

## Nina Morgana

*Soprano Nina Morgana was born in Buffalo, New York, on November 15, 1891. She sang locally in Buffalo churches and schools from the age of four, but her performances at the Pan-American Exposition's Venice in America venue in 1901 presented her talents to a larger audience. The family of seven children was remarkable not only for her success, but also her siblings' successes. In addition to her brother Dante Morgana (who, as she mentions in the interview, became a nationally known eye surgeon), her brother Emilio Morgana entered the priesthood and became a close friend of the friar-author Thomas Merton. Another brother, Charles Morgana (né Giuseppe Carlo Morgana), was an automotive inventor and a close associate of Henry Ford. His older sister, Angelina Morgana, followed their brother Dante into medical school, where she became the only female in her class in the Medical Department (as it was then known) of the University of Buffalo. Nina Morgana auditioned for Enrico Caruso during one of his concerts in Buffalo in 1908. After hearing her, Caruso arranged for her to study with Teresa Arkel, the legendary soprano and vocal instructor, from 1909-1915. After a successful debut at La Scala in 1915, Morgana joined Caruso as his "assisting artist" (as she was billed on programs) for concert tours in the United States from 1917-1919.*

*You and Beniamino Gigli made your Metropolitan Opera debuts during the same season, am I correct?*

In the same season, yes, and less than twenty-four hours apart: Gigli made his as Faust in Boito's *Mefistofele* on November 26, 1920, and I made mine as Gilda in *Rigoletto* on November 27. But strictly speaking, my debut was not my first performance at the Met. Several months earlier, on March 28, I sang three arias at a Sunday Night Concert, with Pasquale Amato and [violinist] Albert Spalding also on the program.

*Was Caruso was to have sung the Duke in your debut in Rigoletto?*

Yes, but he was not available,<sup>1</sup> so Mario Chamlee was cast as the Duke. Giuseppe De Luca sang *Rigoletto*. Chamlee and De Luca were also my partners in *Barber of Seville* during that same season. I also sang Nedda in *Pagliacci* with Edward Johnson as Canio and Antonio Scotti as Tonio in my debut season. I was to have sung *Pagliacci* with Caruso originally.

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<sup>1</sup> On the day of her Metropolitan Opera debut (Saturday, November 27, 1920) Caruso sang a matinee performance of *La forza del destino*, and hence would not have sung an evening performance that same day.

*In operatic circles, it is widely known that you were discovered by Caruso. When and where did this “discovery” take place?*

I can tell you precisely: it was on Saturday, May 9, 1908, at 3:00 p.m., in Buffalo, New York, in one of the four suites on the top floor of the Iroquois Hotel. I can be more specific by telling you that Caruso’s suite was the one atop the front of the hotel, which faced Eagle Street. The hotel, which had one-thousand rooms, was still new at that time; it had opened for business in conjunction with the Pan-American Exposition, which was held in Buffalo in 1901.

*You performed at the Pan-American Exposition, correct?*

Yes, I sang there in an exhibition called “Venice in America,” on the midway. I was nine years old, and was billed as “Baby Patti” or “Child Patti” in the [Buffalo] newspapers.

*It was at the Pan-American Exposition, on June 13, 1901, that President William McKinley was assassinated. Do you recall anything about that tragic day?*

The only memory I have is hearing adults around me saying very agitatedly, “The President has been shot! The President has been shot!” I was too young to know what “being shot” meant—and I also didn’t know what “president” meant, much less who the president was. When I asked my parents about it, they tried to explain to me that in the United States, the president was “the king.” Well, I didn’t know what a “king” was, so I just accepted the fact that someone important had been hurt in some way.

*When you auditioned for Caruso, do you recall what you sang?*

I sang “Caro nome.” Just the “Caro nome,” without the recitative. When I finished, Caruso patted me on the cheek and told my father, who came with me, that I had a very promising voice. He told us that I would have to study in Italy, and he said he would write a letter on my behalf to the great Teresa Arkel, asking her to accept me as a pupil. He did so, and about a year later, my father and I sailed to Italy. During the day, while I was at Mme. Arkel’s having my lessons, my father worked as a laborer.

*Regrettably, Teresa Arkel made recordings before the technology was able to capture the voice adequately. Have you heard any of her recordings, and if so, did she sound like them at all?*

I’ve heard two of them, and if Francis Robinson, who played them for me, hadn’t told me whom I was hearing, I would never have guessed that the voice on the recording was Mme. Arkel’s. In the large music room of her estate, where we sang as her pupils, she would demonstrate phrases for us. Even

though she was long retired, she could still trill on the F above high-C. I heard her do that many, many times. Like Lilli Lehmann, and in a way Emma Calvé, now that I think of it, Mme. Arkel was from an era in which there were no distinctions among lyric, lirico-spinto, dramatic, and coloratura sopranos. Her repertoire consisted of more than one hundred roles.

*As a teacher, was she from one of the schools such as the Garcia or Lamperti school of singing? For instance, what sorts of vocalizes did she use in her teaching? And did she distinguish among the various registers and how to negotiate the transitions between them?*

We learned solfeggio and sang scales upward and downward from the middle of our range. As for registers, she regarded the notion of a vocal “register” as a fiction. I distinctly remember a discussion she had with Frieda Hempel when she came to visit Mme. Arkel. Hempel talked with her about the placement of tones, and covering tones, and how many registers there were. Mme. Arkel said, “There is only *extension*”—by which she meant range—“and the voice extends from the lowest note to the highest note. There are no *registers*.”

