

## **CESARE VALLETTI – A Tribute**

**DONIZETTI *Don Pasquale*.** Fernando Corena (*Pasquale*); Roberta Peters (*Norina*); Cesare Valletti (*Ernesto*); Frank Guarrera (*Malatesta*); Live: Metropolitan Op Ch & O, 2/11/1956

**BRITTEN *Soirée*** • Thomas Schippers, cond; Live: Metropolitan Op Ch & O, New York 2/11/1956

**MASSENET *Werther*** • Renato Cellini, cond; Cesare Valletti (*Werther*), Nell Rankin (*Charlotte*); Josephine Guido (*Sophie*); Arthur Cosenza (*Albert*); New Orleans Op Ch & O, Municipal Auditorium, New Orleans 12/1/1956

& **MASSENET *Werther***: Excerpts (Cesare Valletti and Rosalind Elias).

& Cesare Valletti sings scenes from *La sonnambula*, *Falstaff*, *La favorita*, *L'elisir d'amore*, *L'Arlesiana*, and *Manon* (with Maria Callas, Rosana Carteri, and Giulietta Simionato)

- IMMORTAL PERFORMANCES 1143-4, mono (4 CDs: 298:16)

Review by **Henry Fogel**

FANFARE March / April 2021

This four-disc set is built as a tribute to Cesare Valletti, and a well-deserved one it is. Valletti's all-too-brief career at the Metropolitan Opera ran from 1953 (when the tenor was 31) through 1960. His abrupt departure came when Rudolf Bing bizarrely replaced Valletti, after a dress rehearsal of a new production of *L'elisir d'amore*, with Dino Formichini, a tenor nowhere near Valletti's equal. Bing's decision has never been explained. Valletti kept singing until 1967, but he never returned to the Met, despite invitations.

Although knowledgeable opera lovers have always admired his singing, Valletti never achieved star status. The brevity of his Met career might be partially responsible, as might competition from other outstanding lyric tenors at the time. I think it is also fair to say that Valletti's voice lacked the unique signature that captures one's attention the moment the sound is heard. He did have an instrument of genuine lyrical beauty, however, along with an elegance of style that few tenors in any generation exhibit.

Moreover, he sang with real personality, more than he is generally credited with. In two completely different roles here, as Ernesto and Werther, Valletti excels both musically and dramatically. William Russell's superb essay in the lovely booklet with this set, *A Tribute to Cesare Valletti—A great "tenore di grazia,"* provides an eloquent exploration of the singer's art. The most meaningful document, however, is of course the singing itself as demonstrated on these four discs.

Valletti was one of the most prized students of the great Italian lyric tenor Tito Schipa, and it is no coincidence that two of Schipa's most acclaimed roles, Ernesto in *Don Pasquale* and the title role in *Werther*, are combined here by Immortal Performances. It doesn't take long into *Don Pasquale* before we recognize the beauty and elegance of Valletti's singing. His breath control and exquisite shading of dynamics distinguish Ernesto's act 1 aria "Sogno soave e casto." Throughout the opera Valletti gives us refined singing and a completely involved characterization. His comedic timing and inflections are very effective. Valletti is paired with one of the most skilled *bassi buffi* of the era in Fernando Corena, and the tenor more than holds his own.

Conversely, he is a convincing lovesick swain as well. One of the most impressive aspects of Valletti's singing is his rhythmic precision, so that in the ensembles the genius of Donizetti's musical inventiveness is always clear. The classic model for Ernesto on disc is Schipa's 1932 recording. Valletti's portrayal is the closest I've heard to his teacher's skilled vocal production and innate musicality. Having these qualities in a live performance, with the *frisson* that this adds, is treasurable. It is regrettable that the *cabaletta* to "Chercherò lontana" in act 2 was cut. What may surprise in everything in this set, is the interpretive strengths and risk-taking Valletti demonstrates. He is far more willing to hold notes, stretch phrases, and exhibit the kind of strong personality that was more common in singers of an earlier generation than today's. Never becoming tasteless, all of it is both beautiful and engaging.

Fernando Corena in the title role is also as good as it gets. Corena was the reigning *basso buffo* at the Met from 1954 to 1978. He was the much-loved successor to Salvatore Baccaloni. In the later years of his career, Corena got by on his superb comedic skills and his ability in the rapid patter of the arias common to *bel canto* comedies, while the core of his voice thinned. But here in 1956 we get not only the extraordinary gift Corena had for characterization, but also really strong singing. Key to the success of any performance of *Don Pasquale* is depicting the title character as a human being rather than caricaturing him as a buffoon. Corena manages this so well that, like Norina, we feel just a little sorry for the trick being played on Pasquale.

