

Sound Recording Reviews

The Gigli Edition, Vol. 1: Milan Recordings, 1918-1919, Naxos Historical 8.110262; **Vol. 2:** Milan, Camden and New York Recordings, 1919-1922, Naxos Historical 8.110263; **Vol. 3:** Camden and New York Recordings, 1923-1925, Naxos Historical 8.110264; **Vol. 4:** Camden and New York Recordings, 1926-1927, Naxos Historical 8.110266; **Vol. 5:** New York Recordings, 1927-1928, Naxos Historical 8.110266; **Vol. 6:** New York Recordings, 1929-1930, Naxos Historical 8.110267; **Vol. 7:** London, New York & Milan Recordings, 1931-1932, Naxos Historical 8.110268; **Vol. 8:** Milan, London & Berlin Recordings, 1933-1935, Naxos Historical 8.110269; **Vol. 9:** Berlin, Milan & London Recordings, 1936-1938, Naxos Historical 8.110270; **Vol. 10:** Milan and London Recordings, 1938-1940, Naxos Historical 8.110271; **Vol. 11:** Milan, Berlin and Rome Recordings, 1941-1943, Naxos Historical 8.110272; **Vol. 12:** London Recordings, 1946-1947, Naxos Historical 8.111101; **Vol. 13:** London Recordings, 1947-1949, Naxos Historical 8.111102; **Vol. 14:** London, Milan and Rio de Janeiro Recordings, 1949 & 1951, Naxos Historical 8.111103; **Vol. 15:** Carnegie Hall Farewell Recitals, 1955, Naxos Historical 8.111104.

Beniamino Gigli: Songs, 1949-1952, Testament SBT 1162; **1952-1953,** Testament SBT 1163; **1953-1954,** Testament SBT 1164; **1954-1955,** Testament SBT 1165.

Combined, the Naxos and Testament releases fall short by just nine known titles or takes in being able to offer a complete collection of the commercial output of Beniamino Gigli. In a retrospective of *The Gigli Edition*, Mark Obert-Thorn lists in his producer's notes in Volume 15 six titles not released on CD by either Naxos or Testament, in the former case due to copyright restrictions at the time the Naxos series reached completion. In addition, a few previously unpublished recordings were released after the tenor's death, as recently as 1981.

Gary Galo, the *ARSC Journal's* editor of Sound Recording Reviews, went sleuthing to identify additional titles.¹ Gary checked the contents of EMI's three-volume, nine LP *The Art of Beniamino Gigli*, EMI Italiana's three-volume, twenty-six LP *Beniamino Gigli*, and the Peel & Holohan discography published in *The Record Collector* (1990).² As a result of his efforts, Gary identified two additional titles not found on either of the Naxos or Testament CDs: an alternate take of the "Siciliana" from *Cavalleria rusticana*, recorded during sessions for a 50th anniversary edition of Mascagni's opera, first released in Vol. 1 of *The Art of Beniamino Gigli*; and, a stereo take of Volonnino's "Luntano, luntano" that appeared in Vol. 2 of the same series. During his research, Gary confirmed that the stereo version of "Luntano, luntano," released in the Testament

series, is a different take from the one issued by EMI. Strictly for research purposes, which proved of immeasurable value in writing this review, Gary transferred to CD the missing titles.³ The discovery process, however, was not to end there. Roger Beardsley, in the U.K., recently turned up a test pressing of a previously unknown take of the aria “O cessate di piagarmi,” from Scarlatti’s *Il Pompeo*.⁴

Research in the field of discography, by its very nature, is a work in progress and the recent attempts to identify *all* of Gigli’s commercial recordings (i.e., the released and unreleased takes) serve only to demonstrate this maxim.

Gigli was a prolific recording artist and he cut his first disc in the fall of 1918 and his last 37 years later in the spring of 1955. Remarkably, the tenor’s recording career spanned the acoustic and stereo eras. In those heady days of the 78 era, recording companies fell over one another in an attempt to feed the insatiable appetites of a record-hungry public. Gigli must have been heaven sent, his HMV and Victor recordings of operatic pieces and popular song being big sellers that were to remain so long after his death in 1957. Re-issues, on LP and later CD, proliferated. Naxos and Testament exceed by a wide margin previous efforts to capture the recorded legacy of this truly legendary tenor – in terms of selection (near-complete) and the clarity and fidelity of transfers. Obert-Thorn demonstrates once again that there is more to be heard – and appreciated – in the grooves of the old 78s than met the ears of the first listeners or that could be captured by the playback machines of the times. For Naxos, Mark worked with fine, if not pristine copies, of 78s, and American and Italian LPs of Gigli’s farewell concert at Carnegie Hall in 1955 (Vol. 15). Testament covers the tenor’s recordings of popular song from 1949-1955, a time when EMI’s engineers were using magnetic tape, which gives this label’s re-issues an audible, technical edge. It is a fascinating juxtaposition to compare the 1918 Milan acoustic and the 1955 London stereo recordings.

