Giacomo

PUCCINI

Suor Angelica

Victoria de los Angeles • Fedora Barbieri
Rome Opera House Chorus and Orchestra
Tullio Serafin

NAXOS

Great Opera Recordings

Giacomo

PUCCINI

(1858 - 1924)

Suor Angelica

Opera in One Act
Libretto by Giovacchino Forzano

Suor Angelica . . . . . Victoria de los Angeles (soprano)
La zia principessa (the Princess) . . . . . Fedora Barbieri (mezzo-soprano)
La badessa (the Abbess) . . . . . Mina Doro (mezzo-soprano)
La suora zelatrice (the Sister Monitor) . . . . . Corinna Vozza (mezzo-soprano)
La maestra delle novizie (the Mistress of the Novices) . . . . . Mina Doro (mezzo-soprano)
Suor Genovieffa . . . . . Lidia Marimpietri (soprano)
Suor Osmina . . . . . Santa Chissari (soprano)
Suor Dolcina . . . . . Anna Marcangeli (soprano)
La suora infermiera (the Nursing Sister) . . . . . Teresa Cantarini (soprano)
Una novizia (A Novice) . . . . . Santa Chissari (soprano)
Prima cercatrice (First Alms Sister) . . . . . Lidia Marimpietri (soprano)
Seconda cercatrice (Second Alms Sister) . . . . . Santa Chissari (soprano)
Prima conversa (First Lay Sister) . . . . . Sylvia Bertona (soprano)
Seconda conversa (Second Lay Sister) . . . . . Maria Huder (mezzo-soprano)

Rome Opera House Chorus and Orchestra
Chorus Master: Giuseppe Conca
Luigi Ricci, assistant conductor
Tullio Serafin

Recorded in June 1957 in Teatro dell'Opera, Rome
First issued on HMV ALP 1577

Reissue Producer and Audio Restoration Engineer: Mark Obert-Thorn

1 *Ave Maria, Ave Maria* 4:08
(Sisters, Suor Angelica)

2 *Sorelle in umiltà* 1:38
(Monitor, Lay Sisters, Mistress of the Novices)

3 *Suor Lucilla, al lavoro* 1:52
(Monitor, Mistress of the Novices, Suor Osmina, Six Sisters)

4 *O sorelle, sorelle* 2:51
(Suor Genovieffa, Sisters, A Novice, Mistress of the Novices)

5 *O sorelle in pio lavoro, quando il getto* 1:03
(Suor Genovieffa, Two Sisters)

6 *I desideri sono i fiori dei vivi* 1:53
(Suor Angelica, Monitor, Suor Genovieffa, Three Sisters)

7 *Io sì, lo confesso* 2:49
(Suor Angelica, Suor Dolcina, Sisters, Suor Genovieffa, A Novice)

8 *Suor Angelica, sentite!* 2:32
(Nursing Sister, Suor Angelica, Sisters)

9 *Laudata Maria!* 1:41
(Two Alms Sisters, Sisters, Suor Dolcina, Monitor)

10 *Chi è venuto stasera in parlatorio?* 2:17
(First Alms Sister, Sisters, Suor Angelica, Suor Genovieffa)

11 *Suor Angelica!* 4:26
(Abbess, Suor Angelica, Six Sisters)

12 *Il Principe Gualtiero vostro padre* 3:06
(Princess, Suor Angelica)

13 *Vostra sorella Anna Viola anderà sposa* 1:45
(Princess, Suor Angelica)

14 *Di frequente la sera, là nel nostro oratorio* 2:34
(Princess)

15 *Tutto offerto alla Vergine, sì, tutto* 2:27
(Suor Angelica)

16 *Or son due anni* 3:02
(Princess, Suor Angelica)

17 *Senza mamma, o bimbo, tu sei morto!* 4:57
(Suor Angelica)

18 *Sorella, o buona sorella* 2:20
(Suor Genevieve, Sisters, Suor Angelica)

19 *La grazia è discesa dal cielo!* 4:01
(Suor Angelica)

