

RCA's 1956 Rigoletto Now Available on Naxos CD

by Dan Shea



Rigoletto is fortunate to have many good recordings that capture the drama as well as the opportunities for vocal display that are inherent in this breakthrough masterpiece among Verdi's operas. My own favorite version has been RCA's classic 1956 recording made with Met Opera stars Robert Merrill, Roberta Peters, Giorgio Tozzi, and of course Jussi Björling, all in prime voice and with Jonel Perlea leading the Rome Opera forces.

In its day, this recording saw serious competition from great baritones including Bastianini, Gobbi, Taddei, Warren, and sopranos like Berger, Callas, Güden, Pagliughi, not to mention tenors like Kraus, del Monaco, Peerce, di Stefano, Tucker. And subsequently there have been many excellent performances in superb sound which give us the score without the

cuts that weakened Verdi's compact score. But when I want to listen to a recording of *Rigoletto*, I usually return of the version that gives me Jussi and Bob in their 1950s-era glory.

These days we're finding many re-issues of favorite old recordings and that's interesting since the old LPs are not so convenient and the early CDs often have tinny sound. RCA squeezed its 1956 *Rigoletto* onto two

LPs, probably preferring lower costs to completeness. (But what wouldn't we all give now, for just the extra few minutes of the Duke's ebullient *cabaletta* "Possente amor," with Jussi's brilliant trumpet singing that music!) The 1990 transfer to CD by Nat Johnson, that many of us have as a "RCA Victor Gold Seal" set, was OK in its day but clearly could be improved with modern transcription methods using the original RCA tapes. RCA's CD edition also was hampered in my opinion by added reverberation, intended to make the sound more "modern." The result is frustrating, especially with evident distortions in Merrill's rich sound.

Thus I was glad to see that Naxos has a new version of this classic recording in a beautifully clean-sounding transfer by esteemed sonic engineer Mark Obert-Thorn. Working from best-available German LP press-

ings, Obert-Thorn observes that even the original master tapes "contain many instances of overload distortion, which cause the popping sounds heard during, for example, the cadenza to 'Caro nome.'" I am glad to put aside my earlier versions of this recording and rely on the Naxos edition for normal listening.

Furthermore, the Naxos set contains a bonus group of Verdi and Rossini arias recorded by Merrill in the days directly after *Rigoletto* was completed, for a recital LP. Again we have the baritone in his effulgent prime, and in what Obert-Thorn considers "noticeably better sound" than in the complete opera. The included arias are the *Otello* "Credo," the "Il balen del suo sorriso" scene from *Trovatore*, "Di Provenza" from *Traviata*, and "Largo al factotum" from *Barbiere*: wonderful reminders of the glorious sound that Merrill had at his command, and done with a more mature artistry than in his earlier 78s.

One special peculiarity of RCA's LP and CD editions is the difference between the versions of "La donna è mobile" used: the final high B on the original LP lasts six seconds, while on the CD it's a less-extravagant sounding three seconds! I had never heard anyone mention this until Obert-Thorn pointed it out as one of several "obvious edits" made in these RCA editions. We can reasonably ask for the history of this change since, as far as I can tell, the rest of the aria remains the same. Did the RCA engineers adjust the final note themselves somehow, or did Jussi record the aria, or just part of it, more than once? Here's the answer by Obert-Thorn that decides the question for me, after listening again to this final high note on the LP version:

"That note sounds as if it's prolonged by overlapping two takes, or perhaps using the same take twice. There's defi-

nately a part of that note where one can hear two Björlings singing together!”

Thus in 1956 the RCA engineers tried to gild the lily, doubling the length of Jussi's final high B. That can of course also be heard on the new Naxos CD version, since it's based on the RCA LPs.

I for one am relieved to learn that Jussi did not really hang onto that B so long as it seemed, and now we can blame that excess onto the engineers. But surely Jussi noticed this himself, and if so why did he decide to go along with the misrepresentation? Likewise the producer, Dick Mohr, probably knew of this decision and might have participated in making it.

