

# OPERA NEWS



## RICHARD LEECH

The world's sanest tenor  
on the Met, marriage and Mario Lanza

## BRENDA LEWIS AND PHYLLIS PANCELLA

Two Lizzie Borden's to reckon with

## LEAP OF FAITH

Why *Tosca* is easy to love

**BROADCASTS:** *Elektra, Trovatore, Khovanshchina, Tosca*

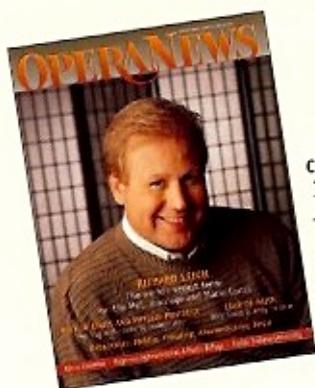
Elena Zaremba • Hugo von Hofmannsthal: A Poet's Refuge • Inside Indiana University

# OPERANNEWS

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*Photographed in New York by Gene Martin*

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# the tenor

A photograph of Richard Leech, a man with short brown hair, smiling broadly and looking towards the camera. He is wearing a blue button-down shirt and a patterned tie. He is surrounded by a crowd of people, some of whom are raising their hands and holding up a large, round, metallic object, possibly a tambourine or a similar instrument. The background is slightly out of focus, showing the faces and movements of the crowd.

APART FROM HIS ROBUST VOICE AND ALL-AMERICAN CHARM, RICHARD LEECH IS ABOUT AS UNLIKE HIS TROUBLED, TEMPERAMENTAL IDOL, MARIO LANZA, AS HE CAN BE

# Next Door

BY BROOKS PETERS



**i**n the opera world, there is always a “brilliant new tenor” on the horizon — the next Caruso, the great pretender to the high-C throne. They seem to rush in like hurricanes, with last names as their labels. One year it’s Araiza, another Giménez, then Alagna, Giordani, now Álvarez and Cura — a steady stream of heirs apparent to the holy trinity of Domingo, Carreras and Pavarotti. But for the last fifteen years, one of the finest tenors on the scene has been conspicuously unheralded — Richard Leech, who has risen to the top of his field almost by stealth.



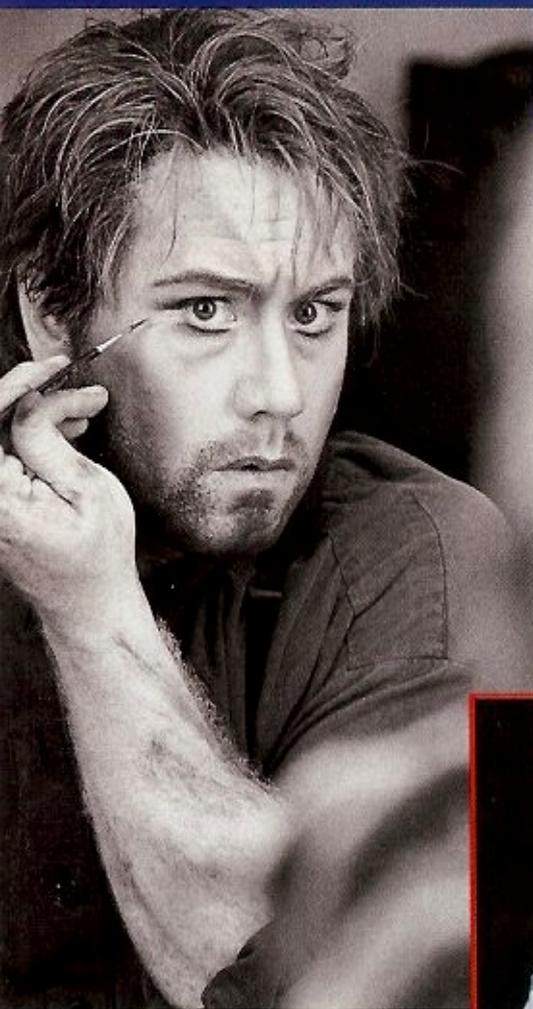
LEECH FIRST MADE IMPORTANT OPERATIC WAVES AS NEW YORK CITY OPERA’S RODOLFO IN THE EARLY EIGHTIES (INSET); TODAY HIS ACCOMPLISHMENTS HAVE SURPASSED THOSE OF HIS EARLY IDOL MARIO LANZA

