

## The fine art of lieder singer: Lotte Lehmann recordings of Schumann's *Dichterliebe*

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### Abstract

The article focuses on the soprano Lotte Lehmann's specific contribution to the performance practice of *Lieder* repertoire. Lehmann's recordings of and discourses around Schumann's cycle *Dichterliebe* are analyzed by comparing documentary information with musical data obtained through the software SonicVisualiser. Finally, the article discusses Lehmann's legacy to the US Second Post-War context and young musicians.

**Keywords:** singers, recordings, performance studies, Lieder, US reception.

### Introduction

Lotte Lehmann (1888-1976) has been one of the most distinguished singers of the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century: she specialized in the wagnerian and straussian operatic repertoires, giving vivid and internationally appreciated portrayals of roles such as Eva, Elsa, Leonore and the Marschallin. She was an acclaimed *prima donna* at the Wiener Staatsoper under the superintendences of Hans Gregor, Franz Schalk, Richard Strauss and Clemens Krauss, until the Nazi-Anschluss of 1938 led her leave for the USA on political and contractual reasons (Lehmann 1966; Kater 2008: 153-166). She established in California, continuing her operatic career till a farewell San Francisco *Rosenkavalier* in 1946. In 1950s she co-founded the Music Academy of the West in Santa Barbara, where she taught “vocal interpretation” to singers such as Grace Bumbry, Rose Bampton and Marilyn Horne.

Lehmann gave her first *Lieder* recitals during the First World War, while she was in the Hamburg Stadttheater's *ensemble* (Hickling 2011). Furthermore, her autobiography signals an important contact with Richard Strauss's *Lieder* occurred in August 1919: Lehmann stayed at Garmisch for three weeks in order to study the role of the Färberin (*Die Frau ohne Schatten*) under the guidance of the composer himself, who used to play domestic *Liederabenden* for the leisure of his mercurial wife Pauline (Lehmann 1964: 26-31; 1970: 148-149).

A true interest in the *Lieder* repertoire grew in parallel with her international fame, when, after her 1924 Covent Garden debut in the role of the Marschallin, she was more and

more called to appear as concert singer all over the world. The Salzburg Festival became Lehmann's preferred place for *Lieder* concerts, but it was in the United States, before as well as after the *Anschluss*, that the singer developed a properly liederistic career. Starting from Lehmann's Chicago debut on 28<sup>th</sup> October 1930 as Siegliende in *Die Walküre*, 117 operatic appearances in seven roles are attested against 277 *Lieder* recitals, till the definitive farewell concert at New York Town Hall in 1951.

Studies on Lehmann have generally engaged with her biography and discography or with her didactic activity (Glass 1988; Jefferson 1988; Kater 2008; Hinton-Brown 2012).

Notwithstanding the general appreciation of her vocal, musical and actorial qualities, less space has been dedicated to their systematic analysis, with the significative exception of few studies by Daniel Leech-Wilkinson in the frame of a wider project on recordings of Schubert *Lieder* (Leech-Wilkinson 2009a; 2009b).

In particular, through spectrographic analysis Leech-Wilkinson isolated specific features of Lehmann's voice, which color "runs from harsh at the bottom (strong in the fundamental and in dissonant upper partials) to childlike at the top (strong lower harmonics only, giving a pure tone almost like a treble)" (Leech-Wilkinson 2009b: chap. 4 parag. 24). In addition to a vibrato that is "even in wavelength but uneven in pitch", this results in an imperfect but yet effective balance of "stability and instability: we sense warmth (the strong consonant lower harmonics), dependability (the regularly beating vibrato combined with warmth of tone) and yet vulnerability" (Leech-Wilkinson 2009b: chap. 4 parag. 25). In general, Leech-Wilkinson considers Lehmann to be one of the best actors in the gradual increasing of emotional intensity in *Lieder* singing that took place during the 1920s and 1930s, before the new generations imposed an emphasis on psychological depths (Leech-Wilkinson 2009a: 801).

In the following pages I will try to add new datas and to deepen Leech-Wilkinson's general conclusions about Lotte Lehmann by considering her writings on and recordings of Schumann's *Dichterliebe*. I aim to identify the singer's specific contribution to the *Lieder* performance practice, and to gain a first image of how Lehmann influenced the reception of *Lieder* repertoire in the US.

