

# OPERA FANATIC

## Biographies, Opinions — and Dish

by Stefan Zucker

### *Leyla Gencer*

“I actually cried on stage. Once in a while a note would issue forth that was not orthodox. That’s why the American critics don’t like me. But I don’t care. They want a music with water and soap.”



BORN IN 1928 (some reference books give dates as early as 1924) near Istanbul to a Polish Catholic mother and a wealthy Turkish Moslem father, Gencer received a classical European-style education. Her mother pulled her out of a lyceum at 16 because she had fallen in love with a 34-year-old Polish architect with whom she read Plato. Her mother enrolled her in a conservatory. Initially her range extended to high F, but a French voice teacher soon shortened it to high A. She entered a competition in Holland without success and, in 1946, married a banker. She was temperamental and difficult, but he loved her. She left the conservatory to study with Giannina Arangi Lombardi, meanwhile singing in the chorus of the Turkish State Theater.

Her opera debut was in Ankara, as *Santuzza*, in 1950. Arangi Lombardi promised to launch Gencer’s career in Italy but died in 1951. Still in Turkey, Gencer took lessons from Apollo Granforte and was accompanied by Alfred Cortot. She gave a recital, was noticed by the government and began singing at official functions, such as receptions for Eisenhower, Tito and Adenauer. Wrapped around her little finger were the President of Turkey and other high government officials. They interceded on several occasions so that her Turkish commitments wouldn’t interfere with her foreign offers. She had a much publicized affair with

American Ambassador George McGhee. Her Italian debut came about on short notice—Santuzza with the San Carlo’s 1953 summer season. From 1957, she appeared at La Scala, including in the world premieres of *I dialoghi delle Carmelitane* (Poulenc) and *L’assassino nella cattedrale* (Pizzetti).

Gencer performed in San Francisco, Dallas, Chicago, Philadelphia, New York (Carnegie Hall), Verona, Florence, Spoleto, Rome, Vienna, Salzburg, Munich, Brussels, London, Glyndebourne, Edinburgh, Oslo, Stockholm, Warsaw, Moscow, Leningrad, Buenos Aires and Rio.

Olivero embodies Italian—or at any rate verismo—tradition, disseminated by the composers and teachers with whom she coached. Gencer, on the other hand, said:

I had no tradition of opera, of singing, such as existed here in Europe, in Italy. Everything was new for me. When I studied, I remained very close to the score as written. I didn’t imitate anyone. I sang according to my own musical conception, according to my own musical understanding. My colleagues had grown up in the verismo era and believed you always had to sing forte. Perhaps because I hadn’t heard the others, I was untainted by any vestige of the infamous age of verismo.

The return to the school of bel canto singing was not

*Leyla Gencer told Stefan Zucker: “I gave more bad performances than good ones.”*

*Right: at La Scala, in Opera Fanatic*



without its problems. There was an emphasis on loud singing, on exaggeration. I sang with delicacy and nuance—a style that in a few years everyone imitated.

In the 50s she sometimes had a mediocre breath span, inadequate breath support and a tendency to flat. Her middle voice didn't really sound fresh. But she could be tender, plaintive and full of yearning. And she had ravishing high pianissimos, such as the C in "O patria mia," and excellent coloratura. Her sound could be dark, almost husky, for heavy roles and limpid and lyric for light ones. As Lucia, in general she adopted a bright sound, reserving a darker quality for such moments as "il fantasma."

Although it is not unusual for substantial voices to have good agility in general, I can think of few examples of their having good staccatos. (Sutherland, for instance, sometimes avoided singing them or sang them slowly.) Thus I was astonished on hearing Gencer come out with the staccatos of a soprano leggero in "Regnava nel silenzio."

In a 1957 film of *Trovatore* (BCS Video #5, now deleted), she often sings with fragility and otherworldly inwardness. She supplicates beautifully, exhorts with wonderful urgency and conveys the pathos of the death scene more affectingly than any other Leonora on video or CD.

As both actress and musician her timing is exquisite. She adds some crescendo to impel phrases toward their most dissonant points, their harmonic climaxes. When there's a tied note she supplies a pinch of crescendo at the tie so that you feel the pulse. (This last touch, not uncommon with instrumentalists, is rare with opera singers.) She has a good trill, also lovely fioritura, particularly in descending passages. Her voice has *smalto* (bloom, sheen, enamel)—which it lost ten years later.

In Italy, foreigners usually only were engaged for works that couldn't be well cast with Italians. In 1957 the country was not suffering from a dearth of Leonoras. Perhaps Italy cast Gencer in Verdi because she knew how to *valorizzare la parola* (to give value

to the word), to make every syllable count.

Her 72-role repertory included operas by Prokofiev and Mozart (also concert works and songs), but she is best known for Donizetti, Bellini and Verdi. She declared:

You must always seek to adapt the voice to the score. The voice must not be of one color alone. It must be like an artist's palette and have many colors. You cannot sing *Lucia* and *Forza* with the same voice. They have different ranges of color, they express different sentiments. You must find the right expression and the right color. When I began to sing the more dramatic operas, my voice became thicker, the color more burnished and perhaps also more interesting.

We artists are strange beasts, and sometimes we exaggerate when we wish to emphasize certain dramatic passages. I began to do that when I started working with maestros such as Gavazzeni [as early as 1958—the Italian opera community takes for granted they became lovers]. He demanded great intensity.

She didn't have chest resonance by nature but developed it for interpretive purposes. A literalist, she rarely embellished the Donizetti scores in which she came to specialize.

In *Roberto Devereux* (1964) she sang with a thrilling white-hot emotional intensity and used chest resonance amply. Her sound was at moments a bit spread in pitch. But she packed such a wallop and sang with such sizzle that the recording is one of the handful of memorable opera recordings since W.W. II.

In a 1966 *Aida* (BCS Video #610A), Gencer's performance is distinguished by the vigor of her rhythm, created by a feeling for precise rhythm relationships, also by swiftness of attack. As with other singers, her consonants are positioned just before the beat and her vowels begin right on the beat. Other singers' consonants, however, take up more time. Notice how quickly her notes reach peak volume. This quick rise time enables her to minimize loss of volume of short notes and make a great deal out of, say, the 16th

note in an emphatic passage with a dotted eighth and a 16th. Aside from the odd scoop, her intonation is better than most singers'. Her scale is even in power without the weakness low in the staff, around G and A, characteristic of most sopranos. Her chest voice is strong. She has good control over dynamics, including a pianissimo. Her vocal personality is fierce.

A huge number of her live performances have been issued on LP and CD.

## Magda Olivero

“One has to find the exact facial expression for what one is saying and singing. If one just sings, without putting in any heart or soul, it remains just beautiful singing and not a soul that sings!”

Demonstrations: *Adriana*, *Tosca*



“SHE HAS NO VOICE. She has no musicality. She has no personality. She has nothing. Change profession.” That was the verdict of V.I.P.s from Italian radio concerning the young Magda Olivero. Olivero had come with a recommendation from an important magistrate, so the radio staff felt bound, at her insistence, to give her a second audition. The result was the same—with one difference. Voice teacher Luigi Gerussi said, “I’d like to teach her.” “If you want to waste your time, waste it,” one of the others remarked.

Olivero, too, had her doubts. “I’ve already changed teachers three times, and I’d have to convince my father.” Her father had come to feel her voice lessons were futile and wanted her to study piano at the conservatory. He relented, however, and Gerussi took her on. He was so severe a taskmaster that he made her cry. “This is the last time you are going to say ‘I can’t,’” he screamed. “Those

words must not exist. If necessary, I'll see you dead to get what I want! Die afterward if you wish, but first you must do what I want." Above all, they worked on breath support. Olivero already had studied piano, harmony and counterpoint with composer Giorgio Federico Ghedini. (In the days of the castratos, singers received thorough musical groundings. Since the Napoleonic Wars, however, most Italian singers have studied voice but not music.) She also studied dance and, later, Dalcroze Eurhythmics. During her career she had occasion to put her dance background to specific use in the title role of Armando La Rosa Parodi's *Cleopatra*: instead of allowing a ballerina substitute, she performed the ballet sequence, a seduction scene, herself.

