

While this set should and likely will not rank as anyone's primary recording of *Carmen*, it is one whose real virtues have tended to be overlooked by a focus on its shortcomings (as in Conrad L. Osborne's negative review in the March 1960 issue of *High Fidelity*). What is most intriguing about it, and makes it stand out from the pack of many other recordings, is that it is done in a true *opéra comique* style, almost closer to operetta than to opera. The primary agency for this lies with conductor Pierre-Michel Le Conte (1921–2000), who made his career primarily with the RTF and its successor, the ORTF. He conducts the score with a quintessentially French approach: briskly, with pointed rhythms, clarity of detail, vibrant energy, elegance, and even (in its rough and tumble) grace. Instead of presaging dark, fatalistic tragedy, the results are as light as a soufflé. While the Choeurs et Orchestre des Concerts de Paris are not top-tier ensembles, they have this music in their blood, and sing and play with obvious affection and commitment. Unfortunately, the effectiveness of this approach was compromised by the decision to exclude all spoken dialogue, except for a couple of lines that have underlying music. While this shortened the running time of the recording by a good half-hour and saved at least one LP side, it undercuts the overall atmosphere of the musical approach. Of course, listeners who find spoken dialogue disruptive when listening to opera recordings will consider this a plus factor instead.

The four principal singers all provide pleasure and are good, though none is outstanding here. The Spanish soprano Consuelo Rubio (1927–1981) is little remembered today, though she was well regarded during her peak years in the 1950s and 1960s. Her voice has the right weight for her role, and she likewise has the right interpretive instincts, leaning to her character's earthier side. Technically she is initially a bit rough around the edges, though she improves after act I. Her major limitation is that she is not memorable in any particularly individual way—she sounds like a good generic Carmen that one would be pleased to encounter at any house below the level of the Met or La Scala or similar venues. French-Canadian tenor Léopold Simoneau (1916–2006) was justly famed as a singer of Mozart, light lyric roles (particularly Nadir and Orphée), and mélodies. While his casting as Don José is entirely in line with the overall approach of this recording, he clearly is overparted in terms of vocal weight for the major dramatic moments, though he is always stylishly elegant and delivers a touching act II "Flower Song." He is certainly preferable to many bullish, coarse-voiced dramatic tenors who have undertaken the role. Simoneau's wife, soprano Pierrette Alarie (1921–2011), who sang with him frequently live and on records, has the right basic voice for Micaëla and sings well; the one mild reservation is that her voice leans a bit to the soubrette and girlish side and lacks the underlying mettle ideal for the role. Swiss-American baritone Heinz Rehfuss (1917–1988) was a distinguished and much-valued artist, who encompassed a repertoire ranging from Bach to Luigi Nono's *Intolleranza 1960*, and who was noted for his secure vocal production, elegance, and interpretive sensitivity. As one expects, he sings very well technically; however, his essentially lyric voice lacks the virile force and swagger needed for a top-tier Escamillo. The various comprimarios are all capable, but none is distinguished; still, that easily beats casting in most opera productions today, in which a couple of headliners are undermined by inadequate voices in the supporting roles.

The original 1959 recording sound on Concert Hall, Epic, and (in France) *Guilde Internationale Du Disque* LPs was clear but rather dry; that acoustic was reproduced unaltered on previous CD issued by the *Hamburger Archiv für Gesangkunst* (2007) and *Urania* (2009). This new remastering by *Pristine Audio* imparts a good deal more warmth and body to voices and instruments alike.

James A. Altena



disc one
(62:48)

1. Prélude (2:08)
ACT ONE
2. Sur la place (7:03)
3. Avec la garde montante (3:43)
4. C'est bien là, n'est-ce pas (1:32)
5. La cloche a sonné (4:18)
6. L'amour est un oiseau rebelle (3:54)
7. Carmen! Sur tes pas, nous nous pressons tous! (1:30)
8. Quels regards! Quelle effronterie! (1:03)
9. Parle-moi de ma mère! (8:47)
10. Reste là, maintenant, pendant que je lirai (1:47)
11. Que se passe-t-il donc là-bas? (3:14)
12. Mon officier, c'était une querelle (3:40)
13. Près des remparts de Seville (3:58)
14. Voici l'ordre; partez (1:56)
15. Entr'acte (1:36)
ACT TWO
16. Les tringles des sistres tintaient (4:13)
17. Messieurs, Pastia me dit (0:58)
18. Vivat! Vivat le Toréro! (0:59)
19. Votre toast, je peux vous le rendre (4:47)
20. La belle, un mot (1:41)

disc two
(78:05)

1. Eh bien, Vite, quelles nouvelles? (4:45)
2. Mais qui donc attends-tu? (0:29)
3. Enfin, c'est toi (7:14)
4. La fleur que tu m'avais jetée (4:03)
5. Non, tu ne m'aimes pas! (3:48)
6. Holà Carmen! Holà! Holà! (4:23)
7. Entr'acte (2:12)
ACT THREE
8. Écoute, écoute, compagnon, écoute (2:53)
9. Reposons-nous une heure ici, mes camarades (2:43)
10. Mèlons! Coupons! (7:21)
11. Quant au douanier, c'est notre affaire (2:16)
12. C'est les contrebandiers le refuge ordinaire (5:40)
13. Je ne me trompe pas (0:31)
14. Quelques lignes plus bas (10:45)
15. Entr'acte (2:09)
ACT FOUR
16. A deux cuartos! (1:54)
17. Les voici! Voici la quadrille (6:28)
18. C'est toi ... Carmen il est temps encore (8:32)

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carmenPRISTINE
AUDIO

PACO 217

CAST

Carmen - Consuelo Rubio
Don José - Léopold Simoneau
Micaëla - Pierrette Alarie
Escamillo - Heinz Rehfuss
Frasquita - Maria Lopez
Mercédès - Francine Arrauzau
Le Dancaire - José Serrano
Le Remendado - Pierre Louvier
Moralès - Bernard Delacroix
Zuniga - Pablo Ferme

Choeurs des Concerts de Paris
Les Petits Chanteurs de Saint-Nicolas
Orchestre des Concerts de Paris
conducted by Pierre-Michel Le Conte

Recorded Paris, 1959

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