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Course Number: 133.881 *Performance and Research*

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Claudia Muzio (1889-1936), Her Life and Career

A thesis in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree Master of Philosophy

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Due date: 31 October 2003

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Summary

The purpose of this thesis is to provide a much-needed account of the life and career of one of the most respected sopranos of the twentieth century. Claudia Muzio's career on the operatic stage was impressive when compared with any of the leading singers of her era, some of whose names are much more familiar than her own.

Among sopranos, her contemporaries included Rosa Ponselle; among contraltos, Ernestine Schumann-Heink; among tenors, Enrico Caruso, and among basses, Feodor Chaliapin – four of the most recognizable names in operatic history. All of these four (and many more only slightly less famous) have captured the interest of opera historians. There is at least one biography in English of each of them. All left behind many recordings which frequently appeared in re-pressings in both vinyl and compact disc formats.

Muzio, too, made an impressive number of recordings. There are over one hundred examples of her singing from the time of her debut (1910) in opera until a year before her death (1936). These recordings, like those of the above, are often reproduced. The fascination with Muzio seems to renew itself with every new generation of lovers of great singing.

There is only one published full biography of Claudia Muzio, by Eduardo Arnosi¹, and it has not been translated from its original Spanish. Arnosi was a critic in Buenos Aires in the years that Claudia Muzio sang there (1919 – 1935). His work was published to commemorate her contribution to opera in the fiftieth year after her death. It is in effect a eulogy and offers little information about the woman herself.

¹ Arnosi, Eduardo. Claudia Muzio, La Unica. en el cincuentenario de su muerte. Buenos Aires, 1986.

This “hole” in the recorded history of opera is surprising, given Claudia Muzio’s continued appearances on re-issues of historic recordings, but understandable. It is surprising because a number of operatic authorities including John B. Steane, Nigel Douglas and Rupert Christiansen in the United Kingdom, Rodolfo Celletti in Italy, and the playwright Terrence McNally in the USA have all produced long chapters in books or radio broadcasts about her, but none has embarked on a full biography. It is understandable because there is so little documentation and practically nothing in writing by Claudia Muzio herself. All accounts of her, therefore, are second-hand ones.

My history of Claudia Muzio’s life and career begins with her birth in Pavia, Italy, on February 4, 1889 and documents her childhood spent backstage in important opera houses due to the fact that her father was a popular operatic stage director and her mother a chorus singer. Her early training as a pianist and harpist then led on to vocal tuition in her native Italy, an early debut, and almost instant world-wide success. Her first important engagement, at Covent Garden in London (1914) was followed two years later by a debut at the Metropolitan Opera in New York, where she sang for seven consecutive seasons, during which she began to appear in South America, then by ten years at the Chicago Lyric Opera, simultaneously keeping alive her career in South America and returning to Italy and the Continent, and traveling all over the USA singing recitals.

Her early death in 1936 at the age of forty-seven came after several years when her early childhood brush with rheumatic fever took its toll in the form of heart failure.

In between accounts of her appearances, Claudia Muzio, the woman, is able to be glimpsed through accounts of her in the print media of the time; and in 1929, a woman called May Higgins became her personal secretary and wrote letters to a devoted group of admirers (The Claudia Muzio Fan Club) in Chicago which were collected under the title "Following a Star" and copies made available for the members of the Fan Club. These letters form a valuable almost day-to-day chronicle of the life of the singer for the six years Miss Higgins was associated with her in that way.

Acknowledgements

I am grateful to Caterina Secchi, Cesar Dillon, Nigel Douglas, John B. Steane, Rupert Christiansen, Claudia Pinza, Bill Park, Robert Tuggle, Studs Terkel, Henry Pleasants, Terence McNally and Marty Robinson for sharing their impressions of Claudia Muzio and in some cases a great deal of information about the facts of her career.

Laurence Jenkins, 2003

INTRODUCTION

The Italian soprano Claudia Muzio was, in the course of her short career (1910-1935) hailed as one of the world's great singers. There is a great deal of evidence, in the form of reviews and testimonials by her contemporaries, that Claudia became famous amongst critics and audiences alike for her dedication, histrionic ability and the beauty and intelligence of her singing. Claudia was what we would call today a role model. There was a dedicated following of young girls and women, the Muzio Fan Club, which started in Chicago and soon had members throughout the United States. Only one other soprano of the day had such a following, Geraldine Farrar, whose 'gerryflapper' following was more impressive, though not so much devoted to the singing of their idol as to her style.

Both genetically and environmentally, conditions were ideal for Claudia to become what she did. Her parents, though at the time Claudia was born to them they were still unmarried, were both musicians. Carlo Muzio, though, soon turned his attention to stage directing. Giovanna Gavirati, his mistress and Claudia's natural, and later legal, mother, was a singer and had a sister who was a professional singer as well. Added to those already favourable conditions was the constant backstage environment in which Claudia spent her childhood, "at work" with her parents who doted on her and were reluctant to leave her behind when they travelled between several of the major opera houses of the world – Covent Garden in London, The Metropolitan in New York, the San Carlo in Naples and others.

During the course of what was an accelerated rise to world fame, after her debut in 1910, Claudia came into contact with the developing recording industry almost immediately. She made her first recordings in 1911, again recording in 1917-18, then in 1920 through 1925, and, finally, in 1934-35.

Like many other performers who achieve international fame and whose reputations live after them, Claudia Muzio was dedicated to her career. As it grew, so shrank her interest in much else, and with the time it took to get from one continent to another in those times, and the fact that her method of preparation was to immerse herself in her character by seclusion and deep rest on the days of performances, little time was left for a private life. What there was was jealously guarded, and we know very little of what occurred offstage.

Seven years before Claudia's death, one of the fan club members who had been following her, first from Chicago to New York, and then to Italy, a woman of about the same age as she, became her personal secretary. She accompanied the singer everywhere, writing about their day-to-day activities to the Muzio Fan Club members. The woman was May Higgins, and to Muzio scholars, her writings are the most significant body of information about the singer. May Higgins was, first and foremost, a fan, and her comments must be taken as those of someone absolutely smitten with the subject. Nevertheless, they paint the closest thing to a picture of Claudia Muzio that we have, and much can be learned from them.

I propose in this thesis to present the known facts about Claudia Muzio along with a chronology of her performances, a discography, and to quote from a large body of criticism concerning her countless public appearances. There is no biography of Claudia Muzio in English, only one in Spanish, written by a devoted critic in Buenos Aires in 1986, and it is rather lacking in information about the personality of the artist herself. I have attempted, through interpreting a very sparse body of interviews with the singer and the comments of the press and her friends, to “flesh out” the picture as well as possible. .