

DIARY OF A CAVPAG MADMAN



INTRODUCTION AND THUMBNAIL REVIEW

This article will be a departure from the accepted review format. It's a forced departure that may hit some readers as an act of critical desperation; if so, the basic message is coming through. A crazy response for some crazy realities — R. D. Laing would understand.

But some of you, I'm sure, will only be indignant at all this craziness and desperation. What call is there, who needs it, isn't there enough? (No! Here are things getting crazier and more desperate by the day, and here are lots of people *not noticing*. They include people who are paid to notice, and should be the craziest and most desperate of all, like me. Perhaps they must be paid more to keep on noticing: At the going rates, how important can it possibly be? A point, but no excuse; if the rich pusher and the poor cop are in cahoots, I say shoot the cop first.)

Still, you want a sensible review after all, some facts and come now reasonable evaluation. So we open with *morceaux* of each, the more so since it gets crazy farther on. This pairing of *cavpag* was recorded in London two years back, and is a vehicle for the charming and currently popular lyric tenor Luciano Pavarotti. It's a *cavpag* package, you have to buy them both, which is sort of too bad,

BECAUSE

the *Cavalleria* is passably sung and quite interestingly conducted by Gianandrea Gavazzeni, therefore conceivably desirable to those who place high value on conductorial nuance, whereas the *Pagliacci* is a no-account bore. (End of facts. Further reasonable evaluation, and somewhat more detailed review, can be found rather far below, for those who wish to skip the craziness and desperation.)

WHAT!?

Oh, you don't think it can possibly be a no-account bore? I exaggerate, I have given in to the rhetorical?

THUMBNAIL REVIEW OF PAG AS IT WOULD READ IF HONESTY WERE THE ONLY CONSIDERATION

This really stinks. Ees so bad, ees terrible. I suspect Robert Wilson's influence, in that the case passes beyond questions of competence or incompetence to those of the very nature of performance, of whether or not the performance can be said to exist and if so why. I say it doesn't, and this is getting to be a hateful and sophisticated inquiry of a philosophical nature; there is obviously nothing evaluative to be said about something that is, literally, a nonentity. End of review.

EXPLANATORY NOTE ON DESPERATION

There is a degree of desperation, or at the least anxiety, that is always present in the makeup of a critic worth anything at all. It relates to his evaluative function. Admit it: The strongest single motivating factor is the stubbornly held conviction that something's wrong, that the critic sees what it is when others don't, and feels he must say so. He believes it is constructive to say something's wrong; saying that something's wrong is the act he most fervently believes in and regards as his contribution. Naturally he also says that something's right when he believes it to be. But frankly, that is less important, because whatever's right is already okay, right?, and besides it doesn't happen as often. Because of his astonishment and delight at finding something right, he is apt to discourse disproportionately over it, especially when he considers it important that a particular right be recognized and accepted. But he really shouldn't. No one



Anita Siegel

ever became a critic in order to say that all's well, nor has anyone ever given a damn for such a critic except for selected beneficiaries (foolish ones) of such criticism.

If one accepts this, then whence anxiety? Why first, one belongs by definition to an embattled minority. If many others shared the perception that something's wrong, then either it wouldn't be wrong or there would be nothing noteworthy about the perception. Of course the critic finds allies, he is not universally disliked or resented. But since he frequently feels more in common with the dislikers and resenters than with the allies, there is a mild anxiety about the whole business, just on the human level.

That is nothing. The real problem defines itself when the critic arrives at the view that the somethings wrong are so basic, so pervasive, and so crippling that they render the usual evaluative norms quite useless. This type of perception is, of course, the source of all true innovation and reform in art. No creator would accomplish anything of importance without it, as one of the very few valuable critics (and creators), Shaw, observed in his wonderful commentary on the relationship between progress and "the unreasonable man."

But to offer criticism from this perspective is very difficult. How helpful (and how credible?) can it be to repeatedly point at a crumbling cornerstone when all concerned insist that the building is structurally sound and is to be judged on the taste of some new decorative elements, a dormer or some new lintels? And indeed there may be some splendid new dormers and lintels, and some not so hot, and a number of companies in the business of the manufacture thereof, and here is the *Monthly Dormer and Lintel Review*, and can you really keep on saying, "The dormers

and lintels do not matter, because when I passed the building yesterday morning it had fallen down," when here is the morning paper with a photo of the building as it once was and a perfectly intelligent-sounding article on the new dormers and lintels, and you look out the window and by God there is a truck delivering more dormers and lintels to the site, and your neighbors in earnest discussion of the new details of the building, as if it were still standing?

