

# Adelina Patti



*Centenary edition*

Adelina Patti  
Recordings



*issued by EMI Archive & Historic Masters*

*An appreciation and  
full discography*



The current Patti edition has been issued to mark the centenary of her recordings, made for the Gramophone and Typewriter Company in 1905 and 1906

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# Adelina Patti

*an introduction to the centenary issue by Lord Harewood,  
President of Historic Masters*

**H**er place in the pantheon of singers is secure. Adelina Patti was effectively the most famous and perhaps the best soprano in the world for almost the entire second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century. All the composers welcomed her presence in a cast and Verdi himself, not a facile judge, praised her singing above most. She was obviously a fine musician, though not all her records demonstrate this fact – *Voi che sapete* with no dotted notes represents a curious memory lapse. But the purity of her voice and what must have been the intensity of her performance are widely documented.

Patti was the most senior singer to make gramophone records. They were made in what was for a singer old age but they cover quite a chunk of her great career. Nobody would imagine that she sang exactly like this in her great roles and at her heyday. But there is something in her phrasing and much in the beauty of tone to suggest a truly great diva. The centenary of her recording is a fit moment (even if this present publication comes slightly late) at which to rejoice in the imagination of all concerned – the Gramophone Company company and the artist – in making this group of recordings. Historic Masters is proud to join EMI – successor to the Gramophone Company – in serving as a platform for this major event.

# Adelina Patti (1843-1919)

*An appreciation by Michael Aspinall*



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## The Queen of Song

“FOR THE GENERATION OF OPERA-GOERS who grew up in the period which ought to be referred to for all time in the annals of music as The Reign of Patti, she set a standard by which all aspirants for public favour were judged except those whose activities were in a widely divergent field. Not only did she show them what the old art of singing was, but she demonstrated “the possibility of its revival.” (Henry Edward Krehbiel, *Chapters of Opera*, New York, Henry Holt and Company, 1911, p.126.)

Patti was the most important singer of the second half of the nineteenth century, her fame on a par with that of Caruso and Callas in later generations. Her career, which lasted from 1851 until 1914, was one of the longest in musical history and was enormously influential, especially in England and the United States: the living presence of one of the greatest

exemplars of *bel canto* was an inspiration to generations of singers. It is a privilege to be able to hear the “somewhat breathless and impulsive” records (to quote Desmond Shawe-Taylor) that the revered elderly lady made in her Welsh castle in 1905 and 1906. Brought up by an old-fashioned musical family in New York, far away from the unfortunate decline in vocal standards in Italy, she was taught to sing in the old-fashioned style, so her records are a guide to what Italian singing might have been like in the eighteenth century. They are master classes of unique importance to singers and to all lovers of the old art of singing: they are a clue to “the possibility of its revival.” For the musicologist, these are the most important records ever made of singing. For the purity and warmth of her tone, her flawless attack, her command of light and shade, for the elegance and finish of her phrasing

and the charm of her manner, Patti at sixty-three may be compared with Horowitz in his warm and mature old age: the occasional wrong note will not worry us.

### The 19th century tradition

“Patti has ever been my highest ideal...a majestic being, more divine than human, so exalted that it was almost sacrilege to speak her name.” (Luisa Tetrazzini, *My Life of Song*, Cassell and Company, 1921.) Through the hyperbole of her ghost writer, the soprano whom Patti herself designated her successor gives us an idea of the unique position that the Queen of Song enjoyed among her contemporaries.

Unlike her great predecessors Pasta, Malibran and Grisi, Patti was considered at her best in lighter roles (though greatly admired in *La traviata*, *Il trovatore*, *Aida* and even as Valentine in *Les Huguenots*). She avoided roles like Norma, Lucrezia Borgia and Donna Anna that called for outbursts of violent rage (though she always longed to sing Donna Anna). Her voice was of exceptional purity, yet warm, womanly and rich, with a “...strange, dark, penetrating timbre - the *voix sombre*, as Garcia classified it” (Klein). She excelled in every kind of vocal agility, reaching the high F with ease, and she established the type of the “coloratura soprano”. Her voice, even at the age of eighteen, was big enough in volume for the largest theatres. In later years, judging from the records and from reports of those who heard her, she sang carefully in a restricted range of volume.

