

The SYMPOSIUM OPERA COLLECTION – Volume 9

LILLIAN NORDICA & OLIVE FREMSTAD

LILLIAN NORDICA née Norton was born in Farmington, Maine in 1859, the last of six children, all girls. Both of her parents had excellent voices which, due to the strict religious outlook of their parents, could be heard only in church. However, the family moved to Boston so that a very gifted older daughter could be enrolled at the New England Conservatory to be taught singing by John O'Neill. Lillian, it is reported, inveighed her way into the lessons to such effect that after the older student died it was deemed appropriate for her to continue on her own. For four years she stolidly studied the technique of singing under the exacting, but inspiring, Irishman, but apparently learning very little music with him. Her progress in music included occasional church appearances; she sang the "Inflammatus" from Rossini's *Stabat Mater*, for example, and parts of Handel's *Messiah* in Boston under the baton of Theodore Thomas. The experience improved her confidence before an audience, although her abilities as a singer were judged by the critics to be wanting. Nevertheless, when Therese Tietjens appeared in Boston at the end of 1875, and offered to hear some students, she was very pleased with Lillian's performance, and thus she was able to go to New York in 1876 for study with Mme. Max Maretzek, wife of the distinguished impresario. After some months of rapid progress she sang with Patrick Sarsfield Gilmore's band in Madison Square. Then, with Gilmore, a flamboyant character adept at publicity, she went on a tour of the West, and in 1878 embarked for Europe. She gave about eighty concerts each in England and in France, including appearances at the Crystal Palace and at the opening of the Trocadero in Paris, before going on to Milan for coaching in opera by the noted teacher Sangiovanni.

It has been said that she changed her name to Nordica because of the disgrace she would bring on her family if were she to sing in opera. In fact she had every support from her family; the change was to provide a name pronounceable by Italians. Her début was as Donna Anna at the Teatro Manzoni, Milan. It was quickly followed by *La Traviata* at Brescia, both in 1879. The response of audiences was excellent; more engagements, giving valuable experience, followed.

The next year an invitation came to sing in St. Petersburg and Moscow. This necessitated learning ten parts in six weeks. These included Inez (*L'Africaine*), the Queen (*Les Huguenots*) and Philine (*Mignon*). In St. Petersburg, where her colleagues included Antonio Cotogni, Louise Kellogg, Angelo Masini, Sofia Scalchi and Marcella Sembrich, she was acclaimed by one of the world's most critical and knowledgeable audiences.

After further engagements she was coached for the parts of Marguérite (*Faust*) and Ophélie (*Hamlet*), each by the composer, for her first appearances in Paris at the Opéra. Whilst in Paris she also took lessons from Jean-Baptiste Sbriglia, who had taught Pol Plançon and re-trained Jean de Reszke from baritone to tenor.

On her marriage to Frederick Gower in January 1883 there was talk of her giving up her career. Nevertheless, in November she made her American début, not in the new Metropolitan Opera House, but with Colonel Mapleson's competing company. In New York and in Boston, too, the first reviews pointed to faults more than they praised. With

Patti and Gerster in town it cannot have been easy. In addition, marital problems were probably affecting her ability to perform. Her husband, a highly successful businessman, devoid of any cultural interest, detested his wife's singing and was interfering in her career. Matters moved rapidly towards an acrimonious divorce. However, Gower was lost in a ballooning accident; a lasting source of fear for Lillian, as his body was never recovered.

Then, in 1886 Lillian was a member of Mapleson's company in a disaster-ridden tour across the United States and back, and then to England to escape Mapleson's debts. Thus Nordica made her London début in straitened circumstances, in a shabby Covent Garden, with an Alfredo from the chorus, the scheduled one having walked out for being so long unpaid.

The performance nonetheless led to success, of what she had been able to make of her solos the reviewers spoke well. Nordica responded by barging her way into Harris's Drury Lane company, where she was at once singing with the likes of Emma Albani, Sigrid Arnoldson, Minnie Hauk, Victor Maurel, Nellie Melba (making her début), Adelina Patti, the brothers de Reszke, and Francesco Tamagno.

Nordica returned to the Crystal Palace to sing in Sullivan's oratorio *The Golden Legend* when Emma Albani was indisposed and for the great Handel Festival of 1888.

Her first appearance in a work of Wagner was as Elsa in *Lohengrin*, in 1889. She had been chosen by no less than Jean de Reszke and she was immediately very successful, though in fact he was not in London for her first performance of the part. George Bernard Shaw thought that "Miss Nordica turned Elsa of Brabant into Elsa of Bond Street, by appearing in a corset." and was not very impressed. Hans Richter thought otherwise however, and his recommendation took Nordica to Bayreuth in 1894 to sing Elsa. Nordica found Cosima a despotic mistress, but one who inspired imagination. Public reaction was mixed, Nordica was not a German Elsa. However no objection was taken to the Belgianness of Ernest van Dijk, or the Roumanianness of Demeter Popovici. Was the much older Lilli Lehmann's ill-concealed jealousy at Nordica's success a factor?

