

# Tito Schipa

The Early Years

The Complete Gramophone and  
Pathé Recordings 1913-1921

## LINER NOTES

Tito Schipa proves Goethe's maxim that we know a great artist by his flaws. Schipa's limitations are so well known, they hardly need to be enumerated. He lacked Martinelli's trumpety top, Pertile's explosive attack and Lauri-Volpi's lithe, muscular tone. Unlike Caruso, Schipa could not dominate the big vocal climaxes, nor could he negotiate *fioriture* with the easy accuracy of De Lucia or McCormack.

Despite these shortcomings, Schipa incontestably ranks on the short list of great tenors. Anyone familiar with his recordings knows why. Martinelli could only dream of shading a phrase with the inimitable charm Schipa brought to everything he sang. Did Lauri-Volpi ever display the blandishing rhythmic grace that informed Schipa's singing? De Lucia must have admired the natural clarity of Schipa's diction, especially the purity of his vowels. Even Caruso might have envied the stylish way Schipa tossed off light music.

Caruso, like most great singers, was always on the look out for potential rivals. In her memoirs, Dorothy Caruso recalls accompanying her husband to Schipa's debut recital at Carnegie Hall in 1920. The Carusos arrived late and left after only fifteen minutes. Asked why he had bothered to attend the recital, Caruso told his wife, "Because he is a tenor. But it's all right." Caruso immediately sensed he had no reason to fear Schipa. Other tenors never considered Schipa a rival either, but most admired his artistry. "Although many outstanding tenors possessed a greater vocal potential than Tito Schipa," explained Gigli, "we have all had to bend our knees before his greatness."

Schipa still inspires admiration. After noting that Schipa, like Caruso, didn't have a high C, Luciano Pavarotti continued, "Schipa didn't even have a particularly beautiful voice. But he was a great singer. His musicality was so great that it enabled him to override every handicap. Listening to his records, you can hear him guiding his voice along, like a skipper steering his ship through all kinds of treacherous waters in an exemplary way that should be a lesson to us all. He had something far more important, twenty times more important, than high notes: a great line."

Despite his limited vocal resources, Schipa held his own against an army of Italian tenors. His recordings show why he could stand up to such charismatic singers as Gigli, Martinelli and Lauri-Volpi. Schipa imbued every aria or song with matchless grace and charm. He did not conquer listeners. He seduced them. Lacking powerful high notes, he threaded out delicate *filature* that caressed the ear. Lacking heft in mid-range, he enlivened his singing with subtle rhythmic stretchings and exquisite dynamic shadings. Schipa was a master of finding the right *accento* to

emphasize a single word or note—a sudden change of tone color, dynamics or rhythm that transfigures a phrase and imprints it forever in the memory of a listener. Employing these effects with a natural ease, he never distended or disrupted the vocal line. As Bidu Sayao noted, Schipa “chiseled phrases like a goldsmith.”

Schipa’s voice falls on the ear like the warm touch of a friend’s hand. While Pertile postured or Lauri-Volpi strutted through a performance, Schipa ingratiated his way into the hearts of his listeners. He charmed his colleagues, too. “Modest and cozy” was how Maria Caniglia described Schipa. In contrast to the difficulties she had with the temperamental Gigli, the Italian soprano enjoyed a warm and friendly relationship with Schipa. So did other sopranos who never had to worry he would try to outsing them or hold on to a high note longer than they could. Amelita Galli-Curci became the godmother of his two daughters. Gilda dalla Rizza affectionately referred to her colleague as Schipetta. Gianna Pederzini called Schipa “a blessed artist and human being.”

