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The Career of Francesco Tamagno

The enthusiast who wants to know everything about Tamagno should read "Otello Fu", La Vera Vita di Francesco Tamagno, il "tenore-cannone" by Ugo Piovano, Rugginenti Editore, Milano 2005, a magnificent biography which quotes extensively from reviews in English, French, Spanish and Portuguese. For accurate dating of the performances in Tamagno's career we are indebted to Mr Thomas G. Kaufman's chronology, considerably amplified by Piovano.

Francesco Tamagno was born in the Borgo Dora quarter of Turin on the 28th December 1850 and baptized Innocenzo Francesco. His father, Carlo Tamagno, the proud possessor of a fine natural voice, was a wine-seller and proprietor of a modest trattoria named "Al Centauro". Carlo and his wife Margherita had 15 children, of whom ten died either in the epidemic of cholera in 1854 or in that of miliary in 1856. Of the five who were spared, three studied singing: Francesco, Domenico (1843-1905) and Giovanni (1858-1910). Francesco and Domenico joined a group of young hopefuls who clubbed together to pay for private lessons: they sang their exercises under a bridge over the river Dora. Unfortunately the Tamagno boys sang much louder than the others, who resentfully forced them out of the group! They studied for a while in a Salesian school for orphans and poor boys in which sacred music played a part in the curriculum, and Francesco made his first public appearances in 1865, singing at this school and in religious services for which the Salesians provided the music.

From 1870 to 1873 Francesco and Domenico studied singing at the Liceo Musicale, today the Conservatorio di Torino (where the lessons were free), with the composer Carlo Pedrotti, who told them that, in time, they might become excellent choristers and earn a decent wage in England! Domenico graduated from the Liceo in 1871 and Francesco in 1873. During the year 1871-72 Francesco did his military service, only six months as his father was able to pay the necessary sum to reduce the period of service from the full three years.

Students at the Liceo were groomed for secondary roles or chorus work, and it seems likely that Tamagno first stepped onto the operatic stage as a member of the chorus in *Gli Ugonotti* at the Teatro Regio, Turin, in December 1870. He made his first appearance in a *comprimario* role as Gaspero in Francesco Cortesi's *La colpa del cuore* on the 27th February 1872. In the 1872-3 season Tamagno was engaged for three

small roles in *Il Guarany*, *Poliuto* and *Ruy Blas*. Telling his life story to Edmondo De Amicis in 1898 the great tenor remembered Nearco in *Poliuto* as being his debut role, which it was not, but it was certainly the first role in which he was noticed: at the performance (in which Mongini was singing the title role), when Nearco sings the phrase "l'anima no, chè l'anima è di Dio" Tamagno, on the spur of the moment, introduced a high note, one of the brazen trumpet kind for which he would soon become famous. (He always claimed it was a B flat, but this does not seem possible from the harmonic structure of the music.)

The early career

Having signed a contract with the theatrical agent Antonio Rosani, the young tenor embarked for Palermo, but this first season, though successful, may have been upsetting psychologically. The ship bearing the company from Messina to Palermo met with such a terrible storm that all the scenery and costumes had to be thrown overboard, which delayed opening night. Half-way through the season the impresario went bankrupt and the singers had to carry on as best they could or risk getting no pay at all. The season at the Teatro Bellini opened with *La forza del destino* and then Tamagno should have appeared in *Don Sebastiano*, but the opera was changed and so it was as Riccardo in *Un ballo in maschera* that he made his official debut as a leading tenor, on the 20th January 1874. In a gala performance, a mixed bill, he sang the last act of *Il trovatore*. On the 24th February he sang *Poliuto*, an opera that would remain in his repertoire right until the end, and in a concert he was able to sing two duets from the shelved *Don Sebastiano*. His Palermo season ended with a performance of Rossini's *Stabat Mater* in April 1874, conducted by the composer Pietro Platania, director of the Palermo Conservatorio, who gave him some advice about how to improve his singing technique.

Tamagno next appeared in Ferrara in May, in *Un ballo in maschera* and *La forza del destino*. Throughout his career he enjoyed singing duets and ensembles in his concert appearances, and in June he sang the trio from *I Lombardi* for the first time in a Ferrara concert. The conductor in Ferrara, Antonio Buzzi, was - like many conductors in that distant age - also a singing teacher, and Tamagno took some lessons from him. At a later date he also took lessons from the famous teacher Luigi Vannuccini, also a conductor and violinist and a friend of Rossini's.

He began the 1874-5 season in Rovigo, singing the title role in *Roberto il diavolo* and Tebaldo in *I Capuleti ed i Montecchi*, after which he went to La Fenice, Venice, for *Il Guarany*, *Poliuto*, the world première of *Selvaggia* by Francesco Schira, *Der Freischütz* (as *Il franco cacciatore*, of course) and *Lucia di Lammermoor*. It was the first time he sang with "star" singers: Josephine de Reszke sang in *Guarany* and *Selvaggia* and his Lucia was Emma Albani. After singing in Libani's *Il Conte Verde* at Carpi in August 1875, Tamagno went abroad for the first time, to the Teatro Liceu, Barcelona, where he remained from October 1875 until April 1877, covering two

complete seasons. Here he added to his repertoire *L'africana*, *Saffo* (Pacini), *Ernani*, *Lucrezia Borgia*, *Ruy Blas*, *Il trovatore*, *La traviata*, *Marta*, *Don Carlo* (in the five-act version), *Gli Ugonotti*, *Aida* and Verdi's *Requiem*. Some of these roles he quickly dropped, others he clung to. Like many great Italian singers, he was a very quick learner even though he was never able to be absolutely precise in musical detail and relied heavily on the prompter.

In June 1877 Turin heard him at last at the Teatro Vittorio Emanuele in *Il Guarany*; he returned to the Teatro Regio in 1884 for *Poliuto* and in 1885 for *Il profeta*, but on this last occasion he fell ill and was not able to complete the full number of performances, which led to such ill-feeling and such unfriendly comments in the press that he would never sing in opera again in his native town, only in concerts. On the 26th December 1877, the opening night of the season, Tamagno made the first of many appearances at La Scala, Milan; he chose *L'africana* as the opera of his debut, stubbornly resisting all attempts to get him to appear in either *Aida* or *Don Carlo*. Thirteen triumphal performances were followed by eleven as Paolo in *Fosca* by Gomes. He then disappeared for a while to South America, singing from May to November 1878 first at the Teatro Colon, Buenos Aires, then in Rio de Janeiro, adding to his repertoire *Rigoletto*, *Il profeta*, and *Enrico* by Miguel Angelo. He returned to La Scala to open the 1878-9 season with 21 performances of the title role in *Don Carlo* (still in five acts), in which he was praised for his increased mastery of his voice and for the new refinements in his singing: it seems that he and the baritone Giuseppe Kaschmann sang their duet in an intimate and hauntingly soft manner, though Tamagno always introduced a brilliant high C at the close, to everyone's approval and delight. *Don Carlo* was followed by Massenet's *Il re di Lahore* (with Jean Lassalle in his original role) and on the 27th March by the world première of Gomes's *Maria Tudor*, a flop that only scored two performances. On the 17th April Tamagno was back in Buenos Aires and later in Rio de Janeiro. He sang for the first time in Lisbon between December 1879 and April 1880, in May he was heard at Bilbao in *Poliuto* with Erminia Borghi-Mamo and Kaschmann, and in November sang *L'africana* in Florence with Battistini. That year he opened the Scala season again, with the world première of Ponchielli's *Il figliuol prodigo*, followed by *Ernani*.

