

Opera as Politics

The Troubled History of San Francisco's War Memorial Opera House

ABSTRACT This article describes the troubled, politically fraught path to the realization of San Francisco's War Memorial Opera House, the first municipally owned operatic performance venue in the nation. Although envisioned prior to the 1906 earthquake (in which the two most important opera houses in the city were destroyed), the realization of an innovative concept in which the people of the city would found and maintain an opera house took a quarter century to materialize. Supporters of the idea ascribed to the common sentiment of the time that classical music had an "elevating" and "ennobling" potential to "uplift" the poor and create a more responsible citizenry, but opera's historic association with wealth and elitism counteracted these arguments and blocked progress on the building until at last, in the 1920s, San Franciscans raised \$2 million in direct contributions and voted for a \$4 million bond issue. **KEYWORDS:** San Francisco Opera, War Memorial Opera House

SAN FRANCISCO'S War Memorial Opera House, the first municipally owned operatic performance venue in the United States, opened with great fanfare in October 1932. The 3,200-seat hall continues to the present day to provide a home for the San Francisco Opera and the San Francisco Ballet and, until the erection of the Louise M. Davies Symphony Hall in 1980, also served as the venue for the San Francisco Symphony. The path to the building's realization, however, was torturous, obstructed by roadblocks, attacked with vituperative rhetoric, and derailed by political maneuvering over the course of more than two decades. In essence, this auditorium was a replacement for a 4,000-seat hall that was destroyed in the fires following the 1906 earthquake. Supporters of a new performance space began to mobilize soon after the disaster, but were stymied over and over again by opera's associations with big money and social selectivity. In the end, adherents only succeeded by forging an unlikely, and ultimately troubled, partnership with World War I veterans' organizations, an alliance that still presents challenges to the opera house's administration today. This article is the story of War Memorial's troubled history.

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SAN FRANCISCO, CITY OF OPERA LOVERS

San Francisco was an opera town almost from the time of its founding. The city's first production took place in 1851, only three years after gold was discovered in the hills near Sacramento.¹ During the next half century, touring opera companies flocked to San Francisco and big stars, including Adelina Patti—perhaps the most renowned vocalist of the entire nineteenth century—sang for sold-out houses packed with hysterical fans.² San Francisco's opera craze was largely fueled by two sizable local ethnic communities: the Italians and the Germans. Italy, of course, was the birthplace of opera in the seventeenth century and San Francisco's large Italian population cultivated and promoted its illustrious artistic heritage by supporting the art through sponsorship and patronage. The Germans, for their part, took pride in their formative historical role in the development of symphonic music; a number of German conductors founded short-lived orchestras and presented concerts and operas in San Francisco during the city's first half century.

By the beginning of the twentieth century, San Francisco had proven to be nothing short of an operatic gold mine. Among the most eminent visiting companies in this period was New York's Metropolitan Opera Company (the "Met"). First under Maurice Grau and then under Heinrich Conried, the Met included San Francisco on four national tours from 1900 to 1906. (See Table 1.)

San Francisco's seemingly insatiable thirst for opera made the Met's residencies extremely lucrative. Indeed, the company stayed in the city far longer than on any other stop of their annual tours. For example, in 1901, the company's thirty-performance run was six times longer than that in the next most popular city. (See Table 2.) The gross income for the Met's San Francisco stay that year was nearly \$180,000, or about \$6,000 per performance, equivalent to about \$140,000 in 2015.³

The various touring opera companies in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries performed primarily in two venues—the Tivoli and the Grand. The thousand-seat Tivoli had opened first as a beer garden and then, in 1879, as an opera house. It catered primarily to San Francisco's Italian population both in terms of its audience and its casts. The Tivoli's managers typically imported singers directly from Italy and presented a variety of operatic entertainments, including light operettas, programs of opera scenes and arias, and full-scale productions of individual works. Patrons came to the Tivoli for the art itself rather than to participate in a social spectacle.

In December 1903, the Tivoli opened a new building only a few blocks from the much larger Grand Opera House. The Grand, which seated close to four thousand, hosted large traveling companies such as the Met, and attracted an ethnically and economically diverse audience, from the "common folk" who crowded into the galleries to the social elite, who

Table 1 • The Metropolitan Opera's San Francisco Residencies (1900–1906)

1900: Nov 12–Dec 2	24 performances
1901: Nov 11–Dec 6	30 performances
1905: Apr 6–Apr 15	13 performances
1906: Apr 16–Apr 17	15 performances scheduled (interrupted by the earthquake)

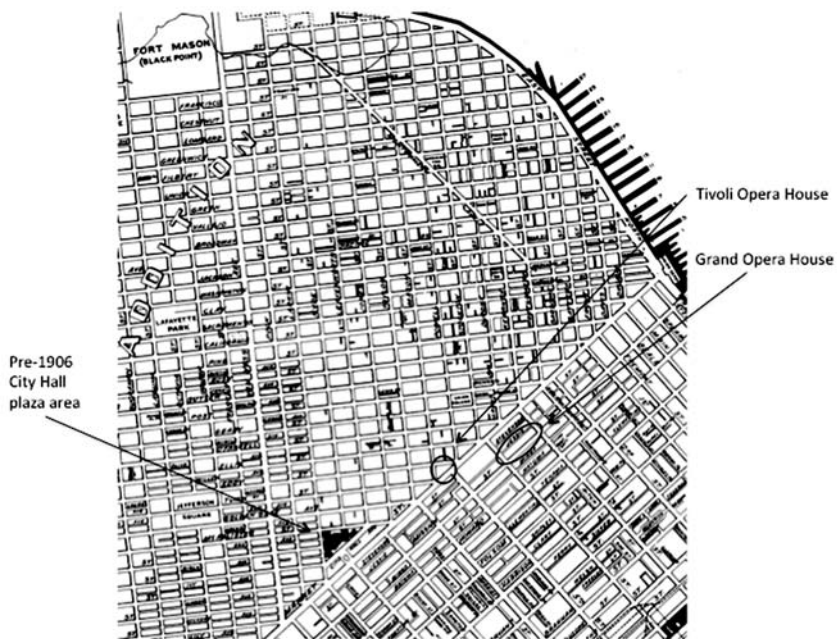
Table 2 • The Metropolitan Opera's 1901 National Tour (October 7–December 21)

City	No. of performances
Albany	1
Montreal	4
Toronto	4
Rochester	2
Syracuse	1
Buffalo	5
Louisville	3
Nashville	2
Memphis	3
Atlanta	3
Birmingham	1
New Orleans	5
Houston	1
San Antonio	1
Los Angeles	3
San Francisco	30
Kansas City	3
St. Louis	4
Indianapolis	1
Cincinnati	5
Cleveland	3

used the opera performances as an occasion to flaunt the latest fashions from Paris. Newspaper accounts in San Francisco (as in many other cities) described in some detail the gowns of the women and presented caricatures of some of the city's wealthy men.

