

Opera-Világ

100 years ago Livia Dobay was born

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We remember the first „Mimi“ in „La Bohème“ written by ILDIKÓ JÁNOSI



Lívia Dobay

Livia Dobay was an exceptional lyric soprano in the years of 1930-1940;. - Her voice was the "personification of beauty" with an excellent stage presence and ability. Last but not least her attractive appearance raised her up to an opera star.

Livia was born in Budapest on May 15th 1912. Her father was a retailer and her mother (of a family of music lovers, accompanied her daily life by singing). Very early Livia obtained musical education: as a three year old child she got piano lessons. She was considered as infant prodigy after her first piano concert in 1916 in Budapest at the "Vigado" (the four-year-old girl had to be lifted up to the elevated piano seat).

After completing her school, she began her studies at the Academy of Music as a student by Béla Szabados, as well of Jenő Hubay and Imre Ungár. - In 1932 she studied in Italy and received her diploma as opera singer in 1933 in Budapest.

After her concert of graduation she was immediately taken under contract by the Royal Hungarian Opera House, remaining member until 1956. - She made her debut as Nedda (in Leoncavallos' "Bajazzo"), and within a few years she became a leading soprano singer in the Opera House of Budapest, where she gave world class performances of Puccini operas. Her unique sweet singing voice was paired with shades and extraordinary stage presence. She was probably the best "Mimi" and "Madame Butterfly" on the Hungarian opera stages, for sure certainly the best "Alice Ford" (in Verdi's Falstaff).



As „Zdenka“ in „Arabella“

In the Thirties' she was starring at the Vienna State Opera as "Butterfly" and "Mimi", as well as in America, where the "St. Louis Grand Opera" had invited her as a guest singer.

In 1934, as young soprano of 20-years, she got the leading part in the unforgettable new staging of "Butterfly", composed by Nádasy Kálmán. Livia Dobay appeared deservedly on the title page of "A Opéra Villág".

She always remained at the highest level and achieved this in other roles also: as "Sophie" in "Rosenkavalier" by Richard Strauss and as "Leila" in the opera "Azra" by Jenő Zádor.



Cover of the "Theatrical World" in 1934 as "Butterfly"

At the premiere in 1934 on 28th December, she impersonated an unforgettable "Zdenka" in Arabella. – “Whoever proves oneself in this demanding role is a thoroughbred artist. – Singing the high notes, she left a striking impression by her brilliant shining voice. Her ability of sensitive stage performance and her singing are of high quality. - We will experience a lot of promising things by this young artist”, a newspaper emphasized her performance.

Her repertoire was expanded by "Agata" of "Freischütz" / Weber, also "Liu" (of Turandot / Puccini, as well as "Thais" of Massenet and "Wellgunde" (of "Rheingold" and "Götterdämmerung" / R. Wagner).

Temporarily she also made an excursion to the operetta: 1934 she sang the leading role in Léhar's "Guiditta". – In January 1937 she sang the part of "Soubrette" in "Sybill" with the singer Lajos Laurisin. at the Royal Hungarian Opera. - In the film "Rendez-vous am Donauquai" she also took over a guest role as a "bar singer". (Hit:"Hajdú - Zágon": "What else would I need more than having a rendez-vous at the quai of the Danube".



1937 as „Mimi“

May 11th. in 1937, it was the time for "La Bohême" which remained a legendary production up till these days: supported by Kálmán Nádasdy as director, Gusztáv Oláh responsible for the scenery and Tivadar Márk for the costume design.

"The sensation in the opera was the new production of" La Bohême ". The special feature of the performance was the musical direction by the world-famous conductor Issay Dobroven. During the further performances the friends of the operas experienced a special pleasure by the distribution of the stars: in addition to Kálmán Pataky as Rodolph and Mihály Székely the main parts have been transferred to: Livia Dobay as Mimi, Julia Osváth as Musette, Andor Lendvai as Chaunard and György Losonczy as Marcel.

In 1987, Livia Dobay recalled this special performance in an interview with László Dalos: "For the role of Mimi I am grateful to Kálmán Nádasdy Looking back I remember the words of Zoltán Egyed: Mimi is like a rain-soaked sparrow tearing to pieces the heart of the audience.- 1937 you can discover me on the front page of the newspaper Színházi Élet (Theaterlife) as "Mimi" wearing the original costume..."



Once, Johnson the director of the Metropolitan came to Budapest, saw my Mimi and engaged me immediately. But the world war had begun, which made the chance of a world-wide career a mystery, which meant that from 1941 her opera performances had ceased at home. After the entry into force of "the Law against the Jews" the opera ensemble (OMIKE and, well-known artists plus Livia) had merely the possibility to perform in the "Goldmarkt Hall".

As Sophie in „Rosenkavalier“

Only at the end of the war the possibility of returning to the opera stage was given. In 1947 the communist system closed the borders, so there were neither trips abroad neither performances in European music centers. Unfortunately the opera career of the excellent soprano finished at the age of 44. - In 1956 she had to flee from Budapest and stopped singing. - She settled in Vienna with her family. In her homeland (Hungary) she fell into oblivion. –

(Livia Dobay and Ferenc Fricssay studied at the same time in the Music Academy of Budapest and received their diploma the same day: the chairman of the examination commission was Richard Fricssay, Sr.) Years later the two artists worked together in the opera.- The son of Livia married the daughter of the legendary conductor Ferenc Fricssay.

The previously glowing star of the Hungarian opera died shortly after her 90th birthday in July 16th of 2002.



Unfortunately, there are very few recordings of her, because after her flight the Hungarian government decided by verdict to destroy all her gramophone recordings. For this reason, almost nothing remained of Livia Dobay's splendid and varied repertoire, hardly anything of her beautiful voice is preserved for posterity.

1940 Livia Dobay as „Butterfly“