
SOUND RECORDING REVIEWS

Three Preiser CDs:

1: **Giannina Arangi-Lombardi (1890-1951).**

Donizetti: *Lucrezia Borgia*: Com' è bello (BX 1324); M'odi, ah! m'odi (BX 1325); Verdi: *I Lombardi*: Te, Vergin santa invoco (BX 1327); O Madre, dal cielo (BX 1328); *Ernani*: Da quel dì che t'ho veduta (w. Enrico Molinari, baritone) (BX 641/642); *Il Trovatore*: Tacea la notte placida (BX 1120); *Un Ballo in Maschera*: Ma dall' arido stelo divulsa (BX 1326); Morrò, ma prima in grazia (BX 1323); *Aida*: Ritorno vincitore! (BX 385/394); Ponchielli: *La Gioconda*: O cor dono funesto (w. Giuseppina Zinetti, contralto) (BX 643); Così, mantieni il patto? (w. Enrico Molinari, baritone) (BX 645); Mascagni: *Cavalleria Rusticana*: Voi lo sapete, o mamma (BX 710); Puccini: *La Bohème*: Sì, mi chiamano Mimi (BX 1118); *Tosca*: Vissi d'arte (BX 1119).

(Preiser) Lebendige Vergangenheit 89013 (One CD: AAD/MONO) p1989 Time: 62:32

2: **Leo Slezak (1873-1946).** Weber: *Euryanthe*: Unter blüh'nden Mandelbäumen (14579u); Auber: *Die Stumme von Portici*: Des Armen Trost (11809u); Rossini: *Wilhelm Tell*: O Mathilde (w. Leopold Demuth, baritone) (11806u); Halévy: *Die Jüdin*: Grosser Gott, hör mein Fleh'n (10852u); Ach! lass dein Vaterhertz (w. Wilhelm Hesch, baritone) (11799u); Meyerbeer: *Die Hugenotten*: Ihr Wangenpaar (11131u); Nimm von mir Lieb'um Liebe! (w. Elsa Bland, soprano) (694r/695r); Meyerbeer: *Der Prophet*: Klein's von allen Erdenreichen (11802u); Herr, dich in den Sternkreisen (11801u); Wagner: *Lohengrin*: Nun sei bedankt (10815u); Höchstes Vertrau'n (10822u); Verdi: *Ernani*: Habt Dank, geliebte Freunde (10857u); *Rigoletto*: Freundlich blick ich auf diese und jene (10061u); O wie so trügerisch sind Wieberherzen (10851u); *Der Troubadour*: Dass nur für mich dein Hertz erbebt (10063u); *Ein Maskenball*: Ha, welche hohe Wonne (10816u); O sag, wenn ich fahre (10062u); Gounod: *Romeo und Julia*: Ach, gehe auf, geh auf (11156u) Goldmark: *Die Königin von Saba*: Da plätschert ein Silberquelle (485c); Du Ew'ger, der mein Aug'gelichtet (11800u).

(Preiser) Lebendige Vergangenheit 89020 (One CD: AAD/MONO) p1990. Time: 60:15

3: **Marcel Journet (1867-1933).**

Rossini: *Il Barbiere di Siviglia*: La calunnia (CVE-4994-7); Wagner: *Tannhäuser*: O tu bell'astro (BVE-3010-2); *Lohengrin*: Mein Herr und Gott (BVE-2310-6); Berlioz: *La Damnation de Faust*: Devant la maison (BVE-4207-5); Gounod: *Faust*: Mais ce Dieu que peut-il pour moi? (w. Fernand Ansseau, tenor) (CS 4270-2/4271-1); Le veau d'or (CG 882-2); Vous qui faites l'endormie (CVE-3163-5); Bizet: *La Jolie Fille de Perth*: Quand la flamme (BVE-8563-3); Carmen: Je suis Escamillo (w. Fernand Ans-

seau, tenor) (CTR-3177-1); Massenet: *Thaïs*: La paix soit avec vous! (CK 2768-2); Honte! horreur! ténèbres éternelles! (CK 2769-1); Voilà donc la terrible cité! (w. Michael Cozette, baritone) (CK 2770-2/2771-2); *Le Jongleur de Notre Dame*: Fleurissait une rose (CVE-4996-3); Charpentier: *Louise*: Reste, repose-toi! (CVE-36714-2); Luce: "O Salutaris (OPG-743-1); Letorey: "Ceux qui pieusement sont morts pour le Patrie" (OPG-744-1). (Preiser) Lebendige Vergangenheit 89021 (One CD: AAD/MONO) p1990. Time: 61:11

Giannina Arangi-Lombardi was one of Italy's leading dramatic sopranos during the sparse inter-war years. She made her concert debut as a contralto in 1919, her operatic debut (as Santuzza) in 1920, and after further study with soprano Adelina Stehle in Milan, emerged as a dramatic soprano in 1923. With her reputation established, La Scala became her principal artistic home until 1930, although her career was international, taking her to major houses throughout Europe (including the 1935 Salzburg Festival) and South America. One has only to listen to her recordings to appreciate Toscanini's patronage of her during his last seasons at Scala.

