



Can't Help Singing: The Life of Eileen Farrell

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Eileen Farrell

Northeastern University Press (Nov 9, 1999)

Unknown \$29.95 (256pp)

978-1-55553-406-6

Those who think that the life of an opera star is filled with fame, honor and wealth will find Eileen Farrell's memoir an honest and good-humored revelation. Gifted with a phenomenal voice and a mother who had the good sense to recognize it, Farrell easily achieved early success in radio, film and television.

A classically-trained dramatic soprano, she was also a convincing singer of pop songs and blues, but her acclaimed 1960 Metropolitan Opera debut in *Alceste* marked her entry into a world in which she never really felt at home. Her frank, down-to-earth and sensible nature brought her into frequent confrontations with The Metropolitan Opera's director, Sir Rudolph Bing, and led to the abrupt termination of her operatic career after only five seasons. In Bing Farrell found little to commend, and it didn't take long for her to realize that she was not one of his favorites, either. She says "we started out being wary of one another, and we worked our way up to intense dislike."

Farrell is equally honest in discussing her offstage life, including her forty year marriage to Robert Reagan, a New York City policeman, and her time on the faculty of Indiana University, a tenure marked by frustration with a system she saw as destroying more voices than it nurtured.

Farrell is not afraid to point a finger at the various fears and foibles of the famous. About Franco Corelli she said, "he had the worst stage fright I'd ever seen...singing seemed to be an agony for him....," and "At intermission, his wife Loretta would barricade herself in his dressing room and scream at him, telling him everything he had done wrong." As for her life at the Met, Farrell said: "In radio, in television, even, for the most part, in the concert world, I had been used to everyone pulling together and trying to get the show in shape. We all worked hard but had fun in the process. Opera was something else. There seemed to be very little sense of everyone working together toward a common goal; instead, I saw a lot of people who were interested only in how they came off and didn't give a damn about anything else." She described traveling with the Met touring company as being "as much fun as having an upper and lower GI" and always flew separately to their engagements.

In spite of it all, Farrell's love for singing, her open and generous spirit, and her strong devotion to her family helped her keep her feet planted firmly on the ground. Now retired and a widow, she shares her rich, full life in these pages. Readers will enjoy her sketches of friendships and encounters with such luminaries of the music and entertainment worlds as Arturo Toscanini, Leonard Bernstein, Leontyne Price, Robert Merrill, Maria Callas, Ethel Merman, Ed Sullivan and Carol Burnett. A discography is included for those who would like a deeper experience of Farrell's art.

KRISTINE MORRIS (November / December 1999)

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