

MUSEO ITALO AMERICANO PRESENTS

BRAVO 

Celebrating
San Francisco Opera
Its Italian Roots and Legacy





This page:
 The final scene from *Tosca*, Act III, 1997. This set design by Thierry Bosquet depicting Castel Sant'Angelo in Rome with the city skyline in the background was modeled after Armando Agnini's 1923 *Tosca* design. Photo by Marty Sohl.

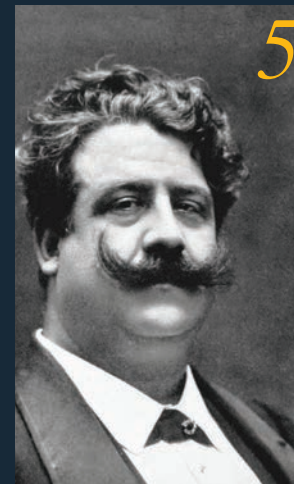
Cover:
La Traviata, 1932. Photo by Lawrence B. Morton. Images courtesy of San Francisco Opera Archive



The prestigious San Francisco Opera company, one of our nation's largest and most admired, was founded by Italian Americans a century ago. As the Company presents its Centennial Season (2022-23), the Museo Italo Americano is proud to partner with San Francisco Opera to present this exhibit celebrating the vital role that the Italian community and Italian artists played in creating the institution and fostering the art of opera—especially Italian opera—in our city.

The story begins during the Gold Rush years of the 1850s, leading eventually to the founding of San Francisco Opera in 1923. Then it continues through a century of extraordinary accomplishments up to the present day. As we look back in this exhibit at the history of Italian opera in San Francisco, we also look forward in anticipation of yet another century of great opera in our city.

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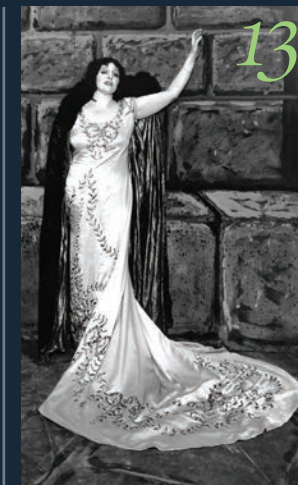
1850-1921

Early Days
 of Opera in
 San Francisco



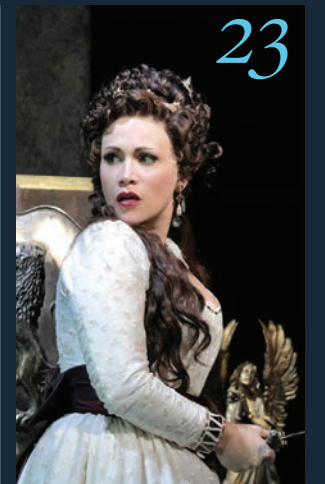
1921-1922

The Italians Who
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1923-1953

San Francisco
 Opera is Born:
 The Merola Years



1954-2023

Gaetano Merola's
 Legacy

Italian Opera Arrives in San Francisco

Italian Opera

First Italian Opera Aria Sung in San Francisco

The Gold Rush of 1849 was barely underway, bringing thousands of fortune seekers to the City, when the music of Italian opera was first heard here. The aria “Ernani, involami” from Giuseppe Verdi’s *Ernani* was the first operatic music to be sung in town professionally. It was performed on November 4, 1850, at the newly-opened Jenny Lind Theater (the first of three theaters to bear her name) by German soprano Mathilde Korsinsky-Von Gulpen.

First Opera Performance in San Francisco

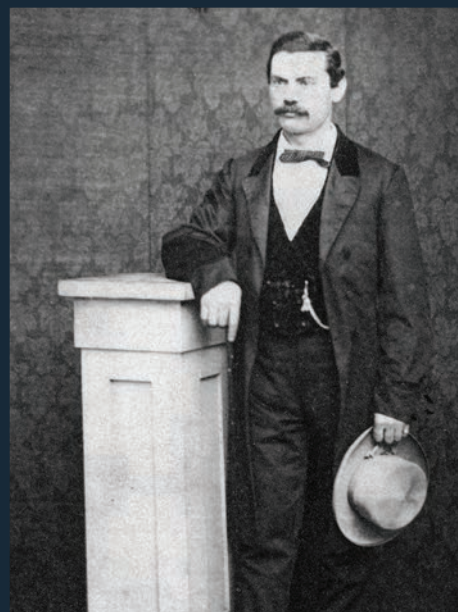
Bellini’s *La Sonnambula* (abridged), the first opera heard in San Francisco, was presented by Innocenzo Pellegrini’s traveling troupe at the Adelphi Theater on February 12, 1851. The cast included Pellegrini as Elvino and his wife, Rosina Mauri, as Amina. A performance of Bellini’s *Norma* followed on February 27.

San Francisco’s First Verdi Opera

On April 8, 1851 at the Adelphi Theater, Pellegrini’s company presented the City’s first opera by Verdi, the relatively “modern” work *Ernani* (premiered seven years earlier). Since the Company lacked a suitable baritone for the part of Don Carlo, Matilde Korsinsky-Von Gulpen sang the role transposed to a soprano key.

San Francisco’s First Complete Opera Performance

Nineteen-Century San Franciscans loved Verdi! Eugenio Bianchi’s Italian Opera Company presented the first fully staged performance of an entire opera in San Francisco, Verdi’s *Il Trovatore*, at Maguire’s Opera House on May 5, 1869. In later months at the American Theatre the Company gave the local premieres of three more Verdi operas: *Attila*, *La Traviata*, and *Un Ballo in Maschera*.



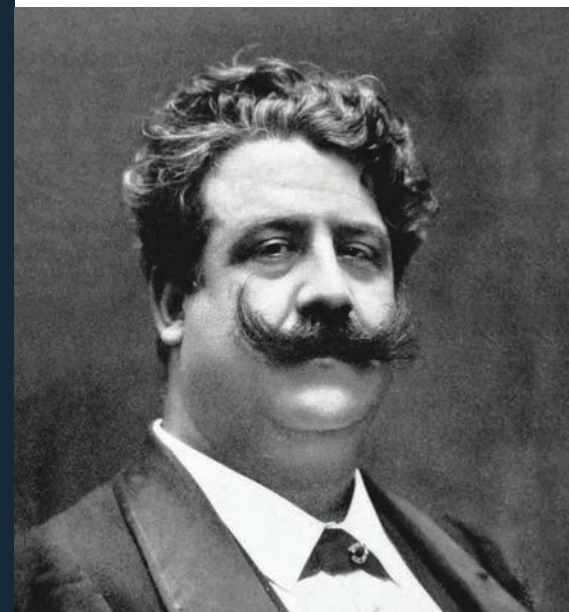
Top:
Rosina Mauri. Portrait, undated.

Bottom from left:
• Innocenzo Pellegrini. Portrait, undated.
• Eugenio Bianchi. Portrait, undated. Images courtesy of the Museum of Performance + Design, San Francisco

1850 1921

Early Days of Opera in San Francisco

The Tivoli Opera House: A Busy San Francisco Opera Hub



San Francisco was an opera town from the very beginning, and the culture-craving Gold Rush-era locals loved Italian opera. European immigrants, especially from Italy, who came seeking success here often had opera in their blood and were determined to keep their culture in their lives.

By 1851, a scant two years after the world rushed in to create this city, Italian operas were beginning to be performed regularly. Touring companies brought opera, mostly Italian opera sung by Italian artists, to the City on a regular basis. This history of opera in San Francisco between the Gold Rush and the 1906 earthquake is rich and varied, with singers such as Adelina Patti, Antonio Scotti, Luisa Tetrazzini, and Enrico Caruso drawing immense and enthusiastic crowds. San Franciscans seemingly could not get enough Italian opera. By 1922, thanks to the Italian immigrant Gaetano Merola and his supporters, the City was on the verge of having its own resident opera company.



