

VERDI *Aida* • Zubin Mehta cond.; Virginia Zeani (*Aida*); Lili Chookasian (*Amneris*); Jon Vickers (*Radamès*); Victor Braun (*Amonasro*); Montreal Op Ch & O; Montreal 10/11/1965

BIZET *Carmen* • Georges Prêtre, cond., Jon Vickers (*Don José*); Grace Bumbry (*Carmen*); Joan Carlyle (*Micaëla*); Robert Merrill (*Escamillo*); Teatro Colón Ch & O Teatro Colón, Buenos Aires 7/5/1968

& VERDI *Aida*: Judgment Scene (*Giulietta Simionato* (*Amneris*); Jon Vickers (*Radamès*). Live: Bell Telephone Hour 5/5/1964)

IMMORTAL PERFORMANCES 1056-4 mono (4 CDs: 297:51) Live

By Henry Fogel

FANFARE September/October 2016

This wonderful memorial tribute to Jon Vickers is to be welcomed not only by the many fans of the great Canadian tenor, but opera lovers in general. Vickers made fine studio recordings of both operas. The *Aida* is considered by many to be one of the greatest (Price, Gorr, Merrill, Solti). But when it comes to a great singing actor there is no substitute for a live performance, and good examples of that with Vickers are fairly rare. This *Aida* has been issued by Opera Depot in an atrocious-sounding copy, recorded from a seat somewhere in the house. But this recording was made by stage director Irving Guttman, who died in December 2014 after a distinguished career in opera, and the sound is quite fine, particularly after being given the usual superb treatment by Richard Caniell.

In addition to getting the extra intensity of Vickers on stage, this recording gives us something else very special: Virginia Zeani's *Aida*. Add the young Zubin Mehta (in his early 30s) and the fiery Lili Chookasian's *Amneris*, and you have a performance that has a lot to offer even beyond the tenor. Even Victor Braun, a very good (if not great) Canadian baritone who made much of his career in Germany, is a solid addition to the whole.

As good as Vickers is in the Solti recording (despite the fact that he and Solti apparently feuded throughout and never worked together again), he is clearly more inspired here by the presence of an audience and the momentum and energy developed from a real performance rather than segmented recording sessions. His interactions with *Aida* during the Nile Scene and his big scenes with *Amneris* are even greater examples of specificity of inflection than the already fine studio recording. The intensity he brings to the final phrases of the Nile Scene makes you fear that his head is going to explode. While one wishes he (and so many other tenors) would have tried Verdi's soft ending to "Celeste *Aida*," there is no denying the visceral thrill of the power of his final note. At the other end of the spectrum one is awestruck by the ravishing beauty of his pianissimo singing in the Tomb Scene. Even Björling, in the famed Milanov recording, doesn't quite match the magic created by Vickers here (and beautifully echoed by Zeani).

Throughout, Vickers does so much more than just pour out sound. He colors the voice to suit the moment, and he marries words to music better than almost anyone who sang this repertoire during his time. To give you one example, take the end of the third act, where Radamès gives himself up to the priests with the line "Sacerdote, io resto a te." Most tenors thrill us with ringing high notes, held onto for dear life. No question that this is goosebump music, but it is also somewhat wrong because it sounds like Radamès is triumphant, which is anything but true. Vickers tightens the tone just a bit and adds a hollowness to the sound—clearly not a vocal problem, but a dramatic approach to make clear Radamès's bitterness and self-hatred at this moment. There is so much more in the tone here than just tenorizing, and it is that intelligence operating throughout which makes this performance unique. There will always be some who find it hard to accept his non-Italianate voice in this repertoire, but I would hope that most can adjust quickly and recognize the genius behind the singing.

Zeani's Aida is another reason to obtain this set. The Rumanian soprano is 90 years old as this is being written and still doing some teaching! In the 1950s, 60s, and 70s she had a major career, but mostly in Europe, and without the advantage of a major record label contract (at the time Decca had Tebaldi, EMI had Callas, RCA had Milanov and then Price). Her Aida is quite extraordinary, for both vocal beauty and dramatic impact. It is true that she takes a breath before the C in "O patria mia," but the soft high C is as beautiful as almost any on disc. She brings plenty of tonal radiance and variety of color to the role. In her duet with her father in the Nile Scene she breaks your heart, making clear the conflict between romantic love and love of country at the heart of Aida's dilemma. This is a beautifully sung and dramatically powerful performance worthy of comparison with the great ones on disc.

Chookasian's biting and brilliantly sung Amneris is one more asset to the performance. She manages to convey both the venomous, vengeful side of the character and the pitiable, wounded side of the rejected lover. She and Vickers light a real fire in the Judgment Scene. Braun is a more-than-adequate Amonasro, if not a truly great one. He has a strong, evenly produced baritone voice, but one that lacks the distinctive timbre of a truly great singer, and while his acting is also convincing it too doesn't have the spark of greatness about it. He is least impressive in the second act, but does rise to the occasion with Zeani in the Nile Scene.

