

SYMPOSIUM RECORDS CD 1209

THE THIRTY TENORS

Few of us have not played Desert Island Discs, either with friends or on our own. We never win; only "the man that hath no music in his soul" can do that. No two people agree; even the single player will have a change of mind after the Bible, Shakespeare and one luxury object have arrived.

And so it is with The Thirty Tenors.

How was the choice made? Tamagno and Caruso, for example, presented no problem. Certain artists undoubtedly merited inclusion, but their records are technically too poor for general listening. Jean De Reszke is an obvious case.

Some were ruled out by time: no suitably short record of Paul Franz sprang to mind; his magnificent piece from *Sigurd* is simply too long.

"My Dreams" or "You are my heart's delight" would better represent Tom Burke but they are too long. Francesco Marconi was by no means old when his records were made but one feels he was past his best. And Lázaro? The magnificence and power of the voice are undeniable but is there not more to great singing?

If this record is enjoyable and it provokes reflection and argument then it will have served its purpose.

FRANCESCO TAMAGNO 1851-1905 Italian tenor. He was one of fifteen children of a Turin innkeeper. He sang in a chorus and then, after military service, had his voice trained. A successful début in 1874 marked the opening of a hugely successful career ranging from London to St. Petersburg and also in New York. Verdi, who regarded him very highly, wrote *Otello* with him in mind and coached him for the title-role. The opening words of this opera open this recital. The tenor has to sing these phrases in full voice with no chance to warm up first (cf. "Celeste Aida"). Perhaps only half a dozen singers since Tamagno have had the elemental force and dramatic power to succeed in this part.

Tamagno's records are available on Symposium 1186 and 1187.

LÉON ESCALAÏS 1859-1941 French tenor. He trained at the Conservatories of Toulouse and Paris and made his début in 1883 at the Paris Opéra in the demanding role of Arnold in Rossini's *Guillaume Tell*. He sang with great success in the main opera houses of Europe and North Africa, but otherwise only in New Orleans. His career was probably hampered by the differences with managements. From 1896 onwards he also taught. His records show a voice of brilliant sound with great flexibility and utterly astonishing top notes.

The records of this artist are available complete on Symposium 1126 and 1128.

FERNANDO DE LUCIA 1860-1925 Italian tenor. He entered the conservatory of the town of his birth, Naples, to study double-bass, but his voice was soon noticed and he switched to singing. He became rapidly one of the most sought after singers of his time

for the sensitivity of his singing and the passion of his acting. He was celebrated in *I Pagliacci*, *Carmen* and *Cavalleria Rusticana*. His success is the more astonishing as he had a "short" voice; where tenors are worshipped for their top notes, De Lucia was unable to compete. Indeed, the very opposite of Escalaïs, he usually had to transpose to avoid anything above A.

A recital of opera by De Lucia is available on Symposium 1149.

IVAN ERSHOV 1867-1943 Russian tenor. He sang a wide range of heroic parts, Meyerbeer to Wagner, including *Otello*. His greatest successes were in St. Petersburg, where, from 1916, he also taught. On the concert platform, he had many triumphs. He sings of his love for Berta in Russian. The insistence on opera in its original language was still a long way off. The record, however primitive, leaves us in no doubt of the thrilling effect he must have produced.

ALESSANDRO BONCI 1870-1940 Italian tenor. When his voice was discovered he gave up an apprenticeship as a cobbler for studies in Pesaro and Paris. After some work as a soloist with a choir he made his début in opera in 1896 and by 1900 had sung in Milan and all the main centres of opera of Europe. In 1906 he appeared at the Manhattan Opera in New York, set up in direct competition with the Metropolitan. Thus he was ranked as a direct rival of Caruso. During the Great War he was a volunteer in the Italian Air Force. He retired completely in 1925. His very sweet and flexible voice was most suited to the older Italian operas; he must have been ideal, for example, in *Don Pasquale*.

LEONID SOBINOV 1872-1934 Russian tenor. He studied law and became an advocate before deciding to become a singer. His début in 1894 was as Sobonini with an Italian company. He was given only small parts. Success came with a move to the Imperial Opera, Moscow in 1897. Here and at the Imperial Opera, St. Petersburg he was greatly admired and became an idol of Czarist society. Unlike many artists, he remained in Russia after the Revolution with continued success. He was permitted to fulfil engagements abroad and the 35th anniversary of his début at the Bolshoi was marked by a gala performance. It is a beautiful lyric voice trained in the finest Russian tradition.

