



STREAMING THE FIRST CENTURY

SESSION 3: Italian Roots

HISTORIC TOUR: War Memorial Opera House, October 15, 1932

Featuring: NBC Reporter, walking tour of opening night in the new WMOH

(transcript read time ~ 10 minutes; audio run time ~ 14 minutes)

[BEGIN AUDIO]

NARRATOR: Welcome to San Francisco Opera's Centennial Celebration.

NBC REPORTER: Citizenry of San Francisco, join me in a greeting of welcome, and in extending you a cordial invitation to join us in the glory of the opera, a dream long denied, fulfilled, and the opera house in which the most enthusiastic opera lover could feel a just and glowing pride. Tonight, San Francisco celebrates the completion of the War Memorial group, the Veterans Building and the Opera House, at a cost of over \$5 million. Two imposing buildings that add dignity and beauty to the already famous Civic Center, with its Library, State Building, Auditorium, and City Hall.

As I am speaking, the crowd is still arriving, and a colorful sight it is. Limousines, taxis, and privately-owned cars continue to roll into the Memorial Court separating these two buildings. From this particular position on the second-floor balcony of the Opera House the Court is immediately below, and directly north across the Court is the Veterans Building. Lovely women, furs, jewels, livery cars all combine to paint a picture reminiscent of the early days, when San Francisco first became noted as an opera center, when Caruso, [inaudible], Schumann-Heink, and Melba, world-renowned stars of another day, too many to mention, thrilled Western audiences with their golden voices.

While the late arrivals are filing into the various entrances of the opera house, you might be interested—I know I was—in the location of the War Memorial. Both buildings face east on Van Ness Avenue, historic thoroughfare of San Francisco, stretching from the Hills on the south to the Golden Gate on the north, and the Avenue graced by the Civic Center; spacious automobile [inaudible]; towering apartment houses; old, historic churches; and finally, toward the Bay, residences.

Across Van Ness Avenue are the Civic Center buildings, most prominent from here being the golden-domed City Hall. When the two buildings comprising this Memorial group were conceived, it was planned that the general height and style of architecture should correspond with other buildings in the Civic Center in order that they would blend harmoniously with this splendid group of civic structures.

That the architect, Arthur Brown, Jr., and builders have succeeded beyond our fondest hopes was evidenced by the praise from well-known critics everywhere. To me, a lay observer, the total effect is dignified and beautiful. The Opera House and Veterans Building are identical in external appearance,

except for the necessary stage block of the Opera House that rises above the main roof. The architecture is classic. The exterior of the buildings, having granite bases and steps, balance the walls being rusticated terra cotta. Above and across the main entrance to the Opera House, composed of five pairs of doors, are eight pairs of imposing granite doric columns, all comprising the main facade of the Opera House. Mansard roof completes the picture.

No doubt you're getting anxious to join the crowd and enter the Opera House. The excitement of the crowd is infectious, isn't it? And perchance you imagine you hear the great orchestra swinging into the strains of the overture, although really there is no overture to Puccini's *Tosca*. And, well, anyway, I feel the urge myself, so let's proceed around to the main entrance.

However, before entering, let's pause long enough to tell the newcomers that we are attending opening night in the new War Memorial Opera House in San Francisco, and that in a few minutes we will hear the first act of *Tosca*.

All right now, we'll join up. We'll enter through one of these main doors. [break in audio] Crystal door, set in bronze, into a spacious foyer, traversing the entire width of the building. All right, here we are, on to the vaulted copper ceiling, which is 38 feet high, between stately doric columns. You'll notice that we're walking on a white marble floor. The lighting here is certainly effective as a huge radiance pervades the foyer, obtained by three great bronze lamps hung from the ceiling, and by two rows of bronze candelabra, tall and graceful, running the entire length of the foyer.

Entrance is made into the main floor of the auditorium, up four gentle steps through these doors, between the Doric columns, but instead of going on to the main floor, let's proceed up these broad stairs of marble here, which will take us up to the upper level. You will notice that stairs identical to these we're ascending lead out of the other end of the foyer; also, that spacious halls follow down either side of the auditorium, permitting easy access to the audience, and also providing for the traditional promenades. Main elevators are located near these main stairs.

The first level is the mezzanine, which provides entrance and promenade space for the 25 private boxes. You can see the many doors leading to the boxes, each door entering into the private vestibule or retiring room, which each box is provided. However, let's ascend this easy rising stairway to the next level and catch our first view of the auditorium itself, which seats 3,285, with room for 700 standing patrons, practically 4,000 people.

Here, let's go through this oak door. Notice it's padded with crimson leather and studded with nails. And we'll be on the dress circle level. Hey, what a vision of loveliness this scene presents, a vast chamber in cream and gold, and it's relieved by the burnt orange velvet on the seats. The senior panels of the side walls are unbroken, except for dignified lines of gold molding. On either wall are three great arches, and painting perforated plaster grills, artfully covered by gracefully looped golden draperies. From these grills will come the music of the great organ.

