

La GIOCONDA

Opera in Four Acts by Amilcare Ponchielli,
Libretto by Tobia Gorrio (pen name of Arrigo Boito)
based on Angelo, Tyranne de Padoue by Victor Hugo

Ever since its inception the Metropolitan Opera has been unique amongst world opera houses. It has always given its performances in repertory, with performances of different operas each night, and often four or five works in a week. This system was traditionally favoured by many German opera houses, but none, with the possible exception of Vienna, had artists of the calibre the Met could afford. The alternative system of stagione, a single work performed on a number of occasions and then replaced by another, was traditionally favoured by many Italian houses. Repertory or stagione, the Metropolitan also has much longer seasons than most of the world's other companies and until recently it has also given extended tours outside its Manhattan base.

With many of the leading artists available for the entire season, the Metropolitan has been able to build an ensemble and that much is readily evident on listening to this *La Gioconda*. The conductor, Hector (Ettore) Panizza (1875 Buenos Aires - 1967 Milan) clearly plays a key role in this. Although born in the Argentine his family was Italian. He was trained as a composer and pianist at the Giuseppe Verdi Conservatoire, Milan. His works include a cello sonata, a quartet and several operas; one was conducted by Toscanini in Buenos Aires in 1901. His conducting career began in Rome in 1899 and he introduced Elgar's *Introduction and Allegro* to Italy. He conducted for a number of seasons at Covent Garden and was assistant conductor to Toscanini at La Scala in the 1920s. In 1934 he succeeded Serafin as chief conductor of Italian opera at the Metropolitan and gave 134 performances up to 1942. We hear a conductor of ability, experience and vision.

La Gioconda has long been one of the staples of the Metropolitan repertoire. It is fascinating to compare its performance history at Covent Garden with that at the Met. At Covent Garden, just seven performances, the most recent in 1929, but in his *Annals of the Metropolitan Opera*, Gerald Fitzgerald itemizes 267 performances up to 1985 by which date it had also been broadcast on three occasions. The first broadcast, on 30 December 1939, is the one presented here. The cast that night was composed of artists particularly associated with the Met. We realize just how high was the normal standard at the house when we hear this superb performance and then read the slightly acerbic critique by Irving Kolodin, leading historian of the Met.

Giovanni Martinelli (1885? Montagnana - 1969 New York) was on any count one of the very greatest tenors of the century. We know him as perhaps one of the two or three finest exponents on records of the core Verdi repertoire. It is perhaps not surprising that the role of Enzo, with its mixture of beautiful lyricism and sometimes slightly absurd dramatic histrionics, suited him so well. In 32

seasons at the Met, between 1913 and 1946, Martinelli gave 926 performances of 38 roles. His most frequent was Radames in *Aïda*, which he sang on 123 occasions. He was Manrico 69 times and Faust 56. He first sang the role of Enzo at the Met in 1932.

Zinka Milanov (1906 Zagreb - 1989 New York) arrived at the Met in 1937. Ponselle had retired and Rethberg was in vocal decline. Milanov was to become the reigning dramatic soprano in the Italian wing, giving 446 performances of just 14 works. Interestingly, her two most frequent were also *Aïda* and *Il Trovatore* with 75 and 49 performances respectively. However, *La Gioconda* comes next with 41 performances beginning with this 1939 broadcast. It is normal for record collectors to bemoan the lateness of her commercial recording of the role. Certainly by then she could not offer anything to resemble the long, sustained high note at the climax of the Act 1 ensemble which she achieved in 1939.

If none of the other singers is on quite such a high plane, they were all important members of the Met ensemble.

In twenty three years from 1939 to 1962, Nicolai Moscona (1907 Athens - 1975 Philadelphia) appeared on 717 occasions in 35 roles. In opera the bass is often in the opposite position to the tenor in that he is likely to impersonate older characters. In this performance the two youngest artists, Kaskas and Moscona, portray the oldest characters. Moscona's voice is fresh and youthful, but not really sufficiently sinister. Ultimately Moscona replaced Pinza as the Met's leading basso. Alvise was in Pinza's repertoire and he made a late recording of part of the role, but sadly he did not figure in any of the broadcast performances of *La Gioconda*.

