

***MADAMA BUTTERFLY* ON CD**

HISTORICAL INTEREST AND TWO SPECIAL CASES

THE SPECIAL CASES

The original 1904 version of *Madama Butterfly*

Neuhold: Katchour, Rankin, Brillemburg, Kilpeläinen (Bremen Philharmonic State Orchestra, 1997) (Naxos) (1904 La Scala Version)

This recording presents the first version of *Madama Butterfly*, although its value is somewhat offset by the lack of an English translation of the enclosed libretto. The detailed moment by moment summary in the booklet does not identify the differences from the “standard” version and the intermediate variants are not included. Hearing this version confirms for me how much Puccini improved the opera with his revisions—not merely removing the ugly racist vestiges of the earlier concept, but also tightening scene after scene, removing retarding musical material and intensifying many of the major moments, such as the death scene. This performance is quite good in excellent, well-balanced sound, It offers good voices, with Svetlana Katchour a warm-voiced Butterfly. Overall it is a more attractive performance than the version on Vox, but the lack of a translation seriously limits its appeal as a way of comparing the original with the revised version.

Rosenkrans: Spacagna, Di Renzi, Graham, Parce (Hungarian State Opera House Orchestra, 1995) (Vox) (1904 version + variants)

This four CD issue is a remarkable production as a document of Puccini’s working process. The original La Scala version of the opera is given its first recording, followed by appendices of the revisions made for Brescia and for Paris. With a CD changer you can program any one of these versions, though it would be a very complicated task. The performance itself is not top rank, however. Maria Spacagna, who sang Butterfly with Florentine Opera in 2000, is a bit rough vocally but an intense and involving Butterfly, while Robert de Renzi as Pinkerton pushes his decent voice unmercifully and seems to think every single phrase needs at least three sobs or glottal attacks. The rest of the cast is competent but undistinguished and the recorded sound puts the orchestra too far back to have much impact. The ambitious project is of great interest for its documentary material (including very full notes) but not a memorable performance. The libretto packs in a huge amount of interesting information and extensively documents the changes made for Brescia and Paris, plus notes on variants in some other early productions—though it is sabotaged by a quirky typographical layout which places the English translation of the alternate versions on the far edges of the facing pages, making it very confusing to follow. Despite these limitations it provides immensely valuable insights into the evolution of a major opera.

HISTORICAL INTEREST

Klobucar: Jurinac, Lorenzi, Paskalis, Rössl-Majdan (Vienna State Opera, 1961) (Orfeo d'Or) (mono, live)

Internationally soprano Sena Jurinac was known mainly for her Mozart and Richard Strauss roles, but in her many years as a mainstay of the Vienna State Opera she had equal success in a wide range of other roles, including Italian repertoire. She first sang the Butterfly there in 1957 and over the years sang it some 40 times. This 1961 live performance, issued in good mono sound for the period, captures her interpretation in its prime—and what an interpretation it is! Jurinac's slightly darkish sound was one of those special voices that communicate with an immediate emotional directness, even in a purely audio recording. (Onstage her beauty, combined with the skills of a great actress and that glowing voice made her performances unforgettable.) In this live recording her singing alone creates a memorable and heart-wrenching Butterfly, one of the finest on record. The performance is strongly conducted by Berislav Klobucar. Tenor Ermanno Lorenzi, the only native Italian speaker in the cast, is a competent Pinkerton and the supporting singers, Vienna State Opera regulars, contribute solid performances, though their Italian is often less than idiomatic. As an overall recorded performance it provides a solidly professional framework for Jurinac's truly memorable interpretation. Not competitive overall with more idiomatic recordings, but well worth hearing for its heroine.

N. Rescigno: Olivero, Cioni, Cadoni, Zanasi (Naples, 1961) (Hardy Classic, live, mono)

Unfortunately the sound here is very poor—there is substantial background noise, severe distortion for orchestra and for the voices. The performance is of interest only for the great Magda Olivero's highly individual and emotional Butterfly. Renato Cioni and Mario Zanasi are competent, but conductor Nicola Rescigno is extremely slow and lethargic.

Cellini: Kirsten, Barioni, Nadell, Torigi (New Orleans Opera, 1960) (VAI, live performance)

This stage performance is caught in decent stereo sound but there is a lot of stage noise and a flu epidemic of coughing in the audience. Daniele Barioni is a crude Pinkerton but Richard Torigi creates a sensitive Sharpless. Conductor Renato Cellini moves things along but the orchestra and chorus are second-rate. The major attraction is Dorothy Kirsten's Butterfly, a role she sang many times but never recorded commercially. She was 50 at the time but sounds convincingly young and is in fine voice. Her performance is amazingly spontaneous and intense dramatically, very text and situation oriented. It is a powerful characterization and very well sung by an artist of importance.

