

Odyssey Y33793 Legendary Performances
Claudia Muzio (1889-1936) on Edison Diamond Discs, vol. 2 (1920-1921)

Side 1

Gomes: Mia piccirella, from *Salvator Rosa* (Recorded November 5, 1920);
Bachelet: Chere nuit (Recorded November 11, 1920); Sodero: Crisantemi
(Recorded November 11, 1920); Verdi: Tacea la notte, from *Il Trovatore*
(Recorded November 1, 1920); Verdi: D'amor sull'ali rosee, from *Il*
Trovatore (Recorded November 6, 1920); Giordano: La mamma morta, from
Andrea Chenier (Recorded November 8, 1920);

Side 2

Tchaikovsky: Sei forse l'angelo fedele?, from *Eugene Onegin* (Recorded
November 3, 1920); Leoncavallo: Ballatella, from *I Pagliacci* (Recorded
January 24, 1921); Catalani: Ebben? Ne andró lontana, from *La Wally*
(Recorded November 22, 1920); Chopin: Aspiration (Recorded April 1,
1921); Puccini: Si, mi chiamano Mimi, from *La Boheme* (Recorded January
31, 1921); Mascheroni: Eternamente, Albert Spalding, violin; Robert
Gayler, piano (Recorded April 27, 1921)

This is the second rerecording of Muzio's Edison discs in a welcome series of recordings issued by Columbia-Odyssey. The first of these was issued in 1974, Odyssey 32676, entitled *Legendary Performances*, Claudia Muzio: Re-recordings from the *Edison Diamond Discs*. The producer whom we have to thank for these excellent and interesting records is James Gladstone, who has used a recent technique "of placing separate pickups within the horn of the acoustical reproducing instrument." As Howard Klein states in his notes on the first reissue, "The result is that a youthful, many-faceted Muzio can again be heard in an evocative approximation of the original. Here, emerging from the fifty-year-old acoustical discs, is the living voice of the singer, its pathos and joy vibrantly intact."

The transfers from the original diamond discs on both of these Odyssey records have been accomplished very well, although I confess to still prefer hearing these records on the original machines, for I believe there is always a certain loss in the transfer to the microphone, especially a certain thinness and flatness in the rerecordings. Nevertheless, despite a loss of mellowness as played on the original machines, these L.P.s do give "an evocative approximation of the original" and are heartily to be recommended to those who wish to hear Claudia Muzio's voice and art in her prime. And all lovers of vocal art should wish to hear Muzio in her prime, for she was not only one of the finest sopranos of the century, she was certainly one of the greatest operatic artists of all time, in the same realm, for me, as Caruso, Ruffo, and Chaliapin.

Her life in music, and she lived it in and for music with a fierce passion, is a story of one success after another, with death coming when she was still at the pinnacle of her fame.

Claudia Muzio, born in 1889, was the daughter of Carlo Muzio, a

stage director at Covent Garden and the Metropolitan, so she literally grew up with opera and music, hearing all the greatest operatic artists from early childhood. She started on the harp and piano before she was ten, and soon after that began studying voice with Mme. Casaloni of Turin and Mme. Viviani of Milan. Her operatic debut was made at Arezzo in 1912 in Puccini's *Manon Lescaut*, and she was immediately successful—indeed she never suffered a setback in her career—it was one series of remarkable achievements. At La Scala, Milan, in 1914, she made her debut as *Desdemona* in Verdi's *Otello*. Muzio made her Met debut on December 4, 1916, in *Tosca*, with Caruso and Scotti. It was remarkable that the role of *Tosca* had never before been sung at the Metropolitan by an Italian, and this added greatly to the interest in Muzio's debut. She was warmly received by the audience, but Richard Aldrich, in the *New York Times*, spoke with reservation:

In many ways the new soprano justified the interest taken in her appearance. She is young and beautiful. It is possible to feel enthusiasm for her acting which is composed, animated, intelligent and tasteful Of her voice judgment will be more accurate if it is reserved for later occasions—she was always willing to sacrifice vocal display to the need of coloring a phrase to suit the dramatic intention of the moment Miss Muzio established the fact that her voice is of fresh and agreeable quality and that she governs it artistically. She was enthusiastically received by the audience.

Muzio sang at the Metropolitan Opera from 1916 to 1922. Then in 1922 she moved to the Chicago Opera, where she made her debut in *Aida* and sang Italian roles for ten years. She often sang in South America during the twenties, appearing in *Norma* and *Rosenkavalier* besides her regular Verdi, Puccini repertoire. In 1926 at Buenos Aires she sang the difficult role of the Princess in Puccini's *Turandot* at its South American premiere. With Muzio appeared Lauri-Volpi, who said of her: "Muzio was the 'divine Claudia,' as they called her in Buenos Aires, singing with that unique voice of hers made of tears and sighs, and restrained inner fire." Muzio's last American appearances were in 1933-34 at the Metropolitan, in performances of *Traviata* and *Cavalleria Rusticana*. In the spring of 1936 Muzio returned to Rome from her South American tour in poor health, and she died on May 24, 1936, mourned by Italy and the world. She received a magnificent Roman funeral reminiscent of the state funeral given to Caruso at Naples.

