

JOHN McCORMACK – “I hear you calling me”

John McCormack was born on the 14th June 1884 in the town of Athlone which is at the very heart of Ireland. The Great Famine, a famine of truly biblical proportions that killed or forced into exile more than two and a half million of Ireland's population, was forty years in the past. Two years in the future was the rejection by the British Parliament, its Irish members were overwhelmingly nationalist proponents of an independent Ireland, of a proposal to grant Ireland a limited form of Home Rule.

These events each had an enormous impact on John McCormack's life. The Great Famine triggered an emigration which guaranteed McCormack Irish audiences wherever he sang; whilst the failure of Home Rule led nationalist Ireland, in collaboration with the Roman Catholic church, to a conscious re-invention of a distinct Irish cultural identity. This was complete with its own language, literature, sporting traditions, and music. For McCormack, who grew up and was educated in the midst of this cultural cauldron, the new identity, and pride in Ireland and all things Irish, provided a confidence and an identity that helped to overcome his own natural shyness, and with his great gifts as a singer, helped him to become a world-class performer.

This most remarkable son of Ireland was one of eleven children born to an Irish mill foreman and a Scottish Presbyterian mother. John McCormack had the good fortune to receive a first-rate education. At a time when most Irish children received a minimal amount of schooling, he won a scholarship that took him to a Catholic boarding school in Sligo, where the curriculum included languages, classics and music. The school also gave him the essential qualities of discipline and self-reliance necessary for the success of any professional singer. Although the aim was for a post in the civil service, the opportunity his education gave to develop his musical talent persuaded McCormack to look to a career as a singer. Thus he went to Dublin, where, in 1903, he joined Vincent O'Brien's pro-Cathedral Palestrina Choir. O'Brien recognised innate talent in this callow youth of nineteen, and gave him the best musical training then available in Ireland. That same year McCormack entered the Dublin *Feis Ceoil*, or Festival of Music, and won first prize in the tenor section: the gold medal he was awarded became a talisman he treasured till the end of his days. It was this victory that determined McCormack on a career as an opera singer.

The following year, after a short period singing Irish ballads with O'Brien's choir at the St. Louis World Fair, he returned to Ireland in order to prepare for a period of intensive vocal training in Italy. Incredibly it was at this early stage in his career that John McCormack began his recording career - a career that lasted until 1942. In September 1904 he came to London, where he made disc records for the Gramophone and Typewriter Ltd., and cylinder records for Edison Bell and for Thomas Edison's National Phonograph Company. The story behind these is instructive. William Hayes, Thomas Edison's London-based recording engineer, recalled in a 1960s memoir, a visit Edison's

London manager made in 1904 to a Dublin wholesaler named Harris, who told him:

There was a young Irish tenor named John McCormack who was very popular at that time throughout Ireland and that it would be to our benefit to have him visit our London Recording Department and sing at least 10 different selections.

[McCormack artist file, Edison National Historic Site, West Orange, New Jersey, USA]

Harris even offered to bring McCormack to London.

Further light is shed on these events by a 1921 letter from Sidney Dixon, then director of the Gramophone Company's International Artistes Department in London, to Calvin G. Child, his opposite number at the Victor Talking Machine Company. Dixon noted:

We actually discovered John McCormack in Dublin, and asked him whether he wanted to come over to London to make some Irish records. . . [He] asked for third class return fare to London, and, if my memory serves me, £10 for fifteen Irish songs . . . We never hoped to have any particular sale for these records in England, but we wished to have a representative number of Irish ballads sung by an Irishman for our small Irish business in Ireland. [McCormack artist file, EMI Music Archive, Hayes, Middlesex, England]

In fact his contract reveals a fee of a guinea (£1.05) per record with bonus of a gramophone and a dozen records.

The commercial considerations that caused these records to be made are of great importance in understanding McCormack's worth in 1904. As records they are uniformly poor both vocally and as examples of recorded art (a view with which in later life McCormack agreed), and enjoyed a short catalogue life. Their importance lies in the fact that they are the debut recordings of the first artist whose singing career has been chronicled from first to last by the gramophone. Furthermore, the fees he earned helped to pay for the all important Italian training with Maestro Vincenzo Sabatini. Under his tuition, McCormack developed rapidly from a mediocre interpreter of Irish ballads into a potentially great opera singer. It was in 1906, whilst under Sabatini's tuition, that McCormack made his operatic debut in Mascagni's *L'Amico Fritz* at a tiny opera house in Savona.

