

COLLECTIONS: Vocal

**BIDU SAYÃO: A Tribute • IMMORTAL PERFORMANCES 1159-4, mono (4 CDs for the price of 3)
(4:56:45)**

Massenet

MANON

Bidú Sayão (Manon), Charles Kullman (Des Grieux), John Brownlee (Lescart)
Nicola Moscona (Count), Alessio de Paolis (Guillot), George Cehanovsky (Brétigny)
Metropolitan Opera – 16 January 1943 - Sir Thomas Beecham

BONUS

BIOGRAPHIES IN MUSIC, 1964 - EXCERPTS

(Francis Robinson)

Debussy: *La Damoiselle Éluë*

New York Philharmonic Orchestra / Toscanini, 26 April 1936

&

Mozart: *Le Nozze di Figaro*, Act IV

Deh vieni non tardar

Metropolitan Opera / Paul Breisach, 17 April 1943

Puccini

LA BOHÈME

Bidú Sayão (Mimi), Giuseppe di Stefano (Rodolfo), Giuseppe Valdengo (Marcello),
Lois Hunt (Musetta), Cesare Siepi (Colline), George Cehanovsky (Schunard)
Metropolitan Opera – 17 March 1951 - Fausto Cleva

BONUS

STANDARD HOUR 1 OCTOBER 1950

San Francisco Opera / Merola

Rossini: *William Tell*: Matilda's aria (Sayão)

Gounod: *Faust*: *Salut Demeure* (Di Stefano)

Mozart: *Le Nozze di Figaro*, Act I - *Non so più cosa son* (Sayão)

Flotow: *Martha*: *M'appari* (Di Stefano)

Puccini: *La Bohème* Act I final scene with Di Stefano

SAYÃO: RARE 78 RPM ACETATES

(Collection of the late Donald Jackson)

Villa-Lobos: *Lundú da Marquesa de Santos*

Fauré: *Clair de Lune*

The Bell Telephone Hour; 1 October 1945 /Donald Voorhees

Puccini: *La Bohème*: Act III, *Addio, senza rancor*

The Standard Hour; 10 December 1947 /Gaetano Merola

Ken Meltzer

FANFARE March / April 2022

Immortal Performances (IP) graces us with yet another glorious tribute to a beloved Metropolitan Opera artist; Brazilian soprano Bidu Sayão (1902-1999). Sayão made her Met debut on February 13, 1937, in the title role of Massenet's *Manon*. That was also the role of her farewell Met performance, a tour production in Boston on April 23, 1952. All told, Bidu Sayão sang 226 Met performances of 12 different roles. Only Bidu Sayão's Serpina in Pergolesi's *La serva padrona* lacks the documentation of one or more Met broadcasts. Sayão's Met debut took place a year

after the departure of the Spanish soprano Lucrezia Bori (IP has also issued a lovely tribute to the Spanish soprano, IPCD 1136-2). In many ways Sayão was a most appropriate successor to Bori's mantle. Like Bori, Sayão exuded personality and charm on the operatic stage. Both were lyric sopranos whose voices were rather limited in volume. But as with tenor Alfredo Kraus, Bidu Sayão's (and Bori's) exemplary technique and wise choice of repertoire made considerations of vocal size fade into the background, if not irrelevance. Time and again, critics remarked that Bidu Sayão's voice was lovely, but quite modest in size. Nonetheless, those same critics assured us Sayão could easily be easily heard, all the way to the highest seat in the Met's balcony. Sayão employed her voice with exquisite artistry, and the utmost charm. A beautiful and captivating stage presence, Sayão fully embodied her characters both in vocalism and stage manner. Sayão fashioned unforgettable interpretations ranging, among others, from Massenet's *Manon*, to Puccini's *Mimi*, to Debussy's *Mélisande*. During her illustrious Met career, Bidu Sayão and her audience enjoyed a mutual love affair. Time and again in her performances, Sayão demonstrates a genius for phrasing an aria, or even a passing solo, with such impeccable timing, so as to garner the utmost applause from her appreciative audience. I write that comment with the greatest admiration and affection, for Sayão was always true to the composers she served, singing their music with the unfailing sensitivity and feeling. At the time of her April 23, 1952 Met farewell, Sayão, nearing her 50th birthday, remained in superb voice (as the March 17, 1951 *Bohème* broadcast on this set documents). Rudolf Bing, the Met's GM since 1950, in one of his many wrongheaded, dictatorial, and ham-handed actions, offered Sayão but a few performances. Sayão chose to retire from the Met, which no doubt was the outcome Bing was seeking. Still, Rudolf Bing's obtuseness in no way diminishes Bidu Sayão's sterling Met legacy, and one celebrated by the new IP set.

