

Rosa Ponselle

Born Rosa Maria Ponzillo in Meriden, Connecticut, on January 22, 1897, she was the youngest of three children of an entrepreneurial but marginally ethical father, and a mother who operated a grocery store on the lower level of the family's two-story home. To help alleviate the family's ongoing financial struggles, all three children—the eldest, Carmela; the middle child and only son, Antonio; and the youngest, Rosa—all had full-time jobs by the age of fourteen. All three had exceptional voices, and all would eventually appear in vaudeville.

It was as “The Ponzillo Sisters” on the Keith Circuit in vaudeville that Carmela and Rosa first came to national attention. When Rosa's primary sponsors—Richard Halliwell, the owner of several motion-picture theaters in Connecticut, and James Ceriani, a New Haven café owner and opera enthusiast—urged her to leave Broadway to pursue an opera career, she followed their advice and soon came to the attention of Enrico Caruso through some of the tenor's colleagues and friends. Caruso urged the Metropolitan's General Manager, Giulio Gatti-Casazza, to audition Ponselle, whom he chose to sing the role of Leonora in the upcoming premiere of Forza del destino.

Once described as “a Caruso in petticoats” because of her large, opulent, ruby-colored dramatic-soprano voice, Ponselle took on a succession of roles which Gatti-Casazza had carefully selected to enable her voice and artistry to master the bel canto requirements of the classical roles of Giulia in Spontini's La vestale, and ultimately the title role in Bellini's Norma, which was then considered the apex of singing for an Italian dramatic soprano. All of New York's major critics were unanimous in their praise for Ponselle's musical and dramatic achievement in Norma. When the Metropolitan revived Don Giovanni a few seasons after Norma, many of the same New York critics considered Ponselle's Donna Anna to be the apex of her career.

You created the role of Margared in the Metropolitan Opera premiere of Lalo's Le Roi d'Ys. What do you remember the most about that premiere performance?

Beniamino Gigli singing “Vainement, ma bien aimée.” That was the best moment in the whole opera!

Do you remember the first time you heard Gigli, and what your initial impressions were of him?

It was in *Andrea Chénier*. I don't think it was his debut—I don't remember that it was, anyway—but I was so impressed by the beauty of his tone! I had the same impression when I heard [Amelita] Galli-Curci the first time. With both of them, you could talk on and on about their techniques and their range, but

what got to me about Gigli, just like it did with Galli-Curci, was how absolutely beautiful the color, the timbre, of Gigli's voice really was. And the way he sang "Vainement, ma bien aimée" would make you think Lalo wrote it just for him.

Did you and Gigli get along well?

Oh, yes, right from the start. We were never close, not like I was with Giovanni Martinelli, but we were good partners for one another. Gigli had an entourage with him all the time, you know. I didn't go in for entourages and that sort of thing myself, so it was kind of funny to see Gigli coming into the Metropolitan with all of those people in tow. But they were very loyal to him, and he took good care of them too. There was never any trouble between Gigli and me. He was the live-and-let-live type. If you stayed out of his way, he never got in yours. And, of course, that voice of his was just beautiful!

In the intervening years, have you heard a tenor voice which you would consider equal to Gigli's?

No—not in the operas I sang with him.

One of the operas in which you sang together was L'Africana. Are there especially memorable moments for you from L'Africana?

Yes, any of the scenes that I did with Gigli. You know, *L'Africana* was really his opera.

And yet I have heard you say that you were not always fond of his singing of "O paradiso!"

Well—yes, that's true. He would step out of his character, go to the footlights, sing the aria—I mean he sang it beautifully, when it comes to the use of the voice—but then at the climax there at the end of the aria, in the line "O nuovo mondo ...tu m'appartieni ... a me ... a me!," he would hold onto those final notes so long that it would ruin the effect. I thought it was very inartistic. He had nothing to prove by showing how long he couldn't hold those notes. It wasn't like Gigli to do that in his other operas, not the ones I did with him anyway. Usually, he tried to be very artistic. And with that beautiful voice of his, you always wanted him to use it in the best artistic way.

