

# *SYMPOSIUM RECORDS CD 1248*

## The HAROLD WAYNE COLLECTION Vol. 38

### FROM VERDI TO VERISMO

For record collectors interested in great singers of the past, a special interest attaches to the Fonotipia company. The label, with its angel holding a lyre in one hand, whilst with the other operating what appears to be a book press from which emerges a stream of records, presents an image as romantic as it is unforgettable. When the company was founded, opera composition was still a living art form, particularly in Italy. The earliest record to be issued by the Societa Italiana di Fonotipia-Milano was made only three years after the death of Verdi. This record, its matrix number xPh 1, is reproduced on this Compact Disc, and is, most appropriately, of music by Verdi. The series continued for almost a quarter of a century, well into the era of electric recording, by which time it numbered around 6,000 titles, and the careers of the artists represented span almost a century. Thus music from Puccini's last opera, *Turandot*, is also reproduced in this album. Throughout its history, the company was well aware of the commercial and other advantages of creating a catalogue of leading vocal artists, however, it also gave recording opportunities to many lesser singers, and to a few instrumentalists and orchestras. Worthy of note, too, is that Fonotipia's recorded sound was, by both the acoustic and the electric processes, with few exceptions, of the highest quality.

The first performance of *Turandot*, in 1926, just two years after Puccini's death, must now be considered a seminal event. With few exceptions, opera houses have now to rely for their entire repertoire on works composed prior to that date. When opera composition was truly a living art form, most Italian companies would include a novelty in their annual seasons. Once a new work achieved a measure of success in Italy, it would be rapidly exported to the rest of the operatic world. As a norm, most of the standard repertory was made up of operas produced within the previous twenty or thirty years. A negative side of this is that many of the operas of the bel canto era were rarely produced in the early part of the twentieth century; Mozart was not the fashion, Verdi's earliest operas were virtually forgotten.

It is perhaps hard for us to identify with such circumstances. Today's companies with "adventurous" repertoire are those seeking to revive forgotten masterpieces, whereas, up to 1926 adventure and enterprise were to be accounted mainly by reference to new works. Fonotipia's activities coincided with the final two decades of opera as a living art form. Both because of the number of leading Italian musical figures involved, and in response to public expectation, the company was quick to record arias from new works, often performed by their creators, or by some of their earliest interpreters. Correspondingly, there was at the time no shortage of fine singers in Italy, so recording became rapidly of interest to those not at the major houses where the largest fees were to be had. We need also to remember that prior to 1900 the gramophone was little more

than a toy. Thus Fonotipia's recordings are an indispensable, on occasion unique, part of operatic history.

Various groupings of composers can be identified on this Compact Disc. Verdi stands alone in the pantheon of Italian maestri, whilst Boito, Catalani, and Ponchielli bridge the gap between him and Puccini and verismo. Most musicologists tend to argue that Puccini, whilst not divorced from the verismo school, nonetheless stands slightly apart. The works are presented by chronological order of first performance, and this reveals much about the history of opera in late nineteenth century Italy. *Cavalleria Rusticana* was the touch paper from which the verismo movement burst into life. Its immediate stupendous success throughout Italy, and further afield, has never been equalled. It was written at the beginning of Mascagni's career and he was never able to recreate its success. By way of contrast, *La Wally*, which was ultimately recognized as Catalani's one major work, came near the end of his short career and life. Boito found it far easier to complete opera libretti than scores. He was pre-occupied with *Nerone* for most of his adult life. At a more usual speed of composition it would have been completed before Verdi's *Otello* and *Falstaff*. In fact, completion of the score was by other hands after the composer's death. One final point may be worthy of notice. Ricordi was traditionally the leading music house in Italy. It published major works of Verdi, Boito, Catalani, Ponchielli and Puccini. The works of the verismo composers featured on this disc were published by its one great rival, Sonzogno, and probably made a major contribution to its success.

