

VERDI *Ernani* • Thomas Schippers, cond; Leontyne Price (*Elvira*); Franco Corelli (*Ernani*); Mario Sereni (*Carlo*); Cesare Siepi (*Silva*); et al; Chorus and Orchestra of the Metropolitan Opera, Live: New York, April 10, 1965

& Leontyne Price, opera excerpts, songs, and interview. Handel: **Giulio Cesare:** *Tu la mia stella sei. Se pietà di me non senti. Piangerò la sorte mia. Da tempeste il legno infranto.* Mozart: **Le nozze di Figaro:** *E Susanna non vien...Dove sono.* Verdi: **Ernani:** *Surta e la notte...Ernani! Ernani, involami.* Meyerbeer: **L'Africaine:** *Sur mes genoux.* Puccini: **La rondine:** *Chi il bel sogno di Doretta.* **Suor Angelica:** *Senza mamma.* **Tosca:** *Vissi d'arte.* Cilea: **Adriana Lecouvreur:** *Io son l'umile ancella.* Barber: **Anthony and Cleopatra:** *Give me my robe.* Strauss: **Die ägyptische Helena:** *Zweite Brautnacht!* **Die Liebe der Danae:** *Ein Schiff!* Barber: *Sleep Now. The Daisies. Nocturne. Nuvoletta.* • IMMORTAL PERFORMANCES IPCD 1123-3 (3 CDs 228:48)

Review by Ken Meltzer
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What a marvelous release, courtesy of Immortal Performances! It opens with the complete Metropolitan Opera April 10, 1965 broadcast of Verdi's *Ernani*. Although this is a performance long treasured by collectors, and previously issued by some companies specializing in live performances (I own releases on the Memories and MYTO labels), it does not appear to have ever been the subject of a *Fanfare* review. It is a shining example of the kind of legendary cast the Met could assemble, week in and week out, during the 1960s. And every member of that cast is in superb form. I'll cover them in order of vocal appearance. The *Ernani*, tenor Franco Corelli, is in glorious voice, and it was a voice like no other—rich, vibrant, and glowing, with generous, brilliant high notes, and the ability to execute breathtaking, extended diminuendos. On some occasions, Corelli, a harshly self-critical artist who suffered from bouts with nerves, could take some time during a performance to warm up. Not in this *Ernani* broadcast. Verdi gives the lead tenor his only grand solo *scena* at the very outset. Corelli seizes the moment, and delivers a bravura performance, earning a huge ovation. The Italian tenor sings gorgeously throughout the remainder of the broadcast. *Ernani* is a rather two-dimensional character, and I don't think that Corelli finds any additional hidden depths or subtleties. But Corelli is

totally committed throughout, and convincingly portrays Ernani's desperate plight. The concluding death scene is majestically delivered. "Ernani, involami" was long a trademark aria for the glorious American soprano Leontyne Price. It is music tailor-made for her extraordinary gifts. Price's gleaming voice, generous and exquisite phrasing, radiant, effortlessly-produced high notes, and facility with coloratura (trill, included) are all showcased in Elvira's entrance scene. Like Corelli, Price is wonderful both vocally and dramatically throughout the afternoon (there always seemed to be a special chemistry when these two giants appeared together onstage). While baritone Mario Sereni had a long and successful career, he never achieved the superstar status of Corelli and Price (and for that matter, Siepi). But Sereni was a fine singer, one who had the kind of warm, attractive, and vibrant timbre so appropriate for Verdi. Sereni also well understood how to phrase Verdi's long and majestic vocal lines with a flexibility of pulse and dynamics. Perhaps Sereni did not have a voice with the heft of a Leonard Warren, Cornell MacNeil, or Robert Merrill. But given that we hear this performance from the perspective of a broadcast listener, courtesy of microphones positioned near the singers, Sereni sounds potent enough. In his great Act III scene, Sereni does not interpolate the stratospheric high notes sung by Warren and MacNeil in their Met *Ernani* broadcasts (1956, and 1962, respectively). But what Sereni does sing is delivered with a beautiful voice, style, and conviction. Basso Cesare Siepi rounds out the cast of principals in the role of Silva. Like, Corelli, Siepi was a strikingly handsome man, someone who had tremendous charisma both in appearance and from a vocal perspective. Siepi is in his typical marvelous form in this broadcast. The voice is rich, potent, and like his colleagues, Siepi could spin a Verdi phrase with the best. The conductor is Thomas Schippers, a brilliant talent whose death at the age of 47 was a huge loss to the music world, perhaps especially to opera. Thanks to Schippers' inspired direction, this *Ernani* crackles with excitement and momentum from start to finish. Within the taut and propulsive framework, Schippers still gives his vocalists ample breathing room to shape phrases in an individual, compelling manner. There are the expected stage cuts of the period, which is a shame, because with this cast, you want to hear every single note! In short, this is one of those Saturday afternoons at the Old Met when everything was burning on all

