

# ALL THAT, AND SHE CAN SING, TOO?

*Prepared by John Horsefield, Cowra U3A*

*Thus spoke an opera novice in the audience at a lieder recital.  
Many admirers around the world must have thought this as they  
listened to one of the greatest sopranos of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.*

Elisabeth Schwarzkopf was a German-born opera singer who was much admired for her performances of Mozart, Strauss and Hugo Wolf. She was the consummate soprano who appeared in the world's greatest concert halls. She was perhaps even more admired as a lieder-singer.

She drew praise for her warm tone, flexible voice, and attention to detail in her interpretation of roles. Good-looking, full of vivacity and charm, Elisabeth was also a woman of fine intellect and a fanatically hard worker. She used her beautiful soprano voice with impeccable artistry, and she was a splendid actress. Elisabeth was a highly stunning soprano. Her mane of hair acted almost like a halo, remaining golden well into old age.

Christened Olga Maria Elisabeth Frederike Schwarzkopf, she was born on December 9, 1915, in Jarotschin, near Posen in Germany (Jarocin, Poland since 1919), the daughter and only child of a Prussian schoolmaster and classical scholar, Friedrich Schwarzkopf and his wife, Elisabeth Fröhling. The family moved around Silesia before arriving in Berlin when she was 17.

Elisabeth showed an interest in music from the very beginning. She performed in her first opera in 1928, as Eurydice in a school production of Gluck's *Orfeo ed Euridice* in Magdeburg, Germany. She was also in demand in concerts and local amateur performances.

In 1934, she began her musical studies at the Berlin Hochschule für Musik. Elisabeth began studying with

Lula Mysz-Gmeiner, who began training Elisabeth as a mezzo-soprano. However,



at the suggestion of tenor Karl Schmitt-Walter, her mother demanded that her daughter be transferred. Elisabeth began studying with a Dr. Egonolf, who was convinced of Elisabeth's potential as a coloratura soprano.

She switched teachers and started working with the celebrated coloratura soprano Maria Ivogün as well as with her husband, the noted pianist Michael Raucheisen. Raucheisen recruited Elisabeth for his ambitious project of recording whole swathes of the lieder repertory. These were preserved on early tape, and issued later on disc. They show her voice in its youthful prime. Ivogün's advice to her new pupil was, 'Be noble my child!'

Elisabeth made her professional debut at Berlin's Berlin State Opera on 15 April 1938, as the Second Flower Maiden



As *Esmeralda* in *The Bartered Bride* at the *Deutsche Oper*, June 1938.

(First Group) in Act II of Richard Wagner's *Parsifal*. During that first season she sang many supporting roles in both opera and operetta, mixing Wagner with Lortzing, before she was cast as the soubrette Zerbinetta in a new production of Richard Strauss's *Ariadne auf Naxos*.

Raucheisen partnered her in her first lieder recital, in the Beethoven *Saal*, Berlin, in 1942. Elisabeth sang in Berlin for four years; she initially sang minor parts but soon graduated to more important roles. During her time in Berlin she became a member of the Nazi Party (a decision which later caused her to be boycotted in the United States for several years). She also appeared in a handful of propaganda films under Goebbels' banner.

She left Berlin only once, to sing in one performance as Adele in *Die Fledermaus* at the Paris Opera when the Deutsche Oper went on tour in September 1941 for the benefit of German occupying forces. She is reported to have travelled to the Eastern Front to entertain the troops.

Rumours linked her amorously with Propaganda Minister Joseph Goebbels, who operated a vigorous casting couch, and subsequently with the notorious Hans Frank, music-loving governor-general of occupied Poland who was hanged at Nuremberg in 1946. Elisabeth sang in Poland repeatedly during the Holocaust years.

Elisabeth is probably the only singer in history to sing under two names in a single performance. In October 1941, she sang Adele for the first of a series of *Die Fledermaus* performances but was demoted to the role of Ida for the remainder of the performances. In retaliation, Elisabeth kicked off her shoe during a performance, damaging the huge canvas screen at the back of the set.

Her punishment was that she couldn't always sing in productions using her own name. Therefore, in a perform-

ance of *Parsifal*, the role of the Second Flower Maiden (First Group) was sung by Elisabeth Schwarzkopf, and the role of the First Page is credited to Maria Helfer, Elisabeth's pseudonym for the month following the *Fledermaus* incident.

