



John McCORMACK

**1910 Acoustic
Recordings**

BIZET

PUCCINI

DONIZETTI

VERDI

GOUNOD

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New restorations by Ward Marston

John McCormack (1884-1945)

The McCormack Edition Vol. 1

‘Presumably,’ Robert Tuggle writes in *The Golden Age of Opera*, ‘there were Irish tenors before John McCormack ... just as there have been pale imitations ever since’. It is a graceful way to express a simple truth: namely, that John McCormack is unique among the small but cherished band of Hibernian tenors. This Irishman also holds a special place among the great singers of our time. In his vocal prime he was not only one of the finest tenors on the operatic stage, but also a supreme Handel and Beethoven stylist. Later he would develop into a remarkable interpreter of German lieder. However, it was McCormack’s unique ability as an interpreter of songs in English that made him one of the greatest recitalists of all time and, for nearly three decades in the twentieth century, the most popular concert artist in the world.

Born in the small Irish town of Athlone on 14th June 1884, John McCormack seemed destined for a life in the civil service until he won the gold medal in a Dublin music festival in 1903. For the first time he realised that a singing career was possible. With the help of local supporters, he travelled in 1905 to Milan where he began his only sustained period of vocal training. This was under Vincenzo Sabatini (the father of the novelist), and by 1906 the fledgling tenor was deemed ready for his first appearance in opera, in Mascagni’s *L’amico Fritz* in Savona, a small town on the Gulf of Genoa. The following year, after his Covent Garden début in *Cavalleria Rusticana*, McCormack quickly gained recognition with the London public in such operas as *La Sonnambula*, *Rigoletto*, *Lakmé*, *Roméo et Juliette* and *Lucia di Lammermoor*. His attempts to establish a career in Italy met with failure, however, and by 1909 he was forced to admit that he simply did not have the weight and quality of voice that Italian audiences demanded.

It was during these early years in London that McCormack undertook a period of further study. This

time he was self-taught. The recordings he made for the Odéon company between 1906 and 1909 clearly indicate that Sabatini’s instruction, coupled with McCormack’s innate musicality and sense of language, had been a solid foundation. His ability to emulate his fellow tenors, especially Bonci and De Lucia, along with his capacity for sheer hard work, led to a rapid artistic growth that is without parallel in the history of the gramophone.

By 1909 McCormack was a fully matured artist looking for fresh opportunities, one of which presented itself when Oscar Hammerstein, at Luisa Tetrazzini’s insistence, invited McCormack to sing at his Manhattan Opera House. In November 1909 the tenor made his New York operatic début opposite Tetrazzini in *La Traviata*. He was well received and virtually all the critics praised his singing, with one commenting indirectly on his poor acting ability by noting that this young Irishman came close to making Alfredo a likeable character.

McCormack enjoyed an advantage in the United States that few other singers could hope for: when he arrived he had an enthusiastic audience ready and waiting for him. The large number of Irish immigrants living in America may have left their native land, but their emotional ties to hearth and home were deep. In McCormack they found their ideal minstrel. From his earliest days in London, McCormack had often sung in concert and had earned a reputation as a singer of song, a reputation that was quite separate from his work as an opera singer. In fact, it has been said that the real beginning of what would become his more important career as a recitalist dates from 1907, when McCormack first sang Samuel Liddle’s *A Farewell* and caused something of a minor sensation in London.

Until the beginning of the First World War, McCormack continued to be heard in opera and concert on both sides of the Atlantic. In 1914 Lilli

Lehmann invited the tenor to sing his already legendary Don Ottavio in her forthcoming production of *Don Giovanni* in Salzburg. It was a dream destined not to come true; McCormack and his wife were on their way to Austria when war was declared. The singer spent the war years in the United States and decided to become an American citizen. It was a decision that would cause him great difficulty. The British viewed him as a traitor, and he became so unpopular in England that he was unable to give a London recital until 1924.