Olivero was born March 25, 1910 in Saluzzo, near Turin. She was one of a handful of Italian singers who didn't come from peasant stock; her father was a judge and she was educated.

She made her debut, in 1932, as a lyric soprano, her first lead role, Laretta in *Gianni Schicchi*. In 1933 she made her La Scala debut, in a small role (Anna) in *Nabucco*. During preparations for *Favorita*, Ebe Stignani told Olivero, who was of retiring disposition, "If you have to remain in this environment you'd better become a bitch"—advice Olivero didn't heed. (According to her, neither did Stignani.) After a Gilda in 1935, following the advice of Tullio Serafin, she prepared roles for soprano leggero: Lucia, Norina, Rosina, Adina, Amina. Her range extended to F above high C. Serafin promised her the part of Philine in *Mignon* at the Rome Opera. When the contract came, however, it was not for Philine but for Elsa in *Lohengrin*. Olivero maintains that the maestro did this out of revenge because she had remained immune to his advances. To prepare herself for the challenge of Elsa, she decided to strengthen her middle voice by first undertaking *Butterfly*, *Bohème*, *Manon*, Zerlina in *Don Giovanni*, *Mese Mariano* (Giordano) and *I quattro rusteghi* and *Il campiello* (both by Wolf Ferrari). Her Elsa was a success, likewise a *Manon* with Gigli in Modena, where a critic noted her "lively intelligence at portraying

the contrasting aspects of the part.” Her career began to thrive.

However, prior to her marriage, in 1941, to industrialist Aldo Busch, she gave it all up. An innocent girl from a good family background, Olivero had been subjected to such episodes as this: The duet for soprano and tenor in Giordano’s *Marcella* concludes with an impassioned embrace and kiss. During rehearsals at La Scala, Giordano made her repeat the scene again and again. Schipa, the tenor in question, really threw himself into the action. Because of the august company Olivero dared not rebel.

For ten years after her marriage Olivero performed only intermittently, at concerts to aid charities. She had two miscarriages—and was brought back to life by Cilea. He insisted that, “An artist such as you has obligations to the public and to art.” Olivero said he called her “the ideal interpreter of Adriana,” adding, “You have gone beyond the notes. You have grasped what I felt in composing the opera and have entered into the spirit of *Adriana* as I have felt it.”

In 1951 she made her comeback, as Adriana, and her career again took wing. In 1967 she made her U.S. debut in Dallas, as Medea. In 1975, at the instigation of Marilyn Horne, Olivero

*Olivero as Adriana*





*Magda Olivero in  
Opera Fanatic*

made her Met debut, as Tosca. She was then 65 years old. In 1983, upon the death of her husband, she stopped performing. Prostrated for a number of years, she's since given several concerts and in 1993 recorded Adriana and sang on TV. Thanks perhaps to her vegetarian diet and practice of yoga, she is in good health.

Verismo sopranos were of two varieties: the fragile young girl with a slender shiny tone and the tempestuous mature woman with a large dark voice. (Sopranos today use an uninflected, charmless, all-purpose tone.) Over the years Olivero's sound changed from the first variety to the second. As she aged she grew still more intense emotionally.

Olivero's reviews in Italy always were laudatory. One critic called her "more expressive and musical than Callas." But in this country critics such as Alan Rich and Barton Wimble wrote of her with derision, regarding her vocalism as like Florence Foster Jenkins's, her style as exaggerated and campy.

Olivero was coached by Cilea and a number of now-obscure verismo composers and is the last singer with such background. For me, she distils and exemplifies the tradition. From Gemma Bellincioni to Lina Bruna Rasa, the verismo era was transfigured by searing vocal actresses. Unlike Olivero, few also were consummate musicians able through rubato (lengthening or shortening notes or groups of notes) to convey the music's tension and relaxation. More, hers is "il cantar che nell'anima si sente"—singing that is sensed in the soul. Her London/Decca *Fedora*, made in 1968, is the last emotionally important *commercial* recording of an Italian opera. Given a choice between Callas and Olivero, I'd actually pick Olivero. She has greater warmth and depth and is more moving.



In 1984 the radio program “Opera Fanatic” held two favorite soprano contests: Favorite Soprano of the Century and Favorite Soprano of Our Time. In the former Olivero came in third, after Callas and Ponselle. In the latter she came in second, after Caballé. Olivero was the only one who placed well in both contests. Unlike the other major contenders, she had given only a handful of performances in this country. (Detailed results for these two soprano contests are reported in the first issue of *Opera Fanatic*—the magazine, not the catalog.)

On recording *Fedora*:

Fortunately I had a technique that enabled me to *recitar cantando* [to act or recite through singing]. And so, in death scenes I tried my utmost, through my technique, to render my voice disembodied, that is to say, no longer a palpable human voice, to convey a human soul. An example I like to recall is the death of Fedora, which I recorded for Decca. The entire opera had been recorded. The conductor, Lamberto Gardelli, speaking for the musicians and technicians, said, “Signora, we still have two hours at our disposal.” Del Monaco, Gobbi and all the others had left. “We would like to offer you an homage. Is there something you would like to repeat?” I said, “The death of Fedora, but with my eyes closed, so as not to see the mechanical apparatus in front of me, as though I were on stage.” Maestro Gardelli replied, “Sing just as you like, with your eyes closed. We are all here, ready to follow you, with all our love.”

And so we repeated the death of Fedora only once. From beginning to end it went very well. My eyes were closed. I think you can sense this on the recording. They inserted Loris’s brief phrase, which Del Monaco already had recorded. When I listen to the scene, I think young people who are prejudiced against the opera will feel such



*Olivero in Traviata*

emotion that they can no longer say we can't accept this, this voice singing on and on, with all those high notes, while the character is supposed to be dying. I succeeded in making even those high notes ethereal, even if they weren't written this way, because I had the good fortune to study with two exceptional maestros [Gerussi and Luigi Ricci]. They taught me the true technique, which enables the artist to go on-stage thinking about acting rather than singing. This is

something wonderful, because you feel emotions, sensations that are indescribable.

I remember, for example, the last act of *Traviata*, on an evening in which I had perhaps a particular physical and psychic equilibrium. It was as though for a moment I had gone beyond the barrier of the human, although just for an instant.

Olivero on Mario Del Monaco:

When Del Monaco and I sang *Francesca da Rimini* together at La Scala he explained his whole vocal technique to me. When he finished I said, "My dear Del Monaco, if I had to put into practice all the things you've told me, I'd stop singing right away and just disappear." The technique was so complicated: you push the larynx down, then you push this up, then you do that—in short, it made my head spin just to hear everything he did.

We recorded *Francesca* excerpts together. Francesca has

a beautiful phrase, “Paolo, datemi pace,” marked “piano,” and then Paolo enters with “Inghirlandata di violette,” which also should be sung softly, delicately. Instead, Del Monaco was terrible—he *bellowed* the phrase [she imitates him and laughs]! When he listened to the playback he exclaimed, “I can’t believe it! After that soft poetic phrase I come in and what do I sound like—a boxer punching with his fists!” He recorded the phrase again, but the second attempt was more or less the same because he was incapable of singing piano. He was furious with himself because he wanted to. He tried everything, but his technique would not permit him to sing softly since it totally was based on the muscles.

