

TOSTI: Penso; RUBINSTEIN: Night; MASSENET: Werther—Tears; ROTOLI: Fior che langue; PUCCINI: Tosca—Vissi d'arte; TCHAIKOVSKI: Pique Dame—Lisa's aria; FAURE: Crucifix (with Figner); GLINKA: You tempt me so (with Figner); GRODSKI: Sea gull's cry (with Figner); BOITO: Mefistofele—Lontano, lontano (with Figner); NAPRAVNIK: Dubrovski—French duet (with Figner); NAPRAVNIK: Harold—Lullaby; PUCCINI: Tosca—Vissi d'arte; BIZET: Carmen—Habanera; DAVIDOFF: Night, love and the moon; BIZET: Carmen—Chanson bohème; Carmen—Séguidille; MEYER-HELMUND: In the evening I bring you violets; HUMPERDINCK: Hänsel und Gretel—Folksong; Unknown song; BILLI: E canto il grillo; RESPIGHI: Stornellatrice (2 versions); TCHAIKOVSKI: At the ball. Medea Mei-Figner, soprano. Talk between Medea Mei-Figner and Mr. Hegermann Lindencrone. Rubini RS 301, 2 discs.

TOSTI: Penso; RUBINSTEIN: Night; MASSENET: Werther—Air des larmes; ROTOLI: Fior che langue; PUCCINI: Tosca—Vissi d'arte; TCHAIKOVSKI: Pique Dame—Air de Lisa; FAURE: Le Crucifix (with Figner); GLINKA: You tempt me needlessly (with Figner); GRODSKY: Sea gull's cry (with Figner); NAPRAVNIK: Dubrovski—French duet (with Figner); BOITO: Mefistofele—Lontano (with Figner); BIZET: Carmen—Habanera; Carman—Chanson bohème; DAVIDOFF: Night, Love, Moon; NAPRAVNIK: Harold—Cradle Song; BIZET: Carmen—Séguidille; MEYER-HELMUND: In the morning I bring you violets; BOITO: Mefistofele—L'altra notte; NAPRAVNIK: Dubrovski—Masha's air; BILLI: Canta il grillo; RESPIGHI: Re Enzo—Stornellatrice. Medea Mei-Figner, soprano. Club 99 CL 99-96, \$5.50.

To begin by stating the obvious, recordings of Medea Mei-Figner are among the most sought-after of collectors' items. Very few of us have ever seen an original. Due to the invaluable enterprise of the late Bill Seltsam, we first made her acquaintance in 1948 by way of a ten-inch 78 rpm dubbing, IRCC 3041, two Napravnik numbers, the Cradle Song from Harold and the French duet from Dubrovski (with her husband, Nicolai Figner). The duet was later included in Souvenirs of Opera, series 4 (IRCC L-7014) and the Air des larmes from Werther in series 1 (L-7011). More recently Aida Favia-Artsay performed the herculean feat of bringing four Soviet-made electrical recordings down to pitch (the original speeds were unbelievable) and making them sound very presentable on OASI 598.

Now suddenly we have a feast. According to Jerrald Moore in the brochure accompanying the Rubini set, Medea made 22 sides in 5 sessions for G&T in 1901 and 1902. "About this time," says Moore, "she also made six cylinders for Pathé." (Girard and Barnes, as well as Club 99, give the date as 1903.) Finally, "Apparently just before leaving Russia for the last time in 1930, she made a final group of Gramophone recordings, with her daughter's accompanist Hélène Polivanoff at the piano." (Club 99 gives the date 1929.) Moore lists five numbers, one of which is a second performance of Respighi's Stornellatrice, an extract from his opera Re Enzo. Of this grand total three early matrix numbers are unaccounted for,

which leaves us and the producers of these rereleases with thirty titles, of which we still lack four. But now comes Club 99 with two 1904 Columbia sides which have been truly legendary. To sum up, the Rubini issue adds up to twenty-three 78 rpm sides, five of which are not on Club 99, while Club 99 has twenty-two sides, two of which are not on Rubini.

And so we are confronted with a heartbreaking choice. Rubini follows a strictly chronological order; Club 99 mostly so.

The quality of the records is such as to leave little doubt that Mei-Figner's reputation in Russia was fully deserved. From their debuts in 1887 until her final appearance in 1912, Medea and Nicolai Figner were the reigning favorites at the Saint Petersburg Opera. Two things about the soprano are significant. Though hers was a Russian career, she was Florentine by birth, and only learned to sing in Russian after her Saint Petersburg debut as Valentine in Les Huguenots, which she had sung in Italian. Surely the singer who recorded some fourteen years later sounds convincingly Russian. The second thing is that her vocal training began as a light soprano, with "disastrous results," according to Moore. She was then pronounced a mezzo-soprano, and her operatic debut was made as Azucena in Trovatore. This might perhaps account for her extraordinary range. Of her admired abilities as an actress we may find some evidence in the recordings, for she was a vocal actress; several reproduced photos in the Rubini brochure give an inkling of her personal beauty.

