

Alfredo Kraus (1927-1999)

One of Spain's finest tenors dies

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Alfredo Kraus, one of the great lyrical tenors and masters of zarzuela and opera, died on September 10 in Madrid, at the age of 71, after a long illness.

Rightly acclaimed as the finest Spanish tenor of his generation, Kraus was well known for his sophisticated and elegant style. Able to combine apparently effortless singing with rigorous attention to musical technique and detail, he was one of the few tenors who performed right up until the last years of his life. In 1992, at the age of 64, Kraus starred as Nemorino in Gaetano Donizetti's *L'elisir d'amore* at London's Covent Garden. Four years later, in 1996, he undertook an extensive international tour to commemorate his 40 years in opera. Critics commented that Kraus's easy delivery, elegant phrasing and bright tone were like those of a young man.

The son of a Spanish naturalised Austrian, Alfredo Kraus was born in Las Palmas, the Canary Islands, on September 24, 1927. While he began piano lessons at the age of four, Kraus's early years were devoted to formal studies. After completing secondary education he studied industrial engineering. But soon after graduation Kraus began to concentrate more and more on singing, which he studied in Barcelona, Madrid and later Italy.

By nature a perfectionist, Kraus at first did not consider himself sufficiently accomplished to perform on stage. This changed after he met and studied under Mercedes Llopert in Milan, Italy. Llopert, a popular soprano in Italy and Spain in the 1920s and 1930s, encouraged and assisted Kraus in his early career.

Kraus made his operatic debut as the Duke of Mantua in Giuseppe Verdi's *Rigoletto* in Cairo, in January 1956. He then appeared in *La Traviata* in Venice, Turin and London, and in 1958 made his first appearances in Rome and Lisbon. In 1959 he performed in Barcelona,

Turin (*Les Pêcheurs de Perles*) and Lisbon (*Lucia di Lammermor*) and 1959-60 performed in Vincenzo Bellini's *La Sonnambula* at La Scala, Milan.

Kraus quickly developed into a world class tenor, starred in a movie based on the life of Gayarre, an early famous Spanish tenor, and became a frequent and well-respected performer at the world's most prestigious opera houses, singing with Maria Callas, Joan Sutherland other world renowned sopranos. Perhaps his most famous and best-loved role was in Jules Massenet's *Werther*.

Kraus also recorded many zarzuela, or Spanish operetta, during his career. The zarzuela, which is based on regional Spanish folktales and melodies, are a special Spanish musical genre first developed in the early 1600s and written initially to overcome local resistance to traditional operatic forms. Some zarzuela are similar to musical comedies, such as *La Montera*, *El Santo la Isidra*; others, such as *Marina* and *El Caserio*, more closely resemble traditional opera.

While thousands of zarzuela have been written, recordings were mainly done by conductor Ataúlfo Argenta, tenor Carlos Munguía and baritone Manuel Asensi in the 1930s and 40s. Kraus helped to revive and broadly popularise this genre among a new generation. His recordings include *Doña Francisquita* and *La Tabernera del Puerto*,

Although Kraus's voice was not "large" by some standards, and he refused to engage in the spontaneous virtuoso and often flamboyant outbursts expected by some Latin audiences, he developed a refined, warm-toned character to his singing. As one critic remarked Kraus "had no peer for intelligence, musicality, and 'line', that high mystery of the art that conceals art without any suspicion of artifice."

Kraus's emergence as an operatic star came at a time

when there was a peculiar scarcity of tenors in Spain and throughout the world. Despite this shortage, the period produced some of this century's outstanding tenors including Giuseppe DiStefano, Mario del Monaco, Franco Corelli and Mario Lanza.

Kraus not only ranks among these greats, receiving countless awards and decorations from France, Italy and Spain, but his more than forty year career was characterised by a deep opposition to any dilution or vulgarisation of opera, introduced under the pretext of achieving broad popular appeal.

As he told one interviewer: "You have to make a choice when you start to sing and decide whether you want to service the music, and be at the top of your art, or if you want to be a very popular tenor. I want to be known by people who are knowledgeable about opera, who appreciate bel canto singing, people who have more sensitivity."

The last two years of Kraus's life were darkened by the death of his wife in 1997, which affected him so deeply that he stopped performing for eight months. A proud and strong-willed man, he eventually returned to the stage and to teaching, making the comment: "I don't have the will for singing but I must do it, because, in a sense, it is a sign that I have overcome the tragedy. Singing is a form of admitting that I'm alive."

Kraus's funeral, held last week in Madrid's elegant Teatro Real, was attended by hundreds of singers, musicians, friends and senior government officials. He is survived by three daughters and a son.



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