

Spring 2007 Vol. 99 No. 3

PANI PIPES



Melody Triumphant

SAI Honorary Member Marjorie Lawrence



MELODY TRIUMPHANT

“Another memorable event at this time was when I had the honor of receiving the certificate of merit from Sigma Alpha Iota, no doubt the world’s largest and finest musical fraternity. I take great pride in being an Honorary Member.”

The Epsilon Chapter at Ithaca (NY) College initiated Metropolitan Opera great Marjorie Lawrence as an Honorary Member in 1939. These words were written by Miss Lawrence in her autobiography, *Interrupted Melody**, published in 1949, only eight years after her incredibly successful career had been severely affected by a bout with polio.

The year 2007 marks the Centennial of Marjorie Lawrence’s birth in the small, isolated Australian town of Deans Marsh, Victoria. How she traveled from this place to the most prestigious opera stages of the world reads like a Cinderella story.

From Deans Marsh to the Geelong Competition

In the late 1890s, Marjorie’s mother, Elizabeth Smith, played the organ at the Deans Marsh Church of England when William Lawrence joined the choir.

“His baritone voice,” reports the Deans Marsh Celebrations program, “made a striking addition to the Church vocal talent.” These two church musicians married in 1898, and their sixth child, Marjorie Florence Lawrence, was born on February 17, 1907.

Marjorie’s early life was marked by two tragic events. When she was two years old, her mother died giving birth to the

MARJORIE LAWRENCE



Lawrence appeared before the Allied Commanders in Berlin following World War II. At right, Lawrence's roles at the Met included, from top, Salome, Brünnhilde, Venus, and Isolde.

Lawrences' seventh child, and Marjorie lived in Pennyroyal with her grandmother, Julia Lawrence, for the next two years. When her grandmother died in 1910, Marjorie returned to her family's home in Deans Marsh.

Early musical encouragement came from the pastor of her church who had recruited several of the Lawrence children for his choir: Lindsay, baritone; Ted, tenor; Cyril, boy soprano and pianist; and Marjorie. She also began taking piano lessons from a music teacher who drove out by horse and buggy from Birregurra one day a week.

After the family moved to a larger farm at Winchelsea, Marjorie was told by an itinerant musician, whose name she never learned, that she should go to Paris and study. The Celebrations program described Paris as seeming "distant as the moon." Marjorie read that an Australian from Geelong had become a leading baritone in the Paris Opera after studying with Ivor Boustead, whose studio was in Melbourne.

Shortly after her 18th birthday, she and her brother Cyril set out for Melbourne against her father's wishes. She earned enough money to study with Boustead, who finally indicated she was ready to compete in Geelong. The teacher convinced Marjorie's

father to let her return home and continue her lessons until the Geelong competition. He agreed, telling her if she did *not* win at Geelong, she must give up the idea of becoming a professional singer.

For the springtime aria contest, she was driven to Geelong by her aunt only after her farmyard chores had been done.

"My life has not been uneventful . . . but my most exciting moment was when I won the 1928 Sun Aria Contest."

A few months later, she was on her way to Paris, seeing her father for the last time as he watched her on the deck of the departing *Hobsons Bay*.

Paris and the Met and Beyond

Success was not long in arriving for the young soprano. A student of Madame Cecile Gilly, she signed a contract with the Opéra de Monte-Carlo in 1931 and debuted there as Elisabeth in *Tannhäuser*. Her Paris Opera debut came in 1933 as Ortrud in *Lohengrin*. By June 1935, she had signed a contract with the Metropolitan Opera in New York City and made her debut in December as Brünnhilde in *Die Walküre*. Perhaps her

continued on page 12



MARJORIE LAWRENCE

LAWRENCE continued from page 11

most astounding performance that set the opera world on its ear came the next year when she eschewed the traditional leading of an ancient nag across the stage by a bridle in the final scene of *Götterdämmerung* and instead charged boldly on horseback across the stage toward the funeral pyre – just the way Wagner wrote it!

In the late 1930s and early 1940s, her performances took her to Germany, Argentina, and back to her homeland Australia.

