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I don’t want to be another Caruso; I just want to be Gigli,” said the tenor who inherited many of Caruso’s lyric roles after his sudden death in 1921. Over the years, other tenors have expressed similar reservations, sincere or otherwise, about the “second Caruso” label which Beniamino Gigli addressed in his memoirs. Yet there actually was a “second Caruso”: the legendary tenor’s son and namesake, Enrico Caruso, Jr., whom I was privileged to meet at a social event in Tampa, Florida.

The state of Florida has seen opera companies come and go since its “Gilded Age” when railroad magnates Henry Flagler and Henry B. Plant built their lavish resorts in St. Augustine and Tampa, respectively. Some of these opera companies were founded by wealthy patrons who had winter homes along the state’s Atlantic and Gulf coasts. In some instances they were aided by legendary singers who, like Emma Thursby, spent the winter months in Florida’s favorable climate.

In Tampa, the port city on the Gulf coast, several opera companies had flourished briefly but had failed because of the city’s transient population. During the 1960s, a young psychiatrist, Walter E. Afield, M.D., was determined to revive opera in Tampa. A year earlier, as a Harvard Medical School graduate and a resident at Johns Hopkins, Afield had become acquainted with the legendary soprano Rosa Ponselle when she was being treated for depression. The time Afield spent with Ponselle at Villa Pace, her estate in Baltimore’s Greenspring Valley, had deepened the young physician’s appreciation for great singing—and now in the early-1980s, he was funding yet another small opera company from his own pocket and from funds he raised by holding musical soireés at his home overlooking Tampa Bay.

Having become a friend of Walter Afield when I relocated to Tampa as a Dean at a local university, I was pleased when he called to invite me to his home for an event honoring Enrico Caruso, Jr. I had known about him from Nina Morgana (later Nina Morgana Zirato), whom the senior Caruso had discovered in 1908 when he was concertizing in Buffalo, New York, where Morgana lived with her immigrant Sicilian parents. She would go on to become a coloratura soprano at the Metropolitan Opera from 1920-1935—but of far more importance to her was that Caruso had chosen her as an assisting artist in his American concerts in 1917-1918.

As the youngest of seven children, Nina Morgana began her career as a toddler billed as “The Child Patti” and “Baby Patti” at the Pan-American Exposition held in Buffalo in 1901. By 1908, when she auditioned for Caruso at the city’s Iroquois Hotel, her voice had matured into a potent soprano. Caruso listened to the petite young woman sing “Caro nome” for him, after which he wrote a note and handed it to her. The note said that he would personally arrange for her to study in Italy with Teresa Arkel, under whose tutelage, Caruso wrote in his note, Morgana would become “una
that Caruso, Jr., would have very little first-hand details about his father’s life and career because, as she explained, Enrico, Jr., had been "shipped away" (her phrase) to the Culver Military Academy during his teenage years. His only recollections, Morgana believed, would be insignificant for a potential biography of the great tenor.

Morgana then recounted the last time she had seen Enrico, Jr., an incident which she described to me vividly. During the late-1950s, her son, Bruno Zirato, Jr., had become a middle-management executive with the CBS network. Later, he would join the Goodson-Todman Company and produce "To Tell the Truth" and other American daytime television shows. When Enrico Caruso, Jr. phoned the senior Zirato and asked to visit him and his wife, Zirato

In 1921, when Nina Morgana married Bruno Zirato, who was Caruso’s secretary at the time, she and her new husband were his frequent dinner guests in his massive suites in the Knickerbocker and Vanderbilt hotels in Manhattan. The great tenor would occasionally talk about his two sons, Enrico, Jr. and Rodolfo, whom he had nicknamed “Mimmi” and “Fofò” respectively. They were the sons he had fathered with his common-law wife who, according to Caruso himself, had been his greatest love: the soprano Ada Giachetti. When she had left him at the crest of his fame, the care of their sons was divided between her sister, soprano Rina Giachetti, and the governesses Caruso employed for their care.

When Walter Afield called to invite me to the event at his home, I telephoned Nina Morgana, whom I had seen daily for nearly seven years when her son, television executive Bruno Zirato, Jr., had placed her in a specialized assisted-living facility in Ithaca, New York in 1973. At the time, I was a professor and administrator at Ithaca College, which had been responsible for the construction of Ithacare, Inc., the facility to which Morgana was relocated from mid-town Manhattan after the senior Zirato had died.

When I called to tell her that I had been invited to an event at which Enrico Caruso, Jr., was a guest of honor, I took the opportunity to ask her whether I should broach with him the subject of a biography of his father, which perhaps I could write with him as co-author. During that time, I was in the midst of a similar project with Rosa Ponselle, resulting in the publication of Ponselle: A Singer’s Life by Doubleday & Company.

Morgana replied that she was certain that Caruso, Jr., would have very little first-hand details about his father’s life and career because, as she explained, Enrico, Jr., had been “shipped away” (her phrase) to the Culver Military Academy during his teenage years. His only recollections, Morgana believed, would be of his visits as a boy to one of the Caruso estates in Tuscany—but even those recollections, she felt, would be insignificant for a potential biography of the great tenor.

