

A Look At  
The Record of Singing Volumes 1 and 2;  
The Books and Recordings

From the moment one has seen EMI's massive twelve record set The Record of Singing Volume 1, and the thirteen record The Record of Singing Volume 2, there is only wonder and admiration at the size and ambition of what (when it is finished) will be a virtually complete aural reference of singers who recorded. As such these sets cannot be too highly praised and the guiding spirits behind the project, George Stuart and Vivian Liff, who lent their recordings and pictures, deserve the highest accolades. Unfortunately, there is a Jekyll and Hyde aspect to the entire project. Because of this it will be necessary to consider the two books by Michael Scott, which accompany the sets and which are also called The Record of Singing, Volumes 1 and 2, separately from the recordings. As the recordings are by far the most important historical re-issues devoted to opera singers to yet appear, I will first look at the "records of singing."

Volume 1 has recordings of singers who recorded or were active until 1914. It begins with the curious recording of the last of the castrati, Moreschi, but turns completely around with the immensely important record by Adelina Patti of "Ah! non credea" from Bellini's La Sonnambula. Although the singer is undoubtedly past her prime, this is a wonderful reading by possibly the greatest prima donna of the nineteenth century and the most accurate preservation of a relatively pure early nineteenth century romantic style on records. This is only the beginning of the set. Classic interpretations of French, Wagnerian, and Italian opera are presented, often by the original singers of the roles. Thus extinct styles are preserved along with unmatched singing. There are no singers before the public today who can equal the feats displayed by Pol Plançon, Lillian Nordica, Sir Charles Santley, Emilio de Gogorza, Leon Escalais, Mattia Battistini or Antonio Pini Corsi, who gives an invaluable demonstration of coloratura buffa singing in "Udite!" from L'Elisir d'Amore. Fernando de Lucia looks back to the art of Mario with his recording of an aria from La Sonnambula while Francesco Tamagno reveals that he has never been approached as Otello, a role he created.

The list is endless. Suffice it to say that more can be learned about opera in these discs than in all of the complete recordings of opera made since the LP era has begun. Happily, except for a few unfortunate pitch problems, Bryan Crimp has done an admirable job with the transfers which make easy listening indeed. Only rabid purists will object to the discreet filtering. Even so, one will never get closer to the true sound of Lilli Lehmann's titanic art than in her two selections in Volume 1.

Volume 2 reveals even more marvels. Fabulous singing by David Devries, Marcel Journet and Rosa Ponselle are only a few of the treasures in the set. There is the most spectacular recording of a Mozart aria

ever put on a disc: the incredible florid aria from Idomeneo recorded by the great Hermann Jadlowker. The wide-ranging selections in this volume, covering the years 1914-1925, are free from the major problem of Volume 1, in which so many of the legendary stars of the distant past recorded long past their primes. Thus a young Riccardo Stracciari and Fernando Carpi give bel canto lessons in their duet from Il Barbiere, a far cry from the heavy-handed treatment it is given in modern performances. The relatively obscure Genevieve Vix, Suzanne Brohly and Fanny Helder quite seduce the listener. There will be no surprise at the marvelous singing of Galli-Curci, but considerable surprise at the spirited singing of Elvira de Hildago, a singer who failed miserably at the Met. Once again the list of singers is extensive and since there are fewer pitch problems by far, I am even more enthusiastic if possible about this volume of records.

So much for Dr. Jekyll. Now for Mr. Hyde.

With the sets, one finds books by Michael Scott also called The Record of Singing, Volumes 1 and 2, with the covers identical to the record boxes seemingly linking the records with the books, a drastic mistake. For while the records give an impartial, unarguable account of the singers, at least as they recorded, the books only present a highly slanted record of Michael Scott's prejudices against singers which is damaging to the project and unfair. Further, it is written in a smug superior manner offensive to many readers, some of whom have refused to have anything to do with Volume 2 as a result. To see why I am so appalled by this book a detailed examination is in order.

In the preface, Scott writes "I have let the records-so to speaking for themselves and been content to act as guide to features of technique, style and interpretation..." Good advice, but unfortunately it is ignored. Scott acts not as a guide, but as a judge, an arbiter. It is not enough for him to criticize an individual singer, but he even goes on to condemn the whole national German style of singing. He notes that "Germany has never been a Land of Song." Considering that just about the only eighteenth century operas in the repertory are, with the exception of Pergolesi's La Serva Padrona, all written by Germans, this is strange indeed. Of course many were written in the Italian style, but many were written in the French and the German style as well and Mozart, not a bad vocal authority himself, was quite taken with many German singers and praised them greatly in his correspondence. But Scott ignores Mozart and writes that "In the eighteenth century...the Germans were not thought to be able to sing at all."

Scott is not necessarily incorrect in basing his judgements on singing upon the historic precepts laid down by the great Italian teachers Tosi and Porpora, but things have changed a lot in the last 300 years and it is not always a good idea to rigidly base all judgements on how we think singers sang before the age of recordings. All that we can really know is the music they sang, and from colorful contemporary criticism we can get an idea of what singing was like; considering how much singing changes

and fluctuates within even these two volumes of the Record of Singing, it is a mistake to use such unyielding yardsticks. Scott, however, falls headlong into the trap and even speculates that Tosi would have thought Chaliapin "the paragon of Bel Canto" and superior to Plancon. I personally think Tosi would have despised both of them, since their styles must have been so completely foreign to his own. Scott's attempt to place Chaliapin, one of the few singers he seems to favor, in the great line of bel-canto artists is a laughable assertion in the face of the Russian's absurd, sporadic attempts in bel canto repertory and completely misses the true genius of this unique singer. In both volumes he is highly selective in his quoting of contemporary criticism. Thus, he uses Chorley's glowing review of Viardot's singing to suggest that Schumann-Heink's virtuosity was something inferior, but neglects to quote Chorley on the subject of Patti, a singer the critic actively disliked; yet Patti is in the set, while Viardot, alas, made no recordings. One also gets the impression that Scott skimmed on research and is doing a lot of faking. Singers as important as Wilhelm Hesch and Paul Knupfer get short shrift while comparatively insignificant singers like Henschel are dwelt upon at length.

