

Music

Giovanni Martinelli, 1885-1969

By HAROLD C. SCHONBERG

IF ever a man looked indestructible, it was Giovanni Martinelli. One was constantly seeing the spry octogenarian at the opera. He was always laughing, his body was straight, his massive chest looked as though it could still take in a couple of gallons of air and release them in the stentorian high B with which he used to electrify his audiences. His white hair was fluffed in every direction, he strolled confidently around, and one was looking at a man who had grown old gracefully.

His career was one of the most impressive in operatic annals. He made his official debut in 1910 and his Metropolitan Opera debut three years later. Caruso had made his Metropolitan Opera debut only 10 years earlier, in 1903. But Caruso died in 1921, while Martinelli kept on singing until 1946. He had 33 seasons at the Metropolitan Opera, during which he sang 36 roles (his full repertory consisted of 56 roles).

And it was a career marked by steady growth. Unlike so many of today's younger singers, Martinelli paced himself, progressing from lyric to spinto roles until, at the age of 51, he finally sang Otello. (He even sang the role of Tristan in Chicago for one performance, but that cannot be considered part of his repertory; he was trying to prove something to himself.) He was the greatest Otello of his generation, just as he was by common consent the greatest of Italian dramatic tenors.

It was not until the latter part of his career that he came into his own. During his early days at the Metropolitan, he was under the shadow of Caruso, against whom there was no competing. Caruso was kind enough to refer to Martinelli as the "crown prince," and it was expected that Martinelli would take up where Caruso had left off. Instead, the Metropolitan brought in several singers to succeed Caruso, among them the brilliant Aureliano Pertile, who for some reason never had much of a success here. But Gigli, who came to the Metropolitan Opera in 1920, did turn out, in a way, to be Caruso's successor, though in lyric rather than dramatic roles. Again Martinelli had to take second place. The public could not get enough of Gigli's ravishing sound. Gigli, however, was never the musician, or the versatile kind of singer, that Martinelli was, and when Gigli left in a huff after the 1931-32 season (he refused to take a salary cut to help out the Metropolitan in those days of the Great Depression), Martinelli was there to take over. From that point until his departure from the house, he was the leading Italian tenor, and probably the greatest one alive.

He had a voice of unusual brilliance and carrying power. It was so solid a voice that one felt it could be used to hit baseballs with. And it was a voice that had a



curious means of production. All the high notes were there, but Martinelli's method made it appear as though notes were squeezed from the throat rather than supported by the diaphragm. He worked very hard on stage, and in his early career there were those who said that such a method of production would necessarily result in a permanently impaired voice. But year after year after year, Martinelli confounded the skeptics. And, as he grew older, his voice became stronger, his musicianship more secure, his acting more subtle. He was a terrifying figure as Otello—a role, incidentally, he claimed was for a lyric tenor once the hazards of

the opening "Esultate" were surmounted.

Those who knew him not only admired him, they loved him. Martinelli throughout his career was a generous colleague, and there was virtually no backstage gossip about him. He did not feud with other singers, he never hogged the curtain, he always was generous with his advice to young singers, and he was a walking encyclopedia of the opera. He had been a close friend of Puccini and Toscanini, and of every important opera singer for decades, and he was full of anecdotes about them. His was an easygoing nature, one that loved people, good wines, good food.

It was this love for the good life that got him into his most embarrassing situation as a singer. On the evening of Feb. 25, 1938, Martinelli had an enormous sea food dinner. The man liked to eat; he was a noted chef and gourmet. On the afternoon of Feb. 26, 1938, he was scheduled to sing Radames in "Aida." He arrived at the house, somewhat pale, got into costume, went on stage, started to sing "Celeste Aida," broke down midway, and collapsed. The curtain was brought down for one of the few times during a performance in Metropolitan Opera history. Backstage, they thought he was dying. In the meantime, Frederick Jagel, listening to the broadcast, knew something was wrong. He rushed into a taxi, got to the Metropolitan in short order, and saved the day. Years later, reminiscing about this unhappy episode, Martinelli said: "Because I was weak, I got nervous. Because I was nervous, I got cramps and fainted."

Through the years, he made good newspaper copy. There are stories about him from the newspapers of 1923, in which he told reporters he was a follower of the Coué system of autosuggestion. Yes, he told the press, whenever he went on stage, he repeated to himself the following incantation: "I never have trouble with my high notes. I never have trouble with my high notes. I never have trouble with my high notes . . . I am singing better all the time. I am singing better all the time. I am . . ." Or he would call in the reporters to show them how he could not shatter a drinking glass with his voice, a story in reverse. There used to be countless stories about Caruso letting out and shattering half the glassware in Sherry's. So Martinelli tried his high C on a variety of crystal before the reporters. The crystal sneered back at him. "See?" Martinelli said, "It can't be done." And if Martinelli at full blast could not shatter a glass, nobody could.

He was in the news only two years ago when, at the age of 81, he appeared as the Emperor in the Seattle Opera production of "Turandot." It was a last-minute whimsy, in which he stepped in to replace an indisposed singer. The role calls for an aged sort of wheezing, rather than singing, and Martinelli was perfectly cast. He said that at least he came in on the beat and made no musical mistakes. Perhaps there were those in the Seattle audience who remembered Martinelli in his prime—remembered that big, authoritative, free-swinging voice, that soaring upper register, and the lyricism with which he could soak a phrase. At least he made some recordings, though regrettably few for a singer of his stature. But there are private, off-the-air recordings of his Saturday afternoon appearances at the Metropolitan, and one of these days those records will be made public, giving a future generation an idea of one of the phenomenal singers of an earlier age.