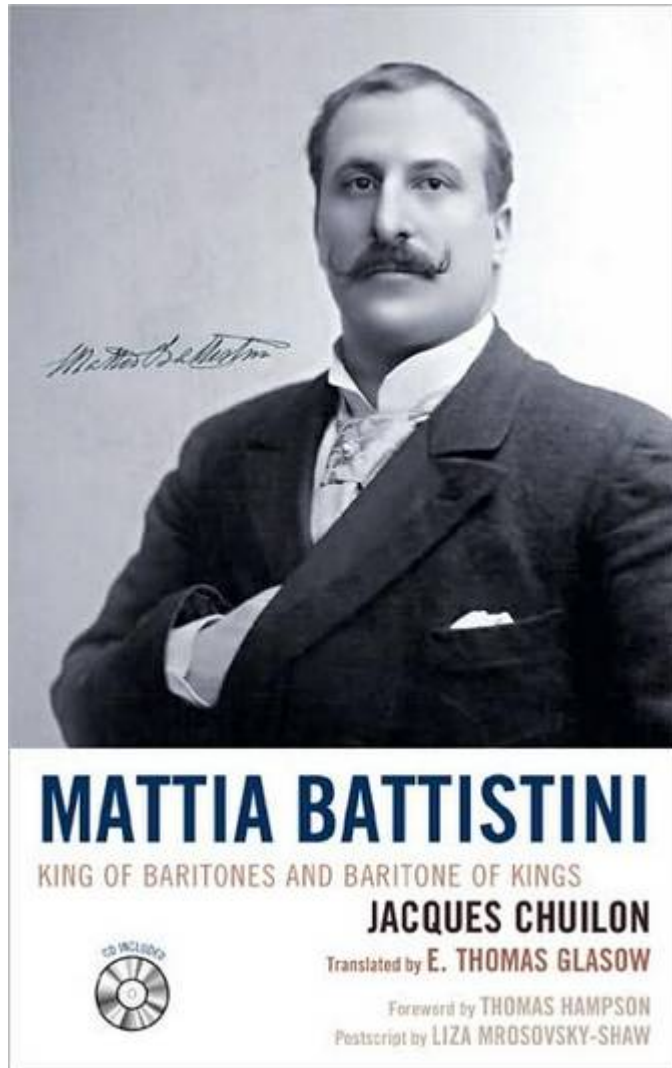


Recent online reviews



Mattia Battistini, King of Baritones and Baritone of Kings

By Jacques Chuilon



www.amazon.com

At last, a book on Mattia Battistini in English. This is not an intimate biography. However, it does follow his career in such detail as may be gleaned from the many newspaper and magazines that reviewed his performances. It is not only a study of Battistini's

career but about his voice. Chuilon states on page 125 that it is one of his aims to analyze the image of the artist as perceived by the public; of course the public is often incorrect. Chuilon utilizes the previous biographies written in the last 100 years, mostly to debunk the erroneous statements made by those authors. Chuilon in fact does a lot of debunking in the course of this book. He makes it his business to shoot down the myths and prejudices, ignorance and foolish statements made over the years by critics and "historians".

Chuilon obviously has a vast knowledge of the art of voice and speaks clearly about it, not like some writers on the subject whose taste for mysticism takes the place of experience and understanding. He is familiar with the singers who made acoustic recordings and compares them with finely tuned analytical powers in a clear-cut manner, not just giving opinions but reasons why the art of bel canto is represented by Battistini and few others. He understands performance practice and the objectives which make different styles so interesting to lovers of old vocal recordings. It seems he also has a view of the big picture, that of Art in general, and explains many aesthetic concepts about the art of voice (and its decline) in the twentieth century which can be applied to other arts.

