STREAMING THE FIRST CENTURY

SESSION 4: Ho jo to ho!
CONTEMPORARY PERSPECTIVE: Paul Thomason on Marcia Davenport

First Lady of the Airwaves

BY PAUL THOMASON
(read time ~ 6 minutes)

Marcia Davenport always seemed to be in the most interesting place at exactly the right time. For a significant part of the Twentieth Century, she not only knew all the movers and shakers in the worlds of music, literature, and politics—both U.S. and international—but was herself an active participant. Happily for us, she related a good bit of the story in her riveting autobiography, *Too Strong for Fantasy*.

Her mother was the legendary soprano Alma Gluck who made her Metropolitan Opera debut in November 1909. A month later, Gluck sang the Happy Shade in Gluck's *Orfeo ed Euridice*, conducted by Arturo Toscanini with Louise Homer as Orfeo and Johanna Gadski as Euridice. Growing up in such circumstances, it is no wonder Davenport wrote, "While fortunately I had no talent as a potential performer, the soundest part of my education was a saturation in music so thorough as to give me professional relation to it."

She was an early staff member of *The New Yorker* magazine when she became obsessed with writing a biography of Mozart. "No American had ever written a biography of Mozart," she explained in her autobiography, "and in England nobody had written a modern biographical study, modern in the sense of the author's intent to recreate if he can his subject as a living personality of flesh and blood in full dimensions, faults and all." A friend suggested Davenport talk to his editor, the legendary Maxwell Perkins at Scribners'. "He listened to my description of the book I wanted to write. I may add that no editor in New York could have had less interest in Mozart or music generally than Maxwell Perkins … But he drew from me my reasons for wanting to write my book. Then he said, 'Go ahead and write it. We will publish it.'" Off Davenport went to Prague—which began a lifelong love affair with the city and all things Czech—Vienna, and then Berlin, where the Prussian State Library housed two-thirds of the Mozart manuscripts then known to exist, and where, on her first day, she was left all alone in a room with the original manuscript of *Le nozze di Figaro*, something she could scarcely believe.

She and her then husband, Russell Davenport (later managing editor of *Fortune* magazine) were in Berlin in January 1933 when Hindenburg named Adolf Hitler Chancellor of Germany. Along with their friends John Gunther, Red Knickerbocker, and other members of the American press corps, they managed to get to the windows of a building directly opposite the Chancellery and Hindenburg's residence, from which they watched the endless torchlit Nazi parade that passed in the street that night. "Red Knickerbocker told us a day or two later, when we were recovering from the colds we had all caught, that the sooner we got out of Germany the better. We were incredulous. Did he mean they would molest us? Americans? He looked doubtfully at me [Davenport was born Jewish]. 'You never know.'" They left.

After her Mozart biography, she wrote a string of bestselling novels. The first was *Of Lena Geyer* (1936), the story of an opera singer (a world she knew inside out and backwards). It was followed by *The Valley of Decision* in 1942 (the movie stared Greer Garson and Gregory Peck among many others), *East Side, West Side* in 1947 (James Mason, Barbara Stanwyck, and Ava Gardner were in the film), *My Brother's Keeper* (1954), and *The Constant Image* (1960).

Given her combination of music and writing experience it is perhaps inevitable that Davenport would end up on the radio during the early days of opera broadcasts. "In Salzburg in the summer of 1936, I was the commentator when the National Broadcasting Company for the first time broadcast the opera performances to the United States; in the winter of 1936–37 I talked (ad nauseam, in my opinion) in all the intermissions of the Metropolitan Opera broadcasts." Among other topics, she discussed Nietzsche's use of Carmen to illustrate the difference of ideas between himself and Wagner; the similarities between the lives of Verdi and Wagner; the vocal demands of Norma contrasted with Isolde and Leonore in F*idelio*; the requirements of good singing; the early history of the Met; and American singers in opera. Prior to the Met's radio broadcasts, Davenport was San Francisco Opera's on-air commentator in 1936 for partial broadcasts of *La Juive* (October 30), *Il Barbiere di Siviglia* (October 31), *Carmen* (November 4), *Rigoletto* (November 6), *Pagliacci* (November 11), *Die Walküre* (November 13) and *Das Rheingold* (November 21).

Today the best-known example of Davenport on the radio is her introduction to the San Francisco Opera's 1936 broadcast of Act II of *Die Walküre*. To say she is extremely enthusiastic is an understatement. ("Zany" was the word one critic used.) But given the cast Merola had assembled her enthusiasm was justified. Unfortunately, even with substantial cuts in the score, the broadcast ran longer than NBC had budgeted time for, and apparently Davenport got word to end things *immediately*. She jumped in while during the waning moments of the act while Wotan was dispatching Hunding and the music was still playing to announce, "The curtain is now coming down very slowly…" The unfortunate interruption of this stunning performance insured her notoriety among collectors of historic opera broadcasts.

In Harvey Sachs' *Toscanini, Musician of Conscience*, he says that when David Sarnoff, then head of both RCA and NBC, decided to try and lure Toscanini back to the US by asking him to head NBC's house orchestra, which had been turned into a first-rate symphonic group to entice the Maestro, he realized sending a personal emissary would work best. "He asked Marcia Davenport, whom he knew to be a friend of the Toscanini family, to recommend someone whom he could send; she introduced Sarnoff to Samuel Chotzinoff, who was promptly dispatched to Milan." The rest, as they say, is history. Toscanini returned to the US and led the NBC Symphony from 1937 to 1954, leaving an indispensable recorded legacy of instrumental music and opera. (Sachs also says that in the early days of the NYC Symphony Toscanini "was dallying" with several woman in their thirties, among whom was Davenport.)

After World War II, she returned to her beloved Prague. Davenport had grown extremely close to Jan Masaryk, Czechoslovakia's foreign minister, and for several years she watched him desperately resisting Russian domination, trying to preserve the country's democratic government. One by one the Czech leaders who resisted Stalin's will met mysterious deaths. Finally it was obvious Davenport and Masaryk had to get out of the country. Masaryk insisted she go to London to relay verbal messages to officials there; he would join her in a few days and they would be married. Davenport arrived in London on a Sunday. Early Wednesday morning the phone rang. It was a friend who was a Member of Parliament: "There are newspaper extras just out. I think I had better tell you before you hear some other way." Masaryk had been found dead in the courtyard of his home early that morning. The communists said he had jumped from a widow. Few believed it.

Today there is a memorial plaque on the building where Marcia Davenport lived those last years in Prague. We have her remarkable books—and the sound of her voice enthusiastically welcoming us to one of the greatest performances of Act II of *Die Walküre* ever broadcast.

Paul Thomason has combined a lifelong passion for music, his decades of experience in publishing, and his delight in storytelling to create a unique voice in writing and lecturing about opera. In addition to writing regularly for the Metropolitan Opera, San Francisco Opera, Aspen Music Festival and other companies in the US and Europe, he is also a regular guest on the award-winning podcast Aria Code and the London Wagner Society's Zoom series.