Tamagno and Verdi

In a review of the Scala *Ernani* published in Il Secolo on the 30-31 January 1881 we find one of the earliest references in print to a phenomenon which would soon become universal: Tamagno was criticised for singing only one strophe of the *cabaletta* to his aria in Act One.

Then, on the 24th March, came his first historic collaboration with Verdi, when he created Gabriele Adorno in the revised version of *Simon Boccanegra* with Victor Maurel in the title role and Edouard de Reszke as Fiesco. Though this helped to place Tamagno in the forefront of tenors, only ten performances were given and he

never sang the opera again. Verdi had considered raising Adorno's aria a semitone but it proved comfortable for Tamagno in the original key; some high notes that the composer had intended to introduce here for Tamagno's voice do not seem to have got themselves written, but Piovano points out several phrases in the new Finale to Act One where Verdi might have had Tamagno's powerful high notes in mind. In a letter to Verdi, Giulio Ricordi observed that in the last three performances Tamagno "having sung the opera several times now, had come to understand both the music and the action of his role better... he had moments of happy inspiration and aroused the audience to great enthusiasm."

From May 1881 to October 1883 Tamagno was busy in Argentina and Brazil, adding to his repertoire *Mefistofele*, *Guglielmo Tell* and *La juive* (as *L'ebrea*). After a few performances in Bologna and Rome he made a return visit to La Scala to create Don Carlo in Verdi's new arrangement of the work in four acts; *Don Carlo* was given 13 performances beginning on the 10th January 1884. A letter of Verdi's to Ricordi stipulates that "in the duet with the Queen, the tenor should sing as though fainting, with a veiled voice and ... not leaning over wide-eyed trying to follow the beat....", which sounds like a typically Verdian doubt about Tamagno's ability to enter fully into his ideas. On another occasion he worries Ricordi about the rehearsals: "Don't try to tell me that the singers have studied their parts and know the opera. I don't believe a word of it. Two things they certainly do not know: *how to pronounce their words clearly and how to sing strictly in time*. These qualities are more essential in *Don Carlos* than in all my other operas. Tell Faccio to get on with the rehearsals of *Don Carlos*, and urge him to insist above all on clear diction and strict attention to the time. This may well be pedantry! But what can you do? This opera is written in this way and must be performed thus if we are to hope for any success." Tamagno's success was overwhelming, and the Filippo Filippi wrote of him in *La Perseveranza*: "Tamagno comes back showing great progress in his manner of singing, of phrasing, of shading effects, singing in *mezza voce*, bringing out the accents of impassioned music and of immersing himself in the character he represents.... I cannot help warning the esteemed tenor, however, that he comes rather too often to the very front of the stage to sing his most energetic phrases...."

Tamagno sang *Don Carlo* only once again, in Buenos Aires in 1890.

Preparing for "Otello"

After finishing his Scala season with 16 performances of *Gli Ugonotti* and three of *Il profeta*, Tamagno returned to Buenos Aires, where he sang *La Gioconda* for the first time, with Elena Teodorini and Medea Mei-Figner, as well as his more usual repertoire, then appeared with the same company at the Teatro Solis, Montevideo, where he also sang *La favorita* with Mei-Figner. In this season in Uruguay he sang 10 performances of 7 operas in 13 days!

On the 8th February 1885 he was back at La Scala for *Il profeta*, *Mefistofele* and the world première of Ponchielli's *Marion Delorme* (17th March 1885). A very short season followed in Buenos Aires and Rio (May-August). We find him in Barcelona for *Poliuto* in December, then in March and April 1886 he sang for the first time in Madrid in *Guglielmo Tell* and *Aida*; after singing *Poliuto* and *Aida* in Lisbon in May he returned to Madrid for a few performances in October. He was keeping himself free for *Otello*, which, he knew, was going to secure his place in history (as well as usefully increasing his future fees).

On the 26th December 1886 the future cast of *Otello* - Tamagno, Maurel, Romilda Pantaleoni and Francesco Navarini - under the baton of Franco Faccio, opened the Scala season in *Aida*. Tamagno, with boyish eagerness, made himself available for rehearsals with Verdi and Faccio and Verdi's often expressed doubts and hesitations are well documented. We might just quote his letter to Faccio of the 29th October 1886: "I urge you make Tamagno, when he arrives, thoroughly study his part. He is so imprecise in his reading of music that I really want him to study the role with a thorough musician who can get him to sing the notes with their full value and in time." Ricordi was able to reassure him, in November, that "Tamagno is studying every day with Faccio, *with all his heart and with the greatest love*, and that Faccio is rather pleased with him."

From Verdi's letters, from reviews and other sources Giorgio Gualerzi has shown the development of the relationship between composer and singer, singer and role (Gualerzi, *Esultate! Otello c'è: si chiama Tamagno* in the volume *Il Titanico Oricalco / Francesco Tamagno* published by the Teatro Regio, Turin in 1997). In Boito's words: "Giuseppe Verdi had decided that Tamagno should take the leading role in the appalling tragedy even before composing it; he was, therefore, the first to guess that he would be capable of a formidable performance. Then, when the opera was ready and put into rehearsal he was the first to admire Tamagno as singer and tragedian; in fact, the Maestro's expectations were greatly surpassed." The impresario, critic and historian Gino Monaldi says that on the evening of 5th February 1887 Tamagno appeared "suddenly transformed into a great artist". This miracle was "the work of Verdi", who had tried "to instil the eloquence of art into that voice ... genius is all-powerful, and the proof of that is that Tamagno, stimulated by the great Maestro, suddenly changed his nature and underwent a complete metamorphosis in those few months." (Monaldi, *Cantanti Celebri del XIX Secolo*, Roma, Nuova Antologia [1929].) Although Dottor Piovano quotes a review from 1880 criticizing Tamagno for a lack of roundness in the medium register, an emission not perfectly natural and poor diction, many other reviews confirm the impression that throughout his career he studied continually to perfect his method and refine his artistry.

