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## **Claudia Muzio (1889-1936), Her Life and Career**

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## Summary

The purpose of this thesis is to provide a much-needed account of the life and career of one of the most respected sopranos of the twentieth century. Claudia Muzio's career on the operatic stage was impressive when compared with any of the leading singers of her era, some of whose names are much more familiar than her own.

Among sopranos, her contemporaries included Rosa Ponselle; among contraltos, Ernestine Schumann-Heink; among tenors, Enrico Caruso, and among basses, Feodor Chaliapin – four of the most recognizable names in operatic history. All of these four (and many more only slightly less famous) have captured the interest of opera historians. There is at least one biography in English of each of them. All left behind many recordings which frequently appeared in re-pressings in both vinyl and compact disc formats.

Muzio, too, made an impressive number of recordings. There are over one hundred examples of her singing from the time of her debut (1910) in opera until a year before her death (1936). These recordings, like those of the above, are often reproduced. The fascination with Muzio seems to renew itself with every new generation of lovers of great singing.

There is only one published full biography of Claudia Muzio, by Eduardo Arnosi<sup>1</sup>, and it has not been translated from its original Spanish. Arnosi was a critic in Buenos Aires in the years that Claudia Muzio sang there (1919 – 1935). His work was published to commemorate her contribution to opera in the fiftieth year after her death. It is in effect a eulogy and offers little information about the woman herself.

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<sup>1</sup> Arnosi, Eduardo. Claudia Muzio, La Unica. en el cincuentenario de su muerte. Buenos Aires, 1986.

This “hole” in the recorded history of opera is surprising, given Claudia Muzio’s continued appearances on re-issues of historic recordings, but understandable. It is surprising because a number of operatic authorities including John B. Steane, Nigel Douglas and Rupert Christiansen in the United Kingdom, Rodolfo Celletti in Italy, and the playwright Terrence McNally in the USA have all produced long chapters in books or radio broadcasts about her, but none has embarked on a full biography. It is understandable because there is so little documentation and practically nothing in writing by Claudia Muzio herself. All accounts of her, therefore, are second-hand ones.

My history of Claudia Muzio’s life and career begins with her birth in Pavia, Italy, on February 4, 1889 and documents her childhood spent backstage in important opera houses due to the fact that her father was a popular operatic stage director and her mother a chorus singer. Her early training as a pianist and harpist then led on to vocal tuition in her native Italy, an early debut, and almost instant world-wide success. Her first important engagement, at Covent Garden in London (1914) was followed two years later by a debut at the Metropolitan Opera in New York, where she sang for seven consecutive seasons, during which she began to appear in South America, then by ten years at the Chicago Lyric Opera, simultaneously keeping alive her career in South America and returning to Italy and the Continent, and traveling all over the USA singing recitals.

Her early death in 1936 at the age of forty-seven came after several years when her early childhood brush with rheumatic fever took its toll in the form of heart failure.

In between accounts of her appearances, Claudia Muzio, the woman, is able to be glimpsed through accounts of her in the print media of the time; and in 1929, a woman called May Higgins became her personal secretary and wrote letters to a devoted group of admirers (The Claudia Muzio Fan Club) in Chicago which were collected under the title "Following a Star" and copies made available for the members of the Fan Club. These letters form a valuable almost day-to-day chronicle of the life of the singer for the six years Miss Higgins was associated with her in that way.

### **Acknowledgements**

I am grateful to Caterina Secchi, Cesar Dillon, Nigel Douglas, John B. Steane, Rupert Christiansen, Claudia Pinza, Bill Park, Robert Tuggle, Studs Terkel, Henry Pleasants, Terence McNally and Marty Robinson for sharing their impressions of Claudia Muzio and in some cases a great deal of information about the facts of her career.

Laurence Jenkins, 2003

## INTRODUCTION

The Italian soprano Claudia Muzio was, in the course of her short career (1910-1935) hailed as one of the world's great singers. There is a great deal of evidence, in the form of reviews and testimonials by her contemporaries, that Claudia became famous amongst critics and audiences alike for her dedication, histrionic ability and the beauty and intelligence of her singing. Claudia was what we would call today a role model. There was a dedicated following of young girls and women, the Muzio Fan Club, which started in Chicago and soon had members throughout the United States. Only one other soprano of the day had such a following, Geraldine Farrar, whose 'gerryflapper' following was more impressive, though not so much devoted to the singing of their idol as to her style.

Both genetically and environmentally, conditions were ideal for Claudia to become what she did. Her parents, though at the time Claudia was born to them they were still unmarried, were both musicians. Carlo Muzio, though, soon turned his attention to stage directing. Giovanna Gavirati, his mistress and Claudia's natural, and later legal, mother, was a singer and had a sister who was a professional singer as well. Added to those already favourable conditions was the constant backstage environment in which Claudia spent her childhood, "at work" with her parents who doted on her and were reluctant to leave her behind when they travelled between several of the major opera houses of the world – Covent Garden in London, The Metropolitan in New York, the San Carlo in Naples and others.

During the course of what was an accelerated rise to world fame, after her debut in 1910, Claudia came into contact with the developing recording industry almost immediately. She made her first recordings in 1911, again recording in 1917-18, then in 1920 through 1925, and, finally, in 1934-35.

Like many other performers who achieve international fame and whose reputations live after them, Claudia Muzio was dedicated to her career. As it grew, so shrank her interest in much else, and with the time it took to get from one continent to another in those times, and the fact that her method of preparation was to immerse herself in her character by seclusion and deep rest on the days of performances, little time was left for a private life. What there was was jealously guarded, and we know very little of what occurred offstage.

Seven years before Claudia's death, one of the fan club members who had been following her, first from Chicago to New York, and then to Italy, a woman of about the same age as she, became her personal secretary. She accompanied the singer everywhere, writing about their day-to-day activities to the Muzio Fan Club members. The woman was May Higgins, and to Muzio scholars, her writings are the most significant body of information about the singer. May Higgins was, first and foremost, a fan, and her comments must be taken as those of someone absolutely smitten with the subject. Nevertheless, they paint the closest thing to a picture of Claudia Muzio that we have, and much can be learned from them.

I propose in this thesis to present the known facts about Claudia Muzio along with a chronology of her performances, a discography, and to quote from a large body of criticism concerning her countless public appearances. There is no biography of Claudia Muzio in English, only one in Spanish, written by a devoted critic in Buenos Aires in 1986, and it is rather lacking in information about the personality of the artist herself. I have attempted, through interpreting a very sparse body of interviews with the singer and the comments of the press and her friends, to “flesh out” the picture as well as possible. .

## Chapter One

### Birth, Early Childhood and Musical Training

In the eighth century the ancient Lombards, led by King Liutprand (who ruled from 712-744), threatened Rome from their capital in Pavia.<sup>2</sup> Pope Stephen appealed for help from Pepin the Short, the Frankish King, to defeat them. Later, Pepin's son Charlemagne, after a nine-month siege, completed the task begun by his father and, destroying the Lombard kingdom, took the "iron crown" of Lombardy for himself. The succeeding centuries saw the Lombards through many political changes, finally coming under Austrian domination, for they had by the 13th century become important bankers, and it was not until 1861 that they were considered Italians, with allegiance to the Roman government of the day.

Pavia is a University town. In the 12th century, it had the sort of reputation, thanks to the students, that the following was said of the city:

Pavia became a house of ill fame for corrupted women, who were many, and for the great number of corrupted young men. Neither God nor the Saints were honoured. Merry making, dances, sing-songs and musical instruments resounded everywhere. As the old traditions said, during the religious vigils, men and women lay together to enjoy carnal pleasures.<sup>3</sup>

The Visconti Dukes of Milan took away Pavia's status in 1359, moving their seat to Milano, and since then the city has had little connection with the world of music or the other arts; like the *lucchese* further South, the *pavese* seem to have concerned themselves with commerce rather than art. Lucca, the birthplace of Boccherini, Puccini, and Catalani, retains little of the heritage of her illustrious musical sons.

On February 7, 1889, at No. 4, Piazza del Duomo, in the city of Pavia, Claudina

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<sup>2</sup> Azarius, Peter, *Chronicon*, as quoted in Pavia by Alberto Arecchi, trans. Monica Vittadini, p. 3.

<sup>3</sup> *ibid.*

Emilia Maria Muzzio<sup>4</sup> was born, the illegitimate infant of an operatic stage director and a singer. It was not until her seventeenth year that she took the name Claudia Muzio, a name which has for nearly a century inspired awe and devotion in connoisseurs of great singing. Claudina escaped the fate of many other children born out of wedlock in that era. The custom in Italy was to put unwanted infants through the *tornella* or turnstile at an orphanage or *ospedale* and the nuns or friars received them on the other side and took them in. The turnstile babies were likely to be lumbered with any name.<sup>5</sup>

Pavia is thirty kilometres or so from Milan and, like many Italian towns of its size, has a minor *duomo* or cathedral, dedicated to St. John and built of brick in the Romanesque style of the 12th century. The bell tower that once stood alongside the edifice (it collapsed in 1989, a century after Claudia's birth) was not simply the belfry of the church, but was the *torre civile*, the civic tower. The civic buildings behind the cathedral are attached to the cathedral, and it is clear that church and city-state were intimately connected in this case. The house in which Claudina was born, a divided-off part of what was once the bishop's palace, faced the tower directly.

Claudia Muzio was, to quote Gilda Dalla Rizza, one of her rivals, "...the queen of sopranos" in her own time,<sup>6</sup> but, partly due to her premature death, there has been little examination of her position in the history of singing. Her reputation has lived on despite both her reticence to seek publicity and her demise before she could safeguard her fame through teaching or influencing the operatic world in some other way. Even though her personal life was so sheltered from public scrutiny (she lived in a time when the media didn't, unbeckoned, come too close to celebrities), there were sufficient admirers of her art to ensure the survival of her reputation.

<sup>4</sup> Birth certificate obtained from Comune di Pavia. Muzzio is the spelling on the birth certificate.

<sup>5</sup> Arnosí, Eduardo, *Claudia Muzio, La Unica, en el cincuentenario de su muerte*. Buenos Aires, 1986, pp. 19, 20.

<sup>6</sup> Sachs, Harvey, *Toscanini*. London: Weidenfeld & Nicholson, 1978, p. 162.

At the time of the birth of their daughter Carlo Muzio and his *de facto* partner Giovanna Gavirati were living together in Pavia, though employed at Milan's *Teatro alla Scala*. Carlo was *pavese* and Giovanna came from further north, either from the village of Gavirati or from Ponte Tresa, overlooking Lake Lugano. Giovanna must have known she was pregnant about May of 1888 but seems to have been, like many other women in the theatre at that time, not particularly worried about having a child, despite her lack of marital status.

Carlo Alberto Muzio was born in Pavia on May 31, 1848.<sup>7</sup> He studied music and became a good singer himself, but gradually gravitated to the production side of opera and eventually became a stage director.<sup>8</sup> He was in demand in some of the world's most important lyric theatres. The position of Director in a theatrical production is much more specialised now than in the 1880s. Directorial duties then could range from managing props, through prompter, to actual stage management, but in the 19th and early 20th centuries singers commonly attended only a rehearsal or two of even a new production, had their own costumes which travelled with them all over the world, and did pretty well what they wanted on stage. An account by George Bernard Shaw of a production of Verdi's *Otello* in 1891 goes some way to illustrating the lack of sophistication in operatic productions at Covent Garden in this era:

It remains to get through the most melancholy part of my task --the criticism of the staging. I need hardly say that what money could secure in the way of scenery and dresses has been secured, and that amply. But money alone does not go very far in the first act of *Otello*, which stands or falls by the naturalness of the delightful scene where the storm subsides, the thunder dies out of the air, and there begins that merry scene round the bonfire which is perhaps Verdi's freshest and prettiest piece of descriptive music. Its total failure at Covent Garden was a foregone conclusion ... The final outrage of the stage-manager (if there is really any such functionary at Covent Garden) was the turning on in the sky of a most outrageous constellation, intended, I think, for the Great Bear, and consisting of gas lamps of the first magnitude and of aggressive yellowness...(which) achieved a sort of *succès de rire* by winking

<sup>7</sup> Birth certificate, obtained from Comune di Pavia.

<sup>8</sup> Giuseppe Gino Martini, "Claudia Muzio" in *Musica*, vol xxiv, p. 23.

at the most rapturous part of the duet which De Reszke and Albani were carrying on below in happy ignorance of the facetiousness of the firmament.<sup>9</sup>

The critical blow aimed at the stage manager enlightens us about another of the facets of the profession, i.e. lighting designer, and perhaps Carlo Muzio may even have been the butt of this criticism, suggested by the date of the piece, but the records of employment at Covent Garden from that era are nonexistent.

Another task was the actual looking after and marking of orchestral scores and parts, and Claudia did this for her father. "I used to take charge of all the scores for him, and knew all the cuts, changes and just how they were to be used. The singers themselves often came to me for stage directions about their parts, knowing I had this experience."<sup>10</sup>

Carlo Muzio and his colleagues were also expected to do the work of what we would call "artist liaison," for the actors, musicians and manager. Carlo was a personable and happy man by all accounts. We can presume that he was a good stage director and was popular since he was repeatedly engaged at La Scala, San Carlo, Covent Garden, and in the days of rivalry between Oscar Hammerstein's Manhattan Opera House and the Metropolitan in New York, at both houses.

Giovanna Gavirati, born in 1860, though she had no apparent career as a solo singer, was engaged at Covent Garden and at the Met as a member of the chorus. Very few singers have risen out of the chorus in a major opera house to become opera stars.<sup>11</sup> We may assume one of two things: that Giovanna was not ambitious or that she had a mediocre voice. Claudia's musical genes were further strengthened by the fact that her aunt, Felicia Gavirati, Giovanna's sister, was also a singer, a famous one.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>9</sup> Shaw, Bernard, writing as Corno di Bassetto, Music in London, 1890-94. London: Constable and Company, Ltd., 1932, i., pp. 242-43.

<sup>10</sup> Brower, Harriette, "Claudia Muzio, a Child of the Opera," in Vocal Mastery. New York, 1917, p. 160.

<sup>11</sup> Rosselli, John, Singers of Italian Opera. Cambridge: CUP 1992, p. 203.

<sup>12</sup> Undated press clipping in "The New York Times". (Metropolitan Opera House Archives).

By her contemporaries, Giovanna was perceived as both pious and superstitious. The piety was characterised by her refusal to go anywhere without her missal, the superstition by the notes made in the margin of it (and, in later years, by some of her ritualistic practices with regard to Claudia's performances.)<sup>13</sup> Claudia was much loved by both her parents, and was, from the time she was old enough, brought to the theatre and was backstage and in contact with the theatrical world.

In 1891, Giovanna gave birth to a son, Andrea.<sup>14</sup> What happened to him is a matter of conjecture, but it is possible that he died soon after birth. Their child Claudina was cherished, perhaps more than would have been usual because of the death of Andrea, and there was no thought of leaving her with relatives. She led a sheltered childhood, as Carlo and Giovanna kept her away from other children, but when she was five years old she contracted rheumatic fever, a crucial event in her life ultimately contributing to her early death.<sup>15</sup> The family called themselves the Three Musketeers and were inseparable. Claudina loved her parents, especially her father, upon whom she and Giovanna depended to make important decisions. But as a child Claudina had an independent streak and a fun-loving side. Once, on a sea journey to Italy from London, the family was accompanied by one of her schoolmates. The two girls had a stateroom together and the moment Giovanna closed the door on them Claudina began a pillow fight with her new companion. Her hunger for a playmate seems to have been momentarily filled on the journey, but for the most part she lacked friends of her own age.<sup>16</sup>

Claudina was obsessed with the operatic world and thought of nothing else from her childhood onwards. She knew all of the singers' names wherever she happened to be

<sup>13</sup> Martini, *op.cit.*

<sup>14</sup> Celletti, Rodolfo, "Claudia Muzio" in the series *Grandi Voci alla Scala*, Milan, 1968, p. 27.

<sup>15</sup> Letter to author from Caterina Secchi, 22 September, 1999.

<sup>16</sup> Davis, Ronald L., Southern Methodist University Oral History Project, Number 75: Interview with May Higgins, 2 May 1975, Chicago.

with her family and insisted constantly that she wanted to be like them.<sup>17</sup> This was not surprising, since she had spent her childhood in the wings of the best opera houses. The case for cause and effect could have no better defense than the story of this lonely child, bearing the stigma of illegitimacy and kept from any sort of ordinary life. Fantasising about becoming a Melba, or any of the other divas who regularly swept by her in the wings of Covent Garden, the Metropolitan Opera in New York, or smaller provincial houses where Carlo might station her offstage while he went about his business, became for her the norm. Her imagination and sensitivity were stimulated constantly in this hothouse environment.

From the time she was two years old until she was sent back to Italy at fifteen to study, Claudina was based in London and was enrolled in convent schools first in Tottenham and later in Hammersmith, both at that time satellite boroughs to London. She was only at these schools during the periods her parents found it inconvenient to take her with them when they worked abroad. Carlo worked in the opera houses of Naples, Geneva, and in other theatres not so prestigious, but Covent Garden and the Metropolitan were his two bases. Carlo and Giovanna spent the summer seasons as employees of the Grand Opera Syndicate whose productions at the Royal Opera House were headed by Harry V. Higgins, and made up of Earl de Grey, Lord Esher and Lord Wittenham.<sup>18</sup>

The years from 1891 to 1900 at Covent Garden were indisputably a Golden Age in the history of opera. They were also the years Claudina Muzzio played backstage during rehearsals and watched and listened from the wings as some of the most venerated opera stars sang many of the works we still enjoy in the temples of opera today. The roster included Nellie Melba, Enrico Caruso, Jean de Reszke, Marcella Sembrich, Lillian Nordica, Emma Eames, Adelina Patti, Emma Albani, Francesco

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<sup>17</sup> Davis, Ronald L., loc. cit.

<sup>18</sup> Hetherington, John, Melba, A Biography. London: Faber & Faber, 1967, p. 76.

Tamagno, Victor Maurel, Pol Plançon, Emma Calvé, Sybil Sanderson, Fernando De Lucia, Madame Schumann-Heink, and conductor Gustav Mahler. These are only the more familiar names. Less well-known now are Minnie Hauk, Mario Ancona, Marie Brema, Galli-Marié (the original Carmen), Pauline Lucca and many others whose reputations at the time of their appearances at Covent Garden during this period were extremely high.<sup>19</sup> Claudina's childhood was in effect, an opera school. The artistry of the adult Claudia's own interpretations was solidly built on some of the finest operatic performances of all times. Once, when told she was a beautiful child by a visitor to her father's house in London, she replied tearfully, "No, I want to be like la Melba!"<sup>20</sup> She gave her first public performance at home at the age of six, singing a "little recital."<sup>21</sup>

Claudia had to learn English, and there is ample proof that she learned it well. For instance, the English soprano Eva Turner reported meeting Claudia in Chicago in the late 1920s and being invited to a very English tea during the course of which she was, to her surprise and delight, questioned about London - all in perfect English.<sup>22</sup>

Giovanna, at Carlo's insistence, was withholding any vocal training until his daughter reached maturity. She studied piano and harp with Giovanna, and she performed on the latter well enough to be a harpist in the orchestra at Covent Garden<sup>23</sup> and the former sufficiently competently to entertain a career as a concert pianist.

One day Carlo gave her a notebook and encouraged her to write about what she was seeing and hearing at the theatre.<sup>24</sup> Under his guidance, details about sets, costumes, and the way singers rehearsed were entered religiously by the intelligent and impressionable young girl, who built up in this way a good knowledge of operatic

<sup>19</sup> Klein, Herman, *The Golden Age of Opera*. London: Routledge & Sons Ltd, 1933, pp. 149-264.

<sup>20</sup> Jahant, Charles, "Muzio Onstage and Off" in *Stereo Review* December 28, 1957, p. 31-39.

<sup>21</sup> Brower, loc. cit.

<sup>22</sup> Douglas, Nigel, *More Legendary Voices*. New York: Limelight Editions, 1995, p. 203.

<sup>23</sup> Claudia Muzio Obituary, "New York Times" May 25, 1936, Sec 3, p.19.

<sup>24</sup> Arnosi, p. 35.

routine and repertoire.

Giovanna Gavirati was very large of frame and presented an impregnable front to the world, though genuine reserve coupled with the typical upbringing of a Catholic girl in Italy obliged her to stay in the background and let the men do all the talking. As her mother had done before her, she instructed her daughter in the ways of women and the parameters within which they were expected to operate. Claudia, too, was shy-many great performers are-and took refuge in pretending to be someone else. Before a mirror and feigning the life of one of the heroines she studied from the theatrical sidelines, she could emote forcefully and tragically for her own entertainment.

Her sheltered childhood, spent mostly in the company of her protective parents or with nuns, resulted in her knowing very little of the world outside theatre or convent walls. At the age when most little girls were preoccupied with dressing up their dolls, little Claudina was confronted with dressed-up adults who played out stories she could not understand. She costumed her own dolls as replicas of the characters onstage. Years later, when she was the reigning *prima donna* of the Chicago Lyric Opera Company, she offered a "Tosca" doll to aid a Christmas fund. The mature Claudia dressed the doll herself, just as she had done in her childhood. When she presented the doll to the patron of the charity, she said, "Ah, those were happy days. You may feel that I was dreaming wonderful dreams. But I was not dreaming. I was living in a beautiful world of my own, and every happiness today is but a repetition of some happiness of those days when I hugged my 'Tosca' doll in the wings and waited for the great Caruso to pass me by and pat my head."<sup>25</sup>

By the time she was old enough to read, she could repeat the words of most of the

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<sup>25</sup> Undated clipping from "Jewish Review and Observer," Cleveland, Jan 29 (year unknown, but perhaps 1924.) Metropolitan Opera Archives.

librettos of the operas she knew, and whether they were in French or Italian, knew what they meant. In her head she heard the works of Massenet, Gounod, Verdi, Mascagni, Leoncavallo, Meyerbeer, Rossini, Donizetti, and Bellini and there may have been the odd scrap of Wagner. Carlo and Giovanna spoke Italian when they were alone or with their daughter, but English was more often than not the language Claudia spoke outside the home. She became very adept at jumping from one to the other at a moment's notice.<sup>26</sup>

By 1908 it was clear that her musical development would be best served by a return to Italy, and so she was sent to live with relatives in Turin. There she would study with the seventy-eight-year old mezzo-soprano Annetta Casaloni, but she was to have only piano lessons. Mme. Casaloni had been very successful as a celebrated interpreter of the role of Angelina in Rossini's comic masterpiece *La Cenerentola*. Verdi then chose her to create Sparafucile's sister Magdalena in *Rigoletto*, which opened at La Fenice, Venice, in 1851.<sup>27</sup> Carlo's ideas about furthering his child's music education at this juncture appear now to have been overly circumspect. He had strong objections to her becoming an opera singer because he feared her being a "flash in the pan." He held the view that the period of greatness of a singer was a short one and might be followed by a longer period of mediocrity, whereas Claudia might become a great piano teacher. However, Annetta Casaloni heard her piano pupil sing and advised her to consider an operatic career: "Your voice is properly placed and you will not have to endure drudgery for long," she told her young charge.<sup>28</sup> Carlo gave in only under one condition: that the training be serious and aimed at "*...la sua creatura riconosciuta un giorno dal pubblico e dalla critica come una grande concertista*" ("...a creature recognised one day as a major artist by the public and critics"). Giovanna wanted her daughter to study in Milan with Antonio Fugazzola, but in the end Casaloni sent her to the soprano Elettra Callery-Viviani in

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<sup>26</sup> Douglas, loc. cit.

<sup>27</sup> Celletti, loc. cit.

<sup>28</sup> Brower, loc. cit.

Milan, who only taught her for a brief while.<sup>29</sup>

In 1908 Carlo apparently dropped all caution and boasted to none other than John McCormack, the Irish tenor, that his daughter had a brilliant future as an opera singer. He refused to allow her to sing secondary roles. He had faith that she was good enough to sing the lead parts. Also, in 1908, she became the legally-acknowledged daughter of Mr. and Mrs. Carlo Muzio<sup>30</sup> and took the stage name Claudia Muzio. On the surface it looks as if this move on the part of Carlo and Giovanna was a gesture of faith in the talents of their only child but there is more to the story than that. Before Claudia's conception one of her parents was "tied" to another person either in marriage or in betrothal, which to some degree amounted to the same thing.<sup>31</sup> The act of becoming betrothed in the nineteenth century was tantamount to marriage. Breaking off an engagement was a scandalous act on the part of a woman and positively criminal on the part of a man. Even with the looser moral code of the theatre world, it would have been very difficult for either Carlo or Giovanna to marry with either a fiancée in his life or a husband in hers. Whatever occurred to allow them to marry, it was a long time coming.<sup>32</sup>

The training of singers up until the twentieth century is documented in certain published "methods," most notably those of the French-based Maria Marchesi and the Italian Vaccai. Before the era of strong private teachers, a singer was often apprenticed to another singer or to a composer, a practice found especially effective in the days of the convention of castrating young boys with promising voices. Young women, too, were often taken from their families and bonded to the household of a *maestro*. Giuditta Pasta and Maria Malibran, both celebrated artists, had a minimum of actual vocal training, lasting only a few months.<sup>33</sup> (Few singers would have

<sup>29</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>30</sup> Marriage certificate, obtained from Comune di Pavia.

<sup>31</sup> Arnosi, *op. cit.*, p. 152.

<sup>32</sup> Interview with Caterina Secchi by the author, 1996.

<sup>33</sup> Rosselli, *op. cit.* p.100.

persevered after a debut like Malibran's in New York. Her father, the Spanish tenor Manuel Garcia, in the role of Rossini's Otello, threatened to actually murder her in the death scene if she didn't sing Desdemona to his satisfaction.<sup>34</sup> No wonder we have this description of her acting in that scene, "...when Othello moves toward her with drawn dagger...Malibran tried desperately to escape, running to every window and every door, leaping though the room like a startled deer."<sup>35</sup> )

In Claudia's case, the two years or so that she spent in formal training were the culmination of a lifetime thus far spent observing and soaking up the atmosphere of the opera house. Did the young Claudia sing *sotto voce* with her idols watching them, in the wings? Did she hear the divas of the day discussing the mysteries of the art and were these discussions in fact early singing lessons? Whatever the answers to those questions, her very short student life could acknowledge an already developed understanding. It could also indicate a quite stubborn impatience to get on the stage and imitate the heroes and heroines of her pantheon. But Carlo and Giovanna would have prevented her premature entry into a world which they knew only too well, and we can assume that her two Italian singer-teachers, thinking of the effect a too-early debut might have on their reputations, would have held her in check. We must conclude, then, that Claudia was ready for what followed and that she only needed the brief training she received to learn how to breathe and place her voice and to acquire some repertoire. All that we now know about her astounding triumphs in opera - the ability to empathise with her characters, the countless times she stepped into a new role with little or no rehearsal, the ease with which she learned music, her uncanny sense of the dramatic - is made plausible by the fact that she needed so short a period of vocal instruction.

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<sup>34</sup> Clement, Catherine, tr. Betsy Wing, Opera, or the Undoing of Women. London: Virago, 1989, p. 57.

<sup>35</sup> Pleasants, Henry, The Great Singers, from the dawn of Opera to our own time. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1966, p.148.

## Chapter Two

### Debut and Early Career

Steeped in stagecraft, musically and dramatically gifted, Claudia was certainly equipped for an operatic career. She was tall. By 1910, in her bare feet she stood five feet nine-and-one-half inches. Add to her height an inch or more when she wore heels and she made an imposing sight, onstage or off.<sup>36</sup> She had large dark eyes, framed in very black, long lashes, which, when made up, were quite visible from the farthest point of an opera house. Her hair was dark brown and her very white teeth were not large but were very visible when she sang. According to Rosa Ponselle, when Claudia sang, she always looked as if she were smiling.<sup>37</sup> Her skin was luminously pale, not dark, and her figure slim and her waist small, though this was not always the case during the course of the next twenty-five years.

Hers was a rich voice. While the scale was even and the quality could accurately be described as lovely, even beautiful, the different colours in Claudia's voice, and her use of them, caused the most comment in her lifetime and now cause the *aficionado* to return to her recordings time and again. These shades of timbre carry with them meaning, and Claudia learned early on how to fit them to the text she was singing. As Mimi, she sounded both ingenuous and world-weary. As Aïda she could call forth an ethereal, disembodied sound, as if she had just stepped out of some ancient Egyptian tomb, an entirely appropriate and individual approach to the part.<sup>38</sup> In her early days, just after her two years' tuition, she could already astound audiences with the natural way she applied vocal colour to music, but the voice was bright, high and light and the parts she was given reflected this.

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<sup>36</sup> As evidence of this, there is a 2-minute clip of anonymously – produced amateur film, which shows Muzio with some average-sized women and she is indeed imposing.

<sup>37</sup> Drake, James, *Rosa Ponselle*. Portland: Amadeus Press, 1997, p. 150.

<sup>38</sup> Jahant, loc. cit.

The official date and place of the operatic debut of Claudia Muzio, and the role in which she made this beginning, has been subject to some contention. Some sources say that she first sang professionally at Arezzo on 15 January 1910, some say it was in the same theatre in 1911. Whichever year is preferred, it is now known that the role of Manon in Massenet's opera of that name was the vehicle. Before that was established, there were many who insisted that Claudia first sang at the Teatro Mastrojeni, Messina, as Gilda in Verdi's *Rigoletto* on 24 March 1910. The confusion surrounding these claims seems to have been cleared up by correspondence received by Harold Barnes and reported in an article by John B. Richards.<sup>39</sup> There was no opera being performed in Messina in 1910 until July of that year, the theatre being closed for repairs necessitated by the earthquake of 1908. Claudia did, in fact, *unofficially* open that season on 7 July, but only because it was agreed to admit the public to the rehearsal of *La Traviata*, in which she was singing Violetta, in lieu of the scheduled *Il Trovatore*, which had to be cancelled due to the illness of Clotilde Rubini, the Leonora. Claudia sang Violetta again on July 9, 10, 29, and 31 in that theatre and, in between, Gilda in *Rigoletto* on July 20 and 28. This information is further supported by the tenor Tito Schipa, who reports that he sang with Claudia in all the scheduled *La Traviata* and *Rigoletto* performances that month. The strongest argument is that Claudia herself always referred to Arezzo as the place of her debut and the opera as *Manon*. Luckily, proof has been found and the official debut of Claudia Muzio, confirmed in a letter from Piero Fasseti, the general manager of the Petrarca in 1967, was in the Teatro Petrarca at Arezzo on 15 January 1910 in the title role of Massenet's *Manon* and with a tenor who was to reach the top of the profession - Tito Schipa.<sup>40</sup> *Manon Lescaut*, heroine of the classic novel by the Abbé Prevost, loomed large in Claudia's life that season. She sang not only Massenet's music, but also that of Puccini's *Manon Lescaut* and of his *Tosca*. The Puccini operas

<sup>39</sup> Richards, John B., "Claudia Muzio," *The Record Collector* xvii, nos. 9, 10 (1968): pp. 198-9.

<sup>40</sup> *ibid.*

constituted her repertoire for the only performances she sang in the *Teatro Comunale de Catanzaro* in Calabria on December 17, 1910, and February 27, 1911, respectively. Learning the part of *Tosca* so early in her career was to stand her in good stead three years later when she had to step into the part at short notice in London. She also sang Violetta again, in Cerignola at the *Teatro Mercadante*.

The Milanese public, on May 13, 1911, had its first experience of the new soprano, though not at the major opera house, *La Scala*, but at the *Teatro dal Verme*. Claudia sang Musetta in Puccini's *La Boheme*, a role she was not to sing again.

In June of 1911, she made her first recordings for His Master's Voice. These pressings were somewhat in the nature of an experiment for the company and were made of five different musical items, though only two were released: the above-mentioned *Si, mi chiamano Mimi*, and *Amami, Alfredo*, from *La Traviata*, which was not released until 1914.

Then, in September, Claudia was engaged to sing Gilda at the Victor Emanuele in Turin, the city in which she had received her vocal tuition and one of the principal opera capitals of Italy. The part of Gilda, the daughter of Rigoletto in Verdi's opera by that name, may have suited Claudia two years earlier, but her voice by 1911 had changed and become heavier in the middle register, and she abandoned the hapless Gilda after these performances in Turin. It could be she was simply never again engaged to sing that particular part or it could just be that the vocal tessitura of the role, which lies quite high, simply made it a struggle. Contrarily, there is ample evidence on later recordings that the top of her voice was clear, secure, and that she could have managed coloratura roles if she had been attracted to them. Claudia herself settled the question. In discussing how her voice had developed from "...a very light soprano, hardly yet a coloratura... to ...a dramatic soprano," she let it be known that she was "...very happy about this fact, for I love to portray tears as well

as laughter -- sorrow and tragedy as well as lightness and gayety (sic). The coloratura manner of singing is all delicacy and lightness, and one cannot express deep emotion this way."<sup>41</sup>

At Turin, she moved on, in December, to her first Leonora in *Il Trovatore*, a role that did match her voice and temperament, and one that she repeated many times. Also that month she reappeared at Milan's *Dal Verme* as Marguerite in Gounod's *Faust* and as Nedda in *I Pagliacci*, paired with another future star tenor, Aureliano Pertile.

On February 14, 1911, an appropriate date, she sang in Ponchielli's *I Promessi Sposi* at the *Dal Verme*. This opera, based on the novel by the revered poet Manzoni, is set in Italy during the Spanish domination. The novel was immensely popular, so much so that the English writer E. M. Forster alludes to it in *A Room with a View*, a novel in which the characters are besotted with Italy.<sup>42</sup>

In March of that same year, Claudia sang, for the first time, Desdemona in Verdi's *Otello* at the *Teatro Massimo in Palermo*.<sup>43</sup> There were thirteen performances, and in between some of them, in that same theatre, she had her first experience at creating a role. The opera, performed for the first time on April 16, was *La Baronessa di Carini* by Giuseppe Mulé, a composer who was, appropriately enough, influenced by Sicilian folk song and the music of Mascagni.<sup>44</sup>

Claudia returned to the *dal Verme* for her first major triumph on September 17. She appeared opposite Giovanni Martinelli and the baritone Mariano Stabile as Puccini's

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<sup>41</sup> Brower, loc. cit.

<sup>42</sup> Forster, E.M., *A Room with a View*. London: E. Arnold, 1908. p. 93.

<sup>43</sup> Leone, Guido *L'Opera a Palermo 1653-1987, L'Opera al Teatro Massimo dalle origini (1897) al 1987*, vol. 2, Palermo: Publiscula Editrice (1987), p. 63.

<sup>44</sup> Cassella, Alfredo and Waterhouse, J.C.G, in *The New Grove Dictionary of Music*, ed. Stanley Sadie. London: Macmillan, 1980, vol 12, p. 766.

Manon. There were good notices<sup>45</sup> and the opera was repeated twenty-two times. The number of repeat performances in Italy, as well as in other countries, was governed by popular demand and the singers were quite happy to postpone other engagements to continue the run if necessary. Besides this long run of *Manon Lescaut*, Claudia performed in *Otello* again and took part in another world premiere, this time of *Melenis* by Zandonai, all before the end of the year. The verdict on the new opera by the "...genial young composer" was that it reaffirmed the promise of his earlier opera, *Conchita*, and that Claudia and Martinelli provided many joys, especially the finesse of Claudia in the title part.<sup>46</sup>

Each year her reputation grew. This is reflected in the roles she was offered and the prestige of the managements who sought her out. A debut at the *Teatro San Carlo* in Naples has traditionally been considered one of the tallest hurdles in the career of any Italian opera singer. Neopolitans, like the volcano Vesuvius under which they live and work, are likely to erupt, especially at the *San Carlo*. On January 13, 1913, Claudia sang the first of seventeen performances of *Otello*, and the conductor was Vittorio Gui. In the same San Carlo season, beginning on March 5, Claudia sang three performances as Susanna in *Il Segreto di Susanna* by Wolf-Ferrari, a charming opera in which the "secret" is the concealment, by the heroine from her husband, of the fact that she smokes cigarettes. On March 30, Mascagni's *Isabeau* was produced for the first of a run of eleven performances with Claudia. (She returned to the *Teatro San Carlo* in her prime, but only for one season, in 1930, to sing Violetta, and the long memory of the Neopolitan public produced a wonderful tribute: her name appeared in foot-high letters all over Naples.<sup>47</sup>)

Her performances as Desdemona in Milan's *Dal Verme* had attracted attention at *La*

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<sup>45</sup> The *Gazzetti Musicali di Milano* of October, 1912, described Muzio as a "...gentile and intelligent protagonist."

<sup>46</sup> Richards, loc. cit.