*Back to your audition with Caruso, obviously he detected the youthful promise in your voice, just as he did several years later with the young Rosa Ponselle. Looking back, what do you think he heard in your voice that prompted him to refer you to Teresa Arkel?*

Well, whatever he heard was not what Mme. Arkel heard! In his letter to her, Caruso had written that he believed my voice would become a *mezzo-sopranone*, or in English, “a great big mezzo-soprano.” When I sang for Mme. Arkel, however, she said that my voice would be fine for roles like Lucia, Amina in *Sonnambula*, and Adina in *Elisir d’amore*, which require an exceptional top. And I had one, too. By the time I left Mme. Arkel, I could sing the G above high-C effortlessly. But vocally, I was certainly not going to be singing Mamma Lucia in *Cavalleria rusticana*.

*When you studied in Italy, was Caruso as famous there as he was in the U.S.?*

Actually, no. His recordings were well-known and hence his name was well-known, but since 1903 he had been at the Metropolitan Opera, not La Scala or one of the other houses in Italy. The tenor who was admired when I was studying in Italy—not just admired, but *adored*—was Giuseppe Anselmi. He was as famous there as Caruso was in the U.S. Giuseppe Anselmi, whom I heard several times, had a gorgeous voice and a perfect technique, and was also extraordinarily handsome. Anselmi was “all the rage,” so to say, as was Maria Galvany among sopranos. It was Galvany, not Melba, who was adored in Italy, yet in America she was almost unknown other than on recordings.

*I find it interesting that you pronounce her surname as “Gal-va-nee,” with the accent on the “y.” As you may know, there is a young singer who has the same surname, Marisa Galvany, but she places the accent on the second syllable.*

I don't know anything about this young singer. What I do know is that Maria Galvany pronounced her name exactly as I said it. I know so because I was introduced to her.

*Returning to Giuseppe Anselmi, there was another tenor who sang during Anselmi's time, Alessandro Bonci, whom some historians claim was the equal of Caruso in certain roles. Did you see Bonci, and if so, what was your assessment of him?*

The distance between Caruso and Bonci as tenors was about the size of the Grand Canyon. They had nothing at all in common, either vocally or as men. In Italy, it was rumored that Bonci was an unethical man. He had played some part in obtaining a forged letter from Verdi, giving Bonci supposed permission to sing the “É scherzo od è follia” in a unique way. I heard a recording of it, and Bonci's performance was different yet acceptable. But he was still in disrepute because he had paid someone to forge the letter from Verdi.

I saw Bonci as Faust in Boito's *Mefistofele*, in which he was wearing an overstated costume topped by a large hat with an even larger feather protruding from it. Frankly, he looked silly on the stage. Vocally, his singing was pleasant enough, and it reminded me somewhat of Lauri-Volpi because both of them had exceptional high ranges. But Lauri-Volpi was handsome onstage, whereas Bonci was a feather-bearing little man in a ridiculous-looking costume with high-heeled boots.

*Earlier, you mentioned having sung with Edward Johnson in *Pagliacci* at the Met. When Johnson's name is mentioned in connection with the Metropolitan Opera, it is usually in reference to his tenure as General Manager, not as one of its significant tenors. Do you recall the first time you heard him sing?*

Yes, in Italy in 1910. I sang with him there in *Elisir d'amore*. At the time, he was singing under the Italianized name “Eduardo di Giovanni.”

*Where in Italy did you make your debut?*

My very first performance on an opera stage was as the hidden forest bird in *Siegfried*, at the Teatro Dal Verme. Tullio Serafin, who was young and handsome—his hair was brown and thick in those days—had come to Mme. Arkel to ask if she had a pupil who could sing the part. She told him that I could do it, and I did—I sang it hidden in a papier-mâché tree. Giuseppe Borgatti was the star of the performance.

I was also in the premiere of *Der Rosenkavalier* at La Scala on March 1, 1911, which was led by Serafin. The cast included Lucrezia Bori in the breeches role of Octavian, Inès Maria Ferraris as Sophie, and Pavel Ludikar as Baron Ochs. During one of the curtain calls with the full cast, I held Strauss's hand.

*At the Met, Lucrezia Bori and Edward Johnson were famously paired as Romeo and Juliet. But you knew both singers in Italy a decade before you made your Met debut?*

Bori and Johnson were perfect for each other in *Romeo et Juliette*. And, yes, I sang a number of performances with Johnson at the Met. But his best partner among sopranos was Lucrezia Bori, not Nina Morgana. I'm sure you have heard recordings of Bori, but have you seen photographs of her?

*Yes, mostly studio portraits but a few candid ones, in various books about the history of the Met.*

Most of her publicity photos were taken [of her] in profile, or else at an angle, rather than facing the camera lens. She had an ocular condition called *strabismus*, which laypeople refer to as having a "lazy eye" or, less kindly, as being "cross-eyed." When she was relaxed, Bori's right eye would tend to drift toward her nose. My brother, Dante Morgana, a premiere ophthalmologist and surgeon, gave her exercises to train the muscles of her right eye to keep the eyeball centered.