Elisabeth was determined to get to the top and was not inclined to go looking for obstacles. At the Deutsche Oper one or two of the older sopranos were none too pleased with the presence of a young rival who was exceptionally good-looking as well as talented.

She used to tell the story of her arrival, with her mother, in gloomy, bomb-torn Vienna. They had little or no money, but her mother insisted that their meagre luggage contained one impressive and expensive-looking dress for auditions.

But she was not content with being a star in wartime Berlin. In 1942 Austrian conductor Karl Böhm heard Elisabeth in a recital in Berlin and invited her to join the Vienna State Opera (*Wiener Staatsoper*). Encouraged by Böhm, who was considering her as Blonde in a production of *Entführung* he was planning, she went to Vienna, with that audition dress in her suitcase. There she made her debut in her regular role of Zerbinetta.

The Deutsche Oper was abandoned and she threw in her lot with Vienna for such performances as were going in the last months of the war. Her roles included Konstanze in Mozart's *Die Entführung aus dem Serail*; Musetta and later Mimi in Puccini's *La Bohème*; and Violetta in Giuseppe Verdi's *La Traviata*.

During 1946 Elisabeth, in common with other prominent musicians including Furtwängler and Karajan, came under the scrutiny of the Allied Denazification Bureau. But while the process was continuing they were allowed to appear from time to time.

At the end of World War II, Walter Legge went to Vienna on a talent-spotting trip. On Karajan's suggestion Legge, who was working for ENSA but looking for future artists for EMI, heard

Elisabeth in *The Barber of Seville*. He recognised the talent at once but believed that she should be a lyric soprano—but not before he recorded her singing Johann Strauss's *Frühlingsstimmen*, one of the first of their many discs together.

Legge was an assistant director at Covent Garden, a classical music producer and a founder of the Philharmonia. In March 1946, Elisabeth was invited to audition for Legge. They met in the Cafe Mozart in a Harry Lime world, went directly to the Musikverein, where Legge gave her an audition of an inordinate length, which even Herbert von Karajan, who was present, described as cruel. He asked her to sing Hugo Wolf's Lied *Wer rief dich denn?* and then signed her to an exclusive contract with EMI.

They began a close partnership and Legge subsequently became Elisabeth's manager and companion. With him she made all her records, apart from song recitals recorded in Germany during the war, many of which remain unsurpassed in their field.

Her first appearance on record was in 1938 as part of the chorus of a *Zauberflöte* made in Berlin by Sir Thomas Beecham. His technical assistant was a young man called Walter Legge. Neither Elisabeth nor Walter could have guessed at the future influence they were to have on one another.

When just before her 75<sup>th</sup> birthday Elisabeth was asked whether anyone else had acted in the recording studios as her producer she was faintly surprised by the question and replied that she had never considered anyone else, adding: 'In any case Walter would never have allowed it.'

Legge was equally punctilious about her stage appearances. He recognised that her voice was supremely musical, intelligently coloured, and capable of conveying extremes of meaning. But it was neither exceptionally large, nor did it have the high notes of the coloratura range.

On the one hand Elisabeth steered away from heavy parts, such as Beethoven's Leonore, which she sang only in concert performance, and on the other



As Gilda in Rigoletto.



As Madame Butterfly at Covent Garden with Rudolph Schock

hand from parts such as Strauss's Arabella for which she was physically ideal but which lay a little too high.

The Legge-Schwarzkopf combination was a redoubtable one, combining a huge breadth of musical knowledge with a total understanding of the practicalities of music-making in theatres, studios and concert halls.

In 1945, Elisabeth was granted Austrian citizenship to enable her to sing in the Vienna State Opera. Supported by Legge, she rejoined the opera in its temporary home of the Theater an der Wien. Superb Mozart was performed in a city short of food and that was still in ruins.

In 1947 and 1948, she appeared on tour with the Vienna State Opera at London's Royal Opera House at Covent Garden on 16 September 1947 as Donna Elvira in Mozart's *Don Giovanni* and at La Scala on 28 December 1948 as the Countess in Mozart's *Le nozze di Figaro*, which became one of her signature roles.

Elisabeth then moved to London and sang a variety of roles in German, Italian, and French operas with the Covent Garden opera company for five seasons. Covent Garden at the time, like Vienna, was trying to rebuild its company. But it recognised in Elisabeth a natural talent. The problem was that Covent Garden was committed to opera in English, in which she was then far from fluent.

