

BELLINI Norma • Richard Bonyngne, cond; Joan Sutherland (Norma); Marilyn Horne (Adalgisa); John Alexander (Pollione); Richard Cross (Oroveso); Vancouver Op Ch & O
• IMMORTAL PERFORMANCES 1053-3 mono (3 CDs at the price of 2: 216:41) Live:
Vancouver 10/26/1963

& Excerpts from *La traviata*, *Die Meistersinger*, *Alcina*, *Lucia di Lammermoor*,
Rigoletto, *Tosca*

by James Forrest

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Time was when a performance of *Norma* was, of itself, an occasion, an event to stand out from the routine of a regular season. In 1954, Irving Kolodin wrote with no little anger that it was not or should not be a work put on in the middle of a busy season with a few draperies hung and “flats” laid about the stage in the hope of recreating ancient Gaul. The performance at hand, which took place October 26, 1963 certainly qualifies as an occasion, and, as amazingly resuscitated by Richard Caniell and his Immortal Performances staff from relatively unpromising source material, conveys that sense in a manner far more direct and impressive than many a recorded performance of sterling sonic qualities. Caniell describes the sound as “shallow” and I suppose that is accurate, but it is not tiring to the ear, and, since it was seemingly recorded with a single microphone, when a singer walks to the rear of the stage, or in one horizontal direction or another, there is an audible reminder of stage movement. The sound is entirely adequate to our enjoyment.

Dedicated to the memory of Irving Gutmann, who had served as artistic director of the Vancouver company as well as of other Canadian operatic institutions, this set is the result of a lengthy period of work and processing. Gutmann first handed this tape to Caniell more than 15 years ago. A trial set of CDs reached Sutherland and Bonyngne in early January 2001. It put them, in the conductor’s words, “over the moon.” The product at hand, having undergone the most careful remastering will, I confidently predict, have the same impact on any listener devoted to this work, to the performers, and all who love great singing.

This was the first hearing of Bellini’s great work on the West Coast in years, possibly since the San Francisco Opera’s sole performance with Cigna, Castagna, Martinelli, and Pinza, on November 13, 1937. A touring company had presented the work in San Francisco six or seven years earlier, and I have read that the Chicago Opera performed it during the 1920s in Oakland with Rosa Raisa, but I have no confirmation. Beyond that, this *Norma* was Joan Sutherland’s stage debut in the title role, and likewise the debut of Marilyn Horne as Adalgisa. Both artists became indelibly associated with those roles and their partnership was recorded in London the following year. They finally appeared at New York’s Metropolitan Opera in 1970.

For this Vancouver premiere, Gutmann cast the opera with great care. The 40-year-old American tenor John Alexander proved an apt choice for Pollione, and bass Richard Cross, like Horne, less than 30, had the right voice, if perhaps too youthful a timbre, for Oroveso. The four artists and Bonyng collaborated for the 1964 recording, and Alexander rejoined Sutherland in San Francisco when the soprano finally appeared there as Norma in 1972 (not with Horne). Bonyng had only conducted Faust previously in Vancouver and as he recalls perhaps only one other opera. One would not know it from hearing this recording. He surely improved his conducting skills over the years, and as he notes the orchestra is at times a trifle “bangy,” but not inappropriate to those sections of the opera where Bellini’s orchestration enables such effects. What strikes me is the energy throughout this performance. In some studio recordings I have felt the conductor rather lacking in “push” from the podium, but not here. This performance moves; tempos are brisk, and the total elapsed time is less than other performances I know, including some led by Bonyng. The action sweeps ahead and we are swept with it, not with a sense of undue haste, but with an inevitability in dramatic momentum.

What also strikes me is the amazing quality of the singing. We know that both women will go down in history as genuinely great vocalists. But this was their first public performance of this music, some of the most difficult in all opera, and you would think the girls had been singing their perfect thirds for years. I heard them in their first collaboration during 1960–61, a concert Semiramide in Los Angeles led by Horne’s husband, Henry Lewis (the two couples became friends), but fine as that was, it did not prepare me for the quality of their ensemble as heard here. Similarly, Alexander, a splendid musician with a finely managed tenor voice of perhaps just less than top quality, gives here the performance of his life. His contribution to the studio recording is surely decent, but not a patch to my ear on what he achieved in Vancouver. My first hearing caused me to send a message to *Fanfare’s* Henry Fogel, who provided splendid notes for this enterprise, the first of several fascinating essays in the handsome booklet accompanying these discs. I asked Henry as to his initial reaction. He assured me that his response was the same as mine: disbelief.

Sutherland was not a singer who brought the most forceful or sophisticated dramatic insight to her roles, but she always responded well to coaching and she makes all of the necessary dramatic points. It is, to use Fogel’s term, a carefully “nuanced” performance. Not Callas, or Gencer, surely, but as interesting a concept as such earlier sopranos as Cigna and Milanov and more accurately sung. Actually, more accurately sung than any Norma I know. She is matched only by herself in other performances: the 1964 recording, one of the 1978 Holland Festival performances I’ve heard, and the 1970 Met broadcast with Horne, Bergonzi, and Siepi which, despite one patch of bad ensemble, has long been my favorite Sutherland performance. By 1970 the voice had broadened; that performance remains unique of its time as this debut performance is unique for preserving the way she and Horne sounded in their early years; tonal gold at a bargain price.

A bargain price indeed, because Immortal Performances includes a third disc of nearly 80 minutes' duration which offers Sutherland in repertoire both familiar and highly unusual. This three-disc set is sold for the price of two, in consideration of the album being dedicated to Irving Gutmann's memory. Through the beneficence of a British collector, we hear Sutherland before she ever came to North America, as Wagner's Eva (in English, 1957) with no less than Kubelík conducting, and such colleagues as James Pease, Jon Vickers, and Noreen Berry. We have almost a quarter hour ending with a quintet in which Sutherland limns the high soprano line memorably.

Also from 1963, her debut in Philadelphia as Violetta with Bonyngé conducting and the French baritone Gabriel Bacquier as Germont, is the entire Violetta-Germont scene in a most affecting performance. Her singing of the scena which closes act 1 quite brings down the house and there are variants and ornamentation which she did not always use in later performances. Two arias from *Alcina*, one of her most famous Handel roles, rather squarely conducted by Malcolm Sargent, are followed by an incredibly brilliant and expressive traversal of Lucia's act 1 aria. Sargent is a bit more "with it" here, and her performance reminded me of my first hearing of her SFO Lucia in autumn 1961, a month or so before Henry Fogel first heard her in the role at the Met. She had a freshness largely evident in her first studio Lucia but there is a matchless zest here. As I noted in a review in *Fanfare* 39:3, she was best heard live, both for the amplitude of the voice in the hall, but also, as Henry notes in his essay, because the editing in search of perfection for which Decca was noted often seems to reduce somewhat her energy and spontaneity.

A not too well-balanced Bell Telephone Hour transmittal of the *Rigoletto* quartet finds the soprano (expectedly) and the American mezzo Mildred Miller (perhaps unexpectedly) in opulent voice. Gobbi is not quite in the aural picture and Gedda sounds to my ears out of voice. But this is swiftly forgotten as we hear nearly 10 minutes from *Tosca* with Gobbi at his most characteristic and Sutherland in a role never associated with her contributing one of the most superbly sung performances of "Vissi d'arte" I have ever heard. It is a stunning conclusion to a spectacular release; one that cannot be too highly recommended.