

JOHN McCORMACK – “I hear you calling me”

John McCormack had the rare ability of convincing the listener that any piece of music he performed was worthy of his attention in preparing it, and of his audience's attention in listening to it.

This recital is unashamedly of popular pieces which McCormack chose to include in his programmes. Some of them are fine pieces of music; there is no law that songs can only be great songs if they are in French or German; others are made great by McCormack's handling of them.

The recital proceeds generally in order of recording, thus showing McCormack's voice and style developing, and indicating the fare that interested him throughout his career.

Three items appear more than once, illustrating how the artist sometimes changed the manner of his performance, but also could produce identical takes.

As in other volumes of this series, a number of unpublished takes have been included. These, from McCormack's own collection, are obviously fascinating documents, and the listener will be understanding when, on some of them, a degree of wear indicates their popularity in the McCormack household.

In 1908 McCormack was invited to meet Charles Marshall (1887-1927) in London, and from this meeting came one of McCormack's best loved concert items: "I hear you calling me". By the end of the year, McCormack had both performed and recorded it, together with another of Marshall's songs: "When shadows gather". Both songs were recorded with piano accompaniment by the composer, and re-recorded shortly after with orchestra. The "orchestra" was actually the band of the Grenadier Guards. This is known as the band's name appears on other records nearby in the matrix series.

The singer was presumably content with the piano-accompanied takes for he wrote with pride in the wax at the time of recording: 'John McCormack accompanied by the Composer' and, for the second song: 'John McCormack Ireland accompanied by the Composer'.

Differences in treatment in the two performances of each song are fascinating. The band-accompanied versions are both considerably longer; indeed over-long for 12" sides, which leads to some distortions. It will be noted that the lowest notes of the voice need some strengthening, nevertheless the second versions, though made only a very short while later, seem more polished, more assured.

Twenty years later, McCormack's final and most polished version of "I hear you calling me" was made by the recently introduced electrical system. The label of this take bears the singer's pencilled comment: "Best". Why it was nevertheless not used is unclear; perhaps there was some mechanical reason.

"Absent" is well sung but we sense that the artist is still feeling his way, still not able to vary vibrato as a tool of expression as he did later.

"Parted" is a good example of McCormack's ability to make from a slight piece a memorable performance, an occasion. There is studio noise after the record ends: such things could not be edited out as now.

"The ould plaid shawl" is a setting of words by the Irish Francis Fahy by the English Battison Haynes (1859-1900). It is typical of its time, a less sophisticated time than ours, for ballad concerts and for the drawing room.

In 1919 McCormack took citizenship of the United States of America. Thus it is not surprising that he included a number of items of American origin in his concerts, particularly those of Irish interest. "Little town in the old County Down", is one of these; it was composed by a song writing team: Richard Pasco, Monte Carlo and Alma Sanders. This transfer is from an unused take.

"A fairy story by the fire" by the Finnish composer Oscar Mericanto (1868-1924) is a delightful and simple song. The orchestral accompaniment of a later, electrically made recording of the piece makes it rather heavy and pretentious. Everything is sung, but with the impression of speech.

The two takes of "Silver threads among the gold" are from unique test pressings in the artist's own collection. McCormack recorded this piece for Victor twice in 1912 and once in 1913. These takes, electrically made but with the same forces, should be takes 4 and 5. However, there is no matrix number and takes 1 and 2 are indicated. These and the published record (1173, DA 823) seem totally identical. This is a remarkable comment on the ability of the artist and the engineers to clone a performance, moreover a very moving and in no way mechanical performance.

Edwin Schneider, McCormack's accompanist for more than a quarter of a century, said of him, "John dramatized every song he sang . . . He painted the picture vocally . . . Words meant something to him, and the vocal line was at times a secondary thing."

"Mother Machree" by Cleveland-born Ernest Ball (1878-1927) is from *Barry of Ballmore*, a musical of 1910.

The composer of "The Irish Emigrant", George Barker (1812-1876) was English, but Helen, Lady Dufferin (1807-1867) who wrote the text was a granddaughter of the Irish born Richard Brinsley Sheridan.

The melody of "The short cut to the Rosses" is traditional, the text is by Nora Hopper of Dublin.

Herbert Hughes (1882-1937) published a number of volumes of songs which he

gathered early in this century in the north part of Ireland. It seems that Hughes frequently "improved" these songs and some may be from his own hand. McCormack sang a considerable number of songs from Hughes's volumes. Edwin Schneider wrote of McCormack, "His Irish folksongs were of the earth, and I grew to love them as my very own."

"Ireland, Mother Ireland" is an American-Irish concoction. It plays, like many another, on the sentiments of the times and is, frankly, not in any respect great music. It is, however, worth preserving for the passionate performance. The somewhat worn state of this unpublished take is testimony to its popularity with the McCormack family.

"The garden where the praties grow" is sung with a lightness and deftness of touch which makes it unforgettable. As always, McCormack's singing of lighter fare is without any trace of condescension or pretentiousness. Again, a take on which the artist has indicated "Best" but which, for whatever reason we do not know, was not issued.

Thomas Moore (1779-1852) was born in Dublin and became much admired in Ireland and England as poet and singer. "Irish Melodies" are his settings of texts written by himself to traditional airs. (In fact some were English and some Scottish.) McCormack's records have helped to keep Moore's name alive in an age in which purist trends tend to disparage such editions.

"Little child of Mary" is one of a number of arrangements of Negro spirituals by H.T. Burleigh (1866-1949). It is interesting to compare McCormack's record with that of Paul Robeson, with which many people will be familiar. This and the following two are from the artist's test pressings, takes which were not issued.

Vincent O'Brien (1870-1948) taught McCormack before he went to Italy. They remained friends for life and sometimes toured together. "Baby Aroon" is a collaboration of O'Brien and his brother.

The version of "O Mary dear" in this recital is another piece with several elements: The tune is traditional, it is an arrangement by Edwin Schneider and the text is by the singer.

The last four records were made as the artist approached the end of his career. The voice is sometimes a little tired but constant study by a devoted artist leads to ever increasing power of communication.

Acknowledgements: Symposium Records is most grateful to David Fitzgerald for making available records and pictures from his collection. Thanks are due also to Paul Lewis and Adrian Tuddenham for assistance with the production.

Copyright Notice: This compilation with its notes is copyright. It may not be broadcast, copied, hired out, publicly performed or stored in a retrieval system without permission.