

SYMPOSIUM RECORDS CD 1212

The life and times of Florencio Constantino are the very stuff of operatic legend. Next to nothing is known of his family background and early years. He was born in the Basque part of Spain; Argentina became his adopted country. His greatest operatic successes were in Eastern Europe and North America; far away from both countries. He founded his own opera company and helped fund an opera house. Entanglements with various impresarios led to protracted lawsuits. On a quite separate matter he was briefly imprisoned in New York. His death, in a place far removed from the countries of his birth, his adoption and his greatest triumphs, was in circumstances almost as obscure as his birth. This was indeed a tenor, and one who forged an important international operatic career in the time of Caruso, Bonci and Zenatello.

Constantino, the original Basque spelling was Constantineau, was born in Bilbao on 9 April 1868. After minimal schooling, which he later tried to remedy, he ran away from home and worked initially as a machinist on a railway, and then on a ship. He married early and, with his wife, emigrated in 1889 to Argentina. Probably he worked or paid in part for their passage as ship's engineer. One account has it that he also sang for the entertainment of passengers, and that this led to an introduction to the director of the Montevideo Opera who arranged for him to study and ultimately to make his *début*. Be this as it may, he established himself in Bragado near Buenos Aires as a farming contractor, and with a fine natural voice, was in demand locally as a singer at weddings and funerals. During 1895 he studied singing with Stiatesi, a student of Lamperti. After a number of concerts in Buenos Aires he made his operatic *début* at the Teatro Solis in Montevideo in *La Dolores* by Bretón. His only other operatic engagement in this first phase of his career was in La Plata where he appeared in *Lucia di Lammermoor*, *Cavalleria Rusticana* and *La Gioconda*.

In 1896 Constantino returned to Europe for further study, and in January 1897 he made his European *début* in *Manon* at the Teatro Ponchielli in Cremona. This was followed by short engagements in other centres including the Teatro Mercadante in Naples. Next he was engaged as a principal tenor with a company recruited to present Italian opera in the Netherlands. Between September 1897 and March 1898 he appeared in all the major Dutch cities and considerably expanded his repertoire. There were performances of *Lucia di Lammermoor*, *Ernani*, *La Favorita*, *La Gioconda*, *Guglielmo Ratcliff* and *La Traviata*.

The major source for Constantino's career is a remarkable book by Julio Goyen Aguado (Julio Goyen Aguado: *Florencio Constantino 1868-1919. El Hombre y el Tenor: Milagro de una Voz*; Bilbao). However, there are gaps in the early years and questions remain unanswered. No performances are listed for a year after the final appearance in the Netherlands. During the next two and a half years Constantino seems to have sung a variety of roles in minor Italian houses. The turning point was an engagement in Madrid at the end of 1899. Here for the first time Constantino appeared with artists whose names still register with us as important. They included Hariclea Darclée, Ramón Blanchart and

the conductor Cleofonte Campanini, brother-in-law of Luisa Tetrazzini. Engagements in Warsaw, St. Petersburg and Moscow confirmed Constantino's new status; he appeared in casts which included Vittorio Arimondi, Mattia Battistini, Adamo Didur, Guerrina Fabbri, Salomea Kruszelnicka and Luisa Tetrazzini. He also appeared, to considerable acclaim, in Berlin and Frankfurt with Marcella Sembrich. During this period of his career, Constantino developed a varied repertoire, but one typical and sensible for a tenor of his weight and timbre. It included *La Bohème*, *The Demon*, *Eugène Onegin*, *Faust*, *La Favorita*, *La Gioconda*, *Lohengrin*, *Lucia di Lammermoor*, *Manon*, *Mefistofele*, *I Puritani*, *Rigoletto* and *La Traviata*.

