

# Gramophone

August 2019

By Rob Cowan

## McCormack the magnificent

When it comes to encapsulating sentiment, genuine emotion, maximum vocal presence, as well as projecting poetic content and shaping the curve of a great tune, no one bettered John McCormack. In fact I think it fair to say that Ward Marston's latest McCormack set – his long awaited completion of the great singer's recorded legacy as expertly transferred to CD [previous volumes are available on Naxos and Marston Records] – will prove one of the glories of recorded vocal art. Best I think to start with a single example. Try Disc 3, tracks 26 and 27, 11<sup>th</sup> October 1927, two versions of the Crouch's touching ballad *Kathleen Mavourneen* – the first, an unpublished take, the smoother of the two where McCormack's singing approximates the style of an opera aria, excepting the tortured words 'it may be for years, and it may be forever', where a sense of theatre takes over. For the marginally broader issued take McCormack ups the tension with a more acute sense of vocal colour, more prominent accents, and as the narrative unfolds, so the emotion wells to fever pitch. Beam up 2:18 and follow the song to the end and you have the very gist of what this great singer is all about, especially from 3:09 and the repetitions of the name 'Mavourneen' and then, again, 'it may be for years, it may be forever' and the soulful closure that follows. Surely no recording of German *lieder* or French *mélodie*, let alone British or American art song, is more affecting. Then there's *The Star of the County Down*, gently ornamented and delivered with such a wistful sense of reverie – I'm thinking in particular of the version recorded on 30<sup>th</sup> November 1939, disc 9, track 23. And *The Garden Where the Praties Grow*, another case where contrasting takes were recorded on the same day (4<sup>th</sup> December 1930, disc 6, tracks 23 and 24). The song is about a courting couple who eventually marry and have a family, ie 'two boys just like their mother, and the girl's the image o' me' – and note how, on the issued version, McCormack can barely suppress a chuckle, as if to say 'hasn't *she* drawn the short straw!'

An acoustically recorded selection from the early 1900s featured towards the end of the set (some of them skilfully transferred from primitive wax cylinders) is interesting in that it underlines the significant journey that the singer still had ahead of him but listening to the earliest electrical recordings, set down just a year or so after the recording horn had become redundant, allows us to rejoice in McCormack's prime. Take *When You and I Were Young, Maggie*, the 1919 recording on track 18 of Naxos 8.112056, the 1925 recording, on disc 1, track 9 of the set under review. The differences are minimal (both are beautifully sung) but the sound of the electrically recorded version is infinitely preferable to its horn-recorded predecessor. It makes you realise that although some singers responded well to the earlier recording process – and McCormack was certainly one of them – the leap of added presence, literally bringing the artist into your room, was of inestimable value.

What we have here, so far as I can tell, are all of McCormack's electrical recordings save for filmed material such as those included on the 1930 movie *Song O' My Heart* (which you can in any case access via Youtube at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lMyrvNjwV4Y>). Repertoire-wise, Ward's 11-cd acoustical aforementioned series for Naxos includes a good deal more opera than is heard in this later collection. True, there are plenty of songs and ballads there too but here lighter fare makes up the bulk of the contents. And while it would be idle to downplay the artistry that McCormack brings to thoughtfully arranged traditional songs from Ireland and elsewhere it's good that the present collection additionally includes unforgettable performances of repertoire by Bach, Bantock, Beethoven (a rare showing for music from 'Christ at the Mount of Olives'), Elgar, Handel, Mozart, Parry, Quilter, Rachmaninov, Schubert, Strauss, Tchaikovsky, Wagner and (most particularly) Hugo Wolf. Two especially memorable tracks follow on from *When You and I Were Young, Maggie*, Donaudy's *Luoghi sereni e cari* and Rachmaninov's *To the Children*, both of them vivid samplings of what McCormack could achieve through sensitive phrasing and varied voice production. Generally speaking, his vibrato widened with age, and darkened in the emotional heat of the moment. While the earlier electrically recorded discs invariably report unalloyed tonal beauty, the later ones speak to you more on the edge of song; as with another recent Marston celebration, the Russian bass Chaliapin, it's as if you're being neither spoken to nor sung to, but rather encouraged to relish a level of intimate communication that calls on both methods of delivery simultaneously.

Also included are numerous broadcast recordings of variable sound quality hosted by the likes of Bing Crosby, Rudy Vallee and McCormack himself and a charming encounter between McCormack, Maggie Teyte, Eileen Joyce, Herbert Dannison and Gerald Moore, with musical performances included. As I say, transfers are first rate, generally superior to those in EMI's 4-cd McCormack Icon collection (6 82771 2; compare the two in 'Oft in the stilly night'). Presentation is also excellent, with tributes from Vincent O'Brien, Edwin Schneider, Gerald Moore and Ernest Newman while among other written materials, Ward himself contributes a note about the recordings, and there are revealing appreciations by McCormack Edition mastermind Jeremy Meehan and Michael Aspinall. Discographical information is copious, too. It should be said however that locating individual titles relies on scanning the disc content pages in the 162-page booklet, which inevitably takes time. The process rather resembles running your eyes across book spines on a bookshelf in search of a particular volume when, suddenly, you find something else you want to read even more. And who could complain about that? A truly wonderful set

### **John McCormack: A Patrician Artist**

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