

Irene Jordan Caplan: Soprano

1919 - 2016

by Rebecca Williams Mlynarczyk

In June 2007, when Irene was eighty-eight years old, I asked if she would be willing to participate in my project on successful aging in women, and I was thrilled when she agreed. I remember her saying, "I'd be glad to be a part of this. I don't seem to be able to do very much else these days besides sit and talk."

Irene and her husband, Arnold, had owned their home in Plainfield for years as a summer and weekend retreat. When Arnold retired in 1986 after forty-eight years playing first violin in the Metropolitan Opera Orchestra, it became their permanent residence though they often traveled South in the winter months. Irene was something of a celebrity in Plainfield. At the age of twenty-seven, she had had her debut singing major roles as a mezzo-soprano at the Metropolitan Opera. She went on to have a long and successful career in music, singing all over the world with major orchestras and teaching voice at the best universities and music schools including Northwestern, the Eastman School of Music, and the Manhattan School of Music.

Irene was in her seventies by the time I got to know her as a friend and neighbor in Plainfield, no longer in her prime as a vocalist. But she continued to give concerts locally and often sang solos at the Plainfield Congregational Church. Listening to Irene sing was always an emotional experience. She seemed to become one with the music, using her remarkable voice and dramatic delivery to tell the story of the song.

During her years in Plainfield, Irene could have played the diva. But, instead, she became a vital part of the community, cultivating many warm friendships. She was active in local organizations such as the Ladies Benevolent Society. She joined the Plainfield Congregational Church, attending regularly and singing in the choir. She and Arnold often entertained friends from town at their home on Union Street. I remember a dinner party at their house after Irene had given an ambitious concert in a nearby town. I asked her daughter, Rosebeth, who was visiting from out of town, "How can your mother give a

concert and then host a dinner party in the same evening?” Rosebeth shook her head: “I don’t know. But she’s been doing this for as long as I can remember.”

As a couple, Irene and Arnold were often seen around town, swimming in the Plainfield Pond or sitting on the small beach, sharing stories with everyone. Arnold was a lover of vintage cars, and the two of them sometimes drove to the Pond in his huge white Lincoln Continental convertible. When my children were young, Arnold and Irene would sometimes stop by and pick us up on their way to the Pond—a thrill for the whole family.

Irene and Arnold loved children and were comfortable interacting with them, having had four of their own. Their adult children and their five grandchildren often visited the Plainfield house, and their son Rowen lived next door in a beautiful house he had designed and helped to build. Devotion to family was an important shared value for Irene and Arnold. They had been determined not to let their careers in music prevent them from having a wholesome family life, and they carefully planned their professional engagements so that at least one of them would always be home to care for the children as they were growing up.

Now that both were home more than they had been in their younger years, another thing that kept Irene active and involved with life was her love of language, both the spoken and the written word. An early reader as a child, she remained fascinated with words in her elder years and always worked the Sunday *New York Times* crossword puzzle, sometimes consulting with her close friend Kin Cullen, another word maven. Irene read widely, and in 1999 she enrolled in a senior writing workshop that met in neighboring Cummington. ([Click here](#) to read two of the stories she contributed to the workshop’s publication.)

Irene was also sustained by her strong religious faith. The granddaughter of a minister, she was a committed Christian and a firm believer in the power of prayer. She was shaped by her upbringing in the Southern Baptist church, and her appreciation for the poetic power of words was undoubtedly encouraged by her love for the cadences of the Bible, which she knew better than many ministers.

When Arnold died on July 8, 1997, after a long struggle with cancer, Irene faced her grief with strength and faith. They had had a wonderful marriage—two world-class artists united by their love of music, devotion to their children, and obvious adoration of each other. Arnold passed away just a month after their fiftieth wedding anniversary. In the years that followed, I was struck by Irene’s stoicism in the face of her loss. A few years after Arnold’s death, she told me that sometimes her grief would come upon her unawares, in a grocery store or at the hairdresser’s, and she would suddenly burst into tears. But, instead of feeling sorry for herself, she carried on, continuing to engage in town activities, sustained by her faith in God, her love of music, her strong ties with family, and many warm friendships in Plainfield and beyond. Lina Bernstein, a friend in town who knew Irene summed it up. “The important thing as we age is to remain engaged. And Irene did. She was engaging, funny, full of stories, and beautiful.”

Conversations with Irene

My first interview with Irene took place on July 4, 2007. We agreed to meet at her home on Lower Union Street. As I stepped out of my car, I inhaled deeply. The scent of pines was heavenly, and I could hear the brook gurgling behind the cabin-like house—Canto Brook, as the family had christened it.

Irene suggested that we talk in the music room, the heart of the house with its large windows looking out on the deck and the woods beyond. As its name suggests, the room was filled with music, containing the piano, family photos, many from Irene’s opera career, and a beautiful music stand handcrafted of wood by Irene’s son Rowen. After we had been talking for a while, Irene said with conviction, “I *can* still sing.” Then she walked to the piano, struck middle C, and demonstrated by singing the note, diminuendo to crescendo and back to diminuendo. “It’s about all I can do these days, but it gives me physical pleasure to sing.”

Finding pleasure in singing was important for Irene in 2007, which had been a very painful year in her life. Her older sister, Martha, an amazing woman and pillar of Irene’s childhood, was nearly blind and suffering from dementia. Her only daughter,

Rosebeth Miller, had died of colon cancer in January at the age of fifty-six. She had spent her last weeks at Irene's home in Plainfield. Irene herself was having health problems. She had had a stroke a few years earlier while visiting relatives in Alabama, and though she had made an excellent recovery, her short-term memory had been affected.

Given these challenges, I was fortunate to have two long conversations with Irene in the summer and fall of 2007. I had planned a third interview focused on the aging process, but this was not to be. By the end of 2007, Irene had moved to an assisted living facility in a nearby town, and a few years later she moved to a nursing home. During these years, Irene gradually slipped into dementia, no longer able to describe the extraordinary life recounted here. And on May 13, 2016, she passed away peacefully at the age of ninety-seven.

Although Irene could no longer answer my questions as I worked on this biography, I soon discovered that I had a new partner—the Internet. Almost everything Irene had told me in our interviews, on topics ranging from family history to her opera career, was quickly confirmed by an online search. Her accuracy in recalling names and dates was astonishing. The sources I used included ancestry records and photographs from the Alabama archives, newspaper articles about her career (now available online), archives documenting her appearances with the Metropolitan Opera and the New York Philharmonic, and recordings available on YouTube.

As I continued to piece together the puzzle, the serendipity of finding clues and confirmations added to the fascination of reconstructing a life. Many people in Plainfield remember Irene as a dear friend and gifted artist. However, in the larger world of opera history, she often appears as a footnote in other people's stories. But in the story you will read here, Irene moves from the shadows into the spotlight as we look back on a remarkable life devoted to music, family, and friends.

Family Background and Childhood

In my first interview with Irene, I explained that in order to understand what enables people to live successfully in old age, we need to learn what they had been like as

children. Irene was quick to agree. “The example of your parents makes such a difference,” she told me.

In the next two hours, I learned a lot about Irene’s parents. Both of them had been musicians. Her father, Eugene Crawford Jordan (1891-1969), was the band director at the Alabama Boys Industrial School in Birmingham. This school was a unique institution, founded in 1900 thanks primarily to the efforts of Mrs. Elizabeth Johnston, a wealthy woman from a prominent Southern family who, in later years, became a good friend of Irene’s mother. Mrs. Johnston was concerned about the cruel treatment of young convicts in the Alabama prison system and worked tirelessly to get the state legislature to pass a bill to create a training school for these boys. This school is believed to be “the first altruistic state institution of its kind.” It was also unique in having a board of managers comprised completely of women. Mrs. Johnston served as chairperson of this board for the rest of her life.¹

By the time, Irene’s father became the school’s music director, the Alabama Industrial School had earned a positive reputation. Explaining the school’s structure, Irene said, “The boys had half a day of vocational training and half a day of academics. Many of the boys were orphans, but some of them were considered ‘bad’ boys who were too young to be sent to jail.” Irene’s father was devoted to making these boys into musicians, and his work ethic as well as his devotion to music were strong influences on his young daughter. “My father was an absolutely splendid, talented musician,” she told me with conviction.

In February 1924, the famous composer and conductor John Philip Sousa visited Birmingham and was greeted at the train station by the band from the Industrial School, led by Irene’s father. Sousa was so impressed with the boys’ playing that he visited Eugene at home to learn more about the man who had trained these boys to play so well.

Irene’s mother, the former Sarah Ann Whitehurst (1895-1971), was also musical. She was a skilled violinist, who played in the Birmingham Symphony for years. Irene’s

¹ Source: <http://ncpedia.org/biography/johnston-elizabeth>. Accessed 2 Aug. 2013.

love and admiration came through clearly as she talked about this “remarkable lady.” Early in the first interview, she said, “Her whole life she kept a beautiful figure. She walked like a queen. Arnold often said that she didn’t walk, she skipped.” This was quite a feat, especially for a woman who was the mother of ten children. ([Click here to read “Twenty Plus Things About My Mother,”](#) the story Irene wrote in the senior writing group she attended in 1999.)

Irene was the second of those children, born on April 25, 1919, two years after her sister, Martha. Remembering her childhood, she told me, “My parents thought I was precocious because I learned to read when I was three years old. When I was a very young child, my mother had ordered a Chautauqua desk. It was the joy of my life.” She went on to explain that this desk was based on the educational principles of Maria Montessori and was widely available by mail order in the first half of the twentieth century.²

Irene’s face lighted up as she described the desk.

It hung on the wall, maybe about this high [gestures about three feet from the floor]. There were little wire things that you could put chalk in or crayons. And there was a place for the eraser. It had charts that you could take out, scrolls that you could replace. I remember the pictures. Everything was on sort of greenish paper with these little white drawings. Montessori’s method of teaching reading was like you’d draw a cat, just a few lines. And you’d have the picture of the cat, and it would say *C* as in *cat*. And *CH* as in *church*, and it would just have a little thing with a steeple.

One night the family was sitting around in front of the fireplace. I was three. And Mother and Daddy said, “What is she saying?” I was sitting on the floor, and there was a newspaper open in front of me, and I was saying, “5 C puh ging ham.” And they kept saying, “What is she saying?” And they looked down and saw that it was “5 cents per yard. Gingham.”

² For more information on the Chautauqua desk, see <http://www.pixelpixie.net/chautauqua/>. This website includes a replica of a publication entitled *The Home Teacher*, intended to promote sales of the desks. Accessed 23 Oct. 2013.

As a three-year-old, Irene had learned to sound out words phonetically and was reading aloud from the newspaper. Her parents were amazed, seeing her early reading as a sign that their little daughter was a child prodigy. But Irene saw it differently. “Montessori claimed that children should be taught to read when they’re very young because they notice little tiny things. I think that’s why I learned to read at an early age. I didn’t have an unusual IQ or anything. It was just my exposure.”

It was typical of Irene to minimize her accomplishment in this way—perhaps a characteristic of her generation of women or of her Southern upbringing. But this comment is revealing in other ways as well. Irene’s explanation of how she learned to read at age three says quite a bit about her basic character—her independence and desire to do things on her own, her love of order and attention to detail, and her fascination with words. These traits not only helped her learn to read at age three, but they also helped her to succeed in the competitive world of opera—and to deal with the challenges of aging.

Because of Irene’s early reading, she started school at age six, but in third grade rather than first, with classmates who were much bigger than she was. Irene felt that this was “very bad” for her and commented that her mother must have been “too busy to investigate.” She remembered one incident in great detail:

We had a fire drill, and the teacher said, “Stay right behind the person in front of you.” Well, the person in front of me went over to a drinking fountain outside—a big one that several people could drink out of at once, and I followed him. I thought it was like follow the leader. I tried to walk like he walked, do everything like he did. And when we came back in, the teacher called us both up to her desk, and she said, “Put your hand out.” I thought she was going to reward me for doing a good job, but she smacked my hand with a ruler. I started to cry, so she took me over to the board and wrote “baby” on the blackboard. Then she drew a circle around the word and told me to put my nose in that little circle.

From then on, the other children in her grade called her “baby.” She never told her mother about this episode because she was too embarrassed. For a child who had wanted to go to school “forever” and was eager “to be a success in school,” this was especially painful. Irene continued to feel at a disadvantage socially at school for years. “I didn’t

feel like I was on the level with any of the girls I knew in school until nearly my senior year in high school. Then I began to be a little friendly with some of them, but not close.”

