

Anna Schoen-René

Minnesota Musical Pioneer

Janis White Dees



"HAVEN'T they erected a monument to you in Minneapolis yet?" asked Walter Damrosch, nationally known orchestra conductor and music commentator.¹ His question was directed to Anna Schoen-René, the woman who worked arduously to promote music in the twin cities of St. Paul and Minneapolis at the turn of this century.

She had come to the United States from Europe to sing with the Metropolitan Opera in New York, but her health had broken. In the hope that the cold climate would bring recovery, she moved to Minneapolis to live with her sister Marie, who was teaching German at the University of Minnesota. Almost immediately upon her arrival in 1893, she surveyed the small, but fast-growing city and became determined to upgrade its standard of music. In the 16 years she spent in Minneapolis, Schoen-René organized and directed a choral group at the university, staged large music festivals for the community, and brought in internationally known performers, orchestras, and opera companies. She gave lectures in music history, taught voice to several future Metropolitan Opera performers, and organized a cham-

ber orchestra. In 1898 she may have become the first woman orchestra conductor in the country. Finally, she made a bold attempt to found a Northwestern Symphony Orchestra, which "quickened the formative processes already at work in the community" and led to the founding of the Minneapolis Symphony Orchestra. This gave the young, urban area the distinction of being the smallest city in the country in 1903 to have its own professional orchestra. She left Minneapolis in 1909 to return to Paris and her teacher, the renowned Pauline Garcia-Viardot, and later became her "certified representative in Berlin." In 1925, back in America, she joined the faculty of the Juilliard School of Music in New York, eventually becoming the teacher of the famous opera singer, Risë Stevens.²

Who was this woman who made such an impact on

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¹ Anna Eugénie Schoen-René, *America's Musical Inheritance: Memories and Reminiscences*, 42 (New York, 1941).

² Schoen-René, *America's Musical Inheritance*, 37-48, 49; John K. Sherman, *Music and Masters: The Story of the Minneapolis Symphony Orchestra*, 40 (Minneapolis, 1952); John H. Mueller, *The American Symphony Orchestra: A Social History of Musical Taste*, 137 (Bloomington, Ind., 1951); obituary, *New York Times*, November 15, 1942, p. 57. Schoen-René's sister Marie, who spelled the family name as "Schon," was listed as an instructor at the university from 1891 to 1897; another sister, Ida, taught there in 1898. See university directories, 1891-98.

musical life in Minnesota? How was she able to become personally acquainted with Johannes Brahms, Cosima Liszt Wagner, Clara Schumann, Richard Strauss, Ignace Paderewski, and Enrico Caruso?

She was born Anna Eugénie Schoen in Coblenz, Germany, in 1864. The youngest of eight children, she grew up in a wealthy household in the Rhineland where her father was a royal court councilor under Emperor Wilhelm I. When she was ten, her father died and the emperor assumed responsibility for the family. In her early teens, she attended a French boarding school that operated under the patronage of Queen Emma of the Netherlands. It was the queen who "completed the negotiations which enabled [Schoen-René] to get the fellowship which Emperor Wilhelm had promised if [her] talents warranted a higher musical education." After passing stringent auditions, she enrolled at the Royal Academy of Music in Berlin. Having completed her musical education, she embarked upon a singing career, studying with Francesco Lamperti in Milan, Ferdinand Sieber in Berlin, and eventually with Viardot in Paris and Manuel Garcia in London.³

It was Viardot, famous in Europe as an opera star, accomplished piano student of Franz Liszt, and teacher *extraordinaire*, who was most responsible for Schoen-René's success and who introduced her to many great musicians of that era. Viardot's home was "a center for writers, musicians, and artists," and her long list of friends included Frederic Chopin, Felix Mendelssohn, Louis Hector Berlioz, Richard Wagner, Giuseppe Verdi, Peter Tchaikovsky, Robert Schumann, and Claude Debussy. Viardot arranged for Schoen-René to sing for Charles Gounod, under whose patronage she made her successful debut in Paris. In 1891 Schoen-René became the first German woman to be elected to the Union Internationale des Sciences et des Arts in Paris.⁴

