

LICIA ALBANESE: A Tribute • Licia Albanese (sop); various artists • IMMORTAL PERFORMANCES 1154-4, mono (4 CDs: 327:52)

VERDI *La traviata* Cesare Soderò, cond; Licia Albanese (*Violetta*); Richard Tucker (*Alfredo*); Leonard Warren (*Giorgio Germont*); Op O & Ch. Live: Metropolitan Opera, New York, 3/23/1946

PUCCINI *Tosca* Dimitri Mitropoulos, cond; Licia Albanese (*Tosca*); Daniele Barioni (*Cavaradossi*); Leonard Warren (*Scarpia*); Metropolitan Opera O & Ch. Live: Metropolitan Opera, New York, 3/23/1957

& **BONUS:** Arias and scenes from **BOITO *Mefistofele***. **CHARPENTIER *Louise***. **CILEA *Adriana Lecouvreur***. **DONIZETTI *Don Pasquale*** (with Giuseppe de Luca). **MOZART *Don Giovanni***. **PUCCINI *Manon Lescaut*** (with Richard Tucker). **SUOR ANGELICA**. **VERDI *La traviata*** (with Guy Richard Gordon)

By Ken Meltzer

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The Italian-born soprano Licia Albanese (she became an American citizen in the 1940s) (1909-2014) was one of the most beloved Metropolitan Opera artists of the 20th century. Her Met career spanned more than a quarter-century. Albanese's Metropolitan Opera legacy began and ended with performances of signature roles by her beloved Giacomo Puccini. Albanese debuted at the Met on February 9, 1940 in the title role of *Madama Butterfly*. Her final Met house performance in a complete opera took place on January 20, 1966 in *Manon Lescaut* (a July 12, 1966 tour performance of *La bohème* was her last Met appearance). All told, Licia Albanese sang more than 400 Met performances, in 17 roles, in the house and on tour. Despite Albanese's popularity, one that coincided for the better part with the LP era, studio recordings of complete operas are few; a 1938 La Scala EMI *Bohème*, RCA's 1951 *Carmen* (Micaëla) and 1954 *Manon Lescaut*. Of course, there are the iconic 1946 RCA Toscanini-led renditions of *La traviata* and *La bohème*, both of which are transcriptions of broadcast performances. And along those lines, we are fortunate that Albanese's magnificent artistry is preserved in a series of Metropolitan Opera broadcasts (as well as performances from the San Francisco Opera), two of which are included in a new Immortal Performances (IP) Albanese four-disc tribute. Licia Albanese shares many of the qualities associated with her contemporary, another magnificent Italian soprano I've had the privilege to write about in these pages—Magda Olivero (1910-2014). In addition to their remarkable longevity both in terms of overall life span and singing careers, Albanese and Olivero brought similar attributes to the stage, even if no one could ever possibly confuse one for the other. Neither singer had a voice one would be tempted to describe as classically beautiful or even youthful in quality. But the basic tonal quality is rendered irrelevant in light of the

musicianship and dramatic insight Albanese and Olivero invest in their characterizations. Every phrase, indeed every word and syllable, is given the utmost purpose and meaning. While other singers might be inclined to skirt over “lesser” episodes in anticipation of the “big moments”, no such dichotomy existed for Licia Albanese (or Magda Olivero). For Albanese, recitative and recitative-like passages offered every bit the dramatic and musical opportunity as the most beautiful and lavish aria. And Albanese had the knack for seizing on brief moments to create a monumental effect. I’ll offer but one of many examples from the performances featured on this IP tribute, the March 23, 1946 *Traviata* broadcast. In Act II, Giorgio Germont tells Violetta that at some point, her beauty and charms will dissipate, and his son (her lover) Alfredo will become bored and desert her (“Un dì, quando le veneri”). Violetta responds: “È vero!” (“It’s true!”). Albanese utters those words in a voice both hushed and drained of color. It’s clear, in Albanese’s interpretation, that Violetta is contemplating this scenario for the very first time, and is devastated to the core. These kinds of masterful touches abound throughout the IP set, far too many to detail here. But I do believe that any soprano (or, for that matter, any singer) aspiring to the opera stage would do well to study the recordings of Licia Albanese and Magda Olivero, as often and as closely as possible.

