

MARIO LANZA

Heaving a piano into the Philadelphia Academy of Music heaved Mario Lanza right into a top spot in the musical world -- and Hollywood.

However, being catapulted into fast company is no novelty for this young American. This has been happening almost since the day he was born in New York City, January 31. His Dad, Antonio Coccozza, a disabled veteran of World War I, is one of the most decorated heroes of that conflict. His mother, Maria, proud of "both her men," had to become the wage-earner in her struggle to keep her family happy and together.

From childhood the boy, christened Alfred Arnold Coccozza -- he took his mother's maiden name Lanza when he entered the professional world -- became intensely interested in music. One of his father's greatest pleasures was listening to his fine collection of Caruso records. These intrigued the boy as well. Night after night the two sat side by side thrilling to the magnetic voice of the great tenor. Maria, too, enjoyed the music as she busied herself about household tasks.

When Mario was still under school age, the family moved to Philadelphia where the boy entered school. Though there was no money for music lessons, occasionally there would

be enough for a new record -- records of the great symphonies, beloved Neapolitan folk songs by Caruso, as well as operatic arias sung by other Metropolitan greats such as Gigli, Melchior, and anything to feed the need for music felt by the entire family.

There was time, however, for the youngster to indulge his other love -- sports. He became one of Southern High's outstanding athletes, starring in baseball, football, boxing and weight-lifting. Following his graduation from high school he played semi-professional baseball and football, but always keeping his ear attuned to the finest in music.

Whenever there was an extra coin in the kitchen bank, it went to Mario so he could attend the Philadelphia symphonies. No work was too much for his mother if it meant her boy could study music. Nothing gave the parents a greater thrill than listening to their son sing, note for note, with the immortal Caruso. Friends of the family thrilled with them and Mario was much in demand at parties -- to "sing like Caruso."

However, there was one dissenting voice -- his grandfather. Let the rest rave about Mario's voice! He insisted Mario's muscles be put to work! Finally, he had his way. Mario secured a job moving pianos.

One of his first assignments was to deliver a piano to the Academy of Music in Philadelphia where a concert was scheduled for that evening. Lanza and the piano arrived just as Koussevitzky, the great symphony conductor, had finished a rehearsal. He was in his dressing room when he heard singing, and what singing! Half-dressed, Koussevitzky rushed out from his room to see who was making such magnificent noise. It was the piano heaver. And right then and there, Lanza's one and only job came to a quick end.

Master musician Koussevitzky recognized talent when he heard it. He arranged for the boy to join him in the Berkshires where each summer he conducts the Berkshire School and Music Festival. For several weeks the boy lived with the conductor, studying, eating, sleeping and living music. Such was Koussevitzky's faith in his protege that, with the opening of the Festival in the summer of 1942, Lanza made his professional debut singing with such musical celebrities as Christine Joynson, Mack Harrell of the Metropolitan, and Irma Gonzales, South America's greatest diva.

In the audiences were the New York critics and they were unanimous in their reviews. All agreed that "a star is born!" Some added, "Here is the greatest tenor voice since Caruso!" All, too, agreed that the boy needed training, experience and poise.

The training was assured. When he returned to Philadelphia from the Berkshires, he found "Greetings from Uncle Sam." Lanza was in the army.

In 1945 he was discharged. By then he knew that no one, not even his doughty grandfather, would insist on his giving up music as a career.

During the war years he had met a number of theatrical personalities at various shows for the G.I.'s. Among them was Irene Manning who invited Lanza to a party. There he sang, the guests becoming so enthusiastic that Miss Manning, at midnight, telephoned neighbor Walter Pidgeon to hurry over. When the actor heard Lanza sing he was as excited as the other guests and urged the young man to continue studying. Still further development was a contract with Victor Records and appearances on the Columbia Concerts program, taking Jan Peerce's place for the summer on the Celanese Hour. This was

late in 1945 and early 1946.

It was during those radio shows that Lanza met New York business man Sam Wieler, who was impressed with his voice, but also had the foresight to recognize the boy's need for additional training. As his manager, Wieler took the young singer to Enrico Rosati, the great Gigli's one-and-only teacher. Lanza became Rosati's pupil.

Wieler next arranged a number of concerts in small towns, everything with an eye to give the youth poise, a feeling of security in front of an audience, and the experience he needed.

In 1947, Lanza came to Hollywood to sing at the Bowl. His success was phenomenal. After his aria from "Andre Chenier," there was applause lasting twelve minutes.

In that audience was Ida R. Koverman of Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer Studios. She met the singer backstage, arranged a meeting at the studio for the following day, when the boy found himself before a distinguished group of men -- Louis B. Mayer, Irving Berlin, and top producers and directors. First, Lanza played a number of his own records -- home-made ones with which he'd delighted his family and friends -- and then he sang -- an aria from "La Boheme" and Victor Herbert's "Thine Alone."

Next, he signed a contract, a long-term one which allows him six months each year for concerts and opera.

More study, more concerts, more study, more concerts, followed. Then came chances to sing with Philadelphia and the Boston Symphony orchestras. In 1948 he made his operatic debut singing "Madame Butterfly" with the New Orleans Opera Association and following a second Hollywood Bowl appearance in 1948, he made his screen debut in "That Midnight Kiss" co-starring with Kathryn Grayson and Ethel Barrymore.

And his first role? A piano mover!

"You see," he grins, "grandfather was right. I'm just a piano mover at heart."

But he is definitely far more than that. Immediately after his first film, he left Hollywood for an extensive year of concerts, each more successful than its predecessor. Back to Hollywood for his second film, "The Toast of New Orleans," Lanza was again co-starred with Miss Grayson.

Now his lifelong dream has come true -- he's starring in "The Great Caruso," heading the greatest array of singing talent ever assembled on a Hollywood sound stage. Following his 1950 concert tour, Lanza will co-star in a picture with Ezio Pinza.

However, his screen break and music highlights aren't the only excitement in the life of the five feet, eleven-and-one-fourth inches, 180-pound, dark-eyed singer. During the war, he met pretty Betty Hicks, sister of one of his Army pals. They were married April 13, 1945, and now are the proud parents of two daughters, Colleen, born December 9, 1948, and Elissa, born December 3, 1950. Today, the Lanzas live in a charming home in Beverly Hills and right down the street are Mamma and Papa Coccozza.

STATISTICS

Born Alfred Arnold Coccozza, New York City, January 31, son of Antonio and Maria Coccozza. Educated, grade schools, Southern High, South Philadelphia. Married Betty Hicks, April 13, 1945, in Beverly Hills, California. Two daughters, Colleen, born December 9, 1948 and Elissa, born December 3, 1950. Height, five feet, eleven-and-one-fourth inches. Weight, 180 pounds. Hair, dark brown. Eyes, black. Occupation, singer.

1942: Sang at Berkshire (Mass.) Music Festival;
1945-46, on the air (Celanese Hour), also Victor Records discing, also numerous concerts; 1947, concerts, soloist also with Boston

Lanza...6

and Philadelphia Symphony orchestras, soloist at Hollywood Bowl concert; 1948, grand opera debut, "Madame Butterfly," New Orleans; then second Hollywood Bowl Concert.

SCREEN: Film debut in "That Midnight Kiss" (1949),
1950
"The Toast of New Orleans," "The Great Caruso," (1950).

--1451jmc--



Tecnológico
de Monterrey