

Zsa Zsa Sent Me

BY JOSEPH SMITH

A friend who lives abroad heard that Zsa Zsa was hospitalized, and called to find out how she was faring. (Zsa Zsa Gabor—do you know another?) Although I remembered her as a ubiquitous celebrity, it occurred to me that I had no inkling what she was famous for. I did a little reading and, to my astonishment, found she had crossed paths with two substantial figures in classical music. She was, in fact, discovered at seventeen by the legendary Austrian tenor Richard Tauber, and debuted in an operetta he composed and starred in. Surely this indicated that she had been a serious, professionally trained singer. Well, not exactly...



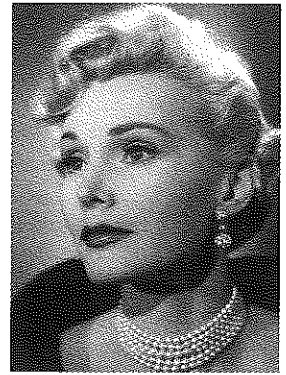
Richard Tauber

Tauber (1891–1948) was an international star. Although he enjoyed a distinguished career in opera, it was his appearances in operetta that brought him to the attention of a wider public. Franz Lehár composed most of his operettas expressly for him. Tauber's fame was further advanced by recordings (opera, operetta, and popular songs of the day) and films, in both German and English. His timbre—bright, with a fast vibrato—may be an acquired taste. (I once gave a recording to a friend who initially found it “weird.” Within a week, she was so addicted to Tauber's throbbing rendition of “Komm, Zigan” that her husband insisted he would regard one more repetition as grounds for divorce.) Tauber's initial studies had been in composition and conducting, and he had a sensitivity to rhythmic nuance rarely found in singers.

Tauber did not imagine Zsa Zsa to be an accomplished artist—he hired her as type casting. In 1934, he perceived the beautiful teenager, seen chatting in an outdoor Vienna café, as the incarnation of Violet, the vivacious niece of an American bank president in his operetta *Der Singende Traum*, and impulsively sent Zsa Zsa's mother a note introducing himself and asking her daughter to audition. (In answer to the inevitable question, I think not! Had they had an affair, Zsa Zsa would not have been reticent to tell us.) She got the part, and by her own disarming account, her inexperience exhausted the patience of the director, the choreographer, and the conductor. Nevertheless, both she and Tauber were vindicated—Zsa Zsa, playing herself, managed to charm even the critics. She recalls the crowds cheering as she exited the stage door on opening night, as the conductor muttered, “Toscanini? No. Wagner? No. But this one with no voice—*her* they want!”

Almost twenty years later, Zsa Zsa suddenly found herself a star. Married to actor George Sanders at the time, she was invited as a “celebrity wife” to dispense advice on a TV panel show. Her beauty, glamour, and characteristic acumen, inhabiting that strange twilight zone where unconsidered candor and conscious wit overlap, seduced the public. (One viewer wrote that she was breaking her engagement to a man who had given her a home, a mink, diamonds, a

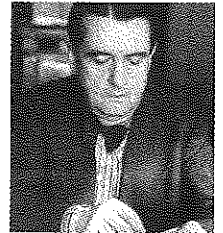
stove and an expensive car. What should she do? Zsa Zsa: “Give back the stove.”) Overnight, she became the celebrity and her husband the celebrity spouse. The movies began offering her roles. Somehow, all these roles resembled the persona of Zsa Zsa herself!



One wonders what the young Auric would have thought of the middle-aged Auric's languid “Song of Moulin Rouge.”

Zsa Zsa recognized her portrayal of Jane Avril in John Huston's 1952 film *Moulin Rouge* as the apex of her film career. She happily recalled her entrance “dancing down the stairs, singing ‘The Song of Moulin Rouge.’ Though there were many stars in the film, in this scene I felt myself the star of them all. I sang the song, I danced the dances I had improvised... I was Zsa Zsa living a dream.” But elsewhere she reported, “I would have to sing, but they would be able to fix that,” an oblique acknowledgment that her song was dubbed. (It was sung by Muriel Smith, who had a small role in the film and whose remarkable career spanned classical and popular music.)

Watching *Moulin Rouge* produced several surprises. It turned out that I had known the evocative “Song of Moulin Rouge” my entire life, without knowing its name. But as sung in the film, the melody is more elaborate and shapely than the version I had remembered. (The popular song version, “Where Is Your Heart,” simplifies the melody as heard in the film, “It's April Again.”) And, to my astonishment, I learned that the composer was Georges Auric.



Georges Auric



I had known Auric (1889–1993) only as the youngest member of Les Six. This group of French composers, under the guidance of Satie and Cocteau, expounded a saucy, iconoclastic aesthetic intended to decisively purge French music of heavy Wagner influence. Auric's prelude to the 1920 collective piano *Album des six* is a definitive example: short, unequivocally tonal, but shot through with momentary dissonances, and thoroughly unsentimental. One wonders what the young Auric would have thought of the middle-aged Auric's languid “Song of Moulin Rouge.”

Find Georges Auric's Prelude to the Album des six on page 48.

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