

GERALDINE FARRAR

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Geraldine Farrar was a truly great singer. Her most regular opera partner was Enrico Caruso who is still admired but, sadly, Farrar is not quite the same household name. And that is unfair.

She was a clean-cut all-American girl, sophisticated and down to earth, the type of girl who knew about baseball, a girl of vivacity and charm although often outspoken. Stardom and fame came her way but it did not turn her into a snob or into a difficult person, although her wealth caused her to be very fashion-conscious. It is said that her dress account at Henri Bendel ran into eighty thousand dollars a year.

In the season 1907-8, her fee was \$800 a performance and she gave 40 performances that year. The following season it was \$1000 a performance ; in 1909-10 it was \$1,200 ; in 1911-12 it was \$1,500 a performance (Toscanini earned \$7,500 a month).

She had a tremendous and likeable personality. Even when stardom came her way and she appeared in many films, she remained a delightful ordinary person. But she had a fan club more extensive than Valentino so that all her fans knew all about her, what size she was, what she weighed, what she had for meals. She was so popular that news reporters and others wanted her opinions on all sorts of matters from food and drink to politics. The public's interest in her was endless and never waned. She was not a nine day wonder. The cameras were always there and always caught her radiant smile.

Farrar was born in Melrose, Massachusetts in 1882. Her ambitious mother pushed her into all her achievements and career. Her father kept a store and both her parents had good singing voices. Her father pitched for a baseball team in Philadelphia. Geraldine was always independent, an individual. She once purchased a pair of lurid stockings and said to her family and friends that whenever she wore them no one was to speak to her. When she was ten she gave a brilliant impersonation of Jenny Lind at a school production and this may have confirmed that she should become a singer, aided and abetted by her mother. After her mother's death, Farrar insisted that her mother spoke to her from the grave and, in Farrar's autobiography, *Such Sweet Compulsion*, this spiritualist nonsense takes up too much of the book.

Her first serious musical studies took her to Boston and she was admired by the existing stars of opera. Lillian Nordica recommended that she continued her studies in Berlin, and Melba recommended Paris. A local wealthy lady granted Farrar \$30,000 to pursue her studies and such was the goodness of Farrar's character that she paid this money back, every cent. Farrar and her mother went to teachers in New York and in Paris.

At the Berlin Opera in 1901, Farrar made her debut in Gounod's *Faust* and she received letters of praise, so much so that Lilli Lehmann demanded an audition for the nineteen-year-old. Farrar had already written two or three letters to Lehmann and the older singer complained that her writing was too big and not easy to read. Farrar pleaded with Lehmann to take her on.

She agreed and the two got on very well. Of course, they clashed from time to time but there was never any acrimony. Lehmann admired the girl's courage and Farrar played on Lehmann's maternal disposition.

The two singers were so different, and Farrar never tried to copy Lehmann. Farrar was concerned with the technical properties of the voice and her voice shows immense expression. Lehmann was more into the emotional content of the music. Farrar developed into a singer of 'bracing vitality and precision' as J B Steane put it.

She became overwhelmingly popular at the Berlin Opera and was invited to the highest Court circles. In fact, the Crown Prince showed her too much amorous attention and Mr Farrar had to deal with this royal person who had cast doubts upon her honour. This was widely reported in the American press.

One of her greatest admirers was the young Frida Leider who was to become the greatest Wagnerian of her time. Farrar's appeal to girls and women was as potent as it was to men. Farrar had wealth, talent, fame, admirers, independence and a stunning beauty. What girl would not like to be like her?

When singing Marguerite in *Faust*, it is reported that Farrar wore expensive shoes with jewels on the



buckles. Leider wrote, "She is a most bewitching creature, and I used to colour in all the sepia postcards of her which showed her in a long evening gown, a little diadem of pearls in her gently waving hair, with long white kid gloves, her head gracefully resting on one hand."

