

Milton Cross

Born in Manhattan on 16 April 1897, Milton Cross was one of radio's first full-time announcers, and remained so until his death on 3 January 1975. His association with the Saturday afternoon radio broadcasts of the Metropolitan Opera's matinee performances began literally with the first such broadcast: a performance of Hänsel and Gretel that aired on Christmas afternoon, December 25, 1931. Although Christmas Day fell on a Friday that year, the National Broadcasting Company decided to continue broadcasting Metropolitan Opera performances over its Blue Network (which later became the American Broadcasting Company, the corporate name of the ABC network) every Saturday afternoon, a holiday from work for most American men and women.

In addition to his 43 consecutive seasons as radio's Voice of the Metropolitan Opera," Milton Cross served as an announcer for a variety of other radio programs including "The Magic Key of RCA" (a music program sponsored by RCA Victor), "Information Please" (an early quiz show), "Coast to Coast on a Bus" (a children's show featuring child performers), and "The Chamber Music Society of Lower Basin Street" (a highly popular jazz-and-blues program). He also narrated a number of film shorts (five- to fifteen-minute sound films that were shown between feature films in movie theaters), as well as educational and entertainment recordings for children, including "Peter and the Wolf" (Musicraft Records, 1949) and "The Magic of Music" (Cabot Records, 1964).

Were either of your parents, or any of your siblings, involved in music?

Not professionally, no. My father, Robert Cross, and my mother, Margret, who was called "Maggie" within the family, had six children, and I was the fifth of their brood of six. My father was a machinist, a tool-and-die maker. He worked in several factories over the years, usually because he was offered a higher wage from another factory. He earned a good, steady income, and was never out of work.

As was the fashion in those days, our family had an upright piano. My oldest sister turned out to be a pretty good pianist. She and two of my other sisters sang a lot around that upright [piano]. Our family also owned a phonograph, a Victrola, which my parents bought through an installment plan when I was about ten years old. In those days, a Victrola was almost considered a musical instrument.

Do you recall the style of your family's Victrola? Did it have an external "morning-glory horn," or an internal horn?

It had an internal horn. It was a fairly standard mahogany upright, with its distinctive lid, and the doors behind which the horn—or speaker, as we would say today—was located, and the long double doors behind which were shelves for the special record albums. These were large albums—they were designed to hold twelve-inch records. The albums were essentially binders with individual sleeves for each record. [These albums] had alphabetical letters imprinted on their spines, and on the inside cover was an index that was blank, so that the record buyer could fill in whatever the title of the recording in each sleeve was.

In those days, the Victor Company had, if I remember correctly, four colors of labels for their recordings. The black label was for popular music, the music of “Tin Pan Alley,” as it was then called. The black label [Victor] records had two sides, and were available in two diameters, ten-inch and twelve-inch. They were priced, I think, at seventy-five cents, and they were intended for the general public.

Victor also had a blue label, which was a bit more expensive and featured recordings that were made by well-known theatrical figures. There was also a purple label, which was used for top-drawing Broadway stars like George M. Cohan. I was fortunate to see several of George M. Cohan’s hit musical comedies—I remember seeing *Forty-Five Minutes to Broadway*, *George Washington, Jr.*, and *Little Nellie Kelly*—and in the late-1920s, when I was doing radio-announcing, I got to know the great man.

I was fortunate to have had that same experience with (Sir) Harry Lauder, the comic Scotsman whose Victor recordings were very, very popular. My father had come to the United States from Edinboro, so I had a special liking for Harry Lauder. Looking back, George M. Cohan and Harry Lauder, and Nora Bayes among the women [of vaudeville], were the most significant entertainers that the Victor Company had in its catalogs in the years before World War One. And, of course, Al Jolson too. After George M. Cohan, Jolson became the biggest star on Broadway.

Of all the Victor labels, the elite one was the “Red Seal,” which was strictly for classical artists. The Red Seal is still used by RCA for its classical discs and tapes. When I was in my teens, Victor Red Seals were the most expensive of all phonograph records, and they were issued only in single-sided form. The reverse side [of a Red Seal record] was blank—just a smooth black surface with a hole in the center, in other words. If there was anything at all on the blank side, it was either the word “Victor” pressed into the black surface or, in some instances, there was a decal with white lettering that described the music that was heard on the playable side of the record.

I would estimate that my family owned maybe a hundred Victor recordings when I was growing up, and that about thirty of them were Red Seals, which

were quite expensive. I remember that the *Lucia* Sextet cost \$7.00, and it was just a one-sided record.

You heard Enrico Caruso in his prime. What do you remember about the experience of hearing and seeing Caruso in the opera house?

I first heard Caruso on 15 March 1910, with Johanna Gadski as Aida, Louise Homer as Amneris, Pasquale Amato as Amonasro, and Arturo Toscanini conducting. At home, we owned Caruso's Victor Red Seal of "Celeste Aida" [Victor 88025], which he had recorded in 1908, and the second-act duets by Johanna Gadski and Louise Homer ["Fu la sorte" and "Alla pompa, che s'appressa"]. We also had the two Red Seals of the Tomb Scene with Caruso and Gadski. Before I went to the Met for that *Aida* performance, I played all of those Red Seals, especially the Tomb Scene discs, over and over until I could have heard them in my sleep.

