

THE EDISON LEGACY: Unpublished Treasures of the Edison Archive.

Vol. 1 Marston 52042-2 (two discs)	36 tracks	157min.
Vol. 2 Marston 53014-2 (three discs)	43 tracks	232min.

These two sets, the most important historical vocal releases in my lifetime of 70 years, have many lessons for us. One is that the late release of a recording can skew the entire discography of an opera or aria. Consider Umberto Macnez's previously unpublished Edison wax master of 'Ecco ridente'. Had this 1910 performance been issued a century ago, we would all be mentioning it in the same breath as McCormack's 'Il mio tesoro' and hardly anyone would have the temerity to set the versions by Schipa and De Lucia up against it. I have often wondered about Macnez, as he was in the famous cast – alongside Anitua, Galeffi and De Angelis – when the centenary performance of *Il Barbiere* was given in his native Pesaro in 1916. Well, now we know how he could glide over the divisions and decorations in 'Ecco ridente', throwing in *cadenzas* along the way and making light of the faster section. He also shows plenty of personality. He slightly runs out of breath at the end of the first section and in today's world of editing he would probably want to remake the very end of the aria, but any faults are like pimples on a Michelangelo statue.

More of Macnez later. First I must explain what is on these five astonishing CDs. By 1910 the eccentric Thomas Edison had evolved a vertical cutting system that could give a timing of more than four minutes on a ten-inch side and more than seven minutes on a 12-inch side. Just imagine the benefit to civilisation, had this system been generally known. But the silly man never marketed these amazing artefacts. Fortunately many wax masters are preserved at the Edison National Historic Site and Ward Marston has been allowed access. The recorded sound is exceptional, as far as the voices are concerned. The accompaniments are pushed a little into the background but I imagine this order of priorities will offend few vocal buffs. Virtually everything here, by names such as Bori, Delna, Destinn, Hempel and Kaschmann, is previously unpublished.

Some singers appear in both volumes. Oreste Benedetti, a baritone previously known by just one cylinder, sings a reasonable 'Eri tu', although the weight is all in the middle and upper registers of his voice, so that he has to take the higher option on one low note. In the duet 'Ora posso morir' from Act 4 of *La Gioconda* he is stimulated by Paola Koralek's presence to give his all: her tone is slightly occluded but this is a fine record of a dramatic scene. Koralek is a mite fluttery in the *Trovatore* Act 1 trio, where Benedetti and Carlo Albani would not give Galeffi and Merli any sleepless nights. Albani is more impressive in the Nile duet from *Aida* and once Koralek gets going the drama is impressive despite her backward balance. Her Church Scene from *Faust* is an excellent piece of recording with the Covent Garden Chorus – its first appearance on record? Bass Pompilio Malatesta is no Chaliapin but he does a good job and the organ is very present. On his own in the *Faust* aria, Albani displays a flickering vibrato, weak, poorly-supported low notes and a bleat in *fortissimo*, but creates quite a pleasing impression despite these faults. Italo Cristali, a tenor with a pronounced tremolo and a bit of a bleat, has a real go at the *Cavalleria Rusticana* duet in true *verismo* style with another vibrant singer, Luisa Garibaldi. On his own he offers a well-routined Flower Song from *Carmen*. Heinrich Hensel, a better-than-average German tenor, provides a trill in 'Am stillen Herd' from *Meistersinger* and is excellent in

a long extract from *Götterdämmerung*. He is more a *spinto* than an *echt Heldentenor* but the voice is fresh and he sings well.

Macnez contributes a fine serenade from *Cavalleria Rusticana*, with a nice *morendo* and a good *crescendo* on the last note. The aria from *L'Amico Fritz* is superbly sung, with a lovely floated final note, and who cares if he sounds too young for Fritz? He puts pleasing little decorations into 'M'appari' and in the *Les Pêcheurs de Perles* aria, although the recording itself is less stable than usual, affecting his low notes, he ends with a gratifying *pianissimo*. In the duet from *Sonnambula* with Maria Galvany, he again outdoes Schipa with exquisite singing and far outstrips Galvany's partner, Aristodemo Giorgini, on her 1906 G&T version; you also get two more minutes of music: 5:52 as opposed to 3:33. Galvany goes off into elaborate *fioriture* which do not aid the scene but when she and Macnez sing together, synchronising their decorations, the effect is memorable. On her own, Galvany starts 'Proch's Variations' quite well but is soon off into her musical clock mode: her *staccato* is terrific but leaves me cold. Arditi's 'L'incantatrice' is not his most inspired waltz but for those who like that kind of thing Galvany takes her musical clock impression into the stratosphere.

