

BIZET *Carmen* & • Lorenzo Molajoli, Carlo Sabajno, cond; Gabriella Besanzoni (*Carmen*); Ines Alfani Tellini (*Micaëla*); Aureliano Pertile (*Don José*); Benvenuto Franci (*Escamillo*); La Scala Op O & Ch • IMMORTAL PERFORMANCES 1175-2, mono (2 CDs: 157:50)

& DONIZETTI *Lucia di Lammermoor*: *Sulla tomba* (Pertile; Anna Rosza).  
GIORDANO *Andrea Chénier*: *Vicino a te* (Pertile; Margaret Sheridan)

Ken Meltzer  
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A new release from the Immortal Performances (IP) Heritage Series presents a composite recording of Bizet's *Carmen*, sung in Italian. The source materials are two La Scala studio releases:

1931 (Victor): Carlo Sabajno, conductor; Gabriella Besanzoni (*Carmen*); Piero Pauli (*Don José*); Maria Carbone (*Micaëla*), Ernesto Besanzoni (*Escamillo*)

1932 (Columbia): Lorenzo Molajoli, conductor; Aurora Buades (*Carmen*); Aureliano Pertile (*Don José*); Ines Alfani Tellini (*Micaëla*), Benvenuto Franci (*Escamillo*)

In his liner notes, IP's Richard Caniell describes his experiences with both sets. In particular, Caniell focuses on his great admiration for Besanzoni's *Carmen*, and dislike for Pauli's *Don José*: "I thought since about how much better this Besanzoni *Carmen* set would be if it were fused with the Columbia set, but the undertaking was beyond my capacities." But over time, such a project became feasible, leading to this Heritage Series release. I'll quote Caniell's explanation of his general methodology: "In short, Pertile, Franci and Tellini were brought into the Voce del Padrone/Victor recording. The passages heard with them offer Molajoli and La Scala forces; all else is Sabajno with the same La Scala forces." Caniell adds:

When I did finally work on a fusion, the difficulties were multiplied by the fact that I didn't like the voice of the baritone singing Moralès to Tellini's *Micäela* in the first scene of the Columbia set, so I brought in the Moralès from the Victor recording. This is in addition to bringing the Victor set *Frasquita-Mercédès-Remendado* and *Le Dancaïre* into the Columbia set, because they had to be heard with her in the Act II quintet.

Caniell has done a superb job in achieving a convincing, unified performance from the two recordings. To some degree, he was aided by the nature of the recordings themselves. The 1931 Victor and 1932 Columbia releases document the La Scala forces in fine performing mettle, and adopting similar approaches to Bizet's masterpiece. As a result, even the moments where Caniell juxtaposes line-by-line exchanges between Besanzoni (Victor) and Pertile (Columbia) have a convincing sense of pace and flow. And while yes, this is due in great part to the similarities of the two recordings, it is also testament to Caniell's artistic sensitivity when splicing of the fragments into a continuous entity. This is true

both in terms of the music's pacing, and the sonic platform Caniell achieves. With regard to the latter, Caniell has restored the La Scala recordings in a manner that allows full enjoyment of the vocal and instrumental timbres. Both the singers and orchestra emerge with striking presence. In short, if you share Caniell's strong conviction that Besanzoni's Carmen and Pertile's Don José belong together (and, to a lesser degree, that they should be joined by Tellini's Micaëla and Franci's Escamillo), acquire this set with the confidence that your wishes will be fulfilled, and in a most impressive and satisfying fashion.

There is no question that Gabriella Besanzoni is one of the most vocally impressive Carmens on records. It is a rich and sensuous voice with true alto depth and color, with thrilling ease and power in the upper register as well. Carmen was one of Besanzoni's signature roles, and her experience and authority are evident throughout. This is a Carmen fully aware and confident of her seductive powers. Besanzoni's Carmen is constantly amused at the extraordinary spell she casts over men. Besanzoni rarely displays flashes of anger. Quite the contrary, the smile in her voice is evident, often erupting into outright laughter. In the final scene, Besanzoni is implacable, and her loss of interest in José is palpable. She embodies the notion: "the opposite of love isn't hate, it's indifference." Contrast that with mezzo Aurora Buades, the Carmen on the 1932 Columbia set. To be sure, Buades does not possess Besanzoni's opulent vocal gifts. But she is an accomplished and secure singer in her own right, who presents a quite different take on Bizet's Carmen. In Buades's portrayal, Carmen is a mercurial, emotional individual. And in the final scene, Buades and Pertile both raise the tension to the breaking point, turning *Carmen's* final scene into a harbinger of the Turiddu-Santuzza confrontation in Mascagni's *Cavalleria rusticana*. Pertile's desperation becomes something quite different when juxtaposed with the Besanzoni's granite stoicism. Both versions work, but I think everyone should hear the Buades-Pertile original.

