

Giuseppe Di Stefano: the southern Italian voice that conquered the world!

Luigi Boccia (March 05, 2008)



Sicilian born tenor Giuseppe Di Stefano died at the age of 86 in his home in Brianza (Lombardy) last Monday, March 3rd at 5am, after a long agony caused by injuries sustained in November 2004, when he was attacked at his family's villa in Kenya. Opera fans from everywhere cried for the tremendous loss.

The news rapidly circulated in the [newspapers](#) [2] around the world and caused profound sorrow among all those who got to see this extraordinary tenor in theater or had a chance to listen to one of his many live and studio recordings.



Giuseppe Di Stefano was born in Catania, Vincenzo Bellini's hometown, in 1921 and moved to Milano with his family when he was six, gradually becoming a 'milanese' as he would often joke commenting about his Sicilian roots and northern Italian accent.

A young Giuseppe Di Stefano's autographed portrait (1946)

Pippo Di Stefano, as his fans around the world would lovingly address to him, is definitely one of the most phenomenal and controversial operatic vocal talents of the last century. People very often start conversations about Di Stefano with words like "I wish he had never sung that role...I wish he had never smoked so much, or gambled so much....I wish he had covered the sounds in the 'passaggio' ...I wish he had sung more belcanto repertoire... I wish he had sung longer etc.

This long list of wishes serves as an indirect proof of how much his fans and people in the operatic field cared about his astonishing vocal gifts and loved him. In fact, wishes apart, Giuseppe Di Stefano will be always remembered for the unbeatable quality of his voice, a color whose velvety warmth would win even the most arid hearts and as a man of unbearable charisma...even in a world, Opera, where gossip and professional jealousy are often the two sides of the same coin.



The debut on the operatic stage for the young Giuseppe came right after the II world war, in a production of Massenet's *Manon* in Reggio Emilia, [Ferruccio Tagliavini](#) [3]'s city and ironically enough in the same theater (Teatro 'Peri' then, Teatro 'Valli' now) where another star of the tenor galaxy would make his debut in years to come, of course the modenese [Luciano Pavarotti](#) [4].

In 1943 Giuseppe Di Stefano moved to Lugano, Switzerland and started working for a radio station, where in a couple of years he recorded some of the most famous operatic arias that still now are the most vivid witness of his glorious days. He was only 22 and the recording rapidly circulated around the world as "Giusepppe Di Stefano: the early years" (available on-line at www.bongiovanni70.com [5]) and many claim that this is not only Di Stefano's best one, but the most thrilling solo album ever recorded.

Giuseppe Di Stefano in the role of Duke of Mantua from Verdi's *Rigoletto*

A year after the Reggio Emilia debut, Di Stefano was already at La Scala, again in Des Grieux's shoes, the leading tenor role in Massenet's *Manon*.

His U.S. debut came almost immediately after his first Italian successes and already in 1948 the American audience was having the privilege of hearing one of the most rare and precious tenor sounds in Verdi's *Rigoletto*.

One of the features that most determine someone's career, beside technique, stamina and consistency is always the possession of a distinctive sound, a sound that is recognizable or easily associated with the name of the singer. If one recalls the names of the best male and female singers



one can also recall the uniqueness of their voices - their timber. Even an average opera goers can tell when Callas is singing rather than Tebaldi, Nilsson rather than Sutherland. Among tenors Di Stefano's was unique for virtues and defects. His virtues were uncountable, especially at the beginning: beauty, warmth, endless extension, natural projection of the sounds made him rise to fame incredibly quickly. Among his defects there were some related to technical issues - sometimes his singing was too open, almost screamed and his pronunciation too emphatic - and some related to his lifestyle and personal behavior.

His career is conventionally divided in two periods, the Belcanto period and the lirico-spinto - we agree with this division.

The young Di Stefano had a sunny, shining Italian sound, a natural inclination towards perfect diction and pronunciation of the words, while everything came to an exaggeration in the late years and where a strong, solid technique (Pavarotti docet!) could have made the difference, Di Stefano's total refuse of technical support caused a quick deterioration of his miraculous natural gift.

Di Stefano surely had few technical skills on one hand, but avalanches of passion and sentiment on the other. The extension was phenomenal: Di Stefano sang the highest roles of the Belcanto repertoire and succeeded as few others, especially with operas like Bellini's *Puritani*, where the tenor has to prove himself able to sing 4 high C sharps, of which one in the last act after the poor Arturo, the leading tenor role, has already exhausted his throat with the long and melismatic Bellini's melodies throughout the first two acts.