For those wanting the intimate biography, I cannot condemn this book for what it is not. It mentions Battistini's wife only a few times. One wonders where all the letters are between these two considering Battistini's long stretches spent in Russia. But the book does fill a gap that has existed too long. Let someone else write the conventional bio. I hope this book interests someone to do that. Chuilon quotes many newspaper reviews, this seems to be his main source, besides the previous bios in Italian and several other publications long out of print. This book contains a good consolidation of writings that one would never be able to find elsewhere. He does quote a few of Battistini's letters in the latter part of the book. I would like to have read more about his personal relationships, although there is a postscript mentioning his lovechild with a rich Russian woman. This is something not in the original French version. But something in the French version that is not in this English translation is the wealth of photos and pictures that make the French book into an art book with a text.

A CD comes with this book and covers Battistini's career, his first recording, his last recording and 17 more in between. The audio restoration on these acoustical recordings is really great, and I think compares with the two maestros in this field, Marston and Zwarg.

I expect most collectors of the music on vocal 78s will buy this book and read it since they, like me, have been longing for one

for years. The info on Battistini would be enough to want it, but the fun I had and the benefit I gained from Chuilon's knowledge of voice and his clarity in discussing matters pertaining to it were quite unexpected for me and held at least as much of my interest as the actual bio info. The very last part of the book should be required reading for music majors and anyone in a professional capacity whose business involves understanding voice.

Jeff Stevens
Austin, Texas, USA



Jacques Chuilon in New York City, December 2009, to promote *Battistini, King of Baritones and Baritone of Kings*

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amazon.com.uk

★★★★★ **a worthy biography of the greatest baritone**

5 Oct 2009

By **Col William Russell**  (Springfield, VA)

At last! A biography in English of the greatest baritone in recorded history.

One aspect I enjoy of the book is that M. Chuilon doesn't spend needless time about his parents and childhood. He gets right into the career with only the necessary information about the early years. He also does something no other biographer of great singers does in that he gives us conflicting contemporary reviews and works to find a common thread. Quite outstanding and gives far more of the artist than simply copying reviews, whether they be accurate or not.

In addition, M. Chuilon adds subchapters about Battistini's recording sessions during the years in question and discusses the recordings in clear, analytical detail. I know and enjoy Battistini's recordings but his notes made me go back and re-evaluate some.

Another plus of this book is a CD included with it. The remasterings - also by the author - are excellent plus he offers readers access to his website that offer fifty arias by Battistini for download. I regret to say that I haven't had the time to explore this but if the downloads are the same quality as the book and CD, they are excellent.

Highly recommended!

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“Wagner Notes,” December 2009, published by

The Richard Wagner Society of New York

Battistini and Bel Canto

Jacques Chuilon. *Mattia Battistini—King of Baritones and Baritone of Kings*. Translated from the French by E. Thomas Glasow, with Foreword by Thomas Hampson and Postscript by Liza Mrosovksy-Shaw. Scarecrow Press, Inc., Lanham, MD. ©Copyright 2009 by Jacques Chuilon. 405 pages, 24 B & W photographs, compact disc, hardcover. List price: \$85.00. Special price: \$60.00 (valid only through 1/31/10).

“For Battistini the score is only a blueprint of how the work should sound and therefore somewhat incomplete and imperfect. It is a matter of rediscovering and reconstituting the music by means of this *aide-memoire*, which, fortunately, consists of more than just paper: besides its innate musical properties, it draws on oral tradition.”—Jacques Chuilon.

Them’s fightin’ words, not only to 21st-Century musical sensibilities, but even to those back at the turn of the last century; yet they very accurately describe much of Mattia Battistini’s artistic *credo* when it came to his art, an art that he practiced gloriously for a half-century. And this has to make any good Wagnerite wonder about what the Master may have been looking for in his artists since, outside of Lilli Lehmann, Battistini is surely the only singer we can hear in his prime on records about whom Richard Wagner had laudatory things to say. You can bet the farm that Wagner never considered any of his own music “incomplete or imperfect.” Indeed, when our heroic 24-year-old subject appeared as the Herald in an 1880 Rome *Lohengrin*, Wagner, who was