<sup>47</sup> Letter from May Higgins to Claudia Muzio Fan Club, April 19, 1930.

*Scala*, and she was asked to sing the same part for her debut there, which was to take place in December of 1913. (Claudia was engaged to sing this part in Paris the next year and Harry Higgins, the head of the Syndicate which presented opera at Covent Garden, heard Claudia sing in a rehearsal there and asked her to come to London to sing Manon at the Royal Opera House.<sup>48</sup>) On February 10, 1914, in the same *La Scala* season, Claudia took part in the first of two more premieres, the quickly but unjustly forgotten *L'abisso* of the blind Wagnerite, Antonio Smareglia.<sup>49</sup> Then, in April, she had a tremendous success creating Fiora in Montemezzi's *L'Amore dei tre Re*, a debut<sup>50</sup> which caused the Italian critic and opera historian Carlo Gatti to state that she was "...a gift to the musical stage in Italy...we were given a taste of her power and she is on the same level as the best interpreters...this is the announcement that an imminent, great artist has arrived that all the great theatres of the world will fight for."<sup>51</sup>

<sup>48</sup> Douglas, Nigel, op.cit p. 187.

<sup>49</sup> Smareglia (1854-1929) was such a partisan of Wagner that he fought a detractor of *Lohengrin* at its Milan premiere in 1873, the two combatants rolling down four levels of stairs in their fierce confrontation. (The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians, Vol 17 p. 387.)

<sup>50</sup> An un-named reporter, on hearing Muzio in her Metropolitan Opera debut in this same role, said: "Mme. Muzio created Fiora for the La Scala local premiere at Milan and studied her role under the personal supervision of the composer and the librettist. She emphasizes the true Italian intensity and passion of Fiora and does not make of her a pale and pallid figure, buffeted unresistingly by fate, like Melisande. Such an impersonation, no doubt, is mystic and gently appealing, but it is not the creation intended by Benelli and Montemezzi. Mme. Muzio's Fiora is traditional, correct, and irresistibly effective."

<sup>51</sup> Gatti, Carlo, pamphlet *Il Teatro alla Scala nella storia e nell'arte*, Milan, 1963.

## Chapter Three

### Covent Garden, London, 1914 – The First Big Break

The 1914 Summer season at Covent Garden opened, as usual, with Melba as Mimi, in *La Bohème*. Bianca Bellincioni, a popular soprano, was engaged that summer to recreate Puccini's *Manon Lescaut* in which she had had a great success, but was unavailable for either of the two planned performances, on May 6 and June 22. The management had to replace her in both. As a result of his hearing her (see chapter 2) Harry Higgins engaged Claudia, only 25, with comparatively little operatic experience. Claudia was launched in a season including not only Melba and Caruso, but Martinelli, Rosa Raisa (who was making her Covent Garden debut in that season as well), John McCormack and Emmy Destinn. Claudia had sung the other *Manon* by Massenet in her debut at Arezzo and twenty performances of Puccini's version of the Abbé Prevost's tale, with Martinelli, only a year later, at Milan's *Teatro dal Verme*. With what trepidation she returned to the scene of her childhood fantasies we can only guess, but her debut was a respectable one. She read in the "Times" on May 7 that "...the new soprano is in many ways an interesting one with a voice of considerable richness," but the critic was not over-warm. Others of the press corps were much more enthusiastic. "Up to the end of the third act it is no very great exaggeration to say that Mme. Muzio dominated the position and carried the whole action along almost unaided," was the verdict of the "Pall Mall Gazette".

The young debutante gave an interview to the reporter from "The Daily Mail", which appeared two days after her first appearance:

...my father placed me in a musical college at Turin, there is really nothing very exciting to tell except that I studied music --music as well as singing!-- there until it seemed that I really had a chance of a successful opera career, when I went to Milan.... Then on Monday last Mr. Higgins of the Covent Garden Syndicate heard me in a rehearsal of 'Othello' [sic] at the Champs-Elysées theatre in Paris. Suddenly he asked me to sing in 'Manon' in London. It meant leaving Paris the same night, but off we came my father and I; then a little rehearsal; then last night's performance -- when I am glad

I pleased the Londoners, who hear so many good singers. Well, my father and I had arranged to go back to Paris, but today we have been asked to stay on in London. I am to be the heroine in the new "Francesca da Rimini," and perhaps I shall sing in "Boheme" here.<sup>52</sup>

The promised *Francesca da Rimini* never occurred at Covent Garden. But a stroke of luck came between the two *Manons*. Canadian-born Louise Edvina, who preferred to be known by her surname only, was one of that legion of singers whose extremely high reputation in their own time has not outlived them. She was one of the house's favourite interpreters of the role of Floria Tosca, and, as happens, was too ill to sing that part on that occasion. Claudia was asked to stand in and, in one night, Saturday May 16, 1914, established herself as a singer of great emotional depth. Ten days after her first *Manon Lescaut*, she dazzled the sophisticated audience in a role that she was singing in public only for the second time, with none other than Caruso opposite her as Cavaradossi. He and the baritone Scotti, appearing as Scarpia, were ample reason for the audience to ignore all but the most electrifying newcomer.

In a flash, Claudia saw the press, which had been tepid about her debut, become overheated. The "Times", luke-warm after her debut, now headed their report of her performance with "New Tosca at Covent Garden/ Miss Claudia Muzio's Singing" (a double headline signalled an important story.) Declaring her diction clear and her voice admirable in the big climaxes, the critic was reserved about her acting,<sup>53</sup> but the "Sunday Times" disagreed:

...Mademoiselle Muzio proved that she was not only a singer of great resources but an actress of intense dramatic power! Throughout the second act her study of the harrassed heroine was grimly and overwhelmingly convincing, and she made her audience feel with almost gruesome reality La Tosca's agony at the sufferings of her lover in the torture chamber. No less telling than the dramatic ability was the beauty of Mademoiselle Muzio's singing. Her range of tonal values was great enough for every shade of feeling and her voice never failed either in power or variety.<sup>54</sup>

<sup>52</sup> "The Daily Mail", London, Thursday, May 8, 1914, p.22.

<sup>53</sup> "The Times", London, Monday, May 19, 1914, p. 4.

<sup>54</sup> "The Sunday Times", London, Sunday, May 18, 1914, p. 25.

The “Telegraph” declared her a “superb” Tosca, and went on to say:

Those who saw the expression of her varying emotions in the first act, in her conversation with Cavaradossi first and later with Scarpia, who later still saw the hideous fear, the intense horror, and the ultimate triumph over her foe, Scarpia, saw a personal, individual performance upon the highest possible level of stage presentation.<sup>55</sup>

The same reviewer wrote at length about details of her portrayal, taking into account vocal nuance and gesture, and ended up finding the whole thing “wonderful.” The “Morning Post” was unequivocal in its praise and trumpeted, “Now...an artist has come among us that can give greater effect to the histrionic side of the part than any living singer.”<sup>56</sup>

The Syndicate now came up with offers of not only another *Tosca* (22 May), but also Mimi (17 June), originally to be shared by Melba and Bellincioni; Alice Ford in *Falstaff* (21 and 25 July); Desdemona (12 and 20 June, 14 July), again shared with Melba, and Margherita in a revival of a remarkable production of Boito's *Mefistofele* (26 June, 4 and 8 July) with sets by Leon Bakst, Diaghilev's designer. There were three repeats of this. John McCormack was Faust and the great Polish bass Adamo Didur sang the title role. Rosa Raisa took the role of Helen. Claudia was, however, able to escape to Paris, where she sang a single performance (May 29) with the Boston Opera Company at the Theatre des Champs Elysées. The opera was Leoncavallo's *I Pagliacci*, which she had sung in Milan the year before. It was to become an old friend. The role of Nedda was already one of her favourites, with its mixture of lyric and dramatic vocal challenges and its opportunities for histrionics. This Paris performance brought her to the attention of American opera personalities.

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<sup>55</sup> “The Daily Telegraph”, London, Monday, May 18, 1914, p. 17.

<sup>56</sup> “The Morning Post”, London, Monday, May 18, 1914, p. 5.

Reports of this soprano, with the ability to act as well as to sing, filtered back to New York, and the wheels began to turn for her eventual invitation to the Mecca of all operatic aspirants - The Metropolitan Opera House in Manhattan.

Meanwhile, returning to London in time for *Otello* on June 12, Claudia faced the possibility that her Desdemona would be unfavourably compared to that of Nellie Melba. The Australian had sung the role in the first performance of the opera that season and left for Australia because of a family matter, and the remaining three repeats went to Claudia. She needn't have been concerned, for the *Musical Times* not only approved of her performance, but also referred to her as the "fortunate discovery" of the Syndicate.

The "Evening Standard" was more generous:

With every fresh appearance in public the clever young artist deepens the impression her acting and singing made when she first took opera-goers by surprise. She is certainly the greatest acquisition the Syndicate have secured for years...Her versatility is remarkable, and though it is perhaps early days to speak of the place she is likely to occupy in operatic history, it may at least be said with confidence that she will never do anything badly. Last night she sang and acted with real charm and pathos, while in the more dramatic moments of the opera she never failed to rise to the occasion.<sup>57</sup>

At the part of Mimi in *La Boheme*, Claudia was allowed only one shot, on June 17, while Melba was in Australia. Claire Dux, the Polish soprano who only the year before had given Covent Garden its first Sophie in *Der Rosenkavalier*, had been scheduled to sing Mimi but fell ill. Caruso was Rodolfo and New Zealander Rosina Buckman was Musetta. The first of Claudia's recordings, made three years prior to this performance by Edison's Gramophone Company, contains Mimi's first act aria *Si, mi chiamano Mimi*, and it bears out the impression of a syllabic style of singing, not very concerned with legato and long lines. The youthful charm she doubtless brought to the role is apparent, but so is her inexperience. This offering went unnoticed in the

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<sup>57</sup> "The Evening Standard", London, Saturday, June 13, 1914, p. 3.

London press, but the performances of Boito's rarely-heard *Mefistofele* created excitement in the papers, not least because of its stellar cast and the presence of another Covent Garden novice in the person of Rosa Raisa, née Burchstein, who later in that same year would cause a sensation as Verdi's *Aïda* in Chicago. In less than a decade, she and Claudia would become rivals there. The presence of John McCormack and the bass Adamo Didur and the Bakst sets were enough to divert attention from all but the strongest female members of the cast, but Raisa and Claudia were too prominent to be ignored, and the critics' reaction to the prison scene focused on Claudia's by-now-recognised ability to move audiences.

Verdi's *Falstaff* was revived on July 21, and that performance and one four days later were to end Claudia's connection with the theatre which had been her playground for much of her impressionable childhood. The reviews were mixed for her as Alice Ford and much of the critical homage was paid to Scotti in the role of the protagonist. The other women in the cast were Zepilli (who had also studied in Milan with Elettra Calery-Viviani), Hume and Kirkby Lunn and all, including Claudia, were praised for the quick timing of their comedy. Claudia was singled out by the *Musical Times* as a "charming Alice", and Victor Gollancz, in his *Journey Towards Music* of 1964, states that he was there for one of the two performances and the house was half-empty. He described Claudia as "...an adorable Alice."<sup>58</sup> Many commentators looked forward to her being there "next season," unaware that that would not be until 1919, for Covent Garden was closed by the Great War, and by then Claudia had moved on to a destiny across the Atlantic.

Claudia spent the rest of 1914 in Italy, where, from November 21, she sang in Turin in eleven performances of *Manon Lescaut*. Also at the *Teatro Regio* in Turin, she sang, in Italian, the role of Sieglinde in *Die Walküre* or, as it appears in the programme, *La Walkiria*. There were twelve performances. This marked a startling

<sup>58</sup> Gollancz, Victor, *Journey Towards Music*. London: Gollancz, 1964, p. 76.

departure from the repertoire she had drawn on thus far in her career. Wagner was not common in Italian opera houses and was seldom sung in its original language, even as late as the 1950s, in that country. She had a great success in this role, so much so that in his autobiography the conductor Panizza said that she was "...a revelation in the part of Siglinda (sic)." Panizza later regretted that he had not taken *La Walkiria* with Claudia on tour in Italy and to Buenos Aires, where they were beginning to play Wagner operas at the *Teatro Colón*.<sup>59</sup>

Claudia left Europe to make her first professional American appearance in Havana but only after another triumphant debut, this time in Florence's *Teatro Politeama*, playing Puccini's *Manon* on February 25, 1915. The tenor was Amadeo Bassi and the conductor was Edoardo Mascheroni.<sup>60</sup> Despite the danger of submarines she travelled to Havana, where on April 24 she sang Nedda in *I Pagliacci* with Giovanni Zenatello and Tita Ruffo; *Tosca* on April 27 with Giuseppe de Luca; *Otello* on May 6 with Zenatello and Ruffo (Fernando de Luca in later performances) under Tullio Serafin's baton; Mimi, in *La Boheme*, on May 11, with Zenatello and Ruffo; and Micaela in *Carmen*, with Maria Gay and Ruffo, again with Serafin at the helm. On May 28 there was a performance of *Carmen* in the Havana stadium with Gay and Zenatello, in the days when outdoor performances were beginning to appeal to the public. The Havana tour was a tremendous undertaking for the impresarios of the *Teatro Nacional*. It was doomed to lose money, with Caruso getting near his Mexican record of US\$15,000 a performance and the others in the company receiving huge amounts. Maria Gay, who was only two years married to the tenor Giuseppe Zenatello, reported to the press upon her return to New York in June of 1915:

If the operatic venture in Havana was not the complete success which it might have been, it was because of the exceedingly poor administration. The public demonstrated its interest and approval of the work of the company and of the principals by exceedingly liberal attendance...The daily newspaper critics were thoroughly friendly and, although it is true that the prices were high, the public was most generous in

<sup>59</sup> Panizza, Hector, *Half a Century of Musical Life*, Buenos Aires, 1952, in Arnosi, loc. cit.

<sup>60</sup> *Musical America*, 12 May 1915, p. 6.

attendance and also in its preliminary guarantee of the undertaking. The figures will show that there was ample support if the season had been conducted on anything like a business basis. The conductor, Serafin, was a big success. My husband and I received all the money due us with the exception of \$1400. This represented the last amount due us and was in the form of a check. When we presented it at the bank we found there were no funds there to meet it.<sup>61</sup>

Claudia was praised in the role of Micaela. "La Prensa", the chief Havana newspaper, on May 14 carried this comment:

What a talent is this girl! Even if she were not so beautiful the people would admire her just the same. One of the most stupendous receptions, such as never before witnessed in Havana, was received by Claudia Muzio after she sang the aria of the third act; and she triumphed not only as a great singer, but also as an eminent actress.<sup>62</sup>

Claudia had the summer to herself to learn new roles and to be with her parents, who had bought a house at 174 Madison Avenue, in Flushing, New York, on Long Island.<sup>63</sup> She somehow reached them there despite the dangers of sea travel. In any case, it is clear that she was in New York on June 12, as "Musical America" ran a story on her containing an interview which she gave them in their office, and what's more they reported that she was "...accompanied by her father."<sup>64</sup> By the end of June the young soprano was back in Italy. She was able to get passage on the SS. Dante Alighieri and went to stay in Turin with relatives.

In August, a telegram arrived. It said:

*Claudia Muzio, Turin*

*Would you consent to offer your worthy co-operation for the season I am going to start at Dal Verme Theatre, Milano, for the benefit 'Theatrical Family,' September, giving opera "Tosca"? Many among the best lyric artists co-operate with me in this brotherly patriotic manifestation. Hoping very much for your consent, I put myself at your disposition if you want to read "Tosca" with me. Many thanks and distinguished regards.* Arturo Toscanini<sup>65</sup>

Claudia ended up doing *I Pagliacci* as well. Two performances in Turin starring

<sup>61</sup> *Musical Courier*, 19 June, 1915, p. 10.

<sup>62</sup> *La Prensa* quoted in *Musical Courier*, loc. cit.

<sup>63</sup> Obituary of Carlo Muzio, "The New York Times", August 3, 1917, p. 25.

<sup>64</sup> *Musical America*, 26 June, 1915, p. 13.

<sup>65</sup> *Musical Courier*, 30 September, 1915, p. 3.

Claudia in the role of Nedda (15 and 23 September, 1915) made operatic history. Toscanini, who was accustomed to making musical history, even acknowledged that these performances were notable and that he found Claudia remarkable. But the historic nature of the dates involved the fact that Caruso was in the cast as well and these were to be his last performances in his homeland until he returned, ready for death, in 1921. In less portentous circumstances Claudia and Caruso were to be reunited many times in this work, and she sang Nedda on countless other occasions. In October and November, Claudia sang 10 performances of *Tosca* at the Dal Verme. As a kind of conducting *tour de force*, on October 17, in one day, Toscanini conducted three operas: *La Traviata*, *Madame Sans-Gêne* and *Tosca*. Taking part were Claudia, Rosina Storchio, Alessandro Bonci, Ester Mazzoleni, Tito Schipa and Caruso. Claudia's inclusion in this roster further confirmed that she was by then included in the elite of opera singers.<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> Sartori, Claudio, "The Scala under Toscanini", in *The Opera Bedside Book*, ed. Harold Rosenthal, London: Victor Gollancz, 1965, p.264.

## Chapter Four

### The First Years at the Metropolitan, New York, 1916-17

When Claudia was a young girl and being shunted across the ocean between New York and London, the Italian actress Eleanora Duse was appearing in those cities. Duse was, by the time Claudia was born, the only serious rival of the French actress Sara Bernhardt. She made her first tour of America in 1893. Claudia has more than once been compared with Duse, and indeed was referred to as “the Duse of Song” on more than one occasion. Duse made tours of England in 1895 and of America in 1896, as did Bernhardt. In 1898 she appeared in Paris, in 1902 in New York and in 1905 in London. It seems likely that Claudia saw Eleanora Duse at work. Carlo might have been stage-managing for some of Duse's performances in which case she was surely backstage at rehearsals.

Many who heard Claudia felt that her acting was her strong point, not her singing. The evidence on recordings is that her singing was of the highest order - vocal acting that went beyond mere vocalisation to the depths of whatever text was being sung.

Giulio Gatti-Casazza (who is often referred to as, simply, ‘Gatti’), the general manager of the Metropolitan Opera Company of New York, was present at Brescia when Claudia sang in the Teatro Grande's 1916 production of Giordano's *Madame Sans-Gene*, an opera she sang later in the year at the Casino, San Pellegrino.<sup>67</sup> Gatti was tall, charming and the wielder of absolute power at the Manhattan house. He had successfully faced down opposition from Oscar Hammerstein and had the full support of Otto Kahn, the chairman of the Metropolitan's Board of Directors. The impression Claudia made on this demigod of promoters was sufficient for him to invite her to sing in New York, although his commitment did not stretch to the offer of a date.

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<sup>67</sup> “Claudia Muzio nel XXXanniversario della morte,” in *Mondo Lirico*, iv/ii, May, 1966, p. 6.

Her career in Italy proceeded, and in all she added three new roles to her repertory: the aforementioned Giordano opera, Catalani's *Loreley* - the music of which she later declared was her favourite - at the *Carlo Felice de Genova*, and *Francesca da Rimini* (Zandonai) in Pisa, which she never sang again. She also played Tosca in the Donizetti Theatre in Bergamo. Gatti returned to New York to find chaos in his soprano department at the Met. Lucrezia Bori had undergone throat surgery and Emmy Destinn was incarcerated in her native Czechoslovakia for sedition. Geraldine Farrar was ill. Toscanini had resigned as musical director the year before and there was a new artistic era dawning at the young house, which had only been opened six years before Claudia was born.<sup>68</sup> Gatti telegraphed Claudia to come at once to New York for her debut. It was announced after she arrived that she would sing the role of Floria Tosca on December 4.<sup>69</sup>

One only has to read the novels of Edith Wharton, set at this time, and written by a woman who was both rich and a member of the New York elite, to know that New York society had a pretty high opinion of itself and the monetary resources to back up its assumptions. It was an era characterised by privilege and snobbery and part of that snobbery was played out at the "Met." Whether or not the wealthy patriarchs of New York, their wives and daughters resplendent in precious stones which reflected the stage lighting, were actually enjoying the artistic best from the boxes and stalls, was never an issue. They were convinced that money could buy the best and the best was on display before them. It was not for naught that the entire operatic experience in the house acquired the name 'golden horseshoe.' The horse and its shoes were indeed made of gold. Even the curtain was gold.

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<sup>68</sup> Toscanini's reign at the Metropolitan was not universally respected. Emma Eames, one of the accepted "golden age" sopranos, hated the prospect of this regime and urged Pierpont Morgan, according to her own account in her biography (*Some Memories and Reflections*, New York: D. Appleton & Co., 1927, pp. 293-95), to block the appointment not only of Toscanini but of Gatti-Casazza as well. She justified her campaign by the assertion that in Italian Theatres the artists were treated "...like dogs" and were, in theatrical slang, actually referred to as *cane* (dogs).

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.* p.189.

Maria Jeritza, the Czech soprano described, in her autobiography, what it was like to look out on the vast audience from the stage:

The sheer mass of the audience is always impressive; and no singer could ask for a public more generously appreciative and attentive. Then, too there is a most impressive display of beauty, of rich gowns and jewels in the 'Golden Horseshoe'<sup>70</sup>

Discounting the loss of Bori and Destinn, the soprano roster at the Metropolitan was still an intimidating list: Frances Alda (a New Zealander married to the general manager), Maria Barrientos, Johanna Gadski, and, even though Destinn and Bori had departed, the inevitable comparisons with them and with the recent appearances by Melba, Tetrizzini, and other 'greats' awaited any newcomer. It was, as far as Claudia's career was concerned, the most important and potentially damaging engagement she would ever have. A success, and she would become a force to be reckoned with; a failure could send her scurrying back to Italy with no entrée to the rewards an American career held.

She arrived in New York on the French liner *Rochambeau* on November 23 - eleven days before her debut,<sup>71</sup> preceded by much publicity. She was warmly welcomed by Antonio Scotti,<sup>72</sup> who was to play Scarpia in the Metropolitan production. Carlo accompanied his daughter. The management and staff were well acquainted with the girl who had played backstage for so many seasons, and Gatti had secured a release from the Geneva opera for Carlo and Giovanna so that the Muzio family could travel to New York together.<sup>73</sup> Newspapermen on the spot began to approach the young woman and ask "Do you remember me?" and to reminisce with her "You were just a girl with long curls when I saw you last." "You were studying to be a harpist then."

<sup>70</sup> Jeritza, Maria, *Sunlight and Song*, New York: D. Appleton & Co., 1924, p.142.

<sup>71</sup> "The New York Times", November 24, 1916, p. 5.

<sup>72</sup> Antonio Scotti (b. Naples 1866, d. Naples 1936), principal baritone at the met for 35 years. Maria Jeritza thought him the best Scarpia the world had at the time.

<sup>73</sup> "The New York Times," loc. cit.

The young singer answered coolly, "I've changed my mind."<sup>74</sup>

Monday night audiences at the Met were notoriously hard to please. An air of dread must have invaded the anticipation with which Claudia and her parents faced the dawning of December 4. In Harriet Brower's interview with Claudia, we have a description of the young debutante's preparation regime:

I work regularly every morning on vocal technic [sic]. Not necessarily a whole hour at a stretch, as some do; I give practically my whole day to study, so that I can make frequent short pauses in technical practice...I never use the notes or score when going over a part in which I have appeared, for I know them absolutely, so there is no occasion to use the notes.<sup>75</sup>

We know from later descriptions of Claudia's intense preparations on the day of a performance that she usually arrived at the theatre about four hours before the curtain went up and tried on her costumes, kept to herself in the dressing room, and never took any food until after the performance. Prior to going onstage, she usually drank a glass of port, which relaxed her and perhaps lubricated her vocal chords. By 1916 she had refined this routine, which worked best for her and allowed her to completely submerge her own personality in the character of the evening's heroine

The family needn't have worried. On Tuesday, December 5, in the "Herald", the headline was "Miss Muzio Makes Opera Debut Here; She Weeps for Joy as Audience Cheers Her." She was, strange to say, the first Italian who had ever appeared there in the role, and the youngest prima donna singing at the Metropolitan that season. The Italians in the audience swooped upon her dressing room declaring that she was "...the greatest Tosca since Ternina."<sup>76</sup> The papers inevitably compared her with Farrar, who was the incumbent Tosca (claims on parts by powerful and popular sopranos existed here as well as at Covent Garden), but not unfavourably by any

<sup>74</sup> Paul Morris, "Leaves New York as Child, Returns as Prima Donna", "New York Herald", Sunday, December 3, 1916, sec. 2, p.1.

<sup>75</sup> Brower, op.cit. loc.cit.

<sup>76</sup> Milka Ternina (1863-1941) was Croatian and had been the first Tosca at both Covent Garden (1900) and the Metropolitan (1901.)

means. Her acting was praised, as was her voice and her beauty. The response of the audience after Act Two was so great that the "Herald" reviewer was prompted by its warmth and length to describe it as the greatest response to a Met debut in many years. He went on:

Not in a decade has a new Italian soprano had such success at a first performance here as Miss Claudia Muzio had last night when she sang for the first time in America in "Tosca" at the Metropolitan. She was the first Italian to sing the role in that house. Miss Muzio's Tosca was in many respects the most striking portrayal seen in New York in years. The singer is strikingly beautiful. Also she has the bearing that the part requires and she is a remarkable actress. She put thrills into the role that were unknown here. Without a doubt she will be a valuable asset to the Metropolitan this season when singers of Italian roles are scarce. Her facial expression, the use of her hands, the intensity of her acting, all are admirable.<sup>77</sup>

The other New York papers were full of praise and many other critics commented on the use of her hands, her facial expressions able to convey revulsion in act two, her eyes, the way she moved and not least her voice. In comparing her with her predecessors in the part, the "Evening Sun" went so far as to say:

The very stage held pictures of German (sic) Terina's great creation of the Roman singer, pictures too of the American beauties, Eames and Farrar. But Muzio really was *Tosca*. Youth, that gem above rubies, shone like a Kohinoor in her modest crown. The drama, for sheer realism or actuality, had not been so visualized in years before, and the singing of the great song of *Tosca's* life for art's sake - ever so gently, so tenderly - warmed a social Monday house, the most critical audience in the world, to a demonstration of handclapping loud and long from all parts of a packed theatre.<sup>78</sup>

Claudia herself said, "I am overwhelmed. I don't know what to say. When I first came out on the stage I felt that the audience was sympathetic. It took away all stage fright at the start. I am glad to be the first Italian singer to appear as Tosca at the Metropolitan."<sup>79</sup> Even though the Scarpia and the Cavaradossi (Caruso) were both favourites at the Met, they were for the most part ignored on this occasion, except for

<sup>77</sup> "The New York Herald", Tuesday, December 5, 1916, p. 2.

<sup>78</sup> "The New York Evening Sun", Tuesday, December 5, 1916, p. 25.

<sup>79</sup> Paul Morris, "The New York Herald", Wednesday, December 6, 1916, p. 16.

the “New York Times” critic who said Caruso was 'considerate' of the newcomer, and the *Musical Courier* whose critic took the opportunity to chastise Caruso for some horseplay before his execution. This critic also asked, quite rightly, "why did Tosca change her gown for the last act? Is she not supposed to go to the St. Angelo Castle directly from the Palazzo Farnese of Act II?" It would appear that Claudia made an error of judgement in the matter of costumes. The “Morning Telegraph” concentrated on her dramatic sense, flatly stating “...no finer acting has ever been seen on the Metropolitan stage...”<sup>80</sup> Claudia sang ten performances of *Tosca* that season, so it would seem that she pleased the management as well as the patrons of the charmed half-circle.

On the Friday before Christmas, Claudia sang in *I Pagliacci* with Caruso and Amato.<sup>81</sup> She was also the first Italian Nedda in New York in many years. Christmas, which Claudia was able to spend on Long Island with Carlo and Giovanna, was a time of celebration. There was ample reason for jubilation. She had been engaged to open the new season in 1917 in *Aïda* with Caruso as Radames. This honour, coming so soon, was a measure of the esteem in which both the public and the management at the Metropolitan already held the new prima donna. There were signals of approval at the Metropolitan. Being offered the opening night of a new season was, for a prima donna, one of the highest marks of approval and the pairing with Caruso was another. The two went together, as in the years up until his death in 1921 Caruso always opened the season. In her time at the Metropolitan, Claudia was partnered by the great tenor more often than any of her rivals. In that first season she sang Manon Lescaut and Nedda with him as well as *Tosca* and *Aïda*. The company went on tour to Philadelphia and Atlanta, where she was teamed again with Caruso in *Pagliacci* and *Tosca*. The opening night of the 1917-18 season brought the promised reward in *Aïda* with him and in that season she repeated all of the operas which she

<sup>80</sup> “The Morning Telegraph”, Tuesday, December 5, 1916, p. 9.

<sup>81</sup> Pasquale Amato (b. Naples 1878, d. New York 1942), baritone, acclaimed for his interpretations as Scarpia and other roles, retired in 1924.

had sung with him after her debut and introduced two more: Meyerbeer's *Le Prophète* and Montemezzi's *L'Amore dei Tre Re*. When she was not singing with Caruso, more often than not she appeared opposite Martinelli.

Almost immediately after the end of the 1916-1917 Met season, Claudia was in the recording studio. Her contract with Pathé Frères called for an initial fourteen recordings of arias and songs, which were issued that year. Claudia committed to the thick Pathé discs arias from *Manon Lescaut*, *Tosca*, *Il Trovatore*, *I Pagliacci*, *La Gioconda*, *Otello*, *Mignon*, *Madama Butterfly*, *Aida*, *La Bohème*, *Madame Sans-Gêne*, *Mefistofele*, *La Wally*, *La Forza del Destino*, and *Il Segreto di Susanna*. In addition there were songs by Olivier-Mercantini and Giordano. The youth that 'shone like a Kohinoor,' to reiterate her New York review, emanates from all of these recordings. So does the ability to colour and shape a phrase and the approaching musical maturity that was to single her out as a soprano upon whom lasting greatness would fall.

Carlo's sixty-ninth birthday on May 31 that year was to be his last. Father and daughter posed for a snapshot on the lawn of the Flushing house (it was later published in a magazine). Carlo had aged. By now the Muzio family was settled together in Flushing, and Claudia was perhaps ever afterwards grateful for that summer of 1917, for Carlo, the jovial, good-humoured and well-known stage manager, died of sunstroke on August 2, 1917. She must have been thankful that Carlo had seen her Metropolitan debut,<sup>82</sup> which must have seemed to him to be the Kohinoor in his own crown.

Later in her life, Claudia spoke adoringly of her father. Her mother survived Carlo by some twenty years or more. Giovanna became her daughter's constant companion. As

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<sup>82</sup> In an interview in the "San Francisco Examiner", she said as much, "One of the happiest memories of my life is that my father lived to hear me sing in the Metropolitan Opera Company in New York, where I made my debut in 1916. He died during my first season."

we know, Giovanna was the complete antithesis of her husband. Tall and from now on dressed always in black, she presented to the world a formidable countenance, which did not encourage intimacy or even acquaintance. She hardly spoke except to her daughter and seemed to be a female Svengali in the eyes of the casual observer. Deeply superstitious, her habit of sprinkling holy water on the stage before Claudia's appearances resulted more than once in her falling into the orchestra.<sup>83</sup>

The first of the two men who were to become drains on Claudia's finances and emotions came into her life almost immediately. Impresarios and managements at this time had somewhat shady reputations, and out of the death of her father, one of the more ruthless types seized an opportunity to manage Claudia's business affairs and insinuate himself into her life as almost certainly her first romantic interest. Ottavio Scotto, a Ligurian and self-styled impresario, who would eventually take over the managing of tours for the South American *stagioni*, which at this time were organised by Walter Mocchi, introduced himself to the two women after Carlo died. He saw that the young prima donna was vulnerable, her mother helpless to act for her. He was able to persuade them both to let him have control of Claudia's career. It was a shrewd move on his part.<sup>84</sup>

Meanwhile, rehearsals claimed her, except for a concert appearance in Detroit on October 16. It was her American concert debut, and by today's standards it must have been a curious event. The accompaniment was partly provided by a young American girl, Mildred Dilling, described in the "Detroit Journal" as "a player upon the harp." The conductor Gennaro Papi, who the same reporter called "...the most blasé accompanist who ever dodged a fish-tail train," also shared the stage and at one point

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<sup>83</sup> Davis, *op. cit.*, p. 24.

<sup>84</sup> Grandi Voce alla Scala, ed. Massimo Baldini, vol. No. 21, p.8

“...forsook the piano for the melodeon.”<sup>85</sup> The next day all of the artists were treated to a tour of the Ford factory at Dearborn, and the press photograph shows the soprano and her mother looking unsurprisingly grim. The provincial nature of the entire undertaking, to women as travelled as they were, must have amused them.

The 1917 Metropolitan season opened on November 4, starring Claudia and Caruso as planned. From then until April she buried herself in work, appearing exclusively with the Metropolitan Opera Company, either in the House on 39th Street or in Philadelphia, Boston, or Brooklyn. She sang 36 performances in the space of 25 weeks. All of the operas she had performed in her first season were repeated. Added to them were *La Bohème* and *Il Trovatore*, to give some idea of the varied demands on her vocally. From lyric roles such as Mimi, through the agile lyric-dramatic parts of Nedda and Manon Lescaut, to the straight dramatic parts of Verdi, Claudia marched with assurance. One of the few French roles she ever undertook was Berthe in Meyerbeer's *Le Prophète*. The fact that Claudia sang Berthe attests to her versatility. Berthe is a role that in our own time one would associate with Joan Sutherland or June Anderson, both *spinto* singers. Her French, as recorded examples show, was faultless.

When that, her most successful season at the Met, was over, the singer was back in the recording studio for Pathé for another long and strenuous series of arias and songs. This time the operas represented included *La Traviata*, and she chose the letter scene from Act III (minus the actual reading of the letter; she recorded it again in 1935 with the reading.) Some surprises include Rossini's *Selva opaca* from *Guglielmo Tell*; Musetta's Waltz from *La Bohème* and Verdi's *Ernani! Ernani, involami*, from *Ernani*. Songs are included by Delibes, Sanderson, Braga, Roxas, and Arturo Buzzi-Peccia, whose opera *La Forza d'amore* had received its world premiere

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<sup>85</sup> Holmes, Raplp F., *Claudia Muzio gets Big Reception at American Concert Debut Here*, in the “Detroit Journal”, October 17, 1917. The reporter was quite enchanted with Miss Dilling: “She has a blonde presence that pictures well with a golden harp...”

under Toscanini in 1897, but who is remembered mainly for a handful of songs such as *Baciarmi*, recorded here.<sup>86</sup>

The University Choral Union, thirty-nine seasons old, began presenting a May Festival (in imitation of the Florentine Maggio Musicale) in 1915 in Hill Auditorium, on the campus of the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor. The Chicago Symphony was in residence there for a month and many concerts and recitals by famous musicians were the attraction. On May 17, 1918, in the fourth May Festival, Claudia sang with the orchestra under the conductor Frederick Stock. *Depuis le jour* and *Suicidio* as well as *Bird's Song* (sic) from *Pagliacci*, were interspersed among orchestral selections by Schumann, McDowell, Dukas and Elgar.

In the summer of 1918 Claudia appeared at the Ravinia Festival, near Chicago, singing in twelve different operas. This served to bring her to the attention of the Chicago opera-going public and planted the seeds of her later association with the Chicago Opera Company. Having done most of the twelve roles before, she would undertake this strenuous season, which ran from the 29th of June to the 29th of August, without having to learn large amounts of new music, but there were 32 appearances in the space of eight weeks. The roles of Mimi, Manon, Aïda, Leonora (*Il Trovatore*) Fiora, Santuzza, and Susanna (*Il segreto...*), Nedda, Floria Tosca and Marguerite were all revivals for her, but she added, at Ravinia, Puccini's *Madama Butterfly*. Performances of the latter opera are historic now not only because they were Claudia's first in the part, but also because they marked the stage debut, in the silent role of the child Trouble, of one of the giants of the world of the cinema - Orson Welles, eight years old.<sup>87</sup> Maliella in Wolf-Ferrari's *I gioielli di Madonna*, an opera already well-loved by the Chicago public who had seen its American premiere

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<sup>86</sup> Buzzi-Peccia is also remembered as one of New York's finest vocal instructors whose most illustrious student was Alma Gluck. Gluck's recording of "Carry Me Back to Old Virginny" was the first RCA million-seller.

<sup>87</sup> Website: "The Theatre of Orson Welles," <http://www.bway.net/~nipper/page 2.html>

in 1912, was the last new role for Claudia to learn.

