

Beniamino Gigli: The Record of Prejudice

The following article is based on a paper presented by Barry R. Ashpole at the 27th annual conference of ARSC held in Chicago, IL, in 1993. Co-author of the paper is Colin Bain (of Australia), on whose exhaustive research much of the information is based. Amendments and additions to the original paper reflect new research and further investigation.

During the controversial period in his career, in the years leading up to and immediately following World War II, Beniamino Gigli was, above all, the most international of Italian singers, in both his personal orientation and in his arrangement of his itineraries. In effect, Gigli wanted to make himself what he called a “free artist” in the way that his friend Chaliapin had been a free artist, that is, one attached to no national theater. Although he lived in Rome between 1932-1944, and in a sense used the Teatro Reale dell’Opera as a kind of artistic home or base, Gigli had only a very general agreement with the Italian government for him to give performances in Italian theaters as he chose. Much of his time was spent abroad.

Gigli was never a political artist in the sense that Schnabel, Gieseking, Kreisler, Flagstad or certain others could be said to have been political artists. He had a reputation for disliking political discussion and taking no part in it. He was never a Fascist. It is true that, as one of more than six thousand honors bestowed upon him, Gigli was granted honorary membership of the Fascist Party in 1932, when war was not an issue, but he never attended any meeting and the membership was purely “honorary,” indeed an honor he could not have politely declined.

In dealing with this subject, it is necessary to distinguish carefully between the attitudes toward their respective artistic communities of the Nazi and the Fascist governments. The Nazis sought to control and direct the arts in Germany, while the Fascists did no such thing, although both governments lavished money on the arts.

The impact of Fascist Italy on the opera scene in Europe was to preserve the highest possible standards of operatic production and performance during the period of the Great Depression and the earlier years of the war. As a consequence, Italy became, with the exception of Wagnerian opera, the center of world opera, and certainly of opera in Europe. In Germany, the impact was not dissimilar, though Jewish music was not performed and Jewish performers were not engaged, with the exception of a few Jewish players in the Berlin Philharmonic, who had been protected by Furtwängler on artistic grounds. This unhappy loss of Jewish music was, as far as the Nazis were concerned, compensated for by the funds and the enthusiasm the Nazis injected into the musical community.

Up to 1944, the impact of both regimes on Gigli and his career, but more especially

that of the Fascist regime in Italy, was minimal, but basically favorable. The main factor here, by far, was simply the very high standard of production achieved by the Italian theaters during the Fascist period. There was virtually no political element at all. Mussolini was not a particularly musical man; his interest in music was simply an aspect of his general urge to promote Italy and things Italian, and opera happened to be the art form most popular in Italy at the time and the one in which the Italians themselves were most gifted. Some of the German leaders were highly musical, chiefly Hitler himself and, still more, Goebbels, Hitler being attracted mainly by Wagnerian opera, Goebbels having more catholic tastes. Both men held Gigli in the highest esteem as an artist and the tenor was undoubtedly the most popular singer with German audiences at the time. But this popularity had been established in Germany long before Hitler had come to power, by Gigli's tours of Germany in 1924, 1925, 1929, and 1932, when he was rapturously received by German audiences. After Hitler came to power, Gigli paid fewer and fewer visits to Germany, but during them both Hitler and Goebbels demonstrated what can best be called a kind of reverence for him. The same could be said, of course, for Caruso's receptions by Kaiser Wilhelm II. Gigli's contacts with Hitler were limited by the fact that Hitler spoke no Italian, Gigli no German; such conversations as they held were conducted in English, which Hitler spoke just a little, Gigli only slightly more. Goebbels was another matter, because he spoke Italian. On the rare occasions when Gigli was in Berlin, Goebbels visited him privately in the apartments of German residents Gigli was visiting and at hospitals where Gigli was singing for the sick. These were their only contacts.

