

(in May), with the understanding that you can return it for a full refund if you wish, send me a check for \$103 and I'll have one sent to you at once.

Your entrepreneurial Editor, Dan Shea (1007 Edgehill Dr., Madison WI, USA 53705)

P.S. Here're just some of the websites that feature Marika Somogyi's work (all these URLs are to be preceded by <http://www.>):

Sculptures-R-Us.com

stir.ac.uk/external/bams/somogyi.htm

artinthehand.com/somogyi.htm

amuseum.org/iahf/about/about1.html

asmamedals.org/Queensboro/Somogyi.jpg

usmint.gov/catalog (for Marika's Capitol Commemorative Coin just released).

Leonard Warren: American Baritone

Mary Jane Phillips-Matz

(Opera Biography Series, No. 13)

Portland, Oregon: Amadeus Press, 2000

520 pages, \$40

I came to Mary Jane Phillips-Matz' life of Leonard Warren not as a stranger, having read her monumental life of Verdi only a year ago. As *Opera News* said (February 2001), her Verdi is "an account of composer and milieu more thoroughly *pondered, researched and understood* [emphasis mine] than any other biography." In the course of some nine hundred pages, I got to know Verdi, first, through her remarkable ability to gather and document literally thousands of sources. Not only did she amass this widespread and inchoate material, but she wove it into a seamless narrative which veritably flew by. Though she does not intend to be a stylist in the mode of, say Lytton Strachey or Oscar Wilde, in *Verdi* she is a stylist in the sense of producing sentences, paragraphs, sections, and chapters through which the reader moves effortlessly.

Such is likewise the case with *Leonard Warren*, her latest book. Though her scope is smaller, her achievement is commensurately successful. Guiding us from the history of Warren's Russian immigrant family background, through his struggles to establish himself, to his position at the pinnacle of operatic stardom, Mrs. Phillips-Matz furnishes as complete a picture of the singer as we are likely to have. With the cooperation of his beloved younger sister Vivien as well as access to family papers and photographs, she presents a portrait of the premier Verdi baritone of his era—a portrait which is no shallow hagiography but a full presentation of a complex man who rose to the top of the operatic world.

Before embarking on Warren's musical career, Mrs. Phillips-Matz offers a fast-paced and vivid picture of his Russian forebears and family, including the extended family's marriages, customs, and business successes. Then she presents Warren's musical formative years as a testament to the struggle of all creative artists who believe in themselves, when few others do. The family recognized early on that he had a remarkable voice, but his father wanted him to follow in the family fur business. Warren spent his years after high school fluctuating among fur industry jobs, taking business courses, and singing sporadically in the Catskills. The turning point came for him in 1932 when he viewed a partial performance of *Carmen* with Tita Ruffo: "This was one of the reasons that made me choose a career in singing," he says.

Mrs. Phillips-Matz engagingly traces Warren's first tentative career steps. His first steady employment as a singer was with the Radio City Music Hall Chorus. This experience, from the end

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of 1934 until the end of 1937, was a period of musical growth and increasing confidence despite his initial lack of musical knowledge and the animosity of the chorus director. He tried mightily to get a solo or even some solo lines, but Robert Weede, who was *the* star, commanded all such perquisites. Through a family connection, Warren landed a singing job with radio station WOR and then won a Sealtest Competition award. In mid-December of 1937, he asked the chorus director for time off to prepare for the Met Auditions, to which she replied, hurtfully: "Sure. Take a couple of weeks and don't come back . . . Your voice isn't virile enough anyway." Here, the author pauses in her narrative to give some sense of how the Met auditions were organized at that time, after which she explains what and when Warren sang to earn him his first placement with the Met.

Warren's Lack of a Musical Education

As she unfolds his career, she documents the problems that stemmed from his lack of a musical background. Though he started studying with various teachers in 1933, he never learned to read music, a fact which often put him at odds with chorus and operatic conductors. Early on, he struggled to gain control of his unusual voice with its tenor-like top and nearly non-existent lower register. (Eventually, of course, his lower register developed, and opera lore is filled with stories of his ear-shattering high Bs and Cs.) Warren listened obsessively to his self-made recordings and carefully chose a succession of increasingly better teachers. These early recordings, says Mrs. Phillips-Matz, show him often thrilling in Italian songs and arias, but almost hopeless in English songs. This latter point is particularly noteworthy as we learn that eventually he became admired for his handling of songs in English (well demonstrated in his Russian recital recording). His true operatic study began when, through a generous benefactor, he went to Milan for a summer to study under the protective wing of Wilfrid Pelletier, who greatly influenced him in style and phrasing. Here he began his career-long practice of intensive research and working with coaches. Syncopation did not come easily to him, and he would always find ensembles somewhat daunting. He had particular difficulties in learning roles because of his ignorance of time values. For his entire career, he had to write everything phonetically, breaking the words into syllables with lines and dashes for beats and rests. Warren depended completely on a number of coaches, especially Konstantine Yannopolous, sometimes studying with him for a year or more to master a role before essaying it.

