

**VERDI *Rigoletto*** • Gennaro Papi, cond; Lawrence Tibbett (*Rigoletto*); Lili Pons (*Gilda*); Helen Olheim (*Maddalena*); Jan Kiepura (*Duke*); Virgilio Lazzari (*Sparafucile*); Metropolitan Op Ch & O • Live: Metropolitan Opera, New York 3/11/1939

& **PUCCINI *Tosca***: Excerpts (Tibbett with Grace Moore and Jan Peerce), Met 1946; // **tabarro**: "Nulla! Silenzio!" (Tibbett) Met 1946

IMMORTAL PERFORMANCES 1198-2, mono (2 CDs: 150:05)

By Henry Fogel

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Immortal Performances has already released a Met *Rigoletto* with Lawrence Tibbett coupled with Verdi's *Simon Boccanegra*, both from 1935. That performance was Tibbett's role debut. I reviewed the earlier set in *Fanfare* 42:4. Ken Meltzer reviewed it in the same issue and may well have been more accurate than I in pointing out some of the flaws in the performance. I was so taken with Tibbett's remarkable voice and presence that I underestimated some of the performance's shortcomings. Unquestionably, this 1939 broadcast is preferable. In fact, it is hard to imagine anyone to whom *Rigoletto* is important not wanting it.

*Rigoletto* has benefitted from a number of highly successful recordings. The first was in 1930 with Riccardo Stracciari's classic portrayal of the title character. Other fine studio recordings include those with Callas, Gobbi, and di Stefano for EMI, and Warren, Peerce, and Berger for RCA. Among the best of live recordings is a 1945 Met broadcast with Warren, Björling, and Sayão, particularly as heard on a Pristine transfer. This 1939 broadcast stacks up with any of those even with its sonic limitations.

The main factor in its success is Tibbett. Possessing a virtually ideal voice for the role, firmly centered and freely produced, he also exhibits the complete scope of *Rigoletto*'s character. Meltzer correctly pointed out in the 1935 broadcast that Tibbett seemed more comfortable in the intimate and poignant moments than in the grand, public ones. That is not the case here. His mastery of the role in its entirety is apparent from the beginning. *Rigoletto*'s monologue, "Pari siamo," is sung with both nuance and grandeur. His fury at the courtiers in "Cortigiani" is thrilling and terrifying in its power, while the tender moments with Gilda remain completely convincing and moving.

Admittedly, Tibbett takes some liberties that would probably be frowned upon today, stretching a few notes here and there, but the effect is never unmusical, and conductor Gennaro Papi is with him at all times. Tibbett's dynamic range is extraordinary; his ability to sing a true *pianissimo* without losing tonal focus is a rare quality. His attention to the text, even in the small moments, is more thorough and specific in inflection than with most singers. That is particularly admirable from an American singer.

Perhaps the biggest improvement over the 1935 broadcast is the one major cast difference: Jan Kiepura as the Duke instead of Frederick Jagel. In addition to Kiepura and Jagel, the Met's roster of tenors in the 1938–39 season was prodigious: It included Jussi Björling, Beniamino Gigli, Richard Crooks, Charles Hackett, Charles Kullman, Giovanni Martinelli, Nino Martini, Galliano Masini, and Armand Tokatyan. It is a

shame that this broadcast wasn't given to Björling or Gigli, but we can be grateful that it fell into Kiepura's hands. Jagel's limited, somewhat hard tone did not really fit the Duke's music or his seductive character. Kiepura sings with a much greater range of color and dynamic shading. If he lacks the vocal glamor that Björling or Gigli would have brought to the role, he provides many moments of real beauty. His soft singing in "La donna è mobile" will make you catch your breath.

Before Maria Callas transformed our view of how Gilda could be sung, it was almost always the property of light coloratura sopranos like Lili Pons, who may have been the ideal of that type. While there are layers of complexity within Gilda that Pons may not bring out, it is unfair to think of her as a bird-like soprano who just tweets and twitters. Gilda comes to life in her touching interactions with Tibbett, and Pons's vocalism is beyond reproach. Coloratura fireworks fly by in "Caro nome," as they should. At the same time, Pons can produce a great variety in dynamics throughout her wide range, even in the highest register.

In the secondary roles, Virgilio Lazzari offers an unusually powerful and strongly sung Sparafucile, a role that too often gets tossed to fading basses near the end of their careers. Lazzari, who sang at the Met until 1950, was still in his prime at 51 for this broadcast, and his rock-solid column of sound, as well as the sheer dramatic presence of his singing, makes this portrayal excitingly impactful. Helen Olheim was a fine Met *comprimario* mezzo-soprano, and she more than holds up her end as Maddalena. Norman Cordon creates the requisite vengeful chill as Monterone intoning his curse.

At the outset it sounds as if Papi has a train to catch, but things soon settle down. While his tempi remain on the fast side (he was a Toscanini protégé), Papi's conducting is flexible and sensitive to the dramatic moment. He allows his principal singers liberties that Toscanini might not have, but they add, in fact, to the beauty and spirit of this performance.

The bonus material is valuable as well. Much of Scarpia's role is included in excerpts from a 1946 *Tosca*, where Tibbett delivers a beautifully sung and powerfully dramatic performance. The interaction between him and Grace Moore is intense; Tosca's anguished outcry of "Assassino" is blood-curdling. Tibbett's imagination in coloring his voice puts his portrayal in a special league. The oily quality of "La povera mia cena fu interrotta" is chilling. To close the disc, the producers chose an overpowering rendering of Michele's "Nulla! Silenzio" from *Il tabarro*, also a 1946 broadcast. Everything that was great about Tibbett is encapsulated in these three and a half minutes, from the drained tone of a defeated man at the beginning to a raging high A1 at its conclusion.

As is the norm from Immortal Performances, the audio restoration is superb, and the accompanying booklet befits the historic nature of the performance. William Russell's exemplary essay on Tibbett and this performance is insightful, as are his comments on the opera itself and its place in Verdi's output. As an added feature we get enjoyable historical photographs.

For anyone who cares about *Rigoletto* or the development of operatic performance style in the 20th century, this set is essential. Immortal Performances' recordings are available at the label's website, [immortalperformances.org](http://immortalperformances.org).