She recorded acoustically as a mezzo-soprano for the Fonografia Nazionale in Milan in the early to mid-twenties, and beginning in 1926 as a soprano for Columbia. This Preiser recital consists entirely of electrical Milanese Columbias, all accompanied by the Scala Orchestra under Lorenzo Molajoli. The discs with three-digit matrix numbers given in the listing above were recorded between 1927 and 1930, while those with four-digit numbers date from 1932 and 1933. Most of her Columbias still turn up with some regularity and at reasonable prices, so this CD is perhaps best purchased as a sampling. The repertory has been chosen wisely, and includes many of her greatest successes: *Aïda*, *Santuzza*, *Tosca*, *Gioconda*, and *Amelia*—the roles that we associate most closely with this breed of dark, opulent dramatic soprano.

In his liner notes, the late Leo Riemens insists that Arangi-Lombardi deserves comparison to Ponselle, not only on the basis of their similarly "dark-colored voices" and the fact that their repertories overlapped, but also because both were "bel canto singers" which he further contends "explains why Arangi-Lombardi was underestimated during her lifetime." Perhaps, but this does little to explain Ponselle's overwhelming success during the same period. Mr. Riemens offered the same argument in defense of Boninsegna (*The Record Collector*, Vol. 12, No. 1-2 (January-February, 1958) p. 13), namely, that the bel canto stylist was left adrift in an "unappreciative age." Ironically, La Boninsegna herself, in a 1937 interview with critic Max de Schauensee, was frank in expressing displeasure with her successors, and Arangi-Lombardi in particular. "No soprano produces her voice properly today," she told de Schauensee. ". . . A friend took me last year to La Scala. Arangi-Lombardi was the *Aïda*, and it was so bad I had to leave." To be sure, the two had much in common stylistically, but the fact remains that Boninsegna was the more accomplished *singer*. Compared to Boninsegna's florid 1907 "Come' è bello (Pathé 84525), 1905 "Ma dall' arido" (G&T 053065) 1905 "Morrò, ma prima in grazia" (G&T 53415), and her melting 1906 "Tacea la notte" G&T (053063), Arangi-Lombardi's readings seem clumsy and uncertain, with high notes that often are unbearably forced and out of tune, and passage work that is downright clumsy. Her voice was far more voluptuous than beautiful; her singing more mannered than stylish.

Even a 10-CD “gift pack” could not hope to do justice to tenor Leo Slezak’s enormous catalog of recordings. He was an unusually prolific recording artist. From about 1900 to 1930 he managed to leave nearly 400 souvenirs of his voice, among them operatic excerpts drawn from the four corners of the international tenor repertory, as well as an imposing number of superbly executed lieder. His huge voice took to recording exceptionally well from the very beginning, and remained more or less intact over a period of some 40 years, enabling him to record electrically with great effectiveness.

Given in the listing above are the matrix numbers of the selections included on this CD, as these best distinguish the versions represented. With one exception, the titles are 10-inch Viennese Gramophone Company recordings made between 1906 and 1908. The “Da plätschert ein Silberquelle” from *Königin von Saba* is a 12-inch recording from 1905 (G&T 042112). This is a good sampling of Slezak, but certainly not an essential one. Most items have been drawn from the tenor’s “standard” repertory which, buried under all of those German titles, includes the “Plus blanche” from *Huguenots*, “Pour Berthe” and “Roi du ciel” from *Prophet*, “Come rugiada al cespite” from *Ernani*, the “La revedrà” and “Di’tu se fedele” from *Ballo*, and a tragically abbreviated “Ah! lève-toi, soleil” from *Roméo et Juliette*. There is little from the German repertory, and nothing at all that is of great rarity—in fact, a few of the titles, as collectors will be quick to see, were even issued in the U.S. by Victor and remained in our domestic catalogs for many years. Among the highlights, the Act IV Raoul-Valentine duet from *Huguenots* with Bland (“Tu l’as dit”) is a standout, with Slezak at his most lyrical; the *Rigoletto* titles (“Questa o quella” and “La donna è mobile,” 10061u and 10851u, respectively), and the *Trovatore* “Ah sì, ben mio,” (10063u) stand up quite well, notwithstanding the brutality of their translations. The *Königin von Saba* titles, especially “Da plätschert ein Silberquelle,” are fine examples of Slezak in the music he tended to sing best. The “Roi du ciel” from *Prophet* is a peerless reading—forceful and heroic, the voice trumpet-like in its clarity and almost entirely free of the infamous Slezak wobble. But be warned. There is little here of the tenor’s splendid *mezza voce*. We get only brief glimpses in the *Trovatore* and *Stumme von Portice* arias.