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had invited him to the apartment that he and his wife maintained at the Carnegie House in midtown Manhattan.

As Morgana recalled, she had arranged a light lunch for Enrico, Jr. “He had grown into a very handsome man,” she said, “and we were especially pleased by his courtly manners and his mastery not only of formal Italian but also Napuletan’, the dialect spoken in Naples.” After they had finished lunch, Enrico, Jr., who had arrived carrying a small leather-bound case, asked if he could use their hi-fi system to play a recording he had made of “Questa o quella” from Rigoletto.

Morgana, who had debuted at the Metropolitan Opera as Gilda in 1920, remembered being surprised by the ease with which Caruso, Jr. sang the high B-flat at the close of the aria on the recording. The young Caruso then played his recording of “Che gelida manina,” and again impressed both Ziratos with the prolonged high-C at the apex of the aria.

Afterward, Morgana said, Enrico, Jr., explained that he had come to ask a favor: would the senior Zirato tell his son to arrange for a television appearance for (as Morgana remembered his words) “the son of the world’s greatest tenor, who is also a tenor.” The atmosphere in the room changed suddenly as Zirato, who was then General Manager of the New York Philharmonic, firmly told Enrico Caruso, Jr., that this “favor” was out of the question.

According to Morgana, Enrico, Jr. replied angrily to Zirato, “My father made your career possible — and now you refuse to ask your son to help me, the son of the man who gave you your career!” Zirato, a tall, formidable man who was accustomed to giving orders to subordinates, stood and launched into a blistering attack, in Italian, upon the young Caruso. “In his booming voice my husband told him that he was impertinent, an ingrate, a spoiled brat in the body of an adult,” Morgana said, “and then he ordered him to leave our apartment immediately. That was the last time I ever saw Mimmi.”

My telephone conversation with Nina
her if he had sung the words correctly. She was so taken by hearing his singing and speaking voice again that she exclaimed, “You have transported your Nina to another time, when I was young and you were even younger, when both of us were in the presence of Maestro”—the title by which those closest to the great tenor had always addressed him.

Wanting to give them privacy, I left the room so that they could continue talking. Some twenty minutes later, Enrico Caruso, Jr., rejoined us. It was obvious to me that he had been crying. Hoping to avoid having others notice this change in his demeanor, I complimented him for his singing of the Pergolesi art song. He thanked me but added that his voice was only a fraction of what it had been when he made recordings and was singing in films that he had made for Warner Brothers First National Studio, for their Spanish department. “I would rather you remember my voice as it was then,” he added as he retrieved the small carrying case he had brought with him.

Inside the case were two recordings of “Questa a quella”: his father’s Victor Red Seal disc from March 1908, and his own recording of the aria from March 1938. As soon as Dr. Afield saw the discs, he offered to play them on his sound system, which contained an adjustable-speed turntable for 78 r.p.m. recordings. The first disc that Enrico, Jr., asked to play was the senior Caruso’s 1908 Red Seal, which filled the large room and excited the guests when the legendary tenor sang a clarion B-flat near the end of the aria.

Next came the 1938 recording by the tenor’s namesake. As I listened to the opening measures, which were played by a piano accompanist, the sound of the piano seemed so distant that I thought I was hearing the studio piano in one of the senior Caruso’s early recordings of “Questa o quella”—until I heard the voice of Enrico Caruso, Jr. I remember having to adjust my ears to the timbre of his tones, which lacked the baritone tint of his father’s voice. But in the second verse, when the son sang the climactic B-flat effortlessly, I remember exclaiming, “Your B-flat is every bit as good as your father’s!”

After a prolonged ovation, Walter Afield mentioned to Enrico, Jr., that I was writing the authorized biography of Rosa Ponselle and that perhaps he and I should talk about collaborating on a biography of the two Enrico Carusos. The reaction of Enrico, Jr., was a brief smile that I interpreted as the nonverbal equivalent of, “Maybe, maybe not.” Remembering Nina Morgana’s comment that the son’s two teenage years in America (1919–21) were at the Culver Military Academy, I asked a series of questions to help me determine how much information the son had about his father. His replies led me to conclude that he had very little.

Before he left the party, I asked him for his postal address and in return I jotted down Nina Morgana’s mailing address for him. I noticed that he was living in Jacksonville, Florida, which struck me as ironic because I had heard that Caruso’s only daughter, Gloria Caruso Murray, was also living in Jacksonville. Not knowing what relationship, if any, the two of them had, I decided not to mention her name. The next morning I called Nina Morgana, who told me how elated she was about their telephone “reunion” and also said that she had begun writing a letter to Enrico, Jr.

After the evening at the Afield home, in which the best of everything was served for the guests, I gave little thought to pursuing any sort of project with Enrico Caruso, Jr. While I could not envision working with the legendary tenor again, I was pleased that he and Nina Morgana were now corresponding. Although intensely curious about what they may be discussing, I never brought myself to ask Nina Morgana to share with me what she had written.

