

VERDI *Un ballo in maschera* • Ettore Panizza, cond; Stella Roman (*Amelia*); Josephine Antoine (*Oscar*); Bruna Castagna (*Ulrica*); Giovanni Martinelli (*Riccardo*); Richard Bonelli (*Renato*); Metropolitan Opera Ch & O • IMMORTAL PERFORMANCES 1174-2, mono (2 CDs 156:42) Live: Metropolitan Opera, New York, 2/28/1942

& **STELLA ROMAN & RICHARD BONELLI** Arias from *La forza del destino*, *Zaza*, *I Pagliacci*, *Die Todt Stadt*. Various orchestras and conductors

By Ken Meltzer
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Immortal Performances (IP) presents a February 28, 1942 Metropolitan Opera broadcast of Verdi's *Un ballo in maschera*. I have not previously heard this broadcast. Paul Jackson does include it in his marvelous book *Saturday Afternoons at the Old Met*. According to Bill Russell, the author of the booklet notes for the IP set: "It amazes me that this fine performance hasn't been circulated more widely. The only previous ones have been an EJS set and an indifferent CD by an amateur." In his Recording Notes, IP's Richard Caniell describes the challenges presented by his source material:

an off-the-air recording set done on acetate discs, many of which had their surface degenerated over the years and which had some of the discs repeatedly played by the owner so as to be excruciatingly noisy. The discs had pitch defects, acres of grit, forests of ticks and pops, levels which repeatedly lapsed 4 to 5 dB either up or down, this the result of the recordist monitoring the input, turning the level down every times he heard a loud sound, then turning back up, often too much, so that the next turndown would be more extreme.

Over the past five years or so, Caniell made several (and for him, unsatisfactory) attempts to restore the recording for public consumption. In 2022, Caniell was finally able to create a restoration that he deemed "listenable", allowing nonetheless for continued issues of volume level and surface noise. What Richard Caniell has achieved is a sound document that is far more than adequate to enjoy what is both a truly great performance and important historic document. It is true that the sound quality is inferior to commercial recordings of the time. And yes, surface noise rears its head throughout the broadcast. But through it all, the voices emerge with admirable presence, clarity, and tonal richness. And those voices are quite special, indeed.

The cast is led by the Riccardo of the veteran Italian tenor Giovanni Martinelli. With regard to Martinelli's long and glorious Met career, Verdi's *Un ballo in maschera* occupies an interesting niche. Martinelli sang a total of four Met performances of *Ballo*, and they were separated by more than a quarter century. The first two took place on January 14 and February 5, 1916. The final pair occurred on February 5 and 28, 1942; the latter being the broadcast issued by IP. According to a writer for *Variety* who reviewed the February 5, 1942 performance: "The opera was to have been dropped from the repertoire, but was carried when Giovanni Martinelli experienced phenomenal success in it in Chicago last November, leading to his being assigned the lead part." At the time of the 1942 performances, Martinelli was 56, and had been singing at the Met for almost

three decades. During that tenure, Martinelli performed the most demanding roles, including Verdi's *Otello*, one of the great interpretations by any 20th century tenor. Martinelli had also sung Wagner's *Tristan*—in Chicago, but not at the Met, where Lauritz Melchior reigned supreme as heldentenor. A review of Martinelli's series of Met *Otello* broadcasts from the late-30s to the early-40s suggests a steady and noticeable decline in vocal resources, although certainly not in artistry and commitment to the music and drama. What then to expect from the veteran Martinelli, in his sixth decade, singing Riccardo, a role that overflows with gorgeous melody, youthful romantic passion, and at times, delightful humor?

