

Collections: Vocal

LUCREZIA BORI: A Tribute • Lucrezia Bori (sop); Various artists • IMMORTAL PERFORMANCES 1136-2, mono (2 CDs: 157:33)

PUCCINI *La rondine*: Act 2 • (with Mario Chamlee, ten). Live, St. Louis Opera, 10/8/1934.

PUCCINI *La bohème*: Act 4, final scene • (with Tito Schipa, ten; Carlo Sabajno, cond)

PUCCINI *La bohème*: Act 1, scene 3 (with Joseph Bentonelli ten; Otto Klemperer, cond) Live: Hollywood Bowl, Los Angeles, CA 6/6/1937

MASSENET *Manon*: 3, Scene 2 • (with Richard Crooks, ten; Léon Rothier, bs; Louis Hassemans, cond). Live: Metropolitan Opera, New York 3/29/1928

& Arias from *La bohème*, *Madama Butterfly*, *Louise*, *La fille du régiment*, *Pagliacci*, *L'enfant prodigue*, *Mignon*, *La rondine*.

Review by **Henry Fogel**

FANFARE November / December 2020

The Spanish soprano Lucrezia Bori (1887–1960) is an extremely interesting artist, in that she achieved stardom without a truly spectacular aspect to her singing. Her voice was apparently not large, her top was somewhat limited, and when you first hear it your reaction might very well be something along the lines of “well, that’s pretty.” The more one listens, the more one appreciates her greatness. This two-disc tribute affords that opportunity.

What we observe as we listen is a pure, bright lyric soprano voice that she used with great expressivity and musical imagination, and a technique that allowed her to maintain a consistency of quality at all dynamic levels. For example, in Mimì’s farewell aria in the third act of *La bohème* Bori spins two extraordinary *diminuendi*, making evident the character’s regret at having to say goodbye (which, of course, by the end of the act she reverses). Those are the kinds of moments that make the listener catch his breath. Her talent was perfectly suited

to opera's more fragile characters, and to that she added a wit that registered perfectly in comic roles. It is very unfortunate that although she was a very important artist at the Met and a favorite of Met audiences, for some reason she was not assigned many broadcasts, the result being that we do not have as many examples of her art as we should.

Throughout the fairly wide range of repertoire on this set, we are repeatedly impressed by Bori's ability to convey tenderness, fragility, as well as strength and even power, and to do it all through what is classically fine singing. Her intonation is flawless, her *legato* perfectly even, and her singing a consistent model of lyrical grace and elegance while never short-changing the dramatic moment.

The set begins with a live second act from Puccini's *La rondine*. The source of this has been questioned before, but Immortal Performances documents it clearly as being a St. Louis Opera broadcast from October 8, 1934. Her Ruggero is the fine American lyric tenor Mario Chamlee. Bori, like most singers, was more dramatically expressive when on stage, and this is a particularly vivid example of her art. One regrets that Magda's great aria is in the first act rather than the second, so we don't get to hear that. But what we do hear is a passionate and beautifully sung act of an opera that is rarely treated to this level of singing. Richard Caniell, the producer, has worked tirelessly to improve the flawed original sound, and he gives a brief example of his work by including a brief example of the bad mike placement with an overly prominent bassoon. This is not the first release of this *Rondine* act, but it is far superior to the earlier one with which I am familiar. This set does include, by the way, not the great aria "Che il bel sogno di Doretta," but does include the 1937 RCA recording she made of "Ore dolce e divine," which is very lovely.

The other big chunk here is the excerpt from the Metropolitan Opera Gala Farewell for Bori on March 29, 1936. Because NBC would not permit enough time for the entire concert to be broadcast, only the *Manon* scene and the speeches were aired. Richard Crooks is a very elegant Des Grieux, and Bori's *Manon* balances all of the elements of Massenet's rather complex character: delicacy, elegance, tenderness, and strength. This must have been an extraordinarily moving event for her, and her touching speech makes that clear, but her singing is flawless. Immortal Performances follows that with RCA recordings from 1937 that Bori made of three excerpts from *Manon*, which demonstrate that same balance of vocal, musical, and dramatic virtues. "Adieu, notre petite table" is particularly touching, with her characteristic attention to text and shading.