The IP Sayão tribute opens with a January 16, 1943 Met broadcast of Massenet's *Manon*. Unlike the March 17, 1951 Met *Bohème*, which I think is one of the most satisfying renditions of Puccini's score, this *Manon* is a supplement to such reference recordings as the studio versions starring Victoria de Los Angeles (Pierre Monteux, cond), and Beverly Sills (Julius Rudel, cond). That status for the Met broadcast is due more to the disfiguring cuts to the score than to the quality of the performance. What remains is a treasurable document of Sayão giving a masterful interpretation of a signature role, and alongside worthy colleagues. Sayão, in marvelous voice, is absolutely convincing in her portrayal of Manon's transformation from an innocent (if highly curious) teenager, to seductive woman of the world, to tragic figure. Sayão's rendition of "Adieu, notre petite table", to cite but one example, is a master class in shaping an aria to achieve its utmost impact, capped by the sort of magical conclusion I described earlier. Score cuts aside, for Sayão's contribution alone, I would not want to be without this *Manon*. As her lover des Grieux, tenor Charles Kullman (sounding on this occasion much like Nicolai Gedda) sings attractively, with passion, and admirable French style. He is able to do justice to both the hushed lyric aria "En ferment les yeux" and the dramatic and passionate "Ah! Fuyez, douce image". Baritone John Brownlee is an enthusiastic and robust Lescaut, but one who lacks the character's insinuating charm. Bass Nicola Moscona is a sonorous Comte des Grieux, a convincing and admirable partner in his scenes with Sayão and Kullman. The superb comprimario tenor Alessio De Paolis is a delicious Guillot, declaiming and singing the role to the hilt, and with crystal-clear diction. Sir Thomas Beecham, a justifiably celebrated interpreter of French repertoire, leads a

performance that is both vigorous and stylish, one that has many felicities of color and phrasing. Beecham gives his singers room and flexibility to imprint their personalities onto Massenet's score. A pity, then, that the score couldn't have been presented complete, or at least nearly so. The sound of the Met broadcast as restored by IP is excellent, the best I've heard to date of this performance (the source is a South American transcription of the broadcast, with Spanish commentary by Augustin Llopes de Olivares). Following the *Manon* broadcast, IP includes commentary by Francis Robinson from a 1964 radio feature, *Biographies in Music*, illustrated by an excerpt from Sayão's 1936 concert performance of Debussy's *La Dama en el jardín*, and a 1943 Met broadcast of Susanna's final act aria from Mozart's *Le nozze di Figaro*. Both musical selections, interpolated by IP, are ravishingly sung.

The March 17, 1951 *La bohème* is one of those occasions when all elements coalesce to produce a performance for the ages. Sayão, once again in radiant form, throws herself into the role of the desperately ill Mimì. Sayão's interpolated coughs and sobs make one fear for her exquisite soprano voice. Of course, Sayão calculated this to the final degree, but it all sounds spontaneous, and a brilliant embodiment of the verismo approach to opera. Alongside these elements, Sayão shapes her music with the utmost elegance and purpose. Sayão's genius as a Mozart artist to a degree informs her Mimì, and in a way that does Puccini justice. Anyone listening to Sayão's delivery of Mimì's death scene should have a full box of Kleenex at the ready. As her lover Rodolfo, tenor Giuseppe Di Stefano is in his unequalled youthful prime, singing the role with ravishing tonal beauty, breathtaking freedom in the upper register, and the kind of dramatic insight and involvement that make him an ideal partner for Sayão's Mimì. They are entirely convincing as Puccini's young, ill-fated lovers, among the finest whose performances are documented on recordings. Baritone Giuseppe Valdengo, a wonderful singing actor, relishes Marcello's text and music to the utmost degree, and is marvelous in his ensemble work. Bass Cesare Siepi is true luxury casting as Colline. Siepi's rendition of the final act "Vecchia zimarra", ravishingly sung, manages just the right balance between pathos, dignity, and irony. Lois Hunt is an excellent Musetta, a welcome vocal and dramatic presence. The remainder of the cast is fine as well. Fausto Cleva leads a performance teeming with youthful energy, tempered by a willingness to allow the music and drama the time and space to breathe. His pacing of the work strikes me as approaching the ideal, and he inspires superb execution by all concerned. The recording includes some of host Milton Cross's commentary. Once again, the excellent sound for this broadcast is the best among the versions I've heard. Following the conclusion of the Met *Bohème*, IP features an October 1, 1950 Standard Hour broadcast with Sayão and Di Stefano in music from Rossini's *William Tell*, Gounod's *Faust* (including Di Stefano's amazing diminuendo on the high C in "Salut! Demeure chaste et pure"), Mozart's *Le nozze di Figaro* and *La bohème*. Both artists are in marvelous voice, and the recorded sound is quite fine. The IP Sayão retrospective concludes with recordings from the collection of the late Donald Jackson. Rare 78rpm acetates include songs by Villa-Lobos, Fauré, and Mimì's Act III farewell from *La bohème*, all treasurable documents of Sayão's exquisite artistry.