The careers of singers reflect operatic vogues. At the beginning of the twenty-first century a budding Italian tenor may opt to concentrate on bel canto, light lyric, spinto, heavier dramatic, or Wagnerian roles. However, at the beginning of the twentieth century the parameters governing choice were somewhat different. Opera was an endemic part of Italy's national culture, and every city and town expected an annual season. There were plenty of opportunities for singers, but careers were built on limited term contracts. In most locations the opera season would be relatively short, probably consisting of no more than three or four works. As already indicated, a large proportion of the repertoire would be made up of relatively recent Italian operas. This, therefore, had to be core repertoire for most Italian singers, especially those at the outset of their careers. In the years immediately before and after the turn of the century, that meant verismo.

The vogue for verismo had an effect on the career of virtually every Italian singer. Caruso's success was in no little measure due to his willingness and ability to master the arts of both bel canto and verismo (and a good deal else as well). Fernando de Lucia, whose records of the great bel canto arias are treasured today amongst the greatest of their kind, was, in his own time, in greatest demand for the lead roles in *Cavalleria Rusticana*, *I Pagliacci*, *Fedora*, and *Tosca*.

Alessandro Bonci (1870-1940) was one of the last great exponents of pure bel canto singing. Fifty years earlier he would surely have been the successor to Rubini, whilst fifty years later he might have been the ideal partner for Callas and Sutherland in the bel canto revival. As he resisted any temptation to dabble with verismo, his career was limited to a narrow repertoire. Seven works by Bellini, Donizetti and Rossini were at its heart. He sang two Verdi roles: the Duke in *Rigoletto* and Riccardo in *Un Ballo in*

*Maschera*, and one Puccini, Rodolfo in *La Bohème*. Despite these limitations Bonci enjoyed a major international career in Europe, South, and North America. During the first season of Hammerstein's Manhattan Opera Bonci was the leading tenor. Subsequently he gave more than 120 performances with the Metropolitan Opera. Bonci's version of the *Luisa Miller* aria in no way suffers from comparison with the justly famous interpretation by Anselmi. Both have a degree of vibrato which has always been more acceptable in Italy and Spain than in Northern Europe.

Alfredo Brondi (1874-1928) was not a front line singer, but he had an active and busy career throughout Italy and beyond from 1897 to 1915. Its high point was probably his one season at La Scala, 1909-10, when he sang Hunding in *Die Walküre*, Count Rodolpho in *La Sonnambula*, and minor parts in *La Damnation de Faust* and *Samson et Dalila*. In 1913 he sang extensively at the Colón, Buenos Aires, as Rodolpho, Monterone in *Rigoletto*, Tom in *Un Ballo in Maschera*, a Nazarene in *Salome*, Nourabad in *Les Pêcheurs de Perles* and Pogner in *Die Meistersinger*.

Giuseppe Pacini (1862-1910) is not one of the better known of the many Fonotipia baritones, but both the recorded and historical evidence suggests that he was one of the finest. He had an extensive career at La Scala appearing in the première of two works by Mascagni: *Guglielmo Ratcliff* and *Silvano*. In the 1902-1903 season of Rome's Costanzi Theatre he sang the Duke in *Rigoletto*, and Amonasro in *Aïda* opposite Caruso. In the summer of 1903 he was in South America. At Sao Paulo in Brazil he appeared in *Aïda*, *La Bohème*, *Rigoletto*, *Tosca* and *Il Trovatore*, all with Hariclea Darclée.

Fausta Labia (1870-1935) is less well known than her sister, Maria, who enjoyed a wider international career, and whose records had a far greater circulation. Fausta sang various roles at Turin's Carlo Felice in 1897-1898 and 1898-1899, including Sieglinde in *Die Walküre*, with Toscanini conducting. Her only appearance at La Scala was in the same role with the same conductor in the 1901-1902 season. The following season she sang Brünnhilde in *Siegfried* in Rome.