Think back to James Levine’s twenty-fifth-anniversary gala at the Met, that elephantine but exhilarating extravaganza broadcast live on PBS in 1996. Leech had the thankless task of appearing just after Renée Fleming brought down the house with a rapturous “Depuis le jour.” Leech strode out confidently and sang a heartrending “Lamento di Federico” from *L’Arlesiana*. Yet his

PHOTO: GENE MARTIN

MARCH 1999

“i don't fit the profile  
I'm just a



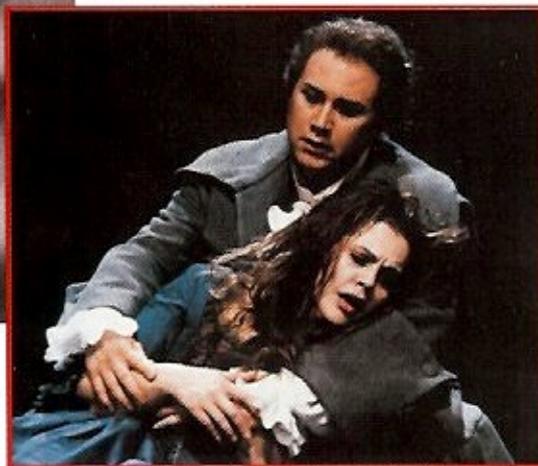
most “heavenly” Faust (to quote his early supporter Beverly Sills) not better known? Even at a house as loyal as the Met, where he has sung leading roles every year since his debut in 1989, Leech is not yet a household name. And why is a nice-looking, clean-cut American tenor with an enviable recording legacy and a fine new album of arias and songs (“From the Heart,” Telarc) not featured in more record stores or promoted in Columbia House music catalogues like every new wunderkind on the block? Maybe it's because he's a blond, born in California — and most opera aficionados seem to prefer their tenors to be dark, temperamental Latins. Perhaps it's because he's relatively trim and athletic, with real stage

you have over your career. It's liberating, but also confining. Luckily, except for a very small handful, most opera singers stay obscure. Being famous in opera is not like being Mark McGwire or Michael Jordan. We have the luxury of fame and anonymity at the same time.”

For all his success, Leech is one of the friendliest and, contrary to tenorial tradition, *sanest* singers around. He does have a few idiosyncracies: he adores air-conditioning, gulps down “Breathe Easy” tea to quell nagging allergies and sucks ice cubes to soothe his overtaxed vocal cords before dashing onstage. But pity the writer who tries to coax industry insiders to say something negative about him. The most damning comments I could dig up were that he's “cheeky,” a “perfectionist” and that he once blew his top during a rehearsal of *Contes d'Hoffmann* at the Met. But even Simone Young, who conducted that rehearsal, has good things to say. “Boy, does he keep you on your toes!” she chuckles. “He demonstrates an obsession with every detail in the score. He is a real artist, not just a singer. But he also has an extremely good sense of humor, which is a great gift when tempers are running high.”

An informal poll of local opera-lovers supports what I already suspected: women seem to like Richard Leech more than men do. Maybe it's the boy-next-door

LEECH'S SIGNATURE ROLES NOW INCLUDE DON JOSÉ (MAKING UP FOR SAN DIEGO'S CARMEN, ABOVE), DES GRIEUX (IN PARIS, WITH RENÉE FLEMING AS MANON) AND RAOUL IN *LES HUGUENOTS* (AT THE ROYAL OPERA, COVENT GARDEN)



contribution went largely unnoticed, while Pavarotti generated a mountain of press clips for the same event simply by not showing up.

When Pavarotti canceled again this season, bowing out of all his Met *Toscas* to recover from knee surgery, Leech, who had already sung several scheduled performances as Cavaradossi, was tapped to sing the remainder. Then, in a surprise development in late November, Pavarotti decided he was well enough to sing the final three performances of the season, claiming Cavaradossi for March 16, 20 and 25. Though Leech had to relinquish his originally scheduled March performances, there will surely be more Cavaradossis in his Met future, for it's a role he was born to sing. He performs it with pathos and intelligence and with enough rafter-stirring high notes to satisfy many in the audience.

