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**CD REVIEW:** Giuseppe Verdi – **LA TRAVIATA** (V. Zeani, B. Prevedi, R. Merrill; St-Laurent Studio Opera Vol. 6 YSL T-267) and Vincenzo Bellini, Gaetano Donizetti, Giacomo Puccini, & Verdi – **OPERATIC RECITAL** (V. Zeani; DECCA Most Wanted Recitals! 480 8187)



[1] **GIUSEPPE VERDI** (1813 – 1901): *La traviata*—Virginia Zeani (Violetta Valéry), Bruno Prevedi (Alfredo Germont), Robert Merrill (Giorgio Germont), Marcia Baldwin (Flora Bervoix), Charles Anthony (Gastone de Letorière), Ron Bottcher (Il barone Douphol), Gene Boucher (Il marchese d’Obigny), Louis Sgarro (Il dottor Grenvil), Karan Armstrong (Annina), Lou Marcella (Giuseppe), Peter Sliker (Un domestico di Flora); Chorus and Orchestra of the Metropolitan Opera; Georges Prêtre, conductor [Recorded ‘live’ in performance at the Metropolitan Opera, Lincoln Center, New York, on 12 November 1966; **St-Laurent Studio** Opera Volume 6 YSL T-267; 2 CDs, 115:28; Available from **St-Laurent Studio**] & [2] **VINCENZO BELLINI** (1801 – 1835), **GAETANO DONIZETTI** (1797 – 1848), **GIACOMO PUCCINI** (1858 – 1924), and **VERDI**: **Operatic Recital**—Virginia Zeani, soprano; Orchestra del Maggio Musicale Fiorentino; Orchestra dell’Accademia di Santa Cecilia, Roma; Gianandrea Gavazzeni and Franco Patanè, conductors [Recorded in Teatro della Pergola, Florence, Italy, 8 – 15 September 1956 (tracks 5 – 8), Accademia di Santa Cecilia, Rome, Italy, 25 – 31 July 1958 (tracks 9 – 18); DECCA Most Wanted Recitals! 480 8187; 1 CD, 79:41; Available from **Amazon**, **ArkivMusic**, **jpc**, **Presto Classical**, and major music retailers]

It seems logical to begin an assessment of any recording featuring the Romanian-born soprano **Virginia Zeani** by stating that this exceptional singer needs no introduction, but the distressing reality is that this is perhaps no

longer the case. The propensity in opera in the Twenty-First Century for substituting praise for adequate singers of today for remembrance of extraordinary singers of yesterday is nearly as confounding as the genre itself, but an environment in which mention of Virginia Zeani is met with blank stares on the faces of young singers and opera lovers—an environment inconceivable not so long ago—is endemic of an Art form that cannot possibly know where it is going because it no longer cares about where it has been. The neglect of no one singer or listener will destroy the future of opera, but the attitude that it represents is a greater threat to the genre than funding shortfalls or aging populations. It is hardly insignificant that Dame Joan Sutherland wrote that both she and her husband, the conductor Richard Bonyngé, regarded Zeani's voice as the finest natural instrument they heard during their storied careers in opera. Aside from a few indifferently-engineered titles recorded in her native Romania and recordings of widely-varying quality of live performances, in many of which she partnered her husband, bass Nicola Rossi-Lemeni, Zeani's is a voice scarcely documented on recordings. For this reason alone, the releases of St-Laurent Studio's edition of a 1966 Metropolitan Opera performance of Verdi's *La traviata* and Zeani's installment in DECCA's Most Wanted Recitals! Series are invaluable, but the greater reason for jubilation is the quality of the singing enshrined on these discs. Disheartening as it is to realize that a career as significant as Zeani's could be neglected by subsequent generations, especially as her dedication to teaching has contributed to the development of some of today's most accomplished singers, there are at least these releases to which to point as examples of the sound of one of the Twentieth Century's most purely beautiful voices.

It was as Violetta in the 12 November performance of *La traviata* preserved on St-Laurent Studio's discs that Zeani made her début with the Metropolitan Opera, for which she would ultimately sing only three performances [two as Violetta in New York and one as Elena in Verdi's *I vespri sicilianion* tour in Newport, Rhode Island]. It is an exasperatingly scant MET legacy for a singer of Zeani's stature, but hers was the misfortune of emerging in an era in which Sir Rudolf Bing had Sutherland for Zeani's coloratura parts, Leontyne Price for her Verdi repertory, and Renata Tebaldi for her verismo rôles. [Her consort Rossi-Lemeni fared little better, amassing only a dozen performances with the company during the 1953 - 1954 Season.] Her Electrocord studio recording of *La traviata*, made in Romanian in 1968, is a worthy memento of her Violetta, but this MET performance is a still more compelling document of the bewitching artistry of which she was capable in Verdi's music. Zeani was, to a great extent, one of the most 'complete' Violettas in memory. As dashingly lovely as Vivien Leigh and Elizabeth Taylor, she possessed the extraordinary physical beauty for Violetta that must often be taken on faith, but, hearing this MET performance, it is the absolute suitability of the voice for the rôle that is immediately and consistently enthralling. In Act One, there are occasional