She kept her stage career a secret from her family for almost two years by using her mother's French name, René. Her mother was opposed to having a daughter on the stage using the family name, Schoen, a situation that might have made "some difficulty for my brothers in government service." Later, as a teacher, Anna combined the two names with a hyphen.⁵

HISTORIANS have recorded Schoen-René as a teacher of opera performers, but her achievements in Minnesota

have gone largely unrecognized. If she had not written her autobiography at the age of 77, many of her contributions to musical life would have been lost to posterity. Presently, the main documentation of her endeavors resides in many unindexed newspapers and a few periodicals.

Schoen-René's first major undertaking in her new city took place at the University of Minnesota. She started men's and women's glee clubs and later combined them to form the University Choral Union. Membership was encouraged by the offer of free admission to her local lectures on music history. Though she received no compensation for her work, Schoen-René began a zealous rehearsal and concert schedule. And her presence in Minneapolis did not go unnoticed. One journalist described her wearing "a mannish jacket always,

ANNA SCHOEN-RENÉ, photographed by Sweet of Minneapolis during her final years in Minnesota



³Schoen-René, *Musical Inheritance*, 5–15; *Northwestern May Musical Festival 1897*, souvenir program, in Edward R. Sanford and Family Papers, 1896–97, in Minnesota Historical Society (MHS), St. Paul.

⁴Schoen-René, *Musical Inheritance*, 35, 121–144; Stanley Sadie, ed., *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, 19:694 (London, 1980); *The Gopher* (University of Minnesota yearbook), 1898, p. 154.

⁵Schoen-René, *Musical Inheritance*, 30.

while her hair was cut short. Wherever she went she was accompanied by a great Dane, Thieras, a dog which had been sired by Prince Bismarck's great Dane, also named Thieras. She was authoritative in manner, brooked no contradiction, and spoke English with a pronounced German accent.

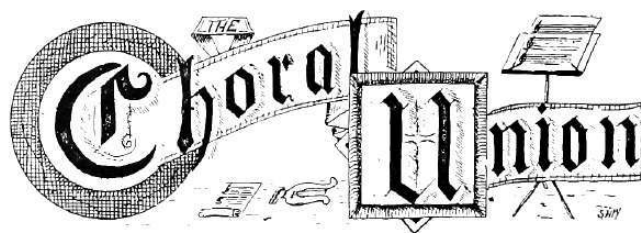
If you talked with her for five minutes, the conversation would almost inevitably run to music, and you would wonder how under the sun any woman living in 1900 Minneapolis could possibly know so much about music and musicians."⁶

In her autobiography, she noted: "as my health improved, I made more ambitious plans for the advancement of music not only in the university but in the entire Middle West. I felt that the only way in which the young student could learn to discriminate between good and bad music was for him to hear the best, and the only sure way of making him love it for life was to let him take part in its production. So I began to make arrangements to bring the best living artists to Minneapolis to give concerts, oratorios, and operas, which would be augmented musically by our Choral Union."⁷

With this philosophy, Schoen-René's goal became the establishment of a department of music at the university. She brought in Lillian Nordica, Metropolitan Opera soprano, Hermann H. Wetzler, pianist, and Anton Hegner, cellist, for concerts at the People's Theater in Minneapolis and the People's Church in St. Paul on May 1 and 2, 1894. The university president, Cyrus Northrop, made a brief speech in which he "voiced the hope of the [Choral] Union that this concert might be the first step towards establishing a scholarship of music." The favorable review in the *Saturday Evening Spectator* stated: "The opening chord was struck and with a wave of the magic wand the chorus arose together and sang 'America.' The effect was magical, and showed the effect of the training which the chorus had received.

