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HISTORICAL



# **RITA GORR**

**sings  
French Opera**

**GLUCK  
CHERUBINI  
BERLIOZ  
MASSENET  
SAINT-SAËNS**

**ORCHESTRE DU THÉÂTRE  
NATIONAL DE L'OPÉRA  
ORCHESTRE DE LA SOCIÉTÉ  
DES CONCERTS DU  
CONSERVATOIRE  
ANDRÉ CLUYTENS  
GEORGES PRÊTRE**

*Recorded 1959-1962*

**Christoph GLUCK (1714-1787): Alceste**

- 1 Divinités du Styx 5:08  
Rita Gorr (Alceste), Orchestre du Théâtre National de l'Opéra, André Cluytens  
Paris 11., 17.-20. & 27. 6. 1959 (His Master's Voice ASDF 141)

**GLUCK: *Iphigénie en Tauride***

- 2 Ô toi, qui prolongeas mes jours 4:27  
3 Ô malheureuse Iphigénie (Chœurs René Duclos) 4:01  
4 Je cède à vos désirs – D'une image, hélas! trop chérie 4:08  
5 Non, cet affreux devoir – Je t'implore et je tremble 4:08  
Rita Gorr (Iphigénie), Orchestre de la Société des Concerts du Conservatoire,  
Georges Prêtre  
Paris 1961 (His Master's Voice ASDF 231)

**GLUCK [/BERLIOZ]: *Orphée et Eurydice***

- 6 Malheureux, que je fais? – J'ai perdu mon Eurydice 5:33  
Rita Gorr (Orphée), Orchestre du Théâtre National de l'Opéra, André Cluytens  
Paris 11., 17.-20. & 27. 6. 1959 (His Master's Voice ASDF 141)

**Luigi CHERUBINI (1760-1842): *Médée***

- 7 Vous voyez, de vos fils, la mère infortunée 4:10  
8 Perfides ennemis qui conspirez ma peine Guy Chauvet (Jason) 4:38  
9 Chers enfants, il faut donc que je vous abandonne Guy Chauvet (Jason) 6:07  
10 Du trouble affreux qui me dévore 4:20  
11 Eh quoi! Je suis Médée 5:03  
Rita Gorr (Médée), Orchestre du Théâtre National de l'Opéra, Georges Prêtre  
Paris, Salle Wagram, 2.-3., 5.-6. & 16. 4. 1962 (Columbia SAX 2482)

**Hector BERLIOZ (1803-1869): *La damnation de Faust***

- 12 Autrefois un Roi de Thulé (solo viola, Pierre Ladhuie) 5:21  
13 D'amour l'ardente flamme (solo cor anglais, Robert Casier) 7:26  
Rita Gorr (Marguerite), Orchestre du Théâtre National de l'Opéra, André Cluytens  
Paris 1960 (His Master's Voice ASD 430)

**A GUILD HISTORICAL RELEASE**

- Master source: Recordings from the Schaarwächter Collection
- Remastering: Peter Reynolds
- Final master preparation: Reynolds Mastering, Colchester, England
- Photographs: Claude Poirier (cover and back cover); Houston Rogers (p.5)
- Design: Paul Brooks, paulmbrooks@virginmedia.com
- Art direction: Guild GmbH
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without too much (but neither without too little) physical effort into the climaxes: “while her dramatic presence is always well remembered, the unforced womanliness of her soft singing, beautifully evinced at ‘Mourir pour ce qu'on aime’, should be no less insisted upon.”

One of the first attempts to revive the original of Cherubini’s *Médée* as originally intended is the Pathé Marconi LP, although practically all even of the numbers included are heavily cut. The distinguished nineteenth-century critic Henry Chorley well summed up the requirements of the central figure, who from her first entry is not off the scene for a single moment, and on whom the entire action centres (there are no sub-plots, and the rest of the cast are two-dimensional characters who come to life only when illuminated by the blaze of her dominating personality): Medea, he wrote, needs “a voice like a clarion and a frame of adamant and gold [as well as] grandeur of expression ere the creation of the composer can be rightly filled up”. In more recent renderings of *Médée*, often period-instruments and a lower pitch are used, which would also have comforted Gorr for whom the tessitura may a semitone high. In any case it is clear that we have here a much more appropriate access to the role than any Italian approach might be able to offer. The beauty and firmness of tone Gorr produces, together with “the clarity of her enunciation and her obvious intelligence” (Lionel Salter), bring to live an operatic figure far too long dominated by Maria Callas and only in the past twenty years rediscovered in its original guise.

