

MARIA CEBOTARI

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We are in danger of forgetting great musicians of the past. We tend to know and support only those musicians which belong to our own generation, and some justify this by stating that life is only for the living.

To forget is to neglect and ignore.

There is, however, a small minority of music-lovers and musicians who do admire great performers of the past. Nevertheless, we still live in a society and, indeed, in a world that seems only to rate and value contemporary performers. This attitude is becoming even more prevalent in many forms of the arts, such an example is the modern trend to reject and devalue films which were made in black and white.

One such injustice is evidenced in the case of the Russian soprano, Maria Cebotari, whose voice was crystal clear, pure and with a secure intonation that can only be admired. Her voice was never mannered with ugly portamenti, ghastly slurs and histrionics. She had an amazing voice and the whole range of her voice was thrilling. Her top notes were unbelievable and never forced. Nor did they have the unfortunate over-prominence and exaggerated dominance that lesser singers bring to top notes. Like every true musician, Maria believed that she was the servant of music, and that music should be devoid of personal idiosyncrasies and personal licence. So many musicians, singers in particular, use licence which means that they believe that they have the right to a liberty of action and have permission to alter the music, or include deliberate deviations from what is written by the composer.

Maria was born on 10 February 1910 in the city of Kischinew in Bessarabia. She was the daughter of a teacher and showed amazing musical talent at a very early age. Congregations at the local church were deeply impressed by her voice in the choir loft. She grew up speaking Russian both and Rumanian. But musicians in eastern-European countries were not liked, particularly if they came from middle-class families. These difficulties initially hindered Maria but, eventually, she entered the conservatory in her home town.

It was the Russian actor, Count Alexander Vyrubov, of the Moscow Arts Theatre, who, on a tour to Kischinew, experienced Maria's superlative talents and offered her a contract with his ensemble. Her parents were not in favour of this arrangement and Vyrubov pleaded with them. It took his proposal of marriage to Maria to cause the parents to yield.

The marriage did, in fact, take place and the couple travelled from city to city finally settling in Paris where Maria endeavoured to find vocal work.

It was on a trip to Berlin that her husband introduced her to the composer Max von Schillings who recommended her to the singing teacher Oscar Daniel. She underwent intensive study and then was engaged by Fritz Busch for the Dresden State Opera. On 15 April 1931 she appeared as Mimi in Puccini's *La Boheme*. Later that year, Bruno Walter appointed her as Amor in Gluck's *Orpheus and Euridice* at the Salzburg Festival.

In 1934 she was awarded the title *Kammersangerin*, a very high distinction for meritorious singers. She is the only 24 year old to receive this prestigious award. She subsequently appeared at all the leading opera houses in London, Paris, Milan, Rome and Zurich. The Vienna State Opera welcomed her with open arms in 1936 and she was a member of that company until her death in 1949. Due to her heavy schedule she was not able to perform in America although she was invited to visit there in 1940.

She had made her debut in the film *Troika* in 1929 and from the middle 1930s onwards she appeared in several films namely *Giuseppe Verdi* (1935), *Madchen in Weiss* (1936), *Solo per te* (1937), *Starke Herzen* (1937), *Mutterlied* (1937), *Il sogno Butterfly* (1939), *Amani, Alfredo* (1940), *Maria Malibran* (1942), *Odessa in fiamme* (1942) and *Leckerbissen* (1948).

Her films did little if anything to further her career. The tenor, Benjamino Gigli (1890-1957) said that he wanted Cebotari to appear in movies with him because of her great vocal talent and yet, in his autobiography,



he does not mention her once.

Her first marriage had ended in 1938 and her second marriage was to the actor Gustav Diessel (1899 - 1948) with whom she had two sons.

She lived in Berlin and the war took her lovely home in 1943 and also resulted in her separation from her family. Indeed, the war left a very dark mark upon this wonderful singer. Uncertainty was her most frequent companion at this time. In the summer of 1945 she sang Konstanza in Mozart's Abduction from the Seraglio at the Salzburg Festival.

As usual she received a tumultuous reception. She was a star and one of the very rare people who deserved stardom. She worked with Richard Strauss, who demanded that she play Salome and Daphne in his operas stating that ' no one else would do.' She created the role of Aminta in Strauss's Die Schweigsame Frau. Cebotari also worked with Hans Pfitzner and created the role of Lucie in von Einem's Danton's Tod in 1947.

Her other more unusual roles included Carmen and, Gabriele in Schoeck's Das Schloss Durande. She appeared in The Gypsy Baron and Offenbach's Tales of Hoffman and, as Laura, in Millocker's operetta Der Bettelstudent. She also sang Mahler's Symphonies nos 2 and 4 with Bruno Walter.

After the war, she was active in restoring opera internationally. She worked hard and feverishly. Her voice had obtained a new dynamism and intensity. Her acting ability was not sensational but acceptable. And she possessed a quality that few opera singers really have , a stage presence.

She was a strong-willed personality and highly sensitive. She sang music from Gluck to Richard Strauss's Daphne. She sang with Tiana Lemnitz, Lore Hoffman, Olga Rieser, Beate Anderson, Hans Wocke, Willi Dongraf-Fassbaender, Eduard Kandl, Otto Husch, Ernst Kurz, Helge Rosvaenge, Heinrich Schlusnus. Peter Anders, Walter Ludwig, Karl Scmitt-Walter , Elizabeth Schwarzkopf and many others.

Her voice was so beautiful that it is difficult to believe that she was mortal. It is a beauty which has the rare capacity to move one to tears and to realise again that music is both powerful and emotional and an universal language that needs no translation but can produce the most heartfelt response. She was also blessed with physical beauty.

Her final triumph was as Mistress Ford in Nicolai's Merry Wives of Windsor in 1949, a triumph which displayed her playful humour and sparkling temperament. A few months later she died suddenly although she knew she had incurable liver cancer and her funeral in Vienna in June 1949 was imposing, a warm demonstration of love and honour bestowed on the greatest singer of her time and of all time. How do you say farewell to an incomparable artist?

The concert pianist Clifford Curzon and his wife Lucille adopted Cebotari's two small sons.

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