

Piston remained a central figure on the American musical scene throughout his career. His numerous honors and prizes include a Guggenheim Fellowship, Coolidge Medal, Naumburg Award, two Pulitzer Prizes (one for his Third Symphony in 1948 and one for his Seventh Symphony in 1961), and three New York Music Critics Circle Awards. He was elected to the National Institute of Arts and Letters in 1938, the American Academy of Arts and Sciences in 1940, and the American Academy of Arts and Letters in 1955. In 1969 the French government decorated him with the *Officier dans l'Ordre des Arts et des Lettres*, and two years later the governor of Vermont presented him with an award for excellence in the arts. Piston died in Belmont, Mass.

[Piston's papers are in the Boston Public Library and the Library of Congress. See David Ewen, ed., "The Composer Speaks," in *Book of Modern Composers* (1961); and Peter Westergaard, "Conversation with Walter Piston," *Perspectives on New Music*, vol. 7 (1968). For a full-length biography, see Howard Pollack, *Walter Piston* (1982). Also see Howard Pollack, *Harvard Composers: Walter Piston and His Students, From Elliott Carter to Frederic Rzewski* (1992). A shorter source is Oliver Daniel, ed., *Walter Piston* (1964), a booklet celebrating Piston's seventieth birthday. Obituaries are in the *New York Times* and the *Boston Herald*, both Nov. 13, 1976.]

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PONS, LILY (Apr. 12, 1898–Feb. 13, 1976), coloratura soprano, was born Alice Josephine Pons in Draguignan, France, near Cannes, the daughter of Maria Naso, an Italian, and Auguste Pons, a French engineer and automobile enthusiast. Lily first studied piano as a young child. At age thirteen, she enrolled at the Paris Conservatory, aspiring to become a concert pianist.

Near the end of World War I, Pons became very ill and was forced to discontinue her piano studies for approximately two years. After she recovered from her illness she played piano at French hospitals for wounded soldiers. It was said that one soldier asked her to sing and when the audience stopped applauding, Pons realized that her voice was something out of the ordinary. Soon after Lily convinced the manager of the Théâtre des Variétés, Max Dearly, to hire her as an actress and singer. She was selected to perform a small role in one of the productions. Her talents were immediately acknowledged

and many believed Pons was destined for the highest goal of French actors—the *Comédie Française*—but in 1923 she decided to quit the stage and married August Mesritz, a wealthy retired Dutch lawyer and publisher who was considerably older than Pons. Mesritz recognized Pons's rare talent and encouraged her to concentrate on developing her voice. He arranged for her to study with the renowned Spanish voice teacher Alberti di Gorostiaga, and Pons diligently studied one hour every day for three years with Gorostiaga. It has been said that Pons and her husband even followed Gorostiaga on his vacations in order to avoid missing a lesson.

In 1928, Pons made her operatic debut in the title role of *Lakmé* at the opera house of Mulhouse in Alsace, France. During the next two years she performed in various French provinces. On one such occasion, retired opera singers and artist agents Maria Gay and Giovanni Zenatello heard Pons and encouraged her to audition for the Metropolitan Opera in New York City. At this time, Pons was not well versed in opera repertoire, as were other vocalists aspiring for the Met, but one of the Met's leading coloraturas, Amelita Galli-Curci, was forced to withdraw because of illness and a replacement coloratura was needed. Even though Pons had unimpressive credentials and a limited repertoire of only five opera roles, Zenatello and Gay persuaded Giulio Gatti-Casazza, manager of the Metropolitan Opera, to audition her. Another version of the story has it that Gay and Zenatello heard Pons in Gorostiaga's studio (arranged by the teacher) and were so impressed that they signed a management contract with her, and sent her to the United States to be heard by Gatti-Casazza.

Her audition at the Met led to a five-year contract, and she made her debut in January 1931 at a matinee performance in the title role of *Lucia di Lammermoor*. There were no press releases about the new singer, but when the Met audience heard Pons sing they were quickly enamored of her voice and stage presence. Soon people stood in line at the box office to attend Pons's performances. By March 1931 the relationship with Gay and Zenatello had soured, with Pons claiming that after agent fees she received very little salary. Gay countered that Pons's voice was still undeveloped when they met and that her vocal imperfections were corrected through her influence. Gay took Pons to

court, stating that her intervention and expertise made Pons into "a sensation," but both parties decided on an out-of-court settlement.

