

Each entry lists main artist, with supporting cast in some cases, or personnel of a band. It also has master number, record number (if applicable), and if known, year or date of session, which studio it was recorded in, and other notes of interest.

It's almost astonishing to see the range of music Mercury and associated labels have recorded in rock, jazz, pop, country, international and classical. This leads to the question, how can a label like this turn in such a lackluster sales performance?

At one time or another, their artists have included Rod Stewart, Bachman-Turner Overdrive, The Four Seasons, Rush, Def Leppard, James Brown, Jerry Lee Lewis, Edith Piaf and Nana Mouskouri.

Perhaps part of the reason is that Mercury didn't have bigger names than the above, and that some recorded for the label at the wrong parts of their career.

And perhaps because there were so many obscurities, deserved or not. Who remembers The Pallbearers, Fonda Feingold, Vicky, The Cascading Strings, Childe Harold, Kurt & Noah, The Love Stick, and The Electronic Concept Orchestra? I could go on, but it would be too cruel.

There are other oddities-artists we don't generally associate with Mercury, such as Aaron Neville, Jo-el (then Joel) Sonnier, and Sergio Mendes; and the curious collection of talk-show hosts (Mike Douglas, Merv Griffin and Regis Philbin).

The jazz lineup, however, was outstanding: some of the artists read like a Who's Who of Jazz: Oscar Peterson, Clifford Brown, Cannonball Adderley, Billy Eckstine, Quincy Jones, Sarah Vaughan, Dinah Washington, etc.

Finally, if the current regime of Mercury (now part of the Polygram pantheon with Polydor, A&M, Island and others) wants some unsolicited advice, how about tying in the 50th anniversary celebration with these books, including the release of sampler CDs, videos, etc.

Possibly Mercury and Greenwood Press can put together a multimedia CD-ROM. It will make searching that much easier, and will give us a chance to see and hear some of the treasures we've missed over the years. *Reviewed by Bruce Rosenstein.*

Legendary Voices.

By Nigel Douglas. London: Andre Deutsch' 1992. 305 pp, indexes, ISBN 0-233-98790-8. Available from Nimbus Records, Ltd., P.O. Box 7746, Charlottesville, VA 22906-7746.

Companion CD: *Legendary Voices.*¹ Nimbus Prima Voce NI 7851.

Nigel Douglas is well-known to opera lovers in the U.K., having been heard in over two hundred radio programs for the BBC. He is, himself, a singer, trained at the Vienna Academy, with over eighty tenor roles in his repertoire, which he has performed with opera companies in Britain as well as on the continent. *Legendary Voices* makes no pretense at being a complete or definitive source of information on the greatest singers on record. Instead, it recalls the lives and vocal art of fourteen of the author's personal favorites.

Although the author heard most of these singers in person, it is through their recordings that their art survives. Mr. Douglas offers extensive and insightful commentary on the recorded legacy of each singer surveyed, including discussions of recent CD releases on a variety of labels. For the companion CD, Nimbus Records has selected a representative recording of each of the singers in Douglas' book. Four of them — Rosa Ponselle, Alexander Kipnis, Lotte Lehmann and Jussi Björling — merit two selections each.

Decisions regarding who should and should not be included in such a collection are invariably matters of personal taste. This reviewer finds only one who is clearly inferior to his company — Alfred Piccaver. Douglas freely admits a bias, since Piccaver was his first voice teacher. An English tenor greatly admired in Vienna, Piccaver was a respectable artist with a credible vocal technique. Yet, in terms of inherent beauty of voice and ease of production he is clearly not in a league with Caruso, Björling, or even Wunderlich. Even Douglas admits that languages were a problem for Piccaver, and as an English-speaking tenor based in Vienna, he became a “jack of all tongues and a master of none.” One might prefer a chapter devoted to Beniamino Gigli, Giovanni Martinelli or Lauritz Melchior to complement his other tenors (all three are mentioned numerous times in Douglas’ book, and he leaves no doubts about his admiration for them). But *Legendary Voices* is clearly a personal statement, one to which the author is most certainly entitled.

