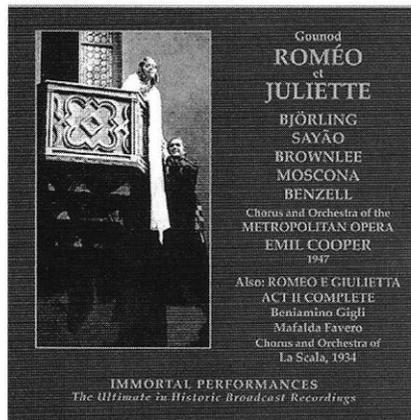


Roméo et Juliette

Immortal Performances IPCD 1003-2: Björling's radiant Roméo at last in good sound

by Kristian Krogholm



The February 1, 1947 *Roméo et Juliette* performance from the Metropolitan Opera has at last surfaced in fresh and good sound and has been released in a fine package from Immortal Performances, with nice texts, information and photos. The improvement from Myto's version is substantial, and the sound is warm and pleasant, and the voices both full and clear.

After having mesmerized lovers of great singing now for decades, this evening of truly great singing can now be acquired in very gratifying sound. Before listening, I read through the reviews from the last *Roméo* performance Bidú Sayão and Jussi Björling sang together. That was in 1951 in San Francisco. The headlines from the papers all referred to the tremendous vocalism of Björling, and the Los Angeles Times concluded after a rave review of Björling's singing: "Even Gounod himself could not have possibly dreamt of a more perfect Roméo".

Even though Bidú Sayão certainly must have her share of the glory of the evening, it is Björling who brings the

performance to an almost ecstatic level with his gorgeously effortless and passionate singing. His voice, even the middle register, has such radiant shine that it soars above both orchestra and colleagues on the stage. That evening, he truly sang like a God.

There have been other tenors in the past who were great, even fantastic, but still I feel that they almost pale in comparison with Björling's incredible vocal gifts which were displayed in full on that evening. He has everything a singer can wish for: a beautiful voice, a wonderfully rich vocal timbre, effortless production, perfect technique, an even, silken quality throughout the wide range, and the quality remains the same whether he sings a dramatic *forte* or a lyric *pianissimo*. When he comes on stage in the first act, you immediately realize that this will be something absolutely special. In the duet "Ange adorable", listen to how he sings the repeated ending phrase "rendez-moi". First with a blazing *forte*, then with the most tender *pianissimo*.

One might assert that he sang the Cavatina with even more of that youthful freshness and ring seven years earlier in Stockholm, and the Garden scene with more poetic abandon, but he makes up for that abundantly in the third act when his vocal splendor is beyond comparison. The conclusion of the act is crowned with an intensely dramatic, incredibly resonant and ringing high C of unparalleled brilliance, making the already emotionally drained audience become absolutely delirious. If you haven't been to heaven by the end of that act, then surely by the end of the Tomb

scene you will be lifted above yourself.

Björling and Sayão give everything they have, both on top of their form, and the singing is *hors concours*. There are some slight flaws in the text: Björling debuted in 1930, not in 1932. He returned to the Met in 1945, not in 1946. He sang 90 performances for the Met, not 120. And despite assertions to the contrary, Björling IS a passionate singer, if ever there was one. Listen to his live operatic performances from 1939 to 1959 and that will convince even the most doubtful customer. His return performance to the Met in 1959 is still, to this day, the most passionately dramatic singing of *Cavalleria Rusticana*, and the avalanche of applause which he receives is approached only by that for Flagstad on her return in 1951.

If you love great singing, this *Roméo* set from Immortal Performances is a must-have illustration of what singing at the highest level is all about. ■