

Rosa Raisa

THE COMPLETE RECORDINGS

Rosa Raisa The Complete Recordings

LINER NOTES

ROSA RAISA (23 May 1893 - 28 September 1963) A PERSONAL APPRAISAL

The Chicago Tribune's astute and powerful critic Claudia Cassidy effused: "Raisa's voice was a royal purple dramatic soprano shot with gold and fire, and if you ever heard it on a great night you know that isn't fancy writing, but a reasonable description of the improbable come true."

Having read similar paeans by Cassidy over the years and being predisposed to believe them, I wrote to her in 1968, asking to reconcile the esteem in which she held Raisa with her recordings. She replied, "Yes, Raisa was that good. Records never fully captured her voice, not the records of those days. But it was a huge voice of wonderful warmth and color, and it belonged to the most warmhearted woman. No doubt one of the reasons for the lavish language is that it was impossible to hear her in opera without being emotionally stirred. She was generosity itself, on and off the stage, and her voice and presence shared the color and opulence of the great roles. The great ones are unique, of course. I have heard no voice like hers, but in its own way Rosa Ponselle's voice in its prime shared some of the darkness and depth. Raisa's voice struck straight at two vulnerable places: the spinal column and the heart."

I asked *Washington Post* critic Paul Hume in 1961 for clarification of his printed opinion that Raisa's was the greatest voice he had ever heard, as I was beginning what was to be a lifelong interest in Raisa's story and had heard similar estimates from opera-goers of the teens and twenties, but again couldn't reconcile those tributes with the recordings. He told me about the first time he heard her in a 1934 Chicago *Turandot* where she sang the most glorious high C, obliterating the tenor, chorus, and orchestra, and Hume elaborated: "the sound was superb in quality, utterly unforced.... One reason her high C, which she never abused, was so supreme a tone was that she had in her voice a high D of easy quality. She used it in *Norma*, and in *La Juive*, which was something no one else ever suggested as she did." He then described one of her very last performances in 1936—a Chicago *La Juive*: In the aria "Il va venir!": Raisa darkened the quality of her voice, which from her records you can tell is a velvety thing anyway until it was nearly as black as midnight.....in the second act, when the Princess Eudoxia has her big scene all full of coloratura, running up to the high D, Raisa would let the light shine back in her voice in order to match the lighter voice's brilliance....so when the two sopranos started up their fast scales to the top D, Raisa just sort of let out her girdle a little and after that you simply did not hear Miss D. C. (Vivian Della Chiesa). But the great moment that night came in act three in the duet with Martinelli...one has a phrase, then the other has it, and finally they do it together. Martinelli began it, then Raisa came in for her part, and cut the time almost in half, slowing it down so that the top would roll out. It was the kind of thing that just picked the house up and shook it all the way through.."

In summary Hume said: "I can easily hear Raisa's voice in my mind by merely recalling any one of a number of phrases—the peak phrase from "In questa reggia," her fabulous HMV recording of "La mamma morta," with all of its vocal problems—have you ever heard any other crescendo in the middle of a note like hers there? (Referring to *voce piena d'armoni*)... She was, and is, a glorious woman, and an artist whose equal I have never seen or heard remotely approached since she stopped, which was not until 1938."

It is unlikely that Raisa's humble origins in a Polish ghetto would make her a candidate for world operatic glory. Her story oft told in its day even now has the appeal of one transcending barriers in her rise to stardom. Fleeing the 1907 Bialystok pogroms and settling in Italy, her potential being discovered by a wealthy family sponsoring her at Naples's San Pietro a Majella, studying with the nineteenth century legendary Barbara

Marchisio (also at that time the teacher of Toti dal Monte), being introduced to Eva Tétrazzini and Cleofonte Campanini early in her rise, making her operatic debut at Parma as Raisa Burchstein 6 September 1913 in the Verdi Centenary *Oberto*, being immediately taken by Campanini to his Chicago Opera and renamed Rosa Raisa, and achieving instant success in Chicago, Philadelphia and on its national tour, her rising to operatic fame has a surreal quality.