signs of the inevitable nervousness that is part of a *début* in a house like the MET, but from her first lines in the Brindisi, 'Tra voi saprò dividere il tempo mio giocondo,' the voice gains markedly in security and easily-projected resonance. Unlike many Violettas, she makes much of a conversational line like 'Un tremito che provo,' highlighting the dramatic significance of the text without overemphasizing its musical prominence. Likewise, there is unmistakable sincerity in her voicing of 'Solo amistade io v'offro: amar non so, né soffo un così eroico amore.' The soprano's breath control in her imaginatively-phrased account of 'Ah, fors'è lui che l'anima solinga ne' tumulti' is a marvel, but her *coloratura* in 'Sempre libera degg'io folleggiare di gioia in gioia,' in which the pair of D ♭ 6s are barely touched and there is no interpolated E ♭ 6, betrays intermittent uncertainty. Few Violettas manage to portray as sympathetic a character in the context of Act One, however, and by any standard except her own best work Zeani's vocalism is remarkable.

It is in the Act Two scene with Germont that Zeani irrefutably proves her mettle. The probity with which she delivers 'Donna son io, signore, ed in mia casa; ch'io vi lasci assentite più per voi che per me' reveals the delicate heart of her Violetta, and the simplicity of her singing of 'Il previdi – v'attesi – era felice troppo' is heartbreaking. Zeani accentuates the almost rigid rhythmic profile of 'Non sapete quale affetto vivo, immense m'arda in petto' to startling effect, effectively elucidating the terrible price of the sacrifice that Germont is demanding of her. 'Ah! dite alla giovine sì bella e pura' surges from her with the force of a thunderbolt. The unaffected sadness with which this Violetta bids Germont farewell is profoundly moving, and the sheer vocal poise of Zeani's singing of the arching 'Amami, Alfredo, quant'io t'amo' is arresting. Zeani declaims 'Alfredo, Alfredo, di questo core non puoi comprendere tutto l'amore' in response to Alfredo's denunciation of Violetta at Flora's ball with undiluted emotion, the words illuminated by her glistening tone. After the frequent ascents into the upper register in Act One, Violetta's *tessitura* in Act Two hovers at the top of the stave, and this lower center of vocal gravity provides Zeani with steadier technical footing. This increased confidence fosters singing and vocal acting of special eloquence.

The knell of death resounds in Zeani's voice from her first note in Act Three. Violetta's reading of Germont's letter is often one of the most muddled scenes in opera, sopranos either preserving their resources by reciting the letter as though it were a shopping list or over-emoting with the extravagance of Sarah Bernhardt's infamous portrayal of Sardou's *Fédora*. In this performance, Zeani makes a plausible attempt at reading the letter without resorting to embarrassing melodrama. Her cry of 'È tardi!' after reading Germont's words is piercing, however, the whole weight of Violetta's suffering borne by those two words. Zeani's voicing of 'Addio, del passato bei sogni ridenti' rivals the most rapturous accounts of the aria on disc, her top As utterly solid and

supported with tonal placement and breath control that should be models for all aspiring Violettas. She phrases 'Parigi, o caro, noi lasceremo, la vita uniti trascorreremo' in the duet with Alfredo with conviction that imparts a concerted effort to defy the ravages of disease. In the final scene, there are genuine shock and rage in Zeani's 'Ah! gran Dio! Morir sì giovine, io che ho penato tanto!' and 'Se una pudica vergine degli anni suoi sul fiore,' but it is again the combination of technical acumen and tonal luster rather than histrionic effects that facilitates the dramatic verisimilitude of this Violetta. Comparing this Metropolitan Opera performance, recorded from the audience [none of Zeani's MET appearances were broadcast performances] in generally good if occasionally distant sound that **Yves St-Laurent** has restored with admirable attention to faithfully preserving the timbres of the voices, with the familiar Covent Garden *Traviata* broadcast from January 1960, Zeani was marginally off her best form on the evening of her MET début, but she remained a Violetta of genuinely stunning style, substance, and sentimental effectiveness. [An additional, even finer perspective on Zeani's Violetta will be furnished by the forthcoming release by **Celestial Audio** (catalogue number CA1740) of a beautifully idiomatic 1963 RAI Roma broadcast featuring Zeani, Luigi Infantino as Alfredo, and Antonio Boyer as Germont.]