Raffaele Attilio Amedeo Schipa was born in Lecce on 2 January 1889. Schipa came from a poor family in the poorest part of Italy. Although a lazy student, he displayed a precocious talent for singing. Maestro Giovanni Albani picked Schipa’s voice out of a school chorus and provided his first vocal instruction. When touring opera companies performed in Lecce, Schipa sang in the children’s chorus in *Carmen* and took the child’s solo line in the second act of *La Bohème*. By the time he was ten, Schipa was praised by the critic for the *Gazzetta delle Puglie* for his “wonderful tenor voice” after he sang one of his teacher’s songs in a school recital. By then, Raffaele was already called Tito (*titu* means “little chap” in the Lecce dialect).

The talented young boy, like so many great singers, attracted important patrons. Don Gennaro Trama, the Bishop of Lecce, convinced Schipa’s parents to allow him to educate their son in the seminary at his own expense. The Bishop sometimes invited his young charge to sing a solo during church services. Listening to the young singer from under the organ loft one morning was Alceste Gerunda, a singer and musicologist who had studied with Saverio Mercadente. Gerunda immediately invited Schipa to become his private pupil. Subjecting the teenager to rigorous schooling, he restricted Schipa to a strict regime of vocal exercises. If he heard his protégé had sung a popular song or aria, Gerunda boxed his ears. In 1908, he presented Schipa in a benefit recital that raised money for a trip to Milan, where the young tenor hoped to put the final polish on his voice and launch a career.

While Schipa lived out a real-life *Bohème* in a cramped Milan apartment with three friends from Lecce, he worked intensively with Emilio Piccoli. In less than a year, Schipa was ready for his debut as Alfredo in a performance of *La Traviata* at the Teatro Facchinetti in Vercelli. On 4 February 1909, Schipa made his debut in difficult circumstances—the Vercellesi were notorious for showering singers with chewed pumpkin seeds. Thrust into an ill-fitting costume, Schipa was sent out onto the stage to contend with an undermanned orchestra and an overweight soprano. Schipa later recalled he was “overwhelmed by . . . a great wave of abundant fleshly charms” when the enormous Violetta swept him up in her arms during “Amami, Alfredo!” From the gallery cried out a voice, “Mind you,

don't hurt the poor little thing!" More unintended humor ensued in the gambling scene after the wardrobe mistress forgot to put the bundle of banknotes in Schipa's pocket. In a panic, he extricated a coin from his pants and threw it at Violetta. "Well—*she* didn't cost you much!" cried out another galleryite.

That difficult debut was followed by more Alfredos in Sebenico and Savona. By the end of 1909, Schipa was singing *Adriana Lecouvreur* and *Zazà* in Crema. He quickly added *Mignon*, *Rigoletto*, *Faust*, *La Bohème*, *Don Pasquale* and *Il Barbiere di Siviglia* to his repertory while touring the Italian provinces in Giuseppe Borboni's company. By the middle of 1911, Schipa was already singing Werther, the role destined to become his signature piece. At the same time, he was performing Loris Ipanov and Turiddu, verismo roles that must have tested his *leggiero* voice.

Massenet's opera helped introduce the young tenor to the audiences at Rome's Teatro Quirino in 1911 during the Universal Exhibition celebrating the fiftieth anniversary of the reunification of Italy. In 1913, Schipa made his South American debut at the Teatro Colón in performances of *La Sonnambula*, *Mignon* and *La Traviata* with Maria Barrientos. At the end of the year, Schipa moved up another rung when he sang in *Falstaff* under Leopoldo Mugnone at the Teatro San Carlo in Naples. *Tosca*, *Fedora*, *Madama Butterfly* and *Marcella* rounded out his three-month engagement in Naples. During 1914, Schipa returned to South America. A coveted contract from La Scala followed a year later.

