

**EILEEN FARRELL: A Tribute** • Eileen Farrell (sop); various artists • IMMORTAL PERFORMANCES 1155-3, mono (3 CDs: 202:54)

**ROSSINI *Otello*** Arnold Gamson, cond; Thomas Hayward (*Otello*); Eileen Farrell (*Desdemona*); Martha Lipton (*Emilia*); Loren Driscoll (*Rodrigo*); Giuseppe Baratti (*Gondoliero*); Hugh Thompson (*Iago*); Chester Watson (*Elmiro*); American Op Society O & Ch. Live: Carnegie Hall, New York, 10/10/1957

**WAGNER *Tristan und Isolde, Act II*** William Steinberg, cond; James King (*Tristan*); Eileen Farrell (*Isolde*); Nell Rankin (*Brangäne*); Robert Hale (*King Marke*); Boston S O. Live: Symphony Hall, Boston, 4/21/1972

& **BONUS:** Arias and scenes from **GLUCK *Alceste***. **MASCAGNI *Cavalleria Rusticana*** (with Richard Tucker, Mildred Miller, and Lili Chookasian). **VERDI *La forza del destino*** (with Richard Tucker, Robert Merrill, and Jerome Hines). **WAGNER *Tristan und Isolde***

By Henry Fogel

FANFARE November / December 2021

This is a wonderful tribute to a great American soprano whose career was not as big as her talent warranted. The set's principal component might well surprise many of Eileen Farrell's fans. I had no idea that she had ever performed in a Rossini opera, and I would not have predicted that she would be so successful at it.

Arnold Gamson and Allen Sven Oxenborg founded the American Opera Society in 1950, developing it into a highly respected organization that presented concert versions of operas that were largely unknown in the United States, often casting them with major artists. Gamson conducted most of the performances, and one of his favorite singers was Farrell. In 1957 the company produced Rossini's *Otello*, and it is that performance which is preserved here in fine monaural sound.

Beyond *The Barber of Seville*, Rossini operas in 1957 were rarities. This American Opera Society performance was one of *Otello's* first 20th-century revivals. While Rossini style has evolved a great deal since then, this account is lighter in touch than you might expect given the cast. Farrell displays an unexpected fluency in the coloratura demands of the role, and at the same time she envelops Desdemona in rich, shimmering tone.

Tenor Thomas Hayward sings the title role with a strong, firmly focused voice and equal ability negotiating the fioratura. He was a surprise for me. Although he enjoyed only a fairly minor career at the Met, this performance and William Russell's excellent notes make a strong case for the lack of imagination on the part of Rudolf Bing that limited both Hayward and Farrell's Met careers. Hayward here sings with a bright, well-focused tone and command of the idiom. He and Farrell may not resemble Juan Diego Flórez and Cecilia Bartoli with their

vocal agility, but they both sound completely at ease in the passagework required of them.

Desdemona's Willow Song and prayer are magnificently sung by Farrell. Throughout the opera she brings a gorgeous dramatic soprano to the music, and her agility will come as a complete surprise to many. The closest comparison I can come up with is Montserrat Caballé, another soprano with the heft to sing major Verdi roles and the technical skill to execute rapid passagework with ease. Farrell is careful to give meaning to the text. She is not simply singing notes on a page but bringing a flesh-and-blood character to life.

The rest of the cast is quite strong too. This includes the rich mezzo of Martha Lipton as Emilia and the warm lyric baritone of Hugh Thompson as Iago. In fact there is not a weak link in the cast. Note that Iago is sung by a baritone instead of Rossini's original designation of tenor. Arnold Gamson conducts a lively reading; even though its textures are a bit thicker than we associate with Rossini today, he keeps everything moving along while allowing his singers room to make their effect.

While this should not serve as anyone's sole recording of Rossini's *Otello*, it remains important as a representation of two important American singers, one of whom achieved greatness. (It is important to note that the opera is significantly abridged—somewhere in the vicinity of a full hour of music is missing, and numbers have been shifted from their original place in the score.)

