



Like A Man Possessed

**Mario Lanza: An American Tragedy, by Armando Cesari
(Fort Worth, Texas: Baskerville Publishers, Inc., 2004)**

When Aristotle first enunciated the principles by which to characterize "tragedy" in literature, he argued that such "serious" stories should project a certain "magnitude, complete in itself," exploring "incidents arousing pity and fear, wherewith to accomplish its catharsis of such emotions" (*Poetics* 1449b24-28). "Catharsis" is the operative word in this context; for Aristotle, telling a tragic tale can be a means to an end. The word "catharsis" derives from the Greek *kathairein*, to "cleanse."

There can be no question that Armando Cesari has provided us with a cathartic experience in his exploration of the "American tragedy" that is Mario Lanza, a man with "a great tenor voice and a larger than life personality" (6). But we need to remind ourselves that this is not a literary tragedy, but a real story about a real man, an artist, a singer, whose tragic death at the age of 38 remains a testament to a life of magnitude—a magnitude both of achievement and of unfulfilled promise. As in literary tragedy, however, the unfulfilled promise is not strictly the result of the actor's choices. It is the result of a collision among choice, circumstance, constraint, and even accident.

Cesari's book is also a reclamation project: it is a successful attempt to reclaim Lanza's artistic legacy in a world that clings furiously to the false dichotomy of art and entertainment. This is the kind of dichotomy that fuels an antagonism between great art and popular culture, as if the two were mutually exclusive spheres.

In a superb foreword, Lindsay Perigo writes that "Lanza's admirers ... had to contend with the sneering dismissiveness of those who considered themselves arbiters of good taste," those who claimed that Lanza "did not belong in the hallowed precincts of Great Singers, that he was a second-rate Hollywood singer who owed his popularity to the ignorance of the masses who adored him" (vii). But, as Perigo maintains, "there's no necessary disconnection between greatness and popularity," and "being popular doesn't automatically disqualify one from greatness."

This unique book provides us with much evidence of Lanza's greatness. It is, in many respects, a multimedia adventure, richly illustrated with expressive photographs, and inclusive of a CD of selections, which further illustrates "the stuff of legend," as Derek McGovern puts it in the accompanying liner notes. McGovern is right to maintain that the CD "should severely undermine the efforts of those who still scoff at this 'movie singer'" (ix). It may not offer all of the very finest examples of Lanza's recorded output, but it traces the evolution of a voice, providing classic renditions of such gems as *E lucevan le stelle* from *Tosca* and *Un tal gioco* from *Pagliacci*.

While we bemoan the dichotomy of art and entertainment, it seems that the acceptance of this lethal split by Mario Lanza himself consumed him throughout his life. As Cesari explains:

Lanza possessed an outstanding tenor voice—a gift that lacked only the proper channelling, nurture and guidance to fulfill its promise. (1) More than anything, Lanza wanted to be accepted as a serious artist. But because of his involvement with Hollywood and the resulting loss of confidence in himself ... all attempts to lure him back to the operatic stage failed. ... To this day there are still those who refuse to accept Lanza as a legitimate artist. A number of music critics and musical snobs have never accepted him, and never will, regardless of the recorded evidence. (5).

Cesari provides a superb snapshot of Lanza's humble beginnings in Philadelphia;

born Alfred ("Freddie") Arnold to Antonio Coccozza and Maria Lanza in 1921, he learned to appreciate opera from a very young age as he devoured his father's Enrico Caruso record collection. The sublimity of his listening experiences was contrasted by the feistiness of his scholastic experiences. He was actually suspended from high school for misconduct. "It seems that one of his teachers had slurred the Italian people by referring to them as 'dagos.' Freddie's immediate reaction was a punch that almost broke the teacher's jaw. In his defense years later, Lanza said: 'He called us dagos. Now, if one of my friends—or even an enemy my own age—had called me that, I would have laughed in his face. It was the fact that a teacher had said it'" (16).

Lanza eventually went on to study at the Berkshire Music Center in Tanglewood, Massachusetts, where he was "placed ... under the direction of strict taskmasters such as conductors Leonard Bernstein, Lukas Foss and Boris Goldovsky, with whom [he] worked eight to ten hours a day" (21). After six weeks of study, he made his operatic debut (in August 1942) in *The Merry Wives of Windsor*. He met many individuals connected to the world of opera—and became "so involved in his new found musical world that he had almost forgotten the outside world." That "outside world" didn't forget about him, however. Like others his age, Lanza received "Greetings" from the draft board, requesting "that he report for his medical examination for induction into the Army" (25). This man, so sensitively immersed in a universe of music and art, was suddenly thrust into a situation that would have an immeasurable impact on his life.