In 1906 McCormack completed his Italian training and married Lily Foley, a fellow Irish singer. There were two children. The family life they provided gave the singer an essential stability, and acted as a brake on his temperament and excesses. In addition, Lily McCormack was a shrewd businesswoman; for example, surviving correspondence suggests that she assisted her husband in negotiating his tour contracts. McCormack returned to London to build a professional career. He approached both the Gramophone and Typewriter Ltd and Edison's National Phonograph Company with a view to making further records, but neither company was enthusiastic. As Dixon recalled:

McCormack offered to sing for us again at a moment when I had with great difficulty obtained the services of Mr. Edward Lloyd, then by head and shoulders the greatest English tenor living. Mr. Edward Lloyd had always featured the principal

Irish ballads such as 'The Minstrel Boy', 'Come Back to Erin', 'Snowy Breasted Pearl', etc.

The obtaining of the services of Edward Lloyd was quite a milestone in our business at that time, and there may have seemed no particular object in continuing with an unknown tenor, such as John McCormack was then, with Edward Lloyd in our catalogue. Further, John Harrison, who for many years was the most popular record maker we then had, had been singing a great deal in Ireland and had also made the Irish ballads.

I remember very well Mr. Green asking me whether we wished to have John McCormack sing in grand opera. The programme McCormack then proposed to Mr. Green included the records just made by Caruso and De Lucia. No one, including Landon Ronald, who was then our advisor, found in McCormack's quality of voice the promise of what he subsequently developed. [Ibid]

In his memoir William Hayes remembered McCormack demanding excessive fees, and also refusing to be bound by an exclusive contract. Nevertheless, Hayes did make a test record of the singer and was impressed at the improvement in his voice.

McCormack was, however, engaged to make some cylinders by Sterling Records, a company owned jointly by Louis Sterling (later first managing director of EMI) and the recording engineer Russell Hunting. After the failure of Sterling Records in 1908, Hunting took the McCormack cylinders to Pathé Records and engineered some transfers to Pathé's own centre-start, vertical-cut discs.

As a consequence of his work for Sterling Records, McCormack gained a contract with the German International Talking Machine Co., manufacturers of Odeon records, whose British agents at that time were Sterling and Hunting.

In 1908 the Gramophone Company (the Typewriter was dropped in 1907), recognising the tenor's growing importance, attempted to negotiate a complex recording contract under which he would sing exclusively for them on discs, and exclusively for Russell Hunting on cylinders. The deal fell through, again because McCormack would not accept the financial terms offered.

Eventually, by searching keenly for every possible engagement, McCormack began to build up a following. His big break came in 1907 when he performed the role of Turridu in Mascagni's opera *Cavalleria Rusticana* at the Royal Opera House, Covent Garden. At twenty-three, he was the youngest principal tenor the company had ever engaged. Thereafter, until the outbreak of the First World War in 1914, McCormack never missed a Covent Garden season. He appeared in leading roles with the greatest artists, such as Tetrzzini and Melba. In 1909 he sang the part of Alfredo in *La Traviata* at the San Carlo Opera in Naples, and later that year he made his American operatic début, also as Alfredo, at the Manhattan Opera House. In 1911 Melba took him with her on a triumphant tour of Australia. His roles included the Duke in *Rigoletto*, Don Ottavio in *Don Giovanni*, and Rodolfo in *La Bohème*. It was during these years that the voice matured and became more focused; its unique liquid sound and quality evident to all who heard him either in person or through the medium of the gramophone.

In January 1910, the Victor Talking Machine Company bought out McCormack's Odeon contract for £2,000 (in effect a transfer fee, equivalent in 1998 to around £150,000) and signed him on an initial five-year exclusive contract for twenty records per year. Although Calvin Child, head of Victor's recording studios, was enthusiastic about the new signing, he was clearly uncertain of the long term prospects, for he confided to his London colleagues:

I think his records are going to amount to a good deal more than we first anticipated, and will be of real value to us for a year or two but after that, he will take a great tumble if I do not miss my guess. [Artist file, EMI]

Child could not have been further from the mark. McCormack's work for Victor, which included many of his finest records, continued until the Great Depression all but destroyed the American record industry.