The legendary Tivoli Opera House opened for business on July 3, 1879, and became a bustling center of almost constant opera performances. By 1903 the Tivoli, in disrepair, was demolished and a third Tivoli was built, only to be destroyed in the earthquake and fire of 1906. On March 12, 1913, to inaugurate the New (and fourth) Tivoli Theater, Luisa Tetrazzini sang Gilda in *Rigoletto*. Later that year composer Ruggero Leoncavallo conducted his opera *Pagliacci* at the New Tivoli.

Top:
Tivoli Opera House chorus line, circa 1890s. Roy D. Graves Pictorial Collection. Courtesy of The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley

Left:
Ruggero Leoncavallo. Portrait, undated. Courtesy of Biblioteca della musica di Bologna



Ida Valerga

The descendants of Genoese immigrants Bartolomeo and Antoinetta Valerga were prominent in Bay Area cultural life from the 1870s through the 1930s, often featured on San Francisco Playbills, with many starring at the Tivoli Opera House.

Ida Valerga, born in 1851, was one of the most famous members of the Valerga family. She sang at Milan's La Scala when she was twenty-two and later performed before the Tsar, for Kaiser Wilhelm, and Queen Victoria.

This page:
Ida Valerga. Portrait, circa 1890s. From the Valerga Collection. Courtesy of the Museum of Performance + Design, San Francisco

Adelina Patti: A Diva for the Ages

On March 13, 1884, a tumultuous crowd attended the San Francisco debut of famed Italian American soprano Adelina Patti as Violetta in Verdi's *La Traviata* at the Grand Opera House located at Mission and Third Streets. Scuffles broke out among those waiting for standing room. Normally polite operagoers pushed and shoved and cursed. No rock star has enjoyed a more frenzied San Francisco reception.

Born in Spain to Italian opera singers, Patti grew up in New York City. She was singing onstage by age eight, a celebrity by sixteen, and an international star by eighteen. Described by composer Giuseppe Verdi as a "stupendous artist," she became the consummate diva who traveled in her own private rail car.

The highly paid Patti was already forty by the time of her San Francisco debut, but she enjoyed the City enough to return four more times on "farewell tours," the last in 1904. By then she was age sixty-one and she avoided the most taxing operatic repertoire in favor of sentimental ballads and songs.

Below:
Adelina Patti, undated. World History Archive. Alamy Stock Photo



Baritone Antonio Scotti Arrives in San Francisco

Famed Neapolitan baritone Antonio Scotti debuted at the Tivoli Opera House in 1900 as Amonasro in *Aida* with the touring Metropolitan Opera Company and would return with the Met in 1901 and 1905. Later he formed his own touring company.

In 1920 the Antonio Scotti Company presented eight operas at the Civic Auditorium, including *Tosca*. Scotti himself played the villain Scarpia, a role for which he was legendary. He sang it only once, in 1927, at San Francisco Opera. That same year he also gave the Company its first Falstaff.

Above:
Baritone Antonio Scotti (on right) with tenor Enrico Caruso. Photograph by Adolfo Croce, from "L'illustrazione Italiana," Year XXXIII, No. 37

Below:
Portrait of Scotti, 1891. Courtesy of the Museum of Performance + Design, San Francisco





Caruso Carries Away Opera Audience

The legendary tenor Enrico Caruso made his San Francisco debut on April 6, 1905, at the Grand Opera House with the touring Metropolitan Opera, singing the Duke in Verdi's *Rigoletto*. A *San Francisco Chronicle* headline read "Caruso Carries Away Opera Audience." His aria "La donna è mobile" was encored three times.

He came back in 1906 just in time for the earthquake that devastated the City. Having starred in *Carmen* the night before, the Great Caruso was shaken from his bed at the Palace Hotel at 5:12 a.m. on April 18. He would draw sketches of himself viewing the ensuing fire that engulfed the City and of the horse cart that took him and his luggage to the ferry bound for Oakland. There he boarded a train to New York, never to return. The native of Napoli declared that he preferred volcanoes to earthquakes: "Give me Vesuvius."



The Composer of Cavalleria Rusticana in San Francisco

In 1903, Pietro Mascagni conducted eight performances of his 1890 smash hit *Cavalleria Rusticana*, along with his more recent *Zanetto*, at the Tivoli Opera House. The March 24 performance was a benefit for the Verdi monument fund for a statue of the beloved Italian composer to be erected in Golden Gate Park.

On February 25 he was honored at a reception at the Palace Hotel attended by Mayor Schmitz. Grateful for the warm reception he received in San Francisco, Mascagni composed a short fragment for piano, entitled "Un pensiero a San Francisco" (*A Thought for San Francisco*).



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Above, top to bottom:

- Enrico Caruso, seen here in his popular role as Don José in Bizet's *Carmen*, which he performed in San Francisco on the evening of April 17, 1906.
- Pietro Mascagni at the piano.
- Caricature of Pietro Mascagni (center) and his librettists for *Cavalleria Rusticana*, Giovanni Targioni-Tozzetti (left) and Guido Menasci (right). Drawing by Mascagni. Images Lebrecht Music & Arts/Alamy Stock Photo

The "Florentine Nightingale" Sings in San Francisco

Internationally renowned coloratura soprano Luisa Tetrazzini made her American debut in San Francisco on January 11, 1905, as Gilda in Verdi's *Rigoletto* at the Tivoli Opera House. Tetrazzini was immediately charmed by San Francisco, and San Franciscans were enthralled by her.

Defying impresario Oscar Hammerstein, who claimed that under his exclusive contract she could legally sing only for him, Tetrazzini gave a hugely popular free concert on Christmas Eve 1910 at Lotta's Fountain (at Market and Kearny), complete with choir and orchestra. An estimated crowd of 200,000 people joined her at the conclusion as they all sang "Auld Lang Syne."

On March 23, 1914, the Italian community came out to Golden Gate Park in force. A throng of some 20,000 people attended the unveiling of the monument to the great Verdi, for which Tetrazzini had helped raise funds. Although battling a cold, the diva sang "Ritorna vincitor" from *Aida* to a tumultuous response.

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Below:

Luisa Tetrazzini greeting the crowd at the dedication of the Giuseppe Verdi Monument on March 23, 1914. On stage in front, from left: Ettore Patrizi, Tetrazzini, and Andrea Sbarbaro. Historical Archive Collection of the Museo Italo Americano. Gift of Alessandro Baccari



