

SYMPOSIUM RECORDS CD 1235

The HAROLD WAYNE COLLECTION – Volume 34

MARIO SAMMACO & DOMENICO VIGLIONE-BORGHESE

MARIO SAMMARCO was born in Palermo in 1867. His preliminary musical studies were in the town of his birth where progress was rapid, leading to a Palermo début as Valentine in *Faust* at the early age of twenty-one. Realizing that he needed more experience, he travelled to Milan for further study with Antonio Cantelli. In 1894 his teacher judged him ready to make his début at the Teatro Dal Verme in Milan where he sang the principal baritone role in Puccini's *Le Villi*. Success at this house led to an invitation to appear at La Scala. Here he was heard by Umberto Giordano, who chose him to create the role of Gérard in his opera *Andrea Chénier*. As his career expanded he soon found himself in demand to create a number of important roles in the many verismo operas written during that period. Notable amongst these were Cascart in Leoncavallo's *Zazà*, and Worms in Franchetti's *Germania* with Enrico Caruso and Amelia Pinto.

His fame spread and he rapidly became an international artist, travelling to both North and South America, and all over Europe. He was particularly admired at Covent Garden where, although sharing roles with Antonio Scotti, he excelled amongst the then formidable baritone opposition, which included such brilliant voices as those of Giraltoni, Ruffo, Amato, de Luca and Stracciari. In the United States he was similarly admired, especially in a regular partnership with Tetrizzini and McCormack. He had sung with them originally in Buenos Aires, and was the baritone at the soprano's famous début as Violetta in London. When McCormack joined them for a performance of *Rigoletto* at the Manhattan Opera House in 1909, the New York press wrote describing Sammarco as "a Caruso amongst baritones". Subsequent appearances as Canio in *I Pagliacci* witnessed scenes of incredible enthusiasm after his rendition of the prologue. Apparently the normally staid audience rose to its feet screaming, and waving programmes and handkerchiefs. In 1911 he was with McCormack again for the première of Victor Herbert's *Natoma* in Philadelphia, and he remained in America for a further two years, in both that city and Chicago.

By 1913 he was again back at La Scala in *Falstaff* and *Otello*, and other operas. His final rôle at this house was Malatesta in scenes from *Don Pasquale*, but his last stage appearances were at the house where he had been most fêted, Covent Garden. Here in 1919 he sang his final *Rigoletto*. The critics, whilst noting the toll that the years had taken on the

voice, still praised his artistry and brilliant acting. After this season Sammarco retired and lived quietly in Milan until his death in 1930. He recorded for the Gramophone & Typewriter Company from 1902 to 1904, and then for Fonotipia for some years from 1905. He also recorded for the Gramophone Company, Victor and Pathé. Judged solely upon recordings made for Victor and for the Gramophone Company, it is often difficult to understand the totally acclaim that the baritone enjoyed during his active career. Several of these records reveal weaknesses in the lower tones, and a decided lack of resonance in comparison with the freedom and splendour of his high notes. Other recordings show occasional pitching problems, although it must be said that contemporary critics never mentioned these when reviewing his live performances. Clearly he was an extremely fine actor with a compelling stage presence, and something of this comes over in the recordings in this album, made by the Fonotipia company. In general these are much more successful than those made for the rival firms, and probably give a more accurate portrait of this often engaging artist.

DOMENICO VIGLIONE-BORGHESE was born at Mondovi in Piedmont in 1877. He studied singing with Leonese in Pesaro and also with the great baritone Cotogni in Rome, before making his début at Lodi as the Herald in *Lohengrin*. Although he subsequently obtained engagements in small provincial theatres, he seemed unable to progress further. Finally, he abandoned his career and emigrated to the United States. Without funds he was reduced to working as a navvy on the railways to maintain himself. Fortunately he did not stop singing and by a great stroke of fortune he was heard in 1905 by Caruso. The tenor gave him an introduction to a touring company in which Tetrizzini was the prima donna. For nearly two years he stayed with this company as it toured Mexico, Venezuela, the Antilles, and even some islands in the Caribbean. Although successful and greatly admired, towards the end of 1906 he decided to return to Italy.

Once back in Italy, he was engaged to sing an Amonasro in *Aida* at the opera house in Parma. The sheer power of his voice, surpassed only by Ruffo, created a sensation and his Italian career was secure. By 1910 he had reached La Scala, where he made his début as Nelusko in *L'Africaine* and later created a role in Samara's *Rhea*. Subsequently his international career blossomed and he sang in most of Europe's top opera houses, as well as becoming a particular favourite at the Colón, Buenos Aires. He was especially famous for his interpretation of Jack Rance in Puccini's *La Fanciulla del West*, having created the role for the opera's Italian première; indeed the composer himself dubbed him "the greatest of all the Sheriffs".

Viglione-Borghese included over 70 parts in his repertoire and continued to sing into his 64th year, finally retiring in 1940. Like Sammarco he passed his final years in Milan, but taught singing until his death in 1957.

