

Colin Bain: Gigli The Master Tenor

Printed version 85 Canadian dollars (approx. £50 in early May 2021);

e-book: 29.95 Canadian dollars (approx. £18 early May). see www.giglithemastertenor.com

Proceeds from the biography will be donated to Médecins Sans Frontières (Canada)

This new book, *Gigli: The Master Tenor* was obviously a labour of love for the Australian author Colin Bain. Sadly his manuscript was unfinished at the time of his death in 2007. But a second labour of love has been that of Barry R. Ashpole who was determined to get *Gigli – The Master Tenor* published.. The original manuscript was missing some important elements, such as footnotes and identification of the author’s source material ... but, to quote Ashpole: “Such is the importance, scope and significance of Colin Bain’s research – and of his subject matter – that I decided to push ahead and meet a commitment made to the author’s widow before she died several years ago.”

Obviously in this brief 1,000 word review it is possible only to scratch the surface of this weighty (two and half pound) 533-page labour of love but since the heyday of Beniamino Gigli (1890-1957) it has been possible to look more dispassionately at the great Italian tenor’s life and career and this book takes an almost microscopic look at his life’s work. The text is bolstered by almost two dozen illustrations, many of which I have not seen before and several appear to come from the singer’s own family albums. Of particular interest to Society members is a full page photograph of Gigli listening to what our Editor has identified as a Victrola 120 launched exactly 100 years ago.

Colin Bain, born in 1926, was regarded as a major authority on opera

– not only in his native Australia but also in Europe and the United States where he travelled extensively. He undertook exhaustive research on Gigli at the request of the singer’s family and was acknowledged by daughter Rina as her father’s official biographer. Based on thousands of official and personal documents secured by the author as well as interviews with opera stars, musicians, teachers, and loved ones (including extensive interviews with members of the Gigli family and household) the new biography literally spans a lifetime. His life is covered in detail from his birth in March 1890 to his death in November 1957, which I as an eleven-year-old with two wind-up gramophones and a growing collection of HMV red label 78s, can still recall.

It is difficult now for us to realise how big a star Gigli really was; it was not just opera buffs who knew the name and the voice, it was a much wider public – think Pavarotti and you would be close to the sort of following Gigli enjoyed. Part of it was due to the range of music he sang and part to the fact that according to at least one source, he appeared as an actor in no fewer than twenty films between 1935 and 1953. And for most of his career Gigli did not have the exposure of world-wide television coverage, à la *The Three Tenors!* But above all it was the voice!

I was pleased that Colin Bain did not avoid the difficult bits of the Gigli story. There was the singer’s alleged over-dependence on lachrymose effects and what was claimed to be “a lack of

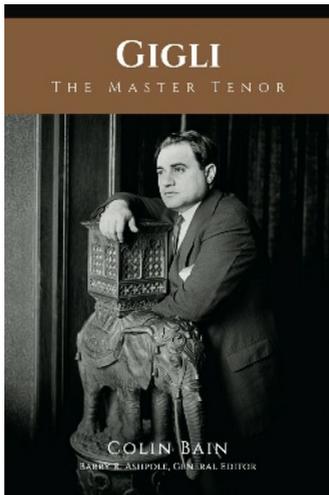
restraint and a true sense of style”. Tell that to the millions who bought Gigli’s records or saw his films – and tell that to the fellow singers (Bonci, Martinelli, Lauri-Volpi, McCormack, Bjorling among others) who spoke or wrote of Gigli in the most flattering terms. Tell that also to that most discerning of judges of voice, the Gramophone Company’s Fred Gaisberg, who signed up the 28-year-old Gigli as soon as possible after being introduced to him by Mascagni in 1918.

Gigli’s apparent flirtations with Fascism and his relationship with the Italian dictator Benito Mussolini and the Nazi hierarchy of Germany might appear to cast a shadow over his reputation. This period of Gigli’s life is explored in depth by Colin Bain, who maintains that “Gigli had never been a fascist either in thought or sympathy ... but like many others he had contrived to admire Mussolini as a man and leader, appreciating his regeneration of Italy, his dynamic style, and the efficiency with which he had infused government.” However the singer had “failed to detect the core of megalomania that lay at the basis of the Duce’s temperament and would have such dire consequences.”

During tours of Germany Gigli had met Hitler whom he found “charming, warm and affable but unfathomable”. Bain says that the singer found Goebbels “sensitive, intelligent and sympathetic” and Goering “pompous and insufferable”. Unease over Nazi

ideology and practice led Gigli to withdraw for a time from German activities and concentrate his singing on Italy and the English speaking world.

In later years, Gigli’s daughter Rina spoke of the singer’s growing disenchantment with Mussolini and Italian Fascism: “My father was not personally interested in politics and scarcely followed them ... In earlier years he was a keen admirer of Mussolini for all he seemed to be doing for Italy, but when Mussolini led us into the alliance with Germany ... he became very disillusioned ... He could feel that a tragedy was coming.”



About 200 pages cover the events where Gigli’s

and Mussolini’s careers overlap and readers will need to draw their own conclusions about Gigli’s private feelings, thoughts and beliefs about Il Duce and Fascism. Gigli would not have been the first, or last, performer to have their art tainted by association with less than savoury characters.

Gigli – The Master Tenor is a monumental work which merits posthumous credit to Colin Bain for research and scholarship. But for his determination in bringing the work to print, and providing such missing elements as a name index and appendix, credit is due to Barry R. Ashpole (formerly editor of the ARSC Journal, 1994-2015). Ashpole started work on the book early in 2020 and within a year Colin Bain’s manuscript was transformed into a published book.

Colin Johnson