Kempe: De Los Angeles, Lanigan, Howitt, Evans (Royal Opera House, 1957) (ROH Live,

mono)

Dramatically this is the most powerful of De Los Angeles' three recordings of the role, less polished vocally, but incredibly expressive and spontaneous. It is also the best conducted of the three; Rudolf Kempe and the soprano are wonderfully on the same wave-length. John Lanigan's attractive, light tenor is covered a bit in ensembles but he is a convincing, very youthful-sounding Pinkerton. Geraint Evans makes a very positive contribution as Sharpless. The sound is variable: most of the time the voices and orchestra come through warmly and in a natural balance, though there are occasional shifts in perspective and, of course, some audience coughs—and throughout there is a steady hiss which is loud enough to be obtrusive. It is a valuable document of a great singer, live, in one of her best roles, nevertheless.

Bron: Shumskaya, Kozlovsky, Gribova, Lisitian (Moscow Radio Symphony Orchestra, 1953) (Gala, mono) (SUNG IN RUSSIAN)

The language and constricted studio sound make this a specialty item, but Yelisaveta Shumskaya is an exceptionally fine Butterfly—it is beautiful spinto soprano and very flexible, expressive, and well-characterized. Ivan Kozlovsky is also an imaginative Pinkerton, but his “white” sound seems out of place in this music, and he is hard to distinguish from the excellent Goro, P. Shevtsov. Sharpless is sung by the legendary baritone, Pavel Lisitian, who is also heard in two bonus excerpts from Leoncavallo's *Pagliacci*, also sung in Russian, of course.

Rudolf: Steber, Tucker, Madeira, Valdengo (Metropolitan Opera, 1949)) (Sony, mono)

This 1949 studio recording with MET forces still holds up very well. Eleanor Steber's Butterfly is warmly sung and acted, with soaring high notes. Richard Tucker in his youthful prime is luxury casting as Pinkerton, and Giuseppe Valdengo is an expressive Sharpless. The performance is a strong ensemble effort and does justice to the opera. The mono sound is very good. The sound is better than in Steber's Hollywood Bowl performance, though it is not without inevitable distortion in loud passages.

Ormandy: Steber, Peerce, Carré, Bonelli (Unidentified Orchestra, 1948) (VAI, mono)

This live broadcast of a performance in the Hollywood Bowl captured Eleanor Steber's first staged Butterfly, just a year before her studio recording with MET forces. It is also a rare recorded document of an opera conducted by Eugene Ormandy, the longtime musical director of the Philadelphia Orchestra. Steber was already a fine Butterfly and her approach is similar to her MET recording. Jan Peerce is a forceful Pinkerton but monochromatic in tone, while Richard, Bonelli is rather uneven as Sharpless. The sound is extremely poor and Steber is much better served in the studio recording on Sony.

De Fabritiis: Dal Monte, Gigli, Palombini, Basiola (Rome Opera, 1939) (Naxos, mono)

Toti Dal Monte was a coloratura soprano who was famous and controversial for this much heavier role. The “little girl” voice she uses for Butterfly takes considerable getting used to, but the character is vivid and the emotional power is immense. Beniamino Gigli is a golden-voiced and colorful Pinkerton and the supporting cast is idiomatic. If you can accept Dal Monte’s vocal sound, the experience can be very moving. Her emotional involvement and nuanced expressiveness are incredibly vivid and specific, and the character develops as the opera progresses. Ward Marston’s transfer is very good. De Fabritiis takes rather broad tempos and builds strongly to the climaxes. It is a unique and memorable performance. The Naxos issue has a very lovely bonus of arias and songs sung by Dal Monte.

Molajoli: Pampanini, Granda, Velasquez, Vanelli (La Scala, 1929) (Centaur, Arkadia, et. al., mono)

This strong, idiomatic performance was recorded just a few years after Puccini’s death. The singing shows the influence of *verismo* style, but not excessively so, and the vocal acting is intense, especially from Rosetta Pampanini as Butterfly and Conchita Velasquez as Suzuki. It is a valuable document for the vocal style of the period and of a highly Italian approach to the work. The Arkadia transfer has very poor sound; Centaur seems better, within the limits of 1929 capabilities, but although the good voices come through fairly well, the orchestra makes little impact.