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## Nicolai Gedda, 91 Hailed as one of the most outstanding lyric tenors of the 20<sup>th</sup> century



*Swedish operatic tenor Nicolai Gedda with his first wife, Nadia Sapounoff Nova, in the 1950s.  
(AFP/Getty Images)*

by [Matt Schudel](#)

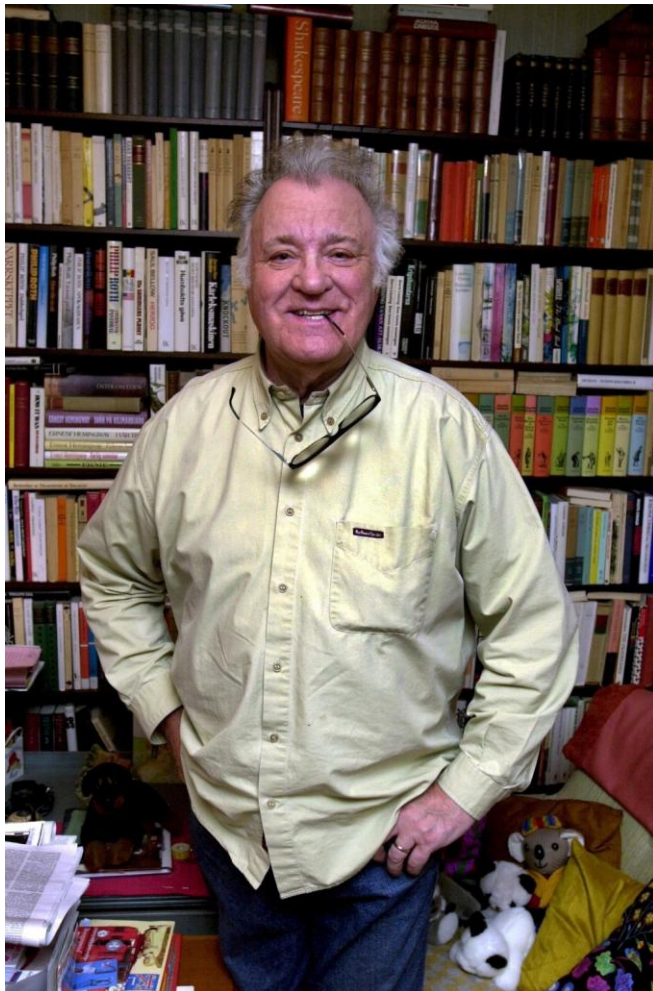
Nicolai Gedda, a Swedish-born singer who was one of the most renowned lyric tenors of the 20th century, performing dozens of roles on the world's leading opera stages, died Jan. 8 in Tolochenaz, Switzerland, where he lived. He was 91.

His death, which was not announced until the past week, was confirmed to Opera News by Swiss officials and the singer's daughter. The cause was a heart attack.

From the 1950s to the 1980s, Mr. Gedda was a regular presence at La Scala in Milan, Covent Garden in London and New York's Metropolitan Opera. He sang in a variety of languages and was widely heralded for his versatility, musical refinement and vocal clarity.

During a career of nearly 50 years, Mr. Gedda made more than 200 recordings, sang 367 times at the Metropolitan Opera and gave hundreds of recitals before retiring in his 70s. In 2008, BBC Music magazine ranked him the ninth-greatest tenor in history.

"Nicolai Gedda is one of the absolute masters of singing of our time," Washington Post music critic Paul Hume wrote in 1971. "He is in many ways a phenomenon."



*Nicolai Gedda in 2001. (Janerik Henriksson/AFP/Getty Images)*

Early in his life, Mr. Gedda took lessons from a strict Russian singer he thought was his father and sang in Russian Orthodox Church services. (Years later, Mr. Gedda learned that there were many family secrets surrounding his parentage.)

He spent part of his childhood in Germany, then moved back to his native Sweden, where he studied singing while working as a bank teller. Mr. Gedda originally aspired to be a “heldentenor,” or a heroic tenor in the full-throated Wagnerian tradition, but he didn’t have the voice for it.

“God gave me a very high, rather smallish tenor voice which, with study, I developed,” Mr. Gedda told the Weekend Australian newspaper in 1996. “I constructed the voice so it gained in volume and so on and I was able to preserve that with technique.”

