

VERDI *Simon Boccanegra* • Ettore Panizza, cond, Lawrence Tibbett (Boccanegra); Elisabeth Rethberg (Amelia); Giovanni Martinelli (Gabriele); Ezio Pinza (Fiesco); Alfredo Gandolfi (Paolo). Live: Metropolitan Opera, New York 2/16/1935

VERDI *Rigoletto* • Ettore Panizza, cond; Lawrence Tibbett (Rigoletto); Lily Pons (Gilda); Helen Olheim (Maddalena); Frederick Jagel (Duke of Mantua); Virgilio Lazzari (Sparafucile); Live: Metropolitan Opera, New York 12/28/1935

& Giovanni Martinelli: British Institute of Recorded Sound Lecture (London, 5/1962). VERDI *Falstaff: È sogno, o realtà?* (Lawrence Tibbett, unidentified conductor and O, Packard Hour, 2/20/1935). PUCCINI *Il tabarro: Scorri, fiume eterno* (Lawrence Tibbett, unidentified conductor and O, Packard Hour, 10/30/1934). DEEMS TAYLOR Peter Ibbetson: Act I excerpt (Lawrence Tibbett, Tulio Serafin, Metropolitan Op O, 3/17/1934)

IMMORTAL PERFORMANCES 1114-4 (4 CDs 289:03)

By Ken Meltzer

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In a new release (four discs, priced as three), Richard Caniell and Immortal Performances transport us back eight decades, to a pair of 1935 broadcasts of Verdi operas, both starring the legendary American baritone Lawrence Tibbett. First is a December 28, 1935 broadcast of *Simon Boccanegra*. Immortal Performances previously issued the famous January 21, 1939 broadcast, featuring the same principals, with the exception of the young Leonard Warren (instead of Alfredo Gandolfi) as Paolo. IP originally issued the 1939 broadcast in 2013 (IPCD 1031-2), supplemented by an improved restoration in 2016. I reviewed the latter for the March / April 2017 issue of *Fanfare* (40:4): "This is one of the greatest Verdi performances documented on recordings. The stellar cast includes two artists whose vocalism and interpretations have never been equaled (Lawrence Tibbett in the title role, and Ezio Pinza as Fiesco). The other two principals, Elisabeth Rethberg (Amelia) and Giovanni Martinelli (Gabriele), while not quite in the vocal primes of Tibbett and Pinza, sing magnificently, with marvelous dramatic commitment and an unerring sense of Verdi style. The young Leonard Warren, a future great Boccanegra in his own right, makes an impressive

broadcast debut in the smaller, but dramatically important role of Paolo. It's also gratifying to encounter a group of singers who uniformly grasp that clear, idiomatic diction is not just important from a textual perspective, but in launching and maintaining the musical line as well. At the helm of this stellar cast is conductor Ettore Panizza, leading a performance that crackles with tension from start to finish, but never at the expense of the beauty of the music, or the subtle depiction of the personal conflicts at the heart of this great drama. Panizza's Verdi conducting here (and in other Met broadcasts) is every bit the equal of Tibbett and Pinza's exalted achievements."

The 1935 broadcast presents the same kinds of strengths, but with the enhancement of all of the principals (most strikingly in the cases of Rethberg and Martinelli) in fresher and more youthful voice. As I mentioned, the Paolo in the 1935 broadcast is the Italian baritone Alfredo Gandolfi, instead of Warren in the 1939 performance. As Gandolfi sang mostly  *comprimario*  roles at the Met, one might assume he would not be competitive with Warren, one of the greatest of all Verdi baritones. But Gandolfi was a highly accomplished singer in his own right, and one who also performed lead roles (he was Amfortas in the Italian premiere of Wagner's *Parsifal*, and Scarpia alongside Claudia Muzio's *Tosca* and Dino Borgioli's Cavaradossi in the 1932 opening of San Francisco's War Memorial Opera House). And in the 1935 *Boccanegra*, Gandolfi not only sings with a rich and powerful Italianate tone, he is hair-raising in his depiction of Paolo's anguished, terrified state after Boccanegra discovers his treachery. And if anything, the 1935 *Boccanegra* has an even greater overall intensity than its 1939 successor. Indeed, there is a kind of life-or-death atmosphere throughout that even the great 1939 performance does not equal. Of course, the singers deserve great credit for this, but Panizza, too, outdoes himself in a performance that manages to convey a sense of abandon, but always in the context of superb, incisive execution.

