

## SYMPOSIUM RECORDS CD 1364

### Titta Ruffo

Titta Ruffo, né Ruffo Cafiero Titta was born at Pisa in 1877 to Oreste Titta, smith, skilled in decorative wrought iron work, and Amabile née Sequenza, housemaid, her family originally Spanish. There were an older brother and four younger sisters, each with artistic talents. At his father's wish he entered the family business, but rebelled and left for Rome where he began to study engineering. Changing direction again, he resolved to become a singer. Ruffo claimed to be have been entirely self taught in acting, piano and singing, and to have modeled himself on the baritone Oreste Benedetti (1872-1917). This is, perhaps, somewhat disingenuous, as for a while at any rate he was in the class of Venceslao Persichini at the Liceo Musicale di Santa Cecilia in Rome, and then with Lelio Casini in Milan. Melba was another singer who repudiated her first teacher, but Marchesi, great teacher though she was, must have been building on foundations well laid in Australia by Pietro Cecchi.

Ruffo's début was in 1898 at the Teatro Costanzi, Rome as the Herald in *Lohengrin*. He next sang in Livorno and Pisa. His development both as a person and as an artist was much influenced by Adelina Fanton, a mezzo-soprano whom he met whilst travelling to his first foreign engagement in Santiago in 1900. They appeared together also in *La Gioconda* and *Nabucco* at Trieste in 1901, in *Nabucco* at Venice in 1903 and possibly in *The Demon* at Odessa in 1905. Adelina Fanton, née Fontana was born at Venice in 1867. Her début was as Azucena at Urbino. She sang throughout Italy until prevented by illness. Some months after her death at Rome in 1907 Ruffo married Lea Fontana.

In 1901 he appeared in Cairo and in 1903 at Covent Garden in *Lucia di Lammermoor* and *Il Barbiere di Siviglia*. He was also to have sung Rigoletto with Melba as Gilda, but Melba complained that he was too young to be her father. The role was given to someone else and he was never asked back. (It is said that Ruffo's rejoinder when asked to sing in *Rigoletto* with Melba years later was, "Tell Melba that she is too old to be my daughter." - This seems to be apocryphal; such a repeated conjunction of the planets being untraced.) His début at La Scala in 1904 was as Rigoletto. From 1904 to 1907 he enjoyed immense success in Kiev, Moscow, Odessa, St. Petersburg and Warsaw. In these years he was appearing also in Barcelona, Berlin, Paris and Vienna.

Ruffo first came to North America in 1912. He made his début at the Metropolitan Opera, but as a member of the Chicago-Philadelphia Grand Opera Company, which used the house by arrangement. He appeared in Chicago and with the Canadian National Opera, but in 1916 he returned to Italy to volunteer for military service. Apart from some appearances in Paris, for which he was given leave, he next

sang in Mexico in 1919 and Boston in 1920. Strangely, Ruffo was engaged by the Metropolitan Opera only in 1921 and by the time of his retirement in 1929 he seems to have appeared on only some forty or fifty occasions, including a couple of appearances in Brooklyn and Philadelphia. The reason he gave for retiring from opera was a very remunerative engagement for sound films. However, his film career was limited to three “shorts” in which he sang arias from *L'Africaine*, *Il Barbiere di Siviglia* and *Otello*.

He retained his father's libertarian outlook and refused to join the Fascist party. Also he was a brother-in-law of Giacomo Matteotti, an Italian socialist who was assassinated in 1924. His persistent refusal to perform in Italy after 1926 and the overt sympathy of many audiences abroad with his outlook led to his passport being sometimes withdrawn and to an attack on him in Marseilles in 1931. His last operatic performances were as Hamlet and Scarpia at Buenos Aires in 1931, but he continued to give concerts. In 1937 his passport was again withdrawn and he was imprisoned. Such was the outcry abroad that he was released, but his passport was not returned. This marked the end of his career. Ruffo was heard only once again in public; on Mussolini's arrest in 1943 he sang the Marseillaise from his balcony in Florence. Shortly after, under the German occupation of the region, he refused to sing on the wireless and was advised to go into hiding. Then, in 1944, he had to escape when the building in which he was hiding was blown up.

Titta Ruffo died in Florence in 1953. With the knowledge and approval of his widow and family he was taken to Rome to lie next to Adelina Fanton.

Generalisations are always open to objection. Nevertheless, it can be claimed that Caruso and Ruffo were the leading singers in the transition to the new verismo school, excelling in areas largely closed to Bonci and Marconi, to Ancona and Battistini.

Ruffo possessed undoubtedly one of the most powerful voices of his era, which might lie behind Melba's refusal to sing with him, but, as is evident from the records, he used it at levels to suit the music, which included an effective quiet parlando manner. His voice was also of a most distinctive timbre and could take on many shades and colours to suit the occasion. Its impact as recorded is impressive; in the theatre it must fully have justified Giuseppe de Luca's remark, “It is not a voice but a miracle.”. However, Ruffo's deficiency in formal training may account for the relatively early decline in his career and for his refusal in retirement to take pupils. Indeed, as early as 1912, at his first appearance in New York W. J. Henderson was concerned for him and significantly de Luca's remark concluded, “which he bawled away.”.

Premières in which he sang include *Paolo e Francesca* (Mancinelli-1908), *Aurora* (Panizza-1908) and *Edipo Re* (Leoncavallo-1920; written for Ruffo).

Rigoletto and the Barber of Seville were perhaps his greatest roles; others in which he excelled include Amonasro, Barnaba, The Demon, Don Carlos (*Ernani*), Hamlet, Scarpia and Tonio.

[In *Record Collector* Vol. 35 Ruffo Titta, jnr. writes interestingly of his father.]

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