

THE OPERATIC CAREER OF JOHN MCCORMACK

An assessment

by Professor Stanley Henig

John McCormack's is a central voice in the legacy of recorded art. His recording career started in 1904 when he was just twenty, about the same time as he commenced his professional career. His concert and recording careers only ended in 1942, a mere three years before his death. In those thirty-eight years he made nearly 800 recordings in a variety of genres: operatic arias, classical songs and Lieder, ballads, folk songs. In every one of these records his voice with its soft Irish brogue is instantly recognizable. In the years of his prime this striking timbre was married to an impeccable bel canto technique possessed by no other singer from these islands. The combination is quite unique.

For any student of McCormack's art there is a missing dimension. Various biographical studies have failed to give definitive documentation of his prodigious operatic and concert career, although there is now a superb discography by Paul Worth and Jim Cartwright. Some serious work has begun on sorting through the web of exaggeration and fiction which has so obscured the actual career. John Ward writing in *The Record Collector* has been a pioneer in this respect. However there are major gaps in our knowledge of McCormack's operatic activities; a phase in his career which was almost at an end by 1914 and which was completely finished by 1923.

We do know that soon after his 1904 recordings McCormack went to Milan to study with Vincenzo Sabatini, and he made his operatic début in Mascagni's *L'Amico Fritz* at the Teatro Chiabrera in Savona in January 1906, where he also sang the title role in Dupont's *La Cabrera*. Conceivably he then sang in other small provincial cities: Lily McCormack's book mentions performances of *Faust*. However, no firm data is available. In a series of visits to recording studios McCormack concentrated on ballads and folk songs. Prior to 1908 there were only two operatic arias; one from *The Lily of Killarney* and the second an unpublished 'Miserere' from *Il Trovatore* with his wife singing Leonora's part. The breakthrough as an important operatic singer came in October 1907 with his début at Covent Garden as Turiddu in *Cavalleria Rusticana*. During this same autumn season he also appeared in *Don Giovanni* and *Rigoletto*. According to *The Daily Telegraph*, his Turiddu was enthusiastically received, whilst *The Times*, commenting on his relative inexperience, nonetheless felt he used his voice with admirable effect. He sang both tenor arias in *Don Giovanni*, not universally the practice at that time, and *The Times* commented on his fine taste and vocal finish. Although this was the less prestigious autumn season, the cast included Félia Litvinne as Donna Anna and Mario Sammarco as the Don.

Within three months of these first major performance, McCormack also made his first serious opera recordings, arias for the Odeon company from *Cavalleria Rusticana*, *I Pagliacci*, *Rigoletto* and *Tosca*. He was also engaged to appear in the far more important summer season at Covent Garden in 1908.

The earliest recordings of great singers are invariably a magnet for collectors. Not infrequently they are the rarest records, but often they also demonstrate the freshest and most unspoilt voice. In the case of McCormack, pursuit of his earliest recordings can be frustrating. Commentary on the non-operatic part of this career is strictly outside the scope of this article, but there is some consensus that in all genres of his art McCormack's finest recordings were produced after he joined the Victor company in 1910. Many of the Odeon operatics are sung in English and were presumably recorded for the domestic market. They demonstrate many of the attractive characteristics of the later Victor operatics; soft, even singing with a fine legato line, whilst every word seems to be caressed. However, most of these records seem just slightly earth-bound when compared to the later work of the matured international operatic star. Sadly some of the Odeon titles were never re-recorded.

May 2nd 1908 may be the date when McCormack became in effect an international operatic artist through his first appearance in the Covent Garden summer season, singing in *Lucia di Lammermoor* with Luisa Tetrazzini. During that same season he also appeared in *Cavalleria Rusticana*, *Rigoletto* and *La Traviata*. Reviewers extolled his singing, particularly his phrasing, but not his acting; similar comments were to be made throughout his operatic career. It ought perhaps to be pointed out that Caruso did not appear in the 1908 Covent Garden summer season. Ottokar Marák opened the season opposite Tetrazzini in *La Traviata*. He had no great success and McCormack took on the role later. Even the arrival of Bonci and Zenatello did not fill the gap left by the absent Caruso.

