

# LOTTE LEHMANN

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## The Life and Art of Lotte Lehmann

### By Beaumont Glass

Lotte Lehmann had *genius*. What set her apart from most of her colleagues was her unusual ability to articulate her interpretative insights, an ability she demonstrated abundantly in her books and in her master classes. Another quality that set her apart from many singers with more beautiful voices or more dazzling techniques: she knew how to win not just the admiration, but the *love* of her audience. Few performers in the world of classical music have been so loved.



Lotte Lehmann as "The Composer" in Ariadne  
Auf Naxos by Richard Strauss, Vienna 1916

Lehmann was born in Perleberg, Germany, a town halfway between Berlin and Hamburg, on February 27, 1888. Her voice was discovered by a neighbor who heard her singing at her housework and encouraged her to study music. Her father, however, favored a "practical" profession, one that would entitle her to a pension some day. Fortunately for opera, her dismal marks in math kept her out of the commercial course.

She has been revered for some time as one of the outstanding singers of this century. All the more startling, then, to learn that she had been expelled from a famous school of singing for lack of talent.

In an age when many opera singers simply stood around in their sumptuous costumes and sang to the gallery gods, she became famous for her acting, for her total identification with the role. She was often called "the Duse of opera." Yet during her first two years on the stage, directors had torn their hair out in despair over her hopeless, helpless clumsiness. She herself was the first to admit that when she was a green beginner if there were two or three steps on the stage she would shake in mortal terror at the inevitability of stumbling over them. After she was already a famous star, one of her early directors told in an interview how — years before — she had acted her first aria "with her feet," beating time and staring wildly at the conductor. At the end of *Der Freischütz* she

was supposed to cry out: “Don’t shoot, I am the dove!” Her fun-loving colleagues kept prompting from the wings: “Don’t shoot, I am the goose!” Fortunately she was too nervous to notice.

Lotte had started her career in opera with bit parts at the Hamburg Municipal Theatre in 1910. She made her debut as the Second Boy in *The Magic Flute* and spent most of her brief time on stage trying to pull the skimpy tunic a little lower over her legs. Her first real solo role was Freia in *Das Rheingold*. One critic wrote that among the gods of Valhalla Miss Lehmann appeared to be the chambermaid. During those early months in Hamburg, Lotte wrote several times a week to her brother in Berlin. Those letters are packed with vivid pictures of her first impressions of life in the theater, with colorful backstage gossip, and with a running account of her apparently successful efforts to fend off the mostly unwelcome advances of the brilliantly talented but highly predatory young conductor, Otto Klemperer, who was constantly chasing her around the furniture in otherwise deserted rehearsal rooms, or blocking her way up narrow stairwells.

Deciphering those early letters was my first and most daunting challenge when I began my research [for my 1988 Lehmann biography]. They were scrawled very hastily — sometimes in pencil, in a now-obsolete form of German script, further obscured by her own personal idiosyncracies. Fortunately I had learned that alphabet for fun while I was studying German in high school; and my cryptographic work as a naval officer came in handy too. I made myself a “Rosetta Stone.” Her first letter took about two days. The next two hours. After that it was pure entertainment, like a double-croctic.

Lehmann’s first real success, when it came, was very sudden. And it came through that same Otto Klemperer (who, for the record, was now chasing another young soprano around the pianos). He believed in Lotte’s voice and persuaded the theater to let her sing Elsa in *Lohengrin* when a colleague had to cancel. He coached her himself, a mad Svengali, and screamed at her in front of the whole company at rehearsals. But the performance made her a star. It was the happiest day of her life until then. She forgot her insecurities and became the part she was playing. From then on there were no more Second Boys or Third Pages. She found herself the darling of Hamburg. Young fans followed her everywhere.

The career of Lotte Lehmann is a striking reproach to any of us who may be tempted to disparage the talent of a beginner. First she was assured that she would never earn a penny with her voice; then, after finding a teacher who uncovered the beauty of her instrument, she was told that she could never act. Yet she became, at the height of her long career, the most highly acclaimed singer in Europe and,

finally in America too, one of the most beloved.

Preparing her biography I read thousands of reviews, from Hamburg, Berlin, Salzburg, Vienna, London, Paris, Florence, Rome, New York, Chicago, San Francisco, Buenos Aires, Sydney, Melbourne. I expected to find plenty of enthusiastic praise; I was astonished to read a thousand raves, more consistently ecstatic than I have ever encountered elsewhere. Those eyewitness reports of her performances are in themselves such a remarkable tribute to her career, they provide such an impressive documentation, that it was truly difficult to keep more than a representative sampling out of my book.

What was the nature of this “genius” of hers? As she sang she seemed to re-experience what the poet had felt when he was first moved to write the text, what the composer must have felt when he was inspired to set that text to music. Everything she sang was to her a piece of someone’s life, born of a powerful feeling that needed to be expressed in a poem, in a moment of drama. Everything was special, unique; the ordinary life of every day is rarely the inspiration for a song. Before the first note of the introduction Lehmann had already transformed herself into that unique person who felt that special feeling, who was living that piece of a life. As her assistant I saw that transformation take place a thousand times. It seemed to be an instantaneous thing: no matter how often she had sung a particular song or acted a particular scene, there was never a sense of “routine”; her inspiration seemed always to have the freshness of a first time. There was always a special sensitivity to the words and to their most subtle nuances, perhaps because she was herself a poet. The ten marks she earned when one of her adolescent poems was published by a Berlin newspaper meant more to her than many a fabulous fee that she later received as a reigning prima donna. Later she published two volumes of verse, in German. Some of those poems were set to music, by Robert Heger among others, the conductor of her famous *Rosenkavalier* recording.



