

This Day in History... January 22, 1897

Birth of Rosa Ponselle

Opera singer Rosa (Ponzillo) Ponselle was born on January 22, 1897, in Meridan, Connecticut. Though she had no vocal training as a child, Ponselle had a naturally strong singing voice from a young age. The organist of a local church encouraged her to play piano rather than sing, though. As a teenager she played piano accompaniment for silent motion pictures and sang popular songs in between them when the film reels were changed out.

At age 16, Ponselle began singing in vaudeville with her sister Carmela. The two performed under their real name, the Ponzillo Sisters. The sisters left the vaudeville circuit when they asked for a pay increase and were let go. Rosa then accompanied her sister to New York, where she was studying with voice instructor William Thorner. Thorner wasn't initially impressed with Rosa's singing, but changed his mind after hearing her audition for Victor Maurel.



From the Performing Arts Series

Thorner then called legendary opera singer Enrico Caruso from the Metropolitan Opera to come hear her sing. Caruso didn't usually have high hopes when he was called in to hear young singers. However, he was moved by Rosa's singing and quickly arranged an audition for her with the Met's general manager. She was subsequently offered a contract for the 1918-19 season.

Ponselle made her debut at the Metropolitan Opera as Leonora in Giuseppe Verdi's *La forza del destino*. She studied for the role with Romano Romani, who remained her vocal coach throughout her career. It was her first public performance on an opera stage and she was extremely nervous. She received glowing reviews, though, including one that read, "what a promising debut! Added to her personal attractiveness, she possesses a voice of natural beauty that may prove a gold mine; it is vocal gold, anyhow, with its luscious lower and middle tones, dark, rich and ductile, brilliant in the upper register."

Most of Ponselle's career was spent at the Metropolitan, where she sang 22 dramatic roles. Many of these were coloratura parts – that is, marked by ornamental vocal trills and runs. She also sang one season at the Covent Garden in London in 1929, and another at the Maggio Musicale in Florence in 1933.

Classified by experts as a coloratura soprano, Ponselle's voice was one of the greatest ever found in America. It had an extremely rich tone, especially in its lower notes – almost like a contralto (the lowest female voice part). Her most noted performance is considered to be the title role in Vincent Bellini's *Norma*.

Outside of the Met, Ponselle also toured the country with a successful concert career and made 166 commercial recordings. Ponselle made her final performance at the Met on April 22, 1937. Having worked non-stop for 21 years and suffering from significant nervousness over her performances during that time, she was happy to have a quiet retirement without the stress of performing. Though she never performed on stage again, she did enjoy singing at home for friends. She was also a great supporter of the Baltimore Civic Opera Company, where she coached young singers. Among the singers she coached were Beverly Sills, Sherrill Milnes, Plácido Domingo, James Morris, Lili Chookasian, and Joshua Hecht.

After a long battle with bone marrow cancer, Ponselle died on May 25, 1981.

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From the 1997 Opera Singers Issue



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