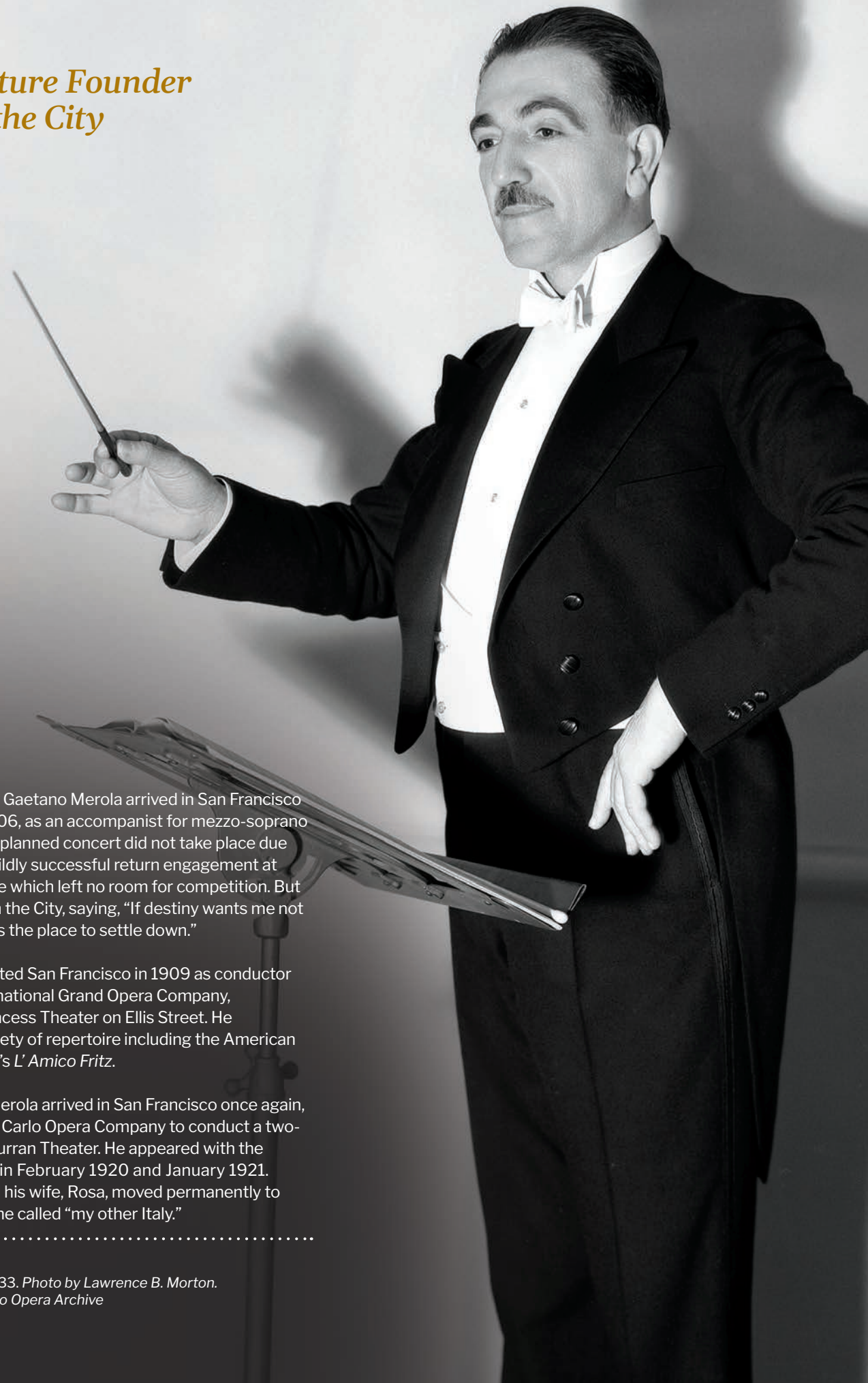
Opera's Future Founder Arrives in the City

Neapolitan conductor Gaetano Merola arrived in San Francisco for the first time in 1906, as an accompanist for mezzo-soprano Eugenia Mantelli. The planned concert did not take place due to Luisa Tetrazzini's wildly successful return engagement at the Tivoli Opera House which left no room for competition. But Merola fell in love with the City, saying, "If destiny wants me not to return to Italy, this is the place to settle down."

Maestro Merola revisited San Francisco in 1909 as conductor for the traveling International Grand Opera Company, performing at the Princess Theater on Ellis Street. He conducted a wide variety of repertoire including the American premiere of Mascagni's *L' Amico Fritz*.

In February of 1919, Merola arrived in San Francisco once again, this time with the San Carlo Opera Company to conduct a two-week season at the Curran Theater. He appeared with the San Carlo here again in February 1920 and January 1921. Later that year he and his wife, Rosa, moved permanently to San Francisco, which he called "my other Italy."

This page:
Gaetano Merola, circa 1933. Photo by Lawrence B. Morton.
Courtesy of San Francisco Opera Archive

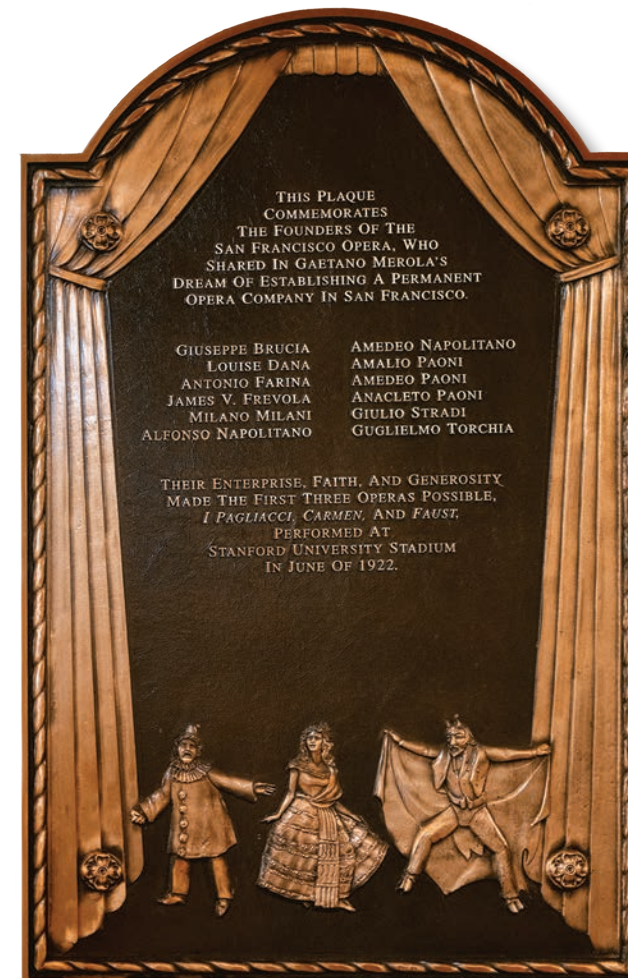


1921 1922

The Italians Who Made Merola's Dream Possible

Maestro Merola recognized the City's potential to be a great opera center. When he moved to San Francisco in 1921, he brought with him the dream of launching the Bay Area's first opera season. After attending the "Big Game" in the fall of that year, he was determined to hold the season at Stanford Stadium, with its wonderful acoustics.

For his Stanford Season, Merola found financial support to the tune of \$40,000 (in 1922 dollars) from a small group of San Francisco Italians with whom he often dined and played cards. Although not greatly wealthy, they too had brought their love of opera from Italy and shared Merola's dream of a permanent opera company in San Francisco. Their financial sacrifices—some of them causing great personal loss—made this dream possible. They had helped to plant the seeds of a homegrown resident opera company, and those seeds were soon to bear fruit.



“...this triumphant accomplishment is not the work of millionaires. It is the outcome of the enthusiasm for opera of a dozen Italians.”

Jeanne Lane, *San Francisco Examiner*,
June 16, 1922

Left:
The plaque at the War Memorial Opera House honoring the memory of the twelve original Italian American Founders of San Francisco Opera: Giuseppe Brucia, Louise Stradi Dana, Antonio Farina, James V. Frevola, Milano Milani, Alfonso Napolitano, Amedeo Napolitano, Amalio Paoni, Amedeo Paoni, Anacleto Paoni, Giulio Stradi, Guglielmo Torchia. Photo by Kristen Loken. Courtesy of the San Francisco Opera Archive.



Stanford Season

Paving the Way for a New Opera Company

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Above:
 Giovanni Martinelli as Canio in Leoncavallo's *Pagliacci*, 1922.
 Courtesy of San Francisco History Center, San Francisco Public Library

With the force of his charm and organizational skill, Merola managed to present four staged open-air opera performances at the Stanford Stadium in 1922, including one performance each of *Pagliacci* and *Faust*, and two of *Carmen*. Merola attracted top-rate singing talent (his specialty), including the great Italian tenor Giovanni Martinelli, who starred in all three operas. Special trains took San Francisco residents down the Peninsula to the performances, which were seen by a total audience of 30,000.

The *San Francisco Examiner* wrote: "Gaetano Merola ought to be jubilant. He has greatly dared, and he has succeeded almost beyond what he probably dared to hope ... He has given us opera as good as that which we cross the continent to see." The star tenor Giovanni Martinelli told the *San Francisco Chronicle*, "But you must not stop at this festival. You have no opera company of your own? You should have, and I hope that this festival will speed the day."

