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## SOUND RECORDING REVIEWS

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**The Caruso Edition, Vol. III, 1912-1916.** Pearl EVC III. 3 CDs. **The Caruso Edition, Vol. IV, 1916-1921.** Pearl EVC IV. 3 CDs.

With the release of Volumes III and IV of *The Caruso Edition*, Pearl has completed their 12-CD collection devoted to the recordings of the legendary Italian tenor, and since the first two volumes were reviewed by this writer in the last issue of the *ARSC Journal*, the present review should be considered a sequel to the last. Documenting exactly what constitutes the “complete” recordings of Enrico Caruso is not as difficult a task as it may seem, thanks, in large part, to the excellent research by Dr. John R. Bolig.<sup>1</sup> According to the Bolig discography, the total number of 78 rpm sides recorded by Caruso is 498. However, approximately half of these recordings were never approved for release and have not survived. Some of these unissued items are simply alternate takes of published recordings and others consist of material otherwise unrecorded by Caruso.

A total of 245 individual 78 rpm sides of Enrico Caruso have been found and issued to date. These include “published” items originally issued as shellac 78 rpm discs with acoustic-style labels, and those “unpublished” items which have survived in the form of test pressings, many of which were eventually released as electrical transcriptions on 78 rpm or 33 1/3 rpm records.

The good news for Caruso collectors is that Pearl has achieved the seemingly unattainable; they have assembled every 78 rpm side known to exist in *The Caruso Edition*. As was the case with Vols. I and II, Ward Marston has prepared all of the transfers for these concluding installments. Mr. Marston’s transfers are consistently excellent, and having an entire Caruso collection prepared by a single engineer will be of enormous benefit to students and admirers of Caruso’s vocal art. For the first time, it is possible to hear all of Enrico Caruso’s recordings with reasonable consistency of recorded sound from the beginning of his recording career to the end. Sound recording underwent tremendous evolution and progress during Caruso’s lifetime, and this progress is certainly reflected in the 18 years covered by Caruso’s records. However, with one transfer philosophy applied to the entire project, the consistency over these 18 years is really quite remarkable. Caruso’s vocal development can be assessed in a way previously impossible, without the variabilities introduced when several transfer engineers are involved in such a project. As this writer stated in the spring 1991 *ARSC Journal*, the lack of a consistent transfer process is a major weakness in RCA Victor’s “Complete Caruso” collection.

During the preparation of this review, pitch was checked on every recording, using

Aida Favia-Artsay's *Caruso on Records*<sup>2</sup> as a guide, and every selection was found to be correct. In Vols. I and II three items were reproduced at speeds different from those previously thought to be correct (this writer ultimately found himself in agreement with the choices made by Mr. Marston). It is worth noting that none of the recordings included in Vols. III and IV of *The Caruso Edition* required a re-assessment of Mrs. Artsay's research regarding the playback speeds of the original recordings.

The completeness of *The Caruso Edition* insures that, for the first time, collectors can compare the three unpublished takes from 1917, first issued by RCA in 1973 as part of ARM4-0302, with their published counterparts. Both the unpublished and published versions of the Sextet from *Lucia*, Tosti's "L'alba separa dalla luce l'ombra," and "Oh! Lumière du jour" from Rubinstein's *Neron* are included and correctly labeled in the Pearl anthology. Readers will recall that RCA Victor actually included the unpublished version of "L'alba separa" twice, omitting the published take from their "complete" collection.

Perhaps the most unusual item included in *The Caruso Edition* is a fragmentary recording of the Quartet from *Rigoletto*, recorded on January 25, 1917, that contains only the tenor's opening solo. The recording, which abruptly ends after mezzo-soprano Flora Perini sings her first two syllables, was apparently made to test the recording level. This recording was first issued by the Stanford Archive of Recorded Sound on a seven-inch 33 1/3 rpm disc in the late 1970s (coupled with a previously unpublished recording by Nellie Melba).

Transfer engineer Ward Marston offered a tantalizing note in the booklet accompanying Vol. III, stating that he had located a collector in California who claims to own a "sizable" number of Caruso recordings which have never been released. Mr. Marston wrote that he hoped to include these recordings in Vol. IV, if the collector could deliver them in time. Unfortunately, that collector failed to deliver these allegedly unpublished Caruso recordings, and Vol. IV does not offer any recordings beyond the 245 known to exist. This writer believes that Pearl acted somewhat irresponsibly in announcing the finding of previously unpublished recordings before they could be delivered and verified for authenticity.

The list of Caruso recordings which remain unpublished is a source of frustration. Every serious collector holds a glimmer of hope that test pressings of the duets from *Tosca*, recorded with Geraldine Farrar on January 27, 1912, will eventually be discovered in someone's attic. Caruso made only one published recording with Titta Ruffo, the duet from Act II of *Otello*, called, not without justification, "one of the finest phonograph records ever made" by Rosa Ponselle.<sup>3</sup> During that same recording session on January 8, 1914, Caruso and Ruffo also recorded "Enzo Grimaldo, Principe di Santafior" from *La Gioconda*, but the masters were destroyed and test pressings have never surfaced. Caruso made another recording of the *Otello* duet, with Pasquale Amato, on November 26, 1911. That same day these two singers made a superb published recording of the duet "Invano, Alvaro" from *La Forza del Destino*, yet the *Otello* master was destroyed.

It would seem unlikely that singers of the stature of Caruso, Ruffo and Amato could, on the very same day, inscribe some of the greatest vocal recordings ever made, alongside others which were unfit for public consumption. Indeed, the numerous "unpublished" Caruso recordings which have surfaced since the tenor's death bear this out. Only when compared to his own extraordinarily high standards are these "rejected" recordings in any way inferior. In some cases, the artist's preference for one interpretation over another appears to be the only basis for determining which takes were published and

which were kept from the general public. Today, students and admirers of Enrico Caruso would undoubtedly find these rejected recordings enormously satisfying. Compared to the vocal standards of our own time, they would probably be regarded as extraordinary. Yet it appears unlikely, 70 years after his death, that any of these recordings have survived. It is this writer's sincere hope that such a pessimistic view will someday be proven unfounded.

As was the case with Volumes I and II, the documentation supplied with Pearl's concluding installments is not free of errors. Although Pearl has helpfully included matrix numbers, as well as the American Victor and British HMV catalog numbers for each recording, several of the Victor matrix numbers are incorrect. For example, the *Lucia* Sextet recorded January 19, 1912 is listed as matrix no. C-11445-3, when, in fact, the correct number is C-11446-3. Similarly, the song *Pecchè* by Pennino is listed as matrix no. C-15588-1, but the correct number is C-15568-1. The very next Caruso matrix number is B-15569-1, assigned to Clociano's *Cielo turchino*, yet Pearl lists B-15589-1 as the matrix number for this recording. In the cases of these three recordings, the discographies by Bolig,<sup>4</sup> Moran<sup>5</sup> and Secrist<sup>6</sup> are in agreement on the correct matrix numbers, and Pearl's errors would appear to be typographical rather than errors in scholarship. More careful proofreading would probably have corrected these mistakes.