Lotte Lehmann, 1916



Lotte Lehmann, 1916

Words were very important to her; more important still was feeling. It was her nature to give lavishly of herself in her singing. Her genius was a genius for expression, for communicating her enthusiasm and love to her audience. That exuberance, unrestrained except by her exceptional sense of style and artistic form, was offensive to some of her more reserved colleagues. Kirsten Flagstad, her most formidable rival at the Metropolitan Opera, made the comment to a friend that Lehmann sang Sieglinde as if she were undressing in public. That same exuberance was largely responsible for her faults as a vocalist, which were duly noticed — and forgiven — by even her most enthusiastic critics. All that outpouring of emotion was incompatible with the sort of economy of breath that a singer needs to sustain a long musical phrase.

Giving so much, holding nothing back, meant a chronic shortness of breath that was always characteristic of her singing. But she learned how to make a virtue out of necessity by mastering the art of the “expressive” breath, well known to actors but avoided by most singers for the sake of a smooth musical line. Lehmann could take a breath just before an important word and make it seem even more important because she had breathed there. That “trick” carried her safely past many a lurking danger. Her almost reckless lack of caution meant taking the hurdles of the high notes on “the wings of emotion,” without the conscious technical preparation that most singers find necessary when nearing the upper limits of the voice. Her ecstatic rush toward the climaxes could be wonderfully



Heger with principal artists: Olczewska, Schumann, Lehmann.

thrilling when she was in great voice; but there was always the risk that intensity would produce tension, the constriction that results in shrillness of tone. Those were her “faults,” but they were the shadows of her virtues.

Her instinct for interpretation, as it developed in time, was close to infallible. Her artistic wisdom did not suddenly spring, fully armed, out of the mind of Jove. It was gradually molded. The teacher who helped her find her voice, the Austrian dramatic soprano Mathilde Mallinger (1847–1920), had been Wagner’s first Eva and had even inspired him to add a trill to his score of *Die Meistersinger*. One of her accompanists,

Ferdinand Foll, had been a close friend of the great composer of songs, Hugo Wolf. Many of her colleagues were outstanding musicians and actors. She was part of a great tradition. When she was not singing herself, she was up in the artists' box at the opera house, studying the repertoire, observing the other singers. She learned from everyone; but she went her own way.

And she had the inspiration of working with the leading composers and conductors of her day. She always considered Bruno Walter her greatest teacher. She had prepared her most famous role, the Marschallin in *Der Rosenkavalier*, with him; and their lieder recitals were one of the major attractions of the Salzburg Festival for many years, until Hitler's annexation of Austria. Walter taught her how to think in character through the musical interludes, when she had nothing to sing, so that every movement, every facial expression, led naturally



With Bruno Walter

into her next cue. She had always been nervous before the great quintet in *Die Meistersinger*, which is very soft and sustained, very exposed and difficult. There is no real action in the introduction, which is the expression of an inner soul-state only; there seems to be nothing to do but get nervous waiting for the cue, while your mouth and throat are drying out and your knees start to rattle. Bruno Walter guided her thoughts through that delicate music in such a way that she lost all sense of self and found the unbroken line that led her character into the difficult opening phrase as if it were the most natural, inevitable thing in the world.

Then there was Arturo Toscanini. Her performances of Beethoven's *Fidelio* with him at Salzburg were the absolute high point of her career. Toscanini and Lehmann struck fire together. Their spiritual union in that music ran parallel to a passionate,



In *Die Meistersinger*



secret love affair. One of the exciting moments in my research was the discovery of hidden fragments of his love letters. After Toscanini's death, a mutual confidante managed to find Lotte's letters to him before anyone else could do so and sent them to Lotte, who burned them. As for *his* letters to *her*, Lotte tore them up into four to six large pieces each and tossed them into the fireplace. But there was no fire burning there and she did not have the heart to strike a match. When she left the room her companion — who had a sense of history — rescued the fragments from their bed of cinders and stuffed them into a secret compartment behind a file cabinet drawer. There they remained, forgotten, until very recently, when odd bits of them happened to fall into the files. Soon many pieces were found that fit together like a jigsaw puzzle. But there were frustrating gaps at some of the most interesting points. I was living in the house at the time, writing my biography of Lehmann. My long, thin arm and flexible fingers finally managed to dig out the last remnants from the depths of their very inaccessible hiding place. At least the most crucial lacunae could finally be



*Thomas Mann, Lehmann, Bruno Walter*



*Toscanini rehearsing Fidelio with Lehmann at a Salzburg Festival*

filled. There are passionate love letters, postcards, inscribed photos, and a daringly indiscreet telegram; besides the very personal messages, there is also a vehement emotional diatribe against Hitler and Mussolini. All were fascinating to decipher. Almost nothing was dated; but it was generally possible, from internal evidence and a knowledge of Lehmann's whereabouts, to reconstruct an approximate date for each item.

Since Lotte did not speak Italian and was not yet fluent in English, Toscanini wrote to her in his own highly individual brand of French,

seasoned with an occasional dash of Italian spice. He shared with her an addiction to rows of exclamation points. Both of them would underline key words two, three, or four times for emphasis. Temperament practically leaps out of every page.

A tremendous passion flared brightly for about two years — 1934 and 1935; the embers continued to smolder for the rest of their lives.

The reassembled Toscanini letters, which are now in the possession of Lehmann's only heir, are to be sealed for a certain number of years and will eventually become a part of the Lotte Lehmann Archive of the University of California, Santa Barbara.