His words would prove prophetic.

1923
1953

San Francisco Opera is Born: The Merola Years

The Birth of San Francisco Opera



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Above:
 Queena Mario. Portrait, 1931.
 Photo by Alessandro Baccari, Sr.
 Courtesy of San Francisco History Center, San Francisco Public Library

Right:
 San Francisco Civic Auditorium, 1920.
 Photographer unknown. Courtesy of OpenSFHistory/wnp27.5542

Gaetano Merola's short season of operas at Stanford in 1922 was a huge artistic success despite losing money. His proven abilities as an organizer as well as a conductor convinced several influential backers to support the establishment of a permanent opera company in San Francisco. A committee was formed to raise funds throughout the business community and in social circles, and the San Francisco Opera Association became a reality in 1923.

Merola's background made him well-suited to his new role running an opera company. Born in Naples in 1881, the son of a Neapolitan court violinist, he studied piano and conducting at the Conservatorio di San Pietro a Majella in Naples. After immigrating to the United States in 1899, he served as an assistant conductor with the New York Metropolitan Opera, worked with Oscar Hammerstein at his Manhattan Opera Company as well as his London Opera House, and got to know San Francisco well as a visiting conductor with Fortune Gallo's San Carlo Opera Company.



Maestro Merola's first season of San Francisco Opera opened on September 26, 1923, at the Exposition Auditorium (now known as the Bill Graham Civic Auditorium) with Puccini's *La Bohème*, starring Queena Mario and Giovanni Martinelli. Merola, of course, conducted. The season featured ten different operas (all but one of them Italian) in thirteen days including Puccini's relatively new triple bill *Il Trittico*, which had premiered at the Met in 1918 and Boito's complex *Mefistofele*, a big challenge for the amateur chorus.

A *San Francisco Chronicle* headline read: "Merola's Efforts Show Opera Without [An] Opera House Is Better Than [An] Opera House Without [A] Music Organization."

Yes, San Francisco had an opera company. An opera house was still a decade away.



Claudia Muzio Becomes San Francisco Favorite

Italian soprano Claudia Muzio debuted at San Francisco Opera on September 22, 1924, as Maddalena in *Andrea Chénier* opposite tenor Beniamino Gigli, returning a second straight season in the title role. The talented Muzio sang *Tosca* and *Violetta* that same season and would become a Company favorite over the ensuing decade. In 1932 she would inaugurate the new War Memorial Opera House with a performance in the title role of *Tosca*.

Born in Pavia in 1889, the daughter of an operatic stage manager, Muzio spent her childhood in London, returning to Italy at age sixteen. She made her La Scala debut in 1913 at age twenty-four and quickly became an international star, with wide ranging repertoire including all the leading Verdi, Puccini, and “Verismo” roles.

This page:
 Claudia Muzio as *Tosca* in Puccini’s *Tosca*, 1932. Photo by Lawrence B. Morton. Courtesy of San Francisco Opera Archive



Merola Lures Beniamino Gigli to San Francisco

Maestro Merola succeeded in bringing one of the greatest tenors of his generation, Beniamino Gigli, to launch the first season of San Francisco Opera in 1923.

His debut in the title role of Umberto Giordano’s *Andrea Chénier* received such an enthusiastic reception that, as the *San Francisco Chronicle* reviewer griped, “the auditors did not allow him to finish the first act aria, but broke clamorously in where they should have been silent.” Gigli would return to San Francisco Opera starring in twelve productions in the 1920s and 30s.

Left:
 Beniamino Gigli as *Andrea Chénier*, 1938. The talented Gigli, born in 1890 in Recanati, Italy, was called by many “The Second Caruso.” Photo by Lawrence B. Morton. Courtesy of San Francisco Opera Archive



“Tenore di grazia”

Tenor Tito Schipa

Born in Lecce in 1889, Schipa was the leading *tenore di grazia* (light lyric tenor) of his generation and one of the most popular tenors of the early 20th century. He made his La Scala debut in 1915. His celebrated San Francisco Opera debut in 1924 (when he starred in three operas) was followed by return visits through 1940.

Italian tenor Tito Schipa made such a hit in his 1924 debut as Des Grieux in Massenet’s *Manon* that he was forced by public acclaim to encore his Act II aria “Le Rêve.”

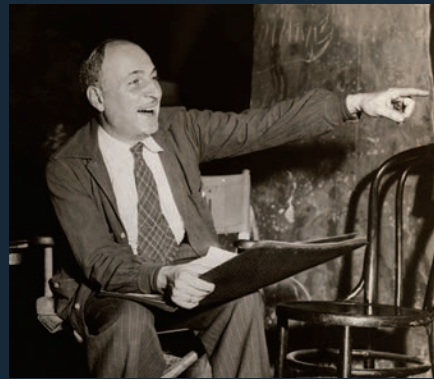
Above:
 Tito Schipa as Chevalier des Grieux and Brazilian soprano Bidu Sayão in the title role of Jules Massenet’s *Manon*, 1939. Photo by Lawrence B. Morton. Courtesy of San Francisco Opera Archive

Merola
Conducts
Puccini's
Last Opera,
Turandot

“Turandot”

Only one year after its world premiere in Milan, *Turandot* is heard in San Francisco on September 19, 1927. The very “modern” opera so thrilled the audience that a second performance was added at the end of the season. The elaborate production won high praise for its director Armando Agnini, Merola's nephew, who staged nearly all of Merola's operas from 1922 to 1953. Another of Merola's nephews, Alessandro Agnini, served as Wardrobe Master.

Acclaimed Italian bass Ezio Pinza sang the role of Timur in *Turandot*, plus three other major roles that season. The *San Francisco Chronicle* found him “imposing” as Timur and “splendid” as Colline in *La Bohème*. The dashing and charismatic Pinza became a popular favorite in San Francisco, singing twenty-six roles during twenty seasons from 1927 to 1948 before going on to fame on Broadway in 1949 as the French planter Emile de Becque in *South Pacific*.



From top:

• Portrait of Ezio Pinza in *Don Giovanni*, 1948. Pinza performed the title role in *Don Giovanni* with San Francisco Opera in six seasons between 1938 and 1948. Courtesy of San Francisco History Center, San Francisco Public Library

• Armando Agnini, San Francisco Opera Stage Director, 1938. Courtesy of San Francisco History Center, San Francisco Public Library

• A scene from San Francisco Opera's 1927 production of *Turandot*, designed and directed by Gaetano Merola's nephew and close collaborator, Armando Agnini. Photo by Lawrence B. Morton. Courtesy of San Francisco Opera Archive



“Ah! Finalmente!”

San Francisco
Opera's
New Home

At long last the War Memorial Opera House opened with a performance of *Tosca*, on October 15, 1932, starring Claudia Muzio and Dino Borgioli, conducted by Maestro Merola. Act I was broadcast on radio. The first words sung in the opera--“Ah! Finalmente!” (Ah, finally!-- had special meaning.

The huge success of *Lucia di Lammermoor* on the second night of the 1932 opening season caused another performance to be added at the end of the season, broadcast to the Civic Auditorium (San Francisco Opera's former home) and the Civic Center Plaza. This first “simulcast” by San Francisco Opera was heard by an estimated audience of 20,000.

Above:

War Memorial Opera House, viewed from across Van Ness Avenue, circa 1932. Photographer unknown. Jack Tillmany Collection. Courtesy of OpenSFHistory/wnp67.0060



1 | *The Mayor Who Loved Opera*

Angelo Joseph Rossi, the son of Italian immigrants and an avid opera lover, was Mayor of San Francisco during the tumultuous period from 1931 to 1944. His tenure witnessed the building of the Golden Gate Bridge, the Bay Bridge, and the War Memorial Opera House.