NOTE ON THE STANDING BUILDING MIRAGE

Here is the rubble of the building, already cold and settled in a deep hole, and here are many estimable people with a stake in the illusion of its existence. They range from the manufacturers and deliverers to media persons assigned to report on gingerbread to far-off subscribers of the Review who have in fact never seen the building but look forward to reading about the new dormers and lintels and like to buy similar ones for their own homes. My God, they will all be bloody angry if I say, "Either this building has not yet been reconstructed or it has fallen down again. In any case it still isn't standing up. I believe some residents are trapped in the rubble. As I said last month, there doesn't seem much point in commenting on the many new dormers and lintels under these circumstances."

The editor of the Review will say, "Cut that out! Our readers could care less about cornerstones, they're into D&L! And here are eight other articles, not one of which says anything about the building being down!" Guess I'll really have to look one more time—

EVIDENCE FOR ALLEGED EXISTENCE OF PAG

LEONCAVALLO I Pagliacci*

Nedda
Mirella Freni (s)
Canio
Luciano Pavarotti (t)
Beppe
Vincenzo Bello (t)
Tonio
Ingvar Wixell (b)
Silvio
Lorenzo Saccomani (b)
Villagers
Pacho Panocia (bs),
Fernando Pavarotti (t)

MASCAGNI Cavalleria rusticana†

Santuzza
Julia Varady (s)
Lola
Carmen Gonzales (ms)
Mamma Lucia
Ida Bormida (ms)
Turiddu
Luciano Pavarotti (t)
Alfio
Piero Cappuccilli (b)

Finchley Children's
Music Group*,
London Voices,
National Philharmonic
Orchestra,
Giuseppe Patané* and
Gianandrea Gavazzeni†,
cond.
[James Mallinson* and
Michael Woolcock†, prod.]
LONDON OSAD 13125,
\$26.94 (three discs,
automatic sequence).

Comparisons
(Pagliacci):
Amara, Corelli,
Gobbi, Von Matačić
Angel SBL 3618
Carlyle, Bergonzi,
Taddei, Karajan
Deutsche Grammophon
2709 020
Tucci, Del Monaco,
MacNeil, Molinari-Pradelli
London OSA 1212
Caballé, Domingo,
Milnes, Santi
RCA LSC 7090

No doubt at all about the package. Here is a humiliating photo of Luciano (see below for surname usage), with enough whitewash out around the beard for that whole Calabrian village. Inside is a booklet containing cavgag articles by William Weaver, who is definitely alive. They are good articles, as his invariably are. Also the librettos, with translations colloquially British in tone ("Whip-crack-away!" says Alfio), and some illustrative matter, and the records themselves, cav on the first three sides, pag on the last three. The labels claim the collaboration of a number of prominent operatic artists; the laws on such matters are pretty stringent.

BRIEF RECAP OF CONCEIVABLE ARTISTIC JUSTIFICATIONS FOR NEW RECORDING OF AN OPERA

1) The absence of any acceptable recording of the same work. 2) The presence of a complement of artists whose work is of such unusual quality and appropriateness to the work that it merits the widest possible circulation, even if only in recorded form. 3) The presence of a striking perception of the work, or belief about it, that can be conveyed by the chosen artists and production team, if all goes well.

POWERFUL SUSPICION AS TO REAL REASONS BEHIND NEW CAVPAG RECORDING

1) Luciano. 2) Estimated market opening. **OBSERVATION IN INTEREST OF FAIR-MINDEDNESS**

So what? The motive hardly concerns us if the outcome is legitimate. Calculations similar to those powerfully suspected have produced some fine recordings.

MUSINGS ON LUCIANO'S RECENT PROGRESS

I think he'd want us to call him Luciano, don't you? "Charming and currently popular" he decidedly is. Not too long ago, in one of those worshipful Sunday *New York Times* Mag articles, Terry McEwen (not exactly a disinterested on-looker, but a knowledgeable one) was quoted as suggesting that L.P. had captured the public imagination like no other male singer since Caruso. I guess in a sense he's right, though other and greater singers have certainly claimed their share. "Captured" seems to me altogether correct (with Johnny Carson, Merv Griffin, Dinah Shore, and Live from Lincoln Center, a complete assault force is mobilized), but not "imagination": Showing everyone you are a regular guy who cooks pasta, harmlessly ogles women, and tells jokes is, in fact, the process of dismantling imagination.