At home too, Irene, was two years younger—two years younger than her sister Martha. Throughout their childhood years, Martha was the dominant sister. Irene explained that her older sister “was such a social person. She had lots of friends. And I was very much of a loner in a way. Whenever anyone asked me anything, Martha always answered.” Later, after Irene went off to college, things changed. “When I came home on vacations, I would start answering for myself. And Martha would say to me, ‘You’ve turned into a not very nice person.’” According to Irene, her sister was “used to being the boss and in charge. If I hadn’t gotten away from her, I would always have been under her—or under somebody else’s—influence.”

Although Martha tended to dominate her younger sister, Irene made it clear that the two had always been good friends, a relationship that lasted throughout the years. Irene often spoke proudly of Martha, who was trained as a professional organist but went on to study medicine at the University of Louisville, graduating in 1941. Later she completed a fellowship and residency in obstetrics and gynecology at the Mayo Clinic and worked as an obstetrician and gynecological surgeon in Nigeria for forty years as a representative of the Southern Baptist Foreign Mission Board.³

Like her sister Martha, Irene was interested in music from an early age. She explained with a story she had told many times.

When I was not quite five years old, my folks took me to see *Aida* performed by the Chicago Civic Opera in Birmingham. Rosa Raisa sang the title role. So much pageantry! The music was wonderful. The orchestra was great. And I decided that’s what I was going to do when I grew up. My older sister laughed at me and

³ In her work for the Mission Board in Nigeria, Martha served with her first husband, Reverend William McKinley Gilliland. After his death in 1964, she continued to serve in Nigeria, retiring in 1981, when she was in her mid-sixties. After returning to the U.S., she married Dr. David Stewart of Louisville. He died in 1989. Martha Jordan Gilliland Stewart died in Rocky Mount, North Carolina, on December 27, 2009, at the age of ninety-two. *Source:* Martha’s obituary from the *Louisville Courier-Journal*. Accessed 26 July 2013.

said, “You won’t know if you have a voice until much later.” But I said, “That’s what I’m going to do.”

Irene never lost sight of this goal, and at her grammar school graduation, when she was twelve years old, the “class prophet” pronounced that “Irene Jordan will sing the Brahms Lullaby on the stage of the Metropolitan Opera.” Many years later, Irene remembered:

I was just so embarrassed. You do *not* sing the Brahms Lullaby at the Metropolitan Opera. But the speaker, Dean Burns from the college, gave a speech about going up the King’s Highway, and he said, “That little girl who wants to sing at the Metropolitan Opera should follow her dream and just go up the King’s Highway.”

Irene never wavered in her commitment to this early prophecy. “All my friends knew this was what I was going to do when I grew up. And I never did change my mind.”

Although Irene did not study singing in a formal way until she entered Judson College at age sixteen, she did get an excellent musical education in her early years, studying piano for nine years, from age five to age fourteen. She told the story of how she convinced her parents to let her take piano lessons. In those days, the piano companies had small recital halls, which people could rent. Martha had been taking piano lessons for a few years and participated in one of these recitals.

There were two boys. One was Martha’s age, and one was my age, and we called each other sweethearts. I was not yet five, and Martha was not yet seven. But she gave this little recital, and at the end of it, these two boys brought her a bouquet of flowers and a box of candy. So, of course, I wanted to take piano lessons and give a recital. And so, nothing doing, but my parents started me with the same teacher that Martha had—a Mrs. Dupree, who was wonderful. I was so young that I couldn’t lift my fingers independently. I spent several weeks at her dining room table practicing lifting my fingers. She had so much patience. And she made it *fun*. She was a very gifted teacher of youngsters.

Having grown up in Alabama myself, I was captivated by these stories of a Southern childhood. How, I wondered, did two little girls born in Alabama early in the

twentieth century go on to achieve such renown—one becoming a respected physician and surgeon in Nigeria and the other fulfilling her dream of singing major roles at the Metropolitan Opera in New York City? As Irene continued to talk, her parents emerged as major influences on this success. She clearly enjoyed telling these stories, famous ones in the family's history.

Her father, Eugene Crawford Jordan, “inherited” his love of music, and perhaps some of his talent, from his father, Eugene Rhett Jordan (1851-1923). Eugene Rhett had been too young to fight in the Civil War, but after the War, when he was in his early twenties, he taught himself to play the cornet and joined a traveling minstrel show, performing in small opera houses in Southern towns. Sometime in his early thirties, he found himself performing in the small town of Ozark, Alabama. That night he wrote in his diary, “Saw the girl I’m going to marry.” According to family legend, he stayed on in Ozark, courting this girl, Martha (“Mattie”) Matthews (1868-1906), who was only fifteen at the time. When she was seventeen, they married. The couple had four children before she died at age thirty-eight. Brokenhearted, her husband, who was fifty-five at the time, took to drink, and Irene’s father, who was fifteen years old, had to take over as “the man of the place,” working to bring in a few dollars to support his younger sisters.

Like his father before him, Eugene Crawford, made a career in music, and like his father, he was self-taught. Eugene Rhett had refused to teach his son about music, declaring, “The life of a traveling musician is just no good. It’s not a life.” But, according to Irene, her father “would get hold of his father’s cornet and learned to play. Since he had taught himself to play, he was able to teach other people.” He must have succeeded quite well, since as a young man he was appointed band director at the Boys Industrial School in Birmingham. Early in his tenure there, he regularly traveled downtown by trolley in order to study theory and harmony with the owner of a local music store. Eugene realized that this kind of training was necessary in order for him to achieve his dream of composing music, a dream he eventually accomplished. “He wrote a number of lovely marches,” Irene said. “He’d just clear the dining table at night and spread his manuscript out and write the parts for all the different instruments.”

Another way in which Eugene followed in his father's footsteps was to go on tour, at least for a time. In the early 1920s, the band from the Boys' Industrial School toured with a traveling show that featured Harry Jolson, Al Jolson's older brother, and Sheila Terry, a glamorous actress who had played in early movies.⁴ This was something of a family odyssey since Eugene was accompanied on this train journey by his wife and two oldest daughters (the baby was left with his grandmother in Fort Worth, Texas).

This adventure "made quite an impression" on Irene, who was three years old at the time. One thing she remembered were the minstrel numbers in which Harry Jolson, like his more famous brother, Al, performed in blackface, singing "Mammy" or some other song to a white woman dressed in an antebellum dress with hoop skirt. Looking back on these performances, Irene wondered, "How could people have done that? It was so disrespectful to blacks! But they toured doing that kind of thing. I saw it over and over with Harry Jolson."

Other aspects of the tour left a more positive impression. "Many of the big theaters had places for children to play. It was like a fairyland. They had fancy dolls and a lady in charge, and parents could leave a little child there." She remembered with special fondness the kindness of fellow passenger and silent-screen actress Sheila Terry. "She was so nice to entertain me on the train. And when she left, I just cried and hung on to her, walked to the end of the car. That was my first taste of touring."

The first but definitely not the last taste of touring for Irene! For much of her long career, she traveled across the country and to major cities in Europe performing in operas, giving recitals, and teaching voice at universities schools of music. Her grandfather may have believed that "the life of a traveling musician is just no good," but touring had its

⁴ Interested readers may want to view a brief video from a short film entitled *The Voice of Hollywood* (1929), in which Harry Jolson jokes with the actress Lola Lane about all the time he has spent on trains: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OVxxwzmIMks>. There are multiple Internet sources on Sheila Terry including one entitled, "Glamour Girls of the Silver Screen"

<http://www.glamourgirlsofthesilverscreen.com/show/700/Sheila+Terry/index.html>.

Accessed 23 Oct. 2013.

positive sides—the idea of bringing music to the masses, the thrill of connecting with an audience, the adventure of traveling to places previously unknown. Three generations of the Jordan family spent at least part of their careers as touring musicians—a thread that ties them together.

For Irene, they were also tied by affection. She “adored” Eugene Rhett Jordan, “the only grandfather I ever knew.” She remembered going to his burial in December 1923, when she was only four years old. “Why they let me go I don’t know. I had nightmares about it.” Looking back on his life, Irene could understand what a difficult time he had had. “His mother died early, and his father remarried and moved to Michigan of all things. His grandfather raised him.” As an older man, Eugene Rhett spent considerable time with his son and his grandchildren, and family photographs document this togetherness.

As we talked, Irene had even more to say about her mother, the remarkable Sarah Ann Whitehurst Jordan. She had been born in Texas to parents who took their religion seriously. Her father had left a teaching job in order to move to Oklahoma and become a missionary to the Indians. Later, after becoming a Methodist minister, he was transferred every few years, so Sarah moved frequently as a young girl. When she was eighteen or nineteen, her parents allowed her to enter an oratorical contest, which included contestants from several states including Texas, Louisiana, and Arkansas. According to Irene, it was unusual that her parents let her enter this contest because “girls were sort of depressed in those days.” Sarah was the only girl in the competition, and she went on to win. She entered college and earned a bachelor’s degree in oratory. Irene pointed out that oratory and the ability to project one’s voice were important skills in those days before microphones. “Every public personage—people going into politics or the ministry—had to project. My mother knew exactly how to open up her voice. But she also talked like a nice lady.”

Sarah’s parents were ahead of their time in their attitudes toward education for women. All eight of their children graduated from college, “the girls too.” Although this emphasis on college education for girls as well as boys was unusual at the time, it wasn’t

really surprising in this family since Sarah's father went on to become the president of two small Methodist colleges later in his career.

After Sarah's marriage to Eugene Jordan on May 17, 1916, and while the children were coming along, she helped with the family finances by giving violin lessons at their home in Birmingham. She also played violin in the Birmingham symphony for years, and she was an active participant in the Shakespeare Club, which met fortnightly. At the Boys Industrial School, where her husband worked, she put on "the first Shakespearean play that was ever performed in Birmingham," using boys for the female roles as was done in Shakespeare's day.

Clearly, Sarah *was* a remarkable woman, ahead of her time and multi-talented. In one area, though, she was a failure. "She bought a Singer sewing machine, an electric one, and took lessons, and tried to make dresses. But we just would not wear them. She had no gift for sewing."

When I asked Irene what values she felt she had absorbed from her parents, the first thing she mentioned was hard work. This was partly due to the Depression that was devastating the entire country. Her parents had to teach as many music classes as possible just to make ends meet. Irene reeled off her father's schedule.

My father left the house at 8:00 in the morning and started to teach at the Boys School at 8:30. He got home at 5:00, had a couple of pupils before he had supper, then three nights a week he dashed off to teach what was called the Allendale Mills band. On another night he had either the Howard College Band or the Birmingham Southern College Band or the Shrine band. So four nights out of five, he would rush off. He was always on the go. "Step lively!" That was the word. We had the example of hard working parents, busy parents.

Despite their father's busy work schedule, in some ways the children lived like aristocrats. Irene's parents found a way to provide the things they thought were important for their children—the Chautauqua desk, music lessons, college educations.

Because Sarah was so busy with her teaching responsibilities, she decided to hire a cook, which was possible in Alabama at that time, since black women were available to work for very low wages. "They were the only people that would work for that little

money. They came from over the hill, and if they were within walking distance, which could be like two miles, they would walk back and forth to work each day.” If the cook lived too far away, she would stay in the “servants’ room” attached to the garage.

Thanks to her mother’s energy and creativity, Irene and her siblings had an enchanted childhood:

All the kids in the neighborhood played together. Mostly they played in our yard because we were not allowed to leave home after supper. After we had electric lights in the yard, Mother put Japanese lanterns over them. They were nothing fancy, but they made it attractive. Mother was so good about finding ways for us to play, and the neighborhood found it delightful. She was very imaginative and knew how to make a little go a long way.

One of the most distinctive features of the Jordan place was the small swimming pool, which the neighborhood children enjoyed. Irene told the story of how this dream became a reality.

In the depths of the Depression, people would come by asking for work. And these two brothers came by. They lived up on the hill that was almost in the black neighborhood. They were white people—but very poor. Their house had burned, and they needed everything. Mother said, “I just don’t need any work done right now. What I’d really like is to have a little wading or swimming pool dug. But I can’t afford the lumber to make the sides.”

