

SYMPOSIUM RECORDS CD 1379

CREATOR RECORDS

What would one not give for a box for the first night of *Don Giovanni* or *Fidelio* or *Lohengrin*? In the spirit of that question CREATOR RECORDS, records of artists in roles they sang in first performances, are keenly sought by many collectors. The gramophone, of course, does not take us back as far as *Lohengrin*, let alone *Don Giovanni*, but it does reach back to singers who were in first performances as long ago as the 1870s.

Interest in these records is based on a number of assumptions, which need to be examined.

For the first performance, the argument runs, the composer selected the finest and most appropriate artist available for each role in his latest work. And, of course, as the composer was living in the days of the Golden Age of Singing when great singers were still around, such records are permanent exemplars of Grand Opera As It Should Be Performed. A creator record is thus akin to a photograph, a frozen instant in time, a direct path to the intentions of the composer, informing us how the composer wanted his work performed.

The supposed "Golden Age of Singing" was supposedly in steep decline at the end of the 19th century and we are given to understand that the gramophone just caught its remnants in the first decade of the 20th century.

There are two strands in this argument: 1) concerning authentic performing practice and 2) whether or not today's singers are as good as yesterday's.

1) Authentic performing practice. A composer has an idea which he writes down on paper. (For Busoni, "A score is already an arrangement.") The singer studies the score, until he thinks he knows what the composer wants, and how and to what extent he can achieve that. If the composer is present at rehearsals, or he can otherwise meet him, he may come by further information which he may build into his conception, information which the composer did not think to put in the score, or which of its nature could not be written down. Of course the singer or the conductor may not agree on what the composer wants. A lesser composer, or a great composer at the start of his career, may not have access to the top singers or conductors, but the less renowned may be more amenable to fulfilling his wishes. And by the time of the final dress rehearsal the composer himself may have decided on changes, perhaps also adopting suggestions from participants. Well, the first performance takes place. There is a standing ovation from a packed over-hot auditorium or just some lukewarm handclapping from a bored half filled draughty house. The following morning some critics commend the music, some vilify it; some praise the artists, some disparage them. A few days later a singer enters a recording studio, various benches, stools, music stands and pieces of equipment lie around, the place is cold, dusty and stinks of stale tobacco. He is told to stand at a particular point and to sing precisely into a metal funnel, never below pp and never above ff and he is accompanied by a pianist he has never met before and who appears to be sight-reading. It is a tribute to the professionalism of

many singers that many creator records are musical, packed with drama and enjoyable, but how close are they to the first performance?

Additional authenticity is attributed to records on which the composer accompanies or conducts the orchestra. However, if the composer is but an indifferent pianist or a mediocre conductor he may not be able to achieve the performance he wants. Reznicek said of Mahler's performance of his *Donna Diana* that, "he had never met such a scrupulous conductor and had never heard his work so perfectly interpreted." [Gustav Mahler I, 495-H.-L. de La Grange]

The gap may be further widened when, as often happens, records are made many years later; memories fade, fashions change, interpretations mature - a first performance is a work in progress. Do decorations, upward and downward portamenti for example, add to the meaning of music rather as hand movements add to the meaning of conversation? If they do, then in judging creator records we may have severe difficulty if the idiom has changed.

2) Are today's singers less good than yesterday's? There were indeed singers whose pre-eminence cannot be doubted; the evidence of their records convinces. Battistini, Boninsegna, Calvé, Caruso, Chaliapin, Eames, Lilli Lehmann, McCormack, Melba, Plançon, Schumann-Heink, Tamagno and Zenatello are examples, and the evidence of one brief record suffices to include Anna von Mildenburg. Probably equally fine were Albani, Cotogni, Lassalle, Maurel, Melchissède, Patti, and Jean and Édouard de Reszke, but on one count or another their records are less than satisfactory and harder to judge. And there were singers who excited controversy then and still do. Fernando De Lucia is an obvious example. But beyond them the record catalogues of the time were filled with pages and pages of singers of lesser and lesser grades.

Has the position changed? Many maintain that we have moved from the age of the singer, through the age of the conductor and in to the age of the stage designer.

For those who do not believe in the golden age, or at any rate have doubts about it, there are today equally fine singers. To amplify this a little, there are today excellent voices, though aims and aspirations in training and in using them have changed with increasing experience of earlier music and with the needs of later music.

The rise of the microphone on the radio and in the recording studio has been significant both for good and for ill. It has given access to great music to large numbers of people together with the possibility of studying individual performances in detail and comparing them closely with other performances. However, because it is easy to spot and criticise small errors and hard to recognize and describe great performance, it has also led to an obsession with clinical perfection at the expense of the risk-taking associated with excitement in music.

