

THE ART OF BENIAMINO GIGLI VOLUME 1: 1918-1946 - EMI-HMV RLS-729
(3 discs, England) (Imported by German News Company)

THE ART OF BENIAMINO GIGLI VOLUME 2: 1947-1955 - EMI-HMV RLS-732
(3 discs, England) (Imported by German News Company)

BENIAMINO GIGLI VOLUME I: ARIE DA OPERE Edizione integrale - EMI Discoteca Classica Historical Archives 2C 153-03480/86M - released between 1918 and 1951, re-recorded 1978 (7 discs, Italy)

In "High Fidelity" for June, 1979, Volume 29, no. 7, pp. 128-132, there appeared an excellent review of the Italian EMI Gigli Volume I, by David Hamilton. Anyone who is interested in historical reissues in general or in those of Gigli in particular should read this article, for it is full of good sense and sane commentary on several subjects which seem to cause some people in the record industry to suffer loss of reason and restraint. Rather than extensively quoting or paraphrasing Mr. Hamilton's comments, especially since I would only harm the effects of his expert writing, I'm just going to state my almost complete agreement with what he has said about Gigli, his recordings, and their reissues, as well as reissues in general and "complete" ones in particular, and limit this review to some comments upon the technical qualities of the transfers in these sets.

The method used to check the quality of the transfers was the normal, simple one: direct comparison ("A-B", "B-A", "A-B", etc.) of the long-play reissue properly played back upon high-quality equipment with the 78-rpm original properly played back (i.e., with the correct size stylus for best results, the speed adjusted to match pitch with the lp, and the playback curve, or equalization, properly set for the particular type of 78-rpm recording) upon the same high-quality equipment, with the obvious exception that two different cartridges of the same model and two different but high-quality turntables were used. No filters or tone controls of any kind were used in the original comparisons, though I did later attempt, unsuccessfully, to use both kinds of devices to duplicate the sound on a few bands of the lp's by playing the 78's. The 78's selected were all shellac pressings (one a pre-release "advance"), covered all the periods of recording represented, and happened to turn out to range in condition from nearly mint to mediocre (well-scuffed and somewhat worn). Enough 78's were used in comparisons to make firm conclusions, and every single selection on each lp disc was tested for sound. Alas, in every single case in the Italian set and in every recording made before 1946 in the British issues, the results fulfilled or even exceeded the unpleasant expectations I've been forced by facts to adopt when dealing with all lp transfers from 78's except those bearing the name of A.C. Griffith and a few other people whose results seem to be consistently good.

On the first volume of the British set there appear several acoustical recordings and various types of electricals, only five of which were made in the "safe" time of 1946. On all but those five the high frequen-

cies have been sharply cut far enough into the range of the music that the recordings sound pinched and dull, thin and acoustically dead in comparison to the 78's. Not only does this filtering compress Gigli's voice but it also tends to change the balance by making the accompaniments seem to recede. Particularly in the acousticals I wonder if there has been some sort of boost in the mid-range of what sound remains, for Gigli's voice sounds fatter than on the original discs. Furthermore, many acousticals have peaks of noise which emerge most unpleasantly on these reissues because of the sharp cut-off of frequencies above them and because of the equalization. The filtering is overdone so much in this set that in terms of recorded sound one hears only the changes in qualities of recording from 1918 to World War II in the bass frequency-range. The amount of surface-noise audible varies a good deal, no doubt because of the use of both vinyl pressings or metal parts as well as shellacs as sources; and fortunately there is relatively little trouble from transient noise. Listening to Volume One caused occasional suspicion that the engineer was trying to standardize all the pre-1946 recordings, but the actual qualities of originals recorded by many different engineers in different locations at different times makes that idea seem impossible to consider. In dealing with the recordings made from 1946 onwards, however, the engineer allows a higher cut-off point in filtering 78-rpm originals; and the sound becomes much more open and lively. Volume Two is thus safe to acquire, but I cannot recommend Volume One except for those who are desperate for certain of the contents. Each set comes with an illustrated but sparsely filled booklet of eight pages which includes full information on the contents and some discographical information.

