



The Metropolitan Opera Archives

Corelli and Birgit Nilsson in Turandot, Met. From 1958–75 he performed Calaf often, with Nilsson as his most frequent partner. That they were perceived—correctly—as rivals in an athletic contest over who could hold high notes longer brought them publicity. Various versions float around of the story about him biting her in Turandot. It was a montatura—something built up for the sake of publicity. But that didn't stop me from asking him if he preferred Nilsson to pastrami.

CORELLI: TENORE DEL MONDO

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In recent years the legendary tenor Franco Corelli participated in a series of interviews with Stefan Zucker, host of “Opera Fanatic,” the popular (now defunct) late-night program on New York radio station WKCR-FM. They also collaborated on a theater series, *An Evening with Franco Corelli and Stefan Zucker*. The following comments are excerpted from these programs.

SZ: It’s said that before you began your career you lost your high notes and became a baritone. What happened?

FC: I was young and didn’t know how to use my voice. My vocal cords were unable to sustain the pressure to which I subjected them. Since I was very athletic, with a strong diaphragm, my voice’s birth-right was great volume of breath and breath span. After three months of lessons with soprano Rita Pavoni Giulia I lost my voice, and then for a period of three or four months I studied as a baritone.

When I was a boy Tito Gobbi gave a concert in my hometown, Ancona. He said that singing is like sport. In sport if you get tired you still keep on pushing, and without proper training I drove my voice. After a page of music my voice would get lower. I thought that to get through an entire aria I’d have to make the switch to baritone. I did have a big enough middle register to enable me to pass for one.

SZ: Were you successful as a baritone?

FC: No. The technique I was studying wasn't good and led me to close my throat. I used the throat muscles so much that the voice didn't pass through freely.

SZ: Did you study with other voice teachers?

FC: Yes, I took a few lessons from half the voice teachers in Italy. The ones who had been celebrated singers included Nino Piccaluga, Nazzareno De Angelis, Francesco Merli, Apollo Granforte and Riccardo Stracciari. I also consulted with Titta Ruffo.

SZ: Why did you go to so many teachers?

FC: I was doing research, trying to find the best technique. People told me, "Doing research is good, but choose a method and don't look back. You can sing with any one of many methods, provided you don't hurt your throat. Settle on a technique and try to make a career." But I said, "There are many possible ways to sing, in the larynx, in the pharynx, concentrating on the diaphragm, the throat, the chest. Who is to say which of these approaches to use? Who has tried them? Who will give assurance? What works for one may not for another. You can sense the voice at all these different points. Which impulse are you to heed?"

SZ: What technique did you adopt ultimately?

FC: A friend, Carlo Scaravelli, who was studying with Arturo Melocchi, taught me his approach, involving singing with the larynx held low. After a few months I regained my freedom in singing and my high notes.

SZ: Did you yourself study with Melocchi?

FC: I went to him sometimes although some advised me he was a throat-wrecker. His teaching was drastic and violent. His method was based on opening the throat. When you yawn the throat is open. A truly open throat remains that open.

Melocchi taught Del Monaco for a number of years. Because he began to perform a few years before I did, I used him as my example, scrutinizing everything he did throughout his career. He sang with the larynx lowered as far as it would go. Melocchi's tenors all came to resemble Del Monaco in tone color, range and style. This means that, for better or worse, Melocchi taught a real technique.

SZ: What are its pros and cons?

FC: The lowered larynx permits you to have a vibrant, strong, brilliant voice, like steel, but it does tend to prevent you from singing sweetly. It also can cause problems with *mezza voce* and *legato*.

SZ: According to Del Monaco's autobiography, *La mia vita e i miei successi*, at the beginning of his career he appeared as Ernesto and Alfredo—and couldn't be heard. Then he studied with Melocchi, who had learned the lowered-larynx technique in China from a Russian¹—the technique previously was unknown in Italy. To sing Verdi with a lowered larynx is as anachronistic as playing Bach on a concert grand—although the result can be thrilling.

FC: In today's theaters, with today's louder and more brilliant orchestras, singers need the power and steel that come from the lowered larynx.

SZ: With some other methods the larynx may lower as a by-product, but with Melocchi's method lowering the larynx is the beginning of everything. Carried to an extreme this road leads to Luigi Ottolini, a tenor who was unable to change vocal color although he had a concentrated, focused sound with immense ring. Like Del Monaco he had difficulty modulating dynamics, with soft



Bel Canto Society Archive

Giulietta Simionato and Corelli in Carmen. She was his most frequent partner in this opera.