Even in these early years, tension between the music lovers and the fashion lovers was palpable. Operatic impresarios such as James Henry Mapleson shamelessly catered to the latter. Mapleson's comments about his 1884 tour, in which he brought Adelina Patti and Etelka Gerster to San Francisco, centered almost exclusively on the glamor: "The Grand opera-house presented a spectacle of magnificence which I may say without exaggeration can never have been surpassed in any city. The auditorium was quite dazzling with a bewildering mass of laces, jewels, and fair faces . . . Outside in the street . . . the broad steps of the church opposite were occupied by persons anxious to catch a glimpse of the toilettes of the ladies as they sprang out of the carriages into the vestibule."⁴

Even at the Metropolitan Opera performances, those wishing to hear the opening scenes of the performance often had to catch what they could "above the clatter and bustle of seating the tardy ones."⁵ It was typically well into the first act before silence prevailed. In this regard, however, San Francisco differed little from New York City. Conductor Alfred Hertz (who made his U.S. debut with the Metropolitan Opera and later became the conductor of the San Francisco Symphony) recalled that at his first performance at the Met in 1902 his heart sank as he entered the pit. "Most of the boxes were empty! I had yet to learn," he wrote, "that . . . these good people rarely arrived before the end of the first act, and generally left during the last."⁶



1909 map of the downtown area of San Francisco, showing the street configuration prior to reconstruction, annotated with the locations of the Tivoli and Grand Opera Houses in relation to the old City Hall plaza as they existed before the 1906 quake and fire.

Map collection, University of California, Santa Cruz



Caricature from the *San Francisco Examiner*, April 17, 1906, highlighting opera's traditional appeal to the rich. The caricature accompanied reviews of the Metropolitan Opera's first performance in San Francisco on its projected 1906 tour. Karl Goldmark's *Die Königin von Saba* opened the Met's season two days before the disastrous earthquake and fire that put an end to the company's projected fifteen-performance run.



Remains of the Grand Opera House at Third and Mission Streets, destroyed by the fires following the 1906 earthquake.

Courtesy, California Historical Society

Both the Tivoli and the Grand Opera House burned to the ground in the fires that consumed 4.7 square miles of San Francisco after the 1906 earthquake. The Tivoli had been operating successfully out of its third building, which had been open for only a little over two years. But in its short life, this venue had hosted the city's most important operatic triumph—the U.S. debut of soprano Luisa Tetrazzini. William “Doc” Leahy, the Tivoli's manager, and Ettore Patrizi, the editor of the city's main Italian newspaper, had discovered Tetrazzini and her hundred-person troupe on an ill-fated visit to Mexico and brought them lock, stock, and barrel to San Francisco. Her first performance, on January 11, 1905, in Giuseppe Verdi's *Rigoletto* created a sensation and launched her international career.⁷

By 1913, the Tivoli had reopened with great flourish in its fourth building. The inaugural performance was given by the Chicago-Philadelphia Grand Opera and opening night featured none other than Tetrazzini, again singing *Rigoletto*. At two thousand seats, the fourth Tivoli showed promise of once again attracting the brilliant touring opera companies of old, but the management simply could not make financial ends meet. Only one year later, the theater was bought by the Turner and Dahnken Circuit and made into “the finest motion picture house in America.”⁸

The Grand, on the other hand, had actually been too large to be profitable. Except for a few special events, like extended Met tours, the huge theater could not fill up and did not become financially solvent until manager Walter Morosco started mounting melodramas at popular prices.

An opera theater that could both accommodate a large company and make money had, in fact, been proposed about a month before the quake by a group of local businessmen allied with politicians and influential men statewide. At the core of the group were four Jewish business leaders from San Francisco: Louis Sloss, who first proposed the idea; Mark Gerstle; and the brothers Mortimer and Herbert Fleishhacker. (A quarter century later Herbert Fleishhacker's personal graciousness would prove crucial in overcoming the last barrier to the War Memorial auditorium.)⁹ Their board, announced with great fanfare only three days before the quake, included Alden Anderson, the lieutenant-governor of California; Joseph Chanslor, a Los Angeles businessman who was cofounder of the Chanslor-Canfield Midway Oil Company; and furniture entrepreneur John Breuner (founder of Breuner's Home Furnishings, established during the Gold Rush and operating throughout the country until 2004). Gerstle enlisted enthusiastic support from the mayor, Eugene Schmitz, who happened to be a musician himself.¹⁰

The vision of this group, known as the Union-Square Theater Company, was radical; they proposed a *municipal* opera house, in contrast to the privately owned Tivoli and Grand. There was no such opera house in the country at the time, and indeed there would be none until San Francisco's War Memorial building finally opened. The new company was cautious about proposing actual government subsidies, however. Its board projected erecting a 2,200-seat, \$800,000 theater "owned not by the city as such, but founded and maintained by the music-loving population of San Francisco."¹¹

Members of the new board contributed \$150,000 to launch the project and banker Ignatz Steinhart donated a lot on Post Street near Union Square. (Steinhart was later the principal financier, with his brother, of the Steinhart Aquarium building in Golden Gate Park.) This plan fundamentally encapsulated the social contradictions that repeatedly hampered efforts to build a new opera house in later years: although the Union Square Theater Company's ideal was that the "music-loving population" would "found and maintain" the theater, funding for the building depended on the generosity of the wealthy social class. In any case, this plan soon came to naught. Three days after the announcement of the land donation and the launch of the project, the April 18 earthquake put an abrupt end to these visionary plans.

Six years later the idea resurfaced, but the municipal theater did not materialize for another two decades, mired in political battles over opera's "elitist" reputation and public support for an edifice seen by some as a playground for the rich. Meanwhile, San Franciscans had to make do with the often amateurish productions of small touring companies.

THE FAILED PROJECT OF 1912

In 1909, a group of business and professional men founded the San Francisco Musical Association (here referred to as SFMA), an organization with a dual purpose: first, to establish an on-going "permanent" symphony orchestra to replace the myriad ad-hoc groups that had dotted the urban landscape during the previous decades; and second, to build a new viable replacement for the demolished Grand Opera House. They succeeded quite quickly in their first goal. The opening concert of the San Francisco Symphony took place on December 8, 1911.¹² The second goal, however, proved far more elusive, but not, interestingly, because of a lack of funds. By 1912 the SFMA had raised enough money to construct a new building, and its board had forged a novel partnership with the city.

This partnership proved central to the success of the fundraising effort—but also to the project’s downfall. Contrary to the model articulated by the Union-Square Theater Company, this new vision of a municipal opera house involved a direct subsidy from the government, namely the donation of the land. The SFMA, for its part, had agreed to raise the money for the structure, which it would then donate to the city. By November 1912, the SFMA had gathered sufficient subscriptions to cover the cost. The minutes of the board of directors meeting on November 6 detail pledges amounting to \$764,000 and spell out the terms of the agreement. The city would determine the building’s exterior design; the SFMA would control the interior decor. Usage would be restricted to opera, music drama, ballet, and concerts. Upkeep of the building, which would be free from taxes as a municipal edifice, would be provided by the city. To cater to the less fortunate, four hundred seats for each performance would be designated as a “family circle,” available at low cost on the performance day.¹³

Judging from the lively debate in the press, these particular specifications met with little opposition. There were two sticking points, however. One was the composition of the governing board: nine of the fifteen members were to be appointed by the SFMA, which was a private organization.¹⁴ The second concerned the perquisites the subscribers would enjoy in return for their donations. The agreement specified that they would pay for particular seats, which they would hold *in perpetuity* and could pass down to their descendants. This provision prompted strong editorial opposition, despite reassurances from the SFMA that these subscribers would be required to pay for their tickets for each performance and would have to exercise their option twenty-four hours in advance. If these points of contention could be resolved, conceded the *San Francisco Chronicle*, San Francisco would have the only municipal opera house in the country—high art supported (in this new plan) by the city for the enrichment and “uplift” of the populace, surely a model to lead the rest of the nation.