On these records Patti’s tone production is natural, spontaneous and unforced, and she is free from mannerisms. Within the central octave from F to F the timbre is fresh and unworn: there is no harshness, rasp or wear. Her diction is perfect, crisp and limpid in English, Italian, French and Spanish. Her well-developed chest register has separated off from the medium register, so Patti tries various combinations of registers in medium-low passages, with varying success. She has almost lost her head register, so her ventures above

the stave are fraught with risk. The highest note available seems to be B flat, a rather wild shriek at the end of the Jewel Song: in this aria she goes down as low as A flat in chest (in an unwritten appoggiatura). The least successful songs in her cunningly chosen repertoire seem to be those like *The last rose of summer* (which she tries both in E and in F) or *The old folks at home*, in which the melody demands octave leaps up to rather whining high notes, the head register failing to oblige. Her famous trill is most successful on middle tones, sung piano. Of her once famous staccato ornamentation there is not a single example. She is very short of breath, but surely no Diva was ever more tightly corsetted. For all the limited resources available to her at this late period, Patti sings with a palette of vocal colour and expression unrivalled by any other singer in our experience.

In the summer of 1905 Patti heard some of Jean de Reszke’s pupils and was so enthusiastic that she asked the great tenor for lessons: she was worried about her high notes! De Reszke sent his pupil Florence Stevens to Wales to begin the delicate task of patching up what was left of the greatest voice in the world. Patti was delighted with the results and probably had more lessons later from de Reszke himself: in the second series of records, made in 1906, her breathing and support are much improved.

### Critical comment

The elderly Diva, whether in the flesh or on records, was often appreciated by great musicians. Sir Henry Wood accompanied her at the piano on her last appearance in public, at the Royal Albert Hall, London, on the 24th October 1914: “We rehearsed *Voi che sapete*. I felt the marvellous evenness of her warm quality. Her voice was not powerful but it excelled anything I had imagined in red-rose-like quality and voluptuous sweetness.” (*My Life of Music*, Gollancz, London 1938.) In the June 1958 issue of *Records and Recordings* Sir John Barbirolli enthused about his collection of

old Patti records: “And there is one, on which she sings Tosti’s *Serenade*, which is quite incredible. There is one bar in it when she puts in vocal turns and trills which always make me listen, enthralled - it is just like an instrument, not a voice, and one can almost imagine the moving of a violinist’s finger on the strings.”

A volume could be filled with the admiring comments of singers, composers and critics who heard Patti sing. The description given by Emma Eames is particularly significant, for this distinguished soprano was generally sparing in her praises. Eames heard Patti in *Marta* and *Semiramide* at the Boston Theater, probably in January 1885:

“Although she was still a comparatively young woman - in the forties - she had been singing a great many years. But her voice was entirely unimpaired. Hers was the most perfect technic imaginable, with a scale, both chromatic and diatonic, of absolute accuracy and evenness, a tone of perfect purity and of the most melting quality, a trill impeccable in intonation, whether major or minor, and such as one hears really only in nightingales, liquid, round and soft. Her crescendo was matchless, and her vocal charm was infinite. I cannot imagine more beautiful sounds than issued from that exquisite throat, nor more faultless phrasing, nor more wonderful economy of breath. Her phrases were interminable, in spite of the fact that her waist was so pinched that her ribs could not have done otherwise than cross in front, thus proving beyond the shadow of a doubt that length of breath does not depend upon the volume or freedom of the lungs, but upon the perfect pose of the voice with no waste of breath between the notes or in their production.” It is only typical of Eames that she feels obliged to qualify this eulogy: “Patti had perfection of vocal art, of rhythm, of finish, of proportion, of charm, but she had the soul of a *soubrette* and in temperament was suited only to such roles as Martha, Zerlina and Rosina in the *Barbiere*. Young and utterly inexperienced as I was, I knew this even then, though I dared

not voice it.” (*Some Memories and Reflections*, New York & London, D. Appleton and Company, 1927.)

### Verdi

Verdi’s unqualified praise for Patti is all the more remarkable when we consider his general lack of enthusiasm for singers. It seems that Patti could do no wrong. In 1877 he writes: “Her artistic nature is more complete than has perhaps been the case with any other”. In the following year he commented: “What a wonderful singing actress she was at 18 years of age, the first time that I heard her in *La Sonnambula*, *Lucia*, *Il barbiere*, and *Don Giovanni*! She was then what she is today apart from some developments in her voice, especially in the low notes, which in those days were somewhat thin and childlike, and are now most beautiful. But her talent, her feeling for the stage, and her singing were just the same, the same.”