Which brings us to the pair of complete broadcast performances. First is the 1946 *La traviata*. I already mentioned the famous Toscanini NBC SO broadcast from the same year. It is true that some of Toscanini’s tempo choices border on the frenetic, especially in the Act I and II party scenes, where the participants embrace the philosophy of *carpe diem* in a fashion suggesting mania (in his Recording Notes, IP Producer Richard Caniell makes the case that such tempo choices may have been based in part on circumstances not under Toscanini’s control; i.e., the allotted time for the broadcast). Elsewhere in the NBC broadcast, the pacing is broader and more flexible. Nevertheless, the conductor of the Met broadcast, Cesare Sodero, adopts a far more relaxed view of Verdi’s score. This is not to say his performance lacks shape or forward momentum. Sodero paces the work with sensitivity and attention to the music’s dramatic mission. Both the Act I and III orchestral Preludes are sculpted in loving fashion, presented as miniature synopses of the course of the opera’s narrative. And throughout, the singers are given far more leeway to express themselves than Toscanini affords in his (nonetheless superb) interpretation. As with Toscanini, Albanese is in marvelous voice. It’s no easy feat for a soprano performing Violetta to encompass the gaiety and coloratura fireworks of Act I, the heartrending outbursts of Act II, and the kaleidoscope of emotions in Act III. But Albanese succeeds on all counts, and in triumphant fashion. Licia Albanese’s Violetta is a credible, three-dimensional character; one who, above all, hungers for the opportunity to live her life in true happiness. As a result, the impact of her tragic fate, as dictated by Piave (via Dumas) and Verdi, is crushing. For this broadcast, Licia Albanese is joined by an impressive cast, one that comprises artist who were cherished longtime colleagues. On this occasion,

tenor Richard Tucker was a bit more than a year into his three-decade career at the Met (he had debuted as Enzo in Ponchielli's *La Gioconda* on January 25, 1945). Tucker sang his first Met Alfredo on December 15, 1945 (the occasion of Robert Merrill's Met debut as Germont). The March 23, 1946 performance was Tucker's second Met appearance in the role. Tucker's Alfredo is youthful, ardent, and in the Act II denunciation of Violetta, suggests the kind of vocal power and authority that would make the American tenor one of the leading lirico-spintos of his generation. That said, Tucker offers little in the way of individual dramatic insight, a shortcoming placed in relief by Albanese's interpretive genius. Nevertheless, I always treasure the opportunity to hear Tucker in youthful, lyric form, which he most certainly is here. By contrast, Leonard Warren sang his first Met Germont on January 14, 1942, with about a dozen more performances preceding the March 1946 broadcast. Like Albanese and Tucker, Warren is in prime voice for the performance. His Act II scene with Violetta, in which Warren and Albanese both sing gloriously and respond to each other in the most focused and intense fashion, is one of the highlights of the broadcast. The great aria "Di Provenza" fits Warren's rich high baritone like a glove, and he concludes the scene with an atomic A-flat above the staff. The various comprimario roles, taken by the likes of such Met stalwarts as Thelma Votipka, George Cehanovsky, and Louis D'Angelo, are sung well and with dramatic point. The recorded sound is quite good, approximating studio recordings of the time. The Toscanini NBC broadcast *Traviata* is essential listening, but the opportunity to hear Albanese's Violetta in a less pressured and more expansive setting brings its own rewards. The voice of longtime Met broadcast host Milton Cross is a welcome and comforting presence, both here and in the March 23, 1957 *Tosca* broadcast.

Conductor Dimitri Mitropoulos's way with Puccini's *Tosca*, as evidenced in the 1957 broadcast offers the best of all worlds. Mitropoulos combines energy and drive with a relishing of Puccini's rich orchestral palette, and keen flexibility of pacing and phrasing. How fortunate we are that one of the great orchestral conductors of the 20th century had such a love and affinity for the opera house! I place Mitropoulos's vision of *Tosca* alongside that of Victor de Sabata's in the iconic 1953 EMI La Scala *Tosca* (Callas, di Stefano, Gobbi) as the most gripping renditions I've heard. Albanese's voice was more lyric than spinto, one not by nature ideally endowed for Puccini's Floria Tosca. And on occasion, the role could be somewhat beyond Albanese's vocal resources. The March 23, 1957 broadcast is decidedly not one of those occasions. Albanese is in rich and secure voice, and the high C's ring out with authority. As with her Violetta, Albanese presents Tosca as a three-dimensional character. This Tosca's jealousy is in no way melodramatic or cartoonish; rather it is a natural outgrowth of her love and passion for Cavaradossi. Once again, Albanese and Warren (as Scarpia) play off each other in riveting fashion. With Mitropoulos leading the way, the tension in Act II is maintained from Tosca's entrance until her final departure following Scarpia's death. "Vissi d'arte" is both ravishingly