What we get is a brilliant performance; indeed, a vocal miracle. Martinelli's immediate Met predecessor as Riccardo was the great Swedish tenor Jussi Björling. We are fortunate that Björling sang in a December 14, 1940 Met broadcast of *Un ballo in maschera*. Both IP (IPCD 1033-2) and Pristine Audio (PACO 140) have issued excellent restorations of this broadcast. As I wrote in my review of the Pristine Audio release (*Fanfare* 41:3, Jan/Feb 2018): "Björling, 29 at the time of the Met broadcast, is in prime, youthful vocal estate. Throughout, the tenor demonstrates a breathtaking vocal ease, freedom, and tonal beauty. And while the voice is not large, it seems to ride easily over the orchestra into the expanse of the Metropolitan Opera House." I'm not sure anyone (including Giovanni Martinelli) has ever sung Riccardo as beautifully as Jussi Björling does on this occasion. And even in the prime of his youth, Martinelli's voice did not possess the radiant, silvery quality Björling maintained throughout his life. But Martinelli brings his own strengths to the role. First and foremost, Martinelli is in remarkable form. The voice rings out with confidence and security throughout the registers. Also notable is Martinelli's willingness to explore a diverse palette of dynamics and vocal colors. As Martinelli's performances of *Otello* demonstrated, he was a master at wedding crystal-clear diction to a vocal line teeming with expression. Martinelli's astounding breath control allows him to sustain long phrases, even within the context of expansive tempos. Riccardo's first extended solo "La rivedrà nell'estasi," is a notable case in point. The intensity of Riccardo's passion for Amelia, culminating in a superb rendition of their great love duet "Teco io sto," is never in doubt. And Martinelli splendidly embodies Riccardo's infectious sense of humor. Who would ever anticipate that a great *Otello* and *Tristan*—and one nearing 60 years of age—would be so masterful in such lighthearted moments as "Ogni cura si doni al diletto" or "È scherzo, od è follia"? And yet, Martinelli is as convincing in the opera's lighthearted moments as in the serious/tragic. And in one sense, Martinelli does vocally outdo Björling. In the 1940 Met broadcast, Björling (as was his custom) omits Riccardo's great and fiercely demanding final act aria, "Ma se m'è forza perderti." Martinelli restores that aria to Met performances, and sings it with all the feeling and authoritative vocalism one could desire. In Riccardo's death scene, Martinelli's genius in tragic expression that made him a singular *Otello*, comes to the fore. How lucky we are to have this document of Martinelli toward the end of his storied Met career, still in fine vocal estate, and offering an unforgettable performance of one of Verdi's greatest tenor roles.

The Amelia, Stella Roman, is in admirable form for this broadcast. At times, the Romanian soprano suffered from occasional vocal insecurities, including vagaries of pitch. None of that is present in the 1942 Met *Ballo*. Roman sings gloriously, and with

the utmost feeling. Like Riccardo, Amelia is a highly taxing role, but Roman overcomes all obstacles with breathtaking ease. And Roman sculpts the music with the utmost care, sensitivity, and passion, convincingly depicting Amelia's desperate plight. Zinka Milanov is at her peak in the 1940 broadcast with Björling. But in the 1942 broadcast, Roman is every bit Milanov's equal. The American baritone Richard Bonelli (born George Richard Bunn) is excellent as well. Like Martinelli, Bonelli was in his 50s at the time of the broadcast (he was born February 6, 1889). Bonelli remains in prime form, lavishing his vibrant and handsome baritone, complete with ringing high notes, on the role of Verdi's Renato. In the great aria "Eri tu," Bonelli expertly couches Renato's anger and remorse in a nobility of utterance. In her brief appearance, Bruna Castagna possesses both the dramatic and vocal depth to make Ulrica an imposing and memorable figure. Soprano Josephine Antoine is a delightful, vocally assured Oscar. Ettore Panizza, then the Met's leading conductor of Italian repertoire, sculpts a propulsive, taut performance. Within that framework, Panizza allows his singers ample space for expression. Panizza is masterful in such moments as the orchestral introductions to Act I, sc ii, and Act II, each masterfully sculpted to achieve a fever pitch. In the opera's finale, Panizza, the soloists, and Met Chorus offer a rapt account of the ensemble attending Riccardo's death, a precursor to Verdi's great *Requiem*.

As a bonus, the second disc concludes with operatic excerpts sung by Stella Roman and Richard Bonelli. Roman is excellent in two excerpts from a 1943 Met *Forza*. Bonelli is likewise impressive in an aria from Leoncavallo's *Zaza*. Bonelli's rendition of the *Pagliacci* Prologue, recorded when the baritone was in his 60s, is richly vocalized, but less secure in pitch. No such problems are evident in his lovely performance of Pierrot's *Tanzlied* from Korngold's *Die tote Stadt*. Roman is likewise alluring in that opera's "Glück das mir verblieb." Bill Russell's booklet notes include commentary on Verdi's *Ballo*, the opera's performance history at the Met, and the featured broadcast. There is a full plot synopsis, Richard Caniell's Recording Notes, and artist bios and photos. Thanks to IP for restoring this historic Met *Ballo* in sound that allows complete enjoyment of its special qualities. Recommended.

