

## **The Czech and Slovak Presence at the Metropolitan Opera**

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To sing at the Metropolitan Opera is every singer's dream. But to become a member of the Met is reserved for only the best among the best. It is the pinnacle of a singer's career. There are other important opera houses, such as La Scala in Milan, the Vienna Staatsoper, and Covent Garden in London, indispensable steps in a singer's international career, but to be singing at the Metropolitan Opera means one has arrived.

Among the many Czechoslovak singers that graced the stage of the Metropolitan Opera, only Maria Jeritza and Jarmila Novotná joined the hall of fame of legendary singers there.

When the Metropolitan Opera moved from its original quarters at Broadway and 39<sup>th</sup> Street in New York to its new location at Lincoln Center, a unique gallery of portraits of great artists was established on the concourse level of the new opera house. Among the 64 subjects represented are two Czechoslovak sopranos, the beautiful Maria Jeritza in a full length portrait, costumed as Octavian in *Der Rosenkavalier*, and the exquisite Jarmila Novotná, pictured as Manon.

The reason behind the establishment of the Metropolitan Opera is rather amusing. The first home of the opera in New York was Park Theatre in 1825. Next was the Academy of Music in 1854 on 14<sup>th</sup> Street and Irving Place. And that is where the trouble started. There were only nine boxes held from season to season by the descendants of first families. The new railroad and banking millionaires were vexed that they could not get boxes at the opera to show off their wives' fabulous jewelry. So they banded together and built their own opera house with 122 boxes, and the Metropolitan Opera was born in 1883.

Opera began in the 16<sup>th</sup> century in Italy. By 1650 the city of Venice had eleven opera houses and this new art form spread quickly through Europe. When the Met was born there were great opera houses in Paris, Vienna, Bayreuth, and Milan. La Scala in Milan preceded it by more than 100 years. Through the years the Metropolitan Opera became preeminent.

Emmy Destinn, the Czech dramatic soprano, was one of the most important female figures in the operatic world during the first quarter of the last century. A brilliant success in Berlin and highly acclaimed in Bayreuth, she was the darling of London audiences. During her Metropolitan Opera engagement she stood in the first rank of its greatest stars. She was Caruso's favorite partner and everywhere they sang they were hailed as "the divine pair." Richard Aldrich, the critic of *The New York Times*, said of her: "She glorified the Met with one of the finest voices in a human throat."

Destinn was not only an exquisite artist, but also a personage of renaissance proportions. She was born Emma Kittlová in Prague on February 26, 1878 into one of the most prosperous families of that city. Showing unusual gifts at an early age, Emma began studying violin at the age of five.

When her father's friend, music critic and writer Ludevít Procházka, discovered that she had a voice, Emma at the age of fourteen abandoned her violin to become a singer. Marie Loewe-Destinn was chosen as her voice teacher. Marie was a former dramatic soprano with the Court Opera in Vienna and had had a successful career in Italy as well. She was a master of the Italian bel canto and together with her husband, Thomas Loewe, a former opera conductor and coach, maintained a prestigious voice studio in Prague. Madame Loewe used the name Destinn as her professional name and a grateful Emma took the name of her beloved teacher for her own when she became an opera singer. Marie Loewe Destinn was the only voice teacher Emma ever had and to her she "owed everything," as she expressed it.

The Loewe's saw the great promise in Emma. With her intelligence and superb musicianship, Emma mastered the bel canto technique easily. At this time she also became a special student at the Dramatic School of the National Theater in Prague, where she was the pupil of the great Czech tragedienne Otylie Sklenářová-Malá. Equally gifted as an actress, Emma became the prize pupil of Madame Malá.

Her language studies began at an early age and due to her acute musical ear her German and Italian were flawless. Her command of German was such that she wrote poetry in that language and had it published. She also spoke excellent English. Finally, after five years of rigorous training, she was ready to step out into the professional world.

In 1897 the 19-year-old Emma Kittlová was ready for auditions, which ended in disaster. František Subert, the powerful director of the National Theatre in Prague, dismissed her audition as the arrogant presumption of a wealthy spoiled girl. That same year her audition in Dresden was also unsuccessful because she was Czech. Her third attempt failed at the Theatre des Westens in Berlin, where she was told she had no voice, besides being ugly.