Although Bruna Castagna (1908 Bari - 1983 Pinamar, Argentina) made some commercial recordings, she is probably best known to us from some twenty of the Metropolitan broadcasts. She is a fresh voiced and lovely Laura and one can only regret that her Act 2 aria was omitted from the performance, possibly because of constraints on broadcast time. She sang at the Met from 1935 to 1945 giving 167 performances.

Carlo Morelli (1897 Valparaiso - 1970 Mexico City) was the brother of Renato Zanelli. Renato Zanelli had given a small number of performances at the Met as a baritone in the early 1920s. He never sang there as a tenor and died before his brother joined the company late in 1935. In the five years to 1940 Morelli gave 72 performances in 13 roles.

Anna Kaskas (1910 Bridgeport, Connecticut -) was an active member of the Met ensemble, although hardly a leading artist. Between 1936 and 1946 she appeared on 297 occasions in 33 roles, almost all minor, although she did sing Azucena in *Trovatore* on four occasions.

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Sources consulted: Fitzgerald - *Annals of the Metropolitan Opera*
Grove - *Dictionary of Opera*.

Act I: La Gioconda, a ballad-singer, is devoted to her blind mother, La Cieca. Barnaba, a spy of the Inquisition, whose attentions La Gioconda is rejecting, regards her mother as a witch but in any case she loves Enzo.

Enzo is a nobleman who has been banished. As his return to town is illegal, he has disguised himself as a ship's captain. Before his banishment he was engaged to Laura. Now, however, Laura is married to Alvisè, a senior member of the organisation for which Barnaba works. Zuane has been defeated at a sporting event. Barnaba suggests that La Cieca is a witch and, but for her machinations, he would have won.

The crowd takes up this theme, La Cieca finds herself in danger. The seamen, led by Enzo, come to her rescue. At the same moment Alvisè and his wife, Laura, appear at the head of the palace steps. He orders the release of La Cieca. Laura is wearing a mask despite which Enzo recognises her. La Gioconda begs Alvisè's mercy for her mother, at Laura's request she is freed. La Cieca thanks Laura (*Voce di donna*), gives her a rosary and blesses her.

When they meet, Enzo and Laura realise that their feelings for one another are even stronger than before. Barnaba discovers this and sees that it can be turned to his advantage. He will offer Enzo and Laura means to elope (*Enzo Grimaldo*) and he will inform on them to his master, Alvisè. This will undoubtedly result in Enzo's demise which will in turn leave La Gioconda for him. He dictates a letter to Alvisè but he is overheard by La Gioconda who realises that Enzo's love is no longer for her. Barnaba despatches his letter (*O Monumento*). The Act ends with the crowd dancing a *furlana* outside the church whilst inside the chant of the monks can be heard.

Act II: Enzo and Laura have embarked. The crew sings a *marinaresca*. Barnaba disguised as a fisherman in a small vessel nearby, sings, suitably, of a fisher-boy about to lower the net (*Ah! pescator affonde*). Enzo, on his boat, gives instructions to the crew and sings of his great love (*Cielo e mar!*). Laura prays. However, La Gioconda is also on board, tormented, as Enzo's devotion to Laura is obvious. As was operatically bound to happen, the two women meet. They compare vehemently the magnitudes of their loves for Enzo. (*L'amo come il fulgor*). La Gioconda is about to stab Laura but stays her hand as she sees a third boat. It is carrying Alvisè and his guard towards them. Laura prays. La Gioconda recognises the rosary and thus her erstwhile saviour. She effects Laura's escape in a fourth boat, the one by which she herself stole aboard. Enzo comes up on deck. Laura is not there but La Gioconda is. During the ensuing scene between them, it becomes clear that escape is impossible; Enzo sets the boat ablaze.

Act III: Alvisè plans his punishment for the faithless Laura. As Laura enters, a serenade can be heard in the square. She must drink poison; she and the serenade will end together.

