



# The enduring magic of Mantovani

Mantovani's orchestral arrangements were the romantic soundtrack of the 1950s and 60s, and now those cascading strings are finding a new audience thanks to a 21st century collaboration

WORDS: Jeremy Blackmore

To millions of music fans around the world, Mantovani was a cherished conductor, composer and arranger. By the 1950s, his signature cascading strings helped make him Britain's most successful album act before The Beatles. He was also the first British artist to 'crack' America. During the sixties Mantovani moved to Poole, to a new home named Greensleeves, after one of his biggest selling recordings.

To Simon Mott though, Mantovani was simply his beloved grandfather. This month marks 41 years since Mantovani's death, and Simon, in his role as custodian of the Mantovani archive, is helping to keep the maestro's legacy alive. He fields regular requests for original scores from orchestras all over the world

who want to include a Mantovani piece in their repertoire.

Most recently he has collaborated with Decca on the release of a new album in which Mantovani's original orchestral 1950s and '60s recordings have been remastered and reimagined with new vocals. *The Magic of Mantovani*, features one of today's most sought-after singers, the award-winning Maltese tenor, Joseph Calleja. The album was released in September 2020 and reached number four in the Official Classical Artist Albums Chart.

Simon says the whole process has been very exciting for the Mantovani family. 'When we were approached by Decca, we were absolutely thrilled. It's not your parents who were enjoying Mantovani music, it was your grandparents. So, it's

just extraordinary to us, that this music from the 1950s and 60s can be revitalised in this way and be popular again.'

The family had some concerns that the original recordings might be overshadowed by Joseph Calleja's rich and powerful voice – particularly on such iconic recordings as *Charmaine* – but their fears were soon allayed.

'The amazing thing about Joseph is he has this real sensitivity,' says Simon. 'The way Mantovani interpreted melody with his strings, which are pretty much the closest instrument to the human voice, and the way Joseph interprets melodies, they actually made a very beautiful pairing.'

For a fully authentic sound, Joseph Calleja's voice was recorded using original 1950s microphones, the vocal track



was then laid down over the Mantovani orchestral tracks.

‘What really struck me was Joseph’s passion for Mantovani music,’ says Simon. ‘It was so mainstream in the 1950s and 60s, a little bit like ABBA in the 70s, then there was a sort of backlash. But maybe enough time has elapsed that people can just enjoy the nostalgia of the music.’

Simon says that it was the modern technology that the producers used in the recording that was the main reason that they came on board with the project. ‘All through his life Mantovani was an artist who embraced modern technology, almost more than any other.’

Indeed, Mantovani’s career was defined both by number one records and incorporating the latest advances in recording such as stereo. *Charmaine* was his first single to sell 1 million copies, and his hits included *Cara Mia* which spent 10 weeks at

No.1 in the UK Singles Chart. But it is the incredible catalogue of over 80 albums made across four decades, coinciding with the birth of the long-playing (LP) record, which propelled Mantovani to global superstar status and over 100 million record sales.

The magical, ‘shimmering’ effect was achieved with a full-size orchestra, warmed by the resonance of Decca’s new Full Frequency Range Recording (FFRR). Huge international record sales and a weekly radio programme brought the hallmark Mantovani orchestral sound into millions of homes. To mark his 25th anniversary with Decca, in 1965, as well as his 60th birthday, the company presented Mantovani with a silver baton.

‘Stereo, when it came in was such an innovation in the quality of recorded sound that everyone really wanted hi-fis that would play this music at this higher-level

quality. And Mantovani albums were seen as the go-to albums for that,’ says Simon. ‘He was the first artist to do an FFRR on record. So, there are all these milestones where Mantovani was right at the forefront of music recording’s evolution.’

Born in 1905, Annunzio Paolo Mantovani came from a musical family – his violinist father played under Toscanini at La Scala opera house in Milan. In 1912, the family moved from Venice to the Italian quarter in London. Life was tough, but young Annunzio’s musical talent was irrepressible and by the 1920s he had formed his highly successful dance band orchestra which proved to be one of the most popular British dance bands in concert and on BBC radio broadcasts until the outbreak of World War Two.

Though he enjoyed a glamorous professional life, Mantovani was very much a family man, modest about his success with a gentle sense of humour. In 1934 he married Winifred, and throughout the 1930s and 1940s the couple lived in north Kent, welcoming their children Ken in 1935 and Paula in 1939.