Marie Rappold, London born of German parents and New York trained, comes across as a typical clear-toned Teutonic soprano – nature triumphing over nurture? Micaëla's air shows off her lovely voice and a 6:47 side allows for a very full version. Intervals are perfectly in tune and, although some of the phrasing is a bit short-breathed, this is distinguished singing, as is 'Vissi d'arte', beautifully done with full commitment. Elsa's 'Einsam in trüben Tagen' finds her lower register not especially strong but her upper register clear and gleaming. The *Tannhäuser* aria is well phrased on a 5:34 side; Aida's 'Ritorna vincitor' is excellently sung and, given a timing of 6:05, she is able to phrase expansively. She is fine in the *Otello* love duet, of which the final 10-inch side is missing: it is further marred by Leo Slezak's strange voice production – his singing is a mixture of the passable and the execrable.

From the distinguished baritone Domenico Viglione-Borghese we have his first two records, hitherto unknown. 'Eri tu', despite more surface noise than usual, displays his clear tone and enunciation and his excellent range. The vocal part of the *Pagliacci* Prologue is heard complete on a 5:16 side: he takes some liberties, gives a hearty laugh before the big tune and omits one of the customary interpolated high notes. These are good souvenirs of a worthwhile singer.

Much of the excitement generated by these Edison sets concerns the American soprano Carolina White, previously unknown to me. Had she not abandoned opera in 1914, aged 29, she would have given Rosa Ponselle a real run for her money. She is a little overparted in *Gioconda* and the phrasing does not really expand at the climax, but the voice is a fine one, with a firm lower register. The arias from *Andrea Chénier* and *La Wally* are commanding performances, with gleaming tone. She sounds more Italianate than Rappold in an impassioned 'Ritorna vincitor' and in the duet with the splendid Amneris of Eleonora de Cisneros she emits terrific top notes: the recording, a diamond disc test pressing, is not one of the clearest. 'Il est doux, il est bon' from *Hérodiade*, sung in Italian, shows her warm middle register. The *Mefistofele* aria, in which she ranges fearlessly through the intervals, again shows the benefit of her Italian training; and the arias from *Cavalleria* and *Butterfly* are lovely. She is a real discovery for me. On her own, de Cisneros again shows her individuality of tone in 'O mio

Fernando'; the aria is nicely sustained, with lovely variations in dynamics and a fine *cadenza*; but she takes the *cabaletta* too fast for its full effect.

Singers appearing only in Volume 1 are headed by the delectable Lucrezia Bori, in clear voice although some repertoire is too heavy for her – perhaps a clue to her later vocal problems and years of enforced silence. The Act 1 aria from *La Traviata* is taken a little faster than it probably was in the theatre and 'Sempre libera' is down a semi-tone; some of the *coloratura* is a bit sketchy. 'Caro nome', from 1913, is also transposed but beautifully done. Against the arias from *Manon Lescaut*, *Tosca* and *Butterfly* I note 'lovely but light'. Emmy Destinn in *Cavalleria*, the aria and the duet with Dinh Gilly's Alfio, is a mite raw in places but superb dramatically. Handel's 'Sweet bird' is a good souvenir of Frieda Hempel, with lovely trills, her only Handel I think: the duetting with an unnamed flautist is celestial. Tenor Valentin Jaume displays his forward production and good enunciation in 'O Paradis'; one or two breaths spoil the musical line but this is a real voice. In the duet from *Les Huguenots* with Maria Labia, he sings pretty well and they both manage the high *tessitura* – an excellent disc. Lucette Korsoff's super 1910 record of the 'Laughing Song' from Auber's *Manon Lescaut*, with fine *fioriture* and *staccati*, was published, but only briefly. Her 1914 Waltz Song from *Mireille* is more forwardly recorded but the singing is just as good.