Despite the various objections, fundraising continued to progress very well. By 1913, subscriptions had reached \$900,000 and a preliminary architectural design was completed that included additional loges to meet increased demand. The goal was to erect the building in time for the 1915 Panama-Pacific International Exposition, which ultimately attracted eighteen million visitors over a period of nine-and-a-half months. At the beginning of February 1913, the board of supervisors acceded to a revised agreement (eliminating the city’s obligation to provide heat, exterior lighting, and water), and Mayor James Rolph signed it.

The subscriber list reads like a Who’s Who of the social elite of San Francisco. Among the most prominent contributors were William Crocker, son of Charles Crocker (one of the Big Four railroad magnates); M. H. de Young, founder and publisher of the *Chronicle*; Phoebe Hearst, arts patron and mother of newspaper tycoon William Randolph Hearst; Cora Koshland, owner of the grandiose “Petit Trianon” mansion, at which she held concerts for audiences of one hundred to five hundred people; the Spreckels brothers, inheritors of the Spreckels Sugar Company fortune and publishers of the *San Francisco Call*; Sigmund Stern and his brother Jacob, nephews of Levi Strauss and inheritors of his blue jeans fortune; and Richard Tobin, a banker who later became a delegate to the peace conference ending World War I.

The rich, in short, were now pledging to give the city an elegant building that could not only “raise up” the masses through the fine art of opera, but also enhance San Francisco’s cultural reputation nationwide. “The new temple of music, when completed, will give to this

city a musical prestige the importance of which will be difficult to overestimate,” editorialized the *Chronicle*.¹⁵ A member of the city council in Cleveland, Ohio, wrote to San Francisco supervisors for details at the request of the mayor, and commented that “every city in the East is discussing” the San Francisco project.¹⁶ The *Chronicle* lobbied strongly for the building. A supportive editorial noted that

for thirty years or more, up to the time of the fire, San Francisco was known as one of the few places in America where high-class music was appreciated. . . . Grand opera is largely a hereditary instinct or desire, imparted from father to children, and San Francisco, because of its large sprinkling of Latin and German population, has for a long time desired it. Even those of its citizens who are “plain American” have become influenced musically.¹⁷

At the same time, the editorial addressed the contradictory class implications of the building: “To be financially successful,” wrote the reporter, “grand opera needs either the whole-hearted support of private individuals of wealth, or municipal encouragement amounting to some form of endowment. San Francisco has provided both.”¹⁸ In the heady atmosphere of the successful fundraising campaign, city supervisor Henry Payot, chair of the public welfare committee, even projected an associated music conservatory, where “young men and women desiring to have their voices cultivated will be able to do so without going to Europe.”¹⁹

Critics of the project, on the other hand, asked cynically whether this opera house would be merely a gathering place where the wealthy could stage the most lavish social events of the season. Even Alfred Metzger, publisher and editor of the *Pacific Coast Musical Review* and a strong supporter of opera, called the proposed building a “Snobbery House.”²⁰

The parties to the agreement between the city and the SFMA realized that it contained potential legal pitfalls, so they initiated what the press described as a friendly suit to put to rest all areas of controversy. The suit asked three questions. Does a municipality have the right to own an opera house? If so, does the city have the right to dedicate public property for it? And finally, does the city have the right to delegate management of the enterprise to a body other than its own board of supervisors?²¹ At the beginning of March 1913, Superior Court judge James M. Seawell responded positively to all three questions.²² In an appellate ruling, however, the state Supreme Court determined that it was illegal to place “in the hands of a private corporation in perpetuity the control of city property.” At the same time, the court left the door open, indicating that if the city retained a majority on the Board of Governors, the project might be legal.²³ The lawyers went back to work, making alterations to the agreement, and all seemed poised for success. The *Chronicle* crowed that the opera house would make San Francisco into another Bayreuth.²⁴

At this point, however, the mayor threw a curve ball into the project. Rolph, a wealthy Republican banker, decided to cast his lot—somewhat uncomfortably—with the “common folk.” Hastily convened high-level closed-door meetings with supportive city supervisors failed to change his mind. On November 20, 1913, Rolph vetoed the project he had previously supported. Efforts to override the veto in the Board of Supervisors failed and subscribers paid 1 percent of their pledges in what they ironically called “funeral expenses.”²⁵

Rolph’s objections centered on the privileged rights of the donors, which, he argued, would establish a class structure in a city-owned facility. He demanded that the subscribers

make “an absolute gift” of the opera house and that the agreement between the city and the SFMA contain no restrictions concerning management or seating. That proposal was clearly a non-starter. Subscribers had purchased seats and without that enticement, the money would simply not materialize. Rolph’s decision also proved savvy for his own career. Adopting popular positions like this one, Rolph managed to be reelected handily year after year, serving as the city’s longest-term mayor—from 1912 to 1931. He then became governor of California.

In vetoing the project, Rolph confronted head-on the contradictory class implications of opera: its social appeal to many wealthy citizens versus its musical appeal to a broad spectrum of the population, ranging from the rich to the far less privileged. This latter group formed an enormous audience for opera in San Francisco, which music critic Redfern Mason colorfully characterized in a 1917 article on the city’s Italian working class. One could easily “lasso a cast for ‘Il Trovatore’ in the course of an hour,” wrote Mason, by simply strolling through North Beach. “As you walk along Columbus Avenue you will hear a barber tinkling a mandolin while he sings ‘la donna [e] Mobile.’ Here are chorus singers who tend bar between engagements, shoemakers who chant Bellini while they ply the awl, dressmakers who have ambitions to sing Mimi or Santuzza.”²⁶ Indeed, the populace, it seemed (and especially the Italian populace), was crazy for opera. On Christmas Eve 1910, Luisa Tetrazzini had returned to the city and sung in the street on a stage hastily erected at “newspaper corner”—the intersection of Third, Market, Geary, and Kearny Streets. A quarter million fans turned out to hear her. People hung out of windows, dangling telephone receivers so that friends and relatives across town (and even in Los Angeles) could listen in. The next day, the *Chronicle* ran five full pages of reviews of the event. Ralph Renaud, one of those reporters, wrote, “I saw an obscure Italian listening to his famous countrywoman. His head was bent down and he was making no attempt to see, only listening. As Tetrazzini sang, the tears dripped steadily from his eyes.”²⁷ For this crowd, Mayor Rolph wanted a municipal opera house financed largely by the rich with no strings attached. That wish would eventually become a reality, but not for another two decades.