With great determination and support from her teacher, who had total faith in her ability, she went directly to the Berlin Imperial Opera. The Intendant, Count Hochberg, recognized immediately an exceptional talent and offered her a contract, which lasted ten years. After her debut as Santuzza in *Cavaleria Rusticana* she became an instant success. Critical praise and offers began to pour in. Altogether she created forty roles in Berlin.

Richard Strauss wrote *Salome* with Destinn in mind. She was decorated with the Legion d'Honneur by President Fallier of France. She went from one triumph to another. Her performance as Senta during the first performance of *The Flying Dutchman* at the Bayreuth Festival was described as "unsurpassable." Her Madame Butterfly at Covent Garden was simply overpowering and for many years she was the "only Butterfly in London."

The unique personality of Destinn, combined with her prodigious talent and ability, was responsible for her enormous success. Not a great beauty, she was very feminine with a radiant and bewitching personality. This made her extremely attractive to men. Yet she never found lasting happiness with the men she loved.

When true love was offered by Enrico Caruso, Arturo Toscanini, and Giacomo Puccini, she was unable to accept a lasting relationship. Toscanini was very jealous of Caruso, feeling that he had no chance against the famous singer who was adored by many women. Of these three men who loved Destinn, Caruso fared the worst. Accustomed to easy conquests, Caruso was crushed when she rejected his offer of marriage. Urged by her friends to accept his offer, she replied, "If I ever marry it will be only with a Czech."

Destinn became a world figure in opera with her debut at the Metropolitan Opera on November 16, 1908 when she sang *Aida* on the opening night of that season. The Berlin years formed a solid foundation for her artistic career. Then as today the ultimate recognition was to sing at the Metropolitan Opera. When the offer came in 1908 she accepted readily.

The opening of the Metropolitan Opera Season was always an occasion for elegance. It was the highlight of the social season. The opening of the 1908 season was an extraordinary event in the history of the Metropolitan Opera. An American double debut took place on that night with the Czech soprano Emmy Destinn as *Aida* and Arturo Toscanini as the new conductor. Destinn sang that night with a star-studded cast: Caruso as *Rhadames*, Antonio Scotti as *Amonasro*, and Louise Homer as *Amneris*. The success was overwhelming. Destinn conquered the New York audience as easily as she had conquered audiences in Berlin and London.

Although Destinn's repertoire at the Met included many of the roles she sang in Berlin and Covent Garden, led by Maestro Toscanini, the majority of her roles were eventually from the Italian repertoire. Altogether her operatic repertoire comprised some eighty roles. Destinn formed with Caruso a perfect pair. When they sang, they inspired each other. Whenever they performed together the performances were sold out and scalpers sold tickets at inflated prices. It was not surprising that Destinn and Caruso sang opening performances in most seasons at the Met.

Destinn stayed at the Met for eight seasons, from 1908 to 1916. These were the years of the "golden age of the Metropolitan Opera," under Toscanini's leadership.

Destinn's steady success was due to her meticulous and hard work. She was nervous before every performance. "It is not for me that I am nervous, but I have a great responsibility to the audience" she said.

Two special events should be mentioned during Destinn's years in New York. The American premiere of *The Bartered Bride* in 1909 and the world premiere of Puccini's *Girl of the Golden West* in 1910. Destinn sang *Mařenka* in the performance of *The Bartered Bride* with Gustav Mahler conducting. It was an extraordinary success. The opera was repeated eight times that season and Smetana became a household word in New York.

Puccini wrote *The Girl of the Golden West* for Destinn, who created the role of Minnie for the world premiere at the Metropolitan Opera on December 6, 1910. New York was in an uproar. The composer himself came to take charge of the rehearsals. Destinn and Caruso sang the opera seven times in America and later in London with Toscanini conducting. The American success was due more to the performance of the "divine pair" than to the work itself.

After the outbreak of the First World War, Destinn became increasingly homesick and finally in 1916 left for home. As an ardent patriot, she worked unceasingly for the independence of Czechoslovakia. These activities led the Austrian authorities to revoke her passport and intern her throughout the duration of the war at her castle Stráž.

