

The Carmel Pine Cone

Volume 100 No. 23

On the Internet: www.carmelpinecone.com

June 6-12, 2014

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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 May 12 in Cupertino, California. She was 96. She had retired to Carmel in 1977 and lived there for over thirty years.

Marguerite Caroline Louise Mayer was born on March 19, 1918, in Chicago, Illinois to Gottlieb Mayer and Lillian (Greiner) Mayer.

Known professionally as Margery Mayer, she began her career in Chicago, singing on radio and with the Chicago City Opera Company, then traveling extensively with the San Carlo Opera Company. She was singled out early for her vocal potential by opera soprano legend Mary Garden, who brought the 18 year old to MGM for screen tests as her protégé. In 1946 she debuted with the New York City Opera, where, during her ten-year tenure, her repertoire spanned some 35 operas, including nearly 100 performances of Carmen, Aida, Il Trovatore, and Madama Butterfly.

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. ... 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. She performed in oratorios and solo engagements with the nation's leading symphony orchestras. Her radio performances of Lohengrin, Samson and Delilah, Carmen, and Boris Godunov were heard coast-to-coast, and she appeared in some of the earliest presentations of opera on television.

A teacher as well as a singer, Mayer taught in the music department of Wagner College on Staten Island, New York, for 28 years. In retirement she 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, 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 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.

The family requests that memorials be sent to the Margery Mayer and Sigvart Steen Music Scholarship at Wagner College in Staten Island, New York.