To turn to the Italian set, the promotional booklet that accompanies it in order to describe the two sets to be issued later includes (in Italian and English) a note that is such a masterpiece of "P-R-ese" that parts of it must be quoted: "Unfortunately, earlier releases were not adequate, because of the omission of many pieces recorded by Gigli and never published" (NOTE: as Mr. Hamilton points out, this set doesn't even contain all the published arias), "and also because of the technical means used for transferring the original masters onto tape, in the years between 1957 and 1964. These tapes, which can be called original, have now been taken up again by EMI and 'worked over'" (NOTE: that statement is certainly true, in a somewhat different sense from that that was probably intended) "in such a way as to restore to Gigli's voice all its essential qualities ... without compressing the sound ... Every side lasts less than 23-24 minutes, the ideal length for 'freeing' a monophonic recording." (NOTE: I wonder if that works as well as opening up the studio and letting the discs, tapes, and cutting equipment out for a romp in the fresh air). "When a work interpreted by Gigli had not already been transferred to tape, an effort was made to find the original master; in certain desperate cases, when the master no longer existed, we turned to the best 78-rpm record available, to collectors," (NOTE: To collectors who sing like Gigli?), "or to the EMI archives. One last problem should be mentioned: many Gigli records transferred to tape in the past, had to be rejected because the tonality of the piece was incorrect. This was caused by the imprecise speed of the master at

78 rpm. Very few records made by Gigli in the 'acoustic period' really revolved at 78 rpm" (NOTE: How many records have you ever seen "really revolve" by themselves at any speed?); "and the difference between 78, 80 or 76 revolutions per minute caused a variation in tonality that EMI ... has now corrected, thanks to the exceptional technical means available to it. Modern systems permit treatment of the tapes, the original masters and the 78 rpm records ... " Even apart from the digs which I couldn't resist inserting, what all these words seem to be saying is that the producers of this set avoided original sources whenever possible, preferring the usually mis-equalized and over-filtered dubbings made in the days of the variable, and in Gigli's case dull-sounding, days of the "Great Recordings of the Century" series (for example, try a bit of EMI/Angel COLH-146 "The Young Gigli") and that EMI now has not only a variable-speed turntable but also a variable-speed tape machine and even some equalizing and filtering equipment! Now in spite of all the verbiage about these revolutionary new tools the prospective buyer should not be misled into thinking that the people who worked on this set knew how to use them properly; in fact these records provide quite an extensive course of instruction in the results of how NOT to re-record 78-rpm recordings. There are varying types of mis-equalization, varying amounts of high-frequency and low-frequency cut-offs, varying amounts of surface noise (as could be inferred from what's been said above) remaining to be heard, amazing variations in dynamic levels and distortion levels, and so on. The variability and most of the faults are present from the earliest of the acoustical originals right up to the latest of the electricals. A few striking examples are the two acoustical recordings from Faust on the first side of Record no. 2, the almost unlistenable edgy and distorted sound of the duets from Cavalleria Rusticana on the second side of the same disc, and on Record no. 5's Side 1 the startling difference in clarity between the selections from Lodoletta on the one hand and Manon Lescaut and Andrea Chenier on the other, all recorded in the same place, probably in the same session. The best that can be said for this volume is that it provides excitement at each change of selection (what will happen next?) and exercise for the ear in attempting to hear what remains of the sound of Gigli through sonic curtains of constantly changing thickness; and much of what does remain does sound like Gigli. A large illustrated booklet (42 pages) printed in maroon ink provides commentary, fairly good discographical documentation (including take numbers), and texts with English translations.

It is sad to consider how much of the hard work that must have gone into the preparation of these sets has been squandered. Only Volume Two of the English issue can be recommended sonically; but potential buyers must remember that all of its contents reflect the last eight years of Gigli's recording career, beginning when he was 57, and that the set includes less than two sides of operatic selections. David Hamilton's advice to record companies to think before plunging into "complete editions" is certainly most appropriate in the case of the Italian set and should be amended to apply to selective editions also in cases like the sets considered here. If these sets are indicative of the future of reissues from EMI, the prospect is unfortunately rather bleak.

Richard Warren Jr.