

Timson, like many before him, also overstates Caruso's accomplishment in singing and, subsequently, recording the bass aria from Puccini's *La Bohème*, Vecchia zimarra. The feat is not so astonishing as has been suggested. The aria lies high and the average robust tenor could make some attempt at it. Another example of Timson working perhaps a little too hard to perpetuate the Caruso myth and of his undue reliance on dated research.

Thirty well-chosen selections from Caruso's remarkable legacy of recordings is the real appeal of this set. That said, it is hard to imagine that they are incentive by themselves to fork out \$40.00-plus to buy *A Life in Words and Music: Enrico Caruso*.

If the purpose of this issue is to stimulate interest in singers of the past, and Caruso in particular, the purchaser would have benefited from a short list of additional reading or other sources of information. Naxos may be asking too much of your "average" listener to judge the tenor as one of the greatest and most colourful of his or any age based on this documentary. The biographical information, to a knowledgeable ear, lacks authority and the recordings, as pointed out, are to be found elsewhere in the Naxos catalog.

The next subject in this series is the Italian tenor Beniamino Gigli, due for release in the spring of 2004. *Reviewed by Barry R. Ashpole*

Endnotes

1. *Caruso: The Complete Recordings* will be reviewed separately in a later edition of the *ARSC Journal*.
2. "Caruso's First Recordings: Myth and Reality," *ARSC Journal* 1994;26(2):193-201.
3. "Caruso on Records: A New Discography," *ARSC Journal* 2003;34(1):33-47.

Beniamino Gigli: The Complete Recordings 1936-38.¹ Romophone 82020-2.

With this issue Romophone continues its complete Gigli series to cover the period from May 1936 to June 1938, with the sensible but important omission of the complete *La Bohème* recorded in March 1938 and widely available on other labels including the recent Naxos Historical release. The effect of this abbreviation is to create the impression of a mélange of Gigli's variegated art at this time, in which popular hits from his films by such composers as de Curtis, Melichar, Becce, and Bixio are interspersed with sacred airs by Gounod, Bizet, and César Franck, art songs by Schumann and Grieg, two great operatic arias, one famous operatic duet, two patriotic songs reflecting a fleeting national exuberance before the disasters of the German alliance, and a series of perennial favorites from the genre of the Italian and Neapolitan song down to the romantically moving "Occhi di fata" by Denza, and the sparkling "La Danza" by Rossini sung with a vivacious sense of rhythm and an apparently inexhaustible flow of breath.

Paradoxically, these were the years Gigli had originally promised himself and his public would be the first of his retirement. He wanted to leave, he said, while he was still at his best, and some part of his life, he felt, should be for himself.² But in 1935 he made a film, almost as an experimental gesture of farewell. It proved popular, he was induced to make another, and then another, until he found that, with his energies

renewed in abundance as a result of the discovery and treatment of his diabetes in combination with certain developments in his private life, these years of his projected retirement actually became the ones of his most intense activity in opera, concerts, films, radio, and recordings, carrying his fame to still greater heights. Vocally, despite some loss of the sheer lyric beauty of his timbre as it had been in earlier years and its replacement by a more burnished, robust quality, he was still in his prime, able to achieve the most tender lyric effects through his skill in modulation and his mastery of *mezza voce*. Consequently, all the items on this issue are beautifully and expressively sung, the Grieg no less than the de Curtis pieces, some of them with an angelic voice as in the Bach-Gounod "Ave Maria," others reverentially as in "Panis Angelicus," more often with truly Latin fervor, sentiment, or scintillating verve.

The great glory of the issue is the hauntingly lovely Cilèa aria from *L'Arlesiana* commonly known as the Lamento di Federico, first sung but never recorded by Caruso, later popularized by Gigli and Schipa in concerts and on records, and finally given by Gigli on the operatic stage. Here, the atmospheric of the recording, the interplay of *mezza voce* and full voice, and the flexibility of the *mezza voce* itself, are things at which to wonder. Scarcely less impressive is the *Bohème* duet with Caniglia in which every phrase is instinct with the youthful ardor both the score and text suggest. Moreover surely no other tenor has sung the recitative "Se quel guerrier io fossi!" that precedes "Celeste Aïda" with the arresting vigor Gigli displays. The aria follows in more romantic vein, pointing to a Radamès who is very much a lover first, a warrior second, a concept that is justified by the eventual unravelling of the plot. Only the cutting back of the tone on the final high B-flat is, perhaps, questionable, although the effect must have been intentional, since another take could easily have rectified it.

