

The Note That Makes Us Weep By DANIEL J. WAKIN

A PUBLICIST long ago gave Luciano Pavarotti the sobriquet King of the High C's, for his remarkable ability to hit and sing the heck out of one of the highest notes of the tenor voice. The tag followed Mr. Pavarotti, who died last week, into most of his obituaries.

His voice, especially earlier in his career, was remarkable across its range. But that little note, an octave above middle C on the piano, played a role in projecting Mr. Pavarotti's fame around the world. That is no surprise. The tenor high C has a long and noble tradition, and a healthy dose of mystique.

"It's the absolute summit of technique," said Craig Rutenberg, the Metropolitan Opera's director of musical administration — in effect, its chief vocal coach. "More than anywhere else in your voice, you have to know what you're doing. To me it signals a self-confidence in the singer that lets him communicate to us that he knows what he's doing and he has something very important to express with that note."

Tenor high C's are scattered throughout the opera literature. Sometimes tenors transpose the aria down slightly or drop an octave, other times they fake it and edge into falsetto voice, where it is easier to sing. Just as often, they hit it, and hold it, and that moment is one of the most exciting in an opera house. It is moments like those when opera, in addition to the aesthetic joys and emotional satisfactions, can seem like a spectator sport or a circus high-wire act. They're times when opera audiences cheer or jeer.

But the high C has a more visceral, spine-tingling lure.

"The reason it's so exciting to people is, it's based on the human cry," said Maitland Peters, chairman of the voice department at the Manhattan School of Music. "It's instinctual. It's like a baby. You're pulled into it." When a tenor sings a ringing high C, it seems, "there's nothing in his way," Mr. Peters said.

The pitch, in itself, has a satisfying quality. The key of C major, after all, is a stable, cheerful, happy key, the one with no sharps or flats.

Fascination may also derive from the fact that high tenor notes are somewhat freakish. Women have high voices, and men have low voices. For a male to sing that high with such power somehow seems unnatural.

With one important exception: through the 18th century, the most celebrated singers were castrati, boys altered before puberty who grew into men with powerful high voices. Un-altered tenors rarely got higher than an A without singing falsetto. Many of their roles were decidedly unheroic, like the slightly wimpy Don Ottavio in Mozart's "Don Giovanni." But the style was one of grace and agility.

Then, with the rise of Romanticism and a taste for bolder singing — and perhaps a distaste for gelding — the modern tenor voice was born. The first notable tenor to hit a modern high C was the Frenchman Gilbert-Louis Duprez. He sang the note not with a falsetto but with a chest voice, at the first performance of Rossini's "Guillaume Tell," in 1831. Rossini was not pleased. The sound, he said, was like "the squawk of a capon with its throat cut."

But there was no turning back, especially with the heroic tenor voices demanded by Wagnerian opera.

In the mid-20th century, Alfredo Kraus, Franco Corelli and Jussi Bjoerling had great high C's. Curiously, Enrico Caruso, arguably the greatest opera celebrity, had a weak one and had to work hard to develop his top. Plácido Domingo, who extended his voice up from the baritone range and who is widely admired for his musicianship and artistry, is also not known for pinging high C's. An unkind joke among singers has him dubbed "Mingo." "Where's the 'Do?'" someone is asked. "He doesn't have one," goes the answer, "do" being the singing syllable for C.

Mr. Pavarotti won his place in the pantheon of high C's with a run of Donizetti's "Fille du Régiment" in the 1972-1973 season at the Met. The aria "Pour mon âme" calls for nine of them in a row, and Mr. Pavarotti tossed them off brilliantly. In 1995, it was a different story. Singing the same aria, he transposed the notes down, missed the first and eventually left the stage for his understudy to take over.

Being able to hit the note consistently, in the context of a moving line and with a ringing, beautiful sound, requires talent, but also technique.

Mr. Peters, of the Manhattan School, said the chest voice, the strongest source of sound, and the head voice, where the sound vibrates in the head's cavities, must be perfectly balanced. The base of the tongue, the jaw, the larynx must all lie in just the right position, unrestricted by tension.

Mr. Pavarotti once described the feeling this way: "Excited and happy, but with a strong undercurrent of fear. The moment I actually hit the note, I almost lose consciousness. A physical, animal sensation seizes me. Then I regain control."

The tenor Juan Diego Flórez, also acclaimed for his top, will sing "Fille" at the Met in April. He said in an interview on Thursday that he imagines a keyboard in his head, and reaches for the note there.

"You think very high," he said. "You give a lot of space in your throat." Mr. Flórez said that as he is heading for the high C's in "Fille," he feels the adrenaline flow. "It has to sound very spontaneous and happy," he said. "You have to hit them without effort. But that's the acting. You're concentrating on making those notes sound great."

When he feels them vibrating correctly in his head, the pleasure is deep. "The public can feel that," he said.

Sometimes, a pleasure it ain't. Adolphe Nourrit was the reigning tenor in Paris until Duprez came along with that new-fangled C. Nourrit struggled to keep up with his younger rival, but could not muster the note. That fact, it was said, helped lead him to suicide.

Quite possibly a case of death on the high C's.