***Otello* and after**

The long-awaited first night of *Otello* took place on the 5th February 1887; there were, altogether, 25 triumphant performances. The Scala company with Faccio at the helm set off on an unprecedented tour of Verdi's latest opera, giving eight performances at the Teatro Costanzi, Rome in April and eight at La Fenice, Venice, in May. The unsatisfactory Romilda Pantaleoni, who was Faccio's mistress, withdrew at Verdi's request and was replaced by Adalgisa Gabbi. Tamagno then busied himself in 1888 and 1889 with further productions of *Otello* at the San Carlo, Naples, at the Teatro Argentina, Rome, at the Colon, at the Politeama Garibaldi, Palermo, the Carlo Felice, Genoa, and at the Lyceum Theatre, London. He amazed even his warmest admirers by alternating performances of *Otello* with *Guglielmo Tell*, and in Monte Carlo in 1902 to these two operas he added not only *Messaline* but also *La traviata* with Melba! On the 12th June 1888 Tamagno escorted Adelina Patti to the Teatro Politeama, Buenos Aires, to hear the local première of *Otello* (in a "pirate" version unauthorized either by Verdi or Ricordi) with the great tenor Roberto Stagno, who was miscast in the title role. Citizens of Buenos Aires were able to hear the "authorized version" at the Colon on the 6th July, when Tamagno appeared in the first of fourteen performances. During this period he also sang in Madrid and in Italian theatres, appearing at the Teatro Pagliano, Florence in Franchetti's *Asrael* in April 1889. Meanwhile some theatres attempted to give *Otello* without Tamagno from motives of economy, including La Scala, where in February 1889 an ailing José Oxilia alternated with Ferruccio Giannini. Giovanni Battista De Negri was the only other tenor to have any real success in the role and to win Verdi's approval.

The London impresario M. L. Mayer engaged Tamagno, Maurel, the conductor Franco Faccio and the forces of La Scala to give twelve performances of *Otello* at the Lyceum Theatre, London, an extraordinarily successful event: the first performance was on the 5th July 1889. Critics pulled out all their superlatives to describe Maurel's Iago and, despite the reservations that were only to be expected, were deeply impressed by Tamagno's *Otello* - in the face of this vocal glory, and the magnificent choral and orchestral work, they could afford to gloss over the weak point of the cast, the "shattered, wavering, stagy" voice (as George Bernard Shaw described it) of Aurelia Cataneo as Desdemona.

Patti's manager, Henry E. Abbey, engaged the diva to tour North America in opera, yet another "Farewell Tour", beginning at Chicago on the 9th December 1889 and ending in New York in April 1890. Abbey engaged Tamagno to join the company as the other main attraction, an expensive and therefore risky proposition, and not much money could be spared for the rest of the company, which did, however, include Lillian Nordica, Emma Albani, Guerrina Fabbri, Giuseppe Del Puente and Armand Castelmarty: the conductors were Luigi Arditi and Romualdo Sapio. Fortunately everyone did make a lot of money, including the impresario. Tamagno made his U.S.A. debut as Arnaldo in *Guglielmo Tell* in Chicago on the 11th December 1889. During the tour (in which he never once sang with Patti as their repertoire was totally different) he also sang *Il trovatore*, *Aida*, *Gli Ugonotti*, *Otello*, *L'africana* and *Mefistofele*, appearing in Mexico

City, San Francisco, Denver, Louisville, Boston, New York and Philadelphia; he cancelled only three performances.

Tamagno and Maurel sang together in *Otello* again in Buenos Aires in 1890 and in Nice in 1891; after singing for the last time in Lisbon in March 1891 he went to Russia, making his debut in Moscow as *Otello*, with Kaschmann as Iago, on the 4th April. In 1892 he returned to Madrid and Barcelona; in Madrid he sang Puccini's revised version in three acts of *Edgar*. He had already read through the first version with Puccini, with whom he enjoyed friendly relations: in a letter to Tamagno dated 15 January 1892, Puccini writes "I can always hear the sound of your divine voice in my ear and and think of the extraordinary, the inspired interpreter who will sing my music!"

Tamagno was invited to sing *Guglielmo Tell* in Pesaro during the celebrations for the centenary of Rossini's birth, but for some reason refused and appeared only in a miscellaneous concert on the 27th July, in which he deigned to sing the duet "Le minaccie" from *La forza del destino* (with Delfino Menotti, an excellent baritone with whom he sang often but who unfortunately left no recordings) and the trio from *I Lombardi*. Gino Monaldi has left us a vivid description of Tamagno singing *Otello's* entrance, "Esultate", from the balcony of his hotel to an importunate mob of admirers below:

"...he stepped onto the balcony, bareheaded, and in the sepulchral silence of those five or six thousand people crowded into every corner, sang his famous *Esultate*. Like everyone else I had had no idea of what Tamagno's voice would be like in the open air, and supposed only logically that the acoustic effect would certainly be less than in a theatre; quite the contrary! Tamagno's voice suggested to me a silver trumpet, animated by the breath of the famous Brizzi of Bologna! A quite prodigious ring and power. Almost everyone in Pesaro heard the blast of that human trumpet echoing through the night, and many were the windows that were flung open, even in the most distant streets, so that people might admire that formidable sound. And when, urged on by the frantic applause of the crowd, Tamagno sang the *Esultate* a second time, at least half the citizens of Pesaro gathered that that was the voice of Tamagno, the only one capable of such a prodigious feat." (G. Monaldi, op.cit.)

At the Teatro Costanzi on the 15th November 1892 Tamagno created another new opera, undertaking the title role in his friend Andrea Gnaga's *Gualtiero Swarten*, in which he was conducted by Toscanini for the first time. Tamagno considered that Gnaga's music suited his voice perfectly, but he only managed to get the opera performed twice more, in Fano and at the Teatro Dal Verme, Milan, in 1893.

From January to April 1893 he was busy on his last visit to Spain, singing *Otello* and other operas in Valencia, Madrid and Seville. His hitherto happy relations with the Teatro Real, Madrid came to a bitter conclusion when the director of the theatre attempted to persuade Tamagno to reduce his fee! At the Teatro Dal Verme, before reviving *Gualtiero Swarten*, the publisher Sonzogno presented on the 9th November 1893 the première of Leoncavallo's *I Medici*, in which Tamagno created the role of Giuliano, which he repeated at the Teatro Costanzi in December, at the Teatro

Mercadante, Naples in February 1894, at the Bolshoi, Moscow in April (with Battistini) and in Buenos Aires in 1898 with Mario Sammarco.