Obert-Thorn worked on a Gigli series for the now defunct Romophone label. When Naxos acquired that company’s catalogue and salvaged the project the company wisely retained the same producer. All of the titles previously issued by Romophone are found in Volumes 1-10 of *The Gigli Edition*. For all intents and purposes, therefore, the content of these volumes has been reviewed in this journal.⁵ Obert-Thorn took the opportunity to “re-visit” some of the earlier Romophone transfers, removing clicks and pops that remained, adjusting equalization of each track, fine tuning pitch – particularly in the early Milan acoustics – and in a few cases re-transferring a title. With only the few (acceptable) liberties noted, presentation is in order of recording. The original aim of *The Gigli Edition* was to include every one of the tenor’s commercial recordings, every published alternate take and, where available, unpublished takes. The “project” began in 2003 and was completed in 2008, marking the 50th anniversary of Gigli’s death. But, as noted, copyright and the Testament re-issues forced a shift in the original aim of *The Gigli Edition*. The Naxos re-issue does include a few songs not re-issued by Testament. (All of Gigli’s recordings of complete operas and Verdi’s *Messa da Requiem* have also been re-issued on CD by Naxos Historical, transfers by Ward Marston.⁶ In addition, Gigli was profiled in the Naxos ‘A Life in Words and Music’ series.⁷)

Discographical “footnotes” accompanying *The Gigli Edition* merit mention here, most certainly if the listener has the Peel & Holohan discography at hand when listening to

the Naxos re-issue. In Vol. 1, the conclusion of the *Faust* duet, originally set down several matrix numbers after the first part, has been moved ahead and in sequence to present the scene without interruption (Tracks 15-17). Listening to Vol. 3, those familiar with the discography may question the absence of several unpublished acoustics (Items 63, 68 and 71 in the discography). The studio logs indicate all takes of these sides (as well as the final scene from *Bohème* with Bori, not mentioned by Peel & Holohan) were destroyed shortly after they were recorded. In addition, the recording dates for the two *Roméo et Juliet* duets (Tracks 3-4), and the song "Good-bye, Marie" (Track 18), have been corrected. Obert-Thorn also points out that the discographers allotted Victor 6511 to the take numbers of the two 1925 *Lucia* sides (Tracks 15-16), but these were not issued by that label in the U.S. Based upon the numbers found at 9 o'clock in the runout area surrounding the label, it had been assumed that the issued takes were 1 and 2, respectively, for "Tombe degli' avi miei" and "Tu che a Dio." The original matrix number and take information inscribed in the label area of test pressings reveal that the takes are, in fact, 2 and 1. (Track 15 is the unpublished Take 1.)

In the case of the 1927 *Lucia* "Tomb Scene" (Vol. 5, Tracks 4-10), Obert-Thorn has combined the alternate issued take of part two with an unpublished take of part one, and the only issued take of side three to form two complete versions of the scene. This marks the only departure from strict recording-order sequence in *The Gigli Edition*. There is an interesting anecdote to explain the original sequence of recording: all takes of part two were recorded first, followed by all takes of part three, so that Ezio Pinza and the chorus could be dismissed before Gigli essayed the solo aria which begins the scene.

Another divergence from the Peel & Holohan discography concerns the absence of Item No. 101 in the researchers' listing, a 1927 version of "M'appari," from Flotow's *Martha*. Although the take listed in the discography was indeed recorded at the 4 October session, there is no indication it was ever released. In any event, it would not have been issued on Victor 6446, as stated in the discography, since this is the number of the double-faced acoustic version of the aria. Obert-Thorn points out that the "blue history cards" in the BMG Listings Department in New York confirm that only three alternate takes of Gigli's Victor electrics were published on 78s, all dating from the ensembles recorded in November and December of 1927. Take 1 of "Enzo Grimaldo" (*La Gioconda*) with Giuseppe de Luca (Track 2), Take 2 of "Giusto Cielo" (*Lucia*) with Pinza and the Met Chorus (Track 8), and Take 1 of the *Rigoletto* Quartet (Track 11) were all substituted for the originally-issued takes in 1943, and only appeared on wartime and postwar American Victor issues. Except for the unpublished take of "Notte lunare" (Vol. 6, Track 2), and the unpublished version of Tosti's "Addio" in Italian (Vol. 7, Track 4), the selections in Vols. 6 & 7 were issued by Romophone. Interestingly, Historic Masters issued the Italian version of the last mentioned in its original 78 format for the first time in 2004.⁸