By 1914, with a major recording contract and an established position as one of the world's leading tenors, McCormack seemed set to be a mainstay of the operatic stage for years to come. However, it was not to be. His light lyric voice, attractive and polished though it was in the recording studio and on the concert platform, simply could not compete with the bigger voices of the likes of Caruso and Zenatello. Furthermore, McCormack knew he was not a good actor, and he was never at ease on the operatic stage trying to be someone else. Although he continued to appear in opera until the early 1920s, his appearances became less and less frequent, being replaced by increasing numbers of concerts. On the concert platform he could give himself to singing the kind of music he and his audiences wanted to hear, and he could be himself: the great communicator. Meanwhile, in the recording studio work continued unabated, but with a corresponding shift in repertoire.

Just before the outbreak of war in 1914 John McCormack began an association with the man who transformed him from a top singer into an American musical phenomenon. He was the American impresario Charles Wagner. In his memoirs Wagner claimed that during the thirteen years he managed McCormack's American tours they grossed the staggering figure of \$5 million. Such earnings were not surpassed until the coming of rock 'n' roll and modern pop stars. McCormack earned a fair proportion of this figure, and in 1918, at the peak of his popularity, he paid \$75,000 in American income tax, a figure representing an estimated income of around \$300,000. Of this, over half came from Victor record royalties, the balance was from investments, opera and touring. Although some people believe the life of a singer is easy, little more than standing on a stage and singing, in the case of McCormack nothing could have been further from the truth. Charles Wagner arranged American tours of anything up to ninety concerts per season. It was a punishing schedule, and one that took its toll on the singer and his fragile temperament. Wagner did not travel with the singer, instead McCormack took with him his accompanist Edwin Schneider, his personal manager, protector, friend and fellow Irishman Denis McSweeney, and, occasionally, his brother James McCormack. The strain and tedium of the long, often uncomfortable, train journeys was made endurable by this companionship. McSweeney in particular formed a close bond with the singer; they played

cards, smoked, drank and argued together for weeks at a time.

McCormack's surviving letters to Charles Wagner amply bear out the stress and tension he felt repeatedly criss-crossing America. In October 1921, he wrote from Vermont:

I notice you have 37 dates booked before Xmas and as my contract specifically mentions 60 for the season you have 23 after the New Year. I will not sing one more than 60 or if I do I will count them as part of my next year's contract. I have no desire to sing myself to death like poor Caruso and I want to have some voice left for my European tour. This is final. [McCormack-Wagner letters, Heinemann Collection, Music Division, Library of Congress]

Nonetheless, the goose continued to lay the golden eggs; McCormack's tours of America, and sales of his Victor records during these years, mark him out as a new kind of performer: someone willing to use all the means at his disposal, including records, mass advertising, regular personal appearances and, later, radio and films to exploit his extraordinary talent.

By the outbreak of war in 1914 McCormack had decided to move to America. During the war he became an American citizen, and in 1917, when that country entered the war, he threw himself into the American war effort. He sang at Army camps, and gave concerts to raise money for the Red Cross and other war-related charities. He also raised huge sums at Liberty Bond concerts. On one occasion in 1918 he appeared with his friend Caruso, the violinist Jascha Heifetz and other musical luminaries. Together they raised \$5 million in Liberty Bonds.

McCormack's repertoire encompassed the music of that war. There were British war songs such as: 'It's a long way to Tipperary', 'Keep the home fires burning' and 'Roses of Picardy', together with American songs such as: 'God be with our boys tonight' and a best-selling version of 'The Star Spangled Banner'. Nonetheless, for this high-profile Irishman to abandon his British citizenship in the midst of the war, and at a time when Ireland was spiralling into revolution and civil war, proved highly unpopular. McCormack was censured in the British press and even described as treacherous in some British quarters. In 1921 he was forced to abandon a tour of Australia by extreme Empire Loyalists who interrupted his concerts with the British national anthem. His anger at what he saw as a slur against his new homeland took several years to dissipate. Eventually all was forgiven. Britain became increasingly his second home, and during the Second World War he remained, singing until the collapse of his health in 1943.