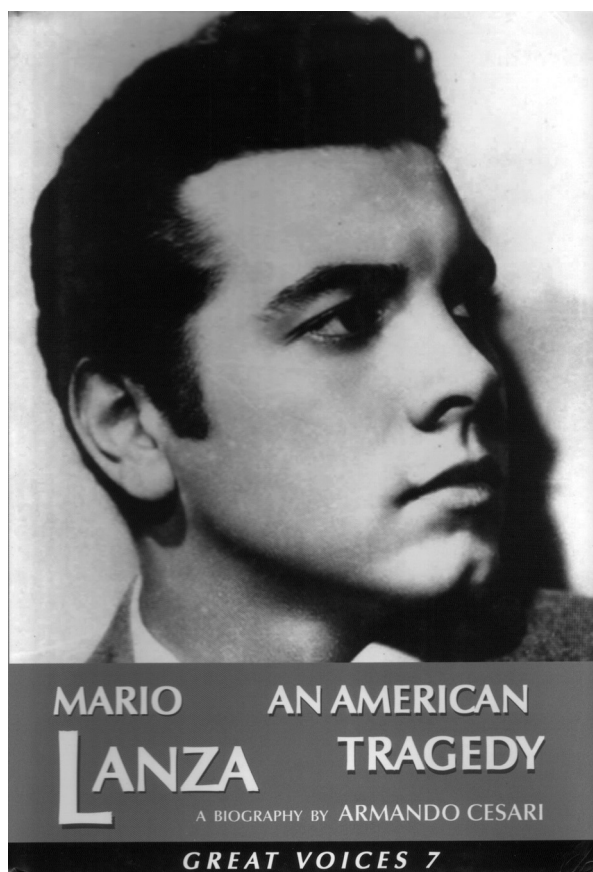
Except for those who have been drafted to fight and die in the trenches of war, I could think of few more potent examples of the evil of military conscription, which forcibly snatches *time*, a scarce commodity, from an individual's life, without that individual's consent. Despite pleas for a deferment from various people who were deeply impressed with Lanza's musical promise, he was soon off to basic training in Miami, and then on to the "hot and dusty air base of Marfa, Texas" (26). Cesari explains: "The idea of becoming a soldier did not appeal to the recently acclaimed tenor. The world may have been at war, but Lanza was unable to imagine of what possible use he

could be to the Army. More importantly, he resented the sudden interruption of what had constituted an excellent start at Tanglewood, and the postponement of the intensive vocal training that he knew he still needed" (27). Lanza wrote to his agent in March 1943: "This place is second only to the kingdom of Mefistofele. ... in fact it's worse than Hell. We are living here on a vast desert. We breathe nothing but dust and believe me my voice has not benefited from it." Before too long, he was receiving throat treatments twice daily because of the dusty conditions.

It was here that Lanza learned to bury his troubles under an avalanche of food. "The solution to the misery of army life, and what was to become a standard procedure in future moments of crisis and depression, was to overeat. And overeat he did. Huge amounts of army food were consumed until he weighed in the vicinity of 260 pounds (118 kg)" (28). Fortunately, for Lanza, he also sought relief in his singing; he eventually performed in various military shows, and befriended such show-biz celebrities as Barry Nelson, Edmond O'Brien, and Bert Hicks. Through these contacts, he would meet influential Hollywood types, and even his own wife-to-be (Betty, sister of Bert Hicks).

Nevertheless, so long away from formal study, learning to run in the fast lane, Lanza remained "an insecure young man, conscious of his lack of training, and aware that he was not yet ready to perform in public" (49). Despite an attempt to begin study again—this time with Enrico Rosati, who tried to keep "his star pupil from being prematurely exploited" (56)—his swift entrance into the public world of music was unavoidable. With each performance he gave, he came to the attention of those who would push him to the next level, from the Hollywood Bowl and other venues to a film contract with MGM, whose executives were enchanted by the artist's voice, flawless diction, vibrant personality, and good looks. That MGM contract would bring 500 fan letters a day, much fame and great wealth, but he would be "more confused and insecure than he had ever been" (71). He continued to dream of life on the operatic stage, but his remarkable film presence would lead most music critics to dismiss or ignore his "operatic efforts" (94).

Lanza reached the pinnacle of that film career in 1951 with the release of *The Great Caruso*, a film that "opened to overall critical and public acclaim," and that sold more than 100,000 soundtrack LPs prior to that release (119-20). (Lanza was RCA's best-selling recording artist up until 1956, when he was eclipsed by Elvis Presley [181], who actually claimed Lanza as an influence [287].) Indeed, with the release of this film, "[t]he whole of America had Lanza fever ..." (133). Cesari argues:



The success of the film resulted not only in a renewed interest in Caruso and his recordings, but in increased sales of the recordings of practically all opera singers. Lanza succeeded not only in renewing interest in opera, but also in introducing it to countless cinema-goers who had previously been oblivious to the art form. He was also instrumental in influencing successive generations of prospective opera singers ...

