



Highlights of San Francisco Opera's First Century

1922: Gaetano Merola, a charismatic Neapolitan conductor who had visited San Francisco with traveling companies since 1906, produces *Pagliacci*, *Carmen* and *Faust* at the Stanford Stadium. He is convinced that San Francisco is ready to have its own opera company and begins lining up supporters.

1923: Merola's newly founded San Francisco Opera opens its first season on September 26 at the Civic Auditorium (now known as the Bill Graham Civic Auditorium) with *La Bohème* starring Queena Mario and Giovanni Martinelli. Merola conducts an orchestra of mostly San Francisco Symphony musicians and a chorus of 150 that he trained over the preceding year. 10 operas are presented in 13 days including Puccini's relatively new triple-bill *Il Trittico* and Boito's daunting *Mefistofele*.

1924: Soprano Claudia Muzio makes her SFO debut as Maddalena in *Andrea Chenier* opposite Beniamino Gigli in the title role. Muzio also sings *Tosca* and *Violetta* and becomes a Company favorite over the ensuing decade. Tenor Tito Schipa also makes his SFO debut as Des Grieux in *Manon* and repeats his Act II aria, "Le Rêve," in response to the audience's ovation.

1927: On the second night of the season, SFO's first opera in German, Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde*, is led by San Francisco Symphony Music Director Alfred Hertz. A few nights later, Merola conducts Puccini's last opera, *Turandot*, 17 months after its world premiere in Milan.

1928: Groundbreaking on the new opera house takes place. Meanwhile, unhappy with the Civic Auditorium, SFO performs two seasons at a cavernous skating rink called Dreamland. Later renamed Winterland, the hall would become the site of concerts presented by rock impresario Bill Graham featuring groups like The Grateful Dead.

1932: San Francisco Opera's new home, the War Memorial Opera House, opens on October 15 with a performance of *Tosca*, starring Claudia Muzio and Dino Borgioli, conducted by Maestro Merola. Act I was broadcast on radio. Excitement over the second night, *Lucia di Lammermoor* starring Lily Pons, causes an additional *Lucia* to be appended to the end of the season. To accommodate overflow, the performance is relayed to speakers in the Civic Auditorium (SFO's former home) and the Civic Center Plaza. This first "simulcast" by SFO is heard by an estimated crowd of 20,000.

1935: SFO opens the season with its first complete presentation of Wagner's four-opera cycle, *Der Ring des Nibelungen*, conducted by Artur Bodanzky with leading Wagnerian artists Kirsten Flagstad, Lauritz Melchior, Friedrich Schorr and Elisabeth Rethberg.

1937: The Company makes its first tour to Los Angeles under the name San Francisco Opera Association

and performs at the Shrine Auditorium. Tours to the Shrine would continue annually through 1964, with a visit to the new Music Center in 1965 and a final Shrine season in 1969.

1939: The San Francisco Opera Guild, a volunteer organization founded in 1938, produces its first student matinee, *Madama Butterfly* starring soprano Jarmila Novotná, beginning a long tradition of introducing Northern California young people to opera.

1944: For the first time in SFO history, the full 14-opera season is broadcast on radio station KYA locally and on other stations in California, Washington, and Idaho. The following year, supermarket chain Safeway sponsors broadcasts of fifteen operas.

1946: SFO's season expands to 52 performances: 27 at home, plus 4 each in Portland and Seattle, three in Sacramento, twelve in Los Angeles and two in Pasadena.

1948: The San Francisco Boys Chorus is founded by SFO General Director Gaetano Merola and his assistant, Kurt Herbert Adler, under its founding director Madi Bacon. While remaining closely connected with SFO, the organization soon begins touring and performing on its own.

1949: A post-war controversy erupts over Norwegian soprano Kirsten Flagstad's reengagement for *Tristan und Isolde* and *Die Walküre* because she had returned to her homeland during the Nazi occupation. The War Memorial Board of Trustees votes unanimously to "disapprove" her performances and Merola responds by threatening to cancel the season. After a major furor involving the mayor, the press, veterans' groups and community leaders, the Trustees reverse their decision by a one-vote margin and the season proceeds. Flagstad's *Isolde* is a triumph.

1950: The San Francisco Opera Guild presents its first annual "Fol de Rol" fundraiser at Civic Auditorium, with many artists donating their services in an evening of musical hijinks. In the sextet from *Lucia di Lammermoor*, Lily Pons and 5 other artists each sing their parts in a different language.

The season opener of *Aida* features the American debuts of Renata Tebaldi in the title role and Mario Del Monaco as Radames. On doctor's order, Merola does not conduct, but rather than stay home to rest he attends and joins the two soon-to-be opera legends backstage.

