



Lehmann Bio



There are many biographies of Lotte Lehmann (1888–1976) long and short, so I thought for this unconventional book of a singer’s artwork, the obituary that appeared in the *New York Times* would be an interesting alternative. You’ll see some corrections. The accompanying photos show her in her maturity and old age, as well as ones that apply to the words in the story of her life.

Lotte Lehmann, one of the most illustrious operatic sopranos and lieder singers of her day, died in her sleep yesterday at her home in Santa Barbara, Calif. She was 88 years old and had been in failing health for several months.

Mme. Lehmann (she was of an era when the great prima donnas were always addressed as Madame)

performed in every major opera house in Europe and the United States and under every major conductor in her stage career, which extended from 1910 to 1945.

She was a lovely Eva in *Die Meistersinger*, a dramatic Sieglinde in *Die Walküre*, a radiant Elsa of Brabant in *Lohengrin*, an awesome Elisabeth in *Tannhäuser* and a matchless Marschallin in *Der Rosenkavalier*, a role she made synonymous with her name. Moreover, she was a diva in the regal manner.

In her lieder singing career, which continued until 1951, she excelled in songs by Schubert, Schumann, Brahms, Wolf and Strauss and never failed to pack recital halls. Her accompanists included such distinguished musicians as Bruno Walter and Paul Ulanowsky.

Although she had long been celebrated throughout Europe and had made her American debut with the Chicago Civic Opera in 1930, Mme. Lehmann did not make her Metropolitan Opera bow until 1934, when she was almost 46 years old. She was acidulous in blaming the Metropolitan's management for the delay, accusing it of being "passive" and of "taking no interest in me." [Actually the diva and her rival from Vienna Opera days Maria Jeritza had forbidden the administration to allow Lehmann to sing there until she had retired.]



At the opening of the UCSB hall named in her honor

Despite her successes in New York, and the raptures she excited among critics and opera goers, she said after she left the company that “I never really felt at home on this longed for stage.” The Metropolitan, she insisted, “came as a sort of anticlimax.” [She also spoke of loving to singing there.]

In 1962 she returned to the Metropolitan to direct a production of *Der Rosenkavalier*. Her relationship with the management on that occasion was serene.

In her opera prime Mme. Lehmann was statuesque and amply proportioned, with thick, short walnut hair, dark brown eyes [clear blue] and a plump and childlike face. She made an indelible impression as she moved about the stage, for she was an actress of uncommon talent and communicativeness, as well as a singer of great emotional range and limpidity.



‘I Live What I Sing’

“... I give myself to my love with all my soul,” Mme. Lehmann explained. “I cannot think of technical matters while I sing, because I live what I sing so completely that there is no room left for anything else.”

She had a voice that for a Wagnerian soprano was not large in volume. Her pianissimo, however, was of exquisite quality and her fortissimo pierced the climaxes of the orchestra without difficulty. Her enunciation, even in moments of tense dramatic activity, was remarkably clear.

Her voice was esteemed by her peers. Hearing her for the first time, Enrico Caruso embraced her and exclaimed:

“Ah, brava, brava! Che bella magnifica voce! Una voce Italiana!”



Generous in Praise

Other singers were equally generous in their praise. Among composers, Richard Strauss preferred Mme. Lehmann above all others as a soprano in his operas. [not always true] Conductors, even including the mercurial Arturo Toscanini, admired her abilities.

Although Mme. Lehmann sang Sophie and Octavian in *Der Rosenkavalier*, a third soprano role, that of the Marschallin—a woman with much experience in affairs of love—was her most famous. Discussing it,

Harold C. Schonberg, music critic of *The Times*, wrote:

Talking about it, strong men snuffle and break into tears. They discuss her with the reverence of a legal mind talking about Justice Holmes, or a baseball connoisseur analyzing Hornsby's form at the plate, or the old-timer who remembers Toscanini's Wagner at the Metropolitan Opera. In short, she was The One: unique, irreplaceable, the standard to which all must aspire.

Audience 'a Melting Blob'

"She generated love," Mr. Schonberg continued, in explanation of her extraordinary rapport with audiences...Lehmann in her concert and opera days had only to walk on stage to reduce the audience to a melting blob.

"She was the most aristocratic of artists, and also the most intelligent. Whether or not her interpretations were worked over, they always sounded spontaneous and instinctive."

Vincent Sheean, the writer, who heard Mme. Lehmann many times, was haunted by her.

"The peculiar melancholy expressiveness of her voice," he wrote, "the beauty of her style in the theater, the general sense that her every performance was a work of art, lovingly elaborated in the secret places and brought forth with matchless authority before our eyes, made her a delight that never staled.

