



STREAMING THE FIRST CENTURY

SESSION 3: Italian Roots

CONTEMPORARY PERSPECTIVE: Diva Edition

Featuring: Ira Siff on Claudia Muzio, talking with Jefferey McMillian (SF Opera public relations director)

(transcript read time ~ 33 minutes; audio run time ~ 42 minutes)

[BEGIN AUDIO]

NARRATOR: Welcome to San Francisco Opera's Centennial celebration.

JEFFERY MCMILLIAN [JM]: Greetings. This is Jeff McMillan of San Francisco Opera. I'm here with Ira Siff, a voice teacher, repertory coach, director, writer, and radio commentator for the Metropolitan Opera's Saturday afternoon broadcasts. He's also an authority on historic singers, and I have a feeling our subject today, Claudia Muzio, will be one that he has some things to say about. Welcome, Ira.

IRA SIFF [IS]: Thanks, Jeff. It is a great pleasure to be with you, and to talk about Muzio, of course.

JM: So where did you first hear about Claudia Muzio, or where did you first hear her?

IS: Well, it's funny: I didn't hear about her, but I bought an Angel Records sampler LP of artists on Angel Records, so I saw these familiar names: Callas, Nielsen, Crespini, Sutherland, de los Angeles. So I bought this thing -- it was probably \$1.99 at Sam Goody Records in Manhattan -- and I went home, put it on, and all of a sudden there was this voice, which was someone I didn't know, and I had never heard of, and I looked on the label and it was Claudia Muzio, and she was singing "Voi lo sapete" from *Cavalleria rusticana*. And when she reached the final phrase "lo piango," in chest voice, I immediately picked up the arm of the turntable and put it back on to listen to it again.

And I became kind of obsessed with these Muzio recordings, and I hunted them down, the only ones I knew about were her final recordings from '34 and '35 so I bought the set that that thing came from, which was *Great Recordings of the Century*, a lovely Angel thing with a booklet and all this stuff, and then it came out on Seraphim, a budget Angel label, so I bought it again, even though it was the same arias, 'cause I just wanted to have it again. (laughs) And then I bought it on 78s at a used bookstore, and one more round of LPs that came with a very beautiful booklet that I found somewhere else. Then, with CDs, I discovered the rest of the Muzio legacy, all these amazing Pathé recordings, Edison recordings, and even earlier recordings than that. So then I just got everything that there was. But no one ever told me about her; I just sort of happened upon her.

JM: Let's talk a little bit about the singer and the person, Claudia Muzio. Tell us a little bit about her background, how did she find her way to opera, who this singer was before she was so well known on the stage.

IS: Obviously, she was Italian. She was born in Italy, we think, in 1889. (laughs) She's a figure of great mystery, so her birth, her death, her debut are all kind of shrouded in wonderful mystery, which is a treat in the Information Age, where you can find out anything. But her parents were involved in opera. Her father was a stage manager, and her mother was a chorister, and her father was a stage manager in, among other places, Covent Garden, and the Manhattan Opera House in New York City, and the Met.

So Claudia grew up around opera, and she grew up speaking Italian and English, even went to school in London sometimes when her father was working at Covent Garden. She was around opera, and she would hang out in the wings, worshipping the singers -- Melba, Gadski, Farrar, Sembrich -- at the Met, particularly Melba, which, you know, I find fascinating, because when Claudia became a singer and developed into an artist, you could hardly find two singers that were different from Melba, from Muzio, with different criteria. Melba was kind of icy perfection, and Muzio was passion and spontaneity, but often singers really admire what they don't have, or who they aren't, or maybe it was just a schoolgirl crush on a diva.

She was sent to live with relatives in Italy, and to study, because it was obvious that something was going on with her as a musician. So she studied piano first with Annetta Casaloni, and Casaloni was this mezzo who had been the first Maddalena in *Rigoletto*, but she didn't teach her voice, 'cause she thought that Claudia's voice was placed perfectly, and she didn't want to touch it. And she studied voice with a Madam Viviani. I don't know, really, anything about Madam Viviani.