Verdi was still enthusiastic when he heard her for the last time, at La Scala as Violetta in 1893: in a letter to Herman Klein, Patti reported that Verdi “actually wept tears of joy and delight. It appears that he said ... that my phrasing was too touching for words and that I sang divinely!” There is no reason to believe that Patti’s performances of *La traviata* in Milan were any different from the cut down version that she sang elsewhere: we know that she sang only one strophe of *Sempre libera* (a tone down by 1893) and *Addio del passato* - this, however, was then common practice. In Act two Patti frequently made a large cut in the duet with Germont père, passing from the end of *Dite alla giovine* to the *Addio*! In the last scene she would sometimes sing a few bars of *Gran Dio, morir sì giovane* but more often she would cut from the end of *Parigi, O cara* straight to the entrance of Germont and the Finale. (In her earlier years upward transposition had sometimes made her more comfortable: by means of a cut in the preceding recitative she would transpose *Amami Alfredo* a tone up, and in *Faust* she would sing the Jewel Song in F

rather than the original E major.) Although Verdi was furious when Patti wanted to cut the cabaletta to the duet with the tenor in the third act of *Aida*, he never complained about her cuts in his earlier works: in *Rigoletto* she cut out the final duet, ending the opera with the trio. Verdi described Patti’s singing of *Ab, fors’è lui* as “a matchless performance”, but of course the gramophone came too late for her to record anything from her Verdian repertoire - though Marcella Sembrich includes Patti’s beautiful embellishments in her recordings of Violetta’s aria.

## Patti’s life and career

The exhausting labour of chronicling one of the longest and most important of operatic careers has been admirably carried out by John Frederick Cone in *Adelina Patti, Queen of Hearts*. Adelina’s mother was the celebrated soprano Caterina Barili Patti, born Caterina Chiesa (? – 1870). She had four children by her first husband, her teacher Francesco Barili. Left a widow, she married the Sicilian tenor Salvatore Patti (1800 – 1869) to whom she bore another four children, the last of whom, Adelina, was born in Madrid, where her parents were singing, on 19th February 1843: on 8th April, in the church of San Luis, she was baptized Adela Juana Maria. At the end of their Madrid season the Patti family returned to Italy, but in 1846 they all set off to take part in an operatic venture in New York, where they stayed and where Adelina grew up.

### The child prodigy

With her mother and sisters Carlotta, Clotilde and Amalia singing regularly and practising all day, it is not surprising that Adelina could sing before she could talk. When her father found himself in financial difficulties, the family turned to little Adelina to save the day: at the age of eight she made her debut as an assisting artist in the pianist Alfred Jaell’s second concert at Tripler Hall, New York, on 22 November 1851. She

sang the *Echo Song* by Carl Eckert, which had been popularized by Sontag, and as her encore *I am a Bayadère*. Between 1852 and 1858 she sang on several long concert tours, going as far as the Caribbean, generally accompanied by her brother-in-law Maurice Strakosch and her sister Amalia, but appearing also with the Norwegian violinist Ole Bull and the pianist Louis Gottschalk.

Adelina’s vocal education was supervised by her half-brother, the baritone Ettore Barili, and Eliza Valentini Paravelli, who also taught her to read and write. “Her abnormal imitative gift enabled her not only to learn every bar, every fioritura, every note and syllable of the Italian music and text by heart, but to control her tone, to sustain it without effort through the long cantilena, and to deliver the phrases just as she had heard them sung, with natural expression and balanced suavity of style.” (Klein, *The reign of Patti*, page 16.) In 1903 Patti told the critic William Armstrong “It was my half-brother, Mr. Ettore Barili, who laid the foundation of my singing. My brother-in-law, Mr. Strakosch, taught me certain embellishments and cadenzas, but it was to Ettore Barili that I owed the foundation as well as the finish of my vocal equipment. With him I studied solfeggi, trills, scales; the chromatic scales came naturally. I think I was trilling when I came into the world.” (Quoted by Klein, page 21.) Apart from more conventional exercises, she was taught to vocalise the fugues of Bach! Patti resented Strakosch’s claims that he was her only teacher, but his influence seems fairly summed up by Klein: drawing on his experience as a pupil and as the accompanist of Pasta, he taught Adelina to perfect her style, taught her many of the songs she included in her early tours, composed her cadenzas and changes, and, later, taught her the role of Rosina. On his advice Adelina “retired” to rest her voice at the crucial age of twelve: according to Thomas G. Kaufman’s indispensable chronology of Patti’s career (in John Frederick Cone’s biography, pp. 317-384) between 25 March 1854 and 3 March 1856 she appeared in only five concerts.

