

LEONCAVALLO *Pagliacci* • Genaro Papi, cond; Giovanni Martinelli (*Canio*); Queena Mario (*Nedda*); Richard Bonelli (*Tonio*); George Cehanovsky (*Silvio*); Metropolitan Opera Ch & O • Live: Metropolitan Opera, N. Y., 2/29/1936

VERDI *Aida* • Wilfrid Pelletier, cond; Zinka Milanov (*Aida*); Bruna Castagna (*Amneris*); Giovanni Martinelli (*Radamès*); Richard Bonelli (*Amonasro*); Norman Cordon (*Ramfis*); Metropolitan Opera Ch & O • Live: Metropolitan Opera, N. Y., 3/16/1943

**Bonus:** DONIZETTI *Lucia di Lammermoor*: Act I, Scene 1 • Richard Bonelli (*Enrico*); Ludovico Oliviero (*Normanno*) Live: Metropolitan Opera, N. Y., 2/3/1940

IMMORTAL PERFORMANCES 1108-3, mono (3 CDs: 225:51)

By Henry Fogel

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You might think of this package as having been assembled to honor and display the artistry of one of the most famous Italian tenors in recorded history, Giovanni Martinelli, and certainly it does that magnificently. But it accomplishes something perhaps more important—it reveals the greatness of the American baritone Richard Bonelli, a seriously under-recorded and undervalued artist. It was Bonelli's misfortune to overlap with another great (and more famous) American baritone named Lawrence Tibbett, and furthermore to be subject to personal favoritism that the Met's powerful general manager Edward Johnson extended to his friends, particularly John Brownlee. Brownlee's light baritone was well suited to Mozart, and he made a name for himself at Glyndebourne in major Mozartean roles. He and Johnson were close friends, and Johnson kept casting Brownlee in roles inappropriate for his vocal resources, such as *Rigoletto*, at a time when the Met had a true Verdi baritone at Johnson's disposal in Bonelli. These two performances make clear that Bonelli holds a high place in the ranks of great American baritones: Tibbett, Warren, Merrill, MacNeil, Milnes.

Both of these performances deserve preservation, and neither has been available in a satisfactory restoration until now. Producer Richard Caniell has performed his usual magic. For *Aida* Caniell's source is a set of NBC transcription discs made for delayed broadcast for South America. Sitting alongside Milton Cross's box was positioned the Spanish-language announcer, Augustin Llopes de Olivares, and I rather enjoyed the unusual experience of hearing him instead of Cross (his commentary is separately tracked, so it can easily be skipped if you wish). Using these transcriptions along with some of NBC's regular ones enabled Caniell to pick the best source for each section of *Aida*. Caniell himself states that the sound of *Aida* is "shallow," but I find it stunningly vivid for a 1943 radio broadcast, partly owing to what Caniell describes as surprisingly silent discs. The source for *Pagliacci* was a set of 78 rpm acetates recorded privately for Bonelli, which were used by E. J. Smith for his LP issue (on his EJS label) and also GOP (Great Opera Performances) for their set. I own the GOP and compared it directly with Immortal Performances's sonics. The improvement is considerable, certainly significant enough to warrant replacement if you own the GOP. Caniell has improved dynamic range and overall opened up the sound to make it more natural and less constricted. He has also fixed some portions of missing music from the original by seamlessly replacing them with material from a 1934 Met performance featuring the same cast.

I will start with *Aida*. As William Russell observes in his superb notes, what makes this historic account such a success is that it is a *performance* in every sense of the word. No one in the cast is being careful or just routinely reading through the score. Conductor Wilfrid Pelletier, though more remembered for excellence in the French repertoire, leads Verdi with a keen dramatic sense. He is able to balance the long-arching lines and incisive rhythmic pulse. The program notes highlight one moment in Pelletier's conducting that merits attention. In the second act, when Amonasro has just entered as a prisoner and after his aside to Aida "Non mi tradir," he says to the King, "Suo padre. Anch'io pugnai vinti noi fummo, morte invan cercai." ("Her father. I too have fought and we were conquered. I sought death in vain.") Russell points out the importance of the conductor timing the timpani stroke as Verdi wrote it, precisely as the last syllable of "cercai" sounds, and also making certain that the stroke is sharp and powerful. Pelletier does this incisively. Details like that make the difference between a vital performance and a routine one. Pelletier

demonstrates the flexibility that the singers need, while never weakening the overall architecture of the score.

