

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 (Cavaradosi); Giangiaco-
mo 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