Puccini

La Bohème

Sung in German (Munich 1951)

Trude Eipperle (Mimi), Karl Terkal (Rodolfo), Wilma Lipp (Musetta), Alfred Poell (Marcello), Karl Hoppe (Schaunard), Hans-Hermann Nissen (Colline)
Choir and Orchestra of the Bavarian Radio
Clemens Krauss *cond*

Walhall WLCD0047 (2 CDs) Audiophile Remastering Quality, £10.49
24-bit/96 kHz

Puccini was perhaps the first truly international composer. His operas were almost invariably based upon non-Italian literary sources, and he embraced the innovations of foreign composers from Wagner to Stravinsky. His works often gained success abroad more quickly than at home, and several even received their world premieres outside of Italy. Although the financial and personal rewards for Puccini of writing music that would please a worldwide audience were considerable, he was often criticized for turning his back on tradition. Hostility among nationalist critics keen to encourage a distinctive Italian manner of composition reached its peak in the publication in 1912 of Fausto Torrefranca's *Giacomo Puccini e l'opera internazionale*, a vicious attack in which Puccini was accused of writing in a style that cobbled together all the crudest features of modern foreign music and which represented 'the progressive *denationalization* of the Italian lyric theatre'.[1] However, a positive spin was also put on Puccini's 'internationalism': comments such as 'his work knows no borders' were near ubiquitous in his obituaries, and he was depicted by numerous publications as an ambassador of Italian culture abroad, a musical 'imperialist' at a time in Italy's history when overseas expansion was much desired.

For better or worse, then, Puccini was deemed in his own day to speak an international language. Thus, if Puccini's scores were written in what Torrefranca referred to as a musical 'Esperanto', then surely their libretti could be translated without detriment to the spirit of the original? *La Bohème* received its British premiere in Manchester (where Puccini complained bitterly of the smoke, rain and cold) in English, and its first performances in Berlin and Vienna in German. Presumably the audience in Prague who heard the opera for the first time in 1898 thought hearing Parisian students singing in Czech to be no more preposterous than hearing them sing in Italian. Over the next couple of decades *La Bohème* would be performed in languages as varied as Croatian, Finnish, Russian, Rumanian, Swedish, Polish, Hungarian, Slovenian, Lithuanian, Bulgarian, Danish and Lettish, and it would probably not have occurred to Puccini to object. Today, however, performing and recording operas in their original languages has largely become the norm, partly because of our fixation with the idea of 'authenticity', and more pragmatically because of the invention of supertitles.

[1] Fausto Torrefranca, *Giacomo Puccini e l'opera internazionale* (Turin: Bocca, 1912): 24.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1479409800000203 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Moreover, Puccini somehow no longer seems so much of an 'international' composer. Whereas his contemporaries, obsessed with fear of Italy's musical decline, were shocked by the echoes of Massenet and Debussy they heard in his music, these 'outrages' are not so apparent to our ears, after a century in which the mixing of eclectic cultural influences in music has become routine. Nowadays Puccini seems to represent the very essence of Italian opera, at least as it is popularly imagined; suddenly, hearing his music sung in any language other than Italian sounds rather strange.

This is indeed the case with the 1951 recording of *La Bohème* with Clemens Krauss conducting the Bavarian Radio Symphony Orchestra and Choir, which comes from a catalogue of over fifty historic recordings from the 1930s to the 1950s released by the Walhall Eternity label. Many of the recordings in the series are of familiar operas in unexpected languages – *Tosca*, *L'Africaine* and *Eugene Onegin* in German, *Die Zauberflöte* in Italian, and *Lohengrin* in Russian, amongst others. Clearly this is a label that targets niche audiences: the older listener nostalgic to recapture the operatic sound-world of her youth; the scholar interested in mid-twentieth-century German operatic performance practice; the opera fanatic eager to add the umpteenth obscure recording of *Aida* to his collection. A non-German-speaking general listener, however, may find it difficult to overcome the language barrier, especially as no libretto is provided. *La Bohème* is not an opera that works particularly well in translation: in the fast, 'chattering' passages in the garret in Acts I and IV, the Italian flows along effortlessly, whereas the same text in German sounds angular and clumsy, as if there are too many words. (English would sit no more comfortably with this music, and it is difficult to imagine what Lettish would have sounded like.) Matters are made worse by the painfully slow pace at which Krauss conducts the opening pages of the score, just one instance of several rather erratic tempi on this disc. Puccini portrays the energy, carefreeness and *joie de vivre* of youth with incredible vividness in this opera, yet Krauss's rendition captures none of the necessary adrenalin and he achieves the rather difficult feat of making the first scene sound dry, leaden and pedestrian.