Sir Thomas Beecham had wanted Gorr to be his 1960 Didon in *Les Troyens*, but this did not materialize; and although admittedly Gorr may not be the youthful Marguerite of our dreams, the beauty of her tone and her passionately sensuous phrasing more than compensate. Much better she is in Berlioz’s version of Gluck’s *Orphée et Eurydice*: although she never liked trouser roles, her Orphée has much of the sensuous longing and heroic grandeur of the best of interpreters of the part. As Massenet’s Charlotte, Gorr offers plenty of detail and feeling, and although some may consider the voice too rich and voluminous, she is overall most convincing, in a performance on the highest level. Gorr’s special approach to Dalila lies, as Jürgen Kesting has pointed out, in not focussing the part on the character of a sensuous seductress; her “degree of restraint”, as Alan Blyth did put it, was fully calculated; in order to control Samson, she knows that she must not give herself away too easily, that there should always remain some mystery around her. There may interesting comparisons be made between her two solos rendered here and the complete studio recording under Prêtre, where she stars alongside Jon Vickers’ emotional Samson, in a “recording of the century”.

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### Jules MASSENET (1842-1912): *Werther*

- [14] Werther! Werther – Ces lettres ... ah! je les relis sans cesse 6:07  
Rita Gorr (Charlotte), Orchestre du Théâtre National de l’Opéra, André Cluytens  
Paris 11., 17.-20. & 27. 6. 1959 (His Master’s Voice ASDF 141)

### Camille SAINT-SAËNS (1835-1921): *Samson et Dalila*

- [15] Printemps qui commence 4:46  
[16] Samson, recherchant ma présence – Amour! viens aider ma faiblesse 3:28  
Rita Gorr (Dalila), Orchestre du Théâtre National de l’Opéra, André Cluytens  
Paris 11., 17.-20. & 27. 6. 1959 (His Master’s Voice ASDF 141)

Belgium is often forgotten as a country of opera, although the Théâtre de la Monnaie in Brussels is not the least known of major European opera houses. One of the most prolific Belgian opera singers of the 20th century was mezzo-soprano Rita Gorr, who had been born in the industrial town of Zelzate in East Flanders on 18 February 1926 to the name of Marguerite Geirnaert (she later claimed that her stage name was the invention of some friends). After leaving school she worked as a nurse, where the family who employed her discovered her singing and paid for her first lessons, with Vina Bovy. From 1943 she studied at the Royal Conservatoire in Brussels with Jeanne Pacquot d’Assy and Germaine Hoerner, winning the Concours Verviers in 1946. She made her debut in Antwerp in 1949, as Fricka in *Die Walküre*. For the next three years Gorr sang at the Strasbourg Opera, where she won high praise as Carmen, Amneris, and Gluck’s Orpheus; she also sang Ursula in the French premiere performance of Hindemith’s *Mathis der Maler*. She retained her connection to Strasbourg until close on the end of her career, regularly appearing there in new productions; in 1957 she gave a guest appearance as Ortrud alongside Wolfgang Windgassen’s Lohengrin. Her breakthrough came in 1952 when she won First Prize at the Lausanne International Singing Competition, and made her Paris debuts in the season to come, first at the Opéra as Magdalene (*Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg*) and the following year at the Opéra-Comique as Massenet’s Charlotte (*Werther*). She performed at the Milan Scala from 1958, her roles including Santuzza (*Cavalleria rusticana*) and Kundry. Also in 1958 she had her Bayreuth debut, as Fricka and Third Norn; the following year, she returned as Ortrud. In 1959 she first appeared at the Royal Opera House, Covent Garden, as Amneris, and in 1961 won high acclaim both there and on the Edinburgh Festival in Gluck’s *Iphigénie en*

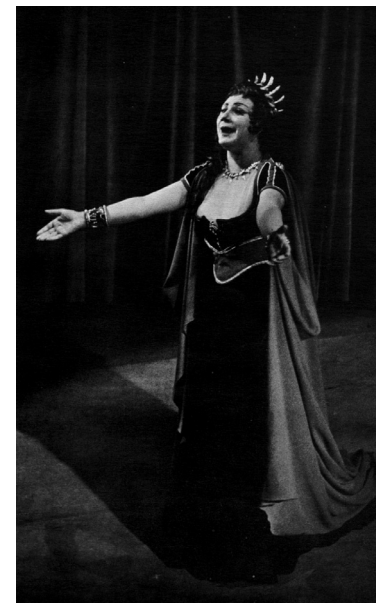
*Tauride*. In 1963 she appeared at Covent Garden as Ortrud alongside Régine Crespin's Elsa and Conducted by Otto Klemperer. In 1969 Gorr sang in the English premiere of Albert Roussel's *Padmâvati*. Her Vienna State Opera debut took place in 1960, as Fricka, Waltraute and Brangäne. From 1962 to 1966 she appeared at the Metropolitan Opera, New York, mainly in Italian repertoire but also as Dalila, in which role she made her Chicago debut also in 1962. In 1972, at the peak of her career, Rita Gorr retired from stage, to return only ten years later after her successful change in type part; now she performed as the mother in Charpentier's *Louise*, Taven in Gounod's *Mireille*, Kabanicha in *Katya Kabanova*, Herodias in *Salome*, Nêris in *Médée* and, eventually, Madame de Croissy (*Dialogues des Carmélites*), which she sang in Seattle, Lyon, Berlin and Essen, and the Countess in *Pique Dame*, which she performed, amongst others, in Amsterdam, Antwerp, Vienna, Munich. She retired from stage in 2006 and died in Denia (Spain) on 22 January 2012, after a long illness.

