

SCENE 14:
A.C. = AFTER CARUSO
(EARLY 20TH CENTURY—BETWEEN CARUSO & CALLAS)

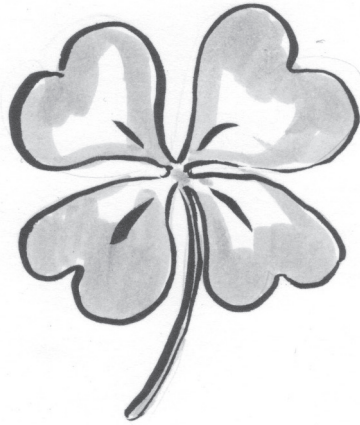
There were so many fine singers at the turn of the century that the period between 1890 and 1920 is called the “Golden Age” of singing.



American superstar soprano **Geraldine Farrar** (1882-1967) was pretty, she was often paired with Caruso, and she was a better singer than she's usually given credit for. (Her recording of “*Vissi d'arte*” from Puccini's *Tosca* has a rhythmic drive that few other singers managed.)

Mary Garden (1874-1967) was born in Scotland, raised in Chicago, and specialized in French opera.

Titta Ruffo (1877-1953) was the baritone Caruso. They didn't exactly avoid each other, but it was no accident that Ruffo made his American career in Chicago and they recorded together only once—the duet from Verdi's *Otello*. Caruso's voice, always magnificent, became darker and more baritone as he aged. By the time he sang that duet with Ruffo, you could barely tell them apart.



The great Irish tenor **John McCormack** (1884-1945) was as unlike Caruso as a tenor could be—McCormack's voice was high and thin and very Irish—but he and Caruso admired each other so much that each called the other "the world's greatest tenor."

Amelita Galli-Curci (1882-1963) was a tiny, hummingbird-voiced coloratura who could sing circles around the Big Mama's. (There is a bizarre recording alternating Galli-Curci's little flute-like singing voice with her 75-year-old croaky speaking voice.)

Speaking of big mamas, **Ernestine Schumann-Heink** (1861-1936), was an extremely big mama, a contralto who was born in Czechoslovakia, studied music in Germany, and became a proud American citizen. **Schumann-Heink** was a life-loving earth-mother, roughly the size of a large refrigerator. About the only thing that'd tick her off is if you implied that she hadn't lost her German accent. (She made a beautiful recording of "Danny Boink.") One day the lovable linebacker boogied into an American drugstore for a few staples ...

"I'd like some powder please," says she.

"Mennen's" asks the clerk.

"No. Vimmen's."

"And would you like it scented?"

"No, I'll take it vit me."

Always Be Sincere ...

The Italian tenor Beniamino **Gigli** (1890-1957) is generally considered Caruso's successor, although he was much different in voice and personality. Caruso's voice was always "studly," whereas Gigli's voice was not only smaller, but a little sissified. Caruso, even though his sobs were sometimes over the edge, had what contemporary tenor **Francisco Araiza** calls "a tear in the voice," whereas Gigli is clearly an impostor. Gigli is famous for many things—for having one of the most beautiful natural voices, for "covering" the voice (using the sound "aw" instead of "ah"), but what Gigli is most famous for in my heart is his Magnificent Phoniness. Gigli was so moved by his own singing that he would stand on stage, clutching his heart, sobbing for several minutes after he finished his aria.

In the words of Harry S. Truman—
"Always be sincere, even if you don't mean it."

It's NATURAL

Giovanni Martinelli (1885-1969) is usually considered next in the line of great Italian tenors. Opera lore has it that he was scheduled to replace an ailing **Gigli** halfway through the opera *Andrea Chenier*. **Gigli**, who was in resplendent voice despite his illness, sang Chenier's "Improviso" aria.

Martinelli said, "You expect me to go out there and sing after that!"

"A very young performer, inexperienced in the perils of the profession, made an appearance in company with the great Giovanni Martinelli. Both flattered and awed by the veteran's concern for her well-being during an embrace, she discovered—to her maidenly surprise—that she was encountering a rigid male organ poking her in the groin. As she instinctively recoiled, he squeezed her hand in a gesture of reassurance, and said, "Perdona, signorina. E' naturale!" ("No need to get bent out of shape, lady. It's natural!")"

Irving Kolodin, *The Opera Omnibus*

To Vibrato or NOT to ...

