

VERDI *Otello* • Fausto Cleva, cond; Mario del Monaco (*Otello*); Renata Tebaldi (*Desdemona*); Leonard Warren (*Iago*); Metropolitan Op Ch & O • IMMORTAL PERFORMANCES 1161-2, mono (2 CDs: 2:21:05) Live: Metropolitan Opera, New York 12/20/1958

Henry Fogel
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A legendary earlier performance of Verdi's great opera from the Met in 1958 has circulated for years on many labels. That performance was from the final portion of the 1957–58 season, specifically March 8, 1958. The Met issued it on its own LP label for fundraising purposes, and many labels reissued it (Pristine's is the best-sounding version). Most of the cast is identical to this one from nine months later (though the first half of the next season), with one major difference. In that performance Victoria de los Angeles sang *Desdemona*, and in this one the role is taken by Renata Tebaldi.

I mean no disrespect to de los Angeles, whose *Desdemona* is beautifully sung and delicately portrayed. Her performance certainly deserved the exposure it got, but I will never understand why it served to keep this one from the marketplace, considering that Tebaldi is as close as one can get to being the quintessential *Desdemona*, vocally, dramatically, and stylistically. Perhaps one reason for the scarcity of this performance was that del Monaco and Tebaldi recorded the opera twice for Decca. Both times, however, they were done in by a mediocre *Iago*. It is this triumvirate of del Monaco, Tebaldi, and Leonard Warren that "owned" the score for a few seasons at the Met, and Immortal Performances' superb restoration makes clear why.

The first performance of *Otello* in the 1958–59 season was given on November 15. In the *New York Times* Harold C. Schonberg, who could be a very picky critic, wrote the following: "*Otello*, given yesterday afternoon at the Metropolitan Opera, is Verdi at his best. At this occasion it was also the Metropolitan Opera at its best. The cast did not contain a single weak member, and it was one of those performances animated by a mysterious surge of electricity that seemed to communicate itself to all the members. Even the orchestra musicians, normally a pretty blasé group of citizens, applauded and cheered the singers after each act." Schonberg ended his review with this: "If future *Otellos* this season come up to this one, New Yorkers should break down the doors to get in." This broadcast was the second performance of the season, and everything Schonberg wrote applies here too.

There are many live *Otello* broadcasts in circulation featuring del Monaco in the title role. I own 14 and make no claim that this is all of them. There are two others with the same three principals: a 1954 La Scala performance with Antonino Votto conducting (on the Myto label) and a 1955 Met performance conducted by Fritz Stiedry (released by Walhall). The Scala

performance is quite good, but it is limited by Votto's unimaginative conducting and by the fact that the three principals were singing the opera together for the first time, as yet to develop the chemistry that marks the 1958 broadcast. The 1955 Met performance is leadenly conducted by Stiedry (he did better in a 1952 broadcast with Ramón Vinay). Fausto Cleva, while lacking the distinctive interpretive profile of Toscanini, Furtwängler, or Levine, here leads an incisive and sensitive performance that shows a deep feeling for the Verdi idiom. The orchestral playing is well above the norm for the Met at this period.

Everyone acknowledges the power and brilliance of del Monaco's singing, but he is frequently accused of singing everything at *forte* and louder. Later in his career, and on some of his commercial recordings, that was a justifiable criticism. But in his prime the tenor was, in fact, a sensitive musician who could sing with subtle shadings. The power required by Otello is certainly present. His "Esultate" is arresting in its force, and his interruption of the fight scene later in the first act, "Abbasso le spade" (Put down your swords), is exactly what was needed to put a complete halt to the tumult. What is likely to surprise many, however, is the gentle singing he displays in the love duet that ends the act. At the words "un bacio" del Monaco's tone is genuinely tender, and while he cannot manage a *pianissimo* on the final GI, neither does he blast it out. In the act III monologue "Dio mi potevi," his soft singing at "L'anima acqueto" is truly beautiful and movingly portrays Otello's inner suffering. This is as complete a performance of the role as I have ever experienced.

The role of Desdemona suits Tebaldi perfectly, both musically and dramatically. There is a refinement and delicacy to her singing, in addition to her unique tonal beauty. The glow in her voice and the tonal richness of her soft singing at points like "Amen, risponda" in the love duet make for moments that remain long in one's memory. In the big act III confrontation scene with Otello, Tebaldi encompasses the full range of Desdemona's emotions. She will break your heart when she sings "guarda le prime lagrime," and later, at her final protestation of innocence ("E son io l'innocente cagion di tanto pianto!") you wonder how it is possible that Otello doesn't believe her. The ravishing beauty of tone produced in the Willow Song and Ave Maria can only be described as exquisite. Finally, Tebaldi's portrayal of panic as Otello is about to murder her is chilling.