Again, those familiar with the Peel & Holohan discography will be aware of the researchers' claim that a second take of "Occhi di fata" was issued on Brazilian Victor. From his research, Obert-Thorn concludes that this was a dubbed version (made to reduce the volume towards the end of the side) of the take that was issued elsewhere on HMV. He has not included it in *The Gigli Edition*. In addition, Take 3 of Bizet's "Agnus Dei," which appears on some HMV pressings, turned out to have been a dubbed version of the second take, which appeared on Victor in the USA.

Vol. 11 was originally prepared as part of the Romophone series, but went unpublished by that company. Volume 12-14 are entirely new transfers. An appendix to Volume 14 is the second half (all that exists) of an earlier (1931) version of the duet from *Cavalleria rusticana* with Dusolina Giannini that, chronologically speaking, belongs in Volume 7, (between Tracks 7 & 8). The producer speculates that the recording of the duet had remained unpublished on technical grounds. Volume 15 is the first issue on CD of Gigli's farewell concerts at Carnegie Hall in 1955. (Listed in the accompanying notes are the six tracks that at the time of publication of this volume were not yet in the public domain.)

Beniamino Gigli's voice remains one of the most distinctive, and perhaps one of the most flexible to be heard on stage or on record. It was a truly wonderful instrument, supported with great expressivity, musicality and technique – rare then, and certainly today. Gigli's tone was clear and pure, tearful, and with an almost "flower-like fragrance." One critic observed that his voice was "likened to extra virgin olive oil." The tenor never seemed to force his voice, but it was of great resonance, up to a high B-natural. He lacked a solid High C. Gigli moved with ease from light to dark tones, and his delivery was filled with subtle accents, nuances and inflections. His was a natural gift. The tenor's stage manner, however, was comparatively wooden ... but, his phenomenal ability to express the full range of human emotion with his voice was nothing short of remarkable. His acting skill was in his voice.

Gigli was at the peak in the years leading up to World War II. The tenor remained in fine voice well into the 1940s and wisely adjusted his repertoire as he aged. He was careful to husband his resources. Superlatives abound in describing Gigli's vocal attributes:

Some of the more fastidious critics correctly cited stylistic lapses and emotional excesses ...but nobody ever made the mistake of questioning the unrivalled beauty of Gigli's voice. (de Schauensee, 1965)

Gigli's singing (the voice itself; but the style too) conveys warmth ...a vivid central humanity that is perhaps the most engaging among all the singers of this period. (Steane, 1974)

He possessed a great technique, a prodigious instrument, innate musicality, superior memory, direct communication with audiences, and that elusive quality that some call "angel," and the Spaniards call "duende." (Halley, 1997)

The voice we hear is one of unexampled beauty, pure and round in tone, luminous on every note, mellow and vibrant, sweet and beguiling to the ear, and it is suffused with a softness, the prized morbidezza of the Italian school, that extends even to its forte and fortissimo passages. There are no register breaks, no impediment to the absolute homogeneity of the voice over a scale of two octaves. The high, the middle, and the low notes are all equally well sung. The voice is uniquely liquid; it flows over the music with the uninhibited naturalness of speech. It is untouched by any suggestion of hedonism, of sensuous beauty enjoyed for its own sake, because it has to it, even in its most joyous and sparkling moments, an underlay of melancholy that speaks to us of many things that are remote from transient sensual delight. It becomes a mirror of all that is within us, of the joys, sor-

rows, passions, yearnings, anguish, ardor, and sadness that, between them, comprise the totality of subjective human experience; and the beauty of the voice is indispensable to the spell it lays. (Bain, 1999)⁹

...the most sheerly beautiful tenor voice in the history of the gramophone, and probably the most natural too ...his was also a voice that was so well produced that it easily reached the furthestmost point of the house. (Blyth, 2003)

