

## *SYMPOSIUM RECORDS CD 1102*

### Opera at La Scala

For opera lovers there is a special resonance to the very name of LA SCALA. It stands alone on a pinnacle above Vienna, the Metropolitan Opera, Covent Garden and the Colón in Buenos Aires. A glance at its history and above all at performance chronologies, particularly in the early part of this century, may justify its reputation.

Within Italy La Scala stands at the apex of a major industry. Every town of significance boasts an opera season, however short. The theatrical records show that even small towns engage major singers at the beginning of their careers. Italy was for a long time the greatest producer of operatic voices and it offered the most performance opportunities. Singers would graduate from opera houses in towns such as Ancona or Vicenza, through such important centres as Parma and Palermo. The Fenice in Venice and the San Carlo in Naples were nearer the top of the pyramid. La Scala was always at the apex. Two further points are worth making. The Italian operatic world extended beyond Italy itself. It certainly included Spain and Portugal for most of the nineteenth century as a look at the cast lists for Barcelona and Madrid will testify. Equally importantly, it included much of South America whose operatic fare was essentially contributed by touring companies recruited and organized in Italy. Secondly, unlike most other opera houses in Italy, La Scala also engaged leading non-Italian artists. In the first few years of the twentieth century, Chaliapin, Renaud and Sobinoff were all on the artist roster.

La Scala was thus at one and the same time a national operatic leader and an international house. Amongst the world's leading five opera houses only the Vienna can challenge La Scala in this respect. Until recently native singers were few and far between at Covent Garden, the Metropolitan Opera and the Colón. All three attract the major international artists, but it would be fanciful to see them as enmeshed in national operatic activity. The point of contrast is further underlined by the fact that some of La Scala's greatest singers did not, for various reasons, have extensive international careers. Giuseppina Cobelli (who is featured on this disc) is a case in point. A series of spectacular triumphs at La Scala and elsewhere in Italy led to early appearances at the Colón, but otherwise she seems only to have sung in Belgium and Holland.

The earliest of the singers on this disc GIOVANNI ZENATELLO (1876-1949) enjoyed a major career at La Scala. Like many other tenors he actually started as a baritone, making his début at Belluno as Silvio in *I Pagliacci* in 1898. He joined the company at Naples' Teatro Mercadante for the 1899/1900 season appearing in *Mignon*, *Cavalleria Rusticana* and in the more important role of Tonio in *I Pagliacci*. Then a colleague fell ill and he stepped into the role of Canio in *I Pagliacci*. From this time on he was a tenor and still in Naples he sang the leading

roles in *Il Trovatore*, *Lucia di Lammermoor* and *Faust*. Various engagements followed at lesser Italian houses, and he also appeared in Malta and Portugal as well as joining a South American tour.

Zenatello's La Scala début was on December 22, 1902 - the opening night of the season - in Berlioz's *La Damnation de Faust*, in Raoul Gunsbourg's staged version and conducted by Toscanini. In this first season Zenatello also appeared in a new opera *Oceana* by Smeraglia and as Riccardo in *Un Ballo in Maschera*. In total he sang on 43 occasions. The following season he appeared in the premières of Giordano's *Siberia* and in the solitary disastrous first night of *Madama Butterfly* with Rosina Storchio and Giuseppe de Luca. He also sang in Gounod's *Faust* and Franchetti's *Germania*. He was back at La Scala for the 1905-6 season, appearing in Catalani's *Lorelei*, Tchaikovsky's *Queen of Spades* and Franchetti's *La Figlia di Jorio*. The following season he added Don José in *Carmen* (opposite Maria Gay who he later married), Enzo in *La Gioconda* (conducted by Toscanini with Burzio and Amato) and in Cilea's *Gloria*.

This more or less marked the end of his career at La Scala, for Zenatello had now become an international artist, appearing at Covent Garden, the Manhattan Opera, New York and elsewhere in the USA. He returned to La Scala only in 1913 to sing Radames in *Aida*. Thereafter he sang extensively throughout Italy as well as in London, Vienna, Barcelona and Madrid, finally retiring in 1927.

