

VERDI *Il trovatore* • Gino Nastrucci, Carlo Sabajno, cond; Aureliano Pertile (*Manrico*); Maria Carena (*Leonora*); Irene Minghini-Cattaneo (*Azucena*); Apollo Granforte (*Conte di Luna*); Bruno Carmassi (*Ferrando*); La Scala Ch & O & • IMMORTAL PERFORMANCES 1198-3 mono (3 CDs: 229:24)

& **AURELIANO PERTILE, APOLLO GRANFORTE:** Operatic excerpts

By Ken Meltzer

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Immortal Performances (IP) presents a restoration of one of the earliest commercial recordings of Verdi's *Il trovatore*. Recorded by HMV in 1930, it features the La Scala forces and many of the eminent singers of the day. *Trovatore* is an opera that has fared impressively on disc. It has been recorded numerous times, with several outstanding versions. These include 1952 RCA (Björling, Milanov, Barbieri, Warren, Cellini conducting), 1955 EMI (di Stefano, Callas, Barbieri, Panerai, Karajan, conducting), 1969 RCA (Price, Cossotto, Domingo, Milnes, Mehta conducting), and 1983 DG (Plowright, Fassbaender, Domingo, Zancanaro, Giulini conducting). All feature appreciably better sound than the 1930 La Scala recording, and especially in the 1955 EMI, 1969 RCA, and 1983 DG, far superior conducting. The 1955 EMI opens up many of the traditional stage cuts, and the 1969 RCA and 1983 DG are note-complete. The casts in this recommended list also do far greater justice to the bel canto elements of *Il trovatore*, without neglecting the more declamatory episodes. What, then, is the value of a recording in relatively primitive sound, incorporating all the stage cuts of the day, indifferently conducted, and featuring singers who, for the better part, struggle (or just dispense) with such bel canto-influenced niceties as pure legato, coloratura, and trills? I think that *Fanfare's* James Camner answered that question most eloquently in his superb review (21:6, July / Aug 1998) of the 1998 Romophone Opera Magna reissue (89003-2) of this recording: "Though the style of HMV's singers is inevitably contaminated by the influences of verismo, this is the most exciting recording extant of what was once the world's most popular opera. It may be theoretically possible to assemble a decent *Il trovatore* cast today, but it's hard to imagine four modern singers who would commit body and soul to this old warhorse, as did HMV's true believers of 1930." I concur with James Camner, and would argue that no other commercial recording comes close to communicating the passion and desperation at the heart of *Il trovatore*.

While the plot of *Il trovatore* is hopelessly convoluted, the emotions the principals feel and express resonate, especially when embraced by the interpreters. And it is the HMV 1930 La Scala cast that best conveys, without respite, that matters of life and death are at stake. Leading the cast is tenor Aureliano Pertile as Manrico. An intense and imaginative artist, Pertile phrases with individuality and distinction, brilliantly portraying Manrico's youthful passion for Leonora, filial devotion to Azucena, and intense rivalry with the Count di Luna. When Pertile's Manrico and Apollo Granforte's di Luna square off at the conclusion of Act I, their mutual contempt is palpable. Pertile did not have a classically beautiful tenor voice, but he used it with a commitment often sorely lacking in modern performance. On this occasion, Pertile is also in fine vocal estate. The high notes ring out with security (Pertile does transpose "Di quella pira" down to B), and his tone is rich and generous throughout. And again, the depth of feeling Pertile expresses should be studied by all tenors who attempt the role of

Manrico. Two other principals are on Pertile's high level. Mezzo Irene Minghini-Cattaneo (Azucena) and baritone Apollo Granforte (di Luna) bring all the voice and temperament to their roles that one could hope for. In reviews of this recording, soprano Maria Carena's Leonora is invariably the odd singer out. It is true that Carena's voice lacks the vocal richness and flexibility exemplified by the finest Leonoras. But like the other principals on this recording, Carena throws herself unreservedly into the drama, and to most impressive effect. Carena truly rises to the occasion in her last-act duet with di Luna, and in a death scene that is credible and heartbreaking. In the end, for all her flaws, Carena does not let the side down. Bass Bruno Carmassi is ever-attentive to the twists and turns of Fernando's opening narrative, and sings with a resonant, vibrant tone. Carlo Sabajno was originally credited as the conductor of this recording. Research of the archives revealed that Sabajno conducted only two of the 30 78rpm sides. The remainder were led by Gino Nastrucci, who at various times in his career served as concertmaster of the La Scala and Metropolitan Opera Orchestras. If Sabajno's and Nastrucci's leadership of this *Trovatore* lack ideal propulsion and intensity, it is nonetheless clear that the La Scala Orchestra of the day was a fine ensemble, and that Verdi's opera was very much in their blood.

The 1998 Romophone set, remastered by Mark Obert-Thorn, is quite fine, offering a rich and detailed perspective, with minimal surface noise from the 78 rpm sources. As fine as the Romophone is, I much prefer the new IP. It is true that the crackle of the 78rpm discs are more apparent. But the voices now also emerge with a striking immediacy, color, and vibrancy. The orchestral definition is improved as well. All of this serves to intensify a uniquely gripping rendition of Verdi's middle period melodrama. Equally impressive are the restorations of the generous bonus material; operatic excerpts performed by Pertile and Granforte. Both artists are in top form both vocally and interpretively. These excerpts add considerably to the pleasure of the set (the Romophone offers the complete *Trovatore*, with no bonus material). IP's booklet contains extensive commentary by Dewey Faulkner, a full plot synopsis, Richard Caniell's "Recording Notes" and artist bios. I do firmly believe that this 1930 La Scala *Trovatore* is an essential supplement to various reference recordings of the work. IP's restoration brings it to life in a manner I've not previously experienced. Enthusiastically recommended.

Five stars: A riveting 1930 La Scala *Trovatore*, beautifully restored by Immortal Performances