

BOOK REVIEW

Bidú: Passion and Determination by Denis Allan Daniel

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According to the author, this is the first biographical study in English of the world-renowned Brazilian soprano, Bidú Sayão, who had a storied career in opera during the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s. Of considerable interest to members of the Jussi Björling Societies, this study emphasizes her collaboration with Jussi in major Metropolitan Opera productions... notably Gounod's *Roméo et Juliette* (1947) and Puccini's *La bohème* (especially the 1948 performance). Blessed with a haunting lyric soprano voice, she specialized in *bel canto* roles that took her to the major operatic houses of the world and left an indelible impression on critics and audiences alike. She was, in her generation, the outstanding soprano from Brazil. At a time when voices alone were admired in operatic circles, she was also known for her superior acting talents. Luckily, we can judge this theatrical ability from the many YouTube excerpts that are still available, in particular her sensitive interpretation of "Un bel dì vedremo" from *Madama Butterfly*. This biography

presents a fact-based evaluation of Sayão's career and personal life, leaning heavily on performance reviews, especially those of Jussi and Bidú's common appearances, a discography of Bidú's known recordings and concerts, a list of her performances at the Metropolitan, Rio de Janeiro, and San Francisco operas together with an ample bibliography crafted for audiophiles and scholars alike. Although the author is Brazilian by birth, the book is written in flawless English and contains numerous illustrations, photos, and other iconographic details that give it an intimate tone.

Born into an upper-class family in Botafogo, Rio de Janeiro on May 11, 1904 (almost seven years older than Jussi), Bidú demonstrated unusual musical talents as a child (very similar to Jussi's career) and made her major operatic debut in Rio at eighteen years of age. This critically-acclaimed performance gave her the opportunity to study first with Elena Teodorini in Brazil, then in Romania and finally with the world famous Polish tenor, Jean de Reszke, in Nice, France. Following this period of operatic training, she sang a number of leading lyric roles in Europe as well as her native Brazil. After her first marriage failed (to impresario Walter Mocchi), she married the well-known Italian baritone Giuseppe Danise in 1935. His death in 1963 came as a considerable shock and the loss of her beloved mother in 1966 was a source of great sadness for Bidú Sayão during the rest of her life. In addition to these sorrows, Brazilian officials and music critics were highly critical of her commitment to the Metropolitan Opera. She was accused of having "abandoned" her native country and being unpatriotic. This was, of course, a source of great disappointment in her personal and professional life.

She debuted at the Metropolitan

Opera in 1937 as Manon (Massenet) and performed a wide range of lyric and coloratura roles at major opera houses throughout the world. As a Jussi fan himself, the author, Denis Daniel, devotes an entire chapter to Jussi and Bidú's joint appearances as well as a variety of periodical reviews of their performances.

Bidú Sayão was one of the favorite sopranos of the great Brazilian composer, Heitor Villa Lobos, and made her final recording as the soprano soloist in Villa-Lobos' cantata, *Forest of The Amazon*, with the composer himself conducting the work. As one critic described her voice: "This was a voice such as one doesn't often hear in this world. Pure and effortless, it ranged from a silver trickle to a golden torrent... her voice soared to almost unbelievable heights and hung there--hung there like a skylark pouring its heart out in the sky." In this regard, it is relevant that Jussi himself initially refused to record *Roméo et Juliette* without Bidú Sayão as Juliette. Unfortunately she retired prematurely from opera in 1952 and spent the remaining years of her life at her home (purchased with her husband Giuseppe Danise) in Lincolnville, Maine. In 1995, several years prior to her death, she returned to Brazil to attend a tribute to her career during the *Carnaval de Rio*, thus receiving from her fellow citizens the recognition she so richly deserved. Bidú Sayão passed away on May 12, 1999 at the age of 94 in Rockport, Maine. Her ashes were scattered at sea in the bay near her home. This biographical and operatic study of Sayão's career reveals the triumphs and tribulations of an ambitious and highly successful Brazilian soprano whose greatest performances will be forever linked with Jussi Björling. It is a book which should be a part of every Jussiphile's personal library.

— Tom Hines