Meanwhile, La Gioconda has guessed what will happen and prepared for it. She enters with an identical bottle, but her bottle contains only anaesthetic. Laura drinks and leaves dutifully to lie down on the bier her husband has prepared for her. La Gioconda swaps the bottles over and she also leaves. Alvisè enters, believes himself avenged and he too leaves.

The ballet, customary for a 19th century Grand Opera, is in the form of a ball in Alvisè's palace. The piece, "The Dance of the Hours", is known to millions through its appearance in *Fantasia*, conducted by Leopold Stokowski.

It now transpires that La Cieca and Enzo are also in the house. Barnaba discovers the former who says she has come to pray for the deceased lady. Enzo enquires who has died. The death of Laura is announced. In a very moving concerted number the various participants in the scene express their various emotions. Alvisè draws back a curtain to expose Laura. Enzo's attempt to stab him is prevented by the guards.

Act IV: Laura is brought secretly to La Gioconda. She asks the men who bring her to find her mother. She has promised her hand to Barnaba if he will engineer Enzo's escape, but her despair drives her to contemplate suicide (Suicidio!). She thinks, too, of stabbing Laura. She hears gondoliers discussing the news. It seems that bodies have been found in the canal. Enzo enters, he is livid when he learns that La Gioconda has had Laura exhumed. He makes to stab her and the thought of dying at his hand excites her. However, at this very moment Laura recovers and calls out "Enzo". The serenade to which Laura had drunk what Alvisè thought was poison is heard again in the distance. The gratitude of Laura and Enzo to La Gioconda becomes even greater when she tells them that she has ordered a gondola to take them away. They rejoice as they realise how fortunate it turned out to be that La Gioconda's mother happened to have a rosary on her earlier on.

La Gioconda is left ruminating on her own but not for long, for Barnaba appears. He has kept his side of the bargain and La Gioconda says that she must prepare to honour hers. She goes to the dressing table and starts to adorn herself, but this is only a ruse, for she picks up a knife and stabs herself. Barnaba shouts at her that her mother offended him last night so he strangled her. La Gioconda does not hear him.

The performance has survived on giant studio acetate recordings, each side holds about eighteen minutes of music, but each time it was necessary to change to a new side, some music was lost. Most regrettable for us is the loss of a considerable part of the great duet between La Gioconda and Laura but in any case, this could not have been accommodated on compact disc with no interruption. As noted, Laura's prayer was not sung. The review, from the issue of *Musical America* of January 10, 1940, indicates the standard of performance expected.

Milanov Sings in First 'La Gioconda'

An excellent performance of Ponchielli's 'La Gioconda' was given at the last Saturday matinee of the old year on Dec. 30, a large audience attending and applauding with enthusiasm throughout the afternoon. The performance was further notable on account of the first hearing here of Zinka Milanov in the name part.

Mme. Milanov made an impressive Gioconda and most of her singing was on a high plane. Certainly the voice itself is as fine a soprano as one often hears, but that its owner makes the best use of it cannot be said. If the focus of the high tone when soft, could only be maintained in the loud tones, what a high register this would be! The first act was especially well sung and the sustained high B-Flat on the exit, was excellent. 'Suicidio'! tonally excellent, suffered from some vagaries of tempo. Dramatically, Mme. Milanov was convincing and often gripping.

Mr. Martinelli was in excellent voice and held the audience spellbound during 'Cielo e Mar', earning a furore of applause. His 'Tu sei Morta' in the Finale to Act III, was also beautifully sung.

Mme. Castagna's fine voice sounded admirable in Laura's interesting music, though one regretted the omission of the Prayer in the second act, Anna Kaskas won plaudits for 'Voce di Donna' and Mr. Morelli sang Barnaba's music with the craft and unction it requires and Mr. Moscona was a sonorous Alvisé.

Mr. Panizza conducted skilfully, though he occasionally gave the singers a trifle too much headway in the matter of tempo. The lovely Dance of the Hours showed good individual intention but very bad timing and unimaginative choreography. It was, however much applauded. Solo dancers were Ruthanna Boris, Grant Mouradoff and George Chaffee.

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