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RECORD REVIEW

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In examining these 13 recent operatic reissues from the 1940s and 1950s, I find only one performance (Toscanini's *Mefistofele* excerpts at La Scala) in which every element seems to be working with equal strength to produce something magical. At the same time, however, not one of the recordings is without its points of interest and excitement. If any single asset is common to them all, it is the singers' unflinching textual awareness; in most of the performances one could easily take dictation from anyone. In many cases, too (the supporting artists in the Cetra performances, for example), projection of the words goes a long way in compensating for a notable lack of fine vocal technique.

Callas illuminates two *bel canto* operas

Maria Callas's first commercially recorded portrayal of Donizetti's Lucia is the last word in feminine fragility, the characterization touching the heart from the first moment. In 1953 the soprano already suffers from harshness on high (notwithstanding a solid E flat to close the Mad Scene). Her florid work, however, is spectacularly accurate, and her sound overall reminds one yet again of how revolutionary the dark, veiled vocal colour must have seemed half a century ago in this Galli-Curci/Dal Monte/Pons role. The opening phrases of the Fountain Aria and the justly famous voicing of 'Alfin son tua' are two of the countless lessons Callas offers in truly communicative *bel canto* singing. In blessedly unconstricted voice and with his usual crystal-clear diction, Giuseppe di Stefano is, on the whole, worthy of his partner, despite a frequently overly vehement delivery. Tito Gobbi is under strain in his top notes and apt to snarl throughout, while Raffaele Ariè performs at less than his impressive best. Tullio Serafin, admirably committed to the drama (each scene shaped with remarkable sensitivity and care), allows numerous cuts, all of them grievous (**Naxos Historical 8.110131/32**, two discs, 2 hours 25 minutes).

The 76-year-old Serafin is also surprisingly vital in the 1954 *Norma*. The more dramatic portions go with a genuine sweep, with only 'Sola, furtiva' suffering from a funereal pacing of the sort that sabotages much of the venerable conductor's later recorded work. The grandeur of Callas's earlier *Normas* is now achieved only through significantly greater effort, her voice already somewhat reduced in size and security. The gains are a deepening of detail and subtlety, notable in both song and meaningfully inflected recitative. Many phrases ('O rimembranza', for one) project an almost unbearable tenderness. Of course, *fioriture* are brilliantly executed, with Callas's rhythmic drive paying constant dividends. Leaving nothing unsaid, the interpretation remains a landmark of recorded opera. Alas, Ebe Stignani sounds her age to a distressing degree; Mario Filipeschi has terrific heft and confidence but is maddeningly inexpressive; and Nicola Rossi-

Historic Opera Reissues

by Roger Pines

Lemeni's authoritative manner is negated by woolly tone. I remain more attracted to the live Callas *Normas*, whether Covent Garden (1952) for vocalism or La Scala (1955) for characterization (**Naxos Historical 8.110325/27**, three discs, 3 hours 18 minutes).

In the 'filler' for each of these sets, Naxos has included well over a half-hour of historic performance material from the operas in question. It is all choice, from the earliest (John McCormack, 1910) to the latest (Robert Merrill, 1952). The singers' names say it all: in addition to the two already mentioned, the rest include, among others, an especially outstanding Pinza plus Ponselle, Cigna, Telva and Merli singing from *Norma*; and Barrientos, Galli-Curci (she and Schipa break the listener's heart in the love duet), Dal Monte, Gigli, Stracciari, and again the matchless Pinza, in the *Lucia* excerpts. These performances require no further comment – they are virtually all of legendary stature and remain essential listening.

Rossini and Puccini on Cetra

The (in)famous post-war Cetra performances usually involve one or two world-class artists, surrounded by second- or even third-stringers. The era of Muti and Abbado has led to considerably greater fidelity to the score among Italian artists; the 'fudging' heard here, especially in florid passages (many of which have to be simplified), would not be countenanced today. None the less, the vitality in these seemingly thrown-together performances yields more pleasure than one would have anticipated – with excellent work, by the way, from the RAI orchestras, whether Turin or Milan.

