
SOUND RECORDING REVIEWS

The Bayer "Complete Caruso"

Enrico Caruso: Complete Recordings. Bayer CD 200 010. 15 CDs.

Only a few weeks prior to this writing, OASI Recordings mailed a flyer to their customers announcing what appeared to be the first CD edition of the complete recordings of Enrico Caruso. Produced by Bayer, a German label heretofore unknown to the author, these recordings promised to be brand new transfers of the original recordings, "cleaned up" by the trademarked NoNOISE system. The NoNOISE process is not new to CD collectors, having been used by Philips on a series of reissues of analog tapes from the 1950s, including some of the original 35mm Everest recordings. This writer's reactions to the NoNOISE system, based on the Philips reissues, had not been entirely positive, the process having removed much of the original hall ambience, making the recordings sound rather dry. In addition, the high frequencies seemed a bit muffled when compared to good LP pressings of these same recordings.

The OASI flyer was reassuring, stating that "Whatever the results this may have had on instrumental and orchestral recordings, it has truly worked wonders on this material!" One statement in the OASI ad provided cause for concern: the claim that the new set began with the 1900-1901 Path (Anglo-Italian Commerce Co.) cylinders. Knowledgeable collectors have been aware for at least thirteen years that these dates are incorrect, thanks to a superb article by the late Martin Sokol,¹ and more recent research by Dr. John R. Bolig,² which places them between October and December, 1903. But since the OASI advertisement stated that the CDs were "ADD," it was reasonable to assume that these were fresh digital transfers of the original recordings.

The review copy was purchased through a local record dealer who orders regularly from Koch Imports (the U.S. importer for the Bayer set). Upon opening the large box and examining the CDs, the author became suspicious, since the CDs were stamped "AAD," which seemed to indicate that these were not brand new transfers of the Caruso recordings. As shall be explained below, this proved to be precisely the case, the CDs being nothing more than a careless reprocessing of previously released analog tapes.

The Bayer collection contains fourteen CDs allegedly covering the complete Caruso recordings, plus a fifteenth disc devoted to a demonstration of the various stages involved in removing the noise from these recordings, including a first stage of filter-

ing, de-noising, de-clicking and final filtering. The demonstration material is the November 30, 1902 Gramophone and Typewriter Co. (G&T) recording of "Vesti la giubba" from Leoncavallo's *I Pagliacci*. When a demonstration disc of a new process shows progressive deterioration of the original with each successive application, it does not bode well for the rest of the project. This was precisely the case with Bayer's demonstration CD.

First, the original source is poor, not even close to the vivid sound Keith Hardwick extracted from this recording on a recent Angel/EMI CD entitled "Enrico Caruso—Opera Arias and Songs, Milan 1902-1904" (CDH 7610462). These excellent Hardwick transfers also appeared on LP, on a French Pathé-Marconi pressing which was part of their References series of historical reissues (2903341). The various stages in the NoNOISE process did remove a great deal of the surface noise, but it also dulled whatever brilliance remained of Caruso's voice on the poor original. In addition, pumping and breathing at dynamic changes could be heard on the "finished product," a very disturbing side effect. Particularly noticeable was a chopping off of phrase endings, as if someone quickly lowered the volume, albeit slightly, at the moment a note was released, only to raise it slightly again for the noise following the release.

The next selection examined was the Radames/Amneris duet from Act IV of *Aïda*, "Già i sacerdoti adunansi," recorded with Louise Homer on December 29, 1910. The sound was dreadful, plagued by offensive pumping and breathing at the dynamic changes and accompanied by an annoying metallic reverberation not present on the original.

These were the poorest transfers of Caruso's recordings heard by this writer since Murray Hill issued their "Complete Recordings of Enrico Caruso" in 1973, the year of the Caruso centennial. At the conclusion of the first part of this duet, the author was surprised to find that this 78 rpm side (75 rpm, actually) had not been spliced to the second half of the duet, "Misero appien mi festi," which is the very next recording on the CD, leaving a gaping hole in the middle of this scene. Since the two sides contain the music exactly as written, free of any cuts, this is both senseless and unfortunate. At this point it appeared quite possible that the Ghost of Murray Hill, after an all too brief absence of seventeen years, had reappeared.