From the close of the Ravinia Festival to the opening of the next Metropolitan season, she did not have much time for reflection. On October 15, in Detroit, Claudia, together with Caruso and Amato, appeared in a production of *I Pagliacci* described as 'The greatest musical event in Detroit's history.' This had begun as a concert planned by a well-heeled impresario, but Caruso didn't particularly want to do it, forcing the price upwards to \$7000 for himself, then, finally, when this posed no problem, demanding that a full production of the opera be mounted. The audience numbered 5000, Giorgio Polacco conducted the amateur orchestra and chorus, and it was entirely successful.<sup>88</sup>

There had been no time after Carlo's sudden death to miss him properly, and now she felt the full impact of his loss and it began to dawn on her what being responsible for her mother would mean. Giovanna was no longer participating in the chorus at the Metropolitan and would be a dependent. This turn of events, coming after so many heady successes, had a sobering effect on Claudia as she approached her thirtieth year. Moreover, the extravagant Ottavio was now both manager and lover<sup>89</sup> - a combination which was eventually to devastate her.

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<sup>88</sup> Scott, Michael, The Great Caruso. London: Hamish Hamilton, 1988, p. 165

<sup>89</sup> This is borne out the fact that Scotto was often referred to as her husband.

## Chapter Five

### The Metropolitan Seasons of 1918–19; Claudia Conquers South America

Despite the public and critical acclaim, which took him very much by surprise, Metropolitan Opera Company General Manager Gatti does not appear to have been a great advocate of his new star. Perhaps he had intended to employ her only until Farrar and Destinn, the one ill and the other incarcerated in Poland, were able to return to the company, and then drop her unceremoniously, but her popularity in those first years thwarted his plans. The clamour over Claudia had the opposite effect - she was contracted to do more roles than ever before and in fact was the first choice for one of the most important premières to be handed to the Met during Gatti's reign - Puccini's *Trittico*. Claudia gave 32 performances in 1918-19 at the Metropolitan, beginning with *Aida* on November 13. In April, in Philadelphia, she sang a Mimi opposite Caruso's Rodolfo, the tenor's last time in the role, though at the time he did not know that.<sup>90</sup> The last performance with the company was in Atlanta on April 23, the opera, again, *Aida*.

The season's repertoire had been the same as that of the previous season except that on December 14, 1918, Claudia created the role of Giorgetta in Puccini's *Il Tabarro*, one third of the composer's long-gestating *Il Trittico*. The other operas, *Suor Angelica* and *Gianni Schicchi* starred Geraldine Farrar, returning after a throat operation, and Florence Easton, respectively. Puccini's biographer Stanley Jackson's account of the première names *Gianni Schicchi* as the hit of the evening, and indeed it was this opera's famous aria, *O mio babbino caro*, which caused such a demand for an encore that the house rule against them was relaxed for once.<sup>91</sup> Claudia's interpretation of the adulterous Giorgetta was hailed in the press as a triumph. The role was, like Nedda, the kind of heroine she played best and the music was more

<sup>90</sup> Scott, Michael *The Great Caruso*. p. 169.

<sup>91</sup> Jackson, Stanley, *Monsieur Butterfly, the Story of Puccini*. London: W. H. Allen, 1974, pp. 224-25.

suited for her voice than would have been the daughter, Lauretta, in *Schicchi*. *Il Tabarro's* love triangle consists of Michele, his wife Giorgetta, and her lover Luigi, who is murdered by Michele and covered with the *tabarro* (overcoat) of the title until Giorgetta appears for a rendez-vous and Michele uncovers the body and hurls her on it. In *The Operas of Puccini*, William Ashbrook, who interviewed people who had seen the original Metropolitan production, reports that 's acting produced a powerful impression, especially her scream when the body is revealed, and Gatti, in a cable to Puccini, pronounced her "incomparable." Farrar, on the other hand, was considered a disappointment in *Suor Angelica*.<sup>92</sup>

It was two nights after Claudia opened in this Metropolitan season that the tide of fortune began to turn against her there. The previously unknown Rosa Ponselle arrived and caused a sensation in *La Forza del Destino*. It was a role Claudia had expected to have offered her. Ponselle's voice was described as "vocal gold" and proved to be so. Even though Ponselle was an admirer of Claudia's, this rivalry was to cause her much anguish. Ponselle's voice was truly magnificent and she was as beautiful and versatile as Claudia, though perhaps not as good an actress. Having been born in America of Italian heritage, she was naturally more at home with the press and was generally considered to be convivial, a label that was never applied outside her own intimate circle to Claudia. Most importantly, Ponselle was Gatti's darling, so much so that he not only gave her *La Forza...* but tried to wrest Giorgetta away from Claudia and bestow it upon his new find, even to the point of furtively rehearsing Ponselle in the role for seven days and nights.<sup>93</sup> Ponselle charmed the public and critics alike and sang in many Metropolitan seasons until she retired prematurely in 1936. It is ironic that Claudia died the same year her rival took up a life of retirement, an idea that was far from Claudia's mind.

<sup>92</sup> Ashbrook, William, *The Operas of Puccini*. London: Cassell, 1968. p. 175.

<sup>93</sup> James Drake, *Rosa Ponselle*. Portland: Amadeus Press, pp. 37-38.

Concerts were to become a frequent feature of Claudia's public life, and while at the Metropolitan she took part in gala performances and concerts as a member of the company. For example, in March, 1918, she appeared with Martinelli in the third act of *Aida* and with Caruso and De Luca in the second act of *Pagliacci*; and later, in April, she joined Martinelli, De Luca, Alda, Amato and other artists in a benefit concert for Italian soldiers and their families who had been devastated by the war. In all she took part in eight galas and thirteen concerts in the seven seasons she was in New York.

After the Metropolitan season closed in April of 1919, Claudia made her first appearances in South American opera houses, where she was to become known as "*La Única*." (This epithet was the result of a letter which the mezzo soprano Gabriella Besanzoni addressed simply: *Claudia Muzio, La Única* in 1926, and which found its way to her in Rio).<sup>94</sup>

The *Teatro Colón* in Buenos Aires was establishing itself as a major theatre by inviting some of the best Italian singers in the world to form a company each season with the conductor Tullio Serafin.

Serafin's career was distinguished partly because of its sheer length and breadth. He was born in 1878 and died in 1968. Off and on from 1910 to 1917 he was principal conductor at *La Scala* and had worked with Claudia in *L'amore dei tre re* in 1913, when she created the role of Fiora. From 1924 to 1934 he was at the Metropolitan, conducting, besides other first performances, the Metropolitan's first *Turandot*.<sup>95</sup> At the *Colón* in 1919 he conducted all of the operas in which Claudia appeared save one. They opened together in *Tosca* June 28, in *Aida* July 9, *Mefistofele* (Boito) July 22, with Claudia singing both Helen and Margarethe; in *Madame Sans-Gêne* August 5,

<sup>94</sup> *Grandi voci alla Scala*, No 21, p. 8.

<sup>95</sup> Douglas, op. cit., p. 209.

and *Bohème* August 11. Only *Manon Lescaut* was performed without him that season.

In all Claudia sang thirty-seven performances at the *Colón* between June 18 and September 28 and one gala performance of the first act of *I Pagliacci* on September 10. Amongst the Italian community of Buenos Aires she was welcomed instantly, and, as the season progressed, it was clear that the Argentinians adored her. In *Tosca*, her tenor was a very young Beniamino Gigli, and in his *Memoirs* he describes the opening night:

...That night, I must confess, I spent an unusually long time before the looking-glass. I studied my appearance from every angle...Claudia Muzio, the young soprano who was to be my partner, was very beautiful. I felt myself growing self-conscious and shy; but there was nothing I could do about it, except remind myself of what Puccini had said 'People won't notice the figure when they hear the voice.'<sup>96</sup>

*Tosca*, though, was a great triumph for both tenor and soprano, although the critic of "*La Razón*" commented liberally on the *bella figura* of the evening's heroine.<sup>97</sup>

Claudia and the other members of the Italian company returned year after year to this house. They were also engaged in Rio, Montevideo and São Paulo. In her first season, for instance, Claudia wedged a debut in *Madame San-Gène* at the *Teatro Solis* in Montevideo (September 13) between performances of *Bohème* in Buenos Aires. In Montevideo she also appeared as Mimi, *Tosca* (with Gigli) and as *Aida* that season.

At this point in her life, Claudia was doing very well financially. Her entourage consisted of her mother, Scotto, and a maid and secretary. All their expenses came out of her fees, as was the customary agreement. Her accumulated profits were

<sup>96</sup> Gigli, Beniamino, tr. Darina Silone, *The Memoirs of Beniamino Gigli*. London: Cassell & Co., Ltd., 1957, pp. 102-105.

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*

unfortunately placed in the dubious trust of Scotto. She stayed in the best hotels and maintained the residence at Flushing, New York. At that time income tax for high earners was not punitive in the United States, and performers of Claudia's rank and distinction could become rich.

Principal singers at the *Teatro Colón* were paid between 6,500 and 8,000 French francs a performance, the equivalent today of around US\$25,000, a great improvement on the Metropolitan's fees. The *New York Times* on October 23, 1920, reported that Claudia had received US\$100,000 (at 1920 exchange rates) for twenty seven appearances in South America the previous summer, nearly seven times what she was getting paid at the Metropolitan. It is no wonder that she eventually moved her sphere of activity, for such fees were irresistible. After travel and living expenses, salaries and commissions, there was enough money left to support even the most extravagant lifestyle and Claudia believed in keeping up appearances. Her tastes ran to the best, no matter what the cost, though she does not seem to have had, like Gigli, the desire to own a huge estate in Italy and build a castle worthy of an aristocrat. Later in her career she did own a Riviera villa in Italy, near Imperia, which she seldom had time to visit. Her clothes and jewels, like her cars, were tastefully expensive. Many of her costumes and gowns came from the best fashion house in Paris, for, following the example of many other prima donnas, she patronised Worth of Paris. Gowns from that house, both on and off stage, were a true status symbol for women at the turn of the century until late into the 1930s.

Returning home after her South American success, Claudia welcomed the brief period of rest awaiting her. October was free of engagements, though the new Metropolitan season began as usual in November. New parameters surrounding her Metropolitan career had been suggested by her South American conquests. These new considerations partly concerned her fees, which had been held in the first two seasons at US\$625 a performance. Gatti-Casazza was quoted as saying that no

singer was worth more than \$500 a performance, but there were of course exceptions. Caruso sang for \$2500, though in Mexico he had been paid \$15,000 a performance, more than any opera singer had ever received,<sup>98</sup> in addition to being able to buy 50 tickets at concessionary prices for every performance, and it was his own choice that he was not paid more.<sup>99</sup> Others, like Farrar, received as much as Claudia's South American fee and more. This made Claudia one of the lowest paid principals. Ottavio negotiated a higher fee of \$800 per performance for the 1919-20 Metropolitan season, but Claudia was not asked to open the season, and it was clear that Farrar was now to sing all of the *Toscas*. This slight was offset by the fact that she was cast as Tatyana in Tchaikowsky's *Eugene Onegin*, in its Metropolitan première (in Italian, not Russian.) Claudia's seasonal commitments looked like this: on November 19, she sang in *Aïda* with Martinelli and then, in quick succession, *Il Trovatore* (November 22), *Pagliacci*, with Caruso (November 26), *L'Amore dei tre re* (December 12), and a revival of *Il Tabarro* (December 17). After Christmas there were Santuzza on January 9 and March 13, Berthe on February 4, 21 and March 5 and 22 and the aforementioned *Onegin* on March 24, for four performances. The last opening of that season was on March 27, as Puccini's *Manon*. On tour that year, Claudia was the Leonora in *Trovatore* on January 27 in Brooklyn. There she sang Nedda on February 10 and again in Philadelphia on March 16. In Philadelphia she also sang a Fiora (April 6) and a Tatyana (April 20).

The Paris Opéra engaged her to sing one performance of *Aïda* on May 5. Although she had sung with the Boston Opera Company in Paris in 1914, she had not made a formal debut at the Palais Garnier. If this was a trial run for Claudia, it seems to have been successful for this one opera alone, for she returned in 1923 (in that season there was one *Tosca* as well), 1924 and 1925 to sing it and no other work.

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<sup>98</sup> Caruso, Dorothy, Enrico Caruso. His Life and Death. London: T. Werner Laurie Ltd, 1952, p. 84.

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid.*

## Chapter Six

### Endings at the Metropolitan and More Successes in South America 1920 - 22

Claudia sailed from Europe and arrived in Valparaiso, Chile, on June 3, well in time to be in Buenos Aires to open the *Colón* season on June 17 with her beloved *Loreley*.

But, it being winter, she had an unexpected adventure. She found the great tunnel route over the mountains closed, the snow too deep for road traffic. The winds prohibited air travel as well, and the group set out for Buenos Aires via the tropical North. When, after much trouble, they arrived at Uyuni, in Bolivia, a rail company made up a special train for them to proceed. The trip from that point she described in a letter to her father's successor at the "Met", Edwin Siedle, quoted in the "New York Times":

We left for a little place called Atochia, reaching there early in the morning - 40 below outside, and no steam on our Pullmans, as they use wood to run their trains. We were all very sick unto death, nearly frozen, although every one of us was bound from head to foot with wool and furs, but we could not get warm. Well, they told us to get off and have breakfast at the hotel, before the automobile came to take us on the next stage of the journey. Words can never express how the hotel looked, a little stone hut, with the bare ground for its floor, and stifling heat within. We told them to set the table out on the lawn, and there we breakfasted in the icy air. Then came the motor, and we had to leave all our seventeen trunks behind us, to be brought on mule-back. From Tupiza, Bolivia, where we lunched, at noon, it was harder going. What with blow-outs and all of us getting out to help push up some of the steep grades on the mountains, we arrived at La Quaica, Argentina, at 9 p.m., all of us hardly able to get out after the rough riding and many hard bumps our driver gave us. We put up at the Grand Royal Hotel, with one candle in each room for light, and an old-time pump out in the courtyard, where every fellow had to go to wash--it was only 20 below zero there. The night passed after a fashion, and after having breakfast in the bar we went for our train on the morning of the 13th, wondering what would be our luck. Imagine -- the Minister of Argentine Railroads, the Directors of the line, and Senor B\_\_\_ of the Colón Opera management, had a most wonderful special train, with every service deluxe, waiting for us. Arriving at Jujuy, we stayed overnight in our train, and the following night reached Tucuman.<sup>100</sup>

The *Colón* season opened on time with Claudia. Serafin was again the conductor for the Bonetti *stagione* in South America and the operas in which Claudia participated

<sup>100</sup> "The New York Times," undated (but possibly late June, 1920) clipping from Metropolitan Opera Archives.

were *Aida*, *Lohengrin*, *Loreley*, and, most important, *Traviata* at the *Colón*, and also, strangely enough, *Lohengrin*, which received only two performances. When the season moved on to Rio's *Teatro Municipal* on September 8, Claudia sang Violetta, *Aida*, *Loreley*, and *Elsa* under Serafin and also, auspiciously, as the composer himself was present, the Marschallin in an Italian-language *Der Rosenkavalier* in its South American premiere. Richard Strauss approved both conductor and soprano and a letter he wrote to his librettist and friend Hugo von Hofmannsthal is worth quoting in part for its compliment to Claudia:

*Rio de Janeiro, 5th October, 1920*

My dear friend,

Now that *Rosenkavalier* has at last been produced here with the greatest possible success -- on Saturday, 2nd October -- as the final performance of the Stagione Bonetti (during which I have so far conducted six concerts here) under that excellent conductor Serafin, with Claudia Muzio as an exceedingly elegant and charming *Marschallin*...

Richard Strauss <sup>101</sup>

As her popularity with Gatti waned, so did Claudia's reputation in South America rise. In that 1920 season at the *Colón* she sang the role with which she was to be most closely identified in the remaining years of her career - Violetta in Verdi's *La Traviata*. Violetta stands apart from almost all operatic heroines by virtue of both her character and her music. For a start, she is based on a real person, Marie Duplessis, who died in 1847, a Paris courtesan with whom the author of the original story, the younger Dumas, fell in love. The opera, though, is not *La Dame aux Camellias* but the 'lost' or 'wandering' woman, a person who fits nowhere, a reprobate, according to Catherine Clément in her book, *Opera or the Undoing of Women*. The plot is "cleaned up" for the opera and Clément describes the unfortunate Violetta as "...a good girl...one possessing those mysterious, innate qualities of soul that the

<sup>101</sup> Hammelmann, Hanns, and Osers, Ewald, trs. *A Working Friendship: The Correspondence Between Richard Strauss and Hugo von Hofmannsthal*. New York: Vienna House, 1974, p. 339.

bourgeoisie recognizes among its own kind: a sense of duty, a generosity with money, an acute sense of kinship, and an indefinable air of the homebody making this heroine of prostitution seem like a housewife who has strayed into kitchens that are cooking up evil.”<sup>102</sup>

Nevertheless, the opera is one of the composer's best and requires a great singer/actress, one who can convince us in the rather brisk journey from Violetta's Act One persona, a jaded, pleasure-seeking fashion plate, through to the martyr of Act Two, Scene One, who agrees to abandon the only happiness she has known in order to make possible another woman's prospects. In Act Two, Scene Two, she is the defeated victim of Alfredo's spite and becomes the pitiful tubercular wreck of Act Three. That much of the action is set to waltz music is a powerful stroke of irony, and the forcing of the pace through the telescoping of events poses an enormous challenge to interpreters. It was said of Claudia's celebrated portrayal that in the last act that one could almost smell the sickroom.<sup>103</sup>

Claudia's continuing reputation owes much to *La Traviata*. Firstly, had she not later recorded the famous letter-reading and subsequent aria *Addio, del passato* from the last act the world might have forgotten this major operatic figure. This one recording eclipsed her others for many years until, having hung in the air like a fragrance reminding the world of her greatness, it sparked a revival of all her recorded work. But also, onstage, she became so identified with Violetta that she created a near frenzy amongst the audiences who experienced her portrayals in Buenos Aires, Rome, and, later, when she returned briefly to the Metropolitan.

Claudia first sang Violetta at the *Colón* on July 17, 1920, conducted by Serafin. She had not sung the role in any other theatre after the performances in 1910 in Messina.

<sup>102</sup> Clément, Catherine, *Opera, or the Undoing of Women*. University of Minnesota Press, 1988, p. 61.

<sup>103</sup> Douglas, op. cit., p.194.

In the intervening ten years Claudia had certainly matured from a young girl to a woman, and her voice and artistry ripened, too. Her interpretation differed wildly from that of Melba, whose Violetta vocally resembled a nun in its purity. But Claudia left so indelible a stamp on this role in this theatre that, years later, Maria Callas was keenly aware of the memory of Claudia when she sang Violetta for the first time in Argentina.<sup>104</sup> Frieda Leider<sup>105</sup> heard Claudia's Violetta in Chicago and wrote in her autobiography years later: "It was a role in which she made full use of her magnificent appearance...at the beginning she was the true and very beautiful grand lady; then she changed slowly as the tragedy developed. I have never heard the last act so poignantly performed."<sup>106</sup> Eva Turner called her the greatest of all the Violettas. The critics in Buenos Aires waxed poetic. "Miss Muzio has proven that she is one of the greatest artists of the glorious Italian theatre," stated "*La Nación*" on July 18, 1920.<sup>107</sup>

Claudia returned to the recording studio, this time in New York for the Edison company, for whom she had made a trial recording in 1914 and been rejected.<sup>108</sup> They finally offered her two contracts each running for two years and requiring her to make ten recordings a year. The first one began on October 29, 1920 and her last recording for the company was on January 28, 1925. Between November of 1920 and April of 1921, she made a variety of recordings, both reflecting her operatic repertory and demonstrating her charm as a recitalist. She was particularly fortunate to have as a recording engineer Walter Miller, Edison's New York studio manager. At

<sup>104</sup> Meneghini, G. B., *My Wife, Maria Callas*. London: Bodley Head, 1983, p. 98.

<sup>105</sup> Frieda Leider (b. Berlin 1888, d. 1975) was one of the great Wagnerian sopranos of the century, and appeared with Muzio in four seasons of opera in Chicago.

<sup>106</sup> Leider, Frieda, *Das war mein Teil*. Berlin: 1959, p. 145.

<sup>107</sup> Quoted in Arnosi, op. cit. A more recent tribute to Muzio in the role of Violetta was made by the American playwright Terrence McNally, who called her "...a Violetta for all times" in a broadcast Memoir on the Texaco Metropolitan Opera Broadcast of December 16, 1998.

<sup>108</sup> Edison's assessment of her audition (he was characteristically blunt and critical) reads "General voice fair - but we do not believe we know her 8/7/15" (The Edison File). His assessment of Elisabeth Schumann was only "pretty good...if not expensive, might take a half dozen." and of Amelita Galli-Curci, one of the best-selling of all recording artists, he said "...in many places becomes sharp and thin. Cannot use."

no time were more than two selections recorded at any one session.<sup>109</sup> The first session, on November 1, was devoted to recording the aria *Tacea la notte placida* from *Trovatore*, and the next month she recorded Leonora's other aria *D'amor sull' ali rosee*. Other operatic arias were Tatyiana's letter scene, Maddelena's *La mamma morta* (a much-loved recording), and arias from *La Wally*, *I Pagliacci*, *Zazà*, *Adriana Lecouvreur*; and a rarity, André da Silva Gomes's *Mi piccirella* from his opera *Salvator Rosa* (1874). This opera, by Brazil's celebrated composer, had been in production in Rio when Claudia was singing there. These selections were complemented by a few songs from her concert programmes: Sodero's *Crisantemi*, Bachelet's *Chère nuit*, an anonymous (her own, perhaps? as an accomplished pianist, she was certainly familiar with this work) arrangement of the Chopin Nocturne in B-flat major entitled *Aspiration*, and *Eternamente* by Mascheroni with violinist Albert Spalding and pianist Robert Gaylor.

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<sup>109</sup> Wile, Raymond R., "The Edison Legacy of Claudia Muzio," in *The American Record Guide*, April, 1961, p. 634.

## Chapter Seven

### Last Years at the Metropolitan and New Beginnings in Chicago

In 1920, Caruso became ill and was taken back to Italy to die after struggling to appear in opera between November, 1920, and February, 1921. He finally succumbed on August 2, 1921, and was buried in Naples. The date for Claudia had a bitter significance, for exactly four years earlier her own father had died on that same date. In over half of her Metropolitan appearances thus far, Caruso had been the tenor. She had been alarmed to find him so ill when she arrived back in New York to begin the recordings. She visited him and sent him notes and flowers, as did most of the population of the city, it seemed to Dorothy Caruso.<sup>110</sup> For Claudia there never could be another Enrico, for though she, as had Melba, found the atmosphere of jocularly surrounding the rehearsals with him and his neighbour, the baritone Scotti, unbearable at times, there was no doubt that, in performance, he was impossible to equal as a partner and generous enough not to upstage anyone. Many who heard the two singers in *Aida* regarded it the operatic experience of a lifetime.

Claudia returned to the Metropolitan in January, 1921. Her South American successes and the recording contract with Edison had bolstered her self-esteem, and she was no longer content to do as she was told while other sopranos took from her the roles she loved and in which she was considered by critics and the public to excel. Tosca, her debut role at the "Met," had again been assigned to Farrar; Mimi belonged to Alda, and Nedda hadn't been offered to her. The *Trovatore* Leonora was now Ponselle's.

The ungenerous Gatti was not accustomed to Claudia being anything but compliant, and he began to turn against her. He is reported to have said that Claudia's head was

<sup>110</sup> Caruso, Dorothy, Enrico Caruso: His Life and Death. London: T. Werner Laurie Ltd, 1952, pp.

turned by her successes at the *Colón* and other South American houses, though this sounds as if it might have come from a rival prima donna rather than the manager of an opera house.<sup>111</sup> Ultimately, even though she (or Scotto) must have persuaded him to reinstate her in certain roles, including *Tosca*, that season marked the beginning of the end.

Perhaps as an attempt to mollify Claudia, Gatti assigned to her the first Metropolitan performances of *Andrea Chenier*, with Gigli, and the response included the praise of Rosa Ponselle, who listed Claudia's characterisation of Madelenna among the unsurpassable, along with Aïda.<sup>112</sup> One *Tosca* in the house and one on tour in Philadelphia may have been further results of her newfound self-esteem, and the season was rounded off with *Manon Lescaut* in Manhattan and *L'Amore dei tre Re* in Brooklyn. *Eugen Onegin* was revived, with her and Martinelli. In all there were twenty performances that season in which she sang.

A new threat was posed by the soprano Maria Jeritza, who had so beguiled both Strauss and Puccini that, despite her many vocal flaws, she had ascended to the very top of the wish list of virtually every opera house in the world. Born in Brno in 1887, she changed her name from Jedlitzková and seems to have spent much of her life reinventing herself in other ways. Her autobiography<sup>113</sup> is a model of self-absorption and she was the antithesis of Claudia in every physical and artistic detail. Her enormous blue eyes stared out from under her abundant ash blonde hair and, despite these two obvious physical contradictions, which ought to have prevented her playing Floria Tosca without at least a wig, Puccini declared her his favourite in the role. With this stamp of approval, what management would dare to point out that Mario's opening aria was the strongest argument against an undiluted Jeritza?

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<sup>111</sup> This rumour was reiterated in a letter from the soprano Edith Mason in Chicago, but as Mason didn't yet know Muzio, it is unreliable, though would explain subsequent events.

<sup>112</sup> Drake, James, *op. cit.* p. 190.

<sup>113</sup> Jeritza, Maria, *Sunlight and Song, A Singer's Life*. New York: D. Appleton & Co, 1924.

He sings to the painting of the Magdalen he is creating:

*Oh hidden harmony  
of contrasting beauties! Floria  
Is dark, my love and passion  
And you, mysterious beauty...  
Crowned with blonde locks,  
Your eyes are blue  
And Tosca's black!*

Puccini's interest in Jeritza was no doubt sparked by her breathtaking Aryan beauty and by the incident in Vienna earning her the nickname "La prima donna prostrata." The well-known story is that she tripped and fell just before singing *Vissi d'arte* and, afraid that she might be bleeding from her nose, or else thrown off balance and unable to rise before the beginning of the aria, sang it while lying face down on the stage, and Puccini, who was present at this rehearsal, leapt to his feet shouting "Brava!" and told her never to sing it any other way.<sup>114</sup> She never did, and when she sang it at the Metropolitan in that 1921 season it caused an uproar described as "...a tempest" by Henry Krehbiel.<sup>115</sup>



*Maria Jeritza as Floria Tosca*

Jeritza's debut at the Metropolitan was so spectacular, thanks to the media buildup, that for twelve years she was the top box office attraction in Gatti's fold. Farrar, who

<sup>114</sup> Farrar, Geraldine, *Such Sweet Compulsion*, New York: The Greystone Press, 1938, p. 192.

<sup>115</sup> This information comes from Jeritza's own pen, in her biography, *op.cit.* p. 89.

had been the first (and last?) opera star to achieve cult status among young people, and Claudia, whose Metropolitan debut as Floria Tosca had caused an uproar of a different kind, both saw that it was time to bow out. Farrar retired from the stage, but not without a parting shot in her memoirs about Jeritza's "...pose of unashamed abandon"<sup>116</sup> Claudia's debts were mounting, and she had no choice but to go on. (Ten years later she said to Edith Mason in Chicago words to the effect that if she worked every day for the next hundred years she would never get out of debt.)<sup>117</sup>

In Mexico City, in October, Claudia made a spectacular debut in the opera house and the *Plaza el Toreo* in *Aida* with the Bracale Opera Company. Curiously, though she probably commanded a very high fee (this was the city where Caruso was paid \$15,000 a performance), she did not return in the course of the rest of her career. Perhaps the way her fee was delivered so shocked her that she was put off:

The general public may not know that all singing artists receive their fees before their appearance...Miss Muzio tells an interesting story of her first visit to appear in opera in Mexico City...[She] requested her personal manager to bring her fee to the dressing room. He tried to explain that it would not be convenient and might be in her way. With Miss Muzio, however, a request is usually a command, and so the manager threw open the door and with the aid of several stage hands, dozens of sacks, which appeared to be heavy, were brought in and laid on the dressing table, the chairs and the floor of Mme Muzio's dressing room, while she stood in the midst of all the confusion, begging them to explain. In Spanish they tried to explain, but even then Miss Muzio could not understand. So they opened the bags and poured the contents on the floor.<sup>118</sup>

Her dislike for singing in arenas and stadiums might have prompted her to refuse any future dates, but she was in Mexico City for only a month.

Claudia's last appearances as a regular member of the Metropolitan company began after her return from South America and Mexico, in February, 1922, in *Aida*, and ended on April 27 in *Pagliacci* on tour in Atlanta.

<sup>116</sup> Farrar, loc.cit.

<sup>117</sup> Letter from Edith Mason to Frances Robinson, dated December 4, 1964.

<sup>118</sup> Report in the "Milwaukee Journal," December 4, 1927.

As soon as the Met season was behind her, Claudia made a lightning trip to Havana, where she had last appeared in 1915. She sang at the *Teatro Nacional* on May 3 and May 6, singing arias and songs; notably of interest to the American music journal *Musical Courier*, some by E. de Curtis, a composer she sought to promote, but who has remained obscure.<sup>119</sup>

In March and April that year, Claudia had returned to the Edison studios. This time her list of recordings differed greatly from what she was singing onstage and, in fact, does not much resemble her operatic output. There were *Pace, pace mio Dio* and *L'altra notte in fondo al mare* as well as *Che me ne faccio del vostro castello* (from *Madame Sans-Gêne*) to be sure, but there were also arias from Bellini's *Bianca e Fernando*, Massenet's *Hérodiade*, Meyerbeer's *L'Africaine*, Händel's *Rinaldo* and Verdi's *I Lombardi*, none of which she ever sang on stage; but some of these items appeared on her concert programmes alongside the anonymous *Odorano le rose* and Rossini's *La Separation* which she also committed to the "hill and dale" discs in 1922.

In May the list of singers for the 1922/23 season at the Metropolitan was published, and conspicuous was the absence of Claudia from the roster. The management announced that she wished to absent herself for a year to sing in Italy, and truly she had already departed for her home country and bought the aforementioned villa from the Russian count in which she subsequently rarely spent time. But before sailing, in her stateroom, she signed a contract to sing with the Chicago Civic Opera Company to take effect the following season.

Claudia was, as the directors of the company knew, a popular opera star, and most of the other stars were at the Metropolitan and could only be engaged as guest artists. A financial boost came about this time for the Company, in the form of a tax exemption. The Treasury Department informed the Directors that they no longer

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<sup>119</sup> *Musical Courier*, April 20, 1922, p. 10.

needed to charge 10% on top of the ticket price and pay it in tax making the Chicago Opera Company the first company to have educational status.<sup>120</sup>

There were already ties between the Muzio family and the Chicago Opera Company. From 1910 Carlo Muzio, who had worked for then director Oscar Hammerstein, served Maestro Camapanini, the musical director, as stage manager during the years when his daughter was having her initial successes in Italy, 1911-13. In his first season there he bragged about her to the backstage staff. In response to their reaction to a particularly good night for the reigning prima donna, Carlo enthused to a reporter for *The Musical Leader*, "I wish you could hear my daughter."

"Is she so wonderful?" asked the writer.

"Not yet," replied Carlo, "...but since she began to toddle, she has been in the wings watching my rehearsals, at Paris, Covent Garden, Italy and New York. She has, what you say, imbibed opera, and, like other youngsters, her delight is to be with me on the stage. She knows all the dramatic roles, the lyric roles and the coloratura. She is still too young to determine the range of voice but nothing will come amiss to her. She could sing *Aida* or *Traviata* and if any one of the singers suddenly defaulted in his or her role, I think my Claudia could pick up the phrase immediately."<sup>121</sup>

How prescient this turned out to be, and in Chicago Claudia was to prove her father right yet again by making her debut in Verdi's Egyptian piece. The role of the Ethiopian slave-princess had served her well, with countless appearances already under her operatic girdle at the Met and other houses, including Paris. The evidence on recordings clearly proves that *O patria mia* was beautifully sung, and all we know of her performing this role serves to assure us that Ponselle's admiration was well-deserved. Claudia's appearances at the Metropolitan as the tragic princess numbered among the highest, and, of her contemporaries, perhaps the highest overall in the

<sup>120</sup> Moore, Edward, *Forty Years of Opera in Chicago*, New York: Horace Livewright, 1930, p. 254.

<sup>121</sup> Reported in Moore, op. cit, p. 255.

space of a career. Charles Jahant, in *Stereo Review* in 1957, speaks disparagingly about her acting in roles that elicited nothing but the highest praise from other critics, including that of Violetta. But of her *Aïda*, he says, "The most accomplished of Claudia's dramatic successes was undoubtedly in 'Aïda.' The stylized nature of the role limited the free-wheeling which she could throw in. The stiff and statuesque traditions of the part kept Claudia ever within the moderate bounds of gesture and feeling."<sup>122</sup>



*Claudia Muzio as Aïda*

During March and April of 1923, Claudia made her first appearances at Monte Carlo, the opera, again, *Aïda*. She sang, in quick succession, *Il Trovatore* and *La Bohème* there. After Monte Carlo, she returned to Buenos Aires and opened in *Aïda* with her old friend Ariano Pertile, an operatic partnership going back to 1911, as Radames on May 20. He was Radames, Cavaradossi, Alfredo, Rodolfo, and Walter (*Die Loreley*) to Claudia's corresponding heroines in South America in that season, which ended on October 12 after a single *Loreley* at Rio de Janeiro.

Claudia had sung all of her favourite heroines - Violetta, Tosca, Aïda, Leonora, and Manon Lescaut - in Buenos Aires, and, in São Paulo and Rio, added Loreley and Mimi to the list. Returning post haste to Chicago for *Andrea Chenier* on November 27, she was very tired, and on the second night of that run she carried realism on the stage to the extreme by actually fainting at the point where Chenier is carried off to

<sup>122</sup> Jahant, Charles. "Muzio Onstage and Off," *Stereo Review*, December 28, 1957, p. 31.

prison at the end of Act Three. (Her blood-curdling scream, for which she was renowned at this point, was often recalled by those who saw her portrayal.) The Gérard, Cesare Formichi, suddenly found that when the curtain descended, he was holding a dead weight. Claudia had to be revived before taking her bows, and the audience was obliged to go on applauding until the three principals appeared, Claudia supported between tenor and baritone. Whether by design or not, this amount of involvement certainly had its effect on Farnsworth Wright, critic for *Musical America*:

I could not sleep last night. I lived over and over again Muzio's dramatic work in the climax of the third act, and it took so powerful a hold on my mind that sleep was out of the question.<sup>123</sup>

When Wright asked her if it wasn't dangerous to take one's roles as deeply to heart as she obviously did, Claudia replied, "I suppose it is. It may be very foolish for me to enter so thoroughly into a role, but I can't do otherwise, for that is the way I was trained. If I do not feel the emotions of the character I am portraying, how then can I expect my public to feel them?"<sup>124</sup>

Claudia also sang her first *Traviata* that season to excellent reviews:

The laughter and sobs tremble on her notes and are drawn from the profoundest depths of herself, thus giving them a persuasive force which is irresistible. (*Music News*)

[Muzio is] without a doubt the greatest Violetta of them all. (Herman Devries in the "Evening American")<sup>125</sup>

Chicago's Auditorium Theatre was the venue for the Company, and some of the singers were protected from having to brave the city's formidable winter winds and snows by a covered overbridge connecting the Congress Hotel, across the street, with the theatre. Claudia was to use this passageway many times in her

<sup>123</sup> Wright, Farnsworth, "Emotions of role seize Muzio in Opera," in *Musical America*, December 29, 1923, page 1.

<sup>124</sup> Ibid.

<sup>125</sup> Davis, R. *Opera in Chicago*, New York: Appleton, p. 150

ten years at Chicago, for the season was always in the worst weather.<sup>126</sup> In 1923/24 she was in twelve performances of seven operas - for her a light schedule - between November and February, but she gave concerts as well. The repertoire was more varied than at the Metropolitan and included, besides Maddelena in Giordano's French Revolution opera, the heroine in Fevrier's *Monna Vanna*, a rarity today, but very popular after its premiere at the Paris *Opéra* in 1909. Set in mediaeval Italy, the plot involves the warring dukes of Pisa and Florence, the heroine Monna Vanna being the wife of the former. Upon discovering that the latter is an old childhood friend, she attempts to intercede but is accused of infidelity by her husband and absconds with her former playmate, whom she now loves. Though it has since fallen from the repertoire, it was presented in most major opera houses for a time. Claudia first sang it in Buenos Aires in the 1921 season conducted by Polacco, who was also the conductor of the Chicago Opera and the lover, later third husband, of one of America's finest singers, Edith Mason, whose career was principally with the Chicago company. Publicity stills of Claudia in the Chicago production of *Monna Vanna* are among the most attractive of her career and show her face in beautiful repose. She recorded nothing from the opera, and we must be content to know that she looked good in the part and not much else. It does not appear again in her North American repertory after the last Chicago performance, on December 26, 1923. After that, in Chicago, Mary Garden played the part almost exclusively.

