

## L'Opéra de Paris—Une Histoire Sonore (1900-60)

Excerpts from operas by Auber, Berlioz, Borodin, Bourgault-Ducoudray, Büsser, Canteloube, Chabrier, Cherubini, d'Indy, d'Ollone, Donizetti, Dukas, Dupont, Duvernoy, Enesco, Fauré, Février, Georges, Gluck, Gounod, Hahn, Halévy, Honegger, Hue, Ibert, Lalo, Leroux, Magnard, Massenet, Meyerbeer, Milhaud, Mozart, Paladilhe, Poulenc, Puccini, Rabaud, Rameau, Reyer, Rimsky-Korsakov, Rossini, Rousseau, Roussel, Saint-Saëns, Sauguet, Strauss, Thomas, Tomasi, Verdi, Wagner, Wolf-Ferrari. With various artists. Malibran CDRG 215 (ten CDs)

This set offers limitless pleasure to anyone interested in historically important French singing. More than 100 singers are heard in repertoire produced at the Opéra de Paris during the first six decades of the 20th century. Many of the performances are live, some actually recorded at the Palais Garnier.

The first disc starts off in grand style with live excerpts from the Opéra's justly famous 1954 revival of Rameau's *Les Indes galantes*. The Gluck excerpts are predictable choices (Suzanne Balguerie's 'O malheureuse Iphigénie' is the highlight there). There's fine Mozart (especially Gabrielle Ritter-Ciampi's Susanna, elegance itself) but little bel canto. Most of the better-known French operas go unheard: one gets bits of *Faust* and *Roméo*, but nothing of *Mignon*, *Carmen*, *Les Pêcheurs de perles*, *Hoffmann*, *Manon* or *Werther*. One does, however, hear the gamut of off-the-beaten-track 19th- and 20th-century French material. Verdi, Wagner and several Russian composers are represented, the latter sung exclusively in French translation.

Standard repertoire occasionally disappoints, but delight is assured by Yvonne Gall's scintillating Marguerite, Régine Crespin's ultra-feminine, deeply affecting Desdemona and Marschallin, Charles Fontaine's imposing Manrico, Georges Thill's noble Lohengrin, and Gabriel Bacquier's hair-raising Scarpia. On many occasions the comfort gained from singing in French translation inspires exceptional interpretative acuity, the best example being Vanni-Marcoux's devastating Boris Godunov.

Malibran includes only a few of the Opéra's non-Francophone stars: three tenors—John O'Sullivan, Beniamino

Gigli and Mario Del Monaco, all true to form—and three other singers heard here in exceptionally authentic, meaningfully inflected French: Marjorie Lawrence (sublime in Brünnhilde's plaint to Wotan), Eidé Norena (an enchanting Gilda, technically immaculate) and Arthur Endrèze (typically intelligent if not vocally effulgent as Hamlet and Athanaël).

Notwithstanding the presence of major guest artists at the Opéra through the decades, the company—at least, up to the star-studded Liebermann era—was generally able to cast much of its repertoire without going that far afield. Repeatedly one discovers dazzling artistry in 'house' singers. Whether vocally outstanding (as many of them unquestionably are) or only average, virtually all of them, from earliest to most recent, sing 'off the words'. Their vividness in textual communication is the single most satisfying element of this set.

Of artists who appeared at the Palais Garnier in significant roles but remain infrequently remembered today, my favourites include three who, coincidentally, all feature on recordings from 1930: José de Trévi, another Belgian, exciting here in Tannhäuser's hymn to Venus; Marguerite Soyer, mixing tenderness with fervency in a superb Immolation Scene; and Pierre Nougaro, offering noble style, grave beauty of tone, and an apt emotional exhaustion in Prince Igor's monologue.

The better-known greats confirm their reputations, excepting Félicia Litvinne (heavy-handed in Sélika's prison-scene musings from *L'Africaine*) and Marie Delna (quite dull in 'O mon Fernand'). One is repeatedly awestruck listening to

so many of the men, especially the leading tenors—not just Léon Escalaïs, Paul Franz and Thill, but also singers familiar only to collectors, among them Agustarello Affre, Léon Beyle, Fontaine, and Emile Marcelin. Baritones, beginning with such legends as Maurice Renaud, Jean Lassalle and Jean-François Delmas, continue strongly over years before a final burst of talent in the 1950s with the group I'll refer to henceforth as the 'Five Bs': Bacquier, René Bianco, Ernest Blanc, Jean Borthayre and Roger Bourdin. Another baritone, recorded in 1947, provides the single most remarkable display of vocal opulence in the entire set: the magnificent Charles Cambon, singing from a work the Opéra had premiered six decades earlier, Paladilhe's *Patrie*.

