

SYMPOSIUM RECORDS CD 1158

The Harold Wayne Collection – Volume 18
Giovanni Zenatello – Volume 3

Zenatello The Impresario

Apart from his outstanding career as a singer, Zenatello was interested in the presentation of opera under the very finest conditions. As early as 1913 he was determined to make his native Verona an operatic centre of international importance. He gave up his customary annual visit to South America because he wished to concentrate upon a project which was dear to his heart. He wished to create in his own city a great and popular operatic centre of the highest artistic level, but one which would also be within the means of all citizens of Verona.

He returned to Italy and stopped in his native town. One very hot day in June 1913, Zenatello, Maria Gay, who became his wife that year, Maestri Serafin and Cusinati, together with their friend Ottone Rovato were seated at a café quenching their thirst when suddenly Zenatello, raising his eyes towards the great arena said, "There is the great theatre for which I have long been looking and which would be ideal for presenting fantastic productions of operatic works. It only remains to find out if the acoustics are good. I can already visualise it. Why don't we go and give it a test with my voice?"

His companions agreed and they entered the arena. Zenatello leapt up some steps to a platform facing the via Mazzini and, whilst the others remained below, started to sing the aria 'Celeste Aïda'. If there were any sightseers present on that occasion, then what they thought is unrecorded, but as Zenatello finished and jumped down, Maestro Serafin called out, "Bravo". The acoustic had passed the test and had indeed exceeded their fondest hopes, for the result was quite perfect. Now that this possible obstacle was removed everything was plain sailing.

Another important event which gave added significance to 1913 was the centenary of Verdi's birth. Thus the first choice for the opening performance in the arena was obviously *Aïda* to which Zenatello had instinctively turned when he sang to test the acoustics.

The great tenor financed the original undertaking himself. He and Maria Gay gave freely of their talents, Maestro Serafin set to work to complete the casting and it was he who was in charge of the first performance. Maestro Cusinati trained the chorus while Ottone Rovato was the impresario. Another friend, the architect Ettore Fagioli, was responsible for the scenery.

Excitement ran high in Verona and the success of the initiative far exceeded the rosiest hopes. The weather was fine with clear skies and the nights were pleasantly warm. There were two types of seats: the stalls and the stone steps; and such was the enthusiasm of the public that even the steps behind the stage were filled every night.

In 1913 the means of transport were scarce and inadequate. Cars were a rare novelty, and there were not the coach services of our day. The few trains which ran normally half empty were crammed to overflowing on the days of the Festival. From the surrounding countryside the people came in carts, wagons, carriages or on bicycles. The spectators also arrived in the early afternoon hoping to get the best seats. The dusty roads of the surrounding area had never seen such traffic. The major part of the audiences had never attended any operatic performance before, and they occupied their waiting time opening hampers and eating on the stone steps.

The happiest of all was Zenatello who, apart from his success as soloist at the aristocratic Teatro Filarmonica, had only dreamed, as he said, of being able to realize one day his desire to create a great and popular theatre where all the citizens of his own town could hear opera finely performed.

The season of 1914 was cut short owing to the commencement of the first world war, but with the return of peace the annual Festival was resumed. Zenatello maintained his great interest, but his own operatic engagements kept him away until he retired at the end of the season of 1926.

For the following three years he took personal command at the arena and was responsible for engaging many famous artists including Gigli, Lauri-Volpe, Thill, Borgioli, Pinza, Eva Turner, Arangi-Lombardi and Cigna. After this he gave up the active direction of the Festival, but maintained his great interest in it. Indeed, Maria Callas's first Italian engagement of consequence was at the Verona Arena. It was arranged by Giovanni Zenatello in 1947, just two years before his death, in 1949.

1. Manon Lescaut - Donna non vidi mai Zenatello had the ideal voice for the Puccini roles - a clear ringing tenor which he could modulate and soften to a lovely controlled mezza-voce. Here, as the ardent young des Grieux rhapsodising over the charms of Manon, he is clearly in his element.

2. Manon Lescaut - Guardate pazzo son The recording actually starts with the captain's query 'Che avvien' ('What's going on?') and then des Grieux has a short recitative beginning 'Ah non v'avvicinate' ('Don't come near me') before the aria proper starts with the words given on the record label. At the end we again hear an anonymous captain agreeing to des Grieux's request to be taken on board as a cabin boy on the ship taking Manon to exile in North America. Zenatello sings with a tearful desperation which is utterly convincing and his technique is equal to all the drama which the role demands.

3. Manon Lescaut - Donna non vidi mai There is little to choose between this orchestrally accompanied version and the earlier one with piano. Again Zenatello is in marvellous voice and sounds deeply involved in his interpretation.

4. Manon Lescaut - Ah! Manon mi tradisce Des Grieux has come to the house of Manon's elderly lover Geronte. He accuses her of her unfaithfulness and of dragging him down with her into a life of shame. Zenatello sings the aria superbly bringing out all the resentment and despair which overwhelms des Grieux in his hopeless love for Manon.

5. La Bohème - Nei cieli bigi The recording starts with Rodolfo's first entry in which he complains that despite the smoke coming from the chimneys of all the surrounding houses, their own stove has no fuel to light it. Eventually they decide to burn a manuscript of Rodolfo and both Zenatello and Sammarco sing the music with a light hearted abandon. They may be cold, but they are still full of life.

6. La Bohème - Che gelida manina Zenatello sings the famous aria carefully, with beautiful phrasing and lovely lyrical tone, including an easy high C near the conclusion. For once I feel that he sounds less involved as Rodolfo than he did as des Grieux, but there is no denying the finely controlled quality of the singing.

