

## Irene Dalis: Superstar mezzo-soprano and founder of Opera San Jose, dies at 89

By Mark Emmons, Mercury News

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Irene Dalis is 88 years old, sharp as a tack, and still the brains and motivating force behind Opera San Jose, which she founded 30 years ago. But the the Grande Dame of the arts scene, a San Jose native, is about to retire -- a major event in the South Bay. She lit up the lobby of the California ...

SAN JOSE -- Irene Dalis, the beloved Grande Dame of the South Bay arts scene who reached the lofty heights of international stardom as a mezzo-soprano opera star before returning home to found Opera San Jose, has died. She was 89.

Dalis was a towering figure in the local artistic community and remained the driving force behind Opera San Jose until retiring as director in June after three decades with the organization.

"Irene had many, many wonderful attributes, but her greatest was an undying love of San Jose," said her close friend Andrew Bales, president of Symphony Silicon Valley. "She had a major international career as a performer, as an amazing diva. And then she came home for what, in her mind, was something that was far more important -- creating Opera San Jose. Her passing really is the end of an era and a terrible loss for San Jose."



Irene Dalis lit up the lobby of the California Theater in San Jose on April 10, 2014. (Karl Mondon/Bay Area News Group)

Laurie Warner, the board president of Opera San Jose, said Dalis recently had entered a San Jose hospital.

"She said that she had completed everything that was on her bucket list," said Warner, who has known Dalis since 1982. "She thought that Opera San Jose was in good hands now under the direction of Larry Hancock. She literally told us that she was ready to let go."

Her daughter, Alida Loinaz, posted on social media that Dalis died peacefully Sunday in hospice care after a brief illness.

Hancock, her hand-picked successor to take over what she had lovingly called "my baby," is in Europe and was unavailable to speak about his mentor.

A book about Dalis was published earlier this year, and many of her friends and associates would testify that the title perfectly captured her remarkable life: "Irene Dalis: Diva, Impresaria, Legend."

#### MORE A PIANIST

She was born Yvonne Dalis on Oct. 8, 1925, and grew up on Delmas Avenue in downtown San Jose, the last of five children of a Greek hat maker. She rose from humble origins to embark on a long, storied career, performing at the highest levels of world opera, including

at New York's Metropolitan Opera House.

A prodigious musician -- who considered herself more a pianist than a singer -- Dalis received her bachelor's degree from San Jose State College (now San Jose State University), in 1946 and her master's degree in music education from Columbia University Teachers College. There were honorary doctorates, and before launching her stellar career, Dalis was a Fulbright scholar.

The lyrical singer was dubbed "Irene" by famed Metropolitan Opera General Manager Rudolf Bing, because he believed that particular name added a dramatic ring to his shining star.

"She was the most important mezzo-soprano at the Metropolitan Opera in the '50s, '60s and well into the '70s," Bales said. "She was the leading dramatic mezzo of an entire era, and she played all around the world. She was a true diva. And yet for those of us lucky enough to know her, she also was sweet-hearted and as loving as could be."

After 20 seasons with the New York Opera Company, Dalis retired in 1976 and returned to her San Jose hometown, where she bathed in local adoration afforded a performer who made her dazzling debut in 1953 as Princess Eboli in Verdi's Don Carlo. That was the first of 274 performances, including those she sang with opera superstars such as Birgit Nilsson, Leontyne Price and Plácido Domingo.

#### 'FROM SAN JOSE'

But even with that remarkable career, she recently told this newspaper that it merely was a warm-up for what she called "my life's work, coming home to build this company."

Once again at San Jose State, where she held a position as professor of music, Dalis developed so many talented singers out of her Opera Workshop program that she went on to form Opera San Jose in 1984.

Dalis was badly injured in a 2010 car accident that left her right ankle badly damaged. But it did nothing to her sparkling personality.

"She never fully recovered from that," Bales said. "She was in a wheelchair and used a walker. But she never lost her spirit."

But now, Bales added, the city is at a deep loss after her passing.

"Irene let people know that San Jose mattered on the world stage," he said. "She worked so hard for this city."

In a profile in this newspaper earlier this year, Dalis recalled how on Nov. 30, 1957, when she made her broadcast debut at the Metropolitan Opera House, she was asked by announcer Milton Cross how she would like to be introduced.

"Well," she replied, "you'll have to tell them that I'm from San Jose."

Dalis is survived by her daughter, Loinaz, of Maryland, and two grandsons.

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