

## Book Reviews

### *Adelina Patti Queen of Hearts.*

*By John Frederick Cone; chronology by Thomas G. Kaufman; discography by William R. Moran. Portland, OR: Amadeus Press, 1993. 400 pp, illus. ISBN 0-931340-60-8 \$39.95.*

John Frederick Cone's biography of the great soprano, Adelina Patti, provides much new information and fresh insights on this fascinating singer's career and life. This has been accomplished through solid, extensive research. Dr. Cone's bibliography lists more than 50 letter and manuscript sources, 150 newspapers, and more than 400 books. His more than 600 text notes and quotations cite contemporary sources to describe Patti's life in the Victorian era — "the age of Patti." It is Dr. Cone's organization and writing skill that make the narrative flow, but it is the viewpoint of Patti's contemporaries that pervades the work.

Dr. Cone is currently adjunct associate professor of English at Fordham University; he was previously academic dean of the North Carolina School of the Arts. His particular qualifications for the Patti biography are evident from his previous works. He is a contributor to *The New Grove Dictionary of American Music* and *The New Grove Dictionary of Opera*. He is also the author of *Oscar Hammerstein's Manhattan Opera Company and First Rival of the Metropolitan Opera*.

Published in 1993 to honor the 150th anniversary of Patti's birth, the book opens with a foreword by Lord Harewood and an introduction by the director of the Metropolitan Opera archives, Robert Tuggle. In a brief prologue Dr. Cone notes that he has frequently encountered students and adults who, when he mentions her name, ask, "Who was Adelina Patti?" He goes on to say, "That the name and fame of such a legendary figure is today virtually forgotten saddened me and ultimately prompted my action...[to write her biography]."

For collectors and students of early sound recordings, his decision is particularly welcome. Adelina Patti is the earliest-born (1843) woman singer to have made recordings. Although she was on the verge of final retirement when she recorded in 1905 and 1906 (her final tour was in 1907, although there were six concerts and one private opera appearance in following years), the records are of major historical importance. While the singer reveals her age and the discs the technical imperfections of the time, they manage to reflect, in brief flashes, the voice of the greatest singer of her time.

As Dr. Cone notes, Adelina Patti made her concert debut in New York in 1851, when she was eight years old, and gave her last public performance sixty-three years

later in 1914 at the age of 71. During the last forty years of the 19th century she was the world's preeminent singer, the "Queen of Song." Withstanding all challenges during her long career, she was unsurpassed as an artist — or as *the* prima donna of her time. Dr. Cone's account makes clear that what made Patti the outstanding singer of her time was her background, incredible talent, ability to learn, and her work ethic.

Adelina was born into a family of professional singers and grew up in theaters and concert halls; her musical talent was evident by the time she was four. When she made her operatic debut in New York, at age 16, she already had eight years experience as a concert artist. Her public appearances thereafter were an unequalled series of triumphs. Her reviews were an unbroken string of superlatives. Even her few critics were won over in time. Dr. Cone sustains this element of the Patti narrative without generating the boredom that often permeates books about singers ("and then she/he/I sang ...").

By the time Adelina returned to Europe in 1861 she was ready to conquer the musical world. A year later came the famous meeting with Rossini who, after complimenting her on her florid singing of Rosina's aria from his *Il Barbiere di Siviglia*, went on to shatter her by asking who had written the music. Many anecdotal accounts leave it at that. Dr. Cone relates the aftermath when Patti returned to Rossini, apologized, and sought his advice. Within a short time she was one of his favorites. Patti's artistry and musicality earned her the esteem and friendship of such composers as Meyerbeer, Gounod, Berlioz, and Verdi.

Dr. Cone's narrative reveals that the heart of Patti's operatic repertory was to be found in the coloratura display pieces of Donizetti, Bellini, Rossini, Meyerbeer, and Gounod. Although she sang seven Verdi parts, only *Aida* was from his late period; most often she sang *Violetta (La Traviata)* and contemporary reports focused on her brilliant singing in the first act and her bejeweled appearance in the second act ballroom scene. Her concert programs consisted of a combination of two bravura arias or songs like Ardit's *Il bacio* and two simple lyric pieces, such as *The last rose of summer*. There were always several encores invariably ending with *Home, Sweet Home*. By the end of the century and the end of Patti's operatic appearances, much of her musical repertory was beginning to seem old-fashioned and was being crowded off the stage by the music of Wagner, late Verdi, and the emergence of verismo.

