

RICHARD CROOKS

Neapolitan Love Song

Songs from
Operetta,
Musical Comedy
and Films



Original Recordings 1924-1933

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Probably the finest lyric tenor America ever produced – and in the 1930s on radio and in opera and concert certainly the most popular – Richard Crooks was born into a family of modest means, of Scottish and English ancestry, in Trenton, New Jersey on 26 June, 1900. His mother, Elizabeth Gore, herself a gifted amateur singer, gave Richard the boy-soprano soloist in Mendelssohn's *Elijah* in his native town, before a 10,000-strong audience, provided the necessary spur to his talent. His stage-partner at that baptism of fire, Ernestine Schumann-Heink (1861-1936), the German-American contralto star of the Metropolitan Opera, predicted great things for her ten-year-old colleague, all of which duly came to pass. Having reached puberty, Crooks began to re-train as a tenor. At fourteen he was already earning his own living, and financed his studies by manual occupations until 1917 when, with the US entry into World War I, he entered the US Armed Forces flying corps.

A year later Crooks was on active service with the US Airforce over France but, the war over, he returned to the USA and continued his vocal studies with vigour, principally (from 1920 onwards) with Schumann-Heink's accompanist, the influential, New York-based pianist-composer and vocal coach Frank La Forge (1879-1953), whose illustrious pupils included Crooks' fellow-Americans Marian Anderson and Lawrence Tibbett as well as the much-admired Spanish soprano import, Lucrezia Bori. Under La Forge's tutelage Crooks first won fame in oratorio (the curriculum in which he would also end his career) and in 1922 the hopeful young tenor sang in nine concerts with the New York Symphony Orchestra under its prestigious conductor Walter Damrosch. The success of these led to a further series of engagements across the States and, indirectly, to his first Victor recording contract, in 1923. In an item from an early session, **Red, Red Rose** (from incidental music to Rudolph Valentino's 1924 Paramount silent-screen vehicle *Monsieur*

Beaucaire) Crooks simultaneously offers us a fine sample of his youthful voice and a prime early example of recorded film-music.

During 1925 Crooks made his first European concert tour. His venues included London, Belgium, Holland and Germany, where his lieder recitals won him particular acclaim. On his return to the States in 1926 the European reputation he had gained appears to have excited considerable further interest. His voice already had passion and thrust and a certain endearing lyrical quality which most – if not quite all – of his records seem to have preserved for posterity. At home, the public took him to their hearts and further concert successes followed, crowned by two performances of Beethoven's *Choral Symphony* at Carnegie Hall, under Toscanini, in 1927. Later that same year he embarked on the first of several recital tours of Great Britain, Scandinavia, the Low Countries and Germany which would continue until 1932. Meanwhile, Crooks' growing list of recordings, which hitherto at least comprised mostly popular ballads and items from operetta, distributed on both sides of the Atlantic, were already beginning to sell in such quantities that Victor saw in him an inexpensive replacement in their Red Seal catalogue for McCormack as well as a viable promoter of the latest in film-ballads. Although comprehensive in his art as a recitalist, on records he veered, predictably, towards the popular repertoire.

Richard Crooks made his opera début in Hamburg, in Puccini's *Tosca*, in May 1927, and his subsequent accounts of the tenor leads in *Faust*, *Carmen* and *La traviata*, as well as in Wagner's *Meistersinger* and *Lobengrin*, left a lasting impression on his German audiences. Back in New York, in 1928, he was chosen by Mengelberg for the New York première of Mahler's *Das Lied von der Erde* and in 1930, with the Philadelphia Company, made so resounding a US opera début that he was at once offered a contract by the New York Metropolitan Opera. Sensing himself unprepared for such a step, however, Crooks passed up the offer in favour of further European tours and weekly guest appearances on the coast-to-coast radio programme *Firestone Hour*, which was to be his intermittent Monday evening niche for several years to come. He first trod the boards of the Met as Des Grieux in Massenet's *Manon* in February 1933 (at this début he

reportedly took 37 curtain-calls) and thereafter appeared at intervals with the company, between concert tours to Australia, Canada and elsewhere, until his retirement in 1946.

The Crooks discography of the late 1920s and early 1930s reflects a rebirth of interest in operetta, on both stage and screen. In **Overhead the moon is beaming**, the Serenade from the long-running 1924 escapist best-seller *The Student Prince* by the Hungarian Sigmund Romberg (1887-1951) – later famously revived in a film starring Mario Lanza – Crooks is joined by the Rounders male chorus headed by sometime Reveler Lewis James. In this Crooks gives us a tantalising aftertaste of a Broadway show which he all but premiered, while in **I bring a love song**, a charming albeit now neglected item from the pioneering film-musical *Viennese Nights* – a 1930 collaboration by Romberg and Oscar Hammerstein II (1895-1960) – the tenor complements his soprano colleague to perfection. The *Student Prince*'s long-running “twin” rival on Broadway, the 1925 hit *Vagabond King* by the Czechoslovakian-American Rudolf Friml (1879-1972) also affords him a golden opportunity to show off his superbly-managed head voice in **Only a rose**.