We have documentation for some three hundred performances of opera during McCormack's career. Of these about one third were given at Covent Garden which was until 1914 his operatic home base. In addition to *Cavalleria Rusticana*, *Don Giovanni*, *Lucia di Lammermoor*, *Rigoletto* and *La Traviata* he was to add *La Sonnambula*, *Lakmé*, *Il Barbiere di Siviglia*, *La Bohème*, *Madama Butterfly*, *Mefistofele* and *Tosca* to his repertoire, making a total of 12 roles at Covent Garden. My own researches have only produced references to seven other roles in his repertoire: *L'Amico Fritz* and *La Cabrera*, both sung earlier at Savona; Donizetti's *La Fille du Régiment*, *Faust*, Victor Herbert's *Natoma*, *Die Zauberflöte* and Moussorgsky's *Sorochintzy Fair*, which ended his operatic career in 1923. This makes nineteen roles in all, but Lily McCormack's book gives a total of twenty one.

The Covent Garden years also effectively encapsulate the bulk of McCormack's international opera career. Early in 1909 he appeared at the San Carlo, Naples in *La Traviata* and *Rigoletto*. Local press reviews were supportive but a touch unenthusiastic. He was a mainstay of the final season of Hammerstein's Manhattan Opera in 1909-10 appearing in *Lucia di Lammermoor*, *La Traviata*, *Rigoletto*, *Cavalleria Rusticana* and *La Bohème*. His local début was in *La Traviata* when he was suffering from influenza and Hammerstein had taken the precaution of having Zenatello on standby as possible substitute. In the end McCormack scored a considerable success. Pitts Sanborn commented on "a good taste that is rare" and went on to praise his "command of mezza voce... smoothness in legato... fluent execution... (and) clear enunciation". As usual comments on his acting were more reserved, but John Cone gives a pair of contrasting views from fellow performers in his Oscar Hammerstein's Manhattan Opera Company. Carmen Melis singing Santuzza urged him to be more fiery but Mariette Mazarin in the

same role said: "Monsieur McCormack, if Turiddu was like you, I should never have had to complain to his mother about my unfortunate predicament". There is a delphic ambiguity to this last sentiment.

The collapse of the Manhattan led to a series of performances the following season with the Boston and Chicago companies, but not before a further and presumably last foray to Italy where McCormack sang *Fille du Régiment* in Parma. In 1911 McCormack went to Australia as leading tenor in a company organized by Nellie Melba. Quite clearly he was the favoured singing partner for both Melba and Tetrizzini. During the Australian tour he appeared with Melba in *La Bohème*, *Faust*, *Rigoletto*, *Roméo et Juliette* and *La Traviata*. McCormack also sang in *Madama Butterfly* and *Tosca*.

After 1911 the international operatic career was starting to run down. I can trace no more appearances in Italy. The only documented operatic performances in Paris were as part of a company organized by Henry Russell, the Boston impresario. McCormack sang in *Il Barbiere di Siviglia* and *La Bohème*. There were sporadic appearances with the Metropolitan Opera Company, only ten in all, from 1910 through to 1918. When he reappeared in 1917 in *La Bohème* the critic Aldrich doubted that McCormack, now well launched on his successful concert career, was a Puccini tenor, but he described the singing as being "of its kind unsurpassable".

Finally there were fifteen operatic performances in the 1921 and 1923 seasons at Monte Carlo, where McCormack appeared in *Tosca*, *Die Zauberflöte*, *Il Barbiere di Siviglia*, *Madama Butterfly*, *Tosca* and *Sorochintzy Fair*. An interesting review from the *Journal de Monaco* is cited by T.J. Walsh in his *Monte Carlo Opera 1910-51*: "it is the voice of a light tenor... to which study has given an incredible suppleness... he does not hang on to high notes for interminable periods to win applause... Never does he transgress the most elementary law of song, that is absolute respect of the music... the matter in which he sang the last act of *Tosca* was a real feast of delicacy". During these years the role of Cavaradossi was shared at Monte Carlo with Charles Hackett and Lauri-Volpi. One can speculate that neither was quite so delicate, but this kind of review suggests that vocally McCormack was at his very prime when he retired from the operatic stage after his one essay into the Russian repertoire.