One of the unfortunate realities of making records through the 1980s was the exclusive contract. Record company executives saw music much more as a business than as art. As a result it was difficult to assemble ideal casts in the recording studio, because singers were exclusively bound to their labels, who often refused to release them. When Decca made its first *Otello* with del Monaco and Tebaldi in 1953, they couldn't turn to Warren because he was exclusively signed with RCA, the other leading Iago, Tito Gobbi, to EMI. Even so, there were certainly better choices than the utterly routine Aldo Protti on whom they settled. There were also better conductors available than Alberto Erede. In 1962 Decca redid the opera with Herbert von Karajan conducting, and the plan was to engage

Ettore Bastianini as Iago, but according to producer John Culshaw, the baritone never learned the role sufficiently well, and so it was Protti all over again.

Warren never made a commercial recording of one of his greatest roles. Of the six broadcasts with the great American baritone that I am familiar with, this one from 1958 is the finest. Part of that may be the result of what Schonberg referred to as the “mysterious surge of electricity” everyone felt onstage. Warren’s voice had the requisite power for Iago’s big moments, but he was also a fine musician who was a master of vocal shading and color.

“Era la notte” is sung in a dynamic range entirely between *pianissimo* and *mezzo-forte* that makes it creepily insinuating. The final phrases of that little arioso are remarkable in their quiet intensity. His singing of the “Credo” is chilling in the specificity of Warren’s depiction of pure evil. Just listen to the hollowness of tone as he utters “La morte è nulla” before opening up the voice for the aria’s commanding conclusion. It is masterful.

What may further surprise anyone who didn’t grow up with these artists is the degree of subtlety in their interactions. The pivotal act II scenes between Iago and Otello show the result of both artists’ experience with their roles and, by 1958, with each other. They inflect their exchanges to give great import to the meaning of the text, creating a feeling of spontaneity and dramatic intensity.

For *Otello* to totally work, even the smaller roles must be sung at least adequately, because every phrase of Verdi’s score is important. Happily, Paul Franke’s Cassio, Martha Lipton’s Emilia, Charles Anthony’s Roderigo, and Nicola Moscona’s Lodovico are all done about as well as I’ve ever heard.

Immortal Performances’ transfer is vastly superior to the YouTube version, and I am not aware of any other alternative. Richard Caniell’s source is a private off-the-air recording, and it is in good monaural broadcast sound from the 1950s. As usual, the recording is supplemented by a lavish 40-page booklet that includes an insightful essay about the performance and a second essay about the opera, both by William Russell. There is also a detailed synopsis and recording notes by Caniell, bios of the artists, and some wonderful historical photographs. The atmosphere of listening to a Saturday Met broadcast is enhanced by the inclusion of Milton Cross’ commentary, which is tracked separately if you want to skip it.

I recall attending at least two performances of *Otello* in the 1958–59 season as a standee, and I have been waiting for over 60 years for a good-sounding release of this broadcast. Now it has finally arrived. I find it very difficult to imagine opera lovers for

whom *Otello* is an important work not wanting to add this set to their library. It is a recording shattering in its musical and dramatic impact.

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Ken Meltzer

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From Immortal Performances (IP), the second of two performances of Verdi's *Otello* that were broadcast from the stage of the Metropolitan Opera in 1958. Both broadcasts (March 8 and December 20) are conducted by Fausto Cleva, and star the *Otello* of tenor Mario Del Monaco and *Iago* of baritone Leonard Warren. Victoria de los Angeles is the *Desdemona* in the March broadcast, while Renata Tebaldi assumes the role of the tragic heroine in the December performance. In his extensive, passionate, informative, and thought-provoking liner notes for the IP release, William Russell states: "In my opinion, this (December)1958 broadcast may be the last truly great performance of *Otello* from the Met." Without unduly extending the debate, I'd note that on December 28, 1958, the identical cast performed *Otello* at the Met. And a visit to the Metropolitan archives will stir the memories of many *Fanfare* readers who attended subsequent performances conducted by Georg Solti, Karl Böhm, Zubin Mehta, James Levine, and Carlos Kleiber, starring the *Otellos* of James McCracken, Jon Vickers, and Placido Domingo, with Renata Tebaldi, Montserrat Caballé, Kiri te Kanawa, and Renata Scotto as *Desdemona*, and Robert Merrill, Tito Gobbi, Gabriel Bacquier, and Sherrill Milnes performing the role of *Iago*. But there is no question that the December 20, 1958 Met *Otello* is a great performance, and an historic one for many reasons. The December 28, 1958 *Otello* (not broadcast) was Del Monaco's final Met appearance in the title role (on January 3, 1959, Del Monaco sang his last Met performance, as Canio in *I pagliacci*). And so, the December 20 broadcast is the last recorded document of Del Monaco's Met performances in his greatest role. Mario Del Monaco sang his first Met *Otello* on February 15, 1952. Cecil Smith, writing for *Musical America*, praised Del Monaco's vocal power and stamina, but added: "Many moments in his singing, however, were merely crude and others seemed thoughtless, as though he had not taken time to discover the musical inflections implied by the score and the drama. When he turned his attention to expressive coloration he employed it very effectively, but too often he was content to plough through considerable passages with rather undistinguished loud singing." By the time of a February 27, 1958 Met *Otello*, Ronald Eyer was able to report for *Musical America*: "Mario Del Monaco has grown astonishingly in the role of the Moor. From the moment of his appallingly difficult 'cold' entrance on the "Esultate!" with its high A, he is the alternately regal, brooding, tender, sickly jealous, ferocious Moor of Shakespeare's creation. And he has brought