In January 1894 Tamagno began his long and lucrative connection with the Monte Carlo Opera, then under the inspired direction of Raoul Gunsbourg, where he would sing eight seasons, appearing in fourteen operas. Although Verdi referred scornfully to the theatre in one of his letters, apparently because on the only occasion he had visited Monte Carlo he had lost money at the gambling tables, the Salle Garnier had an excellent orchestra under the direction of Léon Jehin and there was no shortage of money for the engagement of the most expensive artists and the production of the most *recherché* operas. Tamagno was the favourite tenor of Princess Alice of Monaco - she even wanted him to sing Tristan, but a few years earlier he had decided, like Caruso, that the tessitura of *Lohengrin* was uncomfortably low. In January and February 1894 he sang in *Le prophète*, *Otello* and *Aida*. He re-appeared in Monte Carlo in 1896, 1897, 1898, 1899, 1900, 1901 and 1903, securing the largest fees of his career: in 1899 he received 6,500 francs per performance for three performances each of *Otello* and *Aida* and 10,000 francs each for four performances of Isidore De Lara's *Messaline*, in which he created the role of Hélios. In 1900 he earned 124,740 francs for fourteen performances, over 26% of the opera budget for the year. (See T.J. Walsh, *Monte Carlo Opera 1879-1909*, Dublin, Gill & Macmillan, 1975.) Princess Alice - and Isidore de Lara - left Monte Carlo for ever in 1901, but Gunsbourg persuaded Tamagno to return in 1903, soon after he had made his gramophone debut, to sing two new roles: John the Baptist in *Hérodiade* and Faust in *La damnation de Faust*.

In October and November 1894 Tamagno sang in Mexico City before going on to New York for his only season as a member of the Metropolitan Opera, in which he sang 51 performances of eight operas in New York and on tour in Philadelphia, Brooklyn, Baltimore, Washington D.C., Boston, Chicago and St. Louis. His first appearance (since appearing "unofficially" with Henry E. Abbey in 1890) was at the Metropolitan on the 21st November 1894 as Arnaldo in *Guglielmo Tell* with Mario Ancona, Edouard de Reszke and Pol Plançon in the cast., after which he appeared in *Aida*, *Lucia di Lammermoor*, *Il trovatore*, *Otello*, *Sansone e Dalila*, *L'africana* and, for the only time in his career, *Cavalleria rusticana*. He sang with such great singers as Melba, Nordica, Eames, de Lussan, Mantelli, Maurel, and Campanari. He appeared in several Sunday Evening Concerts, and sang Rossini's *Stabat Mater* three times (lucky the audiences that heard him with Nordica, Scalchi and Plançon!). He sang in the concluding night of the season, a gala concert on the 30th April, but on the 13th May he was already making his Covent Garden debut as Otello. He also sang *Il profeta* (with Giulia Ravogli), *Il trovatore* and *Gli Ugonotti* (with Melba, Albani, Ravogli, Ancona and Plançon). A private performance of *Il trovatore* was given for Queen Victoria at Windsor Castle on the 24th May.

Tamagno made his first appearances in St. Petersburg in January 1896, singing with Battistini in *Otello* and *Il trovatore*.

Between April and August 1896 Tamagno sang again in Buenos Aires and Montevideo, then we find him back in St. Petersburg in January and February 1897, where Luisa Tetrizzini was his Berta in *Il profeta*; Battistini sang with him in *Otello* and *Il trovatore*. On the 13th April 1897 he sang *Otello* in Italian at the Paris Opéra, then an unheard-of proceeding: Rose Caron, Jean François Delmas and the other soloists sang with him in Italian, while the chorus sang in French. Verdi only half approved of this arrangement: his view was that the Opéra was a thoroughly French institution - for better, for worse - and he had already authorized a French version for the theatre, with a specially composed ballet, in 1894. The performances were a triumph for Tamagno. In May he gave a series of guest performances of *Il profeta* and a few of *Otello* and *Il trovatore* in German opera houses, and in June was back in Paris for a few more *Otellos*.

1898 was a busy year, with seasons in St. Petersburg - in which he added *Andrea Chénier* to his repertoire, with Battistini - Monte Carlo, where he sang De Lara's *Amy Robsart* for the first time, Nice and Buenos Aires.

The great tenor was now showing signs of slowing down; although nobody could detect any signs of vocal decline, his health was beginning to fail through heart trouble. He returned to La Scala in April 1899 for *Guglielmo Tell*, one of the great triumphs of his career, and later in the month sang *Poliuto* at the San Carlo, Naples. His next engagement would appear to have been in December, when he opened the La Scala season in a revival of *Otello*. After this most of his appearances were in concert, one of the most significant being at La Scala on the 1st February 1901, to solemnly celebrate the death of Verdi, in which he sang a duet from *La forza del destino* with Antonio Magini Coletti; Caruso and Borgatti also sang at this concert. His last opera seasons were in Monte Carlo (1900, 1901 and 1903), Verona (*Guglielmo Tell* in May 1900), Covent Garden (*Otello*, *Aida* and *Messalina* in June-July 1901), a disastrous - for De Lara, but not for Tamagno - single performance of *Messalina* at La Scala on the 7th April 1901, one last gala performance of *Otello* for the Kaiser at the Teatro Argentina, Rome on the 5th May 1903, and a series of guest appearances in Acts Two and Three of *Poliuto* in Rome, Naples, Turin and Milan in 1904. Dottor Piovano has established that Tamagno's very last public appearance was in a concert at the Circolo degli Artisti in Turin on the 27th March 1905. Accompanied by his son-in-law Alfredo Talamona, Tamagno sang the *Invocazione alla Vergine d'Oropa* by Mapelli, and as encores *Charitas* by Gnaga and *Perché* by Filippi. Another fascinating discovery of Dottor Piovano's is that in concerts throughout his career Tamagno would sing the operatic excerpts in costume, and yet another is that Tamagno almost never sang excerpts from *Otello* in concert. This tireless biographer has traced more than eighty concerts, mostly from the last years of his career and the majority of them for charity. Piovano's list of a total of 55 "roles" includes comprimario parts and the larger sacred works, but is still a very respectable catalogue of achievement for a tenor whose musicianship was sometimes questioned.

At the beginning of May 1905 Tamagno, who had gone to pass Easter in his villa at Varese, had a severe attack of *angina pectoris*, from which he had been suffering for a long time: as early as the rehearsals for the *Otello* in 1887 he was kept in bed for a while with chest pains. Regular health bulletins were issued by the newspaper La Stampa, as if the great tenor were a member of the royal family. After some weeks of apparent progress Tamagno suffered a cerebral haemorrhage on the 19th August, and died on the 31st August after a second attack. He was buried in the cemetery of Turin on the 5th September: Boito was among the pall-bearers. Although he was a very strong man, he had to be very careful of his health: once in Chicago he lost his voice for several days just because he said "Good-night" to a fan outside the theatre when a cold wind was blowing.