Il barbiere di Siviglia, recorded in 1950, is dominated by the irresistible Giuseppe Taddei, whose nutty-brown tone creates probably the sexiest Figaro on disc. He and Giulietta Simionato respond delightfully to every turn of the dialogue (listen to Rosina's questioning of Figaro before their duet). The mezzo, perhaps too mature in timbre, is still adorable, handling the extremes of range with aplomb. Her Almaviva, Luigi Infantino, is stingy with his full voice – he's almost dainty at times. Carlo Badioli (Bartolo) exaggerates for effect but does live his role, while Antonio Cassinelli makes a formidable noise with Basilio's 'colpo di cannone'. Fernando Previtali conducts with significant cuts, both expected (Almaviva's demanding final aria) and unexpected (the *a cappella* coloratura section of 'Zitti, zitti'). He brings tremendous verve to the proceedings, the sense of fun absolutely palpable. I haven't heard Preiser's release of

this performance, but I wouldn't be surprised if its booklet and sound reproduction are notably superior (**Warner Fonit 5C50467-1050-2-7**, two discs, 2 hours 8 minutes).

La Cenerentola, recorded in 1949, is a disc of highlights only. The luminous leading couple are Simionato, vocally aglow and exceptionally endearing, and Cesare Valletti, who epitomizes the *leggero* tenor of the 1950s: the top not remotely in a class with today's best, but the character treasurable for intelligence and unforced charm. Dandini (Saturno Meletti) and Magnifico (Cristiano Dalamangas) are acceptable, if often over the top, as with so many other *buffo* artists of the period. Mario Rossi is the effervescent conductor (**Warner Fonit 50467-1042-2-8**, 1 hour 15 minutes).



Giuseppe Taddei

A. Villani, Bologna

Released in 1949, the first complete recorded Gianni Schicchi boasts terrific ensemble work, along with four individual portrayals of particular merit. At just 33 years of age, Taddei is already a fabulous Schicchi with a wonderfully 'fat' baritone, limitless reserves of colour, and both likeability and danger in the characterization. The rounded tones of Franco Calabrese (Spinelloccio, Amantio) and Fernando Corena (Simone) are a plus, as is the Rinuccio of Giuseppe Savio, a ringing-voiced lyric tenor with just the right animated, engaging style. The Lauretta is barely adequate, while the Zita inspires amused smiles only when she rasps. Alfredo Simonetto's reading breathes vitality, precision and real theatrical awareness. Too bad the

sound is harsh and congested at higher dynamics. This performance, too, is on Preiser, and I can't imagine that it didn't manage to clean it up (**Warner Fonit 5050467-1048-2-2**, 53 minutes).

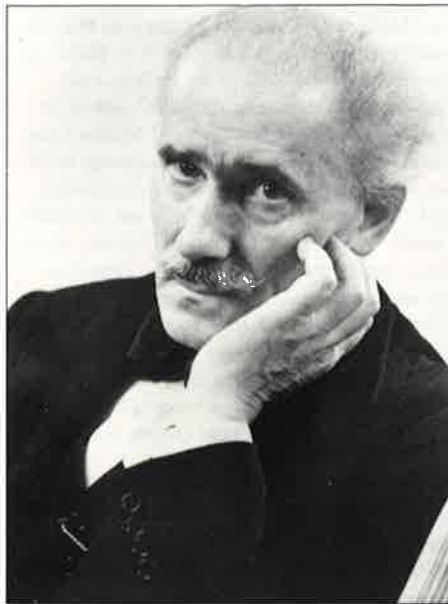
Falstaff: Toscanini versus Karajan

What a brilliant idea it was for Andante to combine two classic live performances of *Falstaff*, separated by two decades but both originating from the Salzburg Festival. If Herbert von Karajan in 1957 wins on points, it's only because Arturo Toscanini in 1937 does not boast as consistently excellent a cast as one would like.

The earlier performance – heavy on the tape hiss – stars Mariano Stabile, who collaborates magnificently with his conductor. A true baritone rather than bass-baritone, Stabile's lightness of touch is exquisite, and only occasionally is vocal opulence genuinely missed. Depicting a captivating old knight used to getting his own way, Stabile responds to the text line by line with readings that make an instant impact (listen to the frustration of 'Mi struggete le carni' in the opening scene). The sheer polish of the portrayal is as much to be admired as its total lack of routine – everything seems freshly conceived. The other singers are uneven, especially the women (they nearly come apart musically at 'Ci scoppia, si spaccia'). The only non-Italian in the entire cast, America's Franca Somigli – née Marion Bruce Clark – boasts strong, easy vocalism and a helpful element of womanly glamour in her timbre. Nannetta is white-toned, Quickly and Meg characterful but undistinguished. The men do better, especially Dino Borgioli as a heaven-sent Fenton (no mere *tenorino* he, but a substantial lyric voice – alas, the recorded sound fades in volume at 'Cosi' baciai'). Pietro Biasini's Ford is satisfactory, if lacking as broad and attractive a voice as one would like.