MARIO SAMMARCO

1 L'Africaine-Adamastor, re dell' onde profonde

In this intensely dramatic aria the slave, Nelusko, sings of his joy and exultation at the prospect of wrecking the ship commanded by his hated captors, on which they all sail. A storm is rising which is echoed in this ballad - a wonderful showpiece for a dramatic baritone. Unfortunately the recording is poorly balanced, Sammarco seems uneasy throughout and his sardonic laughs sound particularly unconvincing.

2 La Damnation de Faust-Su queste rose

Mephistopheles has transported Faust to the banks of the Elbe, where he lulls him to sleep with this seductive air. Surprisingly, the baritone delivers a remarkably suave account of what might have been considered uncongenial music for him. His excellent legato singing and fine phrasing are particularly noteworthy.

3 Tannhäuser-O tu bell'astro

In his famous apostrophe to the evening star, Wolfram prays for it to greet the soul of Elizabeth as it departs the earth. Unfortunately the Italian text tends to lessen the dignity of this lovely air. An excessive use of portamento further adds to the Italianate feeling, but the voice does sound unusually beautiful.

4 Ernani-O sommo Carlo

Sammarco sings the opening phrases with all the essential authority required, and rightly dominates the ensemble in which de Bohuss and Palet give excellent support. This is a thrilling version of the finale to Act III of the opera.

5 Rigoletto-Pari siamo

The dramatic aria in which Rigoletto compares himself with the assassin Sparafucile, the one wounding with his tongue, the other with his dagger, suits Sammarco admirably. The excellent enunciation and ringing high tones combine in a stylish performance.

6 La Traviata-Di provenza il mar, il suol

In a father's plea to his son to return home to his family in Provence, Sammarco sings with conviction. The high tessitura of the aria is tackled with ease and he sounds suitably authoritative.

7 Un Ballo in Maschera-Eri tu che macchiavi?

Renato here sings, first vigorously, of his hatred of the king who has betrayed him, before expressing in a more lyrical outburst, his anguish over the joys forever lost to him. These contrasting sections are splendidly delineated in the true bel canto tradition.

8 Aïda-Quest'assisa

In the great triumphal scene Amonasro, the king of Ethiopia, is led in with his other captured fellow countrymen. He pretends to be merely one of the defenders of the dead king

and begs mercy for himself and his fellow captors. Sammarco sings this short but forceful passage effectively, with expressive contrast between its two main sections.

9 Otello-Inaffia l'ugola

Iago is jealous of Cassio who has been promoted above him. In this brindisi he constantly plies Cassio with wine to make him drunk prior to instigating a quarrel between him and Rodrigo, thus ensuring that Cassio is dismissed and he himself promoted in his place.

This deceptively difficult piece is ideal material for Sammarco, who sings with subtlety and great finesse.

10 Otello-Credo in un Dio crudel

Sammarco sings with great force and determination, as he expounds Iago's philosophy of life. He is an atheist. After death there is nothing. Heaven is an ancient lie. Sammarco suggests all Iago's malevolence.

11 Otello-Era la notte

To further inflame Otello's jealousy, Iago invents a story about overhearing Cassio talking in his sleep of his love for Desdemona. This wonderfully telling passage is particularly well characterised, with splendidly controlled mezza-voce singing.

12 The Demon-Do not weep child

Whilst Tamara and the assembled wedding guests are mourning the death of the bridegroom, the Demon's voice is heard off-stage in strains combining consolation with temptation for the bereft bride. The Russian language emerges idiomatically, and the baritone sings this famous passage most effectively.

13 La Gioconda-Ah! Pescator, affonda l'esca

The foul spy of the inquisition, Barnaba, sings this lilting barcarole which sets the marine location of the opera's second act. He uses the fisherman's catch as an allegory for his ability to trap his human quarry, the disguised nobleman Enzo Grimaldo. This aria finds Sammarco at his peak, delivering warm tone in a performance full of drive and rhythmic impulse.

14 Zazà-Buona Zazà

In this slight piece, Cascart, a music hall singer, warns Zazà that her lover is in fact married and has a child. This is one of the several roles Sammarco created and his performance is both winning and authoritative.

15 Adriana Lecouvreur-Ah! Stupenda, mirabile

This commentary is sung by Michonnet, the stage manager at the Comédie-Française, as from the wings he watches his beloved Adriana performing. The role was created by Giuseppe de Luca, who also recorded this selection. Sammarco sounds equally convincing and his acting talents are well to the fore in this recitative-like aria.

16 Andrea Chénier-Un di m'era di gioia

Gérard, the violent revolutionary, recalls that he was once the servant of aristocrats before joining the revolution and becoming a free man. Yet he is now a slave to his

overwhelming passion for Maddalena, who he knows loves only Andrea Chénier. This is another creator record and must presumably indicate how the composer himself wished the passage to sound. Certainly the interpretation is most convincing, and it is an historical document of great importance.

