

## *SYMPOSIUM RECORDS CD 1323*

### **CELESTINA BONINSEGNA (1877-1947)**

Opera has always been a glamorous profession. In popularity, as seen through the media, the most famous opera singers have often vied with film stars, pop artists, sports personalities and the rest. In the early years of the twentieth century, above all in Italy, there were numerous periodicals, often well illustrated, devoted to opera and music. Photographs and postcards of leading singers were widely available, with aficionados, as now, collecting autographs. There was plenty of press material too, biographical notes, career information, gossip, scandal etc. All this forms the material from which ephemera collections are built and it offers a useful starting point for more detailed research, but we should not invest it with automatic authenticity and accuracy.

In the case of Boninsegna, very little of this material exists. She is hardly featured in contemporary periodicals, whilst few photographs or postcards were circulated. I suspect that the reason is depressingly simple: Boninsegna was indeed one of the greatest dramatic sopranos, but she completely lacked glamour. Writing in 1963 P.G. Hurst recalled hearing her at Covent Garden in 1905, “having heard Aidas in plenty, including Destinn, when I think of Aida I think of Boninsegna”. The great baritone Riccardo Stracciari confirms the verdict: Boninsegna was “the only one who could sing Aida the way I thought it should be sung... her voice was so big and beautiful, sheer velvet”. Interestingly, Stracciari adds that “she had no charm, no elegance of person and when she appeared in her Metropolitan debut (Stracciari was her Amonasro) her ample form swathed in chocolate-coloured underwear, the New York public and critics would not forgive her, despite a voice which was unique in this role”.

This lack of glamour, possibly re-enforced by a desire to retain her privacy, may help explain why so little is known about her private life. In *Music on Record* Fred Gaisberg offers a rare glimpse. He describes Boninsegna as “a fine big woman with a temperament to match” whilst years later he could “still taste that dish of tagliatelli bolognese” which she cooked for him. Gaisberg also mentions her husband and son. These seem to be the only references anywhere to her family. Gaisberg gives no precise date for his visit, but it seems reasonable, on the basis of his own recording activities, to place it in the period 1905-7. There are few other references to Boninsegna by her contemporaries aside from a late interview given by Ester Mazzoleni, “there were three exceptional Normas: Giannina Russ, Celestina Boninsegna and myself”. Mazzoleni adds that “Boninsegna’s tone was utterly ravishing, but a little too sweet”.

At one time it was suggested in some quarters that despite the magnificence of her recorded legacy, Boninsegna did not really enjoy a major career in the great opera houses. Detailed articles in *Record Collector* by Clifford Williams and John B. Richards (January/February 1958) and by Bob Rideout (March 2000) demonstrate unequivocally that Boninsegna sang in all the important centres in

what we might classify as the Italian operatic world (including Spain and Latin America) as well performing at both Covent Garden and the Metropolitan Opera, and that she twice visited Russia. It needs to be remembered that many leading singers have always led a rather peripatetic existence with no obvious home base. The fact that she sang relatively small numbers of performances in certain locations, sometimes during only one or two seasons, is not particularly unusual.

Boninsegna studied at the Pesaro Liceo which was directed by Mascagni. After some early student performances she made her *début* in the small town of Fano as Gilda in *Rigoletto* on Christmas day 1896. Her first lengthy engagement was at the Teatro Communale in Piacenza over the winter of 1899-1900 and this was followed by appearances at Milan's Dal Verme where she sang her first *Il Trovatore*. She crossed the Atlantic to Chile in 1901 and in 1902. In Santiago and Valparaiso she gave her first performances of *Aida*, *La Gioconda* and *Mefistofele*.

These, and *Il Trovatore*, were the operas with which she became most closely identified. Boninsegna clearly had an affinity for Verdi's great dramatic heroines. By the end of 1902 she had added *Ernani*, *Un Ballo in Maschera* and *I Vespri Siciliani* to her repertoire, later came *La Forza del Destino* and the Requiem. Her lack of real acting ability probably limited her interest in verismo, outside the work of her one time director Mascagni. Besides *Cavalleria Rusticana*, she appeared in *Guglielmo Ratcliff*, *Le Maschere* and *Amica*. In 1911 all four works were presented in a variety of South American cities including Buenos Aires, Rosario, Rio de Janeiro, São Paulo and Montevideo by an Italian troupe led and conducted by Mascagni himself. Boninsegna was the company's dramatic soprano.