Tamagno the man

The popular writer Edmondo De Amicis wrote a short biography of Tamagno (Francesco Tamagno. Ricordi della sua vita, Palermo, casa editrice Salvatore Biondo, 1898? Reprinted in its entirety in Piovano, op. cit.) with whom he enjoyed a mutually admiring friendship. It is cast largely in the form of an interview, in which the voice of the man of letters prevails over that of the innkeeper's son; none the less a sympathetic portrait of the tenor emerges. "... his triumphs...had not at all altered the modest and cordial simplicity of his ways. He was still the handsome, ruddy and sturdy grenadier, with little, smiling eyes and a little, pointed moustache, with no more grey in his hair than when I had seen him in *Il trovatore* [in Buenos Aires]...with a fair, open face and the every-ready sonorous laugh of the happy, healthy man." At the outset of his career Tamagno had to endure considerable financial hardship because he sent all his modest earnings to his mother: "But those privations were sweet because they enabled him to ease the hardship of his mother's life...This great filial love certainly helped to keep him modest when he became famous, and today he recalls his family and his poor childhood not only with a feeling of satisfaction but also of pride, which does him honour and makes him even more likeable." May we not allow ourselves to believe that this need to save money for his family was the fateful seed of the parsimony for which he became notorious? De Amicis says that "No other famous singer was ever so generous with his own voice", and it was easy for friends to persuade him to sing for them in private, "asking him how a certain well-known tune went, pretending not to remember it, or asking him how he had managed to solve the problems presented by certain difficult passages in his repertoire, which he could only explain by singing them aloud."

This generosity extended to giving his voice for charity, which he was always eager to do. It was when it came to spending money or to bargaining with impresarios that Tamagno's parsimony rose to the surface. In a letter of 4th November 1886 to Giulio Ricordi, Verdi says: "I would not have the courage to make him spend about a hundred Lire after I saw him travelling from Genoa to Milan with his little girl in second class!"

There is scarcely a book of reminiscences by his fellow musicians that does not contain some amusing anecdote about his stinginess; however, this was regarded as an eccentricity that in no way prevented Tamagno from being a well-loved comrade. Everyone remarks that he was simple, good-humoured, modest and highly professional. Once he had wrung his extraordinarily high fee from some suffering impresario he always turned up regularly at the rehearsals and sang them in full voice. One of the things that endeared him to everyone was his love for his daughter. Tamagno was an "unmarried father" (the Italian term "ragazzo padre" suits him admirably), openly proud of his illegitimate daughter in an epoch when such things were normally not mentioned. Tamagno was always discreet about his amorous adventures (another sympathetic trait) and not even his descendants today know the identity of the mysterious aristocratic lady who on the 2nd September 1879 gave birth to his daughter Margherita (named after his mother). De Amicis tells us that "for years he was a mother to her; he dressed her, sewed her buttons on, tucked her up in bed and sang her sweetly to sleep with those tones that he had used to keep millions of human beings awake. In the midst of his triumphs abroad he longed to go back home to her, and whenever he received one of her little letters written in large characters, his voice rang out more ardently in the Hymn of the *Prophet* or more sweetly in the loving notes of *Armando* or *Raoul*. And today she alone is the centre of all his hopes and ambitions. She had become engaged to a young man from Milan, as good and well-educated as she is, the son of a well-known industrialist. The marriage should be celebrated in two months' time in a chapel in the villa built by the father. 'They are in love' he says, 'and they will be happy. That's all I want in this world.'" Fortunately this loveable man did not live to see the sad ending of all his dreams and plans: in his will Margherita was practically his sole heir, and she is believed to have inherited about eight million lire, making her one of the richest women in Italy. Within a few years the unlucky business speculations of her husband Alfredo Talamona had dissipated the fortune so carefully accumulated for her by her father's scrimping and saving.

Tamagno sings today

Tamagno's voice is very different from the darkly burnished (even "baritonal") sounds emitted by most other famous *Otellos* from Zenatello to Domingo. His voice is "open" and brilliant, ringing with head (sometimes even nasal) resonance, and enlivened by a vibrato that always sounds perfectly natural and that never gets out of control or degenerates into a wobble. His vibrato reminds us of Pavarotti, Melchior or the young Lauri Volpi. On records his range is from the D below the stave to the high C. The low notes are massive, the medium range is vibrant but also velvety when the singer is in a melting mood, and the famous high notes are still almost perfectly controlled, taken either softly or loudly. It is in his ability to sing *crescendo* and *diminuendo*, loudly and softly, that he rises above all other dramatic tenors. Where

others shout, strain or push, Tamagno always sings. Tamagno had carefully studied the *voce mista*, or half-voice, and without conspicuously darkening the tone (as most of us common mortals have to do) he begins to make his *passaggio di registro* (or blending of the chest and head registers) on D, fourth line: this D is usually a particularly lovely note, full, rounded and shining. He can take the high notes either *piano* or *forte* and has no problems in sustaining them.

The remarks of the Gazzetta Musicale di Milano for the 13th April 1899 (anno LIV, n° 15, p.177) are apposite to the records: "The voice is of wide range, of phenomenal power, the high notes easy, the breath-spans ample and robust, the diction is perfect, in fact beyond all comparison. But to these natural gifts, which we have often admired in the past, the singer has added some acquired achievements: for example, we can delight in the delicious *mezza voce*, the quality and ring of which corresponds to the power of the full voice, and Tamagno can carry this *mezza voce* up as far as the A natural and sometimes even to B flat."

In his records Tamagno's breath-spans are never very long, but in spite of this and the prevalently slow tempi one never has the impression that the phrases are too short. His phrasing always *seems* to be broad and expansive - as in his prime it no doubt really was - which is always the case when the voice is forwardly placed and solidly supported on the breath (c.f. Tetrizzini). Tamagno's diction is, indeed, marvellous. No "sur-titles" would have been necessary in theatres where he was singing. He recalls Garcia's observation in his Traité complet de l'art du chant: "Diction must not be merely correct, but also noble, elevated...To excel in the dramatic style the singer must possess a fiery soul, gigantic power; the actor must constantly take precedence over the singer." Tamagno has not only the fiery soul, but also a touching vein of tenderness. In his records of two arias from Meyerbeer's *Il profeta* he succeeds almost perfectly in singing the "Pastorale" in a light, lyrical style with beautifully modulated soft high B flats, whereas in the Hymn "Re del ciel" the style is heroic, the high B flats blasts from a golden trumpet. In his prime he had always transposed this aria a semitone higher, as he did "Celeste Aida"! The only known example of his transposing down in the theatre is the Septet in *Les Huguenots*, which all tenors - probably - transposed a semitone down to avoid the high C sharp.

