

DONIZETTI *L'elisir d'amore* Giuseppe Antonicelli, cond; Bidú Sayão (*Adina*); Inge Manski (*Giannetta*); Ferruccio Tagliavini (*Nemorino*); Francesco Valentino (*Belcore*); Italo Tajo (*Dulcamara*); Metropolitan Op O & Ch. Live: Metropolitan Opera, New York, 2/5/1949

MASCAGNI *L'amico Fritz* Pietro Mascagni, cond; Pia Tassinari (*Suzel*); Amalia Pini (*Beppe*); Ferruccio Tagliavini (*Fritz*); Saturno Meletti (*David*); EIAR O & Ch.

& **BONUS:** Arias and scenes from *Manon*, *Mignon*, *Rigoletto*, *La traviata* (with Tassinari), *Tosca* (with Tassinari), *Werther* (with Tassinari), *L'amico Fritz*, *Falstaff* (with Franca Somigli), *La sonnambula*, *Il barbiere di Siviglia*, *L'Arlesiana*, *L'elisir d'amore*, *I Lombardi*, and *La bohème* (with Tassinari, Maria Huder, and Enzo Mascherini) • IMMORTAL PERFORMANCES 1124-4, mono (4 CDs: 259:37)

Review by **Ken Meltzer**

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A four-disc set from Immortal Performances is a tribute to the Italian lyric tenor Ferruccio Tagliavini (1913-1995) in the form of complete recordings of Donizetti's *L'elisir d'amore* and Mascagni's *L'amico Fritz*, along with several delectable excerpts from various operas. Tagliavini made his professional debut in 1938 as Rodolfo in Puccini's *La bohème*. His La Scala debut followed in 1942. Tagliavini first sang at the Met on January 10, 1947, again as Rodolfo, in a performance that earned him sterling reviews both for his beautiful singing and convincing dramatic portrayal. All told, Tagliavini gave 96 Met performances in the house and on tour, in nine different roles. Tagliavini continued to sing in operatic performances until 1965. But his finest years were the decade or so from 1940 to the early 50s. Like other lyric tenors blessed with voices of exceptional beauty (Giuseppe di Stefano and José Carreras immediately come to mind), Tagliavini could not resist the temptation to branch out into tenor repertoire demanding a heavier, more dramatic voice. As a result, Tagliavini lost much of the vocal sheen and flexibility of his prime years. But what a prime it was. At its best, Tagliavini's voice rivaled Beniamino Gigli's for sheer beauty. Indeed, Tagliavini's voice bears more than a passing similarity to his legendary predecessor. The quality of Tagliavini's voice alone was more than sufficient for an international career. But Tagliavini was a fine artist as well. He sang with considerable dramatic involvement and musical imagination. While he was an Italian tenor to his core, Tagliavini sang with a constant sense of propriety and restraint that, for better or worse, eluded many of his compatriots. And Tagliavini was a master at applying a rich palette of vocal colors and dynamics that lent his performances a special magic. While Tagliavini could summon power when needed, his hushed singing was especially beautiful and accomplished. And unlike some singers, Tagliavini's *piano* and *pianissimo* vocalism was not a tacked-on crooning effect. It was fully supported, as evidenced by his ability to journey seamlessly from loud to soft (or vice-versa) on a single breath. In his prime, Ferruccio Tagliavini was one of the finest lyric tenors appearing before the public, one whose recordings still bear comparison with such icons as Schipa, Gigli, and Björling. If I were forced to choose a single recording that illustrates all of Tagliavini's arresting strengths as a vocalist and artist, it would be his 1940 rendition of "Ed anche Beppe amò" from *L'amico Fritz*, that concludes the second disc. But typical of Immortal Performances, all of the selections included on release showcase Tagliavini at his finest.