7. La Bohème - Quest'e Mimi The recording actually starts as Rodolfo joins his friends asking for two seats ('Due posti') after which an anonymous baritone sings the one word 'Finalmente' before Rodolfo launches into his introduction of Mimi to his friends at the Café Momus. Zenatello is in splendid voice and sounds more involved here as he enthuses over his latest girlfriend.

Many collectors enjoy speculating whether this or that famous singer might just have happened to be in the studio conveniently to sing the odd word or phrase to oblige an illustrious colleague. Usually, however, from the quality of the voices themselves it is much more realistic to suppose that the participant is the accompanist or a member of the studio staff.

8. La Bohème - Mimi tu piu non torni Sammarco and Zenatello have to face much competition in this often recorded duet in which Rodolfo and Marcello find it difficult to work having temporarily lost their girlfriends. Both artists sing well and have certainly earned their places in any selection of the top ten versions.

9. La Bohème - Sono andati Both Cannetti and Zenatello are at their best, singing with easy grace in this moving duet recalling their first meeting. The recording occupies two sides, Rodolfo's phrase 'Torno al nido la rondine e cinguetta' ('The swallow has returned to its nest and is chirping') finishes the first side. The second side repeats the same phrase quite unnecessarily, and then proceeds to a rather unsatisfactory conclusion as Mimi sings 'Era buio e la man tu mi prendevi' ('It was dark and you took my hand') where it ends rather tamely and in mid-air before the end of the scene.

10. Tosca - Recondita armonia Cavaradossi looks at his painting, comparing the lovely blond on the canvas with the contrasting dark beauty of Tosca. For once Zenatello is not at his best. He hardly sounds enthusiastic, the whole performance

seems laboured and lacks his usual fastidious phrasing. It is a useful lesson in how wary one must be in judging those artists who have left us only one or two records.

11. Tosca - Non la sospiri Tosca tells Cavaradossi that she will meet him at their secluded cottage in the country after her performance in the opera house. She paints a vivid picture of the delight in store for them and Cavaradossi responds enthusiastically. Mazzoleni had a vibrant voice which suggests well the passionate nature of Tosca and Zenatello is ardent and powerful in his reply in this fine record.

12. Tosca - O dolci mani . . . Amaro sol per te Here we are given an almost complete account of the great duet from the last act of Tosca. It actually begins as Cavaradossi sings 'Tu? di tua man l'uccidesti' ('You killed him with your own hand') exquisitely sung by Zenatello. This finishes the first record and then there is a cut until 'Amaro sol per te m'era il morire' ('Only for you did death taste better to me') after which the last two sides give an almost uncut version of the duet until the arrival of the jailer. Zenatello is really superb in this tender but passionate music with Mazzoleni also at her very best.

13. Madama Butterfly - Vogliatemi bene This recording is of great historical importance since Zenatello created the role of Pinkerton. Fortunately he is in excellent voice and so we have an authentic account of his part in this wonderful duet. It would have been even more valuable if either Storchio, who was the first Butterfly, or Krusceniski who replaced her for the revised version given at Brescia, had been recorded instead of Cannetti. Both were Fonotipia artists at this time. However Cannetti sings very well and the recording is one to treasure.

14. La Fanciulla del West - Or son sei mesi Zenatello sings the aria in which Dick Johnson confesses to Minnie that he is indeed the bandit Ramerrez, but that since meeting her he has decided to reform and had hoped that she would never learn of his shameful past. The role suits Zenatello to perfection and the recording is excellent for its period.

15. La Fanciulla del West - Ch'ella mi creda libero This is sung by Dick Johnson just before he is to be hanged. He appeals to his captors to tell Minnie that he is free but far away. In the event Minnie rescues him, and the aria - one of Puccini's finest - gives the tenor a marvellous opportunity. Zenatello has just the right voice to bring out the full dramatic intensity of the passage.

16. Cavalleria Rusticana - Questa mattina Santuzza pleads with Turiddu not to desert her. Mazzoleni is in her element as Santuzza and the ensuing duet, with both artists at their best, is wonderfully convincing dramatically.

17. Cavalleria Rusticana - Addio alla madre Zenatello sings the famous aria in which Turiddu, with a sense of foreboding, says farewell to his mother before he

goes off to fight a duel with Alfio. This typically verismo music is superbly sung by Zenatello with the voice rising effortlessly to the climaxes.

18. I Pagliacci - Un tal gioco This piano accompanied version actually starts with Canio singing 'Di Tonio, vieni via' ('Hi Tonio, are you coming?') followed by short phrases sung by an anonymous Tonio and a villager before Canio sings the famous 'Un tal gioco'. He warns everyone that while Nedda may be unfaithful in the play, it would be very different if she were untrue to him in real life. Zenatello infuses the climax with great intensity.

19. I Pagliacci - Vesti la giubba The recording starts with the recitative 'Recitar mentre preso dal delirio' ('To act when I am stricken with grief'). There are, of course, many fine versions of this well known aria and Zenatello's is certainly one of the best.

20/21. I Pagliacci - Un tal gioco and Vesti la giubba These re-recordings with orchestra are very similar to the earlier piano versions except that this version of 'Un tal gioco' does not include the phrases sung by Tonio and the villager. The singing throughout is equally fine.

22. I Pagliacci - O Colombina It is difficult to understand why such a superb Canio should decide to record Beppe's little serenade. Certainly he sings it delightfully, lightening his voice to suit the more lyrical music, but with so many other arias available it seems a strange choice.

23. I Pagliacci - No Pagliaccio non son Here we have the great tenor again in one of his finest roles. Canio's third aria, while less well known to the general public than 'Vesti la giubba' is possibly even superior from a purely musical point of view. Zenatello is in his element, singing with great freedom and deep involvement.

John Freestone

Symposium Records thanks Dr. Paul Lewis for his help with this production.

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