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NEIGHBORHOOD REPORT: NEW YORK UP CLOSE

NEIGHBORHOOD REPORT: NEW YORK UP CLOSE; Caruso: The Tenor Who Started It All

By **AMY WALDMAN**

Before the three tenors, there was, simply, the tenor. And after Pavarotti, Domingo and Carreras have gone, Enrico Caruso will retain his pre-eminence in that narrow sliver where opera and popular culture overlap. He was the first to bridge the gap between the two worlds, and many say his voice and persona have remained inimitable.

Caruso was a citizen of Italy and a resident of Manhattan, and his bon vivant life left a trail of colorful anecdotes from Berlin to San Francisco. But he struck a particular chord among Italian immigrants in Brooklyn, where fathers collected Caruso records and sons dreamed of Caruso careers. So it seems fitting that North America's only Caruso Museum is in the home of a Brooklyn-born Italian-American, Aldo Mancusi.

From the outside, the only sign that something extraordinary is in this ordinary two-story house at 1942 East 19th Street is a black plaque proclaiming the Enrico Caruso Museum. Inside, the ordinary makes way for seven rooms of Carusiana.

There are costumes, busts, letters, photographs and opera posters; a knife and fork he ate with; a pack of his cigarettes (Egyptian's Prettiest Cigarettes), and jewelry he bought for the mistress who bore him two children. The Golden Voice had a nimble hand as well: he was a prolific caricaturist, and Mr. Mancusi has many samples of his work.

Mr. Mancusi has even converted one room into a mini-theater (including a few small pieces of the old Metropolitan Opera house). There, he can screen Caruso's silent films, which were, he says sadly, flops.

Caruso, who was born in 1873, died in Naples in 1921, prompting days of mourning worldwide. Mr. Mancusi was born eight years later, and said he was raised on Caruso.

He began collecting Caruso materials more than 30 years ago, pouring the money he made in real estate back into his true passion. The Enrico Caruso Museum of America opened in 1992 and was incorporated in 1995. Mr. Mancusi is determined that one day it will have a home of its own. Next month, the museum will celebrate the 125th anniversary of Caruso's birth with a concert featuring his great-grandson, Riccardo.

A collector of Thomas Edison inventions and paraphernalia as well, Mr. Mancusi is as passionate about machines as he is about music. "There is nothing mechanical I can't fix," he said.

So the museum's treasures include a collection of, essentially, music machines, from music boxes to the Reginaphone to a Mills Troubador jukebox. There is also an original Victor Talking Machine Company wind-up phonograph with an enormous fluted gold horn, made by the company for which Caruso recorded, becoming one of the first bona fide recording stars.

Mr. Mancusi played "Core 'ngrato," a Neapolitan love song, on the phonograph last week, swaying to the music that swelled soulfully over the record's gentle scratching. It is his favorite Caruso recording, he said, because his parents, too, were Neapolitan. "My father loved Caruso," Mr. Mancusi said, "with a passion that boiled over into me." **AMY WALDMAN**

Photo: "My father loved Caruso," says Aldo Mancusi. So does the son. (William Lopez for The New York Times) Map: "A TENOR'S TRAIL: Enrico Caruso In Brooklyn" shows the locations of the following: the Brooklyn Academy of Music, The Brooklyn Pier, The corner of Sackett and Van Brunt Streets, and the Sheepshead Bay Race Track. It also provides briefings which relate the significance of these sites in the life of Mr. Caruso.