Destinn pride of place amongst the female singers. He comments on the sheer "beauty of her voice. . . in any century there will be no more than one or two who can aspire to perfection in their art."

Destinn appeared with the Metropolitan Opera until 1916 and, as with Covent Garden, returned after the First World War. She gave 339 performances with the company, 268 in the house, the remainder on tour. The most frequent of her 24 roles were *Aïda*, *Gioconda*, *Marenka*, and *Minnie* in Puccini's *La Fanciulla del West*. Destinn created this latter part at its Metropolitan and world première opposite Caruso; she also sang it in the first London performance. Her Metropolitan Opera career was abruptly interrupted when she decided to return to her native Bohemia, still part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, during the First World War. Destinn, a fervent Czech nationalist, never concealed her views. Years before, her adverse comments on a production of Smetana's *Dalibor* in Berlin had excited controversy. Destinn found herself interned in her château at Straz in Bohemia for the rest of the war. The baritone Dinh Gilly, with whom she enjoyed a passionate love affair; it probably started when they appeared together in *La Fanciulla del West*, joined her at Straz for part of the time.

The war over, Ema Destinnová became virtually an icon of the newly independent Czechoslovakia. From 1901 onwards she had appeared, if not very frequently, at the Narodni Divadlo Theatre in Prague. In all she only gave around 80 performances there. They included three works by Smetana. Her occasional appearances in *Libuse* and as *Milada* in *Dalibor* became national events in the post-war climate. Towards the end of her career, Destinn was more often to be found on the concert platform than on the stage. It seems very likely that her final operatic performance was as *Tosca* in Bratislava on 11th November 1925, although even after that there were occasional concerts.

Events during the war years must have shortened Destinn's career. In May 1914 *The Times* reviewed *Aïda* and noted that whilst Caruso had returned in his best voice "the higher honours belonged to Mlle. Destinn". The review continues, "She riveted attention upon the dramatic significance of every phrase. Her soliloquies had a rare beauty". At the time she was only in her mid-thirties and it might have been expected that her international career would continue for many years. When she returned to London and New York in 1919 as Destinnová, she clearly did not make the same impact. Something

of the change can be detected readily in her final recordings. Truly great artists know their own limitations. The pieces recorded in 1919 and 1921 were carefully selected, nine Czech folksongs and only two arias. “Morrò, ma prima in grazia” from *Un Ballo in Maschera* is sung with much of the old commitment, but it is a bit effortful, and there is a distinct lack of power at the climax. We are still listening to a great artist, but the voice is in decline.

Destinn was one of the first singers the major part of whose career is readily accessible through the gramophone. Her earliest record was made in the autumn of 1901, only three years after her operatic début; her last early in 1921, a few years before retirement. Few singers have ranged so widely in their recordings and these certainly reflect the breadth of her stage repertoire. Her records include music from Czech, French, German, Italian and Russian operas. They range from *Die Zauberflöte*, *Le Nozze di Figaro* and *Don Giovanni* to early twentieth century verismo, *Cavalleria Rusticana*, *I Pagliacci*, Strauss’s *Salome* and Leoncavallo’s *Der Roland von Berlin*. Wagner is represented by arias from *Tannhäuser*, *Der Fliegende Holländer*, *Tristan und Isolde* and *Lohengrin*; Verdi by *Il Trovatore*, *Un Ballo in Maschera*, *La Forza del Destino* and *Aïda*; Puccini by *Madama Butterfly* and *Tosca*. French opera looms particularly large. Destinn was in the first ‘complete’ recordings of *Faust* and *Carmen*. She must have felt a special affinity for Thomas’ *Mignon*; besides “Kennst du das Land” she recorded three other arias. There are also records from three of Meyerbeer’s operas. Finally, there are important recordings of arias from Czech operas by Dvorák, Smetana and Kovarovic.

