

'I believe that singing a beautiful repertoire is in itself a world without bitterness, without violence — a world where the greatest achievement is to make beauty.'

Singher, master singer

By Hillary Hauser
News-Press Staff Writer

The greatest compliment Martial Singher ever got was from a fan of the Paris Opera, who stopped the great baritone in the street and asked for a look at his face.

"Excuse me," the stranger said. "I have been a subscriber to the opera, two times a week for 10 years, and I don't know what you look like."

Reflecting on the incident at the Music Academy of the West, where Singher now teaches, he remembered the incident with pleasure.

For him, it meant he had so successfully submerged himself in his operatic roles that he was unrecognizable in real life.

This is Singher the actor, who calls his own life "non spectacular" while his stage life is a universe unto itself.

Photographs of Singher in action reveal the depth of his submergence into character: Iago, Pollux, Hamlet, Orestes, Pelleas, Escamillo stare out from tragic souls through Singher's intense, luminescent eyes.

World baritone

Martial Singher (pronounced SanGUERRE) is one of the world's leading baritones of the operatic stage. Since 1968 he has lived in Santa Barbara. In addition to teaching at the Music Academy, he also teaches at UCSB.

Singher's summer classes at the Music Academy attract crowds who must squeeze into Abravanel or Lotte Lehmann halls to hear him coach singers in their art.

Typically, he lets the singers perform, then asks for repeats of certain sections. He has been known to ask for more passion,

more charm, more everything. He'll illustrate what he wants by singing some passages himself.

If Singher is happy with the changes in the singing, he'll look out at the audience, smiling in wonderment and content.

The most important thing a teacher can impart to his students, Singher said, is "the happiness of submitting yourself to the music that's written."

"Then, it's finding the original thought of the composer," he continued. "After that, everything else will come with it."

The words are equally important to the music, Singher said. A student rattling off the spoken words of an aria before performing it will undoubtedly be asked for more heartfelt repeats of the written text.

Singher's voice has an elegant quality that is as much, or more, poetry as it is singing technique.

Singher doesn't believe in trademarks, such as white handkerchiefs, and he has no magic formulas either for stardom or for singing.

He believes too much is made of technique.

"The idea of years of technique is extremely ridiculous," Singher said. "The first quality of a good singer is common sense, not complicated concepts.

Several of the greatest singers I have had the pleasure of working with were very simple-minded people."

The most difficult students have been those who are "too intellectual, who devise systems for themselves," Singher said.

Singher was born in the Basque region of France on Aug. 14, 1904, and his childhood was full of music — largely from his singing father. He got his start in theater by performing for his parents after dinner. He also sang in a Catholic church —

soprano, until he lost his voice at 13.

At 20, he began to sing tenor roles, "defeating myself, for I was not to be a tenor." At 21, he enrolled at the Ecole Normale Supérieure de St. Cloud, and two years later, the Paris Conservatoire.

Here, he studied opera, voice and opera comique.

Paris opera

In 1930, Singher was given a contract with the Paris Opera, where he made his debut as Athanael in Massenet's "Thais."

The Paris Opera loved him, however, and Singher stayed 10 years with the company — playing Iago, Rigoletto, Amfortas, Wolfram, Mercutio and many other parts. In January, 1940, he married Eta Busch, whose father was the great German conductor Fritz Busch.

In 1941, the Singhers fled Europe, and two years later, the baritone made his debut with the New York Metropolitan Opera, singing the role of Dappertutto in the "Tales of Hoffman."

The critics stood up and took notice: "Incomparable elegance," they said. "Vocally impeccable and dramatically superb." "A performance of breath-taking artistry."

Singher said the most exciting moment of his career was his debut of Pelleas at the Metropolitan because "it was an opera that hadn't won the favor of the public, but was a great, popular success."

One of his embarrassing moments occurred in Amsterdam, where he was backstage in his undershorts and was introduced to Princess Juliana and the Court of the Netherlands.

Singher stayed with the New York Metropolitan until the 1958-59 season. His last per-



News-Press photo by DOUG PENSINGER

Martial Singher, a baritone who has been applauded at the world opera houses, returns the compliment to one of his Music Academy students.

formance was to sing four parts in "Tales of Hoffman" — three roles in addition to his original Dappertutto.

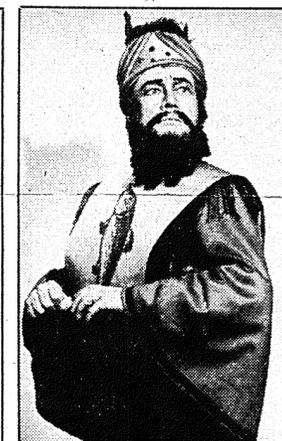
For the next four years, Singher performed in recitals and orchestral concerts, and in 1963, he retired from the concert stage on doctor's orders.

Singher said if he had to live his life over again, he'd live it the same way.

"Life was made for me the way it happened," he said. "It's the way things are organized from somewhere — fate. I don't think I was qualified to do anything better."

After his retirement, Singher served on the faculty of several music institutions, including the Curtis Institute of Music, the Peabody Conservatory, the Aspen and Marlboro music festivals, and the Julliard Summer School of Music.

In 1962, he was invited to serve as head of the Music Academy's vocal department, opera producer and director. After commuting from the East Coast for about six years, the Singhers moved here permanently, in 1968. He said Santa Barbara reminds them of the Basque country of his childhood.



