

FRANCESCO MERLI AT LA SCALA • Francesco Merli (ten); various artists •
IMMORTAL PERFORMANCES 1167-3, mono (3 CDs: 232:13)

LEONCAVALLO *Pagliacci* & • Lorenzo Molajoli, cond; Francesco Merli (*Canio*);
Rosetta Pampanini (*Nedda*); Carlo Galeffi (*Tonio*); Gino Vanelli (*Silvio*); La Scala Ch &
O • IMMORTAL PERFORMANCES 1167-2, mono (3 CDs: 232:13)

& **PUCCHINI *Manon Lescaut*** • Lorenzo Molajoli, cond; Maria Zamboni (*Manon*); Francesco
Merli (*Des Grieux*); Lorenzo Conati (*Lescaut*); La Scala Ch & O

& Maria Zamboni sings arias from *Manon Lescaut*, *Turandot*, and *La Wally*

& Francesco Merli sings arias from *Manon Lescaut* and duets from *Il Guarany*, *Loreley*, and
Andrea Chénier with Bianca Scacciata (sop)

Henry Fogel

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This 1931 Columbia recording of *Pagliacci* has long been highly esteemed by vocal collectors. Now that it has been given its finest restoration, perhaps a new generation of listeners will come to appreciate its merits. All previous transfers that I have heard have been harsh, constricted, and worse still, sharp. A sharp transfer not only affects speed, but more importantly also the sound of the voices. In this case, it compounded the original shrillness of the recording. Immortal Performances has corrected the pitch and warmed up the sound to a degree I would not have thought possible, and the result is similar to having a great painting expertly restored.

Beyond any observations about specific performers, the most important thing to say is that this *Pagliacci* plays like a performance. It has the sweep, the passion, of the theater, even though it was made in the studio recording, and moreover, in four-minute segments to fit on 78rpm sides. How conductor Lorenzo Molajoli and his cast accomplished this is hard to fathom, but they did.

Francesco Merli is the centerpiece of the set, and what a pleasure it is to hear him. A true dramatic tenor who could lighten his voice and was a superb vocal actor, Merli's ability to vary color and intensity of tone made him a star at La Scala—he was used frequently by Toscanini. In his illuminating notes William Russell points out how Merli could vary his *vibrato* for expressive purposes. While most singers do the same to some extent, rarely do we hear this technique used as imaginatively as here. Added to the other virtues already mentioned, the result is a Canio who never appears to be merely singing the notes but is a complete character. There are Canios with a more glamorous tone than Merli (for example, Del Monaco, Corelli, and Björling) but none with his specificity of vocal characterization.

The remainder of the cast is at a similarly high level. Rosetta Pampanini was known for her Puccini and *verismo* roles in general. Her Nedda is beautifully sung, with limpid tones in her aria and the Nedda-Silvio duet. She displays great dramatic skills in her interactions with the other singers. The Tonio, Carlo Galeffi, was a leading baritone

at La Scala from 1912 to 1938, created the roles of Michele and Gianni Schicchi, and was a favorite of Toscanini's. The Prologue is sung with resplendent tone, and Galeffi, like the other principals, is fully involved in the drama, believable both as the scorned lover in his scene with Nedda and as the clown in the play-with-a-play. There are very few recordings of *Pagliacci* that engage a second fine baritone to sing Silvio, which is problematic, because of the beauty of his duet with Nedda, a centerpiece of the opera. Gino Vanelli is one of the finest recorded Silvios, singing with warmth and a lovely lyrical line. The cast's total dramatic involvement includes Giuseppe Nessi's Beppe.

Beyond assessing each singer individually, the crucial point is that this *Pagliacci*, from beginning to end, has an electric vitality. Much of the credit must go to Molajoli's conducting. Molajoli was English Columbia's "house" conductor in Milan (not to be confused with American Columbia). He made 18 complete opera recordings for the label, and his naturally dynamic temperament is particularly suited to *Pagliacci*.