PHOEBE HEARST AND THE PROPOSAL FOR A UC OPERA SCHOOL

Phoebe Hearst had been an avid supporter of opera since she first came to San Francisco with her husband George in the early 1860s. On July 2, 1865, Hearst wrote to her son’s former nanny that she had attended “six or eight” productions at Thomas Maguire’s Academy of Music and immensely enjoyed the experience.²⁸ On her subsequent trips to Europe, Hearst made a point of attending opera wherever she went. Her letters contain excited accounts of productions from London to Seville; and at least twice she heard Wagner’s operas at Bayreuth.²⁹ Hearst was thus an enthusiastic supporter of the 1912 effort to replace the Grand Opera House. She subscribed for a box at \$15,000 (equivalent to more than \$350,000 in 2015).³⁰

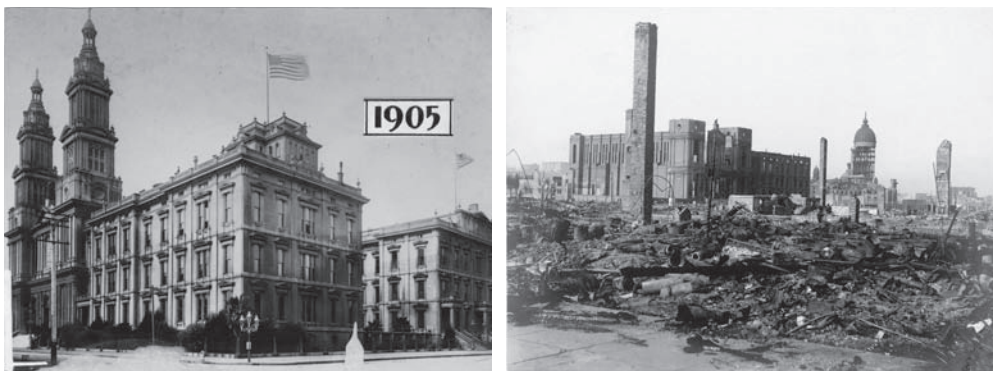
Hearst was also a major supporter of the University of California. In a series of donations that began shortly after her husband died in 1891, she established the first scholarships for women, funded an architectural competition to design a coherent plan for the campus, paid

for two buildings (one specifically for female students), helped establish the anthropology department and its museum, purchased for the university collections of rare books and portraits, funded scholarly travel and lectures, provided lighting in the library, and much more. In 1897, California governor James Budd appointed Hearst to the Board of Regents; she was its first female member.³¹

Phoebe Hearst was thus understandably intrigued when a local businessman, Bernard P. Miller, advocated not only rebuilding the opera house but also establishing therein an opera school associated with the University of California. The university's President, Benjamin Ide Wheeler, a strong supporter of the arts and a close friend of Hearst, enthusiastically agreed to the idea.

A series of letters from Miller to Hearst document her encouragement and financial aid.³² She provided Miller with a stipend of \$100 per month (equivalent to about \$2000 in 2015) for the period of one year as he traveled throughout the state to elicit support; and she promised that if he obtained enough pledges, she would donate \$10,000 for the new building and the school. At the end of the year, Miller had indeed obtained endorsements from many of the wealthy in California, including William Crocker, various politicians and UC officials, and newspaper publishers M. H. de Young (*San Francisco Chronicle*) and Harry Chandler (*Los Angeles Times*). Echoing the sentiments expressed by Payot three years earlier, the *Chronicle* again jumped in eagerly in support of the new plans. The California School of Opera, editorialized the paper, would provide domestic training in all aspects of the art.³³ Redfern Mason, one of the most perceptive critical voices on the local music scene, advocated for the school as a way of building a U.S. conservatory, rather than sending budding musicians to Europe for what had become a mandatory rite of passage. "We have the voices; we have the money, and we want opera to be a constant recreation, not, as it is to-day, the casual, foreign-made, distraction of a few weeks every now and then."³⁴

Wheeler presided over an organizational meeting at the luxurious Palace Hotel on November 9, 1916, called at Hearst's behest. The assembled group of wealthy music patrons



St. Ignatius Church, which stood on the site presently occupied by Davies Symphony Hall. This site was purchased in 1920 as the proposed location for the new opera house and veterans' offices. The first image is the church in 1905; the second is the same following the quake and fires of 1906, shown with the destroyed City Hall in the background.

San Francisco History Center, San Francisco Public Library

set up a committee to spearhead the fundraising effort. By the following year the group was exploring the purchase of a site near the new city hall where the enormous Saint Ignatius Church and Academy had stood before the quake and fire and where Davies Symphony Hall stands today. (The St. Ignatius Academy was the precursor of the present-day University of San Francisco.) As the map below shows, the opera house's new location encompassed the block surrounded by Hayes Street, Van Ness Avenue, Grove Street, and Franklin Street, as opposed to the older 1912 site, where the Asian Art Museum now stands.

Progress in fundraising was slow, due to the war and to the reluctance of potential contributors to donate money to a project that had only recently failed. Nevertheless, by September 1919, the group had taken an option on the St. Ignatius site in preparation for an opera house and an Academy of Music to be run by the University of California.³⁵ By this time Phoebe Hearst, unfortunately, was no longer alive. She died on April 13, 1919, her vision of San Francisco as a national leader in the training of young opera singers unfulfilled.

ENTER THE VETERANS

In February 1920, the opera house group purchased the Saint Ignatius block for \$300,000. In an effort to stimulate fundraising, Crocker and his colleagues began to embrace the other arts as well, proposing a fine arts museum and a small memorial court dedicated to peace and the conclusion of the Great War.

The prewar energy, however, had dissipated. The fundraising effort garnered less than a million dollars. At this point Major Charles Kendrick stepped in.³⁶ He was a national committeeman, and later vice commander, of the American Legion and he also had ties to the Jesuit community of St. Ignatius. (Kendrick was later chairman of the University of San Francisco's Board of Regents and contributed \$1 million for the building of the university's law school.) He was also an opera aficionado. Kendrick advanced an appealing proposal: "The soldiers killed in the war deserved a memorial. But why build a hall for only the dead? Why not raise a building for the use of the living as well?"³⁷ Proponents were intrigued. The legion was amenable. Veterans were enthusiastic, because the building would house office space for their organizations. Thus an effective—but ultimately confrontational—alliance was born.