In the opera house, did Caruso sound like he did on his many Red Seal recordings?

At first, I didn't think so. I was expecting to hear a huge voice, and instead it seemed a good deal smaller but also much more nuanced. In "Celeste Aida," for example, his tempo was considerably slower than it was on the recording, and he did a lot of shading that you don't hear on that "Celeste Aida" recording. Of course, from the little seat I had way up in the balcony, I was hearing him from far away. In the recordings, his voice was coming directly into my ears from the Victrola.

That's an interesting point, although it will be lost on today's listeners because all they have to do is turn a knob to increase the volume of a recording. But that wasn't possible until electrical reproduction became commercially viable.

Yes—the only way to control the volume on the Victrolas like my family had was to close the two doors on the front of the cabinet. You could close them part way, or all the way, and you could also use a sewing needle or a cactus thorn for the stylus, to lower the volume somewhat. That all changed when Victor introduced its Orthophonic recordings and phonographs in the middle 1920s. The Orthophonic Victrola was an acoustical machine, but the playback horn was specially designed to reproduce the much wider frequency range of the new electrical recordings.

Was Caruso's "live" voice beautiful in your judgment?

Yes, in its own way. His voice had the baritonal quality that you hear on his recordings—and there was no effort at all in his singing. I remember that his movements onstage were more natural, I thought, than Gadski's. She looked

rather stiff by comparison. The makeup they used for her was awfully dark, almost the color of mud, which didn't exactly help her.

In the intervening years, have you heard another tenor whom you considered equal to, or perhaps even better than Caruso in the roles in which you heard him?

Well, I didn't hear Caruso in *Forza del destino*, or *Pagliacci*, or *Martha*, or *La Juive*, which are the roles that are mostly associated with him. His Radamès was superb, but the role itself is not as dramatically interesting as the *verismo* roles are. But that aside, Caruso's voice didn't sound like his recordings—not to my ears, anyway—and I was a little disappointed about that.

I feel sure you realize that your assessment of Caruso's "live" versus recorded voice is rather at variance with those who performed with him, including Wilfrid Pelletier, who coached him in Samson, Bruno Zirato, who was his secretary, and Rosa Ponselle, who made her debut with him in the Met premiere of Forza del destino and was also his Rachel in La Juive.

Yes, I realize that, but in my defense I will point out that all those whom you just mentioned performed with Caruso or else were on his payroll, like Bruno Zirato. I question how objective Pelletier, or even Rosa Ponselle, can be about Caruso's "live" voice versus his recordings. I know that Bruno [Zirato] was present at all, or almost all, of Caruso's recording sessions at Victor after he became Caruso's secretary, but Bruno has no musical training at all. Whenever he was asked what instrument he played, he would always reply, "I play a keyboard instrument called a cash register"—so I doubt how objective, or really how knowledgeable, he could speak about Caruso's live voice compared to his voice on recordings.

Was there any part of that Aida performance in which you heard the Caruso voice that we're familiar with on recordings?

Well, looking back, it was probably a mistake to listen to those recordings over and over again before going to the opera house. What I was expecting to hear were those ringing high notes that I had heard in those *Aida* recordings. In my head, I was listening to the recordings, especially of "Celeste Aida," and as soon as I heard him singing the aria at a slower tempo, and with so much nuance, I was disappointed because I wasn't hearing those trumpet-like high notes.

But I *did* hear them later in the opera. It was at the end of the Nile Scene, when he sang "Sacerdote! Io rest' a te!" Maybe [Francesco] Tamagno sang high notes with such tremendous power—I don't know—but when Caruso sang "Io rest' a te," I said to myself, "Yes! That's it! *That* is Caruso!" He had never recorded that music, so I was hearing him sing it—I should say, I was hearing *him*, meaning his real voice—for the first time. There's a lesson in that for people

today. Enjoy your records when you play them, but don't expect the record to sound like the singer, or vice-versa.

You have made several recordings yourself, correct?

Well, I made two or three recordings, but just as an announcer rather than a singer. That was in the late-1920s, when I was reasonably well known in the New York area. I would love to have been a singer. I studied voice, but I just didn't have the goods. I spent about six months studying under Percy Rector Stevens, who had taught [Reinald] Werrenrath and some other notable singers. But I never could "free the top." I could never get through the *passaggio* and into the upper register.

The first recording I did for Victor was a reconstruction of Lindbergh's reception in Paris, in which my voice was mixed with a recording of the shouts and cries of the crowd. I was also asked to narrate a "tone demonstration" on the Orthophonic label, which was new at the time. This was just a demonstration disc that Victor gave away with the new Orthophonic Victrolas. It was really a sales pitch hidden slightly under the tone of some "expert." Nat [Nathaniel] Shilkret conducted the orchestra for the musical portions.¹

Although you became an announcer, you managed to land a job as a singer on radio, correct?

