LISTENING TO MUSIC: PEOPLE, PRACTICES AND EXPERIENCES

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FEBRUARY 27, 2017 BY *MATHIEU D'AQUIN*

Early 78s, celebrities of the Italian operatic tradition, and audiences

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Abstract

Early recordings from the pre-electrical era have something magical and unique about them: they preserve the fresh impression of live performances, unmediated by the adjustments of technology. The singers' lack of any previous experience in what recording a disc of a cylinder consisted of explains why they failed to appreciate the profound differences between singing on stage and singing in front of a phonograph.

Emma Calvé could not be convinced that stamping her feet while recording Carmen's *Seguedilla* was pointless for the listener, who was unable to see her acting. The negotiations which often preceded great singers' involvement with the recording industry were exhausting, such as in the case of Nellie Melba. In particular, Melba's reluctance to release her recorded material, and her skepticism regarding the ability of the early reproduction process to capture the quality of her voice, show how traumatic the advent of recording was for some interpreters of those days.

From the exclusive perspective of the Italian operatic tradition, I will focus on the reactions of singers and audiences to the advent of recorded sound, and its revolutionary impact on the personal experience of listening to music.

Introduction

The primary purpose of this chapter is to present an overview of the different reactions expressed by some of the most celebrated singers of Italian opera at the beginning of the twentieth century while listening to their own recordings. Enrico Caruso, John McCormack, Nellie Melba and Luisa Tetrazzini, among many others, are inextricably linked to the history of the recording industry, which first took off at the beginning of the last century. These singers had the advantage of being considered pioneers in the rudimentary technology of acoustic recording; they risked all in terms of its limitations and its sonic experience, which to the ears of any contemporary listener sounds quite primitive.

How did these singers approach the recording experience? How did they respond when they listened to their own recordings? To what extent were they aware that in participating in these early recordings they were among the first performers in the history of music to leave sonic evidence of their singing? These considerations must have played a subtle psychological role at the exact moment when the 78 was put on the gramophone machine and they had the opportunity of being able to hear themselves for the first time. In some respects, acknowledgement of their own efforts must have been a quite shocking experience, analogous to the experience shared by many of us when we hear the playback of a recording of a talk or performance we have given. Indeed, who among us has not thought with disappointment: 'Is this how my voice sounds? I had a completely different idea!' Common though that reaction might be, anyone who has had that experience should bear in mind the vast difference between recording in a modern studio and hearing the result in high fidelity sound, in contrast to the experience of Nellie Melba or Enrico Caruso who sang into a horn and heard their performances played back through very rudimentary machinery.

In addition to examining the reaction of singers to their early recordings, this chapter will also assess whether the first listening experiences of recorded material had any tangible impact on performers' habits and/or audiences' expectations. In singers' writings or interviews from those years, it is perhaps surprising that we hardly find any reflections regarding the ways in which their recordings might have influenced their performing habits. Obviously, the influence of one's own recorded performance is much

more of a concern to contemporary performers, who are used to the perfect recording, where any mistakes can be removed and the final result depends on a copy and paste process, which includes only the most perfectly realised takes. In contrast, early recordings from the pre-electrical era cannot be manipulated. The singer goes into the recording room, sings with their lips a few inches from the recording horn and listens to the accompanying instruments placed behind their head. This creates an unnatural distance between the performers.[1] Moving back from and forward towards the horn, the singer is hampered in many ways. There are also time constraints, as the seven-, ten- and later twelve-inch gramophone discs last between two and a half and four and a half minutes, a factor which inevitably affected the speed of performances. Furthermore, sound quality was compromised due to the fact that the recording apparatus is not able to capture all partials of the voice and even, at times, interferes with them by introducing its own sympathetic vibrations.[2]

No matter where the recording session took place, in a hotel room, in the lavish drawing room of the most magnificent villa or in the fancy recording studio of the Gramophone London site on the top floor of a commercial office building in City Road, the feeling of being constricted by a hostile environment could not be overcome. The vision of the singer was restricted to the edges of the recording horn, the body firmly still, the ears anxiously expecting the two bell rings that signalled the starting point, and the breath held until the whirring of the recording mechanism came to an end.[3] Although the recorded performance is just one of hundreds that the singer had already performed live, could the simple fact that this is a recorded example, and therefore can be listened to many times, affect the way in which the recorded solo will be performed in the future?

