

VERDI *La Traviata* • Ettore Panizza, cond; Helen Jepson (Violetta); Richard Crooks (Alfredo); Lawrence Tibbett (Germont); Live: Metropolitan Opera NY 12/23/1939

MASSENET *Manon* • Wilfrid Pelletier, cond; Grace Moore (Manon); Richard Crooks (des Grieux); John Brownlee (Lescaut); Nicola Moscona (Count); Live: Metropolitan Opera NY 1/13/1940

& BIZET *Carmen*: Flower Song. *Les pêcheurs de perles*: Je crois entendre encore. CILEA *L'arlesiana*: È la solita storia. WAGNER *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg*: Morgenlich leuchtend (Richard Crooks, ten; Rosario Bourdon, Wilfrid Pelletier, cond; Victor SO). DUPARC *Phidylé*. PALADILHE *Psyché*: Je suis jaloux. HAHN *Si mes vers*. PAULIN *Que devienne les roses* (Grace Moore, sop; Wilfrid Pelletier, cond; Victor SO)

IMMORTAL PERFORMANCES 1115-4 mono (4 CDs: 293:03)

By Henry Fogel

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The *raison d'être* for this set is the great American tenor Richard Crooks, whose singing in both operas more than justifies the result. Were Crooks performing today he would probably be a major star. Basically a lyric tenor with a sweet sound and graceful style, Crooks also had the ability to sing with thrust and power. It was that capacity to sing with delicacy and power, to go from one to the other without a break in timbre, and to sound utterly natural in each mode, that distinguished him. He also had a successful and important career in radio and was host for many years on the radio version of *The Voice of Firestone*. Despite that fame, though, his name is not the first that leaps to one's mind when discussing great tenors of the 1930s and 1940s. Singing at the same time were Jussi Björling, Beniamino Gigli, Tito Schipa, Georges Thill, Cesar Vezzani, Giovanni Martinelli, and a number of others. This release (the four CDs selling for the price of three) of two live performances from the stage of the Met, excellently remastered by Richard Caniell, reminds us that Crooks was an extremely important artist.

In *La traviata*, Crooks is virtually ideal as Alfredo. His natural feel for the ebb and flow of Verdi's music, married to a gorgeous tenor voice, and his dramatic involvement add up to a complete portrayal musically and dramatically. It is unfortunate that he was not the tenor in the 1935 Rosa

Ponselle broadcast, as Crooks is superior in every way to Frederick Jagel. This music wants long-breathed phrases, an evenly produced legato, and a graceful manner. But Alfredo also has to be convincing in his explosions, particularly in the party scene confrontation with Violetta, and Crooks is almost terrifying in his intensity.

The other significant element of this *La traviata* is the Giorgio Germont of Lawrence Tibbett. Acknowledged as one of the greatest baritones of the second quarter of the 20th century, Tibbett is matchless here. As Gerald Parker points out in his superb accompanying essay, the elder Germont is hardly as central a character in the opera as either Violetta or Alfredo, but you come away from this performance remembering Tibbett's performance as strongly as anyone's. His is an immediately recognizable, rich and firmly focused baritone, used with total authority and presence. His pleading of his case to Violetta in their central scene in act II is inflected with specificity and persuasively shaped, and then Germont's aria at the end of the act is a supreme example of the vocal art.

I wish I could be as enthusiastic about Helen Jepson's Violetta. Even Parker makes the admission that she is not as positive a presence as Crooks and Tibbett, but to my ears it is not just a matter of lacking the kind of dramatic or vocal specificity displayed by the other two. There are notes that seem just under the correct pitch, and while she doesn't make any ugly or harsh sounds, neither does she make any of particular beauty. The reason to own and listen to this set is not Jepson, but Crooks and Tibbett, along with Ettore Panizza's dynamic, consistently enlivened conducting. (Panizza observes the traditional performing cuts of the day.)