*Although fate deprived you of the opportunity to sing Pagliacci with Caruso, you sang not only Nedda but other major roles with almost all of the legendary tenors who inherited Caruso's repertoire.*

My best roles were Nedda in *Pagliacci*, Micaela in *Carmen*, and Musetta in *Bohème*. Although I also sang Mimi in *Bohème*, [General Manager Giulio] Gatti-Casazza said that I was not only better as Musetta, but that I was the best Musetta of the several sopranos who sang the role under his management.

*Do you recall some of the casts in your performances of those operas?*

I sang my first Micaela in *Carmen* with Giovanni Martinelli and Miguel Fleta alternating as Don José, and with José Mardones as Escamillo. I know of no other *basso profondo* who could sing Escamillo—later, Pinza sang it, but his voice was a less powerful lyric *basso* compared to José Mardones' voice. Mardones' range was so marvelous that he could sing Escamillo easily and convincingly. In some of my performances in *Pagliacci*, Antonio Scotti sang Tonio and the "new boy," Lawrence Tibbett, was Silvio.

In the 1924-1925 season, in a new production of *Tales of Hoffmann*, I sang the part of the mechanical doll Olympia, with Miguel Fleta as Hoffmann. In that

production, Bori sang the roles of Giulietta and Antonia, and she did them great distinction. Later, Queena Mario sang Antonia, but with no distinction at all. Perhaps you know that Queena Mario's birth name was Helen Tillotson, a perfectly fine name. She claimed that [conductor and coach Wilfrid] Pelletier, to whom she was married at the time, had suggested the stupid name "Queen," but I think she made it up herself. I used to make her mad by asking, "If you have a brother, is his name Kinga?"

*You sang several times with Giovanni Martinelli, who, perhaps with the sole exception of Caruso, seems to have been beloved by everyone, even by the other great tenors of that era.*

I sang Eudoxie in the revival of *La Juive* with Martinelli as Éleazar, Leon Rothier as the Cardinal, and Rosa Ponselle as Rachel, the role she had created [at the Met] with Caruso in 1919. In fact, other than Martinelli singing Éleazar in place of Caruso, the revival had almost the same cast as the [Met] premiere. Ponselle sang most of the performances, but not all of them. Florence Easton sang several Rachels, as did Elisabeth Rethberg later.

Among the other great tenors of that period, I sang with Giacomo Lauri-Volpi for the first time in *Rigoletto* in 1926, with De Luca and Mardones. For that performance, with Gatti-Casazza's consent, I made a change in Gilda's costume: I wore a pink gown in the first scene. I also sang with Lauri-Volpi in *Africana*, with Ponselle as Selika, and I sang with him again in *Pagliacci* in the 1929-1930 season. In *Africana*, Gigli was cast instead of Lauri-Volpi in several of the performances I was in, and Florence Easton replaced Ponselle in some of them. Most were conducted by Serafin.

*Do you recall the tenors with whom you sang in Bohème?*

As I said earlier, Musetta one of my best and most frequent roles, and I was especially fortunate to sing several performances with Lauri-Volpi as Rodolfo [in 1932]. A few times, Rodolfo was sung by Martinelli. It's not a role that one would immediately associate with him, but the color of Martinelli's voice was light enough for it, and he restrained the volume of his clarion voice. I also sang some performances with Armand Tokatyan, who was a very fine tenor and deserves to be remembered better today.

I was fortunate to be in the opera house on the opening night of the 1921-22 season, when Gigli sang Alfredo to Galli-Curci's Violetta at her debut. I knew Galli-Curci before then. Both of us had sung in Chicago during Mary Garden's time as the general manager there.

*What do you recall of Elisir d'amore when you sang it with Gigli?*

My first *Elisir* with Gigli was in March 1930. I sang Adina with Gigli, De Luca, and Pinza, with Serafin conducting. I wasn't cast for that performance—Editha Fleischer was supposed to sing it—but I got the last-minute call from Gatti-Casazza, and I went on in her place. I did it well enough that he kept me with the same cast for several more performances. I also sang *Elisir* with Tito Schipa as Nemorino.

*How did Gigli and Schipa compare in Elisir?*

Both of them were excellent as Nemorino, and both received ample applause for “Quanto è bella,” which is a better indicator than “Una furtiva lagrima” of the fit between the voice and the characterization of Nemorino. In that role, Beniamino Gigli was the *perfect* Nemorino.

*Even more so than Caruso, whom you saw and heard in Elisir?*

I saw five performances of *Elisir* with Caruso as Nemorino, and I heard him sing “Una furtiva lagrima,” either as a published selection or as an encore, during the concerts I did with him. As my late husband, Bruno Zirato, wrote in his book and said in radio interviews, Caruso never received more than cursory applause after “Quanto è bella.” As soon as he made his exit, he would exclaim to Bruno, “Pigs! They are pigs, these people in the audience! I give everything I have to ‘Quanto è bella,’ and they do not applaud!” Yet every time Gigli sang “Quanto e bella,” the audience would erupt in applause.