“No problem,” said the industrious workers. “We’ll slope the sides.” The plan was to make one end lower than the other. That way the ground would absorb the extra water, and it would not be necessary to add plumbing pipes and a drain out to the sewer. The result was a little swimming pool, “just big enough that you could take several strokes across it.” This was a wonderful way for the children to cool off in the Alabama heat in the days before air conditioning. “Mother had a sort of a trellis with asparagus planted near it,” Irene recalled. “The asparagus fern looked so lacy and pretty, and it thrived because the water from the pool got splashed on it. The spigot to turn on the water was there. That much plumbing was done. But she got it done so cheaply.” The workers were happy too with the small rewards they got for their labor. “Little things that Mother could

give them that we didn't need. You know, when your house burns, you can use anything. She paid them what she could, and they were pleased, and it worked. Our swimming pool cost very little!"

With such a role model for a mother,⁵ it is not surprising that Martha and Irene soon took on a project of their own. "We felt like it was our mission to teach the neighborhood. We had a little school in our yard. We had an alarm clock and would set that for the ringing of the bell. We had periods, and we used our servants' house to hold the school desk. But at lunchtime, we used the big sandbox that Mother had had made for us." There was a little white picket fence around the sandbox and a slide and a merry-go-round. "I don't know where Mother found these things. She ordered them from somewhere. She wanted us to play at home."

Lunchtime was always a favorite at the sandbox school. "We took the slide off and put it across the sandbox to make a long counter where the kids could eat their lunch. There was a peach tree over the sandbox, and when the peaches were ripe, we'd just take them down and peel them and give them to the kids. Other times they had Post Toasties with peaches on top." The results of this little school were sometimes dramatic. "One of the mothers came and thanked us because her son had been double promoted when he got back to school in the fall." Clearly, the children did more than just eat and play at the Jordan girls' school!

When I asked Irene how she would contrast her own childhood with that of today's youngsters, she was quick to reply. "Children don't make their own fun today. They sit with their Game Boys or watch something on TV. They don't have the kind of community we had growing up."

Hearing these stories of Irene's childhood, I began to ponder the kinds of childhoods described by Irene and the other women I interviewed. As little girls, they felt

⁵ Sarah Ann Jordan was named Birmingham's "Mother of the Year" in 1947; at this time all ten of her children were living and doing well in their chosen fields. Source: "Metropolitan Opera Star Irene Jordan Tells of Days at Judson as Student," *The Tuscaloosa [Alabama] News*, 12 Apr. 1959, p. 29. Accessed 24 Oct. 2013.

safe and played freely with no adult direction or supervision. As I thought about these stories, and remembered similar ones from my own childhood, I began to wonder if perhaps this early independence might be one of the keys to successful aging—one reason why the women I interviewed have been so resourceful and independent in old age, living on their own but within a caring community of peers. Perhaps independence in old age is related to independence in childhood. It's an intriguing idea, one that merits further study by psychologists and sociologists. If proven valid, this would not bode well for more recent generations, who have been so closely monitored by parents who stayed connected via baby monitors, play dates, cell phones, and social media.

Returning to Irene's childhood for a moment, another very strong value, which she was prompt to point out, was religious faith. "We had to go to church. We *had* to. My parents were both very faithful church attenders. Mother was deeply religious, and, I think, she got more so as she studied the Bible more deeply." A serious approach to Christianity had been ingrained in Sarah since childhood, growing up as the child of a Methodist missionary and minister. She remained a Methodist for many years before becoming a Southern Baptist, the denomination that Irene also accepted.

In recalling her mother's religious faith, Irene described a moral crisis that Sarah had experienced as a young woman. After her mother's death in 1971, a woman who came to the funeral home to pay her respects said how much she and her classmates had loved and admired Sarah, who had been their Sunday School teacher for many years. The woman told Irene about the time when one of the girls asked Sarah if it was wrong to use birth control. She exclaimed, "Heavens, no! It's not wrong!" And then she explained why she had had so many children.

When Irene was sixteen months old, Sarah gave birth to a son, who was born with a cleft palate and a harelip. When she became pregnant again, she was terrified that the next child would be born with a similar defect. She prayed for guidance and then decided to go to her doctor and ask for an abortion. "Daughter, I cannot do that," the doctor replied. "Mother drove home crying and fell on her knees next to her bed. She promised that she would have as many children as the Lord sent her if they would all be without

defect.” Sarah kept her promise, and so, apparently, did the Lord. Sarah gave birth to seven more children, all perfectly healthy.

After recounting this dramatic story, Irene laughed. “She told this to her Sunday School class, but she never told us!” What Irene *had* known about was the extraordinary efforts her mother made to get state-of-the-art medical help for her firstborn son despite the family’s limited finances. When he was just an infant, she took him to a surgeon in Chicago, who was supposed to be the best in the country. Later, she took him to the Emerson School of Speech in Boston, and then, when he was in high school, to another surgeon in St. Louis, who performed plastic surgery, with very positive results.

Hearing Irene talk so vividly about her mother, I began to think of Sarah Ann Jordan as a force of nature. She would have been a worthy role model for a young woman in any era, demonstrating self-reliance, intelligence, artistic vision, and great resourcefulness. Irene took these lessons to heart.

The College Years

One of many ways in which Irene’s life parallels that of her mother is that both of them won contests that resulted in scholarships to college. Irene was in the college preparatory program at East Woodlawn High School in Birmingham when she read about a contest sponsored by the *Birmingham News*. The task was to write an essay describing what you expect to get from college. Irene’s essay won first place for an in-state student (another prize was awarded for a student outside the state). She commented, with her typical modesty, “The essay must have been saying what they wanted to hear.” Her reward was a full scholarship for the first and last year of college.

She chose to attend the all-female Judson College, a Baptist institution in Marion, Alabama, where she majored in voice and piano. Up until this time, Irene had only sung in church or at Sunday School. In college, she was classified as a mezzo-soprano. Early in her time at Judson, she was asked to sing a solo at one of the chapel concerts that were held once a week before lunch. She was overcome with nervousness but managed to get through the ordeal. Afterward she was too embarrassed to show up for lunch or dinner in

the dining room because she thought her singing had been so bad. The next day when she went to the music department, the teachers said, “Where were you? We wanted to congratulate you. You did such a good job.” Irene learned from this experience that “your nervousness does not have to show,” a lesson that proved valuable in her career as a professional singer.

Irene studied with Ivan Rasmussen, the only voice teacher at the college in those days.⁶ One night, early in her time at Judson, he told her, “You’ve got to sing tonight in a faculty quartet.” He knew that she had studied piano and read music well. Handing her the part of Amneris in *Aida*, he said, “You don’t have time to vocalize.⁷ You’ve just got to look at this music.” The performance went well, and her teacher said, “Your voice sounds better without vocalizing.” Irene agreed. “It almost feels better.” And so Professor Rasmussen decided, “As long as you study with me, you will never vocalize. You’ll just go right in to music.” This natural method worked well during these formative years. “My voice just grew and got better. I was sixteen when I entered college and twenty when I graduated. The whole music faculty talked about how my voice had improved. Just from singing the way I felt like doing it.”

Looking back on this early training many years later, Irene was quick to share her opinions on the subject. “I think people study voice because they can already sing. And I was fortunate that my teacher at Judson had an ear to recognize that I sounded better without vocalizing.”

A Prophecy Fulfilled

After graduating from Judson in 1939 at age twenty, Irene taught voice in the college’s music department during the 1939-40 academic year. In 1940 she moved to New York

⁶ Source:

<http://news.google.com/newspapers?nid=1891&dat=19590414&id=4r0fAAAAIIBAJ&sjid=BdgEAAAIBAJ&pg=2573,1802315>. Accessed 2 Apr. 2014.

⁷ Vocalizing is done to warm up the voice before singing. It may consist of scales or other vocal exercises and often lasts for twenty to thirty minutes.

City, where she studied singing, ballet, German, French, and Italian.⁸ It must have taken great courage for this shy girl from Alabama to move to New York and strike out on her own. But Irene was determined to make that grammar school prophecy about singing at the Met come true.

After two years of life in New York, Irene didn't seem to be getting her any closer to her dream of an opera career. And so when she was asked to teach at Judson again for the 1942-43 school year, she decided to move back home to Alabama. During this time, her father asked her to sing at a banquet where his band from the Boys Industrial School was entertaining prominent businessmen from all over the South. A day or two after this performance, Irene's father got a message to call a Mr. Donald Comer, the president of a Southern textile mill who had attended the performance and was knowledgeable about opera.⁹ He was adamant about Irene's future. "Your daughter *cannot* stay in Alabama. She's got to go to New York," he told Irene's father. He asked how much money Irene would need to go back to New York and study opera in a serious way. Irene calculated the expenses carefully, with a loan from Mr. Comer, she headed back to New York.

During this time Irene found work in summer theater and Broadway musicals, appearing in the chorus of Franz Lehár's *The Merry Widow* (which ran from August 4, 1943, to May 6, 1944).¹⁰ A few months later she played the role of Mary Jane and sang in

⁸ Source: "Irene Caplan: 1919-2016." Obituary. *The Berkshire Eagle*, 14 May 2016. <http://www.legacy.com/obituaries/berkshire/obituary.aspx?n=irene-caplan&pid=179985767&fhid=4936>. Accessed 18 May 2016.

⁹ Donald (James McDonald) Comer (1877-1963) was the son of Braxton Bragg Comer, who served as governor of Alabama from 1907 to 1911 and was appointed as a U.S. Senator in 1920. After his father's death in 1927, Donald Comer served as president of Avondale Mills for many years (<http://encyclopediaofalabama.org/face/Article.jsp?id=h-2616>). As Irene stated in our second interview, his wife, nee Gertrude Miller, came from a wealthy Pennsylvania family that always had a box at the Metropolitan Opera.

¹⁰ Cast list available at <http://www.playbillvault.com/Show/Detail/Cast/7866/The-Merry-Widow-at-Majestic-Theatre>. Accessed 1 Apr. 2014.

the chorus in the Broadway production of *Sing Out Sweet Land: A Salute to American Folk and Popular Music* with book by Walter Kerr and choreography by Doris Humphrey and Charles Weidman (December 27, 1944, to March 24, 1945).¹¹ In 1946-47, she appeared in radio plays and was listed as a “staff soloist” for NBC Radio, where she hosted a weekly radio program called “Songs by Irene,” accompanied by the NBC Symphony.¹² Another major achievement of this period was her appearance in the American premiere of *Peter Grimes*, an opera by the British composer Benjamin Britten. On August 7, 1946, Irene sang the role of Mrs. (Nabob) Sedley in the second of three performances of this work at the Berkshire Music Center in Tanglewood, Massachusetts, under the directorship of Serge Koussevitsky. Leonard Bernstein conducted.¹³

With funding from Mr. Comer, Irene had been studying voice for a year with Clytie May Hine (later Mundy), an Australian-born soprano who became a well-regarded voice teacher in New York City.¹⁴ Comer was eager to loan her the money for a second year of study, but Irene, a child of the Depression, told him, “I don’t want to borrow money unless I’m operatic material. I know I’ll always sing, but I don’t know whether I have enough voice for opera.” Comer replied, “I think I know somebody who could

¹¹ Cast list available at <http://ibdb.com/production.php?id=1613>. Accessed 1 Apr. 2014.

¹² Source: *Gadsden [Alabama] Times*, 12 Jan. 1958, p. 9. Accessed 21 Oct. 2013.

¹³ Donald Mitchell, Philip Reed, and Mervyn Cooke, eds. *Letters from a Life: The Selected Letters of Benjamin Britten 1913 - 1976. Volume 3: 1946 – 1951*. Faber & Faber, 2004. Source: https://books.google.com/books?id=22OPd1_ISNsC&pg=PT193&lpg=PT193&dq=irene+jordan+britten&source=bl&ots=UEil4ByndF&sig=xDeSSvzpMuRwC3vVzImJtTRfPAI&hl=en&sa=X&ved=0ahUKEwic_ei2v4zNAhUGGT4KHWi9AsAQ6AEIJzAC#v=onepage&q=irene%20jordan%20britten&f=false. Accessed 3 June 2016.

¹⁴ Source: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Clytie_Hine. Accessed 1 June 2016. See also Diane Langmore, ed. *Australian Dictionary of Biography: 1981 – 1990*, p. 536. Source: https://books.google.com/books?id=22OPd1_ISNsC&pg=PT193&lpg=PT193&dq=irene+jordan+britten&source=bl&ots=UEil4ByndF&sig=xDeSSvzpMuRwC3vVzImJtTRfPAI&hl=en&sa=X&ved=0ahUKEwic_ei2v4zNAhUGGT4KHWi9AsAQ6AEIJzAC#v=onepage&q=irene%20jordan%20britten&f=false. Accessed 3 June 2016.

advise you.” That person turned out to be George A. Sloan, the chairman of the Metropolitan Opera Association. Soon Irene got a call from Mr. Sloan asking her to call the assistant general manager of the Met to arrange for an audition.

