SYMPOSIUM RECORDS 1069

FRANCESCO MARCONI

This Compact Disc is one of a series which presents recordings of singers of major importance who recorded in the years before 1910. The records have been chosen for their musical and historical value. All are of extreme rarity and most have been unavailable in any form for eighty years or more. Great care has been taken to transfer the voices as vividly as possible even though this has inevitably required inclusion of more mechanical noise than one would wish. Similar care has been exercised in determining the speeds at which to transfer them, the more so since the Compact Disc medium normally offers no possibility of variation.

Biographical Notes

'In the years of his youth he had no rivals, other than Gayarre. Devoid of education, he yet possessed a marvellous instinct which spurred him into singing, like the birds, almost spontaneously.' Thus wrote Arturo Lancellotti (Le Voci d'Oro) of Francesco ('Checco') Marconi, one of the greatest historical figures whose voice and style have been preserved by the gramophone. For here we have a tenor who learned his craft in the 1870s and earned his place among the select few - Gayarre, Masini, Stagno, and Tamagno - who were then household names.

Marconi was bom in Rome on May 14th 1853 or, according to Schmidl, 1855. His father was an ironmonger whose business failed during the upheavals which attended the Papal State in Francesco's youth. The young man was obliged to take employment in a carpentry business whose principal product was coffins. He never shrank from revealing his humble origins; indeed, he rather gloried in them. He had an earthy and irreverent humour. Once, at the precise moment when Fanny Toresella - late, as was her wont - arrived at rehearsal, Marconi, who had been awaiting her for some time and in some annoyance, made a choice Roman comment. Toresella, affronted at what she had heard, said to him: 'It is easy to see that you were a carpenter!' In a trice he replied: 'Always ready to make you a coffin!' Such an interchange, however, did not prevent the two artists from forming a friendship which caused many a whisper in operatic circles.

One day, crossing Piazza della Pigna with Carlo Montani, Checco halted before a door. 'Do you see this door? It is four metres high and two-and-a-halfwide! I made it with my own hands when I was a boy.' And to a

merchant who disputed some defects which Marconi had uncovered in furniture that he wanted to purchase: ‘But perhaps you think that you, who cannot distinguish between a plane and a saw, can give lessons to me, who eamed a living for years as a carpenter.’ But he was, and justly so, proud of having raised himself: ‘... from working as a carpenter’, as he would say, ‘to being seated at Tsar Alexander III’s right hand at dinner, and being received at Court in Madrid as though it were my own house.’

However, he laboured at the artisan's bench until he was twenty. After a hard day’s work he would wander the city, especially the area of Trastevere, serenading its fair inhabitants. It is said that it was on one of these romantic occasions that his singing was heard by the voice teacher Ottavio Bartolini, who expressed the wish to take him into his school. At first, the Marconi family hardly took it seriously, but when they were made to understand the truly exceptional nature of his voice, they raised no real objections. After hardly a year of study, in which he was assisted by the advice of the famous Roman tenor Enrico Tamberlick (1820-1889), he was able to make a début on, according to Lancellotti, April 6th 1876, in *Mefistofele* at the Teatro Pagliano, of Florence. The occasion was recalled by the critic and impresario Gino Monaldi:

“I shall never forget the sweetest sensations that I experienced on hearing the romanza 'Dai campi, dai prati', sung by Marconi. To me, he seemed to dream. I have heard some voices and singers! And yet I certainly never heard that voice before. The sweetness of timbre, the purity of tone, the firmness and marvellous precision of sound, the capacity and the phenomenal stamina of the lungs, such that the notes, rather than coming from a human larynx, seemed to be the product of a ’cello bow: all this constituted so fine and enchanting a whole that I could not take it in. ‘But how is it possible’ - I said to my friends – ‘that here at the Pagliano, for a 1 lira entry ticket, we could hear such a tenor and one whose name we did not even know on arrival?’ All this would be incredible, were it not true. . . . I believe that I have heard Marconi a hundred times, but never perhaps has the voice of the great tenor seemed 80 beautiful to me as it did that night at the Pagliano.’