The scenes from *Cavalleria rusticana* and *La forza del destino* underscore the fact that Farrell was one of the great dramatic sopranos of her era. All of her vocal attributes are evident in these two broadcasts: *Cavalleria rusticana* from 1964, *La forza del destino* from 1961. Her rich soprano retains its quality throughout its range, she has the power to ride over the full orchestra and the technique and intelligence to employ the full range of dynamics available to her. In the Santuzza-Turiddu duet she rises to the big climactic moments but also softens the volume and even the color of the voice to convey Santuzza's pleading with her lover. Many singers in the role (Milanov for one) sound like they are trying to overpower Turiddu; Farrell swings back and forth between anger and pleading, precisely the range of emotions we would expect from that character at that moment. Richard Tucker is his usual full-blooded self, and in brilliant voice. The curse that Farrell hurls at him at the conclusion of the duet is one of the most impassioned I have ever heard. From the way she screams "Bada!" I wouldn't have been surprised if Tucker had melted into a puddle on the stage.

Everything required for a Verdi dramatic soprano is to be found in Farrell's rendition of "Pace, pace, mio Dio." She could have occupied the same roles filled by Milanov, Price, Tebaldi, and later Caballé. Farrell's glowing voice fits Verdi's music perfectly, and once again she uses the full dynamic range available to her. The *crescendo* and *decrescendo* on the opening note of the aria are a model of how to start it, and the final high B1 is rock solid. Had she been given similar exposure in the Italian repertoire as the other sopranos just mentioned, experience would have led

her to develop her Verdian skills even further. As it is, this excerpt is absolutely marvelous. Russell's booklet essay contains informed speculation about the reasons for her underuse at the Met, all of which strikes me as reasonable. In the final trio from *La forza del destino* Tucker and Jerome Hines join Farrell with admirable sensitivity.

The third disc in this set presents Farrell in the Wagner repertoire with which she is most strongly identified. The strength of that association is amazing when you consider that she never sang a complete Wagner opera on stage. Hearing the second act of *Tristan und Isolde* from a 1972 Boston Symphony broadcast makes clear the depth of our loss. Farrell was 52 at the time and still in prime vocal condition. What she delivers here would have held its own even against Birgit Nilsson. Farrell sings with a resplendent glow to the tone, power to ride over a Wagner orchestra, delicacy to suggest Isolde's femininity, and great attention to details of text and rhythm. There are reasons that most of us will never understand what prevented her from the Wagnerian career she merited, but I will say without hesitation that this second act proves she had what it takes.

The beautiful flood of sound and her intelligent delivery of the text are simply thrilling. James King is a more than adequate Tristan, if not in Farrell's league for vocal greatness. Nell Rankin's Brangäne has real stature, as does Robert Hale's beautifully sung King Marke. William Steinberg and the Boston Symphony are impassioned partners for the singers. The final bonus of this set is the "Liebestod" from *Tristan und Isolde* as sung in a New York Philharmonic concert with Leonard Bernstein conducting. It is a thrilling conclusion to a thrilling set.

The one thing I could have done without is "Divinités du Styx" from Gluck's *Alceste*, the role of Farrell's 1960 Metropolitan debut (the broadcast is from February 11, 1961). Kurt Adler's conducting is awful here. The slow tempo, the thick textures, the weighty rhythms all bog the aria down, but it does serve as a souvenir of Farrell's first Met role.

I've already commented on the excellent notes by William Russell. All there is to add is that the usual extras from Immortal Performances, including artists' bios, plot summaries, and lovely historic photos, are present. The sound quality throughout is very good, with the *Tristan* excerpts in stereo.

