

SYMPOSIUM RECORDS CD 1219

MATTIA BATTISTINI – Volume 2

This album follows the plan of the previous album (Symposium 1210) by dividing Battistini's records into early, middle and late. Battistini's first records were made in 1902, the year in which it might well be considered that the gramophone came of age as an artistic and musical instrument. His last records were made in 1924 and thus can be regarded as the swan song not only of the acoustic recording process, but also of an entire epoch in the history of sung art.

Of course Battistini changed his approach to singing and music as his years and experience increased, but nevertheless, in his records we hear a method of singing, and a musical style which were thoroughly imbibed before the première of *Parsifal*, before the première of *Otello* and before *Giordano*, *Leoncavallo*, *Mascagni* or *Puccini* had written any significant piece.

Although we have suggested that the gramophone came of age in 1902, that is not to say that every problem had been solved. Then, as now, customers looked at the playing time of a prospective purchase. Thus two suitably related pieces could be recorded together: two Chopin Studies or the "Esultate" and "Ora e per sempre" from *Otello*. The very brief "Quand'ero paggio" sung by Antonio Scotti is followed by a long, anonymous piano piece (Symposium 1100). Here the 'Champagne Aria' is vociferously applauded; Battistini orders "Encore" and the pianist starts the piece again. In 1902 a 10-inch red-label record playing for about 2½ minutes cost 10/-. What the public made of these devices to extend the playing time is not known. Even more puzzling is the presence of a studio audience, also present on records of d'Andrade, Maurel and Sobinoff. Were office workers or restaurant waiters drafted in? Did singers arrive with a retinue of friends? Perhaps there were always people loitering around in the hope of earning a few coppers in a pick-up chorus.

Battistini's 'Serenade' is sung by a Don clearly an old hand at laying on the charm; it is part of the procedure, a possible negative result is not contemplated. In assessing the style we should bear in mind that Battistini would find equally puzzling what we do today.

The two songs which follow, the rarest of Battistini's early series, are sung with supreme elegance and sentiment, not sentimentality; the vocal polish is breathtaking.

By 1906 orchestral accompaniment of operatic pieces had become the norm. The singer is somewhat further back than in the earlier session. Even so, the balance with the orchestra is poor.

The Donizetti aria is a long smooth melody, demanding and receiving, singing of utmost polish and refinement. Camoens, poet and soldier, is at last able to see again his beloved Lisbon. Some, perhaps including Battistini, may feel that we have here an example of beautiful singing rather than a poet and soldier seeing again his beloved city.

In 1906 Battistini recorded a number of pieces from *Ernani*. Indeed, he recorded more music from this work than from any other. (For musical integrity the one piece that was made later is included here.)

In *Don Carlos*, King of Castille, later Emperor Charles V of Spain, Battistini has the perfect vehicle for his art. The part is truly regal, in text and musical line.

Don Carlos expresses his love for Elvira (in Victor Hugo's original: *Donã Sol*, a part in which Sarah Bernhardt was very successful). The accuracy of both intonation and timing in the extended cadenza for the two singers is, we use the word again, breathtaking.

The concerted piece, track 8, is superbly performed. If it is not Verdi at his finest then, as can happen, it is the quality of the performance which deceives one into thinking it is.

Don Carlos, track 9, orders the castle to be searched. The unfortunate owner, di Silva, must hand over Ernani or die. The soldiers return without Ernani, for in Spain the safety of a guest requires any sacrifice. Elvira pleads that di Silva be spared; the king speaks of his devotion and love for her. (A second take of the first part, 879½c, was also issued. It is slightly inferior for a trumpet being too forward, and for Battistini somewhat overdoing his habit of accentuating drama by sharpening a note.)

In the sombre aria, track 10, Don Carlos stands before the tomb of Charlemagne, bent on overhearing a group conspiring to take his life. There are moments in this music which call to mind scoring in *Don Carlos* written almost a quarter of a century later.

The King has caught the conspirators. Elvira pleads for them. The King prays for guidance, pardons the conspirators and unites Elvira and Ernani to the acclaim of all present. (A remake of this piece in 1921, excellent though it is, has slightly less vibrancy and excitement.)

Reports of the size of Battistini's voice are mixed. Certainly it was not small, for as improvements were made to the recording system, including sensitivity and dynamic range, he was placed further back. Thus in the pieces from *L'Africaine* some impression of size and ambience begins to be felt. The music is dated, but with singing of this calibre a revival would surely draw applause.

It is often maintained that opera singers, even German opera singers are unable to adjust themselves to *Lieder*. Whether or not that is true, it certainly does not apply to Italians singing Italian songs. In the first of two songs by Tosti, Battistini makes one of his few excursions out of his native tongue, whilst the second is probably the only surviving copy of an unpublished take.

The scene from *La Forza del Destino* is split between a 12 and a 10 inch disc. (A recording of Caruso in 1904 is likewise, and a "complete" recording of *Die Fledermaus* was made on 7, 10 and 12 inch records and issued in an album with leaves to match.) The singer has sworn to destroy a casket of letters entrusted to him by a dying man. The temptation to look is too great. He realises that the dying man is not his new friend but his old enemy. A messenger enters announcing that the man will live. The scene ends with an allegro section in which the singer welcomes the prospect of revenge. In track 15 we have the continuity of the scene as originally recorded. However the first part was not released but was re-made almost three years later. Thus in track 16 we hear the scene as released. The first version is by no means inadequate, but the second version has considerably more tension and vehemence. Both are sung half a tone below score pitch.

Battistini's record of "O casto fior" was made when he was in his late sixties. Antonio Cotogni (1831-1918) was born a generation earlier than Battistini. Undoubtedly

Battistini learnt from many singers whom he heard, and would have welcomed comments and advice from such artists as Cotogni. However, whether there was a formal teacher/pupil relationship between them depends upon the source consulted. Either way, Cotogni recorded the same piece when in his early seventies (Symposium 1186/1187X) and the comparison is most interesting.

Carissimi and Gluck are unusual territory for Battistini. The song demonstrates that to the end of his career he retained the flexibility and control necessary to bring off fast moving and florid writing, the only thing missing from his equipment being a shake or trill.

We leave Battistini with an aria, surely one of the most beautiful melodies ever written, entering his 69th year, just beginning to show slight signs of age, though noticeable only because we "remember" him twenty-two years earlier.

Since the first volume was issued a correspondent has written giving conclusive evidence that the two Fonotecnica records were made in Zürich.

A sketch of Battistini's life is included in the notes to Volume I (Symposium 1210). An account of his immense success in Russia, and a detailed critique by a professional colleague can be read in *The Levik Memoirs: An Opera Singer's Notes* (Symposium 1155).

Acknowledgements: Symposium Records is most grateful Mr. Jean-Paul Getty C.B.E. for tracks 3, 7, 14 and 15 and thanks Paul Lewis and Adrian Tuddenham for help with this production.

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