

**VERDI *Aida*** • Ettore Panizza, cond; Stella Roman (*Aida*); Bruna Castagna (*Amneris*); Giovanni Martinelli (*Radamès*); Leonard Warren (*Amonasro*); Ezio Pinza (*Ramfis*); Metropolitan Opera Orchestra and Chorus, Live: New York March 22, 1941

& **GIOVANNI MARTINELLI** Arias and Scenes from *Aida* (with Ezio Pinza and Grace Anthony) and *Il trovatore* (with Louise Homer). Biographies in Music (with Francis Robinson) • IMMORTAL PERFORMANCES IPCD 1166-3 (3 CDs 140:20)

**Ken Meltzer**

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A new three-disc release from Immortal Performances presents a March 22, 1941 Saturday afternoon broadcast from the Metropolitan Opera of Verdi's *Aida*. It is one of the finest performances I have heard of this iconic work. And the sound quality of IP's restoration compares with commercial recordings of that era. In short, I think this *Aida* belongs in every opera lover's collection. Now, I will be a bit more long-winded! On January 1, 1941, Romanian soprano Stella Roman made her Met debut in this same work. On that occasion, *New York Times* critic Olin Downes noted Roman's "inconsistencies of technique and style", and a "variable" approach to "attacking, breathing and focusing tone. There were as many changes of tone quality and there were some uncertainties of pitch." Downes surmised that "(n)ervousness may have been responsible for an interpretation always interesting and singularly uneven." Over the next decade, Roman was an important presence at the Met, singing 126 performances in 13 roles, and excelling in the Italian lirico-spinto repertoire. Roman is in superb form for the March 22, 1941 broadcast. On this occasion, Stella Roman delivers one of the finest performances I've heard of this most challenging role. Roman's voice manifests a warm and vibrant quality, remarkable ease of production, and consistency and security throughout the registers. Roman uses these considerable vocal gifts as the foundation for a characterization that is brimming with tension. *Aida*'s plight as an Ethiopian princess, who is both a slave to Amneris, the daughter King of Egypt, and her rival for Radamès, is made manifest throughout. In her great Act I soliloquy, "Ritorna vincitor!", Roman masterfully portrays *Aida*'s gamut of emotions brought on by her tragic circumstances. "O patria mia" is beautifully and affectingly sung, capped by a brilliant and prolonged high C. In her love duets with Radamès, Stella Roman demonstrates she can scale back dynamics to ravishing effect.

Tenor Giovanni Martinelli was 55 at the time of this broadcast, and had been singing at the Met since 1913. During that period, Martinelli undertook the most demanding tenor roles, including the Egyptian warrior Radamès, Don Alvaro, Samson, and Otello (he also sang Tristan, but sad to say, never at the Met). Bonus material following the *Aida* broadcast features Martinelli in late-1920s recordings of excerpts from *Aida* and *Il trovatore*. A comparison between those commercial recordings and the 1941 broadcast makes clear what had been sacrificed over time. By 1941, Martinelli no longer possessed the bloom and warmth that permeates the earlier recordings. But what remains is considerable, and more

than enough to assure Giovanni Martinelli's continued status as one of the greatest Italian tenors of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. While Martinelli's production is more effortful in the *Aida* broadcast, he is nonetheless vocally fearless, attacking the most exposed and demanding passages with an abandon and security that any tenor would crave. And no Radamès (with the possible exception of Aureliano Pertile in his 1928 EMI recording) matches Giovanni Martinelli's feeling for the role, intensity, and ability to wed crystal-clear textual declamation with Verdi's cantilena. Martinelli's miraculous breath control is yet another rare asset. Yes, Martinelli ignores some of Verdi's hushed dynamics in "Celeste Aida" and the Nile Scene. But so do most other tenors. And the music of Radamès's love for Aida is always phrased with the utmost sensitivity. In the Tomb Scene, Martinelli's hushed expression of grief is heartbreaking. This is a treasurable document of a tenor near the end of a great career, but still doing full justice to a composer he revered and served so well.