But Elisabeth accepted the challenge and in the late 1940s and early 1950s London heard her as Pamina (*Zauberflöte*), Eva (*Die Meistersinger*), Violetta (*La Traviata*) and Susanna (*The Marriage of Figaro*) among other roles. There was an outstanding Mimi, with Welitsch as Musetta, in *La Boheme*.

She made her official debut at the Royal Opera House on 16 January 1948, as Pamina in Mozart's *Die Zauberflöte*, in performances sung in English, and at La Scala on 29 June 1950 in a performance of Beethoven's *Missa Solemnis*.

Her association with the Milanese house in the early 1950's gave Elisabeth the opportunity to sing certain roles on stage for the only time in her career: Mélisande in *Pelléas et Mélisande*; Jole in Handel's *Eracle*; Marguerite in Gounod's *Faust*; Elsa in Wagner's *Lohengrin*; as well as her first Marschallin in Strauss' *Der Rosenkavalier* and her first Fiordiligi in Mozart's *Così Fan Tutte* at the Piccola Scala.

During her career, Elisabeth performed in two world premieres. She appeared as Anne Trulove in the world premiere of Stravinsky's *The Rake's Progress* on 11 September 1951 at the Fenice in Venice (of which there exists an off-the-air recording), as well as the Second Page in the world premiere of Arthur Kusterer's *Katarina* on May 14, 1939.

As Legge was one of EMI's two chief producers, Elisabeth had an open sesame to make virtually as many recordings as she liked. From the era of 78rpm discs until 1964, when Legge left EMI, they collaborated on an unprecedented long catalogue of recordings, among the most successful of which were many sets of operetta, to whose heroines Schwarzkopf's style was peculiarly well suited.

*Die Fledermaus* and *The Merry Widow*, both conducted by Herbert von Karajan, were among the most successful. Karajan was also in charge of one of Schwarzkopf's three recordings of Richard Strauss's *Four Last Songs*, a live event at the Festival Hall, but probably the best of the three is the earliest, a 1953 studio performance under Otto Ackermann, the voice at its freshest, and her style at its most natural.

In the early 1950s, Schwarzkopf became the centre of a heated musical controversy when it was revealed that she had dubbed two youthful high C's to a recording of *Tristan und Isolde* by the aging Kirsten Flagstad, who was having difficulties with her upper register. The substitution was carefully accomplished and

nobody would have likely found out about it had it not been for the voracious hunger for gossip within the opera world.

Purists were scandalized—they thought the whole thing smacked of



*Their wedding photo, 19 Oct 1953, (l to r), Elisabeth, Walter and witnesses E Newman and J Withers.*



*With Maria Callas, 1954*

fakery. The pianist Glenn Gould thought otherwise: He considered the loan of the two C's a professional courtesy from one artist to another, all to the creation of a more perfect 'Tristan'.

In 1951, Elisabeth made her only Bayreuth appearances—at the re-opening of the house in Beethoven's *Choral Symphony* under Wilhelm Furtwängler, whom she greatly revered, and as Eva under Karajan. Both events were recorded by Legge for posterity, and show her at her most persuasive.

Elisabeth and Walter Legge were married on 19 October 1953, in Epsom,

England. She became his second wife (the first, soprano Nancy Evans, was quietly discarded). She made her home in London, becoming a British citizen, although she remained essentially an international



*Curtain call after Act 1 of Der Rosenkavalier, Metropolitan Opera debut, 1964.*



*As Alice Ford in Falstaff, San Francisco,  
September 1956.*



*Elisabeth in 1957.*

singer. Not all, however, was as rosy as it seemed. Her relationship with Legge was mutually abusive, often vocally so.

But the honeymoon with London also soured. William Walton composed the role of Cressida in his opera *Troilus and Cressida* for Elisabeth, but there were arguments and the first night found another soprano in the role. She was never to sing the part.

She gave her first American performance, a recital at Carnegie Hall, in 1953. Elisabeth made her US operatic debut with the San Francisco Opera on 20 September 1955 as the Marschallin, and her debut at the Metropolitan Opera on 19 December 1964, also as the Marschallin.

However, as far as non-British opera was concerned, Elisabeth saw no reason to continue in a language where the words did not always fit the music. A growing band of critics started to complain that, even when she was singing in German, her performances were too artificial.

