Collections and collectibles

The Librarian and the Tenor

A tale of passion, Pavarotti and poultry.

By Angela Fox

Tens of thousands of items are housed in the Special Collections Department of Vanderbilt's Heard Library. The collections run the gamut from astronomy, archaeology and antebellum history to women's issues and World War II. There are collections that contain the musings and memorabilia of the famous and the obscure. There are rare manuscripts, books, films, photographs, sound recordings, posters, letters and more.

As diverse as they may be, all the collections have one thing in common: Each reflects the passion of its collector, whether for history, art, literature or science. Among them all, however, the Clarise DeQuasie Luciano Pavarotti Collection may be the most passionate yet. DeQuasie, you see, was a librarian at the Jean and Alexander Heard Library for 30 years, and when she died in 2001, she bequeathed to Vanderbilt boxes and boxes of material charting her personal relationship with Luciano Pavarotti, the most famous tenor of the 20th century.

Like any great opera, the story of DeQuasie and Pavarotti includes a heroine of humble origins and a kingly hero who recognizes in her a kindred spirit. The tale also includes fresh eggs and a flock of beloved chickens, but we'll get to that in a moment.

According to longtime co-worker and friend Don Jones, DeQuasie was by no means an opera buff, nor did she come from a background steeped in classical music. "Clarise grew up on a farm in West Virginia—I mean, she actually was a coal miner's daughter," recalls Jones, a catalog librarian at the Heard Library. "She first became enamored of Pavarotti in 1979 when she changed the TV channel from a presidential address and saw the singer on PBS." That chance encounter led to a 22-year passion for Pavarotti that would last until DeQuasie's death at age 63 of multi-system atrophy.


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Dear Clarise,

It is always a pleasure to hear from you, and I appreciate your taking the time to write whether I'm here or abroad. Yes, I did get your letter at Covent Garden, andyour Valentine and my father received your card. Also, your Christmas wishes and goodies,were enjoyed.

My father is back in Italy and is doing extremely well.

Hope all is well with you. I enjoyed meeting you in Sarasota, and hope to see you again.

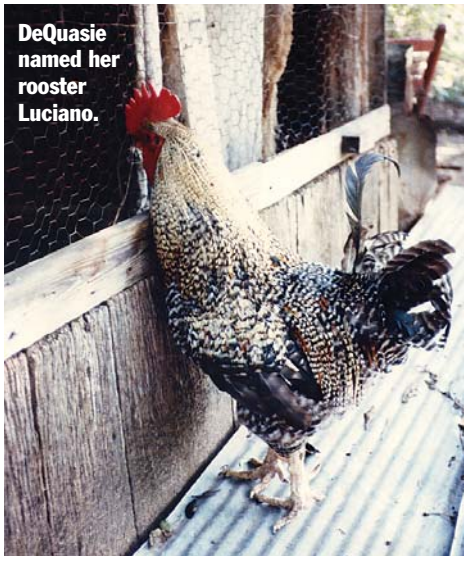
Tanti cari saluti,

Luciano Pavarotti 87

Letters and memorabilia reveal Pavarotti and DeQuasie's warm relationship.

Unlike other ardent fans of Pavarotti, however, DeQuasie developed a warm, personal relationship with her hero that is revealed in letters to her from the tenor and in memorabilia collected by DeQuasie from every concert she attended and every rehearsal and private party to which she was invited by Pavarotti himself. "She traveled all over the country to his concerts, and he always had her come backstage and invited her to rehearsals," Jones says. "She went to Tavern on the Green in New York City after one concert to dine with him and other guests including Joan Kennedy and Richard Thomas."