cylinders. Immortal Performance presents this unforgettable event in the finest sound I've heard to date. The sonics are rich and detailed, with an admirable dynamic range, and a minimum of overload in loud/high passages. The voices emerge with remarkable presence and impact. The inclusion of host Milton Cross's commentary enhances the atmosphere and sense of occasion. I can't imagine any fan of great Verdi performances not wanting this *Ernani*. The Immortal Performances restoration is the one to own, and alone justifies acquiring this set.

But that is only the (literal) half of it! The remainder of the 3-CD set includes four live performances by Leontyne Price, plus an interview. These excerpts, spanning the years 1953-68, are all in fine sound, and capture the great American diva at the height of her powers. First are excerpts from Handel's *Giulio Cesare*, in an American Opera Society performance from October 10, 1958. Price, in youthful, elegant, and shimmering voice, sings Handel's music with beauty and distinction. She was, after all, a remarkably versatile artist. CD 2 concludes with an extended interview with Bill Wells, from an April 6, 1960 "Opera for You" radio broadcast. It's fascinating to hear Price, at the outset of her emergence into superstardom, speak about her training, accomplishments to date, and plans for the future. The Leontyne Price of later years would adopt more of a classic diva affect, which I found no less endearing. But in this interview, Price is down-to-earth and self-effacing. It's a wonderful souvenir. A February 15, 1968 Paris Concert follows, with Price performing music by Mozart, Verdi, Meyerbeer, Puccini, Cilea, and Samuel Barber. The program comprises one blockbuster aria after another, and Price is in stunning form. If you can listen to the magical, gossamer conclusions of "Chi il bel sogno di Doretta" from *La rondine*, or "Io son l'umile ancella" from *Adriana Lecouvreur* and not be completely overwhelmed, you have more resistance than I! Although Price did not perform a great deal of Richard Strauss, her rich voice and soaring, shimmering upper register were great assets in the German composer's music. Excerpts from *Die ägyptische Helena* and *Die Liebe der Danae*, performed in England on July 26, 1959 find Price in thrilling, uninhibited, and gorgeous voice. The set concludes with a recital of songs by Samuel Barber on October 30, 1953, with the composer at the piano. Price and Barber were frequent artistic collaborators, and the four songs included here

are a marvelous souvenir of that relationship. The recorded sound on the Barber recital is the least impressive of the excerpt material, but still more than acceptable for its vintage. The remaining excerpts are captured in first-rate sonics.

The booklet includes informative essays by William Russell on the performances, and on Verdi's *Ernani*, reflections on same by Richard Caniell, a detailed plot synopsis, artist bios, and Caniell's Recording Notes. A unique, irreplaceable performance of Verdi's *Ernani*, and precious documents of the artistry of one of America's greatest and most treasured singers, all captured in fine sound. Highest Recommendation.

5 Stars: A Superstar Met *Ernani*, and Leontyne Price at Her Best.

Review by Henry Fogel

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When some of us speak of the good old days and young opera lovers are tempted to roll their eyes, we are speaking of an era when the Metropolitan Opera could present Verdi's *Ernani* in two different seasons, offering Carlo Bergonzi in the title role for the first run and Franco Corelli for the next. Today one would kill to have a single Verdi tenor of their caliber. (Moreover, just a few years later the Met added Domingo and Pavarotti to the list, while in 1956 they staged *Ernani* with Mario del Monaco.) Bergonzi sang it in 1962, and RCA made a fine studio recording using the Met cast. Then, in the 1964–65 season the Met revived the opera with much of the same cast and conductor, but replacing Bergonzi with Corelli. This newly reissued 1965 broadcast has circulated on a number of labels such as Myto but never with the superb sound quality that Richard Caniell of Immortal Performances has given it.