Zinka Milanov was a mainstay of the Met's Verdi wing from 1937 to 1967, except for a few years in the late 1940s. Rudolf Bing brought her back in 1950, and Milanov reigned as one of the key divas of the 1950s and early 60s. She probably hung on too long, and some of her performances after 1964 were not up to her standards. The Milanov that most opera lovers know is the one from the 1950s, when she made some very important recordings for RCA. Her voice was that of a real dramatic soprano: dark, weighty, evenly produced from bottom to top, all made even better by her trademark floated high *pianissimi*.

Her acting was rather generalized, but it served its purpose. It may have lacked the kind of specificity of inflection and color that a great singing actress could apply, but the singing was not without affect or dramatic impact. In that period, there was a *gravitas* that marked Milanov's singing because of the depth and richness of her tone. In earlier years the voice was somewhat lighter, closer to a *spinto* than a dramatic soprano. One notices this in her 1938 and 1940 performances of the Verdi *Requiem* with Toscanini, the 1939 *Gioconda* from the Met with Martinelli, and the famed 1940 *Ballo in maschera* with Bjoerling. It is the same in this *Aida*. There is a brightness to the timbre that was not to remain a decade later. Also present here is a greater sense of ease in *forte* high notes, more fluidity through the *passaggio* (the tricky area that joins the middle and upper registers), and more true intonation. Milanov is especially effective in Verdi's long spun lines ("La tra foreste vergine," and "O terra addio" are exquisite), and she can also turn on the power in confrontational scenes. One easily understands why Milanov sang 449 performances of leading roles at the Met in a span of three decades.

Giovanni Martinelli is a more complicated case. Some opera lovers react negatively to his voice, which was somewhat tightly produced. That he was a figure of huge importance to the Met can be deduced from statistics. Between 1913 and 1946 Martinelli sang 926 performances of 36 different roles. Few leading singers can match that. Although John Steane was referring to the role of Otello, his remarks apply to Martinelli's Radamès as well: "Others have had finer and more suitable voices for the role, but none has left his personal stamp quite so firmly on every phrase." Listen to the power at the end of the third act ("Sacerdote, io resto a te"); it brings

goosebumps. At the same time, Martinelli possessed a highly developed sense of legato and line, and his soft singing at those moments where it is wanted is very beautiful indeed. His singing is marked by a vitality, an inner rhythmic life, a presence that practically defines the “grand” in grand opera. The confrontation with Amneris (Bruna Castagna) in the first scene of the final act brings us two lions of the stage. “Celeste Aida” is not the strong point of Martinelli’s performance, however; the voice sounds somewhat tight. But once that is out of the way, he is tremendous.

That other lion, Castagna, is an Italian mezzo-soprano whose Met career was all too short (168 performances from 1936 to 1945), but who was unquestionably one of the greats. Everything you want in an Amneris is hers to deliver: rich, voluminous sound, thrilling dramatic presence, keen rhythm and pitch. Castagna’s lower register is particularly dark and powerful. In her pleading with the priests to spare Radamès she conveys Amneris’s growing hysteria very realistically as step by step her desperation increases. The way she spits out the word “infami” as the priests make their judgment is as clear a characterization of hatred as one could imagine. Norman Cordon’s fine, evenly produced bass is more than adequate as Ramfis (despite the fact that Ezio Pinza was also singing this role at the Met in this era) and Lansing Hatfield (of whom I had never heard) is strong as the King of Egypt.

I have saved the fourth principal for last, as I will use him to turn from *Aida* to *Pagliacci*. As I noted in opening of this review, the real revelation to many will be Richard Bonelli, who triumphs as both Amonasro and Tonio in *Pagliacci*. Bonelli’s voice is rich, ringing, darkly colored but with complete freedom on top. His ringing A-flats in the *Pagliacci* Prologue give the impression that Bonelli could easily go higher if needed. His ability to shape and fill a long line such as “Pensa che un popolo” in the Nile Scene from *Aida*, or “Un nido di memorie in fondo all’anima” in the *Pagliacci* Prologue, matches the kind of generosity of phrasing that marked Tibbett and Warren at their best. Bonelli, born in Port Byron, New York as George Richard Bunn, is a completely convincing actor as well. His powerful persuasion of Aida to get the information from Radamès is very specifically enunciated, and his shift from seductive to enraged in his scene with Nedda is stunning in its impact.