## Beginnings

At fifteen, despite her mother's warnings that the voice is soon lost, Adelina decided that she was ready to prepare herself for the operatic stage, and began to study roles with Ettore Barili. The Academy of Music in New York was under the direction of Strakosch and Bernard Ullmann; the principal conductor was Verdi's pupil Emanuele Muzio. In a letter to *The Times* (London), 7 August 1884, Muzio states that the Italian prime donne engaged for the 1859-60 season had failed, so "Adelina's sister, Mme. Strakosch, suggested the idea of making the little girl appear in opera. Her husband was opposed to it, saying she was too young. I was then appealed to, and, being the musical director, the decision was left to me, and, after hearing a single piece sung by her, I concluded favourably for the début..... The conditions of the engagement were stipulated with her father, Salvatore Patti, at one hundred dollars for each representation. I then began to teach her Donizetti's *Lucia* at Mr. Strakosch's house..... After having taught her *Lucia* I did the same for *Sonnambula*. Then Signor Manzocchi, *a maître de chant* of talent, prepared her for the *Barbiere di Siviglia*, *Puritani*, etc."

Adelina Patti made her operatic debut on the night of Thanksgiving Day, Thursday, November 24, 1859: it was an unqualified triumph, the sixteen-year-old artist being called to encore the Sextet and the Mad Scene. In her first two seasons at the Academy of Music (1859-60, and 1860-61) she sang ten operas, and at the Théâtre de l'Opéra of New Orleans, added another four roles, in French! This would be a remarkable achievement for any debutante, let alone a sixteen-year-old, but then she would have known all these operas - except perhaps *Les Huguenots* and *Le Pardon de Ploërmel (Dinorah)* - since she was a baby, from hearing them sung at home.

## The reign of Patti at Covent Garden

News of the phenomenon reached London and Strakosch

arranged for Frederick Gye to present her at Covent Garden for three trial performances without pay: if she were successful he would give her a contract. The sophisticated audience was too stunned to applaud when "a mere child" stepped onto the Covent Garden stage on the 14th May 1861, audaciously following in the footsteps of such singers as Grisi, Malibran, Persiani and Lind as Amina in *La sonnambula*. At the end of her first aria the audience erupted into a frenzy of applause, and the reign of Patti had begun: for Covent Garden it would last until 1895. Most critics had only praise for her, whilst pointing out that perfection could hardly be expected from a girl of scarcely eighteen. Henry F. Chorley, perhaps the greatest of them, considered that her voice showed signs of wear and that she neglected legato singing in favour of an excess of staccato (the coloratura sopranos who succeeded her were quick to imitate this). Charles Dickens noted that "Mlle. Patti's voice has been carefully and completely trained. Those who fail to find it as fresh in tone as a voice aged nineteen should be, must be struck by its compass, by the certainty of its delivery, by some quality in it (not to be reasoned out or defined) which has more of the artist than the automaton. She has a rare amount of brilliancy and flexibility." In his *Musical Recollections* (1872), Dr. John Cox declares that "she came out with equal powers to those manifested by her great predecessor (Grisi) is not to be admitted. She had not the advantages of the same training, nor was her voice thoroughly formed; but the singular combination of youth and maturity in her appearance could not fail to strike every beholder; and this, being added to musical qualities already singularly high, won for her, on the instant, a rapturous welcome. Her voice - a high soprano, well in tune - reached E flat in alt easily, and was powerful enough for any theatre. It was then more flexible than fascinating. The latter quality was to come, as it has done most abundantly. Her shake was clear and brilliant; but she seemed to prefer staccato flights and ornaments, which were

more extraordinary than agreeable or satisfactory to a well-trained ear."

