

THE THREE Ms
and
THE MARY MUNCHOFF MUSIC COLLECTION

In the summer of 1987, Mary Fitzsimmons Massie died at the age of 91, in Omaha. She was best described by many Omahans as the "Grande Dame" of voice teachers in the region. To me, she was simply **Mary**, a close friend, honest, trusted, and gracious in all respects.

Upon her death, Mary left an extremely valuable music collection, which originally belonged to **her** voice teacher, Mary Munchoff, also from Omaha. The collection was given to Mary when Miss Munchoff died in 1942. The Massie estate, upon Mary's death, bequeathed **The Mary Munchoff Music Collection** to the University of Nebraska at Omaha where it now resides in the campus library. Since 1987, I have been involved personally in evaluating, processing, and cataloging this valuable music trove. Its size is quite astounding, consisting of over 2,000 pieces of music and books on music. The collection was so large, that during Mary's lifetime, it had to be divided between her home at 405 North 40th Street and the Rudy Miller home in Council Bluffs, Iowa.

Sensing that there were deeper historical implications involving this collection and the lives of the **two Marys** (Munchoff and Massie), while doing research at the University of Cincinnati last fall, it occurred to me that the significance of the collection is historical in at least two ways:

1. It contains music published in Europe in the late 1800s and early 1900s, music now out-of-print and no longer available, and perhaps more important.
2. The collection reflects a legacy of the **bel canto** singing method and a line of succession of great voice teachers dating all the way back to around 1600 (nearly 400 years ago), when opera first developed in Italy during the late Renaissance and early Baroque eras. [Bel canto singing stresses lyric weight in the voice and coloratura training --- that is, the ability to sing rapid scale passages to keep the voice sounding young and flexible, as opposed to the ponderous dramatic power of the Wagnerian style and the heaviness of Italian verismo singing].

Some of the greatest teachers of **bel canto** singing were the Italians, Giulio Caccini, Bartolomeo Monari, Nicola Porpora, and Giovanni Ansani, and their greatest disciples, the Spanish Garcias --- both named Manuel --- one the father, the other the son (Senior and Junior). Mary Munchoff's teacher was **Mathilde Marchesi** from Paris who was Manuel Garcia Jr.'s best student.

I want to talk to you today then about three outstanding voice teachers of **bel canto** singing, who had a direct impact on **The Mary Munchoff Music Collection** at UNO --- Mathilde Marchesi from Paris, and Mary Munchoff and Mary Massie both from Omaha I call them the "3 Ms" --- Marchesi, Munchoff, Massie (ironically, their first names also begin with "M" --- Mathilde and the two Marys).

Mathilde Marchesi
(1821-1913)

Madame Marchesi was born Mathilde Graumann in Frankfurt am Main, Germany on March 24, 1821 and died in London, November 17, 1913. After study with Felice Ronconi in Frankfurt and Otto Nicolai in Vienna in 1845, she went to Paris for two years of study with Manuel Garcia, then launched a concert and opera career. She married Salvatore Marchesi, an Italian baritone with whom she had often appeared on the concert platform. Ultimately, at the age of 33, her career led her into teaching, first at the Vienna Conservatory (for 7 years) where she became professor of singing then Cologne (3 years), a return to the Vienna Conservatory (3 years), and finally in 1881 at the age of 60 to Paris where, for 25 years, she attracted pupils from many parts of the world. Among her star singers were Emma Calve (one of the great Carmens at the Metropolitan Opera in the early 1900s), Emma Eames, Mary Garden, and Nellie Melba (the toast was named after her), Sybil Sanderson, Blanche Marchesi (her daughter), and Mary Munchoff from Omaha, Nebraska U. S. A.

Madame Marchesi's vocal method was based on that of her teacher Garcia, stressing

- (1.) Correct placing and classification of the female voice, and
- (2.) The settlement and blending of its three registers (chest, middle, and head voice) over the whole range of the singing voice.

After her husband died in 1908, Marchesi went to live in London.

In the Preface to Mathilde Marchesi's book, Ten Singing Lessons, published in 1901, Nellie Melba wrote about her teacher (translated from the French)

"One of the most conspicuous traits of Madame as a teacher is her rigid honesty. Take her a voice which has no potentialities of successful training, and no considerations of personal gain will restrain her from kindly, but relentlessly sending you away. Or even if you have a voice, but have no enthusiasm and intelligence to back it up, your departure is equally certain. She logically demands of her pupils an enthusiasm and intelligent energy in response to her own. Given these conditions and there is no trouble too great, no care and patience too incessant for her to devote to the pupil's interests. And this care and patience are, in Madame's case, absolutely personal. . . . and to this day she is at her piano from nine o'clock in the morning till six in the evening, alert, energetic and sympathetic, and ever eager for another of those conspicuous successes which has in so remarkable a manner punctuated her unexampled career as a teacher." [Nellie Melba]

And, in Marchesi's own words "It isn't sufficient to proclaim, 'I will be a singer.'
An attractive appearance, the gifts of the musician, quickness of conception, and the power

of representation, together with requisites of relatively minor importance; a good ear, a sound and rich voice of extended compass, added to an ardent desire to become an artist --- such is the essential equipment of those that would travel the fair, if thorny, road which stretches out before them. From the very inception of one's studies, vanity, false ambition, and greed must be set aside; and divine art only must inspire the pupil with zeal, compel industry, and illumine the distant goal."