It was about this time that May Higgins heard her first opera and joined the Claudia Muzio Fan Club in Chicago, a group of girls and women who, like herself, had been converted to the art form by Claudia's sometimes hair-raising performances. May, who had been born a year before Claudia, was an Irish girl, with two sisters

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<sup>126</sup> Davis, R., Interview with May Higgins, op. cit.

(one, Florence, twenty years younger) and three brothers, brought up by Irish immigrant parents and put into the work force after a grade school education, at the age of fourteen. It took a special certificate to allow Sears, Roebuck and Company to hire her, and she worked for many years in the company's home office in Chicago, living at home and going to the theatre on Sundays for entertainment with a small group of friends. "Every Sunday afternoon if we got a dollar to spend, we all went..." she later told Ronald Davis.<sup>127</sup> She usually attended the same play in the afternoon and evening especially if Adelaide Keim was the star. It is clear that she was starstruck. This devotion to the theatre as a pastime began about 1897. (Her mother took her to her first play when she was nine years old. It was called "Aristocracy".) She frequented the theatre after that initial experience for about 25 years, but May admitted that once she heard Claudia sing there was no looking back. It was only opera for her after that. Her mother had been a fine pianist and music was there in her upbringing, but it took Claudia to interest her in opera. In the way that Geraldine Farrar's "gerryflappers" haunted the stage door of the Metropolitan a few years earlier, the Claudia Muzio Fan Club attended every performance and a recital in Chicago but were too shy to make any inroads backstage, until one day May was waiting for a friend near that overbridge connecting the Congress with the Auditorium, when:

...I happened to be coming in the, the...it was after a performance..I didn't know you could go backstage in those days. And I stood waiting for someone at the front -- I've forgotten now who it was--and all of a sudden I saw her coming down the corridor...from the theater, see? Her mother, Claudia, and the dog, Cici. And before I lost it, my courage oozed out, I thought, well I'll go speak to her. And I did, and she was charming. ...I told her how much I enjoyed her music. She said, 'Why didn't you ever come back to see me?' and I said, 'I didn't know it was allowed.'<sup>128</sup>

Thereafter, by her own admission, May was backstage "every time," but as a fan only for many years, waiting for the diva to emerge in street clothes, always with Giovanna and the dog and secretary (and Scotto) in tow. Scotto, according to Edith

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<sup>127</sup> Davis, R, interview, loc.cit.

Mason, had now adopted the same strategy that Caruso and Gigli had used to endear themselves to the box office staff and men and women of the chorus. He distributed gold cufflinks and other expensive trinkets, all bought with Claudia's money, amongst these employees, seeing this as a way of upstaging Rosa Raisa, who was Chicago's leading dramatic soprano.<sup>129</sup> Raisa and Claudia did share some roles but there was clearly no rivalry felt between the two sopranos, who, in 1914 had had equally good notices in *Mefistofele* at Covent Garden in that last season before World War I. Three years later Raisa was to join Toscanini at La Scala to sing the title role in Puccini's *Turandot* in its first performance. For sheer power she had no equal and, as Jahant says, "Given a choice of Raisa or Muzio in, say, 'Aïda,' one's favourite depended on whether one preferred dramatic sweep and a voice of phenomenal power, or a smaller-scaled version sung with delicacy, simplicity and warmth."<sup>130</sup>

Appearing in Chicago that season were two of the greatest basses in the world, both citizens of post-Revolution Russia. Claudia sang in *La Forza del Destino*, Verdi's politically sensitive opera, with Alexander Kipnis, the Ukrainian who had also sung Amonasro with her. Kipnis had just arrived in the USA after a moderately successful Continental career and had debuted in Wagner's *Die Meistersinger* in New York in February. He was immediately engaged for the Chicago appearances. The other bass was none other than Chaliapin, with whom Claudia appeared in *Mefistofele*. Chaliapin and she became great friends during this season, and he frequently visited her dressing room after performances.

The rest of 1924 was filled with a strenuous succession of appearances in Paris, Monte Carlo, Buenos Aires, and Rio. No new operas were prepared, and but for *La*

<sup>129</sup> Letter from Edith Mason to Francis Robinson dated Dec. 4, 1964. (Metropolitan Opera Archives.)

*Forza*...it would seem that Claudia was typecast as Aïda, Tosca and Loreley - that is, until September that year, when she sang for the first time at San Francisco, with Schipa, de Luca and Gigli. She sang Tosca and Violetta in her first season and afterwards became so adored by the San Francisco public that when the company at last had its own War Memorial Opera House, it was Claudia they honoured by asking her to open it. The stamp of approval was awarded to her portrayal of Floria Tosca by the "San Francisco Examiner" critic, Redfern Mason, the morning after her first performance of the role in San Francisco:

The word had gone round that the diva had based her delineation of Tosca on the work of Bernhardt<sup>131</sup> and, having studied the great French woman's representation on many occasions, I can vouch for the fact that Muzio's study of the Roman prima donna is a development of the Bernhardt picture.

Like Bernhardt, Muzio speaks through all her members and every pose is inspired by a state of mind. In the sheer sensuous charm of the scene with Mario in the church Muzio made me think of D'Annunzio's description of Gemma Bellincioni in 'Il Fuoco.' Here is the same resplendent and conquering youth....The character of Muzio sings in her voice, which is at all times a mirror of what is going on in the mind...<sup>132</sup>

In October, Claudia repeated *Andrea Chenier* and *La Traviata* in Los Angeles, and the headlines screamed

#### MUZIO CREATES FURORE IN LOS ANGELES

not without foundation, for the audience would not let the opera proceed several times during the evening after her arias.<sup>133</sup>

A concert in Houston, Texas, later in October, produced a review in the Houston Chronicle in which, unusually for reports of pre-war concerts, the accompanist was given editorial space. Gavin Williamson, the pianist, a Canadian educated in Boston

<sup>131</sup> Victorien Sardou's *La Tosca*, the play on which Puccini based his opera, was one of Sarah Bernhardt's most famous creations.

<sup>132</sup> Mason, Redfern, review in "The San Francisco Examiner", Monday, September 8, 1924, p. 17.

<sup>133</sup> Unidentified article, most likely in the "San Francisco Examiner", dated October 16, 1924.

and New York, where he presumably began to work with Claudia, is described by Douglas MacCorquodale, the critic, as "...an artist of discrimination and good taste, and his accompaniments were delicately attuned to the thought content of the song and the singer's voice, even when the piano approximated the orchestra in the operatic arias." Furthermore, Claudia credited him as the source for much of her concert repertoire, especially the English songs.<sup>134</sup>

Claudia returned to Chicago, where, on November 29, she was partnered in *Tosca* by Alfred Piccaver as Cavaradossi. Chaliapin returned for another batch of *Mefistofele* performances with Claudia as Marguerite. Schipa joined her in *La Traviata*, and there were three performances of *Il Trovatore* in which debuted a voice which had come from the horns of almost as many gramophones in America as had Caruso's - it was that of Louise Homer, only a few years away from her farewell performance in 1929 in the same role - Azucena. Homer's "He Shall Feed His Flock" (Messiah) recordings eclipsed in sales almost all of Claudia's entire output. Her 1906 recording of the quartet from *Rigoletto* with Bessie Abott, Caruso and Scotti was also a "best seller."<sup>135</sup>

During the year, May Higgins had been writing to her idol, sending her humorous notes and cards, so that by the time Claudia returned to Chicago in 1924, May felt comfortable going backstage and timidly waiting outside the star's dressing room after the performance. Her almost comical self-restraint was reversed by witnessing the easy entry gained by the singer Toti Dal Monte, who came knocking on the door while the fans stood outside. The coloratura was greeted with "Come in, dear," at which point the scales dropped from May's eyes and she boldly did likewise and was welcomed.<sup>136</sup>

<sup>134</sup> MacCorquodale, Douglas, "Muzio Opens Concert Season in Singing that Stamps Her as Artist of the Chosen Few," *Houston Chronicle*, October 25, 1924., p. 25.

<sup>135</sup> Moses, Julian Morton, *Collector's Guide to American Recordings 1895-1925*. New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1977, p. 16.

<sup>136</sup> Davis, R., Interview with M.H., op.cit.

Estelle Scotto, Ottavio's wife, was then Claudia's secretary,<sup>137</sup> doubtless employed at the instigation of her faithless husband. May Higgins was flattered to learn from Estelle that Claudia looked for her letters and cards and always asked if there was anything in the post from "that Miss Higgins." Gradually, a friendship developed between the shy career girl and the shy singer. May would often walk the singer back to her hotel after the performance and it could not have been long before she was asked to enter the hotel suite. The sense of importance resulting from this growing friendship with the object of her devotion eventually led to May's assuming leadership of the Fan Club and the role of interlocutor between Claudia and the membership.

The Chicago Civic Opera Company always toured the USA's main cities after the season was finished, in January. The tour ended in February, and Claudia was immediately on a ship bound for Paris, where she sang two *Aïdas* and then had three months to visit her Riviera villa and rest before she was due in Buenos Aires at the end of June. She kept an expensive car in Italy, as did the novelist Edith Wharton, and she, like Wharton, delighted in being driven through the countryside dressed in the finest clothes and accompanied by an entourage, in this case Giovanna, Cici and Estelle. One of her favourite destinations became the small town of Riolo Bagni,<sup>138</sup> at the foot of the Appenines near Ravenna, where she could rest in the hotel and visit the *stabilmente*, or spa, with its restorative waters. Her entrance into the town was always dramatic because the townspeople received prior warning from the hoteliers that "La Muzio" was on her way.

The *Teatro Colón* season in 1925 was unusually long. The opening opera, Verdi's *Falstaff*, saw the return of Serafin to the podium. Claudia and he had not worked

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<sup>137</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>138</sup> May Higgins always referred to the town known as Riolo Terme by this name, and I shall continue to call it by her name.

together in Buenos Aires since 1919, her opening season. The inclusion of Verdi's last work in the season was a risky venture. The press was not enthusiastic and preferred Claudia in *La Traviata*, which opened four nights later. "She is statuesquely perfect, exquisitely elegant, ...from every point of view, the modern ideal of an incarnation of Violetta." and "... to the moving appeal of her glance and the natural charm of her gesture she adds the beauty of melody which flows from a throat of gold...One could write a hymn of triumph for this interpretation..." were among the calmer comments in the papers the day after *Traviata* opened. There were eight curtain calls after the first act and after the last act, repeated calls for her alone. When she did appear for solo bows the audience refused to let her go home, recalling her again and again.<sup>139</sup>

A fine singer new to the company that year, one whose career was to have great scope, was Ezio Pinza. His recent successes at *La Scala* under Toscanini were succeeded by a greater triumph at the Metropolitan, where he stayed for many years as a principal bass. His appearances with Claudia in *Aida*, in the secondary role of Ramfis and as Rodolfo in *Loreley*, were the first of many engagements at the *Colón*. Claudia became so fond of Pinza that she agreed to be the godmother of his daughter. The girl was named Claudia, in her godmother's honour.<sup>140</sup> Claudia and Gigli starred in *Tosca*, *Andrea Chenier* and *Loreley*. *L'Amore dei tre Re* completed the roster for that season. There was no time for Rio or the other South American houses because the Buenos Aires season was two months long; she had been onstage twenty-three nights, the last time as *Aida* on September 6.

Unfortunately for the fledgling San Francisco Opera, for whom Claudia had agreed

<sup>139</sup> Arnosi, op. cit., p. 200.

<sup>140</sup> Claudia Pinza now lives in Pittsburgh, PA and conducts an Italian summer school for Young American Singers near Venice each year. Of her godmother, she told me: "Claudia Muzio was a great singer, but most of all a great artist and during performances she gave so much that once in a while she would have to enter into the wings, even for a moment, to take a breath and a sip of water. When she entered a room it was like a dream was coming to reality...I am very proud she was my godmother."

to sing Violetta early in their season, she was late, due to the extension of the Buenos Aires schedule well past what was originally intended. Operas presented in early July were repeated at the end of August, the series of repeats launched on August 18 by a special performance of *Loreley* for the visiting Prince of Wales, later King Edward VIII, who bestowed on the singer the privilege of meeting him after the performance. The journal *La Patria degli Italiani* the next day reported that "...she was escorted to the royal box, where she was the recipient of many kind felicitations." This was not the last time the Prince demonstrated a preference for her singing.

*La Traviata* went on in San Francisco with Elvira de Hidalgo. Miss de Hidalgo, described that season in the *San Francisco Examiner* as "a coloratura with brains...", was to become the only teacher of Maria Callas and was known for florid roles. She also sang in *Marta* prior to Claudia's late arrival to sing *Aida* and *Tosca* on successive evenings (October 3 and 4) before a concert tour, which culminated in Chicago. The forgiveness of the San Franciscans seemingly knew no bounds where Claudia was concerned, for the "...Examiner", after her *Aida* raved, "Muzio is a regal creature -- no wonder the Prince of Wales used his influence to prolong her season in Buenos Aires. She has beauty and she has that even rarer thing -- great art."

## Chapter Eight

### 1926, Toscanini, and *Turandot*

Proceeding then to Chicago, Claudia sang *en route* in Kansas City, Chattanooga, Memphis, Quincy, Illinois and Keokuk, Iowa. The Chicago opera season opened on November 3 for nineteen performances between then and the middle of January, 1926. The Chicago Company tour occupied her until the middle of March, with performances in Boston, Baltimore, Cleveland, Cincinnati, Chattanooga, Birmingham, Memphis and Miami; the repertory was a repeat of all the operas she had sung the previous season in the other houses but for the reappearance of *Pagliacci*. Another concert tour comprising Steubenville, Ohio, Urbana, Illinois, and Pittsburgh filled up March.

In April, Toscanini called her to Milan, where she appeared at *La Scala* for the first time since her performances there in 1913. Victor Gollancz was again in the audience:

...we rushed off, and were mercifully allowed in just as the curtain was going up, with no time for a programme. And there was the *Traviata* ballroom before us, very gay and richly appointed, ...directly the *Libiamo* started, my attention was held. This was no ordinary Violetta! When the curtain came down I bought a programme, and the lady turned out to be Claudia Muzio. I learned later that she was returning to the Scala that evening after an absence of a decade or so in America. She may even have been singing Violetta there for the first time. Anyhow, it was an occasion indeed, and I wondered afterwards whether they had been drinking real champagne: I thought I detected bubbles through my field-glasses.<sup>141</sup>

One may safely assume that it was real champagne, for according to Ronald Davis, “[Claudia] insisted on realism in her operas, clear down to the wearing of real jewels on stage and the serving of real champagne in *La Traviata*.”<sup>142</sup>

<sup>141</sup> Gollancz, op.cit., p. 91.

<sup>142</sup> Davis, Ronald *Opera in Chicago*, New York: Appleton, p. 146.

This was the first appearance in Italy since early in her career, but the Italian public had not forgotten her. “*Corriere della Sera*”, the chief Milanese newspaper greeted her return as Violetta with reports of the rapturous audience response and called her a “singer-genius.” When Claudia and Toscanini appeared together after each act, the cheering was tumultuous and the open scenes were often interrupted, especially after *Sempre libera* in Act One. The clamor for her to appear alone after each act made it clear to all that it was Claudia who had been the draw. Toscanini then conducted her in *Il Trovatore* six times, and the response was equally warm.<sup>143</sup> After these appearances, whether it was because the applause for Claudia was as great as for him, he seems to have had enough of “Muzio Mania.” He is known to have helped Gilda Dalla Rizza by recommending the latter soprano over Claudia when both were considered for the same part, and a letter from him to Gilda Dalla Rizza makes it clear that he was conspiring against Claudia.<sup>144</sup> In the years since they had first worked together, it is likely that Claudia had developed an authority on the stage, which challenged his dictatorial ways. Dalla Rizza had created a sensation as Violetta three years earlier, was considered a great singing actress and also seems to have been called “the Duse of the Lyric Theatre.”

It was a turbulent time for Toscanini at *La Scala*. His refusal, for two years running, to observe the custom of playing the Fascist hymn *Giovinetta* before performances, had been a slap in the face to Mussolini, who ordered it but was loath to take on so formidable and important an adversary as Toscanini. The matter again came to a head two nights into the run of *Il Trovatore* with Claudia, and *Il Maestro* again avoided the issue by closing the theatre on April 21, the official Roman holiday, and holding, instead of a performance of Verdi's opera, a rehearsal of *Turandot* (though whether with Rosa Raisa who was the first Princess Turandot, or with Claudia, who was also tipped to sing it, is not clear), which was receiving its première a few days

<sup>143</sup> “Muzio Triumphs at La Scala...” *Musical Courier*, May, 1925, p. 7.

<sup>144</sup> Sachs, op. cit., p. 162.

later. Before that important occasion, Toscanini again let it be known that he would refuse to play the anthem, and Mussolini's anger was formidable. He refused to attend and demanded the removal of Toscanini, but the determined conductor, who had the Directors of *La Scala* terrified, remained in charge and in defiant mode until 1929. Claudia watched all of this fascinated, glad not to be involved in the politics of the moment. But returning to Italy meant that she, like others in the lyric theatre, was to be used by the Fascists for their own purposes.

The première of *Turandot* was to some extent a chance for Toscanini, according to Giorgio Gualerzi, to get back at Puccini for all the trouble he had been to the conductor in the many years of their love/hate relationship. The casting of the principal parts was contentious and earned him many enemies. Lauri-Volpi, Martinelli, and Gigli all claimed that Puccini had personally wanted them for the role of Calaf, but *il maestro* would have none of them, casting instead Miguel Fleta; likewise, Dalla Rizza and dal Monte for Liu (Toscanini chose neither, preferring Maria Zamboni); likewise, Raisa and Jeritza for the Princess. The Metropolitan management stepped in regarding Martinelli and, possibly, Jeritza, warning that their participation in the *La Scala* première would be frowned upon. In the end, only Raisa carried the composer's standard into the ring.<sup>145</sup> *Turandot* was prepared with two teams in mind - Raisa and Miguel Fleta, and Claudia and Lauri-Volpi.

Toscanini eventually chose the former pair for *La Scala*, and the first performance there is historic, since Toscanini respected Puccini's wish to have it performed as he left it - that is, up until the death of Liù in the third act. Perhaps Claudia's reception as Violetta had something to do with the ultimate choice of Raisa, but Lauri-Volpi and Claudia, keenly disappointed, were to have their day in Buenos Aires two months later, though not under Toscanini, and in the completed version by Alfano.

Lauri-Volpi was one of the world's most respected tenors and almost an exact

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<sup>145</sup> Sachs, *op.cit.*, p. 162.

contemporary of Claudia's. His debut in 1919, under the name of Rubini, soon led to engagements at *La Scala* under his own name. He came to the Metropolitan just as Claudia was severing her relationship with that house, and he was the first American Calaf.<sup>146</sup> He married the soprano Maria Ros in 1921.

By 1926 Claudia was realising her mistake in ever getting involved with Scotto; she was quite close to Lauri-Volpi and things could have gotten out of hand. However, the two colleagues decided to remain "good friends" rather than upset everything. The tenor stayed a staunch supporter and valued friend until she died. Ever afterwards, his advocacy ensured that her memory stayed with the public.<sup>147</sup>

With almost no time to learn a new role, except in transit from one place to another, Claudia always put her extraordinary powers of concentration to good use in such situations as the one she now faced. She could learn an entire role away from the piano and preferred to know the text first. Immediately after her *La Scala* triumphs, she was due to give the South American première of *Nerone* by Arrigo Boïto, in whose *Mefistofele* she had appeared often. Boïto was known both as a librettist and a composer. Two of the most important Italian *libretti* are his - those of Verdi's last and greatest efforts, *Otello* and *Falstaff*. *Mefistofele* was begun in 1866, but the composer's political activities delayed its completion until 1868. Nearly twenty years later, *Nerone* appeared, but it was not performed before Boïto's death in 1918. At its *La Scala* debut starring Raisa, in 1924, it was judged inferior to *Mefistofele*. The *protagonista* in this work is Asteria, a snake charmer who is in love with the emperor Nero. Claudia played her in the *Teatro Colón* production on May 22, 1926, and for six more performances. The reception in Argentina was, like the Italian one, lukewarm. In the cast were Pertile and Pinza and another Muzio, the bass Attilio (sometimes spelled Atilio) Muzio. This other Muzio was part of the stock company

<sup>146</sup> Patricia Ann Meyers, "Giacomo Lauri-Volpi", in *The New Grove...*, vol. 10, p.549.

<sup>147</sup> *Grandi voci alla Scala*, p. 8.

at the *Colón* and over the years while his more illustrious namesake was starring at this theatre, he slowly advanced from *comprimario* to minor leads, though he never sang principal roles.

It was an auspicious opera season for Claudia. Ottavio assumed the management of the *Teatro Colón*, and in the space of four months she appeared in as many new roles, all of them premières of a sort. In June, she took up the gauntlet of *Turandot*, not, as one would imagine, appearing as the slave girl Liù, but in the *hoch drammatisc* part of the icy Princess. In challenging such singers as Raisa, the first *Turandot*, and Jeritza, who was to become identified with the role in Europe and at the Metropolitan, Claudia was risking not only her voice, but her reputation. As Melba found when she insisted, in 1896 at the Met, on singing Wagner's Brunnhilde against all advice, this sort of action is a clarion cry to all those who would watch a singer topple. Luckily for Melba, the New York critics were kind, but Krehbiel's famous quote, "The world can ill afford to lose a Melba, even if it should gain a Brunnhilde. But it will not gain a Brunnhilde," chillingly put a cap on the episode with a warning to others.

There is another side to the coin, of course. The expression "art which conceals art" is often used to explain occasions when the near impossible is achieved, and Claudia's *Turandot* may just have been one of those instances. The critic of "*La Prensa*" praised her acting, and, of the vocalization, simply stated that it "...was produced with an effort less visible" in Act Three. Lauri-Volpi, the Calaf, had great respect for Claudia and described her performances from his perspective as "ironical, enigmatic and reserved." There were four performances, and Claudia sang them all without any reported signs of strain. She went on to sing the role in Rio as well that season, but she never was *Turandot* again after 1926. This was almost certainly her own choice, for *Turandot* is not a very sympathetic character until the end and, even then, her capitulation to love is hard to believe, given what has gone before. The

opera became extremely popular, and opportunities to appear in the part must have arisen, given that she was one of the two sopranos chosen to bring it to life.

The rest of that season brought *Chenier*, *Trovatore*, *Cavalleria*, *Tosca*, *Aïda*, only one performance of *Traviata* (undoubtedly by popular demand), and the première of the Argentinian composer Constantino Gaito's *Ollantay* sung in Italian. This work then lay in repose for nineteen years until a revival in 1945, the composer's last year.<sup>148</sup> Gaito's musical education was completed in Italy, and Verdi once conducted a programme of his works at the Conservatory in Milan. *Ollantay* was based on Argentinian themes and was the last of his eleven operas. The final of Claudia's "first performance" roles was as Santuzza for the first time in Buenos Aires, in which she made quite an impact, though of course she had sung it elsewhere. Charles Jahant accuses her of indulging in "...too much heaving of the bosom" in this part in Chicago,<sup>149</sup> but in South America they loved it, declaring that she was Santuzza incarnate. Eduardo Arnosi firmly states that it was one of her greatest interpretations.<sup>150</sup>

Scotto took his opera season to Rio in the middle of August for three weeks. He presented, in the *Teatro Lirico*: *Chenier*, *Trovatore*, *Turandot*, *Tosca*, *Bohème*, and *La Wally*, all starring Claudia and Lauri-Volpi, except that, in *Trovatore*, Pertile was Manrico. Claudia's earnings were used to fund this season and the Buenos Aires season, and it was not the first time Scotto speculated with her money, nor the last.

San Francisco beckoned again in September, and again there was a delay involved in getting there because of a hurricane threat on the Atlantic sailing to New York. Claudia then had to travel to San Francisco by train, so that by the time she arrived

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<sup>148</sup> Arnosi, p. 84.

<sup>149</sup> Jahant, loc. cit.

<sup>150</sup> Arnosi, p. 82.

she was, as Arthur Bloomfield says, in good form.<sup>151</sup>

“At last I am here,” she said to Merola, who embraced her warmly. “It is so bad of me to be late, but only you wait until you hear all I have been through,” she told waiting reporters, to whom she recounted all the different ways she considered getting to San Francisco while the storm threatened her detouring ship, “...it was dreadful! Dreadful, yes, and thrilling, too.”<sup>152</sup>

Moreover, she had lost weight since her appearance there the year before and, claiming that she survived on one meal a day, a noon repast of chicken broth and vegetables, grandly pronounced ‘...the day of the fat prima donna is over.’ Whether speaking ironically and personally, or making a statement, the announcement was certainly premature in all respects.<sup>153</sup> Many, many overweight divas have appeared since those words, and Claudia's weight, as can clearly be seen in photographs, fluctuated so that she sometimes appeared sylph-like and at others was clearly very plump, though at nearly five-foot-ten the extra pounds made little difference to her appearance onstage.

“I carry with me all my own food,” she told reporters. “Live chickens and all the delicacies that I require I carry with me and my own maid superintends their preparation.”<sup>154</sup>

Claudia provided the expected passion in her performances as Mimi, Aïda, Tosca, Leonora in *Trovatore* and Manon in the Puccini opera, all within a space of eight days.

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<sup>151</sup> Bloomfield, Arthur, The San Francisco Opera, 1933-1978, Sausalito, CA: Comstock Editions, 1978, p. 33.

<sup>152</sup> “San Francisco Examiner” undated.

<sup>153</sup> Bloomfield, loc. cit.

<sup>154</sup> Blomfield, loc. cit.

After San Francisco, there was one performance of *La Traviata* in Los Angeles where Claudia had, made an impact in 1924. She immediately embarked on a concert tour across the West and the Midwest before opening the Chicago season in *Aida* on November 8. In Chicago, singers' contracts stipulated that fares to and from the city be paid by the opera company, not only for the artists, but also for one other person besides, and the fees were generous. The repertoire for the principal singers stayed the same from season to season, with the occasional variation. One of these aberrations, in the 1926 season, was Giordano's little opera *La cena delle beffe* (The Feast of the Jest). Claudia took part in this, the North American première, on November 27. The opera concerns trickery and deception in fifteenth century Florence, and Claudia sang the role of Ginevra, the love object of the physically weak hero, who is a poet and painter, a peculiarly "new age" hero for Italian opera, especially as he wins the day by using his wits. The critics begged off, and most of them attended the Army-Navy football game at Soldier's Field, so poor Giordano's opera received very little attention.<sup>155</sup> The other operas Claudia performed in that season duplicated her San Francisco repertory with the exception of *Manon Lescaut*, which was not popular in Chicago.<sup>156</sup>

May Higgins waited for Claudia after performances, walking her back to her hotel, willing to do anything for her. May's position, as buyer at Sears, Roebuck and Co., was soon to see her transferred to New York, but in Chicago she was still living at home. Her adoration of the soprano increased as the years went by, and she continued to send cards and letters and was kept up to date by Estelle Scotto.<sup>157</sup>

A pair of recitals at the end of November and beginning of December, 1926, were reported in the "Philadelphia Record" and the "Baltimore Evening Sun" and are rare accounts of Claudia on the concert platform. In Philadelphia, she sang Mozart and

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<sup>155</sup> Davis, op. cit., p. 170.

<sup>156</sup> Moore, op. cit. p. 298.

<sup>157</sup> Davis, R., Interview with May Higgins, op.cit.

Pergolesi, though the titles are not given in the reports, and Italian and Spanish songs and "...an entire group of English songs." Then, there were arias: *Vissi d'arte*, which she swapped for the programmed *Salce, salce* and *Ave Maria*, from *Otello*, and the obscure *Mia piccirella*, from *Salvator Rosa*, which she later recorded. The "costume" she wore, consisting of "...an old fashioned picture dress in black taffeta, with long black gloves and black hat," gained the reporter's approval. The concert was a morning one, sung at the Penn Athletic Club. The Baltimore concert, a much more formal affair at the Lyric Theatre, contained, besides the Tosca aria, *Pace, pace mio Dio* and then song after song: Donaudy's *Spirate, pur spirate*, Franck's exquisite *Nocturne*, Staub's *L'heure Delicieuse*, Delibes's *La Fille du Cadiz*, and the sprightly *Bonjour, Suzanne*, again included in her last recordings. She ended with the Spanish song *Estrellita*. After she finished the set programme there were the usual demands for encores.<sup>158</sup>

During the Chicago Opera Company tour, which extended into 1927, Claudia sang only one performance of *Aida* in Boston, at the end of January. They then departed for Europe and her villa until April when she was again to sing at *La Scala* in *Chenier* and *Tosca*, the latter under Toscanini, who was moving towards his legendary symphonic phase in New York and so conducting less and less at *La Scala*. The Italian public was not as loyal, and trouble with the Fascists was causing him to cast his eye elsewhere.

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<sup>158</sup> Typed copies of these reviews were included in "Following a Star", May Higgins's collection of letters to the Muzio Fan Club in Chicago.

## Chapter Nine

### 1927, *Norma* Debut and the Onassis Episode

Claudia returned to Buenos Aires in May, 1927, after a peaceful sea journey spent polishing one of the most difficult roles in all opera - Bellini's Druid priestess Norma. She opened in *Norma* at the Colón on May 25. Pollione was Lauri-Volpi and Ebe Stignani played Adalgisa. The conductor was Marinuzzi. It was a strong cast, and both "*La Nación*" and "*La Prensa*" had nothing but praise for Claudia's interpretation, citing her "good taste" and the depth of her emotional involvement.<sup>159</sup> After the run of *Norma* came opening night in *Lohengrin* on June 7th.

Claudia was a secret smoker, like the heroine she had played in *Il segreto di Susanna*. There is evidence to suggest that she had an affair with the young Aristotle Onassis, at that time living in Buenos Aires and attempting to start a cigarette manufacturing business. It is said that he used his connection with her to promote his brand, persuading her to be seen smoking in advertisements for his company.<sup>160</sup> Whether or not she affected the market is anyone's guess, but Onassis was appreciative, though by this time he was now involved romantically with a Russian ballerina who was part of Pavlova's travelling company visiting the city. Pavlova tried to bribe Onassis to give her up but eventually the Russians left without her.<sup>161</sup>

This story provides a window into the mind of Claudia the woman. Perhaps she knew all along that Onassis's attentions were fleeting. Certainly, she recognised that he was exceptionally ambitious and that she had been used, but what other kind of treatment had she known? Scotto's exploitation had set up a pattern of dependency she was to repeat yet again a few years later. Her own life thus supplied much of the

<sup>159</sup> This was another well-remembered interpretation Maria Callas had to contend with when she came to sing here years later.

<sup>160</sup> Evans, Peter, *Ari: The Life and Times of Aristotle Socrates Onassis*, London: Jonathan Cape, 1986, p. 51.

<sup>161</sup> *Ibid.*

material on which she drew for her ever-deepening portrayals onstage. Violetta, Norma, Tosca were her sisters in tragedy, and onstage she merged with them ever more closely. The veracity of her portrayals now took on a frightening intensity.

As for Onassis, turn the clock momentarily forward thirty years, to 1957. Aristotle Onassis, shipping magnate, foe of opera, attends a concert at the *Opéra* in Paris. The singer is beautiful, exciting, tall, a woman of extraordinary dramatic gifts with a voice she is able to colour with the passion of her heroines. The audience is mesmerised by her performance and bouquet after bouquet rains upon her as she takes her bows.

Flowers begin to arrive at her hotel with cards signed "Onassis." The next year the prima donna and the tycoon, who by now is one of the world's richest men, meet. She is Maria Callas. Just as Onassis had tantalised and flattered Claudia thirty years before, in his youth, he now lay siege to Maria Callas. She leaves her husband and becomes his mistress. Eventually her career is in tatters, he abandons her for a wealthy widow and Callas becomes a recluse, tries to make a comeback but fails and dies in her Paris apartment aged 53. There are unconfirmed rumours of suicide.

Claudia dallied in Buenos Aires after Onassis's desertion. She appeared in São Paulo in *Traviata*, *Trovatore*, and *Chenier* at the end of the season. There was no urgency to depart, as she was not to appear in Chicago until October, when she left for the northern hemisphere.

There were to be no operatic appearances in San Francisco, but Claudia sang concerts there on October 13 and 18, heralded by an interview in the "...Chronicle":

"True, I know all the operas so well I believe I could sing every part...but there is something in recital work - perhaps it is that your audience is nearer to you and not under the spell of scenery and a great orchestra - that makes you 'en rapport' with them; in other words you scent their reaction and it gives you an answering thrill. When I am singing I like to single out some particular person in the audience, preferably a very young one, because their enthusiasm and emotions are mirrored on their faces; then I sing to that

one."<sup>162</sup>

She didn't return to San Francisco for five years, but when she did it was to open the first season in the new War Memorial Opera House, which is the home of that company still.

In a concert in Los Angeles later in October, Claudia sang a few arias. A preference for sentimental crowd-pleasing items like Liza Lehmann's *The Cuckoo* often invaded her concert programmes, perhaps because this is what was expected of her. The American West was still thought of as frontier land.

Claudia arrived in Chicago to sing Violetta to Schipa's Alfredo on November 3, 1927. It was an auspicious and nerve-wracking opening. The National Broadcasting Company had negotiated a contract with the company to begin broadcasting their productions, one a month, and Claudia's voice was heard by an audience totalling 2,000,000 nationwide. Not all of the opera was heard by the critics, however, because competing with it across the river in Orchestra Hall was the Boston Symphony, after a sixteen year absence, under Koussevitsky, making his Chicago debut.<sup>163</sup> Karleton Hackett, the critic for the *Chicago Post*, wrote rhapsodically of the first act, and then:

... a rush away with the return in time for the finish [sic] act. If the two intervening acts were on a par with the first and last it must have been a brilliant performance. Down in New England - where they know - they have a saying that if the upper and lower crusts are right you may be sure that it is really a pie; so we will take the second and third acts for granted.

Mme. Muzio's final scene as la traviata [sic] is one of the great performances of the operatic stage. Last evening she put heart and soul into it and her voice

The Fan Club welcomed her back and she again excited the enthusiasm of the public for her Loreleys (according to Ronald Davis, the "most effective role of her Chicago

<sup>162</sup> *San Francisco Chronicle*, September 11, 1927.

<sup>163</sup> Moore, Edward, op. cit p. 321.

career”<sup>164</sup>) Aïdas, Toscas, Santuzzas and Leonoras that season - in all twenty-one performances in the three-and-one-half months she was resident in the Congress Hotel. There were side-trips for a concert on December 9 in Milwaukee's Pabst Theatre and to New York, on December 16, to make her solo recital broadcast debut on radio station WEAJ, which was heard on all of the NBC Red Chain stations around the country.<sup>165</sup>

Claudia was forced to abandon the Chicago Civic Opera Company tour in Detroit, for her mother, Giovanna, was so ill that Claudia asked for leave from the Chicago company for the next season and departed with Giovanna and Estelle to join Ottavio in Rome, determined to stay in Italy so that Giovanna could recover. It was rumoured, though, that Mussolini would send her packing back to Chicago to complete the season, fearing possible American prejudice against Italy due to the broken contract, such was her then perceived importance in the international opera world.<sup>166</sup>

Claudia's Roman Spring began in April, with three performances of her by- now- finely-tuned *Violetta*, which had brought her so much critical and popular notice in the Americas.

Claudia's debut coincided with the Teatro Costanzi's transmogrification into the Teatro Reale dell' Opera, by which name it is known today. It is the only opera house in Rome subsidized by the state and local government, in return for which it is expected to mount new operas by Italians and early operas of special interest. Perhaps it is poetically proper that it was in the Eternal City that Claudia was best understood. Rodolfo Celletti speaks of the timeless quality of her singing in *Grandi voci d' Italia*,

<sup>164</sup> Davis, Ronald, *Opera in Chicago*, p. 174.

<sup>165</sup> Moore, op. cit., p. 324

<sup>166</sup> Ibid.

a tract about great voices which appeared sporadically in the 1950s, and of which Celletti was one of the editors.

The Romans now began to claim her as their own. Scotto, according to Edith Mason,<sup>167</sup> had taken control of the opera company at the *Teatro Reale* and arranged for Claudia to appear there in *Traviata*, *Tosca* and *Cavalleria*. It was here, hearing her as Tosca and Santuzza with Lauri-Volpi, and Violetta with Schipa, that the Eternal City clasped her to its collective heart and called her "*La Divina Claudia*." They meant it, and only one season after that one went without Claudia. Gradually, Rome became the home she had not had, even though "home" was, as it had been most years, a suite of rooms in a hotel.