I'm by no means against all this. Opera singers are actual people. Luciano is charming.

My critical concerns would be, first, the possibility that a subtle (or unsubtle) confusion arise between the identities of Luciano, media personality, and a good tenor with fine artistic potential; second, the possibility of his being led away from what he does well to satisfy the new demand; third, the possibility of his media rating being taken for his artistic standing.

A BACKWARD GLANCE AT LUCIANO

It wasn't a sight to make the heart leap, the first time I saw Luciano live; you knew there were muscles trying to move bones under there, but finding it all too much even for such undemanding exertions as a moderate bend from what should have been the waist for the purpose of depositing Edgardo's cloak and hat on the rim of *ah, quel fonte*, alongside the nearly-as-unmotile Renata.

NOW YOU'RE GETTING PERSONAL

But certainly. It is artistically relevant. I don't say Edgardo must look precisely this or that way, but I insist that a person of his temperament and life-style is not credibly represented by obesity. A performer in such a condition always arouses two feelings in me: concern for the human being so afflicted, and a certain immediate artistic disrespect. Not a good start. However, the uneasiness grew less over the evening, as it became clear that it was possible to enjoy the man's singing. Indeed it was the one time I have enjoyed it without reservation — the voice was beautiful, steady, well balanced, and the role exactly the right caliber and tessitura for it. Though not much of an actor, he was comparatively relaxed and seemed to take it all seriously. He and Renata really did a job.

MOVING ALONG NOW

You keep hoping all will go well, that such a gifted person will continue singing that way, perhaps lose some weight and learn a bit more about acting. On his records, the top sometimes sounded a bit pinched and thinned-out, but it hadn't been that way that night, and, you know, records —

But here's my friend, my companion of the *Lucia*, a day or two after seeing Luciano do *Daughter of the Regiment*. "Yeah, he sings all the Cs," he tells me, "but who cares? — they're the size of a pea." My friend also didn't care for the campy spectacle Luciano made of himself. But, you know, *friends* —

Now here's Luciano singing the Duke in a big splash of a *Rigoletto* with Joanie and Sherrill (Scene 1, sick) and Matteo (rest of show). Still pretty good, at points brilliant, but the tops of some phrases ("sarò per te" in the duet, the big toughie in "*Parmi veder*") do have a disappointingly constricted sound. He moves with an oddly



dainty gait. In the last act, he makes a point of feeling up Maddalena while leering cutely at the audience. Luciano has learned to keep on being Luciano while an opera is trying to take place. The audience would rather see Luciano than an opera, so it's total success. After you shoot the cop, fire a few rounds into the auditorium, just over their heads this time.

Later yet, at a *Bohème*, I really can't hear Luciano's top at all, except when the accompaniment is *vide* or he happens to catch hold of a phrase riding nicely from below, as at the opening of "O *Mimi, tu più*." To put it bluntly, it's a bust, but the audience reaction is wild—this is a personal appearance event. I begin to form a rather unappetizing image of a huge, mincing galoot with a pretty, medium-sized voice that can't make climaxes, kneading his handkerchief and appealing to the audience for sympathy for all his hard work and sweet personality. The image of what Jerzy Grotowski calls "the courtesan artist." (Now, *there's* a passing strange fellow. Being Polish, he makes a mean stuffed cabbage, I bet—but would he even *do* it for Dinah? Would he *tell* a Polish joke on a talk show, just one? Or would he possibly tell you to go stuff your own cabbage, and maybe not even want to be called Jerzy except by a personal acquaintance? How do you promote a guy like that?)

Since then, I have heard Luciano sing high and small, low and large, though once (in *Favorita* last year), the lie of a part pulled things together in a way that at least suggested the Edgardo voice. On all the TV shows, it's of course much harder to tell about the balance of the voice. But you can tell that singing, good or bad, is tough labor (indeed, Luciano shows off the labor just a bit) and that Luciano is a genuinely likable and amusing man with a sharp sense of his own appeal. Also that he has lost weight. Artistic failures and successes cease to have any relative values, since the audience and colleagues are parts of the act and behave as *if* each effort produced a triumph of absolutely equal and predictable proportions. The thought does occur that "live" audiences are learning the lesson.