Similar qualities are brought to bear by Crooks on gems from a wide range of other operetta landmarks, both contemporary and of older vintage. Especially fine are his selections from the shows of the Irish-American Victor Herbert (1859-1924), including **Ah, sweet mystery of life** and **I'm falling in love with someone** (from *Naughty Marietta*, 1910; filmed by MGM, 1935), **When you're away** (a lingering waltz from *The Only Girl*, 1914) and **Neapolitan Love Song** (from *The Princess Pat*, 1915). He also displays an endearingly lyrical quality in **Rio Rita** (the title-song of a long-running Broadway musical of 1927 by Harry Tierney (1890-1965), filmed by RKO in 1929) and **One alone** (hit-song of Romberg's mega-hit 1926 show *The Desert Song* – filmed by Warner Brothers in 1929, 1943 and 1953).

In selections recorded simultaneously with the 1932 Broadway revival of *The Dubarry* by the Austrian Karl Millöcker (1842-1899 – Crooks' partner on disc Grace Moore appeared in this show; Crooks did not) he shows something of the imaginativeness of tone-colouring which made him famous, while his treatment of other generically

‘Viennese’ favourites place him stylistically on an easy par with Richard Tauber, including **Just two hearts and a waltz refrain** (a translation of the title waltz-song from the 1931 German film *Zwei Herzen in Dreivierteltakt*, by the Austrian Robert Stolz – 1880-1975), **Yours is my heart alone** (American translation of “Dein is mein ganzes Herz”, hit-song from *Das Land des Lächelns* – Berlin, 1929; produced in London in 1931, as *Land of Smiles* – by the Hungarian Franz Lehár, 1870-1948), **Castles in the air** (from *Frau Luna* (1899) by the German Paul Lincke (1866-1946) and **I walked in the blossoming garden** (the famous Waltz Song from *A Waltz Dream*, in the 1908 London version by Felix Doerman and Leopold Jacobson, with lyrics by Adrian Ross and music by the Viennese Oskar Straus, 1870-1954). Crooks concludes the recital with **Tell me tonight** (in this title-song from the 1932 film-musical landmark (US title *Be Mine Tonight*) in which Polish tenor Jan Kiepura sang the music of the Russian-born pianist-composer and conductor Mischa Spoliansky (1898-1984), he is ably backed by a fine orchestral adaptation under the baton of HMV’s then house-conductor Ray Noble).

Richard Crooks died in Portola Valley, California, on 29 September, 1972.

Peter Dempsey, 2002

1. NEAPOLITAN LOVE SONG (Victor Herbert–Henry Blossom Jr., from *The Princess Pat*)
With Victor studio orchestra conducted by William Merrigan Daly
(Victor CVE 73319-2) Recorded 24 August 1932, New York 4:51
2. RED, RED ROSE (Fred Rath–Mel Shauer; Love theme in the Moton Picture Production *Monsieur Beaucaire*)
With Victor studio orchestra conducted by Rosario Bourdon
(Victor B 30982-11) Recorded 4 December 1924, Camden, New Jersey 3:35
3. AH, SWEET MYSTERY OF LIFE (Victor Herbert–Rida Johnson Young, from *Naughty Marietta*)
With Victor studio orchestra conducted by Nathaniel Shilkret
(Victor BVE 43734-3) Recorded 28 April 1928, New York 2:40

4. OVERHEAD THE MOON IS BEAMING (SERENADE) (Sigmund Romberg–Dorothy Donnelly, from *The Student Prince*)
With Lewis James, tenor; The Rounders Male Chorus; Victor studio orchestra conducted by Nathaniel Shilkret
(Victor BVE 54858-5) Recorded 7 July 1930, New York 3:04
5. I'M FALLING IN LOVE WITH SOMEONE (Victor Herbert–Rida Johnson Young, from *Naughty Marietta*)
With Victor studio orchestra conducted by Nathaniel Shilkret
(Victor BVE 49072-3) Recorded 2 February 1929, New York 3:40
6. WHEN YOU'RE AWAY (Victor Herbert–Henry Blossom Jr., from *The Only Girl*)
With Victor studio orchestra conducted by Nathaniel Shilkret
(Victor BVE 49943-2) Recorded 11 February 1929, New York 3:35
7. I BRING A LOVE SONG (Sigmund Romberg–Oscar Hammerstein II, from the film *Viennese Nights*)
With Edna Kellogg, soprano; Victor studio orchestra conducted by Nathaniel Shilkret
(Victor BVE 63621-2) Recorded 3 September 1930, New York 3:39
8. YOU WILL REMEMBER VIENNA (Sigmund Romberg–Oscar Hammerstein II, from the film *Viennese Nights*)
With Victor studio orchestra conducted by Nathaniel Shilkret
(Victor BVE 63620) Recorded 3 September 1930, New York 3:09
9. RIO RITA (Harry Tierney–Joseph McCarthy, from *Rio Rita*)
With Victor studio orchestra conducted by Nathaniel Shilkret
(Victor BVE 58185-3) Recorded 10 January 1930, New York 3:15
10. ONLY A ROSE (Rudolf Friml–Brian Hooker, from *The Vagabond King*)
With Victor studio orchestra conducted by Nathaniel Shilkret
(Victor BVE 58186-2) Recorded 10 January 1930, New York 3:35
11. WITHOUT YOUR LOVE (Karl Millöcker–Rowland Leigh, from *The Dubarry*)
With Grace Moore, soprano; Victor studio orchestra conducted by Nathaniel Shilkret
(Victor BVE 74707-2) Recorded 19 December 1932, New York 3:16