According to Irene, the audition “was timed just right.” Nine mezzos performed the afternoon that Irene auditioned and nine more the next day. Irene was offered a job in the Metropolitan Opera chorus by Kurt Adler, the director of the chorus. But she soon received another call with a very different message. “Tell Mr. Adler to take that job in the chorus and shove it! You’re coming in tomorrow to sign a contract to sing major roles for the Met.”¹⁵ From that point on, things moved quickly.

It was a tremendous shock! I was expecting to get advice on whether or not I might eventually have a career in opera. And instead I learned that I was to sing on opening night at the Met—just three weeks away. The situation was this: Lily Pons was to sing the opera *Lakmé*. She had just done it in Canada with a gal who was assigned to do it at the Met, Martha Lipton. She was a beautiful gal, and she had a nice voice, but she was quite heavy, and she couldn’t move around on the stage. Lily was tiny, and she liked to flit here and there as she sang. She said she was *not* going to sing on opening night unless they could find a mezzo-soprano who could sing the duet and move with her on the stage. Well, I had been studying ballet for over a year with Nico Charisse, the husband of Cyd Charisse. My feet were never very good, but I could move. I didn’t plant myself in one position on the stage. So here was the Met, stuck, just a few weeks before opening night, and Lily was saying she wasn’t going to do it. I just fit the bill.

And so, on November 11, 1946, Opening Night for the Met’s fall season, Irene fulfilled the grammar school prophecy and made her debut on the stage of the Metropolitan Opera.¹⁶ “How did it go,” I asked, “learning the part so quickly and

¹⁵ Irene signed a three-year contract with the Metropolitan Opera as a mezzo-soprano. Source: “Irene Caplan: 1919-2016.” Obituary. *The Berkshire Eagle*, 14 May 2016. <http://www.legacy.com/obituaries/berkshire/obituary.aspx?n=irene-caplan&pid=179985767&fhid=4936>. Accessed 18 May 2016.

¹⁶For the complete cast listing, see <http://archives.metoperafamily.org/archives/scripts/cgiip.exe/WService=BibSpeed/fullcit.w?xCID=143000&limit=500&xBranch=ALL&xstartdate=&xenddate=&theterm=1946-47&x=0&xhomepath=&xhome=>

performing alongside one of the most famous sopranos in the world?” As she did many times in these interviews, Irene minimized her accomplishment. “It wasn’t a heck of a lot to learn for opening night. I really wasn’t very nervous. I just had this lovely duet with Pons in the first act. She was very pleased with me because she could flit around the stage, and I could go with her.” It may not have been a lot to learn, but the opening night audience would have been waiting for this piece, the hauntingly beautiful Flower Duet from the well-known opera by Léo Delibes.

Ten days later, Irene performed in *Boris Godunov* by Modest Mussorgsky, playing Godunov’s son, Feodor, with the famous bass Ezio Pinza in the title role.¹⁷ “I was small enough that I could look like a boy, so I took over a lot of ‘pants’ roles that I had to learn very quickly.” The opera was performed in Italian instead of the original Russian.¹⁸

Irene was animated in discussing her memories of singing with Pinza, a topic that came up when I commented that she had a great range in her voice.

There’s only an octave’s difference between the highest soprano and the lowest bass voice. So when I was singing at the Met as a mezzo with Ezio Pinza I would be singing Cherubino, the pants role, in *The Marriage of Figaro*, and during the rehearsal, I would hear him singing notes, and I would sing along. I could sing about as low as he could, a basso. [She went to the piano and demonstrated.] Pinza would take every opportunity to pull a gal onto his lap, and so I was very close to him, and I would hum the notes that he was singing. [She demonstrated again, singing.] Too much is made of the difference in range.

Things moved quickly for Irene once she got her big break and found herself on the stage of the Metropolitan Opera. Not only was she singing with famous stars like

¹⁷ For the complete cast listing, see <http://archives.metoperafamily.org/archives/scripts/cgiip.exe/WService=BibSpeed/fullcit.w?xCID=143090&limit=5000&xBranch=ALL&xdate=&xedate=&theterm=G&x=0&xhomepath=&xhome=>

¹⁸ According to a comment by J.M. McCracken on a YouTube recording of Pinza singing the coronation scene from *Boris Godunov*, Pinza learned the opera in the original Russian, but the Met management decided to perform it in Italian instead to avoid the expense of teaching the chorus to sing it in Russian (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=V47jBpTd7y8>). Accessed 5 Feb. 2016.

Pons and Pinza, but she was also becoming a radio personality. On the broadcast of “Opera News on the Air” for February 8, 1947, she was introduced by Milton Cross as “a young lady who is now in her first season as a singer at the Metropolitan—Irene Jordan, mezzo-soprano.” In this feature during the intermission of Puccini’s *Madama Butterfly*, Irene held her own in conversation alongside the famous composer Kurt Weill and the conductor and broadcast commentator Boris Goldovsky. The transcript of this feature, which was made available in 2012 on the website of the Kurt Weill Foundation for Music, provides glimpses of the twenty-seven-year old Irene.¹⁹ Responding to Weill’s comment that Puccini’s heroine Cio-Cio San was a fully developed character, Irene responded, “You know, Puccini seems to have had an especially deep understanding of his heroines. Most of the stories he chose revolve about a woman as the central character. And he certainly gave some of his loveliest music to the soprano!”

Irene, far from being intimidated by her famous conversation partners, parries their comments with a wry wit. Speaking of the beautiful musical passages in the opera, Goldovsky mentions *Butterfly*’s death scene in the last act. Irene doesn’t miss a beat. “For all her unhappiness, the lady *does* get the best of it musically!”

Toward the end of the intermission, Irene made a bold conversational move, questioning the famous composer. “Do you yourself confess to be influenced by Puccini, Mr. Weill?” He replies in detail, confirming his admiration for Puccini. Irene comes right back at him. “Well, I’m glad to hear you say that, Mr. Weill. I sometimes find myself very impatient with certain academic musicians who underestimate Puccini.” What a feisty—and well-informed—young woman she was.

This glimpse of Irene in conversation not only about the music but also the drama of a famous opera reveals a singer for whom the story was just as important as the music. Although I never got to see Irene perform in an opera, one of the things that always

¹⁹ For the full transcript of this intermission feature, see <http://www.kwf.org/kurt-weill/for-further-reading/33-foundation/kwp/359-opera-news-on-the-air-1947>. This conversation was transcribed in 2012 from an audiocassette in the collection of the Weill-Lenya Research Center, Ser.114/24. Accessed 1 Apr. 2014.

impressed me about her singing was her dramatic ability, the way she conveyed the emotion of the song. When I asked how she learned to do this, she seemed a bit surprised. She had tried out for plays in high school but was never chosen. She remembered a conversation with the school's drama teacher on the day of her graduation. The teacher told Irene that she had great talent for the stage but that she hadn't been chosen for any roles because of her age. "You were so young looking. You just wouldn't have been convincing playing a grown woman."

Without formal training in acting, Irene felt that whatever dramatic talent she had came from the example of her parents. Her father, whom she remembered as an extremely handsome man, was "absolutely exciting" in the way he walked out and "took the stage." And her mother was "a splendid actress." She was active in Birmingham's Fortnightly Shakespeare Club and was often called to do readings. Irene remembered hearing her practice these readings at home. She felt that her parents' example was a powerful influence on her later ability to dramatize a song: "If children are exposed to their parents doing things like that, they can copy it. They don't even have to think about it." Once again, we see Irene minimizing her own accomplishments, crediting others for her own success. Friends of Irene in her later years didn't take her too seriously when she reacted this way. We knew that she knew how good she was. And whenever Arnold was around, he would praise her to the skies. He idolized his wife and thought she was one of the greatest singers and actresses who ever lived.

Wherever Irene got her ability to dramatize a role, she made it clear that it wasn't from any training she got at the Met. "I must say at the Met, in those days, they didn't help you with it. They just wanted you to know where to stand and that sort of thing."

As we continued to talk about the beginning of Irene's opera career, she showed me a copy of *Life* magazine from 1946 with an article featuring the Metropolitan's young mezzos—Risë Stevens, Martha Lipton, Blanche Thebom, and Irene Jordan, described as "the Met's prettiest new star." In the photograph, Irene is wearing the costume she wore as the slave Mallika in *Lakmé*. It was while wearing this costume that Irene attracted the

attention of Arnold Caplan, a young violinist in the Met Orchestra recently home from the service. Irene explained:

It was a midriff costume, quite beautiful And I wore dark body paint since I was playing the role of a Hindu servant. It was a big job to wash it off. And when I met Arnold, I thought, "Oh, he's gonna see me all washed out, you know, the way I am, and he won't be interested in me at all." Later on when I told him about that, he said, "Look, I had seen you in rehearsal for several weeks so I knew what you looked like." So I was worrying for nothing. He had seen that I wasn't that exotic Indian color.

The romance moved swiftly. Arnold and Irene were married in 1947 at the end of Irene's first season at the Met. In fact, they were married twice, first in a civil ceremony in Chicago at Arnold's insistence. "He was *so sure* that my parents were going to object to his being Jewish, knowing that they were Southern Baptists. I tried to assure him that they would not be anti-Semitic in any way. But he said before he met them, we had to be legally married so they couldn't break us up." Irene seemed agitated during this part of the conversation and defended her parents adamantly before admitting, "Of course, they would have been happier if he were a professed Christian." In any case, her parents never knew about the earlier wedding. The second wedding, a family ceremony in Birmingham, took place on July 10, 1947. Irene was twenty-eight, and Arnold was thirty-one.

A Musical Marriage

Like Irene, Arnold had grown up in a musical family. The son of Russian Jewish immigrants, he was born in Texas. His mother had come to this country with her parents. A forceful woman, she had four sons, and she decided when they were just babies what their futures would be. "The oldest had to be a violinist. That was Arnold. The next one had to be an architect. The next one had to be a doctor. And the next one had to be a lawyer. And, by golly, those boys *did it*." Pointing to a small violin hanging on the wall, Irene said, "That's his first fiddle."

Arnold's mother had always loved music. The daughter of a Jewish tailor who lived on the estate of a noble Russian family, she used to hide in the bushes beneath the

open windows of the drawing room to listen to the evening musicales. In this way, “she fell in love with chamber music.” She immigrated to the United States with her family at the age of fourteen and eventually married Arnold’s father, a young man from another Jewish family that had immigrated to Texas.

When Arnold was only twelve years old, his mother brought him to Philadelphia to audition for the Curtis Institute of Music. He was awarded a scholarship, and she stayed with him for about a month to help him settle in to this new life as a serious music student in a city so far from home. “I’ve got a cute picture,” Irene told me, producing a photograph of the young Arnold with another boy, the pianist Sidney Foster.²⁰

After completing his studies at Curtis, Arnold went on to study at the graduate program of the Juilliard School in New York City, beginning at age sixteen or seventeen. During this time he roomed with the cellist Bernard Greenhouse, who had a distinguished career and was a founding member of the Beaux Arts Trio.²¹ Arnold also distinguished himself as a musician. At twenty-one, he became the youngest musician ever admitted to the Metropolitan Opera Orchestra,²² where he remained until his retirement forty-eight years later. During his years at the Met, Arnold played first violin under many famous conductors including Bruno Walter, Erich Leinsdorf, and James Levine.

²⁰ Like Arnold, Sidney Foster was a musical prodigy, whose mother brought him north for an audition at Philadelphia’s Curtis Institute of Music. He was admitted at the age of ten and later went on to a distinguished career as a concert pianist and a beloved professor of piano at Indiana University’s Jacobs School of Music. See “Bach Cantatas Website: Sidney Foster (Piano)” <http://www.bach-cantatas.com/Bio/Foster-Sidney.htm>. Accessed 20 May 2016.

²¹ Many years later, Bernard Greenhouse would play at Arnold’s funeral service in the Plainfield Congregational Church. It was very moving to hear the famous cellist playing a Jewish folksong, a tribute to their shared Jewish roots.