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**By Ken Meltzer**

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Eileen Farrell (1920-2002) was one of the greatest and most versatile American sopranos of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Farrell's voice was remarkable for its power and beauty. She was also a thoughtful and sensitive musician, an artist who excelled in

an extraordinarily wide range of music and styles. Farrell's classical repertoire spanned Handel's *Messiah* to Berg's *Wozzeck*. Eileen Farrell was also a singer capable of marvelous, idiomatic performances in popular fare. For those seeking an introduction to Eileen Farrell's gorgeous voice and remarkable artistry, I recommend starting with a 1957 EMI recital of opera arias, with Thomas Schippers conducting the Philharmonia Orchestra (reissued by Testament), and popular song albums Farrell recorded with Luther Henderson (Sony Classical). But there is so much more to explore and enjoy, including a compelling new issue from Immortal Performances (IP), *Eileen Farrell: A Tribute*. The three-disc set focuses on Eileen Farrell in operatic repertoire. Farrell's voice was ideally suited to the lirico-spinto and dramatic operatic repertoire, as demonstrated in her March 31, 1962 Met broadcast of Ponchielli's *La Gioconda* (IP IPCD 1130-3) (*Fanfare* Mar/Apr 2020, 43:4). But for various reasons Farrell preferred the concert stage, radio, and recordings to the opera house. And so, Farrell's Met career comprised only 44 performances in five different roles. Three of those roles (Gluck's *Alceste*, Leonora in Verdi's *La forza del destino*, and Santuzza in Mascagni's *Cavalleria rusticana*) are represented on this IP set.

The tribute opens with an October 10, 1957 American Opera Society Carnegie Hall performance of Rossini's *Otello*. While this *Otello* is an important part of Farrell's recorded legacy, it is by no means a complete performance of Rossini's opera. The score is severely cut (retaining about 90 minutes of an opera that borders on 3 hours when performed complete), with some music repositioned or repurposed. In addition, the tenor role of Iago is recast for baritone. But what remains is of considerable importance and interest. Farrell's contribution is stunning, a testament to what a remarkable artist she was. Farrell scales back her heroic voice to one of lyric dimensions, but without sacrificing any beauty, texture, or color. She sings Rossini's music with a gorgeous legato, intense feeling, and arresting precision in coloratura passages. *Otello* is the American tenor Thomas Hayward, an artist who, during his Met career, was a reliable artist in both comprimario and leading roles. Hayward's bright lyric tenor does not suggest the baritone qualities associated with Rossini's first *Otello*, Andrea Nozzari. But Hayward is quite impressive in Rossini's florid writing, his top is secure, and he sings with arresting dramatic commitment. Conductor Arnold Gamson leads a brisk and stylish performance, and the other principals acquit themselves in admirable fashion. The recorded sound is not the equal of contemporaneous studio recordings, but it offers more than adequate dynamic range, color, and detail. There is some congestion in louder passages. It must be reemphasized that the 1957 American Opera Society *Otello* is a severely abridged performance of Rossini's score. If you want to hear a full representation of Rossini's *Otello*, try the 1999 Opera Rara set, conducted by David Parry (Bruce Ford, Elisabeth Futral, William Matteuzzi), or a Dynamic release of a February, 2014 Antwerp performance, led by Alberto Zedda (Gregory Kunde, Carmen Romeu, Maxim Mironov). But fans of

Eileen Farrell will most certainly want this performance for her splendid contribution.