Yes and no. Yes, I got a job as a singer *and* an announcer on [station] WJZ, which was then located in Newark, New Jersey. The Westinghouse Company owned the station. Some of my friends talked me into auditioning there. "You sing a little, Milt, and you have a good speaking voice," they said, "so why not give it a try?" One of those friends was a pianist named Keith McLeod, who was playing several hours a week after school and on weekends at WJZ. Keith McLeod helped me get an audition there, and he accompanied me on the piano when I sang.

Do you recall what year that would have been?

It was in 1921, in June or July, during the summer vacation from school. I remember singing "In the Gloaming" and then reciting William Jennings Bryan's "Cross of Gold" speech for my audition. I'd like to say that my talent was so extraordinary that I was hired on the spot. I *was* hired, as it turned out, but it was probably because radio was a novelty in 1921. Relatively few people

¹ The Victor recording ledgers, or "logs," which are now available online from the University of California at Santa Barbara under the title "Discography of American Historical Recordings," identify the recording as follows: "Matrix Number BVE 56985, Victor Radio Tone Demonstration, 'No Compromise with Purity of Tone,' Milton J. Cross, Narrator, and the Victor Symphony Orchestra, Nathaniel Shilkret, Director." The ledgers indicate that the recording was made on 2 November 1929, at the Victor studios in Camden, New Jersey.

had radios in those early days of the medium. Those who did own them usually built them from a kit.

A typical set was just a crystal, plus a piece of wire called a “cat’s whisker” which had to be positioned very precisely on the surface of the crystal, plus a coil of wire that was wrapped around a tube of cardboard—generally, an empty Quaker Oats container. That coil of wire served as the tuner. To listen to one of those early sets, you had to use headphones. This was before vacuum tubes and loudspeakers. Radio was considered an eccentric hobby in 1921.

Your speaking voice, which doesn’t seem to have changed during your long career, is that of a tenor. Perhaps stereotypically, most of us tend to think that announcers should have deep baritone voices. Were most of the announcers baritones when network radio became well established in the 1930s?

No, that trend came somewhat later. In the early days [of radio], the few of us who were full-time announcers had tenor voices. If you listen to fragments of my earliest Met broadcasts, and also the broadcasts which my friend and competitor, Graham McNamee, announced, you’ll hear that our speaking voices are in the tenor range.

Most of the great orators of the early 1900s, ones like William Jennings Bryan, had tenor-like speaking voices. Even Franklin D. Roosevelt had a tenor’s speaking voice. The reason is that before there was any such thing as electrical amplification, a speaking voice had to carry on its own to several hundred people in a crowd. A tenor voice will carry much farther than a baritone or a bass voice, all other things being equal.

The baritone speaking voice didn’t become the norm in the public arena until Thomas E. Dewey became a national political figure, and Lowell Thomas became popular on radio and in newsreels. By then, microphones and amplifiers and loudspeakers were the stock in trade.

Let me ask you about many of the great singers whose names you mentioned earlier. As I mention them, please tell me what comes to mind when you hear their names. Let me begin with Geraldine Farrar.

Of all of the great singers I have been privileged to come to know, Geraldine Farrar was the most special to me. The first performance in which I heard her was a *Tosca* with Antonio Scotti as Scarpia, and Alessandro Bonci as Cavaradossi, in 1909. I still have the program from that performance, and her autograph is written across it. I treasure that program more than any other—and believe me, I have many!

Almost twenty-five years later, in the 1930s, I had the privilege of working closely with her when she did intermission features during the Met broadcasts.

She based each of her features on the opera that we were broadcasting that afternoon—and to demonstrate various musical points that she was making, she would sing two or three measures from the score, accompanying herself on a little upright piano that was put in the box for her.

What was Farrar like as a person?

This sounds trite to say, but she was a star—a real *star*—but she was very approachable, very considerate, and very supportive of everyone she worked with. When I first saw her in 1909, I thought she was even more beautiful in-person than in the photograph I had of her. In those days, I had her photo in a frame next to my bed. I was thoroughly smitten! I see the same phenomenon happening today [1974] with Kiri Te Kanawa, just as I saw it happening with Anna Moffo a few years ago.

In the opera house, did Farrar sound like she does on her Victor Red Seal recordings?

Yes and no. The mechanical-recording process was none too kind to women singers, except perhaps for coloratura sopranos. In the [opera] house, Farrar's voice was much larger than what you hear on her old recordings, and her middle range was much larger than her recordings would lead you to believe. That's why I'm so glad that several of her intermission features were saved as radio transcriptions. Those transcriptions capture the gorgeous sound of her middle range. None of her old recordings were able to do that.

You mentioned that Pasquale Amato sang Amonastro in the performance of Aida with Caruso and Gadski. In the opera house, did Amato sound like his Victor recordings?