²² Source: Irene and Arnold’s wedding announcement in the *Hempstead New York Sentinel*, 12 Apr. 1947. <http://fultonhistory.com/Newspaper%2018/Hempstead%20NY%20Sentinel/Hempstead%20NY%20Sentinel%201947-1949/Hempstead%20NY%20Sentinel%201947-1949%20-%200038.pdf>. Accessed 2 Apr. 2014.

From Mezzo to Soprano

But I'm getting ahead of myself. Let's return to 1947. The newly married couple honeymooned in Mexico because Irene had an engagement with the National Opera in Mexico City. By the time they got back to the U.S., Irene could tell she was pregnant, but she didn't let this interfere with her second season at the Met. She was careful to keep her weight down and didn't announce her pregnancy. Finally, she gave notice that February 12, 1948, would be her last day. But the baby had other ideas. Joel Caplan was born on February 6, two months before the expected due date.

According to Irene, this was to have been the end of her operatic career. "You know, I had sort of reached my goal. I wanted to get in the Met, and I had done it. And I wasn't planning to go back." In the interviews, Irene always sounded rather contemptuous of the roles she sang as a mezzo—the pants roles, those little pieces between the big soprano arias. It is impressive, however, that in her first season (1946-47), she performed forty-nine times with the Met, more than any other singer.²³ From her Met debut in *Lakmé* on November 11, 1946, to her final performance as a mezzo in *Madama Butterfly* on January 16, 1948, Irene performed at the Metropolitan Opera a total of seventy times.²⁴

During the period of forced inactivity when Irene's children were coming along with regularity, she began to study with a new teacher. His name was Emanuel Marti-Folgado, but Irene always referred to him with the greatest respect as Maestro. He

²³ Source:

[http://archives.metoperafamily.org/archives/scripts/cgiip.exe/WService=BibSpeed/gisrch2k.r?Term=Jordan,%20Irene%20\[Mezzo%20Soprano\]&limit=50&vsrctype=no&xBranch=ALL&xmtype=&Start=&End=&theterm=Jordan,%20Irene%20\[Mezzo%20Soprano\]&srt=&x=0&xHome=&xHomePath=](http://archives.metoperafamily.org/archives/scripts/cgiip.exe/WService=BibSpeed/gisrch2k.r?Term=Jordan,%20Irene%20[Mezzo%20Soprano]&limit=50&vsrctype=no&xBranch=ALL&xmtype=&Start=&End=&theterm=Jordan,%20Irene%20[Mezzo%20Soprano]&srt=&x=0&xHome=&xHomePath=). Accessed 1 June 2016.

²⁴ Fortunately, all performances for the Metropolitan Opera are meticulously noted in the Company's online archive, so Irene's career at the Met is well documented. Source: [http://archives.metoperafamily.org/archives/scripts/cgiip.exe/WService=BibSpeed/gisrch2k.r?Term=Jordan,%20Irene%20\[Mezzo%20Soprano\]&limit=2500&vsrctype=no&xBranch=ALL&xmtype=&Start=&End=&theterm=Jordan,%20Irene%20\[Mezzo%20Soprano\]&srt=&x=0&xHome=&xHomePath=](http://archives.metoperafamily.org/archives/scripts/cgiip.exe/WService=BibSpeed/gisrch2k.r?Term=Jordan,%20Irene%20[Mezzo%20Soprano]&limit=2500&vsrctype=no&xBranch=ALL&xmtype=&Start=&End=&theterm=Jordan,%20Irene%20[Mezzo%20Soprano]&srt=&x=0&xHome=&xHomePath=). Accessed 2 May 2016.

was a native of Spain and about ninety years old when Irene became his pupil. He died a few months later, but in those few short months he transformed her vocal technique.

The basis of Maestro's teaching, according to Irene, was mastering the control of the voice. "I knew from hearing my parents teach instrumental music that he was on the right track. He just had me sing single notes—crescendo and diminuendo. If you can do it on one note, you can do it on all of them. Practicing that control. The vocal cords are so small! You don't have to run around all over the place. You just think it, and it comes out."

Maestro only heard Irene sing in public once, an operatic program she had contracted to sing with an orchestra on WOR radio. She hadn't studied with him very long at this point, but she felt he must have heard her do some things right. His comment was one she always remembered. "You have that toughness that's necessary for a singer." When I asked her to explain what he meant by "toughness," she elaborated. "He could tell that I was still striving to do what he had taught me. I didn't give up on trying to do that. I wasn't always successful by any means. But I think he could see that I was aiming right."

Although Irene only studied with this teacher for a short time, she continued to practice his technique—and teach it to others—for the rest of her life. "That's the reason I can still sing. At eighty-eight," she told me "It's very unusual for people to have voices that last like that. Without this technique I would have been finished long ago. The wobble that people get!" And then she imitated the wavering that many people today associate with opera singers. Irene had strong feelings about the wobble. "You can't hear the one clear note. And it's just *wrong!* You wouldn't take it from a violinist who wobbled all over the place like that. They just simply make a vibrato, a ring in the sound. They don't change the pitch!"

I asked Irene if it was her teacher who decided she should be a soprano. "We didn't talk about that," she replied. But, clearly, as a result of her new approach to technique, this transformation had begun.

Maestro left Irene with another lasting gift in addition to her altered technique. He liked to draw and paint, and his studio was filled with his artwork. Irene was scheduled to sing the role of Suzuki in a Newark production of Puccini's *Madama Butterfly*. He drew a caricature of Irene in this role. "Now, that'll help you to put on your makeup," he said. It used to hang in the hallway near the dining room in their Manhattan apartment, where it always frightened Irene's daughter, Rosebeth. Years later, Irene still treasured this drawing, which she hung in the music room of the Plainfield house.

According to Irene, it was Arnold who insisted that she should continue her career in spite of their rapidly growing family. Rosebeth was born in 1950, Rowen in 1954, and David in 1956. "Arnold was so impressed with what I could do vocally that he insisted. 'You have to stay and do this.' " As Irene told it, Arnold was friendly with the conductor Erich Leinsdorf, who used to visit him in the days before his marriage in order to play ping pong on the table that Arnold kept in his living room. One day Arnold asked Leinsdorf to listen to Irene sing. After hearing her, the conductor said, "Hers is the voice that the masters had in mind when they wrote their operas."²⁵ At the time, Leinsdorf was the conductor of the Rochester (New York) Philharmonic Orchestra, and he engaged Irene to sing the role of Gilda in Verdi's *Rigoletto*. Remembering this breakthrough, Irene spoke with animation. "It was a *real soprano role!* That was my first performance as a soprano!"

Later it was Leinsdorf who recommended Irene to Boris Goldovsky, the conductor at Tanglewood (and her interview partner from 1947), to sing in Mozart's *Clemenza di Tito*, "a very demanding role for the lead soprano." According to Irene, this was the first time this opera had been performed in the United States, and it got considerable attention. Irene received "really good notices," even from the Associated Press she told me.²⁶

²⁵ Source: *Gadsden [Alabama] Times*, 6 Jan. 1958, p. 9. Accessed 18 May 2016.

²⁶ I have not been able to confirm with certainty Irene's statement that she was the first to sing the lead soprano role in Mozart's *Clemenza di Tito* in the opera's first performance in the United States. But a reference from the opera's performance history, as reported in Wikipedia, suggests that this may be correct since the U.S. premiere is listed as having

She got another break early in 1953 when Margaret Harshaw, another mezzo turned soprano, bowed out of a planned appearance at Carnegie Hall singing Eglantine's aria from Carl Maria von Weber's opera *Euryanthe*. According to Irene, Harshaw "canceled thirteen days before the performance when she found she just couldn't cut it. She could not move her voice fast." Irene had just over a week to learn this aria, which is seldom performed. She described the piece as "such a showy big aria. Very, very flashy and technically demanding." Her performance on January 13, 1953, was a triumph.²⁷ She recalled, "I got magnificent reviews." Writing in the *New York Times*, Olin Downes, was effusive in his praise.

The leading feature of the performance was the astonishingly dramatic and vocally brilliant interpretation of Eglantine's music by Irene Jordan. . . . [T]hough she recently has classified herself as a soprano, she was originally billed as a mezzosoprano. This mezzo quality gives her voice a richness that the dramatic soprano does not always possess. There is a wealth of color in it as well as power and dramatic quality. All rejoiced in Miss Jordan's success.²⁸

As often happened in Irene's career, she did not have the luxury to focus solely on her singing in January of 1953. One of her brothers, who was a missionary as well as the director of music for a large radio station, was in New York with his wife and their new baby. Irene was pleased that he got to attend her performance at Carnegie Hall, but she

taken place on August 4, 1952, at the Berkshire Music Center in Tanglewood. Boris Goldovsky was the director of the Music Center from 1942 to 1962. Again, whenever I try to confirm Irene's memories of her career, the facts continue to check out. See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/La_clemenza_di_Tito#Performance_history. Accessed 1 Apr. 2014.

²⁷ This performance was made available on YouTube after Irene's death. "In Memoriam Irene Jordan: Soprano 1919 – 2016" (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BP40BN8FvMM>). Accessed 1 June 2016.

²⁸ This review was quoted on the cover of the CD of selected live performances from Irene's career, *Irene Jordan: Dramatic Coloratura (Live Performances: 1953-1969)*, RJC Talent, 1999. Irene's 1953 Carnegie Hall performance of Eglantine's aria from *Euryanthe* is included on the CD.

also had to prepare for this family visit. “I took a dresser drawer and put pillows in it. I was sort of busy with this new baby coming in.” Ever resourceful, Irene was able to manage her home life while also mastering one of the most difficult arias in the operatic repertoire.

Things did not go as smoothly four years later when Irene made her debut as a soprano on the stage of the Metropolitan. “I only went back to the Met because of Bruno Walter. He had heard me do the Queen of the Night in London, and he insisted that I would do the performances at the Met.” In the interviews we did not talk about the previous London performances, but my later Internet searches revealed the details of what sounded like an exciting opportunity for Irene. An article entitled “ ‘The Magic Flute’ in 1956” by Christopher West in the British publication *Opera Magazine* describes in detail the plans for a new production of Mozart’s *The Magic Flute* to be sung in English at the Covent Garden Opera House in London. West mentions that “Irene Jordan, the American coloratura soprano, will make her debut here as the Queen of Night.”²⁹ These performances, conducted by Rafael Kubelik, took place on January 19, 21, 23, 25, and 27, 1956. It seems likely that the famous German-born conductor Bruno Walter attended at least one of these performances and was extremely impressed by Irene’s singing of this challenging soprano role.³⁰ Unfortunately, shortly before Walter was to conduct the Mozart opera in New York at the Metropolitan, he suffered a heart attack,³¹

²⁹ Source:

<http://opera.archive.netcopy.co.uk/article/january-1956/10/the-magic-flute-in-1956>. Accessed 5 Apr. 2014.

³⁰ Supposedly, Mozart wrote this role for his sister-in-law Josepha Hofer, who was renowned for her beautiful high soprano voice, and he was gratified by her success in early performances of the opera. The Queen sings two demanding arias, the second of which, “*Der Hölle Rache kocht in meinem Herzen*” (“The vengeance of hell boils in my heart”), is reputed to be one of the most difficult arias in opera, with a vocal range that spans two octaves.

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Der_H%C3%B6lle_Rache_kocht_in_meinem_Herzen. Accessed 4 May 2016.

³¹ The 1957 heart attack is confirmed on this web source:

http://www.naxos.com/person/Bruno_Walter_31907/31907.htm. Accessed 5 Apr. 2014.

and though Irene did appear as the Queen of the Night in the performance on March 23, 1957, Tibor Kozma, not, Bruno Walter, was at the podium.

Irene was wistful in talking about this performance, her first and only one as a soprano at the Metropolitan Opera. She said of the demanding aria, “It has Fs above high C, and I missed one of ’em or something. I don’t think I missed it in London.” The Met Opera Archives, available online, lists this as Irene Jordan’s “last performance,” and includes an excerpt from a review by Jay S. Harrison that appeared in the *New York Herald Tribune*. He mentions that Irene Jordan was returning to the Met after an absence of nine years “with a new voice and in a new role.” The review continues:

It is, one hopes, not misplaced charity to attribute the results of Miss Jordan’s performance to a severe case of debut nerves, since the singer was quite clearly off her stride. Her coloratura was consistently out of tune, for which reason the Queen’s supposedly blinding technical displays made absolutely no effect, and the perceptible break between her registers often snapped the thematic line at crucial moments. In all, it was an unhappy showing which very likely may be traced to the pressures naturally attendant on a first appearance at the Met in a major assignment.³²

Irene herself seemed to have some reservations about her only Met appearance as a soprano. But, I wondered, who was this Jay Harrison, the critic who wrote the negative review? He does not have a big presence on the Internet, but I was able to access several other excerpts of his reviews, all of which evidenced a rather acerbic tone. For example, in reviewing Maria Callas’s first Tosca at the Met on November 15, 1956, a performance that was greeted with huge enthusiasm by the audience, he describes her voice.