Beside the singing of 'America,' the chorus sang the 'Bridal Chorus' from Lohengrin and Brahms's [sic] Lullaby. It responded perfectly to the baton of the director, singing with smoothness and rhythm, that were almost perfect. The shading was also much more effective than that usually done by choruses. Fraulein Schoen-René is to be congratulated on the success of her efforts at the University and that institution cannot help but receive a large impulse along musical lines as a result of her work."⁸

For a concert held November 29, 1895, Schoen-René refurbished the old Exposition Building on 1st Avenue Southeast at her own expense, putting in a heating plant, a stage, and makeshift dressing rooms. Nellie Melba, the renowned Australian soprano, and her opera company were accompanied by the Boston Symphony. *Ariel*, the university student newspaper, reported: "The great musical event of the Winter season of '95-'96 has come and gone and there is left only the memory of an affair



THIS DECORATIVE heading appeared with a biography of Schoen-René in the 1898 university yearbook, The Gopher.

which it is the chance of a lifetime to enjoy. There were 6,000 people present, this being by all odds the largest gathering ever assembled at a similar event in the Northwest. On the stage sat the University Choral Union, two hundred strong.

The opening number of the evening was the famous Wagnerian composition, the March, from Tannhauser, by the University Choral Union.

The piece was rendered in a manner that won hearty applause from the assembled multitude, establishing more firmly than ever the reputation of the Choral Union as one of the great musical organizations of the Northwest. The event is a great credit not only to the Union but to the University at large."⁹

During an 1896 summer visit to Europe, where she attended a choral concert at the University of Heidelberg and learned that students there received academic credit for participation, Schoen-René wrote to the student newspaper, campaigning for the same recognition by the university. Two months later *Ariel* announced that students could petition for credit for work done under Schoen-René. She continued to direct the University Choral Union for five years.¹⁰

As so often occurs, Schoen-René's bold, successful venture brought detractors as well as supporters. Harlow Gale, a psychology professor who took part in university musical activities, wrote a scathing article published in 1895. Criticizing Schoen-René's choral concerts featuring opera singers as "professional voice-exhibitors," he suggested that very little time was allowed for music by the chorus. Schoen-René's response said in part: "We will be assisted only by an eminent artist or orchestra, as I consider the very best just good enough as an inspiring example for our young music-loving people. . . . It is not the quantity but the

⁶ Schoen-René, *Musical Inheritance*, 39; *Ariel* (University of Minnesota student weekly), October 21, 1893, p. 87; William J. McNally, "The Great Schoen-René," in *Minneapolis Tribune*, November 21, 1942, p. 4.

⁷ Schoen-René, *Musical Inheritance*, 40.

⁸ *Minneapolis Tribune*, May 2, 1894, p. 4; *Saturday Evening Spectator* (Minneapolis), May 5, 1894, p. 8.

⁹ Schoen-René, *Musical Inheritance*, 41; *Ariel*, December 7, 1895, p. 1.

¹⁰ *Ariel*, September 19, p. 16, November 14, p. 11, 1896.

quality which educates." She supported her stance further by quoting Henry Krehbiel, a well-known New York music critic who had visited a choral rehearsal: "I am greatly surprised and highly pleased," he said, "to find here in the West what we so badly miss in the East — a University Chorus of a high aim, of an excellent training, going the only possible way by which the taste and understanding for good, classical music can ever become universal here."¹¹

A more well-known and bitter rival was Emil Oberhoffer. German born like Schoen-René and possessed of a musical education as comprehensive as hers, he had directed two men's choruses in the city — the Apollo and Philharmonic clubs. The two conductors "warred over choral societies, university activities, operatic festivities. the town was divided into two camps. If you were in the Schoen-René camp, you were practically supposed to shoot anybody in the Oberhoffer camp at sight. And if you were in the Oberhoffer camp, you were practically supposed to shoot anybody in the Schoen-René camp at sight. [It] was a Montague-Capulet musical world."¹²

