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On the End of Opera

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In Memoriam Luciano Pavarotti

I think that if I were to ask most people to name three opera singers, they would be able to answer with only one. Beyond his remarkable instrument, perhaps Pavarotti’s most profound gift was his ability to make opera visible and accessible to the masses. He became one of the most recognizable figures in the field of concert music, perhaps more so even than Yo Yo Ma. (By the way--If you are asking yourself, “who?” right now, my next point will be well taken). Pavarotti in his prime, in the 1970’s, became famous for his uncommonly flexible and facile voice, especially his high range, but as his career progressed, he, unlike so many before and since, was able to translate his appeal to the vast populous which knew little of his technical abilities and much of his charisma. Indeed, he became the stereotype of the opera singer: overweight, tuxedoed, bearded, with dramatic facial gestures, white scarf in hand. His image stands along the metal-bustier-ed Brunhilda character (which most of us know from the Bugs Bunny cartoon “What’s Opera, Doc?.”)

It would take someone of this stature to fill 70,000 seat venues, and introduce them to great the Italian arias like “Nessun dorma” or “Che gelinda manina.” Even the neophyte opera lover could hear the comfort with which Pavarotti negotiated the high B-flats and C’s, and D’s. The music generates the passion, but it took an advocate of his

caliber to introduce that passion to so many people, many of whom would not have been attracted to opera had he not been there.

Let's face it: Opera is hard work. Most of the great operatic literature is in another language, and even when it is in English, either translated or originally, the technique of singing it properly often makes understanding the texts difficult. Operas are often long—up to five and a half hours—and require knowledge of the story before hand. In other words, one must have done one's homework before going to see it. And seeing it live, though the best way to discover opera, is not an easy experience: there are relatively few professional opera companies (amateur opera companies are virtually non-existent), tickets are expensive, the demographic that attends operas regularly is aging, and many mistakenly feel that tuxedos and ball gowns are required for admittance. Add to that stories that many times border on ridiculous, and the result is a general lack of interest. After all, why spend four hours and \$100 at an opera when you can download a three-minute song, which you can understand without too much effort, for \$.99. But Pavarotti, even in his final performing years, was able to overcome that, and fill 70,000 seat venues with people who would not have been there if it were not him performing.

Now, with him gone, opera's greatest and most eloquent advocate is no more. Is anyone now able to fill that void? Let me ask you a rhetorical question: can you name the others of the "Three Tenors?" And, no, it is not Andrea Bocelli, who is more pop star than opera singer (google him, see if he has performed any operatic roles!).

New operas are being composed and performed in the great opera houses of the world. Many of these have successful runs. It has been, though, a long time since a composer has had enough charisma and public presence to single-handedly sustain any

genre. I suspect that this is largely a result of the evolution of culture to include popular musics, musical theater, jazz, the internet, television, etc. It is nigh impossible for a composer, author, or visual artist to attract sufficient interest in his or her art so as to created sustained, permanent growth in market share. In literature, the Harry Potter series and Dan Brown's *The Da Vinci Code* created peaks of interest in the genre, and Oprah, with one endorsement, was able to generate tremendous sales of a particular title, at least temporarily. Is there an operatic equivalent to these phenomena? The closest we had was Pavarotti.

With the loss of Pavarotti, opera is in trouble. One of the greatest achievements of Western Civilization is now in grave danger of disappearing. We are a culture which has taken great pains to decimate our ability to discern good music from bad (see my essay on this topic), and in an age in which music is everywhere, but nowhere; in which we hear it all the time but never actually listen to it, the prospects for enticing a new generation of opera buffs which were frighteningly low before Pavarotti's passing are now virtually non-existent. As far as I am concerned, that is not progress.