

## SYMPOSIUM RECORDS CD 1335

### Francesco Navarini & Eugenio Giraldoni

Basses and baritones rarely attract the same critical or popular attention accorded to tenors. Both FRANCESCO NAVARINI (1855?-1923) and EUGENIO GIRALDONI (1871-1924) enjoyed significant international careers. Each took part in the première of a major work; respectively as Lodovico in Verdi's *Otello* and Scarpia in Puccini's *Tosca*. Despite this, it is not easy to find biographical data or even contemporary performance assessments.

Regarding Navarini, the gap was to some extent filled by an article in *The Record Collector* (Volume 40) by Paolo Padoan, translated by Peter Dempsey. The appended chronology is incomplete, but it gives enough detail to show that the bulk of his career was in Italy and Russia. There were visits to Spain and Portugal and a few appearances in London; not all listed in the chronology. He was in the magnificent company assembled by Augustus Harris for a Drury Lane season in 1887, when he sang Sparafucile in *Rigoletto* with Battistini in the title role, the High Priest in *L'Africaine* and Ramfis in *Aida*. In *Thirty Years of Musical Life in London* Herman Klein 'remembers' him in the latter role, but forgets to tell the reader more. As the company also included De Lucia, the de Reszke brothers, Maurel and Nordica, Klein's failure to give further attention to a young bass when he came to write the book a quarter of a century later is understandable.

At Covent Garden Navarini appeared in *Don Giovanni*, *Lucia di Lammermoor* and *Lucrezia Borgia*. It should be noted that the Navarini who sang at the Metropolitan and at Covent Garden some twenty years later was the much lesser known Vittorio Navarini. P.G. Hurst includes Navarini in his *Golden Age Recorded*. He could only have known the voice from records, but, insofar as he had heard other great basses of the period, his testimony is relevant, "in 1907 he was 52, which speaks volumes for the glorious quality of his voice... a singer in his prime... one could hardly over-estimate the beauty of Navarini's voice and style, the controlled phrasing and the unfailing artistry".

Navarini enjoyed a long career at La Scala, starting in 1883 in *La Gioconda*. He was the first to sing the role of the Grand Inquisitor in Verdi's revised four act *Don Carlos* and he created the role of Lodovico in *Otello*. In Italy, he also appeared in Bologna, Genoa, Rome and Trieste. Of particular importance in his career were the considerable number of leading bass roles in the French repertoire, operas such as *Les Huguenots*, *Le Prophète*, *La Juive*, *Mignon*, *Hamlet* and *Le Cid*.

In the final phase of his career Navarini was a frequent visitor to St. Petersburg. Of course, he sang almost exclusively with 'western' artists. Where performances by largely Russian casts were concerned there was not exactly a shortage of fine basses. Indeed in his memoirs Serge Levik asks rhetorically what point there was in bringing basses to Russia where Chaliapin, Kastorsky and

Sibiriakov were active. Nonetheless he goes on to describe Navarini as “an excellent bass of the baritonal type and a favourite with St. Petersburg”.

Eugenio Giraldoni was born in Marseilles. His parents, Leone Giraldoni and Carolina Ferni were both well known singers. There seems to be general agreement that the youthful Eugenio made his début as Escamillo at the Liceu in Barcelona in 1891, but details of his activities over the next few years are extremely vague up to the time of his first visit to South America in 1898. In Buenos Aires he appeared in *Lohengrin* and *Die Meistersinger* with Borgatti, and in *Aïda*, *Guillaume Tell*, *Poliuto* and *Samson et Dalila* with Tamagno. The cast for *Guillaume Tell* included Tetrizzini with whom Giraldoni also appeared in *Lucia di Lammermoor*.