Even Caruso's son praised Lanza for having made opera "no longer an art form for an elite group of eggheads, but ... acceptable entertainment for all" (120). This, however, was "the ultimate sin," according to those "musical snobs," writes Cesari, who were angry that a man "[w]ith virtually no operatic background ... had dared to impersonate Caruso in a film" (120). Alas, these "constant comparisons with Caruso

would slowly turn into a nightmare, while the ongoing postponement of an operatic career would continue to haunt" Lanza (126). Lanza had become a valuable commodity to the studio, and they exploited that commodity by flooding the market with uneven productions. All that seemingly mattered was slapping the Lanza label on vinyl, and selling it to a hungry public. The critics, by contrast, questioned the "correctness" of his technique, and wondered if his voice was "large enough

for the operatic stage," or if it was "merely the product of sound engineers who could increase the volume of a singer's voice and splice together a number of different takes into a single number" (143). The critics were wrong. But Cesari explains that artistic crossover between genres just wasn't appreciated back in Lanza's day. "Versatility and the ability to cross over convincingly from opera to Cole Porter," he writes, "were not considered virtues in the 1950s..." (147).

Unfortunately, this same snobbery is on display today among many "classical music" enthusiasts. The great twentieth-century composer Miklos Rozsa entitled his autobiography *Double Life*, partially because he had to shuttle between the "serious" music of his orchestral compositions and his more popular film scoring for noir and epic genres, which was routinely derided as "movie music." That famous film scoring, however, militated against acceptance of Rozsa's "serious" work. It took the New York Philharmonic fifty years to finally debut Rozsa's "Violin Concerto (Opus 24)," which was first performed by Jascha Heifetz in the 1950s.

Still, it is no accident that among the most well-attended concerts at Lincoln Center are those featuring important popular contemporary composers such as John Williams, whose 2004 film score concert was astounding in its diversity, virtuosity, and melodic beauty. The Rozsa and Williams concerts provide us with further evidence of a point once made by the novelist and philosopher Ayn Rand: it is simply not true that art must be "serious and dull," while entertainment must be enjoyable, but superficial. Such a conventional dualism alleges that no "serious" work of art could possibly be both entertaining and "true to the deeper essence of life" (*Journals of Ayn Rand*, 603).

But it was an implicit acceptance of this conventional dualism that tore Mario Lanza's soul in two. As if to fill-in the chasm created by such acceptance, Lanza continued to eat and drink "without restraint in order to compensate for his emotional turmoil" (Cesari, 149). And his emotional turmoil made Lanza an even

capacity to sing for the operatic stage, and unwilling to sacrifice the lavish lifestyle to which he had become accustomed, Lanza performed in live concerts and made films overseas. But these activities only created greater stresses on his physical health, demanding a constant cycle of dietary weight loss, and subsequent gain.

and classical music. His multiform interpretative capacity and extensive repertoire formed a wide spectrum that ranged from popular songs to show tunes, musical comedy, art songs and opera. No other singer before or since has achieved this with the same degree of success, and to this day he remains a unique phenomenon. His singing continues to inspire successive generations of singers, all of whom have expressed their admiration and acknowledged the influence Lanza has had on them. (287)

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more vulnerable target for the unscrupulous among men, ruthless individuals who took advantage of his generosity of spirit (a generosity displayed in countless ways; see, for example, Cesari's touching discussion of Lanza's efforts on behalf of a terminally ill 10-year old child named Raphaela). Five years into his Hollywood career, Lanza had already lost \$2 million. His MGM contract was gone, his earnings dried up, and even his record royalties were on the verge of being absorbed by the government, to whom he owed over \$250,000 in back taxes (166-67). Enslaved by that government in the 1940s as a conscripted soldier, and now, in the 1950s, threatened by the possibility of a government lien on his royalties, Lanza was pushed further and further away from "his dream of an operatic career" (217). Plagued by crippling inner doubts of his

By 1959, his crash dieting and excessive alcohol consumption had left him with liver problems, an enlarged heart, high blood pressure, and phlebitis. Medical malpractice appears to have dealt the death blow; Lanza died in Italy at the age of 38. (His heartbroken wife Betty passed away five months later.) "It was the tragic conclusion to the unfulfilled career of a great talent," Cesari writes (282). "It is tantalizing to contemplate what might have been" (275).