On Galliano Masini:

Masini had the most beautiful voice of all tenors—a magnificent bronze sound. What a pity nature had not gifted him with a brain that corresponded to his voice! If he began a performance well, he would sing well throughout. But if he began with a cracked note, he would crack during the entire evening. In 1940 I sang some *Adrianas* with him at the Rome Opera. Offstage, he was appalling, so ordinary you could die. Onstage, he was perhaps the tenor who most resembled Maurizio, Il conte di Sassonia—regal, elegant, gorgeous. I remember his costume, embroidered with pearls. He also had a magnificent head of black wavy hair and a handsome face. Too bad he was a little slow!

On Giuseppe Lugo:

Lugo was another *stupendous* voice. I sang *Bohème* with him at the San Carlo. He was a handsome man with a beautiful voice. He has recently been reevaluated and his records reissued. Unfortunately, he is no longer with us. The beauty of that voice! There again, he was another whose brain was not the equal of his voice. Imagine, at the

peak of his career he suddenly stopped singing! Not even his wife—he had six children too—ever knew why he stopped singing overnight.

On Giuseppina Cobelli:

When Cobelli left, I inherited Adriana from her. She was intelligent, a beautiful woman with an exciting personality and a wonderful voice. And she's *never* spoken of today.

## *Fedora Barbieri*

“A singer should never change vocal color.”

—Fedora Barbieri

Demonstrations: *Falstaff*, song

BORN IN TRIESTE IN 1920, Barbieri debuted in Florence, in 1940, toured Germany, Belgium and Holland in 1943, retired because of marriage but reemerged in 1945. She is perhaps best remembered for Azucena but in the 1960s turned increasingly to character

*Fedora Barbieri in Opera Fanatic*



parts, notably, *Quickly*. During a total career of 55 years she appeared in Milan, Verona, Rome, Salzburg, Buenos Aires, London, Paris, Vienna, San Francisco and New York in a repertory of 110 roles in such operas as *Cenerentola*, *Don Carlo*, *Carmen*, *Orfeo* and *Giulio Cesare*. She made a great number of recordings, among them *Ballo*, *Favorita*, *Gioconda*, *Suor Angelica*, *Aida*, *Forza*, *Trovatore*, *Don Sebastiano*, *Medea*, *Eracle* (Handel) and *Linda di Chamounix*.

As is evident in this film, Barbieri's face is as expressive as her singing is gutsy.

*Barbieri as Eboli*



## *Giulietta Simionato*

“If I had it to do all over again,

I wouldn't become a singer.

I suffered too much.”

Demonstrations: *Samson, Trovatore*



*Giulietta Simionato in an aria from  
Samson et Dalila, in Opera Fanatic*

BORN IN 1910 on Sardinia, Simionato won a singing contest in Florence, in 1933. From 1936 she was under contract to La Scala as a cover and *comprimaria* (performer of supporting roles) but was not thought to have the voice of a leading singer. After 11 years she was “discovered” there when she was assigned Mignon. Although the audience had come not to hear her but the new star, Di Stefano, her performance was thought a revelation. She emerged as a leading mezzo, appearing in London, Paris, Berlin, Munich, Vienna, Brussels, New York, Chicago, Mexico City, Buenos Aires and Rio, also at festivals in Holland and at Verona, Glyndebourne, Edinburgh and Salzburg. Her recordings include

*Matrimonio segreto, Cavalleria, Cenerentola, Barbiere, Italiana, Trovatore, Favorita, Rigoletto, Gioconda, Suor Angelica, Falstaff, Aida, Adriana, Ballo, Forza, Carmen, Orfeo, Ugonotti, Norma, Bolena and Medea.*

When a *comprimaria*, Simionato married a Scala violinist. In the early 50s she allegedly had an affair with bass-baritone Mario Petri. She told me, however, that they merely simulated the affair so she could force a divorce and that Petri used her to advance his career. She had a long affair with an eminent doctor, whose wife, according to Simionato, was “manic depressive and a little out of her mind. He couldn’t ask her for a divorce because she was incapable of understanding and of giving her consent.” In 1965, on the death of the wife, Simionato married the doctor and, in 1966, gave up her career. After his death she married an old friend, who died in 1996.

Simionato had top notes many sopranos might envy. A voice teacher warned her not to be tempted by soprano parts, maintaining that, “The color of your voice is typical of mezzo-sopranos,

*Simionato as Amneris*



and it's the color that determines the category, not the range." She came to think of herself as a falcon\*—a hybrid between soprano and mezzo—and triumphed in the falcon role of Valentina in *Ugonotti* (La Scala, 1962). Unlike Cigna, Simionato's voice was mellow rather than penetrating.

SZ: Have you always tried to use the same color of voice?

GS: Always.

SZ: Always?

GS: Always.

SZ: Did you always sing Azucena, for example, with the same color as Amneris?

GS: The color was always the same, except that with Azucena there was naturally always this kind of madness. She had experienced such a tragedy that there was something wild and unbalanced about her, whereas with Amneris there was the yellow color of jealousy. And since I am jealous by nature—I'm jealous of people, of my possessions, of my dog—without, however, overstepping that level where it becomes something pathological or morbid. I'm jealous in the good sense of the word. When I sang Amneris I was jealousy incarnate. At a certain moment she actually has these two unfortunates buried alive, who were guilty only of loving each other. But she didn't want to permit this. There was jealousy in my voice, but the color was always the same. I couldn't change it like the painter who changes the color in his painting with his brush. The color is what it is.

SZ: Can you compare your Santuzza with Lina Bruna Rasa's?

GS: Bruna Rasa had a beautiful voice, but the poor thing soon became a little demented. She was a favorite of Mascagni because he had written *Cavalleria* for a soprano, and he didn't like it sung by mezzos. So when he heard me sing it, naturally he had his

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\* The voice category "falcon" was named after Marie Cornélie Falcon (1812–1897), who created the role of Valentine in *Les Huguenots*.



doubts. But afterwards, he said, “I didn’t believe that...I was wrong.”

SZ: Did Bruna Rasa\*\* use chest voice?

GS: Yes. She sang a [middle-voice] A with chest, for example, at “Io piango, io piango” [in “Voi lo sapete”]. I couldn’t, but she did. It was ugly, certainly, but she was able to do it because she had an emission that allowed it. Mascagni permitted her to do it. Another thing—Mascagni in his music always resolved at the *passaggio* [change of register]. He had a strange fondness for that note. Unfortunately, down there you can’t force or push your head voice. A singer with a long career in back of her might be astute enough to bring up chest resonance without damaging her voice, but most would not be able to do this. Without chest it just isn’t possible to resolve on those notes with enough force. Even in *L’amico Fritz*, all of Beppe’s arias finish on F-sharp, right in the middle of the *passaggio*.

SZ: Where is your *passaggio*?

GS: It’s F-sharp—for everyone, sopranos and mezzos alike. I don’t know about men because I’ve never looked into that.

[SZ: Counterexamples come to mind.]

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\*\* Lina Bruna Rasa (1907–84) opened the 1927 Scala season as Elena in *Mefistofele* under Toscanini. That year she sang in the world premiere there of Wolf Ferrari’s *Sly*. Mascagni chose her for the world premiere of his *Nerone* at La Scala (1935), for a *Cavalleria* tour in Holland, Belgium and France (1937) and for his studio recording of *Cavalleria* (1940). (Simionato is the Mamma Lucia.) In 1935, after the death of her mother, she became schizophrenic and, in 1937, tried to throw herself into the orchestra pit during a performance. In 1940 she was institutionalized but was released occasionally to perform. She moved Toscanini to tears at a 1947 Milan concert. After an unsuccessful comeback in 1948 she was returned to the institution.

In the live recording of *Cavalleria* (1937), Bruna Rasa carries chest resonance up to middle-voice B-natural, on “Io son dannata!”

## Mezzo-Sopranos: A Breed Apart?

Stefan Zucker: I touched on the sexuality of mezzo-sopranos with Fedora Barbieri.

Giulietta Simionato: No comment.

SZ: How come?

GS: In her case, it was something beyond the normal. Naturally one person has this hunger and another doesn't. Gabriella Besanzoni used to call any convenient stagehand into her dressing room between acts to do to her what she needed to have done because she said it was good for her voice.

