

Miliza Korjus Lily Pons

PREVIOUSLY UNISSUED RECORDINGS



notes enclosed

VOCE-90



Miliza Korjus

SIDE 1

Künsterleben - J. Strauss

Alleluja (Exsultate, jubilate) Mozart

Kaiserwalzer - J. Strauss

Wiegenlied - Schubert

Wer uns getraut (Die Zigeunerbaron) J. Strauss
with John Carter

An der schönen blauen Donau - J. Strauss

conductor: Robert Stolz

Lily Pons

SIDE 2

Di mia stirpe ... Verrano a te (Lucia di Lammermoor) Donizetti
with Giuseppe Di Stefano

Ah! fors' è lui ... Sempre libera (La Traviata) Verdi

Madamigella Valery? ... Dite alla giovine (La Traviata) Verdi
with Frank Guarrera

conductor: Gaetano Merola

VOCE

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RAHVUSRAAMATUKOGU

DC-2117A

MILIZA KORJUS

VOCE 90
MONO

SIDE 1
27:16

1. Künstlerleben (J. Strauss)
2. Alleluja *Exsultate, jubilate* (Mozart)
3. Kaiserwalzer (J. Strauss)
4. Wiegenlied (Schubert)
5. Wer uns getraut *Der Zigeunerbaron* (J. Strauss)
with: John Carter, tenor
6. An der schönen blauen Donau (J. Strauss)

conductor: ROBERT STOLZ

VOCE

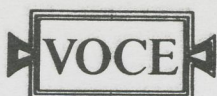
LILY PONS

VOCE 90
MONO

SIDE 2
30.42

1. Di mia stirpe...Verrano a te *Lucia di Lammermoor*
[Donizetti] with: Giuseppe Di Stefano, tenor
2. Ah! fors' e lui...Sempre libera *La Traviata* [Verdi]
3. Madamigella Valery?...Dite alla giovine *La Traviata*
[Verdi] with: Frank Guarrera, baritone

conductor: GAETANO MEROLA



90

SIDE 1: MILIZA KORJUS

1. Künstlerleben (J. Strauss)
2. Alleluja *Exsultate jubilate* (Mozart)
3. Kaiserwalzer (J. Strauss)
4. Wiegenlied (Schubert)
5. Wer uns getraut *Der Zigeunerbaron* (J. Strauss), with John Carter
6. An der schönen blauen Donau (J. Strauss)

Hollywood Bowl, 1946, 1950

Conductor: Robert Stolz

SIDE 2: LILY PONS

1. Di mia stirpe ... Verrano a te *Lucia di Lammermoor* (Donizetti)
with: Giuseppe Di Stefano
2. Ah! fors' è lui ... Sempre libera *La Traviata* (Verdi)
3. Madamigella Valery? ... Dite alla giovine *La Traviata* (Verdi)
with: Frank Guarrera

San Francisco Concert Orchestra, 1950, 1951, 1952

Conductor: Gaetano Merola

NOTES

The roughly contemporaneous careers of the two famous coloratura sopranos featured on the disc could not possibly have been more divergent. Miliza Korjus' active operatic career, and her major recording career, centered in Berlin between 1934 and 1936. Lily Pons made her operatic debut in Mulhouse, Alsace-Lorraine in 1929. After singing for a couple of years in provincial opera houses in France, she made a sensational Metropolitan Opera debut on January 3, 1931 and reigned as the principal coloratura soprano at the Met for 30 years. One similar aspect found both sopranos venturing into Hollywood: Pons, three times, starring in *I Dream too Much* (1935), *That Girl from Paris* (1936), and *Hitting a New High* (1937); Korjus was brought to Hollywood specifically for *The Great Waltz* (1938). Pons' films were neither artistic nor box-office successes; however, *The Great Waltz* was a success and is still today regarded as a "classic film."

Miliza Korjus was born 17 August 1913 in Warsaw. Her mother was a

Russian/Polish countess, her father, Arthur Korjus, a Swedish military attaché. [Kutch & Reimens in their **A Concise Biographical Dictionary of Singers** suggest that it is probably closer to the truth "that she was born in a Swedish colony in Wisconsin and later went to Europe to study singing."] Thus one is faced with an enigmatic beginning to the story of an enigmatic singer.