Patti's importance in the history of opera and concert singing may well be that she exemplified to a spectacular degree the last flowering of an epoch, the time of the predominance of the singer over everything else in operatic performance. Her public persona frequently exemplified the display and self-indulgence we associate with the term "prima donna." She understood her audiences and how to present herself most effectively. Her fabulous gowns, hundreds of jewels, and elaborate hair styles were all calculated to emphasize her dark-eyed beauty and tiny figure. Her instinct for self-advertising and business sense frequently surpassed that of her promoters. She may well have been — in comparable terms — the highest paid singer of all time; certainly, she was the highest paid in her time. For the many knowledgeable musicians and music lovers quoted by Dr. Cone, however, the furor could not obscure the beautiful voice, secure technique, and expressiveness that made Patti able to become "Queen of Hearts."

The author's account of Adelina's personal life illuminates her career and explains many of the things that created her public image. Only rarely though — mostly in her childhood and old age — are we able to glimpse the vulnerable human being behind the professional singer. The child sleeping curled up on the seat of a train en route to the next town on the concert tour, the elderly, lonesome woman reaching out to her

nieces and nephews in America, and other brief moments penetrate the carefully cultivated serenity of Patti the celebrity.

William R. Moran's discography of Patti (pp. 305-316) has been significantly enhanced and reorganized from the one he and Clifford Williams prepared for a 1956 issue of *The Record Collector* (1956;10[8&9]:169-195). The new discography table is numbered by title with variant performances in matrix-number order; this results in a listing of twenty-two titles. The new table includes the (no-matrix-number) "Christmas Greeting to Baron Cederström"; the earlier one did not.

Moran devotes considerable attention to recommended playing speeds in the discography. Although he does not say so, this may account for his decision to omit mention of all but one of the LP reissues and one CD reissue of Patti's recordings. He does discuss the EMI RLS 711 (LP) set which contains all twenty-eight of the known sides and the Pearl GEMM 9312 issue on CD which presents twenty-two selections. In both cases he notes the playing speeds used for dubbing the recordings and compares them with his own conclusions.

In his final paragraph, Moran deals with the question of cylinder recordings of Patti's voice. Without completely destroying the hopes of those who will continue to search out rumored treasures, he again refutes the contention of a tiny number of promoters of the authenticity of the supposed Patti cylinder dubbed onto IRCC 219 and 3100 (subsequently other labels) by setting forth the source of the recording and identity of the singer. One can only hope that publication of the facts in so authoritative a book will end the matter.

Thomas Kaufman's 68-page chronology of Patti's appearances and his listing of her operatic repertory conclude the book. He includes a separate bibliography in his introduction. Kaufman lists the participating artists, when known, for the opera appearances and for the concert tours made with other artists (a frequent practice by Patti). Individual concert programs are not given. Kaufman's listings will be useful to those doing research on artists who sang with Patti at one time or another.

This is an outstanding work. The research has been as thorough as existing source material permits. The notes and bibliographies are extensive. The authors' presentations are factual and balanced. The distribution of the 154 illustrations contributes to the effectiveness of the narrative. There is an extensive and well organized index. Above all, Dr. Cone has achieved a high degree of elegance in reflecting the Victorian era and in illuminating "the age of Patti" and the unique singer who became "Queen of Hearts." *Reviewed by Elwood A. McKee.*

***EJS: Discography of the Edward J. Smith  
Recordings—"The Golden Age of Opera," 1956-1971***

*By William Shaman, William J. Collins, and Calvin M. Goodwin. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1994. 856 pp, notes, appendix, indexes. \$125.00.*

Return with us now to those thrilling days of yesteryear, when the radio brought us the sounds of which legends are made: Rosa Ponselle and Giovanni Martinelli singing Verdi, Ezio Pinza as Don Giovanni and Figaro, all of Wagner with Melchior, Flagstad, and Schorr, and Bruno Walter or Sir Thomas Beecham in the pit — not just in arias and scenes but whole operas, operas by the dozens. This was the promise of Edward J. Smith's "Golden Age of Opera," and the promise was kept. And more: the monthly bulletins were filled with operas and composers unheard and sometimes unheard of. On