

IN MEMORIAM

FIORA D'ITALIA ROSA CONTINO

Distinguished Conductor Fiora Contino, who served on the faculty of the Butler School of Music at The University of Texas at Austin during the 1980s (including a year as Department Chair), died on March 5, 2018, in Carmel, Indiana. She was ninety-two years of age and was survived by four children, nine grandchildren, and fourteen great-grandchildren.

Fiora d'Italia Rosa Corradetti Contino, aptly named "flower of Italy" by her father, came from a highly musical family. Ferruccio Corradetti was a leading baritone at La Scala in Milan when he left Italy after Mussolini's fascist regime took over the country. Ferruccio's half-sister, Iris Adami Corradetti, a soprano, was one of the leading Madama Butterflies in Italy during the 1930s. Daughter Fiora, who was educated in the United States and Europe, studied with the famed Nadia Boulanger in Paris in the 1950s before completing her doctorate at Indiana University. She then joined the faculty there and became Principal Conductor and Chair of the Choral Department, while also running the choral program at the Aspen Music Festival during the summer.

While her father was performing in New York, Fiora was born on Long Island on June 17, 1915. The family settled there and she attended Long Beach High School and met the conductor Arturo Toscanini (who was a friend of her father's). Toscanini's letter of recommendation helped Fiora obtain a scholarship to Oberlin College in Ohio, where she earned her first degree in piano performance. She married a fellow student there named Joseph Contino with whom her four children were conceived; the marriage ended in divorce. For the last several decades of her life, she lived with Dr. Jeraldine C. Baumgartner, who died in 2012.

As one of the pioneering female conductors in the U.S., Fiora led performances at the Chicago Opera Theater, the Anchorage Opera, and the San Francisco Opera; for two decades she was Artistic Director of Opera Illinois in Peoria, retiring in 2005. Her performance of Puccini's *Madama Butterfly* with the Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra received this accolade from the *Philadelphia Evening Bulletin*: "She held everything together with a baton that was sharp and in clear control of a magnificently coordinated performance." Fiora frequently remarked that the members of most orchestras were not used to being led by a woman, and her no-nonsense approach to the podium resulted in more than a few standoffs during rehearsals. While rehearsing *La Traviata* with the Pittsburgh Symphony, the orchestra balked at having to rehearse a standard work they had performed many times. "They were less than thrilled being held captive to 'some unknown woman,'" she told a later biographer. In *Wisdom, Wit, and Will: Women Choral Conductors on Their Art* (2009), Fiora remarked, "I found that a woman rather sounds like a kindergarten teacher when saying 'I don't like this.' I think that has to do with gender, because a man sounds different when he complains about something."

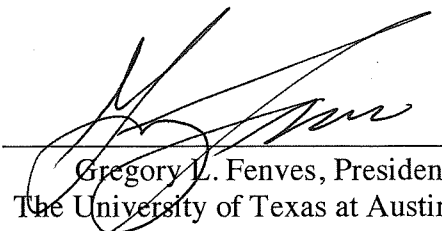
Also a noted pedagogue, Fiora was on the faculties of Indiana University, Smith College, Mount Holyoke College, Hillsdale College in Michigan, and the Peabody Institute in Baltimore, in addition to her work at The University of Texas at Austin. She led opera performances at UT Austin for several years and also founded the Texas Bach Aria Group, which toured the state offering historically accurate performances of Baroque masterworks. A member of that group, Professor Virginia DuPuy (now Professor of Voice at the Meadows School of the Arts at Southern Methodist University in Dallas) writes:

Personally, Fiora was a teacher unlike any other in my experience. She invested in each of us individually and played to our strengths. Fiora, rather than training me to sing a piece, educated me as to how to approach the learning of music. She gave her students many opportunities as she respected our talent and shared her passion, which was not only inspiring but contagious!

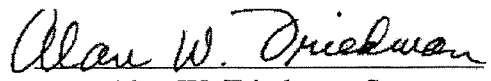
Oboist and retired physician Fred Fox, also a founding member of the Texas Bach Aria Group, says this about his experiences with her:

Fiora Contino was my musical mother...she taught me a great deal about Bach, music, and life. She said there were two kinds of teachers: 1) those who guided and fostered their students, supported them emotionally and professionally, and helped advance their personal lives and launch or advance their professional careers, and 2) those who ate their students. Of course, Fiora was the exemplary loving teacher to her students. My gratitude to her for her love and inspiration will remain with me the rest of my years.

After leaving Texas, Fiora maintained a home in Indiana and a studio in New York City, where she continued to teach and work as a vocal coach. She defined opera as “an art form which is a magnificent attempt at combining many, many disciplines.” Conducting, she said, is “like being an enabler for other people to create the music.”



Gregory L. Fenves, President
The University of Texas at Austin



Alan W. Friedman, Secretary
The General Faculty

This memorial resolution was prepared by a special committee consisting of Professors Dan Welcher (Chair) and Darlene Wiley.