

# WAGNER COLLEGE

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## *In memoriam:*

### Retired music professor Margery Mayer Steen

Margery Mayer Steen Voutsas, former music professor at Wagner College and contralto with the New York City Opera, died on May 12 in Cupertino, California at age 96.

Marguerite Caroline Louise Mayer was born on March 19, 1918 in Chicago, Illinois to pianist Gottlieb Mayer and seamstress Lillian (Greiner) Mayer. At age 16, Miss Mayer began vocal studies with famed vocal teacher and children's opera director Zerlina Muhlmann Metzger. Within 2 years, she won her first singing contest and became a protégé of renowned soprano Mary Garden, who helped arrange for screen tests for Miss Mayer at the MGM studios in Hollywood in the spring of 1937.

In 1938, shortly after her debut recital, Mayer was offered contracts with the Chicago Civic Opera Company and with 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.

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. From 1943 to 1945, Mayer toured extensively in the United States and Canada with the San Carlo Opera Company and gained wide recognition for her interpretations of several major contralto roles, including "Aida" (Amneris), "Il Trovatore" (Azucena), "Faust," "Rigoletto" and, most celebrated, the title role in "Carmen."

In 1939, Margery Mayer married a childhood friend and neighbor, Dietrich George Berthold. They had one son, Lynn. Three years later, Berthold died after a lengthy struggle with tuberculosis. On January 26, 1946 she married Navy veteran and musician Sigvart J. Steen, whom she met when he was conducting the famed Blue Jackets Choir at the Great Lakes Naval Air Station in Chicago.



Four month later, on May 16, 1946, Mayer debuted with the New York City Center Opera Company in a historic production of "Madame Butterfly" in the role of Suzuki opposite Camilla Williams, soprano, as Cio-Cio San, the first black woman to be cast by a major U.S. opera company. Later that year, she began singing on three radio shows in New York — WOR's "Serenade to America," "WOR Opera Theatre" and NBC's "Let's Go to the Opera."

In August 1947, Mayer moved to Decorah, Iowa, where her husband had been hired to chair the music department at his alma mater, Luther College, and Mayer to teach voice to Luther students. But just one year later, after the birth of their son Richard, Mayer and Steen moved to the newly opened Levittown on Long Island so that Mayer could join the City Center Opera Company. A year later they moved to Staten Island, where Steen had accepted a job as chairman of the Music Department at Wagner College and conductor of the Wagner College Choir.

During the next 10 years, Mayer became one of the leading contraltos at the New York City Center 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 many highly acclaimed performances of "Carmen," "Aida" and "Il Trovatore." Her Carmen was especially well received by the New York critics.

In 1949, Mayer performed in the City Center's hit production of Prokofiev's satirical opera, "The Love for Three Oranges," its first American performance in over 30 years. That same year she sang with the Fort Wayne Symphony in the American premier of Arthur Honneger's "La Danse des Morts." Other Mayer American premiers include Pizetti's "Murder in the Cathedral" in Carnegie Hall.

For several seasons, Margery Mayer was a regular guest artist with the Pittsburgh Opera Company, where she sang "Lohengrin" (Ortrud), "Madama Butterfly," "Il Trovatore" and "Aida." Among her interpretations of contemporary works were 10 Broadway performances of "The Medium" (Baba), with composer Gian Carlo Menotti conducting, and "Amahl and the Night Visitors" (the Mother) at New York City Opera, with Menotti directing and Thomas Schippers conducting, and "Die Junge Magd" with the Chicago Symphony, composer Paul Hindemith conducting.

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

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

In 1958 Mayer sang in the Douglas Moore opera, "Ballad of Baby Doe," first for ABC television, then for six performances at the Musicarnival in Cleveland with Beverly Sills. In 1959, Mayer sang "Carmen" and "Il Travatore" (Azuchena) with Eileen Farrell (Leonora) for the Richmond Opera Company.

A woman of prodigious energy, Mayer also sang for 20 years in a quartet for weekly 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.

In 1961, Mayer was appointed assistant professor in the Music Department of Wagner College and was subsequently granted tenure. While at Wagner, she taught private and class voice lessons. Recalling her own teacher's motto, "If you can speak, then you can sing," she sought to give to others some of the gift she had received. Several of her students won Fulbright fellowships or were offered contracts with the Metropolitan or City Center opera companies.

After the death of her husband, Sigvart Steen, in 1968, Mayer developed a very popular course in opera appreciation at Wagner College. Beyond the study of librettos and scores, these classes were enhanced by guest lectures from renowned New York City artists, in-class opera scene demonstrations, field trips to opera performances in Manhattan and Mayer's ability to relate behind-the-curtain aspects of opera.

After her operatic career ended, Mayer continued to teach at Wagner and to sing locally on Staten Island until she retired in 1977.

The following year, Mayer married George Voutsas, a retired NBC music producer with whom she had worked in her Chicago days performing on radio. In November 1977 Mayer and Voutsas moved to Carmel Highlands, California. Voutsas, Mayer's third husband, died on Jan. 2, 2003.

In retirement, Mayer continued teaching voice as well as singing as soloist in her church. She also did couture sewing, gardening and watercolor, and continued to extend her trademark hospitality to friends new and old. At her surprise 90th birthday party she reprised her Carmen role by teasing guests with "L'Amour! L'Amour!"

Mrs. 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; her sister's daughter Marcia Podlesak and son Alan Vogt; numerous other nieces and nephews and six great-grandsons. She was preceded in death by her parents; her husbands, Dietrich George Berthold, Sigvart J. Steen and George Voutsas; an infant brother, Herbert F. Mayer; a sister, Ethel Mayer Vogt, and a nephew, Paul Vogt.

The family requests that memorials in honor of Margery Mayer be sent to "The Sigvart J. Steen Scholarship Awards" at Wagner College, Staten Island, New York.