

SYMPOSIUM RECORDS CDs 1192 & 1193

LAKMÉ

Opera in three acts by Léo Delibes
Text by Edmond Gondinet and Philippe Gille
Based on *Le Mariage de Loti* by Pierre Loti
First produced at the Opera-Comique, Paris, on 14th April 1883

Delibes' best known opera has enjoyed only an intermittent history at New York's Metropolitan Opera House. It was first given there by a touring company in the spring of 1890 - a single performance in Italian with Patti in the title role. Two years later it entered the repertoire of the resident company, but there were only four performances. It was not given again until the 1906 season when it received a further four performances. Possibly this continued failure is an explanation of the relative slowness on the part of Oscar Hammerstein in mounting a production - it should have been obvious for the Manhattan Opera with its concentration on French works and its contract with Tetrizzini. In fact it was the very last new opera to be mounted at the Manhattan, receiving a single performance in March 1910. The Manhattan's legacy and its commitment to French opera was largely inherited by the Chicago Opera, but *Lakmé* did not enter its repertoire until December 1917, the same year as a further revival at the Metropolitan. In Chicago the role was primarily a vehicle for Galli-Curci, although Pareto also sang it. By 1929 the opera had been performed on sixteen occasions. There were also a few performances by Russell's Boston Opera with Lipkowska.

The opera's change of fortune in New York, indeed in the USA as a whole, can be dated quite precisely to February 19th 1932. Between then and April 7th 1947 the Metropolitan company presented it on 52 occasions. No less than six of these performances were broadcast, including that of January 6th 1940. The first and last performances and the six broadcasts are just eight of the no less than 49 performances which included Lily Pons in the title role. It is as complete an identification of one singer with a particular role as is possible to find in the history of the Met. Once Pons gave up the role, *Lakmé* disappeared from the repertoire. Certainly it was never to be given again at the old Met.

Lily Pons was born near Cannes in 1898 and entered the Paris Conservatoire at the age of thirteen. The first part of her career consisted of concerts and variety performances. According to most sources she was already thirty years old when she made her operatic début at Mulhouse in Alsace as Lakmé, with Reynaldo Hahn conducting. This was followed by various appearances in other French provincial cities such as Bordeaux, Cannes, Grenoble and Toulouse. Around this time she auditioned unsuccessfully for the Paris Opéra. She also made her first recordings for Odéon. The turning point of her career was a meeting with Giovanni Zenatello and Maria Gay immediately after a performance of *Lucia di Lammermoor* in Montpellier. They arranged an audition at the Metropolitan Opera where Gatti-Casazza, without the services of Galli-Curci, lacked a leading coloratura. On January 3rd 1931 Lily Pons made her largely unheralded, but sensationally successful, début as Lucia.

Pons was to become one of the great popular favourites at the Metropolitan. According to one critic her only rival as a box office attraction in the late 1930s was Kirsten Flagstad. In all she gave three hundred performances with the company. Significantly, though, she only sang ten different roles. Of these Lucia was performed the

most frequently - on 93 occasions. She appeared 49 times as Gilda in *Rigoletto*, the same number as in *Lakmé*.

Contemporary accounts and reviews suggest that Pons enjoyed very much greater success with the general public than with the critics. One of the most perceptive of the latter, W. J. Henderson, suggested that one reason for her success was the "astonishing preponderance of bad singing" at the time. "When in such conditions we are made acquainted with a youthful voice, fresh and unspoiled, and a delivery in which fluency and smoothness usually preserve melodic lines we naturally rejoice... Miss Pons has precious gifts. Some day she may be a great singer. She is not one yet." It seems doubtful whether the critics ever accepted any "greatness" but popular perceptions clearly differed. Much of the reason for Pons' success lay in her innate ability to communicate. Throughout her career she knew exactly what she could achieve. Her roles were limited in number and carefully chosen. Her major gift was a sparkling top register almost designed to generate applause when she held a note at the right moment. To this was added theatricality.

It is all too often assumed that coloratura singing is somehow mechanistic and automatic. But Pons did attempt to read behind her roles. Interviewed by the critic, Rasponi, prior to her final Metropolitan appearances in *Lakmé* she offered her interpretation of the opera and the role: "She is doomed from the start... and that is how my interpretation differs now...from the first moment she is a willowy instrument in the hands of her gods. Formerly I built up her character to a series of climaxes, but that was wrong... When Lakmé drinks the juice of the poisonous exotic flower, she is only facing karma and reincarnation."