Another major formative influence was Lehmann's close



*Performing with Toscanini*

working relationship with Richard Strauss. Their

first meeting was a turning point in her career. She was the understudy for the role of the Composer in *Ariadne auf Naxos*, the new version that was about to be premiered in Vienna. The part had been especially written for a famous singing actress, Marie Gutheil-Schoder, who was one of Strauss's favorite performers. But on the day of a crucial rehearsal Gutheil-Schoder was ill. The understudy threw herself into the role with all her heart, glad for the chance to sing it at least that once. Strauss was overwhelmed by her ecstatic interpretation. He announced that she would sing the premiere. Lehmann protested: Gutheil-Schoder was her idol, she did not want to hurt her. Franz Schalk, the conductor that day, wrote in his memoirs that never before had he known a singer to re-



*Lehmann sitting with Toscanini*



fuse a leading role in an important premiere for the sake of a colleague. Lehmann, later, laughingly disclaimed any right to a halo: she let herself be persuaded soon enough, when Strauss insisted. She sang the premiere, a world premiere of the new version. The next day a leading critic wrote his most often-quoted line: “last night at 7:40 all Vienna knew who Lotte Lehmann is.”

She had established herself in Vienna with an authentic sensation. The year was 1916. For the next 22 years, until the Nazi *Anschluss*, she was a top star in Vienna — one of two. Every diva needs a rival. Lotte Lehmann had Maria Jeritz. They were opposites in many ways: Jeritz was glamorous and beautiful; Lehmann had a rather plain face, but inner beauty. Jeritz was tempestuous, temperamental; Lehmann seemed to embody all the



Maria Jeritz  
*Maria Jeritz*  
 Photo: Georg Wink

Maria Jeritz



With Richard Strauss

womanly virtues. Jeritz might be a man’s dream mistress and Lehmann his fantasy wife. They shared some of the same roles. And, since Vienna loved to watch the sparks fly on the opera stage, they were often cast together in the same opera; they would enter the house through different doors, different flocks of fans waiting at each entrance. Lotte never knew when Jeritz’s lightning would strike; but she could be fairly certain that if she had a soft, sustained high note to sing, Jeritz would find a way — as if it were a part of the staging — to nudge her off balance.

Once Lotte asked the wardrobe department if she could borrow, for a guest engagement in London, a cloak that had been part of Elsa’s costume in *Lohengrin*. Jeritz would be singing the role during Lotte’s leave of absence and everyone in Vienna knew that Maria had recently added a magnificent cloak, all cloth of

gold, with a spectacular long train, to *her* Elsa costume. The wardrobe mistress was sure there would be no need for the old costume and was about to pack it in a trunk for Lotte to take to London. Somehow Jeritza got wind of it and suddenly materialized at the scene. “Put that back!” she ordered, “I might just get a whim to wear it.”

After Lehmann’s success as the Composer in his *Ariadne*, Strauss naturally wanted her to create leading roles in his future premieres. The next, in 1919, was to be *Die Frau ohne Schatten* (*The Woman without a Shadow*). Lotte took one look at the part he had supposedly written for her and nearly died of fright. An unsympathetic role, bad enough; but, above all, fiendishly difficult — so it seemed — and high and loud. She turned it down. Strauss invited her to come to Garmisch and study the part with him at his villa. Schalk, codirector with Strauss of the Vienna State Opera, sent off an urgent telegram: IMPLORER YOU OVERCOME HYSTERICAL PANIC STOP ROLE SCREAMS FOR LEHMANN AND ARTISTIC SPIRITUAL SALVATION STOP ON TO GARMISCH. Strauss also sent a telegram. Lotte was still adamant; she answered that she did not want to sing the part because she had no intention of establishing herself as a match seller on the *Kärntnerstrasse* the day after the premiere. Another telegram from Strauss: ROLE NEITHER LOW NOR HIGH NEITHER LONG NOR TAXING COME HERE SO I CAN PERSONALLY CURE YOU OF THE STUDY — SICKNESS DIAGNOSED IN ALL SINGERS SINCE SALOME WITH TRIED AND TRUE REMEDY OF ALTERATIONS. Still she refused. Finally a mutual friend was ordered by Strauss to pack her into a trunk and bring her to Garmisch by force, if need be. At last she relented. The weeks she spent with Strauss at his villa in Garmisch were among the most artistically productive of her life. Fortunately his wife — seen by everyone but her husband as the most notorious shrew since Xantippe — took a liking to Lotte. Just as well, too; for in the next Strauss premiere, *Intermezzo*, Lehmann was called upon to play the part of that very woman: Strauss had written an opera about his own marriage. He felt that only Lotte would know how to make a sympathetic character out of a wife that the rest of the world seemed to regard as a gorgon.

Meanwhile Lotte had married. She met her future husband, Otto Krause, under rather unusual circumstances: she was his birthday present. His first wife, very wealthy, had engaged Lotte Lehmann, his favorite opera star, to sing at his birthday party. The unforeseen result: he fell in love with his gift. And she with him. He was a dashing handsome former cavalry officer and he swept her off her feet. He asked his wife for a divorce. For four years she refused, doing whatever she could to embarrass Lehmann in public. Four children were involved. The scandal titillated Vienna. Finally, in



With Otto Krause, 1931

During the 1920s Lehmann's career spread out all over Europe and even as far away as to Argentina, Uruguay, and Brazil. She was a great favorite in London and Paris. She was the brightest star of the Salzburg festivals. But North America was slow to beckon. A key factor was Maria Jeritza, Lotte's *bête noire* in Vienna, who was now enjoying a very gratifying success in New York and who had no desire to share it with her most dangerous rival. Maria decided that the Met was not big enough for both of them. That seems to have been the gist of a notorious clause in her contract with the Metropolitan Opera. At any rate, Lehmann never sang there until Jeritza had left. Actually Lotte conquered New York first as a lieder singer in January 1932, two years before her Met debut. And it was mainly as a lieder singer that Lehmann became famous in America. For a whole generation her name was practically a synonym for German lieder. Lotte's mother, with whom she had a particularly deep emotional

April 1926, Lotte became the second Mrs. Otto Krause — or rather, Otto Krause became the first and only Mr. Lotte Lehmann. He played that part extremely well and was a great help and support to her during the rest of his life.

