

Selections<sup>1</sup> performed by Golden Age Singers. Naxos Historical 8.110178-79 (2 CDs).

The Arkadia 78005 re-issue of this 1943 recording was reviewed enthusiastically in these pages by Colin Bain (*ARSC Journal* 1998;29[2]:220-221). Mr. Bain's praise for the performance is amply borne out by the fact that it has remained in the catalogs in one medium or another for sixty years. The justifications for bringing attention to this Naxos re-issue are threefold.

First, the Naxos producers have appended eight electrically recorded selections from *Un Ballo in Maschera* made by distinguished artists for Italian Columbia. The tenor excerpts are performed by Alessandro Bonci, a true "Golden Age" singer born 20 years earlier than Gigli. Bonci's impeccable technique and elegant style were much admired by his younger colleague. Endowed with a lighter (and probably smaller) voice than most of his contemporaries, Bonci was a distinguished member of that group of singers, such as Battistini and Plançon, whose artistry set the dimensions of a musical era. He performs "La rivedrò nell'estasi," "Di tu se fidele," "È scherzo od è follia," and the love duet from Act 2 (with Pagliarini). Each of these selections ranks with the best on record. The baritone selections – "Alla vita che t'arride" and "Eri tu, che macchiavi" – were recorded by Riccardo Stracciari, who was able to stand out in a period rich in baritones due to a naturally beautiful voice and dramatic style. Giannina Arangi-Lombardi, at age 44, contributes Amelia's "Ma dall'arido stelo" and "Morrò, ma prima in grazia" in beautiful fashion, but not with the overwhelming passion she brought to her Gioconda and Leonora in *Il Trovatore*.

A second reason for considering this re-issue is its modest price, particularly in comparison with competing versions. Finally, it is hard to believe that Ward Marston's transfers from the original discs could be bettered. As usual, Naxos furnishes brief liner notes (by Paul Campion) and a summary of the action (by Keith Anderson) but no libretto.

As one of the best performances of *Un Ballo in Maschera* on record, this set can be recommended to listeners who are comfortable with clean monaural sound. *Reviewed by Elwood A. McKee*

### Endnote

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| <p>1. "La rivedrò nell'estasi" (Bonci, <i>et al.</i>), "Alla vita che t'arride" (Stracciari), "Di' tu se fedele" (Bonci), "È scherzo od è follia" (Bonci <i>et al.</i>), "Ma dall' arido stelo" (Arangi-Lombardi),</p> | <p>"Teco io sto" (Bonci &amp; Pagliarini), "Morrò, ma prima in grazia" (Arangi-Lombardi), "Eri tu, che macchiavi" (Stracciari); all from Italian Columbia originals.</p> |
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**Beniamino Gigli: Verdi Operatic Arias.**<sup>1</sup> Fono 1003 (1CD).

Immediately as this CD begins to play the famous recording of the Quartet from *Rigoletto* with Galli-Curci, Homer, Gigli, and de Luca, originally recorded in 1927, it is apparent that something sensational is happening in the reproduction of voices on historical recordings. For virtually the first time, the lush luminosity of Gigli's timbre as it was in that year is captured with all the loveliness that had seemed to have passed into legend long ago, with only a shadow of it remaining for the modern listener on even the best transfer. The same is true to only a slightly less degree for the other celebrated

singers in this famous ensemble. When Alfredo's aria from *La Traviata*, dating from 1928, follows, the impression deepens; never before has the Gigli voice sounded so beautiful on a CD, an LP, or on a 78. At last something very like the living voice is heard nearly seventy-five years after this singing was originally committed to wax. In trios from *I Lombardi* and *Attila* the same is true for the voices of Elisabeth Rethberg and Ezio Pinza. Then, when the record moves ahead nine years from the Gigli of 1930 to the Gigli of 1939 in two duets from *Traviata* with Maria Caniglia, the change of timbre effected by those nine intervening years is at once evident. The singing is still of the highest standard, enough to keep any audience on the edge of its seats throughout, but the luxurious lyricism of Gigli's voice in the earlier recordings has now been replaced by a distinctly more burnished but still appealing quality; this runs through excerpts from *Il Trovatore*, *La Forza del Destino* and *Un Ballo in Maschera*, dating from the years between 1940 and 1943. Finally, when we come to the postwar Gigli of 1946 in excerpts from the complete *Aïda* with Maria Caniglia, the same picture of increased fidelity in the reproduction remains and we gain a new and enhanced impression of Gigli's Radamès as it was at the age of fifty-six. Certainly the tenor has aged perceptibly but the voice sounds much better than it does on alternative issues; it is still vibrant, still free without apparent strain, and it continues to exude that quality of operatic grandeur that has formerly been one of its chief characteristics.

The explanation for this startling quality of reproduction seems to lie in the fact that, according to Fono, its "24-Bit transfers" have been made from the original masters, thus eliminating the more or less grave deficiencies in fidelity that always arose in the manufacture of even the best 78s, to say nothing of the deterioration that has more or less invariably arisen in them from the baleful effects of time and, usually, repeated playing. This may be an expensive approach for a recording company to take through the possible payment of royalties, but its advantages are so manifest that, in what has become in many instances a fiercely competitive market with many rival labels striving against each other for sales, it may be a signpost for the future, one from which the purchaser stands to make artistically invaluable gains.

Quite apart from the superior quality of its reproduction of historic voices, the disc is interesting for the vivid picture it gives of Gigli as a Verdi interpreter, from the lyric effusions of his Duke of Mantua and Alfredo, to the more dramatic triumphs of his Riccardo in *Un Ballo in Maschera*, recorded in highly adverse circumstances in 1943, and his Radamès of 1946. *Reviewed by Colin Bain*

### Endnote

1. Arias and ensembles from *Rigoletto*, *La Traviata*, *I Lombardi*, *Attila*, *Il Trovatore*, *La Forza del Destino*, *Un Ballo in Maschera*, and *Aïda*.

**Bach: Matthäus-Passion.** Elfriede Trötschel, soprano; Diana Eustrati, alto; Helmut Krebs, tenor/Evangelist; Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau, baritone/Jesus; Friedrich Härtel, bass; Silvia Kind, harpsichord; P. Hoffman, organ; St. Hedwig's Cathedral Boys' Choir, Berlin Radio Chorus and Orchestra, Fritz Lehmann, conductor (Rec. 1949). Music and Arts CD-1091 (3 CDs).