The same question can be asked with respect to the audiences. Could the recorded version of a solo, heard many times inside the domestic privacy of the listeners' drawing room, create some expectations in the listeners themselves when hearing it in the concert hall or opera house? Early recordings preserve the fresh impression of live performances: defects and even plain mistakes are evident, conferring upon them a sense of magical uniqueness. In her biographical volume *Melodies and Memories*, Melba suggested that she had received numerous marriage proposals from men at far ends of the world who fell in love with her having heard her angelic voice on a disc.[4] In their letters, these men claimed that they felt the heavenly beauty of her soul behind the pure sound of her voice. Clearly one cannot take these statements at face value, given that Nellie Melba was a beautiful and extremely wealthy woman at the peak of her career at that time. Nevertheless, they suggest the strong impact that early recordings exerted on audiences.

In contrast, feeling the soul of an artist through a recording is hardly a common consideration nowadays in terms of critical listening. Judging from the reviews that most modern recordings receive, our first preoccupation would be with technical aspects of the performance, such as the clarity of the phrasing, the articulation of the words, the length of the breaths, the covering of the *passaggio* area and the effective projection of the voices. We only feel able to engage with the performance at an expressive and emotional level, if the technical aspects of the singing are completely secure. Moreover, we bring the same expectations to a live performance, where we expect the same faultless precision and finesse that we are used to hearing in recordings.[5]

Early recordings, therefore, represent a world belonging to a thoroughly different era, with its own specific performing habits and its own idea of what the artistry of a singer was. A number of scholars from the 1990s onwards have assessed the way listening to recordings has exerted a very powerful influence in changing the tastes of audiences throughout the last century.[6] What I will argue here is that at the beginning of the twentieth century the individual personality of an interpreter was even more of a crucial element in the expectations of the audience than today. The early twentieth century was the era of the singer, where conductors had to bow to the singer's absolute power. When the Russian bass Fedor Chaliapin finally signed his gramophone contract in 1910, he was little concerned with the choice of the conductor for his recordings: '… anyone will do, for it is I who will direct' was his answer to the company inquiry on the topic.[7] As Gemma Bellincioni, a famous Italian soprano of those years, pointed out, the opera-goer of her days went to the opera house expecting to find a specific singer creating a specific role from an opera whose authorship had in effect been transferred from the composer to the singer themself. Audiences were going to theatres in order to listen to *Les Huguenots* of the tenors Stagno, or Gayarre or Masini, forgetting that the actual composer was Meyerbeer.[8]

The problematic relationship between Nellie Melba and her recordings

Reactions to the early recordings of Nellie Melba (1861–1931) are among the most fascinating of early twentieth-century examples in the Italian tradition. Her first recording session took place in March 1904 at her London house in Great Cumberland Place. Melba's drawing room was large enough to make space for a small orchestra and all the technical equipment of horns and turntables used by the technicians of the

Gramophone and Typewriter company. After having listened to the 'scratching screeching' results of this first session – which includes, among seventeen other surviving sides, versions of *Donde lieta* from Puccini's *La Bohème*, and *Caro nome* and *Sempre libera* from, respectively, Verdi's *Rigoletto* and *La Traviata* – she stated:

> *Don't tell me I sing like that, or I shall go away and live on a desert island, out of sheer pity for the unfortunate people who have to listen to me.*[9]

Melba's voice had a particularly pure quality, described as silvery or shining by critics such as W. J. Henderson or H. Klein, who heard Melba during her glory days.[10] The splendour of her timbre was probably not captured by the acoustic recording system, which cut out all her upper partials.[11] In effect, comparing the early pre-electrical recordings with her 1926 farewell concert at Covent Garden, the listener almost has the impression of hearing two completely different singers, as these two examples of *Donde lieta uscì* from Puccini's *La Bohème* attest:

- from the 1904 London recording session
- from the Covent Garden farewell concert in 1926.