... on the basis of her present performance this much is sure: her soprano is not big, nor is it of a quality even approaching velvet. Indeed, there are moments,

³² Source:

<http://archives.metoperafamily.org/archives/scripts/cgiip.exe/WService=BibSpeed/fullcit.w?xCID=174510&limit=500&xBranch=ALL&xodate=&xedate=&theterm=&x=0&xhomepath=&xhome=>

especially in the top register, when the tints in her voice prick the ear like barbs. Also, she has a perceptible wobble and her scale is neither even nor smooth.³³

To be fair to Harrison—and to Callas—he acknowledges that later in the opera, Callas’s voice “steadied” and that her great dramatic power as “a singing actress” was “a joy to behold.” However, it seems obvious that this reviewer was hard to please when assessing a soprano’s voice. In his 1957 review of Irene’s performance, Harrison, though not positive, seemed to be making a conscious effort to be fair to a singer making her Met debut as a soprano.

This experience was clearly a painful one for Irene to talk about. Her voice became very soft as she said, “I forget the little gal, you’ve probably never even heard of her, but there were two more performances of *The Magic Flute* at the Met that season, and they had her do them.”³⁴ In fact, the Metropolitan Opera season for spring 1957 included only one more performance of *The Magic Flute*, on March 26. The Queen of the Night was sung by Laurel Hurley, a young soprano who had sung this role in the three performances that took place before Irene’s debut. Hurley, not a name that is well known today in the opera world, sang a total of 304 performances at the Met.³⁵

For Irene, the failure to have a career as a soprano at the Met represented a painful conclusion to her childhood dream. In a story she has told often, she explains the reasons for the Met’s decision. “They dropped me after Bruno Walter was not there to champion me. The management of the Met was determined not to have me. They were angry and

³³ Source:

<http://archives.metoperafamily.org/archives/scripts/cgiip.exe/WService=BibSpeed/fullcit.w?xCID=173150&limit=500&xBranch=ALL&xodate=&xodate=&theterm=1956-57&x=0&xhomepath=&xhome=>

³⁴(<http://archives.metoperafamily.org/archives/scripts/cgiip.exe/WService=BibSpeed/gisrch31.r?Term=1956-57&limit=2500&xBranch=&xmtype=&xodate=&xodate=&theterm=1956-57&xhome=&xhomepath=&x=0>).
(https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_performers_at_the_Metropolitan_Opera)

³⁵ (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_performers_at_the_Metropolitan_Opera).
Accessed 17 Apr. 2016.

told me that if I valued my career, I would stop seeing this man in the orchestra. I don't think the management is like that now, but back then it was pretty rotten." Of course, Irene wasn't just "seeing" this man in the orchestra. She had been married to him for ten years, and they had four children together. But the Met, in its wisdom, was strictly opposed to opera stars mixing with "musicians."

This was a topic Irene returned to again and again in talking with friends as well as in our interviews. "According to the Met, I did a very wrong thing in marrying Arnold. They told me not to marry him, that they were grooming me as a star. I was an artist, and he was just a musician."

In conversations over the years, Irene had mentioned other possible reasons why she did not achieve lasting fame as a soprano. One reason was that she was competing against Maria Callas, who may not have had a perfect voice but who did have an outsize personality and dominated the opera world during the 1950s and 1960s.³⁶ Another reason was that she did not hire professionals to promote her career. She was naïve, she once told me, believing that talent and hard work would carry the day. She also had four children and arranged her engagements with the children's needs in mind.

After the Met

Irene would never again sing on the stage of the Metropolitan Opera after the ill-fated performance of March 23, 1957. However, she went on to have a long and distinguished career as an artist singing major roles all over the world, performing important new and challenging works, and teaching voice at prominent universities and music schools—a career that for most mortals would have seemed superlative.

³⁶ Although Callas had a huge career on the world stage, she was not a frequent performer at the Metropolitan Opera, appearing only twenty-two times at the Met as compared with Irene's seventy-one appearances. Because of differences with the Met's General Manager, Rudolf Bing, she did not sing even once at the Met from 1958 until her two final appearances with that company in 1965.

[http://archives.metoperafamily.org/archives/scripts/cgiip.exe/WService=BibSpeed/gisrch2k.r?Term=Callas,%20Maria%20\[Soprano\]&limit=500&vsrctype=no&xBranch=ALL&xmtype=&Start=&End=&theterm=Callas,%20Maria%20\[Soprano\]&srt=&x=0&xHome=&xHomePath=](http://archives.metoperafamily.org/archives/scripts/cgiip.exe/WService=BibSpeed/gisrch2k.r?Term=Callas,%20Maria%20[Soprano]&limit=500&vsrctype=no&xBranch=ALL&xmtype=&Start=&End=&theterm=Callas,%20Maria%20[Soprano]&srt=&x=0&xHome=&xHomePath=). Accessed 2 May 2016.

Irene did not talk about this part of her career in her interviews with me. But, fortunately, traces of this impressive career remain in the historical record. For example, in the fall of 1957, the same years as Irene's Queen of the Night performance at the Met, she appeared as Lady Macbeth in a production by the New York City Opera. In *First and Lasting Impressions: Julius Rudel Looks Back on a Life in Music*, Rudel writes of being appointed principal conductor and director of the New York City Opera in 1957, with the mission of saving the company from being permanently disbanded. One of the operas featured in the crucial fall 1957 season was Verdi's *Macbeth*. Rudel knew that mounting this opera would be a challenge but felt that his choice to sing the role of Macbeth, the baritone Cornell MacNeill, "would create a sensation, and I could surround him with a well nigh ideal cast led by Irene Jordan as a steely voiced Lady Macbeth." Unfortunately, MacNeill withdrew from the production when he received an offer to appear with the Lyric Opera of Chicago. He was replaced by the understudy, William Chapman. Despite the change in casting, Rudel recalls, "*Macbeth* received excellent reviews and caused a stir"³⁷ when it premiered on October 24, 1957. A review in the *New York Journal-American* called Irene's performance "A personal triumph! A well-sung and effectively acted portrayal. [Miss Jordan] sang with confidence and brilliance. This was a debut of real distinction."³⁸ The performance was also reviewed in the *New York Times* of October 25, 1957, and featured a large photo of Irene, in costume, along with her Macbeth, William Chapman. The *Times* reviewer, Howard Taubman, wrote: "Both parts are exacting vocally and dramatically. Both singers accomplished more than one has a right to expect of young performers." In giving a historical perspective on the opera, Taubman pointed out that Verdi had specified that Lady Macbeth should be ugly both physically and vocally. In these two respects, Irene did not fit the bill.

³⁷ Rudel, Julius, and Rebecca Paller. *First and Lasting Impressions: Julius Rudel Looks Back on a Life in Music*. Rochester, NY: University of Rochester Press, 2013.

³⁸ Quoted on the CD liner for *Irene Jordan, Dramatic Coloratura: Live Performances 1953 – 1969*. RJC Talent.

Miss Jordan, to her good fortune, could not satisfy Verdi's requirement as to personal appearance; she is too attractive. And her voice, which used to be a mezzo, has been raised to the dramatic soprano range so that she can negotiate the coloratura and the high tessitura with its D flat. She has the technique and vocal size for the role, but she does not convey the ferocity of Lady Macbeth.

Taubman suggested that, with more experience in the role, Irene might acquire "more of Lady Macbeth's furious determination," and even in this debut performance, he felt that as the performance progressed, she began to acquire more of the "steely voiced" quality that Rudel had envisioned when he cast her in this role.³⁹

After this 1957 debut with the struggling New York City Opera, Irene doesn't appear to have sung with that company again. But she did have an active career singing in many other cities under the management of Joseph Lippman of Barrett Management.⁴⁰

In 1959, Irene was nominated by Leonard Bernstein for a Ford Foundation grant awarded to the "Top Ten American Performing Artists" to show "public appreciation of the richness and variety of America's musical resources at their highest level." As one of the ten winners, Irene commissioned the Italian-American composer Vittorio Giannini⁴¹ to compose a piece for solo soprano and symphony orchestra especially for her.⁴² The resulting composition was a forty-minute, four-movement "monodrama" entitled *The Medead for Soprano and Orchestra*, based on the ancient Greek drama of Medea, who kills her own children in order to punish her unfaithful husband, Jason. *The Medead*

³⁹ Taubman, Howard. "Opera: 'Macbeth' Sung at City Center." *The New York Times*, October 25, 1957, p. 24.

⁴⁰ Liner notes, *Irene Jordan, Dramatic Coloratura: Live Performances 1953 – 1969*. RJC Talent.

⁴¹ In November 1954, Irene had performed the role of Kate in the premiere of Giannini's opera *The Taming of the Shrew* at the Chicago Lyric Opera. Source: <http://archives.chicagotribune.com/1954/11/04/page/39/article/on-the-aisle#text>. Accessed 18 May 2016.

⁴² Family members recall Irene saying that Bernstein wanted her to select Aaron Copland to compose the piece, but she declined because she didn't care for his compositions for the voice.

premiered in October 1960 with the Atlanta Symphony conducted by Henry Sopkin.⁴³ The Ford Foundation had specified that Irene would perform this work with other major orchestras over the next two years.

A complete listing of these performances does not exist. But we know that Irene did perform this work several times in the early 1960s.⁴⁴ Then, in 2015, two new CDs of Irene's singing became available.⁴⁵ The first disc features a complete performance of *The Medead* recorded on January 4, 1962. Paul Paray conducts the Detroit Symphony. In a review written for *Fanfare*, an archive of reviews of classical music recordings, Walter Simmons, a musicologist and critic of twentieth- and twenty-first-century music, describes this work, which Irene had commissioned.

THE MEDEAD, by Vittorio Giannini, is one of the greatest works of the 20th-century never (until now) documented on a recording available to the public. It is remarkable that the piece has had to wait more than half a century for this to happen, and even now, it is a first release of live recordings dating from the 1960s....THE MEDEAD is a four-movement monodrama for soprano and orchestra that tells the story of the ruthless Medea from her own perspective, through a text written by the composer; in a sense it is a hybrid of a symphony and a dramatic monologue. I might describe the style as derived from the language of Wagner and Strauss (in his SALOME and ELEKTRA vein), but with an Italianate passion and emotional immediacy, disciplined by a 20th-century concentration of focus and formal economy.⁴⁶

Later in the same review, Simmons comments on Irene's performance.

⁴³ Simmons, Walter. *Voices in the Wilderness: Six American Neo-Romantic Composers*. Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2006.

⁴⁴ On May 16, 2013, a complete performance of this rarely performed work was published on YouTube. Irene sings the solo soprano role with the National Orchestra Association, John Barnett conducting. Source: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jh-Lk6HZXSk>. Accessed 18 May 2016.

⁴⁵ Available from Norbeck, Peters & Ford <http://www.norpete.com/v2459.html>.

⁴⁶ In May 2013, a complete performance of *The Medead* was posted on YouTube. Irene sings the title role with the National Orchestra Association, John Barnett conducting. Source: <http://www.norpete.com/v2459.html>. Accessed 18 May 2016.

What is most striking about the soprano we hear in *THE MEDEAD* is her power and intensity, unblemished by ugly moments of loss of control or of imprecise pitch—and these are live recordings! One realizes that Giannini and Jordan fully understood the expectations each held of the other. This became abundantly clear to me after I had heard the attempts of several other sopranos to present this piece. The Atlanta premiere is of interest largely in demonstrating Jordan’s comprehensive mastery of the work from the start....⁴⁷

Simmons goes on to say that in this 1962 performance, Irene “is as acute in negotiating the work’s demands as she was in Atlanta, if not more so.”

