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Manon (review)

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(Review)

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Manon. Jules Massenet

Manon Lescaut: Angela Gheorghiu
Châtelier des Grioux: Roberto Alagna
Lescaut: Earle Patriarco
Count des Grioux: José van Dam
Guillot de Morfontaine: Gilles Ragon
Brétigny: Nicolas Rivenq
Poussette: Anna Maria Panzarella

Javotte: Sophie Koch
Rosette: Susanne Schimmack
Orchestre Symphonique et Choeurs de La Monnaie
Antonio Pappano, conductor
EMI Classics 5 57005 2 (3 CDs)

Though Massenet's treatment of the Abbé Prévost's novel is accepted as one of the great musical theater pieces in the operatic firmament, *Manon* has undergone a steady decline in performance frequency, and has all but vanished from the repertoires of many of the world's major opera houses. There are many troubling aspects associated with this state of affairs, the most crucial being that French singing traditions are fast disappearing (the stylistic quirks necessary to its authenticity have long been grossly misunderstood by the majority of modern singers); consequently, the nature of opéra comique is swiftly losing ground.

One of the telling indicators of *Manon*'s fallen state in current times is the infrequent appearance of complete recordings of the opera. Incredibly, the EMI Classics version under review is the first to appear in eighteen years (EMI seems to be *Manon*'s champion, for it is responsible for five out of seven of the twentieth century's complete recordings). Most of these sets have served the work well, and one could base one's preference on the soprano and tenor leads, with the same holding true for the current release.

In many respects, the new recording is the equal of its predecessors, most notably for the conducting of Antonio Pappano, who presides over the score like an old master — much like Pierre Monteux in the now-classic 1956 Victoria de los Angeles recording. Not only does Pappano pay careful attention to the finely wrought orchestral details so laid down by Massenet, but he leads the proceedings with a specific aim toward a real performance and pursues this goal with a flair and, thankfully, a non-eccentricity that is all too rare today.

Whereas many "star" conductors give the impression of serving themselves, Pappano seems to serve the score. Textures are absolutely lucid, immaculate; details are given paramount importance, speeds are well-judged, and most of all, his performance has spirit, passion, and a sense of occasion. *Manon* has a large cast, with many small roles, choristers, and the like, and they all sing with gusto and an enthusiastic "lift." One senses that Pappano is the propelling force behind this happy enterprise. Even more happily, the score is given absolutely complete, including the ballet for the Cours-la-Reine scene. The sonic quality is one of the very best I have ever heard on CD: atypically warm and lacking in the harsh, cold quality that seems to afflict the modern digital technique.

Remarkably, most of the singers in this cast are French in origin, hence the proceedings have a blessedly authentic feel. EMI did well to recast the ageless

José van Dam as the Count des Grieux, and in the eighteen years since essaying the role for the same label's Michel Plasson recording there is astonishingly little decline in tonal quality. Everything is as flawless as one has come to expect from this cherishable artist. Owing to his rock-solid technique, van Dam has a peerlessly natural way of shaping a line, an instinctive feel for the understated inflection and for the way the tone effortlessly falls on the breath, words perfectly integrated into the whole. "Épouse quelque brave fille" is gorgeously sung, one of the best accounts on record. Earle Patriarco's Lescaut, which is lively, properly pontificating in manner, also boasts a thorough command of the language, but the voice tends to be placed back and emerges slightly throaty, not especially resonant tonally. "Regardez-moi bien dans les yeux!" is quite colorfully sung, but the vibrato, often pushed forward rather than ridden on the breath, tends to intrude. Nicolas Rivenq as Brétigny is more pleasing in tone quality and no less fluent; particular enjoyable is Gilles Ragon's impudent old Guillot, whose personality fairly jumps out of the speakers. Anna Maria Panzarella (Poussette), Sophie Koch (Javotte), and Susanne Schimmack (Rosette) sing with brisk, insinuating alertness and characterize their roles superbly.

With some pointed reservations, both Manon herself and Des Grieux are well cast. The unpredictable Angela Gheorghiu holds fascinating interest in the title role, which might conceivably be suited to her talents. Manon is well within her vocal means and, for the most part, her vocal range, and she has both personality and imagination. Gheorghiu works hard to establish the many facets of Manon's character, from the (rather studied) girlish innocence in the beginning, all the way to trollopdom, and to her grimly ironic fate. The soprano is gripping in the last act, where she vividly conveys the character's wretched throes of misery. If there is one thing that somewhat eludes Gheorghiu, it is charm. Spontaneity does not come easily to her, and much of the gaiety is more determined and ambitious than captivating. The voice alone, dusky in timbre, uniquely individual, alone inspires fascination; it is the kind of voice that immediately distinguishes itself as belonging to its owner. Whether or not that tone is backed by a firm technique is another question. Whenever Gheorghiu sings the unhurried parts of the score in the pristine middle of her range, the delivery and shimmering tone quality are very attractive; "Adieu, notre petite table," unforced and quite touchingly sung, is a model of its kind. However, when the score takes Gheorghiu to either end of the range, the voice simply fails to respond with ideal ease. In "Je marche sur tous les chemins" and the following Gavotte, Gheorghiu sounds hard-pressed in moments where the vocal range takes her high and loud; passagework, too, is graceless and labored. Upward scalework and staccati bring an insecure, hard snatching of the notes and little freedom on high. In addition, this being very much a microphoned performance (very closely so), it is doubtful whether the croony lower end of the soprano's range would carry well in the theater, as it often threatens to sink out of audibility even with electronic boosting. Then there is the problem with Gheorghiu's French pronunciation, which is foggy and noticeably less flavorful than

the rest of the cast's. This problem may be exacerbated by her backward vocal placement, which of course goes against the ideal method of French singing.