Three arias sung by Pampanini fill out the *Pagliacci* disc. All three were recorded for Columbia in 1927. The three are "In quelle trine morbide" from *Manon Lescaut*, "Signore, ascolta" from *Turandot*, and "Ebben? Ne andrò lontano" from *La Wally*. They document a warm, rich *spinto* soprano who sings with tenderness as well as power.

The 1931 Columbia recording of Puccini's *Manon Lescaut* is also a success, though not perhaps as complete a success as *Pagliacci*. Puccini's writing is more varied, with longer expanses of delicacy than in the hard-hitting *Pagliacci*. This performance recognizes the need for delicacy, but some of the score's gentler moments are treated more urgently than is ideal. Nonetheless, there is a great deal to enjoy here.

Merli is once again the *raison d'être* for the recording. His singing is ardent but never too aggressively so, and his strong, evenly produced tenor is thrilling. Merli's Des Grieux can be spoken of in the same terms as his finest rivals on disc—Björling, Di Stefano, and Del Monaco to name three, although Merli's voice lacks the uniqueness of thrilling tone from those singers.

Maria Zamboni has the right natural feeling for the Puccini line, but there is a hardness to her voice that contradicts the character of Manon. The problem may well be the 1931 recording technology, which tended to work against the soprano voice. Caniell has done a lot to improve this (some prior issues were sharp in pitch, which made the problem worse), and he has helped to uncover a greater tonal beauty than I ever thought Zamboni could produce. She is a scrupulous musician and very sensitive to texts, although perhaps not as imaginative in the role as Albanese and Callas. The remainder of the cast is fine, and once again Molajoli does a superb job in the pit, creating a genuine theatrical atmosphere. This is a wonderful, exciting recording of the opera that deserves the loving restoration it has been given here.

The bonus selections for *Manon Lescaut* include the two main tenor arias recorded by Merli, followed by three duets with soprano Bianca Scacciata, from Antônio Carlos Gomes's *Il Guarany*, Filippo Marchetti's *Ruy Blas*, and Alfredo Catalani's *Loreley*, all rarities. We also get a splendid recording of the final duet from Giordano's *Andrea Chénier*. Scacciata was a true *verismo* singer known for her passionate portrayals. On records her voice has always seemed brittle, but Caniell's restoration allows for a reassessment. Correctly pitched and with some of the harsh treble removed, Scacciata turns out to be a more attractive singer, although some hints of tonal hardness remain.

It is wonderful to hear two singers with big voices and big personalities singing these four duets; they represent a marvelous throwback to the era of *verismo* singing by big voices and big personalities.

One of the great pleasures of Immortal Performances' releases are the booklets that accompany them. The always excellent annotator, William Russell, surpasses himself here with such perceptive comments on the performances and the operas. Caniell provides informative recording notes, and the photographs and artist bios are another fine addition. In sum, this set restores to life a recording of *Pagliacci* that some consider the finest ever made and a thrilling historical *Manon Lescaut*.

Review by

Ken Meltzer

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A three-disc set from Immortal Performances (IP) documents the artistry of the great Italian dramatic tenor Francesco Merli (1887-1976). I previously reviewed another superb IP Merli set that combined a live broadcast of Act I of Verdi's *Otello*, as well as various operatic excerpts (43:4, Mar / Apr 2020). The new release couples a pair of early-1930s La Scala studio recordings of Leoncavallo's *I pagliacci* and Puccini's *Manon Lescaut*, both starring Merli, as well as some gratifying bonus material. In my review of the earlier IP release, I offered this summary of Merli and his career:

It's a sad truth that at least in the United States, the perceived importance of a singer is inextricably bound with his or her Metropolitan Opera career. Merli's time at the Met was all too brief. He debuted at the Met as Radamès in Verdi's *Aida* on March 2, 1932. His last Met performance came that April 14, as Pinkerton in Puccini's *Madama Butterfly*. All told Merli sang 10 times with the Met, in four different roles, and as a participant in a couple of programs of operatic excerpts. No doubt, Merli's brief career at the Met had everything to do with the economic pressures of the Great Depression, and not his talents as a singer and artist. For in truth, Merli was one of the great tenors of the period between the two World Wars, and one who had a grand career in Italy. Merli's voice, like that of Giacomo Lauri-Volpi and the young Franco Corelli, featured a prominent, though always controlled vibrato, one that was capable of brilliance in the upper register, and the capacity to sing the most demanding dramatic roles. It's a type of voice that is quite rare today, although at least in terms of timbre, Joseph Calleja is reminiscent of that bygone era. Merli was a thoughtful and probing singer and actor. He phrased with great beauty and dramatic meaning, always using the text as a springboard for the music. And he was a singer capable both of overwhelming power, and affecting tenderness. All who love great singing owe it to themselves to become familiar with Francesco Merli's legacy.

I previously reviewed for another publication a Preiser CD reissue of the *Pagliacci*. As my opinion of the recording has remained steadfast, I am reprising much of what I initially wrote. *I pagliacci*, Ruggiero Leoncavallo's *verismo* masterpiece, has fared particularly well on recordings. Indeed, there are many fine stereophonic versions from which to choose. Nevertheless, there are many compelling reasons to consider adding this 1930 La Scala recording to one's collection. The recording, originally released by Columbia on eighteen 78rpm sides, offers a valuable document of an earlier and quite different era of operatic performance. Listen, for example, to the beautiful *portamenti* employed by the strings of the wonderful La Scala Orchestra. Quite striking as well are the vocal timbres of the principal singers, featuring the pronounced and rapid vibrato that was so common in the first half of the 20th century. It is also a pleasure to listen to the way these singers—all Italian—relish each and every syllable of Leoncavallo's text. These are all qualities that have greatly disappeared in our modern, jet-setting operatic world. Additionally, although this is a studio recording, it has the atmosphere of a live performance. Much of the credit for this must go to conductor Lorenzo Molajoli, who leads a reading that crackles with energy and momentum. The gorgeous rendition of the *Intermezzo* demonstrates that Molajoli could be superb in more reflective moments as well. The La Scala Chorus and Orchestra respond in outstanding fashion to Molajoli's direction. Throughout, perhaps it is possible to discern the mark of Arturo Toscanini—the man who led *Pagliacci*'s 1892 premiere, and who ended his second tenure as La Scala Music Director the year before this recording.

The principal singers, important Italian artists during the period between the two World Wars, throw themselves into the drama. Merli, in vibrant and powerful voice, is a glorious Canio. It is clear that this imaginative artist put a great deal of thought into his characterization. For example, the light touch Merli employs in his initial address to the villagers makes the sudden revelation of Canio's jealous nature ("Un tal gioco") all the more frightening. Indeed, Merli is superb throughout in depicting the tempest that is constantly simmering in Canio's heart. Merli's "Vesti la giubba" is notable for its declamatory power and nobility, proceeding to a stunning climax. The final confrontation between Canio and Nedda is one of the most hair-raising on discs. In listening to this recording, it's easy to understand why Merli was one of the great Otellos of his era. All in all, I certainly count Merli's Canio among the finest.

Perhaps soprano Rosetta Pampanini's upper register does not possess ideal bloom and warmth. But the voice is secure throughout, and her characterization, like Merli's, is highly involved. The duet with Silvio, for example, is more than just a lyrical interlude between the confrontations with Tonio and Canio. Both Pampanini and the wonderful baritone Gino Vanelli portray the intense sexual attraction that exists between the two lovers. The desperation of their situation makes Nedda's defiance of Canio in the final scene all the more credible and tragic. There will probably be a greater difference of opinion regarding Carlo Galeffi's Tonio. There is no question that he possessed one of the most lovely of baritone voices, along with a brilliant upper register that provides a thrilling conclusion to the "Prologue." Some, however, may be put off by Galeffi's interpretive choices. In emphasizing Tonio's emotional instability, Galeffi

frequently resorts to extra-musical interjections that might not wear favorably upon repeated listening. Nevertheless, Galeffi's vocalism is superb, and he is certainly never boring. The fine character tenor Giuseppe Nessi offers luxury casting as Beppe. This is a recording that satisfies both as an important historical document, and a compelling representation of Leoncavallo's musical and dramatic vision. The first disc of the IP Merli set, comprising the La Scala *Pagliacci*, concludes with a trio of Pampanini 1927 studio recordings of arias from Puccini's *Manon Lescaut* and *Turandot*, as well as Catalani's *La Wally*. Here, Pampanini voice is in a freer, more voluptuous estate than the 1930 *Pagliacci*, and she sings the arias with a command of style and depth of feeling that are beyond reproach.