ENRICO CARUSO 1873-1921 Italian tenor. By determination and hard work he rose from the humblest beginnings to become the undisputed greatest tenor of the century. He was able to sing with equal success the older, elegant Italian operas such as *L'Elisir d'Amore* and the modern "Verismo - True to life" works such as *I Pagliacci*. His nerve-racking determination always to give his public of his very best was the probable cause of failing health, but smoking cannot have helped. All who heard him vouched for the unmatched beauty of his voice. In this brief piece, the accuracy of Verdi's four-note decorations is unrivalled.

An opera recital by Caruso is available on Symposium 1070.

LEO SLEZAK 1873-1946 Austrian tenor. After working as a gardener and as a locksmith he developed his voice so rapidly that by 1896 he was able to make his début as *Lohengrin*. This was in a small provincial house, but he rapidly progressed, and after appearances in Berlin and London he was engaged by Mahler for the Vienna Imperial

Opera. He remained there, adored and loved by his public, for a third of a century and on retirement made a considerable name in films, some of which are still shown. His children, Margarethe and Walter, also had careers in films. It was a large voice, suitable for *Aida* and *Otello*, but thorough preparation enabled him with equal facility to produce the smooth, quiet, polished sounds needed for this piece.

Leo Slezak can be heard in opera on Symposium 1329 and in Lieder on 1366.

GIOVANNI ZENATELLO 1876-1949 Italian tenor. His first appearances were as a baritone, the change to tenor being by no means unusual and, in suitable instances, perfectly correct if properly carried out. He rapidly achieved renown on all the world's leading stages, including the Manhattan, like Bonci, as a rival to Caruso. On Tamagno's untimely death he was a fitting heir to the role of Otello. He discovered that the arena of Verona was acoustically excellent and by initiating the Festival there was able to fulfil his dream of providing operatic performances of highest standards for large audiences at prices people could afford. This song, irresistible in his performance, shows the brilliant tones of an outstanding true tenor voice.

A series of records by Zenatello can be heard on Symposium 1138, 1148, 1158 and 1168.

GIUSEPPE ANSELMINI 1876-1929 Spanish tenor. Initially he studied violin for a career as a soloist, but after some appearances turned to singing. His début in Athens in 1896 was followed by successful engagements throughout Italy. He then appeared on all of Europe's leading stages with highly acclaimed annual successes in Russia's Imperial Opera Houses and veritable triumphs in Spain. His performance of this piece (the clearing of the throat was probably inaudible on contemporary machines) is captivating. It was not possible to include here his outstanding rendition of the recitative to this aria but it is available, with other equally fascinating arias, in a recital by him on Symposium 1170.

BERNARDO DE MURO 1881-1955 Sardinian tenor. He appeared initially as a baritone, but even during his training in Rome it was realised that he should retrain as a tenor. His successes in the Verismo repertoire were phenomenal: *Cavalleria Rusticana* and *Isabeau* of Mascagni and *Andrea Chénier* of Giordano. Undoubtedly the voice and the temperament were right for Otello, as is borne out by the records. However, he refused all offers to sing the role on stage, as he considered his short stature would make adequate presentation impossible. As one listens to this voice one understands his dilemma and respects his judgement.

ALFRED PICCAVER 1883-1958 English tenor. His family, possibly of Spanish extraction, moved to New York, where he studied electrical engineering and worked for a time with the Edison Company. He seems to have sung without much success in New York and then to have had periods of study in Europe. His first appearance on the operatic stage, in Prague in 1907, was not well received, but by 1912 he was a permanent member of the Vienna Opera. He remained there during the First World War, apparently as an American citizen. When America entered the war he was caught trying to leave, but allowed to continue singing on parole. A high point in his career was his appearance as Florestan in *Fidelio* during the Beethoven centenary celebrations of 1927. Piccaver

returned to England just before Germany entered Austria, but he returned to spend his last years there and although he was a foreign artist who had not sung there for two decades, the traffic on the Ring was halted for his funeral and the slow movement of the Eroica Symphony was played as the procession halted in front of the newly rebuilt opera house. His voice was considered by many most nearly to resemble the voice of Caruso.

