

SYMPOSIUM RECORDS CD 1231

The HAROLD WAYNE COLLECTION – Volume 33

FERNANDO De LUCIA - tenor

Fernando De Lucia was born in 1860 into a respectable middle-class Neapolitan family. His early musical precocity led to his placement in music school, where he commenced his studies as an instrumentalist. It was not long before the possibilities of his voice attracted more attention than his abilities as a double-bass player. His subsequent vocal studies were interrupted by military service, but a sympathetic officer ensured that he speedily returned to his musical vocation. Initial minor engagements at various society salons rapidly spread word of his gifts and he advanced swiftly in the opera world of his day.

His career blossomed, especially in Italy, the scene of many of his greatest successes. Here he was much in demand to create new roles in the works of the emerging school of verismo composers. He was chosen by Mascagni to create roles in *L'Amico Fritz* (1891), *I Rantzau* (1892), *Silvano* (1895) and *Iris* (1898). He also sang in the première of Giordano's *Marcella* (1907) and Mugnone's *Vita Brettona* (1905).

Although recognised as one of the leading tenors of the day, he evoked some criticism both for the actual quality of his voice, as well as its rapid vibrato. This natural movement of the voice was better tolerated in Latin than in Anglo-Saxon countries. However, his acting abilities were universally admired, and many of the leading critics considered his interpretation of the role of Canio in *I Pagliacci* to be unequalled, even by Caruso.

He enjoyed a wildly enthusiastic following in Russia and in South America, but was predictably less successful in London and New York. During his first season at Covent Garden, in 1897, he sang in such operas as *Don Giovanni*, *La Traviata* and *Il Barbiere di Siviglia*. In these, of course, he could be compared with many illustrious predecessors. His triumphs came later in the operas of Mascagni and Leoncavallo, performances which won praise even from the intensely critical George Bernard Shaw. It is curious to contemplate that whilst today De Lucia is regarded as one of the exemplars of the old bel canto singing school, it was his performances of contemporary operas that won him greatest praise.

After 1908 he sang less frequently in opera, although, as evidenced by these recordings dating from 1917 to 1922, the voice remained, if reduced in range, in

remarkable shape. In 1921 he sang at the funeral of his colleague Enrico Caruso.

After that, apart from two or three minor appearances, he devoted his last years to teaching. His pupils included Caroline Caprile, Maria Nemeth, Antonio Notariello, Gina Pederzini, Peter Raitscheff and Georges Thill. De Lucia died in Naples in 1925.

De Lucia was a prolific recording artist for the Gramophone & Typewriter Company from 1902 until 1909, for Fonotopia in 1910 (a series of songs) and, finally, for Phonotype from 1917 until 1922. Indeed, so prolific were his Phonotype recordings that until Dr. Michael Henstock finally unravelled the matter in his biography, *Fernando De Lucia*, it was for many years widely thought that the tenor actually owned the company. A few titles from this last series are of exceeding rarity since they were made in Naples and may have had only very limited circulation outside that city.

The tenor was in his late fifties and early sixties when these records were made, but this is nowhere apparent. These fascinating mementos of his art present a unique legacy. Indeed, it is widely felt by vocal specialists that only Battistini and De Lucia represent on record the true art of bel canto in all its aspects.

1 Ecco ridente in cielo - De Lucia had already recorded this aria twice for the Gramophone & Typewriter Company and the first one, recorded in 1904, was one of my early treasures. However, this late version is really splendid. De Lucia's technical skill is still amazing and the agility with which he throws off the rapid scale passages in the concluding phrases, each note cleanly given, is surely unique.

2 Se il mio nome - This recording is equally splendid and contains some very appropriate decorations all sung with the effect of a delightful silvery vocal tracery which no other recorded version remotely approaches.

3 Una furtiva lagrima - Nemorino sings tenderly of the furtive tear he has seen fall from Adina's cheek; he realizes that she truly loves him. De Lucia sings with great delicacy and wonderful phrasing in his perfectly controlled mezza voce. It is one of his finest recordings.

4 Spirto gentil - Fernando, a novice, has returned to the monastery he originally left for the outside world. He bids farewell to any thought of his lost love, Leonora, in this very beautiful aria which Donizetti intended first for *Il Duca d'Alba*. De Lucia sings with great tenderness and delicacy and includes a high B flat at the climax. This is possibly the highest note he recorded in all the Phonotype discs he made.