So, what was it about a librarian from the mountains of West Virginia that resonated with an opera superstar from Italy? By all accounts from her colleagues and friends at Vanderbilt, DeQuasie was a unique individual who, though outwardly quiet and even shy, connected with others through a sense of humor and a love of life's simple pleasures—qualities that are also often attributed to Pavarotti. "Clarise was the most unusual person I've ever known," agrees Frank P. Grisham, retired director of the Jean and Alexander Heard Library, who co-officiated with Will Campbell (a close friend and neighbor of DeQuasie) at the memorial service and celebration of the librarian's life. "I hired her as a cataloger for the Divinity Library, and we became fast friends. She didn't have roots in family and had to make it in this world on her own. It was really some-



DeQuasie named her rooster Luciano.

thing to see how this young lady moved from a limited background to create for herself her own world."

Born in 1938, DeQuasie graduated cum laude from Morris Harvey College in Charleston, W.Va., in 1961. She worked briefly as a newspaper reporter in her home state and then came to Nashville in 1963 to attend Vanderbilt University Divinity School on scholarship. While at the Divinity School, she was editor of the school publication *Prospectus* and received the J.D. Owen Prize in Old Testament. She later switched her career focus and earned a master of library science degree from George Peabody College for Teachers in 1966. She worked in the Vanderbilt library system from 1966 to 1996.

"I got to know her interests through the years—and there were many besides Pavarotti, including her love of animals," Grisham continues. It was, in fact, the librarian's flock of chickens that sealed her friendship with the great Italian tenor. DeQuasie lived on a farm east of Nashville in Mount Juliet and, after discovering Pavarotti, named her rooster Luciano and all of the hens Clarise. Pavarotti, who has a well-known appreciation for women, was amused and flattered when he learned of his fan's dedication. DeQuasie created humorous signs that caught his attention at concerts, sent fresh eggs to him backstage, and regularly wrote him letters—letters to which he, or his personal secretary, regularly responded.

In one letter on Hotel Navarro stationery from New York, dated 1980, Pavarotti addresses her as "Dear Clarise," thanks her warmly for the "Christmas wishes and goodies," and closes by saying, "I enjoyed meeting you in Sarasota and hope to see you again" before signing his name with a flourish. In another letter, his secretary and protégé, the opera singer Madelyn Renee Monti, assures DeQuasie that "your letters have brought many a smile" to Pavarotti and thanks her for the Christmas ornament DeQuasie made and sent to her. DeQuasie also became friends with Adua Pavarotti, the tenor's first wife, and is mentioned in her memoir, *Life with Luciano* (1991, Rizzoli).

These letters, along with signed notes and autographed photos of Pavarotti and DeQuasie together, are part of the Vanderbilt collection. Other items in the collection include scrapbooks, t-shirts, ticket stubs, buttons, concert posters, programs, newspaper articles, recordings of Pavarotti's television and radio performances, and one of the singer's famous oversized handkerchiefs used during his concerts.

When DeQuasie's health began a precipitous decline, she went to live in McKendree Village Retirement Community, and in February 2000 she attended her final Pavarotti concert at the Gaylord Entertainment Center in Nashville. "McKendree provided a van so she could go in her wheelchair, along with a nurse to accompany her," says Dorothy Parks Evins, former director of the Divinity Library and DeQuasie's closest friend. Evins and several other friends pitched in and bought DeQuasie a black velvet dress, did her makeup and her hair, and then attended the concert with her.

Anne Richardson Womack, associate director of the Divinity Library, recalls the highlight of the evening. "I had corresponded with Herbert Breslin [Pavarotti's longtime manager and author of *The King and I: The Uncensored Tale*

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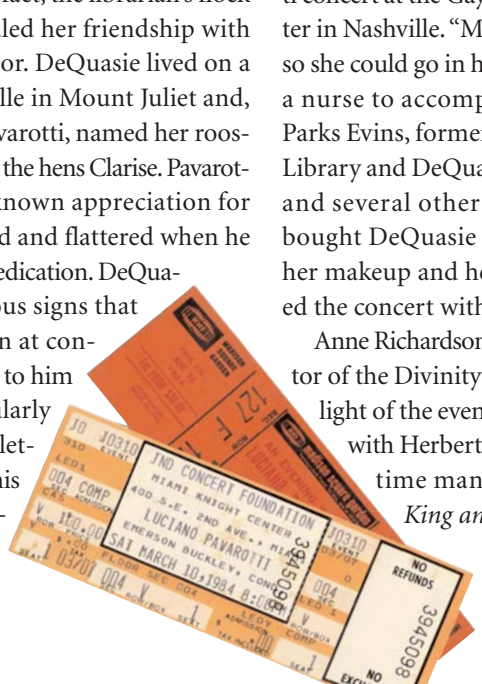