Just at the end of her career, in 1934 and 1935, Claudia Muzio made the marvelous series of electrical discs for Italian Columbia which are well known to most record collectors. Comparing these to the Edison Diamond Discs, one could conclude that the electrical Columbia's are fuller in tone and sound than the Diamond Discs, and they show the interpretive artist at the height of her powers as in the classic and intensely personal interpretation of the *Traviata* "Addio del passato" or the searing violence of the Act III *Otello* duet with Merli. But her marvelous voice was beginning to show some signs of wear by 1934, espe-

cially in some of the highest registers, as I can attest, for I heard her in the fall of 1934 in *Trovatore* in Los Angeles.

Claudia Muzio's recording career had begun in 1914 with a few recordings for the Gramophone Company in England. Then she auditioned for Edison in London that same year of her debut at Covent Garden. As Howard Klein has written on the cover of the first Muzio Edison Diamond Disc reissue, "The result of that voice trial is an agonizing example of talent going unnoticed. The notation, by W. A. Hayes, of rejection read: 'General voice fair—But do not believe we need her.'" So Muzio went over to the Pathé Freres and made a fine series of arias and songs for them during the late war years. Then, after the First World War, when Edison was searching for artists to strengthen their classical repertoire, one of the recording experts of that period, Walter Miller, tested her voice in New York and captured her voice successfully. This led to the remarkable series of Diamond Discs recorded for Edison between 1920 and 1925.

In all, Edison made a series of 52 recordings, of which 23 have been released on the two *Odyssey* releases—12 on the LP being reviewed here. Besides the surprisingly lifelike reproduction of Muzio's voice and her superb vocalism, perhaps the most remarkable feature of this Diamond Disc series is the variety and the unhackneyed repertoire she chose. For in her 1920 Edison contract Muzio was able to choose and stipulate a great many of the selections she recorded. One of the provisions of her contract was: "The Company will, from time to time, refer to the Artist as 'The Artiste Supreme,' and, in harmony with the facts, will from time to time, refer to the Artist as 'The leading soprano of the Metropolitan Opera Company.'"

For anyone who is not familiar with the Muzio voice and style, so aptly described by Lauri-Volpi as "that unique voice of hers, made of tears and sighs and restrained inner fire," I would advise her/him to listen first to side 1, band 2, of this record, Bachelet's song "Chere nuit." This song exemplifies many of the most ingratiating aspects of Muzio's art, clean attacks, complete ease of delivery, marvelous soaring pianissimi, and an artistic sense of the vocal line. This is one of the finest of all Muzio's lyrical discs. For the dramatic Muzio, the listener should turn to the final band on side 1, "La mamma morta," from Giordano's *Andrea Chenier*. This rendition does not seem to me as deeply impassioned as the later Columbia electric version, but vocally the Edison disc is probably finer. One needs to hear both records to get a true idea of Muzio's art.

Also on side 1 we have Muzio's renditions of Leonora's two great arias from *Il Trovatore*, "Tacea la notte," with the cabaletta "Di tale amor," and "D'amor sull'ali rosee." These numbers are sung very lyrically, but both suffer from the lack of trills, for this was almost the only weakness of Muzio's vocal technique. To hear how the "D'amor" aria should sound, with the trills, I still turn to the recordings of Destinn or Callas. But except for the absence of trills, Muzio's are wonderful

interpretations of music from a role she often sang on the stage.

The song by Sodero, "Crisantemi," was written especially for Madame Muzio and was sung by her at a concert at the New York Hippodrome in 1920, but it has never struck me as a very significant piece of music. The first band of side 1 is the aria "Mia piccirella," from the Brazilian composer Carlos Gomes's opera *Salvator Rosa*. Caruso also made an excellent recording of this display piece, brilliant and gay, with plenty of high tones.

The first three bands of side 2 of this recording contain some of the very best singing Muzio did for Edison Diamond Discs. The first band is a part of Tatiana's aria from Tchaikovsky's *Eugene Onegin*, the only music that Muzio ever recorded from this opera in which she created the role of Tatiana for the Metropolitan on March 24, 1920, with Martinelli as the Lenski. His recording of Lenski's aria for Victor and this recording of Tatiana's aria, both in Italian, are historical mementos of this important premiere of *Onegin*.

