

# Impresario Irene Dalis of Opera San José dies at 89

By Joshua Kosman Updated 7:33 am, Monday, December 15, 2014



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Opera legend and founder of Opera San Jose, Irene Dalis poses for a portrait in San Jose, Calif., on Wednesday, August 18, 2010.

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Irene Dalis, the San Jose native who established a starry international career as an operatic mezzo-soprano before returning to found and run Opera San José for 30 years, died Sunday in San Jose after a brief illness. She was 89.

**Larry Hancock**, her longtime collaborator who succeeded her at the company's helm in June, confirmed her death.

Ms. Dalis was known as a fierce, take-no-prisoners impresario. For the young singers in her charge, she was a nurturing but strict mentor; her co-workers and members of the company's board soon learned that she rarely took no for an answer.

Those qualities, along with a concern for high artistic standards, kept the \$4 million company afloat — and sometimes even prosperous — in the face of the difficult cultural and economic landscape of the South Bay. And it now falls to Hancock, who worked alongside Ms. Dalis for many years, to maintain that level of firm leadership.

Ms. Dalis' most notable legacy was her concern for fiscal prudence, which she attributed to her Depression-era upbringing. Although the company has faced occasional budgetary shortfalls — most recently a \$700,000 deficit in 2013-14 — it owns two administrative buildings and two apartments free and clear, and can boast a cash reserve of \$3 million.

## European influence

The company has a dual identity as both a presenting organization and a training program for young singers, many of whom have gone on to successful if not stratospheric careers. The plan of the company was based on the model of the small European houses in which Ms. Dalis began her career.

As a singer, Ms. Dalis was renowned for her tonal richness and fiery dramatic presence in dramatic roles. She was the first American singer to undertake the role of Kundry in Wagner's "Parsifal" at the Bayreuth Festival, and went on to appear at the [San Francisco Opera](#), the [Metropolitan Opera](#), Covent Garden and elsewhere.

Among her signature roles were Amneris in Verdi's "Aida," the female title role in Saint-Saëns' "Samson and Delilah," and in operas by [Richard Strauss](#), Clytemnestra ("Elektra") and the Nurse ("Die Frau ohne Schatten"). She made her San Francisco Opera debut in 1958 as Princess Eboli in Verdi's "Don Carlo," and went on to make dozens more appearances at the [War Memorial Opera House](#) over the ensuing 15 years.

In 1977, she retired from the stage and came home to San Jose. At first she taught in the voice department at [San Jose State University](#), her alma mater, before starting Opera San José in 1984.

She was born [Yvonne Dalis](#) on Oct. 8, 1925, the daughter of a Greek immigrant father and an Italian mother. The youngest of five children, she began her career as a pianist.

"My father wasn't really educated — he had come over at 14 — and we never spent money frivolously," she told *The Chronicle* in a 2010 interview. "But he insisted that all of the kids study an instrument; his idea of an evening of entertainment was to have us all perform for him."

## Becoming Irene

At San Jose State, she became interested in opera, and soon left to pursue vocal studies in New York and then Milan. Her teacher in Milan, a German named [Otto Mueller](#), gave her the name Irene.

"I was always built on heroic proportions," she recalled. "He thought that for American audiences, 'Yvonne' would make them expect some kind of French gamine."

Ms. Dalis made few commercial recordings, but many of her appearances at the Met — alongside such stars as Jussi Björling, [Leonie Rysanek](#), Leontyne Price and [Carlo Bergonzi](#) — can be heard on the company's radio broadcasts.

Ms. Dalis is survived by a daughter, **Alida Loinaz** of Baltimore, and two grandsons, Gregory and J.T. Her husband, **George Loinaz**, a Cuban-born book editor, died in 1990. Plans for a memorial service are pending.

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