Most of the singers are represented on the CD by repertoire with which they were closely associated — Kipnis in Schubert and Mozart, Lehmann in Schumann and Wagner (as Sieglinde, one of her finest roles and a definitive portrayal), de Luca, Pinza and Turner in Verdi, Flagstad in Wagner, and Tetrazzini in one of her truly legendary showpieces, “Ah! non giunge” from Bellini’s *La Sonnambula*. Kipnis and Lehmann were equally versed in opera and lieder, as the recordings featured attest. A few of the singers are featured in unusual roles. Caruso’s magnificently sung 1911 recording of “Quando nascesti tu” from Gomez’ *Lo Schiavo* is one of his least familiar recordings, the first of three featuring music by the Brazilian composer. Although he never performed a Gomez opera on stage, Caruso twice returned to his music before the recording horns. In 1914 he recorded the duet “Sento una forza indomita” from *Il Guarany* with Emmy Destinn (a piece he did perform in concert), and in 1919 the aria “Mia piccirella” from *Salvator Rosa*.

Rosa Ponselle’s Columbia acoustics did not, for the most part, represent the repertoire she was performing at the Metropolitan Opera. Although her Columbias include arias from *La Bohème*, *Madama Butterfly*, *Manon Lescaut*, as well as “Vissi d’arte” from *Tosca* featured by Nimbus, she never sang a Puccini role on stage. Her voice would have been as ideal for Puccini’s heroines as it was for Verdi’s. Yet, as she said in a 1954 Met broadcast intermission interview with Boris Goldovsky, “there wasn’t time!”, further explaining that the roles they were constantly adding to her repertoire consisted of Met premiers of then neglected works, including Verdi’s *La Forza del Destino*, *Luisa Miller* and *Don Carlo*, as well as Spontini’s *La Vestale*.

For all but one of the recordings featured on the CD, Nimbus has used their Natural Ambisonic Transfer process, previously discussed in these pages by reviewer Sharon Almquist.² The Nimbus Ambisonic process involves reproducing the original 78 rpm discs on an Expert Horn acoustic gramophone of mid-1930s vintage, equipped with an extremely large, custom-built horn (a color photo of the horn can be seen in Nimbus’ ad on the back cover of the January 22, 1994 issue of *Opera News*). Thorn needles are used in the acoustic reproducer, but the original spring-wound turntable has been replaced with a modern electronically-controlled transcription turntable for the best possible speed accuracy. The gramophone is housed in a small recital hall located at Nimbus’ elegant headquarters in Monmouth, Great Britain. A custom-designed, multi-capsule stereo microphone captures the acoustic playback, which is then recorded digitally.

Nimbus makes many claims for the Ambisonic process, including an absence of surface noise and a result which “captures for all time the immediacy of the original

performances.” As pointed out by Ms. Almquist, the Nimbus process continues to be a subject of controversy among collectors. In 1983 William Storm, Director of the Belfer Audio Laboratory and Archive at Syracuse University, discussed two divergent philosophies on the restoration of historical recordings.³ They are: Type 1 — Sound preservation of audio history, involving reproduction of the original recordings as the original purchasers would have heard them, i.e., on phonographs of the same vintage as the recordings; and Type 2 — Sound preservation of the musical performance, involving reproduction using the most modern electronic equipment in an attempt to extract as much of the musical information contained in the original record grooves as possible.

The Nimbus Ambisonic process doesn't really fit either category, although it is certainly closer to the first. The acoustic phonograph used by Nimbus was made ten years after the abandonment of acoustical recording, and the modifications made by Nimbus have made it far superior to virtually any acoustic phonograph available to consumers in the 1920s and 30s. However, it is still an acoustic phonograph, and still suffers from all of the inherent limitations of that medium, including high levels of distortion, limited and uneven frequency response, resonances, and limited dynamic range.

Some will argue the validity of reproducing acoustic recordings on an acoustic phonograph. It is true that acoustic recordings generally possess a “dry” sonic character, since the limited dynamic range of the recording process captured very little hall ambience. For this reason, concert halls were rarely used as recording locations, with record companies normally preferring small, cramped, non-reverberant studios as their venues. The Nimbus process does give the listener a sense of the singer performing in a concert hall, a characteristic invariably missing on acoustic records. But accompanying this is a loss of musical information, both vocal and instrumental. As primitive as acoustical orchestral recordings are, there is far more orchestral detail inherent in the record grooves than the Ambisonic process can capture.

