

PAVAROTTI'S SWANSONG

Italian tenor Luciano Pavarotti has died of cancer, aged 71

Mark Swed

LUCIANO Pavarotti's voice made him the opera world's greatest star as he brought classical singing to the masses on a scale never before imagined.

The Italian tenor, who died yesterday from pancreatic cancer, was acclaimed for the clarion tone of his gorgeously lyrical voice that could effortlessly fill the largest arena.

Pavarotti, 71, was loved for his ar-

dour and Italian charm, which came across equally well whether he was singing on the opera stage or cooking as a guest on a late-night talk show.

Former Los Angeles Philharmonic music director Zubin Mehta, who collaborated with him frequently over decades, said on Wednesday that whatever Pavarotti did, he did "always with great joy".

As a singer, Mehta said, "he set a standard that will remain with us for decades to come".

The tenor's appetite for food and his thirst for fame became legendary, as did the trademark oversized handkerchief he waved whenever he sang in recital and the giant Hermes scarves he draped around himself.

Extraordinary as it seemed for a man whose weight was said to peak at well above 135kg, he even became a sex symbol.

In sheer numbers of fans, he was more popular than anyone before in classical music. He invented the large arena show for classical music. He was the first opera star to perform solo in Las Vegas venues and at Madison Square Garden in New York City.

As a motivating force for the Three Tenors, he - along with Placido Domingo, now 66, and Jose Carreras, now 60 - sang before hundreds of thousands of fans and sold millions of CDs.

Their concerts were televised to audiences said to number in the billions and earned vast sums of money.

His singing of Nessun Dorma from Puccini's last opera, Turandot, was the theme for the 1990 World Cup soccer tournament and he made that aria as recognisable as a pop hit.

Between 1965 and 1975, when he often sang with the celebrated Australian soprano Joan Sutherland, he produced electrifying moments on stage night after night. The recordings he made in those years have been regularly recycled into new formats and collections that have retained their popularity.

But in poor health and hardly able to walk, he regularly cancelled appearances in his later years. When he did perform, he hid water and apple slices around the stage so he could lubricate his voice.

Humble beginnings

HE CAME to fame in the early 1970s, and by 1976, the New Yorker's Andrew Porter was expressing disappointment at a Pavarotti performance in Bellini's I Puritani: "The fresh, limpid flow of sweet sound with which he used to delight us now ran jerkily."

The singer's one feature film, Yes, Giorgio, was a flop in 1982.

Pavarotti was born Oct 12, 1935, in Modena, Italy. His father was a baker who was an amateur singer.

As a boy, he showed more interest

in soccer than his studies, but he also was fond of listening to his father's recordings of tenor greats.

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He became a teacher but grew bored with it after two years and decided to sing as a career. He financed his voice studies by selling life insurance and was highly successful.

His professional opera debut was as Rodolfo in Puccini's La Boheme in 1961. It would become one of his most famous roles, and he would spectacularly record it in 1987 with conductor Herbert von Karajan and the Vienna Philharmonic. The same year, he married Adua Veroni. The couple had three daughters.

A turning point was his association with Sutherland. In 1965, he joined the Sutherland-Williamson company on an Australian tour during which he sang Edgardo to Sutherland's Lucia.

In his heyday, he was known as the "King of the High C's" for the ease with which he tossed off difficult top notes.

He was thus in demand on both sides of the Atlantic. He opened the 1966-67 season of the Rome Opera, and made his La Scala debut in Milan that fall. Von Karajan asked him to sing in a performance of Verdi's Requiem, also at La Scala.

In short order came Pavarotti's San Francisco Opera debut in La Boheme in 1967 and his Met debut with the same opera in 1968.

Over the next four years, his fame grew. His 1972 appearance at the Met in a new production of Regiment marked his arrival as a major star - he received 17 curtain calls.

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Pavarotti touched many in Singapore

Stephanie Yap
ARTS REPORTER

SOPRANO Nancy Yuen, 41, still remembers where she was sitting when she first saw Luciano Pavarotti perform live as the Duke of Mantua in Verdi's Rigoletto, at London's Royal Opera House in 1983.

