

Lily McCormack Recalls

IN HER wholly disarming and thoroughly absorbing reminiscences of her famous husband titled "I Hear You Calling Me,"* Lily McCormack has some observations of special interest to the legion of the singer's recording enthusiasts. As, for example:

"While waiting to hear from Maestro Sabatini (his first Italian singing master, who also happened to be the father of the celebrated author of 'Scaramouche' and other novels) John went over to London, where he was engaged to make eight phonograph records for the Edison Company, and later ten for the Edison Bell Company. The industry was then in its infancy, and for these ten cylinder records he was paid the breathtaking sum of fifty pounds. 'His Master's Voice,' then called the Gramophone Company, engaged him to make ten for them at the same fee. With a hundred pounds in his pocket and all expenses paid John felt established as a singer." [This was 1904, when McCormack was twenty.]

"In later years he got the greatest fun out of playing his record of 'Killarney,' made at this time, for some of his musical friends—telling them it had been done by an Irish boy who wanted his opinion as to whether he

should take up a singing career. John writes [in his unpublished "Memoirs"]: 'Without exception every one of them, including such an excellent critic as my friend Dr. Walter Starke, said: "Oh, Lord, John, don't advise that poor boy to study singing. It is too pathetic for words."' Then John would show them the name on the record, and laugh until the tears came."

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Concerning critics, Mrs. McCormack recalls the following: "John invariably read the newspaper comments on his work, and I often heard him say: 'The artists who claim they never read their reviews are lying. We read them all, every word, even though they make us mad as Hades.' When he had a bad review, he'd say: 'Now, take this! I'm going to write this fellow a letter that'll curl his hair and show him he doesn't know what he's talking about.' After a while he'd come along all smiles and say, 'I wrote that beggar a four-page letter telling him what I thought of him.' 'Is it posted yet?' I'd ask. 'Not yet,' he'd answer sheepishly. 'I tore it up and chucked it in the wastebasket. Anyway, I've gotten it off my chest. Now I feel better.' . . . When he got a good press notice, he was like a child, following me about the house and wanting to know *why*

I must do this or that instead of sitting down and talking it over."

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Are artists conscious of the accomplishments which show them at their best, or do they want to be liked for things which, really, they cannot do? The musical world is in general agreement that McCormack's "Il Mio Tesoro" from Mozart's "Don Giovanni" is one of the memorable singing accomplishments in the half century, 1900-50 (RCA Victor 15-1015). What did McCormack think of it?

"I have frequently been asked," notes Lily McCormack, "which were John's favorite operas. I'd say 'Don Giovanni' and 'La Bohème.' . . . He adored singing Mozart and said: 'I love "Don Giovanni" so much I never go to my dressing room. I stand in the wings and listen to every note. As a result I can sing everybody's part.' About his recording of 'Il Mio Tesoro,' he said: 'If my reputation as a singer is to be judged in the future by any particular record of mine, I am willing to stand or fall by "Il Mio Tesoro." My wife informs me that the immortal George Bernard Shaw told her how much he liked it. Knowing his affection for Mozart's music and his intimate knowledge of it, that is some compliment.'"

