

TANCREDI PASERO: Operatic Arias and Scenes • Tancredi Pasero (bs); various performers • IMMORTAL PERFORMANCES 1121-2, mono (3 CDs: 203:24)

BOITO *Mefistofele*, excerpts. **GOUNOD** *Faust*, excerpts. **Verdi** *Requiem, Dies Irae. La forza del destino*, excerpts. **Mozart: Don Giovanni: Madamina, il catalogo è questo.** **Rossini: Il barbiere di Siviglia: La calunnia. Semiramide: Deh! Ti ferma.** **Bellini: La sonnambula: Vi ravviso. I puritani: Il rival salvar tu dei..Suoni la tromba.** **Norma: Ite sue colle. Ah! del Tebro.** **Verdi: Nabucco: Vieni o Levita! Ernani: Infelice! E tuo credevi. Luisa Miller: Ah! tutto m'arride...Il mio sangue. Il trovatore: Abbieta zingara. I vespri siciliani: O tu Palermo. Simon Boccanegra: A te l'estremo addio...Il lacerato spirito. Don Carlo: Ella giammai m'amò. Thomas: Mignon: Leggiadra rondinella.** Tancredi Pasero (b); Various conductors and vocalists •

Review by Ken Meltzer
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A new release by Immortal Performances (three discs, priced as two) documents the artistry of the Italian basso Tancredi Pasero (1893-1983). For better or worse, American opera fans tend to judge the legacy of an opera singer by his or her prominence at the Metropolitan Opera. And if asked to name the greatest basso between the World Wars (and just a bit thereafter), the American operaphile would in all likelihood name Pasero's contemporary Ezio Pinza (1892-1957). Pinza's great Met career spanned 22 years, and more than 800(!) performances. Tancredi Pasero's stay at the Met was a fraction of Pinza's. He debuted on November 1, 1929, as Alvisio in Ponchielli's *La Gioconda*. On March 9, 1933, Pasero gave his Met farewell as Archibaldo in Montemezzi's *L'amore dei tre re*. All told, Pasero gave more than 100 Met performances. But for the better part of his distinguished career, which lasted from 1917 until the early 1950s (sources differ as to the exact date of his retirement), Pasero was the leading bass at Milan's fabled La Scala. Pasero's artistry is documented in several recordings, including numerous excerpts, and some complete operas, most notably Cetra recording of Bellini's *Norma* (1936) and Verdi's *La forza del destino* (1941). Those recordings demonstrate that Pasero, like Pinza, was one of the finest basses of all time. The two shared several strengths, including a rock-solid technique throughout the registers, rich and beautiful voices with the pronounced (but always controlled and evenly-produced) vibrato often present in the Italian singers of their era, crystal-clear diction, and a sensitive, patrician approach to phrasing. Pasero's timbre strikes me as somewhat darker than Pinza's. He also, based on the recorded evidence,

took a more subdued approach to comedy. But in the final analysis, comparisons between the two artists are of minimal importance. Both are legends, and both command the attention of anyone interested in the recorded legacy of great singers and singing. In that spirit, the new Immortal Performances set dedicated to Pasero is a wonderful gift. Had IP just given us selections that showcase Pasero in a wide range of his broad repertoire, that would have made the set of great importance. But IP goes a step further, and includes recordings of unique historic importance, documenting Pasero in collaboration with some of the finest artists of his time.

Each of the three discs has an overarching theme. The first comprises operatic settings of the Faust legend. The disc opens with a performance of the Prologue from Boito's *Mefistofele*, recorded in performance on May 11, 1946, part of the concert celebrating the opening of the rebuilt La Scala Opera House. Pasero is Mefistofele, and the La Scala Orchestra and Chorus are conducted by Arturo Toscanini, returning to his beloved homeland. There is, of course, a 1954 Toscanini recording of this same music, made in Carnegie Hall, and featuring bass Nicola Moscona, the NBC Symphony Orchestra, the Robert Shaw Chorale, and The Columbus Boychoir. That is an impressive achievement in its own right, and in far better sound than the 1946 La Scala concert, even taking into consideration Caniell's fine restoration. But the 1946 La Scala performance has a sense of occasion, and an electricity that the 1954 RCA release does not. And while Nicola Moscona was a very fine bass, Pasero was a great one, and he is in magnificent voice, relishing the sinister, even playful aspects of Boito's Mephisto. Toscanini builds the performance to a shattering climax, perhaps the most thrilling I've ever heard in this music, and the La Scala audience responds in kind. Here, I'll note that while Pasero's contribution from the 1946 performance is included complete, some sections are filled in from a June 10, 1948 La Scala concert, also conducted by Toscanini. The disc continues with more excerpts from *Mefistofele*, including the complete Act II, sc. I Garden scene (with Gina Cigna, Paolo Civil, and Ida Mannarini). Pasero is a marvelous, characterful Mefistofele, by turns debonair, conniving, and malevolent. Selections from Gounod's *Faust*, sung in Italian, round out the first disc. The excerpts, comprising broadcast and studio recordings, are also impressive, both for Pasero's contribution, and for those of sopranos Ornelia Fineschi and Cigna, and tenors Giovanni Malipiero and Civil.