in Rome to oversee things, predicted great things for this impressive young baritone and demanded that he learn Telramund, Wolfram, and the Dutchman. No doubt he, Battistini learned Telramund quickly enough to take it over in subsequent Roman performances from the great Giuseppe Kaschmann, and then kept it in his repertoire for a dozen years, while subsequently mastering Wolfram for a two-decades-plus career run. There was no Dutchman in his future stage life, but he did program "*Die Frist ist um*" (in Italian, of course) at concerts for a good while. And that is pretty much our hero's entire history with Wagner's music. So, why, you may well ask, is his biography being reviewed in *Wagner Notes*? What is this singer's relevance to Wagner beyond his having sung two of the lighter baritone roles of the Wagner canon?

Well, we all know that Wagner had great respect for the bel canto style of singing, and, although he often writing music seemingly inimical to such stylistic possibilities, he always claimed to want his roles sung in the most beautiful manner. Yet, within two decades of his passing, his widow Cosima had instituted and encouraged the practice at Bayreuth of a style of singing that came to be known as the "Bayreuth Bark" ("Bayreuth Wobble" came later). Even had he sung German, Battistini could never have been happy there, nor would Cosima have been happy with him.

Still, the very fact that he found such favor with Wagner may be, when listening to his recordings, as good an indication as we can imagine of what the Master really wanted his heldenbaritones to sound like. We cannot know for sure, of course, and there's precious little Wagneriana from this point on, but you really should continue reading about this phenomenon called Battistini, if only to learn what the shouting (Wagner's and everybody else's) was all about.

For some 45 years it is no exaggeration to say that Battistini was to baritones, Italian or otherwise, what Adelina Patti had been to sopranos and Jean de Reszke and/or Enrico Caruso to tenors. Even the phenomenal Titta Ruffo, who was born as late as the year before Battistini's debut, could not displace him in the hearts and affections of vocal connoisseurs and his vast public over a quarter-century later, and Battistini's voice was, rather incredibly, still pretty much in its prime in the 1920s, when Ruffo's had

commenced its much-lamented deterioration. A quick look at his career is all we can accomplish here, but it should be enough.

Battistini was recognized as a great baritone almost from the time he stepped onto Rome's Teatro Argentina stage in 1878, at age 22, as Alfonso in *La Favorita*, a role that would remain in his *active* repertoire for 45 years! By his late 20s, he was recognized as the best baritone in Italy and the legitimate successor to Antonio Cotogni. By his mid-30s, he was popularly and critically acclaimed as the best baritone in the world, and most of those who claimed that honor for him were still doing so when he hit his mid-60s. By the time he reached 40, he had achieved a kind of legendary status and reputation that can no longer even be imagined, and the awe (not too strong a word) in which he was held by critics and audiences alike would continue until the day he died. As to the span of his career, just imagine this: Battistini's 1878 debut partner was Isabella Galletti-Gianoli, for whose voice Verdi had composed Amneris in 1870, yet in 1924 Battistini was still at the top of his game, singing Germont at the Vienna State Opera to Richard Tauber's Alfredo and Selma Kurz's Violetta.

Battistini loathed sea travel and, after two ocean voyages to South America while only in his mid-20s, he henceforth refused all offers, no matter how lucrative, to sing either in North or South America. Going in the other direction, as did so many of the greatest singers of his day (Sembrich, Masini, Scalchi, etc.), he became perhaps the biggest opera star in Russia, Poland, and all points east of Italy. Indeed, a huge portion of his career up to World War I took place in Russia, where his usual repertoire was supplemented with *Eugene Onegin*, *Pique dame*, *The Demon*, and even *Ruslan and Ludmilla*, these usually sung in Italian, but at least two of them also in Russian. Altogether he sang a total of 68 roles, these including six world premieres, and untold local premieres (the first performances in both Russia and Poland of *Andrea Chenier*, the Portuguese and Spanish premieres of *Otello*, even the Barcelona premiere of the great zarzuela *Maruxa*, etc.).