The Night I Fell in Love

BY CLARISE DEQUASIE, *MLS'66*

Clarise DeQuasie, MLS'66, was known among her friends and co-workers as a talented writer with a self-deprecating wit not unlike that of Dorothy Parker. Among the items included in the Clarise DeQuasie Luciano Pavarotti Collection is a rough draft of a talk DeQuasie once gave about her relationship with the Italian tenor. The following edited excerpt describes the time the librarian first heard Pavarotti sing.

I owe it all to the 39th president of the United States. He didn't do much else for me while he was in office, but I'll always be grateful to Jimmy Carter for introducing me to Luciano Pavarotti.

It was one of those days two or three years ago. I was caught in rush-hour traffic; the elevator got stuck between floors; a heel came off my boot; my lunch sat at home on the kitchen counter while I ate peanut-butter crackers out of a vending machine; I got an obscene phone call, and the party on the other end hung up. And all this before noon. All I wanted to do was go home, prop up my feet, pop the cork on a bottle of wine and not even bother with a glass. And watch something inane on TV. Then my life was changed in the twinkling of a picture tube.

President Carter was on all three commercial stations. Now, I consider myself a good American. I stand up for the "Star-Spangled Banner"; I could probably remember the capitals of maybe 27 states; I cheat on my income taxes just like everyone else. So I watched for a while. Then it occurred to me that unless the CIA had my television set bugged, no one would know if I had watched the president or not, so I flipped over to the local public television station.

There was this woman singing. Now, that's not what my mother would have called it. I came from so far back in the hills of West Virginia that we didn't even get the "Grand Ole Opry" on the radio until Tuesday morning. But the announcer identified this woman as Joan Sutherland. I knew she was supposed to be good because I had a roommate once who told me so. I figured it would not hurt me to get a little culture.

Well, the more she sang, the more I drank. And the more I drank, the better she sounded. And I thought, "Well, this at least is not as bad as the music appreciation course I took in college." (We'd had to sit through something called *Carmen*. All I could identify with was the bull.)

After a while this large white handkerchief came out on stage with this gorgeous hunk of man tied to it. The audience was on its feet cheering. I removed my hand from the dial. And then he opened his mouth. I had never heard such sounds coming out of the mouth of a human being; I thought the wine had gone to my ears.

The next day I went to work proclaiming to everyone in sight that I was in love with Luciano Pavarotti.

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of Luciano Pavarotti's Rise to Fame, 2004, Doubleday]," Womack says. "He had arranged for tickets and for Clarise to have a special pass that allowed us into Pavarotti's suite backstage." There, for the better part of an hour, the great singer sat and talked with DeQuasie, holding her hand and murmuring terms of endearment. "He was really a regal presence, attended by his staff. Clarise was his only guest, yet she felt perfectly natural with him," recalls Womack. "In fact, Pavarotti said words to the effect that Clarise was the most genuine person he knew, that she was her own person, with no pretenses, and there was no one else like her."

A little over a year later, DeQuasie died. She donated her body to medical research and later, according to her wishes, her ashes were sprinkled in the yard of Evins' home at McKendree Village. Her collection of Pavarotti memorabilia now sits in 22 boxes in the Library Annex, waiting to be cataloged. "This is the hardest kind of collection to process because you have to go through each box and all the items individually," says Kathleen Smith, associate university archivist. "It's a treasure waiting to be mined—we just don't have the resources to process it yet."

