

# THE MAGIC OF MANTOVANI

Long before The Beatles, one Kent-based musician cracked the US market and became a household name with his romantic strings. Now a Decca recording project is bringing his sound to a whole new audience

WORDS: Jeremy Blackmore ♦ PHOTOS: Decca/Mitch Jenkins and courtesy of the Mantovani family



Maestro Mantovani

To millions of music fans around the world, Mantovani was a cherished conductor, composer and arranger. He began his rise to fame while living in north Kent during the 1930s and 1940s, first with his tea-band orchestra and later as a leading recording artist with Decca. By the 1950s, his signature cascading strings helped make him Britain's most successful album act before The Beatles and become the first British artist to crack America.

To Simon Mott though, he was simply his beloved grandfather and, 40 years after Mantovani's untimely death, Simon is helping to keep the maestro's legacy alive.

From his home on the Sussex/Kent border, Simon acts as custodian of the Mantovani archive. He fields regular requests for original scores from orchestras all over the world who want to involve a Mantovani piece in their repertoire.

Most recently, he has collaborated with music label 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 acclaimed singers, the award-winning Maltese tenor Joseph Calleja, and recently reached number four in the official classical artist albums chart.

Simon says the whole process has been very exciting for the Mantovani family, including the maestro's children, Ken and Paula, who still live in

## ROMANTIC SOUNDTRACK

Looking for a soundtrack to your evening of love this Valentine's Day? Three of Mantovani's most romantic recordings, chosen for *Kent Life* by his family, include:

- Cara Mia
- Lonely Ballerina
- Manhattan Lullaby



**ABOVE:** Mantovani was Simon's beloved grandfather

Kent: 'When we were approached by Decca, we were just absolutely thrilled because obviously Mantovani music is lovely, but it's from a dim and distant past. It's not your parents who were enjoying Mantovani music, it was your grandparents. He was very popular in the 1950s, and then into the '60s – so it's a long time ago. It's just extraordinary to us that the music can be revitalised in this way and be popular again.'

The family had some nerves that the original recordings might be overshadowed by Calleja's exquisite, but rich, powerful voice. Though uncertain initially how the producers would pull off such a feat – particularly on such iconic recordings as *Charmaine* – their fears were soon allayed.

'The amazing thing about Joseph is he has this real sensitivity. The way Mantovani interpreted melody with his strings, which are of course pretty much the closest instrument to the human voice, and the way Joseph interprets melodies in terms of the way he sings, they actually make a beautiful pairing.

'We weren't quite sure how they were going to pull it off,

***'It's extraordinary to us that the music can be revitalised in this way and be popular again'***

but it's the power of modern technology. That was a key thing for us. Mantovani all through his life 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 one million copies and his hits included *Cara Mia*, which spent 10 weeks at number one in the UK Singles Chart. But it is the incredible catalogue of over 80 albums made across four decades, and coinciding with the birth of the long-playing 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



**ABOVE:**  
Happy family man: Mantovani with his wife Winifred and their children, Ken and Paula

record sales and a weekly radio programme installed 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 him 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 which would play this music at this higher-level quality. And Mantovani albums were seen as the go-to albums for that,' says Simon.

'Before that 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's evolution. So it's nice now they've got the innovation, the technical ability to overlay Joseph's voice with the original recordings, that Mantovani is again, one of the innovators.'

Joseph Calleja made these new recordings true to style, using Decca original 1950s microphones. '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. They were so mainstream, and then there's a sort of backlash. So, we were thinking, how's it going to work now? But time has elapsed and now people can just relax and enjoy the nostalgia of the music.'

Young Annunzio Paolo Mantovani was born into a musical family – his violinist father played under Toscanini at La Scala opera house in Milan. When he was just a small child, though, his family moved from Venice to the Italian quarter in London. Life was tough, but young Annunzio's talent for music was irrepressible and, by the 1920s, he had formed his highly successful dance 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 II.

For all his global success and glamorous professional life, Mantovani was very much a family man, modest about

his success with a gentle sense of humour.

He married Winifred in 1934 and throughout the 1930s and 1940s, the couple lived in Mottingham, in north Kent, from where Mantovani was able to easily commute into London. The couple welcomed their children, Ken in 1935, and Paula in 1939.

During the war, Mantovani disbanded his Tipica dance 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 Noel Coward during this period.

Living in north Kent during the war years, with its proximity to London, provided one or two scary moments.

Ken, who attended Bickley Hall Preparatory School in Kent, remembers a close encounter with a German fighter bomber.

'During the early days of the war, Dad and I were in the house alone and heard this noisy aircraft engine very close by.

Dad decided that we would rush out to the air raid shelter from the lounge patio doors in case whatever it was crashed into the house. We left the lounge doors and directly above us this German fighter bomber flew as we ran to the shelter. A few rear gunner bullets missed us, thank goodness. We remained in the shelter for a few minutes to get our breath back.'

By the 1950s, Mantovani and his family moved to London as his international career took off. At the beginning of the 1960s he relocated to Bournemouth.

The maestro regularly toured Britain both in the 1930s with his Tipica Orchestra and then, more famously, with his Orchestra of the fifties, sixties and seventies. These tours incorporated many major towns in Kent, such as

Chatham and Tunbridge Wells – which he also visited regularly to see his five grandchildren. Ken moved to the town in 1965 and Paula in 1978.

It was Tunbridge Wells where Mantovani spent the final years of his life, moving to the town in 1977 to be closer to his family following Winifred's death, and dying there himself in 1980.

To Simon, Mantovani was Nunnu, an anglicised version of Nonno, the Italian for grandfather: 'My presiding memory is the feeling that I had when I was with him – like being wrapped in a warm blanket.'

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 across the globe who enjoy playing the music, and we've run a "ghost orchestra", doing tours in the Far East and the US.'

Keeping his grandfather's music alive remains a labour of love for Simon. He has written about his grandfather and his life, and developed a one-hour motivational talk that he presents to schools, businesses and groups, such as the

## *'Keeping his grandfather's music alive remains a labour of love for Simon'*

University of the Third Age, entitled *What Makes a Superstar*.

'It lists 10 secrets of his success: everything from having the courage of your convictions to embracing modern technology, which is why it was weird 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 Mantovani's music."'

For now, the immediate future is with Calleja. Simon and his family have made the original orchestral scores available so the singer can perform this music when live concerts are possible again. Calleja will also perform music from the new album as part of a series of promotional videos to promote Maltese tourism.

Simon is pleased that his own children, Mantovani's great grandchildren, are enjoying the album. His son, Casper, an accomplished dancer, bought a record player especially so he could play the album. Simon hopes that one day 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, he really felt music, so that's what comes through for me.' ♦



**LEFT:**  
The young  
Mantovani