If the source materials for the Bayer anthology were indeed the old Murray Hill tapes, then it would be logical to conclude that the other errors found in the Murray Hill LP set would probably have been repeated by Bayer. This proved to be exactly the case. The next selection considered was the supposedly unpublished "Celeste Aïda," recorded on March 13, 1906. This unpublished recording was included in a four-LP Caruso centennial album issued by RCA in 1973, along with eight other allegedly unpublished items, most of them simply alternate takes of issued recordings. The authenticity of the unpublished takes in the RCA album (ARM4-0302) had been questioned by some, so this writer attempted to clarify the situation by analytically comparing RCA's alternate takes with their published counterparts. The results of those comparisons were published in *Antique Phonograph Monthly* in 1984.³

The "Celeste Aïda" take finally approved for release was made on March 29, 1908. Two new takes were made on that date, both bearing the same matrix number as the 1906 attempt. Take 3, bearing matrix number 3180-3, was the version released by Victor. Describing the 1906 unpublished recording in the above mentioned article, the author stated:

the phrasing in this version is much different than in the published take of March 29, 1908. The unpublished version, for example, has a breath between 'forma' and 'divina' in the second phrase of the aria, and there are numerous other differences. Caruso's voice also goes sharp for a second, near the end of his final note, and then comes back down to the B-flat.

Comparing RCA's efforts to those of Murray Hill, this writer noted: "Murray Hill claimed that they included the 3/13/06 unpublished version as well. Closer scrutiny, however, shows that their set does not contain the unpublished version at all, but instead includes the 3/29/08 published recording twice!"

It came as no surprise to find that Bayer had perpetuated the same error as Murray Hill, issuing the 1908 published version of "Celeste Aida" on two different CDs, falsely passing one of them off as the 1906 unpublished recording. Despite Murray Hill's claim that correct playing speeds for their Caruso anthology were based on Aida Favia-Artsay's definitive volume on the subject,⁴ numerous recordings were transferred at the wrong pitch. The same recordings are pitched incorrectly in the Bayer set. Incorrectly pitched recordings on LP were nothing more than a nuisance—listeners could easily correct them with a variable speed turntable. Unfortunately, no manufacturer has produced a CD player with a pitch control, making careful attention to the speeds of the original recordings absolutely essential if reissues are to appear on CD.

Among the early recordings transferred at the wrong speeds by Bayer are three of the Zonophones. Trimarchi's "Un bacio ancora" and Zardo's "Luna fedel" are both one-quarter step sharp and the "Siciliana" from *Cavalleria Rusticana* is one-half step sharp (Favia-Artsay states, quite convincingly, that Caruso transposed this aria down one-half step for the Zonophone recording). The same errors were made by Murray Hill. Much has been written about the more lyric quality of Caruso's voice as heard on the early Milan recordings. Unfortunately, incorrect pitching of these recordings has greatly exaggerated the situation. Certainly Caruso's voice was not as dramatic as it became later on, but when reproduced at the proper speeds, his early recordings reveal a strong, virile young tenor.

One never hears the light, boyish voice that emerges when the recordings are played sharp. Considering the convincing case made by Favia-Artsay for pitching the Milan recordings at A-435, the results are truly disastrous when these recordings are one-quarter to one-half step sharp relative to A-440.

This writer once assembled, for personal research and reference, a tape of all of Caruso's Milan recordings, pitched at A-435. With the exception of three of the 1902 G&Ts, the author does not possess originals to any of these recordings (and will probably never acquire most of them; one of the Zonophones recently appeared on an auction list with a minimum bid of \$2,000.00!). The tape was made from various LP reissues, carefully copied using a turntable with variable speed. Listening to them as a group, Caruso's vocal progression from the first Milan session through the early Victors appears much more logical. There are no abrupt changes in the basic timbre from one session to the next, just a natural development of the voice.

Many of the Murray Hill recordings, as mentioned above, were "enhanced" using artificial reverberation, with disastrous results. The reverb sounded extremely metallic and unnatural. The same artificial reverb can be heard on the Bayer recordings as well. In addition to the *Aida* duet with Homer, listeners can make a note-

for-note comparison of the reverberation on the other Bayer recordings with their Murray Hill counterparts. "Deh, ch'io ritorni" from *L'Africana*, made during his last recording session on September 16, 1920, is but one additional example, and there are numerous others.