Under this new umbrella, raising funds turned out to be the easy task. The harder one was navigating through San Francisco's political minefields. The goal was now to reach \$2.5 million: To that end, the sponsors staged a mass meeting at the Civic Auditorium, preceded by intensive publicity. On May 17, 1920, schoolchildren were brought to the site for a special program that included a performance by three hundred students of the San Francisco State Normal School, led by the supervisor of music in the public schools. They sang a rendition of Rudyard Kipling's "Recessional," highlighting the theme "Lest We Forget." "Women's day" on May 18 featured a forty-piece band.³⁸ And the big event itself—on May 19, 1920—was billed as a campaign for a memorial to honor the "men and women, living and dead, who sacrificed so much in order that American ideals might endure."³⁹ Excitement rose to a fevered pitch. "San Francisco's fighting spirit, exemplified in the will to do and the soul to dare, will find ample opportunity for expression tonight," heralded the *Chronicle*. The entire city

was asked to attend: "Every man, woman, and child will have an opportunity to determine by his individual act whether or not the proposed war memorial here shall stand as a living monument, commemorative of those who made the supreme sacrifice and indicative of the community idealism of this city."⁴⁰

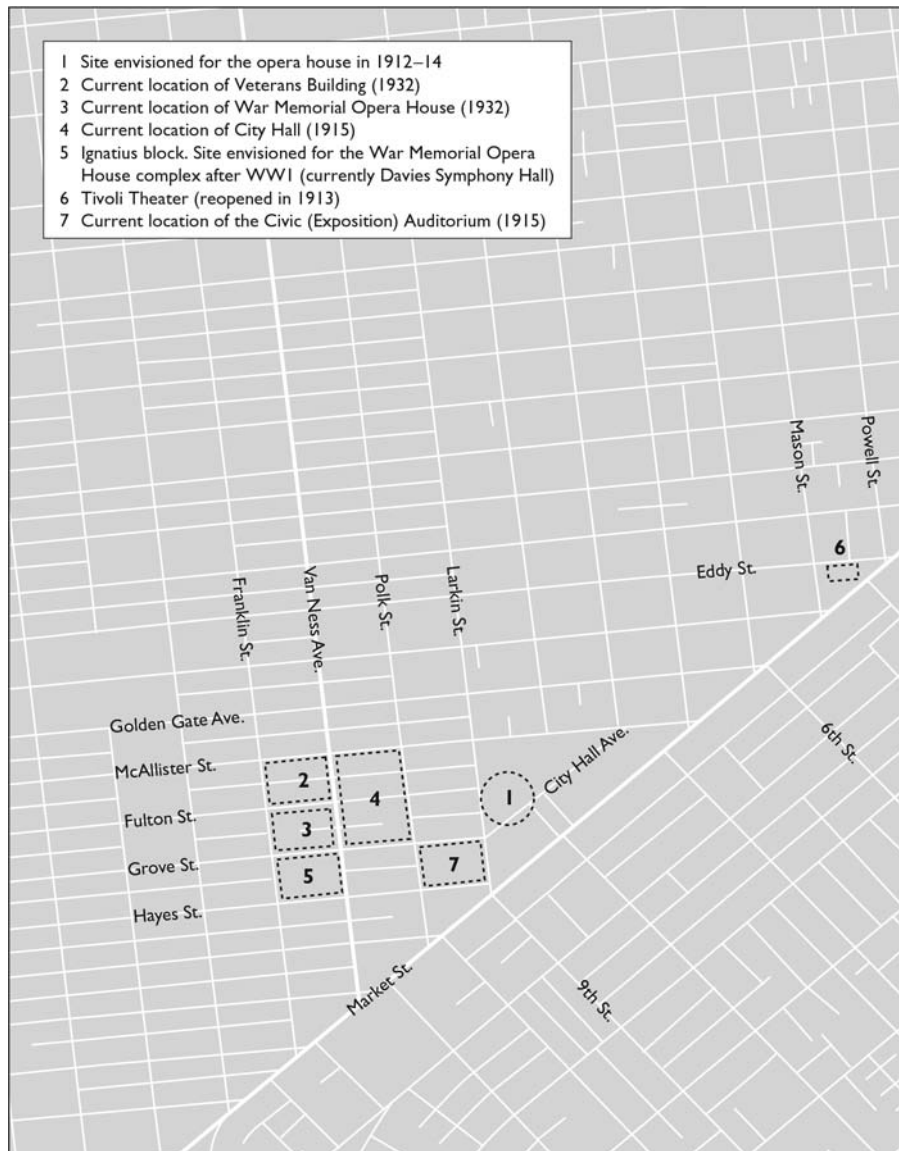
Who could resist supporting such a cause? Buried deep within this promotional article—perhaps to prevent any accusations of elitism—was the mention of an opera house as part of this "living monument." And to forestall any repetition of the earlier fight, the administration was to be overseen by the regents of the University of California. The plan called for three buildings surrounding a memorial court on the St. Ignatius site: to the west, an auditorium for music and drama; to the east, the San Francisco Art Institute and two buildings housing veterans' organizations.

By May 21, 1920, subscriptions had reached \$1.6 million, and promoters began to tap small donors. Businesses encouraged employees to help them reach 100 percent participation. Among the first to achieve that goal was the Sing Fat Company in Chinatown. Indeed, the Chinese community contributed with great generosity. A street fair in the area attracted thousands "with merrymakers pouring a steady flow of coins into the coffers of the amusements, which go to swell the war memorial fund."⁴¹ Another fundraiser featured the Art Hickman jazz orchestra at an all-night dance at the Dreamland Roller Rink. By the end of the campaign, \$2,150,000 had been pledged. The project was on its way.

Sponsors turned over the funds to the university's regents, who appointed a temporary board of trustees and, a year later, a board of architects. Then, in May 1922, a startling development led to a scramble to change the memorial's site. The Lyon Fireproof Warehouse Company bought half of the block across the street from City Hall—the area presently occupied by the opera house and the Veterans Building shown on the map below. The company proposed to erect an eight-story warehouse. War memorial planners moved quickly to block the project. In fact, the St. Ignatius site was already proving inadequate in size. So the memorial committee borrowed money from the trustees, filed condemnation charges against the warehouse company, and managed to purchase the entire block across from the City Hall.

That same year, Gaetano Merola, an Italian conductor who had visited San Francisco three times with the San Carlo traveling opera company, presented a series of operas in the Stanford University football stadium (thirty-five miles south of San Francisco).⁴² He intended the performances as a fundraiser for the university, but did not realize any profit on the venture. More importantly, however, the reception from San Francisco's Italian community was highly enthusiastic and in 1923, Merola established the San Francisco Opera with substantial financial support from the city's Italians—among them A. P. Giannini, founder of the Bank of Italy, which later became the Bank of America.

Merola's new opera company performed in the Civic Auditorium, originally called the Exposition Auditorium. It had opened for the 1915 fair and afterwards became home to a \$40,000 organ that had been specially built for the international exposition. At ten thousand seats, the Civic Auditorium was even larger than the old too-large Grand Opera House. And the acoustics for music were undesirable, to say the least. Nevertheless, through sheer willpower, and with the support of a community still hungry for opera, Merola kept the company going until a real opera house opened nine years later.



Map of downtown San Francisco showing the street layout prior to the 1906 quake, annotated with the proposed sites of the opera house in 1912–1914 and 1920–1922, as well as the final location of the opera house and veterans’ buildings when completed in 1932.

Map created by Bill Nelson, for Miller’s *Music and Politics in San Francisco: From the 1906 Quake to the Second World War*.

THE FINAL STRUGGLES

Ground breaking for the War Memorial Opera House took place, appropriately, on Veterans Day 1926, preceded by a parade from the Ferry Building and marked by elaborate ceremonies that included performances by the San Francisco Symphony, the San Francisco Opera chorus, and the municipal chorus. But that is as far as the project went for the next few years, due to another factional battle: growing opposition from the veterans. They began to chafe at

the attention being devoted to an opera house. The old elitist arguments resurfaced in force. The solution emerged in the form of a separation of the memorial into two distinct buildings. Between them a memorial court, providing a view of City Hall, would honor the fallen soldiers of the war. But that plan required a significant increase in funding. The project was now \$4 million short.