Why is the best Rodolfo in America, the smartest Pinkerton on any stage, the

presence, whereas tenors are meant to stay put, their legs planted firmly like the pillars of Hercules, making their mark through voice alone. Or maybe it's his less than euphonious name.

“What makes me so controversial,” Leech says, with a touch of irony, over lunch at Manhattan's Café Luxembourg, “is that I don't fit the profile of an opera star. I'm not what people expect. I'm just a normal, American, small-town guy at heart.” With that attitude comes a certain native humility. Leech is fully aware of his predicament but seems surprisingly at ease with it. In fact, he suggests that the lack of attention has been a bonus. “I think of my singing as a job,” he says. “I try not to define my career and where I want to go in terms of fame. Fame defines itself. The more success you have, the more control



phenomenon. (Without his stage make-up, Leech has a faceful of freckles.) If the tenor is notorious for anything, it's for having the world's wackiest fan, banker Rosemary Dunne, who has followed him around the world to more than 200 performances, showering him with bizarre keepsakes: golf balls inscribed with his every opera gig, a “life calendar” noting salient events since March 26, 1957, the day he was born. Dunne's unflagging, and

of an opera star.

normal, American, small-town guy at heart.”

apparently much appreciated, devotion was chronicled in a widely discussed article last year in *The New York Times*. The ironic subtext of the piece, of course, was that she was following *Richard Leech* around. The article probably would not have appeared if she'd been a Domingo or Carreras fan.

Back in 1984, when Leech was first making waves as Rodolfo at New York City Opera, he received a glowing review from Will Crutchfield in the *Times*. "Apart from Luciano Pavarotti on his best nights," the critic noted, "I can't think of a current tenor I'd rather hear in the part." Since that time, many new tenors have made their bid for the limelight. How does Leech feel about Roberto Alagna and other young singers who have drawn more recent comparisons to Pavarotti? "They're very different singers," Leech says diplomatically. "You can talk about specifics or technique, but to compare one singer to another is too subjective. I leave it to the audience to say, 'I like that singer.' As for me, I sing with the voice that was given to me, in the way that pleases me. And that is all I can do."

Nevertheless, some observers have likened Leech's simple, unpretentious style to such pure singers as Alfredo Kraus and Tito Schipa. "Schipa was an amazing singer," Leech says. "He understood his own voice maybe better than anyone I've heard. Listening to him is a real lesson in phrasing and portamento." Leech's plangent, sweet-toned instrument also offers a thrilling top that opera impresarios cherish because it's so consistent. "Ricky has this wonderful youthful quality, with an edge that cuts across an orchestra," says Beverly Sills, who first heard Leech years ago on the recommendation of Christopher Keene, the late artistic director of City Opera. "There's a real ping to it. One thing about Richard is that if I hear him on a recording or the radio, I always recognize his voice, just like I know Isaac Stern's violin. In the end, that's what separates the men from the boys."

Leech didn't think much about music when he was growing up. "I was never a big listener," he says. "I bought a guitar and wrote dumb songs. I enjoyed music but never got into it the way so many kids do." Born in Hollywood, California, Leech migrated with his family to Binghamton, in upstate New York, when he was eight. His father, originally from Vir-

ginia, was an IBM employee, with "a white shirt and a slide rule." His mother was a native of Los Angeles whose grandfather had moved west after making his mark selling stereoptic photography devices in Pennsylvania. "He was also a world-class fencer who taught fencing to the early movie stars," Leech says. "My grandmother was a concert pianist. My

cultural influences were such that it never occurred to me growing up that opera wasn't a cool thing to do." (An interesting side note: Richard's maternal grandfather was a sound man responsible for making the "swooshing" effect whenever Superman flew on the screen.)