The impression that results is of decidedly studious and dull students. The Rodolfo on this recording, Karl Terkal, seems particularly miscast. His voice is powerful and heroic, but sounds slightly mannered and rather old-fashioned to a twenty-first-century listener. All too often he sounds as if he is merely hammering out the notes rather than putting any genuine feeling into the role, a perception that is exacerbated by his tendency to milk the star moments for all they are worth and his attempts to drown out his co-singers. The more impressive the vocal acrobatics – substituting a top B for the G♯ on 'Mimì!' ten bars from the end of the opera, for example – the less convincing the dramatic impact. Rather than rewriting Puccini's score, Terkal would have been better advised to pay attention to matters of pitch, an area in which he is somewhat casual at times. Looked at in another way, however, even this apparent sloppiness is interesting as a record of the performance values of its era, when audiences did not expect the accuracy and precision that we demand from singers today. Likewise, if Terkal's repetition of 'Che gelida manina' seems bizarrely gratuitous and holds up the flow of the dramatic action, it sheds an intriguing light upon contemporary staging practice.

A more sensitive performance is given by Trude Eipperle as Mimì, light-voiced with a richer vibrato on the top notes. Although her voice sounds rather strained at times in Act I, she seems to gain confidence across the course of the opera,

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1479409800000203 Published online by Cambridge University Press

and gives a truly impassioned performance in Acts III and IV. A slight distortion to the purity of the voice reveals the fact that she was in middle age (43) when this recording was made. However, we are able to hear a younger, fresher-sounding Eipperle on this disc in some bonus excerpts from a 1940 Krauss recording of *La Bohème* with the Bavarian State Opera Orchestra and Chorus. At this point, when she was evidently at the height of her talents, Eipperle is paired with Alfons Fügel, a sweeter-voiced and more convincing Rodolfo than Terkal. Their voices blend smoothly, as, somewhat unexpectedly, do those of Eipperle and Wilma Lipp as Musetta on the 1951 recording, to the extent that their voices are hard to tell apart in the ensemble scenes. Often the contrasts in personality between the two female protagonists are matched by a corresponding contrast in vocal tone, but not so here. There have been so many shrill and screeching Musettas over the years that it is refreshing to hear a different interpretation; this strikingly light-voiced Musetta – effortlessly agile and flute-like at the top of her range – is a mischievous young girl rather than the strident tart with a heart that we are accustomed to hearing. Yet Lipp can still act, colouring her voice with a swagger and a laugh in 'Quando m'en vo' and a breathless quality when she arrives with news of Mimì's decline in Act IV.

The overall sound quality on the 1951 recording is rather inconsistent – fairly clean on the whole but with occasional sudden surges of sound, and crackling during the otherwise very moving quartet in Act III. Sometimes the voices are foregrounded; at others they seem curiously set back in the texture. Predictably, the overall orchestral sound is rather harsh compared to what we are accustomed to today, although there are moments where certain details of the orchestration are brought out with wonderful clarity, as if a spotlight has been thrown onto a certain instrument or group. At other moments, however, the limitations of the early-1950s recording technology result in a distorted sound, with voices and instruments merging into an undifferentiated mush at climaxes. The excerpts from 1940 are marred by an almost continuous hissing, which is understandable given the date of the recording but unfortunate given that this recording has the more pleasing and homogeneous cast.

Overall, patchy would be the word that best sums up this disc, both in terms of sound quality and performance. Unsurprisingly it is less easy on the ear than the touched-up recordings of today, and although it has some very beautiful musical moments it cannot rival such celebrated classic recordings as the Jussi Björling and Victoria De Los Angeles version. Nevertheless, it is fascinating as a historical document. During the 1930s and 1940s Krauss conducted at all the major German and Austrian opera houses and was much fêted by the Nazi administration, for whom he made no secret of his support. Krauss's recording of *La Bohème* from 1940 and the not substantially different recording from 1951 both give us a glimpse of what Puccini's music must have sounded like during the Third Reich, when he was the third most popular opera composer in Germany after Wagner and Verdi.[2] Perhaps it is this thought that makes listening to Puccini in German a rather uncomfortable experience.

Alexandra Wilson
Oxford Brookes University

[2] According to statistics of operatic performances in Germany in the 1930s cited in Erik Levi, *Music in the Third Reich* (London: Macmillan, 1994): 192.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1479409800000203 Published online by Cambridge University Press