On 6 July 1861 the great retiring diva and her successor sang together in *Don Giovanni*, Grisi as Donna Anna, Patti as Zerlina, her interpretation hailed as "a genuine artistic triumph". She was scolded for her (stylistically impeccable) variant at the end of *Vedrai, carino*, but "still more striking was *Batti, batti* - a little drama in itself. Besides being exquisitely sung, the by-play by which Mlle. Patti accompanied this was inimitable." (Davidson, in *The Times*.) *Musical World* reports that "Mlle. Patti showed her skill in the art of delivering the light, rapid parlante recitative of the Italian comic stage - an art in danger of being lost, now that this kind of musical dialogue is going out of use... Zerlina's lively prattle was clear and intelligible as if she was simply talking without musical notes at all." On 28th June Patti was summoned to Buckingham Palace to sing in the first of many Royal Command Performances.

## New conquests

When the Covent Garden season finished at the end of July, Gye took the company on tour and Patti sang in opera in Manchester, Birmingham and Liverpool, after which she made the first of the provincial concert tours through the British Isles that she would continue until 1907. During the winter of 1861-62 she sang in opera in Dublin, Berlin, Brussels and Amsterdam before returning to Covent Garden for the Grand Season of 1862. In the winter of 1862-63 she sang for the first time at the Théâtre-Italien, Paris, the occasion of her much-quoted clash with Rossini. After she had sung *Una voce poco fa* for him, he testily inquired: "Who wrote that aria you just sang?" Not wishing to have Rossini for an enemy, Patti wisely went to study with him and "two months after this incident, Patti sang the arias from *La gazza ladra* and *Semiramide*, with the Master as her accompanist. And she combined with her brilliancy the absolute

correctness which she always showed afterwards." (Camille Saint-Saens, *Musical Memories*, translated by Edwin Gile Rich, Boston, Small, Maynard & Company, 1919.) Rossini composed for her voice the variations for *Il barbiere*, *La gazza ladra* and *Semiramide* that she used from then on. (Her "authorized" variations for *Una voce poco fa* and *Bel raggio lusignhier* may be heard in Marcella Sembrich's Victor recordings.)

On 14 February 1863 Rossini wrote to his "Gentilissima Adelina": "I do not want you to leave Paris without receiving these few lines from me, to thank you for the signal honour that you conferred upon me by singing in my house, where, by means of your (Mephistophelectric) singing you electrified myself and my friends. I feel I must also offer you my warmest good wishes for your success in your career, an arduous one for the majority but sweet for you, to whom nature has generously given musical and dramatic instinct together with an enchanting quality of voice, the wide range and even scale of which, with a wide breath span, constitute the gifts with which one can arrive naturally at perfection." (*Musical World*, 21 July 1877.)

Year by year she conquered new cities: Vienna and Madrid in 1863, Florence and Turin in 1865, St. Petersburg in 1869, Moscow in 1871, Milan (La Scala), Venice and Genoa in 1877, Naples, Rome and Bologna in 1878, New York and other major American cities in 1882-3, Bucharest, Barcelona and Lisbon in 1886, Buenos Aires and Montevideo in 1888, Mexico City in 1890. After 1890 she reduced the number of her operatic appearances and began to sing more in the kind of miscellaneous concert in which she would alternate with other artists, her contract obliging her to sing perhaps two arias plus three encores in each programme. She sang operatic performances in Nice in 1891, 1893, 1895, 1896 and 1897; in January 1893 she bade farewell to La Scala with *La traviata*; in 1895 she bade farewell to Covent Garden as Violetta, Zerlina and Rosina; in 1896 she sang *La traviata* in Monte Carlo,

adding *Lucia di Lammermoor* in 1897. Her last appearances ever on the operatic stage were in private performances: *La traviata* at her own theatre in her Welsh “castle”, Craig-y-nos, in 1899, and *Il barbiere* at Jean de Reszke’s private theatre in Paris on 25 May 1907, worthily surrounded by an all-star cast: Giuseppe Anselmi as Almaviva, Mario Ancona as Figaro, Edouard de Reszke as Basilio and Antonio Pini-Corsi as Bartolo. Despite her age, in this performance Patti did not shirk her duty: in the Lesson Scene she sang *Bel raggio, Voi che sapete* and *Home, sweet home*.

Patti married three times. In 1868, with the encouragement of the Empress Eugénie, she married the Marquis de Caux, an equerry to the Emperor; they separated in 1877 as a result of Patti’s infatuation with the French tenor Ernest Nicolini and were divorced in 1885. In 1886 she married Nicolini, who died in 1898. In 1899 Patti married the twenty-eight year old Baron Rolf Cederstrom.

