SYMPOSIUM RECORDS CD 1239

LEONID SOBINOV

Volume 2 – Recordings 1910 & 1911

LEONID VITALYEVICH SOBINOV was born in Yaroslavl in 1872. Yaroslavl lies about 170 miles North-East of Moscow, where the Kotorost joins the Volga. It had then a population of around 70,000, and derived its income from its linen and tobacco factories and its cotton and flour mills. His father was a sales representative in flour, and from this occupation he derived an income sufficient to support his family in a fairly comfortable manner. Sobinov seems to have got into a number of scrapes at school, but he did very well academically; so well, indeed, that he was able to coach less successful students. Interest in music was at first satisfied by playing the guitar and singing in a local choir; thus on leaving school he enrolled in Moscow on a course leading to a degree in law, as the family intended. He completed the course in 1894, but by this time he had acquired considerable experience in a student choir. This included some appearances as its soloist at some public concerts. On occasion the choir was also used to increase the size of the chorus for operatic performances. Thus it came about that, half-way through his course in law, Sobinov began to study singing as well. His academic abilities have already been mentioned, so it will come as no surprise that the addition of singing to his curriculum did not prevent him from obtaining a law degree with honours. Incidentally, he also got married in the year leading up to his finals; a procedure which has caused more than a few students to come unstuck. After university came military service, compulsory at that time in Russia, and then he began to practice law. He continued to study singing, but probably at this stage he saw the law as his career.

As his voice was tenor he had deemed it sensible to be taught by a tenor; a Professor Dodonov. However, by mid-1896 he felt that this teacher was not succeeding in helping him over certain problems; in particular, a distressing amount of tremolo. Thus he began to take additional lessons from Alexandra Santagano-Gorchakova, who had had a successful international career as an operatic soprano. With this teacher he felt once more that progress was being made. He was gaining experience, too, by appearing in student performances and singing for music circles. Sobinov, however, still saw the law as his career; he was still supporting his wife and himself, and paying for his lessons out of his legal work. However, Santagano-Gorchakova had other ideas; she made him go for an audition at the Bolshoi. This was in 1897, and it resulted in a début as Sinodal in *The Demon*, which, in turn, resulted in good reviews and, perhaps assisted by these, a two year contract. His next appearance was in *Ruslan and Ljudmilla* in the part of Bayan. Again there were very good reviews, which referred to his ability to be heard throughout the large Bolshoi auditorium, his breath control, mezza-voce, enunciation, rapport with his

audience and so forth. During the remainder of 1897 Sobinov appeared about a dozen times in total, always in these two works. In the first quarter of the following year, however, he added to these Faust, Prince Igor and Lenski. By the time his contract was expiring he had added Jontek in Moniuszko's *Halka* and the Duke of Mantua. He had also appeared in *Tannhäuser*, but as Walter von der Vogelweide. *Zabava Putyatishna* by Ivanov was another work which he added to his repertoire at this period.

It was at this period, too, that a certain Feodor Chaliapin, two years younger than Sobinov, was also starting to receive great praise. Sobinov, always wishing to learn more, went to hear Chaliapin. He was extremely impressed, the two soon met and, in 1899, they went together to sing in Odessa. There Sobinov added *Rusalka* to the list of operas in his repertoire.

Clearly, the amount of time that Sobinov could devote to legal practice was ever more limited. By the time Sobinov's contract was due for renewal his confidence in his progress, and the management's confidence in his abilities, had grown sufficiently for him to give up legal practice altogether, and for the management to offer him a contract for three years and at enhanced terms.

In 1899 the Bolshoi gave its first performance of Tchaikovsky's *Mazeppa* with Sobinov as Andrej, and, towards the end of that year, he first sang the roles of Gérald in *Lakmé* and Alfredo Germont in *La Traviata*. He was also offered the part of Don José in *Carmen*, but after going carefully through the score he declined it as he felt that the dramatico-lyrico writing would overtax, and thus perhaps inflict damage to, his voice.

In the season which marked the birth of the twentieth century Sobinov appeared for the first time in St. Petersburg. He sang Alfredo, the Duke of Mantua, Faust, Lenski, the Prince (*Rusalka*) and Sinodal.