Leech first learned that he had an unusual voice at fifteen, when a choir



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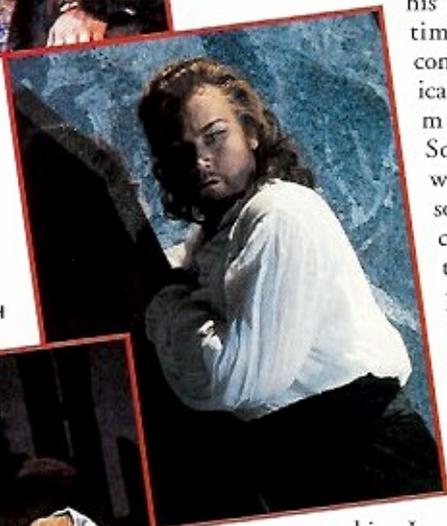
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METROPOLITAN OPERA CREDITS FOR THE TENOR RANGE FROM BEL CANTO TO VERISMO: FROM TOP, LEECH IN *UN BALLO IN MASCHERA*, *LUCIA DI LAMMERMOOR*, *ROMÉO ET JULIETTE* (WITH PAUL PLISHKA AND RUTH ANN SWENSON) AND *MADAMA BUTTERFLY* (WITH CATHERINE MALFITANO)



teacher suggested he take lessons. Later, working as a cook and then as a busboy in a restaurant, he was constantly being corralled into singing “Happy Birthday” for the customers. Word soon got around that he had a major talent. (If the story sounds a bit like a Hollywood movie starring Mario Lanza, it’s only fitting. From his early childhood, Leech was exposed to records of the Hollywood heartthrob on his parents’ hi-fi. In time, Lanza would come to play a significant role in Leech’s musical career.) Soon the teenager was performing solos in the school chorus. He joined the Summer Savoyards, a local Gilbert & Sullivan troupe. “All of a sudden, around seventeen or so, I thought maybe this is something I could pursue professionally,” he recalls. “The more I lived around opera, the more that love was nourished and became a passion.”

Binghamton proved a propitious place to “live around opera,” thanks to Tri-Cities Opera, which recently celebrated its fiftieth anniversary (see OPERA NEWS, August 1998). Having learned the ropes there as a teenager helping out backstage and performing small roles, Leech had his “baptism of fire” when he sang the title role of *Contes d’Hoffmann* at twenty-two. “Luckily, I didn’t know how hard it was,” he laughs. “I just sang it. That’s the great thing about youth. You just do it — under watchful eyes, mind you. I had been doing Goro, every First Justice in the world, even Siebel. I had earned my wings.”

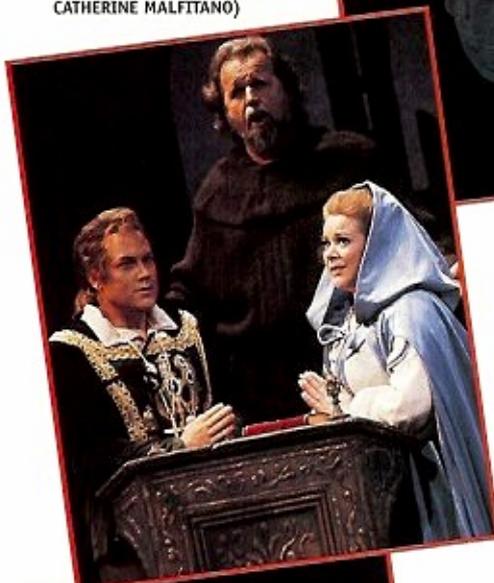
Leech also earned raves that propelled him in 1984 to Carnegie Hall, where he sang in a concert version of Donizetti’s little-known *Dom Sébastien* with Opera Orchestra of New York (available on Legato Classics). New York City Opera wooed him that same year. “It was a pretty quick journey, and I wouldn’t have wanted it any quicker,” he says. “No’ is the operative word when trying to build a career.” No to what? “To City Opera. They offered me a contract for more money than I had ever

earned in a year, and for only three months or so, but it was for a couple of roles I wanted to sing, some I shouldn’t sing and a bunch of comprimario roles in between nights. That wasn’t what I wanted. I knew I would end up doing bad performances, and to be looked at on the wrong night doing a bad performance is not good for your career. The following year they offered me *Bohème* as a guest artist — which was what I wanted.”

