

STRAUSS *Der Rosenkavalier* • Herbert von Karajan, Elisabeth Schwarzkopf (*The Marschallin*); Lisa Della Casa (*Sophie*); Sena Jurinac (*Octavian*); Erich Kunz (*Faninal*); Otto Edelmann (*Baron Ochs*); La Scala Ch & O, Milan; 26 January 1952

STRAUSS *Four Last Songs* • Sena Jurinac; Karl Rankl, cond; Philharmonic Symphony, London; 23 July 1952

IMMORTAL PERFORMANCES 1178-3 (212:16)

Review by Ken Meltzer
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Immortal Performances (IP) presents its restoration of a January 26, 1952 La Scala staging of Richard Strauss's *Der Rosenkavalier*. For many reasons, this is a performance of the utmost historic and artistic interest. First and foremost, it marks the role debut of Elisabeth Schwarzkopf in one of her signature parts, Strauss's *Marschallin*. Schwarzkopf performs alongside a stellar cast, including Sena Jurinac (*Octavian*), Lisa Della Casa (*Sophie*), Otto Edelmann (*Baron Ochs*), and Erich Kunz (*Faninal*). All are in exemplary vocal and dramatic form. Herbert von Karajan leads the La Scala Orchestra in a brilliant rendition, a masterful balancing of charm, wit, propulsion, and humor. If this performance were preserved in recorded sound equivalent to early-50s mono studio recordings, or even representative Met broadcasts of the period, the La Scala *Rosenkavalier* would be essential to any collection. Alas, that is not the case. IP and Richard Caniell have done noble and effective work to present the source material in its best light. A comparison of the IP release with a previous issue on Legato Classics demonstrates vast improvement in matters of pitch stability, and focus of both the vocal and orchestral elements. That said, the final product is still highly problematic. Worst is Act I, with cramped sonics, intrusive surface interference, and some remaining wavers of pitch. By contrast, Act II is in quite fine sound. If the entire performance maintained this level of sonic depth, clarity, and beauty, collectors would be in Strauss/*Rosenkavalier* heaven. Act III presents a sort of cross between its predecessors; not as challenging as Act I, but not nearly as fine as Act II. In short, this 1952 La Scala *Rosenkavalier* joins some other irreplaceable early-50s performances that have the misfortune to be documented in compromised sound; the May 22, 1950 Royal Albert Hall world premiere of Strauss' *Four Last Songs*, with Kirsten Flagstad, and Wilhelm Furtwängler conducting the Philharmonia O (Testament), and a December 13, 1951 La Scala *Tristan und Isolde*, led in galvanizing fashion by Victor de Sabata, and starring Max Lorenz, Gertrude Grob-Prandl, Elsa Cavelti, Sigurd Björling, and Sven Nilsson (Archipel).

Because of the sonic deficiencies, some of the greatness of this performance will be a matter of faith. Most frustrating for Schwarzkopf devotees is the fact that the best sound is reserved for the only Act in which she does not appear! Still, there is much to savor. Schwarzkopf is in gorgeous, youthful voice. What I wrote about another Schwarzkopf in-performance recording of *Der Rosenkavalier*, from Covent Garden on December 7, 1959 (Pristine Audio 142)

(reviewed in Mar/Apr 2018 *Fanfare*, 41:4) holds true here as well: “Schwarzkopf’s EMI recording, conducted by Herbert von Karajan, is one of the iconic versions of this work. It is an impressive achievement overall, as is most certainly Schwarzkopf’s interpretation. But I have long felt that Schwarzkopf was a more spontaneous artist in live performance (or at least she gave that impression), far less inclined toward the kind of micromanagement, both of articulation and vocal color, that could appear in her studio recordings. Schwarzkopf is in marvelous voice for the 1959 Covent Garden *Rosenkavalier*, and, as in the EMI recording, is brilliant in portraying the Marschallin’s complex and sympathetic character (and of course, recordings don’t take into account her extraordinary stage presence and physical beauty). But in this live performance Schwarzkopf strikes me as less calculated and more sympathetic.” While the quality of the recorded sound on the 1952 La Scala *Rosenkavalier* is far below that of the 1959 Covent Garden (and of course, the 1956 EMI), the same strengths may be discerned. A superb debut in a role that Schwarzkopf served so well throughout her career.