20 *Addio, buone sorelle, addio, addio!* 1:24
(Suor Angelica)

21 *Ah! Son dannata!* 1:33
(Suor Angelica, Chorus of Angels)

22 *O gloriosa virginum* 2:29
(Chorus of Angels, Suor Angelica)

Giacomo Puccini (1858-1924): Suor Angelica
Victoria de los Angeles • Fedora Barbieri • Tullio Serafin

Suor Angelica is the second work in Puccini's triptych of one-act operas commonly known as *Il trittico*. The composer had long been interested in the idea of a collection of one-act operas to be performed in a single evening, but his publisher Ricordi had consistently rejected the idea as impractical and costly. The libretto is by Giovacchino Forzano, who in 1917 offered the composer an outline which found immediate appeal with Puccini, whose older sister Igenia was Mother Superior of the convent at Vicepelago. Forzano (1884-1970) was a polymath – he had studied medicine, the law, had for a time been a baritone singer, then a journalist, had been an editor of the Florentine paper *La Nazione,* playwright and producer, in the last capacity working at La Scala and the Teatro Reale in Rome. He later became a friend of the Italian dictator Benito Mussolini.

The opera, set in a convent in Siena during the latter part of the seventeenth century, recounts the fall, redemption, and final transfiguration of its central character, Sister Angelica, who has taken the veil in repentance for bearing a child out of wedlock. The idea of a work employing the spectacle of the Roman Catholic liturgy in a Latin country greatly appealed to the composer. One recalls the finale of Act One in *Tosca* in which Puccini used to great effect the *Te Deum*. He paid his sister a number of visits so as to capture the authentic atmosphere: he even tried out some of his ideas and effects on the nuns themselves to gauge their responses. Sadly Puccini misjudged how his theatre audiences would react. Whilst the score contains some of Puccini's most adventurous writing (the musical language at times even flirts with polytonality) the work has not enjoyed popularity comparable to that of its companions, the dark *Il tabarro* and the comedy *Gianni Schicchi*, each of which has enjoyed an independent life in the repertory. Critics have always decried the unashamedly sentimental and episodic drama and the fact that the composer, a lax Catholic, indulged in various pastiches of his musical forebears who were associated with the cathedral in Lucca. Angelica's aria *Senza mamma* (Without your mother), however, one of the most poignant moments in any of Puccini's works, has long remained a favourite with sopranos.

Puccini employs only female voices in the opera, all the characters bar one members of the convent, the exception being Angelica's aunt the imperious and icy-cold Princess. The latter, the only significant rôle he wrote for the mezzo-soprano voice, is without doubt the cruellest and most glacial of all the composer's extraordinary female creations. The structure of the opera is quite loose in that the composer sees fit to present a series of vignettes of monastic life: the one real scene is the confrontation between Angelica and her aunt when the former is told of her son's death seven years earlier.

The première took place at the Metropolitan Opera in New York on 14th December 1918 with the soprano Geraldine Farrar in the title-rôle and the mezzo Flora Perini as the Aunt with Robert Moranzoni as conductor. The first European production took place at the Teatro Costanzi, Rome, on 11th January 1919 conducted not by Toscanini, as has been stated, but by Gino Marinuzzi. London was introduced to the opera on 18th June 1920 in the presence of King George V and Queen Mary with the composer and librettist present, and with Gina Dalla Rizza as Angelica. The work was coldly dismissed as 'anaemic' and has never been revived in that house.

The present recording was made in the Teatro dell'Opera, Rome, during June and September 1957. The producer was Victor Olof (1898-1974) who had joined EMI the previous year after a decade with Decca where he had been responsible for the production of a considerable number of operas in both Rome and Vienna between 1950 and 1955. The balance engineer was Harold Davidson who had joined The Gramophone Company in 1916 at the age of fifteen. He later transferred to the recording department in 1925

and over the next forty years engineered recordings throughout Europe in addition to working in Japan during the 1930s. In 1958 he moved over to balancing stereo recordings and continued until his retirement in 1966.