She returned to Buenos Aires in May. She sang for the first time, in this season, both Nedda and Santuzza in the same evening on August 13, after numerous Violettas and Toscas and three appearances as Norma, three as Maddelena in *Chenier*, two as Mimi and two as Loreley. Serafin was again in the pit, conducting her as the Druid priestess and the dying courtesan, but most of the other works were conducted by Franco Paolantonio. Her last performance was in the "Spring Season" in *Cavalleria*. In Rio she repeated *Traviata* and *Norma* and sang *Manon Lescaut* for Serafin, and *Tosca* and *Loreley* under Paolantonio. In São Paulo, she appeared in six operas, including the only *Mefistofele* on the tour, and in Santiago she sang Norma. It was an extensive tour, and it was almost, for Claudia, a farewell, for circumstances forced her to absent herself from South America for the next five years.

May Higgins had been transferred to the New York office of Sears, Roebuck and Co. Fortunately her immediate superior at Sears was Mrs. May Sprintz, a Dallas-born opera lover who also admired Claudia. Together these two women decided to take a trip to Europe. They took a month off, but for May it was a trip that would change her life and take her away from Sears, Roebuck and all that she knew.

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<sup>167</sup> Letter from Edith Mason to Francis Robinson dated December 4, 1964.

May lost no time in getting in touch with Claudia, who was by now in Rome living at the *Quirinali*. They stopped in Paris for one day only and then, when they reached Rome, May found that Claudia had sent to her room, which she had booked next to her own apartment in the hotel, a huge bouquet of roses. Claudia could not remember Mrs. Sprintz's name and kept referring to her as "Mrs. Springtime."<sup>168</sup>

One day, after lunch, they were taken for a drive in the country in the singer's luxurious Italian car, an Isotta Fraschini, all blue and silver, and Claudia said "Why don't you and Mrs. Springtime just finish your trip and then come back and stay with me for a while?" Naturally they agreed, and after taking in the South of Italy and Milan, they returned to Paris, from whence May Sprintz, having had second thoughts, returned to New York. May Higgins took her courage in hand and sent a cable to Sears asking for some more time, and then she returned to Rome to be with Claudia, who by now was singing at the *Teatro Reale*. May was taken everywhere the soprano went, and in the course of events she met Chaliapin, who was also singing in Rome. The singer and the Russian bass spent a lot of time together. Feodor was one of the few people Claudia would see socially. Thanks to her mother's dependency on her and her own confused private life, she seldom went out, and Chaliapin amused her. He was very fond of Italy, having made his fame outside Russia first in this cradle of opera, and he returned there to sing until the end of his career.

The break with Scotto had finally come and his wife Estelle was forced to leave Claudia's service. Continually taking risks with her earnings, when the stock market crashed in that year of 1929, beginning the famed Great Depression in America, Scotto lost much of Claudia's fortune. Unknown to her, he signed her name as guarantor on a loan for 500,000 lire from the Roman Government. He defaulted on the payment, and she was forced to dissolve their partnership in the courts under a legal claim of *matrimonio mal assortito*, even though there was no marriage. She

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<sup>168</sup> Davis, R., Interview with May Higgins, op.cit.

then had to pay off the amount and a substantial penalty, and the publicity surrounding the whole sordid affair saw her proudly assuring the Roman public at the end of April 1929 that the matter had been settled.<sup>169</sup>

Scotto had the same kind of dealings with others on a wider scale. Years later, he was to be found embroiled in the failure of the U. S. Opera Company, a venture which began in 1946, ten years after Claudia's death. Involved were Maria Callas and her husband, Meneghini, and the promoter Richard Bagarozzy. Nicola Rossi-Lemeni, then a young singer, was to sing Timur in the proposed *Turandot* opening the new company, but he reported that "...[ Scotto] was a scoundrel. He disposed of the entire amount that he had received for the season before it had even started."<sup>170</sup>

With the departure of Scotto, a hole in Claudia's emotional life opened. Perhaps Ottavio had introduced her to the young lawyer who became her press agent. Or, it may be that, as had Onassis, another young man with Mediterranean good looks saw the opportunity to exploit her. In any case, she married Renato Liberati on the 24th of July, 1929, in Faenza. Renato was, at the time, twenty - five years old. He seemed to appear from nowhere. His curly black hair and brown eyes set off a very handsome face, though he was several inches shorter than his new bride.<sup>171</sup> From then on Renato was always with her in Italy and on tour to other places, though from the outset it was not a happy union. The fights and disagreements that troubled their marriage began almost immediately. He was already on the scene when May Higgins arrived. May mistrusted him on sight although she had no choice but to tolerate him. She delighted in thwarting him whenever she could, especially if she divined that his presence at a function would be awkward for Claudia. On occasion, she simply told him he wasn't invited and swept Claudia away before he had a chance to object.<sup>172</sup> She always alluded to him in later years as "the fly in the

<sup>169</sup> Grandi Voci, p. 8

<sup>170</sup> Scott, Michael, Maria Meneghini Callas, London: Simon & Shuster, 1992, pp 28-29..

<sup>171</sup> Douglas, op.cit., p. 125.

<sup>172</sup> Davis, op. cit.

ointment.” It is quite likely that May, who later made the revealing statement that had she only been around six months earlier she might have stopped the marriage,<sup>173</sup> was in love with Claudia, much more than she allowed herself to suspect, certainly more than just a “crush” or hero worship would have indicated.

May was beguiled into remaining in Rome a week longer than she had planned, and then Claudia asked her to stay on as her secretary. She depended entirely on her secretary to take care of travel arrangements, book hotels, and do all of the menial but necessary tasks she herself found perplexing. For her own part, May was excited and flattered but terribly afraid. She was advised by her parents and all her friends at work to refuse, but her desire to be of service to her idol won out in the end. She went back to the USA to see her parents and resign from her job. Her mother's comment was: “At least now you'll be here for the opera season.” Claudia remained in Rome until the end of May and then sang in Florence and Zürich before departing for her Riviera villa.<sup>174</sup>

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<sup>173</sup> Author's interview with Caterina Secchi.

<sup>174</sup> Letter from May Higgins to Muzio Fan Club, April 19, 1930.

## Chapter Ten

### The Beginning of the Higgins Era

From October 1, 1929, May Higgins kept a running account of her years with Claudia, in the form of letters to the Claudia Muzio Fan Club, “published” under the name Following a Star.<sup>175</sup> The narrative begins with Claudia's arrival in New York on the *Biancamano*, which docked that night. The passengers had to wait until morning to disembark and go through customs, but May procured permission to go aboard. It was then that she officially began her duties as Claudia's secretary. The Chicago season was barely a month away, and after a round of farewells at Sears, one of which saw her receive a set of luggage, she left after 27 years of service, literally to follow her star. Arriving in Chicago on October 29, they put up at the Morrison Hotel and departed for Milwaukee, where Claudia was singing a concert the next night. They were joined by Salvador and Carmen Herrasti, a wealthy Mexican couple. In 1921, they had begun to follow Claudia, after hearing her in Mexico City, her one and only season in that city. Thereafter, until she died, they spent their leisure-filled lives trailing Claudia, always finding out where she was going to appear next and arranging to have seats, whether in San Francisco, Chicago, or in various cities and towns in between. If Claudia sang, they were in the audience.

May's secretarial duties began in November in earnest. Claudia opened in *Traviata* at the Chicago Civic Opera on November 6. On November 9, she sang a historic *Trovatore*, being the first opera broadcast from the Chicago Lyric Opera stage.<sup>176</sup> Before Christmas she appeared as Violetta, Leonora, Desdemona and Aida. On the 22nd of November, she and May took the time off to go Christmas shopping, which May described as “an event!”

<sup>175</sup> Website: [www.mrichter.com/opera/files/follstar.pdf](http://www.mrichter.com/opera/files/follstar.pdf)

<sup>176</sup> Davis, R. Opera in Chicago, p. 185

Singing again on December 10 for the University of Michigan Choral Union, one of America's oldest established concert series, Claudia won over the highly sophisticated Ann Arbor audience with her famed platform manner and eclectic choice of programme, including four songs in English: "Phyllis has such Charming Graces," by Wilson; "Yesteryear" by Crist; "Lullaby" by Shadwick, and "Under the Greenwood Tree" by Buzzi-Peccia - all forgotten now. Charles Lurvey was the pianist, the same accompanist she used in California. Claudia had not performed in Ann Arbor since May, 1918, when she sang with the Chicago Symphony in the May Festival. She returned to Chicago to make a radio broadcast on the "Armour Hour," sponsored by the American meat company, whose product "Spam" has left its everlasting mark, on WKYW and then sang in *La Forza del Destino* on December 14, after which there was a break for Christmas. She was back onstage in *Tosca* the night after Christmas and two nights later sang Desdemona for the holiday crowds. In January, there were repeats of all the operas she had sung that season and a concert in Orchestra Hall on the 29th. The company traveled to Boston and Cleveland in February. The trains were luxurious and each singer had a private compartment but ate with the company in the dining car. An article in the Boston Globe of January 24 described how the company traveled:

The company comes in two special trains, which are running on a schedule that has complete right-of-way that will enable the singers to make time equal to the speed of the Twentieth Century Limited\*. For days past preliminary cars of baggage, scenery and property have been arriving at the Boston & Albany Railroad yards, in the vicinity of the Boston Opera House. The scenes for tomorrow night's *Andrea Chenier* are already in place; costumes of Charles Marshall, who sings the title role, of Claudia Muzio, of Cesare Formichi and the dozen other stars scheduled for tomorrow's opera, are hanging in the respective dressing rooms.<sup>177</sup>

\*The Twentieth Century Limited was a model high-speed train of the day, which still travels as part of the Amtrak network

The Italians hardly ate on the trains, satisfying their hunger only in the good Italian restaurants in each city they visited. Claudia sang a concert in Cleveland and then

returned to New York. May had departed for New York earlier and spent a day at the insurance appraiser's office preparing for the journey to Europe. The enormous amount of luggage which travelled with Claudia each time was growing yearly, and her costumes and jewelry were worth a great deal of money. The singer insisted on an immense amount of detail in her costumes and preferred to wear real jewels, not fakes. May had the nightmarish charge to keep up with all of this and to know its value and where everything was. She listed everything in every drawer of every trunk that went on board the *Aquitania* when they left New York on February 1.

The Costume List she kept read like this:

Trunk No. 1 - Hanging  
 Purple Dressing Room Curtain  
 White Silk Scarf  
 White embroidered Silk Coat, Ermine Trim  
 Two White Nightgowns - Traviata  
 Black Veleve robe                   "  
 Two underslips                   "  
 Crinoline  
 Gold and Black Velvet Tosca Cape  
 White Chiffon Ruffled Dress - Boheme  
 Blue wool plaid dress               "  
 Blue plaid silk dress               "  
 Violet velvet cape               "  
 Violet velvet hat               "  
 Wine velvet dress               Forza  
 Velvet boy suit (cape)           "  
 Prate(sic) outfit (under)       "  
 White Crepe Nun dress       "  
 Black boots                   "  
In Box  
 Pink muff for Boheme  
 Black kid shoes "

Drawer #1

Boheme shawl, apron, velvet ribbons  
Boheme wig  
Boheme head band  
Aida make-up

Drawer #2 (Traviata)

Box of flowers  
 White fan  
 Black fan

Yellow satin shoes  
 Black satin shoes  
 White satin shoes with ribbon bows  
 White mules  
 Box jewelry  
 Silk Stockings

Drawer #3 (Cavalleria)

Three pair tights  
 Pink silk vest  
 Green wool shirt with silk blouse  
 Green velvet Bolero  
 White cashmere shawl  
 Paisley shawl  
 White cotton undershirt  
 White cotton stockings  
 Sicilian apron  
 Black kid shoes  
 China dog (?)  
 Doll

Drawer #4

Pair lavender house slippers  
 Table cover  
 Make-up

Drawer #5 (Forza)

Black tricorne  
 Two wigs  
 Metal cloth shoes  
 Brown sandals  
 Spanish comb  
White cords

Drawer #6 (Aida)

Green chiffon beaded dress  
 Green veil  
 Two blue chiffon veils  
 Black chiffon with Leopard Skin dress  
 Black and gold veil  
 Navy blue dress with black and silver  
 Black veil  
 Red sandals  
 Gold lace dress (U.S.)

Trunk #2

Black silk dress (white trim) Chenier  
 Light blue satin dress                   "  
 White brocaded silk dress               "

Black, white & red silk dress "

Black cloth cape, velvet collar "

White lace dress Traviata

Black taffeta dress "

Lavender velvet dress "

Rose Brocade dress "

Yellow lace dress "

Drawer #1 (Chenier)

Ornaments

Black kid shoes

White satin shoes

White & black wigs

Drawer #2 (Traviata)

Grey suede shoes

Box gardenias (actually camellias)

Gold metal cloth shoes

White satin shoes

Gilt hair ornament

Bag of stockings

Hankerchief(sic) case

Trunk # 3

Yellow satin dress Tosca

Red cloth gold lined cape "

Gold Lace Blue lining cape"

Lav. satin dress, velvet coat "

Black silk bead-embroidered(sic) "

Blue velvet dress, velvet coat " (U.S.)

Heavy white corded silk dress "

Tosca cane

Blue satin shoes

Lavender satin shoes

White satin shoes

Loreley harp

In bag

Blue velvet and Black velvet Shoes Trovatore

Drawer #1

Two wigs Tosca

Gold leaf headress Tosca

Dresser scarf

Two pair of tights

Drawer # 2 (Trovatore)

Two light blue satin dresses

White Nun veil

White veil  
 Wig and hair ornaments  
 Black velvet dress

Drawer # 3 (Norma)

Two white silk dresses  
 Ecu silk dress  
 White cape  
 Red cape  
 Purple cape  
 Stiletto falche, bracelets  
 Green leaf crown  
 Black veil  
 White sandals  
 Cords for dresses

Drawer #4 ( Loreley)

Brown veiling dress  
 Green wool skirt  
 Red veiling dress with cape  
 Two wigs  
 Two combs  
 Brown sandals  
 Flowers  
 Red silk dress

Drawer #5 (Pagliacci)

Rose colored torn silk blouse and bolero  
 Grey silk blouse with bolero  
 Black velvet bolero  
 White underskirt  
 Blue and white striped silk & velvet dress  
 White bloomers  
 Brown sandals, rose stockings  
 Blue satin shoes  
 Tamborine(sic)  
 Brown felt hat  
 Ornaments, black and white wigs

Drawer #6

Lavender velvet plumed hat  
U.S.  
 White satin dress (green embroidery)  
 Green velvet jacket  
 Green velvet hat with plumes<sup>178</sup>

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<sup>178</sup> The author is grateful to Caterina Secchi for providing this list, which was part of the legacy left to her by May Higgins.

This list was begun by Estelle Scotto and then completed by May. It is evocative. As one reads it, certain objects seen in photographs leap to mind. Tosca's golden laurel wreath is perhaps the item most familiar from the many times the famous oval portrait has appeared illustrating articles about Claudia or on the covers of the reissues of her recordings.



*Claudia Muzio wearing the golden laurel wreath*

The inordinate number of pairs of shoes depicts the care with which Claudia selected and matched her costumes and the fact that so many are made of satin suggests that she never spared any expense. It was quite a responsibility keeping up with all of these items, booking travel, seeing to hotel accommodation, writing to the Fan Club, and protecting the singer's privacy. The job was an entirely new beginning for the Irish spinster who'd always worked for the big firm of Sears; but May Higgins was up to the many demands of becoming personal secretary to a major opera star by virtue of her dedication, her resourcefulness, and her iron will.

When they arrived in Rome, Claudia became very ill and had to spend two weeks in bed before she was allowed to sing. But sing she eventually did - four performances

of *La Traviata*. She seemed to be able to sing through any kind of illness and though exhausted even after two weeks of bed rest, she gave her all, according to May. In Naples, where she sang four more Violettas, the posters advertising her first appearance at the San Carlo since 1913 had her name in foot-high letters and the reaction in the house was wildly enthusiastic. May's seat was specially placed down front, next to the orchestra railing, from which she saw and heard everything.<sup>179</sup>

The management of La Scala had made specific plans to welcome Claudia. The party was booked in at the Grand Hotel, in the same suite Verdi had occupied for several years while he was having an affair with the soprano Theresa Stoltz. The demand for tickets for Claudia's appearances was high, and she arrived at La Scala to find people already outside pushing to get in to hear her as Violetta, her sixteenth performance in this part since May had joined her.<sup>180</sup>

As they were near the Italian lakes, a drive to see Claudia's aunt, Felicia Gavirati, Giovanna's sister, in PonteTresa, was a must. Easter Sunday there began a month of rest in Riolo Bagni. It was May's first time in the little spa town and the usual red-carpet welcome for the opera star was a bit of a surprise for her. Claudia was very close to a collapse. So much had happened so quickly. The ending of her relationship with Ottavio, losing her secretary, breaking in a new one, the rough sea journey, her own illness as well as Giovanna's failing health - and all the while she never missed a performance, constantly aware of the need to keep the coffers filled.

With the coming of the Depression, the bubble of high fees burst for many opera singers. In 1935, a series of reforms in Italy included the limiting of fees for sopranos to 6000 lire per performance, or about US\$500. These reforms had an escape clause which included 'exceptional' singers allowed to received as much as Lit20,000 a performance and the soprano roster did not include Claudia's name. It is a curious omission in the light of the awards heaped on her head by the fascist

<sup>179</sup> Letter from May Higgins to the Claudia Muzio Fan Club dated April 19, 1930.

<sup>180</sup> *Ibid.*

government.

At the Metropolitan, fees were drastically reduced, with a policy of limiting the top to \$1000. This was accepted by all but Gigli. His refusal to welcome the reforms of the newly appointed Director of the Board of Trustees, Paul Cravath, resulted in his saying farewell to the Met. It was a rash act and he lived to regret it, but he never sang there again after 1932.<sup>181</sup> As much of the world's economy was tied to that of the United States, both South American and European opera houses felt the pinch to a degree, and disaster befell the C6lon for a while but it soon recovered.

Unfortunately, Claudia could not travel to South America because Giovanna became so unwell that it was unwise to take her, and Claudia would not leave her behind. Thus she had to forego the lucrative seasons at the C6lon and other South American houses during these years when she could've been rebuilding her finances. This closeness with Giovanna tells much about Claudia's reciprocal dependency on her mother, for although Giovanna was totally reliant on her daughter for food, shelter, and any of life's luxuries, it may be that Claudia's habit of having her mother close by was the consequence one of those superstitions operatic singers and actors often have. Enrico Caruso must have been referring to Claudia in this excerpt from his treatise on singing:

We of the opera are often inclined to be superstitious in a way that might annul (sic) matter of fact Americans....a prima donna who is a favorite on two continents and is always escorted to the theatre by her mother, invariably goes through the very solemn ceremony of kissing her mother good-by and receiving her blessing before going on to sing. The young woman feels that she could not possibly sing a note if the mother's eyes were not on her every moment from the wings<sup>182</sup>

Such a superstition would certainly explain Giovanna's constant presence and the impossibility of long journeys if her health was not up to it, but it became costly indulging in it. This notion is further supported by other reported superstitions.

<sup>181</sup> Gigli, op. cit. p. 175.

<sup>182</sup> Caruso, Enrico, *The Art of Singing in Caruso and Tetrzzini on the Art of Singing*, New York: Dover Publications Inc., 1981, pp. 68-69

Nigel Douglas tells the following story:

I was given another personal glimpse of Claudia Muzio, and the touching vulnerability of her character, while I myself was appearing recently in the Teatro Colón, Buenos Aires. The mother of one of my colleagues had been a chorus singer there in Muzio's day, and she recalled an evening when Muzio was seriously concerned about a sore throat. The leading clarinetist in the orchestra, a particular friend of Muzio's, went into her dressing-room before the performance and, gently laying his thumb and forefinger either side of her larynx, he assured her that she had nothing to worry about. '*Hai una gola d'oro*' he said – 'You have a throat of gold'. She sang that evening like an angel, and for the rest of the season she was unable to go on stage until he had come to her dressing-room and performed exactly the same production to exactly the same words.<sup>183</sup>

The people of Riolo adored their resident celebrity and often offered her spontaneous tributes. May recorded one of them :

The other morning about one o'clock we were awakened by strains of "Loreley" being played under our windows. Looking out we saw several hundred people, and the orchestra which has been playing on the Piazza every evening for the past month. It is composed of players from some of the best orchestras in Europe and they are marvelous musicians. They had learned that "Loreley" was Claudia's favorite music, so they decided to serenade her. The music, played softly, was perfectly beautiful and there wasn't one word spoken by the crowd. When they had finished, the crowd melted away as quietly as they had come. It was an odd and touching tribute.<sup>184</sup>

On September 1, Claudia and her party left Riolo, the convertible top on the car down so that the people of Riolo could see her properly. The car took them to Trieste, stopping in Padua so they could visit the Shrine of St. Anthony. Next day they boarded the liner *Saturnia* for New York, luxuriating in the "Imperial Suite" with its private verandah. After a smooth sailing which took them through Greece, where they took on a cargo of figs, then through the Adriatic to the Mediterranean, up the coast past Naples, via Marseilles to Gibraltar then Home.<sup>185</sup>

<sup>183</sup> Douglas, *op.cit.* p. 204.

<sup>184</sup> Letter from May Higgins to the Claudia Muzio Fan Club dated August 14, 1930.

<sup>185</sup> May Higgins, letter dated September 5, 1930.

## Chapter Eleven

### The Last Chicago Season

Leaving New York for Chicago the Claudia entourage was broken up while May travelled to Los Angeles for a relative's wedding. She undertook a small concert tour, taking in Colorado Springs, Colorado and then to San Francisco where she joined May, who had booked them into the Fairmont Hotel. The night she arrived she gave a concert in Berkeley, at the University of California, and, during October, sang three further concerts in the area, at Dreamland Auditorium on October 2, at the Exposition Auditorium on the 18th, and again at Dreamland Auditorium on the 21st. The pianist for all these recitals was Charles Lurvey. Claudia wrote to May in Los Angeles and did a drawing of herself and Lurvey on the platform, Claudia in a gold lace concert dress of which she was very proud. Her girlish sense of humour inspired her to portray the audience with potato heads.<sup>186</sup>

These concerts, all different, contained Italian and French items in equal numbers and then a section of songs in English. There were arias as well - *Deh vieni non tardar*, *Casta diva*, *Mia piccirella*, *O mio babbino caro*, *Vissi d'arte*, and *D'amor sull'ali rose*. She sang two of César Franck's songs, the *Nocturne* and *Serenade*, works then popular with good platform singers, and Debussy's *Beau Soir* and Delibes' s *Les Filles de Cadiz* from her recorded repertoire.

Much of the success of the evening depended on the personality of the singer, and in this respect Claudia left many memories behind her. Her smile is often remembered by those who write about the experience of Claudia in concert. But when she began to sing, she "...stilled the listener to moods of poetic solemnity" in the words of one critic. Even more praise was reserved for her vocal

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<sup>186</sup> Author's interview with Caterina Secchi.

characteristics. "A catalog of her vocal virtues would make a nice table of contents for a textbook of singing. Breathing, enunciation, tonal rectitude; these are axiomatic with her. She phrases with intelligence; loses herself in the rhythmic pattern. But beyond these details the greatest of all beauties is in her songs: the fitness of vocal texture and expression to the textual meanings. Almost...she could merely speak her songs, abandoning the melodies altogether, and carry to her auditors the thrill of passionate truth." She was usually encouraged by the audience to sing a string of encores, and on one occasion, at Berkeley, found it necessary to leave the stage and return dressed in her coat as a hint that she would like to go before the patrons would quit the aisles.

Continuing across the USA, there were further recitals in Tulsa, Oklahoma, Lawrence, Kansas, Sheboygan, Wisconsin, Elgin, Illinois, Jamestown, New York, and Erie, Pennsylvania. Arriving back in Chicago with four days to rest and rehearse, *La Forza del Destino* brought her onto the stage of the Auditorium Theatre for her first in a demanding roster of operas: *Amor dei tre Re*, followed by a concert in Indianapolis; *Cavalleria*, then a concert in Kansas City and one in Toledo; *Cavalleria* and *Otello*, then *Traviata*, *Trovatore*, and *Mefistofele* before New Year's 1931. The tour, for which she added *Boheme*, *Pagliacci* and *Aida*, began in January in Boston. Hilda Burke, who was to sing Santuzza on tour, broke her arm in rehearsals and Claudia stepped in at the last moment. She only had time to change her wig from Santuzza's black one to Nedda's white one before going back onstage.

She celebrated her forty-second birthday in between the last night of the Boston appearances and arriving in Pittsburgh. After Pittsburgh there were Memphis, Tulsa (where for the first time May had heard Claudia sing Nedda) again, Dallas (she did not sing there but they visited the mother of "Mrs. Springtime"), San Antonio, Los Angeles, San Francisco and Seattle, then Portland, Lincoln,

Nebraska, and back to Chicago. Concerts in Chicago, Buffalo, Niagara, and Binghamton led her back to New York City and embarkation on the *Saturnia* at midnight on March 27.<sup>187</sup>

For the return journey to Italy the Fan Club had packed some gifts and games to while away the party's hours on the *Saturnia* on which they sailed just prior to Easter, 1931. The conductor Roberto Moranzoni, with whom Claudia had worked in Chicago since his debut in the 1924-25 season, was on board and was included in their party as a kind of "member of the family." This sort of closeness with a colleague was unusual for her, and Moranzoni felt honoured to be singled out as worthy of her companionship when in private. A rare picture of Claudia's entourage in a social context is painted by May's description of their Easter Sunday:

...I must tell you how much Claudia and all of us enjoyed the daily games and jokes that Signy prepared. They surely were well thought out. Renato won the auto games and Claudia won the others. The whole family went up on deck Easter Morning, which gave me the chance to arrange the table. Can't tell you how much they liked all the cards and the favors. Moranzoni thought you were very nice to include him too. Grace Ober's Easter bonnets were much admired -- all the other things in her box were, too--to say nothing of the horse-shoe and the shamrock to the "Wild Irish Rose". Must confess that the first four days' games were all played on the fourth day, as yours truly was laid low for the first three. Claudia spent most of the first days in bed, too --not sea-sick, thank goodness, but just tired out. Since then, we have been out every day and Claudia as you would know is the chief attraction on the boat, even though she will try to make herself inconspicuous. Mama has been fine all during the trip. Never missed a meal or a movie, and if she isn't playing cards, she is promenading. She is the best sport in the family. Think the word "indefatigable" was coined especially for her.<sup>188</sup>

On the way to Rome they stayed one night only at Riolo and the reception for the party was stupendous. The streets were lined with young and old and baskets of

<sup>187</sup> Letter from May Higgins. to Muzio Fan Club dated March 14, 1931.

<sup>188</sup> Op. cit. Wednesday, April 8, 1931.

flowers were presented and bouquets rained into the car. Tears of welcome greeted them and a quiet departure the next morning was made very difficult

Rome was meant to provide a restful place where they could stay for two weeks, but the pressure put on Claudia to sing - whether in concert or opera didn't matter - by Ottavio, with whom she still had a professional relationship in his capacity as impresario for the Teatro Reale, was so intense that after many refusals she took flight with her band of followers to Naples. They visited Caruso's final resting place and drove along the Bay of Naples to Amalfi.

They arrived a few days later at Riolo again. In acknowledgement of the devotion of the townspeople in Riolo, Claudia sang at Mass on Sunday morning - her selections were the Gounod *Ave Maria* and *La Vergine degli Angeli* from *La Forza del Destino*, the church choir singing the monks' parts. The church organist was very nervous at the thought of playing for so great a singer, but the opportunity would, he knew, never come again.<sup>189</sup>

On board the *Saturnia* again, on October 24, gradually it dawned on them that Claudia was to open the Chicago season on November 2nd.<sup>190</sup> Unbeknown to her, she was about to begin her last season in Chicago. Twice before, in 1910 and in 1922, different Chicago companies had struggled with spectacular financial disaster, only to rise again like a Phoenix, to use the obvious simile. But in 1931, in the wake of the 1929 crash, even the millionaires who had benevolently bestowed opera on their city could not save the Chicago Civic Opera. From 1932 until after World War II, locally-produced opera died in that city.

It was said of Claudia by her following in Chicago that she "seemed above

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<sup>189</sup> Letter from May Higinis to Claudia Muzio Fan Club, dated July 16, 1931.

<sup>190</sup> Op. cit. October 24, 1931.

criticism," echoing the sentiments of her colleague Ebe Stignani. Reviews, it is true, were consistently empty of adverse comments, when every other soprano suffered barbs at times.<sup>191</sup> This ultimate season began with *Tosca* on November 2, 1931, with Claudia, Kiepura, Vanni-Marcoux and Salvatore Baccaloni and ended for Claudia on January 23. The last opera she sang on the stage of the Auditorium Theatre in Chicago was *Cavalleria Rusticana*.<sup>192</sup>

Tragically, only three years after moving optimistically to its new theatre, one that, with its modern stage machinery and space for scenery and its amenities for artists, was the envy of the Metropolitan, the Chicago Civic Opera Company was no more. The tour went ahead, and in Boston Claudia braved the snow to get to the Opera House. She sang two performances, one of *Tosca* and one of *La Traviata*, both attended by Geraldine Farrar, who sent her bouquets and visited her backstage to wish her a Happy Birthday on February 7. The two former Metropolitan stars had not seen one another for nearly ten years. Farrar was not alone in seeking out Claudia after the performances. "I said that half of the ermine wraps and swallow tails in Boston must have been there," May boasted to her friends. The Fan Club wired flowers from Chicago and sent cards. Claudia acknowledged them with a note appended to a letter from May: "To All my girls - a big kiss and thanks for your telegrams, the lovely flowers and the birthday cards - Cuckoo!" and signed it "Claudia." (Whether she meant "Cuckoo!" for "Ta-ta" or whether it was a private joke between her and "the girls," it was a strange sign-off. It was, however, the name of one of the slight "encore" type works which she often sang in concert [see

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<sup>191</sup> Richards, op. cit. p. 206.

<sup>192</sup> After the company folded, the Muzio Fan Club kept functioning. Thirty-five years later they were still keeping the memory of their namesake before the Chicago public by making sure that the anniversary of Muzio's death was observed with a radio broadcast in her memory on May 24. Marty Robinson of radio station WFMT began a series of broadcasts with the title "The First 50 Years," in which he made programmes about all of the principal singers of the various opera companies of Chicago. These broadcasts, preserved on tape, make up a very important archive of great singing. (Another Robinson, Francis, of the Metropolitan Opera Broadcasts, produced a similar series of programmes within the Texaco Metropolitan Opera Broadcasts. Both Robinsons included a programme about Muzio in their series, and both played similar examples of her recorded output.)

p. 78], and perhaps this is an “in” joke involving that song.)<sup>193</sup>

The collapse of the Chicago Civic Opera wiped out the major source of income for its regular singers. Many of them sang almost exclusively for the company, and for years, until the end of World War II, there was no resident company in Chicago. For Claudia, it meant that the upcoming return to South America after five years, already planned and contracted, was even more significant, for it was essential that work be found in all seasons of the year. It also meant that more work in Europe would have to be found to make up for the loss of the long and lucrative Chicago season.

The Boston performances over, Claudia then sang in a sponsored radio broadcast carried by the stations WJZ in New York and WBZ in Boston. Swift and Company, the meat packers, were also manufacturers of Vigoro, a popular plant food. Claudia shared the programme with the Swift “Master Gardener” who gave out helpful gardening hints between programme items.<sup>194</sup>

Palm Beach, Florida, was, in the 1930s, the glittering setting for a winter “season” of the rich New Yorkers and east-coast millionaires who had supplanted the original “Four Hundred” of Old New York about which Edith Wharton wrote. The sumptuous winter palaces of the Vanderbilts, the Morgans and their friends attracted away from their drafty castles and townhouses the cream of European aristocracy, including Edward Prince of Wales, later King of England, still later Duke of Windsor. The Prince had met Claudia in Buenos Aires after a performance of *Loreley* in 1925, and it was to please him that she was asked to come to Palm Beach for one concert, on March 7th.<sup>195</sup>

<sup>193</sup> Letter from May Higgins to Claudia Muzio Fan Club, dated February 6-7, 1932.

<sup>194</sup> Richards, op.cit. p. 206.

<sup>195</sup> This concert was reported in the *Palm Beach News* on March 8, 1932, and the article was copied into “Following a Star,” the collection of letters which May Higgins sent to the Claudia Muzio Fan Club. It was included with the letter dated May 8, 1932.

Returning to New York, they embarked for Europe on the *Augustus*. Breaking up the journey at Cannes, they went ashore and were met by a car that was to drive them along the coast in the balmy Spring air as far as Genoa. They made an unscheduled stop at Ospadaletti to inspect Claudia's villa. The thirty-three-room mansion looked mournfully out to sea across the manicured gardens, kept as though the house might be used any day now. Claudia clung on to this status symbol even though she could ill afford it. The next stop was Naples. The party were in a suite in the Majestic Hotel in Rome by eight o'clock on Easter Sunday evening.<sup>196</sup>

Opening the Rome season on April 6, Claudia sang Mimi. She made her entrance to a storm of applause, a great tribute in itself, for the Romans, unlike Americans, rarely applaud the entrance of the prima donna. The Royal Box held the Princess Mafalda. The Princess, sister of Umberto II, the reigning King of Italy, was married to Prince Philip of Hesse, grandson of Queen Victoria and therefore a cousin of the Prince of Wales. Like her cousin by marriage, Mafalda admired Claudia. At later performances could be seen Queen Marie and other Italian royals, but Mussolini did not put in an appearance, claiming to be in mourning for his brother, although it was reported in the Chicago press that he in fact attended a performance of *Norma* in which Claudia sang. During this short season (only four weeks) a pleasant surprise in the person of John McCormack appeared at a performance of *Boheme*. The tenor was in Rome "to receive his Papal decoration," after which he began to call himself Count McCormack.<sup>197</sup> "Well, God love you, how did you know me?" he asked May, who spotted him in the audience. She told him there wasn't an Irish American who wouldn't recognise him and that Claudia

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<sup>196</sup> Ibid.

<sup>197</sup> Ibid. The title was in fact awarded in 1928 (according to Desmond Shawe-Taylor in his article: "John McCormack" *The New Grove*..., XI, p. 414), but the tenor's concert engagements precluded him collecting the award until now.

wanted him to come back stage at once. The two singers spent the first interval happily embracing and talking about Carlo, for whom McCormack had many kind words.

In early May, Claudia was presented with a medal for her work in opera by the Italian Government. A similar award had been conferred on Eleanora Duse, the only other recipient of the medal in its history. This served to link Claudia even more closely with the actress and solidified the notion that she was a great exponent of the Duse school of acting. It was another example of the Fascist government's recognition of artists when it suited their political purpose, while simultaneously taking action to avoid paying them. The post-concert function at which the award was made was attended by the Italian royals and aristocrats, and Claudia was the focal point of the evening. Someone discovered, after she departed characteristically early, that she had left her powder puff in the ladies' room and it was auctioned off for 500 lire (about 40 US dollars at the time.) The money went to charity.<sup>198</sup>

The customary stay in Riolo Bagni was to follow the Rome season, but first Claudia had to perform in Florence, at the Teatro Politeama, for the Florence May Festival, the Maggio Musicale. Again, foot-high letters announced her in the role of Floria Tosca. The Florentines had not heard her for many years and on the first night of the series, after Act Two, fifteen men carried her flowers onto the stage as she took her curtain. One of the baskets was from Edith Mason and Giorgio Polacco, both successful in *Madama Butterfly* a few nights before. The performance was broadcast, and the people of Riolo who had radios put them in their windows so that the less fortunate could share the treat, ahead of actually having their diva in residence.

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<sup>198</sup> Ibid., and also included in the mailing to the Fan Club was a copy of an unidentified press article headed "High Distinction to Claudia Muzio" which confirms the award and the duplication of the honour afforded to Duse.

This time the residence was more purposeful than usual, planned around a concert which Claudia presented for the people of Riolo. She shared the spotlight with Dino Borgioli, the young tenor who was to make his American debut in San Francisco with her later that year, and with Cesare Formichi, baritone, one of the Chicago staples. As there was no theatre large enough for the expected crowds, the piazza was turned into an outdoor theatre and a stage erected for the singers and piano. The entire square was filled with seating and the audience began to arrive in the early afternoon. Special trains, cars and carts bore the people from all over the region, swelling the population of the town to over ten times its normal size. Claudia sang, among other things, Buzzi-Peccia's *Columbetta* and *Girometta*, two of the humorous songs in her repertoire. *Columbetta* (as her recording of it two years later illustrates) amply demonstrated that she was a singer with a light side, which she called upon as needed. The great tragedienne was put aside for a moment or two and the *riolese* and their guests were as delighted as children and shouted their approval. The three singers combined in scenes from *Tosca* and the tenor and baritone sang arias and songs. The Mayor of Riolo presented the artists with gold medals, and Claudia hosted a party at the hotel after the concert for the Mayor and the Commune officials who had helped with the preparations.<sup>199</sup>

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<sup>199</sup> Letter from May Higgins to Claudia Muzio Fan Club from Riolo Bagni, September 5, 1932.