There were, effectively, three areas of operatic music in which she excelled. The first was Wagner, her large voice, of rich, sometimes metallic timbre, ranging freely over two octaves, was joined to a powerfully dramatic temperament. As early as 1957 she gave Venus (*Tannhäuser*), additionally to the roles already mentioned. She declined performing Kundry at Bayreuth, and also rejected Solti's offer to perform Isolde; nor could she comply to Windgassen's wish to partner him as Brünnhilde. She recorded Fricka (*Die Walküre*) and Ortrud under Erich Leinsdorf for RCA in Vienna and Boston respectively; additionally there is a Wagner recital conducted by André Cluytens (now on Testament). The second area was Verdi; as Eboli, Amneris and Azucena she gave grandly exciting performances, her Amneris on record (under Georg Solti alongside Leontyne Price, Carlo Bergonzi and Robert Merrill) has always remained among the top five or six of the recommended recordings. When Maria Callas re-recorded *Norma*, Gorr had been asked to sing Adalgisa, but was otherwise engaged.

But perhaps the most lasting impact Rita Gorr made on stage was in French opera. Although born and raised in Flemish Belgium, Gorr was always thought to be a French singer, and her heart-felt and hard-working advocacy in this repertoire found her thousands of admirers. She was able to make complete studio recordings of at least some operas, including *Pelléas et Mélisande* (1953, under Pierre Fournet), *Le roi d'Ys* and *Faust* (1957 and 1958, under Cluytens), *Samson et Dalila* (1962, under Georges Prêtre) and *Werther* (1964, under Jésus Etcheverry). She performed in both studio recordings of *Dialogues des Carmélites*, as Mère Marie in 1957 under Pierre Dervaux and as Madame de Croissy in 1990 under Kent Nagano. Apart from one recital LP including German, French and Italian repertoire, several highlights LPs featuring Gorr were produced by around 1960 by Pathé Marconi in Paris, including Gluck's *Iphigénie en Tauride* (alongside Ernest Blanc's Oreste), Cherubini's *Médée* (alongside Andrée Esposito, Guy Chauvet, and René Bianco), and Berlioz's *La damnation de Faust* (alongside Nicolai Gedda and Gérard Souzay), in 1963 followed by Massenet's *Hérodiade* (alongside Régine Crespin, Albert Lance, Michel

Dens and Jacques Mars). Numerous live recordings that are meanwhile also available so that we can easily access the noble breadth of expression which won her special praise in this repertoire. Her voice was not to every taste – some found her timbre metallic and her upper range narrow – but few would deny that Rita Gorr had a grandeur and command of the stage unequalled in her generation. Gorr sang with the daring and shrewd sense of her own worth that recalled the divas of a previous golden age: critics reaching for superlatives most often compared Gorr to Marie Delna and Jeanne Gerville-Réache, two nonpareil French contraltos of the Belle Époque. After her New York debut, American critic Conrad L. Osborne claimed her voice “the greatest mezzo-soprano instrument” since 1950.

It is sad that no complete studio recording of *Iphigénie en Tauride* was made in consequence to the huge success in London and Edinburgh (this was caused by the fact that EMI had already one such recording in their archive, which was not selling too well, in spite of Carlo Maria Giulini conducting and Patricia Neway, Léopold Simoneau, Pierre Mollet and Robert Massard starring). As “the permanent value” of the Pathé Marconi highlights LP, Max Loppert names Rita Gorr's Iphigénie: “Here, we recall from the opera house and are able to reaffirm on the evidence of a limited number of appearances on record, was a singer of the front rank, of presence definite and delivery thrillingly bold. In classical roles the fire could be tempered, though happily never tamed, by the kind of soft, supplicating utterance so beautifully instanced here in ‘D'une image, hélas!’ (In my mind's ear it is in Gorr's voice, its keen edge shaded by gently nostalgic melancholy, that such a phrase as ‘Chassons une vaine chimère’ is now indelibly carried.)” Some passages may be somewhat uncomfortable for Gorr, but she succeeds in transmuting her inner pain, the As of “O malheureuse Iphigénie!”, into the cries of her soul. Loppert has also praised Gorr's “Divinités du Styx”, “after Orpheus's lament ... the Gluck aria most frequently encountered on record”, as most exciting, and



Rita Gorr as Iphigénie, Edinburgh 1961