Matters came to a head in the *Rosenkavalier* of 1959 where her Marschallin came in for some harsh words. She was the leading exponent of the role, as Paul Czinner's film of the Salzburg production of the same period demonstrates, and she had every right to be cross. She was not to appear in opera at Covent Garden again and she selected any friendships with London critics very carefully.

Indeed, she had little need of London, which henceforth was to hear her only in lieder recitals, especially of works by Wolf, Schubert and Brahms, which always attracted full houses. During the 1950s, with Legge's hand on the tiller, she had become EMI's leading soprano.

There was a series of Viennese 'champagne' operettas devised by Legge and conducted, with the exception of *Fledermaus*, by Otto Ackermann using a team of singers highly skilled in this genre. With Karajan she recorded Mozart, Eva in *Meistersinger*, a witty Alice Ford

in *Falstaff* and, perhaps best of all, Humperdinck's *Hänsel und Gretel*. For the young Wolfgang Sawallisch there was a *Capriccio* which has not been surpassed

She fell out with von Karajan after he refused to help her husband when he was sacked by EMI for making heavy profits from an orchestra he owned on the side.

During her career Elisabeth sang 74 different operatic roles. But from the 1960s, she concentrated almost exclusively on five operatic roles: Donna Elvira in *Don Giovanni*; Countess Almaviva in *Nozze di Figaro*; Fiordiligi in *Così fan tutte*; Countess Madeleine in Strauss' *Capriccio*; and (probably her most famous role) Marschallin in Strauss' *Der Rosenkavalier*. She also was well received as Alice Ford in Verdi's *Falstaff*.

Elisabeth's last full performance in an opera house was as Marschallin in *Der Rosenkavalier* at the theatre of La Monnaie in Brussels just after Christmas 1967. She chose the same theatre for her official farewell to opera on New Year's Eve 1971, *Rosenkavalier* again, but just the first act. For the rest of her career, she devoted herself exclusively to lieder recitals.

Quantities of lieder recitals continued, usually with Geoffrey Parsons as accompanist and always carefully masterminded by Legge who was ever attentive to the hall and the potential audience. These eventually came to an end in 1978 with a farewell at the Wigmore Hall.

Elisabeth was at her very best in choral works. Her Bach, as evinced in her recordings of that composer, was impeccable in voice and style. She floated the soprano solo of Brahms's *Ein Deutsches Requiem* with calm loveliness.

On 17 March 1979, Legge suffered a severe heart attack. He disregarded his doctor's orders to rest and attended Elisabeth's final recital two days later in Zürich. Three days later, he died. She announced that she would not sing in public again. In 1982 she published his memoirs, *Walter Legge: On and Off the Record*.





*Elisabeth in 1965.*



*As the Marschallin in Der Rosenkavalier at La Scala.*



*Portrait by Christian Steiner, 1982*



*Elisabeth displaying her DBE, 1992.*

Great care over detail, almost to a fault, was always the hallmark of her performances. They were part and parcel of her concern to communicate her feelings about the piece in hand to her audiences. Any reservation on that account pales before the poise and musicianship of her readings.

Nowhere was that more self-evident than in her recording of Wagner's song *Träume*, which she chose to have played at Legge's memorial service. The hushed intimacy and emotional charge was a tribute to all he had done to make her the individual artist she became.

In 1981, Elisabeth tried her hand at directing. Inevitably the opera was *Der Rosenkavalier* and she went back to her beloved La Monnaie. But the venture was not the success she had hoped for, partly because of a chill that developed between her and the chosen Marschallin, Elisabeth Söderström. The two women were too similar in musical style and temperament for the combination to work.

Thereafter Schwarzkopf devoted most of her energies to teaching, which she had already developed by the side of Legge. A number of singers who went on to international careers passed through her hands, usually getting individual coaching at her Zurich home. She rarely accepted payment, although those receiving advice were sworn to secrecy lest too many came knocking at her door.

Elisabeth taught and gave master classes around the world, notably at the Juilliard School in New York. She was well-known for being an extremely demanding, exacting teacher. Some even called her methods unnecessarily harsh.

Several of her pupils were distressed that she was so intent on giving them minute instructions on interpretation that they lost confidence in themselves. Undoubtedly she was all too keen to pass on to them all she had learnt in her long years on the recital platform.