As John McCormack made records throughout his long career, it is possible, beginning with his early records of Irish ballads in 1904, to trace the development of his repertoire as well as his voice. Under the tuition of Sabatini this came to encompass operatic roles, of which he recorded many fine examples. Finest of all, perhaps, is the 1916 record of 'Il mio tesoro' from Mozart's opera *Don Giovanni*. George Bernard Shaw considered this to be the greatest record he had ever heard. (It is included on Symposium 1163.)

In the early years, overtly political Irish nationalist songs such as 'The croppy boy'

and 'A nation once again' figured prominently in his repertoire. After his death in 1945, the critic Neville Cardus recalled one such early concert:

He came on a Queen's Hall platform forty or so years ago and sang 'Who fears to sing for ninety eight' and 'The west's awake'. The Hall was only half filled but those who were there were entranced as we used to be entranced by the voice of Sarah Bernhardt in the theatre. It was as if a new magic had been born in Ireland. [The Manchester Guardian, 18th September 1945]

However, after the move to America and particularly after the Easter Rising in 1916, most of these songs disappeared from his repertoire.

McCormack may have tempered his political nationalism, but he never forgot his Irish cultural roots; until the end of his days he sang and recorded many traditional Irish ballads and songs of farewell written in response to the pain of emigration.

The former include songs by Thomas Moore, and settings of folk melodies by Herbert Hughes. The writer Compton Mackenzie wrote of McCormack's singing of Irish ballads:

Nobody can give Tom Moore's Irish songs like him: that is not surprising. But when he gives us something more ancient and more truly Irish than anything Moore ever wrote, like 'The Snowy-breasted Pearl', it is equally unparagoned. [Gramophone October 1924. Vol 2, No 5, p.152].

The latter group included songs like, 'The Irish Immigrant', a setting of Lady Dufferin's poem 'The Lament of the Irish Immigrant' sung to an old Irish air, and, of course, Julia Mary Crawford's 'Kathleen Mavourneen'.

The nationalist repertoire was replaced by a series of Irish songs written by two Irish-American friends of his: Chauncey Olcott and Ernest Ball. Although of Irish descent, these two writers who had never visited the country, created a mythical land of fairies and stage Irishmen. It was an attractive confection and very much in keeping with an America still dominated by immigrant cultures and yearnings towards Europe. Among Olcott and Ball classics were songs such as 'My wild Irish rose', 'Mother Machree' and 'When Irish eyes are smiling', all of which McCormack popularised.

After the First World War ended in 1918, McCormack began to broaden his repertoire to include pieces by Handel and Mozart, and Lieder by figures such as Brahms, Richard Strauss and Hugo Wolf. In his generation, he became one of the great exponents of the music of Handel and Mozart. His outstanding recordings of 'Oh, sleep! why dost thou leave me?' and 'Care selve' remain important milestones in the re-introduction of Handel operas, and what is now called early music, back to the standard repertoire. During the 1920s and 1930s he developed a scholarly interest in the works of Hugo Wolf. Under the tuition of his German-speaking accompanist Edwin Schneider he made many important recordings and introduced the art of Lieder singing to many in his audiences.

McCormack was a devoted son of the Church and many of his recordings of songs and hymns, César Franck's 'Panis Angelicus' and Ethelbert Nevin's 'The Rosary' being two which spring to mind, reflect this. In the 1920s his generosity to Catholic charities was recognised by a number of awards, the most pleasing for him was his elevation to the

papal aristocracy by Pope Pius XI; he became Count John McCormack of the Holy Roman Empire.

Just as McCormack's career as an opera singer ended earlier than expected, so unexpected forces ended his second career on the concert platform. The end of the First World War saw a dramatic change in American musical tastes. Developments in jazz and jazz-based dance music swept the country. It was no longer dominated by immigrant cultures. Although they were able to sing the new music, classically-trained artists could not sing it idiomatically. Besides, Americans wanted their music performed by young American-born musicians. In these circumstances, interest in John McCormack and his music waned, his concerts became fewer and less well-attended. He tried to adapt to the situation and made several records of the new popular music - his record of 'Sonny Boy' was considered a gem - but his heart was not in it. The Victor company recognised this and, with the decline in sales of his records, his appearances in recording studios also became fewer. He made his final Victor records in 1930. Such was the speed and ferocity of the Great Depression that not all of these were issued. Fortunately some test pressings have survived; the stunning excerpts from Beethoven's *Christus am Ölberge* 'Jehova, hear o hear me' and 'Jehova, du mein Vater', together with the aria 'O König, das kann ich dir nicht sagen' from *Tristan und Isolde*, are included in this anthology. Thereafter all his records were made in London for British home and dominion markets.