On the stage, Amato's voice was like a French horn. It was quite large, though not like Titta Ruffo's was. Unfortunately, both of them kept singing past their primes. I was at the microphone for the broadcast of the 25th anniversary of Gatti-Casazza's leadership as General Manager, which aired on 26 February 1933. Prudently, Amato decided to retire, and that was his last appearance at the Met—but by then [Amato] had very little voice left. Amato used a lot of shading in his singing, like Caruso, which doesn't come across in [their] recordings. But there was such precision in that performance of *Aida*. Toscanini saw to that!

After Caruso's passing, many of the dramatic roles for which he was famous were assigned to Giovanni Martinelli, and the more lyrical roles to Beniamino Gigli. You heard them many times in the ensuing years. Are there particular performances of theirs which you recall vividly?

Yes, especially in Martinelli's case. You must remember that Gigli left the Metropolitan in 1932, but that Martinelli sang there until 1946. Martinelli's first in-house role was Rodolfo in *Bohème*, with Lucrezia Bori in 1913, and his last in-house performance was as Rodolfo, with Licia Albanese as Mimì. I didn't see his debut, but I did see his last performance.

Were you in the audience when Beniamino Gigli made his debut as Faust in Mefistofele?

Yes, and I think I heard almost every in-house performance that Gigli gave during his first season. His debut was one of the most talked-about and the most anticipated in the circles that I was in.

Were there any similarities in Gigli's voice, compared to Caruso's?

Not to my ears, no. Gigli had the most beautiful tenor voice I have ever heard. It was *the* perfect lyric tenor voice—and a sizable voice, too. The beauty of [his] timbre was indescribable.

Which of Gigli's first-season performances stand out in your memory?

I remember his Turiddu in *Cavalleria rusticana*, with Emmy Destinn as Santuzza, and I thought he was magnificent! He sang the "O Lola" from the wings, which was customary, yet his voice filled the entire opera house. Every moment of that performance was memorable, but none more so than Gigli's singing of the "Viva il vino spumeggiante" and "Mamma, quel vino è generoso" arias.

I remember Gigli's first *Bohème*, which he sang with Antonio Scotti as Marcello and Frances Alda as Mimì. Since then, I've heard a couple hundred performances of *Bohème*, but the best Rodolfo of them all was Gigli. And he sang "Che gelida manina" in key—that's how secure his top was. I know that he sang it in key because after the performance, I asked one of the fellows in the string section, and he confirmed that Gigli had sung the aria according to the score. Now, he didn't take the high-C in the duet that closes the first act. That wasn't allowed at the Met—and certainly not in a performance with the tempestuous Alda! In any performance she was in, Alda had to be the star.

I also saw Gigli and Alda in *Mefistofele*, which I heard at the Met on Christmas Day 1920. My parents had managed to get four tickets, and they let me treat three of my friends to the performance. By then, I was so taken with Gigli that I couldn't wait to hear "Dai campi, dai prati" in the first act. The entire performance was unforgettable: José Mardones sang Mefistofele, and his "Ave, Signor" and "Son lo spirito" rolled through the Met like thunder! In "Ave, Signor," he even interpolated a note from the high baritone range.

I don't remember very much about Alda's Margherita, now that I think back to that performance. I heard her in most of her great roles, and later on I worked with her on radio, but I don't remember much about her Margherita. I was concentrating on Gigli's exquisite singing of "Colma il tuo cor d'un palpito" in the second act, the "Forma ideal purissima" in the fourth act, and "Giunto sul passo estremo," the epilogue.

In the lyric roles that Gigli sang at that early point in his career, Tito Schipa and later Ferruccio Tagliavini also sang them. How would you compare them to Gigli?

In one role that I can think of, the title role in Mascagni's *L'Amico Fritz*, Schipa and Tagliavini were superb. But I also heard Miguel Fleta as Fritz, with Bori as Suzel, in 1923, and Fleta was extraordinary! In those days, *L'Amico Fritz* was occasionally paired with *Cavalleria rusticana*, since both were written by Mascagni.

On recordings, in my personal opinion, the two best versions of the second-act "Cherry Duet" are Schipa's with Mafalda Favero, and Tagliavini's with Pia Tassinari, his wife, as Suzel. If you're familiar with *L'Amico Fritz*, you'll know that the singing in the third act, such as the "Ah! Ditela per me," requires some vocal heft. That's why Fleta and Gigli were excellent in *L'Amico Fritz*. They could sing at any dynamic level, from *pianissimo* to *fortissimo*, and their techniques were excellent.

If I were asked to choose between Schipa or Tagliavini and Gigli in *L'Amico Fritz*, especially in the third act, Gigli would always be my first choice. It's remarkable, though, how much Tagliavini sounded like Gigli in the softer passages—but only in the softer passages. Although he had a very fine career, I think that Tagliavini's similarity to Gigli worked against him. He was always compared to Gigli, but his [Tagliavini's] voice had none of the heft that Gigli had.

If my research is correct, you were in the audience for the Met debut of Leo Slezak, in an historic performance of Otello with Frances Alda and Antonio Scotti.

And with Toscanini conducting. What a night! That was only a few weeks before I heard Farrar in *Tosca*. When Leo Slezak made his entrance, everyone in the audience literally gasped! He looked like a real-life Paul Bunyan! When he sang "Esultate," the applause went on so long that Toscanini had difficulty restarting the orchestra. I have heard a number of tenors in *Otello* since then, but I have never heard one who could equal Leo Slezak in that role.