IP's booklet includes William Russell's extensive and informative commentary, one that takes some fascinating side routes along the way. There are full synopses of *Manon* and *La bohème*, as well as Richard Caniell's Recording Notes, and artist bios. A worthy tribute to one of the Met's most cherished and beloved artists. And the *Bohème* should be heard by anyone who loves Puccini's bohemian masterpiece. Highest recommendation.

5 Stars: A glorious tribute to the beloved soprano Bidu Sayão

BIDU SAYÃO: A Tribute

Henry Fogel

FANFARE March / April 2022

This set is a tribute to Brazilian soprano Bidu Sayão (1902–1999), and as such it is treasurable. Included are two of her most important roles, *Manon* and *Mimì*, along with some rare bonus material. Sayão did not quite possess the kind of voice that calls attention to itself by virtue of a unique sound, in the way that singers like Maria Callas, Leontyne Price, Renata Tebaldi, or even Licia Albanese did. However, she offered a level of artistry and individual personality that arguably made her as important as any of those singers. Her lyric soprano possessed a distinctive combination of warmth and sharp focus, combined with a superb technique and keen dramatic instincts. Its production was equalized from top to bottom with no apparent register breaks. Sayão's diction was crisp and clear, and she always inflected her singing with meaning, either dramatic or comic. Although her singing was always elegant, don't mistake that as a polite way of saying that it lacked emotion. Her *Mimì* and *Manon* express fragility, passion, and charm in just the right proportion.

It is *Manon's* coquettish charm that one especially takes away from her portrayal. I am familiar with two Met broadcasts of *Manon* with Sayão, the other being from 1937, her first season at the Met. Unsurprisingly, this later one from 1943 is a more finished product; it sounds effortlessly natural throughout. *Manon* being one of her most important roles, Sayão sang 22 performances of it during her 15-year career at the Met. The silvery beauty of her tone provides something close to an ideal vocally. She could sing *pianissimo* without ever losing tonal body. The secret of Sayão's immense popularity with Met audiences, however, was the magnetism of her singing as much as its beauty. Every phrase is alive with meaning. She finds the perfect balance between nostalgia and self-pity for "Adieu, notre petite table," avoiding the maudlin excess some sopranos bring to it.

Despite the heavy cuts the Met inflicted on *Manon* at that time, the overall performance has a dramatic integrity rare for the opera house, particularly in that era. Sayão's interactions with Charles Kullman, the excellent Des Grieux, sound like intimate conversation. I expected Kullman to be good, but his is a performance of real distinction. He sings with a wide range of dynamic shading and color, a beautiful lyric tone, and musical imagination. His singing of "Ah!

Fuyez, douce image” is memorable, with a remarkable *diminuendo* at the end. This performance helps to explain why Kullman had a successful 25-year career at the Met.

John Brownlee’s Lescaut is well characterized but vocally ordinary. Other small roles are very well taken. Thomas Beecham’s enlivening and sensitive conducting is an important part of the success of this performance. Like Sayão, he finds the right balance between elegance and delicacy on the one hand, passion and intensity on the other. One specific example can suffice. As Manon declares that she must leave Des Grieux, “Allons! Il faut pour lui-même,” the intensity of the strings underneath those words is shattering. The orchestral playing that follows in “Adieu, notre petite table” is remarkably tender and affectionate.

There are four Met broadcasts of *La bohème* featuring Sayão as Mimì, including a famous one from 1948 featuring Jussi Björling as Rodolfo (best heard on West Hill Radio Archives 6020, reviewed by me in *Fanfare* 33:1). The performance heard here from 1951 offers another great tenor, di Stefano at the peak of his career. It also raises questions about the judgment of Met general manager Rudolf Bing, who by 1951 was phasing Sayão out. Her Mimì here is every bit as well sung and intelligently acted as the performances from the 1940s.

In fact, as an overall performance I think this is every bit as desirable as the 1948 one. At this point in his career di Stefano yielded nothing to Björling in terms of vocal beauty. He interacts with his bohemian friends boisterously but always musically. “Che gelida manina” is sung in the original key, providing a brilliantly ringing high C, after which di Stefano shades the conclusion gorgeously. In the lovers’ first meeting, Sayão and di Stefano are thoroughly persuasive as their mutual attraction becomes clear, aided by effective conducting from Fausto Cleva, which makes the first part of the scene as important as the three set pieces (two arias and a duet) that conclude it.