Germaine Lubin, heard here in three selections (her radiant Agathe is the best), asserted in an interview half a century ago that 'In France the lyric art is dead—there is only Régine Crespin.' This set proves Lubin decidedly wrong. If any of the performances attain perfection both vocally and stylistically, I would cite three Massenet portrayals: Renée Doria's Thaïs ('L'amour est une vertu rare', tonally exquisite and quite extraordinarily moving), Andrea Guiot's Salomé and Robert Massard's Hérode.

Composers of post-Massenet generations were admirably championed by the Opéra during the three decades of Jacques Rouché's tenure as company director (1915-45). He gave no fewer than 71 premieres, while also presenting other new works. It's important to remember that major artists usually participated in these productions; in arias from Février's *Monna Vanna*, for example, listen to the exceptional performances of Vanni-Marcoux (the first Colonna in 1909), Lucien Muratore (who created Prinzivalle) and Fernand Anseau (who took that role in the 1925 revival). The tenor comparison is fascinating: Muratore typifies the bright-timbred French full lyric sound, while Anseau, the supremely eloquent Belgian, offers



■ Germaine Lubin as Ariane, 1935

one of those wonderfully dark-coloured, tonally effulgent instruments with which the Opéra once abounded.

Three full discs are devoted to rarely heard French works by 23 composers, extending chronologically from Lalo and Reyer to Poulenc and Sauguet. I wish I could say, 'Yes, let's revive them all,' but, *Dialogues des Carmélites* excepted, as one dignified but musically often aimless arioso episode follows another, one begins to lose enthusiasm. There are some interesting grand-scale declamatory scenes, including one from Büsser's *Les Noces corinthiennes* (somewhat hectoring and excessively long) with Hélène Bouvier the authoritative mezzo in a 1960 recording. Rabaud's *Marouf* registers strongly, and, of course, so does Enescu's *Oedipe* (Rita Gorr and Xavier Depraz are marvellous in the Sphinx-Oedipe confrontation). Géori Boué gives one of her loveliest performances in an affecting episode from the Honegger/Ibert *L'Aiglon*. Lucky the composer of any new opera to have had a Thill to sing it—for example, Canteloube's *Vercingétorix* and Rabaud's *Rolande et le mauvais garçon*, each excerpted here with the tenor in his most spectacularly confident form.

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The tracking information omits many recording dates and the transfers vary a good deal in quality, but the glories of these performances are largely

unimpaired. Malibrán includes a substantial essay giving much-needed background on the Opéra's major achievements.

ROGER PINES

### Marcelo Alvarez — 20 Years on the Opera Stage

Arias from *Andrea Chénier*, *Fedora*, *Pagliacci*, *Chatterton*, *La Bohème* (Leoncavallo), *Zazà* (Leoncavallo), *Cavalleria rusticana*, *Turandot*, *La fanciulla del West*, *Lo schiavo* (Gomes), *La Juive*, *Adriana Lecouvreur*, *Giulietta e Romeo* (Zandonai), *Le Cid* (Massenet). With the St Petersburg State Symphony Orchestra, c. Constantine Orbelian. Delos DE 3472 (one CD)

Marcelo Alvarez made his debut as Almoviva in *Il barbiere di Siviglia* in his native city of Córdoba, Argentina, in 1994. Recorded in St Petersburg 20 years later, this new CD is by way of a celebration of his art which largely addresses the heavier operas that he has been adding to his repertory over recent seasons, *Adriana Lecouvreur*, *Andrea Chénier*, *Cavalleria rusticana* and *Pagliacci* among them. *Turandot* and *La fanciulla del West* are coming up on his schedule.

His voice has matured well, with no loss of quality in the tone itself, and it is certainly a larger and more powerful instrument than it was; there remains plenty of juice still in the sonic mix and, as the *Chénier* 'Un dì, all'azzurro spazio' solo amply demonstrates, his use of text continues to be focused and expressive.

There are some unusual pieces here, too, including works very rarely performed on stage (how many tenors have recorded a recital containing extracts from no fewer than *four* different operas by Leoncavallo?). The *Chatterton* aria suits his beefy instrument and is a powerful piece of writing in itself. He brings spirit to the tragic 'Testa adorata' from the same composer's *La Bohème*, and sensitivity to the delicately attractive solo from *Zazà*. He is articulate in the intriguing piece from Gomes's *Lo schiavo* (1889), and the atmospheric extract from Zandonai's *Giulietta e Romeo* (1922) suits him equally well.

On more familiar territory, he provides a firm line in 'Amor ti vieta', is forcefully vivid in 'Vesti la giubba', and movingly engaged in 'Mamma, quell' vino è generoso' from *Cavalleria*. He gives a direct and unfussy account of 'Nessun dorma'; there's a purposive intensity to 'Rachel, quand du Seigneur' and he's entirely inside 'L'anima ho stanca' from *Adriana Lecouvreur*. Overall, it is good to see an artist fulfilling the ample promise of his earlier appearances with such an intelligently selected and expertly sung recital. Fine accompaniments are provided by the stylistically aware conductor and the excellent Russian players.

GEORGE HALL

#### ■ Marcelo Alvarez