Turning to *Manon*, you get an even more satisfying overall performance. Like Jepson, Grace Moore was also a film star, but she was a better singer. Let us begin, however, where we did in *La traviata*, with Crooks. For me, Crooks was matched in the French repertoire only by a handful of other tenors. His ability to sing with a gentle tonal beauty, but always to retain a firm core of sound at its center, separates him from many who succeeded in this *Fach*. Crooks's singing of des Grieux's two famous arias is impeccable, displaying a lovely use of *voix mixte* (a blending of chest and head registers so as to minimize differences of production and timbre between them). Then when he opens up, for example in the big moments of "Ah! Fuyez! Douce image," the sound grows and rings out but never takes on a different character. Crooks also displays a complete involvement with the character. His breath control is spectacular, enabling him to produce long phrases with comfort. His tone is forwardly placed, his diction is

extremely clear, and the restraint and elegance of his singing rival that of many French artists.

In Moore he has a stronger partner than he did in Jepson. If you analyze Moore's singing, you can find some fault in it. She somewhat lacks facility when the music requires it, sounding just a bit labored, and one can find other singers who render "Adieu! Notre petite table" with greater imagination and color. And yet as you are listening to Moore, you are not thinking about those other singers. She knew how to hold the listener, how to turn a phrase so that it was important. Above all, her voice had a genuinely beautiful glow to the tone that is not something we should ever take for granted. In their duets Crooks and Moore really do play to each other, presenting a genuine interaction.

John Brownlee's Lescaut is somewhat brusque and rough-edged, while Nicola Moscona's Count des Grieux is more successful in both its regal bearing and emission of a steady bass tone. Wilfrid Pelletier's conducting, as has been the case on so many Immortal Performances reissues of Met performances of the French repertoire, is stylish and dramatically involved. He gives his singers just enough freedom to invest the performance with personality without ever losing the overall direction of the score.

The bonus material is a wonderful extra. To fill out the *Traviata* discs we are given some beautifully sung arias by Crooks, and for *Manon* four excellently done French songs by Moore. Milton Cross's announcements, as always, help to recreate the atmosphere of sitting at home and listening to the radio on a Saturday afternoon. If you prefer to omit them you can, because they are separately tracked. The usual high standard of this company's booklets applies here, with a particularly insightful essay by former Fanfare critic Parker, bios, evocative photos, and Caniell's informative recording notes. This package is a gem.

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Review by Ken Meltzer

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The unifying artistic force in this Immortal Performances release (four CDs priced as three) of two Met broadcasts is the American tenor Richard Crooks (1900–1972). After studies and early performances in the United States, the Trenton, NJ-born Crooks traveled to Europe, where he

established himself as an important artist. After returning to his homeland, Crooks made his debut at the Met on February 25, 1933, performing one of his signature roles, Des Grieux in Massenet's *Manon*, an opera included on this set. Crooks sang leading roles at the Met until December 3, 1942, when he made his farewell as Don Ottavio in Mozart's *Don Giovanni*. Richard Crooks also had great success as a recording and radio broadcast artist. Illness led to Crooks's premature retirement in the mid-1940s. But during his relatively brief career, Crooks made several wonderful recordings. And companies like Immortal Performances have done us a great service by making Crooks's opera broadcasts available to a wider public. As much as I admire Richard Tucker (and that is to say, a very great deal), I would argue that Richard Crooks is the finest American operatic tenor whose work is preserved on recordings. As I wrote in my review of the Immortal Performances release of the Met's March 20, 1937 broadcast of Gounod's *Faust* (*Fanfare* 41:4, March/April 2018), "Crooks possessed a beautiful lyric tenor voice that soared easily into the upper register, and possessed ample power for Cavaradossi in Puccini's *Tosca*, and Des Grieux's St. Sulpice Scene in Massenet's *Manon*....Crooks was also a highly accomplished interpreter of songs (both classical and popular), and at his best, the tenor brought a Lieder singer's nuance and detail to his operatic performances."

