

“Il mio tesoro” from “Don Giovanni”--John McCormack; orchestra conducted by Walter Rogers (1916)

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Essay by Doreen M. McFarlane (guest post)*



John McCormack

Tenor John McCormack (1884-1945) was beloved throughout the English-speaking world. His music spanned from opera and concert music to popular songs of his time. He was one of the first to make cylinder recordings and then shellac records, and was one of the first opera singers to sing on radio. From a successful opera career, he moved on to become a beloved recitalist, touring the USA and the world, garnering huge and adoring audiences. He spotlighted upcoming composers, raised large donations to support America in both World Wars, and was a role model singer, husband, patriot and friend.

On May 9, 10, and 11 of 1916, the renowned tenor made a total of 13 recordings for Victor/HMV in their Camden, New Jersey studio. Of these, ten were sung with orchestra conducted by Walter B. Rogers, and, the other three, with his accompanist Edwin Schneider at the piano. Of the 13, two were unpublished. In some cases, there were two takes with just one published. But, the aria recorded on May 9th, which is unsurpassed and seen as the consummate performance of this aria--unmatched by even the greatest of tenors--is his performance of “Il mio Tesoro” from the opera “Don Giovanni” by Mozart; it was accomplished in one “take.” This aria has been included in at least 22 different LP and CDs over many years.

McCormack sang this aria in his concert programs from 1907 to 1917 and again from 1919 to 1921. (It has not been found that he performed it after the 1920-21 season.) He sang the role of Don Ottavio ten times at Covent Garden--November 1907 (twice), June-July 1909 (twice), July

1913 (three times), and July 1914 (three times); in February 1913, he sang it in Boston (three times), and then sang it once in Chicago in January 1916.

McCormack would likely have been comfortable and relaxed in making this recording for a number of reasons. For one, he had already made recordings in March and November of 1915 and then again in January of 1916, with orchestra under the same conductor, Walter B. Rodgers. Also, as mentioned above, he had recently performed the opera “Don Giovanni” in Chicago on January 19th, with Mario Ancona, Frances Rose and Marcel Journet (under the baton of Cleofonte Campanini). And, most importantly, the aria was perfect for him because McCormack’s technique was the true *bel canto*, and, thus, his voice was well suited to this particular operatic role.

Still, at the time the recording was made, McCormack had become primarily a concert singer, and his schedule was unrelenting. He had, for example, sung no less than 42 solo concerts between his January Camden recording session and this one on May 9th. These concerts required extensive train travel from New York to Chicago, then Buffalo, Philadelphia and other cities.

But McCormack was in his prime, and this recording is often described as miraculous. He had astounding breath control. In this aria, he sings no less than 64 notes in one breath! His technique is flawless, and yet this performance shows the well-known McCormack sense of spontaneity, charm, and humility. (He was known for communicating the essence of the text in every song he sang; one gets the feeling, in listening, of being present in the situation the words describe.) The glory and purity of his clear voice, combined with his ability to communicate, makes for a performance that is near to perfection.

McCormack was, without a doubt, one of the world’s greatest singers of Mozart and Handel. Yet, we do not have enough of the best of his work on recordings. He was one of the earlier singers to make records, yet he seems to have taken his concert work more seriously. Lovers of vocal music often lament that there are not more recordings of classical music from McCormack, although there are many. But, we are grateful to listen to and share the magnificent “Il mio Tesoro,” so that others can come to understand the power and beauty of his voice and know such a performance is even possible.

Gordon Ledbetter, author of “The Great Irish Tenor; John McCormack,” points out:

McCormack said that, if he was to be judged by only one recording, it should be his 1916 version of “Il mio Tesoro” from “Don Giovanni.” It is justly famous. The intonation is exemplary, the voice absolutely centred on the note. The coloratura runs are made with complete accuracy and the vocal line is free of any bluster or fudge. For all that, the technique is immaculate, the singing still comes across as utterly spontaneous.... What sets the record apart from any other is the *architecture* of McCormack’s phrasing; the manner in which the voice rises and descends in perfect symmetry. No other recording of the aria equals it.

In James Joyce’s letter to McCormack, after hearing him sing in Paris in 1920, Joyce writes:

“... How delighted we were by your singing, especially the aria from ‘Don Giovanni’ [‘Il mio tesoro’]... No Italian lyrical tenor that I know...could do such a feat of breathing and phrasing--to say nothing of the beauty of tone.”

The great soprano, Rosa Ponselle, was also known for her excellent vocal technique and beautiful singing. She was always an admirer of John McCormack. In once being asked to compare McCormack’s voice to that of another tenor, Ponselle put it this way: “His [McCormack’s voice] was too singular a phenomenon to compare to anyone.”

Interestingly, the Christmas following John McCormack’s death in September of 1945, Victor created a special vinyl pressing and labeled it as “Christmas Greetings from RCA Victor 1945.” It was a copy of none other than the Victor recording of John McCormack’s 1916 performance of “Il mio tesoro.” The late Paul Worth suggested that, “This was a premium likely distributed to dealers and other figures within the recording industry and not offered for general sale to the public.” This would have been a profound and deeply appropriate way to honor and remember the late, beloved tenor who had contributed so greatly to Victor’s success; they offered to their supporters the very best of what they had to offer as a gift at Christmas and that was the incomparable “Il mio tesoro” by the one and only John McCormack.

After a substantial career in opera, Doreen McFarlane toured for many years with her beloved late husband, Michael McFarlane, in their own “concert shows” throughout the US and Canada. Her second career is in ministry; she holds a Master of Divinity and Ph.D. in Bible from prestigious Chicago seminaries. She has four published books, including “John McCormack: A Singer’s Life.” She currently serves as solo pastor of St. Paul’s Lutheran Church ELCIC, in Niagara Falls, Canada.

* The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.