The singers are not well-served by the Nimbus process either. Perhaps the most disturbing characteristic of Nimbus' vocal reproduction is the compression of dynamics, which severely impairs the original interpretations of the artists. Singers with robust, dramatic voices, such as Caruso and Ponselle, are stripped of the impact captured on the original recordings. Some will argue that the colorations inherent in acoustic playback are complementary to those of the recording process. This is nonsense, unless the phonograph in question was designed to complement the specific resonances and frequency response aberrations of a *specific* acoustic recording system. This was normally not the case, and since record companies often modified and changed their recording equipment, it would be impossible for one acoustic phonograph to match the characteristics of every acoustical recording. As far as distortion is concerned, acoustic playback can only add to what is inherent in the recording, and that is precisely what Nimbus' Ambisonic process does. Comparing Caruso's 1911 *Lo Schiavo* aria with Ward Marston's transfer in Vol. II of *The Caruso Edition* (Pearl EVC II), this reviewer finds Marston's to be warmer, with greater clarity, presence and wider dynamic contrasts.

Playing electrical recordings on an acoustic phonograph is a completely misguided effort. Many of the electrics contained on the *Legendary Voices* CD are outstanding recordings for their time. Keith Hardwick's superb CD transfer of the 1935 Melchior/Lehmann/Walter recording of Act I of *Die Walküre* (EMI CDH 7610202) nearly qualifies as “high fidelity,” with remarkable orchestral and vocal detail and a warm hall ambience (Vienna's Musikvereinsaal has plenty of reverberation without an audience present). Hardwick's transfer is the best possible example of Storm's “Type 2” restora-

tion, relying on the best surviving copies of the originals (Hardwick had access to original metal parts) and the sophisticated electronic playback equipment. The original performance survives with stunning impact and remarkably low levels of surface noise.

An excerpt from this recording, Lotte Lehmann's "Du bist der lenz," is included on *Legendary Voices*. The reproduction is a travesty of the original, with one of the finest examples of mid-1930s recording made to sound as though it were recorded at least ten years earlier. The remarkable orchestral detail inherent in the original recording has been all but obliterated, and the dynamics compressed. Lehmann is now swimming in reverberation, removing much of her immediacy and presence, exactly the opposite of what Nimbus claims for the Ambisonic method. Comparing the Nimbus transfer of Eva Turner's 1928 "Ritorna vincitor" from *Aida* with EMI's CD devoted to her recordings (CDH 7697912) again reveals the vast superiority of Hardwick's sophisticated electronic transfers.

Not even "Type 1" restoration is served by the Ambisonic process, especially for electrical recordings. Contemporary listeners could certainly hear reproduction superior to this on the best electrical phonographs of the mid-30s. Nimbus' acoustic phonograph would have given listeners little indication of the progress which had been made in sound recording over the previous decade. In this writer's opinion, Nimbus' Ambisonic process fails to do justice to either the recordings or the original performances.

The *Legendary Voices* CD includes one recording from the era of stereophonic, magnetic tape recording, specifically Fritz Wunderlich's 1962 recording of Lensky's aria from *Eugene Onegin*. How would Nimbus reproduce this recording? Perhaps they would cut a 78 rpm disc for playback on their acoustic gramophone, mixing the stereo tape to mono in the process! Fortunately, sensibility prevailed and the stereo tapes were transferred directly to the digital medium. Collectors who own the Seraphim LP entitled *Fritz Wunderlich — Lyric Tenor*, Album 2 (S-60078) will be surprised to find that Nimbus has included a different take of the recitative than the one found on the LP, the take used by Seraphim being noticeably slower in tempo. The Nimbus version contains an audible splice where the recitative is joined to the aria; no editing is audible on the Seraphim LP.

Legendary Voices contains many outstanding performances by some of this century's greatest singers, and Nigel Douglas' accompanying book is an excellent guide to them. Vocal collectors will surely wish to add Douglas' book to their libraries. The Nimbus CD is another matter. Many of these recordings are available in superior transfers on other labels, some of which are discussed in the book. Serious collectors are advised to seek them out. The *Legendary Recordings* CD can only be recommended to more casual collectors who desire a "sampler" rather than a number of CDs or collections devoted to these artists, and who are not concerned about sound quality.

Reviewed by Gary A. Galo.