By this time, Schipa was already beginning to leave behind *verismo* operas to concentrate on the lyrical roles that became the focus of his operatic career in the next three decades. Before his Scala debut, he appeared in two productions at the Teatro Dal Verme under Arturo Toscanini: *Falstaff* with Maria Farneti and Giacomo Rimini and *La Traviata* with Rosina Storchio. Schipa's only appearances with Toscanini formed a prelude to his Scala debut on 26 December 1915 in *Prince Igor*, under Gino Marinuzzi. He showed off his lyrical talent to finer effect two months later in *Manon*. Schipa later recalled he achieved a success of "alarming proportions" as des Grieux. *Manon* also provided his entree to the Teatro del Liceo in Barcelona and the Real in Madrid. Spanish newspapers quickly proclaimed "a divo is born" and noted people were demanding "bread and . . . Schipa." The young tenor left Spain with a new sobriquet: *El Encantador* ("The Enchanter").

A highlight of Schipa's career came in 1917 when Puccini invited him to create the role of Ruggero in the world premiere of *La Rondine* in Monte Carlo with Gilda dalla Rizza. Monte Carlo also introduced Schipa to Antoinette Michel d'Ogoy, a popular entertainer who became his wife. Like most tenors' wives, Lilli Schipa kept a jealous eye on her roving husband. His infidelities finally became too much for her to bear. The troubled marriage eventually dissolved in bitter recriminations after the birth of their daughters.

Schipa's ascent to stardom was capped in 1919 with an invitation from Cleofonte Campanini to join the Chicago Opera. Barely ten years after his debut, Schipa launched his American career in a performance of *Rigoletto* with Galli-Curci, Claessens, Galeffi and Cotreuil. In addition to the Duke, he sang Elvino, Almaviva and Ernesto—all with Galli-Curci—during his first

season in Chicago. A day after his 4 December debut, Maurice Rosenfeld of the *Chicago News* called Schipa “that rare and precious ornament of grand opera—the true *tenore leggero*” and added, “His tone production and direction were admirable and his *mezza voce* and *diminuendi* . . . surpass those of any tenor the Chicago company has boasted for many years.” Summing up, Rosenfeld noted that Schipa had achieved “the most single and spontaneous success of the current grand opera season.”

Two months after his Chicago debut, Schipa traveled with the company to New York for performances of *La Sonnambula*, *Falstaff*, *Rigoletto* and *La Traviata*. One New York critic praised his “young and boyishly ardent” Elvino, and the critic for the *New York Telegraph* called Schipa’s debut “the surprise and chief joy of the performance.” That winter, Schipa also began his American recital career with debuts at Carnegie Hall and Boston’s Symphony Hall. These performances marked the beginning of what Schipa’s son later called “the golden decade.”

From 1919 to 1929, Schipa focused his career in America. Between operatic appearances in Chicago, New York and San Francisco, he embarked on long, cross-country tours that lasted for months and took him to as many as forty cities. During this time, the tenor became a huge celebrity and one of the highest-paid artists in the U.S. Living lavishly in a villa in Santa Monica and an estate in Beverly Hills, he frequented parties with Mary Pickford, Douglas Fairbanks, Greta Garbo and Charlie Chaplin. A return to Italy brought Schipa back to Rome in 1928 and to La Scala a year later for *L’Elisir d’Amore* and *Don Giovanni*. In his forties, Schipa embarked on a film career that brought him even greater fame. After making some shorts for Paramount in 1929, Schipa appeared in a string of feature films that included *I Sing For You Alone* and *Vivere!* At the same time, he continued his recital tours around the world and made carefully chosen operatic appearances in his core repertory.

Everyone loved Schipa. And why not? During the heyday of his career, American newspapers were filled with photos of the diminutive tenor posing in a huge sombrero next to cowboy star Tom Mix or striking a comically combative attitude with prize fighter Primo Carnera, who towers over the tenor. Magazines printed images of Tito giving a singing lesson to his pet monkey, Toto. Fascinated by animals, Schipa often traveled with a menagerie of pets. *Musical America* reported the tenor arrived in Chicago with a live snake in his pocket as a mascot. During his long career, Schipa made and lost countless fortunes. He spent money carelessly and constantly found himself holding a worthless investment. At one point, he became the owner of 45,000 automobile heaters after the Continental Automotive Corporation of Chicago defaulted on a loan.

