

Virginia Zeani Rossi-Lemeni

Virginia Zeani was born in Solovastru—a region of Transylvania in Romania. She heard *Madama Butterfly* at age nine and came home determined to become an opera singer. At the age of 13 she began serious study in Bucharest, and at 16 met the famous Russian coloratura soprano Lydia Lipkovska, who had sung with Caruso and was a *bel canto* expert.

In March 1947 Virginia left her country to pursue her studies and career in Italy. There she studied with Aureliano Pertile, the preferred tenor of the Toscanini era. A fan of the tenor's records, she wept when she first met him. She found his lessons revelatory, and he in turn prized her seriousness of purpose. In Milan she worked with the finest coaches of La Scala, including Luigi Ricci, who had been a répétiteur for Puccini and Mascagni in Rome. From these musicians she learned the art of *bel canto*, style, expression of the phrase, articulation, diction, the projection of sound, and how to create characters within her voice.

In May 1948 at the Teatro Duse in Bologna, Virginia made her debut in Verdi's *La Traviata*. Her rare combination of voice, dramatic commitment, and physical beauty made her debut an enormous success. As she says: "Attitude, words, phrasing, and movement were *tutt'uno*—all together. I never divided them." Violetta became her signature role. It remained in Virginia's repertoire the rest of her career for an amazing 648 performances.

She first appeared outside Italy in 1950, when she and baritone Gino Bechi performed for King Farouk of Egypt. They returned the following year to sing for the monarch and his fiancée. "It was the most incredible dinner I ever saw in my life, and I couldn't eat, because I had to sing after. I languish about it even now!"

At the beginning of her career Virginia sang light-lyric *bel canto* roles of Bellini, Rossini, and Donizetti, Mimi in *La Bohème*, Gilda in *Rigoletto*, and Adina in *L'elisir d'Amore*, which she sang in Cairo with Beniamino Gigli, then in the twilight of his career. Her Florentine debut took place in 1952 in Bellini's *I Puritani*, and it was in this production that she first met and worked with the man who would become her husband, Nicola Rossi-Lemeni.

Virginia made her debut at Teatro alla Scala in Milan in 1956 in the role of Cleopatra in Handel's *Giulio Cesare*, with the heroic tenor Franco Corelli as Sextus. Giulietta Simionato sang Cornelia and the title role was assigned to a bass, Nicola Rossi-Lemeni. Three months later she and Rossi-Lemeni married. Their son Alessandro was born about a year later. He is now a leading surgeon in Rome. Virginia sang the role of Blanche in the world premiere production of Poulenc's *Dialogue of the Carmelites* in January 1957 at La Scala. The next year Cleopatra was the role for her American debut both in Philadelphia and shortly thereafter in New York.

After 20 years on the stage Virginia began to sing the more *spinto* and dramatic roles in the soprano repertoire, in Verdi's *Otello*, *Don Carlo*, and *Aida*; Puccini's *Tosca*, *Madama Butterfly*, and *Manon Lescaut*; Giordano's *Fedora*; and Cilea's *Adriana Lecouvreur*. Virginia's singing career before the public drew to a close in late 1982 with her participation in the San Francisco Opera production of *Dialogue of the Carmelites*.

In all Virginia sang 67 operas, running the gamut of Italian, French, German, and Slavic repertoire. She starred in every major Italian house, in London, Amsterdam, Paris, and as far afield as Russia, Brazil, and South Africa. She sang with the most famous singers of her time, from Beniamino Gigli to Alfredo Kraus, Mario Del Monaco, Franco Corelli, Giuseppe Di Stefano, Luciano Pavarotti, Plácido Domingo, Renato Bruson, Piero Cappuccilli, Tito Gobbi, and Boris Christoff, under conductors from the grand old maestro Tullio Serafin to Herbert von Karajan and Zubin Mehta.

Of course Virginia's most cherished colleague was her husband. Their partnership encompassed 14 operas, covering three centuries of repertoire. The two of them came to IU in 1980 and taught together until Nicola's death in 1991. Virginia considered him a Renaissance man—a poet and a painter as well as a singer. The couple read voraciously and spent countless hours shopping for antiques. "I was never bored for a second with Nicola. I'm not bored even now, in the sense that I remember everything." He was named a distinguished professor of music in 1991, and Virginia was also honored with this title in 1994, the first occasion in the history of the university for both a husband and wife to receive this award.

Virginia invested enormous time and energy in her voice students. Her lessons, master classes, and guidance in what it means to be a singer have inspired them to much success. In the 1997 Metropolitan Opera Council auditions 16 of the finalists were Virginia's students. Ten were winners. Others have gone on to win international competitions. Today her students sing in opera houses all over the world and pass on her legacy as voice teachers in universities and conservatories.

Now teaching from her home in Florida, Virginia continues to work with students who were her pupils at IU. She is still in great demand to teach master classes and judge competitions in the United States, Europe, and New Zealand, and young singers from these events follow her back to Florida, hoping to learn from her the heritage of Italian *bel canto* style.

As she always has, she embraces her students with the warmth of her love of music. She maintains a lively curiosity for music that is new to her and brings her ideals of beauty and expressivity to whatever repertoire her students sing. "I love my life as a teacher," she says. "Why? Because never was I a great diva. No! Had I been a great diva, I could not teach now."

Mary Ann Hart