Gigli had made his attitude to Fascism clear in a statement he made to the American press in 1925, when he said: "I am neither a Fascist nor an anti-Fascist. It is just that when Mussolini is in power I know that my mother in Italy is safe." From this attitude, Gigli never wavered. Like most Italians of his time and many foreigners, including Otto Kahn and Winston Churchill, he was an admirer of Mussolini for the order he had brought to Italy and for the favorable attitude his government had taken to opera. Gigli was a man who was almost entirely artistically obsessed; he was, in any case, far too busy with his art to take more than the most passing interest in political developments. Political movements and theories did not interest him at all.

In so far as he had an attitude to Nazi Germany in the earlier years of Hitler's power up to 1936, the year of the Berlin Olympics, when all the nations of the world gathered in Berlin, Gigli's could best be described as equivocal and mistrustful. From 1936 onward he tacitly dissociated himself from Nazi Germany, except so far as his duties as an Italian subject obliged him to go to Germany with the Scala company in 1937 for two performances in Munich and two in Berlin, with an additional concert in Berlin, and then to go with the Teatro Reale company in 1941 for two performances in Berlin. Even if there were no other evidence available, the virtual discontinuance of Gigli's German career after 1936 sufficiently demonstrates his underlying attitude, which was not at all one of hostility to the German people, but was increasingly distrustful of German policy and privately distressed by the intense militarism he had seen emerge in Germany, as well as the racial discrimination, which was anathema to Gigli, not to mention his fears of the possible consequences of German designs on, and eventual occupation of, Austria, which would make Italy vulnerable to a German attack.

To understand Gigli's political attitudes, in so far as he had any, it is necessary to distinguish between patriotism and nationalism. Gigli was essentially an Italian patriot, as

many Italians were in the wake of the *risorgimento*. This is to say that he was loyal to Italy, felt himself to be deeply Italian, and came to regard himself as a kind of roving ambassador for Italian music and culture. He at times intensely resented any actions, attitudes, or statements of an anti-Italian nature, but he was in no sense an Italian nationalist. His views were extremely international. He merely thought that Italian singing and opera were a precious heritage to be cherished, not for Italy alone, but for the whole world.

It would seem that the only slightly political action in the entire course of Gigli's life was his refusal to sing in France in 1937 while France maintained sanctions against Italy over the Ethiopian war. He, however, sang in Britain in the same year. His various refusals to sing at Covent Garden in 1933, 1934, 1935, 1936, 1937, and for that matter 1925, were based entirely on the unwillingness of the Covent Garden management to pay his fees. Lauri-Volpi had refused to sing there in still more fervent terms in 1934 and on other occasions. There was also, with both tenors, some concern about the inferior artistic standards then prevailing at The Royal Opera House.

German occupation of Austria in March 1938 seriously alarmed Gigli, as it did most other Italians. His response can be seen in his giving a concert in the American Embassy in Rome almost immediately and then proceeding to arrange his extensive concert tour of the United States and other parts of North America in 1938-1939. During this tour, he appeared in opera in San Francisco, Los Angeles, Chicago and eventually at the Metropolitan in New York, as well as in other concerts coast to coast across the United States. His aim in doing this most arduous tour was to reconcile himself to American audiences and, he hoped, to renew his association with the Metropolitan, which he envisaged visiting annually as a visiting artist, not a house artist, as Lauri-Volpi had done during his Metropolitan career. This latter aim failed because the then General Manager of the Metropolitan, Edward Johnson, refused adamantly to make any reasonable arrangements as to fees, insisting that the rule of a maximum of one thousand dollars a performance that the Metropolitan had applied to all artists could not be adjusted for Gigli. This annoyed Gigli, for he saw it as militating against the best artistic interests of the Metropolitan, and effectively alienated him from the theater thereafter, as it did the majority of established Italian singers.

