

GIUSEPPE DI STEFANO: A Tribute • IMMORTAL PERFORMANCES 1158-5, mono (5 CDs, priced as 4) (6:21:01)

Donizetti

L'ELISIR D'AMORE (Scenes)

(these excerpts are apparently all that have survived)

Nemorino (Giuseppe di Stefano), Adina (Marisa Morel), Gianetta (Lucie Mayer),
Dr. Dulcamara (Fritz Ollendorf), Sgt. Belcore (René Chambaz)
L'Orchestre de la Suisse Romande / Otto Ackermann
3 September 1944
Radio Lausanne

Lehár

PAGANINI (abridged)

Paganini (Di Stefano), Princess Maria Anna Elisa (Andrée Walser)
Marchese Giacomo Pimpelli (Claude Maréda), André Wachomuth (solo violin)
L'Orchestre de la Suisse Romande / Victor Desarzens
rec. RSR Studio, Lausanne - 13 September 1946
Sung in French

BONUS

Mascagni: Serenata; Falvo: Dicitencello vuje; Bianca: La Leggenda del Pastore
Henri Ottone, pf
Recital 28 June 1946

Bizet: Pecheurs de Perles: Del tempo al limitar
with Luigi Marchio, baritone - rec. 26 March 1945

Puccini

IL TABARRO

Michele (Marko Rothmüller), Giorgetta (Marise Morel), Luigi (Giuseppe di Stefano), Il Tinca (Carlo Barbessa),
Il Talpa (Renè Shambex), La Frugola (Marie Louise Rochet), Venditore di canzonette (Bruno Manazza)
L'Orchestre of Radio Lausanne / Otto Ackermann
rec. 18 February 1945

DI STEFANO FIRST RECORDINGS

with Henri Ottone and Edoardo Moser, pf
rec. 1944-45

CIOFFI *Na sera e maggio*. **BELLINI** *Fenesta che lucive*. **TOSTI** *Ideale. L'ultima canzone*. **BIZET** *Les pêcheurs des perles: Je crois entendre encore*; **MASSENET** *Manon: En fermant les yeux*. **Werther: Pourquoi me réveiller**. **CILEA** *L'arlesiana: È la solita storia*. **MASCAGNI** *L'amico Fritz: Ed anche beppe amò*

Donizetti

LA FAVORITA

Fernando (Giuseppe di Stefano), Leonora (Giulietta Simionato),
Baldassare (Cesare Siepi), Inez (Rosa Rodrigues),
Alfonso, Il Re (Enzo Mascherini) / Renato Cellini
Chorus and Orchestra del Palacio de Bellas Artes
12 July 1949

Bonus: RAI CONCERT - 26 NOVEMBER 1956

Giuseppe di Stefano - Giulietta Simionato
Orchestra of RAI, Milano / Nino Sanzogno

ROSSINI *L'Italiana in Algeri: Amici, in ogni evento. Tancredi: O Patria! Dolce e ingrasta patria!. Il barbiere di Siviglia: Una voce poco fa*. **GIORDANO** *Andrea Chénier: Un di all'azzurro spazio*. **PUCCINI** *Turandot: Nessun dorma*

GIUSEPPE DI STEFANO 1949 NBC CONCERT

Ivor Newton, pf
Orchestra Hall, Chicago

THOMAS *Mignon: Elle ne croyait pas*. LALO *Le Roi d'Ys: Vainement, ma bien aimée*. DONIZETTI *La crepuscule*. SMETANA *The Bartered Bride: Jenik's Aria*. TCHAIKOVSKY *Eugene Onegin: Lensky's Aria*. PUCCINI *Turandot: Nessun dorma*. TRAD *Muttetti di lu Paliu*. BARRERA *Adiós Granada*. CARDILLO *Core 'ngrato*.

RAI - TORINO CONCERT

8 December 1952
Orchestra Sinfonica di Torino della RAI / Oliviero de Fabritiis

DONIZETTI *La Favorita: Ah mio bene, un diot'invia*. PUCCINI *Turandot: Nessun dorma*. FLOTOW *Martha: M'appari*. PONCHIELLI *La Gioconda: Cielo e mar*.