*To what do you attribute the difference in the audiences' reactions to Caruso and Gigli in that aria?*

There were two factors, in my opinion, and I will try to explain them as precisely as I can. The main factor was Caruso's splendid recordings of “Una furtiva lagrima,” of which he made two versions for the Victor Talking Machine Company—the first one with piano accompaniment [in 1904], and a subsequent one with an orchestra [in 1908]. Both versions were staples of the Victor Company catalogs in their day, and those recordings sold by the thousands.

Consequently, Metropolitan Opera audiences came to *Elisir d'amore* to hear Caruso sing “Una furtiva lagrima.” Had he recorded “Quanto è bella,” the audiences probably would have applauded him as ardently as they did after he sang “Una furtiva lagrima.” But other than that aria and “Venti scudi,” which he made with De Luca, Caruso never recorded anything else from *Elisir d'amore*.

*You were present at the ill-fated performance of Elisir d'amore at the Brooklyn Academy, when the performance had to be halted at the end of the first act*

*because a blood vessel burst in Caruso's throat. Weren't you to have sung Adina in that performance?*

That happened on Saturday, December 11, 1920, and yes, I was to have sung Adina. The day before the performance, however, Gatti-Casazza told me that for a variety of reasons—none of which he explained—he would have to give that performance to Evelyn Scotney. I didn't object, nor could I have objected to "the boss," and I assumed that there would be many future performances in which I could sing with Caruso.

*What do you remember about the trauma of that event?*

Early in the first act, before "Quanto è bella," a small vein hemorrhaged in Caruso's throat. He was still able to sing, but a trickle of blood formed on his lower lip, and in order to wipe it away, he used the neckerchief of his costume. Between phrases, he would dab his lips on the kerchief to blot the blood. In the wings, when Gatti realized what was happening, he motioned to Bruno to rush to get more kerchiefs. One by one, those were passed from the wings to Caruso, and as each became saturated with his blood, he put it in the circular well that was part of the scenery.

At the close of the act, Caruso was examined by a doctor who had been called before the performance. The doctor was called because Caruso noticed a small amount of blood when he was gargling in his dressing room. I don't know what the doctor did—I was not near him when he was treating Caruso—but there was an air of gloom backstage.

As I was standing near an elevator, Gatti saw me, and he pointed to his nose and said to me, "Che naso!"—in other words, in English, "What a nose I have," meaning that he had had a sort of premonition, and for that reason had not wanted me to sing Adina that day. I didn't believe him, although I nodded politely when he said it. I think that when he saw me, he just felt that he should say something because he knew that I was disappointed by his decision to replace me with Evelyn Scotney.

*On the topic of Caruso and Gigli, you mentioned that there were two factors in the difference in audiences' receptions of Gigli and Caruso as Nemorino. The first, as you explained, was attributable to Caruso's recordings of "Una furtiva lagrima." What was the second factor?*

Although Caruso could portray a bumpkin onstage, and even in a movie [*My Cousin*, produced by Jesse Lasky and released in 1918], his *persona* was inherently unlike the character of Nemorino. Gigli, who was sweet, kind, and generous, was basically a simple man who had an extraordinarily beautiful voice. Caruso, by contrast, was a complex man who, over the years, had

acquired a level of sophistication which was reflected in every aspect of his daily life.

*Would you give us some examples of how that sophistication was manifested in Caruso's lifestyle?*

With his extraordinary success came, of course, an ever-expanding personal wealth, which enabled him to acquire the finest of everything—the finest clothing, the finest automobiles, the finest homes, the finest *objets d'art*, and even the finest cigarettes, which were made exclusively for him from a special Egyptian tobacco. Every fabric, whether it was the material of his shirts, ties, and handkerchiefs, or the sheets and pillowcases on his bed, was the most luxurious that money could buy, or else he would not have owned them.

I cannot think of another artist who appreciated luxury more than Caruso. Well, let me amend that because I *can* think of one: Feodor Chaliapin. But I can't think of another *tenor* who appreciated luxury more than Caruso did. He had risen from near-poverty in Naples, and when he became famous and wealthy, he indulged in luxury—almost boyishly so, in certain ways.

To give you an example, when he retired to bed at night, Caruso wanted to be surrounded by goose-down pillows from head to foot. So, at his bedtime, my husband Bruno, who was his secretary, would delicately place one large pillow under Caruso's head, and would systematically place six identical pillows around his body—two on each side for his arms and legs, and two at his feet. Bruno said that the expression on Caruso's face, as he closed his eyes and then spread his fingers on the pillows, was as tender and serene as a little boy's.

*Did Caruso ever speak of Gigli in your presence?*

Indeed! Not only did he speak of Gigli, he discreetly attended a performance of *Cavalleria rusticana* in which Gigli sang Turiddu. Caruso didn't attend the performance expressly to hear Gigli, but rather to be present for a triple bill that included the American premiere of a ballet called *Il carillon magico*. The star of the ballet was Rosina Galli, who was Gatti-Casazza's *paramour* at the time.