That she was still an Italian, by birth and training, is evident in her very first recording, Tosti's song Penso. The easy freedom of her style is decidedly right in this song, as again in Rotoli's Fior che langue. The recording of the voice is surprisingly forward and lifelike. In the well-known Rubinstein Romance this freedom seems less stylistic, but the long held notes are decidedly beautiful in themselves. In contrast is Davidoff's outgoing song, Night, love, and moon, sung with great abandon. She makes the most of Charlotte's lament from Werther and shows herself a temperamental Carmen. Perhaps she was the more so because of singing in Russian. But the tempo of the Habanera is erratic, to say the least—one would never think of it as a dance song—and in the Chanson bohème she simply alters the vocal line whenever it does not suit her. This, of course, was not uncommon practice in her day, but with her unusual range one wonders why she should avoid the low passages. The same is true of the Séguidille. Two different versions of Vissi d'arte are included in the Rubini selection; only the first of them is on Club 99. The second is the more passionate in performance and the better recorded. The Mefistofele aria, from the rare Columbia, is temperamental, but unfortunately the recording is noisy and weak, and it plays a half-tone low by the score. For reasons I will explain below, the most interesting of all the opera airs is the Pique Dame. If the tempo at first seems leisurely, the piece is full of drama,

and amazingly, at the end she descends to a low A. The Napravnik Cradle song is distinguished by an extremely lovely sustained note at the end. Club 99 includes a second recording of this, which adds little because it is noisier; the original was apparently a worn copy. An unfamiliar aria from Dubrovski, again from a Columbia original is valuable in itself, though the sound is rather veiled.

Perhaps the most unexpected selection of all is the Meyer-Helmund song. Rubini calls it In the evening I bring you violets, but Club 99 has it In the morning. As it happens, Club 99 is right, for the text is from Heine's Morgens send' ich dir die Veilchen. The Rubini, pitched in C-sharp has more vitality than Club 99 in B. The duets with Nicolai Figner do her the greater credit. Crucifix, in which the sound is particularly good, shows his voice as perhaps a little thin and constricted. The piece is sung in the original French. Musically more interesting, and good in sound, is Glinka's You tempt me. The Sea gull's cry (warmly remembered from the old Michailowa-Tugarinova disc) is a few shades less clear. Best of the lot is the French duet from Dubrovski, the text of which, once very popular with composers from Duparc to Bemberg, is by Sully Prudhomme--Ne jamais la voir, ni l'entendre. Lontano, Lontano, from Mefistofele, has extra interest because, as we learn from the brochure, it was a favorite with their audiences when they sang recitals together.

The electrical recordings reveal a remarkably well preserved voice. She takes her time in the appealingly simple song from Hänsel und Gretel. The "unidentified Russian song," I am told, is Night, or more properly The night is warm, by A. Kochetova. Only a fragment of it is given here. Finally, the two performances of Respighi's Stornellatrice, E canto il grillo and At the ball, are all stylish and attractive. But here we have serious disagreement as to keys. Mrs. Artsay pitches the Respighi in G-flat, and Club 99 follows her. Rubini has it in G. On Club 99 E canto il grillo is in F, on Rubini in G and on OASI in F-sharp.

In general it seems safe to say that Rubini has had access to better originals. They have also set their noise levels a bit higher, so that while the transfers may be less quiet they are more lifelike. It is notable that Rubini gets only one more band on three sides than Club 99 has on two. This means crowding on the latter with resultant loss of quality. There is considerable contrast in the sound of the G&T originals and the Pathés, which have an exceptionally tinny piano accompaniment. In these, unhappily, Club 99 has cut off the opening announcements, while Rubini retains them.

But what makes Rubini decidedly more valuable is a musicological point. Listening to the Pique Dame aria, as I mentioned above, brings a surprise descent to a low A at the end. Mei-Figner, we know, created the role of Lisa. All questions are cleared up on

the final side, which is given over to an interview with the Danish critic Knud de Hegermann-Lindencrone, recorded in Paris 20 April 1949. Here the singer tells (in French) of how Tchaikovski completed his opera on the Figiers' estate, and of how she suggested to the composer that the aria would be more effectively finished in this way. His reply was that though he would permit her to do it thus, he would not dare to put it in the score, as most sopranos could not manage it. (Why not, one wonders, as ossia?) In any case, here it is, with Tchaikovski's blessing. The interview has been "transcribed" in the brochure, but one quickly finds it all but impossible to follow the record with this. Apparently the original 78 rpm discs were not properly marked for sequence. There is much repetition and the order of what one sees is not that which one hears. Furthermore, the translation is often approximate, and it is incomplete. As I have indicated, this interview is a valuable musicological document, but it should have been edited properly.

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