Warren's Religious Conversion and Marriage

It is evident that his conversion from Judaism to Roman Catholicism and his marriage to his beloved Agatha were fundamentally important decisions. Mrs. Phillips-Matz makes it very clear that Warren did not become a Roman Catholic merely to win Agatha's hand. Throughout the biography, she gives ample evidence that his conversion sprang from deeply religious convictions. Of particular interest is how members of his family and Agatha's dealt with their mixed marriage, and she offers interesting sidelights on how various colleagues viewed his embracing of Catholicism. Equally compelling are the details of the Warren marriage. We are shown proof of their mutual devotion and how Agatha allowed her life to revolve around Warren's to make his career both profitable and satisfying to them both.

Sidelights (1)—The Concert World at that Time

Periodically, Mrs. Phillips-Matz pauses in her narrative to give us glimpses of the opera and concert world from 1930 to 1960. For instance, we see how such eventually famous singers as Warren, Weede and Peerce used the Radio City Music Hall to launch and make careers. We also learn about the nuts and bolts of the grueling concert tours which took singers to the highways and byways of medium and small-sized cities, often requiring such singers to perform in inadequate school auditoriums. (If the reader will allow me a bit of reminiscence, I recall Sunday, April 17, 1955, when Jan Peerce came to the Alamo Heights High School Auditorium in San Antonio and sang for just a few hundred people. I had already heard a few of his recordings, and I still have the program, which he graciously signed for me. He sang English, Italian, Spanish, and French songs as well as arias from *Carmen*, *Rigoletto*, and *Tosca*. The room's resonance was miserable, and above his head was the usual basketball net, for as in many such

venues, the room doubled for assemblies and basketball games. And bless him, this diminutive, barrel-chested man sang his heart out and later stood for some time signing programs.) Until I read this portion of Warren's biography, I did not fully appreciate the rigors which these artists endured, often in the dead of winter, as they attempted to spread their names and supplement their incomes. Most likely, Peerce continued on to Houston, Galveston, El Paso or other cities in the South or Southwest before returning to the world's great opera houses. The author uses this background to underscore Warren's insistence that the Met give him ample time to make these tours, for despite the rigors and the lack of glamorous venues, these recitals represented substantial income for singers. (Compare Chapter 24 in *Jussi*, titled "Crisscrossing America.")

Sidelights (2)—Contracts

Mrs. Phillips-Matz supplies ample insight into the way contracts were arranged to give singers time off for concerts, rehearsal time, and yearly, weekly, or per-performance wages, depending on the stature of the artist. Through Warren's experiences, we learn much about the intricacies of Met contracts, especially during the regime of Rudolph Bing. Warren's first contract was so meager that it provided only "a modest salary, which could not cover even the basic needs for himself, his mother, and his sister." We learn the minute details of, among others, rehearsal requirements, performances per week, covering of performances, sick leave, and expenses while on Met tours. She appraises us also of his early RCA contract as well as subsequent ones. The author makes us appreciate what a victory it was for a singer, in this case for Warren in 1948, to attain a Met contract "with the status of a per-performance artist," which Bing finally offered him. After much struggle, Warren achieved contracts with Bing, which eventually reflected his truly great artistic stature. However, despite the glowing reviews he garnered in America, Europe, South America, and Mexico, Warren occasionally had contract conflicts. For instance, despite his satisfactory contract in 1948, he was terribly disappointed to be left out of Bing's 1950 opening night *Don Carlo*.