Pictured from left to right: Gaetano Merola, Mayor Angelo Rossi, Claudia Muzio, and Opera President Wallace Alexander, at the inauguration of the War Memorial Opera House, 1932. Courtesy of Rose Marie Cleese

3 | *Josephine Tumminia*

Hometown celebrity Josephine Tumminia made her San Francisco Opera debut at age twenty-two as Rosina in *Il Barbiere di Siviglia* opposite Tito Schipa.

Josephine Tumminia in *Il Barbiere di Siviglia*, 1935. Photo by Franklin and Rognon. Courtesy of San Francisco Opera Archive

2 | *San Francisco Ballet*

Under Maestro Merola the San Francisco Opera Ballet was founded in 1933 under the direction of Ballet Master Adolph Bolm. Dancer William Christensen, with his brother Harold, purchased the Company from the Opera in 1942, renaming it San Francisco Ballet in 1951.

San Francisco Opera Ballet dancers (from left to right) Elise Reiman, Dimitri Romanoff, and Nico Charisse in *La Traviata*, 1933. Photo by Lawrence B. Morton. Courtesy of San Francisco Opera Archive

4 | *Salvatore Baccaloni*

Rome native Salvatore Baccaloni, a huge talent in comic roles, made his first San Francisco Opera appearance in 1938. A great basso buffo whose performances won the hearts of his audiences, he appeared with the San Francisco Opera regularly for a generation.

Salvatore Baccaloni as Dr. Bartolo in *Il Barbiere di Siviglia*, 1938. Gift of Alessandro Baccari. Historical Archive Collection of the Museo Italo Americano



Italian Baritone Tito Gobbi's American Debut

Already an established film star, the lively Italian baritone Tito Gobbi was an audience favorite in his 1948 U.S. debut in the title role of *Il Barbiere di Siviglia*, among three roles that season. Critic Alfred Frankenstein wrote: "He was a Figaro straight off the cover of a candy box." Gobbi would return in three more seasons singing a total of nine different roles.

Right: Italo Tajo, Ferruccio Tagliavini, and Tito Gobbi signing autographs at Cavalli Bookstore in North Beach, circa 1948. The three stars all performed together in the 1947 Italian film *Il Barbiere di Siviglia* and performed for the first time with San Francisco Opera in its 1948-1949 season. Gift of Alessandro Baccari. Historical Archive Collection of the Museo Italo Americano

Licia Albanese's San Francisco Reign Begins

The native of Bari in Italy's Apulia region debuted October 20, 1941, as Madama Butterfly, causing critic Alfred Frankenstein to exclaim: "In this one performance she became a star whom one will want to hear many times in many roles." His prediction came true. Miss Albanese returned to sing "Butterfly" a total of ten times and became a much-beloved artist here, appearing in countless roles in almost every season for the next twenty years. She holds the record for the most leading roles performed with San Francisco Opera.

Left from top:
 • Portrait of Licia Albanese in *Madama Butterfly*, 1941.
 • Albanese and Robert Merrill making spaghetti, 1957. Images courtesy of San Francisco History Center, San Francisco Public Library



Tebaldi and Del Monaco Debut in *Aida*

The 1950-1951 season opener *Aida* featured the first American appearances of two soon-to-be opera legends, Renata Tebaldi, singing the title role, and Mario Del Monaco as Radames. The *Chronicle* critic Alfred Frankenstein described what the crowd loved about Del Monaco: "The fat, trumpeting clear high notes sustained until the audience yells with the excitement they engender." Tebaldi would go on to sing seven major roles with the Company over the next fifteen seasons.

Main:
Portrait of Renata Tebaldi as Aida, 1950.

Inset:
Portrait of Mario Del Monaco as Radames in *Aida*, 1950. Images courtesy of San Francisco History Center, San Francisco Public Library



Maestro Merola Dies Doing What He Loved

On August 30, 1953, at an outdoor concert of the San Francisco Symphony at Sigmund Stern Grove, Gaetano Merola, San Francisco Opera's founder, who at age 72 had been in failing health, collapsed and died while conducting soprano Brunetta Mazzolini in the aria "Un bel di" from Puccini's *Madama Butterfly*.

In November the Austrian conductor Kurt Herbert Adler, who had been Chorus Master since 1943 and later became a close advisor to Merola, was named Artistic Director of the Company. In 1956 his title became Artistic and Musical Director, and finally in 1957 he was named General Director.

Right:
From left to right: Dino Borgioli (as Pinkerton), Maestro Gaetano Merola, and Alfredo Gandolfi (as Sharpless) on the set of *Madama Butterfly*, 1934. From the Historical Archive Collection of the Museo Italo Americano. Gift of Alessandro Baccari

Bottom from left:
• Gaetano Merola shaking the hand of soprano Brunetta Mazzolini at the Stern Grove concert at which he later died, 1953. Photo by Lillian Bauer. Courtesy of San Francisco Opera Archive
• Plaque in honor of Maestro Merola with sculptor Spero Anargyros, 1953. Courtesy of San Francisco History Center, San Francisco Public Library



“Addio, Maestro”



1954
2023

Gaetano Merola's Legacy

Following the death of Gaetano Merola in 1953, San Francisco Opera's new General Director Kurt Herbert Adler was determined to perpetuate his legacy. Adler ensured that Merola's gift to the City of a thriving opera company of international importance would grow in stature and influence by presenting the great singers of the day and fostering the careers of talented young artists to carry on Merola's tradition of excellence.

The Merola Opera Program Takes Root

In memory of San Francisco Opera's founder Gaetano Merola, Kurt Herbert Adler established the Merola Opera Fund in 1954 to underwrite the San Francisco Opera Debut Auditions for young singers.

Renamed the Merola Opera Program in 1957, the organization began offering a summer training institute for young singers that soon became recognized as the finest such program in the nation, starting countless promising talents on the road to stardom. Instrumental in its founding were tenor, scholar, and teacher James H. Schwabacher, Jr., pianist and vocal coach Otto Guth, and production coordinator and stage director Matthew Farruggio.

San Francisco Opera's Italian Factotum

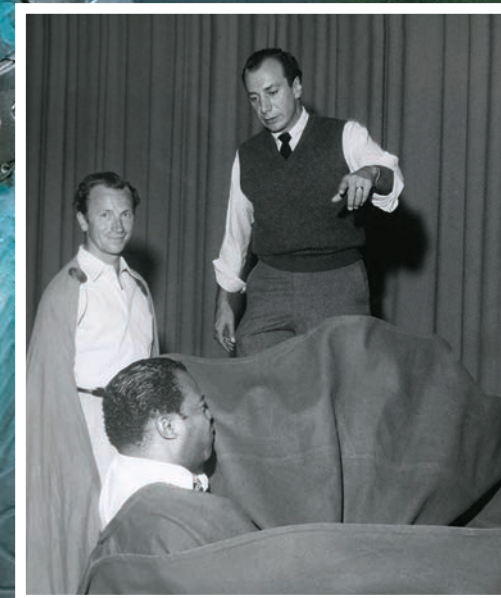
Of Sicilian heritage, Matthew Salvatore Farruggio joined the San Francisco Opera staff in 1956. His knowledge of stagecraft was invaluable in teaching the "Merolini" theatrical movement, including his legendary sessions on "how to die." A mainstay of the Company for over 30 years, Matt was awarded the prestigious San Francisco Opera Medal in 1981. Ever playful and humble, when asked about his profession, Matt replied, "I was a ham."

Inset left:

Matthew Farruggio (on right) coaching stage movement for Merola Opera Program participants Walter Hinton and Karl Woellhoff, 1959. Photo by Carolyn Mason Jones. Courtesy of Merola Opera Program



Main: Veena Akama-Makia, Adia Evans, Sahel Salam, and Erin Wagner in the Merola Opera Program's 2022 production of *Die Zauberflöte* (*The Magic Flute*). Photo by Kristen Loken. Courtesy of Merola Opera Program



A New Mezzo in a New Opera

New Mezzo

The powerful mezzo-soprano voice of Irene Dalis first caught San Francisco's attention with her debut as Princess Eboli in Verdi's *Don Carlo* in 1958. The *Chronicle* praised her "rich and vital command" and "thoroughly believable characterization." Of Greek-Italian descent, Dalis would appear regularly with the Company over the next fifteen seasons, eventually becoming the founder and General Director of Opera San Jose, where she also established the Irene Dalis Vocal Competition.



