

# Presenting Edna Saunders

When Edna Woolford Saunders reported to her father in 1918 that she had been asked to book events for the City Auditorium, he protested, "that was no job for a lady."<sup>1</sup> Edna, however, was not dissuaded by her father's opposition and embarked on a career that would fill the remainder of her life. In the process of becoming one of the best known impresarios in the country, she instilled a deep appreciation for the performing arts among the citizens of Houston. Edna Saunders planted the seeds that would grow and flourish to make Houston one of the nation's major cultural centers.

Edna was born in Houston on August 31, 1880, and grew up in her family's spacious home on the corner of Texas Avenue and Fannin Street. The Woolford family was a prominent one, her father, John, serving as the city's mayor at the turn of the twentieth century. Edna's parents exposed her to the arts early in her life. She

## *Her Life and Her Legacy*

by Betty Trapp Chapman

recalled later that, at the age of 4, she had accompanied her parents to a performance of Joseph Jefferson's *Rip Van Winkle* at the city's opera house and that it made a memorable impression on her.<sup>2</sup>

Edna graduated from Houston High School in 1898 and completed her education at the Stuart School in Washington, D. C., and the Gardner School in New York City. Although she was trained in piano and voice, Edna apparently had no ambitions for the concert stage and once said, "My music was never intended for that, but only as a part of a well-rounded education."<sup>3</sup> The 20-year-old Edna returned to Houston where she was presented to society at a debut ball sponsored by the ZZ Club at the Capitol Hotel and again at a festive affair of the Thalian Club at Bryan's Hall. After marrying Ernest Saunders in 1902, she settled into the life of a young matron.<sup>4</sup>

Edna's interest in music, however, led to her active member-



*Woman's Choral Club in 1913 during the presidency of Edna Saunders*

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ship in the Woman's Choral Club, founded in 1901 as a performing group to present musicales for family and friends. During its second season, the club decided to sponsor visiting artists in concerts for its associate members. This activity continued for several years. As a club officer, Saunders was in charge of arranging these programs. In 1917, Judge Edwin B. Parker, whose wife, Katherine, was a member of the Woman's Choral Club, urged Saunders to undertake a larger project. He agreed to be her "silent partner" in bringing the Boston Opera Company to Houston to present excerpts from *Madame Butterfly*. Judge Parker also suggested that they invite dancer Anna Pavlova to appear in *Snowflakes* as the second act on the program. Although the concert's profits totaled only \$14, it was considered a great success.<sup>5</sup> More important, Edna Saunders found her calling and, in spite of her father's disapproval, began booking well-known artists for appearances in the city.

Saunders' first major effort was in persuading the Chicago Civic Opera Company to travel to Houston for a performance in October 1918. Advance ticket sales went so well that the performance was sold out. Then disaster struck. The city's mayor ordered all entertainment venues to close because of the influenza epidemic sweeping across the country. An additional disaster occurred for Saunders when her father died on the day the concert was scheduled. She attended his funeral and then began refunding \$19,000 collected in ticket sales. Demonstrating the resilience that would become one of her trademarks, the fledgling impresario immediately rescheduled the Chicago opera troupe for the next season.<sup>6</sup>

Saunders ensured her reputation as a skilled impresario in 1920 when she brought Enrico Caruso to Houston. When the internationally famous tenor's manager asked Saunders why he should do business with her, she boldly replied, "Because I am the proper person to present Caruso in Houston."<sup>7</sup> When she discovered that Caruso would be traveling through Houston en route from New York to Mexico City, she convinced him to stop his private railroad car long enough to give a concert. Saunders liked to recall that City Auditorium recital; "We were sold out.

But people jammed the hall anyway, hoping for tickets. Many were Caruso's countrymen and I didn't want to turn them away. We opened the doors, and Caruso sang from that old stage with a voice that could be heard by those hundreds packing the sidewalks

out front...I remember well. He sang 'Vesta la giubba' and 'O sole mio.'"<sup>8</sup> Caruso's reminiscences were not so laudatory. The City Auditorium, though only 10 years old, was not a place of beauty or fine acoustics. Caruso was not favorably impressed with the facility, even though advance ticket sales totaled \$26,000. When Saunders remarked, "It would be wonderful if some day you could return to sing one of your operas," Caruso retorted, while thumping his cane on the floor, "Here...nevaire, nevaire."<sup>9</sup>

