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Bolshoi Packed for Tribute to Legendary Singer Yelena Obraztsova

By Layli Foroudi

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Obraztsova's casket on stage at the Bolshoi Theater on Wednesday.

Hundreds of Russians paid their last respects to renowned and much-loved opera singer Yelena Obraztsova in the Bolshoi Theater on Wednesday.

Roses, carnations and sunflowers in all sizes and quantities were tearfully and lovingly carried up the theater's dark aisle to be placed at the base of her casket, which had been placed on the dramatically lit stage. An orchestra behind the casket played music from arias that she made her own as a singer.

Obraztsova died from a heart attack, aged 75, on Monday in Germany.

"Yelena was never second, always first. Today is another triumph — a full house at the Bolshoi Theater," said Natalya Ignatenko, director of the Yelena Obraztsova Foundation, speaking from the stage.

Obraztsova started her career at the Bolshoi Theater in 1963 and many of those paying tribute in the theater to her had seen her sing on the stage there.

"[She was] Russian to the core and was always proud to represent her country. We have lost a great singer and a great teacher," said Ignatenko.

The mezzo-soprano was one of Russia's most famous opera singers in both her home country and abroad. She performed at the Metropolitan Opera House in New York, La Scala in Milan and Covent Garden in London.

Her performance as Carmen in Franco Zeffirelli's staging at the Vienna State Opera in 1978 became one of her best-known roles and her own personal favorite.

Spanish tenor Jose Carreras paid tribute, saying she was a fantastic artist and a wonderful partner, RIA Novosti reported.

Speaking in October at the opening of an exhibit about her life, Obraztsova talked about playing "Carmen." The role was one that she did not simply sing — "It sings through me," she said.

Obraztsova taught many aspiring students at the Moscow Conservatory and in 1999 set up an arts center in St. Petersburg that sponsors an opera competition for young people. In 2011, she established the Yelena Obraztsova Charitable Foundation for Musical Arts to support opera in Russia.

Viktoria Korovova, a student at the Moscow School of Musical Theater, had rushed out of a morning exam to attend the service. "I am a vocalist and so for me Obraztsova represents a standard to strive toward," she said.

Famous musical and establishment figures also came to pay tribute, including Culture Minister Vladimir Medinsky and head of the Bolshoi Theater, Vladimir Urin.

"She changed our country, the world and she raised the quality of opera," said Olga Golodets, deputy prime minister for social affairs.

Obraztsova's daughter, Yelena Makarova, closed the ceremony by thanking the public and friends for their support. She asked journalists not to approach the family at this difficult time. Makarova said her mother's last days were difficult: "She could not hear, see or joke."

The opera singer will be buried in Novodevichye Cemetery after a burial service Thursday at Christ the Savior Cathedral.

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