

Raiders of the lost archive

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Every collector, whether of rare porcelain, jade or Old Masters, dreams of that one find that will astonish their peers and bring fame everlasting: their name will be spoken with bated breath for as long as there is interest in their field. Collectors of gramophone records are no different. For the instrumental enthusiast it might be a previously unknown recording of Johanna Martzy; the vocal collector may dream of finding the two fabled Fonotopia sides of the nineteenth-century tenor, Jean de Reszke. Whatever it may be, each and every collector has the belief that once in their lifetime he, or sometimes she (and it does seem that collecting is a male feature, or problem, depending on your point of view!), will make 'the great discovery' that will place them at the forefront of the craft.

At this juncture I must confess to being a 'record collector' – there, I've said it! My excuse is that I am a second-generation collector and my father inspired me with stories of his visits to Covent Garden to hear Supervia and Chaliapine (that's how it was spelt then): my earliest memories are of thorn needles being sharpened prior to wonderful sounds coming from an elaborate radio-gramophone. I still remember my first records when I can have been no more than five years old: a job-lot box from Morphet's sale room in Harrogate that included, oh joy of joys, Charles Penrose's 'The Laughing Policeman'. That's probably why my professional life has revolved around records and recording for more years than I care to think. Love of the artists, and their performances, has been why I am in this strange business of ours. But although I had been on the receiving end of luck in finding interesting and sometimes rare records, I still awaited The Great Discovery.

Among the various roles I perform, I have the privilege to be a member of the Historic Masters Committee. We work with the EMI Archive to produce limited editions of important 78 rpm records pressed directly from the original metal parts in the Archive, many of which were unpublished during the 78 era or are exceptionally rare as originals. In 2005, while we were planning a complete Adelina Patti edition, I became aware that Deutsche Grammophon had some HMV masters from before the First World War, when DG was still part of the Gramophone Company (HMV and later EMI). In fact DG pressed all the Gramophone Company's

records up until 1907, when the Hayes plant opened. This new information was despite enquiries over the last fifty years being met with the reply that almost no metal masters from pre-1914 had survived the two world wars.

My contact at DG checked some numbers, and there in the vaults was an almost complete set of first shells (metal masters taken from the original waxes) of the Patti recordings. DG could not identify most of them, however, and this I offered to do, also for any more they might have. In due course an old handwritten list in an obviously German script arrived. As soon as I started work, it became obvious that, as well as the Patti masters, there was a group of unpublished recordings from 1903, long thought destroyed.

The artist was Francesco Tamagno, the tenor chosen by Verdi for the role of the Moor in arguably his greatest opera, *Otello*. Tamagno did make published records, but they were mostly ten inch and the masters soon wore badly. He also made a batch of the then new twelve-inch records – a dozen in all. Only three were published, and they were soon superseded by remakes. A fourth was discovered at Hayes, and we published it a few years ago. But there on this list were all twelve, including four made for the private use of Tamagno only. You can imagine that I needed a very stiff drink shortly after. If I tell you that a battered test copy of one of these changed hands for over £7,000 some years ago, you'll get some idea why! Many of the others had never been found, although the titles were known and were repeated when he made them as ten-inch published sides.

I requested the loan of these metals so that stampers could be made, and a few weeks later they arrived. I made transfers while checking them and was bowled over by the immediacy of the sound on these unworn masters. Looking at them it was obvious that they were the original masters made from the waxes. That in itself would have been enough – to hold in my hand the masters for all those unpublished recordings by one of the super-tenors of Verdi's generation was quite overwhelming – but there was a further twist. Two of the private recordings were always understood to be different takes of the same aria from *Messalina* by Tamagno's friend, Isadore de Lara. These were the last two metals I was to play and transfer. What I thought was the second take was the same as the test pressing found some years ago, but of course in so much better sound than had been heard before. For some reason I left its companion until later that evening.

Returning to the turntable, I sat the metal on the platter, clamped it in place (metals are not as flat as pressings) and lowered the pickup onto the first grooves. The music I heard was not *Messalina*, and momentarily I cursed, thinking that the matrix had been wrongly identified, but then I realised that it was the opening to that great *Otello* duet, 'Sì, pel Ciel'. Of

course it had to be someone else: after all, Tamagno's records had been the subject of intensive study for over seventy years and he had never recorded that duet, so who would the Otello turn out to be, and also the baritone? Seconds later, I really was in a state of complete amazement: the tenor was so definitely Francesco, and soaring in the upper registers as only he could.

To say I was speechless would be putting it mildly. I played it again, and no mistake, it really was what I thought: I had not imagined it. Here it was in master form that we could press to make records for the world to hear. Perhaps the greatest vocal record discovery of the last 100 years – something I could never even have dreamed of. An unknown recording by the creator of the Moor, personally chosen and coached by the composer, and I was the first person to hear it in over a century.

The next thing I did was to pour that stiff drink and telephone my dear friend, Richard Bebb (then Historic Masters's chairman), who in my estimation was the world's foremost collector of vocal 78s. Like me he was lost for words: as he said, a Holy Grail, but one not known despite so much research. Sadly Richard died only a few months later, in April 2006, although he did hear the transfer I made for him. I wish he could be with us to see the special set of all these Tamagno sides that Historic Masters are issuing: rightly the set will be dedicated to him. It was through Richard that I learned so much about records, singers and the music, spurring me to go to the lengths that resulted in the discovery of these long-forgotten masters. He is as much responsible for their discovery as anyone.

Ave atque vale.

Discography

Matrix numbers of the Tamagno records referred to above were all in the Gramophone and Typewriter Company's 'C' series and were recorded at Tamagno's villa in Ospedaletti, Susa, Italy in February 1903. They are:

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| 10 W | <i>Otello</i> (Verdi): 'Esultate!'
(published as Gramophone and Typewriter issue number 052101) |
| 11 W | <i>Otello</i> (Verdi): 'Esultate!'
(unpublished) |
| 12 W | <i>Otello</i> (Verdi): 'Ora e per sempre addio'
(published as Gramophone and Typewriter issue number 052102) |
| 13 R | <i>Otello</i> (Verdi): 'Ora e per sempre addio'
(unpublished) |
| 14 R | <i>Otello</i> (Verdi): 'Niun mi tema'
(unpublished except as HM 36) |
| 15 R | <i>Otello</i> (Verdi): 'Niun mi tema'
(unpublished) |

- 16 W *Andrea Chénier* (Giordano): 'Un di all'azzurro spazio'
(unpublished)
- 17 R *Guglielmo Tell* (Rossini): 'O muto asil'
(published as Gramophone and Typewriter issue number 052103)
- 18 R *Roi de Lahore* (Massenet): 'O casto fior' (Promesse de mon avenir)
(private recording and unpublished; sung by an unnamed baritone – see also 19 W)
- 19 W *Otello* (Verdi): 'Sì, pel Ciel marmoreo giuro'
(with unnamed baritone; private recording and unpublished)
- 20 R *Messalina* (De Lara): 'Dei del patria suol'
(private recording and unpublished)
- 21 R *Ave Maria* (Mapelli)
(private recording and unpublished)

The 'R' suffix indicates Belford Royal, and the 'W' indicates Will Gaisberg – the two engineers who made the recordings.

As of March 2007 the identity of the unnamed baritone remained unknown. A plausible theory is that it is Tamagno's brother, who was also a singer, if of rather less repute.

All published as direct pressings from the original masters in 2007 by Historic Masters Ltd, www.historicmasters.org