I have a feeling that Claudia's singing was mostly natural. Certain things developed, and certain things never developed. She was secure in high notes, and she had good agility. She never had a trill. She couldn't trill, in an age where everybody could trill at the beginning of the twentieth century. Even German sopranos like Frida Leider had a perfect trill, and all those Marchesi students around that time all could trill their brains out.

Claudia never bothered, and she never did what I call the Tebaldi trill, where you indicate it but you never do it. She just skipped it. If an aria had a trill, Claudia didn't trill, but she made up for that in myriad ways with emotional connection, passion, artistry, and the most beautiful and haunting pianissimo that you ever heard.

And at a certain point I guess she must have gotten representation, because she began to appear in all these Italian opera houses, and, as I'm sure you know, there is debate about her debut, 1910 in Messina, 1912 in Arezzo, Gilda or Manon Lescaut, but one thing I think is certain: from my point of view, 1910 makes sense, because her first recordings were in 1911, and why would they have engaged her to make recordings if she wasn't anybody yet?

And what everybody agrees on is that her second role, Violetta, was a fantastic success. And I find it interesting that she made just two recordings, I think, in 1911: "Mi chiamano Mimi" from *Bohème*, but she recorded this little snippet of *Traviata*, not one of the famous arias but a theatrical moment of great

intensity, "Amami, Alfredo," where she leaves Alfredo. ["Amami Alfredo" from Verdi's *La Traviata* (Gramophone Company: June 20, 1911)] The idea that she recorded that, I think speaks volumes about who she was already as a singing actress, that she would choose to do that.

Then she started to make important debuts: San Carlo in Naples, La Scala, Paris, Covent Garden. And then this thing happened with the Met. Lucrezia Bori, who had had a vocal crisis, was supposed to be better by that time, but it took a little longer than they planned, so Gatti-Casazza, the manager of the Met, general manager, had heard Claudia in Italy, and he planned to bring her at some point. It was a vague plan. Suddenly, he really needed her, and he cabled her, and she managed to get out of the engagements she already had, and when she got there, on top of the Bori situation, Emmy Destinn, who was sort of the leading dramatic soprano at the Met, was being held in Czechoslovakia in a prisoner of war camp.

So suddenly Claudia was also gonna fill the shoes of an Aida, a *Trovatore* Leonora, bigger, bigger roles. And it's telling, I mean, that she made her debut at 26, I think, as Tosca, opposite Caruso and Scotti. Singers she probably watched drooling from the wings not long before then. And it was a theatrical mega success. I mean, all the reviews praised her acting, and the singing, as well, but particularly that she was a stage animal; people went crazy for her acting. And she had about six years at the Met of doing a lot of leading roles, and she created Giorgetta in *Il tabarro* at the premiere of the *Trittico*. This is huge thing -- and was the first Tatyana in *Onegin* at the Met, in Italian, of course, opposite De Luca and Martinelli. But that's the way all Russian operas were done then: they were done in Italian.

So she was a very big deal. But around 1922 she'd had huge successes in South America by then, and Mexico, and she was a diva. Gatti wrote to a friend that the formerly very agreeable, charming, and docile Muzio was now having tantrums and making demands, and he thought maybe he wouldn't rehire her. He attributed this to jealousy, particularly... I mean, there were rivals -- Bori came back; Destinn came back; Farrar was a huge star -- but it was Maria Jeritza, apparently, who got her back up. And Jeritza was so worshipped, so beautiful, and I think that there's probably some truth in that.

It's funny, it's ironic, because these days, because of recordings, Muzio is remembered far more than Jeritza, in a way, but... Anyway, she left for Chicago because she felt threatened, and Gatti was not so happy. In Chicago she only had dramatic soprano -- Rosa Raisa and Mary Garden, this actress/singer, to contend with. So each one kind of had her niche. And she was quite happy in Chicago. And she always remained suspicious of rivals, though, but they spoke well of her.

