

PONCHIELLI *La Gioconda* • Emil Cooper, cond; Zinka Milanov (*Gioconda*); Margaret Harshaw (*Cieca*); Risë Stevens (*Laura*); Richard Tucker (*Enzo*); Leonard Warren (*Barnaba*); Giacomo Vaghi (*Alvise*); Metropolitan Op O & Ch • IMMORTAL PERFORMANCES 1093-2, mono (2 CDs: 159:44) Live, Metropolitan Op, New York 3/16/1946

Review by Henry Fogel
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La Gioconda was one of Zinka Milanov's most famous roles, and there are quite a few recordings of her singing it. A 1939 Met broadcast, previously issued by Immortal Performances (IPCD 1012) is limited by constricted sound and the hard-toned (although beautifully shaped and inflected) singing by Giovanni Martinelli. Two decades on, a 1959 RCA recording unfortunately catches Milanov too late in her career (nor is Giuseppe di Stefano at his best). In between there have been Met broadcasts and at least one from New Orleans. Of them all, this 1946 Met broadcast is the finest.

In comparison with a previous Myto release, there is little need to replace it, although Immortal Performances' edition adds a shade more color and realism to the orchestra and voices. If you don't own the Myto, however, and enjoy *La Gioconda*, this release is close to a necessity. Unlike the other Met broadcasts that feature Kurt Baum as Enzo, here we get Richard Tucker in prime voice at 33. Throw in the fine Barnaba of Leonard Warren, and you have three Met stars from this era all at their considerable best.

For anyone who is unfamiliar with Milanov's work and who wonders why she had such an enthusiastic following among Met audiences for three decades, the famous moment near the beginning of *Gioconda*, "Enzo adorata, ah, come t'amo," will clarify matters. The beautifully floated and long-held high BI is characteristic of the soprano at her greatest. Frequently, particularly in later years, those "Milanov moments" would be offset by squally singing, intonation problems, and rhythmic sloppiness, which is not the case here. This performance offers dramatic-soprano singing of grandeur, tonal beauty, and vocal presence duplicated by very few. Milanov's rich chest voice, her ability to reflect emotion with tonal coloring, and her capacity to soar in ensembles are all treasurable.

Tucker's rich, powerful lyric tenor is perfect for Enzo. Although I always enjoyed his singing, one must admit that later in his career Tucker broke the music's line with too many sobs and a tendency toward explosive interruptions. None of that is true here. His singing of "Cielo e mar" is perfect for this moment of praise and awe before the beauty of nature, "a paeon to sky and sea" as William Russell calls it in his excellent notes. The aria's climax is powerful while still preserving the natural flow of the music.

Warren was, of course, one of the Met's greatest baritones until his horrifying death on stage in 1960. Here, in his youth the power and ring in his voice is astonishing. Warren was a fine vocal actor, and he presents Barnaba vividly as the evil force he is. By turns Warren can sound smarmy or grand, and the richness of his high notes is unique. They never sound like forced additions to the singer's natural range, but rather are smooth extensions of his middle register.

Unfortunately, Margaret Harshaw is miscast as La Cieca, a soprano in a contralto role. Nonetheless her fine artistry and intelligence overcome this, and we hear a touching “Voce di donna.” Less successful is Risë Stevens, who sounds out of sorts as Laura. Giacomo Vaghi is good enough as Alvisè, until looking into the Met annals reveals that a few months earlier Ezio Pinza was singing the role. That would have been triumphant casting!

Emil Cooper conducts quite well. He finds delicacy and shade in Ponchielli’s score, and he keeps pace with the singers while giving them their space.

As usual with Immortal Performances, the booklet is a major asset to the production. Essays about the opera and the performance by Russell and producer Richard Caniell add to one’s knowledge and pleasure. The historic photos are always a treat. There is also a detailed plot synopsis keyed to track numbers. The sonic restoration is excellent, and the aura of Met broadcasts is enhanced by including some of Milton Cross’s commentary (shortened in order to fit the opera on two discs).

Immortal Performances recordings are available from their website, immortalperformances.org.