So much charm radiated from everything Schipa did, the public was prepared to forgive his foibles. He created a stir during an Australian tour in 1937 when he defied a ban and ended his recitals with the Fascist salute. Schipa offended his American fans in 1941 when he breached his contracts to return to Italy at the request of Mussolini’s son-in-law. Schipa performed for the Fascists in Italy and also sang in Nazi Germany. But when he returned to the U.S. after the war, he encountered none of the hostile demonstrations and vituperative press attacks that beset Kirsten Flagstad when she resumed her American career.

Italian vocal authority Rodolfo Celletti calls the years from 1920 to 1935 Schipa's "best period." During those years, the tenor made the RCA and HMV records that have insured his fame. Less well known are the earlier acoustic recordings he made for the Gramophone Company and Pathé in Milan and New York between 1913 and 1921. Gathered together for the first time on this double-CD set, these recordings show a young artist exulting in his voice, taking risks and singing with a passion that was to abate with maturity.

These early recordings bear most of the hallmarks of Schipa's artistry: the elegant phrasing, the clear diction and the ingratiating interpretive style. The acoustics catch his voice in the fresh flush of youth. Some tones tend to be throaty and husky—especially in the lower reaches—but most float magically on the breath. Later, Schipa may have found an even wider array of vocal colors but he already knew how to refine his voice to haunting effect and, of course, he could execute the delicate *diminuendi* that became the trademark of his vocal art. Schipa shows himself to be a master vocal craftsman as he shapes a flowing legato informed with constantly shifting dynamic contours and expressive rhythmic expansions and contractions. The acoustics also document Schipa's shortcomings. To avoid the high Cs, he transposes down a semi-tone the arias from *Faust* and *La Bohème*. The short top was there from the beginning. So was the lack of a flawless florid technique. "Ecco ridente," bluntly phrased, shows Schipa can neither trill nor toss off *fioriture* with the technical mastery of a genuine vocal virtuoso.

Schipa's first recording, the recitative and aria from *Manon*, reveals his indelible artistry. With one phrase, we recognize at once a distinctive vocal personality—not merely through the sound of the voice, appropriately plaintive and reflective, but through the deeply personal and affecting style. Schipa makes the scene his own as he charts the emotional progress of the music with sensitive dynamic shadings (not always Massenet's). Sustained tones at the ends of phrases shimmer like colors reflected in a prism.

No selection shows off Schipa's artistry better than the Duke's second-act recitative and aria in *Rigoletto*. Schipa molds the recitative elegantly. Shading the tone and stretching the rhythm magically, he conveys the Duke's blandishing charm and suggests, as well, his aristocratic bearing. At the repetition of "Ella mi fu rapita," he sings with surprising passion before refining his voice into an ingratiating thread of sound. A magical attack, a delicate rhythmic lilt and an immaculate legato inform his graceful singing of "Parmi veder le lagrime."

The Duke became one of Schipa's great roles. He never sang Enzo, but his recording of "Cielo e mar"—despite a massive cut—is exquisite. Schipa's voice floats into the night air, catching the enraptured mood of Ponchielli's music. And he sustains the climax without flinching. Elsewhere, he does not. Milio's brief outburst from the last act of *Zazà* tests his voice to the limits, revealing a tightness on top and a lack of support on bottom. But how ardently and persuasively the young Schipa sings! Turiddu must have tested Schipa, too—he gave up the role quickly. But the offstage serenade catches his liquid style to perfection. Schipa suffuses his voice with an ardent energy that suddenly dissolves into a sensual *mezza voce*. At the end, he shades the repetitions of "Ah!" exquisitely.

Schipa sang Cavaradossi twenty-one times in Naples in early 1914. In the third act, he invariably stirred audiences to vociferous demonstrations as they demanded an encore of the aria. One night, Leopoldo Mugnone added his voice to the cries for a *bis*, “Not for them. . . for me,” pleaded the maestro. Both the Gramophone and Pathé versions of “E luceven le stelle” document, in contrasting ways, how Schipa spun out the phrase “disciogliea dai veli.”