A press conference Gigli gave in 1939, on his return to Italy from America, was fairly widely seen as being political in its implications. However, a careful and balanced examination of the statements he made does not endorse this view. The artists of the time were wending their way as best they could through a quagmire of politics and national hostilities bordering on hysteria in the immediate leadup to the war. The fact that Gigli gave a press conference at all on the subject of his American tour was seen as being political in its implications. Such a press conference, however, was not an unusual thing for Gigli to give after a foreign visit; he was almost invariably interviewed by the Italian press on his return from a foreign tour. Nevertheless Gigli had no wish to give a press conference on the subject of America. He was drawn into it by the extremist elements in the Fascist Party, among which Roberto Farinacci was a leading figure, this wing being strongly aligned with Germany.

The facts were these: Gigli was to sing in Massenet's *Manon* in the Teatro Reale following the end of the British concert tour that followed on his American visit. For this reason, he decided to have his portrait in his costume for the role of des Grieux painted by

a capable Italian painter. While Gigli was sitting for the portrait, day by day, the artist inquired of him as to various impressions he had gained during his long tour of the United States. Gigli answered frankly and truthfully, as was his wont. Unknown to Gigli, the painter was also a freelance journalist working for the extreme wing of the Fascist Party. Having completed the painting, the artist wrote a long article on the "interview" Gigli had given him and the Fascist extremists proposed to publish it. Learning of this, Gigli decided to give an open press conference, in which he could at least control to some extent the statements that were attributed to him. In the conference, Gigli expressed his disenchantment with the declining musical conditions he had encountered during his American tour, as compared to those he had known in the period 1920-1932, particularly at the Metropolitan, and he expressed his deep concern at the economic and social plight of many Americans in the Great Depression, mentioning that millions were homeless. This, of course, was only too true; but American journalists took his statements to be a reflection on their country and interjected and booed, while certain extreme Fascist journalists endeavored to draw him into anti-Jewish statements that would please Germany. On the latter, Gigli declined to be drawn, but he was obliged to concede that the Jews were prominent in American banking, which was also true, of course. There was no actual political content in anything that Gigli said; but the extreme Fascist press in Italy took up his statements in such a way as to suggest that there might be, while American press reports almost hysterically presented him as condemning America as such, whereas in fact, he had merely expressed regret for the artistic decline of the Metropolitan and sympathy for the American people. To call his statements at this time political would be a misuse of language, while to see them as an expression of hostility would be to ignore their content. Gigli had been drawn inadvertently to tell the truth at a time when truth itself was little respected and people were highly sensitive to it. Apart from this incident, there was no actual political action in Gigli's life.

The outbreak of war in 1939 certainly affected Gigli's career. His activities were thereafter confined to Italy, but in other respects his career flourished until 1943 and the Allied invasion of Italy. When, following the arrest of Mussolini, Italy prepared to change sides and shortly afterward did so, thus precipitating German occupation of most of Italy, Gigli withdrew from the opera scene to his villa at Montarice, near Porto Recanati. Several times, Maessler, the German commander in Rome, wrote to him requesting him to return to the Teatro Reale and to sing in concerts for the German troops. Gigli politely declined on each occasion, giving health as his reason. In fact, he was suffering from diabetes, a condition that had been discovered in 1935, and he was taking insulin, but he was certainly well enough to sing, as he was presently to do.

After many months of seclusion in his villa, Gigli received a letter from Maestro Oliviero de Fabritiis of the Teatro Reale entreating him to return to the opera in the interests of the other singers, the chorus and orchestra, and all the other people, stagehands, ushers, costumiers, scenographers, cleaners, and maintenance staff, whose employment depended on the opera, which he said could not continue without Gigli because, in his absence, the productions would not attract the necessary audiences. To this, Gigli responded, returning to his Roman villa and appearing at the opera with his daughter, Rina, who was herself by now a prima donna. This was the situation when the American army entered Rome in 1944. Gigli's first response was to arrange to sing with his daugh-

