

## From Pop to Opera, Part 1: Ron Della Chiesa Rocks the Music World

Not many radio broadcasters can boast a background that covers such widely diverse passions as opera, symphony, jazz and pop music. Ron Della Chiesa is unique in that respect. His melodious, perfectly honed voice is instantly recognizable as that of the Boston Symphony Orchestra's radio announcer. Also well known for his captivating interviews, the award-winning broadcaster also has conversed with panoplies of the world's greatest musical stars, from Met Opera luminaries such as Luciano Pavarotti and Eileen Farrell to the pop world's Tony Bennett and Frank Sinatra.

It's hardly any wonder that Ron couldn't resist chronicling his vast experiences in the field in his captivating book, *Radio My Way* (<http://www.amazon.com/Radio-My-Way-Featuring-Celebrity/dp/0205190782>). Recently inducted into the Massachusetts Broadcasters Hall of Fame, this year Ron heads into his 25th year as The Voice of the BSO. I caught up with Della Chiesa at Tanglewood, the Orchestra's iconic summer home.

**EM:** Ron, congratulations on your 25-year milestone broadcasting the BSO's concerts from Symphony Hall and Tanglewood. When was your first broadcast?

**RDC:** October 4, 1991, 2 p.m. at Symphony Hall. Beethoven 8<sup>th</sup>, Prokofiev's *Alexander Nevsky*, with Seiji (Ozawa).

**EM:** What a program. How does it feel now, years later?

**RDC:** It feels like I started only yesterday. So much has happened in between, from Ozawa's final period through Levine and the many guest conductors. Perhaps the most exciting thing now is to be part of what Andris Nelsons is doing, shaping the orchestra in a very special, most positive way. Probably not since Munch have we had such a feeling, the energy, the way he works with an orchestra. All the orchestra members I've talked to unanimously agree - they've been pining for this, they've been waiting. Now like a sponge they're absorbing this, playing in a very passionate way for this man, and it can only head in one direction.

**EM:** The greatness of an orchestra just waiting to happen, with the right person.

**RDC:** And they've got the right person. The excitement Nelsons is creating - I remember "The Golden Ring", the documentary about the first complete *Ring* Cycle recorded in the '50s by John Culshaw, producer of the famous Solti *Ring*. The excitement was so powerful during the recording sessions that the producer said he wanted to go out on the street and grab people and say, "Don't you know what's going on in here? This is the musical experience of my life." That's how I feel. I want to come down from the broadcast booth and say, "Come in, you've got to experience this. This is something you must hear, even if you're not a lover of classical music, the electricity and energy in the hall when Andris Nelsons is conducting." Just drag people in from the street as they're walking by [Laughs] or driving in their cars. Stop everything you're doing, come into the hall and experience this orchestra now. It can only enhance your experience in life, being uplifted in that way. Look what he's done with Shostakovich already. And Mahler. It's life changing to go in and hear the orchestra.

**EM:** It sounds like a wonderful time to be around the orchestra. What was your journey from your boyhood days in Quincy, Mass, to the venerated halls of the Boston Symphony?

**RDC:** Both my parents were schoolteachers. My father was a painter, a very accomplished artist who could cry at sunrises and sunsets. I was an indulged only child. Our home was always filled with music, on recordings. My father had an extensive collection of opera. He was untrained but liked to sing the arias. He was very partial to tenors and knew all the tenor arias. Caruso, who was above all the others, and Gigli and especially Bjoerling. I remember when Dad brought home one of the early recordings Bjoerling made of Rodolfo's aria from the first act of *bohème*. He put it on and cried. I began collecting and listening to opera recordings. Dad took me to my first opera in the old Boston Opera House, *la bohème*, by the San Carlo Opera Company. Sad to say the opera house is gone. What a tragedy, tearing down our beloved opera house. Then he took me to my first symphony, Munch and the BSO in the *Symphonie Fantastique*.