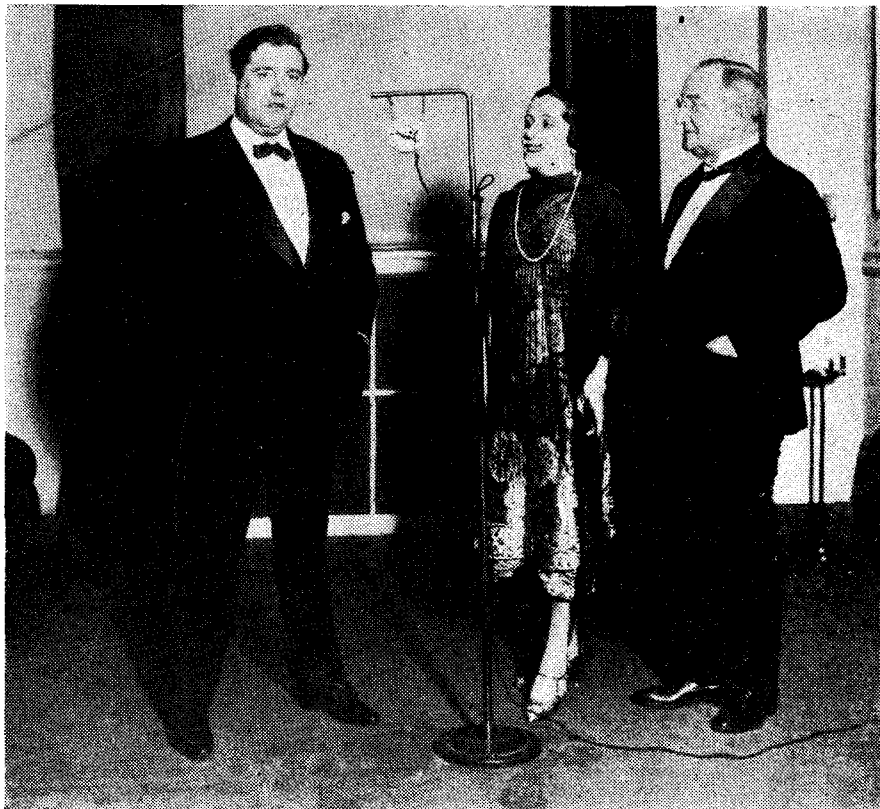
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Shortly after his American debut, in 1909, McCormack was approached by a representative of the Victor Company, in New York. What ensued can best be described in his own words:

"To one of my first opera performances came the head of the Artists' Department of the Victor Talking Machine Company. He was pleased with my work and asked me to make a test record of an operatic aria and an Irish ballad ('Tu che Dio Spiegati l'Aie' from 'Lucia' and 'Killarney'). They were excellent, and I think they are still in the catalogue.

"I was offered a contract immediately, but unfortunately I had two more years to sing for the Odeon Company in London. The Victor Company cabled to London and asked the Odeon Company how much they would accept to release me. Then the Victor Company cabled the Gramophone Company in London asking them to pay half of the release—they had a working agreement about their artists. My old friends the Gramophone Company thought the Victor Company had suddenly gone crazy.

"Well perhaps they had. In any case, the Victor Company paid the two thousand pounds, and on February 10, 1910, gave me a contract which does not lapse until February 1938. [These excerpts are from the "Memoirs" written by McCormack in 1936, but never published.] I received ten thou-



John McCormack and Lucrezia Bori broadcasting from New York to London. At right is Calvin Childs of the Victor Company.

sand dollars in advance and 10 per cent of the list price of the records."

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Record making, while McCormack was in America, was often reserved for the Easter season, when the family would take a holiday in Atlantic City, and John would spend part of the time in Camden. Mrs. McCormack notes: "John was a perfectionist about his work and would rather do a record over a dozen times than pass it, if he felt it had the slightest flaw. One year Harriet and Fritz Kreisler, Rachmaninoff, Teddy Schneider [McCormack's accompanist], John, and I went to hear the tests of the first records Fritz and John had made of Rachmaninoff's songs. . . . I could hardly breathe, and kept stealing a glance at each one in turn. Fritz and John kept their eyes fixed on the floor while the records were being played and Rachmaninoff kept his eyes closed. At the end he came over and put his arms around them, saying 'Bravo! Bravo!'"

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Among the many notables of his generation who paid McCormack tribute was one who might have also been a singer had not the native talent of the Irish turned him in another direction. During a visit to Paris, in 1920, McCormack received the following letter from a contestant who finished second in the bass competition at the Dublin Fest of 1903, in which McCormack won the tenor award:

Dear McCormack: In the general confusion the other afternoon I had not an opportunity to tell you how delighted we were by your singing, especially the aria from "Don Giovanni." I have lived in Italy practically ever since we last met but no Italian lyrical tenor that I know (Bonci possibly excepted) could do such a feat of breathing and phrasing—to say nothing of the beauty of tone, in which, I am glad to see, Roscommon can leave the peninsula a fair distance behind. . . .