Bruna Castagna, a great Verdi mezzo, sings the role of Amneris with rich tonal beauty and dramatic fire. And speaking of abandon, Castagna plunges into the Act IV confrontation with Ramfis and the priests with hair-raising intensity, rightfully earning cheers from the Met audience. Baritone Leonard Warren was just a few years into his storied Met career at the time of this broadcast, and already in prime vocal estate. In truth, the role of Amonasro was not ideal for Warren's unique gifts. Warren's strengths resided in the portion of his voice extending from the middle register to a blazing top that encompassed brilliant high notes that would rival many tenors. Amonasro's lower tessitura, on the other hand, has been successfully negotiated by bass-baritones. Nonetheless, Warren sings with arresting power, intensity, and vocal beauty. Bass Ezio Pinza, also in his 50s, remains a force of nature as the high priest Ramfis. Pinza's synthesis of vocal splendor, incisive diction, and elegant phrasing is a miracle. Conductor Ettore Panizza leads a performance that hits all the marks. While there are several instances of breathtakingly fleet and thrilling tempos, Panizza also gives the music and his singers ample flexibility to embody the music's ebb and flow. To put it another way, Panizza's musical pacing strikes me as consistently apt, riveting, and never exaggerated. And the execution by all concerned is exemplary. I have no doubt that the greatness of this performance is due in major part to Panizza's guiding hand. As I mentioned, the sound of this broadcast is quite extraordinary, offering the kind of quality and presence found in commercial recordings of the 1940s. The recording also includes a generous portion of broadcast host Milton Cross's spoken commentary; always a most welcome feature.

Bonus materials include Martinelli's glorious 1926 "Celeste Aida", and the 1927 recording of the Temple Scene with Pinza, and Grace Anthony as the High Priestess. The latter, featuring Martinelli and Pinza in prime voice, is one of the greatest operatic recordings ever made. How wonderful to hear it in IP's beautiful restoration. Martinelli and contralto Louise Homer join forces for 1928 recordings of the two Manrico-Azucena duets from *Il trovatore*. Again, the transfers are marvelous. Concluding the set is a "Biographies in Music" feature that first aired as part of a Metropolitan Opera broadcast on January 28, 1961. Host Francis Robinson's interview with Martinelli also includes excerpts from many of the tenor's historic recordings. Martinelli graces the program with

fascinating anecdotes, self-deprecating humor, and an infectious enthusiasm for life and art that were trademarks of his personal appearances. William Russell's liner notes offer a wealth of information about Verdi's *Aida* and the featured broadcast performance. A full plot synopsis of the opera precedes Richard Caniell's recording notes. Artist bios include Caniell's insightful reflections on Stella Roman. From start to finish, this is a magnificent and treasurable release.

5 Stars: A brilliant 1941 Met *Aida* broadcast, in superb sound

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Review by

**Henry Fogel**

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The most important aspects of this *Aida* are that it is a thrilling, fully engaged performance from beginning to end, and that much of the singing is truly great. In his excellent booklet notes, William Russell correctly calls this "a dramatic, spell-binding reading." It is also worth noting at the outset that producer Richard Caniell has obtained excellent sound from NBC radio transcriptions, and he has corrected the pitch, which was 1.5% off. This is the first time the broadcast has been available in acceptable sound. The main competition among historical performances is a 1937 Met broadcast, also released by Immortal Performances, with Gina Cigna in the title role and Carlo Morelli as Amonasro. An early Amonasro from Leonard Warren would be enough to justify this release, but it turns out that Stella Roman brings considerable merit to *Aida* as well.

The place to begin is Giovanni Martinelli's Radamès. He sang the role at the Met 124 times between 1913 and 1943. Martinelli's voice is an acquired taste, and I have acquired it. I admit that there is a certain hard or metallic quality to the sound, but as far as I am concerned, Martinelli's was one of the most thrilling voices in recorded history. There can be no rational reservation about the way he used his instrument. He sang with the kind of passion, a specificity of inflection and diction, and rhythmic precision that has rarely been duplicated. Every word has meaning, nothing is sung without feeling. "Celeste Aida" demonstrates a true *legato* and control over the long phrase. Radamès's interaction with Aida in the Nile Scene, and then his shock at Amonasro's appearance at the end of that scene, demonstrates the range of Martinelli's artistry. As the character shifts from tender lover to fierce warrior, he is convincing at every moment. The confrontation with the ferocious Amneris of Bruna Castagna in the first scene of act 4 is vividly dramatic, and his lyric abilities re-emerge in the fatal Tomb Scene. You are aware at all times that you are listening to an important artist, one who understands light and shade as crucial ingredients in a vocal performance.