His was undoubtedly one of the voices of the twentieth century. We know it best in dramatic parts, above all *Otello*, where he seems possessed of almost incredible power. However, his early recordings also demonstrate a smooth voice and offer much beautiful singing. His first records were made for Gramophone & Typewriter Company in 1903 and his last for Italian HMV in 1927. The South American Odeons are fabled collector rarities. They were made in Rio de Janeiro for a local record shop called Edison, but not, so far as is known, linked in any way with the Edison recording company. Although the sound is somewhat primitive, they demonstrate Zenatello's lyrical attributes and are generally closer in voice and spirit to the early Fonotipias than to the later Columbians and HMVs. So rare are the originals that few have ever been reproduced. This is certainly the first time they have all appeared on one disc.

About MALVINA PEREIRA, Zenatello's partner in the duets, very little is known. A well known German dictionary of singers describes her as of Portuguese pedigree and speculates that she was born in 1890. In fact she was certainly somewhat older than this and probably Brazilian. She sang Musetta in *La Bohème* in São Paulo as early as 1905. For the next few seasons she sang frequently in that city, which was a more important operatic centre than Rio de Janeiro. She must have had some local fame for she has a solo piece on the other side of the duet from *Il Guarany*. Later she sang extensively in Spain, Portugal and the lesser Italian houses, making a few records for HMV.

GIUSEPPINA COBELLI (1898-1948) is a quintessentially Italian soprano with a career almost exclusively within her native country. Reference books usually give her début in 1924 as La Gioconda at Piacenza, but there is no evidence of the opera being performed there that year. Almost certainly her début role, in Piacenza, was as Ginevra in Giordano's *La Cena delle Beffe*, which had only recently had its première at La Scala. Cobelli herself was singing the role at La Scala by the end of 1925 with Toscanini conducting, although her début role a few weeks earlier was Sieglinde in *Die Walküre*. During the next three years she added appearances in Montemezzi's *L'Amore dei Tre Re*, *Don Carlos*, in which she sang Eboli, *Cavalleria Rusticana*, *Turandot* and *Mefistofele*. In 1930 she returned as Tosca and as Marguerita in Berlioz's *La Damnation de Faust* before essaying her first Isolde with Zanelli as Tristan, Stignani as Brangäne, Rossi-Morelli as Kurwenal and Righetti as King Mark with de Sabata conducting. She continued to appear with enormous success throughout the 1930s. Her last role and final appearance in 1942 was as Adriana Lecouvreur. The career was brought to its early end by growing deafness.

It seems strange, given her extensive activities in Milan where so many records were made, that there should be only two commercial recordings and these at the very outset of her career in 1925. It is doubtful if they do full justice to what was clearly an outstanding dramatic talent. Nonetheless on any listening it is clear that one is in the presence of a great artist. This appreciation is echoed by her own colleagues. Augusta Oltrabella considered her "the most superb of all the artists I heard . . . a sumptuous voice, the warmest timbre I can recall". Adelaide Saraceni's testimony is equally remarkable - "What an immensely brave woman Cobelli was, as deaf as a post, using a hearing aid, and never missing a beat - she was music itself". For good measure Ebe Stignani adds that Cobelli "was a beautiful woman - and there never was a kinder one either - a tremendous favourite".

BIANCA SCACCIATI (1894-1948) was a close contemporary of Cobelli with an overlapping repertoire, although she began her career as a lyric soprano first appearing in Florence in 1917 in *Faust*. She gradually moved into the more dramatic repertoire and her début at La Scala was as Elisabetta in *Don Carlos* in 1926 (with Cobelli as Eboli). In this first season she also sang in *Turandot*, *Cavalleria Rusticana*, *Tosca* and *Nerone*. As well as repeating such roles, she subsequently added major Verdi parts: Aïda, both Leonoras, Desdemona and Giselda in *I Lombardi* - as well as the leads in *Norma* and *La Vestale*. A mainstay of La Scala throughout the 1930s, Scacciati's career was confined exclusively to the Italian world of opera. She performed extensively throughout Italy and visited South America.