All Destinn’s records prior to 1911 were made in Germany and probably intended primarily for sale in the German-speaking area, which probably explains why most of them are in German. Opera-goers now are generally more concerned about language, but record collectors would be well advised not to let this stand in the way of appreciating some of Destinn’s very best records which were made during that time. However, there is something very special about the few recordings in the Czech language, the earliest of which were made in Germany. German-speaking Austria was the imperial power over the Czechs; in virtually every note of her Czech recordings one senses Destinn’s total commitment to her country and her people.

Her recording career actually began with a single disc for the Gramophone and Typewriter Company in 1901. This was followed, probably in 1904, by four records for Columbia. It is not unfair to regard all five as museum pieces of interest to collectors, but scarcely representative of the great artist Destinn became. Thus, musically her recording career commenced with the series made for Fonotipia in Berlin at the end of 1905. [These, when found, are usually with Odeon labels.] From then until 1910 Destinn sang for Odeon and for the Gramophone companies. Her final records for the latter company, made in London in 1911, are in the correct languages and higher price categories, both indicating Destinn’s international status. Thereafter she recorded exclusively in the United States. Victor in effect took her over from the Gramophone Company, to which it was related, but in 1911 and 1912 there were short series for Edison and for Columbia. Naturally, the American recordings are almost all in the ‘right’ languages. The majority of Destinn’s records are of operatic fare, as is befitting for a great stage artist, but her legacy includes also examples of Lieder and a number of Czech folksongs.

Around two hundred and twenty 78rpm records of Destinn, each playing for some three or four minutes, are known. The purpose of this album, of just under eighty minutes, is to present the opera-star Emmy Destinn in her best years through a group of her finest records. The voice, by its vocal quality and timbre, is at once identifiable. Her

great strength lies in the vibrant middle and lower registers. There is an instantly recognizable and highly moving pulse in almost all her records. Victor Gollancz used a graphic phrase, “rapt intensity”, to describe Destinn’s singing, a description which seems entirely relevant and appropriate. Listening to her 1905 Fonotipia recording of “Ritorna vincitor” from *Aïda*, we join Gollancz in his enthusiasm. Destinn was only twenty-seven, but this is a singer at the very height of her powers and one who is supremely confident of her ability to surmount all of Verdi’s vocal challenges. It is a powerful, and yet an intimate performance, reflecting *Aïda*’s conflicting emotions. It may even benefit from being limited to a piano accompaniment. In England the Odeon label bore the legend: “Covent Garden/The greatest dramatic soprano”. For once such commercial hyperbole does not seem out of place.

Leonora’s final act aria from *Il Trovatore* is also excellent; the early vibrant and powerful performance on Odeon being preferable to the later more mature version on Victor. In Destinn’s early records we sense a deep understanding of Verdi’s dramatic heroines, and we understand why she was so keen to develop this side of her repertoire. We are conscious, also, of immense vocal power and strength. There is even more empathy with the two Puccini roles represented on record; alas, she did not record anything from the role she created in *La Fanciulla del West*, but in *Madama Butterfly* it is hard to think of any other singer portraying so vividly the pathos, despair and yet heroic determination.

Destinn seems to have had a particular affinity with French opera. The seldom recorded pieces from *Robert le Diable* are particularly fascinating, and for a powerful dramatic soprano she seems incredibly comfortable with Thomas’ waif, Mignon, singing with soulful urgency and exactly the right injection of pathos. By way of contrast, her recording with Carl Jörn of the great duet from *Les Huguenots* shows just why so many of her contemporaries considered her to be the last great interpreter of the role of Valentine. It is a thrilling and unforgettable performance, for many the best on record of this taxing duet with its soaring climactic high notes. Many collectors are dismissive of Carl Jörn, his top notes do not match those of, say, Wittrisch, but, that apart, it is a musical and sensitive rendering, and his enunciation is excellent. Destinn and Jörn were limited to two “78” sides, as were also Teschemacher and Wittrisch. The version by Antoinette Laute-Brun and Agustarello Affre, spread over three sides, is more complete and has the merit of being sung in French by French artists [Symposium Records CD 1252]. However, in the end it is a matter of personal preference, the record by Destinn and Jörn being my own choice.

