

PUCCINI: Manon Lescaut. Magda Olivero, sop. (Manon Lescaut); Vincente Sardinero, bar. (Lescaut); Richard Tucker, ten. (chevalier Renato des Grieux); Eugene Green, bass (Geronte de Ravois); Bernard Fitch, ten. (Edmondo & a dancing master); Aurora Cipriani, mezzo-sop. (a singer); Alfredo Izyulero, ten. (a lamplighter); José Mantenegro, bass (a naval captain); Boris Serdos, bass (a sergeant of archers); chorus and orchestra conducted by Michelangelo Veltri. Legato Classics LCD-113 (2 compact discs).

Fillers on 2nd disc: **BOITO: Mefistofele:** Act 3 (Cesare Siepi, bass, as Mefistofele; Giorgio Merighi, ten., as Faust; Magda Olivero, sop., as Margherita; conducted by Nello Santi). **VERDI: Il trovatore:** Ah! si, ben mio, coll'essere ... Di quella pira (Richard Tucker, ten., as Manrico; Montserrat Caballé, sop., as Leonora).

For a few years, BJR Records circulated a disc of excerpts from Puccini's Manon Lescaut (BJR-119, one mono LP) that made serious collectors yearn to hear Magda Olivero in the complete part. The chance to do that is now here, thanks to Legato Classics. However, the discerning collector should seek out that BJR treasure since, in this case, the foretaste (and foreshortened taste!) remains sweeter than the entire meal. The BJR excerpts capture Olivero in a 1964 performance, her voice measurably in fresher state, and with the glory of the Concertgebouw Orchestra of Amsterdam supporting her (under Flavio Vernizzi's direction). By 1972, at 60 years of age, even Olivero began to sound less than youthful as Manon, her voice having taken on a dryness of timbre that sustained legato phrasing less successfully than in 1964. For all that, it is a joy to hear her in the full role, singing with the refinement and dramatic urgency that set her apart as the last, and arguably the greatest, of a generation of sopranos who were stage-reared in Italy before verismo, albeit already waning, was toppled from its ascendancy. Olivero's command of dynamic shading and vocal coloration are much in evidence. For example, the soprano depicts Manon's dying moments with a palpably visceral agony that not only touches the heart far more than mere sentimentality would, but actually shocks and unnerves the listener in a very unsettling way.

The leading men in the cast fare well, although more vocally than theatrically, since Olivero in the title puts dramatic values into such high relief. Lyric Distribution, on its ERR and Historical Recording Enterprises LP lines as well as on Legato Classics CDs, has done much over the years to perpetuate Richard Tucker's memory and to document his achievements. Just a couple of months short of a 59th birthday that would make him only a year younger than Olivero herself, Tucker begins the performance sounding a trifle elderly for Renato des Grieux, but with the solidity and brilliance in his singing that scarcely ever failed him. As the opera progresses, the tenor really hits his stride and any vocal impression short of ruddy youth quickly dissipates.

Occasionally Tucker lacks the sheer charm that suits his role, but the voice's dazzling sheen has a marvelous, youthful appeal. Vincente Sardinero, however, conveys little of Lescaut's cynicism. Particularly noteworthy in the casting of the minor roles is Aurora Cipriani singing, all too briefly, but very sumptuously, in the part of the madrigal soloist in Act Two.

The orchestra and chorus carry out their functions capably, although Veltri leads them with little more than the proficiency of well-oiled routine. With more imagination, the conductor could have coaxed more lilt from the players in the Act Two dancing lesson's terpsichorean strains, or could have summoned the fuller range of dynamics indicated in the score for the Intermezzo between Acts Two and Three.

There are two fillers to round out this 1972 *Manon Lescaut* from Caracas. The first, a 1968, Florence performance, finds Tucker in fine fettle as Manrico in Verdi's *Il trovatore*. The other stars Olivero, who was recorded singing Boito's Margherita in *Mefistofele* masterfully on other occasions (this one being July 8, 1972, in Macerata), but who aspirates the tracery of "L'altra notte in fondo al mare" rather crudely in this performance.

Manon Lescaut, aside from mild hiss and fleeting moments of drop-out, enjoys decent sound. Of the fillers, the *Mefistofele* act, quite distantly recorded, benefits from a boost in the volume setting. Notes, including a synopsis, but no texts, are provided in the booklet that accompanies the set.

C.-P. Gérald Parker