

Margery Mayer Voutsas, March 29, 1918 – May 12, 2014

Margery Mayer Voutsas, a singer widely acclaimed for her portrayal of some of the most famous contralto roles in opera, died Monday, May 12 in Cupertino, California. She was 96.

Mrs. Voutsas, known professionally as Margery Mayer, began her career in Chicago, singing on radio and with the Chicago City Opera Company, then traveling extensively with the San Carlo Opera Company. In 1946 she debuted with the New York City Opera.

Of her favorite role, *Carmen*, the *New York Times* wrote in 1951, “Miss Mayer ... is now as satisfying a *Carmen*, vocally and histrionically, as is to be found hereabout. She has filled out the part with thoughtful bits of business that make it most credible, and her singing is even in quality and full of spirit.” Beyond her signature roles of *Carmen* and *Amneris*, her career is especially notable for her appearances in a number of prominent works and American premieres.

A teacher as well as a singer, Mayer based her instruction in voice on the science of vocal production. She taught in the music department of Wagner College on Staten Island, New York, for twenty-eight years, and taught private students after she retired to California.

Marguerite Caroline Louise Mayer was born on March 19, 1918, in Chicago, Illinois. Her father, Gottlieb Mayer, was a pianist who performed in movie houses for silent movies and on Lake Michigan cruise boats; her mother, Lillian (Greiner) Mayer, was a seamstress who served clients on Chicago’s North Side.

As a student at Nicholas Senn high school in Chicago, Mayer began vocal studies at age 16 with the famed voice teacher and children’s opera director Zerlina Muhlmann Metzger. Within two years she won the Chicago high school singing contest. This enabled her to study at the American Conservatory of Music in Chicago, where she studied sight-reading, harmony and music theory with composer Leo Sowerby.

The renowned operatic soprano Mary Garden, then a talent scout for Metro-Goldwin Mayer (MGM), arranged for Mayer to audition with Louis B. Mayer (no relation), who offered her a four-month contract with the MGM studios in Hollywood in the spring of 1937. So the 18-year-old Mayer took the train to Hollywood for screen tests and coaching with Mary Garden. There she sang at sponsored functions with Judy Garland and other MGM entertainers and attended the 9th Academy Awards luncheon. In 1938, shortly

after her debut recital, Mayer debuted with the Chicago Opera Company as Nicklausse in *Tales of Hoffman*. She was also offered a contract with WGN radio, where she sang opera and classical programs on the “Theater of the Air.” Her radio performances of *Lohengrin*, *Samson and Delilah*, *Carmen*, and *Boris Godunov* were heard coast-to-coast.

The following year, Mayer was signed by NBC to perform on General Mills’ popular radio program “Hymns of All Churches.” She also began singing for services at the North Shore Congregation Israel in Glencoe, Illinois.

During 1943-45, Mayer toured extensively in the United States and Canada with the San Carlo Opera Company and gained wide recognition for her fine interpretations of the major contralto roles. Her operatic repertoire expanded to include *Aida* (*Amneris*), *Il Trovatore* (*Azucena*), *Faust*, *Rigoletto*, and, most celebrated, the title role in *Carmen*.

Mayer continued performing on radio programs, as soloist with the NBC Symphony Orchestra in Grant Park and with the Chicago Opera Company (alongside Grace Moore, Lilly Pons, Kirsten Flagstad, Dorothy Kirsten, and Lawrence Tibbett). In 1944, she sang in a live broadcast on the Metropolitan Opera Auditions of the Air in New York.

In 1939, Margery Mayer had married a childhood friend and neighbor, Dietrich George Berthold. They had one son, Lynn. Three years later, her young husband died after a two-year struggle with tuberculosis. In 1946, she married Sigvart J. Steen, a Navy veteran and musician whom she met when he was conducting the famed Blue Jackets Choir at the Great Lakes Naval Air Station in Chicago. They had one son, Richard.

On May 16, 1946, Mayer debuted with the New York City Opera, playing Suzuki in a historic production of *Madama Butterfly*. Cio-Cio San was sung by Camilla Williams, the first black woman to be cast by a major U.S. opera company. Later that year Mayer began singing on three radio shows in New York—WOR’s “Serenade to America,” “The WOR Opera Theatre,” and NBC’s “Let’s Go to the Opera.”

In the fall of 1947, she moved to Decorah, Iowa, where her husband had been hired to chair the music department at his *alma mater*, Luther College. A year later, the family moved to the newly opened Levittown on Long Island so that Mayer could resume her singing

with the New York City Opera. Later they moved to Staten Island, N.Y., where her husband had become chair of the music department at Wagner College and conductor of the Wagner College Choir.

