

The first Australian to sing at the Bayreuth Festival



The soprano Norma Gadsden was the first Australian to sing at the Bayreuth Festival, performing there in 1937 just two years before the outbreak of the Second World War. Born Dorothy Smith in Sydney in 1898, she moved with her family to Melbourne as a teenager. Known to her friends and colleagues as Dolly, she attended the Albert Street Conservatorium hoping, initially, to establish a career as a pianist. There she discovered that she also had a fine voice and was given singing lessons, including by Melba during one of her visits home.

In July 1917, when she was only seventeen, Dolly married Norman Gadsden, scion of a well-off packaging and jute importing family. He embarked for the war just a few days after their marriage. The young couple had two beautiful children but their marriage did not work out and, at twenty-two, Dolly decided to leave her husband and two children, to see if her voice held the key to her future.



Lieutenant Norman Gadsden in 1917.

In 1929 Dolly travelled to Paris where she found lodgings in the same house as Marjorie Lawrence who was the girlfriend of the landlady's son and was therefore given the best room in the house! Dolly worked for a year in Breslau studying German and the Wagnerian repertoire. With her warm voice, placed between a mezzo and a soprano, she attracted the notice of the conductor Franz von Hoesslin, and she was engaged to sing Sieglinde for her Monte Carlo debut on 22 January 1937. On 29 January she sang her first *Walküre* Brünnhilde, conducted by Hoesslin. She had also sung Fricka in *Das Rheingold*. She sang Marina in *Boris Godunov* opposite Chaliapin, in his last performance.



Norma Gadsden as Brünnhilde in *Die Walküre*.

Dolly met her future husband, the baritone and later singing teacher Dominique Modesti when he had to go to a singing engagement some distance outside Paris. She had a car, and Madame Gilly, her teacher, asked her to drive him. On the way, the car had a flat tyre which Dolly asked Dominique to change. He looked helpless and confessed that he had not the faintest idea how to do this, so Dolly did it herself. This was the beginning of a relationship that lasted sixty years. Around that time he sang Klingsor and Telramund in French – the latter opposite Dolly as Ortrud.



As Ortrud.



As Brangäne opposite Dominique's Kurwenal.

Eventually Norman Gadsden divorced Dolly in 1938 (on the grounds that she had deserted him by not returning from Europe) and she married Dominique

Modesti in France. Her mother, Mrs Smith, never forgave her for severing the Gadsden connection, and was unsympathetic towards Modesti.

Franz von Hoesslin, who had conducted at Bayreuth in Siegfried Wagner's day, persuaded Dolly to go to Germany to audition, and she sang Waltraute in *Die Walküre* and *Götterdämmerung* at the 1937 Bayreuth festival under the baton of Wilhelm Furtwängler with Heinz Tietjen directing. Frieder Leider sang Brünnhilde, and Max Lorenz sang Siegfried. Hoesslin, whose second wife was the Jewish contralto Erna Liebenthal, was forced to leave Germany in 1935 when he refused to conduct the Nazi anthem at a state ceremony, although he returned to Bayreuth in 1938 through the intervention of Winifred Wagner. Those were the days when Winifred ruled the roost, duly protected as a staunch admirer and close friend of Hitler.



Photo from 1937. Winifred, Paul Eberhardt (technical director), Wilhelm Furtwängler, Emil Preetorius (designer), and Heinz Tietjen (stage director).



The Valkyries of 1937 (Schwertleite absent). Norma Gadsden is second from the right.

In Bayreuth, the Modestis met their lifelong friend Friedelind Wagner, the grand-daughter of Richard and sister of Wieland and Wolfgang.



Friedelind Wagner

In Paris, Friedelind lived for a time in Dolly's flat. Friedelind was, to her eternal credit, scathing of the Nazi regime, a thorn in the side of her mother and an embarrassment to her brothers. She eventually went into exile in Switzerland, England and America, where she made anti-Nazi broadcasts. In her biography she tells how Tietjen had microphones installed in the backstage areas of the Festspielhaus and in his office to record any unguarded remarks that might prove useful to him. Even Josef Goebbels described Tietjen as 'a sneaky intriguer'. Nevertheless, Hitler approved of him because Winifred did and, despite Furtwängler's protestations, endorsed Tietjen's appointment as principal conductor for the 1938, 1939, 1940 and 1941 seasons. The Wotan between 1931 and 1941, Rudolf Bockelmann, had become an avid Nazi and was given important responsibilities in the party relating to the oversight of opera. The atmosphere must have been tense to say the least, and Norma Gadsden did not return to Bayreuth in 1938. Neither did Furtwängler. She went on to sing elsewhere, including as all three Brünnhildes in Brussels.

In the 1930s Hitler had wanted to keep the British Empire out of any future conflict and he took the view (according to Friedelind) that 'the two nations spring from the same race; the Germanic races belong together'. He tried hard to get the sympathetic Edward VIII to attend the 1937 Bayreuth festival, and even proposed sending the beautiful 1936 *Lohengrin* to Covent Garden for the coronation that never happened. For his part, Edward said that he would welcome the visit but hoped he wouldn't have to attend any performances because opera bored him stiff! On the other hand, Hitler despised the French. The engagement of Dolly at Bayreuth in 1937 fitted this pro-Anglo Saxon policy, but Dominique Modesti, with his Corsican ancestry, Algerian birth and French upbringing, and reluctance to sing in German, was another matter, and he was never invited to Wahnfried.

In September 1941 the following item appeared in the Melbourne press:

'Interviewed at the home of her mother, Mrs. T. Smith, of Toorak, Melbourne, last week, the celebrated operatic soprano Norma Gadsden recalled with pride that she refused two invitations to dine with Hitler. "When he sent me flowers I burnt them," said Madame Gadsden, "I met the Führer twice when I was singing at the Wagner Festival at Bayreuth. On both occasions I was at Wahnfried, the home of Wagner. Hitler sat with one of the Wagner grandchildren on his knee and talked and talked. It was the same old thing — everybody must support him — nobody must ask questions. Nobody else spoke. It just wasn't done. Hitler looks like a small sergeant-major. He raps out the orders. Nobody answers back. I met Goering, too, a fat fellow in white uniform with blue ribbons.

They call him Lohengrin. And Goebbels, who is so full of diabolical schemes, and looks it.” ’

The war effectively ended Norma Gadsden’s career. Dominique Modesti had to register in his place of birth – Algeria, and when France fell, they went to America, then to Australia, and after the war back to France where Dominique became a famous pedagogue.



Dominique Modesti (seated centre front) and his Australian students including Robert Allman, Lance Ingram (Albert Lance), Lauris Elms and Elizabeth Fretwell.



Photograph of Dominique Modesti and Dolly taken many years later by Lauris Elms and published in her autobiography *The Singing Elms*.

Norma Gadsden's two children by her first husband were both killed in accidents during the war, something which, Dominique said, had nearly driven her mad. Her son was killed during Air Force training in New South Wales in 1940, and her daughter in the snowfields at Mount Bogong in 1943 when her group became trapped in a blizzard and perished in the snow. Dominique Modesti also lost a son from his former marriage during the war.

I have searched high and low for a recording of Norma Gadsden's voice but without success. Perhaps one does exist, in which case it would be an important memento of the first Australian to perform at the Bayreuth Festival and one who was also a very fine Australian singer of the pre-war years.

I am most grateful to Lauris Elms, herself a celebrated Australian singer, for personal reminiscences of her long-time friends and colleagues Norma Gadsden and Dominique Modesti.

PETER BASSETT