**EM:** It can't get better than that.

**RDC:** It changed my life forever. Recently I discussed that with Stéphane Denève (<http://www.laopus.com/2015/08/stephane-deneve-creates-repertoire-of.html>) (<http://www.broadwayworld.com/boston/article/BWW-Interviews-Stphane-Denve-Helps-Create-the-Repertoire-of-Tomorrow-20150810>), one of our premier guest conductors. He said (French accent), "You've heard Munch? *Mon Dieu*, what was it like?" I had to explain to him how electrifying it was to hear the March to the Scaffold. The rafters were shaking. The late great (BSO timpanist) Vic Firth told me later on when I became host for the Boston Symphony broadcasts, "It was an *event* when Munch conducted. Simply fantastic." That's the way he described it. Munch had that strong connection with Berlioz and Debussy and Ravel. It was in his DNA. So you can imagine what a high standard that set for me. Little did I know when I was there, 1952 or '53, that one day I would be up in that broadcast booth. I had no idea I'd ever achieve that. I didn't even think about it at the time. I was just starting to break into radio.

**EM:** What caused your burning passion for radio?

**RDC:** Probably because I was a frustrated musician. When I was 6 or 7 I had this little baton and used to conduct to the *William Tell Overture*, the Toscanini recording. My cousin Walter had an old beat up trumpet. I found this nice Italian man in my neighborhood to give me lessons. I began to play along with records, jazz by Stan Kenton and Harry James - I tried to imitate him, and improvise. But my skills were limited. I struggled with it. I didn't think I had the discipline to make it as a musician. But I always had this love of radio. Listening to great broadcasts on the Metropolitan Opera, with Milton Cross, made a big impact on me. The NBC Symphony Orchestra with Ben Grauer. The Voice of Firestone, the Bell Telephone Hour. On any given night you could hear on radio, and later on watch on television, some of the greatest opera singers, conductors and instrumentalists in the world. I decided to try and emulate what I heard on radio. I built this little radio station in my bedroom, with a turntable and my records. I imagined myself on the radio, broadcasting to myself. I wrote little scripts, introductions, and made *believe* I was on the air. That was the beginning. Then I started visiting radio stations. My father would take me with him to Boston to pick up his art supplies, we'd visit the Museum of Fine Arts and he'd say, "Where do you want to go?" I'd say, "Dad, take me to some radio

stations.” We’d visit those stations and I imagined I was one of those broadcasters. I’d look at them behind the big glass and knew I wanted to do that.

**EM:** you found that way of expressing yourself.

**RDC:** Exactly. I knew I wanted to be on the radio. The question was how to get there. Both my parents were schoolteachers, didn’t have much money, but Dad bought me a little VM reel-to-reel tape recorder. So in my little studio, my bedroom, I could play back and hear how I sounded. And I sounded terrible. I had a “Bahston” accent. My uncle was mayor of Quincy. He had a contact with the owner of the community radio station WJDA and told the owner, “My nephew wants to get into radio.” The owner said, “Send him down.” I was 16 and here I am on the verge of maybe getting my first radio job. I brought down my precious little tape, hit the play button, and this came out (high-pitched voice): “Hi. I’m Ron Della Chiesa. Today we’re gonna hear some music by Debussy and Ravel.” It was just awful. He stopped the recording and said, “Well, you know your music, but your accent is terrible. The voice is not quite there yet.” I was devastated, but I went home and started to practice my delivery, pacing, inflection, timing, and trying to get rid of that Boston accent. I wrote down all these problematic words - “Cah, bah, Hahvahd Yahd, doah.” I’d say them in a Boston accent and re-record them the way they were supposed to be. “Car, bar, never.” It hurts back here in the throat to say “R” in Boston.

**EM:** I never thought of it that way.

**RDC:** [Honking noise] “R, r...” It’s easy to flatten it out, to say,” Ah, cah, yahd, goin’ to the bah, close the doah.” “Get the *car*, it’s in the *yard*, close the *door*.” You have to bring it back. It’s a major effort to conquer that. I still have it when I’m relaxed.

**EM:** What did you do next?

**RDC:** I went to Boston University, took two years of Liberal Arts and transferred to the School of Communication. They had a student-run radio station, WBUR. After graduating I got my first radio job, WBOS, an ethnic radio station, hired by a famous guy who had one of the first Rock N’ Roll shows, Arnie “Woo-Woo” Ginsburg. I was still going to college, working my way through, in a shipyard in Quincy. Nights I would do my radio job, 6 to 10. I met some wonderful characters. I liked comedy, too, so I was doing little bits on the side. I had this passion for jazz.