Three contraltos are well represented. Emmi Leisner, at the start of her career in 1914, delivers a pleasing 'Che farò' with chamber accompaniment, avoiding one high note. She is quite dramatic, especially for her, in 'Je suis, hélas!' from *Le Prophète*, in German. 'Kennst du das Land' from *Mignon* is lovely and very sensitive. Margarete Matzenauer's 'O don fatale' is much better than her Victor version, although still not ideally dramatic. I am never sure what to make of Rosa Olitzka: in 'Nobles seigneurs' she shows considerable flexibility as well as a trill, of good duration but a bit shallow. Is one note not quite in tune? In 'Les tringles' from *Carmen*, sung in Italian, though you can barely tell; she is definitely out of tune. She inserts an extra note but executes quite a decent trill.

We hear lovely, vibrant singing from the great Carmen Melis in 'Io son l'umile ancella' from *Adriana Lecouvreur*, complete with its introduction and recitative. Though Tosti's 'Io son l'amore' is not one of his best songs, she is persuasive.

Fritz Vogelstrom has a fine voice, the top notes a little 'straight' as with Urlus, and we hear good declamation in 'In fernem Land', even if the phrasing is not as well-organised as on versions by other tenors. Alas, his track is followed by Edyth Walker, well on the way to ruining her voice, in 'Ho-yo-to-ho' – heave-ho would be my response.

Singers appearing only in Volume 2 include Adelina Agostinelli. We hear a good, bright tone in 'Tu che la vanità' from *Don Carlo*: greater amplitude of phrasing would not come amiss but it is wonderful to hear this scene at all, and in such a full version, in 1910. 'O patria mia' immediately sounds more assured and is excellent although she helps herself to a little breath before the climactic note. 'Ho fatto un triste sogno' from *Iris* has the style and is cleanly, committedly sung; and the Jewel Song from *Faust* has a good trill and fine flexibility – she was clearly able to hold her head up in any company. Three tracks from Celestina Boninsegna do not add to her discography but are welcome: 'Tacea la notte' is slightly rewritten but nice, despite the plunges into her infamous chest register; 'Pace! Pace mio Dio' is very fine, quite an inward interpretation; and 'Ritorna

vincitor' is deeply felt, well acted with the voice, her conception of Aida more emotional, more rhythmically varied than Agostinelli's.

Four unpublished tracks by the wonderful Marie Delna unfortunately lead off with another version of her horrible 'Che farò', rhythmically very strange, all over the place in fact, with a big sob, an interpolated high note and the *da capo* at a faster tempo. 'Chers Tyriens' from *Les Troyens* shows her at her best, with terrific tone. 'Mon coeur' from *Samson* is pleasing, despite having the phrases rather broken up: she gives us both verses, with lavish *portamenti*. The Letter Scene from *Werther* again brings the best out of her, with glowing tone, natural phrasing and total immersion in the role.

Andrés de Segurola, a good company man with not much voice, delivers a very full version of 'La calunnia', well characterised. 'Vi ravviso' is quite nicely turned, with *cabaletta*. Infinitely more important is Giuseppe Kaschmann, captured in 1910 before he began specialising in buffo roles – he was the Bartolo in the 1916 *Barbiere* mentioned above. Aged 60, he has quite a tremolo but still commands a lovely tone and a fine *legato*. 'Sei vendicata assai', with its recitative, is very well sung in the old *bel canto* style, with a delectable *morendo* at the end of the first verse. Iago's Creed finds the voice a little under pressure, though he comes through all right. Hector Salomon's 'Extase', a pleasant song, allows him to vocalise well within his remaining powers.

The singers in each set are presented in alphabetical order, which I have more-or-less observed. Presentation is up to the usual Marston standards, with quite a chunky biography of each singer. The sound quality is nearly always superb and often startling. And there is more to come!

Tully Potter