



OP3239. LA BOHEME, Live Performance, 24 Dec., 1977, w. Conlon Cond. Met Opera Ensemble; Renata Scotto, Barry Morell, Leona Mitchell, Ingvar Wixell, Italo Tajo, Paul Plishka, etc. [This is a case of truly luxury casting in that we have the glorious Swedish baritone Ingvar Wixell as Marcello. In addition to Wixell and the inimitable Renata Scotto, Barry Morell

gives a beautiful performance of Rodolfo, ending the first act as written - a rare achievement!] (Canada) 2-St Laurent Studio stereo YSL T-654.

Transfers by Yves St Laurent.

CRITIC REVIEWS:

Why, one might ask, should one investigate this recording of a broadcast when its principal attraction, Renata Scotto, made two commercial recordings of LA BOHÈME? There are multiple answers. The first recording, made in 1962 for DG, suffers from a very poor choice as Rodolfo (Gianni Poggi). The second, from 1980, was made with Alfredo Kraus and is conducted by James Levine, and is very fine. However what sets this Met broadcast apart is that Scotto in performance is different from Scotto in the recording studio, and significantly so. There are details of phrasing, of dynamic shadings, of pointed inflection, moments of risk-taking that make this performance tellingly more vivid than her commercial recordings.

Scotto's opening scene with Rodolfo is a perfect example. She is alternately shy, flirtatious, and tender. This is a real character, not a soprano impersonating one. Then, when her first big aria comes, the imagination with which she employs dynamic shading will have you as completely seduced as it does Rodolfo. In the duet that follows she inflects every phrase with specificity, so it becomes a real conversation with Rodolfo. In her third act interchanges with Marcello, she again makes a real person; we feel her sadness at having to come to grips with Rodolfo's jealousy, and we also at moments hear in her voice the illness that will ultimately kill. Her singing of 'Addio, senza rancor' is heartbreaking, inflected and shaded with a specificity that is displayed by very few sopranos apart from Maria Callas. She holds onto the final 'rancor' in a manner that conveys the feeling that she really does not want to let go of this relationship. There are a few forte high notes that are a touch shaky, but they are more than compensated for by the glorious floated pianissimi and the artistry of the whole. This is one of the most complete performances of this role, from both musical and dramatic points of view, that I have ever heard

In a season where all three of the 'three tenors' were on the Met's roster (though they had not yet formed their trio) it is hard to understand why the BOHÈME broadcast was given to the 50-year-old Barry Morell. The American tenor had a lovely natural lyricospinto tenor voice, but it was beginning to dry out by this time. Moreover, he never was a singer with much imagination, and that lack is highlighted when juxtaposed with a soprano who was blessed with an excess of that quality. Morell is certainly not bad, and

he sings musically (his aria is transposed down a half-step), with a warm and appealing timbre, and he displays a good generalized feel for the shape of Puccini's line.

Leona Mitchell is delightful as Musetta, with a somewhat richer sound than many of the soubrette types who sing this role. She throws herself into the spirit of the character fully, and is clearly having fun while singing beautifully. Ingvar Wixell's Marcello is cannily acted, but by 1977 his voice had lost some of the luster it had earlier. He does communicate sympathetically his warmth toward ,while also letting his hair down effectively in the comic scenes. Puccini's genius for this opera is the dramatic juxtaposition of the comic and the tragic, requiring interpreters to be able to switch on a dime, and Wixell is superb at that. Allan Monk is excellent as Schaunard, and Paul Plishka is luxurious casting as Colline. And in the veteran Italo Tajo the Met found the perfect basso to take on the dual roles of Benoit and Alcindoro.

James Conlon conducts with just the right balance of contrasting elements. He expands Puccini's expansive phrases with richness and intensity, but never lets the momentum sag. He underlines the comic elements of the Bohemians's shenanigans with wit and sharp rhythmic contours. In particular he is an extremely sensitive accompanist for Scotto, allowing her the liberty to stretch phrases and linger over moments where she is making a dramatic point while at the same time keeping the music's shape. The important orchestral interlude introducing the final scene (just before 'Sono andati') is particularly touching, as it prepares the opera's final tragedy.

As usual, St. Laurent Studio's transfer is of the highest quality, and the Met's broadcast engineers original stereo recording was very clean and well balanced. No notes come with this, but detailed tracking information and full cast are included. St. Laurent Studio recordings are available from Norbeck, Peters & Ford (www.norpete.com). This is highly recommended for Scotto's uniquely moving for Conlon's imaginative conducting, and for the overall sweep and impact of a fine live performance that is almost impossible to deliver in the recording studio.

- Henry Fogel, FANFARE