

ALLA CORRENTE

Fausto Cleva

Fausto Cleva (1902-1971) studied music first in his home town of Trieste at the Trieste Conservatory and later at the Milan Conservatory. He made his professional conducting debut at the age of seventeen at the Teatro Carcano in Milan, conducting Verdi's *La Traviata*. Almost immediately leaving for the United States, he was engaged by Giulio Gatti-Casazza to be the assistant chorusmaster for the 1920–1921 season of the Metropolitan Opera in New York, the company with which he was to be so closely associated for the rest of his life. He gradually worked his way up the musical hierarchy of the Metropolitan Opera, first as chorusmaster, then as assistant conductor and finally as conductor in February, 1942 with Rossini's *The Barber of Seville*. Although the critics gave him laudatory reviews, further opportunities seemed too doubtful to keep him in New York.



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In addition to his work in New York, Cleva also conducted elsewhere. Between 1934 and 1963 he was the chief conductor of the Cincinnati Summer Opera. He was also chief conductor of the Chicago Opera Company for two years from 1944 until its demise in 1946, receiving especially good reviews for his leadership of the 1944 opening-night *Carmen*. In Chicago, he was credited with improving the standards of operatic performance. He also appeared with the San Francisco Opera during its 1942–1943 season, and later between 1949 and 1955. His conducting with the San Francisco Opera began with *La Traviata* with Bidú Sayão in 1942. His position in the Italian wing of the San Francisco Opera substantially grew in the early 1950s until his return to the Metropolitan Opera as a full-fledged conductor expanded to keep him largely in New York. He also toured quite extensively, conducting opera in Canada, Cuba, Italy and Sweden, including his appearance with the Swedish Royal Opera at the Edinburgh Festival in 1959, directing *Rigoletto*.



Metropolitan Opera House, New York City

At the Metropolitan Opera, Cleva conducted the Italian repertoire almost exclusively, and between 1950 and 1971 he led 657 performances of 27 different operas. Recordings of many of these performances have been preserved through the Metropolitan Opera's regular Saturday afternoon broadcasts. While in Italy, Cleva had worked with the composer Mascagni, and he proved to be a powerful and sympathetic conductor of operas of the Verismo School, as recordings of his performances of Giordano's *Andrea Chénier* (Metropolitan Opera, 1954) and Catalani's *La Wally* (Carnegie Hall, 1968) clearly demonstrate. His conducting of the operas of Puccini was also highly idiomatic (*La Bohème*, at the Metropolitan Opera in 1951 and *Tosca*, at the Metropolitan Opera in 1965).

Cleva's commercial recording career falls into three distinct parts. During the early 1950s he directed a number of complete recordings of Metropolitan Opera productions for Columbia-USA, notably Gounod's *Faust*, Donizetti's *Lucia di Lammermoor*, and the double-bill of Mascagni's *Cavalleria Rusticana* and Leoncavallo's *Pagliacci*. These were perfectly acceptable readings, if at times without the fire displayed in

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Cleva's contemporaneous live performances. In addition he conducted many of the accompaniments for the arias recorded by singers under contract to Columbia, such as Richard Tucker. He went on to conduct several of the recordings released during the late 1950s by the short-lived Metropolitan Opera Club, including the Club's issues of Verdi's *Aida* and *Rigoletto*, as well as several verismo operas. Cleva then returned to the recording studios of RCA in 1964 for what many critics think is his finest commercial recording: Verdi's *Luisa Miller*, with Anna Moffo and Carlo Bergonzi. This recording was one of the first to give the early and middle period operas of Verdi their full musical weight. Later he also recorded for Decca Catalani's *La Wally* with Renato Tebaldi and Mario del Monaco. Cleva was a completely reliable and stylish conductor of the core Italian operatic repertoire; at his best, as his interpretation of *Luisa Miller* and many of his live performances show, could be much more than this.



Herodes Atticus Theatre, Athens

He died, in 1971, while conducting an outdoor performance of Gluck's *Orfeo* at the Herodes Atticus Theatre in Athens, shortly after celebrating his fiftieth anniversary as a member of the Metropolitan Opera Company.

*Adapted by James J. Boitano, Ph.D.
from Naxos.com website, All Music.com website, and Wikipedia.com*