Another discrepancy between Pearl's documentation and the Bolig discography is worth noting. Adam's *Cantique de Noël* bears matrix number C-17128-3, according to Bolig, but Pearl has identified this recording as C-17218-3. Although Bolig gives C-17128-3 as the number of the published recording (Victor catalog number 88561), his listings of the two previous takes are not consistent. *Cantique de Noël* was recorded on February 23, 1916 and a total of three takes were made. The first two takes were not approved for release and the masters were destroyed. Bolig lists C-17218-1 and C-17128-2 as the matrix numbers for takes one and two, respectively. It is highly unlikely that C-17128 applies to this recording, since the numerical sequence is incorrect when compared to the recordings made adjacent to it.

Caruso's unique recording of the bass aria "Vecchia zimarra" from *La Bohème* was made the same day, just before take one of *Cantique de Noël*, and it bears matrix number B-17198. The next number assigned by Victor to a new Caruso selection was C-17341-1, which belongs to an unpublished first take of "O sommo Dio" from *La Gioconda* (the first of two takes with Emmy Destinn and Louise Homer; both were destroyed). Given this sequencing in the Victor matrix numbers, C-17218 would appear to be correct, making Bolig's entry for takes two and three of this recording in error. Finally, Pearl's concluding installment is titled "Volume IV 1916-1921." Caruso's last recordings were made on September 20, 1920.

Despite the minor reservations cited about Pearl's documentation, both here and in the previous *ARSC Journal*, *The Caruso Edition* must be regarded as a milestone. For the first time in the 70 years which have elapsed since the incomparable tenor's death, all of the known extant recordings of Enrico Caruso have been assembled in one collection, in consistently fine transfers, at the correct playback speeds. Even RCA Victor, whose predecessors made most of the tenor's recordings, lacked the necessary expertise to produce a complete collection of Caruso's recordings, as documented in this writer's last review. Bayer's so-called "Complete Caruso," reviewed by this writer in *V. 21*, No. 2, was so tragically flawed that it must be totally dismissed. Fortunately, the Bayer collection appears to have been withdrawn from the catalog.

Now that Pearl has completed their Caruso project, a few comments may be in order regarding a recording once thought, by some, to contain a single word sung by Caruso.

On January, 17, 1910, Marcel Journet and Geraldine Farrar recorded "Elle ouvre sa fenêtre" from *Faust*, and the disc was issued by Victor as catalog no. 89040. Although Faust's short appearance at the beginning of the scene was omitted, an anonymous, second-rate tenor did sing the word "Marguerite" near the end of the recording. Many decades ago, some "genius" (as this person was described by Aida Favia-Artsay) started the rumor that this single word was sung by Caruso. No other Caruso recordings were made on Jan. 17, and the Victor log books on that date make no mention of him. As Mrs. Artsay stated: "How could anyone who heard him on records even once, say that the puny, dialectal Italian *Margarita* (not *Marguerite*, as Caruso repeatedly sings in French on V 89033) emanates from that great throat?"<sup>7</sup> Although this recording was listed in a few Caruso discographies in the 1940s and 50s, contemporary Caruso scholars, including Bolig and Moran, have long since discredited the rumor. Needless to say, Victor 89040 has not been included in *The Caruso Edition*.

*The Caruso Edition* is the most significant vocal release in recent memory, and it is certainly the most important Caruso collection ever assembled. It is extremely doubtful that any other record manufacturer will be able to duplicate Pearl's accomplishment, and highly unlikely that any will even make the attempt. Pearl's anthology is *the* Caruso collection to own and belongs on the shelf of every serious vocal collector. *Reviewed by Gary A. Galo*

Notes:

1. Bolig, Dr. John R. "A Caruso Discography." In *The Great Caruso*, Michael Scott, New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1988.
2. Favia-Artsay, Aida. *Caruso on records*. Valhalla, NY: The Historic Record, 1965.
3. Ponselle, Rosa, and James A. Drake. *A Singer's Life*. Garden City, NY: Doubleday and Company, 1982.
4. Moran, William R. "Discography of Original Recordings." In *Enrico Caruso: My Father and My Family*, Enrico Caruso, Jr. and Andrew Farkas, Portland, Oregon: Amadeus Press, 1990.
5. Secrist, John. "Caruso Discography." In *Caruso: His Life in Pictures*, Francis Robinson, New York: Bramhall House, 1957.

**Enrico Caruso: Tenor.** Verdi: *Aida* "Celeste Aida" (two versions); *Il Trovatore* "Miserere" (with F. Alda), "Ai Nostri Monti" (with L. Homer); Puccini: *La Boheme* "O Soave Fanciulla" (with G. Farrar), "Vecchia Zimarra"; Costa "Sei Morta Ne La Vita Mia"; Donizetti: *Don Sebastiano* "Deserta in Terra"; Verdi: *Rigoletto* Quartet (with Tetrizzini, Jacoby, Amato); Bizet: *Carmen* "Parle Moi De Ma Mere" (with F. Alda); Flotow: *Martha* "M'Appari"; Boito: "Dai Campi"; Alvarez: *La Partida* (with piano); Donizetti: *L'Elisir D'Amore* "Una Furtiva Lagrima"; De Curtis: "Canta Pe 'Me." Club "99" CL 99-60 (one CD)  
Total time: 56:55

The 250 recordings that Enrico Caruso made during his career used the new technology to spread his fame as operatic selections became available for repeated hearings in homes. Music previously had been disseminated through piano arrangements to a somewhat limited group; with the advent of sound recording the audience for recordings increased and the operatic vista widened. Recently, Club "99" released an early group of the tenor's discs that were made before the 1925 advent of electrical recordings. Although most of these "takes" were discarded to remain unpublished during his life, a few appeared in limited editions after his death. While the results of the

selection process are obvious when the discs are flawed, in other cases they raise speculation. Whatever the reasons at the time, the releasing of these rejections adds firsthand to our knowledge of the singer's ideas, approach, and artistry.

No author is listed, unfortunately, for the valuable if brief liner notes which concentrate on the origins of the recordings. A bit more information regarding the tenor's career at the times when the recordings were made would have been of interest and rounded out a rather skimpy package. One assumes this was Club 99's choice rather than the author's. All recordings are listed with dates, matrix numbers with subsequent changes, and any other pertinent information including other versions published or unpublished. This is important data and although given anonymously, it appears to be accurate.

The speeds of the original 78s seem to have been carefully adhered to with the possible exception of the Donizetti aria from *Don Sebastiano* in which everything sounds a bit pinched, thinner and raised just a hair in pitch.