1953: At an outdoor concert on August 30 at Stern Grove, Gaetano Merola collapses and dies while conducting soprano Brunetta Mazzonlini in the aria "Un bel di" from Puccini's *Madama Butterfly*. In November, Kurt Herbert Adler is named Artistic Director of the Company. In 1956 his title becomes Artistic and Musical Director, and finally he is named General Director in 1957.

1957: Soprano Leontyne Price makes her debut as Madame Lidoine in the American premiere of Poulenc's *Dialogues of the Carmelites* and a month later performs *Aida* for the first time. Her numerous other role debuts at SFO include Leonora in *Il Trovatore* (1958), Leonora in *La Forza del Destino* (1963), Amelia in *Un Ballo in Maschera* (1965), Giorgetta in *Il Tabarro* (1971) and the title roles in Puccini's *Manon Lescaut* (1974) and Strauss' *Ariadne auf Naxos* (1977).

The Merola Opera Program, named for SFO's founder Gaetano Merola, is created as a summer training

program for young singers and soon becomes recognized as the finest such program in the nation.

A performance of *Turandot* at the Greek Theater at UC Berkeley begins a tradition of performing one opera there per season which lasted through 1969, often featuring operas on classical subjects such as *Elektra* (1966) and *Les Troyens* (1968).

1961: On September 18, SFO presents its first-ever world premiere, Norman Dello Joio's *Blood Moon* starring soprano Mary Costa. 15 years later, the world premiere of *The Angle of Repose* by Bay Area composer Andrew Imbrie, based on the Pulitzer Prize-winning novel by Stanford Professor Wallace Stegner, marks the American Bicentennial in 1976. By the end of the Centennial Season, SFO will have presented 21 world premieres and commissioned or co-commissioned 27 new works.

Russel Oberlin's portrayal of Oberon in the American premiere of Benjamin Britten's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* marks one of the first appearance of a countertenor in a leading role with a major American company.

1966: Kurt Herbert Adler creates Western Opera Theater, a touring company that visits countless cities across the U.S., providing valuable experience for young artists.

1968: The "Great Gold Curtain" at the Opera House is replaced, and the old one is cut up into pieces and sold at auction to benefit the Merola Opera Program.

1969: On October 1, as would later be reported in *Time* magazine, "Luciano Pavarotti was singing the role of Rodolfo in *La Bohème*. Suddenly, midway through the third act, the entire theater seemed to rumble and shudder. Chandeliers began swaying. Members of the audience stood up in confusion; some bolted for the exits. "What is happening?" Pavarotti hissed to the prompter between phrases. "Terremoto—earthquake!" the prompter breathed back. Pavarotti gripped the hand of his Mimi, soprano Dorothy Kirsten, a little more tightly, but kept on singing at full voice and never missed a beat."

1970: Dorothy Kirsten, a San Francisco favorite since her debut in 1945, receives the first San Francisco Opera Medal, the Company's highest honor. Distinguished artists and longtime Company staff are awarded the Opera Medal in subsequent years.

1971: The first *Opera in the Park* concert, conducted by Charles Wilson, is held at the band shell in Golden Gate Park. The free outdoor event becomes an annual tradition, drawing thousands each year to hear the opera's stars.

Unusual opera attire reaches a milestone at a performance of *Die Meistersinger* when composer Robert Moran, harpsichordist Margaret Fabrizio and engineer Clay Grillo arrive in a "togetherness suit" consisting of a three-person toga fashioned from a single (intact) parachute.

1972: To mark its 50th anniversary, SFO presents, for the first time since the 1930s, Wagner's complete *Der Ring des Nibelungen* conducted by Otmar Suitner, directed by Paul Hager, designed by Wolfram Skalicki and featuring soprano Birgit Nilsson, tenor Jess Thomas and bass-baritone Thomas Stewart.

The U.S. premiere of Gottfried von Einem's *The Visit of the Old Lady* is directed by Francis Ford Coppola, a

few months after his film *The Godfather* is released.

1973: Luciano Pavarotti makes his first of several role debuts at SFO as Fernando in Donizetti's *La Favorita*. Others include 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 Scotto singing the title role for the first time) and Radames in *Aida* (1981). Pavarotti says of San Francisco: "This is my second hometown. Musically, it is my first."

1976: SFO expands the orchestra pit by removing two rows of audience seats at the insistence of the 82-year-old Maestro Karl Böhm, who is on the podium for Richard Strauss' *Die Frau ohne Schatten*. The pit will be permanently expanded in 1987.