Another live broadcast included is the final scene from the first act of *La bohème* from a Hollywood Bowl concert of June 6, 1937. The tenor is Joseph Bentonelli (an American born Joseph Benton), who sings Rodolfo's aria very prosaically, followed by the completely involved, coquettish, and imaginative Bori in Mimi's aria. Caniell makes the point in his notes that Bentonelli must have been paying attention, because he is more attentive to details of shading in the duet, though his voice is still a generic one. Otto Klemperer, not a conductor we associate with Puccini, has a very good feel for the music. Bori's singing is like a master class in how to phrase Puccini, and how to make every single word mean something. The original recording has some static and compression problems, but Caniell has made it more than listenable. For those to whom this is important, I will note that the ending of the duet is transposed down a half-tone. The group of RCA recordings of arias and scenes, mostly made in the late 1920s, demonstrate Bori's gifts flawlessly. RCA recorded Bori with Tito Schipa in the final scene of *La bohème*. With typical corporate thinking, they chose not to pay for a baritone and second soprano to sing Marcello's and Musetta's lines, leaving gaping holes in the music. Caniell has edited that music in from RCA's complete recording of the opera, also conducted by Carlo Sabajno, and done so seamlessly. In 1928, if there were an artistic vision functioning at RCA, they might have recorded the complete opera with Bori and Schipa, but that didn't happen. This fragment is treasurable. The way Bori holds on to the next-to-last note of "Sono andate," as if she were trying to hold onto life itself, will break your heart. Schipa is wonderful in his brief turn here as Rodolfo, and all we can do is think about the missed opportunity.

The *Butterfly* aria is sung with a less dramatic voice than we have become used to, thanks to the likes of Renata Tebaldi. Bori is more in the Toti dal Monte tradition, and we remember that this is a fragile, and very young, Japanese girl. Every word, every phrase, is articulated with meaning. This is not sung to the gallery; it is sung to Suzuki, remonstrating her for her lack of faith.

All of the recordings have been carefully and correctly pitched, and cleaned up to the full extent possible. In the two arias from Donizetti's *La fille du régiment* Bori shows her spunky comedic sense and a fluid coloratura technique. (These are live performances for which the source is not clear). "Depuis le jour" from Charpentier's *Louise* has some lovely moments, but strikes me as something not as comfortable for Bori as most of the rest of the material here. On the other hand the aria from Debussy's *L'enfant prodigue* is absolutely masterful, and surprisingly successful is "Connais-tu le pays" from Thomas's *Mignon*, an aria usually sung by an alto. Nedda's aria from *Pagliacci*, usually a piece I can take or leave, is

absolutely riveting here, delivered with energy and élan perfectly depicting the free spirit that is Nedda.

The booklet is up to the usual high standards of Immortal Performances. William Russell, one of the company's regular contributors, provides a very knowledgeable and well-written tribute to, and analysis of, Bori's art, and Caniell provides insightful commentary as well and his helpful recording notes. The pictures that round out the booklet are one more attraction to an extremely satisfying packet.