ter in a benefit concert for the partisans. Before the arrival of the Americans, Gigli had been requested every time he appeared at the opera to give a broadcast address after the performance to the German troops. He had on every occasion declined to do so, although other Italian singers did speak to German troops on the radio after performances, driven more by fear of the possible consequences of not doing so than by any enthusiasm for the idea. Maezler had also invited Gigli and a number of others, including Caniglia and Tagliavini, to participate in a concert for the German command given at the Hotel Excelsior. Gigli alone declined to appear. The others cannot be blamed in any way for obliging Maezler; it would have been perilous for them to have done otherwise. At the same time, Gigli's refusal to sing warrants notice and credit. His country was by now at war with Germany and the larger part of it was under German occupation. While he was willing to pursue his normal occupation in these circumstances, he was unwilling to sing specifically for the troops of a country with which his own country was at war. When the Americans entered Rome, on the other hand, they did so as the allies of Italy, and Gigli was more than willing to sing for them.

What ensued is known as the "Gobbo affair," which fuelled rumors of Gigli's identification with Fascism and, particularly, with the German Nazis. The Gobbo, or Hunchback, was an eighteen-year-old Sicilian criminal, named Giuseppe Albano, living in the Roman slums, who had made himself the leader of a gang. He was in prison when the Americans entered the city and he persuaded a junior American officer that he was actually not a criminal, but a patriot unjustly imprisoned by the Fascists, and he was released. In fact, he had been convicted of murder, rape, and armed robbery. A state of chaos prevailed in Rome at the time, and Albano and his gang conducted a reign of terror that is still notorious in Italian history. Since almost everyone in Rome adored Gigli and regarded him as one of the richest Italians, Albano set about a course of blackmail. Heavily armed, he went to each of the newspapers in turn and denounced Gigli as a Fascist. The result was a set of glaring headlines in the Roman newspapers next day, some of which made fairly trivial but completely unfounded allegations about Gigli's having sung for Maezler, which he alone had not done. Looked at today as headlines crafted by journalists, most of whom a week earlier had themselves been Fascists, these articles raise a wry smile; but at the time they were far from amusing, and were perhaps the worst instance of slander in the history of Italian publishing. It has to be admitted, of course, that the journalists writing the articles did so at the point of a gun.

It seems incredible now, but the highest ranking American officer in Rome at that particular moment held only the rank of Captain; the main army had moved north in pursuit of the Germans. This captain was persuaded by Albano, acting of course as a patriot, to ban Gigli from appearing in the forthcoming concert in the interests of public order. Rina Gigli then voluntarily withdrew from the concert too. The Albano reign of terror continued unabated for six months. He arranged for the Gigli villa to be surrounded by a mob, some of whom were simply reacting hysterically, most of whom were merely intimidated. On one occasion, the Gigli villa was broken into and some damage done. Autographed portraits of Hitler, Mussolini, and Goebbels, which Gigli was keeping as historical mementos along with the portraits of many other famous people, including US Presidents Coolidge and Roosevelt, were torn from the walls and damaged. But never again did Albano permit anyone to enter the villa without authorization. However, he

went there himself nearly every day, persuaded Gigli to sing for him, and went out boasting that the greatest tenor in the world could sing only for him.

Very soon, Albano's visits took a more sinister turn, for he endeavored to blackmail Gigli for large sums of money. Inaccurate and hysterical reports appeared in the world press, some of them saying that Gigli had been arrested, others that he had been shot as a Fascist. These reports were quickly corrected, but had caused grave alarm to many of his admirers throughout the world.

Gigli's response to Albano was, naturally enough, to send for the police. The Questore of Rome saw Gigli, took a personal interest in the case, and assigned the Vice Questore to the case full time. An extensive investigation was made.

The American Command seems to have been more gullible than the British. Of course, the real position was that Gigli was a prominent citizen of Italy, which was a country allied with the United States and Britain in the war against Germany; the matter therefore did not concern the American Command. The case was referred to the Supreme Allied Commander in the Mediterranean area, Field Marshal Alexander, who sent a British colonel to interview Gigli; the colonel ended by inviting him to visit Britain when the war was over and affairs had settled down a little.