After appearances at some minor theatres, on January 18th 1878 Marconi appeared at the Teatro Real, Madrid, as Gounod’s Faust. His success was immediate: indeed, on Gayarre’s home ground they came to say that Marconi possessed the grace of Gayarre and the power of Tamagno.

Subsequently, he was heard at Milan, Rome, St. Petersburg, Buenos Aires, Paris, London, Naples, and Barcelona. In Russia, especially, where he sang many seasons, and not only in the great operatic centres of Moscow and St. Petersburg, he enjoyed a vogue bordering on fanaticism. His repertoire embraced *Aida, Un Ballo in Maschera, Carmen, Dinorah,*

Don Giovanni, L'Elisir d'Amore, La Gioconda, Linda di Chamounix, Lucrezia Borgia, Lucia di Lammermoor, Marta, I Puritani, Rigoletto, Romeo e Giulietta (Gounod), *La Sonnambula, Tannhäuser, La Traviata,* and *Gli Ugonotti.* His great success in this last induced him (it is said) to call two of his children Raoul and Valentina. With several other great tenor contemporaries he was a notable Lohengrin. He sang in the first London *La Gioconda* (Covent Garden, May 31 1893). *Spartaco* (Platania) at the San Carlo, Naples, March 29th 1891, *Sandanapolo* (Libani) and *Giuditta* (Falchi) are the traceable examples of creations at world premières. He was also much admired in Verdi's Messa da requiem.

To such works he brought the beauty of a tenor voice which, by common consent, was one of the finest of his time and which J.H. Duval described as 'a voice of silver, a perfect free-flowing stream of silver throughout, [which] seemed limitless on the extreme upper notes. Others wrote of his ample, extended, ringing voice, of absolutely golden timbre; it was sweet and malleable, sustaining a splendid legato and flexing itself effortlessly in graceful phrases. A.B. De Schauensee has put it: 'His voice had a shining enamel, the ringing, high-placed upper notes characteristic of the pre-verismo tenors.' He had eloquence, ardour, and dash, and he used his fine voice intelligently; in *Rigoletto* he entertained his public in the traditional encores of 'La donna e mobile', as the simplicity of his first performance turned to comedy or sarcasm in the repeats. Almost everywhere he went he was acclaimed: one notable exception, and almost certainly the greatest disaster of his career, was when, in a season organised by the tenor Italo Campanini, who in 1888 was impresario at New York's Academy of Music, he essayed Verdi's Otello, a part to which his lyric tenor was unsuited. After two performances Marconi was replaced by Campanini himself.

Marconi's career brought him considerable wealth and he was careful of how he spent it and of how much tax he paid. Though frugal, he did not deny himself a gracious palazzo in his native Rome; Fred Gaisberg, in *Music on Record* [*The Music Goes Round*], writes of its 'terraces of palms and azaleas interspersed with fragments of Roman and Greek sculpture' and of recording the tenor there. But he remained a simple man who, though idolised in his native city, and legitimately proud of his status, remained - it is said - quite without conceit. His name may be found among the participants at many a benefit concert. He died at Rome in 1916.

By 1903 when, at the age of about fifty, he first recorded, Marconi had already been in decline for a decade, with a well-documented history of vocal problems. Nevertheless, both these and his later series (1907 and 1908) make fascinating listening and will repay close attention: though the breathing is unpredictable, the intonation sometimes uncertain, and

the voice is sometimes throaty, or lacks its first freshness, at other times it rings out with the brilliance which we might expect of a much younger man. The control is still formidable: anyone who doubts it should essay, for example, the opening phrase of an apparently simple song, Denza's 'In questa sera', and note just how difficult it is, after the descending intervals of 'sera', to end accurately on the final note. Stylistically, many of these pieces are near-irreproachable. The soaring phrases of the 1903 'O paradiso!' from *L'Africana* and the nobility of the *Lucia di Lammermoor* pieces no doubt brought many an audience to its feet. In less-taxing passages we detect the beauty of voice for which he was famed: the opening bars of 'O mia mimosa' and the final pianissimo of 'Non guardarmi cosi' are ravishing. The flexibility, too, is unimpaired, especially in 'In questa sera' and Mascagni's 'Bella cantiam l'amore'; not for him the aspirate as a routine method of reaching one note from another on the same syllable. They provide aural evidence of how much more spaciously such music was once performed, in the singers' world of other days. The diction is exemplary: from some of these old records we might well write down the complete texts of the pieces. Ingratiating and delicate touches are to be found in almost every one of his records.