### **Concepts: the creative artist**

The first step is to reconstruct Lehmann's general conception about *Lieder* singing, as it emerges from her books on interpretation (Lehmann 1945; 1971), from her masterclasses at Santa Barbara (tape-recorded and partially transcribed in Hinton-Brown 2012: 197-215 for *Dichterliebe*) and from a number of newspaper articles, first of all one published by «The New York Times» (Lehmann 1941). Lehmann's ideas can be summarized into four interrelated points. Firstly, the soprano preaches a firm opposition to imitation: the singer

must develop his own idea about a Lied; he can refer to tradition or to the reaches of another singers, but never as an impassable limit. Secondly, she stresses the importance of inner feelings and momentarily inspiration:

There is nothing I hate more than the doctrine that a song must be sung in just one way. Art must be alive and living feeling must spring from the ever changing richness of the heart. [...] The singer who in himself is not capable of changing conceptions would certainly be no creative artist". (Lehmann 1941)

The third point concerns the preeminence of interpretation over technical perfection. Lehmann affirms that vocal technique should be a ground and not a goal. The *Lieder* singer can choose to use imperfect sounds, i.e. a "veiled *pianissimo*" or a "whispered *forte*" to express specific meanings and feelings: "Dynamic shadowing are like sketches, but the enchanting in-between colors alone can give the tone picture a personal quality". Moreover, regarding phrase-arching: "Singing should never follow a straight line. It should have a sweeping flow, it should glide in soft rhythmical waves which follow one another harmoniously" (Lehmann 1971: 4-5). Finally, the *Lieder* singer should every time be careful about the balance between words and melody:

First there was the poem. That gave the inspiration for the song. Like a frame, music encloses the word picture - and now comes your interpretation, breathing life into this work of art, welding words and music with equal feeling into one whole, so that the poet sings and the composer becomes poet and two arts are born anew as one. (Lehmann 1971: 4)

For Lehmann, the achievement of these four features in the act of interpretation is the only way through which a performer can reach the status of "creative artist", a fundamental concept in her discourses about music and art.

### **Recordings: *Ich grolle nicht***

In order to show how Lehmann's ideas found practical application in her recordings of *Dichterliebe*, we can turn to consider two significative study-cases from the cycle. The first one regards musical data drawn from the analysis of *Ich grolle nicht*, which Lehmann recorded three times:

- on 19<sup>th</sup> June 1930, accompanied by an instrumental trio conducted by Frieder Weissmann<sup>36</sup>;
- on 13<sup>th</sup> August 1941, in Columbia recording studios with Bruno Walter at the

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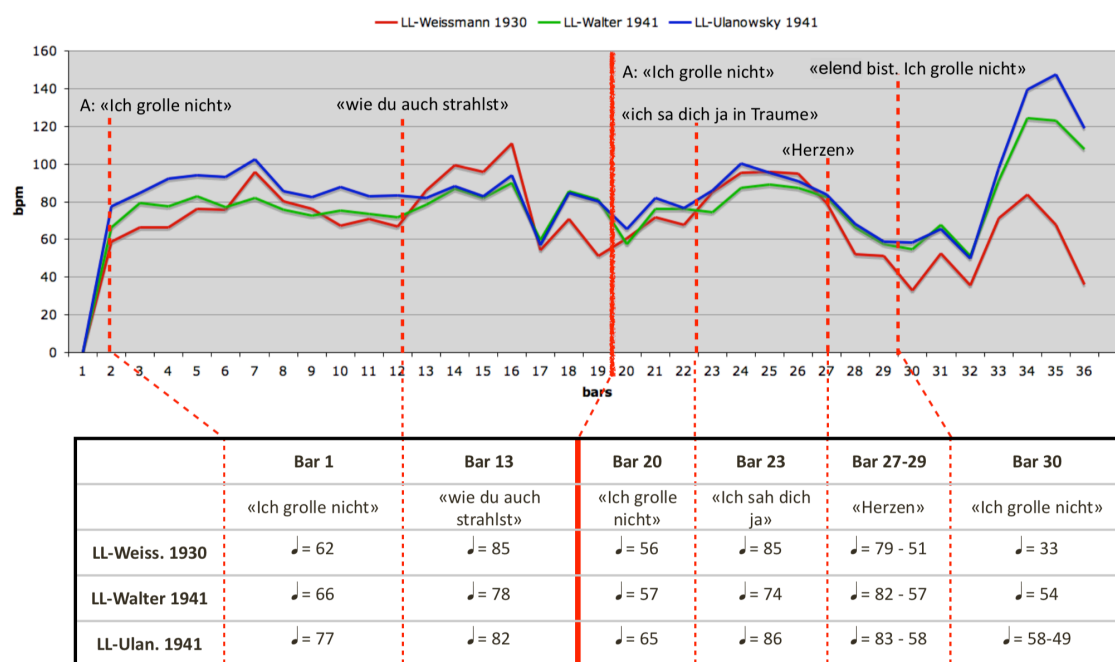
<sup>36</sup> Odeon catalogue O-4825a, matrix n. Be9044.

