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## Présentation de la *Revue internationale Dire et Chanter Les Passions*

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La *Revue internationale Dire et Chanter Les Passions* (revue DCLP) est une revue à comité de lecture qui publie des articles rattachés à la thématique principale de l'expression des passions. Elle propose des sujets de réflexion interdisciplinaires de qualité, notamment autour de la voix et des émotions qu'elle suscite, selon des angles d'approche divers et originaux. La revue DCLP publie dans le domaine des sciences humaines et sociales, en format numérique et/ou papier, des articles émanant de chercheurs, d'experts, de spécialistes, d'artistes et de personnalités rayonnant dans une sphère nationale et/ou internationale. La revue DCLP publie des numéros thématiques et également des hors-séries, et une rubrique varia. Cela souligne l'engagement résolu de la revue DCLP en faveur du décroisement des savoirs et la diffusion des connaissances.



# THE BIRTH AND POPULARIZATION OF THE MODERN TENOR VOICE FROM GILBERT DUPREZ TO LUCIANO PAVAROTTI

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## INTRODUCTION

In this article, I address several aspects of vocal expression that mark the modernity of the tenor voice in its artistic, societal, cultural and intercultural dimensions. Certain events have marked the evolution of voice production, and its perception in society and across cultures. The voice has a very powerful communicative impact because it conveys universal emotions, and this is particularly true of the dimensions linked to the voice of the modern tenor, which expresses strong emotions through linguistic, musical and cultural messages. To put these societal and historical dimensions in relation to the modern tenor voice into perspective, three emblematic figures have, by virtue of their careers and exceptional personalities, left a lasting mark on history, society, cultures and, in a way, our perception of the world: Gilbert Duprez, Enrico Caruso and Luciano Pavarotti.

## I. GILBERT DUPREZ AND THE BIRTH OF THE MODERN TENOR

At the Paris Opera, an exceptional and unexpected event was marked by the first ever high C from the chest, sung by the French tenor Gilbert Duprez in 1837, during the aria “Asile héréditaire” in Rossini’s opera *Guillaume Tell*. Gilbert Duprez’s very first chest high C dates back to 1831, when he was in Italy for performances of *Guillaume Tell* in two Italian cities: Lucca and Firenze. Gilbert Duprez, in his autobiographical book *Souvenirs d’un chanteur*, relates his precious memories:

To live up to this energetic creation required the concentration of all the willpower, all the moral and physical strength of the person who would interpret it...! “By Jove,” I exclaimed in conclusion, “I may burst, but I’ll get there!”

That’s how I came up with the C from my chest that brought me so much success in Paris, too much perhaps, for, after all, what is a sound if not a means of expressing a thought? What is a note without the feeling it colours and animates?<sup>2</sup>

The inspiration for this new sound came from the emotion aroused by the musical work itself, which prompted Duprez to innovate in his vocal interpretation, to go beyond the physiological

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<sup>1</sup> The role of Arnold was created by Adolphe Nourrit at the premiere of *Guillaume Tell* on 3 August 1829 in Paris. Adolphe Nourrit sang the top notes of the aria “Asile héréditaire” with a falsetto voice, as was the tradition in those days.

<sup>2</sup> Duprez, G., *Souvenirs d’un chanteur*, Paris : Calmann-Lévy, 1880, p. 75, original quoted text : “Il fallait pour se mettre à la hauteur de cette énergique création, la concentration de toute la volonté, de toutes les forces morales et physiques de celui qui s’en ferait l’interprète... ! Eh ! parbleu, m’écriai-je en terminant, j’éclaterai peut-être ; mais j’y arriverai ! Voilà comment je trouvai cet ut de poitrine qui me valut, à Paris, tant de succès, trop peut-être ; car, enfin, qu’est-ce qu’un son, sinon un moyen d’exprimer une pensée ? Qu’est-ce qu’une note, sans le sentiment qu’elle colore et dont elle est animée ?...” Book accessible at: <<https://archive.org>>

limits of the voice. This vocal prowess, which emanated from an emotional impulse and a desire to break out of the traditional framework, created a new singing technique – a technique based, in particular, on the production of “darkened” sounds, involving a lowered larynx and inducing the holding of a powerful chest voice right up to the top of the tenor’s vocal tessitura.