One Schoen-René supporter was Ada Hinton Sherman, a Minneapolis columnist who wrote for several periodicals under the pseudonym of Acton Horton. Based on an interview, Sherman wrote that Schoen-René's "motive" in forming the University Choral Union was a rare, unselfish act to give the students "a start in the right direction of the proper understanding of music as an art." She added that Schoen-René was offered the leadership in this venture and was surprised when over 100 students volunteered. Sherman was defending her from those who thought she was seeking "self-aggrandizement."¹³

Support also came from Edwin Biorkman, a Minneapolis music critic, who wrote in the Chicago-based periodical, *Music*, that only one mixed chorus was "worthy of mention in an article like this. It is that of the Minnesota University Choral Union. its influence has become a potent factor in the musical life not



RIVAL musician Emil Oberhoffer, "a pictorial blend of grace and authority," caricatured by Charles F. Brisley in the *St. Paul Dispatch*

only of this city, but of the whole state. To-day the names of Miss Schoen-René and of the University Choral Union stand for the best and most valuable that has ever been offered this city in the way of musical events." He also noted that Schoen-René expected her students, upon hearing and participating in first-rate music, to retain this knowledge wherever they went after graduation. He observed that because the university administration would not give full credit for work in music, most upperclassmen could not afford the time, and therefore the group consisted mainly of freshmen.¹⁴

SCHOEN-RENÉ's greatest undertaking was the Northwestern May Musical Festival of 1897, held in the Minneapolis Exposition Building. For the two-day event, she brought in the Boston Festival Orchestra and 11 soloists, then on a nationwide tour. Among them were such illustrious artists as Emma Calvé, Lillian Blauvelt, and Giuseppe Campanari. She personally directed the 400-voice chorus, which included members from as far away as Duluth.¹⁵

¹¹ Harlow Gale, "Music in a University: What Claim Has Music to a Place in a University," in *Minnesota Magazine* (University of Minnesota monthly), 2:64-69 (November, 1895); *Ariel*, November 23, 1895, p. 9.

¹² Sherman, *Music and Maestros*, 43; McNally, in *Minneapolis Tribune*, November 21, 1942, p. 4.

¹³ Acton Horton, "Musical Review," (n.d., n.p.), in Alfred E. Hinton Scrapbook, "Musical Courier Excerpts, 1890-98," in Minneapolis History Collection (MHC), Minneapolis Public Library. The *Courier* was a weekly magazine published in New York.

¹⁴ Edwin Biorkman, "Music in Minneapolis," in *Music*, 12:696-698 (October, 1897), a monthly magazine published in Chicago.

¹⁵ Here and below, see *Northwestern May Musical Festival*, Sanford Papers; *Ariel*, May 1, 1897, p. 8.





ABOVE THE FALLS of St. Anthony near present-day St. Anthony Main stood the Exposition Building where Schoen-René presented her festivals.

The three concerts, held on May 17 and 18, offered choral, orchestral, operatic, and vocal and instrumental solo selections. Wagner, Rossini, Tchaikovsky, and Bizet were among the composers represented. A special afternoon concert featured only American performers; 100 university students ushered while attendants met carriages and gave out numbers to avoid confusion at the end of the concerts. Railroads offered reduced fares to those living outside the cities.

