



Katharine Evan von Klenner (1860-1949)

by Elizabeth Schmidt

The eye catches the word "baroness" on a Celtic cross marking a gravesite in Mount Hope; the brain registers surprise and asks questions. Why is a baroness buried in Mt. Hope? Is there more to her than a title?

The first question is easily answered by examining the other stones at the gravesite. It is the Evans family plot and Baroness Katharine von Klenner is buried with her family. Yes, the baron is also buried there.

The second question is more difficult to answer since there are gaps in her life about which little is known, but enough information can be found to outline it. The baroness was a native Rochesterian, the only child of William H. and Katharine Carpenter Evans. She was born in 1860. At the age of 16, her name appeared in the Union and Advertiser when she graduated from the Rochester Free Academy, the youngest in her class, with an average of 92%. Two years later her name appeared in the City Directory as a teacher at School No. 5, boarding with her parents.

During the two intervening years between her graduation and teaching job, she might have been furthering her education. At some time in her life, the baroness studied under private tutors in Paris, Milan, and Berlin. The directory continued listing her name until 1885, the year her father died, and then it disappeared along with that of her mother. She either preferred to have her name unlisted in the directory or moved to some other place, never to return except for an occasional visit and to bury her husband. In 1895, she was living in New York City. Also, she spent many summers at Chautauqua, New York, where other members of her family joined her.

Although she had a varied career -- voice teacher, author, lecturer, journalist -- music was the center of her life. In Paris she studied voice under Pauline Viardot-Garcia and many years later recalled a moment in her life that meant a great deal to her. As the baroness wrote in a letter to the New York Times at the New York revival of the opera "Don Giovanni" in 1929,

"... So far as is known to me, I hold the singular distinction of being the only person in America to have held the original score of "Don Giovanni" in my hands."

At that time, as Katharine Evans, I was studying under Pauline Viardot-Garcia in Paris and remember with great pride the day when my beloved maitresse, in going over to the special cabinet in which the score was kept, brought it forth for me to examine -- with all the composer's markings.

Pauline Viardot seldom produced it for public scrutiny, and, after her death, her will provided for the giving of this valued possession to the Paris Conservatoire, where she





had taught for many years. Katharine added:

"I have often heard from her of the first performance here in America, when her father, Manuel Garcia, and her elder sister, Mme. Malibran, sang the principal roles, and I take great pride in thus being linked with this epoch of famous singers in this great world of music."

In 1895, Katharine Evans married Baron Rudolph Ferdinand Auguste Mariavon Klenner, an Austrian soldier, diplomat, and linguist who was fluent in 25 languages and dialects. They had met the previous year in Europe. He gave up his Austrian title and position to reside in this country as she wished, and they lived mainly in New York City, except when traveling, and were known as Mr. & Mrs. von Klenner.

Von Klenner was no stranger to this country. In 1885, he became Professor of Languages at College Point Academy, and in 1891 he was appointed an instructor of language at Johns Hopkins University and later taught at Georgetown. After his marriage he spent time in study and wrote for European publications. It was probably sometime after his death in 1914 that his wife started to use the title, baroness. It might even have been after his sister, Baroness Emma von Klenner, who lived in the family home in Vienna, died.

Katharine von Klenner gained a reputation as a musician. Most of her life was spent as a teacher of voice and music educator. At the 1900 Paris Exposition she received an Honorable Mention from the Education Department for her report on the progress of music in the United States. She founded the National Opera Club in 1913, primarily for the purpose of bringing young American singers, composers, and musicians to the attention of the public.

In 1937, Baroness von Klenner urged Congress to declare February a month of tribute to American composers and musicians. On February 7, the New York Times reported that she anticipated the introduction of such a bill, but whether it was ever introduced and adopted by Congress at that late date is unknown. The National Opera Club planned and presented a series of events highlighting American musicians in that month. The baroness also initiated "Dollar Opera for the Multitudes" in an effort to develop a greater audience for opera.

Besides her career in music, she contributed articles to several magazines and newspapers and wrote four books: *A Tale of Two Roses* (1908), a children's story; *Musical Travels*; *The Greater Revelation* (1925), a book on spiritualism; and *Seven High Spots in a World's Pause* (1926). She wrote about general character, juvenile, or religious subjects.

Katharine Evan von Klenner lived a long active life, achieved recognition in her lifetime, and never lost her love of music. She died at age 89 in 1949 in New York City.

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