

Marta Eggerth, 'Callas of the Operetta,' Dies at 101

AUDIO: Marta Eggerth on WNYC's Evening Music on March 3, 2007:

Friday, December 27, 2013 - 10:51 AM

By [Brian Wise](#)



Marta Eggerth in 1932 (Wikipedia Commons)

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Marta Eggerth, the Austro-Hungarian operetta star and actress whose performing career lasted well into her late 90s, died on Thursday at her home in Rye, New York. She was 101.

The Manhattan School of Music, where Eggerth had given master classes in recent years, confirmed her death.

Dubbed the "Callas of Operetta," Eggerth was one of the most recognizable and glamorous operetta stars of 1930s, both on stage and film, and her passing was widely covered in German-language news media on Friday. During the inter-war era, composers including Franz Lehar, Fritz Kriesler and Richard Stolz wrote works for her. Eggerth was particularly renowned for her starring role in Lehar's *The Merry Widow*, one she reportedly sang more than 2,000 times in five languages.

Eggerth was born on April 17, 1912 in Budapest and made her stage debut at age 11. In 1930, the composer Emmerich Kalman brought the young singer to Vienna where she was quickly discovered by the Austrian film industry. During the filming of "Mein Herz ruft immer nach dir" ("My Heart is Calling You," of 1934) she met the Polish tenor Jan Kiepura, whom she married two years later.

The couple, known as Europe's "Liebespaar" ("The Love Pair") in Europe, performed together regularly. In 1938, fleeing the Nazis, they moved to the United States, where they soon got work on Broadway and in Hollywood. In 1943, they starred together in an acclaimed Broadway production of *The Merry Widow*, with Robert Stolz conducting and George Balanchine as choreographer.

A coloratura soprano, Eggerth occasionally appeared on opera stages, most notably starring opposite Kiepura in a Chicago production of *La Boheme* during the early 1940s.

Eggerth made over 40 films in four different languages (English, German, Italian and French) including two for Metro-Goldwyn-Meyer in Hollywood: Busby Berkeley's "Me and My Gal" in 1942, starring Judy Garland and Gene Kelly, and "Presenting Lily Mars," also with Garland and released in 1943.

After World War II, Eggerth and Kiepura returned to France and resumed touring throughout the Europe and the U.S. They made several films and were particularly sought after for performances of *The Merry Widow*. After Kiepura died prematurely in 1966, Eggerth stopped singing for several years but, at the urging of her mother, she resumed her career in the 1970s.

The last decade brought fresh recognition, with cabaret and concert performances at venues such as the Royal Albert Hall in London, the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the Neue Gallery in New York. She received the Knight's Cross of the Order of the Merit of the Republic of Hungary, her native country's highest honor.

Eggerth's last public appearance was in Oct 2011, when she appeared at a career retrospective event for the Vocal Record Collectors Society in New York.

Eggerth is survived by her sons John and Marjan, and her daughter-in-law Jane Knox Kiepura. At an event in [The Greene Space](#) in 2009, Eggerth told WQXR host David Garland that she continues to feel young and alert. "Until the end of my life I want to learn," she said. "I am still a student; I enjoy it very much."

Below is an excerpt from that appearance. William Hicks accompanied her at the piano in an old Viennese song. Recorded live on July 8, 2009:

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BRIAN WISE

Brian Wise covers the classical music business for WQXR, including aspects of performance, technology, philanthropy and institutional trends. He produces the Café Concerts series and the podcast/show Conducting Business. He manages the station's homepage and makes sure what you hear on air is what you see online. Follow him on Twitter at [@BrianCwise](#).

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Les from Miami, Florida

Ms. Kiepura, thank you, Ma'am. I'm very touched and humbled all at once. Your parents' artistry lives in our memories and in recordings for all to see and hear.

Dec. 30 2013 09:22 AM

Score: 0/0

Marjan Kiepura from New York

In answer to Les from Miami:

Thank you for your comment about my parents, Marta Eggerth and Jan Kiepura. Marta Eggerth passed away last Thursday. Her wake will be at the Frank E Campbell funeral home at 1076 Madison Ave at 81 Street in New York City on Thursday January 2 from 2 pm to 5 pm and from 7 pm to 9 pm.

Dec. 29 2013 10:16 PM

Score: 0/0

Diana Mario from New York, NY

One editorial note -- since Ms. Eggert was born in 1912, that means she was 18 years old in 1930, not 11. Clearly a typo, which should be corrected.

Dec. 29 2013 05:59 PM

Score: 0/0

Marion Berghahn

Would it be possible to correct the name of Kreisler? I know it is a common problem with German spelling many Americans have but I expected staff at WQXR to know better.

Dec. 29 2013 09:34 AM

Score: 0/0

Beverly Joy from Cambridge

<http://youtu.be/IrAQIYRBeFo>

Dec. 28 2013 09:07 PM

Score: 0/0

[DuckDeadeye](#)

Thank you for editing the article. WQXR should always be presented in the best light.

DD--

Dec. 28 2013 06:13 PM

Score: 1/1

Les from Miami, Florida

The word "icon" is much used and overused, but surely Marta Eggerth was and is one. Like so few remaining with us, she knew and performed in works many of whose composers she knew. It's rather difficult to think of her without also thinking of Jan Kiepura. I treasure hearing a lecture by the late Professor Dr. Marcel Prawy of the Vienna State Opera/Philharmonic who worked with both artists in their heyday as their secretary, if memory serves. May they all rest in peace.

Dec. 28 2013 09:27 AM

Kenneth Bennett Lane, Lake Hiawatha, NJ from Richard Wagner Music Drama Institute, Boonton, NJ

MARTA EGGERTH was a colorful radiant personality with a joie de vivre whom I got to meet at the New York College of Music where I was studying voice with ALEXANDER KIPNIS and her son studied piano and at a RICHARD TAUBER TRIBUTE EVENT with JARMILA NOVOTNA and GEORGE JELLINEK at the old Aquarium, formerly the Fort Clinton on the Hudson River built to confront a possible British naval invasion in the pre-Revolutionary War era at the Battery, Manhattan's most southerly landscape, that P.T. BARNUM converted into the Castle Clinton concert auditorium to serve as the debut site in the USA for the touring world-renowned JENNY LIND. Like NOVOTNA and my teacher FRIEDA HEMPEL she was a stunningly beautiful woman in her heyday and her voice was clear and silvery, the very ideal icon of her age for everything bourgeoisie Viennese. My own background with famous opera singer and acting teachers and my own performances consort to evaluate so highly her longtime performance achievement, totally amazing. I will sing the four song cycles that are most often performed in their orchestral garb: Wagner's "Wesendonck Lieder," Mahler's "Lieder eines fahrenden Gesellen," Mahler's "Das Lied von der Erde" and Schoenberg's "Gurre-Lieder" at the New Life Expo at the Hotel Pennsylvania in NYC on Saturday March 22nd at 6 PM. I have sung four three-hour-long solo concerts in the Isaac Stern Auditorium of Carnegie Hall including programming the Wagner and the first named Mahler song cycle. I am the director at the Richard Wagner Music Drama Institute of Boonton, NJ, where I teach voice and train artists in all the Wagner and Shakespeare roles.

Dec. 27 2013 08:15 PM

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