The Pathés also show Schipa’s inimitable way with light music. He achieves miraculous gradations of tone in “Ay, ay, ay” and “Granadinas.” Schipa teases the rhythm and indulges in disembodied head tones without blurring the contours or dimming the spirit of these popular songs. The infinitely varied melismas in “Granadinas” remain unsurpassed for their bewitching lightness and delicacy. Then, in “Chi se nne scorda cchiù,” Schipa sings with an irresistible combination of plebeian verve and patrician elegance. His tangy tone adds further expression to Barthélemey’s jaunty song. The Pathé “Ave Maria” reminds us that Schipa was a composer as well as a singer. He wrote songs, sacred works and an operetta which he even conducted.

Schipa’s recordings remain a text book for any tenor willing to study and learn. They provided a kind of vocal Bible for Carlo Bergonzi during his transition from baritone to tenor. Schipa’s imprint can be heard in Bergonzi’s supple phrasing, exquisite tonal shading and pliant rubato. Bergonzi learned from Schipa’s recordings how a great artist can make much out of little. The lesson is still there for any tenor willing to learn.

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## TRACK LISTING

CD 1 (66.51)

### **Gramophone, Milano, 1913**

Accompanied by orchestra with Carlo Sabajno, conductor

1. MANON: **Io son sol... Ah, dispar vision {Je suis seul... Ah, fuyez, douce image}** (Massenet) 4:12  
*10 November 1913; (722aj) 052421*
2. LA GIOCONDA: **Cielo e mar** (Ponchielli) 2:39  
*12 November 1913; (2893ah) 252130*
3. LUCIA DI LAMMERMOOR: **Tu che a Dio spiegasti l'ali** (Donizetti) 2:30  
*12 November 1913; (2894ah) 252142*
4. TOSCA: **Recondita armonia** (Puccini) 2:42  
*12 November 1913; (2895ah) 252133*
5. TOSCA: **E lucevan le stelle** (Puccini) 2:39  
*12 November 1913; (2896ah) 252134*
6. LA BOHÈME: **Che gelida manina** (Puccini) 4:25  
*14 November 1913; (731aj) 052422*  
*Transposed down a semi-tone to G*
7. LA TRAVIATA: **Un dì felice, eterea** (Verdi)  
with Nina Garelli, soprano 3:12  
*14 November 1913; (2900ah) 254060*
8. RIGOLETTO: **Ella mi fu rapita... Parmi veder le lagrime** (Verdi) 5:22  
*14 November 1913; (2901/2ah) 252143/4*
9. CAVALLERIA RUSTICANA: **O Lola ch'ai di latti la cammisa [Siciliana]**  
(Mascagni) 3:19  
*14 November 1913; (2903ah) 252127*
10. LA TRAVIATA: **Libiamo, libiamo** (Verdi)  
with Nina Garelli, soprano 3:08  
*15 November 1913; (2904ah) 254059*
11. CAVALLERIA RUSTICANA: **Intanto, amici, quà... Viva il vino [Brindisi]**  
(Mascagni) 2:49  
*21 November 1913; (2907ah) 252128*
12. FAUST: **Salve dimora {Salut! demeure chaste et pure}** (Gounod) 3:05  
*26 November 1913; (2916ah) 252147*  
*Transposed down a semitone to G*