Another thing I remember about singing with Gigli in *L'Africana* is that he would always try to get to the "hotspot" on the Met stage. At the [old] Metropolitan, there was a spot on the stage where the voice felt and sounded especially good. It was on one side, and we all knew where it was. When any of us had an aria, or maybe even just a special phrase we wanted to put over, we would head for that spot.

In *Africana*, Gigli would inch his way over to that spot, even in some of the ensembles! Of course, some of the others in the ensembles didn't want to be outdone, so you'd see them work their way over to where Gigli was. Pretty soon, you have a small crowd all bunched up around that one spot on the stage!

Were you impressed with Gigli's acting?

Well, I always thought of him as a great singer first, and not really as an actor. He kept his place, didn't move much, and some of the time he would sing directly to the audience like they used to do in the old days. But with that voice, who cared?

The Metropolitan Opera Annals show you singing L'Africana with Giacomo Lauri-Volpi three times, and that you also did one performance each with Giovanni Martinelli, Mario Chamlee, and a bit later on a performance with Frederick Jagel.

That's strange, because I don't remember ever singing it with anybody but Gigli.

That's understandable, because in your twenty-six performances of L'Africana at the Metropolitan, according to the Annals, twenty-one of those performances were with Gigli as Vasco da Gama.

And nobody could sing it better than Gigli. Not in my time, anyway.

What about Giacomo Lauri-Volpi's singing? Did you like to sing with Lauri-Volpi?

I didn't think about it one way or the other. See, I didn't make up the casts. Gatti-Casazza and the people who ran the Metropolitan made up the casts, not me. If Lauri-Volpi was to be in the same cast that I was in, okay, that was that. But frankly, I could never stand Lauri-Volpi or his singing. [Ponselle's mentor Romano] Romani and I used to refer to him as Narciso [Narcissus], who looked at his reflection in a pond and was so impressed with himself.

Was didn't you like about Lauri-Volpi's singing? Was it his technique? Did you fault his vocal production?

Oh, no. Give him his due: he had plenty of technique. The proof of that was that he could do a *diminuendo* even way up in the high range. You can't do that without excellent technique, and you have to be in tiptop shape too. But, really, all he had were high notes. I think of his voice as being kind of like a pyramid turned upside down: it wasn't an even voice from top to bottom. The quality just wasn't there in his low tones, and I didn't like the sound of the tones in the middle, either. But the higher up he went, the more focus he had in the voice. And oh, how he loved the sound of his voice!

What about his musicianship?

Lauri-Volpi wasn't any kind of a musician, as far as I could tell. He got on by instinct, I think. And he was very unpredictable. From one night to the next, he just sang an aria whatever way he felt like singing it, which would give you fits if you were in a duet or an ensemble with him because you had no idea what he might do.

In roles like Manrico, or perhaps Andrea Chénier, how was Lauri-Volpi's acting compared, say, to Gigli's?

Oh, Volpi tried to be full of fire and passion and such, but he overdid it. To me, his acting looked hammy. But you really wouldn't want to talk about either Lauri-Volpi or Gigli as actors. If you want to talk about tenors who were excellent actors, you want to talk about Martinelli, or [Aureliano] Pertile, or [Lucien] Muratore, but not Gigli or Lauri-Volpi.

Gigli had the best voice of them all—it was such a gorgeous voice from his lowest to his highest notes—but he wasn't an actor. Lauri-Volpi wasn't much in either department. He did have a very good physique, though, very trim. Now, Gigli was just plain fat! But it was kind of becoming on him. He had a very sweet face, like a grown-up choir boy. He was short, though, like Lauri-Volpi was. I think Volpi wore built-up shoes and boots when we had to sing together, because I was taller.

Incidentally, did Caruso also wear built-up shoes when you sang with him?

Why, no. Caruso wasn't a short man. Did you think he was?

Yes, for some reason. I think that's the impression many people seem to have from photographs of him in various roles.

No, Caruso was around five-feet-nine. That was a little more than the average for a man at the time, and it was on the tall side for a tenor. I remember that in *Forza*, when I was wearing high boots, I was almost at eye-level with Caruso.

It's been suggested that the Metropolitan Opera premiere of Andrea Chénier in March 1920, which went to Gigli to sing with Claudia Muzio because of Caruso's declining health, had really been intended by Gatti-Casazza for Caruso to premiere with you as his Maddalena.