Roberta Peters also had a long and successful career at the Met, and she is superb as Norina. Peters did not have a great range of vocal colors at her disposal, but her voice was attractive, her technique in florid passagework excellent, and she too had real skills at comedy. She vividly interacts with the other characters and maintains the appropriate comedic spirit. She softens her tone just enough to convey that Norina feels some degree of regret at doing the needful thing, slapping Pasquale to make him rue the thought of marrying her.

I wish I enjoyed Frank Guarrera's Malatesta more than I do. His timbre lacks a strong core, and its dry sound provides limited pleasure, especially in such exalted company. He does enter into the spirit of the comedy and is not so much a strong negative in the performance as he is the lack of a strong positive. Overall, one has the sense that the orchestra and singers are actually listening to, and interacting with, each other.

One does not often speak about conductors in Donizetti operas. If they keep things moving along and stay with the singers, we consider it successful. However, Thomas Schippers does much more than that. He conducts with character, pointing the rhythms in the comic sections, caressing the line in the music's tender moments, and exhibiting keen sensitivity to orchestral balances and color.

The title role in *Werther* has attracted a wide range of lyric and dramatic tenors from Valletti through Franco Corelli. If you think Valletti might not have the strength for the score's bigger moments, this New Orleans Opera performance from 1956 will disabuse you. He rides over the orchestra at the climaxes, fills generous phrases with tone, and conveys through tone color and dynamic shading the requisite tenderness. The best Werthers manage to encompass both the delicate and volatile sides of this romantic poet, which is precisely what Valletti accomplishes. His outbursts are febrile, his love for Charlotte is deeply felt and exquisitely expressed.

Nell Rankin was a stalwart at the Met in a huge range of roles in the Italian, French, and German wings of the house. She had a rich mezzo evenly produced from the bottom of her range to the top, and her emission of a smooth tone throughout is one of the pleasures of her Charlotte. Rankin was also a terrific actress, dramatically and vocally, and her Letter Scene will break your heart.

In two smaller but important roles, Josephine Guido is an attractive Sophie and Arthur Cosenza a stronger vocal presence than we usually get as Albert. (Cosenza became the longstanding general director of the New Orleans Opera from 1970 to 1998.) The competent but routine conducting of Renato Cellini doesn't get in the way of the momentum, but it doesn't add anything either. What is most important about this release is that we finally have a complete *Werther* with Valletti, in a fine overall performance and in good monaural sound. The recording apparently was made for archival purposes by the New Orleans Opera.

Additionally, Immortal Performances has included three excerpts from an RCA LP of highlights from *Werther* with Valletti and Rosalind Elias in 1956. René Leibowitz is the excellent conductor. It is nice to have these excerpts, but even more valuable are the other bonus tracks that fill out CD 4. All demonstrate the beauty of Valletti's singing and the strength of his personality. The duet "Prendi, l'anel ti dono" from *La sonnambula* comes from the famed La Scala broadcast with Maria Callas and Leonard Bernstein. Listening to Valletti caress the musical line at the outset is a thrill, and even in this short excerpt the imagination of Bernstein and Callas makes for something very special. Two Donizetti excerpts come from an NBC "Standard Hour" radio broadcast. In the finale to act 4 of *La favorita* Valletti is joined by Giulietta Simionato in some thrilling vocalism, and in the following "Una furtiva lagrima" from *L'elisir d'amore* Valletti is exquisite. He stretches the phrase at the end of the first verse; the beauty of his singing draws the listener right into his world. "È la solita storia" from Cilea's *L'arlesiana* and "La rêve" from Massenet's *Manon* are both lessons in breath control and dynamic shading. This is truly memorable singing.

The set also has a rather odd inclusion in Benjamin Britten's *Soirée*. Met choreographer Zachary Solov arranged numbers from Britten's *Soirées musicales*, based on Rossini's *Sins of My Old Age*. Why the Met felt the need to fill out an evening of *Don Pasquale* remains a mystery, and without seeing the dancers, our ability to really appreciate this work is limited. However, any example of the talents of Thomas Schippers is welcome.