Giannini’s *Medead* has seldom been performed though several knowledgeable critics believe it to be a major work of twentieth-century music. According to Walter Simmons, quoted above, *The Medead* is one of “the great American masterpieces of the 1950s and 60s that were buried during the stylistic skirmishes of that fractious period.”⁴⁸ Reviewing a 1990 performance by the Manhattan Symphony, James Oestreich, music critic of the *New York Times*, concurs with Simmons’s high opinion of Giannini’s *Medead*: “an impressive creation in an operatic mode that owes something to Verdi, most notably in its striding low-string descents, but far more to Wagner.” Oestreich says the piece is similar to Wagner in “the way it sets the voice afloat on an orchestral sea and challenges it to surmount the surging waves.”⁴⁹ Irene was equal to these challenges. But perhaps one reason this work has been performed so rarely is that not many sopranos in any era have been able to “surmount the surging waves” of the orchestra as Irene could.

In the early 1960s, Irene was in her prime vocally, and she was much in demand, singing major operatic works across the United States though in that pre-Internet era documentation of her appearances is hard to come by. Much of the press coverage that

⁴⁷

Source: <http://www.norpete.com/v2459.html>. Accessed 18 May 2016.

⁴⁸ Source: <http://www.norpete.com/v2459.html>. Accessed 18 May 2016.

⁴⁹ Oestreich, James. “Manhattan Symphony on a Forgotten Man.” *New York Times*, Sept. 30, 1990. www.nytimes.com/1990/09/30/arts/review-music-manhattan-symphony-on-a-forgotten-man.html. Accessed 18 May 2016.

surfaces on the Internet is from sources in her native Alabama. For example, an article in the *Tuscaloosa [Alabama] News* dated April 11, 1959, describes Irene performing in a Birmingham production of Verdi's *La Traviata*. The photo in the online version of this article shows Irene in costume, but half the image appears in a ghostly silhouette, ironically emblematic of the evanescence of Irene's presence in the larger history of opera.

In recent years, however, traces of Irene's impressive career have begun to appear online. Thanks to a \$2.4 million grant from the Leon Levy Foundation in 2014, the New York Philharmonic has created a comprehensive digital archive. This online collection reveals that Irene was a soloist at the Philharmonic's concerts in 1958, 1959, 1960, 1961, and 1963. Three of these concerts (1958, 1959, and 1963) were held outdoors in Lewisohn Stadium of the City College of New York (demolished in 1973). The 1960 and 1961 concerts were held in Carnegie Hall with Leonard Bernstein conducting.⁵⁰

Searching through other websites, I discovered that Irene had sung in the world premiere of *Athaliah*, an opera by Hugo Weisgall, commissioned by the Concert Opera Association and first performed in New York's Philharmonic Hall, Lincoln Center, on February 17, 1964. In this opera, based on the Biblical story of Athaliah, the daughter of Ahab and Jezebel, the soprano Shirley Verrett sang the title role with Irene taking the part of Yehosheba. Reviewing the performance the next day in the *New York Times*, the well-known music critic Harold C. Schonberg wrote, "The cast was splendid. Shirley Verrett sang the title role and made the most of it, with her imposing voice and equally imposing presence.... Irene Jordan and John Reardon, two accomplished veterans, also sang with confidence and security."

Later in the same year, Irene sang the title role in the U.S. premiere of Donizetti's *Maria Stuarda* at Philharmonic Hall on November 16, 1964.⁵¹ Also sponsored by the

⁵⁰ The actual concert programs are available online. Source: [http://archives.nyphil.org/index.php/search?search-type=singleFilter&search-text=*&npp:SoloistsNames_facet\[0\]=Jordan%2C+Irene&doctype=program](http://archives.nyphil.org/index.php/search?search-type=singleFilter&search-text=*&npp:SoloistsNames_facet[0]=Jordan%2C+Irene&doctype=program). Accessed 20 May 2016.

⁵¹ Metropolitan Opera Guild, "Maria Stuarda" <http://www.metguild.org/guild/templates/Utilities.aspx?id=45846&LangType=1033>. Web. Accessed 3 April 2016.

Concert Opera Association, the American premiere of a work by a major nineteenth-century opera composer was an important event even if it was not a fully staged version of the opera. As with *Athaliah*, the performance was reviewed the next day in the *New York Times* by Harold Schonberg. In assessing the singers, he writes that most of them, obviously including Irene, were “familiar to Concert Opera audiences.”

Reviewing Irene’s performance as Maria, he writes:

Miss Jordan sang variably—sometimes with brilliance, sometimes with a hard sound, once in a while off pitch. She was at her best in the third act “Quando di luce,” a cavatina in which all of her considerable resources came together. Here the tone was soft and focused, and the phrasing sensitive.⁵²

Another review of this same performance, appearing in the British publication *Opera*, expands on Schonberg’s comments:

The beautiful Irene Jordan was delightful to look at as Mary Stuart, but she had some trouble with her pitch and her intonation was sometimes less than perfect. More differentiation between her moods seemed desirable, particularly in the dialogue between the two queens when Mary, kneeling before Elizabeth, begs her forgiveness at Leicester's urging but, accused of horrible crimes, loses her temper and with it, her cause. She looked every inch a queen in the sense of Schiller's drama—which Bardini's libretto followed as closely as the contemporary operatic convention permitted, regardless of historical fact (the two queens never did meet).⁵³

In 1965, Irene had a chance to work with Igor Stravinsky, one of the most famous living composers. On April 17 of that year, she sang the soprano role in the Chicago Symphony Orchestra’s first performance of Stravinsky’s ballet *Pulcinella*. Stravinsky himself was conducting. Nicholas Virgilio, tenor, and Donald Gramm, bass, were the

⁵² Schonberg, Harold C. “Opera: ‘Maria Stuarda.’ ” *New York Times*, November 17, 1964. Web. Accessed 3 April 2016.

⁵³ *Opera: The World’s Leading Opera Magazine*. January 1965 (<http://opera.archive.netcopy.co.uk/article/january-1965/24/from-chicago-to-new-orleans>) . Web. Accessed 4 April 2016.

other soloists.⁵⁴ On August 23, 1965, Irene was in Hollywood, where she recorded *Pulcinella*. Again, the composer was conducting, this time with the Columbia Symphony Orchestra. Other soloists included Donald Gramm, bass, and George Shirley, tenor.⁵⁵

Finding traces of Irene's career is often a matter of chance, causing me to wonder how much else might be out there waiting to be (re)discovered. In January 2016, Judy Williams, President of the Plainfield Historical Society, handed me a thin folder marked "Irene Jordan Caplan." Inside were copies of two letters from United Nations Secretary General U Thant. A quick Internet search revealed that Irene had been asked to sing at a concert celebrating the twentieth anniversary of the Declaration of Human Rights. She performed as soprano soloist in the world premiere of a piece that had been specifically commissioned by U Thant in 1967. The cantata for soprano, baritone, six speakers, two mixed choirs, and orchestra (with two conductors), entitled, "Yes, Speak Out, Yes," was composed by Christóbal Halffter with text by Norman Corwin. On December 10, 1968, accompanied by the Minnesota Orchestra (formerly known as the Minneapolis Symphony Orchestra) and the choir of Augsburg College, Irene sang in the premier performance of this work at the UN General Assembly Hall. On December 23, 1968, U Thant wrote a personal letter of thanks:

Dear Miss Jordan,

⁵⁴ Source:

http://cso.org/uploadedFiles/1_Tickets_and_Events/Program_Notes/ProgramNotes_Stravinsky_Pulcinella.pdf. Accessed 2 June 2016.

⁵⁵ Source: "Igor Stravinsky: The Complete Guide."

https://books.google.com/books?id=s8ScQvfmaQAC&pg=PA30&lpg=PA30&dq=irene+jordan+stravinsky+hollywood+1965&source=bl&ots=E2_QhavPJ6&sig=h07I2DVrTr09XdJEasrsCpdgZP8&hl=en&sa=X&ved=0ahUKEwj0qruGrInNAhVIGz4KHRSADcQQ6AEIKzAC#v=onepage&q=irene%20jordan%20stravinsky%20hollywood%201965&f=false. This recording had been available only in old vinyl copies, but in 2012, a seven-CD set entitled "Stravinsky Conducts Stravinsky – The Ballets," including this performance, was released by ArkivMusic: The Source for Classical Music <http://www.arkivmusic.com/classical/Name/Irene-Jordan/Performer/20700-2>. Accessed 2 June 2016.

I wanted you to know how much we appreciated your presence here on Human Rights Day, and your memorably beautiful singing.

I know that your performance required many hours of very difficult preparation and that it involved you also in uncomfortable journeys and extended rehearsals.

For all this effort—which produced such splendid results—please accept this expression of gratitude from all of us.

As with *The Medead*, Halffter's cantata "Yes, Speak Out, Yes" has not been performed often. The fact that it requires a symphony, full chorus, and two conductors may be part of the reason. But finding soloists who can negotiate this difficult contemporary work is another reason. Beginning with her performance of the demanding Eglantine aria from Weber's *Euryanthe* in 1953, Irene consistently demonstrated that she was equal to the challenges of performing difficult contemporary works. In fact, she seemed to excel in them.

Another aspect of her 1968 performance at the UN that must have been gratifying for Irene was that Halffter's cantata was written in celebration of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Drafted and approved in response to the atrocities committed during World War II, the Declaration was composed by a committee chaired by Eleanor Roosevelt and approved, after much discussion and amendment, on December 10, 1948. The principles underlying the declaration were of great importance to Irene. Born in the Deep South in a time of strict racial segregation, she had thought deeply on the subjects of race and human rights. Her views as a Southerner and a woman of faith are revealed in the story of the time she met Martin Luther King, Jr. Despite their surface differences, the opera singer and the civil rights activist had much in common. Both were Southerners. Irene was born in Birmingham, Alabama, and King in Atlanta, Georgia. Both had been raised in deeply religious Southern Baptist families, both were very familiar with the Bible, and, as adults, both acknowledged their Christian faith as the foundation of their lives. Because their work often took them far from home, it's not surprising that their chance meeting took place on a plane.

This is how Irene told the story:

He was sitting right next to a younger black man on a flight from New York to Atlanta. When I got on the plane, I sat down immediately opposite him. I was wearing a big cloche-like hat. And I thought, “Well, I’m going to eavesdrop.” I’d heard that in private he was not like he talked in public. His voice was carrying, and I just sat and pretended to be reading. But I had my ear out to hear him just across the aisle. And he was telling this young person, “No matter what they do to you, there is *no* retaliation. You cannot react in a way that would be normal, in a violent, forceful way. Everything must be very, very peaceful.”

When we were standing in line to get off the plane in Atlanta, I said, “Dr. King, I want you to know that there are some in my family, Southerners, who are praying for you and your movement.” And he said, “Oh, thank you.” Then he reached out his hand toward the little suitcase I was carrying and said, “Please, let me take your baggage.” And he carried my hand luggage into the terminal for me.

It was nice to know that in private, he was saying the same thing he was saying in public—no retaliation, no reaction, nothing but love.

Irene had high standards for those who, like herself, professed to be Christians. And, in this brief encounter, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., had confirmed her high opinion of him.

Another thing Irene shared with Dr. King was a belief in the power of words.

Here’s how she explained it to me in September 2007:

I love words. I think they are fascinating. I love that passage in the book of John: “In the beginning was the word, and the word was with God, and the word *was* God.” It says, God “spoke the worlds into being.” He said, “Let there be light.” And there was light. Words have a power beyond almost anything that we know of.

