

OBITUARIES

CUPERTINO, CALIF.

Margery Mayer, 96, retired Wagner College music professor

Margery Mayer, 96, a retired Wagner College music professor and renowned contralto who performed with the New York City Opera and many other famous musical groups, died May 12 in Sunny View Retirement Community, Cupertino, Calif.

Born Marguerite Caroline Louise Mayer in Chicago, she began vocal studies at age 16. In 1938, shortly after her debut recital, she was offered contracts with the Chicago Civic Opera Company and with WGN radio, singing opera and classical programs, heard coast to coast. The following year, she was signed by NBC to perform on General Mills' popular radio program, "Hymns of all Churches." She also sang for services at North Shore Congregation Israel in Glencoe, Illinois.

Ms. Mayer toured extensively from 1943 to 1945 in the United States and Canada with the San Carlo Opera Company, gaining wide recognition. In 1939, she and a childhood friend and neighbor, Dietrich George Berthold, wed and had a son, Lynn. Mr. Berthold died of tuberculosis three years later.

She and Sigvart J. Steen, a U.S. Navy veteran and musician whom she met when he was conducting a Navy choir at the Great Lakes Naval Air Station, were married in 1946.

Ms. Mayer debuted with the New York City Center Opera Company on May 16, 1946, in a historic production of



1975

"Madame Butterfly," singing the role of Suzuki opposite Camilla Williams, soprano, as Cio-Cio San, the first black woman to be cast by a major U.S. opera company. Later that year, she began singing on three radio shows in New York — WOR's "Serenade to America," "WOR Opera Theatre" and NBC's "Let's Go to the Opera."

The family moved to Decorah, Iowa, in 1947, where her husband was to chair the music department and she to teach voice. Their son, Richard, was born there. In 1948 they relocated to Levittown on Long Island, so Ms. Mayer could join the City Center Opera Company. A year later they moved to Staten Island, where Mr. Steen took a position at Wagner.

Over the next 10 years, she

became one of the leading contraltos at City Center Opera, starring in dozens of roles. Her repertoire included some 35 operas, including many highly acclaimed performances of "Carmen," "Aida" and "Il Trovatore."

In 1949, Ms. Mayer performed in the City Center's hit production of Prokofiev's "The Love for Three Oranges," its first American performance in over 30 years. That same year she sang with the Fort Wayne Symphony in the American premiere of Arthur Honneger's "La Danse des Morts." For several seasons, she was a regular guest artist with the Pittsburgh Opera Company. She also sang at Broadway performances, with the New York City Opera and the Chicago Symphony.

An accomplished oratorio singer, Ms. Mayer sang many performances of Bach's "St. Matthew Passion," Handel's "Messiah" and Verdi's "Requiem." She also sang with many of the major symphony orchestras in the country, including the New York Philharmonic and the Chicago Symphony.

In 1950 and 1951, Ms. Mayer was the featured soloist at Radio City Music Hall's famed eight-week Easter Show and appeared in one of the earliest presentations of opera on television. In 1957, she performed for the NBC-TV Opera Theater's presentation of "War and Peace," and in 1958 sang

in the Douglas Moore opera, "Ballad of Baby Doe" for ABC television and the Musicarnival in Cleveland. In 1959, she sang with Eileen Farrell for the Richmond Opera Company.

In 1961, she was appointed assistant professor in the Music Department of Wagner College and was subsequently granted tenure. While there, she taught private and class voice lessons, and sought to give to others some of the gift she had received. Several of her students won Fulbright fellowships or were offered contracts with the Metropolitan or City Center opera companies.

Her second husband, Sigvart, died in 1968.

Ms. Mayer later developed a very popular opera appreciation course at Wagner, with guest lectures by renowned New York City artists, in-class performances and field trips to Manhattan. After her operatic career ended, she continued to teach at Wagner until retiring in 1977.

In 1978 she married George Voutsas, a retired NBC music producer, and the couple lived in Carmel Highlands, Calif. Mr. Voutsas died in 2003.

Surviving, along with her sons, Lynn and Richard, are two grandchildren and six great-grandchildren.

Arrangements, including cremation, were handled by the Neptune Society, Monterey, Calif.