

BIZET *Carmen* & • Gennaro Papi, cond; Rosa Ponselle (*Carmen*); Hilda Burke (*Micaëla*); René Maison (*Don José*); Ezio Pinza (*Escamillo*); Metropolitan Op O & Ch • IMMORTAL PERFORMANCES 1169-4, mono (4 CDs: 277:55) Live: Public Hall, Cleveland and Metropolitan Opera, New York 1936–1937

& **MOZART *Don Giovanni*** (excerpts) • Tullio Serafin, cond; Ezio Pinza (*Don Giovanni*); Virgilio Lazzari (*Leporello*); Tito Schipa (*Don Ottavio*); Rosa Ponselle (*Donna Anna*); Maria Müller (*Donna Elvira*); Edith Fleischer (*Zerlina*) • Live: Metropolitan Opera, New York 1/20/1934

& Interview with Rosa Ponselle

Henry Fogel

FANFARE September / October 2022

There have been few portrayals of operatic characters more controversial than Rosa Ponselle's *Carmen*. It was the last role she took on in her Met career, beginning in December, 1935. She sang it 15 times with the company, five of them on tour. Following the opening night, she was roasted by the powerful chief music critic of the *New York Times*, Olin Downes, who wrote, "We have never heard Miss Ponselle sing so badly, and we have seldom seen the part enacted in such an artificial and generally unconvincing manner." I could not disagree more. To my ears, Ponselle is one of the great *Carmens*. Reviewing St. Laurent Studio's release (YSL T-649) of the January 9, 1937, Met broadcast in *Fanfare* 41:5, I said, "I hear no hints of any of the issues that [Downes] (and other critics) raised. To be sure, if your view of *Carmen* is that it must be performed in a restrained, delicate, so-called French style, this performance in the grand manner may not be for you." To my ears, she is one of the great *Carmens*.

What producer Richard Caniell has done in this Heritage Series release is to assemble a recorded performance of Ponselle's *Carmen* that combines the best possible cast from all available sources. There are two problems with the casting in the single performance released by St. Laurent Studio (although I recommended it enthusiastically at the time). First, Sidney Raynor's *Don José* is ordinary. It is musically and dramatically competent but little more, and Raynor's voice is undistinguished. Second, Julius Huehn is a misused Wagnerian bass-baritone who has no idea how to sing *Escamillo*'s music or how to convey the character's swagger. Still, that performance had more consistently good sound quality than other surviving broadcasts, and the musical strengths from Ponselle and the conductor, Gennaro Papi, merited preservation.

The sound quality is surprisingly good for broadcast material from the 1930s, and having a Ponselle *Carmen* with Pinza's *Escamillo* in this level of reproduction is something quite extraordinary. To provide some context, here is a chart of the Ponselle *Carmen* performances that I prepared for my earlier review, but with some corrections thanks to the online Metropolitan Opera Annals. All performances took place at the Met in New York unless otherwise specified.

Date	José	Micaela	Escamillo	Conductor
12/27/1935	Martinelli	Burke	Pinza	Hasselmans (Ponselle's role debut)
1/6/1936	Kullman	Burke	Pinza	Hasselmans
1/14/1936	Kullman	Burke	Pinza	Hasselmans (Hartford, CN)

1/25/1936	Martinelli	Burke	Pinza	Hasselmanns
1/28/1936	Martinelli	Bori	Pinza	Hasselmanns
2/1/1936	Kullman	Fisher	Pinza	Hasselmanns
2/12/1936	Maison	Mario	Pinza	Hasselmanns
2/25/1936	Maison	Fisher	Pinza	Hasselmanns (Brooklyn, NY)
3/14/1936	Maison	Fisher	Huehn	Hasselmanns
3/28/1936	Maison	Burke	Pinza	Hasselmanns (Boston, MA)
4/4/1936	Maison	Burke	Huehn	Hasselmanns (Baltimore, MD)
1/9/1937	Rayner	Bodanya	Huehn	Papi
1/21/1937	Maison	Bodanya	Huehn	Papi
2/15/1937	Maison	Burke	Huehn	Papi (final Met performance)
4/17/1937	Maison	Burke	Huehn	Papi (Cleveland, OH)