Whilst to be thrice married, each time unhappily, suggests a certain lack of care in private matters; in professional affairs Nordica was most astute. The caché of having sung at Bayreuth would outweigh any fee which that perennially impoverished institution could afford; Nordica sang for nothing. She was right. [An exception to this astuteness may have been her display of outrage on learning that Melba would sing Brünnhilde; she should have bided her time.]

Nordica's appearances at the Metropolitan Opera, New York spanned the decade before and the decade after the turn of the century. In her first season Emma Albani, Lilli Lehmann and Adelina Patti sang, and Anton Seidl conducted; when she left, amongst the singers were Alessandro Bonci, Enrico Caruso and Olive Fremstad; whilst Gustav Mahler and Arturo Toscanini conducted. Of her performances of Isolde with Jean de Reszke as Tristan, Krehbiel remarked, "Let one fact be pondered: 'Tristan und Isolde' was sung in tune throughout... Never since Mme. [Lilli] Lehmann left us have we had an Isolde [so] capable... It is wonderful how Mme. Nordica rose to the opportunity which Wagner's drama opened to her... ". No doubt she had benefited greatly from studies in Bayreuth with Cosima Wagner and Anton Seidl. And W. J. Henderson wrote, "It is a peculiar fact that one of the noblest, and one of the hollowest of all operas are always selected by opera managers for performance by what may be called display casts. The first of these operas is Mozart's 'Don Giovanni' and the latter is Meyerbeer's 'Les Huguenots'. The former cannot be acceptably performed without a great cast; the latter is absolutely intolerable unless it is so performed." The casts to which W. J. Henderson referred

included:

Don Giovanni		Les Huguenots	
Donna Anna	Nordica	Valentine	Nordica
Zerlina	de Lussan	Urbain	Scalchi
Donna Elvira	Eames	Marguerite	Melba
Leporello	Édouard de Reszke	Raoul	Jean de Reszke
Don Ottavio	Russitano	Marcel	Édouard de Reszke
Don Giovanni	Maurel	St. Bris	Plançon
		Nevers	Maurel

In 1896 she was talked at great haste into a second marriage. This, alas, also ended hastily, this time in divorce.

Her last appearances at Covent Garden were in 1902. She may have been re-engaged for 1906, but did not appear. In 1907 she was at the Manhattan Opera, opening Hammerstein's second season with a brilliant *La Gioconda*. Around this time three other causes engaged Nordica's attention. She devoted much thought to the possibility of an American Bayreuth on the Hudson, she became a suffragette [if men could go to prison for their views, why should not women?] and she became embroiled in arguments for opera in English. She also married again, once more unfortunately.

As time took its toll her career turned increasingly towards the concert platform. At the Carnegie Hall in 1913, her health indifferent and her voice unmistakably in decline, she commenced a world farewell tour, but it ended in 1914 with a shipwreck off the coast of Java. Although rescued, the exposure proved too much; she died in a hospital in Batavia.

In these lines both Lilli Lehmann and Emma Albani have been mentioned. Lillian Nordica resembled them in the astonishing breadth of her repertoire, and in the facility with which she sang extremely diverse rôles, Brünnhilde, Violetta and Valentine, for example, one immediately after the other. All three sang, to give but a few instances: Donna Elvira, Donna Anna, Violetta, Gilda, Marguerite, Philine, Selika and Isolde.

ANNA OLIVIA FREMSTAD was born in Stockholm circa 1870, probably, such being the way with sopranos, earlier rather than later. Her father, Olaf Fremstad, was a doctor with a strong leaning towards evangelism; her mother was Anna née Rundquist. They were one Norwegian, the other Swedish, though sources vary as to which was which. Both were musical, and their love of music they passed on to their children. When Olive, as she later chose to be known, was three the family moved to Norway, where she made her début, aged four. A year later in Stockholm she appeared as a piano prodigy. She also played the organ at revivalist meetings organised by her father.

Circa 1880 the family moved to St. Peter's, Minnesota. There, we learn, to piano

and organ, she added violin and teaching. Singing gradually took the lead in her activities, so that at the age of sixteen she was appointed soloist in a Minneapolis church. Shortly after came her stage début as Lady Saphir in *Patience*. In 1890 she went to New York to study singing with F. E. Bristol, paying for her lessons by accompanying in his studio. She trained as a contralto, and the following year she appeared at the Lenox Lyceum with the orchestra conducted by Anton Seidl. By 1893 she had saved sufficient from concert and church engagements to travel to Berlin for further studies with Lilli Lehmann. Lehmann immediately set about re-training her as a soprano, and when she left, after two years, she had a good command of a dozen roles.