Overall, pride of place may well go to two other and very different arias. “Und ob die Wolke” from Weber’s *Der Freischütz* has a rare, almost ethereal beauty, especially in its ascent to, and soft holding of, the high notes. This is the lyrical Destinn at her absolute finest. In complete contrast, Milada’s aria from Smetana’s *Dalibor* is a joyous, but dramatically charged paean to Czech nationalism. For this item language has at the very least a psychological importance; the more widely circulated German version is very low key in comparison. But the passion, power and drama of even this recording is without rival; the piece from *Psohlavci*, coupled with the *Dalibor* aria in the original 78rpm format, demonstrates exactly the same qualities.

It may be appropriate to conclude with a little concerning Destinn’s private life. In our more voyeuristic age much would no doubt be made of her succession of love affairs, the most important with Dinh Gilly and with the conductor, Karl Muck, and, amongst others, briefly, with Arthur Rubinstein. In her younger days Destinn was certainly

beautiful, even if her charms were somewhat less obvious than those of her Berlin and Metropolitan colleague, Geraldine Farrar. Caruso seems to have proposed to her and been rejected. In reality her life was her career. Only in her mid-40s, when she met Joseph Halsbach, an officer in the Czech air force, did she marry. According to biographer Artus Rektorys, Destinn owned a library of some seven thousand volumes, with sections devoted to such bizarre subjects as alchemy, astronomy, flagellation, spiritualism, witchcraft and the occult. She wrote novels, plays and poetry. She was also a great animal lover and there was room in her château at Straz for cats, dogs, birds and assorted reptiles. Perhaps it was this enthusiasm which led her to appear in a film *The Power of Song* in which she is surrounded by a lion, lionesses and cubs. Presumably her other film *The Lion's Bride* was along similar lines. No trace of either seems to have survived.

Destinn's wartime experiences and her failure to control her diet each contributed to both her relatively early retirement from both stage and concert platform, and to her relatively early death which occurred in 1930.

Perhaps the finest tributes to her art are in the opinions of two of her contemporaries. Sydney Homer, husband of the contralto Louise Homer, wrote of her début, "a new and unique voice;... the high notes pure, yet charged with emotion; a legato like a river of sound". And to Frances Alda, like a good many sopranos not noted for giving plaudits to rivals, the final word, "Nobody ever sang Butterfly as Destinn did... her manner of singing was so perfect, her voice so divine.... and the pathos she put into the role.... all these made her unforgettable".

Stanley Henig

The third act [in the first Berlin Aida] brought something extraordinary: truly an experience! Destinn-Aida, Caruso-Radames achieved in this performance a realisation of which all those to whom it was given to be present will long retain the memory, perhaps lifelong. Both sang the great duet with a sumptuousness of tone which was somehow out of this world. The sounding together of these two magnificent voices, in combination, individually, re-uniting, mutually competing, in every way was beyond the mere human. And the most exquisite delivery that the throat can offer, both with the vocal qualities necessary to support their intentions - it was of a fabulous beauty, indescribable fulfilment and unique effect. What happened after the duet ended and as the act closed in the Berlin Opera House was really - measured even by southern temperaments - no longer clapping, neither jubilation nor applause but Paroxysm! I saw an audience which filled the house to the eves raise itself from the seats as one man, heard a thousand people shout and stamp their feet. They no longer shouted for Caruso, for Destinn, they roared, they raved, they exulted! We gave up counting the curtain-calls. The fourth-act duet, the tomb-scene, held to the same level and at the close of the performance, the same result on the public was let loose.

Acknowledgements: Symposium Records is grateful to Richard Copeman for making available records from his collection, and Len Court for the portrait. Thanks are due also to Paul Lewis and Adrian Tuddenham for assistance with the production.

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