Apparently, the electrical recordings made later in her career proved to have exerted the same impression on Melba herself. The Australian baritone John Brownlee, who sang with the great *prima donna* during her last recording session in December 1926 at the Small Queen's Hall as well as in her farewell concert earlier in June, tells us the very characteristic story of the *diva* working at her last recording session. At first, she stared at the microphone, asking ominously: 'How can anything good come out of that obnoxious looking box?'[12] But then, after listening to the playback of her sound test, she cried out: 'For the first time I hear something of what I think my voice really sounds like. Why wasn't this thing invented before?'[13] This remark seems to confirm that the aural results of her pre-electrical recordings caused considerable anxiety and a sort of embarrassment for the great soprano.

The root of Melba's discomfort may lie in a mismatch between the very pure tone of her voice and the limited capacity of pre-electrical recording techniques to capture that quality. Melba's vocal training was completed under Mathilde Marchesi, one of the most accomplished singing teachers of the late nineteenth century, at whose school many operatic celebrities of those decades were trained.[14] Marchesi was a pupil of Manuel II Garcia, the author of the famous treatise the *Art of Singing*, which is considered the bible of *bel canto* style.[15] The explicit intentions of Mathilde were to perpetuate the teaching tradition of her great Master, and Nellie Melba's vocal production relies on the

technical features outlined by this tradition. The neat manner of blending the vocal registers, supported by the costal-diaphragmatic breathing, might have conspired to produce a recorded sound that Melba could not recognise as her own voice.[16]

Melba was aware of the historical relevance of her recordings. She was anxious that any mistakes, 'any faint error in breathing [....] will remain, mercilessly reproduced, to all eternity'.[17] Therefore, she approached the recording process with a great sense of responsibility towards the audience of her own time and also the future. Long and difficult were the negotiations that eventually overcame her opposition to release her first recordings – those realised in her drawing room by the Gramophone and Typewriter Company in 1904. Melba judged them unreliable, as they would have left a completely deformed impression of her voice for the listener. This decision is surely evidence of Melba's acute aesthetic conscience, rather than the irrational and narcissistic response of a *prima donna*. Melba was genuinely concerned about the kind of evidence for posterity that such recordings would have transmitted, not just of her own singing but also of an entire vocal tradition of which she was a major representative.

Contemporary opinions on the recordings of Melba

In stark contrast with the concerns raised by Melba on her pre-electrical recordings, the opinions of other qualified witnesses of this early stage of the recording industry express different views. Frederick Gaisberg was the Gramophone and Typewriter Company's technician. He recorded the greatest opera stars during the early decades of the twentieth century, including Adelina Patti, Francesco Tamagno, Enrico Caruso, Pol Plaçon and Feodor Chaliapin. Gaisberg claims that the acoustic process was especially suitable for sopranos, whose voices sounded bigger and more full-bodied when recorded with this system.[18] In his opinion, Melba's voice was fairly represented by her early recordings, as we can assume from his remark: 'For long she doubted, or pretended to doubt, our ability to reproduce her voice', but '... in those pioneer days ... enough was achieved to convince Melba that, under favorable conditions, the engineer could make a successful record of her voice'. [19]

Another influential testimony comes from the critic Hermann Klein, who closely followed the rise and the technical development of the recording industry, becoming one of the musical advisors for the Columbia company.[20] Klein was a man of many talents. A singer himself, and one of the last pupils of Manuel II Garcia, he played the roles of singing teacher, impresario, music critic and journalist. He was acquainted with the major opera stars of his days: from Melba to Marcella Sembrich – between whose

voices he could not decide which was the best; from Emma Eames to Lillian Nordica – the latter gave him the idea of a singing method with recording examples, which became the Phono-Vocal Method; from Tamagno to Caruso, to name a few. Klein was an acute judge of vocal recordings, and did not spare Nordica from a harsh judgment of her recorded voice, which to him seemed 'thin and pinched and even muffled in tone'.[21] However, he had nothing but praise for the quality of Melba's voice as heard in her pre-electrical recordings, in stark contrast to the singer herself.[22]