RAI - TORINO CONCERT

9 November 1953
Orchestra Sinfonica di Torino della RAI / Oliviero Fabritiis

GIORDANO *Andrea Chénier: Come un bel dì di maggio*. MASCAGNI: *Iris: Apri la tua finestra*. VERDI *La forza del destino: O tu che in seno agli angeli*. BELLINI *I puritani: Vieni fra questa braccia*¹⁸

Henry Fogel

FANFARE March / April 2022

This extraordinary set brings together many performances from the early portion of the career of Giuseppe di Stefano. If you ever had doubts, this compilation confirms that di Stefano was truly one of the great singers of the 20th century, based on a number of factors. At the core is a uniquely beautiful lyric tenor voice coupled with a fine innate sense of phrasing and a special ability to float the head voice with the kind of beauty that makes you catch your breath. The criticism most often made is that by undertaking heavy roles di Stefano shortened his career. In his very thorough and informative booklet essay, William Russell spends some time on that subject, and while I think he may be a bit more generous to the tenor than I would be, understating somewhat what I hear as problems in later di Stefano recordings. However, Russell offers a very knowledgeable perspective. Leaving aside what would happen in the future, this set presents early-to-middle performances from 1944 to 1956, when di Stefano was 23 to 35 years old. From the beginning his singing displayed a quality of beauty found in very few singers in a generation.

Much of this material has circulated, although in all cases Immortal Performances' sound is superior to earlier issues. In addition, there is one recital that I have not encountered before, an NBC radio broadcast of a concert the tenor gave in Chicago's Orchestra Hall in 1949 with pianist Ivor Newton. It contains some of the finest singing in the set.

Di Stefano was drafted into the Italian army in 1941, at the age of 20. A lieutenant with a taste for music used various tricks to keep the tenor away from combat, feeling that di Stefano was likely to turn into a major talent. When Mussolini's government collapsed and the Germans occupied Italy, he escaped to Switzerland, where he was interned in a refugee camp. Permission was granted for him to leave camp, however, in order to appear in concerts. The artistic director

of Radio Lausanne, Edoardo Moser, hired di Stefano for his first professional engagements (Moser accompanies him in a broadcast recital that was preserved and is part of this set).

The collection begins with a few excerpts from a 1944 Swiss Radio broadcast of Donizetti's *L'elisir d'amore*. I'm glad they exist, but they are afflicted with all kinds of noise from the original source, and Nemorino's great aria, "Una furtiva lagrima," is unfortunately not among the fragments that survived. It is an important document, but the real listening pleasure begins later. What comes next is a Swiss radio broadcast from 1946 of an abridged version of Lehár's operetta *Paganini*. It has been issued before on the Preiser label but with overly filtered sound. The present version is far preferable. The role of Paganini was composed with Richard Tauber in mind, and di Stefano clearly revels in Lehár's lush melodies. The performance is sung in French; the other singers are adequate, and Victor Desarzens' conducting is idiomatic. There is more pleasure to be had from this recording than was evident on Preiser.

The rest of the Swiss Radio material would be stunning even if you did not realize that the singer was only 23 or 24 years old. The complete broadcast of Puccini's *Il tabarro* was previously issued on CD on the Vocal Archives label, a division of the Italian company Fono. But the sound was cramped and pitch often incorrect. Those flaws have been corrected here, even though there is little Immortal Performances could do with the cramped and noisy original recording. Otto Ackermann's taut, dramatic conducting and di Stefano's passionate singing are the highlights. There is also much to be said for Mark Rothmüller's Michele as well. Soprano Marisa Morel is somewhat squally as Giorgetta.

After *Il tabarro* the recorded sound becomes good enough to truly enjoy. The 1944 and 1945 Swiss recital performances demonstrate all of the di Stefano virtues, a combination of passion and imagination hard to believe from a singer so young. He floats some exquisite head tones in the arias from *Les pêcheurs de perles*, *L'arlesiana*, and *Manon*. Already, at the very beginning of his career, he shows not only the distinctive and beautiful timbre that was to distinguish him, but also the personality that poured out from the start. Every aria and song on the early recitals is sung with "face", that is, a distinctive unmistakable sound, along with a commitment to communicate the essence of the music and the drama. There is one rarity here that I had not encountered before: a lovely recording of "Au fond du temple saint" from *The Pearl Fishers*, with a rich-voiced baritone named Luigi Marchio.