Richard Strauss was by no means the only composer who saw Lotte Lehmann as the key to the success of one of his operas. When Giacomo Puccini heard her sing his *Suor Angelica* he felt that finally an artist had come along with the special qualities needed to bring the title role to convincing life and to confer success upon the least successful of his trio of one-act operas, *Il trittico*. "Go to Vienna!" was his answer to those who cast doubt upon the effectiveness of that centerpiece to his "trilogy." He came to her dressing room with tears in his eyes after her Mimi in *La Bohème* and wrote to her enthusiastically about her "exquisite" Manon Lescaut.



In *Suor Angelica*



1927 Fidelio with Alfred Piccaver, Florestan

“Profile.” She was in demand all over America for concerts and recitals. But there was no special thrill. The Met had waited too long; it was hard for her to forget that.

Lehmann found her real satisfaction in America in introducing to a broad audience the intimate beauties of German song. Her expressive singing transcended the language barrier. She made you see what she was seeing, feel what she was feeling. It was not just voice; it was eyes, face, hands; it was personality, warmth, humor, and charm. What one saw and what one heard were in total harmony. Not for a moment did one see a singer waiting for her entrance while her accompanist was playing an introduction: she herself *was* the introduction; the prelude, the interludes, the postlude — they were *her* feelings, and her expressive face mirrored every nuance in the music. Even before she started to sing, the tilt of her head, the way she stood at the piano, the way she nodded to the accompanist that she was prepared — all those things conveyed a world of meaning about the song that was to come. Every song was an adventure, a touching glimpse into a life, an unforgettably atmospheric picture. Those who knew German could admire the subtle inflections; those to whom the

bond, died the day after the final dress rehearsal of *Arabella*, Strauss’s newest opera. The premiere could not be postponed: people had come to Vienna from all over the *world* for this important event — not the *world* premiere (that had been in Dresden), but a performance that would be crucial for the success of the opera. No other singer was available. Lehmann had to go on. As usual, she gave herself to the role. She forgot her personal agony in the emotions of *Arabella*. She considered *that* the greatest blessing of an artist’s life, the opportunity to step outside of oneself and to overcome private torments in the re-creation of another being. Toscanini was in the audience that night. He had not yet met her, but he was impressed with her courage. Later, when they were working together, he called her “the greatest artist in the world.”

Success at the Metropolitan Opera was almost anticlimactic. She had conquered the ultimate stronghold of opera.

She made the cover of *Time*. There was a *New Yorker*

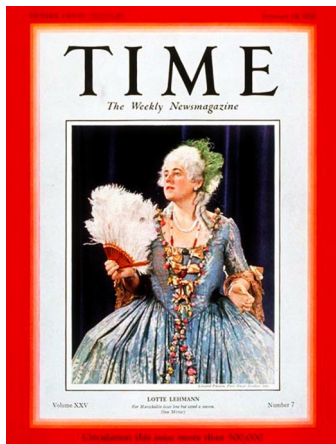


*At the Met - Sieglinde*

recital in Dresden, an official-looking man tried frantically to interrupt her in the middle of a song. She closed her eyes, tried to concentrate, and finished the piece. He informed her in front of the whole audience that Hermann Goering, then the minister of education, was on the telephone, wanting to speak to her. Lehmann kept him waiting until she had completed her group of songs. There was no applause: the audience was in a state of shock at her audacity. Goering, of course, had hung up by then; but he sent his private plane to bring her to Berlin the next day, which happened to be Hitler's birthday. After her arrival it was his turn to keep *her* waiting, while he exercised his horse. The Nazi salutes, the whole goose-stepping show, struck her as ridiculous, second-rate play-acting. At lunch Goering offered her the title "National Singer." He proposed an enormous fee that left her speechless. Then he promised her a villa, a pension for life, and a horse. Did she have a special wish? Why not a castle on the Rhine? There was, however,

words meant nothing still felt the magic. America showed its appreciation in endearing ways: from the sponsors of the Kraft "Bing Crosby Show" a year's supply of cheese; from General Motors a magnificent limousine; from the music lovers of Detroit a life-size gingerbread Santa Claus, which occupied the upper berth on her train ride back to New York.

Meanwhile the Nazi nightmare was darkening Europe. Lotte Lehmann, like many other German artists of that day, was still naive about the true intentions of the new regime. She had never taken the slightest interest in "politics." One evening in April 1934, while she was singing a



1935

a catch in all this munificence: she would not be allowed to sing outside of Germany. “The world should come to *us* to hear you,” he declared. Then he introduced her to his pet lioness. Was that perhaps a subtle hint?

Lehmann was unwilling to limit her career to one country. They could keep their castle on the Rhine. Her refusal sent both Goering and Hitler himself into respective rages. The result was that Lotte Lehmann was *forbidden* to sing in Germany.

They could not stop her from singing in Austria, however. Not yet. She was still the star of Vienna and Salzburg. And now she had a family there: when the first Mrs. Otto Krause died in 1936, Lotte suddenly inherited four grown-up stepchildren, aged 17 to 21.