The First of San Francisco Opera's Many World Premieres

Miss Dalis was in the cast when composer Norman Dello Joio, son of Italian immigrants, saw his opera *Blood Moon* become the first world premiere at San Francisco Opera in 1961. Also starring in the opera was Italian American soprano Mary Costa, who had voiced the role of Princess Aurora in the 1959 Disney animated film *Sleeping Beauty*. Costa appeared regularly with San Francisco Opera throughout the 1960s.



From top:

• Mary Costa is assisted by Wig Master Stan Dufford as she prepares to perform the role of Ninette in the world premiere of *Blood Moon*, 1961. Photo by Carolyn Mason Jones.

• From left to right: tenor Claude Heater, Irene Dalis, and General Director Kurt Herbert Adler in rehearsal for *Blood Moon*, 1961. Photo by Carolyn Mason Jones. Images courtesy of San Francisco Opera Archive



Giorgio Tozzi Debuts

In 1955, the American premiere of William Walton's *Troilus and Cressida* featured a dashing handsome Italian American bass named Giorgio Tozzi in the role of the High Priest. Tozzi returned for numerous roles over the next twenty-three years, also appearing on Broadway and television. He dubbed the singing voice of the actor Rossano Brazzi in the film role of Emile de Becque in "South Pacific" (1958).

Left:

Giorgio Tozzi playing the title role in *Boris Godunov* (sung in English), 1961. Photo by Maria-Jeanette. Image courtesy of San Francisco Opera Archive

The "King of the High Cs" in San Francisco

The great Italian tenor Luciano Pavarotti made his San Francisco Opera debut on November 11, 1967, beginning a twenty-year love affair with the City and its opera company. The role was Rodolfo in *La Bohème*, opposite soprano Mirella Freni (also in her debut). Soon to become international stars, the two had grown up together in their native Modena.

Pavarotti's poise under pressure was tested during his 1969 *Bohème* when, during Act III of the October 1 performance, the theater began to rumble and shudder. Some in the audience headed for the exits, but the tenor gripped soprano Dorothy Kirsten's hand and kept on singing. Unlike Caruso in 1906, he did not leave town after his earthquake experience.

Pavarotti made several role debuts at San Francisco Opera, including Fernando in *La Favorita* (1973), Rodolfo in *Luisa Miller* (1974), Manrico in *Il Trovatore* (1975) opposite Joan Sutherland singing her first Leonora), Calaf in *Turandot* (1977), Enzo in *La Gioconda* (1979 with Renata Scotti in the title role for the first time) and Radames in *Aida* (1981). "This is my second hometown," he said "Musically it is my first."

Right:

Pavarotti in his dressing room on the night of his San Francisco Opera debut as Rodolfo in *La Bohème*, 1967.

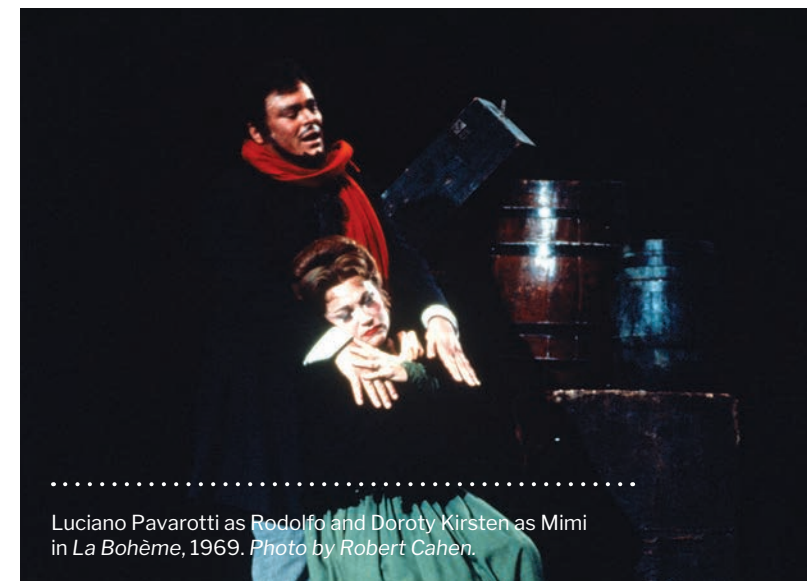
Images in this page courtesy of San Francisco Opera Archive



Luciano Pavarotti



Mirella Freni and Luciano Pavarotti in *La Bohème* in their 1967 San Francisco Opera debut. Photo by Margaret Norton.



Luciano Pavarotti as Rodolfo and Dorothy Kirsten as Mimi in *La Bohème*, 1969. Photo by Robert Cahen.



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4

1 | Renato Capecchi

Famed for his endlessly expressive gestures, baritone and master comedian Renato Capecchi made his San Francisco Opera debut in 1968 as Doctor Bartolo in *Il Barbiere di Siviglia*, starting a twenty-five year relationship with the Company.

.....
 Nicola Rossi-Lemini (standing, left) as Don Basilio, Renato Capecchi (right) as Dr. Bartolo, and Ingvar Wixell (seated) as Figaro in *Il Barbiere di Siviglia*, 1968. Photo by Margaret Norton. Courtesy of San Francisco Opera Archive

3 | Francis Ford Coppola

In 1972, just months after the release of his now legendary film *The Godfather*, director Francis Ford Coppola staged the American premiere of Gottfried von Einem's *The Visit of the Old Lady* at San Francisco Opera.

.....
 Francis Ford Coppola (right) with Kurt Herbert Adler, 1972. Photo by Carolyn Mason Jones. Courtesy of San Francisco Opera Archive

2 | A Powerhouse Mezzo-Soprano

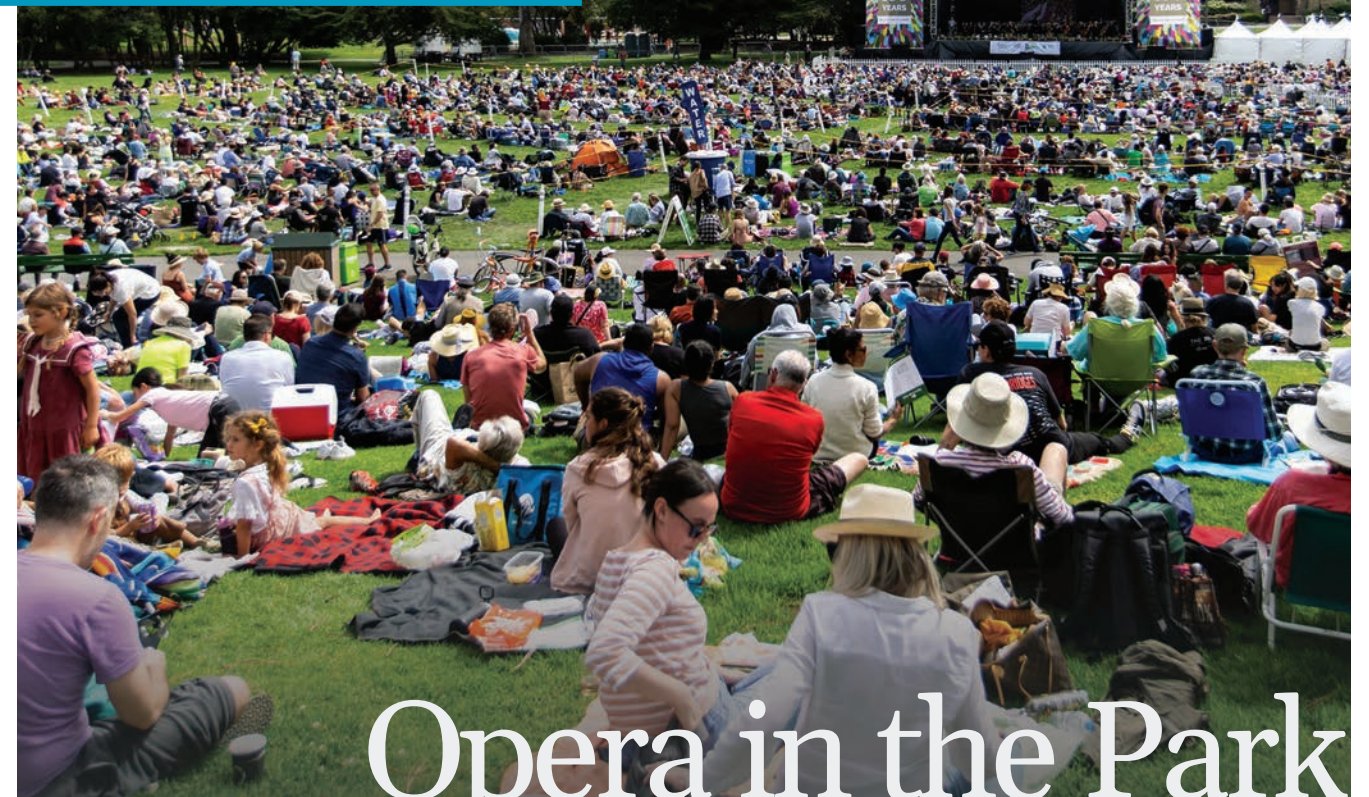
The imposing Italian mezzo-soprano Fiorenza Cossotto wowed San Francisco in her 1977 debut as Amneris in Verdi's *Aida*. She returned with equally impressive performances in three more roles in 1981 and 1985.