Caruso's was a remarkable voice, freely produced with a warm, burnished resonance and color, capable of creating many worlds for the listener. Of the two "Celeste Aida" listed, the second (number 11) is the earliest one of the five he made. The recording industry's growth was just beginning and had recently taken a giant step forward because of the development of the flat disc that could easily be reproduced. Caruso, then 29 and a rising star at La Scala, sang the aria at a recording session in Milan during March 1902. This conception of the piece is more reflective and inner-directed than his other versions, and for the final, telling touch he ends on a pianissimo. There is a lot of surface noise and the balance is pretty poor with the piano sounding as if it is squarely in front of the singer. Interestingly enough, the piano's tone quality has the harp-like color common to some late 19th century European instruments. The other version of the aria presented here was performed in 1906. Here, there is much less surface fuzz, the vocal quality has minimal distortion and the orchestra sounds pretty thin. Incidentally this is the same take described by Gary Galo in his discussion of *The Bayer "Complete Caruso"* (*ARSC Journal*, Vol. 21, No. 2, pp. 283-289). Another recording of 1906, the aria from *Mefistofele*, has equal surface noise and a false start by the tenor—doubtless why it was rejected. Since this aria shares the same date (March 1902) as 'Celeste Aida' (number 11) as well as the same distinctive piano intonation and balance (or lack of same) it seems likely that they were recorded in the same session. Of all the recordings listed here, Costa's 'Sei Morta Nella Vita Mia' of 1918 displays the clearest and most realistic reproduction of voice and piano.

Caruso's self-assured, beautiful legato line paints a wonderful "Ai Nostri Monti" complemented by the darker, rich contralto of Louise Homer who sounds superb. This was recorded in 1908 and despite the clouding hiss and surface noise, which is greater here than in most other pieces, one can discern the true vocal and orchestral image through the haze. One of the important aspects of this disc is the appearance of other 'greats' of the past. For the first time we have a quartet from *Rigoletto* in which Caruso's suave impassioned Duke combines with Tetrazzini's crystal clear Gilda over Jacoby and Amato. This, with only a few blurs in its surface, was made in 1912 but not published during his lifetime. Although the duet "O Soave Fanciulla" (*Boheme*) with Geraldine Farrar also from 1912 is thrilling, it went unreleased in favor of an earlier version with Melba.

An unusual example of the tenor's versatility is revealed in the bass aria "Vecchia Zimarra" when he substituted unexpectedly for an indisposed Colline toward the end of

*Boheme*. This was a private recording that the tenor made for himself and inscribed "To Caruso by Enrico" and indeed was not the only example of such versatility, according to Andrew Farkas.

Despite the problems of this CD—notably surface noise and tantalizingly scant information in the liner notes—it appears to have been more thoughtfully put together than many others, presenting some beautiful and exciting moments. *Reviewed by June Ottenberg*

**Medea Mei-Figner: Soprano.** Tosti, *Penso* (It.); Rubinstein: *Night*; Massenet: *Werter* "Air des larmes"; Rotoli: *Fior che langue* (It.); Puccini: *Tosca* "Vissi d'arte"; Tchaikovsky: *Pique Dame* "Air de Lisa"; J. B. Fauré: *Le crucifix* (with N. Figner); Glinka: *You tempt me needlessly* (with N. Figner); Grodsky: *Sea gull's cry* (with N. Figner); Napravnik: *Dubrovsky* "French duet" (with N. Figner); "Masha's Air"; Napravnik: *Harold* "Cradle song" (two versions); Boito: *Mefistofele* "Lontano" (with N. Figner); "L'altra notte"; Bizet: *Carmen* "Habanera"; Chanson *Boheme*; Seguidilla; Davidov: *Night, love, moon*; Billi: *Canta il grillo* (It.); [In the morning, I bring you violets (Meyer-Helmund)] Respighi: *Re Enzo* "Stornellatrice." Club "99" CL 99-96 (one CD) Total time: 61:42

Opera singer Medea Mei-Figner (1859-1952) focused her performing career mainly in Russia. Special thanks go to Club "99" for collecting 22 rare recordings by this gifted soprano who is little known in the United States. Born in Florence, she won early fame in Italy, Central Europe, and Spain. Although she later sang at Covent Garden and toured South America with Caruso (1903), she did not appear in this country. A few years after her first Tchaikovsky role in Russia (Tatiana in *Eugene Onegin*), she was chosen to create Lisa in his *Queen of Spades* (St. Petersburg, 1890). This in turn led to the leading role of Yolanta in the composer's last opera of the same name, which, while a far weaker work than the masterful *Queen of Spades*, offers some fine moments for the soprano. Mei-Figner also premiered two roles in works by the Russian composer Napravnik, for many years the main conductor at St. Petersburg's Maryinsky Theater. His well-constructed music reflects little contemporary influence or "Russian" character, but it was successful and popular in its day.

Five selections are sung with her husband, tenor Nicolai Figner, who also premiered roles in Tchaikovsky and Napravnik operas, achieving considerable fame. All selections are accompanied by piano. Most of the recordings are from the G & T collection dating from the winter of 1901/2. The "Seguidilla" and Meyer-Helmund piece, which were made by Pathé in 1903, seem to have been recorded at a faster speed, raising the pitch and lending the piano a thin, metallic sound. "L'altra notte" (*Mefistofele*) and Masha's Air (*Dubrovsky*) are Columbia labels of 1904, while the Soviet Music Trust issued the two electric recordings, "Canta il grillo" and "Stornellatrice" in 1929. Works with English titles are sung in Russian.

It is not surprising that the best sound is on the most recent discs, namely the Soviet Music Trust releases. Surface fuzziness is reduced, the piano tone sounds less tinny, and the vocal quality is more even. Sonic subtlety as we now know it, of course, is lacking. Despite the constant buzzing surface sound that veils the two 1904 Columbia recordings, one can discern the singer's impressively projected legato line. Especially notable in the arresting "L'altra notte," her vocal line displays some distortion when notes occasionally bulge as though she had stepped closer to the microphone. Although surface sound is less in the *Carmen* Seguidilla (Pathé), technical recording problems at times wiggle the pitch. The G & T recordings offer a truer sense of the voice than the Columbia or Pathé, despite

a constant surface fuzz or crackle and the loss of tonal quality in the upper registers.

A wide vocal range and strong technique brought soprano, mezzo, and even Wagnerian roles within the repertory of this eminent singer. Her chest voice is dark and powerful, has a slight break at the shift to mid-range and then flows upward, seamless and clear. The distinctive color and slight metallic edge that stamp the voice are best displayed in the fuller, more lifelike sound of the final selection "Stornellatrice," an unexpected treasure by Respighi. Here one gets a consistent, if shadowy, imprint of the quality and color of the voice: round, creamy, and powerful. Even where the reproduction is less clear, as in Massenet's "Air des larmes," one easily discerns the melting tone quality that spins out delicate or intense shades of feeling in an exciting play of sound. Technically, one is struck by the expressive use of words, limitless (it seems) breath control, and command of dynamics. Tastes in performance styles, however, have changed since the turn of the century. She and the accompanist take more rhythmic liberties in Carmen's "Habanera" (in Russian) than is now fashionable. Also, her departure from Bizet's opening melodic line in the *Chanson Bohème* would raise eyebrows nowadays. In duets with her husband Nicolai, we hear a musical balance and unity of purpose that attest to their acclaim and fine reputation as a team. Perhaps the most striking feature of her voice is the expressive intensity and involvement she brings to her work whether in the famous Rubinstein song "Night" or the exposition of Tosca's feelings in "Vissi d'arte." One can only hope that more recordings become available.

