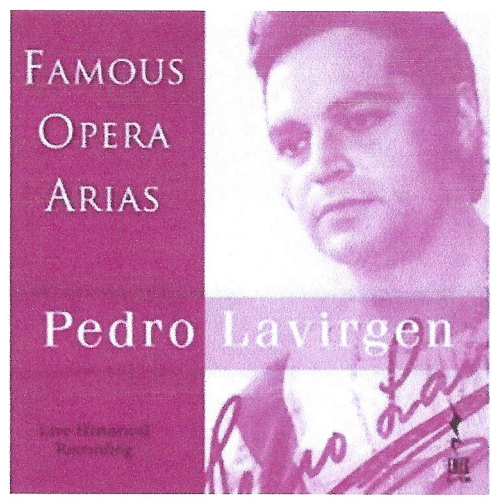


05 September 2013

CD REVIEW: FAMOUS OPERA ARIAS - Pedro Lavirgen, tenor (EMEC E-109)



VINCENZO BELLINI (1801 – 1835), GEORGES BIZET (1838 – 1875), GAETANO DONIZETTI (1797 – 1848), OSMÁN PÉREZ FREIRE (1880 – 1930), UMBERTO GIORDANO (1867 – 1948), AGUSTÍN LARA (1900 – 1970), RUGGERO LEONCAVALLO (1857 – 1919), GIACOMO PUCCINI (1858 – 1924), TOMÁS BARRERA SAAVEDRA (1870 – 1938), and GIUSEPPE VERDI (1813 – 1901): **Famous Opera Arias**—Pedro Lavirgen, tenor, Orchestras and Conductors not identified [Recorded 'live' in various unspecified venues, 1967 – 1978; EMEC Distribución, E-109; 1CD, 70:41; Available from [Amazon](#), [ClassicsOnline](#), and other major music retailers]

Aside from a much-circulated live recording of Verdi's *Aida* prized by collectors because of a rare performance of the title rôle by Jessye Norman, a near-unknown recording of a thrilling Barcelona performance of Montemezzi's *L'amore dei tre re*, a Buenos Aires *Vespro siciliano* opposite Martina Arroyo, and a few *zarzuela* recordings never widely available in North America, the career of Spanish tenor Pedro Lavirgen is little documented on records. Born in Córdoba in 1930, Mr. Lavirgen launched his career, as have many Spanish singers, with performances of *zarzuela*, Spain's unique *género chico*, though it was in Emilio Arrieta's opera *Marina* that he made his professional début as a singer. In addition to great stars of the genre like Leda Barclay who enjoyed little recognition beyond Spain's borders, the great *zarzuela* recordings of the 1950s and 1960s were populated by some of the greatest singers of the 20th Century, recorded at the dawns of their careers: Teresa Berganza, Montserrat Caballé, and Pilar Lorengar, in particular. Among the tenors heard in many *zarzuela* recordings, there were Mr. Lavirgen and the incomparable Alfredo Kraus. Despite the power of his singing and an especially firm, vibrant upper register, Mr. Lavirgen never enjoyed the opportunities in the recording studio that benefited the careers of his countrymen, among whose ranks Plácido Domingo and José Carreras should also be included. Like sopranos whose recording careers could never take flight in the vacuum created by the dominance of the major record labels by María Callas, Renata Tebaldi, and Dame Joan Sutherland, it was Mr. Lavirgen's lot to sing in a time in which, even in its 'Golden Age,' the Classical recording industry could promote and sustain only a limited number of 'star' tenors, and del Monaco, Bergonzi, Corelli, and, later, Pavarotti were already the darlings of the opera-buying public. Fortunately, tapes were rolling when Mr. Lavirgen gave some of the finest performances of his career, and sixteen selections from those tapes are here compiled and reintroduced to the public by Madrid-based EMEC Distribución.