Although she had a contract for 76 more performances with the Metropolitan Opera, the Austro-Hungarian Government refused to let her go. The enforced isolation during the war years caused her to lose most of her overseas contacts and she found to her dismay that her position had been filled by new talent. Although Destinn sang two more seasons at the Metropolitan Opera (1919-1921), she never regained her previous glory.

Another colleague from the homeland of Emmy Destinn at the Metropolitan Opera was Karel Burián, known in America as Carl Burrian. The Czech *heldentenor* Karel Burián was born in Rakovník in 1870. After studying with the famous teacher František Pivoda in Prague, he made his debut at the National Theatre in Brno in 1891. Demand for his specialty—the Wagnerian heroic roles took him to many leading European opera houses, including Covent Garden in 1904 and Bayreuth. He created the role of Herod in Richard Strauss's *Salome* in Dresden in 1905. The critic Arnold Bax wrote of Burián's interpretation of the role, "Burián was a horrifying Herod, slobbering with lust and apparently almost decomposing before our eyes."<sup>1</sup> During the Berlin premiere of *Salome* on December 6, 1905, he sang Herod to Destinn's Salome. Later, when Destinn sang Salome during the French premiere at the Theatre Chatelet in Paris on March 6, 1907 he again sang Herod. Music critics called it a musical event of the first order.

His Metropolitan debut was as Tannhäuser on November 30, 1906, the role that made him famous throughout Europe. He remained with the company until 1913, singing Siegfried, Tannhäuser, Lohengrin, Parsifal, and Herod in *Salome*.

Another Czech dramatic soprano who became a member of the Metropolitan Opera was the beautiful Maria Jeritza, who with her marvelous voice and tremendous acting talent became one of the most admired and sought after artists in the years between the wars.

Maria Jeritza was born Mimi Jedličková in Brno, Moravia in 1887. She studied at the Music Conservatories in Brno and Prague. Her operatic debut in 1910 was in the Olomouc opera house where she sang Elsa in *Lohengrin*. Within a few months she was engaged by the Volksoper in Vienna. In 1912 Richard Strauss chose her to create the role of Ariadne in the world premiere of *Ariadne auf Naxos*. Ever afterwards she became the darling of Strauss and his favorite interpreter of his leading female roles.

After she charmed the Austrian Emperor Franz Josef in a special performance of *Die Fledermaus*, she was engaged in 1912 by the Royal Opera (later State Opera), where she remained a star until 1932. There she achieved triumphs in the operas of Richard Strauss,

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<sup>1</sup> The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Opera, London: Oxford University Press, pg. 59

Puccini, and Erich Korngold. She sang in all the important opera houses, reaping personal triumphs and admiration wherever she sang.

She made her American debut at the Metropolitan Opera in Korngold's *Die Tote Stadt* on November 19, 1921. She remained with the company through the 1932 season. In her ten years there, she appeared in the American premiere of Janáček's *Jenůfa* in 1924. She was the first American Turandot in 1926. She sang the leading roles in revivals of Massenet's *Thais*, Puccini's *Girl of the Golden West*, and in many first performances there. Wagnerian roles, such as Senta, Elsa, and Sigelinde were her staples.

Puccini considered Maria Jeritza to be an ideal Tosca, and her performances of Turandot, Tosca, and Minnie were cheered by the audiences in her decade-long reign at the Metropolitan Opera. She resigned from the Met in 1932 but continued singing throughout Europe and America. After her marriage to the motion picture executive Winfield Sheehan in 1935 she withdrew from opera. Her autobiography *Sunlight and Song* was published in 1924.

Pavel Ludikar, the eminent bass-baritone came to the Metropolitan Opera via the Vienna Volksoper, Dresden Staatsoper, La Scala, and Teatro Colon in Buenos Aires.

He was born in Prague in 1882. After completing his studies in law and philosophy he turned to music. His operatic debut was as Sarastro at the National Theatre in Prague. His first American debut was with the Boston Civic Opera in 1913. In November 1926 he made his debut at the Metropolitan Opera in the American premiere of Puccini's *Turandot*, in which performance Maria Jeritza sang the title role. He remained at the Met through the 1932 season, singing about eighty roles in a dozen languages. He sang the role of Figaro 110 times during his tenure at the Met.