Farrar built up a deservedly admired reputation throughout Europe. In Salzburg she was Zerlina to Lehmann's Donna Anna. She returned to New York in 1906 with the whole of America buzzing with excitement about her. She made her debut at the Met in Gounod's *Romeo and Juliet* on 27 November 1906, but some critics, no doubt frustrated by her appeal, were unkind to her. But in the next sixteen years she was the star of French and Italian opera with Caruso as her most frequent partner. Although it is said by some that Caruso was the crowd-puller, it is certain that Farrar was the greatest attraction.

When Farrar first met Caruso she said, "He was clad in shrieking checks, topped by a grey fedora, yellow gloves grasping a gold-headed cane, he jauntily walked on to the stage". It was in February 1904 that Farrar sang with Caruso for the first time in *La Boheme*. She was so taken with his voice that her emotions got all tangled up with the golden tones of his voice. She wrote, "I forgot all about the theatre, the action, everything. I sat there sobbing like a child. When my cue came, I did not hear it. The orchestra hesitated. My mother, who was in the wings, waved dramatically at me, I did not see her, I was having a beautiful old fashioned cry. Then the prompter arose from his seat and said, 'Well, Miss Farrar, are you going to sing or not?'"

The Met took on a new director in 1908, one Giulio Gatti-Gasazza with whom Caruso had worked at La Scala in Milan. With Toscanini he advanced the idea that singers must develop their voices in size and power to accommodate the new energy the orchestra had in their playing. A letter of objection was written to the management and Caruso and Farrar were among the signatures.

On 26 February 1914 the Met put on a production of Carpentier's ill-fated sequel to *Louise* and Caruso took the title role of Julien to Farrar's Louise. Actually, she sang five separate roles in each of the five performances but the lack of rehearsal for the chorus distressed Farrar and the opera died a death.

Her appearances on stage were exemplary not just because of her voice and technical security but because she was such a good actress and naturally so. In fact, she is reported as saying that she was an actress who happened to be in opera. She remarked that many opera singers were merely warblers having no conviction to their role since they had no dramatic or acting ability. However, Farrar 'milked' her audience. Sometimes this was somewhat vulgar.

While in *Carmen* she invoked Caruso's displeasure by slapping his face with too much realism. This incident was on 17 February 1916. In this performance, Caruso gripped Farrar by the wrist to hold her still and she turned in his grasp, bent her head swiftly, and bit the hand that held her. Caruso, furious and bleeding, flung her from him and she went down smack on her bottom and by the time the curtain had fallen she was back on her feet and having it out with Caruso. The applause was tremendous and so the two stars had to reappear hand in hand to acknowledge the applause. Caruso had been spoiling for a fight and had been pushing the girls of the chorus about and creating unnecessary ill-feeling. He was a pompous man.

In one performance of *Carmen*, Farrar surprised everyone by whistling the opening bars of the *seguidille*.

In the opera of the same name by Leoncavallo, she scandalised the audience by lifting her skirt and perfuming her panties with an atomiser. In Humperdinck's *Goose Girl* she took her curtain calls with a bird under her arm. She had developed into being a coquette.

Perhaps her most famous role was *Madame Butterfly* which she sang over 90 times at the Met. Puccini was not altogether taken with her performance, but there is no doubt about her secure intonation and the warmth and intimacy of her voice which suits the role. Against the usual run of play, she sang Elisabeth in Wagner's *Tannhauser* to great acclaim... partly because it was not her usual type of role.

Perhaps Caruso and Farrar's best performances were as Cavardossi and Tosca respectively in Puccini's *Tosca*. Many have raved about the performance on 17 November 1919 which opened the New York 1919/20 season.

Caruso died on 2 August 1921. He was only 48. He had several illnesses including pneumonia, abscesses in muscles of the chest and peritonitis.

But to return to Farrar. It seems surprising today to realise that teenage girls loved her singing and the operas in which she took part and screamed with genuine enthusiasm. It was not the pop group The Beatles that started this trend. There was embarrassment at the Met because this sort of adulation had never been witnessed before. Her fans were called Gerryflappers. This meant the Farrar was now regarded as a nuisance but she always brought in full houses and, therefore, maximum revenue for the opera house and its directors.