Comparisons with the reigning star, Nikolai Figner, were inevitable, the more so as they appeared one evening in a double-bill: *Eugene Oniegin* and *I Pagliacci* with Sobinov and Figner respectively. This was almost a throwing down of the gauntlet as Lenski was one of the older tenor's most admired interpretations. To enlarge his repertoire, in particular to include *Martha*, *Werther*, *Mignon* and *Roméo et Juliette*, and to hear more of the Italian school of singing than could be heard by attending performance of foreign touring companies, Sobinov made several journeys to Italy. Such visits were possible as Sobinov's success had put him into the higher income bracket of singers, as each contract was arranged or renewed.

At the end of 1903 the tenor added to his repertoire the role of Nadir in *Les Pêcheurs de Perles*. His partner was Nezhdanova, who was regarded in every way his equal as a singer and an artist. This should be noted, as perhaps today she is not so well remembered.

Next year, in the same season he appeared for the first time in *Martha* and in *Werther*. The reader will by now have noticed how closely Sobinov's recorded repertoire reflects the roles in which he was appearing. He was not an artist, like some, who seek to make an effect with one piece from an opera which they have not otherwise studied, or an aria which was learnt as a student exercise and has not been touched since. Even the few

bars from Cui's *Angelo* are from a role studied in its entirety, although he appeared in the opera probably only once.

At the end of 1904 Sobinov made his début at La Scala, Milan as Ernesto in *Don Pasquale*, singing in Italian, to the complete satisfaction of the public, and receiving great praise from the critics.

At the time of the Russo-Japanese war of 1905 Sobinov received his call-up papers as a reservist. However, after a few months he was discharged to continue his career.

He first sang in *Manon* and *Fra Diavolo* in 1906. Des Grieux, one might say, could have been written for him, but in *Fra Diavolo* he never sounded really comfortable.

Moscow and St. Petersburg were, of course, the places in which Sobinov appeared most frequently, though he had, as we have said, appeared with great success in Milan. At the end of 1906 he sang in Monte Carlo. With him in the company were Selma Kurz, Rosina Storchio, Chaliapin, Maurice Renaud and Titta Ruffo. Video recordings of *Don Pasquale*, *Faust*, *Mefistofele* and *Rigoletto* from that season are the stuff of dreams. After Monte Carlo the company moved on to Berlin.

Lohengrin and *Werther* were next prepared for his repertoire; as always with this artist, by intense study of all aspects of each role.

The next great operatic centre to award Sobinov every plaudit was Madrid. And this was something special as his parts in *Manon*, in which he first appeared, and *Les Pêcheurs de Perles*, were well known to his audiences, the latter through recent performances by Anselmi and more distant, yet still well-remembered, triumphs by Gayarre.

On his way home he appeared in a concert in Berlin conducted by his compatriot Sergej Koussevitzky; a convenient point at which to mention that his public was not limited to those who loved opera.

At the end of 1908 came his first performance of *Lohengrin.* This was in Moscow. The quality of his interpretation and signing, and of his partner, Nezhdanova, were praised. However, then as now, critics must find fault with something; in this case that Lohengrin was without a beard.

Incidentally, whilst the opera-lovers of Madrid had praised his des Grieux and Nadir, despite their memories of Anselmi and Gayarre, his first portrayal of Lohengrin in St. Petersburg could not totally overcome memories of Ershoff's recent knight. And this writer, whilst admiring greatly the subject of this article, must admit that, offered a ticket to hear one or the other in this part, might have opted for the latter. However, Arthur Nikisch, who conducted some of Sobinov's performances, and must have been familiar with a selection of the finest Teutonic Knights, spoke of being so moved as nearly to lose control of the performance. But to speak in a more balanced way, to learn the most about the possibilities of the character and the music, one would have been best advised to see both of them.

Sobinov learnt the part of Levko in *May Night* for the 1909 season and also that of the good fairy, Finn in *Ruslan and Ljudmilla*. (It will be recalled that previously he had sung Bayan). Also in 1909 he sang in London and in Paris.

The Spring of 1910 was taken up with a vast tour of Russia, which then included Poland. There were around three dozen concerts in almost as many towns.

To prepare such a series of concerts, to travel such huge distances, to rehearse in so many halls, even just to unpack and pack and settle into so many hotels, must have been a wearing experience, and on top of that, to subjugate the nerves and give of ones absolute best on so many occasions, must have caused Sobinov to reflect. And to this reflection must have been added the thought that he was shortly to enter the fifth decade of his life. It is not surprising, therefore, to learn that he wanted to try his hand at production.