The microphone thus far has been a means of distributing music. In doing this it may also have allowed a number of singers whose voices are not suitable for auditoria to have worthwhile careers. However, if the microphone extends its domain to the opera house then singing and opera as we know them will undergo profound changes.

GEMMA BELLINCIONI [Monza, Piedmont 1864-Roccabelvedere near Naples 1950] was the daughter of a bass, Cesare Bellincioni and a soprano, Carlotta Soroldoni, with whom she studied. She studied also with Giovanni Corsi and Luigia dell'Armi in Naples and she made her début there at the age of 15. In South America in 1886 she married the tenor Roberto Stagno and they appeared together with great success in every operatic centre. Amongst the many premières in which they sang was that of *Cavalleria Rusticana*. After Stagno's death she continued on her own. In 1906 she appeared as *Salome*; it became one of her best roles. Bellincioni was renowned for her singing of verismo roles. For Verdi she was one of the finest Violettas.

CELESTINA BONINSEGNA [Reggio Emilia 1877-Milan 1947] studied with Virginia Boccabadati at the Liceo Rossini, Pesaro Liceo and, discounting some student performances, made her début as Gilda in *Rigoletto* at Fano in 1896. She appeared throughout the operatic world in a repertoire that extended from Norma through Verdi to verismo roles. On records her stellar quality is obvious, but in life, perhaps lacking elegance and charisma, audiences seem not to have taken to her.

FERRUCCIO CORRADETTI [San Severino Marche, Macerata 1866-New York 1939] was at first a journalist, but then studied with Giuseppe Faini in Rome and made his début there in 1893. He gained considerable experience in major roles, but he came to realise that he would succeed best as a buffo, and as a buffo he developed a considerable international career. From about 1912 he was involved more and more in teaching, though he continued to sing and was amongst the first opera singers to broadcast. His repertoire was largely Italian. His 600 records show him as an opera singer and also as a comic. He was married to the soprano Bice Adami and their daughter was also a soprano.

FLORENCE EASTON [Middlesborough-on-Tees, Yorkshire 1882-New York 1955] grew up in Toronto and soon showed talent in music. She studied under Agnes Larkcom in London and W. E. Haslam in Paris. She joined the Moody-Manners Company, where she met her husband, the American tenor Francis MacLennan. After two seasons with Henry Savage's company in America they moved to Berlin. The ability to learn new roles or roles in new languages with great speed often stood her in good stead. By 1917 she was singing with Caruso at the Metropolitan Opera. Until 1928 she also appeared in Chicago, now singing the big Wagnerian parts to which she had long aspired. As the 1930s advanced Easton sang less and turned more to teaching.

CESIRA FERRANI [Turin 1863-Pollone near Biella 1943] studied under Antonietta Fricci at the Liceo Musicale, Turin and made her début there in 1887 as Marguérite in *Faust*. Her repertoire was largely Italian but extended to lighter Wagnerian parts and to *Pélleas et Mélisande*. Her career was mainly in Italy, but

she sang also in Egypt, France Portugal, Russia, Spain. In 1909 she retired and taught in Turin.

HIPÓLITO LÁZARO [Barcelona 1887-Barcelona 1974] sang in a boys choir. He then scratched a living, but was too poor to complete his training with Carmen Bonaplata in Barcelona. His début, whilst on military service in the Moroccan War, was at Olot near Gerona in 1909 in Arrieta's *Marina*. Service over, he studied further in Rome under Ernesto Colli. As a protégé of Mascagni, he soon earned an enviable reputation except that at the Metropolitan Opera, from 1918 to 1920, he was inevitably in the shadow of Caruso. He lived for thirty years in Cuba, appearing there as late as 1950.

FERNANDO DE LUCIA [Naples 1860-Naples 1925] entered the local Conservatoire San Pietro a Majella to study bassoon and double-bass, but he soon turned to singing, studying with Carelli and Lombardi, and he made his début in Naples as Faust. He rose to sing in every significant European centre of opera and in North and South America. His records suggest a most polished singer of earlier 'bel canto' operas, but in his day he was greatly in demand for leading roles in the new verismo works. After 1908 he sang relatively little, but in 1917 he started to record for a local Neapolitan company, which eventually published some 300 records of his voice.