## Chapter Twelve

### 1932, the Opening of the San Francisco War Memorial House, and Claudia's Return to New York

The long way back to North America was begun, but this time no Chicago season awaited. The usual ship, the usual route saw them as far as New York by September 22, and they departed for California that very night. It took six days to cross the country by train. In Los Angeles for only a few days before her opening in *La Traviata*, Claudia was flattered to hear that many of Hollywood's gods and goddesses were to be in the theatre once more for her performances.<sup>200</sup>

After a week of Los Angeles, the prospect of opening the new opera house in San Francisco was doubly attractive. The San Francisco Opera prospered to the point that the city now had a theatre built for the performance of opera. The town was in a high state of excitement for this landmark event, and when Claudia and her party arrived, they were greeted as royalty and whisked off to prepare for a round of celebratory events and the inevitable media obsession to follow.<sup>201</sup>

The newspapers and magazines were in hot competition for features about the "...true metropolitan opera house" about to open its doors. Built in the highest neo-classical style, it forms the centre piece of a Civic Centre unique in its uniformity, (at least until fairly recently, when a new theatre and a library were added, both in modern styles which blend but at the same time contrast with the older, Greek-revival granite monuments around the open plaza; the old library and council chambers complete the original group.) The lofty marble foyers of the War

<sup>200</sup> Op. cit. from Fairmount Hotel, San Francisco, Calif., November 1, 1932.

<sup>201</sup> Bloomfield, op. cit., pp.51 – 56.

Memorial Opera House surround the vast hall of fan-shaped construction, a phenomenon which often occurs in large theatres of the post-depression era in North America. The old, rectangular, balconied “meeting house” and the horseshoe shape of the European houses with tier-upon-tier of boxes, gave way to a new, more egalitarian shape with most of the seats facing the stage and very few enclosed in the privileged boxes.

The populist ideal was carried over into the price of tickets. Seats in boxes were \$1 each. Some of the boxes seated six, some eight. All of the seats in the grand tier and orchestra stalls sold for 50 cents and the balcony seats were 25 cents. The acoustics are devoid of “blank spots” and there are no constricted views of the stage, even in the lowest-priced seats. The building was immediately hailed as “...itself a musical instrument, a sort of architectural violin” by the distinguished critic of the “San Francisco Examiner”, Redfern Mason.<sup>202</sup>

Claudia had spared no expense in costuming herself for the occasion. She had researched the period of the Napoleonic siege of Rome and instructed the costumier, Worth of Paris, to follow her suggestions. The resulting effect may be seen in a painting by Irvine Sinclair now owned by the War Memorial Board of Trustees.



*Claudia Muzio as Tosca in Act I painted by Irvine Sinclair*

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<sup>202</sup> Ibid.

Claudia made her entrance in Act I of *Tosca* in a long-trained white silk gown heavily embroidered with floral motifs in threads of green and gold. Topped with a jacket of rich green velvet, the whole ensemble, with its plumed soft velvet hat, allowed her to cut a stunning figure as she swept onto the set of the Church of Sant'Andrea supported by a long staff of ebony topped with silver. It is an occasion that, uniquely, we can recreate with closed eyes, albeit with a technical rough-edge, for perhaps the oldest commercially-available pirated recording is of the broadcast of Act I on the very night of October 15, 1932, opening night. Looking at the reproduction of this painting and hearing the applause as Claudia's voice is heard first offstage, and then as she comes onstage singing *Mario, Mario, Mario!*, is as near as one can now get to experiencing her in performance. Heard through the scratchy reproduction, the applause is warm and welcoming, and her voice comes through in all its radiance.<sup>203</sup>

For the other acts, Worth created for her an Empire-waisted gown of cloth-of-gold embroidered in green and purple. A resplendent mantle of bright red velvet lined with cloth-of-gold completed the costume. Both of these outfits together cost over 2000 US dollars.

There was not universal approval of Claudia in San Francisco. Homer Henley, a critic for a magazine called *The Argonaut* stated, quite unequivocally, that “... Muzio's singing has gone off. Her high tones are forced, her breathing does not support her tone adequately, and one notices those thousand cunning devices to which prima donnas resort to conceal the encroaching ravishes of time.”<sup>204</sup> He gave her acting full marks, though, and said that overall her *Tosca* was second only

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<sup>203</sup> EKR CD 48.

<sup>204</sup> Press clipping from *The Argonaut* of October, 1932, supplied to me by the San Francisco Performing Arts Museum, but, unfortunately, not further identified.

to Destinn's. Some years later, another dissenting voice named Noddy Chancellor was quoted as saying much the same thing about Claudia's singing in 1932. "What a glorious voice she had --once," said Mr. Chancellor, as he gazed at the plaque commemorating the opening of the War Memorial Opera House with Claudia's *Tosca*. "...What Happened? She took up smoking cigarets(sic). Turkish. Absolutely true. You could look it up. Who started her? None other than Aristotle Onassis! Ari was a salesman working for Turkish cigaret companies. He seduced Claudia in Buenos Aires before World War II."<sup>205</sup>

These opinions are very difficult to reconcile with the admittedly crude recording pirated from the radio broadcast. Other reports in the press contradict the notion that there was any sign of vocal decline. Alexander Fried in the "San Francisco Examiner" describes her rather clumsily as "...in her splended best estate. Her voice was luscious, her bearing queenly. No artist of grand opera is more sensitively the actress and singer of expressive words and song than she."

*Tosca* was not the only opera Claudia sang in San Francisco that season. The others - *Il Trovatore*, *Pagliacci*, *Cavalleria Rusticana*, *La Traviata* - were all occasions producing invitations to receptions, teas, and grand dinners. She declined practically all invitations, but after she sang *Pagliacci* the Italian Consul gave a large reception for her, which she could not refuse. She rushed into the reception still wearing Nedda's white wig.<sup>206</sup>

Shortly before the end of the season, Mayor Rossi decided to make Claudia an Honorary Citizen of San Francisco, a quite significant gesture, as the only other artist upon whom this title had been bestowed was Luisa Tettrazzini. The certificate was presented to her, as it had been to Tettrazzini, on the stage of the

<sup>205</sup> Unidentified press clipping, also supplied by San Francisco Performing Arts Museum.

<sup>206</sup> Higgins, loc.cit.

opera house, accompanied by a huge key made up of flowers. In response, Claudia walked to the footlights and asked to be forgiven for not speaking as she was overcome, but a Steinway was rolled out for her and the conductor Merola accompanied her in several of her concert songs, to the delight of a packed house.<sup>207</sup>

All went well for the opening season until the *Lohengrin*, in which not only were there mishaps, such as a stage trumpeter taking a fall and chorus girls entering late and early, but also that night a comical error occurred which was the opposite of the famous Leo Slezak mishap, the absence of the swan boat.<sup>208</sup> Once aboard, the Lohengrin found that the swan would not leave.<sup>209</sup>

A trip to Chicago was undertaken, not to sing in opera, but to take part in a memorial service to Mrs. Rockefeller McCormick, a well-known patron and member of the Executive Committee of the defunct opera company.

Claudia sang soon after in Orchestra Hall. She performed a song written for her by the great pianist and teacher Rudolf Ganz who headed the piano department of the Chicago Musical College. The setting of Rupert Brooke's "The Way that Lovers Use" was seldom if ever sung by anyone else and is out of print. *Musical Leader* reported, "...[the song] is one of the noted composer-conductor's best contributions to the song literature, the work of a great musician who also has a sense of melody. Mr. Ganz, who was in the house, must have been very delighted at the performance and the song was repeated." Charles Lurvey accompanied, and the cryptic comment about him - "Mr. Lurvey supplied accompaniments that were unique inasmuch as he gains effects according to his own reading instead of conforming meticulously to the composers' scores," - opens up speculation about his

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<sup>207</sup> Bloomfield, loc. cit.

<sup>208</sup> The well-known anecdote has the famous tenor turning to the audience and saying "What time does the next swan leave?"

<sup>209</sup> Bloomfield, loc.cit.

abilities.<sup>210</sup>

In New York, the next stop, Claudia arrived a day before an auspicious concert she was to sing at eleven in the morning at the Waldorf Astoria. She installed the retinue, including May Higgins, in the St. Moritz and enjoyed the solitude of staying at the Waldorf alone.<sup>211</sup> In all the years May had been with her and known her, it was the first time Claudia had stayed anywhere on her own. She was nervous. The engagement marked her return to New York after ten years and her undignified leave-taking from the Metropolitan Opera Company. The sponsor of the concert, Mr. Diaz, called these events "Morning Musicales" and this one was sold out. The next day she sang in a Mr. Bagby's Morning Musicale, also held at the Waldorf. It was also completely booked out. There were, naturally, curious operalovers in New York who wondered what had become of Claudia and this explains the two well-attended concerts back to back.<sup>212</sup> It almost certainly got back to Gatti that she was in sublime vocal form and as beautiful as ever. The effect of these concerts snowballed and it was two seasons later that their full effect was felt and she was asked to sing again at the Metropolitan. But for Claudia now, the date for departure came none too soon as winter began to close in on New York. Before the sailing there were several days to shop, and she insisted on buying Christmas tree decorations to enhance her Roman Christmas from Woolworth's in Manhattan.

As the *Saturnia* left New York Harbour on December 6, 1932, all of "the family," which included Cici the dog, were on board.

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<sup>210</sup> "A Perfect Recital", *Musical Leader*, 24 November 1932, p. 1.

<sup>211</sup> Letter from May Higgins to the Claudia Muzio Fan Club from the St. Moritz Hotel, N.Y., December 1, 1932.

<sup>212</sup> *Ibid.*

## Chapter Thirteen

### Historic Returns to Buenos Aires and New York

The year 1933 began, literally, for it was on January 1 this occurred, with a broadcast performance of *Loreley* from the Carlo Felice Theatre in Genoa. Quite clearly one could wish for more pirated recordings when thinking about all of these broadcasts Claudia and others made of complete operas. The blessed poacher who left us all the richer with his 1932 activity in San Francisco doesn't seem to have had any furtive fellows in the rest of the world, though there is a rumour that a pirated recording exists of a broadcast of *La Forza del Destino* from Buenos Aires.<sup>213</sup> There were by all accounts listeners all over Europe to *Loreley*, for no sooner was it over than telegrams and letters began to arrive from England, France, Holland, and even from the *Saturnia* on its return voyage to New York; and of course in Italy countless fans let Claudia know that they were eagerly anticipating her upcoming visits to their own opera houses.<sup>214</sup>

From Genoa to Rome is a journey of some five hundred miles, and, despite being superstitious (it was Friday the 13th of January), Claudia decided that they would make the entire trip at one go, so her car was loaded up with maid, mother, secretary, husband, dog and luggage and in the early morning light the long trip got underway. During the daylight hours there was much to see, but when the moonless night descended they began to be apprehensive as the outlines of the hills merged with the darkness and it was impossible to tell the difference sometimes between stars and lights in the windows of hilltop towns. Having got to Rome, the party rested briefly and then started for Palermo, where, on the 17th Claudia was

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<sup>213</sup> This is only a rumour, but is common enough that it is alluded to in the sleeve notes to the aforementioned CD of the opening night broadcast from the San Francisco Opera House, EKR CD 48. No credit is given for this sleeve note, unfortunately, and there are inaccuracies in the rest of this text. This recording is not the complete opera, only the first act.

<sup>214</sup> Letter from May Higgins to Claudia Muzio Fan Club, from Majestic Hotel, Rome, dated April 20, 1933.

party rested briefly and then started for Palermo, where, on the 17th Claudia was scheduled to sing the first of three Violettas. At Naples they boarded a tiny steamer and arrived in Palermo in the rain, which continued throughout their stay. The spectacular Sicilian opera palace, the Teatro Massimo, where Claudia had last sung in *Otello* and in Mulé's *La Baronessa da Carini* sixteen years before, was built for the beautiful singer Lina Cavallieri and only opened in 1897. One of the world's largest theatres, it seats 3200, and all the seats were taken for Claudia's return. The opening night audience crowded the theatre and the police were called to limit the number of standing room patrons. The nobility of Sicily turned out in diamonds, furs and tiaras, decorations, medals and full dress uniforms and crowds came backstage after each of the three evenings.

In Naples again after Palermo,<sup>215</sup> the opera was *Tosca*, the same opera she sang afterwards in Brescia, where she had not appeared since before her Metropolitan years and where all three performances were sellouts. It had been in Brescia in 1916 that Gatti-Cassazza had first heard Claudia and coyly invited her to the Metropolitan without naming the date. Now Claudia's entire party were swept up by the aristocratic pair Count and Countess Bettoni and taken to their two-hundred-room Palazzo outside Brescia where they were feted like royalty.<sup>216</sup>

The departure from Brescia was delayed two days because of a sudden snowstorm making the roads unsafe. A funeral was held up outside the city and the hearse had to be left with the corpse inside for two days. May Higgins, Renato and Giovanna, and even Cici were quite content to remain the guests of the Count and Countess, but Claudia was getting anxious because her debut in *La Forza del Destino* in Rome was facing her next and she needed to be settled in at the Imperial and working every day on the part. Arriving in Rome on the 26th of February, they

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<sup>215</sup> Ibid.

<sup>216</sup> Ibid.

found that Spring had arrived early. March 8th was the date of the first night of *La Forza* at the Teatro Reale. The seat prices had been inflated to the equivalent of twelve US dollars (when in San Francisco the best seats were only a dollar, this seemed a fortune) but that failed to deter the Romans and there were no unbooked seats on opening night. Claudia also appeared as Santuzza and Tosca (with Gigli) during the season, making fifteen appearances total. On the last night hundreds were disappointed by being turned away at the box office and at the stage door Claudia was held up for a long time as the stalwart gathered to kiss or shake her hand to bid her farewell for another Roman season.<sup>217</sup>

Claudia had summoned May and the others earlier in their stay to announce that she would be returning to Buenos Aires after Rome. It had been five years since her last South American season and there had been a lot of pressure on her to return. Now Giovanna was reasonably well and there was no reason to prolong her absence from what had been, after all, the setting for some of her greatest successes.

Claudia had been uncharacteristically sociable while in Rome. Many invitations poured in and some she accepted, visiting in homes as well as dining out with friends. Her insistence on her privacy was relaxed and it was almost as if in the Roman Spring a social butterfly had emerged from its chrysalis. It was no surprise then that some of Claudia's fans followed the soprano's car to Genoa at the beginning of May to see her off to South America. Claudia, May, Giovanna, Renato and the maid joined the assembled Italian opera company, which was to embark for a long season in Buenos Aires, Rio and Sao Paolo. Gigli was among the company, along with Ebe Stignani, Salvatore Baccaloni, and Galeffi - all old friends. The crossing this time was on the *S. S. Diulio*, a luxurious liner with a six-room apartment on a deck with no other passenger cabins. This spacious and

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<sup>217</sup> Ibid.

private accommodation was Claudia territory, and the ballroom, library and salons and the Main Promenade were all just outside the door. The voyage could hardly have been more enjoyable - smooth seas, sunny weather, for sixteen days. The company spent much of its time outdoors, joined by the soprano in a relaxed mood.<sup>218</sup>

After visiting Dakar, in North Africa, the ship turned and crossed the Atlantic. When they crossed the Equator, always a celebratory moment aboard passenger ships, the basso Salvatore Baccaloni, dressed as Neptune, his bulk impressing everyone, supervised the "baptism" of all who were crossing the line for the first time, May among them. She had to eat a spoon full of salt and be doused with water and given the name "Serena." Baccaloni had taken the role of Neptune seriously and written out certificates for all of the new initiates with verses of his own.<sup>219</sup>

Claudia was met by her old chauffeur, Aureliano, who had driven her car ever since her first visit to Buenos Aires, and by old Tomaguino the stage door manager from the Teatro Colon. It soon became apparent that her return had become something of a public relations exercise, for all of the papers were full of articles about her, and one even had a photo of the *Duilio* with a caption identifying it as "...the ship on which Claudia returned to Buenos Aires." The Plaza Hotel suite in which the Muzio party was to stay was overflowing with flowers. Also, there were jealous rumours circulated by an Italian singer that the real reason Claudia had been absent from the Colon for five years was clear: she had lost both her voice and her looks. She naturally got very upset upon reading this report in the newspapers and dreaded the first rehearsals where she knew she would be on trial for the first time since her debut; but after the first notes the anxious faces relaxed and the chorus

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<sup>218</sup> May Higgins, letter from the Plaza Hotel, Buenos Aires, dated July 1, 1933.

<sup>219</sup> Ibid.

and management looked accusingly at the rumour monger who had really given Claudia a boost after all.<sup>220</sup>

The young Italian soprano Mafalda Favero was at the rehearsal, in fact at each rehearsal. She later described her own involvement:

...it took me a very long time to find my own interpretation [of the role of Violetta], for I was haunted by Claudia Muzio in the role. When she sang it at the Colon in Buenos Aires in 1933, I went to each rehearsal, worshiping her, and it took a superhuman effort for me to finally obtain my personal approach. My Violetta was on a far more intimate scale, not only because of my voicebut because of the helplessness I felt this character suffered from her fate.<sup>221</sup>

Four thousand strong, the audience for her first *Traviata* on May 29th pounded her with flowers and recalled her a dozen times after each act. The attendants at the theatre encircled her with tightly gripped hands in order to get her from the theatre to her car after the performance. At the second *Traviata*, a Sunday matinee, the fans gathered outside the stage door so thickly that the police arrived to keep them from mobbing the theatre from that entrance. The streets around the Colon were blocked and all public transportation, and the traffic re-routed until after Claudia left the theatre. It was the same at the end of each one of her appearances. "La Unica" reacted to all of this with as calm a front as she could manage. She handed out flowers to the crowds as she was escorted through, she never tried to fend off all of those would touch her, she smiled and blew kisses and received them on her hands, her coat, the back of her hat. The cheers were deafening as she was inched through the crowds and she arrived back at the hotel each time more exhausted from the ordeal of getting there than from the performance. If the Italians loved her, the South Americans worshipped her. During the season she autographed more than two thousand photographs. *Traviata* was followed by *Norma*. The conductor, Marinuzzi, was so cowed by Claudia's fierce intensity in

<sup>220</sup> Ibid.

<sup>221</sup> Rasponi, Lanfranco, *The Last Prima Donnas*, London: Gollancz, 1984, p. 515.

this role that he was afraid to look at her. *Andrea Chenier* with Gigli was next, and after *La mamma morta* in the third act, there was a ten -minute hiatus as the audience erupted. *Tosca* and *La Forza del Destino* completed the list of operas in which Claudia re-established her place in the heart of the patrons of the Colon, proving both that the rumours of her decline were unfounded and that she was loved above all sopranos in that theatre.<sup>222</sup>

Press comments were rhapsodic, none more so than those after the opening night of *La Forza Del Destino*, in which she was partnered by Gigli, singing the role of Don Alvaro for the first time in his career, on July 5.

Returning to Rio, where the Italian company repeated some of the same repertoire from Buenos Aires, Claudia was heard as Maddalena, Violetta and Tosca as well as Norma, with the mezzo-soprano Ebe Stignani.<sup>223</sup>

The company then appeared for a short season in Sao Paolo. Claudia was Violetta, Norma, and Tosca during early September, and at the end of a week, the Italians boarded the *Duilio* at Santos. After a six-week journey, they were back in Italy. Mimi Zuccari, a loyal fan of Claudia's met them at the pier in Genoa having driven from

<sup>222</sup> Higgins, op.cit.

<sup>223</sup> Keating, Jurgen tr John Hunt, *Maria Callas*, Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1992, p. 201. Stignani was of a generation which bridged the pre-war and post-war opera worlds and was in a position to compare standards before and after the searing and damaging results of a war that sucked up resources and in which some artists died who might have achieved high status in opera. Singing the opera often with Maria Callas in 1952 and 1957, she commented that there was no comparison between the two sopranos in Bellini's opera. In her estimation, Callas came nowhere near Muzio's interpretation vocally or dramatically. It has been suggested that this was said in a fit of pique; but Stignani was in a unique position to hold this opinion, and by 1957, twenty years after Muzio died and nearly twenty-five since the two Italians sang together, there weren't a lot of people who could with any authority contradict her. Furthermore, Stignani's assessment of the two women in the role is backed up by Mafalda Favero, who sums it up in these words, "[Muzio's] Norma was also an unforgettable creation. She had the quality I consider so essential in an artist: to make the public suffer along with her. If a singer doesn't make the audience cry at certain passages, in my estimation she has failed her job. Callas was a phenomenon, but she had no femininity, and she never produced chills down my spine. She was theatrical to a degree, but never touching." And if another opinion is still sought, we have the words of Gina Cigna, herself a celebrated Norma: *[Callas] simply did not compare with Muzio. With Muzio one suffered the agonies of these heroines, never with Callas.*

Padua, where she lived, in her new car.<sup>224</sup>

The three women – Claudia, May and Mimi- had one night together in Genoa, but Claudia was eager to get to Riolo for her much-needed holiday and rest. They drove to Rome, delivered Renato, and then back up to Riolo, where the usual commotion was awaiting her return.<sup>225</sup>

The stay this time was short, and on October 16, they left for America, driving to Naples with Mimi, then Claudia and May and the rest of the “family” sailing on the 18th on the *Conte di Savoia* for New York and leaving almost immediately on the long train trip to San Francisco. The entire entourage, Claudia, May, Cici, Renato, and Giovanna, entered the city in triumph, though Claudia had by now developed a bad case of shingles. Ezio Pinza and Martinelli were the most distinguished members of the company that season, with American bass Lawrence Tibbett representing the home team, all partnering Claudia in four operas: *Aida*, *Cavalleria Rusticana*, *La Traviata*, and *La Forza del Destino*, the last performance of which took place on December 1. It was to be Claudia’s final appearance in this theatre, with the company that had loved her almost as much as had Buenos Aires and Rome, but no one was to know that in 1933. At the end of the season the expectation hovered that Claudia would be back year after year, but it was not fulfilled.

Arguably, due to the pressure arising from her New York concerts the previous year, Gatti invited Claudia to perform again at the Metropolitan, and the date of her first performance there in eleven years was January 1, 1934, in *La Traviata*. By this time New Yorkers had heard the reports of Claudia's overwhelming successes in this opera, one she had never sung at the Met, and, being New Yorkers, they wished to make up their own minds. Rosa Ponselle had put her own stamp on Violetta in that

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<sup>224</sup> Higgins, letter from Savoy Plaza Hotel, New York City, January 19, 1934.

<sup>225</sup> Ibid.

house, and Ponselle herself, who by now was feeling very insecure because of her inability to conquer stage fright, and also because of upsets in her personal life, felt protective about the role. She felt, as she later said, that Claudia's Violetta was close to the role as she imagined it but that she herself brought hope to Violetta.<sup>226</sup> New Yorkers had Lucrezia Bori's Violetta to compare with Ponselle's and now they would have the chance to experience a conception of the role that had captivated patrons of La Scala, Milan; the San Carlo, Naples; the Teatro Colon, Buenos Aires; the Chicago Civic Opera; the San Francisco Opera; and, not least, the Teatro Reale, Rome.

The "New York Times" featured this headline next day:<sup>227</sup>

**Muzio receives twelve minutes ovation at the Metropolitan**

...Her convincing projection of the role was due in part to her delightfully supple and easy playing, and her beauty, but even more to the musicianship with which she endowed her portrayal. The vocal line was always clear, plastic, excellently phrased. It embodied, moreover, the grace and fluency inherent in the music and the situations of the drama.

The "Herald Tribune":

The demonstration bestowed upon Mme Muzio at the end of 'La Traviata' was unusual both in intensity and in duration; one observer times its length as twelve minutes as enthusiasts lined up several rows deep along the orchestra pit to applaud ardently and unwearyingly, and recall the singer again and again before the curtain.

The "Evening Journal" called it "...one of the finest 'Traviata' performances on record", and the "New York American" commented not only on the ovation at the end but on the prolonged clapping during scenes and after each act.

<sup>226</sup> Drake, James, *op. cit.*, p. 237.

<sup>227</sup> This and the subsequent New York reviews are quoted by May Higgins in her letter to the Claudia Muzio Fan Club from the Saboy Plaza Hotel, New York City, dated January 19, 1934.

It was not only in *La Traviata* that she triumphed, but in *Cavalleria Rusticana* as well. The audience was by all reports nearly as enthusiastic about her Santuzza as about her Violetta. In the "Herald Tribune", we read:

Claudia Muzio, who had made her re-entrance in "Traviata" last week, was warmly greeted as the Sicilian Santuzza. The old saying as to opera singers, that "when they're old enough to act a part, thy can no longer sing it," did not fit in this case. Miss Muzio, once a child on the stage to which she now returns, is the daughter of Carlo Muzio and his wife, members of the Metropolitan personnel from the days when stars were the stars of Grau.

She acted with innate conviction and she sang often with a mezza voce of tender and touching appeal. The woes of Santuzza were not shrieked, the melodrama never became a mockery. It was evident that the audience found haunting memories in such aristocratic care for the singing tone, the phrase and gesture, all without prima donna airs or undue sophistication. The heroine's half subdued recital to Mama Lucia, in her principal air, was followed by long applause from the entire house. The curtain brought an ovation.

A repeat of *La Traviata* and one *Cavalleria*, both in Philadelphia with the company brought this brief Muzio season at the Metropolitan to a close.

Gatti-Casazza had most likely bowed to pressure in asking Claudia back to the "Met." There were stories of her vocal and physical decline and he probably felt reasonably sure that her return would be a failure, thus vindicating his decision in 1922 not to make it more attractive for her to stay. Those who had heard her in the Waldorf Astoria Morning Musicales the previous year could have told him what to expect, but he probably hadn't foreseen such a triumphant return. Claudia was "*La Divina*" in New York as well as in Rome after her Violetta conquered the hard-to-move Metropolitan audiences. She would never have allowed herself to gloat over her conquest, but a certain amount of satisfaction must have been derived now that New Yorkers knew what they had missed all those years. When she returned to Rome for the rest of the season, Gatti telephoned her with an offer of another "Met" Season,<sup>228</sup> which she would have been very glad to accept but her health, her absorption in the

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<sup>228</sup> Higgins, loc.cit.

role of Refice's *Cecelia*, which she had been created for her, and further commitments in South America dictated that she decline his offer.<sup>229</sup> She never stopped looking forward to another return to the stages of America, but it was not to be.

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<sup>229</sup> Ibid.

## Chapter Fourteen

### 1934 and 1935, the Final Years of Singing and a Great Première

The return to Italy was swift, and by January 27th the ship reached Naples, where Claudia and her family spent three nights before starting to drive to Rome. Near the Hotel Majestic in Rome is the Church of Santa Maria Maggiore, one of Rome's finest Renaissance churches. Famous for its music, the church then had as music director the fifty-year old priest Licinio Refice (1885-1954), distinguished in appearance and refined of manner. He was, from Claudia's first season in the Teatro Reale, a backstage visitor and soon the friendship with the famous singer developed into something more, perhaps a spiritual rather than physical relationship, but a very intense one.<sup>230</sup>

May describes Claudia's devotion to the preparations for this premiere:

A day or two after our arrival in Rome, Claudia began her work for "Cecelia" the opera written by Monsignor Refice of the Church of Santa Maria Maggiore...it seemed more like the creation of a saint – the real Saint Cecelia. I was amazed at her attention to every detail, however small, which might help her to perfect her interpretation...the opening night, when Claudia made her entrance...one "felt" the saint – not the opera star.

Refice's greatest ambition had been to write a work for Claudia. His position as director of music at the Liberian chapel of Santa Maria Maggiore left him free to compose, and he had produced much sacred music. Among Italian composers he was almost an unknown. Had it not been for his Vatican support, his music almost

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<sup>230</sup> An article by Bill Zakariassen in the New York *Sunday News* on December 12, 1976, forty years after Claudia's death, discusses the relationship and the opera, and there is no doubt in the reporter's mind that it was a physical and very satisfying one to the diva. Zakariassen says, "The metaphor of Muzio herself, who sacrificed earthly love, even her life, for art, is too coincidental to ignore. And the certainty that marriage with her priest-lover was impossible adds to the opera's semi-autobiographical, semi-tragic status."

certainly would never have been performed.<sup>231</sup> He conceived for Claudia an operatic tableau, which he called a *rappresentazzion sacra*, a modern-day adaptation of the Miracle Play, the mediaeval ancestor of all Western theatre, especially opera. The subject, suitably enough, was Saint Cecilia, patroness of music, a second-century Roman patrician, who, the story goes, was married to the youth Valerian against her will. She persuaded her young husband that an angel of God would punish him if he claimed his conjugal rights. Valerian quite rightly asked to speak to this angel and, after his bride persuaded him that this was possible only if he converted and was baptised, underwent conversion at the hands of Bishop Urban. The conversion worked and Valerian, too, saw the angel, offering to the couple floral crowns. Subsequent conversions of Valerian's brother-in-law Tiburtius and others resulted in the beheading of all concerned and the attempt to put Cecelia to death by burning. When this failed, a soldier was sent to behead her and three blows only left her mortally wounded. She prayed that her death be delayed for three days while her house was consecrated as a church. This was granted and she was buried in the cemetery of St. Callistus. Her alleged remains now rest in the Basilica named after her in Trastevere, and by the fourth century she was celebrated as one of the chief Christian martyrs.<sup>232</sup>

Preparations for the première of *Cecelia* indeed absorbed Claudia to the point of obsession. She pored over illustrations of Patrician dress of the late Roman empire, studying the drapery and just how it fell. She visited the catacombs repeatedly and shuddered at the cold and the macabre display of skulls and bones. And, of course,

<sup>231</sup> J.C.G. Waterhouse, "Licinio Refice", *The New Grove Dictionary of Music & Musicians*. Vol. 15, p. 671.

<sup>232</sup> The reasons why Cecelia became the patron saint of musicians are shrouded in mystery. She has no connection with music, although most representations of her show her playing the organ. Countless odes to her were composed during the early baroque era, some set unforgettably by Henry Purcell. Her day is November 22, which is the birthday of Benjamin Britten.

she learned the part, which was created with her specifically in mind. Refice's score is lush and slow-moving. His models were Puccini and Mascagni, the one for harmonic language and the other for orchestration. When Claudia heard the music he had composed for the prologue she insisted on singing the angel herself, and she was right to do so. The recording she later made of this bit of the opera and the *Death of Cecelia* and *Ave Maria* are some of the most moving of her recorded performances, and no doubt she had a very personal interest in making them so.



*Licinio Refice and Claudia Muzio at the Rome première of Refice's  
"Cecelia"*

May found the Refice business hard to overlook. Reading between the lines in her normally super-positive reports to the Fan Club, it is clear that the prim Irishwoman found it difficult to accept Claudia's dependence on men. She never failed to praise the art of the singer, but her ageing parents, who had not before particularly worried her, became suddenly a cause and an excuse to plan her exit. It is not unlikely that jealousy was a motive, for, although there is not a hint of any kind of sexual attraction between the two women, an even stronger bond had developed in what resembled a mother-daughter alliance (May frequently refers to Claudia as "my child") with May in complete control of everything except the purse strings. Monsignor Refice no doubt threatened that control, for it was to him that Claudia now turned in moments of crisis.

Not long after her 45th birthday, Claudia created the role of Cecelia at the *Teatro Reale* in Rome. The exact date was February 15th, 1934, and the opera was being

presented to commemorate the 350th anniversary of the venerated Accademia Santa Cecilia, the Roman conservatory of music. It was an unexpected success. The prolonged applause after the prologue and the twenty-five curtain calls for Claudia at the end established it as a victory for a kind of presentation that was old-fashioned but very different from anything the Roman public was then experiencing. Based on an ancient format and containing music that owed a great deal to other composers, no one could have predicted that it would succeed. The journal *L'avvenire d'Italia* applauded Claudia's scrupulous preparations: "La Muzio...had the wish to relive the life of her Virgin compatriot...spending hours in the Catacombs of St. Calisto; searching, in a word, to penetrate into the closed life of the privileged soul....What a marvel! One would need a volume to describe the majesty of this interpretation. Her bearing, every gesture, every movement, every expression, every accent, every tone of her voice that in its sweetness bordered on the supernatural, all converged toward a whole of complete and perfect beauty."<sup>233</sup>

One of the most dramatic compliments Claudia ever received was on this occasion. Mafalda Favero, who had been so enslaved by Claudia's Violetta in Buenos Aires the year before, attended the opening night of *Cecelia* and visited Claudia backstage:

She had been so sublime...that I went backstage to express my admiration at the end and impulsively dropped to my knees. 'Now really, my child!' she said with those sad eyes which haunted me. 'What are you doing?'<sup>234</sup>

A week or so after the premiere of *Cecelia*, Claudia recorded the prologue *Per amor di Gesù porgete il core* in Milan at the studios of EMI for Columbia Records. She also recorded *Voi lo sapete...* from *Cavalleria* and the little song *Columbetta* by Buzzi-Peccia, which she had popularised in her recitals. These sessions made her realise that certain interpretations of arias as well as songs from her repertoire had

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<sup>233</sup> This article is reproduced in May Higgins's letter to the fan club from the Plaza Hotel, Buenos Aires, and dated July 14, 1934.

<sup>234</sup> Rasponi, loc. cit.

matured to the point that they were unrecognisable when compared to her early recordings. At the insistence of Mimi Zuccari, she determined to re-record many of them and set about striking a deal with Columbia for the sessions. There was no more of 1934 left, for she was to return to South America immediately after the last performance of *Cecelia*. Plans were made for a month of recording in June of 1935.

Claudia almost literally stepped off the stage and onto the *Oceania* bound for South America on April 28th. In Algiers, a new port of call for them, they were lured to the Casbah and joined by a police escort for safety. They wandered the narrow streets and were watched by the ghost-like Arabs in their white native dress. Later in the evening their guide took them to a club where the dancing girls were trotted out, stark naked.<sup>235</sup>

Other ports of call for the *Oceania* included Bahia in Brazil, a city with a church for every day of the calendar year. For once, Claudia went ashore, because Captain Iviani took them in his launch and guided them through the little city, and she allowed May to photograph her with the captain among the flowers and eucalyptus trees.

When they arrived in Buenos Aires it was to find that pianist Arthur Rubenstein and his wife were staying in their hotel. May and Aniela Rubenstein attended several of Claudia's performances at the Colon together. The great pianist had only recently returned to the concert world. In 1932, when he married Aniela Mylnarski he took stock of his career and decided to withdraw from concert life to improve his technique and interpretations. He was two years older than the two women, and, at the time, was still a Polish citizen.<sup>236</sup>

Claudia decided to make a costume statement in *La Traviata* in Buenos Aires and had

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<sup>235</sup> Ibid.

<sup>236</sup> Ibid.

a striking dress made for the third act, in which Violetta appears on the arm of Baron Duphoul at the soirée given by Flora, having sacrificed her happiness and deserted Alfredo. This scene usually finds the heroine in red or black to highlight her return to the *demimonde*, her grief and self-loathing. Claudia's appearance in a magnificent gown made of sixty - five yards of white tulle, relieved only by a black velvet bow on the left shoulder, the streamers reaching to the hem of the skirt, was revolutionary. The rationale behind this radical approach is not apparent until one sees Violetta from Claudia Muzio's advantage. To her Violetta was a tragic figure, brought down by the flaw in her character - her innate goodness and the purity of her love for Alfredo. Her desertion in Act Two is as deliberate an act of self-destruction as is Oedipus's relentless questioning of the blind Tiresias. Dressing her in white for the moment of her public disgrace served to heighten the tragedy.



