

ELISABETH RETHBERG: A Tribute • Elisabeth Rethberg (sop); Various artists • IMMORTAL PERFORMANCES 1137-2 mono (2 CDs: 144:31)

PUCCHINI *La bohème*: Acts I (almost complete) and III (complete) (Vincenzo Belezza, cond; Elisabeth Rethberg (*Mimi*); Nina Morgana (*Musetta*); Frederic Jagel (*Rodolfo*); Giuseppe de Luca (*Marcello*); Millo Picco (*Schaunard*); Ezio Pinza (*Colline*); Metropolitan Op O. Live: New York 3/23/1935).

MOZART *Don Giovanni*: Excerpts (Ettore Panizza, cond; Elisabeth Rethberg (*Anna*); Richard Crooks (*Ottavio*); Metropolitan Op O. Live: New York 1/14/1939).

HALÉVY *La Juive*: Act II (Gaetano Merola, cond; Elisabeth Rethberg (*Rachel*); Charlotte Boerner (*Eudoxie*); Giovanni Martinelli (*Eléazar*); Hans Clemens (*Léopold*); San Francisco Op O. Live: San Francisco 10/13/1936).

VERDI *Un ballo in maschera*: Act II, scene 1 (Gennaro Papi, cond; Elisabeth Rethberg (*Amelia*); Jussi Björling (*Riccardo*); San Francisco Op O. Live: San Francisco Op 10/23/1940).

& Excerpts from *Madama Butterfly* and *Die Meistersinger*

Review by Henry Fogel

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What makes Elisabeth Rethberg one of the great singers in recorded history is first and foremost the classic virtues of her singing. Born in Schwarzenberg, Saxony in 1894, she reigned at the Metropolitan Opera as a leading *prima donna* from 1922 to 1942, singing a wide range of repertoire. One has to be careful in describing the “classic virtues” of an artist’s singing. This could be taken as code for “but not dramatically interesting.” Rethberg was never a dull singer, but she mainly made her dramatic points through musical means. One cannot point to a remarkable imagination in coloring the voice or a highly individual turn of phrase, as one might with Maria Callas or, closer to Rethberg’s own time, Claudia Muzio. She communicated the meaning of the words through the push and pull of subtle rubato, through a wide range of dynamic shades, and by varying the intensity of tone. John B. Steane, in his classic book *The Grand Tradition*, writes of her singing that “it makes its expression through the purest musical beauty.”

This valuable set brings us some remarkable examples of Rethberg's singing in live performances. Some of the material has been issued before, but often incorrectly pitched and never sounding as good as it does here. The scenes from *La bohème* from a 1935 Met broadcast will require some patience with occasional intrusions of static or noise that could not be removed. But I cannot state strongly enough how important it is to listen through the problems; most listeners with a tolerance for historical vocal reissues should be able to do so.

The *Bohème* excerpts include all of act I except for the final duet, "O soave fanciulla," which has been lost to history, as have acts II and IV. But act III is complete. These extended excerpts give us an opportunity to hear Rethberg develop a character in a way quite different from recording a single aria in a studio.

In the scene where Rodolfo and Mimì first meet, leading up to "Che gelida manina," Rethberg is sweet and flirtatious. In the third act, she vividly characterizes Mimì's anguish and conflicted feelings, and Rethberg does this with ultimate respect for the notes and phrases Puccini crafted. At the height of her anguish in "Donde lieta" she pours out intensely ringing sound, with the urgency of emotion made very clear. It is also wonderful to have the first half of act I, before Mimì's entrance, which is vividly acted and sung by an outstanding male cast.