G. Di Stefano in the role of Des Grieux from Massenet's Manon

He also was a wonderful Rodolfo in Puccini's Bohème and a superbe Duke in Verdi's Rigoletto and had the luck to be quite at ease with French, due to his swiss experience and sang a repertoire that many of his colleagues would butcher, if not avoid at all.

Famous is Di Stefano's Faust at the Met in the 1949-50 Season that general manager Rudolph Bing recalls in his "5,000 nights at the opera" with the following words: " The most spectacular single moment" was "when I heard his diminuendo on high C in Salut! Demeure in 'Faust'. I shall never as long as I live forget the beauty of that sound!

Another French title that will be forever linked to Di Stefano's voice is Massenet's Manon. In the recording with Licia Albanese and Fausto Cleva as conductor (New York 1951), Di Stefano's rendering of Le Rêve is a dream with open eyes for the listener!

And yet Di Stefano's abilities were beyond that of making a diminuendo on a High C. His velvety



voice was warm, his phrasing so fiery and dynamic, his interpretations always unforgettably passionate. On stage he was a fine actor, probably one of the finest of his generation and his 'sicilian look' (an abundant bunch of black hair, cunning eyes, charming smile) made of him a favorite of opera goers, especially among women.

His name is also often associated to another astounding name: Maria Callas. From the very first opera they sang together, *Traviata* 1951 in São Paulo (Brasil), they became a very consolidated operatic couple like Pavarotti-Sutherland, Corelli-Nilsson and why not (?) Nebtremo-Villazon just to show for a second how low we have sunk recently!

With Maria Callas, Giuseppe Di Stefano shared more than a simple professional relationship, the two of them eventually became lovers and it was Di Stefano to sing next to her in the last pitiful tour of America, Asia and Europe that the 'divine' Maria (by now the divine attributes had already left her along with all the money that Onassis took from her) made in 1972-1973.

G. Di Stefano and M. Callas at the Royal Festival Hall (London) - Nov. 26th 1973

Di Stefano in that period was in his descending phase as well, although precision wants us to say that the decline started in the late 50's, when Di Stefano started opting for heavier roles: Cavaradossi in *Tosca*, Turiddu in *Cavalleria*, Canio in *Pagliacci*, Andrea Chenier in the homonymous opera by Giordano, Fabrizio in *Fedora* in a climax that led him to the final disastrous Pasadena's *Otello* in 1966.

These roles tired his voice especially for his way of singing with scarcely open sounds in the delicate transition from the middle register to the high register. Lacking of a good, strong technical basis like his colleagues [Raimondi](#) [6] or [Bergonzi](#) [7], Di Stefano soon lost his top and started having problems with pitch. In the last years of his career unfortunately he became famous also to be the tenor that was always flat.



Despite all this, his charisma on stage remained intact until the very end and even in a negligible performance some of his sounds would remind the audience of the glorious splendor of that voice. [Giacomo Lauri Volpi](#) [8], another famous Italian tenor from Caruso's era, in his book 'Voci parallele' wrote a remarkable comment about Di Stefano, saying: "Sul palcoscenico e nella vita, nessuno fu più tenore di lui" ("On stage and in life, no one was more of a tenor than he was!").

In fact it's notorious how Di Stefano's behavior affected very much his career, especially after he had reached success and wealth. His lifestyle was not really what one would call a diligent and wise way to preserve stamina and concentration before the performance. He was sensitive to the feminine element and enjoyed very much smoking and gambling...now one doesn't need to be a famous tenor or necessarily an opera singer to know that certain activities could exhaust your body after a long period. For a singer, though, the issue is even more important because the vocal cords are in the body and reflect of the body's health as much as they reflect the body's fatigue.

G. Di Stefano's DECCA solo album of Neapolitan and Sicilian Songs

Last but not least, we must make specific mention of Di Stefano as interpreter of Neapolitan songs. Since Caruso, who was a Neapolitan "scugnizzo" ("street urchin") and knew his dialect perhaps better than he knew Italian, Di Stefano is the only other Italian tenor that was able to sing Neapolitan songs with an almost perfect Neapolitan diction, but always with true, authentic Neapolitan sentiment.

In conclusion, I want to share a private experience with my readers. My passion for Opera started a long time ago with a LP of Luciano Pavarotti singing Neapolitan songs. Being from that region, those songs were all known to me because my grandmother would sing them often while doing her housework. Of course I immediately fell in love with most of them and sang along with Pavarotti for months until one day a friend brought me an LP of another tenor: Giuseppe Di Stefano. I listened and for the first time I felt that intense, visceral, dramatic and melancholic southern Italian passion that made Pippo's voice so unique and these songs so immortal.



*** A special thanks to Maestro Arthur Mc Manus for his tireless and priceless editorial supervision!

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