

# Honorary Advisor Licia Albanese

A profile by Andy Karzas



At the Albanese/Puccini gala, October, 2002

What a joy and honor it is for me to write a few words ...it'll probably be more like a love letter ...about one of the century's greatest artists and a dear friend, soprano Licia Albanese.

Born in Bari, Italy—the official date is July 22, 1913—Licia Albanese made her debut at the Teatro Lirico in Milan as Butterfly, and was soon singing principal roles in major Italian opera houses. In 1935 she sang Refice's *Cecilia* in Malta, and in 1937 she appeared at Covent Garden as Nanetta in *Falstaff* and as Liù in *Turandot*. Some early roles which she never sang later in her

career were Elsa in *Lohengrin* and Pamina in *The Magic Flute*. In 1938 tenor Beniamino Gigli selected Albanese to sing Mimi in a complete HMV recording of *La Bohème*, and Gigli additionally recommended her to the Metropolitan Opera, which urgently needed an Italian lyric soprano. Engaged without formal audition, despite wartime travel difficulties, she came to New York and made a highly successful debut as Butterfly; the date was February 9, 1940. Within a short time Albanese was leading lyric soprano at the Met, appearing there year after year in both Italian and French lyric soprano repertory. In December 1940 she sang Susanna in *Le Nozze di Figaro* in the first Texas Company/Texas sponsored Met broadcast. In a 1942 broadcast she sang the first Violetta of her career. In 1944 she opened the Met season as Marguerite in *Faust*. Four years later she again opened a new Met season, this time as Desdemona in *Otello* with Vinay in the title role and Fritz Busch conducting, the first complete opera performance televised from the Met. In a 1951 broadcast of Massenet's *Manon* alongside Giuseppe di Stefano she made you believe the opera was best when sung by passionate Italians, and as a result of this broadcast I fell hopelessly in love with Albanese. She sang leading soprano with the Met over a near record-breaking 26 seasons, missing only one season along the way (more about that

later). She sang over 400 Met performances in all, including 43 broadcasts.

For several years in the early 1940s Albanese was the star of her own radio show, "Treasure Hour of Song," on which she sang arias from opera and operetta. In 1945 she married Joseph A. Gimma, a prominent New York stockbroker; their son, Joseph Jr., was born in 1952. We knew him at the time as Peppino, and he got some stage experience early in life appearing at the Met as the child in *Madama Butterfly*.

Parallel to her career at the Met was a love affair between Albanese and the San Francisco Opera, where she sang year after year, including roles she never sang in New York. Among them were the title roles in *Martha* and *Suor Angelica*, Antonia in *Tales of Hoffman*, Norina in *Don Pasquale*, Zerlina and later Donna Anna in *Don Giovanni*, Margherita in *Mefistofele* and Maddalena in *Andrea Chenier*. Chenier was originally to have been sung by Mario Lanza, but another Mario, this one named del Monaco, deputized. In 1949 Albanese and Jussi Björling appeared together in San Francisco in *Manon Lescaut* and *La Bohème*.

Although Albanese yearned to branch out into the *spinto* repertory, her Mimi, Butterfly and Violetta filled the Met year after year; she has sung more Violettas with the Met than anyone in the company's history. In 1946 Arturo Toscanini selected her for his complete broadcast performances of *La Bohème* and *La Traviata*, both eventually released to the public via now-famous recordings. Following a brief hiatus in 1952 for the birth of her son, Albanese returned to the Met in a role new to her, Tosca; she sang her first without a stage rehearsal. Over the years there were few deviations from her regular Met repertory; everyone was surprised when in 1957 she was assigned two performances as the

Countess in *Le Nozze di Figaro*.

Allied to her gorgeous voice and seamless legato was a highly personal acting skill. She believed in her characters, and she brought them to life beautifully. As critic Alan Rich once wrote about her, "She didn't merely sing a role; she infused it, and it infused her." With each portrayal came several little touches that struck the viewer's heart. Some may not have been noticeable to the audience, but they meant everything to her character in the opera. For example, she always wrote out in advance the words of the letter from Giorgio Germont that Violetta reads in act 3 of *La Traviata*, beginning "Teneste la promessa." The written letter became a treasured souvenir for some lucky individual after each performance.

A *Met Bohème* on Feb 1, 1954 with Albanese, Björling, Merrill and Siepi was one of those occasions when the stars above were in their right place as well as the stars on stage. Albanese and Björling again sang together at the *Met* Saturday afternoon broadcast of *Manon Lescaut* on March 31, 1956 with Dimitri Mitropoulos conducting. The soprano and tenor had previously recorded the work together, but the broadcast found them at the peak of their vocal and emotional abilities, and the airwaves sizzled. Albanese and Björling were scheduled again for the following year's *Tosca* broadcast, but Björling withdrew shortly before performance time, and tenor Daniele Barioni went on, having had virtually no time to warm up.

Throughout her career an active fan organization reported every almost every move made by their idol, and an annual dinner party gave us a chance to mingle with Albanese and other artists. One time Albanese surprised the police commissioner of New York who was in attendance, and the rest of

us, by emerging from behind the scenes dressed as a New York cop and singing "A policeman's lot is not a happy one" from *The Pirates of Penzance*. In 1957 when Albanese was in Chicago singing *Butterfly* on a *Met* tour, I had the honor of entertaining her at a gathering of local fans. The *Met's* general manager Rudolph Bing broke his long-standing rule about not attending such fan gatherings and showed up; Albanese whispered to me, "take a picture!" Another time she said to me, "what is this 'Madame' Albanese? I like my friends to call me Licia!"

