

Puccini's Enchantress: Margaret Burke-Sheridan by Francis Pettitt

A friend complained it was hard for her, an English soprano, to pursue a career on Italy's operatic stage. She had sung in several works (including *Nabucco*) and received praiseworthy reviews in the newspapers (*an intense delight for the audience*) but her difficulties remained. As the 2012 Torre del Lago opera season approaches us I can only think of Rosalind Plowright, who first sang Puccini's *Manon Lescaut* there in 1980, as a living English singer who "made it" with Italian audiences.

It remains true, without a doubt, that most Italians want their own compatriots to sing their operatic repertoire. The opposite (i.e. for Italian singers to perform in England) is, fortunately, not true. Otherwise, there would have been no Callas, Freni or Bartoli on the Covent Garden stage, to mention only three names – to say nothing of the Italian *castrati* that took the London operatic stage by storm in the eighteenth century!

The problem is that the majority of Italians consider that *bel canto* is the exclusive property of their nation. In short, a voice from another country doesn't do at all. Few are the "foreign" singers who have been successful in Italy. In the last century there was, of course, Joan Sutherland, *La stupenda*, weaned from Wagner and Richard Strauss by her husband, the conductor and coach Richard Bonyngue, to interpret authentically and completely for the first time, after years of neglect, the *bel canto* repertoire (especially Bellini and Donizetti) and also to sing a magnificent *Turandot* under the baton of Zubin Mehta,

who was born in Bombay. (Conductors obviously do not have the same problems as singers, and Mehta continues to direct the Maggio Musicale Fiorentino; indeed, has been made an honorary citizen of the city of the lily.)

It was not always so. Two of the greatest Puccini singers came from the British Isles. I refer to Eva Turner and Margaret Sheridan. The latter was of Irish descent and was Puccini's favourite *Cio-Cio-San*.

Years ago, in a second-hand shop in a murky London suburb, I found an album of 78 rpm discs – a complete recording, on thirty-four sides, of *Madame Butterfly*. Listening to these discs through the sizzling noise of shellac under the needle of an old gramophone player, I detected an extraordinarily beautiful voice singing the part of *Cio-Cio-San*; a voice which belonged to Margaret Burke-Sheridan.

Burke-Sheridan was born on October 15, 1889 in Castlebar, Co. Mayo, Ireland, the youngest of five children. Her mother died when she was four and her father when she was eleven, and Margaret was then brought up in an orphanage in Dublin. Fortunately for her, a musical nun there, Mother Clement, realized the great potential of her voice and sent her to the London for voice-training. Subsequently she studied in Italy. Nick-named "Maggie from Mayo", "La Sheridan" is still considered the second greatest Irish *prima donna*, after Catherine Hayes (1818-1861) who was the first in that part of the world to sing at La Scala.

Sheridan, a soprano, was the idol of the public at La Scala and Covent Garden for a period of twelve years. When "Maggie"

played the part of the heroine in *Madame Butterfly*, Puccini was completely bewitched by her voice and preferred it above all others for this role. As he wrote in one of his letters: "she is full of charismatic intensity and childlike appeal." It is also said that an Italian, rejected in love by Margaret, shot himself in the head during a performance at La Scala and that, after this tragedy, Sheridan never again sang in public. She died, almost forgotten, a resident of the Shelbourne Hotel Dublin, in 1958 (exactly 100 years after the birth of Puccini) and was buried in Glasnevin cemetery in that city. I have been told that Margaret Sheridan expired during the Italian opera season of Dublin and that the singers from Italy in the company sang a requiem (perhaps Puccini's *Requiem*?) at her funeral service at a Franciscan church out of respect for a star they had known and esteemed as "one of them" for so many years.

"Maggie from Mayo" was certainly one of the principal soprano voices in the twenties of the last century. Unfortunately, she began her vocal studies rather late for an opera singer and her career, as already mentioned, was relatively short. Sheridan made her very successful debut in 1918 in Rome in *La Bohème*. The following year she sang for the first time in *Madame Butterfly* at Covent Garden. She also sang the part of Mimi in *La Bohème* with Tom Burke as Rodolfo, and this was followed by the English premiere of Mascagni's *Iris*. Her performances were always admirably received and praised by enthusiastic audiences. Sheridan returned to Italy to make her debut in *Butterfly* at the dal

Verme theatre (Milan) in 1919. This was followed by *La Bohème* and *Mephistopheles*, the latter with the protagonist sung by De Angelis.

She continued at the San Carlo theatre with *Madame Butterfly* and *La Wally*, an opera by another great Lucchese, Alfredo Catalani. It was with *La Wally* that she made her debut at La Scala on April 6, 1922. In 1923, she sang in *Andrea Chenier* with Gigli in Rimini. Gigli made his debut at Covent Garden with this work in 1930 together with Sheridan.

In 1923 the world premiere of Respighi's *Belfagor* took place at La Scala with Sheridan, Merli and Stabile. Margaret was also invited to sing in America but never took up this offer. To sum up, "Maggie from Mayo" was highly thought of in Italy for several years and sang with most of the best known tenors of that era: Gigli, Pertile, Lauri-Volpi, Smirnoff, Zanelli, Merli, Hackett and Borgioli.

Sheridan's repertoire was not very extensive and comprised just twelve roles. The quality of her voice may be described as pure and ardent at the same time. It's very lucky that we can still hear it in several recordings. Arguably the most important is the second complete *Madame Butterfly*, recorded in 1929-30 with the part of *Pinkerton* taken by Lionello Cecil and under the direction of Carlo Sabajno. (The first complete recording was in 1929 with Rosetta Pampanini and conducted by Lorenzo Molajoli).

It is also worth mentioning that Margaret Sheridan recorded many traditional Irish songs that are still available in specialized record catalogues.



If you have an ADSL connection there are several internet pages and sound links to Margaret Burke-Sheridan, particularly on *youtube*. For starters, I would suggest the following magnificent rendering of the famous aria *Un bel dì vedremo*:

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RJ9mS0L_Qc
(Readers can listen to this piece by clicking on the above photograph on Grapevine's website.)

Margaret counted not only Giacomo Puccini among her friends but also Guglielmo Marconi (who, hearing her sing, declared "yours is the voice I've been waiting to hear all my life" and brought her to Italy to train further), William

Butler Yeats and even Arturo Toscanini, who was unable to resist her Gaelic beauty and whose quarrelsome nature always lost out to her sharp wit.

Margaret Sheridan was a singer who began her relatively short opera career rather late but, who, at the same time, made exquisite recordings, of which *Madame Butterfly* remains unequalled, always very listenable, very close to Puccini's original concept, and very wonderful. Let us hope, therefore, that British and Irish singers will again find a place in the *bel paese's* operatic stage that they truly deserve.

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