The second band is, in my opinion, the finest rendition of the "Ballatella" from Pagliacci on records, despite the absence of trills. The reviews of Muzio's time leave no doubt but that she was a superb Nedda. As critic Edward Moore wrote: "Claudia Muzio is to all other Neddas as a limousine to a baby carriage." Her interpretation displays Nedda's inner torment and frustration as well as her longing to be "free as the birds." The singing represents Muzio at her best.

The aria from *La Wally*, "Ebben ne andr ," by Catalani, is one of the most beautiful melodies in all Italian opera, and Muzio sings it very eloquently. But the inadequate orchestral support, so important for this number, weakens the total effect; nevertheless, Muzio's singing can be compared to the classical renditions of Spani and Tebaldi.

Band 5 of side 2 presents Muzio's "Mi chiamano Mimi," from Puccini's *La Boheme*, on Edison. This recording displays a more mature voice than on the earlier Gramophone disc, but in the *Boh me* the intensity of interpretation and the excellent orchestral support of the electrical Columbia "Mi chiamano Mimi" make it preferable to Muzio's other versions.

The last two bands on side 2 are songs that were popular in the first two decades of the century but are seldom heard today. One is the melodic "Eternamente" by Mascheroni, also recorded by other great singers of that period such as Caruso and Danise. It is a pleasant "Tosti type" encore number. The other song is more interesting—one of Chopin's few compositions for the voice, entitled "Aspiration" here, but popularly known as "The Maiden's Wish." Muzio sings the beautiful melody in Italian with a flowing legato, but doubtless the celebrated Sembrich interpretation in Polish with the soprano at the piano is more idiomatic to Chopin.

All in all, Columbia-Odyssey is to be congratulated for issuing this

rerecording of Muzio's Edison Diamond Discs. Now that Columbia has rediscovered what treasures lie in Edison's recordings of Claudia Muzio, perhaps they will investigate other treasures in the Edison vaults, truly legendary performances by such great artists as Destinn, Zenatello, and Urlus when they were in their primes. Lovers of the vocal art should hope for Edison Diamond Disc rerecordings on Odyssey by these and other great artists of the Golden Age of Opera.

Odyssey Y33130

Bidu Sayão, French Arias and Songs, produced by William Seward

Side 1

Hahn: Si mes vers avaient des ailes* (Recorded May 12, 1950); Duparc: Chanson triste (Recorded May 12, 1950); Debussy: Lia's Recitative and Aria from L'Enfant prodigue* (Recorded May 12, 1950); Debussy: Je voudrais qu'il fut déjà près de moi, from La Dame à la queue** (Recorded March 14, 1947)

* The Columbia Concert Orchestra; Paul Breisach, conductor

** The Women's Chorus of the University of Pennsylvania; Robert Elmore, director. The Philadelphia Orchestra; Eugene Ormandy, conductor

Side 2

Koechlin: Si tu le veux (BMI) (Recorded June 23, 1947); Campra: Chanson du Papillon, from Les Fêtes Venitiennes (Arr. J. B. Weckerlin) (Recorded December 29, 1938); Auber: L'Eclat de rire, from Manon Lescaut (Recorded December 29, 1938); Traditional: C'est mon ami (ASCAP) (Arr. Bainbridge Crist) (Recorded June 20, 1947); Chopin: Tristesse (ASCAP) (Arr. Burle Marx) (Recorded December 29, 1938); Moret: Le Nelumbo (ASCAP) (Recorded June 20, 1947); Debussy: De fleurs (Recorded June 20, 1947); Ravel: Toi, le coeur de la rose, from L'Enfant et les Sortilèges (ASCAP) (Recorded June 23, 1947; previously unissued) Milne Charnley, piano

This is a delightful and most welcome recital of French arias and songs performed by Bidu Sayão, the Brazilian soprano who is generally considered not only to be the most famous singer Brazil has ever produced but also probably the best-known and most popular South American artist of the lyric theater ever to sing in the United States. From the time of her first appearance in the United States in 1935 until the time of her retirement from the Metropolitan Opera in 1952 she was always popular here both as an operatic artist and as a concert performer. She was a true artistic ambassador of Good Will for her native Brazil in the United States and, for that matter, wherever she went.

Unlike many opera singers, Bidu Sayão was just as successful on the concert as on the operatic stage. One of the reasons for this was her teacher, the famous Polish tenor Jean de Reszke, with whom she studied in France during the early 1920s. As William Seward writes on the back cover of this reissue of some of Bidu Sayão's Columbia record-

ings of French songs:

But it was the great tenor Jean de Reszke who taught her the nuances of dramatic vocal expression. From him she learned the delicate art of delving deeply into the spirit of what she sang. His famous school was a gathering place for musical celebrities of the 1920's, and it was there that Mme. Sayão met Reynaldo Hahn. His lovely chanson *Si mes vers*, set to words by Victor Hugo, is sung here exactly as the composer taught it to her. Interested friends of de Reszke arranged an opportunity for his 'Brazilian Night-ingle' to be heard in the French capital during the summer of 1924.

