

**BELLINI *Norma*** • Cesare Sodero, cond; Zinka Milanov (*Norma*); Jennie Tourel (*Adalgisa*); Frederick Jagel (*Pollione*); Norman Cordon (*Oroveso*); Metropolitan Op Ch & O • IMMORTAL PERFORMANCES 1183-2, mono (2 CDs: 154:33) Live: Metropolitan Op, New York 12/20/1944

Review by Henry Fogel  
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Between Rosa Ponselle in the 1930s and Maria Callas in the 1950s, there were only two important Normas, Gina Cigna and Zinka Milanov. Cigna starred in a studio recording on Cetra (a Met broadcast has also been issued by Immortal Performances), whereas a good representation of Milanov's performance has not existed until now. This one from the Met in 1944 was first issued by Eddie Smith on his EJS LP label in 1960 and later reissued on Myto CDs. In both cases the sound is cramped, distorted, and not always correctly pitched. A YouTube version that I found is even worse. Fortunately, Immortal Performances had access to a much better source. For the first time it is possible to listen to the entire performance and enjoy it, and therefore to fully appreciate Milanov's accomplishment. This is the most important role in the Yugoslavian soprano's repertoire that was not captured in the recording studio.

If your view of *Norma* has been completely shaped by Callas, Milanov is likely to be less satisfying, because she is almost the polar opposite of Callas. Callas possessed a unique ability to color her voice for dramatic purposes. She did not have a classically beautiful voice, but she willed it into a uniquely expressive instrument. Her *Norma* is *sui generis*. What Milanov provides is also a rare but different experience: a beautifully sung performance of this notoriously difficult role from beginning to end.

From her entrance, "*Sediziose voci*," we are aware of Milanov's vocal presence. This is a voice that announces its importance immediately. We hear a unique combination of glowing beauty supported by a rich, almost dark, foundation. Milanov was a true dramatic soprano who could also float *pianissimi* of breathtaking, hushed beauty. It becomes clear in the *cabaletta* to "*Casta diva*" that flexibility is not one of her strengths, however—runs are smudged rather than articulated. Still, much of this role demands singing that is truly beautiful, and Milanov supplies that in a way very few have.

Decades later, perhaps Sutherland and Caballé offered such tonal beauty, but not quite the weight and grandeur of Milanov. The essence of her art was her ability to sustain a long, evenly produced *legato* line with a natural instinct for how to bind phrases together. Even in the long recitatives, she shapes them musically and dramatically. No phrase is simply thrown away. Milanov also uses the dramatically dark low register of her voice powerfully. "*In mia man alfin tu sei*" (At last you are in my hands) is devastating as an expression of *Norma*'s hatred of *Pollione*.

Milanov has the advantage in this performance of Jennie Tourel's *Adalgisa*. Tourel brings similar vocal accomplishments to Bellini's score, and she interacts perfectly with Milanov. "*Mira o Norma*" offers a ravishing blending of voices and a degree of agility from both singers that will pleasantly surprise many listeners. One gets

the impression that Milanov and Tourel thoroughly rehearsed this music, not because it sounds over-prepared but because the vocal blend is so remarkably accomplished.

Tenor Frederick Jagel is not on the level of the two ladies, but he is an adequate Pollione. He sings musically and acts well vocally. What Jagel lacks is a voice of distinction or particular beauty. The sound is somewhat husky, but he inflects intelligently and exhibits a secure rhythmic pulse. Norman Cordon is a more than adequate Oroveso, although Ezio Pinza was still on the Met roster in 1944 and would have been splendid.

On the podium Cesare Sodero is a bit rough. He certainly understands the drama and emphasizes it, but Bellini's long-line melodies could use more supple phrasing than Sodero provides. The Met orchestra and chorus perform well enough, though not with the technical excellence and style that they offer today.

Dewey Faulkner's excellent essay about the performance and the opera makes stimulating reading. He also contributes an essay about Tullio Serafin, who conducted for Ponselle but not here. I enjoyed reading about Serafin, but it made me enjoy Sodero even less.

Richard Caniell's recording notes are of interest not only for his explanation about the high quality of his restoration, but also for his personal reaction to Milanov's singing. This set is a treasure.