

DANA SUESSE

1909 - 1987

“The Girl Gershwin”

Dana Suesse stood tall between the pillars of European classical tradition and the new art form of Jazz. Born Nadine Dana Suesse in 1909 in Kansas City, her talent blazed early, holding her first concert at the age of nine. Soon she was touring through the Midwest and improvising piano pieces for each show -- a regular vaudeville Mozart. She would enchant the audience by asking them to suggest a theme from which she would spontaneously compose a classical refrain.

In 1926 she moved to New York City with her mother in order to be able to study piano with Alexander Siloti, one of the four surviving pupils of Franz Liszt. Exposed in New York to an emerging jazz idiom, she hungrily studied composition with one of George Gershwin's teachers, Rubin Goldmark, and began what would be a lifetime habit of pouring out compositions at a breakneck pace. She was known to compose sitting up in her bed, sheets of music dropping down in a veritable waterfall of musical output. This early work happily careened between classical music and songs influenced by the jazz sound that was spilling out all over New York City.

Showing off this dual musical passion at age 19, her first published instrumental piece in 1928 entitled "**Syncopated Love Song**" did quite well, gracing many a household piano and performed by orchestras and bands all over the country. Nathaniel Shilkret recorded it in 1929 and catapulted the song to popular acclaim. With the addition of a lyric by Leo Robin and a new title ("**Have You Forgotten**") the following year, she had discovered a way to be successful in both classical and popular music markets.

At age 20, in a dizzying year of productivity, Dana Suesse wrote "**Whistling in the Dark**" (with lyricist Allen Boretz) and "**Ho-Hum**" (with Edward Heyman) all the while producing instrumental compositions such as "**Jazz Nocturne**" which were in great demand. Using her own earlier formula for popular success, she turned a portion of "Jazz Nocturne" into another popular hit with a lyric by Heyman, "**My Silent Love**". Peter Mintun writes: "When asked who originally made "My Silent Love" famous, the lyricist and the composer said, "Everybody!"

it wasn't long before the press began to refer to her as "The Girl Gershwin." In 1924, Paul Whiteman (the most influential orchestra leader of his day), had approached Gershwin with the idea to write 'something modern' for Whiteman's orchestra, and the resulting "Rhapsody in Blue" launched the composer far beyond Tin Pan Alley. Now

Whiteman commissioned Dana Suesse to compose "**Concerto in Three Rhythms**", which was performed at Carnegie Hall in 1932.

1932 also found Dana Suesse writing for a variety of Broadway shows. Paired with Yip Harburg, she wrote a song which was placed in the *Ziegfeld Follies of 1934*, "**Moon About Town**". Later this song became a favorite on the supper club and cabaret circuit. Teaming up with the energetic impresario Billy Rose, she contributed music to every one of *Diamond Horseshoe* revues, adding to their popularity. Out of this collaboration came a few more enduring standards: "**The Night Is Young and You're So Beautiful**" (with Irving Kahal), and "**Yours for a Song**" (with Ted Fetter).

During this same breathtaking period she collaborated again with Edward Heyman on "**You Oughta Be in Pictures**," which the New York Times called "Hollywood's Anthem" as it has been used more than forty times in movies and television.

It should be noted that through this output of music, Dana Suesse managed to become financially independent at a fairly young age, an impressive feat for any woman in those times, but especially for a serious composer. She continued to work at her steady pace for a few more years, writing incidental music for several plays (including *The Seven Year Itch* in 1952). And in her 'spare time', she tried her hand at writing plays as well.

Managing to sell the film rights to one fairly desultory play (*It Takes Two*, written with Virginia Faulkner) she took her half of the money and fulfilled a lifelong dream to move to Paris for three years and study under the legendary Nadia Boulanger. Upon her return to New York she devoted herself to orchestral work, which has since been performed by many symphonies. Suesse's concertos and other works have been featured at Radio City Music Hall, Carnegie Hall, Madison Square Garden and the Met. She was the only American composer other than Gershwin to be invited to perform on the General Motors Symphony national radio broadcasts. She never stopped writing, plays, comedies, screenplays, symphonies, concertos and was midway through a musical when she passed away in 1987 at the age of seventy-six.

Many thanks go out to pianist and music historian Peter Mintun, whose tender stewardship of Dana Suesse's works, recordings and memorabilia have kept her memory alive.

Sources:

The Unsung Songwriters, Warren W. Vache, Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, Inc, 2000

The American Popular Ballad of the Golden Era, 1924-1950. Allen Forte, Princeton University Press, 1995

Dana Suesse, Internet Broadway Database www.ibdb.com

Dana Suesse, IMBd Mini-Biography by mintunmusic.com

www.mintun.com

Suggested Listening:

Various Artists: The Night is Young: Concert Music of Dana Suesse

Premier Recordings PRCD 1055

Artists include Cy Coleman, Robert Barlow, All City Choir & the American Symphony Orchestra Conducted by Frederick Fennell Liner Notes: Peter Minton

Keyboard Wizards of the Gershwin Era volume II: Dana Suesse, Pearl Pavilion Records LTD.

“The Night is Young and You’re So Beautiful” – Vic Damone, Frank Sinatra, both had wonderful versions, and don’t forget the Mel Brooks movie ‘Men In Tights’ which does feature this song.

“My Silent Love” – Peggy Lee (‘Mink Jazz’), Billy Eckstine and His Orchestra, (‘Blowing the Blues Away’), Charles Brown (‘Snuff Drippin’ Mama’) George Shearing (‘As Requested’)

A new CD is expected out in late 2009 by Sara Davis Buechner – **“The Collected**

Piano Compositions of Dana Suesse” Koch International Label, notes by Peter

Mintun.

“Yours for A Song: Women of Tin Pan Alley”, American Masters 1999. (DVD)

Great video clips of Dana Suesse & Edward Heyman:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wxuWfAJvtCg>