The RCA archives should have some sort of producer's notes that tell of such decisions and the reasons they're made, and perhaps some JBS sleuth will try to penetrate SonyBMG corporate walls to discover whether this information still can be found. There still are many minor mysteries out there that seem worth trying to settle.

Finally, I'd like to recall for you some comparisons of the RCA *Rigoletto* recording with its competitors of the 1950s, via the contemporary book *The Collector's Verdi and Puccini*, by Max de Schauensee [J. B. Lippencott, 1962]. The author notes that the success of any performance of *Rigoletto* “depends much on the brilliance with which it is sung. The vocal demands on the three principal characters reveal every asset or liability of technique, tone, and style.”

De Schauensee begins by considering RCA's first two recordings of this opera: “Both contain swift and trenchant tempi” with conductor Perlea preferable to Cellini since he offers the singers more freedom: “For this reason, Björling's Duke (perfect in vocal weight and color) is sung with more

virtuosity and elegance” than Peerce's ... “Björling is not afraid to ‘play’ with his music at appropriate moments; he emerges as the best” of the Dukes considered in this book (Kraus, del Monaco, di Stefano, Tagliavini, Tucker, besides Peerce and J.B.). “Victor possesses in both Merrill and Warren baritones of impressive caliber. The more brilliant one of Merrill emphasizes the rather bulky, opaque quality of Warren's sumptuous voice. Warren was justly famous for his Verdi characters ... and a choice here comes down to a personal preference ... I prefer Merrill, who here gives his finest performance on records. Erna Berger is a much colder Gilda than Peters, but her style is more refined, as Peters tries to underline some of the drama ... in this music.”

“The drama of *Rigoletto* comes across best in EMI-Angel's version. Gobbi's voice is sometimes recalcitrant, but he sweeps everything aside with an overwhelming portrait of the warped jester ... Callas brings us a very interesting Gilda, though her efforts to appear virginal becomes sometimes apparent.” Di Stefano, “despite an ideal voice for the Duke, proves stylistically inelegant and slides up to and spreads his high notes to the detriment of exact pitch. The end of ‘La donna è mobile’ is very bad indeed.”

“A strange bit of casting finds Mario del Monaco as the Duke” in Decca-London's recording, for while this tenor “lacks vocal contrasts and refinements, he is never vulgar as his Duke emerges brilliant and brazen. Guden supplies a lovely, clear-voiced Gilda ... and Simionato and Siepi bring prestige to the roles of Maddalena and Sparafucile. Del Monaco is one of three Dukes [considered here] who restore the ebullient *cabaletta*, ‘Amor possente.’” But this set is “badly handicapped through the dull *Rigoletto* of Aldo

Protti.” On the other hand, Cetra's Giuseppe Taddei “is a fine declamatory stylist” who nonetheless struggles painfully with the upper reaches of his role. Tagliavini restores “Amor possente” and offers “honeyed *pianissimi* along with vocal bombast and tightly pushed climaxes.” And although Pagliughi is past her prime she still “manages to infuse Gilda's music with singular limpidity and sweetness, attaining angelic sounds in her final duet with Taddei.”

Columbia's recording features Richard Tucker with the forces of the San Carlo Opera in Naples, with Gianna D'Angelo a “small, silvery, and accurate Gilda” and Renato Capocchi's baritone, too light for his role. Tucker offers “neither the grace nor the virtuosity of the *grande amoroso*; a mature and somewhat labored Duke.” Mercury's set is “rough but often dramatic,” with Bastianini shouting his way through the title role without fatherly tenderness, and Renata Scotto driving her tone, never suggesting the young, romantically inclined heroine. “Alfredo Kraus brings us a very respectable *Duca*,” stylish and adding a “counter-tenorish high D at the close of ‘Possente amor.’”

All these recordings have their interest as do some superb later versions with Dukes like Pavarotti, Domingo, Bergonzi and *Rigolettos* like Milnes, MacNeil, Nucci. We need to remember also extraordinary live performances including those by Björling and Gedda from Stockholm as well as a starry 1945 Met broadcast with Sayão, Björling, Warren. This opera has been fortunate for its interpreters and we easily can defend our own favorites! ■