

Walking in Mephisto: Pavarotti's penchant revealed

Even for those who have never been to the opera, there is no mistaking the sound of the late Luciano Pavarotti's voice or his distinctive appearance. Born in 1935 in Modena, Italy, the great singer is known across the globe for his sensational talent and flamboyant personality. He was one of the celebrated Three Tenors (with José Carreras and Plácido Domingo), who gave sparkling concerts in the build-up to the Fifa World Cup Final in 1990, 1994, 1998 and 2002. Furthermore, Pavarotti's private life was often in the media spotlight as he was no stranger to scandal. But, despite his extremely public profile, very few people would be able to say what he liked to wear on his feet. Indeed, although people always remember his signature white handkerchief—which he was first seen with in 1973 when he performed with a heavy cold—it is doubtful that they would ever have noticed his long term fascination with Mephisto shoes.

One man who remembers vividly, however, is Greg Nicoghiosian. Based in Montreal, Canada, Mr Nicoghiosian and his brothers, Raffi and Elie, own high-end shoe retailer TF Firma, which specialises in high-end comfort footwear. The company was passed down to their father—who opened his first shop in Montréal in 1981—from their grandfather, who started making



Luciano Pavarotti had a lifelong devotion to Mephisto shoes.

shoes in 1922. Among the brands it now sells are Allen Edmonds, Calvin Klein, Hush Puppies, Clarks, Ecco, Puma and, of course, the previously mentioned Mephisto.

In fact, the retailer's reputation as a reliable source of shoes from the French manufacturer is even reflected in the names of three of its outlets. It runs Mephisto Concept Stores in Montreal's Eaton Centre, Carrefour Laval and Promenades St-Bruno shopping malls, as well as shops under its own TF Firma and TF Concept banners.

"Luciano always wore Mephisto, all through his life," explains Greg Nicoghiosian, TF Firma chief executive. His own personal experience with the star began in 1997 when he received a telephone call from Pavarotti's manager. Due to perform in the city, the singer was desperately trying to

"Luciano always wore Mephisto, all through his life," explains Greg Nicoghiosian, TF Firma chief executive.

find out where he could buy a new pair of Mephisto shoes and a friend tipped him off about TF Firma. The singer's manager contacted one of the company's stores to enquire about the selection of Mephisto shoes it had in stock and revealed that Mr Pavarotti was interested in buying the shoes. "I really thought it was a prank," says the CEO. "I told the caller 'Sure, by all means' and thought no more about it."

A call from the Maestro

But this was just the beginning of the company's relationship with the famous tenor. On arrival in Montreal, Pavarotti's manager asked Mr Nicoghiosian and his team to bring a range of Mephisto styles to the Vogue Hotel, where the party was staying. "So the store goes to the Maestro," says Mr Nicoghiosian, revealing the nickname they affectionately used for the singer. They took eight to ten pairs of shoes in various colours and styles—all in US and Canada size 9.5—to show him and were greeted warmly by the great man himself. "That's all you brought?" enquired



One of TF Firma's Mephisto Concept Stores in Montreal.

Pavarotti when he saw the shoes. He told us to 'bring some more' in his typical Italian way," he recalls, laughing. Obediently, the team went back to the store and returned with approximately 30 more pairs of shoes, boots and sandals, many of which he intended to purchase and send to other people as gifts.

"He kept calling family and friends in Italy to ask what size they all wore and which colours they would prefer," explains Mr Nicoghiosian. The team made two more trips to the store and back, returning each time laden with stacks of shoes, boots and sandals. "By this time the hotel suite looked almost like a shoe store," he says. The experience finished shortly after midnight, by which time 63 pairs of shoes had been selected, including several pairs for his children, first wife and manager. Just eight or nine pairs were for Pavarotti himself. He handed over his credit card and instructed the company to return with five suitcases to pack the shoes in the next day so they could be sent off to Italy by private jet. The singer allowed Mr Nicoghiosian to take just one photograph. "I put my hand on his shoulder but he shook it off

immediately," says the executive, "I thought he was offended but he wasn't. He wanted me to stand in front of him to hide his size," he explains.

The store's second encounter with the Maestro took place some time later, in February 2002. Amid a fierce Canadian snowstorm, TF Firma staff drove a truck across town to his hotel, which was the Ritz this time. "Again he greets us and tells us what he needs," Mr Nicoghiosian says. "We brought all that he wanted and more."