In 1895 she made her début as a soprano in Schumann's *Das Paradies und die Peri* conducted by Franz Willner in Cologne. From this followed a contract at the Cologne opera. Here, for three seasons, she sang mainly mezzo-soprano and contralto parts, commencing with Azucena in *Il Trovatore*, and including Carmen, later to become an important part for her. This may seem strange in the light of her conversion by Lilli Lehmann to soprano. Later Fremstad explained that in reality she had not changed, being possessed of a typical long Scandinavian voice.

She was very soon invited for an audition at Bayreuth, which led to appearances in a number of minor roles in the Ring cycle of 1896. She also gained experience in several other European centres of opera. In 1900 she signed a contract for three years at Munich, her Carmen being there much appreciated. Whilst at Munich she was engaged by Maurice Grau for the Metropolitan Opera in New York.

Fremstad's début in New York was as Sieglinde in *Die Walküre* under Felix Mottl on November 25th 1903; two nights after the début of a certain Enrico Caruso. On 28th the opera was given again, and on 29th she sang an aria from *La Clemenza di Tito*, her colleague being Plançon with an aria from *Der Freischütz*. [The "other" work in the programme was the 'Eroica' Symphony; it is interesting how what is regarded as a reasonable length for a concert has varied over the years, and from place to place.] In December she appeared as Elisabeth [*Tannhäuser*] twice, and sang an aria from *Samson et Dalila* in another concert. Surprisingly, she was not in Alfred Hertz's performance of *Parsifal* on Christmas day; the performance which Bayreuth was unable to prevent. Her next appearance was as Santuzza, replacing Gadschi.

In her first year Fremstad made not much over a dozen appearances, including arias at concerts and post-season matinées. Her next seasons, however, were more significant.

On January 22nd 1907 *Salome* received its first American performance with Fremstad as Salome, Burrian as Herod, van Rooy as Jokanaan and Dippel as Narraboth. The storm of virulence from press and pulpit made it the only performance for many years. The reaction of Nordica was more reasoned, being the granddaughter of a Methodist minister might colour one's views, even so, there were many lovely stories Strauss had chosen to ignore, but of the greatness of the music she was in no doubt. Fremstad, who had studied the work with the composer, sang the part but twice in her career; for the other performance, as she remarked laconically, she was decorated by the French Republic.

On the second night of the 1908-1909 season she sang Sieglinde, and a few nights later, Kundry, both under Hertz, then, on December 10th Brünnhilde in *Die Götterdämmerung*. It was her first appearance in the part; the conductor was Arturo Toscanini. The performance was repeated on 18th, then, on 23rd she sang the part of Isolde under Gustav Mahler. To sing successfully in the space of five days under two

conductors as musically poles apart as were these two, is testimony to great acumen and professional competence.

Fremstad's career at the Metropolitan Opera continued to expand to include more major roles. Her last performance there was on April 23rd. The applause that evening certainly equalled that accorded to Caruso and Farrar the previous evening, and after the performance the curtain calls, as the public proclaimed its respect and affection, went on and on. Why an artist of her calibre was not re-engaged is not known; perhaps a phrase from her brief speech of farewell is indicative, she hoped that we might "all meet in the land where peace and harmony reign". [Whatever the circumstances, in fact Fremstad appeared once more with the company the following year, but in Brooklyn.]

As confirmation that it was not a matter of failing powers, Fremstad continued to sing in the opera houses of Boston, Chicago and Manhattan in 1914 and 1915; and until 1920 on the concert platform.

In retirement Fremstad taught until about 1942. She was three times married. Her last years were afflicted with arthritis. She died in 1951.

Her obituary in *The New York Herald Tribune* spoke of "... her ability to color the tones of a phrase or passage in a manner which ineluctably conveyed its musical and poetic immanence." Whether Kundry or Isolde or Brünnhilde in *Die Götterdämmerung* was her finest role was a matter of keen debate. It was not decided then, and we cannot decide it now, but it is conclusive as to where her strengths lay.

Some Notes on the Records

LILLIAN NORDICA was, without doubt, the greatest singer her country has ever produced. Of her another very great singer, Ernestine Schumann-Heink, remarked, "She sang like nobody I ever heard sing - nobody."

In the first decade of the 20th century the Columbia company, broadly speaking, allowed itself to fall badly behind the Victor + Gramophone & Typewriter combine in the prestige classical repertoire [then to all intents and purposes operatic arias]. In 1906 it sought to catch up. However, although leading singers, amongst them Nordica, were engaged, its ability to record big trained operatic voices was well behind that of its main competitor. Nordica's records, why is not known, are technically amongst the least satisfactory. That something was not right must have been known at the time, for between 1906 and 1911 there were at least nine recording sessions at which around fifty records were made, but only about a quarter were issued. It must, alas, be admitted that even with the aid of modern technology much of somebody who "sang like nobody I ever heard sing" remains lost to us.