If the 1935 broadcast were in sound equal to, or even reasonably comparable, to the 1939, I believe we would have not only a clear first choice between the two, but among all non-commercial recordings of the work. I'm sure you can guess what is coming next. The source for this broadcast recording is from a private recording Tibbett commissioned from a New York company. According to Richard Caniell's Recording Notes, Tibbett's children dripped molasses on some of the transcription discs (I'm

reminded of my parents' admonition, "We can't have nice things in this house!"). In addition, Tibbett played and replayed several of his favorite broadcast passages, thereby wearing down the grooves. At the conclusion of disc 1, Caniell includes several brief passages that illustrate the challenges posed by the source material. Caniell addressed the problems by substituting portions of the 1939 broadcast for the unlistenable sections of the 1935 (his Recording Notes offer painstaking detail on how the replacements break down). The greatest number of substitutions occur in the Prologue, with the procedure applied much more infrequently from that point on. Caniell does his usual impressive job of dovetailing the various source materials into each other in unobtrusive fashion (the same holds true for the *Rigoletto*, reviewed below). And Caniell has also made dramatic improvements to the sound I've heard on previous issues. Comparing, for example, the 1935 Council Chamber Scene, included as an appendix to MYTO's release of the complete 1939 broadcast (2CD 981.H006) to Caniell's new restoration, the latter offers dramatically greater presence and color, especially in the voices.

Yes, surface noise and some fragmentation in louder passages remain. It is true that the sound does not begin to approach studio recordings of the period, or, for that matter, IP's magnificent restoration of the 1939 broadcast. But Richard Caniell and Immortal Performances allow us, at long last, to enjoy a performance that may have no rival among recordings of *Simon Boccanegra* for a synthesis of vocal splendor and white-hot intensity. And as if that were not enough, the *Boccanegra* broadcast is followed by excerpts from Giovanni Martinelli's 1962 lecture on performing the music of Verdi, delivered by the tenor to the British Institute of Recorded Sound. Martinelli, well into his eighth decade, regales the audience with a delicious combination of erudition and humor, all delivered in robust voice (Martinelli was still capable of impressive singing at this stage) and precise, accented English. It's an absolute treasure to hear Martinelli recount aspects of his career, including performing *Trovatore* with Toscanini (the Maestro allowed interpolated high notes), and to experience the tenor declaim, in hair-raising fashion, portions of Azucena's text from that opera. Martinelli was a one-of-a-kind tenor and personality, as the *Boccanegra* broadcast and ensuing lecture amply illustrate.

The December 28, 1935 broadcast of *Rigoletto* was the Met's first performance of that opera during the 1935–36 season. It featured two of the

company's greatest stars, Lawrence Tibbett and Lily Pons, and its foremost conductor of the Italian repertoire, Ettore Panizza. (The production's choreographer was a man by the name of George Balanchine.) It appears that a fair amount of opening afternoon/broadcast jitters afflicted the distinguished cast. For those familiar with Panizza's razor-sharp performances of such works as *Boccanegra* and *Otello*, this *Rigoletto* will come as a bit of a surprise. There are numerous examples of flubs and lack of coordination between pit and stage. When Frederick Jagel makes his entrance as the Duke of Mantua, he begins not with the assigned opening line ("Della mia bella incognita borghese"), but rather, "Ah più di Ciprano importuno non v'è," which, while set to the same music, occurs quite a bit later in the scene. Both the prompter and the tenor singing Borsa, Giordano Paltrinieri, work to get Jagel back on track, and are finally successful. Tibbett in particular, seems to have difficulties (interest?) in following Panizza's lead. In both the baritone's entrance, and the start of "Cortigiani!" for example, Tibbett is noticeably ahead of the beat. This detracts from the strong rhythmic profile Verdi brings to both the vocal and orchestral writing in *Rigoletto*, an opera that in many ways looks forward to the great works of the composer's late period.