an added dignity to his performance—a restraint in the frenetic moments and a vocal refinement and nuance which are highly commendable.” The trajectory of these reviews accords with my own exploration of Del Monaco’s *Otello*. In addition to the 1954 and 1961 Decca studio recordings, I have heard the following Del Monaco live performances of *Otello*:

Teatro Colon, Buenos Aires, July 21, 1950: Antonio Votto, cond., Delia Rigal (*Desdemona*), Carlos Guichandut (*Iago*). MYTO (Del Monaco’s debut in the role)

Mexico City, June 20, 1950: Oliviero de Fabritiis, cond., Clara Petrella (*Desdemona*), Giuseppe Taddei (*Iago*). Private Issue

La Scala, Milan, January 7, 1954: Antonio Votto, cond., Renata Tebaldi (*Desdemona*), Leonard Warren (*Iago*). MYTO

Torino, September 6, 1954: Tullio Serafin, cond., Onelia Fineschi (*Desdemona*), Renato Capecchi (*Iago*). MYTO

Metropolitan Opera, NY, March 12, 1955: Fritz Stiedry, cond., Tebaldi (*Desdemona*), Warren (*Iago*). Walhall

Metropolitan Opera, NY, March 8, 1958: Fausto Cleva, cond., Victoria de los Angeles (*Desdemona*), Warren (*Iago*). MYTO

Metropolitan Opera, NY, December 20, 1958: Cleva, cond., Tebaldi (*Desdemona*), Warren (*Iago*). Private Issue

Milan, 1958: Serafin, cond., Rosanna Carteri (*Desdemona*), Capecchi (*Iago*). Gala

Tokyo, April 20, 1959: Alberto Erede, cond., Gabriella Tucci (*Desdemona*), Tito Gobbi (*Iago*). Opera d’Oro

Teatro dell’Opera di Roma, Rome, December 26, 1960: Franco Capuana, cond., Floriana Cavalli (*Desdemona*), Gobbi (*Iago*). MYTO

Royal Opera House, Covent Garden, London, June 30, 1962: Raina Kabaivanska (*Desdemona*), Gobbi (*Iago*). Pantheon

Dallas Civic Opera, Dallas, November 30, 1962: Nicola Rescigno, cond., Ilva Ligabue (*Desdemona*), Ramón Vinay (*Iago*). Living Stage

I’ve also heard a 2-disc Bongiovanni release, with excerpts of Del Monaco singing *Otello* in Cremona (February 27, 1971), Mantova (January 21, 1971), and Budapest (April 1, 1971). These demonstrate that even toward the close of his career, Del Monaco’s *Otello* was a force to be reckoned with.

It is clear from Del Monaco's very first *Otello* that his vocal gifts surpassed almost any *Otello* who preceded or followed him. Del Monaco's rich middle register ascended with ease to upper notes remarkable for their power, and laser intensity and focus. In a role viewed by many as the most punishing in the entire Italian repertoire, Del Monaco was able to maintain his full vocal resources from the punishing "Esultate!" entrance, all the way to the heartbreaking final death scene. In many ways, Mario Del Monaco's voice comes closest to matching the individual qualities and splendor of Verdi's very first *Otello*, Francesco Tamagno (while Tamagno made his recordings of excerpts from *Otello* after his retirement from the stage, and while in precarious health, the authority of his vocalism and dramatic commitment shine through). But Del Monaco's early attempts at *Otello*, for all their vocal magnificence, hardly do justice to the subtleties of Verdi's score. As I wrote for another publication when reviewing the 1950 Buenos Aires *Otello*: "it also soon becomes clear that Del Monaco is intent upon playing to the gallery by repeatedly straying from Verdi's prescribed rhythms and pitches, as well as the expressive and dynamic markings. Occasionally, as in the Act I love duet, Del Monaco offers some attempt at dynamic shading. But for the most part, Del Monaco's approach in this Buenos Aires *Otello* is unremittingly forceful. That the performance is still a qualified success is testament to Del Monaco's amazing vocal gifts and unflagging dramatic intensity. I doubt you will ever hear greater vocal gifts applied to the role of *Otello*. But more subtlety can yield so much greater musical and dramatic satisfaction, as del Monaco himself would soon demonstrate." And throughout the 1950s, Del Monaco applied himself with the utmost devotion to making his interpretation worthy of Verdi's, Boito's and Shakespeare's conception. Over time, Del Monaco's *Otello* assumed an arresting three-dimensional quality. Del Monaco achieved this by a willingness to explore a variety of dynamics and vocal colors, and to wed them to a pointed, meaningful articulation of the text. During his prime, all of this transpired without any loss of vocal beauty or authority (from the early 1960s on, Del Monaco's voice lost some of its warmth and beauty in the middle register). At its zenith, Del Monaco's *Otello* was not just a display of brilliant vocalism, it was masterful operatic acting.

