

Music Views and Reviews by Kathy Wolfe

Recording catches up with bel canto

Nimbus Records Prima Voce:

"*Jussi Björling: The First Ten Years*" (NI 7835)

"*Enrico Caruso: Arias, Ensembles, Songs*" (NI 1790), 3 CDs

"*Conchita Supervia in Opera & Song*" (NI 7836/7) 2 CDs

Nimbus Records has just issued the first CDs of great singers using its new "Big Bertha" gramophone horn, which pulls so much sound off old 78s, that it seems the singer is in the room. While the best bel canto singers died before the recording era, it is nevertheless a service to history that so much of the first-generation recorded voices can now be heard. The first such releases are the legendary tenors Jussi Björling (1911-60) and Enrico Caruso (1873-1921), and mezzo-soprano Conchita Supervia (1895-1936).

The hallmarks of the Italian school of bel canto are roundness of sound, "elevation," and a rapid, refined vibrato. All these are compressed into too narrow a range for the real voice heard on recordings *electronically* transferred from 78s before 1940. Lovers of vocal music know from the LPs of these artists, for example, that all three had plenty of vibrato—but so much of it often sounds annoying, because the high range of frequencies "sticks out."

"Elevation"—one of several terms for the bel canto method of amplification of tone purely in the head, not in the throat—can also seem tinny or nasal on electronic transfers.

The relation between the *acoustical* transfer process used in these recordings to electronic transfer is a bit like comparing an acoustical guitar to an electric one. Nimbus plays old 78s on a 1923 Victrola in the warm acous-

tics of a ballroom in an 18th-century Welsh castle. They use a teak thorn needle, the old needle of organic material which "gives" with the old shellac 78s, where metallic needles just scratch.

Classical technology

Nimbus first used Victrola's original papier-maché horn, which was curled up ram's-horn style to fit into living rooms. Then they created a straightened horn, expanded, which pulled even more sound off the 78s. The third generation Mark III horn just on line, "Big Bertha," has been widened in fiberglass to 10 feet across, and the results are big, too.

Electronic transfers are much cheaper (thorn needles used in acoustic transfers, for instance, are very costly and wear out with one or two playings) and far less time-consuming. But they lose a lot of the voice, and also pick up surface noise off the 78s. The electronic transfers must then use Dolby noise reduction, which compresses the signal, taking the highest and lowest frequencies out, deleting whole swaths of singing voice with it. After all, Dolby is a rock technology, used to compress a sound signal for radio transmission, because it helps pop music sales to broadcast music uniformly. It has no place in classical music.

The first CD on the new horn, "Jussi Björling: The First Ten Years," was a pleasant shock. His "Ah si, ben mio" from Verdi's "Il Trovatore" is a veritable definition of "round sound": every vowel made with a very large, round space inside the mouth—a hint of "o" and "u" in each vowel—imparting what is described as a golden color. The depth of tone allows a full legato which makes even Puccini (a

composer who scrapped bel canto for raw sensuality at the end of the 19th century) sound like music.

Rounder and rounder

Remarkably, Big Bertha makes Enrico Caruso's 1908 recordings sound almost as full as Björling's 1938 ones. Caruso was a baritone before becoming a tenor, but, as with Björling, none of the earlier electronic reproductions prepares one for the depth of his instrument. As the liner notes report, he continued to fill in for the baritones.

Caruso had artistic problems, a coarseness which stemmed from collaborating too much with Puccini and others of the *verismo* school. Nonetheless, this CD set—one each of arias, ensembles, and songs both in Italian and other languages—shows his best. They are available singly as NI 7803, NI 7809, and NI 7834.

Noteworthy are the tempi and the poetic uses of rubato ("stealing" from one beat and adding to another) and portamento (anticipation of the next note over a wide interval), which are much more drawn out than anything allowed in today's "just the notes, please" world. In the "Sextet" from Donizetti's "Lucia di Lamermoor" on the ensemble disc, the group's ability to "stretch" out a line is breathtaking.

Spanish mezzo-soprano Conchita Supervia championed bel canto composers in the 1920s, returning many forgotten Rossini works to the stage. Her elevated tone, nearly unique for a low voice, is obvious on electronic transfers, where she often sounds like a high soprano, so highly placed in her head are the fast passages. It might prompt some to say she is too nasal. Not here, where the whole voice comes through, with a richness, especially in the low register, which is never heard today.