



For Immediate Release

Glynn Ross, Founding Director of Seattle Opera, Dies at Age 90

Most Well Known for Establishing *Ring* Tradition in America



Seattle—Glynn Ross, Seattle Opera’s first general director, died Thursday, July 21, 2005, in Tucson, Arizona, of complications resulting from a stroke. He was 90 years old.

Able to operate on a shoestring, Ross was well known for his audacious undertakings in the world of opera. He presented a new rock opera *Tommy*, featuring Bette Midler, by the WHO; the world premiere of Carlisle Floyd’s opera *Of Mice and Men*; the world premiere of Pasatieri’s opera *Black Widow*; and a new production of Wagner’s mammoth four-opera *Ring des Nibelungen*—shocking and impressing an opera world that couldn’t believe a regional company in the United States, much less in Seattle, could undertake and succeed in presenting the most challenging work in all opera.

The impact Ross had on the arts community, the Seattle community at large, and the rise in popularity of opera throughout the United States was evident early on in his administration (which extended from 1964 to 1983) and recognized by community leaders, as indicated by remarks made by F.A. LeSourd (President of Seattle Opera from 1965 to 1968) in a speech at the Seattle Real Estate Board’s First Citizen Dinner, March 1, 1972:

“...Glynn Ross is first citizen of Seattle. Among other things, in our troubled economic times he has done the top job of showing the world that the lights are still on in this city....”

(over)

At a time when the national impression of Seattle was unemployment and breadlines, we started getting headlines around the country like “Out in Seattle, Opera Lives” in the *New York Times*, “Opera flourishing in Seattle on the Move” in the *Los Angeles Times* ...[and] “It’s like man, wow! Seattle Opera House sells it like it is” in the *Wall Street Journal*....

It was obvious that the lights weren’t out in Seattle. You can’t build the most dynamic opera company in the world on breadlines.”

That impact is still felt today, as Seattle Opera’s Speight Jenkins explains:

“Glynn Ross was a giant in American opera. He founded our company and barely ten years later started our tradition of the *Ring* cycle when few knew that Seattle had an opera company or could possibly mount the cycle. He was one of the founders of OPERA America, the group of American opera companies that has vast influence today not only in America but in the whole world of opera. After his years in Seattle, during which he established an opera tradition in the Northwest, he had a distinguished career in Arizona in which he did what he did here: started in a place with very little opera background, made opera important, and even, again, mounted a *Ring*. His abilities as a spokesman and salesman for opera cannot be exaggerated. We are all grateful for him and for what he has done for our art form.”

Ross and his wife Gio, residents of both Tucson and Seattle, had tickets for this summer’s *Ring* at Seattle Opera, which opens August 7. Every summer Seattle Opera has presented a *Ring*, Gio and Glynn Ross have been there, and they had planned to be at the opening cycle of this year’s presentation. Eternal *Ring* fans, they bought their tickets early (they didn’t want to accept comps) for the 2005 *Ring* “to be sure we would have good seats.”



Glynn Ross

Born in 1914 in Omaha, Nebraska, Glynn Ross began his professional opera career in 1940 as a director when he staged Gounod’s *Faust* at the Los Angeles Philharmonic Auditorium. The following year, he founded an Opera Department at the New England Conservatory, which he left to join the U.S. Army during World War II. He was assigned to Naples, Italy, where he remained after the war as stage director at the Teatro San Carlo, the first American to direct in a major Italian opera house. While in Naples, he met and married Gio (Angelamaria) Solimene.

Returning to the United States in 1948, Ross staged opera at the Los Angeles Opera Theater (1948-60), the San Francisco Opera (1948, 1950-60), Fort Worth Opera (1948-56), New Orleans Opera Association (1949-62), Northwest

Grand Opera Association in Seattle (1953-55), and the Opera Company of Philadelphia (1960-62). He was a working observer at the Wagner Festival in Bayreuth, Germany, in 1953 and 1954.

