

Marie Litta (1856 – 1883)

Marie (pronounced Maria) Litta, born Marie Eugenia von Elsner, was born in Bloomington, IL on June 1, 1856 at her family's home located at 710 E. Front Street. She was the daughter of Professor Hugo von Elsner, a trained musician from Germany who came to Bloomington in 1854 and Amanda Dimmitt, whose father William Dimmitt was one of the first settlers in Bloomington. Marie was the oldest of five children.

At a young age, Marie had an outstanding talent for music getting “her genius and mental endowments from her father” and a powerful voice from her mother, “who was known to have an unusually sweet but untrained voice.”¹ Marie's father was determined that she would become the leading singer of the world. Her father trained her carefully. When she was young, her father was her only teacher. When it came to the “science of music,” her father was best fitted to this task. Later, however, he would employ professional voice teachers in order for Marie to achieve his high expectations.² Marie sang at private gatherings and made her first public appearance when she was five years-old by singing “Tis the Last Rose of Summer” in front of a group of volunteer Union soldiers in Springfield, IL in 1861. She stood alone and sang in “clear, sweet, and plaintive tones that brought a sudden stillness over her audience.”³

Her father realized that it was important for him to “introduce Marie into a new and wider circle of more influential friends.” This would allow her to become more known to the public, which would help further her career. When Marie was about fourteen years old, her father, and possibly her mother, took her to Chicago, New York, and Cleveland. She performed in each of these cities and was received quite well by audiences there. Of the cities she performed in, she was the most well received by people in Cleveland where a large percentage of the population was German.⁴ While in Cleveland, her father became acquainted with Dr. John Underner who was the head of a music conservatory. He had heard Marie perform and became very interested in her talents as a singer. Dr. Underner offered to take her on as his student and when Marie was about sixteen years old, he signed a five-year contract with her and her parents to continue instructing her and perfecting her talents.⁵ Marie was so well loved in Cleveland after her many years of studying and performing there that in 1879 the people of Cleveland actually claimed Marie as their own stating: “Cleveland is ignoring the fact that Marie (M'lle Litta) ever saw or heard of Bloomington, and claims all her glory, as a Cleveland girl, with *stupendous cheek*.” In response, Marie wrote a letter to the editor of the newspaper *The Elf* saying: “I like Cleveland, and am very grateful to the Cleveland people for their kindness to me, and shall always take pleasure in visiting Cleveland; but Bloomington is my home and I am proud of it and the many kindnesses I have received from the Bloomington people have filled my heart with gratitude; and I say frankly that there is no place on earth like my old home.”⁶

¹ John M. Scott. *Litta, An American Singer: Marie Eugenia Von Elsner*. (Bloomington, IL.1897) 28-29

² Scott, 41-42

³ Scott, 46

⁴ Scott, 48-49

⁵ Scott, 49-51

⁶ “Marie Litta,” Marie Litta Evergreen Cemetery Discovery Walk folder, page 3, McLean County Museum of History Archives

On October 25, 1874 after training in Cleveland for several years, Marie traveled to Europe to continue her studies and complete her musical education.⁷ She went on to audition in London and studied with the best music and voice teachers in Paris all while still a teenager. She received mixed reviews in London after her debut there in 1876 making it clear that she needed more training. She returned to Paris for more training until finally making her debut in Paris at the Theatre des Italiens in 1878 where she won the hearts of the Parisians under her new stage name, “Marie Litta.” At that time, Parisians had strong feelings about Germans. This was due to France’s defeat by the newly formed Germany Empire during the Franco-Prussian War⁸ (which ended seven years prior). So Marie took the precaution to conceal her German background and adopted the noble Italian family name, Litta.⁹ In fact, the next morning Count Litta from Italy called upon her and thanked her for honoring his family name. Her performance was given rave reviews. In one review it was stated that “ladies stood up in their boxes and burst their gloves clapping; the entire orchestra declared her the young artist with one voice. Elegantes threw upon the stage bouquets they had brought with them.” She continued to perform at the Theatre des Italiens for a few more months with people flocking “to hear her in her different roles.” Because of this, her fame spread through all of Europe and back to her home in the United States as well.¹⁰

In October of 1878, Marie returned home to Bloomington after the close of the opera season in Paris. Her mother and other family members still lived in Bloomington. Her father Hugo had passed away in July of that year, shortly before she returned home.¹¹ She was the center of attention at a reception hosted by Capt. John H. Burnham and his wife at the Ashley House (located on the corner of Jefferson and Center streets) in Bloomington, IL. Prominent townsmen were present such as David Davis, Judge Lawrence Weldon, Hudson Burr, Absolom Funk, Cyrinius Wakefield, Joseph Fifer, James Ewing, and Adlai Stevenson I. At the reception, those men pledged enough money to build Marie’s mother a cottage which would be located at 812 East Washington Street.¹² When she was not traveling or on tour, Marie would make this her home as well. During this same visit, she gave a concert at Durley Hall which was filled to capacity. At the end of the performance, she received a standing ovation and it was said that “her achievements in music was a triumph in which each and all of them [the audience] had a part” in.¹³