Emilio Perea (1884- ) sang the leading tenor roles in *La Bohème*, *Fedora*, and *Tosca* in Mexico in 1906, in all three cases opposite Fausta Labia. It seems likely that this was the beginning of their artistic and personal partnership, although there was quite an age difference. They married in 1907 but parted 1911. In 1914 he sang both Lohengrin and Parsifal in Rome, whilst early in 1916 he appeared as Almaviva in centenary performances of *Il Barbiere di Siviglia* at La Scala. Clearly Perea was a versatile tenor.

Elisa Petri (1869-1929) was an early visitor to the Fonotipia recording studios. She appeared at La Scala on the opening night of the 1902-1903 season in Berlioz's *La Damnation de Faust* opposite Zenatello and Renaud, with Toscanini conducting. This was the great success of the season, and in all there were twenty-four performances. She returned in 1906 as Laura in *La Gioconda*, with Amato, Burzio and Zenatello, and as Brangäne in *Tristan und Isolde* with Amato, Borgatti and Krusceniski.

Oreste Luppi (1870-1962) was Fonotipia's most recorded bass, with some seventy published records and also a considerable number unpublished. Known career details are somewhat sketchy. On 17th January 1901 Mascagni's *Le Maschere* received simultaneous first performances in seven Italian cities. Luppi was in the cast at La Scala.

He also appeared there in *Otello*, *Lohengrin*, *Eugene Onegin* and *Un Ballo in Maschera*. He was a much more frequent visitor to the San Carlo in Naples, appearing in *Poliuto*, *Mefistofele*, *Iris*, *La Gioconda*, *Aïda*, *Ernani*, *L'Amore di tre Rei* and *I Puritani*. In Covent Garden's 1907 autumn season he sang Méphistophélès in *Faust*.

Edoardo Garbin (1865-1943) and Victor Maurel have in common the distinction of creating roles for both Verdi and Leoncavallo, though of the latter composer, not in the same works. Garbin was Fenton in the first performance of *Falstaff* and Dufresne in that of *Zazà*, the latter opposite Rosina Storchio. He sang again with Storchio in the first performance in Argentina of *Madama Butterfly* in July 1904, soon after the celebrated fiasco of its La Scala première. Garbin was also in Buenos Aires in 1906 and 1907, and appearances included *Mefistofele* and two operas by Catalani: *La Wally* and *Lorelei*. He also had a single season at Covent Garden in the summer of 1908, appearing in *Fedora*, *Madama Butterfly*, and *Tosca*.

Giannina Russ (1873-1951) has not perhaps received the recognition she deserves, for she was one of the greatest dramatic sopranos of the period. Like Bonci, she seems to have steered away from verismo. It may be significant that in the huge published Sonzogno annals, her name only occurs once, for a performance of Mascagni's *Amica*. After her début in Bologna in 1903 in *Un Ballo in Maschera* she appeared in *L'Africaine* and *Il Trovatore* at Milan's Teatro dal Verme. Two years later she was at La Scala in *Aïda*, *Tannhäuser* and *Le Nozze di Figaro*. In 1904 she sang at Covent Garden in *Aïda*, and *Un Ballo in Maschera*, both with Caruso. In 1909 she appeared in *Norma* and *Don Carlos*, a rarity at the time, at the Costanzi in Rome.

Dominico Viglione-Borghese (1877-1957) seems to have begun his career in Italy before joining a company organized by Tetrizzini to visit Mexico in 1905. He appeared with her in *Rigoletto*, *Lucia di Lammermoor*, *La Traviata* and *Faust*. Thereafter the bulk of his career was in Italy. He participated in the first performance in Italy of Puccini's *La Fanciulla del West*, at the Costanzi. He was still singing in his sixties and was Scarpia to Margherita Grandi's *Tosca* in Naples in 1939.