During the 1930s Lily Pons sang in Buenos Aires, London and Paris, but essentially the USA was her operatic home. Apart from the Metropolitan she appeared regularly in San Francisco. Perhaps the last word should go to Henderson. It is by no means clear from his book, *The Art of Singing*, that he fully appreciated the Pons phenomenon as perceived by the American opera and concert-going public. However, writing just a few weeks after her US *début* he linked her with Adelina Patti and made a trenchant point: "Unconsidered references to famous singers of the past, most of whom have not been heard by those making the references, should be taken with large grains of salt". For fifteen years Pons and Lakmé were synonymous. And not only in New York, for some of her performances with the Metropolitan company were given whilst on tour and she also sang the role with the Chicago and San Francisco companies. In popularising the opera, ultimately to millions through radio audiences, she succeeded where illustrious predecessors in the role, Patti, van Zandt, Tetrazzini, Sembrich, Galli-Curci and Barrientos, had largely failed. After Pons took out US citizenship in 1940 she sang all over the world for American forces and, like Schumann-Heink before her, became a legendary American figure. Both artists also reached a further audience through their films. However, her niche in operatic history is secured above all by her triumphs in *Lakmé*.

The voice of Lily Pons is well known to record collectors. After her early Odéon discs, she recorded extensively for Victor and finally she made a large number of discs for Columbia, many accompanied by her husband, André Kostelanetz. Today they may not be special favourites of more advanced collectors, but they sold in vast numbers at the time.

By way of contrast, the recorded legacy of Armand Tokatyan extends to a few Victors, some rather elusive Vocalions and, finally, some anonymous operatic highlights

issued in various formats most notably on the Camden label. Of Armenian ancestry, he was born in Bulgaria in 1894. His singing career was largely in the USA. He first appeared with the Scotti Opera Company in its final season in 1922 singing Cavaradossi with Scotti himself was Scarpia. Tokatyan joined the Metropolitan the same year and was with the company for twenty seasons, during which time he gave 448 performances, including no less than 118 concerts. In all he sang 38 different roles, almost exclusively light lyrical. However, easily the most frequent role was Turiddu in *Cavalleria Rusticana* which he sang on 50 occasions. He sang the role of Gérald in *Lakmé* just seven times. Tokatyan also appeared elsewhere in the USA, particularly in Chicago, Los Angeles and San Francisco.

Saturday afternoon broadcasts have helped preserve more of Tokatyan's art, particularly in complete performances of *La Bohème*, *Boris Godunov*, *Madama Butterfly* and *Mignon* as well as *Lakmé*. His voice is instantly recognizable. It has a light, rather Slav timbre and he blends well with his partners. Contemporary criticism is hard to find. Given that the other leading tenors at the Metropolitan were Gigli, Martinelli and Melchior, one suspects that Tokatyan may simply have been taken for granted.

We are likely to think of both Pons and Tokatyan as quintessential Metropolitan artists: this was their prime artistic home during the peaks of their careers. Although Ezio Pinza gave more performances with the company than the other two together, 878 in all, he remains one of the truly great international artists. Born in 1892, the onset of his career was in effect held up by the First World War. His first season at a major house was at Rome's Teatro Costanzi in 1919-20 where his most important roles were Padre Guardiano in *La Forza del Destino* and Alvisé Badoero in *La Gioconda*. The lot of the bass is different to that of soprano or tenor. He is likely to sing more frequently and to appear in a wider range of roles. Thus in 1920-1921 he gave 66 performances in eight different operas during a three and a half month period at the Costanzi. The roles ranged from lead roles such as King Mark in *Tristan und Isolde* and Pimen in *Boris Godunov*, down to the Count in *Manon* and the First Nazarene in *Salome*. He was equally busy during his early seasons at La Scala which established his pre-eminence as the number one Italian basso cantante. In the mid-1920s he sang extensively at the Colon, Buenos Aires and also in Rio de Janeiro.

Pinza's Metropolitan career began on November 1st 1926, the rest of those 878 performances were spread over twenty-two seasons. His 52 roles in 48 works cover a vast area of the operatic repertoire, including minor roles such as Timur in *Turandot* and the Grand Inquisitor in *L'Africaine*. He frequently appeared as Ramfis in *Aïda* (77 times) and Colline in *La Bohème* (45). However, the high points were the major bass roles: Mephistophelès in *Faust* (958), Don Giovanni (64) and Boris Godunov (25). He appeared as Nilakantha in *Lakmé* just eighteen times. During these years he still found time to sing elsewhere in the United States and internationally. At the very end of his career he found a new audience in musicals; there are millions of people for whom opera is an obscure, esoteric art and for whom the name Ezio Pinza is synonymous with *South Pacific*.

