

## Observations from the Opera Sidelines

Harry van Bommel

*Gigli: The Master Tenor* is a fan's dream book highlighting his career—season to season—across two world wars, a depression and personal life that could just as easily have been a modern rock star's progress through the decades.

It took me longer than normal to read because I didn't know much about opera so I took time between chapters to listen to his videos and those of his daughter, some film clips, and YouTube excursions through his villa. Certainly, it made me want to visit Italy even more!

I counted six concerts in Toronto during his career. That must have been something for our little city (little, back then). I know his last was at Massey Hall and presume that the others likely were as well. Having sung there myself (okay, along with a hundred other kids in the Metropolitan Toronto Separate School Centennial Choir of 1967) I could at least imagine what it might have looked like from the stage for him.

His successes are not commonly known but reach the levels of the most well-known artists. Had he been born only fifty years later he would have been of the Boomer Era and all that entails in terms of connecting to a large audience. However, given the tens of thousands of people he sang to in piazzas and other open air venues (without application), the accomplishment is all the more impressive.

It always saddens me to read about artists whose personal lives are out of balance with the successes of their professional lives. He was fortunate to be able to perform with his daughter, but that is one of the few highlights of living between two families and six children. Costanza was certainly no angel with her gambling and surveillance of him over the years ... and "cheating" on him with her former *fiancée*. It was an imperfect life and in some ways a sad one. Probably, however, not an unusual one for men of that level of popularity. It's no different today except privacy is almost non-existent nowadays.

My dad had emphysema, and so I understand what he suffered, somewhat at least, in his own life. Imagine a coffee and cigarette at each entry and exit during a performance for sixteen years. His mother's forced pledge saved some of his life.

The summary of his character starting at the bottom of page 87<sup>1</sup> is most striking giving a real overview of his life so succinctly and raised the question: *How would someone write about us?*

Just reading that he performed about one thousand charitable concerts overwhelms the imagination—aside from his professional engagements. I don't know that even modern rock bands achieve that many concerts. It is staggering to think of what he put his voice through during those years before application became the norm. I like to pick up my guitar and sing, but this is not just a level above; it is a stratosphere above.

His fights with Gatti and later Gobbo seems so typical of success. It really always comes down to some inherent talent and hard work and then it is really up to the people that surround you in your profession and those who have control over the money. Politics is rampant in opera as it is in parliaments around the world. Sometimes the fights lead to a better outcome and sometimes to destruction—both of which people have very little control over.

His love of other women including Lucia, Jean Avard, Gertrud Wattenback, and others had real consequences too, of course. People sometimes think that one's dedication to religion prevents so many affairs and point to Donny Osmond and Pat Boone as examples of men who can remain faithful (or at least as far as we know). But it is not the norm and he certainly didn't represent the highest values of married life. So much pain for relatively short term passion.

I love the quote about Pavarotti using how long one has to study to become a tenor: "I am still studying" is the perfect answer for all of us.

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<sup>1</sup> Fortunately, his was essentially a secure personality composed of strikingly disparate elements held in balance by the vital outlet of his art. If he had not been a singer, Luigi Luglié remarked, the contradictions inherent in his nature, his Christian devoutness, his pagan sensuality, his dreaming, his need for action, his instinctive humility, his yearning for fame to obliterate the memory of his family's misfortunes, his desire for domestic tranquility, his instinctive amorousness, his joyful ebullience, his sense of fun, and his melancholy, would have driven him to neuroses. But he was a singer, and obviously a very great singer at that, according to Alessandro Bonci, the ultimate tenor, and his art therefore bestowed on him the gift of complete and harmonious sanity. Only very rarely, and then very briefly, did his inner tensions erupt in an explosion of rage such as Costanza had experienced outside the offices of *La Tribuna* in 1913. Consequently, he was not a difficult man to live with; he was a loving and singularly indulgent father, and he was a devoted husband whose constant aim was to keep Costanza contented, often with lavish presents and great kindness. But his devotion to his art was absolute and all was subordinated to it.