Rosa Raisa always did, and Edith Mason, who also was in Chicago, they all said wonderful things about her, but she was not really outgoing to them. She was more kind of an isolated, suspicious sort of diva.

She became a huge star in Italy. You read these reviews of performances with Toscanini. You couldn't write these reviews yourself about yourself, or by them. She was a goddess. There was a *Chénier* with Giordano in the audience, and he loved her. She sang *La fiamma*. Respighi, who composed that, loved her. She had become a very big star onstage.

JM: That kinda leads to my next question, talking about her jealousy of rivals, and her behavior with the Met's general manager. What do we know about her personality and her life off the stage?

IS: Well, she was apparently very reclusive. She never went to parties, never went to the dinners that everybody goes to after a show. She traveled with a small group, which always included her mother -- her father had passed away shortly after her Met debut; he was very proud of her but, unfortunately, he didn't live -- and with her secretary.

And then later she had a second secretary, May Higgins, starting in 1929. And we're very lucky because May Higgins, who was clearly madly in love with Claudia, was a chronicler. She would send home copious letters in which she wrote about where they were in Italy, where they were in South America, San Francisco, Chicago -- and what went on, and what she sang. So we have this amazing chronicle of Muzio through the secretary.

But she was very, very reclusive, and rather suspicious, and so, so serious about her work that she considered social life a luxury that she couldn't afford because she would exhaust herself. She had bouts of exhaustion. She had black and blue marks and bruises when she sang Santuzza from hurling herself on the church steps in *Cavalleria Rusticana*. She would exhaust herself from doing a *Traviata* where she would just get so inside it that she was like Violetta by the end of it, just completely frail.

She had a place in Riolo, in Italy, where she would go rest, in a little village. They all loved her in the village. Sometimes she'd sing in church. But she was very reclusive but lived like a diva. When they traveled, it was steamship. She had a suite of rooms, with its own veranda. She would have all the meals brought to the rooms, 'cause she wasn't that social. Maybe the last night she'd let the captain have a dinner in her honor.

In Milano, she stayed in the Grand Hotel, in the suite of rooms that Verdi had stayed in, and there was a giant portrait of Verdi in the rooms, and she would go up to the portrait and say, "You have no idea how much you've given me." She was very, very (laughs) spiritual, and very connected to her work as her life, until she was 40, and she married, at 40, a 23-year-old gentleman. The received wisdom is that he and her manager, Ottavio Scotto, kinda went through her money. There are even articles about her jewels being seized before a performance and having to get them back.

So it's kind of a dichotomy: she lived like a grand diva, but she was antisocial and very reclusive, and suspicious; and yet, those around her, and the people in the small village where she had her house, loved her, and felt she was a very warm and giving and generous person. She was generous. I mean, she gave a lot of her money away, as well.

So, she's like all these wonderful, mystical creatures, she's a series of contradictions.

JM: Muzio is San Francisco Opera's first great prima donna. We're celebrating our Centennial this year, and Muzio is our grand dame for a little more than the first ten years. And of course, she opened the War Memorial Opera House in 1932. It was clear from reading reviews of her performances in San Francisco that the people here really connected with this artist, and when she was coming back it was a big deal, and the houses sold out.

Of course she was a big star, but there seemed to be a real connection between Claudia Muzio and the people of San Francisco. I wondered if you could talk a little bit about that, and is this a, a rare thing, or do we see this in other artists, that bond between audience and artist.

IS: Yeah, it's interesting. I think that Muzio had a sort of magic, a sort of hold on audiences, that she cast a spell with her voice, but also with that thing that you cannot teach, the perfume, the magic. She had a special quality, an extra something that artists like Callas or Olivero or Virginia Zeani subsequently had.

