

## Grace B. Wagner (1890-1964)

Grace B. Wagner was born on May 1, 1890, to Henry and Nellie (Spafford) Wagner in Bloomington, Illinois. The family lived at 1011 N. Main Street, and Grace's father owned a business downtown that sold books and stationery. She attended local schools, starting with Franklin School. Early on, it was clear Grace had a beautiful singing voice. Encouraged by her family, she began studying voice and piano at the Skinner School of Music in Bloomington.

The Skinner School of Music was opened in 1907 by O.R. Skinner to give students a higher level of music education, even if they didn't plan to make music their career. The school taught music, art, and specific skills for instruments like piano, voice, and violin. Grace believed learning piano was important for singers, and although she was a talented pianist, she decided to pursue a singing career instead of one in concert piano.

After studying at the Skinner School, Grace needed more voice training, so she started taking lessons from Madame Helen Van Schoick, a well-known local voice teacher. Madame Van Schoick worked with Grace for many hours, teaching her French, German, and how to act like a professional singer. She also helped Grace prepare for her first public performance. After this local debut, Madame Van Schoick took Grace to New York City in 1911 for more training, where Grace earned a scholarship to study at a prestigious music school.

Grace's studies continued abroad in Paris with Jean De Reszke, a famous Polish tenor who taught many American singers. He introduced Grace to new techniques for breathing and singing, which helped her become a better singer. These methods also influenced her own teaching style later on.

In 1915, after four years of training, Grace was ready to perform with a European opera company. However, World War I interrupted her plans, and she was forced to return to America. She made her American debut in Bloomington at the Chatterton Opera House on October 25, 1915. Her concert included songs in several languages, and the audience loved her performance. She received great reviews and was compared to the famous Swedish soprano Christine Nilsson.

After her debut in Bloomington, Grace went back to New York and performed in the opera *Aida*. The following year, she joined the Silingardi Opera Company in New Orleans. She was the youngest member of the company and the only dramatic soprano in the group. She performed two to three times a week.

In 1919, she performed as Marguerite in *Faust* with the Hinshaw Opera Company, which was known for performing grand opera in English. She received high praise for her voice and acting. One critic said her voice was "fresh and pleasing," and her acting was "delightfully easy and girlish."

In 1921, Grace signed an exclusive recording contract with Columbia Records, which was a huge achievement in her career. Before her final concert in Bloomington, she said making her first record was like "working for the movies" because there was no live audience to inspire her. Her last concert was on February 23, 1921, and she performed a variety of songs to a packed crowd. A reception was held in her honor afterward, with many friends and family attending.

Between opera seasons, Grace toured the country and performed with famous singers and orchestras, including the New York Philharmonic and symphonies in St. Louis, Los Angeles, and Minneapolis. Grace was also the niece of Charles L. Wagner, a well-known manager of professional theater singers. He likely helped her start her professional career and make important connections in the music world.

In the 1920s, Grace began teaching voice and piano to young students. She started with just a few students but gradually focused more on teaching as her career in performing slowed down. By 1930, she retired from performing entirely to focus on teaching. She opened a music studio in New York City and continued teaching for the rest of her life. Some of her students even became clients of her uncle Charles. Because she loved teaching and music, Grace never married.

Grace B. Wagner passed away on April 27, 1964, at the age of 74 in New York City. She was buried in Bloomington, next to her parents, in Evergreen Memorial Cemetery.