

* REVIEWS *

VERDI: Rigoletto--Bella figlia dell'amore. Enrico Caruso, tenor, with orchestra (25 January 1917?).

DVORAK: Songs my mother taught me. Nellie Melba, soprano; Frank St. Leger, piano (12 January 1916).

STARS 1000, 7", \$5.10 (for the benefit of The Stanford Archive of Recorded Sound).

At first glance we may wonder what prompted this rerecording. Caruso, we all know, made no less than five Rigoletto Quartets at various stages of his career--what more can we learn from yet another performance of his opening solo? There is, to be sure, enough mystery about this fragment to give it extra-musical interest, and Bill Moran, who is responsible for making it available, analyses in the accompanying notes the divergences of this from the performances we know. Although there is no documentation whatever, Moran seems safe in placing it on the same day with the Galli-Curci quartet. Was Caruso warming up, or perhaps trying out certain effects? It is a fact that he spreads himself here a little more than he had done in the earlier recordings, which is true also of the Galli-Curci performance. An extra point for speculation is added by the fact that this fragment ends not neatly with the solo, but just after the contralto has sung her first four notes. Is it Flora Perini or, as Moran suggests, possibly Minnie Egner, who was in the studio for the Lucia Sextet recorded the same day? Although I remember both Perini and Egner from the old days at the Met, I have little impression of the quality of their voices beyond these recordings (despite the statements in Kutsch-Riemans-Jones that each made "a few recordings for Victor"). As for Egner--who ever caught the vocal quality of Alicia in the Sextet? Be that as it may, it seems safe enough to assume that either this is the start of an unfinished performance, halted for some reason or other, or else Caruso had his personal objectives for trying out the solo. He had every

reason to be satisfied. And we are much in Bill Moran's debt for the loving care and skill that has been lavished on the dubbing.

The Melba side of the little disc is another story. We know it was made the same day as her orchestrally accompanied published recording of the song. Moran tells us this one was passed and assigned a number but apparently did not survive the wear-tests to which all records were subjected in those days. Which probably means it proved too powerful for the equipment of the time. Perhaps it was the fine solid accompaniment. As so let us heave a sigh for the untold treasures that did not come down to us because they were too good, too far ahead of their times. Melba never surpassed this recording and indeed rarely enough approached it. One feels that at last something like the fabled sound of her voice has come through to us. Fine as are the electrical recordings of a decade later, they do show the effects of her age. Here she sounds like a singer in her prime. Technically the reproduction is not much inferior--one could almost believe a microphone had somehow been sneaked into the studio. At the piano is Frank St. Leger, later a familiar figure at both the Chicago and Metropolitan operas, but in 1916 Melba's protégé and accompanist. This is, says Moran, the only surviving souvenir of their association--occasion for another sigh.

The little disc is issued for the benefit of the sound archives at Stanford University; it may be ordered from Town & Country Music Center, 127 Town & Country Village, Palo Alto, California, 94301. To the price of \$5.10, California residents should add 30 cents sales tax.

This review is by Philip L. Miller, retired Chief of the Music Division of the New York Public Library and Past President of ARSC.