Liner notes are by J. Dennis and reproduced from *The Record Collector*, but undated. They are comprehensive in their coverage of the singer's career and roles, offering pertinent information. Mr. Dennis reports that he checked his facts with Mei-Figner's daughter and one other personal source. More extensive coverage would have enhanced the notes considerably. One wishes for more details, especially since the singer is not listed in the standard sources. The inclusion of texts and translations would have been welcome as well. *Reviewed by June Ottenberg*

**Bellini: *La Straniera*.** Montserrat Caballé, soprano (Alaide [La Straniera]); Amadeo Zambon, tenor (Arturo); Vicente Sardinero, baritone (Baron Valdeburgo); Biancamaria Casoni, mezzo-soprano (Isoletta); Alan Ord, bass (The Prior); Clifford Billions, tenor (Osburgo); Done Yule, bass (Lord Montolino); Chorus and Orchestra of the American Opera Society; conducted by Anton Guadagno. **Strauss: *Four Last Songs*.** Montserrat Caballé, soprano. **Bellini: *Bianca e Fernando*.** La mia scelta a voi sia grata (Montserrat Caballé soprano as Bianca). Legato Classics LCD-134 (2 CDs) distributed by Lyric. Produced by Ed Rosen.

Fans of the Spanish soprano Montserrat Caballé will be delighted with this release. Bellini fans may be mildly attracted to an adequate, but hardly stellar performance of one of his lesser operas. As for others, it may prove to be a long listen.

Legato Classics continues to re-release live performances on CD. *La Straniera* was recorded during a concert performance in Carnegie Hall on March 26, 1969, sponsored by the American Opera Society. Mauro R. Fuguetta issued this "private" stereo recording on vinyl as MRF 35-S with different fillers than presented here.

*La Straniera* (The Stranger), Bellini's fourth opera, dates from 1829. The ridiculous plot, as brought to the operatic stage by Felice Romani's libretto, is based on the novel *L'Étrangère* by Victor-Charles Prévôt, vicomte d'Arlincourt. To understand the plot, it is necessary to know the background of the story. To begin with, the King of France married Isamberg. On his wedding night he had second thoughts about the woman and

never consummated the marriage. Abandoning Isamberga, he married a second time to Agnès. Romani's notes are unclear and do not indicate whether this marriage was consummated. In any case, the Church compelled the king to take back his first wife, Isamberga, and Agnès was forced into exile.

The opera starts here. In exile, Agnès takes the name of Alaide and is known to the local folk as La Straniera. The mysterious stranger lives alone by a lake, wears a heavy veil, and dresses in black. Because of her secrecy, she is thought to have supernatural powers. In spite of this, the local tenor, Arturo, falls in love with Alaide conveniently overlooking his own engagement to another woman, Isoletta. Add Alaide's brother, Valdeburgo, also in disguise, and complications arise.

Arturo believes Valdeburgo is a rival suitor and tries to kill him. After the duel, Alaide picks up Arturo's bloody sword as the country folk rush in and accuse her of murder. At the height of Alaide's trial, Valdeburgo enters, wounded, but obviously not dead, and requests that both Alaide and Arturo be released. Finally, Alaide convinces Arturo to marry Isoletta when word comes that the king's first wife, Isamberga, has died and that Alaide can now ascend the throne as Agnès, Queen of France. Arturo in despair runs himself through with his sword as Agnès swoons and the opera ends.

Well below the level of *Norma* or *I Puritani*, this formula opera consists of a predictable collection of carefully plotted ensembles, solos, and choruses. The performance at hand hardly does justice even to the formula as many annoying cuts are made throughout. Mezzo Casoni loses much of her music from the duet "Io la vidi" in Act I. The short (26 measure) scene between the Prior and Osburgo in Act II vanishes entirely.

As for the singing, it can be summed up in one name: Montserrat Caballé. Caballé treats the listener to a shimmering display of lush, silvery sound. The long lines are exquisitely shaped. She makes much use of her famous *pianissimo* creating some truly lovely effects that, unfortunately tend to pall with overuse. Very tastefully done, and in true *bel canto* style, Caballé inserts her own cadenzas and embellishes the line. While revelling in such beautiful sound, one starts to wish for a Callas to bring the cardboard figure of La Straniera to life.

The only other singer capable of approaching Caballé is Sardinero whose pliant baritone and apt characterization make his music exciting. Zambon determinedly takes his loud, course, and rigid tenor through Arturo's florid music. On the plus side, he is listenable and sings on pitch while even managing to pull off a quite credible B-Flat at the end of the second act tenor-baritone duet, "A tempio io giungio." Casoni's large voice suffers from a wide vibrato, although in good *bel canto* tradition, she does embellish the second verse of "Al mio sguardo un roseo velo" very nicely. Ord is worth noticing in the few measures he is allotted.

The chorus handles its part accurately and in particular the Coro di cacciatori give a rousing account of "Campo ai veltri" in Act I. Conductor Guadagno moves the opera along propulsively, but with some noticeable lapses in rhythmic accuracy.

The stereo sound is good, the tape hiss loud, the audience indiscriminate. All singing, good and bad, gets applauded to the point of irritation. Also annoying is the chatter around the microphone. Luckily, the observers deliver most of their running commentary while applauding.

Legato, as we have come to expect, provides a plot synopsis, but no libretto. The cuing is barely adequate and CD 2 begins Act II with "T'apressa e il ver rispondi" not Act I again as incorrectly printed in the guide.

The release features two fillers. The first is a live recording of Richard Strauss's *Four Last Songs*, which Legato dates from 1979. It seems more probable that this was one of the performances held in October 1978 (three concerts on October 5, 7, and 9) at the Avery



Fisher Hall in New York City with Zubin Mehta conducting the New York Philharmonic. Beautifully sung by Caballé without much attention to the words, the recording suffers from a wobble in the tape due to shifting speed and pops. Otherwise, the sound is bright, tape hiss minimal, and orchestra undistorted.

The second filler features the Act I cavatina for soprano from Bellini's *Bianca e Fernando*. Actually, *Bianca e Fernando* is the revised version, prepared in 1828, of Bellini's second opera, *Bianca e Gerlando*. Interestingly enough, the cabaletta is the same melody as Norma's "Ah! Bello a me ritorna." Legato gives no clue as to recording date, but Caballé included this aria on a concert given on April 15, 1979, at Carnegie Hall. Accompanied by pianist Miguel Zanetti, a frequent partner of the soprano, the sound is almost unlistenable. The piano sounds distant and hollow while the treble distortion makes the high notes especially painful. This excerpt will not invite repeated listenings. *Reviewed by Sharon Almquist*

**Creator's Records: Recordings by Artists who Created their Roles in World Premieres 1877-1903.** Standing Room Only. SRO-818-2 (2 CDs 800 Series).

Producer Ed Rosen has provided us with a very interesting set of two CDs containing selections of arias and ensembles from 35 operas performed by singers who helped create these works. Considering the restricted space provided in the liner notes, the biographical sketches on the many artists are informative and well done. Also worth noting is the list of operas premiered, with dates and the names of principal singers and conductors. Pitch consideration is well documented, unlike so many re-issues which ignore this fact. Some of the original recordings must be in poor shape, considering the time elapsed since their manufacture; it is a wonder that we still have a handful of these recordings available.