EMILIO DE MARCHI [Voghera near Pavia 1861-Milan? 1917] gave up a military career to study singing and made his début as Alfredo in *La Traviata* in 1886 in Milan. As his career blossomed he moved from Italy to Barcelona, Buenos Aires, Prague, Madrid and North and South America. He sang mainly Italian opera, but also some Wagnerian parts. There was some talk that Caruso would be chosen for the première of *Tosca*, but he was eventually passed over in favour of de Marchi.

GIUSEPPE NESSI [Bergamo 1887-Milan 1961] studied with Melli and Vezzani at the Conservatoire, Bergamo and made his début in 1910 at Saluzzo as Alfredo in *La Traviata*. For a while he sang lyric roles in the Italian provinces, but then, on the advice of the conductor Tulio Serafin, he took to character parts and in these he had a highly successful career over some forty years. He was especially popular at La Scala. He sang also at Buenos Aires, London, Paris, Salzburg, Verona and Vienna and his career included many premières.

GIUSEPPE PACINI [Florence 1862-1910 Florence] was taught by Cortese in his home town and made his début there in 1887 in Verdi's *I due Foscari*. After singing successfully in Italy and Mexico his career was halted in 1892 by a scandal until Mascagni chose him in 1895 for the premières of *Guglielmo Ratcliff* and *Silvano*. Thus relaunched he went on as one of the most talented baritones of the time.

EMILIO VENTURINI [Brescia 1878-Brescia 1952] sang as a lyric tenor and then moved to buffo roles. He was in the premières of *Le Maschere* (Turin) and of *Siberia*. He sang at Paris, Covent Garden and the Metropolitan Opera [Cassio (*Otello*) and Spoletta (*Tosca*)]. From 1910-1917 in Chicago he also sang major roles including Edgardo (*Lucia di Lammermoor*), Pinkerton and Turiddu. From 1921 to 1948 he became almost an institution for his singing of comprimario parts, including at least six premières, at La Scala. He was also successful as an actor.

MARIA ZAMBONI (Peschiera near Lake Garda 1895-Verona 1976) studied under Silva at the Parma Conservatoire and made her début as Marguérite (*Faust*) in 1921. She had a successful career throughout Italy in a wide range of Italian roles and lighter Wagnerian parts and as Euridice and Donna Elvira. She also sang in Holland and in South America. In 1936 she retired and taught in Milan.

GIOVANNI ZENATELLO [Verona 1876-New York 1949] took careful stock when his elder brother lost his excellent voice by early misuse. He was taught privately as a baritone by Zanoni and his début, in 1898, was as Silvio in *I Pagliacci*. When a while later the tenor for the same work suddenly withdrew, reluctantly the manager allowed him to stand in. He was now a tenor. He was heard by Toscanini and harshly criticised, but he bit on his tongue and, learning much, went on to become by general consent one of the world's great tenors and successor to Tamagno as Otello. Zenatello's lirico-spinto voice was remarkably even over the full range. He and his wife, the contralto Maria Gay, started the Verona Festival.

Tracks 5 and 6 These technically primitive cylinders, the only recordings of de Marchi, were made live at the Metropolitan Opera, New York.

Track 8 From an extremely rare vertically cut recording.

Track 10 Nessi created the role of Pong and Venturini that of Pang. Baracchi, who sings here the role of Ping, was in the première, but as the Mandarin.

The Columbia company recorded sections A and B of the ministers' trio, and independently, using the same artists, the Fonotipia company recorded sections A and C. In this transfer the outer sections are from the Fonotipia and the central one from the Columbia recording.

13 At any rate in the studio De Lucia transposes much more than most singers; the first side of this duet was recorded in score pitch, the second, a half tone lower.

15 An amusing 'Descrizione di Londra'

17 and 18 The première of *Le Maschere* took place simultaneously in six different towns. Boninsegna and Corradetti were both in the one successful performance, that under the composer at the Costanzi Theatre, Rome.

17 'Aria delle lettere'

18 'Stutter Song', an excellent vehicle for Corradetti's buffo abilities.

19 Some of Lázaro's records suggest a degree of vocal and dramatic exaggeration. Here, however, he sings with taste and restraint.

Further records and information on Gemma Bellincioni can be found on Symposium CD 1073, on Celestina Boninsegna on CD 1323, on Florence Easton on CD 1296, on Fernando De Lucia on CDs 1149 and 1231, and on Giovanni Zenatello on CDs 1073, 1138, 1148, 1158 and 1168.

Acknowledgements: Symposium Records thanks Dave Mason for tracks 9 and 11, John Wolfson for tracks 15 and 17, and Alan Bilgora for track 19. Thanks are due also to Paul Lewis and Adrian Tuddenham for assistance with the production.

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