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Luciano Pavarotti Is Dead at 71

By [BERNARD HOLLAND](#)

[Luciano Pavarotti](#), the Italian singer whose ringing, pristine sound set a standard for operatic tenors of the postwar era, died Thursday at his home near Modena, in northern Italy. He was 71.

His death was announced by his manager, Terri Robson. The cause was pancreatic cancer. In July 2006 he underwent surgery for the cancer in New York, and he had made no public appearances since then. He was hospitalized again this summer and released on Aug. 25.

Like Enrico Caruso and Jenny Lind before him, Mr. Pavarotti extended his presence far beyond the limits of Italian opera. He became a titan of pop culture. Millions saw him on television and found in his expansive personality, childlike charm and generous figure a link to an art form with which many had only a glancing familiarity.

Early in his career and into the 1970s he devoted himself with single-mindedness to his serious opera and recital career, quickly establishing his rich sound as the great male operatic voice of his generation — the “King of the High Cs,” as his popular nickname had it.

By the 1980s he expanded his franchise exponentially with the Three Tenors projects, in which he shared the stage with [Plácido Domingo](#) and José Carreras, first in concerts associated with the World Cup and later in world tours. Most critics agreed that it was Mr. Pavarotti’s charisma that made the collaboration such a success. The Three Tenors phenomenon only broadened his already huge audience and sold millions of recordings and videos.

And in the early 1990s he began staging Pavarotti and Friends charity concerts, performing with rock stars like [Elton John](#), [Sting](#) and [Bono](#) and making recordings from the shows.

Throughout these years, despite his busy and vocally demanding schedule, his voice remained in unusually good condition well into middle age.

Even so, as his stadium concerts and pop collaborations brought him fame well beyond what contemporary opera stars have come to expect, Mr. Pavarotti seemed increasingly willing to accept pedestrian musical standards. By the 1980s he found it difficult to learn new opera roles or even new song repertory for his recitals.

And although he planned to spend his final years performing in a grand worldwide farewell tour, he completed only about half the tour, which began in 2004. Physical ailments limited his movement on stage and regularly forced him to cancel performances. By 1995, when he was at the [Metropolitan Opera](#) singing one of his favorite roles, Tonio in Donizetti's "La Fille du Régiment" high notes sometimes failed him, and there were controversies over downward transpositions of a notoriously dangerous and high-flying part.

Yet his wholly natural stage manner and his wonderful way with the Italian language were completely intact. Mr. Pavarotti remained a darling of Met audiences until his retirement from that company's roster in 2004, an occasion celebrated with a string of "Tosca" performances. At the last of them, on March 13, 2004, he received a 15-minute standing ovation and 10 curtain calls. All told, he sang 379 performances at the Met, of which 357 were in fully staged opera productions.

In the late 1960s and '70s, when Mr. Pavarotti was at his best, he possessed a sound remarkable for its ability to penetrate large spaces easily. Yet he was able to encase that powerful sound in elegant, brilliant colors. His recordings of the Donizetti repertory are still models of natural grace and pristine sound. The clear Italian diction and his

understanding of the emotional power of words in music were exemplary.

Mr. Pavarotti was perhaps the mirror opposite of his great rival among tenors, Mr. Domingo. Five years Mr. Domingo's senior, Mr. Pavarotti had the natural range of a tenor, exposing him to the stress and wear that ruin so many tenors' careers before they have barely started. Mr. Pavarotti's confidence and naturalness in the face of these dangers made his longevity all the more noteworthy.

Mr. Domingo, on the other hand, began his musical life as a baritone and later manufactured a tenor range above it through hard work and scrupulous intelligence. Mr. Pavarotti, although he could find the heart of a character, was not an intellectual presence. His ability to read music in the true sense of the word was in question. Mr. Domingo, in contrast, is an excellent pianist with an analytical mind and the ability to learn and retain scores by quiet reading.

Yet in the late 1980s, when both Mr. Pavarotti and Mr. Domingo were pursuing superstardom, it was Mr. Pavarotti who showed the dominant gift for soliciting adoration from large numbers of people. He joked on talk shows, rode horses on parade and played, improbably, a sex symbol in the movie "Yes, Giorgio." In a series of concerts, some held in stadiums, Mr. Pavarotti entertained tens of thousands and earned six-figure fees. Presenters, who were able to tie a Pavarotti appearance to a subscription package of less glamorous concerts, found him valuable.

