

VERDI *Rigoletto* • Tullio Serafin, cond; Tito Gobbi (*Rigoletto*); Lina Pagliughi (*Gilda*); Anna-Maria Canali (*Maddalena*); Mario Filippeschi (*Duke of Mantua*); Giulio Neri (*Spafafucile*); Rome Op Ch & O • IMMORTAL PERFORMANCES 1182-2, mono (2 CDs 152:31)
& *Rigoletto* Excerpts. Luigi Piazza (*Rigoletto*); Lina Pagliughi (*Gilda*); Tino Folgar (Duke of Mantua); La Scala O; Carlo Sabajno, cond

Henry Fogel
FANFARE March / April 2023

Tito Gobbi was in many ways an ideal interpreter of Verdi's *Rigoletto*, and it is wonderful to have this early example of him in the role at the age of 33. There is no question that his famed 1955 EMI recording with Maria Callas and Giuseppe di Stefano is a classic. Nine years earlier, Gobbi performed the role on stage at the Rome Opera, and on March 28, 1946, the production was filmed in the theater without an audience. This is the soundtrack of that film, which Immortal Performances has cleaned up significantly, producing a result far more listenable than any version that has previously circulated. Pitches have been corrected, music missing from earlier versions has been located and included, and the overall sonic picture is far less harsh than it had been.

Gobbi's voice, as you would expect, is solid throughout its range and capable of an enormous range of coloring. One reason that his *Rigoletto* is so powerful is that he can portray the tenderness of the father to his daughter as convincingly as his fury at the mocking courtiers. As Dewey Faulkner expresses in his excellent essay in the accompanying booklet, every phrase is characterized with masterful specificity. The sarcastic bite of the court jester, the heartbreaking pain of a devastated father, everything is encapsulated in the colors of Gobbi's voice and its variety of inflection. The transformation during the "Corteggiani, vil razza dannata" monologue from unrestrained rage to pitiful pleading is stunningly vivid. Even without the visual element of the film, we can picture *Rigoletto* before our eyes because of the clarity of Gobbi's portrayal. To be sure, the same is true on the EMI recording as well, but perhaps because the Rome production was filmed through rather than recorded in sessions, and immediately following a series of live theatrical performances, there is a degree of intensity and power here that even surpasses that effort.

Lina Pagliughi is obviously no Callas, but for an old-fashioned coloratura soprano, she was a sensational one. Her voice is silvery, and she executes the *fioriture* with consummate ease. Hers was the standard approach to *Gilda* before Callas showed us a different way, and it is musically very satisfying. When sung this way, "Caro nome" is a show-stopper. There is a sweet core to Pagliughi's voice, and she displays a firm *legato* and very smooth tone. She is not bland, either—her vocal acting may be generalized, but when wedded to such lovely singing, it is enough.

About Mario Filippeschi's Duke I have stronger reservations. He is best known as the Pollione on Callas's first *Norma* recording, but he sang both lyric and dramatic roles throughout his career. The voice itself is undistinguished, however, and Filippeschi's style could be bullish. He reins in the forcefulness much of the time here, and his is certainly a competent performance. He doesn't get in the way of enjoyment, even if he doesn't add a lot, either.

Giulio Neri is as good as it gets as Sparafucile, his powerful black bass and intimidating inflections are all one can ask for. His big scene with Gobbi in the first act is marvelous. Anna Maria Canali is solid as Maddalena, adding an important voice in the famed Quartet.

Tullio Serafin is a major asset to the performance. The simplest of Verdi's accompaniments take on meaning from the way he inflects them. The orchestra's warm phrasing as Gobbi sings tenderly to his daughter perfectly support Rigoletto's emotions. Conversely, Serafin delivers biting incisiveness as Rigoletto fumes at the courtiers. He makes overly familiar numbers like the Quartet feel fresh by his attention to rhythmic detail.

In the end, however, it is Gobbi who dominates this *Rigoletto*, as it should be. There is not a single line uttered without meaning. Even his asides, normally thrown away even by other leading baritones, are sung with intent.