sung, and emoted as the plea of a woman driven to the brink of desperation. A masterful performance, and one that all fans of *Tosca* will want to hear. Warren's Scarpia was, to my mind, one of his most complete and brilliant characterizations. In terms of investing meaning to the text via phrasing and coloring of the music and text, Warren proves Albanese's equal. And Warren is in stupendous voice for the broadcast. Italian tenor Daniele Barioni is the Cavaradossi. Barioni was a tenor with a gleaming lirico-spinto voice; an artist who sang with passion, some style, and ringing top notes, if not the most secure negotiation of the passaggio. During the mid-1950s to early-1960s, he was a frequent and valuable presence at the Met, at a time when there were many other fine tenors on the roster. But on this occasion, it seems that events conspired against Barioni. The scheduled Cavaradossi for the broadcast was the immortal Swedish tenor Jussi Björling. But Björling was indisposed, and replaced by Barioni. On the Thursday evening prior to the Saturday afternoon broadcast, Barioni had sung Alfredo at the Met, alongside Renata Tebaldi and Ettore Bastianini. The lack of appropriate rest, the last minute call to come to the rescue, and the responsibility of replacing an artist of Björling's stature seem to have been too much for the 26-year-old Barioni. Act I is marred by intonation problems, choppy phrasing, and pinched high notes. Acts II and III proceed in much better fashion, but overall, this broadcast hardly finds Barioni in optimal form. Still, the performances of Mitropoulos, Albanese, and Warren, in tandem with excellent comprimario work (including an especially well sung and characterized Sacristan by Gerhard Pechner), make this *Tosca* worth hearing. And if you are an Albanese fan, you won't want to miss her in such vocally authoritative and dramatically commanding form. The recorded sound is excellent; even better than the *Traviata*. And if I can't quite say the sound is equal to studio recordings of the time, that is only because we have now entered the era of some opulent studio productions from the likes of such companies as Decca. Still, this is an important and thrilling document. And if you want to explore more of Mitropoulos's work in Puccini's *Tosca*, a January 7, 1956 Met broadcast with Tebaldi, Tucker, and Warren, issued by various labels specializing in live performances, is a must. Likewise, a November 21, 1959 Met performance offers the opportunity to hear Mitropoulos collaborating with Jussi Björling as Cavaradossi. Mary-Curtis Verna is the Tosca, and Cornell MacNeil the Scarpia. The latter is part of a marvelous 6-disc IP tribute to Björling (*Fanfare* 44:2, Nov/Dec 2020).

IP includes additional Albanese performances at the conclusions of both Met broadcasts. First is a 1959 Lewisohn Stadium performance of the Act II Manon/des Grieux duet ("Tu! Tu! Amore tu!") from Puccini's *Manon Lescaut*, with both Albanese and Tucker in prime form, and singing and emoting for all its worth. Next, IP combines Albanese's studio recording of Norina's Act I aria with a May 16, 1946 broadcast performance of the ensuing Malatesta duet from Donizetti's comic opera *Don Pasquale*. Albanese sings the music with a beguiling lightness of touch, humor, and vocal flexibility. The Malatesta is the

legendary Italian baritone Giuseppe De Luca, 69 years old, but in fine voice, and ever the master of bel canto style. The appendix to the *Tosca* broadcast opens with Albanese's heartfelt, beautifully sung, and idiomatic studio recording of "Depuis le jour" from Charpentier's *Louise*. The recital concludes with excerpts from a December 8, 1957 Carnegie Hall concert, a joint opera recital with baritone Guy Richard Gordon. The excerpts on this set include all those in which Albanese participated. In the various arias, Albanese masterfully bridges the Classical style of Mozart's *Don Giovanni* to the Romantic/Verismo world of *Mefistofele*, *Adriana Lecouvreur*, and *Suor Angelica*. In the latter repertoire, Albanese proves that she, like Magda Olivero, well understood how to intensify passionate expression to the brink, without ever descending into bombast. In the *Traviata* duet, Gordon sings with security as Germont. He is no Leonard Warren, either in voice or dramatic bearing, but Albanese holds up the side for both. The Carnegie Hall audience, no doubt gathered to pay tribute to Albanese, is ecstatic throughout. The recorded sound for all the bonus material is quite fine.