.....
 Fiorenza Cossotto as Amneris in *Aida*, 1977. Photo by Ron Scherl. Courtesy of San Francisco Opera Archive

4 | Dueling Diva and Divo

Italian co-stars Luciano Pavarotti and Renata Scotta were famously feuding during San Francisco Opera's 1979 production of Ponchielli's *La Gioconda*, which was telecast live worldwide (a Company milestone), garnering eleven Daytime Emmy Awards.

.....
 Renata Scotta performing the title role and Luciano Pavarotti as Enzo Grimaldo in *La Gioconda*, 1979. Photo by Ron Scherl. Courtesy of San Francisco Opera Archive



Opera in the Park

A New Tradition: Opera in the Park

In 1971 the first "Opera in the Park" concert, conducted by Charles Wilson, was held at the bandshell in Golden Gate Park. The free outdoor event became an annual tradition (moving eventually to what is now called Robin Williams Meadow), drawing thousands each year to hear the opera's stars.

Rained Out? Not Quite.

In 1980 drizzling rain made it impossible for the Opera Orchestra to perform in the park, but the show went on accompanied by piano, with mezzo-soprano Shirley Verrett, baritone Wolfgang Brendel, and tenor Plácido Domingo (who supplied some piano accompaniment as well).

From top:

• Luciano Pavarotti performing at Opera in the Park at the Music Concourse Bandshell, Golden Gate Park, 1970s.

• Opera in the Park, performed at Robin Williams Meadow in Golden Gate Park, 2022. Photo by Drew Altizer Photography. Images courtesy of San Francisco Opera Archive

Residencies for Young Artists

Continuing Gaetano Merola's mission to provide professional opportunities for young American singers, the San Francisco Opera Affiliate Artists Program was founded in 1977 by Kurt Herbert Adler.

A year-round residency for young singers, the program was transformed in 1982 under General Director Terence McEwen into the Adler Fellowship Program (named in honor of his predecessor) as part of the newly created San Francisco Opera Center designed to coordinate the Company's activities for young artists.

Recognized as one of the premiere opera training programs, the Adler Fellowship program now boasts countless distinguished alumni.

.....
This page:

Adler Fellows in concert: *The Future Is Now* performance in Herbst Theatre, December 2022.
Photo by Kristen Loken. Courtesy of San Francisco Opera Archive



From Supertitles to Superlative Career

On October 8, 1983, during a student matinee of *La Traviata*, San Francisco Opera became one of the first companies in the United States to provide English translations via projected titles ("supertitles") using a slide-projector system devised by Jerry Sherk and Francesca Zambello.

A stage director with a long association with San Francisco Opera, Zambello soon established a major international career, serving for many years as Artistic and General Director of the Glimmerglass Festival in Cooperstown, New York, and continuing as Artistic Director of the Washington National Opera.

.....
Left from top:

• Supertitles, as well as the OperaVision screen for the balcony, are visible in this photograph from a 2018 performance of *Tosca* (Act III). Photo by Cory Weaver.

• Francesca Zambello and Jerry Sherk working on supertitles, 1984. Photographer unknown.

Below:

Robert Orth as Harvey Milk, Juliana Gondek as Dianne Feinstein, and Gidon Saks as Mayor Moscone in *Harvey Milk*, 1996. Photo by Ron Scherl. Images courtesy of San Francisco Opera Archive

An Opera About San Francisco Supervisor Harvey Milk

Slain San Francisco gay rights leader and City Supervisor Harvey Milk became the hero of an opera composed by Stewart Wallace (co-commissioned by San Francisco Opera, New York City Opera, and Houston Grand Opera, where it premiered).

At the performance on November 27, 1996, in conjunction with the eighteenth annual Candlelight March marking the anniversary of the assassinations of Supervisor Milk and Mayor George Moscone, nine of Harvey's friends and associates appeared onstage as participants in the Gay Pride Parade scene.





Italian Leadership

Nicola Luisotti's Italian Musical Leadership

Shortly after becoming San Francisco Opera's Music Director in 2009, Viareggio native Nicola Luisotti conducted the Opera Orchestra in "Concerto Italiano" on November 28 at Herbst Theater to benefit the Museo Italo Americano.

On June 13, 2015, Maestro Luisotti led the world premiere of *La Ciociara* (*Two Women*), San Francisco Opera's first commission of an Italian opera. The work by composer Marco Tutino, with a libretto by Tutino and Fabio Ceresa, was based on a script by Luca Rossi and on Alberto Moravia's novel of the same name.

Following in Sophia Loren's footsteps, the magnetic Italian diva Anna Caterina Antonacci created the operatic role of Cesira, "La Ciociara" – the woman from the Ciociaria region. Antonacci's striking beauty, vocal sensitivity, and dramatic presence garnered accolades.

From top:

• Anna Caterina Antonacci (left) as Cesira in *La Ciociara* with Sarah Shafer as her daughter, Rosetta, 2014. Photo by Cory Weaver.

• Nicola Luisotti conducting, 2012. Photo by Cory Weaver. Images courtesy of San Francisco Opera Archive

The Gockley Era Begins with "Plazacasts" and Opera at the Ballpark



Thanks to generous funding by Joseph Brucia (son of one of Gaetano Merola's original financial supporters, Giuseppe Brucia), San Francisco Opera's new General Director David Gockley presented the Company's first-ever free live video "Plazacast," on the chilly night of May 27, 2006, featuring *Madama Butterfly* at San Francisco's Civic Center Plaza, with an estimated 8,000 in attendance.

On September 28 the following year, an audience of 15,000 attended the free simulcast of *Samson and Delilah* at AT&T Park (now Oracle Park), the home of the

San Francisco Giants. By 2021 a total of thirteen "Opera at the Ballpark" simulcasts had drawn a combined audience of 300,000.

Left: David Gockley (left) with Plazacast funder Joseph Brucia, 2006. Brucia shared his father Giuseppe's love of opera as well as his generosity. Photo by Drew Altizer.

