

Alma Gluck



By SAMUEL CHOTZINOFF

ON AN October afternoon in 1911, I sat in a day coach of a train bound for Morristown, New Jersey. My companion was a young Russian violinist who had a few days before made his debut in New York. His name was Efrem Zimbalist. I was his accompanist and we were going to Morristown to play at a private concert at the house of a wealthy Jerseyite. Mr. Zimbalist was not the only artist on the program. The wealthy Jerseyite was being given a surprise birthday party and his wife had engaged—besides Mr. Zimbalist—a young soprano, Alma Gluck by name; Pasquale Amato, the famous baritone; Edmond Clement, the French tenor; and the entire Metropolitan Opera House chorus and orchestra. Quite a birthday party, one would say.

Mr. Zimbalist scanned the passengers in the day coach. His eyes rested on a figure seated some distance from us. I followed his look and said, "That's Alma Gluck, the young soprano of the Met, a fine singer and a beautiful woman. I have never met her so I can't introduce you to her."

Mr. Zimbalist spent the next half hour gazing alternately out of the window and at Alma Gluck. Finally I said, "Why don't you go over and introduce yourself? I imagine she would be happy to meet you." The young violinist hesitated a moment, got up

and walked over to Alma Gluck, and I saw no more of him for the rest of the trip. Thus began a romance which was only cut short by the death of Alma Gluck Zimbalist on October 20, 1938.

At the Morristown concert, Alma Gluck sang the aria from *Louise, Depuis le Jour*. I thought then, as I think now, that it was the most beautiful and emotional interpretation of the aria that I had ever heard. The voice and the emotion were as one. Indeed I was to feel that about everything that Alma Gluck sang during her sensational but all-too-brief career.

It was quite impossible to talk about her voice as distinct from her personality. Any analysis of her art had to be based on the inseparableness of the singer and the voice. Even when she sang a coloratura aria, the florid phrases were tinged with the personality of the artist. Hearing her do a "Lied," something from Bach, an operatic aria, or a popular ballad, one could never say that here was a model of good singing. It was a model of the best singing. But it was weighted so much with the personality of the artist that it could not be isolated for the purpose of cold examination and appraisal.

Artists, great and small, are notoriously lacking in a sense of humor. But Alma Gluck was an exception. The usual affectations and

pretensions of prima donnas were altogether foreign to her nature. Another quality which differentiated her from popular vocalists was her genuine love for music. It was Alma Gluck who launched the Musical Art Quartet. She herself wrote hundreds of letters (she hated to dictate) to elicit support for the organization. And I may say that her powers of persuasion amounted to an art. Each Sunday for years the Musical Art Quartet and some of her friends would meet at her house for lunch and music, with the music sometimes lasting till far in the night.

HER SCOPE, as an artist, was unlimited. Millions of Americans were deeply touched by her singing of popular ballads. Sophisticated music-lovers were affected by her beautiful interpretations of the classics. She sang French, German, Italian, Spanish, and Russian like a native of each country. She realized the dream of alchemists to transmute base metal into gold. She could make *The Little Gray Home in the West* sound like the purest art. Nowadays, great vocalists are specialists. They are Wagnerian singers, Italian singers, or French singers. They are lieder, ballad or opera singers. Alma Gluck felt at home in all music. She never sang Wagner in public, but I once asked her to sing for me Brünnhilde's War Cry from *Die Walküre* and I still remember it as one of the most beautiful renditions of the music I had heard anywhere.

Whenever I think that the golden age of vocalists is with us right here and now, I play Alma Gluck's recordings of *Angels Ever Bright and Fair*, the aria from *Louise*, of *Lo Hear the Gentle Lark*, of Handel's *Come Beloved*. I realize then that no singer today possesses the voice and musicianship, the charm and universal appeal of Alma Gluck.

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