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## LAURI-VOLPI VS. THE VERISMO STYLE

**FC:** Old-style heroic tenors such as Giacomo Lauri-Volpi sang the center and bottom notes lightly and sweetly but let loose on top. Lauri-Volpi's repertory was vast, but the operas that suited him best were *Tell*, *Puritani*, *Poliuto*, *Turandot*,<sup>a</sup> *Luisa Miller* and *Ugonotti*, heroic works where he could neglect the center notes and seek to display brilliance and high notes and where he could emphasize classical style and purity of tone over passion. In contrast verismo singers favor the center notes and sing with portamento and heart. In verismo the theatrical effect of the phrase is more important than purity of tone. Words sometimes are more important than music, and you have to use the center notes to interpret them.

**SZ:** What are the characteristics of the verismo tenor?

**FC:** The verismo tenor has a round, strong middle voice and pushes high notes with his guts. Caruso gave us this manner of singing. As a verismo tenor you do try to sing beautifully, lightly and sweetly, at moments. You must have this chiaroscuro, this contrast. But

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a In common with Iris Adami Corradetti, Gina Cigna, Magda Olivero, Rosa Raisa and Eva Turner Corelli always pronounced the name "Turando."

*Opposite: Giacomo Lauri-Volpi as il Duca, Met, 1923. He called Rigoletto "the opera that made my fortune." He made his Scala and Met debuts in it and sang it more than 300 times.*

you can't sing some notes in *falsettone*<sup>b</sup>—no more of that!—you've got to sing with your real voice even when you sing softly. You do your sensual singing in the middle and only sing high notes on occasion. The risk for the heroic tenor who sings verismo is abuse of the center: he won't be able to sing the high notes called for by the heroic repertory. If you push your center you lose your high C. Heroic tenors can sing verismo, but verismo tenors generally cannot sing heroic repertory.

SZ: And Lauri-Volpi?

FC: When he was studying around 1915, the influence of the nineteenth century still was felt strongly. He worked with people from then who especially were conscious of style.

SZ: What was he like as an interpreter?

FC: He was Romantic, far from verismo. His singing of verismo repertory wasn't impulsive; it was too noble. He was like a priest. He wanted his voice to be dreamlike, to express pathos and suffering. Otherwise, he wasn't preoccupied about emphasis, color or expression.

SZ: And his voice?

FC: It pealed forth like a thunderclap. It was steely and alive, not dark, incisive but not dramatic.

SZ: What's the difference?

FC: The voice was too bright to be dramatic; it didn't have the color of a cello. Every note was silvery pure, at any rate in the octave

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b *Falsettone*: Corelli thinks of this as a mix of falsetto and chest voice; some others think of it as a mix of head and chest voice, "falsetto" at one time typically having been synonymous with "head voice."



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*Lauri-Volpi as a boy*



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*Onstage and backstage Lauri-Volpi was irritable and, when pushed, could be suspicious, aggressive, even violent. In private he was a perfect gentleman, refined, sensitive, chivalrous.*



between C in the middle and high C. His emission was so perfect that even his low notes rang. His low C was silvery, not heavy. He was able to have strong notes in the center, but he disliked muscular singing.

**SZ:** What then did he make of Del Monaco's singing? Did he find it muscular?

**FC:** He thought exactly that—that Del Monaco's singing not only was muscular but that he also broke legato, had insufficient sweetness, an insufficient mezza voce and didn't do enough diminuendos, that he couldn't observe composers' markings.

**SZ:** What was Lauri-Volpi's breathing like?

**FC:** He had a long breath span: he once said to me, "See, after a mere sniff of air I can sing twenty seconds"—and he did! When he sniffed his diaphragm flexed out.