Following the war McCormack gave concerts in Paris, toured central Europe (giving a memorable recital in Berlin) and made what would be his final opera appearances in Monte Carlo. His 1923 creation of the rôle of Gritzko in the newly edited *La Foire de Sorotchintzi* by Mussorgsky was his farewell to the opera stage. Three years later he would make an extended tour of the Orient, and in 1929 he answered the call of Hollywood, starring in his only full-length motion picture *Song O' My Heart*. His co-star was the young Maureen O'Sullivan, then at the beginning of her film career. After several more seasons of touring the United States and England, McCormack bade farewell to his public at London's Albert Hall in 1938. He continued to record until 1942, and made fund-raising tours and BBC broadcasts in support of the war effort. He retired to Ireland where he died just outside Dublin on 16th September 1945.

When Calvin Childs of the Victor Company heard McCormack shortly after the singer's arrival in America, he realised that this lyric tenor would fit extremely well into the Red Seal catalogue. The commercial potential of the singer's nationality was also not lost on the record company's executives. After hearing McCormack's test records of *Killarney* and *Fra poco a me ricovero* - so successful that Victor at once upgraded them to regular issues - they approached HMV to ask if they would share the cost of buying out the singer's contract with Odéon. The British affiliate, headed by HMV's Fred Gaisberg, refused to do so, and McCormack never forgave that lack of faith; to the end

of his career he would openly insult Gaisberg at every opportunity. HMV had ample time to regret this error of judgement, as McCormack went on to become one of the best-selling recording artists in history (one year he even outsold Caruso).

The present recording documents the first year of McCormack's great career in the United States. It also reflects his twin careers in opera and concert, and indicates how early he began to favour the recital hall over the opera house. The recorded output for 1910 is equally divided between songs and arias, but in the following year songs outnumber arias threefold. The *Lucia di Lammermoor* and *Lakmé* arias are documents of his Covent Garden days with Tetrazzini, but an even more memorable souvenir of their association is the *Per viver vicino a Maria* from *La Fille du Régiment*. The aria, for which McCormack himself translated the text into Italian, seems more comfortable for him than the excerpts from *Lucia*, and his extensive use of pianissimo shows how he could use one of the loveliest parts of his voice on the opera stage. *De' miei bollenti spiriti* is a model of Verdi singing; both recitative and aria ripen beautifully in McCormack's hands.

Throughout his career in opera, McCormack favoured the works of Puccini, especially *La Bohème*, *Madama Butterfly* and *Tosca*. Although some thought Mario Cavaradossi too heavy for his voice, McCormack clearly relished the part and sang it often. His Puccini is warm and focused, with a tone and style well suited for a Rodolfo or a Pinkerton. As is the case with many of his opera recordings, *Che gelida manina* is taken at a rather brisk tempo, while the *Ah, Mimi, tu più non torni* benefits from the artistic affinity he always shared with Sammarco.

In some cases McCormack's opera recordings represent a wish list of rôles he would have liked to perform had his voice been stamped from a different metal. While Don José and Enzo Grimaldo from *Carmen* and *La Gioconda* may have been too strenuous for him, he would have made an elegant Nemorino in Donizetti's *L'elisir d'Amore* - his *Una furtiva lagrima*

is elegant and pure, avoiding any old-fashioned mannerisms.

As an opera singer McCormack soon realised that he would never be a Caruso. He did not have to emulate the great Italian, however, for the enormous enthusiasm of his concert audiences, whose demand for encores often doubled the length of his programmes, led him virtually to abandon opera in favour of concert tours. It was a wise and profitable decision. Caruso was without a rival in the opera house, but McCormack reigned supreme in the concert hall. As a recitalist, McCormack brought his audiences into the heart of every song. Francis Robinson expressed it best when he recalled McCormack's total immersion in the music of each song: 'He looked the mood of the instrumental introductions'. When we realise that this was the atmosphere he created before he sang we begin to understand the effects he could create through his art.