First is a February 5, 1949 Met broadcast of Donizetti's *L'elisir d'amore*. This is billed by IP as a world premiere release, and I have not heard it before. There is another Met broadcast of *L'elisir* from Christmas Eve of the same year, duplicating the tenor and soprano leads, along with the conductor, from the earlier performance. The later broadcast, starring Tagliavini, Bidú Sayão, Giuseppe Valdengo, and Salvatore Baccaloni, conducted by Giuseppe Antonicelli is a fine one, indeed. It has been issued by several labels specializing in live performances. The February 5, 1949 broadcast can stand proudly alongside it. At the start, I'll confess that *The Elixir of Love* is one of my handful of favorite operas. Not only is it teeming with melodic inspiration, it features characters who are identifiable, sympathetic, and engaged in pursuits that ring as true to life today as when the opera premiered in 1832. When a cast embraces the musical and dramatic potential of this work, Donizetti's *Elixir* casts its magic spell. And that is the case here. Nemorino was one of Tagliavini's signature roles, and he excels in every possible manner. If the voice is not quite as exquisitely sweet and beautiful as his early 1940s recordings (more on them later), it is very close to that peak. From his entrance aria "Quanto è bella", Tagliavini embodies the lovesick Nemorino. Tagliavini's Nemorino may be an uneducated country lad, but he is no comic buffoon. Rather, he is a person of substance, capable of feeling the deepest and most profound emotions. Throughout, Tagliavini's Nemorino is a sympathetic and believable figure. Along the way, Tagliavini interpolates some unwritten high notes, sung with relish. The showpiece "Una furtiva lagrima" is delivered with great feeling and nobility, beautifully phrased and filled with marvelous variety of dynamics. This is a fine document of an important and endearing singer at his best. As with Tagliavini and Nemorino, Adina is a role tailor-made for the talents of Bidú Sayão, one of the most charming artists ever to grace the Met stage. The Brazilian lyric soprano is in radiant and free voice. And like Tagliavini, Sayão creates a sympathetic and believable character, expertly portraying Adina's journey from coquette to a woman deeply in love with Nemorino. A wonderful actress, Sayão is ever attentive to her colleagues. The scheduled Belcore was the same performer in the December 24 broadcast, Giuseppe Valdengo. But Valdengo became indisposed, and was replaced by Francesco Valentino. His voice is a bit more rough-hewn than Valdengo's, but that is not inappropriate for the blustering, preening Sergeant Belcore, and Valentino sings with style and panache. Italo Tajo is a very fine Belcore, a lyric bass who handles the patter and other comic moments with aplomb, but never at the expense of vocal beauty or smoothness of delivery (Baccaloni, the Dulcamara on the Dec. 24 broadcast, is his usual extroverted and charming self, a buffo character who delights in playing to the gallery). Inge Manski is fine in the smaller role of Giannetta. All of the singers relish Felice Romani's text to the fullest, projecting with admirable clarity and meaning. Giuseppe Antonicelli leads a crisply executed performance, one that proceeds in sprightly fashion, but without ever slighting the singers' opportunities for individual expression. Act I is subdivided, converting the two-act opera into three. There are the usual stage cuts of the period, a shame given the genius of Donizetti's score. But what remains is treasurable, and a worthy companion to the December 24, 1949 broadcast. The sound is typical of broadcasts of the period; not equal to contemporaneous studio recordings, but certainly fine enough to enjoy every aspect of this lovely performance. As always, the inclusion of commentary by host Milton Cross enhances the experience.

The Cetra recording of Pietro Mascagni's *L'amico Fritz*, recorded and broadcast in the fall of 1942, will be more familiar to collectors. Indeed, even with dated sound, it could easily serve as a reference recording for this lovely work (although I would not want to be without the 1968 EMI issue, with the young Luciano Pavarotti and Mirella Freni). Mascagni himself is the

conductor. As in the case of his 1940 EMI *Cavalleria rusticana*, Mascagni favors broad tempos. But I never feel that his interpretation of *L'amico Fritz* bogs down, and Mascagni secures beautiful, tonally rich playing from the EIAR (Ente Italiano Audizione Radiofoniche) Orchestra. As Fritz, Tagliavini is in prime voice. He sings with a directness, sincerity, and beauty that would melt a stone. In listening to both Tagliavini's Fritz and Nemorino, I'm struck by the nobility he brings to each character. As Suzel, Tagliavini's wife Pia Tassinari proves to be an ideal partner. She, too, sings gorgeously, and absolutely without diva pretense or affect. Tassinari would later segue from soprano to mezzo roles, and the warmth of her voice lends even greater humanity to Suzel. Bass-baritone Saturno Meletti is a first-rate David; rich of voice and exuding warmth and geniality. In the opera, David is an Alsatian Rabbi. But given the recording's origin during Fascist Italy, David becomes a doctor ("dottore", rather than "rabbino"). The smaller roles are well-performed. I suspect that many already own this recording. All of the previous reissues, including a 2003 Warner Fonit CD release, apply excessive filtering and reverb to the original 78 rpm discs. In his Recording Notes, Richard Caniell makes no secret of his disdain for such an approach, and I am in complete accord. The IP restoration, an honest and expert achievement, allows us to hear the recording in a much more natural acoustic, and all for the better. The voices and orchestra emerge with far greater beauty and definition. Even if you already own this recording from a prior issue, you will want to hear the vastly superior IP version. After each complete opera, IP includes various excerpts. With the exception of an excerpt from an April 28, 1941 Rome Opera broadcast of Verdi's *Falstaff*, they are Cetra studio recordings from the 1940s. They find Tagliavini at his vocal and artistic best, some of the finest lyric tenor singing committed to disc. As in the case of the *L'amico Fritz*, the Warner Fonit remasterings suffer from the filtering/reverb horrors I've already described. And once again, Richard Caniell and IP have salvaged them, much to our benefit.