Caruso, yes. But me, no. Even Caruso couldn't have found fault with the cast of Gigli and Muzio. Gigli's voice was still on the *leggero* side at the time, so he didn't have all of the passion, the drama, in his Chénier that he came to have later on. But Claudia Muzio had it all.

Were you less pleased with your own Maddalena?

Less pleased? No, I was satisfied with it. In fact, I like it a lot. It was a very popular opera, of course, and was still new at the Met in those days. Plus, Maddalena is a very believable character, which gave me an opportunity to really *do* something with her, compared to Elvira in *Ernani* or Selika or some of the other roles I was doing at that time. But I still go back to Muzio when I think of Maddalena. It just fit her like a glove—nobody could touch her Maddalena.

You sang Andrea Chénier with Martinelli, Gigli, Lauri-Volpi, Giulio Crimi, and Miguel Fleta, although primarily with Gigli, as we said earlier. What do you remember of Crimi and Fleta?

I don't remember singing *Chénier* with Fleta. I remember his voice—a very good *lirico-spinto* as I remember it—but I can't place him in *Andrea Chénier*. Now, Crimi I remember very well in that role. His voice was warm and rather mellow, an all-around good *spinto* tenor voice. Yet his wasn't what I would call a luscious sound, and it didn't ring—no *squillo* to it. But he was a good artist, and he was very satisfying as *Chénier*.

Martinelli was an excellent *Chénier*—he was excellent in everything he did—and the blend of our voices was always just right. You need that especially in the very last scene, when they sing “Vicino a te”: the voices of Maddalena and *Chénier* have to blend perfectly if that scene is to come off right. They have to be able to sing at the same volume—which is full out—and they have to be able to sustain those notes together, which means that their breath control has to be up to the requirements. That's the only place where Gigli and I weren't a perfect match in *Chénier*.

What was the basis of the problem? Was it that Gigli didn't have the breath control?

No, no. He had the breath control, for sure. But his voice was more lyrical, so I had to make myself hold back a little so that the blend of the sound would be right. In that moment especially, you don't want to be thinking about holding back. You see, whenever you have to be concerned about your partner instead of being able to let out what's inside you, you're going not only to be working harder than you should have to, but you also compromise yourself, and you lose some of the drama.

But with Martinelli, the blend of voices in “Vicino a te” wasn't a problem?

No, never. While I'm on that subject, I just thought of something very good I can say about Lauri-Volpi: he was good in that scene. His timbre wasn't broad, but his high notes were strong. When I was singing "Vicino a te" with him, I didn't have to hold anything back at all. And I didn't have to worry about how long he was going to hold any high notes, either. After all, if he wasn't going to cut off the high notes, the guillotine would cut off the source.

You made your first trip to Italy in 1924. According to newspaper accounts of that trip, one of your purposes was to travel to Naples to place a wreath on Caruso's tomb. Do you remember your visit to the Del Pianto cemetery where he is buried?

Oh! Good God! I didn't want to go anywhere near it! I mean, not that I didn't want to pay my respects. He was the king, and I will always be sad that he had to die when he did. I'm sad for him, sad for me, and sad for all the people who should've heard that voice the way I was able to hear it. But what those Neapolitans who ran the cemetery did to poor Caruso! They embalmed him and put his body on display under glass, like some mummy in a museum case! I was told that they had him laid out in full evening dress and that they changed his clothes every year. Can you believe that? What the hell did they think he was going to do? Sit up and sing?

And do you know that it took Mrs. Caruso years to have his casket closed? She had to beg them to close it up and let him rest in peace, so that she didn't have to look at his dead face every time she went to say a prayer at his grave. I mean, remembering the dead is one thing, but what those people did to Caruso was just damned morbid.

For me, singing with Caruso was the high point of my early career—just being on stage with him, standing right there next to him, watching every expression, taking in every gesture, feeling the emotion that he was creating, and hearing my own voice soaring with his! Nothing could ever take the place of that.

It was during that journey to Italy, if I am correct, that you went to Venice to work with Tullio Serafin.