Not only was his an uncommonly beautiful instrument, but he was irrepressibly and instinctively communicative. (Ashbrook, 2004)

As noted, the content of Vols.1-10 has previously been reviewed in the pages of this journal (when released by Romophone). What to highlight, then, on either the Naxos or Testament re-issues? I experienced *déjà vu* in tackling this question, for I had faced a similar dilemma compiling a playlist for a presentation I made at the 1993 ARSC Conference – that year in Chicago – *Beniamino Gigli: Italian Patriot or Fascist Sympathizer*.¹⁰ After listening and thoroughly enjoying these latest re-issues, I found that the half dozen titles I selected 15 years ago to demonstrate Gigli's vocal art still hold up to close scrutiny today – to this reviewer's ears, at least.

1. *L'Africaine* (Meyerbeer): "O Paradiso" (Vol. 5, Track 17). A truly remarkable demonstration of breath control and sweetness of tone in this 1928 recording of the Meyerbeer aria. The tenor's first recording of this popular operatic piece was in 1923 (Vol. 3, Track 1); another rendition is featured in Gigli's Carnegie Hall concert (Vol. 15, Track 1).
2. *Marta* (Flotow): "M'appari" (Vol. 6, Track 3). Wonderful ...but, with a tone and timbre not unreminiscent of Enrico Caruso; the latter, admittedly, deserving of the laurels in any note-for-note, breath-for-breath comparison. This 1929 recording is Gigli's second of this, another operatic gem; the first was recorded in 1923 (Vol. 3, Track 6).
3. *La Gioconda* (Ponchielli): "Cielo e mar!" (Vol. 6, Track 4). The 1929 recording. Luscious ...with overtones of melancholy, and a thrilling B flat at the end. Gigli first recorded this aria in 1918 (Vol. 1, Track 12), and again in 1921 (Vol. 2, No. 10).

Although still in its infancy, the electrical recording process considerably enhanced the dynamic range and the vocal texture of these performances of the Meyerbeer, Flotow and Ponchielli arias.

4. *L'elisir d'amore* (Donizetti): "Una furtiva lagrima" (Vol. 8, Track 6). This 1933 recording is much preferred over the earlier 1929 Victor recording (Vol. 6, Track 7). Delicious. Delicate. Contemplative ...and, with a seamless flow of tone. The recording is superior in most every respect to the earlier rendition.

5. *L'Arlesiana* (Cilea): “E la solita storia” (Vol. 9, Track 8). This 1936 recording is widely regarded as one of Gigli’s finest recordings. To echo Blyth: “...he displays that haunting beauty of tone he brought to tragic utterances and conveying sadness of the soul. He gradually and unerringly builds the intensity of the piece to its searing climax on a high B.” The tenor’s second recording of this aria in 1941 (Vol. 11, Track 1) is beautifully executed, but his first recording is clearly the tenor’s *pièce de résistance*.

The last in my conference playlist of preferred recordings by Gigli is a “cheat” in the context of this review, for which I make no apology.

6. *Andrea Chénier* (Giordano): “Un di all’azzurro spazio” (from the complete recording of the complete opera on Naxos 8.110275-76). Gigli recorded the Act I aria in 1922 (Vol. 2, Track 20), in excellent voice in a portrayal that captures the singer’s empathy with the character he is portraying. The recording from the complete, opera, with superior performance and recording quality, has both the emotional and technical edge.

Perhaps with the exception of the Cilea aria, my playlist reads like the choices many a tenor would make for a recital-type compilation CD. They must surely be among the most often recorded of operatic arias, showpieces to show off the singer’s vocal attributes. As such, the *aficionado* might understandably dismiss the selection. Listen again, for the first time, and re-establish the benchmark against which to measure any other renditions.

The Testament re-issues are a delightful collection of the popular songs that remained in Gigli’s repertoire his entire singing career, but that were perhaps most conspicuous in his later concert appearances and studio recordings. Gigli executes them with verve and vitality, even as his vocal powers were in decline. Testament’s transfers are clean and vivid.