**EM:** Where did that come from?

**RDC:** I loved the sound of the big bands. I developed a great interest in Sinatra, his wonderful arrangements, his style of delivery. I loved listening to great innovators like Charlie Parker and Dizzy Gillespie. I started hanging out at jazz clubs. I was a member of the Teenage Jazz Club. I attended one of the first Newport Jazz Festivals.

**EM:** What year was that?

**RDC:** 1955, the year I graduated from high school. In one night I heard Louis Armstrong, Dave Brubeck, Erroll Garner, Duke Ellington’s band, Ella Fitzgerald.

**EM:** All live and in person.

**RDC:** It was incredible. And I heard them in Symphony Hall. Norman Granz, a pioneer in the classical music world, presented concerts in opera houses and symphony halls. He had a group come to Boston every year in the late 50s, Jazz in the Philharmonic, every major name in jazz. I was developing a parallel career going to the opera and symphony hall, and Fiedler and the Pops. All this was combined with my passion for radio.

**EM:** When did you start doing radio interviews?

**RDC:** When I was a student at BU School of Communication I had a radio show on WBUR. My first was with Howard Hanson, who was in Boston for a concert. What a charming man. He had a little goatee, looked kind of like a famous French painter. I went up to his room with my LP of the Romantic Symphony, Symphony No. 2, and my reel-to-reel tape recorder. He was delightful. He signed the album for me. I have it, it's a treasure. My first opera interview was Eileen Farrell.

**EM:** That must have been amazing.

**RDC:** I had never interviewed an opera singer. She was just like me, sang opera, loved jazz. A crossover before crossover. She came to Boston College in the 1960s, sang the Poulenc *Gloria*. I said, "Miss Farrell, I really enjoyed your Poulenc performance. It must be wonderful singing at the Met." She said, "No, it isn't. That Bing is a jerk." And she unloaded on the Met, she just let it rip. "I don't want to sing that stuff, Gluck. I want to sing Wagner. He doesn't give me any of that to sing. I was meant to sing Wagner." She stayed at the Met for only 5 or 6 years, sang *Chenier*, Santuzza, but never Wagner. She did make a great Wagner recording with Munch, the "Immolation Scene," which is a classic. We became very good friends. I wrote about her in my book, *Radio My Way*. In the jazz world my first interview was with a group called The Four Freshmen. They sang with Stan Kenton's orchestra. They're still around today. The original group no longer but they carried on with four other musicians who have that sound. It's a very west coast sound. I developed an interest in west coast jazz. Jerry Mulligan, Chet Baker. I was reading books on jazz, hanging out at clubs, going to Symphony Hall. It was great growing up in Quincy, so close to Boston.

**EM:** Seems like there was more crossover between jazz and classical then.

**RDC:** And there was Fiedler, such a giant then, though everybody took him for granted. For 50 years it was like, "Oh, yeah, Arthur Fiedler." But his programming was unprecedented. No one in classical music was doing The Beatles. The elitists in classical music didn't like that. Messing with the classics. Veering away from the format. But he kept it solid. He would open lighter, do a major work in between more light stuff. That tradition continues with Keith (Lockhart). Fiedler was the one who broke through.

**EM:** He set the stage for what's been going on with the Pops ever since. You've also interviewed Luciano Pavarotti.

**RDC:** That was set up through my friend Francis Robinson, assistant manager of the Met. Wonderful man. He knew so much about the Met's Golden Age and wrote several books, a great

book on Caruso. He knew I wanted to interview Pavarotti, who came to Boston for his first performance here, *Daughter of the Regiment*. Francis set up the phone conversation. I called and Pavarotti answered, (Italian accent) “*Pronto?*” We talked. He said, “You speak Italian?” I said, “A little bit.” He said, “We do in English, we talk in libretto Italian.” He told me the wonderful story about growing up in Modena. His best friend was the great singer Mirella Freni. He said, “We shared the same wet nurse. There was something in that milk, the milk coat our throat. Nice, no?” So that was my interview with Pavarotti. After he died they found it and aired it on NPR. One of the few early interviews on the telephone. I still have it.