I couldn't choose between Bergonzi and Corelli if forced to. It is true that Bergonzi sings with more elegance and grace, and equally true that Corelli had one of the most thrilling voices I have

encountered in a lifetime of listening. I was fortunate enough to have experienced a performance of each of those *Ernani* runs, and even at the time I thought, "This must be a golden age for Verdi." In addition to a thrilling natural sound, Corelli displays a smooth, evenly produced *legato* and a sensitivity to dynamic shading that might surprise his detractors. He inflects the music with attention to the text and to the shape of Verdi's phrases. And when he does let loose, he delivers one of the grandest sounds ever to originate from a human throat. Is there some of his characteristic scooping? Yes. But it is quite controlled here, and it simply cannot detract from the vocal grandeur he displays.

Leontyne Price owned much of the Verdi repertoire in the post-Zinka Milanov era at the Met, and as Elvira, her singing here will demonstrate to anyone why that was so. The voice has a natural glow, or vibrancy, that encompasses opulent high notes and manages the demands Verdi makes in terms of rapid passagework far better than Milanov ever did. William Russell, in his superb essay in the accompanying booklet, points out that Price's voice had darkened a bit since the 1962 performances and RCA's recording; the richness of tone that he notes is to the music's benefit. Price and Corelli, who sang together many times at the Met and elsewhere, provide the kind of goosebumps that define thrilling operatic performances.

Mario Sereni would today be a star baritone, but his competition at the time included Leonard Warren, Robert Merrill, Cornell MacNeil, and Ettore Bastianini. While Sereni had an evenly produced and powerful tone, the voice lacked the distinctiveness of color and the glamour of those other singers; thus he was taken for granted during his 27 Met seasons. Listening to him now, it is plain that we should have valued Sereni more. As Don Carlo he does not sound out of place in this company, holding his own in the many ensembles Verdi wrote into the opera and providing the appropriate lead in the "O sommo Carlo" ensemble that concludes the third act.

Finally, in Cesare Siepi we have one of the premier basses of his generation. He sang leading roles at the Met from 1950 to 1974, and the reasons for his success are evident here. Smooth vocal production, convincing vocal acting, and a dark, powerful tone are all

combined with scrupulous musicianship (this last quality made Siepi one of the most important Don Giovannis after Ezio Pinza).

The small roles are all done very well by standard Met comprimarios, and one must pause to take note of the exemplary conducting of Thomas Schippers. His early death from cancer in 1977 at the age of 47 robbed us of an American conductor who had, in my view, the potential to become one of America's major conducting talents. His leadership of the Cincinnati Symphony Orchestra from 1970 until his death was beginning to propel the orchestra to a new level of excellence and visibility, and his work at the Met was expanding as well. Schippers balances all of the contrasting elements in Verdi's score—long-breathed phrases, incisive rhythms, quick tempo shifts—and does it with energy and a fine ear for orchestral color. There are a few moments, as happens in any live performance, of untidy ensemble, but Schippers quickly gets everything back together. His reading sings and soars with urgency and vitality.

The bonus material gives us a wonderful picture of the scope of Leontyne Price's extraordinary vocal and musical gifts, consisting of about an hour and a half's worth. It begins with a scene from an American Opera Society 1958 performance of Handel's *Giulio Cesare*, which shows that Price could have made more of her career in Baroque repertoire had she chosen to. There is also a lively interview of the singer with Bill Wells from 1960. Then comes a 1968 Paris recital, conducted by Nicolas Rizchin, that reminds us of Price's skill in Mozart with a stunningly lovely and graceful "Dove sono" from *Le nozze di Figaro*, along with a soaring performance of "Sur mes genoux" from Meyerbeer's *L'Africaine*, Elvira's big *Ernani* scene, three gloriously sung Puccini arias, the first-act aria from *Adriana Lecouvreur*, and finally "Give me my robe" from Barber's *Antony and Cleopatra*, a role she sang in the world premiere. As if that weren't enough, we have excerpts from Richard Strauss's *Die Ägyptische Helene* and *Die Liebe der Danae* from a BBC all-Strauss concert in 1959, and captivating performances of four songs by Samuel Barber from 1953 with the composer at the piano. The bonus material is a treasure in itself, a reminder of just how great a singer and artist this national treasure was.

The sonic presentation of everything is up to Immortal Performances' usual very high standards, carefully pitched and reproduced with clarity. The generous booklet, which is much more than is given by any other label specializing in historic live opera performances, is filled with informative and well-written information along with great historic photos. (In fact, the booklets for Immortal Performances are generally superior to those of the commercial companies too). Milton Cross's radio announcements bring back the times when we were sitting in our homes listening to the Met's Saturday afternoon broadcasts (if you want to skip the commentary, it is separately tracked).

In sum, here is a thrilling almost four hours of listening pleasure.

5 stars: A thrilling *Ernani* with Price and Corelli, and much more