

MOZART *Don Giovanni* • Karl Böhm, cond; George London (*Don Giovanni*); Elisabeth Grümmer (*Donna Anna*); Sena Jurinac (*Donna Elvira*); Emmy Loose (*Zerlina*); Léopold Simoneau (*Don Ottavio*); Erich Kunz (*Leporello*); Harald Pröglhöf (*Masetto*); Ludwig Weber (*Il Commendatore*); Ch & O of the Vienna St Op • IMMORTAL PERFORMANCES 1191-3 (3CDs: 218:42) Live: London 9/24/1954

& **SENA JURINAC AND LÉOPOLD SIMONEAU** • Sena Jurinac¹ (sop); Léopold Simoneau² (ten); various accompaniments • Arias from: ¹*Il trovatore* and ¹*Ariadne auf Naxos* (Stanford Robinson, cond; London 5/27/1951); Lieder by: ¹Schubert and ¹Mendelssohn (Ernst Lush (pn); London 7/20/1950); Duets from ²*Die Entführung aus dem Serail* and ²*Così fan tutte* (Pierette Alarie (sop); Joseph Krips, cond; Canada, 1962); Arias from ²*Così fan tutte* and ²*Les Pêcheurs des Perles*

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In the Jan/Feb 2017 *Fanfare* (40:3), I reviewed an Eloquence reissue (4807 181) of the May 1955 Philips studio recording of Mozart's *Don Giovanni*, conducted by Rudolf Moralt. I wrote: "The cast is representative of the kind you might have been able to see, had you been fortunate enough to attend a 1950s performance at the Vienna State Opera." Immortal Performances (IP) now brings us one such performance, from September 24, 1954 at London's Royal Festival Hall, part of the Staatsoper's London tour. Karl Böhm conducts. It's not surprising that the Philips studio recording has appreciably better sound. But the 1954 London broadcast has adequate presence, definition, and dynamic range. Distortion is relatively minimal. Overall, the quality is slightly below what you might expect from a good preservation of a Met broadcast from the same era, but certainly fine enough to appreciate the excellent performance. IP's Richard Caniell has seamlessly filled in four brief gaps in the broadcast tape with other recordings featuring the same performers. He has also expanded audience applause, cut off by the individual who recorded the broadcast off the air.

Four of the eight principals are heard on both recordings; George London in the title role, Sena Jurinac (*Donna Elvira*), Léopold Simoneau (*Don Ottavio*), and Ludwig Weber (*Commendatore*). My feelings about those artists' performances in the 1954 London performance replicate my reactions to the 1955 Philips. I wrote in 2017: "But for me, the shining light of this recording, and reason enough to purchase the set, is Léopold Simoneau's *Don Ottavio*... Simoneau is, on every conceivable level, absolutely sublime. Simoneau's ravishingly beautiful and technically pristine tenor is aligned with crystal-clear diction, seamless legato, and admirable breath control. Simoneau is also a first-rate actor, one of the few on disc to make Ottavio more than a stock (some would say milquetoast) character. Simoneau's Ottavio is a nobleman to be sure, but also passionate both in his love for Donna Anna, and his quest for revenge. Simoneau achieves this compelling portrait by giving full due not just to Ottavio's two great arias, and ensembles, but by a masterful shaping of the recitatives."

"Also sublime is Sena Jurinac's *Donna Elvira*. Like Simoneau, Jurinac was a great Mozart singer, one able to combine vocal beauty and technical mastery with compelling and thoughtful interpretations. Jurinac sails through the

technical demands of the role, all the while making Elvira a very human and sympathetic character... George London was a great singing actor, and Giovanni was one of his signature roles. The voice is both very masculine and rich, and London certainly portrays the dashing, swashbuckling Don to the hilt. But both the tonal quality and production of the voice are on the thick side, an issue magnified when London's charismatic visual stage presence is absent. Still, London does not let the side down in this endlessly fascinating, challenging role... The veteran bass, Ludwig Weber, is suitably imposing as the Commendatore, rising to the challenge in the final confrontation with Giovanni."