Four performances were broadcast and have survived: February 1, 1936, March 28, 1936, January 9, 1937, and April 17, 1937. As outlined in Caniell's recording notes, he has taken Ezio Pinza's Escamillo from the March 28, 1936 broadcast and inserted it into Ponselle's final *Carmen* broadcast of April 17, 1937 in Cleveland. Another significant improvement, as applied to Ponselle's performance, was to edit in a much better ending to the Seguidilla from the same 1936 broadcast. These insertions occur seamlessly, and one cannot overstate the value of Pinza's Escamillo compared to Huehn's. So why not just use the entire 1936 broadcast? The main reason is its more constricted sound quality, and to a lesser degree the preferable Don José of René Maison over Charles Kullman. Perhaps because the April 1937 performance was the end of a long Met tour, Papi disfigured the opera with even more cuts than the norm for that era. Caniell reinstates the Prelude to act 2 from the January 1937 broadcast, but many of the other cuts remain.

I have been familiar with Ponselle's *Carmen* broadcasts for decades, and I continue to find myself baffled by Downes's comments. To be fair, we don't have a recording of her opening night, and possibly Ponselle was nervous or else she later toned some things down. But the four surviving broadcasts are thrilling. Yes, she does ad lib some extra lines (the performance utilizes Guiraud's recitatives). Moreover, she adds grunts in places, her anger flares out with fury, and she is blatant in her seduction of Don José. Even so a portrayal of Carmen that emphasizes the character's outsized temperament does not feel in any way wrong.

Then there is the singing *per se*. Ponselle's voice is evenly produced from top to bottom, the tone gleams, and her high notes ring out gloriously. The reason she was considered one of the greatest dramatic sopranos in Metropolitan Opera history is crystal clear from her *Carmen* and *Traviata* broadcasts, much more so than from the dry acoustics of her RCA recordings. One can legitimately object to her over-use of an exaggerated register break for dramatic effect, though over the years I have come to mind it far less. Aside from that, what we have on these discs is an extraordinary demonstration of the operatic art.

René Maison's Don José is beautifully sung and dramatically convincing. The voice is not a truly distinctive one, the kind you recognize on hearing two notes, but it is attractive and perfectly suited to Bizet's music. Although Maison sings the high B \natural in the "Flower Song" *forte*, as does just about everyone, his overall vocalizing of the aria is sensitively shaped and

shaded. In the final scene, he and Ponselle whip up a veritable storm. It is impossible not to be caught up in the heat of the opera's final ten minutes.

I have already commented on Pinza's Escamillo. It too is a portrayal that merits the word historic, both for its vocal glory and its dramatic flair. American soprano Hilde Burke is a more than adequate Micaëla. Little seems to be known about her, but here Burke displays a firmly focused and evenly produced lyric soprano. She interacts well with Maison in their scenes together. The rest of the cast includes strong performances from Thelma Votipka (Frasquita), George Cehanovzky (Dancaire), Louis D'Angelo (Zuniga), and Helen Olheim (Mercédès).

Papi's conducting has grown on me over the years. I still find it too explosive and lacking in subtlety, but it is exciting. The orchestral playing is fully committed, and Papi stays with Ponselle at all times, which is no easy task. Italian record companies were recording complete operas as early as the 1920s, and it is a shame that RCA executives were so lacking in imagination, or even the understanding of their role, that they never even tried complete operas in those years. They had these singers under contract, or available to them, and could have made a *Carmen* for the ages with them.

As a bonus, Caniell has assembled excerpts from *Don Giovanni*, taken from a Met broadcast on January 20, 1934. The sound is awful, as he points out in his notes. Only these particular excerpts have survived, and they have been published elsewhere, but Immortal Performances has improved on the previous efforts. Overall, it is worth making the effort to listen through the noise and distortion to hear the glory that is Rosa Ponselle (although Donna Anna's "Non mi dir" is not one of the excerpts that survived). Besides her, the value of these excerpts is found in Tito Schipa's Ottavio and Maria Müller's Elvira.

Pinza's singing is wonderful, but there are many other examples of his *Don Giovanni* that are easier to listen to. The sound is so compromised here that one really cannot conclude much about Tulio Serafin's conducting. For serious vocal collectors, being given even a glimpse of a live *Don Giovanni* with these singers is a privilege, and I am grateful to Immortal Performances for the enormous effort it must have taken to bring these excerpts to this level of listenability.