The première of *Tosca* took place at the Teatro Costanzi in Rome on 14th January 1900. Its critical reception was mixed, but not that of the public. The opera received seventeen performances by mid-February. The following month it was performed at La Scala, going on to achieve twelve performances in the season and was soon introduced into the repertoires of other major houses. Giraldoni created the role of Scarpia in Rome, Milan and Turin. More than a century later it is difficult to assess his impact in the role. As the world’s opera houses rushed to mount performances, other great contemporary baritones, particularly Sammarco and Scotti, also took on the role. According to P.G. Hurst neither equalled Giraldoni who “although not especially pleasing vocally, was a superb actor”. Elsewhere Hurst speculates that Giraldoni’s voice was already in decline. Another contemporary critic, cited by Celetti, argues that Giraldoni “sang and acted in a way exactly contrary to that in which he should have sung and acted, and that the accusation levelled at Puccini of having introduced into *Tosca* the usual ‘monster of the arena’ was certainly encouraged by, if not entirely due to, the errors of the performer”. And a third contemporary critic felt Giraldoni simply misunderstood the character “portraying him in a state of permanent rage and making him a bloody monster instead of a cold-blooded creature”. These verdicts are flatly contradicted by Charles de Platen, a Swede living in Rome, who wrote a fascinating book in French about his time there, *Souvenirs Musicaux et Dramatiques*. He felt that Giraldoni deserved particular praise for the moderation with which he had presented such a repulsive character.

Whatever the critical disagreements, when Giraldoni returned to Buenos Aires in May 1901, he was an established star. He was joined in *Tosca* by Darcée, who had created the title role in Rome, and Caruso. He also appeared with Caruso in *La Traviata*, *Lohengrin* and Goldmark’s *Die Königin von Saba*. All these were conducted by Toscanini. Giraldoni’s success was such that thereafter there were frequent visits to South America. Besides Argentina, he sang also in Brazil, Chile

and Uruguay. In 1909 he was the first to sing the title role in *Boris Godunov* at the new Colon. It may be of interest that a few years later, another great baritone, Titta Ruffo also sang the role at the Colon.

It seems that Giraldoni was rather less successful in the United States. He was with the Metropolitan Opera for one season, 1904-1905. He was in 26 performances, but was not invited back. It must be remembered just how many fine baritones were available to the Metropolitan Opera and that Antonio Scotti, whose style of singing was very different, was the reigning favourite. Giraldoni's most frequent role was Barnaba in *La Gioconda* opposite Caruso and Nordica. Perhaps the most intriguing performance was on 16th February 1905, the very first performance in the house of *Die Fledermaus*, and an opportunity for the Met to revel in the introduction of 'guests' at the end of Act 2. The guests included Ackté, Eames, Fremstad, Nordica, Caruso, Journet, Plançon, Scotti, van Rooy and Giraldoni. The latter's contribution to the festivities was in the quartet from *Rigoletto* in which he joined Caruso, Homer and Nordica.

During Giraldoni's career, there were many other fine Italian baritones, Amato, Ancona, Battistini, de Luca, Ruffo, Sammarco, Scotti and Stracciari are amongst the better known. This may in part account for the diverse reactions to his performance. 1900 was a key year; of all Puccini's operas it is the clearest example of verismo. Many critics looked back with affection to the years of bel canto. As far as that rather purer style of singing was concerned, Giraldoni clearly could not equal some of his rivals, but he completely mastered the verismo style and must have been an imposing stage figure. Interestingly, the disagreements persist in assessing Giraldoni's recordings, all from the years just after the *Tosca* première. P.G. Hurst considered him "lacking in subtlety", a view echoed by Michael Scott who finds "little of the smooth tone and shapely legato apparent in the singing of Ancona and Scotti... the voice is impressive but rather gruff". By way of contrast Keith Hardwick had "no hesitation in asserting that he (Giraldoni) was one of the most accomplished vocalists ever to record". Perhaps, though, the final word should again go to Serge Levik who heard them all, or at any rate all those who sang in pre-Bolshevik Russia.

Levik contrasts performances of Rubinstein's *The Demon*. "In some places he (Battistini) was almost ludicrous... it was only his incomparable cantilena which made the listener forget his absurd appearance which was especially obtrusive after Eugenio Giraldoni's demonic rendering of the role; a mediocre singer in comparison with Battistini, but a fine actor". In general Levik shows a preference for Russian singers in the great Russian works. He devotes considerable space to Giraldoni's performance as Iago, opposite the Otello of Nicolai Figner, "Giraldoni, a great specialist in villains like Scarpia and Barnaba, as well as a superb actor, here abandoned all subtlety... he stood facing the audience, with a sanctimoniously contrite look on his face as though ashamed of the fact that he has to describe such human abomination, while garnishing his infamous slander by purely vocal means, and held Figner riveted to the spot".

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