5 A te o cara - Lord Arthur Talbot learns that consent has been given to his marriage with Elvira, and this beautiful song of love expresses his joy at the news. There is some transposition necessary, but De Lucia's lovely singing fully justifies this. The famous tenor is again in his element in a bel canto aria, caressing the phrases with stylish elegance.

6 Vieni, vieni fra questa braccia - In this duet sung by Lord Arthur Talbot and Elvira, De Lucia is joined by Angela de Angelis. The two voices blend well together in the concluding phrases.

7 Ella mi fu rapita.... Parmi veder le lagrime - In the recitative the Duke of Mantua expresses his horror and distress when he thinks Gilda has been abducted. In the aria which follows he gives way to his apparent grief at her loss. De Lucia's singing of the recitative is a model of stylish but restrained declamation; it is followed by an excellent version of the aria.

8 La donna è mobile - De Lucia sings the aria with good rhythm until he comes to the phrase 'Muta d'accento' and here he displays his wonderful messa di voce on the 'cen' of the last word, starting it forte and gradually reducing it to the merest whisper. Surprisingly, the usual cadenza at the conclusion of the aria is not included and the ending is rather abrupt.

9 Un di se ben rammentomi... Bella figlia dell'amore - The passage leading up to the quartet is included, thus greatly enhancing the impact of the music. De Lucia dominates the proceedings in his own highly individual manner, but the Maddalena of Vida Ferluga is quite adequate. All of these recordings of Rigoletto are taken from Phonotype's set of the opera.

10 Pery! Che brami?... Sento una forza indomita - In this love duet De Lucia sings his opening phrases beautifully and in fact his singing throughout shows him at his best in music which lies well within his range. Unfortunately De Angelis cannot in any way match the artistry of the tenor in her rather fluttery performance.

11 Bada Pagliaccio... Un tal gioco - A villager has remarked that Tonio has not joined Canio in the village inn, but has remained behind to make love to Nedda. Canio grimly replies that in reality anyone who robs him of Nedda must beware. De Lucia sings the passage with great dramatic conviction and excellent enunciation, but his tone becomes rather hard in places and the vibrato is a little overdone for my taste.

12 No, Pagliaccio non son - Canio stops any pretence of acting. He is no longer the jester, but a man in a frenzy of despair. The opera received its initial Covent Garden performance in May 1893 with Melba and De Lucia. Here De Lucia sounds a little subdued.

13 Che gelida manina - De Lucia was the first to sing Rodolfo in Italian at Covent Garden and his Mimi was Melba. In this broadly sung version he alters the first phrase presumably because he found the opening notes of the transposition lay rather uncomfortably for his voice. This seems to me one of his least attractive recordings and it is curiously unconvincing. Altogether he does not sound very romantic in introducing

himself to Mimi.

14 Suzel buon di... Tutto tace - De Lucia created the role of Fritz in Mascagni's opera with Calvé singing the part of Suzel. They repeated their successes at La Scala, Milan, Covent Garden and the Metropolitan Opera, New York. As a consequence this recording shows De Lucia in a role which he made very much his own. It is of the very greatest value as an historical document. De Lucia sings his part in the famous Cherry Duet with great charm and authority. De Angelis enters into the spirit of this lovely music and altogether this recording is of enormous significance.

15 Ed anche Beppe... O amore o bella luce - All I have written about the previous record applies equally to this solo from the third act of the opera. Fritz is soliloquising on his newly found love. De Lucia sings with the utmost involvement; it is a gem of historical importance.

16 Apri la tua finestra - Osaka goes with a marionette troupe to the house of Iris and in the character of Jor he sings this serenade. The music gives De Lucia less opportunity to exhibit his mastery of bel canto, but he sings it fervently and again it is a creator's record.

17 Colpito qui m'avete... E volli pien d'amore - This is a very leisurely version of the Improvviso. It is surprising that De Lucia chose to record this music which is usually sung by a voice capable of more power than one would imagine De Lucia possessed, but his singing is eloquent and stylish.