Regarding the recordings, one can only speculate what the results might have been if the 1918 Vocalion vertical-cut recordings, which best capture her vocal resource, and the 1933 HMVs her dramatic delivery, had been combined. The 1920-1924 lateral-cut Vocalions made in her prime are so inadequately recorded that one 'sees' only a blueprint lacking in textures and overtones. Although clearly not having one of her best days, she was able on the reasonably forward and unrushed HMVs to reveal her melodramatic and lachrymose style. Crying was Raisa's vocal signature: tears giving utterance to the desperation of her heroines. Raisa sings her encore piece, the Yiddish "Eili Eili," plaintively at the start, but at the end she cries out the Hebrew credo, "Sh'ma Yisroel" with stirring emotion.

Raisa herself told me in a 1962 letter that "your collection of my recordings I don't have—because I would listen to them, and then break them into pieces—They never showed the volume of my voice—just a faint remembrance of how I sounded on the stage—in my days recording was much more difficult than it is today." It is true that very large and brilliant voices have always been difficult to capture on record, and even to this day many feel that a clarion voice like Birgit Nilsson's has never been revealed on recordings as it thrilled in the opera house.

Being neither successful in the recording studio nor under contract to the superior New York based Victor or Columbia companies means Raisa's discography lacks arias and ensembles from her roles in *Turandot*, *La Juive*, *La Fanciulla del West*, *Suor Angelica*, *Un Ballo in Maschera*, *Nerone*, *La Battaglia di Legnano*, *Francesca da Rimini*, *Falstaff*, *Don Giovanni*, *Lohengrin*, *Tannhäuser*, *Les Huguenots*, *Lo Schiavo*, *Isabeau*, *La Nave*, *Die Fledermaus*, *La Fiamma*, *The Dybbuk*, and concert warhorses: "Inflammatius" from the Rossini *Stabat Mater*, Lisa's aria from *Pique Dame*, Rachmaninov songs, and the *Luisa Miller* and *Don Pasquale* duets with which she and husband Giacomo Rimini closed many a concert. Rumor is that the Scala *Turandot* premiere was recorded, but that owing to mislabeling the masters were inadvertently destroyed at Hayes.

Raisa is often identified simply as the creator of *Turandot*. To most that would indicate an iron voice and a soaring upper register, but not well known is that Raisa was Puccini's first choice to create Magda in *La Rondine*, which was planned for Monte Carlo in early 1917. Hearing her at La Scala in 1916 as a twenty-three year old sensation, he was eager to cast her in his next opera. We think of Magda as a lyric role, worlds apart from the demands of *Turandot*. My guess is that in 1916 Puccini focused on Raisa's youth and charm rather than pure vocal suitability. Toscanini, hearing the same 1916 La Scala performances (*Aida*, *Francesca da Rimini* and *La Battaglia di Legnano*), thought Raisa a "female Tamagno." In April 1924 Puccini again heard Raisa, this time in a rehearsal of Boito's *Nerone*, and offered her *Turandot*. Advised that the opera was not yet finished, with the final duet still to be penned, Raisa was quoted suggesting to Puccini that he "be sure to put in plenty of high Cs."

Had Raisa risked crossing the already dangerous Atlantic for the *Rondine* premiere in 1917 her career might well have taken a different turn. She remained in America and was to make her big career at the Chicago Opera as its leading dramatic soprano, performing in the fifteen week Chicago seasons and the long transcontinental tours. Raisa and Mary Garden were the pillars of that great company, helping to define its artistic profile. Galli-Curci and Muzio had equally important but fewer Chicago seasons. Raisa over twenty-four years participated in twenty-one seasons, singing 275 performances in Chicago and 235 on the tours. Of the stars, only Mary Garden achieved similar numbers. It was inevitable when the new opera house was inaugurated in 1929 that opening night honors would go to Raisa in *Aida*.

Raisa's heavy workload at the Chicago Opera often involved singing three and sometimes four times a week. In 1919 she sang nine *Aidas* and one *Amelia* in *Ballo* (replacing an indisposed Emma Destinnova) in a twenty day span in nine different cities from Milwaukee to Houston. In the 1928-29 season, the last in the old Auditorium, both Raisa and Muzio were absent; Raisa remaining in Italy near death with pregnancy complications, and Muzio taking leave to tend to family illness. To fill this void Chicago's management prevailed on the Berlin Staatsoper to release Frida Leider a year earlier than had been planned; moreover, Eva Turner was engaged for heavy roles. Raisa rallied from her illness and returned in a blaze of glory for a new production of *Norma* on New Year's Eve with Coe Glade, Charles Marshall, and Virgilio Lazzari; Giorgio Polacco conducting. The unpublished Brunswick *Norma* "Ah, bello a me ritorna" dates from this period.

