

CHARPENTIER Louise • Eugène Bigot, Thomas Beecham, cond; Ninon Vallin (Louise); Georges Thill (Julien); Ezio Pinza (Father); Various orchestras • IMMORTAL PERFORMANCES 1103-2 mono (2 CDs: 135:40)

& CHARPENTIER La chanson du chemin. La ronde des campagnons. A mules. Les cheveux de bois. Les yeux de Berthe. Sérénade à Watteau • Gustave Charpentier, cond; Germaine Feraldy (s); Jean Planel (t); Joseph Lanzone (br)

Review by Henry Fogel

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This is another release in Immortal Performances' *Heritage Series*, where producer Richard Caniell assembles what to him comes close to an ideal performance from different sources. In this instance, the result is glorious.

*Louise* is an opera that I find deserving of much better treatment than it has been given by history, and that includes how it has been treated on records. The first recording was a 1935 abridgement for French Columbia, under the "supervision" of the composer, with an ideal combination of soprano and tenor, but a weak bass-baritone (André Pernet) as Louise's father, a crucial role. Even worse, Columbia abridged the opera, eliminating approximately half of the music. In 1956, Philips made a recording well conducted by Jean Fournet, and with an idiomatic French cast. In some ways, that was a satisfying version, but none of the voices can be described as important; Berthe Monmart in the title role sings adequately, but with limited color and expression, and André Laroze's Julien is bland. Only Louis Musy as the Father turns in a performance that one remembers. In 1976 American Columbia issued a recording that looked promising on paper (Ileana Cotrubas, Plácido Domingo, and Gabriel Bacquier, conducted by Georges Prêtre), but it sounds as if everyone was sight-reading. There is no vitality to the performance, no sense that this group really believed in the opera. In 1978 EMI issued a better performance, sensitively led by Julius Rudel and well sung by Nicolai Gedda and José van Dam. But Beverly Sills was well past her best singing years, and the unsteadiness and hardness of tone makes for difficult listening. Then Erato released a live 1983 performance with Felicity Lott, Jerome Pruitt, and Ernest Blanc, with Sylvan Camberling conducting, which may be the best of the "modern" recordings. Also of interest is a 1943 Met broadcast released by Naxos, conducted by Thomas Beecham, with Grace Moore, Raoul Jobin, and Ezio Pinza. Moore is satisfactory in the title role, but no more. She doesn't seem able to vary the color and intensity of her voice.

However, the existence of that Met broadcast gave Richard Caniell, the proprietor of Immortal Performances, the opportunity to create a conflation that put the extraordinary Pinza into the 1935 recording in place of the ineffective Father portrayed by Pernet. Caniell's *Heritage Series* is quite open about the substitutions it makes, and he has received what I consider to be deeply unfair criticism for assembling casts that did not actually record the opera together. It is a complaint that I don't understand, simply on the grounds that he is upfront about what he does, and if you don't like the idea you won't buy the discs. You aren't being tricked in any way. For me, the idea needs to be judged on how successfully it has been executed, and as is usually the case with Caniell the execution is remarkable.

Pinza was one of the very greatest singers of the 20th century, and this was a role he sang often at the Met. What Caniell has done is to take Pinza from the Met recording and replace Pernet with him. What surprises is that Eugène Bigot and Thomas Beecham seem to have such a similar view of the score that one really cannot sense where the edits are between the two recordings, even in scenes between Louise and her father that switch back and forth often. In addition, Caniell took the act III Prelude from a 1930 recording conducted by Gustav Cloëz. That prelude was omitted on Columbia's original recording, a particularly stupid decision since it leads right into the opera's most famous aria, "Depuis le jour," and perfectly sets the mood for it. I don't know why Caniell chose the Cloëz reading over the Beecham, but it is a perfect match and he joins it into the introduction for the aria perfectly. Throughout I was amazed by the seamlessness of transitions, not only between different recordings but even the side-breaks from the original 78s. This has the flow and unity of an actual performance, and a great one at that.