In the fall of 1878 Marie joined the Max Strakosch Opera Company for two seasons and performed for the first time in the United States under the name “Litta” at the McVicker’s Theatre in Chicago on November 16, 1878.¹⁴ Delegations of citizens from Bloomington and Cleveland traveled to Chicago to see her first performance on

⁷ Scott, 57-60

⁸ The Franco-Prussian War was a yearlong conflict (1870-1871) between France and the unified German states under the leadership of the German state of Prussia. France was resoundingly defeated by unified German forces under the direction of Prince Otto von Bismark. The German Empire was formerly created following the end of the War and Wilhelm of Prussia was proclaimed the first Emperor of the new empire.

⁹ Scott, 71

¹⁰ Scott, 75-77

¹¹ Scott, 81

¹² Scott, 82

¹³ Scott, 83-84

¹⁴ Scott, 84

American soil. She continued to perform with that company in New York, Boston, and likely other cities in the East. By the time the opera company had reached Boston, she had become the leading star of it. Her reputation preceded her wherever she went and her audiences expected a great deal from her. It was also written in newspapers of that time that Litta “had to be the reigning musical star of America.”¹⁵

Marie continued to sing in other European cities like Vienna, Austria and achieved many triumphs. The European press called her the “Queen of Song” or the “American Jenny Lind,” who was a renowned Swedish singer. Marie also sang in larger cities across the United States and Canada and eventually formed her own company in 1880, the Litta Concert Company. The company toured New York, San Francisco, Galveston, and Halifax and played everywhere to rave reviews. At the height of her career, the young singer was earning \$75,000 a year which would equal about \$1.6 million in 2008. She was also unselfish and made sure to send trunks full of presents back to her loved ones in Bloomington. The citizens of Bloomington were very proud of the young, world renowned singer.

Judge John M. Scott, another well-known resident in Bloomington, wrote a book on Marie Litta after her death in 1897. He described her as while “still young she developed mentally and physically into beautiful womanhood. She was of medium height, with form rather slight but graceful, her complexion delicately fair; her hair was quite heavy, having a very light tinge of brown, not blonde perhaps, but rather light; her eyes were blue, neither large nor small, through which when under emotion her soul found strange expression. Although her mouth was large, it was not an unbecoming feature. It may be said all her features were cast in the finest mould and her social worth was of the best and purest. From tender childhood to maturity she was gentle, loving, and kind.”¹⁶

Marie’s manager accepted more and more bookings until the point where Marie’s small, delicate body could not handle it. She grew ill in the spring of 1883 but she nevertheless followed through with her performance commitments. Stars during that time were expected to play anywhere, particularly if one wanted the funds to support one’s entourage and family. This responsibility took its toll on Marie and she collapsed after a concert that summer in Escanaba, Michigan. Crowds gathered at the station when she was put aboard the train heading back home to Bloomington. She was dying.

On July 7, 1883, Marie passed away from her illness in her mother’s home, at the young age of 27. Marie’s funeral was the largest funeral McLean County had ever known with over 12,000 citizens attempting to enter the First Methodist Episcopal Church where it was held. All the stores were even closed on that day. Marie was so beloved that her gowns were cut into small pieces and distributed as mementos to her fans, friends, and family. She was buried in Evergreen Memorial Cemetery

The eight men who carried Marie’s coffin to the grave, James S. Ewing, Adlai E. Stevenson I, Joseph W. Fifer, Lawrence Weldon, Francis Julius Fitzwilliam, Adelbert S. Eddy, Henry P. Seibel, and General B. Wendling, decided to form themselves into a committee to raise funds to erect a monument in honor of Bloomington’s star. Through a series of concerts and collection of donations, they raised a total of \$1,450, which would equal about \$31,000 in 2008.

¹⁵ Scott, 112-113

¹⁶ Scott, 36-37

The monument was made of Vermont granite and includes a 17-foot, 5-inch shaft topped by a draped urn representing eternal life. It is adorned with a book representing her chosen profession with one leaf bearing simple music such as the ones Marie first sang, and the other leaf with more difficult, classical music like what she sang later in her career. On the south side is a treble clef surrounded by a beautiful laurel leaf which represents victory in music. In the shadow of the column on the north side (where no sunlight ever falls other than that of the evening and morning sun) are engraved the words: “Her sun rose through clouds in the morning and was eclipsed at noon. By a life laborious and heroic, her girlhood witnessed the triumph of her genius. Welcome to the banks of the great artists of her time. She was loved most for her pure and gentle life, and so loving hands weave roses with the laurel in her chaplet of fame.”¹⁷

By: Sarah Yoo, 2008

¹⁷ “Marie Litta” *The Daily Pantagraph?*, dated unknown, Marie Litta Evergreen Cemetery Discovery Walk folder, McLean County Museum of History Archives