The joys of motherhood and domesticity were not destined to last. Less than two years later Austria became a part of Nazi Germany. For the second time Lotte lost a homeland. Because they were half-Jewish through their mother, her stepchildren were now in mortal danger. The *Anschluss* came while Lehmann was in America. Otto, her husband, seriously ill with what turned out to be tuberculosis, rushed back to Austria to try to settle his family affairs. His physical condition soon became so critical that his doctors sent him to a sanatorium in Switzerland. His children had passports and immigration papers for the United States, but to leave Austria they needed two things: official proof that all taxes had been paid — their mother’s estate was still far from settled — and evidence of professional necessity to travel abroad. There were endless snags, they were trapped in a legal labyrinth. Finally they decided, on their own, to risk a bold adventure. They packed their bags and boarded the Orient Express, bound for Paris. But their papers were not stamped and one of the borders to be crossed was virtually uncrossable.

Meanwhile Lotte was in London, terrified for Otto’s life and for the children’s safety. In the middle of the first act of *Der Rosenkavalier*



Lehmann with the Vienna Philharmonic, Weingartner conducting



she collapsed on the stage of the Royal Opera House, Covent Garden. A few days later the children somehow bluffed their way across the border. They looked young and innocent; the guard did not notice — or ignored — the missing permission. One catastrophe had been averted. The reunited family made its way to America and applied for U. S. citizenship. Then another catastrophe struck: Otto died while Lotte was away on tour. She struggled through a raging blizzard to try to reach his side in time; trains had been delayed for her sake; but all her frantic efforts were in vain. She felt utterly lost without him.



*Walter, Lehmann, Felix Altstadt-Tomaselli*

She needed someone to help her cope with all the exhausting demands of a singing career. She found the ideal companion in Dr. Frances Holden, a professor of psychology at New York University who was fascinated by Lehmann's artistry and hoped to make her the focus for her study of genius in the performing arts. Dr. Holden helped Lotte through a difficult time by encouraging her in new and different forms of creativity. They began to paint together. For the rest of her long life, Lotte never ceased to turn out prodigious quantities of sketches and paintings, sculptures and ceramics, mosaics of stained glass, or tapestries made of colored bits of felt. Once one of her paintings was stolen from an exhibition. Lotte was delighted; her work suddenly seemed more valuable to her, since someone had found it worth stealing.



*Onstage as the Marschallin*

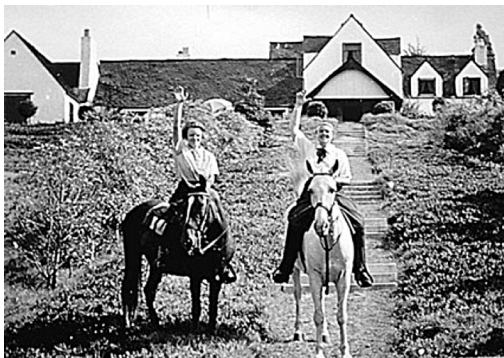
Soon Europe was at war. Lotte found a refuge in Santa Barbara, a dream house high on a mountain pass. Thomas Mann, Bruno Walter, and Otto Klemperer risked the narrow, winding roads — along the very edge of precipitous drops — to visit her there. Five weeks after she had moved in, there was a gigantic

forest fire. The dream house burned to the ground. Her next home, home for the rest of her days, was less spectacular but just as beautiful — and far more accessible. Her private paradise — overlooking the Pacific — was something of a zoo. She had always traveled with little dogs in the time-honored prima donna tradition; now she could have all the big dogs she wanted, along with parrots and talking Mynah birds. The latter had the disconcerting habit of saying “time to go!” whenever a guest happened to overstay his welcome. No one ever knew whether those birds were psychic or had simply recognized the first symptoms of boredom in their normally vivacious mistress. Most of us simply took the hint and said our hasty goodbyes.

America entered the war. Although she had long since applied for U. S. citizenship, Lehmann found herself in the legal position of an enemy alien. A shortwave radio receiver was confiscated. There were severe travel restrictions. For every concert, she had to apply for special permission to leave her home. Sometimes that was arbitrarily denied by this or that ignorant official. Once Frances Holden, in despair, telephoned the officer in Sacramento who was in charge of alien affairs and asked him what *he* would do in Lotte Lehmann's place with a contract for a concert and no permit to travel to the concert hall. “I would just pack my toothbrush and leave,” was the honest, encouraging hint.



*With Frances and the dogs*



*Frances and Lotte in from of their Santa Barbara home*

Many Americans are not aware that a Japanese submarine shelled the coast of Southern California, near Santa Barbara, in February 1942. At the time Lehmann was in the East on a concert tour. She was to sing a recital at Dartmouth College the next evening. Her accompanist had read the news in the morning papers. He and Frances, who had intercepted a telegram with the words “deepest sympathy” and was frantic with worry that the house in Santa Barbara had been hit, were determined to keep the news from Lotte, at least until after the recital. They managed to persuade the hotel to remove all newspapers from the lobby every time that Mme. Lehmann passed through. After the recital — a superb success as usual — Lotte reproached Frances for her apparent lack of enthusiasm. Frances, who had kept a heroic poker face for hours, finally exploded. The next day brought the reassuring news that their home was still intact, in spite of the shelling a few miles away. Lehmann spoke out staunchly against the Nazis in interview after interview. For the BBC she made several broadcasts to Germany during the war. She went out of her way to sing for American troops whenever possible, both at their bases and at the Hollywood Canteen.