Thus, with his usual thoroughness and conscientiousness, Sobinov set about producing *La Bohème*, but keeping, so to speak, a foot in each camp, he was also to sing in it. This "thoroughness and conscientiousness" encompassed a line-by-line, phrase-by-phrase, re-working of the Russian text for correspondence to his satisfaction with the original.

The first performance took place in January 1911. Sobinov's singing was, as usual, admired. However, the orchestra was held to have been so loud that much of the singing was lost. One must wonder if this is the whole or true reason for the dissatisfaction, for it is hard to accept that between them, an experienced opera singer as producer, and an experienced conductor of opera, Emil Cooper, in charge of the orchestra would permit this to happen; or that an experienced management would be so influenced by critics as to cancel further performances, for, whatever the truth, that is what happened.

Next, Sobinov returned to Milan to appear in *Roméo et Juliette* with Lucrezia Bori. Immediately before this she had sprung to fame by taking over a role, and at exceedingly short notice, appearing with no less than Caruso during the visit of the Metropolitan Opera company to Paris. Sobinov was particularly pleased by the reception of Gounod's opera; the score had remained on the shelf for too long. Of course, no small part in this success was due to having a conductor of the calibre of Tulio Serafin.

In 1911 and 1913 Sobinov sang Orfeo in Gluck's version of the story.

Sobinov, understandably, particularly liked operas based on the stories of Pushkin. It had been necessary for him to decline *The Queen of Spades* as the management had expected him to perform it without, what to him, was adequate time for preparation. He was to some extent recompensed with Vladimir in *Dubrowski* by Napravnik. Only much later, after the Revolution, did he sing in Tchaikovsky's work

In the months before the outbreak of the 1914-18 war Sobinov appeared, as usual with great success, in one more Italian part, Cavaradossi.

In 1914 he was yet again conscripted for military service, though in fact no duties were immediately demanded of him. In the Spring of 1915 his contract with the Imperial Opera lapsed. There had been various disagreements and his intention was henceforth to work with the private companies. However, unwittingly or otherwise, within days of his final appearance (des Grieux) he was charged with organising concerts for the wounded and for charity. He contributed further to the war effort by remitting a sizeable proportion of his income and by turning his flat into a small military hospital unit, the costs of which

he himself met.

Seen in purely personal terms, the Revolution gave Sobinov a second chance of moving into management. His professional career as a singer had lasted two decades, he was in his mid-40s, he had already indicated his wish for a change and he must have recognised that his remaining time as a leading tenor was, in the nature of things, uncertain. Thus to be offered the posts of General Manager of the Moscow State Theatres and Artistic Director of the Bolshoi Theatre must have been both a relief and a compliment. Presumably he had had previously either no interest in political matters or had been discreet, as he had not been in trouble with the previous régime and was regarded as "politically correct" by its successor. The Bolshoi post he relinquished after a couple of months, precisely why was not disclosed, but he still gave a few performance there.

In Petrograd, as St. Petersburg had now become, he sang a few times and then went off to the Ukraine on a concert tour which began in Autumn 1918 and ended in Spring 1921.

En route he had a nasty attack of Spanish influenza, which necessitated a period of convalescence at Yalta, and he appeared a number of times on the operatic stage of Kiev. In Kiev also he was offered an administrative post, which he accepted as he did not wish to go back to Moscow.

He may have come to regret this, for in the civil war that was raging, he found himself both again enlisted, and in a beleaguered area. Once more, there were no military duties for him and he continued for some considerable time on what seems to have been a sort of nomadic concert life in territory controlled by the White Army.

Clearly there were opportunities for him to move abroad, but unlike, for example, Chaliapin, Davidov, Kousnetzova, Medtner and Rachmaninov, whether for ideological or other reasons, he elected to stay.

When the Red Army gained control, he was given an administrative cultural post in Sevastopol. The work seems to have left him time to sing on many occasions for the armed forces, but, perhaps because of the conditions, he appeared in opera at most on only two or three occasions.

Eventually he returned to Moscow, whether by command of the authorities, or because he had tired of life in the South, is unclear.

He gave a number of concerts, then, in May 1921, he was made Director of the Bolshoi. He expressed the intention of instituting a programme of cultural reform, but, for whatever the reasons, he presumably did not get far with this, for after a few months he resigned to return to a life of opera and concerts.

A new staging of *Lohengrin* in 1923 was used to mark the quarter century of his career (actually by then 26 years). There was a special Festschrift of articles about him and great general conviviality, perhaps in part inspired by his refraining from emigrating and his politically correct public utterances.

