

A Gala Concert

To some, McCormack is simply Ireland's greatest musical artist. Others have compared his massive U.S. popularity in the 1920s to that of Elvis Presley in the 1950s. McCormack also paved the way for later crooning stars such as Bing Crosby and Frank Sinatra.

But while audiences and critics remain fascinated with Elvis, Sinatra and Crosby, McCormack's light has dimmed somewhat. In terms of sheer talent and popularity, however, McCormack should always be remembered — especially by the Irish in America.

Towards that end, a very special concert will be held at Carnegie Hall's Stern Auditorium in Manhattan on December 17. "Icon of an Age: A John McCormack Gala Tribute Concert" will feature songs made popular by McCormack.

Next year also marks the 80th anniversary of another important McCormack concert, this one in Dublin. The year was 1929, and the Irish were celebrating the 100th anniversary of Catholic emancipation. The world, of course, would soon be sinking into a Great Depression. Ireland itself was only a few years removed from a grueling Civil War. But McCormack was able to transcend these divisions,

Gold Medal Winner

McCormack was born on June 14, 1884, the fourth of 11 children, and baptized at St. Mary's Church in Athlone, County Westmeath. McCormack's parents worked in nearby mills, but despite this working-class upbringing, young John was able to cultivate his impressive singing talents. Though countries such as Italy are better known for producing opera singers, Ireland's musical tradition served McCormack well. John sang in the church choir as did his father Andrew. He went to the 1903 Feis Ceoil (the Irish National Music Festival) in Dublin and emerged as a gold medal winner.

McCormack first gained U.S. attention while performing at the Irish Village section of the 1904 World Exposition in St. Louis. His engagement was short-lived as he objected to the "stage-Irish" aspect of the show. He quit, but not before he met the love of his life, Lily Foley, also a member of the troupe, whom he would marry two years later.

It was a performance by another towering artist the following year that left a lasting impression upon McCormack. At London's Covent Garden, McCormack watched Enrico Caruso in *La Boheme*. "The best lesson I ever received," McCormack later said.

McCormack now knew what he wanted to do, and also knew he had the raw talent. So, he traveled to Italy, where the acclaimed Vincenzo Sabatini was charged with honing the Irishman's technical singing skills.

McCormack then made his famous debut in Savano, before, in the fall of 1907, he made his London debut. McCormack was just 23 years old, making him the youngest principal tenor ever to sing at Covent Garden, according to the John McCormack Society, founded in 1960 to preserve the Irish tenor's great achievements.

A Hit Around The World

McCormack quickly showed he had the stuff to be an international star, selling out shows in Ireland, England, the U.S. and Australia. This wide appeal can be



TOP LEFT: John McCormack as Don Ottavio in Mozart/da Ponte's *Don Giovanni*. LEFT: McCormack with wife Lily, whom he met at the Chicago World's Fair, the couple's two children, Cyril and Gwen, and an unidentified woman, possibly the children's nanny, aboard ship. ABOVE: McCormack at the piano.

blending art, faith and history through his powerful music, which one critic has said "speaks from the heart, to the heart."

So who, exactly, was John McCormack? How did a fellow dubbed Giovanni Foli become the first in a long line of popular Irish tenors? And what role did he play in cultivating Irish-American pride?

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