

The SYMPOSIUM OPERA COLLECTION – Volume 8

**FLORENCE EASTON (1882-1955)**

Florence Gertrude Easton was born in the Yorkshire town of Middlesborough-on-Tees in 1882. The year was later changed to 1884; some other data may have been varied to match. The family moved to Toronto when she was five. Her parents were both involved with the choir of the church, and it was in this setting that Florence began to show musical talent as a proficient pianist, and soon she was also singing. In the late 1890s her mother died and she returned with her father to England. A firm date is that of her entry into the Royal Academy of Music in 1900. In addition to studying singing under Agnes Larkcom, she applied herself to harmony, piano and Italian. She left after only a year, and went to study with W. E. Haslam in Paris. The reason may have to do with lack of funds or with Haslam and her father having been well acquainted in Canada. After a year her father also died, and she had no option but to go to her grandparents. They, as respectable people, decided that marrying her off would put a stop to all this stage nonsense. She responded by leaving them, continuing her studies, presumably in considerable poverty, and joining the Moody-Manners company.

Her first appearances were probably less auspicious than she later wished to be thought. Whatever the truth, her aspirations were towards Wagner, as also were those of a young tenor of the name of Francis MacLennan. In 1904 they were married, and in 1905 they were singing in Henry Savage's company in America. Whatever the truth of her English appearances, her début in America was as Gilda and she was highly praised. After a further season with Savage, which included a further success, as *Madam Butterfly* in English, the couple, to gain experience, their aspirations always in mind, moved to Berlin; although only the husband had a position.

But Florence was not silent for long. The management wished to teach a recalcitrant soprano a lesson; Fräulein Easton was, of course, familiar with Margerethe, but could Fräulein Easton re-learn the part in German in one week? Fräulein Easton could. Fräulein Easton also sang *Aïda* in German at two days notice, and after an *Eva*, at short notice, came a five-year contract.

The couple sang, as was expected in a German house at that time, small parts and large parts with equal readiness and equal diligence. Contractually, when not required in Berlin, they were free to make guest appearances elsewhere. Thus they sang at other German houses and at Covent Garden. They gained the experience they sought, and this began to include Wagner. One would certainly like a trip in the *Tardis* to hear Easton as *Elektra* with Anna von Mildenburg as *Clytemnestra*.

In 1912 their contracts expired and they accepted offers from Hamburg, now making guest appearances in Berlin. When the war started, Easton, British by birth, but married to an American, was permitted to remain in Germany.

In 1915 and again in 1916 the couple crossed the Atlantic to sing in Chicago. He had a contract, she had a fulsome letter of introduction from Richard Strauss. Her début in Chicago was as *Brünnhilde*. As with her *Gilda* of a decade before, praise rained down.

As 1917 began America was still neutral, but, the Atlantic crossing now very

unsafe, they remained in America, supporting themselves with concert work. By the end of 1917 Easton, replacing Gadski at the Metropolitan, was singing with Caruso, but MacLennan was not engaged. All the experience counted, her Metropolitan debut, as Santuzza with Paul Althouse and Giuseppe de Luca, was noted for being unbeset by nerves. The distinguished critic, Huneker reported that as an actress she was like Calvé, but that the upper tones of her big voice were being forced.

Her greatest triumph in her first season was in *Die Legende von der heiligen Elizabeth*, Liszt's oratorio being performed in America for the first time. Next, her powers of rapid learning once more advanced her career, she replaced Geraldine Farrar as Lodoletta at very short notice; her colleagues were Enrico Caruso and Pasquale Amato.

The big event of the 1918/1919 season was the première of *Il Trittico*, Puccini's penultimate work. *Musical America* was in no doubt that Easton's "O mia babbino" was the highlight of the evening. Towards the end of the season Easton earned twofold praise for her singing of Fiora in Montemezzi's *L'Amore dei Tre Re*; it was a faultless performance, and, to replace Claudia Muzio, the part was learned at short notice.

Easton continued to work between Metropolitan seasons. In 1919 she sang in Ravinia Park, and appeared there every Summer until 1928.

Rosa Ponselle arrived at the Metropolitan at the end of 1919. Comparisons were unavoidable, and, for us today, interesting, the more so as the artists had such different backgrounds. A work they shared was *Oberon*. Running to form, Easton learned the part in a week (though certainly she was already familiar with the big "Ocean" section). It is probably fair to say that Easton and Ponselle were praised equally highly; if one critic singled out a particular aspect in one artist, then another found the same in the other.

At the end of 1920 Easton sang in Caruso's last performance.

For many her Marschallin, two seasons later, was the zenith of her career.

In 1924 she learned *La Gioconda* at short notice, this time it was Ponselle who was ill.

In the season of 1926-1927 Easton moved yet further into the Wagner repertoire.

She was judged to have sung Brünnhilde in *Die Walküre* in with great beauty in some sections, but uneasily in others.

At the end of the season Easton travelled to England for a holiday. (This paragraph is for the film version.) Feeling like some entertainment one evening, she went to the opera. There she just happened to bump into Colonel Blois, Oh, Miss Easton, Mme. Jeritza is ill and the audience is not taking to Scacciati, could you possibly do a few Turandots? Miss Easton thought she could. Herman Klein, who had not heard her for two decades, readily understood why she was now "with the giants of the Metropolitan".