Regrettably, many of the singers made these recordings when they were well past their prime, leaving us with just an inkling of how they must have sounded at the time of the premieres. The most obvious example is Victor Maurel, whose voice can no longer negotiate the phrase "Quasi baciando" from Verdi's *Otello*. On the other hand, the 57-year-old Fernando de Lucia gives a beautiful performance of selections from *Iris* and *Amico Fritz*, although the pitch has been lowered a half-step.

Another regret is the omission of the source of these recordings, including the company that first issued the recordings and whether the selections issued were taken from the original recordings or from LP re-issues. Also, as in the *Tosca* selection, there is no indication that this is indeed a live performance. (This recording was made live from the stage of the Metropolitan Opera House by Mr. Mapleson on its legendary cylinder recording machine.)

Several items indeed are overwhelmingly beautiful, such as Caruso's rendition of "Amor ti vieta" from Giordano's *Fedora* and Rosina Storchio's "No, se un pensier tortura" from *Siberia*. One unfortunate omission from the collection is Giovanni Zenatelo's singing of the Pinkerton music in the first act love duet from *Madama Butterfly*, (Fono. 1905).

Flaws aside, this two-CD set is recommended. The collection contains many performances that by themselves would make the purchase worthwhile: the artistry of Media Mei-Figner and her husband Nicolai Figner, both intimate friends of Thiakawski; Giordano, Debussy and Cilea accompanying their own selections; the voices of Maurel and Tamagno who worked side by side with Verdi and Boito, and Cesira Ferrani who was the first to sing the sweet melodies of Manon and Mimi under the tutelage of Puccini himself. Every student of singing, every musical institution, and above all, every teacher of singing, should have a copy of these CDs. *Reviewed by Gustavo Halley*

**Titta Ruffo: Baritone.** Songs: Capalongo: *Suonno e Fantasia*, Brogi: *Visione Veneziana*, Paganucci: *Il Gitano Re*, Billi: *E Canta il Grillo*, Stonrello Tuscano: *E La Mia Dama*, Costa: *Sei Morta nella Vita Mia*, Saesmit-Doda: *Querida* (Spanish), Padilla: *El Relicario* (Spanish), Tremisot: *Novembre* (French), Soriano: *El Guitarrico* (Spanish), Tosti: *Marechiaro*, *Chitarrata Abruzzese*, Rotoli: *Mia Sposa Sara a Mia Bandiera*, Leoncavallo: *Merigliata*, E. Titta: *E Suonan Le Campane*, Ferradini: *Non Penso A Lei*, Buzzi-Peccia: *Lolita*, Di Capua: *Maria Mari*. Club "99" CL 99-63 (one CD) Total Time: 49' 25"

These acoustic recordings of Titta Ruffo (1877-1953), made between 1908 and 1929, span the most important period of the singer's career. A legacy of this type is rather unusual for a baritone whose reputation was so totally identified with opera. Ruffo sang extensively in South America as well as in Europe and later the United States. The selections focus on 19th century Italian songs, but also include three Spanish and one French offering. The Buzzi-Peccia and Tosti pieces, with their easily recalled melodies and simple, catchy accompaniments, evoke a popular, folk-like, or Neapolitan style written to delight and charm their audience. On the other hand, the French song and Leoncavallo's piece are more complex and demanding. All the songs are given orchestral rather than piano accompaniment.

Although the baritone made his reputation in opera, he also gave concerts and it was then that he sang the popular and salon songs recorded here. As surefire items in recitals, these types of selections were included in the repertory of many a famous Italian singer. Obviously, these pieces can barely explore a singer's dramatic and musical capabilities and that is perhaps the great limitation of this legacy. Ruffo saw himself as a singing actor and even performed on the legitimate stage in Buenos Aires. One or two arias that offered greater scope would have served as an interesting contrast.

All the recordings were made for either the Gramophone Company in London and Milan or the Victor Talking Machine Co. in New York and New Jersey. Generally, the surface sound has been well cleaned up and remains minimal. The exceptions are in *Il Gitano Re* where a low crackle appears and again in *E Suonan Le Campane* which has a crackle plus a scratch. At times the orchestra is sonically thin, but in passages where the size is reduced this becomes less noticeable. Recorded speed is a problem due to a pitch variation which is more apparent in some cases (such as *E La Mia Dama*) than others, distorting the already thin instrumental quality as well as the voice. William Moran in his discography of 1980 notes that most of the speeds of the originals usually were at 76.60, but also as high as 79.13. An added distraction occurs in four of the Gramophone recordings where the accompaniment positively thumps along. Despite these complaints, the voice comes through quite well with clear articulation and a consistent tone quality.

Since Ruffo says in his autobiography that he made his first recordings in 1897, he was quite familiar with the medium by 1908, the earliest date listed here. By then he had a solid and burgeoning reputation, and the clarity and 'natural' quality of the voice is apparent. However, it was not until the peak of his career around 1914 that we hear the deepened tonal richness and expressive quality that so impressed his contemporaries—singers as well as audiences. In the famous *E Canta il Grillo* he has a pitch problem at the end of the second full phrase, but one hardly notices it in the face of the liquid legato the voice pours out. The full, sonorous high notes come off especially well over a simple, arpeggiated accompaniment such as that of the Spanish *El Guitarrico*. He embellishes the long melodic lines of *Maria Mari* with delicate nuances of color, takes full advantage of the long-held notes towards the end and firmly slows the opening fast pace of the

orchestra to suit his taste. Even the latest recording is performed with verve and panache despite the fact that the voice was suffering from overuse. He was then only 52. His reputation as one of the great baritones of a generation which included Scotti, De Luca, and Amato was clearly deserved. De Luca once described Ruffo's voice as a 'Miracle' and from this disc, even with its limited repertory, we can understand why. His achievements are even more unusual when one considers that he was largely self-taught, had little formal academic education and came from a modest background.

Liner notes consist of a condensed reprint of an article by Max de Schaunsee that appeared in *Opera News* from April 1967. Although the author, who was music critic for the *Philadelphia Bulletin* for many years, offers the outlines of Ruffo's career, the article is too truncated and is somewhat misleading on a few points. Considering the amount of material easily available on Ruffo this seems a limited analysis and a casual choice. Unfortunately, no texts for the songs are provided, but catalog numbers from either Victor or His Master's Voice (Gramophone Company) are included with dates. Club 99's idea of liner notes is pretty chintzy especially given the stature of the singer, his magnificent voice, enormous success and international career. *Reviewed by June Ottenberg*

**Bellini: *Norma*** Maria Callas, soprano (Norma); Ebe Stignani, mezzo-soprano (Adalgisa); Joan Sutherland, soprano (Clothilde); Mirto Picchi, tenor (Pollione); Giacomo Vaghi, bass (Oroveso); Paul Asciak, tenor (Flavio); chorus and orchestra of Covent Garden, London, conducted by Vitorio Gui. Legato Classics LCD-130 (2 CDs) distributed by Lyric. Produced by Ed Rosen.

Much has been written about Maria Callas's debut as Norma at Covent Garden on November 8, 1952. The "private" recordings chronicling that event have been around for quite some time. To name just a few of those venerable vinyl sets: Mauro R. Fuguetta, MRF 11; Estro Armonica 021; Historical Recording Enterprises, HRE 339.