1 This piece, a distinctly strange choice for the repertoire of an American soprano, was learnt at the instance of her second husband, a mediocre Hungarian tenor. Whilst it clearly works as a showpiece for Nordica, it retains little resemblance to the Czardas intended by the composer. The piano is very distant. The ambience of the studio is caught giving a considerable impression of a big voice at a distance from the apparatus.

2 As with Albani's "L'Été" and various of Lilli Lehmann's records, one marvels at the training which allows Nordica to sing so fleetly the Polonaise from *Mignon* after so many years of heavy dramatic roles.

3 Isolde's Liebestod can just be crammed onto one 78rpm side, but it is probably a superhuman task to make it truly effective out of context.

4 The pianist on these records is Romaine Simmons, Nordica's accompanist over many years. It seems that his qualities as a coach and insistent drill-sergeant prevailed over his rather idiosyncratic behaviour. This record, not passed for release, may have been some kind of balance test. Presumably because of the size of the voice the singer is far removed from the recording horn, so far that the record is almost a piano solo. Nevertheless, we sense a very feminine Brünnhilde.

5 Leonora in *Il Trovatore* was the first role studied with Madame Bertucca Maretzek. She discussed with her how the cavatina was phrased by Tietjens and embellished by Parepa-Rosa. The distinguished critic, Herman Klein, who knew Nordica well and was instrumental in persuading her to record, reported that Nordica considered this the best of her records. In the opera there are two verses of the cavatina "Tacea la notte" followed by two verses of the cabaletta "Di tale amor", but the confines of the record allow only one of each. Presumably in performance the first verse was sung as written, the variants being introduced in the second verse.

6 The tenor part is, according to the label, sung by one Marcello Resenil. Nothing has been discovered of any singer of this name.

7 La Gioconda was probably the last role Nordica added to her repertoire. She first sang it, with Caruso as Enzo, at the Metropolitan Opera in 1904. Her record from it is perhaps the best of her operatic records.

8 An earlier version, possibly released, albeit very briefly, in England.

9 There is a curious resemblance between the records of Nordica and Emma Eames. In songs both seem more relaxed, more natural than in opera; as if the latter required a more formal or serious attitude.

10 Nordica sang German opera in German; presumably the use of English for Strauss and Stange is related to her advocacy of performance in English.

11 Nordica's records were at first available in the United Kingdom only to special order from the United States, later they were pressed in England with special pink labels. Columbia retained the records of Nordica and Eugène Ysaÿe in its catalogue as special single-sided records with a special price category until they were deleted in the 1940s. Thus Debussy's brief song was a very expensive buy.

OLIVE FREMSTAD also made records only for Columbia, but her records are much more accessible for two reasons: the sound achieved is far superior than for Nordica, and Fremstad, although born only a decade after Nordica, is a much more "modern" singer.

12 "Connais-tu le pays", Goethe's "Kennst du das Land", has also been set by no less than Beethoven, Liszt, Schumann and Wolf. Heretical though it may be, one dares to suggest that the melancholy and longing of Mignon are most completely captured by Thomas; and these qualities Fremstad expresses very effectively, in beautiful style, and with the required lightness.

13 "Dich teure Halle" starts off with exemplary manner, but becomes a little pallid towards the end; perhaps the artist became nervous at the approaching limit of the 78 side, or perhaps she was being signalled not to sing too loudly.

14 "Elsas Traum" is a very good, if not outstanding, performance.

15 As Isolde Fremstad, like Nordica, was very highly praised, but, as said above,

compressed on to one side and out of context much of the music's impact is inevitably lost.

16 and 17 "Du bist der Lenz" has beautiful warmth and colour, but when she moves from Sieglinde, singing comfortably within her range, to Brünnhilde capering around, she is exciting, but all over the place.

18 Fremstad claimed that although Lilli Lehmann had trained her as a soprano, she was left fully able to cope with roles for lower voice. This is fully born out in Eboli's aria fuming of hatred and revenge.

19 Carmen à la Fremstad is, as to be expected, well sung, but perhaps, like Fremstad, from somewhere some distance to the North of Spain.

20 and 21 The two pieces from *Tosca* are excellent. The first piece indicates a more serious Tosca than is often heard, the second is remarkable for the variety of ways, including this one, that it can be excellently sung.

Today a singer is constantly on the move, from an opera-house in America by aeroplane to a recording session in London next morning, then straight on to a recital in Cologne, back to London the following morning for a patching session, and to Heathrow for a master class in Tokyo. Two statistics of the appearances of the artists in this album are an interesting comment:

In 11 seasons at the Metropolitan Opera (1891-1909) Nordica made 394 appearances in 25 roles; and in 12 seasons (1903-1915) Fremstad sang 351 times in 20 roles.

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