piano<sup>37</sup>;

- in November 1941, pianist Paul Ulanowsky, for a Columbia radio broadcast<sup>38</sup>.

Moreover, even though Lehmann sang the complete cycle only 8 times in her career, *Ich grolle nicht* was her most performed Schumann's *Lied*, with 47 attestations (often as *encore*) on a total of 185 appearances of Schumann's pieces in her programs.

The following data have been obtained by using SonicVisualiser, a software for recording's analysis developed by CHARM.



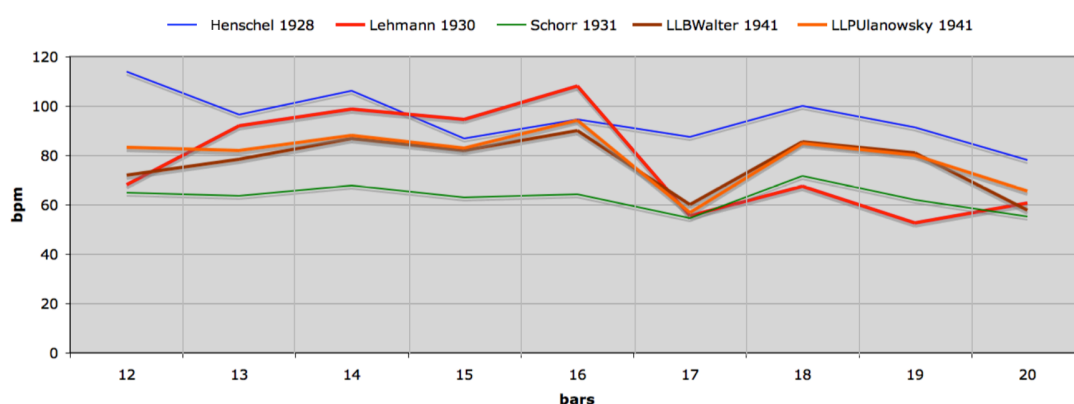
Graph I. *Ich grolle nicht* – Overall agogic in Lehmann's recordings.

Graph I shows the overall agogic development of the piece in Lehmann's recordings. According to the different emotional states expressed by the text, the singer tends to subdivide the two halves of the piece (marked by the recapitulation of the initial motif and words at bar 20). There are two subsections for the first half, the second one starting at bar 13 with the words «wie du auch strahlst», and three for the second half, respectively bars 20-23, 23-30 with the high A of the word «Herzen», and 30-33 with the final statement of «Ich grolle nicht». The 1930 recording (red line) shows more variability in tempo than the others, marking the subsections of the piece with sudden metronomic changes. As Robert Philip demonstrated, this was a common feature of early 20<sup>th</sup> century performance practice and recordings (Philip 1992: 7-36; 2004: 104-139). It is interesting to note that in the 1941 recordings (blue and green lines) Lehmann managed to temper this

<sup>37</sup> Columbia catalogue 72077-D in M-468, matrix n. XCO31383-1A, later in LP ML-2183.

<sup>38</sup> Columbia matrix n. YTN766, later in LP LRT1-3.

tendency without renouncing at her interpretation. In all three cases, in fact, the soprano maintains a double repetition of an *accelerando-to-decelerando* scheme: i.e. the second half of the piece (bar 20) starts at a lower tempo than the first half; then, from bar 23 there is an *accelerando* (and *crescendo*) which allows the singer to render much more effective the explosion on the high «Herzen» and the sequent dramatic *declamato* and *decelerando* of the last words, concluding with a strong *glissando* on «grolle nicht» (bars 31-32). The next graph isolates the second subsection of the first part (bars 12-20) comparing Lehmann's recordings with two others, respectively by George Henschel (1928, blue line)<sup>39</sup> and Friedrich Schorr (1931, green line)<sup>40</sup>, both representatives of *Lieder* performance style around 1920s-1930s.