Korjus certainly lived in Europe, principally Russia, during her early years and is reputed to have attended sixteen different conservatories of music in Moscow, Kiev, and elsewhere - wherever her father was posted in his embassy duties. She claimed that she learned to sing by studying phonograph records of Tetrzzini, Hempel, and Galli-Curci. She had a natural gift for languages and became fluent in Russian, Polish, Swedish, Spanish, Italian, German and English.

In 1933 she was engaged by Max von Schillings for the Berlin Staatsoper and made her debut as Gilda (**Rigoletto**) in 1934. Her success was so sensational that she was immediately signed to a recording contract by German Electrola and began the series of recordings that were to bring her lasting fame. Between 1934 and 1936 she recorded forty two selections in Berlin. At the Staatsoper she sang Violetta, Santuzza, the Queen of the Night and Lakmé. She made guest appearances in opera in Warsaw, Kiev, Lucerne, Stuttgart and Budapest as well as radio appearances in Berlin.

Legend has it that Irving Thalberg heard one of her records and, sight unseen, engaged her for his film **The Great Waltz**. Korjus went to Hollywood in 1937 and, again according to legend, spent several months reducing before appearing on camera. Despite the success of the film which was released in 1938 and despite the fact that she was highly praised as singer and actress, **The Great Waltz** was to be her sole cinematic venture in Hollywood. She began shooting a film entitled **Guns and Fiddles**, co-starring Robert Taylor, but a serious automobile accident put her in a Santa Monica hospital with a broken back. She spent fully nine months recovering, and by that time the film was shelved. Korjus "vanished into Mexico and South America." *Time* magazine reported her exodus in an article entitled "The Marvelous Miliza - letting the musical world go hang." In Mexico and South America she appeared in recitals and on the radio. In 1942 she made a film in Mexico entitled **Caballeria del Imperio**.

In 1944 she returned to the United States and was persuaded to give a concert at Carnegie Hall. The critical reaction to her New York debut on 22 October 1944 is worth noting:

Noel Strauss (New York Times): The tones were firm and pure and the florid passages remarkable in flexibility and ease of emission. The crispness, clarity and full lusciousness of the voice were admirable.

Oscar Thomson (New York Herald-Tribune): At its best the voice shames the two-penny pipes we have heard in opera here in recent seasons.

Virgil Thompson (New York Herald-Tribune): She has a

voice with coloratura work that seems almost unbelievable for beauty of tone, accuracy of pitch, musicianly rhythm and phrasing and a velocity unknown since the early years of this century.

Korjus embarked on a concert tour that took her to Washington, D. C., Portland, Cleveland, Pittsburgh and San Francisco. In 1945 she toured Canada, appearing in Toronto, Winnipeg, Vancouver and Victoria. At the Maple Leaf Gardens in Toronto she broke all existing attendance records - 20,000 acclaimed her:

E. W. Woodson (Toronto Evening Telegram): It might have been Tetrizzini, Galli-Curci or Albani singing at any moment of her concert and to their tones were added marvelous flexibility of scale and trill. ... Effortless song, artless as the song of a laughing child and yet of polished technique that caught the listeners breath by its unfailing precision.

In 1946, after a concert at Hollywood Bowl (from which some of the material on this recording is here presented) she all but retired from public performances. In 1950 she was lured back to the Bowl for another concert (also featured on this disc), and she appeared with the Metropolitan Opera touring company as guest artist in the "party" scene of *Die Fledermaus* at the Bowl in that same year. She sang the *Kaiserwalzer* and stopped the show. (This was the only occasion when this writer had the good fortune to hear Korjus live.)

Her commercial recording career continued throughout these years. In Hollywood, in conjunction with the film *The Great Waltz*, she recorded four Strauss waltzes. In 1942 she made four sides in Mexico, and back in America recorded eight more Strauss waltzes. Evidentially American Victor type-cast her as a singer of Johann Strauss, continuing to capitalize on her reputation from the film. During the years 1966-1968 she and her second husband, Dr. Walter Spector, formed the Venus Recording Company of America and issued five long-playing records. On these rather eccentric discs the voice is still remarkable, accurate and tonally resplendent, however the musical taste is, to say the least, questionable. Items such as the "Habanera" and "Gypsy Song" from *Carmen*, as well as Dell'Acqua's "Villanelle" and a selection from Strauss' *Der Zigeunerbaron* are sung in Russian! She exhibits a fascination for not only singing duets with herself, but also being accompanied by "William" her live pet songbird on several selections. Thus on these records she exhibits a musical idiosyncrasy which is in startling contrast to the impeccable musical taste that distinguishes her early recordings.