During the early period of his American years, McCormack possessed a rich tenor sound, sweet and almost plummy in its lower part, bright, clear and poised in the upper register. He was capable of the most beautiful shading throughout the voice, even to the trademark pianissimi that he often used. This richness of tone - one critic likened its effect to tasting a spoonful of honey - changed in a few years to a less fulsome sound, but here it is at its sweetest, as we can hear in *I Hear You Calling Me* (his signature song throughout his career) and the beautifully expressed *Drink to Me Only with Thine Eyes*. These songs and others are taken at an uncharacteristically slower tempo, almost as if the tenor wanted to luxuriate in the beauty of his own voice. One striking quality of McCormack's singing is the utter modernity of his technique. When we listen to this tenor we hear no nineteenth-century mannerisms, no trills held too long

for special effect, no vibrato in the place of true emotion.

Ever mindful of his Irish-American record buyers, McCormack was careful to include many Irish selections in the Victor Red Seal catalogue. Although some of these were closer to Tin Pan Alley than to Dublin, all were redolent of the Emerald Isle. No one could sing Thomas Moore's Irish melodies as McCormack did, and we are most fortunate to find Moore selections in this set. This has added significance when we realise that during this period the singer preserved almost as much Moore as he published during the rest of his recording career. Hamilton Harty's *My Lagan Love* reveals a further dimension to McCormack's musicianship. There is an absence of operatic style in McCormack's chaste interpretation, and every inflection is placed at the service of the singer's ancient musical culture. His approach is a model for classical artists who find themselves venturing beyond their own training.

Other Irish material may fall below the standards of Harty and Moore, but surely no one else has revealed the hidden beauties of *The Snowy Breasted Pearl* as McCormack does in his 1910 recording. His ability to extract every nuance and colouration in *Molly Bawn* gives us the impression (as the singer so often did) that we are listening to music that is far more important than it really is. The two different recordings of *Molly Bawn* give us a rare insight into McCormack's exploration of a song's possibilities. The first take from 1910 shows a beautifully shaped vocal line, but the second version, made a year later, will reveal a more polished approach to the piece. Not only has the phrasing become more fluid but the last part of the song has been reshaped.

John Scarry

A Note on the Song Texts

Throughout his career John McCormack's managers were repeatedly advised to save money by not printing the words to songs in the concert programmes; the singer's diction was so clear that his audiences did not need the texts. Every record McCormack made proves this point, but the words and phrases in some of his songs are rather removed from modern English and require explanation.

The words of *Annie Laurie* are generally accessible, but a few Scottish terms need clarification. '*Maxwelton's braes*' are the steep slopes or hillsides near Maxwelton, while '*bonnie*' means 'beautiful'. In the phrase '*Like dew on th' gowan lying*' the drops of water are seen on white and yellow field flowers, and by supplying the single word '*fall*' at the conclusion of the line, we understand the '*fa'o*' her fairy feet'.

Scottish English is understandable with a minimum of explanation, but Irish words and phrases are even less familiar to the modern listener. A number of these words come directly from Gaelic, while others are Anglicised spellings that retain the sounds and meanings of the ancient language. For McCormack's Irish-American audiences and record buyers, these echoes of an Ireland filled with lore and legend were precious reminders of the culture they had left behind; for his other listeners they were beautifully produced musical sounds, exotic hints of another world they would never experience directly.

Predictably, most of these old Irish words are terms of endearment. For example, in *Kathleen Mavourneen*, '*Mavourneen*' means 'my love' or 'my dear', and in *Mother Machree* '*Machree*' is from the Gaelic '*mo chroldhe*' - 'of my heart' in Irish. A similar transformation of a Gaelic word forms part of the title of the song *Molly Bawn*. Samuel Lover, writing in the nineteenth century, preserved the sound and meaning of the original Gaelic '*bain*' (meaning 'light' or 'fair') by spelling it '*bawn*' for the convenience of his many English-speaking readers.

In *The Snowy Breasted Pearl* two phrases are mixtures of English and Gaelic. The second verse contains the words '*sweet cail'n og a stóir*' referring to a sweet young colleen (a young girl), while in the fourth verse, '*my cail'n geal mo chroidhe*' could be translated as 'shining (or fair) colleen of my heart'.