I will deal with each opera on this release individually. But at the outset I'll note that Crooks, outstanding in each, displays the talents I've outlined above. His Alfredo in the December 23, 1939 Met broadcast of Verdi's *La traviata* is one of the finest on records. Not only is Crooks in splendid voice, but he displays a variety of vocal colors and dynamics, and a keen attention to the text (delivered in precise, idiomatic diction) and dramatic situation rarely encountered in this work. Often, the part of Alfredo serves as an unobtrusive foil to the heroine Violetta, and her plight. That is hardly the case in this broadcast. Crooks creates a compelling, three-dimensional portrait of the young Alfredo. It's a shame that, in accordance with the practice of the time, Alfredo's act II cabaletta, "O mio rimorso," is cut. But Crooks makes the most of what remains in his part. This Alfredo is a very important document of Crooks's legacy.

Most welcome, too, is the elder Germont of another glorious American artist, baritone Lawrence Tibbett. His vocal crisis of 1940 was just around the corner, and those with hindsight might be able, at certain moments, to hear some premonitions of its onset. But if Tibbett does not quite exhibit the vocal ease of his early-mid 1930s performances, he remains in rich, sonorous voice. And it was, to be sure, one of the most glorious, spine-tingling voices of its kind. Like Crooks, Tibbett lavishes all of his artistry

and dramatic gifts upon his role. Tibbett, as well as any singer I've heard, conveys both Germont's determination to end Violetta's love affair with his son, and the concurrent arousal of his sympathy for the young woman. Tibbett's "Di provenza," aided by Ettore Panizza's sensitive accompaniment, is a touching and very personal address to his son, radiantly sung in the bargain—a great performance by a great artist.

But the opera is titled *La traviata*, a reference to its soprano heroine. And here, I'm afraid, the performance falls a bit short. The American soprano Helen Jepson was a radiantly beautiful woman who also possessed a secure and lovely voice that sailed confidently throughout a range of repertoire, both operatic and song. In my review of the *Faust* broadcast, I wrote: "What Jepson lacks ... is an individuality of approach." That is once again the case with her Violetta. And in this *La traviata*, even more than with Jepson's Marguerite, the soprano rarely if ever gets below the surface of the text and music. It is all vocalized attractively, securely, and tastefully. But Violetta is one of Verdi's greatest and most human soprano heroines, a woman who, by sacrificing the only true love she has ever known, also knowingly signs her death warrant. Such nobility and desperation are at the heart of any great interpretation of this role. I'm afraid you will search in vain for it in Jepson's broadcast performance. But given the special contributions of Crooks and Tibbett, I still heartily recommend the broadcast to anyone with an interest in those singers and/or *La traviata*.

The remaining singers, many Met stalwarts (including de Paolis, Cehanovsky, D'Angelo, and Votipka) acquit themselves well. Ettore Panizza, one of the Met's finest conductors of Italian opera during that era, characteristically leads a performance of tremendous vitality, but one that is also attentive to the singers' desire for expressive time and space. The recorded sound is quite fine, competitive with commercial recordings of the era. And speaking of commercial recordings, the *Traviata* portion of the set concludes with Crooks singing arias from *Carmen* (in German), *The Pearl Fishers* (in Italian), *L'arlesiana*, and *Die Meistersinger*. Crooks is in fabulous voice, and frequently uses his mastery in blending of chest and head registers to create moments of absolute magic, hushed singing in which time seems to stand still. These recordings, too, are all marvelously restored.