The current recital ends with Francesco Masini's 'I Mulattieri', which is of special interest since, discounting rumoured recordings of 'O casto fior' (*Roi de Lahore*) and Filippi's song 'Perchè' (G&T 52685, which Kelly documents as appearing in the register under the entry for Tamagno), it is the only known and undisputed example of the voice of Antonio ('Toto') Cotogni (1831-1918). Cotogni, who was one of the most celebrated baritones of the nineteenth century, and one who made his operatic début as long ago as 1852, partnered Marconi on many occasions in the theatre, including that first London *La Gioconda*; he is also remembered as the teacher who advised Jean de Reszke when the latter changed from baritone to tenor. Other pupils were Beniamino Gigli and Giacomo Lauri-Volpi.

Except for the few titles which were reissued in, for example, the HMV 'Archive Series', Marconi's records are remarkably scarce - regrettably so, for a singer of such major importance - and much sought-after. According to Bauer's Historical Vocal Records some of the 1903 group were deleted as early as January 1905. The reissue of all Marconi's published records has been a long-cherished hope for this writer.

The remaining titles ('Bella cantiam', 'Non guardarmi cosi', 'In questa sera', 'Cielo e mar' (*La Gioconda*) and 'O mia mimosa' (*Geisha*) of the 27 known Marconi records appear on another Compact Disc (The Harold Wayne Collection, Vol. III, Symposium 1073), which also includes records by other singers of the Italian school.

Dr. Wayne writes: To Michael Henstock's notes I am happy to add some comments, based on my own collecting experience, on the relative rarity of the original discs which are transcribed here through the work of Symposium Records. The exciting 1960s was the period in which most of my early records came together. After travelling throughout Italy and Sicily - and where else would one expect to find significant holdings of Marconi? - I concluded that of all the leading Italian collectors only Fernando De Michelis could boast of more than a handful. For example, Roberto Bauer possessed only five titles, and Professore Carbone but three. From Signor De Michelis I was proud and grateful to receive several rarities. Another major source was South America, no doubt due to the enormous success that the great tenor had there. It is most interesting to note that the monogram EDZ seen on some 1903 specimens, the significance of which had long puzzled me, was finally explained in the following way. The courier from Argentina, who delivered Pandolfini's *Nozze di Figaro* (now to be heard on Symposium 1073) into my hands, explained that, before 1908, there lived in Montevideo a certain Eduardo Della Zoppa, who had a gramophone record business in that city. Furthermore, he was individualistic enough to stamp in gold leaf his own highly ornate emblem on the label of each record for which he had special regard. Now we knew previously that Medea Mei-Figner had set up such a business in Montevideo around 1904-5, with an associate there. My belief is that Eduardo Della Zoppa was in charge of that concern at that eventful time in gramophone history. More of this at a later date, when I hope for the release of an almost complete set of Emma Carelli recordings. Now to the records. Taking first the 30 cm, 1903 group: 052054 *Eugenio Oneghin*. I have a sample copy, originally in the possession of Marconi himself, autographed by the great man, and passed on to Sig. De Michelis, who was a friend of the family. Another copy of this title I found in - of all places Budleigh Salterton in Devon, in 1967. 052055 *Africana*. This, the only copy that I have seen, came from Colin Shreve in 1967. His usual method of valuation was to write in pencil on the blank sides of single-faced records. This bears the notation XHF 17/1/64. 052056 *La Gioconda*. Four other copies of this, which I rate as by far the least rare of the 1903 titles, have been through my hands, but all in shocking condition. This beautifully preserved pressing came from South America. 052057 *Messa da requiem*: 'Ingemisco'. This (with the first *Nerone*, and the *Ruy Blas*) is my favourite Marconi record. He sings with the fervour and delicacy that made him celebrated in this music, which he sang many times. Both the specimens that I have seen came from South America. 056065 'Non guardarmi cosi'. This tremendously rare disc, which I encountered only on a Colin Shreve 'Golden List' of about 1955, went, I was informed, into the Keating Collection, and thence to Witten and Yale. Incidentally, I once saw in the hands of Fernando De Michelis a sample copy of an unpublished 1903 30 cm Marconi of *Mefistofele*: 'Giunto sul passo estremo', a reminder of Marconi's operatic debut in that opera. It has a