For a time, however, it remained impossible for Gigli to appear in public, mainly because of the menace of Albano and his gang, partly because the Roman public in its terror might have objected to Gigli's appearance, and almost certainly would have while Albano was at large. The Italian police then struck. Albano was shot dead, the papers said, trying to escape arrest, and five hundred people were arrested in the largest police raid in the history of Rome. After this, Gigli returned to the opera almost immediately, singing in Rome and Naples. Sections of the audiences in both cities booed him at his first appearances, but it seems that they were chiefly members of a *claque* Tagliavini had organized and paid, not that this should be taken as anything particularly unusual in the opera performances of the period. At all events, on every occasion, Gigli was finally given an ovation. In Naples, the enthusiasm was so great that on a number of occasions he was obliged to give a concert from the stage after his performance. The whole issue then subsided.

After appearing in opera throughout Italy, Spain, and Portugal, singing also in Sicily and Switzerland, Gigli returned to London on 4 November 1946 to one of the greatest, most ecstatic receptions of his entire career. His final tour of the United States and Canada in 1955, at a time when he was dangerously ill and should not have been singing, was intended as a final gesture of reconciliation. He was received in this spirit by the American audiences, who greeted him warmly.

Unless one calls Gigli's declining to sing in France in 1937 "political," the most patient research has failed to uncover a single political act by the tenor. Of course, the French matter related to the Ethiopian war, not World War II. Gigli's motivation was patriotic rather than aggressive; French newspapers had attacked Italy in strong terms at a time when Italy was trying to form an alliance with France and Britain to block the ambitions of Hitler; and, as Gigli fully understood, both France and Britain had conceded Ethiopia to Italy by a secret treaty entered into between the three powers prior to 1914. Gigli could not abide abuse of his beloved Italy and felt that his French tour might become an opportunity for anti-Italian demonstrations in France.

Undoubtedly, perceptions of Gigli's conduct during the war, both in Italy and abroad,

were influenced by the unhappy Albano affair at the time. This was soon cleared up and informed people took no notice of it. The envious Lauri-Volpi sang at Gigli's funeral, but in visits to Italy much later, at a time when he was aged and sorrowing for the loss of his wife, he made statements on Italian television to the effect that Gigli had been "a great Fascist". This is both deplorable and sad, for Lauri-Volpi had himself been an enthusiastic Fascist and had lived in Fascist Spain after the collapse of Fascist Italy, though I should add here that the tenor's wife was Spanish. Naturally, Lauri-Volpi supplied no evidence and other Italian singers paid tribute to Gigli on television, describing him as the greatest of all tenors and rebutting the accusations. As everyone who knew him was well aware, jealousy of Gigli was a lifelong obsession with Lauri-Volpi from the time they both studied together at the Liceo Musicale in Rome until the day Lauri-Volpi died. His singing at Gigli's funeral perhaps assuaged his feelings at the time, but they reasserted themselves later, most of all in his last sad years after his wife had died.

In 1957, Gigli was given the largest funeral ever accorded an Italian singer. In 1990, his centenary celebrations were the greatest and most extensive any singer has ever had: the United States took little or no part in them, yet Gigli had been one of the two greatest tenors ever to appear at the Metropolitan and had rendered inestimable services to American musical life and charities. I wonder if this American inertia reflects some naive and misinformed lingering suspicion concerning the allegations made by the criminal Albano, or whether it really reflects the resentment of the Metropolitan Opera of Gigli's withdrawal from that theatre in 1932, when it was said that he was the only singer to refuse a salary cut. If so, since I doubt that Americans could be so resentful over a widely misunderstood incident sixty years ago, I wonder if some myth Gatti-Casazza left behind him, which Edward Johnson possibly perpetuated, has persisted, so that present day American authorities, believing the myth, are simply misinformed.

