

RECORD REVIEW: AIDA, Naxos 8.111042-44, 3 CD's

by Stephen Hastings writing in *Musica* (Nov. 2006), and translated by Andrew Farkas

Perlea's *Aida*, recorded in July 1955, is not especially charged with electricity, yet it has some musical gems of great value, among them the Judgment Scene in which the painful identification of Fedora Barbieri (Amneris) and the pure and passionate lyricism of Jussi Björling (Radames) blend into something forceful and unique, and the final duet in which Björling and Zinka Milanov reach incomparable sublime beauty. The tenor and soprano's paths had crossed for the first time in Prague, also in *Aida*, on March 14, 1938 (he sang in Swedish, she in Croatian), and curiously, that was their only joint performance of the Verdi work in the theater. Björling, who sang Radames 31 times in his career, never wanted to sing the role at the Met (he was somewhat apprehensive of a comparison with the stentorian Mario del Monaco), where Milanov was until 1956 the most authoritative interpreter of the role of *Aida*. On disc, however, it is he who hits the mark better. Even if the higher

octave does not have that brilliant *squillo* that one can hear in the live excerpts recorded in Vienna (Koch Schwann) and Stockholm (Bluebell)—the acoustics of Rome's Teatro dell'Opera transformed into a recording studio always had a tendency to turn his timbre dry—the Swedish tenor captures the tenderness of the warrior in love much better than any other interpreter on disc, and he phrases with a musicality that is disarming even when the words of the role aren't fully grasped. He does not attempt the *morendo* on the last note of the aria (yet achieves a sufficiently floated *mezzo-forte*) and stresses poorly the first word (*Ce-este Aida*), but for the rest he gives an extraordinary demonstration how to convey a fascinating psychological dimension of a profoundly divided personality through his scrupulous attention to markings: dynamic, legato, note values. His diction does not have the lively exhibitionism of Carlo Bergonzi (or even Del Monaco), but the timbre has a silvery patina of someone truly in love and the clarity of his emission projects every word naturally, even in the difficult phrase in the third act *stretta*—"su noi gli astri brilleranno"—which Milanov transforms into a vocalise without words. The soprano, at 49, was by then nearly at the limits of her abilities in this opera, even if her voice in the theater had unquestionably more weight than Björling's. Here the extreme high notes are sung *forte* (especially the C) lacking in sheen, and in the agitated passages in the duet with Amonasro the voice acquires an unpleasant hardness. Her *Aida* is never

young and vulnerable, but one appreciates nevertheless the appropriate stress of every phrase, the regal fire of certain utterances, and the insinuating duplicity of "Là tra foreste vergini." In the recording hall the vocal difficulties are resolved more gracefully than in the previous broadcasts from the Met, released on Myto or Bongiovanni (1952, 1953).

Fedora Barbieri's Amneris is as magnificent here as the recording she made at la Scala a month later. She seems to be entirely "inside" the role from beginning to end and projects a highly charged sensuality: this princess is indeed in love, not merely wounded pride (as it seems, nearly always, in the interpretation of Cossotto). The voice is in its full glory, as is that of Boris Christoff: it would be hard to imagine a more implacable Ramfis; the same unmistakable sonorities of his instrument express absolute assurance. On the other hand, Leonard Warren's Amonasro is a disappointment, and not a small one at that. He has the proper size voice for the role, but he is annoyingly clumsy in the more agitated passages. Less impressive, but more suitable as to expression, are Plinio Clabassi's King and Mario Carlin's Messenger. The forces of the Teatro dell'Opera cannot equal the coherent recording of the Milanese under Serafin, and even Perlea comes up short compared to the successful efforts of the Venetian Maestro. Nonetheless, he remains a good accompanist, never a routinier, always mindful of the subtleties of the Verdian instrumentation, able to create a dramatic tension in all respects in the fourth act. ■

TRAVEL NOTES

The Board of the Society will be meeting in Washington D.C. from the 7th of November through the 9th. The 7th kicks off with a performance of *Lucrezia Borgia* at the Kennedy Center; the actual Board meeting is on the 8th, and we will finish up on the 9th at the Swedish Embassy where Harald Henrysson will be giving a talk on Jussi at 3 PM, part of their "Voices of Sweden" program. Consider joining us!