Not surprisingly, Pinza was frequently featured in Metropolitan broadcasts and again, in a considerable mixture of roles. Of them all, his Fiesco in *Simone Boccanegra* is perhaps the most important. It is a magnificent role for Pinza, and his partners are Martinelli, Rethberg and Tibbett. Nilakantha has a good deal to sing and one major aria, but the role is not one of the most rewarding. Of course Pinza also left an extensive legacy of commercial recordings from all periods of his career. Those made for the

Gramophone Company in Milan and the early Victors are collectors' favourites; they are outstandingly good and mostly not difficult to obtain in original form.

Before leaving the group of singers who perform in this *Lakmé*, a word on George Cehanovsky is almost mandatory. Of course the Metropolitan remains a house for stars, but it produces repertory rather than stagione opera and it does have a permanent company. The lot of most singers in what I term the permanent company is to sing in a host of both minor and mini roles. Cehanovsky is the epitome of the company member. In forty seasons stretching from 1926 to 1966 he gave 2395 performances of 96 roles in 58 different operas. They include Schaunard in *La Bohème* (146), the Surgeon in *La Forza del Destino* (35), Yamadori in *Madama Butterfly* (191) and Marullo in *Rigoletto* (112). He had two roles in *La Traviata*, often singing both in the one performance. He also appeared frequently as Silvio in *I Pagliacci* (61) and just once as Mercutio in *Roméo et Juliette*, and as Valentin in *Faust*.

Wilfrid Pelletier was born in Montreal in 1896 and studied in Paris. He enjoyed a long career at the Met. In 1916 he was already an assistant conductor and then, from 1932 to 1950, chief conductor. During that time he conducted 461 performances of 29 works, with the French repertory uppermost, including *Carmen* (56), *Faust* (57), *Lakmé* (20), *Mignon* (31). He also conducted at Ravinia Park and San Francisco, and he was well regarded as an accompanist.

Today's collectors enjoy many advantages. There are vast numbers of complete recordings including live performances of most operas in the repertoire. As it happens, there are relatively few versions of *Lakmé*; presumably because it is, today, so rarely in the repertoire. Thanks to the generosity of Michael Pinner, this performance of *Lakmé*, preserved on fine acetate recordings, is now available in good sound. This issue, a further example from the treasure trove of preserved Metropolitan Opera performances, goes some way towards explaining the Pons phenomenon and also offers significant contributions to the recorded legacies of Ezio Pinza and the almost forgotten Armand Tokatyan.

Stanley Henig

As always, these notes have drawn extensively on Fitzgerald (ed.): *Annals of the Metropolitan Opera*. Other sources include Jackson: *Saturday Afternoons at the Old Met* and issues of *Record Collector* devoted to Ezio Pinza and Lily Pons.

This 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, a little was lost.

Lakmé is an opera typically French and as such, typically, full of ingratiating melodies. It is immediately enjoyable, it is a little sugary and it is not *Tristan und Isolde*, which may account for the condescension accorded it by some, but then its composer was not trying to write *Tristan und Isolde*.

The name part might have been written for Lily Pons, with her notes in alt and her fiery and totally dependable technique. Undoubtedly it was her star role. She does not pretend to great musical intelligence, the role does not demand that, but she has read the text, which not all singers do, and responds to it.

Tokatyan produces always a beautiful, at times a very beautiful, sound for which one forgives him for seeming, here and there, somewhat heavy of voice. His habit of reaching a high note by way of the semi-tone below, for some a decoration, for others an undesirable expedient, is more than compensated for by his vivid and fervent personification of Gérald; the accent perhaps symbolising that neither he nor, for that matter, the composer accepts the reputed reserve of the British.

Basses alternate endlessly between priests and the Devil. Here Pinza is an imposing priest, his voice as always instantly recognised for what it was: one of the most beautiful and best-schooled on record.

Cehanovsky's voice might be described as neutral; in the sense of being neither particularly likeable nor particularly non-likeable and thus, in the company of the great, prone to attract unfairly adverse criticism. But if his career was confined mainly to secondary roles, it was nevertheless a long career and distinguished for musicianship and intelligence.