Unlike many other American singers of his generation, Leech didn’t automatically go to Europe to further his training. “I was happy at Tri-Cities, doing *Rigoletto*, *Bohème*, *Faust*, *Butterfly*, *Lucia* — all this incredible repertory.” But in 1987, he was lured overseas to sing Raoul in Meyerbeer’s rarely staged grand opera *Les Huguenots* at Deutsche Oper Berlin. Replacing an ailing René Kollo, Leech created a sensation, singing in German, opposite Pilar Lorengar, then in her late fifties, but still peerless. “She changed how I view opera and who I am as an opera singer,” he says. “She was incredible dramatically, and wonderfully generous. She helped me get through a duet that was a killer. When I had to sing a phrase up to a high C, she led me to the place, vocally and mentally, creating a synergy between us. She brought out the best in me.”

A year later, Leech reprised the role in Montpellier, France (recorded live by Erato), in the original language. This time, the score was uncut, and the evening ran over six hours. “I ate two chickens during the performance,” he recalls. Reviewers, starved for a hero in the French manner, were ecstatic. Leech’s crisp delivery and flawless accent fit the Gallic canon perfectly. Back in New York, he won the prestigious Richard Tucker award. The grant helped pay for singing lessons and afforded him the freedom to pick and choose his next roles. As if on cue, the Met offered him Rodolfo for his debut in 1989.

Since then, Leech has crisscrossed America, singing at all the major opera houses — San Francisco, Los Angeles, Chicago, Houston, Santa Fe, Cincinnati, Miami. Abroad, he has sung at La Scala, Covent Garden, Vienna and Paris, his repertory embracing *Rigoletto*, *Werther*, *Manon*, *Roméo et Juliette*, *Carmen*, *Un Ballo in Maschera* and *I Lombardi*. Leech has become a frequent partner of such American sopranos as Renée Fleming, Aprile Millo and Patricia Racette. “Ricky



I am living Mario's dream.

I'm having the operatic career he wanted."

is a really generous artist," says Racette, the 1998 Tucker award winner and a frequent *Bohème* co-star. "He has so much energy and charisma that he funnels into the character. He's as strong as a horse, always ready to get out of the gate." Leech returns the compliment, describing Racette as "scrumptious," then a worried look flashes across his face. "Are you going to tell Renée that I said Pat was scrumptious — get me in trouble with my sopranos?"

Among Leech's most memorable triumphs was his riveting portrayal of Pinkerton in the Met's controversial Giancarlo del Monaco production of *Madama Butterfly*. The Italian director instilled a seething sensuality into the story. Who can forget the climax of the love duet, when Pinkerton pulled down the top of Cio-Cio-San's (Catherine Malfitano) kimono, revealing her bare shoulders? At one performance, that moment drew loud boos from Licia Albanese, a famous Met Cio-Cio-San who was in the audience. "Somebody who was up in the Dress Circle wrote me," Leech recounts

with a laugh, "saying, 'I loved the production, but they should never add sounds to the score the way they did at the end of Act I. To have Butterfly moaning in ecstasy was highly inappropriate.'"

For years, Leech avoided the role of Cavaradossi. He finally sang it for the first time, at Cincinnati Opera, in 1993. "By then, I was so ripe, it wasn't funny," he says. "Cavaradossi is so complex. You have to look at him as a lover. Anyone who has been in love with a diva knows it is not an easy thing! Puccini was brilliant in the way he gave Cavaradossi this very relaxed moment in Act I, where he sits back and observes Tosca. In his mind, he's saying, 'She's nuts, and she's wonderful!' What makes Cavaradossi so unusual is that he's able to see the woman through the diva."