**[BREAK]**

Part 2: Ron Della Chiesa Reveals Secrets of “One of the Best Jobs in Broadcasting -  
“From Copland to Count Basie”

**EM:** Your Broadcasters Hall of Fame award must have been very gratifying.

**RDC:** It was. I’d carved out this niche for myself and feel very fortunate. Sometimes I think I have one of the best jobs in broadcasting. It doesn’t get much better than what I’m doing. I work with a great team. Being involved with the Boston Symphony, even though I’m not a musician, I feel a part of what’s going on. I get to be a part of so many orchestra members in my own way in the broadcast booth. The enthusiasm for what we do comes out over the air waves.

**EM:** You’re about as close as it gets to actually sitting in the orchestra.

**RDC:** Looking down at them, watching everything on a television monitor and hearing it through the headsets, hearing the audio mix going out, is a whole different experience from being out in the hall. Very intense. When I sit in the hall it’s another experience to hear it live.

**EM:** In the broadcast booth you have a perspective nobody else has. That must feel amazing.

**RDC:** It does. So exciting. For example, the ending of any one of Mahler’s symphonies. It’s almost difficult to get myself together to go on. Very emotional.

**EM:** It’s amazing how you do that - objective vs. subjective. Everybody admires you so much for that.

**RDC:** One of the tricks is you always have to be careful about not stepping on the music, talking over it. Conductors have different ways of getting to the podium. Some really hustle, others very leisurely. The trick is to get it all out in the introduction before the downbeat. You do *not* want to overstep. I’ve been very lucky. It’s never happened. If the intermission is running a little long we have to cut, ad lib and get away from the script, because we can see things are tight. We might have an audio clip with an interview, say with Joshua Bell. All of a sudden I’ll hear through the headsets from (producer) Brian McCreath, “Okay, we’re going to cut out.” Bing. And I’ll just say, “That was Joshua Bell,” get out of the script and get back as quickly as I can, because I know things are going to happen. It’s an improvisational skill.

**EM:** An art you've developed over many years now, and a talent, too.

**RDC:** Sometimes I'm so enthusiastic I'll break away from the script and just reflect on my own personal feelings about, for example, Yo-Yo Ma. What can you say that hasn't been said? He's like a rock star. There's always throngs of kids waiting to see him, just meet him and have him sign a program.

**EM:** A classical rock star. We need more of those. Speaking of which, this is the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Frank Sinatra's birth. You're a Sinatra specialist. What's your perspective on him, and how have you been celebrating?

**RDC:** I've been doing a series of lectures on his life, which I see in three acts. The first was coming out of Hoboken, becoming a big band singer. Harry James hired him the first time and he went on the road with Tommy Dorsey. He stayed about a year and a half and then went off on his own. That ended act one. He became a major solo singer, started recording with Columbia Records as a solo artist, with different arrangers. That's act two. In the early 50s he gets into some really serious problems with his voice, his divorce, his involvement with Ava Gardner. He loses his voice and record contract and is in serious trouble financially. His marriage over, he marries Gardner and is on the road to ruin. That's the end of act two. Then he makes the movie *From Here to Eternity*, wins the Academy Award for best supporting actor, reinvents himself. Gets hired by Capitol Records, comes back in act three as the Swinging Sinatra. A great period at Capitol with Nelson Riddle, Billy May, Gordon Jenkins. Leaves Capitol, forms his own Reprise company and takes us all through the 60s, right up to his retirement. So we have the early years with the big bands, the solo Sinatra after he leaves Dorsey, becoming a big star, making movies, the collapse and the end of that, the ascent again. It's like an opera.

**EM:** Or a movie.

**RDC:** One of his favorite composers was Puccini. He even had a restaurant in Hollywood called Puccini's. Sinatra's favorite singer was Tony Bennett. We've had this wonderful relationship. (My wife) Joyce and I were visiting Tony once at his home, where he proudly displayed these photos that said, "To Tony, the best damn singer in the world. Love, Frank." Frank never forgot the people who supported him during his down years. Tony has the torch now, at 89. On the road with Lady Gaga, packing them in at Tanglewood. Joyce is the godmother to Antonia Bennett. Tony is very much like Sinatra in that they're Old World entertainers. They're dedicated to their friends.