1977: The San Francisco Affiliate Artists Opera Program is founded. The year-round residency for young singers is transformed in 1982 into the Adler Fellowship Program.

1979: Kurt Herbert Adler announces plans to retire in 1981 after 38 years with the Company. Canadian-born Terence McEwen, vice president of London Records, is his hand-picked successor.

Ponchielli's *La Gioconda*, starring Renata Scotto and Luciano Pavarotti, is telecast live worldwide and garners eleven Daytime Emmy Awards. A PBS documentary illustrates the making of the production.

1980: A drizzling rain makes it impossible for the SFO Orchestra to perform at the annual *Opera in the Park* concert at Golden Gate Park, but the show goes on accompanied by piano, with mezzo-soprano Shirley Verrett, baritone Wolfgang Brendel and tenor Plácido Domingo (who provides some of the piano accompaniment).

The opening of Davies Symphony Hall gives rise to concurrent seasons by San Francisco Opera and the San Francisco Symphony, requiring musicians tenured with both orchestras to choose. As a result, San Francisco Opera hires 26 new players after hundreds of auditions.

1981: A new production of *Aida*, starring Margaret Price and Luciano Pavarotti, is telecast live to Europe and by closed-circuit relay to an audience in the Civic Auditorium. At the third performance, Leontyne Price is a last-minute substitute for the ailing Margaret Price.

1982: Terence McEwen becomes SFO's third General Director. He announces the creation of the San Francisco Opera Center to coordinate the Company's activities for young artists, renaming the Affiliate Artists program as the Adler Fellowships Program in honor of his predecessor.

1983: Tenor Plácido Domingo rescues the season's opening night on September 9 by hopping on a private jet from New York to replace the ailing Carlo Cossuta as Verdi's *Otello*. To accommodate his late arrival, the Opera Ball is held *before* rather than after the performance. Originally scheduled for 7:00 p.m., *Otello* gets underway at 10:25 p.m. and ends at 2:06 a.m.

On October 8, at the first of several Student/Senior matinees of *La Traviata*, SFO becomes one of the first companies in the U.S. to provide supertitles using a slide-projector system devised by Jerry Sherk and Francesca Zambello.

1985: Worldwide attention greets the new production of Wagner's *Der Ring des Nibelungen*, conducted by Edo de Waart (Music Director of the San Francisco Symphony), directed by Nikolaus Lehnhoff and designed by John Conklin. The production is inspired by the paintings of German Romantic painter Caspar David Friedrich and the neoclassical architecture of Karl Friedrich Schinkel. In response to overwhelming ticket demand, a live simulcast of one complete *Ring* cycle, called "The Video Ring," is simulcast to screens in Davies Symphony Hall.

General Director Terence McEwen appoints Sir John Pritchard as San Francisco Opera's first Music Director, a post he holds until his death in 1989.

1987: Scottish conductor Ian Robertson is hired as Chorus Director and remains with the Company for 35 seasons before retiring in 2021.

1988: Lotfi Mansouri, the Iranian-born General Director of the Canadian Opera Company, who had directed countless productions at SFO since 1963, is named the Company's new General Director when Terence McEwen steps down for health reasons.

1989: The Loma Prieta Earthquake on October 17 damages the interior of the Opera House and forces the cancellation of that night's scheduled performance of *Idomeneo*. While the building is inspected to ensure safety, the next three performances (*Otello*, *Aida* and *Idomeneo*) are presented in concert format at the Masonic Auditorium.

1991: The Company premiere of Prokofiev's *War and Peace*, conducted by Valery Gergiev of the Kirov Opera in St. Petersburg (in his American debut), marks the beginning of a series of collaborations with the Kirov to present Russian works and artists at SFO.

In the Shadow of the Stars, a documentary about the San Francisco Opera Chorus directed by Allie Light and Irving Saraf, wins the Academy Award for Best Documentary.

1992: The young Scottish conductor Donald Runnicles becomes SFO's Music Director, a post to which he was named following his successful debut during the Company's 1990 *Ring*.

Sir Charles Mackerras is named SFO's Principal Guest Conductor. His 30-year span of SFO performances would include the Company's first main-stage Handel opera, *Giulio Cesare* (with two others to follow) and three Czech works, one of his specialties. Patrick Summers would hold the Principal Guest Conductor role after Mackerras.

1996: *Harvey Milk*, an opera about the slain San Francisco gay rights leader and City Supervisor, composed by Stewart Wallace and co-commissioned by SFO, Houston Grand Opera and New York City Opera, is performed at the Orpheum Theater. At the performance on November 27, in conjunction with the eighteenth annual Candlelight March marking the anniversary of Milk's assassination, nine of his friends and associates appear onstage as participants in the opera's Gay Pride Parade scene.