Disputes with Colleagues and Alliances with Friends

Through numerous interviews from which she quotes liberally, Mrs. Phillips-Matz gives a full picture of Warren's periodic conflicts with various colleagues. In significant detail she presents his differences with such members of the operatic world as Leinsdorf, Bing (in the beginning), Peerce (over Warren's religious conversion), Cleve, and the best known of all (reported in *Opera News* but with Warren's name omitted), the conflict with Mitropoulos over tempi in *Ernani*. This dispute became public enough actually to involve Richard Tucker and the Met Orchestra. It is clear that many of his conflicts with conductors occurred because he could not tolerate being corrected in public. To her credit, the author pulls no punches when Warren was in the wrong, and where there are conflicting reports, she presents both sides. In spite of these occasional contretemps, Warren had many friends and colleagues, all of whom held him in high esteem. From the earliest days under Pelletier's tutelage, Warren had an unerring sense of people who could help him, and he never forgot their generosity. Among those who influenced, liked, admired, and even revered him were Ettore Panizza (conductor), Willard Sektberg (his accompanist from 1945-60), Margaret Carson (director of the Met press office for ten years), Thebom, Munsel, De Luca, Hines (perhaps his closest professional friend, one who deeply admired Warren's religious faith), Tucker (who supported him in his religious conversion), Charles Anthony, Yannopoulos, Tebaldi, Tozzi, Thebom, Nathaniel Merrill, Dr. Helen Hatton (a fan who became a close friend), Del Monaco and Bergonzi, especially his and Agatha's long friendship with Licia Albanese and her husband. As the author constantly attests, these and others found Warren to be warm, gracious, generous, and at times almost child-like in his enthusiasms and affections.

Warren and Jussi Björling

Leonard Warren shared a special friendship with Jussi Björling. Their first appearance together occurred upon JB's return to the Met, in *Rigoletto*, in 1945. Two two joined forces every year except

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Leonard Warren

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for 1953 (when Warren did not appear at the Met) and the years 1954, 1955, and 1958. Their last appearance together was in a Met *Tosca* with Milanov, Mitropoulos conducting. Mrs. Phillips-Matz particularly mentions a 1948 *Il Trovatore* at the Met, a Met *Ballo* in 1948 and two performances of *Faust* in the 1950–51 season. By 1946, the Warren and Björling families became quite close. The Warrens invited the parents and their children to their apartment for Christmas of that year. She quotes the then ten-year-old Anders: "Leonard had a whole room devoted to his model railroad. He would turn out the lights in the room and let the lights from the trains blaze in the darkness. He loved things like that." In one passage, she says that Jussi was a "dear colleague" to Leonard. The author further connects JB personally with Warren as late as 1958 when she documents the Warrens' summer in Italy with William Appleton. He was a professor of English at Columbia University who met Warren in 1939 and became a close friend. In a passage referring to Agatha's reverence for Milanov, Mrs. Phillips-Matz has Appleton quote Agatha: "She thought a divine constellation was Leonard, Milanov, and Björling. That was her dream trio." She also offers the testimony of John S. White, who coached Warren for many years. He says not only that Jussi's voice "was the best match" for Warren's but that Warren "loved Jussi Björling." Finally, elsewhere I have mentioned the two photographs of Jussi which appear in the book. One is quite special, showing the two families in Central Park. The foursome is walking jauntily on a clear winter day in 1948. As they walk, the two men are smiling at each other. They sport stylish hats, and the women are dressed in fashionable furs of the period. Their smiles speak volumes about friendship and collegiality.

Warren's Personal Warmth

Warren's endearing human qualities and generosity may surprise some readers. From his earliest years, he loved electric trains (a passion he shared with Nathaniel Merrill). When he and Agatha were barely making ends meet in a tiny apartment, he kept a Lionel train set under the bed to pull out and show to anyone who expressed interest. He developed such a love of gadgets that he was seldom happier than when repairing someone's TV set or radio. He was infatuated with home movies, and the author relates a charming episode when Warren and the youthful Anders Björling were in Rome for a two week period, during which they filmed many of their explorations. Anders says: "He really was a lot of fun. I had my dad's movie camera, and Leonard had his, and we went around Rome filming." Some of Warren's happiest times were spent at his Connecticut home where he could indulge his fondness for boating, fishing (he might have invited Jussi, if the Swede did not have his own ideas about where to relax), and cooking. He was immensely fond of barbecuing for occasional guests. Many readers might not know that Leonard Warren did more than his part for the war effort. Among his recitals, he performed for many USO camp shows and War Bond rallies, and he "sang more than thirty wartime concerts in camps and hospitals for the USO on Navy and Coast Guard bases in the U. S. and in the Caribbean." He sang for service members even after the war, receiving a citation from the U. S. Treasury Department for his contributions. He was chosen to sing under Toscanini in a highly publicized Red Cross Concert. At the request of his dear friend, Jerome Hines, he gave his help to the Bowery Mission, and he loaned Renato Cellini three thousand dollars so that the conductor could return to Italy and bring his family to America. Hines is quoted as saying, "Who knows how many other people he helped like that?" Finally, Mrs. Phillips-Matz relates a remarkable incident that occurred at an recital in Abilene, revealing a humble and conciliatory side of Warren which would have surprised many of his colleagues.