FINAL QUERY BEFORE LISTENING TO ALLEGED PAG

How does it happen that a charming and popular lyric tenor, marvelously suited to parts like Edgardo, Alfredo, Faust, and Werther when in peak condition, decides that such roles as Calaf, Canio, Cavaradossi, Manrico, Radamès, and Enzo are his *Fach* at the very time, almost to the hour, that his upper range is losing its juice and open-throatedness? The timing is devilish. One recalls that certain lyric tenors, notably

Bjoerling, sang several of these roles effectively enough, though only some of them in the theater. But one also recalls that Bjoerling's voice was in almost ideal balance at the time, and that the undertaking did not represent any general change in repertory or in his way of singing. And one remembers a larger number of other lyric tenors, some with voices as lovely and full as Luciano's, who wound up hoist by their own petard in an all-too-literal sense.

PRELIMINARY INVESTIGATION OF PAG RUMORS (MORE LIKE A REVIEW)

I begin playing the three sides labeled *I Pagliacci*. I have already listened a couple of times to the sides called *Cavalleria rusticana* and have concluded (though not without some travail, see below) that it exists and even has a shaky but palpable *raison d'être*. Well here we go. Side 1, Side 2, Side 3, there it went. I have a poignant sense of elapsed time as the stylus wallows in the takeup groove. Damn it, I set the alarm and everything. Otherwise, nothing. *Io? Nulla. Allora.* . . . It's like driving through a contourless but familiar landscape in a quiet, air-conditioned car, but arriving back where you started instead of at your destination. It is later, but did I do it? Did anything transpire? It's a nonexperience.

SO WHAT'S THE EXPERIENCE?

Yes, it's true that one has certain expectations. Me, I love *Pagliacci*, and will try to tell you why. It is not because of the extremely high level of craft present in the libretto and score. As a critic, I can enjoy listening for that, analyzing and detailing it for readers, mostly for the sake of making a case for it in terms that a certain valued segment of readership will accept as verification. Some performances tend to underline those considerations, and I would want to write about them under those conditions. But it's of no importance right now, these whys and hows of the experience that lie in the text.

What's important here is that there is an experience. I am moved, excited, frightened by any performance of this opera, it can't miss. It gets straight at some very important emotional issues that I recognize as parts of myself (that's where the fright comes in) and as important to the life that exists inside me and everyone else I have ever been close enough to to have emotional knowledge of. By some funny process that no one has explained awfully well, though we do keep trying, it is a part of my relationship to those issues, my definition of them, my effort to cope with them. I believe in that as a function of art, I'm inclined to think it the most important



one. I have never not had some of this experience at any live performance of the piece, however dreadful, and do not remember ever missing it on records before.

**UTTERLY SUBJECTIVE, THEREFORE
ENTIRELY VALID REPORT OF
FURTHER INVESTIGATIONS**

Despite this accumulated experience of the interaction between *Pagliacci* and C.L.O., which we could well take as sufficient grounds for judging a new encounter, it has to be conceded, as always, that some factor bearing more on my own state than that of the recording may account for the nonexperience. Have I changed, is some connection out of its socket, did I perhaps prejudge out of anticipations formed about the performers, as for instance my pre-existing attitudes re Luciano? Given my trust in my way of dealing with this always present problem, and my primed condition for hearing a new *Pagliacci*, it doesn't seem likely, but you have to keep the door open: *could be*.

So I decide to re-familiarize myself with some of the other recordings, which is of course a good idea anyway, before going back into the void in hopes of bumping up against something. To minimize the subjective factors, I rule against listening to any of the oldest recordings. That will ensure that the Gigli recording, which was a major adolescent sublimation, won't just be running its old track, or that the Bjoerling/Warren/De los Angeles one, rendered by artists who meant much to me at a still impressionable stage, will not come up with a nostalgia number. I even stay away from the Callas/Gobbi/Serafin version, which was a lesser part of my life but might still call up some romantic distance, capture my imagination, you might say.

I instead go to the three earliest stereo versions, all of which I had reviewed upon original issue and none of which I had even sampled in quite some time. Well for Pete's sake, there it all is! *Pagliacci* and C.L.O. are still in business, it's a happy day! I wind up listening to practically all of all three versions, sort of pinching myself aurally and luxuriating in the differences of three performances I had not recalled as great, but which are *performances*, and which I can tell you sound mighty healthy from this perch. I now figure I must have underrated these recordings unforgivably when they were new, so I look up the old reviews. Now I'm relieved, and a little astounded, to find that the opinions there seem very much the same as the current ones, give or take an emphasis here and there and allowing a slight advantage on the perspective. Some comforting verification is building up; just possibly the enthusiasm will

carry over when I check again for vital signs on the new album.