I don't mean to give the impression that the performance as a whole is a shambles, or even close to it. For the better part, Panizza brings his usual keen attention to detail, sense of forward momentum, and suppleness of phrasing. But I would be remiss not to point out the broadcast's more precarious moments. This broadcast documents Lawrence Tibbett's Met debut in the title role. Tibbett would sing Verdi's (by way of Victor Hugo) tragic court jester 32 times at the Met—22 in the house, and 10 on tour. There are two Met broadcasts of *Rigoletto* starring Tibbett. In addition to the performance reviewed here, there is a March 11, 1939 broadcast conducted by Gennaro Papi, again with Pons, and Jan Kiepura as the Duke. In many ways, the great American baritone was ideal for one of Verdi's greatest and most demanding roles.

Overall, Tibbett makes a very impressive role debut. First and foremost, there is Tibbett's voice; rich, vibrant, and powerful, with a miraculous combination of a dark, concentrated middle register and ringing high notes. Tibbett was also a first-rate vocal actor, someone capable of specificity, nuance, and the ability to portray a wide range of emotions. And Tibbett could deliver Verdi's flowing, *cantabile* writing with an

elegance and depth of feeling that would be the envy of any baritone. Verdi loved to explore the dichotomy between a character's public and private life. In his public life as a court jester, Rigoletto is a bitter, acerbic man who delights in the misfortunes of others. Privately, he is a tender, loving (and over-protective) father. On this occasion, I think Tibbett is more successful in portraying Rigoletto's private, fatherly side. It's no surprise, given his sterling achievements as Verdi's Boccanegra and the elder Germont (reviewed elsewhere in this issue), that Tibbett is equally persuasive as Gilda's father. Indeed, in each of the Rigoletto-Gilda duets, Tibbett and Pons bring out the best in each other, with singing and acting for the ages. The tenderness and, in the later scenes, anguish that Tibbett conveys would melt a stone. In Rigoletto's "public" scenes, Tibbett strikes me as somewhat less convincing. There is certainly nothing at all wrong. Tibbett is quite wonderful from a purely vocal perspective, and he is attentive to the drama. But these moments don't seem to come quite as easily for Tibbett. Compare, for example, the aforementioned rushed "Cortigiani!" with the beautifully sculpted and emoted "Miei signori ... perdono" that follows. Here, the desperate pleas of a loving father (rather than the preceding angry outburst) inspire Tibbett's best. And in Gilda's death, Tibbett rises to characteristic great heights, singing magnificently, and acting for all its worth. I'm sure more than a few handkerchiefs were needed at the Old Met when the curtain came down on this performance.

And such tears would have been due in great part as well to Pons's masterful Gilda. Pons had been singing Gilda at the Met since 1931, and the jester's daughter was supremely well suited to the French coloratura soprano's gifts. It's true that a trill was never really a part of Pons's arsenal. But Pons had everything else in spades; flexibility, stratospheric high notes (including a high E at the conclusion of "Caro nome"), a captivating vocal timbre both feminine and warm, and personality to spare. In addition to her magical stage presence, Lily Pons could be a wonderful vocal actor, and that is the case with her Gilda. I've already mentioned her marvelous interaction with Tibbett. But elsewhere, Pons is brilliant in conveying Gilda's transformation from a sheltered, albeit curious, young girl, to a woman willing to sacrifice herself for the man she loves. There is an underlying humanity and passion throughout this performance, one in which Gilda emerges as a sympathetic, three-dimensional character.

The Duke is Frederick Jagel, an American tenor with a secure vocal technique and the ability to perform an admirable range of repertoire (e.g., Edgardo in *Lucia*, the title role in *Peter Grimes*, Gerald in *Lakmé*, Radamès in *Aida*). Jagel was a singer who could be counted on to give a vocally reliable and dramatically credible performance, albeit one without any particular charm or individuality. After the aforementioned precarious entrance, Jagel settles down to give a performance of the Duke that, while not matching the standards of Tibbett and Pons, is thoroughly professional, and not out of place on the Met stage. Jagel does some lovely shaping of phrases in “È il sol dell’anima,” and “Parmi veder le lagrime.” He also has secure high notes, a big plus for any tenor singing the Duke (although, due to some missing sides from the transcription of this performance, it is Jan Kiepura in the 1939 broadcast who joins Pons for a high D $\flat$  at the close of “Addio ... speranza ed anima”). At the time of this performance, Jussi Björling’s first Met Duke of Mantua (with Tibbett and Pons) was, to our regret, still some four years away. Virgilio Lazzari and Helen Olheim are both convincing as the assassin Sparafucile and his sister accomplice, the seductress Maddalena.

