

COMPACT
disc
DIGITAL AUDIO
PACO 177

Puccini

La fanciulla del West

Pristine
XR

"It is good that this vintage recording of Puccini's Wild West opera should reappear, when it offers so fascinating a performance by the young Birgit Nilsson in the title-role. I remember a long talk I had with her, when rather to my surprise she said that she found the role more taxing than Turandot, and the high tessitura no doubt explains that. Nilsson remembered what a struggle she had learning the part at the last minute specially for the recording, yet her poise and control of line readily match that of Tebaldi on the rival Decca set which was also recorded in 1958, while her vocal agility and control of tonal gradation are even greater. The EMI set was always a strong contender, but it had limited circulation, partly because it arrived after its rival, and unlike the Decca—which became a showpiece recording in the stereo era thanks to its superb sound—failed to survive long, or later to get reissued at mid-price.

Yet with vigorous direction from Matakac, conducting repertory unexpected for him, it has much to offer besides the heroine's performance. This is a more melodramatic, if less atmospheric reading, missing some of the reflective beauty caught by Franco Capuana and enhanced by the Decca engineers, but bitingly dramatic in its extreme contrasts. Generally this is a more urgent performance, as even the overall timings make plain—127 minutes as opposed to nearly 134 on the Decca set.

Joao Gibin as Dick Johnson is certainly less coarse than Mario del Monaco on Decca, with a distinctive flickering timbre that reminds me a little of Pertile. I am only sorry that Matakac encourages him—exceptionally—to take the big aria, "Ch'ella mi creda", dangerously slowly, though the speed does not tax the voice too greatly. Andrea Mongelli with a firm, well-focused tone makes a splendid Jack Rance, in pride and nobility more than a conventional villain. The others reflect the strength of the Scala company at the time. What CD brings out, even in a first-rate transfer, is that the recording is noticeably coarser than that of the Decca."

Edward Greenfield, Gramophone, April 1992

As has proved often the case with other EMI recordings of the 1950s made at the Teatro alla Scala in Milan, there's a truly fine sounding recording here just waiting to be revealed. The coarseness of sound referred to in the 1992 CD reissue review reproduced here is something referred to, albeit in different terms, back in 1959 when the original LPs were first reviewed. Put simply, it didn't stand up well to the superior sound quality of Decca's release a few months earlier, and as a result has been somewhat neglected since, despite several reissues. Right now the EMI CD is out of print, and it was this - together with the potential for significantly improved sound quality - which prompted an email to me urging an XR remaster of this recording. I'm pleased to say that the results of the remastering are quite astonishing, transforming a rather dull recording into something very special indeed. It's perhaps a shame it's taken over 60 years for the true sound of this performance to be revealed, but I think you'll find it was worth the wait.

Andrew Rose



puccini

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PUCCINI LA FANCIULLA DEL WEST
NILSSON, GIBIN, MONGELLI, LA SCALA, MATAČIĆ

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PRISTINE
AUDIO

disc one ACT ONE

1. Introduction (1:12)
2. Alla 'Polka'! Alla 'Palme'! (1:49)
3. Hello, Nick! (4:09)
4. Che faranno i vecchi miei (4:12)
5. Jim, perchè piangi? - Jim! (2:30)
6. Ragazzi, fate largo! (2:52)
7. Hello Minnie! Hello Minnie! (3:36)
8. Dove eravamo?... Ruth... Ezechiele... No... (3:26)
9. La posta! (2:22)
10. Ti voglio bene, Minnie... (2:01)
11. Minnie, dalla mia casa son partito (2:05)
12. Laggiù nel Soledad, ero piccina (2:20)
13. Chi c'è, per farmi i ricci? (3:47)
14. Ragazzi! Uno straniero ricusa confessare (5:42)
15. Mister Johnson, Siete rimaste indietro (4:09)
16. Io non son che una povera fanciulla (1:21)
17. Quello che tacete (1:10)
18. S'è visto qui attorno (2:20)
19. Oh, non temete, nessuno ardirà (5:24)

CAST

Birgit Nilsson (soprano) - Minnie
João Gibin (tenor) - Dick Johnson
Andrea Mongelli (baritone) - Jack Rance
Nicola Zaccaria (bass) - Jake Wallace
Renato Ercolani (tenor) - Nick
Antonio Cassinelli (bass) - Ashby
Enzo Sordello (baritone) - Sonora
Florindo Andreoli (tenor) - Trin
Giuseppe Costantini (baritone) - Sid
Dino Mantovani (baritone) - Bello
Dino Formichini (tenor) - Harry
Antonio Costantino (tenor) - Joe
Leonardo Monreale (bass) - Happy
Giuseppe Morresi (bass) - Jim Larkens
Gabriella Carturan (soprano) - Wowkle
Carlo Forti (bass) - Billy/Castro
Angelo Mercuriali (tenor) - Pony Express Rider

disc two ACT TWO

1. Il mio bimbo è grande e piccolo (2:37)
2. Billy, è fissato' (3:00)
3. Hello! Buona sera! (2:34)
4. Oh, se sapeste come il vivere è allegro! (4:47)
5. Ugh... Neve! (7:19)
6. Hello! Chiamano... (4:25)
7. Vieni fuori! Vieni fuori! (1:51)
8. Quando, or sono sei mesi (3:03)
9. L'han ferito... Che importa? (2:38)
10. Che c'è di nuovo, Jack? (3:08)
11. Oh, strano! (2:35)
12. Una partita a poker! (5:49)

ACT THREE

13. Ve lo giuro, sceriffo (3:57)
14. Ah! Ah! Urrah, ragazzi! (5:16)
15. E così, Mister Johnson, come va? (2:04)
16. Risparmiate lo scherno (2:03)
17. Ch'ella mi creda libero e lontano (3:13)
18. È Minnie!... È Minnie! (1:42)
19. Non vi fu mai chi disse 'Basta!' (2:08)
20. E anche tu lo vorrai (3:02)
21. Le tue parole sono di Dio (2:46)

Chorus and Orchestra of the Teatro alla Scala, Milan
conducted by Lovro von Matačić

XR remastered by Andrew Rose

Recorded July 1958, Teatro alla Scala, Milan
Cover artwork based on a photograph of
Birgit Nilsson as Minnie

Total duration: 2hr 6:22 CD1: 56:26 CD2: 69:56

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