He turned more toward the music of Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, the French and Italian operatic canon and various Russian composers. He sang in at least eight languages and fluently spoke six: Swedish, Russian, German, English, French and Italian.

Mr. Gedda was singing in an opera production in Stockholm in the early 1950s when he was heard by Walter Legge, a British recording executive with EMI Records who was married to the soprano Elisabeth Schwarzkopf. Legge signed Mr. Gedda to a recording contract and reportedly sent a cable to conductor Herbert von Karajan: “Just heard the greatest Mozart singer in my life: his name is Nicolai Gedda.”

In 1953, Mr. Gedda made his debut at La Scala, under von Karajan’s baton, as Don Ottavio in Mozart’s “Don Giovanni.” The next year, he appeared at the Paris Opera and a year later was at Covent Garden, singing the role of the Duke of Mantua in Giuseppe Verdi’s “Rigoletto.”

He first performed in the United States in 1957, appearing in Pittsburgh, Chicago and San Francisco before his Metropolitan Opera debut on Nov. 1, 1957, in the lead role in Charles Gounod’s “Faust.”

Mr. Gedda was a powerful presence on stage, at 6-foot-2, but some critics noted a certain awkwardness in his acting and a coolness in his tone. His performances tended more toward purity and didn’t always project the dramatic intensity of other tenors, such as Franco Corelli or Luciano Pavarotti.

But no one could fault Mr. Gedda’s musicianship, scholarship or diction. When he appeared in the 1958 world premiere of Samuel Barber’s opera “Vanessa,” New York Times critic Howard Taubman wrote, “Though he is a Swede, the only non-American in the cast, his English is the most comprehensible.”

Mr. Gedda’s upper register was so smooth and cultivated that he could sing roles that called for a high D, one octave above middle C. After a 1963 performance at the Metropolitan Opera of “I Puritani” by Vincenzo Bellini, in which Mr. Gedda effortlessly hit a high D, “The audience recoiled in amazement and then came back with a roaring ovation,” critic Harold C. Schonberg wrote in the Times. “No tribute was more deserved. . . . As a manifestation of vocal virtuosity it was electrifying.”

Mr. Gedda was born July 11, 1925, in Stockholm. He grew up as Harry Gustaf Nikolai Ustinov, believing that his father was Russian and his mother was half-Russian, half-Swedish.

When he was an adult, he learned that he was born of a liaison between a Swedish teenage girl and a half-Russian man named Nikolai Gädda. The woman he thought was his mother was his aunt, the sister of his natural father. She married a Russian who sang Cossack folk music and directed Russian Orthodox choral groups.

The family lived in Germany from 1928 to 1934. By age 5, young Nicolai (as he later spelled his name), could read music, play piano and speak three languages.

After returning to Stockholm, Mr. Gedda completed high school, worked at a bank and studied singing at a Swedish conservatory and with Carl Martin Oehman, who also trained the Swedish tenor Jussi Björling.

He adopted the name “Gedda” from the maiden name of his aunt, the woman he believed was his mother.

“A poor and wretched girl gave me life, another poor and equally forsaken woman ensured my survival,” Mr. Gedda wrote in his autobiography, “Nicolai Gedda: My Life and Art.” “By dint of incredible efforts I was given a happy childhood and a proper schooling.”

He met his birth mother one time, discovering that she kept a framed picture of him on the wall. He never met his natural father.

“One summer evening in 1977 I got into a taxi that I had ordered in my name, and the driver looked at me and said, ‘Funny, my last customer was called Nicolai Gedda too, but he was an old man,’” Mr. Gedda wrote in his autobiography. “ ‘He was having heart trouble, and I drove him to emergency room.’ The name and the address left me no doubt that it was my natural father. I heard from my mother Olga some time later he had died.”

Mr. Gedda’s first two marriages, to Nadia Sapounoff Nova and Anastasia Caraviotis, ended in divorce. Survivors include his longtime companion, Swedish journalist Aino Sellermark, whom he married in 1997; and two children from his earlier marriages.

Mr. Gedda was often sought out by younger singers who wanted to learn about his mastery of vocal technique. No amount of practice, he said, could overcome the butterflies he felt before going onstage.

“Every night I am singing to a different public,” he said in 1969, “and every night, though I may not show it, I’m as nervous as if I was singing whatever part it may be for the first time.”