

## Sound Recording Reviews

**Beniamino Gigli: The Complete HMV Recordings, 1918-1932.** Romophone 820111 (2 CDs).

This set of two CDs from Romophone complements their recent release of the complete Gigli Victors, 1921-1932, and, with the exception of a few recordings Gigli made for Vitaphone film shorts in 1927, completes the cycle of the tenor's recordings from his first Milan acoustics of 1918, made on the eve of his La Scala debut, up to the time of his London and Milan electrics made at the height of his career in 1931 and 1932. In so doing, they provide striking evidence of the essentially dynamic nature of Gigli's art, and of the extent to which his singing changed and developed over the years of his Metropolitan career.

The fifteen acoustic recordings Gigli made on already out-of-date equipment in Milan in 1918 have always held a special fascination for collectors because they capture his voice in its most pristine estate in the months preceding the international successes that were to lead him to the Metropolitan and world renown. Never before have they been heard with such faithful clarity or with relatively quiet surfaces as in these transfers by Mark Obert-Thorn. What they reveal is a voice of astonishing purity, roundness, sweetness, and vibrancy that runs along the scale from D to high B natural with the unimpeded liquidity and naturalness of a stream of flowing water, now meandering, now rushing onward; already they disclose a quality of *mezza voce* singing that is without twentieth century precedent.

Despite two transpositions of a semi-tone to avoid the possible stricture to the delicacy of the tenor's youthful timber of a high *C forte*, there are some extraordinary gems here, not only for the quality of the singing but also for the control and interpretative percipience they display. Particularly impressive are the fluency of "Cielo e mar!" with its entranced *mezza voce roulade*; the rhythmic freedom and expressiveness of "Ah! ritrovarla nella sua capanna," one of Gigli's great successes of this period; the elegiac quality and interior feeling of "Giunto sul passo estremo"; the suave persuasiveness of "Apri la tua finestra"; the delicacy of the erotic evocation in "E lucevan le stelle"; the tremulous murmurings set against an incandescent climax in "Mamma, quel vino"; the rapport of the singers in duets from *Favorita* and *Gioconda* with Elvira Casazza; and, possibly most wonderful of all, the polished delivery of "Spirto gentil" with its sighed reprise and audacious *cadenza* marked by a double attack in the style of Rubini. In other instances, in the *Faust* and *L'amico Fritz* excerpts, sheer loveliness of tone becomes a substitute for a surer grasp of the idiom and a more telling interpretative touch; here Gigli lacks the experience of the stage in these works that in other cases has led him to a deeper mastery of the music.

When we move abruptly to the 1931 and 1932 electrics, the transition is arresting, for we enter a domain of supremely assured singing at which Gigli had not quite arrived in 1919. Now the voice is stronger, the tone is more lavishly bestowed, and the communication is complete. The two songs in English, one by Tosti and one by Sullivan, are all voice and little else, salutes by Gigli to his English speaking admirers. But in the other recordings, in arias from *Manon*, *Faust*, *The Pearl Fishers*, and *La Bohème*, the last surely the recording that won him more admirers than any other, Gigli has become a unique tenor phenomenon who is able to do anything he likes with his voice, within the extensive lyric and *spinto* repertory of his choosing. The frequent transitions from *piano* to *forte* and back become something to wonder at. The *Faust* and *Bohème* arias are crowned now with two prodigious top Cs, and in *The Pearl Fishers* aria Gigli, like the legendary Angelo Masini, achieves the distinction of singing an entire aria in *mezza voce*, including a cadenza rising to a high B natural.

The Milan electrics continue this pattern. "Cujus animam" is sung with breathtaking élan, with a modified cadenza intended to avoid the falsetto high D-flat Rossini had written (all falsetto singing then being deeply out of favor in Italy, as Lauri Volpi was to discover painfully when he ventured the role of Arturo in *I Puritani* in Florence the following year). "Pietà Signore" is a reverent but virtuoso memento of that singing of sacred music that had first nurtured Gigli as an artist, while the songs in Italian and Neapolitan, two of them with a certain moving autobiographical significance for Gigli, are sung with an attack and variety as well as an opulence of tone that merge operatic forms of vocalism with what are usually the more muted idioms of drawing room and folk music. Mark Obert-Thorn is to be congratulated on transfers that bring vividly to life the singing of one of the century's greatest tenors. *Reviewed by Colin Bain.*

### Endnote

1. Arias and duets from *Mefistofele*, *Tosca*, *La Favorita*, *La Gioconda*, *Lodoletta*, *Iris*, *Faust*, *La Bohème*, *Cavalleria Rusticana*, *L'amico Fritz*, *Les Pêcheurs de Perles*, *Fedora*, *Manon*, and *Stabat Mater*. Songs by Cannio, Tosti, Sullivan, Schubert, Niedermeyer, and De Curtis.

**Giordano: Andrea Chénier.** Beniamino Gigli, Maria Caniglia, Maria Huder, Giulietta Simionato, Vittoria Palombini, Gino Bechi, Giuseppe Taddei, Leone Paci, Italo Tajo, Adelio Zagonara, Gino Conti; Chorus and Orchestra of La Scala, Milan, Oliviero de Fabritiis, conductor. Arkadia 78012 (2CDs).

After lapsing for some years from the currently available catalogs, this classic performance is now available on three labels, Grammofono, Phonégraphie, and Arkadia. However, the Arkadia issue is of such superior sound quality, absolutely clear in both the voices and the orchestral detail, with the timbers of the voices and the spirit of the moment faithfully captured as if they had been recorded only yesterday, as to merit special comment and reappraisal.

Gigli's Chénier has long been famous both for the quality of his performance and for the prominent position it occupied in the molding of his career. He first essayed it in Philadelphia on 1 March 1921; he gave the opera its Metropolitan première six nights later;