

THOMAS Mignon (two performances) • Wilfrid Pelletier, cond; Metropolitan Op Ch & O • IMMORTAL PERFORMANCES 1061-4 mono (4 CDs: 313:38)

Jennie Tourel (Mignon); Josephine Antoine (Philine); Armand Tokatyan (Wilhelm); Désire Defrère (Laërte); Leon Rothier (Lothario); Norman Cordan (Jarno, Antonio) (2 CDs: 154:58) Live: New York 5/15/1937

Risë Stevens (Mignon); Josephine Antoine (Philine); Richard Crooks (Wilhelm); Alessio de Paolis (Laërte); Ezio Pinza (Lothario); John Gurney (Jarno, Antonio) (2 CDs: 158:40) Live: New York 12/17/1938

& Arias from Mignon sung by Georgi Vinogradov; excerpts from Orfeo sung by Risë Stevens

By James Forrest

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Toscanini was quoted as saying: "There are good operas, there are bad operas, and, then, there is *Mignon*." I'm not quite sure what the Maestro meant and I know his recording of the opera's Overture is unsurpassed. This "double" offering of two complete performances of Thomas's opera, dear to our ancestors, is precious historically and musically, and great value, as well, inasmuch as it is being sold for the price of three CDs. We have here a performance which has circulated fairly widely in pretty good sound on "pirate" labels (the Tourel, from 1937), and Risë Stevens in her first Met broadcast of any role with Richard Crooks in his only available performance as Wilhelm Meister, a major item in his U.S. repertory. The 1938 Stevens/Crooks/Pinza broadcast has never before been available in its entirety. In his notes, restorer Richard Caniell discusses the incredible difficulty of piecing this together from archival material. There are a few "plugs" from other sources, none of them long-lasting, nor even noticeable. With the reliable French-Canadian Pelletier on the podium as he was for every *Mignon* heard from March 13, 1937 until the last (ever) broadcast in 1948, excepting only Beecham's in 1943, we have remarkable continuity in basic approach.

There are, however, interesting differences in the singing and the vocal and dramatic emphases heard from the different casts. Further, these are irreplaceable in that we hear Tourel in what was both her house debut and her New York operatic debut, and we hear Stevens in her Saturday afternoon broadcast debut. Also, as noted, we hear Crooks, whose only other (earlier) broadcast has never surfaced. The 1937 performance was also Leon Rothier's farewell to the airwaves. He retired shortly thereafter. Then, there is the opera itself. After 108 performances, as Henry Fogel notes in his absorbing commentary accompanying this album, the work has not been heard at the Metropolitan since 1948. The last Met performance was in Dallas, with Stevens and Giuseppe Di Stefano. Your correspondent has only heard it once, live, in a student performance (of semi-professional quality but still student) at the University of Minnesota more than 35 years ago. Operas with far less melodic

distinction and far sillier plots survive. Tastes differ, of course, but I am devoted to this work. Susan Graham performed it in Manhattan in concert form some years ago, I believe, and I have a fine 2001 performance with no less than the young Jonas Kaufmann as Wilhelm. But *Mignon* performances are not exactly thick upon the ground.

It was my great pleasure to review Immortal Performance's three-disc devoir to Tourel in these pages last year (Fanfare 38:6), and my devotion to the artist is boundless. She arrived in New York, in 1937, from Paris via Canada where her family had settled, a fully finished artist, in her 37th year. She sang Thomas's waif, and a week later Bizet's gypsy, and went back to Paris, from which she emerged at the very last minute in terms of safe passage and settled in the U.S. in 1940. She is introduced for this broadcast (not by Milton Cross) as "the Canadian mezzo." That's OK; Cross describes Stevens as an American contralto. Tourel offers what must be one of the best-sung, most finely nuanced debuts in history. Stevens, after her superb schooling in this country and in Prague, is equally poised in her broadcast debut—and she was not yet 26. Stevens is in remarkable form, her voice at this point a rather darker instrument than we later heard. This is, in purely vocal terms, her best of four broadcasts in the role, although the last (1948) after a period of rest and vocal restudy in 1947, is also superb—just with a different and slightly lighter timbre which she then carried until retirement. But this is a Stevens broadcast which expands our sense of the artist. The 1939 Rosenkavalier is, of course, similar in voice and tone, but is a very different type of singing. Included here are excerpts from a 1939 Teatro Colón *Orfeo* which also show her early darker vocal timbre. Perhaps for a season or two they understandably used the term "contralto."