"I was in row D, the fourth row from the orchestra, and I could see him very clearly. He was mesmerising," recalls the Hong Kong-born, Singapore-based singer, who was then a student at the Royal Academy of Music.

"His voice was so beautiful, the intensity so strong, that I was totally captivated. It was a voice in a trillion, not even a billion. Like Mozart, he is one of a kind."

Even though the late Italian tenor only performed here once, at the

Singapore Indoor Stadium in 1993, it is clear that he has made an impact on the local opera scene.

Opera practitioners and buffs Life! spoke to expressed sadness - but not surprise - at the tenor's death from pancreatic cancer at age 71.

Singapore Lyric Opera (SLO) tenor Lim Shieh Yih, 38, says that what made Pavarotti stand out from his peers was his clear diction and purity of sound.

"He could produce some of the purest vowels ever heard. They were very distinct, which is not something many people can do. Every tenor aims for his standard," he says.

Still, even Pavarotti buffs admit that he had been underperforming for the last decade or more, plagued by health problems caused by obesity.

Dr Terence Dawson, an associate professor with Nanyang Technological University's English department, has listened to Pavarotti since the late 1960s and has almost all his recordings.

He reviewed the tenor's 1993 concert here for The Straits Times.

"I have always had a soft spot for Pavarotti because of what he does well. If you have heard him hit High C as he used to be able to, you can see why people go gaga over him," he says.

"But his last 20 years - and that includes the Singapore concert - were sad, sad years of decline. He got too fat, couldn't control his breath and what he was delivering was only a ghost of what he was in his younger years."

The SLO's Lim caught Pavarotti in New York in 1995 when he performed the role of Tonio in Donizetti's Fille Du Regiment, and says that he "didn't do too well then".

Still, he says that the flak the tenor received then was uncalled for. "I was a bit angry as they totally bashed him in the newspapers. He has worked so hard for so many years, and to rake him over the coals for one bad performance is unfair," he says.

Mr Phan Ming Yen, director of artistic development at The Arts House and a classical music buff, recalls catching Pavarotti live in Los Angeles in

1994, in a concert that was part of The Three Tenors series the singer did with renowned Spanish tenors Jose Carreras and Placido Domingo.

He recalls not being all that wowed by Pavarotti until the end, when the tenor sang his signature aria, Nessun Dorma (Let No One Sleep) from Puccini's Turandot.

"He really got the crowd worked up: I will never forget one man sitting a few rows in front of me raising his hands up as in victory when he sang 'All'aba vincero! (At daybreak, I will win!),' he says.

"The funny thing is that Carreras and Domingo left a more lasting impression on me than Pavarotti did, except for the Nessun Dorma moment. That, I have to admit, was quite something."

But whether or not he ended his career on a high note, those that met him remember a charismatic man whose massive girth was matched by his warm personality.

Singapore Symphony Orchestra co-leader Lynnette Seah, 49, recalls working with him on his concert here:

"Whenever he came on stage, you could feel the aura of his charisma, and his voice was the most amazing human voice I've ever heard live."

Meanwhile, Malaysian tycoon Francis Yeoh, 53, who was friends with the tenor ever since becoming a fan more than 10 years ago, says he last saw the tenor when he visited his seaside house in Pesaro, Italy, six months ago for dinner.

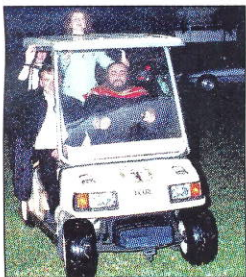
The CEO of construction firm YTL Corporation recalls that Pavarotti had taken pains to hunt for a special homemade Italian wine that Yeoh liked.

He last spoke to the tenor on the phone about two weeks ago, and is glad he managed to speak to him about religion and the Bible before his death.

He says tearfully: "He had earlier promised he will sing for me when he gets well."

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With additional reporting by Frankie Chee



TENOR KING: Pavarotti arriving at the Singapore Indoor Stadium in a golf cart.

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