Mehta shows all of his strengths as a conductor: genuine excitement and intensity, an ability to convey the tenderness, heartbreak, grandeur, anger, and beauty of this great score. There are moments where things threaten to break down (as is frequently the case in every live performance) but they always come back together quickly. As I write this it is 50 years after this performance, and Mehta is still going strong.

A wonderful bonus at the end of the second disc is the Judgment Scene confrontation between Vickers and Simionato, recorded near the end of Simionato's career (demonstrating that she retired too soon). This is thrilling, classic singing as heard on the Bell Telephone Hour, at a time when commercial television still offered things of quality.

The recorded sound is miles ahead of the earlier release of this performance. This is decent monaural sound, Caniell himself admits that the sound is rather shallow, but it

is clear and there is sufficient presence to give us a real sense of what it was like to have been there. He has done his usual superb job in restoration. Bringing us an early, live Radamès of Vickers and a wonderful Aida from Zeani, this is an extremely important release. The sound from the Bell Telephone Hour is much better, and gives us Vickers and Simionato in professional recording quality sound.

The *Carmen* has better sound than the *Aida*—some of the finest I have ever heard on a Teatro Colón recording. This was an official recording made from the broadcast of the performance, and thus it presents few problems for us. It did apparently present some for producer Caniell because mike placement caused forte notes to be extra loud. He has addressed that with success, though the solo horn at the beginning of Micaëla's aria is rather too forward.

Vickers's own commercial competition in this opera is less serious, in my view, than with *Aida*. Vickers did, in fact, record *Carmen* for EMI, with Bumbry and the fine conducting of Rafael Frühbeck de Burgos. That version uses the original spoken dialogue, and in fact replicates the score as it was heard on its opening night. This version uses the then-traditional Guiraud recitatives. If that issue is important to you, you can figure out how it weights your decision. However, as a dramatic, powerful exposition of *Carmen*, this scores many points over the EMI (and also over the 1967 Vickers/Bumbry performance with Karajan, which is too fussy in many details on the part of both conductor and Vickers). Bumbry in particular is extremely impressive here, much more dramatically alive and varied than on the studio recording. And the one conducting flaw in the studio recording (pointed out by James Miller in his very fine reviews of its original LP release and CD reissue) is Frühbeck's maniacal acceleration in the Gypsy Song, rendering it unsingable by the final verse.

Vickers is truly extraordinary here, perhaps even more so than as Radamès. The almost schizophrenic nature of José, a lovesick little child at one moment, a swaggering soldier at another, a murderous madman at yet another, is a difficult role to bring off without exaggeration or caricature. Vickers achieves precisely that here. His tenderness toward Micaëla in their first act duet is movingly conveyed, and introduces us to the gentle side (which is real) of the character. In the second act we get the full range of the character, and of Vickers's art. The heartbreaking tenderness of the Flower Song, the pleading, the rage, it is all there, and it is unified by Vickers into a whole. The Flower Song has always been special with Vickers, hushed and filled with a quiet intensity, rather than sung out full-voiced. Here it is absolute magic, complete with the soft climax that Bizet imagined but that we very rarely encounter. The transitions of mood, the subtlety of the interactions with Carmen, the integration of everything he does into the portrayal of a flesh-and-blood character is quite unlike any other Don José. Vickers doesn't only think about, or turn it on for, the big moments. What he has in common with Maria Callas is that both of them give as much attention to the small moments of dialogue and interaction with other characters, and think about how to color and inflect those as well as the big arias and duets. We hear this quality throughout. If I had to choose a single performance to demonstrate to someone the greatness of Jon Vickers, it might well be this.

Bumbry, who was rather staid in the EMI studio recording and didn't seem fully engaged in the Karajan film performance either, is on fire here. The sparks, the fierce

independence of Carmen, the seductive qualities as well as the ultimate coldness of this lady, are all conveyed by Bumbry. When she mocks José, it is emphatic and utterly convincing; we feel his pain. Vocally she is in great shape throughout. The concluding 15 minutes of the second act, starting with the Flower Song, reaches at a level of dramatic impact, of operatic greatness, that we always seek and rarely find in the opera house.

Joan Carlyle's Micaëla is also terrific. The role doesn't make those dramatic demands on the singer, but she sings gorgeously and matches Vickers in imagination in their first-act duet. Her voice is perfectly placed and produced with beauty and focus. Robert Merrill does not bring the kind of imagination to Escamillo that we find in Vickers, or even Bumbry, but he does bring an incredibly rich, resonant baritone voice and, quite frankly, that is sufficient. Most of the remainder of the Colón cast members sing and act well, and the performance is terrifically guided by Prêtre. He could be inconsistent, but seems to be completely involved in what is going on here and in sync with his cast.

This set is a very apt tribute to Jon Vickers, not only because it preserves in good sonics live performances of two of his most important roles, but because the performances are wonderful beyond just Vickers. The four discs are sold for the price of three, making this a genuine bargain. I will note that the *Aida* is transferred at a lower volume level than is normal, but this presents no problems as all you need do adjust your volume knob a bit. As is their custom, Immortal Performances' booklet is a big part of what makes them special. Stanley Henig's annotation is informative, engaging, and well written, and Caniell's own notes about the recordings also add value. There are many lovely, well-chosen photographs as well.