Mr. Lavirgen made an auspicious entry into the international opera arena with an acclaimed portrayal of Radamès opposite the Aida of Antonietta Stella and the Amonasro of Robert Merrill in Mexico City's Palacio de Bellas Artes, to which he returned for a still-discussed production of Puccini's *Turandot* with Birgit Nilsson in the title rôle and Montserrat Caballé as Liù. His sole performance at the Metropolitan Opera was as Cavaradossi in Puccini's *Tosca* in 1968, but his Wiener Staatsoper début as Canio in Leoncavallo's *Pagliacci* inaugurated a long and successful tenure with that house. His Don José introduced him to audiences at London's Royal Opera House in 1975, when his Carmen was Ruza Baldani, and he returned to Covent Garden three years later to sing Pollione to Caballé's Norma. From the time of his 1964 début there in *Carmen*, Barcelona's Gran Teatre del Liceu was Mr. Lavirgen's artistic home: his appearances in twenty seasons at the Liceu convey something of the esteem in which he was held. Statistics of a singer's career are enlightening, but it is the voice that is the proverbial proof of the pudding. The voice heard in these recordings, made between 1967 and 1978, during the best decade of Mr. Lavirgen's career, is a gloriously full-throated *spinto* tenor with an exhilarating upper register, the burly *machismo* of the timbre not reducing the impact of Mr. Lavirgen's more introverted singing. Though there are inevitable concessions to be made owing to the quality of the recorded sound,

which has been remastered by Sean Murray with obvious concern for preserving an accurate reproduction of the voice's timbre, it is wonderful that the selections on this disc were recorded in performance: hearing Mr. Lavirgen's voice more or less as it sounded to audiences in the theatres in which he sang, the listener gains an ever deeper appreciation of the travesty of this singer's recordings being so few.

The disc opens with two Puccini arias, and these selections illustrate the fluidity of Mr. Lavirgen's singing of an Italianate line. The start of 'E lucevan le stelle,' recorded in 1973, is almost startling: the playing of the solo clarinet is so immediate that the instrument seems to be mere inches from the listener. The voice is recorded from a slightly greater distance, but Mr. Lavirgen's performance is gripping. There are little in the way of *pianissimo* effects as the line ascends, but the 'ping' of Mr. Lavirgen's top A is irresistible. So impressive was his singing of 'Nessun dorma' in a 1972 performance of *Turandot* that the audience seemingly demanded—and received—an encore of the aria; seemingly because it is impossible to judge with certainty whether the two performances of the aria, which are contained in a single track, are sourced from a single performance of the opera. Regrettably, the performance sounds as though it was recorded in the Lincoln Tunnel at rush hour. In the principal performance of the aria, the orchestra and chorus are virtually inaudible: in the encore, the orchestra and chorus emerge from the murk with greater clarity. If anything, the encore is the stronger performance of the aria. In both performances, Mr. Lavirgen sings manfully, phrasing idiomatically. He does not linger over the top B in the encore, but he produces the note with far greater ease than many more famous tenors. Here and in all of the Italian selections hints of a Castilian delivery of c's and z's reveal that the singer is not a native Italian, but in every other aspect of his singing Mr. Lavirgen beats most of the Italians among his contemporaries at their own game.

The rôle of Don José in Bizet's *Carmen* was central to Mr. Lavirgen's career, and the 1973 performance of the 'Flower Aria,' 'La fleur que tu m'avais jetée,' offered on this disc gives a glimpse of the singer in one of his best parts. The last word in French stylishness is not spoken in Mr. Lavirgen's singing of the 'Flower Aria,' but his diction is generally good. Contrary to Bizet's instructions in the score, the aria's climactic top B-flat is taken in full voice, and Mr. Lavirgen's Don José is seemingly almost as martial in making love as in making war, but the strength and security of the voice cannot be dimmed by slight stylistic concerns.