Although Chicago Opera was the centerpiece of her career, Raisa had seven important seasons in South America and Mexico between 1915 and 1929 as well as several in Italy. She was especially proud of her three Toscanini Scala seasons 1924–1926; honored with two world premieres (*Nerone* and *Turandot*) and a new production of *Il Trovatore*, last heard there in 1902. In all three instances La Scala scheduled these late in their season, thus enabling Raisa to honor Chicago Opera and tour commitments before sailing to Italy.

An intriguing engagement taken by Raisa and Rimini was the October 1933 two week *stagione* in Berlin with a troupe of top Italian artists including Dal Monte, Giannina Arangi-Lombardi, Ebe Stignani, Beniamino Gigli, and Cesare Formichi, under the baton of Ettore Panizza. Impolitic as it was for Raisa to sing in 1933 Germany, it was even more ironic that Hitler, Goebbels, and Hess sat in a loge for the 13 October *Tosca* with its non-Aryan protagonist; probably the Nazi leaders were unaware of Raisa's biography and were in attendance to hear the Berlin favorite, Gigli.

Raisa's vocal power was frequently noted by critics throughout her career. There is the oft-repeated quote from Edward Moore's *Forty Years of Opera in Chicago*: "Oh, you think I sing loud here? You ought to hear me in South America where they really like loud singing!" The late eminent American opera historian Charles Jahant told me that the four loudest female voices he ever heard in person were Raisa, Eva Turner, Caterina Mancini, and Suzanne Juyol. He made clear that he was referring only to voices that "pinned my ears back." When asked about Flagstad he paused, adding a special category of volume allied with a depth of sound that was qualitatively different and ultimately rarer.

Raisa brought her *Norma* to New York City in 1920. The critics were divided in their reactions; some thought she was simply mesmerizing, but Herbert Peyser writing in *Musical America* best summed up the old guard's frustration, saying:

In the singing of Rosa Raisa were paired splendor and crudity, rudeness and exaltation.....Of what superb metal is this voice! Of what marvelous expressiveness, both accomplished and illimitable potential! Of what marvelous bel canto possibilities, if she will tutor herself to the eradication of the faults and curb somewhat the conflagration of her temperament! Such moments of incredible magnificence as the final appeal to Orovoso—an outpouring of golden tonal fire, vibrant with an emotion beyond the reach of words—almost earned pardon for prior flaws. These were far from slight! Not only was the evenness of her scale marred by a decided cleavage between her middle and upper registers, but she showed herself addicted to a deplorably persistent coup de glotte and a disconcerting nasal resonance. Reediness and crudity of tone, violence of attack, and an absence of smooth legato in tracing the contours of Bellini's exquisitely molded phrases were, together with waverings from pitch, faults that returned ever and anon to plague the admirer of a miraculous vocal organ.

Sopranos assuming the supreme role of *Norma*, more than almost any other in the repertory, evoke the strongest reaction from opera lovers and critics. Everyone, it seems, has opinions as to the caliber of voice required and who even has a right to attempt it. New York critics were no exception, embracing with skepticism great reputations made elsewhere. For most of them, Lilli Lehmann's *Norma*, last heard at the Met over a quarter century before and sung with finish and authority, remained the standard. Ponselle's *Norma* was still seven years in the future. Ponselle attended Raisa's *Norma* and later told friends she felt she herself couldn't handle the role, saying "I never heard so much coloratura for a dramatic soprano—and so many high Cs!" The rest is history. Critic Cecil Smith, in a 1952 essay in *Opera* magazine in anticipation of the approaching Callas debut in London, compared the five *Normas* of his experience (Raisa, Ponselle, Milanov, Cigna, and Muzio— He had heard all in person except Muzio whose *Norma* he felt he could reconstruct from his familiarity with her in other roles), saying "Raisa...took a showman's attitude, using the music to display the spectacular flexibility and freedom of her voice. Her ebullience was exciting, but she was on the whole indiscriminating both musically and dramatically, although her characterization was well conceived in its externals."