The period of McCormack's major operatic activity on stage more or less coincides with recordings. His record of "Il mio tesoro" set a standard by which all others are measured and by which most are found wanting. Curiously this was one of his very last operatic records. Victor purchased his contract from Odeon some time in 1909 and he first visited the Camden studios in January 1910. Most of his finest work in the operatic sphere was recorded in 1910, '11 and '12. Assessment is about personal preferences. My own are for the Donizetti arias, above all the one from *La Fille du Régiment*. In music which is not easy; the piece has not often been recorded, McCormack excels... a triumph of technique and voice. However, as a collector who dreams of the impossible I long to hear the unpublished and unknown arias from *Le Cid* and *Roméo et Juliette* recorded on 5 April 1912.

The shortness of McCormack's career in opera, the limited repertoire and the fact that he hardly sang outside Britain and the United States of America, together with his greater pre-eminence in the concert genre, must colour any final assessment of his status as an international opera artist. However, the magnificence of those few dozen of his eight hundred recordings which are concerned with operatic art form an imperishable

contribution in their own right to the history of singing.

A Commentary on the Records

One of the advantages of the compact disc is that one may dart from track to track in any order, with very little inconvenience and without the risks of damage which arose with the long playing record. Thus the order of a compilation is of less significance. Nevertheless, the order should follow some rationale for the listener who, whatever the risks of saturation, wishes to listen from beginning to end. On this disc the order of first performance of the works is followed and it reveals at once that McCormack's recorded operatic repertoire is a very adequate representation of roles for light tenor in grand opera.

McCormack's record of "Il mio tesoro" has long been held as one of the most outstanding vocal records ever made; indeed George Bernard Shaw, a most perceptive music critic, held that it was the greatest record ever made. If there was any tinge of favour through their shared country or for *Don Giovanni* being Shaw's favourite opera, it was unnecessary. The record is as perfect a model of Mozartian style and of singing as one could hope to hear. Let any non-singer try to emit a breath with perfect evenness over a quarter of a minute; let alone at the same time performing all the other tasks of faultless singing.

It may be, and McCormack might well have agreed, that his was not as sumptuously beautiful a voice as those of, say, Caruso, Tauber or Gigli, but his singing of "Una furtiva lagrima" is unmatched for style and polish, refinement and poise. The turns and decorations, the control of line and the shading of sound, share the perfection of classical architecture. The same is true of the finale of *Lucia di Lammermoor* and the aria from *La Fille du Régiment*, sung in the singer's own translation from the French into Italian.

The Mozart record and the three of Donizetti just mentioned were made in 1916 and 1910 respectively, a period which corresponds with the very peak of the artist's career in opera. It opened with his move from the Odeon Company to Victor, a move which was negotiated for £2,000, about eighty times that today.

McCormack started his recording career before his serious training had really begun. He freely admitted his enormous admiration for Caruso, and that at the beginning of his career he had imitated him. This can be heard in the next piece, "Spirto gentil", sung when he was, so to speak, in his final year as a student. He was still with the Odeon company. It is indeed a fine record but lacks the sheer perfection of many of his Victor records. To some extent this may reflect differing studio conditions, Odeon's orchestra, for example, is drastically inferior to Victor's. But it may well also reflect McCormack's realisation in 1910 that he had "arrived" and that consequently recording was to be taken more seriously. On this record, for example, aided perhaps by youthful impetuosity, he goes for a top B, although truly he only had a B flat. The result is not entirely satisfactory and leaves him audibly unsettled in the succeeding phrase. One cannot call to mind examples of this sort of thing on the Victor records. Today "perfection" is achieved by splicing together pieces of tape, the best pieces from a number of attempts. The result may be clinically perfect, but it is often also clinically dead. In McCormack's day, either you could stand up and sing properly for four minutes or you couldn't. The tension

generated by this requirement made the whole thing much more of a real performance.