The whole is, however, greater than the sum of its parts, thanks to Toscanini, who is clearly living this work along with his singers. One senses the true extent of his sheer vitality, especially in the introduction to Act 3. There are no awkward transitions from scene to scene: the moves from quicksilver to lyricism are executed with utter inevitability. The delicious opening to the opera's second scene is lighter than air, as are all the Nannetta/Fenton episodes. The cast is recorded at excessive distance much of the time, but the less-than-optimum sound hardly matters, for Toscanini and Stabile together are a must-hear.

As for Karajan, forget his post-1960 **Verdi** conducting and remember him instead for this beautifully recorded *Falstaff*, which does not put a foot wrong. He is glorious, if a little overwhelming – not to say exhausting – in his sheer ebullience (listen to the second scene of Act 2, a miracle of precision while also bursting with comic verve). The VPO,



Arturo Toscanini

NBC

a full partner in the performance's success, contributes extraordinarily sprightly, technically pristine playing. The star onstage is Simionato's Quickly, an upbeat and warmhearted busybody who produces an elegance of phrasing as atypical in this role as it is welcome. She functions as a sympathetic surrogate aunt for Anna Moffo's spirited Nannetta, who ravishes the ear in all the floated legato phrases. Very lovable indeed is Luigi Alva, heard on peak form – which means the finest Fenton one could desire. Rolando Panerai lets his dramatic involvement in Ford's predicament get way out of hand (unnecessary shouting in the role's very first utterances); he's much more persuasive in the quieter moments of the music for 'Signor Fontana'.

The same is true of Gobbi in the title-role, a treat when he isn't letting a sort of 'tuned shout' take over his singing. On the other hand, when a shout is perfectly appropriate, he's priceless (listen to 'Alice è mia!' or 'Riconosco Bardolfo!'). His responses to Quickly and Alice in their dialogues are as memorable as one would expect from such an experienced Sir John. 'Mondo ladro' shows in no uncertain terms the depth of Gobbi's artistry, although the worn quality of his top remains problematic. As the object of his affection, Schwarzkopf – seemingly desperate to leave her mark on Alice's every phrase – eventually tires the listener with her relentless vivacity. One longs for her simply to sing naturally, as Ilva Ligabue did in her three recordings. That much-lamented Italian soprano had an expansiveness of phrase that Schwarzkopf cannot quite manage, although she does exhibit a flexibility (especially in 'Poi ci smaschereremo') exceeding that of most Alices.

Andante's packaging is impeccable, although considerable liberties are taken with the libretto's English translation (**Andante AN3080**, four discs, 3 hours 51 minutes).

Toscanini ablaze at La Scala

Listeners are fortunate indeed to have radio broadcast documentation of La Scala's 1948 concert commemorating the thirtieth anniversary of Arrigo Boito's death. Under Toscanini's direction, the Prologue and Act 3 of *Mefistofele* achieve perhaps the summit in this opera's discography. The conductor is simply on fire, every single episode superbly judged in terms of mood, colour and tempo. His soloists perform as if their lives depend on it. Cesare Siepi's devil, for example, offers an ease, beauty and solidity from top to bottom that seem astounding from a singer then only in his mid-twenties. Siepi was never the most detailed interpreter, but his intensity fits the bill here. Herva Nelli never equalled her heart-stopping singing of Margherita's prison-scene music, and her emotional commitment is complete ('Enrico, mi fai ribrezzo' is, for once, delivered with truly believable loathing). Giacinto Prandelli partners Nelli gallantly in the 'Lontano' duet.

The La Scala Chorus and Orchestra cover themselves with glory in both *Mefistofele* and the extended excerpts from **Boito's Nerone**. Even Toscanini is hard-pressed to breathe life into this intermittently striking but exceedingly unwieldy score, on which the composer laboured for an unbelievable six decades (its completion was supervised by Toscanini himself). The singers do their best. The soaring baritone of the young Frank Guarrera (Fanuël) gets the lion's share of the music heard here. Joining him are Siepi's monumental Simon Mago, the vocally secure and superbly dramatic Nelli (Asteria) and Simionato (Rubria) in her warmest voice.

The 'filler' material, also with the La Scala Orchestra under Toscanini, is splendid: the two *Traviata* Preludes (1951) and **Beethoven's** Symphony No. 1 (1946) are all done with the thrilling intelligence and expressive force that one would expect (**Guild Historical GHCD2307/8**, two discs, 2 hours 19 minutes).