The Lombard tenor **Bruno Prevedi** (1928 – 1988) is a singer whose work truly justifies the too-familiar cliché: were he singing in 2015 as he did in 1966, he would occupy a place of prominence in Italian repertory that few of today's tenors could rival. Having debuted at the MET in 1965 as Puccini's Cavaradossi, Prevedi was largely dismissed by the New York press for failing to be Bergonzi, Corelli, or Tucker, but his portrayal in this performance with Zeani is not unworthy of comparison with Bergonzi's Alfredo, one of his best rôles. Prevedi's is not a youthful-sounding Alfredo, but the freshness of his vocalism is impressive. His voicing of 'Libiamo, ne' lieti calici che la bellezza infiora' is buoyantly light-hearted, contrasting with the seriousness of his statement of 'Oh, se mia foste, custode io veglierei pe' vostri soavi dì.' Prevedi suffuses 'Un dì felice, eterea, mi balenaste innante' with all the hope of young love, and his 'Oh, quanto v'amo!' is an intensely private admission. The tenor's pitch sags from time to time, most noticeably in the first half of Act One, but his intonation in his part's moments of greatest stress is generally accurate. In Act Two, the legitimately Italianate fervor of Prevedi's singing of 'Lunge da lei per me non v'ha diletto!' and Alfredo's aria, 'De' miei bollenti spiriti il giovanile ardore' is wonderful. Unlike many Alfredos of similar vintage, Prevedi was allowed one verse of his cabaletta, 'O mio rimorso! O infamia e vissi in tale errore,' which he sings strongly despite a bizarrely truncated ending that makes the number seem more than usually perfunctory. The desolation and anger that shape his exchange with his father are also the core of his Alfredo's public shaming of Violetta at Flora's ball. Prevedi's articulation of 'Ogni suo aver tal femmina per amor mio sperdea' has the

slashing edge of a dagger, contrasting tellingly with his despondent 'Ah sì che feci! ne sento orrore.' In Act Three, he phrases both 'Parigi, o cara, noi lasceremo' and 'Oh mio sospiro, oh palpito, diletto del cor mio!' affectionately, seemingly clinging to a desperately idealistic belief that Violetta will recover and resume their idyllic coexistence. In his five seasons at the MET, Prevedi was heard alongside stalwarts of the company—Martina Arroyo, Dorothy Kirsten, Anna Moffo, Leontyne Price, Gabriella Tucci—in several of Verdi's and Puccini's most popular tenor rôles. His singing lacked the aristocratic grace of Bergonzi, which it resembles in the lower octave, and the raw power of Corelli, but his Alfredo in this performance is a sonorous-voiced Latin lover in the tradition of Marcello Mastroianni who exudes affection for his Violetta and for Verdi's music: what more is required?

Giorgio Germont was the rôle of **Robert Merrill's** (1917 – 2004) MET début on 15 December 1945, when his Violetta and Alfredo were Licia Albanese and Richard Tucker. It was also as Germont that Merrill celebrated his twenty-fifth anniversary as a MET artist in 1970, on which occasion he was reunited in a ceremony following Act Two of the Halloween performance of *La traviata* with eight of his MET Violettas, an illustrious sorority that included singers as diverse as Bidú Sayão, Eleanor Steber, Victoria de los Ángeles, Dame Joan Sutherland, and Teresa Żylis-Gara. Merrill recollected that, at the time of the 1946 NBC broadcast performances recorded by RCA Victor, Arturo Toscanini advised him that Germont is a rôle that a singer can master only after he is a father himself, and the 'greenness' of Merrill's early interpretations of Germont had ripened by the time of this 1966 performance into a knowing, keenly-felt portrait of a man whose actions are driven by a commitment to upholding his family's honor. Merrill's performances were often more memorable for the quality of the vocalism than for psychological insights, but his Germont in this 1966 *La traviata* is an elegant, emotionally vital presence. In Act Two, Merrill and Zeani communicate more of Germont's and Violetta's feelings solely through thoughtful execution of Verdi's score than many singers manage to do with more overtly dramatic effects. Merrill phrases 'Pura siccome un angelo iddio mi die' una figlia' with a father's love for his daughter, and that affection is shared with Violetta in his comforting performance of 'Sì, piangi, o misera – supremo, il veggio, è il sacrificio – ch'ora io ti chieggo.' Unlike many Germonts, even those who sing well, Merrill seems to actually listen to Zeani's enunciation of Violetta's counterarguments. The aria 'Di Provenza il mar, il suol' defeats many otherwise capable Germonts, but this performance preserves one of Merrill's most effective recorded accounts of it, the tone steady and attractive throughout the wide range of the music. His 'Di sprezzo degno se stesso rende chi pur nell'ira la donna offende' in response to Alfredo's spiteful condemnation of Violetta exhibits as much hurt as ire. At the sides of his son and the dying Violetta in Act Three, Merrill's Germont intones a moving 'Di più non lacerarmi troppo rimorso l'alma mi divora,' and his caressing 'Cara, sublime vittima d'un

