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Carmela Cafarelli, harpist, singer, ran opera company for many years

Carmela Cafarelli was a native Clevelander who became internationally known in two musical careers — as a harpist and an opera singer. She founded the Cafarelli Opera Company here in 1934, which presented a grand opera each year in Cleveland until the early 1960s.

Miss Cafarelli, 90, died Saturday at Margaret Wagner House of Benjamin Rose Institute in Cleveland Heights, where she had lived for three years.

Miss Cafarelli was harpist with the Cleveland Orchestra from the first concert in 1918 until 1921, when she left to pursue a career as a singer.

In 1968 she recalled in an interview, "I loved playing the harp, but I wanted to be a singer, too."

Conductor Arturo Toscanini wrote a letter of recommendation for her to the Royal Conservatory in Rome.

She made her debut in voice in Florence in 1923 in the role of Micaela in "Carmen."

That was to be the first of many successes for the soprano. For the next three years she toured Italy, appearing in leading opera houses of the country including Torino, Rome, Milan and Genoa.

She continued to sing and play the harp in Europe until 1932, when she returned to the United States. She sang several concerts in Carnegie Hall and made three tours of the country singing and playing the harp, including several appearances with the Cleveland Orchestra.

After returning to Cleveland to establish her opera company, she also taught harp and voice in her Cleveland Heights home and in her various studios. She taught until 1976, when her health began to fail.

In 1947 Elmore Bacon wrote in the Cleve-

land News, "Carmela Cafarelli once a year shows Cleveland that local opera not only is feasible, but pleasing and interesting as well."

The performances were in the Masonic Auditorium on Euclid Ave.

Miss Cafarelli began studying the harp at age 4 under her father, Rocco G. Cafarelli, a well-known harpist and teacher in Cleveland for 35 years. He died in 1922.

Miss Cafarelli's parents had emigrated from Enzi, Italy.

"Father was the first harpist in Cleveland and I think I was the first female harpist," Miss Cafarelli had recalled.

"When I was 10, I studied with the greatest harpist that ever lived (Henry B. Fabiani). My father had studied with him in Paris. Father always believed we must have the best of everything, and he brought him (Fabiani) from Canada to be my teacher."

By the time she was 12, Miss Cafarelli had begun to play professionally. "I played with all the operas and operettas that came to Cleveland. None of the traveling companies ever brought a harpist with them," she said.

The entire Cafarelli family was schooled in music. On Sunday evenings they presented an informal neighborhood musicale with her two sisters on the violin and piano, her brother playing the cello and Miss Cafarelli and her father playing their harps.

Miss Cafarelli was a charter member of the Lecturer Recital Club and the Fortnightly Club and was a member of Cenacola, a cultural organization. She also was a member of St. Paul's Episcopal Church.

Survivors include nieces and nephews.

Services will be at 1 p.m. Wednesday in St. Martin's Chapel of St. Paul's Episcopal Church, 2747 Fairmount Blvd., Cleveland Heights.