

Discoveries

A recent publication by the enthusiastic if unsystematic Italian reissue producer Maurizio Tiberi, devoted to odds and ends of Tito Schipa, brought to mind an anomaly (only one among many, to be sure) in the work of another producer who might be characterized by the same adjectives: the late Edward J. Smith. Tiberi's two-disc set (Timaclub 41) includes a series of excerpts from a live performance of Massenet's Werther, sung in Italian, with Gianna Pederzini as Charlotte: the first part of the tenor's entrance aria; a segment of the duet at the end of Act I; most of Charlotte's big scene; the Ossian aria ("Ah, non mi ridestar"), and the opera's final moments--certainly enough to give a clear and beguiling impression of Schipa's famous Werther.

Connoisseurs of Smith's output may recall that he too published bits of Schipa in this role--the same bits, in fact, though without Pederzini's solo scene. As a fill-up to Act II of Cimarosa's Matrimonio Segreto on Golden Age of Opera EJS-371, the Werther passages were merely attributed to "Tito Schipa and Gianna Pederzini (1934)," and the truncated entrance aria was tacitly (although not subtly--not even at the same pitch!) completed with part of Schipa's later commercial recording (HMV DA-5420).

Some years later, Smith published Unique Opera Records UORC-221, a Schipa collection devoted mostly to a 1939 Berlin recital, but appending from Werther the Act I duet passage, "Ah, non mi ridestar," and the death scene, here attributed to Schipa and Coe Glade; the label proclaimed: "All Werther excerpts San Francisco Opera, Nov. 22, 1935, conducted by Gaetano Merola." (The fact of such a performance is confirmed by Arthur J. Bloomfield, The San Francisco Opera 1923-1961, New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1961, p. 188.) Despite the conflicting attributions, the passages common to EJS-371 and UORC-221 were in fact identical performances. The questions remained: who, where, and when? (If I'd looked further in Bloomfield than his chronology, I might have immediately resolved the mystery--or at least discarded one possibility: on p. 58, he tells us that in San Francisco "Schipa...sang in Italian while the rest of the cast used French." The Charlotte of this recording clearly sings in Italian.)

To complicate the picture a little more, Fonit-Cetra in 1981 brought out extensive excerpts from another Schipa-Pederzini Werther (DOC 16), ascribed to the Rome Opera on February 3, 1948--and, clearly, for most of their length different from the Smith recordings. According to the liner

note by Tito Schipa Jr., "the terrible condition of the acetate forced us to substitute the last portion of the opera...with another 'private' recording which, however, is not new to collectors. It is impossible to express a definite opinion as to the date of this particular passage as various hypotheses held by Italian and foreign experts (Milano '49? San Francisco '35?) do not appear, in the light of research, completely credible." This final scene is identical to the recording issued twice by Smith. (To keep the pot boiling, Rodolfo Celletti in his liner note for the Rome performance on Fonit-Cetra questions its attribution: "I may be mistaken, but I feel that this performance dates from the period between 1937 and 1940." To which Tiberi now replies in his liner note, "I had the glass-based acetates in my hands...much earlier than Cetra, and others may doubt as much as they wish: the recording is certainly that of February 3, 1948....")

Although its version of these recordings is fuzzier in sound than Smith's, Timclub comes to the rescue in the matter of attribution. Their set begins with Werther's entrance aria, but when the performance recording breaks off, we hear a cheerfully gruff female voice announcing, "Sono Gianna Pederzini," and the mezzo proceeds to authenticate the performance as from La Scala on April 29, 1934--not merely because she presumably recognizes and authenticates her own voice, but because, she says, the labels of the original discs said so; she adds that the entire performance was recorded, but that the rest of it has been lost. The commercial "O natura" follows her "intervento" (thus, no attempt to splice it into the live performance), and then come the remaining excerpts; including Pederzini's very expressive scene, previously unpublished and on internal evidence almost certainly stemming from the same occasion.

-- David Hamilton

CORRECTION

In the penultimate paragraph of my review of John Squire's and John Hunt's Furtwängler and Great Britain The Furtwängler Sound (ARSC Journal XVIII, 140), a gremlin contrived to change a "now" into a "not." Lines 17ff. of that paragraph should read as follows: "the various 'misabeled' Wagner recordings, listed as genuine in the first edition, have now been assigned to their correct dates (or when appropriate, omitted altogether) without comment--a procedure sure to confuse readers benighted enough not to subscribe to this Journal."