Graph II. *Ich grolle nicht* – Agogic (bb. 12-20).

**Audio Sample:** *Ich Grolle Nicht* (bb. 12-20): Henschel 1938 – Schorr 1931 – Lehmann 1930, [https://educast.fcn.pt/vod/clips/1et4jyfp9u/link\\_box?locale=pt](https://educast.fcn.pt/vod/clips/1et4jyfp9u/link_box?locale=pt)

The peculiar *accelerando-to-decelerando* scheme already noted for Lehmann (see the great emphasis on the word «längst» at bar 17 in Lehmann) has no equal in the other two recordings: here the singers prefer an overall *decelerando* directionality, less pronounced in Schorr. Lehmann explains her original interpretative choice:

Change the quality of your voice, which has been dark and flowing, at «Wie du auch strahlst in Diamantenpracht». Sing with a bright tone, disparagingly and ironically, as if you were saying: “But don’t think that I don’t see through you! The splendor with which you surround yourself is all on the outside - don’t think that you can fool me, that you can make me forget what you really are!” Sing broadly, with sad accentuation, «das Weiss ich längst». (Lehmann 1971: 82-83)

<sup>39</sup> Columbia D1658, matrix n. A8086.

<sup>40</sup> HMV E587, matrix n. Bb19308-1/2.

This bright, broad and ironical tone is particularly evident in the spectrogram of the recording with Bruno Walter: on the vowel /a/ of the word «strahst» there are both a wider amplitude of the wave from peaks to troughs and stronger lower partials (their color is more vivid), in this case denouncing an intentionally less “covered” sound<sup>41</sup>. Moreover, Lehmann stresses the consonantal group /str/|: it lasts 0,44 seconds, 0,18 of which are occupied by the /r/|, intoned on the pitch of the precedent «auch». This is just one of the numerous examples, in this piece and in the cycle, of a phenomenon which has been defined as the “German swoop”, a speech-associated expressive gesture typical of female singers for signaling a particular emotional turn (Leech-Wilkinson 2009b: chapter 8, par. 78-89).

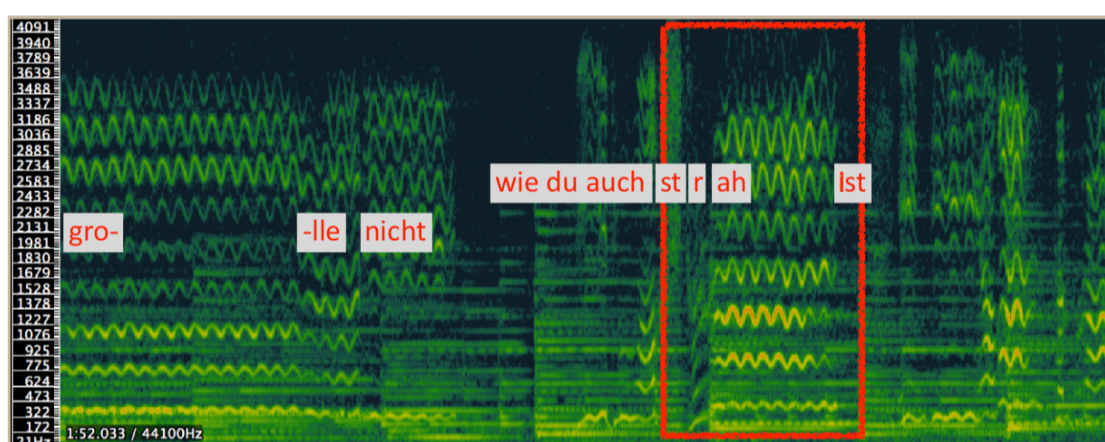
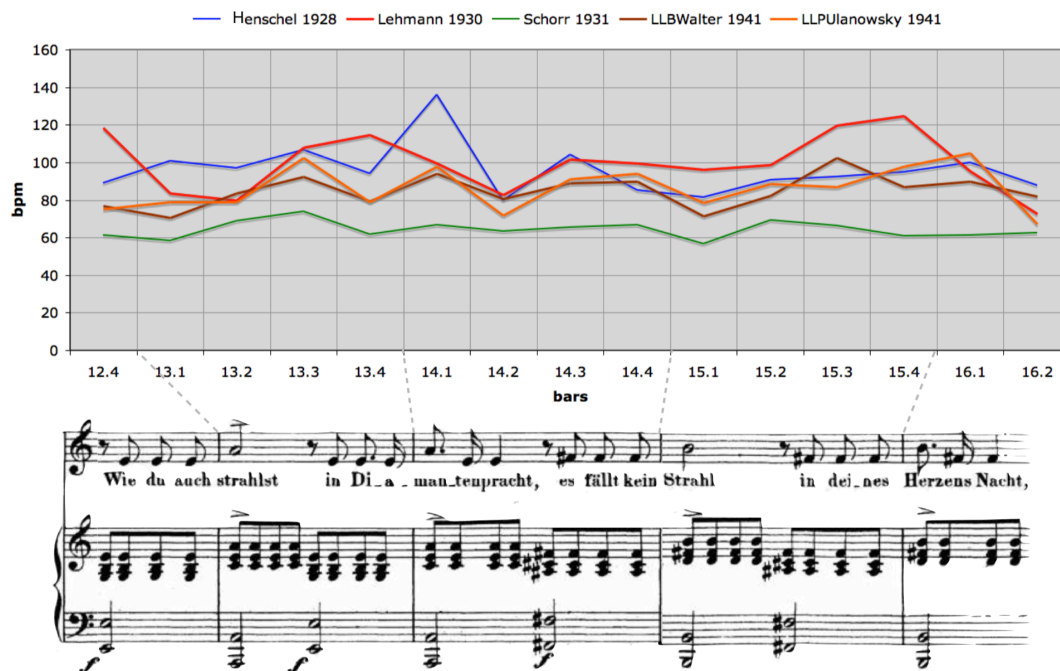