This *Heritage* conflation offers most of the opera sung by what would be an ideal cast. A bit over a half-hour of music is missing, most of it from the third act, including some the "Coronation of the Muse" scene (edited by Charpentier for the original Columbia recording) and the final portion where Louise's mother convinces her to return home to her ill father (which was not recorded in the original). What is clear from this set is that no other soprano who has recorded the title role comes close to Vallin, musically or dramatically. The evenness of vocal production, seamless from bottom to top of her range, is one remarkable asset. The steadiness of tonal emission is a second. But most impressive is the way in which she inhabits the character. Hers is a performance distinguished by its dramatic sweep and urgency. There is not a single phrase that seems just note-spinning. Her third-act duet with Julien leaps out of the speakers, and she reflects through specificity of color and inflection Louise's inner conflict,

rebellious against the conventional upbringing from her parents while at the same time feeling love for them.

Georges Thill's Julien is a vivid demonstration of the reasons for the tenor's fame. Thill is sometimes criticized for being boring, but that is surely not the case here. Certainly much of his success is due to a remarkable technique and a strong, solid tenor produced in the French manner with almost unsettling ease. And while some of his aria recordings do seem too straightforward and lacking in the injection of a personal touch, that is not the case here. The ecstasy of the big second-act duet with Louise could hardly be exceeded while remaining faithful to the score. His sound manages to combine the virtues of the heroic and the lyric tenor in perfect balance.

The principal triumph of this set is the insertion of Pinza into the cast. As you listen you know, intellectually, where the edits must be that inserted him in place of Pernet, and you are sure you are going to be able to hear the edit. But you cannot. One cannot imagine the work involved in matching pitch, tone quality, recorded sound, but the result is so natural that if you didn't know better you would swear this was all a single recorded performance. Pinza is, as you would expect, a miracle of vocalism and dramatic force. His singing of the lullaby in the last act can be used by voice teachers as a demonstration of *cantabile* and *legato*, while at the same time conveying the love of father to daughter. Equally powerful is the scene at the end of act I, where Louise's Father tries to soothe her and make clear to her that he and Louise's mother have only her best interests at heart. It is an extraordinarily powerful and telling depiction of the intense emotions that underlie the moment. And, of course, his is a voice of authentic presence and impact, whether at *fortissimo* or *pianissimo*. Pinza's association with *Louise* went back to 1923–24 at La Scala, where Toscanini conducted the first French-language performances ever produced there, with Fanny Heldy and the great French basso Marcel Journet. After a few performances Journet left the cast and Toscanini chose Pinza to replace him.

The six bonus tracks contain six songs by Charpentier in recordings conducted by the composer. Two feature the well-known soprano Germaine Feraldy, three a lesser-known but fine French lyric tenor in Jean Planel. The remaining one features an also lesser-known baritone, Joseph Lanzzone. He too is of more than passing interest.

The sound quality is up to the high level established by Immortal Performances in the past, and no one with a tolerance for "historic" recordings should find anything to object to here. I was able to compare

what Caniell has achieved here with the sound on the original 78s, and he has actually improved the balance and orchestral color from the original. The booklet offers more than 50 pages of superb notes by Caniell, covering the opera itself and the details of the recording he has assembled. The booklet is, in fact, a major achievement in itself. He writes intelligently about the opera and the culture from which it sprung, and he includes wonderful photographs of the principal singers performing their roles as well as of Paris around the time of *Louise* (1900). Big commercial record companies do not produce booklets as informative and attractive as this. What comes across is his passion for *Louise*, a passion that I have always shared but which has been inflamed even more by this stunning compilation. Charpentier's score combines some of the essence of the French style we know from Gounod and Massenet with an almost Wagnerian weight. The orchestra plays a more important role here than it does in most French opera of the period, and the conducting of Bigot and Beecham is riveting in intensity. This is recommended with enthusiasm.

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Review by Ken Meltzer

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Gustave Charpentier's opera (the composer referred to it as a "roman musical") *Louise* premiered at the Paris Opéra-Comique on February 2, 1900. *Louise* was an immediate and great success, quickly becoming an important part of the central French operatic repertoire, although it has not fared nearly so well on this side of the Atlantic. In 1935 in Paris, French Columbia made a recording of *Louise*, supervised by the composer, and featuring two of the greatest French artists of the 20th century, Ninon Vallin in the title role, and Georges Thill as her lover, Julien. By this time, such iconic complete (or nearly complete) sets as the 1930 *Faust* with Vezzani and Journet, and 1931 *Werther* with Thill and Vallin had already been recorded in Paris, and issued. Nevertheless, Columbia chose a different course, and produced a heavily abridged version of *Louise*, conducted by Eugène Bigot. The recording stars Vallin in the title role, and Thill as her lover, Julien. Bass André Pernet and mezzo-soprano Aimée Lecouvreur sing the roles of Louise's Father and Mother. The excerpts on the Columbia recording focus upon the love story of Louise and Julien. In doing so, Columbia excised a good portion of Charpentier's score, including scenes devoted to the magic of his beloved Paris, and in particular Montmartre. The Columbia excerpts are just under 70 minutes, less than half of the complete score's total running time. In addition, scenes are often truncated in abrupt fashion in order to make way for the