In 1935 he was appointed manager of the National Theatre in Prague and during the war years was unfortunately closely associated with the Nazis.

Among the more recent Czechoslovak operatic singers, Jarmila Novotná became one of the leading sopranos at the Metropolitan Opera. Her name ranks in the annals of contemporary opera with singers such as Lisa della Casa, Kirsten Flagstad, Dorothy Kirsten, Renata Tibaldi, and Maria Callas. She belongs to the last of the great operatic personalities who were not only impeccable musicians but also consummate actors.

Lanfranco Rasponi, journalist, critic, and great lover of opera, who interviewed Jarmila Novotná paid her the ultimate compliment. "She was a legendary beauty with an uncanny gift for the stage. She made a spectacular career despite a voice that was not prepossessing. So remarkable were her musical skills, her knowledge of vocal boundaries, her irresistible charm, natural glamour, and superb showmanship that she won over all the outstanding conductors and *metteurs-en-scene*. She was human, not malicious, generous, adored by everyone in all walks of her life, for she was a prima donna in looks and distinction, but not in character. She brought a

radiance to every role she undertook, her every entrance was a burst of sunshine...her successors seem like shadows on a Chinese screen.”<sup>2</sup>

Jarmila Novotná was born on September 23, 1907 in Prague. She was interested in music from her early years. Too young to be accepted at the National Conservatory, at the age of 15 she started her vocal studies with Emmy Destinn, who became her main teacher. But during Destinn’s many professional absences she studied with the baritone Hilbert Vávra. In 1925 Vávra arranged for Jarmila Novotná to sign Rosina and Traviata in performances at the provincial theatre in Louny. The operatic debut of the 17-year-old singer was a huge success. Vávra then arranged for her an audition with Otakar Ostrčil, principal conductor of the National Theatre in Prague. Ostrčil offered her two guest appearances at the end of the season. In 1926 she became a permanent member of the National Theatre in Prague.

Jarmila Novotná started as a coloratura, but switched in a few years to lyric repertoire. Because of her remarkable musical and technical skills she also excelled in three mezzo-soprano roles, all trouser roles: Cherubino, Prince Orlofsky, and her most famous one, Octavian in *Der Rosenkavalier*.

After hearing her at a concert, conductor Franz Schalk suggested Vienna Staatsoper as a next step. Jarmila Novotná knew she was not ready and that she needed more training. She chose Italy and in January 1927 departed with her mother for Milan.

Maestro Tenaglia became her teacher. The year 1928 marks the beginning of her international career as Gilda in the spectacular Arena di Verona. Lanfranco Rasponi tells a charming story connected with this performance:

Before the curtain went up Novotna was asked for money for the claque, which she did not have. Knowing the caprice of the Italian public she worried she would be booed as a revenge. After she finished the aria “Caro nome” she received such an ovation that she had to repeat it. Lauri-Volpi, who sang the Duke, told her “*Brava cecoslovacchina, hai vinto*” (Bravo, my little Czech, you won.)<sup>3</sup>

At the end of 1928 Novotná accepted an engagement as a permanent member of the Berlin Kroll Opera, which was a branch of the State Opera. At the time it was considered the most exciting and avant garde opera house in Europe. When the Kroll Opera was closed in 1931 she was transferred to the State Opera.

In 1934 Jarmila Novotná created the role of Giuditta, which Franz Lehar wrote for her. At this time she also continued making films. Altogether she made ten films. Her last one was *The Great Caruso* in 1950.

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<sup>2</sup> Rasponi Lanfranco, “The Last Prima Donnas,” Alfred A. Knopf, New York, 1984, pg. 296.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid, pg. 319

After hearing her in Salzburg and Vienna, Toscanini invited Novotná to sing in performances he was planning for the World Fair in New York in March 1939. When Jarmila Novotná arrived in New York in March 1939 she was greeted with the horrible news that her homeland had been occupied by the Germans.

Her Metropolitan debut on January 5, 1940 was warmly received. She sang Mimi with Jussi Bjoerling singing Rodolfo. When she sang the leading role in *La Traviata* the following February, she was hailed as the greatest singing actress of her time.