## Final performances

In his book *Notes brèves* (Paris, Librairie Ch. Delagrave) Camille Bellaigue reviews Patti’s last operatic performance: “In losing its range her voice has preserved its purity. ... One can still say of this voice that it is ‘pure as a pearl’. It has preserved its roundness...”

References to decline in Patti’s technical powers may be found as early as Emanuele Muzio’s letter to Verdi from Nice on 14th February 1886: “Last night Patti sang *La traviata*, but I must say that yesterday was her 43rd birthday and her years make themselves felt both in her face and in her voice. She is short of breath, continually breaking the phrases, and her voice has little legato in the middle range... Her picchettato notes no longer have the silvery sound of years gone by...The sustained trill that she sings on G flat running into the wings was too short, because of her lack of breath, and so did not produce much effect.”

In his article in *The World* of 26 November 1890, George Bernard Shaw exults that “time is coming to my assistance at last. Patti now has to evade the full weight of *Ombra leggiera* ... Now that the agile flights up to E flat in alt have become too hazardous to be attempted, Patti, deprived of her enchantments as a wonderful florid executant, is thrown back, as far as operatic arias are concerned, upon her capacity as a dramatic soprano, in which she is simply uninteresting. Fortunately she has another string to her bow - one that has for a long time been its best string. She is a great ballad-singer, and I have no doubt that twenty years hence I, as a fogey of the first order, shall hear her sing *Home, Sweet Home* to an audience whose affectionate veneration I shall compare sadly with the ardent enthusiasm of the days when the black hair was not yet tinged with the hues of sunset.” In 1893 he would write that time had transposed Patti “a minor third down”.

Of her last Violetta at Covent Garden in 1895 *The Pall Mall Gazette* opined: “Her voice has been, and probably still is, the most purely exquisite thing of its kind, when it is at its best, among the voices of the world. It is true that brilliance has somewhat forsaken it, that the high notes, having lost the smoothness of the strength of youth, are often harsh and untameable, that there are occasional gaps and weaknesses; but if you throw all these things into the scale, there still remains a wonderful beauty of tone, a magical and quite individual smoothness, roundness, sweetness of expression, a magnificent style.”

## The Records

### Mozart

“At Covent Garden between 1861 and 1885 she had, at any rate as Zerlina, ... established her fame as a genuine Mozart singer. One reason for this was that she had studied the role

with her brother-in-law Maurice Strakosch, who previously acted for some time as accompanist for the great Pasta when she was teaching at Como. There Strakosch learned the tradition of the part of Zerlina from one who had sung Mozart in London less than twenty-five years after the composer’s death. The tradition was therefore direct and (in the opinion of Garcia) correct.” (Herman Klein, *The Bel Canto*, Oxford University Press, London, 1923, p.46.)

“In the Zerlina of Mozart she reached the highest pinnacle of her art. In one of her last appearances she had the advantage of the company of Pini-Corsi as Masetto; in the ballroom scene, the two little peasants were seated on a sofa that was much too wide for them to put their feet to the ground, and there they were with their legs stuck straight out, admiringly stroking the grand upholstery.” (J.A. Fuller-Maitland, *A Door-keeper of Music*, London, John Murray, 1929.)

Heard at the correct speed, at which it appears transposed a tone down into the key of E flat, Patti’s record of *Batti, batti, o bel Masetto* is a perfect lesson in how to sing this aria; it scarcely matters that she runs out of breath at one point and cannot finish her phrase when she is able to demonstrate so much of the eighteenth-century Italian style and sing with such beguiling tone. Zerlina coaxes most winningly. Trying to keep her voice light, she avoids singing the many E flats (first line) in chest register (perhaps instinctively: for years she had sung the aria in the original key of F, and she would not have sung F in chest in her palmy days). On the last note of all she collapses onto an unsupported, hard chest tone on the E flat. Ruskin complained that Patti sang “Batti, batti” much quicker than Malibran, and Jenny Lind told her so to her face. They were not suggesting that she was wrong to sing the second part of the aria allegro, which is correct, but that her overall speed for the aria was too fast. I think I see what they meant, but I find Patti’s performance entirely convincing.