While she was still active in opera, fellow professionals, including leading artists of the Metropolitan Opera, began to come to her for coaching and advice in interpretation. Eleanor Steber was one of the first. Rose Bampton studied all of her Wagner roles, *Fidelio*, and the *Rosenkavalier* Marschallin with Lehmann. Risë Stevens worked with her on lieder. Dorothy Maynor and Anne Brown, the original Bess in Gershwin’s *Porgy and Bess*, came to Lotte for lessons. She never taught singing as such, only interpretation. Jeanette MacDonald, the popular movie star, who had sung operatic scenes in several of her films but had not yet performed in an opera house, studied *Faust*, *Bohème*, and some art songs with Lehmann. She wrote to a mutual friend that her first lesson had been a revelation: it was, to quote her



*Der Rosenkavalier* at the MET, 1943, with Risë Stevens, Eleanor Steber; Erich Leinsdorf conducting.

own words, “as if I had been in a dark room and suddenly a window was opened and sunshine flooded all around me.” After her inspiring work with Lehmann on every detail of the role of Marguerite in *Faust*, it was a profound shock to discover at her rehearsals for a Philadelphia production that in those days opera performances were sometimes thrown together with an abysmal lack of preparation or artistic integrity. The so-called stage director had no idea what the rented scenery would look like until the day of the performance. Each individual singer did his or her thing with no guidance or coordination. The offstage chorus got lost in the Church Scene during Marguerite’s prayer. The musical chaos reminded Miss MacDonald of a cat-and-dog fight. Two decades later that performance might have been called a “happening.” For the leading lady, at least, it was a nightmare.

One by one Lehmann’s famous roles were disappearing from her active repertoire. During her last few years in opera, they had dwindled down to one, the Marschallin in *Der Rosenkavalier*. Richard Strauss considered her portrayal of that infinitely subtle part to be the best in the world. Every other singer who sang the role after her was measured according to the standard she had set.

She had revealed the gallantry and the wisdom in that part in a definitive way, and she tried to use what she had learned from the Marschallin in her private life as well as on the stage. Most obviously, she had learned the art of letting go with dignity and grace. She took her leave of the Metropolitan in February 1945. The audience gave her an endless ovation. Her colleagues were in tears. She continued to sing a few performances of *Rosenkavalier* on the West Coast, however. Her final farewell to the opera stage was in Los Angeles on November 1, 1946. When she gave that wonderful last look to her stage lover, she was saying goodbye to a part of her life. What was it that made her Marschallin so special? She remembered Strauss’s prescription: a tear in one eye and a twinkle in the other. She never gave in to self-pity. At the end of act 1, where other Marschallins burst into tears, Lehmann mastered her



As *The Marschallin*, with Boy

melancholy with dignity and noblesse. With the last chord she lifted her face, and one could see determination and courage in her eyes. That was the image as the curtain fell. It was not sad. It was a lesson in wisdom.

Lehmann continued to sing concerts and recitals until 1951, when she was 63. That “second career,” as she thought of it, was a voyage of discovery into new worlds of lieder. Whereas before she had



*In Der Rosenkavalier, 1935, photo by Steichen*

occasionally been reproached by the critics for singing too many “chestnuts,” too many thrice-familiar songs, in her recitals, she was now being urged by her managers, on the theory that audiences like what they know, to put more “sugar” into her programs, which now featured many of the rarer treasures she had unearthed. But, thanks largely to her own efforts over the years, recital audiences in the United States, in the major cultural centers at least, had become more sophisticated, more receptive to unfamiliar songs. Lotte Lehmann in semi-retirement was more successful than ever. She was now singing five to eight recitals during the annual concert season in New York City alone, year after year, an unheard-of exposure for a lieder singer.

When she was not singing or painting, she was writing books. Besides her poetry, she had already written a novel, *Eternal Flight*, and an autobiography, *Midway in My Song*. Both had been published in the original German and in English translation, and both had sold well in America as well as abroad. Now she produced two books of major importance: one, *More Than Singing*, discussed in detail her ideas about the interpretation of songs and her practical techniques for communicating those interpretations to an audience; the other, *My Many Lives*, explored in depth the psychology of the characters to whom she had given such vivid life on the opera stage. Both books are invaluable — in fact, indispensable — to any student of singing and to anyone who cares about lieder or opera at all. They have been reprinted several times and are still available in paperback. To read her chapters on Elisabeth in *Tannhäuser* or Manon, or the Marschallin, is to marvel at her insight into those widely differing personalities and to

discover new depths of meaning and truth in masterpieces one had begun to take for granted.

In 1947 Lehmann signed a contract to sing at the Edinburgh Festival and agreed to a European recital tour with Bruno Walter. As the time drew nearer, she began to panic. She had not appeared in Europe for ten years, she had stopped singing opera; her artistry was more mature than ever, but there were inevitable signs of vocal decline; would her old audiences be disillusioned, would new audiences be disappointed? Would it not be wiser to leave precious memories intact? She became more and more nervous, until her health was in jeopardy. At the urging of her doctor she canceled her plans for Europe and begged to be released from her contract. Her self-confidence was at its lowest ebb. Then, out of the blue, came a call from Hollywood. MGM offered her a part in a motion picture. That was just what Lotte needed, a new interest, a new challenge, a chance to act without having to worry about her voice. Little by little her old vitality returned.

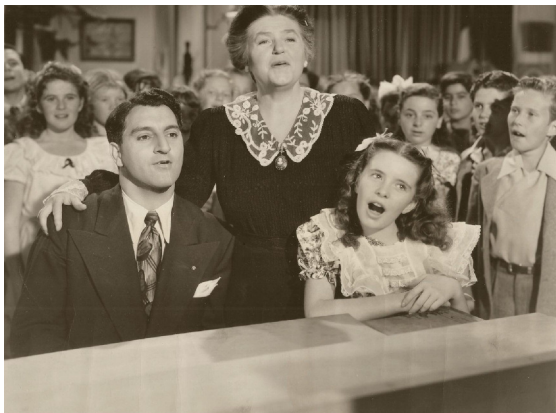
Bruno Walter was furious, at first. He did not know that she had canceled her European commitments *before* the offer came from Hollywood. When he learned the facts, harmony was restored with the humor and charm that usually characterized their correspondence.

