



ideale
BEN HEPPNER
Songs of Paolo Tosti



TOSTI Prince of Melody

This disc calls to mind the three decades prior to World War I, when salon repertoire was welcomed and even expected from the greatest singers of the day. Among contemporary vocal works regularly heard on the recital platform, few, if any, were more familiar and beloved than those of Francesco Paolo Tosti. Indeed, the same Tosti songs interpreted by the likes of Melba, Tetrazzini, the de Reszkes, Caruso and Battistini were also embraced by amateur singers in countless salons and drawing rooms – above all in London, where the composer spent his most productive years.

The *bel canto* orientation of Tosti's melodies, as well as the sincerity and ingenuousness of their texts, eminently suited the venue's refined ambience. Tosti was himself a fixture of the most fashionable London salons as composer, singer and accompanist. After war forced the salon into a rapid decline, the eventual transformation of popular culture via radio and cinema radically altered public perception of the composer; his music was now regarded as a relic of a bygone age. Fortunately the tide has turned, and in recent years Tosti has entered a period of renewed respect.

It was Ben Heppner's admiration for the magnificent "L'alba separa dalla luce l'ombra" that prompted his thorough exploration of Tosti's songs. The singer immediately recognized their manifold vocal rewards, as well as a musical and textual accessibility that he was eager to share with his audiences. In addition to "L'alba separa," his particular favorites include the irresistibly buoyant "Io ti sento!" (dedicated to Caruso) and the poignant "Lasciali dir!" Heppner enjoys the operatic quality of "In the hush of the night" and what he describes as the "café-on-the-Champs-Élysées color" of the French pieces. "Goodbye!" was chosen as a reprise of his very first performance of Tosti.

Who was this extraordinarily cultivated figure who rose from humble beginnings to become the composer of nearly 400 songs, a colleague of the most illustrious names in singing, and a favorite of Queen Victoria?

The son of a cereal dealer, Tosti was born in 1846 in the coastal town of Ortona in the Abruzzo region, north of Naples. That city's San Pietro a Maiella conservatory accepted him as a twelve-year-old scholarship student. His instructors included the renowned opera composer Saverio Mercadante, whose encouragement proved invaluable. After completing his studies, Tosti returned to Ortona at the age of 20 as cathedral choirmaster, serving from 1866 to 1869. He suffered a

serious breakdown, however, requiring a lengthy convalescence, during which he produced the first songs of his professional career.

Rome beckoned to Tosti as a far more exciting artistic milieu. Shortly after his arrival in 1870 he was presented in a debut concert, exhibiting not only his pianistic talent but also a very pleasing lyric tenor voice. The event was so successful that

Princess Margherita of Savoy named him as her singing teacher. In 1873, an even more important association for the composer was initiated with the house of Ricordi, which over the years would publish virtually the entire Tosti oeuvre.



© Istituto Nazionale Tosti - Roma

His first trip to London in 1875 and annual visits there over the next four years found Tosti totally at home; he established permanent residence in 1880. During his London years his excellence as a singing teacher benefited stars of Covent Garden (Melba for one), students of the Royal Academy and Royal College, and talented dilettantes who could meet Tosti's exacting standards. London society regarded him as an engaging personality and an

essential presence at any musical *soirée*.

The ultimate stamp of approval came with his appointment as singing teacher to the younger children of Queen Victoria, herself a fervent devotee of vocal music. Her secret diaries reveal great admiration for Tosti, who proved himself indispensable as her music administrator. He arranged frequent performances at the royal res-

idences, in which many prominent artists performed with him. Having become a British citizen in 1906, he was knighted two years later by Edward VII. The king's death proved a major fac-



© Stefano Napolitano - Corbis

tor in Tosti's decision to return to Rome for good, but he spent only four years there before his own death in 1916. The most courtly and gentlemanly of musicians, he exuded an unforced charm and graciousness. His best songs certainly do likewise.

Whether in English, French, "pure" Italian or Neapolitan dialect, the effectiveness of Tosti songs stems in large part from an unfettered *legato* style (albeit one allowing ample scope for the singer's interpretive imagination). His profound understanding of the voice is apparent in consistently grateful lines that promote relaxation and freedom in the vocalism. Generally he concentrates on the middle voice, only occasionally exploiting extremes of range; "In the hush of the night," for example, spans from low D sharp to high B. Many of the top notes one expects in certain songs are interpolations not written by Tosti, the close of "L'alba separa" being an obvious example. Those climactic high phrases that he *did* compose are beautifully prepared and yet always comparatively "contained." Tosti included Puccini and Mascagni among his dearest friends, though their feverish *verismo* expansiveness was hardly his stock in trade, and indeed, would have seriously undermined his basic expressive approach.

Tosti committed himself almost exclusively to contemporary texts, although not necessarily by the greatest writers. London's salons gladly accepted his choice of English poetry – sometimes endearing, more often unabashedly sentimental. In his French settings significantly more distinguished literature comes to the fore, including Hugo, Musset and Verlaine, whereas in Italian he invariably chose poems that get to the heart of the matter through a disarming emotional direct-

ness. Among Tosti's Italian writers, the only truly consequential figure was his lifelong friend, poet-dramatist Gabriele D'Annunzio. Perhaps most noteworthy among their collaborations are the superb *Quattro canzoni d'Amaranta*, three of which are included on this disc.

The majority of Tosti's texts deal with some aspect of love (it is perhaps worth noting that Ben Heppner has characterized himself as "the romantic type"). Of the 19 songs recorded here, it is the idea of suffering in love that dominates in "Good-bye!", "Lasciami! Lascia ch'io respiri", "Plaintes d'amour", "Pierrot's lament", "Non t'amo più", "Chitarrata abruzzese" and "Pensol". Tosti is also a master at portraying lovesick longing, whether in passionate outpourings ("In the hush of the night", "Entra!"), stark simplicity ("Lasciali dir!") or tender intimacy (the exquisite, justly celebrated "Ideale"). He also captures the lover's unbridled joy ("Io ti sento!"), impatience ("Seconda mattinata"), sweetness ("A vucchella") and defiance ("I dare to love thee"). Heppner's program moves beyond love to encompass both life's optimism ("Demain") and its misery ("Invan pre-

ghi"), as well as two views of death: "Vorrei morire!" expresses a willingness to die if nature proves calm and welcoming, while in "L'alba separa" the singer asserts that death and heaven are preferable to a dream unfulfilled.

Tosti's original piano accompaniments are well matched to melody and mood, but are often excessively spare in texture and, frankly, seldom inspired.

Rather than rely solely on the piano, this recital opts for the captivating sound of a "salon orchestra." With no selection involving more than eleven instruments, the arrangers avoid the unnecessary lushness to which many of these songs have previously been subjected. This accompaniment may not have been in the composer's "mind's ear," but

he would surely have applauded the elegant manner in which it enhances Ben Heppner's heartfelt performances.

Roger Pines

The author acknowledges the cooperation of Prof. Francesco Sanvitale, director of the Istituto Nazionale Tostiano in Ortona, which since 1983 has promoted Tosti's works internationally through publications and concerts.