If Martinelli was convincing as Radamès in 1943, he is positively triumphant as Canio in 1936. At age 51 he sounds in complete command of his voice, and the power and intensity of his portrayal must have been something to witness in the house. A great example occurs in “Vesti la giubba.” As Canio sings “Oh...Ridi, Pagliaccio” Martinelli manages an astonishing crescendo on “Oh,” singing that entire phrase over a span of 16 seconds without a breath, even increasing the intensity as he goes. The effect is jaw-dropping. As in other broadcasts of him in this role, he cries out “Infamia” at the end of the orchestral postlude to the aria, and it too is completely convincing as a depiction of a man who has lost his mind and is about to commit murder. Immortal Performances has already issued a 1934 *Pagliacci* with Martinelli, and there is no significant difference in his performance here. But the overall sound quality is a bit fuller and richer.

Soprano Queena Mario is quite good in both performances; it is not a voice with the glamor of a star, but she produces a well-acted and attractively sung Nedda. The 1934 *Pagliacci* has the wonderful Tonio of Tibbett, but you may well be surprised at how good the far less well-known Bonelli is here. It isn't easy to express a preference. George Cehanovsky is the Silvio in both, and he sings the part well, but is the voice a rather ordinary *comprimario* baritone. Leoncavallo invited this problem by writing a really important and beautiful duet for Nedda and Silvio in an opera where Silvio is the *second* baritone after Tonio. Genaro Papi's propulsive, flexible conducting is both exciting and, when needed, beautiful. The *Aida* in this set is very, very good. The *Pagliacci* is extraordinary – a truly great performance.

The booklet is up to Immortal Performances's usual standard, which is to say magnificent. They put to shame all the other companies that specialize in historic opera reissues, and this example may be the finest yet. Its 55 pages include two penetrating articles by William Russell covering each performance, extensive recording notes from Caniell, wonderful photos of the various singers in costume, and detailed documentation of sources. As a lovely bonus, since one of the purposes of this set is to bring attention to Bonelli, we are given Enrico's scene from act I of *Lucia di Lammermoor* from a Met broadcast, sung with rich warm tone and very convincing vocal acting. This set is a treasure trove of operatic greatness. (As an enticement, one can hear Bonelli's 1936 *Pagliacci* Prologue on YouTube, although the sound quality is considerably inferior to Immortal Performances.)

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By Ken Meltzer

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A new three-disc set from Immortal Performances comprises two Met broadcasts, a 1936 *Pagliacci* and a 1943 *Aida*. In addition to their common performances venue, the broadcasts share the leading tenor and baritone. The tenor is Giovanni Martinelli (1885–1969), who made his Met debut in 1913, and continued to sing with the company until 1945, taking part in almost 900 performances. Martinelli, one of the most important tenors of the 20th century, did make numerous studio recordings of excerpts from various operas, but he never took part in a studio recording of a complete opera. As such, Martinelli's Metropolitan Opera broadcasts, issued by such companies as Immortal Performances, are of the utmost importance. Whether they provide the utmost pleasure remains a subject of debate. Martinelli's voice, as preserved on disc, does not have the natural beauty and warmth of such tenors as Caruso, Gigli, Björling, di Stefano, and Corelli (a few people who heard Martinelli live told me that his voice had a far more attractive quality in the theater than was evident on recordings). But while opera fans may differ about the attractiveness of Martinelli's voice, they are close to unanimous in their admiration of this tenor as a conscientious, thoughtful artist, and first-rate singing actor. Few tenors ever wed text and music with the kind of care and intensity Martinelli lavished upon them.