Despite such unfulfilled promise, what there was ... was magnificent. Cesari concludes:

In a unique career that encompassed films, recordings and the concert stage, Lanza was able to bridge successfully the gap between popular

Among these, Cesari lists: Di Stefano, Corelli, Carreras, Pavarotti, Leech, Hadley, La Scola, Alagna, Vargas, Boccelli, Krause, Hvorostovsky, Allen, Nucci, Gheorghiu, Stapp, and Domingo. Plácido Domingo, in fact, wrote the Preface to the book; he proclaims Lanza's to be "a voice of beauty, passion and power!" For Domingo, Lanza's "voice communicated to millions all over the world and I venture to say that his films did more to lure the general public to the art form of operatic singing than the voice of almost any other performer of his time" (xvi). He only laments the fact that so many in the "classical music world ... belittled not only [Lanza's] impact on the public but his God-given voice" (xvi).

That voice may have been savaged by the musical snobs of his time, but rarely if ever by his peers in the world of music. Famed conductor Arturo Toscanini saw Lanza's as "the greatest natural tenor voice of the



20th Century" (99). And Maria Callas, whose artistry Lanza greatly admired, had described the Italian tenor as "Caruso's successor." Her "biggest regret [was] not to have had the opportunity to sing with the greatest tenor voice [she'd] ever heard" (271).

What of some of those poor recordings that Lanza left behind? These were released by record companies that cashed-in on the master's popularity, with no consideration for the quality of the product they issued. But even among these recordings, the critics have chosen to focus on those atomistic flaws, with no recognition of the organic whole that Lanza presented to his listeners. As Perigo points out in his foreword, "in a contest between a note-perfect performance devoid of feeling and a note *imperfect* performance that brings you to the edge of your seat with pulse racing, spine tingling and hair standing on end, the latter is always going to win out. It is not *just* his godly voice that has rekindled the Lanza flame; it is also the super-human *passion* with which he delivered it. In Mario's own words, 'I sing each word as though it were my last on earth'" (viii).

This biography may not be the last word on Mario Lanza, but it provides us with so many cathartic words, images, and sounds through which to celebrate his gift.

"I'll Walk With God"

It is sad that Mario Lanza never debuted on the New York operatic stage. The Ebb-Kander "New York, New York" song lyric—"If I can make it there, I'll make it anywhere"—has never been truer. But Lanza didn't actually have to perform on a New York stage in order to be loved by the millions of New Yorkers who played his records with religious conviction.

And so, it was on the Victrola of the Sciabarra household that I was first introduced to Lanza's voice. My father loved him (what New York Italians *didn't* love him?), and by the time I sat for a TV showing of *The Great Caruso*, the great tenor had earned my deepest admiration for his enormous talent.

But it was a visit from Lindsay Perigo in October 2003 that opened the emotional floodgates—quite literally, as we sat there in my home, listening to Lanza's magnificent voice. Lindsay can provide running liner notes as a preface to each song you hear. But he can also provide an endless supply of tissues for those of us who can't stop the flow of tears, and who wouldn't stop it even if we could. They serve, after all, as the cleansing cathartic waters that I allude to in my review of Cesari's book.

Lanza, at his best, sang each song like a man possessed. It is an overblown cliché, but it is utterly impossible to project in words what I hear when I listen to a classic Lanza recording.

Let's take one example: "I'll Walk With God," a composition that features the words of Paul Francis Webster and the music of Nicholas Brodsky, interpolated into the movie version of *The Student Prince*, as Prince Karl Franz stands

by the coffin of his father and contemplates his impending, reluctant ascension to the throne of Carlsberg.

Lanza begins the first stanza with enormous restraint. "I'll Walk with God from this day on. His helping hand I'll lean upon," he sings. "This is my prayer, my humble plea," he almost whispers. "May the Lord be ever with me."

Bolder now. "There is no death, tho' eyes grow dim." "There is no fear"—and he enunciates that phrase "no fear" with confidence, nay, fearlessness—"when I'm near to Him." "I'll lean on Him forever," gloriously proclaimed. "And He'll forsake me never," sensitively adorned. "He will not fail me, As long as my faith is strong"—strong is his voice. "Whatever road I may walk along."

He returns to the title words, showing deference to its hymnal testament: "I'll Walk with God, I'll take His hand. I'll talk with God, He'll understand"—sung as if by a man who so *needed* that understanding.

The music builds. "I'll pray to Him, each day to Him, And He'll hear the words that I say." Lanza's voice explodes with passion: "His hand will guide my throne and rod" (from the top of the scale all the way down). "And I'll never walk alone" (ascending the scale again). And he leads us to a magnificent orchestral finale: "While I walk with God" (up to a thrilling, sustained High B-Flat).

It brings me to tears yet again to listen to this song and the divinity that is its singer. If ever there were a religious experience, it is embodied in this man's voice.

