

Manon Lescaut is something more than a historical curiosity framing a few famous solos. It was written *con amore* and also *con slancio*. The very beginning of the first act catches you up in its hand and sweeps you forward to the arrival of the coach and poor Manon sitting all by herself in a corner of the hotel yard waiting to be taken off to a convent, where she would have made Sister Angelica and even Casanova's nuns look like paragons of virtue. Once Manon arrives, *amore*, not to say *passione disperata*, takes over; and, given a Manon who can present the gay, fatal *ingénue*, you can be kept on tenterhooks for the rest of the evening. The difference between this and *La Bohème* is that three years later [Puccini] was able to convey the *slancio* in more memorable, flexible themes, and observe the *amore* with amusement as well as passion.

Serafin, in the new recording, manages the *slancio* all right, the impetus, the bright lights, the charm, the gathering of students whose name is youth and whose god is hope. The opening scene is more neatly, but much less irresistibly, handled in the Decca set. Di Stefano does not make a strong impression at his entrance; too close to the mike to give a suggestion of stage effect, he is vocally awkward too, with his shifts of vocal placing in mid-phrase. He leaves the impress of "Tra voi, belle" to Serafin whose accompaniment is rhythmically superb. In the Decca set Del Monaco sings the piece more engagingly (once you can persuade your gramophone to get over the raw, wiry noise that his microphone placing emphasizes — when will tenors understand that their voices sound less faulty when slightly removed from the mike?) but is poorly supported by the orchestra. There is time to observe that the Lescaut and Geronte are vocally well differentiated and characterized in the new set (and here, by the way, may I correct a misapprehension recently committed to print? Geronte is, as his name implies, an old man, not a coeval rival for Des Grieux); and then Manon is upon us, and a promising set becomes a really stimulating one.

It is the old story again. Maria Callas's high notes, not so much in the first act as later, are acid in quality and develop what is a beat if not a wobble. But her singing of Manon's more vivacious passages (I am chiefly thinking of "L'ora, o Tirsi") is beautifully poised and dazzling; she characterizes Manon in every mood—the gentle, rather preoccupied girl in her first meeting with Des Grieux ("Manon Lescaut mi chiamol", and a caressing portamento on that last word so as to bring home the thematic importance of the phrase), the spoiled darling at the beginning of the second act, the woman knowing herself in the wrong but still promising to do better next time though everybody else knows she won't, the kept woman throwing scorn at her protector ("this is the love you offer me", as she plants a looking glass in front of his face, and Callas's inflexions make both it and him as visible as the ring and fine clothes with which the old Croesus has adorned her). And so her performance continues, through the slightly comic quick trio in which she tries to collect all her treasures before decamping, through the forlorn degraded convict of the third act, to the death in the American desert which Puccini had the creative audacity to make an act for two characters alone, a symbol of solitude which makes its point on the gramophone more impressively than any proscenium-bounded stage can ever do. Comparison with Tebaldi is here unkind, because Tebaldi is always herself, warm and opulent and slightly fuller toned (if only because "L'ora, o Tirsi" is beyond her reach, Manon is not her part). She makes a really lovely noise in all Manon's expansive cantabile music, and that in turn is beyond Callas's reach; but opera is more than vocal euphony, and the much more is where Callas displays herself at every moment of this opera a great artist of the gramophone, an interpreter who removes veils from our eyes, and a singing actress who, like all great singers of this century, transforms a gramophone from a wooden box into an experience.

I must mention that Di Stefano makes a most enjoyable impression in the second and third acts, singing his A minor solo "Ah, Manon, mi tradisce il tuo folle pensier" with genuine ardour, and sustaining with the tension of the third act which explodes in "Guardate, pazzo son". Fiorenza Cossotto, at present the young singer for whom I can envisage the brightest future among her contemporaries, makes a show-stopping moment of the Madrigal in act two. Serafin gives a disappointing account of the third act intermezzo, strangely exaggerated and heavy. There is a short cut in the last act, from figures 20 to 21. The recorded atmosphere is dull, much less vivid and theatrical than that of the Decca set. I am in no doubt that the new records (which will not appear in stereo form) are musically and dramatically more desirable, though; and for that we have to thank Callas and the conductor who has done so much to make her the artist she is. I am fairly sure that Puccini would thank them too.

W.S.M., *The Gramophone*, December 1959 (excerpt)



puccini manon lescaut

PACO 205

maria callas
giuseppe di stefano
giulio fioraventi
franco calabrese
dino formichini
carlo forti
vito tatone

chorus & orchestra of
la scala, milan

conducted by
tullio serafin

studio recording, 1957

Pristine
XR

disc one
(76:25)

ACT ONE

1. Ave, sera gentile (4:48)
2. L'amor? l'amor? (1:01)
3. Tra voi, belle, brune e bionde (1:18)
4. Ma bravo! (1:52)
5. Descendono, vediam! Viaggiatori eleganti, galanti! (2:10)
6. Cortese damigella, il priego mio accettate (4:15)
7. Donna non vidi mai simile a questa! (2:27)
8. La tua ventura, ci rassicura (5:41)
9. Vecchietto amabile (2:55)
10. Vedete? Io son fedele alla parola mia (4:01)
11. Non c'è più vino? E che? Vuota è la botte? (1:45)
12. Di sedur la sorellina è il momento! (4:21)

ACT TWO

13. Despettosetto questo riccio! (4:58)
14. In quelle trine morbide (2:15)
15. Poiché tu vuoi saper, Des Grieux (2:56)
16. Che ceffi son costor? Ciarlatani o speciali? (2:14)
17. Paga costor! (1:19)
18. Minuetto (8:36)
19. Oh, sarò la più bella! (8:19)
20. Ah! Affè, madamigella (2:17)
21. Senti, di qui partiamo (3:30)
22. Lescaut! Tu qui? (3:28)

disc two
(44:09)

1. Intermezzo (5:19)

ACT THREE

2. Ansia eterna, crudel (4:30)
3. E Kate rispose al Re (2:57)
4. All'armi! All'armi! (1:49)
5. Rosetta! Eh! Che aria! (3:59)
6. Presto! In fila! Marciate! (3:44)

ACT FOUR

7. Tutta su me ti posa (3:09)
8. Manon, senti, amor mio! (2:13)
9. Sei tu che piangi? (5:19)
10. Sola, perduta, abbandonata (4:09)
11. Fra le tue braccia, amore, l'ultima volta! (7:01)

PRISTINE
AUDIO

PACO 205

CAST

Manon Lescaut - Maria Callas
Chevalier des Grieux - Giuseppe di Stefano
Lescaut - Giulio Fioravanti
Geronte di Ravoir - Franco Calabrese
Edmondo - Dino Formichini
L'oste - Carlo Forti
Il maestro di ballo - Vito Tatone
Un musico - Fiorenza Cossotto
Un sergente - Giuseppe Morresi
Un lampionaio - Franco Ricciardi
Un comandante - Franco Ventriglia

Orchestra e Coro del Teatro alla Scala, Milano
conducted by Tullio Serafin
chorus master: Norberto Mola

Libretto by Domenico Oliva, Giulio Ricordi,
Luigi Illica, Giuseppe Giacosa & Marco Praga

Recorded 18-27 July 1957,
Teatro alla Scala, Milan

Ambient Stereo XR remastering
by Andrew Rose

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