Tibbett hired a company in New York to record his broadcasts, and their transcription is the source for this restoration. Some portions of the broadcast are missing, requiring the substitution of the 1939 broadcast for sections of the act II Rigoletto-Gilda duet, and the conclusion of the scene for Gilda and the Duke. Richard Caniell previously restored the 1935 broadcast for a 1998 Naxos Historical release (8.110020-1). In his Recording Notes for this Immortal Performance issue, Caniell relates: “When I recently reheard the Naxos CDs, I felt that I’d learned sufficiently to improve the sound substantively enough to warrant re-issue.” I agree. The new Immortal Performances restoration features sound of greater warmth, depth, and an increased sense of space around the voices, without any added artificial coloring. It is a significant improvement. An appendix features Tibbett in performances of excerpts from Verdi’s *Falstaff*, Puccini’s *Il tabarro*, and Deems Taylor’s *Peter Ibbetson* (an opera in which Tibbett sang the world premiere). Tibbett is in wonderful voice, and the fine restorations of these recordings allow us to enjoy this great artist in his prime.

The booklet includes essays by Stanley Henig and Bill Russell, synopses of the plots of both operas, Richard Caniell’s Recording Notes, and artist bios and photos. I’ve tried my best to point out both the challenges presented by

the source material, and how Richard Caniell and Immortal Performances have addressed and met those challenges. In the final analysis, this set presents us with the opportunity to hear a pair of unique and irreplaceable treasures in the history of the Metropolitan Opera, and in the best sound to date. It is a release that, despite its inherent issues, commands the interest and attention of all who appreciate historic vocal treasures. Bravo!

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Review By Henry Fogel

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In 1935 Lawrence Tibbett was at the peak of his vocal and dramatic powers. To have these splendidly preserved examples of two of his most important Verdi roles from that season is treasurable. Although Immortal Performances has already issued a Tibbett *Simon Boccanegra* from 1939 with an almost identical cast, this one is preferable because the baritone is in slightly more splendid voice. The same, applies even more dramatically to Giovanni Martinelli and Elisabeth Rethberg.

If you were to start with a blank mental canvas and try to imagine the ideal Verdi baritone, you would quite likely come up with Lawrence Tibbett. A big, rich, ringing voice with a rock-solid tonal core, a personality large enough to inhabit the towering characters created by Verdi, complete control at all dynamic levels, and strong acting ability—those are the qualities that define the species of *baritonus verdianus*, and which defines Tibbett. His dark chocolate lower and middle registers blend seamlessly with an extraordinarily brilliant and focused top that seems to have no upper limit.

Keeping all of that in mind, Tibbett's *Rigoletto* is, to my ears, one of the finest ever recorded. (The four discs are priced as three by Immortal Performances). He manages to convey the full range of *Rigoletto*'s emotions—anger, sadness, grief, tenderness, and bitterness are all present in the voice. He switches instantly between them in the big scene with Gilda, ending with the "Vendetta" duet. Tibbett's overall performance here is on a par with my two favorite *Rigolettos*: Leonard Warren and Riccardo Stracciari. It is different enough from either of those to offer its own gratification. In his excellent and quite candid essay in the accompanying

booklet, Bill Russell does raise some points of subtlety that Tibbett misses in this, his first Met performance of the role. The point is not mistaken, but there is so much right about Tibbett's performance that I cannot bring myself to think about what more there might have been.

Staying with *Rigoletto* for the moment, the other strong asset is Lily Pons, who was the type of Gilda we don't hear very much any longer—a light coloratura with astounding top notes (including a high F) and all the agility the role needs. Pons also invests the character with real personality, but the significant reward in listening to her is vocal. She retains the same gleaming tonal quality no matter how high the music goes, and this provides great pleasure.

I wish I could be as positive about Frederick Jagel's Duke. The voice itself is not unpleasant, but it is a generic tenor not distinguished by any special quality. More disturbingly, I find Jagel's singing far too aggressive, even fierce. "Questa o quella" totally lacks the insouciance that is inherent in the music. This Duke sounds like he is in some kind of battle. "La donna è mobile" is a bit more relaxed, but not sufficiently so. One gets the feeling that the Duke didn't seduce Gilda with charm or even ardor, but rather through force. Jagel does sing in tune and with a firm rhythmic pulse, which shouldn't be taken for granted, but he is nowhere near the level of the other two principals.

