

### HISTORIC MASTERS - Third Series

GLINKA: Ruslan and Ludmilla--Farlaff's rondo; BORODIN: Prince Igor--No sleep, no rest. Vladimir Kastorsky, basso (1908).

Historic Masters 26 (76 rpm)

RIMSKI-KORSAKOV: May night--Sleep, my beauty. Vasili Damaev, tenor (January, 1910). May night--Duettino, Levko and Panochka. Elena Katulskaya, soprano; Vasili Damaev, tenor (December 1913).

Historic Masters 27 (71, 78 rpm)

VERDI: Traviata--Dei miei bollenti spiriti (in Russian) (1910);

MASSNET: O dolce incanto (1913). Dmitri Smirnov, tenor.

Historic Masters 28 (77 rpm)

FLOTOW: Martha--Qui sola, vergin rosa (1908); MEYERBEER:

Huguenots--O lieto sol (1908). Olimpia Boronat, soprano.

Previously unpublished. Historic Masters 29 (77 rpm)

ROSSINI: Guillaume Tell--O muto asil (1908). Francesco

Signorini, tenor. BELLINI: Sonnambula--D'un pensiero (1924).

Graziella Pareto, soprano; Giovanni Manuritta, tenor. Historic Masters 30 (77, 75 rpm)

VERDI: Don Carlos--O don fatale (19 December 1910); Clara Butt, contralto. WEBER: Oberon--Ocean, thou mighty monster (19

December 1911) Agnes Nicholls, soprano. (Previously unpublished.)

Historic Masters 31, 80, 78 rpm

Historic Masters is a small company, avowedly non-profit making. Any profits there may be from its sales will be put into new re-issues and into research. To quote from the prospectus: "The first series of Historic Masters appeared in 1972. Twenty records by great singers of the past were made available by the British Institute of Recorded Sound (now part of the British Library) on an advance subscription basis. The records were pressed on vinyl and the scheme represented a collaboration between the BIRS and EMI Ltd. It was a great loss to the collecting world when this series--which enjoyed considerable world wide sales--was not converted into a continuing project. A committee was formed under the chairmanship of Lord Harewood in the hope of reviving the project and after the withdrawal of the BIRS, this became Historic Masters Ltd. Considerable technical research has been needed into the best means of producing disc from old metal masters, the specifications of which are very different from those of modern LPs. Despite this, two further series of discs have already been produced and Historic Masters Ltd. are proud to announce a fourth." Records may be ordered from Historic Masters Ltd., 10 Yealand Drive, Lancaster, LA 1 4EW, England. The discs are not available separately; the third series, considered here, costs \$70 for air mail to the United States.

Since these are direct pressings, there has been no attempt to edit them in any way. Though generally the sound is good for its day, there is a certain amount of surface noise, especially in the outside grooves of several discs. Dates of recordings and speeds are given on the labels. Speeds vary from 71 to 80 rpm;

therefore they can be satisfactorily played only on machines equipped to handle these variations.

Vladimir Kastorsky, who belonged to the great line of Russian basses, was a contemporary of Chaliapin and Sibiriaikov. After beginning in the provinces, he joined the Marubskii Theater in 1895, and he made his final appearance at the Bolshoi in 1943. His repertoire embraced a wide variety of roles, including Wotan and the Count in Figaro. He won particular acclaim in 1907 as Pimen when Boris Godounow was first heard in Paris, and that remained one of his most admired roles. Here he gives us the patterish rondo of Farlaff from Ruslan and Ludmilla, of which Chaliapin made a wonderful record many years later. Kastorsky puts it over in a similar manner without ever sounding like the latter master. In strong contrast, Prince Igor's aria is sung with fine solid tone and a realization of the unrest in the music. The Ruslan side has been available in a Kastorsky recital on GV 2, but the sound of this re-pressing is superior.

Elena Katulskaya, who sang in Russia from 1909 until 1949, owned a pure, very Russian soprano voice that blended well with her tenor partner in the duet from May night. Of Damaev I have no information, but he shares a disc with Lydia Lipkowska on Club 99 (CL 99-75) in which this duet is included. The more familiar slumber song on the reverse (with its curious resemblance in the opening phrase to Brahms's Die Mainacht) shows him as a typically "white" Russian tenor singing rather powerfully for a song of sleep. In this he may be compared with both Smirnov and Sobinoff, whose records are well known; I would say Damaev stands up well without surpassing the competition.

Dmitri Smirnov came to the Metropolitan in 1910, at the age of 29, and remained for two seasons without any great success. So Russian a voice did not appeal to New York audiences at the time, and though he was said to have a god presence, he did not arouse any great enthusiasm. He also sang with the Boston Opera, but he left the country complaining that the Metropolitan management was entirely Italian. According to the books, Stean calls him an interesting artist in contrast to Sobinoff, whom he finds dependable but dull. Whether or not one agrees with this judgment, Smirnov's voice seems not to have been one of many colors. He sings the Traviata aria with generally good style (better than it often gets) though the aria sounds rather strange in Russian. On the whole it fares better than the Italian Manon. Here Smirnov allows himself the excesses that are usual in this aria when sung by Italians, including a lingering extra high note at the end.

One can hardly help admiring the appealing soft quality of Olimpia Boronat's voice, but I have not always enjoyed her emotion-laden delivery. I am happy to note that there is nothing of the sort to bother me here. The Huguenots aria, after a long orchestral introduction, is sung simply enough in Italian. The Last Rose of Summer, also in Italian, must always seem strange to English-oriented ears, and I am not convinced by the singer's way of stretching the phrasing out of shape or by her use of

portamento; her intonation also is not above criticism.

Francesco Signorini (1860-1927) was active principally in Italy from 1882 to 1910. Of the 13 titles listed in Bauer, seven are from Leoncavallo's Chatterton; otherwise his repertory runs to Aïda, Trovatore, Prophète and Guillaume Tell. Not surprisingly, then, our example shows a robust tenor in the tradition of Tamagno. He sings smoothly enough and is not bothered by the tessitura.

The coupling brings us Graziella Pareto, well remembered for her early HMV-Victor recordings, and a lesser known tenor. Pareto first recorded in 1908 when she was 20; in 1924 she was in her full prime, and her partner would have been 29. His was a light voice, at its best, we are told, as Almaviva in Rossini's Barber. This we can believe hearing this graceful performance. The two voices blend especially well, and there is a choral background.

Clara Butt, not yet a Dame, recorded Eboli's great aria in 1910, when she was at the height of her career. Not surprisingly, she transposes the difficult aria down a third, and her spectacular voice rings out majestically. She manages to alter the melodic line enough to add a low F. Perhaps if there were a single word for her performance, it would be ladylike.

Agnes Nicholls (Lady Hamilton Harty) was a more temperamental singer, but her voice was also an impressive one. Though she made a favorite record of Ocean, thou mighty monster on 18 December 1911 (available on Rubini GV 7), this is an unpublished take recorded, according to the label, one day later. (Paul Lewis's Nicholls discography in The Record Collector, vol. 30, nos. 12-13, gives the date as 18 December, the same as the published version.) Needless to say, the aria is cut. It is delivered in good, understandable English and in clarion tones, perhaps a trifle stiff. On both sides of this disc there is considerable surface noise in the first grooves.

-Philip L. Miller-