

## **GIGLI THE MASTER SINGER**

by Colin Bain, edited and published by Barry Ashpole, 548 pp, ISBN 978-1-7774390-1-9, limited edition, C\$85. Available from [giglipublisher@gmail.com](mailto:giglipublisher@gmail.com)

When opera singers were the most admired artists in the world, and the tenor became the romantic or heroic character, with composers writing music that especially displayed their personality and technique, their names became known to the general public. The advent of sound recording enabled the talents of many to become household names. However, certainly the first half of the 20th century was dominated by two: they were Enrico Caruso (1873-1921) and Beniamino Gigli (1890-1957). Both were possessors of voices that immediately impressed audiences by their individual timbre and a musicality that communicated a strong character and sense of romance. They, too, had the ability to sing both lyrically and dramatically, according to the requirements of the operatic roles they undertook. Another feature of their art was to communicate easily through ballads and Neapolitan song, and Gigli's voice became loved by millions who, through his many recordings and broadcasts, together with his film appearances, enjoyed his singing but who had never been inside an opera house.

There have been several biographies and articles in various languages but, since the publishing in 1957 of Gigli's own English version of his life, this is the first truly comprehensive one in English. The author, who died in 2007, gained access to many previously unseen and private documents, and this enabled him to write, at the request of the Gigli family, and especially his daughter Rina, who died in 2000, details of his large and immediate family and his infancy. It highlights how his early vocal talent was nurtured, and how he developed as an artist, thus ensuring him a place as one of the finest and most admired tenors of the 20th century. In particular it clearly demonstrates why, after the death of Caruso in 1921, he became the world's most famous tenor.

The author has spared nothing in dealing with Gigli's natural ability as a child, his closeness to his mother and his gradual development as an adult. Following his discharge from the army there followed his interesting period of training at the Liceo Musicale di Santa Cecilia, where he was guided by two noted teachers: Antonio Cotogni and Enrico Rosati. This led to his initial success in a famous 1914 competition held in Parma and eventually to his operatic debut. Here follows a detailed and fascinating account of the various noted singers and musicians who were on that judging panel, and how the noted tenor Alessandro Bonci, then considered as one of the greatest singers, wrote in his report the famous comment "we have found the tenor". For once, a reference is made to his competitors and their successes. It then covers his personal and public life as a husband and father and quickly and discreetly mentions an affair that nearly brought his marriage to an end. Full coverage is given to his American career with the Metropolitan Opera and subsequently, following his return to Italy, how he gradually established his European reputation. As an international mega-star he was decorated by Royalty and was a guest of the richest and most important people of the time. In fact, the book gives a very good idea of his comfortable life despite it coinciding with the Great Depression. Details of the careful planning and building of his magnificent home, his financial situation, and some serious reflections on his later questionable politics are dealt with in a sympathetic manner. Full details of his initial recording sessions and considerable film career

make interesting reading and, in a very supportive way, it shows how he was to re-establish his name, especially in America and the UK after World War II, having sung in Germany, where he had been so popular for many years.

The book is a boon to anyone interested in a chronology of his performances, and, as his career was a long and distinguished one, and so completely international, references to and comments on the talents are made on his almost countless number of colleagues. So many are very well known, but many were not. Nevertheless, their names mainly read like a 'Who's Who' to the opera lover and especially to the record collector.

The reader will find interesting comparisons made with performances given by Giovanni Martinelli, his long-term colleague at the Metropolitan Opera, and especially to the outstanding voice of that literate and temperamental tenor Giacomo Lauri-Volpi who, with his sensational *acuti*, was considered, in those roles that overlapped Gigli's, to be his most serious rival. Obviously one finds comments being made on the qualities of other gifted tenors, such as Hipólito Lázaro and Antonio Cortis, two Spanish singers of the same generation who were not only admired at home but also enjoyed fine international reputations. It was thought by many an opera house management that, with Miguel Fleta, these three artists were so much in demand that each of them might have been considered to be the most famous tenor in the world. In Italy the admired Aureliano Pertile, Francesco Merli and the popular Tito Schipa come under scrutiny, with Gigli seemingly always a preferred choice in much of the standard repertory. Coverage in detail is given to the professional relationship with his daughter Rina, of whom he was very proud, and whose talents have been consistently rather undervalued. Of real value to the appreciation of his voice are the many detailed reviews by knowledgeable critics. They cover concert and theatre performances that admirably show the effect he had, not only on his audiences but also the musical establishment, who for nearly forty years constantly requested his appearances in the greatest opera houses and concert halls in Europe, North and South America, Africa and Asia.

Perhaps some readers who might think that such a biography, revealing a person's character warts and all, is questionable and perhaps too demeaning will alter their opinion of Gigli as an artist. However, this book should not do so and certainly does not go out of its way to try and 'bring down' an admired public figure. All lovers of singing as an art-form should enjoy a great deal of information that was not available before. It certainly helps to bring to life a singer who gave, and still does through his recordings, pleasure to millions, and who certainly deserves a wider distribution than this limited edition, which I have no hesitation in recommending highly.

There is an outstanding detailed index by Judith Scott and, although the book does not include a discography of his recordings, readers will know that an excellent one exists in *The Record Collector* published in 1990 (Volume 35, no. 7 & 8) compiled by Tom Peel and John Holohan. However, more recently, there is now available an even more definitive one, by the eminent American discographer John Bolig, which is published by Mainspring Press, June 2020.

**Alan Bilgora (RIP)**