

# Lionel Mapleson cylinder recordings of the Metropolitan Opera (1900-1903)

Added to the National Registry: 2002

Essay by Edward Komara (guest post)\*



*“Music of the Modern World”*

There is an evocative Gilded Age era painting of the Metropolitan Opera--“the Met” to its longtime attendees--by Charles Courtney Curran, created specially for Anton Seidl’s “Music of the Modern World” (New York: Appleton, 1895). Curran showed three operagoers watching from their box the closing apotheosis scene from Charles Gounod’s “Faust,” the staple opera in the company’s repertory. (So much a staple that the Met was dubbed the “Faustspielhaus,” a pun based on Richard Wagner’s Festspielhaus in Bayreuth, Germany.) The conductor in the orchestra pit and the three singers on stage are much too small to have identifiable faces, but perhaps Curran made his sketches on one of the nights during the 1894-1895 season when Nellie Melba was singing Marguerite, Edouard De Reske hectoring as Mephistopheles, and Luigi Mancinelli was conducting. This gorgeous, if silent, painting begs the question, “What would these operagoers have heard?”

The Met’s librarian at this time was Lionel Mapleson (1865-1937); he had been serving in that capacity since 1889. In March 1900, Mapleson purchased an Edison recording phonograph, whereupon he tried it out at the opera house, initially in the prompter’s box (between the conductor and the stage, as seen in the Curran painting), then in the flies, and finally, and most effectively, from a catwalk over the center of the stage. Due to the short length and the expensive cost of the cylinders, Mapleson could record only short arias and excerpts of scenes, but not of whole acts. Rumor has long been that Mapleson stopped recording in 1903 when a cylinder fell from the catwalk to the stage. Two more likely theories why he stopped are that the singers took up exclusive recording contracts with Victor and Columbia, and that he lost his last and best recording spot during the preparations for the Met’s first performances of Wagner’s last opera “Parsifal.”

Through the mid-1930s, the cylinders were kept--and played--by Mapleson but the memories of his phonograph and its humongous horn were shared from one generation of Met singers to the next. It was soprano legend Geraldine Farrar who encouraged Mapleson in 1937 to share access to the cylinders, in the nick of time, as it turned out as Mapleson would die by the end of that year. In four donations through 1962, the 126 known surviving cylinders were placed at the New York Public Library; today they are in the Rodgers and Hammerstein Archive of Recorded Sound at the NYPL. There may have been many more cylinders--Mapleson wrote in a 1900 diary entry that he was taking 100 cylinders with him on a family trip to England--but those appear to have been lost, perhaps by the time of Mapleson’s death. However, if dissemination is the best means of preservation, that phase of work was begun in the late 1930s with William

Seltsam's International Record Collectors Club issues on 78s and LPs of some 60 performances. The authoritative edition of the complete surviving cylinders is the six-LP set "The Mapleson Cylinders Complete Edition" (Rodgers and Hammerstein R&H 100, 1986), with a scholarly booklet containing narrative, transcripts and translations.

Even after more than 100 years after recording, the repertory should be familiar to today's opera fan. The Italian warhorses are already in place—"Lucia di Lammermoor" by Donizetti, "Aida," "Ernani" and "La Traviata" by Verdi, "Tosca" by Puccini, Leoncavallo's "I Pagliacci" and Mascagni's "Cavalleria Rusticana." Mozart's "Magic Flute" and seven of the ten canonical Wagner operas represent the German component. Some of the French operas have been revived through the years, especially Gounod's "Faust" and "Romeo et Juliette," and Bizet's "Carmen." Other French operas are lesser known, especially the two by Meyerbeer, "Les Huguenots" and "L'Africaine," likely because of the decline in French-style singing since World War I, and of the few well-suited singers for Meyerbeer style on today's Met roster. (The music of "Les Huguenots" is demanding enough to need seven top singers in order to be performed well.) The Mapleson cylinders give valuable glimpses of Italian singing at the Met before Enrico Caruso's arrival in November 1903, and of French singing in its late prime.

Even though Mapleson stopped recording before Caruso's Met debut, he did capture a representative cross-section of the best operatic singing to be heard in America. The major stars are here: sopranos Nellie Melba, Emma Eames, Emma Calve, Marcella Sembrich, and Johanna Gadski; contralto Ernestine Schumann-Heink; baritone Antonio Scotti; and bass Pol Plancon. The cylinders preserve a few legends otherwise unavailable on commercial recordings, namely soprano Milka Ternina, and tenor Jean de Reske, whose resonant execution of the aria "O Paradis" from "L'Africaine" has been a favorite of vocal record collectors since its first release on an IRCC 78.

Most surprising, and as gratifying as the recordings allow, are those artists who sound more unfettered on stage than on their commercial records. Practices in the early recording studios required the singers to perform without an audience into an indifferent looking horn, often having to lurch backwards at high or loud pitches to minimize the chances of blasting or overloading the groove being etched into the master. Lillian Nordica sounds more heroic, and Edouard de Reszke has more swagger, on their Mapleson cylinders than on their respective commercial discs. Most astonishing is the soprano Suzanne Adams, hardly a known name among opera listeners today, but whose spectacular onstage execution of the Queen's cabaletta from "Les Huguenots" was once thought to have been sung by Melba.

Mapleson's cylinders, fragmentary as they may be, do allow vivid if brief glimpses at a leading *fin de siècle* opera house at work. One of the recordings of the closing execution scene of "Tosca" is notable less for having Ternina and Emilio de Marchi (the creator of the role of Cavaradossi) and more for the startling gunfire. For a few of the operas such as "Les Huguenots" and "Carmen," the singer may be singing in French, but the chorus may be answering in Italian. One of Mapleson's longest recordings is of the duel scene from Gounod's "Faust," which is rare among the recordings for retaining a sense of theatrical atmosphere. Also evocative is the four-cylinder sequence of the duet from "Les Huguenots," during which the audience applauds briefly during a structural pause before the conductor resumes the music with a deft cue.

And what for the operagoers in Curran's painting? Mapleson's cylinders offer five surviving attempts at recording the concluding trio and apotheosis of Gounod's "Faust," one of them (March 4, 1901, just six or seven years after the painting) with Melba, Edouard de Reske, and Mancinelli's orchestra audible. The recording may be crude, and the music may seem quaint to our ears, but the sound enhances what we have seen on canvas for years.

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