BUT HOLD IT A SEC

Before I do that, I ought to give a listen to what we'd call the current competition, which it happens I've never heard. That would be the RCA Victor recording with Placido and Montserrat and Sherrill. Zounds if I'm not getting that creepy feeling again. These people are in a trance, bemused and preoccupied with matters left over from some other opera or, more probably, their private affairs. Sort of a stoned meditation, *verismo* viewed from the hazy yon. We could blame it all on Nello, but that wouldn't be fair: Singers can still sing, however slowly. The voices float in limbo, they are caught inside someone's toy.

**FINAL BEDCHECK (YOU GUYS HAVE
EXACTLY ONE MINUTE OR I GIG THE
WHOLE BARRACKS)**

No further room for doubt. Pag ain't here, he's prolly out to lunch wit Victah.

CAN'T YOU BE MORE SPECIFIC?

Oh sure. It's just that I don't want you thinking that the specifics, grisly as they are, can possibly account for so whelming a reality as nonbeing. If you go at this aspect by aspect, as you might in a depth review of something extant, you will total it up to a poor performance, like some others on records. Truly, that isn't what's at issue. Still, if you like, we can run it down a bit, beginning with the nonsuitability of the cast.

BUT WHAT ABOUT MIRELLA?

Touché, Mirella's the one principal here you might think of if you were casting a real pag. A good, warm, full-bodied lyric soprano, and a nice easy style in operas like *Bohème* and *L'Amico Fritz* that aren't far from the mark. But this wasn't the time for her Nedda. There's still a pleasing sail to sustained sounds in the upper-middle part of her voice, but the whole middle octave is unsteady and not always cleanly intoned. She never did have any anchoring at the bottom and so (as I had occasion to observe about the work of certain other female vocalists while inspecting some of the dormers and lintels along Broadway back in Jan/Feb, '79), now that she's trying to lean on it a bit, she gets a very thin variety of chest jabbing in at odd assorted spots, some of them too high. Because of the way weights are sliding and heaving about in her voice, she can't sing a really smooth line these days, and tends to pump into the downbeats just to keep it all cranking along. The *Balletta* is not good at all; she settles in a bit better in the Silvio scene, but then goes in and out in the last act. Why?, I hear you ask.



SEX

Not a trick subhead at all, just the shortest tag for Theory No. 1 concerning Mirella's mucked-up middle. Back to the *Times* and Mr. McEwen, who is full of caution about singers having any fun. Claims he can always tell when a singer's had sex before singing (how long before? this could be important) — "the middle goes" (does it ever!). Tell the truth, this bothered me, because here I've been working with voices for years, and can't tell you when a singer's had sex unless I've been 1) the party of the second part, or 2) told. Also because singers have enough to be uptight about without reading baloney like that in the Sunday paper. Still, the symptom does fit in this case, doesn't it, and here's a photo of Luciano giving Mirella a cozy hug, *right around the middle*, which you may acquire by purchasing this album.

Theory No. 2 would have to do with Mirella having a bit of unbalance in her voice to begin with and then singing an overheavy repertoire. That one's already been run through in a *Bocca-negra* review (Feb '78), q.v. Theory No. 3: Mirella was ill or otherwise indisposed at time of recording. Theory No. 4: She just had an off week and sang lousy.

THEORIES ABOUT MIRELLA'S MIDDLE RANKED ACCORDING TO OUR FONDEST WISHES

1, 4, 3, 2.

M's M THEORIES RANKED ACCORDING TO REAL-WORLD PROBABILITIES

2, 3, 4, 1.

WHO ELSE?

Let's leave Luciano for cav. Ingvar sings Tonio with tone that is sometimes pleasing, sometimes rattley, never Italianate, and with a top so open it's starting to sound like a Bway shout (funny how Bway keeps coming back here). He uses almost no portamento, even where the score indicates it, and is unconvincing dramatically. Lorenzo, a singer whose name I've seen but whom I'm hearing for the first time, has decent equipment but little technique and no real phrasing sense. He needs more training. The usually omitted duet section of his scene is restored, but the advantage squandered. Vincenzo sounds as if he has more voice than most Beppes, particularly when he goes into the top in the Serenade, but he doesn't sing phrases either, and in the important interruption at the end of Act I seems to be giving a reading.