And that zenith is precisely what we encounter in the two 1958 Met broadcasts. Both are essential to any *Otello* collection, but my preference is for the December 20 performance. I would certainly not want to be without Victoria de los Angeles's radiant Desdemona. But as I will discuss, Tebaldi's performance is equally splendid. And Del Monaco is in marginally better voice for the latter performance. Indeed, there is not a blemish on his part to be found. The "Esultate!" rings out with overwhelming confidence and power. Any time vocal forcefulness is required, Del Monaco supplies it in an abundance you are unlikely to hear from any other *Otello* (again, Tamagno excepted). But alongside the clarion tones are moments of aching tenderness, as in the Act I love duet, and the final "Niun mi tema". And Del Monaco shapes the great Act III soliloquy "Dio! mi potevi scagliar" with the utmost attention and care, masterfully depicting *Otello*'s transition from self-pity to vengeful rage. There have been many great *Otellos*. But this is one of the performances to make a very strong case that among tenors whose complete

interpretations are preserved on recordings, no one brought a greater and more impressive array of gifts to Verdi's *Otello* than did Mario Del Monaco.

The remaining principals are on an equally exalted plane. Renata Tebaldi is in her glorious prime as Desdemona. Throughout her career, Tebaldi possessed one of the most beautiful soprano voices. Tebaldi's floating pianissimos in the Act I love duet and the final act's "Ave Maria" would melt a stone (if not, in this tragedy, Otello's heart). But Tebaldi, a marvelous actress, could also summon impressive vocal reserves, as in the third act confrontation with Otello. At a later stage of her career, Tebaldi's upper register became more problematic. But not on this occasion. Both Tebaldi's radiant vocalism and complete involvement in the role are never in doubt. There was always a wonderful chemistry between Tebaldi and Del Monaco that is abundantly evident in this performance. Leonard Warren, also in superb voice (including a unison high A with Del Monaco at the conclusion of the Act II duet, "Si, pel ciel"), is a first-rate Iago. In addition to his rich and secure vocalism, Warren brings a lightness of touch that, while so essential to a depiction of the nefarious Iago, was not always a part of the great American baritone's arsenal. Warren is absolutely convincing in his portrayal of a scheming villain who is able to convince others of his generosity and sincerity. All of the secondary roles are sung and acted with distinction. The excellent supporting cast includes Martha Lipton's Emilia, Paul Franke's Cassio, and Nicola Moscona's Lodovico. Conductor Fausto Cleva is an experienced, sure, and authoritative presence. The performance has admirable precision, momentum, and, where needed, repose and flexibility. Both William Russell and producer Richard Caniell (the latter, in his Recording Notes) are highly complementary of Cleva's pacing of the great Act III concertato that precedes Otello's outburst and collapse. I agree that Cleva leads this episode in a highly satisfying manner. If Cleva lacks the final degree of restless tension and power conductors such as Ettore Panizza, Arturo Toscanini, Wilhelm Furtwängler, and Carlos Kleiber have found in the score, his contribution is quite fine, and worthy of this special occasion.

The recorded sound is excellent, with admirable dynamic range, definition, and a fine representation of both vocal and instrumental timbres. If not quite the equal of studio recordings of the time, it is a realistic and compelling document of a broadcast of its time. A generous portion of Milton Cross's radio commentary is included. In addition to Russell and Caniell's essays, there is a full plot synopsis, and artist bios and photos. This is most certainly one of the great performances of *Otello*, deserving of a place in any opera collection. Recommended with the greatest enthusiasm.

5 Stars: One of Mario Del Monaco's greatest performances of Verdi's *Otello*, preserved in excellent sound