

Luciano Pavarotti, 1935-2007

BY ANDREW MORAVCSIK

THE FAT MAN SINGS NO MORE. THE GREAT BEARDED figure with outstretched arms, holding a flag-size silk handkerchief at the front of the stadium. The global superstar whose rendition of "Nessun Dorma" from Puccini's "Turandot" topped the charts and became the theme song of the 1990 World Cup in Italy. The man whose "Three Tenors" concert with Plácido Domingo and José Carreras became the best-selling classical recording of all time, heard by one fourth of humanity. The celebrity who bantered on TV and

crooned his way through pop duets with Bono, Sting and Elton John. Luciano Pavarotti is dead.

In the final decades of his career, Pavarotti achieved the goal he had set as the son of a Modena baker in the 1950s: to become the most famous opera singer since Enrico Caruso. At his death, he was the only opera singer instantly recognizable by millions across the globe, even those who would never see an opera.

He was the most unlikely of superstars. Weighing 160 kilos and frequently on a diet, he lacked a handsome physique or memorable features. He dyed his hair black and covered his bald spot the way

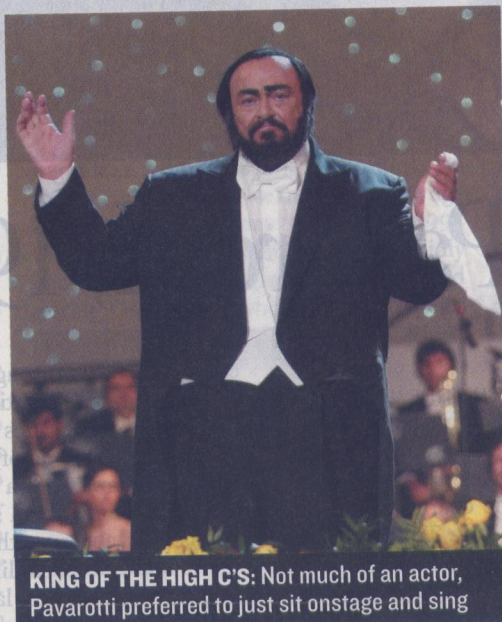
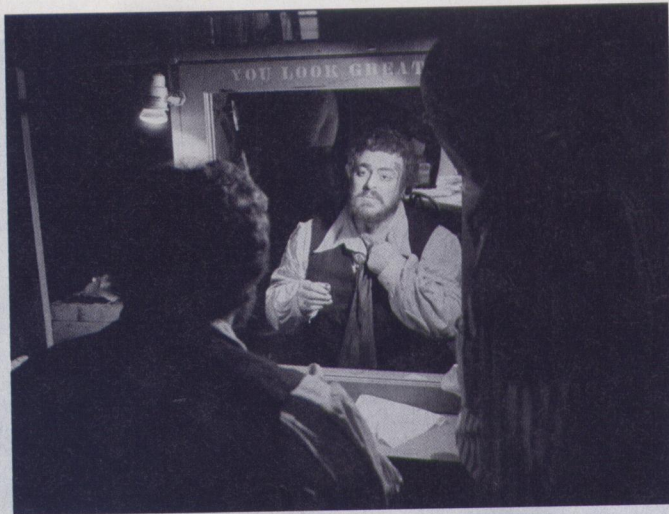
Italian men did a half century ago: with burnt cork. He sweated profusely on stage. He cheated on his wife and his taxes. He traveled with an enormous entourage, once asking them to ship home to Italy all the furniture in his Caesars Palace hotel suite. He skipped rehearsals and canceled performances until top opera houses banned him. Bono said of him: "Some can sing opera; Luciano *was* an opera."

To be sure, a smart media man got him the American Express ads, the "Tonight Show" invitations, the stadium shows—and the big money. Carreras says: "We have Luciano to thank for big fees." Purists responded with predictable scorn. "The very incarnation of hype," sniffed German highbrow Jürgen Kesting.

None of it mattered. Pavarotti possessed one of the great natural voices in living memory: brilliant, vital and pure, even-toned from top to bottom, with a distinctive metallic ring (*squillo*, Italians call it) that projected each note to the back row of the largest hall.

And those high notes. Tenors live and die by their high notes. In his prime, Pavarotti's were effortless and powerful. His breakthrough into international celebrity came in 1972 at New York's Metropolitan Opera, when he reeled off nine spectacular high C's in less than a minute in Donizetti's "Daughter of the Regiment." It was done, as critic John Steane wrote, "with the joy of a youngster doing cartwheels." The crowds went wild. Thereafter he was "King of the High C's."

That was Pavarotti's secret: keep it simple and direct. In music, as in life, he was a natural, a man guided by instinct. He never really learned to read music. He rarely varied vocal color or, after the first few years, volume. He sang almost exclusively in Italian. The voice, while splendid, was neither agile enough for Handel or Mozart, nor weighty enough for the classic romantic leads. So he stuck to what he could do: Bellini, Donizetti and a bit of early Verdi and Puccini. Domingo and Carreras became great actors; Pavarotti just sat there onstage. He became best known for the role in Donizetti's fluffy "Elixir of Love" of the naive peasant lad



KING OF THE HIGH C'S: Not much of an actor, Pavarotti preferred to just sit onstage and sing

Nemorino, who buys a magic love potion from a traveling quack doctor but gets the girl in the end. A perfect role for Pavarotti, requiring nothing but his genial smile.

Yet Pavarotti's greatness exposes a crisis in modern opera. By many measures, the genre flourishes. Pavarotti has helped make opera popular and remunerative. Conservatories produce hundreds of singers who show up for rehearsals, read a score, sing on pitch and perform in numerous languages. Yet Pavarotti leaves no successor with a voice like his. It is easy

to find good young tenors. But where are the great ones?

For one thing, great voices are found, not made. Who could have predicted that a baker's son born in Modena 71 years ago would turn out to have one of the world's most glorious voices? Back then opera was a way to a better life—just as Caruso had used it to escape the ghettos of Naples a century earlier. Pavarotti's father, an enthusiastic church tenor, encouraged him. His childhood playmate, the great diva Mirella Freni, studied with

him. Local singing teachers instructed the impoverished boy for free. And he grew up watching films starring the glamorous Mario Lanza, the Italian-American opera singer turned movie actor.

Today how many children in Italy, or anywhere, dream of becoming a singer? Those who do surely imagine themselves not as an opera singer but as a rock star, jazz singer or MTV idol. And their parents are likely to tell them to stop dreaming and get a job.

Pavarotti's death reminds us why this widening gap between good and great matters so much. A century from now, long after Pavarotti's persona and popular appeal are long forgotten, people will still turn to his recordings to hear that magical, spine-tingling voice. Let us hope they do not say: Luciano Pavarotti, the last great Italian tenor. ■