I agree with Richard Caniell that Piero Pauli as Don José is a poor match for Besanzoni, and that Aureliano Pertile offers a much more worthy alternative. Pauli is provincial both in vocal quality and interpretation. Pertile, on the other hand, was one of the great tenors of his era. Which is not to say that Pertile is above criticism; quite the contrary. Without question, Pertile's voice is powerful and dynamic, employed in a most expressive manner. But the texture of that voice has a grainy quality that can at times devolve into a spread, unfocused tone. And Pertile is often willing to disturb a legato, flowing line with sobs and other methods of over-emphasis. There are most certainly numerous examples of these techniques in Pertile's Don José. But there are also moments of arresting poetry, including a "Flower Song" in which Pertile demonstrates how to sculpt an aria so that it emerges as an inexorable crescendo to the emotionally shattering climax. I don't think Pertile's Don José in the 1932 Columbia recording offers his finest or most imaginative work. For that, I'd recommend his complete La Scala recordings of Verdi's *Aida* (1928) and *Il trovatore* (1930), as well his versions of the *Tomb Scene* from Donizetti's *Lucia di Lammermoor* and the "Improvviso" from Giordano's *Andrea Chénier*. And among Pertile's great recordings, his duets with soprano Margaret Sheridan also deserve pride of place. Although born and raised in Ireland, Sheridan possessed both the vocal

gifts and temperament that made her an ideal operatic match for Pertile in Italian repertoire. An excerpt of Giordano's *Andrea Chénier* conclude this two-disc Heritage Series release. But even if the *Carmen* does not represent Pertile at his artistic zenith, it is a fine document of a committed and thrilling artist, and in heroic voice.

The choice of Benvenuto Franci over Ernesto Besanzoni (Gabriella's brother) as Escamillo is also well-justified. Neither Ernesto Besanzoni's voice nor interpretation does much to suggest Escamillo's bravado. The opposite is true of Franci, whose vibrant and focused baritone is aligned with a swashbuckling rendition of the "Toréador Song" that fully embraces the heroic and romantic narrative. In the case of the two Micaëlas, it's a closer call. Ines Alfani Tellini has a lovely and bright lyric soprano that she employs with admirable feeling and artistry. In both voice and bearing, she is eminently suited for the role. Maria Carbone offers a richer and more mature vocal quality, although she was only in her early 20s at the time of the recording. It's a voice perhaps more attuned to dramatic repertoire, and Carbone would go on to distinguish herself in the title roles of Richard Strauss's *Salome* and *Elektra*. Carbone, who sang in the world premieres of Gian Francesco Malipiero's *Ecuba* and *Antonio e Cleopatra*, was a noted exponent of contemporary repertoire. Carbone recorded infrequently, and her contribution to the Besanzoni *Carmen* is well worth hearing. But I certainly don't fault Richard Caniell's preference for Tellini's admirable Micaëla.

Toscanini's reign as La Scala Music Director ended just a few years before the Victor and Columbia recordings. The precision and rich, focused sonorities of the La Scala Orchestra and Chorus evident on the recordings suggest Toscanini's influence. Carlo Sabajno and Lorenzo Molajoli both lead propulsive and stylish accounts. Their notable and expert use of rubato, as well as portamenti, greatly add to the period flavor of these recordings. One gets the sense that *Carmen* was an opera central to all the featured performers' artistic worlds. The booklet includes Caniell's detailed and eloquent explorations of Bizet's opera, the two featured recordings, and the thought process behind this Heritage Series release. There is also an in-depth plot synopsis of *Carmen*, and artist photos and bios. I think I could make a strong argument for a restoration of the 1932 Columbia as is, with Besanzoni's contributions to the 1931 Victor serving as an appendix. But what Richard Caniell has achieved with this Heritage Series *Carmen* is, I think, fully defensible on artistic terms. And Caniell has realized his concept with brilliant technical aplomb. Recommended.