Excellent biographical notes and thoughtful comments on selected recordings in *The Gigli Edition* inform the listening experience; contributors are well-known members of the Gigli fraternity – Alan Blyth, William Ashbrook and Marc Ricaldone. Mark Obert-Thorn’s informative notes provide technical details, discuss playback speeds and artist’s transpositions, correct or clarify published discographical information, and commentary on the alternate or previously unpublished takes. The producer makes an important contribution to his subject’s discography. What the Testament notes lack – the biographical information is repeated with each CD – notes on the individual songs more than compensate. *The Gigli Edition* and the four Testament CDs are highly recommended. *Reviewed by Barry R. Ashpole*

Endnotes

1. Gary A. Galo. [Personal communication, January 2008]
2. Peel T, Holohan J. "The Beniamino Gigli Discography" *The Record Collector* 1990;35(5-7):111-158.
3. Track 1: *Cavalleria rusticana* (Mascagni): "O Lola, ch'ai di latti" (Siciliana) EMI RLS 729 (2BA 3811-3) April, 1940; Track 2: "Ritorno" (Mazziotti) EMI 7ER 5100 (OEA 12666) 01.03.48.; Track 3: "Ave Maria" (Cecconi) EMI BLP 1095 (OEA 17255) 03.24.53; Track 4: *Maristella* (Pietri): "Io conosco un giardino" EMI RLS 732 (OEA 17316) 04.02.53; Track 5: "Weigenlied" (Brahms) EMI Italiana 3C 153-54010-17 (OEA 17882); Track 6: *La Maggiolata veneziana* (Selvaggi): "Maggio, sereno il cor" EMI RLS 732 (OEA 17899) 03.26.54; Track 7: *La Maggiolata veneziana* (Selvaggi): Ballata EMI RLS 732 (OEA 18133) 10.21.54; Track 8: "Luntano, luntano" (Volonnino) EMI RLS 732 (OEA 18269) 03.23.55.
4. Roger Beardsley. [Personal communication, January 2008] Test Pressing of OEA 12663-1 – *Pompeo, Il...* (Scarlatti): O cessate di piangarmi. Take 2 was commercially released.
5. Reviews in the *ARSC Journal*: The Complete Victor Recordings, 1921-1932, Romophone CDS 82003-2 (2 CDs), 82004-2 (2 CDs), and 82005-1 (1CD), 1997;28(1):102-104 (reviewed by Gustavo R. Halley); The Complete HMV Recordings, 1918-1932, Romophone 820111 (2 CDs), 1999;30(1):53-54 (reviewed by the late Colin Bain); The Complete HMV Recordings, 1933-1935 (including *I Pagliacci*), Romophone 82017-2 (2 CDs), 2003;34(1):85-86 (reviewed by Colin Bain); The Complete HMV Recordings, 1936-1938, Romophone 82020-2 (2 CDs), 2004;35(1):123-125 (reviewed by Colin Bain).
6. Reviews in the *ARSC Journal*: Leoncavallo: *I Pagliacci*, Naxos Historical 8.110155, 2003;34(2):240-242; Puccini: *La Bohème*, Naxos Historical 8.110072-73, 2002;33(1):127-129; Puccini: *Tosca*, Naxos Historical 8.110096-97, 2002;33(2):275-277; Puccini: *Madama Butterfly*, Naxos Historical 8.110183-84, 2002;33(2):273-275; Mascagni: *Cavalleria rusticana*, Naxos Historical 8.110714-15, 2003;34(2):242-243; Giordano: *Andrea Chénier*, Naxos Historical 8.110275-76, 2004;35(2):301-302; Verdi: *Un ballo in maschera*, Naxos Historical 8.110178-79, 2003;34(2):243-244; Verdi: *Aida*, Naxos Historical 8.110156-57, 2002;33(1):126-127. Verdi: *Messa da Requiem*, Naxos Historical 8.110159, 2003;34(1):99-100. (Reviews by Elwood McKee.) *I Pagliacci* was included in Romophone's The Complete HMV Recordings, 1933-1935 (82017-2) – see endnote No. 5.
7. *Beniamino Gigli: A Life in Words in Music*, NAXOS 8.558148-51. *ARSC Journal*, 2004;35(2):303-304. (Review by Barry R. Ashpole.)
8. Ashpole, BR. "Historic Masters: Re-Issues on 78s of the Unpublished, Unknown & Forgotten." *ARSC Journal*, 2004;35(2):197-205 (p.203).
9. Colin, B. "The Aesthetics of the Recordings of Beniamino Gigli." *ARSC Journal*, 1999;30(2):111-124.
10. Ashpole BR, Bain C. "Beniamino Gigli: The Record of Prejudice." *ARSC Journal*, 1999;30(2):125-133 (a much updated and revised version of the authors' original ARSC conference paper).