**EM:** And they both have golden voices.

**RDC:** Frank changed so much about singing because he had the ability to do *legato* lines, the *bel canto* sound in his early days, to lay back and swing hard and collaborate so well with his arrangers. Yet he was not a trained musician. He just intuitively knew how to do it.

**EM:** What are some of your other lectures?

**RDC:** I lecture on opera, great opera singers of the past. I bring my little RCA Victrola, wind it up, play the recordings. Joyce and I did an interesting event with Cat Silirie of the restaurant No. 9 Park (<http://no9park.com>) where we matched wine and food with opera singers. There's a connection there. Certain wine and food resonates with coloratura sopranos or with dark voices like Tito Ruffo's. You can feel the sound and incorporate it into what you're eating. Cat is very good at that. She can describe every little subtlety of wine to perfection.

**EM:** Sounds like an event any opera lover would jump at. One final question. Opera, symphony, jazz, pop. Which is your greatest passion?

**RDC:** Opera moves me because of my earliest experiences of voices I heard coming from my father's Victrola and radio - those arias, melodies, ensembles and overtures embedded in my musical psyche resonate in a special way as I get older. Sometimes I get so emotionally involved if I hear an opera selection. For example, the Intermezzo from *Manon Lescaut* never fails to move me. If I'm driving I have to pull off and just listen to it. Wotan's Farewell from *Die Walküre*. Talk about sublime music. [Sings] "Da, da, da, da dee da..." Other moments - I would say all of Puccini, the great Verdi aria from *Don Carlo*, *Ella giammai m'amò*. Everybody who knows opera knows that. But then I listen to Tony Bennett sing "Stranger in Paradise." He soars with the best of them because he's basically a *bel canto* singer. In jazz, Coleman Hawkins playing "Body and Soul" - that's a definitive recording if ever there was one. Anything by Louis Armstrong.

**EM:** You love it all.

**RDC:** It all moves me in different ways. Doing what I'm doing at my age sometimes I really feel I have the best job in radio right now for where I'm at in my career. Like the great Cy Coleman song, "The best is yet to come."

**EM:** Your theme song.

**RDC:** Years ago WGBH had a slogan on 89.7, "A world of choice." Occasionally when I was doing my Music America show - a very eclectic blend of all kinds of music with an American face to it, from Copland to Count Basie, from Sinatra to Tony Bennett - I would say, "Today instead of a world of choice it's a world of Joyce." Because I live in my wife's world, Joyce's world. She's all the world to me. "All the World to Me" is our song because that's one of her favorite songs that Tony Bennett recorded. A great song, from *Bandwagon*, I think. [Sings] "Da-da, da-da, da da da da da. You're all the world to me." She is my anchor, my foundation. My rock.

**EM:** That's a wonderful sentiment. Anything you'd like to add?

**RDC:** You know the feeling I get when I come in to the hall, literally dragging people off the street? One experience in that hall with the orchestra can change their life. You can come back again and again. It's a positive addiction for young people. How many places can you go where you're held captive for these two hours by one man and a hundred musicians? Like it was two hundred years ago. Nothing basically has changed - the way you play the instrument, the sound of the hall - we all know Symphony Hall is one of the great halls of the world - and an audience

made up of everybody. Brain surgeons, construction workers, students, lawyers, attorneys, politicians. They all come together, held captive in that hall. How many places can you achieve that in life today? There are so many other options, thousands of places involved with the Internet. But for this two hours you're in another place and time and world.

**EM:** And it's a real world, not virtual. Symphony Hall is real. It's live. There's nothing else like it.

**RDC:** With nothing else in the way. It's wide open, uncontaminated, until that moment of silence after the orchestra's tuned. There's such power in that. You know something's about to happen - Okay, now what? And then those first chords. Where else can you experience that? Think about it. Maybe in nature, walking along the ocean. It's good for whatever ails you.

**EM:** That's a great slogan. "Good for whatever ails you - The Boston Symphony."

Ron's broadcasts can be heard on Saturdays at 8 pm EST at WCRB 99.5 FM  
(<http://www.wgbh.org/995/bso.cfm?MM=1>)