The most enduring symbol of Mr. Pavarotti's Midas touch, as a concert attraction and a recording artist, was the popular and profitable Three Tenors act created with Mr. Domingo and Mr. Carreras. Some praised these concerts and recordings as popularizers of opera for mass audiences. But most classical music critics dismissed them as unworthy of the performers' talents.

Ailments and Accusations

Mr. Pavarotti had his uncomfortable moments in recent years. His proclivity for gaining weight became a topic of public discussion. He was caught lip-synching a recorded aria at a concert in Modena, his hometown. He was booed off the stage at La Scala during 1992 appearance. No one characterized his lapses as sinister; they were attributed, rather, to a happy-go-lucky style, a large ego and a certain carelessness.

His frequent withdrawals from prominent events at opera houses like the Met and Covent Garden in London, often from productions created with him in mind, caused administrative consternation in many places. A series of cancellations at [Lyric Opera of Chicago](#) — 26 out of 41 scheduled dates — moved Lyric's general director in 1989, Ardis Krainik, to declare Mr. Pavarotti persona non grata at her company.

A similar banishment nearly happened at the Met in 2002. He was scheduled to sing two performances of "Tosca" — one a gala concert with prices as high as \$1,875 a ticket, which led to reports that the performances may be a farewell. Mr. Pavarotti arrived in New York only a few days before the first, barely in time for the dress rehearsal. On the day of the first performance, though, he had developed a cold and withdrew. That was on a Wednesday.

From then until the second scheduled performance, on Saturday, everyone, from the Met's managers to casual opera fans, debated the probability of his appearing. The New York Post ran the headline "Fat Man Won't Sing." The demand to see the performance was so great, however, that the Met set up 3,000 seats for a closed-circuit broadcast on the [Lincoln Center](#) Plaza. Still, at the last minute, Mr. Pavarotti stayed in bed.

Luciano Pavarotti was born in Modena, Italy, on Oct. 12, 1935. His father was a baker and an amateur tenor; his mother worked at a cigar factory. As a child he listened to opera recordings, singing along with tenor stars of a previous era, like Beniamino Gigli and Tito Schipa. He

professed an early weakness for the movies of [Mario Lanza](#), whose image he would imitate before a mirror.

As a teenager he followed studies that led to a teaching position; during these student days he met his future wife. He taught for two years before deciding to become a singer. His first teachers were Arrigo Pola and Ettore Campogalliani, and his first breakthrough came in 1961, when he won an international competition at the Teatro Reggio Emilia. He made his debut as Rodolfo in Puccini's "Bohème" later that year.

In 1963 Mr. Pavarotti's international career began: first as Edgardo in Donizetti's "Lucia di Lammermoor" in Amsterdam and other Dutch cities, and then in Vienna and Zurich. His Covent Garden debut also came in 1963, when he substituted for and Giuseppe di Stefano in "La Bohème." His reputation in Britain grew even more the next year, when he sang at the Glyndebourne Festival, taking the part of Idamante in [Mozart's](#) "Idomeneo."

A turning point in Mr. Pavarotti's career was his association with the soprano Joan Sutherland. In 1965 he joined the Sutherland-Williamson company on an Australian tour during which he sang Edgardo to Ms. Sutherland's Lucia. He credited Ms. Sutherland's advice, encouragement and example as a major factor in the development of his technique.

Further career milestones came in 1967, with Mr. Pavarotti's first appearances at La Scala in Milan and his participation in a performance of the [Verdi](#) Requiem under Herbert von Karajan. He came to the Metropolitan Opera a year later, singing with Mirella Freni, a childhood friend, in "La Bohème."

A series of recordings with London Records had also begun, and these excursions through the Italian repertory remain some of Mr. Pavarotti's lasting contributions to his generation. The recordings included "L'Elisir d'Amore," "La Favorita," "Lucia di Lammermoor" and "La Fille du Régiment" by Donizetti; "Madama Butterfly," "La Bohème," "Tosca" and "Turandot" by Puccini; "Rigoletto," "Il Trovatore," "La Traviata" and the

Requiem by Verdi; and scattered operas by Bellini, Rossini and Mascagni. There were also solo albums of arias and songs.

