

VERDI *Il trovatore* • Herbert von Karajan, cond; James McCracken (*Manrico*); Leontyne Price (*Leonora*); Giulietta Simionato (*Azucena*); Ettore Bastianini (*Count di Luna*); Nicola Zaccaria (*Ferrando*); Vienna St Op Ch; Vienna P • IMMORTAL PERFORMANCES 1176-2 (2 CDs: 147:42) Live: Salzburg, Austria 8/13/1963

& ***Il trovatore; excerpts*** • Zubin Mehta, cond; Placido Domingo (*Manrico*); Leontyne Price (*Leonora*); Ch & O Metropolitan Opera (New York: 3/6/69)

Ken Meltzer

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Immortal Performances (IP) offers an August 13, 1963 Salzburg Festival broadcast performance of Verdi's *Il trovatore*. In its *Recording Notes*, IP's Richard Caniell acknowledges the 1963 *Trovatore's* "similarity to the well-known 1962 preservation (which offered Corelli as Manrico in an electrifying performance)." The 1962 Salzburg *Il trovatore* has been issued on several labels, including an official release by DGG. It is in markedly better sound than the 1963 *Trovatore*, and with one exception, duplicates the principals in the 1962 performance. That one exception is the American tenor James McCracken, who sings Manrico. As Caniell noted, Franco Corelli is the Manrico in the 1962 recording. I agree with Caniell that Corelli is splendid in that performance. But McCracken brings his own considerable strengths and virtues to the role. And since (unlike Corelli) McCracken never made a commercial recording of *Il trovatore*, the release is of this 1963 *Trovatore* merits attention.

In truth, it's not quite accurate to state that McCracken never made a commercial recording of *Trovatore*. In 1957 the Met recorded an abridged version of the work, part of its *Metropolitan Record Club Series*. On that occasion, Kurt Baum was the Manrico. McCracken assumed the secondary tenor parts of Ruiz and a Messenger. During the 1950s, McCracken performed numerous comprimario roles at the Met. In 1957, McCracken and his wife, mezzo Sandra Warfield, moved to Europe. There, James McCracken established himself as a leading dramatic tenor. On March 10, 1963, McCracken made his triumphant return to the Met, now starring as Verdi's *Otello* (one of the tenor's signature roles). For the better part of a quarter century, with a few breaks, McCracken was a Met stalwart in the dramatic tenor repertoire. McCracken's robust and secure voice, aligned with an intensely committed stage presence, served him well in several of the most demanding tenor parts. I think it only fair to point out that James McCracken had his share of detractors. McCracken's burly vocal production and a rather "clenched teeth" approach to high notes were not to all tastes. Some also found McCracken's stage presence overly melodramatic. I count myself among those who admired what James McCracken brought to the operatic stage. And his commanding strengths are on display in the 1963 *Trovatore*. It's not surprising that McCracken delivers all of Manrico's dramatic outbursts with impressive authority and commitment. These include a rousing "Di quella pira," sung in key, and capped by two interpolated high Cs (in the 1962 *Trovatore*, Corelli transposes the cabaletta down a half-step). But McCracken proves equally convincing in the more lyrical moments (throughout *Il trovatore*,

Verdi is constantly juxtaposing *bel canto* and heroic modes of expression). “Ah sì, ben mio” is lovingly shaped, with a winning flexibility of phrasing and dynamics, even if the trills are not observed. During the course of the opera, McCracken fully embodies Manrico’s roles of lover, devoted son, and warrior. And on this occasion, McCracken is in prime, youthful voice, with a sweetness of tone perhaps was less evident in later years. Fans of McCracken will most definitely want this *Trovatore*.