JOHN McCORMACK 1884-1945 Irish tenor. Some artists are "discovered", others, McCormack is an example, are determined right from the start to succeed. His earliest records can be described without unfairness as "excruciating". We cannot hear now why it was thought worthwhile to subsidize his studies abroad. Yet determination, a good teacher and plenty of hard work transformed a meagre voice into that of one of the most sensitive and ingratiating singers ever heard. As success and fame came to him, he sang less in opera and more on the concert platform, which he preferred. His singing of German Lieder was widely admired, Elgar wanted him to sing in *The Dream of Gerontius*, though this never came about, and his performances of his Irish repertoire were treasured. (He regarded himself absolutely as Irish, though in fact his parents were Scots who had settled in Ireland.) His career was not a particularly long one, rich food, alcohol and smoking took their tolls, but he came out of retirement to sing for the Red Cross and other charities well into the last war. McCormack can be heard in opera and Lieder on Symposium 1163 and 1164 with other aspects of his art on 1165, 1166 and 1167.

GIOVANNI MARTINELLI 1885-1969 (One of several for whom the year of birth may be optimistic) Italian tenor. His father, though of very limited means, took him to hear Tamagno, De Lucia and the baritone Battistini. Nevertheless he intended to follow his father into cabinet-making. During a lark whilst he was on military service as a clarinetist, the bandmaster heard him sing. This led to a publisher funding his training as a business proposition. After initial failure he recovered to enjoy one of the longest careers of any singer. The death of Caruso, whom he worshipped, enlarged his repertoire and the retirement of Zenatello came at the right moment for him to sing Otello. The voice, if not particularly beautiful, has a steely sheen ideal for heroic parts. Martinelli can be heard as Enzo in *La Gioconda* on Symposium 1186 and 1187.

AURELIANO PERTILE 1885-1952 Italian tenor. He sang as a boy soprano in the Cathedral of Montagnana where he was born and after vocal studies lasting four years made his début in 1911 as Lionel in *Martha*. His career was interrupted by the First World War. In 1921 he was one of a number of artists summoned to New York to fill roles formerly sung by Caruso, but he was not particularly successful there. However, he was engaged the following year by Toscanini for La Scala, where he became and remained the most celebrated tenor until his retirement in 1940. The amount of vibrato in the voice may disturb some north-European ears and not everyone will enjoy the sound of every part of the voice. However, there can be no doubt of Pertile's status as a powerful singing-actor, particularly of verismo roles.

FRANCESCO MERLI 1887-1976 Italian tenor. His first appearances in the Italian provinces were followed by a successful season in South America. The main part of his

career was from 1922, encouraged by Toscanini, until 1946 at La Scala, Milan. For a number of seasons he was acclaimed also at Covent Garden and the Festivals of Verona. His engagement at the Metropolitan Opera was cut short by illness. Like De Muro's, his voice must have pinned the listener to the back of the most remote seat of the highest gallery; like Pertile, however good he was, his career was, in public esteem, overshadowed by that of Gigli.

TITO SCHIPA 1889-1965 Italian tenor. His career started in a manner typical of those of Italian singers of the time: Noticed by somebody local with some influence, in this case the Bishop, who supported studies, including a spell in Milan; two years or so gaining experience in the provinces; a successful engagement in South America and then La Scala, Milan, possibly, as in Schipa's case, via Rome; the crown, of course, a contract at the Metropolitan Opera. His career was long and took in post-war appearances in Soviet Russia and the Royal Festival Hall. The voice was of neither particular beauty nor of great power and its owner could offer neither spectacular top notes nor brilliant technical feats. What he did have, in the phrase of the distinguished critic, Henderson, was taste, refinement and elegance.

TOM BURKE 1890-1967 English tenor. He started out as a miner, but preferred to eke out a living singing in public houses. He progressed to ballad concerts put on by publishers of sheet music to promote their products. He maintained that Caruso predicted a great future for him on the strength of which he was able to go to Italy. He was able to work hard and learn quickly, mastering Italian as well as vocal matters. His rise was rapid: Melba heard him and insisted on him appearing with her for the re-opening of Covent Garden in 1919. He became known as the Lancashire Caruso and the predicted future was within his grasp. Alas, alcohol and outspokenness caused doors to shut and ranks to close, so that only the records tell of what might have been.