From this divergence of opinions, one might conjecture that Melba's reaction to her own recordings was partly a consequence of the striking effect of hearing her voice for the first time at the age of 43. Since her early twenties, she had been first trained and then acclaimed for her roles throughout Europe and the Americas, celebrated by wildly enthusiastic audiences, praised for her sweet, flexible, pure tone and the unprecedented perfection of her coloraturas. She now found herself faced with the aural reproduction of her voice. Melba recorded regularly for the Gramophone Company from 1904 to 1926. Admittedly, she was not happy with the results of her pre-electrical recordings, but she must at least have listened to the discs produced from any recording session in order to authorise the public release of the discs themselves. Melba must have speculated on the sound of this voice and, because of the lack of any instrument of reproduction until then, the mental image that she had of her own voice could have been dramatically contradicted by the sound that came out from the horn that morning in March 1904.[23] It is also possible that the invention of the electrical system of recording, from which Melba's voice surely benefited, helped her to become reconciled with the sound of her recorded voice during the years spent hearing her discs. Eventually the trauma of listening to her 'external' voice might have been overcome by a combination of technology and habit.

Melba and her colleagues

By comparing Melba's pre-electrical recordings with those of Luisa Tetrazzini (1871–1940) we can evaluate how the vocal characteristics of the latter were more suitable for the acoustical recording system than those of Melba. For example, Tetrazzini's rendition of Violetta's grand aria *E' strano … è strano* conveys a more full-bodied and rounded voice: her top notes in particular resound in a broad and powerful manner, supported by a strong use of the *appoggio*. In the Italian vocal technique, the word *appoggio* indicates a specific system of breathing, where the pressure of the air is perceived to be in the lower region of the chest, under the breast bone. The features of Tetrazzini's vocal production could be linked to the new repertory created by the *giovane scuola italiana* – young Italian school, also known as *verismo* opera – which,

between the 1890s and 1920s, shaped a new operatic style where declamation and dramatic accentuation were essential. To fulfill these new demands, the earliest interpreters of these roles had to reinforce their breathing technique, which in turn altered the way of blending together resonances from the various registers. The more satisfying – due to it being more true to life – vocal colour that we hear in Tetrazzini's recordings may perhaps depend on such changes in vocal technique.

In stark contrast, Nellie Melba, educated on the basis of the traditional rules of *bel canto*, sang her top notes in the pure head register, as the Victor recording of 1907 demonstrates. For this reason her singing resembles the style of old-fashioned singers such as Adelina Patti much more than that of her contemporary colleagues. It is instructive to compare Melba's reaction to her own recordings with those of Patti (1843–1919), probably the most famous operatic celebrity of any age. Patti, in fact, was ecstatic while listening to her own voice on the discs recorded in 1903 at her castle of Craig-y-Nos in Wales, as the conductor Landon Ronald confirms, recalling her words: '*O mon Dieu*! Now I understand why I am Patti. Oh yes! What a voice! What an artist! I fully understand it all!'[24] This enthusiastic attitude was shared by Ronald himself who affirms: 'the fact that she (Patti) was praising her own voice seemed to us all to be right and proper'.[25]

Patti's response to her own recordings sheds light on the subjective aspects of the listening experience. This experience also depends on psychological and emotional elements of which the listener is hardly aware. Patti, even more so than Melba, belongs to an era in which the power of the opera singer was unrestrained and absolute. Patti is known for not taking part in any kind of rehearsals during her stage career; she would appear the night of the performance moving and lying on stage at her ease, avoiding any prior consultation with colleagues, none of which seemed to bother her audiences, who continued to adore her.[26] This degree of self-confidence might have led Patti to an uncritical appraisal of her own voice on record, as the cheerful, child-like reaction recalled by Ronald's narrative would suggest. Ronald himself reflects on the fact that the great singer never previously heard her own voice and 'when the little trumpet gave forth the beautiful tones, she went into ecstasies!'[27] However, this kind of uncritical response is hardly unknown to contemporary listeners. If we think of audiences' behaviour at a live concert of any acclaimed opera singer, we realise this simple fact: no matter how the great star in question is actually performing, they will be greeted by a delirium of unconditional praise. Therefore, the purely emotional appraisal of a performance is surely typical of the listening experience of any age.