Miliza Korjus died in August 1980 in Los Angeles. Although her career on the opera stage was brief, it was spectacular. Speaking of Korjus' performances, at the Staatsoper in Berlin as the Queen of the Night, Rupert P. Seemugul (in 1965) wrote:

Most of the great coloraturists refused to touch it [the role of the Queen]; Callas with the ideal type of voice for it, clearly had not the technique to cope with it. Sutherland tried and failed; scores of other coloraturas piped and

squeaked off pitch, wobbled or strangulated in it. Only four coloraturas I know emerged from the ordeal triumphantly: Hempel, Ivoguen, Berger and Korjus.

Lily Pons was born in Draguigan Var, a small village near Cannes, France on April 13, 1904. Her mother was the first to encourage her obvious musical talents, providing her with a piano and piano lessons. At the age of 15, while she was a student at the Paris Conservatoire, she won first prize in a piano competition. She, herself, admitted that stage fright was the principal reason for her abandoning what seemed to be a promising career as a concert pianist. Illness at this time also hampered her activities, but upon recovering, she dedicated herself to entertaining convalescent French soldiers, an audience which did not frighten her. The story goes that at one such concert a soldier requested that she sing for them, and Pons discovered she had a voice. With new found self confidence she talked herself into a role in a show which was being produced by a famous French impresario, Max Dearly, and her singing made such an impression on an acquaintance that she was taken by the friend to a noted vocal expert, Alberti di Gorostiaga. After a period of intense study with di Gorostiaga, she made her aforementioned debut in Mulhouse. She sang several roles in provincial French houses, among them the Queen of the Night, Gretel, Cherubino, Baucis, Mimi, Blondine, and Rossignol (**Parysatis**). When she was performing Lucia at Montpellier, she was heard by the celebrated husband and wife singing team of Giovanni Zenatello and Maria Gay. They encouraged her to seek an audition at the Metropolitan in New York.

The Zenatellos preceded her to New York armed with copies of Pons' early recordings of the **Rigoletto** and **La Boheme** duets, which she had recorded with the tenor Enrico di Mazzei. Gatti-Casazza was reportedly unimpressed with the notion of hiring a fledgling who had never sung at a major opera house, but when Maria Gay offered to pay the cost of Pons' passage to New York if she failed her audition, he consented to hear her. Suffering from an upset stomach, and an attack of stage fright, she determined to "shoot the works" at the audition. She was immediately signed to a contract.

Of her Met debut, **Time** magazine reported:

The "Mad Scene," given in the key of F instead of a tone lower as is usually the case, was superbly sung. Difficult chromatic runs and arpeggios done with the greatest of ease, trills and staccati true to pitch, a high E-flat clearly sung - not just peeped - those won her cheers and a dozen or more curtain calls.

Pons could not have come to the Metropolitan at a more opportune time. Even though the **bel canto** repertoire was in a state of serious decline, a house that had boasted not too many years earlier of Melba, Tetrassini, Sembrich and Hempel was reduced to featuring Sabanieeva, Mario, Morgana, and the sadly past her prime, afflicted by goiter, Galli-Curci (in her final season) in the few coloratura roles then in the repertoire. Even the perennial **Lucia** had been

absent from the Met repertoire for two years before Pons' sensational debut. She quickly established herself as the reigning queen of the coloratura repertoire at the Met, and in subsequent seasons the following operas were revived especially for her: **Lakmé** (1932), **La Sonnambula** (1932), **Linda di Chamounix** (1933), **Le Coq d'Or** (1936) and **La Fille du Régiment** (1940). The paucity of the coloratura repertoire during Pons' years at the Met is illustrated by the fact that such a celebrated artist, in addition to roles in the 5 operas mentioned above, only sang Lucia, Gilda, Rosina, Olympia and Philine during her 29 years there - a total of only 10 roles in all.