Caruso also came to see *L'Oracolo* with his old friend Antonio Scotti. *L'Oracolo* was part of the triple bill, as was *Cavalleria* with Gigli and Emmy Destinn. Backstage afterward, Caruso not only congratulated Gigli but embraced him as well. A day or so later, he drew a wonderful caricature of Gigli, which he had Bruno hand-deliver to the Ansonia Hotel, where Gigli was living.

*Caruso is quoted as having said, "He could have waited until I died," or words to that effect. Did he say that in your presence?*

He never made any such comment. First of all, it was entirely out of character for Caruso to make any negative remark about another singer. Being a public figure, a “celebrity” as we would say today, Caruso was acutely aware that anything he said would be repeated, if not quoted, in one of the newspapers. So, he weighed his words very carefully when he was in the presence of others—which was most of the time.

What Caruso said in *my* presence after the triple-bill with Gigli in *Cavalleria* was, “I used to sound like that when I was young.” He said that matter-of-factly, not ruefully, and certainly not enviously. The way he said it was not that Gigli *literally* had the same voice that Caruso did when he was young. Rather, he meant that one would expect a young, very gifted tenor to have the lyric sound that Gigli had.

*Caruso would have had no reason to envy Gigli’s success in Chénier, in other words?*

Of course not! And that alleged comment about “waiting until I died” implies that Caruso was somehow preoccupied with death. But the fact was that he had a new wife and a new daughter, and he seemed to us, and certainly to his doctors, to be recovering from the illness he had suffered. He had *empyema*, which as my doctor-brother Dante explained to me, was an abscess that had formed in Caruso’s pleural cavity. When he and Dorothy and their daughter Gloria sailed for Italy, where he could relax and regain his stamina, he looked well, although he had lost twenty pounds or more.

*To be clear, then, you place no stock in the often-repeated statement, “At least they could have waited until I died,” which Caruso is alleged to have said when Gigli was given the Met premiere of Andrea Chénier?*

I don’t put any stock in it because it is contradicted by Caruso’s regard for Gigli when he heard him as Turiddu—and the caricature he drew of Gigli is the evidence I would point to. Caruso never caricatured *anyone* he didn’t like or didn’t admire. But suppose, for the sake of the allegation, that Caruso did say it. If so, he would have been referring to Gatti-Casazza, not Gigli, because it was Gatti who assigned and approved every cast. Beniamino Gigli didn’t cast Beniamino Gigli, Giulio Gatti-Casazza was the one who cast Beniamino Gigli—and every other artist at the Metropolitan Opera.

*Do you remember the Met premiere of Andrea Chénier?*

Yes, very clearly. I was in the Caruso box with Dorothy [Caruso] for the first in-house performance of *Andrea Chénier* on March 7, 1921. The premiere was supposed to be on February 26, but Gigli was ill and it had to be postponed. He sang a performance in Philadelphia a few days before the in-house premiere

[March 1], but I wasn't there [in Philadelphia] so I can't speak about it. But the first in-house performance of *Chénier* was superb!

When Gigli sang “Un dì all'azzurro spazio,” it almost had to be repeated because of the prolonged applause. I have heard many performances of *Andrea Chenier* since then, but no tenor I have ever heard could match Gigli for vocal beauty in that role. But he was not the only star of the show: Claudia Muzio was Maddalena, and she too was unmatched in that role. That's not just my opinion, but the opinion of Rosa Raisa and Rosa Ponselle. Both of them said in my presence, at different times, that Muzio had no equal as Maddalena.

*What was Caruso's reaction, if you know, to the premiere of Andrea Chénier with Gigli?*

A few days after the premiere, Bruno and I were having supper with Caruso in his apartment, and he asked me how Gigli had done. I said that I thought he had done very well, and that the audience had reacted very favorably. I was never less than honest with Caruso—even at his expense. One time, I asked him why he sang two and three phrases in one breath when it would be more artistic to take breaths in the appropriate spots. Although Bruno probably wanted to strangle me for being so brazen, Caruso answered me by saying, “That's emotion”—meaning, that's how he felt when he was singing, and that's how he conveyed in his voice what he felt emotionally.

As far as *Andrea Chénier* is concerned, keep in mind that Caruso had sung it in London at an earlier point in his career. He was more than familiar with [the opera], and he was pleased that Gigli had done well at the premiere. As I said before, Caruso *liked* Gigli, and had no reason whatsoever to envy him.

*Do you have any idea how Gigli regarded Caruso?*

Yes, he regarded Caruso as we all did—as the *King*. In deference to him, we addressed him as “The Master” when conversing with him.

*What do you recall of Gigli's Met debut?*

What I remember the most was how exciting it was to hear such an exquisite tenor voice! The beauty of Gigli's voice was almost beyond description! I have heard most of the great tenors, the tenor “stars,” for nearly seventy years—and not one of them had a voice more beautiful than Beniamino Gigli's voice. Now, at that time he had a tendency to turn toward the audience in “Dai campi, dai prati” and other solo moments, which was acceptable in many Italian [opera] houses. But Gigli's voice was so inherently beautiful that his tendency to sing to the audience was not that objectionable, at least not to me.

*Was Faust in Mefistofele his best role during his debut season?*

No, not compared to his Nemorino, nor to his Turiddu in *Cavalleria rusticana*. His Turiddu was better than his Faust, in my opinion. It wasn't the "Siciliana" [in *Cavalleria*] so much as the "Brindisi" and "Mamma! quel vino," which he sang with complete abandon, yet without ever forcing his voice.