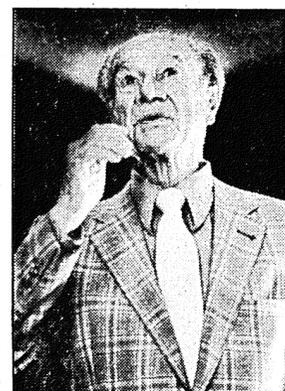
Two of Singher's roles at the Metropolitan Opera in New York were, left, Golaud in "Pelleas et Melisande" in 1953, and the high priest in "Samson et Dalila" in 1958.

Since retiring from his directing posts at the Music Academy in 1981, Singher has devoted his time to teaching master classes and coaching individual students.

Singher will celebrate his 82nd birthday on Thursday. Reflecting on his career,

Singher said he feels satisfaction.

"I believe that singing a beautiful repertoire offered to me is in itself a world without bitterness, without violence — a world where the greatest achievement is to make beauty," Singher said.



Virginia Robinson's glorious tradition

August Moon festivity at famed estate

ALAS, THERE IS no way to break the news gently to all the young society men who have burned incense before the shrine of dainty, illusive Miss Virginia Dryden! Since yesterday afternoon she has been Mrs. Harry Robinson.

That report is part of a Los Angeles Daily Times article of Nov. 17, 1903, and it was about Mrs. Harry Winchester Robinson. Many Santa Barbarans have happy memories of her and the glorious parties she gave.

The Daily Times article continued, explaining that the couple were married in the parlors of the bride's No. 1902 Harvard Boulevard home. "No one was there but Mrs. Dryden and Rev. Hugh K. Walker, who married them."

The newlyweds left immediately for New York, where they would stay at the Waldorf-Astoria. "They will probably be gone for some time, at least a month. How much longer will depend on how Mrs. Robinson agrees with the villainous climate of New York in the winter (slightly less bad than New York in summer.)"

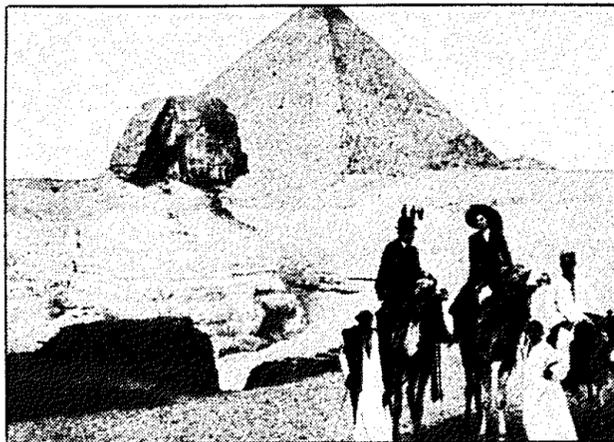
The article explained that the lucky groom had been living on his ranch near El Monte, Calif., and was the son of William Robinson, who founded the Boston Store (later to be Robinson's). "He is a charmingly simple and likable young fellow, just 25 and is heir to much money."

About Virginia Robinson, it said in part. "Never was there a girl here with so many adorers. All seemingly unconscious, she fairly breathed in an atmosphere of rapturous devotion."

She was a giant of a woman in the most petite body, impeccably dressed by top Parisian couturiers, always smiling, and a joy to be near. Her tennis luncheons, overseen by her majordomo of many years, were coveted invitations. And her party each year for the Hollywood Bowl patrons was a highlight of the summer season in Los Angeles.

Open spaces

Harry and Virginia Robinson built their Beverly Hills home in 1911, when the area was just that — hills. Pickfair and the Beverly Hills Hotel were there.



Harry and Virginia Robinson, who were married in 1903, went sightseeing in Egypt during their 'round-the-world

By the Way



By Beverly Jackson

And there were lots of streets lined with palm trees. The rest was wide open spaces.

When the Robinsons built their home, their official deed read, "First residence in Beverly Hills." It was a superb example of Beaux Arts architecture. The variety and integrity of the plans on the 6 1/2 acres surrounding the estate have created Los Angeles' oldest botanical garden. It is listed in the National Register of Historic Places.

No government funding exists to preserve this splendid historic and cultural resource. So the Friends of Robinson Gardens was founded three years ago. Its 150 members have been busy these past several years replacing the roof of the main residence and guest pavilion, and refurbishing the front courtyard. There is a lecture series offered in the gardens, and a decent-guided tour is available to the public.

Historic mall

Next, the Friends will begin an extensive restoration and replanting program for the historic central mall.

To raise the needed money for this project, the Friends of Robinson Gardens are recreating Virginia Robinson's legendary August Moon party. She celebrated her September birthday in grand style every year with an elaborate dinner dance. For this party, the best jewels came out of the vaults for the women of Pasadena, Hancock Park and old Beverly Hills to wear with their custom-designed gowns.

The tradition began when the newlywed Robinsons moved into their new home. The date was changed in 1932, when Mr. Robinson was buried on Virginia Robinson's birthday. She changed the party date to the first night of the full moon in August. These parties continued until 1973.

Incidentally, when Mrs. Robinson died in 1977, at the age of 99, she was planning her 100th birthday celebration.

Everyone who was anyone attended the August Moon party. Among them, through the years,



The beautiful Virginia Robinson was noted for the parties she gave at her home, the first one built in Beverly Hills.

were Mary Pickford and Buddy Rogers, Fred Astaire, Greta Garbo, Charlie Chaplin, Mae West, the Barrymores, Irene Dunne, and Loretta Young. The food was most wonderful, the flowers were superb, and the gardens were lighted by the moon — helped along by hundreds of hurricane lamps. It won't be quite the same, of course, without the wonderful little grande dame, but the party planned for Saturday on the

See Page 4, Col. 2

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