A second factor that contributed to Pons' almost exclusive ownership of the few coloratura soprano roles at the Metropolitan was the onset of the World War II, which prevented European rivals from coming to the United States. The war years again provided no competition; Josephine Antoine, Hilde Reggiani, Josephine Tuminia, and Mimi Benzell (notables all) shared the Pons repertoire. The only notable exception was Bidú Sayão, who had been assigned principally lyric roles, as the replacement for Lucrezia Bori when Sayão debuted at the Met in 1936. The only role she shared with Pons was Rosina, outside of a very few appearances as Gilda.

One of the most notable performances in Pons' career took place at the matinee performance of the revival of **La Fille du Régiment** on 28 December 1940, co-incident with the fall of France. Pons had arranged with the conductor, Gennaro Papi and the chorus to interpolate **La Marseillaise** at the conclusion of the opera in the final **Salut à la France**; as Olin Downes reported:

The part of the Vivandiere is one of tremendous difficulty. It is a light opera role, but perhaps the most taxing of all the coloratura roles that this singer takes at the Metropolitan. She sang it, barring some occasional and usually slight deviations from pitch, with a skill and esprit that bespoke her constant improvement in vocalism. ... The mood reached its logical climax as she waved the French colors at the end to the tune of the "Marseillaise," and brought the audience up standing.

During the second world war, despite her dislike of flying, she flew over 100,000 miles around the world to sing and entertain American G.I.'s from the Persian Gulf to the remote bases in western China. With her husband, the noted conductor André Kostelanetz, she concertized extensively and usually drew record crowds.

On October 5, 1951 she sang, for the first time in her career, the role of Violetta in **La Traviata** at the San Francisco War Memorial Opera House. She repeated the role in San Francisco the following season. On 3 January 1956, Pons was accorded a 25th anniversary gala at the Met. Her final performance there was in the role of her debut, Lucia, on April 12, 1958. Once more, however, the Pons voice was heard there at a benefit concert on 14 December 1960 when sang **Caro nome**. Her final operatic appearances were as Lucia in Fort Worth, Texas in November 1962 with the then young, virtually unknown Plácido Domingo as her Edgardo. She died on February 13, 1976 in Dallas.

Since Korjus' active stage career was brief, it is principally as a recording artist that she gained fame and enduring recognition. She recorded 43 selections in the period of her "serious" career (1934 - 1936). Sixteen of these selections were operatic arias, two operatic duets with Marcel Wittrisch and Helge Roswaenge; the rest were of "light" music - standard coloratura showpieces and Strauss waltzes. The second phase of her recording career began in Hollywood when, in 1938, she recorded three selections from the film **The Great Waltz**. In Mexico she recorded four selections from the film **Caballeria del Imperio**, including "Casta Diva" from **Norma** and Adele's laughing song from **Der Fledermaus** - the latter in Spanish. After she returned to America, in 1945, she recorded two Strauss waltzes, accompanied by Giuseppe Bamboschek, and in 1947 followed with six more Strauss waltzes accompanied by Antal Dorati. This four record 78 album was her last commercial recording. Also published, in addition to the Venus recordings previously mentioned, are excerpts from Mexican radio - duets from **Rigoletto** and the final portion of the **Lucia** mad scene (OASI 552), and a **Liebstedt** from Mexico as well as a group of privately made records (c1950's) on **VOCE 52**.

Korjus was essentially a throwback to an earlier age - the last surviving member of an old tradition which placed emphasis on musical rather than dramatic values. Her voice is used as a musical instrument, stressing perfection of intonation and pitch - in fact Korjus' high notes are so squarely dead-center on pitch that there are almost no overtones, thus the sound, particularly on sustained high notes, does not fall gracefully on the ear. Above all her ease of production is amazing; the voice effortlessly pours out.

As was her active career, Pons' recording output was much more extensive. She recorded 20 sides for French Odeon (1928/29) before her Metropolitan debut. From 1930 to 1940 she became a Victor recording artist; 46 sides were released, and another 15 unpublished. From 1941 to 1954 she recorded for American Columbia - 123 sides. Two further sides remain unpublished.