A six-CD set, containing some previously unissued tracks, came out to

celebrate her 75<sup>th</sup> birthday. 'You cannot alter the vocal apparatus of the singer,' she said in her 75<sup>th</sup> birthday interview with *Gramophone*. 'You can only bring the technique to the utmost degree of perfection.'

When she had passed 80 she personally supervised a re-press of the *Rosenkavalier* recorded with Karajan. After living in Switzerland for many years, Elisabeth took up residence in the village of Schruns, in Vorarlberg, Austria. She died of natural causes on 2 August 2006 at her home, aged 90.

Her numerous awards included an honorary doctorate in music from Cambridge University (1977) and life membership of the Vienna State Opera (1993). On New Year's Day 1992, she was created Dame Commander of the Most Excellent Order of the British Empire (DBE) by Queen Elizabeth II. This provoked controversy about her early links with the Nazi Party that would disturb the tranquility of her later years.

After her retirement, she admitted she had applied to join the Nazi Party in 1939—something she said was 'akin to joining a union. I applied for membership when I was 24, in my second year at the Deutsche Oper in Berlin. I was told that I must do so if I wanted to continue my career. The membership card never reached me. Could it possibly be that some of us merely worked hard to become decent singers?'

She went on: 'My father [was] a victim of Nazi procedure himself, having refused to join and consequently having lost his position of *oberstudiendirektor* (principal) at the Cottbus Gymnasium (high school). [He] urged me to join. Nothing was more important to him than my singing. Although it was never in my repertoire, I cannot help quoting Tosca: "*Vissi d'arte ...*" (I lived for art).'

She leaves a discography that is considerable both in quality and in quantity and will be mostly remembered for her Mozart and Strauss portrayals, her two

commercial recordings of Richard Strauss' *Four Last Songs*, her countless recordings of Lieder, especially those of Hugo Wolf in which she was peerless.

Many listeners may criticize her mannerism, the way she felt it necessary to colour each word and sometimes even each syllable within each word, but in this specific composer's repertoire, it is precisely what is required. Whatever one may think of her human faults, as an artist she was in search of an artistic ideal, which she often found thanks to her extremely hard work and her dedication to the composers and poets she chose to serve.

She was vocal in her distaste for avant-garde interpretations of opera classics, accusing some directors of 'spraying graffiti over masterpieces' in a 1990 interview. Her unpopularity with fellow singers was an ill-kept secret. Elisabeth held herself apart from backstage life and shared little of her art.

The BBC's creative director, Alan Yentob, said: 'Despite her fiery temperament, Elisabeth Schwarzkopf was one of the great sopranos of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Her very early recording of Richard Strauss's *Four Last Songs* is still for me a heart-stopper.'

'She combined every quality you wanted in a great soprano,' critic Edward Greenfield told *The Guardian*. 'What made her so special was the unique timbre of her voice and her unique responsiveness to words.'

The late critic BH Haggin once complained of her 'excessively mannered and affected phrasing and expressive hamming, exaggerated pouting, archness, gasps and whispers.' Some listeners agree, saying that the cliché about the forest and the trees could be adapted for Elisabeth; there were times when one could hardly hear the music for the interpretation.

The best evaluation of Elisabeth remains that of the English critic JB Steane in his invaluable book *The Great Tradition*: 'The thought and art are so marvellously exact that one wants to call

them calculated, which immediately suggests something unfeeling and insincere; yet this is self-evidently absurd, for insincerity, like sentimentality, betrays itself by inexactness and distortion. What one has in Schwarzkopf is a high degree of awareness—of colours and styles, and of the existence of choice.'

Her film appearances were:

- Drei Unteroffiziere (1939) ... Carmen in den Theaterszenen ... aka Three Non-Coms (USA)
- Mädchen von St. Coeur, Das (1940) ... Mademoiselle Thérèse de Lorm
- Nacht ohne Abschied (1943) ... Sängerin
- Ewige Klang, Der (1943) (uncredited) ... Vocal:'Der Lerche und der Gaiger' ... aka Geiger, Der ... aka The Eternal Tone (UK)
- Verteidiger hat das Wort, Der (1944) ... Sängerin
- Passione secondo S. Matteo (1949) ... Soprano ... aka Matthäus-Passion (Austria) ... aka St. Matthew Passion (USA)
- Svengali (1954) (singing voice)
- Rosenkavalier, Der (1962) ... The Marschallin



An EMI release of her 'hits'.