Not even, say, Giovanni Martinelli, or more recently Mario Del Monaco?

No. Mario Del Monaco either could not or would not sing at any dynamic level other than *forte*. Leo Slezak could do a *diminuendo*, which very few other tenors could do. The only ones who come to mind in that regard are Giacomo Lauri-Volpi in his prime, and Franco Corelli and Carlo Bergonzi today. Corelli has done *diminuendi* on the air, notably in “Ah, lève-toi soleil” in *Roméo et Juliette*.

I saw most of Martinelli’s *Otello* performances and I remember them well, but it’s hard to compare Martinelli to any other tenor because no one else sounded even vaguely like him. I think his recordings, when compared to any other tenor’s recordings, bear that out. But I don’t think his [electrical] Red Seal Orthophonic recordings are as good as his acoustic ones. I heard him so many times over the years, and when I listen to his first electrical recordings, his voice sounds rather thin compared to what it sounded like in the [opera] house.

Before the long-playing record, complete opera recordings—or nearly complete ones—were being done in the 78 rpm format. Martinelli made what was essentially a complete recording of Otello with Lawrence Tibbett and Helen Jepson in 1939. Did that recording, in your opinion, capture Martinelli’s voice faithfully?

If you compare those studio recordings with the air-checks [recordings made from the radio signal during the live performance] of the Met broadcast of *Otello* in 1938, you can hear a considerable difference in the tone quality not only of Martinelli but of Tibbett, too. Martinelli had a voice that needed a lot of space around it. [Giacomo] Lauri-Volpi’s voice was also like that. They needed the space of a large auditorium for the overtones to resonate fully. The radio microphones in the old Met were hung above the proscenium arch, so they were able to capture that resonance. But the studio recordings, even the ones that were done in RCA’s converted church in Camden, don’t have that kind of resonance.

As an announcer, one of the many firsts with which you are credited are the “Metropolitan Opera Auditions of the Air,” for which you served as the emcee. Do you have specific memories about the “Auditions of the Air”?

I think all of us who were associated with the “Auditions of the Air” will remember Leonard Warren’s audition. Under Edward Johnson’s management, [conductor] Wilfrid Pelletier was more or less in charge of the “Auditions of the Air.” Almost always, Pelletier had already heard the singers who were going to perform in the “Auditions”—but he had never heard Warren until we did what we call a “level check,” which is when the audio engineers test the volume of the sound coming from the stage.

I was in the booth with Pelletier and a couple of the audio men when Warren’s voice came through the speaker that was mounted next to the control board.

Warren was singing the “Pari siamo” from *Rigoletto*. The sound of that voice was just unbelievable! In my mind’s eye I can still see Pelletier looking through the glass window in the booth while Warren was singing on the stage. Pelletier would look at Warren, then look at the audio fellows and me, and then look down at the stage again.

After a few moments, he said to us, “Who put that record on?” He thought that the audio boys had played a prank on him by having the fellow on the stage—Leonard Warren—pretend to be singing while mouthing the words to a recording by Riccardo Stracciari. That’s how refined Warren’s singing was when he auditioned on the air.

Warren had sung the role of Paolo Albiani to the Simon Boccanegra of Lawrence Tibbett in a number of performances. Do you recall those performances?

Yes, there were several with Tibbett in the title role, Elisabeth Rethberg as Amelia, Martinelli as Gabriele Adorno, and Warren as Albiani—but I don’t remember much about Warren in them. Yet I remember very clearly the first time I heard Tibbett.

That was at his debut?

No, it was in a special program in 1924. I don’t think it was called a “gala,” but it was a special program in which scenes from three or maybe four different operas were presented. I went because Maria Jeritza was scheduled to sing a scene from *Thaïs*. I had been fortunate enough to be in the audience at the Met premiere of *Thaïs*, with Farrar and Amato [as Athanaël] in 1917, and I was eager to hear Jeritza in a scene from *Thaïs*. One of the other operas from which a scene was performed was *Carmen*, and Lawrence Tibbett was the Escamillo.

Although he made films, Tibbett is almost two generations removed from the public memory today [1974]. Would you say that Tibbett was Leonard Warren’s equal vocally?

Well, they’re rather hard to compare because Tibbett was a bass-baritone with an extraordinary range, and Warren was a baritone who had an unusual top. Warren could sing high-Cs during warm-ups, or when he was inclined to show off. But Warren wasn’t anywhere near Tibbett as an artist—not in the slightest. Warren was an insecure man, and he was notoriously difficult in rehearsals. He would complain that other cast members weren’t up to his standards, or, worse, that they were trying to undermine him.

Tibbett was nothing like that. It would have been completely foreign to him to complain about other cast members. As an actor, Tibbett was on a par with the best singing actors of any era. Of course, Chaliapin set the standards by which every singing actor was measured—and even by Chaliapin’s high standards,

Lawrence Tibbett was a very fine actor. By comparison, Warren was a marginal actor, nothing more.