**W**hile opera has been good to Leech, he yearns for a return to an era when the distinction between classical and popular categories was less severe. Opera singers appeared routinely on *The Ed Sullivan Show* in the '50s and

'60s, singing mainstream standards as well as arias. That's where Leech's boyhood hero Mario Lanza comes in. Since 1995, Leech has been giving recitals in which he performs a tribute to the troubled movie and recording star, who fancied himself the American Caruso and died prematurely at thirty-eight in 1959. Last June, Leech opened the Grant Park Music Festival in Chicago with his Lanza act. "What I am trying to do is to be able to sing both 'Be My Love' and 'Che gelida manina,' and show that the lines are not so sharply drawn." What he is also cannily succeeding in doing is drawing more attention to Richard Leech. These concerts just might be the breakthrough he needs. (He brings his Lanza tribute to Carnegie Hall this fall, with Skitch Henderson and the New York Pops, on October 8.)

While Leech sounds nothing like Lanza, he conveys the same level of passion and warmth that made Lanza a crossover phenomenon. Leech's between-songs patter (which he wrote with Laurie

*continued on page 102*

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repertory that threatens his middle register, as critics have repeatedly suggested? "Sometimes the voice is not functioning at 100 percent," he acknowledges, "but usually the [critics'] perceptions of why that is so are wrong. There are a number of reasons that someone outside my life cannot figure out. It's not a problem with singing the wrong repertory. Sometimes you have this tickle in your throat, and you didn't sleep the night before." Problems can also arise from too much humidity and a malfunctioning sound system, as was the case with the Chicago Lanza concert, which was held outdoors on a warm evening. Or perhaps the conductor and the singer are on different wavelengths, as seemed to be the case during the first Met *Tosca* last fall. But then, everyone onstage (and many in the audience) that night seemed to find Nello Santi's tempos perplexing. At any rate, says Leech, the bottom line is the connection to the audience. "No matter how the voice is functioning, I try to stay focused on honest communication. That is what touches an audience — not sound. The ideal response is not 'Oh what a great voice he has!' but silence. That's when you know they were moved."

If Leech's history is any indication, present difficulties will soon be surmounted. "I'm very excited about this stage of my career," he continues. "I've paid my dues, in a sense. In your early twenties, you have all this potential, and you have to sort of survive that time without losing your voice. Then there's a big hump in the late thirties or early forties. I feel that I've come through the second hump of danger. I am happier with my singing now than I ever was before — and that makes it a blast."

When the time comes to put performing on hold, Leech will have no qualms about moving on. "Some people lose their status as an opera star," he says. "If that is what is most important to you, you are vulnerable to losing your identity. You must keep your own priorities. To put the briefcase down, hang your hat on a hook and come home to your family — that is your life." He smiles winningly. "Right now, I'm blessed with the ability to do what I love to do. And don't tell Joe Volpe, but I'd do it for free." □

BROOKS PETERS, a contributing editor at *Quest* magazine, has written for *Vanity Fair*, *Architectural Digest*, *Interview* and *Out*.



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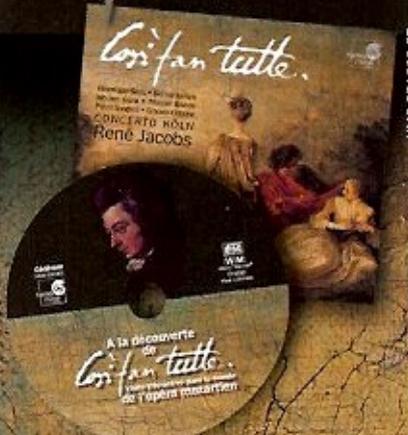
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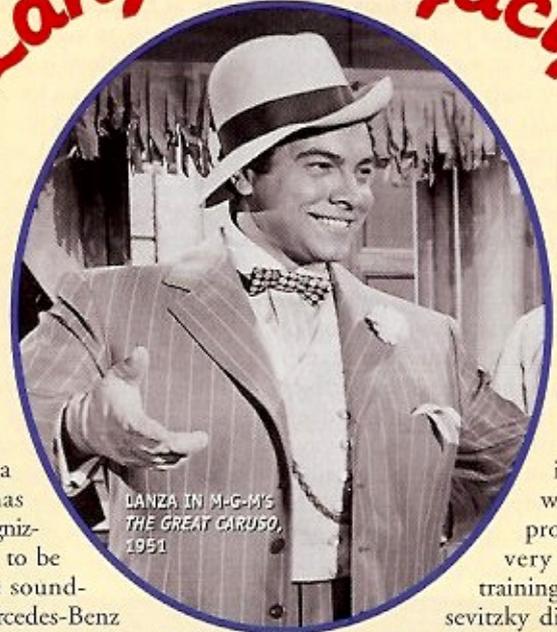


