

act starting from 'Stride le vampa' through the duet with Manrico. However, I think her finest singing is in the first scene of the following act. Captured and threatened by the Count's soldiers, her initial response is quiet and contemplative, rising to an exciting climax as she defies her captors and warns of divine vengeance.

Nicola Moscona as Ferrando and Francesco Valentino as Di Luna were both at relatively early stages in their Met careers and *Trovatore* represented their debuts in Live Met broadcasts. Moscona would go on to give a total of more than 700 performances with the company; Valentino a mere 450! Both offer solid, workmanlike performances. Moscona

would still be around for the later 'Björling performance' where he does not sound a great deal different. Finally, I cannot resist mentioning the very first voice we hear on these discs—not Moscona's, but rather that of Milton Cross, the inimitable presenter of Met broadcasts for more than 40 years.

As ever with Immortal Performances there are extras. One can take for granted the fine sound restoration and the beautiful booklet. There is also a musical bonus—a 1952 Björling broadcast containing several songs starting with a gorgeous 'If I could tell you' and just one operatic aria—'Nessun dorma', a performance comparable with his superb 1944 commercial recording. STANLEY HENIG

Czech Romantic Opera

Extracts from *Viola* (Smetana), *Král a uhlíř* (Dvořák), *Hedy* (Fibich), *Dědův odkaz* (Novák), *Starý ženich* and *Lejla aneb Obležení Granady* (Bendl), *Zmařená Svatbal* (Šebor), *Svatojanské proudy* (Rozkošný), *Zakletý princ* (Hřimalý), *Veselé námluvy* (Malát), *Na starém bělidle* (Kovařovic), *U božích muk* (Suda), *Dubrovský* (Nápravnik). With Ludmila Červinková, Libuše Domanínská, Ludmila Hanzalíková, Jaroslava Procházková, Milada Šubrtová, Maria Tauberová, Drahomira Tikhlová, Jaroslava Vymazalová, Věra Krilová, Beno Blachut, Jaroslav Gleich, Antonín Votava, Ivo Židek, Antonín Zlesák, Karel Kaláš, Bořek Rujan, Jan Soumar, Theodor Šrubač, Eduard Haken, Prague Radio Chorus and Orchestra, c. Karel Ančerl, Antonín Devátý, František Dyk, Alois Klíma, Jiří Pinkas. RadioServis CR0782-2 (two CDs)

These Prague Radio performances, broadcast between 1949 and 1959, make fascinating and delightful listening. Fascinating because they offer some improbable rarities from beneath the waterline of the Romantic repertoire. Delightful thanks to some stellar Czech singers, well able to make silk purses from ... though to call anything on this well-packed double album a sow's ear would be unkind, when the composers—even the most obscure—show themselves at the very least capable of weaving grateful melodic lines. Derivative many of their operas may be, but there's no one in this varied anthology of peasant comedies, fairy tales and historical dramas who doesn't have something to say.

Taking one for all, Karel Bendl (1838–97) was in his time Bohemia's most popular composer after Smetana and Dvořák, and on the evidence of the half-hour extracted from his 1868 tragedy *Lejla or The Siege of Granada* (based like Wagner's *Rienzi* on a Bulwer-Lytton drama) he deserves to be better remembered. Bendl's gently exotic Romanticism and feel for theatre are relished by Beno Blachut and Drahomira Tikhlová in an ardent love duet, and by the earth-elemental bass Eduard Haken in a Spanish patriotic song. Last and best comes a chain of mellifluous solos and duets showcasing Milada Šubrtová, that most touching of Czech lyric sopranos, as a dancing girl in love with the doomed Moorish King Boabdil. He is portrayed

with tender strength by Bořek Rujan, a strikingly virile-sounding baritone new to me—one of the set's major satisfactions is hearing some unfamiliar singers proving themselves the equals of better-known contemporaries.