“She was like that Chinese empress of ancient days who commanded the flowers to bloom—except for Lotte they did.”

Mme. Lehmann had an immense repertory, perhaps 100 roles, for her early career was fashioned in German opera houses where she had to sing virtually everything. In addition to Wagner and Strauss, in all of whose major operas she appeared, her principal roles were Leonora in *Fidelio*, Floria Tosca in *Tosca*, [not a principal role], Donna Elvira in *Don Giovanni*, [only a few performances], Tatjana in *Eugen Onegin*, Manon in *Manon Lescaut*, [really Massenet’s *Manon* far more than Puccini’s *Manon Lescaut*], Mimi in *La Bohème*, Marguerite in *Faust* and Turandot in *Turandot*. [not a major role in her career.]



Glowing Review

Her New York debut on Jan. 11, 1934, was made as Sieglinde in *Die Walküre*, with Artur Bodansky conducting. Hubbard Hutchinson, covering the event for *The Times*, wrote:

She had not been on the stage 10 minutes when it was apparent beyond doubt that she was a Wagnerian soprano of first rank. To those familiar with her lieder singing her finished phrasing, precise in definition yet always plastic, and her crystalline diction were no surprise. Yet even her admirers in the recital field were not altogether

prepared for the other qualities she brought to her superb impersonation; her telling restraint and sureness as an actress. At the end of the first act a cheering audience recalled her seven times.

But if her first act was of a sort to startle the critical faculty into sharp attention and admiration, her performance in the second had an electrifying quality that swept that faculty away for once and made even the guarded listener a breathless participant in the emotions of the anguished Sieglinde.

She was still an impressive, artist when she appeared In *Der Rosenkavalier* for almost the last time toward the close of her career in 1945.

“Although Mme. Lehmann’s voice possessed less volume than formerly and was used with caution on top notes,” *The Times*’s Noel Straus wrote, “her every phrase

was so replete with meaning and so deeply communicative that never has her artistry in the role worked with greater conviction of impressiveness.”

Mme. Lehmann appeared with virtually all the great singers of her era, including Ganna Walska, Maria Jeritza, Lauritz Melchior, Lily Pons, Ezio Pinza, Feodor Chaliapin, Frieda Hempel, Richard Tauber and Lawrence Tibbett. [The Chronology in Volume II can flesh out this list. I believe Risë Stevens would have been saddened not to have appeared on this list.]

In addition to Toscanini and Bodansky, her principal conductors were Sir Thomas Beecham, Otto Klemperer, Franz Schalk and Bruno Walter. [A chapter of Lehmann’s conductors appears in Volume II.]



Lehmann as the Marschallin

As a lieder singer Mme. Lehmann ranked at the top.

Intensity and Understanding

“Lehmann brought to the concert stage an alliance of words and song, an intensity and an understanding, that gave audiences a new insight into artist and music,” Mr. Schonberg recalled in a *Times* article on the singer’s 75th birthday. “Lehmann’s voice was a large one of rather dark coloration. She may not have been one of the great vocal technicians, and she admits as much. Her singing could have moments of effort, moments when her vocal unease was characterized by breathiness.

“In a curious way, those moments were part of her charm. They suggested to the audience that she was not an inhumanly perfect singing machine; that she, too was human, with human limitations. Nobody cared about these occasional lapses,

as they would have cared with a lesser artist, for at all times the flame of Lehmann's inspiration burned so strongly that it burned away the imperfections."

Farewell in Town Hall

It was at a lieder recital in Town Hall in 1951 that Mme. Lehmann announced her retirement as a singer. Stepping to the footlight at intermission, she said, "This is my farewell recital." [In New York]

"No! No!" the audience cried.

"I had hoped you would protest," the soprano continued when the shouting had abated, "but please don't argue with me. After 41 years of anxiety, nerves, strain and hard work, I think I deserve to take it easy."

Then, referring to the aging Marschallin, who gives up her young lover in *Der Rosenkavalier*, Mme. Lehmann said:

"The Marschallin looks into her mirror and says, 'It is time.' I look into my mirror and say, 'It is time.'"

Many in the throng wept.

Later, backstage, she remarked:

"It is good that I do not wait for the people to say: 'My God, when will that Lotte Lehmann shut up!'"



Lehmann's Farewell Recital with Ulanowsky 1951

Mme. Lehmann lived on a royal scale and thought in royal terms. Opera audiences were "my audiences"; the public was always "my public"; the conductor was "my conductor." Those were not expressions of egotism so much as they were those of a queen accepting her due.