The sound quality for everything here is the equivalent of superior monaural broadcast sound, no surprise given Immortal Performances's track record for excellent restoration. The booklet is up to the label's usual high standard. In addition to Russell's essay, producer Richard Caniell's recording notes are filled with interesting insights and information. Lovely photos and

the inclusion on the discs of Milton Cross's commentary complete the package. I have always felt that Cesare Valletti never really received the credit he deserved, and this superb tribute helps to redress that.

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Review by **Ken Meltzer**

FANFARE March / April 2021

“Cesare Valletti Tribute” from Immortal Performances celebrates the great Italian *tenore di grazia*. Valletti (1922-2000), born in Rome, included among his teachers Tito Schipa, to whom he is often compared in voice and artistry. Valletti's professional career spanned the years 1947-68. The most significant portion of Valletti's international career took place at the Met where, between 1953-60, he sang eight roles and 113 performances in the house and on tour. Valletti left the Met after GM Rudolf Bing removed the tenor from the cast of a production of Donizetti's *L'elisir d'amore*. But if Rudolf Bing didn't appreciate the voice and artistry of Cesare Valletti, audiences, conductors, and the other great opera houses of the world certainly did. Valletti had a distinguished career that is well documented on records. He made numerous complete opera recordings for Cetra and RCA, as well as recital discs for the latter company. There are also documents of many of Valletti's live performances. The IP Valletti Tribute includes 1956 performances of Donizetti's *Don Pasquale* (Met) and Massenet's *Werther* (New Orleans Opera). And as supplements, the four-disc set (priced as three) includes excerpts from Valletti's RCA recording of highlights from *Werther*, along with live excerpts from other operas. The IP material, like all of Valletti's recordings, presents a vocal and interpretive talent of the highest order. Valletti had a beautiful tenor voice, easily produced throughout the registers. Although not especially celebrated either for vocal power or a brilliant upper register, Valletti could summon both (within his appropriately chosen repertoire) when needed, and to fine effect. But it was the manner in which Valletti deployed his vocal gifts that distinguished him among other like voices of his era. Some tenors are content to make their impact with an unending and unvaried stream of attractive sound. By contrast, Cesare Valletti was an intelligent, imaginative, and searching artist, one who was ever attentive to the music and text at hand. These qualities were evident in any operatic role Valletti portrayed. They were also present in his many recitals. An October 16, 1959 NY Town Hall concert with pianist Leo Taubman, originally issued by RCA, and reissued by Testament, documents Valletti moving with ease and expertise from concert arias by Pasquini and Mozart, to Berlioz's *Les nuits d'été*, to Wolf lieder, to songs by Obradors and Calleja, to opera arias by Boito and Cilea. Throughout, Valletti sings with vocal brilliance, consummate style, and exquisite diction (in all three featured languages). Valletti was a true master singer, and I have yet to hear a Valletti commercial recording or live performance that does not merit attention. And both the 1956 Met *Don Pasquale* and New Orleans *Werther* find Valletti at the top of his form.

The Met *Don Pasquale* was presented as a double bill, opening with *Soirée*, a ballet choreographed to various Benjamin Britten orchestral arrangements of music by Rossini. Thomas Schippers, who on December 23, 1955, made his Met conducting debut, at the age of 25, leads a stylish and energetic performance. The same may be said of Schippers's conducting of *Don Pasquale*. This is a rendition brimming with life, humor, and razor-sharp orchestral execution. The cast is a strong one, headed by basso Fernando Corena in the title role. Corena was 39 at the time of the broadcast, and in prime voice. Corena employs his vocal gifts with admirable musicianship and the avoidance of the kinds of clowning and exaggerations often associated with basso buffo performance. Instead, Corena makes his comic points through a range of vocal colors and articulation of the text. This Pasquale is much less of a clown than a man who has allowed his vanity to place him in a situation over which he has no control. As Malatesta, baritone Frank Guarrera brings his familiar healthy and masculine voice, dramatic involvement, and flair for comedy. Guarrera and Corena (and Schippers) make the most of the brilliant patter duet "Cheti, cheti, immantimente". Guarrera does lack the ideal smoothness and beauty of vocal production for this lovely bel canto baritone role. In his excellent liner notes, William Russell reminds us that Robert Merrill sang Malatesta in this production as well. Under the right circumstances, that might have been something very special. But in any event Guarrera, as throughout his Met career, proves a reliable and welcome colleague. Another familiar and beloved Met artist, soprano Roberta Peters, sings Norina. Peters was a fine coloratura soprano, one who combined her bright and secure voice and captivating stage presence for many treasurable performances. She is excellent in this broadcast, singing beautifully, and never overplaying her comic hand. But although I doubt that Donizetti intended the Ernesto to steal the show in *Don Pasquale*, that is what Cesare Valletti does on this occasion. Valletti's singing is so beautiful in tone, and his phrasing so exquisitely crafted in terms of dynamics and rubato, he emerges as the star of the afternoon. This is bel canto tenor singing of the highest order. Valletti made a superb commercial recording of *Don Pasquale* for Cetra in 1952 (with Sesto Bruscantini, Alda Noni, and Mario Borriello, and conducted by Mario Rossi). Valletti's Ernesto in the 1956 Met broadcast can stand proudly alongside it. My previous familiarity with this performance was from a 2001 release on the Gala label. The Gala sound is quite fine, representative of a mid-1950s radio broadcast. But unlike the IP release, it lacks the Rossini/Britten, as well as Milton Cross's broadcast announcements. And the IP sound is an improvement over the Gala. If the differences are not dramatic, IP's sound is a bit warmer and defined, and maintains integrity better in loud passages.