SZ: And Gianna Pederzini?

GS: Pederzini was something else. She didn't have a great voice but was a great artist, with great theatricality.

SZ: She didn't only have Roberto Farinacci [one of Mussolini's most notorious ministers; for information about the Pederzini-Farinacci relationship, see Bel Canto Society's web site].

GS: I don't know if there were others. I didn't know her well. With Farinacci it was official, and everybody knew it. He would write to the directors of the theaters and say, "Gianna has to do so many performances of this opera and so many of that," and he specified her fees. During the fascist era she commanded, and that was that. However, she was an exceptional artist.

SZ: And you yourself?

GS: I was a rather tranquil creature. I thought only of my work and nothing else. If I did something, it was after due consideration, far from the theater, because I always was a bit worried that it could adversely affect my performance on stage. However, there were others who felt the need, and necessity is necessity! [Laughs.] When that happens....

SZ: Some say mezzos are more passionate than other women.

GS: [Laughs.] I don't know. There are lots of sopranos who behave in the same way! [Big laugh.] And so it's not a question of category.

SZ: Well, Tebaldi said of Del Monaco, "The man was the slave of

the tenor.” After his death his widow said that in order to sing he had renounced sex. Should mezzos do the same?

GS: I don’t know. A man is a man, a woman a woman. Once my hotel room was next to Del Monaco’s. He had a performance the next day, and his wife said, “No, Mario no, Mario—remember that you have a...” “Yes,” he said. “Remember that you have...” “Yes, yes!” I could hear them thrashing about on the bed. I had a single room next to theirs, and naturally I didn’t know what to do. I thought, I hope they calm down because I have a performance tomorrow, too, and I need my rest. Later I asked her, “What finally happened?” “I made him take a cold shower,” she said, “and he finally calmed down.” So you see, the man’s needs are more pressing than the woman’s. At least I think so. I think I’m a normal woman. And those women who have this need, according to me, are not normal. Perhaps they have some kind of hormonal imbalance. Rather than say something incorrect, I’ll keep quiet.

SZ: During Pederzini’s era, was it difficult to make an important career as a mezzo because of Farinacci?

GS: Yes, because besides Pederzini there was Cloe Elmo, who was the wife of the brother of the personal secretary of Bufarini Guidi. He was a very important figure during the fascist regime. And then of course there were Elena Nicolai, Ebe Stignani and other important mezzos. It was by no means easy to get ahead.

SZ: Can you compare these mezzos?

GS: In what sense?

SZ: Their interpretations.

GS: Nicolai, for example, was a mezzo of Wagnerian dimensions. Her voice was rough, dark, wide-ranging—Wagnerian. Stignani was, of course, a vocal phenomenon. I admired that woman wildly because she had a magnificent voice. She too had to play second fiddle to Pederzini and be willing to do lots of *Trovatores* because Pederzini didn’t want to make up as an ugly old woman. That’s the way it was. In any case, Stignani is up there high above all others.

SZ: As an interpreter?

GS: No, as a vocalist. She always sounded the same and wasn't an actress.

SZ: Barbieri told me you impeded her career.

GS: She impeded her own career! Although she was a fine artist with a beautiful voice, she had a short vocal range so she couldn't sing all the works I could on account of my extensive range. She even would strangle on a [high] G!

Fedora Barbieri: Simionato was not really a mezzo but a short soprano. Her voice had nothing to it below G or G-sharp. She was only able to make a career on account of her lovers. She didn't know how to sing. She should be ashamed of herself! She went ahead only because they pushed her, because she was the lover of big shots!

SZ: Which big shots?

FB: She had Frugoni [Cesare Frugoni, the eminent doctor she married]. For 20 years I didn't go to the Vienna State Opera because she was the lover of someone from the theater. That's how she got ahead. She did all kinds of bad things to me! I can't look at her or listen to her or anything. She is the most evil woman in opera! Write that Fedora Barbieri called her that! She's invidious, bad! She wants to teach but doesn't know how and ruins all voices. She demands 350,000 lire a lesson. She's bad, perfidious!

Gianna Pederzini was a great artist even if she wasn't a true mezzo but really a soprano. She was good.

Gabriella Besanzoni told me I was the greatest Carmen and the most beautiful mezzo.

Simionato was abnormal. Don't speak to me further about her!

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I can't vouch for the truth of these allegations, but I do know that throughout opera history (at least until very recently), singers have slept with impresarios as commonly as did actresses in the Hollywood of the 30s. Barbieri herself married the head of the Maggio Musicale fiorentino, and he managed her career.

Simionato declared she wouldn't accept an invitation from The Bavarian State Opera to attend a screening of *Opera Fanatic* unless the opera company un-invited Gencer and Barbieri. Barbieri stated she wouldn't attend if Simionato were there.

## *Iris Adami Corradetti*

“The first act of *Butterfly* should be sung very sweetly but not with the *voce infantile* [a childlike or white voice suggestive of innocence and virginity]. *Butterfly* has renounced her family and changed her religion—the actions of a mature woman.”

Demonstrations: *Butterfly*

ADAMI CORRADETTI was born in 1903.

Her father, Ferruccio Corradetti, was among the most important baritones from the late 19th century into the 1930s as well as an actor and critic. Her mother, Bice Adami, created the leading soprano part in Mascagni's *Le maschere*. Both parents made many recordings.

Adami Corradetti began as a concert pianist. Toscanini attended a party

at which she not only played but sang. He engaged her for La Scala, where she made her debut in 1927, as the Page in Wolf Ferrari's *Sly*. For several years she mostly sang *comprimaria* parts. She appeared under Toscanini's baton and those of every other famous Italian conductor of the period as well as of Blech, Mascagni, Zandonai and Strauss. Adami Corradetti performed nearly 100 parts in operas by composers from Carissimi to Menotti, creating roles in 35 operas, including many by more than 20 now-obscure



composers favored by the fascist regime. Famous for Zandonai's *Francesca*, at La Scala from 1938 she "owned" *Butterfly*. In 1946 she married and, to please her husband, retired—a decision she came to regret.

Adami Corradetti grew up disliking opera and claimed to have absorbed little about it from her parents or anybody else. Her singing technique was largely self-taught.

A critic remarked that she wedded verismo expressivity to such traditional graces as legato. Another critic maintained that, as an interpreter, she "balanced head and heart."

In her recordings of "Flammen, perdonami" (*Lodoletta*) and "Paolo, datemi pace" (*Francesca da Rimini*), from 1940, she brightens her tone to imbue it with more tenderness, fragility and pathos. In Italy at this time characterful tones were prized and it didn't matter if they were so bright and penetrating as to be acerbic. Bianca Scacciati and Adelaide Saraceni sang with vowels that were still brighter and more open and penetrating than Adami Corradetti's. (In Germany, England and the U.S. singing was expected to be mellow.) But by the time of Adami Corradetti's song recordings from 1954 and '57, she too was cultivating a mellow sound—darkened and rounded—as is now expected worldwide.

All the divas in the film teach or have taught singing. Adami Corradetti's protégées included Ricciarelli and Margherita Rinaldi. Carteri, Valentini Terrani and Mara Zampieri also studied with her. Adami Corradetti told me she was opposed to the use of chest voice. However, her pupil Diana Fanizza said Adami Corradetti didn't stop her from singing with it.

After I interviewed Adami Corradetti I sat in on a lesson. A soprano sang "Oh! quante volte" from *Capuleti*, making the notes of cadenzas equal in value—and the result was dull. From time to time Adami Corradetti stopped her and demonstrated the way she felt a phrase should be sung. In singing a cadenza she would begin slowly, accelerate in the middle and then slow down at the end.

