



Rosa Ponselle *On the Air, Volume 2*

LINER NOTES

Rosa Ponselle, that admirable artist who, both as a dramatic *prima donna* soprano and as a concert singer has impressed her art and her personality so powerfully on present-day American audiences, holds well-defined and positive opinions on some of those important points which are of interest to the girl who hopes to attain the higher rungs of the ladder of vocal success. The views and ideas which Miss Ponselle has been kind enough to express to the writer are the outcome of a vocal experience which has justified itself beyond all shadow of doubt.

“First of all,” said Miss Ponselle, “I regard singing purely as a mental operation—that is, the *art* of singing. For the girl who is a student of opera in the higher sense, mechanical exercises cannot well be advised, because vocal mechanics do not enter into singing as an *art*. Too many students, I think, definitely fix their ambitions on opera, when they begin to study singing, before they find out whether or not they are fitted for it. When you begin to study singing, let your first thought be to learn how to sing. And then, if later you feel drawn to opera, make sure that you possess the requisite qualifications for an operatic career. I know that in my own case I began to study singing without any fixed determination to become an opera singer.

An American Training

“Yes, my own training has been altogether American—one hundred per cent, as the phrase is—and if you insist that this is proof of the fact that a *prima donna* can be developed in the United States I do not very well see how I can contradict you. I cannot honestly say that I have ever regretted not having studied with European teachers. William Thorner was my teacher, and all that I may have gained in the way of voice production and flexibility, singing poise and tone development, I owe to him. There seems little advantage to the student in recommending this, that or the other set of *vocalises* or exercises for study use. After all, if you get down to the gist of the matter, it is altogether a question of the proper use of the exercises selected; *how* to study what you study and not *what* you study.

Some Lessons of Prima Donna Experience

“I spent less than a year preparing for opera, but when you ask me how I managed to accomplish so much in a time so comparatively short, the answer is simple. I was studious—working with my mind as well as with my throat—and I had had correct teaching from the *very beginning*, and therefore no faulty teaching to undo. One thing in which I am a great believer is the avoidance of vocal overexertion. During the opera or concert season I use daily vocal exercises to keep my voice flexible; but I practice them only a *few minutes* each day—and during my vacation I give myself a complete rest. Even while I was preparing to sing in opera, I did not practice more than fifteen or twenty minutes a day; unless, of course, I was studying a new rôle. The pronouncedly coloratura rôles, as I see it, do not properly lie within the range of the dramatic soprano voice; but there is no earthly reason why the dramatic soprano cannot sing purely lyric rôles, and sing them well. As regards the actual dramatics of the stage, the singer’s dramatic action, I do not think it can ever be prepared, that is *completely* prepared, before stage presentation; though, of course, it should be studied. My own belief and practice is to allow stage action to depend to a great extent on spontaneous interpretation. If the artist thoroughly identifies herself with her rôle in an opera, her stage action will be the natural outcome of her impersonation. It will express itself with a sincerity and conviction which the most painstaking study will not give.

“No, I would not attempt to draw comparisons, as regards to difficulty, between one and another operatic rôle of the dramatic soprano repertory. Technical as well as musical difficulties are so largely individual. I could not say that Leonora, for instance, is a rôle more difficult to sing than that of Elvira. My own experience is that *all rôles require the same mental exertion in order to render the motif in its best light!*

“For the student who wishes to become a dramatic soprano one first requisite is absolutely essential. She must have dramatic talent as a basis. No particular line of study will develop a dramatic soprano if this natural aptitude and instinct be missing. On the other hand, I am so strong a believer in individuality in art, and especially in the art of song, that I do not think it possible to specify limitations as regards vocal and dramatic interpretation where the dramatic soprano is concerned. Each singer has her own natural limitations, and another cannot specify them for her. She must do so herself, and be her own judge as to how far she may go and what she may do. As regards the studying of soprano rôles or songs which the singer, for some one reason or other, may be doubtful of carrying to success, there is a very simple and logical rule, one which I follow myself: *I have never studied any rôle to which I did not believe I could do justice.*

Singing in Concert

“There is, basically, no difference—so far as I can see—in the way the voice is used or projected on the boards of the opera and on the recital platform. I sing on the concert stage just as I do in opera. I use my voice in the same manner, always, and with no mental reservations in projecting it.

“As for programs, I study my audiences and give what their applause indicates they would like to have by way of encore numbers. I always include at least two operatic arias in my programs, because I believe that in cities where grand opera is not presented, my audiences desire to hear me in the rôles I sing during the opera season. Yet I believe that, after all, it is the old heart-to-heart ballads, the simple emotional songs, which any audience loves best. I have noticed that there is always more feeling in the response to these songs.

“The great essential in concert singing, and the one without which the singer cannot succeed, is the ability to render a song in a *convincing* manner. Unless the concert singer can convince, can move her audience, make it feel that her art is genuine and whole-souled, her other more purely vocal gifts, no matter how great they may be, will not count. And, if you wish me to give a message to the ambitious girl students of singing as—to use your own words—‘a successful *prima donna*,’ the best I can give them is this: *Be sure of proper guidance in the initial stages when you study singing!* And this applies to every student, whether she have the opera or the concert stage ultimately in view.”

