

IL TROVATORE AT ITS BEST

By John H. Haley

Verdi always paid enormous attention to the dramas that formed the basis for his operas, but today's stage directors, and consequently audiences, often ignore the needs of the dramas upon which his operas are constructed and focus instead on creating "entertainment" by some other means than a forthright presentation of the plot acted out convincingly on stage. Among Verdi's large output, *Il trovatore* has been especially ill-served as a stage drama, and it has come to be known primarily as a work with a silly plot that is performed mainly for its glorious music. Failing that, it offers at least an evening of robust singing.

This January 11, 1941 broadcast recording of Verdi's *Il trovatore* undoubtedly stands above all other recordings of this great opera in its matching up the character of the voices we hear to the personalities of the characters in the drama, giving us, for once, a convincing sense of the drama and allowing us to appreciate this opera more completely as a music-drama than any other performances we are likely to encounter. That it is also gloriously performed, musically, by at least three of the principals, all of whom offer up excellent Verdian style as well as vocalism, and is also quite well conducted by conductor Ferruccio Calusio, are almost rendered pleasing byproducts by the convincing nature of the whole enterprise. This was one great afternoon indeed at the old Met.

Both members of the couple at the center of the drama sound convincingly young, in addition to meeting all the other substantial requirements of their roles, which is no mean feat. It is safe to say that no 20th century tenor has fulfilled the almost impossibly diverse requirements of Manrico quite as fully as Jussi Björling, a Swede who arguably became the greatest all-around Italian tenor of his time. Apart from possessing a meltingly beautiful tone, one which can fairly be described as both Italianate and Nordic at the same time, what sets him apart from almost every other Manrico on recordings is the fact that early in his career, he achieved full confidence in the power of his essentially lyric voice to project without forcing the tone or trying to sing with a larger tone than he possessed. Coupled with this vocal confidence was an obviously intelligent, well schooled mastery of true Verdian musical style. The result was his ability to essay a number of Verdi roles almost always sung by heavier voices. Here, there was enough bright metal in his tone to portray the warrior, but at the same time enough lyric beauty to succeed and convince with the lyrical phrases of the troubadour, the devoted son and the ardent lover, in a way that larger voiced Manrico's do not seem to encompass. Further, he offers a level of involvement in all the various aspects of the character that is very rarely encountered.

The little known soprano, Norina (Eleanora) Greco, is our Leonora, and the quality of her performance here makes one realize what a loss the Met incurred by letting her go after only two seasons. Born in Italy in 1915 and transplanted as a young girl to Brooklyn (where her younger brother would be born—he was to become the Hollywood Spanish dancer José Greco), she was hired by the Met in the 1940-1941 season due to the absence of Stella Roman. That means Greco was literally only 26 at the time of our 1941 broadcast, but she was in fact already experienced in other companies, including the touring San Carlo Opera Company, in such roles as Violetta, Santuzza, Mimi and Aida, receiving fine reviews that one can find on the internet. Operatic writers have not been as enthusiastic about Greco as they should have been, but the undeniable evidence is before us in this stunning broadcast.

Greco meets all of its requirements of the role with aplomb, including excellent musical style (surprising in such a young performer), fine and often quite beautiful vocalism, sophisticated sense of phrasing, excellent flexibility, dramatic fire that makes her Leonora genuinely exciting, and a young dramatic soprano voice of great appeal and promise. Her final act is especially moving, and her interaction with Björling is outstanding. In short, hers is a most winning and complete performance; she would be an instant superstar today.

This brings us to the superb Azucena of the very underrated Bruna Castagna. There are a number of fine recorded Azucena's, but none of them quite measures up to the level of this one, considering the totality of all the elements she brings together in this memorable performance. Her dramatic conception is quite imaginative, in fact captivating, and her vocalism very beautiful, easily meeting all the requirements of this difficult role. The only real fault that can be registered with her singing is her rather habitual tendency to bringing her chest tones up substantially higher than we normally hear in such grand, dramatic mezzo voices of her size and caliber, resulting in some fairly dry tones here and there, but things nevertheless remain well under control. The preservation of this broadcast goes a long way toward making up for her plainly unwarranted absence from commercial opera recordings. She was a major artist.