BENIAMINO GIGLI 1890-1957 Italian tenor. He worked as a chemist, taking singing-lessons in his spare time until success in a singing-competition permitted full-time studies. After experience in the provinces and then in Rome, Madrid, Berlin and Paris, he was engaged by Toscanini for La Scala. His *début* was sensational and he was the obvious choice for the Metropolitan Opera when Caruso became ill. There cannot be a centre of music in the world in which he did not appear and re-appear, always in triumph. Of the Italians, perhaps only Martinelli was not over-shadowed. And if some found his mannerisms tiresome and some of his effects lacking in refinement, there can be no question that to the public at large he was second in our century only to Caruso. The voice was of velvety beauty throughout its range and at all levels. It was a more powerful voice than is often credited, yet capable of softest tones, audible at the back of the largest house.

LAURITZ MELCHIOR 1890-1974 Danish tenor. For five years he appeared as a baritone. Then, after three years' further training, as a tenor. He made a sensational *début* at Covent Garden. He became rapidly the foremost Wagner tenor of his time and was for seven years a pillar of the Bayreuth Festivals. Sir Thomas Beecham ranked him with Tamagno as one of only two genuine heroic tenors he had heard. In 1926 he arrived at

the Metropolitan Opera, where he appeared with continual success until his retirement in 1950. He had not only power and stamina and ringing top notes, but also a noble and distinctive timbre.

RICHARD TAUBER 1891-1948 Austrian tenor. He originally enrolled at a conservatory to study conducting and later on he did quite frequently conduct, but he soon switched to singing-lessons. The enormous acclaim which he won throughout the German-speaking lands was followed by great pain when Germany and then Austria no longer wanted him (he was half Jewish). He settled in England, where he sang and conducted throughout the war. After the war he fulfilled his wish to sing once more at Covent Garden, but his health was broken and he died of cancer shortly afterwards. He excelled in opera from Mozart to Puccini and to operetta he was so suited that Franz Lehár wrote a number of parts with him in mind. Lovers of each form regretted that he spent time performing the other form and a critic summed him up well: "He has the ability to make a top A sound like a top C and to make the slightest song sound like a late Beethoven quartet."

ANTONIO CORTIS 1891-1952 Spanish tenor. He was born on a Spanish ship as his recently widowed mother returned home from Algiers. At first he studied violin, harmony and composition whilst supporting himself with his boy-soprano voice and, when this broke, as an orchestral violinist. Eventually the voice returned as a tenor. He insisted on, and was given, small parts rather than chorus work. On the three-month annual spells of military service the captain allowed him time to continue choral singing and at other times of the year he studied tenor repertoire. Service over, he gained experience in small roles, including performing with Caruso. As the Great War ended he appeared in leading roles in Spain, Italy and South America. Perhaps the most important part of his career was his Chicago years from 1925 until 1932. He continued to sing in Italy until political conditions deteriorated. He then appeared in Spain until his health failed in 1950. The voice is beautifully placed: it has both the strength to carry and the Southern-European warmth.

WALTER WIDDOP 1892-1949 English tenor. He began work as a wool-dyer. A fellow worker urged him to sing, and every spare penny went on singing lessons and hearing opera. Through winning a number of competitions he came to be engaged by the British National Opera Company, making his début as Radames in *Aida*. He went on to a Covent Garden début as Siegfried, which earned fine reviews. In Germany, where foreign upstarts attempting Wagner can receive rough rides, Widdop was approved. He appeared regularly at the great English music festivals and toured on four continents. Moving from one of the finest Spanish to one of the finest English voices illustrates the richness of our heritage on records. It was a big voice yet capable of fluent runs, with every note cleanly hit and precisely in tune; intrusive H's and smudged runs are unknown.

GIACOMO LAURI-VOLPI 1892-1979 Italian tenor. He turned to singing after studying law and soon appeared throughout Italy and in South America, Monte Carlo, London and Chicago. He was for ten years a member of the Metropolitan Opera. He retired as late as 1965 but appeared occasionally even after that. In retirement he wrote extensively about opera, singing and his colleagues, about most of whom he could write in the safety of having survived them. The voice is clearly of both great power and great beauty. If one

might reject some of Gigli's records for dubious musical taste or for seeming to shout, so one might do without some of Lauri-Volpi's for their out-of-tuneness and poor style. However, at his best he earns a place with the foremost of singers.