The specificity of Sayão’s inflection and coloring throughout the opera is always effective done within the shape of Puccini’s musical phrasing. If anything, the shining glimmer in her tone is more beautiful here than on the earlier *Bohème* broadcasts, which might be aided by improved broadcasting techniques. The back-and-forth with Rodolfo in “O soave fanciulla” is captivating for its coquettish wit as well as musical beauty. There is a world of meaning in the way Sayão utters her one-word reply, “Curioso?” to Rodolfo’s “E al ritorno?” In act III the two lovers will break your heart with the intensity of their singing. Sayão’s “Addio senza rancor” is as beautiful and moving a rendition as I have ever heard. She holds on to the first syllable of “rancor” forever, not really wanting to let go of the man she loves.

Lois Hunt is a spirited Musetta, and Giuseppe Valdengo digs into the role of Marcello with more care than most baritones give it. In Colline’s aria we are treated to Cesare Siepi, a worthy successor to an earlier generation’s Ezio Pinza. There is an overall spontaneity to this performance that has to be credited to Cleva. He had been an assistant conductor and chorus master in the 1930s and 40s and then left the Met for a while, before returning as a regular conductor in 1950. While later on he could be inconsistent, at his best Cleva was more than a *routinier*. Here he delivers no interpretive insight, but the performance is completely convincing, covering all the emotional extremes. Puccini’s genius in *La bohème* is the sharp and unexpectedly abrupt contrasts between the comic and the tragic. Those moments are powerful

here. The orchestra is extremely expressive even though the first-desk players are not at the world-class level they would later become in the Levine era.

The bonus material further elevates the quality of this set. As filler for *Manon* Immortal Performances includes portions of Francis Robinson's feature on Sayão in his radio series, *Biographies in Music*. Robinson played excerpts from commercial recordings on the program, often just fragments of arias. For Susanna's "Deh vieni non tardar" from *Le nozze di Figaro*, Immortal Performances replaces the fragment of Sayão's commercial recording with the entire aria from a 1943 Met broadcast. It fully demonstrates why Susanna held a place as one of Sayão's most important and frequently assumed roles at the Met. Robinson also played a fragment of her commercial recording for Columbia of Debussy's cantata for soprano and orchestra, *La damoiselle élue*. Immortal Performances instead inserts an excerpt from Sayão's performance with Arturo Toscanini and the New York Philharmonic.

The bonus after *La bohème* is a Standard Hour radio broadcast from October 1, 1950 that featured Sayão and di Stefano. The soprano's feeling for the long line of Rossini's writing in *Guillaume Tell* (sung in Italian) reflects the music's majesty and the character's dignity. Sayão offers Cherubino's "Non so più cosa son," a contrast to her usual role of Susanna in *Le nozze di Figaro*. Her witty and perfectly pointed reading shows that she would have been just as effective as the amorous page. Immortal Performances has kept two of di Stefano's arias from the broadcast, and wisely so. The *Faust* aria includes an utterly remarkable *diminuendo* on the high C that even surpasses the one that was preserved on a famous 1949 Met broadcast, and the sweet timbre di Stefano applies to "M'appari" from *Martha* also merits preservation.

To conclude the Standard Hour selections, the two join for the final scene (without the other characters) from act I of *La bohème*. Di Stefano sings a second high C magnificently, and both singers manage almost as much characterization in a broadcast studio setting as in the Met performance a year later, and with equally thrilling vocalism.

The final bonus material consists of rare material from 78rpm acetates, beginning with a delightful rendition of Villa-Lobos's *Lundú da Marquesa de Santos*, followed by a charming performance of Fauré's *Clair de lune*. The set concludes with one more sample of Sayão's Mimi, "Addio, senza rancor" from a 1947 Standard Hour program.

As always from Immortal Performances, the booklet is a treasure in itself, filled with perceptive notes by William Russell, additional comments from producer Richard Caniell, synopses, artist bios, and lovely photographs. Most importantly, the quality of the sonic restoration is superb. For remastering purposes Caniell tries to use generally tries to find copies of the landline transmissions made from the Met to NBC's studios in Rockefeller Center. These include Milton Cross's commentary, some of which is included on the *La bohème*.

However, during World War II the lacquer exteriors of those transcriptions were stripped off to provide the underlying aluminum for military purposes. Caniell has found an alternative for *Manon*, the simultaneous Spanish-language transcription made from another box in the Met, which has survived. It comes with some of Augustin Llopes de Olivares's commentary, to maintain the atmosphere of the broadcast. (Commentary is tracked separately, making it easy to

skip.) For everything here the sound quality is very good for the period. I compared the material with prior issues, and it is notably superior.

Bidu Sayão, who lived to be 96, was beloved by Met and broadcast audiences . She fully merits this affectionate tribute from Immortal Performances. Because she did not make a great many commercial records (she was contracted by Columbia, which recorded very few complete operas), this set may well serve to introduce her exquisite art to a new generation of listeners.