Sincerely yours,
JAMES JOYCE.

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Those who esteem McCormack as a phenomenon purely of the English-speaking world may be interested in the opinions expressed during a post-World-War-I visit to the Continent:

"We have witnessed," his manager wrote to Mrs. McCormack, "great demonstrations at the Hippodrome (New York), Symphony Hall in Boston, Sydney, and elsewhere, but I can truthfully say that the ovations in both Berlin and Prague were greater. Had the crowd in Prague been as large as a Hippodrome audience they would have been heard in Paris almost. . . . The ovation following the Beethoven aria in Berlin was simply colossal. I don't think I have ever seen our tenor so deeply touched."

Looking Backwards— John McCormack

ROBERT MOLLOY

ACCORDING to a story which John McCormack himself told, the Irish tenor, out for a stroll, encountered Enrico Caruso.

"Good morning, Enrico," said McCormack in Italian, which he spoke well. "How is the world's greatest tenor this morning?"

"Giovanni," Caruso replied, "since when have you become a basso?"

Dyed-in-the-wool McCormack fans see nothing extravagant in that. For them, the popular lyric tenor's rare

a brief essay which is a case in point—but, he was too successful to be stomachached by the average vocal teacher. He was usually dismissed as a pleasant singer of ballads, a view in which the Victor list more and more concurred. The HMV catalogue was more just.

Somewhat belated amends were made a year or more ago when Victor issued an album of repressings, under the inane title "John McCormack Sings Again," which contained some of his more serious repertoire along with such items as "Mother Machree" and "Macushla." Some of these repressings have been souped up, but in this case to advantage. For, although one of the most popular of all recorded singers, McCormack was not, in general, vocally flattered by his discs. The acoustical records had a tendency to whiten his tones, making him sound rather like a counter-tenor, and the electrical process, particularly as his voice became a bit dryer and darker in later years, gave a wiry sound and exaggerated his strong Irish accent.

The listener who can disassociate his mind from preconceptions and listen to McCormack's more serious recorded repertoire will find much to impress him. As it is with Toscanini, McCormack's fundamental assets were simplicity and exactness. You will find few exaggerated ritards or distortions of phrase, but you will find an almost unerring choice of pace (yes, I know that Toscanini sometimes goes too fast). You will find distinction of line, the right amount of dynamic contrast, and of course the much admired clarity of enunciation which even the hostile conceded and which never at any time degenerated into parlando. McCormack had all the graces of bel canto—clean fioritura, liquid trills, delicate execution of gruppetti.

The voice itself, to which, I repeat, the phonograph has not done entire justice, was in the concert hall a genuine lyric tenor, rich and full-bodied and of ample range, sometimes with a nasal coloring which records exaggerated. To make a comparison which could be qualified, it was rather like Tagliavini's voice, or Gigli's in his more intelligent moments. Of moderate size, though by no means small, it sounded just as good from the balcony of Carnegie Hall as from the

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John McCormack in "Faust," Dublin, 1906 — "distinction of line and clarity of enunciation."

combination of subtlety and warmth was more than sufficient to make up for what he may have lacked in robustness of timbre.

There were, however, lots of detractors. Although he was one of the most popular singers of the first two-fifths of this century, and although his death at sixty-two rang down the curtain on an age of high vocal standards of which only a few representatives have lingered, McCormack has for the most part been treated with good-natured contempt. This was undoubtedly due in large part to his willingness to sing songs that would appeal to the widest audience, and even to the fact that he performed them without condescension. Occasionally a perceptive critic would point out the sterling qualities of his art—H. T. Parker's "Eighth Notes" contains