She was a success everywhere. Of her 1938 performance in a revival of *Salome*, Olin Downes of the *New York Times* said

she was “the finest Salome the rising generation of America had seen.” [In 1976, the Joseph Dickinson portrait, depicting her as Salome was hung in the Artists Gallery at the Metropolitan Opera House.] In March 1941, she married Thomas King, a young New York physician.

Global and Personal Catastrophes and Triumphs

As the world teetered on the brink of a world war in June 1941, Marjorie Lawrence was struck with polio while in Mexico City rehearsing *Brünnhilde*. Despite the crippling effects of her disease, with the help of her physician husband, she recovered the use of her

vocal chords and made her first public performance at a Christmas service at her husband’s church in Miami. By 1942, she was back at the Met, singing Venus in *Tannhäuser* in a gala concert in her honor. She was seated for the performance. She resumed a full schedule, with radio, concert, and recital engagements, and toured 50,000 miles of the Southern Pacific, singing to the troops, both American GIs and Australian “Diggers,” opening with her “signature” song, “Waltzing Matilda.” Two troop concert tours of Western Europe and singing for Queen Elizabeth, Princess Elizabeth, and Princess Margaret kept her traveling in 1945.

In 1946, the war over, she performed

Marjorie Lawrence Centennial Celebration

Opera Music Theater International (OMTI) Director James K. McCully has announced the launch of a series of events to commemorate the Marjorie Lawrence Centennial. The renowned Australian-born soprano and Honorary Member of Sigma Alpha Iota was born February 17, 1907.

Marjorie Lawrence Centennial Award for Operatic Excellence

Among the events was the selection of the recipient of the 2007 Marjorie Lawrence Centennial Award for Operatic Excellence, and the honor was bestowed on SAI Honorary Member soprano Deborah Voigt.

“Once in a generation,” the award citation reads, “a true dramatic soprano comes along, with a rare voice built for the works of Wagner and Strauss in an opera house the size of the Met. Deborah Voigt is the real deal.” Miss Voigt, whose most recent operatic triumph was in the title role in the rarely-performed *The Egyptian Helen* by Richard Strauss, was initiated by the Orange County (CA) Alumnae Chapter in 1993.

“I am deeply moved to receive this award, named in honor of the greatly gifted Ms. Lawrence, whose tragic story is ultimately one of triumph over devastating adversity,” the soprano said in response to the honor. “In the coming years, I hope to sustain your confidence in me, and as I look at this beautiful award, will be reminded of the tremendous legacy of which I am so humbly grateful to be a part.”

Marjorie Lawrence International Vocal Competition

First place in the 2007 competition’s studio division was captured by Cristina Nassif, an initiate of the Gamma



Deborah Voigt



Cristina Nassif

Epsilon Chapter at the University of Maryland and winner of first place in the vocal division of the Sigma Alpha Iota Graduate Performance Awards Competition in 2000.

The daughter of two musicians, Cristina began her vocal training with her mother, Spanish mezzo-soprano Cristina Herrera de Nassif, and the two have shared the concert stage with father/pianist, Dr. Thomas Nassif. She earned a Bachelor’s degree from the University of Maryland (with Regina McConnell) and an Artist Diploma from The Academy of Vocal Arts in Philadelphia. While there, she began working with her current teacher, Bill Schuman.

A winner of many competitions and honors, Cristina has performed roles with the Virginia Opera, Washington National Opera, and Central City Opera in Colorado, as well as being featured soloist with several orchestras, including the Buffalo Philharmonic and Virginia Symphony. Upcoming performances include *I Pagliacci* with Virginia Opera and *Carmen* with the Shreveport Opera.

MARJORIE LAWRENCE

a series of concerts in Germany, singing in Russian, German, and English – uniting an audience which included the leaders of the four occupational powers. During this post-war era, she continued to sing for troops in hospitals from her wheelchair. By 1947, despite professional predictions that she would neither sing nor stand again, her recovery had reached the point that she could stand and sing, which she did in the title role of *Elektra* with the Chicago Symphony.