Farrar insisted on a key to her dressing room and in the years that Toscanini was at the Met (1908 - 1915) she had difficulties. He was jealous of her following and complained that she thought she was a star. "I am not," she retorted, "the only stars I know are in the heavens". However they had a passionate affair which somehow was kept out of the press. Farrar demanded that Toscanini left his wife and married her. Toscanini refused and Farrar left him. Toscanini suddenly left the Met and it was clearly because he had been rejected by Farrar. The story goes that many years later, Farrar invited him to dinner which had caviar on the menu. He was apparently beside himself with rage and railed, "That bloody woman. I slept with her for seven years and she knows I hate fish!"

By 1915 things has changed for Farrar. The war meant that she could not travel to sing at the Berlin Opera. When the Met season ended she went into the movies and made fourteen films. One was based on Carmen, another on Joan of Arc, which Cecil B de Mille directed, but none of her films were particularly good.

It was in 1915 that the Lasky Feature Play Company brought Farrar to Hollywood.

Agnes de Mille said, "When Geraldine Farrar came out there was a great to-do about her in Hollywood. It was the first an opera singer of her stature had come out. She had her own entourage, her own maid and her own hairdresser, her own manager and she had her own private dressing room. Everybody adored her, particularly the cowboys. 'Our Gerry,' they called her. And they gave her a mirror at the end of Joan the Woman with the fleur-de-lis on it, with all their names — every grip, every cameraman, everyone. They worshipped her. I don't think I've met a star in my life who had that effect on people".

In 1915 Farrar starred in the title role of Carmen with Jeanie Macpherson, an actress who became Cecil de Mille's star writer.

In Hollywood she met a handsome actor called Lou Tellegen, a Dutch matinee idol who was born in 1881, and she married him very soon afterwards. It was a bad choice. He was an alcoholic and involved with many other women and spent money lavishly. Farrar was not used to this sort of behaviour and divorced him. In 1931 he wrote his autobiography with the same title as his best film, *Women Have Been Kind of 1917*. Later, in 1934, he committed suicide. Farrar never married again.

In 1918 she had a node on her vocal chords and was unable to sing for six months and so making silent pictures was useful at this time. Somewhat recovered she worked tirelessly at the Met but there are those who say that while she was still very good, her voice was never the same.

She made the right decision to retire from the Met at the height of her powers. So many singers go on when their ability is so lessened to become very poor. There were problems with her divorce, her voice and she was approaching forty years of age. There was now a new beauty on the scene in Maria Jeritza and the Met was captivated by her beauty rather than her operatic talents. Jeritza was a fiery character and created many upsets at the Met and elsewhere in her turbulent career.

Farrar announced that she would do a few farewell performances but as Jeritza was to perform *Tosca* Farrar could not do that, although Farrar was a great *Tosca*. At a Saturday matinee in April 1922 she went out as *Zasa* the goose girl. At the end of the performance, the Gerryflappers clad in her a robe with a crown and sceptre and she was carried aloft along Broadway to a cheering crowd.

She did not return to Hollywood. She embarked on ten years' of concert tours. She sang a shortened version of *Carmen* 123 times in 125 days on one such tour. There was talk of her returning to the Met but, at the age of fifty, she retired from singing altogether. She did, however, sometimes appear as the announcer and commentator for operas at the Met for their famous Saturday matinee broadcasts and she had the distinction of announcing Kirtsen Flagstad's debut in 1935.

She retired to Ridgefield, Connecticut and was a popular figure in the community and involved in worthy causes such as the Women's Voluntary Service and the Girl Scouts. She was, to all extent, a spinster but constantly visited by those who admired and loved her for her magnificent achievements in opera who gave her deserved praise and commented upon her piercing blue eyes.

She was the first of the American prima donnas. She was the first great American opera singer. Of that there is no doubt. Her glamour was second to her wonderful singing. After her the Met employed lesser singers. No one could compare with Farrar and, even to this day there does not seem to be an America singer of her class.

She died in 1967 leaving her papers to the Library of Congress in Washington.

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