



## STREAMING THE FIRST CENTURY

### SESSION 3: Italian Roots

#### CONTEMPORARY PERSPECTIVE: Preservation Edition

**Featuring: Ward Marston (Grammy award winning, restoration engineer, and audio preservation specialist) and Jefferey McMillian (SF Opera public relations director)**

(transcript read time ~ 9 minutes; audio run time ~ 12 minutes)

[BEGIN AUDIO]

NARRATOR: Welcome to San Francisco Opera's Centennial celebration.

WARD MARSTON [WM]: I'm Ward Marston, and I've been doing audio restoration work for the past almost 50 years. I started working in broadcasting when I was in college, and I was the station manager and classical music director of the little college station for Williams College, WCFM. I was already a collector of old recordings—I mean, 78 RPM records—and I used to love playing 78s on the air, which was a novelty in 1971 for listeners. I remember playing the first act of *Die Walküre* with Melchior and Lehmann, with Bruno Walter conducting, from actual original 78s, instead of an EMI transfer that would've been on LP in 1974. I was asked by the national public radio station, WHYY—in those days it was called WUHY, in Philadelphia to produce and narrate a series on Leopold Stokowski and the Philadelphia Orchestra, and that was a 58-week series. It went on one hour each week. And I played every recording that Stokowski made with the Philadelphia Orchestra. I had them all in my collection at the time. I had been collecting old recordings since I was in single digits, (laughs) so by the time I was in my early twenties I probably had three or four thousand records.

And then I started doing audio restoration work for other record companies, for me it was a coup—my first major job was to work for CBS Records in 1976, when I produced the audio transfers for a Budapest String Quartet retrospective reissue of Budapest String Quartet recordings from the 1930s. From there it just went forward. I now have a CD label of my own, which my partner, Scott Kessler, and I formed in 1997, and we issue vocal recordings from the past, as well as historical piano recordings.

JEFFERY MCMILLIAN [JM]: In terms of your label, if you could just say a little bit about some of the technical challenges that are involved with your audio restoration work.

WM: Yeah. That could be a whole program in itself. I always use what I would call primary sources, or original sources. And much of the material that we issue is over a hundred years old. I try first of all to get original discs sources. Now, I have about 30,000 records in my own collection at this point, so a lot of the material comes from my own collection. But I have networked for years with collectors around the world, let's say in Europe, and ask them if they had this record or that record, and then they would

have to send me a transfer that they made on CD. And then when I would receive the CD, I would evaluate it to see if it was usable or not. But most of the material came from my own collection,

JM: Do you have an aesthetic goal that you're going for when you do this kind of restoration work? Is it based on the 78 and how do you get there based on whatever kind of material?

WM: My aesthetic goal is rather straightforward: I try to make everything sound like music. I don't want it to sound like an old record. My goal is to make it sound as musical as possible. So I use some intervention from technological tools, software, computer programs, but the results are all based on my own hearing. Often the intervention can do more harm than good if you overuse it. And that means finding a balance between that very old scratchy 78. You know, just put the needle down and play it, that's at one end of the spectrum; the other end is to use a tremendous amount of digital intervention, or digital processing, which can make old records sound absolutely abysmal, so I try to find a middle ground.

JM: So you have to figure out when to stop using the intervention.

WM: The other thing is that old recordings did not use only one speed that the turntable—at which the turntable would be rotating, so that when people think of 78 RPM records, that's a nominal speed of 78, which really wasn't established universally until the 1930s, and even then there were variations. There are companies that made their recordings that played in the 90s, in the 95 RPM, and sometimes there are also records that I've found from the early years of disc recording that play in the 60s. You have to be able to listen to a voice and establish whether it sounds like a human voice or not, 'cause if you're playing it too slow, it will sound like this, and if you're playing it too fast, it sounds like that. You have to be able to determine the speed, according to the sound of the voice.

JM: Could we talk a little bit about your work on San Francisco Opera recordings, because I know you've worked on the 1932 recording of Claudia Muzio and that opened the War Memorial Opera House.

