

Massenet: *Manon*.

Mirella Freni, soprano (Manon); Luciano Pavarotti, tenor (Des Grieux); Rolando Panerai, baritone (Lescaut); Antonio Zerbini, bass (Le Comte Des Grieux); Franco Ricciardi, tenor (Guillot); Giuseppe Morresi, baritone (De Brétigny); chorus and orchestra of La Scala, Milan, conducted by Peter Maag.

Puccini: *Tosca: Act I, Duet*

Luciano Pavarotti, tenor, as Cavaradossi; Mirella Freni, soprano, as Tosca. Legato Classics LCD-132 (2 CDs) distributed by Lyric. Produced by Ed Rosen.

Even if you prefer Massenet's *Manon* in the original French, this Italian language version recorded during a June 3, 1969 La Scala performance presents an electrifying and irresistible interpretation. Legato Classics, distributed by Lyric, is reissuing on CD some wonderful and important recordings from the LP Mauro R. Fuguetta (MRF), Historical Recording Enterprises (HRE), and Unique Opera Records lines. In the early 1970s, this performance appeared on vinyl in a two-disc set issued by Unique Opera Records (UORC-215). Currently, Melodram (MEL 27046, distributed by Qualiton) is offering this same performance on CD although apparently from a different "private" source than Legato's. HRE included the St. Sulpice scene (Act III, Scene II) as a filler to a Pavarotti/Freni concert album of duets and arias (HRE 248-2).

The singing is first-rate. Mirella Freni in the title role creates a passionate Manon. She uses her warm voice to good advantage when seducing Des Grieux, and with infinite pathos in "Adieu notre petite table" and the death scene. Pavarotti is an ardent, yet vulnerable, Des Grieux. He resists the temptation to belt out notes and instead presents some truly charming and gentle moments such as in the Act II aria, "En fermant les yeux." Soprano and tenor blend their voices nicely. Their scenes radiate passion and emotion without resorting to sobs or other questionable mannerisms.

Baritone Panerai creates a suitably oily and cynical Lescaut, but one who also can feel compassion for his cousin on the road to Le Havre (Act V). Zerbini, as the Count, sounds appropriately fatherly. The rest of the cast is adequate. Conductor Maag leads a spirited performance and paces the opera well. The orchestra responds to his direction with lush, romantic sound, and fine attention to detail with only a few misplaced notes, particularly during *rallentandi*.

On a sour note, the opera is by no means complete. Cuts, other than those authorized by Massenet, are frequent. As is often the case, the first act ends with the lovers' flight, but here the entire Cours la Reine scene (Act III, Scene I) is omitted. Manon sings her Gavotte in Act IV. In addition, several linking passages are cut. Again, traditionally, instead of spoken dialogue, the words are abridged and sung. For a totally complete French *Manon*, including the "Fabliau" in an appendix, there is the Sills/Gedda/Rudel set originally issued on four LPs by Audio Treasury (ABC/ATS 20007), and reissued on CD by Angel (CDMC-69831).

The monaural sound is quite good, neither blurred nor muddled, even in the massed ensembles with forte orchestral accompaniment. Light tape hiss cannot distract from the clean separation of voices and general lack of distortion. Stage noises are hardly noticeable; the La Scala audience is enthusiastic, but polite.

The first act duet from *Tosca* fills out disc two. Even though the voices in this excerpt are distantly recorded and slightly muffled, Pavarotti's glorious tenor fills

the house. Freni, on the other hand, is a faint-voiced Tosca and the warm, sweet sound which stood her in such good stead as Manon fails to project in Tosca's music. A bout of coughing, close to the mike—in the “microphone in the audience production”—is an unwelcome accompaniment to the music.

Legato's accompanying booklet provides a synopsis written by John Gotwalt with references to cuing numbers, but no libretto is included. The cuing is ample but in French which, according to Gotwalt, allows the listener to recognize familiar arias.

Not complete, not in French, neither digitally recorded nor in stereo, and with no libretto, this *Manon* nevertheless generates excitement and passion—which is what *Manon* is really all about anyhow. “Et c'est là l'histoire de Manon Lescaut!” *Reviewed by Sharon G. Almquist*

Verdi: *I Lombardi alla Prima Crociata*.

Renata Scotto, soprano (Giselda); Anna di Stasio, soprano (Viclinda); Sofia Mezzetti, soprano (Sofia); Luciano Pavarotti, tenor (Oronte); Ruggiero Raimondi, bass (Pagano/Hermit); Umberto Grilli, tenor (Arvino); Mario Rinaudo, bass (Pirro); Fernando Jacopucci, tenor (Priore della città); Alfredo Coletta, bass (Acciano); orchestra and chorus conducted by Gianandrea Gavazzeni.

Verdi: *La Traviata*.

Libiamo ne'lieti calici; Che è ciò?... Oh qual pallor; Un dì felice; Ebben? Che diavol fate; Parigi o cara (Renata Scotto, soprano, as Violetta; Luciano Pavarotti, tenor, as Alfredo; conducted by Carlo Felice Cillario).

Legato Classics LCD-148 (2 CDs) distributed by Lyric. Produced by Ed Rosen.

I Lombardi, Verdi's fourth opera, appeared in 1843, one year after *Nabucco*. Although the plot is winding and confusing, the music offers beautiful melodies with some moments of true dramatic invention. This early Verdi work may be uneven and mechanical in some places, but it is never dull.

Neither dull nor new to early Verdi fans is this live performance from Rome now issued on CD by Legato Classics. According to the notes accompanying this release, the recording was made in 1969. On November 20, *Lombardi* opened the 1969 Rome opera season, with a second performance three days later on the 23rd. The LP release by Mauro R. Fuguetta on MRF-48, gives a recording date of November 20, 1969. Edward J. (“Eddie”) Smith on his “Golden Age of Opera” series issued this performance on two LPs (EJS-503), also without a specific recording date.

The recording has a few drop-outs, but generally fine monaural sound considering its “private” source. The bass is rather boomy and from time to time the soloists and chorus sound distant as they move about the stage. The staging of this production kept the chorus stock still on revolving benches—and their performance and uneven sound projection reflects this odd arrangement. Even without the chorus clomping about, stage noises are distinctly audible. Especially realistic is the battle scene in Act II. Here the fighting seems so intense, violent, and loud that it truly sounds like a medieval crusade. Perhaps this is misleading to the later listener because contemporary critics criticized some scenes for being too stylized and conflicting with the realism of duels.

The singing is quite exciting—uninhibited, but not vulgar. At this stage in her career, Scotto exhibited all the qualities of a first-class lyric/spinto soprano moving