Nevertheless, this success spurred Saunders into action. She realized that Houston had a wealth of music lovers who would welcome the finest artists in the country. Although a theater had been established in Houston soon after the town was founded, cultural affairs did not take center stage in a place obsessed with commercial progress. Various artists appeared in Houston under the auspices of the businessmen who owned the performance facility, but bookings were usually considered on the basis of profitability rather than artistic quality. With the opening of the Sweeney and Coombs Opera House in 1890, musical productions became more prolific. Gilbert and Sullivan's *The Gondoliers* was performed in Houston less than two years after it was written. By the turn of the century, individual artists such as Ignace Jan Paderewski were brought to Houston to perform at the Winnie Davis Auditorium. When the 3500-seat City Auditorium was built in 1910, it was apparent that Houston had a venue large enough to attract major companies. It was even more apparent that someone needed to take a professional approach in booking performances. Saunders, operating under the title, Edna Saunders Presents, stepped in to fill this role. Over the next six years she brought such celebrated artists as Serge Rachmaninoff, Ernestine Schumann-Heink, Louise Homer, Amelita Galli Curci, Freda Hempel, Fritz Kreisler, Feodor Chaliapin, and Mary Garden to the city. In addition, there were appearances by the Scotti Grand Opera Company, the New York Philharmonic Orchestra, the Cincinnati Symphony Orchestra, the Minneapolis Symphony Orchestra, John Philip Sousa's Band, the French Army Band, and the Chicago Civic Opera Company, which returned for several consecutive seasons to compensate for that cancelled concert in 1918.<sup>10</sup>

Saunders' career as an impresario filled her life. Having divorced Ernest Saunders and being childless, she preferred to

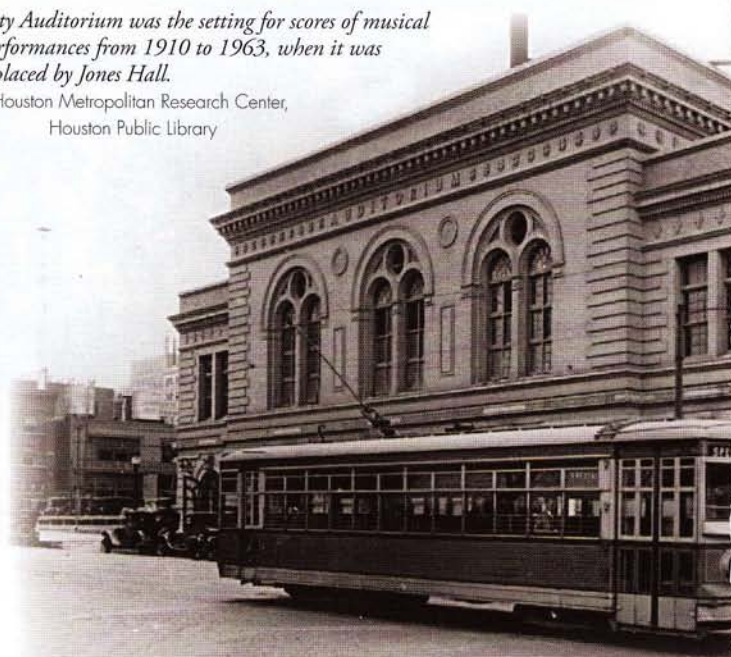


*Edna Saunders and celebrated tenor Enrico Caruso, who performed before the largest audience of his career in Houston in 1920.*

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*City Auditorium was the setting for scores of musical performances from 1910 to 1963, when it was replaced by Jones Hall.*

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operate alone in her business.<sup>11</sup> She never trained apprentices until she hired an assistant in 1959. Until then, the only employee of Edna Saunders Presents had been her faithful driver, Jesse, who guided the Chrysler Imperial to points north and east each year for Saunders to book upcoming events. Her reputation among agents in New York was such that she seldom had a written contract. Much of her business was handled by a handshake or a telephone conversation. She financed her own shows, only asking for guarantees from a group of citizens led by Jesse H. Jones when the expensive Metropolitan Opera Company was scheduled. It was widely acknowledged that concert management was not a profitable venture, but Saunders never discussed successes or losses. She would just say, "Now, the next show..."<sup>12</sup> She was willing to absorb losses on programs that were artistically, but not financially, successful. To offset low revenues from more classical programming, Saunders would present popular figures like Will Rogers, Katherine Hepburn, Al Jolson, Bob Hope and the Hour of Charm Girls. In an unusually canny move, she booked Jeannette McDonald and Nelson Eddy in separate concerts rather than in a joint appearance, ensuring two sold-out houses.