That's right. Maestro Serafin and his wife had already taken a place in Venice. His wife, you know, was Elena Rakowska, a very good soprano and a very beautiful woman, too. She used to sing the *spinto* Wagner roles, and she did Italian roles too.

Do you remember your very first impressions of Serafin?

Of course, vividly. He was an idol of mine. We all idolized him. He was still relatively young back then—he was in his mid-forties, but his hair was already gray; I remember that, because it made him look very distinguished. He was a

very good-looking man, very attractive. All of the singers were in awe of him. Yet he had so much warmth about him that he made you feel secure all the time. Everything he asked us to do was *con amore* ["with love"]. There was never any of these outbursts that you hear about with other conductors.

Perhaps you have Toscanini in mind?

Well, I think everybody knows what his reputation was with singers. Bruno Zirato told me that Toscanini ruined so many watches by stomping on them when he got mad at rehearsals, they finally had to buy him a whole box of cheap watches so that he would stop ruining the expensive ones! I was scared to death of him! That's why I never would sing under him.

He used to send Bruno and others to talk to me about things he would like to do with me in New York or over in Italy, but I would always say no—very politely, of course. You see, I couldn't possibly sing if I was upset. You never even had to give a thought to that kind of thing with Maestro Serafin. He understood everything about you. You would swear that he could read your mind when you were onstage. He could anticipate exactly what you were going to do, and he made you feel like the whole orchestra was your accompanist. That's why we all adored him.

In Forza, which you sang with Martinelli when it was revived in 1926, Lawrence Tibbett is listed in one of the casts as Fra Melitone. Were you impressed with the rapid progress Tibbett had already made by then?

Oh, sure. Tibbett was a hard worker. I can still see him with that funny false nose he wore as Melitone. You know, even then he was already beginning to create a real character. Even in a small part like Melitone, he made as much out of [it] as anybody could.¹

When Tibbett was just beginning his career in his native Los Angeles, you auditioned him there. Do you recall who arranged the audition, and what your first impressions were of Tibbett?

Frank La Forge asked me to do it. I auditioned Tibbett, and I thought he was very talented. You couldn't help but be impressed by his voice. It had a color all its own, and he had a fine technique. But Tibbett was at that stage where a young singer is either going to make it, or isn't. Knowing the odds involved in making it in an operatic career, I would've been surprised at his success or at his failure. If he hadn't been totally dedicated, if he hadn't gotten the right

¹ "The duet of allegiance with Mr. Martinelli was one of many moments that occasioned applause," wrote Olin Downes in *The New York Times* (12 December 1926). "Mr. Tibbett indulged freely in comedy of the quite obvious kind as Melitone and amused the audience greatly."

breaks at the right time, we might never have heard of Lawrence Tibbett. But lucky for us, he did.

When you speak of a “break” for Tibbett, do you mean the famous performance of Falstaff when the audience demanded that Tibbett appear onstage alone for a curtain call?

No. I was thinking about the little things, the small favors that somebody does for you, that lead to bigger things bracket and help your career along. To me, that *Falstaff* story shows that Scotti was his own worst enemy. If he had been a real professional, he would’ve let Tibbett take a curtain call by himself. That would’ve been the natural thing to do, and the professional thing to do. So, Scotti made a very big mistake that night. But I think that *Falstaff* story does Tibbett a disservice.

In what way?

For one thing, it makes it sound like Tibbett never had to work hard. You’d think he got the role of Ford by just walking in off the street and having it handed to him—no work, no study, just dumb luck. The other thing that bothers me is that it makes it sound like Tibbett also didn’t have to work very hard after *Falstaff*. You get the impression [from the *Falstaff* incident] that the Metropolitan just handed him all these roles, one right after the other, and he sang them, and everybody lived happily ever after. But Tibbett worked very, very hard. I sang with him, so I know.

In the revival of Forza del destino, how would you rate Giovanni Martinelli as Alvaro?

Good, but not as good as his Eléazar in *La Juive*. There isn’t much to the character of Alvaro compared to what you can do with Eléazar. And Martinelli, God bless him, didn’t have the kind of voice that Caruso had. He would tell you that himself.

