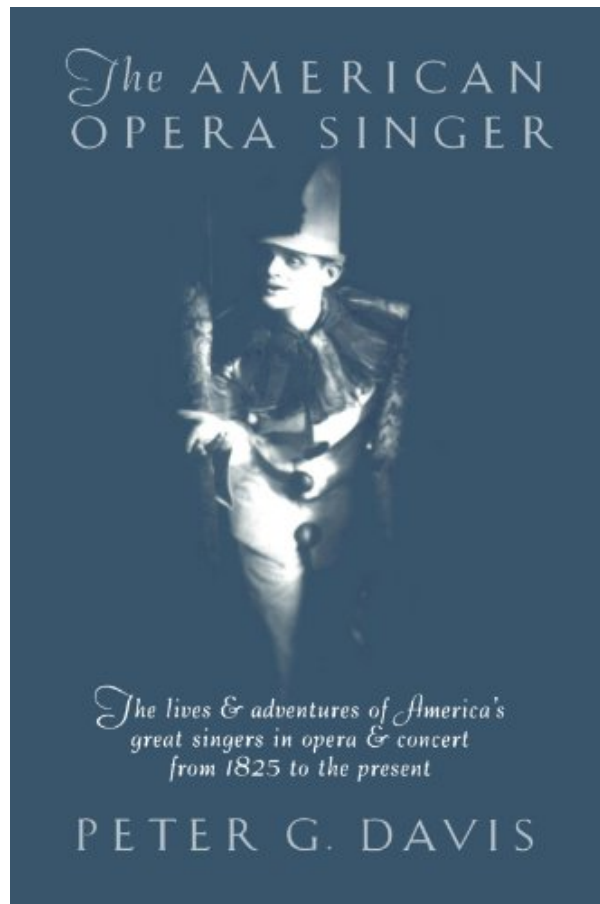


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*The lives & adventures of America's
great singers in opera & concert
from 1825 to the present*

PETER G. DAVIS

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Most helpful customer reviews

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A hard-nosed look at singing and singers

By james s. calvert, jr.

This book is not for the faint-hearted, nor is it for those who cannot abide anything other than unadulterated praise for their pet singers. Peter G. Davis has long been one of most brutal, but often insightful, of American critics, as those who read "New York" magazine will know. Both the brutality and the insight are on display here.

Davis provides a fascinating and comprehensive review of the "American" singer - which is limited not just to native-born Americans and Canadians, but also to foreign-born singers like Caruso and Pons whose careers were centered in the U.S. and who in some way had a major impact on the American operatic consciousness. In these pages, I encountered many singers of whom I had previously been unaware, particularly from years past. For the open-minded reader, there is a great deal to learn here.

There is also a great deal to infuriate fans of certain singers of the recent past. Beverly Sills, for example, comes in for some pretty rough treatment. But in this reader's opinion, Davis is right on the mark with his assessment of Sills' voice and career. Davis is absolutely right in his assertion that Sills was, by nature, a light lyric soprano and that she sang at her best in this repertoire. Only the most gushy, stars-in-the-eyes fan would deny that Sills' voice began to take a crash-dive after she started singing the heavy bel canto repertoire in the early 70's, or that many of her later recordings are marred by excessive vibrato and shrill, wobbly high notes - it's all there to hear. Indeed, the whole of Davis' book takes Sills to task for her ridiculous, self-serving assertions that before her career, American singers "didn't get no respect" or that she was some kind of trail-blazer. Dozens of great American singers had done it all before her. Similarly, Davis' unflattering remarks on Leontyne Price's later singing may not be particularly gallant, but they are accurate.

Davis is generous with praise, where he thinks it is deserved, which is often. But like any good - or honest - critic, he considers the bad along with the good. I found this book continually fascinating and a source of much information. I recommend it highly to inquiring minds.

12 of 15 people found the following review helpful.

Comprehensive and opinionated

By klavierspiel

Peter G. Davis' definition of "American" in this volume is quite broad, encompassing singers born abroad who made a significant contribution to the American operatic scene, as well as native-born artists who, for one reason or another, spent much of their artistic lives overseas. Thus, he discusses singers as diverse as Callas and Sills, Astrid Varnay and Helen Traubel, Claire Watson and Roland Hayes. With singers whose most significant career contributions took place outside the U.S., such as Callas and Varnay, Mr. Davis takes pains to show what role their American years and appearances played in their artistic lives.

The scope and detail of the book is its strength, particularly the early chapters, which deal with many singers about whom detailed information would be difficult to obtain elsewhere. I particularly appreciated the chapter detailing the tortuous progress of the African-American opera singer in the American musical landscape.

Mr. Davis is forthright and uncompromising in his opinions, which is the cause of the low ratings this book has received from reviewers on this site whose favorite singers have been singled out for rough treatment. What these fans seem not to have noticed is his even-handedness, even with those he criticizes. I happen to agree, for example, that Leontyne Price probably made a more significant contribution to the operatic art on recordings than in live performance. If one can get beyond knee-jerk reactions to this or that assessment, however, there is much of value here. His writing style is polished without being pretentious. This is a book that should be read in tandem with John Dizikes' *Opera in America* for a full portrait of this art form since its inception in the United States.

1 of 1 people found the following review helpful.

Exceptional

By Diarci

Aside from providing an immense amount of information about many early singers I (and probably you) was unaware of, Peter Davis' writing style is clean and moves crisply. Oddly, the book becomes marginally less interesting as it reaches the present day, probably because present day singers are less individual and less interesting. All the expected singers are covered - Mary Garden, Geraldine Farrar, Rosa Ponselle, Lawrence Tibbett - but it's the stories of the nineteenth century divas that fascinate.

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