Tamagno's own comments on his vocal technique in conversation with De Amicis are interesting: "And when I cunningly asked him what he actually meant by the *placing* of the voice, he immediately gave me a practical demonstration, imitating the individual method of placing of Masini, Stagno and Patierno and other famous tenors so faithfully that I could believe I was actually hearing each one of them singing; and then, to show me the difference, he gave me an example of his own." Then Tamagno explained: "The voice is not in the throat: it is in the lungs; and he added, beating his ample breast with one hand: - The voice is here - and he let me feel the formidable depth of his breathing, like the blowing of a factory bellows. - When a singer is finished, they say he has no voice left. Oh, no! In most cases the voice is just as it

was: what he has lost is his lung power. I feel as if I had a pump inside me! Just listen to how I sustain a note.- And he attacked a high B, and he held on to it so long that I would have had time to write down an alexandrine verse in fair copy."

Another declaration of the singer's about his technique is quoted by Giulio Gatti-Casazza in Memories of the Opera (Charles Scribner's Sons, Inc., New York, 1941). On the morning of the première of *Guglielmo Tell* at La Scala in 1899 Gatti was summoned to Tamagno's apartment by his valet, and found him "in a little room, seated on a little low bed, quite broken up and almost in tears. 'See here!' he said to me. 'See what ill luck! My nose is stopped up. How it all happened I don't know - but one must have patience. When my nose is not open, wide open, I can't sustain a tone. I'm very sorry - you must excuse me - but the performance must be postponed. Confound my nose!'" Gatti-Casazza had to cancel the performance, and when he visited Tamagno again two days later he told the tenor that rumour was busy accusing him of being afraid. "Tamagno uttered a roar such as to cause the room to resound. 'Me? Afraid!' Then changing his tone, 'But listen to that! The voice is clear! The nose is free! Very good! Since they say that I, Tamagno, am afraid, put out your announcements. I'll show these asses what I can do!'"

Tamagno and the Gramophone

The story of the negotiations between Tamagno and the Gramophone & Typewriter Company has been told in detail by Paul D. Lewis in The Record Collector, Vol. 40, N° 2, April, May, June 1995. In a letter of the 31st January 1903 to William Barry Owen, Managing Director of the company in London, Alfred Michaelis - head of the Italian branch - says that Tamagno had put two rooms of his villa at Ospedaletti at the technicians' disposal. Some of the records were to be of the new twelve-inch size, for "we could take in much more of his phenomenally powerful voice on a 12-inch plate, while on a 10-inch one he would have to moderate his voice considerably, which would be a pity...." It is believed that Will Gaisberg made the recordings between Saturday 7th and Wednesday 11th February 1903. By the terms of Tamagno's contract, after Will Gaisberg had finished recording enough multiple takes of the scheduled twelve items, his colleague Belford Royal recorded the last five sides, for private use only. Tamagno was paid a cash advance of £2,000 and became the first singer to be paid a royalty - four shillings on each record sold. The price to the public was fixed at one pound each, and each label carried a little numbered tag so that the royalties could be accurately calculated.

The great tenor was delighted with his records. Herman Klein went to visit him at Varese and "...he played them for me himself, and never shall I forget the signs of intense enjoyment which he displayed in doing so, or the undisguised delight with which he listened to and commented upon the sounds created by his own voice. He leaned over and caressed the instrument, just like a child with a new plaything or a mother holding her baby to the keyboard of the piano. They were sounds worth

hearing, too, and Tamagno was very happy when I told him I thought them a splendid reproduction of his wonderful voice From time to time he would ejaculate with a broad smile "Che bellezza!" or "Com'è bello, non è ver?" (Herman Klein and the Gramophone, Amadeus Press, Portland, Oregon, 1990, pp. 121-2 and 76-7).

The 12" Tamagno records

The pianist accompanying Tamagno on the 1903 recordings is anonymous. He does not sound like a professional, for all his dexterity in covering up whenever Tamagno makes a slip and for all his skill in "vamping". Dottor Piovano has, I think, solved the problem: Tamagno's son-in-law Alfredo Talamona had begun to accompany him in some of his less important concerts, and, no doubt, his services would have been free....

In an interview published in the magazine Records and Recordings for June 1958, Sir John Barbirolli declared: "I come of a family of musicians, and in Italy both my father and my grandfather were in the orchestra for performances of *Otello* supervised by Verdi himself. I have more or less grown up with the music in my blood, and I can find nobody who sings it today as Tamagno did on these old acoustic recordings." Those hearing Tamagno's *Otello* records for the first time are frequently perplexed by the slow and stately tempi he adopts. This was his style, at least in the last years of his career, causing rows with Toscanini at the rehearsals of *Guglielmo Tell* (1899) and *Otello* at La Scala. After a performance of *Otello* in Manchester, Barbirolli assured the record collector F.S. Winstanley that his father had also loved the Tamagno records and reported that the tempi were exactly those used by Tamagno when conducted by Faccio at La Scala. However, it is only fair to point out that there is no lack of evidence as to Tamagno's having modified, over the years, the careful instruction imparted by Faccio and Verdi. In the New York Times of 4th December 1894, Henderson reported:

"Signor Tamagno's *Otello* was made known to this public in 1890 as a vivid and powerful interpretation, which justly entitled the tenor to the name of artist. In his performance of the part at that time he gave the impression of uncommon intelligence and high ideals. It is a truth and a pity that some of his recent work at the Opera House has done much to destroy that impression and to convince thoughtful persons that his *Otello* owed more to the training of the Maestro Verdi than to the natural ability of the singer.... while Signor Tamagno's *Otello* has lost some of the dignity that the severe restraint of the master's hand imposed upon it in earlier years, it has lost none of its tremendous power, its sweeping expression of fierce, overmastering passion, and its superb virility of declamation. Some of the very traits of Tamagno's work which call for condemnation when exhibited in "*William Tell*" or "*Lucia*" fit so perfectly into the plan of Verdi's musical embodiment of the Moor that they become virtues."

At the time of his *Otello* season at the Lyceum Theatre, London, Sir Henry Irving - the great actor whose theatre it was - declared that the effect of hearing Tamagno's voice was "like a cold shower on the neck accompanied by a flash of fire through the veins". The music critics tempered their praise with a few reservations. In the Scottish Art Review for September 1889 George Bernard Shaw complained that, though Tamagno was "a quite exceptional artist", his voice "had not the pure, noble tone, nor the sweetly sensuous, nor even the ordinary thick manly quality of the robust tenor: it was nasal, shrill, vehement, sometimes fierce, sometimes plaintive, always peculiar and original." (In later years Shaw would listen with pleasure to his records of Tamagno, Caruso and Patti.) The Times critic (probably J.A. Fuller-Maitland) on the 5th July 1889 declared that "as a singer he has sacrificed too much to the cultivation of his high notes, which in truth are of magnificent volume and quality. In the lovely duet with Desdemona ... the opening phrases require the smoothest possible *cantabile* singing, and the passage does not lie out of the ordinary compass: it was far too low, however, for its effect to be realized by Signor Tamagno, and the result was far from satisfactory. In the later scenes the vigour of his declamation caused all vocal shortcomings to be forgotten, and his singing of the fine passage representing the well known "Farewell, a long farewell to all my greatness" - one of the few pages in the score which remind the hearer that he is listening to Verdi's music - was splendid; here again the audience demanded and received its repetition. The grand duet between Otello and Iago which closes the second act produced an overwhelming effect, and indeed it is not possible to imagine much finer operatic singing."