Photo 1 – Gilbert Duprez

This vocal innovation, which Gilbert Duprez brought back to Paris after a stay in Italy, was to trigger a veritable cultural revolution, leading composers such as Gounod, Verdi, Puccini, Mascagni and Leoncavallo to write works that were consequently more dramatic and expressive, adapted to the new vocal possibilities of the tenor, who now possessed a wider, more virile and more heroic expressive palette<sup>3</sup>. Unfortunately, no audible trace of this event remains, and only the writings of the time describe it. We can only imagine what Duprez’s very first *do di petto* high C might have sounded like. The following musical extract illustrates this famous high C in the aria “Asile héréditaire” performed by Georges Thill in 1935.

Audio extract 1: « Asile héréditaire » interpreted by Georges Thill in 1935, *Guillaume Tell* by Rossini

Then, tenors following Duprez’s lead set out to conquer this new acute note with varying degrees of success. Adolphe Nourrit, one of the star tenors of the old school, was unable to produce this new high C. He ruined his voice trying to produce it, and at the height of his despair, he preferred to die, shooting himself in 1839, which made the headlines in Paris.

<sup>3</sup> See also Smith, M. L. Jr., "Adolphe Nourrit, Gilbert Duprez, and the high C: The influences of operatic plots, culture, language, theater design, and growth of orchestral forces on the development of the operatic tenor vocal production", 2011, UNLV Theses, Dissertations, Professional Papers, and Capstones.



## II. ENRICO CARUSO AND THE PHONOGRAPH

The first sound recordings at the beginning of the 20th century marked a turning point for the voice and its sound dimension. Previously, we had no sound recordings of the voices of our ancestors. Now we can only imagine what the spoken or sung voices of the past were like, and that leaves a huge gap of several thousand years. 11 April 1902 is the date of the very first preserved recording of Caruso in a hotel in Milan, thus entering posterity. The generations that follow that famous day will be able not to imagine, but to hear Caruso's voice.



Photo 2 – Enrico Caruso

Audio extract 2: « Studenti ! Udite » interpreted by Enrico Caruso on 11 April 1902, *Germania* by Franchetti

From now on, the public's relation with singers has changed considerably: one can certainly go and see an artist sing in a show, but with the record, many listeners can now hear a singer who is not physically there, in front of them. The singer is dematerialised: only the sound reaches the listener, and the recording immortalises the singer's vocal expression. Nevertheless, the relation between the vocal production and the listener becomes closer, more intimate: recordings are listened to in bedrooms, living rooms, as many times as you like, at any time of the day or night.

By recording the very first sung recordings in history, Enrico Caruso became the model for the modern tenor, an emblematic figure. He became the ultimate reference for the tenors who followed; in several interviews Luciano Pavarotti spoke of the immense respect tenors had for this mythical master.

Audio extract 3: « Demeure chaste et pure » interpreted by Enrico Caruso in 1902, *Faust* by Gounod

Caruso was both the first tenor in history to be recorded, and a tenor with exceptional vocal and artistic qualities. All this makes him a legend. Caruso also added an intercultural dimension to his repertoire by recording Neapolitan arias. This led to a strong popularization of the tenor's voice. Enrico Caruso's early successors included such formidable tenors as Beniamino Gigli, Francesco Merli, Aureliano Pertile, Giacomo Lauri-Volpi, Jussi Björling, and later Giuseppe di Stefano, Mario del Monaco and Franco Corelli. The voice of the modern tenor was then widely popularized by the invention of radio, a technological advance that allowed the voice to be broadcast more widely.