*Claudia Muzio as Violetta in "La Traviata" Act 3*

The season in Buenos Aires contained *Loreley* and was the only opera in which adverse remarks were made in the papers about her. The critic of *La Nacion* spoke of her vocal insecurity in no uncertain terms, but praised her acting. There was no doubt that Claudia was suffering physical ill-health. Her breath was short and she was very

resourceful in employing dramatic tricks deflecting attention from her vocal troubles, but to those with ears they were there. Intonation was affected, and she increasingly approached high notes from below. More and more *parlando* crept into her vocalisation, but the great care she took with her interpretations always saved the day and the overall effect was still one of great art.<sup>237</sup>

After Respighi's *La Fiamma*, which was the final opera in her Colon season, there were no such carpings in the papers, only words of praise, for this was a memorable theatrical experience. In the South American performances of his opera, Respighi was the conductor as he had been in Rome. The composer had travelled on the same ship with Claudia and her party having been engaged at her request to introduce his work to the South American public. Elsa Respighi, in her 1954 biography of her father, speaks of the importance of Claudia in his life. Her deeply personal interpretation of the part of Silvana made a lasting impression on him. Claudia took great care in the preparations for this premiere, repeating each scene until she was secure enough in her movements not to leave anything to chance. She was thus able to deliver a performance of great emotional intensity, concentrating on the music.<sup>238</sup>

The opera had been premiered in Rome in the same season with *Cecelia* and, along with that opera, was brought to South America. Respighi was at best only a moderately good opera composer and *La Fiamma* does not even merit mention in most books on the subject, but it is an unusual work, set in the seventh century in Ravenna. The heroine, Silvana, has a mad scene in the last act, which climaxed with Claudia on her back, her head hanging upside down. This bit of business had a mighty impact, for the audience erupted and called her before the curtain again and again – eighty-one times after the last performance, a number agreed on by both May and the critic for “*La Nacion*.” She arrived back at the hotel at 2:30 in the morning.

<sup>237</sup> Arnosi, p. 150.

<sup>238</sup> Respighi, Elsa. *Ottorino Respighi*, Milan: Ricordi, 1954.

In Montevideo there were repeats of *La Traviata* and *La Fiamma* before sailing again for Italy. Stopping by the theatre on the way to the ship, Claudia wanted to say farewell to the conductor Panizza of whom she had become very fond. The orchestra followed her out of the theatre to her car in an impromptu send-off. She then boarded the *Conte Grande* for Italy, even though she was to return to Buenos Aires for the South American premiere of *Cecelia* not two months later. The old habit of spending the summer months in Italy could not be broken. Giovanna was looking forward to being on her home ground, and Claudia was hoping for a rest.<sup>240</sup>

On the way, in the Canary Islands, a monkey named Coco took a fancy to May and followed her aboard. The little animal soon had May enslaved, so much so that she sat up all night to keep Coco quiet so Claudia and Giovanna could sleep. Every time May closed her eyes Coca began to squeal. Coco was soon into everything, even Claudia's makeup, and the sight of the monkey putting on lipstick at the same time as Claudia kept them all entertained.<sup>241</sup>

They finally arrived in Rome and decided, as it was unseasonably cool there, that they would stay and not drive to Riolo. May spoke of the possibility of going to Chicago to visit her parents while Claudia returned to South America. This was at first unthinkable, but Refice was to travel with them, and May was perhaps feeling resentful. Claudia finally gave in, and May sailed for New York on the *Rex* three days after Claudia sailed from Naples on the *Neptunia*, bound for Buenos Aires. The luggage was sent from Rome to the two ships, and strangely enough, although May's trunks were plainly marked for the *Rex*, they were found in Claudia's apartment aboard the *Neptunia* just before it sailed. Claudia cautioned May that this was a sign,

<sup>239</sup> Higgins, loc. cit., and Arnosi, op. cit., p. 172.

<sup>240</sup> Higgins, loc. cit.

<sup>241</sup> Ibid.

but nonetheless the two women were separated from September until December.<sup>242</sup>

The South American tour included not only nine performances of *Cecelia* at the *Teatro Colón*, but more appearances in Montevideo in the same opera. Refice was very pleased with the reception of his new work. The papers were full of praise. Day after day the fanmail poured into Claudia's hotel room in sacks, and she had no secretary to deal with it. When she was not rehearsing or performing, she was autographing photographs. She also made her debut on Radio Belgrano, or LR3, in a programme of arias from *Cavalleria Rusticana*, *La Boheme* and *Tosca* and some Italian songs. This was considered important enough for the press to be on hand to photograph and to report on this historic recording session. It was a gala occasion, and Claudia dressed herself in a florid silk dress and, uncharacteristically, wore no hat. A group of admirers and officials presented her with a large bouquet of flowers and joined her in a photograph. In another photo in the display, she discusses the programme with her accompanist, Azuiles Lietti, former conductor of the orchestra at the *Teatro Colón*, but by far the most extraordinary photograph in the group is of her alone before the microphone clearly revelling in the process of singing, her head thrown back with abandon, her teeth bared in a grotesque grin and her hands flailing the air expressively. This photograph's almost embarrassing spontaneity gives an impression of vulnerability, whereas in most of her photographs she strove for a look of composure.

In the meantime, May, aboard the *Rex* bound for America began to suspect that she had made a mistake.

September 10th, 1934

Dear Girls

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<sup>242</sup> Ibid.

This may seem a strange remark, coming from me, but for the first time in my travels, I'm hating this trip on the Rex. Never thought I could miss anyone as much as I've missed Claudia since I left her in Naples a few days- or is it weeks- ago. She left Naples three days before I did, on the Neptunia bound for South America and Italy suddenly lost all its attractiveness...If it wasn't for my anxiety to see my family, you can be sure that I would be bound for Rio di Janiero this minute, with my "child".

On January 5th, 1935, May wrote from the Majestic Hotel in Rome:

The Rex is back in my good graces, and my eastbound trip back to Italy was a grand success. It was good to see you all again, and to be with my family, but to be frank, I didn't feel quite as easy about leaving my Mother and Dad as I have on previous trips. Time goes on you know!

May seems to have been paving the way for a break, and it came soon enough. Only a few weeks later, on January 29, she wrote the following letter:

Dear Girls,

Know you will be surprised - but I've decided and Claudia has finally agreed that my place is at home with my Mother and Father, so I am leaving my dear Claudia. There is nothing I need add to that; you must all know what I am feeling. Am going though, with hopes that some day in the not too distant future, she will come to America and we will be together again. Will sail on the Saturnia on [February] 28th - leaving behind me the grandest and dearest person in the world and taking with me the memory of the most wonderful six years that anyone has ever experienced. How wonderful she has been to me you all know and it will be 'hard going' without her.

Behind this letter is a complete drama. How May finally extracted herself from the situation which she obviously now found unbearable would make fascinating reading if we only knew what transpired. The words "...Claudia has finally agreed" fairly leap out of that letter. Claudia needed May to do all of the things she had always done. The correspondence alone was a full-time occupation, and booking the travel and accommodation, packing, taking care of insurance and customs, protecting Claudia from unwanted visitors, dealing with Giovanna and Renato, seeing to Cici and being there for the rehearsals and performances kept May on her toes and made Claudia so totally dependent on her that to imagine carrying on without her must have been impossible. For May's part, going back to live in Chicago would have seemed a

dreary fate indeed after all she'd experienced. If she hadn't had to contend with the Monsignor it is fairly certain that she would've stayed

Perhaps she would have remained even under duress if she had been able to see what the next fourteen months held.<sup>243</sup> She said as much later. The struggle with her own health was beginning to cause Claudia nothing but despair. May could see that Claudia was not well - the signs were there in her appearance. The photographs from around this time show a woman who is tired, whose figure has swelled with fluid retention, and whose face has started to show signs of age before it should have done. Her shoulders were rounded and, even though onstage she could still be the queen May always said she was, the offstage snapshots and press photos show a tired and overworked soprano struggling to put a brave face on things.



*Claudia Muzio in 1935, listening to the results of her last recording sessions*

They continued to write. May kept the letters that she and Claudia exchanged for many years, but they never saw one another again. For some inexplicable reason she

<sup>243</sup> That May had a choice is demonstrated by her admitting to Caterina Secchi, years later, that, had she known Muzio was so ill and would die within a year, she never would have left.

chose to destroy those letters before her own death more than forty years later, about which time she met Caterina Secchi, a young singer who, like May, idolised Claudia.

Caterina describes the 1975 version of May as:

...[not] at all a glamorous type (especially in old age), but was always neat and well-groomed, with show white hair in a fluffy bun with a waved top held in place by an invisible hair net. She was bent over with arthritis and wore rather dowdy-dress-with-jacket combos and old-lady shoes. She had been a tall woman, about Claudia's height...and had a strong, square face, a rather stubby nose and a florid complexion which went nicely with the white, white hair. As her arthritis grew worse she walked around Chicago bent almost at a ninety degree angle, but was jolly and never complained much of pain or stiffness. She loved the Italian Village Restaurant on Monroe Street in Chicago. They all loved her there. ... The first time I met May she generously took me there. ...Maria Caniglia and Piero Cappuccilli were in the next booth and they came out and Maria stopped to talk with May at length. Maria's husband, Pino Donati was with them, too. Piero Cappuccilli (with whom I was later to perform at the Regio in Parma) was very flirtatious with me and stared at me with his big, beautiful eyes! I was about 13 but looked about 19 because of my height and clothing...The flood of info was incredible! Then she took me back to her house on Logan Boulevard where she lived with her brother Willy...She had an Edison phonograph with a horn and played some original Muzio records on the Edison. They sounded good!<sup>244</sup>

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<sup>244</sup> This was sent in an email to the author.

## Chapter Fifteen

### “*La Commedia è finite!*” (*I Pagliacci*)

In Rome, Claudia tried to cope with the administrative details and with her ever-declining health. A secretary who was bilingual was very difficult to find, and Claudia still had to record most of the items for Columbia for which she had contracted in 1934. Mimi Zuccari, at whose urging the sessions had been arranged, now helped Claudia to prepare to finish what had been started, even to the point of financial help, for it is almost certain that Claudia had to invest in the making of these last recordings.<sup>245</sup> The most famous of these was the reading of the letter (*Tenesti la promessa...*) and Violetta's last aria, *Addio del passato...* from *La Traviata*, which has become a Claudia Muzio trademark in the same way *Vesti la giubba* became Caruso's. Claudia spent a week of June in the studio, and the list of masters, all with Columbia numbers, is long. If the rumours of her financial investment are founded on fact, it would have been a very costly exercise, for most of the arias were accompanied by orchestra, some with chorus. The tenor Francesco Merli partnered her in selections from *Otello*. It is in this last group of recordings that we are faced with both the faults and virtues of Claudia the artist. What John B. Steane sees as a lack of sound technique,<sup>246</sup> others see as the use of technique to an end rather than an end in itself. Steane admits that “...the listener ...may well reply that there is an art which transcends technique...” and it is certainly the case that Claudia had to sacrifice line to drama in order to put across some of the more powerful arias. Conversely, the singing of Donaudy's *O del mio Amato ben* amply illustrates that she could sustain a line while at the same time colouring and shaping the phrases exquisitely.

Other items which attest to her still-intact technical powers are Delibes's *Bonjour*,

<sup>245</sup> Douglas, op.cit. p. 130.

<sup>246</sup> John Steane, sleeve notes to Romophone 81015 - 2 A and B, Claudia Muzio, the complete Columbia recordings, (1934-35), 1995.

*Suzon* and *Les filles des Cadiz*, both recalling charm as a platform singer. When one speaks of “technique” it is useful to know what particular technique is the reference - the Marchesi <sup>247</sup>technique, for instance, was never a feature of Claudia's singing and should not be in mind when discussing her. Perhaps it is enough to say, like the soprano Lucrezia Bori, that in the end “...you had been so emotionally destroyed by her performance, you did not even know anymore what kind of instrument she had,”<sup>248</sup> nor indeed how she had applied technique.

The pairing with Merli for the duets from *Otello* on the Columbia discs was no random choice, for Merli was the Moor in performances that summer at the *Teatro Reale*, where Claudia also sang *Norma* with him and *Violetta* with Gigli and a revival of *Cecilia* with the cast from the première of the previous year. She left Rome in August for Rio and Sao Paulo and *La Boheme* and *Cecilia* and an unintentional farewell to Buenos Aires at the Teatro Broadway in a concert performance of Refice's “Trittico Francescano,” *Il Martirio di Santa Agnese* in November 1935.

Before Christmas she went back to Rome, but not before agreeing to return to the Teatro Colon for ten weeks of the 1936 season to sing *Tosca* and *Violetta*. The contract for this engagement was signed on February 2, 1936, by Athos Palma, the Director General of the Teatro Colon and sent to her in Rome. She promptly sent it back duly signed, so she cannot have thought that she had given her last performance ignominiously in November of 1935 at the Teatro Broadway in Buenos Aires.

But early in April she was forced to write to Palma's assistant Juan Coltella the following letter:

April 4, 1936

Dear Sir

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<sup>247</sup> Mathilde de Castone Marchesi (1821 – 1913) was the teacher of, among many others, Nellie Melba.

<sup>248</sup> Rasponi, op. cit., p. 326.

...to confirm we have verbally communicated, I am sad to tell you that it impossible for me to embark on the 2 of May on the ship *Neptune*.

The long rheumatic illness which I have endured in the past winter continues to cut across my habitual artistic activity requiring a long period of convalescence in a dry and temperate climate, and the doctors do not favour my facing the rigors of another winter.

Let me assure you, however, that when my convalescence is verified in a short time that I will communicate with you and you will permit me to return to your house.

Please accept my best wishes for your season and with all consideration for you, for Mr. Palma and all friends and associates of the Director and for Grassi Diaz.

Devotedly yours,

Claudia Muzio

Whether or not she recognised the fact, Claudia was dying when she wrote this letter. She could barely manage to get out of bed. Her breath came with such difficulty that singing was out of the question. Doctors entered and left her sickroom with regularity, and there was no one to reassure her. Renato stayed away, and Giovanna was little comfort, though she was constantly in attendance. It was unbearable for Claudia not to be able to sing. As the doctors' accounts were presented and the hotel bill grew in size she worried about creditors and her dependents. She grew more depressed daily.

Ezio Pinza was in Rome, recording the famous Verdi *Messa da Requiem* which is one of his recorded gems. He and his child Claudia, the famous soprano's goddaughter and namesake, heard that Claudia the soprano was very ill. They called at the Hotel Majestic and were turned away<sup>249</sup>

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<sup>249</sup> Interview with Claudia Pinza.

Lauri-Volpi visited her often in these last days. In *Voci Parallelli*, he later wrote:

*Grande e felice artista sulla ribalta, quanto modesta e sventurata nella vita, la Muzio uscì dalla scena del mondo in sordina, con l'indice sulla bocca, come per dire: non vi muovete, restate, non disturbatevi per me.*

“Don't disturb yourself for me,” said Claudia - the words show the discomfiture of someone embarrassed at having to depend on the ministrations of others.

At 7:00 a.m. on the morning of Sunday, May 24, after a very long night when she had been watched over by her mother, by her friend Mimi and the doctors, Claudia rose from her bed at the sound of the church bells for which Rome is famous and which Puccini used to open the third act of *Tosca* to wonderful effect. A bunch of gardenias in a crystal vase by her bed gave off their heavy perfume, which she liked. She had not slept, but longed for a deep sleep. Her heart was pounding, her temples throbbing. She decided to return to her bed for yet another attempt at sleep. She returned to the bed and, at 7:45 a.m., her heart stopped.<sup>250</sup>

There were many expressions of shock in the wake of Claudia Muzio's passing. The New York, Chicago, and London papers (The *Times* said that news of her death was received with the “...utmost consternation...”) printed glowing obituaries and the Italian and South American outpouring of grief was intense and sincere. Renato commented to the press four years earlier that Claudia was “...the best cook in the world...”, the only word from him that was ever reported. “*La Prensa*” in Buenos Aires said that the news of her passing had caused a profound impression on the public. “*La Nacion*” followed suit. She was young and had always been a working artist. Some others her age had retired, like Rosa Ponselle and Geraldine Farrar; but Claudia had soldiered on, unlucky enough in money matters not to be able to retire,

<sup>250</sup> Martini, Giuseppe Gino, “Claudia Muzio,” in *Musica*, May, 1985, p.24

but also unable for another reason: she would not have wanted a life without work, for in her life work had become synonymous with living. She preferred to call it art. It was, to use a cliché, all she had. She had raised expectations by her example as an artist.

Mussolini sent a telegram of consolation to Renato. Claudia's body lay in state at the Capucine church in the Via Veneto for three days. On Wednesday, May 27, she was buried in the Liberati family mausoleum. She now lies under a massive memorial put in place two years later and designated as a national monument. Lauri-Volpi, Mimi Zuccari and a few other friends were responsible for raising the considerable amount of money required for this dramatic sculpture by Pietro Canonica, which depicts Claudia in a shroud-like drapery sitting on a plinth, behind her a mixture of clouds and organ pipes. Her distinctive signature is carved into the marble at the base of the monument and a bed of flowers in the shape of a heart covers the ground before it.

There was speculation that she had taken her own life. This constitutes another of those curious parallels with the life and career of Maria Callas, who spent her last years shut up in her Paris apartment, bereft of career, estranged from her family and the men in her life. In Claudia's defense, should she need any, it could be pointed out that there was still a career and that there were plans for the future - an unfulfilled contract, a tour planned - but the illness and her shrinking theatre of operations no doubt depressed her.

The official cause of death was reported in the papers as both a heart attack and a cerebral hemorrhage, though the death certificate states it was the former. It is almost unanimously agreed that she had been suffering from nephritis, inflammation of the kidneys produced by Bright's disease, which causes retention of fluids and swelling of the ankles. This would have been brought on by the poor condition of her heart,

which in turn could have been the result of a viral infection sometime earlier in her life.

Heart failure is recognised as a chronic and progressive illness. The lost blood that cannot be pumped out of the heart through a defective valve must go somewhere, and in this case it backed up into Claudia's kidneys, causing infection, and flooded her lungs, causing breathing problems. Now, patients are put on diuretics to reduce the fluids being retained in the tissues and are given drugs which boost the heart's pumping strength and others that relax the blood vessels and make it easier for the heart to pump blood through the circulatory system. In 1936, these therapies weren't known to Claudia's doctors. She found walking difficult and was in pain due to the infection. Possibly the pain and the embarrassment of her condition led to a severe depression, aggravated by her economic troubles. Her unhappy marriage to Renato was another factor, but she had had seven years to put this in its proper perspective and in any case her relationship with Refice was presumably antidotal. Refice, though, seems to have disappeared after their return to Rome. Was he at her side on that final evening in May? There is no evidence to suggest his presence. In 1954, in Buenos Aires, conducting Renata Tebaldi in the same opera which Claudia premièred, *Cecelia*, he had a heart attack and died.<sup>251</sup>

A further argument against suicide is the fact that Giovanna was very much alive, and still depended on her daughter. It would have been uncharacteristic of Claudia to abandon her mother after looking after her so diligently for twenty years. Lastly, the interdiction on suicide of the Catholic religion certainly adds weight to the argument that Claudia probably died of natural causes.

Cici was inconsolable. Mimi Zuccari took the little dog into her care. He languished

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<sup>251</sup> John C. G. Waterhouse, "Licinio Refice," The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians, 1980, Vo. 15, p 671.

on a garment belonging to his mistress and died within a few weeks. In 1975, on May 24, the anniversary of Claudia's death, Mimi Zuccari died and is buried near her friend in the Verano cemetery in Rome.

And what of May Higgins? Already we have traced her back to Chicago. Somehow she inherited many things formerly belonging to Claudia. She and Mimi continued to be friends and it is probable that Mimi left her own Muzio memorabilia to May ( and there are some photographs now housed in the *Museo alla Scala* in Milano which were bequeathed to them by Mimi). Caterina Secchi shared in this bounty:

Then [May] brought out the Traviata gown - gorgeous and all in ivory hand-made lace. She also showed me a gorgeous black dress belonging to Claudia with gold lace insets in the elbow to [the] wrist part of the arm. You may see the dress in some snapshots. Then boxes and boxes of portraits, snapshots, letters, etc. May liked my enthusiasm and, as I lived in Detroit, I took the Greyhound bus many times to go visit her. Once I asked too many questions and she got a little snappish, but she was a sweet and dear lady. She gave me so many photos and [some] clothing.<sup>252</sup>

On the tomb of Claudia Muzio is inscribed the following:

<i>La sua voce divina</i>	<i>(Your divine voice enchants</i>
<i>le genti d'ogni remoto</i>	<i>the people of every remote nation</i>
<i>paese ammaglio</i>	<i>Messenger of Glory</i>
<i>Messaggero di Gloria</i>	<i>Who shines the light</i>
<i>chi forza di luce</i>	<i>of Art.)</i>
<i>d'arte.</i>	



*Claudia Muzio's Monument in the Verano Cemetery, Rome*

<sup>252</sup> Secchi, loc.cit. Unfortunately, these effects have been lost.

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 Caterina Secchi, Los Angeles (1998) New Zealand (1999), Internet (2000)  
 Nigel Douglas, London (1996)  
 Rupert Christiansen, London (1996)  
 John B. Steane, Kent (1996)  
 Robert Tuggle, New York (via internet, 1998)  
 Cesar Arthur Dillon, Buenos Aires ( December, 1998)

Letters:

May Higgins: Following a Star, letters to the Muzio Fan Club (unpublished)  
 Letters from Mimi Zuccari to Caterina Secchi  
 Letters from May Higgins to Caterina Secchi  
 Letter: May Higgins to Francis Robinson  
 Letter: Edith Mason to Francis Robinson

**Audio Sources**

Compact discs: Claudia Muzio, The Complete Pathé Recordings (1917-18) Romophone 81080-2  
 Claudia Muzio, The Complete Edison Recordings (1920-25) Romophone 81005-2  
 Claudia Muzio, The Complete Columbia Recordings (1934-35) Romophone 81015-2  
 Claudia Muzio, A selection of her finest Edison recordings, including unpublished Items, GEMM CDS 9072  
 Tosca, Act 1 (Giacomo Puccini) Muzio, Borgioli, Gandolfi EKR CD 48

Cassette Tape: The First Fifty Years – Marty Robinson, FFY # 526: Claudia Muzio First Broadcast 2/6/82, Chicago, Illinois, USA.  
 Terence McNally Tribute to Claudia Muzio, Broadcast live over Texaco Metropolitan Opera Network, 16/12/1998.

## **Discography**

## A Discography of Claudia Muzio

### 1911 Gramophone Company, Milan

- 2-54063 TRAVIATA: Amami, Alfredo (with Tommasini)  
 053264 BOHEME: Si, mi chiamano Mimi  
 (the latter was issued by Victor (55028-A) and by IRCC (39).)

### 1919 Pathé-Frères Phonograph Company, New York

- 63021 AIDA: Ritorna vincitor (IRCC 3003)  
 " " I sacri nomi (IRCC 3003)  
 \*54015 " O cieli azzuri (O Patria mia)  
 54047 Baciarmi! (Buzzi-Peccia)  
 \*54036 BALLO IN MASCHERA: Ma dall'arido stelo divulsa  
 63022 BOHEME: Si, mi chiamano Mimi  
 54050 " Quando me'n vo (Musetta's Waltz)  
 63020 Canzone guerresca (Giordano)  
 ..... CARMEN: Habanera  
 54031 " Je dis que rien me m'épouvante  
 54021 CAVALLERIA RUSTICANA: Voi lo sapete  
 54026 CONTES D'HOFFMANN: Baracarolle (with K. Howard)  
 \*54053 ERNANI: Ernani involami  
 ..... FORZA DEL DESTINO: Pace, pace mio Dio  
 63020 Garibaldi Hymn (Mercantini-Olivieri)  
 \*54042 GIANNI SCHICCHI: O mio babino caro  
 63091 GIOCONDA: Suidicio!  
 54039 Good morning, Sue (Delibes)  
 \*54025 GUGLIELMO TELL: Selva opaca  
 54027 LOUISE: Depuis le jour  
 \*63022 MME. BUTTERFLY: Ancora un passo  
 54016 " " Un bel di vedremo  
 \*63023 MANON LESCAUT: In quelle trine morbide  
 63024 MEFISTOFELE: L'altra notte in fondo al mare  
 ..... MIGNON: Non conosci il bel suol  
 63019 OTELLO: Ave Maria  
 63017 PAGLIACCI: Ballatella  
 \*..... SEGRETO DI SUSANNA: O gioia, la nube leggera  
 54024 La Serenata (Braga) in English  
 54043 SUOR ANGELICA: Senza mamma  
 63018 TOSCA: Vissi d'arte  
 54022 TRAVIATA: Addio del passato  
 \*63018 TROVATORE: Tacea la notte placida  
 \*..... " D'amor sull'ali rosee  
 54038 Until (Sanderson)  
 63024 LA WALLY: Ebben, ne andro lontano

[In addition, Pathé catalog number unknown, *O del mio amato ben* (Donaudy), unpublished until Romophone CD 81010]

- \* At least eleven – those marked with an asterisk – were re-recorded by the Pathé company on needle-cut discs, labeled *Perfect* or *Actuelle*; the catalog numbers given above are the American numbers, and those unknown are represented by .....

**1921-25 Edison, Orange, New Jersey**

- 82247 ADRIANA LECOUVREUR: Io son l'umile ancella  
 82300 L'AFRICANA: Figlio del sol  
 82291 L'AMICO FRITZ: Son pochi fiori  
 82224 ANDREA CHENIER: La mamma morta  
 82234 Aspiration (arrangement of a Chopin nocturne)  
 82267 BIANCA E FERNANDO: Sorgi, o padre (IRCC 192)  
 82334 BOHEME: Si, mi chamano Mimi  
 82324 CARMEN: Je dis que rien ne m'épouvante  
 82218 Chère nuit (Bachelet)  
 82324 CONTES D'HOFFMANN: Elle a fui, la tourterelle  
 82218 Crisantemi (Sodero)  
 82287 ELENA E PARIDE: Spiagge amate (IRCC 192)  
 82243 Eternamente (Mascheroni) (*with Albert Spalding, violin, and Robert Gayler, piano*)  
 82224 EUGEN ONEGIN: Sei forse l'angelo fedele?  
 82267 FORZA DEL DESTINO: Pace, pace mio Dio  
 82339 Guardami! (Guagni-Benvenuti)  
 82309 HERODIADE: Egli è bel  
 82317 A Kiss in the Dark (Herbert)  
 82309 I LOMBARDI: Se vano è il pregare (IRCC 175)  
 82320 LORELEY: Dove son? (IRCC 321)  
 82305 MME. SANS-GÈNE: Che me ne faccio del vostro castello  
 82287 Mal d'amore (Buzzi-Peccia)  
 82305 MEFISTOFELE: L'astra notte in fondo al mare  
 82232 PAGLIACCI: Ballatella (IRCC 175)  
 82247 " Silvio! A quest'ora (*with Mario Laurenti*)  
 82300 RINALDO: Lascia ch'io pianga  
 82216 SALVATOR ROSA: Mia piccirella  
 82291 La Separazione (Rossini)  
 82339 Se tu m'ami Pergolesi  
 82317 Shepherd's Love (Manahan)  
 82223 TROVATORE: Tacea la notte placida  
 82223 " D'amor sull'ali rosee  
 82320 I VESPRI SICILIANI: Mercè, dilette amiche (IRCC 321)  
 82232 LA WALLY: Ebben, ne andro lontano  
 82243 ZAZA: Dir che ci sono al mondo

(In addition to this list, Edison catalog number unknown, *Odorano le rose*, composer unknown, unpublished until Romophone CD 81005)

**1933-35(?) Columbia, Milan**

- 4134-M ADRIANA LECOURVEUR: Poveri fiori  
 9107-M ANDREA CHENIER: La mamma morta  
 9108-M AL=RESIANA: Esser madre è un inferno  
 9113-M Ave Maria (Refice)  
 4136-M Beau soir (Debussy)  
 9107-M BOHEME: Si, mi chiamano Mimi  
 4140-M " Donde lieta usci (Mimi's Farewell)  
 4136-M Bonjour Suzon (Delibes)  
 9084-M CAVALLERIA RUSTICANA: Voi lo sapete  
 9148-M CECELIA: L'Annuncio (two parts)  
 9149-M " Death of Cecelia (two parts)  
 9114-M C'est mon ami (Crist)  
 9084-M Colombetta (Buzzi-Peccia)  
 9114-M Les filles de Cadiz (Delibes)  
 9106-M FORZA DEL DESTINO: Pace, pace mio Dio  
 9108-M MEFISTOFELE: L'altra notte in fondo al mare

4135-M Nina-nanna della Vergine (Reger)  
 9105-M NORMA: Casta diva (*with chorus*)  
 9112-M O del mio amato ben (Donaudy)  
 9113-M Ombra di nube (Refice)  
 9100-M OTELLO: Già nella notte densa (*with Francesco Merli*)  
 9100-M " Ed io veda " " "  
 9102-M " Esterrefatta fisso " " "  
 9102-M OTELLO: Dio ti giocondo, o sposo (*with Francesco Merli*)  
 9112-M Se tu m'ami (Pergolesi)  
 9105-M SONNAMBULA: Ah, non credea mirarti  
 4135-M Spirate pur, spirate (Donaudy)  
 4140-M TOSCA: Vissi d'arte  
 9106-M TRAVIATA: addio del passato  
 4134-M TROVATORE: Tacea la notte placida  
 (Catalog numbers are from the American Catalog)

In addition, EKR CD 48 and Romophone CD 81015 both contain the first act of TOSCA, pirated from radio by an unknown listener, on the night of the opening of the San Francisco War Memorial Opera House, October 15, 1932.

IRCC = International Record Collectors Club

The IRCC is not the only record archive to hold reissues of Muzio recordings. Over the years since 1935, items have appeared on the following labels:

Esoteric  
 Counterpoint  
 OASI  
 CBS  
 Rubini  
 Pearl  
 Cantabile  
 Minerva  
 Romophone  
 Top Artists' Platter  
 Belcantodisc  
 Scala  
 EMI  
 Angel  
 Fabbri  
 Famous Records of the Past  
 Memories HR  
 Nimbus

I am indebted to two sources for this list:

Monograph: Claudia Muzio, *A Biographical Sketch and Discography* (revised) Harold Barnes, Jr, 1947

The Art of the Diva: Muzio, Callas, Olivero Discographies compiled by John Hunt, published by the author 1997.

## Claudia Muzio (1889-1936)

### Chronology

It is an almost impossible task to produce an accurate chronology of Muzio's performances. I have limited this chronology to operatic performances and not included her many concerts. Some of the latter I have mentioned in the biographical section, but the information regarding them is much less rich than for opera.

The sources of this chronology are varied. First of all I depended heavily on the information in John B. Richards's groundbreaking article: *Claudia Muzio*, in *The Record Collector* Vol. XVII, Nos. 9 and 10. Additional information was provided by theatre historian Cesar A. Dillon in Buenos Aires, and lastly, for the final years of Muzio's career, there is very accurate information in May Higgins's unpublished diary.

Listing these performances has confirmed me in my conviction that the growth of the voice of Claudia Muzio from a light lyric to a dramatic soprano was a steady progression, but that she never lost the ability to diversify and sing lyric roles, even coloratura. Beginning, in 1910, with Manon (Massenet) and Gilda in Verdi's *Rigoletto*, she soon experimented with heavier parts (Tosca and Violetta early on in her career, and then not again until much later), adding Mimi in Puccini's *La Bohème*, Loreley, Catherine in *Madame Sans-Gêne*, Fiora in *L'amore dei tre re*, and then, gradually, the bigger dramatic soprano roles – both Leonoras of Verdi, Aïda, Santuzza, Tosca, and in the final phase of her career concentrating on Violetta, Norma, and the heavier Verdi roles. She planned her seasons so that they held a wide variety of repertoire, but gradually, as her career solidified, there were more Normas, Violettas, Toscas and Aïdas than anything else.

The wide variety and the sheer number of roles that Muzio learned during her twenty-five years as a professional opera singer is worth mentioning. There are forty-five different operas on the list, quite a few of them first performances, some of which never surfaced again after the initial run. But fully thirty of these works comprised her core repertoire. As a comparison, the great Austrian soprano Elizabeth Schwarzkopf sang a narrow repertoire of Mozart and Strauss for most of her operatic career, even though the total number of different operatic roles she learned was far bigger. Muzio's few appearances in Wagner and her coloratura roles, i.e. as Gilda and as Violetta scores of times tell us that hers was a remarkably versatile voice.

## **Chronology**

## Operatic Appearances of Claudia Muzio

### 1910

#### **Teatro Petrarca, Arezzo**

15 January *Manon* (Massenet) Manon Lescaut

#### **Teatro Mastroieni, Messina**

7 July Open rehearsal of *La Traviata*

9,10,29,31 July *La Traviata* (Verdi) Violetta

20,24,28 July *Rigoletto* (Verdi) Gilda

#### **Teatro Communale, Catanzaro**

(?)December *La Traviata* (Verdi) Violetta

17 December *Manon Lescaut* (Puccini) Manon Lescaut

### 1911

#### **Teatro Communale, Catanzaro**

27 February *Tosca* (Puccini) Floria Tosca

#### **Teatro Mercadante, Cerignola**

(?)April *La Traviata* (Verdi) Violetta

#### **Teatro dal Verme, Milano**

13 May *La Boheme* (Puccini) Musetta (18 further performances)

#### **Teatro Victor Emanuele, Torino**

Autumn (September-December) *Rigoletto* (Verdi) Gilda; *Il Trovatore* (Verdi) Leonora  
*Il Trovatore*(Verdi) Leonora.

