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UCSB Special Collections Exhibition Highlights the Golden Age of Opera

While Union Oil executive William R. Moran enjoyed a successful career in petroleum exploration, he also had a passion for opera and the earliest sound recordings of opera singers -- particularly those who recorded for the Victor Talking Machine Company.

The Department of Special Collections at UC Santa Barbara's Davidson Library is home to Moran's collection of sound recordings, photographs, and correspondence with singers, as well as the Encyclopedic Discography of Victor Recordings (EDVR). A selection of items from the Moran Collection -- including cabinet cards and albums, a caricature by the Italian tenor Enrico Caruso, and a special-issue Victor recording by soprano Nellie Melba -- is currently on display on the third floor of Davidson Library. The exhibition, titled "Stars of the Opera Stage: 'Golden Age' Images from the William R. Moran Collection," is free and open to the public.

"The Golden Age of Opera starts in the 1850's and continues until about 1920," said Zachary Liebhaber, a library assistant in the Department of Special Collections and the exhibition curator. "It's typified by grand productions with huge casts, and, of course, the diva."

Among the divas represented are German soprano Johanna Gadski; American soprano Emma Eames; Wagnerian soprano Anna von Mildenburg; Australian soprano Nellie Melba -- for whom Peach Melba and Melba toast were named -- and Spanish

soprano Adelina Patti. "One of the albums of cabinet cards is devoted to Adelina Patti," Liebhaber noted. "It's a unique album that originally belonged to her."

Cabinet cards are thin photographs mounted on cardboard. Roughly the size of a modern-day snapshot, they were universally adopted for photographic portraiture. "They were highly collectible, and people would buy fancy albums to hold them," Liebhaber explained. "It's very rare to have this many albums with this many cabinet cards devoted solely to opera stars. That's another reason why we put this exhibition together."

In addition to Caruso, the exhibition also features important male opera stars of the time, including Irish tenor John McCormack, American baritone Emilio de Gogorza, and American baritone David Bispham as Alberich in an 1896 production of Wagner's Ring Cycle. Also on display are a caricature of Pasquale Amato drawn by Caruso, and a set of caricatures by Sir Leslie Ward (aka "Spy"), which appeared in Vanity Fair magazine.

The exhibition continues through September 7.

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