Disc 2 is devoted to Verdi, and it opens with an absolute treasure; the Dies Irae portion of a December 14, 1940 RAI broadcast of the Verdi Requiem, conducted by Victor de Sabata, and featuring soloists Maria Caniglia, Ebe Stignani, Beniamino Gigli, and Pasero, along with a chorus and orchestra assembled from musicians in Turin and Rome. In short, a collaboration between one of the greatest and most intense conductors of the 20th century and a dream quartet. And what a performance it is. De Sabata opens the Dies Irae at a hair-raising clip, marvelously executed by all concerned. As in the case of the Toscanini *Mefistofele* Prologue, de Sabata builds to a stunning climax in the Tuba mirum. Having portrayed the abject terrors of the Day of Judgment, de Sabata gives the soloists the opportunity to plead their case before God. Without ever slackening the tension, de Sabata allows the soloists to impart their unique artistry and voices to Verdi's miraculous score. To cite but one highlight, Gigli's rendition of the "Ingemisco" is remarkable for its flexibility of phrasing, diverse palette of dynamics and vocal colors, and just plain glorious vocalizing. But all of this performance of the Dies Irae is on that level. IP's restoration, while not the equivalent of studio recordings of the era, is excellent, allowing us to enjoy this once-in-a-lifetime performance (and one that eclipses the same portion of de Sabata's fine EMI 1954 complete La Scala studio recording). If only we had access to the complete 1940 Requiem! But the Dies Irae is a priceless gift. The remainder of the disc includes music from Verdi's *La forza del destino*, the greater part taken from the Cetra 1941 complete recording. Made in Turin, it stars Caniglia, Stignani, Galliano Masini, Carlo Tagliabue, Pasero, and Saturno Meletti. Gino Marinuzzi is the superb conductor, in a recording that remains one of the finest of this opera. The IP set includes the complete Act II Cloister Scene. By this stage of her career, high notes did not come easily to Caniglia. But she soldiers through in admirable fashion, and there is no denying the intensity of her voice, and of her interpretation. Alongside Caniglia's masterful portrayal of the desperate Leonora, Pasero's Padre Guardiano is the perfect foil; a man of strength and authority, but also of great compassion. And what a pleasure it is to hear Guardiano's music sung with such elegance and vocal richness. For the final scene, we hear a 1929 studio recording with Pasero, Bianca Scacciati, and Francesco Merli. No shortage of Italianate vibrato, temperament, and all-round glorious singing! The final disc features studio recordings of arias, and a few duets, spanning the 1920s-40s. They demonstrate that Pasero was an artist of impressive versatility and sensitivity, and one who was able to maintain, with remarkable consistency, a voice that was one of the glories of

its time. Thanks also to Richard Caniell and IP, for painstakingly presenting all the excerpts at correct pitch.

The IP booklet includes an essay by *Fanfare* colleague David Cutler, Richard Caniell's Recording Notes, artist bios, and some photos. The 1946 La Scala *Mefistofele* Prologue and 1940 Verdi Requiem Dies Irae alone make this set of prime interest to all collectors of historic vocal performances. But what IP has given us is an embarrassment of riches. I confess that I was not embarrassed in the least to savor every minute. Wonderful.

5 Stars: A Superb Tribute to the Great Italian Basso, Tancredi Pasero.

Review by Henry Fogel
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What a welcome release from Immortal Performances! The fame of Ezio Pinza was so significant that it tended to blind us to other Italian basses of the period. Pinza (1892–1957) and Tancredi Pasero (1893–1983) were exact contemporaries, and it is undeniable that Pinza had the stronger dramatic presence and vocal charisma. But one should never take for granted the warm, skillful, technically secure singing that Pasero gives us. This 3-CD set is surely the most complete picture of Pasero's art that we have ever been given, and it is extremely gratifying.

Notably Toscanini chose Pasero to sing in the Prologue of Boito's *Mefistofele* at the grand reopening of La Scala in 1946. That historic occasion is reproduced here with a much more brilliant and open sound than on any prior issue. There were apparently a few defective moments in the source, so Richard Caniell, the proprietor of Immortal Performances, has filled them in from a 1948 performance from La Scala also conducted by Toscanini. None of Pasero's passages are from 1948, however. This collection fills out the excerpts from Boito's masterpiece with commercial recordings made by Pasero in 1944. The Garden Scene with the glowing soprano of Gina Cigna is particularly treasurable. Pinza made a more immediate dramatic impact through the unique combination of his rich voice and incomparable sense of characterization. Closer to our own time Nicolai Ghiaurov made a strong impression in *Mefistofele* through an unusually richly colored, dark voice. But none of that takes away

from the strength of Pasero's singing, noble in its generous phrases and seamless *cantabile*. Pasero's quick vibrato is something less commonly heard today, but I do not find it intrusive in any way.