Adami Corradetti sang an ascending half-step dissonance slightly sharp, which made it more telling. In general she emphasized dissonances—moments of harmonic tension—and de-emphasized their resolutions. But when I asked her why, she was unaware of what she had done and had no explanations as to the reasons she had lengthened certain notes and shortened others. Her musical intuitions were so powerful that, without being able to verbalize her reasons, she phrased as if by intellectual analysis of the music's structure.

Having appeared as Liù to Cigna's *Turandot*, in 1930, Adami Corradetti declared:

Cigna's kind of *Turandot* is far removed from the way I conceive the role. I'm not so enthusiastic about virago interpretations such as Cigna's and Nilsson's because, from my point of view, the princess is a fragile girl, psychologically weak, who in the end falls in love like all women do.

*Iris Adami Corradetti in Opera Fanatic*



Nevertheless I recognize that Cigna gave some stupendous performances of this opera, with her beautiful, cutting, vibrant voice.

Iris Adami Corradetti died June 26, 1998, in Padua. This interview is the only footage of her. (Another portion of it was used in *The Tenors of the 78 Era*; see Bel Canto Society's web site.) Her last words to me were, "I'd still love to be able to sing, to give, because my soul is still alive."

## Gigliola Frazzoni

"Throughout the first act of *Butterfly* I used the *voce infantile*."

Demonstrations: *Butterfly*, *Fanciulla* and *Tosca*

BORN IN 1927, she debuted in Bologna, as Mimì, in 1948, and appeared in Rome, Venice, Turin, Palermo, Parma, Verona, Munich, Stuttgart, Wiesbaden, Zurich, Geneva, Bordeaux, Cairo, Dublin and Vienna. She made her Scala debut in 1955, replacing Callas in *Chénier*. There she also sang *Cavalleria*, *Fanciulla*, *Butterfly* and *Pagliacci*. Her recordings include *Tosca*, *Fanciulla* and the world premiere, at La Scala, of *I dialoghi delle Carmelitane*. Her Minnie was filmed.



An uneven singer with an ample, round, dark sound, at her best she had a warm vocal personality—tender, endearing, adorable, sensuous, feminine, passionate, cuddly. She was a Minnie who laughed, loved, raged, suffered and exulted—electrifying. She was wild at "Vieni fuori! Vieni fuori!" in Act II. She sometimes sang slightly flat. She was insecure on high B and C.

Frazzoni tells her story:

My teacher took me from Bologna to Milan to audition for the agent Liduino. In another part of the office Serafin was



making up the cast for *Francesca da Rimini*. He said, “This voice interests me. Don’t send her away.” He signed me for a small part, Samaritana. Thus I made my debut.

Later Liduino blocked my career because I represented a threat to someone he was protecting. Once Del Monaco and Gobbi were in Chicago for *Fanciulla*. Steber was supposed to sing Minnie but was sick—in reality she was on a bender—and they recommended me. Liduino called me and asked me how much I wanted. I wasn’t accustomed to big fees. To make my American debut, in my opera, I would have gone if they had covered my expenses. I told Liduino I left the money up to him. I was afraid of flying but for that occasion was prepared to. I bought a valise. When nothing happened my husband called Liduino’s office and was given a runaround.

A week later I received a letter from Del Monaco saying he was ashamed to know me because I’d asked for so much money—Liduino had demanded \$3,000 a performance although I would have gone for \$300. He didn’t want me to go to America because he managed Stella and a number of other sopranos. Steber mimed the performance with someone singing from behind the curtain.

*Frazzoni demonstrates her Butterfly in Opera Fanatic*



Bing flew from New York to Chicago to hear me, in vain.

As a result my good friend Tebaldi ended up performing *Fanciulla* at the Met and recording it for Decca. She wanted to do everything. She was one of the greatest singers, with a sweet voice, an exquisite legato. She was wonderful in *Lohengrin*, *Otello*, above all, and was even a good Maddelena, but she was unsuitable for verismo. (I would have been a bad Desdemona because I needed to run around onstage.) Her temperament was too controlled for Minnie and she was too static onstage. Minnie has to be violent at moments. She was too sweet for that.

The *Fanciulla* recording was to have been done at La Scala with Votto conducting but Decca moved it to Rome because he said, "I want to record *Fanciulla* with the cast we had at La Scala." [At La Scala Frazzoni was the Minnie, Del Monaco and Corelli the Johnsons. The recording was conducted by Capuana and starred Del Monaco and Tebaldi.]

In 1958 I was scheduled to do seven performances of *Butterfly* at La Scala. They were so successful that the theater added 10 additional performances, whereas Callas only got to do 14 of *Traviata*.

In the first act of *Butterfly* you must seem fifteen. *Butterfly* and *Violetta* each require two voices. I try to adapt my sound to the situation. I had the discipline to decline engagements, to prepare myself for certain roles. When I performed *Butterfly* I only did that part that year because I had to make my voice smaller and childlike for the first act. But in the second act I became a spinto and threw out all the voice I had.

I used chest voice when the drama called for it, for example, at the end of "Voi lo sapete"—the way Bruna Rasa did. The word "piango" calls for it. I reconciled chest voice with my masque placement. You shouldn't really dig into

those notes. They should sound natural, not forced. [She demonstrated the phrase with great passion and a sob at the tied note on “piango” but used chest very lightly if at all, I thought.] Bruna Rasa once came backstage to congratulate me after a performance. Incidentally, the poor thing went crazy because of syphilis.

The first requirement in singing is to have temperament and sensibility. You must be happy, joyful, full of love. In Puccini every phrase teaches you to sing with happiness and humility.

There are no more Giocondas. Today Bohème-type voices sing heavy repertory and they lack impact as Santuzza. Voices that would have sung Micaëla or Liù end up doing Gioconda and Fedora.

What I regret most of all is not having any children—I would have liked to have had six.

Frazzoni on Adami Corradetti: She made me feel a lot of tenderness.

On Simionato: In *Cenerentola* she sounded like a soprano leggero. She had great facility with high notes.

On Stignani: She was a mezzo but she sang the high C in *Norma*. Callas told her, “But why do you put in the C? Only I do it.”

On Gavazzi: She was one of the last with great temperament. She also had a beautiful voice.

On Olivero: Her recording of “Ah! fors’è lui.... Sempre libera” is unsurpassable and was an inspiration to me. Those who do Adriana today are ridiculous compared to her. But unfortunately she was one of those singers who had to do everything, and so she even performed *Fanciulla*. Her Minnie is of no interest to me.

SZ: Why is that?

GF: No comment!

On Corelli vs. Del Monaco:

SZ: You sang *Fanciulla* with both Del Monaco and Corelli. Please compare them.

GF: Del Monaco was a normal person. He didn't create problems for others. With Corelli you never knew if he'd sing or not. Offstage he was unbearable. "I don't feel well—this bothers me, that hurts me." After performances he disappeared. Del Monaco instead was a tranquil man. He was very serious about his singing. He listened to himself while he sang. Offstage he was like a brother. He was happy, he gave joy. After the performance he was able to sing through the entire opera again in full voice in the hotel, after he had eaten. His wife, Rina, was a dear, good person. Del Monaco had a beautiful voice, but his singing was more calculated.

Corelli was the Callas of tenors. His voice was not beautiful but it had an allure that excited the public. Callas had a pathos, something great inside her, that Franco also had. His voice gave me goosebumps. He threw himself into the performance. He *was* Johnson—he was more true to the drama.

*Frazzoni in Chénier with "the Callas of tenors."*



He sang, “Minnie, Minnie” with such tenderness! On-stage I was in love with him, offstage less so because he was impossible.

After performances with Corelli women said to me, “He touched you! That must have been so thrilling!”

## *Gina Cigna*

“If you don’t know how to breathe, you don’t know how to sing....Opera has lost spontaneity, beauty and freedom.”