#### **Teatro dal Verme, Milano**

19 December *Faust* (Gounod) Marguerite (16 further performances)

30 December *I Pagliacci* (Leoncavallo) Nedda (8 further performances)

### 1912

#### **Teatro dal Verme, Milano**

15 February *I Promessi Sposi* (Ponchielli) Lucia (1 further performance)

#### **Teatro Massimo, Palermo**

27 March *Otello* (Verdi) Desdemona (12 further performances)

16 April World Première *La Baronessa di Carini* (Mulè) Caterina la Grua (3 further performances, one conducted by Mulè)

#### **Teatro dal Verme, Milano**

7 September *Manon Lescaut* (Puccini) Manon (23 further performances)

2 October *Otello* (Verdi) Desdemona (3 further performances)

13 November (World Première) *Melenis* (Zandonai) Melenis (5 further performances)

### 1913

#### **Teatro San Carlo, Napoli**

31 January *Otello* (Verdi) Desdemona (16 further performances)

5 March *Il segreto di Susanna* (Wolf-Ferrari) Susanna (2 further performances)

12 March *Isabeau* ( Mascagni) Isabeau (10 further performances)

**Teatro Dante, Borgo San Donnino**

(?) May *Otello* (Verdi) Desdemona

**Teatro alla Scala, Milano**

18 November *Otello* (Verdi) Desdemona (Muzio substitutes Linda Canetti on opening night)

**1914****Teatro alla Scala, Milano**

10 February World Première *L'abisso* (Smareglia) Mariela (6 further performances)

12 April World Première *L'amore dei tre re* (Montemezzi) Fiora (1 further performance)

**Royal Opera House, Covent Garden, London**

6 May, 22 June *Manon Lescaut* (Puccini) Manon (3 further performances)

16, 22 May *Tosca* Floria Tosca (4 further performances)

12 June, 14 July *Otello* (Verdi) Desdemona

17 June *La Bohème* (Puccini) Mimi

21, 25 July *Falstaff* (Verdi) Alice Ford

**Theâtre des Champs Elysées, Paris**

29 May *I Pagliacci* (Leoncavallo) Nedda

**Teatro Regio, Torino**

10, 11, 13, 17, 21, 25, 28 October *Manon Lescaut* (Puccini) Manon Lescaut

**Teatro Alighieri, Ravenna**

21 November *Manon Lescaut* (Puccini) Manon Lescaut (10 further performances)

**Teatro Regio, Torino**

26 December *La Valkyria* (Wagner) Siglinda (11 further performances)

**1915****El Teatro Nacional, Habana**

24 April *I Pagliacci* Nedda

27 April *Tosca* (Puccini) Floria Tosca

11 May *La Bohème* (Puccini) Mimi

18 May *Otello* (Verdi) Desdemona

**El Stadio Nacional, Habana**

13 May *Carmen* (Bizet) Micaela

**El Teatro Matanzas, Sauto (Cuba)**

(?) *I Pagliacci* (Leoncavallo) Nedda

(?) *La Bohème* (Puccini) Mimi

**Teatro dal Verme, Milano**

23, 26 September *I Pagliacci* (Leoncavallo) Nedda

(?) October & (?) November *Tosca* (Puccini) Floria Tosca

**1916****Teatro Carlo Felice, Genoa**

(?) *Loreley* (Catalini) Loreley

**Teatro Verdi, Pisa**

13,15,17,19,23,25,27 March *Francesca da Rimini* (Zandonai) Francesca  
 (?) *Tosca* (Puccini) Floria Tosca

**Teatro Grande, Brescia**

8 February *Madame sans Gêne* (Giordano) Catherine

**Teatro Verdi, Padova**

23 April *Tosca* (Puccini) Floria Tosca

**Teatro Kursaal, San Pellegrino Terme**

8 July *Madame Sans Gêne* (Giordano) Catherine

**Teatro Grande, Brescia**

September 16 *Tosca* (Puccini) Floria Tosca

**Metropolitan Opera House, New York City**

4, 27 December *Tosca* (Puccini) Floria Tosca

**Brooklyn Academy of Music, New York City (with Metropolitan Opera Company)**

23 December *Tosca* (Puccini) Floria Tosca

**1917****Metropolitan Opera House, New York City**

3 January, 2 February, 17 March, 1 December *Il Trovatore* (Verdi) Leonora  
 11 January, 15 December *Tosca* (Puccini) Floria Tosca  
 18 January, 10 February, 31 March, 18 April, 7 December *I Pagliacci* (Leoncavallo) Nedda  
 27 January, 12 February, 3, 21 March, 5 April, 12 November *Aïda* (Verdi) Aïda  
 29 November *La Boheme* (Puccini) Mimi

**Philadelphia Academy of Music, PA USA (with Metropolitan Opera Company)**

10 April *I Pagliacci* (Leoncavallo) Nedda

**Fox Theatre, Atlanta, GA, USA (with Metropolitan Opera Company)**

24 April *Il Trovatore* (Verdi) Leonora  
 26 April *Tosca* (Puccini) Floria Tosca

**Metropolitan Opera House, New York City**

12 November *Aïda* (Verdi) Aïda  
 29 November *La Boheme* (Puccini) Mimi  
 1 December *Il Trovatore* (Verdi) Leonora  
 7 December *I Pagliacci* (Leoncavallo) Nedda  
 15 December *Tosca* (Puccini) Floria Tosca

**Philadelphia Academy of Music, PA, USA (with Metropolitan Opera Company)**

20 November *Le Prophete* (Meyerbeer) Berthe  
 18 December *I Pagliacci* (Leoncavallo) Nedda

**Brooklyn Academy of Music, New York City (with Metropolitan Opera Company)**

8 December *Il Trovatore* (Verdi) Leonora  
 29 January *I Pagliacci* (Leoncavallo) Nedda

**1918****Metropolitan Opera House, New York City**

4 January, 16 February *Manon Lescaut* (Puccini) Manon  
 26 January, 10 April *I Pagliacci* (Leoncavallo) Nedda  
 24 January, 25 February *Il Trovatore* (Verdi) Leonora  
 11 February, 9 March, 4 April *Aida* (Verdi) Aida  
 7, 15, 27 February, 16 March, 1 April *Le Prophete* (Meyerbeer) Berthe  
 14, 22, 30 March, 6, 17 April *L'amore dei tre re* (Montemezzi) Fiora

**Brooklyn Academy of Music, New York City (with Metropolitan Opera Company)**

29 January *I Pagliacci* (Leoncavallo) Nedda

**Philadelphia Academy of Music, PA USA (with Metropolitan Opera Company)**

19 March *L'amore dei tre re* (Montemezzi) Fiora  
 16 April *Il Trovatore* (Verdi) Leonora

**Opera House, Boston MA USA (with Metropolitan Opera Company)**

22 April *Le Prophete* (Meyerbeer) Berthe  
 24 April *Aida* (Verdi) Aida  
 25 April *I Pagliacci* (Leoncavallo) Nedda

**Pavilion, Ravinia, Illinois (Ravinia Opera Festival)**

29 June, 18 July, 15 August *Aida* (Verdi) Aida  
 2, 13 July, 31 August *Il Trovatore* (Verdi) Leonora  
 3, 20 August *L'amore dei tre re* (Montemezzi) Fiora  
 3, 21 July, 29 August *I Pagliacci* (Leoncavallo) Nedda  
 7, 16 July, 13 August *Tosca* (Puccini) Floria Tosca  
 9, 30 July, 1 September *Faust* (Gounod) Marguerite  
 11, 23, July, 8 August *Cavalleria Rusticana* (Mascagni) Santuzza  
 25 July, 6 August *Manon* (Massenet) Manon  
 27 July, 1 & 27 August *La Boheme* (Puccini) Mimi  
 10, 22 August 2 September *Madama Butterfly* (Puccini) Cio-cio San  
 17, 25 August *I gioielli della Madonna* (Wolf-Ferrari) Act 2 only Maliella  
 17, 25 August *Il segreto di Susanna* (Wolf-Ferrari) Susanna

**Metropolitan Opera House, New York**

13, 29 November, 1, 19 December *Aida* (Verdi) Aida  
 16 November, 25 December *I Pagliacci* (Leoncavallo) Nedda  
 23 November, 2 December *Le Prophete* (Meyerbeer) Berthe  
 6 December *Tosca* (Puccini) Floria Tosca  
 11 December *Il Trovatore* (Verdi) Leonora  
 14, 23 December *Il Tabarro* (Puccini) Giorgetta

**Philadelphia Academy of Music, PA USA (with Metropolitan Opera Company)**

3 December *Tosca* (Puccini) Floria Tosca  
 17 December *Il Tabarro* (Puccini) Giorgetta

**1919****Metropolitan Opera House, New York**

2 January, 31 March *I Pagliacci* (Leoncavallo) Nedda

13 January, 12 February *Aida* (Verdi) Aida  
 18 January, 21 February, 6 March *Le Prophete* (Meyerbeer) Berthe  
 1 March *Il Trovatore* (Verdi) Leonora  
 20 January, 20 February *Cavalleria Rusticana* (Mascagni) Santuzza  
 8 February *Manon Lescaut* (Puccini) Manon  
 22 March, 7 April *L'amore dei tre re* (Montemezzi) Fiora  
 29 March *La Boheme* (Puccini) Mimi

**Philadelphia Academy of Music, PA USA (with Metropolitan Opera Company)**

17 January *Aida* (Verdi) Aida  
 4 March *Il Trovatore* (Verdi) Leonora  
 11 March *La Boheme* (Puccini) Mimi  
 1 April *L'amore dei tre re* (Montemezzi) Fiora

**Fox Theatre, Atlanta, GA, USA (with Metropolitan Opera Company)**

23 April *Aida* (Verdi) Aida

**El Teatro Colón, Buenos Aires**

18, 19, 22 June, 13 July, 16 August, 30 September *Loreley* (Catalani) Loreley  
 28 July *Tosca* (Puccini) Floria Tosca  
 9, 12, 16 July, 12, 20 August, 9, 24 September *Aida* (Verdi) Aida  
 19 July *Manon Lescaut* (Puccini) Manon (3 further performances)  
 22 July *Mefistofele* (Boito) Margherita/Elena (5 further performances)  
 5, 7, 31 August South American Première *Madame Sans-Gêne* (Giordano) Caterina  
 10 September *I Pagliacci* (Act I)  
 11 August *La Boheme* (Puccini) Mimi

**El Teatro Solis, Montevideo**

13 September *Madame Sans Gêne* (Giordano) Caterina  
 (?) *La Boheme* (Puccini) Mimi  
 (?) *Tosca* (Puccini) Floria Tosca  
 (?) *Aida* (Verdi) Aida

**Metropolitan Opera House, New York**

19 November *Aida* (Verdi) Aida  
 22 November, 6 December *Il Trovatore* (Verdi) Leonora  
 26 November, 25 December *I Pagliacci* (Leoncavallo) Nedda  
 12 December *L'amore dei tre re* (Montemezzi) Fiora  
 17 December (World Première) *Il Tabarro* (Puccini) Giorgetta

**1920**

**Metropolitan Opera House, New York**

1 January, 28 February *L'amore dei tre re* (Montemezzi) Fiora  
 3, 31 January, 1 March *Il Tabarro* (Puccini) Giorgetta  
 9 January, 13 March *Cavalleria Rusticana* (Mascagni) Santuzza  
 23 January, 7 February, 12 April *I Pagliacci* (Leoncavallo) Nedda  
 4, 21 February, 5, 22 March *Le Prophete* (Meyerbeer) Berthe  
 12 February *Aida* (Verdi) Aida  
 24 March (North American Première) *Eugen Onegin* (Tchaikowsky) Tatyana  
 27 March *Manon Lescaut* (Puccini) Manon

**Brooklyn Academy of Music, New York City (with Metropolitan Opera Company)**

27 January *Il Trovatore* (Verdi) Leonora  
 10 February *I Pagliacci* (Leoncavallo) Nedda

**Philadelphia Academy of Music, PA, USA (with Metropolitan Opera Company)**

16 March *Il Trovatore* Leonora  
 6 April *L'amore dei tre re* (Montemezzi) Fiora  
 20 April *Eugen Onegin* (Tchaikowsky) Tatyana

**Palais Garnier, Paris**

5 May *Aïda* (Verdi) Aïda

**El Teatro Colón, Buenos Aires**

17, 19, 24, 27 June, 11, 27 July *Die Loreley* (Catalani) Loreley  
 23 June *Aïda* (Verdi) Aïda  
 17, 21, 23, July, 2, 8, 10 August *La Traviata* (Verdi) Violetta  
 1, 4, August *Lohengrin* (Wagner) Elsa

**Teatro Municipal (Reale) Rio De Janeiro**

8, 23, 24 September *La Traviata* (Verdi) Violetta  
 11, 14 September *Aïda* (Verdi) Aïda  
 16, 17 September *Loreley* (Catalani) Loreley  
 29 September *Lohengrin* (Wagner) Elsa  
 2 October South American Première *Der Rosenkavalier* (R. Strauss) Marschallin

**1921****Metropolitan Opera House, New York**

15, 27 January, 18 February, 10 March, 11, 18 April *Aïda* (Verdi) Aïda  
 21 January, 7, 17 February *Eugen Onegin* (Tchaikowsky) Tatyana  
 26 February *Tosca* (Puccini) Floria Tosca  
 4, 28 March *L'amore dei tre re* (Montemezzi) Fiora  
 7, 17 March, 8 April *Andrea Chenier* (Giordano) Maddelena  
 16 March, 15 April *Il Trovatore* (Verdi) Leonora  
 6, 16 April *Manon Lescaut* (Puccini) Manon

**Philadelphia Academy of Music, PA, USA (with Metropolitan Opera Company)**

1 February *Tosca* (Puccini) Floria Tosca  
 22 March *Aïda* (Verdi) Aïda

**Brooklyn Academy of Music, New York City (with Metropolitan Opera Company)**

19 March *L'amore dei tre re* (Montemezzi) Fiora

**El Teatro Colón, Buenos Aires**

9 June, 3 July, 26 August *Aïda* (Verdi) Aïda  
 4 June *La Boheme* (Puccini) Mimi  
 16, 23, July, 4, 10, 13, 21 August *La Forza del Destino* (Verdi) Leonora  
 30 July, 16 August *Monna Vanna* (Fevriér) Monna Vanna  
 19, 29 June, 13, 18 July, 14 August *Tosca* (Puccini) Floria Tosca  
 5, 24, 27, 28 August *Il Trovatore* (Verdi) Leonora.  
 9 July GALA - *I Pagliacci Act I* (Leoncavallo) Nedda  
 28 July GALA - *Aïda Act II, Scene II* (Verdi) Aïda  
 2, 3, 7 October *Aïda* (Verdi) Aïda

**Teatro Iris, Mexico City**

13, 20, 30 October *Tosca* (Puccini) Floria Tosca  
 (?) *Andrea Chenier* (Giordano) Maddelena  
 (?) *La Boheme* (Puccini) Mimi

**1922****Metropolitan Opera House, New York**

1,13,22 February, 9 March, 6 April *Aida* (Verdi) Aida  
 9 February *L'amore dei tre re* (Montemezzi) Fiora  
 11, 20 February, 8, 20 April *Andrea Chenier* (Giordano) Maddelena  
 4, 16, 29 March, 3, 14 April *Die Loreley* (Catalani) Loreley  
 11 March *Il Trovatore* (Verdi) Leonora

**Brooklyn Academy of Music, New York City (with Metropolitan Opera Company)**

18 March *I Pagliacci* (Leoncavallo) Nedda

**Philadelphia Academy of Music, PA, USA (with Metropolitan Opera Company)**

21 March *Andrea Chenier* (Giordano) Maddelena

**Fox Theatre, Atlanta, GA, USA (with Metropolitan Opera Company)**

26 April *Die Loreley* (Catalani) Loreley  
 27 April *I Pagliacci* (Leoncavallo) Nedda

**Civic Opera House, Chicago ILL, USA**

7, 20 December *Aida* (Verdi) Aida  
 11 December *Il Trovatore* (Verdi) Leonora  
 13, 23, December *I Pagliacci* (Leoncavallo) Nedda  
 16 December *Tosca* (Puccini) Floria Tosca

**1923****The Opera House, Boston, MA, USA (with Chicago Opera Company)**

22 January *Aida* (Verdi) Aida

**Palais Garnier, Paris**

28 February *Aida* (Verdi) Aida

**Casino, Monte Carlo**

4, 13, 29 March *Aida* (Verdi) Aida  
 8, 18, 27 March *Il Trovatore* (Verdi) Leonora  
 11, 24 March, 3 April *La Boheme* (Puccini) Mimi  
 1, 10 April *La Traviata* (Verdi) Violetta  
 8, 15 April *Tosca* (Puccini) Floria Tosca

**El Teatro Colón, Buenos Aires**

20, 23, 27 May, 1, 4, 18, June, 4 July *Aida* (Verdi) Aida  
 3, 16, 21, 29 June, 9 July *Tosca* (Puccini) Floria Tosca  
 1, 10, 14, 21 July *La Traviata* (Verdi) Violetta  
 7, 25 July, 6 August *Il Trovatore* (Verdi) Leonora  
 27, 29 July *Manon Lescaut* (Puccini) Manon

**Teatro Municipal, São Paulo**

(?) *Aïda* (Verdi) Aïda  
 (?) *Die Loreley* (Catalani) Loreley  
 (?) *Tosca* (Puccini) Floria Tosca  
 (?) *Il Trovatore* (Verdi) Leonora  
 (?) *La Traviata* (Verdi) Violetta

**Teatro Municipal (Reale) Rio De Janeiro**

1,4, 9 September *Aïda* (Verdi) Aïda (2 further performances)  
 6,15 September *La Traviata* (Verdi) Violetta  
 18,21,30 September *Tosca* (Puccini) Floria Tosca (2 further performances)  
 1,9,14 October *La Boheme*(Puccini) Mimi  
 4, 8 October *Il Trovatore* (Verdi) Leonora  
 12 October *Die Loreley* (Catalani) Loreley

**Civic Opera House, Chicago ILL, USA**

27 November, 6 December *Andrea Chenier* (Giordano) Maddelena  
 11,26 December *Monna Vanna* (Fevriér) Monna Vanna  
 15 December *Aïda* (Verdi) Aïda  
 19 December *La Forza del Destino* (Verdi) Leonora  
 22 December *Cavalleria Rusticana* (Mascagni) Santuzza

**1924****Civic Opera House, Chicago ILL, USA**

6, 14 January *La Forza del Destino* (Verdi) Leonora  
 11 January *Aïda* (Verdi) Aïda  
 18 January *Cavalleria Rusticana* (Mascagni) Santuzza  
 26 January *Mefistofele* (Boito) Margherita/Elena

**Palais Garnier, Paris**

22,26,31 March *Aïda* (Verdi) Aïda

**Casino, Monte Carlo**

2,7,11 April *Tosca* (Puccini) Floria Tosca  
 4, 9 April *Aïda* (Verdi) Aïda

**El Teatro Colón, Buenos Aires**

2,25 June, 4 July *La Forza del Destino* (Verdi) Leonora  
 27 June, (?) July, (?) August *Aïda* (Verdi) Aïda  
 9, 12, 28 July, 2 August *Die Loreley* (Catalani) Loreley

**Teatro Municipal (Reale) Rio De Janeiro**

19 August, 8 September *Tosca* (Puccini) Floria Tosca  
 21 August *La Forza del Destino* (Verdi) Leonora  
 25 August *Die Loreley* (Catalani) Loreley  
 29,31 August, 2 September *Aïda* (Verdi) Aïda (2 further performances)

**Civic Auditorium, San Francisco CA, USA(with San Francisco Opera)**

22 September *Aïda* (Verdi) Aïda  
 30 September *Tosca* (Puccini) Floria Tosca  
 4 October *La Traviata* (Verdi) Violetta

**Civic Opera House, Chicago ILL, USA**

6,15,29 November, 17 December *Tosca* (Puccini) Floria Tosca  
 19 November, 6 December *Il Trovatore* (Verdi) Leonora  
 23 November *Aïda* (Verdi) Aïda  
 2, 22 December *La Traviata* (Verdi) Violetta  
 9, 31 December *Mefistofele* (Boito) Margherita/Elena

**1925****Civic Opera House, Chicago ILL, USA**

5 January *Tosca* (Puccini) Floria Tosca  
 7 January *Aïda* (Verdi) Aïda  
 9 January *La Traviata* (Verdi) Violetta  
 10 January *Il Trovatore* (Verdi) Leonora  
 19 January *Mefistofele* (Boito) Margherita/Elena

**Palais Garnier, Paris**

30 March, 6 April *Aïda* (Verdi) Aïda

**El Teatro Colón, Buenos Aires**

1 July *Falstaff* (Verdi) Alice Ford  
 5, 11, 17, 16 July, 26 August *La Traviata* (Verdi) Violetta  
 9, 12, 19, 25 July, 23 August, 6 September *Aïda* (Verdi) Aïda  
 15, 18 July *L'amore dei tre re* (Montemezzi) Fiora  
 7, 9 August *Tosca* (Puccini) Floria Tosca  
 16, 30 August *Andrea Chenier* (Giordano) Maddelena  
 18, 21, 29 August *Die Loreley* (Catalani) Loreley

**Civic Auditorium, San Francisco CA, USA (with San Francisco Opera)**

3 October *Aïda* (Verdi) Aïda  
 4 October *Tosca* (Puccini) Floria Tosca

**Civic Opera House, Chicago ILL, USA**

4, 16 November *Manon Lescaut* (Puccini) Manon  
 8, 14 November *La Traviata* (Verdi) Violetta  
 12, 21 November, 21 December *Il Trovatore* (Verdi) Leonora  
 24 November, 5, 8, 17 December *Andrea Chenier* (Giordano) Maddelena  
 11 December *I Pagliacci* (Leoncavallo) Nedda  
 12 December *Aïda* (Verdi) Aïda  
 24 December *Cavalleria Rusticana* (Mascagni) Santuzza  
 29 December *Tosca* (Puccini) Floria Tosca

**1926****With Chicago Civic Opera Company on Tour (names of Theaters unknown)**

Boston, 25 January *Andrea Chenier* (Giordano) Maddelena  
 27 January *La Traviata* (Verdi) Violetta  
 1 February *Falstaff* (Verdi) Alice Ford  
 4 February *Manon Lescaut* (Puccini) Manon  
 6 February *Il Trovatore* (Verdi) Leonora  
 Baltimore 8 February *Tosca* (Puccini) Floria Tosca  
 Cleveland 15 February *Tosca* (Puccini) Floria Tosca  
 Cincinnati 24 February *Aïda* (Verdi) Aïda

Chattanooga 27 February *La Traviata* (Verdi) Violetta  
 Birmingham 2 March *La Traviata* (Verdi) Violetta  
 Memphis 5 March *La Traviata* (Verdi) Violetta  
 Miami 10 March *La Traviata* (Verdi) Violetta  
     13 March *Il Trovatore* (Verdi) Leonora  
     15 March *Cavalleria Rusticana* (Mascagni) Santuzza

### **Teatro alla Scala, Milano**

11 April *La Traviata* (Verdi) Violetta  
 17, 22 April *Il Trovatore* (Verdi) Leonora

### **El Teatro Colón, Buenos Aires**

22,25 May, 3 June Première *Nerone* (Boito) Asteria  
 30 May, 6,8 June 2 July *Andrea Chenier* (Giordano) Maddelena  
 11 June *Il Trovatore* (Verdi) Leonora  
 15 June *Cavalleria Rusticana* (Mascagni) Santuzza  
 25,29 June, 9, 13 July South American Première *Turandot* (Puccini) Princess Turandot  
 5,16,28 July *Tosca* (Puccini) Floria Tosca  
 23, 25 July World Première *Ollantay* (C. Gaito) Cussi-Coillur  
 2,7 August *Aïda* (Verdi) Aïda  
 4 August *La Traviata* (Verdi) Violetta

### **Teatro Municipal (Reale) or Teatro Lirico, Rio De Janeiro**

14 August–5 September (10 performances) *Turandot* (Puccini) Princess Turandot.  
 A publicity brochure of Muzio's appearances in 1926 includes these performances, but no evidence can be found in the incomplete archives of either theatre that they actually occurred.

### **Civic Auditorium, San Francisco CA, USA (with San Francisco Opera)**

28 September *Manon Lescaut* (Puccini) Manon  
 1 October *Aïda* (Verdi) Aïda  
 3 October *La Boheme* (Puccini) Mimi  
 4 October *Tosca* (Puccini) Floria Tosca  
 6 October *Il Trovatore* (Verdi) Leonora

### **(Theatre Unknown) Los Angeles, CA, USA**

10 October *La Traviata* (Verdi) Violetta

### **Civic Opera House, Chicago ILL, USA**

8 November, 5, 11, 30 December *Aïda* (Verdi) Aïda  
 23 November, 19 December *Il Trovatore* (Verdi) Leonora  
 27 November, 16 December (USA Première) *La Cena delle Beffe* (Giordano)  
 26 December *La Traviata* (Verdi) Violetta  
 28 December *La Boheme* (Puccini) Mimi

## **1927**

### **Civic Opera House, Chicago ILL, USA**

2, 5, 22 January *Il Trovatore* (Verdi) Leonora  
 18 January *La Cena delle Beffe* (Giordano)  
 3, 12, 16 January *La Traviata* (Verdi) Violetta

9 January *La Boheme* (Puccini) Mimi  
 14 January *Cavalleria Rusticana* (Mascagni) Santuzza

**With Chicago Civic Opera Company on Tour (names of Theatres unknown)**  
 Boston 31 January *Aïda* (Verdi) Aïda

**Teatro alla Scala, Milano**

13, 17 April *Andrea Chenier* (Giordano) Maddelena  
 23,26,28 April *Tosca* (Puccini) Floria Tosca

**El Teatro Colón, Buenos Aires**

25, 29 May, 4 June *Norma* (Bellini) Norma  
 7 June *Lohengrin* (Wagner) Elsa  
 10, 26 June, 3, 9 July *Tosca* (Puccini) Floria Tosca  
 24 June *Il Trovatore* (Verdi) Leonora  
 1 July *Andrea Chenier* (Giordano) Maddalena  
 5, 19 July *La Wally* (Catalani) Wally  
 24 July, 6, 7 August *La Traviata* (Verdi) Violetta  
 31 July, 2 August *La Boheme* (Puccini) Mimi

**Teatro Municipal (Reale) Rio De Janeiro**

15 August *Norma* (Bellini) Norma  
 17 August *Il Trovatore* (Verdi) Leonora  
 26 August *Andrea Chenier* (Giordano) Maddelena  
 30 August *Tosca* (Puccini) Floria Tosca  
 4,8,10 September *La Traviata* (Verdi) Violetta

**Teatro Municipal, São Paulo**

(?) *La Traviata* (Verdi) Violetta  
 (?) *Il Trovatore* (Verdi) Leonora  
 (?) *Andrea Chenier* (Giordano) Maddelena

**Civic Opera House, Chicago ILL, USA**

3, 20 November, 20, 25 December *La Traviata* (Verdi) Violetta  
 8, 16, 28 November, 10 December *Die Loreley* (Catalani) Loreley  
 12 November, 7 December *Aïda* (Verdi) Aïda  
 25 November, 12 December *Tosca* (Puccini) Floria Tosca  
 27 November *Cavalleria Rusticana* (Mascagni) Santuzza  
 4 December *Il Trovatore* (Verdi) Leonora

**1928**

**Civic Opera House, Chicago ILL, USA**

21 January *La Traviata* (Verdi) Violetta  
 1, 13 January *Tosca* (Puccini) Floria Tosca  
 11, 24 January *Cavalleria Rusticana* (Mascagni) Santuzza  
 5, 14 January *Il Trovatore* (Verdi) Leonora

**Teatro Reale, Roma**

19, 20, 22, 30 April *La Traviata* (Verdi) Violetta  
 24 April *Tosca* (Puccini) Floria Tosca  
 26, 28 April *Cavalleria Rusticana* (Mascagni) Santuzza

**El Teatro Colón, Buenos Aires**

25, 27 May, 2 June, 8 August *La Traviata* (Verdi) Violetta  
 5, 9, 10 June *Tosca* (Puccini) Floria Tosca  
 12, 17, 30 June *Norma* (Bellini) Norma  
 16 July GALA *La Traviata, Act I* (Verdi) Violetta  
 (?) *I Pagliacci* (Leoncavallo) Nedda  
 22, 24 July, 5 August *Andrea Chenier* (Giordano) Maddalena  
 1, 3 August *La Boheme* (Puccini) Mimi  
 7, 12 August *Die Loreley* (Catalani) Loreley  
 13 August, 14 October (Spring Season) *Cavalleria Rusticana* (Mascagni) Santuzza

**Teatro Municipal (Reale) Rio De Janeiro**

20, 26 August *La Traviata* (Verdi) Violetta  
 1, 7 September *Tosca* (Puccini) Floria Tosca  
 3 September *Die Loreley* (Catalani) Loreley  
 10, 13 September *Manon Lescaut* (Puccini) Manon  
 15 September *Norma* (Bellini) Norma

**Teatro Municipal, São Paulo**

(?) *Die Loreley* (Catalani) Loreley  
 (?) *Manon Lescaut* (Puccini) Manon  
 (?) *Mefistofele* (Boito) Margherita/Elena  
 (?) *Tosca* (Puccini) Floria Tosca  
 (?) *Norma* (Bellini) Norma

**Teatro Municipal, Santiago**

(?) *Norma* (Bellini) Norma

**Teatro Reale, Roma**

26, 30 December *Norma* (Bellini) Norma

**1929****Teatro Reale, Roma**

5, 9 January *Norma* (Bellini) Norma  
 1, 10, 13, 15, 25 January, 10 February, 1 April, 8 May *La Traviata* (Verdi) Violetta  
 17, 20, 31 January, 2 February, 27 April *Tosca* (Puccini) Floria Tosca  
 22 January *Cavalleria Rusticana* (Mascagni) Santuzza  
 14, 17, 19 February, 16 March, 2 May *Andrea Chenier* (Giordano) Maddalena  
 21, 25 April *Aida* (Verdi) Aida  
 30 April, 5, 9 May *La Forza del Destino* (Verdi) Leonora

**Teatro alla Scala, Milano**

12, (?) April May *La Traviata* (Verdi) Violetta

**Teatro Politeama, Firenze**

30 May *Norma* (Bellini) Norma (1 further performance)

**Opernhaus Zürich (possibly spurious)**

These undated performances are listed in John B. Richards's Chronology provided in his valuable article printed in *The Record Collector*.

(?) *La Traviata* (Verdi) Violetta  
 (?) *Norma* (Bellini) Norma

**Civic Opera House, Chicago ILL, USA**

6, 18, 28 November, 8, 21 December *La Traviata* (Verdi) Violetta  
 9 November, 1, 18 December *Il Trovatore* (Verdi) Leonora  
 12 November *Aida* (Verdi) Aïda  
 24 November, 28 December *Otello* (Verdi) Desdemona  
 14, 24 December *La Forza del Destino* (Verdi) Leonora  
 26 December *Tosca* (Puccini) Floria Tosca

**1930****Civic Opera House, Chicago ILL, USA**

12, 28 January *La Traviata* (Verdi) Violetta  
 5 January *La Forza del Destino* (Verdi) Leonora  
 13 January *Tosca* (Puccini) Floria Tosca  
 15 January *Otello* (Verdi) Desdemona.  
 23 January *Il Trovatore* (Verdi) Leonora

**With Chicago Civic Opera Company on Tour (names of Theaters unknown)**

Boston 12 February *La Traviata* (Verdi) Violetta  
 15 February *Il Trovatore* (Verdi) Leonora  
 Detroit 17 February *Aida* (Verdi) Aïda  
 20 February *La Traviata* (Verdi) Violetta

**Teatro Reale, Roma**

20,23,25,28 March *La Traviata* (Verdi) Violetta

**Teatro San Carlo,Napoli**

1,12,16 April *La Traviata* (Verdi) Violetta

**Teatro alla Scala, Milano**

2,6,8April *La Traviata* (Verdi) Violetta

**Civic Opera House, Chicago ILL, USA**

29 October *La Forza del Destino* (Verdi) Leonora  
 6,9,17 November *Cavalleria Rusticana* (Mascagni) Santuzza  
 22 November, 2 December *L'amore dei tre re* (Montemezzi) Fiora  
 25 November, 4,13,22 December *Otello*(Verdi) Desdemona  
 29 November *Mefistofele* (Boito) Margherita/Elena  
 6,15 December *La Traviata* (Verdi) Violetta  
 11 December *La Boheme* (Puccini) Mimi  
 20,27 December *Il Trovatore* (Verdi) Leonora  
 31 December *Aida* (Verdi) Aïda

**1931****Civic Opera House, Chicago ILL, USA**

7 January *La Boheme* (Puccini) Mimi  
 10 January *Mefistofele* (Boito) Margherita/Elena  
 24 January *La Traviata* (Verdi) Violetta

**With Chicago Civic Opera Company on Tour (names of Theatres unknown)**

Boston 27 January *Il Trovatore* (Verdi) Leonora  
 28 January *La Boheme* (Puccini) Mimi  
 31 January *La Traviata* (Verdi) Violetta  
 3 February *Aida* (Verdi) Aida  
 5 February *Otello*(Verdi) Desdemona  
 Pittsburgh 10 February *Cavalleria Rusticana* (Mascagni) Santuzza  
 Memphis 13 February *Cavalleria Rusticana* (Mascagni) Santuzza  
 Tulsa 17 February *Cavalleria Rusticana* (Mascagni) Santuzza  
 San Antonio 20 February *Cavalleria Rusticana* (Mascagni) Santuzza  
 Los Angeles 23 February *La Traviata* (Verdi) Violetta  
 25 February *Cavalleria Rusticana* (Mascagni) Santuzza  
 27 February *Aida* (Verdi) Aida  
 San Francisco 2 March *La Traviata* (Verdi) Violetta  
 4 March *Cavalleria Rusticana* (Mascagni) Santuzza  
 6 March *Aida* (Verdi) Aida  
 Seattle 9 March *La Traviata* (Verdi) Violetta  
 11 March *Cavalleria Rusticana* (Mascagni) Santuzza  
 Portland 12 March *La Traviata* (Verdi) Violetta  
 14 March *Cavalleria Rusticana* (Mascagni) Santuzza  
 Lincoln 17 March *Cavalleria Rusticana* (Mascagni) Santuzza

**Civic Opera House, Chicago ILL, USA**

2 November *Tosca* (Puccini) Floria Tosca  
 4 November, 5 December *Aida* (Verdi) Aida  
 14, 24 November *La Boheme* (Puccini) Mimi  
 28 November, 8, 19 December *La Traviata* (Verdi) Violetta

**1932****Civic Opera House, Chicago ILL, USA**

2, 12, January *I Pagliacci* (Leoncavallo) Nedda  
 6, 28 January *La Traviata* (Verdi) Violetta  
 15 January *Aida* (Verdi) Aida  
 23 January *Cavalleria Rusticana* (Mascagni) Santuzza

**Teatro Reale, Roma**

6,16,24,29 April *La Boheme* (Puccini) Mimi  
 19,23,27 April, 1 May *Tosca* (Puccini) Floria Tosca

**Teatro Politeama, Firenze**

18, 21 May *Tosca* (Puccini) Floria Tosca

**Teatro Carlo Felice, Genoa**

(?) *Die Loreley* (Catalani) Loreley

**(Theatre Unknown) Los Angeles, CA, USA**3 October *La Traviata* (Verdi) Violetta8 October *Il Trovatore* (Verdi) Leonora**War Memorial Opera House, San Francisco**15 October *Tosca* (Puccini) Floria Tosca22 October *Cavalleria Rusticana* (Mascagni) Santuzza*I Pagliacci* (Leoncavallo) Nedda29 October *Il Trovatore* (Verdi) Leonora1 November *La Traviata* (Verdi) Violetta**1933****Teatro Carlo Felice, Genoa**1,4,9 January *Die Loreley* (Catalani) Loreley**Teatro Massimo, Palermo**17,19,22 January *La Traviata* (Verdi) Violetta**Teatro San Carlo, Napoli**28 January, 5 February *Tosca* (Puccini) Floria Tosca**Teatro Grande, Brescia**14, 15, 19 February *Tosca* (Puccini) Floria Tosca**Teatro Reale, Roma**8, 11,15,19,23 March, 3 April *La Forza del Destino* (Verdi) Leonora17,21,26,28 March *Cavalleria Rusticana* (Mascagni) Santuzza30 March, 6,9,20,27 April *Tosca* (Puccini) Floria Tosca**El Teatro Colón, Buenos Aires**30 May, 4,10,15,21 June, 18 July, 16 August *La Traviata* (Verdi) Violetta6 June *Norma* (Bellini) Norma13, 29 June, 9,14 July *Andrea Chenier* (Giordano) Maddalena27 June, 12,20 July *Tosca* (Puccini) Floria Tosca4, 16 July *La Forza del Destino* (Verdi) Leonora**Teatro Municipal (Reale) Rio de Janeiro**3 August *Andrea Chenier* (Giordano) Maddalena16,27,31 August *La Traviata* (Verdi) Violetta24 August *Norma* (Bellini) Norma**Teatro Municipal, São Paulo**2 September *La Traviata* (Verdi) Violetta4 September *Norma* (Bellini) Norma6 September *Tosca* (Puccini) Floria Tosca

**War Memorial Opera House, San Francisco**

8 November *Aïda* (Verdi) *Aïda*  
 21 November *Cavalleria Rusticana* (Mascagni) *Santuzza*  
 23 November *La Traviata* (Verdi) *Violetta*  
 4 December *La Forza del Destino* (Verdi) *Leonora*

**1934****Metropolitan Opera House, New York**

1 January *La Traviata* (Verdi) *Violetta*  
 10 January *Cavalleria Rusticana* (Mascagni) *Santuzza*

**Philadelphia Academy of Music, PA, USA (with Metropolitan Opera Company)**

16 January *La Traviata* (Verdi) *Violetta*

**Teatro Reale, Roma**

7,10,18,22 February, 7 March *Cavalleria Rusticana* (Mascagni) *Santuzza*  
 15 (World Première), 17, 20, 25 February, 1, 21 March, 2,7 April *Cecelia* (Refice) *Cecelia*  
 4,7,10,15 April *Manon Lescaut* (Puccini) *Manon*

**El Teatro Colón, Buenos Aires**

23,29 May, 3,5,16 June, 7 July *La Traviata* (Verdi) *Violetta*  
 7,9,24 June *Die Loreley* (Catalani) *Loreley*  
 29 June, 1 July *Manon Lescaut* (Puccini) *Manon*  
 11 South American Première, 13 July *La Fiamma* (Respighi) *Silvana*

**Teatro Municipal, Montevideo**

15 July *La Traviata* (Verdi) *Violetta*

**Teatro Urgurzia, Montevideo**

17 July *La Fiamma* (Respighi) *Silvana*

**El Teatro Colón, Buenos Aires**

4 South American Première, 6,7,10,12,14,17,21 October *Cecelia* (Refice) *Cecelia*

**Teatro Augusteo, Roma**

16,19 December *La Samaritana* (Refice) ?

**Teatro Reale, Roma**

29 December *Otello* (Verdi) *Desdemona*

**1935****Teatro Reale, Roma**

2,6,15,28 January, 2,28 February *Otello* (Verdi) *Desdemona*  
 10,17,24,27 January, 6 February *La Traviata* (Verdi) *Violetta*  
 14,16,19,27 February *Norma* (Bellini) *Norma*  
 1 May *Cecelia* (Refice) *Cecelia*

**Teatro Municipal (Reale) Rio De Janeiro**15,18,25 August *Cecelia* (Refice) Cecelia30 August. 8 September *La Boheme* (Puccini) Mimi**Teatro Municipal, São Paulo**(?) September *La Boheme* (Puccini) Mimi(?) September *Cecelia* (Refice) Cecelia**Teatro Broadway, Buenos Aires**(?) November *Il Martirio di Santa Agnese, Trittico Francescano* (Refice) Agnes

## **List of Illustrations**

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These illustrations come from four sources: most of the production photographs are either in the *Museo alla Scala*, Milan or the Library of *El Teatro Colón*, Buenos Aires. The photograph of Maria Jeritza is taken from her autobiography (see entry in Bibliography section, p. 142.). The photograph of Muzio's monument in the Verano Cemetery in Rome is my own.

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