12. IF I AM DREAMING (Karl Millöcker–Rowland Leigh, from *The Dubarry*)
With Frank La Forge, piano
(Victor BVE 74733) Recorded 28 December 1932, New York 3:39
13. ONE ALONE (Sigmund Romberg–Otto Harbach, from *The Desert Song*)
With Victor studio orchestra conducted by Nathaniel Shilkret
(Victor BVE 49073-4) Recorded 11 February 1929, New York 3:37
14. JUST TWO HEARTS AND A WALTZ REFRAIN (Robert Stolz, from the film *Two Hearts In Three-Quarter Time*)
With orchestra conducted by Nathaniel Shilkret
(Victor BVE 53056-2) Recorded 23 April 1931, New York 3:35
15. YOURS IS MY HEART ALONE (Franz Lehár–Harry Bache Smith, from *The Land of Smiles*)
With Victor studio orchestra conducted by Nathaniel Shilkret
(Victor BVE 53055-3) Recorded 23 April 1931, New York 3:34
16. CASTLES IN THE AIR (Paul Lincke–Adrian Ross, from *Frau Luna*)
With Victor studio orchestra conducted by Nathaniel Shilkret
(Victor BS 75598) Recorded 3 April 1933, New York 2:55
17. I WALKED IN THE BLOSSOMING GARDEN (WALTZ SONG) (Oscar Straus–Adrian Ross, from *A Waltz Dream*)
With Victor studio orchestra conducted by Nathaniel Shilkret
(Victor BS 75599) Recorded 3 April 1933, New York 3:41
18. TELL ME TONIGHT (Mischa Spoliansky–Frank Eyton, from the film *Tell Me Tonight*)
With New Mayfair Orchestra conducted by Ray Noble
(Victor HMV OB 4242-2) Recorded 30 September 1932, London 3:37

Transfers and digital noise reduction by Peter Dempsey.

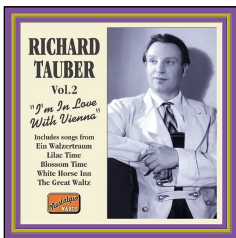
Photo: Richard Crooks (b/w original, Glenn A. Baker Archives/Redferns Music Picture Library)

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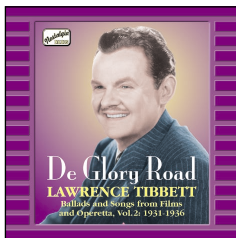
Peter Dempsey

A tenor singer of wide range and performing experience, Peter Dempsey specialises in Victorian and Edwardian genre ballads and art-song, and has recorded various CDs, including *Love's Garden Of Roses* for Moidart. Quite apart from his personal enthusiasm for music in the broadest sense, through his assiduous collecting and study of 78s over many years, Peter has acquired not only a wide knowledge of recorded musical performance but also a heartfelt awareness of the need to conserve so many "great masters" who – were it not for CD – might now be lost for future generations. A recognised authority on old recordings, Peter now regularly researches and produces CD albums from 78s.

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6. When You're Away 3:35
7. I Bring A Love Song 3:39
8. You Will Remember Vienna 3:09
9. Rio Rita 3:15
10. Only A Rose 3:35
11. Without Your Love 3:16
12. If I Am Dreaming 3:39
13. One Alone 3:37
14. Just Two Hearts And A Waltz Refrain 3:35
15. Yours Is My Heart Alone 3:34
16. Castles In The Air 2:55
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18. Tell Me Tonight 3:37

Total Time: 64:00



Original 1924-1933 Recordings

Research, Transfers and Digital Restoration by Peter Dempsey
NOTES AND FULL RECORDING DETAILS INCLUDED

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