Volume 2 finds Scott at his meanest. Where in Volume 1 he sometimes demurs, he does not hesitate in Volume 2 to make sure, as one reader put it, "that everything bad that can be said about a singer isn't left unsaid." He also seems anxious not leave any judgement to the listener. So we are told that Rosa Ponselle and Elsa Bland, celebrated stars of the Metropolitan Opera and Vienna Court Opera respectively, were "provincial," a surprising term for headliners of two of the most cosmopolitan opera houses in the world. American singers particularly are given nasty treatment. In addition, Ponselle is unfavorably compared to her contemporary, Florence Easton, a British singer who is all but forgotten in the United States, and does not seem to be celebrated in England today, if historical reissues are any indication. In the head-to-head "competition" in the record set, Ponselle gives a stunning account of the "Ernani involomi" while Easton sings an agreeable, but by no means outstanding rendition of "O mio babbino caro." Scott uses selective reviews to support his dubious contentions in a manner reminiscent of modern advertisers quoting even negative reviews to appear like raves. Other Americans coming in for harsh treatment include the lovely Anna Case, who Scott notes had "self-conscious diction," and Riccardo Martin, "a good second rate singer," somehow neglecting to quote the important critic Henry Finck who had this to say about Martin in his book My Adventures in The Golden Age of Music published in 1926: "His (Caruso's) successor might have been an American. One evening...Nordica came in...she asked: 'Is that Caruso singing?' 'No,' I answered, 'it is Riccardo Martin,' ...a greater tenor than Gigli or Martinelli." Interestingly, Caruso admired and liked Martin and they went to performances together.

Scott likes to qualify his qualifications with petty and irrelevant slogans, such as calling Bronsgeest an "excellent routine artist" or the designation of Mardones as "the best kind of house singer."

Perhaps the most startling of Scott's revelations is that John McCormack's "Il Mio Tesoro," recording is "deficient from character." He explains that McCormack's virtuosity was exaggerated in an age when singing was so poor, but that such achievements as male coloratura singing are common today. He fails to mention who are the modern male virtuosos who can accomplish these feats or where they are performing today and we can only regret that such singers appear to have stayed away from the Metropolitan or recordings.

But if he criticizes McCormack, Scott is generous with British singers. Overgenerous perhaps in a way which does no service to them. Just as it does not help Easton's reputation to compare her to Ponselle, it is also a mistake to compare Peter Dawson, a likeable enough singer, to such giants as Battistini and Santley, two baritones who are quite unapproached by any others on records.

Now if we have seen that Scott is condescending to Americans, he maintains his prejudices against German singing and really skewers many German singers. Two that he treats particularly harshly are Herman Jadlowker and Elisabeth Schumann. No doubt some of this comes from his active and reiterated dislike of Richard Strauss since both of these singers were particular favorites of the composer.

Dismissing Jadlowker's technique, one of the most accomplished on records, as the result of "simple" practice, Scott also implies that Jadlowker had no impact at the Metropolitan where he was given four premieres in as many years! Scott states that Jadlowker returned to Berlin as "the big fish," implying "in a small pond." Since many experts who are not burdened with Scott's anti-German attitude rightly consider the performances in Germany to have been more musically important than the "Rolls Royce" performances of the Met and Covent Garden, the pond was big enough. While the Met was presenting Julian, Jadlowker was creating Bacchus in Ariadne auf Naxos, a role Strauss wrote for him. It is well known and was noted by Henry Lahee that Jadlowker left the Met at a peak of popularity because he was offered the highest salary ever given to a tenor in Germany. However, Scott truly outdoes himself when he writes that Jadlowker's "voice, like that of most cantors, has a guttural quality," a statement suspiciously close to anti-Semitism and in any case a strange comment from one who is so impressed with the undeniably guttural voice of Chaliapin.

Elisabeth Schumann was one of the most beloved singers ever to grace the stage but gets cruel treatment from Scott. Not content to discuss the records, Scott actually criticizes her singing in, of all things, her photographs. He writes that the pictures prove she sings incorrectly by the way she holds her shoulders in still photographs. How can we take any of his observations seriously after this?

Sadly, we can also look forward to much castigation of Toscanini, if the first two volumes are any indication. He is seen as a villain by Scott, responsible for many of the singers' sins. [Readers are advised

to consult the superb biography of Toscanini by Harvey Sachs to find out about Toscanini's vocal influence.]

Frankly, I don't know if it is possible for anyone to write a complete history of singing and make the clear-cut judgements and pigeonholing that Scott attempts without self-destructing. Better perhaps to consult the Kutsch/Reimens A Concise Biographical Dictionary of Singers as a far more useful book to the scholar and enthusiast.

I can only hope that the books will not damage singers' reputations too greatly and that those who read them will be able to see through the layers of pseudo history and expertise and enjoy and appreciate the invaluable recordings which belong in the collections of all music libraries and vocal historians.

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