

SYMPOSIUM RECORDS CD 1210

MATTIA BATTISTINI – Volume 1

Mattia Battistini, Barone di Poggio Casalino, "La Gloria d'Italia" was born on February 27th 1856 in Rome and died at Rieti, near Rome, on November 7th 1928. He was expected to follow his father into a career in medicine and he may have commenced to study for this. However, a change of mind led him to study law where, by a twist in the skene of his Fate, his tutor's daughter was a pianist. Intervals between lectures became occupied with private recitals and, by the time he was twenty, law followed medicine as he enrolled at the Reale Accademia Filarmonica Romana. Amongst his teachers were Terziani and Persichini. His first two engagements were in the choir for performances of *St. Paul* and *Die Jahreszeiten* (presumably both in Italian). As a soloist his first engagement was in a motet, *O Salutaris Hostia* by Luigi Stame. In 1878 he appeared at the Teatro Argentina, Rome in *La Favorita*. This first engagement in opera was well received; as the records made many years later show, the part suited him well.

He went on to win rapid and wide acclaim in his own country and in Spain. In 1881 he sang in Buenos Aires and in 1883 in London. However, London did not enthuse about him; he and a number of others being overshadowed by Jean de Reszke then emerging as a tenor. At his next appearance in 1887, the year of Queen Victoria's Jubilee, his status was assured. He did not sing in London again until 1905, and his last season of opera at Covent Garden was the following year. Why he appeared so little in London is not clear.

He sang in Russia every year without exception from 1888 until the outbreak of the Great War. Usually his travels there opened and closed with Warsaw, then part of Russia, on his route to St. Petersburg and Moscow. His status seems to have been on par with that of a pop star today, and his always impeccable dress, his bearing and fluent French made him acceptable in society to such an extent that the Romanov family is said to have treated him as an equal. (It is even reported that his personal request sufficed for a sentence of death to be rescinded). It is eloquent testimony to his powers that in an epoch when Russia had plenty of great singers of her own he was frequently asked to take leading roles in *Demon*, *Ruslan and Ludmilla*, *Queen of Spades* and *Eugen Onegin*. As a corollary to this it should be remembered that it was also an epoch in which to sing in the "wrong" language was not seen as quasi-criminal.

In 1889 he travelled for a second time to Buenos Aires but apparently two trips across the Atlantic were enough; he never again went on any substantial voyage. Such was his renown, however, that despite never appearing in any of the great centres of opera in the United States, many of his records were issued there and were sold in large numbers. His repertoire exceeded four score roles of which he felt himself most suited to those in which he could portray royalty, or at any rate nobility. This, together with the association mentioned above, and his unrivalled position as a singer over four decades led to the soubriquet: "The King of Baritones, the Baritone of Kings".

Battistini was not a great actor; report has it that he simply stood there and sang. This is apparent in some of the very florid music from earlier operas where we occasionally feel we are invited to forget the action and just admire Battistini being

Battistini. This, his age, and his disposition to portray the nobility, probably account for the relative paucity amongst his records of examples from verismo works. He did, however, create a part in Mascagni's *Die Rantzau* and whilst his performance of the Prologue to *Pagliacci* was celebrated, he would sing that and leave the remainder of the role.

Time treated Battistini's voice with kindness or, rather, excellent training, hard work, careful use and good health allowed him to sing into old age without loss beyond some inevitable decline of the breath-support. He moved gradually, as do many singers, from the opera stage to the concert platform. In 1922 he appeared at the Queen's Hall, his first visit to London since 1906, and in the following two years he sang there and at the Royal Albert Hall.

The chronicle of his life is of success after success, hampered by neither poverty nor hardship. There was only one set-back: plans to mark the fiftieth anniversary of his début with a re-appearance in the same role, Alfonso in *La Favorita*, were thwarted by an attack of asthma which brought about his death just a month before.

Battistini's recording career spanned the last two decades of his singing career. It is hard to believe that the youthful voice of the first records is that of a man in his mid-forties or that the last records represent him on his sixty-eighth birthday. At the earliest session eleven records were made and eleven records were issued. The happy-go-lucky atmosphere of this session, one of them even includes a studio audience, gradually becomes more formal until, at the last sessions, we sense the black tie and tails of the concert platform. But always there is a musician and personality.