The fourth disc is filled out with an interview with Ponselle, a wonderful additional bonus. She is very open about many things, including her sudden departure from the Met after the *Carmen* season. She was not happy with the contract that general manager Edward Johnson offered her, including the fact that he would not revive *Adriana Lecouvreur* for her. These 17 minutes are enlightening and entertaining.

The booklet is up to Immortal Performances's usual high standard. The essay about the performance by William Russell is filled with insights and keen observations. Wonderful historic photos, singers' bios, and a plot synopsis completes the superb package. Immortal Performances is selling the four CDs for the price of three.

Review by

Ken Meltzer

FANFARE September / October 2022

A 4-disc (priced as 3) Heritage Series release from Immortal Performances focuses on the *Carmen* of the legendary American soprano Rosa Ponselle. The foundation for this release is a Metropolitan Opera broadcast of a tour staging in Cleveland on April 17, 1937. This proved to be

Ponselle's final Met performance. Producer Richard Caniell incorporates other source material into the broadcast in order to present what he views as a more favorable representation of Bizet's *Carmen* and its performing artists. And so while the April 17, 1937 performance featured Julius Huehn as the bullfighter Escamillo, IP substitutes Ezio Pinza from a 1936 broadcast (it should be noted that Ponselle and Pinza did sing together in several Met *Carmen* performances). Ponselle's *Carmen* was the subject of much critical disagreement. And to this day, opinions are sharply divided. I doubt anyone would argue that at the time of the 1937 broadcast, Rosa Ponselle lacked the vocal equipment to sing a convincing performance of *Carmen*. It is true that by this stage of her career, the highest notes had become a greater and greater source of uncertainty and stress. But the title role in Bizet's *Carmen*, which may be sung by a mezzo or soprano, has no terror-inducing high Cs. No, the controversy is in how Ponselle treats Bizet's score, and by extension, the composer's vision of *Carmen*. Back in the days when I took voice lessons, I would anxiously bring a new piece of music to sing for my ever-patient teacher. I'd plant my feet, and proceed to give my best impression of some famous singer, past or present. At the conclusion, my teacher would look at me, and without changing expression, say: "That was very nice. Now, why don't we try it the way the composer wrote it?" How often that crosses my mind when I am reviewing performances or recordings! And most certainly in the case of Rosa Ponselle's *Carmen*.

It is clear that Ponselle viewed *Carmen* as a headstrong, independent, and powerful woman, someone who never lacks conviction, or the bravery to pursue her desires. All of those qualities are most certainly an appropriate and potentially compelling view of Bizet's gypsy. The problem is that at least from a vocal perspective, Ponselle creates her portrait by frequently and noticeably departing from Bizet's score. Most obvious are the many spoken interjections Ponselle interpolates while others are singing. This is especially the case in the climactic scenes of Acts III and IV. Indeed, in the final confrontation with Don José, Ponselle suggests an impression of a furious auctioneer, hurling prices nonstop at potential bidders. Then, there are Ponselle's many deviations from Bizet's noted pitches and rhythms (not to mention dynamic markings). IP removes one of the most egregious instances; Ponselle's extension well beyond the score's cutoff of the concluding B in the *Seguidilla*. IP substitutes Ponselle's somewhat more compliant version from the 1936 broadcast. I must emphasize that through it all, Ponselle's commitment (wrongheaded or otherwise) to the drama is never in doubt, and she is in strong, secure voice. And every now and then, there is a breathtaking moment that suggests what might have been. The gorgeous F on "prends garde" at the close of Act I, softly spun and beautifully sustained by Ponselle, communicates all of *Carmen*'s dangerous allure (yes, Bizet specified a *forte* dynamic for this note, but Ponselle's rendition is stunning on its own terms). In any event, it's clear the audience loves Ponselle's performance, one in which she leaves nothing in reserve. If you've never heard Ponselle's *Carmen*, and are wondering if this release is for you, I recommend going to YouTube and watching the soprano's 1936 MGM screen test in which she performs excerpts from Bizet's opera. You'll decide pretty quickly if this is a road upon which you wish to journey further. And if you proceed, you'll be rewarded by IP's excellent sonic restoration that allows the vocal and instrumental colors to shine with great beauty and presence.