However, the process took longer than expected because there were several distractions. At nine o'clock the singer, whose personal chef travelled everywhere with him, and his entourage sat down to dinner, which was cooked to his exact specification, according to Mr Nicoghiosian. After this, Pavarotti took a short nap, and this was followed by a practice session with a soprano singing partner, which lasted more than an hour. The shopping spree resumed shortly after midnight.

"Once he had decided what he wanted, we were told to lay all the shoes out on the dining table," says Mr Nicoghiosian. "He then sat in

silence, meditating over all the pairs—54 in total—and thinking about each colour and style. He thanked us profusely."

The footwear retailer was granted one more photograph with the opera giant, and was also given third-row tickets for Pavarotti's performance, which he happily accepted. "I attended with my wife and mother and was amazed to see Pavarotti charge onto the stage wearing his Mephisto shoes," he claims. Mr Nicoghiosian describes the singer, who died of pancreatic cancer in September 2007 at the age of 71, as "very warm" and "very Italian". "He was always asking me for better prices," the owner reveals.

High instep

At first glance, one might wonder what caught Pavarotti's eye when he first encountered the Mephisto collection, and exactly why he fell in love with the shoes. Though smart in appearance, and clearly made from quality materials, the footwear might appear rather ordinary amid the glamorous tuxedo and champagne world in which Pavarotti appeared to live. Mr Nicoghiosian explains that ➤

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the main appeal for the singer was the way the shoes fitted him as the singer had a wide foot and high instep, which made it much more difficult for him to find comfortable shoes.

The first Mephisto shoes he was probably fitted with allowed him to simply become addicted to their comfort. "The key to comfort is how you feel at the end of the day," the TF chief executive claims. With all the travelling and performing the celebrated singer had to do, and the considerable weight he was carrying, Pavarotti needed to be able to rely on his shoes. Mr Nicoghossian estimates that the star had more than 50 pairs of Mephisto shoes in his wardrobe. His standout favourite style was the Match—a sturdy lace-up shoe which, incidentally, is the brand's number-one selling walking shoe. "He liked the taupe nubuck version best," he says, "but on stage he wore black grain leather, code 714." Both styles

retail at approximately US\$400.

Established in Sarrebourg, France, back in 1965 by Michael Michaeli, the original Mephisto shoe was based on a moccasin design, although the brand now features a wide range of styles, including city, sport and leisure models. Mr Michaeli's vision was to make "the world's most comfortable walking shoe" and it would seem that, in Pavarotti's eyes at least, this dream has actually been realised. A subsidiary was established in Canada in 1989 and the brand has grown in popularity across the country ever since. Mephisto now exports to more than 60 countries worldwide and has almost 3,000 employees. Annual sales are approximately 100 million pairs, the bulk of which are sold in Germany, Austria and Switzerland.

And its growing celebrity clientele has helped to raise the brand's profile

on a global scale. Other well-known visitors to TF Firma's store include world-famous actors such as Robert De Niro, Al Pacino, Denzel Washington and Sean Connery. Moreover, "Cate Blanchett wears the brand in her film Babel as well as in real life," according to Mr Nicoghossian. "And, around two months ago, Jet Li came into the store. He was very reserved and kept a low profile," he relates. The company is unlikely to have an encounter with any other celebrity that would come close to its two experiences with Pavarotti, however. "It was truly unique," says Mr Nicoghossian, who speaks about the singer with great fondness. The eccentric manner of shopping described above fits well with the larger-than-life image Pavarotti will always be remembered for, and certainly does not appear to have done the Mephisto brand any harm. 🌐

“...and it should be noted...”



COMPLEX SOLE TECHNOLOGY

Mephisto goes to great lengths to make its shoes comfortable. Its website shows no less than 18 comfort factors that are built into each shoe. Although the use of full grain leather, Gore-Tex linings and careful padding of key parts of the upper all play a part, it is the sole and insole that are the key factors.

These are extremely complex. Each sole is moulded from natural rubber with a microcellular mid section and a specially treaded wearing surface. The forepart contains an airbag and the heel a shock absorption insert, both of which reduce joint stress over uneven surfaces. In addition, there is latex foam padding

between the sole and the insole. Inside the shoe is an anatomically moulded removable innersole. And, as if this was not enough, there is also a valve in the heel that pumps air throughout the microcellular structure of the sole.

Many would regard this as both too complex and expensive. Mephisto shoes are certainly not cheap but they are both very well made and extremely comfortable. This makes them ideal for people who spend a great deal of time on their feet or who may be built along similar lines to the great Pavarotti.