You may ask why our eyes have gone irresistibly upward. The reason's obvious to hear: from the blue eclipse to the gold-bordered ceiling descends a great sunburst chandelier. This beautiful fixture, 27 feet in diameter and weighing eight tons, is a series of metallic rays of decreasing size, which conceal the indirect lighting. The effect to us is that of a huge, illuminated star against a field of blue.

The San Francisco Opera Association, Wallace M. Alexander, President, has as its General Director Gaetano Merola, brilliant, visionary genius of the opera. Mr. Merola, as he directs the opera *Tosca* tonight, will realize the fulfillment of a vision and a dream that transcends the ten years of pioneering and sacrifice, for his work with unstinted energy and enthusiasm through these years will bring this temple of music, San Francisco's own War Memorial Opera House, into being.

Now for the opera. *Tosca*, an Italian opera in three acts by Giacomo Puccini, brilliant Italian composer of opera. The cast includes Floria Tosca, celebrated singer, sung by Claudia Muzio, a soprano; Mario Cavaradossi, a painter, sung by Dino Borgioli, tenor; Baron Scarpia, Chief of Police, Alfredo Gandolfi, baritone; Cesare Angelotti, Marsden Argall, baritone; Sacristan, Louis D'Angelo, bass; Spoletta, a police agent, sung by Marek Windheim, tenor; Sciarrone, a gendarme, Louis D'Angelo, bass; a jailer, Austin Sperry, baritone; and a shepherd, Eva Gruninger, contralto. Ladies, nobles, soldiers, citizens complete the cast. The action takes place in Rome in the month of June, 1800.

The production tonight is under the direction of Mr. Armando Agnini, who is also the Technical Director of the San Francisco Opera Association, who has been responsible for the plans and appointments of this marvelous, modern stage, exemplified in this new War Memorial Opera House in San Francisco.

And now, a bit about the story of the first act of *La Tosca*, which we will be broadcasting in a few moments. The scene is laid at Naples, in the Church of St. Andrea. Mario Cavaradossi is painting a picture of a golden-haired Madonna, which excites the curiosity of the aged sacristan of the church. While thus engaged, a stranger arrives whose disheveled appearance excites the sacristan's wonder still more. This is Angelotti, Mario's friend and a political refugee who has escaped from prison. Mario sends Angelotti to his country home to hide and agrees to provide him with food. Soon, Cavaradossi's sweetheart, Tosca, arrives. Tosca's hair is dark and finding him at work on a blonde Madonna she is filled with jealousy. Mario explains that this is a portrait of a political friend who will help them so that they may happily unite. Tosca is, for the moment, placated and leaves. A basket of food, brought for the escaped prisoner, attracts the attention of the sacristan, who now reveals himself as one of the spies of Scarpia. When Scarpia himself arrives, he is warned and guesses that Mario is aiding the escaped Angelotti. Scarpia is also attracted by the beauty of La Tosca and sees an opportunity to rid himself of his rival by arresting Mario for assisting the prisoner. Scarpia plans Mario's death, even as preparations are made for the end of the act. This consists of a celebration of the supposed Austrian victory at the battle of Marengo. Choristers enter, and the church is filled with incense. Officials of the church follow, and soon the dignitaries of the city appear, arrayed in all its splendor. Scarpia, in his black and silver, outshines them all. A great *Te Deum* is sung and comes to a tremendous climax, as the cardinal himself appears in the procession and gives the benediction, which brings the first act of *La Tosca* to a close.

I'd like to mention at this time, before the orchestra starts, before the lights in the auditorium go down, some of the details of the intricate nature of the modern opera house. Perhaps you will pardon me if I suggest that you accompany me hurriedly in the forbidden land backstage. Truly, one misses the big story in the opera house if this place is omitted. The stage itself is 83 feet deep, 131 feet wide, and 140 feet high. There are four fly galleries at each side of the stage, and two gridirons extending over the entire upper stage area. In addition, there are other levels for the 19 star dressing rooms, all

accessible by stairs and elevators, property rooms, [arms?], and clothing. Clothing rooms, green rooms, and a room of 90 feet for the chorus practices, sometimes between the acts.

And now the lights of the opera house have gone down. The orchestra is in the pit. Mr. Gaetano Merola is receiving the ovation of the crowd, and is bowing from the orchestra pit as he receives this tremendous ovation and welcome from the citizenry of San Francisco. Merola has won a place in the hearts of these people. For ten years he has worked steadily, consistently, courageously.

The lights are down. Mr. Merola looks to his orchestra. The orchestra rises, and it leads "The Star Spangled Banner." [music] [applause]

NBC REPORTER: The crowd is now resuming their seats. The lights of the opera house have come up. Players in the orchestra pit have resumed their seats. The lights in the house are now going down, and we are ready for the first act of Puccini's opera, *La Tosca*.

NARRATOR: You've been listening to "Streaming the First Century: San Francisco Opera's Centennial Celebration, told through historic recordings." This recording is a copyrighted production of San Francisco Opera, all rights reserved.

[END AUDIO]