### **Pathé, Milano, 1916**

13. TOSCA: **O dolci mani** (Puccini) 2:45  
*(86557) 10242*
14. ZAZÀ: **Ed ora io mi domando** (Leoncavallo) 2:26  
*(86559) 10241*
15. L'ARLESIANA: **C'è nel sonno l'oblio [Lamento di Federico]** (Cilea) 3:11  
*(86561) 10243*
16. IL BARBIERE DI SIVIGLIA: **Ecco ridente in cielo** (Rossini) 5:08  
*(86562/4) 10244*
17. TOSCA: **Amaro sol per te... E non giungono... Trionfal di nuova speme**  
(Puccini)  
with Giuseppina Baldassare-Tedeschi, soprano 4:55  
*(86563/5) 12554*
18. I PAGLIACCI: **O Colombina** (Leoncavallo) 1:50  
*(86566) 10241*
19. MANON: **Chiudo gli occhi {En fermant les yeux}** (Massenet) 2:41  
*(86567) 10243*
20. RIGOLETTO: **Questa o quella** (Verdi) 2:15  
*(86568) 10242*

All tracks accompanied by orchestra

Languages: Italian [1-8 and 10-21] and Sicilian dialect [9]

CD 2 (73:17)

**Pathé, Milano, 1919**

1. LA BOHÈME: **Che gelida manina** (Puccini) 3:52  
(80841) 10314 / *Transposed down a semi-tone to G*
2. TOSCA: **Recondita armonia** (Puccini) 2:23  
(80842) 10315
3. TOSCA: **E lucevan le stelle** (Puccini) 2:42  
(80843) 10315
4. RIGOLETTO: **La donna è mobile** (Verdi) 2:17  
(80845) 10316
5. CAVALLERIA RUSTICANA: **O Lola ch'ai di latti cammisa [Siciliana]** (Mascagni) 2:22  
(80846) 10314
6. GUYANA: **Ay, ay, ay {A sóma te a la ventana}** (traditional; arr. Perez-Freire) 3:28  
(80847) 13090
7. EMIGRANTES: **Granadinas** (Calleja & Barrera; words by Cases) 2:34  
(80848) (U.S. release only) 54041
8. **Pesca d'ammore** (Barthélemy; words by Bracco) 2:06  
(80851) 13081
9. **Chi se nne scorda cchiù** (Barthélemy; words by Marvasi) 1:55  
(80852) 13081
10. **Amarilli mia bella** (G.Caccini; words by Guarini) 2:41  
(80853) 13082
11. **Panis Angelicus** (Franck) 3:13  
(80854) 13083
12. **Agnus Dei** (Bizet) 3:03  
(80855) 13082
13. **Ave Maria** (Schipa) 3:30  
(80856) 13083
14. La Bruja: **Jota** (Chapí) 3:06  
(80859) 13080
15. LA CORTE DEL AMOR: **La de ojos azules [Princesita/Mariposa]** (Padilla; words by Palomero) 2:55  
(85960) 13080

**Pathé, New York, 1921**

16. LA TRAVIATA: **Lunge da lie per me... De' miei bollenti spiriti** (Verdi) 3:41  
(E-68256) 54045
17. **Cuando te aai la faace** (traditional) 3:45  
(E-68356) unpublished
18. **Bella ragazza delle trecce bionde** (traditional) 3:39  
(E-68357) unpublished
19. **Somewhere a Voice is Calling** (Tate; words by Newton) 2:49  
(E-68381) 54047
20. LA SONNAMBULA: **Prendi, l'anel ti dono** (Bellini) 2:42  
(E-68382) 54052
21. DON PASQUALE: **Povero Ernesto!... Cercherò lontana** (Donizetti) 3:30  
(E-68383) 54046
22. FALSTAFF: **Dal labbro il canto estasiato** (Verdi) 3:20  
(E-68384) 54060
23. **Santa Lucia** (Cottrau; words by Cossovich) 3:21  
(E-68385) 54049
24. **Marechiere** (Tosti; words by di Giacomo) 2:36  
(E-68386) 54051

Tracks 1-5, 16 and 19-24 accompanied by orchestra Tracks 6-15, 17-18 accompanied by piano

Languages: Italian [1-4, 10, 16, 18 and 20-24]; Sicilian dialect [5]; Spanish [6-7 and 14-15]; Neapolitan dialect [8-9]; Latin [11-13]; Leccese dialect [17] and English [19]

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