Not one of these persons gives the impression of having so much as shaken hands with pag prior to recording date. Neither do the orchestra and chorus, who play and sing nicely enough (a lot nicer than those found on several

actual performances), but without the faintest suggestion of why or in what direction. No, it is not all Giuseppe's fault; if you're playing an opera gig you're supposed to do the homework, otherwise you're robbing us blind. While we're at it, though, Giuseppe is in some kind of time warp here, the tempos droop like Spanish moss.

The engineering might as well have been put together in a rock studio. It has no acoustic whatever save for the reverb that puts the solo voices into an electronic box canyon.

LISTEN

to any of the versions mentioned above. On Angel's, hear the Scala orchestra under Von Matačić seethe and crack with a magnificent unanimity of goal, with the sense of theatrical ensemble, operatic musicianship at the highest level. Hear the color and bite of Gobbi's Tonio, the lovely nap of Mario Zanasi's baritone before he blew it out on big Verdi parts. And remind yourself that the minute Franco Corelli opens his mouth in this type of role, it's forget it Luciano. But observe, in fact, that all elements (even the Nedda of Lucine Amara and the Beppe of Mario Spina, though not all that distinctive) are at another level of professional qualification entirely from those of the new version.

Same's true on DG's pag. But listen in particular for the loving shaping of every phrase (Scala again, very different under Karajan, but just as fine), the unfailing firmness of decision about the shapes of musical gestures as dramatic statements. All soloists and every ensemble element reflect this. Special prizes: the aching tenderness (not just sexuality) of the Nedda/Silvio scene (Joan Carlyle and Rolando Panerai, the latter in a class by himself in binding note and word into evocative phrase, at — dast I say it — capturing our imaginations), and the Beppe of Ugo Benelli, especially with the above-noted interruption, which becomes a true scene.

On the earlier London (and the new one is a replacement, so buy the old one quick; it's available separately), Molinari-Pradelli and the Santa Cecilia forces aren't in the same league, but they are still opera professionals giving a performance. Del Monaco's is another genuine Canio voice, not quite as free and supple as Corelli's, but lent to a performance of even greater intensity and dignity. Cornell MacNeil was young, quite American, and on the bland side, but vocally just stupendous — no other Tonio on the complete recordings, not even Warren or Granforte, soars through the music like this. And another splendid Beppe, Piero de Palma. Those are the special things, but once again, all along the line it's *nolo contendere*.

REFLECTIONS ON CAGEY CARLO AND





A COUPLE MORE

Carlo's the Turiddu and Canio of the Karajan *cav*pag. A *tenore di forza* he's not, barely a *tenore di ballo*. I vividly recall his cries for help in the Nile Scene of *Aida* and at sundry other athletic events. A Sicilian standee I knew in the '50s insisted Carlo had to be a really great tenor. "How do I know?" he would ask. "Because, anyone who can sing Canio *with that voice* —"

But he did, and actually did most of his work in the heavy roles you would have assumed he had no more business singing than does, for instance, Luciano. This isn't to say one didn't prefer him in more lyrical parts, but he survived, kept his dignity, and brought a suavity of phrase and control of dynamics that held rewards for even the heaviest roles.

As it happens, Carlo's a levitated baritone. Story goes that he threw up his hands with teachers (no doubt with excellent cause) and made the transition himself within a few months — you must know something of singing to appreciate how much that says about his vocal instincts. Nonetheless this does not mean that the operation was perfect. It's interesting to listen to his earlier recording of *pag*, which like his *Boccanegra* Adorno was made very close to the beginning of his tenor career. If you know his later vocalism, you'll be shocked. Carlo! This is downright vulgar! You still hear the baritone, the roughness of the transition into an uncertain top, which rather like Luciano's is narrower than the rest of the voice.

Carlo had a choice to make. Possibly it was not the ideal one — you can't help feeling that a true technical master might have helped him balance out the voice with a fuller-throated entry to the upper range. That did not happen. But Carlo was cagey and did the next-best thing: He worked to align the lower two-thirds of his range with the ever-more-carefully husbanded top, to smooth the transition within that alignment and to avoid violating its limits. His singing grew continually smoother and more graceful. It lacked the final excitement (his defiance of Philip in the *Don Carlos* *auto-da-fé* will not make your blood race) and lost some of the vitality that early *pag* shows in flashes. Finally the voice became too much of a wisp. But a safe wisp that is still wisping, artistically guided as it is.