Jarmila Novotná stayed with the Met for fifteen seasons. Among the roles that she sang there were Elvira, Pamina, Violetta, Mimi, Antonia, Mařenka, Euridice, Freia, Massenet's Manon, Melisande, and Giuletta. But the roles most frequently sung with the company were Orlofsky, Cherubino, and Octavian. Her final appearance was on January 15, 1956. Altogether she sang 193 performances, of which 142 were in house and 51 on the road.

As an artist of international stature she sang in all the major opera houses and concert halls. In 1950 she also appeared on Broadway in Korngold's *Helen Goes to Troy*.

Rasponi has this to say about her Octavian. "In the estimation of many, myself included, there never has been an Octavian to compare to hers in charm, distinction, utter credibility, and total involvement."<sup>4</sup> And Florence Page Kimball, the grande dame of music in New York says: "Jarmila and Octavian on the stage were one. Now that she has retired I simply cannot bear to see anyone in the part."<sup>5</sup>

Edita Gruberová comes close to filling the shoes of her predecessors. She is a true coloratura soprano and content to stay in this field of vocal specialty. Coloratura sopranos are light voices that specialize in roles demanding agility, have a gift for ornamental singing, and a very high top register. Gruberová sings G sharp above high C. She is being counted among such legendary coloraturas of the twentieth century as Marcella Sembrich, Luisa Tetrazzini, Nellie Melba, Amelita Galli-Curca, and Lily Pons. She sings such roles as the Queen of the Night, Blonde, Olympia, Zerbinetta, Rosina, Lucia and many roles in Donizetti, Bellini, and Meyerbeer operas.

Edita Gruberová was born in Slovakia on December 23, 1946. At the age of 15 she entered the Conservatory in Bratislava and at 21 made her debut as Rosina at the Bratislava Opera. A two-year engagement in a provincial theater in Slovakia led directly to an engagement at the Vienna Staatsoper. Later when Dr. Karl Böhm decided to use her as Zerbinetta in *Ariadne auf Naxos* by Strauss her success and career were assured. Zerbinetta is one of the most difficult coloratura roles and today Edita Gruberová is referred to as "Zerbinetta extraordinaire." With her sparkling high notes and great flexibility she has captivated audiences in Munich, Milan, Covent Garden, Berlin, San Francisco, New York, and Washington, D. C. She has a permanent contract with the Vienna Staatsoper and is a frequent performer at the Salzburg Festival.

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid, pg. 316

<sup>5</sup> Ibid, pg. 316

Edita Gruberová made her debut at the Met in 1977 as the Queen of the Night and has crossed the ocean many times since for repeat performance.

Another Slovak singer preceded Edita Gruberová at the Met. Soprano Lucia Popp, with a ravishingly beautiful voice came to the Met from the Vienna Staatsoper where she held the title of Kammersangerin. Her first Met appearance was in 1967 when she sang Queen of the Night and later Sophie and Pamina.

Another crop of Slovak singers was busy at the Met from the late seventies to the present. Peter Dvorský sang Alfredo during his Met debut in 1977, followed by DeGrioux in Puccini's *Manon* and Ricardo in *The Masked Ball*.

The golden voiced soprano Gabriela Beňáčková made her debut in 1991 as Kát'a Kabanová and through 1992-96 seasons sang Mimi, Jenůfa, Leonora in *Fidelio* and *Rusalka*.

Bass Sergej Kopčák has had excellent reviews for his supporting roles in *Kát'a Kabanová*, *Rigoletto*, *Don Giovanni*, *Lady McBeth of Mtsenks* by Shostakovic, and Schönberg's *Moses and Aaron*.

The Czech singers are not lagging behind with their appearances at the Met in the new millenium—namely soprano Eva Urbanová and mezzosoprano Eva Randová.

But could any of these singers achieve the legendary status of Destinn, Jeritza, Novotna, or Caruso? Today in the jet age with lightening communications, television and radio broadcasts, and with electronic recordings and distribution any outstanding artist from any corner of the world can be instantly summoned to the Met, certainly an honor and the crowning achievement of a career. But it is only a quick passage through, hardly a permanence on which legends are built.

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