As interpreters, especially of songs, Tibbett and Warren were worlds apart. Both of them recorded the pop-music standards that most baritones have favored over the years—songs like “On the Road to Mandalay,” for instance. If you listen to Tibbett’s recording of “Mandalay,” and if you compare it to Warren’s, the difference is clear: Warren sings the notes, but Tibbett creates a character.

Were you in the audience in 1926, when Tibbett replaced Giuseppe De Luca in Faust, with Chaliapin as Méphistophélès?

I was one of the lucky ones who were able to get a ticket to that performance. I had already seen Chaliapin three times in *Boris Godunov*, and I couldn’t tell you who else was in any of those performances. Anyone who ever saw Chaliapin on the stage will tell you that they can’t remember anyone on the stage other than Chaliapin. Every performance that he gave was so overwhelming—dramatically, musically, and emotionally overwhelming—that everyone in the audience lost all sense of time and place when he was onstage.

Even the third time I saw him in *Boris*, the impact his performance had on me was every bit as large as the first one. I was fortunate to have heard him in “the other Faust,” Boito’s *Mefistofele*, in which Gigli sang Faust. That’s about the only Gigli performance I can’t remember very distinctly. I know he was in it because I was looking forward to it, having heard him as Faust a few seasons earlier. But this time, my focus was entirely on Chaliapin.

I wanted to see Chaliapin in every role he sang—and thanks to a connection my mother had, I was able to get a ticket to the *Faust* performance you’ve asked about. When it was announced that De Luca was indisposed and that Lawrence Tibbett—whom I had heard a year or so earlier, as I mentioned, in a scene from *Carmen*—would be replacing [De Luca], it didn’t really matter to me. I remember that Tibbett, who didn’t seem to be nervous, sang Valentin very nicely, but I was there to see and hear Chaliapin.

Among your many firsts, you were the announcer who introduced Jussi Björling to the American public.

Yes, that was on the *Ford Sunday Evening Hour* in March 1937. He had arrived in New York only a few days before the broadcast, but he was ready for it. He was twenty-six years old—I remember mentioning his age in my introductory remarks. Although there had been a rehearsal earlier that day, I had another obligation so I couldn’t be there, so I didn’t hear Björling until we went on the air.

I could hardly believe my ears! He tossed off “Che gelida manina” as if were just a *vocalise*, and he held the high-C for several beats. Almost without a break, he launched into “La donna è mobile,” and immediately after that he sang “Celeste Aida.” He also sang “Sverige,” which lies very high and requires considerable stamina and an extremely secure top.

The Ford Company received hundreds of letters and cards after that broadcast, so a week or so later, Bjoerling was engaged for a second broadcast. This time, he sang “Recondita armonia,” and then did “O paradiso,” both in Italian. His Italian was not quite idiomatic, but the “ping” in his voice and its evenness from the bottom to the top of his range were remarkable. Almost overnight, he was famous here in America, and he was in constant demand.

What was Björling like as a person?

Well, I didn’t get to know him, but he was very genial and had no “airs” about him—he wasn’t egotistical at all. He was also very nice to me in the way he reacted to a silly thing I said when I was introduced to him. I knew that he was Swedish, and since he sang in French and Italian, I assumed he was conversant in those languages but that he didn’t speak any English. When we were introduced, I said to him rather slowly, as we tend to with foreigners, “How ... do ... you ... like ... America ... Mister ... Björling?” He didn’t bat an eye as he answered, in flawless English, “Yeah, sure, it’s a wonderful place, and it’s changed a lot since I was here when I was a boy.”

That was the second time I said something like that and made a fool of myself. The first time was with Nina Morgana, incidentally. I had heard her several times [at the Met] in the 1920s but had never met personally until the Met broadcasts were underway. She was married to Bruno Zirato, and when I was around them, they were always speaking Italian. Bruno could speak English, but his accent was so thick that it was sometimes difficult to understand what he was saying.

I assumed that the same was true of his wife, so when I was formally introduced to her I said haltingly, “It ... is ... a ... pleasure ... to ... meet ... you ... Madame ... Morgana.” She waited about two seconds and then said, exactly this way, “It ... is ... a ... pleasure ... to ... meet ... you ... too ... Mis- ... ter ... Cross ... I ... am ... from... Buffalo ... New ... York ... so ... English ... is ... my ... native ... language.” She never changed her expression—she just stared at me as she watched me turn red from embarrassment!

Although a Victor test recording exists of her singing “Come per me sereno,” Morgana never made any commercial recordings. There is also a fragment of a 1932 Met broadcast of Bohème with Morgana as Musetta and Rethberg as Mimi,

but the quality of the air-check is so bad that it's almost impossible to hear anything clearly.

I remember that *Bohème* very well because very few would associate Elisabeth Rethberg with the role of Mimi, yet she was a very good Mimi—especially with Nina Morgana as Musetta. I also heard Morgana as Gilda in *Rigoletto*, in a performance with Lauri-Volpi as the Duke in 1926. The ovation the two of them received for “É il sol dell’anima” went on so long that they almost had to repeat it!

