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The Complete Recordings of Giuseppe Anselmi

Arias by Donizetti, Giordano, Leoncavallo, Mascagni, Massenet, Meyerbeer, Thomas, Verdi and others. Songs by Tosti, Scarlatti, Mendelssohn, Strauss and others. With Angelo Bettinelli, Vincenzo Bellezza, Leopoldo Mugnone (piano), unidentified pianists, orchestra and conductor. Marston 55004-2 (five CDs)

Listeners eager to familiarize themselves with Giuseppe Anselmi's artistry are generally directed to his justly celebrated performance of 'Quando le sere al placido' from *Luisa Miller*. My suggested alternative would be the tenor's most historically significant disc, 'Io sono come nube vaporosa' from Mascagni's *Le maschere* (Anselmi appeared in the 1901 Naples performance, one of the work's premieres which occurred simultaneously in six Italian theatres). Here is Anselmi at his most persuasive, with dazzlingly youthful tone, typically graceful phrasing, and pristine textual projection.

Born near Catania in 1876, Anselmi—a gifted violinist who received comparatively little vocal training—was already singing leads with a touring company in Greece and Egypt in his early 20s. He enjoyed particular acclaim at La Scala, as well as in Russia, South America and, above all, Madrid, where the public idolized him. After retiring in 1918, he founded a music academy in Italy, directing it for nearly a decade before dying of pneumonia in 1929.

Anselmi's 119 surviving records were made from 1907 to 1913. Even in his 'debut' disc, 'Sogno soave e casto' from *Don Pasquale*, all his hallmarks are memorably evident, including cleanly executed *gruppetti*, superbly chiselled enunciation and unfailingly sincere expressiveness. The singer insisted on recording exclusively solo pieces, and nearly everything was accompanied by piano (most of his pianists are decidedly below par). When finally singing with orchestral support in his last recordings, Anselmi seems more secure overall.

The French arias are sung in Italian translation, a shame considering that

Anselmi did speak French and, in the few songs performed in that language, his enunciation is commendable. The voice eminently suited French lyric parts, especially *Mignon*'s Wilhelm; in 'Elle ne croyait pas' Anselmi skilfully narrows and brightens the sound, shaping his phrases nobly and offering a heavenly diminuendo in the second verse.

Throughout Anselmi's discography, one must bear with frequent aspirates, a weak low register and odd scratchiness and split-second deviations from pitch that mar many full-voice top notes. Fortunately, the classic Italian lyric-tenor timbre, flexibility,

Giuseppe Anselmi



incomparable command of *mezza voce* and *diminuendo*, and above all, an exquisitely poetic sensibility offer more than ample compensation.

Anselmi can caress a phrase as few others have done (listen to the arias from Mascagni's *Iris* and Giordano's *Marcella*). More than many of his tenor contemporaries, Anselmi could also create a distinctive characterization through voice alone. A splendid example is his irresistible 'Questa o quella', with the devil-may-care Duke of Mantua instantly present before us. While this instrument lacks sufficient heft for the arias of Enzo Grimaldo, Radames and Canio, the latter is certainly

an extraordinarily moving portrayal.

Much of the recital repertoire here is musically mediocre salon music, which even Anselmi can't bring to life. In any of Tosti's best songs, however—say, 'Ideale' or 'La Serenata'—Anselmi's voice and style are ideal.

As always, Marston's transfers are flawless. The booklet includes many marvellous photos, plus Francisco Segalerva's exceedingly thorough biographical essay and a magnificently insightful discussion of the recordings credited to William Crutchfield. A revelatory set, warmly recommended.

ROGER PINES

OPERA ON DVD AND BLU-RAY

Acis et Galatée, Lully

Elena Harsányi (*Galatée*), Valeria La Grotta (*Diane/Scylla/Second Naiad*), Francesca Lombardi Mazzulli (*L'Abondance/Aminte/First Naiad*), Silvia Spessot (*Dryad*), Jean-François Lombard (*Acis*), Sebastian Monti (*Apollon/Télème/Priest of Juno*), Markus Van Arsdale (*Comus/Tircis*), Luigi De Donato (*Polyphème*), Guido Loconsolo (*Neptune*), Davide Piva (*Sylvain*), Coro e Orchestra del Maggio Musicale Fiorentino, c. Federico Maria Sardelli, d. Benjamin Lazar, des. Adelin Caron and Alain Blanchot, *video director* Matteo Ricchetti. Dynamic DVD 37971/Blu-ray 57971 (112 mins)

It says much for Lully that the elegant grace of his last opera enables us to forget, if only for an instant, Handel's familiar vision of Ovid. The composer's 'dissolute lifestyle' had led to a rift not only with his royal master Louis XIV but also with his regular librettist, Philippe Quinault; yet though Jean Galbert de Campistron's text for *Acis et Galatée* (1686) does not offer depth—its slim prologue and three pastoral acts present ease rather than tragic grandeur—it does offer effective opportunities for varied solos and ensembles. Beyond that, Lully's *Galatée* has more agency than her Handelian sister, and her equivocal encouragement of Polyphème leads directly to Acis's death.

Although the lumbering cyclops himself is comedically treated—his main aria is perkily accompanied by pan pipes, pre-empting the sopranino recorder of Handel's 'O ruddier than the cherry'—Lully's monster has real cause for anger, and is allowed a moment of regret when passion dies. His music is always distinctive, as is the magnificent 15-minute *passacaille* for two naiads, chorus and dancers celebrating the concluding metamorphic marriage: one breathtaking variation, entwining rushing semiquavers in treble and bass, graphically suggests the physical union of the rivers that personify the changed hero and heroine.