Francesco Tamagno

Until now we have focused on reactions to recordings of *prima donnas* who faced the challenge of the gramophone. Were similar issues of consequence to male singers? Consider, for example, Francesco Tamagno (1850–1905), who is linked to Giuseppe Verdi's last dramatic opera *Otello*, whose main male role was written for the tenor's colossal voice. Tamagno was aged 53 when, in 1903, he recorded for the Gramophone and Typewriter Company in his villa of Ospedaletti in Italy. In those days hotel rooms were the usual site for travelling recording studios, but operatic stars were often extremely reluctant to accommodate to this necessity. Therefore, as in the cases of Adelina Patti and Nellie Melba, the recording studio and its technicians had to travel to Tamagno's mansion. The recordings that he approved to be released were sold at the astonishing price of £1 each – the average weekly wages for common workers – while the company paid Tamagno £2,000 for the session plus the royalties for every single sold item. In comparison, Enrico Caruso's discs made in 1902, at an early stage of the tenor's career, were sold for 10 cents each. Differences in prices and label colours on the discs – the greatest stars had their own recognisable colour – were the elements that identified the higher or lower status of a celebrity.[28]

On the occasion of one of his visits to Tamagno's house in Varese, Herman Klein recalled that the great tenor was leaning on the gramophone with amazement and delight, enjoying the rich tones of his huge voice, repeating '*Che bellezza*' – 'What a wonder' – or '*Com'è bello, non è ver*?' – 'It is gorgeous, isn't it?'[29] Tamagno belongs to the same golden age of Patti and, like Patti, was a first-rank singer. Not only were their habits and level of self-confidence alike, but also the age at which they were able to listen to their recorded voices was quite advanced. Therefore, the sentiment expressed by Tamagno while listening to his own voice is unsurprisingly close to that of Patti. Both these singers considered recording as an enjoyable addition to the ways in which they experimented with their voices during their careers: an addition that arrived at the very end of Tamagno's career and after Patti's retirement. Therefore, it neither added to nor detracted from their huge reputations and the eternal praise that they felt ought to be paid to their art.

Tamagno's recordings display the features of *bel canto* style: fluid phrasing, clear diction, open timbre, slow and flexible tempos, free use of decorative notes and the ability to sing the top notes at any degree of volume. His repertoire encompassed the middle and late nineteenth-century Italian and French operas, while he only occasionally performed roles of the *giovane scuola* operas, such as Turiddu from

Cavalleria Rusticana and Canio from Leoncavallo's *I Pagliacci*. From this latter repertoire, the only aria he recorded is *Un dì all'azzurro spazio* from Giordano's *Andrea Chenier*.[30] It displays the characteristics of a manner which was about to disappear shortly after his death and which is preserved in a few early recordings.

Enrico Caruso as a gramophone singer

In 1901 Tamagno sang with Enrico Caruso (1873–1921) at the *Teatro alla Scala* at Giuseppe Verdi's memorial concert. Tamagno predicted the splendid rise of the younger tenor, whose career is closely associated with the history of the recording industry. Caruso threw himself into this new adventure with no qualms. Gaisberg depicts the late arrival of Caruso at his first recording session at the Hotel Milano on 11 April 1902, his confident approach to the recording machine and the tremendous commercial success of his first recordings. That day Caruso poured his voice into the horn for two hours, obtaining ten recordings. He earned £100 from the recording session, which was paid on the spot, while the company profits were later estimated at more than £15,000.[31]

The great tenor created several roles from the *giovane scuola* repertoire, such as Loris in Giordano's *Fedora*, Federico in Cilea's *Arlesiana*, and Dick Johnson in Puccini's *La Fanciulla del West*. Moreover, his interpretations of the roles of Canio in Leoncavallo's *I Pagliacci* and Turiddu in Mascagni's *Cavalleria Rusticana* defined certain stylistic features, which were widely imitated by others. In his biography of Caruso, Michael Scott stresses the fact that the great singer became the archetypal tenor voice thanks to the influence of the phonograph.[32] His muscular singing, where any recourse to falsetto was progressively abandoned, as well as his taste for consistent covered tones throughout the vocal range, explain the words of the composer Sidney Homer:

> *Before Caruso came I never heard a voice that even remotely resembled his. Since he came I have heard voice after voice, big and small, high and low, that suggested his, reminded me of it at times even forcibly'.*[33]

Herman Klein claimed that Caruso was the greatest tenor of the twentieth century for the purity and the clarity of his singing.[34] In other words, Caruso defined the archetype of the modern tenor in developing a more dramatic and declamatory vocal style, in order to capture the essential realism of the *giovane scuola*. This sort of style affected

female voices in turn, as the cases of Tetrazzini and her colleagues, such as Bellincioni, Boninsegna and later Ponselle, demonstrate.