Listening to Callas at this point in her career, one is struck by the veiled quality of her voice that cannot detract from its expressiveness or the ringing top notes. The voice is many different voices ranging from the creamy tone used in "Casta Diva" to the reed-like declamation used in recitative. Unfortunately, some of the severe deficiencies in the voice that intensified later are already evident. Two noticeable problems include swallowing some high notes when attempting a diminuendo and singing an uneven scale. On the dramatic side, however, Callas infuses the coloratura with meaning and makes the listener understand the complex woman who is Norma.

Callas, in the tradition said to have been initiated by Giuditta Pasta, transposes "Casta Diva" to *F* from the original *G*. Some of the repeated *As* are rushed and in the cabaletta she hits the high *C* half a beat early. The Act III duets between Norma and Adalgisa are both sung down a tone.

On a purely trivial note, this was pre-weight-loss Callas and the photographs of the diva and mezzo Stignani in the accompanying booklet remind one of two Druidic pillars. When listening to the recording, one can visualize the elegant Norma that Callas later presented.

Nonetheless, the performances sizzle. As Adalgisa, Stignani's bright open tone combines well with Callas's darker hooded timbre in duets. Signani conveys what Bellini meant her part to convey, that is, a woman younger than Norma. It is interesting to note the tradition of having a mezzo-soprano or contralto sing Adalgisa who is supposed to be a young girl. The original Adalgisa was a soprano, Guilia Grisi. The relationship between the older woman and the young virgin is captured in Bellini's music, such as

the thirds in "Mira o Norma," in which Norma sings the top notes.

A young singer named Joan Sutherland takes the small part of Clothilde, sounding very much like the Joan Sutherland of later years. Next to *The Times* (London) review of *Norma* on November 10, 1952, a review of a Sutherland concert called Dame Joan a "promising soprano."

The gentlemen are led by tenor Mirto Picchi, who projects heroic sounds tempered with finesse. Instead of stentorian ranting, Picchi ardently woos Adalgisa. He is lyrical and capable of projecting Bellini's music in true *bel canto* style with taste and sensitivity. A minor complaint could be made about his rapid vibrato containing just a hint of a bleat.

As Oroveso, Giacomo Vaghi wobbles through his music. An asset in the small part of Flavio is the Maltese tenor Paul Asciak. The phrase "Odi?... I suoi riti a compiere Norma del tempio move," is a dramatic moment so often ruined by a less powerful comprimario.

Conductor Gui follows his singers well, maintains the drama and momentum, yet he is flexible enough to allow the vocalists to shape the line. The sound is boxy mono, showing its age, and with much tape hiss. But the intensity of the performance soon makes the listener forget the sound.

London audiences had not heard *Norma* since Rosa Ponselle's performances in 1929 and 1930. The critic reporting on the 1952 performances did not offer many flattering comments about the opera itself. In fact, he called *Norma*...

an object lesson in music vapidty. Present taste is more indulgent to the weaker side of Italian opera than was that of our grandfathers, who had not so long before been satiated with the pizzicato bass, the rum-tum wind chords, the scrubbed string accompaniment, and the eternal appoggia...; We can tolerate it as a historical curiosity...; No producer can do anything to help out so bald a score...; sets were sufficiently monumental and shaggy for an opera of the type that did for perhaps half a century make the form a byword for absurdity.<sup>1</sup>

Perhaps absurd in the hands of a lesser leading soprano, but Callas imbues the music with a fire and passion that is the stuff for legend. *Reviewed by Sharon Almquist*

Note:

1. *The Times* (London), November 10, 1952 (Monday).

**Giuseppe Di Stefano: The Glory of Italy.** CD 1 contains selections from *Faust*, *Martha*, *Boheme*, *Le Cid*, *Rigoletto*, *La Gioconda*, *Tosca*, *Turando*, *Iris*, *Andrea Chenier*, *La Forza del Destino*, *Lucia*, *Gianni Schicchi*, *Carmen*, *La Traviata*, *Maristella*, and *Un Ballo in Maschera*. CD 2 contains excerpts from *Rigoletto*, *Werther*, *La Favorita*, *Puritani*, and a Mexico Radio Broadcast. Cantabile BIM-704-2 (2 CDs).

The recordings in this collection unfortunately represent just a small portion of Di Stefano's output. Included are only selections from live performances, which for the most part, are less than acceptable both artistically and sonically.

One of the problems with this set is its lack of information about the recordings; no place, orchestra, conductor or colleagues are mentioned. We must assume that the aria from *Faust*, containing the famous "diminuendo" on the high "C," belongs to the recording of the Metropolitan Opera broadcast. Also, the *Tosca* excerpt must be the "bis" from Mexico City. These recordings should be treated as documents in themselves and proper information should be provided, especially for the benefit of younger audiences.

The sound of the first CD is adequate, considering the source of the material. The *Faust* aria seems to have had special attention from the engineer for it is the best-sounding piece in the entire collection. The *Traviata* and *Maristella* selections are the

worst, sonically speaking.

This reviewer's favorite selections are the *Lucia* and *Carmen* arias. They are well sung, well expressed, beautifully phrased and vocally correct. They show the promise that Di Stefano offered around 1954-55; a career that could have rivaled Caruso's, but, to paraphrase Rudolf Bing, did not.

With the exception of the radio concert, one has no idea from the accompanying booklet that these recordings were made in Bellas Artes, Mexico, and broadcast over the radio. The sound of these selections is rather poor, with many hisses and other radio wave sounds creeping in during the performance. Also, some type of microphone condenser must have been used, for at times the music has more presence in the *piano* passages and then draws back during *fortissimo* parts.

The radio concert pieces bring to the fore the most significant qualities of Di Stefano's art: phrasing, beauty of tone, melting "mezza voce," and the directness of his delivery. The operatic selections suffer from many ills, ranging from off-pitch singing (both sharp and flat), uneven musicianship and strained, pushed tones. It is understood that live performances are far from being musically accurate and vocally perfect. Spontaneity is the basis of their appeal to the record collecting public. Also to be taken into consideration are Di Stefano's youth at the time of some of these recordings and, judging from the sloppy orchestral playing, the possible lack of rehearsal time.

However, after hearing some of the selections that producer Mr. Rosen has included here, one must wonder in puzzlement at his eulogy of the tenor, in which he states: "He possessed the most beautiful tenor voice of the century . . . this CD truly represents the best of the best." Let us not forget that Caruso, Gigli, Bjorling and Carreras all sang in this century. And, if one had not heard better Di Stefano, both live and in recordings, it would be concluded that the best of the best is mediocre at most! *Reviewed by Gustavo Halley*

**Ezio Pinza: Bass.** Verdi *Simon Boccanegra* "A Te L'Estremo... Il Lacerato Spirito"; *Il Trovatore* "Abbieta Zingara... Di Due Figlie"; *La Forza Del Destino* "Il Santo Nome Di Dio"; Donizetti: *Lucia di Lammermoor* "Dalle Stanze"; *La Favorita* "Non Sai Tu" (with R. d'Alessio), "Splendon Piu Belle"; Gounod: *Faust* "Ebben Che Ti Pare," (with Aristodemo Giorgini), "Dio Dell'Or"; Halevy: *La Juive* "Se Oppressi Ognor," "Voi Che Del Dio Vivente"; Boito: *Mefistofele* "Ave, Signor," "Son Lo Spirito Che Nega"; Bellini: *I Puritani* "Cinta Di Fiori"; *Norma* "Ah, Del Tebro"; Thomas: *Mignon* Berceuse. Club "99" CL 99-12 (one CD) Total time: 53:11.