In June 1927, San Francisco voters approved a bond issue to raise the needed funds. A two-thirds majority was required for passage and the War Memorial proposition exceeded the needed total by a comfortable margin (48,771 to 20,893, or 70 percent in favor). Times were good and the populace was apparently impatient to see its grandiose fundraising efforts finally realized—particularly after the most recent delays caused by the location change, the acquisition of land parcels, and the redesign of the structure(s) to fit the new site. Passage of the bond issue had not by any means been assured, however. The veterans campaigned against it vigorously, citing the familiar argument that opera catered to the tastes of a wealthy minority. And two other bond issues on the same ballot were defeated. Despite the passage of the bond issue, however, the veterans would continue to voice strenuous opposition during the five years before the building opened.

The next hurdle was the establishment of a permanent group of trustees to oversee the construction, management, and operation of the buildings. That move required a city charter amendment. This time the veterans nearly succeeded in crushing the project. They demanded the resignation of Charles Kendrick and another member of the acting board, as well as the defeat of the amendment itself. In the end the amendment passed by only 717 votes out of a total of 138,767 (a margin of 0.5 percent).

Complete Vote by Legislative Districts						
Assembly Dist.	Vote	(1) Bernal Cuf.	(2) War Mem.	(3) Mun. Ry. Ex.	(4) Spring Val Par	(5) Carb. Ord.
DISTRICT 21 (So. of Market)	Yes	2070	1856	1940	1783	1614
	No	574	761	703	863	1022
DISTRICT 22 (Bay Shore)	Yes	1606	1429	1507	1364	1480
	No	646	800	757	854	788
DISTRICT 23 (Potrero)	Yes	4868	3844	4216	3737	3408
	No	1020	1807	1500	2027	2304
DISTRICT 24 (Ingleside)	Yes	6138	5024	5257	4997	4015
	No	1166	2074	1939	2384	3127
DISTRICT 25 (Mission)	Yes	3410	2972	2939	2733	2658
	No	945	1331	1406	1583	1794
DISTRICT 26 (Hayes Valley)	Yes	4695	4279	4083	3639	3385
	No	1528	1831	2073	2339	2783
DISTRICT 27 (Sonest)	Yes	5717	5812	5458	4922	4462
	No	2986	2823	3221	3797	4175
DISTRICT 28 (Richmond)	Yes	7458	7312	6227	5764	5280
	No	3521	3619	4769	5181	5636
DISTRICT 29 (Mission)	Yes	2808	2658	2498	2389	2218
	No	890	1050	1218	1368	1537
DISTRICT 30 (W. of Van Ness)	Yes	2740	2594	2279	2072	1965
	No	1038	1143	1490	1558	1791
DISTRICT 31 (Presidio)	Yes	4322	4382	2953	3065	2443
	No	1622	1411	2987	2836	3491
DISTRICT 32 (Nor. of Market)	Yes	4251	4427	3244	3224	2719
	No	1539	1368	2482	2524	3036
DISTRICT 33 (Nor. of Market)	Yes	2144	2182	1704	1579	1701
	No	926	875	1343	1465	1418
TOTALS	Yes	52,224	46,771	44,305	41,488	37,348
	No	18,391	20,893	25,888	28,779	32,872
Vote Necessary to Carry		47,077	46,443	46,796	46,845	46,845
		Carried	Carried	Lost	Lost	Carried

Results of the vote on the 1927 bond issue for the opera house

San Francisco Chronicle, June 15, 1927

James Rolph—who was still mayor of the city—then began to prepare a slate of names to constitute a board of trustees. Perhaps recalling the 1912–1913 fiasco, he consulted all constituencies in advance to avoid an embarrassing debate. The veterans, however, effected another delay, arguing that they had not been properly consulted and needed to conduct a survey to assess their organizations’ needs. Rolph moved cautiously; he took until August 26, 1929, before naming the eleven nominees.

The list included five veterans, two of whom were also present or former members of the city’s board of supervisors.⁴³ Also included were the president of Standard Oil; banker Herbert Fleishhacker, now head of the Park Commission; and the publishers of the *Chronicle* and *Examiner* (George Cameron, son-in-law of M. H. de Young, and George Hearst, son of William Randolph Hearst).⁴⁴ Fleishhacker, of course, had a long history with the opera house efforts: he had been one of the founders of the ill-fated Union-Square Theater Company that proposed erecting a municipal opera house way back in 1906.

Unfortunately, the mayor’s intensive behind-the-scenes negotiations failed to satisfy the veterans, who let loose with another objection: they now demanded a majority on the board of trustees. Rolph found himself in an untenable position. He had cajoled city leaders to serve and had vetted his nominations with all parties in private. He was understandably reluctant to dismiss any of those nominees or subject them to public humiliation. Instead, he tried unsuccessfully to force the city’s board of supervisors to vote independently on each individual. Why, asked Rolph, should the veterans, who campaigned against the bond and city charter issues, now be granted a majority on the memorial’s board of trustees? The supervisors, however, stood firm and informed the mayor that he needed to replace one of his nominees with a veteran.



Herbert Fleishhacker (1872–1957)

San Francisco History Center, San Francisco Public Library

The stalemate was at last resolved on February 28, 1930, when Fleishhacker voluntarily resigned, citing his banking and corporate duties, as well as his activities as park commissioner. We will probably never know the behind-the-scenes dialogue that led to his gracious withdrawal, but it immediately solved the mayor's dilemma and cleared the path for approval by the board. "All but a few of the Supervisors," noted the *Chronicle*, "have pledged themselves promptly to confirm the nominations if a majority are war veterans."⁴⁵ In Fleishhacker's place, Rolph nominated Richard Tobin, who had been one of the original founders of the San Francisco Musical Association in 1909 and head of its music committee from that time to 1915. As one of the most active members of the SFMA, Tobin had played a key role in the 1912 fundraising campaign and therefore had a large stake in the opera house project right from its inception. Furthermore, after joining the navy as a lieutenant in 1917, Tobin had served on the U.S. commission at the Paris Peace Conference, and, from 1923 to 1929, he was U.S. ambassador to the Netherlands. He had just returned to San Francisco. Tobin was a safe choice. The veterans could hardly object.

The construction of War Memorial Opera House began in 1931 and the hall opened on October 15, 1932. Its total cost was \$5.5 million, not including the land. Rolph, who as mayor had scuttled the original project two decades earlier under accusations of elitist bias, and who was now governor of California, finally had the auditorium he envisioned—a 3,200-seat replacement for the Grand Opera House destroyed in the 1906 fires, financed not only by the rich but also by the general citizenry. As the first municipally owned opera house in the country, San Francisco's War Memorial was thus truly the long-delayed realization of the preliminary proposal put forth by the Union-Square Theater Company in the months preceding the quake.