Well-mannered *verismo*

Vocally speaking, RCA's 1953 *Cavalleria Rusticana* is one of the most sumptuous versions of **Mascagni's** one-acter. Zinka Milanov produces one perfectly formed phrase after another in a rather too polite portrayal, as if *Trovatore's* Leonora had strayed into Santuzza's village. (In other recordings both Renata Tebaldi and Fiorenza Cossotto offer comparable vocalism, while also doing justice to the heroine's emotional stress.) Jussi Björling, similarly trouble-free as to vocalism, is in his familiar 'distanced' mode up to Turiddu's drinking song, after which he sings with fine involvement for the rest of the opera, even arousing a degree of sympathy for this cad. Robert Merrill, in his prime, sails through Alfio in thrillingly voluminous voice, but real tonal shading emerges only in his brief, tense exchange with Turiddu. The satisfactory singing of Carol Smith's Lola

projects no character whatsoever. Renato Cellini, RCA's usual *routinier* in the 1950s, is uninspired except in a finely wrought *intermezzo*. The recorded sound is on the dry side (**Naxos Historical 8.110261**, 1 hour 11 minutes).

Also in 1953, Björling recorded **Leoncavallo's** *Pagliacci*. Koch Schwann's invaluable Vienna Staatsoper series showed the tenor at his best as Canio during the 1930s, singing in Swedish and bringing a lacerating pain to 'No, Pagliaccio non son' that he never duplicated elsewhere. As in the studio *Cavalleria*, he does gain appreciably in excitement in the work's second half. In fine voice, Leonard Warren's Tonio fares best dramatically in the hushed asides to Canio after Silvio's escape. This Tonio's fury at Nedda is hardly justified by Victoria de los Angeles's rather restrained exclamation of 'Miserabile!'. The Spanish soprano is altogether too ladylike (Mimi-like, really), with the close miking catching graininess in her tone whenever it moves above the stave. Of course, the light touch in Colombina's music is delectable, but it doesn't compensate. Merrill sings an unexpectedly effortful, not especially ardent Silvio. The Robert Shaw Chorale is a major asset, with Cellini doing no more than efficiently at the helm. The bonus disc is all Björling, including superb opera and song performances that any of the tenor's dedicated fans will know well (**Membran Music 221759-303**, two discs, 1 hour 9 minutes; bonus disc: 1 hour 5 minutes).

Have translation, will travel

Two *opéras-comiques* give pleasure in broadcast performances, even if the German translations do frequently give a feeling that Nicolai and Lortzing have entered the aural picture. The choppy, biting quality often pervading the jauntier passages here is absolutely alien to the same music sung in the original French. Be warned that unless you speak German you will be hard-pressed to follow the plot of each work, since the CDs include neither synopses nor librettos (the former could have been easily managed simply by cutting a portion of the lengthy cast and conductor biographies).

Fra Diavolo, **Auber's** uproarious tale of a resourceful bandit's doings at an Italian inn, was still popular in the German-speaking countries in 1954 when this Hamburg Radio performance was recorded. It is led by the redoubtable Wilhelm Schüchter, whose high spirits are infectious in this consistently bubbly score. Everyone delivers the spoken dialogue with relish. Rudolf Schock convinces in the title-role, even if he lacks the instant appeal of a Gedda or a Wunderlich. He covers the large range confidently if not effortlessly, and in Act 3 his extended use of high falsetto is a riot. The other gentlemen are marvellous, especially James Pease, who speaks a sort of 'Germlish' to amusing effect as Lord Kookburn ('I beg your pardon, wenn ich komme in meinem Nachthemd'). His ripe

bass-baritone is a distinct pleasure in this role, usually assigned to tenors. The two ladies are the frisky Ursula Zollenkopf, whose Lady Pamela gets the maximum 'juice' out of an unexceptional *mezzo* voice; and Wilma Lipp, scintillating as Zerline with a buoyancy to her phrasing, nimble coloratura and a ravishing trill. Filling out the second disc are enjoyable French opera excerpts sung by Schock, among them *Carmen* duets with Elfriede Trötschel (an adequate Micaëla) and Margarete Klose (Herodias-like in the final scene). Schock's Flower Song – one of the finest on disc – is in German, as are all the other arias except 'O paradis,' in which the tenor's French is perfectly respectable (**Relief CR1909**, two discs, 2 hours 10 minutes).