Tourel, however, after this amazingly sensitive, fluent, and expressive single broadcast, sang what was said to be an equally fine Carmen and returned three years later to few operatic engagements, but to a career on the concert stage which endured almost until the day she died. One early New York City assignment was as Lisa in Tchaikovsky's *Pique Dame*, but that was the only flirtation with soprano register of which I am aware. Nineteen forty-three found her singing Berlioz with Toscanini, 1944 found her in Bellini's *Norma* at the Met with Zinka Milanov—and a few years later, she was recording Hindemith. There was not much our Jennie could not do. We are lucky she sang a few Met performances, and that this and her Adalgisa were captured for posterity. Caniell issued part of a second act from *Carmen* (New York City Opera, 1944) in the afore-mentioned compendium.

The tenor and bass stars here are hardly less luminous. Pinza was famous for his Lothario, and after Gounod's *Méphistophélès* probably sang that more than any other French role. (His Escamillo was striking but seldom heard, and he had few opportunities to offer his coruscating take on Louise's father.) Pinza can be heard on the first 1937 broadcast, comforting Gladys Swarthout's opulently voiced *Mignon*, but "heard" is a courtesy because the sonics are execrable. I suspect that broadcast is beyond resuscitation. He also sang the 1945 broadcast and more or less at that time recorded the "Swallow" Duet with Stevens. In the 1940s Norman Cordon, who sings Jarno in the Tourel broadcast,

took over Lothario, including for Beecham. He was a good Jarno, but I do not find him, in the 1943 and 1948 broadcasts, adequate in the larger role. Leon Rothier, after a long and distinguished career, came to the end of the Metropolitan trail with the 1938 season's *Mignon*. There are some barren patches, but actually he sounds better than in the 1935 Gounod *Romeo et Juliette* broadcast (Friar Laurent). The style is matchless and he accomplishes with pointed text as well as surprisingly good singing what Pinza achieves by a more purely vocal (but warm and sympathetic) interpretation of the role.

Crooks is of expected distinction, still close to his prime time here, with the top secure. He warms up audibly during the performance and is particularly marvelous in the last two acts. Caniell's remastering of the 1937 performance is most beneficial to Tokatyan. The tenor has some fine broadcasts to his credit (*Bohème* with Elisabeth Rethberg, *Lakmé* with Lily Pons, *Butterfly* with Licia Albanese—her first Met broadcast of the role), but the improved sonics of this release confirm that his Wilhelm Meister is worthy to stand with Charles Hackett (March 1937) and Crooks. That is high praise, and makes it all the more unfortunate that the 1940s broadcasts, all three, feature James Melton, referred to by Thomas Beecham after two or three rehearsals as "the gentleman jockey." I would like to have heard Di Stefano in that final Dallas performance. Fogel mentions in passing one of my favorite performances of *Mignon*, from Mexico City, 1948, in Italian (I know! All wrong!), in which Simionato almost takes the roof off the great opera house, Di Stefano's dulcet tone at age 25 is amazing, and the 27-year-old Cesare Siepi is a rather youthful Lothario. Simionato is the only singer I know to equal, or possibly exceed by a hair, Tourel's blazing commitment in act II. Stevens, in 1938 (and again in 1948), comes very close.