If you follow through the records of Franco and Mario, you will hear them making increasing efforts to lighten the break and sing more suavely, too, but with guns of heavier caliber than Carlo's. Franco is given increasingly to *diminuendos* and to attempts at the lyric roles,

while Mario treads less heavily in the low range and opens the vowels more at the break. These are authentic dramatic voices striving to gain more complete control. The choices are not always aesthetically persuasive and may have been counterproductive when it comes to vocal wear. But among them all there are some lessons about why which voices succeed with what roles, and how they endure.

CAV REVIEW

As already suggested, it is Gavazzeni's reading that is the noteworthy element, and though orchestra and chorus still don't have it in the blood, they do respond professionally to expert guidance. In discussing leadership of *cav*, one must first set aside the Karajan, which is in a class of its own. I don't say one has to agree with it, but it is a special view, spectacularly carried through (the only comparable performance of the music I've heard was Bernstein's at the Met, so gorgeously played you were happy to go along with a reading that verged on the preposterous). Hearing Karajan's *cav* is like viewing a primitive rural scene painted by a sensitive, sophisticated urban artist who sees it from his time and place, and therefore discovers in it much that the inhabitants would be slow to recognize.

Next to Karajan's, Gavazzeni's reading is the most distinctive on records. This is most noticeable in the prelude and opening choral sections, where he has a unique plasticity of *rubato*, an individual feel for the shapes and motivations of all the many tempo fluctuations, that keep us glimpsing the life of the musical scene. But throughout, the reading is intelligently judged and nicely detailed, and its playing is lacking only by the Scala standard.

Julia Varady, the Santuzza, has a round and solid mezzo voice and a firm way with the phrases. It is a very predictable performance, though, with not much individuality of expression to it. If you're picking and choosing, there's Giulietta and Fiorenza and Maria and Zinka and Renata, and for my money Caterina, so you'll want to think that one over.

PERSPECTIVES ON PIERO

Since performance criticism is a much lesser part of my life than it used to be, I do not attend as many performances as I once did, nor listen to the vast majority of vocal records upon release, as was formerly my custom. That's how I'm thankfully certain I'm not wracked by Jaded Reviewer's Syndrome. While I've heard a number of Piero's recent recordings, I haven't precisely *followed* them.

I have friends who have, and from such sources I hear word that this is one of his best; since I regularly see in print considerations that do not blush to rank Piero with Tito, and Tito with the great baritones of yesteryear, I could figure it's dumb luck that such an one might condescend to the role of Alfio.

Now sure enough it's not bad, we've had many worse in and out of town in my time. He is bright and thrustful enough in the song, rather dry in the scene with Santuzza. But my perspective is not all that au courant, and my standard tends to be not Piero's last few recordings, but the many other baritones who have inscribed the part, and I find myself doing a bit of checking to determine not whether Piero might be the best of them, but whether he's not the worst. He's not, but I tell you it was a search. Aldo Protti, back on the first Del Monaco recording, is perfectly atrocious (but he later did it very competently with some Naples folk), and Carlo Tagliabue, though a major singer, was long in the tooth when he got his down.

There are some others you wouldn't call Great Shakes —Sereni and Guarrera and Guelfi—but it's moot whether Piero is above their class. Then you've got the real voices in prime shape—Bechi, Panerai, MacNeil, Merrill, Bastianini (Ettore hasn't heard about note values, though, and that may put you off a little)—and you have to realize that Piero's closer to the bottom of the list than the top. It's a shift in perspective, all right, and if Piero's lagniappe, something's sure happened.

PIERO, THE ACTOR

For some reason, Piero sneers the line "*Ite voi altri in chiesa.*" (No mere bel canto show-off he, but a singing actor.) Is Alfio an atheist? Or does he make fun of the womenfolk? Or is he just The Villain? You got me.

LUCIANO!?

All right, all right. Naturally the timbre of the instrument is still in evidence a good deal of the time. But this is crude, pushy singing, fake-dramatic. He falls into every trap of the role. His phrasing choices are the obvious clichés. He resorts to irrelevant bursts of energy to try to fill out the music. He gets off meaty top notes here and there, constricted ones at other points. The vibrato turns tremulous in the middle (this is even more the case in pag).

All in all, it would have to be said that Luciano offers neither the authentic vocal caliber of singers more naturally suited to such roles (like Mario and Franco), nor the combination of technical expertise and extraordinary musical

sensibility that others with no more sheer voice than he (like Carlo or, especially, Jussi) have brought by way of compensation.