WM: Yeah, it's always been a challenge. It's one of the earliest known broadcasts that was captured on disc. In the 1920s, electrical recording came into being around 1925, before that it was impossible to record off the radio, because first of all, radio was in its infancy and recordings off the air didn't really come to be until the early 1930s. There were occasions where record companies recorded something off the radio and had pressings made, but it wasn't until the early 1930s that you could actually have a machine that would record a disc, let's say, off the air, and that you could actually just play back without any kind of processing.

When the system was developed for recording off the air, it was called instantaneous recording. There were several systems. All of them were very primitive. There were problems with distortion and really, recording off the air did not really get perfected until the later '30s—1936, '37, '38—but this recording of act one of *Tosca* has survived. The only problem is that, as far as I know, the original discs have been lost. I have been searching for them for 50 years, since I first started making calls to collectors to try to find out where the original discs were back in the early 1970s, and I have made no progress in the past 50 years. No one seems to know where the original discs are, or even what sort of discs they were. Were they 10-inch discs, 12-inch discs, 16-inch discs? Nobody knows.

So, when I restored this *Tosca*, I had to use a tape that somebody had made from the original discs when it was known where they were. This tape circulated among collectors for years, so the tape that I used could've been a third or a fourth or a fifth generation from the original, but it's all we had to work with. And so I did the best I could.

JM: I know you're a big fan of Claudia Muzio. Is there something that you hear in that performance from 1932 that we don't hear on the studio recording she made during her life?

WM: All live performances reveal something about a singer, there's something quite tangible about the fact that it is in front of an audience. The other thing is that Muzio didn't record anything commercially. She didn't do anything from act one of *Tosca*. So the whole thing adds a whole new dimension to her recorded legacy. That's really a major plus for this recording. It must have been quite a find when collectors first realized that that broadcast had been preserved, and it's sad. We don't even know who preserved it. We don't know whether it was preserved by a recording studio or whether it was recorded by the network. We just don't know anything about it. It's a complete mystery.

Later on, we know more about what was going on with recordings off the air. For example, the 1936 *Die Walküre* act two that was broadcast from San Francisco, I had at my disposal original discs for that broadcast. They are 16-inch aluminum discs that were coated with lacquer. We call these lacquers, or lacquer discs. They were cut at a nominal speed of 33 RPM, you could get about 15 minutes on a side. So in order to have a continuous recording there had to be two turntables set up. The sound on this recording is pretty good. It's certainly much better than the Muzio *Tosca*.

JM: I wonder if we could talk a little bit about the performance. What can we learn about the opera at that time? And those singers, Kirsten, Flagstaff, and Lottie Lehmann.

WM: And Friedrich Schorr. They were the hot ticket singers in the late 1930s. The duo of Lauritz Melchior and Kirsten Flagstad was absolutely a huge draw at the time, and Lotte Lehmann also came in with very high marks. And Friedrich Schorr had been singing at the Met for years and years and years, Flagstad is, of course, fabulous. She is at the beginning—really right near the beginning of her Wagnerian career.

The thing is that the San Francisco Opera broadcasts were sort of specialty broadcasts, where they would do one act of an opera. You'd get act two of *Manon* with Tito Schipa, let's say, that sort of thing. And unfortunately, these sorts of broadcasts were often just not preserved.

You asked me about my goals, or my aesthetic. My real interest in this is a love of sharing with other people what I have in my collection; and also sharing my abilities as a recording engineer, or a restoration engineer. It used to be that collectors tended to play dog in the manger with their records, but collectors, modern collectors of old recordings, the new generation of collectors of old recordings, tend to be much more generous with their records than, let's say, collectors in the 1940s and '50s and '60s. And that's a huge benefit to people like me. And I'm very grateful to collectors who share. And I'm delighted to be able to share this material with a greater public.

JM: Wonderful. Thank you so much Ward Marston, for speaking with us about these broadcasts for this project. And for those who are interested, please check [marstonrecords.com](http://marstonrecords.com) to see more about Ward's projects.

WM: Thank you, Jeff. It was nice chatting with you today.

NARRATOR: You've been listening to *Streaming the First Century*, San Francisco Opera's centennial celebration told through historic recordings. This recording is a copyrighted production of San Francisco Opera, all rights reserved.

[END AUDIO]