

**VERDI *Otello*** • Fritz Busch, cond; Ramón Vinay (*Otello*); Licia Albanese (*Desdemona*); Leonard Warren (*Iago*); Metropolitan Op Ch & O • IMMORTAL PERFORMANCES 1189-2, mono (2 CDs: 139:59) Live: Metropolitan Opera House, New York 12/18/1948

**By Henry Fogel**

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There are a few primary factors that merit attention for this 1948 Met broadcast of *Otello*. The main one is the opportunity to experience the exceptional conducting of Fritz Busch, and another is the Desdemona of Licia Albanese, a role she never recorded in the studio. In addition, it is always fascinating to hear Ramón Vinay, the most important Otello between Giovanni Martinelli and Mario del Monaco. While you can also hear him in Toscanini's famed 1947 recording and in Furtwängler's Salzburg performance from 1951, Vinay was the kind of spontaneous singing actor who rarely performed a role the same way twice.

Comparing the Toscanini performance with this one, one is aware that Toscanini restrains some of what he felt were Vinay's dramatic excesses. For me, the result is that Vinay's Otello for Toscanini is less interesting than this one. There are many effective touches here that are not duplicated in Vinay's other versions. The emptying of virtually all color from his voice in the first half of "Dio mi potevi," standing for Otello's drained emotion after the explosive confrontation with Desdemona, is one such effective moment.

At the other extreme, those explosions are particularly intense, even unhinged, in this performance. One wishes for less forceful singing in the Love Duet, but overall Vinay's Otello has nuance along with the requisite power. Of the five *Otellos* from him that I have heard, this is the most satisfying. He is in ringing voice and is dramatically splendid without going off the rails. In a 1952 Met broadcast stodgily conducted by Fritz Stiedry, and a 1955 Covent Garden broadcast well-led by Rafael Kubelík, Vinay's voice was in poorer shape.

Albanese lacks the tonal beauty of Elisabeth Rethberg and Renata Tebaldi, the two greatest Desdemonas of my experience. Also, the climactic AI in the "Ave Maria" is slightly under the pitch. What Albanese brings to the role, though, is her unique specificity of inflection. When she protests Desdemona's innocence in the big act III duet with Otello, expressing Desdemona's shock and pain, the impact is visceral. The urgency and anguish that Albanese imparts in the line, "E son io l'innocente, cagion di tanto pianto," will break your heart. Indeed, in this entire scene, beginning "Dio ti giocondi, o sposo," the interaction between her and Vinay is electric.

There is little to complain about in Leonard Warren's Iago. His performance is thrilling; there is no other word for it. Over the next few years, it is true, his interpretation would deepen a bit, adding more varied nuance in his interactions with Otello in act II, but the differences are subtle. Warren's was not only the ideal Verdi baritone voice, but he also had an innate understanding of the style that allowed him to master both the big moments and the intimate ones. The remainder of the cast, all Met regulars in the 1940s, perform superbly.

Busch's conducting is closer in style to Toscanini's than Furtwängler's. The tempi are fast, accents are sharply articulated, and there is plenty of dramatic intensity. To that intensity Busch adds some flexibility, particularly in permitting Vinay to stretch certain phrases for theatrical effect. I know that the Toscanini *Otello* from 1947 is considered a classic, and because of its superior sound quality, many will prefer it. For me, however, it is here that Vinay shines with a complete performance, being allowed his head but within limits.

Producer Richard Caniell has created a significantly better-sounding restoration than the ones I am familiar with, of which the best is Preiser's. There is less congestion here, less compression, and a somewhat richer orchestral sound. Much of Milton Cross's commentary is included as well, and Immortal Performances' usual excellent booklet is supplied with notes by Caniell and Dewey Faulkner, and significant historical photographs. For anyone to whom *Otello* is important, this release is close to a necessity.

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