Many of the qualities and strengths found in the 1930 *Pagliacci* return in the 1931 La Scala recording of *Manon Lescaut*. Once again, Molajoli directs a fleet and lively performance. But Molajoli never rushes his singers, and provides ample flexibility for expressive purposes. Like its counterpart in *Pagliacci*, the *Manon Lescaut* orchestral Intermezzo is broadly paced and delivered with passion. The affecting string portamentos are again a welcome souvenir of a bygone era. Merli, here as the lovesick Des Grieux, is once again in sterling form. The tenor makes a noticeable—and to my ears, effective—effort to lighten both his voice and delivery for much of the music of Act I. In the remaining acts, Des Grieux is by turns angry, desperate, and grieving, all emotions that suit Merli's heroic voice and temperament. Jussi Björling, especially in the 1956 Met broadcast with Licia Albanese in the title role and conducted by Dmitri Mitropoulos, remains my favorite Des Grieux. But Merli's assumption of the role, too, is stylish, passionate, and gloriously vocalized. I would not want to be without his contributions to the *Manon Lescaut*, or the *Pagliacci*.

Maria Zamboni, Liù in the 1926 La Scala world premiere of Puccini's *Turandot*, is the *Manon Lescaut*. Zamboni was renowned as Puccini soprano, and her performance on the 1931 La Scala recording is impressive. Like Albanese (another great Puccini artist), Zamboni did not possess the most seductively beautiful or youthful-sounding voice. But (again like Albanese) Zamboni employed her vocal resources with technical assurance and impressive artistry. If Zamboni is not entirely convincing in Act I as a young and impressionable teenager, she fully embodies the more experienced and ultimately tragic figure of the remaining episodes. "In quelle trine morbide" and "Sola, perduta, abbandonata", are sung with a mastery of the arias' flow and architecture, both culminating in arresting climaxes. Both Lorenzo Conati as Lescaut, and Attilio Bordonali as Geronte give vibrant, characterful performances, and as with all the cast members, their relishing of the Italian text is pure delight. Giuseppe Nessi here does a triple comprimario "star turn" as Edmondo, the Dance Master, and the Lamplighter, all beautifully sung and acted.

Following the *Manon Lescaut*, IP provides more bonus material, this time focusing on Merli. His 1928 renditions of two arias from *Manon Lescaut* are impressively sung, and a worthy complement to the complete recording. Three duets with soprano Bianca Scacciati, recorded in 1929, follow. Scacciati was a compelling singer, but some reissues of her recordings, improperly pitched and/or sonically harsh, have not done her justice.

I am happy to report that is not the case on this IP release. Here, Scacciati's voice displays a vibrant presence and thrilling upper register that make her a worthy partner for Merli. Their singing generates the requisite electricity, particularly in the great duet that concludes Giordano's *Andrea Chénier*. IP's restorations of the two complete operas are likewise impressive. Some prior reissues by other concerns attempted to filter out much or all of the surface noise on the 78rpm source material. But in doing so, they also masked the essential qualities of the vocalists. IP's restorations allow the singers to emerge with remarkable presence, especially in the context of recordings that are approaching their century mark. William Russell is the author of the set's detailed, informative, and lively booklet notes that discuss both the performances and the operas' backgrounds. There are also plot synopses for the two complete operas, Richard Caniell's Recording Notes, and artist photos and bios. Once again, IP has done full justice to important (I would say essential) historic sound documents. Enthusiastically recommended.

5 Stars: Francesco Merli stars in excellent restorations of La Scala *Pagliacci* and *Manon Lescaut* recordings