And finally, upon the sudden death of her daughter Therese in Naples in 1890, Marchesi reflected about life and death

"Life is one long series of griefs, pains, and disappointments. Why should we weep for those who are gone before and are at rest? Should we not rather envy them? Still, the heart has need of affection, and so, when relentless fate separates us from loved ones whose tenderness helped us to support the ills of this sad life, we rebel; but all in vain. Human beings are condemned to suffer here below. We must, therefore, resign ourselves to our fate and submit to God's will." [Mathilde Marchesi]

One of the truly fine singers whom Madame Marchesi directed and developed at the turn of the century was Omaha's Mary Munchoff, considered by Marchesi to be her most talented and favorite student. And, it is through Madame Marchesi's influence that the major portion of the Mary Munchoff Music Collection was assembled for Miss Munchoff's concert repertoire on her spectacular concert tours of the leading music centers of Europe.

**Mary Munchoff
(1867-1942)**

Mary Munchoff was born in the extreme southwest corner of Indiana --- Mount Vernon --- on the Ohio River, west of Evansville, not far from the confluence (around 15 miles) of the Wabash and Ohio Rivers. The current population of Mount Vernon is 7,217 souls. Her parents, Mr. and Mrs. H. R. Munchoff, were of German extraction. The family moved early in Mary's life to Omaha, where she spent many of her girlhood days. Her talent for singing emerged at church services and community functions, and as a result, she became a protege of Count John A. Creighton of Omaha's illustrious Creighton family. In the mid-1890s, Mr. Creighton sent Mary Munchoff to Berlin to study with Professor Selma Niklass-Kempner at the Stern Conservatory. She created a sensation in Berlin with her beautiful voice and exceptional talent for florid singing. She continued her studies in Paris with the world-renowned voice teacher Madame Mathilde Marchesi and became one of the top concert singers of the day, securing for her a prominent place in European circles --- Germany, Russia, France, Switzerland, England, Austria, Denmark, Belgium, Holland, Italy, Scotland, and Greece. These tours took her to the capitals of Europe, singing as a coloratura soprano, before many of the crowned heads of the early 20th century,

and gave her an opportunity to display her phenomenal art, conquering by storm the hearts of the European public. Miss Munchoff sang under the most celebrated conductors of the time --- Arthur Nikisch (Gewandhaus Orchestra in Leipzig); Vasily Safonov in Moscow and St. Petersburg; Willem Mengelberg (Amsterdam Concertgebouw); Felix Weingartner in Munich; Friedrich Hagar in Zurich; and eventually, Victor Herbert in Pittsburgh, U. S. A.

Her main attributes secured her success wherever she appeared

- (a) A rare grace in her appearance.
- (b) A high artistic temperament.
- (c) A beautiful singing voice . . . cultivated to perfection.
- (d) A deep, sincere love of music.

Her rich voice vibrated through a concert hall like the tones of a stradivarius . . . to include marvelous technique and great musical intelligence allowing her to interpret the different moods of various songs with sincere feeling and great effectiveness. One only has to read the hundreds of European reviews in Miss Munchoff's personal effects to realize what a superlative artist she was.

After 16 years of concert tours in Europe, Miss Munchoff gave up her singing career to return home to care for her desperately ill mother. It was after 1913 that Miss Munchoff, at age 36, began teaching young Omaha women how to sing, and she loved teaching, imparting her artistic experience and rich love of music to her students. During her career, she had appeared on the same program with legendary artists such as John McCormack, Josef Hoffman, and Fritz Kreisler.