During the war Mantovani disbanded his Tipica dance

**ABOVE:**  
Mantovani with his Orchestra 1954/55 - one of Simon’s favourite images of his grandfather

**ABOVE RIGHT:**  
(Clockwise) Mantovani celebrating his 70th birthday with his family at ‘Greensleeves’ in Branksome Park, with children Ken and Paula on either side and wife Winifred behind

Simon Mott, who now looks after the Mantovani archive, as a little boy with his grandfather

Mantovani with his wife Winifred at the home of Gracie Fields in Capri

*‘Mantovani was right at the forefront of music recording’s evolution’*



**BELOW:** Mantovani working with Vera Lynn in the 1950s. He provided the orchestral accompaniment to 40 of Vera Lynne's famous wartime recordings, including *The White Cliffs of Dover*

band and joined the war effort. He provided the orchestral accompaniment to 40 of Vera Lynn's famous wartime recordings, including *The White Cliffs of Dover*. He also became the artistic director to Noël Coward during this period.

By the 1950s Mantovani and his family moved to London as his international stardom took off before relocating to Poole in

1961. There he commissioned the building of his new home Greensleeves in Burton Road, Branksome Park, complete with a grand piano-shaped front lawn and outside lights in the form of musical notes. The couple lived there until 1976 before moving into Martello Towers, on Ravine Road in Canford Cliffs. Following Winifred's death in 1977, Mantovani moved to Tunbridge

Wells to be closer to his children. To Simon, Mantovani was Nunu, an anglicised version of Nonno, the Italian for grandfather. He has some wonderful childhood memories of Mantovani the family man, from the excitement of staying in a beautiful Venetian hotel with a swimming pool to more down-to-earth moments, such as sitting on a ride-on mower with him.

'My presiding memory is the feeling that I had when I was with him,' says Simon. 'It was incredible to be so special to someone who themselves was very special. From passers-by in the street to waiters in the restaurants, everyone knew him.'

He recalls one special glimpse into his grandfather's professional life. During a visit to Greensleeves, young Simon asked his grandfather what the house name meant.

'He led me into his little study where he put this million selling record on the gramophone, and said, "This is *Greensleeves*". Then he started conducting to it. At the time I didn't know what he was doing. I was too young to go to one of his live classic concerts, but he showed me what he did even though at the time I really had



PHOTOS: MANTOVANI FAMILY ARCHIVE/DECCA

no idea what a conductor was.’ A chartered surveyor by day, Simon runs a property development business in London where the Mantovani archive fills an entire room with annotated notes for individual instruments.

‘We’re constantly sending out original scores to orchestras all around the world who enjoy playing the music. He was one of the first English acts to conquer the States, so, we get a lot of requests from there.

‘The family also ran a ghost orchestra. Our last performance was in 2017, when we went to China. And we’ve been touring up and down the East and West Coast of the USA, so that’s kept the music alive.’

Simon has also written a one-hour motivational talk entitled *What Makes a Superstar* about his grandfather’s remarkable life story. ‘It lists 10 secrets of his success, everything from courage of your convictions, find a mentor, form true collaborations to the final one, which is embrace modern technology,’ says Simon. ‘So, when Decca came to me and said, “we’ve got this new technology and we’d love to layer Joseph Calleja’s voice over the top of your grandfather’s recordings” I was really excited.’

Simon particularly enjoys giving speeches about this grandfather. ‘Just seeing the reaction on people’s faces,



Photo: Decca/Mitch Jenkins

whether it’s to schools or business, the Women’s Institute, or the University of the Third Age – the older generations, in particular, remember Mantovani music. My talk brings up lots of memories about what they were doing in the 1950s and 60s.’

Simon and his family have made the original orchestral scores available so Joseph Calleja can perform this music when live concerts are possible again. Calleja will also perform tracks from the new album as part of a series of videos to promote Maltese tourism. Mantovani’s great

grandchildren, are enjoying the album too. Simon’s son Casper, an accomplished dancer, even bought a record player so he could play the album. Simon hopes that Casper may be able to combine dance with Mantovani’s music.

Ultimately though, the music brings back memories of the man himself. ‘Listening to his music, there’s just incredible sensitivity, which is the same feelings that I had towards the man. He really felt things, and he really felt music, that’s what comes through for me whenever I hear those cascading strings.’ ♦

**ABOVE:** Maltese tenor Joseph Calleja has recorded *The Magic of Mantovani* using original 1950s microphones for the vocal tracks and overlaying this with the original Mantovani orchestral recordings

**BELOW:** A record shop display of Mantovani recordings

FOR YOUR LISTENING PLEASURE...

Here are three romantic recordings chosen by the Mantovani family:

**Charmaine** and **Cara Mia**

(a Mantovani composition) from the new Joseph Calleja album *The Magic of Mantovani* (Decca)

Another lovely composition is **Lonely Ballerina** from the LP *Mantovani - A Lifetime of Music 1905-1980* DPA 3089/90 and Decca F10395 (1954)

**Manhattan Lullaby** from the LP *Focus on Mantovani* FOS 3/4 and Decca LK/SKL 4561 (1963).