Klein (in *The bel canto*, p.21) notes: “Patti in later years

essayed *Voi che sapete*; but she had not studied it as she did Zerlina with Maurice Strakosch ... and here Patti missed the right rendering.” Her style is that of the Victorian ballad, the style in which she sings her own song *On parting*: she irons out the rhythm by ignoring dotted notes (though she introduces dotted notes of her own in the middle section). She sings the middle section dramatically and with great rhythmic entrain to contrast with the main melody. It is interesting to note that Garcia prints the phrase “che cosa è amor” without the dotted notes, exactly as Patti sings it, in his *Hints on Singing* (1894, edited by Herman Klein!). At the end Patti introduces a high G in a manner foreign to eighteenth century style, but we can forgive her this lapse for the delicious and authentic manner in which she graces the phrase *notte e dì* with an elegant ornament, for her use of echo effects, and for her spectacular mastery of portamento. She sings the opening phrases quite simply, with a good deal of contrast in volume and colour, but she soon begins to introduce light and graceful portamento, which she increases to great sweeping arches to grace the repeat of the melody. Patti’s individual *Voi che sapete* exudes charm and theatrical excitement and the pure and radiant tone is well captured by the recording horn. It may not be a classically correct version of this aria but it is certainly one of the great records of bel canto singing.

Patti’s search for new arias of not too demanding a range led her to Lotti’s *Pur dicesti*, of which she has left us an enchanting record. This is quite a naughty song, and Patti’s excitable breathlessness does not detract from a particularly charming interpretation, with graceful turns and neat trills: the warmth and purity of her timbre is well caught. The highest note, a G sharp, is negotiated with relative success.

### Bellini

*Casta diva* was never a representative aria in her repertoire, though it was one of her show-pieces when she was seven

years old: she had picked it up from hearing her mother practising. She sang it once at the Albert Hall in one of her concerts in 1899. It is a pity that she breathes between *Casta* and *diva*, but her tone is mostly lovely in this record and she demonstrates the correct, slow execution of the turns. She includes Pasta’s variations, passed on to her by Strakosch and hers seems to be the only recording to include these.

*Ah, non credea mirarti* is a souvenir of one of her most famous operatic roles. It remains one of the most moving and historically significant vocal records ever made. Like Malibran, she sings the aria a tone down in G minor. She finds a haunting, dreamy tone, and her ornaments - again, handed down from Pasta and absolutely authentic in style and execution - are a lovely example of vocal ornamentation that truly “embellishes” the music, making it even more beautiful and expressive than the composer had left it.

#### Other operatic records

Among her most successful records *Connais-tu le pays* does not seem to have been included in her programmes, but she may have learned it especially for her charity concert in St. Petersburg in December 1904. She seems to be singing in the original key of D flat. Her voice is beautifully recorded, especially in the quieter passages, showing the lovely glow and bloom of the timbre. The emission of tone is flawlessly steady, the haunting nostalgia of words and music perfectly captured.

Both Mignon’s aria and Marguerite’s Jewel Song from *Faust* (transposed a semitone down) are full of the delicate expressive touches so typical of Patti at her best. The opening trill and run in the Jewel Song, delightfully suggesting the rippling laughter of the excited Marguerite, the lightning changes of mood, the masterly use of rubato - all these things help us to forgive the attenuated upper notes and the obvious gasping for breath. Though it is clear from her exclamations at the close of the unpublished take that she was unhappy

about the high B flat, the wild shriek concluding the published version is no real improvement. All her life Patti had been shielded from adverse criticism, for her father, Strakosch and her husbands would not let her read newspaper reviews. Although the applause of her faithful audiences encouraged her to go on exhibiting what was left of the old glory, the frequently tepid reviews and occasionally less than completely enthusiastic audiences during her unhappy Last Farewell concert tour of the United States in the winter of 1903-4 made it clear to her that if she were not to retire immediately she should at least have a few singing lessons! On the defensive, she declared to the San Francisco *Chronicle*: “Mark this - when you hear me to-morrow evening you will not hear a vibration in my voice; you will understand every word I say - a detail not observed by the later singers, and you will hear that the quality of my tones remains unchanged.” (Quoted by Cone, p.235.)