The reference to encores will puzzle the modern operagoer. In fact, Verdi heartily approved of such demonstrations of audience approval as applause and encores. At the first performance of *Otello* Faccio encored the "Fuoco di gioia" chorus, Desdemona's "Ave Maria" and the orchestral interlude heralding Otello's entrance in the last act. At subsequent performances by the original artists in Italy and abroad Iago's "Credo", Otello's "Ora e per sempre addio" and the great duet were frequently encored. These encores, by the complex nature of the score, must have been prepared for in advance by Faccio. The same thing happened in *Falstaff*: at the first performance the Quartet of the Merry Wives in Act One was encored, and to Verdi's high glee, "Quand'ero paggio" was always sung two or three times.

In accordance with his contract, Tamagno recorded each of his selections twice or more, and each performance sounds spontaneously different. Blanche Marchesi declared that Tamagno's "Esultate!" (matrix 10W FT) was the finest example she had ever heard on records of declamatory singing. In both takes he makes an overwhelming effect, partly because he treats the music as a recitative in free time: "Esultate!" makes no effect in the theatre if the conductor beats strict time throughout. In matrix 11 the singing is equally thrilling if not quite so flawless, but he includes an extra mordent on the third syllable of "l'uragano", which he also sings on the unpublished 10" matrix 3024. On the first syllable of "l'uragano" the score

has a simple acciaccatura as a grace note, which Tamagno converts into a *mordent* of two notes: he does the same thing in "Ora e per sempre addio", and we find both Maurel and Battistini doing it in "Era la notte". It is even more noticeable when Battistini makes this change in "Di Provenza il mar" from *La traviata*, effectively changing the outline of the main melody. This is an unwritten rule of *bel canto* for which I have been unable to find any authority in text books of the period, but, like the Church, the art of singing possesses an oral as well as a written tradition! The deliberate scansion of the phrases and the ringing, copper-coloured timbre are equally inspiring in "Ora e per sempre addio", into which Tamagno introduces another old-fashioned embellishment, a *gruppetto* of five notes of a kind familiar to us from the records of Bonci, De Lucia, Anselmi, Caruso and other tenors. Far from wilfully altering the composer's score, the intention behind such simple embellishments was to heighten the emotional and artistic effect of the cadence, like giving a light final polish to a gem. Tamagno tends to follow the accent of the words rather than slavishly observe the musical notation; for example, at "dardi volanti" he dots the first note of the triplet figure instead of singing three equal notes, as written. I cannot think that Verdi would have disapproved of this, a stylistic feature common to all singers born about 1850. Of the five takes of "Ora e per sempre addio" matrix 12W FT is perhaps the most thoroughly successful, the ornaments neatly executed, and the great singer performs a shattering *crescendo* on the high B flat, followed by a *diminuendo* on the penultimate note.

It was recognized at the time that Tamagno's "Death of Otello" was one of the greatest records ever achieved by the gramophone, and we have five versions available to us today, all overwhelming in their powerful expression and beautiful tone, the lower notes like a great 'cello, with a suggestion of nostalgic sadness unique to the voice of this great man. Matrix 14R FT is full of dramatic contrasts, but the voice is more responsive, more velvety and more beautifully recorded in the following matrix 15. The Milan recording of April 1904 is perhaps the all-round best version.

Tamagno studied *Andrea Chénier* with Giordano, who was by no means averse to adapting his music to suit the special requirements of star tenors. Michael Henstock has revealed how Giordano prepared personalized versions of *Fedora* and *Andrea Chénier* for Fernando De Lucia (involving liberal downward transposition) and I have no doubt that Tamagno's extensive re-phrasing of much of the "Improvviso" carries the composer's authority. Although he sang the opera only in St. Petersburg and Buenos Aires, this aria figured frequently in his concert repertoire, and in fact his very last recording of it, matrix 270, is considered by some to be his finest record. The voice of the prompter is audible in matrix 16R (doubtless to steer the singer through the maze of short cuts) and the voice is not so closely recorded, not so warmly present, as in others of the series. With his brilliantly clear enunciation of the words, never divorced from a solid legato line and forward placing of the tone, he enlivens Chénier's denunciation of the clergy with thrilling snarling and biting effects,

then the voice fills out with sunshine in the ecstatic finale. The ending of the aria is not effectively written - *verismo* tenors such as Gigli or Pertile introduce sobbing to try to ginger up the climax - and Tamagno's impassioned declamation of "l'amor!" on high B flat seems a satisfactory solution. His individual phrasing reminds us that he is not of the *verismo* generation, and he arranges his breaths as though he were singing Ponchielli or Gomes: I find it very effective when he prepares a particularly thrilling B flat by singing "Gridai / vinto d'amor / ah! t'amo".

Now comes a marvellous change, with "O muto asil del pianto" from *Guglielmo Tell*. Matrix 17R FT is even more successful than the better-known 10" version. No other tenor has achieved such a haunting *mezza voce* in this aria, nor sung it with such ease. The upper G (as on "pianto") is taken softly, and the trumpet tones are reserved for the middle section: even here, however, he sings the climax of the upward scale (on "fuggir") softly. He restrains himself in the cadenza, singing with a gentle, mournful tone up to high C flat (instead of the C natural of the score): he is saving the thrilling, loud high notes for the cabaletta, which he had previously recorded on two 10" takes.