Five stars: A wonderfully produced tribute to one of the Met's greatest stars

Review by Ken Meltzer

FANFARE November / December 2020

The adjective "beloved" is one liberally applied to operatic artists, especially those of the past. But perhaps no one so deserved that accolade as the Spanish soprano Lucrezia Bori (1887-1960). Bori made her Metropolitan Opera debut on June 9, 1910, not on the stage of the fabled New York opera house, but at the Théâtre du Chatelet in Paris, where the company was on tour. Bori, substituting for the indisposed Lina Cavalieri, sang the title role in Puccini's *Manon Lescaut*, alongside the Des Grieux of Enrico Caruso. Bori's official Met house debut took place on Opening Night, November 11, 1912. Once again, Bori sang Puccini's *Manon*, with Caruso as her Des Grieux. Over the next three years, Bori charmed Met audiences in a variety of roles, mostly of the lyric fach. In 1915, Bori experienced a crisis, nodules on the vocal chords, that necessitated surgery and a hiatus from the stage that lasted until 1921. On January 28 of that year, Bori made her triumphant return to the Met, as Mimì in Puccini's *La bohème*, joined by tenor Beniamino Gigli. For the ensuing 15 years, Bori was a mainstay at the Met, one of its most treasured performers. And as if that were not enough, after the Stock Market Crash in 1929, Lucrezia Bori led the effort to raise the necessary funds to keep the company in operation. Bori's emotional Met farewell took place on March 29, 1936 in a gala concert, a portion of which is included on a new Immortal Performances two-disc tribute to the soprano. All told, Bori's Met career encompassed more than 600 performances in 29 different roles. In 1935, Bori became the first performer elected to the Met's Board of Directors. And after her

retirement, Bori was elected Chair of the Metropolitan Opera Guild. No artist gave as much of herself to the Met as did Lucrezia Bori. To the extent one can be objective about voices, I think it's fair to say that Lucrezia Bori's soprano did not possess outstanding beauty, power, or range. But Bori used her relatively modest vocal endowment with such care, technical expertise, artistry, and humanity, she transcended whatever limits might have existed. In this way, Bori was very much in a league with another legendary artist, tenor Tito Schipa, who is also featured on this retrospective. And like Schipa, Lucrezia Bori is a singer worthy of the attention by anyone interested in the great singers from a bygone era.

The first disc opens with the complete Act II from Puccini's *La rondine*, broadcast on the radio in 1934. The location of the performance has been credited both to San Francisco and Chicago. Richard Caniell and William Russell explain in their liner notes that documentation clearly establishes the venue as the St. Louis Opera, a performance on October 8, 1934. Regardless of the location, it is an important document. Extended excerpts of Lucrezia Bori in live performance are all too rare. And the role of Magda was an important one for Bori. She performed it several times at the Met, and *La rondine* was the final complete staged opera Bori sang at the Met, on March 21, 1936. In the St. Louis performance, Bori is joined by tenor Mario Chamlee as her love interest Ruggero. Chamlee was a fine lyric tenor who performed with Bori at the Met on numerous occasions. There is a real chemistry between them in the *Rondine* broadcast. If Chamlee adopts a rather generic ardent delivery, albeit an attractive one, Bori's Magda is filled with all kinds of fetching nuances, all sung with the utmost refinement and beauty. That said, the surviving source for this broadcast is compromised by a constricted dynamic range, and faulty mike placement that leads to overloading any time the orchestra plays above a moderate dynamic level. And to top things off, in the closing measures, it sounds as if the mike was stuffed into the bell of the bassoon. Richard Caniell has done his best to tame the bassoon's dominance (illustrated by a comparison track following the broadcast). But even with Caniell's technical wizardry, this is a recording that requires some patience, and maybe even a bit of imagination. All things considered, though, I'm glad, for reasons I've already articulated, that IP chose to include the *Rondine* Act II broadcast (capped by host announcements). After the *Rondine* broadcast, we hear excerpts from another Puccini opera, and a Bori favorite, *La bohème*. First is Mimi's Act I aria, lovingly performed in a 1926 Victor disc, followed by an equally heartfelt 1926 commercial recording of the heroine's Act III farewell. The *Bohème* excerpts are capped by

one of the classics of the gramophone, 1925 RCA recordings of the opera's final scene, in which Bori is paired with tenor Tito Schipa. As I mentioned in my introduction, Bori and Schipa were kindred artists, both in terms of vocal endowment and interpretive genius. It is wonderful to hear their tender, natural and beautifully sung exchanges. The RCA recording did not include the contributions of the other Bohemians. For this release, IP supplies some of them, transplanted from the 1928 complete EMI La Scala recording. The combination of source materials is achieved in convincing fashion. Arias from Puccini's *Madama Butterfly*, Charpentier's *Louise*, Donizetti's *La fille du regiment*, Leoncavallo's *I Pagliacci*, Debussy's *L'enfant prodigue*, and Thomas's *Mignon*, some from commercial discs, and others from live performances, demonstrate Bori's versatility of repertoire, along with the unifying elements of her keen musicianship and sense of characterization. All the source materials are beautifully restored by IP.