Meantime, Lydia M. Acosta, head librarian at the University of Tampa and the founding director of its Merli Kelce Library, accepted a donation from me of approximately 200 Victor Red Seal recordings from 1904 through 1920. The majority were Caruso recordings. As we were inventorying these historic recordings, she retrieved a book from the shelves: Opera and Concert Singers: An International Bibliography of Books and Pamphlets, which had just been published by Garland Press. The book was, and still is, a masterpiece of research, and more importantly, it made me aware of its author, Andrew Farkas.

Many years later, when we met and became friends, Andrew shared me with the letter Morgana had written to Enrico Caruso, Jr. after their telephone reunion. It was among his possessions when he passed away. Dated 25 June 1982, the handwritten letter began with a tribute to his singing, and it included photographs he had sent with his letter. One paragraph in Morgana’s reply is especially touching because at the time she was dependent upon the care of others:

“...I’m so glad you called me. I feel young again. Life was a song to me and I’ve loved your Father’s songs. I am able to sing again—though it’s not much. I can’t speak at all. My voice is very bad! I "stump" along and it is very discouraging. Your letter made me feel young again. Life was a song in 1921 and we loved your Father’s penthouse in the Vanderbilt Hotel. It was so generous of him to give us a "honeymoon" apartment for six months! I shall always be grateful for that wonderful telephone call. It was a joy to talk to you after all those years of silence!”

For my part, I had gone on to write a biography of the American tenor Richard Tucker, and was also doing my “day job” as a higher-education administrator. As an avid reader of The New York Times, I was leafing through the pages of the 12 July 1986 edition when I saw an obituary with the heading, “Nina Morgana, 94, Soprano Who Sang with Caruso.” I had spoken with her two weeks earlier, and at the close of our conversation she had told me that she sensed her end was near.

A year later, in the 11 April 1987 issue of the Times, I saw another obituary: “Enrico Caruso, Jr., 82; Actor and Son of Tenor.” As I read it, I learned more about the films he had made for Warner Brothers, which...
had also been distributed in the capitals of Central and South America. I had not known any of those details when I had met and talked with him. But that was merely a prelude to what came next: in 1990, I began hearing about a book which knowledgeable friends were describing as “the last word” on Caruso, a biography titled Enrico Caruso: My Father and My Family, co-authored by Enrico Caruso, Jr., and Andrew Farkas.

Through Amadeus Press, its publisher, I received a complimentary copy and wrote a detailed review of it in The Opera Quarterly, then published by the Duke University Press. By the time I had read the first 100 pages, I realized how coy Enrico, Jr., had been—and how mistaken I had been—about how much new information he was able to have Andrew Farkas locate and thoroughly document. At 724 pages and replete with numerous monochrome and color plates, this biography, I concluded, was indeed the final word not only on the life and career of the greatest Italian tenor of the twentieth century, but also about much of the family, including the two illegitimate sons to whom he had given his surname.

If, as Nina Morgana had suggested, Enrico, Jr., had relatively few vivid memories of his father and any extended times they spent together, he and his brother Rodolfo (Fofò) and their uncle, Giovanni Giuseppe Caruso, the tenor’s brother, had first-hand knowledge and documentation of the relationships between the senior Caruso and Ada and Rina Giachetti, the sisters who, at different times, were the love interests of the senior Caruso and also figured prominently in the life of Enrico, Jr.

As I was writing my review, I began hearing from a few colleagues who were disappointed that the book’s chapters dealt more with Enrico Caruso, Jr., than his legendary father. I took the opposite position in my review: I concluded that the final third of the Caruso-Farkas book, just as the title indicated, addressed and answered a number of lingering questions about key persons inside and outside the Caruso family, about the assets, value, and fate of Caruso’s estate, about his two sons’ inheritance, and about Dorothy Park Benjamin, the young American woman whom Caruso had married and with whom he had a daughter.

I also concluded that Andrew Farkas, with the full support of Caruso, Jr., had utilized his life story as a backdrop, a canvas on which to depict the events that occurred after the great tenor’s passing. His son’s presence necessarily pervaded the book because he was directly involved in the actions and activities of his heirs. Six years after the book was released, an abridged edition omitting the chapters after Caruso’s death was published in paperback—a disappointment, in my opinion, because those who purchased it were deprived of the full story of the Carusos.

Thirty years have passed since the publication of Enrico Caruso: My Father and My Family, and it remains the proverbial last word on the life, career, and family of the most renowned tenor of the twentieth century. “One hundred years from now,” Luciano Pavarotti told me in a 1973 interview, “Caruso will still sound like a ‘modern’ tenor because he was the first modern tenor.” So too, I believe, the collaboration between his son and namesake and author Andrew Farkas—as with that of Anna-Lisa Björling and Andrew Farkas for Jussi, the biography of “Swedish Caruso”—will remain the standard by which future operatic biographies will be measured.

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