Any number of sopranos have sung successfully in Verdi, Wagner, and Mozart. However, I doubt there are many who sound equally at home as Aida, Elisabeth, and Donna Anna. Rethberg's way with the recitatives in the *Don Giovanni* scenes is entirely communicative, and her singing of "Or sai chi l'onore" and "Non mi dir" is technically secure and radiant. Received wisdom says that by 1939 her singing had slipped from its high standard, but these excerpts refute that. The legato line in "Non mi dir" is flawless and even. Her pacing of the bridge passage between the two sections of the aria is perfectly timed, and her comfort with the coloratura in the final section is complete. These scenes from *Don Giovanni* have never been issued before, and their discovery and the excellent reproduction would alone justify purchase of this set for what it adds to our knowledge of the soprano. A further joy is that it gives us the only combination ever released of Rethberg with the lovely tenor of Richard Crooks. (Collectors will be grateful that Immortal Performances included Ottavio's "Dalla sua pace.") Ettore Panizza's conducting is vital and supportive of his singers.

Only the second act of Halévy's *La Juive* from San Francisco in 1936 was broadcast. This is the act with the famed "Passover Scene," and Rachel's great

aria, “Il va venir!” It is a serious loss to posterity that the remainder of the performance was not preserved. Giovanni Martinelli is magnificent, singing with dramatic force and a soaring lyrical line. Rethberg is likewise superb, spinning out generous phrases and maintaining the glow of her tone unfailingly, while displaying a fluid technique. The original broadcast was savaged by Marcia Davenport, the writer who was also a tasteless radio commentator. I use that term because Davenport frequently spoke over the music, an unforgiveable intrusion. Immortal Performances has removed her from the opening moment (the first three chords repeat after a short orchestral passage, and producer Richard Caniell used them as replacements). Davenport also commented over applause, and she has been removed during the applause after Rethberg’s “Il va venir!” The singing of Martinelli and Rethberg here can serve as a definition of the term “grand opera.” Their voices throb with intensity while still accurately singing the notes. Prior releases of this broadcast on EJS and Voce LPs (Voce being superior in quality to EJS) retained Davenport’s commentary.

The second-act scene in *Un ballo in maschera* from 1940, with the glorious combination of Rethberg and Jussi Björling, was issued on the Guild label, at a time when Caniell was doing restoration for them. He has improved on his previous work, and the two singers come through very clearly. (In his recording notes Caniell describes what he had to do to rescue the scene.) The scene includes Amelia’s great aria “Ecco l’orrido campo. . . . Ma dall’arido stelo divulsa,” and the passionate duet with Riccardo beginning “Teco io sto.”

By 1940 there had clearly been some loss of richness in Rethberg’s voice, and I cannot pretend that her singing here is ideal. There remains, however, the core of a great soprano voice and a complete understanding of Verdi’s style. Along with that comes the kind of expressivity that occurs in live performances and rarely in the recording studio. The chance to hear her interact with Björling is a privilege. In the duet, one of Verdi’s most ecstatic, the two singers revel in its long-spun lines. We get admirably firm conducted by Gennaro Papi.

The two excerpts from *Madama Butterfly* come from a 1934 radio broadcast of scenes from the opera sung in English, with Richard Bentonelli as Pinkerton. The first is Butterfly’s entrance (complete with the appropriate chorus). Rethberg does not take the D \flat at the end of the scene, and I find her singing a bit too aggressive for the music. But immediately following is an extremely poignant and gloriously sung “Un bel di” (“One fine day” in this version), save for a somewhat forced final note. The scene from act III of *Die Meistersinger* derives mainly from an RCA

recording made in 1935. Because the recording omitted the important tenor part, Caniell has inserted Charles Kullman's lovely Walther from a 1939 Met broadcast. Rethberg's singing here is exquisite.

This set will require a tolerance for sonic deficiencies due to the condition of the originals. However, one should never take for granted what Immortal Performances offers. The quality of their transfers of historic recordings is at the highest level found anywhere. The production values are unique—the booklet with this set includes an insightful analysis of Rethberg's career and art by Dewey Faulkner, additional information and commentary by Caniell, and wonderful photos. The two discs are generously filled. Caniell must put in untold hours to make the improvements that he invariably achieves. His Tribute series devoted to individual singers is obviously a labor of love, and we are the beneficiaries.

