

Classical Recordings Quarterly, winter 2010

The Creator of Verismo

Arias and songs sung by the sopranos Gemma Bellincioni, Angelica Pandolfini, Amelia Pinto, Cesira Ferrani, Emma Carelli. **Giordano** *Siberia* -- creator recordings: artists include Giuseppe de Luca, Gaetano Pini-Corsi, Oreste Gennari, Rosina Storchio and Giovanni Zenatello.

Marston mono 52062-2 (2 discs; 157 minutes; ADD); rec. Milan and Paris, 1902-14; Milan, 1904.

Creator records -- often made under the guidance of the composer -- are a treasured part of our cultural heritage. The development of *verismo* -- a somewhat loosely defined school of opera -- coincided with the early development of the gramophone. These CDs bring together recordings by sopranos who participated in early performances of *verismo* operas: in some cases they are actually singing arias from roles they created. Also included are substantial extracts from *Siberia*, a more or less forgotten work by Giordano, with the singers of the December 1903 Milan premiere. None of the records on these CDs would have sold in significant numbers at the time: they are not easily found in original form and some are exceedingly rare.

This current compilation draws on holdings in various important collections. Of the 53 separate tracks, no less than 32 have been made available from the Witten Collection, part of the Yale Collection of Historic Sound Recordings. Recognition that historic recordings are part of a universal cultural legacy, and as such should be made widely available, is worthy of emulation.

For other than *aficionados* of acoustic recordings of the great singers of the past, I would hesitate to recommend two and a half hours of continuous listening to this set. The excellent booklet notes by Michael Aspinall discuss the careers and recorded characteristics of all the singers, including shortcomings -- vibrato and occasional uncertainty from Bellincioni; broken phrases from Pinto. Aspinall comments that although Carelli demonstrates a well-trained voice of considerable charm she too often indulges in "hysterical, neurotic performances".

Nineteenth-century Italian operatic singers were schooled in the works of Bellini, Donizetti, Rossini and Verdi. Gemma Bellincioni, who enjoyed the most substantial international career of the featured sopranos, also performed in the major operas of Meyerbeer. In any opera season in any Italian city a new work could be expected. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth century they were likely to be operas which we now term *verismo*. Listening to Bellincioni's 1903 G&T recordings we are certainly in the presence of a great artist, but to me she sounds more at home in *La traviata* than in *Cavalleria rusticana*. A slight sense of strain is more apparent in the latter item; the vibrato may be unusual in the former but by no means unpleasant.

Pandolfini had a shorter career than Bellincioni but her few records are even more rare in original form. She appeared alongside Caruso and de Luca in Cilea's *Adriana Lecouvreur* and like them made an important creator disc. Cesira Ferrani's

major claim to fame is as creator of two of Puccini's masterworks -- *Manon Lescaut* and *La bohème*. Her creator discs offer affecting performances but the voice sounds somewhat under-nourished. The same consideration may be applicable to Emma Carelli, but it hardly detracts from the histrionics. Once heard it is hard to resist the power and fury of the climatic *Tosca* Act 2 duet with Mario Sammarco. He had a hugely successful career but this does not always seem to be born out by his later recordings.

The Gramophone and Typewriter Company (G&T) recordings on these CDs were all made between 1902 and 1904. Contemporaneous recordings by Caruso and Tamagno are probably more familiar to record collectors than those of the sopranos here under review and I am not the first to wonder if the earliest G&T records were simply less favourable to the female voice *per se*. Indeed the duet from *Tosca* would be a case in point. The slightly later Pathé discs made by Bellincioni were probably originally recorded on to large cylinders: sonically they are if anything less good than the G&Ts. Purely as records the best recorded items on these CDs are the Fonotipia titles of Pinto recorded in 1908 and 1914. By then, she may have been somewhat past her prime, but her arias from Giordano's *Marcella* and *Siberia* are particularly fine.

Rosina Storchio is featured on four of the ten sides in the creators' *Siberia*. Of all the sopranos on these CDs she is my favourite. But again the voice sounds thinner than on her later wonderful Fonotipia recordings and it is the men who seemingly carry off the honours in *Siberia*. But life was not quite fair to Storchio, the creator of *Madama Butterfly* -- its premiere at La Scala wrecked by machinations of the claqué.

This is a unique compilation for delving into *verismo* opera and its earliest interpreters, particularly recommended to those with an interest in the history of singing on record.

Stanley Henig