The set includes IP's typically deluxe packaging, with a booklet including engaging and informative essays by Richard Caniell concerning EIAR, Donizetti, Mascagni and *L'amico Fritz*, as well as his always fascinating Recording Notes. Henry Fogel's appreciation of Tagliavini and the recordings at hand is superb, providing many wonderful insights, and always conveying the writer's admiration for the tenor and music. There are also detailed plot synopses for the complete operas, artist bios, and some lovely photographs. Between the *L'elisir* premiere issue, and vast improvement to the *L'amico Fritz* and Cetra excerpts, you have a release that every Tagliavini fan will want to explore. And if you've never heard this artist, I can't think of a better place to start. Highest recommendation.

5 Stars: The marvelous Italian tenor Ferruccio Tagliavini in his prime

Review by **James A. Altana**

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Along with Cesare Valletti, Ferruccio Tagliavini (1913–1995) was one of two post-war representatives of a now seemingly extinguished vocal breed, the *tenore di grazia*. Whereas Valletti had a somewhat more conventional-sounding voice, Tagliavini had a very unique, instantly recognizable timbre due to use of inflection through the face mask. This imported a

certain nasal quality to his sound, but also a positively ethereal sweetness and capacity for extreme delicacy of effect, ideal for conveying ecstatic rapture or dolorous pathos. His was an exquisitely modulated instrument, particularly in its almost infinite degrees of dynamic shadings; his breathing was well produced and steady, his legato and production of line immaculate. His one inherent limitation was a lack of heft and power, and eventually ill-advised attempts to undertake more dramatic roles resulted in a hardening of tone and shortening of his career. His peak years were from 1940 to 1956; from 1952 to 1956 he was the star tenor of the Cetra roster, making complete recordings of *La sonnambula*, *La bohème*, *Madama Butterfly*, *Rigoletto*, *Un ballo in maschera*, *Werther*, *L'Arlesiana*, *Martha*, *Mefistofele*, and *Tosca*; all except the last of these remain highly regarded by collectors even today. In 1959 he recorded *Lucia di Lammermoor* for EMI opposite Maria Callas, the latter unfortunately being in decline by that time. He also participated in a famous early recording of the Mozart Requiem in 1939, and in a number of Italian films, including an abridged *Il barbiere di Siviglia* from 1947 with Nelly Corradi, Tito Gobbi, Vito de Taranto, and Italo Tajo. In addition, complete live performances with him have been issued of *La traviata*, *Fedora*, *L'elisir d'amore*, *Lucia di Lammermoor*, *Tosca*, *Manon*, and *Werther*, with only three out of these seven titles not overlapping with his official discography.

The recordings featured here all showcase Tagliavini in his absolute prime. The 1949 *L'elisir d'amore* is the second live Metropolitan Opera broadcast with Tagliavini from that year to surface. A previous one from some 10 months later, on December 24, with Giuseppe Valdengo and Salvatore Baccaloni instead of Francesco Valentino and Italo Tajo, has appeared on multiple CD labels, but this is the first commercial issue of this prior performance. Valdengo was also slated to sing Belcore here, but cancelled due to illness. Both performances are estimable, with a choice between them resting on the weight one gives to their relative virtues. Thanks to Richard Caniell's typically painstaking remastering work here, the sound in this February performance is on a par with that of its December successor. In terms of casting, the December performance has a significant edge with the handsome, virile Belcore of Valdengo, which is much superior to the rather crude, bullish effort of Valentino in February, who also has a persistent underlying vocal unsteadiness. On the other hand, by this time the great Salvatore Baccaloni was at the tail end of his career, and was compensating for fading if still potent vocal resources (there are issues with rhythm, intonation, and steadiness of emission) by increasingly exaggerated mugging; some will find him colorful, others irritating. By contrast, the excellent Italo Tajo was just at the start of his career at this point; he is technically immaculate, and has a sure grasp of his character's slyness, so he ably brings his handsome, ample voice to bear in creating a plausible charlatan. As Adina, Bidù Sayão initially is not properly warmed up in the December performance and does not get fully settled in until her first duet with Tagliavini, whereas in this February performance she is in good form right from her first entrance. She was of course an enchanting, charming interpreter with a lovely lyric soprano, including a perfect trill, and she presents an Adina who convincingly turns from pert vixen to imploring sweetheart on a dime. For his part, Tagliavini is likewise in fine form on both occasions; while he is arguably a little more settled into and secure in his role in December, and has found further interpretive nuances, the difference from February is not great. Throughout one marvels at his ravishing *mezza voce*, the pianos and pianissimos floated as lightly as soap bubbles, and the perfectly scaled diminuendos and shadings of tonal color for emotional expression. Giuseppe Antonicelli's conducting on both occasions is buoyant and vivacious. Given that *Dulcamara* is a far more important character than Belcore, my preference between the two versions would be for this new one.

