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“Carlo Bergonzi, celebrated Italian tenor and interpreter of Verdi, dies at 90”

by [Emily Langer](#)

Carlo Bergonzi, who exemplified the Italian tenor as beloved by operagoers for generations — the sort who strode onto the stage, dispensed with acting and stood there and sang with sublime beauty — died July 25 in Milan. He was 90.

His death was widely reported in the Italian media. The cause was not immediately available.

Regarded as a successor to the revered Italian tenor Enrico Caruso, Mr. Bergonzi drew thousands of listeners to leading theaters around the world — notably the Metropolitan Opera in New York, where his career spanned four decades and he was particularly acclaimed for his interpretations of the works of Giuseppe Verdi.

While other singers trained themselves as actors, striving to sashay or swagger like the characters they played onstage, Mr. Bergonzi proudly focused on his music.

“I know I don’t look like Rudolph Valentino,” he once told the New York Times. “I have tried to learn to act through the voice. The proper, pure expression of the line [or musical phrase] is the most important thing.”

Italian tenor Carlo Bergonzi, shown here performing at La Scala opera house in Milan, has died at 90. (Ansa/EPA)

He made his Met debut in 1956 as Radames, the Egyptian warrior of Verdi’s “Aida” who is torn between fealty to his country and love for an imprisoned Ethiopian princess. His other roles there included Manrico in Verdi’s “Il Trovatore” and, in Puccini standards, Cavaradossi in “Tosca,” Rodolfo in “La Boheme” and Pinkerton in “Madama Butterfly.”

Critics noted over the years that while tenors such as Mario del Monaco and Franco Corelli may have outpaced Mr. Bergonzi in magnetism, he easily matched their musicality. Mr. Bergonzi was particularly known for his mastery of portamento, the technique of seamlessly gliding from one note to the next.

He appeared onstage with many of the best sopranos of his era, including [Rise Stevens](#), [Birgit Nilsson](#), Leontyne Price and Maria Callas. Another tenor might have been intimidated by Callas, who was known for her dramatic voice and equally dramatic personality, but Mr. Bergonzi showed no sign of it in their 1958 performance of Donizetti’s “Lucia di Lammermoor” at the Met.

He was “nowhere near Miss Callas in acting ability,” observed Times music critic Harold C. Schonberg, “but he was a worthy vocal partner. His intonation was impeccable, he brought an unusual quality to his phrasing, and never did he attempt to ‘belt’ an aria. He, too, has vocal line and suavity.”

Mr. Bergonzi gave what was billed as a farewell concert in 1994 at Carnegie Hall in New York but returned to the venue six years later, at age 75, to star in a concert performance of “Otello,” the only Verdi opera that he had missed interpreting during his stage career. The Associated Press compared his engagement in the infamously difficult work to Willie Mays returning to baseball in the seventh game of the World Series. Before an audience that included Luciano Pavarotti, Placido Domingo and Jose Carreras, Mr. Bergonzi found that he had overreached. Unable to complete the performance, he was substituted midway through the evening by an understudy.

“The miracle of the ageless tenor did not happen,” journalist Martin Kettle wrote in the London Guardian. “Only those who were at the dress rehearsal know how he sang ‘Dio! Mi potevi,’ or the death scene. But at least, and perhaps appropriately, some of us also have the memory of his singing of ‘Ora e per sempre addio.’” The aria’s title means “now and forever, farewell.”

Mr. Bergonzi was born July 13, 1924, in a small town near Parma, not far from Busseto, the home of Verdi. He worked at a Parmesan cheese factory that had employed his father and began his musical training before being imprisoned by the Germans during World War II for anti-Nazi activity, according to biographical accounts.

Theodore Theodore "Dutch" Van Kirk, the navigator for the Enola Gay, the aircraft that dropped the first atomic bomb died on Monday at the age of 93. He was the last surviving member of the Enola Gay crew. Beau Cabell/The Macon Telegraph via AP

He made his debut in a baritone role and continued singing in the lower register until making his tenor debut in “Andrea Chenier” by Umberto Giordano. In 1953, he made his first appearance at La Scala. Mr. Bergonzi performed in opera houses around the world, including London’s Royal Opera House at Covent Garden, and steadily increased his reputation as an insightful interpreter of the Italian canon. His recordings, with labels including Decca, Deutsche Grammophon and RCA, included a critically lauded compilation of Verdi’s tenor arias.

He was married for more than six decades to the former Adele Aimi, with whom he ran a hotel named I Due Foscari in honor of the Verdi opera. They had two sons — Maurizio, who was born the day Mr. Bergonzi made his tenor debut, and Marco. His wife and sons survive him, according to the Associated Press. Mr. Bergonzi once reflected on his artistic transition from baritone to tenor.

“I told myself not to worry about the high notes,” he told the Times. “I would sing the aria and let the high notes take care of themselves. You just can’t count on the high notes every night. If you look at the great tenors of the past, they were hardly known just for their high notes.”

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