The singer's home outside Vienna, where she lived until World War II, [she left Vienna at the end of 1937] was sumptuously furnished. Her Park Avenue apartment in New York was equally lavishly got up, in what one visitor called a "fussily Victorian" manner. She traveled with two Viennese maids and a housekeeper, two Pomeranians, a make-believe white Persian cat, a huge leather folder of pictures of her mother, another large leather folder of pictures of her father, a third big leather folder of photographs of her brother, Fritz, and a fourth huge folder of pictures of her husband. [this list involves more than slight exaggerations]

Souvenirs Always Along

All these photographs were set up not only in Mme. Lehmann's home or hotel room but also in her dressing room at the opera house or concert hall. In the dressing room they were joined by two miniature Indian totem poles, the root of a Christmas tree, three rosaries, an ancient doll named Poupée, a lace handkerchief embroidered with the opening phrases of the principal arias in a dozen of her operatic roles, a ring that once belonged to Sarah Bernhardt, a wooden elephant, a fan presented by Geraldine Farrar, and an ivory squirrel. [more exaggerations]

Before each performance Mme. Lehmann was wont to kiss the pictures of her mother, her father, her brother and her husband and to kiss the doll. She also said the beads of one of her rosaries. [She was not Catholic. This is more press-release stuff from the pen of her agent Constance Hope.]

Although Mme. Lehmann was a Prussian by birth, she adopted Austria as her country, Vienna in particular. She liked its *gemütlichkeit* and its cuisine, whose rich pastries she was rarely ever able to pass up.

Lotte Lehmann was born in Perleberg, Germany, on Feb. 27, 1888. Her singing lessons began when she was 12 years old, [later, actually] with Erna Tiedke in Berlin. She studied there later with Helene Jordan and Eva Reinhold. [None of these teachers were significant or helpful.]

After further study with Mathilde Mallinger, a Wagnerian star, she made her debut in a bit part with the Hamburg Opera. Her first major role was in Hamburg in 1910, when she sang Freia in *Das Rheingold*. It was at Hamburg that she met

Otto Klemperer, the conductor who encouraged her artistic development, and one of her early triumphs was as Elsa of Brabant in *Lohengrin*, with Klemperer conducting.

In 1914 she scored heavily [hardly noticed] in London as Sophie in *Der Rosenkavalier*, with Sir Thomas Beecham in the pit. She was shortly [thereafter] engaged for the Vienna Court Opera. There she perfected her Wagnerian roles and met Giacomo Puccini and Strauss. She was the Young Composer in the Vienna premiere of Strauss's *Ariadne auf Naxos* and she sang Suor Angelica in Puccini's *Tritico* at its Vienna premiere.



First in Strauss Role

Triumph followed triumph in the nineteen-twenties. She toured South America in 1922 and in the same year sang the Marschallin at Covent Garden, London. [actually 1924] Three years later she was Christine in the Vienna premiere of Strauss's *Intermezzo*. [actually the premiere was in Dresden, which she also sang] Her first "Fidelio," sung that year, [really 1927] was such a success that it was repeated in Paris, London and Stockholm. In 1928 she was at the Salzburg Festival in *Der Rosenkavalier* and *Fidelio*. Musical Europe was at her feet. She was called to La Scala to sing under Toscanini. [but did not]

Mme. Lehmann's American debut occurred on Oct. 28, 1930, when she sang Sieglinde at the Chicago Civic Opera House. Afterward she toured the country in lieder recitals.

During World War II Mme. Lehmann, who had become an Austrian citizen, was naturalized as an American citizen. After her retirement from the Metropolitan she made her home in Santa Barbara, Calif.

Gave Classes on Coast

In California she became a patron of the theatrical arts, gave master classes in lieder singing and operatic performance, taught at the Music Academy of the West, in Santa Barbara [and gave master classes in Chicago, Boston, New York, Vienna, etc.] and painted in oils. [and many other media as this volume attests]

Mme. Lehmann published four books—*Eternal Flight*, a novel issued in 1937; *Midway in My Song*, an autobiography that came out in 1938; *My Many Lives*, a second autobiography [not really an autobiography, but an analysis of the roles she'd sung] that appeared in 1948; and *Five Operas and Richard Strauss*, which was issued in 1964. [*More than Singing* and *Eighteen Song Cycles* and the two books of her poetry strangely are not listed.]

In 1926 the singer was married to Otto Krause, a former Austro-Hungarian cavalry officer. Mr. Krause died in 1939. The couple had no children

Mme. Lehman had a number of honors and decorations, among them the Gold Cross of Austria and the Legion of Honor. [Her complete honors can be found in Volume I.]

There will be no funeral service. A memorial service will be held at the Music Academy of the West on Sunday at 2:30 P.M.



As Christine in *Intermezzo*