Arias follow from two operas on Irish subjects. The works were still popular and are occasionally performed even today.

It is not the purpose of this disc to offer a showcase of rarities, but nevertheless some very uncommon records are included. "When other lips" is from a take which was available for a short time in the British Isles and never anywhere else. For some reason only a later version was available generally.

The Odeon group of companies usually asked artists to autograph waxes as they were cut. Normally only the name is written, but McCormack often wrote more. On "The flower that bloometh" we find "John McCormack/Ireland/3rd Oct.08."

The solo from *La Traviata* is outstanding for the care and devotion accorded to the recitative as well as for the excellence of the aria; whilst the balance and ensemble of the duet are as near perfection as can be imagined.

McCormack and Sammarco made a number of records together. The combination works, perhaps surprisingly for Sammarco is rather bluff and the voice spreads, though not badly or beyond control. On stage as an actor he commanded attention in any role, large or small, for which he was very highly regarded, though few of his records convey this. McCormack, on the other hand, is a most refined singer, but his abilities as an actor on stage were decidedly limited, which may have contributed to his early retirement from opera. The duet "Del tempio limitar" was made on both ten and twelve inch records. The smaller version is commonly found, the larger almost never, so it is pleasing to have an opportunity of hearing it here. It was probably withdrawn quickly for although McCormack's voice is very successfully captured, Sammarco is too far back and the harp is much too prominent.

The solo from Bizet's opera is one of the most attractive melodies in all opera. There are excellent records of it by Gigli, Smirnoff, Sobinoff and many others. McCormack's version stands comparison with any.

"In her simplicity" from *Mignon* opens, in common with a number of the Odeon records, somewhat tentatively, but the singer warms up to give, over all, an excellent performance. The diction is superb, as is normal with the artist. Also in common with a number of Odeon records, the recording runs far too near to the centre (indeed, special small labels had to be printed) so that the sound quality deteriorates.

Whatever the rights and wrongs of singing opera in translation or of recording extracts from roles in which a singer has not appeared, McCormack's singing of the 'Prize Song' from *The Mastersingers* is as fine as any, and an ample demonstration that impassioned singing in no way requires the musical line to be torn to shreds.

Whilst the aria from *Mignon* is too long for a 10¾ inch side (almost four and a half minutes), "Celeste Aida" without its recitative can be amply spaced on a 12" record. There is a very nicely executed ornament and the high B is an altogether happier affair than the previous one.

Many of the Odeon records are decidedly rare, so that on occasion a copy in prime condition cannot be found. The 'Flower Song' from *Carmen*, like the 'Prize Song', demonstrates, whatever may sometimes be said, that McCormack could sing opera with very great passion.

In the duet from *La Gioconda* Sammarco and McCormack are again an excellent combination.

The "Dream Song" from *Manon* is an exceptional example of smooth polished singing through which feeling is conveyed without recourse to exaggeration. Many will prefer it to less restrained performances by, for example, Caruso or De Lucia.

The aria from *Lakmé* may have been sung as well by others, but one cannot imagine it being sung better. Only a technique won by dedication and hard work can file down a sound the way McCormack does the high note towards the end of the piece.

Rudolfo's aria from *La Bohème* is a model of clear enunciation. There are no parlando effect or other distortions; the necessary emotion is expressed within the musical line.

Puccini sanctioned a high note at the end of the duet as the lovers leave; McCormack chooses to sing the more fitting lower note originally written. Another excellent record, though Lucrezia Bori, a normally impeccable singer, is slightly out of tune at the end.

In the third piece which McCormack recorded from *La Bohème* his partner is once more Sammarco and, again, despite their voices and styles being very different, the result is excellent.

The aria from *Tosca*, with which the recital ends, is a well nigh perfect example of how to write for the tenor voice. At this time McCormack was clearly still trying to emulate Caruso.

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Further volumes will cover other facets of McCormack's career.

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