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**Lanza's Legacy**



When a voice has become recognizable enough to be used on the soundtracks of Mercedes-Benz commercials, it is truly consecrated. Mario Lanza reached that exalted status last summer. Fifty years after the fact, consumers are hip to what Lanza fans have known since his heyday in the '50s: the troubled but gifted Italian-American tenor was, simply and indisputably, one of the century's great vocal phenomena.

A Lanza search on the Internet will yield dozens of web pages. Look for a biography of him, and you'll find that four have been published, and two more are on the way. Lanza CDs are flooding the record stores. Fan clubs are popping up all over the country and overseas — in England, Italy, Germany, Belgium, the Netherlands and Australia. Leading the Lanza revival on the opera front is Richard Leech, who considers Lanza an inspiration and influence. Last summer in Chicago's Grant Park, 12,000 fans showed up for a Mario Lanza tribute hosted, narrated and sung by Leech.

All this for a man who sang a total of three opera performances in his life.

Born Alfredo Arnold Cocozza in New York City, Lanza, the son of

immigrants, was a vocal prodigy but had very little formal training. Serge Koussevitzky discovered him at an audition in Philadelphia and cast him as Fenton in a single performance of *The Merry Wives of Windsor* at Tanglewood on August 7, 1942. After an army stint during World War II, he teamed up with George London and Frances Yeend to form the Bel Canto Trio. When M-G-M studio chief Louis B. Mayer heard Lanza sing at the Hollywood Bowl, he promptly signed him to a seven-year contract. Except for two performances of *Madama Butterfly* in New Orleans, the opera world would never hear from Lanza again.

His films and records made him one of the biggest pop stars of the '50s, until he suddenly died in mysterious circumstances on October 7, 1959, at thirty-eight. The death was officially ruled a heart attack due to bingeing on food and alcohol, but a suspicion has persisted that Lanza met his end at the hands of gangster Lucky Luciano, because the tenor refused to do business with him.

Lanza's talent, star power and early death have made him an icon to rank with other '50s flame-outs like James

Dean and Marilyn Monroe. All three died young; all three created a visceral response in the public that retains its power and mystique despite decades of radical change in fashion and taste. Lanza's looks and exuberant charm alone would have qualified him for film stardom; the added attraction of that magnificent voice gave him a crossover appeal that has never been matched. He remains the only operatic tenor in history to have become a Hollywood superstar. "He is at once the delight of bobby-soxers, housewives and ordinary song-lovers," said *Time* magazine in a 1951 cover story, "and the despair of musical highbrows who believe that a great singer's goal should be the Metropolitan, not Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer."

Lanza's voice is rich, ripe, unmistakable. A huge column of spinto sound, it mixes Italianate ardor with a very American brightness — and perhaps this is one of the secrets of his enormous appeal. Lanza was a first-generation Italian-American, and he succeeded in blending and enhancing the attributes of the old world with the enthusiastic optimism of the new. There is a joy in his voice that radiates a pure love of singing, a heart held wide open to an audience. To hear Lanza's records is to fall willing prey to his power. His films — such as *Serenade*, which shows what he could do in everything from *L'Arlesiana* to *Otello* — make it clear that the world lost a fine singing actor when he died. There has never been another American tenor with such an astonishing concentration of gifts.

Arturo Toscanini dubbed Lanza "the greatest natural voice of the twentieth century." Time has not done much to alter that assessment. ERIC MYERS

### Recordings and Video

CD: *Lanza's Greatest Hits*. RCA 68134.

*The Mario Lanza Collection*.

RCA 60889 (3).

VHS: *That Midnight Kiss* (MGM-UA, 1949).

*The Great Caruso*, with guest

appearances by Dorothy Kirsten,

Jarmila Novotná (MGM-UA, 1951).

*Serenade* (MGM-UA, 1956).

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