Five stars: A loving tribute to one of opera's greatest artists

Review by Ken Meltzer

FANFARE November / December

A new two-disc release on the Immortal Performances label celebrates the artistry of the superb German soprano Elisabeth Rethberg (1894–1976). Rethberg, one of the leading sopranos of her era, enjoyed a sterling career at the Metropolitan Opera. Both Rethberg's Met debut, on November 22, 1922, and farewell, on March 6, 1942, were performances of one of her signature roles, Verdi's *Aida*. During her 20 years at the Met, Rethberg sang 350 performances of 29 different roles in the House and on tour. A survey of these roles indicates the breadth and variety of Elisabeth Rethberg's repertoire, spanning the works of Mozart to the contemporary operas of her day. Rethberg was equally adept in Mozart, Verdi, Wagner, and Puccini and his fellow *verismo* composers. Rethberg also numbered among her roles several heroines in French grand opera (Rossini's *Guillaume Tell*, Meyerbeer's *L'Africaine*, Gounod's *Faust*, and Halevy's *La Juive*). In addition to singing the title role in the June 6, 1928 Dresden world premiere of Richard Strauss's *Die ägyptische Helena*, Rethberg sang the U.S. premieres of Primo Riccitelli's *I compagnacci* (January 2, 1924) and Ottorino Respighi's *La compagna sommersa* (November 24, 1928), both at the Met, and the latter with the composer

in attendance. Rethberg's artistry was notable for many sublime elements, including a rich and beautiful soprano voice, in its prime absolutely secure throughout the registers, adept in coloratura, and able to encompass both lyric and lirico-spinto roles (a few unfortunate Met *Siegfried* Brünnhildes in 1942 proved to be beyond her limits). Rethberg was not known as an especially compelling stage actress, but her vocal interpretations are notable for their humanity, passion, and radiance, always within the confines of good taste and keen musicianship. Rethberg was a truly great artist, and that greatness is reaffirmed time and time again in this Immortal Performances release. And, typical of Immortal Performances' artistic mission and creed, the featured works not only celebrate Elisabeth Rethberg; they offer a treasured window into the artistry of many of her esteemed colleagues, as well as performance practices of the time.

The centerpieces of the IP Rethberg set are extended excerpts from Puccini's *La bohème* and Halévy's *La Juive*. The *Bohème* selections, comprising act I up to the conclusion of Mimi's aria, and all of act III, are from a March 23, 1935 Met broadcast. Richard Caniell and IP have done a miraculous job of restoring this 85-year-old sound document. Yes, the sound falls short of the commercial discs of the period. But the restoration is eminently listenable, and more than sufficient to reveal the many glories of the performance. Rethberg, in sumptuous voice, is the embodiment of Puccini's tragic heroine Mimì. At her entrance, Rethberg contrives both to sing beautifully, and to suggest Mimì's illness and frailty. Her interplay with Rodolfo is brimming with life and coquettishness. And true to Rethberg's form and artistry, she sculpts the great aria, "Sì. Mi chiamano Mimì" in such a fashion that the grand climax shines with the utmost splendor. In act III, Mimì's confessional to Marcello is that of a woman on the brink. The subsequent (temporary) reconciliation with Rodolfo therefore becomes all the more affecting. Frederick Jagel, a rather generic tenor (albeit an eminently reliable one) pales in comparison as Rodolfo to Rethberg's sublime Mimì. That said, the American tenor sings with technical assurance and no lack of involvement. Nevertheless, one can't help fantasizing about Rethberg's Mimì alongside the Rodolfos of Gigli, Schipa, or Lauri-Volpi. No such fantasies are necessary for the Marcello. In the 1935 broadcast, the great Giuseppe De Luca, 58 and still possessing one of most beautiful lyric baritones of the century, sings the role. In addition to his vocal splendor, De Luca is ever mindful of the text and music, offering a lieder artist's specificity in his delivery and characterization, but without a hint of artifice. Documents of De Luca in live performance are all too rare, and this is a treasure. And speaking of treasures, Ezio Pinza makes a brief but memorable appearance as

Colline. Vincenzo Bellezza's conducting is from a different era, the passing of which this writer laments. Bellezza is ever attentive to the singers and the flexibility of pacing (even from note to note) they require for individual expression. Nevertheless, the music has an admirable pacing and momentum throughout. The string portamentos further enhance the nostalgia and charm of this performance.