Josephine Antoine, a reliable coloratura lacking much tonal luster, is an accurate, adequate Philine in both broadcasts and also the earlier Swarthout airing. Pons boasted she never sang the role after Gatti left because Johnson could not force her. I guess her contract was negotiated. As late as 1954 I heard her, garbed in white and drenched in diamonds, knock the great aria across the reflecting pool and out of the park at Hollywood Bowl with no less than Monteux conducting. But the "French Lily" had no interest in an evening's work in what she took to be a secondary role. The best-sung Philine I know from the Met (but a tiny voice) was by Marilyn Cotlow, an auditions winner who sang the 1948 broadcast. We were lucky to get Antoine.

The remaining cast members are adequate; both Fredericks a bit nondescript. The finest singing of that role, bar none, is by Frederica von Stade on the Sony studio recording. She went on to be a fine *Mignon*, herself. No one is as bizarre as Jean Madeira, one of the great contralto voices of our time, whom Johnson cast in 1948. (She also recorded Suzuki!) What were they thinking?

Even in days when *Mignon* was a repertory piece, not everyone knew those smaller roles and what we have here are two first-rate performances, different but equal values, and both significant historically. The 1937 broadcast is in the best sound I've heard and improved to the point that one lead artist is heard notably better than was previously possible. No one can praise the 1938 sonics,

but the performance is beyond price and, in fact, it is yours for 4 CDs for the price of 3. There is no commercial recording to equal these movingly, eloquently sung, well-conducted performances. They contain the very essence of the work.

Review by Colin Clarke

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This set offers a great opportunity to get to know an opera that has been sadly sidelined in the modern repertory, *Mignon* by Ambroise Thomas. It also presents the first public performances on the stage of the Met of the two assumptions of the part of Mignon here, Jennie Tourel and Risë Stevens: two complete performances, plus bonus items.

The May 1937 broadcast was previously available on EJS 179, then on Walhall. But this restoration eclipses all comers. Thomas's score demands many passages where multiple vocal lines must be heard, and amazingly this is delivered here. It begins with an Overture in stunning sound for the period; much of its opening is tissue-delicate, and the woodwind and harp contributions come across with amazing clarity. The bright tempo di polacca section is bright and breezy. Throughout, Pelletier's conducting is vibrant, and for the more gentle passages, he is simply beautiful (see the passage that closes track six of the first disc). His suave way with the quiet, pointed, tripping opening to act II is simply delightful, as is his way of creating a magical atmosphere at the opening of act II scene 2. Just listen to how the recording captures the lower strings in between Mignon's exclamations of "Et moi!" a little later; or, indeed, how we are able to hear the excitement and verve of the final orchestral passages of act II. It is his way with the orchestra that so convincingly underscores the great rapture of Mignon and Wilhelm's reuniting in the final act.

It is Jennie Tourel who stands out, as the titular heroine surely should; her prayer-like "O Vierge, mon seul espoir" is beautifully radiant. The recitative and romance "Demain, dis-tu ... Connais-tu le pays" is possibly the most famous section of the score, and Tourel is astonishing in her tenderness as she relates her past (or what she can remember of it) to Wilhelm. The climax ("C'est là") is all the more effective for its restraint. She and Tokatyan join in the radiant "Duo des hirondelles" ("Légères hirondelles"), despatched here with a beautiful light touch from both. Her act II aria, "Elle est aimée," is radiant vocally (and contains a lovely full-toned high B \flat) but emotionally shot through with sadness; we really hear Mignon's desolation. Armenian lyric-spinto tenor Arman Tokatyan is a strong singer, but as the Mélodie "Adieu, Mignon!" shows, he is capable of great pathos also. We really do hear his regret at parting. His final act Romance, "Elle ne croyait pas," contains a couple of ringing high A \sharp .

Josephine Antoine, the Philine, is marvellously light of voice, and has a lovely way of tantalizingly shaping her phrases and delivering her staccato. Her act II showpiece, the Polonaise "Je suis Titania" shows just how vocally dexterous she can be; the woodwind comments and conversations with the singer are an absolute joy. She takes the top C option at the end, not the top E, but decorates the C with a top D for good measure.