The *Minneapolis Tribune* carried articles and advertisements supporting the festival for several weeks and on the day before the event published a half-page advertisement that announced in large, bold-face type: "Tomorrow Night is the Beginning of the Great Northwestern May Musical Festival!" The edition also included a picture of Schoen-René with a half-page article praising her: "Of Anna Schoen-Rene, the ambitious director of the chorus, and to whom the Northwest has already looked for its enjoyment of many of the best musical attractions which have been brought thither within the few years since her arrival, there is much to be said in recognition of her work and effort to elevate the standard of music in the place where her lot is cast. By training and experience she is qualified for the influential position which she has acquired and the esteem which she enjoys."¹⁶

Ada Sherman also fully backed Schoen-René's plans for the festival. "If one judges of this enterprise by past ventures, then the indefatigable little woman, with her capacity for business, her push and energy is deserving of commendation for her untiring efforts. Fraulein Schoen-Rene has accomplished what the rest of us were


'97


Northwestern May Musical Festival

A. E. SCHOEN-RENE,
DIRECTOR

Exposition Building, Min- neapolis

Monday Evening, May 17th ♣ ♣ ♣
 Tuesday Afternoon and Evening,
 May 18th ♣ ♣ ♣ ♣ ♣ ♣ ♣ ♣ ♣ ♣

too timorous to venture." When the two days ended, Sherman wrote, "Altogether the festival was an immense success and Miss Schoen-Rene should be highly gratified with the results of her ambitious undertaking."¹⁷

The *Tribune* reported that during the final concert "there arose a cry for Schoen-Rene followed by a tumult of hand-clapping and from the protection of the stage hangings, Fraulein A. E. Schoen-Rene was pushed in view. She bowed with smiles of pleasure at so public an acknowledgement of her zeal. It was a superb concert in every respect and there are untold thanks due the ambitious personality that planned and executed so great an undertaking for the edification and uplifting of a people that is not ungrateful, however feeble its voice of appreciation." The 7,000 people who attended did not provide sufficient income to offset expenses. As sole backer of her enterprise, Schoen-René lost \$2,000. The reporter blamed the lack of support on businessmen, who would have preferred to run it themselves as a commercial advertisement for Minneapolis, and on unnamed detractors of her pursuits.¹⁸

One of those unnamed detractors was undoubtedly Oberhoffer. "A couple of days after the festival one of the best known musicians, who has repeatedly proclaimed his devotion to his art, admitted he had not gone to one of the concerts. 'I have heard all those artists before,' he said, 'and under the circumstances I could not be expected to take any interest in the event.' Such broad-minded musicians as these were among those who first advocated the festival when it was proposed as a business men's and musicians' project."¹⁹

It must be recognized that Schoen-René did not work in a musical vacuum. Opera companies had been coming to the Twin Cities area from the east coast since 1874, and many German and Scandinavian choral societies were active in the area, sponsoring large festivals. But as a lone entrepreneur and teacher, Schoen-René made extraordinary contributions to musical life, bringing to the area a large number of performers for the first time, including Paderewski and Richard Strauss. She also engaged the Damrosch Wagner Opera Com-

pany for the first performance of *Tristan und Isolde* ever given in the cities.²⁰

Biorkman best described the conditions under which Schoen-René had had to work: "musically this City is in a transitory state, balancing between the state when art is nothing but a means of advertisement for the town or, at the best, a subordinate social function, and the state in which art becomes recognized and cultivated for its own sake," he wrote. "Here the beautiful is still largely looked upon as inferior to the useful. But the revolution has been inaugurated, and signs of the new life are visible everywhere."²¹

Schoen-René's interest in music education extended well beyond the university. The Minneapolis school board asked her to serve as adviser for singing in public schools. She also accepted Bishop John Ireland's request to become a supervisor of music in the convents that he administered. She related the following dialogue between them: "Answering a ring of the bell, I saw him standing there, and heard the request he wished to make of me. 'I think you have come to the wrong door,' I said. 'I am not a Catholic.' 'I did not ask your religion,' he replied. 'I want only the *right* person. I came to offer you this position because I am convinced, by all you have done for the development of music, that you should be chosen as our adviser and guide.'"²²

In the midst of her many community endeavors, she continued to give private voice lessons in her studio at the Metropolitan Music Building on Nicollet Avenue. The location was convenient to her brownstone residence on Nicollet Island. She presented her students in local recitals and took the most talented to Europe to her teacher, Viardot. Among these was George Meader, a University of Minnesota student who later joined the Metropolitan Opera Company.²³

