

# GRAND TRADITION

## *Richard Caniell*

By London Green

Richard Caniell's excitement is contagious. At the moment, he is talking about his deepest enthusiasm: the restoration of thousands of often-forgotten live opera and concert recordings. Caniell is one of a small group of warm-hearted zealots who have worked for decades to rescue rare source materials (cylinders, 78s, acetates, 16-inch transcription records) from leaky storage sheds, private collectors, garbage cans and opera-hating descendants of the deceased, and then to eliminate from them, noise by noise, everything that interferes with the accurate, live sound of the original event.

As a nine-year-old in New York in the early '40s, Caniell fell in love with the Metropolitan Opera broadcasts, saved his allowance, bought 78s when he could and treasured them for the day when he could afford a record player. What really fascinated him most was the context of a complete performance. What circumstances led to the agony of an aria? To passion? To death? This search for both context and the deal in art—and later, in nature—was to guide his life.

Bored with school, Caniell left at 15 and landed a job at RCA, where he discovered a hoard of old broadcast transcriptions. He also haunted standing room at the Met. As the years passed, he worked all over the States at a variety of jobs, train announcer and criminal-investigation specialist among them. Finally, in the '60s, he took his dog and canoe and left for New Denver, B.C., nine hours from Vancouver. There, in a log cabin, he formed the Valhalla Society, an environmental group largely responsible for the Valhalla Wilderness Provincial Park and other protected areas.

In 1981, he and his wife, Madeleine, created the non-profit Immortal Performances Recorded Music Society for the restoration and dissemination of great live opera and symphony recordings. The same motivation (and volunteer staff) animated both societies: to preserve the ideal, in nature and in art.

Over the years, Caniell gained a reputation for his hundreds of restorations, culminating in Guild Music Ltd. recently releasing worldwide several of his operatic albums in what is hoped will be a long series (anything involving the Metropolitan Opera is not available in the U.S., however, since the Met holds the American copyright and will not grant permission for any issues.)

Each recording is superb, technically and artistically. Caniell has resurrected a complete 1937 Met *Siegfried* and a 1938 Act II of *Parsifal*, both with Lauritz Melchior and Kirsten Flagstad; an

incomparably theatrical 1943 *Nozze di Figaro* with Ezio Pinza and Bidu Sayao; a vivid 1949 New York Philharmonic broadcast of *Elektra* conducted by Dimitri Mitropoulos with Astrid Varnay; and all of the extant scenes from Chaliapin's renowned 1928 Covent Garden performance of *Boris Godounov*. Each recording is a single dramatic action greater than the sum of its splendid parts: what every live performance aims for, but only the great ones achieve.

A half-century's ugly performances of *Siegfried* have driven me from it, time and again, but with Guild Music's new issue, all of that is past. Throughout, Melchior's sound and technique are miraculous, and his control of vocal color complete, so we get as a protagonist not the usual brute but a totally isolated genius of a boy who is capable of finding the humanity within himself as he views the natural world around him. The Wotan of Friedrich Schorr is suffused with stern humanity, and the Flagstad of 1937 has the voice of a young goddess just become human. One is captured, too, by their air of total spontaneity. The effect is overwhelming.

As *Parsifal*, Melchior is the golden youth to the life, and Flagstad's voice is shockingly erotic in its youth and command. The mother, the lover and the warmth and frigidity of Kundry are all in her sound—unforgettably.

*Le Nozze di Figaro* is played with such theatrical vivacity that one is swept away by the interplay of its characters. Sayao is memorably witty, and what other bass has sung Figaro with Pinza's masculine elegance and edge? For its spirit and spontaneity, this set becomes definitive. The concert broadcast of *Elektra*, under the exciting Mitropoulos, dates from 1949, a good year for its heroine, Astrid Varnay, and Elena Nikolaidi, an electric Klytemnestra. As for Chaliapin's *Boris*, it is clear why Bernard Shaw called him one of the two most extraordinary dramatic singers of the 20th century. Eighty years later, he remains so. Caniell's notes on the recordings, incidentally, are full of information and delightfully provocative opinions.

And so we have five wonderful new operatic restorations from a Canadian producer of extraordinary knowledge, taste and technical expertise. In today's classical record business, that's spectacular news.

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