Below: Opera at the Ballpark, 2008. Photo by Terrence McCarthy. Images courtesy of San Francisco Opera Archive





A Glamorous Italian Tosca

Carmen Giannattasio's exciting 2018 San Francisco Opera and role debut as Tosca revealed why the stylish Avellino native was once described as "The Lady Gaga of the Opera World." The *San Francisco Chronicle* wrote: "She's got star power, and she knows how to use it."

Left:

Carmen Giannattasio at the San Francisco Opera. Photo by Cory Weaver. Courtesy of San Francisco Opera Archive

San Francisco Opera Confronts the Pandemic

Although the 2020 summer and fall seasons were cancelled due to the Covid-19 pandemic, San Francisco Opera remained connected with the opera community by launching an initiative called *Opera is ON*, featuring new and archival streaming content.

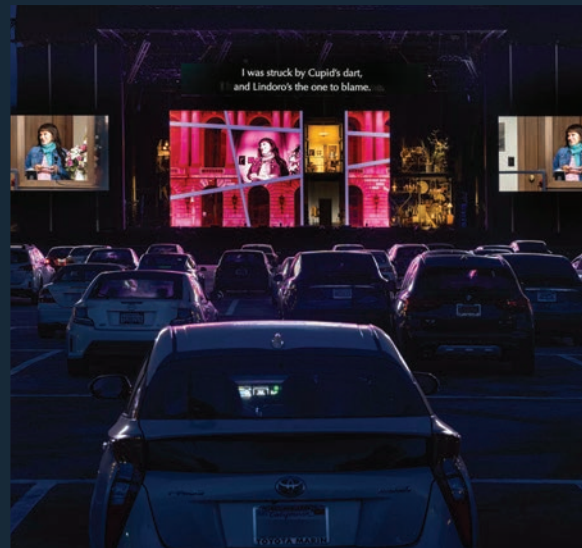
Audiences starved for live opera during the pandemic were treated to a new experience in April 2021 with a production of Rossini's *The Barber of Seville* adapted for a drive-in setting at San Rafael's Marin Center.

In August 2021 live opera performances in the War Memorial Opera House resumed with Music Director Eun Sun Kim conducting Shawna Lucey's new production of Puccini's *Tosca*.

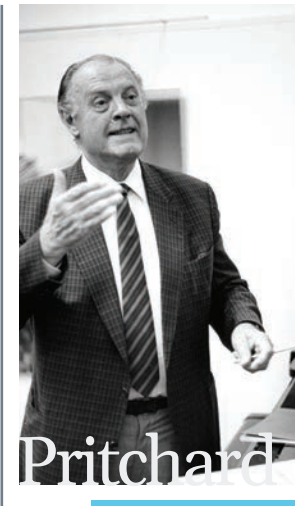
Right:

San Francisco Opera performed *The Barber of Seville* live at Marin Center in San Rafael, while viewers watched "drive-in" style from their cars, April and May 2021. Photo by Drew Altizer Photography.

Galen Till, Senior Costume Production Supervisor at San Francisco Opera, demonstrates a special mask to protect singers against Covid-19, developed by Dr. Sanziana Roman at UCSF. Photo by Sean Karlin. Images courtesy of San Francisco Opera Archive



San Francisco Opera's Music Directors



British conductor **Sir John Pritchard** became San Francisco Opera's first Music Director in 1985. Pritchard would hold the post until his death in 1989. Previous General Directors Gaetano Merola and Kurt Herbert Adler were themselves conductors, thus serving as *de facto* music directors.



Scottish conductor **Sir Donald Runnicles** became San Francisco Opera's Music Director in 1992, following his successful debut during the Company's 1990 *Ring*. He served for seventeen years, leaving in 2009 to become Music Director of the Deutsche Oper Berlin.

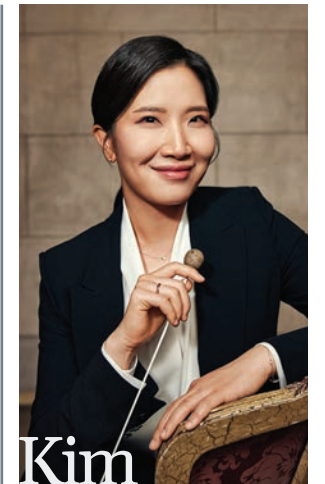
Photo by Michael Winokur, 2005

All photos in this page are courtesy of San Francisco Opera Archive



Following his debut leading Verdi's *La Forza del Destino* in 2005, Italian conductor **Nicola Luisotti** was named Music Director to begin with the 2009-10 season. He would conduct over thirty productions and concerts during the next decade.

Photo by Terrence McCarthy, 2014



San Francisco Opera's current Music Director, Korean-born conductor **Eun Sun Kim**, made her acclaimed Company debut on June 16, 2019, leading Dvorak's *Rusalka*. She was soon after appointed Music Director to begin in August of 2021.

Photo by Cody Pickens, 2023

"The success of our operas rests most of the time in the hands of the conductor. This person is as necessary as a tenor or a prima donna."

Giuseppe Verdi

San Francisco Opera's Seven General Directors



Merola

The Italian-born founder of San Francisco Opera **Gaetano Merola** served as General Director from the first season in 1923 until his death in 1953.



McEwen

Canadian-born recording executive **Terence McEwen** became Adler's hand-picked successor, serving as General Director from 1982 until his retirement in 1988.

Photo by Ron Scher, 1982



Adler

Viennese conductor **Kurt Herbert Adler** succeeded Merola in 1953 and was officially given the title General Director in 1957, serving until his retirement in 1981. He brought the Company to internationally recognized fame.

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All photos in this page are courtesy of San Francisco Opera Archive



Mansouri

Lotfi Mansouri, an Iranian-born director who had staged countless productions at San Francisco Opera beginning in 1963, was San Francisco Opera's General Director from 1988 until his retirement in 2001.



Rosenberg

California native **Pamela Rosenberg** was named General Director in 2001, the first American and first woman in the post. Upon her departure in 2006 she became General Manager of the Berlin Philharmonic.

Photo by Terrence McCarthy, 2005



Gockley

Pennsylvania native **David Gockley**, longtime General Director of Houston Grand Opera, took the reins as San Francisco's sixth General Director in 2006, serving until his retirement in 2016.

Photo by Terrence McCarthy, 2009



Shilvock

Matthew Shilvock, a native of Great Britain, is San Francisco Opera's seventh and current General Director, named to the post in 2016.

Photo by Kristen Loken, 2019



The 100th Season

The Centennial and Beyond

The Company's 100th Season, 2022-23, was especially programmed to feature two new works, two major European works that had their American premieres at San Francisco Opera, a return of Russian repertory, and three new productions of classic Italian works, including Puccini's *Madama Butterfly* in June 2023. Concerts and numerous special events were planned to help celebrate the Company's Centennial.

By the end of its Centennial Season, San Francisco Opera will have presented twenty-one world premieres and commissioned or co-commissioned twenty-seven new works.

Gaetano Merola's legacy—along with that of the generous Italian Americans who supported him—lives on as San Francisco Opera continues to thrive, welcoming diverse new audiences as it enters its second century.

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From top:

• Centennial season logo. *Design by Brian Stauffer.*

• Patrons in the box level of the War Memorial Opera House enjoying a performance. *Photo by Drew Altizer. Images courtesy of San Francisco Opera Archive*

BRAVO



Celebrating San Francisco Opera

Its Italian Roots and Legacy

An original exhibition by the Museo Italo Americano exclusively sponsored by

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BRAVO: Celebrating San Francisco Opera, Its Italian Roots and Legacy is dedicated to the memory of Kristen Avansino of the E. L. Wiegand Foundation, whose constant enthusiasm, partnership, and support throughout the years made this exhibition – and so many others – possible.



MUSEO
ITALO AMERICANO

2 Marina Blvd, Bldg. C
Fort Mason Center
San Francisco, CA 94123

415.673.2200
info@sfmuseo.org
www.sfmuseo.org