HER LAST major pursuit involved her efforts to secure a professional symphony orchestra for the Northwest. She obtained \$30,000 of financial backing from leading citizens, which enabled her to hire players and a conductor. Upon returning from an annual visit to Europe, however, Schoen-René discovered that a wealthy Minneapolis man "had been persuaded to give that city its own orchestra, which was not to be shared with other places, and was prepared to guarantee \$60,000!" Furthermore, the new symphony had attracted some of her musicians. With her plans for a regional orchestra dashed, she was forced to fulfill her obligations to her conductor and remaining musicians by founding the Northwestern Symphony Orchestra of St. Paul.²⁴ Her astuteness, however, was dramatically demonstrated in 1968, when the Minneapolis Symphony adopted the regional concept and changed its name to the Minnesota Orchestra.

Further insult was added when the Minneapolis con-

¹⁶ *Minneapolis Tribune*, May 16, 1897, p. 18, 24.

¹⁷ Acton Horton, in *Musical Courier*, March 25, May 20, 1897, clippings in Hinton Scrapbook, MHC.

¹⁸ *Minneapolis Tribune*, May 19, p. 4, May 23, p. 7, 1897.

¹⁹ *Minneapolis Tribune*, May 23, 1897, p. 7.

²⁰ John K. Sherman, "Music and Theater," in William V. O'Connor, ed., *A History of the Arts in Minnesota*, 29 (Minneapolis, 1958); Schoen-René, *Musical Inheritance*, 40.

²¹ Biorkman, in *Music*, 12:692.

²² Schoen-René, *Musical Inheritance*, 43, 44.

²³ McNally, in *Minneapolis Tribune*, November 21, 1942, p. 4; *Minneapolis Journal*, May 5, 1900, p. 5, September 20, 1902, p. 5; Schoen-René, *Musical Inheritance*, 52.

²⁴ Schoen-René, *Musical Inheritance*, 45.

ductor chosen was none other than Oberhoffer. "Schoen-René's disgust knew no bounds. Up and down Minneapolis she proclaimed her opinion that Oberhoffer was a lout and a musical illiterate who didn't know a rondo from a hydrant. Oberhoffer's opinion of Schoen-René was equally low and he doubted if Schoen-René had ever heard of Wagner."²⁵

Finally, at Viardot's repeated requests, Schoen-René left Minneapolis in 1909 to pursue her career as a voice teacher in Europe. She lived abroad for 16 years before returning to take up permanent residence in New York

City, where she joined the faculty of the Juilliard Graduate School of Music.²⁶

In her autobiography, Anna Schoen-René wrote, "I had sworn not to leave until I saw a musical faculty established at the University of Minnesota and a good symphony orchestra started in the Northwest." Both goals had been reached when she left Minneapolis. Though she later enjoyed a long career as a voice teacher in one of the most prominent music schools in the world, she stated that while living in Minneapolis she was "one of the 'musical pioneers' in America. I am more proud of my right to use this title than of almost anything else in my whole career."

THIS ARTICLE is the seventh in a series of Minnesota Profiles, biographical sketches of interesting Minnesota men and women. Each profile presents the salient facts of the subject's life, attempting to characterize the person and to assess the significance of his or her work.

²⁵ McNally, in *Minneapolis Tribune*, November 21, 1942, p. 4.

²⁶ Here and below, see Schoen-René, *Musical Inheritance*, 36, 47, 49.

THE PICTURE on p. 332 is from Schoen-René, *America's Musical Inheritance*, 48; that on p. 335 is from Sherman, *Music and Maestros*, 47. All other illustrations are from the MHS audio-visual library.



THE MINNEAPOLIS SYMPHONY, Schoen-René's dream, about 1910 under the baton of Emil Oberhoffer



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