As di Stefano's career grew rapidly, he became a regular at Mexico City's Palacio des Bellas Artes. The recording of Donizetti's *La favorita* (the Italian version of the original French *La favorite*) has circulated for decades on a number of labels. Until now the best was the Myto version, but this new one is in a completely different league. Many pitch issues have been corrected, and in general the sound here is fairly clear and in no way an obstacle to enjoyment, something that one has been unable to say before. The style of the performance is sometimes as much *verismo* as it is *bel canto*, but there is no denying the beauty and dramatic thrust of the singing. One evening in Mexico City in 1949 brought together three great singers: Giulietta Simionato and Cesare Siepi along with di Stefano. Enzo Mascherini's Alfonso is no better than routine, but from the others we get grand opera at its grandest. The audience demands, and gets, an encore of the second verse of "Spirto gentil." A phrase that has often been used to describe di Stefano's singing is "honeyed tones." Virtually his entire performance in *La favorita* can serve as a definition of the term.

La favorita is followed by an Italian radio concert from November 26, 1956, the latest item in the set, shared between Simionato and di Stefano. Although Simionato was largely known as a Verdi mezzo, she was also considered in her day an important Rossini singer. Her approach to Rossini's *coloratura* would not be considered first-rate today, but she did lighten her voice somewhat. Otherwise, Simionato demonstrates appropriate coyness in arias from *L'Italiana in Algeri*, *Tancredi*, and *Il barbiere di Siviglia*. We also see from this recital that di Stefano was already beginning to add the more dramatic roles to his repertoire, as evidenced by the two arias from *Andrea Chénier* and *Turandot*. We get the last of three performances of "Nessun dorma" in the collection, but it also seems to be the most comfortable.

After the RAI concert comes the great discovery in the set, the 1949 Chicago recital, which was broadcast by NBC. Immortal Performances has retained the NBC announcer, giving us the flavor of the broadcast (this material is tracked separately in case you want to skip it). Some of the most beautiful singing I have ever heard from di Stefano is contained in this recital. The hushed *pianissimi* of the arias from *Mignon* and *Le Roi d'Ys* are so lovely that they are difficult to describe. The application of *rubato* is generous, but it always sounds right, because of the naturalness of his way of shaping the flow of the line. Two di Stefano rarities, arias from *The Bartered Bride* and *Eugene Onegin* are also beautiful. I think the poorest of the three versions of "Nessun dorma" is this Chicago one, however; di Stefano sounds like he's being stretched, even though he's singing with piano and not orchestra. By the way, Ivor Newton's accompaniments are well above average. Di Stefano's singing of a traditional Sicilian folksong, "Multtetti di lu Paliu," is one of the highlights of the set with its extraordinary breath control and dynamic shading. The sound quality of the Chicago recital is less than ideal, but it cannot hide the greatness of the singing.

Other highlights include two RAI concerts from 1952 and 1953, which bring an exceptional rendition of "Cielo e mar" from *La Gioconda*. Listen to the way he expands the phrase at the end of the first verse, carrying it into the second. The soft singing at the outset of "O tu che in seno agli angeli" from *La forza del destino* is also the kind of magic that stays long in memory.

His critics accused di Stefano of crudeness, and there are signs of it here and there throughout these five generously filled discs. He does rather attack Bellini's lines in the *I puritani* duet with Margherita Carosio (who sings attractively). However, as soon as you hear something that might make you wince (and there is really very little of that), you immediately hear all the qualities that distinguish di Stefano, a combination that rarely comes together in one singer, especially the firmly focused, unique timbre that is identifiable as soon as one hears two notes. It merges brilliance and force with sweetness and a warm glow. This set is a wonderful tribute to him and will provide much pleasure to opera lovers.

As usual, Immortal Performances provides a luxurious booklet (52 pages) with stimulating articles and wonderful photos.