Her standards of excellence, however, never wavered. On one occasion, a local club asked her to handle the appearance of a singer Saunders considered lacking in quality. When she refused, the clubwomen remained insistent. Thinking she could end the discussion by setting a high fee for her services, she was dismayed when they agreed to the price. She ultimately staged the concert, but she spent all of her fee on advertising it rather than making a profit on something she found distasteful. Saunders, who was said to keep her records in shoe boxes, once commented, "I don't think of myself as a business woman. I'm doing what I so love to do."<sup>13</sup>

Saunders' business acumen, nevertheless, was recognized in 1927 when she was chosen by the Woman's Advertising Club for their Torchbearer award, which was given annually to the city's most eminent woman. On June 3, more than 300 persons gathered in the banquet room of the Rice Hotel to honor Saunders. Remarks were made during the evening by Congressman Daniel Garrett, *Houston Chronicle* editor M. E. Foster, Chamber of Commerce President J. W. Evans, and representatives of various civic clubs in the city. Many wires of congratulations came from New York City, Minneapolis,

Chicago, and Dallas. Arthur J. Gaines, manager of the Minneapolis Symphony Orchestra, expressed the admiration and respect so many held for Edna Saunders when he sent this message: "In managerial circles she is, and for years has been, recognized as one of the most enterprising and far-sighted managers in the country. She enjoys the esteem and confidence of all the artists and managers who have ever had any dealings with her." In response to these laudatory addresses, Saunders replied, "I have heard some most astonishing things about myself and qualities have been attributed to me that I never dreamed I possessed."<sup>14</sup> After less than 10 years on the job, the 47-year-old Saunders had obviously made a name for herself. While the approaching Depression would hinder many ventures, Saunders never let up in her quest to bring the best in cultural events to her hometown.

One of her greatest coups during those bleak years was scheduling the original Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo in 1936 during Christmas week, traditionally the toughest time of the year to get a booking. The city's response was so overwhelming that the troupe came back annually for several years, instilling a fascination for ballet which Saunders introduced in 1917 with the appearance of Anna Pavlova. This interest in ballet was further fostered by appearances of the Chicago Opera Ballet, The American Ballet Theatre, the National Ballet of Canada, the Royal Ballet, and Mexico's Ballet Folklorico. Two of the most acclaimed ballerinas in the 20th century, Moira Shearer and Margot Fonteyn, also appeared under Edna Saunders Presents.<sup>15</sup>

Saunders considered bringing the Metropolitan Opera Company to Houston one of her greatest accomplishments. In 1947, she was able to persuade the Met to break its contract with Dallas entrepreneurs which had given that city an exclusive area franchise. The Met had previously appeared in Houston twice—in 1901 with a production of *Lohengrin* and in 1905 when *Parsifal* was performed. These productions had taken place in the Winnie Davis Auditorium. In 1938, the Music Hall was built, providing a more desirable venue for the Met than the City Auditorium provided. After bringing the famed company to Houston in 1947, Saunders booked them again in 1951 and for seven successive years. The Metropolitan Opera Company, which commanded 80 percent of the gross ticket sales, always produced Saunders' most expensive programs since they brought not only their stars, but also their supporting artists, ballet group, orchestra, and technical staff. Although she had guarantors standing in the wings for these performances, she—much to her delight—never had to rely on them. Rudolf Bing, the Met's general manager, became Saunders' good friend, as did many of the opera stars. Houston's appreciation of operatic music instilled by Saunders resulted, no doubt, in the formation of Houston Grand Opera in 1955.<sup>16</sup>



Edna Saunders, shown here with Metropolitan Opera star Roberta Peters, always greeted the arriving troupe, which sometimes filled twenty rail cars.

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Saunders developed a very personal relationship with the artists she recruited, frequently entertaining them in her home. When the 9-year-old violin prodigy, Yehudi Menuhin, appeared in Houston, Saunders invited the boy and his father to her home for dinner. Yehudi particularly enjoyed the peaches that garnished his meal. He ate several and after the meal when he was prodded by his father to perform for their hostess, Yehudi begged off because he was feeling quite dizzy. When Saunders tasted her own peach, she realized that the cook had inadvertently served brandied peaches instead of the intended pickled variety. Saunders' peaches came in handy years later when Jeannette McDonald arrived in town for a concert. McDonald insisted on being served burned rye toast, homemade cottage cheese, and home-canned peaches on the day of her performance. The chef at the Warwick Hotel properly burned the toast, the Star Creamery provided the cottage cheese, and Saunders' own kitchen supplied the peaches.<sup>17</sup>

