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“The Hippopotamus That Swallowed a Nightingale”: The Life (and Recording) of Marie Wilt

By Christopher Kuner

I remember that I once heard Wilt when I was a young child...I was enraptured and walked around for days in love with that voice—for such emotions can only be compared with love.

Gustav Mahler¹

[T]he greatest voice that I have ever heard...[T]he greatest dramatic soprano that ever existed—the size of it was absolutely superhuman.

Blanche Marchesi²

Reports such as those of Mahler and Marchesi (not exactly the easiest observers to impress!) leave no doubt that the Viennese soprano Marie Wilt (ca. 1833-1891), who was regularly compared to Malibran, Grisi, Louise Dustmann, Jenny Lind, and Patti, was one of the greatest singers of the 19th century. Moreover, her life, which included many triumphs but ended in tragedy, could hardly have been more eventful had it been scripted in Hollywood, and it appears that she even made a recording (but more on that later...). Yet today she is hardly more than a footnote in most books on the history of singing.

Kutsch & Riemens give the artist's birthday as January 30, 1833, but contemporary newspaper articles are more cautious, putting it sometime between 1833 and 1835.³ Born into a poor family in Vienna as Marie Liebenthaler, her parents died in an epidemic while she was still an infant, and the doctor who treated them brought her to his sister, a Frau Tremier, who adopted her.⁴ As a child Wilt demonstrated great musical ability, and she was much affected by hearing a concert by Jenny Lind. In a well-known incident, she

¹ Quoted in Nathalie Bauer-Lechner, *Erinnerungen an Gustav Mahler*, pp. 90-91 (1984). This and all other translations from the German are by the author.

² Marchesi, *Singer's Pilgrimage*, p. 115 (Arno Press reprint 1977).

³ The singer herself always refused to give her birthday, stating in her dry Viennese humor “I was born in Vienna, but don't know exactly when; after all, I was very young then!” *Wiener Allgemeine Zeitung*, 26 September 1891, p. 4.

⁴ The best source for Wilt's early life is an article in the *Wiener Allgemeine Zeitung*, September 26, 1891, p. 3.

was presented to a famous singing teacher at the age of sixteen, who refused to take her, saying “My child, however do you want to sing—you have no voice!” Although disheartened by this experience, Wilt was encouraged by others who heard her sing in church choirs (in particular, the famous singer Desiree Artot), and she began to sing more and more in various concerts in Vienna. She then became a pupil of the famous Viennese singing teacher Joseph Gänsbacher, causing a sensation in Schubert’s oratorio “Lazarus” in 1863. Although she felt that it was too late for her to begin an operatic career (she was now in her early thirties), she was persuaded by Gänsbacher to make her stage debut in Graz in December 1865 as Donna Anna, where she enjoyed a huge success.

Covent Garden played a decisive role in Wilt’s career. She had wanted to give up her profession after she almost perished in a hotel fire in Berlin, where she had been singing Donna Anna in March 1866, but director Gye insisted on her fulfilling a contract she had entered into to sing in London, and so she debuted at Covent Garden as Norma on May 1, 1866 (under the name Marie Vilda), and also sang there in 1874-75. Her success in London was immense, and she was known as the “second Malibran”.

Wilt received offers from operatic centers as far away as America, but preferred to remain in her native city of Vienna. She became one of the great personalities of the Vienna Court Opera, and sang in the opening of the new house as Donna Elvira on May 25, 1869. She was also named a Kammersängerin in Vienna in 1869. One of her greatest successes was in the soprano solos of Beethoven’s *Missa Solemnis*, which she sang at the Musikverein on Beethoven’s 100th birthday (December 17, 1870). Her greatest successes at the Vienna Court Opera were as Leonora (*Trovatore*), Aida, Norma, Lucrezia Borgia, Armida, Valentine, Alice (*Robert le Diable*), Bertha, Donna Anna, Donna Elvira, Konstanze, and the Queen of the Night. As can be seen from her roles, she had an enormous range (of three octaves), which allowed her to sing both contralto and high soprano parts.

In Wagner, she sang only Ortrud and Elisabeth in Vienna, but was acclaimed as the three Brünnhildes in Leipzig, which she sang in 1879. Other highlights were her appearance as Aida in the first performance of Verdi’s opera in Vienna in 1874, and her performance as Sulamith in the world premier of Goldmark’s *Queen of Sheba* (also in Vienna) on March 10, 1875. She also sang at the Frankfurt Opera (where she was a member of the ensemble from 1880-82), and sang Donna Elvira at the performance celebrating the 100th anniversary of Mozart’s opera in Salzburg in 1887. Wilt had a special feeling for the Budapest Opera, where she often sang, and was good friends with Franz Erkel, the composer of “Hunyadi Laszlo”; she left a sizeable bequest to the Budapest Opera in her will.

