

### *Marston Records: Rescuing Classical Music's History*

Ward Marston's label meticulously conserves and releases old recordings of giants like pianist Wilhelm Kempff as well as little-known figures such as soprano Celestina Boninsegna.

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By Tim Page

Feb. 5, 2024



Ward Marston in his studio PHOTO: MARK STEHLE

It has been long recognized that people who are missing one sense are often compensated with unusual acuity in another. Ward Marston, blind from birth, found himself gifted with a profound and precocious response to sound. He began studying the piano when he was 4 years old, learned organ a few years later, and founded his first jazz ensemble at 15. Over the years, he became a soulful player who may be heard on several recordings and who once sat in as a substitute for Bobby Short at the Café Carlyle.

Still, Mr. Marston's central interest has always been old classical recordings, some of them dating from the 19th century. He began to collect discs and cylinders from attic sales and bookstores when he was still a child. He played his substantial collection of records on the

Williams College radio station when he was a student there. Shortly after graduation, in the mid-1970s, he began remastering recordings professionally for reissue.

Mr. Marston's ear was so keen and he worked so meticulously on perfecting antiquated sound that he was recognized quickly as a leader in the field. Over the next two decades, he would produce or contribute to more than 400 releases—including the complete recordings of the tenor Enrico Caruso, the pianist Arthur Rubinstein and the violinist Fritz Kreisler.



Celestina Boninsegna PHOTO: ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

Caruso, Rubinstein and Kreisler are legendary names. But what about Celestina Boninsegna? In America, the Italian soprano (1877-1947) sang only a few performances with the Metropolitan Opera in 1906-07 and then a few more at the Boston Opera Company in 1909-10 before spending much of her remaining career in Europe and South America. Yet she made more than 100 discs, and they are beautiful. One of my favorite recent releases has been a complete set of Boninsegna's legacy on five CDs, brought out on Marston Records—a label Mr. Marston

founded with his partner and husband, Scott Kessler, outside Philadelphia more than 25 years ago.

As with all the other recordings on the label, the Boninsegna set, released in 2022, is splendidly packaged, with authoritative liner notes and rare photographs. Her records date from 1904 to 1919 and, listened to consecutively, provide a deep immersion into the art of one of the finest early 20th-century sopranos. She had a pure sweet voice that she managed confidently, with brilliant high notes and a distinctively plush character in the lower register. One quickly acclimates to the ancient sound.

Other Marston projects include complete sets of the Irish tenor John McCormack (20 CDs) and the Russian bass Feodor Chaliapin (13 CDs).

I am particularly fond of the four-CD set of the husband-and-wife piano duo of Pierre Luboshutz and Genia Nemenoff, also released in 2022, whose playing spins together with such tenderness and intimacy. A set of the early recordings of the German pianist Wilhelm Kempff, released the same year, presents a very different musician than heard on the poetic meditations for which he was known in the 1960s and 1970s. In these discs, recorded between 1923 and 1925 in Berlin, he is something of a wild man, with staggering technical command and an irresistible youthful eagerness. There are also sets devoted to the American pianists Robert Goldsand (2023) and Sidney Foster (2019), who have been sparsely represented by commercial recordings.

Equally noteworthy is a set called “The Dawn of Recording: The Julius BlockCylinders” from 2008. It contains some pre-teen discs from the violinist Jascha Heifetz and what may well be a recording of the spoken voice of Tchaikovsky.

Forthcoming is a performance of Wagner’s “Parsifal” recorded at the Metropolitan Opera in April 1938 (on Good Friday, on which day some of the action is set). It is the only surviving souvenir of two great legends of Wagnerian opera—soprano Kirsten Flagstad and heldentenor Lauritz Melchior—singing the composer’s last opera. Acts I and III are conducted by the Austrian conductor Artur Bodanzky, who was effectively the Met’s house Wagnerian. But he was already in ill health (and would die the following year), so his assistant, the very young Erich Leinsdorf, who would later distinguish himself leading the principal orchestras of Cleveland, Rochester and Boston, took over for the central act.

Mr. Marston prefers to call his work “audio conservation” instead of “restoration.” He once explained his method to me in an interview: “When I start on a new project, I try first to get every single bit of sound I can off an old record and transfer it into a digital format. Then I take out most of the clicks and pops—either one at a time or through a computer program. In the old days, when you removed the clicks and pops, you were also removing tiny bits of the music as well.” Those days are well and truly gone—as fascinating as these discs are as history, they are also deeply and movingly musical.

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