

## Grace B. Wagner (1890-1964)

Grace B. Wagner was born on May 1, 1890 to Henry and Nellie Spafford Wagner. The family resided at 1011 N. Main Street in Bloomington, Illinois. Her father owned a business in downtown Bloomington that sold books and stationary. Grace also attended Bloomington schools starting at Franklin School. At an early age it was recognized that Grace had a promising singing voice. With her family's encouragement, she began to study voice and piano at the Skinner School of Music in Bloomington.

The Skinner School of Music was founded in 1907 by O.R. Skinner. The school was located on Main Street in the Eddy Building in Downtown Bloomington. The school was founded with the purpose of providing a higher and better standard in music and to offer students thorough, practical training whether or not they intended to adopt music as a profession. The school provided training in music, expression, art and specific training in piano, voice, violin, and other various orchestral instruments.<sup>1</sup> Grace was quoted late in life as saying that she "took up piano because I believed every singer should know that brand of music."<sup>2</sup> She was an excellent concert pianist and could have made an excellent career as one but she found the allure of opera too hard to resist and wanted to continue with a career in singing.

After studying at the Skinner School of Music for a time Grace still needed additional formal voice training. Local voice teacher Madame Helen Van Schoick, who was well known in music circles, took her on as her pupil. Van Schoick spent many hours training Grace, teaching her French and German, how to stand and walk like a professional, and how to acquire a repertoire for operatic roles. After this intensive training, Mme. Van Schoick presented Grace to the public in her first recital. After this successful local debut, Van Schoick took Grace to New York City in 1911 for further training. There she obtained a scholarship for Grace to study at a well known music school.

Grace continued her studies abroad in Paris as well under the renowned Polish tenor Jean De Reszke (who also taught world renowned singer Minnie Saltzman-Stevens, another Bloomington native). He taught a great number of American singers. De Reszke advocated modifying the art of singing. He felt that each voice required its own particular method. He emphasized a method of relaxed breathing and favored a collapsed chest and rounded shoulders when singing. He also advised his students in the use of a sigh as opposed to the traditional method of releasing the glottis and the tongue. De Reszke taught his students to keep their heads in a raised position, slightly back as though singing to the gallery and he further advocated the "singer's grimace" to produce high notes.<sup>3</sup> These ideas would have a huge impact on the art of singing in France. Grace would later employ these methods in her own teaching career.

In 1915 after about four years of intensive training Grace was ready for her formal debut into the world of opera with a European opera company. This opportunity was cut short by the outbreak of World War I and Grace was forced to return to America. She made her American debut in Bloomington at the Chatterton Opera House sponsored by the Amateur Music Club on October 25, 1915. Her performance included songs in French, German, and Italian and even a cluster of English songs. Every seat in the opera

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<sup>1</sup> O.R. Skinner. *The O.R. Skinner School Yearbook*, Skinner School folder, MCMH Archives

<sup>2</sup> "Miss Wagner is Proud of Home," *The Daily Pantagraph*, February, 24, 1921

<sup>3</sup> Karen Sells. *The Disciples of Vocal Pedagogy, Towards an Holistic Approach*. 35

house was sold and Grace received the ticket receipts after expenses were paid. She received rave reviews and was even compared by some to the well-known Swedish soprano star Christine Nilsson.

After making her debut in Bloomington, she returned to New York City where she made her debut in *Aida*. The following year she opened at the French opera house in New Orleans with the Silingardi Opera Company. She was the youngest member and only dramatic soprano of the 116 member company. Grace appeared in performances two to three times as week.

After a season with the company and a few more years of concert work and study she made her debut as Marguerite in *Faust* in the grand opera on October 30, 1919 with the Hinshaw Opera Company at the Park Theater. This Chicago-based opera company, sometimes known as the Society of American Singers, was widely known for its attempts to popularize grand opera sung in the English language.<sup>4</sup> She received critical acclaim after this first major performance. One critic, Pitts Sanborn, said that her voice was “fresh and pleasing and she has a winsome presence and her acting. . . . was delightfully easy and girlish.”<sup>5</sup>

Perhaps one of the highest moments of Grace’s career was in 1921 when she signed an exclusive recording contact with Columbia Grafonola (today known as Columbia Records). In an interview shortly before her final Bloomington concert she stated that making her first record was like “working for the movies. There is no audience to inspire you. On the concert stage, you can cover up little defects, but when you feel that every breath is being registered, it is apt to make you very nervous.”<sup>6</sup>

Shortly after her signing on as an artist for Columbia, she performed her final concert in Bloomington which was arranged by the Letitia Green Stevenson Chapter of the Daughters of the American Revolution on February 23, 1921 at the Bloomington Coliseum. The building was decorated in blue and white, the colors which symbolized the DAR. She sang a variety of songs to a packed house. These songs included *Madame Butterfly*, “Love Has Eyes,” “Flanders Requiem,” and closed with “Song of the Open.” As a final encore, she also sang “My Ain Folk.” The program for the performance even included a poem written by one of the members of the D.A.R entitled “The Home Star,” which was dedicated to Grace. A reception was held in her honor later in the week which members of the DAR, friends and family of Grace attended.

Between seasons with the opera, Grace continued to tour the country singing in recitals with other well known singers such Caroline Lazzari and Renato Zenelli. She also performed with the New York Philharmonic orchestra as well as symphonies in St. Louis, Los Angeles, and Minneapolis.

Grace was also the niece of well known impresario (business manager) of professional theater performers, Charles L. Wagner. He was manager to many well known singers in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century such as Rudolph Ganz, Emma Destinn, John McCormick, and Charles Hackett. Because of this connection Charles most likely helped Grace establish her professional career and establish contacts of her own.

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<sup>4</sup> “Preferred Teaching to Singing, Grace Wagner Kept Her Own Name Through Career,” *The Daily Pantagraph*, January 23, 1949

<sup>5</sup> “Grace Wagner New Teacher,” *The Daily Pantagraph*, June 30, 1929

<sup>6</sup> “Miss Wagner is Proud of Home,” *The Daily Pantagraph*, February 24, 1921

Sometime in the 1920s, Grace began to teach voice and piano to promising young students. She took on just a few students at first while she continued her own concert career. Some of these students she had identified as needing help in their training and others whose voices were in need of repair. After successfully helping these students she became more interested in this aspect of music. As she became more well-known as a music teacher and continued to gain more and more students, she slowly performed less and less devoting herself almost entirely to teaching. It seemed that teaching was quite agreeable to Grace as opposed to the demands of the often strenuous opera and concert work schedule. Finally, in June of 1930 she retired completely from singing to focus solely on teaching voice and piano. She established a teaching studio in New York City and continued to work there for the rest of her life. Some of her students even went on to become clients of her uncle Charles. Because of her love of music and teaching, Grace never married.

On April 27, 1964, Grace died quietly at her home in New York City at the age of 74. She was brought back to Bloomington for burial and was buried in Evergreen Memorial Cemetery next to her parents.

By: Candace Summers, 2008