Of the sopranos who were famous Aidas at the Met in the first half of the 20th century, one would number Ponselle, Cigna, Rethberg, and Milanov. The name of Stella Roman would not jump to mind. She was a Romanian soprano, born Florica Viorica Alma Stela Blasus in 1904. She sang the major Italian dramatic soprano roles at the Met from 1940 to 1950. Roman had a big, glowing voice and an ability to float beautiful *pianissimi*. Her high C in "O patria mia" is

quite free and lovely, and her soft singing at the end of the aria is exquisite. Some might object that she holds the C a bit too long, but not me!

As you listen to this performance, you wonder why Roman is not as famous as her illustrious peers. Then suddenly there is a moment that makes you think, "Ah! That's why." Her best singing is occasionally offset by peculiar intonation, or by a technique that at times prevents her from sustaining a line. In the Tomb Scene she sings some phrases with a beautiful, floating tone, but others are barked out. It is also fair to note that her voice lacks true distinctiveness, even though it is a fine instrument. The balance, however, is on the favorable side of the ledger. Roman's is an important voice (any opera house today would love to have its equal in the big Verdi roles), and she is a passionate vocal actress.

Bruna Castagna was a mainstay of the Metropolitan's Italian roster from her debut in 1936 until her surprise early retirement in 1945. She had a rich mezzo-soprano, almost dark enough to be called a contralto. The voice was evenly produced from top to bottom, and here she persuasively portrays both the lovesick Amneris and the furiously vengeful one.

Leonard Warren, caught early in his career, was one of the great Verdi baritones of his era. While he would improve some details of characterization in later years, Warren was already a dramatically solid Amonasro. His big scene with Aida is extremely effective, starting out as the tender, loving father and then suddenly snarling, "Non sei mia figlia, tu sei la schiava!" with terrifying power.

Ezio Pinza as Ramfis was luxury casting. Hearing one of the greatest male singers in the Met's history in a secondary role without a major aria is a real treat. The solidity of his voice, the excellence of his characterization, the clarity of his diction—all of these add up to an operatic ideal. Norman Cordon, a very strong bass who might sing Ramfis in another production, is superb as the Pharaoh.

Conductor Ettore Panizza is in large part responsible for the theatricality of this performance. He manages to convey both the beauty and the drama of the score. He takes care with dynamics, shading carefully enough to distinguish every gradation from *mezzo-forte* to *pianissimo*. One takes the climactic moments for granted, but his subtlety in the other parts of the score is impressive. His tempi are well judged; they can be very fast at moments of excitement but are never out of control.

As a bonus Immortal Performances provides superb transfers of some of Martinelli's great RCA Verdi recordings, including the complete Temple Scene from *Aida* with Grace Anthony and Ezio Pinza, and the two duets for Manrico and Azucena with Louise Homer. Finally, we get 17 minutes of one of Francis Robinson's "Biographies in Music" intermission features, a 1961 interview that he conducted with Martinelli. It is dreadfully over-scripted but still contains much that is fascinating to hear (including various excerpts from Martinelli recordings). Hearing Martinelli indicate that he was sorry he didn't get to sing more Wagner made me wish that Edward Johnson, the Met's general manager, had operated with greater imagination (Martinelli did sing Tristan, in German, with Kirsten Flagstad in Chicago. Wouldn't it be something if a tape of that showed up?)

As usual, Immortal Performances provides a 40-page booklet that contains, in addition to Russell's essay on *Aida*, and this particular performance, a survey of the opera's history at the Met. In Caniell's candid recording notes he speaks of his own reservations about Roman's performance. Sprinkled in with a synopsis of the opera are some really wonderful historic photographs.

When I received this release I wondered why Caniell had bothered with it, given his success with the earlier Martinelli/Cigna *Aida*, reviewed by me in *Fanfare* 37:5. But once I listened, I understood. Stella Roman may have been a flawed singer, but she was an important one whose *Aida* deserves preservation. This is especially true in an overall performance with such high musical and dramatic values.