BORN IN 1900 in Paris to a well-to-do family, Cigna studied music theory, also piano with Cortot and voice with Calvé. She was a painter and ceramist. In 1927 she debuted under her married name, Ginette Sens, at La Scala, as Freia. After studies with Storchio and Russ and performances in the Italian provinces, she reemerged under her own name at La Scala as Donna Elvira and went on to appear in Florence, Verona, London, Paris, Cologne, Buenos Aires, Berlin, Vienna, Amsterdam, Brussels, Munich, Hanover, Dusseldorf, Berlin, New York, Chicago, San Francisco and Toronto. In 1947 on her way to perform Tosca in Vicenza she was in an auto accident. She crawled out the window of the car, arrived at and sang the performance but at some point suffered a heart attack. This caused her retirement.

Her repertoire included 50 roles, from Poppea to Kostelnička. Her principal parts were Turandot (which she performed 493 times), Norma, Gioconda and Violetta. She also sang a prodigious number of recitals. Her recordings include *Norma*, *Trovatore*, *Turandot* and *Aïda*.

Cossotto coached repertory with Cigna and Pobbe coached

Aïda with her. Her voice students included Casapietra, Mauti Nunziata, Dimitrova and Luis Lima.

Cigna's voice often had a touch of omnipresent conspicuous fast vibrato, seldom heard since her day. (For the history of vibrato see "The Fluctuating Fortunes of Vibrato" [on BCS website].) Throughout a wide range her voice was plangent. Sometimes, though, it sounded unsupported at ends of phrases, and her breathing was labored. In her recordings from 1930–32 she used chest resonance sparingly, but in those from the late 30s she didn't stint. She claims not to have employed chest resonance. However, her pupil Françoise Detchenique (seen with her in the film) says Cigna advised her to use it with restraint.

Her singing communicated understanding of musical structure: harmonically unimportant notes subordinated, notes of harmonic tension emphasized, those of harmonic relaxation deemphasized. She built crescendos note by note, propelling melodies toward their points of greatest dissonance. Sometimes, however, her treatment of dynamics was a little too understated (perhaps because of her French background).

She was a singer of many aspects. In *Gioconda* her voice was dark like a mezzo's, but in *Faust* it was bright. In dramatic repertory she could sound like a mature woman, yet in *Faust* she was girlish. Although Cigna is remembered principally for *Turandot*, she often sang with *Innigkeit* (with inward or interior feeling), like a Lotte Lehmann of the Italian repertory. (Cigna's vocal person-

*Gina Cigna in Opera Fanatic*



ality wasn't quite as warm.) Her singing created an atmosphere, her characters oozed mystery, so that in listening to her one believes they felt even more than they expressed.

## Anita Cerquetti

“Singers should stay motionless when they sing.

Otherwise the voice shifts. The singer has to be an actor through gestures, face, arms and hands. Through the voice.”

Demonstration: *Norma*



*Anita Cerquetti in  
the 50s*

BORN IN 1931, Cerquetti first studied violin and sang for her own pleasure. At 16 she performed the Bach-Gounod “Ave Maria” at a friend’s wedding and was persuaded to audition for the Perugia conservatory, where she was accepted. She performed Leonora (*Trovatore*) at Modena but her official debut was in 1951, as Aida, at Spoleto. She appeared throughout Italy, France, Switzerland and in Chicago, and she sang Abigaille with Serafin at Verona in 1956. In 1957, in

her only New York appearance (at The Town Hall), she sang *Paride ed Elena* (Gluck). Among her recordings are *Gioconda*, *Oberon*, *Norma*, *Forza*, *Vespri*, *Tell*, *Ernani* and *Abencerages* (Cherubini). She retired abruptly. We discussed this:

AC: I sacrificed my career for my family.

SZ: How?

AC: By leaving my career so early.

SZ: There are various explanations regarding why you stopped. For example, RAI [Italian radio] told me you had a brain disease.

AC: Uff! [Sound of disgust] What?

SZ: And that you could no longer remember your parts.

AC: They told you that at RAI? What dears! How nice of them! No, thank God, no! Do you know why this rumor got started? I was studying *Il pirata*, which I was scheduled to sing in Palermo. At the same time I was singing *Norma* at the Rome Opera, substituting for Callas and going back and forth between Rome and Naples, where I was also performing *Norma*. Naturally, traveling back and forth like that, and singing in both cities, there was little time to study. When I arrived in Palermo, knowing they had a cover ready, I said, “Because I haven’t prepared *Pirata* well, I don’t feel I should sing it.” From that point people began to say I had lost my memory. The Milan paper wrote, “Anita Cerquetti has suddenly lost her memory.” It wasn’t that I’d lost my memory; it was simply that I hadn’t studied. This is the truth.

SZ: Let me read this quote of Franco Corelli [the Pollione of the Rome performances]: “Cerquetti strained her voice by singing too much.”

AC: Yes [sardonically].

SZ: “She substituted for Callas in Rome while performing *Norma* at the San Carlo in Naples at the same time, and after three months she developed nodes on her vocal cords.”

### *Cerquetti in Opera Fanatic*





AC: This is *another* lie, because, thank God, I have never had nodes. Instead I was overcome by stress because I was tired, very tired.

SZ: When did you have the stress?

AC: I was very tired because I couldn't sleep at night and during the day I sang. It got to the point where I had absolute need of physical rest. Above all I needed to sleep. This was from stress. But, thank God, my vocal cords remained intact and have remained so until today. This is the truth. And other things were said as well, not just that. They said my husband left me, didn't they? [Her husband, Edo, grunts affirmatively.] They also said I had lost my mind, that I had had a heart operation (this news arrived from America). So many things were said—understandably—because I had left my career at its most beautiful moment. It's only natural that people asked why. And since everyone needed a reason, each one invented his own.

SZ: Did you commit acts of *divismo*?

AC: When I canceled the *Pirata*, all kinds of things were said about me—that I did scandalous things, that I turned a hotel upside down because I couldn't find a room to my liking. They called me hysterical, a crazy woman—everything. And no one—no one—spoke up for me. No one said, it's not true, that's not the way it is. Apparently it was convenient at that moment for some people that I disappear. Since I needed my family and affection—in this life you need more than just success—I said “*Basta*: I'm closing the door, and that's the end of it.”

SZ: Do you have the desire to sing, to perform?

AC: Not today. The first years, yes, but no longer.

SZ: And the first years?

AC: In the first years it was hard, because I withdrew abruptly, no longer seeing people or listening to music. I wanted to erase those memories even though they can never really be erased. But at least I wanted to keep them at a distance, put them in the back of my mind....

SZ: Why didn't you attempt a return to the stage?

AC: I received many offers to return. There were moments when I almost accepted. But then I thought, what's the point? I've already found my peace, my serenity. To return under the gun! *Basta!* And so I closed the door.

Today one tends to think of dramatic soprano voices as heavy, in the manner of Marton's, but Cerquetti's instead was brilliant and penetrating, with soaring top notes. Her breath span was a trifle short. She was expert at such elusive subtleties as the grace notes in "O patria mia." Her temperament sometimes seems a little cool, lacking in pathos, her sound Nordic. (In *Opera Fanatic* she warmly interprets words in demonstrating an excerpt from *Norma*.) Gioconda inspired her to sizzle. She sang the part with a heavier tone.

SZ: What is your opinion about chest voice?

AC: I hate it.

SZ: To me you sound as if you used pinches of it as Gioconda.

AC: Well, I used chest notes despite myself—but lightly. The part brought them out of me. I couldn't sing with heavy chest resonance if I wanted to because I've always tried to avoid it.

SZ: Are chest notes harmful to the voice?

AC: Yes. They ruin the middle voice, and they are ugly. I prefer a note that is less forte but more beautiful. If you throw a note into the chest you hear the difference when the sound rises and passes the first *passaggio*. You hear that it's no longer the same voice, that something has happened. It's as if you open a door and find a narrower hallway because the notes in the middle voice are comparatively thinner and weaker.