In terms of variety, inventiveness and melodic inspiration, *Fra Diavolo* scores repeatedly over **Adam's** *Si j'étais roi* (here *Wenn ich König wär*), the story of a lucky fisherman who becomes king for a day. That the latter emerges strongly in this 1953 Hessian Radio performance is due largely to the exacting leadership of Wolfgang Sawallisch, who displays an unsuspected affinity for comic opera. Voices, musicianship and acting all show the fine level of accomplishment that one could expect half a century ago in such houses as Mannheim, Zurich, Düsseldorf and Darmstadt, where several of these artists were ensemble members. The two sopranos are nicely contrasted – Olga Moll (Princess Néméa) and an especially perky soubrette, Maria Madlen Madsen (*Zélide*). There is presentable – if not quite stellar – tenorizing from Franz Fehringer as Zéphoris, the fisherman who longs to be king in order to marry his beloved Néméa. Nicely mellow tone is heard from baritone Kurt Gester as King Massoul of Goa and bass Georg Stern as Zizel (**Relief CR1914**, two discs, 1 hour 55 minutes).

Opera on Record identifies the Bolshoi's Russian-language *Traviata* as a 1954 performance, but the reissue's CD booklet indicates that it might also have been 1947. The conductor, Alexander Ivanovich Orlov, died in 1948. He frequently displays decidedly old-fashioned grandeur, beginning with the immensely spacious and expressive Prelude. Tempos do vary in effectiveness, however: a leaden 'Un dì felice'; a splendidly graceful *pizzicato* accompaniment for Alfredo's aria; an exceedingly sensitive traversal through the soprano-baritone duet; a mechanical Second Act finale; and a dreadfully slow reading of the heroine's 'Prendi, quest'è l'immagine'.

Elisaveta Shumskaya's Violetta is vinegary and over-vibrant at the start but she soon blossoms into greater appeal. Even when under no pressure the voice tends towards sharpness but she remains a musical singer, with true loveliness in 'Dite alla giovine'. She has dignity throughout and ultimately proves quite touching. That's more than can be said of Ivan Kozlovsky's Alfredo, perhaps the most maddening of his recorded portrayals. He

seems in a completely different expressive world from his colleagues and often sings too languidly by half (he also commits the unpardonable sin of joining Violetta at the climax of 'Amami, Alfredo!'). What a contrast with the full-toned, utterly unmannered delivery of Pavel Lisitsian (Germont). The great baritone is, as ever, not exactly the ultimate in interpretative specificity, but one senses that emotion is actually built into the very timbre of his voice.

The recorded sound betrays some distortion at climaxes, with voices placed too far forward. The CD booklet offers three times as much information on Kozlovsky as the other two leading singers. The bonus material, however, is all Lisitsian: *Ballo* and *Trovatore* arias plus the Aida-Amonaso duet (with Natalia Sokolova, excessively light-voiced), each a prime example of impeccably vocalized and sensitively shaped **Verdi** baritone singing (**Guild Historical GHCD2305/6**, two discs, 2 hours 15 minutes).

The Met's Offenbach, vintage 1937

Les contes d'Hoffmann, a 1937 Metropolitan Opera broadcast, gives a real sense of 'being there', with the comments of much-beloved announcer Milton Cross framing each act. Cuts are many and irksome, there is only a bit of spoken dialogue (Stella-Lindorf) and the Muse is conspicuous by her absence.

When Hoffmann's music lies within René Maison's comfortable range, he is winning through strength of voice and aptly poetic declamation. Lawrence Tibbett's villains suffer from poor French and unvaried vocal quality. His Coppélius is embarrassingly crude, his Dapertutto fatally lacking in sensuality. He redeems himself to a degree with some spectacularly effective *mezza voce* as Miracle. Vina Bovy, the Met's first soprano to take on the four heroines in one performance, barely manages Olympia, has fine urgency but little velvet for Giulietta, and scores highest with Antonia, although nowhere does she display genuine individuality. Irra Petina is a bright-voiced Nicklausse, but toneless Angelo Badà (four servants) should have been honourably retired years before. Bass-baritone Louis d'Angelo is perversely cast as Spalanzani before reverting to his proper range as a barely decent Crespel. Maurice Abravanel's conducting has fine vigour but suffers from poor ensemble (he was soon to leave the Met, citing lack of rehearsal time). Things tighten up musically in Venice but more trouble arises in the Antonia act, with the male trio something of a free-for-all. Everything finally comes together in the Third Act trio (fine work from Bovy, Tibbett and the rich-voiced Anna Kaskas). The recorded sound suffers from heavy tape hiss, with the septet especially messy. The audience hardly seems to be enjoying itself – applause is perfunctory most of the time (**Guild Historical GHCD2315/6**, two discs, 2 hours 24 minutes).