I read someplace what [Martinelli] told some fan of his who asked him about Caruso. This person said to him, “Don’t you really think that you were as great as Caruso?” Martinelli answered, “You can put Gigli and Lauri-Volpi and Pertile and Martinelli together in one singer, and that *one* tenor still wouldn’t be fit to kiss the shoetops of Enrico Caruso!” I have heard Martinelli say things like that with my own ears. You see, that tells you everything about Caruso, and everything about Martinelli.

Martinelli was a very fine actor, and anything he did. A little while later, though—and I’m talking about the time when Gatti-Casazza was getting ready to produce *Norma*—Martinelli’s technique wasn’t always secure.

That will come as a surprise to a lot of people. What ways did you find his technique to be insecure?

Well, you wouldn't know this unless you're singing with them a lot, but he wasn't too sure of the way he would place a tone in the upper part of his voice—from around F and G, where tenors get into the head register, on up to B-flat, B-natural, and high-C. Once Martinelli got on the tone in that part of his voice, he was fine. But going from one tone to the next wasn't always easy for him when he was singing at a higher tessitura.

Where it showed up the most was in very fast passages—like “Di quella pira” in *Trovatore*, where you have those sixteenth notes, and in the cadenza that Caruso made famous in “La donna è mobile.” Martinelli couldn't sing those notes cleanly, like Caruso and Gigli could. What Martinelli liked to sing with those very long phrases where he could tie one note to the next note very carefully, taking his time. He got a reputation for singing such long phrases, you know, but it wasn't always for the artistic reasons that some people thought.

You and Martinelli were first paired in Oberon in 1923. Do you recall when you first met him, and what your first impressions of him were?

I must've met him at one of the studios, but I can't be sure. What I remember most was his great warmth. He had a terrific personality—very magnetic, very charming. He had a great presence, on the stage and off. He wasn't really tall (most tenors aren't tall), but he had broad shoulders, a wonderful face, a big smile, and of course that mane of wavy hair. He was always full of laughter, full of fun, just like a big boy.

Would you have predicted that you and Martinelli would become such a great box office draw together?

Well, I realized that our voices and our styles blended nicely, of course. We had a sense of how each other did things. Voices don't always go together well, and sometimes styles aren't always compatible, either. But ours were. It was a great pleasure to sing with Martinelli. Always.

Between La Vestale and Norma, you added another new role to your repertoire when you sang L'amore dei tre re for the first time. Did you like the role?

Oh, yes! I love the music, and I love the text—and the music matches the text perfectly. The text is like poetry. One of my favorite parts of it is when Archibaldo, the old king who is blind, gets angry with himself because he knows about the affair that's going on between Fiora and her lover. He sings, “If I must be blind, let me truly not see.” I always loved that.

The role of Archibaldo, the king, became an early success for Ezio Pinza, as I recall.

Not when I was doing it. [Adamo] Didur did Archibaldo. He was just wonderful in that role.

Who was your Avito?

Beniamino Gigli—who was also wonderful, of course, and it was one of many great roles that he sang so perfectly.

On the subject of kings, you sang Don Carlos with Chaliapin as Philip II. As “kings,” how would you compare Didur and Chaliapin?

Oh! Chaliapin was far more dominating on the stage than Didur was. Chaliapin’s Philip II was a marvelous characterization. And his voice was much more distinctive than Didur’s. And when Chaliapin was doing Philip II, the Metropolitan gave him more to sing. They restored the scene between the king and the Grand Inquisitor for Chaliapin.

When we first did *Don Carlos*, they cut that scene and they put in more of the ballet. But when Chaliapin came into the production, they cut the Fontainebleau scene and they put back the part with the Inquisitor and the king. You should’ve heard Chaliapin in that scene, singing with [Léon] Rother as the Grand Inquisitor. If you want to talk about great singing and great acting—that was unforgettable!

There are a few who say that Chaliapin’s voice was frayed by the early 1920s. And some have said that it was a powerful but rather hard or perhaps gruff-sounding voice.

No, no—no! Nothing could be further from the truth! Who told you that?