One of Scacciati's regular partners at La Scala was FRANCESCO MERLI (1887-1976). He actually made his début there in a minor role in Spontini's *Fernando Cortez* which opened the 1916-7 season. The soprano lead was Ester Mazzoleni. He returned in late 1918 to sing in Rossini's *Mosè in Egitto* and in *Urana*, a new opera by Favara. Merli's career as one of the great tenors of La Scala really started

in 1926 when he followed Fleta and Lo Giudice in the role of Calaf in early performances of *Turandot*. His singing partnership with Scacciati dates from these performances and subsequent appearances in *Cavalleria Rusticana*. During the next five years his La Scala repertoire was extended to *Aïda*, *La Gioconda*, *Fidelio*, *Madama di Challant* (a new opera by Guarino), *Mefistofele*, *Manon Lescaut*, *Siberia*, *Il Trovatore*, *La Forza del Destino*, *I Pagliacci*, *Il Tabarro*, *Boris Godunov*, *Germania*, *La Damnation de Faust*, *I Lombardi* and *Lorelei*. Later in the 1930s he added *Otello* in which he is particularly remembered for the duets he recorded with Claudia Muzio. This was also the role for his final operatic appearance at Rome in 1948. It was a major career throughout Italy, but Merli also appeared at the Metropolitan Opera, Covent Garden (where he was the first Calaf in *Turandot*), the Colón and on a tour of Australia with a company organized by Nellie Melba.

GALLIANO MASINI (1896-1986) made his début in 1923 at his home town of Livorno. He did not reach La Scala until 1932 when he appeared as Pinkerton in *Madama Butterfly*, followed immediately by a new opera, *Palla de' Mozzi* by Marinuzzi. In 1934 he sang in *La Bohème* and *Die Meistersinger* after which he did not return until 1940 when he sang Andrea Chénier, subsequently appearing in *Cavalleria Rusticana* and *Carmen*. In the intervening years he sang in Vienna and at the Metropolitan Opera. In Italy he had an extensive career, especially in Rome, where he gave his final performances in the 1950/1 season. He left an interesting recorded legacy. The excerpt from *Adriana Lecouvreur* is light and expressive.

GIACOMO LAURI-VOLPI (1892-1979) enjoyed a prodigious career throughout Italy and in the great international opera houses. His substantial recorded legacy includes commercial discs as well as off-the-air and private items. He also wrote a major autobiography in two volumes and various other books on singing and singers. His début was in *I Puritani* at Viterbo in 1919 and he was still making occasional appearances in the 1960s. His La Scala career began (and almost ended) in *Rigoletto* in 1922 opposite dal Monte and Galeffi with Toscanini conducting. There was a celebrated falling out between tenor and conductor, as a result of which Lauri-Volpi did not re-appear until 1930, by which time Toscanini, an outspoken opponent of the Fascist regime, had withdrawn from La Scala. In that year he appeared in *Il Trovatore* and Rossini's *Guillaume Tell*. The 'live' performance on this compact disc is clearly associated with the run at La Scala. The voice sounds slightly tired (as well it might given the role of Arnoldo!) but there can be little doubt as to the authenticity of the dating. Lauri-Volpi subsequently appeared in *La Bohème*, *Turandot*, *Aïda*, *Otello*, *I Pagliacci*, *La Wally* and *La Fanciulla del West*. He was finally recalled in 1947 to sing in *La Bohème* opposite a new rising star, Renata Tebaldi.

Like Zenatello, RENATO ZANELLI (1892-1935) started as a baritone. However, in his case this phase extended to almost half of his short career. Born in Chile, he made his début in Santiago in 1916. He joined the Metropolitan Opera in 1919; the

first of his thirty one performances was as Amonasro in *Aïda* opposite Muzio and Martinelli. Interestingly the baritone part of his career was to be exclusively in the Americas - South and North. He recorded as a baritone for Victor. It seems that Toscanini advised him that his voice might really be tenor and he went to Italy in 1924 to start a new phase of his career. Thereafter, the bulk of his career was to be in Italy, although he did make various South American tours and appeared in *Otello* at Covent Garden (All the tenors on this disc sang Otello!) He never returned to the Metropolitan Opera. Most of his records as a tenor were made in Milan.