And we'll circle back to San Francisco. But in South America, for instance, at the Teatro Colón, in Buenos Aires, she was worshipped. She was showered with flowers every curtain call when she did *Traviata*. And she went on to Rio, and this was the 1933 season in South America. She did a tour. When she got to Rio in that opera house -- and it's a gorgeous opera house -- I sang in it; I know it very well; it's a grand staircase, huge foyer, a Byzantine-style restaurant in the basement with mosaics; it's a fantastic place -- they absolutely worshipped her, and on closing night of her *Tosca* six white doves were released from the ceiling of the Theater Municipal in Rio, with Italian tricolor streamers attached to them, with Claudia's name in silver, and one of the doves landed on her hand while she was curtsying as *Tosca*, and the place went completely berserk.

She went back the next year. She signed over 2,000 photos. She went back the next year and got 81 curtain calls after her closing performance. People stayed for hours. The police had to be called to make a circle so she could leave the theater. And when she sang *Norma* in South America, the conductor, Marinuzzi, could not look at her. The intensity was so enormous that he would become overwhelmed, overcome, an emotional distraction from conducting, so he couldn't look at the stage, because her *Norma* was so intense.

So, it's no wonder that the San Francisco audience found her something special and apart from even other divas that they loved and admired. She was given the key to the city. Maybe that's the American version of the six white doves being let loose (laughs) from the ceiling. And, of course, she inaugurated, as you said, the War Memorial Opera House, a great honor. But I think she gave an enormous amount back to San Francisco, because she gave them the full spectrum of her greatest roles: *Violetta*; *Chénier* Maddalena; *Aida*; the *Forza*, and *Trovatore* Leonoras; *Mimi*; *Manon Lescaut*; and even *Nedda*.

And she would fulfill a commitment, even when the weather and circumstances that made travel very difficult back in those days might have prohibited it, might have made another diva say, "You know what? I'm very famous, I'll cancel, and they'll get somebody." She would show up, even if it was a great hardship, inconvenience, or a little late.

So I think that there's something special she had.

JM: I'm just still thinking about the doves landing on her hand. (laughter) And, I mean, goodness, presenting the key to the city's a little easier to stage manage than something like releasing doves and having one, magically land on her hand.

IS: That's the thing: when it comes to Muzio, these things that would happen, you read about them in the reviews, and there is an atmosphere that transcends even the normal. We have artists that are loved, and

we've all seen them, and we've seen audiences become attached to them, or become attached to feeling they need to be at that show because that artist is very famous or got a lot of press. This was different. This was something personal, where I feel the San Francisco audience loved her, and loved her artistry and her voice, which is a compelling and ravishing instrument, but lots of people had beautiful voices. This was something different and apart, I think.

JM: I was just reading in these reviews for *Traviata* how she's crying real tears, and the third act of *Andrea Chénier* -- how she's not even singing, but she's just watching the conviction on Chénier, and going to the guillotine, and people couldn't take their eyes off of her. She's not even, singing, but she's the main part of the scene.

IS: That's the thing, and you would see that. One can only imagine and wish that you could have seen her because, like Callas, now Callas has generations of fans who never saw her, from the recordings she has generations of fans, and with Muzio it's the same thing: those recordings are compelling to people when they're exposed to them and that is something, the way what she does comes through her sound, and through the kind of magic she creates in the way she attaches herself to an aria, is something quite extraordinary, and certainly not typical of artists recorded between 1911 and '35.

JM: I wonder if we could revisit the recordings, the legacy. What have you learned from listening to her? I love what you said about that very early, kind of unusual excerpt of a dramatic scene from *Traviata*, rather than one of the arias, but then she made these records during World War I, and then during the '20s, during the big career, and then these late recordings for Columbia not long before she died. I wonder if you could just kind of talk a little bit about that legacy, and what you, as a fan, as a listener, have gained from hearing Claudia Muzio's voice.