Murray Hill also used some type of dynamic noise reduction system on many of their transfers, but this also was poorly executed. A dynamic noise reduction system will sense the energy content (i.e. frequency content) and volume levels of the music, and vary the amount of filtering accordingly, so as to cause minimum alteration of the musical information on the recording. The problem with these types of noise reduction systems is that when they are placed in the hands of an unskilled engineer, the results can be disastrous. Overuse of a dynamic noise reduction system will result in pumping and breathing when the dynamic levels change. Audibly, the music's dynamics are artificially compressed, with the background noise level constantly changing.

Comparing Bayer's transfers with Murray Hill's, the side effects of the Murray Hill processing are clearly heard, beneath the added NoNOISE processing. In fact, perceptive listeners will be able to clearly distinguish the Murray Hill processing from the additional problems the NoNOISE system adds to these recordings. One problem not previously heard on other NoNOISE processed recordings is the audible pumping of dynamics. The author's educated guess is that the pumping and breathing on the original Murray Hill tapes made it impossible for the NoNOISE system to successfully cope with these recordings, exacerbating an already bad situation.

The surface noise characteristics of the Murray Hill recordings can still be heard beneath Bayer's NoNOISE processing, a further indication that Bayer used the Murray Hill transfers. The 1907 "Vesti la giubba" begins with three faintly audible middle-frequency "thumps" on the Murray Hill transfer, and comparison with the Bayer copy shows the latter to have exactly the same "thumps" in precisely the same places. The author possesses three different 78 rpm "originals" of this recording, and none of them have this problem, so it can be assumed that the noises are unique to the pressing used by Murray Hill.

The Murray Hill copy of Pini-Corsi's "Tu non mi vuoi più ben," the first of his three cylinders cut for the Anglo-Italian Commerce Company, has an abrupt change in the pitch of the surface noise (not the music) at the end of the voice announcement. The change occurs when the announcer (probably Caruso) says "Anglo-Italian Commerce Company." Again, Bayer is identical. Keith Hardwick's transfer of this recording, in the above mentioned Angel/EMI CD, has no such problem. However, the old Scala LP reissue of these recordings (Scala 825) does have the same change in the character of the surface noise. Apparently, two different copies of the recording had to be used for this transfer in order to make a satisfactory composite of the complete recording.

Scala, a vocal reissue label distributed by Everest back in the 1960s, produced two LPs of Caruso's Milan recordings. Scala 825 contained the three AICC cylinders and the seven Zonophones; Scala 854 contained all but two of the twenty-two G&Ts. Comparisons of the Scala transfers of the Milan recordings with Murray Hill's, particularly the surface noise characteristics of these recordings, would indicate that Murray Hill actually used the Scala master tapes for their own series, which in turn have now appeared in the Bayer anthology. Since many Murray Hill recordings were actually produced by Everest, it is easy to understand why the old Scala

transfers reappeared in the Murray Hill box. These transfers have been around for at least 25 years, and are crude by today's standards, both in sound quality and accuracy of pitch.

Murray Hill's attempt to maintain strict chronological order led to some truly senseless programming. For example, on November 6, 1909 Caruso recorded the second half of the Tomb Scene from *Aida* with Johanna Gadski, beginning at "O terra addio." The performers must have been quite pleased with the results, since the very next day they went back and recorded the first half of this duet, beginning with "La fatal pietra." Four published solo recordings were made by Caruso on November 7, prior to "La fatal pietra." Any competent transfer engineer would put these two recordings in their proper order, splicing the two sides together to make a complete performance of this scene (nearly complete, actually, since the middle portion of the duet was cut). Murray Hill, on the other hand, gave us "O terra addio," followed by the other four selections recorded on November 7, and then "La fatal pietra!" Bayer has issued these recordings in exactly the same order as Murray Hill.

In fact, Bayer wasn't even imaginative enough to re-edit the Murray Hill tapes so as to fill the CDs to their normal playing capacity. Instead, they have duplicated the fourteen Murray Hill LPs on fourteen CDs. Each CD contains exactly the same material as its LP counterpart in the Murray Hill box. This results in 60 minutes, or less, of music per disc. With re-editing, Bayer could easily have trimmed two CDs off the price. But they apparently think that we're getting a bargain. The OASI advertisement notes a special price of \$139.95, which they tell us is "15 CDs for the price of 8!!". Well, perhaps eight overpriced discs, since eight discs for \$139.95 is \$17.49 per disc. What is really being offered is fifteen CDs at just over \$9.00 per disc, which would be extremely reasonable if the results were technically acceptable.