Cerquetti on Cigna: Cigna, by the way, used chest resonance.

On Olivero: Few singers have pathos. Olivero did. Almost all others are scholastic. Her voice by itself serves for nothing.

On Barbieri and Simionato: They always hated one another.

# Carla Gavazzi

SZ: Cerquetti, Adami Corradetti, Barbieri, Simionato, Pobbe and Olivero are all opposed to the use of chest resonance.

CG: Chest resonance is indispensable. They are ignorant! They don't know anything! Olivero used a lot of chest voice.

Did she ever, in order to become successful.

Even to a vulgar degree!

Demonstrations: *Traviata*, *Tosca*



Carla Gavazzi  
as Santuzza

GAVAZZI WAS BORN IN 1913, in Bergamo, to a prosperous, artistic and educated family. She was sent to boarding schools in Switzerland and France, where she studied violin as well as French and German. She debuted, as Mimì, in 1940. Her career, interrupted by war, marriage and the birth of a son, resumed in 1946. Her repertoire included modern and chamber music as well as *Semiramide*, Pamina in *Flauto magico*, *Faust*, Liù in *Turandot*, Margherita in *Mefistofele*, *Manon*, *Manon*

*Lescaut*, *Otello*, Micaëla in *Carmen*, *Margherita da Cortona* (Refice), *L'incantesimo* (Montemezzi), *La favola del figlio cambiato* (Malipiero), *Mathis der Maler*, *La campana sommersa* (Respighi), *Cyrano de Bergerac* and *Risurrezione* (both by Alfano). Alfano chose her for the world premiere of his song cycle based on the poetry of Tagore. Gavazzi sang at Florence, Milan, Parma, Brescia, Trieste, Bologna, Verona, Rome, Naples, Palermo, Barcelona and Lisbon. She recorded Elvira in *Giovanni*, *Adriana*, *Fanciulla* and *Pagliacci* and filmed *Cavalleria*.

She retired around 1960 because of a goiter, which caused

intermittent swelling in the neck, and because her son had polio.

Gavazzi often was aflame with passion. At moments her *Adriana* recording gives spinal chills. I'm an Oliveroite, but I have to admit that I sometimes find Gavazzi's more rhythmic approach preferable because it enabled her to move a phrase ahead better. Her *Adriana* surpassed Olivero's at aggressive, assertive moments. (Olivero's *Adriana* had other, spiritual dimensions, also a rapt, girlish quality.) Sometimes Gavazzi sang with a flicker vibrato. At her best her intonation was uncommonly accurate. For example, unlike most singers, she sang half steps untempered (as a violinist would play them). She lacked a pianissimo.

CG: I find that in general there is too much preoccupation today with making a rotund sound. All the singers are good and they are all the same, with beautiful pianos, which were much less common before. If Katia Ricciarelli hadn't sung so many pianos, she would still be singing with that lovely voice she started with.

*In Opera Fanatic, Gavazzi compares and contrasts various interpretations of "Amami Alfredo" (Traviata)*



# Marcella Pobbe

“All I did was right. I didn’t make mistakes.”

BORN IN 1927 (some reference books give 1921), Pobbe studied in Vicenza, Pasero, Siena and won several vocal contests, making her debut, in 1948, in Spoleto, as Marguerite. The following season she sang at the San Carlo in a revival of Petrella’s *I promessi sposi*. In 1954-55 she appeared at La Scala as Elsa, as Betsabea in the house premiere of *David* (Milhaud) and as Agathe. In 1956 she sang in the world premiere of Rossellini’s *La guerra*, at the San Carlo. She appeared in Verona, London, Paris, Vienna and in South America. Her Met debut was in 1958, as Mimì.

Her recordings include *Mefistofele*, *Jeanne d’Arc au Bûcher* (Honegger), *Isabeau* (Mascagni), *Carmen*, *Pêcheurs* and *Otello*. She made films of *Adriana*, *Ballo*, *Tosca*, *Francesca da Rimini* as well as the Countess in *Figaro* and several recitals. Her repertory included *Giulio Cesare*, *Ifigenia in Aulide*, *Oronhea* (Cesti), *Kováncina*, *Fiera di Sorocinski*, Beethoven’s *Ninth Symphony* and Strauss’s “Four Last Songs.”

She renounced her Met engagement for Elisabetta, in 1959, because she didn’t want to appear in the same house as Nicolai Gedda, with whom she was having a lovers’ quarrel. This step ended her Met career. (Her affair with Gedda con-

*Marcella Pobbe on stage*



tinued off and on, notwithstanding his various marriages and lovers.) In watching the film it might be helpful to know that, on the phone before the interview, Pobbe herself spoke of all this heatedly and at length and asked to discuss it for the record, but when the cameras were rolling she clammed up.

She supposedly was dogged by ill luck. For example, she divorced a wealthy husband (the divorce was one of the first in Italy), only to have him drop dead the next day. She made bad investments.



*Pobbe in Opera Fanatic*

Hers was a lighter, brighter sound than one associates with *Don Carlo* or *Trovatore* (in which she had a good high D-flat). Divas from the period often claim that, unlike Scotto and Freni, singers then didn't undertake heavy roles if they had voices that were lyric in color. Pobbe is the counterexample.

Her sound was sweet, bright, charming, white, evocative of adolescence. She was an Italian Upshaw or Hong but with a more powerful voice. It was even from top to bottom and seemingly produced without effort. Her intonation was accurate, and she had excellent control over dynamics.

In *Don Carlo* she found more tonal body, but her voice had less focus and her vibrato was wider. She was well schooled but lacked suf-

## Chest Voice: Some History

SINCE WWI WOMEN for the most part have been afraid of chest resonance, fearing it would ruin their voices. But in the 19th century they used it as a matter of course, a practice they inherited from the castratos. Most women on early recordings sing all notes from F at the bottom of the treble staff on down in chest voice.



*Giovanni Battista  
Lamperti*

But they do not sing higher than that in chest voice. Voice teacher Giovanni Battista Lamperti dissuaded his pupil Marcella Sembrich from undertaking *Aida* on the grounds that she lacked the requisite chest resonance. (Records attest to Sembrich's having used chest resonance below G-flat, so presumably Lamperti must have felt her chest voice was too light for the part.) Lamperti did maintain it was unhealthy for the voice for women to carry chest resonance higher than F.

Nineteenth-century Italian opera composers seemingly took for granted that women would employ chest voice. Verdi, in a letter to Ricordi, demanded that a singer being considered for Amneris, Antonietta Frizzi, have “the G and A-flat in chest voice for her fourth-act melody. If she doesn't, that would be more fatal than whether or not the high B-natural were powerful or weak.”

The majority of roles cannot be communicated adequately without chest color at one point or another. Women often find that unless they abstain from chest resonance, the music at certain moments causes them to use it. A challenge for women with modern vocal techniques is how to fulfill the chest requirement without hurting themselves.

In the last 160 years, while women have used chest voice less and less, men have used it more and more. For discussions of men, chest voice and head voice, see my “Last of a Breed: Giovanni Battista Rubini Ruled as the Paragon of Virtuoso Tenors, King of the High F’s” (*Opera News*, February 13, 1982) and “Seismic Shocker: Gilbert-Louis Duprez’s History-Making High C” (*Opera News*, January 1, 1983), also my “Different Kinds of High Notes and the Seismic Shock: Nineteenth-Century Tenors and the Meaning of ‘Falsetto’” (*American Record Guide*, March 1982). The Rubini and Duprez articles are reprinted in my *The Origins of Modern Tenor Singing*; see Bel Canto Society’s catalog. The Rubini article may also be downloaded from the Bel Canto Society website: <<[www.belcantosociety.org](http://www.belcantosociety.org)>>.