The cinema and then television also made it possible to integrate the visual dimension of the singer and the mass distribution of the voice, which accentuated the popularization of the tenor's voice. Beniamino Gigli's films, in particular, took the popularization of the tenor's voice even further. Mario Lanza's films, particularly the one on the life of Caruso entitled *The Great Caruso* and released in 1951, continued to promote the discovery and popularization of great opera arias.



Photo 3 – Poster of the film *Solo per te* starring Beniamino Gigli, released in 1938



Photo 4 – Poster of the film *The Great Caruso* starring Mario Lanza, released in 1951

Developments in technology from the 1950s onwards enabled increasingly accurate recordings to be made. The recordings captured more vocal nuances and allowed a wider dynamic range, even during live sessions. To illustrate this, audio extract 4 corresponds to the same aria as audio extract 3 recorded by Caruso in 1902, but this time immortalized in 1954 by Giuseppe Di Stefano. It highlights the evolution in the finesse with which vocal nuances are captured in recordings over the space of fifty years.

Audio extract 4 : « Salut demeure chaste et pure » interpreted by Giuseppe Di Stefano in 1954, *Faust* by Gounod

### III. LUCIANO PAVAROTTI AND THE APOGEE OF THE TENOR VOICE'S POPULARIZATION

It was in this context that Luciano Pavarotti began his career. He was also the heir to Caruso, Gigli, di Stefano and other tenors such as Mario Lanza, whom he also esteemed. After Caruso's reign, there were a number of fabulous tenors, and it was not easy at the time to find a place among them. Yet Luciano Pavarotti's vocal, artistic and human qualities set him apart from all the other tenors who followed Caruso.

Luciano Pavarotti made his debut on 29 April 1961, singing the title role of Rodolfo in Puccini's *La Bohème*. His career quickly became international and brilliant: two years later, he sang at Covent Garden in London, then at the Glyndebourne Festival, in Miami, and in Australia with Joan Sutherland and Richard Bonyngne. He was in demand by the greatest

conductors, including Herbert von Karajan. His artistic encounters and the remarkable start to his career, mentioned here all too briefly, led him to give vocal performances that made headlines and gave him legendary status.



Photo 5 – Luciano Pavarotti making his debut as Rodolfo on 29 April 1961, *La Bohème* by Puccini

Audio extract 5: « Che gelida manina » interpreted by Luciano Pavarotti on 29 April 1961, *La Bohème* by Puccini

One of the highlights of his exceptional career was his absolute mastery of the vocal gesture considered to be the most difficult, the most extraordinary: the high C from the chest. Luciano illustrated this feat in 1972 at the Metropolitan Opera in New York, singing in French the role of Tonio in Donizetti's *La Fille du Régiment* alongside Joan Sutherland. In the aria “Ah mes amis”, he sang 9 high C's, which earned him 17 curtain calls. This performance, coupled with all his previous performances, made him one of the world's leading opera stars, earning him the nickname “King of the High C's”.

Audio extract 6: « Ah mes amis » interpreted by Luciano Pavarotti in 1972, *La Fille du Régiment* by Donizetti

Beyond his perfect mastery of high C, Luciano Pavarotti is recognised by his peers for the beauty of his timbre throughout the range, the perfect homogeneity of his tessitura, a disconcerting vocal ease, superb musicality, perfect diction, a voice that is supple, deep, clear and dark, brilliant and sunny, and all the other exceptional characteristics that so many specialists, critics and personalities from the world of opera have recognised in him. In addition to his wide and brilliant operatic repertoire, he gave and recorded numerous recitals – an exercise dreaded by most artists because of its difficulty and the perilous exposure of the voice – notably with John Wustman, which showcase the marvellous emotional range of his

voice. The following audio extract, a live recording from 1973, illustrates some of his vocal qualities.