Carol Perrenot Longone, her frequent concert accompanist in the twenties and thirties, told me that to her thinking Raisa's was essentially a Semitic voice, if there be such a thing; the melancholic wail inherent in the sound set it apart from usual notions of Italian and Slavic dramatic sopranos. Longone's opinion was that Raisa was a great artist who sang with thrilling power and strong rhythmic accents, and although on occasion musically imprecise, overall she exhibited a phenomenal voice and magnetic presence.

Not generally known today was that from 1926 to 1932 Chicago Opera performances were broadcast nationwide each week for an hour. To the best of my knowledge none of these tantalizing fragments has ever surfaced. In addition to Raisa's big roles (*Aida*—three times, *Gioconda*, *Norma*, *Rachel* in *La Juive* twice, *Maliella* in *I Gioielli della Madonna*, *Amelia* in *Ballo*, and *Santuzza*) there were several broadcasts featuring Claudia Muzio,

Mary Garden, Edith Mason, Frida Leider, Eva Turner, Alexander Kipnis, Tito Schipa, Vanni-Marcoux, and Antonio Cortis.

In a 25 November 1926 newspaper account of the new broadcasting technology there is an elaborate description of the control panel, with twenty odd indicators, one for each microphone, having to be constantly monitored to avoid overload. Sitting next to the sound engineer is a musician with a score ready to alert about potential pressure points. "Once Mme. Raisa (Gioconda) caught them with an unexpected one which shot the indicator up to sixty, but sixty could be taken, though that is the limit."

A partial list of announced Raisa Chicago Opera projects that never materialized would include: Donizetti's *Linda di Chamounix*, Pacini's *Saffo*, Mascagni's *Le Maschere* and *Tasca's A Santa Lucia*. In 1919 Campanini tried to secure the first performance rights to Strauss's *Frau Ohne Schatten*, planning to cast Raisa as the Empress and Mary Garden as Barak's Wife. *Semiramide* and *Lucrezia Borgia* were often mentioned as future undertakings. Toscanini asked her for *Norma* and *La Wally* at La Scala for his 1921-22 inaugural season. Widely reported was a planned study of the Brunnhildes and Isolde with Lilli Lehmann in Salzburg summer of 1923. *Carmen* and *Fidelio* were announced as future ventures. These plans reveal much about what directors and conductors thought was the breadth of Raisa's artistic and vocal range.

Raisa's artistic credo and deepest internal need was simply to thrill the public. She had the elements that make for easy audience popularity: a huge warm voice capped by ringing high notes, formidable technique that included rare coloratura abilities, the dynamics of soft singing, and a rare personal beauty coupled with superior stage skills.

As Raisa loved to dip into chest voice and hurl out easy top notes, the flaw in so wide-ranging a voice was an inconsistent and occasionally underpowered and undercolored middle register and a yodel-like sound when shifting from head to chest voice. In avoiding the cardinal sin of wobble we hear adjustments, including the '*coup de glotte*,' obviously made to strengthen and smooth out the middle voice in a manner similar to Montserrat Caballe in our day. Reliance on this device leads to occasional jerky phrasing and breaking of the musical line. Stylistically there are many interesting things in Raisa's singing. In the 1920

Norma recording, with all its faults, she sings a piano b-flat at *quella pace, che regnar*, called the Pasta variation. In both "Casta Divas" (1917 and 1920) she ends the cavatina with a full-voiced trill, not very pretty, but also a nineteenth century ornament probably taught her by Marchesio (Patti and Sembrich also take this trill in their recordings). Her cadenzas in the *Trovatore* aria are probably throwbacks to an earlier era. Often noted was Raisa's instrumental approach: the voice was used as if it were a cello, with an even, supple tone enveloping the music and with less emphasis on diction. For someone who was considered a fine vocal actress the lack of biting diction is puzzling. Even with all the faults cited, there are many attractive elements in Raisa's records: a stunning voice, temperament, and a huge technique. Still, we want the recordings to better match the legendary enthusiasm she aroused in her public, just as critics in her day would pick around the edges, hoping for the perfection that eluded her.