The IP *Carmen* offers a strong supporting cast for Ponselle. Belgian tenor René Maison had a heroic voice, and was a fine exponent of French repertoire. He is a passionate Don José, one who rises to the occasion in the outbursts of Acts III and IV. He is also capable of affecting tender

moments, such as the Act I duet with Micaëla. The Flower Song is also beautifully sculpted, even if the climactic B-flat is somewhat forced. As I mentioned, IP substitutes Ezio Pinza in a 1936 broadcast for Julius Huehn's 1937 Escamillo. Pinza, in marvelous voice, sings a dashing Toréador Song, a true star turn. But for me, Pinza's most impressive singing is the brief duet with Carmen in Act IV, "Si tu m'aimes, Carmen". Pinza delivers this music with such beauty of tone, elegance, and dramatic feeling, he turns what is often a throwaway moment into a treasure. Soprano Hilda Burke is a lovely Micaëla, singing her Act III aria with intensity and an attractive lyric soprano. The contribution from the remaining singers, and the Met Chorus and Opera is a strong one. Conductor Gennaro Papi leads a performance that has ample spirit and drive. Papi also works hand in glove with his singers, giving them space to phrase with flexibility. One might argue that Papi's willingness to engage in pronounced *ritardandi* and *acclerandi* is of an older school, but it's a school I greatly admire and covet. There are some small cuts to the score, and the interpolation of a ballet (to Bizet's music) arranged by George Balanchine in Act IV. Milton Cross's spoken commentary is another marvelous souvenir of a Met golden age.

Following the complete broadcast of *Carmen*, IP provides extended excerpts from a January 20, 1934 Met performance of *Don Giovanni*. The *Giovanni* too, was broadcast. But sad to say, what survives is, by Richard Caniell's own admission, in decidedly inferior sound. IP has done its best with the source material, correcting pitch deviations, and providing as much presence and definition as possible. The end result is still markedly inferior to studio recordings of the era, with surface noise being a frequent obstacle. As such, I recommend this portion of the release particularly to those fully acclimated with historic recordings. But if you can get past the sonic challenges, this *Don Giovanni* is a rewarding and fascinating window to the past. Ezio Pinza, in one of his signature roles, is a magnificent Don Giovanni, in superb voice, and relishing Da Ponte's text and Mozart's music to their fullest. Virgilio Lazzari as Leporello is an apt foil, delivering a keenly-inflected Catalogue Aria, and throughout suggesting the servant's more rebellious side. Live recordings of the great tenor Tito Schipa in live performance of opera are all too rare. How wonderful to have his Don Ottavio, masterfully characterized, and radiantly sung. Schipa offers a master class in the art of wedding text and music through sensitive declamation, an array of dynamics and colors, and supple phrasing. I'm not sure any tenor ever used his vocal resources more fully than did Tito Schipa. And his Don Ottavio is fully convincing as a tender and supportive lover, one willing to fight on behalf of Donna Anna. That Donna Anna is Ponselle, in stunning voice, and on this occasion, working within the parameters of Mozart's score. It's a gift to hear "Or sai chi l'onore" sung by a voice appropriate for Aida, Norma, or Gioconda, but with all the Mozartean style and elegance one could ask for. Sad to say, for "Non mi dir", all we get is a snippet of the opening recitative. But what is preserved of Ponselle's Donna Anna on this occasion is treasurable. Maria Müller's Donna Elvira is also sharply characterized and marvelously sung. The conductor is Tullio Serafin, proving every bit the expert collaborator familiar from his later studio recordings, particularly with Callas. And in this 1934 *Don Giovanni*, there is also a vigor and propulsion not as readily apparent in the conductor's later years.

The set concludes with a 17-minute radio interview with Ponselle. Given the content of some of the conversation, it appears that the interview was conducted shortly after the closing of the old Metropolitan Opera House in 1966. Ponselle is extremely forthcoming about both her herself

and career. A compelling and fitting conclusion to this set. William Russell offers written commentary on the featured artists and operas. There is a full plot synopsis of *Carmen*, as well as Richard Caniell's Recording Notes, and artist bios and photos. However one feels about Rosa Ponselle's interpretation of *Carmen*, it cannot be denied that she was both one of the greatest voices of the 20th century, and an imaginative and probing artist. The 1937 *Carmen* broadcast documents Ponselle in the final performance of her Met career, still in impressive voice. And the recorded sound is excellent. The 1934 *Don Giovanni*, in decidedly compromised sound, offers considerable and unique rewards for those willing to brave it. Recommended.

5 Stars: Ponselle's *Carmen*, and 1934 *Don Giovanni* excerpts with all-star Met casts