Bayer has copied Murray Hill's listings of the recordings, but with German translations where English appeared in the Murray Hill booklet. The timings listed by Bayer for each selection are often different from Murray Hill, but by only a few seconds at most. It is probable that more precise timings were required by the CD mastering engineers than by those who cut the LPs. All of the errors in recording dates given by Murray Hill have been precisely duplicated by Bayer. Both offer 1900-1901 as the dates for the AICC cylinders, March 1902 and November 1902 for the first two G&T sessions, fall of 1903 for the G&T *Pearl Fishers* aria, and April 1904 for the G&T "Mattinata." No date was given by Murray Hill for the Zonophones, and Bayer has also omitted this information. Thanks to the research of Sokol and Bolig, it is now known that Caruso's first recordings were made for G&T on April 11, 1902. The second G&T sessions were between November 30 and December 2, 1902, followed by the Zonophones on April 19, 1903 and the AICC cylinders between October and December of 1903. The G&T recordings of the *Pearl Fishers* aria and "Mattinata" were made in Milan on April 8, 1904, two months after Caruso's first recordings for Victor in New York. The fact that Bayer ignored this readily available information is inexcusable.

Both Bayer and OASI are falsely advertising this anthology as Caruso's "Complete Recordings," since several previously published items are not included. First, the "Dai campi" from Boito's *Mefistofele* and the "Celeste Aida" recorded during the first 1902 G&T session are missing, giving us only the second versions of each of these, made on November 30 of that year. These recordings were not to be found on the Murray Hill set, nor were they included on the older Scala 854, lending further support to the argument that both Murray Hill and Bayer have the technically primitive Scala LPs in their ancestry. The two missing G&Ts have been included on

the above mentioned EMI Compact Disc.

Six out of the eight unpublished recordings issued by RCA on ARM4-0302 are also missing, but a word of explanation is necessary before discussing those recordings. RCA claimed to have issued nine previously unpublished items in this four-LP anthology, but closer examination revealed that the unpublished *Rigoletto* Quartet dated February 3, 1908 was not what they had stated, and was, in fact, the published version made on February 7 of that year. RCA made the same error when they produced MET-101, a Caruso album in the Metropolitan Opera Guild's "Great Artists at the Met" series. As far as this writer has been able to determine, no *Rigoletto* Quartet from February 3, 1908 has ever been issued, despite claims to the contrary. Therefore, ARM4-0302 contains only eight genuinely unpublished recordings.

Both Bayer and Murray Hill failed to include six of the unpublished recordings in the RCA set. As mentioned above, the March 13, 1906 unpublished "Celeste Aida" is not included, with the published version from 1908 appearing in its place. Another obvious omission is the Don José/Micaela duet "Parle-moi de ma mere" from *Carmen*, recorded with Frances Alda on December 10, 1914. The first take of Jean-Baptiste Faur's "Les Rameaux," recorded on December 15, 1913, is missing. The second version, from March 9, 1914, is included, but the date is incorrectly listed as December 15, 1913. This is exactly the same error made by Murray Hill, including the incorrect date. Both of these takes were issued on single sided 78 rpm discs, the first version by HMV in England, and the second version by Victor in the United States. In the 1930s Victor finally issued the first take, but with an electrically rerecorded orchestral accompaniment. Therefore, RCA correctly claimed that ARM4-0302 contained the first American issue of the undoctored original. Three other alternate takes issued for the first time in the RCA set also failed to appear in the Bayer collection. They are: "Oh! Lumière du jour" from *Nero* and Tosti's "L'alba separa dalla luce l'ombra," both made on April 15, 1917, and the *Lucia* Sextet from January 25, 1917.

A review of such a horribly produced collection would not normally deserve the extensive coverage given here. It would have been much easier to simply state that the sound is terrible, that many of recordings are reproduced at the wrong speeds, and that the set is not complete, as claimed. However, in order to support these allegations and identify the causes of these problems, the above documentation is necessary. Otherwise, the review has no greater credibility than the recordings in question.