Overall, we are unlikely to find *Il trovatore* better served than we find it here.

jussi björling is il trovatore verdi

with
norina greco
frank valentino
bruna castagna
nicola moscona
maxine stellan
lodovico oliviero
arthur kent

orchestra & chorus
of the metropolitan opera

conductor: ferruccio calusio

Pristine
XR

live broadcast recording, 1941

PACO 134

- 1 Radio Introduction (2:12)
- 2 Act 1, Scene 1 - All'erta! All'erta! (2:53)
- 3 Di due figli vivea padre beato (0:42)
- 4 Abbieta zingara, fosca vegliarda! (3:22)
- 5 Brevi e tristi giorni visse (1:40)
- 6 Sull'orlo dei tetti (1:10)
- 7 Scene 2 - Che più t'arresti? (2:14)
- 8 Tacea la notte placida (3:28)
- 9 Quanto narrasti di turbamento m'ha piena l'anima! (0:51)
- 10 Di tale amor (1:42)
- 11 Tace la notte! (1:48)
- 12 Il Trovator! Io fremo! Deserto sulla terra (1:39)
- 13 Anima mia! Più dell'usato (1:55)
- 14 Di geloso amor sprezzato (3:57)
- 15 Act 2, Scene 1 - Vedi! le fosche notturne spoglie (2:53)
- 16 Stride le vampa! (2:34)
- 17 Mesta è la tua canzon! (1:46)
- 18 Sol or siamo (0:59)
- 19 Condotta ell'era in ceppi (5:17)
- 20 Non son tuo figlio! (2:14)
- 21 Mal reggendo all'aspro assalto (3:05)
- 22 L'usato messo Ruiz invia! (1:28)
- 23 Perigliarti ancor languente (2:13)
- 24 Scene 2 - Tutto è deserto (1:34)
- 25 Il balen del suo sorriso (4:07)
- 26 Qual suono! Oh ciel! (0:45)
- 27 Per me ora fatale (2:05)
- 28 Ah! se l'error t'ingombra (2:22)
- 29 Perché piangete? O dolci amiche (2:23)
- 30 E deggio e posso crederlo? (5:47)

XR remastering by **Andrew Rose**
Matinee concert of 11 January 1941
Cover artwork based on a photograph of **Jussi Björling**
Total duration: **2hr 16:13**
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- 1 Act 3, Scene 1 - Or co' dadi, ma fra poco (4:17)
- 2 In braccio al mio rival! (2:08)
- 3 Giorni poveri vivea (3:02)
- 4 Deh! rallentate, o barbari (2:24)
- 5 Scene 2 - Quale d'armi fragor (2:07)
- 6 Ah sì, ben mio, coll'essere io tuo (3:26)
- 7 L'onda de' suoni mistici pura discenda al cor! (1:51)
- 8 Di quella pira, l'orrendo foco (3:17)

- 9 Act 4, Scene 1 - Siam giunti; oecce la torre (2:48)
- 10 D'amor sull'ali rosee (3:41)
- 11 Misere, Quel suon, quelle preci (5:03)
- 12 Udiste? (1:46)
- 13 Mira, d'acerbe lagrime (2:21)
- 14 Conte! Né basti! (1:06)
- 15 Colui vivrà, Vivrà! Contende il giubilo (3:54)
- 16 Scene 2 - Madre, no dormi? (5:33)
- 17 Sì, la stanchezza m'opprime (1:25)
- 18 Ai nostri monti ritorneremo (2:25)
- 19 Che! Non m'inganna (1:06)
- 20 Parlar non vuoi? Ha quest'infame l'amor venduto (2:53)
- 21 Ti scosta! (1:09)
- 22 Prima che d'altri vivere (3:24)
- 23 Radio Conclusion (4:04)

Manrico - Jussi Björling
Leonora - Norina Greco
Count Di Luna - Frank Valentino
Azucena - Bruna Castagna
Ferrando - Nicola Moscona
Ines - Maxine Stellan
Ruiz - Lodovico Oliviero
Gypsy - Arthur Kent

Orchestra & Chorus of the Metropolitan Opera
Ferruccio Calusio, conductor

NBC Radio announcer: Milton Cross