

# Montreal Gazette

## Brownstein: No shortage of operatic drama in Quilico family's biography

*An Opera in 3 Acts provides a fascinating beyond-the-stage look at Montreal baritones Louis and Gino Quilico and pianist Lina Pizzolongo, including rivalries and triumphs.*

Bill Brownstein • Montreal Gazette



"Without my mother, my father would never have achieved what he did, and I don't think I would have either," says opera singer Gino Quilico. A new book details the lives and careers of Gino, father Louis Quilico and mother Lina Pizzolongo, written in the first person from the points of view of the three principals. PHOTO BY JOHN MAHONEY /Montreal Gazette

Noted American maestro Steven Mercurio referred to the family as “the Quilico dynasty.” The reference wasn't only to famed Montreal opera-singing father and son Louis and Gino Quilico, but to wife and mother Lina Pizzolongo, without whom it's doubtful either would have achieved worldwide renown.

STORY CONTINUES BELOW

Baritones Louis and Gino Quilico played to kings and queens, presidents, noble and regular folk at the Paris Opera, Covent Garden Opera and Metropolitan Opera, among others, but both father and son would acknowledge that Lina guided and propelled them.

Connie Guzzo-McParland's newly published book *An Opera in 3 Acts* provides a fascinating beyond-the-stage glimpse of the family, detailing highs and lows. The author achieves this in rather unique and unusual fashion by writing this biography in the first person, from the points of view of the three principals.

As the title suggests, the book actually plays like an opera, delving into the family drama, capturing both the glory and the agony. All that's missing is a background aria while the pages are turned.

The first act is devoted to Lina, an accomplished pianist who came from a working-class background in Mile End. She saw and heard something special in her husband Louis that the rest of his family did not. His father operated a bike shop off the Main and had little use for the refinements of the arts. Regardless, Louis reluctantly ran the business while trying to make his mark.

The second act is Louis's, while the third and longest is Gino's. Lina's premature death in 1991 had a devastating effect on them personally, yet did not derail them from their career paths.

Louis, who went on to marry concert pianist Christina Petrowska, was known to many as Mr. Rigoletto, in recognition of performing the Verdi opera more than 500 times. He made 300 appearances at the Metropolitan Opera alone, working with tenors Luciano Pavarotti and Placido Domingo and sopranos Joan Sutherland and Beverly Sills.

In 1987, Louis and Gino made opera history when they became the first father/son tandem to perform at the Met. Later that year, they were featured together again in Mozart's *Don Giovanni* for the Canadian Opera Company. Louis, who died in 2000, was made a companion of the Order of Canada and received a Governor General's Performing Arts Award.

In Gino's case, he experienced a high and low at the same time.

"My mother is at home dying of cancer and I'm about to make my debut at La Scala," recalls Gino, 67, in an interview at his Atwater Market-adjacent home. "That really shook me up."

More highs and lows would follow in abundance, both personally and professionally. Gino kept detailed accounts, which he was able to pass on to Guzzo-McParland.

"In the early days, we didn't have computers, so we used to write lots of letters once upon a time. I had plenty of letter exchanges with my mother and some with my father. That really helped (Guzzo-McParland) capture the emotions as well as the historical background."

And there was much emotion. It was never easy for Gino, "the rebel," to live in the shadow of his father. Yet despite their rivalry and some tempestuous relationships, Gino, best known for his renderings of *Don Giovanni*, did manage to establish himself on the world stage.

"I'm so happy that all those elements are captured in the book, because it's not all the glamour that so many people associate with the opera world," notes thrice-married Gino, father of two adult children.

“Over the course of my career, a lot of people used to say that it was easy for me to get ahead because I was the son. That was never the case. It was actually harder. It’s not like a business where you can get in because of your family. You either have the voice or you don’t.

“But one thing is certain: Without my mother, my father would never have achieved what he did, and I don’t think I would have either. She was so supportive, but in a critical way. The best teachers in the world are those who can give criticism but make you feel good about it, which she did so well.”

Gino’s all-time career highlight didn’t take place at La Scala or the Met, but at Montreal’s Maurice- Richard Arena in 1987, one of the very few occasions when he and Louis were joined by Lina on stage.

“To watch my mother after so many years away from the stage come back to play a concerto, after practising eight hours a day, will stand out as my most magical moment,” says Gino, an officer of the Order of Canada and a Grammy winner. “We were like two little boys watching her.”

## **AT A GLANCE**

***An Opera in 3 Acts** (Linda Leith Publishing) is available in English and French editions on Amazon and other online platforms, and will be available in bookstores Saturday, Oct. 15. Author Connie Guzzo-McParland and Gino Quilico will be signing copies Thursday, Oct. 13 at 12:30 p.m. at the Atwater Library.*

*On Nov. 13, Quilico, accompanied by pianist Dominic Boulianne, will perform a concert and sign books at 2:30 p.m. at Salle Joseph-Rouleau, 305 Mont-Royal Ave. E. Tickets cost \$34.50 and are available at [EventBrite.ca](http://EventBrite.ca).*

[bbrownstein@postmedia.com](mailto:bbrownstein@postmedia.com)