Massenet most certainly intended the spotlight to shine its brightest upon the title character in his operatic version of Goethe's *Werther*. Unlike *Don Pasquale*, Valletti never made a complete commercial recording of *Werther*. He did record excerpts of the work for RCA, conducted by René Leibowitz, and co-starring Rosalind Elias and Gérard Souzay. The new IP release includes three excerpts from that highlights LP. They make a lovely prelude to the complete 1956 live performance from New Orleans. Unlike Ernesto, Werther is a role that requires vocal heft, and the ability to project over full, rich orchestration. In this New Orleans *Werther*, Valletti proves that he possessed such resources. Valletti's tenor is never overshadowed by the orchestra, with the voice easily surmounting the climaxes. Throughout, the passion of this Werther is never in doubt. And once again, Valletti brings the utmost in vocal beauty and artistry

to his performance. Valletti's French diction and sense of style are impeccable. And because Valletti applies his bel canto sense of flexibility of phrasing and rich palette of vocal colors to his interpretation, the poetic side of Werther also receives its full due. It's rare to encounter a Werther who combines such vocal and interpretive gifts. Georges Thill, in his classic 1931 recording of *Werther*, is still my favorite in the role. But Valletti's interpretation is worthy of comparison, and most certainly worthy of attention. Nell Rankin, with her rich and beautiful lyric mezzo, and passionate interpretation, is excellent as Werther's beloved Charlotte. And there is a marvelous chemistry between Rankin and Valletti. Josephine Guido is a secure and bright-voiced Sophie. Arthur Cosenza's warm baritone and sympathetic delivery are decided assets as Albert. The wonderful Canadian basso Joseph Rouleau is a lively and sonorous Bailiff. Renato Cellini leads a performance that admirably balances the opera's dramatic and lyric elements, and never flags in pacing. The sound quality of the New Orleans *Werther* is not the equal of the Met *Don Pasquale*. The sonics are not as well defined and a bit cavernous. That said, the sound is more than adequate to hear and appreciate this fine rendition of Massenet's opera. And the IP sound has a warmer and more natural acoustic than the Bongiovanni release that served as my version of this performance until now. Both the voices and orchestra benefit from the IP restoration.

In addition to excerpts from the RCA *Werther* highlights LP, IP features Valletti in several selections from operas, many alongside sterling colleagues. The excerpts reinforce that not only was Valletti a wonderful vocalist, he was an artist who took great care to fashion characterizations attentive to the works at hand. Valletti was definitely not a "one voice fits all" kind of singer. Compare the vocal colors and articulation of Werther to Fenton in Verdi's *Falstaff*. While it might be an exaggeration to say they sound like two completely different singers, they do sound like two completely different characters. The booklet includes William Russell's excellent essays on the works and performances, detailed plot synopses, Richard Caniell's Recording Notes, and artist bios and photos. Two first-rate complete performances (plus highlights), starring a consummate tenor and artist. Recommended with enthusiasm, and with the hope that if you are new to this wonderful artist, you'll be inspired to explore his legacy further.

### **Ken Meltzer**

Five stars: Cesare Valletti shines in live performances of *Don Pasquale* and *Werther*