#### The songs

These are fascinating - after all, as Shaw pointed out, she was a great ballad singer. Surely only a diva living a very sheltered life would have passed for release such records as *Comin’ thro’ the rye* with a tuneless shriek at the end, or *Robin Adair* with the words mixed up. In *Si vous n’avez rien à me dire*, by Baroness Willy de Rothschild, her impulsive wilfulness leads her to force the tone on the last F (top line), a note that she had negotiated easily in the previous verses. She is sorely taxed by the tessitura of *Within a mile of Edinboro’ town* in G flat: yet in 1906 she repeats it a semitone higher! This song was one of her most famous encores and she sings it with great spirit and vigour, telling the ironic tale with a twinkle. The tale of *On the banks of Allan Water* is sad, and she is appropriately dramatic. Her own song to Byron’s words On parting (she hummed a tune to some willing anonymous musical ‘ghost writer’ who then turned it into a song) is splendid. Even though she is sorely taxed by the

tessitura, *Kathleen Mavourneen* is one of her most vivid and memorable performances. She brings to this haunting song an inexhaustible wealth of intensely expressive detail, singing better, perhaps, in the 1906 take, with fewer breaths. Her attack on the very first syllable of *Kathleen* is of extraordinary beauty.

Among her best records are Arditì’s *Il bacio*, Tosti’s *La serenata*, and *Robin Adair*, all among her most frequently programmed songs in the last twenty years or so of her career. *Il bacio* remained in her repertoire when most other coloratura numbers had become impossible because its phrasing allowed her to take plenty of breaths. What a pity that she collapses at the end, because otherwise this unpublished record is a triumph. She sings what little is left of Arditì’s song, after ample cuts, with great vigour, enthusiasm and charm, and an accuracy of execution that belongs to only the very few master singers. She is enchanting in both takes of *La serenata*, the first showing perhaps more of the warmth of her timbre, the second superior in execution, with a longer breath span and renewed security: the perfect pose of the voice on the breath allows her to take the upper F at a different volume and intensity each time it occurs. The combination of an apparently artless spontaneity with an endless variety of colour and accent, typical of bel canto singing, will only be found in the records of Patti.

In some ways *Robin Adair* is one of the most wonderful of her records: how beautifully she floats her voice through the melody, articulating the intervals clearly and cleanly with impeccable legato, and bringing out all the pathos of the song with real feeling. As in *La serenata* a sustained note at the end is flat, but in what has gone before she has already demonstrated that she is the supreme mistress of the art of singing on the gramophone. *Home, sweet home* she must have sung thousands of times by December 1905; she complained that audiences would not let her go until she had sung it, but she would have been very upset had they failed to demand it!

Although these simple songs expose the shaky condition of her upper register, she is still able to demonstrate the perfect steadiness and charm of her middle tones as well as the messa di voce, a swelling and dying away on one sustained note. Her attack is perfect: although audibly preceded by the light aspirate needed for the *H*, the *O* of *home* is struck each time with the clean, rounded and brilliant (though soft) sound of the true coup de glotte as defined by Garcia.

The most successful of her records is the very last one, *La calesera*, Yradier’s song of the cart-driver’s fiancée. Here she sounds happy and lively, singing with freshness of tone and surprising agility (there are even some embellishments). In distant times she had sung it in Rosina’s lesson scene, and she lets herself go with carefree abandon. (Some of her interpolated cries are written in the score!) What a wonderful finale to a list of fascinating, though frequently disconcerting recordings!

## Essential bibliography

Herman Klein: *The Reign of Patti*, London, T. Fisher Unwin, 1920.

John Frederick Cone: *Adelina Patti, Queen of Hearts*, Amadeus Press, 1993.

## Acknowledgements

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# List of records in Adelina Patti centennial edition

HM 500A <i>Nozze di Figaro: Voi che sapete (Mozart)</i> Gramophone & Typewriter 03051 Matrix: 537f Speed: 73	HM 503A <i>Comin' through the rye (Trad.)</i> Gramophone & Typewriter 03061 Matrix: 552f Speed: 74	HM 506A <i>Norma: Casta Diva (Bellini)</i> Gramophone & Typewriter 03082 Matrix:: 681c Speed: 74
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HM 502A <i>Robin Adair (Keppel)</i> Gramophone & Typewriter 03059 Matrix: 549f Speed: 74	HM 505A <i>La serenata</i> Gramophone & Typewriter 03079 Matrix: 677c Speed: 73	All piano accompanied by: HM 500A to HM 504A - (Sir) Landon Ronald (All recorded December 1905)
HM 502B <i>Si vous n'aviez rien a me dire (de Rothschild)</i> Gramophone & Typewriter 03060 Matrix: 551f Speed: 74	HM 505B <i>T'was within a mile of Edinburgh Town (Hook)</i> Gramophone & Typewriter 03080 Matrix:: 678c Speed: 73	HM 504B to HM 507B - Alfredo Barili (All recorded June 1906)