Masters 18, 19, 20 and 21 were private recordings not intended for sale to the public. The mysterious 18R introduces an unnamed baritone who sings "O casto fior" from Massenet's *Il Re di Lahore*. Since it appears to feature an elderly gentleman who sings with remarkable skill and sensitivity, collectors since 1948, when a unique advance sample pressing first came to light, have hoped that it might be Antonio Cotogni (1831-1918) and I myself have eagerly embraced this attribution in more than one article. However, Dottor Piovano's researches show that Tamagno and Cotogni scarcely ever met, and now we timorously suggest that the baritone is more likely to be Tamagno's brother Giovanni. It is true that he sounds about 75 whereas Giovanni was only 45 at the time, but it is likely that he had not kept his voice in trim, especially as he functioned as an agent for Francesco's properties in Argentina for a number of years, returning to Italy in 1903 (just in time, perhaps, to record?) and was certainly an inhabitant of the villa in Varese at the time of Francesco's final illness. To confuse the issue, also at the villa in 1905 was the baritone Giovanni Albinolo, a particular friend of Tamagno's who had been assisting artist at several of his concerts, the first perhaps being Act IV of *La forza del destino* at the Teatro Comunale, Carpi on the 8th September 1900 and the last at the Teatro Vittorio Emanuele, Turin on the 13th September 1903. It seems unlikely that a baritone so tremulous and elderly sounding as the singer of "O casto fior" would have been invited to sing in public in duet with Francesco Tamagno, so Giovanni Tamagno remains a more likely suspect than Giovanni Albinolo! (However, it would be interesting to know when Albinolo was born!) Francesco had sung once or twice in public with his elder brother Domenico, also a tenor - for example, a duet for two tenors in Mercadante's *Il bravo*. The only documented occasion on which Francesco and Giovanni sang a duet together (title unknown) was in a concert in Turin in 1885. It is interesting to observe that in a

concert in which both Francesco and Giovanni sang at the Teatro Alfieri, Turin in the same year, Giovanni sang Filippo Filippi's song "Perché" which would not only become a favourite of Francesco's, but was destined to be the last song he ever sang in public. This perhaps sheds new light on the "Perché" mystery: according to the EMI archives the 10" matrix number 3005 FT, now containing Tamagno's first (unpublished) attempt at the "Improvviso", had originally been allotted to the song "Perché", which was subsequently re-numbered 3023 and even planned for issue under the catalogue number 52685. As various collectors own special pressings from this master, we know that the song recorded is in fact "Ti vorrei rapire" by Stanislao Gastaldon and the singer is a baritone. Where did G & T pick up the name of Filippi's "Perché", scarcely a popular ditty? It seems likely that someone recorded it there in the villa at Ospedaletti, and it could have been Giovanni - or did he then, at the last moment, substitute the rather better known "Ti vorrei rapire"? I like the idea that, after recording five sides, Francesco said: "All right, Giovanni, now you have a go!" and Will Gaisberg, having initially numbered the wax master 3005, decided that it was inappropriate for an amateur baritone who had no contract with G & T to figure in the Tamagno series, and proceeded to number Francesco's next recording 3005II. By the time they got to the recording session that Paul D. Lewis designates "Session III" (or perhaps at the end of Session II) some agreement had been reached about placing "Ti vorrei rapire" back in the list by re-numbering it 3023.

"O casto fior" is a distinguished piece of singing. The recitative is delivered with authority, the aria persuasively murmured in a pleasing *mezza voce*. Although some notes are tremulous, the overall effect is of a firmly supported voice that has aged comfortably and "thinned out" in quality rather like Battistini's or Santley's. The emission is pure and round, free of the guttural resonances of the "modern" school of baritones - Ruffo, Stracciari and their imitators. Like Battistini and Lassalle, the creator of the role of Scindia, our anonymous charmer lingers lovingly over the melody with deliberate *portamento* and expressive *rubato*. Giovanni Tamagno, if it is indeed he, also sings the great duet "Sì, pel ciel marmoreo giuro" from *Otello* with Francesco, another "creator's record" the very existence of which was unknown until work began on this edition of re-pressings. He proves equal to the occasion, articulating the triplet figures cleanly. If it seems rather a pity that *Otello* politely allows Iago to stand nearer the recording horn, a courtesy that Tamagno would certainly not have extended to Maurel, we can hear how grandiloquent, how thrilling is his phrasing; the deliberate tempo and free time at the cadences are just like his other *Otello* recordings. We are not surprised when he transposes the word "sterminator" an octave higher - he must have done this even in his prime. It is rather more of a shock when tenor and baritone both introduce an appoggiatura on "stendo", just before the last phrase. The old lion snatches plenty of extra breaths but still cavorts with ease above the stave, pronouncing the words clearly and nonchalantly sailing up to the B flats.

Hélion's prayer "Dei del patrio suol" ("Dieux de mon pays!") from *Messaline* is interesting because of the changes from the score that De Lara must have written in for Tamagno; the record is a worthwhile addition to his legacy, a particularly expansive and incisive piece of declamation. He appears to have transposed the prayer a semitone up, taking him up to a high B natural that is not perfectly supported, and ending on a typical example of Tamagno's ability to declaim words on the high A. No doubt with singers like Calvé, Tamagno and Renaud this exotic pseudo-French music would be evocative and stirring.

The title catalogued in the archives as "Ave Maria" is more properly described as "A Santa Maria di Oropa", words by Giovanni Camerana, music by Luigi Mapelli, composed for the wedding of Margherita Tamagno and Alfredo Talamona, and Tamagno duly sang it at the ceremony on the 6th January 1899 in the chapel of his villa at Varese. In his biography (Francesco Tamagno, (Otello fu...), *La vita del grande tenore*, Torino, Ente Morale Scuole Officine Serali, 1990) Mario Ruberi prints the vocal score of the entire composition, which is in A major and takes the form of an extended melodious recitative, un-memorable as music but lovingly declaimed by Tamagno, in devotional mood. The music lies comfortably in his upper medium range with effective flights above the staff to a sustained G sharp at "Ascolti il coro", several high As and a sustained B flat. Preparing for this high B flat Tamagno, as so often in his records, instead of singing the previous note as written - here it is an F natural - anticipates the high note and so, in fact, sings two B flats where only one is written!

It was Will Crutchfield who pointed out to me that Tamagno must have been perhaps the only singer ever to introduce the prompter into the recording studio - we hear him at work particularly in the *Hérodiade* selections (which Tamagno had then not yet sung on the stage) but also in the death of Otello and elsewhere. Even in his old warhorses he sometimes misses his entry, and there is a hilarious moment in an unpublished take of "Re del ciel" from *Il profeta* when, probably thrown off balance by the pianist's uncertainty about the cuts in the coda, he fluffs his high B flat, and we hear him exclaim: "Una parola!" - which we might translate as "Easier said than done!" For all his perhaps slipshod approach to questions of musical precision and accuracy of score-reading, Tamagno is one of the most charismatic and communicative singers ever to record his voice for the wonderment of future generations. He had his own, simple but deeply felt musicianship and feeling for a phrase or a line that allowed him to reach heights of powerful expression. As he once told Verdi: "You see, Maestro, many singers are greater artists than I am, but no one has more heart." The privilege of listening to the complete recordings of Tamagno helps us to realise his immense stature among the great names of music drama.

A touching gramophonic footnote: on the 22nd October 1898 Tamagno went to hear Enrico Caruso in the world première of Cilea's *L'Arlesiana* at the Teatro Lirico, Milan, and on the way out said to the editor of Il Secolo: "He will be the greatest of all of us." As part of his contract with G & T Tamagno was presented with a few free gramophones and records, and he chose one record each of De Lucia and Alessandro Moreschi, but six of Caruso.

Michael Aspinall, 2007