Five stars: The veteran tenor Giovanni Martinelli shines in a 1942 Met *Ballo*

Review by Henry Fogel
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Producer Richard Caniell is upfront about the sonic problems he faced in restoring this historic Metropolitan Opera broadcast. Over the years he started and gave up on the project a number of times. The result is still beset by problems in the original source that could not be eliminated. The reason for going to so much trouble comes down to one thing: Giovanni Martinelli."

Martinelli was 56 at the time of this performance in February 1942 and had been singing at the Met for almost three decades, but he was still one of the most important tenors in the house's Italian wing. *Un ballo in maschera* was absent from the Met between 1916 and 1940. Martinelli shared the role of Riccardo with three other leading

tenors, Caruso in 1916, Jussi Björling and Jan Peerce in the 1940s. The result is that he only sang it four times: twice in 1916 and twice in 1942, including this broadcast. Because it is the only opportunity we have to hear Martinelli in the role, opera lovers owe Immortal Performances a debt of gratitude.

While it is true that there is a hardness to Martinelli's timbre that wasn't present to the same degree in the 1920s and 30s, it is also true that he delivers grand-opera singing on a scale that few before or after him could. He was born and debuted in Italy, but he chose to make the bulk of his career in New York, singing 926 performances of 36 roles over 32 years at the Met. Despite the dramatic force that often defined his singing, Martinelli was also capable of a true *cantabile* and demonstrates it in Riccardo's last-act aria, "Ma se m'è forza perderti" (this is the character's main aria, yet for reasons unknown, Björling always cut it).

Martinelli is a passionate partner with soprano Stella Roman's Amelia in their big duet, and he admirably lightens his tone in the first act. Roman was Romanian, born Florica Viorica Alma Stela Blasu in 1904, who competed with Zinka Milanov for dramatic soprano roles at the Met. Her voice is not as distinctive as Milanov's, and every once in a while there is an intonation issue, but on the whole Roman makes a fine impression. She was a true dramatic soprano, with appropriate weight to the voice and a shining top. In addition, she characterizes the music dramatically, memorably depicting Amelia's fears in the aria "Ma dall'arido stelo divulsa".

As Renato, baritone Richard Bonelli (1889–1980), an American born Richard Bunn, was a much finer singer than his lack of recognition might lead you to believe. His chief competition was Lawrence Tibbett in the first part of Bonelli's career and the young Leonard Warren and even younger Robert Merrill near the end. He sang with a vibrant, ringing tone and a natural feeling for the shape of the Verdi line. Today he would be a star.

The acclaimed Italian mezzo-soprano Bruna Castagna (1905–1983) was one of the Met's great mezzos during the decade when she sang in the house (1934–1945) before prematurely retiring at age 40 without explanation. The richness of Castagna's voice was almost of contralto quality, and she sang with urgency and ringing tone. She makes Ulrica's one big scene into a highlight.

The smaller roles are also very well taken. Josephine Antoine's Oscar is delightful. Norman Cordon (Sam) and Nicola Moscona (Tom) provide firmly sung and strongly characterized performances as well.

Caniell in his recording notes is more critical of Ettore Panizza's conducting than I would be. I find his leadership dynamic if perhaps a touch too intense. It still has warmth and lyricism, and the performance as a whole is never dull the way so many routine Met performances could be.

Immortal Performances is always generous in filling its CDs, and here we get some lovely bonus material. Four arias sung by Bonelli are from an LP recital on the rare Sparton label, while Stella Roman's *Forza* scenes are from a 1943 broadcast conducted by Bruno Walter (I'd love to hear the rest of that). The highlight, though, is Roman's beautiful singing of Marietta's Lied from Korngold's *Die tote Stadt* on a Los Angeles Philharmonic broadcast from 1950 led by Artur Rodziński.

There is no denying that some patience is required to listen through the sonic issues on this *Ballo* broadcast including some congestion and constricted dynamic range,

but there is also no question that the effort is worth it to get a fuller picture of the career of one of the great tenors of the 20th century, as well as of the Met's Italian wing in the 1940s.

Immortal Performances recordings are available through their website, immortalperformances.org.