
Callas CDs: Immortal Performances' *'Rigoletto'*, Mexico City 17 June 1952

Dietmar van Oyen has drawn my attention to this new issue on the Immortal Performances label of the Mexico City 1952 *Rigoletto*. I hadn't previously heard of this label, although it has been issuing recordings of musicians and singers of the past for many years. The label is headed up by the Canadian Richard Caniell.

This *Rigoletto* is the first recording with Maria Callas in a forthcoming series, *The Callas Legacy*. According to the booklet, "After 32 years of making available important broadcast recordings from 1934 onward, we have turned our attention to the preservations of the vocal art of Maria Callas: 1949-1959. Beginning in 2011, we began auditioning many CD releases by other labels in order to determine which of our restorations were sufficiently superior to what has been previously available in order to justify issuing them. The first in our proposed series is this Mexico City *Rigoletto*. If sales justify going further, we will then make available other of our Callas restorations."

In my opinion, there is every reason to continue with this series as the sound quality and presentation are very good value for money at 38 CAD (approx. 29 Euro), including shipping.

The 44-page booklet includes – in addition to the contents of the CDs, the synopsis and information about the singers, Maria Callas, Piero Campolonghi and Giuseppe Di Stefano – three very interesting articles, all written by Richard Caniell: 'Rigoletto', 'Maria Callas – A brief appreciation' and 'Maria Callas in Mexico City 1951-1952 – Recording Notes'.

• 'Rigoletto'. A rather long and well-written essay about Callas as Gilda, her art, and her colleagues in this opera. Here are a

Karl H. van Zoggel

few quotations:

"The squally, under-rehearsed performances of Maria Callas can best be ap-

preciated as the well-developed sketches a great artist might make before the ultimate, much celebrated paintings in later

performances, especially when heard at correct pitch and in clear, focused sound. The Aida Callas sang in Mexico City in 1951 is extraordinary, far better than her commercial set, and so is her Gilda in this roughly shod production. Here one can hear a youthful loveliness that

surpasses, in certain ways, her

EMI recording three years later. Indeed, the fragile maiden she puts before us in the voice she chooses from her palette of vocal weights and colors is amazing when one hears her Aida of the previous year."

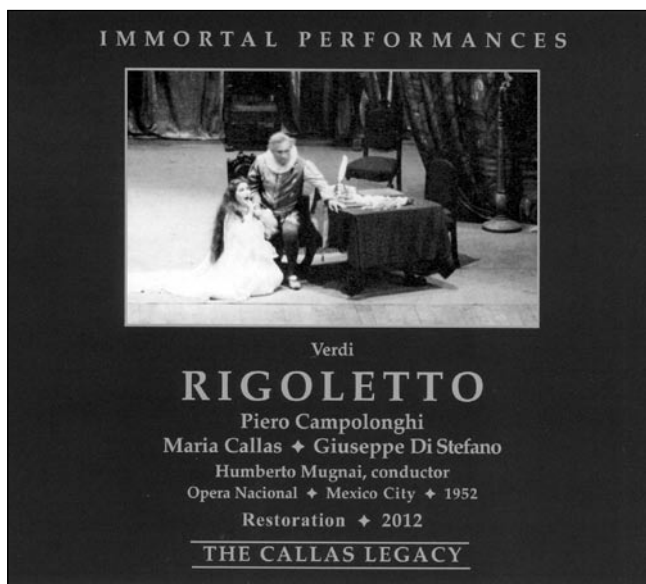
"Her Gilda in this Mexico City *Rigoletto*, with the eager, fresh, maidenly qualities heard in Act I, and the gradually maturing tone of the subsequent acts, is an entirely different character and voice from the Aida she sang in Mexico City. The voice that combines the fresh agility of the coloratura range and the dramatic capacities of a much beset woman comes into focus

as Violetta in *Traviata*, a role she sang in Mexico City in 1951 that was perfect for her, a role which she was ever refining and