**SZ:** What was his diction like?

**FC:** It was pellucid, hammered out, especially in *Trovatore* and *Luisa Miller*.

**SZ:** What was the highest note you heard him sing in person?

**FC:** E-flat. He had almost three octaves at his disposal.

**SZ:** Did his singing have flaws?

**FC:** His first octave was unstable, but in the period 1940–45 it gained in strength and became fuller. The high notes on his early records are narrow; later, they are covered, round but focused. So wonderfully well focused were his top notes that you were all the more aware that they sometimes went sharp. In singing mezza voce he



*Lauri-Volpi as Andrea Chénier: he was loath to sing the role because he feared that its middle-voice tessitura would shorten his top.*

had intonation problems stemming from holding his larynx too low. He told me that when he was to make his debut, in *Manon*, the theater was agonizing over whether or not to cancel the performances on account of his faulty intonation. They decided to give him one last chance and summoned him to a rehearsal with orchestra at 1:00 p.m. on the day of the premiere. Only afterwards did they decide to go ahead with the performance.

He sang with his larynx lowered to the maximum, without pushing, but I don't know if he sang that way because of technique or birthright. He was well endowed by nature; his voice placement was too good to have been the result only of study. Those whose singing largely is the result of study have some problems, in particular, in the *passaggio*.

SZ: Where was his *passaggio*?

FC: On F-sharp. [In *Voci parallele* Lauri-Volpi states in several places that his *passaggio* was not on F-sharp but on G-sharp or between G and A-flat.<sup>1</sup>]

SZ: Where is yours?

FC: In the same place [F-sharp—on occasion he said “F-F-sharp”].

Every other tenor sounds at least somewhat constricted in the *passaggio*, but Lauri-Volpi's F-sharp was like his high B-flat, with the same harmonics, silvery color and rotundity. In any case his voice was free: not one neck muscle was tight. As he continued his career his intonation improved.

SZ: How else did his singing change over the years?

FC: As with many singers, at the beginning he covered his middle voice a lot. Little by little, as his singing became easier and his stamina increased, he covered less. He sang in opera for forty years from 1919 to 1959, beginning with lyric repertory, going to the lyric





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*Lauri-Volpi, a student at the Santa Cecilia conservatory, with his teacher Antonio Cotogni. To the orphaned Lauri-Volpi Cotogni behaved like a father.*

spinto and then to the dramatic. Sometimes people asked him to sing with a rounder center—and he could. His “Un dì all’azzurro spazio” [*Chénier*] was that of a heavy tenor. In the last ten years of his career he rounded his tone while keeping the purity of his singing. By the end his voice was abnormally large. Maria Caniglia told me that whenever she sang in octaves with him she couldn’t hear the orchestra because his voice was so loud.

**SZ:** Many singers get into vocal difficulty at one time or another. Did this ever happen to him?

**FC:** After a tour of *Tell* in ’33 Lauri-Volpi lost his voice—it was breaking on F-sharp. For six months he didn’t sing. He was a real believer and made a vow to God, promising to abstain from something or other if He would give him back his voice and let him sing until he died. He kept on singing with a strong voice until he went to the hospital with a stroke ten days before his death. In the the-



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*Lauri-Volpi and Maria Jeritza premiered Turandot at the Met, November 16, 1926.*

ater, however, he sometimes was less successful because of nerves. When he was old he sang three hours every day, but he told me that, as a young man, if he sang an encore he might have difficulty with a performance two days later. At eighty-six his diaphragm was like a twenty-year-old's. At eighty-seven he sounded like a fifty-year-old.



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*A still from La canzone del sole (1934), in which Lauri-Volpi portrays himself. Note his mouth and cheeks. Mascagni wrote the title song for him.*

SZ: What was he like as an actor on stage?

FC: I didn't see him enough to form a real opinion. I only caught him in *Cavalleria*, *Fanciulla* and *Turandot*. He was handsome. In those days one thought about voice more than anything else.

SZ: What was Lauri-Volpi's background?

FC: He was born at Lanuvio, a small town near Rome, on December 11, 1892 [later dates also are given], studied with Cotogni at Santa Cecilia and made his debut in Viterbo, in *Puritani*, followed shortly by *Rigoletto*.

SZ: Cotogni's ability as a teacher is under a cloud because Gigli wrote in his memoirs that he was advised by the head of Santa Cecilia to leave Cotogni and study with Enrico Rosati on the grounds that Cotogni's teaching was too non-specific and that he was too old to give Gigli rigorous training.<sup>c</sup>

FC: I don't know about this. Cotogni was said to have been a great teacher. He taught many singers who had beautiful placement and good style, including Riccardo Stracciari. Cotogni didn't teach lowering the larynx. Lauri-Volpi's larynx did that on its own.