During her ten-year tenure, Mayer became one of the leading contraltos at the New York City Opera, starring in dozens of roles including the company's first performances of *Die Meistersinger* (Magdalena) and *Falstaff* (Dame Quickly). Her repertoire spanned some 35 operas, including nearly 100 performances of *Carmen*, *Aida*, *Il Trovatore*, and *Madama Butterfly*.

In 1949, Mayer performed in the New York City Opera's hit production of Prokofiev's satirical opera *The Love for Three Oranges*, its first American performance in thirty years. That same year she sang in the American premier of Arthur Honegger's *La Danse des Morts*. Mayer's American premiers also include Pizzetti's *Murder in the Cathedral* in Carnegie Hall.

An accomplished oratorio singer, Mayer sang many performances of Bach's *St. Matthew Passion*, Handel's *Messiah*, and Verdi's *Requiem*. She sang with many of the major symphony orchestras in the country, including the New York Philharmonic performing Strauss' *Electra* and the Chicago Symphony performing Beethoven's *Ninth Symphony*.

In 1950 and 1951 Mayer was the featured soloist in Radio City Music Hall's famed eight-week Easter Show singing Rubenstein's *Komennoi-Ostrow*. For another show, she performed a medley from *Carmen*.

Among her many interpretations of contemporary works were ten Broadway performances of *The Medium* (Baba) with composer Gian Carlo Menotti directing, *Amahl and the Night Visitors* (the Mother) at New York City Opera and *Die Junge Magd* with the Chicago Symphony, with composer Paul Hindemith conducting.

In addition, Mayer appeared in one of the earliest presentations of opera on television, the 1951 NBC-TV production of Puccini's *Il Tabarro*. In 1957 she performed in the NBC-TV Opera Theater's presentation of *War and Peace*, Prokofiev's operatic adaptation of Tolstoy's epic. The same year, Mayer

sang in the Douglas Moore opera *Ballad of Baby Doe* for ABC television. (She later sang six performances as Augusta with Beverly Sills as Baby Doe at Musicarnival, Cleveland.)

A woman of prodigious energy, Mayer also sang for more than twenty years in a quartet for weekly Friday and Saturday Shabbat services at the newly formed Riverdale Temple in New York City, whose first rabbi, Charles Schulman, came from the Glencoe, Illinois, synagogue where she had sung early in her career.

An instructor in voice since 1949, in 1961 Mayer was promoted to assistant professor and subsequently granted tenure in the Music Department of Wagner College. While at Wagner she taught private and class voice lessons, recalling her own teacher's motto: "If you can speak, then you can sing." Two of her students won Fulbright Fellowships; one later joined the San Francisco, New York City and Metropolitan opera companies.

Mayer also developed a very popular course in opera appreciation at Wagner, which was enhanced by guest lectures from renowned New York artists, in-class opera scene demonstrations, trips to opera performances in Manhattan, and Mayer's ability to relate behind-the-curtain aspects of opera. She retired from Wagner in 1977 after 28 years of teaching.

Her husband Sigvart Steen died in 1968. In 1974 she married George Voutsas, a retired NBC music producer with whom she had worked in her Chicago days performing on radio. Following her retirement, the couple moved to Carmel Highlands, California. George Voutsas died in 2003.

In retirement Mayer continued teaching voice, as well as singing as a soloist in her church and in the Monterey peninsula music group Piano Plus. She taught her great-grandsons to find Middle C on the piano when they turned two. She also did couture sewing, gardening, and water color, and continued to extend her trademark hospitality to friends new and old. Her zest for music and dramatic flair were still on view at her surprise 90th birthday party when she reprised her *Carmen* role by teasing guests with a full and warm rendition of "L'Amour! L'Amour!"

Margery Mayer Voutsas is survived by sons Lynn (Mary) Steen of Northfield, Minnesota, and Richard (Robin Cameron) Steen of New York, New York; granddaughters Margaret (David Webster) Steen of Los Altos, California, and Catherine (Jason) Wille of Rochert, Minnesota; six great-grandsons; her sister's children Alan Vogt and Marcia Podlesak; and numerous other nieces and nephews. She was preceded in death by her husbands, Dietrich George Berthold, Sigvart J. Steen, and George Voutsas; her parents; an infant brother, Herbert; a sister, Ethel Mayer Vogt; and a nephew, Paul Vogt.