He continued to give concerts and operatic performances from his already described repertoire, both in Moscow and in the Ukraine, and at the end of 1930 and the

beginning of 1931 he made an extensive tour of "Western" Europe.

For the thirty-fifth anniversary of his début at the Bolshoi, scenes were performed from *Eugene Oniegin* and *Lohengrin.*

He was appointed to a teaching post and was busily and happily planning for this when symptoms of a worrying nature began to appear. He was sent to Marienbad for a cure. After this he travelled on to Milan as an emissary to arrange for Italian artists to visit Russia. On the return journey he reported feeling fine in Berlin and in the evening he arrived in Riga. However, a heart attack struck him the following morning, October 13th 1934, from which he did not recover.

His remains were taken back to Moscow, he lay in state and he was buried with the pomp, ceremony and reverence accorded by a state to a great national figure, which he was.

His honours included:

1910	Imperial Court Singer
1923	People's Artist of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics
1925	Officer of the Red Army
	Deputy of Council of Workers, Moscow Region
1933	Banner of the Red Army
	Plaque on his birthplace
	and renaming of the local music school in his name.

His recorded legacy is perhaps small for an artist of his stature, but it represents most of the principal roles he sang. One might wish, for the number of records he made, for more music and fewer repetitions; rather as one might for Plançon and Renaud. Of all three, presumably the need was felt to keep pace with technical innovation. Of the many superb records of Russian artists, his were amongst the few to be chosen for red label status.

From the records themselves there is no obvious reason why he made no records after 1911. Perhaps he did not feel the need or had not the interest, but there is no reason to suppose it was on account of vocal decline. However, in any case, after 1914 few records were made in Russia.

The voice is obviously of exceptionally fine quality, beautifully schooled, totally suited to lyric parts and instantly recognisable. There is nothing to indicate his abilities in florid music; bar one attempted trill or shake. This starts with apparent excellence, but expectations are disappointed as it soon peters out.

It could be suggested that there is a degree of uniformity in his singing, even of monotony. There may be some element of truth in this, but, equally, such a feeling might be engendered by a singer who sings flawlessly, who sings with complete fidelity to the score, who lacks unfortunate vocal mannerisms and does not seek to "improve" the music with needless or tasteless embellishment.

Of course, on the subject of singing itself, twenty chapters of an historian or a record collector can have little value beside the comments of a trained singer with

experience and a deeply analytic cast of mind. Such was Sobinov's colleague Sergej Levik. And if Levik does raise criticisms of Sobinov's singing and abilities, let us remember that he is equally analytic and censorious of his own work:

"No Alfredo before Sobinov, including the incomparable Anselmi. . . had made me aware that Alfredo's love is as much a tragedy for him as it is for Violetta. . . Sobinov was the first singer to make me pity him as well."

"He was a hard worker. He was very demanding in his attitude to the text."

". . . shortcomings need to be mentioned. . . for the instruction of those who haven't heard him. . . After singing for twenty years. . . Sobinov started to put on weight and to have trouble with his sense of pitch. Considering his musicality and training, it is difficult to find any other reason."

Levik may unwittingly be accounting here for the end of Sobinov's career in the recording studios.

Levik also criticises Sobinov over a matter which would not have affected records of him, namely, that he continued to sing youthful roles for which his appearance no longer suited him.

". . . the singing itself was adored (but) it could seem constricted. . . his forte. . . and the very top of the voice didn't always sound natural. Sobinov was rather saccharine and his lyric singing had something effeminate about it. . ."

Levik generally speaks very highly of Sobinov; I have picked out deliberately these adverse comments to achieve balance, and to void any accusation of partiality. If these faults are not found in the records then it is to the artist's credit if the reason is that he restricted his records to his very best work.

Sobinov had a brother who had a minor career singing small parts well, that is, with intelligence, musicality and fine enunciation. There was a small resemblance in the voices, but that is all. He had the discretion and good sense to avoid any confusion by singing under the name of Sergej Volgin, after the river flowing through the town of their birth. Incidentally, whilst on the subject of names, early in his career, whilst associating with an Italian company, Sobinov became Sobinni or Sobonini.

Sobinov's records of 1910-1911 will be the subject of a second release.

André Kamienski

Leonid Sobinov was amongst the first significant artists to be recorded. Records from his first recording sessions, in 1901 and 1904, are the subject of Symposium Records Compact Disc 1238.

This volume consists of the entire published records from his last sessions

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