IS: Well, I would say when we talk about her recordings -- and we'll talk about the live -- the act one of *Tosca*, but one of the remarkable things is that there isn't that much difference. There is a difference, but she made studio recordings as close as you could get to live performance recordings. It's just a pity... I think there are two things that are a pity: one is she wasn't recorded around 1928, you know. She was recorded in '11, '17, '18, '22, and '34-35.

I think that her artistic peak and her vocal peak probably coalesced, the magic moment, sort of the Callas 1955 moment, (laughs) the Muzio moment probably was then when the artistry met the voice at its peak. But those recordings for Columbia, first of all, they're electric, not acoustic, so there's a microphone rather than an acoustic horn, so the fidelity of what the voice was like was enormous. You really hear the colors, myriad colors and textures to the voice.

So one thing I learned from her when I was a singer -- 'cause I was one of those from 1970 to 2009 -- I learned about coloration. I learned about vocal colors, and different ways to take one vowel and change the color of the vowel during a word. You can hear it in her "Vissi d'arte," in her late Columbia recording, the way she opens the word "d'arte," art, I lived for art. It's astonishing. It just speaks volumes. ["Vissi d'arte" from Puccini's *Tosca* (Columbia; June 4, 1935)]

Chest voice was something when I was growing up, the LPs from Decca, Angel, RCA -- you had the big three -- and Deutsche Grammophon. So people were trying to sound homogenized and smooth, and not overuse these incredible things, like expressive chest register. Callas was even criticized for using it in those days. Muzio's lower register is a phenomenon, because it's unforced in its power, spins out on a stream of molten tone and spinning vibrato, that joins her middle voice. Her upper register in the early recordings has more flexibility, so she has this one really magical thing in her vocal arsenal, and that's a floated pianissimo. And in the early recordings, you can hear her use it higher, because the voice was fresher and younger, but even in those late 1934, 1935 recordings, in the middle of the voice, in an aria like Violetta's "Addio del passato," the floated pianissimos are haunting. They give you chills.

So there is also the use of dynamics, which was an incredible thing, that she had such a grasp of not just out of vanity -- oh, I have this beautiful effect I can make -- but here's where the effect should go to drive you crazy with emotion and so this is where I'm going to use it. And when she couldn't use it on the very high notes anymore, like her early "Vissi d'arte," she uses it in the big money moment, B-flat, A-flat, and G. She floats the A-flat and the G, which is kind of the acid test vocally of that aria. She'll use it later, in a lower passage of an aria, in "La mamma morta" or the *Traviata* aria. Drives you nuts, because you don't expect it, and it makes the word that she's singing stand out in relief to the rest of the text in a way that is totally unexpected. Magda Olivero had that gift later, and I wonder if she didn't see and learn from Muzio.

So I think the recordings, particularly the late recordings, are a lesson, also because they're so modern. She's a singer who's old school but entirely contemporary. Her aesthetic appeals to a contemporary audience. When I play her recordings for lectures that I do with playlists of her, all these opera lovers who never heard her, and some never heard of her, go completely crazy. And the mantra is always, "Why don't we hear singing like that today?" But I don't even think they can tell you exactly what they mean, because it isn't a matter of what they're thinking; it's a matter of what they're feeling.

I read this amazing thing, which startles me still -- I would think it's not true, except it was written by sort of a major Muzio expert -- his name is Charles Jahant and he wrote -- there was a Rome *Traviata* in around 1930, modern dress, that she did, in which Alfredo's voice in the reprise of "Sempre libera" came through a radio. So she was apparently willing to do even a modern dress *Traviata*, which is terribly modern, but I can imagine that for her it was probably liberating, because it just put it as immediate as it could be, and that's what she's about. She is about immediacy.

JM: That's amazing, that instant connection, just updating the production. She would fit perfectly into today's opera world. (laughs)

IS: That's the thing, she really would right now, and if only. (laughs) Yeah.

