

OBITUARY

Chanteuse Monique Leyrac brought Quebec culture to the world

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Singer Monique Leyrac gestures as she receives the Denise-Pelletier award at a ceremony for Les Prix du Quebec at the legislature in Quebec City on November 12, 2013. JACQUES BOISSINOT/THE CANADIAN PRESS

Monique Leyrac, who died on Dec. 15 in Cowansville, Que., at the age of 91, was a celebrated interpreter of Québécois song as well as a global ambassador of chanson and French literature.

She vaulted to global prominence in 1965 by winning the top prize at Poland's Sopot International Song Festival for her interpretation of Gilles Vigneault's *Mon pays*. The

breakthrough is preserved in black and white footage of Ms. Leyrac singing with great passion while carefully enunciating and dramatically teasing out Mr. Vigneault's poetic vision. It was a milestone for Quebec culture. Radio-Canada broadcaster Catherine Pépin, who did an in-depth interview with Ms. Leyrac on the occasion of her 90th birthday in 2018, said, "she brought Quebec poets to the world. Monique was doing Vigneault before he was Vigneault. She believed in him."

In the long and fruitful career that followed, Ms. Leyrac performed at l'Olympia in Paris, Carnegie Hall in New York and the National Arts Centre in Ottawa, as well as on The Ed Sullivan Show and at Montreal's most prestigious concert halls and theatres.

She was born Monique Tremblay on Feb. 26, 1928, in Rosemont, a then-hardscrabble Montreal neighbourhood. Her parents were impoverished. She left school at the age of 13 and was working in a factory by the time she was 15. As her biographer François Dompierre recounts, the teenager was already enamoured with song, an admirer of Maurice Chevalier, Mireille Hartuch and Tino Rossi.

The aspiring performer had her first break when she wrote a letter to the singer and actress Jeanne Maubourg, a Belgian expatriate who hosted a Radio-Canada program. Charmed by the ambition and determination of the note, Ms. Maubourg agreed to meet her. The adolescent went to Ms. Maubourg's rooms in Hotel de la Salle in downtown Montreal and performed verses by Jean de La Fontaine. Ms. Maubourg saw great promise and agreed to train her as an actress and singer. She also recommended a change of name. The teenager settled on Leyrac, a name she came across in a romance column in the Montreal daily newspaper La Presse.

"She was an extremely focused woman, very demanding. I was raised that way, so we got along well," said Jean Marchand, an actor and concert pianist who befriended and sometimes accompanied Ms. Leyrac, who was his elder by more than two decades. They occasionally shared lodgings on the road when they performed in Quebec City, Toronto and Ottawa. "We became soul buddies."

Ms. Leyrac confided in Mr. Marchand that although she loved her family, "she was determined to get out of her milieu."

Ms. Leyrac's daughter, Sophie Gironnay, director of la Maison de l'Architecture du Québec, was always impressed by her independence and capacity for work. "I don't want to play

amateur psychologist, but I'd say she was trying to overcome her beginnings. She had to make it on her own from age 13."

After the Second World War, the young singer got her next break at Au Faisan Doré, Montreal's most prominent French-language cabaret. There she was exposed to the likes of Charles Aznavour. It was a rigorous finishing school, Mr. Marchand explained, "the place was owned by the Mafia. She had to do three sets a night. She was a woman in a man's world. It was not easy."

Around 1950, Ms. Leyrac began appearing in Paris, performing in clubs frequented by France's top musicians and actors. When she was invited to perform in Lebanon, the adventurous Ms. Leyrac eagerly accepted. Ms. Gironnay says the trip had a lifelong impact on her mother. "Can you imagine a single woman agreeing to appear alone in the Middle East at that time? For the rest of her life, she talked about the Palestinian refugee camps near the airport and how people could take such suffering for granted."

In this period Ms. Leyrac also met her eventual husband, the French actor Jean Dalmain. The two moved frequently between Montreal and France. For several years, they had a home in Provence with a view of the mountains. After the marriage ended, Ms. Leyrac and her daughter returned permanently to Montreal.

In the 1960s and 1970s, Ms. Leyrac became a pop diva in Quebec. Her interpretations of songs by the likes of Mr. Vigneault, Félix Leclerc, Claude Léveillée and Luc Plamondon made her a popular sensation. "She's at the peak," Ms. Pépin says. "There is no better singer and interpreter of these songs. Because she trained as an actor, she brought exceptional nuance to her delivery."

