



Kaja Eidé Noréna
Norwegian soprano
Selected Recordings 1911 - 1937

"Mignon" National Theatre 1910.

Photo: Rude & Hilfling / Oslo Museum.



Kaja Eidé Noréna (1884-1968)

Kaja Andrea Karoline Hansen was born in Horten, Norway, in 1884. Her lovely voice attracted attention within her local community, and she joined a children's choir on the recommendation of voice teacher Helene Aschehoug. When she was 14 years old she sang for Ellen Gulbranson in Kristiania (later Oslo), who advised her to let her voice rest until the age of 17.

On 2 December, 1903, Kaja Hansen held her first concert at the Avholdslokalet (Temperance Society) in Horten. This successful debut led to several concerts in the summer of 1904. That same year she moved to Kristiania and began taking voice lessons with Ellen Gulbranson, and on 18 March 1905 she gave her debut concert in the nation's capital, accompanied by pianist Hildur Andersen.

She made her opera debut at the National Theatre in 1907 in the role of Amor in C. W. Gluck's *Orfeo ed Euridice*. At the same theatre she played the leading roles in *Madama Butterfly* (Puccini), *Eugene Onegin* (Tchaikovsky) and *Lakmé* (Léo Delibes). Kaja's first performance on an opera stage left no doubt about her talent, and in 1909 she had a breakthrough playing the title role in *Madama Butterfly*, a success she repeated at the Royal Swedish Opera in Stockholm.

In 1909 she married Egil Eide, one of the leading actors at the National Theatre, and together with pianist Nils Larsen they toured the entire country. Kaja Eidé became one of the National Theatre's foremost opera singers, playing parts including the title role in *Mignon* (1910), *Rosina* in *The Barber of Seville* (1914) and *Gilda* in *Rigoletto* (1915). Her *Lakmé* brought down the house in 1919.

In September 1911 she made her first recordings for the Gramophone Company label. On this release track number 13 presents "The Page's Aria" from *Les Huguenots*, recorded in 1911. She made several other recordings for the Gramophone Company in 1913 and for Pathé in 1916.

After World War I she travelled to London, where she studied under Raimund von zur Mühlen. She found him to be a masterly teacher who suited her own goal-oriented nature; her technique was strengthened and her voice was further developed. At the age of 40, in the spring of 1924, she auditioned for La Scala in Milan, where she had her international breakthrough as *Gilda* in Verdi's *Rigoletto* under the direction of Arturo Toscanini.

A concert tour in Norway that autumn proved to be a victory procession that ended with nine sold-out houses in Kristiania. With the help of the ageing diva Nellie Melba she repeated her success in the role of *Gilda*, this time at Covent Garden, where she also appeared as *Violetta*, *Liu* in Puccini's *Turandot*, *Desdemona* in Verdi's *Othello* (playing opposite Giovanni Martinelli) and *Mimi* (opposite Beniamino Gigli).

It has been said that when she played *Gilda* she always wore the costume made for her debut at La Scala. She eventually settled in Paris, where she sang for both the Opéra and the Opéra-Comique. Among her roles were *Konstanza* in Mozart's *The Abduction of the Seraglio*, *Juliet* in Gounod's *Romeo and Juliet*, *Marguerite de Valois* in *Les Huguenots*, *Mathilde* in *William Tell*, the *Tsaritsa* of *Shemakha* in Rimsky-Korsakov's *The Golden Cockerel*, and *Ophelia* in Ambroise Thomas's *Hamlet*.

It was Toscanini who had the idea of adding "Noréna" to Kaja Eidé's name. This was allegedly inspired by a female character in another opera, *Norina* in Donizetti's *Don Pasquale*. But above all, the stage name "Noréna" was intended to suggest the singer's Nordic origins.

The second phase of her recording career spanned the years 1929 to 1938. She began recording with the French company Odéon before moving to La Voix de son Maître, the French branch of His Master's Voice.

She spent a great deal of time in the USA during the 1930s. Noréna appeared as a guest artist at the Metropolitan in New York from 1933 to 1938 in the roles of Desdemona and Juliet, and in 1935 she performed at the White House for President Franklin D. Roosevelt and 300 guests. When Kirsten Flagstad made her debut at the Metropolitan in 1935, Noréna was present.

From 1935 to 1938 she participated in the Salzburg Festival. She also found time to visit Norway: in 1933 she held three highly successful concert evenings in the National Theatre with pianist Waldemar Alme, and in 1937 she triumphed in her role as Violetta in the same theatre.

She played opposite Jussi Björling in Stockholm from 1936 to 1938 in *La Traviata*, *Faust* and *La bohème*, and took her farewell from Norwegian audiences in 1937 in the role of Violetta at the National Theatre.

Kaja Eidé Noréna never tired of working on her interpretations. This industrious approach to her craft, which she concealed behind an elegant façade (the French regarded her as extremely chic), yielded results. She developed an extremely lovely and natural timbre throughout her entire range, her breathing technique was outstanding, she had complete control of her high notes, and her *messa di voce* (ability to sustain a single pitch while increasing and decreasing the volume) was perfect. The recordings she made in the 1930s bear witness to her virtuosity.

Her last performance at the Paris Opera took place in the spring of 1938, in the role of Desdemona. The last appearance of her career was on 26 February 1939 at Ekserserhuset in Horten, where her fellow townspeople greeted her with rousing cheers. Later that year she divorced Egil Eide and married the American lawyer Henry Myron Blackmer, who had been her music-loving companion for several years. When France was invaded by Germany in the spring of 1940 they moved to Geneva, Switzerland, where she spent many years of retirement.

Kaja Eidé Noréna was awarded H. M. the King's Medal of Merit in gold from Norway and the Legion of Honour from France. In 1933 she was appointed Knight 1st Class of the Royal Norwegian Order of St Olav, and in 1934 she received the Danish medal *Ingenio et Arti*. She died in 1968 at the age of 84 in Lausanne, Switzerland. On the first anniversary of her death her urn was buried in the honorary memorial section of the Cemetery of Our Saviour in Oslo. Ørnulf Bast's relief on the gravestone shows her in the role of Gilda.

Chronology selected appearances:

1907 Kristiania (Oslo), National Theater. *Amor, Orfevs og Evrydike* (Gluck)

1909 Kristiania (Oslo), National Theater. *Suzuki, Madame Butterfly*

1924 Milano, La Scala. *Gilda, Rigoletto* (Verdi)

1924 Covent Garden

1925 Paris Opera

1926 Chicago Opera

1933 - 1938 New York, Metropolitan

1935 - 1938 Salzburg Festival

1935 Performed at the White House for President Franklin D. Roosevelt and 300 guests

1938 Her last performance at the Paris Opera in the role of Desdemona

1939 Eidé Noréna's last appearance at Ekserserhuset in Horten on 26 February 1939



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med Orkester Akkompagnement, Christiania

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“Waltz Song” (Track 1).



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"Madame Butterfly" National Theatre 1909.

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“Dronningen i Hugenotterne”
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Chicago Civic Opera 29. November 1927*

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*Eidé Noréna portrait with signature Paris 1931
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Pamina's Aria "Ah! L'ingrat par son silence" HMV test pressing 1932 (Track 4) Nordic Sound Collection.