After publishing her autobiography in 1949, she hosted a television show, became Artist-in-Residence at Sophie Newcomb College of Tulane University in New Orleans and Voice Professor for 13 years at Southern Illinois University in Carbondale, where she was also the Director of the Opera Workshop. The Workshop was renamed the “Marjorie Lawrence Opera Theater” in 1971. Later in the 1970s, she taught in Arkansas, first at the Garland County Community College and then as a member of the University of Arkansas at Little Rock faculty.

In 1976, Marjorie Lawrence returned to her native Australia and joined Joan Sutherland on “The Rights of a Child Concert” sponsored by the Australian government in honor of UNICEF’s 30th birthday. It was during that visit that she made her

last recording. Appropriately, it was “Waltzing Matilda.” The following year, she was vested as a Commander of the British Empire (C.B.E.) by her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II.

She died January 13, 1979, in Little Rock, AR.

**Interrupted Melody* was made into an Academy Award-winning motion picture in 1955, starring Eleanor Parker and Glenn Ford, with SAI Honorary Member soprano Eileen Farrell providing the vocal numbers. It remains one of the best “opera” movies of all time.

Resources:

Lawrence, Marjorie Florence; <http://encyclopediaofarkansas.net>

Marjorie Lawrence Celebrations, Deans Marsh–Winchelsea, 10-18 February 2007, Program of Events

Opera Music Theater International 2007, James K. McCully, General Director, “Marjorie Lawrence Centennial Celebration,” online at www.omti.org. — *mw*

CALL continued from page 8

Italian, and German and songs in Czech and Spanish. While she has a working knowledge of conversational German, she finds the Czech a little difficult because it’s newer to her and has difficult consonants.

“I have learned a lot working at Bay View with Tim Cheek, whose wife is Czech.” [Dr. Cheek, on the University of Michigan faculty, has written a book, *Singing in Czech: A Guide to Czech Lyric Diction and Vocal Repertoire*, a valuable resource for singers.]

“I love giving recitals,” Amy says. “You get to be so many different characters in songs.”

However, she prefers performing in a fully-staged opera.

“I like the whole effect – poetry, music, scenery, and costumes. The costumes are so much fun, especially the period dresses, with the long, large skirt and fitted bodice.” Costumes, however, can sometimes present their own challenges, she says.

“When I was in the chorus of an Indiana University Opera Theater production of *Candide*, we dressed as

‘natives,’ and wore long skirts with a nude body suit with a ‘strategically placed’ vest on top and two-foot high and heavy ‘Chiquita Banana’ type headpieces.”

While most of the operas in which she has sung have gone smoothly, there is always some chance for mischance, as in the case of the dress rehearsal of *La Bohème* at Bay View.

“I was singing Mimi in a scene in Rodolfo’s flat, with a real fire in the little stove on the set. I heard keys banging as someone was running. The music never stopped, and we kept on singing. I found out later that the sound was made by one of the stagehands who had rushed onstage to put out the fire that had gone out of control.”

Amy has always had a large range (F below middle C to A above high C), but finds the “middle” of the range (B below middle C to G above high C) the most comfortable. As her voice has matured, she finds her lower voice has come into its own and the quality of the high notes continues to improve.

“My lower notes,” she laughs, “are still better early in the morning.”

“My favorite college SAI memories are of the ritual – it is so beautiful and meaningful. I really enjoyed the social times and service projects,” Amy remembers. “I am still in touch with my special sisters.”

Although Amy’s career is taking off, she describes one of the biggest obstacles she is working to overcome is her reaction to rejection in auditions.

“You need to develop a thick skin,” she advises. “Being rejected hurts, but you also can receive positive feedback.”

If Amy finds any spare minutes, she enjoys cooking, cross stitch, and shopping. And, she loves to travel. She will audition in New York for San Diego Lyric Opera in April and plans to do an audition tour in Germany within the next year. Her SAI grant will help make that possible.

You may contact Amy at amylynnccall@yahoo.com.

For the next cycle of Career Performance Grant opportunities, see the inside back cover or www.sai-national.org/phil/philsch1.html.