

ROSSINI *Il barbiere di Siviglia* • Gennaro Papi, cond; Lily Pons (Rosina); Irra Petina (Berta); Bruno Landi (*Il Conte Almaviva*); John Charles Thomas (Figaro); Ezio Pinza (Don Basilio); Pompilio Malatesta (Dr. Bartolo); Live: Metropolitan Opera, New York 1/22/1938

DELIBES *Lakmé* • Wilfred Pelletier, cond; Lily Pons (*Lakmé*); Irra Petina (*Mallika*); Raoul Jobin (*Gérald*); Ezio Pinza (*Nilakantha*)

& ROSSINI *Il barbiere di Siviglia*: *Largo al factotum*; *Se il mio nome*; *All'idea di quel metallo* (Bruno Landi (t); Carlos Ramírez (b); Victor SO). THOMAS *Mignon*: *Je suis Titania*. MEYERBEER : *Dinorah*: *Shadow Song*. DUPARC *Chanson triste* (Lily Pons (s); Thomas Beecham, cond; Concert Hall Broadcast, 6/11/1942)

IMMORTAL PERFORMANCES 1109-4 (4 CDs: 305:11) Live: Metropolitan Opera, New York 12/27/1941

Review by Ken Meltzer

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A new release by Immortal Performances (four discs, priced as three) offers two souvenirs of a past era in the history of the Metropolitan Opera—an era both highly cherished, and different in many ways, from the current scene. The unifying stars are two of the company's most beloved singers, soprano Lily Pons and bass Ezio Pinza. The January 22, 1938 broadcast of Rossini's *Il barbiere di Siviglia* transports the listener far away from the current adherence to performances characterized as "historically informed." Rather than the plummy mezzo/contralto Rossini originally intended, Pons, a high coloratura soprano, is cast as Rosina. Dr. Bartolo sings the alternative aria "Manca un foglio," rather than the more demanding "A un dottor." In the act II Lesson Scene, Rosina/Pons omits Rossini's "Contro un cor," and interpolates two works by other composers. Almaviva's grand final aria, "Cessa di più resistere," is also cut. All of these departures were more or less common practice at the time of the broadcast.

That leaves us with the 1938 broadcast itself, which has much to recommend it. Pons is a delightful Rosina, in marvelous voice, spirited in her interpretation, and radiating the French soprano's trademark charm and charisma throughout. Of course, coloratura fireworks and interpolated high notes abound. And while Pons did specialize in high soprano roles, her basic vocal timbre was much warmer than many who have sung this

repertoire. As a result, the contrast between her and mezzo Rosinas is not quite so jarring as it might have been. In the Lesson Scene, Pons substitutes Dell'Acqua's *Villanelle* and a French-language version of Konstanze's "Ach ich liebte" from Mozart's *The Abduction from the Seraglio*, both marvelously done. As Rosina's suitor, the Count Almaviva, tenor Bruno Landi, offers a lovely vocal timbre, imaginative shading of dynamics and phrasing, and proficiency in coloratura. He is also a fine actor, immersing himself wholeheartedly into the comic scenes. As I previously mentioned, the Count's virtuoso "Cessa di più resistere" is omitted. Figaro is the popular American baritone John Charles Thomas. Henry Fogel, in his superb liner notes, describes Thomas's voice as a "serviceable baritone." I am a bit more enthusiastic about the basic vocal quality, which I find quite handsome and virile. The opening "Largo al factotum," while energetically delivered, is a bit of a mess in terms of coordination between stage and pit. Both Thomas and conductor Gennaro Papi seem intent on proceeding as quickly as possible, regardless of whether they arrive at the destination together (this lack of synchronicity is a recurring issue during the performance). Overall, Thomas is a convincing Figaro, attentive to his colleagues in duet and ensemble, and it's gratifying to have this souvenir of an artist, so beloved in the American opera house, concert stage, and radio studio, in prime form.

The great Ezio Pinza is a force of nature as Don Basilio, pouring forth his distinctive rich and vibrant basso from start to finish. "La calunnia" is everything it should be—a compelling, comic narrative, a vocal display piece, and an overwhelming moment in the opera. The contrast between Pinza's resplendent voice and the bass of veteran Pompilio Malatesta could not be greater. To be fair, Malatesta does employ his facility with the Italian language and comic acting skills to humorous effect. But it would be hard to imagine a singer performing a lead role in one of the world's major opera houses with more limited vocal resources than does Malatesta on this occasion. On the other hand, both Wilfred Engelman (Fiorello) and Irra Petina (Berta) bring more than the usual vocal distinction to their comprimario roles. The occasional lack of synchronicity aside, Gennaro Papi leads a spirited performance that maintains the work's energy and comic atmosphere.