JM: With that recorded legacy, this amazing memento that we have from 1932 and the opening of the War Memorial preserves Muzio in live performance. Which is the early days of preserving radio, and it's just kind of a miracle that it exists. It's a little rough, in terms of the sound quality, but it's there, and it's this great artist live on the stage. What do you hear when you listen to the act one *Tosca* broadcast?

IS: Well, the spontaneity in the phrasing is astonishing. The way she uses rubato, it's musical. The legato is gorgeous, the tone is beautiful, but it sounds like she's speaking. There's an immediacy to the delivery, and you feel like, okay, that was that day, and if you went back another day it could be completely different in nuances and responses, because it's in the moment. It's happening at that time.

And, again, the chest voice is so beautiful, and to hear it the way it sounded in the theater, it's very telling. Even though the sonics on the recording are poor, you can hear what carried and didn't carry and worked and how it worked in the theater, which is utterly fascinating.

Her low register was incredible. The middle register is magical. And then you hear these tiny floated pianissimos on certain lines, and they're the lines you always want to hear that on. It's very, very satisfying.

What I thought also was it reminded me of something. I was fortunate to see Callas and Gobbi in *Tosca* twice, and I had the feeling when I saw them that it was as if you were peeking through keyhole at a real event that happened and was turned into an opera later. That's the feeling I get listening to Muzio's act one of *Tosca*: that you are eavesdropping on something that actually took place in life that happened to be sung instead of spoken.

She's so free inside Puccini's music. And, of course, it shows you how someone might have sung Puccini *Tosca* just 30 years after *Tosca* was premiered. So, you know, that's always fascinating to see what the style was then. But with Muzio, the style is individual, because there are mannerisms to the style of the '30s that you hear in other Italian sopranos, and some great ones like Caniglia, but it's a particular way. This is individual. There is absolutely nobody like Muzio.

JM: That first year in the War Memorial Opera House, Muzio also did the double bill of *Cavalleria rusticana* and *Pagliacci*, and the *Pagliacci* was broadcast over the airwaves nationally. No preserved copy of that seems to exist –

IS: -- it's very frustrating –

And she came back to the Met after she made up with Gatti, came back for just a few performances of Santuzza in *Cavalleria rusticana* and Violetta in '33, '34, and by then the Met was broadcasting, and they were being preserved, but she didn't get the broadcasts. And you just can't think about it too hard. It's (laughs) too frustrating.

JM: Yeah. It's too depressing. (laughter)

IS: It really is.

JM: Could say a little bit about kind of the lasting impact of Claudia Muzio on the art form of opera, just because this artist, you know, she passed away in 1936 –

IS: Right.

JM: -- still very young, and it was a very tragic, early death.

IS: Forty-seven, I think, and very mysterious death, very like Callas: was it suicide? Was it heartbreak? Was it exhaustion? Don't know.

JM: We don't know. Yeah. Well, can you say something about the legacy of Muzio that we have from the reviews, the records? Are there artists that have kind of carried the flame forward, or been influenced and inspired by her?

IS: Well, you mentioned to me Ailyn Pérez which, of course, is extremely heartening because she's a current artist, and, and fairly young, but not surprising that Ailyn would say that Muzio was "mi reina," my queen, because Ailyn is expressive, and Ailyn loves to make beautiful effects, particularly pianissimos, so... But it's very heartening to hear someone who's, you know, that young and performing now.

Aprile Millo was hugely affected by Muzio and sometimes felt she was channeling Muzio, and she would choose to perform excerpts from Refice's *Cecilia*, which was written for Muzio in 1934, an opera that was composed for her and there was a very strong influence there, particularly when Aprile went into singing more verismo roles. There was an uncanny resemblance, she was so serious in her commitment and just the style. She had the style. I think that was an enormous influence on her.

I would wager that Ermonela Jaho is a Muzio fan. I would wager it because I don't know any other singer today who so fearlessly hurls herself into roles, particularly *Traviata*, where it's just devastating, scary to watch her. I'm so looking forward to seeing that again.