Although this matter scarcely falls within the bounds of the subject of this paper, I shall deal with it briefly. Gigli did not accept the salary cut of ten per cent in 1931. More precisely, he first accepted it and then withdrew his consent. He was not the only singer to do so. He withdrew his consent when Fiorello Henry LaGuardia, who later became Mayor of New York, advised the tenor that acceptance of a pay cut would make his contract with the Met for four seasons up to 1935 null and void. It became known to him that the eventual intention of the management was a salary reduction of fifty per cent across the board, which would be sixty per cent for him, because of his high contractual fee, which was to rise to \$2,500 a performance, the fee Caruso had received at the same stage of his Metropolitan career. This sixty per cent cut, in breach of contract, was not a condition that the foremost operatic artist in the world could accept if he wished to retain his position. Furthermore, Gigli was by no means the only artist to leave the Metropolitan voluntarily in 1932; twenty nine other singers left with him, including Jeritza and Bohnen. There were other artists who left forcibly as a result of Gatti's economies. Additional artists, including Lauri-Volpi, left the following year. Only Gigli was given publicity. That was because Gatti had felt the retention of Gigli essential to the maintenance of his own career and because, after a row Gigli had had with him in front of the other singers, Gatti was determined to bend Gigli to his will and to take revenge if he could not do so. It is not well known that Gatti and his wife, who was the prima ballerina at the Met, both received a large salary increase in 1931. When they took a pay cut in

Beniamino Gigli Remembered

On 8 October 1997, the Metropolitan Opera unveiled a bust of Beniamino Gigli in the title role of Giordano's *Andrea Chénier* in recognition of his great career at and services to the Metropolitan between 1920 and 1932. In their addresses at the unveiling ceremony, Gigli's former colleagues, Licia Albanese and Gabor Carelli, and Metropolitan Director of Archives, Robert Tuggle, paid tribute to Gigli's qualities as man and artist. In a concurrent statement Mayor Giuliani of New York proclaimed 8 October as "Beniamino Gigli Day in New York". His declaration acknowledged Gigli's services to American musical life, noting that he had given a world record number of eight hundred performances free for charitable causes, many of them in the United States. Earlier, in 1977, a "Beniamino Gigli Day" had been proclaimed in Brooklyn in similar recognition of Gigli's services.

During his twelve years' residence in New York, Gigli was said to have been instrumental in raising more than a million dollars for charitable causes. He sang and worked indefatigably for such causes as the Italian hospital, the war wounded, the war orphans, the Columbus memorial, the Duse memorial, police orphans, the New York poor, the Unemployed Musicians' Fund, the Opéra Comique, and the Metropolitan, and was for some years Honorary Chief of the New York Police.

1932 it brought their salaries to the same level as they were in 1931. The eventual outcome of this dispute was a brilliant career for Gigli in Italy and throughout the world and Gatti's retirement as, according to Ponselle, a broken and disillusioned man. If the simple facts of this were known, the Metropolitan might be embarrassed for the past statements of its former General Manager, but it could scarcely blame Gigli for not entering into a new, demeaning contract with the Metropolitan Opera Association, which took over the production of opera at the Metropolitan following the liquidation of the original Metropolitan Opera Company.

It is one of the more bitter ironies of history that the accusations of 1944, and to a lesser extent those of 1932 and 1939, should have been levelled at Gigli of all people. Certainly, he was by far the most famous singer of Fascist Italy, but he was the antithesis of all those authoritarian faults that are popularly attributed to Fascism. Deeply religious but an experienced man of the world, he was generous to a fault. He had an abiding and pervasive humanity. In private, his servants ate with him at table; he played cards with them; he invited waiters in hotels and restaurants to join him at table. A patriot in his heart, he had no taint of aggressive nationalism in his nature. Normally almost entirely free of the high temperament that besets most great artists of the lyric stage, he was prone to sudden, very brief, and very extreme outbursts of rage, which would pass within a few moments as if nothing had happened. It was such an outburst that underlay the clash between Gatti and Gigli at the Metropolitan in 1932. Gatti did not readily forgive such things, and the matter was from that time really beyond reconciliation. In 1939, Gigli was the victim, albeit innocent enough, of an extremist intrigue; in 1944, he was

guilty of nothing more than being a rich man and Italy's premier artist, one whose voice will live as long as people listen to opera or enjoy beautiful singing.

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