Raisa's dates spanning a debut at age nineteen (Concerts in Rome—1912) and retirement at age forty-five (1938 Grant Park concert, Chicago) make her career seem short by today's standards. Although trained by one of the great singers of the nineteenth century, even with her formidable technique she could not sustain a repertory of the heaviest roles sung in that opulent and generous personal style of hers without increasing vocal problems. Singers as young as Raisa starting careers in heavy roles were not uncommon in her era, and retiring after a quarter of a century did not make a career look less fine. But as we know of so many artists, who, throughout history, sang into their sixties, we question such an early exit. Had Raisa sung even into her early fifties, it is probable we would have better off-the-air examples of her in-person performance style, and even allowing for advancing age, we just might divine the dimension of a voice and art that can be surmised only from recorded and career evidence. Although longevity is not an absolute virtue, there can be no argument that Raisa's thousand operatic performances and hundreds of concerts, as well as the esteem in which she was held by composers, conductors, and colleagues, are testimony to her singular attainments and greatness. She remains one of the most fascinating personalities of an era often thought of as a 'golden age'.

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TRACK LISTING

CD 1 (76:30)

PATHÉ PAPER-LABEL DISCS
New York -1917

1. ANDREA CHENIER: **La mamma morta** (Giordano) 3:32
(66077) 60062
2. AIDA: **O patria mia** (Verdi) 3:24
(66086) 60070
3. L'AFRICANA: **In grembo a me** (Meyerbeer) 3:29
(66087) 60055
4. AIDA: **Ritorna vincitor** (Verdi) 3:58
(66128) 60054
5. NORMA: **Casta Diva....Ah, bello a me ritorna** (Bellini) 3:27
(66149) 60055
6. **Capelli d'oro** (Stornello) 2:19
(66223) 60062
7. IL TROVATORE: **D'amor sull'ali rosee** (Verdi) 3:04
(66257) 60070
8. CAVALLERIA RUSTICANA: **Voi lo sapete** (Mascagni) 3:38
(matrix number unknown) 60054

AEOLIAN VOCALION: Hill & Dale Recordings
New York -1918

9. CAVALLERIA RUSTICANA: **Voi lo sapete** (Mascagni) 3:49
(A667) 30010
10. CAVALLERIA RUSTICANA: **Voi lo sapete** (Mascagni) 3:47
(A668) 30010
11. IL TROVATORE: **Timor di me...D'amor sull 'ali rosee** (Verdi) 5:07
(A669) 54007
12. **Eili, Eili** (Traditional; arranged by Josef Bonime) 3:08
(A692) 30011
13. LA GIOCONDA: **Suicidio** (Ponchielli) 4:07
(1855) 54027

VOCALION: Lateral Recordings
New York- 1920-1923

14. **Eili, Eili** (Traditional; arranged by Josef Bonime) 2:53
(5505) 30101
15. NORMA: **Casta diva** (Bellini) 4:13
(5508) 55001
17. I VESPRI SICILIANI: **Mercè, dilette amiche {Bolero}** (Verdi) 3:24
(5781) 30115
18. I VESPRI SICILIANI: **Mercè, dilette amiche {Bolero}** (Verdi) 3:22
(5782) 30115
19. DON GIOVANNI: **Là ci darem la mano** (Mozart) 3:14
with Giacomo Rimini, baritone
(5810) 30108
20. DON GIOVANNI: **Là ci darem la mano** (Mozart) 3:17
with Giacomo Rimini, baritone
(5811) 30108
21. IL TROVATORE: **Miserere** (Verdi) 3:51
with Giulio Crimi, tenor
(5813) 55007
22. LA GIOCONDA: **Suicidio** (Ponchielli) 4:06
(5850) 70034

CD 2 (76:02)

1. **Kalinka** (Russian Folk Song) 2:17
(7033) 30160
2. **Night** (Russian Folk Song) 2:53
(7039) 30165
3. **None But the Lonely Heart** (Tchaikovsky) 3:03
(7093) 30134
4. OTELLO: **Ave Maria** (Verdi) 3:46
(7098) 52007

