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| **Eleanor Steber (Soprano)** |
| **Born:** July 17, 1914 (not 1916) - Wheeling, West Virginia, USA **Died:** October 3, 1990 - Langhorne, Pennsylvania, USA |
| The eminent American soprano, Eleanor Steber, grew up in a musical family. Her mother was an accomplished amateur singer and taught her voice and piano, took her to concerts, arranged for coaching, and strongly encouraged her to study and to sing in school and community shows. Eleanor later studied at the New England Conservatory in Boston, originally intending to major in piano, but her voice teacher, William Whitney, persuaded her to focus on singing, instead. She received Bachelor of Music in 1938. At the beginning she did a lot of radio, oratorio, and church work. Steber’s opera debut was in 1936, appearing as Senta with the Commonwealth Opera in a WPA production of Wagner's *The Flying Dutchman*, a demanding role indeed for a 21-year-old. In 1939, she went to New York to study with Paul Althouse who had a great influence on her. In 1940 she won first prize at the Metropolitan Opera Auditions of the Air, earning a Met contract.  Eleanor Steber's first role at the Met was Sophie in Strauss’ *Der Rosenkavalier* on December 6, 1940. During the next years she benefited from conductors such as [Bruno Walter](http://www.bach-cantatas.com/Bio/Walter-Bruno.htm), Sir [Thomas Beecham](http://www.bach-cantatas.com/Bio/Beecham-Thomas.htm), [Erich Leinsdorf](http://www.bach-cantatas.com/Bio/Leinsdorf-Erich.htm) and George Szell. She was a versatile artist and appeared in Italian, French and German operas. Things began to change for her at the Met when Rudolf Bing took over the company in 1950. By this time, her career extended well beyond New York (San Francisco, Chicago and Europe). At the Met, though, she began to feel that she was being passed over for mainstream Italian roles in favour of Tebaldi and Callas. Altogether she appeared 286 times in New York and 118 times on tour. She sang 28 leading roles in an extremely large repertoire. Her easy upper range, coupled with a rich, smoothly produced lower voice made her a natural for [W.A. Mozart](http://www.bach-cantatas.com/Lib/Mozart-Wolfgang-Amadeus.htm) roles, which she sang brilliantly, such as the Countess in *Le nozze di Figaro*, Pamina in *Die Zauberflöte*, Donna Anna in *Don Giovanni*, and even Konstanze in the *Abduction from the Seraglio*, with its vocal pyrotechnics, as well as in other [W.A. Mozart](http://www.bach-cantatas.com/Lib/Mozart-Wolfgang-Amadeus.htm) operas. The 1951-52 season new production of *Cosi fan tutte*, Steidry conductor, Alfred Lunt director, with Steber as Fiordiligi, was a major event in the New York season and became a great hit, recorded on Columbia LP records.  As her voice matured, Eleanor Steber sang some of the spinto roles in both the German and Italian repertoire. Her roles in this repertoire included Violetta, Elisabetta, Desdemona, Marguerite, *Manon Lescaut*, Mimi, and *Tosca*, and the Marschallin in *Der Rosenkavalier.* In Wagner’s operas she sang Eva in *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg* and Elsa in *Lohengrin*. She was also the company’s first Arabella in 1955, and in 1959 was the first to perform at the Met the challenging part of Marie in [Alban Berg](http://www.bach-cantatas.com/Lib/Berg-Alban.htm)’s opera *Wozzeck*. Steber was perhaps most famous for her creation of in January 1958 of the title role in [Samuel Barber](http://www.bach-cantatas.com/Lib/Barber-Samuel.htm)’s opera *Vanessa* (but it was first offered to Maria Callas and [Sena Jurinac](http://www.bach-cantatas.com/Bio/Jurinac-Sena.htm) who both declined), and for commissioning his *Knoxville: Summer of 1915*. Steber was one of the most important sopranos in the USA during the 1940’s and 1950’s, with a sweet and yet full voice, and outstanding versatility (her recitals were practically vocal pentathlons for their wide range of styles and vocal demands, and the day she sang Desdemona in Verdi's *Otello* for a Met matinee and Fiordiligi in [W.A. Mozart](http://www.bach-cantatas.com/Lib/Mozart-Wolfgang-Amadeus.htm)'s *Così fan tutte* that evening is still a legend). Her European engagements included appearances at Edinburgh (1947), Vienna (1953), and Glyndebourne. In 1953 she was amongst the first Americans to appear at the Bayreuth Festival after World War II. The very successful 1953 Elsa in the Bayreuth *Lohengrin* was recorded and issued by London/Decca; it is still in print on Sony CD.  In addition to opera and recitals, Eleanor Steber was a frequent guest on *The Voice of Firestone*'s television broadcasts. However, her career outlasted her voice, and most of her later appearances and recordings were gravely technically flawed.  Eleanor Steber's relationship with the Met was not an easy one, for many reasons on both sides. In 1961, when Bing offered her a contract that only provided “covering” roles, she declined. After several years of absence from the Metropolitan Opera, she took part in the final gala performance of the old opera building in April 1966.  Eleanor Steber was not very happy in private life either, two marriages had fallen apart and she got into problems with alcohol and asthma. After partial retirement in 1962, she turned her attention more and more towards recitals and concerts. She made some appearances on Broadway, mostly in supporting parts, and also gave one of the notorious bathhouse concerts in New York in 1973. She and her husband opened and managed a record label, ST/AND (combining their names), but when they attempted to expand, it was a dismal flop.  Eleanor Steber was head of the voice department at the Cleveland Institute of Music from 1963 to 1972. She taught at the Juilliard School in New York, and at the New England Conservatory of Music (both from 1971), also at the American Institute of Music Studies in Graz (1978-1980; 1988). She established the Eleanor Steber Music Foundation in 1875 to assist young professional singers. With R. Beatie, she published study *‘Mozart Operatic Arias*’ (New York, 1988). Her autobiography, written in collaboration with M. Sloat was published posthumously (New Jersey 1992). |
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