Warren at the Pinnacle and His Death

Mrs. Phillips-Matz spares no detail in her full picture of Warren in his last six years-years which acclaimed him as the dominant Italian baritone. These years include triumphs in Milan, Rome, Spoleto, Paris, and Russia; the New York premier of Norman Dello Joio's *Lamentation of Saul*, as well as new roles at the Met, and a *Macbeth* recording which was "widely hailed as a landmark performance." So taken were the Russians by him that "the directors of the Bolshoi Opera invited him

to return in the 1959–60 season to sing on the opening night, 'any opera of [his] choice.'" Under Edgar Vincent, his publicity was better handled than heretofore, and he was featured in numerous articles in American newspapers and magazines. Warren was highly enthusiastic about plans for the 1959–60 and 1960–61 seasons. The only slightly dark cloud in this period is a brief mention of his medical condition in 1959—that he was weak from a severe bout of Asian flu, and was being treated for high blood pressure. Otherwise, he, Agatha, his friends and colleagues could have only the most sanguine thoughts for his future. And then came that fateful Forza performance in which he died onstage, instantly, of a massive heart attack. The story has been told and re-told, often conflictingly, but Mrs. Phillips-Matz gives space to the multiple points of view of those who were on the scene. In Act One of *Macbeth*, Malcolm says of Cawdor, "Nothing in his life became him like the leaving it," and we might say that of Warren. He died in costume, in his beloved Met house, singing an aria about one's fatal urn of destiny. After offering a touching picture of the funeral, the author closes with this eloquent paragraph:

"In every real sense, Warren died at home because he died in the Metropolitan Opera House. Once, in an interview, he had said of the Met, "This is my home. This is where I live." Gradually, it became a kind of mantra for him, so he died right, in the place where he lived his life and walked his professional road. In that house, the Metropolitan Opera House, his house, Warren's life, career, and even his death became a true celebration of the artist's very being."

In summary, this is a superb biography—diligently researched, clearly organized, and engagingly written. The volume opens with an engaging and informative foreword by Tony Randall and boasts a remarkable collection of photographs (including two with Jussi). Amadeus Press has produced a handsome volume, clearly printed on solid stock, and securely bound with the quality we have come to expect from this fine company. The apparatus concluding the book is extensive: detailed notes; a selective bibliography; a 112 page discography compiled by Barrett Crawford (president of the Leonard Warren Foundation); a chronology of some forty pages listing all of Warren's performances (also compiled by Mr. Crawford); and information about the Leonard Warren Foundation. Mrs. Phillips-Matz gives us all possible facets of Warren's personal life while following the chronology of his career. She depicts the ups and downs of his music training, how he learned his roles, his performances in Europe, Russia, Mexico, South America, San Francisco, other American cities both large and small, and especially New York City. She traces the roles he painstakingly assumed; she limns his triumphs and his disappointments. Of special interest to many of us is the author's discussion of Warren's extensive recital career, which gave him immense satisfaction. She must have read every recital and opera review about him, for they seem to be all there—both the positive and the occasional negative ones.

From my teens, I have been in awe of Warren's voice, but until reading *Leonard Warren*, I had known very little of him as a person. While reading for this review, I replayed my most prized Warren recordings: *Rigoletto* with Berger and Pearce; the famous *Aida* and *Il Trovatore* with Milanov and Björling; *Macbeth* with Rysanek; his Russia recital where he so engagingly sang his favorite American songs; and a disc of arias from 1940 to 1950. Now, thanks to Mrs. Phillips-Matz, I feel I know Warren whole, and frankly, I like him very much. While I regret that I never heard him sing in person, at least I have his recordings, and now that I know him as a man, I see and feel and hear him in those baritone roles all the better. This admirable volume will sit on a special shelf beside my Warren recordings, and I hope it will find such a place of honor on the shelves of all who admire great singing and fine writing.

— William C. Clayton