Is the emergence of this vocal type connected with the recording experience and with the possibility of hearing the progressive development of one's own voice? This question may be illuminated by another: did the attitude of Caruso towards the recording process and the outcomes of the recording session change at all while he was experimenting with this new technology? In other words, did the assessment of what he heard on his discs become critically oriented over the years of his recording career? While the recordings of 1902 were made in two hours, and all items were approved without any being re-recorded, two impressions of the session made on 16 March 1908 for Victor were destroyed,[35] and the rate of the non-approved recordings rises as we progress through the years. For instance, in the Victor session of 23 February 1916 eight out of the eleven songs and solos that Caruso sang that day were apparently destroyed. As John Bolig, the editor of Caruso's discography, explains, these unpublished items were not approved by the singer.[36]

This circumstance seems to confirm an increasing preoccupation on the part of Caruso with the sonic evidence of his recordings that could be attributed to several factors. On the one hand, the recording industry was becoming a serious business. It could no longer be treated with the spontaneity and boldness that Caruso showed at first, as the personal prestige of an artist more and more depended on the cylinders and 78s that delivered their art. The link between stage and recording career was crucial for Caruso if it is true, as Gaisberg suggests, that the manager of the Metropolitan Opera House, Heinrich Conried, engaged Caruso at the prestigious New York theatre after having listened to one of his recording in Paris.[37] Moreover, Caruso had the chance to hear the several steps and phases of his own vocal and technical development on disc. This continuous aural reproduction of what he was elaborating in terms of technique and style might have been nerve-racking, now that Caruso was becoming an international star, whose professional and artistic achievements were increasingly measured by his recordings.

Conclusion

In conclusion, listening to early recordings influenced several kinds of listeners during the first two decades of the twentieth century. First, I attempted to reconstruct the responses of singers brought up within the Italian operatic tradition to the novel experience of hearing their own recorded voice. I then suggested that these early

recordings, even with all their limitations, could have conditioned singers' performing habits and audiences' expectations. Finally, I mentioned critics' and musicians' opinions regarding the influence of early recordings in the creation of modern vocal archetypes.

As I have tried to show, this influence works in two ways. The first relates to the singer's experience of listening to their own voice. Bearing in mind that listening to their own sound constitutes the primary guide in any performer's daily practice, the unquestionable fact that this opportunity was denied to singers added a peculiar relevance to the invention of the recording machine in their case. As we saw in the introductory paragraphs, the shock of hearing one's own recorded voice is still a common experience in the present day. For this reason the impact of this experience on the pioneer singers who experimented with that primitive technology should not be underestimated. The revolutionary transformation of singing technique and style within the Italian operatic tradition at the turn of the twentieth century must surely have been influenced by singers' experiences of hearing their own voice for the first time in history.

The second way in which the invention of recording played a role in the emergence of the new singing style was in the rapid dissemination of that style across the globe. Singers and listeners could hear the voices of Caruso, Martinelli, Tetrazzini, Ponselle and others in their own living room, anywhere in the world. This created a standardisation of vocal types and a new conception of what constitutes a 'good voice', as the new style triumphantly swept all before it – an early example of 'globalisation' in the cultural sphere. To suggest that recording had such a profound influence on the emergence of new singing styles is not implausible, when one considers that listening to recordings has drastically changed our conceptions of tempo, rubato, vibrato and portamento over the last century.

Many other factors have a bearing on the issues discussed in this chapter. They include speed, pitch, the nature of the accompaniment, duration, the variety of equipment used for the reproduction of early recordings, and also wider issues such as the commercial interests connected to their dissemination, or the trademark battles between rival recording companies. While these questions have been touched on in numerous studies – some of which are included in the bibliography to the present contribution – a critical and systematic discussion of the impact of records on singers at the beginning of the recording era has yet to be undertaken. This chapter is a modest first step in that direction.

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LISTENING AND RECORDINGS

ADELINA PATTI, CARUSO, KLEIN & GRAMOPHONE, MELBA & GRAMOPHONE