The most authentic example of Irish folk-song in this set is undoubtedly Sir Hamilton Harty's arrangement of *My Lagan Love*. The song contains only one Gaelic word '*lenanshee*', and Harty's published edition of the song identifies this as a 'fairy mistress'. It may be more idiomatic, however, to think of '*lenanshee*' in its more probable form, namely the Gaelic '*leanbh na si*' ('child of the fairies'). In any case, in the best spirit-world tradition of Irish folklore, the woman of the song has cast an almost other-worldly spell over the narrator. In addition to the use of '*lenanshee*', the text of *My Lagan Love* contains a number of older constructions that merit some attention. '*There blows a lily fair*' is better understood as '*There blooms a lily fair*', and '*her shieling lorn*' refers to the woman's isolated shepherd's hut. The use of '*sparcs*' in the line '*She spares the bogwood fire*' is more obscure. It may mean that she simply adds more wood, but we are safe in assuming the word to mean 'tends' or 'takes care of'.

John Scarry

Producer's Note

In assembling the first recordings made by John McCormack for the Victor Talking Machine Company, I have made every effort to secure the finest primary sources available, and have paid scrupulous attention to the correct pitching of each disc. All the records are presented in chronological order except where noted (e.g. the two Lucia arias have been grouped together), and all alternative or unpublished takes which have been traced are included. Vocally and artistically, these 1910 acoustic recordings stand among McCormack's finest. The sound quality of the records is remarkably full; there is none of the piercing, constricted quality found in many of the tenor's later acoustic Victor records. All the records play at the usual speeds, ranging from 76 to 77.5 rpm. Surprisingly, *The Minstrel Boy* and *Drink to Me Only with Thine Eyes* are pitched in F sharp/G flat major. Despite the unusual key, the timbre of McCormack's voice is consistent with the other records of the period. From the group of opera arias, only *Che gelida manina* and *Salve dimora* are transposed, each a semitone below score pitch. It is worth noting that two of McCormack's rarest Victor records are to be found in this volume. *I Hear You Calling Me* and *Molly Bawn*, both recorded in 1910, were replaced within a year by alternative versions. The 1911 recording of *Molly Bawn*, incidentally, is sung in E, a semitone higher than the 1910 version in E flat.

I am greatly indebted to John Bolig and James Cartwright for their discographic assistance, and especially to Lawrence Holdridge for providing me with pristine copies of much of the published material.

