Beckmann pours out her heart in tribute to teacher Lehmann

By Hillary Hauser
News-Press Staff Writer

"Come, let us LIVE this song together."

Those words, once uttered by Lotte Lehmann, were relived Sunday night at the Music Academy of the West, when Judith Beckmann took the stage and sang a heartfelt program commemorating her late teacher.

By the time Mme. Beckmann was finished, there might not have been a dry eye in Abravanel Hall.

For one thing, the internationally acclaimed lyric soprano has brilliantly captured the essence of Mme. Lehmann's soulful advice to all singers — that a deep inner conviction about music is more important than technique, accuracy and even a beautiful voice.

For another thing, the Sunday night recital was a sentimental re-creation of a program given at the academy 39 years ago by Mme. Lehmann, who taught at the academy following her retirement from the operatic stages of the world.

And one of the accompanists for the Sunday program was the same accompanist who played for Mme. Lehmann in the original recital.

The accompanist, Gwendolyn Koldofsky (then Gwendolyn Williams), recalled what it was like to work with Mme. Lehmann for eight years, and remembered qualities of the late singer that made her one of the world's greatest lyric-dramatic sopranos.

"She was an extraordinary interpreter, a genius, absolutely unique," Mme. Koldofsky said. "She was so deeply involved in what the poetry was, what inspired the composer. She had enormous imagination for every single song, to the degree I've never heard since."

The quality of Mme. Lehmann's voice, Mme. Koldofsky said, was "silver."

"Her voice never grew old, she never sang a note out of tune," she said.

Mme. Lehmann's artistic gifts were not confined to singing alone. Mme. Koldofsky said of the five books written by the late operatic star (one was a novel), three are considered important works on the interpretation of songs.

Mme. Lehmann also painted and created tapestries, some of which are hanging at the Music Academy of the West.

Lotte Lehmann
Operatic diva

Mme. Lehmann's audiences apparently understood her greatness.

"Usually, when she came on stage, almost always the audience rose," Mme. Koldofsky said.

And each one in the audience felt Mme. Lehmann was singing for him or her alone, she added.

On Sunday night, it was apparent that Mme. Beckmann (described by Mme. Koldofsky as one of Mme. Lehmann's last and "most beloved" students) had thoroughly understood her teacher.

Mme. Beckmann is herself extraordinary — almost too good to be true. She embraces her audience in wide-opened arms, capturing waiting hearts with her own silvery voice.

And she, too, sings to each individual in the audience.

What Beckmann sang about Sunday night ranged from the heavenly powers of art and the glories of spring to a poor trout caught on a line.

Only a moment into the opening Schubert song, "An die Musik" ("To Music"), Mme. Beckmann's listeners could know they'd leave the recital somehow changed.

"O kindly Art, in how many a gray hour/when I am caught in life's unruly round, have you fired my heart with ardent love/and borne me to a better world!" Mme. Beckmann sang in German.

The Schubertian hymn was followed by "Ganymed," also by Schubert and with words by Goethe:

"How in the morning radiance/you glow upon me from all sides, Spring, beloved!"

By this time, the singer's soul had opened wide, and she had touched the essence of life's longing.

And so it went, through five songs by Schubert and onto the next five songs, by Brahms.

For this section of the program, Lawrence Leighton Smith, music director and conductor at the academy, took over the accompanying.

The versatile Maestro Smith has now revealed his talents at the keyboard as well as on the podium.

After intermission came four songs from Debussy's "Ariettes Oubliees" (Forgotten Airs), with accompaniment provided again by Mme. Koldofsky.

Maestro Smith then returned to the keyboard to accompany Mme. Beckmann in three Hugo Wolf songs, the highlight of which was "Kennst du das Land" — "Do You Know the Land."

For the grand finale of the eveing, Mme. Beckmann offered three songs by Richard Strauss.

At the end of the program, the enthusiastic, standing-room-only crowd rose to its feet, and Mme. Beckmann (with Smith accompanying) responded with charm and an encore, "Wir wandelten" ("We Wandered"), by Brahms.