Having said which, the prime musical attractions here come from the usual suspects. Maria Tauberová delivers Liduška's brief lyric from Dvořák's rarely-heard *Král a uhlíř* ('King and Collier') with immaculate ease and beauty of line. It is thrilling to have the 15-minute fragment of Smetana's last opera *Viola* (some way after *Twelfth Night*) inspirationally driven by Karel Ančerl. The opening storm at sea has a queasy, chromatic vertigo presaging Sibelius's *Tempest* prelude, and there's a real sense of loss when the score breaks off suddenly, soon after Orsino's entry. Smetana may have been officially mad by the time he tackled it, but there's method in his music. Judging from its noble tenor aria and steamy love duet, Fibich's forgotten fourth opera *Hedy* (1895, drawn from an episode in Byron's *Don Juan*) may be more than a mere staging post on the way to his admired *Sárka*: certainly Blachut and Jaroslava Procházková deliver the hyper-sensual duet as if their lives depended on it.

The chief revelation for me comes with the 17-minute selection from Vítězslav Novák's last opera, *Dědův odkaz* ('Grandfather's Legacy', 1926). This mixture of twisted fairy tale and artistic allegory didn't go down too well



■ Karel Bendl, drawn by Jan Vilímek

at the time, disconcerting the critics and audiences with its neo-Romantic populism, flecked with modernist harmonic and instrumental touches. A wild choral dance and duet in astringent Slovak style are capped by a dreamy, soft-centred song for a village girl (the moving Šubrtová again) which had me longing to hear more of this strange, neglected score. Prague Radio's transfers are very good; and though the booklet summarizes Vlasta Reittererová's comprehensive notes in German only, this remains an important collection of rare operatic music which provides lasting pleasures. CHRISTOPHER WEBBER

Anna Moffo, The Complete RCA Recital Albums

'Anna Moffo', 'The Dream Duet', 'A Verdi Celebration', 'A Portrait of Manon', 'Die Fledermaus (highlights)', 'One Night of Love', 'Moffo and Stokowski', 'Songs of Debussy', 'Heroines from Great French Operas', 'Selected Arias from RCA Opera Recordings', 'Great Love Duets from Opera'. RCA/Sony Classics, 888/5032232 (12 CDs)

All gifted sopranos should regard Anna Moffo's career path as a cautionary tale. After becoming a star overnight in RAI's

televised *Madama Butterfly* (1955), the young American singer—ravishingly beautiful in both voice and



■ Anna Moffo in 1961

person—embarked on a life of constant new roles in major international houses, plus recordings, television and film appearances, and all the glamorous accoutrements of a jetsetting diva. Her technique was hard-pressed to cope, and from the late 1960s her instrument began to unravel, severely compromising the second half of her career.

Moffo was closely associated with RCA, whose discs reveal luscious timbre, firm musicianship and notable communicativeness, although some listeners were put off by Moffo's tendency to 'scoop' for expressive purposes, which often seems almost innate to her singing.

The first solo disc (1960) presents both lyric and *leggero* repertoire. Moffo carries off 'Ombre légère' spectacularly, but it's Mimì and Liù that one relishes most, each exuding feminine warmth. This disc contrasts sadly with the 1974 French aria recital, which includes just one success, 'Chacun le sait'.

'A Verdi Celebration' (1962) shows Moffo faring best with *I vespri siciliani* and Elena's *siciliana* (the aria is cut by half, alas). The other excerpts are similarly well vocalized and admirably phrased, but repeatedly Moffo's vocal weight proves insufficient. Another disc pulls arias from complete opera recordings (1960-6). Vocally these heroines are all memorable, wiry upper-register moments in the *Lucia* excerpts notwithstanding.

In the 'Portrait of Manon' album, Massenet's convent-bound girl sounds too knowing and womanly, but the 'Adieu' proves affecting, the Gavotte delicious, and 'N'est-ce plus ma main?' unforgettably seductive. Moffo also sparkles as Aurore in an *ariette* from *Le Portrait de Manon*. The *Manon Lescaut* excerpts find her decidedly lacking in 'oomph', although tonally lovely. Her opposite numbers are Giuseppe di Stefano (Massenet), croony in *pp* but generally persuasive, and Flaviano Labò (Puccini), in every way superb.