In 1903, now an international star, he returned to Buenos Aires for appearances in *La Gioconda* and *Rigoletto*, both conducted by Toscanini. Other tenors in the company were Enrico Caruso and Giovanni Zenatello. Constantino's only appearances at Covent Garden were in 1905. His début was in *La Traviata* with Nellie Melba, and he and Enrico Caruso alternated in *Rigoletto*. However, his reception was distinctly lukewarm. Perhaps it is significant that during the 1905 season Covent Garden faced competition from a company organized by Henry Russell which gave performances at the Waldorf. Constantino appeared there in *Cavalleria Rusticana*, *I Pagliacci* (in which he sang Silvio whilst de Lucia sang Canio) and *La Traviata*. The Waldorf venture soon foundered, but it was to be in Russell's companies that Constantino was soon to achieve his greatest triumphs, albeit in another continent.

One other set of European appearances is worthy of mention before we follow Constantino across the Atlantic. During the first few months of 1906 he performed fairly extensively in both concerts and opera in Nice, including his participation in the belated French première of Puccini's *Manon Lescaut*. The composer himself was present and Constantino clearly attached considerable importance to the occasion.

In North America, as leading tenor of Henry Russell's San Carlo Opera Company, Constantino made his début as Don José in *Carmen* in New Orleans. In little more than two months he sang in eleven different operas, including *Adriana Lecouvreur* and *Les Huguenots*. The company then embarked on a huge continental tour which included performances in Boston, Chicago, Denver, Los Angeles, Montreal, Portland, Salt Lake City, Seattle, Toronto other places. Boston was to be the most important town in his career. With Alice Nielsen as leading soprano the company was much praised. Eventually this success led to the opening of a new opera house under the direction of Henry Russell. On the first night *La Gioconda* was offered with Constantino, Lillian Nordica and Louise Homer.

Meanwhile, Constantino appeared with Hammerstein's Manhattan Opera in 1908. The company included Adelina Agostinelli, Fausta Labia, Melba, Tetrazzini, Arimondi, Armand Crabbé, Mario Sammarco and Andrea de Segurola. Campanini conducted. Constantino later claimed that when he arrived in New York, the Metropolitan at once asked him to stand in for Alessandro Bonci who was unable to sing because of illness. He was, he said, offered \$1,000 for the performance, but held out for ten performances at that price. Whilst the management considered these terms, Constantino took a taxi to the

Manhattan where, after a few minutes' talk, Hammerstein gave him a five year contract, so that, when the Metropolitan sent word of its acceptance, he was in a position to refuse.

Whatever the truth of this account, reviews of his performances at the Manhattan were very favourable. In his book on Hammerstein, Vincent Sheean suggests that Constantino was the first tenor to be a worthy partner to Tetrizzini who "later on in the season, because he could manage all the high notes, had a fling at *I Puritani* with him". Despite these triumphs Constantino broke his contract which resulted in a long-winded case against him. One wonders what relations were like when, two years later, he, amongst a number of ex-Manhattan personnel, found himself in the employment of the Metropolitan.

As a result of another case about which nothing seems to be known except that it was filed against him by a lady, he received a brief prison sentence. This retribution might have been tolerable, but for the circumstance that the other inmates had never heard of him.

He commanded high fees, but there is a difference between earning and retaining. He was a generous man and in 1911 announced his intention of building an opera house in Bragado. It cost him a quarter of a million dollars. It was never successful and went rapidly downhill. There seems to have been some kind of confrontation between Constantino and the town, as a result of which he left in 1913 never to set foot there again.

Success was marred also by a nasty accident in New Orleans: Giovanni Gravina, a great bass, lost an eye as a result of being inadvertently stabbed by Constantino during a performance of *Il Barbiere di Siviglia*. It is unclear whether or not there had been some altercation between them; accounts vary. Gravina died shortly afterwards of a heart condition though whether this was aggravated by the stabbing is also unclear. Once more there were legal proceedings, but they may have been settled out of court. Suggestions that Constantino was not an easy person to get on with would certainly have been fuelled by such incidents: indeed Kolodin says that he was "a notoriously difficult person".

In 1913 and 1914 he was back in Boston, but he then formed his own company for a South American tour. In 1915 he settled in Los Angeles where he made his final operatic appearances. No longer in the international league, he was, as at the beginning of his career, singing with relatively unknown artists. His final operatic appearance was as Lohengrin, but he continued to give concerts. In 1917, he opened a school for singing.