Figure I. *Ich grolle nicht* – Spectrogram (bb. 11-13).

One last consideration must be dedicated to the micro-agogic: Graph III shows again the ascendant progression of bars 13-16, now considering every subdivision. Henschel (blue line) constantly applies a standard phrase-arching model described by Neil Todd and Nicholas Cook: *accelerando* and *crescendo* to stress the tension of weaker subdivisions towards stronger ones, which instead decelerate and decrease (Todd 1985; Cook 2013)<sup>42</sup>. This scheme is less evident in both Lehmann’s 1941 recordings, almost absent in the 1930 one. To explain it, we can remind the singer’s idea that the singing line “should have a sweeping flow”: she prefers to highlight the emotional/dramatic content of the text, of a word, although this means to contradict the musical phrase directionality.

<sup>41</sup> That means: darkened and homogenized through particular gestures of vocal technique which were becoming standard during the 1920s-1940s.

<sup>42</sup> Moreover, Haenschel fulfills Schumann’s indications (accent on the first subdivision – f on the second half note at piano left hand) better than Lehmann and Schorr.



Graph III. *Ich grolle nicht* – Micro-phrasing (bb. 12/4-16/2).

### Meaning and gender: *Im Rhein, im heiligen Strome*

The second study-case concerns the construction of meaning in *Im Rhein, im heiligen Strome*: this *Lied*, which precedes the bitter awakening of the lyric I in *Ich grolle nicht*, is about the idea of the sacred mixed with the profane sentiments of the protagonist, who recognizes his beloved in a portrayal of the Holy Virgin kept in the Dome of Köln. Elsewhere I have already noticed that Lehmann builds up her interpretation by using different kinds of materials and sources (Palma 2016: 139-153). In the case of *Im Rhein* I found an interesting parallel with a silent monologue by the famous American actress Ruth Draper, *An Italian Paesant Woman*, Scene n. 6 of *In a Church in Italy*. In Draper's own description:

A woman in a long black shawl enters and crosses herself as she passes before the altar. She pauses and then moves forward slowly, gazing up sorrowfully. She crosses herself again and sinks to her knees in deep and concentrated prayer, eyes closed and hands clenched, head bowed, with an expression of deep anguish on her face. Gradually she opens her hands in supplication, her head raised, her eyes still closed. Relieved of suffering, a look of peace and serenity slowly comes over her face. (rpd. in Draper 1960: 295)

I have compared Lehmann's actorial prescriptions for *Im Rhein* and her own description, as spectator, of Draper's monologue, finding interesting parallels and resonances which are resumed in Table 1.