GIUSEPPE DI STEFANO: A Tribute

Ken Meltzer

FANFARE March/ April 2022

In a lavish 5-disc (priced as 4) release, Immortal Performances (IP) celebrates the voice and artistry of the legendary Italian tenor Giuseppe Di Stefano (1921-2008). The IP tribute encompasses performances by Di Stefano spanning the years 1944-56, with a decided and welcome emphasis on recordings from the 1940s. In a previous release (1098-4), IP offered superb restorations of late 1940s Mexico City performances with Di Stefano in Massenet's *Manon* and *Werther*. In my review (41:4, Mar/Apr 2018), I wrote the following about Di Stefano's early years: "In his all-too-brief prime, Giuseppe Di Stefano had one of the most sensuously beautiful tenor voices documented on recordings. It is the kind of beauty that has the power to move listeners, this writer included, to tears. But there is so much more to savor. Di Stefano's diction, both in his native Italian, and French, was exemplary, a gift he used to the utmost dramatic and musical effect. The young Di Stefano also had a breathtakingly wide range of dynamics and colors, even when negotiating the most treacherous high notes. His diminuendo on the high C in the aria from Gounod's *Faust*, "Salut! demeure chaste et pure," featured on this set, is the stuff of legend. And as if all of these talents weren't enough, Di Stefano was an arrestingly handsome man, and a very fine actor in the bargain. Sad to say, the magic was all too short-lived. It was not long before di Stefano began to try his hand at more dramatic repertoire, mercilessly pushing his lyric voice. That, coupled with Di Stefano's open approach to the passaggio and high notes, exacted its toll. To make matters worse Di Stefano, by his own admission, was hardly the most disciplined individual when it came to pursuing a lifestyle and regimen that offered the greatest prospects for vocal longevity. By the late-1950s, much of the vocal luster, especially in the upper portion of the voice, was gone. Compare, for example, the 1953 EMI *Tosca* with its early-1960s Decca counterpart, with Leontyne Price in the title role, and conducted by Herbert von Karajan. In the latter, Di Stefano remains a charismatic, passionate Cavaradossi, but one who is a vocal shadow of the sublime tenor in the earlier recording. But before I become too judgmental of Di Stefano's life and career choices, it's appropriate to consider that had the Sicilian tenor pursued the straight and narrow in all matters, he perhaps might never have been the electrifying artist of those halcyon years. In any event, Giuseppe Di Stefano recordings from the mid-40s to early-50s are treasures to savor."

In that same review, I also commented: "The biography included in this Immortal Performances Massenet release claims Di Stefano's 'best years' were from 1947-1952. I'd go back just a bit further, to some amazing recordings of songs and arias Di Stefano made in Lausanne, Switzerland, in 1944. Although the recordings are rather primitive sonically, and employ piano accompaniment rather than orchestra, they capture a unique artist weaving his special brand of magic." I'm happy to report that the new IP Di Stefano release includes those 1944 recordings (along with some from 1945) at the close of disc 2. In those early recordings, we hear Di Stefano's voice in its freshest, most beautiful, and limpid estate. I doubt I've ever heard a tenor voice that is more ravishingly gorgeous than Di Stefano's as preserved on these discs. That alone would make them essential listening. But Di Stefano also phrases with the utmost imagination, applying light and shade throughout. With no need to project (or play to) a large hall and audience, Di Stefano sings with an intimacy and directness of communication that