MIGUEL FLETA 1897-1938 Spanish tenor. With great difficulty, his brother, a door-keeper of the Barcelona Conservatory, managed to get him an audition. He did not make a good impression, but by chance the audition was overheard by the Professor of the ladies' class. She taught him, became his lover, managed his career and became the mother of his first children; plot for another film. His talent, his teacher and her promotion of his career combined to produce a meteoric rise. Within four years of his début he was singing at the Metropolitan Opera and shortly after that Toscanini engaged him for the première of Puccini's unfinished opera *Turandot*. The career was as short as its rise was fast. For ten years from 1920 Fleta was magnificent, but overwork led to deterioration of his voice and collapse of his health. Apart from New York, his career was almost entirely in the Latin countries, where his vibrato and delight in spinning out a note from a forte to a scarce audible pianissimo were appreciated more than they would have been further North. But everywhere the quality of the voice was admired.

HELGE ROSVAENGE 1897-1972 Danish tenor. He qualified first in chemistry, then, whilst recovering from a nervous breakdown, heard many plays and operas, which decided him to follow his inclination to sing. He was largely self-taught. The records of Caruso were his model: being acoustically made, they could not, he felt, be faked. His career was largely in Germany and Austria, his best years coincided with those of National-Socialism and being Aryan and very hard-working, he was more and more in demand as others left. His career was limited not only by the events of those years and of those which immediately followed, but also because he learned everything in German and declined to relearn roles in other languages. He has been described as the most lyrical of heroic tenors. On this record the thrill is not his high notes or big voice, but the glint of what would be there if he chose to open up.

GEORGES THILL 1897-1984 French tenor. After attending the Paris Conservatoire he studied for two years in Naples under De Lucia (Tom Burke had also some instruction from him). He later attributed to him everything worthwhile he knew. After a successful début in Paris, he was acclaimed at La Scala in Italian as well as French works. Further successful engagements followed: the Verona arena, the Metropolitan Opera, Buenos Aires, Covent Garden, the Vienna State Opera and Brussels. He appeared with Grace Moore in a film of *Louise* by Charpentier and sang until well after the Second World War. With his brilliant and expressive voice he was the leading French tenor of his time.

SERGEI LEMESHEV 1902-1977 Russian tenor. His voice also was discovered during military service, but with the difference that he had volunteered with the wish to become an officer. The wish was thwarted; he was despatched to Moscow to study singing. After experience gained in the provinces he spent more than thirty years at the Bolshoi Theatre, the leading Russian tenor of the period. He received three state decorations and was a Professor of Moscow Conservatoire. His was a typically Russian voice, beautifully trained and able to sing a wide range of music for lyric tenor.

JOSEPH SCHMIDT 1904-1942 Rumanian tenor. He sang as a child in a synagogue choir. Then an uncle enabled him to study in Vienna. His diminutive height ruled out performance in opera. Thus his début was in a radio performance of *Idomeneo* broadcast from Berlin. He built up a huge following through his records and through films, for which suitably small sets were constructed and suitably small actresses engaged. In 1933 he had to leave, but his records continued to be heard at football matches and the like for a long time and four were still in the catalogue for 1937/8. He thought he could return to Germany, but had to flee again. He managed to travel via Belgium and France to Switzerland, where he was interned. He felt ill. The doctor thought he was trying to get special treatment and turned him away. He died of a heart attack. The voice was not a large one and may indeed have been insufficient for the stage. It was, however, a most beautiful lyric instrument and was used with uncommon sensitivity and musicality. This aria, which Schmidt sings in the original German text, is the familiar "M'appari".

JUSSI BJØRLING 1907-1960 Swedish tenor. His father, a noted tenor and teacher, took him at the age of six, with his brothers, on a world-wide tour as a quartet. He studied with the distinguished baritone John Forsell and made his début as Don Ottavio with his teacher as Don Giovanni. He soon achieved great successes at Covent Garden, in the Carnegie Hall and the Chicago opera. He passed most of the war years in Sweden but was able to appear at La Scala. The war over, his career blossomed in opera, on the concert platform, on radio and television and through the gramophone. By thorough training of innate qualities, to a fine and vigorous sound were added a fine musical line displaying flawless technique and excellent taste.

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Front cover: above, Richard Tauber and below, from left to right, Alfred Piccaver, Enrico Caruso, Léon Escalaïs and Lauritz Melchior.

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