

Dominick Argento, 'Traditionalist' Composer of Operas, Dies at 91

Dominick Argento in his Minneapolis home after learning that he had been awarded the Pulitzer Prize for music in 1975 for his song cycle "From the Diary of Virginia Woolf."

Associated Press

By [Anthony Tommasini](#)

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[Dominick Argento](#), a Pulitzer Prize-winning composer who wrote dramatically and stylistically eclectic operas in a mostly conservative idiom that was embraced by audiences but not always by critics, died on Wednesday at his home in Minneapolis. He was 91.

His death was [announced by his publisher](#) Boosey & Hawkes.

Mr. Argento won acclaim for orchestra works, chamber pieces and incidental music for plays, but he was best known for his 12 operas, several of which have entered the repertory. His success came during decades when many composers found it challenging to reconcile contemporary musical languages with the dramatic imperatives of opera.

Mr. Argento had no timidity on that account. He said he was driven by a simple credo: "My interest is people," Mr. Argento told [Minnesota Public Radio](#) in 2002. "I am committed to working with characters, feelings, and emotions."

Still, he took chances and sometimes employed unconventional approaches in getting at the core of a story. "When I set down to work on an opera," he said in a [1979 interview](#) with The New York Times, "the style, form and structure arise out of the subject matter."

For "[Postcard From Morocco](#)" (1971), probably his most popular work, an absurdist saga in which a disparate group of people appear to be stranded at a railway station waiting for a train, Mr. Argento's model was Mozart's "The Magic Flute" — that "wonderful hodgepodge of styles," as he described it.

For "Morocco" he composed a shifting score that matched the surrealist, multileveled nature of the story (with a libretto by John Donahue), mixing ragtime, blues, American musical comedy, pastiche and even elements of more "serious," as he put, contemporary compositional techniques.

The impulse behind a starkly different opera, "The Voyage of Edgar Allan Poe" (1976), was Verdi's "Don Carlo," Mr. Argento said. "I was looking for an equivalent dark, rich subject with similar deep personalities and complex character relationships," he said.

With a libretto by Charles M. Nolte, the [opera presents Poe](#) on a nightmarish journey of self-discovery in his feverish final days.

Mr. Argento shrugged off a criticism that he heard regularly: that his music was conservative. He could counter by pointing to the consistent praise he earned for the technical skill and inventiveness of his music. But he was not interested in innovation for its own sake. He worked best by sticking to his instincts.

“Perhaps this makes me a traditionalist,” he said in the 1979 interview. “Actually, I’m not sure that the advance in opera today has to be made through a more complex — avant-garde, if you will — musical language. We’ve tried that.”

In 1958, on three days’ notice, Mr. Argento went to Minneapolis to accept a job at the University of Minnesota music department. Never intending to stay, he lived out of a suitcase for three years.

But the move proved auspicious when it dawned on him, as he explained in the 2002 radio interview, that by residing in the Twin Cities he could do exactly what he wanted, without the distractions of the politics of the New York contemporary musical world.

He taught at the university for 40 years, forming close associations with the Minnesota Opera, the Minnesota Orchestra, the St. Paul Chamber Orchestra and other institutions in the region.

Dominick Argento was born to Sicilian immigrant parents on Oct. 27, 1927, in York, Pa. As a child he took piano lessons and taught himself music theory from library books. He served two years (1945-47) as a cryptographer in the United States Army in East Africa, then earned his bachelor’s and master’s degrees in music from Peabody Conservatory in Baltimore.

In 1954 he married [Carolyn Bailey](#), a student at the conservatory and a fine singer. She would become his informal adviser and muse. She died in 2006. No immediate family members survive.

Mr. Argento earned a doctorate in composition from the Eastman School of Music in Rochester in 1957. The next year, having been awarded a Guggenheim Fellowship, he spent a fruitful period in Florence, Italy.

He was fully settled in Minnesota when the Guthrie Theater opened in Minneapolis in 1963. Mr. Argento had productive discussions about opera and theater with Tyrone Guthrie, the founder, and wrote music for several plays. The Guthrie was the site of the 1964 premiere of “The Masque of Angels,” Mr. Argento’s breakthrough opera, commissioned by the Walker Art Center in the same city through Minnesota Center Opera (which grew into the Minnesota Opera.)

Center Opera also presented the 1971 premiere of “Postcard From Morocco,” which brought Mr. Argento international attention. In 1975, his song cycle “[From the Diary of Virginia Woolf](#),” written for the British mezzo-soprano [Janet Baker](#), earned Mr. Argento the Pulitzer Prize for music. [Andrew Porter](#), The New Yorker’s music critic, reviewing a performance by Ms. Baker and the pianist [Martin Isepp](#) at Carnegie Hall in New York the next year, described it as “a beautiful, moving, and masterly work.”

Not every Argento opera met with initial success, even among admirers. “Miss Havisham’s Fire,” first performed by the New York City Opera in 1979 and

loosely based on Dickens’s “Great Expectations,” mingles past and present in a drama framed as an inquest into Miss Havisham’s death by fire.

The Times critic [Harold C. Schonberg wrote](#) that though the concept was interesting, it was hard to “work up much interest” in Mr. Argento’s “conservative” and “featureless” music. In the late 1990s Mr. Argento produced a streamlined version, which has been performed with success.

He kept composing into his late 80s, until hearing problems set in. In 2004 he won a Grammy Award for best contemporary classical composition for “[Casa Guidi](#),” recorded by [the mezzo-soprano Frederica von Stade](#) and the Minnesota Orchestra. Mr. Argento fashioned a text from letters that the poet Elizabeth Barrett Browning wrote after moving to Florence with her husband and fellow poet, Robert Browning.

Mr. Argento published “Catalogue Raisonné as Memoir: A Composer’s Life” in 2004. Each chapter is based on one of his compositions, which he likened to children that a parent molds and guides. But eventually each child “develops its own ideas” and “becomes its own master,” he wrote, adding: “My compositions, like children, have surprised me that way.”

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