Marcel Journet’s career was among the lengthiest and most distinguished of any French singer of his age. His professional activities seem to have grown increasingly varied with the passage of each decade. His repertory was large, and included in addition to the leading French and Italian bass roles, many important Wagnerian protagonists—Sachs, Hagan, Gurnemanz, and even a *Rhinegold* Wotan. Though perhaps not quite so nimble as Plançon, his voice was exquisitely flexible in the manner of other French basses, and while never as dramatically malleable as Chaliapin’s, it was still a colorful instrument. Journet’s range, especially in its baritoneal upper extension, was virtually unsurpassed in its power and focus.

Discounting the 1902 and 1903 Mapleson cylinders on which he is heard, Journet began recording in 1905 and continued until the year of his death. The records least frequently encountered are from the sessions made on either end of his long career: the 1905 Columbias, and his late electricals, especially the operatics. The rare 1912 *Roméo et Juliette* recorded for Pathé and the justly famous 1930-1 *Faust* with Berthon and Vezzani are both available on long-playing reissues, which accounts for two of the most desirable sets. The Preiser collection is an all-electrical recital, and this

alone makes it a welcome addition to Journet's scant long-playing catalog. The "BVE" and "CVE" matrix prefixes designate 1925-1926 Victors recorded in the U.S. The "CTR" matrices were recorded by HMV in 1927, the "CK"s in 1928, the "CS"s in 1929, and the "CG"s in 1930-1. All are Parisian recordings. The "OPG" matrices that finish the set are from Journet's last sessions, made in Paris in 1933. Note that among the *Faust* titles, only "Le veau d'or" (CG-882-2) is taken from the complete 1930-1 set. Given the disastrous surfaces of most early "scroll" Victors and pre-war HMVs, the transfers offered here are excellent, representing an equitable compromise between faithfulness to the originals and noise suppression. The substance and variety of the repertory speaks for itself.

Journet's electricals, the first of which were made when he was nearly sixty years old, confirm that his voice had held up remarkably well, and that only its lower reaches had diminished appreciably, although recordings made in his prime reveal that even then he was frequently on awkward ground when required to produce profoundly low notes. It was in the middle and upper registers that Journet's voice was always best, and where it remained most secure and sonorous as late as 1933.

The appearance of Preiser's "Lebendige Vergangenheit" vocal series on compact disc was inevitable. As the LPs become increasingly difficult to come by, let us hope that the entire back catalog eventually will undergo this change of format—if indeed this is what is necessary to keep them all available. Those already accustomed to Preiser's LPs, whether the "Lebendige" or "Court Opera" series, will probably be their most satisfied CD customers. The little silver versions are virtually indistinguishable from their predecessors, down to the familiar cover graphics and the reliable, if not always precise, documentation. English translations of the liner notes are a notable addition to the new format.

Collectors may want to check their holdings to compare the contents of the earlier Preiser LPs devoted to these artists in order to avoid unwanted duplication among these new CDs, such as Arangi-Lombardi (LV 267 and LV 1352), Slezak (Court Opera CO 309 and 409), and Journet (LV 55).

Preiser's transfers, however dependable, are seldom colorful. It has been demonstrated amply in recent years that much of the warmth and clarity of 78s lies in those extreme frequencies cohabited by rumble and high crackle, frequencies routinely dismissed in the past as lying beyond the reach of older recordings, especially acousticals. When suppressed during the transfer, these frequencies become irretrievable, along with much of the sparkle of the original performance. With labels like Symposium, and to a lesser extent Pearl, retaining these extreme frequencies in their transfers, albeit selectively, we are finally getting a taste of 78 rpm "high fidelity." Preiser's dubbings of early electricals are superior to their dubbings of acousticals, but the tendency to over-emphasize lethal middle frequencies at the expense of everything else is common to both. Yet, considering some of the rubbish currently on the market, their historical reissues are still leagues ahead of most. The real distinction of Preiser's contribution has always been the quantity of exceptional artists and their very rare recordings which have been made available to vocal enthusiasts for so many years. This makes any new entry in the "Lebendige" series most welcome. *Reviewed by William Shaman*