

VOICES FROM THE PAST

SINGING, it has been said, is not what it used to be. Today's celebrated names of opera or the concert-hall, so some of the old-timers allege, are not in the same street as the Melbas, Carusos, Pattis of their day. No longer, however, need you take this anecdote as gospel. You can check up on it. Various recording companies, dipping into the barrel, have come up with ghostly voices from the past which, if you're old enough, will bring back a few memories, and, if you're not, maybe will let you into a few secrets about singing.

A bunch that has come my way under the label "Scala" re-introduces some names you will remember and some you may not know—Rehkeper, Zenatillo, Schipa, Ivogun, Destinn, Ponselle, Chaliapin, Raissa, Russ. . .

This is not hi-fi stuff, of course, but the refurbishing of these early discs on LP comes off surprisingly well; which says a lot for today's technical know-how and something, too, for yesterday's. Sometimes, the voice floats ectoplasmically through a thicket of surface scratch; but not so much as you might expect. The personality of each voice is represented well enough. The orchestral accompaniment suffers badly, or rather, it resists much more than the voice this reincarnation.

And what of the voices? Astonishing technique, a grandiose style which might be put down as a little vulgar today, quality which varies but at its best still sounds supremely beautiful, coloratura sopranos who all seem to be turned out of the same mould, a repertoire which seems to go along with anti-macassars, aspidistras and hansom cabs until you notice that it is practically the same repertoire as that of today's celebrity operatic singer!

Amongst the best of this bunch of discs is a recital by the lyric baritone Heinrich Rehkeper (Scala 809). Songs by Schumann, Schubert, Wolf and operatic arias of Mozart and Verdi. This is quite wonderful singing—smooth, liquid phrasing, effortless, but dramatic when required to be so. Rehkeper is tender in Schumann's *Meine Rose*, and an epic singer in Hugo Wolf's *Prometheus*. I didn't like his "Erl-King" so much, but the arias from *Figaro* and *The Magic Flute* are delightful.

Rosa Ponselle (Scala 803)—Verdi, Rossini, Bellini, Puccini, Ponchielli—is another shadow that brings sunlight with her. Warm and romantic, the personality comes clearly through the voice. Some of the tracks of this disc do not take too kindly to re-recording, but even the worst are worth it. A notable item is a duet with the tenor Charles Hackett, "O Terra, Addio," from *Aida*.

Rosa Ponselle has something, something that satisfies—until you listen to the disc by Emmy Destinn (Scala 804), who has that something extra. Destinn's voice may not have been the greatest among her contemporaries, but her singing has character by which the voice seems completely merged in the



Rosa Ponselle

by OWEN JENSEN

song. Emmy Destinn is re-presented in arias from *Der Freischütz*, *Cavalleria*, *Aida*, *Pagliacci*, *Flying Dutchman*, and, of course, the inevitable "Vissi d'Arte," which seems to be the signature tune of almost all these sopranos. But the most attractive singing is in "Du Lieber Mond," from Dvorak's *Rusalka*.

Then there is Maria Ivogun (Scala 815), who seems to have been a phenomenal coloratura. Even on a disc

which does not reproduce as well as one would hope, there is left an impression of impeccable intonation, clean technique and a lovely pure quality. Ivogun gives us some remarkable feats of tone control usual in the coloratura warhorses, but unlike some of her friends does not sacrifice interpretation for vocal fireworks.

After Ponselle, Destinn and Ivogun, the sopranos Rosa Raiga and Giannina Russ (Scala 808) seem small fry, deserving no more than the single side each is given on the disc.

The Chaliapin disc (Scala 807) is a sad disappointment. Nevertheless, if you have heard Chaliapin in the flesh, you must surely be glad to revive memories. The richness of the voice and the deep perspective are lost. But, with Chaliapin, great as the voice was, it wasn't everything. The robust strength of the musician is rekindled in this recital, particularly in the folk songs to the interpretation of which he always gave authenticity.

If you like passionate Italian tenors complete with sob in "Vesti la Giubba," then Giovanni Zenatello's your man (Scala 818). The orchestra in this recording has to be heard to be believed. Zenatello had a great reputation in his time, especially for his powerful high notes and his dramatic delivery. Personally, I do not much like this bang-bang style of singing, and I don't think I would have liked Signor Zenatello even in his heyday.

But who could not but admire the glorious—still glorious, even under the surface noise of this disc—singing of Tito Schipa (Scala 805)? At his worst, Schipa came very near the vulgarity of the "popular" tenor. At his best, he must have been incomparable. His high notes have no edge, his bel canto runs as smoothly as a Rolls Royce. You may, however, have to use your imagination a little in listening to this disc to agree entirely.

The museum has its value in music as well as in the sphere of natural history. If singing in its more grandiloquent aspect is your taste, you will want to look into these discs. It's no use worrying about the reproduction. Be glad that the gramophone arrived in time to catch these voices. One could wish, however, that the editors of the discs could have given more information about the dates of the original recordings—which they mention, I think, on only one. In dealing with history the jazz boys are much more informative.

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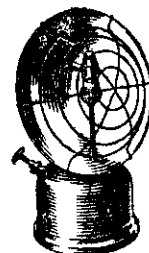
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