I also saw [Morgana’s] Nedda in *Pagliacci*, Micaela in *Carmen*, and Princess Eudoxie in *La Juive* when the opera was revived for Martinelli and Ponselle. I also remember [Morgana’s] Olympia in *Contes d’Hoffmann*. She was so tiny that she looked like a doll, and she could mimic perfectly the herky-jerky movements of a wind-up doll.²

She was a spitfire—very vivacious, more than a little brash, a fine comedienne, and an excellent dancer too—but, oh, was she impish! At NBC, it was well known that when General [David] Sarnoff, the network’s founder, formed the NBC Symphony to bring Toscanini back to the United States, Nina Morgana corrected the General to his face. Nobody ever corrected General Sarnoff about *anything*. If General Sarnoff said that Tuesday was Friday, then Tuesday was Friday. But Nina Morgana not only corrected his pronunciation, she also mimicked his speaking voice, right to his face! “The name is pronounced ‘Tos-ca-nee-nee,’ not ‘Tahs-ca-ninny,’” she told him, “and if you persist in mispronouncing it, you’ll be the ninny!”

Regarding Toscanini, did you ever have any personal dealings with him?

Not personally, no, but I had a funny kind of relationship with him through Bruno Zirato, who was [Toscanini’s] personal representative and later was the general manager of the New York Philharmonic. Actually, I was introduced to Toscanini twice, both times by Bruno Zirato. As anyone who knew Bruno would tell you, he had a very courtly bearing about him. He was an unusually tall man—perhaps six-feet-six, maybe even taller—and Toscanini was a relatively short man, so they made quite a pair.

One of Bruno’s jobs with Toscanini was to re-introduce him to people he had previously met but had forgotten their names. Bruno would jog Toscanini’s memory by saying, as in my case, “Maestro, you remember Mr. Cross, the announcer,” and Toscanini would make eye contact, smile faintly, nod his head, and go on to whatever he was scheduled to do.

² “Nina Morgana has the doll technique as no other soprano,” wrote Charles D. Isaacson in the *New York Telegram* after a Met performance of *Contes d’Hoffmann* on 21 February 1929.

The second time I encountered Bruno and Toscanini, Bruno said to him, “Maestro, of course you remember Mr. Cross,” to which Toscanini said to Bruno—in English—“What means ‘cross’?” I’m sure he meant to say it in Italian, but instead it came out, “What means ‘cross’?” Bruno was obviously embarrassed but tactfully replied, in Italian, “*Croce*.” That seemed to be the only thing Toscanini wanted to know about me, so he nodded and then walked away briskly.

After Toscanini returned to the U.S. to lead the NBC Symphony, he began listening to the [Met] Saturday matinee broadcasts. For Bruno, that was a blessing and a curse. After each broadcast, and sometimes after each act, Toscanini would telephone Bruno to dictate his opinions about the performance. Bruno was supposed to type these opinions and have them delivered by courier to the Met, in an envelope addressed to me.

Undoubtedly, Toscanini knew that I was just the announcer, and not part of the Metropolitan Opera administration. But apparently, he thought that I was sort of a pipeline to the General Manager. Whatever his thinking was, he insisted that Bruno translate his comments into English, type them, and have them delivered to me.

After a while, Bruno must have convinced him that putting things in writing was a dangerous thing to do. In Italy, Bruno had been a journalist, so he may have used his own experience to dissuade Toscanini from having his comments put in writing. So, after a while, it sufficed for Bruno to call me at my home. I can still hear him on the [telephone] line: “Now, Mr. Cross, you and I know that Maestro has opinions,” Bruno would say. “And you and I know that his opinions should not be shared with the management.” I would say, “Yes, I understand.”

Bruno would relay Toscanini’s “opinions” one at a time, and after each one I would just reply, “Yes, I understand,” and Bruno would go on to Toscanini’s next “opinion.” At the end of the conversation, Bruno would thank me and say, “Be happy that you are not poor old Zirato, because I am at his beck and call twenty-four hours a day!”

Do you recall any of Toscanini “opinions”?

Some of them, yes—but Toscanini was not known for his consistency. His opinions seemed to be based on specific performances, from what Bruno told me. For instance, if you asked Toscanini about the premiere of *Otello*, he would give you specific recollections of how [Francesco] Tamagno sang “Ora è per sempre addio,” or how [Victor] Maurel sang “Era la notte.” If you just asked him what he thought of Victor Maurel, his opinion would be based on Maurel’s

Iago at the *Otello* premiere. Even though he heard Maurel in several roles, his answer would be based on a specific performance.

One of his inconsistencies was his opinion of Caruso. According to Bruno [Zirato], if Toscanini was asked about Caruso in the Met premiere of *Fanciulla del West*, Toscanini would say that Caruso was superb as Dick Johnson. But if you asked him about Caruso without mentioning a specific role or a specific performance, Toscanini would exclaim that by the time Caruso was a star at the Met, he had almost ruined his voice.³

Toscanini had certain favorite singers who could do no wrong—[Giovanni] Martinelli, [Lucrezia] Bori, Helen Traubel, [Jan] Peerce, Giuseppe Valdengo, and Herva Nelli, for instance. Even if they weren't at their best in a particular performance, and even if he might have bawled them out during a rehearsal, he seemed to gloss over their lapses and would always speak well of them.