From the above documentation, it should be clear that Bayer simply took the existing Murray Hill master tapes, indiscriminately shoved them through the NoNOISE process, and issued the resulting product on CD. A project as encompassing as a "Complete Caruso" would normally require a high level of technical expertise, an equally high level of musical knowledge and sensitivity, and countless hours of hard work, not to mention access to the best surviving source material. Bayer obviously believed that all of this was unnecessary, resulting in a product which can only be described as the vocal travesty of the year rather than "the vocal release of the year," as claimed by OASI.

There may be light at the end of the tunnel for Caruso collectors. The April 1990 issue of *Gramophone Magazine* contains an ad by Pearl announcing the first volume in a series entitled "The Caruso Edition." A total of four volumes, each containing three CDs, will be "Prepared to the very highest standards by Ward Marston with an essay and notes by John Steane." Given Pearl's excellent track record in the field

of historic reissues and the fine technical work Ward Marston has performed for several other labels, this is an eagerly anticipated edition. Since Koch has recently replaced Qualiton Imports as the U.S. distributor for the Pearl recordings, they have no justification for continuing the sale of the Bayer anthology.

Pearl has not claimed this to be a "complete" release of Caruso's recordings, but twelve CDs would indicate that nearly all of the known recordings will be included. It is possible that a few of the alternate takes issued by RCA on ARM4-0302 will not appear in the Pearl collection, since RCA apparently has the only existing copies of some of these items.

It is probably not possible for any single record company to issue an absolutely complete collection of the 245 extant recordings of Enrico Caruso. RCA's LP collection of Caruso's complete recordings was never actually finished, with Volumes 1, 2, and 3 failing to see the light of day. Had they been issued, the first three volumes would have contained all of the Milan recordings plus the 1904/1905 Victors with piano accompaniment. Perhaps the Soundstream digital process used on the remaining thirteen volumes was found to be an unsatisfactory process for the very early recordings. It is also possible that RCA was unable to obtain satisfactory copies of some rare items. This writer was not satisfied with the sound of any of the Soundstream-processed Caruso recordings, and it would appear that RCA has abandoned this system.

An expertly transferred complete Caruso edition is long overdue. Especially needed are CD transfers of all the 1902-1904 Milan recordings, with sound up to the standards Keith Hardwick has provided on the EMI Milan CD, but also containing the two G&Ts, six Zonophones and one AICC cylinder not included on that disc. Hopefully, the forthcoming Pearl edition will come close to attaining this goal. At that time, a review reflecting on the recorded legacy of this legendary singer will be most appropriate, rather than an essay such as this, which must devote so much space to documenting the inadequacies of a poorly produced collection. In the meantime, Koch and OASI should cease selling the Bayer edition, a collection that does a substantial injustice to the memory of a singer who is arguably the greatest Italian tenor in the history of sound recording. *Reviewed by Gary Galo*

NOTES:

- ¹ Sokol, Martin. "The Pre-Victor Recordings of Enrico Caruso," *Antique Phonograph Monthly*. 5:4 (1977).
- ² Bolig, Dr. John R. "A Caruso Discography." In *The Great Caruso* by Michael Scott. pp. . Alfred A. Knopf, 1988. (Note: this discography contains several corrections and additions to the material Dr. Bolig included in his book *The Recordings of Enrico Caruso*, The Eldridge Reeves Johnson Memorial, Delaware State Museum, (1973). Among the corrections are the dates of the Milan recordings).
- ³ Galo, Gary A. "Caruso: The Unpublished Recordings of ARM4-0302 and the Question of Authenticity." *Antique Phonograph Monthly*. 7 No. 9 (1984).
- ⁴ Favia-Artsay, Aida. *Caruso on Records*. The Historic Record, (1965).

Beniamino Gigli Live Recordings 1935-1955.

Legato Classics LCD-106-1 (1 CD: AAD) n.d. Playing time: 72:35

From the film *Ave Maria* (1936): Verdi: *Il Trovatore*: "Di quella pira;" [?]: "Maria, ti voglio tanto bene;" Humperdinck: *Hänsel und Gretel*: "Ne bosco uometto;" Melichar: "Anima mia;" Verdi: *La Traviata* "[Ah sì,] da un anno . . . Un dì felice" (with Erna