Alexander Kipnis said that, in one of my recent interviews with him.²

Well, I don’t want to get into that because Kipnis is a great artist, and I have always appreciated the nice things he always says about my singing. But I can’t understand how he could say that Chaliapin’s voice was “hard” and “gruff-sounding.” To me, Chaliapin’s voice was like honey: golden and sweet. The same with his *pianissimi*—and very few male singers could ever do a *pianissimo* like Chaliapin. His *pianissimi* were like honey when the last little bit clings to the spoon—a little thread that gets thinner and thinner until you

² For the source of the quote, see the author’s “Alexander Kipnis: The Reflections of a Master Singer” (J. F. Tempesta, co-author), *High Fidelity Magazine*, March 1976.

almost can't see it, but it's still there and still has that same golden color and sweetness. Oh, Chaliapin's voice was one of the most beautiful voices ever!

Did you enjoy singing with Chaliapin?

I was a little scared of him, to tell the truth. There was something about him—he was a very powerful man, and I was kind of intimidated around him. When you were singing with him, you had to protect yourself because he would steal the scene. He was very subtle about it, too. If you weren't watching, he'd take the whole stage away from you, and you wouldn't realize it until it was too late. So, when you sang with Chaliapin, you had to hold your own. But if you did, he respected you.

When you sang L'amore dei tre re at Covent Garden, your Avito was Francesco Merli. What do you recall of your performances with Merli?

That was unforgettable—even the rehearsals! I'll need the air-conditioning turned up if you get me started on that. Whew! I forgot myself around [Merli], even in the rehearsals. I was a bad girl! Those love scenes are pretty close to the real thing. He wasn't behaving himself, either. We got to liking the rehearsals so much that we were forgetting who we were, or where we were.

You know, it's funny how those things happen to you when you least expect them to happen. You're put in the same room, the same situation with someone, and all of a sudden you're attracted. You don't know why, and in a way, you don't want to know. You know that expression "animal passion"? Francesco Merli and I were animal passion—on the stage, I mean.

Also at Covent Garden, you sang Forza del destino with Aureliano Pertile as Alvaro. Where would you place Pertile among the great tenors you sang with?

Oh! One of the greatest! I would have to say that after Caruso, he was my favorite tenor to sing with. He didn't have the most beautiful voice, but it was what he did with it. Pertile was one of the best actors I can remember. He really became the character he was singing, and he was so careful, so supportive and cooperative with the other cast members—just like Caruso had been.

When the Met revived Don Giovanni in 1929, under Serafin's baton, you were one of the stars of that "all-star cast." You sang Donna Anna with Elisabeth Rethberg as Donna Elvira, Beniamino Gigli as Don Ottavio, and Ezio Pinza in the title role. Where would you place Don Giovanni among Norma, La vestale, and the other revivals in which you sang?

Along with *Norma*, that *Don Giovanni* production was the highlight of my career up to that point. Incidentally, *La Vestale* was not a “revival,” it was the premiere of *La Vestale* at the Met.

You have said that Pinza’s Don Giovanni as you saw and heard it in 1929-1930 was not on a par with his performances of the 1940s, correct?

Yes, that’s right. He grew into the role later on. He had the voice for it—no question about that—but the role was new to him when Gatti revived it for Rethberg, Gigli, Pinza and me. As with any singer, it takes a while to settle into a new role and make the most out of it.

After Gigli left the Metropolitan, Tito Schipa sang Don Ottavio. How would you compare Schipa’s Ottavio with Gigli’s?

They were miles apart. Schipa had a lovely timbre, but it was a small voice with a very compressed range for a lyric tenor. Unfortunately, the only recording that exists of one of those *Don Giovanni* broadcasts is almost unlistenable—the sound quality is very, very bad—and Schipa is the Ottavio rather than Gigli. Ottavio was not a good role for Schipa—not as I heard it, anyway. Vocally, there was no comparison between Schipa and Gigli in *Don Giovanni*.

Over the years, there has been a lot of talk about “the second Caruso.” Where would you place Gigli in relation to Caruso?

You have to be an outdoor type like I am to appreciate this, but Gigli and Caruso are like spring and autumn to me. Spring is beautiful because it’s full of the promise of new life, the promise of youth and wonderful things to come. Autumn is beautiful but in a different and deeper way. Autumn is the end of a beautiful period. Life will go away for a while—but it will come back again in the spring. With Gigli and Caruso, I was so fortunate to be there in the spring, and to be there when the autumn came.