Simionato: "Corelli always was professional. His problem was that he was insecure. He always was afraid he wasn't going to make it even though his performances were stupendous. He seemed to feel guilty of flaws he didn't possess. He worried about deficiencies that for the most part were imaginary. Often, right before the "Flower Song" in Carmen, he would say, "Signora, I can't do it, I'm going away." "No, don't say that. Don't be like that. Come on, come on." And he'd begin the aria, ending it with that high note that would bring down the house. He could deliver when the chips were down."

singing in particular. He had a strong voice that was not particularly useful for musical or dramatic purposes.

FC: With the laryngeal method you must know your vocal organ very well, what you can do and how far you can go. For example, I heard some who pushed their larynxes down to the point that they sounded as if they had bronchitis. [He imitates them.] With this technique you can make your vocal cords suffer. Many who teach it cause their pupils to force their voices to the point of ruination. I ultimately modified the method so that my larynx “floats”—I do not keep it lowered to the maximum at all times.

SZ: Tell us about the history of your voice. How was it when you began to sing?

FC: When I began my natural voice was not beautiful. I had a strong voice, and people told me that was my best quality. Still, no one believed in me. I began to sing as a joke. A friend and I listened to records and sang for hours and hours, and that’s when I fell in love with singing. Before entering a competition I had seen only two or three operas. I lost that competition because I screamed too much but won the next one because I was in wonderful voice and my screaming excited the judges. I sang “Celeste Aïda” really well, with a B-flat longer and better than on the ’65 recording. The prize was to be my debut, in Spoleto in September ’51, as Radamès.

I studied the part for three months with conductor Giuseppe Bertelli, but I didn’t have enough technique for Radamès. Little by little I began to lose my voice while singing the third and fourth acts. One day Maestro Bertelli asked me to try “Il fior” from *Carmen*. Afterwards he said, “We have the mezzo, the soprano and the baritone for *Carmen*. If we switch operas it will be easier for us and much better for you.”^a So I made my debut as Don José.^b

a In actuality for *Aïda* Spoleto replaced Corelli with Paolo Hascià, who sang with Anita Cerquetti, at the Teatro Nuovo, September 6, 1951. Cerquetti had won the contest along with Corelli.

b August 26, 1951



Corelli as
Don Carlo

The Metropolitan Opera Archives

In *Aida* you need legato, bel canto and style. *Carmen* is an opera of explosive impulse, and you can succeed in it if you have enough temperament. *Carmen* also is congenial to me because it isn't very high. It does have high notes, but they are well situated and not extremely difficult. And it stays in one tessitura. Thus it's an opera well-suited for a debut, provided the tenor has an appropriate voice. José became my favorite part. [On other occasions he identified *Chénier* and *Rodolfo* as his favorite parts.] *Carmen* perhaps was the opera most congenial to my physique, voice and temperament.

SZ: The reviews of the time maintained that in *Carmen* you were particularly effective in the most dramatic parts, the emotionally intense ones, but that the lyric parts caused you some difficulty.

FC: Mine was a strong voice and I had problems in softening it.

Three months after my debut I went to the Rome Opera, where I remained for four years. My first opera there was Zandonai's *Giulietta e Romeo*, a very difficult work.^c The next month came *Adriana Lecouvreur*,^d the following month *Carmen* at Caracalla.^e After that my life was easy. I was very lucky. But I was humble and studied for hours and hours, asking people what they thought about my voice and what were my mistakes, what were my worst notes and if I could change them. I asked if I could change my vocal color, which I didn't like.

SZ: Tamagno and Pertile were nearly the last dramatic tenors to have made diminuendos—until you. How did you learn to sing pianissimo?

FC: I first sang pianissimo in 1954, in Rome, in *Don Carlo*.^f The conductor was Gabriele Santini, one of the greatest. He taught me well, but I was singing too strongly. I arrived at the last act a little tired—my throat and breathing were tired. The A-flat on the word “mancherò” was difficult for me, and I made what I thought was a bad effect on it. People said, “You had a remarkable moment there, attacking the note strongly and making a diminuendo.” I learned to sing pianissimo from that.

SZ: What is the most beautiful note in your voice?

FC: A-flat above the staff. But it's B-flats that make the public crazy.

[continues]

c Beginning January 31, 1952

d May 8

e Beginning July 12

f March 4