Ward Marston

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1 DONIZETTI: Fra poco a me ricovero (from <i>Lucia di Lammermoor</i>) 3 i 1910; C 8535-1 (Victor 88215)	3:22	12 GOUNOD: Salve dimora, casta e pura (from <i>Faust</i>) 10 iii 1910; C 8694-1 (Victor 88230)	4:16
2 DONIZETTI: Tu che a Dio spiegasti l'ali (from <i>Lucia di Lammermoor</i>) 23 iii 1910; C 8740-1 (Victor 88249)	3:42	13 MARSHALL: I Hear You Calling Me 10 iii 19 10; B 8695-1 (Victor 64120)	3:48
3 BALFE: Killarney 3 i 1910; C 8594-1 (Victor 74157)	3:43	14 MARSHALL: When Shadows Gather 10 iii 1910; B 8696-1 (Victor 64127)	3:10
4 BIZET: Il fior che avevi a me dato (from <i>Carmen</i>) 7 i 1910; C 8538-1 (Victor 88216)	3:52	15 PUCCINI: Ah, Mimì, tu più non torni (from <i>La Bohème</i>) with Mario Sammarco, baritone 23 iii 1910; C 8738-1 (Victor 89044)	3:05
5 BARNARD: Come back to Erin I ii 1910; C 8588-1 (Victor 74158)	4:00	16 DONIZETTI: Per viver vicino a Maria (from <i>La Fille du Régiment</i>) 23 iii 1910; C 8739-1 (Victor 88245)	3:33
6 PUCCINI: Che gelida manina (from <i>La Bohème</i>) I ii 1910; C 8589-2 (Victor 88218)	4:00	17 The Snowy Breasted Pearl (Old Irish Air; arr. Robinson) 3 iii 1910; C 8741-1 (Victor 74166)	5:31
7 DONIZETTI: Una furtiva lagrima (from <i>L'elisir d'Amore</i>) I ii 1910; C 8536-2 (Victor 88217)	4:02	18 DELIBES: Immenso vienteso ... Ah, vien al boscgliia (from <i>Lakmé</i>) 25 iii 1910; B 8750-1 (Victor 87063)	3:08
8 The Minstrel Boy (Old Irish Air) I ii 1910; B 8590-1 (Victor 64117)	2:51	19 My Lagan Love (Old Irish Air; arr. Sir Hamilton Harty) 25 iii 1910; B 8751-1 (Victor 64154)	2:57
9 Drink to Me Only with Thine Eyes (Old English Air) 4 iii 1910; C 8587-3 (Victor 74204)	3:25	20 Molly Bawn (Old Irish Air; arr. MacMurrough) 25 iii 1910; C 8752-1 (Victor 74157)	3:44
10 ANNE, LADY JOHN SCOTT: Annie Laurie 4 iii 1910; B 8683-1 (Victor 64138)	2:42	21 Has Sorrow Thy Young Days Shaded? (Old Irish Air) 25 iii 1910; C 8753-1 (Victor 74184)	3:21
11 VERDI: Lunge da lei ... De' miei, bollenti spiriti (from <i>La Traviata</i>) 10 iii 1910; C 8693-I (IRCC 96A; unpublished on Victor)	3:46		

All tracks with the Victor Orchestra



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John McCormack

The McCormack Edition, Vol. 1

The Acoustic Recordings (1910)

Playing
Time
75:58

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| 1 | DONIZETTI: Fra poco a me ricovero | 3:22 |
| 2 | DONIZETTI: Tu che a Dio spiegasti l'ali | 3:42 |
| 3 | BALFE: Killarney | 3:43 |
| 4 | BIZET: Il fior che avevi a me dato | 3:52 |
| 5 | BARNARD: Come back to Erin | 4:00 |
| 6 | PUCCINI: Che gelida manina | 4:00 |
| 7 | DONIZETTI: Una furtiva lagrima | 4:02 |
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| 10 | ANNE, LADY JOHN SCOTT: Annie Laurie | 2:42 |
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| 15 | PUCCINI: Ah, Mimì, tu più non torni | 3:05 |
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| 18 | DELIBES: Immenso vientesio ... Ah, vien al boscaglia | 3:08 |
| 19 | My Lagan Love (Old Irish Air; arr. Sir Hamilton Harty) | 2:57 |
| 20 | Molly Bawn (Old Irish Air; arr. MacMurrough) | 3:44 |
| 21 | Has Sorrow Thy Young Days Shaded? (Old Irish Air) | 3:21 |

Described by Jean de Reszke as 'the true redeemer of *bel canto* singing', the Irish tenor John McCormack (1884-1945) had an extensive operatic career in his early years, singing at Covent Garden and both the Manhattan and Metropolitan opera houses in New York. Many of the arias from his early rôles, including excerpts from Donizetti's *Lucia di Lammermoor*, Bizet's *Carmen*, Gounod's *Faust*, Delibes's *Lakmé*, Verdi's *La Traviata* and Puccini's *La Bohème*, are featured on this CD. Along with the operatic items there are many beloved Irish songs, including such favourites as *I Hear You Calling Me*, *The Snowy Breasted Pearl* and *My Lagan Love*.

Producer and Audio Restoration: Ward Marston • Production Coordinator: Jeffrey Miller
Special thanks to John Bolig, Jim Cartwright, Lawrence Holdridge, Peter Lack, William Moran, John Scarry and the Metropolitan Opera Archives
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A complete track list can be found on page 8 of the booklet
Cover image: John McCormack (1884-1945) (Lebrecht Music and Arts)