*In what other roles do you recall hearing Gigli during the early years of his Met career?*

I heard him in *Tosca* with Destinn, but I would have to say that he was not up to her standards as an actor-singer. He sang the music beautifully, of course—but unlike, say, Turiddu, he couldn't convey the proper emotion for Cavaradossi during that early part of his Met career. It wasn't just that he was not an actor, and was not conventionally handsome. I don't know how to say it except that the role was "above" Gigli at that point in his career. He didn't have the demeanor of a poet in that role. By comparison, Lauri-Volpi had it in abundance.

I remember Gigli's first Edgardo in *Lucia* during his debut season, and it was excellent in every way. Edgardo is a vocal role, not really a dramatic role, although the last act requires at least a modicum of acting. But one *listens* to *Lucia*, not *watches* it, because the roles are static and most of the music, especially the Sextet and the Mad Scene, is so familiar to audiences through recordings and radio broadcasts.

*On the subject of broadcasts, you sang with Gigli in one of the earliest Saturday matinee broadcasts, am I correct?*

Yes. Radio became more and more important in the early and middle-1930s. I remember singing Inès in one of the first radio broadcasts from the Met [on March 19, 1933], with Gigli as Vasco and Rethberg as Selika. But the most memorable broadcast I can recall was the silver-anniversary gala for Gatti-Casazza [on February 26, 1933]. Lily Pons sang the *Lucia* Sextet with Lauri-Volpi, Tancredi Pasero—what a voice!—and Armando Borgioli, and dear old Angelo Badà. The broadcast was quite special because Alma Gluck spoke on the air, and [Marcella] Sembrich and [Ernestine] Schumann-Heink were present for the gala.

Gigli also had a very memorable appearance in a broadcast that was billed as a "surprise party" in 1932. Certain parts of the playbill were titled after dishes that one would find on a restaurant menu—one scene was called "Russian Caviar," another was "Wiener Schnitzel," and "French Champaign." I sang in the one called "Italian Minestrone" on the playbill. In the "French Champaign" segment, Gigli came onstage in the costume of Carmen and sang the "Habanera." Not in falsetto, but in his real voice.

*You mentioned Lily Pons singing in the Lucia Sextet at Gatti-Casazza's silver-anniversary gala. I believe you sang in the Sextet at his farewell gala in March 1935.*

The *Lucia* Sextet was the opening selection of the farewell for Gatti, but the most talked-about performance of that Gala was Melchior singing the last act of *Otello* with Elisabeth Rethberg.<sup>2</sup>

Five days after that farewell gala, I sang my last performance at the Met. It was in *Bohème*—I sang Musetta, and Rethberg sang Mimi. It was a Saturday matinee broadcast, and a fragment of it was recorded. I have heard it, but the sound quality is so poor that I can barely make out my own voice. So, the only sound recordings I have of my voice are the tests I made for Victor, which Caruso made possible.

*Were you present for any of Caruso's recording sessions?*

Just once, when he recorded "Rachel! Quand du Seigneur," in September 1920. He invited me to come to the Victor studios with Bruno. [Caruso] recorded something else that day—a song, but I can't recall its title now. Of course, Bruno was at all of Caruso's recording sessions from 1917 until 1920. The first one he was present for was the recording of the Rigoletto Quartet and the Lucia Sextet in January 1917.

*Do you recall seeing a test recording of the opening tenor measures of "Bella figlia dell'amore," which Caruso sang? The test recording was cut off when the others in the ensemble began to sing.*

Yes, we had a copy of it. Caruso inscribed the label to himself—either "To Enrico from Enrico," or "To Caruso from Caruso," something of that sort.

*Do you still have that test pressing?*

No. My husband managed not only to lose that one, but he also misplaced the private recording Caruso made of the "Coat Song" from *Bohème*.

*When did you make your test recordings for Victor?*

In 1920. On Thursday afternoon, April 29, 1920.

*Were you intimidated at all by the conical recording horn?*

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<sup>2</sup> Lawrence Gilman in the *Herald Tribune*: "... with Mme. Nina Morgana lending her gifts and skill and feeling and intensity as the unhappy heroine, the novelty of the evening was disclosed to us. This was a performance of the last Act of Verdi's *Otello* with Mr. Melchior embodying the Moor of Venice for the first time in New York and Mme. Rethberg playing Desdemona. It is twenty-two years since the music of *Otello* was heard at the Metropolitan."

Well, it wasn't "conical," it was octagonal. It was suspended by an adjustable chain, and there were two large mahogany doors below it. I wasn't intimidated by it not only because I had watched Caruso make the *Juive* recording, but also because the director at Victor, Mr. [Joseph] Pasternack, who accompanied me at the piano, explained the recording process to me in detail.

*How many test recordings did you make that day?*

Just two. I sang Chadwick's "He Loves Me," and then "Come per me sereno" from *Sonnambula*.

*Were you able to hear the test recordings played back to you soon after you finished making the recordings?*

No. I was invited to the Victor studios in Manhattan to hear the recordings played, and was given both of the discs after they were played for me.