In Omaha, Miss Munchoff was never missing from an audience where good music was to be heard. She had her fingers in almost every affair to promote good music in Omaha. She was a familiar figure at every Tuesday Musical concert --- always formally and elegantly dressed, her white hair piled on her head, making her way down the aisle to her seat, smiling and nodding to her many friends. When Miss Munchoff died in September 1942, her burial was at St. Mary Magdalene Cemetery in south Omaha. It was characteristic of Miss Munchoff's love of home that wherever she appeared in concert, one of the conditions of the engagement was that the program print the words --- **Mary Munchoff, aus Omaha, U. S. A.** Martin Bush, Omaha World-Herald music critic at the time, wrote a beautiful tribute to Mary Munchoff upon her death. I want to read to you a small portion of that memorial

"Possessors of genuine ability and great accomplishments in music are invariably likewise possessors of simplicity, kindliness, a burning zeal for beauty in music and an abiding interest in others. For those were the human qualities that characterized Mary Munchoff, then and through the remaining years of her labors in Omaha's musical vineyard, and will ever be the qualities that will predominate in the memories of all who came to know her." [Martin Bush]

**Mary Fitzsimmons Massie
(1896-1987)**

Mary Massie was born in Chicago and moved to O'Neill, Nebraska with her mother, brother and sister, following her father's death . . . her father's family was in O'Neill. While living in O'Neill, Mary attended St. Mary's Academy, which "offered a good deal of culture in art, music, and drama." She was keenly interested in music as a youngster.

"My mother always wanted her children to get the best of everything and for me it was music. My father was the one inclined to music, though. He had a beautiful voice."

She began formal music lessons in piano at age 5. But, "in a small town there wasn't a singing teacher and my ambition was to learn to sing."

Several years later, Mary Massie came to Omaha to sing in the Federated Music Clubs contest and there met Mary Munchoff.

"I loved her the minute I saw her. I decided I wanted to stay in Omaha and study with her."

"My mother had a millinery store in O'Neill. She sold that, and we moved to Omaha."

Her patrons in Omaha were Mr. and Mrs. Arthur Mullen who lived just a block away from where we are this afternoon, in the Happy Hollow Country Club area, just off Mullen Road (named incidentally, after the Mullen family). Mrs. Mullen introduced Mary to Miss Munchoff and Mr. Mullen arranged for Mary to sing at the Rialto Theater.

When Miss Munchoff died in 1942, Mary Massie began studies with Frank LaForge in New York City and with Conrad Bos at the Juilliard School of Music (Mr. Bos had accompanied Mary Munchoff in her European concert tours --- Bos later gained attention as the singing coach of Margaret Truman). Subsequently, Mrs. Massie spent the summers in Paris under the tutelage of Madame Lotte Schoene, and then studied in London with the great Wagnerian and German Lieder singer, Elena Gerhardt, and with the legendary English soprano Maggie Teyte, continuing additional voice studies at the University of Chicago and the Chicago Musical College.

In the beginning, Mary said she really didn't want to teach voice only to learn how to be a good teacher. When she did begin to instruct singers in the art of *bel canto* singing, she loved it, much like her teacher, Mary Munchoff discovered when she began to teach. In addition to voice instruction for singers, Mrs. Massie used singing techniques to help those with speech disorders --- breathing, tongue relaxation, and tone placement. At that time, various ear, nose, and throat

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doctors in Omaha were sending patients with speech difficulties to Mary. But, in working with them, she emphasized firmly that she was a voice teacher first, not a therapist, and continued to teach not only singers but those who used their voices a great deal --- actors, actresses, auctioneers, and teachers. She admired most such great professional singers as Joan Sutherland, Lily Pons, Richard Tucker, Ezio Pinza, and Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau.

Mary continued to emulate her beloved teacher, Mary Munchoff, while combining foreign travel and vocal studies in Paris, Cologne, Bonn, East Berlin, Yugoslavia, Italy, Switzerland, and Belgium, and the musical mecca, Vienna, along with special studies at the Accademia di Santa Cecilia in Rome. Her favorite music festival, she said, was in Edinburgh, Scotland and her favorite city --- **"Paris in the Springtime.!"**

Mary Massie taught private voice lessons in Omaha for over 70 years and was one of the truly outstanding human beings in the city's musical history. She gained the respect and admiration of her students as an enthusiastic, dedicated, brilliant and inspiring teacher, and a loving, caring human being who gave the last ounce of her energy on their behalf.

In conclusion, Mary Munchoff was reported to have told one of her students a short time before she passed away in 1942 --- **"There must be a transmigration of souls; my music --- and what I have done for the love of music --- surely it will not die with me."** In answer to her query in 1994, over 50 years later, students, teachers, and members of the Omaha community, for years to come, now will have access to the precious treasury of Miss Munchoff's music housed in the UNO Library. And as a direct result, the legacy of *bel canto* singing transmitted through the Marchesi, Munchoff, Massie Paris/Omaha connection will live on into the 21st century. Thus, singers and scholars will be able to enjoy the fine research opportunities these three outstanding women provided, not only through the integrity and inspiration of their spirit of artistic beauty, but also through the magnificent collection of music left in their memory.

Robert G. Ruetz

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