5 Stars: A dream Italian *La Scala* *Carmen* from Immortal Performances

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Review By **Henry Fogel**  
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This is a release in Immortal Performances' Heritage Series, where producer Richard Caniell brings together singers from different recordings in

order to achieve an ideal cast, one that could have been achieved by the recording companies at the time but wasn't. In 1931 RCA recorded *Carmen* with Gabriella Besanzoni in the title role. Although they had the great Italian tenor Aureliano Pertile under contract at that time, the label chose a far lesser singer, Piero Pauli, for Don José. One can only presume that he came at a much lower fee. Pertile was so angered at being passed over that he went over to Columbia Records, which in 1932 recorded his Don José with the Spanish mezzo-soprano Aurora Buades in the title role. Lorenzo Molajoli conducted the Columbia set, Carlo Sabajno the RCA. I would have thought it impossible to achieve the sense of a flowing performance by stitching the two together, but I was wrong. The two conductors have similar approaches to the score, and one cannot really hear meaningful differences between them.

The real value of this set is that it preserves Besanzoni's fine *Carmen* with a tenor worthy of her. Her RCA partner, Pauli, had a voice two sizes too small for the role and a whiny tone as well. Besanzoni's performance is above all beautifully sung. Buades, Pertile's *Carmen* for Columbia, was not such a sharp drop in quality, but there is no denying Besanzoni's superiority. Of course, as was the norm, we get Guiraud's sung recitatives, but this is a gripping, passionate rendition of the opera. As was also the norm in Italy, it is sung in Italian.

Besides placing Besanzoni's portrayal in a more enjoyable setting opposite Pertile, Caniell has inserted Benvenuto Franci, the superior Escamillo, and Ines Alfani Tellini, the preferred Micaëla, into the RCA recording. He details his changes in his informative recording notes. The majority of the performance is conducted by Sabajno, but all of the music involving those three singers is led by Molajoli.

Besanzoni was a true contralto, and the rich, dark colors of her voice, and the evenness of her vocal production, add up to a *Carmen* of great beauty. This is not to shortchange her dramatic abilities. She is particularly seductive, in an understated alluring way, in the *Seguidilla*, for instance, and persuasively sarcastic taunting Don José in the second act. But what really stays in the memory is the rightness of the voice for the role. Besanzoni's is the kind of sound I have always imagined for *Carmen* but very rarely encountered.

Pertile is a powerful Don José. His voice and style are more Italianate than French, but I find him completely convincing in the role. He is very musical as well as dramatically persuasive, and one can easily understand why Pertile was a favorite of Toscanini's. His rhythmic sense is firmer than with many tenors, and the voice rings with authority. Every note Pertile sings has presence and meaning.

In the scenes *Carmen* and Don José together, Caniell employs what must have been dozens of edits, but they are inaudible. In the tragic final scene, Pertile is more excitable than Besanzoni (that scene with Pertile and Buades is truly on fire), but it works here—*Carmen* resolutely holds her ground as her former lover loses his grip completely. Obviously, in the parts where *Carmen* and Don José sing simultaneously, Caniell had to choose one version over the other, usually preferring the recording of the voice that dominates at that moment. All I can say is that I listened closely, expecting to find nits to pick, and I could not.

Caniell's other editorial choices were also the right ones. Benvenuto Franci from the Pertile set is surely the preferable Escamillo to Besanzoni's brother

Ernesto. Franci is not the most imaginative vocal actor, but his is a major baritone voice, rich in color and founded on a particularly smooth legato. As Micaëla Ines Alfani Tellini produces a sweet lyric soprano, without the edge of Maria Carbone from Besanzoni's set.

I refuse to engage in the argument against making a recording with a cast that never recorded the opera together. I find it a silly discussion. Immortal Performances has given us the possibility to hear what could and perhaps should have been, a *Carmen* from 1930–31 that is ideally cast. If you choose to reject the concept, that's fine—no one is being forced to listen. For me, all that counts is what the result sounds like. The two duets from *Lucia di Lammermoor* and *Andrea Chénier* with Pertile are a lovely bonus.

As is usual, Immortal Performances' booklet contains thorough and provocative notes, in this case by Caniell entirely, along with biographies and wonderful historic photos.