John Freestone

In *The World* on June 1st 1892, George Bernard Shaw found *L'Amico Fritz* to be "an opera which will pass the evening pleasantly enough for you, but which you need not regret missing" and that "the cherry-tree duet ought really be hung in the Royal Academy."

There was "a frantic *encore* a little later [for] Madame Calvé and Signor de Lucia." The tenor succeeded "Valero and Lubert as artificial tenor in ordinary." He reports that "his thin strident *forte* is in tune; and does not tremble beyond endurance". However, De Lucia is of the artificial school, a school which Shaw does not like, but does allow that its "exponents have considerable merit" lacking elsewhere "of identifying with their parts".

In the same publication, on May 23rd 1894, he observed that "Cavalleria and Pagliacci derive an altogether exceptional dramatic force from the acting of de Lucia and Ancona".

On May 6th, after mocking at the dual-language *Faust*, he admired "De Lucia's dramatic instinct [which] helped him well through a part in which he seemed likely to be overweighted... Several times... he found the right musical treatment with exceptional success."

And on 20th June, after reporting his disappointment in Ancona's *Rigoletto*: but

"De Lucia, over-parted as he was, got through the Duke's music adroitly and pluckily."

Technical Note: Today the speeds of sound-reproducing systems are closely regulated so that music is heard at precisely the tempo and pitch at which it is recorded. However, in the earliest days of the industry there was no established recording speed; records were made at speeds varying from about 64 to 90 rpm, on Pathé even up to 105 rpm. The user could adjust the speed of the turntable, but was given no information on what was appropriate for a particular record. Presumably it was quite usual for records to be played at incorrect speeds, giving correspondingly incorrect impressions of tempo of performance and timbre of voice. The first indication that speeds might matter was when a few artists insisted on keys being printed on labels of their records; keys, moreover, not speeds, as effective means of measuring speed were not available until later. The first company to print speeds was (probably) Odeon, but, strangely, these speeds are frequently grotesquely wide of the mark.

Broadly, there are seldom problems with instrumental music; the "Moonlight Sonata" must be in C sharp minor. But singers transpose to suit themselves. The brevity of the entry on this topic in early editions of Grove is sufficient indication of how normal this was. Certain transpositions are so frequently made that they can be regarded as standard; "Di quella pira", for example, is frequently sung half a tone down to avoid the high Cs, and so long as the tenor's face turns sufficiently near to puce, few are any the wiser. Generally a singer endowed with a 'short' voice, or ending a long career, is more likely to resort to transposition than a young singer with lusty high notes.

The case of De Lucia is more awkward than most. There can be no doubt that he transposed considerably more than many; so much so that for a while it was even fashionable amongst some critics to refer to him as a baritone. Fortuitously, however, the records of De Lucia most commonly encountered were made at low speeds; thus until the extent of speed variation of early records was recognised, his records tended to be played in printed keys and thus too fast. Eventually the bleating sound thus produced was perceived to be wrong and it became fashionable to choose low speeds, seeking to justify the critics' jibes. Of what, then, can we be certain? De Lucia had a long and highly successful career being paid healthy sums to please the public by singing as a tenor. In preparing this album we have therefore aimed for a consistent sound, the sound of an Italian tenor.

A few specific points may be added: The voice sometimes sounds, for want of a better word, brighter than usual. This effect is probably related to the exact distance the singer is from the recording machine, or maybe alternative pieces of apparatus were sometimes in use.

On occasion there is a very different, some would say, unpleasant tone near the top of the register. This seems to relate to particular phrases where a particular emotional effect is sought. In an auditorium this timbre may have been effective; but not in the recording studio. A few records open with somewhat heavy or leaden-sound which soon disappears; perhaps the singer needs to get into his stride.

The baritone jibes were at their height at a time when De Lucia was working very hard and also subject to stresses in his private life. When the Phonotype records were made he was more or less in retirement and things were easier at home. Thus, relaxed, with his voice well rested and in the privacy of a studio, fewer transpositions were needed.

The baritone in the quartet seems far from the Rigoletto-sound we expect, of Scotti, de Luca or Gobbi, say. Presumably he normally sang smaller, comprimario parts.

The labels of the last piece carry the numbers M 1806 and 2, but the stampers are numbered C 2531 and 2; presumably an earlier performance was prepared but not released.

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