Despite the fact of her enormous popularity with the American public - she remained the **prima donna assoluta** at the Met for almost 30 years - Pons did not have an extensive international career. Perhaps her dislike of flying contributed the fact that only once, in 1935 as Rosina, did she appear at Covent Garden; she never sang at La Scala. Unlike Korjus who was a throwback to the "old" school, Pons was a creature of her time, diminutive, pretty, chic, and exuberant. Speaking of Pons, J. B. Steane notes:

*The "coloratura" was now becoming a specialized performer of whom only certain things were expected. She was to sing in only a small number of operatic roles. ... The prime qualification, moreover, was the ability to sing sweetly and with agility above the stave; what she did on it was considered less important, though perhaps three quarters of the music lay within a normal soprano's compass. ... With this delimiting of the "coloratura's" province went a change in the technique acquired. Because a firm **cantilena** was not the focus of attention,*

there was less incentive to cultivate it. Yet this is the basis of singing in the European tradition, and a deficiency here goes with the sort of short-cut to flexibility in fioritura of which the aspirate is the clearest example. This in turn is likely to affect the tone itself, encouraging breathiness and withdrawing from the singer the power to draw a poised, economical line of sound.

Yet Steane acknowledges that Pons had "a very lovely voice," and that her "high notes seem invariably to be well taken and well sustained."

In contrast he remarks that Korjus' "high notes made the old gramophone rattle more than anyone else's," but also comments on her "clean, decisive style."

On 5 October 1951 Pons made her debut in the role of Violetta in *La Traviata* at the San Francisco Memorial Opera House. Reportedly she had gone to Rome to study the role with Vincenzo Bellezza, thence to Paris to order expensive costumes especially for this debut. She repeated the role only once during that season on 11 October, and then gave one "special performance" the following season (1952) on 4 October. As Arthur Bloomfield notes:

She gave of her voice abundantly, but could not persuade many listeners that Violetta is a role for a coloratura: a number of her high forte tones were shrill. All in all, then, a not uncommendable entrance into difficult coloratura-lyric-dramatic territory, but an ill advised one for the artist on the whole.

Pons had made her debut at San Francisco in 1932 as Lucia. From 1937 to 1947 she appeared in each season at that house, and then again from 1949-1952. With the exception of Violetta, she sang exactly the same roles she had sung at the Metropolitan.

After Korjus' successful Carnegie Hall recital in 1944 her fans and a number of critics suggested that she be invited to sing at the Metropolitan. Irving Kolodin in his *The Metropolitan Opera* sarcastically quotes Edward Johnson's statement that "her voice was too small," an opinion in complete contrast to the critical reviews noted above. Whether Korjus' eccentric and somewhat quirky personality was truly responsible for the lack of an invitation, or whether Pons had enough influence to deny her admission is an unanswered question.

The revival of *bel canto* began in the 1950's when Pons was near the end of a long and distinguished career, and Korjus was to all intent in retirement. With this revival, begun by Maria Callas and furthered by Sutherland, Sills, and Caballé, the older style *soprano leggiera* voice was replaced by the *soprano drammatico con agilità* in what was regarded as the "coloratura" repertoire. Modern critical taste supported this change; interestingly enough Beverly Sills, with the *leggiera* type voice generally received less critical appreciation than the others mentioned. The heavier voice is considered more "dramatic," and actually the dramatic values of one of Pons' specialties, the role of Lucia, were rediscovered by many

when Callas sang the role. This critical reaction has always seemed to me to be somewhat of an injustice to the **leggiera** sopranos.

Certainly the Korjus voice and style is principally meant to astound the listener with a kind of vocal virtuosity that is deemed "old fashioned." The arrangements of the Strauss waltzes featured on this disc are showpieces for this kind of virtuosity. But give Korjus a simple melody to sing, such as the Schubert **Wiegenlied**, and the elements of **legato**, sensitivity to the text, clear enunciation and feeling are all there.

Perhaps Pons could not, at that stage of her career, sustain the role of Violetta successfully on the opera stage, but how many sopranos can? In the first selection on this disc, the **Lucia** love duet with the mellifluous young Giuseppe Di Stefano, her clear enunciation of the text and sensitivity to it are perhaps to be expected. But these same qualities are strongly in evidence in her Violetta; she shows great sensitivity to the text and her clarity of diction is admirable. The **Ah! for' è lui** and **Sempre libera** are sensitively sung, and in the duet, with some unnecessary interpolations in **Dite alla giovane** section put aside, her sensitivity outclasses the rather stodgy performance of her partner.

VOCE is pleased to present these formerly unavailable selections featuring these two unique artists, each of whom in her own way, kept alive an older tradition of coloratura singing in an age which undervalued the tradition.

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