Likewise, Sena Jurinac is one of the great Octavians. There are several documents, both studio and live, of Jurinac in this part. Equally at home in female and trouser roles, Jurinac is the impulsive, youthful, ardent, and noble Octavian to the core. And in the La Scala performance, Jurinac is in prime voice. Likewise, Lisa Della Casa (according to IP, in her only recorded Sophie) embodies youth, innocence, and beauty. Otto Edelmann did not possess a voice of exceptional size, richness, or individuality. But he was a most reliable artist. Here, Edelmann sings Ochs in highly musical fashion, capturing all of the character’s hubris and bluster, without lapsing into the buffoonery and/or *sprechgesang* so many feel tempted to explore. The marvelous singing actor Erich Kunz is a first-rate Faninal. The smaller parts are handled well. Tenor Antonio Pirino makes the most of the Italian tenor’s brief appearance in Act I. In discussing the contribution of the La Scala Orchestra under Karajan, it’s worth noting that at the time of the 1952 performance, Victor de Sabata was coming to the close of his more than two-decade tenure as the opera house’s music director. A great and inspirational conductor, de Sabata may be heard leading the La Scala forces in the aforementioned *Tristan*, a June 7, 1952 *Falstaff* (IP 1156-4), and of course, the iconic 1953 EMI *Tosca* with Maria Callas, Giuseppe di Stefano, and Tito Gobbi. The La Scala Orchestra of de Sabata’s era was an ensemble of distinction, and in the 1952 *Rosenkavalier*, they respond fully to Karajan’s superb leadership. It’s a stylish performance, marvelously executed, and one that never bogs down, even in the lengthy problematic stretch from the conclusion of the *Presentation of the Rose* to the start of the Final Trio. By the way, if you’re looking for another stunning example of the relatively youthful von Karajan’s operatic art, seek out a riveting July 23, 1952 Bayreuth *Tristan* (Orfeo). When listening to such performances, it’s easy to understand why Karajan inspired critical and audience enthusiasm.

As an appendix to the *Rosenkavalier*, IP includes a live performance of the Strauss *Four Last Songs*. Coincidentally, it too occurred on July 23, 1952. Sena Jurinac is the soprano soloist, and Karl Rankl conducts the Philharmonia O. It’s an appropriate conclusion to this set, for many reasons. Like the *Rosenkavalier*, it’s a glorious performance. Jurinac, in youthful, glowing form, soars effortlessly throughout, all the while embodying the reflective, autumnal spirit of Strauss’s

valedictory statement. Jurinac was most definitely of the “less is more” school of lieder singing, avoiding the kinds of excessive textual and musical detailing some artists (Schwarzkopf included) are accused of. But I never find Jurinac lacking in dramatic commitment or expression. There’s room for more than one approach to this type of repertoire. I’m gratified we can enjoy both Jurinac and Schwarzkopf, and others as well. I’m afraid the recorded sound is similarly compromised as the *Rosenkavalier* broadcast. But in both cases, patient listening may well reap considerable rewards.

The *Rosenkavalier* includes with the opening broadcast spoken commentary, in Italian. IP’s booklet includes Dewey Faulkner’s characteristically detailed and insightful exploration of the performances and works, a full plot synopsis for *Der Rosenkavalier*, Richard Caniell’s *Recording Notes*, and artist bios and photos. A release designed to appeal to collectors both experienced with historic recordings, and particularly interested in the featured artists and repertoire. Recommended, with the caveats I’ve outlined.

Four stars: Brilliant, albeit sonically problematic live performances of Strauss’s *Der Rosenkavalier* and *Four Last Songs*