The set's booklet includes lively and informative commentary from William Russell, full plot synopses, Richard Caniell's Recording Notes, and artist bios. There are also some lovely photos. I am grateful to Richard Caniell and IP not only for their devotion to great artists of the past, but for the care they take in selecting material that does those artists full justice, and presenting that material in its best sound possible. The IP Albanese set documents a singular vocalist at the height of her powers, sharing her artistry with those who adored her the most. I am grateful for the opportunity to have heard this set, and I suspect many of you will be as well. Enthusiastically recommended.

5 Stars: The great and beloved Licia Albanese, at the height of her powers and artistry

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By Henry Fogel
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This generously filled 4-CD set is titled *Licia Albanese: A Tribute*. Because it preserves a major Puccini role that she never recorded commercially, the set becomes essential for fans of the Italian soprano. In addition, the booklet contains a perceptive essay by William Russell tracing Albanese's career, analyzing the performances, and exploring some of the politics involved in working with the Met's dictatorial manager, Rudolph Bing. Some of announcer Milton Cross's commentary is also included, maintaining the atmosphere of the

Met's Saturday afternoon broadcasts. This has been tracked separately, so you can easily choose to skip it.

Albanese is an artist that I have always loved, though not for purely vocal reasons. Her lyric soprano could not be described as a naturally beautiful instrument, and she could not float ethereal *pianissimi* the way Renata Scottò could in her best years. What made Albanese great was her ability to marry text and music to achieve dramatic truth. Her particular vocal qualities made her almost unsurpassed at portraying fragility. She could inflect a phrase to amplify its emotional meaning without going so far as to destroy the musical line. Her rapid *vibrato* gave the voice character, and she varied the *vibrato* intelligently for dramatic effect. She never sounded like a singer portraying a character; instead she *was* the character.

Her Violetta has become famous through the radio broadcast recording on RCA of *La traviata* with Toscanini. The notes in the booklet explain the circumstances that led to what some of us find to be a rather inflexible and sometimes hurried pace from the conductor (having to do with NBC Network time limitations). Here, the conducting of Cesare Sodero, while lacking the overall sweep of Toscanini, gives Albanese room to bend phrases a bit more. In the first act she thins her tone noticeably to suggest Violetta's illness, particularly in "Ah, fors'è lui," but then she brightens it for "Sempre libera." The *coloratura* demands are managed more than adequately, and more importantly, Albanese makes the runs fit into the musical line rather than sounding like mere vocal displays.

In the second act her scene with Germont is heartbreaking. Leonard Warren rises to the occasion not only with resplendent singing, but with much more care for the drama than he is often given credit for. The two play off each other brilliantly. Later in the act, at "Amami, Alfredo," Albanese explodes with a desperate passion. Her reading of Germont's letter in the last act is powerful without being hammy (as it often is). In the recitative that connects this spoken part to "Addio del passato" Albanese produces a remarkable *diminuendo* to lead into the aria. Violetta's overwhelming sadness is vividly communicated through inflection, color, and dynamic shading. All is made believable because the one thing Albanese virtually never does is overact.

The rest of *La traviata* is worthy of the soprano's performance. I've already alluded to Warren's Germont. His "Di Provenza" benefits from one of the greatest Verdi baritone voices of the middle 20th century, but it is so much more than just resplendent singing—Germont is trying to comfort his son and at the same time express a father's regret at all that has happened in the half hour leading up to this moment. In contrast, Warren's explosion at Alfredo at the end of the party scene in the third act is overpowering.

Richard Tucker would not be the first singer who comes to mind for Alfredo. His sometimes explosive way of singing can overwhelm what is essentially a lyric tenor role. Tucker is mostly on good behavior here, producing a genuine *legato* in "De miei bollenti spiriti" and occasionally sounding tender when required. There are moments when he distorts the line (he should have

taken lessons from Albanese in how to provide intensity within the framework of a lyrical passage), but the sound itself is glorious, and there is much that is thrilling.

The rest of the cast are all Met regulars from the era, and the then-traditional cuts are employed. Sodero's conducting is knowledgeable, idiomatic, and supportive of his singers without losing momentum. If it lacks the stamp of personality, neither does it hinder the flow of the score. Immortal Performances has transferred the material very well, and the result is good 1940s monaural broadcast sound.