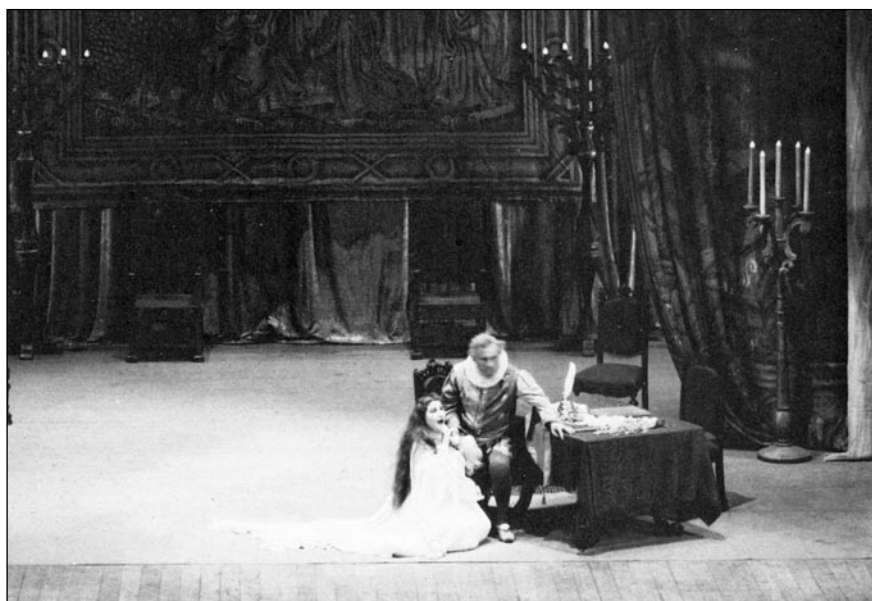
deepening, ultimately arriving at the astonishing truth she gave this character in her 1955 La Scala and 1958 Covent Garden performances. Gilda, then, is extracted from the creative mix of colors from which Callas was learning to draw, using her musical intelligence and her intuitive capacities to create vividly alive personalities that are now imperishable figures that glow in our musical memories."

The essay concludes as follows: "Until now, Immortal Performances has devoted it-

self to the vocal art of the period between the late 1920s and the 1950s, but we have omitted Callas because so many labels have issued her performances. Now, with our first belated endeavor, we hope to add



years. As such, there are smudges, misdirection, imperfectly realized visions in her performances, however they are still the early works of genius. Thus, there is much more to be heard in some of these



Mexico City, Palacio de Bellas Artes, mid June 1952: with Piero Campolonghi

our approach in restoration to the experiences available to the public, in a way we feel most honors her unparalleled place among those, of varied artistry, whom we cherish. One need only hear her in a succession of her famous roles to recognize what an unforgettable phenomena she was, and here, for your delectation, is one of her earliest and rarest creations.”

• ‘Maria Callas – A brief appreciation’

This article concludes beautifully with these words: “... All this hovers in a mist of unmusical significances over a promenade through the gallery of her unforgettable characterizations. This consideration omits some of the commercial recordings that were unpleasantly flawed, sporadically unacceptable, such as her stereo *Lucia* and *Tosca*, and ignores the infidelity of some of the pirate and EMI releases from 1960 onward, through some marvelous portraits shine amidst the vocal degradations. Callas, once so instinctively wise as to her capacities when her genius dominated, lost touch with its realities when the woman in her took over, but that is, in a very real sense, an almost inescapable pivot in life, the sliding balance between person and artist, and between triumph and failure, gain and loss, happiness and sadness. By means still mysterious, Callas emerged from a squat, unattractive chrysalis, to reveal a butterfly-figure of rare, entrancing beauty. Upward into the light of rare achievement she fluttered, hovering, with her incandescence, over our lives for a very few years until

most of her colors faded. Even so, when all her glory seemed to have diminished, she could produce a luminous gleam of vocal color to rekindle our hopes: Dalila, Charlotte, Carmen – an entire new repertoire glimmered but it was not to be. And while there are substantive circumstances to lament what was not recorded or what was preserved so poorly; we are left, in what Callas gave us, with the experience of so luminous a vocal art as to have illuminated, beyond all expectation, even the roles we knew best and have most often heard. When it comes to the roles with which she is most associated, no other voice sings in

the dark vaults of our memory but hers.”
 • ‘Maria Callas in Mexico City 1951-1952 – Recording Notes’.

In these Notes, Richard Caniell publishes a report he submitted, in which the sound and recording details of this Mexico *Rigoletto* on other labels (BJR LP, Urania, Melodram, Legendary Recordings and Myto) are compared. After comparing these more or less inferior issues, he justifies his own amended master as follows: “Once the decision was made to release *Rigoletto*, I endeavored to give the voices heightened focus and to recover overtones lost in the broadcast – to make transparent the sonics as much as was possible, de-tick by hand and, lastly, restore the dynamics between *forte* and *piano*, which the broadcast limiters had flattened.”

Compared with any of the issues that you may already have, I think these words are reason enough to acquire this particular recording. What is more, the price is very reasonable and ordering is easy. Go to www.immortalperformances.org to find out how to order, and for extensive information about the Immortal Performances label and about Richard Caniell himself.

The booklet also contains four well-known photographs of Callas – in small format – but only one of the *Rigoletto* performance, from Act I, Scene 1. It is reproduced on the previous page, and I have added two more on this page.

Mexico City, Palacio de Bellas Artes, 17 June 1952: with Ignacio Ruffino and his wife, Piero Campolonghi, Maria Teresa Garcia and Umberto Mugnai