Riccardo Stracciari (1875-1955) has been strangely under-rated by record collectors. Whilst some of his later Columbia records are on the dull side and show the voice in decline, many Fonotipias and some earlier Columbians reveal one of the greatest Italian baritones, capable equally of Scarpia's snarls and of bel canto legato. His fine record from *Zazà* has the added interest of the composer as accompanist. After early performances in his home city of Bologna, Stracciari started a long association with La Scala as Amonasro in *Aïda* in the season of 1902-1903. This was followed by *La Wally*, *Lorelei*, *Queen of Spades* and *La Traviata*. His last performances at La Scala in 1924 were as Figaro in *Il Barbiere di Siviglia*. Stracciari was active in both North and South America. In two seasons at the Metropolitan, 1906-1907 and 1907-1908, he gave ninety-five performances of which more than half were in operas by Verdi and Puccini. He first visited Buenos Aires in 1906, sharing the baritone roles with de Luca at the annual Teatro dell Opera season. Amongst other parts he sang Kurwenal in *Tristan und Isolde* in a cast led by Krusceniski. He was again in South America in 1912, appearing with the young Galli-Curci in São Paulo in *Il Barbiere di Siviglia*. In retirement he taught singing; the bass Boris Christoff was perhaps his most famous pupil.

Mario Sammarco (1867-1930) was yet another of the outstanding baritones with which Italy was blessed around the turn of the century. It seems likely that his recordings do not do full justice to his vocal and histrionic abilities, for contemporary accounts suggest a powerful presence on stage and considerable theatrical ability. He was in the first performances of three major verismo works: Giordano's *Andrea Chénier*, Leoncavallo's *Zazá* and Franchetti's *Germania*, the last-named with a cast led by Caruso.

His Covent Garden début was during one of the less glamorous autumn seasons. In November 1904 he sang in the first London performance of *Adriana Lecouvreur*. Sammarco sang regularly at Covent Garden until 1913, and he returned for the first post-war season in 1919. Of his contemporary Italian rivals only Scotti had an equivalent Covent Garden career. Indeed, Sammarco seems to have given more performances there than the combined totals of Amato, Ancona, de Luca, Ruffo and Stracciari.

Ester Mazzoleni (1882-1982) was undoubtedly one of the very greatest artists of her time. Her command of an extensive repertoire covering bel canto, Verdi and verismo almost entitles her to the ultimate accolade of 'soprano assoluta'. She started her career at the Costanzi in *Il Trovatore* with Giuseppe de Luca, *La Juive*, and as Fricka in *Das Rheingold*. By way of contrast, her first performance at La Scala was in Franchetti's *Cristoforo Colombo*, followed by *La Forza del Destino*, Spontini's *La Vestale*, Verdi's *I Vespri Siciliani*, and Mancinelli's *Paolo e Francesca*. In 1910 she visited South America for the first time, appearing at the Colón in Buenos Aires in *La Vestale*, *La Gioconda* and *Cristoforo Colombo*. In 1913 she participated in the first summer festival in the Arena at Verona singing Amneris in *Aïda*.

Aureliano Pertile (1885-1952) seems somehow to be a much more recent singer than Mazzoleni, although he was only three years younger. All her records pre-date Pertile's first visit to a studio, and the bulk of his output was electrical rather than acoustic. Indeed, Pertile's career began relatively late with a first appearance in *Martha* in Vicenza in 1911. He was soon well into the verismo repertory with *I Pagliacci*, *Andrea Chénier*, Matteo's *Conchita* and Mascagni's *Isabeau*. However, he also appeared in *Norma* and *Rigoletto*, this latter opposite the youthful Claudia Muzio. He first sang at La Scala in 1916 in Zandonai's *Francesca da Rimini*. His career lasted until 1945. It included the creation of Boito's *Nerone* at La Scala, frequent visits to South America and appearances at Covent Garden, which included *La Gioconda* and *La Forza del Destino*, both with Ponselle. In the later stages of his career Pertile tended to sing more Verdi and less verismo. The last role to be added to his repertoire was *Otello*, which he first sang in Malta in 1937. Thereafter he gave more performances of this role than of any other.