1997: After being closed for 18 months of renovation and earthquake retrofitting, the War Memorial Opera House reopens for SFO's 75th season with a star-studded Gala Concert and a new production of

Tosca based on the original production that opened the building in 1932.

2000: *Dead Man Walking*, the first opera by the Company's former public relations manager Jake Heggie, has its world premiere on the War Memorial Opera House stage. It will become the most widely performed American opera worldwide.

John Else's documentary on San Francisco Opera's 1990 *Ring* entitled *Sing Faster* receives a national Emmy Award in the category of Best Informational or Cultural Program.

2001: On August 1, Pamela Rosenberg becomes the fifth General Director of San Francisco Opera, following the retirement of Lotfi Mansouri.

2002: In conjunction with SFO's U.S. premiere of Messiaen's *Saint François d'Assise*, a broad series of Messiaen-related ancillary events is announced in cooperation with numerous community partners.

2005: An extraordinary variety of community events is presented in conjunction with the world premiere of John Adams' *Doctor Atomic* about J. Robert Oppenheimer and the atom bomb.

2006: David Gockley, longtime General Director of Houston Grand Opera, becomes San Francisco Opera's General Director on January 1. He presents SFO's first-ever free live "Plazacast" on May 27 of *Madama Butterfly* starring Patricia Racette at San Francisco's Civic Center Plaza.

2007: Following his momentous debut leading Verdi's *La Forza del Destino*, Nicola Luisotti is announced as Donald Runnicles' successor as Music Director beginning with the 2009–10 Season.

In May, the Company unveils the new Koret-Taube Media Suite installed in the Opera House. With all-digital, 2K capability and 5.1 surround sound, it is the first permanent, high-def broadcast and production facility installed in any American opera house.

On September 28, an audience of 15,000 attends the free simulcast of *Samson and Delilah* at AT&T Park (now Oracle Park), home of the San Francisco Giants. By 2021, a total of 13 *Opera at the Ballpark* simulcasts draw a combined audience of 300,000.

2011: The American-themed *Ring* production directed by Francesca Zambello and conducted by Donald Runnicles is given three sold-out cycles in June and July. The production is successfully revived in 2018.

2013: SFO celebrates the bicentennials of Verdi and Wagner with performances of the Verdi *Requiem* (with the combined orchestras and choruses of SFO and the Teatro San Carlo, Naples) and *Falstaff*, both conducted by Music Director Nicola Luisotti, and a new production of Wagner's *Der Fliegende Holländer* conducted by Patrick Summers.

2015: Matthew Shilvock is named SFO's new General Director, effective August 1, 2016, succeeding David Gockley.

2016: In February, the Diane B. Wilsey Center for Opera opens in the Veteran's Building, featuring the Dianne and Tad Taube Atrium Theater, John M. Bryan Education Studio, Edward Paul Braby San Francisco Opera Archive, Norby Anderson Costume Studio and the Hume Family Gallery and David Gockley Gallery of photos depicting the history of San Francisco Opera. The Atrium Theater features the state-of-the-art Constellation® acoustic system designed by Meyer Sound.

2019: Eun Sun Kim makes "a Company debut of astonishing vibrancy and assurance" (*San Francisco Chronicle*) leading Dvořák's *Rusalka* on June 16. Six months later, the South Korean conductor is announced as SFO's new music director effective August 1, 2021.

Matthew Shilvock announces the creation of the Department of Diversity, Equity and Community to support the institution's commitment to education, diversity, equity and inclusion.

2020: The COVID-19 pandemic forces the cancellation of the 2020 Summer and Fall Seasons. To remain connected with the San Francisco Opera community, the Company launches *Opera is ON*, an initiative to stream operas from the archives, and launches new digital content series, including [In Song](#), [The Atrium Sessions](#) and the [North Stage Door](#) podcast.

2021: SFO is one of the first major opera companies to return to live opera performances in April with *The Barber of Seville* adapted for the drive-in at San Rafael's Marin Center. In August, live performances inside the War Memorial Opera House resume with Eun Sun Kim, in her first season as Music Director, conducting Puccini's *Tosca*.

2022: The Company's 2022–23 Centennial Season is announced, featuring new works by John Adams and Gabriela Lena Frank, revivals of two major European works that had their American premieres at SFO, three new productions of classic repertory and the return of Russian opera, plus concerts and events to celebrate the Company's first century.

1.19.22