DOMENICO VIGLIONE-BORGHESE

17 Ruy Blas-A miei rivali cedere

This opera, after Victor Hugo's tragedy, is very much in the style of early Verdi. It concerns the revenge on the Queen of Spain by a slighted courtier. He enters his valet at court as a young noble. The valet, Ruy Blas, speedily wins the love of the queen, whom he has worshipped from afar. He is rapidly advanced by her until the courtier reveals that she has stooped to love a mere lackey. When the proud woman dismisses Ruy, he kills himself in despair. This aria, also a favourite show-piece of the great Battistini, is sung with vibrant warm tone and splendid enunciation. It does not suffer in comparison with the older baritone's version.

18 La Gioconda-O Monumento

This soliloquy is addressed to the famous "Lion's Mouth" - a sinister carved stone letter box used for anonymous denunciations of enemies of the state to the Inquisition. The villainous Barnaba gloats over the possibilities it promises. Viglione-Borghese expresses the repulsive sentiments of Barnaba supremely well in this fine recording.

19 Hérodiade-Visione fuggitiva.

One of Massenet's most inspired arias for the baritone voice, it captures the desire of Herod for his beautiful step-daughter, Salomé. He avers that he would gladly sacrifice his soul to win her love. Viglione-Borghese sings this hauntingly beautiful aria with fine technical control, in sculpted legato phrases.

20 Thaïs-Alessandria

Athanaël, the monk, looks down on the sinful city of Alexandria and curses it. He is later impelled to visit it in an attempt to reform the courtesan Thaïs. After accomplishing this task he realises that he loves her passionately. She dies praising God, whilst he vainly begs her to live to satisfy his earthly desires. We hear a fine legato line and enormous dramatic conviction.

21 Le Villi-Anima santa

Anna has died of grief following her abandonment by her lover Robert. Here her father, Guglielmo, prays that if the legend of the Villi is true, they will show Robert no mercy, but finally he asks God to forgive the thoughts of malice which well up in his heart. Viglione-Borghese conveys these conflicting emotions and sings convincingly with a touch of tears in

the voice.

22 Tosca-Ha piu forte sapore

The evil Scarpia crows over the advantages of a violent conquest as opposed to a willing surrender as he thinks longingly of Tosca. The passage is sung with ruthless energy by the baritone; he was clearly an excellent exponent of the role.

23 Germania-Ferito prigionier

24 -Tu m'eri innanzi

25 -Ascolta, io moriro

The opera is set around the time of the battle of Leipzig. Worms, a student, has had a love-affair with a young girl, Ricke, who is engaged to his closest friend. In the first aria he has escaped from a French prison, where he was wounded and ill-treated. He tells Ricke and Löwe of his delight in being home and breathing his native air once more. The narrative continues as he tells of his determination to be revenged on his late captors. Ricke is greatly moved by his sufferings and leaves her husband, Löwe, to return to the country. In the final tragic scene, both Worms and Löwe die. Before his death Worms expresses grief and remorse over the trouble he has caused the couple. All these excerpts are delivered with great involvement and deep feeling. It would be difficult to imagine finer interpretations of these passages from this now forgotten work, in which the young Caruso enjoyed much success.

John Freestone

Dr. Wayne writes:

Adriana 92636 was not popular outside Italy and, despite its creator coupling, *Zazà* 92635, the disc is a very scarce one of this group. Undoubtedly the most difficult one for me was *Demone* 39310, assuredly because it was recorded in Russian. Its coupling, *Ballo in Maschera* 39270 should have sold it, but the public of the day wanted two popular items. Ronald Philips sold this to me in 1967 for the then princely sum of 6 Guineas. The ensemble discs with de Bohuss, who also made G&Ts, are very rare indeed. *Ernani* 39300 was coupled with a solo by Ventura, and was thus less likely to sell. I obtained a pink-label sample copy from Argentina in 1965. Nearly as rare is the other item with de Bohuss, from *Don Carlos*. It was coupled with a choral piece. His very popular Iago sold many copies of the *Otello* excerpts, so these were relatively common on dealers' lists of the 1960s and early '70s; as were the records from *Rigoletto*, *Aïda* and *L'Africaine*. Other top rare Sammarco records are in the 13¾"/35cm series which can be heard in Volume 13 on Symposium 1113.

No record of Viglione-Borghese is easy to find. You could scan dealers' lists for years without finding one. Virtually all mine were in Milan and Florence, but my very best came from the very knowledgeable Marconi specialist, Fernando de Michaelis from whom I acquired 3 records. Then Roberto Bauer left me his copy of the fabulous *Le Villi/La Gioconda* 92649/50. The duets with Gilion, 92663/4 came via a circuitous route from Sergio Rommelli of Turin. The only item I ever saw more than twice was the concerted piece from *Aïda* Act III, which was coupled with "Ora e per sempre" by Calleja. Rarest of the whole group of Fonotipia records of this artist is undoubtedly the duet from *La Wally* 92843/4 with Russ. These duets will appear later in the series.

Viglione-Borghese's two acoustic Polydor records of the early '20s still show a beautiful and powerful voice, but find one if you can!

It give me great pleasure to see another issue from the one thousand double-sided Fonotipias and Odeons I collected being made available to lovers of great voices from the past.

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