There were also some [singers] whose wartime involvement with the Fascists would send him into a rage if their names were mentioned around him. Gigli and Lauri-Volpi were high on that list. Both of them had made recordings of the Fascist anthem "Giovinezza," and they had sung it at rallies in Italy. Martinelli also sang and recorded "Giovinezza," but Toscanini apparently excused it.

Do you personally write everything that you say on the air?

No, none of it. I used to write all of it myself, and I would read my script aloud to my wife at home. She would help me edit my script, and we would use a stopwatch to time my comments. That ended when the G. H. Johnston Company took over the production of the broadcasts. Now I have no role, and no say at all, in what I read on the air.

It's gotten to the point that the person who really "runs the show," Mrs. [Geraldine] Souvaine, is putting more and more pressure on me. She talks like a stevedore—she's the most foul-mouthed woman on this earth—and she can do anything she wants.⁴ Mr. [Gerald H.] Johnston has absolutely no interest in

³ "He [sang] with me at La Scala in 1899," Toscanini told the critic B. H. Haggin, "and I wrote to Boito: 'You must come to La Scala to hear *Elisir d'amore* with young tenor who sing like angel.' But in 1901 is already change; and in New York—! I tell him: 'Yes, you make much money—but no! No! NO!!'" See B. H. Haggin, *Conversations with Toscanini* (Doubleday, 1959), p. 80.

⁴ "Souvaine was indeed a difficult woman, full of bitterness and venom," the longtime radio commentator, George Jellinek, wrote in his memoirs. See Jellinek, *My Road to Radio and the Vocal Scene* (McFarland, 2007), p. 140.

opera. His only interest is in the football broadcasts that his company produces.

Although no one seems to have verified how many hours you have logged as an announcer, a reasonable estimate seems to be more than 40,000 hours on the air. Any announcer with even a fraction of your airtime is bound to have made a “blooper” or two. Some famous ones have been attributed to you—for example, your alleged introduction of Harry Horlick’s radio program, “A & P Gypsies,” as the “A & G Pipsies” on the air. Did that really happen?

No, but it makes for a good story. One that I did make, however, I have to plead guilty about because I’m sure there’s a recording of it somewhere. It was a broadcast of *Madame Butterfly* in 1950, and the cast included Licia Albanese as Cio-Cio-San, James Melton as B. F. Pinkerton, John Brownlee as Sharpless, and Anne Bollinger as Kate Pinkerton.

The day before that broadcast, I had been at the CBS studios and had seen Kate Smith, whom I had known since the early days of radio. Apparently, seeing her stayed with me because the next afternoon, when I went on the air and read the names of the cast, I said, “and Anne Bollinger as Kate *Smith*.” A second or two later, I realized what I had said, and I started laughing—and I couldn’t stop. The studio engineer kept my microphone open, so my “flub,” along with my laughing at myself about it, was heard from coast to coast.

If we could fast-forward to fifty years from now, which singers do you think opera lovers will be talking about?

Caruso will still be talked about, and by then maybe someone will have invented a way to extract his real voice from those old acoustical recordings. If there’s ever a way to do that, then Caruso and all of the other great singers who didn’t make electrical recordings—Mattia Battistini, Adelina Patti, Edouard de Reszke, Emma Calvé, Marcella Sembrich, Olive Fremstad, Lillian Nordica—will be appreciated like they were during their lifetimes.

Caruso will endure partly because there were younger singers of that era who also had phenomenal voices—Gigli, for example—and were in their primes when the transition from acoustical to electrical recording was made. If you compare Gigli’s acoustical and electrical versions of the same piece of music, which were recorded just a few years apart, you can hear how much [of his voice] is missing from his acoustical recordings.

Will Beniamino Gigli be as appreciated by future generations as he was in his day?

Heaven knows he should be, but I’m a little worried about that.

Why?

Well, I don't like to point fingers, but Mr. Pavarotti, who is on every television channel these days, likes to talk about the arguments he and his father used to have about tenors. As he tells it, his father, who was an amateur tenor, revered Gigli as the greatest Italian tenor. Mr. Pavarotti countered that Giuseppe Di Stefano, whom he says was "exciting" compared to Gigli, was the greatest Italian tenor.

Pavarotti cites Di Stefano's handsomeness, and his "go for broke" style.

Yes, but something else needs to be taken into account. Beniamino Gigli's career began in 1914, and continued until his death in 1957. From beginning to end, his voice and technique remained at the highest level. Today, unfortunately, Giuseppe Di Stefano can only manage about one octave. His voice is in tatters.

Where would you place Gigli among all of the legendary tenors you have heard during your long career?

At the very top! If I were asked to write a dictionary, after the word "tenor" I would put a photograph of Beniamino Gigli.