The 1942 *L'amico Fritz* is Tagliavini's earliest surviving opera recording. The opera, which ranks a distant success in the composer's output after *Cavalleria Rusticana*, is of a completely different character from that verismo megahit. A pastoral romance that focuses upon personal character rather than action, its slender plot concerns a middle-aged bachelor who is artfully

beguiled by a friend who is a rabbi into falling in love with a beautiful young girl. (Because this production took place in fascist Italy during World War II, the libretto was altered to replace all reference to a rabbi with anodyne ones to a doctor instead.) The score is gentle and lyrical, devoid of explosive fireworks; it is also less memorable than that of *Cavalleria*, with its two most famous excerpts being the "Cherry Duet" and an orchestral Intermezzo. Although the part of David is significant to the action, the score's demands rest primarily on the soprano and tenor. Modern listeners most likely know the work from the celebrated 1968 EMI recording made by the youthful Luciano Pavarotti and Mirella Freni (who, fittingly for this work, were born in the same year, grew up in the same small Italian town, and even shared the same wet-nurse) under Gianandrea Gavazzeni; there is also a later studio recording with the sometime real husband-and-wife team of Angela Gheorghiu and Roberto Alagna, and several live performances.

This set, however, occupies a special place in the discography of both the opera and the composer. Although it has been more or less continuously in print since its first issuance on 78s, until now it has been sonically hobbled by one poor transfer after another that has grossly distorted the sound with fake electronic enhancements or excessive filtering. This is the first release to present the score in clean, honest sound, and is a revelation, far surpassing my fondest hopes for what could be accomplished with the original pressings. While obviously a monaural recording of 1940s vintage, it is clean and pleasant, with a surprisingly full frequency range and little background noise. The voices have bloom and color, and the orchestra has body. Equally important, it is clear that the entire enterprise is a labor of love for all involved. While Pavarotti's take on Fritz is justly famous, Tagliavini is in his own way virtually an equal in beauty of voice, and superior in interpretive inflection. Again and again one's attention is arrested by Tagliavini's ability to capture the import of a word or phrase with a particular shading of tone color or dynamics. If his wife Pia Tassinari is not quite in the same league as Freni, she is very fine in her own right. Despite being a decade older than her husband, she retained a youthful-sounding timbre, although her vibrant vibrato and mezzo-ish overtones (she would move down to that vocal range in a few years) do make her sound somewhat mature for her character's putative age. Saturno Meletti is unfortunately little remembered today, even though he made several complete opera recordings for Cetra in the early 1950s; heard here a decade before, he makes a most favorable impression with a rich, fruity baritone that completely suits the sympathetic nature of his character. If Amalia Pini sounds superannuated as the youth Beppe, at least her part is a small one. The composer conducts his handwork ably, with evident affection and little sign of the sometimes ponderous tempos in his 1940 recording of *Cavalleria*, while the orchestra plays with style and polish. Even if the accompanying *L'elisir d'amore* was not as good as it is, this set would be worth buying just for this recording.

The second disc for each opera is handsomely filled out with additional Tagliavini recordings from 78s; except for the duets from *Tosca* and *Werther*, made with Tassinari in 1948, these date from 1940–43. In all the solo selections, plus the duets from *Falstaff* and *La Traviata* and the quartet from *La bohème*, the only word for Tagliavini is "ravishing." (On a side note, I was interested to learn that Franca Somigli, Tagliavini's partner in the *Falstaff* excerpt and a name previously unknown to me, was the wife of conductor Giuseppe Antonicelli. An American soprano whose real name was Marion Bruce Clark, she sang briefly at the Met in 1937 after appearing under Toscanini at the Salzburg Festival in 1936.) If forced to pick one selection to illustrate Tagliavini's art for a neophyte, I would unhesitatingly choose "È la solita storia" from Cilea's *L'Arlesiana*; in my experience only Gigli rivals him in communicating the character's devastating heartbreak with such refined finesse. The *Werther* duet is likewise impressive for similar reasons, with Tassinari having now moved down to the mezzo repertoire; the couple would make a complete recording (also sung in Italian, as here) in 1954, when they were a degree less fresh of voice. The one relatively disappointing selection here is the act I duet from

Tosca; Tagliavini is clearly forcing his voice to meet the heavier demands of Cavaradossi, and Tassinari by this time is simply unsuited for Tosca vocally and is also clueless interpretively.

As always, Immortal Performances backs Caniell's remarkable remasterings with lavish documentation. Fellow *Fanfare* critic Henry Fogel provides yet another of his typically erudite essays full of incisive observations, buttressed by a detailed table of contents, plot summaries, singers' bios, and Caniell's recording notes. This four-disc set is being sold for the price of three discs. Both fans of Tagliavini in particular and of historic opera recordings in general can take great delight in this release; enthusiastically recommended.