severe matrix fault in the first stanza. Needless to say, this unique item was not offered to me. Next to the 1903 25 cm group: all three are inordinately scarce, especially - and unfortunately, for it is a beautiful rendering - 52017 *Nerone*. Marconi had great successes in both Montevideo and Rio de Janeiro where the connoisseurs who purchased his records treated them with a care which has ensured their survival for today's generation. My copies of this and of 52016 *Mefistofele* originally belonged to EDZ of Montevideo. My copy of Marconi's first *Rigoletto* recording came from Sig. De Michelis. The 1907/8 group: the International Celebrity Catalogue of January 1914 still carries no fewer than six 25 cm solo, four 30 cm solo, and four 30 cm duet titles. Nos. 052200 and 054208 were intermittently available as late as the HMV 'Archive' series of c. 1951. The 30 cm *Lucia di Lammermoor* solos had wide sale in Italy, as also the *Lucrezia Borgia*, and the *I Puritani* duet, the latter being usually found with a post-original label. 052234 *Lucia*: 'Tu che a Dio' was issued with both Red Pre-Dog and Red Gramophone Monarch labels. Anachronistically, my 'Dog' copy is from stamper No. I while the 'Pre-Dog', which came from my dear friend Otto Müller, is from stamper No. II. The very elusive 052233 *Africana* was another Marconi to reach me from South America. 054186 *Romeo e Giulietta*, in my experience the scarcest of the 30 cm duets, was part of the De Michelis heritage. Almost as rare is 054187 *Geisha*, which reveals a hint of the refinement of bygone years, with 054214 *Forza del Destino* close behind. Also from the De Michelis stable were 054188 *Marta* and 054189 *Guarany*; I have seen two specimens of each of these. 054190 *Lucrezia Borgia* came from the collection of the affable and diligent collector Alessandro Bruscoli, with whom I spent so many happy hours 'en famille' in Florence every year between 1961 and his death in 1973. 054208, which I have as a strict original Pre-Dog bearing a pink label, came from Rome and from the cellared collection of the bibliophile Commendatore Martinez. Of the 1907/8 25 cm records, Bauer had 'I Mulattieri' and the second *Rigoletto* (2-52632). Sig. Bruscoli provided *Favorita* 2-52663 in 1966. Sig. Raminelli of Turin found me the *Ruy Blas*, one of my favourite records, with its evocative, impassioned diction. Dick Alexander had the second *Mefistofele*: 'Dai campi, dai prati', and finally - De Michelis furnished 'In questa sera', the second *Nerone*, and the second *Rigoletto*. I have seen only one copy of 'In questa sera', which is unquestionably the rarest of this group; it is followed by the *Ruy Blas*, of which I have seen two copies, and *Nerone*, four copies, to my personal knowledge. Lastly, 54373 'I Mulattieri', whose rarity and importance are indisputable. I have had three pressings through my hands; that used here is an absolutely mint example from the collection of the noteworthy collector and dealer Colin Shreve.

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The recording dates are those given in Alan Kelly's invaluable book: *His Master's Voice/La Voce del Padrone: The Italian Catalogue*, (Greenwood Press, 1988), which has established many dates much more closely than has previously been possible.

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The Harold Wayne Collection

on

Symposium Records

We believe that this series will come to be regarded by collectors, historians and musicologists as the major means of access to a number of the most important of the earliest generation of recorded artists whose voices have survived only in recordings of surpassing rarity, and which are presented in this collection in the finest known specimens.