The remaining principals reprise their strengths and occasional blemishes from the 1962 performance. Soprano Leontyne Price is the Leonora of one’s dreams, singing with a radiant tonal quality, spine-tingling ease in coloratura and the upper register, and gorgeous, idiomatic phrasing. She is also a wonderful vocal actress, one who embodies Leonora’s nobility and passion. Mezzo Giulietta Simionato is likewise a supreme Azucena. In stupendous voice, Simionato throws herself into the role with a frightening commitment. At the same time, her grasp of Verdian style (and this opera’s *bel canto* roots) is never in doubt. The Count di Luna of baritone Ettore Bastianini is more of a mixed bag. Bastianini’s rich and vibrant baritone, impressive throughout the registers and one of the most striking of its era, is an undeniable asset. Bastianini is credible in balancing the Count’s passion for Leonora with the character’s vengeful side. But the lack of a true legato hampers Bastianini, most notably in the great aria, “Il balen.” Bastianini cannot sustain multiple notes on a vowel without resorting to aspirates. And so the phrase “du’una stella vince il raggio” emerges as “du-hu-na-ha stella vi-hin-ce-he hil ra-ha-ha-gio.” Such baritones like Leonard Warren, Robert Merrill, and Sherill Milnes all demonstrated that it is possible to sing this demanding music both with both an imposing voice and the requisite legato. Bass Nicola Zaccaria is a sonorous and intense Ferrando.

Il trovatore was an opera that brought out the best in Herbert von Karajan as an opera conductor. It’s clear that Karajan had a great affinity for the work. I’ll repeat what I wrote about Karajan’s contribution to the 1956 EMI La Scala recording with Callas, di Stefano, and Panerai: “Herbert von Karajan’s conducting of this score is superb in every way...This is a reading of *Il trovatore* that gives full due to both the dramatic and more lyric moments. Throughout, Karajan’s pacing is exemplary, always incorporating a marvelous plasticity of phrasing, without any hint of self-conscious exaggeration. Throughout, Karajan elicits an arresting precision of execution from his musicians. This is true not only in the unanimity of attack, but in the crystal-clear delineation of the various instrumental and vocal lines and textures. How wonderful it is to hear all the elements of Verdi’s score receive their full due.” If on rare occasion, there are some imprecisions of ensemble, the 1963 (and 1962) Salzburg *Trovatores* embody these strengths as well.

As an appendix to the complete opera, IP includes *Trovatore* excerpts from a March 6, 1969 performance with Price, Placido Domingo, and Zubin Mehta conducting. The selections include Leonora’s First and Fourth-Act arias, and the “Miserere.” Here, Price is beginning to explore a greater division and contrast in her voice registers, and some of the interpolated high notes from the Salzburg performance are omitted. Overall, she is in superb form, and most deserving of the Met audience’s ecstatic reception. It’s also wonderful to be reminded of the beauty of the young Domingo’s voice, and his correspondingly uninhibited use of its resources. I will always hold a special affection for Domingo’s earlier

recordings. The sound for the Met excerpts is quite good. It appears the 1963 *Trovatore* is the product of a private recording of the broadcast. While the sound is good enough to enjoy the performance's considerable merits, it does not (unlike the 1962 version, begin to approach the quality of studio recordings of the era. Announcer commentary, in German, enhances the sense of occasion.

The booklet for the IP set includes Dewey Faulkner's extensive commentary, a full plot synopsis, Caniell's *Recording Notes*, and artist bios and photos. If you're a James McCracken fan, this set is a must. If you don't know McCracken's singing, this might be a fine place to start (but don't miss his *Otello*). And overall, this is a great *Trovatore*. Recommended.

5 Stars: James McCracken shines in an all-star Salzburg performance of *Il trovatore*

Review by **Henry Fogel**

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One might question the decision by Immortal Performances to issue this 1963 Salzburg Festival production of *Il trovatore*. Herbert von Karajan introduced the production to Salzburg the year before, with almost the same cast except that Manrico was Franco Corelli instead of James McCracken. A high-quality broadcast recording of that production was issued by Deutsche Grammophon on CD in its *Dokumente* series from the festival. Realistically, whatever source was available to producer Richard Caniell for the present release was not of similar quality—the sound is compressed, and neither the voices nor the orchestra display their full range of colors. I can only assume the source is from someone's off-the-air taping.