One of the highlights of Mr. Lavirgen's American career came in 1969, when he partnered the indomitable Magda Olivero in Cilèa's *Adriana Lecouvreur* in Hartford, Connecticut. A recording made from the audience occasionally circulates, and it is evident through the atrocious sound that Ms. Olivero was on blazing form and that Mr. Lavirgen kept pace with her. The legitimacy of Mr. Lavirgen's *verismo* credentials is verified by the sterling performances on this disc of 'Vesti la giubba' from Leoncavallo's *Pagliacci* (1973) and the 'Improvviso' ('Un di all'azzurro spazio') from Giordano's *Andrea Chénier* (1972). Mr. Lavirgen's laughter in 'Vesti la giubba' is rather stagey, but he thankfully does not mar the performance with Gigli-esque sobs. In fact, Mr. Lavirgen maintains a firmer line than many singers manage in the piece. In Chénier's 'Improvviso,' he perfectly conveys the rhapsodic nature of the music and again rises to top notes with rapturous confidence.

As might be expected of a gifted *spinto* tenor with charisma and a voice of Mediterranean exuberance, the operas of Verdi provided Mr. Lavirgen with some of his most memorable portrayals and greatest triumphs. The technique that he developed during his youthful work in *zarzuela* enabled him to maintain the flexibility of the voice while also fully exploring its capabilities in heavier repertory, clearing the way to amassing wide experience in the Verdi canon. Mr. Lavirgen's singing of 'Celeste Aida' in a 1973 performance is as ardent as could be desired, though there is no *diminuendo* on the rock-solid final high B-flat. Recorded in the same year, his singing of Otello's 'Niun mi tema' bristles with the horror of an enraged man who is awakening to the fact that he has murdered his own wife. Historically, Mr. Lavirgen is not a meek Otello, but his vocalism soars. From 1970 come performances of two of the Duca di Mantova's melodically prodigious numbers from *Rigoletto*, 'Pami veder le lagrime' and the inevitable 'La donna è mobile.' There is genuine tenderness in Mr. Lavirgen's approach to 'Pami veder le lagrime,' which is inflected with subtlety and crowned with a superb interpolated top B-flat. 'La donna è mobile' is buoyantly phrased, one of the finest, most insouciant expressions of the Duca's chauvinistic *credo* ever recorded; and of course the coda is capped with a starburst of a top B. Macduff's 'Ah, la paterna mano' from a 1973 *Macbeth* is shaped by an emotional directness that is quite moving. Mr. Lavirgen's finest achievement among the Verdi selections is his 1975 performance of Alvaro's 'O tu che seno agli angeli' from *La forza del destino*. This scene calls forth the best of Mr. Lavirgen's artistry, the muscular masculinity of his singing giving way to a very appealing simplicity of approach. Though many musicologists argue that Verdi laid *bel canto* to rest in *Luisa Miller*, elements of *bel canto* are present in his later operas as surely as they are in *Oberto*, *Un giorno di regno*, and *Nabucco*. Mr. Lavirgen taps the vein of *bel canto* that flows in Alvaro's music, and he shows himself fully capable of matching the refulgence of his voice with genuine, open-hearted dramatic insights.

The true *bel canto* that so influenced Verdi might seem slightly strange territory for Mr. Lavirgen, but his mastery of the music of Bellini and Donizetti is revealed by performances of scenes from *Norma* and *Lucia di Lammermoor*. Recorded in 1978, Mr. Lavirgen's performance of Pollione's aria 'Meco all'altar di Venere' and cabaletta 'Me protegge, me difende' is appropriately chest-thumping. Unlike most tenors who sing the rôle in staged performances, he does not omit the top C that Bellini included in the aria, firing it into the theatre like a rocket, and he duplicates the note at the end of his pulse-quickening account of the cabaletta. Edgardo's 'Tombe degli avi miei' throbs with the pain of a man who has lost his beloved, and the anguish that Mr. Lavirgen expresses in his performance is heartbreaking. Mr. Lavirgen is not the unimpeachable *bel canto* stylist that his countryman Alfredo Kraus was, but he sings these selections with unflinching commitment and laudable efforts at *legato*.