Aureliano Pertile (1885-1952) was a star at La Scala and Toscanini's favorite tenor, but he never caught on in America or England because of his fast vibrato (the British called it "bleating").

Tenor **Giacomo Lauri-Volpi** (1892-1979) also had the characteristic Italian vibrato, but he sang at New York's Metropolitan Opera for over ten years (from 1923-1934).

Tito Schipa (1890-1965) was a fine light-voiced tenor, despite the fact that he didn't have a great voice or great high notes. All the poor guy had were brains and elegance.

Do yourself a favor and check all of them out on YouTube.

BEAUTY and the BASS

Spanish mezzo **Conchita Supervia** (1895-1936) was the last of the great vibratos. Her career was not hurt by the facts that she had a beautiful face, a great body, sang her first **Carmen** at the age 15 and sang **Rossini** like she was born for it.

Maria Jeritza (1887-1982), star of the Vienna Opera, didn't have a thing going for her except a gorgeous voice, great acting ability, and a body that looks fat in pictures but apparently had **Puccini** sniffing around her like an old hound dog.

Ezio Pinza (1892-1957), one of the great Italian basses from the 1920s to the 1940s, couldn't read music, loved the ladies, and had one of the most magnificent voices ever.

Feodor Chaliapin (1873-1938), the first Russian "basso profundo" to become internationally famous, single-handedly made **Boris Godunov** part of the standard repertory in opera houses all over the world. He was a great singer and an even better actor.

Claudia Muzio (1889-1936) was a passionate singing actress, one of the first "modern" **verismo** singers. She had a beautiful, smoky voice, a strong personality, and brains.

WAGNERIAN HeldenHonkies

Lotte Lehmann (1888-1976) was one of the great German sopranos of the first half of the 20th century. She originated many of Richard Strauss' soprano roles and she sang with tenderness even when impersonating one of Wagner's helmeted heldenmamas.

Frida Leider (1888-1975), another glorious Wagnerian soprano. Leider had a bright, beautiful, youthful-sounding voice compared to most Wagnerian sopranos. She sang the fat-lady roles with a voice as clear as...as clear as...as clear as...

Friedrich Schorr (1888-1953) was one of the greatest Wagnerian bass-baritones of all time. His huge, vibrant voice glowered over Wagner's zillion-piece-orchestra like rolling thunder.



Many Jews despise Wagner, an arrogant, unrepentant anti-Semite.

Although he didn't exactly advertise it, Friedrich Schorr was Jewish. Maybe he felt that his presence was the best revenge: Schorr's signature role was Wotan, King of the Gods.

Kirsten Flagstad (1895-1962) was nobody's favorite singer until, at age 39, she tackled opera's toughest female role: the mighty **Brunnhilde**. She became the Wagnerian soprano of the 1930s-40s. Flagstad's performances with **Melchoir** saved the Metropolitan Opera from collapse during the Great Depression of the 1930's.

Speaking of Mr. **Melchoir**: if a singer's irreplaceability is the ultimate standard of greatness, then Danish tenor **Lauritz Melchoir** (1890-1973) is the greatest singer of all time. **Melchoir** sang all of Wagner's most brutal heldentenor roles, and in the process, showed us what beautiful music they were. He was also the top partner for all three of the Wagnerian super-ladies listed above (and others). Since **Melchoir's** retirement, nobody has stepped in to fill the "helden-gap" he left. (*Siegfried, where are you?*)

Austrian tenor **Richard Tauber** (1891-1948) started out in opera but made his greatest impact in operetta. He had a unique voice that he used with outrageous flair ... and he wore a monocle!

Rosa Ponselle (1897-1981) was born in Connecticut and discovered by **Caruso**. She became one of the great Verdi sopranos and set the standard for the role of **Norma** ... until Callas came along.

Marian Anderson (1903-1993) was born in Philadelphia, where her father sold coal and her mother worked as a maid. In 1929, she went to Europe on a scholarship and met the impresario **Sol Hurok**, who signed her for a concert in Salzburg (August, 1935). Just before she was ready to go on, she was told that **Toscanini**, the Pope of conductors, might attend. She panicked, but went onstage and sang. After the concert, **Toscanini** came back stage to talk to her but she was so nervous she didn't hear a word he said. After Toscanini left, others in the room told Anderson what he'd said:

"Yours is a voice one hears once in a hundred years."

It would be another 20 years before Anderson would make her debut at the Metropolitan Opera.

During that time, a lot happened, including World War II and Maria Callas.

