The Edison Legacy, Vol. 2 -- Unpublished treasures of the Edison Archive
Recordings of operatic arias sung by various artists including Adelina Agostinelli (sop), Celestine Boninsegna (sop), Umberto Macnez (ten), Giuseppe Kaschmann (bar).

Marston mono

All releases from Marston are noteworthy, but some are more noteworthy than others, and this falls into the latter category. This second volume of a continuing series contains three-and-a-half hours of unpublished recordings, many by singers who were among the greatest of their period, recorded between 1910 and 1912 on Edison’s then-new Diamond Discs. I reviewed a book about Diamond Discs (Collector’s Guide to Edison Records, by George A. Copeland and Michael W. Sherman) in CRQ’s Spring edition (page 55), so anyone interested will find a brief history of them there.

The issue also illustrates the incredibly frustrating nature of Edison’s attitude to his invention. At this point he was experimenting with his disc technology and made over 1,000 test recordings, most of which have exceptionally fine sound for their period. Part of his experimentation was in the use of 12-inch sides that had an unprecedented playing time of over seven minutes. Of these 1,000 tests, fewer than 25 were issued and no 12-inch sides were ever issued. Had they been of typical Edison fare, this would not have mattered so much, but, surprisingly, he made a large number of test recordings of opera singers, a type of singer and music in which he had no real interest. In working on a discography of the great verismo soprano Carmen Melis, who made comparatively few records, I discovered to my immense frustration that she had recorded 36 Diamond Disc sides for Edison at this period. Only one side (a Neapolitan song) was published. Marston published two more of these in Volume I of this series, so perhaps I can hope for more in future volumes.

The contents of these CDs range from names well known to collectors to quite obscure singers, but all are good and some of exceptional quality. We start with an almost forgotten soprano, Adelina Agostinelli. She is a very fine singer with an excellent voice and interesting artistic persona. She certainly would not get away with such an amount of freedom in the "Jewel Song" (Faust) today, but it is a performance full of life and interest, and the 12-inch side lasts 6’55”, allowing a long section of recitative as well as the aria with its middle section. She also sings "Tu che le vanità" (Don Carlo) in full (7’02”) with real intensity. Three sides by the great Celestina Boninsegna make for particularly interesting listening. All three ("Tacea la notte", "Pace mio dio" and "Ritorna vincitor") were recorded by The Gramophone Company and Columbia within a few years of these Edisons, but the Edisons are markedly slower, which, I would have thought, must be closer to the speeds she used in actual performance. "Pace mio dio" lasts six minutes here as opposed to the four-and-a-half of the G&T. The voice comes over magnificently, giving a much greater sense of its amplitude and quality. The French contralto Marie Delna gets four sides that are in a different league to her 1902 Pathé. A Trojans aria is quite
superb, though hearing her very wayward "Che faro" immediately shows why she had a huge row with Toscanini when singing this role at the Met a couple of years earlier.

Possibly the most jaw-dropping sides for the vocal 78rpm collector are the three by Giuseppe Kaschmann, whose five 1902 G&Ts are among collectors' greatest prizes. I had no idea of the existence of these Edisons, and they show little deterioration in Kaschmann's voice over the intervening near-decade. Again, the recordings are superb and the voice rolls out with real majesty and drama. The biggest surprises were six sides by Caroline White. She was just a name to me and I had expected a nice, pure little American voice of the sort Edison liked, but this is a big, dramatic voice of real quality. Her "Ritorna vincitor" doesn't have the passion and natural *italianità* of Boninsegna, perhaps, but it is mightily impressive.

To do justice to everything on these CDs would take ten times my allotted words, so I can do little more than list some of the other singers. There is a finely voiced *Faust* aria from Carlo Albani and three very typical offerings from Maria Galvany, the "Son geloso" duet (*Lucia*) with Umberto Macnez being exquisite. Macnez has four solo sides, displaying a lovely lyric tenor voice and excellent *fioriture* in "Ecco ridente". The lovely Marie Rappold (an Edison favourite) has four beautifully sung sides, though in yet another, "Ritorna vincitor", she is a little small-scale.

The documentation and transfers are, as always, exemplary. I cannot recommend this set too highly.

Paul Steinson