It is interesting to reflect that Lauritz Melchior, the greatest heldentenor of Zanelli's generation also began his career as a baritone. Zanelli's first essays in Wagner were in Santiago in 1928 where he appeared in *Lohengrin* and *Tristan und Isolde*. Back in Rome the following year he appeared as Siegmund in *Die Walküre* with Giuseppina Cobelli as Sieglinde. In 1930 he sang Tristan in both Rome and Brescia. This was the prelude to his first appearance at La Scala in December 1930 in *Tristan und Isolde*. These performances were perhaps the high point of Zanelli's tenor career. There were repeats in 1932. That apart he only appeared in one other opera at La Scala - Pizzetti's *Lo Straniero*.

LUIGI ROSSI-MORELLI (1887-1940) was a major Italian Wagnerian. A pupil of Cotogni, he made his début as Wotan in Brescia in 1912. He performed frequently at La Scala.

EBE STIGNANI (1903-74) had a huge career in Italy and internationally. Her début was at the San Carlo in Naples where she sang Aïda, Gilda in *Rigoletto*, Meg in *Falstaff* and Adalgisa in *Norma* in the 1924/5 season. Her début at La Scala came in 1927 when she replaced Cobelli as Eboli in *Don Carlos*. Her final appearance almost thirty years later was as Ulrica in *Un Ballo in Maschera*.

Stanley Henig

Track 1 is from the only known copy. The other Gramophone & Typewriter recordings of Zenatello can be heard on Symposium 1073.

Tracks 2 to 12 were made in Brazil probably in 1907. The announcements, spoken somewhat under-rehearsed by the artist, include the words, "Gravado no Rio de Janeiro especialmente para a Casa Edison". Casa Edison, at that time the most important record shop in Brazil, was founded by Fred. Figner, father of Medea Mei-Figner and passed on to his children. He was a wise businessman and the shop was still active in the late sixties, then managed by his daughters but no longer dealing in records. The labels of Zenatello's Odeon records are of the usual layout of Odeon at the time, some plain yellow, others a tricolour of light green, light blue and light yellow with gold print. All are double-sided but often Zenatello sings on only one side. All are of extreme rarity, some were less well recorded than others and some have survived in better condition than others. On account of these factors

the sound quality of some tracks is less good than usual. Symposium Records hopes that collectors will be understanding about this.

Tracks 17 to 21 are from performances in La Scala itself.

Track 18: Act II Scene 2 Very last phrases of love duet in which Isolde, alas, is scarcely audible behind Tristan's almost identical line. Followed by Brangäne's voice from the turret from which she is watching over and warning the lovers.

Track 19: Act III End of Scene 1-Start of Scene 2 Tristan, scarcely still alive, expressing his faith that Isolde still lives at which moment Kurwenal shouts out that a ship is sighted. What flag at the mast? Soon Kurwenal is able to make out Isolde herself on board. Tristan is too weak to go down to greet her; Kurwenal must go for him. Tristan then with new strength at the thought of Isolde's arrival springs up and tears the bandage from his wound. His blood shall pour forth to greet Isolde; she shall close his wound for ever.

Track 20: Act III Scene 3 Kurwenal and the shepherd fail to prevent the entrance of Melot at the head of a group of armed men. Melot is slain by Kurwenal whilst Brangäne warns that it is in vain. King Mark enters, he is attacked by Kurwenal, but drives him back and kills him. (There is now a cut in the performance. Mark regrets the death of Tristan and, as he supposes, Isolde, realising that his journey, to release Isolde to her higher love for Tristan, has been in vain. At this moment Isolde revives in Brangäne's arms and Mark, gently chiding her, tells her of the nature of his journey. One wonders why this cut was made; the passage is brief and the matter important to the plot.) Isolde seems not to hear as she gazes on Tristan's body.

Track 21: On the last of the four surviving sides Isolde in an ecstasy of love sinks slowly from Brangäne's arms to die resting on Tristan.

Tracks 2 to 7 and 11 and 12 are from the collection of Dr. Jacques Léon.

Tracks 9 and 10 are transfers from records donated by Mr. and Mrs. Lawrence Witten II to the Yale Collection of Historical Sound Recordings, Yale University Library.

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