Endnotes:

1. **Bellini:** *La Sonnambula*: Ah! non giunge (Luisa Tetrazzini, March 18, 1911, Victor); **Gomez:** *Lo Schiavo*: Qui fortuna insistenza... Quando nascesti tu (Enrico Caruso, Nov. 19, 1911, Victor); **Puccini:** *Tosca*: Vissi d'arte (Rosa Ponselle, Jan. 7, 1919, Columbia); **Herbert:** *Mlle. Modeste*: Kiss me again (Rosa Ponselle, July 26, 1920, Columbia); **Thomas:** *Mignon*: Elle ne croyait pas (sung in Italian, Tito Schipa, May 14, 1924, Victor); **Verdi:** *Rigoletto*: Povero Rigoletto... Cortigiani, vil razza dannata (Giuseppe de Luca, Nov. 29, 1927 and April 5, 1928, Victor); **Verdi:** *Aida*: Ritorna vincitor (Eva Turner, 1928, Columbia); **Mascagni:** *Cavalleria Rusticana*: Addio

alla madre (Alfred Piccaver, c. 1929, Polydor); **Verdi:** *Ernani*: Infelice! e tu credevi (Ezio Pinza, May 7, 1929, Victor); **Mozart:** *Die Zauberflöte*: In diesen heil'gen Hallen (Alexander Kipnis, April 14, 1930, HMV); **Schubert:** *Erlkönig* (Alexander Kipnis, Nov. 20, 1936, Columbia); **Schumann:** *Die Lotosblume* (Lotte Lehmann, April 25, 1932, Odeon); **Wagner:** *Die Walküre*: Du bist der lenz (Lotte Lehmann, June, 1935, HMV); **Wagner:** *Tristan und Isolde*: Liebestod (Kirsten Flagstad, Oct. 9, 1935, Victor); **Ponchielli:** *La Gioconda*: Cielo e mar (Jussi Björling, Sept. 3, 1937, HMV); **Millöcker:** *Der Bettelstudent*: Ich has' kein Geld, bin vogel-

- frei (sung in Swedish, Jussi Björling, April 28, 1938, HMV); **Cilea:** *L'Arlesiana*: Come due tizzi accesi (Tito Gobbi, July, 1942, HMV); **Tchaikovsky:** *Eugene Onegin*: Wohin, wohin bist du entschwunden (Fritz Wunderlich, Nov.-Dec., 1962, HMV).
2. Almquist, S. Sound Recording Reviews: **Royal Opera House at Covent Garden: An Early History on Record**. Nimbus NI 7891; and **Divas, Volume 2, 1909-1940**. Nimbus NI 7818. *ARSC Journal*, 1992;23 (1):73-76.
 3. Storm, W. "A Proposal for the Establishment of International Recording Standards." *ARSC Journal*, 1983;15(2-3):26-37.

Directory of American Disc Record Brands and Manufacturers, 1891-1943.

By Allan Sutton. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1994. 282 pp. ISBN: 0-313-29200-0. \$65.00.

Those who have long lamented the shortcomings of Brian Rust's pioneering *The American Record Label Book* (1978) at last have something to cheer about. In fact, they can give two cheers. Within the past year two volumes have been published which add significantly to the literature on U.S. record labels. Guy Marco's *Encyclopedia of Recorded Sound in the United States* (Garland, 1993),¹ though not without some factual errors, contains concise overviews of a great many labels of the 78 rpm era. Most importantly, it includes an excellent bibliography of further sources which the researcher can consult.

Now we have Allan Sutton's *Directory*, which, for labels at least, is even better. It is essentially an A to Z listing of "commercial and semi-private disc record brands manufactured or marketed in the United States for general entertainment purposes." Every label of significance, and many that were not, is here, more than 330 in all, according to the publisher's blurb. Of course that does not mean *every* label marketed before World War II is listed, but the exceptions are not likely to cost you any sleep. Comparing the *Directory* to my own card file of record labels, I found only five in the "A" that it did not list. In case you're wondering, they are All Star (a c.1915 8" mail order label from the "Standard Mail Order Company"), Ammor (a 1939 juke box label), Angelophone (a 1916 religious label), Apollo (an International Record Co. brand of the early 1900s) and Arthur Fields Melody Shop (early 1920s). Now, those are obscure! On the other hand the *Directory* did list such obscurities as Arthur Fields Melody Record (1923) and Art Tone Gennett (early 1920s), as well as such important brands as Aeolian-Vocalion, American, Arto and Autograph. I do wonder why Arthur Fields made it in, but Arthur Hall did not? Oh, well.

There are two main sections to the book. The first, a Label Directory, covers Actuelle to Zon-o-Phone; the second, a Manufacturer Directory, spans The Aeolian Company to Yerkes Recording Laboratories. In addition there is a competent introductory history of the industry, and appendices including Phantom Labels (anyone ever