All in all, this CD is a valuable memento of some of the greatest operatic singing of the twentieth century and, chiefly, of the ever popular encore and film songs of a great matinee idol at a time when his success was running ever higher.

The transfers by Mark Obert-Thorn are, however, another matter. They are clear and the surfaces are reasonably quiet. But standards in this matter have been rising with the best Marston, Naxos Historical, and, especially, Foni issues, so that clarity alone is no longer enough; one looks also for increasing fidelity to the artist's timbre, which after all is the essence of much of the beauty. Unfortunately in all the Romophone Gigli issues, but especially in this one, the total spectrum of the vocal tone with its overlay of softness even in the loudest passages, and even at the age of forty-eight, has been sacrificed, probably through a preference for certain frequencies, to the pursuit of clarity alone. Furthermore the volume and fullness of certain *mezza voce* passages seem to have been artificially reduced.³ The effect of this is at times a metallic clarity, on occasions almost a harshness that is entirely alien to Gigli's art. His soft singing was soft in texture, not in volume; and something of that softness, *morbidezza* in Italian terminology, carried over to his most powerful notes. A closer study of the singer's actual characteristics would have yielded a still happier result. *Reviewed by Colin Bain*

Endnotes

1. Arias from *L'Arlesiana* and *Aida*; duet from *La Bohème*; songs by de Curtis, Melichar, Gounod, Bizet, César Franck, Schumann, Grieg, Becce, Curti, Bianc, Puccini, Bixio, Tosti, Cinque, Denza, and Rossini.
2. Gigli interview in *The Atlanta Journal*, 22 April 1929.
3. A comparison of the best LP transfers of these recordings and of the original 78s played on suitable electrical equipment will confirm these views.

John McCormack: The Complete Odeon, Sterling & Pathé Recordings. Cheyne Records. CHE44364/67 (4 CDs). Cheyne Records, PO Box 132, Tunbridge Wells, Kent, TN1 2XF, United Kingdom.

The recording career of John McCormack (1884-1945) spanned the years 1904 to 1942. Not surprisingly, the voice changed considerably during that time, and listening to the recordings in sequence allows us to follow its progression from youth to full maturity and beyond.

Frankly, I wasn't expecting too much when this set arrived on my desk, but the presentation is excellent with an attractive, if much reproduced, photograph of the tenor on the front cover. The back cover lists brief details of the contents of all four CDs, though the print is small and legibility suffers. The accompanying booklet is nicely presented, citing lyricists, composers and detailed histories of the songs. The detail is most commendable and must have taken a great deal of time and effort to research. The sheer wealth of it, however, makes finding one's way through the booklet difficult, and it is not always easy to find individual items. Although matrix numbers, take numbers, and even the speeds at which the original recordings were transferred are explicitly stated, catalogue numbers are omitted, thus failing the academic test of fully identifying sources. There are also at least two errors in the matrix listings. Fred Weatherley's "Mountain Lovers" is listed as matrix Lxx3134. However, my copy, on a Columbia pressing (880), clearly shows the 4 scratched through and a 5 substituted.¹ This is corroborated by every McCormack discography I have consulted which lists it as Lxx3135.² Similarly "A Southern Song" cites matrix Lxx3135-2. I have an original Odeon copy and, although the label is too thick to clearly identify the matrix number, Lxx3135 is undoubtedly an error. McCormack discographies are unanimous on Lxx3134.

Overall the production is a little uneven, with long gaps between some items and barely a pause for breath elsewhere but to its credit, texts and translations of most of the Italian songs and arias are provided. This is a most useful feature since texts for such songs as "Pianto del core" and "Voi dormite signora" are by no means easy to locate. Curiously however, the compilers have been unable to supply a text for Leoncavallo's "Mattinata".

Sales of McCormack's very first recordings were evidently poor and, perhaps with good reason, the companies for whom he had previously recorded were not anxious to