Except for unsuccessful operas and relatively undistinguished characters, his parts, once learned, seemed to remain in his repertoire for decades and the biggest and most difficult ones almost forever. At 60 he still had an *active* repertoire of over 20 roles, 10 of them still in place post-65. Nine of his

greatest roles remained in his *active* repertoire for over forty years! Easy ones? Not quite; they were Nelusko, Alfonso, Rossini's *Figaro*, Don Sallustio in *Ruy Blas*, Verdi's two baritone Don Carlos (in *Ernani* and *La Forza del Destino*), Germont, Renato, and (for an incredible 47 years!) Rigoletto. They made giants in those days.

Author Chuilon covers Battistini's career in astounding detail (some fifteen years of research went into his book), but it is very much a career biography rather than a personal one. In fact, the singer's childhood, decision to become a singer, and marriage take place in about two pages with not more than another two pages or so given over to family matters, his wife's passing, and his own final illness and death. That's about four pages out of 400, but it is surely the great career that most of us want to read about anyway. The author's basic modus operandi is to quote copiously from reviews, articles, and interviews of the time, and then comment, usually cogently but often quite maddeningly, on what has been written. And "copiously" in this case often means quotes of over one thousand words in length and, to differentiate them from the rest of the text, in quite small print. This is almost always a very good thing. Indeed, the reviews alone may be worth the price of the book, for they are fascinating; in no small measure due to the fact that the opera critics of those days, from England to Russia and at all points in between, seemed to have a vast and intricate knowledge of vocal music and the human voice allied to a wonderful ability to write about such things in terms understandable to laymen while not insulting to musicians, all at a level that beggars current critical practice, at least where vocal music is concerned.

Of course, Mr. Chuilon is a voice teacher of note himself, and is fully capable of discussing these earlier reviews, relating them to vocal practices of both Battistini's time and our own, and nitpicking at (and sometimes vociferously condemning) any slight, no matter how small or even unintended, to Battistini. One thing that Mr. Chuilon is, to the greatest possible degree without causing total impairment of his judgment, is a Battistini advocate. One example of dozens (perhaps hundreds) may suffice: The author dismisses, or justifies, Battistini's pure hatred of ocean travel with, "Through his fear of the sea, Battistini asserted himself as a man of the

world, of the tangible earth.”[!!!] Silly me, I thought he was just scared to death of getting eaten by sharks if the boat tipped over. But vociferous advocacy of a singing titan is hardly a crime, especially when it is backed up by so much excellent research and knowledgeable commentary by both the author and others. A sampling: There is a major piece of writing by George Bernard Shaw juxtaposing Battistini, his early semi-rival Maurel, and the character of Iago; a 4-page discussion of the difference between vibrato and tremolo; 17 pages given over to a comparison of Battistini’s and Chaliapin’s approaches to singing and interpretation; and a 45-page final chapter called “Posterity,” detailing what Battistini gave to it and what we can learn from his example And many more such fascinating pieces will be found in this text.

Included is an excellent 65-page performance chronology by Thomas G. Kaufman (some of the cast listings will make vocal historians want to scream and die), and a somewhat less good discography (no 78rpm issue numbers are given). There is an index, but a very incomplete one (just try finding Wagner in it!). Happily, however, there is a CD included of nineteen Battistini recordings, running from 1902 through 1924, so that you can listen to his beautiful, high, clear, resonant baritone—and just try to believe that he is 68 on that 1924 selection—while admiring a vocal style of which he was the last recorded practitioner. Even in his earliest years, Battistini was already considered a glorious throwback to an earlier age of bel canto singing, and this CD may give some idea of what it must have been like to be around when Bellini, Donizetti, and a young Verdi were plying their trade. This must have been a difficult book to translate into English, and it will not be an easy “read” for anyone not extremely interested in an earlier style of singing, the times in which that style started to disappear, those who did that singing and those who followed, and in sometimes highly technical writing on vocal technique and style. But for those who have such interests, and can occasionally pull themselves away from Bayreuth Bark and Wobble, it could almost be called a godsend.

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