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Dressing backstage for Met debut is far from life in Milan and on farm with husband Mario.



The Shoemaker's Daughter Makes the "Met"

By CURTIS MITCHELL

ON SATURDAY morning, Nov. 14, at about 6:30, a young woman awoke in her New York hotel suite. That afternoon she was to make her debut at the Metropolitan Opera House singing Violetta in Giuseppe Verdi's "La Traviata."

She was 24 and relatively unknown. No one as young had ever attempted the exacting role on the Met's stage. Moreover, matinee audiences were notorious for their toughness. The performance had long been sold out, and she knew that the Met's upper balconies would be full of knowing students of music.

In addition, because of her debut, in the choicest seats would be a battalion of critics with sharpened pencils sitting beside some of the greatest personalities in the music world. All had heard many a "Traviata" but never one in which a statuesque Pennsylvania girl sought to portray a consumptive French courtesan while singing in Italian. Small wonder, then, that she rose early and began at once to take her voice through the necessary "warm-up."

At noon, she took a taxi to the opera house and went straight to dressing room 10. Dingy and ancient though it is, No. 10 is hallowed ground. All the great sopranos have used it: Flagstad, Pons,

Tebaldi, Albanese, Ponselle, Galli-Curci, and, this season, the new and exciting Wagnerian soprano from Sweden, Birgit Nilsson. She looked around her room almost unbelievably.

"You are not to worry about anything," a soft voice commanded. "Just sing from the heart. People always understand whatever comes from the heart." It was beloved Jennie Cervini, the little woman who has dressed and mothered Met stars for 30 years.

But she felt frightened and alone. She had never rehearsed with the giant Met orchestra. (No Met star does. The cost would run into the thousands.) So she would have to fuse and align her voice with the cadences of an unfamiliar orchestra. Simultaneously, she would have to solve another difficulty. Between singer and audience was a swirling curtain of instrumental sound. How much voice should she use to penetrate it? How thick was it? Simple problems for an old pro, but anguish for a newcomer.

Trembling, she walked toward the Met stage to face the test she had sought since she was seven years old. The warming strains of Verdi's music lifted her spirits. While the curtain was still down, she stepped briskly onto the stage.

As the great drapes opened, joining the stage to the auditorium, she felt and saw two different kinds of curtains, one of sound and one of light, that separated her from the soaring balconies. Her eyes sought the seats which she knew were held by her father and mother. Around them were dozens of old friends and well-wishers from her home town.

"La Traviata" is either sunshine or shadow. Only a resourceful soprano can measure up to its tremendous demands on voice and emotions. Did this girl have the strength to meet its rigors?

THE ANSWER came three acts and more than two hours later. The orchestra, as one, rose and tapped their instruments in appreciation, a rare tribute. The audience offered unrestrained applause. After 21 curtain calls, Jennie Cervini said, "It is enough," and led her from the wings. There was no doubt now: a star had been born.

Her name—Anna Moffo. Said The New York Times: "She is one of the most beautiful women ever to grace the stage of an opera house. She has brains, ability, and looks... there will be no stopping her."

Anna Moffo, recently of Radnor High