3 Prayer is taking place in the temple which Nilakantha, a priest, has built in a beautiful garden for his fanatic observance of the Brahmin religion.

4 He detests the British for occupying his country and outlawing his religion. However, worship continues in secret, Nilakantha travelling to visit adherents.

5 Prayer is again heard in the temple.

6 Lakmé, his daughter, and Mallika, her servant, sing a barcarole as they bathe. Lakmé lays her jewels on a bench and they leave in a boat.

7 & 8 Two army officers, two young ladies and their governess enter. The Orient and its mysteries mean little to them. They enter the garden by breaking through the fence. The garden delights them but Frédéric bids them beware: some of the plants are poisonous and the priest is dangerous, the more so if his daughter is approached. They cannot imagine what it must be like to live cut off from the world in such a place.

Gérald, who has some ability at drawing, accedes to the ladies' desire for him to draw the jewels provided they leave him in peace to do it.

9 From the jewels and whether it could be wrong even to draw them, Gérald turns to speculation about their owner.

10 Lakmé wishes to be on her own to think about her strange feelings; at once sad and happy.

She spies Gérald and calls for assistance but when the servants come she says she wants them to go and look for her father.

11 Had she so indicated, Gérald would have been put to death; now he must go and forget ever seeing her. But Gérald cannot tear himself away and soon realises that his love is reciprocated. She warns him that her father is about to return. He leaves through the broken fence, her father returns calling forth vengeance on the profaners.

12 A bazaar, scrumptious gâteaux, pretty handkerchiefs.

13-19 It is followed by a festival during which beautiful girls dance. An old Hindu and his daughter enter. They are Nilakantha, disguised as a penitent, and Lakmé. Gérald learns from Frédéric that the regiment will move that night. Lakmé thinks that Brahma might just possibly not take a sin by a stranger too seriously. For Nilakantha a sin is a sin. The hardness of his zeal is matched by the tenderness with which he sings of his daughter.

20 Nilakantha expresses his love for his daughter.

1 But he is certain that the intrusion into the sacred precinct was motivated by the beauty of his daughter. She must sing to attract and hence to identify this person; he introduces her to the throng.

2 In her song a sleeping stranger is saved from being devoured by wild beasts of the forest by a maiden who charms them with bells. He awakes and she realises that he is the son of Brahma, Vishnu. She is taken by him to enjoy a life of bliss, both celestial and domestic, and travellers in that area of the forest hear bells even now. Meanwhile back in the market place, to Nilakantha's annoyance nobody has stepped forward.

Lakmé is commanded to sing on. She does, but with little fervour. Suddenly she catches sight of Gérald and after uttering an anguished cry, faints in his arms. Nilakantha assumes correctly that the intruder and Gérald are the same and envisages his destruction during a religious procession later that day.

The crowd thins, soldiers march by and Lakmé is alone with her faithful friend, Hadji. He promises to help her in any way possible.

3 Suddenly Lakmé is joined by Gérald and they declare their love for one another.

4 Lakmé relates that she has a little hut in an unknown part of the forest, there they can live untroubled by the world's judgement of their religious difference.

5 A procession of chanting priests is passing by. Frédéric observes that his friend's obsession with the Hindu girl would be of concern but for the fact that they are to depart that night. But Nilakantha has arranged for Gérald to be stabbed. Lakmé runs to him. He is not severely hurt. She and Hadji are able to remove him to her hut.

6 & 7 The Entr'acte suggests Lakmé soothing Gerald and she sings to him.

8 He awakes, puzzled as to where he is. As he learns of the new life with Lakmé he sings of his happiness. Singing is heard from afar. Lakmé explains that lovers are drinking at a well whose waters convey special benefits; she will bring some of the water for Gérald.

Frédéric has followed the flight of the lovers by traces of Gérald's blood. He uses Lakmé's absence to remind him of their impending departure. In his love for Lakmé his fiancée is forgotten but Frédéric sees that his honour as a soldier still carries weight.

9 Frédéric leaves and Lakmé returns. From the distance a military band is heard. Whatever doubts or daydreams Gérald may have had, he knows he must go.

10 Lakmé, seeing the change in him, quietly eats of a poisonous leaf. When his attention returns to her they drink together the water from the well and swear again their love.

Lakmé tells him, his oath to his regiment is not imperilled as she is dying.

At this moment Nilakantha appears. Lakmé tells him of her lover and that they have drunk of the water of the well.

Gerald cries out as she dies.

Nilakantha's anger is assuaged for Lakmé is now in heaven.

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