

PUCCINI *Turandot* & • Kurt Adler, cond; Birgit Nilsson (*Turandot*); Licia Albanese (*Liù*); Franco Corelli (*Calaf*); Ezio Flagello (*Timur*); Metropolitan Op Ch & O • IMMORTAL PERFORMANCES 1188-2, mono (2 CDs: 150:26) Live: Metropolitan Opera, New York 2/24/1962

& **BONUS: Interview with Rosa Raisa. VERDI *La forza del destino*: Invano Alvaro**¹.

PUCCINI *Manon Lescaut*: *Tu? Tu, amore? Tu?*² Renata Tebaldi (*Manon*); Franco Corelli (¹*Don Alvaro*; ²*Des Grieux*); ²Ettore Bastianini (¹*Don Carlo*). ²Fausto Cleva, ¹Francesco Molinari-Pradelli, cond; ¹Metropolitan Op O. ²Teatro San Carlo O. ²Metropolitan Opera, New York 4/16/1966; ¹Teatro San Carlo, Naples 3/20/1968

By Henry Fogel
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When the Metropolitan Opera revived Puccini's *Turandot* with a new production in 1961 with a cast headed by the ideal pairing of Birgit Nilsson and Franco Corelli, the plan was that Dimitri Mitropoulos would conduct. Then Mitropoulos's death in November 1960 caused General Manager Rudolph Bing to seek another glamorous name. He settled on Leopold Stokowski. The results were mixed at best, and in future seasons the conducting was turned over to the Met's chorus master, Kurt Adler, and Fausto Cleva, the house conductor for Italian repertoire. Neither could be called ideal, though Cleva was more successful.

By 1966 the score was more satisfactorily entrusted to the young Zubin Mehta. I nominated for the Classical Hall of Fame a broadcast from that year under Mehta's thrilling leadership (Living Stage), which would still be my first choice. However, this new release on Immortal Performances has some important assets that make it a valuable supplement.

Chief among them is Licia Albanese. The great Puccini soprano never recorded the role of Liù, and despite her age, 53, and a quarter century of singing, she still offers something very special in her portrayal. Mehta's Liù, Mirella Freni, sings with a more classically beautiful voice, and she has genuine dramatic skills. Albanese, however, manages to capture the combination of fragility and strength that was characteristic of Puccini's heroines. She inflects every word with meaning and sings Liù's second aria, "Tu che di gel sei cinta," with a specificity of inflection and phrasing that makes it an integral part of the story. In fact, this is the one major Puccini role of Albanese's that has not previously been adequately documented (prior releases of this performance have had pitch problems and more sonic congestion). Rectifying those issues alone makes Immortal Performances' release significant.

For the majority of the 1960s Nilsson and Corelli defined *Turandot*. In my view no other pairing is their equal. Their performances were wildly popular at the Met and La Scala, and no wonder. Such thrilling singing comes along very rarely. Both singers have the stamina to sound fresh in the final scene, despite long passages of incredibly demanding writing. Although EMI made a studio recording of *Turandot* with Nilsson and Corelli in 1965, it does not come close to the sense of spontaneity and thrilling power displayed on stage. Francesco Molinari-Pradelli's pedestrian conducting for EMI is part of the problem, but I also believe that both singers needed to be in front of a live audience to truly let go.

What may surprise listeners unfamiliar with the live broadcasts is the vocal shading provided by the two lead singers. Nilsson considerably brightens her tone in

the final scene when the Ice Princess's conversion to love dawns, and in "In questa reggia" she employs vocal coloration to convey Turandot's grief over the torment of her ancestor. Corelli also surprises with some lovely floated soft singing. The Riddle Scene here has to be what Puccini heard in his head when he wrote it.

The Met understood the importance of these performances and cast the whole opera from strength. Unlike the usual doddering portrayal, Ezio Flagello's Timur is firmly sung. All of the smaller roles are taken by Met stalwarts. There is not a weak link in the cast. I wish I could say the same about the pit. Adler served as the Met's chorus master from 1943-1973, and occasionally he was invited to conduct. He was a competent musician and a skilled preparer of choruses, but he always seemed to me an interpretive cipher. Here, at least, he doesn't get in the way, and the vocal performances are so remarkable that there are thrills throughout. But if you compare this broadcast with Zubin Mehta's inspired leadership, you will hear the difference between competence and brilliance.

The bonus material is an added asset. The last act Alvaro/Carlo duet from *La forza del destino* with Corelli and Ettore Bastianini is thrilling. It comes from a 1958 production at Teatro San Carlo in Naples that was filmed by RAI. The performance has been available on video and CD, but Immortal Performances has produced a finer-sounding transfer. To hear these two great singers in their mid-thirties is to experience opera singing at its finest. The *Manon Lescaut* duet with Corelli and Renata Tebaldi derives from the 1966 farewell gala for the old Metropolitan Opera House. Corelli is in splendid voice, but Tebaldi's otherwise beautiful singing is marred in a few spots by the hardness of tone that afflicted the final years of her career. Still, hers was a once-in-a-generation voice. John Gutman's interview with Rosa Raisa, the first Turandot, is fascinating and informative.

William Russell's essay about the performance is insightful, as his commentaries always are, including his remarks about the correct pronunciation of the opera's title (spoiler alert: the "t" is not silent). Richard Caniell's recording notes are a further valuable asset. The lavish 36-page booklet also includes a complete synopsis, wonderful historical photos, and singers' biographies.

For many reasons, chief among them Albanese's Liù, this release is highly recommended.