So busy was Licia at the *Met* and in San Francisco that she turned down many offers to sing opera in Europe. There were two exceptions: in May 1951 she was welcomed back to La Scala for two performances as *Madama Butterfly*, under Victor de

Sabata. She later returned to her native Bari for *Butterfly* and *Violetta*. Elsewhere around the States she often sang relatively unusual repertory, such as *Fedora*, Mary in *Peter Ibbetson*, Charlotte in *Werther*, Fiora in *L'Amore di Tre Re*, Magda in *La Rondine*.

In 1963 Renata Tebaldi was unable to fulfill her contracted performances at the *Met* in Cilea's *Adriana Lecouvreur*. At short notice Licia sang the role for the first times in her career. Despite the fact that she had saved the company in a difficult situation, the *Met* offered an unacceptable contract for the following season, and she did not appear during the 1963-64 season. In 1964, *La Bohème* in Philadelphia alongside Ferruccio Tagliavini brought trainloads of fans from New York and, of course, at least one from Chicago.

The 25th anniversary of her American debut was imminent, and

### Licia and Jussi in Performance

April 28, 1946: *La Bohème*, Cleveland, OH  
 Jan. 25, 1947: *La Bohème*, Met, NY  
 March 30, 1948: *La Bohème*, St. Louis  
 April 3, 1948: *La Bohème*, Atlanta  
 Oct. 12, 1948: *La Bohème*, San Francisco  
 Oct. 31, 1948: *La Bohème*, Los Angeles  
 Sept. 25, 1949: *Tosca*, San Francisco  
 Oct. 7, 16, 1949: *Manon Lescaut*, San Francisco  
 Oct. 25, 1949: *Manon Lescaut*, Los Angeles  
 Jan. 10, 1951: *Manon Lescaut*, Met, NY  
 Dec. 2, 1953: Joint recital, UN, NY  
 Feb. 1, 1954: *La Bohème*, Met, NY  
 March 31, 1956: *Manon Lescaut*, Met, NY  
 April 13, 1956: *Manon Lescaut*, Met, NY  
 Dec. 16, 1959: *Tosca*, Met, NY

### In the Studio

June, 1954: *Manon Lescaut*, Rome  
 (original LP matrix LM 6116)



May 1957, at the Drake Hotel, Chicago

Carnegie Hall was rented for an anniversary concert on the exact anniversary date: February 9, 1965. It was to be a Puccini spectacular: one or more arias from every Puccini opera. A few weeks earlier, however, the Met, now eager to participate in the excitement over her anniversary, called and offered her a gala non-subscription performance as Liù on February 14. Then, two weeks earlier the Met found itself Liù-less at virtually the last moment. Licia was called and agreed to save the performance, and thus on Feb 1, 1965 she returned to the Met after a nearly two-year absence. The general manager announced her participation that evening to a delighted audience. The February 9 anniversary gala at Carnegie Hall was a dazzling event, proving to all that after 25 years Licia was still a vocal and dramatic marvel. Giovanni Martinelli praised her from

the stage; another gentleman rushed to the front and knew no other way to express his enthusiasm than to thrust a silk handkerchief into her hands. Her "official" return to the Met on Valentine's Day was greeted rapturously; the applause upon her entrance virtually drowned out the opera for a few moments. At the end, Nilsson and Corelli gallantly flaunted the prohibition against solo curtain calls by running off stage and leaving Licia alone to receive a thunderous ovation. Licia sang more performances during this season and the next. *Manon Lescaut* on January 20, 1966 was her last complete performance in the old Met. At the historic gala of April 16, 1966 which closed the old Met prior to its demolition she sang "Un bel di," then knelt down and placed a kiss on the stage of the venerable house, a moment that was immortalized by a picture in *Life Magazine*. A *Bohème* in Newport that summer closed her Metropolitan career; she was apparently not offered even a single appearance at the new Met in Lincoln Center.

There were many more years of concerts and opera around New York and elsewhere: A single *Aida* at Carter Barron Amphitheater in Washington DC satisfied a longtime ambition. After her last ever *Violetta*, in Palm Beach on February 1, 1968, she gave me the "Teneste la promessa" letter she had written out for the performance; it hangs prominently displayed on a wall in my music room. In 1985 she appeared as Heidi in Stephen Sondheim's *Follies*, a benefit concert performance by the New York Philharmonic with a stellar cast; an additional *Follies* in Texas closed her stage career. But most certainly NOT her involvement in opera!

Several years earlier Licia and her husband had established the Licia Albanese-Puccini Foundation to foster

an appreciation for Puccini while encouraging the careers of young singers, with Licia coaching and giving them the benefit of her years of experience. The foundation today is an integral part of musical life in New York, with philanthropic activities throughout the year and an annual benefit concert at which some of the best of the prize winners perform to an audience of opera lovers and, hopefully, impresarios and agents looking for new talent.

And it gives to me and hundreds of attendees an annual opportunity to again holler out "Brava Licia!"

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A native of Chicago, Andy Karzas got his B.A. from Harvard College and immediately joined the family business; for ten years he was manager of Chicago's famous Aragon Ballroom where, instead of Licia Albanese, Jussi Björling and Leonard Warren, he mixed with the likes of Lawrence Welk, Wayne King and Eddy Howard! Eventually he joined the staff of WFMT, where, in 1976, he brought "From the Recording Horn" to the air: a weekly program of historic vocal recordings, it has run continuously ever since, every Saturday, at 4 PM, CST.

Andy is a former member of the Lyric Opera Guild Board of Directors and former Chapter President. In addition to radio work he is today active in lecturing and writing on the subject of opera, and in recent years has hosted opera tours to opera capitals in Europe, South America, and to New York for performances at the Met.