Mr. Lavirgen's career began in the *zarzuela* repertory of his native Spain, so it is fitting that the final three selections on the disc are devoted to music in Spanish. Agustín Lara's over-familiar 'Granada' has become hackneyed thanks to the mindless performances of virtually every singer with the ability to sing it. Mr. Lavirgen sings the song with such abandon and unapologetic

sentiment, as though his voice is received not merely by his own body but by the very soul of *España*, that any doubts about the artistic merit of the song or its inclusion on this disc are swept aside. The gorgeous 'Adiós, Granada' from Tomás Barrera Saavedra's *zarzuela Los Emigrantes* also receives a monumental performance, the *flamenco*-like figurations in the vocal line executed by Mr. Lavirgen with brio. Osmán Pérez Freire's breezy '¡Ay, ay, ay!' was memorably recorded by Peruvian tenor Luigi Alva. The song is typical of Argentina rather than Spain, but Mr. Lavirgen sings it as if to the manner born, the music receiving from him a sunny, quicksilver performance.

One of the greatest misfortunes in opera today is that the legacies of so many superb singers either are already or are daily journeying steadily more towards being forgotten. Sadly, opera is not subject to the aphorism that suggests that an ignorance of history dooms the ill-informed to repeat it. Great artists are not born of neglect of the past, and the young soprano who has never heard the voice of Claudia Muzio will not achieve that legend's brilliance via the turning of some miraculous cycle. Originality is a worthy quality in an artist, but how is originality measured if there is no cognizance of what has come before? This disc is a potent reminder of how significant the artistic legacy of an overlooked singer can be. Thankfully, Pedro Lavirgen enjoyed the major career on the world's stages that his electrifying voice deserved. This release does not redress the neglect of this marvelous singer by major record labels, but it contributes to the discography an awesome example of some of the finest tenor singing of the 20th Century. The listener who spends seventy minutes with this disc will have nothing to say but, ¡Muchas gracias!

Posted by Joseph Newsome at 02:02 

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4 comments:

 James Forrest said...

Had I known Mr. Newsome was preparing this feature, I would have provided him a fine IL TABARRO from Caracas, Spring of 1974. The tenor is a rousing, ardent lover and plays well with colleagues Gilda Cruz-Romo and baritone Anselmo Colzani. Sadly, I cannot advise readers where they might obtain this item.

September 5, 2013 at 7:47 AM



Joseph Newsome said...

In fact, I have heard 'bleeding chunks' from that TABARRO, along with several other performances featuring Mr. Lavirgen which I did not mention in my review because of their sporadic-at-best availability. It is likely that the TABARRO turns up from time to time on the unsanctioned download sites, I daresay. Thanks for reading!

September 7, 2013 at 12:18 AM

Jim Byrne said...

At the start of my opera going career I heard Lavirgen in Dublin. He sang the Duke of Mantua And Andrea Chenier in one season and Don Jose a year or two later. These were in the Gaiety Theatre for the Dublin Grand Opera Society. The operas were recorded and broadcast by Radio Eireann (now RTE). I wonder are there master copies still in the RTE Music Archive.

I have 2 commercial LPs by Lavirgen:

"Gala en la Opera con Pedro Lavirgen" (Hispavox 530 40 3133 1)

"Pedro Lavirgen dal vivo al Teatro Comunale di Bologna" (Bongiovanni GB 2)

November 18, 2013 at 10:48 AM



Joseph Newsome said...

Thank you so much for these observations, Mr Byrne. I had hoped that the success of the RTÉ release of a recording of the concert performance(s) of Balfe's *Faust* would lead to further releases of concerts and Dublin Grand Opera Society (the *Emani* from which source remains a personal favorite of mine) from the RTÉ archives. Perhaps, when the global economy is on sounder footing, this might still be the case. Who can say, too, how much of the extensive Hispavox catalogue might eventually find new life on boutique labels? Thanks again for your comments and for reading *Voix des Arts*!

November 18, 2013 at 12:07 PM

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