The bonus material is excerpted from the first electrical recording of *Rigoletto*, a 1927 RCA set conducted by Carlo Sabajno. It is fascinating to hear the young Lina Pagliughi, then age 20, at the beginning of her career. Sabajno allows her more freedom in "Caro nome," and the coloratura brilliance is impressive, though the final high E is sour. It is fair to say that the medium-level vocal acting skills she developed by 1946 were not present in 1927, but the vocalism is dazzling. Baritone Luigi Piazza had an important career in Italy and a well-focused voice. Although this inaugural set was quickly eclipsed by one on Columbia, thanks to the more characterful singing of Riccardo Stracciari a year later, Piazza's is a worthy performance. One is grateful that some highlights have been preserved here.

Lyric tenor Tino Folgar is only heard in the Duke's duet with Gilda and the reprise of "La donna è mobile" that reveals to Rigoletto that the Duke is still alive. His voice is generic, but Folgar is stylish and musical. These excerpts are more valuable to those of us interested in the history of operatic performance than to general listeners.

As is usual with Immortal Performances, the booklet is exemplary, including fine essays, by Faulkner and producer Richard Caniell on the opera, the performances, and the recordings, along with lovely historic photos, a detailed synopsis, and biographies of the performers. The sonic restoration is also superb.

By Ken Meltzer
FANFARE March / April 2023

Immortal Performances (IP) offers its restoration of a March 28, 1946 Rome Opera recording of Verdi's *Rigoletto*, starring the great Italian baritone Tito Gobbi. That recording serves as the soundtrack for a motion picture based upon the Rome Opera's staging. The principal singers perform their roles in the movie, with one exception. While the voice of soprano Lina Pagliughi is heard in the role of Gilda, she is portrayed in the film by actress Marcella Govoni. The recording not only adopts the stage cuts typical of the era, but adds several more small excisions; no doubt to avoid taxing the stamina of the moviegoing public. Richard Caniell was able to locate a source recording from a generous donor that

includes the complete soundtrack. The final product, as restored by IP, allows a full consideration and appreciation of the performance. While not equal to the finest studio recordings of the era, the voices have ample definition and color. This is especially crucial in a document of an artist like Gobbi, a master of vocal and declamatory nuance.

Several of the featured artists may be heard in other complete studio recordings of *Rigoletto*, each offering better sonics than the 1946 Rome production. Gobbi's jester is part of the justly famous 1955 EMI La Scala recording, conducted by Serafin (Maria Callas is Gilda, and Giuseppe di Stefano is the Duke of Mantua). Pagliughi made two commercial recordings of *Rigoletto*. Excerpts from the first, a 1927 La Scala Victor recording, serve as an appendix to IP's restoration of the 1946 Rome soundtrack. In 1954, Pagliughi took part in an excellent Cetra recording with an impressive cast, including Giuseppe Taddei as Rigoletto, and Ferruccio Tagliavini as the Duke. Bass Giulio Neri reprises his Sparafucile, heard in the 1946 Rome recording. I don't think that the 1946 Rome soundtrack casts any new light on what may be heard from Serafin, Pagliughi, and Neri in their other studio recordings.

But that is hardly the case with regard to Gobbi's *Rigoletto*. By the mid-1950s, Tito Gobbi (1913-1984) had passed his vocal peak. He remained, nonetheless, among the greatest baritones of his era, and one of the finest singing actors who ever graced the lyric stage. But Gobbi's recordings of the 1940s, including the Rome *Rigoletto*, document a richer and more supple voice, one far more at ease in the upper portion of the baritone's range. In the famous 1955 EMI *Rigoletto*, Gobbi delivers a master class in portraying the jester's contrasting personas and emotions. And as Gobbi's brilliant Rigoletto appears alongside Callas's unforgettable Gilda, it's clear why the EMI is such a treasure. But it's also evident in the EMI version that Rigoletto's high tessitura is difficult work for Gobbi (as it is not for, say, Leonard Warren), and the highest notes are more hammered than vocalized. In the 1946 Rome recording, Gobbi sings with a tonal beauty and freedom of production not found in the 1955 EMI. This alone would make the recording of interest to admirers of this superb artist. But there is also Gobbi's interpretive genius, already apparent. According to Dewey Faulkner's booklet notes for the IP set, Gobbi did not sing *Rigoletto* on stage until 1946, in Torino. Nevertheless, Gobbi's masterful interpretation of the jester is already in place. As in the EMI version, Gobbi embodies Verdi's complex study (via Victor Hugo) of a man who is cynical, acerbic, and cruel in public, but a devoted, loving, and (over)protective father in private. And all of this is couched in vocalism that is not only dramatically alert, but tonally gratifying. All told, the 1946 *Rigoletto* is an important complement to Gobbi's iconic EMI recording with Callas and Serafin.