Not only was the musical ground shifting from under his feet, but his vocal talents were suffering a decline. Probably a number of factors, as well as natural ageing, contributed to this. In 1922 McCormack suffered a serious throat infection that nearly killed him. Certainly he was weakened by it. Possibly the continued punishing schedule of the Wagner tours overstretched and damaged his voice. Furthermore, he smoked heavily, drank copious amounts of champagne, and enjoyed large meals of rich foods, so that he had a serious weight problem by middle life. One might wonder, also, whether the duration of his training in Italy, two years, was too short a time in which to acquire the techniques and disciplines necessary to sustain a major career.

By 1931 John McCormack was a wealthy man and a figure of some stature, not only in America but also in Britain. However, like everyone else, he was hit by the Great Depression. Under its weight very few of his records were sold in America, though he was successful and did enjoy appearing as a guest on American radio shows, such as *The Inside Story*, featured in this anthology. In that environment he could be himself, tell jokes, reminisce about his long career, and sing the old favourites: the great communicator lived on. In the newly-discovered broadcast he confirms the oft-repeated story of his greeting Caruso with the quip "How's the world's greatest tenor today?" and Caruso's reply "Since when were you a bass, John?".

It was in Britain during the 1930s and 1940s that he was able to enjoy the closing phase of his career. He continued his work for the Gramophone Company, for whom he made a number of important records during this period. These include contributions to the Hugo Wolf Society series, to the Stephen Foster centenary album, and many British art songs and Irish ballads. (The Wolf Lieder are on Symposium 1164 and a selection of

songs and ballads on 1166. A recital of British art songs is planned for Symposium 1165.)

Gramophone Company executives quickly learned that McCormack was not the easiest man to deal with. For example, in 1929 they suggested he might like to record 'Danny Boy'. He replied in high dudgeon: *I do not know any Irish melody called 'Danny Boy'. I do know the Derry Air and I had heard it had been desecrated by having some exceedingly silly words set to it.* [Artist file, EMI]. Nothing further was heard of that proposal. However, he appreciated the professionalism of the recording studio and was always quick and generous in his acknowledgement of this. He wrote in 1930 to Fred Gaisberg, then artistic director of the Gramophone Company's International Artists Department:

Please tell the boys at the recording department that I have never enjoyed a session of recording as much as this last and I am grateful for their kindness and whole-hearted co-operation. [Artist file, EMI]

However, as the 1930s progressed, demand for McCormack records dried up even in Britain. He gave his last American tour in 1937. After it, and before returning for a farewell tour of Britain, he wrote to Gaisberg reminding him that his old Victor contract was about to expire. He enquired whether there was any demand for his records in Britain, and if there was any potential for him to make further records. In typically forthright fashion, the singer wrote:

You can be perfectly frank like the old friend you are. I am retired from the concert world here in America and am having a glorious vacation for the first time in thirty years. [Artist file, EMI]

Gaisberg's reply was not encouraging:

You must see the general trend of things. Every day demand for vocal records gets less and less. It is only collectors who are interested in Lieder, ballads and arias. Apart for this the demand is not sufficient to mean money for you, as you experienced it in the past. [Ibid]

Retirement did not last long for McCormack. The outbreak of the Second World War in 1939 saw the tenor in London. He began to give concerts for the Red Cross, for war workers and for the Army, and he appeared regularly on the BBC. As the war revived the fortunes of the record industry he made what proved to be a final series of records for the Gramophone Company, a fitting epilogue to a recording career that had begun in London so many years earlier. He sang until 1943 when a collapse of his health forced his wife to take him back to neutral Ireland, where, suffering from acute emphysema, he died on 16th September 1945.