Bass Léon Rothier (Lothario) was at this time 63 years of age and this was his last Met broadcast. His act III Berceuse, "De son coeur," reveals a strong legato and a fine feel for melodic shape (and earns deserved applause). As Jarno, Norman Cordon is a solid bass; Désire Defrère is a fine Laërte. The Met Chorus is in resplendent form, particularly at the end of the second act, but they can equally convey the gentle swing of the distant chorus at the opening of act III.

The 1938 performance, heard here in its first release on any format, comes from Pelletier's own store of private recordings. It's nice to hear Milton Cross introducing the event (for the 1937 performance it was Robert Woldrop). The sound of the 1937 Overture is preferable, as there seems to be more detail available; and indeed Richard Caniell is very open about the challenges this 1938 performance held: "Among all the recorded Met broadcasts of this opera, this is the one with the worst defects." There is some patching, using the various Pelletier 1937 broadcasts. It is also true that the Met Chorus sounds thin, and one wishes for an aural windscreen wipe for Pinza's "Fugitif et tremblant"; but still one can hear his artistry, as one can in his act III "Elle dort" and later on in that act at "Mignon! Wilhelm! Salut à vous," as he enters to do the grand reveal of the opera's story. One can hear Pelletier's artistry, too, time and time again: Try the delightful Introduction to act II Scene 2.

Henry Fogel in his booklet note sums up the differences between Tourel and Stevens well: "Tourel may be said to emphasize the dignity and nobility in her portrayal, and Stevens the earthiness and passion." How right he is: Stevens's pathos in "Connais-tu le pays" is quite remarkable, her voice darkly shaded and knowing; her "Légères hirondelles" is also notable in this regard. Stevens does indeed come across more worldly in her ways and knowledge in this Manon. So it is that her act II recitative-cantabile "Elle est là" carries supreme emotional weight, as does the drama of her exclamation just prior to Lothario's entrance, "Je veux vivre." Hearing Pinza and Stevens together here is a joy.

Richard Crooks makes a rather light Wilhelm, although his act II "Adieu, Mignon, courage" is ardent, and he uses the natural sweetness of his voice to his advantage, especially in the final act, in a softly caressed "Elle ne croyait pas." It is Josephine Antoine who, again, takes Philine's vocal acrobatics with delicious lightness (but not in such clear sonics). It's nice to see Alessio de Paolis as Laërte, very characterful indeed in his "Belle, ayez pitié."

Immortal Performances has issued a raft of important and rewarding recordings; but surely it is this one that sits at the top. At least, that's the impression one gets after hearing these rapturous performances of this great opera. And I use the word "great" very deliberately. Again, Henry Fogel's exemplary notes come

in useful as he points out that, at the time of writing, *Mignon* has not been performed at the Met since December 4, 1948 (Risè Stevens was the *Mignon* again, opposite James Melton; it then went on tour to Dallas, with Giuseppe di Stefano replacing Melton). Fogel also points out the risible recorded history of *Mignon*; luckily, it is much richer now.

As this is *Immortal Performances*, if there's space, there's a bonus or two. The end of the 1937 performance brings an effective "encore" as it features music from *Mignon* itself. Georgi Vinogradov sings "Adieu, *Mignon*, courage" in Russian on a 1947 broadcast with the Moscow Radio Orchestra under Alexander Orlov, his tone wonderfully caressing; he follows it with (also in Russian) "Elle ne croyait pas," with the same orchestra and conductor but recorded in 1940 (from USSR 10564). The sound surfaces are astonishingly silent, particularly on the second item, and Vinogradov's voice has a kind of addictive quality that makes one ache for more. Unfortunately, it is not Vinogradov that fills the final disc but Risè Stevens, in two excerpts from Gluck *Orfeo* (with the Orchestra of Teatro Colón under Erich Kleiber, 1939). The sound has problems coping with the choral and brass interjections in "Deh! Placatevi con me," but Stevens is nothing if not determined in her delivery. Finally, we are given just over two minutes of "Che farò"; it's fascinating to hear Stevens and Kleiber in this repertoire, taken at a surprisingly fast speed.