

## ROSA PONSELLE

by David C. F. Wright, DMus

WARNING Strict copyright applies to this article and all of Dr Wright's articles

Rosa Ponzillo was born in Connecticut in 1897, a daughter of the first strand of Italian immigrants. Her father, Benardino was a baker who did not show any interest in his daughter's music, but was always interested in her income. He also showed an interest in his other daughter, Carmela, when she earned money singing between the reels in a nickelodeon. Carmela always sang too loud in the school choir which caused Rosa some embarrassment.

Rosa developed a wide ranging voice of three octaves. She went to hear Tetrizzini, Calve and Melba at concerts and, at her confirmation in to the Roman Catholic church, she argued with the priest because he refused to allow her to take Melba as her saint's name.

Perhaps the singer who most influenced Rosa in style was the contralto Ernestine Schumann-Heink, born in 1861 as Ernestine Rossler. But Rosa, like her sister, began her career in the movie-houses before graduating to the Cafe Malone in New Haven where she would accompany herself on the piano. She would sing the popular pieces from opera and operetta and made Victor Herbert's song Kiss me Again a great hit. Carmela had a part in a Broadway musical and advocated that a sister act would go down well in vaudeville. They scored a success with the Trio from Gounod's Faust and went on tours with Harry Lauder, George Burns, Sophie Tucker, Jack Benny and the Marx Brothers.

When the Met in New York approached her in 1918, Rosa was unknown. Carmela was having singing lessons with William Thorner and Rosa tagged along wanting to get out of vaudeville. Rosa had seen Caruso and Farrar in Madame Butterfly and, on one occasion, Caruso appeared in the Thorner studio and requested to sing duets with Rosa. Caruso recommended her to Gatti-Casazza who was looking for a soprano to give the New York premiere of Verdi's Force of Destiny.

Rosa changed her name to Ponselle and was taken into seclusion for five months to train with Romano Romani, a student of Mascagni and Puccini. Rosa and Romano became lifelong friends.

She always suffered from nerves and at the first performance of Force of Destiny she was terrified. She was literally dragged to the opera house by her mother, Maddalena, and expected some encouragement from Caruso in the wings. But he was always a difficult man and very nervous himself. It may be true to say that Caruso and Ponselle were the most nervous opera singers in history.

Her first performance in November 1918 was a great success. For the next five years she worked with Romani on voice development. These were trying years and she was not able to fulfil her initial promise. She persevered and eventually produced a voice that was lyrical, dramatic and coloratura. Her repertoire was different from most singers probably so as not to clash with other prima donnas of the time. On stage she never sang any Puccini, Richard Strauss or Wagner. She sang a lot of Verdi although she never sang in Verdi's Ballo or Othello which she considered were the greatest operas ever written.

She worked slowly and prepared new roles over years, rather than months. In 1925, she undertook the taxing roles in Ponchielli's La Gioconda and Spontini's Las Vestale. She was a superb Donna Anna in Mozart's Don Giovanni.

The great quality in Ponselle's voice was that it floated.....it was never forced. She adhered to the score with all its subtleties and dynamics. Would that singers today did that!

She triumphed as Norma at the Met in 1927. She sang Donna Anna again, Selika in L'Africaine and starred in Verdi's Ernani and Luisa Miller.

In 1930, she came to London's Covent Garden and sang Violetta in La Traviata. Her Violetta portrayed the good-time girl with all her emotions and perhaps, at times, she was a little over the top, but her performance was one of enthralling power and tremendous excitement.

She had three successful seasons at Covent Garden and it is unquestionable that she restored British faith in Italian opera.

However, she did not want to sing the very top notes particularly when they were exposed. She was very troubled about the top C in O patria mia in Verdi's Aida. She even requested the colour of the walls in the



bedroom scene for La Traviata. In 1935, she sang Carmen but this was not successful. Her interpretation was in bad taste. The dance in the tavern owed more to the Charleston and Black Bottom than the intended Hispanic. She stuck to her interpretation but the criticism obviously affected her and damaged her confidence.

She requested the Met to revive Cilea's Adriana Lecocquer but this was refused as it would not be a profitable venture. She offered to sing it without a fee but this was still refused. Rosa was outraged and now very tired and announced her retirement. Her last performance was as Carmen in the Met in 1937. She gave some concerts for about another year but never sang in public again and she was only forty!

Rosa had lived a life with a string of romances and enjoyed herself without inhibitions. She enjoyed cycling and Gatti-Cazza tried to ban her cycling down Broadway from her apartment on Riverside Drive to the Met lest she were involved in an accident. Once at a Met gala, Rosa and her sister performed an acrobatic cyclist act from their vaudeville days.

But Ponselle was temperamental. She hated criticism and was volatile and ultra-sensitive. She argued with Jeritza, who, herself was a fiery character, and once threw all her belongings including her underwear out of the dressing room they had to share.

In 1937, Rosa married Carle A Jackson, the son of Baltimore's mayor and they built a villa, the famous Villa Pace near Baltimore. But the marriage did not work. The war took Jackson away on active service and then came the sad news that Romani died. Rosa's sister was converted to evangelical Christianity which, to Roman Catholics, was anathema. Her brother, Tony, was mentally unwell and made demands upon Rosa for money and other support. Ponselle succumbed to deep depression and took an overdose and spent a long time in hospital. Jackson left her. They were divorced in 1950.

The joy of music had departed from her. With the divorce out of the way, she regained a sense of purpose. She became artistic director of the small Baltimore Civic Opera and, with limited resources, had some success with such singers as Beverley Sills and Sheriil Milnes. She was sought after for her views on opera and how it was fairsing in America. She also took up singing again and recorded some songs in the Villa Pace in 1954. She was brilliant in opera and excellent in ballads.

Her sister Carmela died in a New York hospital on 13 June 1997, a week after her ninetieth birthday.

Rosa died on 25 May 1981, five months after his 84th birthday. Fortunately many of her recordings are still available and those who can identify a great singer can only respond in admiration to her vocal skill. For me, her voice was homogeneous and seamless..

---

COPYRIGHT David C F Wright 1982. This article or any part of it must not be used or copied without the prior written consent of the author. It must not be stored in any place or in any mechanical system. Failure to comply is a breach of International Copyright Law being theft and will render any offender (s) liable to action at law. However, upon prior written application the author may grant permission

This article was published by American Press in 1982.