### **Chest Voice: The Divas’ Dispute**

GAVAZZI AND GENCER claim that not only did they themselves employ chest resonance but that the other divas—in particular, Olivero, Cigna, Adami Corradetti, Simionato and Barbieri—did as well. These latter deny having resonated in their chests. I asked Gavazzi to explain this. She claimed they employed chest unknowingly.

This kind of explanation is common among singers. Corelli and Hines cannot conceive of any tenor singing above the staff without routinely covering his tone. Yet Alfredo Kraus and I claim we do exactly that. Speaking on the radio program “Opera Fanatic,” Corelli and Hines insisted we cover automatically, without being aware of it—a view we reject.

Also speaking on “Opera Fanatic,” Kraus asserted that Chris Merritt sings his high notes in falsetto—a view he rejects.

Usually I favor giving the singer the benefit of the doubt: if he says he’s not covering, then he’s not.

The dispute over chest voice may be a special case, however. The anti-chest divas were raised in the belief that chest resonance is vocally unhealthy. They also were told it fractures continuity of



musical line. Some of them find it downright ugly. Still, certain powerful emotions and coloristic demands sometimes flushed it out of them. But they hate to admit it. Each diva views her vocal technique as having the sanctity of religion. Each is mortified if the world knows she sinned. Barbieri insisted she wouldn't attend The Bavarian State Opera's showing of *Opera Fanatic* if Gencer were there, on the grounds that Gencer had insulted her by saying in the film that she—Barbieri—used chest voice.

Why should opera lovers care about whether or not someone sings with chest voice? Because the affective consequences are very great. My viscera aren't satisfied if chest isn't used in certain passages, the phrase "Un gel mi prende" (*Norma*), for example.

### Vocal Technique

WITH THE EXCEPTION OF Adami Corradetti, who at least from the 50s onward didn't have a placement-based method, the divas in the film used a technique of resonance called "masque placement" ("placement" of the tone at the front of the face, anywhere between the forehead and the lower teeth). Masque placement prevailed in the period in which they sang.

For much of the 19th century many singers placed their voices at the top of the head, at a point between but above the ears. The mother of verismo divas, Gemma Bellincioni, the first Santuzza, used this placement.

Today masque placement is being edged aside by mechanistic approaches, which do not involve placement at all. Instead, they require manipulation of the lips, mouth, tongue, soft palate, nostrils, jaw, position of the head or the larynx.

With the exception of Adami Corradetti, who did not think about breathing, the divas used a breathing method involving pressing in at the diaphragm. Before, during and after the divas' period a variety of other breathing techniques have been in use.

The divas all subscribe to the view that there is one god, one country and one singing technique—their own. (Olivero concurs

that this is her stand.)

For more detailed information about these and six other fundamentally different kinds of vocal technique, see *Opera Fanatic* magazine, issue 2. (To obtain a copy, see Bel Canto Society's website.)

## **Musical Line vs. Dramatic Expression**

### **Two Kinds of Diva**

THE DIVAS DIVIDE INTO TWO GROUPS. The first group strove not to vary tone color for dramatic expression but to maintain consistency of tone color for the sake of musical line. Half the divas in the film—Barbieri, Cerquetti, Cigna, Pobbe and Simionato—belong to this group (as do virtually all singers today). From their point of view, a change in tone color compromised musical line as much as a break in legato. That they didn't vary tone color didn't prevent them from being emotionally intense. They relied on good diction and musicianship to serve librettists and composers.

For the second group, varying tone color for dramatic expression was paramount. Adami Corradetti (as a performer but not as a teacher), Frazzoni, Gavazzi, Gencer and Olivero are in this group. To my ears, these performers succeeded in changing tone color without damaging the musical line and thereby heightened emotional impact. The singers in the first group acted with their faces and bodies. The singers in the second group also acted with their voices.

One can find counterexamples. Frazzoni and Gencer didn't always come alive interpretively. Cerquetti sometimes inflected her tone, most notably on a live recording of *Ballo*. Cigna on some occasions colored hers as well.

## **Intuition vs. Analysis**

DURING THE INTERVIEWS it became clear that the divas respond to words and to the music's emotions but don't analyze its structure. They never think about clarifying a vocal line by showing through emphasis which notes are melody, which mere ornament-

tation. The notion of each piece containing a hierarchy of notes is foreign to them.

Unlike the majority of singers (Italians in particular), most of the divas in the film turned out to have studied instruments. Perhaps that contributed to their musical intuitions. Simionato had no such background, yet her musicianship was no less expressive.

### Jan Schmidt-Garre

FILM DIRECTOR JAN SCHMIDT-GARRE studied conducting (with Sergiu Celibidache), philosophy and film and was a volunteer and assistant director with, among others, Ponnelle and Kupfer, at several theaters and at the Salzburg Festival. His films include *Bruckners Entscheidung*, *Celibidache*, which won a Silver Medal at the Chicago Film Festival and was nominated for the German Film Prize, and the series *The Tenors of the 78 Era*. (See Bel Canto Society's website.) The Joseph Schmidt episode received Special Jury Mention at the Musée du Louvre's 1998 "Classique en images" international film competition. The series is being shown on TV in many European countries. Portions of it are to be seen on WNET in New York.

*Opera Fanatic: Stefan and the Divas* has been screened at the Prague International Film Festival, where it won second prize out of 120 entries, the Munich International Documentary Film Festival, where it won a prize, the Leipzig Documentary Film Festival and the Minneapolis/St. Paul International Film Festival.

In July it will be shown at the Melbourne International Film Festival. The Bavarian State Opera will screen the film on July 28 at Munich's Cuvilliés-Theater with Frazzoni, Pobbe, Simionato and Zucker as guests of honor. They will be interviewed.

The film is now being broadcast in Finland (on YLE), Norway (on NRK) and Poland (on PT).

## Rosina Wolf

THE SINGING OF Stefan's mother, Rosina Wolf, is referred to several times in the film. She knew some of the divas because they had the same coach, Giuseppe Bertelli, a conductor at the Rome Opera. Her repertoire ranged from Carmen to the Queen of the Night to Butterfly, Salome, Isolde, Brünnhilde and Norma. She performed Nelly in the world premiere of the fourth version of Bellini's *Adelson e Salvini*, at New York's The Town Hall, in 1972. (Stefan Zucker was the Salvini.) In 1976 she appeared with him on RAI, Italian state television, in music from *Puritani*.



She sang on the one hand with more fire and on the other with greater pathos and inwardness than anyone else (possibly excepting Tamagno). As many of the divas say in the film, they based their interpretations first and foremost on the words. Rosina's were founded instead on her emotional response to the music. For her, feeling was everything. One hears the platitude that interpretations are boring when singers don't fathom the words.

She used to say:

The words in some cases inspired composers, who then interpreted the words for us by setting them in particular ways. When a composer has set words well, the singer seldom needs to add to that. When singers base their interpretations on words, the results can be emotionally superficial. Such interpretations often become fussy and busy. Instead, one must have the temperament to feel the music and find the right colors for it. We first come to opera because of our emotional response, which usually has little to do with the words as such. As a singer, one also has to go beyond the words.

She used both the *voce infantile* and chest resonance. For the sake of vocal health she typically refrained from using chest resonance above E-flat at the bottom of the staff and never used it without mixing in some head resonance.

Rosina's recordings currently are out of print. I intend to do something about that.

Rosina greatly admired Olivero, whose interpretations first and foremost are word-based.



*Stefan at the time he first met some of the divas*

## Stefan Zucker

STEFAN ZUCKER is listed in the *Guinness Book of World Records* as “the world’s highest tenor”; he also is editor of *Opera Fanatic* magazine, hosted the radio program “Opera Fanatic” and talks and sings in the film series *The Tenors of the 78 Era*. He has contributed to the *International Dictionary of Opera*, *Opera News*, *American Record Guide*, *The Opera Quarterly*, *Professione Musica* and many others. He is to be

heard on the LP *Stefan Zucker: The World’s Highest Tenor*, which also features Rosina Wolf.

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