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Margery Mayer Voutsas, 1918-2014

Chicago-raised opera singer performed title role in 'Carmen' 30 times



**By Joan Giangrasso Kates,
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Margery Mayer Voutsas was a student at Senn High School in Chicago when she began her vocal studies under the tutelage of noted voice teacher and children's opera director Zerlina Muhlmann Metzger.

By 18, she had won a Chicago high school singing competition and was discovered by renowned operatic soprano Mary Garden, then a talent scout for Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer. Mrs. Voutsas was offered a four-month contract with MGM studios. She hopped a train to Hollywood for screen tests and singing engagements that included the 1937

Academy Award ceremony, said her son Richard Steen.

"It was a whirlwind chapter in her life because people were just beginning to realize her immense talent," her son said.

Mrs. Voutsas, 96, an operatic contralto who performed the title role in "Carmen" 30 times during her career, died of natural causes Monday, May 12, at her home in Cupertino, Calif., her son said.

Born Marguerite Caroline Louise Mayer, Mrs. Voutsas grew up in Chicago, where her father was a pianist who performed in movie houses for silent movies and on cruise boats on Lake Michigan. Her mother was a seamstress who served clients on the North Side.

"When she was young, she'd sing while her father accompanied her on the piano," her son said.

After high school, Mrs. Voutsas briefly continued her musical studies at the American Conservatory of Music in Chicago, where she studied harmony and music theory with composer Leo Sowerby, until heading to Hollywood and undergoing training for a little more than a year.

She returned to Chicago in 1938 and held a debut recital, which was well-received. The Tribune wrote that she possessed "a voice of indescribable quality and power."

She was hired as a featured soloist on WGN radio, part of the new Mutual Broadcasting System, where she sang opera and classical programs on the "Theater of the Air." Her radio performances of "Lohengrin," "Samson and Delilah" and "Carmen" were heard coast to coast over the MBS network.

A short time later, a large commissioned portrait of Mrs. Voutsas, painted by noted artist and sculpture Carl Tolpo, was displayed in the Drake Hotel to

publicize Chicago's rising young opera artists.

That same year, Mrs. Voutsas debuted with the Chicago City Opera Company as Nicklausse in "The Tales of Hoffmann." The following year, she was signed by NBC to perform on General Mills' popular radio program "Hymns of All Churches."

In addition to her radio work, Mrs. Voutsas also performed with the Chicago Opera Company and in 1943 won the Metropolitan Opera contest in Chicago and was selected for live broadcast on the Metropolitan Opera Auditions of the Air in New York.

From 1943 to 1945, Mrs. Voutsas toured the United States and Canada with the San Carlo Opera Company, performing the title role in "Carmen" 30 times and Amneris in "Aida" 15 times.

She was married in 1939 to Dietrich George Berthold, who died three years later of tuberculosis. In 1946, she married Sigvart 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.

Mrs. Voutsas' career took her to New York, where she debuted with the New York City Center Opera Company in a historic production of "Madama Butterfly," singing the role of Suzuki opposite soprano Camilla Williams, the first black woman to be cast by a major U.S. opera company.

During the next 10 years, she became one of the leading contraltos at the New York City Center Opera, starring in dozens of roles. She also began singing on radio shows in New York and in one of the earliest presentations of opera on television, the 1951 NBC production of Puccini's "Il Tabarro."

In 1958, Mrs. Voutsas appeared in "The Ballad of Baby Doe," first for TV and then singing the lead role of Augusta for six performances at the Musicarnival in Ohio with Beverly Sills.

While living in New York, Mrs. Voutsas was also a voice instructor at Wagner College and sang for 25 years in a quartet for weekly services at the newly formed Riverdale Temple, whose first rabbi, Charles Schulman, came from the Glencoe synagogue where she had sung early in her career.

"Margery was a great role model in the way she carried herself," said Walter Baumhoff, a 1959 graduate of Wagner College who studied with Mrs. Voutsas and remained a friend. "She radiated

confidence, but was warm and engaging and had a laugh that could charm just about anyone."

After her second husband died in 1968, Mrs. Voutsas continued to teach and sing on Staten Island. In 1974, she married George Voutsas, a retired NBC music producer, and retired in 1977, the same year she moved with her husband to Carmel Highlands, Calif.

After her husband's death in 2003, Mrs. Voutsas remained in the couple's home in Carmel Highlands until four years ago, when she moved to a senior living facility in Cupertino.

In retirement, Mrs. Voutsas continued teaching voice as well as singing as a soloist in her church and in the Monterey music group Piano Plus. She also taught her great-grandsons to find middle C on the piano when they turned 2.

"The word I'd use to describe her is 'magnetic,'" Baumhoff said. "She had a wonderful way of drawing people in and having you want to stay there."

Mrs. Voutsas is also survived by another son, Lynn Steen; two granddaughters; and six great-grandsons.

Services were held.