What one hears throughout this compilation are the classic virtues of good singing: a dark, warm, evenly produced sound, comfortable at the top and bottom of the range, perfect intonation that always hits the center of the note, and a wonderfully firm rhythmic pulse. Add to that Padero's crisp diction, and you understand why he was valued so highly by Toscanini as well as many other conductors, and why he was able to sustain a 35-year career in which he sang just under 100 roles. Although Pasero sang at the Met for four seasons, he was overshadowed by Pinza's enormous popularity. However, at La Scala he was considered a star, singing there for a quarter century in a huge range of roles. These included all the standard Verdi, Donizetti, Rossini, and Bellini parts you would expect, but Boris, Gurnemanz, Hagen, and King Marke as well. He also appeared in some world premieres, including Boito's *Nerone* and Pizzetti's *Orseolo*.

What one does not hear is a personality that jumps out of the speakers and startles you with its vivid characterizations. This absence is a detriment to character pieces like Leporello's Catalogue Aria, where Pasero seems too buttoned down. But then he will surprise you by capturing the humor of Basilio's "La calunnia" and the dignity and inner pain of King Philip in *Don Carlo*. Pinza might have put more heartbreaking emotion into "Ella giammai m'amo," but Pasero is no less convincing in his more restrained, perhaps more regal, way of conveying the king's heartache. In the Bellini selections one is impressed over and over again by the smoothness of tonal emission, the ease of technique in passagework, and the solid column of sound. The first disc features the Devil roles of Boito and Gounod, and the second the Verdi *Requiem* segment and *Forza* excerpts. The third disc in the set, featuring miscellaneous arias and duets, is in some ways the highlight of the release. The string of Verdi arias demonstrates mastery of line, clarity of diction, and the ability to convey character through purely musical means.

Let me expand a little on the *Mefistofele* Prologue, because it of historic importance of the occasion. The performance of the "Prologue in Heaven" is shattering in its power, from the choral and orchestral forces, and from Pasero, who must have been energized by the occasion, and of course from Toscanini. This performance has been issued before on Naxos, but the sound here is fuller, less compressed, and far more impactful. The 1944 *Mefistofele* excerpts

come from studio recordings made for Italian Columbia; a particular highlight is the complete Garden Scene with the great Gina Cigna. We also get Mefistofele's two arias, "Son lo spirito" and "Ecco il mondo." It must be admitted that Pesaro did not summon up the dramatic force in the studio that he did in the live Prologue, but one remains grateful for vocalism that is on an exalted level.

Another important group are the excerpts from that other great devil role, Méphistophélès in Gounod's *Faust*. Compiling from a variety of studio recordings and Italian radio broadcasts, Immortal Performances has given us a sample of the role large enough to make us wish we had the entire opera. As one expects, Pasero creates the character through musical means rather than dramatic gestures—vocal color and subtle inflection are the methods he prefers, and they are very effective. The performance of "Le veau d'or," from an RAI complete performance, is overwhelmingly powerful because Pasero and conductor Franco Ghione take an unusually fast tempo and a very *con forza* approach. (All the *Faust* excerpts are sung in Italian). By the time we've gone through the *Mefistofele* and *Faust* excerpts, we are starting to learn just what made Pasero such an effective singer. Worth commenting on again is that solid column of sound, a very rare quality in singers of any voice category.

The second CD offers the "Dies Irae" from Verdi's *Requiem* in a 1940 radio broadcast that has been assembled by Caniell from a few sources, since a complete "Dies Irae" did not exist. As is usual, his work is seamless, and he is up front about what he has done in the Recording Notes. These selections have only been available in a poor restoration that was constricted and pitched incorrectly. Sadly, all that survives seems to be the incomplete "Dies Irae." Of course, it would be wonderful to have the whole *Requiem*, but those who love this piece will be grateful for this extensive excerpt.

The other singers are Beniamino Gigli, Ebe Stignani, and Maria Caniglia (listed in descending order of quality), and the dramatic conductor is Victor de Sabata. Gigli and Stignani are perfect. Caniglia, as was often the case with her, demonstrated the right kind of voice but an inability to control her intonation, along with an occasional tendency to turn squally. In David Cutler's superb essay about Pasero, he is honest enough to point out that the singer jumps a beat in the "Confutatis," but Pasero quickly recovers, and Cutler rightly emphasizes that the bass's beautiful shaping of the line at "Lacrymosa" is a model of Verdi phrasing.

The *Forza del destino* excerpts are from a 1941 broadcast that was originally issued on Cetra and later transferred very nicely by Ward

Marston for Naxos Historical. The same issue of erratic intonation affects Caniglia's Leonora, but Pasero is in stunningly sonorous voice as Padre Guardiano. Importantly, Caniell has taken the opera's finale from a different recording, a 1929 set with Gina Cigna and Paolo Civil. It is great to have Cigna in this music, and to hear the young Pasero.

Immortal Performances is famous for the lavishness of their productions. The booklet includes Cutler's insightful essay, Caniell's notes about the recordings themselves, and wonderful photos. This is a superb tribute to one of the 20th century's finest operatic basses.

Five stars: A fine tribute to a great operatic bass