



Gigli Remembers

"I WAS born with a voice and very little else: no money, no influence, no other talents," says Beniamino Gigli. "Had it not been for the peculiar formation of my vocal chords, I should probably at this moment be planing tables or sewing trousers, or mending shoes as my father did, in the little Italian town of Recanati, where I was born on March 20, 1890. I should still be poor, as my father was. But God gave me a voice, and that changed everything."

The life story of Gigli, as the great tenor himself sees it, will be told in *The Gigli Memoirs*, a series of five weekly programmes to start from YA stations, 3YZ and 4YZ, at 3.0 p.m. on

Sunday, September 22. Linked with a narrative written and spoken by G. C. A. Wall, the programmes will present readings from *The Memoirs of Beniamino Gigli*, recently published by Cassell and Co., of London, and now on sale in New Zealand, and recordings covering as far as possible the whole range of Gigli's repertoire. The selections from the book were chosen by Mr Wall and will be read by Willis Williams.

The youngest of the six children of a humble cobbler who was hit by the first competitive blows of mass production, Beniamino found when he was only five years old that he could do something to help, and running to fetch

a supply of wooden heels for the hobnailed boots his father made, he would find there was no escape from the carpenter till he had sung the latest song hit.

"After my mother," says Gigli, "he was my first audience." The carpenter must have told others about the young singer, for Beniamino soon found himself being waylaid by all sorts of people begging for a song.

But it was the Cathedral at Recanati that first really taught Beniamino to sing. Forced to give up his cobbler's tools, his father took a job as bellringer at the Cathedral, and Gigli was not quite seven when the Cathedral organist asked if he might join the Schola Cantorum. "For some time," he says, "I was the baby, and the maestro had to stand me on a stool so that my head might appear above the railing of the organ loft. . . Finally it dawned on me that I was being trained to sing the solo parts." It was after singing solo for the first time at a Pontifical High Mass that young Beniamino knew for certain that he wanted to be a singer.

To become a singer was not, however, a matter of simple choice, and when he was only eight Gigli spent the first of two summer holidays as a carpenter's apprentice. At 10 his parents thought he might do better as a tailor, and for the next two summers he worked with needle and thread. But when he left school at 12 he became for his last five years at home not a

carpenter, but a chemist's assistant. It was during this time that he made his operatic debut—in a soprano role.

"I sometimes allow myself a joke about it," he says. "I tease people by inviting them to guess what was my very first appearance. . . I describe the costume I wore: a long white dress with leg-of-mutton sleeves, a black velvet bonnet with two big white flowers, and a parasol of sky-blue silk. . ."

There's a point in most success stories when a biographer says: "From then on, he never looked back." Gigli chooses the time when he was 18 and had already been a year in Rome, still as a chemist's assistant; but he prefers to say: "After that, he always managed to support himself, studying all the time, until he made his debut when he was 24." This period included his army service; and it was the time when as a telephone operator he met and fell in love with another operator, Ida, whose beautiful speaking voice had attracted him over the phone—and who, like many of the other girls, had got into the way of asking him to sing over the phone.

Gigli's debut as the tenor in *La Gioconda* provided one of the dramatic moments of his career, for he had difficulty with the B flat the audiences had

come to expect at the end of the aria "Cielo e Mar." But he made a great success of the part, and only a month after his debut he was picked to sing Des Grieux in *Manon* at the Carlo Felice, one of the half-dozen great Italian opera houses. His career was well launched.

Gigli was in America when the great Caruso died in August, 1921, and immediately found himself in the midst of a newspaper controversy as to whom Caruso's successor would be. The tipsters were quick to draw conclusions from the fact that Gigli was asked to sing on the opening night of the new season at the Metropolitan Opera House—a privilege Caruso had enjoyed on every opening night but one since 1903. However, the opera chosen, *Traviata*, is a soprano's, not a tenor's, and reluctant to obtrude himself, Gigli hoped that the soprano, Galli-Curci, making her first appearance at the Met., would outshine him. As it turned out, she sang badly, as Gigli puts it, "the evening was mine—almost by default." Gigli sang on stage and platform for 41 years, and between his debut in *La Gioconda* in 1914 and in *Ezechia* in April, 1953, built up a repertoire of 60 operas. His farewell series of tours ended at Washington on May 25, 1955—that was the last time he sang in public.

Thanking his audiences at the end of his *Memoirs*, he says that in a sense their support has meant everything to him: "I might, no doubt, have sung in the wilderness, as one sings in the bath—for fun; but it was only through my audiences that this exercise of lungs, diaphragm and vocal chords became transmuted for me into a profound spiritual experience." Gigli thinks himself truly fortunate in that he was born and lived as a child in Recanati, and he asks: "I wonder what would have become of me if, like Caruso, I had been born in a city slum; for I did not have the gifts of personality that enabled Caruso to create life and warmth around him wherever he went."

Back now in the countryside between the Apennines and the Adriatic that he loves so much, looking out over the Cathedral, the "Hill of the Infinite," the vineyards and the sea, he ends his story: "My roots have always been here, in this serene landscape. When I lived in the world beyond the Apennines, it gave me strength; now that I have come back, it gives me peace."

"It took me a long time to get adjusted psychologically, and perhaps, as the following episode would seem to indicate, even technically, to the whole idea of broadcasting," says Gigli, recalling his first broadcast on December 27, 1925. "It was some months later and I had sung over the NBC network. Coming down from the studio, I was engaged in conversation by the small boy who operated the lift."

"Are you the guy that just sang?" he inquired.

"My secretary interpreted this for me, and I nodded."

"Do you mind if I give you a bit of advice?"

"I bowed."

"Well," said the boy, "I listened in on you and your voice came over too powerful. Next time, don't stand so close to the mike, see?"

"I thanked him with my best smile."

"That's okay, buddy," he said, "I straighten out a lot of amateur singers."

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