Ultimately (though comparisons are odious), what is missing from Gheorghiu's performance is the utter rightness, suitability, and identification with the role of Manon that so marked de los Angeles's famous assumption. For starters, de los Angeles had the kind of inborn charm and personality that just oozed from her pores — the sort of natural, instinctive artistry that cannot be bought at any price. In addition to de los Angeles's flawless French, her forwardly tangy, beguilingly magical purity of tone was absolutely right for the fickle, flighty character. And if de los Angeles lacked freedom in her top notes in much the same way as Gheorghiu does (even if the Spanish soprano had by leagues the better technique and musicianship), she more than compensated with the greatest artistry. In a way it is asking too much of Gheorghiu to live up to such standards, but that does not make them any less desirable. It might have been wiser for Gheorghiu to have gained some experience in the role before going ahead and committing it to posterity, as it may have helped her to sound freer, more spontaneous, even vocally more at ease. Certainly there is something to be said for letting a role "settle" into the voice.

Roberto Alagna's French, unlike his wife's, is a joy to the ear, so that the specificity of words always appear natural and spontaneous. In reality, there are few tenors today who could boast of suitability to the role of Des Grieux as Alagna is, by his birth and voice-type combined. His singing displays the requisite intensity, thus the chevalier's infatuation with the wily Manon is made believable. His technique, however, is a more variable commodity. The most conspicuous shortcoming is Alagna's lack of a real *voix mixte*, so that much of his work lacks that sheer sensuality so particular to French singers. His *forte* upper notes, tight and slightly choked in quality, lack bloom and freedom, hence they wear on the ear after a while; "Ah! fuyez, douce image" is unfortunately afflicted with these problems. "En fermant les yeux," framed so beautifully by Pappano and his forces, begins eloquently enough, but the legato is impaired by insufficient support of the *mezza voce* tones; turn to Nicolai Gedda's superb mid-1950s account for Columbia under Alceo Galliera, and one will hear the most gorgeously dulcet, honeyed soft tones — which are produced correctly and firmly cushioned by a bedrock of support, with the requisite halo of resonance surrounding the core of sound. Alagna's misconceived idea of half tones is to make them breathy, causing them to lack a firm center. The tenor's performance, while competent, even inspired at times, simply does not sound "lived in," and when one compares his performance with Henri Legay on the de los Angeles set, or Gedda in the 1970 Beverly Sills/Julius Rudel recording, the difference is obvious. Experience and technique cannot be replaced by enthusiasm and ambition.

The accompanying booklet, with quality paper, type, photos, and graphics, is a nonpareil of its kind. All the print is spaciously laid out, with individual track numbers clearly marked. The synopsis also has the tracks listed with each

scene described. Rodney Milnes's excellent essay is lively, informative, and refreshingly unstuffy.

For those who are craving a complete modern stereo recording of *Manon*, and who are not as particular about the occasional drawbacks of the two leads as this reviewer is (admittedly spoiled by the de los Angeles recording), this sonically dazzling, marvelously conducted and sung account will bring much satisfaction.

Niel Rishoi

Tosca. Giacomo Puccini

Floria Tosca: Virginia Gordon
Mario Cavaradossi: Franco Corelli
Baron Scarpia: Attilio D'Orazi
Sacristan: Virgilio Carbonari
Angelotti: Silvio Maionica
Spoletta: Walter Artioli

Sciarrone: Bruno Grella
Shepherd: Walter Giorgi
Orchestra and Chorus of Teatro Regio di Parma
Giuseppe Morelli, conductor
Bel Canto Society (distributed by Allegro Corporation) BCS-5013 (2 CDs)

The audience is in fine voice at this *Tosca*, in which they become as much a character in the proceedings as anyone onstage. Their wild enthusiasm, seemingly out of another era of operagoing, is inspired by the tenor of the evening, Franco Corelli, who must surely have been overwhelmed by what amounts to a genuine lovefest, the likes of which few singers experience in any opera house these days.

All the applause is included on Bel Canto Society's discs: at Mario's entrance; following various long-held top notes throughout the performance (the bravos after Corelli's second cry of "Vittoria!" render the rest of the tenor's outburst, and Tosca's responses, virtually inaudible); and of course, after the two arias. The applause for "Recondita armonia" goes on until someone yells to let the performance continue. There is shushing, too, after the outburst of applause at "La vita mi costasse." That's nothing compared to act 3: two and a half minutes of applause follow "E lucevan le stelle," with repeated calls for an encore that persist even after the conductor has begun the music preceding Tosca's entrance; an argument—applause vs. shushing—ensues between the people who want the encore (which is not granted) and those who want the opera to proceed, so that the conductor has to stop momentarily until things calm down. At the end, the audience carries on so vociferously that Corelli finally obliges them with "Core 'ngrato" (with piano) as an encore.

Is Corelli worth all this fuss? If one wants a brazenly confident vocal performance crowned by a consistently thrilling upper register, the answer is an emphatic yes. Few would deny the excitement of hearing this singer throwing caution to the winds (the end of "E lucevan" must be heard to be believed). Has *any* Mario sustained the role's high climaxes longer than Corelli does here?