Disc 2 opens with an excerpt from Bori's March 29, 1936 Met Gala Farewell. The evening included portions of several operas, featuring such artists as Lawrence Tibbett, Elizabeth Rethberg, Ezio Pinza, Kirsten Flagstad, Lauritz Melchior, Rosa Ponselle, and Giovanni Martinelli. But NBC only broadcast the final excerpt; Act III, sc. ii of Massenet's *Manon*, as well as the speeches following the performance. As much as one laments the absence of the star-studded material that preceded the *Manon*, the finale is an absolute gem. In addition to Bori's *Manon*, we hear one of the Met's finest lyric tenors of the time, Richard Crooks, as Des Grieux. Crooks, a marvelous stylist in French opera, offers a heartfelt and gloriously sung "Ah! fuyez, douce image!" Bori, entering to audience applause, is a superb *Manon*, expressing her anxiety over seeing Des Grieux once again, and then turning on the seductive charm that wins him over. Bori, ever the intelligent and insightful artist, decided to retire while still near the height of her powers. And here, she sounds every bit the young and passionate woman. French bass Léon Rothier was in his early 60s when he performed the Comte Des Grieux in this Gala. Nevertheless, Rothier sings with authority and a marvelous grasp of the French style, both in the sung music and spoken dialogue. Conductor Louis Hasselmans leads an energetic performance, and one that is ever attentive to Bori and her colleagues. In addition to George Hicks's broadcast commentary, IP includes all the speeches that followed the *Manon* performance, both those by several Met dignitaries, and Bori herself. These speeches last almost 25 minutes, and some might be tempted to argue they occupy too much of a set whose focus is a great singer and her artistry. I

would argue precisely the opposite (the two groups of speeches are separately tracked, and may be easily skipped over, should you choose). The Transatlantic English accents, complete with the rolled “r’s” are a nostalgic delight on their own. But more to the point, the speeches reveal the sincere affection and admiration everyone at the Met held for Lucrezia Bori. Likewise, Bori’s own speech, filled with humility, love for her colleagues and audience, and reverence for the Met, brought tears to this writer’s eyes. And I’ve heard this speech several times before! For the 1936 Bori Met Farewell has long circulated among collectors. Richard Caniell and IP have restored it in marvelous sound. 1937 Victor commercial recordings of excerpts from *Manon* follow, “Adieu notre petite table” and the Gavotte. Both are marvelously characterized, and find Bori in excellent voice. A 1937 Hollywood Bowl broadcast concert (with announcements) includes Rodolfo and Mimì’s arias, as well as the concluding duet from Act I of Puccini’s *La bohème*. Tenor Joseph Bentonelli is a bright-voiced and technically secure Rodolfo, who, following Bori’s lovely rendition of “Si. mi chiamano Mimì”, joins the soprano for a heartfelt rendition of “O soave fanciulla.” The conductor of the Los Angeles Philharmonic is none other than Otto Klemperer. If Klemperer was not known as a Puccini specialist, he was a highly experienced opera conductor, and he is a sympathetic partner in the *La bohème* excerpts. A 1937 excerpt from Act I of *La rondine* brings the recital to a charming close. Again, IP has done a wonderful job with the restorations of the various sources.

The accompanying booklet includes William Russell’s lively and informative liner notes, detailed commentary on the recordings by Richard Caniell, a plot synopsis for *La rondine*, Act II, and artist photos and bios. Once again, IP has given us a glorious tribute to an important singer, a tribute that not only casts an appreciative light upon her artistry, but also upon her colleagues and their contributions to a glorious time in operatic history. Recommended with the utmost enthusiasm.

5 Stars: Immortal Performances’ superb tribute to the beloved soprano Lucrezia Bori