And with Callas, I know Callas loved Ponselle, but, I would say that they share the seriousness of purpose, and the directness of the way the singing is very dramatic, and yet very direct. It's not self-indulgent. Like Muzio, she's worshipped because of, primarily, her recordings, so it was all done with the voice. People think of Callas as a physical actress, and she was a wonderful physical actress, and so was Muzio, but it's all done with the voice, as well, and if you strip away the video it's just as compelling. That's an extraordinary influence.

I would just guess Olivero, because she was there in Italy, going to the opera, performing in opera in her early career at the time that Muzio was singing a lot, and I can hear in Magda Olivero that kind of influence.

When I play her recordings for young singers, you don't ever encounter that thing you sometimes encounter with historic recordings where they don't get it, or the acoustic sound isn't good enough for them to understand or adjust with their earbud ears, used to everything being mic-ed and contemporary.

I think she could, and I wish she would, influence more artists now. I hear the influence certainly in someone like Ailyn, but I don't hear it as much as I wish I did, to be honest. And I think for opera lovers, I know, she can bring them back to understanding a style of singing that we don't get in the opera house any longer, and they're gaga about it. They just go crazy. I've seen her influence the taste, the aesthetic of people who already consider themselves knowledgeable opera lovers. I just wish more young singers... I

love it when I say “Muzio” to one of them, and they say -- I had that happen with a student the other day -- “She’s a goddess.” So then you know, okay, that’s why this student (laughs) is interesting,

JM: Setting up my last question for you: what is the most important thing that people in 2022 – audience members, singers, people who love opera, people who are new to opera -- what is the most important thing about this great artist who figured so prominently in San Francisco Opera’s early days?

IS: I would say that the thing that singers, that audiences can draw from Muzio can be found in the recorded legacy, particularly the late electric recordings from the year before she died, because there’s a broad spectrum of song repertoire and arias. Unfortunately, I think only two duets. ‘Cause she’s amazing when she’s interacting with another artist. But the songs, some of them are funny, charming. She was a great recitalist. She traveled a lot and did a lot of recitals. Big train compartments of her own traveling across the States.

And I think what people can draw from it requires just sitting down with two CDs of her Columbia recordings. You get the full spectrum of what an artist can be as a recitalist, as a singer of song, and as a singer of opera. And I think that people begin to understand instinctively because of what they feel, not just what they think, they begin to understand instinctively that her emotional plane and her artistic plane travels on another level from most of us mortals.

And I think that... I guess what I mean is they can find a mystical kind of singing... Pavarotti said he met her at a seance, (laughs) and continued to commune with her in the dressing room. He said it gave him confidence. That we are too sophisticated, and we are too embarrassed by things that are just no holds barred, open, raw, not smoothed-over artistry. We’re too well-traveled. We are too easily embarrassed by things that are extreme. And what I think she teaches you is that opera is extreme, that the style of acting in opera is operatic acting. It doesn’t benefit from movie acting. That’s good for movies. And opera acting in movies wouldn’t work. So I think she helps you understand the framework within which the art was created, and how to do it.

JM: Wonderful. Wonderful. I wonder if you could set up a few of the recordings we’re thinking about using for, you know... the commercial recordings, like, particularly the *Cavalleria rusticana* – the letter scene from *Traviata*. These are just so visceral, and so... I think they get at what you’re saying about these final recordings. They just feel immediately when you listen to them.

IS: Yes. I’m so jealous, because on the Met intermissions, they got to play whole arias. What I think is the *Traviata* letter reading is considered definitive. That’s understood, that Muzio is the go-to for that. It may be old school, old style, but it never fails to draw tears, actually. I’ve seen it. I’ve given lectures at the Met Guild, and watched people start to cry when I play the *Traviata*. The fragility and the way you sense everything she’s been through that brought her to that point -- before she even sings a note, and it’s even heightened when the singing starts, I guess, but that’s an extraordinary classic recording.