When the recording was first released in 1958, the reviewer in *The Gramophone* remarked that "Victoria de los Angeles's performance as Sister Angelica demands superlatives: it is in every way perfect, beautifully sung, infinitely touching, and free from the slightest suggestion of theatricality". He later remarked, "The small parts are all well done". Of the conductor it was commented "It is evidently clear that Tullio Serafin loves this opera: he draws very beautiful playing from the orchestra, secures just the right tempi, and at once establishes the right mood in every scene. The recording allows us to hear all the details of the wonderful orchestral part".

The Spanish soprano **Victoria de los Angeles** (1923-2005) was born in Barcelona and later studied in that city. Her formal début was in 1945 as the Countess in *Le nozze di Figaro*. After winning the Geneva International Singing Competition in 1947 she was invited the following year by the BBC in London to take part in studio broadcast performances of Falla's *La vida breve*, an event which aroused great interest and critical acclaim. She then appeared at the Paris Opéra, Covent Garden in London, La Scala in Milan and the Metropolitan, New York, in three successive years from 1949 onwards. She later sang at Bayreuth in 1961 but thereafter began to confine her appearances to the concert hall. Her voice was one of great lyrical beauty and she conveyed infinite tonal contrasts with an unusually warm lower register. She recorded extensively in both opera and song, particularly in the latter area, and Spanish music of many centuries. She continued to appear in concert until her mid-sixties. She can be heard as Nedda in *Pagliacci* (Naxos 8.110258), the title rôles of Massenet's *Manon* (8.111268-70) and Puccini's *Madama Butterfly* (8.111291-2), and Amelia in *Simon Boccanegra* (8.110119-20).

The Trieste-born mezzo-soprano **Fedora Barbieri** (1918-2003) studied in her home town with Federico Bugamelli and Luigi Toffolo, and in Milan with Giulia Tess. In 1940 she made her début at the Comunale, Florence as Fidalma in *Il matrimonio segreto*, then in 1943 married the Director of the Florence May Festival. During the war years she appeared in Poland, Czechoslovakia, Germany, Belgium, Hungary, The Netherlands and Austria. In 1946 she first sang at La Scala, Milan, and the following year appeared at the Colón, Buenos Aires. Her British début was in 1950 as a member of the visiting La Scala Company, London. Barbieri also sang at the Metropolitan, New York, San Francisco and Chicago. Her repertory included rôles such as Dalila, Azucena, Amneris and Eboli. She created Dariola in the première of Alfano's *Don Giovanni di Manara* at the May Festival in 1941 and in 1942 was Telemaco in Dallapiccola's revision of Monteverdi's *Il ritorno di Ulisse in patria*. In Siena that year she sang Giustina in Pergolesi's *Flaminio*, and in 1943 at Cremona, Orfeo in Vito Frazzi's edition of Monteverdi's opera. Her recordings included Amneris in *Aida*, Laura in *La Gioconda*, Azucena in *Il trovatore* and Ulrica in *Un ballo in maschera*, all opposite Maria Callas.

The conductor **Tullio Serafin** (1878-1968) was eleven when he left Venice for Milan to study the violin and viola at the Conservatory and later played in the orchestra of Teatro alla Scala. Having made his conducting début in Ferrara at the age of twenty (under the pseudonym of Alfio Sulterni) directing Donizetti's *L'elisir d'amore*, he soon gained further conducting experience in various other Italian cities before making his début at the Royal Opera House, Covent Garden, in 1907. He became principal conductor at La Scala (1909-1914 and 1917-18). While in Milan, he directed the première of Montemezzi's *L'amore dei tre re* in 1913, as well as the Italian premières of operas by Dukas, Humperdinck, Rimsky-Korsakov, Richard Strauss and Weber, demonstrating the scope of his musical sympathies. Between 1924 and 1934 Serafin was in charge of Italian repertoire at the Metropolitan Opera House, New York. There he conducted the first performances of *Peter Ibbetson* by Deems Taylor (1931), *Emperor Jones* by Louis Gruenberg (1933), and *Merry Mount* by Howard Hanson (1934) and the