*Were you pleased with what you heard?*

With "Come per me sereno," yes. But my voice sounded too distant in "He Loves Me."

*Do you recall what type of piano, a grand or an upright, was used in your recordings, and where the piano was located?*

It was a grand piano with the lid raised to its maximum, pointed toward the horn. I stood on a stool in front of the horn, with the bend of the piano immediately behind me.

*Do you know why your recordings were never released commercially?*

There were two reasons, really. The first was that Caruso died unexpectedly. As soon as he recovered from his illness, he was to have recorded "È il sol dell'anima" with me. After he died, of course, that became a moot point. The other reason had to do with my husband. Bruno wanted only one "star" in our home, and being a traditional Italian man, he had to be the center of attention.

*You were a classically-trained soprano who was taught through the solfeggio method by a legendary soprano. Mr. Zirato had no musical education at all, and yet he spent his career in the operatic and symphonic worlds. To what extent did he really "know" music?*

He knew [opera] libretti as well as any conductor or coach. He knew them so thoroughly that he had an annoying habit of speaking the lines while a singer was singing them. He did that throughout every performance I attended with him, and no matter how many times I stuck my elbow into his arm to shut him up, he couldn't stop reciting the lines. It annoyed everyone around us because his voice was so deep. I felt that he did it [i.e., reciting lines in his box seat

while they were being sung onstage] to show off, to impress everyone around us with his vast knowledge of the repertoire.

*But he could not read music, correct?*

No, not at all. Nor did he have a very good sense of pitch. Unless a singer or an instrumental soloist was flat or sharp by at least a half-tone, his ear couldn't detect it.

*Did you sing at home, and did he give you any opinions about your singing?*

Occasionally, I would go to the piano and accompany myself in arias that I loved but which were not a part of my repertoire. As I said earlier, I loved singing tenor arias such as "M'appari," "Che gelida manina," and "Come un bel dì di Maggio." Once, I remember accompanying myself and seeing Bruno come to the piano, put his hands on the raised lid, and listen to me singing—or so I thought. As soon as I finished, he said to me, "My podiatrist says I have beautiful feet."

*Would you have continued to sing under the Johnson administration if you had been given more performances and more opportunities to sing the major coloratura roles?*

It wouldn't have been possible under the circumstances, for several reasons. Caruso had been my entré to the Met, and when he died I knew that my chances for the major coloratura roles would be limited. Galli-Curci came [to the Met], and then Lily Pons. They were Gatti-Cassazza's and then Johnson's coloraturas, and I was limited mainly to Amina in *Sonnambula*, an occasional Gilda, and more often than not, Musetta in *Bohème*. And as I said, my husband wanted to be the only celebrity in our home. So that was that.

*Some twenty-five years after Caruso's passing, you and your husband became very close to Arturo Toscanini. From some interviews that Toscanini gave, we know that although he admired and respected Caruso, he was not shy about criticizing Caruso for taking on roles that were inappropriate for his young voice.*

He repeated to Bruno and me many times his exclamation, "Per Dio! If this young Neapolitan tenor keeps singing like this, he will have the whole world talking about him!" But as Caruso began to take on gradually heavier roles, Toscanini was prone to lecture him, and all of the rest of us, about the voice being ruined by imposing the requirements of dramatic parts on an essentially lyrical voice and technique.

*Did Toscanini ever speak about Gigli in that regard in your presence?*

Indeed, he did. He made the same comments about Gigli that he had made about Caruso. He was insistent that neither man should have taken on heavier

roles until they were considerably older. Caruso, of course, had the clarion voice for most of the great Verdi tenor roles. Although Gigli was wonderful in *Rigoletto*, Toscanini was very critical of Gigli's performances of *Aida*, for which he lacked the vocal weight in Toscanini's judgment.

*Do you agree with Toscanini in that regard?*

No, I do not. I recall quite vividly a special performance of the Verdi *Requiem* which was performed, I believe, on the twenty-fifth anniversary of Verdi's death. If you know the Requiem, you know that it requires the principals to have substantial voices. This performance, which I remember [Tullio] Serafin conducting, had three singers whose voices were indeed "substantial": Rosa Ponselle, Merle Alcock, and José Mardones. The tenor in that performance was Beniamino Gigli, and he held his own with Ponselle, Alcock, and Mardones. Gigli's singing of the "Ingemisco" was almost ethereal—I know of no other word to describe it, nor have I ever heard another tenor sing it as beautifully, as movingly, as Gigli sang it.

*You sang under Toscanini. Do you recall how many times?*

The only performance I remember distinctly was a Beethoven Ninth Symphony with Richard Crooks, Sophie Braslau, and Ezio Pinza, and the Schola Cantorum in 1928.

*How was the Maestro's temperament during the rehearsals?*

"Vesuvian" is the word that comes to my mind. He broke at least one, maybe two batons, and he threw his pocket watch on the floor and crushed it with his heel! He pointed out poor Crooks and told him that he sang like a sick pig. Then he used a very crude Italian expression for Pinza. It would embarrass me to repeat it [but] he told Pinza that his singing had the same worth that the pig's food has after the pig has digested and eliminated it.