disperato amore' bears the weight of an enormous guilt. With many beloved studio recordings and broadcast performances in circulation, it is possible to take for granted what an important singer Merrill was. This performance reminds the listener of the wonders of which he was capable when in his prime.

**Georges Prêtre** presides over a performance that integrates finesse with full-throated singing, the cumulative power of the drama minimizing the significance of moments of sloppy ensemble and indifferent singing and playing by the **Metropolitan Opera Chorus and Orchestra**. In the casting of secondary rôles, the performance confirms Sir Rudolf Bing's success in building a true company during his tenure as the MET's General Manager: **Marcia Baldwin** as Flora, **Karan Armstrong** as Annina, the evergreen **Charles Anthony** as Gastone, **Ron Bottcher** as Barone Douphol, **Gene Boucher** as Marchese d'Obigny, **Louis Sgarro** as Dottore Grenvil, **Lou Marcella** as Giuseppe, and **Peter Sliker** as Violetta's servant all sing ably, contributing to the overall high musical standards of the performance. The spatial configurations of the Alfred Lunt production of *La traviata*, first seen at the MET less than two months before this performance [it opened on 24 September 1966], aurally impacted the recording of the voices, resulting in greater clarity in Acts One and Three than in Act Two. The opera's Preludio is missing from the recording, but, composing for Venice's Teatro La Fenice in 1853, Verdi likely did not expect the Preludio to be heard by a majority of the audience. This indispensable St-Laurent Studio release supplies a marvelous glimpse into a brief chapter in the history of the Metropolitan Opera now inexcusably at risk of being forgotten.

Artfully and lovingly remastered and prepared for CD release in Universal's Most Wanted Recitals! Series by **Victor Suzán Reed**, Zeani's 1956 and 1958 DECCA recordings of arias by Bellini, Donizetti, Verdi, and Puccini offer evidence of the soprano's exceptional versatility, a quality in possession of which her only true rivals in the Twentieth Century were Maria Callas and Renata Scotto. Like Callas, whose Isolde, Brünnhilde, and Kundry were admired alongside her celebrated *bel canto* portrayals, Zeani won acclaim not only as Bellini, Donizetti, and Verdi heroines but also as Senta in Wagner's *Der fliegende Holländer*, albeit sung in Italian. It was upon *bel canto* repertory that Zeani's early success was founded, however; and which undoubtedly inspired the recordings here restored to the catalogue. Of unknown provenance, the arias from *Lucia di Lammermoor*, *La sonnambula*, and *I Puritani* permit appreciation of the bravura technique that won Zeani the ardent appreciation of Trieste and London audiences for her revelatory 1957 performances as Donizetti's Lucia and Bellini's Elvira. Here elucidating the delicacy of Lucia's mental state from her first entrance in Act One, Zeani sings the aria 'Regnava nel silenzio' captivatingly, the divisions dispatched with disarming naturalness. Her trills lack the crispness of Callas's and

Sutherland's, but, unlike many of her rivals in this repertory, she at least bothers to attempt them. In Lucia's Mad Scene, some of the highest notes, including the traditional interpolated E ♭ 6, seem to have been produced with strong-armed willpower rather than ideal technical control. Though not devoid of expressivity, these performances are the work of a very gifted young singer who had not yet fully honed the interpretive skills that later portrayals evinced. Still, Zeani's phrasing of Amina's 'Ah, non credea mirarti' from Act Two of Bellini's *La sonnambula* radiates girlish melancholy, and her impeccably-voiced 'Qui la voce sua soave,' the aria from Elvira's Mad Scene in Act Two of Bellini's *I Puritani*, is second only to Callas's performance in her 1953 studio recording as an exposition of the character's despair.