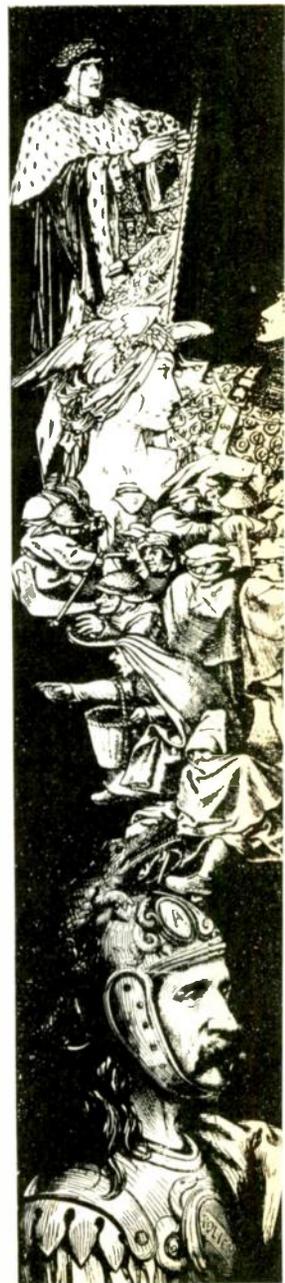
If you care to sample the parts of the role you'd figure him to do well, try the end of the *Siciliana*—it's no pleasure to hear him ram his voice up onto the Fs at full forte, without a hint of curve on the *portando*. Leaving aside Bjoerling, who is the only tenor since Caruso to play with these phrases with a true mastery, you'll find him a good deal less suave than Bergonzi or Corelli, and no more so than De Monaco on his first two recordings of the role. As with Piero, Luciano of course compares well with some of the competition—could we assume otherwise, with the Turiddus of Achille Braschi, Gianni Poggi, and the Del Monaco of the Souliotis set as parts of the legacy?

WHY PICK ON THIS SET?

Simply because the whistle must be blown somewhere; the technical fouls have been piling up like mad. I've called the shots like this before—in a 1967 review of the Leinsdorf *Ballo*, for example, I noted that something eerie was creeping into a good proportion of major operatic recordings. The something need not have to do with the level of musical and technical talent involved, or with the "correctitude" of the interpretation. Some recordings (though this is not among them) have every appearance of excellence and of care in preparation, yet fail to engage any aspect of the experience inherent in the work except that of correctitude, of an intellectualized, operalogical point-scoring. Quite a trap for any critic who has lost faith in his own reactions and sensitivities, or who for any reason is not using them fully in his listening. In coming back to the problem repeatedly over the past dozen years, I have done enough relistening, comparing and second-opinioning to be fairly obstinate about it: We aren't talking about something that has happened to me or to other veteran listeners, but about something that has happened to recorded performance, and is alas invading the live operatic theater as well. We are getting not opera, but a pasteurized, processed opera food, or potted opera product.

WHAT LONDON SHOULD DO WITH THIS CAVPAG PACKAGE

First, try to figure if there is some way you can chop this up so the pag labels don't have to be on the backs of the cav labels, or else subtract the pag price from the cav price. If that doesn't work, consult Jerzy. He can be reached in Wroclaw. He may be reluctant at first, but maybe you can break the ice with a Polish joke.



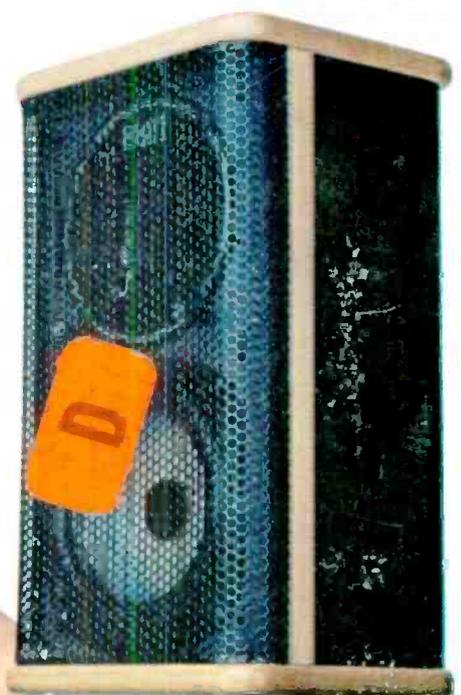
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