

MASSENET *Manon* • Pierre Monteux (cond); Victoria de los Angeles (*Manon*); Cesare Valletti (*Le Chevalier des Grieux*); Fernando Corena (*Lescaut*); Jerome Hines (*Le Comte des Grieux*); Metropolitan Op Ch & O • IMMORTAL PERFORMANCES 1204-3 mono (3 CDs: 231:44) Live: Metropolitan Opera House, New York, 12/18/1954

& **DEBUSSY** *La Damoiselle élue* (Victoria de los Angeles, Carol Smith, Boston SO, Radcliffe Choral Society, Charles Munch, cond). **SONGS BY WEBER, SCHUBERT, SCHUMANN, BRAHMS, FALLA** (Victoria de los Angeles, Gerald Moore, pn). **BEETHOVEN** *Ah! Perfido*. **RAVEL** *Shéhérazade* (both with Victoria de los Angeles, Los Angeles PO, Zubin Mehta, cond)

By Ken Meltzer

Fanfare November /December 2024

A December 18, 1954 Metropolitan Opera Saturday matinee broadcast of Jules Massenet's *Manon* stars Victoria de los Angeles in the title role, with Cesare Valletti as her lover, the Chevalier des Grieux. Pierre Monteux conducts. In May-June, 1955, de los Angeles and Monteux made a complete studio recording of *Manon* for EMI with the Chorus and Orchestra of the Paris Opéra-Comique. It remains one of the finest recorded versions of Massenet's best-known opera. Monteux leads with commanding authority and complete mastery of the work's idiom. De los Angeles is in marvelous voice. The remainder of the cast, all French, sings handsomely, with style and sterling diction. By its nature, the December 18, 1954 broadcast is a supplement to the 1955 studio recording. But it is valuable and most welcome. In the Met broadcast, de los Angeles and Monteux are in excellent form. From the opening orchestral *Prélude*, Monteux demonstrates his shaping of Massenet's score with the utmost care, with attention to the work's dramatic flow and momentum always front and center. Monteux secures first-rate execution from the Met Orchestra. The French maestro is ever mindful of his vocalists, allowing them space for dramatic expression; but again, always within the context of dramatic pacing. De los Angeles, again in superb voice, is a most appealing and affecting Manon. Manon's transition from an innocent (if fun-loving) teenager to a more experienced and coveted woman is convincingly achieved. Representative of her artistry, de los Angeles allows beauty of voice and purity and sincerity of declamation to carry the day. Her Manon is not a complex, dissembling figure; rather, she is an extraordinarily beautiful woman who harbors certain desires, and sees no shame in fulfilling them. Those desires, it should be emphasized, include her love for the Chevalier des Grieux.

Cesare Valletti, one of the finest *tenore di grazia* of his era, conjures several episodes of magic in his portrayal of the Chevalier. The beauty of Valletti's voice, and his mastery of phrasing, vocal colors, and dynamics are all the work of a great artist. Valletti's rendition of Des Grieux's Act II *Dream* aria ("En ferment les yeux") is a master class in hushed lyric singing. The legato is flawless, and the execution of hushed dynamics is sheer magic. Valletti's performance of the aria earns the afternoon's loudest and most sustained ovation, and deservedly so. The dramatic solo in the St. Sulpice Scene ("Ah! fuyez douce image") fares less well. The phrasing and commitment are never in doubt, but here, Valletti's upper voice betrays him, with several tenuous and spread high notes. Valletti recovers

nicely for the ensuing duet with Manon, but the issues recur in the Gambling Scene. For the better part, Valletti delivers a treasurable performance. But when all factors are considered, Valletti does not eclipse the EMI recording's very fine Henri Legay.

Both de los Angeles and Valletti, as well as the Swiss bass Fernando Corena (Lescaut) declaim the French text clearly and idiomatically. The same cannot be said of the remainder of the Met cast, both solo and choral. Typical of the Met's work during this period, their pronunciation is what might be deemed "French-adjacent" (to co-opt what someone wrote about Lady Gaga's performance of "Mon Truc en Plume" before the Paris Olympic Games). Corena is a hearty and somewhat rustic Lescaut. Jerome Hines brings a large, dark bass voice, but little variety or style to his Comte des Grieux. Met veteran comprimarios Alessio de Paolis and George Cehanovsky are characterful as the schemers Guillot de Morfontaine and De Brétigny. But how much more convincing their assumptions would have been with the benefit of idiomatic French diction. The recorded sound is quite good for the period; with ample dynamic range, color, and definition. The broadcast commentary of Milton Cross is also included.

The contributions of de los Angeles and Monteux (and to a somewhat lesser degree, Valletti) make this 1954 Met broadcast of *Manon* a most appealing proposition. The supplementary material following the complete broadcast enhances the pleasure. All include announcer commentary. First is an April 9, 1955 Boston Symphony Orchestra concert performance of Debussy's *La Damoiselle élue*. Two days later, the same artists (de los Angeles, Carol Smith, the Radcliffe Choral Society, Boston Symphony Orchestra, conductor Charles Munch) began making their marvelous studio recording of the work for RCA. The concert performance, preserved in gorgeous sound, embodies all the mystery, beauty, and elegance of the studio recording, with, perhaps, just a bit more sense of occasion and tension. I'm delighted to now have both recordings (the RCA *Damoiselle élue* is included on Testament's release of the 1955 EMI *Manon*: SBT 3203). The broadcast of an August 27, 1950 lieder recital from the Edinburgh International Festival pairs de los Angeles with pianist Gerald Moore. The songs, by Weber, Schubert, Schumann, Brahms, and Falla are (with one exception) tailor-made to showcase de los Angeles's strengths. That one exception, Schubert's *Erlkönig*, strikes me as a miscalculation. I could go into detail, but suffice it to say, *Erlkönig* is not song for an artist whose image is one of a person who didn't have a single mean or menacing bone in her body. De los Angeles also struggles to be heard over Moore's fiery playing. The remainder of the Edinburgh recital, with de los Angeles in radiant voice, is treasurable. The bonus materials conclude with two works performed in concert by de los Angeles, the LA Philharmonic, and Zubin Mehta. While singers grander in voice and temperament than de los Angeles have performed Beethoven's concert aria *Ah! perfido*, her rendition has ample dramatic fire, convincingly wed to a purity and nobility of utterance. Ravel's *Shéhérazade* was a de los Angeles favorite, and the performance is masterful. The Edinburgh and Los Angeles concert recordings are in good sound.

For the CD booklet, Dewey Faulkner provides commentary on the featured performances, relevant works (including the Prévost novel that served as the basis for Massenet's *Manon*), and a discussion of the history of *Manon*

performances at the Met. A detailed plot summary of *Manon*, Richard Daniell's *Recording Notes*, and artist photos and bios are also included. A fine tribute to Victoria de los Angeles that comprises a sparkling performance of Massenet's *Manon*, along with enticing supplementary material. Recommended.

Five stars: Victoria de los Angeles shines in Massenet's *Manon*, and in concert