

“Canzone del Porter” from “Martha”--Edouard de Reszke (1903)

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Essay by Karen Henson (guest post)*



Edouard de Reszke

This recording by the Polish-French bass Edouard de Reszke captures one of the most accomplished opera singers of the 19th century and also documents an important shift in the use of the (still relatively new) technology of sound reproduction. These facts may not be clear from the recording itself, which is fairly unassuming. The aria Reszke is singing is not a great lyric outpouring, but rather a drinking song, the “Canzone del Porter,” from a long-forgotten comic opera, Friedrich von Flotow's “Marta.” Typically for such numbers, the vocal line is simple and catchy, rising and falling lopsidedly to suggest drunkenness. Reszke's performance is elegant--no-one actually drunk could produce such beautiful trills--but not exactly enthralling.

Reszke was nonetheless one of the biggest stars of the 19th century, with a voice and stage presence that assured him a career of virtually 30 years in some of the most important opera houses of the era. This included a period at the Metropolitan Opera--and, indeed, Reszke made this recording in New York, in 1902 or 1903, during one of his last trips to the city. He had been born in Warsaw half a century earlier, in a family that produced no less than three professional singers: Reszke's sister Josephine was briefly very successful as a soprano, and his brother Jean became an internationally-renowned tenor and heartthrob. The two brothers trained in Italy, spent their formative years in Paris, and by the end of the 1880s, had established themselves as a kind of double-act, appearing at the Paris Opéra, Covent Garden in London, and the Met in some of the most popular works of the repertory (including Mozart's “Don Giovanni,” Giacomo Meyerbeer's “Les Huguenots” and L'Africaine, Gounod's “Faust” and “Roméo et Juliette,” Verdi's “Aida,” and Wagner's “Lohengrin” and “Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg”).

As a bass, Edouard was overshadowed by his more bright-voiced tenor brother; the exception was when they appeared together in Gounod's “Faust,” in which, with his deep, resonant voice and immense height, Edouard was apparently the very incarnation of the devil-figure Méphistophélès. Edouard was also the only one of the two to release recordings: the brothers can be heard on an experimental set of recordings made at the Met in the 1900s, the Mapleson Cylinders (which are also on the Library of Congress' National Recording Registry) and Jean apparently tried to make commercial recordings, but he was unhappy with the results and ordered them destroyed. Jean's discomfort with the new technology was not uncommon among

his generation. Trained in the centuries-old tradition of “bel canto,” or “beautiful singing,” and specializing in the very acting-oriented and physical performance styles that dominated operatic production in the second half of the 19th century, he, Edouard, and others were “live” operatic performers *par excellence*.

Edouard's very different decision, to make and release recordings of the drinking song from “Marta” (and also an aria from Verdi's “Ernani” and a song by Tchaikovsky), came at a crucial point in the history of sound reproduction. During the first years of its existence, sound recording had primarily been exploited either in the form of a dictation device (used by businessmen or in court), or as a kind of early juke box that played back recordings of popular songs, band arrangements, or comic skits. The idea of expanding this use to include the home had long been discussed, and by the early 1900s technicians, entrepreneurs, and consumers themselves had begun to reimagine recording as a technology for the home in earnest. An important step, which had been taken in the 1890s, had been to produce a version of the dominant format, the wax cylinder phonograph, that was small, inexpensive, and pleasing-looking enough to appeal to middle-class households. Another was to produce recordings of music and other forms of entertainment that were suitable for middle-class domestic life. So-called “good music,” and in particular the operatic melodies that were already part of that life, when played and sung from sheet music around the piano, quickly became important.

Reszke's “Marta” was part of this push to record opera for home listening. Reszke's three recordings were made with the Columbia Phonograph Company (a company originally based in Washington, DC). They were packaged as part of a larger “Columbia Grand Opera” series, in which the familiarity and respectability of operatic music was combined with the name recognition (and actual voices) of singers such as Reszke, the Polish soprano Marcella Sembrich, the American soprano Lillian Nordica, and the Italian bass Antonio Scotti. The series was followed quickly--within months--by a competing set of opera recordings, the so-called “Red Seal” series, which were released by the Victor Talking Machine Company. This newer, New Jersey-based company specialized in an alternative format, the disc-based gramophone, and they worked with a company in London to circulate and promote the recordings of a younger singer, the Italian tenor Enrico Caruso (also represented on the National Recording Registry). As a result of these and other initiatives, by the 1910s, recording had become widely accepted as a medium for the home, with the gramophone now the dominant format.

Reszke's recording may be unassuming, then, and even a little silly--the song he is singing is essentially about the pleasures of British beer. Yet it provides a unique aural glimpse of an otherwise lost generation of opera singers. It also reveals the extent to which those singers contributed to the creation of a new, more modern multi-media world.

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*The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and may not reflect those of the Library of Congress.