

Puccini: *La Fanciulla Del West*.

Antonino Votto, Conductor, La Scala, 1956 Legato SRO-506 (2 CDs).

Gigliola Frazzoni, soprano (Minnie); Franco Corelli, tenor (Dick Johnson); Tito Gobbi, baritone (Jack Rance); Nicola Zaccaria, (Jake Wallace); Franco Ricciardi, (Nick); Enzo Sordello, (Sonora); Ugo Novelli, (Ashby); Michele Cassato, (Sid); Anton Mercuriale, (Joe); Maria Marini, (Wowkle); Rando Coda, (Billy)

This 1956 recording of Puccini's "Western" filters some fine singing through the tape of a live performance with many acoustical deficits. Despite these ever-present distractions and the lack of background information, these two CDs offer glimpses of the high quality singers and performances then taking place at La Scala. Gigliola Frazzoni, a fine singer who unfortunately was little known outside Italy, emphasizes Minnie's strength rather than her naivety and innocence, thus bringing a certain validity to a difficult role. Not only can she spin out a lovely bel canto line full of nuance, color, and power when given the opportunity (and there are not many), but she can effectively deliver the declamatory style of recitative as well. Tito Gobbi, a first-class singer-actor in his day, brings intelligence and strength to his portrayal of Sheriff Jack Rance. A versatile artist whose roles extended from Mozart to Berg, he achieved both European and American fame as a singer and later as a director. Although Dick Johnson was not one of Corelli's better known roles, he acquits himself well in it, drawing the outlaw-hero in an authoritative, personal fashion. This recording was made two years after his La Scala debut and his voice is full, with a youthful bloom, although the top rarely comes through with clarity. The opera teems with lesser roles all delivered by singers of fine caliber. Franco Ricciardi's expressive tenor, and Ugo Novelli's fine baritone are good examples of the high quality of singing. Conductor Votto interprets the score directly, accepting at face value the dominating nostalgic and melodramatic qualities of the music. The orchestra is responsive to his direction and plays extremely well so far as one can tell given the acoustical limitations.

Those limitations loom large for the listener and the tape is best described as sounding like a scratchy 78 rpm with a warped disc in the middle of Act I. The loss of dynamic subtlety and poor tonal accuracy represent only two of many complaints one could make. But the conviction of the conductor's approach, the quality of the orchestra and the virtues of individual singers, together reveal a performance style of La Scala during the mid-1950s that was not uncommon, and that constitutes an important aspect of this recording. Improved re-mastering and informative liner notes would considerably enhance the significance of this CD as a document of the time. *Reviewed by June Ottenberg*

Puccini: *Tosca*.

Alexander Gibson, conductor. 1957. Legato SRO-511 (2 CDs)

Zinka Milanov, soprano (Tosca); Franco Corelli, tenor (Cavaradossi); Giangiuseppe Guelfi, baritone (Scarpia); Michael Langdon, bass (Angelotti); David Tree, tenor (Spoletta); Forbes Robinson, baritone (Sacristan)

This CD, taken from the tape of a live performance in 1957, reflects the acoustical problems common at that time. Nothing has been done to clean up, "modernize," or even slightly improve the older sound. Because liner notes and any identification of orchestra and theatre are omitted, the performance date is a major clue to the opera's production. London was doubtless the place, for in 1957 Alexander Gibson

had become music director at Sadler's Wells. In addition, both Milanov and Corelli had made Covent Garden debuts in *Tosca's* leading roles in 1956 and 1957 respectively. There appears to be no evidence of an LP release and indeed one seems unlikely since the then current Callas and Tebaldi recordings would have offered fierce competition.

Despite tape hiss, fluctuation of balance, dynamics et al., the individual performances of Milanov and Guelfi are impressive. The latter, whose career was manifest primarily in Europe, depicts an ominous and powerful Scarpia, leaving little doubt as to who dominates the plot. As he punctuates the 'Te Deum' at the end of Act I with the repetition of Tosca's name, he builds a truly exciting scene layered with intense feeling. Milanov's heroine shines with the limpid, expressive tonal quality the soprano could command at her best. A fine singer, she was 51 years old at this time and possessed a powerful voice, full of color and nuance, that dramatically conveys the feminine and fluctuating qualities of Tosca. Although she and Corelli sing very well together, he comes off less successfully, in part because of the thinness in his top range. This is doubtless a problem of the tape since his top range was, in fact, full and the rest of his voice glows with youth and feeling. When in doubt, however, he tends to pull out all the stops and this inevitably weakens the characterization. Later, when Cavaradossi had become one of his most famous roles, he exhibited more vocal restraint.

A major problem lies with the consistency of the orchestra and conductor. In Act II the underlying tension that should be evident from the beginning does not surface until well into the action. Hence, Puccini's gripping juxtaposition of the festive celebration in the outside world and the claustrophobic, evil feeling of Scarpia's apartments is lost. In the opening of Act III, conductor and orchestra again only weakly project the pastoral quality, leaving the charged scene that follows without its dramatic preface and support. Puccini exploited these sharp contrasts in *Tosca* to effectively express its "verismo" character and without their clear articulation the work becomes somewhat diffuse. The rest of the time conductor and orchestra are acceptable, and the almost harsh quality at the end is most effective. *Reviewed by June Ottenberg*

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