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By Colin Clarke

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Professor Stanley Henig pens a heartfelt tribute to the great Canadian tenor Jon Vickers in the booklet accompanying this release. Known for the strength of his voice (and

perhaps above all for his Florestan for Klemperer's HMV *Fidelio*, but with his Aeneas in *Troians* only slightly behind), Vickers appears here in two core roles for the tenor repertoire: Radamès and Don José.

This is the first release of the *Aida*, discounting the Opera Depot set of 2014 from an unofficial source; this one comes from the stage director, Irving Guttman. A dearth of upstage microphones does, as Caniell admits, lead to a slightly thin and distanced sound here, and he is right to refer to the ensembles as "congested" and "compressed." It does not sound like a 1965 recording, for sure; the chorus is completely drowned by a smattering of applause at the beginning of act I scene 2, for example, and their levels around forte and above are just uncomfortable.

Yet one cannot ignore this important document. While Vickers's recording with Leontyne Price is vital to any self-respecting *Aida* discography, this acts as a fascinating supplement, and it also gives proof of the indestructibility of Vickers's voice: He sounds as strong at the end as he does at the beginning. Right from "Se quel guerrier," Vickers stamps his silver-edged, manly presence on this performance of *Aida*; that passage, of course, leads to one of the most famous tenor arias of them all, "Celeste Aida," strongly, confidently delivered. Here's a man who knows his own mind; Lili Chookasian is nearly his equal, formidable as Amneris. But listen to Vickers's strength at "O Re: Pei sacri Numi" in the second act, or the passages in act III around "Pur ti riveggo," which could have been written with him in mind. The final stages of the opera, in the fourth act, are gripping in the extreme; his "O terra, addio" is very special indeed.

Another formidable woman is the *Aida* herself, Virginia Zeani, whose "Ritorna vincitor" begins before the applause for the preceding section has even ended; she hits the pleading, devotional aspect of the second part of her aria square on, also. Even better, in fact, is her "Pieta ti prenda" (act II), as she begs for mercy from Amneris. As Ramfis, Thomas Paul is a resonant presence (try "Mortal, diletto ai Numi," or the lovely "Vieni d'Iside"); Yoland Guérard's King is somewhat less authoritative, but holds its place. Vickers's fellow Canadian Victor Braun is a solid Amonasro.

Zubin Mehta, who was music director of the Montréal Symphony from 1961 to 1967, directs a strong and forthright performance of Verdi's score. One should also add "urgent": Listen to the impetuous, pulling at the lead way with Amneris's act I "Quale insolita givvia," for example; the act II ballet is brisk, for sure. There is plenty of energy running through every moment: The lead-in to the chorus "Gloria all'Egitto" is remarkable, yet even the quiet beginning to act III is electric with dramatic possibility, and indeed the third act is remarkable for its power from all concerned. Yet there is tenderness here, too. Mehta shapes act II extremely well, allowing the music its own propulsion and not forcing.

The extra for *Aida* is a Bell Telephone Hour Judgment Scene duet with Giulietta Simionato. Simionato is in terrific form; the (unnamed) orchestra is spot-on. Urgent and magnificent, she is utterly commanding; Vickers is absolutely her equal, his phenomenal high register cutting through the air waves. The orchestra, excellent technically though it is, is fairly obviously not as involved as the singers.

The *Carmen* opens in a riot of color. This is Prêtre at the helm, right in his home territory, and how it shows. Idiomatic, dramatic, and fiery, this *Carmen* grips from first to last. Vickers sang the role of Don José six times between mid-June and the beginning of August 1968; he is paired here with the splendid Joan Carlyle as Micaëla, a regular at Covent Garden, beautifully mobile of voice, and the one and only Grace Bumbry as the titular heroine. Met regular Robert Merrill joins the star-studded cast as Escamillo. The recording quality is palpably better than *Aida*; the chorus marvelously focused, and if there is a slightly scratchy quality to the lower strings, it is hardly grounds for complaint. Bumbry's voice is magnificently preserved (just listen to "L'amour est un oiseau rebelle"), including her smoky lower register. Her way with "Près des ramparts" is wonderfully light, helped by Prêtre's delicious accompaniment. Robert Merrill delivers, as he always seems to, in his lively and spirited "Votre toast."

The dark shades of act III are magnificently honored by Prêtre, but Vickers is the one being celebrated here, and his unmistakable voice here pours with the finest Gallic cantabile, as "Tu la verras!" proves. There's a special intensity to every phrase Vickers gives out; and when he crescendos into his full voice, as he does towards the end of act II, the effect is compelling. The final stretch of act IV is beautifully done by Vickers; we believe every word of his interactions with Bumbry, and we find his hushed delivery can be every bit as compelling as his voice at full tilt. Everywhere is proof that Vickers was a man who never compromised when it came to his singing.

Henig quotes John Steane (in *Singers of the Century*) atop his essay: "Radamès in the agony of choice and betrayal; Don José in his surrender and confession—these were passages into which Vickers put all the intensity of his being." Well put, indeed.