

ROSSINI *La Cenerentola* • Vittorio Gui, cond; Marina de Gabarain (*Cenerentola*); Alda Noni (*Clorinda*); Juan Oncina (*Don Ramiro*); Sesto Bruscantini (*Dandini*); Ian Wallace (*Don Magnifico*); Royal PO • IMMORTAL PERFORMANCES 1205-3, mono (2 CDs: 146:47) Live: Glyndebourne Festival, 6/26/1952

&ROSSINI ***La Cenerentola***: Overture (Toscanini) NBC Symphony, 10/22/1938); Excerpts (Giulietta Simionato, Cesare Valletti) Radio Italiana, 1949

By Henry Fogel

Fanfare November / December 2024

Although EMI produced a studio recording of Rossini's *La Cenerentola* deriving from the 1953 revival of this Glyndebourne production with the same cast, there is a significant difference between it and this 1952 live performance. If you listen to any five or ten minutes, you will notice its greater energy and livelier spirit, which might seem like a small difference over a short span. But listening to the entire opera, the improvement becomes very significant. The EMI recording is just that—a very fine recording. This, however, is a piece of living operatic comedy. Because the performance originated as a BBC broadcast, the monaural sound is quite good if a bit more constricted than the EMI.

The hero of this performance, aside from Rossini, is conductor Vittorio Gui. Although we cannot ignore the cuts that he made, which are not insignificant, we also cannot ignore the combination of wit and beauty he invests the whole work with. *La Cenerentola* is unusual in its mix of comic, dramatic, and tender elements. Often the villains in Rossini comedies are caricatures, objects solely of parody. *Don Magnifico*, however, contains elements of cruelty that go beyond Bartolo and other Rossini *buffo* characters. The denial of Cenerentola as his daughter is one example.

On the other hand, there is a heartfelt warmth to the expressions of love between Ramiro and Cenerentola that one doesn't find, for instance, in *Il barbiere di Siviglia*. The plight of Cenerentola is portrayed in darker tones than that of, say, Rosina or Isabella in *L'Italiana in Algeri*. Gui's conducting encompasses the full scope of the score, emphasizing not only its rhythmic vitality but also its rich array of colors and moods. The pointing of the woodwinds is perfectly balanced by the genial warmth of the strings. Gui brings a wonderful vivacity to all of the opera's ensembles.

This Glyndebourne production was a breakout role for the 35-year-old Spanish mezzo-soprano Marina de Gabarain. Her singing had been largely with provincial companies up to then, but Glyndebourne led to the EMI recording and a bigger career in Europe. In 1959 de Gabarain got married and gave birth to a daughter, and she reduced her operatic career accordingly. In 1968 cancer struck, and she died while undergoing treatment in 1972 at the age of 55. Here, her brilliant singing of "Non più mesta" brings the opera to a triumphant close. It is worth noting that de Gabarain is the most significant improvement over the studio set. Not only does she sing with more personality here, but her coloratura is cleaner as well. Perhaps in a post-Marilyn Horne era we have come to take this kind of vocal agility for granted, but it was a rarer quality in the generation between Celesta Boninsegna and Horne.

The rest of the cast is also excellent. As Don Ramiro, Spanish tenor Juan Oncina, whose voice could turn whiny or strained when he essayed heavier roles, is stunning

here. He has the agility that Rossini requires and a sweetness of tone that is very affecting. His lovely singing of “Pego adorata,” including a powerful high C, would be enough to attract any woman. Oncina is rhythmically precise in the opera’s many ensembles, where he fits himself in perfectly. He and Gabarain also blend beautifully. Gui may have some of the responsibility, but both singers must have taken their duets very seriously to judge by the way they match in tone and ornamentation. As William Russell points out in his excellent booklet essay, they do this without sacrificing a crucial sense of comic spontaneity.

The young (33-year-old) Sesto Bruscantini could hardly be bettered as Dandini. Many of us remember Bruscantini in his later years, when his mastery of style and stagecraft compensated for diminishing vocal glamor—he sang into his sixties. Here, however, Bruscantini’s stagecraft is combined with a strong, warm, firmly centered voice. He uses vocal color to distinguish between Dandini’s comic moments and those where he is expressing his empathy for Cenerentola’s predicament.

Don Magnifico is in some ways the prototypical Rossini *buffo* role, but it is more than that. Ian Wallace is delightful in the comedy, projecting the humor that is central to the score and enjoying Rossini’s trademark *buffo* tropes. But in such scenes as when Don Magnifico forbids Cenerentola permission to go to the ball, denying that she is anything more than a servant, Wallace darkens his tone and conveys the unexpected ugliness and cruelty of his character. The leading Italian soubrette Alda Noni as Clorinda is almost luxury casting, and the remainder of the cast is fine. The Royal Philharmonic Orchestra performs with élan and accuracy.

As usual, Immortal Performances provides an impressive booklet, 36 pages featuring essays about this performance and the opera in general by William Russell, recording notes by producer Richard Caniell, bios of the cast, and wonderful historical photos. The bonus material is a wonderful addition. Although Simionato was not a natural Rossinian, she brings a real vocal luster to the role, and it is a particular pleasure to hear Cesare Valletti in this music.

This classic set cannot be recommended as your only recording of *La Cenerentola*, because of its monaural sound and Gui’s cuts (many of which are explained in Russell’s essay). My own modern favorite is Abbado’s DG recording with Theresa Berganza in the title role, but there are other good (and uncut) alternatives.

But if you love Rossini, you should not be without this version, which is available from Immortal Performances’s website, immortalperformances.com.