As an appendix to the *Otello* performance, IP offers excerpts from various Farrell Met broadcasts. First is the role of Farrell's December 6, 1960 Met debut, Gluck's *Alceste*. The February 11, 1961 broadcast is sung in English. Farrell's performance of the great aria "Divinités du Styx" exudes vocal splendor, Classical elegance, and regal bearing. Next is an April 11, 1964 broadcast of Mascagni's *Cavalleria rusticana*, with Farrell's Santuzza performing alongside Richard Tucker's Turiddu, Mildred Miller as Lola, and Lili Chookasian as Mama Lucia. Nello Santi conducts. This broadcast also featured *Cav*'s perennial companion, Leoncavallo's *Pagliacci* (Santi again the conductor), starring Franco Corelli (Canio), Lucine Amara (Nedda), and Anselmo Colzani (Tonio). Farrell's "Voi lo sapete" is magnificently sung, a riveting embodiment of Santuzza's desperation. That desperation continues in the great confrontation with Turiddu. Farrell's grasp of the *verismo* idiom is evident throughout, capped by her electrifying delivery of the warning "Bada!" and curse "A te la mala Pasqua" that will make your hair stand on end. Tucker is fully engaged as well, both vocally and dramatically. By this stage of his career, Tucker often resorted to a chopped, percussive delivery of some text (especially penultimate syllables) for dramatic emphasis. Whether one finds this affect troubling or not, there is no denying the vocal authority and temperament Richard Tucker brings to the music. Both Miller and Chookasian are excellent, and Santi leads a propulsive and colorful account. From the December 30, 1961 Met broadcast of *La forza del destino*, Farrell delivers a superb "Pace, pace mio Dio". Farrell sculpts a ravishing crescendo and diminuendo for the opening "Pace." Throughout, Farrell sings with the utmost tonal beauty and sensitive phrasing. If she floated B-flat at the conclusion of "Invan la pace" does not have the ethereal magic of Zinka Milanov or Montserrat Caballé at their best, it is nonetheless lovely, and securely negotiated. The final "Maledizione!" is stunning in its vocal glory. For the concluding scene, Farrell's Leonora is joined by the Carlo of Robert Merrill (briefly), Richard Tucker's Alvaro, and Jerome Hines's Padre Guardiano. Major Verdi voices all, and it's a pleasure to hear them in this stirring music. Conductor George Schick and his vocalists are in sync, and the performance has the requisite momentum. Met radio host Milton Cross makes an appearance following the conclusion of the *Forza* performance. The sound for all the Met broadcast excerpts is excellent.

The second major component of the IP Farrell Tribute is an April 21, 1972 Boston Symphony Orchestra concert performance of Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde*, conducted by William Steinberg. American tenor James King and Farrell sing the title roles. Farrell is once again in glorious voice. It is true that on this occasion, the 52-year-old Farrell opts out of Isolde's high Cs when she and Tristan are reunited. But Farrell, always a sublime Wagnerian, sings gloriously; her delivery passionate, and bearing a tonal quality appropriate for the young heroine. James King—like Farrell, a distinguished Wagner interpreter—is in splendid voice. At his best (as on this

occasion), King was a compelling dramatic presence. This is a Tristan consumed with love for Isolde. Mezzo Nell Rankin is a marvelous Brangäne, fully engaged in her conversations with Isolde, and delivering a ravishing “Einsam wachend in der Nacht.” Bass Robert Hale sings with power and beauty, portraying an unusually sympathetic and human King Marke, a man who is clearly suffering his own emotional pain. The unifying forces in this sterling performance are Steinberg and the BSO. In addition to his talents as an orchestral conductor, Steinberg was a first-rate interpreter of operatic repertoire. Steinberg’s pacing of this pathbreaking score strikes me as approaching/achieving the ideal. The music neither drags, nor does it ever convey a sense of hurry. Steinberg is a master of the drama’s ebb and flow, repeatedly building the tension to a fever pitch. The Boston Symphony Orchestra plays with stunning beauty, precision, and virtuosity. The clarity of execution is such that we are able to hear numerous details often submerged in performance. The sound of the 1972 radio broadcast is marvelous, allowing us to hear every aspect of this magnificent performance. Longtime BSO host William Pierce is heard before and after the performance. The Farrell set concludes with a February 26, 1969 performance of the *Liebestod* with Leonard Bernstein and the New York Philharmonic. Prior to the familiar “Mild und leise”, Farrell sings a portion of Isolde’s address to Tristan immediately following his death (“Ich bin’s, ich bin’s”). This is music Farrell was born to sing; and she sang it often, and always with exceeding beauty, artistry, and passion. Bernstein and the NY Phil are ideal collaborators in this riveting, sensual performance. The broadcast sound is excellent.

William Russell’s extensive liner notes provide much valuable information on the featured artists, performances, and works. Synopses of Rossini’s *Otello* and Act II of Wagner’s *Tristan* are included. Artist bios and Richard Caniell’s recording notes round out the booklet. This IP tribute spotlights Eileen Farrell at the height of her powers, and in a fascinating variety of repertoire. All of the performances are essential hearing for admirers of Farrell. Those seeking to learn about this treasured American artist will benefit from the set as well. Enthusiastically recommended.

5 Stars: A superb tribute to the great American soprano Eileen Farrell