In a moving tribute, his friend the music critic Ernest Newman concluded his obituary notice in *The Sunday Times* with the words:

He was a supreme example of the art that conceals art, the sheer hard work that becomes manifest only in its results, not in the revolving of the machinery that has produced it. He never stooped to small and modest things; he invariably raised them, and with them the most unsophisticated listener, to his own high level. I never knew him, in his public or his private singing, to be guilty of a lapse of taste, of making an

effect for mere effect's sake. He was a patrician artist, dignified even in apparent undress, with a respect for art that is rarely met with among tenors. There is no one to take his place.

Peter Martland
Cambridge January 1998

Dr. Martland is a Research Assistant at Corpus Christi College, Cambridge, where he teaches modern history. He is recognised as the foremost historian of the record industry. He is the author of "A Business History of The Gramophone Company Ltd"; 1897-1918, which was his thesis, and the recently published *Since Records Began, the Centenary History of EMI*.

SOME NOTES ON THE RECORDS

McCormack is perhaps unique as a major singer of whom a considerable number of records were published when little more than foundations had been laid. Hence we should not be surprised that his first recordings are both very rare and rather disappointing. Indeed, in later years McCormack himself was wont to play one of these early discs to unsuspecting acquaintances, saying that an aspiring singer had sent it to him with a request for advice; what ought he to advise? When the unsuspecting acquaintance said that the youngster could hardly be advised to take up singing, the truth would be revealed.

Tracks 1 and 3, though recorded in the same series as track 2, were released under a different name on a cheaper label. No trace of John O'Reilly has ever been found, and the chance of two indistinguishable singers singing the same repertoire in the same studio on the same day must be so small as to be discounted. Surviving examples are so rare that only recently was it possible to "put two and two together" and identify O'Reilly with certainty as McCormack; the recording company was thus extending its Irish repertoire very economically.

The second record transferred to this CD was purchased from a dealer for a very small sum on account of its very poor state. The following two evenings were spent removing what appeared to be some sort of mixture of soap and treacle, hardened with age. The new owner felt well rewarded for his effort.

Two cylinders from the Sterling company appeared as Pathé discs. Pathé, long before electrical recording, had a system of transfer by mechanical pantograph. As this record indicates, it could be remarkably effective. Incidentally, on one side the very end of the announcement, with which cylinders often opened, is still audible. There is no question but that McCormack's voice has benefited from his further studies; now a

professional singer is recognizable.

Late in 1906 McCormack began to record for the Odeon company. At this time, his formal studies completed, he was beginning to gain experience, and to acquire reputation as an artist of note. The repertoire, previously limited (in the recording studio) to Irish songs, is now extended to Italian and French opera, and Italian songs. As the three examples here demonstrate, the ability to hold a line, to sing an ornament, to polish a phrase and to contemplate the span of a complete piece, make him the equal of any of his contemporaries.

For many years McCormack was recorded on both sides of the Atlantic, the matrices being available to both parties. The records are amongst the finest any singer ever made but there were occasional mishaps. The duet from *The Pearl Fishers* is immaculately sung but the balance (still often a problem today) made the record unusable.

The tenor sounds fine but the baritone is far too distant and a piano (playing the harp part) is much too prominent. This record was made in Camden, New Jersey. It was released in Europe, but was withdrawn very quickly as a better balanced one was made shortly afterwards in London. (Inadvertently a description of this disc appeared in the booklet for CD 1163).

The accompaniments of the two Handel arias which follow will upset the purists. No matter. The singing is, simply put, of unparalleled excellence; the trill, the breath span, the floating tone and the polish are paradigm examples of fine singing.

Dr. Martland has suggested that the Beethoven piece was not issued due to the economic situation, but the record may have been to some extent experimental as the first half was repeated in a different language. McCormack convinces us that the music is on a par with Florestan's aria. When a performance of the complete work was announced in London some years ago the writer rushed out to get tickets. In the event it was very tame; far indeed from the Beethoven of Florestan and Fidelio.

The critic Ernest Newman repeatedly told McCormack that he would make an ideal Tristan. He must have intended this in a musical sense, as he must have known full well that McCormack's voice could not possibly have sustained such a role. Both must have been aware of Melba's disaster as Brünnhilde in 1896. However, one aria on its own, a reflective piece, could not possibly do any harm, so here it is, and a very effective performance too.