This collection of 19th century operatic arias is from Ezio Pinza's early career in Italy, shortly before he joined the Metropolitan Opera in 1926. After study at the Conservatory in Bologna he had made his debut in 1914 as Oroveso in *Norma*, a role he would sing many times thereafter. He went on to La Scala, and an international career that included New York, London, Buenos Aires and Paris, as he became one of the most famous bass singers of his time. In his later years, Pinza ventured into films, and finally musical theater where his 1949 performances in *South Pacific* are the most famous. He even had a television show at one point, clearly a versatile, energetic performer looking for new fields of endeavor.

Important aspects of his musical and artistic growth were nurtured early on in Italy by two conductors, Tullio Serafin and Arturo Toscanini. Of the latter Pinza noted, "He taught me most of what I know about style in singing." During 22 seasons at the Metropolitan Opera, the singer's charismatic portrayals earned him an enviable

reputation as a consummate actor and singer who became one of the Met's brightest stars. His physical stature plus the romantic-touched-with-evil aura that he could evoke were telling aspects of his characterizations of Don Giovanni and the Mefistofele of Boito and Gounod. The vocal range was wide with the wonderfully bottomless quality one listens for in some bass parts. Although particularly noted for his Don Giovanni, he also won considerable acclaim in a diversity of roles stretching from Escamillo to Figaro, Hoffman, and Sparfucile to name just a few.

This particular collection includes arias from some 19th century favorites that still dazzled audiences in Italy in the first quarter of this century. That repertory, namely, *La Juive*, *Mefistofele*, *La Favorita*, and *Mignon*, has now all but faded from the stage as tastes, styles, and singers have changed. Some glittering remnants remain, however, in the arias.

The recordings were made by the Gramophone Company in Milan in 1923 and 1924 with the acoustic process just a year before the beginning of electrical recording. Twenty-one are listed in the Pinza discography in *The Record Collector* (1980) and of these 15 are presented here with their catalog numbers.

Pinza was 31 when he began recording these pieces, starting from *Simon Boccanegra*. This clearly presents a finished artist singing with authoritative projection, sensitive phrasing, and a striking palette of colors. Surface sound here, as in most of the others, is kept to a minimum, not overly distracting and the least of the sonic problems. For example, in "Ebben che ti pare" (*Faust*) and "Cinta di fiori" (*I Puritani*), both made late in 1924, the sound is muffled throughout. The choice of Italian for all the French arias was probably due more to custom in Italy at that time than to the ability of the singer. The two Bellini selections best reveal Pinza's impressive musicianship and ability to shape a long lyrical line invested with intense feeling. He receives little instrumental support, however, for it is exactly in the slow arpeggiated accompaniment (the Bellini trademark) that the orchestra is at its most tentative, thinnest and least attractive. This is more a problem of poor performance than one of sound reproduction. The instrumental quality is at its best in the thicker textures of the Halevy arias (*La Juive*) and the "Spendon piu belle" (*La Favorite*). Pinza recorded the latter a few years later for Victor. In two instances (*Favorita's* "Non sai tu" and "Dalle stanze" from *Lucia*), it sounds as though he is at first too close to the microphone and then leans away from it.

Despite these problems, the singer's ease of production and technical facility shine through impressively as he traverses the treacherous pitfalls of the *Mefistofele* and *La Juive* arias. His conviction and ability to toss off difficult passages so that they become (as indeed they are) the core of the meaning is impressive. The true image of the voice appears most clearly in "Voi che del dio vivente" (*La Juive*). The charismatic quality that he radiated and that drew audiences to create such a large following brilliantly comes through; one regrets having never seen him in this work. It was a truly glorious voice and it is our loss that he made no recordings of full operas.

The comprehensive, informative, and well written liner notes are a condensed version of an extensive article that appeared in *The Record Collector* in 1980. Written by John B. Richards and J. P. Kenyon, this article included a discography and was thoroughly researched. This seems to be a more satisfactory set of notes than Club 99's other variable issues. *Reviewed by June Ottenberg*

**Rossini: *L'Assedio di Corinto*** Beverly Sills, soprano (Pamira); Marilyn Horne, mezzo-soprano (Neocle); Justino Diaz, bass (Maometto II); Franco Bonisolli, tenor (Cleomene); Paolo Washington, bass (Jero); Gianni Foiani, baritone (Omar); Milna Paoli, soprano (Ismene); Piero di Palma, tenor (Adrasto); chorus and orchestra of La Scala Milan, conducted by Thomas Schippers. Produced by Ed Rosen. Legato Classics LCD-135 (2 CDs) distributed by Lyric.

In 1975 Angel (SCLX-3619) issued, in conjunction with the Metropolitan Opera premiere, a commercial recording of *The Siege of Corinth*. The shrink wrap of the set proudly displayed the sticker announcing: "First Recording of the Rossini Opera." Not exactly. A more accurate label may have read: "First Commercial Recording of the *Franco-Italian-Opera*." Pre-dating the Angel release by about six years, Fuguetta issued a "private" recording on three LPs (MRF-38, mono) made during the performance at La Scala on April 14, 1969. Legato has re-released this performance on CD and Legato's sound eclipses the vinyl. The CD release offers bright, well balanced sound, with clear separation of parts, and no distortion. While tape hiss is loud, there is a minimum of audience and stage noises.

Both studio and commercial releases feature American soprano Beverly Sills. Sills made her debut at La Scala as Pamira in 1969 having been invited as a replacement for the pregnant Renata Scott. While it is possible to follow the 1969 recording using the libretto from the commercial copy, don't look to Legato for full documentation. The scores are not identical.<sup>1</sup>

Both scores were the result of conductor Thomas Schipper's and Randolph Mickeleson's musical borrowing from two operas: the florid Naples *Maometto II* (1820) with contralto trouser role; and, the French grande opera revision of *Maometto II, Le Siège de Corinthe* (1826), with tenor replacing the contralto. The end result is a clash of styles with extensive and at times excessive ornamentation.

Heavily embellished though the music may be, Sills rises to the occasion with her accurate, flawless coloratura. At this point in her career, the vibrato was under control, the pitch accurate, and the bell-like clarity of her voice combined with shimmering soft high notes to create a truly memorable third act prayer, "Guisto ciel." Her passionate Pamira is also capable of fire, such as in "Si ferite" from the first act. Here she dashes off the *firotore* with an almost metronomic accuracy while coloring her voice and making the character come alive. In the commercial recording, the vibrato has become more noticeable and confuses the pitch; the bell-like quality has become a little clouded. For prime Sills, listen to the Scala.