Ms. Leyrac combined her skills as a singer and thespian in a number of acclaimed revues dedicated to poetical works. The most famous, perhaps, was Leyrac chante Nelligan, a show conceived by Ms. Leyrac about the Montreal poet Émile Nelligan, with music composed by André Gagnon and singing and recitations performed by Ms. Leyrac. Mr. Marchand says it was "probably the most beautiful thing she ever did."

She also conceived a show based on the work of French poet Charles Baudelaire. "She wanted the audience to discover the beauty and power of great writing. She had elevated herself to

appreciate great literature and she wanted to share it with people," Mr. Marchand said. Ms. Leyrac gave her all to such productions, paying acute attention to costumes and set design.

Ms. Leyrac retired from singing in public at around the age of 60. She continued to work as a stage actor before settling into rural life in the Eastern Townships. She had no interest in "being an old singer."

She last appeared on stage as an actor in *Le voyage du couronnement* (The Coronation Voyage) by Michel Marc Bouchard at Montreal's Théâtre du Nouveau Monde in 1995. "I had her in mind for the role," Mr. Bouchard said, "but knew she was retired, so I didn't have high hopes. We met at L'Express restaurant in Montreal. She was wearing a turban and was smoking with an extravagantly long cigarette holder. She had carefully read the play and demanded changes to the script. I agreed. Two weeks later, after I made the changes, she accepted the role."

Mr. Bouchard then had an extraordinary experience. "On opening night she walked on stage and the audience got up and applauded," he said. "I understood the connection, the love, between this woman and an audience that hadn't seen her for years."

Mr. Bouchard remained friends with Ms. Leyrac, visiting her frequently at her home in Quebec's Eastern Townships near the town of Sutton at the mountains along the border with Vermont. In summer, she tended assiduously to her garden there and in winter, she read. Ms. Leyrac was an admirer of Marcel Proust, Colette, Henry James and Gustave Flaubert. She devoured biographies and historical works. Her daughter once gave her the collected correspondence of Chekhov, a toe stubbing tome. She read it in a week.

The last time Mr. Bouchard saw her was about six months ago. Ms. Leyrac's vision was impaired following a stroke she had had several months earlier, so she asked Mr. Bouchard to read an old letter she had received from Mr. Leclerc.

"She didn't sing publicly anymore, but she still did privately. It was beautiful to hear her." The final song she performed for him was *Il en est passé*, by Mr. Vigneault and Mr. Léveillée. "To me she was like Marlene Dietrich in retirement. She had her garden, her reading. ... She was without nostalgia or bitterness," Mr. Bouchard said. "She had a peace about her that was extremely moving."

Mr. Marchand says he believes “she had done what she wanted to do. She was as demanding of herself as she was of others. The demands of her métier as a singer and actor were enormous. She wanted to do other things, such as cooking and gardening, and she brought the same focus to them. One time I spoke to her while she was cooking at her home, she said, ‘Je ne peux pas parler. Je fais à manger!’ (I can’t speak now. I’m cooking!)”

Ms. Gironnay says her mother’s favourite song was la Manikoutai by Mr. Vigneault, a song about a woman and a river, with an Indigenous theme. Although her family denied it in her youth, Ms. Leyrac discovered in adulthood that she was the descendant of a union between a French immigrant, her great-grandfather, and an Indigenous woman, her great-grandmother. Ms. Gironnay said Ms. Leyrac “was extremely proud” of her Indigenous heritage.

Ms. Leyrac leaves her daughter, Sophie Gironnay; grandson, Renaud Salmon; and great-granddaughter, Niko.

Although she was a proud Quebecker, Ms. Leyrac eschewed public declarations of her political views. “The Parti Québécois tried to recruit her,” Ms. Gironnay said, "but she wanted to express herself through art and culture. She believed that for artists, politics and religion should remain private matters.”

Ms. Leyrac was an enormously gifted artist who helped launch careers and buttressed the prestige of some of the province’s finest writers. She found devoted audiences in Quebec and France, and her performances of songs such as Mon Pays helped bring Quebec culture to the rest of the world.