These talents, coupled with a remarkably solid vocal technique, allowed Martinelli to master the most difficult Italian tenor roles, including the Everest of Verdi's *Otello*. Indeed, I would argue that Martinelli's *Otello*, which he first sang in 1936, stands alongside Mario del Monaco's Moor of Venice, and the excerpt recordings of the tenor who sang the opera's world premiere, Francesco Tamagno (a superb restoration of Martinelli's February 24, 1940 Met *Otello* broadcast is available on IPCD 1070-2). In 1936, the same year Martinelli debuted as *Otello* (in San Francisco), he took part in the February 29, 1936 broadcast of Leoncavallo's *Pagliacci* that opens this Immortal Performances set. To be sure, *Otello* and *Canio* are kindred operatic spirits. Both are tenors who believe their wives have been unfaithful (in *Canio*'s instance that belief is well placed), leading to the respective murders of *Desdemona* and *Nedda*. Both express their jealousy

and grief in powerful, eloquent music that demands a tenor of considerable vocal power, artistry, and exceptional acting gifts.

It's not surprising that Martinelli was a Canio for the ages. Rather than making Canio's opening address to the townspeople a kind of throwaway vocal warm-up, Martinelli takes great care to emphasize the lightheartedness in both the text and music. As a result, Canio's subsequent monologue about the differences between playing a cuckold on the stage, and in real life, is all the more menacing. This kind of attention to detail continues throughout, culminating in a "Vesti la giubba" (capped by shouted cries of "Infamia!") and final scene that are hair-raising from both a vocal and dramatic point of view. My colleagues Henry Fogel (*Fanfare* 38:2) and Colin Clarke (38:3) had the highest praise for the Immortal Performances release of a 1934 Met *Pagliacci*, with Martinelli, Lawrence Tibbett, and Queena Mario (IPCD 1047-2). But the 1936 broadcast as restored by Immortal Performances is also a marvelous document of Martinelli's remarkable assumption of one of Italian opera's iconic roles.

A good part of the *raison d'être* for this set is to showcase the artistry of baritone Richard Bonelli. Born Richard Bunn in Port Byron, New York, on February 6, 1889, Bonelli was one of the finest baritones of his era. Bonelli's Met career lasted from 1932 to 1945, thereby intersecting with the tenures of Lawrence Tibbett and the young Leonard Warren. Suffice it to say that Richard Bonelli was very much the equal of those two legendary artists, both from a vocal and artistic perspective. Nevertheless, and for whatever reason, Met GM Edward Johnson chose to assign Bonelli fewer performances and broadcasts than those accorded to Tibbett and Warren (Bonelli's most famous Met broadcast is probably the composer-led February 15, 1941 performance of Montemezzi's *L'amore dei tre re*, with Moore, Pinza, and Kullman). Bonelli deserved better, as the *Pagliacci* and *Aida* broadcasts demonstrate. In *Pagliacci*, Bonelli delivers a majestic Prologue, elegant, and sung with the kind of warm, vibrant Italian sound this music begs for, capped by an extended, ringing A $\flat$  and G above the staff. Once Bonelli assumes the role of Tonio in the ensuing drama, he modifies his vocal color and declamation to embody the clown's oafish, lustful, possessive, and vengeful qualities.

Soprano Queena Mario, also the Nedda on the 1934 broadcast, is a fine Nedda here, with a lovely lyric soprano voice capable of rising to the occasion in the final confrontation with Canio. George Cehanovsky, a valuable and beloved figure at the Met for decades as a comprimario artist, performs Silvio with a compact and attractive baritone but little vocal

personality. The Beppe, Giordano Paltrineri, acquits himself well in Harlequin's Serenade. Gennaro Papi is the conductor, pacing the opera in compelling fashion and with a true sense of collaboration with the vocalists. The recorded sound, as restored by Immortal Performances, while not the equal of studio discs of the time, is more than adequate to appreciate this outstanding performance on its considerable merits, especially Martinelli's Canio and Bonelli's Tonio. (Omissions in the source discs necessitated substituting portions of the 1934 broadcast for a brief portion of the Nedda-Silvio duet and the orchestral Intermezzo.) The recording includes commentary by Milton Cross following "Vesti la giubba" and the opera's conclusion.