A disc of love duets gathered from Moffo's opera sets include seven tenor partners. The soprano sings gloriously throughout. Tucker, Bergonzi and Kraus are all predictably satisfying, likewise Cesare Valletti's Pinkerton (has any pair ever recorded the *Butterfly* duet more affectingly?) and the little-remembered Daniele Barioni, Ruggero to Moffo's matchlessly alluring Magda in *La rondine*.

Moffo was a wonderful operetta interpreter, as we hear in *Fledermaus* highlights (1963). Her Rosalinde copes marvellously with the often-awkward translation and sings impeccably, especially in a terrifically sexy *czárdás*. Richard Lewis is a capital Eisenstein and Jeanette Scovotti an above-average Adele, with Oscar Danon the capable conductor.

Excessively lush arrangements frequently sabotage one's enjoyment of the other operetta or musical theatre discs. In the 1963 'Dream Duet' programme with Sergio Franchi, many of

the excerpts are uncomfortably fashioned from material meant for a single voice. Moffo has the edge over her tenor partner in terms of vocal velvet, but there's an obvious rapport here and at certain moments ('Ah, sweet mystery of life', for example) the magic takes hold. On her own in the solo album 'One Night of Love' Moffo carries all before her, whether in the music of Rodgers, Kreisler or Herbert.

The 1971 Debussy recital (with Jean Casadesu exceptionally stylish at the piano) is surprisingly persuasive, and the

'desert island' choice in Moffo's discography, her 1964 programme led by Stokowski, finds the soprano unfailingly exquisite in Canteloube, Rachmaninov and Villa-Lobos.

In a set commemorating the tenth anniversary of Moffo's death, Jürgen Kesting's booklet essay, while informative regarding career details, seems rather ungenerous in evaluating the soprano's artistry. The original notes adorn the back of each sleeve, but one needs a strong magnifying glass to read them.

ROGER PINES

Opera on DVD and Blu-ray

Turandot, Puccini

Mlada Khudoley (*Turandot*), Guanqun Yu (*Liù*), Riccardo Massi (*Calaf*), Manuel von Senden (*Altoum*), Taylan Reinhard (*Pang*), Cosmin Ifrim (*Pong*), André Schuen (*Ping*), Yasushi Hirano (*Mandarin*), Michail Ryssov (*Timur*), Prague Philharmonic Choir, Bregenz Festival Choir, Wiener Symphoniker, c. Paolo Carignani, p. Marco Arturo Marelli, d. Marelli and Constance Hoffman, video director Felix Breisach. Unitel Classica C major DVD 731408/Blu-ray 731504 (125 mins)

The Seebühne at Bregenz is necessarily a place for spectacle, and Puccini's opera certainly demands that—among other things. Filmed in July 2015, Marco Arturo Marelli's self-designed production throws a huge variety of standard, tourism-familiar Chinese imagery at the piece, some of it pretty randomly chosen.

The set features, for example, a gigantic representation of China's Great Wall, plus groups of figures (205 in all) modelled on the famous Terracotta Army: the show's most attention-grabbing effect accompanies the opening bars, when 44 of the staging's 115 masonry blocks and seven of its battlements collapse on cue, revealing a group of terracotta soldiers behind.

The chorus, wearing grey face masks, are identical, grey-clad non-individuals, based on photographs of innumerable indistinguishable workers during Mao's regime. An individual note is struck,

however, by the Pierrot-like figure of an invented character called the White Clown (played by Paul Bélanger), who mimes his way obtrusively through scene after scene. Is he a reference to *Pierrot lunaire*? Schoenberg is mentioned in a booklet note as one of the composers whose developments Puccini followed with interest.

Another article proudly lists the physical elements of what is undeniably an impressive open-air installation, the wall itself apparently containing 29,000 individual sections and weighing 335 metric tons. The booklet goes on to list the eight martial arts acrobats and four fire jugglers who, alongside the 28 other extras, play significant parts in the visual variations on Chinese themes that the production comprises. All of them add to its busyness and showbiz appeal, though few make any meaningful comment on the opera itself.