In 1981 Mr. Pavarotti established a voice competition in Philadelphia and was active in its operation. Young, talented singers from around the world were auditioned in preliminary rounds before the final selections. High among the prizes for winners was an appearance in a staged opera in Philadelphia in which Mr. Pavarotti would also appear.

He also gave master classes, many of which were shown on public television in the United States. Mr. Pavarotti's forays into teaching became stage appearances in themselves, having more to do with the teacher than the students.

An Outsize Personality

In his later years Mr. Pavarotti became as much an attraction as an opera singer. Hardly a week passed in the 1990s when his name did not surface in at least two gossip columns. He could be found unveiling postage stamps depicting old opera stars or singing in Red Square in Moscow. His outsize personality remained a strong drawing card, and even his lifelong battle with his circumference guaranteed headlines: a Pavarotti diet or a Pavarotti binge provided high-octane fuel for reporters.

In 1997 Mr. Pavarotti joined Sting for the opening of the Pavarotti Music Center in war-torn Mostar, Bosnia, and Michael Jackson and [Paul McCartney](#) on a CD tribute to [Diana, Princess of Wales](#). In 2005 he was granted Freedom of the City of London for his fund-raising concerts for the Red Cross. He also was lauded by the [Kennedy Center](#) Honors in 2001, and he holds two spots in the Guinness Book of World Records: one for the greatest number of curtain calls (165), the other, held jointly with Mr. Domingo and Mr. Carreras, for the best-selling classical album of all time, the first Three Tenors album ("Carreras, Domingo, Pavarotti: The Three Tenors in Concert"). But for all that, he knew where his true appeal was centered.

“I’m not a politician, I’m a musician,” he told the BBC Music Magazine in an April 1998 article about his efforts for Bosnia. “I care about giving people a place where they can go to enjoy themselves and to begin to live again. To the man you have to give the spirit, and when you give him the spirit, you have done everything.”

Mr. Pavarotti’s health became an issue in the late 1990s. His mobility onstage was sometimes severely limited because of leg problems, and at a 1997 “Turandot” performance at the Met, extras onstage surrounded him and helped him up and down steps. In January 1998, at a Met gala with two other singers, Mr. Pavarotti became lost in a trio from “Luisa Miller” despite having the music in front of him. He complained of dizziness and withdrew. Rumors flew alleging on one side a serious health problem and, on the other, a smoke screen for his unpreparedness.

The latter was not a new accusation during the 1990s. In a 1997 review for The New York Times, Anthony Tommasini accused Mr. Pavarotti of “shamelessly coasting” through a recital, using music instead of his memory, and still losing his place. Words were always a problem, and he cheerfully admitted to using cue cards as reminders.

A Box-Office Powerhouse

It was a tribute to Mr. Pavarotti’s box-office power that when, in 1997, he announced he could not or would not learn his part for a new “Forza del Destino” at the Met, the house substituted “Un Ballo in Maschera,” a piece he was ready to sing.

Around that time Mr. Pavarotti left his wife of more than three decades, Adua, to live with his 26-year-old assistant, Nicoletta Mantovani, and filing for divorce, which was finalized in October 2002. He married Ms. Mantovani in 2003. She survives him, as do three daughters from his marriage to the former Adua Veroni: Lorenza, Christina and Giuliana; and a daughter with Ms. Mantovani, Alice.

Mr. Pavarotti had a home in Manhattan but also maintained ties to his hometown, living when time permitted in a villa in Santa Maria del Mugnano, outside Modena.

He published two autobiographies, both written with William Wright: “Pavarotti: My Own Story” in 1981 and “Pavarotti: My World” in 1995.

In interviews Mr. Pavarotti could turn on a disarming charm, and if he invariably dismissed concerns about his pop projects, technical problems and even his health, he made a strong case for what his fame could do for opera itself.

“I remember when I began singing, in 1961,” he told Opera News in 1998, “one person said, ‘run quick, because opera is going to have at maximum 10 years of life.’ At the time it was really going down. But then, I was lucky enough to make the first ‘Live From the Met’ telecast. And the day after, people stopped me on the street. So I realized the importance of bringing opera to the masses. I think there were people who didn’t know what opera was before. And they say ‘Bohème,’ and of course ‘Bohème’ is so good.’ ”

About his own drawing power, his analysis was simple and on the mark.

“I think an important quality that I have is that if you turn on the radio and hear somebody sing, you know it’s me.” he said. “You don’t confuse my voice with another voice.”