In reviewing Irene’s singing, critics often commented on the beauty of her diction. For Irene, the words were just as important as the music, and she loved to perform works based on great literature. Like her mother before her, she knew and admired the works of Shakespeare. In 1959 she performed for six weeks at the Stratford Ontario Shakespeare Festival.⁵⁶ On June 29, 1963, she appeared with the New York Philharmonic, Robert Irving conducting, at Lewisohn Stadium in New York City in a program entitled “Shakespeare and Music.” In this program, the actor Basil Rathbone performed scenes

⁵⁶ Source: “Irene Caplan: 1919-2016.” Obituary. *The Berkshire Eagle*, 14 May 2016. <http://www.legacy.com/obituaries/berkshire/obituary.aspx?n=irene-caplan&pid=179985767&fhid=4936>. Accessed 18 May 2016.

from Shakespeare, alternating with Irene, who sang areas inspired by his plays: Ophelia's mad scene from the opera *Hamlet* by Ambroise Thomas and the sleepwalking scene from Verdi's *Macbeth*.⁵⁷ In 1964 she appeared with actress Agnes Moorehead in a Shakespearean program at the Hollywood Bowl in Los Angeles.⁵⁸

As gratifying as it is to see references to Irene's career documented on the Internet, nothing can compare to hearing the actual singing. For this reason, in 1999, when Irene's son Rowen Caplan produced a CD entitled *Irene Jordan, Dramatic Coloratura: Live Performances 1953 – 1969*,⁵⁹ the recording was a godsend for revealing the artist she had been at the height of her vocal and dramatic powers—and for raising the big question: Why hadn't her artistry gotten more attention? Knowledgeable critics of classical music shared the view that impressive as her career had been, she had not received the fame she deserved. Two reviews of the CD appeared in the January/February 2000 issue of *Fanfare*, which describes itself as “the magazine for serious record collectors” and reviews mostly classical recordings. The first reviewer, James Miller, wrote:

The name Irene Jordan is probably one unfamiliar even to most vocal buffs. She sang in the American premiere of *Peter Grimes* (not the world premiere, as the annotations imply), had a brief career as a Met comprimario [a singer of secondary roles], then, discovering that her mezzo-soprano voice was evolving into that of a dramatic soprano, she left the Met for further study and life as a dramatic coloratura. Although she ended up having a varied, interesting career, she got back to the Met for only one single performance, as the Queen of the Night. In his comprehensive history *The Metropolitan Opera*, Irving Kolodin mentions “the breadth and weight of [her] dramatic sound” as the Queen, but says

⁵⁷ Source: Archives of the New York Philharmonic, <http://archives.nyphil.org/index.php/artifact/f213960a-0dae-4c46-9c45-f01de6105d20/fullview#page/30/mode/1up>. Accessed 18 May 2016.

⁵⁸ Source: “Irene Caplan: 1919-2016.” Obituary. *The Berkshire Eagle*, 14 May 2016. <http://www.legacy.com/obituaries/berkshire/obituary.aspx?n=irene-caplan&pid=179985767&fhid=4936>. Accessed 18 May 2016.

⁵⁹ *Irene Jordan, Dramatic Coloratura: Live Performances 1953 – 1969*. RJC Talent, 62 South Union Street, Plainfield, MA 01070. Email rjcaplan@bcn.net.

she was “erratic in pitch and insecure in skips.”... Listening to this CD of live performances spanning 17 years, beginning in 1953, one listens in vain for that erratic pitch and insecurity, and hears, instead a mezzo-soprano-colored voice knocking off high notes and ornamentation with confidence. Further (for the benefit of the cynical), the stuff I checked wasn’t transposed down. In addition to her technical finesse, she shapes the music sensitively.⁶⁰

Miller goes on to question why Irene wasn’t better known in the opera world of her era.

I was around during the 50s and 60s and, while it really was a comparatively rich period for voices, I remember nothing resembling her until Joan Sutherland showed up. Lacking a complete role to hear, I don’t dare compare her to Callas. Why someone who could sing like this pretty much escaped the limelight, I can’t say. Were Lily Pons and Roberta Peters considered the vocal ideal for a coloratura soprano? Was she “difficult”? Was she actually erratic to the point that she could sound like this one night and awful the next? Was she uninterested in a “big” career? Was she plagued by illness? Did she cancel a lot of appearances? I certainly don’t know, but I will say that this CD is worth investigating.... You will find her, I am sure, an interesting and puzzling discovery.⁶¹

The second reviewer for *Fanfare*, John W. Lambert, echoed this sense of puzzlement.

This is a release that is at once captivating and disheartening. It’s captivating because Irene Jordan clearly was—and, according to the CD’s uncredited notes, still *is*—a wonderful singer (who, at 80, continues to perform in public from time to time). Based on these recordings, which begin with what I am guessing was her first big-time splash, as Eglantine in Weber’s seldom-heard *Euryanthe*, and end, chronologically, with two selections recorded in Holland 16 years later, the voice is large, warm, rich, and remarkably flexible. In some respects, her tonal splendor suggests Flagstad, but her upper register is as agile as Pons’s, and her diction is as good as I have heard from any coloratura—and far, far better than most.⁶²

⁶⁰ Miller, James. Review of *Irene Jordan Dramatic Coloratura: Live Performances, 1953-69*. *Fanfare: The Magazine for Serious Record Collectors*. January/February 2000, pp. 375-76.

⁶¹ Miller, p. 376.

⁶² Lambert, John W. Review of *Irene Jordan Dramatic Coloratura: Live Performances, 1953-69*. *Fanfare: The Magazine for Serious Record Collectors* January/February 2000, p. 376.

Later in the review, Lambert explains why he finds the CD disheartening.

Jordan's approaches to standard-repertoire items demonstrate that she was, in her day, far superior to a lot of people who now masquerade as vocalists. Today, a voice like this would make news even in papers that rarely cover the arts. One can only wonder.... So it is truly disheartening that a singer of this quality apparently never appeared in our major opera houses. At least this CD, announced as Volume 1, has been released while she is very much in our midst. It's time she earned some recognition for her artistry.⁶³

Lambert concludes by urging his readers to obtain the CD "because most of the singing is, in a word, stunning."⁶⁴

Those of us who heard Irene sing in her later years know what this critic was talking about. Her singing was so beautiful, so poignant, that it often left us in tears. Yet as I heard Irene talk about her career in 2007, I learned that a great gift—a magnificent voice and a powerful stage presence—can also be a burden. Irene had what most would consider a stellar career in music. Still, at the end of her life, there was a sense of regret, a yearning for the career and lasting fame that might have been. If only ...

“Music at the Close”

The setting sun, and music at the close,
As the last taste of sweets, is sweetest last,
Writ in remembrance more than things long past.
—Shakespeare, *Richard II*

Yet, after her formal career had ended, Irene went on to another musical life as a frequent soloist in Western Massachusetts. This closing of her career gave her an extended life as

⁶³ Lambert, p. 376.

⁶⁴ Lambert, p. 377.

an artist that very few singers enjoy. It also provided friends and neighbors the pleasure of hearing memorable live performances.

In 2015 a 2-CD set of Irene's singing became available.⁶⁵ Entitled simply *Irene Jordan: Soprano*, this set includes the 1962 recording of Giannini's *Medead* mentioned earlier. It also includes recordings from recitals in 1982 (when Irene was sixty-three), 1985 (age sixty-six), 1999 (age eighty), and 2004 (age eighty-five). Commenting on these later performances in *Fanfare*, the critic Walter Simmons states: "Their main attraction lies in displaying the remarkable durability of Jordan's voice, not to mention her musicianship."⁶⁶

A complete listing of her late-in-life performances is not available. But these are some of the highlights. In 1999, when Irene was eighty years old, she gave a formal recital entitled "Songs for Voice and Viola" as part of the Mohawk Trail summer concert series in Charlemont, Massachusetts. She was accompanied by Arnold Steinhardt, first violinist of the Guarneri Quartet.

In 2004, at the age of eighty-five, she performed as part of a benefit concert in Plainfield along with other musicians in town, including singers Dario and Rebecca Coletta and pianist David Kramer. Four of her songs from this recital are included on the recent CD set. Tenor Dario Coletta recalls singing a duet from *La Traviata* with Irene. "I have a strong memory of performing with her and how interesting it was for an eighty-five-year-old and a fifty-year-old to be singing a love duet that's supposed to be for people in their twenties. But I was very excited because I had never sung the role of Alfredo in *Traviata*, and so it was fun to do the duet with her. I thought she was an amazing voice. Still. And it was so unexpected. To be singing in Plainfield with Irene Jordan. She was a force!"

In February 2006, when Irene was eighty-six, she traveled to Birmingham to attend a reunion for alumnae of Judson College, her alma mater. In Alabama, Irene was a

⁶⁵ *Irene Jordan, Soprano*. St. Laurent Studio. Available from Norbeck, Peters & Ford: Remembrance of Historical Performances Past. <http://www.norpete.com/v2459.html>.

⁶⁶ Source: <http://www.norpete.com/v2459.html>. Accessed 25 May 2016.

celebrity, someone who had brought glory to her native state. And on this occasion she received resolutions recognizing her achievements from Governor Bob Riley as well as from Jefferson county and Judson College. Irene had promised to sing at this celebration. “I don’t have the right to be singing at my age, but I am going to attempt it,” she said before performing two of her favorites, “Sweet Little Jesus Boy” and “A Place Called Heaven,” for a very appreciative audience. Judson’s national alumnae president echoed the sentiments of many in Alabama and beyond when she said, “There are lots of women who have been inspired by what you have accomplished.”⁶⁷

In 2006, at the age of eighty-seven, Irene gave her last major public performance, singing an aria from *Dido and Aeneas* by the English composer Henry Purcell. Stephen Lewis, a music student at Oberlin College and Conservatory at the time, organized a concert production of this Baroque opera in his hometown of Worthington, Massachusetts. Like others in the audience that night, I was amazed to hear this woman in her late eighties singing such a demanding role, which she had learned only a few weeks earlier, with a beauty of tone and diction that would have been admirable in a much younger singer. In 2015, I emailed Lewis, who had recently completed a PhD in musical composition and was studying for another doctorate in contemporary piano performance at the University of California-San Diego, to confirm the details of this performance. He recalled:

Working with Irene was a great pleasure. She had a wealth of musical knowledge and instincts built up over her career, and I was grateful to have gotten to perform such an iconic aria with such an iconic soprano. Even at eighty-seven, her performance revealed depths and insights into Purcell’s aria I hadn’t considered before, which is a rare feat for a work that is already quite famous and often heard.⁶⁸

⁶⁷ Source: “World-renowned opera singer recalls Judson days.” http://thealabamabaptist.org/print-edition-article-detail.php?id_art=2248&pricat_art=4. Accessed 26 May 2016.

⁶⁸ Email from Stephen Lewis, 9 Jan. 2015.

When Irene was a young woman, the conductor Leopold Stokowski had pronounced, after listening to her: “You will sing as long as you live.” “Why would you say that?” Irene asked him. “When I was a young man studying in Italy, I heard that kind of technique. I have not heard it in a long time.” Stokowski’s prophecy proved correct.⁶⁹ Although Irene may not have achieved the lasting fame of sopranos such as Maria Callas or Beverly Sills, she sang and sang well for many more years than they did. Callas died suddenly of a heart attack in 1977 at age fifty-three. Sills retired from singing in 1980 at age fifty-one. Irene gave her final concert performance in 2006 at age eighty-seven. Her singing career spanned six decades.

Irene in Autumn

I saw Irene only a few times after she moved into assisted living in 2007. I found myself making excuses for not visiting, but part of me knew that these visits would have been painful, reminding me of my mother’s dementia at the end of her life and my own aging. Finally, on a Saturday afternoon in August 2013, I visited the assisted living facility where Irene was living at the time. Sandy Powers, a friend from Plainfield whose mother, June Schusser, had been a good friend of Irene’s, was with me.

We found her sitting in an easy chair in her room. Her hair was beautifully arranged, and her skin, at age ninety-four, was remarkably wrinkle-free. She didn’t recognize either of us but welcomed the company of friends who talked about shared memories of life in Plainfield. When we asked about her health, she replied, “I’m not in any discomfort.” Her lovely speaking voice and slight southern accent were unchanged. And she was still attuned to the written word. Several times she commented on the slogan on Sandy’s tee shirt.

We talked for about an hour, and then, sensing that Irene was tired, we said goodbye. Driving back to Plainfield, our conversation was subdued. As we rode past

⁶⁹ Unfortunately, Irene never got to perform publically with Stokowski. There had been plans for a performance at Carnegie Hall or Lincoln Center, but the performance was cancelled because of labor difficulties when the orchestra’s demands proved impossible to meet.

hillsides still lush and green with some trees just starting to show their autumn colors, I found myself thinking of a reflection written by Burton Whiteside, the minister of the Plainfield Congregational Church, where Irene had worshipped for many years.

The spirit of the season invites us to let go in order to receive new inspiration from the heavens. We are encouraged by nature to let go of all that has run its course and is ready to be laid to rest. Reflecting on the passage of time, we recall those who have enriched our lives and are now gone. Memories are bittersweet, with joy and sorrow side by side. These are the days when awe and grief walk hand in hand. As the trees surrender their leaves to the ground, may we surrender our lives, just as they are.... And in so doing, may we be reconnected to what is great and essential, and honor ones who remain with us as treasures of the soul, who are like autumn stars.

For me, even before her death, Irene had moved into a timeless dimension. She may not have achieved star status at the Metropolitan Opera, but in the minds and hearts of those who loved and admired her, Irene will forever be an autumn star, a treasure of the soul.