After hearing the 1936 *Pagliacci*, I approached its companion on this release, a 1943 Met broadcast of *Aida*, with some trepidation, certainly not because of the lead soprano (Zinka Milanov), mezzo (Bruna Castagna), or baritone (Bonelli), all wonderful singers at the height of their powers. But by the late 1930s, Martinelli had begun to evidence a vocal decline. Such a decline is not at all surprising, given that Martinelli was in his 50s, and had been singing professionally for almost three decades, often in the most fiercely demanding tenor roles. A comparison of Martinelli's series of Met *Otello* broadcasts from the late 1930s to the early 1940s seem to document a steady and noticeable decline in vocal resources, although certainly not in artistry and commitment to the music and drama. What a wonderful surprise then, to hear the 57-year-old Martinelli in sterling, even youthful voice as Radamès in the March 6, 1943 *Aida*. It is true that you can hear Martinelli to even better effect in the February 6, 1937 Met broadcast with Cigna, Castagna, and Carlo Morelli (IPCD 1020-3), and a *Heritage Series* compendium of portions of *Aida* and *La forza del destino* (IPCD 1071-2). But Martinelli is in superb, confident, and ringing voice for the 1943 broadcast. It is true that Martinelli ignores some of Verdi's quieter dynamic markings, and drops out altogether for a bit, husbanding his resources to deliver a ringing "Sacerdote, io resto a te" to conclude the Nile Scene. But here, we are dealing with portions of the score that, in performance tradition, are "more honored in the breach than in the observance." And, as I noted in the *Pagliacci* section of this review, Martinelli was one of the great singing actors among tenors. He is absolutely convincing as a young man torn between a sense of duty to his country, and his passionate, tender love for *Aida*.

That *Aida* is Zinka Milanov, one of the most beloved sopranos in Met history. In the September/October issue of *Fanfare* (42:1), I reviewed a Pristine Audio release of a January 24, 1953 Met broadcast of *Aida*, again

with Milanov in the title role. In that review, I noted that the recording documented Milanov “nearing the end of her absolute vocal prime.” In the 1943 broadcast, Milanov is at the very apex of that prime, singing with remarkable beauty, focused power, and ethereal high notes that are sheer magic. Very few sopranos in recorded history combined all these elements the way Milanov did at her very best. Over time, Milanov would create a more varied and detailed portrait of Aida. But in the 1943 broadcast, Milanov’s commitment to the heroine’s plight is never in doubt. When you couple that intensity with her undeniable vocal gifts, you are left with a very special and treasurable performance of Aida.

Bruna Castagna, always an asset in the great Italian mezzo roles, is in wonderful form, and she brings a more youthful, even seductive quality to Amneris than is typical. As in the *Pagliacci* broadcast, Bonelli is in sterling voice, and he plays the role of the powerful, vengeful Amonasro to the hilt. He and Milanov are galvanizing in their Nile Scene confrontation. Norman Cordon is a vocally reliable, sturdy Ramfis, but lacking the vocal glamour and star power of Ezio Pina. Conductor Wilfred Pelletier is best remembered at the Met for his performances of French repertoire. But Pelletier here proves himself a fine interpreter of Verdi’s Italian grand opera, offering a performance of considerable momentum and impact. If, on occasion, there is a lack of synchronization between the orchestra pit and stage, that is more a commentary on the vicissitudes of live performance than on any shortcomings among the performers. The transcription discs used for this release are taken from those prepared for South American broadcasts (as such, the announcer we hear is not Milton Cross, but rather Augustin Llopes de Olivares, speaking in Spanish). The discs, while lacking a strong bass response, are remarkably quiet, and in the Immortal Performances restoration, the voices emerge in all their splendor. In short, this is an *Aida* with several legendary singers in superb form, preserved in excellent sound for the era.

The opening scene of Donizetti’s *Lucia di Lammermoor*, taken from a 1940 Met broadcast, serves as a bonus at the conclusion of disc 3. Bonelli is once again in sterling form as Lucia’s malevolent brother, Enrico. The booklet includes essays by William Russell, plot synopses, artist photos and bios, and Richard Caniell’s “Recording Notes.” These are scintillating performances of two beloved operas by many of the greatest artists of their era, restored in quite acceptable (*Pagliacci*) and excellent (*Aida*) sound. I found this a compelling listening experience from first note to last. Highly recommended.

