

# VICTÒRIA DELS ÀNGELS, THE VOICE OF UNIVERSALITY

PAU CASALS ONCE SAID, "VICTÒRIA DELS ÀNGELS'S  
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I AM PROUD TO BE A CATALAN LIKE HER...".

AGUSTÍ FANCELLI MUSIC CRITIC

**V**ictòria dels Àngels's art belongs to the highest level of musical interpretation... I am proud to be a Catalan like her..." The sentence is Pau Casals's and was quoted on 23rd December of last year by the professor and musicologist Oriol Martorell at an act of deep and moving significance: the eminent soprano's investiture as Doctor *Honoris Causa* by the University of Barcelona. This recognition could easily be taken as just one more of the many tributes the singer has received throughout her career, especially since 1984, when different organizations

around the world celebrated her forty years of unbroken artistic commitment. But in fact it took on an importance of its own for two reasons: because it bore a direct relationship to her own life, as we shall see, and because it was a university, the institution which best embodies the *universality* of knowledge, that was giving the recognition.

For Victòria dels Àngels, that event was like a homecoming. There, in the old university building in Barcelona where her father was a popular beadle, she was born; there she heard music for the first time, from her mother, who had per-

formed in Spanish light opera —she was also called Victòria—, and her uncle Àngel, who never lost a chance to liven up the evenings with a guitar, and there, at night, she made the empty classrooms ring with the sound of her as yet unformed voice. She lived there for twenty-five years, until she got married. Not until later would she discover that that building, with its mysterious court-yards and corridors, was the enchanted castle of a Mélisande still unaware of her condition.

Her training also contained an element of the fantastic. In 1939 she enrolled at the



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Liceu conservatory, to work with Dolors Frau, and three years later she had completed the six official courses, with the highest grades. So far, nothing extraordinary, considering her talent. But just by chance, on 14th May 1941, at the end of term concert, she was heard by the engineer and music-lover Josep Maria Lamaña, who, stunned by her voice, invited her to join Ars Musicae, a group of accomplished professionals and amateurs who specialized in the performance of antique music. This group opened up a vast repertoire to the singer and also acted as a support organization in her professional beginnings.

Victòria dels Àngels made her debut at the Barcelona 'Palau de la Música' on 19th May 1944, with a programme that included work by Brahms, Strauss, Respighi, Ravel, Granados, Rodrigo, Turina, Falla and Mompou; on 13th January 1945 she gave her first performance at the 'Gran Teatre del Liceu', in the part of the Countess in Mozart's *The Marriage of Figaro*; in 1947 she went in for the Geneva International Competition and won the First Grand Prix; the following year she

signed an exclusive contract for EMI records and soon afterwards began her great international career, whose all too well-known details can be omitted. But two events are nevertheless worth mentioning: in 1961 she became the only Spanish singer ever to take the stage at Bayreuth in a leading role —she played Elisabeth in *Tannhäuser* that year and the next—, and in 1980 she received a Gold Disc in London, the first time the award was made to an opera singer, for having sold over five million records.

So far we have looked at Victòria dels Àngels's beginnings, so closely linked to the land where she was born. Now we should move on, if only briefly, to her universal qualities, which have earned her an admiration that transcends borders and classifications. Victòria dels Àngels has sung Debussy, Ravel, Berlioz and Gounod in France —It was in fact with *Faust* that she made her debut at the Paris Opéra—, Beethoven, Schumann, Mendelssohn, Brahms and Wagner in Germany, Mozart and Schubert in Austria... She made her debut at La Scala in 1950, in the first performance the

theatre had seen of Richard Strauss's *Ariadne auf Naxos*, and later returned in Scarlatti's *Mitridate Eupatore*, Rossini's *The Barber of Seville*, not to mention her brilliant interpretations of Cio-Cio-San, in *Madame Butterfly* or Mimi, in *La Bohème*. And at the Liceu, in 1961 —the same year as Bayreuth— she performed in Manuel de Falla's *Atlàntida*, based on a poem by Jacint Verdaguer, conducted by the Catalan violinist and composer Eduard Toldrà, whose songs she sang so often —along with those of Granados, Mompou and Montsalvatge— all over the world.

Victòria dels Àngels's work has known no limits: from French songs to the German *lied*, including the repertoire of Spanish music from the *Cantiques d'Alfons Xè* down to the present day, from the opera of the Italian renaissance (Monteverdi) to that of the twentieth century (Strauss), without forgetting the Baroque, Classicism, the *bel canto*, Romantic opera, Verism... all in a natural tone, a precise diction and impeccable phrasing. All expressed in the voice of universality. ■