

## Music Views and Reviews by Kathy Wolfe

### The great voices of the early 20th century

*Nimbus Records "Prima Voce" NI 7832, Maria Ivoğün; NI 7836, Conchita Supervia; NI 7813, Tito Schipa; NI 7815, Giuseppe de Luca; List price \$10.99 each*

Nimbus Record's "Prima Voce" series is re-issuing the recordings of the great singers of the early 20th century. Musical selections range from wonderful Italian arias to Wagner, but if you want to hear what was meant by "bel canto," listen to these discs. While no recorded evidence has escaped the ravages to classical singing caused by the post-1860 rise in pitch, these are among the best available.

In September, Nimbus will release 10 Prima Voce artists on audio cassette, including Enrico Caruso, Jussi Björling, and Rosa Ponselle.

Among the re-issues appearing, Nimbus's sound is particularly warm, because of a unique recording technique. Instead of cold electronic transfers, Nimbus plays old 78s on an original grammophone in the superb acoustics of a ballroom in an 18th-century Welsh castle, simulating a live performance.

Rather than just buying Caruso because he's famous, better hear a quartet of voice types: soprano, mezzosoprano, tenor, and baritone or bass. As the Schiller Institute's forthcoming *Manual on Tuning and Registration* notes, the way composers use these different *species* of singing voices, each with its own distinct *registers*, shows how a musical composition is constructed.

### Soprano and mezzo

German light soprano Maria Ivoğün (1891-1987) is frankly my favorite, best described as "Galli-Curci with

brains." Amelita Galli-Curci (1882-1963) was the high soprano so justifiably famous in the 1920s for her elevated tone, which sustained a very long musical line. Nimbus's "Amelita Galli-Curci" (NI 7806) is also lovely, as is NI 7802, "Divas, Volume 1," with Luisa Tetrazzini, Galli-Curci, and more. ("Elevation" is the Italian practice of "singing in the mask," i.e., in the head sinuses, the area covered by the Greek drama mask, which makes older recordings sound slightly "nasal" to the modern ear, which is accustomed to the inferior practice of belting from the diaphragm.)

Maria Ivoğün not only sang with as much elevation as did Galli-Curci, who called Ivoğün her main competitor, but where Galli-Curci begins to sound the same after a while, Ivoğün never does. She sang not only opera, but German Lieder with supreme intelligence. Her singing is happy proof that Italian "bel canto" was held to be an international scientific principle by the best German singers.

Tribute to Ivoğün is the fame of her student Elisabeth Schwartzkopf. Ivoğün was a genius as a teacher, training a generation of German singers in the 1930-40s. Ivoğün helped her husband, pianist Michael Raucheisen (1889-1984), achieve his "Lied der Welt" project, in which he recorded the complete Lieder of Beethoven, Brahms, and dozens of other composers for posterity during World War II.

Spanish mezzosoprano Conchita Supervia (1895-1936) sang with the same elevation yet with the distinct register shifts and deeper vocal color of the mezzo. She championed Rossini's bel canto mezzo roles in "The Italian Girl in Algiers" and "La Cenerentola," which had been forgotten, and her recordings from the 1920s show she brought their coloratura alive with humor.

Dramatic mezzo-soprano Ernest

tine Schumann-Heink (NI 7811) is also a phenomenon worth hearing, just to know how low a woman's voice can go and remain elevated.

### Tenor and baritone

Caruso is wonderful, but for musical artistry even better is tenor Tito Schipa (1889-1965). It is not just that Schipa had the grandfather of all vibrati, of which Jussi Björling would have been proud. What is striking is that although it is far more difficult for a tenor to soar as effortlessly as a soprano does, there is precisely that graceful freedom of the soul in every aria.

Verdi's "Rigoletto" tenor arias and the beautiful "Quando le sere al placido" from Verdi's "Luisa Miller" are perfect, as are five favorite, but difficult, Donizetti arias from "Lucia di Lamermoor" and other operas. Normally one expects to cringe occasionally hearing these, but with Schipa they just flow out with long line. Most astonishing is the ease with which he tosses off the almost impossible Count's serenade from Rossini's "Barber of Seville."

Baritone Giuseppe de Luca (1876-1950) was another such intelligent singer. As Nimbus's excellent liner booklet notes, he didn't have a big voice, but "compensated by mastering the technicalities of his art in a manner that has rarely been surpassed." No shouting and dramatic hysteria here for Verdi's "Rigoletto." De Luca's version, which has the more passion for being carried by the legato line, has always been the only one to make me cry, and you will hear why in three selections here, with Galli-Curci as Gilda. His King's aria from Verdi's "Ernani," "O! de' verd' anni miei," is very moving in portraying the soul at the turning point of realizing its responsibility to shape history.