Most illuminating among these early recordings are the studio accounts of Violetta's scene that ends Act One and 'Addio del passato' from Act Three of *La traviata*, recorded a decade before her MET debut and skillfully accompanied, like the *Lucia*, *Sonnambula*, and *Puritani* excerpts, by the **Orchestra del Maggio Musicale Fiorentino** and **Gianandrea Gavazzeni**. The basic construction of Zeani's 'Ah, fors'è lui che l'anima solinga ne' tumulti' is much as it was at the MET in 1966, but even in the relative comfort of studio sessions she did not linger over the D ♭ 6s in the cabaletta—not that Verdi asked her to, of course. Her 'Addio del passato,' though not yet the emotional exegesis that it would later be at Covent Garden and the MET, is already a potent promulgation of the fading Violetta's inner torment. Not surprisingly, the aria is searingly, exquisitely sung, as it was in the 1956 Naples performance of *La traviata* also preserved on disc five months before she created the rôle of Blanche de la Force in the world première of Francis Poulenc's *Dialogues des Carmélites* at La Scala.

Also dating from 1956 are the recordings of Mimì's 'Sì, mi chiamano Mimì' from Act One and 'Donde lieta uscì' from Act Three of Puccini's *La bohème*. Both arias are sung with obvious understanding of Puccini's melodic structures, and the texts are declaimed with the vowels on the breath in the now-extinct fashion of Rosetta Pampanini. The balance of Zeani's Puccini recital, stylishly supported by the **Orchestra dell'Accademia di Santa Cecilia** and **Franco Patanè**, was recorded in Rome in 1958, slightly less than a decade before her Cio-Cio San, Mimì, and Suor Angelica were exalted in Barcelona. Laretta's 'O mio babbino caro' from *Gianni Schicci* is standard fare for any soprano's Puccini programme, but Zeani's performance actually justifies its inclusion. Hers is a passionate rather than a naïve plea, but it is one that few fathers could resist. Innocence is the hallmark of her performances of Liù's 'Signore, ascolta' and 'Tu che di gel sei cinta' from *Turandot*, however, but it is the simple beauty of the vocalism that inspires awe. Zeani's singing of Cio-Cio San's 'Un bel dì vedremo' and 'Tu, tu, piccolo iddio!' from *Madama Butterfly* is characterized by audible responses to

the character's feelings that are rare for studio performances of arias removed from their contexts. The top B b s that crown 'Un bel di vedremo' and the climactic top A in 'Tu, tu, piccolo iddio!' are unforgettable tones. The soprano refuses to wallow in the anguish of Suor Angelica's 'Senza mamma,' focusing instead on mourning for the nun's dead child with near-perfect management of line. In the theatre, Manon Lescaut proved one of Zeani's finest parts, not least in a magical 1969 Rome production that partnered her with the Des Grieux of Richard Tucker. On this disc, her accounts of Manon's 'In quelle trine morbide' and 'Sola, perduta, abbandonata' fuse the temperament of Maria Zamboni, Mafalda Favero, and Clara Petrella with the dulcet femininity of Licia Albanese and the sumptuousness of Renata Tebaldi. Her singing of 'Vissi d'arte, vissi d'amore' summons memories of the Toscas of Dorothy Kirsten and Antonietta Stella, the sweetness of the voice allied with a strength that lends credibility to her impersonation of a woman who sings a gorgeous lyric aria and a moment later plunges a knife into the heart of a tyrant. The punishing tessitura of Magda's 'Chi il bel sogno di Doretta' from Act One of *La rondine* does not prevent Zeani from forging a performance as notable for poetic use of text as for perfectly-placed high notes. These selections are an intriguing preview of the committed, often triumphant Puccinian that Zeani would ultimately prove to be.

It will perhaps seem counterintuitive to suggest that both Studio St-Laurent's terrific *La traviata* and Universal's superb Operatic Recital featuring Virginia Zeani incite a dogged woe. The splendors of these discs force contemplation of the evolution of opera in the last quarter of the Twentieth Century and the first fifteen years of the new millennium. Without question, there are talented, well-trained singers at work in the world's opera houses today, some of whom sing rôles like Verdi's Violetta, Alfredo, and Giorgio Germont persuasively. In many cases, the visages are now younger, the waists slimmer, the diction better, and the emotions less aggrandized, but how can ignorance and dismissal of the work of Verdians like Maria Caniglia, Zinka Milanov, Anita Cerquetti, Dorothy Kirsten, and the ravishing Virginia Zeani be regarded as anything resembling progress?





*Bella Violetta*: Soprano **Virginia Zeani** as Violetta in Giuseppe Verdi's *La traviata* at the Metropolitan Opera in 1966 [Photo by Louis Mélançon, © by The Metropolitan Opera]

Posted by Joseph Newsome at 20:19 