The inaugural performance began with Merola conducting "The Star-Spangled Banner," honoring those who had sacrificed their lives in the Great War, followed by Giacomo



War Memorial Opera House on the right and Veterans Building on the left: construction photo. The courtyard between the two buildings offers a view of City Hall.

San Francisco History Center, San Francisco Public Library



War Memorial Opera House in June 1932, four months prior to its opening

San Francisco History Center, San Francisco Public Library

Puccini's *Tosca*, a longtime San Francisco favorite. As Marsden Argall sang Angelotti's opening line, "Ah! Finalmente!" an assenting murmur spread quietly through the audience.

CONCLUSION

In the patriotic civic frenzy that followed Luisa Tetrazzini's singing in the streets of San Francisco on Christmas Eve 1910, press commentators took pains to remark on the mixture of classes and ethnicities among the auditors. People of all ages, races, ancestries, and financial means were packed together so tightly in the square that it was nearly impossible even to reach into one's own pocket. "Bootblacks rubbed elbows with bankers and painted creatures with the fat and wholesome mothers of families," wrote one observer.⁴⁶ Tetrazzini herself said, "I will sing for the poor people of San Francisco . . . for all the people who cannot afford to buy tickets for my concerts."⁴⁷

Opera as a social leveler seems, perhaps, like an oxymoron, but in the early twentieth century a prevalent attitude held that exposure to the fine arts—and especially to classical music—would stimulate intelligence, enhance character development, teach people to act in harmony with their environment, and, in the process, "elevate" the poor, reduce crime, and create a more responsible citizenry.⁴⁸ The mixing of classes at the Tetrazzini event—where the rich had no better access than the poor—truly exemplified this utopian vision.

So did the old pre-quake Tivoli theater, which encouraged a similar intermingling of social classes. It was a place where "the millionaire came and dropped into a seat beside the laborer," crowed the authors of the WPA's *History of Opera in San Francisco* in 1938.⁴⁹ The Grand Opera House, however, was quite a different matter. There the classes were for the most part physically separated due to the pricing of seats in huge theater's various levels;



Opening night, October 15, 1932, Giacomo Puccini, *Tosca*

San Francisco History Center, San Francisco Public Library

and for at least some of the wealthiest attendees, the musical performance took a back seat to the social experience. It was this second face of opera that most often dominated the popular perception of the art, and, as we have seen, continually blocked the realization of San Francisco's War Memorial. In the end, however, pledges came from a wide social and economic spectrum; and the citizens of San Francisco voted overwhelmingly for a bond issue to contribute municipal funds (and by extension their own dollars) to the cause. The resulting building complex served the needs of many constituencies. The veterans acquired a spacious building that not only housed its various offices, but also included an auditorium (Herbst Theatre, which has hosted quite a number of musical performances in its own right), and the San Francisco Museum of Art, which occupied quarters there beginning in 1935. The Veterans Building connects to the Opera House by a tunnel, which, in addition to its practical uses, stands as a symbol of their joint origin. Only Phoebe Hearst's vision of a domestic opera training school was lacking. It would not develop until 1954 with the establishment of the Merola Opera Program.

The War Memorial complex is still governed by an eleven-member board of trustees, appointed by the mayor for four-year terms. Among the newer sources of revenue was, until recently, four percent of the city's hotel tax, which in 2012–2013 provided \$9,158,500.⁵⁰ This revenue source has now been replaced by an allocation from the city's general fund. Conflicts with the veterans organizations have not entirely disappeared, however. At the time of this writing, litigation is pending against the city by the San Francisco Posts of the American Legion regarding space allocation commitments made in the 1920s. But overall, the buildings have served their various constituencies well over the years and the project that took so long to materialize ultimately demonstrated what could be accomplished when the Tivoli model finally triumphed over that of the Grand.

NOTES

1. Vincenzo Bellini's *La sonnambula* was presented at the Adelphi Theater on February 12, 1851. See George Martin, *Verdi at the Golden Gate: Opera and San Francisco in the Gold Rush Years* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 26. Martin's book presents a detailed view of opera in San Francisco from 1850 to 1860. On early operas in the city, see also the WPA publication, *The History of Opera in San Francisco*, ed. Lawrence Estavan (San Francisco: San Francisco Theatre Research, 1938).
2. Patti first came to San Francisco in 1884 in the company of Henry Mapleson. In his memoirs, Mapleson describes the hysteria surrounding her visit; see *The Mapleson Memoirs: The Career of an Operatic Impresario, 1858–1888*, ed. Harold Rosenthal (New York: Appleton-Century, 1966. Originally published by Bedford Clarke and Co, Chicago, 1888), 196–97. On Mapleson's three San Francisco tours, see also John Frederick Cone, *First Rival of the Metropolitan Opera* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983), 66–79, 140–143, and 174–181. Mapleson brought Patti back in 1885, and she returned a third time in 1890 with the Abbey and Grau Company.
3. Information on income comes from unpublished documents in the archives of the Metropolitan Opera, New York. Many thanks to archivist John Pennino for his invaluable assistance.
4. *Mapleson Memoirs*, 197.
5. "First night of Grand Opera," *San Francisco Chronicle*, November 13, 1900, 9.
6. Alfred Hertz, "Facing the Music," memoir serialized in the *San Francisco Chronicle*, May 3–July 14, 1942 (this quote appears on June 4).
7. Tetrizzini came to San Francisco armed with a contract from the Met for the fall, but she ended up not honoring it. She recounts her experiences in San Francisco and with the Metropolitan Opera in her memoirs, *My Life of Song* (New York: Arno Press, 1977; reprint of the edition of 1921).
8. "Tivoli Opera-House Now Motion Picture Theater," *San Francisco Chronicle*, January 6, 1914, 26.
9. On these and other Jewish business leaders in San Francisco, see Irena Narell, *Our City: The Jews of San Francisco* (San Diego: Howell-North Books, 1981). The Fleishhackers eventually founded the San Francisco zoo.
10. A great deal has been written about Schmitz, who was mayor during the earthquake and was later convicted of extortion (although the conviction was overturned on appeal). See, for example, Walton Bean, *Boss Reuf's San Francisco: The Story of the Union Labor Party, Big Business, and the Graft Prosecution* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1952); Philip L. Fradkin, *The Great Earthquake and Firestorms of 1906: How San Francisco Nearly Destroyed Itself* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), and Lately Thomas, *A Debonair Scoundrel: An Episode in the Moral History of San Francisco* (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1962). Schmitz was president of the local musicians' union before being elected mayor. See Leta E. Miller, *Music and Politics in San Francisco: From the 1906 Quake to the Second World War* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011), 7–8, 22–23.
11. Quotes in this paragraph from "Municipal Opera-House for San Francisco," *San Francisco Chronicle*, March 24, 1906, 13 and "A Grand Opera-House at Union Square," *San Francisco Chronicle*, April 15, 1906, 29.
12. On the early years of the San Francisco Symphony, see Leta E. Miller, "'The Multitude Listens with the Heart': Orchestras, Urban Culture, and the Early Years of the San Francisco Symphony," in *Music, American Made: Essays in Honor of John Graziano*, ed. John Koegel (Sterling Height, MI: Harmonie Park Press, 2011), 161–90.
13. Minutes of the board meeting of the San Francisco Musical Association, November 6, 1912 (San Francisco Symphony archives).
14. The other six were to include the mayor, the president of the Board of Education, a member of the San Francisco Board of Supervisors, an independent citizen, and two professors (one from the University of California, Berkeley and one from Stanford University).
15. "The Opera-House," *San Francisco Chronicle*, November 3, 1912, 32.
16. "Cleveland Wants an Opera-House: Entire Country Praises San Francisco Idea for Municipal Home for Music," *San Francisco Chronicle*, December 12, 1912, 9.
17. "Our Municipal Opera-House," *San Francisco Chronicle*, January 27, 1913, 6.
18. *Ibid.*
19. "Cleveland Wants an Opera-House." The San Francisco Conservatory was ultimately founded in 1923, an outgrowth of a piano school started in 1917 by Ada Clement. For a discussion of the conservatory's founding and early years, see Miller, *Music and Politics in San Francisco*, chapter 5.
20. Alfred Metzger, "Particulars Regarding Municipal Opera House in this City," *Pacific Coast Musical Review* 23, no. 12 (December 21, 1912), 24.
21. "Prepare to Test Opera-House Law," *San Francisco Chronicle*, February 4, 1913, 18.
22. "Contract Legal for Opera-House," *San Francisco Chronicle*, March 5, 1913, 20.
23. "Opera House Pact is Declared Illegal," *San Francisco Chronicle*, June 12, 1913, 1.
24. "Opera-House Will Not Be a White Elephant," *San Francisco Chronicle*, March 30, 1913, 52. Bayreuth is the site of the famous theater built by Richard Wagner to present his ground-breaking works.