- (7098) 52007
5. AIDA: **La fatal pietra** (Verdi) 4:19
with Giulio Crimi, tenor
 (7104) 52023
 6. AIDA: **O terra addio** (Verdi) 4:19
with Giulio Crimi, tenor
 (7106) 52043
 7. **Le Crucifix** (Jean-Baptiste Faure) 3:13
with Giacomo Rimini, baritone
 (7143) 52031
 8. LA FORZA DEL DESTINO: **Pace, pace, mio dio** (Verdi) 4:30
 (7163) 52013
 9. LA FORZA DEL DESTINO: **Pace, pace, mio dio** (Verdi) 4:03
 (7164) 52013
 10. TOSCA: **Vissi d'arte** (Puccini) 2:48
 (8636) 30155
 11. TOSCA: **Vissi d'arte** (Puccini) 2:46
 (8637) 30155
 12. CAVALLERIA RUSTICANA: **Voi lo sapete** (Mascagni) 3:43
 (10984) 52048
 13. **La paloma** (Yradier) 4:13
 (10996) 52051
 14. AIDA: **Ritorna vincitor** (Verdi) 4:26
 (11511) 70007
 15. AIDA: **O patria mia** (Verdi) 4:17
 (11035) 70007
 16. IL TROVATORE: **Miserere** (Verdi) 4:09
with Armand Tokatyan, tenor
 (11189) 55010
 17. IL TROVATORE: **Mira d'acerbe lagrime** (Verdi) 3:43
with Giacomo Rimini, baritone
 (11095) 70039
 18. MEFISTOFELE: **L'altra notte** (Boito) 4:00
 (11157) 70036
 19. MADAMA BUTTERFLY: **Un bel dì vedremo** (Puccini) 4:02
 (11190) 70036
 20. ERNANI: **Surta è la notte..Ernani! Ernani, involami** (Verdi) 4:20
 (11192) 70039

All tracks are recorded with orchestral accompaniment

Tracks 12,14,15, and 17-20 accompanied by orchestra conducted by Gennaro Papi
 Languages: Italian [4-6, 8-12, and 14-20]; Russian [1-3]; French [7]; and Spanish [13]

CD 3 (74:46)

BRUNSWICK RECORDS
 Chicago

1. CAVALLERIA RUSTICANA: **Turridu mi tolse l'onore** (Mascagni) 3:55
with Giacomo Rimini, baritone
 1928; (matrix number unknown) 90004
2. IL TROVATORE: **Mira d'acerbe lagrime** (Verdi) 4:01
with Giacomo Rimini, baritone
 1928; (matrix number unknown) 90004
3. DON GIOVANNI: **Là ci darem la mano** (Mozart) 2:44
with Giacomo Rimini, baritone
 1928; (matrix number unknown) 15131
4. IL FLAUTO MAGICO: **La dove prende** (Mozart) 2:35
with Giacomo Rimini, baritone
 1928; (matrix number unknown) 15131
5. CAVALLERIA RUSTICANA: **Voi lo sapete** (Mascagni) 3:01
 1929; (matrix number unknown) 15174
6. ERNANI: **Ernani! Ernani, involami** (Verdi) 2:28
 1929; (matrix number unknown) 15174
7. NORMA: **Ah, bello a me ritorna** (Bellini) 3:07
 1929; (XE 29236 B) Unpublished

VOCE DEL PADRONE
Milan- May 1933

8. TOSCA: **Vissi d'arte** (Puccini) 3:21
(2M 1442-2) DB2122
9. CAVALLERIA RUSTICANA: **Voi lo sapete** (Mascagni) 3:47
(2M 1443-1) DB2123
10. LA GIOCONDA: **Suicidio** (Ponchielli) 4:36
(2M 1445-2) DB2122
11. ANDREA CHENIER: **La mamma morta** (Giordano) 4:18
(2M 1446-2) DB2123

VITAPHONE SOUNDTRACKS
New York- 1926

12. IL TROVATORE: **Mira d'acerbe lagrime** (Verdi) 8:03
with Giacomo Rimini, baritone
13. **Plaisir d'amour** (Martini) 4:26
14. **La paloma** (Yradier) 3:53
15. **Excerpts from a Rosa Raisa interview with Studs Terkel** 19:33
November 1959

Tracks 1-12 are recorded with orchestral accompaniment
Tracks 8-11 accompanied by La Scala Orchestra conducted by Franco Ghione
Tracks 13-14 recorded with piano accompaniment
Languages: Italian [1-12]; English [15]; French [13]; and Spanish [14]

Producer: Charles Mintzer
Audio Conservation: Ward Marston

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