

FLORENCE FOSTER JENKINS OPERA SINGER

BEST OF THE WORST

WHEN?
1868-1944

WHERE? Wilkes-Barre,
Pennsylvania and New
York City



EVENT
Carnegie Hall, 1944

VOCABULARY
lampooned
mezzo-soprano
syphilis

Florence Foster Jenkins loved music! Born in 1868, Florence lived on South Main Street in Wilkes-Barre. Music was her passion. She played the piano so well that she was considered to be a child prodigy. She traveled throughout Pennsylvania, and also performed at the White House for President Rutherford B. Hayes. After graduation from high school (at nearly 15 years old), she wanted to continue her music studies in Europe, but her father refused to allow her to go. She rebelled and eloped with Dr. Frank Jenkins who was 16 years her senior. (At the time, Pennsylvania law allowed girls as young as 10 to be married.) After the wedding in 1883, they moved to Philadelphia. Due to the marriage, her wealthy father disinherited her. While the marriage lasted only three years, it is thought that Florence was infected with syphilis during this time; the disease would take her life 60 years later.



After her marriage dissolved, (it is not clear if there was ever a divorce), Florence stayed in Philadelphia to teach piano. Her mother came to help her and offered financial support (Lang 2016). By 1900 they were traveling to New York City. According to the webpage, *History vs. Hollywood*, she suffered some sort of injury about this time to her left arm which meant she had to give up playing the piano.



St. Clair Bayfield

Her real interest, however, was not playing the piano though she was quite talented. After her father passed away in 1909, she used a sizable inheritance from her father to fund her career singing in various New York City venues (LA Times). She loved to sing, but, unfortunately, she did not do that very well. In fact, she was considered to be downright awful. Yet her enjoyment exceeded the criticism, and she sang to her heart's delight and became very popular. She also met St. Clair Bayfield sometime in 1909 who became her partner and manager. He was born in England and had been an aspiring actor though his career never got off the ground. Nonetheless, the pair made a go of the relationship and Florence launched her singing career in 1912 after studying with Metropolitan Opera mezzo-soprano Henriette Wakefield (Lang 2016). A 2016 movie about her life, *Florence Foster Jenkins*, starred Meryl Streep and Hugh Grant.



Jenkins

Streep

Jenkins

Streep

She sang in Washington, D.C., Pittsburgh, and Newport, Rhode Island as well as frequent recitals in New York City at the Hotel Seymour (Lang 2016). Each offering was accompanied by costume changes (which she made herself) and the throwing of flowers to the audience. Though critics everywhere were quick to point out all of her flaws, the off-key, off-pitch soprano was not without her fans. The more she was lampooned, the more it increased her popularity. She performed to sell-out crowds for years including her last performance which was given at Carnegie Hall on October 25, 1944. A heart attack put her in bed two days later. On her death bed, she said “people may say I can’t sing, but can never say I didn’t sing.” She passed away from a heart attack a month later and is buried in Hollenback cemetery in Wilkes-Barre by her family.

ONLINE RESOURCES

[Florence Foster Jenkins](#) LA Times

[History vs. Hollywood](#) by Kevin Lang 2016

[Florence Foster Jenkins Youtube](#)

PRINT RESOURCES

Martin, Nicholas, and Rees, Jasper. *Florence Foster Jenkins*. New York City: St. Martin's Griffin.
2016.