As fine as *Traviata* is, the 1957 *Tosca* is even more important, because this is the only representation we have of Albanese in the title role. *Tosca* is generally thought of as a role for *spinto* or dramatic sopranos. Renata Tebaldi and Leontyne Price were celebrated in it, and of course there is the *sui generis* recording by Maria Callas. Yet Albanese was so at home with Puccini's musical language that she made the part work for her more delicate voice.

In his superb program notes Russell remarks, as an example of her dramatic skills, on the intelligent characterization Albanese gives in the three cries of "Mario" at her entrance. He points out that most sopranos sing all three with much the same inflection and color, at most varying only the dynamic as *Tosca* approaches closer. Albanese gives each one a meaning. The first is a bit timorous or coy, the second glowing with warmth, and the third slightly hardening with impatience. Her skill at characterization continues through the duet, where Albanese alternately depicts jealousy, tenderness, and coquettishness.

She makes a major moment of *Tosca*'s scene with Scarpia in the first act finale, where Albanese and Warren give a preview of the sparks they will ignite later in act 2. *Tosca*'s despair, anger, and deeply felt pain are all movingly conveyed there. By the mid-1950s Albanese's tone had become a bit drier, which is not surprising after two decades of operatic singing that was consistently impassioned. It is still identifiably her distinct sound, though, and still a pleasure to listen to.

In the confrontation between *Tosca* and Scarpia that fills most of act 2, Warren's Scarpia is highly nuanced, avoiding the expected traditional gestures. A striking example is the line "Basta, Roberti," which is almost always snapped sharply. Scarpia, still hoping to seduce *Tosca*, might very well speak the line gently, as Warren does here. It is one of many instances of the singer's original thinking and keen dramatic instincts. To hear vocal acting at this level with so sumptuous a voice is a rare privilege.

Daniele Barioni's Cavaradossi is not at the level of the other two principals. He was a last-minute substitute for Jussi Bjoerling. Except for a flatted final "Vittoria," there are no lapses vocally. What Barioni lacks is a voice of unique beauty or the level of musical and dramatic imagination exhibited by Albanese and Warren. He tends to sing in the dynamic range between *mezzo forte* and *fortissimo*. However, it a strong, healthy *spinto* tenor voice, and he sings the role well enough in a straightforward manner.

The other important ingredient is the conducting. Dimitri Mitropoulos manages to encompass the full range of emotion Puccini depicts in the score. Immortal Performances has transferred the broadcast very well, with a clarity that unfortunately gives more presence to an overly enthusiastic prompter.

A major bonus is the collection of arias and scenes that Albanese sang at a Carnegie Hall concert on December 8, 1957. Her performances of "L'altra notte infondo al mare" from Boito's *Mefistofele* and Adriana's first-act aria from Cilea's *Adriana Lecouvreur* are incredibly moving. As with the *Tosca*, one recognizes that the timbre has lost some of its sheen, but she is still able to color it with precision to give meaning to every phrase. Donna Anna's "Or sai chi l'onore" is not as successful. Albanese's voice and approach are too forceful for the music. Also included from this concert is the scene between Violetta and the elder Germont, with a baritone named Guy Richard Gordon, about whom I could find almost nothing in a quick Internet search. I will confess that I found little value in this scene given the extraordinary performance of it in the complete opera. The concert featured the Symphony of the Air conducted sympathetically by Jonel Perlea, and the rest of the program, not captured here, featured some orchestral pieces, and baritone solos for Mr. Gordon.

The duet from Puccini's *Manon Lescaut* is sung by Albanese with Richard Tucker in a 1959 Lewisohn Stadium concert from New York City. The performance is thrilling, if somewhat roughly vocalized. The *Don Pasquale* excerpt includes much of act 1, scene 2, brought together by combining an RCA recording of Norina's aria with a radio WOR program (*Song Treasury*) from 1946 where Albanese is paired with Giuseppe De Luca. It's delightful to hear these two professionals have fun with Donizetti's score, but it must also be admitted that De Luca was well past his best years and Albanese's approach to the music seems to my ears a bit too forceful.

However, do not let a few small reservations stand in your way. The main components of this set are irreplaceable treasures. As is this label's custom, the lavish 56-page booklet contains wonderful photos, Russell's commentary, detailed and instructive plot summaries of the two operas, and insights about the recordings by producer Richard Caniell.