From the book, *The Art of the Prima Donna*, Frederick H. Martens, D.
Appleton & Co., 1923

TRACK LISTING

CD 1 (78:34)

CHESTERFIELD HOUR

25 March 1936

1. **Ave Maria** (Sandoval) 4:19
2. **Ich liebe dich** (Grieg) 2:10
3. **The Night Wind** (Farley) 1:47
4. **CARMEN: Habanera (Bizet)** 4:38

1 April 1936

5. **LA VESTALE: Tu che invoco (Spontini)** 4:36
6. **Good-bye** (Tosti) 4:31
7. **Cuckoo Clock** (Griselle and Young) 1:26
8. **El Morenito** (Buzzi-Peccia) 2:33

GENERAL MOTORS HOUR

24 May 1936

9. **SEMIRAMIDE: Bel raggio (Rossini)** 5:10
10. **LA TRAVIATA: Addio del passato (Verdi)** 5:08
11. **CAVALLERIA RUSTICANA: Voi lo sapete (Mascagni)** 3:24
12. **Marechiaro** (Tosti) 3:00
13. **Carry Me Back to Old Virginny** (Bland) 4:08

GENERAL MOTORS HOUR

31 May 1936

14. **Ave Maria** (Schubert) *missing orchestral closing* 4:51
15. **Annie Laurie** (Traditional) 3:26

ERNESTINE SCHUMANN-HEINK: 75TH BIRTHDAY PARTY

15 June 1936

16. **Wiegenlied** (Brahms) 2:18
17. **Home, Sweet Home** (Bishop) 5:05

GENERAL MOTORS HOUR

27 September 1936

18. **AIDA: Ritorna vincitor** (Verdi) *missing one bar* 7:34
19. **Dicitencello vuje** (Falvo) 3:33
20. **OTELLO: Ave Maria (Verdi)** 4:48

CD 1:

Tracks 1-8 and 18-20 originally broadcast from New York City.

Tracks 1-8 orchestra conducted by André Kostelanetz; tracks 18-20 conducted by Erno Rapee.

Tracks 9-13 and 16-17 originally broadcast from Los Angeles; tracks 9-13 orchestra conducted by Erno Rapee.

Tracks 14-15 originally broadcast from San Francisco; orchestra conducted by Erno Rapee.

Languages: Italian [1,5,9-11,18-20]; English [2-3, 6-7, 13, 15,17,]; French [4]; Spanish [8]; Neapolitan [12]; Latin [14] and German [16]

CD 2 (74:56)

GENERAL MOTORS HOUR

27 September 1936

1. **Ouvre ton coeur** (Bizet) 2:46
2. **Homing** (Del Riego) 2:46

THEN AND NOW

10 December 1936

3. **Moonlight Bay** (Madden-Wenrich) 2:27
4. **Carme** (arr. De Curtis) 3:51
5. LA FORZA DEL DESTINO: **La Vergine degli angeli** (Verdi) 4:30
6. MADEMOISELLE MODISTE: **Kiss Me Again** (Herbert) 4:43

PROMS CONCERT, CINCINNATI OHIO

25 April 1937

7. **Ave Maria** (Kahn) 4:25
8. THE CHOCOLATE SOLDIER: **My Hero (O. Straus)** with Frank Forest 4:33
9. **The Old Refrain** (Kreisler) 4:39
10. **Nur wer die Sehnsucht kennt** (Tchaikovsky) 4:00
11. **The Night Wind** (Farley) 1:50

RCA MAGIC KEY

2 May 1937

12. FEDRA: **O divina Afrodite (Romani)** 4:50
13. **Carry Me Back to Old Virginny** (Bland) 3:38
14. MADEMOISELLE MODISTE: **Kiss Me Again** (Herbert) 4:35
15. **My Old Kentucky Home** (Foster) 4:12
16. **Home, Sweet Home** (Bishop) 4:24

ADDENDUM:

15 November 1933

17. **Drink to Me Only with Thine Eyes** (Traditional) 3:52

MGM SCREEN TEST

13 April 1936

18. **Rosa Ponselle Conversation** 2:56
19. CARMEN: **Habanera** (Bizet) 1:59
20. CARMEN: **Chanson bohème** (Bizet) 3:52

CD 2:

Tracks 1-6, 12-16 originally broadcast from New York City
Tracks 1-2 conducted by Erno Rapee; tracks 3-6 orchestra and chorus conducted by Kelsey; tracks 12-15 orchestra conducted by Frank Black and track 16 piano by Rosa Ponselle

Tracks 7-11 originally broadcast from Cincinnati; orchestra conducted by Eugene Goossens.

Tracks 18-20 recorded in Hollywood

Languages: French [1,19-20]; English [2-3,6,8-9,11,13-18]; Italian [4-5,12]; German [10] and Latin [7]

Producer: Bill Park

Audio Conservation: Ward Marston

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