Also important to the Scala recording is mezzo-soprano Marilyn Horne. Her idiomatic embellishments, tasteful use of chest tones, and understanding of the *bel canto* style make her the choice as Neocle over the Angel's Shirley Verret who sings beautifully, but makes the music sound more like Verdi than Rossini.

A true disappointment on both recordings is Justino Diaz. He seems lost in the coloratura, but even more annoying is the lack of heft and buoyancy to the voice. He comes across dully as a pallid, colorless figure. Tenor Bonisolli is another plus for the Scala recording. His well-focused, pliant voice has a firm top that could manage coloratura passages without derailing.

Scala's lesser roles are handled competently. Washington brings his tremulous but clear bass to Jero's music and makes it through his aria, which is all that anyone could ask. The Omar of Foiani, on the other hand, is excellent with a small thankless part. Soprano Paoli is satisfactory as Ismene.

Schippers leads a spirited performance although some attacks are not crisp. On the whole, the Angel studio recording cannot match the live performance in excitement even though the sound is superior stereo.

With this mish-mashed score, vocal excitement and dramatic commitment must be a factor to avert boredom and ward off derision. Such music as “Al ferro del forte” called the “Turkish music” surely inspired Gilbert and Sullivan at heights of parody. *Reviewed by Sharon Almqvist*

Note:

1. The differences between the commercial recording and the Scala come primarily in Act III. Scala contains the entire tomb scene for mezzo, Angel cuts the last several minutes of it. Angel contains the trio for Maometto, Cleomeno, and Neocle that comes after the tomb scene, Scala cuts the scene. On the commercial discs, Sills sings the Grisi cabaletta after the atmospheric prayer “Giusto Ciel.” This added showpiece may strike the listener as an extremely inappropriate interlude coming as it does right before Pamira and the Greek women commit suicide.

### **Giesecking in 1944 Berlin: First Complete Stereo Tape Recording**

Beethoven: Piano Concerto in E Flat, Op. 73, “Emperor,” with Artur Rother conducting the Berlin Reichsander Symphony Orchestra. Historic Stereo by the Music and Arts Programs of America, 1990 CD 637.

Listen closely to this 1944 recording of Beethoven’s Fifth Piano Concerto, and you can still hear German anti-aircraft guns boom outside the recording hall. For, although this recording on paper tape coated with iron oxide is nearly a half-century old, it still crisply reflects every shade and nuance of a penetrating performance by Walter Giesecking, right down to the faintest “ka-tooms” of heavy artillery in the background. A 1944 disc recording would pop and crackle this faint noise into obscurity, or fade it when digital filters did their work.

At first glance this recording seems like it might be one of those “classics” purchased after a collector already had his fifteen basic performances of Beethoven’s Emperor Concerto on his shelf. Even for collectors of Giesecking’s work, this might be considered a luxury purchase. He recorded it four times, and his final 1955 recording was in stereo. Ah, but so is this one, and that is the catch. Giesecking played in stereo a full decade *before* the 1955 performance. He was in top form, and Berlin Radio was eager to work with stereo tapes. The sound is priceless. Artur Rother, Walter Giesecking and the Berlin Reichsander Symphony Orchestra played a masterpiece that autumn day in 1944, and it is a good thing the RRG (Berlin radio) had developed stereo tape recording sufficiently to capture it. No, this is not a luxury purchase of the Emperor Concerto. This is slick enough to be a collector’s first CD.

The sound, especially for a 1944 recording, stands brightly above the quiet hiss of the tape. Walter Giesecking’s piano leaps, as it should, in and out of the German orchestra, instead of the muted thunder of static or oft-tinny reproduction from vinyl. Leap happens to be a good word to describe his technique in this performance. Of great concertos, the Emperor was one of the first to highlight the solo instrument within a few notes of its beginning, and Giesecking takes his lead well, pouncing upon the arpeggios precisely and poetically. The familiar chords of this concerto should only be recorded by the greatest artists. It is simply too well known, and its tendency to evoke 19th-century emotions (most obvious in Beethoven’s well-known ability to bring tears to the eyes of his listeners) is greatly dimmed by mediocre performances.



Fortunately, at the time of this recording Giesecking was well established as a master—the real work of art on this CD is the original tape. Although stereo recording techniques were established in the early thirties by the Columbia Gramophone Company in England, a decade passed before Germans working with strips of paper made a serious impact on the production of stereo sound. The possibilities inherent in tape recording surpassed anything in stereo discs (the 45-degree angle cutting process was not developed until the late fifties), and state-of-the-art German Magnetophon recorders very quickly carried dual channel capabilities.

Propaganda speeches and music filled a large part of the Nazi program for Germany, and stereo recording suffered no dearth of experimentation in this fertile field. Rumors of earlier tape recordings (Furtwängler and Strauss recordings are sought) may someday be validated, perhaps by opening a long lost Soviet archive. Until that happens, the 1944 recordings remain the oldest stereo tapes known. One other recording from that year is Herbert Von Karajan conducting a single movement of Bruckner's Eighth Symphony.

Walter Giesecking was acutely aware of every sound his fingers and pedalling produced; he was a perfectionist of the highest order. The *New Grove Dictionary* accuses him of setting "standards that have proved impossible to surpass," in his definitive Debussy and Ravel series. His Beethoven concertos were just as notable. In this performance, Artur Rother expertly guides the Berlin Radio Orchestra. The dignified tone set by the first powerful E-Flat chord remains throughout the rest of the concerto. The epithet "Emperor" is well-deserved.

Tom Null's liner notes point out that Napoleon's conquest of Austria culminated while Beethoven composed this piece. As the artillery neared, Beethoven covered his damaged ears with pillows while he took refuge in his brother's cellar. Once the city had fallen, though, he stormed and ranted at Napoleon, and finished this concerto.

How ironic and appropriate that booming anti-aircraft guns in the waning days of World War II are perceptible in the background of this performance. Near the end of the first movement's cadenza, a faint "ta-toom... ka-thoom... brrrooom" faintly, yet distinctly sounds at a great distance, like some ghost timpani. Giesecking's piano playing rolls right along, gently erasing all remembrance of the storms and stresses of war.

Null suggests that Giesecking played at the height of his technique in 1944. There are four different versions of his "Emperor" extant, including a 1938 mono, a 1950 mono, and a 1955 stereo version recorded one year before his death. The present performance has been released previously on LP several times, including once by MAPA's predecessor organization, Educational Media Associates of America. Although this LP was expertly produced as well, the benefits of CD clarity are most obvious on this issue.

But CD transferring must be done well. According to these liner notes, a recent unauthorized CD release on Melodram MEL-18023, though labelled "stereo" is allegedly mono and has a shrill, distorted sound. The present edition has been "carefully reprocessed on digital equipment from a copy of the original master tape in the archives of the German Democratic Radio."

Technically, the current transfer to CD is of excellent quality. And if these ears are any standard, the remarkably light hiss of the original Magnetophon recording is forgotten long before the first cadenza's faint "ka-booms" of anti-aircraft sound off in wartime Berlin. As a masterpiece with a touch of history, this performance should be standard stock in any audiophile's collection. *Reviewed by Jared Smith*