*Were you spared his wrath since you knew him personally?*

Definitely not! He told me that Madame Arkel, whom he had known very well in Italy, should have forbade me ever to mention her name in public because my singing was a disgrace to her name!

*Did he finish the rehearsal?*

Yes, but he rushed through it. He was still enraged at the end [of the rehearsal], and shouted at us to get out of his sight and not come back until we were prepared to give our very best. At the next rehearsal, I can assure you that Morgana, Braslau, Crooks, and Pinza and everyone else associated with the performance sang better than we ever knew we could!

*You sang a number of concerts with Caruso. Do you recall how many you gave with him?*

In all, there were eleven. The first one was in the ballroom of the Waldorf Astoria in February 1919, and the last was in New Orleans on June 26, 1920. He had asked me to sing some upcoming concerts that fall [1920], two in Canada and three in the Midwest, but I was already scheduled to make my debut at the Metropolitan [on November 27, 1920], so I had rehearsals and other obligations to attend to.

*Did you sing most of the joint concerts that Caruso gave during those years?*

No. He did some with Louise Homer, Claudia Muzio, Frances Alda, and Galli-Curci. I think he did a joint recital with Mary Garden, too. One concert I remember particularly well was with De Luca, Alda, and Martinelli. Caruso was very fond of Martinelli, as I've told you.

Before Caruso invited me to appear with him, Carolina White and Mabel Garrison had sung [concerts] with him. And Ganna Walska sang at least one with him. But those were not really "joint concerts," because Carolina White, Garrison, Ganna Walska and I were billed as "assisting artists" to Caruso. The [concerts] he did Mary Garden, Galli-Curci, Alda, Muzio and Homer were truly joint concerts because they were first-rank artists.

*What did Caruso typically sing, and what did you sing—not only on the printed program, but as encores?*

The violinist Elias Breeskin toured with us, so he would open the program. He had his own accompanist—ours was Salvatore Fucito—and [Breeskin] would usually play "Humoresque" or something similar. Then I would sing either "Come per me sereno" from *Sonnambula* or "Ombra leggiera" from *Dinorah*. Those were the two arias that I sang in all our concerts.

Caruso would then sing "Celeste Aida," which was always his first aria on the program. Breeskin would then return to the platform and play two, sometimes three selections. After that, I would sing an aria—again, either the *Sonnambula* or *Dinorah* aria, whichever one I hadn't opened with—and Caruso would sing "Vesti la giubba," which would always earn him a standing ovation.

After the ovation, he would motion for me to join him at the center of the stage, and we would sing "The Star-Spangled Banner" together. Always—always—at the end of "The Star-Spangled Banner," he would take me by the hands, and swing me around him. That delighted him to no end, and the audience loved it! Then he would motion for Breeskin and his accompanist, and also Fucito, to stand with us and take our bows.

After all of us left the stage, the applause would go on and on, and in the midst of it Caruso would walk back onto the stage from the wings—just two or three feet from the wings—and he would arch his eyebrows and turn the palms of his hands upward with a big smile, as if to say, “Would you like to hear more?” That’s when the fun would begin!

He would point to me, and then point to himself, as if to say, “Go ahead and sing something of mine!” This was all rehearsed, of course, and I would proceed to sing “M’appari” from *Marta*. Next, he would motion for Breeskin to join him for the Massenet “Elégie.” Then Caruso would sing three Tosti songs—and always the final one would be “A vucchella.”

*You also sang a joint concert with Beniamino Gigli, am I right?*

Yes, it was in Boston during a two-concert appearance in which his assisting artist was scheduled to be Anna Fitziu, but she was indisposed and I was asked to replace her. I had sung a number of times in Philadelphia—in fact, I was in one of Gigli’s last performances there, a performance of *L’Africana* with Rethberg as Séluka [on April 12, 1932]. When I replaced Anna Fitziu as Gigli’s assisting artist, he told me to sing whatever I wanted to sing, so I chose my two tried-and-true arias, the *Dinorah* and *Sonnambula*, and both were well received.

Gigli opened that concert, as he did many others that he gave, with the two *Elisir* arias: he sang “Quanto e bella” and followed it with “Una furtiva lagrima.” After I sang “Come per me sereno,” he sang three Italian songs. He sang “Amarilli,” then “Primavera,” and before he sang the third one—“Tre giorni son che Nina”—he would extend his hand to me, and he would sing it to me. Then I would sing “Ombra leggera,” and he would sing “O paradiso,” which earned him another standing ovation.

After “O paradiso,” he would leave the stage for a few minutes, and when he returned he would sing three French selections—two songs whose titles I don’t recall at the moment, and then the *Aubade* from *Le Roi d’Ys*. That was the last selection on the printed program. As the applause continued, I came onstage and sang “Caro nome” as an encore.

Then Gigli sang five encores, mind you! He began with “Santa Lucia,” then he sang three Tosti songs—“L’alba separa dalla luce l’ombra,” “Serenata,” and “Marechiaro”—and he ended with “O sole mio.” If that isn’t a tour de force, what is? I can assure you that his voice was just as fresh, just as dolcissima, in “O sole mio” as it was in “Quanto e bella” and “Una furtiva lagrima” at the start of the concert. Gigli’s entire career was that way: fresh and sweet and beautiful from beginning to end.