While Saunders took great pride in presenting acclaimed performers such as Arthur Rubinstein, Jascha Heifetz, and Vladimir Horowitz, she was ever mindful of young, budding artists. She presented not only the youthful Yehudi Menuhin but also arranged concert dates for aspiring local prodigies, including pianist Drusilla Huffmaster, violinist Fredell Lack, and pianist Jacques Abram. She ardently promoted Texan Van Cliburn, booking him for a concert even before he won the prestigious Tchaikovsky competition in 1958. When he appeared in Houston under her auspices, Saunders abandoned her usual seat in the Music Hall's center Box C-5 and sat instead in a straight-back chair in the wings "just to be nearer." Cliburn repaid Saunders' faith in him by repeated visits to Houston.<sup>18</sup>

The appearance of Marian Anderson in the mid-1930s also created a shift in seating, but it occurred for a very different reason. Anderson, an acclaimed African American contralto, was scheduled in a back-to-back concert with Grace Moore, the glamorous star of opera and films. Anderson quietly asked to buy a ticket for Moore's performance. Rather than seat Anderson in the upper reaches of the City Auditorium balcony where black Houstonians were segregated, Saunders invited Anderson to join her in her own box. Although many in the audience stared in disbelief at this occurrence, Saunders did not bat an eyelid and even went a step further in rearranging the seating for Anderson's concert. She divided the house down the middle, reserving half for blacks and half for whites. Then Saunders



*Marian Anderson appeared in Houston under Edna Saunders Presents numerous times, including the last concert in the City Auditorium before it was razed in 1963.*

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and her coterie, which included the city's mayor, sat with the Houstonians of color. In the name of culture, Edna Saunders had taken a small step in the struggle for civil rights.<sup>19</sup>


Saunders' rapport with the press was a warm, collegial one. She understood that abundant publicity and commendatory reviews were necessary to the success of her endeavors. She was eager to educate newcomers to the field by explaining "pirouette," spelling out "arpeggio," and defining "entrechat royale." When one young writer went to England for a year, she sent him a

check, urging him to attend some concerts while there.<sup>20</sup>

By the 1962-1963 season, her 46th one, Saunders was catering to the changing tastes of the audience by incorporating more entertainment influenced by Broadway. She insisted that a poll of patrons revealed that most of them preferred such attractions. In reality, her skillful blending of entertainment ranging from the popular to the classic was a key element in her success. The principal offering that last season was *The Sound of Music*, the romanticized version of the Trapp Family Singers. This was an interesting reflection of the past since Saunders had presented the real Trapp family singers some years earlier. The new Broadway productions were accompanied, however, by two of Saunders' tried-and-true venues: Van Cliburn and a premier ballet company (in this instance, the National Ballet of Canada).<sup>21</sup>

Saunders would plan one more season in spite of the heart attack she had suffered in late 1962. Death came on December 21, 1963, even as newspapers carried ads for two of her upcoming events: a one-night stand by Fred Waring and the Pennsylvanians and a five-performance run of Robert Bolt's play, *A Man for All Seasons*. Just the week before, Saunders had been named honorary vice-president of the International Concert Managers Association. The president of ICMA had called her the "first lady" of local concert managers.<sup>22</sup>

For some time before her death, Saunders had actively promoted a new auditorium that would not be "too large for small things or too small for large things." Ground was broken the month after her death for a new hall bearing the name of Jesse H. Jones. Houston Endowment, Inc., which had contributed funds to the project, dedicated the hall's public reception area, the Green Room, to Edna Saunders "to honor the woman who for half a century reigned as an Empress of the Arts and whose influence had much to do with the city's cultural momentum." John T. Jones, Jr. paid tribute to this extraordinary woman when he said at the Jones Hall groundbreaking ceremony: "Miss Edna gave 46 years of her vitality, vision, and good taste to the city. She left as a legacy the audiences which attend our Symphony concerts, the standing room crowds at Houston Grand Opera, the people who stand in line to buy tickets to the performances of the ballet... There were many who knew her, but among those who did not know her personally, there were hundreds of thousands who have profited from her effort."<sup>23</sup>

Shortly before her death, a fellow concert manager suggested that a monument should be erected to Edna W. Saunders for bringing beauty, music, and culture to her hometown.<sup>24</sup> Perhaps, instead, her lasting monument is a city enjoying world-class renditions of the performing arts almost every day of the year.<sup>25</sup> 



*Edna Saunders, seen in her office on the 5th floor of Levy Bros Dry Goods Co., is surrounded by photographs of artists she had presented.*

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