When it is, the tale of the Vanderbilt librarian and the Italian tenor will provide a happy ending for anyone researching opera, Pavarotti, or that memorable time in the late 20th century when an opera singer was more popular than most rock stars. And, if it is true that collections are as much about the collector as they are about the items collected, the Clarise DeQuasie Luciano Pavarotti Collection will also shed light on another life and career—one perhaps not as illustrious as Pavarotti's, but one as richly enjoyed and generously shared with others in its own quiet way.

Angela Fox writes feature articles about the arts and travel from her Nashville home.

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gious educators and lay people about the relationship between Judaism and Christianity. During the stint of more than two weeks, she stayed in a Maryknoll convent in Manila. (She went as representative of the Catholic Biblical Association of America.) Evidently, she bonded with her audiences.

"At the end of her last lecture, instead of the usual words of gratitude, I decided to ask the audience to sing the Filipino liturgical song 'Hindi Kita Malilimutan,'" says Victor R. Salanga, president of the Catholic Biblical Association of the Philippines. "As soon as the audience began singing, A.-J. removed her shoes, sat comfortably on the stage floor and listened. At the song's end, I think there were tears in her eyes. I also sensed the same tears in the audience's. It was, I think, the best image of a conversation between Jews, whom A.-J. represented, and Catholics."

Lately, she has added a new venue to her long list of appearances—prison. For the first time, in fall 2005, she taught her seminar on the Gospel of Matthew at Riverbend Maximum Security Institution, a Tennessee state prison in Nashville. A dozen divinity students make the weekly drive there, where they are joined by nine inmates.

She calls the experimental Riverbend class a rewarding experience.

"It's very helpful for the divinity students who are studying to be ministers to work pastorally with people who have a take on, say, forgiveness, or hope, or community that is extremely different from those of the rest of us, and that's what's happening here," she says.

Harmon Wray, a Divinity School adjunct professor who co-teaches the Riverbend course with Levine, says she treats the inmates with sensitivity and respect.

"She is with them the way she is with the divinity students," says Wray, a longtime activist in prison and justice issues. "She looks for ways to make the material relevant, and she affirms what kernel of creativity and truth she finds among the students, and she pushes for more."

An Orthodox synagogue member teaching Jesus at a mostly Christian theological school sounds unlikely neither to Vanderbilt nor to Levine.

"She has a real gift," says James Hudnut-Beumler, dean of the Divinity School, "for working with people who want to be Christian ministers, especially around two topics—the issue of what the gospels really say, and on the relationship between Judaism and Christianity. It's a very valuable gift to bring to Vanderbilt, given Vanderbilt's longstanding commitment to the validity of both religious traditions."

Studying the New Testament, Levine says, "makes me a better Jew."

"It recovers a part of my history that the synagogue didn't keep," she says. "It contains some very good Jewish parables. And I find the New Testament extremely informative about the social freedoms Jewish women had at the time. They owned their own homes, they traveled freely. They had use of their own funds. They worshiped in synagogues and the Jerusalem temple.

"And Jesus is a quite splendid Jewish teacher. I find much of what he says about the kingdom of God compelling. What would society look like if people actually took care of each other? If we did forgive debts? If we recognized that we are all children of God?

"I just don't worship the messenger."

Levine has been on the case—pondering the complicated co-existence of Judaism and Christianity—since her girlhood days in New England. Growing up outside New Bedford, Mass., she was raised in a Jewish household in a Portuguese Catholic neighborhood. Her friends were Catholic, and she relished the invitations to the many feast-day celebrations, tree trimmings and Easter egg hunts.

The surrounding Catholicism could also occasion a young Jewish girl's wild surmises about the meaning of it all. In her introduction to *A Feminist Companion to Mariology*, Levine recounts some early musings about another Jewish girl, Mary the mother of Jesus.

"The Virgin Mary made me nervous. When I was a child growing up in a predominantly Roman Catholic town in Massachusetts, my friends informed me that Jesus would return the same way he had come before—that is, a Jewish virgin would be his mother. Being the only Jewish virgin in the