Giorgina Caprile, Giuseppe Krismer, Laura del Lungo and Alessandro Dolci will be less well known to collectors than most others in this album. Indeed, the two sopranos seem to be completely absent from standard reference works.

Giuseppe Krismer (1878-1946) first appeared at the San Carlo, Naples at the end of 1902 in *La Bohème*. His first role at La Scala was the Duke in *Rigoletto*. That was in 1903. In the autumn 1905 he sang the part again, this time opposite Melba at Covent Garden. His final appearance was in *La Gioconda* in 1915, again at the San Carlo.

Alessandro Dolci sang in Mascagni's *Parisina* in Livorno in February 1914, two

months after its première at La Scala. Fonotipia invested in a series of recordings from Parisina, but failed either to enhance the opera's popularity or, from the rarity of the records, to boost its own sales. Dolci began a long association with La Scala in 1916, when he substituted for Crimi as Radames. He sang at the San Carlo, Naples in the season of 1917-1918 in *Andrea Chénier*, *La Traviata*, *Tosca* and *Il Trovatore*. That he was a versatile tenor is indicated by appearances also in *Boris Godounov*, *Khovantchina*, *Salome* and *Elektra*. That his voice production was sound is indicated by a career lasting at least three decades.

Giuseppe Nessi (1887-1961), Emilio Venturini (1878-1952) and Aristide Baracchi (1885-1964) participated in the première of *Turandot* at La Scala singing respectively Pong, Pang and a mandarin. Their recording of the trio for Ping, Pang and Pong can certainly be considered as a creator disc, even though the role of Ping was actually first sung by Giacomo Rimini, who did not record for Fonotipia. Giuseppe Nessi made his début in 1910, and continued to sing and record for some fifty years, well into the long-playing era.

Stanley Henig

The Fonotipia company was closely involved in the musical life of Italy from shortly after the death of Verdi until a few years after the death of Puccini. It is thus particularly appropriate that the theme of this issue should be linked with its products. Thus some details of these products may be of interest.

Generally, the longer the piece of music, the larger the record needed. However, there were, as with most companies, many anomalies. For example, the "Brindisi" from *Cavalleria Rusticana* could have been fitted easily on a standard 10¾"/27cm disc, but this version is on a giant 13¾"/35cm record. However, the recitative and aria from *Luisa Miller*, which could have been sung without interruption on one side of the large size, is on a smaller double-sided record. Conversely, Alfredo Brondi's performance is squeezed on to a 7½"/19cm side, which takes the groove much too near the centre for good sound quality; a 10¾"/27cm side would have been preferable. The first piece from *La Wally* is also much too long for the disc size.

It may, of course, have been that choice of size was influenced by status and pricing policy as well as by engineering considerations.

Like most organizations, Fonotipia was not immune to prevailing economic and political conditions. Thus there was a period when poor stock was used, resulting in noisy surfaces even on apparently fine copies, and there were years when sales were poor, thus explaining why some excellent records are much harder to find than might be expected.

Fonotipia differed from some companies in that, for most of its life, it used one standard label. Thus to determine the price category, which varied with calibre and number of artists, and size of records, the catalogue had to be consulted. Only in its last years was the general system of the industry adopted, to indicate price category by label

colour. Until its last years, also, labels were serially numbered to facilitate calculation of copyright and royalty fees. Similarly, only in its last years was the 10<sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub>"/27cm size dropped in favour of the standard 10"/25cm.

Acknowledgements: Symposium Records is most grateful to Paul Lewis and Adrian Tuddenham for assistance with the production.

Copyright Notice: This digitally transferred compilation with its notes is copyright, it may not be broadcast, copied, hired out, publicly performed or stored in a retrieval system without written permission.