25. "Veto from Mayor Rolph is Deadly Blow to Hope for City's Opera-House," *San Francisco Chronicle*, November 21, 1913, 1; "Opera-House Plan is Declared 'Dead,'" *San Francisco Chronicle*, January 10, 1914, 1.
26. Mason, "S.F. Grand Opera in Full Swing," *San Francisco Examiner*, June 25, 1917, 7.
27. Ralph Renaud, "Great Artist Reveals Her Very Soul to the People She Loves," *San Francisco Chronicle*, December 25, 1910, 27. For a photo of the event, see Miller, *Music and Politics in San Francisco*, 133.
28. The letter is found in the Phoebe Apperson Hearst Papers, Bancroft Library, University of California, Box 22, folder 4 (hereafter PAH Papers). It is also quoted in part in Judith Robinson, *The Hearsts: An American Dynasty* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1991), 78–79.
29. Hearst saw *Tristan and Parsifal* in 1889, and the entire *Ring* cycle (four operas) in 1908. The 1889 visit is recorded in Adele Brooks's notes for her unpublished biography of Hearst (PAH papers, box 82, folder 27 [microfilm reel 130, frames 46 and 60]). In 1908, Hearst bought tickets to the *Ring* for a group of eight. This information comes from two letters from Hearst to Janet Peck (Peck Collection, Huntington Library, Box 11, folder 19): "I hope you and Annie will feel well enough to go and see Lohengrin tomorrow. . . . I am delighted at the prospect of seeing the whole of the 'Nibulungen. . . .'" She includes a list of people she wishes to take to the four productions. The letters are undated, but Robert Hartford's list of Bayreuth performances (*Bayreuth: The Early Years* [London: Victor Gollancz, 1980], 265) documents only 1908 with both *Lohengrin* and the *Ring*.
30. Inflation calculator from the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics: http://www.bls.gov/data/inflation_calculator.htm.
31. Hearst's appointment was confirmed by the California legislature on August 10, 1897.
32. The letters from Bernard Miller to Hearst, dating from October 23, 1915, to March 10, 1917, are found in the PAH papers, box 48, folder 23 (microfilm reel 76).
33. "California Opera School As Part of U.C. Planned; President Wheeler Leads Meeting in Palace Hotel Which Mrs. Phoebe A. Hearst Had Called," *San Francisco Chronicle*, November 10, 1916, 5.
34. Redfern Mason, "\$1,000,000 Opera School in S. F. Looms as Reality," *San Francisco Examiner*, November 1, 1916, 11.
35. "Academy of Music Project Given Support; Capitalists Obtain Option on Site for \$1,500,000 Institution; To Be Run by U. of C.," *San Francisco Chronicle*, September 9, 1919, 11, and "University Regents Approve \$2,000,000 Opera-House Plan," *San Francisco Chronicle*, September 11, 1919, 7.
36. On Kendrick, see <http://www.findagrave.com/cgi-bin/fg.cgi?page=gr&GRid=101272057>
37. *History of Opera in San Francisco*, Part 2, 77.
38. "War Memorial Mass Meeting Plans Formed," *San Francisco Chronicle*, May 17, 1920, 5, and "Memorial Drive Programme is Well Attended," *San Francisco Chronicle*, May 18, 1920, 11.
39. John S. Drum, "Drum Appeals for Big Meeting at Civic Auditorium," *San Francisco Chronicle*, May 19, 1920, 17.
40. "Rally Tonight Will Launch War Memorial Drive," *San Francisco Chronicle*, May 19, 1920, 17.
41. "\$1,675,940 is Total for War Memorial Fund," *San Francisco Chronicle*, May 22, 1920, 4.
42. On Merola's visits to San Francisco with this traveling company, see Cardell Bishop, "The San Carlo Opera Company, 1913–1955" (Santa Monica: typescript published by the author, 1978), various references on pp. 26–56.
43. The five veterans were Major General Hunter Liggett; Frank Belgrano, retiring state commander of the American Legion; Charles Kendrick; James Herz, former supervisor; and Jesse Colman, supervisor.
44. The remaining two nominees were Robert Bentley, chair of the San Francisco traffic survey committee, and James W. Mullen, publisher of the *Labor Clarion*. "Mayor Names Personnel of War Memorial Board," *San Francisco Chronicle*, August 27, 1929, 1.
45. "Fleishhacker Quits War Memorial Nominees," *San Francisco Chronicle*, February 28, 1930, 1.
46. Renaud, "Great Artist."
47. "Market Street for Tetrazzini's Stage," *San Francisco Examiner*, December 21, 1910, 1.
48. Among the more articulate advocates of these views was Charles Seeger, who was chair of the UC Berkeley Music Department from 1912 to 1916. On November 14, 1912, Seeger delivered a lecture at a "grand orchestra concert" that launched the San Francisco People's Philharmonic in which he gave voice to these theories. See "More Music Needed, Declares Professor," *San Francisco Bulletin*, November 16, 1912, 4, and "Good Music Can Prevent Crime," *San Francisco Examiner*, November 16, 1912, 4. On the People's Philharmonic, see Jason Gibbs, "'The Best Music at the Lowest Price': People's Music in San Francisco," *MLA Northern California Newsletter* 17/1 (Fall 2002), and Miller, *Music and Politics in San Francisco*, 44–47.
49. *History of Opera in San Francisco*, Part 1, 104–5.
50. <http://www.bayareaeconomy.org/media/files/pdf/SFHotsEconomicImpactOct2013WebReady.pdf>