His enunciation is excellent. The voice is both beautiful and instantly recognisable. The top notes resound with neither loss of colour nor sense of strain, indeed it is probable that he could have succeeded as a tenor. It may be the case, however, that whatever the lure of the tenor voice, his teachers decided that the production of the voice for the baritone range was more suitable for him than was that of the tenor. His ability to sing ornaments and to swell and diminish a note for a quarter of a minute and more are astonishing. But there are shortcomings: the lowest notes are weak and pallid and there is no trill. Some may not care for his, presumably, intentional slight sharpening of part of a long note as, presumably, a dramatic device, and some of his portamenti are long drawn-out affairs. But neither of these occurs very often. The ability of his Verdian emperors "to monarchise, be feared and kill with looks" is breathtaking, but his Mozartean noble will not be appreciated by the original- performance lobby. In works of both composers, however, recitative is sung with the deftness and sureness of a master; sung, always sung.

Few voices, perhaps only that of Caruso, were so successfully captured by the primitive process of the time. It is proper to attempt to reproduce Battistini's voice as an observer would have heard it in the studio at the time. It would be possible, but foolhardy, to make him sound like a modern singer in a modern studio.

The order of the records in this album represents early middle and late periods of Battistini's work as a recording artist, work which, clearly, he took seriously, performing as required by the recording staff. He moves back and forth in accordance with the volume of his singing so that in louder sections the system is not overloaded but the quieter passages are heard. Very occasionally, however, he does forget the need always to face directly forward. When he is further back for a powerful note we become aware of the ambience of the studio and we sense the size of voice. Generally, in concerted

pieces he does not seek to dominate the ensemble, indeed sometimes we would like him further forward.

The first two arias are from Russian works in which Battistini scored great successes in Russia. Don Giovanni seems rather heavy in "L? ci darem" and the imbalance of the voices adds to this impression. However, the recording justifies its place for the magnificent style and polish of the preceding recitative.

An added bonus is the opportunity of hearing music from *Zampa* and other rarely performed works. At the start of the aria from *Linda di Chamounix* there is a momentary frog in the voice; presumably this did not worry the singer for the record was not remade.

Who chose such unusual repertoire is not known. The record company must have assumed that the artist's name would sell it. The opera *Hamlet*, like the opera *Faust*, is probably best considered without the play too much in mind; within that framework Battistini is an intellectual Hamlet. Why the *Macbeth* piece is with piano accompaniment is not obvious; perhaps it was not intended for issue. Why this take of the aria from *Maria di Rohan* was not published is also unclear, but the following piece, from *La Favorita*, may have been withheld because of a strange surface sound; largely removed by modern means.

The provenance of Battistini's records of "Ideale" (301, 5002) and "Caro mio ben" (302, 5008) is something of a mystery. They were issued in Switzerland by Société Suisse des Disques Phonographiques d'Art, Zürich and in Italy by La Fonotecnica, Milan.

Swiss collectors claim that they were recorded in Zürich in 1920 whilst Italians maintain that they were recorded in Milan. They appear in the catalogue of the Swiss shops Hug & Co., dated January 1922, as:

	Mattia Battistini, Bariton	
301	Ideale	Tosti
302	Caro mio ben (Gesungen in Zürich 1920)	Giordani

Battistini made a number of appearances in Switzerland in 1920 and could have visited a studio there. However, the catalogue does not claim this, but seems to recommend the second item as a souvenir of what he sang at a concert.

"La Partida", Battistini's last record, was never published until now. Again, no reason is obvious. It is very beautiful and forms a fitting close to this album.

(A cylinder of Battistini was offered for inclusion in this anthology but it turned out to be a copy of a known recording.)

EMILIA CORSI was born in Bologna in 1869. Singing, one might say, was the family occupation, for her father, Achille Corsi was a respected teacher of singing, she was a niece of the baritone Giovanni Corsi and she was a cousin of the brothers Antonio Pini-Corsi, baritone (1859-1918) and Gaetano Pini-Corsi, tenor (1868-). She was related also to Umberto Pini-Corsi and Rina Corsi. She was taught by her father and she made her début at the Bologna Opera in 1887. After gaining experience and singing in various parts of Italy for a number of years she came to La Scala, Milan in 1906. There her Lisa in *Pique Dame* and her Agatha in *Der Freischütz* were much liked. Her greatest

successes were in her Russian engagements at Kiev, Odessa, St.Petersburg and Warsaw (then part of Russia). She appeared frequently with Battistini. In retirement she taught in her home town and she died there in 1927.

MARIA MOSCISCA was born Maria Mokrzycka in 1883 in Lwów, Poland. Her teacher was the celebrated Walerij Wysocki in Lwów, and there in 1905 she first appeared. By 1908 she was singing in Warsaw and Battistini, then appearing in Warsaw, persuaded her to go to Italy. In Italy she sang in many places, frequently with Battistini. She also sang in Austria, Hungary and Spain. In 1913 she travelled to North America as a member of a touring company. From 1916 she sang for fifteen years in Warsaw and then taught there. She died in 1971 at Skolinov, near Warsaw.

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