At Lauri-Volpi's debut, in *Manon*, in Rome in 1920, he partnered Rosina Storchio, one of the great sopranos of the era, and Ezio Pinza. In the same year, in the same theater, he also sang in *Barbiere* and *Gianni Schicchi*. A couple of years later he sang at La Scala and in 1923 made his Met debut, remaining there a decade, appearing in *Rigoletto*, *Bohème*, *Traviata*, *Tosca*, *Cavalleria*, *Lucia*, *Chénier*, *Aida*, *Carmen*, *Gioconda*, *Norma*, *Trovatore* and *Tell* as well as the house premiere of *Turandot*. He was the best Calaf ever and the best tenor to have sung *Tell*.

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c Gigli also wrote, "Maestro Rosati turned out to be an ideal teacher. Without doubt he was a better teacher for me than Cotogni. He remained my guide and my mentor for the three years I spent at Santa Cecilia and prepared me for my debut." —*Memorie* (Milano: Mondadori, 1957), p. 93.

SZ: Which style of singing do you yourself prefer, the verismo or the heroic?

FC: I am a modern tenor and sing heavily throughout my range, so I feel more at ease in the verismo style. My big middle voice facilitates this; indeed, I prefer singing in the center to the top. The heroic-Romantic style also is more congenial to me. I am more attracted to the Romantic than the heroic. I'm more inclined to tears than force. I feel Romanticism more: it is the basis for my singing. I sing suffering and I sing love. But I combine Romanticism with the verismo approach. My recitatives are impetuous rather than sickly sweet—unlike Lauri-Volpi's. He sang recitatives with less emphasis, as if they were chamber music; they sounded composed instead of spontaneous.

SZ: How did you feel about singing such earlier works as *Ugonotti* and *Tell*?

FC: *Ugonotti* is more Romantic than *Tell*, which is more heroic. When I was working on *Tell* in '64 [*sic*] I had some difficulty with the center notes and the lower high notes. I visited Lauri-Volpi at his home at Burjasot, near Valencia, to ask him for advice about my singing. He thought my voice was too heavy and that I compromised my ability to have a good climax on high notes by singing my center too loudly. He wanted my voice to float more.

SZ: How long did you work with him?

FC: Each year for thirteen years I spent a month in Valencia studying with him. He was very cultivated and interesting, wrote many books and had the memory of a twenty-year-old, describing his debut in *Manon* as if it had been the day before. I had confidence that he knew his technique.

SZ: What did he think of your technique and style?



**FC:** He wanted to lighten and brighten my voice. “Sing as you did as a young boy,” he told me, “Imitate a baby crying.” He advised me to hold back my voice a little before high notes. He would say, “Corelli, remember, the aria is three or four minutes long. In ninety-five percent of the cases the high note is at the end. The more you push in the middle voice the more difficulty you’ll have on the high note. When you do the high note well the public applauds. When you don’t it doesn’t.” I didn’t like what he had me do with the beginning of “O soave fanciulla” [*Bohème*] because it was too light for my voice. He tried to make me sing certain phrases more smoothly if with less juvenile ardor and impetuosity. He had me sing more clearly, less round and dark, with purer vowels. However, when a person is making a career, sometimes you should leave his technique alone even if it is not right. When you sing as I do, with the laryngeal method, and also have a *mezza voce*—that’s good technique.

**SZ:** He didn’t disapprove of your basing your technique on lowering the larynx?

**FC:** No, he didn’t disapprove.

**SZ:** What were his own goals with regard to technique and style?

**FC:** He wanted his singing to be on the breath. He rejected singing with the sound squashed in the mask—and so do I. He abstained from sobbing. I sob too much albeit spontaneously: the words bring it out of me. But in the true style as expounded by Lauri-Volpi this wasn’t admitted often. His was a contained heroicism, something apart from *verismo*.

**SZ:** What do you mean by that?

**FC:** He didn’t slobber or drool. In *verismo* much is permitted, even vulgar things. One needn’t be vulgar, but the style does permit it.