

On the Beat  
Thomas Staudter

Mary Mancini and Mario Tacca

Among the notable, internationally renowned musical artists who reside here in Westchester are the married couple, soprano Mary Mancini and accordionist-composer Mario Tacca. They have performed together for over 40 years, engaging audiences with both secular and sacred music that spans a number of genres—classical, pop, gospel, you name it, while also visiting traditional songs from a number of countries, most often Italy and France.

On most Sundays you can hear Mancini and Tacca at the Church of the Assumption in Peekskill guiding the liturgical music and hymns for the congregation. While the church is where the couple has long attended as well (Mancini, a Peekskill native, was baptized in the church), you would be surprised how many musical artists have side gigs at churches, synagogues and other places of worship.

Anyway, Mancini and Tacca will be focusing on the pop and secular side of their repertoire on Friday, Jan. 27 when they perform from 7 to 10 p.m. at Rini's Restaurant in Elmsford. Maybe an early Valentine's Day celebration? Since the couple has a sizable following and many, many friends who treasure these musical occasions at smaller, more intimate venues, it is recommended that you make reservations as soon as possible.

For readers unfamiliar with the magic that Mancini and Tacca regularly create, a number of live clips of their performances are available on YouTube, including the duo gracing "The House I Live In," or Tacca ripping up "Tico Tico" with a big band, or Mancini soaring through "O sole mio," sung in Neapolitan, with the Hallandale Symphonic Orchestra.

When I spoke with Mancini and Tacca by phone earlier this week at their home in Cortlandt Manor, they had just

finished dinner: roasted salmon with fresh broccoli and a salad, along with a sauce made from *bacala*, the salted and dried cod. Tacca had a baked potato, too, while Mancini shied away from the extra carbs. Dessert was a compote from apple slices and raisins.

"I love to cook—it's my second passion behind music," said Mancini. As for her husband—"He makes great coffee and eats."

The couple has long endeavored to keep in top physical shape because of their grueling work schedule; some years they clock in more than 200 concerts, shows and appearances. Tacca teaches privately as well, while Mancini serves as a vocal coach for select clients in New York City. There is little room for sick days or stretches of low-energy for these two septuagenarians.

Exercise is important for Mancini and Tacca as well, another key to their career longevity I realize. For many years the couple practiced *tai chi* but are now adepts of *qi gong*, mostly for its healing and energy building qualities.

"We both believe in the value of taking care of ourselves, which is important because of the demands of our careers," said Mancini. "We both have been blessed with artistic gifts, and our artistic training has been long and substantial. We take supplements, watch our diets and benefit from the powerful energy that comes with exercise. This way we can share our gifts for as long as possible."

Tacca added that he walks for at least 20 minutes a few times a day, and when the weather is bad, he rides a recumbent bicycle.

"This morning I worked on my abs and did a combo of exercises before walking," Tacca said, sounding more like a millennial returning from the fitness club.

Mancini and Tacca have been



Mario Tacca and Mary Mancini

married 47 years. Each had a short previous marriage that produced children—two boys for Tacca and a daughter for Mancini. They raised their blended family in Cortlandt Manor and today have eight grandchildren to dote on.

When Tacca mentioned he also has a glass of wine every night with dinner, Mancini began to reminisce about her father, who made red and white wine at home. "The aroma and fragrance from the grapes and wine in our basement was always there in our house," she recalled, enough so that she rarely touches the stuff today.

Raised on South Division Street in Peekskill, Mancini was surrounded by music as a child and always wanted to sing. Her paternal grandfather played mandolin, and on Sundays the family gatherings featured everyone joining in on one song after another. A piano at her grandmother's house nearby captivated young Mary, and at age five she was readily picking out melodies and singing along.

"You couldn't tear me away from the piano," said Mancini.

Recognizing her musical abilities, Mancini's parents arranged for her to have singing and piano lessons, and her first public performance was singing solo on stage at the Church of Assumption's school when she was in fourth grade. She ended up going to Lakeland High School (and singing leads in the musicals, listening to Ella Fitzgerald and leading her own vocal trio, the Honey Tones), worked in the school's guidance office after graduation for two years, and then spent a decade in the legal department at IBM's Thomas J. Watson Research Center—all the while continuing with intense vocals studies and occasional performances—when she decided to dedicate her career to the tuneful arts.

Watching Mancini sing you realize she is putting her entire being into every song.

"Being born with this kind of gift—and I truly believe that everyone has a certain gift that is special—it's important to take advantage of it and share it," said Mancini. "I put myself into the role of every piece of music I sing. Thanks to my wide range, I can tackle different kinds of music, but that's also the result of 22 years of study and countless years of performing and developing my technique. But singing is always a manner of storytelling. I pick music that I have fallen in love with and which matches my musicianship."

So, who picks the songs for each performance, Mancini or Tacca?

"We both do!" laughed Mancini.

Tacca explained that at a gig like Rini's, their repertoire of impromptu, relaxed renditions of popular songs will do.

"You have to read the crowd," said Tacca, "and make sure your music fits in with the ambience." The Rini's gig, he added, will give the duo an opportunity to pick songs much different that what they perform at larger venues, like at the Garden State Arts Center, when they performed for over 8,000 people, or the 3,500 seat Golden Opera House in Szechuan, China.

Originally from a small village in the Abruzzo region of Italy, east of Rome and near the Apennine Mountains, Tacca moved with his family to the Alsace region of France when he was six. In Italy, Tacca's father had a good job in the cable car industry that was busy in the mountains, but he sensed opportunities for his three sons would be limited.

In France, Tacca's family had a friend who played the accordion and visited weekly. He left the accordion with the Taccas on occasion, and young Mario began to pick it up and play the songs that he watched from memory. Seeing this talent, Tacca's father arranged for accordion lessons, but Tacca soon outdistanced his teacher.

Tacca had started on the piano accordion, which gave him proficiency on keyboard instruments. Eventually, like most French accordion players, he was playing the chromatic button accordion. Abetted by a voracious appetite for all kinds of music, Tacca's growing virtuosity was recognized at local and regional competitions, which he easily won, and then his international fame grew when he captured top honors at the World Cup of Italy and the Grand Prix of Paris. A graduate of the Anzaghi Conservatory of Music in Milan, he emigrated to the U.S. in 1959, and two years later became the first chromatic button accordion player to win the International Accordion Competition held in Carnegie Hall.

"I listened closely to the great accordion players of my time, memorized their styles and copied them, and was able to capitalize on all of that while developing my own style," said Tacca.

Mancini and Tacca have a rehearsal and recording studio in their home, and over the years have released 10 albums of music between them.

"We listen, learn, study and grow—to this day," said Mancini. "The magic comes with the transformation of all that information into your own style and voice. With experience you realize that the process of practice—and practicing your art—provides you with this understanding of what you should keep and what you should let go artistically."

Mary Mancini and Mario Tacca will perform on Friday, Jan. 27 at Rini's Restaurant, 12 West Main Street, Elmsford. The music begins at 7 p.m. Reservations are highly recommended. For more info, call (914) 592-6799 or visit [rinisristorante.com](http://rinisristorante.com).