Claims to uniqueness are frequently ill-founded. Probably the longest recording career of any singer was that of Peter Dawson - over half a century. Nevertheless, few others can have exceeded McCormack's 38 years. His last visit to a recording studio closed with a song by Montague Phillips. The voice is not what it once was, but undimmed is the power to take a not very important piece of music and make us listen.

Everything in this series so far has been from commercial recording studios. In the mid-20s McCormack began to enter the broadcasting studios as well, and in the early '30s home recording off the air became possible.

The "RCA Victor HOME RECORDING RECORD" was a double-sided black disc, thinner than a normal 78, and of a considerably softer substance; probably the normal

mix but without filler. Preformed on each side was a groove giving the disc the general appearance of a normal record. However, the groove was unmodulated (contained no sound). The recording head was guided across the record by the groove and at the same time it cut the groove, widening it from side to side in accordance with the electric signal fed to it. By a great stroke of good fortune two such discs of a McCormack broadcast not only survived but came into the hands of a collector, who realised what they were. We have no idea who made them, nor how good they originally sounded. Certainly they had been played with pre-war equipment, and possibly some natural deterioration of the material had taken place in sixty years.

Many hours were needed, using technology available only in recent months, to produce the best possible transfer from this exciting discovery. Even so, collectors will appreciate that levels of noise and distortion inherent in this system are above those normal to commercial records of the period.

The competition section, and the sections sung by the chorus, must have been rehearsed, but one guesses that the interview sections were done from notes or headings. McCormack is clearly in his element chatting about himself, but the announcer sounds stiff and contrived except in his obviously written-out and rehearsed introduction.

McCormack is in splendid voice, enjoying himself as much singing as talking. Incidentally, he forgets for a moment that he is down to sing only the opening of the Mendelssohn song.

As a piece of industrial archaeology this is amongst the earliest surviving broadcasts, and as an example of home recording it is remarkable for its time.

"An Ireland beauty" was never otherwise recorded by McCormack. Not only is this, therefore, an addition to McCormack's discography but, it is also of interest for being, as he testifies himself, the first piece he ever performed before an audience.

Neil Corning has kindly written about how he came by the record, and what he has been able to discover about it.

MIRACLES DO HAPPEN

In the Fall of 1993, at one of the regular meetings of the New England Society for the Preservation of Recorded Sound, a fellow collector from Vermont approached me with a gift. He had seen in a collection of records in a junk store two RCA Victor home recording discs with handwritten notation: *John McCormack - Feb. 10, 1933*. Knowing my lifelong collecting of McCormack, he purchased them for me, and presented them to me that day.

What were they? What was 2-10-33? A call to Peter Dolan of the John McCormack Society of America resulted in the information that on that day McCormack appeared on a radio program entitled *The Inside Story*, with Edwin C. Hill over the CBS network.

Could these be home recordings of that program? Do other copies exist? They

play terribly, almost inaudibly. I can almost hear McCormack speaking. I can almost hear McCormack singing. What can be done?

Another friend transcribes it using a multifilter. The results are negligible but verifies it as a radio interview, and several more songs being sung. Can it be restored? I call several well-known dealers and collectors who advise me of the potential cost. I can't afford it, but it should be available for all to hear.

I tell my U.K. record dealer and friend about it. He offers to check with the record company executive who he knows. A week later I am told that this man will transcribe and clean up these discs, and, if it is what we think, put them out on a CD soon to be issued of rare McCormack recordings.

I send my discs to England and wait. Can anything be done? The answer is a resounding YES!

In a short time, my discs are returned with a gracious note from Eliot Levin, of Symposium Records. Under separate cover I received a preliminary tape of the transcription. Though still noisy in places we can now hear the interview. Edwin Hill asks questions and a light hearted, buoyant, McCormack responds. Nathaniel Shilkret is introduced and speaks about all the McCormack records he has assisted with. McCormack tells the story of Caruso and the meeting in Boston: *And how is the World's Greatest Tenor today?* Caruso responding: *And when did you become a bass, John?*

He tells of his early days in England touring, and he sings seven songs, one of which he never otherwise recorded, 'An Ireland beauty', and which he describes as the very first song he ever learned.

A collector's dream. I own the original recording. Yes, miracles do still happen in record collecting!

Neil T. Corning
Peabody, Mass.

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