

Emma Eames – The Complete Victor Recordings (1905-1911) Romophone 81001-2¹
Emmy Destinn – The Complete Victor Recordings (1914-1921) Romophone 81002-2
Claudia Muzio – The Complete HMV (1911) and Edison (1920-1925) Recordings
 Romophone 81005-2

These two disc sets from the British company Romophone are similar in scope and excellence to the Pol Plancon set reviewed in the last issue of the *ARSC Journal*. In each case, the performers' complete recordings from a label are included, in some cases resulting in duplication of materials. The engineer, Ward Marston, has taken great care to verify recording speeds and the transposition habits of the singers. He provides a sound quality that is natural and clean. Documentation of matrix numbers and recording dates is provided. Biographies of the singers are enhanced by photographs of the artists but no texts of the recorded materials are included.

Romophone has elected to package the discs in the latest insult to the CD consumer. Two discs are housed in a single jewel box. The discs are laid into a double-sided, hinged frame. The posts which hold the discs to the frame are rather fragile and tend to break, leaving the discs floating about in little shards of plastic teeth. As a result, the discs fall out whenever the box is opened. The hinged frame is relatively difficult to open without touching the disc surfaces. Although the space-saving enhancement is an excellent idea, sturdier construction is necessary. This reviewer has had to repackage most of these sets and those from other labels employing the same packaging. This is annoying and an added expense. But enough of complaining, the contents of the packages are wonderful.

Emma Eames: The American soprano Emma Eames (1865-1952) was from Bath, Maine (although born in Shanghai of American parents). She finished her studies in Paris with the famed Mathilde Marchesi at the same time as Melba and Calve. Like Melba, she studied two of her most famous roles, Gounod's Marguerite and Juliette, with the composer himself. Her sensational debut at the Paris Opera in 1889 was as Juliette in a production for which Gounod had chosen her. Eames' career was centered at the Paris Opera, Covent Garden and later at the Metropolitan Opera.

Beginning as a lyric soprano, Eames gradually moved into heavier repertoire ranging from Tosca and Aida to Sieglinde and Elsa. She was noted for vocal and personal beauty but rated an indifferent actress. Her first Aida at the Met prompted James Huneker to quip: "Last night there was skating on the Nile." The relatively early decline of her voice was a result of singing more dramatic roles. When she withdrew from the Met one season, a critic said she had "Toscalitis."

Long after retiring, Eames published her memoirs in which she labelled Marchesi a "Prussian drill sergeant" and found fault with her teaching and method. "Another singer" (a thinly veiled allusion to Nellie Melba) was credited with blocking her career at times. The whole thing ends on a rather sour note of self-righteousness.

The recordings themselves are quite lovely. Eames exhibits a solid legato and a secure coloratura technique. A classical nobility of expression and great intensity make up for any lack of warmth in the voice. Schubert's song "Gretchen am Spinnrade" is particularly moving. Duets with Marcella Sembrich (*Nozze di Figaro*), Louise Homer (*Lakme* and *Lohengrin*) and Emilio de Gorgoza (Eames' husband) are included. She sings with equal ease and clarity in Italian, French, German and English. Eames was a much admired artist in her time. She has been accorded little

attention by the reissue companies in the last decades. This release should do much to re-establish her as the singer of stature that she was.

As an interesting appendix, Romophone has included the spoken commentary on her recordings which Eames gave in a radio interview in 1939. Indexing information is supplied so that one can return to the recording being discussed. This appendix is most suitable for multi-disc players.

Emmy Destinn: Czech soprano Emmy Destinn (1878-1930) was one of the most widely acclaimed artists of her time. The public, critics, composers and her colleagues were equal in the adulation. Puccini created *Fanciulla del West's* heroine, Minnie, for Destinn after hearing her as Butterfly. Often paired with Caruso, she was regarded as the finest dramatic voice and actress of her era. Early training as a violinist enabled Destinn to learn roles quickly. She had a phenomenal memory and covered an enormous repertoire. Her recordings number some 213, of which these Victor records were the last made. Critical opinion of her recordings has always been less than enthusiastic. The sheer size of her instrument did not take well to the primitive recording techniques of the time. Indeed, present day technology still cannot do full justice to really big voices. The faultless technique, secure intonation and thrilling delivery reported unanimously by her contemporaries are denied us. These recordings demonstrate a large warm voice, especially generous at the top, which occasionally strays from pitch. Her phrasing is four square and lacks subtlety. Few phrases stick in the memory. If we use these recordings to judge her, then the reputation she earned seems somewhat unjustified, although the beauty of her voice cannot be denied.

This edition contains 37 tracks including opera arias, art songs and a number of Czech songs (including some of Destinn's own). Four of the Czech songs are duets with Destinn's lover at the time, Dinh Gilly.

Ultraphone, a Supraphon subsidiary, has issued a single, mid-priced CD of 20 tracks (Ultraphone 11 1337-2 601). This disc contains some duplication of materials with interesting differences for comparison. The *Aida* "O patria mia" (both Victor 88469) on Ultraphone appears to have been from a less worn copy than Romophone's version. The sound on the Ultraphone is cleaner and far more listenable. However, the *Mignon* "Kennst du das Land" (both Victor 88467) demonstrates the value of Mr. Marston's thorough research into pitch and speed variables. The Ultraphone version, pitched a good step lower than Romophone's recording results in a leaden affair doing little to enhance Destinn's reputation. "Kennst du das Land" is hardly a happy aria, but at dirge tempo its effect is lugubrious. Ultraphone has announced a 16 CD set of Destinn's complete recordings for 1994. This will include a complete *Faust*, *Carmen* and *Lohengrin* Act 3.

Destinn was an important artistic force in her time but she has not translated well to our age. This collection is a welcome addition in that so few of her recordings have been released.

Claudia Muzio: Countless reissues on LP and CD of Italian soprano Claudia Muzio (1889-1936) have kept her name familiar and the wonder of her singing always available. The better known selection of electrical recordings made for Italian Columbia in the early 1930s demonstrate a more mature artistry but also document the soprano's failing health and vocal powers. The Edison Diamond Discs have long been treasured as the best representation of this voice at its peak despite some reservations about Edison's reorchestration ideas for the accompaniments. (The "complete HMV" consists