Act II of Halévy's *La Juive*, from a San Francisco Opera broadcast of October 13, 1936, is a priceless document as well. The spotlight first shines upon the great Italian tenor Giovanni Martinelli as Eléazar, conducting a Passover Seder with the kind of noble declamation and clarity of enunciation that would soon be hallmarks of his unforgettable assumption of Verdi's *Otello*. And in the bargain, we hear Martinelli in far fresher and more youthful voice than was the norm for him in the late 1930s and early 1940s. Rethberg's glorious participation in the Passover ensemble presages her singing throughout the act. She is in radiant voice, and the great aria "Il va venir!" makes the desired impact. The remainder of the cast—soprano Charlotte Boerner as Princess Eudoxie, and tenor Hans Clemens as Prince Leopold—both sing with distinction, and conductor Gaetano Merola offers a sensitive and dignified reading of Halévy's rich score. Guild Historical previously issued this *La Juive* act II as part of its *San Francisco Opera Gems, Vol. 2*. In the new IP restoration, the surface noise of the Guild set is noticeably reduced, and the voices emerge with increased clarity and warmth. The sound overall is quite fine, and will pose no hurdles for any listener. The remainder of the selections on this Rethberg tribute move from strength to strength. A January 14, 1939 broadcast of Mozart's *Don Giovanni* marks only one of two times Rethberg sang in a staged opera at the Met with the excellent American tenor Richard Crooks (the other was a January 5, 1939 performance of the same work). Disc 1 of the set concludes with several excerpts showcasing Rethberg's Donna Anna and Crooks's Don Ottavio, including the great arias "Dalla sua pace" and "Non mi dir." How wonderful to hear two great artists who are able to sing Mozart's music in a such a full-blooded, passionate, and vocally secure manner, but without ever exceeding the bounds of Classical elegance. The release of these excerpts is a world premiere on disc, and a most welcome one. Following the SF *La Juive* is another excerpt from the San Francisco Opera, an October 23, 1940 performance of the start of act II of Verdi's *Un ballo in maschera*. Rethberg sings Amelia's demanding gallows aria to perfection, her voice easily riding the climaxes. She is soon joined by Riccardo, here sung by the legendary Jussi Björling. The two embark upon a magnificent realization of one of Verdi's great love duets, with the music receiving all the vocal

splendor and passion it deserves, capped by a unison high C that is absolutely hair-raising. Once again, the sound on the IP release exceeds that of the prior *Guild San Francisco Opera Gems, Vol. 2* release. Next are two excerpts from a 1934 American radio broadcast, with Rethberg singing Cio-Cio-San's act I entrance aria, and "Un bel dì" from Puccini's *Madama Butterfly*. The excerpts are in English, although I was hard-pressed to divine that from Rethberg's delivery of the text. The singing, on the other hand, is glorious. The recorded sound is fine, too. And finally, there is an excerpt from the final act of Wagner's *Die Meistersinger*, a 1935 Victor studio recording of the touching exchange between Hans Sachs and Eva. Friedrich Schorr is in marvelous voice, and as ever the embodiment of the warm and noble Hans Sachs. Eva was a role made for Rethberg's gifts, and she is marvelous here. The commercial recording omitted Walther's lines, here filled in with style by Charles Kullmann from a 1939 Met broadcast.

As always, IP supplements its recorded treasures with first-rate printed materials. Dewey Faulkner offers a detailed and informative appreciation of Rethberg, as well as IP's documentation of her artistry via numerous recordings. There are plot synopses for the *Bohème* and *La Juive* excerpts, as well as Recording Notes by Richard Caniell. Artist photos and bios round out the booklet. This is in every way a marvelous tribute to an artist of the highest stature. Brava, Mme. Rethberg, and bravo, Immortal Performances.