

**By Rob Cowan**  
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### **Feodor Chaliapin: The Complete Recordings**

Marston (13) (F) 51301-2

This magnificent set poses the question: what does the term 'great singer' actually mean? A beautiful voice? A mastery of words and musical timing? A genius for acting? Many singers qualify on one, maybe two, of those important counts, but the Russian bass Feodor Chaliapin qualified on all four, and more. The best of his recordings will have you confront not a singing actor, or an actor who sings, but a real person whose heart, soul and considerable intellect transform the act of listening into a personal audience: Chaliapin the man becomes actual, and the years fall away like chaff blown by the wind. Ward Marston's achievement is in making the entire range of Chaliapin's discography sound better than ever before, and when you consider that even though individual sessions could be problematic the voice itself loved the recording horn or microphone, so you can imagine the visceral impact of what's on offer. It's miraculous, nothing less.

Many shellac sides are being published here for the first time and as with most spontaneous musicians (jazzers come to mind first and foremost) the issue of alternate takes or different versions always involves significant shifts in phrasing, dynamics, expressive nuancing, or that unique manner of 'sung speech' that only Chaliapin commanded. The voice itself, though hardly beautiful in the 'bel canto' sense of the term, is dark, dry and grainy, yet capable of countless gradations of tone ranging from a sweetened *pianissimo* to a full-throated *fortissimo*. The beauty is in the pathos and sense of theatre that Chaliapin achieves, in - for example - the six versions of the Russian folksong 'Night' that are included, the recordings dating from between 1902 (two from that year, one maybe from as early as 1898) and 1930. Whether accompanied or unaccompanied (Chaliapin presents the song in both guises) the recognizable manner of rhetoric alters minutely so that the listening experience shifts between emotional planes. Heartbreak is at the of Massenet's *Élégie*, Chaliapin heightening the tragic mood at the climax by projecting his voice to the rear end of the studio, or so it sounds.

Among the operatic highlights is the 'Cavatina' from Rachmaninov's *Aleko*, the later version especially, and famous recording of music from Dargomizhky's *Rusalka* and Glinka's *Ruslan and Ludmilla* (Farlaf's 'Rondo', a virtuoso *tour de force*). There are four live opera sequences from Covent Garden, the Mephistopheles or Mefistofele of Gounod and Boito, respective, Rimsky Korsakov's *Mozart and Salieri* and, most famously, Mussorgsky's *Boris Godunov*. Boris, a signature role, is generously represented throughout the set and while the July 1928 live performances turn the music drama into virtual reality, the studio versions also have much to offer. There are various discs of the 'Death Scene', one of my favourites being an unissued version from May 1926 where the effect of what seem like skilfully reduced forces makes the music sound as if it's being presented in a edition prepared for Schoenberg's Society for the Promotion of New Music. Another meaningful contrast is between the two recordings of Tchaikovsky's *The Nightingale* contained on disc 4, the first from 1913, the second from 1921, the former the more constrained of the two. And among the unpublished gems - and there are quite a few - 'The Old Song' and 'Verses from

an Album' by Grieg on the same CD, the latter especially. Perennials such as *The Song of the Flea* and *The Song of the Volga Boatmen* are variously represented. Chaliapin's idiosyncratic Mozart and Rossini have always divided listeners' opinions and his melodramatic way with *lieder* (sung in Russian) will not please those schooled in the urbane recordings of Fischer-Dieskau though if you're a fan of the more theatrical Hans Hotter, Helge Roswaenge, Leo Slezak or Michael Bohnen you could well be potentially closer to appreciating Chaliapin.

Maybe the best place to start in this particular context would be with the spoken recitation on disc five 'Dreams: When still a child within the walls of school' (unpublished on 78) where then singer employs the full range of his vocal skills to make speech musical: there's no mistaking who you're listening to, and yet *are* you listening to spoken music or musical speech? Such is the vocal variety of Chaliapin's amazing performance that the divide vanishes.

As to Marston's presentation, it could hardly be bettered. The Discs are housed as six double-packs and a single disc in a tough, laminated box with a 324-page laminated hard-book. The book itself is a work of art with texts and translations, full discographical information and an index of titles copious photographs featuring Chaliapin in various roles, most memorably as Boris. In addition to a note from Ward, there are personal recollections by the pianists Gerald Moore and Ivor Newton, a survey of the recording by Michael Aspinall, a survey of the singer's Life and Career by Michael Scott and an essay 'Feodor Chaliapin: the Gory of Imperfection' by Tully Potter, who flies a flag for the acoustical recordings. I on the other hand think that both as an artist and as a singer Chaliapin matured with age, his characterizations gaining in vividness and emotional impact. Perhaps the greatest value of this set is that it enshrines a manner of performance that nowadays would be unthinkable. No-one would have the chutzpah to perform the way Chaliapin did, with such passion, honesty, authenticity of feeling and uninhibited directness. Every music college should own copy of this set, a testament to what is possible but what is so rarely achieved.