Aside from her supreme vocal talent, Wilt was associated in the popular mind with two characteristics, namely stinginess and physical ugliness. She had spent most of her youth learning how to cook, sew, and clean house, and this, combined with the feeling that, as an orphan, she was always dependent on the charity of others, made her extremely frugal.

She was renowned for doing all her own shopping and cleaning, and was fond of saying “tenacity always leads to success.”⁵

The most vivid recollection of the dichotomy between Wilt’s homely appearance and the effect that her singing had comes from Blanche Marchesi, who notes that “she was of exaggerated proportions, very tall and immensely fat. Nobody could say that she was anything but ugly, but her smile was kindness itself, and she could laugh wholeheartedly, like a child.”⁶ Marchesi also gives a vivid description of Wilt in the role of Ophelia:

“When Marie Wilt came out in Ambroise Thomas’ *Hamlet* as Ophelia, even the Viennese public, who admired and worshiped her wonderful, unique voice, could not refrain from smiling, and some even hid their faces in their hands or closed their eyes tightly from the moment she appeared on the stage. I see her appearing in the Mad Scene; the chorus girls standing on both sides instantly became pygmies by contrast. She stands there, a head taller than anyone, clad in a heavy, ungraceful white cashmere dress, her hair made up in the fashion of about 1850, crowned with an enormous wreath of what you would call seaweed, falling over her face, and especially falling in front between her eyes.”⁷

Marchesi goes on to say that “if she had been twice as big and twice as funny her singing would always have carried her audience away”.⁸ She called her “the hippopotamus that had swallowed a nightingale”, but adds that “in my remembrance the nightingale only survived, and I mention her physical defects to show how great was the power of her art”.⁹ Wilt was fond of self-deprecating humor about her appearance; once, when someone asked her why she never appeared in Paris, she answered that she did not wish to learn what “fat cow” (*dicke Dudl*) was in French!

A well-known incident also illustrated how great was the power of Wilt’s art: the famous cartoonist Josephine Gallmeyer wanted to draw a caricature of Wilt, and requested a session in which to sketch her. The singer, who had been enjoying a triumph at the Vienna Court Opera as Aida, began the session by singing “Ritorna vincitor!”. Gallmeyer was overcome with emotion, and told her, “No, my dear Wilt, I cannot parody you!”¹⁰

Unfortunately, like so many famous singers, Wilt’s professional success was far in excess of her personal happiness. At the age of 16 her adoptive family caused her to become

⁵ Motto on a handwritten autographed card by Wilt (dated February 25, 1871) in the collection of the author.

⁶ Singer’s Pilgrimage, p. 115.

⁷ Ibid. 115-116.

⁸ Ibid. p. 116

⁹ Ibid. p. 116.

¹⁰ Wiener Allgemeine Zeitung, September 26 1891, p. 4.

engaged to the Viennese engineer Franz Wilt, who seems to have had no understanding of his wife's talents, and whom she married at the age of 18. Wilt finally divorced her husband in 1878, as a condition of which he obliged her to leave the Vienna Court Opera.¹¹ In the subsequent years the singer admitted in interviews that she had a series of affairs.¹² While still impressive, Wilt's vocal faculties began to decline as she entered her fifties, and the end of her stage career caused her to become depressed.¹³ Wilt had always led a lonely existence despite her stage successes, which she movingly described in a short autobiographical piece reprinted after her death:

“There have been few incidents in my career which would give rise to great public interest. I have led a quiet and peaceful existence; the difficult storms which I had to undergo and which often disturbed my peace of mind always took place inside me, outside the public view. I often had to put up with deep, bitter pain, but always tried to conceal it from the outside world. I never forced my personal trials or heartbreak on the public and always avoided bringing the pain which I had to bear into the public view and never used it as a way to advance my career.”¹⁴

In 1889, while in her late fifties, she became infatuated with a law student in his early twenties known in newspaper reports only as “Herr Dr. W”, and followed him on his travels to Monaco and other places. Her feelings were apparently reciprocated for a time, but he soon tired of Wilt and she then began pursuing her lover and indulging in public scenes to persuade him to return to her.

Wilt's infatuation for the young man led to her becoming estranged from her family. Her son-in-law Heinrich Gottinger, a singer with the Graz opera who has passed into total obscurity, told the newspapers of horrible scenes that Wilt supposedly made. Because of her extreme frugality, Wilt had become quite wealthy, with a fortune estimated at approximately half a million florins, and from reading contemporary newspaper articles one cannot dispel the impression that this played a role in her family's desire to have her break off her infatuation for Herr W.¹⁵ But the incident that seems to have provoked a crisis in the singer's life was her gift of 100,000 florins (a huge sum at that time) to a foundation she set up to provide a dormitory for needy law students at the University of Graz, in an unsuccessful attempt to win back Herr W's affections.