Soprano Lina Pagliughi, a marvelous lyric-coloratura, sings Gilda with an attractive, youthful tone. I must acknowledge that the highest notes are neither easily produced, nor especially pleasing. The rest is delivered with beauty and style. And while Callas's Gilda stands alone for her interpretive insights, Pagliughi is convincing in her own, more conventional right. Tenor Mario Filippeschi's Duke of Mantua is far more problematic. For the better part of his career, Filippeschi was a spinto tenor long on power and stamina, but lacking in

vocal pliancy and beauty. Filippeschi was valuable for his ability to deliver robust and vocally secure performances of such challenging roles as Pollione (*Norma*) and Arnoldo (*William Tell*). But the Duke of Mantua occupies an entirely different world. It's a role that demands a tenor with a light touch, an easy sense of humor, and above all, an ardent and glowing vocal quality. Filippeschi's trumpeting, rather sour tenor is well off the mark. To be fair, Filippeschi does attempt to scale back his voice in such moments as "Questa o quella". And in "La donna è mobile," And Filippeschi achieves a nice diminuendo on the phrase "Muta d'accento." There, Filippeschi seems pleased with his accomplishment, and executes the diminuendo precisely the same way in both verses of the aria, and later, at the moment when Rigoletto discovers that the Duke is still alive. But overall, Filippeschi's Duke is the proverbial attempt to fit a square peg into a round hole, and a trial to hear. I can't resist quoting Conrad L. Osborne in his review of a 1951 Cetra *Aida* (*The Metropolitan Opera Guide to Recorded Opera*) in which Filippeschi sings Radamès. Osborne writes that Filippeschi, "tends to win you over by sheer persistence: either his performances improve as they go along, or the listener just gets used to the sound and grudgingly concedes that he's hanging in pretty well." For his part, Giulio Neri is a sonorous and convincing Sparafucile.

Tullio Serafin balances the score's lyric and dramatic elements with great feeling and style. And typical of the conductor's work, he allows the singers the flexibility and space they need for expression. Still, Serafin's view of *Rigoletto* is better documented in the 1955 EMI recording, with its better sound and fewer cuts. As a very attractive bonus, IP includes a restoration of excerpts from Pagliughi's 1927 Victor La Scala *Rigoletto*. Pagliughi, only 20, offers a polished assumption of Gilda, lovely and secure of voice, and dramatically alert. The Rigoletto is Luigi Piazza. While Piazza offers little in the way of dramatic insight beyond singing more loudly in his denunciations of the courtiers, and more softly in his scenes with Gilda, his rich and vibrant baritone is ideally suited for the role. In his brief appearance, Tino Folgar as the Duke sings ardently and with style. His tenorino is one of the smallest I've heard in the role. Somewhere between Folgar and Filippeschi is a Duke of the appropriate vocal heft. IP's superb restoration of the 1927 recording is remarkably vivid and detailed. When listening to what IP achieved with the source material, it's difficult to believe the recording is approaching its centenary.

The booklet accompanying the IP set includes Dewey Faulkner's lively and insightful commentary on the featured recordings, as well as Verdi's opera. There is a detailed plot synopsis, artist photos and bios, and Richard Caniell's Recording Notes. There are many other recordings that are better overall representations of Verdi's achievement. But this *Rigoletto* is essential listening for all who are interested in Tito Gobbi's voice and artistry. And for that reason, I heartily recommend it for your consideration.

Ken Meltzer

Five stars: A 1946 Rome Opera *Rigoletto* spotlights Tito Gobbi in his vocal prime

