

VERDI *La traviata* • Cesare Sodero, cond; Bidu Sayão (*Violetta*); Charles Kullman (*Alfredo*); Leonard Warren (*Giorgio Germont*); Metropolitan Op Ch & O • IMMORTAL PERFORMANCES 1212-2 mono (2 CDs: 151:45) Live: Metropolitan Op House, New York 4/24/1943

& **BIDU SAYÃO STANDARD HOUR BROADCASTS** • Bidu Sayão (sop); Jussi Björling¹ (ten); Gaetano Merola, cond; San Francisco Op O • **GOUNOD *Faust: Je voudrais bien savoir... Ah! je ris de me voir.*** **BOITO *Mefistofele: L'altra notte.*** **GOUNOD *Roméo et Juliette:*** ¹*Va! je t'ai pardonné* Live: War Memorial Op House, San Francisco 9/28/1952, ¹10/29/1951

By Ken Meltzer
FANFARE September/October 2025

Immortal Performances (IP) offers a complete April 24, 1943 Metropolitan Opera broadcast of Verdi's *La traviata*, starring Bidu Sayão as the ill-fated heroine Violetta Valéry. Violetta is one of Verdi's sublime characterizations, a rich portrait of a three-dimensional protagonist and her tragic struggles. Verdi's depth of characterization presents a remarkable challenge for sopranos who undertake the role of Violetta. As Beverly Sills was fond of commenting, Violetta requires three voices: coloratura for Act I, dramatic for Act II, and lyric for Act III. Sills herself was best suited to the coloratura and lyric aspects of the role. Among complete recordings of the work, perhaps Maria Callas comes closest to realizing all three vocal facets of Violetta and the role's dramatic potential. Among the various Callas recordings of *La traviata*, *Fanfare* reviewers favor a 1958 Covent Garden performance, with Cesare Valletti as Alfredo, and Mario Zanasi as Giorgio Germont (ICA 5006). I concur.

Which brings me to Bidu Sayão. The Brazilian soprano possessed a beautiful lyric voice, that, coupled with radiant artistry, made her ideal for such roles as Mozart's Susanna and Zerlina, and Donizetti's Norina and Adina. But while Sayão's voice was compact, by all accounts it projected throughout the expanses of a large hall like the Old Met. And Sayão's keen musicianship and dramatic insights allowed her to sing, with great success, roles that typically require a bit more heft in the voice; including Gounod's Juliette, Massenet's Manon, and Puccini's Mimì (IP has provided marvelous restorations of broadcasts starring Sayão in all the parts I've mentioned).

Sayão's Violetta is another triumph. The music of Act I best suits Bidu Sayão's vocal resources. The coloratura poses no difficulty for her, and Sayão marvelously juxtaposes Violetta's free-spirited and more reflective moments. There is no interpolated high E-flat at the end of "Sempre libera," but Sayão does float an exquisite C to cap the preceding "Ah! fors'è lui." In Act II, Sayão more than compensates for her smallish voice with a lieder singer's attention detail and meaning, embodying an impressive range of vocal colors and textual inflections. The dramatic outbursts may not possess the last word in heft and volume, but Sayão prepares them so brilliantly, their impact is complete. In Act III, Sayão fully conveys the desperation of the fatally-ill Violetta. Her reading of Germont's letter is a masterclass in tragic expression unmarred by histrionics. The same holds true for the remainder of the act, among the finest realizations I've heard. This is a

marvelous document of a great and beloved artist at the peak of her vocal powers and artistry.

The remaining principals are excellent as well. Tenor Charles Kullman is a youthful, passionate Alfredo, whose warm tonal quality and ardent delivery remind me a bit of Giuseppe di Stefano. Baritone Leonard Warren, singing his first broadcast Germont, is rather generalized from a dramatic perspective; imperious upon first meeting Violetta, lachrymose the rest of the way. Warren's assumption of the role would grow in subtlety and variety over time. But there is no mistaking the rightness of Warren's effortless high baritone, suave phrasing, and seamless legato for the role. Conductor Cesare Soderò leads with a fine grasp of the pulse of Verdi's drama, maintaining dramatic momentum while allowing appropriate flexibility. IP's restoration of the 1943 *Traviata* broadcast is derived from NBC transcription discs used for South America broadcast (the metal from the US discs for the 1943 season were used for the War effort). Augustine Llopes de Olivares provides Spanish-language broadcast commentary. The recorded sound is not the equal of commercial recordings of the era, but more than adequate to enjoy this memorable performance.

As a welcome bonus, IP offers excerpts from San Francisco Standard Hour radio broadcasts with Sayão from 1951 and 1952. Sayão, moving into her sixth decade, is still in superb form. Marguerite's extended scene from Act II of Gounod's *Faust* offers a youthful vocal quality, exquisite French, and superb characterization. In *Mefistofele*, Boito's Italian-language version of the Faust legend, Sayão phrases Margherita's prison aria with intensity. Sayão's characteristic facility in florid writing is a considerable asset. Sayão and Swedish tenor Jussi Björling always had a special chemistry. And in a 1951 broadcast of an excerpt from Gounod's *Roméo et Juliette*, they reprise the magic from their legendary 1947 Met broadcast of the complete opera. All The Standard Hour excerpts are in fine sound, and include announcer commentary.

IP's generous booklet materials include William Russell's insights on the featured performances, Verdi's *La traviata*, and the composer's middle period. There are also a detailed plot synopsis, Richard Caniell's *Recording Notes*, and artist bios and photos. Sayão's unforgettable Violetta, amply supported by her distinguished colleagues, makes this set essential listening.

Five stars: Bidu Sayão's memorable Violetta, broadcast from the Met