

Irene Dalis, Opera Singer and Company Founder, Dies at 89

By WILLIAM YARDLEY

DECEMBER 18, 2014

Irene Dalis, a versatile and fiery mezzo-soprano who starred at the [Metropolitan Opera](#) for two decades before building a second career as the director of [Opera San José](#), an innovative company she founded in her California hometown, died on Sunday in nearby Saratoga, Calif. She was 89.

Her daughter, Alida Loinaz, confirmed her death.

Ms. Dalis did not set out to be a singer or an impresario. She studied piano and music education at what was then San Jose State College before earning a master's degree at Columbia's Teachers College in Manhattan in the late 1940s. The plan was to go back home and teach.

Yet her instructors in New York were struck by her voice and encouraged her to develop it. She began taking lessons with the mezzo-soprano Edyth Walker. Instead of returning to San Jose, she went to Italy to study voice on a Fulbright scholarship in 1951. Just two years later she made her operatic debut as Princess Eboli in Verdi's "Don Carlo" in Oldenburg, Germany. Four years after that, she performed the same role at the Met.

Her debut at the Met, on March 16, 1957, was "one of the most exciting of the season," Howard Taubman wrote in The New York Times.

"By the time she reached the second-act trio she showed she could sing with temperament," Mr. Taubman said. "And in the third-act, 'O don fatale,' one of Verdi's greatest dramatic arias, she was like a veteran. Her voice, which has range, security and brilliant top notes, was now under full control. She sang and moved with a total absorption in the emotion of the character."



**Irene Dalis in the Metropolitan Opera's 1966 production of
"Die Frau ohne Schatten."**

THE METROPOLITAN OPERA ARCHIVES

"Her singing had color and fire. In terms of sheer quality there may be more sumptuous voices at the Met in the mezzo-soprano division; Miss Dalis uses hers like an artist."

For the next two decades, Ms. Dalis (pronounced like Dallas) was among the Met's most admired performers, appearing more than 270 times and singing virtually every major mezzo-soprano part written by Verdi, Wagner, Richard Strauss and others. She was nurtured by Rudolf Bing, the Met's formidable general manager, and performed with Birgit Nilsson, Jussi Bjorling, Robert Merrill, Leontyne Price, Plácido Domingo and Leonie Rysanek.

She sang on many other stages, including at the San Francisco Opera and at Covent Garden.

One of her most acclaimed performances was in 1962, when she sang the role of Kundry in "Parsifal" at the Bayreuth Festival in Germany. She said later that, under stress from a grueling schedule, she had a revelation while she was there.

"I asked myself if my talent, which I had always thought so sacred, was so special after all," she recalled in 1964. "I decided it wasn't. I realized that this was just my way of making a living. I began to see that I couldn't deliver my best all the time, nobody can, and that I shouldn't punish myself for my mistakes.

"I have now approached the time of life where I want to enjoy what I'm doing. Does it seem silly? It seems to me a great discovery."

She would perform for another decade, but in the mid-1970s she finally went home to California to teach voice, finding a position at San Jose State.

Her work with students there led to her founding of Opera San José in 1984. It was modeled on a program in Oldenburg, which gave young performers like Ms. Dalis the chance to sing big roles early in their careers.

“In the old days, singers started singing major roles at a young age, and it didn’t ruin their voices, did it?” she said in an interview with Opera News in 2007. The company, which performs at the California Theater, a restored 1927 movie palace, has its own costume and set shops, owns administrative buildings and provides apartments to some performers. Ms. Dalis ran it until this June.

Opera News called Opera San José “the only opera company in the U.S. entirely dedicated to developing the careers of emerging young artists.”

Yvonne Patricia Dalis was born on Oct. 8, 1925, in San Jose, the youngest of five children. Her father was a hat maker born in Greece. Her mother’s parents had immigrated from Italy. She changed her name to Irene at the suggestion of one of her teachers in Europe, Otto Mueller.

“He thought that for American audiences, ‘Yvonne’ would make them expect some kind of French gamin,” she told The San Francisco Chronicle in 2010.

Besides her daughter, she is survived by two grandsons and one great-granddaughter. Her husband, George Loinaz, died in 1990.

Ms. Dalis often said that she treasured her later careers, as an instructor and the director of Opera San José, more than being a performer.

“That I had a career is an enigma — I don’t understand it,” she once said. “I would sit in my dressing room before a performance and think, ‘What are you doing here?’ I could think of a hundred things I would rather have been doing.”