Bidu Sayão was born in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, in 1902. She received her excellent preliminary training in Rio from Elena Theodorini, who can be credited for the very sound basic development of the singer's voice and its balanced tonality. After her study in France with Jean de Reszke and her Paris debut in 1924, she returned to Rio, where she also started with a successful concert debut in 1925. Then in 1926 she made her operatic debut in the coloratura role of Rosina in Rossini's *Barber of Seville*, and soon became a favorite at the Rio opera house in several of the lighter operatic roles.

From Rio, Miss Sayão went on to fame on the great stages of Spain, Portugal, and Italy, singing with such celebrated artists as Schipa, Stracciari, Pertile, Galeffi, Ruffo, Borgioli, Gigli, De Angelis, Kiepura, and Granforte under the batons of the most famous conductors of the period. She was invited back to Paris in 1931, where she made her debut at the Opera with tenor Georges Thill in *Roméo et Juliette*. The critic of the *Paris Figaro*, Gustave Bret, wrote that Sayão's Juliette "reminded me of the best days of Adelina Patti and the young Melba."

Bidu Sayão came to New York in 1935 at the request of Arturo Toscanini, who had selected her to sing with the New York Philharmonic Symphony under his direction. She appeared as soloist in Debussy's *La Damoiselle élue* and was very well received by the New York press and public. This success led to an engagement with the Metropolitan Opera for the 1936-37 season, and she made her Metropolitan debut as Massenet's *Manon* on February 14, 1937. Thereafter she sang fifteen successful seasons there until her retirement in 1952.

The recordings of French operatic arias and recordings featured on this *Odyssey* disc are mostly drawn from recordings that Miss Sayão made for Columbia between 1947 and 1950, but two, the "Laughing Song" from Auber's *Manon Lescaut* and Chopin's "Tristesse," were recorded for Victor in 1938. All of the recordings are clear and forward and are quite faithful renderings of Miss Sayão's voice as I remember it from hearing her in concert and opera during the forties.

The first song on side 1 is one of the most beautiful, I think, in

all the literature of French song. This is Hahn's "Si mes vers" (If my songs had wings), taught to Miss Sayão by the composer, and my favorite of all in the album. The melody is absolutely haunting, and although I've heard it used to close many concerts and have many recordings of it, I never tire of this perfect miniature, and I've never heard it better sung than on this recording.

The second song is Duparc's "Chanson triste," which is also sung with great charm and challenges comparison with the classic interpretations of Maggie Teyte and Claire Croiza. Next comes the aria of Lia from Debussy's *L'Enfant prodigue*, which for me is perhaps the least attractive number on the disc because the climaxes seem to tax Miss Sayão's upper register and demand perhaps a fuller tone and more powerful voice. Perhaps I still treasure my old recording of this by Rose Bampton too much. But I also think the Dorothy Maynor recording is superior to Miss Sayão's perfectly satisfactory recording here.

The final band on side 1 is a portion of Debussy's *La Damoiselle élue*, commencing about half way through the vocal part at "Je voudrais qu'il fut déjà près de moi." This was the music that Miss Sayão sang at her debut in New York, and I do not believe that anyone has sung this music more beautifully in this century.

The second side of the disc is made up mostly of numbers that Miss Sayão used as encores for her numerous concert appearances. From the older period she sings the traditional folk song "C'est mon ami," probably even more idiomatically than Muzio's version, which has been a favorite of mine for many years. And from the modern period she interprets Koechlin's "Si tu le veux" as well as the haunting and sensitive "Le Nelumbo" by Ernst Moret. All three of these songs were previously issued on a 10" 78 R.P.M. album entitled "My Encores."

Also on this second side we have the delicate "Chanson du Papillon," from Campra's *Les Fêtes Venetiennes*, and Debussy's "De fleurs." But the most spectacular interpretation here is doubtless the "Laughing Song" (*L'Eclat de rire*) from Auber's *Manon Lescaut*. This was a true "showpiece" number during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, displaying the coloratura virtuosity of trills and especially rapid staccato delivery. Miss Sayão is equal to all the challenges, and her rendition compares very favorably with those of Brothier and Galli-Curci. The record is concluded by an interesting excerpt from Ravel's *L'Enfant et les Sortilèges*, with piano accompaniment.

Altogether this is an admirable disc, allowing us old-timers to delight again in Bidu Sayão's enchanting artistry and, at a modest price, enticing younger music lovers to discover this lovely Brazilian soprano, who could bring tears to your eyes or laughter to your heart either on the operatic stage or on the concert platform.

James E. Seaver