Virgilio Lazzari is a strong, dark-toned Sparafucile, and the remainder of the cast is fine. On the podium Panizza manages to balance well the elements of dramatic tension and lyricism. He gives both propulsion and beauty to the orchestral score. Richard Caniell's sonic restoration is close to miraculous. In his recording notes he describes some of his problems in resuscitating the source material, which necessitated having to slip in some sections from the 1939 Met broadcast because they were missing on the original source. Part of act II, for that reason, gives us Jan Kiepura's Duke, which is an improvement over Jagel's. These inserts are virtually seamless, and if someone were to play the recording for me, simply saying that it was an "old Met broadcast" and ask me to guess its age, I would probably have said it comes from the mid-to-late 1940s. Anyone who can listen with pleasure to historic broadcasts will find pleasure here. Caniell supervised an earlier release of this performance on Naxos, but he has obviously continued to study and learn, because now the sound is markedly richer and more natural.

Three Tibbett broadcast arias are a bonus to fill out the second *Rigoletto* disc, and they are magnificent. “Che sogno” from *Falstaff* and “Scorre fiume” from *Il tabarro* come from The Packard Hour. The scene from the Met’s production of Deems Taylor’s *Peter Ibbetson* makes one anxious to hear the entire performance, which Caniell hints might be coming.

Turning to *Simon Boccanegra*, Immortal Performances has already issued a stunning Met broadcast from 1939 with the same principals (except the young Leonard Warren is Paolo), enthusiastically reviewed by James Miller and me in *Fanfare* 37:2 and by Ken Meltzer in 40:4. So why bring out this one, which in Richard Caniell’s own words is a “gravely flawed private recording ... made for Lawrence Tibbett by a New York dub service”? Caniell had to insert portions of the 1939 broadcast to replace some missing sections. He catalogs the replacements in his extensive recording notes that accompany the release. The reason for bothering with it becomes clear as you listen. In 1935 all four principals were in fresher voice, and so this release represents each of them at much closer to their legendary best.

For a collector who would be satisfied with only one recording of *Simon Boccanegra* featuring Tibbett, Rethberg, Martinelli, and Pinza (all serious vocal collectors should have one in their library), I would recommend the 1939 performance in the Immortal Performances edition. But if you, like me, cannot get enough of truly legendary Verdi singing, this new one is a very important supplement.

For me it is Martinelli who benefits the most. By 1939 a certain hardness of tone that was always a part of his vocal production had become more prominent. Here he sounds glorious, and for listeners who have wondered why Martinelli has such a grand reputation, you will find your answer here. Long, generous phrases, perfectly shaped, accompany a classic legato in what is almost a masterclass in Verdi singing. He is also a passionate and subtle vocal actor, and every phrase holds your attention. Rethberg’s Amelia also benefits from the subtraction of four years. She was 41 and in her true prime during this broadcast. The voice glows brightly, she has complete control over dynamic shading, and she caresses phrases in a uniquely personal way. Rethberg’s shining *spinto* soprano was close to ideal for this music, and she sounds freer here than in 1939 (though she was still very fine then too). Tibbett was magnificent in 1939, and he is similarly so here. The voice has a touch more ring here, but his ability to characterize the music is a bit more sophisticated in 1939. Pinza is

magnificent in both cases. Perhaps his bass is a fraction more solid and ringing than it would be five years later, but the difference is minimal. If you feel disappointment that you won't have the young Leonard Warren as Paolo, you might be surprised by the rich baritone and stylish singing of Adolfo Gandolfi, a fine singer who had no significant international reputation.

As is always the case with Ettore Panizza, the conducting is alert, sensitive, energetic, sympathetic to the singers, and balanced between the lyrical and the incisive. He is particularly adept at bringing out the full range of colors in Verdi's score, including its frequent darkness. As a bonus we get some wonderful conversation from Martinelli on the subject of Verdi.

The whole production is rounded out by Immortal Performances' usual fine quality of booklet, with thoughtful and provocative essays, wonderful historic photographs, plot synopses, and biographies of the major artists. Anyone seriously interested in the way operatic singing developed and progressed in 20th-century America will find much gratification here.