Ross was chosen as the first general director of Seattle Opera, which was established in 1963. While general director at Seattle Opera, he founded the Pacific Northwest Ballet in 1972, which was administered by the Opera for its first four years. In 1970, Ross was the organizing force for launching OPERA America, the professional organization for American opera companies.

In 1975, Ross won international acclaim when Seattle Opera became the first company in the United States to produce Wagner's *Ring* cycle in German and English and in the way the composer intended (all four operas in sequence within a week in a "festival" setting). The *Ring* was such a success that it led to annual summer productions of the cycle from 1975 until 1984 and established a tradition at Seattle Opera of producing Wagner's operas that has continued to this day. "The *Ring*," wrote *Seattle Post-Intelligencer* editor Louis Guzzo in 1983, "has given the Seattle area a dimension in the arts and in the quality of life that is distinctive. Ross has proved the hard way through the remarkable marriage of a *Ring* with an Emerald City that Seattle is a place where dreams do come true."

While in Seattle, Ross became known as the P.T. Barnum of opera, due to his unbridled eagerness to increase the public's awareness of opera. He paraded through the streets arm in arm with a Valkyrie and a giant, and his staff came up with bumper stickers that would become marketing history: one read "Get ahead with *Salome*," another, plastered on concrete trucks all round town, "Get Mixed Up With Opera."

In 1983, Ross became general director of Arizona Opera. Though the company was deep in debt upon his arrival, it was revitalized within a year. Ross erased the debt and extended the Opera's seasons in both Tucson and Phoenix. Ross retired as general director of Arizona Opera in 1998, but not before producing one more *Ring*, which was presented in Flagstaff. That same year, Ross was honored in Seattle for his contributions to the arts by ArtsFund (formerly Corporate Council for the Arts).

In 2003, following the opening of McCaw Hall, Ross was honored again and a plaque was mounted in the first-tier lobby overlook that reads: "In honor of Glynn Ross, Founding General Director, whose vision forever links Seattle Opera with Wagner's *Ring*."

Ross is survived by his wife Gio (Angelamaria Ross, of Tucson and Bellevue); by his four children: Stephanie Rogers, of San Francisco, Claudia Ross-Kuhn of Seattle, Melanie Ross of Bellevue, and Tony Ross of Des Moines, Iowa; by seven grandchildren; and by his nephew Roger Aus of Omaha, Nebraska. (Daughter Melanie Ross is company manager of Seattle Opera.)

The family requests donations to Seattle Opera's Wagner Reserve Fund or Arizona Opera in lieu of flowers.

Information about services will be released soon.

Founded in 1963, Seattle Opera has developed into one of the leading opera companies in the United States. The company, which currently presents five productions a year, is recognized internationally for its theatrically compelling and musically accomplished performances. Seattle Opera's summer presentations, particularly of Wagner's *Ring des Nibelungen*, have been acclaimed often and widely as the Pacific Northwest's premier cultural events.

Seattle Opera is grateful to the following organizations for their steadfast major institutional support: ArtsFund, Bank of America, The Boeing Company, Classical KING FM 98.1, Charles E. Stuart Charitable Foundation, The James and Sherry Raisbeck Singers' Endowment, 4Culture, Kreielsheimer Foundation, Wallace Foundation, Microsoft Corporation, National Endowment for the Arts, Nesholm Family Foundation, PONCHO, City Office of Arts & Cultural Affairs, Seattle Opera Guild, Sherman Clay Pianos, and Washington State Arts Commission. Seattle Opera is a participant in the Seattle Arts Stabilization Project, a joint venture of the Seattle Arts Stabilization Committee and the National Arts Stabilization Fund. TR 7/21/05

Photo captions:

1: Seattle Opera Founding Director Glynn Ross (center) with Valkyrie Jeanne Cook and Fafner the Giant Noel Mangin in Seattle, 1978 (Dale Wittner photo).

2: Glynn Ross (courtesy of Seattle Opera).