**Lehmann actorials prescriptions for *Im Rhein*** (Lehmann 1945: 144)

You are compelled again and again to stand before the lovely image of the Madonna whose serene beauty stirs your heart. [...] Your eyes, looking into the distance, are (in your thoughts) uplifted to this picture. It is the most beautiful which you have ever seen.

With astonishment you realize that this exalted face of the holy Virgin is like the beautiful face of your beloved. [...] Hold this expression of tender melancholy until you feel the fateful heavy *crescendo* in the postlude.

**Lehmann's description of Draper's monologue** (Lehmann 1948: 170-171)

Without really seeing it her troubled glance falls upon the painting of the Madonna. Then slowly this picture of the gentle Mother of God grips her. [...] She slowly turns more directly towards the picture as if guided by a supernatural force. Her face is transfigured by her emotion – she drinks in the beauty of the painting, she sees the Holy Mother – she sees the child Jesus in her arms.

One feels that the eyes of the Madonna look down upon her pleadingly; one feels how she changes, how she softens finding her way back to life. Slowly she falls upon her knee, her eyes are veiled by tears.

Table I. Lotte Lehmann and Ruth Draper.

The reference to Draper's monologue works potentially in two ways: on the one side, Lehmann, a skilled actress herself, could bring gestures and facial expressions from other contexts and re-use them as a new code for her own performances. If this is quite clear for the operatic repertoire, in this case Draper's bodily tension and expressions fit with Lehmann's idea of the constant tension to be kept by the singer while performing *Im Rhein*. Secondly, a meaning dimension is inferred from the gestural one: Draper's acting as a woman in grief can serve for Lehmann as a medium to color the masculine "lyric I" of *Dichterliebe* with feminine traits, a problem she arises in the introduction to *Eighteen Song Cycles* (Lehmann 1971: 5-6). This process of feminization is also mirrored in the way Lehmann renders the Madonna of "Im Rhein" in one of her own paintings, insisting on an ambiguous sexualization of the Madonna's eyes and lips.





Figure II. Lehmann's painting for *Im Rhein* (rpd. in Hinton-Brown 2012: 204).

## Conclusions

Both the musical datas on “Ich grolle nicht” and Draper’s resonance in “Im Rehin” point towards the same end: Lehmann operated a careful dramatization of *Dichterliebe* (and of the *Lieder* repertoire in general), basing her interpretation on the power of musical and actorial details and dialoguing in a free way with the performance practice tradition. It is not surprising, then, if shortly before her major *Lieder* recordings Lehmann affirmed: “I found in Bruno Walter the confirmation of my conception that the Lied - always within the limits set by the style of *Lieder* singing - can be a dramatic scene, seized from the purely spiritual and transformed into the pulse beats of reality” (Lehmann 1941).

Going back to Daniel Leech-Wilkinson’s considerations, we can now recognize to Lehmann a specific place in the context of between-wars “emotional singers”: differently from i.e. Elisabeth Schumann and Heinrich Schlusnuss, she was at all a “dramatic singer” grounded in a post-romantic idea of music making (see also Tunbridge 2017). The name of Bruno Walter, one of the most influential figures in the soprano’s formation and

career<sup>43</sup>, is fundamental. Lehmann, in fact, borrowed her concept of “creative artist” from Walter’s own theory of interpretation, slightly modifying the relation between composer and performer (“schöpferisches Ich” and “nachsöpferisches Ich” in Walter’s words, see Walter 1977: 23-33): she professed it constantly during her masterclasses, transmitting to the new generations of US musicians a genuinely German post-romantic idea of music making.

Finally, the impact of Lehmann’s activity in US can be measured from the reviews to her concerts, masterclasses and publications, which were unanimous in appreciating her love for details and insistence on the text, her free dialogue with tradition through the idea of dramatization, and her reference to a recognizable actorial tradition (Drapers and others like Katharine Cornell). Those were the principal elements of Lehmann’s legacy to the US singers, giving them, through concerts and didactic, a model for *Lieder* interpretation which surpassed the great divide of Post-War changes in the musical world and remained vivid for almost three decades.

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<sup>43</sup> For example, for Lehmann’s Covent Garden debut in 1924 Walter coached and conducted her in the role of the Marschallin, giving the first imprint to an interpretation that would have become one of the greatest reaches of the soprano’s career.

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