Audio extract 7: « Amor ti vieta », interpreted by Luciano Pavarotti on 28 October 1973, *Fedora* by Giordano

Aside from his exceptional vocal qualities, there are other extraordinary facts that have made Luciano Pavarotti an outstanding character, an emblematic figure, particularly in the perception of the musical cultures of our societies. These include the events he initiated for young artists, which illustrate his generosity. Very early in his career, he devoted time to young talent, offering a Masterclass at the Juilliard School in New York in 1979, and a year later launching the 1<sup>st</sup> Pavarotti International Competition in Philadelphia, in the United States. The various editions of this competition have enabled many young artists to reveal themselves to the public, including Roberto Alagna. This is an important dimension that other artists will need to be aware of in order to perpetuate the transmission of knowledge and the art of opera. And there's another outstanding fact to add to his exceptional career: from the 1980s onwards, he went out to meet an ever-growing audience, to help as many people as possible discover the art of opera. He did all this despite of the disapproval of purists and music critics. So he sang for ever larger audiences: New York's Carnegie Hall (2,800 seats), San Francisco's Golden Gate Park (412 hectares), the Beijing Theatre in China. From that point onwards, Luciano Pavarotti became a veritable icon, and the glorification of the voice of the modern tenor reached new heights, helping to spread the influence of opera. His approach to reaching out to an ever-growing audience was completely modern and innovative.

In 1990, his interpretation of the aria "Nessun dorma" from Puccini's opera *Turandot* became the official anthem of the football World Cup in Rome. The success of this recording, and the support he gave to his friend José Carreras, who was committed to supporting research into leukaemia, led to the concert of *The Three Tenors* on 7 July 1990, with Plácido Domingo and José Carreras. This concert went down in history: never before had the voice of the modern tenor in its lyrical dimension achieved such a media dimension. The televised show was watched by an audience of almost 800 million, and the recording of the concert became the best-selling classical music record in the world. Several editions of the concert of *The Three Tenors* followed, including those in Los Angeles in 1994, Paris in 1998 and Yokohama in 2002. All of which goes to show the extent to which Luciano Pavarotti, through this type of event, has helped to popularize opera considerably.



Photo 6 – José Carreras, Luciano Pavarotti and Plácido Domingo, *The Three Tenors* concert, Rome 1990

After the event of the first concert by The Three Tenors, followed by Luciano Pavarotti's concert in Hyde Park on 31 July 1991, the influence of the tenor's voice was to grow and reach a peak, linked to a charity initiative that also included an unprecedented intercultural dimension. From 1992 onwards, the series of major charity concerts by *Pavarotti and Friends* opened up a totally innovative intercultural dimension. In all, there were eight concerts between 1992 and 2003, and these humanitarian actions were recognised by the United Nations. All these concerts had an enormous impact on contemporary intercultural musical perception. Among the artists who responded to Luciano Pavarotti's invitation were U2, Elton John, Céline Dion, Bryan Adams, Tracy Chapman, George Michael, Grace Jones, Liza Minelli, Florent Pagny, Joe Cocker and Sting.

## CONCLUSION

Gilbert Duprez gave birth to the modern tenor and Enrico Caruso brought it to life, inspiring many performers with the very first historic recordings of the tenor voice. Of all the heirs to these two great singers who have marked the history of the tenor voice and its impact on society, Luciano Pavarotti is the one who has brought the diffusion and popularization of the tenor voice to its apogee in opera, and in societies and cultures over the world. As such, he outshines all others, and his extraordinary, high-profile career has made him an emblematic figure for whom the glorification and popularization of the tenor voice seems to have reached its apogee. His exceptional voice and outstanding artistic performances have left their mark on the history of opera, the operatic stage and the music scene. All this in itself makes for a highly relevant and fascinating subject of study. Added to this is an unprecedented societal, cultural and historical dimension: Luciano Pavarotti succeeded in popularizing opera to an unprecedented degree in front of huge crowds. As the true precursor of exceptional concerts on a totally unprecedented scale, he has initiated intercultural artistic encounters which, in addition to the formidable charitable actions that have been made possible, have totally broadened musical horizons and intercultural perspectives. Today, Luciano Pavarotti's voice is still very popular and glorified by specialists and amateurs alike all over the world, and apart from the sublime emotions it conveys, it bears the hallmarks of the historical evolution of the lyric art.