I have not heard the previous EJS LP and Bencar CD sets of this broadcast. In his Recording Notes, Richard Caniell describes them in unfavorable detail. The new Immortal Performances restoration allows us to hear the 80-year-old broadcast in very fine sound indeed. The voices emerge in all their glory (or in one case, lack thereof), the dynamic range is fine for its vintage, and the recording maintains its integrity in both loud and high

passages. The inclusion of considerable broadcast commentary by host Milton Cross, as always, enhances the experience of sharing in a part of the Met's history. This is highly recommended to all who want to hear this particular broadcast, or its stars. The inclusion of act I excerpts from *Barbieri* with Landi and the wonderful Colombian baritone Carlos Ramírez, taken from 1942 Victor studio sessions, and in superb sound, is a most welcome bonus.

The 1938 broadcast of Rossini's *Barber* documents the Met's earlier approach to an opera that is still very much a part of its core programming. In the case of Delibes's *Lakmé*, the December 27, 1941 Met broadcast presents a work that has been absent from the Met's repertoire for more than 70 years. Of the 63 total Met performances of *Lakmé*, Lily Pons appeared in 50. She first sang *Lakmé* at the Met on February 19, 1932, with the great Georges Thill as Gérald, a British army officer and *Lakmé*'s beloved. Fifteen years later (May 1, 1947) Pons gave her last Met performance of the work, part of a tour appearance in Dallas. *Lakmé* demands a soprano with a beautiful lyric voice, an artist well-versed in the French operatic tradition, and of course virtuoso coloratura brilliance for the "Bell Song." It doesn't hurt if the soprano performing *Lakmé* is a convincing actress, and visually stunning in the bargain. In short, the role of the tragic priestess was tailor-made for Pons's combination of gifts. Take a moment to journey over to YouTube, and watch a video of Pons performing *Lakmé*'s Bell Song, excerpted from the 1935 movie *I Dream Too Much* (with Henry Fonda in the audience!), and you will see some true musical and visual magic.

In the December 27, 1941 broadcast, Pons is in superb form, dispatching the Bell Song with breathtaking panache, capped by an extended and spot-on high E. The remainder of the role focuses on the lyrical aspects of the soprano's art. Again, Pons is wonderful, shaping the music with a beautiful legato, a variety of vocal colors, and total identification with the tragic heroine who sacrifices herself rather than be apart from her beloved. Pons rises to the occasion in the final scene, as does her Gérald, Raoul Jobin. The French-Canadian tenor was a truly valuable member of the Met roster, a specialist in French repertoire, but also a powerful and effective Canio in *Pagliacci*. Jobin had the technique and artistry to surmount both the lyrical and dramatic challenges of a role. And so, Jobin sings Gérald's act I aria "Fantasie aux divins mensonges" with elegance and an appropriate lightness of tone, but also impressively delivers the forceful episodes. And it is a pleasure to hear French repertoire sung with diction that is both crystal-clear, and wedded to the musical line. As always, Jobin is a

committed and highly convincing actor. Ezio Pinza sings the role of Lakmé's father, the Brahmin priest Nilakantha. He, too, is in magnificent voice. Pinza's rendition of the act II aria "Lakmé, ton doux regard se voile" is a masterclass in gorgeous unforced vocalism, pristine legato, and the kind of dynamic shading that allows the climaxes to make the grand effect Delibes most surely intended. But that excellence is in force throughout Pinza's assumption of the role. The subsidiary parts are all well taken. Pelletier, then the Met's leading conductor in the French repertoire is first-rate, directing a performance of great precision and sweep that is a celebration of Delibes's rich score.

The Immortal Performances release of this *Lakmé* is billed as a "World Premiere on Disc." Richard Caniell used three different sources, including a transfer by NBC, and one from the Raoul Jobin collection held in the National Library of Canada. Like the *Barber* restoration, this *Lakmé* is presented in very fine broadcast sound for the period. Once again, Milton Cross is a familiar and most welcome presence. A January 6, 1940 Met broadcast of *Lakmé* has previously been issued on various labels. It features Pons again in excellent form, as is conductor Pelletier. Tenor Armand Tokatyan is a perfectly adequate Gérald, if lacking the vocal richness and intensity that Jobin brings to the role. Pinza again appears as Nilakantha, this time in slightly less secure vocal form. I'm happy to have both broadcasts. But I think the combination of Pons, Jobin, and Pinza in optimal form makes the December 27, 1941 Met *Lakmé* the preferred version of the two. The final *Lakmé* disc on this set ends with a June 11, 1942 "Concert Hall" radio broadcast, featuring Pons in marvelous performances of music by Thomas, Meyerbeer, and Duparc, with Thomas Beecham on the podium. Lionel Barrymore, sounding very much like his Mr. Potter in *It's a Wonderful Life*, is the host.

In addition to Henry Fogel's excellent liner notes on both Met broadcasts, and Richard Caniell's informative Recording Notes, the booklet includes plot synopses, and artist photos and bios. A fine release that does justice to the participating artists and, in the case of *Lakmé*, an opera that deserves far greater exposure than it currently receives. Recommended, with enthusiasm.