Boninsegna may have been slightly unlucky with her appearances in the major English speaking countries. She sang in the autumn 1905 Covent Garden season in a company which included Zenatello and Sammarco. She probably received the invitation because Destinn, the perennial favourite in the roles the two shared, was required in Berlin where she was under contract. P.G. Hurst may well have preferred Boninsegna, although he was well known for liking controversy. Victor Gollancz probably expressed the majority view in respect of Covent Garden's international summer season, "I certainly could not keep away from *Aida*... Destinn was always the *Aida*; anyone else would have been unthinkable". Be that as it may, Boninsegna never returned to Covent Garden. Her career at the Metropolitan Opera over the winter of 1906-7 was cut short by illness, but she did make her only appearances with Caruso. There are detailed press reviews. The *New York Times* described her voice "as an agreeable and well controlled soprano, with an uncommonly rich and strong lower register which is not, however, well equalized with the middle and upper ranges of her voice. She sang the music with fervour and a dramatic accent and she sang it in tune. Her acting is well-schooled and experienced and there were not a few moments in it of strong and poignant tragic power". This assessment of her acting prowess seems to have been very much a minority view. One critic commented on her "utter lack of stage awareness", whilst another stated that "her acting does not rise above the commonplace". By way of contrast a fourth critic commented on her "fresh, supple, warm voice" and lauded her as "one of the season's discoveries".

Boninsegna's only other performances in the United States were in 1909-10 when she was part of the new Boston company in its first season. This was followed by another season in South America, before the Mascagni tour. In 1912 Boninsegna gave a series of performances in Kiev, and two years later she appeared in St. Petersburg and other Russian cities. Serge Levik the Russian singer, now perhaps better known for his two books on operatic history in the pre-revolutionary era, puts Boninsegna with her contemporary Eugenia Burzio, "With them everything came from the voice and was for the voice.... everything was part of this lava-flow of marvellous sound. They were both fat, middle-aged women... who didn't really act. What was their secret? Their voices and, somewhere in the flow of sound itself, the great temperament".

The chronology assembled after considerable research by Bob Rideout shows that the number of performances was considerably reduced after 1914. The impact of the First World War seems a likely explanation since the 1917 recordings suggest that, if slightly past her best, Boninsegna was still in good voice. In 1920 she made a final transatlantic crossing for appearances in Cuba and Mexico. Her last chronicled operatic performances was in Modena in January 1921 in *La Forza del Destino*. There were a few concerts thereafter, but to all intents and purposes Boninsegna retired into private life. Little more seems to be known about her, although she did undertake some teaching. There is a reference in a book devoted to music events in the small town of Sassuolo to a concert in 1938; this could have well have been with some of her pupils.

Boninsegna's records have always been prized by collectors. As Gaisberg points out, Boninsegna's voice was a notable exception in that dramatic sopranos were generally hard to capture by the acoustic method. Indeed all her recordings, there are more than one hundred, reproduce well. We hear a well-schooled powerful middle and lower register, which in turn offers a completely secure base for the upper register. She has no problem with the cabalettas in *Norma* or *Il Trovatore* and she makes an interesting Elena in *I Vespri Siciliani*. Her recordings from *Aida* and *La Forza del Destino* are amongst the finest. Verdi places enormous demands on the soprano voice. Neither the tessitura, nor the ascents seem to hold any fears for Boninsegna. Her singing over the chorus in 'Madre, pietosa Vergine' makes this its finest performance on record.

There is very little to choose between the various recording sessions made for the Gramophone and Typewriter Company. Her voice is particularly fresh for the 1904 session, but the performances suffer from being accompanied only by a piano. Her Columbia recordings also give the lie to those who argue that the G&T/Gramophone Company recording technology was superior. Another gain in the United States Columbia records of 1910 is the use of 12" sides for some of the arias crammed on to 10" in the early G&T series; 'Casta diva' is given in full on two records. The 1917 Gramophone Company session is a coda to her earlier recordings for G&T. Curiously these late recordings are all duets, several from infrequently performed works.

Boninsegna's three partners in the duets in this album should perhaps be classified as 'house singers'; the house here being the recording company. I have

always felt that the companies were somewhat reluctant to employ more than one celebrity artist for a single record. Besides, they were not regular stage partners of Boninsegna. Luigi Bolis (? -1948), Luigi Colazza (1868-1927) and Giovanni Valls (1872-1943) all sang extensively throughout the Italian provinces and were regulars in the Milan recording studios. Bolis was later in two of the earliest complete opera recordings: *Carmen* and *I Pagliacci*, both for HMV. An interesting feature of Colazza's career is that he spent the winter season 1897-8 with an Italian opera company in the Netherlands where he sang the lead roles in no less than five Verdi operas. Valls was in fact Spanish, but seems to have spent most of his career in Italy. Curiously he goes completely unmentioned in the recent comprehensive *Diccionario de cantantes Líricos españoles* by Joaquín Martín de Sagarmínaga.

Professor Stanley Henig

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