Pons's voice may not have been as big as those of her coloratura colleagues but in her favor was the ease and clarity with which she sang above high C. She reached high F (more than two octaves above middle C) in the "Bell Song" of *Lakmé*. Her petite stature and good looks were unlike the usual full-figured opera singers. Pons stood five feet tall, weighed ninety-five pounds, and had dark hair and eyes. She sang for twenty-eight seasons with the Met, appearing 198 times in ten roles, most notably the roles of Lucia, *Lakmé*, Gilda (*Rigoletto*), Rosina (*The Barber of Seville*), Olympia (*The Tales of Hoffman*), Philine (*Mignon*), Amina (*La Sonnambula*), the title role in *Linda di Chamounix*, the Queen of Shemakhan (*Le Coq d'or*), and Marie (*La Fille du Régiment*). Although she was asked to sing in other operas, Lily Pons wisely refused, stating in 1972, "My voice is like a flute. It has projection. No matter how loud the conductor, I never force my voice. . . . I will stay in my repertory—Lucia, Rosina, Gilda—and that's all."

Throughout her singing career, Pons suffered from a nervous stomach before every performance, but her public presence was always professional and regal. In a 1941 *New York Times* interview, conducted in the same year she became an American citizen, Pons said that she changed her opera costumes every year for the public and that she was also superstitious, her lucky number being thirteen. In the public eye, even during her retirement, Pons maintained an air of sophistication and a well-dressed appearance. At one point, she was on the list of America's best-dressed women.

Pons separated from Mesritz in 1931 and two years later they divorced. In 1938 she married musician and conductor André Kostelanetz; they divorced in 1958. Pons also was one of the Metropolitan Opera stars who appeared in major films—*I Dream too Much*, a Jerome Kern musical score with actor Henry Fonda (1935); *That Girl from Paris* (1936); and *Hitting a New High* (1937). In addition to the Met, she performed with opera companies in San Francisco, Chicago, Buenos Aires, Rome, Monte Carlo, Paris, and London. She also made recordings for Columbia Records, appeared on radio and television, and made yearly national and international concert tours. She sang repertoire from opera scenes and popular light classics. For a brief pe-

riod, Pons also sang regularly on radio with Kostelanetz's orchestra. They also performed together overseas, entertaining American troops during World War II. When she toured the India-Burma war theater, she received the Asiatic-Pacific service ribbon.

Pons celebrated her twenty-fifth anniversary with the Met on Jan. 3, 1956, after which she began singing less frequently. During her Met tenure, Pons maintained homes in New York City and Connecticut. On Apr. 12, 1958, she made her farewell appearance at the Met as Lucia but returned once more for a concert performance in 1960.

During retirement, she moved from New York and bought a home in Palm Springs, Calif., an apartment in Dallas, Tex., where she had several close friends; and a home in Cannes. She was president of the Opera Guild of Palm Springs, which staged familiar opera scenes for elementary schoolchildren in the area.

Even though Pons's singing career had officially ended, she never stopped singing for herself and friends. She became friends with pianist Earl Wild and made an informal tape, with Wild on piano. Still on good terms with his former wife, Kostelanetz invited Pons to appear again with his orchestra, and when he received the informal tape of herself and Wild, Kostelanetz again asked her to perform in concert with him. Pons finally consented in 1972 and appeared with her former husband's orchestra at Philharmonic Hall in New York. She astonished old friends, colleagues, and critics with her vocal performance. Her voice demonstrated remarkable resilience for her age. After a brief illness, Pons died of pancreatic cancer in Dallas.

Pons was not a dramatic singer—she had intonation problems and at times her upper-middle range was inconsistent with the clarity and beauty of her high tones—but no one can deny her feat of singing Lucia's mad scene an octave up from the written part. Among the honors bestowed upon her was chevalier of the French Legion of Honor. A Maryland town was renamed Lilypons in her honor.

[See Lanfranco Rasponi, *The Last Prima Donna* (1982). Obituaries are in the *New York Times*, Feb. 14, 1976; *Variety*, Feb. 18, 1976; and *Opera News*, Apr. 3, 1976.]