American premières of *La vida breve, Turandot* and *Sorochintsy Fair*. Serafin returned to Italy in 1934 to become artistic director and chief conductor at the Teatro Reale in Rome. Here he continued his policy of introducing contemporary operas, conducting new works by Alfano and Pizzetti as well as the first Italian performances of Berg's *Wozzeck*. He relinquished his Roman post in 1943 but continued to conduct throughout Italy, appearing at the Maggio Musicale in Florence and at La Scala in its first post-war season where he was in charge of the Italian première of Britten's *Peter Grimes*. He later appeared as a guest conductor in the major opera houses of Italy and Europe; he also appeared regularly with the Lyric Opera of Chicago between 1956 and 1958. He returned to Covent Garden in 1959-60 to launch Joan Sutherland in the title-rôle of *Lucia di Lammermoor*. Serafin was highly influential in launching the careers of a variety of singers, notably those of Rosa Ponselle and Maria Callas. Tullio Serafin was highly regarded as an operatic conductor for over half a century. He recorded a number of complete operas prolifically from the early 1940s until 1962, especially with Maria Callas but also Renata Tebaldi, Antonietta Stella and Victoria de los Angeles.

Malcolm Walker

Suor Angelica
Synopsis

The scene is set in a convent. On one side between the columns, a cemetery can be seen, on the other the convent garden. In the middle of the stage there is a cross, cypress trees, grass and flowers, with a fountain in the background.

1 It is sunset in spring, and the sisters are heard from their chapel, singing the Ave Maria. They are joined by two late-comers, novices, who fail to do penance, and then by Sister Angelica, who is also late and kneels in penance, before joining in the prayer.

2 The two novices are rebuked by the Monitor and the Novice Mistress for their failure, unlike Sister Angelica, and given penance, which they dutifully accept, before leaving.

3 The Monitor calls on Sister Lucilla to work, and she takes a spinning-wheel and starts to spin. The Novice Mistress explains that it is because she made other nuns laugh in choir. The Monitor then turns to Sister Osmina, who was hiding two roses in her sleeves in choir. Sister Osmina denies it, shrugs and goes to her cell, slamming the door. The Monitor tells the other sisters present to take their recreation. As the nuns disperse, Sister Angelica starts hoeing in the garden and watering the flowers.

4 Sister Genevieve happily draws attention to the sunbeam falling on the garden, to the delight of the other nuns. A novice asks the Novice Mistress the reason for the sisters' joy, and the Novice Mistress tells her that the sun only shines on the garden three evenings in the year, as they leave their evening devotions. The nuns lament the passing of another year and the death of a sister.

5 Sister Genevieve suggests that they take water to the grave of Sister Bianca Rosa.

6 Sister Angelica adds that desires are the flowers of the living, not for the dead, because the Blessed Virgin anticipates desires and grants them; death is a beautiful life.

7 While the Monitor and other nuns deny that they have desires, Sister Genevieve confesses she has the desire, as a shepherdess in the world, to see and nurse a new-born lamb again. Sister Dolcina says that she too has a desire, and the others silence her by suggesting she is greedy. Sister Angelica, when asked, denies that she has any desire, but the sisters whisper among themselves that she must want news of her family; for seven years she has been in the convent with no news, and in the world, according to the Mother Abbess, she had been very rich, a member of a noble family, who sent her to a convent as a punishment.

8 The Nursing Sister hurries in with the news that Sister Clara has been stung by wasps, and Sister Angelica runs to find herbs to soothe the victim's pain,

returning with remedies from the garden.

9 Two alms-collecting nuns appear, leading a donkey laden with produce, nuts, flour, cheese and butter, which they hand over to the Sister Housekeeper. The second nun offers Sister Dolcina red currants, which she shares with the others.

10 One of the begging nuns asks who is visiting the convent; she had seen a grand carriage outside. Sister Angelica questions her, in alarm, asking about the coat of arms and colours of the carriage. The convent bell is heard and the sisters are curious as to who it can be, but Sister Genevieve, in pity, draws their attention to Sister Angelica, and prays that the visitor may be for her, for which Sister Angelica thanks her.