The second featured opera is Massenet's *Manon*, broadcast on January 13, 1940. The *Manon* is American soprano Grace Moore, a singer celebrated for her work in French repertoire, including Massenet's adaptation of the Abbé

Prévost novel. For the greater part of this performance, Moore is quite successful and convincing. Things begin a bit slowly, however. My two favorite recorded Manons, Victoria de los Angeles and Beverly Sills, are masterful in applying a deft touch to portray, at the outset, the young heroine's curious, playful, and spirited nature. By contrast, Moore is a bit heavy-handed, and less specific in her treatment of the text. It's also a surprise, and jarring, to hear Moore's Americanized pronunciation of the first syllable of "Paris." But from act II on, Moore settles in to give a fine and dramatically compelling performance. "Adieu, notre petite table," Manon's farewell to her blissful life with des Grieux, is given an intimate and affecting reading, all the more compelling for its simplicity and avoidance of the lachrymose. Moore firmly comes into her own in the St. Sulpice Scene, as Manon summons all her wiles to seduce des Grieux to abandon his religious vows and return to her. It would be hard to imagine anyone able to resist Moore's entreaties! As the Cours-la-Reine scene is cut, Manon's gavotte, "Profitons bien de la jeunesse," is transferred to the Gambling Scene, where it receives a fine account. And Moore is quite touching in Manon's death scene, once again all the more effective for her lack of histrionics. When hearing this performance, and imagining it within the context of Moore's beauty and compelling stage presence, it's easy to understand why she was so beloved in this role. This is a worthy document of one of the Met's star sopranos of the 1930s and 1940s.

From his entrance, Richard Crooks delivers a masterclass in the art of the French lyric tenor. Listen, for example, to the marvelous deployment of mixed voice technique on the repetition of "Mon père!," as the young des Grieux looks forward to being reunited with his father. That, of course, intensifies the dramatic impact of des Grieux being shocked out of his domestic world upon seeing the beautiful Manon for the first time. And speaking of mixed voice, it's not surprising that Crooks uses it to magical effect in the act II aria "En ferment les yeux," where the tenor spins a seemingly endless thread of poised, hushed singing. The diminuendo on "il y faut" toward the close is sheer magic, as is the prolongation of the concluding "ô" in "ô Manon" for what seems an eternity. Crooks makes it clear that des Grieux wants this moment in his life to last forever. The St. Sulpice Scene requires tenor vocalizing of a far more robust, dramatic nature. Crooks does not disappoint here, either, as he captures the lovesick desperation of the abandoned des Grieux, soon reunited with Manon. Crooks remains in sterling form right to the opera's conclusion, and he matches Grace Moore in communicating the tragedy of the final scene without ever overplaying his hand. As with his Alfredo, Crooks's des Grieux is one of the best to be found on recordings.

Baritone John Brownlee, a Met stalwart, is in virile, secure voice. But the sly, elegant, and humorous sides of Lescaut, Manon's cousin, elude him. Bass Nicola Moscona sings the rather ungrateful role of the Comte des Grieux with the requisite solemnity and richness of voice. The *comprimario* roles are well performed, with Alessio de Paolis especially notable as the oily, lecherous Guillot. Just as Ettore Panizza excelled in Italian opera, so Wilfred Pelletier was a master of the French repertoire. Here, he leads a stylish and beautifully paced rendition, with the more dramatic moments providing optimum impact as well. As Richard Caniell describes in his Recording Notes, the source for the Manon broadcast was somewhat more compromised than for the accompanying *La traviata*. There are moments when surface imperfections make their presence known, but those episodes are few and of brief duration. Overall the sound, while not the equal of the *La traviata*, emerges as quite clear and detailed in this Immortal Performances restoration. It certainly allows for complete enjoyment of a very fine and important performance. A welcome bonus is a series of French songs Moore recorded commercially for RCA, with Pelletier conducting the Victor Symphony Orchestra. Moore, in wonderful voice, gives stylish, idiomatic readings, lovingly accompanied by Pelletier. The restorations of these recordings are first-rate.

The booklet includes an essay by Gerald Parker, detailed plot synopses for both operas, Richard Caniell's Recording Notes, and artist bios and photos. As is the custom for Immortal Performances releases of historic Met broadcasts, the commentary of radio host Milton Cross enhances the experience of coming face to face with great moments in the Met's legacy. This set would be worth acquiring for Richard Crooks's contribution alone. But given the many other strengths, the release merits an overall strong recommendation.