Making a movie was a fascinating new experience for Lehmann. She played the mother of Danny Thomas in a film called *Big City*. Thomas, together with George Murphy and Robert Preston, were the three “fathers” of a foundling, played by the child star Margaret O’Brien. Lehmann sang the Brahms lullaby and a vocal version of Schumann’s “Träumerei” (which was about as close as Hollywood cared to come to German lieder), along with “The Kerry Dance” and, as a sort of grand finale, “God Bless America.” During the shooting, the president of MGM was wildly enthusiastic; he called Lotte Lehmann “the greatest screen mother in



*Lehmann with Ulanowsky*





*In "Big City" 1948*

were determined to meet her personally and nearly broke into her New York hotel suite. She was terrified. From then on she was always afraid to sleep alone.

The annual concert tours became more and more exhausting, and New York winters less and less appealing after the peace and comfort of Lehmann's Santa Barbara home. The dogs used to send her telegrams, to cheer her up. She longed to be back with them. One night, impulsively, she decided that her next recital would be her farewell to New York, in effect her formal farewell to her career as a singer. There was no announcement because, as she put it, she did not like to celebrate her own funeral; but a friend got wind of her plan and persuaded her to let him record the entire recital. That recording, called "Farewell Recital," soon became famous. It is a deeply moving historical document. It has been reissued over and over again. At the end of the first half of the program Lehmann held up her hand to speak. There was a moment of breathless suspense. When she said this would be her last recital in New York, a murmur of "No, no!" rumbled through the hall. People began to cry. With her unflinching humor she found just the right tone in which to take her leave of the public that was dearest to her heart. This is what the critic Irving Kolodin wrote in his review:

the world." Extravagant promises were made for future films. Scripts were discussed. Lotte bought a house near Hollywood, high in the hills. But the picture was not successful at the box office — though in recent years it has occasionally turned up on late-night television. The industry soon forgot about its greatest screen mother.

Movie fans turned out to be more aggressive than the opera and concert variety. Three particularly persistent young men were not satisfied with Lehmann's promise to send them her autograph; they

“Lotte Lehmann taught us something about the singer’s art every time she sang. In the latest and unfortunately the last appearance she taught us how a great artist says goodbye to a career . . . .”

She choked up just before the last words of her encore, “*An die Musik*,” Schubert’s immortal hymn of gratitude to music; she was too overcome by her emotions to sing the final phrase, “*Du holde Kunst, ich danke dir*” “Beloved art, I thank you!”

Every time that Lehmann closed a door behind her, she found another door opening ahead. That same year, in the summer of 1951, she began her famous series of master classes at the Music Academy of the West. It was a new concept at the time, teaching a class in the presence of an audience. For the students there was the excitement and the challenge of a performance. For Lotte the audience provided an extra stimulation that inspired her to give her very best. There were unforgettable moments when she would take her place in the bend of the piano to demonstrate a song, or would act out part of an operatic scene. She showed us how to use all the tools of expression, not just the voice. When she sang, it was only very softly and an octave lower than the original pitch; but there was never any “marking” of *expression* — *that* was always there in full. There were classes in both opera and art song. Eventually she produced complete operas, including such ambitious works as *Der Rosenkavalier* and *Fidelio*. She acted out all the roles, not just those she had sung herself. Her Baron Ochs in the Supper Scene of *Rosenkavalier* was surely the drollest that ever stood on a stage. In 1961 a series of Lehmann master classes was filmed for National Educational Television.

For students who could take criticism in public, Lehmann was a marvelously inspiring teacher. She could be tactful and kind; she could occasionally be devastating. But her criticism was generally constructive and always reflected a lifetime’s accumulation of artistic wisdom. Today her former students are singing in opera houses all over the world.



*With Paul Unlanowsky*



*With Koldofsky*

My years as Lotte Lehmann's assistant at the Music Academy of the West in Santa Barbara were a glorious time for me. The ocean, the mountains, the romantic beauty of the Academy grounds, magnified the unfailing inspiration of working with Lehmann on opera and lieder — nature and music in perfect combination. I had seen her on the opera stage and in recitals and had always revered her artistry; now I had a fascinating opportunity to observe that artistry at work, to follow her thoughts as she built up a scene or demonstrated a song. My scores are scribbled full of her illuminating comments. It was a rare chance to study an exceptionally creative mind in the process of creation. Edification was well seasoned with entertainment:

Lehmann had a remarkable sense of humor. One moment we were moved to tears, the next convulsed with laughter. Audiences always brought out the best in her. Theater blood flowed in her veins. But there was much more than that. There was a spiritual component to her art that is as

rare in the theater as it is precious there. She seemed to be in touch with the same power that had inspired the poets and musicians whose work she brought to life. Those who heard her felt that, and it lifted them up. That is the greatest gift that art can give.

In 1955 Lehmann returned to Europe for the first time since before the war. She had been invited to attend the reopening of the Vienna Opera as an honored guest. The occasion was a highly emotional one for all Austrians. The State Opera House had once been the symbol and the center of Austria's cultural life. But one night in March 1945 it was gutted by both high-explosive and incendiary bombs. The stately facade remained standing; what had been the heart of the building became a pile of rubble and ashes. For ten years the Vienna Opera performed in other halls while funds were raised for the reconstruction of their beloved home. Now that magnificent monument was ready. The musical world flocked to Vienna. The house was packed. On the night of the reopening enormous crowds stood in the streets around the opera house to listen to the performance through loudspeakers. When Lotte Lehmann's name was mentioned by the announcer everyone cheered. She was overwhelmed by the warmth of her welcome all over Austria. Everywhere she was treated like

a queen, her hotel rooms filled with flowers. When she entered a restaurant, the orchestra would strike up music from her famous roles. Old colleagues burst into tears at the sight of her; but even strangers recognized her immediately wherever she went. She had not expected so much adoration after so long an absence, and she was deeply moved. From then on, she returned to Europe for a visit every year. Famous singers came to her for coaching. She gave master classes in London and Vienna. Those in London were hailed as “*the* artistic event of the season.”