Constantino was taken ill in 1919 during a concert tour in Mexico. Yet again accounts differ. His illness may have been caused or aggravated by high altitudes encountered on the journey there, but there are also suggestions of a problem with alcohol. Concerts were presumably delayed or cancelled. Apparently he was found lying in the street. It seems that he received good medical attention, but, for reasons of urgency or lack of funds ready to hand, this may have been in an institution for the poor. In any case he died and was buried there. However, in 1986 his remains were re-interred in Bragado.

Constantino died young, but he had a busy and an important career, largely in major houses. He gave around 900 operatic performances and some 150 concerts. When he first sang, Marconi, de Reszke and Tamagno were still active; as his career ended, Fleta, Gigli and Tauber were on the way up. Tenors whose careers coincided with or overlapped his include: Anselmi, Bonci, Caruso, Ershov, Jadowker, Slezak, Sobinov and Zenatello.

Constantino generally received very good reviews, but it does seem that sometimes all or part of a performance was of less than his usual high standard. Such lapses were perhaps due to nerves. Even the most seasoned artists suffer in this way; perhaps Constantino was less able than some at concealing the problem. Perhaps he was not always in good voice and should on occasion have cancelled, which, it seems, he never did.

Constantino was in great demand by record companies on both sides of the Atlantic. In less than a decade he made well over two hundred records. There were cylinders and discs many of which, particularly the former, are now of great rarity. The voice recorded well, the musicianship is invariably exemplary and if he did have a tendency to sing to the gallery, the records do not convey this.

His earliest records, all but unknown, include some local Argentinean songs, testimony to his regard for his adopted homeland.

The Berlin recordings are unusual for having some piano and some orchestral accompaniments; the industry was still feeling its way.

His best known series were made for the two major American concerns, Victor and Columbia. Much of the repertoire is common to both. What is relatively unusual about the recorded legacy of Constantino is that in his case the Columbia recordings are frequently to be preferred; he sounds more relaxed, and in the concerted pieces, Bronskaya is a better partner than Nielsen. Constantino's recordings demonstrate that by both repertoire and voice he was a lyric tenor, but, like many others, he inclined gradually to the heavier parts: Radames, Turiddu and Cavaradossi. To some ears the voice on Columbia is a little darker than on Victor. Whether it had changed in so short a time or whether the two companies produced a somewhat different sound-quality is unclear. On records many singers have essayed arias from roles in which they never appeared and for which their voices would have been unsuited. One example amongst this artist's records is the Death of Otello.

Many collectors prize records of arias from operas more highly than records of songs. Are "La donna e mobile", "O Columbina" and "Viva il vino" necessarily superior to "Addio", "Core 'ngrato" and "La Partida"? In any event Constantino's records of Argentinean songs are so polished and moving that they merit special attention. The recordings in this album were originally made by Favorit, 1905; Victor, 1907 and Columbia, 1909 and 1910.

Eugenia Bronskaya. 1882 St. Petersburg - 1953 Leningrad. Taught by her mother and then by Teresa Arkel. Début 1902, Tiflis followed by successes in Kiev and Moscow. 1907 appeared on many Italian stages. 1909-1911 much acclaimed in Boston,

Chicago and Philadelphia. In 1911 she returned to St. Petersburg where she sang and then taught until 1950.

Ramón Blanchart. 1865 Barcelona - 1934 San Salvador. Début 1885 in *Faust* in his home town. After further studies and experience in Seville and Madrid, appeared at Covent Garden in 1891 as the Flying Dutchman. The following year he alternated with Victor Maurel as Iago at La Scala. After guest appearances in the principal European capitals he sang in Havana, 1902, and the Manhattan Opera, 1907. He sang for three seasons in Boston, starting in 1911, and then in the 1919-1920 season he was at Chicago. In retirement he taught in Panama.

José Mardones. 1869 Fontecha - 1932 Madrid. Début in South America, 1891, scoring notable successes in Buenos Aires and Rio de Janeiro. Highly regarded in many European cities for a decade. Then appeared in Boston for three years from 1913 and at the Metropolitan for nine years from 1917. In retirement he lived in Spain.

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