succeeding recorded excerpt. However valuable the 1935 Columbia recording is for the composer's involvement, and the preservation of Vallin and Thill's glorious assumptions of the lead romantic roles, it fails to give anything resembling a complete picture of the score, and the magical atmosphere Charpentier weaves to cast his spell over lovers of French opera.

A new Immortal Performances *Heritage Series* release uses the 1935 Columbia recording as the foundation for a more complete and continuous "golden age" presentation of Charpentier's masterpiece. For the additional material, Richard Caniell turns to a wonderful February 20, 1943 Metropolitan Opera broadcast, conducted by Thomas Beecham, starring Grace Moore and Raoul Jobin. On that occasion, the role of the Father is sung by the legendary Italian bass Ezio Pinza. The broadcast captures Pinza in superb form, singing with glorious tone and immersing himself in the role of a character who is by turns sympathetic, loving, domineering, and even threatening. In various essays included in the booklet for the Immortal Performance release, Caniell expresses a strong preference for Pinza over Columbia's André Pernet, and his decision to use the Italian bass's rendition of the Father in the new *Heritage Series* release. I don't share Caniell's stated reservations about Pernet's Father. I find Pernet's voice to be warm and attractive, his French diction impeccable, and his understated interpretation effective in its own right. That said, I certainly find no fault with Caniell's decision to showcase Pinza's Father instead of Pernet's. Although Pinza was Italian to the core, he was also a frequent and distinguished interpreter of French opera. His Met career included several Gallic roles, including the Father in *Louise*. Pinza also sang that role, in French, at La Scala in 1923 under Toscanini's baton, with Fanny Heldy as Louise. As I mentioned, Pinza gives a magnificent performance in the 1943 broadcast. If his French diction is not quite so idiomatic as Pernet's, it is nevertheless precise, clearly articulated, and wedded to the music in loving fashion. There is no denying Pinza's charisma whenever he is on stage. And by using Pinza's 1943 broadcast performance, Caniell is able to expand the Father's presence in the performance beyond that featured in the 1935 Columbia release. And now I think is an appropriate time to note that Richard Caniell does a remarkable job of matching the source materials so that they weave seamlessly into each other. The back-and-forth argument between Vallin's Louise (Paris studio recording, 1935) and Pinza's Father (Metropolitan Opera broadcast, 1943) in the opera's final scene is a particular *tour de force* by Caniell. But the whole proceeds without calling attention to the different sources, and that, I think, is the highest compliment I could pay such a project.

Ninon Vallin and Georges Thill remain the touchstones for recorded interpretations of Louise and Julien. Both were able to combine their mastery of French style and language with the kind of warm beautiful tone, lyricism, and passion that might often be more associated with Italian repertoire. Such a combination ideally suits the young lovers who celebrate both their love for each other, and for Paris. Bigot and Beecham are both superb interpreters of Charpentier's score. Beecham, in particular, demonstrates a mastery of the group scenes that are his domain in this joint project. The various Met artists dispatch the numerous smaller roles with enthusiasm and character. The recorded sound, in addition to its remarkable consistency, is quite fine overall, with both the voices and orchestra emerging with admirable detail and color. Some applause from the 1943 broadcast adds to the atmosphere. There are several informative, thoughtful and passionately argued essays by Caniell that communicate his profound understanding and love for Charpentier's score. A plot synopsis and artist photos and bios are also included, but not the opera's French text or translation. Recordings of songs composed and conducted by Charpentier are the lovely appendix on the second disc. I do think it's worth hearing the 1935 Columbia excerpts as originally conceived. Both Nimbus and Naxos have issued fine CD versions of that recording. The Naxos release features more focused sonics, while the Nimbus includes a French libretto with English translation. Either release is more than adequate as a document of the 1935 project. But what Richard Caniell has achieved in the new *Heritage Series* release is a brilliantly produced set, starring a dream cast giving the performance of a lifetime of an opera that, like Paris, will never lose its power to captivate, charm, and seduce. Recommended.