¹¹ Wiener Fremden-Blatt, September 25 1891, p. 4.

¹² Österreichische Volks-Zeitung, September 25, 1891. In one instance she apparently became infatuated with a Russian nobleman (referred to only as “Dr. Herzenstein”), and pursued him as far as Odessa. Wiener Allgemeine Zeitung, 26 September 1891, p. 3.

¹³ Wilt's last stage appearance in Vienna was on January 28, 1886, as Norma. Wiener Fremden-Blatt, September 26, 1891, p. 5.

¹⁴ Wiener Fremden-Blatt, 26 September 1891, pp. 5-6.

¹⁵ Contemporary newspaper accounts noted this possibility, e.g., Wiener Allgemeine Zeitung, 27 September 1891, p. 3.

After this bequest failed to have the desired effect, Wilt's state of mind began to deteriorate. She had been committed to an asylum by her family for several weeks in the summer of 1891, but in an interview claimed that she had been perfectly sane and was finally able to gain her freedom after legal intervention. Her emotional anguish was demonstrated when she sang Konstanze's murderously difficult "Martern aller Arten" at a concert in Salzburg on July 17 later that year. While newspaper accounts praised her virtuosity and remaining beauty of voice, they also noted that her voice was not what it had been, and that she was visibly nervous, while Wilt herself said in interviews that she had been nearly petrified with fear and had only gotten through the aria by a great act of will.

The celebrated Viennese psychologist Dr. Holländer admitted her to his clinic for a period of rest in September 1891, where she talked incessantly about her lost vocal beauty and the loss of her young lover. On September 24, 1891, she left the clinic, ostensibly for a visit to the dentist, but instead (according to some witnesses) met a young man in front of St. Stephan's cathedral, and spent approximately an hour in animated discussion with him.¹⁶ After he left, she ran into a house at Stephansdom no. 6 (not far from the "Figarohaus", where Mozart wrote his immortal masterpiece), ran up to an empty room on the 4th floor, and jumped to her death (whereby she narrowly missed crushing a servant girl named Johanna). The leap to her death occurred at precisely 16:27, which is known since she fell on her pocket watch.

Wilt's suicide caused a sensation reported on for days in the Viennese press. She left no suicide note or other indication of what the reason was for taking her own life, but Herr Gottinger told the newspapers that his mother-in-law was mentally deranged; however, newspaper commentators differed as to whether her suicide was the result of mental illness or just a broken heart, and some felt that Wilt's family was suggesting she was deranged in order to contest her will, in which she had left large sums of money to various charities.¹⁷ Her funeral on September 27, 1891 and burial in the Zentralfriedhof in Vienna was attended by thousands and by a number of famous colleagues, many of whom (such as Gustav Walter) also sent wreaths.

But finally to the recording, which must be the earliest one in history made by a great singer, and is described in a contemporary newspaper article:

"In 1889 a phonograph was demonstrated at a soiree of the association 'Erholung' in Budapest. Frau Wilt, Sophie Menter and other ladies were present as guests of the association. There was naturally great amazement at the 'demonic'

¹⁶ However, there was disagreement among the witnesses as to whether these people were indeed Wilt and her former lover. Wiener Allgemeine Zeitung, September 26, 1891, p. 3.

¹⁷ A few days before her death she had entered into a large annuity with an insurance company, which is hardly something one would expect of a potential suicide. Wilt's family contested the annuity and her will after her death, but history has not recorded what the result was. Contrary to what Marchesi says in her book, it seems that Wilt did not in fact leave any money to her ex-lover Dr. W.

contraption. Frau Wilt was delighted as the words ‘the phonograph is playing and greets the association’ sounded from the funnel. Herr Gaßt sang into the machine, which then played back his voice. Frau Wilt then stepped before the machine, sang a run as only she could sing one, and held a high D for fourteen seconds. All were silent as the phonograph began to reproduce the run clearly, but with a pronounced tremolo. ‘Heavens! Does my voice really have such a tremolo?’ asked the surprised artist. However, the machine had been positioned so that it was not level, and at the second playing reproduced the run purely and correctly. The owner of the phonograph requested permission to ‘hold on to’ the run, which the artist agreed to only after much persuasion.”¹⁸

From this report the phonograph must have been a great novelty at that time, and was able to reproduce a singer’s voice with reasonable fidelity when set up properly. All vocal record collectors can identify with the unnamed phonograph owner who pleaded (successfully) with Marie Wilt to be allowed to retain this unique memento of her voice.

Of course, the recording must have long since been lost or destroyed. Or could it be that, somewhere in a cellar or attic in Budapest, there still exists, long-forgotten, the sole recording of “the greatest dramatic soprano that ever existed”?

¹⁸ Wiener Allgemeine Zeitung, September 26, 1891, p. 4.