makes one feel as if the tenor is singing for him/her alone. These were clearly single-take affairs, and there are occasional, and very slight, vocal imperfections. But those “flaws” only add to the homemade charm. And I promise you will never hear Di Stefano (or any tenor) sing more beautifully. A lovely version of the great *Pearl Fishers* duet from that same period, with baritone Luigio Marchio, ends the first disc. IP’s restorations are excellent, and Di Stefano’s voice emerges with arresting beauty and presence. That kind of magic is replicated to a great degree in four excerpts from Donizetti’s *L’elisir d’amore* (Lausanne, September 3, 1944), an abridged version, sung in French of Franz Léhar’s *Paganini* (Lausanne, September 13, 1946), and excerpts from a June 28, 1946 song recital. It’s a shame that Nemorino’s “Una furtiva lagrima” is not among the surviving *L’elisir* excerpts, but what remains is pure gold. Likewise, Di Stefano exudes charm and vocal splendor in a role Léhar originally composed for Richard Tauber. A February 18, 1945 Lausanne broadcast of Puccini’s one-act opera *Il tabarro* documents Giuseppe Di Stefano in verismo repertoire. As such, it requires the young tenor to sing with greater vocal force and volume than in the music I’ve already discussed. Di Stefano sings with uncompromising vocal and dramatic commitment, and, I’m glad to report, without any sense of strain. The makings of Di Stefano’s gripping Cavaradossi in the iconic 1953 EMI *Tosca* with Maria Callas and Tito Gobbi, and conducted by Victor de Sabata, may be heard here. Baritone Marko Rothmüller as Michele rises to the occasion in his great aria, and the chilling final scene. Soprano Marise Morel as Giorgietta has temperament to spare, and the kind of prominent, focused vibrato much more common in Italian artists of a bygone era. The *Paganini* is in very fine sound, the *L’elisir* and *Tabarro* excerpts, less so. But Di Stefano’s vocalism justifies their presence, too.

The other complete opera included in this release is a July 12, 1949 Mexico City performance of Donizetti’s *La Favorita*, co-starring Giulietta Simionato, Enzo Mascherini, and Cesare Siepi, with Renato Cellini, conducting. In his Recording Notes, Richard Caniell describes the immense undertaking involved in correcting the source material’s ever-deviating pitch, missing sections, etc. The result of IP’s labor is a recording that, while inferior to the era’s commercial issues and finest broadcasts, nonetheless allows us to enjoy the abundant vocal riches. I must confess that I found this *La Favorita* a mixed bag. Everyone is in splendid voice, and giving his or her all. But that, to some degree, is also the shortcoming. Yes, it is thrilling to hear these artists lavish their opulent voices on Donizetti’s melodies. But there is also far more subtlety and variety to be found in the score. On the other hand, when I hear Di Stefano’s glorious rendition of “Spirto gentil” (complete with an encore of the second verse), or the great final duet with Simionato, I feel somewhat guilty suggesting any criticism at all. I certainly would not want to be without this performance, and I am thankful IP presents it in much improved sound. After the conclusion of *La Favorita*, a November 26, 1956 RAI concert features Simionato in Rossini, and Di Stefano in music from Giordano’s *Andrea Chénier* and Puccini’s *Turandot*. By this stage, the stress Di Stefano is placing on his lyric tenor voice is evident, but his performances are nonetheless both poetic and thrilling. The recorded sound for this recital is quite fine.

A 1949 aria and song recital from Chicago finds Di Stefano not only in supreme voice, but in great spirits as well, as the tenor has a marvelous time interacting with a boisterous audience that includes many of his fellow Sicilians (whom the tenor acknowledges). It's also wonderful to hear Di Stefano's versions of Jenik's and Lensky's arias from Smetana's *The Bartered Bride* and Tchaikovsky's *Eugene Onegin*, both sung in Italian. The pair of RAI Torino concerts from 1952-3 that conclude this release also provide a wealth of treasurable listening. Once again, Di Stefano ventures into more dramatic music, including several excerpts from verismo operas. As the 1956 RAI broadcast suggests, such repertoire would, over time, take its toll on Di Stefano's voice. But in the 1952-3 broadcasts, Di Stefano is at the top of his form, singing with golden tone and vocal abandon, wed to imaginative and passionate phrasing. Ebe Stignani and Margherita Carosio join DiStefano for duets from *La Favorita* and Bellini's *I puritani*. Fine broadcast sound for both concerts. William Russell provides extensive and lively commentary for the set's booklet, which also includes *Tabarro* and *Favorita* plot synopses, and Richard Caniell's recording notes. Perhaps Di Stefano's prime ended far too soon. But in that prime, there was no one better, something this IP tribute makes abundantly clear. Recommended to all fans of Giuseppe Di Stefano, and of the unique thrills that only the greatest tenors can provide.

5 Stars: The legendary Giuseppe Di Stefano in his unmatched youthful prime