The “Voi lo sapete” also is considered, I think rightly, definitive, because the plangency in her tone... You know Lauri-Volpi said her voice was made of “sighs, tears, and restrained inner fire,” and that, to me, defines the Santuzza, the “Voi lo sapete.” That is exactly what’s there. This person has been crying for

months, (laughs) and finally gets to spill to Mamma Lucia, and out it comes in a torrent of emotion, but restrained singing until the very final lines, which kind of pour out in chest voice. ["Voi lo sapete" from Mascagni's *Cavalleria Rusticana* (Columbia; April 1934)] It's an amazing, amazing recording.

Her "La mamma morta" is heart stopping, again, because you sense what Maddalena has gone through. And Giordano, when listening to her sing his music, was moved to tears, and you can tell why. This is a person who's been through the horrors of a war, and we see it now, you know, tragically on video every day. At that time people had lived through wars, had lived through World War I, and you sense the decimation. You just sense it. It's there.

Probably my favorite vocal recording of hers is a Bellini aria, from a very obscure Bellini opera, *Bianca e Fernando*. Just because it's from 13 years earlier, the voice is so fresh, but the style, the legato, the style of singing Bellini, pfft, it's just perfect, and this is somebody who sang a lot of verismo. ["Sorgi, o padre" from Bellini's *Bianca e Fernando* (Edison; March 24, 1922)] That's a thing also: that she was Classical artist, like Callas.

I would have loved to have heard what Muzio would have done with *La vestale* or *Alceste*, you know, with more Classical operas, because there's a classiness and a Classical approach, even to her verismo and to her bel canto. There is real line in this Bellini that is so what Bellini was about. I think that her work transcends fach, style, genre.

JM: Just thinking about the *Cecilia*, the Refice opera that was written for her voice, and then, you know, we know that she sang *Turandot* in 1926 –

IS: Yes.

JM: -- in South America, after it had just had its world premiere, and then the *Trittico*, the world premiere of the *Trittico* in New York. So is she also a New Music soprano?

IS: I think so. I think that people were at that time, because operas were still being composed pretty plentifully, at least in Italy. *Tabarro*, I wish she'd recorded anything from *Tabarro*, but she didn't. I think that there isn't that distinction, maybe because the vocal writing in New Music at that time, a lot of it was still based in Puccini, back to Verdi, back to bel canto, so the criteria were a little different from what we say now when we say New Music, if we're talking about Thomas Adès or Nico Muhly or somebody. The criteria were different.

So I think she was a New Music person, but she could relate to New Music because it still had an opportunity for her to do her thing, what she did with music, connect spiritually and vocally. When you're talking about New Music, but it's Puccini's *Tabarro* or *Turandot*, or the Refice *Cecilia*, these are pieces with all the criteria that probably were prevalent in opera, starting with kind of middle Verdi. So I think, yeah, she is, but I think also because the singing was something you could really indulge in these pieces.

JM: Yeah. Well, thank you, Ira. This has been really wonderful, and really instructive on trying to penetrate the years, the intervening decades, to get back to this artist who, on our stage and the War Memorial Opera

House, was just so celebrated, so beloved, and just had this great connection. We're always kind of hoping for that connection when we go into the opera house, I think.

IS: I think you just hit the nail on the head, actually, that I probably talked around for quite a while, which is we all crave that cathartic experience, and that's why they kept going back, and that's why she sold out: because -- her houses sold out -- because you would go knowing you were gonna have a catharsis. You were gonna have an experience. It was not ever gonna be just a nice evening at the opera. You were gonna leave six inches off the ground. And I think that's what we all crave. That's why we go.

JM: Wonderful. Well, thank you, Ira Siff. It's been a pleasure talking to you about Claudia Muzio.

IS: Thank you, Jeff. It's great opportunity to be able to.

NARRATOR: You've been listening to *Streaming the First Century*, San Francisco Opera's centennial celebration told through historic recordings. This recording is a copyrighted production of San Francisco Opera, all rights reserved.

[END AUDIO]