

EDITED BY GARY A. GALO

Sound Recording Reviews

Giuseppe Verdi: *Un Ballo in Maschera*. Beniamino Gigli, Maria Caniglia, Gino Bechi, Fedora Barbieri, Elda Ribetti, Tancredi Pasero, Nicola Nicolini, Ugo Novelli. Blando Giusto; Chorus and Orchestra of the Teatro Reale dell'Opera, Rome, Tullio Serafin, conductor. Arkadia 78005 (2 CDs).

The sound on this Arkadia reissue, of a performance originally recorded amid the turbulence of wartime Rome in 1943, is of a clarity and vibrancy that sets new standards in the reproduction of historical recordings. Since Grammfono and Phonographe have almost simultaneously issued their own versions, both using the Cedar process, the continuing interest this performance commands can scarcely be in doubt; but it is the Arkadia, using their own patented process, that brings it to life in a way that has not been heard before. The voices leap out at you as they must have done in the recording session itself; their timbres are faithfully captured, the perspectives are right, the detail and color in the orchestration amazing in a record made over fifty years ago.

Riccardo was essentially a role of Gigli's final artistic maturity. As a student in Rome in 1914 he had heard Alessandro Bonci in his celebrated rendition of the part, and thereafter formed a lasting respect for the manifold difficulties it entails. He first essayed it himself at the Teatro C6lon in Buenos Aires in 1928 with great success, but thereafter it lay dormant in his repertoire until he took it up again, once more at the Col6n, in 1935. Ten years of outstanding success in the part followed. In all, sixteen cities across Europe heard him as Riccardo; many Europeans considered it among his finest artistic realizations, some said the finest of all.

If something of supreme vocal splendor departed from Gigli's voice after 1934, he was nevertheless in superb form nine years later when he made this recording, capturing the optimistic buoyancy of spirit that characterizes Riccardo, his generosity, ardor, and courtly frivolity in irresistibly winning tones, most of all perhaps in the dazzling agility with which he executes the famous Bonci staccati in "È scherzo, od è follia," but also in the commanding ebullience of his opening aria, the *slancio* of his "Di' tu se fedele," the surging passions of the Love Duet, and the sense of interior feeling he evokes in "Forse la soglia attinse".

Maria Caniglia's Amelia has been more controversial, mainly for occasional incertitudes of pitch and intonation, and for a suspected beat — interestingly not so apparent here as in other reissues — that enters her tone on the top C in her great Act II aria. But this is a scene of terror, of ghosts and gallows, in which all the demons are loose, and dramatically Caniglia captures it admirably, as she does Amelia's vulnerability and her subjection to the dark forces of Ulrica.

Reservations can be set aside in commenting on Gino Bechi's Renato. Here is a bari-

tone in the grand manner, with a darkly resonant voice, excellent legato and telling shadings. Fiercely loyal in the opening scenes, ferociously vengeful after he discovers what he takes to be his wife's perfidy, he dominates many of the scenes, especially in Act III, and in the notably brilliant ensembles rarely yields place even to Gigli. A peculiarly apt piece of casting is Elda Ribetti as the pervasive, hermaphroditic Oscar. A fluent but scarcely a bravura singer, she strikes just the right, puckish note. But most amazing of all is perhaps the very young Fedora Barbieri as Ulrica. Only twenty-three when this recording was made, she ably conveys the forces of darkness her role demands, and does so in a way that marks her as a worthy colleague of her great contemporaries, Stignani, Pederzini, Elmo, Castagna, and Simionato.

As to the conducting, Serafin presides with a masterly touch. Very aware that he is directing star singers, he affords them every opportunity while summoning up from the orchestra all the somber fires and colors implied by the music. *Reviewed by Colin Bain.*

American Pop: An Audio History — From Minstrel to Mojo: On Record, 1893-1946.
West Hill Audio Archives WH-1017 (Distributed by Music and Arts; 9 CDs priced as 7).

American Pop: An Audio History — From Minstrel to Mojo: On Record, 1893-1946 is a lavish nine Compact Disc set featuring nearly eleven hours of music chronologically divided into three volumes (three discs per volume). The first offers the earliest days of recorded music from 1893-1927, Volume II begins coverage of popular music's golden years between 1927-1935, and Volume III continues with recordings from 1935-1946. The set's emphasis is on the progression of light music from the dawn of sound recording through World War II, with particular emphasis on the profound, and perhaps incalculable, influence of African-Americans. The listener gets to hear popular musical tastes come of age, as the recordings span eras dominated by "coon songs," ragtime, jazz, swing, boogie woogie, and the earliest seeds of rock'n' roll, along with a healthy sampling of folk music ranging from Uncle Dave Macon to Woody Guthrie. The result is an outstanding, if somewhat eccentric, introduction to the halcyon days of American song.

Technical reconstruction and liner notes are by Allen Lowe, author of a *Cadence Jazz* book by the same name, although the book extends to 1956. Lowe intends this collection as a companion for the book, and it works effectively in that manner. However, the listener is hardly required to own the book since Lowe has helpfully included extensive and informative illustrated booklets with each volume. These provide background details on each recording and artist, as well as commentary on significant trends in musical tastes. Lowe's introduction explains that the collection is an attempt to introduce every style of American popular music inspired by African-Americans, from early vocal quartets and minstrels to jazz, hillbilly and country, gospel, rhythm and blues, and "classic" pop singers. Appropriately, the earliest recording included is *The Unique Quartet* singing "Mama's Black Baby Boy," recorded in 1893. As the oldest known surviving recording by black performers, it is a priceless audio artifact and a fascinating example of the late nineteenth century rhythms that inspired most of the musical styles in the United States in the next century. Not surprisingly, the audio quality of "Mama's Black Baby Boy" is poor, and this is true with many of the selections on the first two discs. Among these, the scratchy 1897 *Cousins* and *De Moss* recording of "Poor Mourner" and an unattributed 1900 "Cakewalk" offer similar fascinations despite their obvious and understandable audio deficiencies. Considering the age and fragility of the source materials, it should be noted that many of these vintage selections have been effectively — even remarkably —