There was a brief “third career.” In 1962 the Metropolitan Opera invited Lehmann back in a new capacity — as stage director for *Der Rosenkavalier*. She was 74 then and severely handicapped by arthritis. She agreed to work on interpretation with the singers of the leading roles. Another director, Ralph Herbert, did most of the actual staging, which would have been too strenuous for her by then.

When she passed away in 1976 at the age of 88, Lotte Lehmann left behind a legacy that will continue to inspire singers and stage directors for generations to come, through her recordings and books, of course, but above all through the standards she had set with her own example, as those standards influenced her colleagues, her students, and her audiences. She was always faithful to the spirit of the work; there was fascinating individuality but no eccentricity. She discovered the inner truth of the role in all its facets, never imposing a “conception” from the outside. She had an uncanny ability to lose her own personality in that of the character to be portrayed. They were all utterly different. It was not Lotte Lehmann up there on the stage, *playing* Elisabeth, Fidelio, Manon, or the Marschallin; it really seemed to be another human being, the creature of the composer’s imagination suddenly incarnate in flesh and blood. She found the perfect combination of the universal and the particular in every part, three-dimensional credibility and archetypal essence.



*Lehmann with Beaumont Glass at the piano  
and Grace Bumbry*

Centennials of *composers* are often celebrated. But it is rare that the world honors a singer as Lotte Lehmann is being honored this year. She is the subject of numerous tributes on three continents, of symposia, books and articles, of television features and radio broadcasts, of a gala performance by the Vienna Opera; many of her recordings are scheduled for re-release on compact discs.

Composers, colleagues, critics, and fans have long sung the praises of Lotte Lehmann. Perhaps Richard Strauss paid her the most beautiful tribute of all. He said of her, “When she sang she moved the stars.”

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Beaumont Glass (1925-2011), late Professor of Music and Director of the Opera Theater at the University of Iowa, gave the above talk as the 1988 Presidential Lecture at the University of Iowa, shortly after the publication of his book *Lotte Lehmann: A Life in Opera and Song*. The lecture is reprinted here with the kind permission of Mrs. Evangeline Glass and has been slightly abridged.



*Lehmann and Régine Crespin rehearsing for Der Rosenkavalier*

## Producer Gary Hickling's Notes

Long after her famous final Town Hall recital in 1951 and her death in Santa Barbara in 1976, Lotte Lehmann's fame and artistic legacy live on: five biographies and a book on her teaching; 1988 centennial tributes in Vienna, Santa Barbara, New York, and Washington DC; uncountable LP and CD re-releases of her recordings; two hour-long syndicated radio programs on the 30th anniversary of her death; a foundation in her honor; streets named for her in Salzburg and Vienna; songs written to her poetry; a music festival in her birthplace of Perleberg, Germany; postage stamps from Germany and Nicaragua; concert halls named for her; and Lehmann archival collections at UCSB, Stanford, Yale, University of Missouri-Kansas City; and, as could be expected, at the Vienna Theater Museum. Lehmann was given a last honor to rest in the same Wiener Zentralfriedhof (Vienna Central Cemetery) with Beethoven, Schubert, Brahms, and Wolf, whose music she had sung with so much devotion.

It is a measure of endurance of Lehmann's recorded interpretations that tributes to Lehmann far outstrip those of her contemporaries, Flagstad,

Rethberg, Jeritza, or even

her friend Elisabeth

Schumann, who in their own time garnered similar critical praise.



Must everything great singers record be great? We are interested in a broad range of their performances because we want to discover as much about their talent as possible. Lotte Lehmann seldom fails. Her enthusiasm, commitment, and ardor come across in spite of the limitations of the recording and the performance. In the “live” recital songs on this set you’ll notice that Lehmann often becomes excited and, not having the words in her hands, changes the texts and improvises. She was, after all, also a poet and so this wasn’t so difficult



for her. I've tried to note these changes in the texts that are provided below.

Most of the radio performances included here are available thanks to Lehmann fans who recorded the broadcasts onto their own acetate discs. It is thanks to them, rather than the radio stations or networks that broadcast the programs that we have these precious documents. Luckily, there are archives that preserve such rare treasures. And the "test pressings" in this set were provided to the artist for her approval before their publication. They allow us to hear how these studio recordings sounded before any "ambient" intervention was added by well-meaning engineers in previous LP or CD releases.

I've chosen to present these "rarities" in chronological order. You can hear a few songs more than once, as recorded at different times in Lehmann's artistic career. Don't try to listen to more than a few of these tracks at once, for Lehmann's intensity can be overwhelming. Instead, listen to a little bit at a time, and notice what she does that is unique to her. Not that she tried to be unique! The care that we hear her give to words, phrases, and meanings all came spontaneously to her.



A few words about the repertoire. When we remember that the radio performances in this set were broadcast in the US after Hitler came to power, before and after World War II began, one can assume a degree of hesitancy towards an "all German program." But generally, Lieder, even during the war, were accepted, in spite of the Nazis, and thanks to the great poets and composers of Germany and Austria. As an American, I've always taken it as a matter of pride that

Lehmann was allowed to sing so many Lieder at that time, and that some of these live performances were distributed on the same Voice of America 16-inch discs that served up Bing Crosby, the Andrews Sisters, and Tallulah Bankhead to the Armed Forces.

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*Recital pose, 1940s*