The remainder of the 1954 London cast is, on the whole, superior to the 1955 Philips recording. Soprano Elisabeth Grümmer is a superb Donna Anna. Her voice is beautiful throughout the registers, and she dispatches the coloratura of "Non mi dir" with distinction. She is also a marvelous actress, one who conveys Donna Anna's pain and desire for retribution. Philips's Hilde Zadek, another fine Mozart soprano, is likewise compelling, but not Grümmer's equal in vocal endowment. Emmy Loose brings her characteristic charm and lyric beauty to the role of Zerlina (as does Hilde Zadek in the studio recording). The Philips Leporello, Walter Berry, is in marvelous, youthful voice. But Erich Kunz far surpasses Berry in depth and specificity of characterization. Leporello was one of Kunz's finest roles, and his affinity for and experience with the part shine through in the London performance. And Kunz is in superb voice to boot. As I wrote in the 2017 review of the Philips *Don Giovanni*, the appearance of Eberhard Waechter in the role of Masetto is certainly luxury casting. Waechter would soon go on to become a prominent Don Giovanni in his own right, his interpretation preserved in the classic 1959 EMI recording conducted by Carlo Maria Giulini. Harald Pröglhöf lacks Waechter's charisma, but his assumption of Masetto is well sung and dramatically credible.

Karl Böhm leads a dynamic performance. As one would expect, this is a resolutely pre-HIP account, with modern instruments, piano accompaniment for the secco recitatives, and no added ornamentation. It's also a riveting experience. Böhm grasps the architecture of this work. His pacing always make musical and dramatic sense, both within a set number, and in relation to what precedes and follows. Böhm favors fleet tempos, and coaxes marvelous, taut ensemble playing from the VPO, who of course have this score in their blood. There is plenty of fire in such moments as the Overture, and the Don's final confrontation with the Statue of the Commendatore. But Karl Böhm is also masterful in the opera's lighter moments. The accompaniment to Leporello's Catalogue Aria both skips and laughs along with Erich Kunz. Böhm also applies tasteful rubato when appropriate, without ever disrupting the music's flow. This is an interpretation that has the full measure of *Don Giovanni's* remarkable juxtaposition of tragedy and comedy. Karl Böhm was a great opera conductor, one who excelled particularly under the inspiration of live performance. This 1954 London *Don Giovanni* is a fine souvenir of his art. To complete my comparison with the 1955 Philips recording, I wrote previously that its conductor: "(Rudolf) Moralt is one of the great assets of this *Don Giovanni*. He leads a performance that is both elegant and dramatically propulsive. A hurried Champagne Aria apart, the pacing strikes me as expert from start to finish."

As an appendix to the complete *Don Giovanni*, IP offers recital performances by Jurinac and Simoneau. First, Jurinac sings two operatic excerpts

in a May 27, 1951 broadcast, accompanied by the BBC Opera Orchestra and conductor Stanford Robinson. Leonora from Verdi's *Il trovatore* is not a role one would immediately associate with Sena Jurinac. But the lineage of Leonora's Act I aria and cabaletta "Tacea la notte placida...Ti tale amore" may be traced directly from Mozart to 19th century bel canto to middle-period Verdi. Jurinac sings the music with a lovely, silvery tone, flawless legato, regal phrasing, and adept coloratura. The Composer in Richard Strauss's *Ariadne auf Naxos* is indelibly associated with Sena Jurinac, and she sings the conclusion of the opera's Prelude magnificently. A July 20, 1950 recital with pianist Ernest Lush follows. Jurinac is expert in lieder by Schubert and Mendelssohn. Typical of her artistry, Jurinac is highly expressive, all the while delivering the music and text with a natural, unaffected beauty. Léopold Simoneau returns to Mozart, in 1962 performances of duets (with his wife, soprano Pierette Alarie) from *The Abduction from the Seraglio* and *Così fan tutte*. Simoneau and Alarie are both elegant, in lovely voice, and dramatically expressive. From 1955, a sterling rendition of *Così*'s "Un'aura amorosa." And to conclude, a sample of Léopold Simoneau in French lyric repertoire, "Je crois entendre encore" from Bizet's *The Pearl Fishers*, a 1950 recording. Simoneau's gorgeous, limpid voice, flawless legato, and mastery of soft dynamics serve this music in ideal fashion.

Dewey Faulkner's liner notes that explore Mozart's *Don Giovanni*, as well as the various performances, are of great value. There is a full plot synopsis of the opera, Richard Caniell's *Recording Notes*, and artist bios and photos. Because of its dated sonics, the IP 1954 Vienna Staatsoper *Don Giovanni* must serve as a supplement to the 1955 Philips studio recording that features many of the same artists. But overall, the 1954 live performance has the superior cast and conducting (although again, the 1955 is hardly deficient). And the bonus items add considerable value. Recommended.

Five stars: A sterling 1954 Vienna Staatsoper *Don Giovanni*