At the end of the season in 1929 Easton was tired and wanted a change. With truly astonishing prescience, she drew out a large part of her savings and sailed for Europe. She hired a hall in Berlin, and an orchestra, and gave a concert. It was a case of welcoming home the conquering hero.

Whether or not she had intended to return to New York, she did, but now she was moving towards the concert platform. In the Autumn of 1930 at the Carnegie Hall her English songs, Brahms and Strauss were much appreciated.

In the following year her marriage to Francis MacLennan, it had been going progressively downhill since his failure to be appointed at the Metropolitan, was ended, and one Stanley Rogers became her second husband. They moved to England.

At Covent Garden in 1932 she was in *Tristan und Isolde* under Beecham and *Siegfried* under Robert Heger. In this and the following two years she appeared as Tosca

and Carmen in Birmingham, she sang in Mendelssohn's *Elijah* at the Three Choirs Festival, and under Elgar and Walton in works of their own; and she made various appearances on the BBC and at Promenade Concerts.

In 1934 she sang Floria Tosca at Sadler's Wells. In the cast were Percy Heming and Arthur Cox. As the year ended there were much acclaimed Lieder recitals in New York, and a big tour was planned for 1935. She now changed her mind about settling in England; plans were made to return to the United States. Arthur Cox would come with; she was certain that she could coach him into becoming a major Wagnerian tenor.

But the New York landscape had changed - Kirsten Flagstad had arrived. Easton's tour became Flagstad's tour and Arthur Cox, now Arthur Carron, would probably have done better as the proverbial big fish in the smaller pond of Sadler's Wells.

To become a Heifetz or a Caruso or an Easton requires not only talent, but also the perseverance, drive and energy to reach the top. Easton failed to see that Carron did not have these qualities; but she did recognise them in Flagstad, and the admiration she expressed was with generosity of spirit.

She made one last appearance in opera, as Brünnhilde in *Die Walküre* at the Metropolitan. Flagstad or no Flagstad, such was the love of her public for her that, it is reported, major artists stood to be present.

There were a few platform appearances until 1943, and she did some teaching. Otherwise she lived quietly, moving, as her husband's employment required, to Montreal and then back to New York, where she died in 1955.

If Florence Easton is not, perhaps, accorded the posthumous reputation merited by her abilities, then assessments by two critics, neither of them noted for flattery, should be a corrective.

Hermann T. Finck wrote, "Not just a major talent, but a talent allied to 'voice'."

And W. J. Henderson, "Her resonant agreeable voice at its best reminded me of Nordica's - There can be no higher praise."

#### Some Notes on the Records.

The roster of great artists with whom Florence Easton sang in New York is not dissimilar to the roster of great artists in the Victor catalogue. She, herself, however, recorded mainly for a succession of smaller companies, which, for various reasons, found themselves unable to market her records. Sessions in Berlin just prior to the outbreak of war led nowhere. Her first records in America were with a recording system which, though good, was not widely used. Shortly after changing to the conventional system the company went out of business. The next company also. She then made records with Edison, but Wall Street crashed before they were ready. And in the early '30s the big companies were less avid for new talent than before. Consequently, for an artist of her stature, singing well into the age of the gramophone, most of her records are hard to find and some are very rare. However, apart from certain of the late, non-commercial records, the voice is well recorded; clearly, she was willing to accommodate herself to the medium. There are excerpts from some fifteen of the ninety or so roles she is known to have sung; other arias may be pieces learned as a student or for concert work.

1-3 The early Vocalion records are in the Edison "Diamond Disc" format. The vertical cut and low amplitude allowed of longer playing time, but, with poor material, perhaps for cheapness largely "re-grind", rather than Edison's special moulding process, high noise

levels result. Although stated to be Copyright 1916, Easton's record from *Gianni Schicchi* cannot have been made before the very end of 1918. [Sarah Bernhardt's blood-curdling *Prière pour nos ennemis* must have been made in January 1918.]

4-12 Acoustic Brunswick records.

5 Puccini himself told her that he preferred the voice to come down at the end.

6 The artist particularly liked this record; she felt it conveyed the mood nicely.

13,14 Electric Brunswick records

15-21 Privately made records

15 A short piece, musically self-contained, and one of the most thrilling passages from the prologue; from an acetate disc recorded from a broadcast, 22 July 1937, stored, alas, in poor conditions.

16-18 Celanese Hour, broadcast, New York, 1942

19-20 Julliard School of Music, recital, 13 July 1939. At the very end of the first song the pianist goes badly wrong; today, obviously, an edit would be made.

21 Private recording, New York, 10 February 1940

22 An early Vocalion record found in a used record store in Toronto by a friend of John Stratton, and generously handed to him as he was the one with the complete Florence Easton collection. It is, alas, in a rather worn state, but no other copies are known. The tenor sings the ending as written, in preference to the usual substitution of a high note, however inappropriate to the drama at that point.

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