11 The Mother Abbess enters, to call a sister to the parlour, summoning Sister Angelica. At a sign the other sisters withdraw, taking water from the fountain, gilded by the rays of the setting sun, to the cemetery. Sister Angelica asks the Abbess who the visitor is, after her seven years of waiting, prayer and expiation. The Abbess tells her to offer up also the desire she has, and Sister Angelica kneels, regaining control of herself. The voices of the nuns are heard singing the Requiem versets in the cemetery. The Abbess tells her that the visitor is the Princess, her aunt, and that all she may say is heard by the Blessed Virgin.

12 The old Princess, walking with the aid of a stick, enters, regarding her niece coldly and offering her hand to be kissed. She sits, and Sister Angelica kneels before her, beseechingly. The Princess tells her that, left as their guardian by Sister Angelica's mother and father at their death twenty years before, she has divided their estate as she thinks fit, and now needs Sister Angelica's signature on the document.

13 Her sister Anna Viola is to be married to a man who has been willing to overlook the disgrace Sister Angelica has brought on her family. She accuses her aunt, her mother's sister, of being hard-hearted.

14 The Princess challenges her for even a mention of her mother, whose lamenting she seems to feel, as she prays; it is for Sister Angelica to atone.

15 Sister Angelica tells her aunt that she has offered everything to the Blessed Virgin, but one thing she cannot yield, that is her son, the baby taken from her. The Princess does not answer, and Sister Angelica tells the old woman that she will be damned to eternity, unless she speaks.

16 The Princess declares that the boy was ill two years ago and died. Sister Angelica falls to the ground, and it seems for a moment that the Princess will help her, but instead she turns in prayer, rejecting any feeling of pity. The Abbess and Sister Portress enter with pen and ink and Angelica signs the document offered her. The nuns withdraw and the Princess leaves, looking briefly back at her niece, who shrinks from her.

17 Alone, Sister Angelica laments her child's death, a son that she has not been able to hold or show her love; now she wishes only to join him in Heaven.

18 The sisters return from the cemetery and approach Sister Angelica, who must now be happy, they think.

19 Ecstatic, she agrees, as now she can see her goal; the grace of the Blessed Virgin has descended from Heaven. The nuns withdraw. Night has fallen and the moon rises over the cypress trees. Sister Angelica takes a clay jar and gathers twigs, taking water from the fountain and lighting a fire She has skill with flowers, her friends that hide poison; they will reward her with death.

20 Called by her son, she bids farewell to her sisters and to the chapel; for her son she died and will see him again in Heaven.

21 She embraces the cross and drinks the poison from the jar, before coming to herself again, realising that she has earned damnation by her mortal sin; she prays to the Blessed Virgin to save her, and then seems to hear angels interceding for her. The chapel is filled with light.

22 The Blessed Virgin is seen, with a child before her. dressed in white. Angels sing in praise, and the child seems to step forward to Sister Angelica, who sinks to the ground, dying.

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Giacomo

PUCCINI

(1858-1924)

Suor Angelica

Opera in One Act

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La badessa	Mina Doro
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Rome Opera House Chorus and Orchestra

Tullio Serafin

Recorded in June, 1957 in the Teatro dell'Opera, Rome

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Playing Time 56:52

Victoria de los Angeles's performance as Sister Angelica demands superlatives: 'it is in every way perfect, beautifully sung, infinitely touching, and free from the slightest suggestion of theatricality', wrote *The Gramophone* when this recording was originally released in 1958. Indeed, the review praised the entire production: 'it is evident that Tullio Serafin loves this opera: he draws very beautiful playing from the orchestra, secures just the right tempi, and at once establishes the right mood in every scene. The recording allows us to hear all the details of the wonderful orchestral part'. This is by all measures a classic.

Reissue Producer and Restoration Engineer: Mark Obert-Thorn
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