In his brief recording notes Caniell writes about his "hope to document and make available everything that Leontyne Price sang." Even for dedicated collectors I'm not sure that this release adds meaningfully to the existing inventory of her glorious recordings of this opera.

However, I think that there is an important documentation here in the Manrico of James McCracken. The American tenor's story is well known among opera lovers: he started out as a *comprimario* at the Met and had to go to Europe to gain his fame, returning as one of his generation's outstanding *Otellos*. His Manrico, not available anywhere else, is more than sufficient justification for this release.

One could find fault with McCracken's occasionally explosive approach (although it is reasonably appropriate for much of this opera), and his voice was not as gloriously ringing an instrument as Corelli's or Mario del Monaco's. Even so, one would kill to have a Manrico of such virility and tonal solidity today. Manrico's big scene with Azucena in act II is electrifying, with McCracken matching the great Giulietta Simionato strength for strength. At the same time, McCracken was capable of delicate shading, for example, at the end of "Ah! Si ben mio" and in "Miserere d'un'alma." For "Di quella pira" he innately had the requisite power and high notes (the aria is not transposed down, either).

McCracken was an important enough singer in the 1960s and 70s to merit documentation of his Manrico.

It will be no surprise to anyone that Leontyne Price is close to perfection as Leonora. Her voice glows, her high notes are effortless, she manages the modest *coloratura* demands of the role easily, and she gives a master class in shaping Verdi's long lines through her impeccable *legato* and breath control. Dewey Faulkner, in his perceptive commentary puts it simply: "Price's was a voice from the Golden Age, especially in the early 1960s." She is also dramatically persuasive (or as much as one can be in an opera that relies more on its musical strengths than on dramatic verisimilitude).

Giulietta Simionato, like Price, displays a combination of vocal and dramatic strengths. Her voice is even from top to bottom, her *legato* is seamless, and she convincingly portrays both the tender mother and the vengeful gypsy. When veteran opera lovers talk about to the good old days, we are referring to a time when the pool of Verdi mezzos contained Fedora Barbieri, Ebe Stignani, Fiorenza Cossotto, Oralia Dominguez, and Irene Dalis. Simionato, in her prime, was as great as any of them.

Ettore Bastianini rounds out the quartet of leads. In November 1962, the year he turned 40, he was diagnosed with the throat cancer that would kill him in 1967. Bastianini spent the first quarter of 1963 receiving treatment and then resumed his career. There are only a few signs of the illness in this performance. The bronze tone, the soaring phrases of "Il balen," would be a source of pride for any other baritone, even though a direct comparison with how Bastianini sounded at Salzburg a year earlier in the DG recording demonstrates that his power was down just a little. Rounding out the cast, Nicola Zaccaria is a solid Ferrando.

As in 1962, the entire performance has sweep and an inexorable logic about it. This period was an outstanding one for Karajan in Italian opera. Beginning with the famed Callas *Lucia* performances in 1955 and going through roughly the early to mid-1970s, Karajan had not yet started smoothing out the edges in the music and overthinking every phrase. There is a natural Verdian flow here, and the Vienna Philharmonic's playing is close to perfection. Karajan employs the cuts that were standard at the time, so we don't get Leonora's last act *cabaletta*.

The bonus material captures Price six years later, still at her peak, in a Met performance of *Trovatore* led by Zubin Mehta featuring Placido Domingo in his first Manrico at the Met. The focus, though, is on Leonora's big scenes, with just a bit of Domingo from the final act.

The usual high quality of 'Immortal Performances' production values apply here. In addition to Faulkner's insightful essay, there are wonderful historic photos, complete plot summaries, artist bios, and Caniell's recording notes. It is always a pleasure to hear such a superb performance, but the unique value of this release is the preservation of the powerful Manrico of James McCracken.