

## Canadian Voices

by Nicholas Atkinson

Canada has always been well represented in the international operatic league tables. Edward Johnson, born in Guelph, Ontario, sang at the Metropolitan Opera and eventually became its director. His name is on the music building at the University of Toronto. Ben Heppner has just retired; Jon Vickers has just died. Both were the leading heldentenors of their times. Maureen Forester and Louis Quilico had long and distinguished careers, and the present crop of international stars from Canada seems to grow larger with every passing year. When you consider that opera productions on any serious scale have only been presented in Canada for about fifty years and that the first proper Opera House was built in Toronto only a dozen years ago, it seems remarkable that the vocal talent here is, and has been, so deep and widespread. At the National Arts Centre we have been lucky to perform alongside all of the great singers I've just mentioned, and many more besides. However, there are three great singers from the past that I would love to have shared the stage with. They happen to have been first-class artists who, for one reason or another, are not as well remembered today as they ought to be. They are Lois Marshall, Leopold Simoneau and James Milligan.

At least I was lucky enough to hear Lois Marshall in recital at the National Arts Centre back in the mid-seventies. She was still in fine voice, and, despite having heard some great singers in my lifetime, I can still remember what a wonderful sound she made in such a cavernous hall. It seems obvious, but sound is really important for any musician. There are many virtuosos, but it's the character and quality of the sound that sets the great ones apart from the rest. My first exposure to her singing came from the famous recording of Mozart's *Abduction from the Seraglio*, recorded in the early 1950s with Sir Thomas Beecham conducting. Remarkably, given the plethora of vocal talent available during that golden age, two of the principals on the recording were Canadian: Lois Marshall and Leopold Simoneau. Here she is, singing the famous showpiece aria, *Martern aller Arten*.

Lois Marshall's voice was a beautifully clear lyric soprano, but her range was considerable—she even performed the *Queen of the Night*—and later in her career sang songs arranged for mezzo-soprano. Even on the high notes her voice remains full and round, and the projection is remarkably efficient, every note a pearl, so to speak, and the long runs are well managed. A lot of singers, sopranos included, have difficulty maintaining an even colour throughout their range, and tend to get a bit tight and squeaky at the top end and chesty at the bottom. It's a tribute to Marshall's vocal training that her sound is always under control and well projected; so it's not surprising that the great Toscanini, who knew a thing or two about singers, invited her to sing *Missa Solemnis* in New York when she was still quite young.

Another aria from *The Abduction from the Seraglio* is *Traurigkeit ward mir zum Lose* (Endless grief is now my portion). It shows Marshall at her dramatic best. Her voice has plenty of colour and power, not to mention incredible control in the long phrases and softer dynamics. It's worth mentioning that

emotion in Mozart is less flamboyant than Puccini or Verdi; so the singer has to project anger, sorrow or joy with more subtlety, and within a more restricted orchestration. Nevertheless, with a singer of Marshall's calibre, it works.

It was a miracle that Lois Marshall ever became a professional singer. Born in 1924, she contracted polio as a young child, and, although she recovered, and managed to walk with leg braces, she was not mobile enough to get through opera productions. Much of her career involved non-operatic singing, including oratorios and recitals, although, as we have heard, she was able to make operatic recordings. Her most frequent accompanist, originally her coach and later her husband, was Weldon Kilburn. Here they are together performing the English folk song, Drink To Me Only With Thine Eyes.

I think you'd have to go a long way to hear that song sung any better. The apparent simplicity is achieved only through a complete control of vocal technique. I think if Lois Marshall had been more of an opera star she would have made many more recordings and be better remembered today. Still, she had a long and varied career, which included a substantial amount of teaching. By all accounts she gave generously of her gifts and experience, and deserves her place in the pantheon of great singers.

Leopold Simoneau, born in 1916, died in 1996. A long life: and well lived. He was certainly one of the greatest lyric tenors of all time, and can be spoken of in the same breath as John McCormack and Tito Schipa. He was, in many ways, their natural successor, and performed many of the same roles. It's always a treat to hear fine singing that never goes beyond the boundaries of good taste. No sobbing, squealing, or yelling: just a continuous stream of beautiful sound, effortlessly produced. Listen to Mozart's Dalla sua pace from Don Giovanni, and judge for yourself.

One of the advantages of being a fan of vocal music, especially a broad-minded fan like me, is that it's possible to love many kinds of sounds. You don't want to eat the same food all the time; so why listen to the same singers? Tenors come in many shapes and sizes. The old stereotype, still to be found, is sometimes nasty, occasionally brutish and frequently short. The great ones, however, have beautiful voices; so other traits become less important. My own favourite tenors are Caruso, Melchior, Bjorling, Corelli, Bergonzi, Di Stefano, Wunderlich, McCormack, Schipa, Domingo and Simoneau. I've probably left a few out. It's such a long list that the word "favourite" loses its meaning. They all have readily identifiable sounds, coupled with consummate vocal artistry; so what's not to like? There's an interesting story involving a discussion between two great actors, Laurence Olivier and Dustin Hoffman, who were both appearing in the movie *Marathon Man*. Hoffman was trying to appear exhausted, dishevelled and generally at the end of his tether emotionally, in order to prepare for a particular scene. He helped things along by not sleeping, washing or shaving for a couple of days. When Olivier commented on his scruffy appearance Hoffman explained his method. Olivier then suggested: "Why don't you just act?" It's a great story (I hope it's true), and it brings me, in a roundabout way, to Leopold Simoneau. When you hear his voice you are drawn immediately to the fact that he is just singing. There is no dramatic striving, artifice or unnecessary fuss. It just seems so natural, and you want to hear more. Here's some more.

Like all Canadian singers of his generation, and even the present generation, Simoneau found few opportunities to practice his art in Canada, but enjoyed a remarkable international career, working with the best singers and conductors of his time. One of his frequent partners was his wife, Pierrette Alarie. They also made a lot of recordings together, and after a fairly early retirement from the operatic stage, they taught for many years, first in San Francisco and finally in Victoria B.C. Victoria has produced a number of fine singers in recent years. I don't think it's just because the golf courses are open all year round.

Not surprisingly, Simoneau performed a lot of French opera. Here is a fine example of his scrupulous art, *Elle ne croyait pas*, from Mignon.

Too many opera fans, especially tenor fanatics, seem to prefer the can belto type of tenor, exemplified by Mario Del Monaco or by Pavarotti at his worst. In his youth Pavarotti had a beautiful lyrical voice and exquisite diction, but later on he became almost a caricature of himself. Light lyric tenors like Simoneau have their own repertoire, perhaps not so flashy, which requires a vocal intelligence that often seems to elude their more powerful colleagues. Simoneau was a class act, and deserves to be remembered among the greats.

My third singer, baritone James Milligan, will be unfamiliar to most listeners. He was born in Halifax, Nova Scotia, in 1928, and died, tragically young, in Basel in 1961. Within about ten years the musical world lost Dinu Lipatti, Kathleen Ferrier, Guido Cantelli, Dennis Brain, and James Milligan. If you wonder why Milligan deserves to be included in such exalted company, listen.

I have a special love for this particular recording of *Messiah*, made in the late 1950s with Sir Malcolm Sargent conducting. Milligan is in resplendent voice, and the trumpet soloist, Alan Stringer, was born about a mile up the road from me, although we have never met. Nowadays musicologists turn up their noses at the Church of England style *Messiahs*, performed with large forces and little, if any, vocal ornamentation. But the solo singing on this recording is exceptionally fine and the Huddersfield Choral Society is a first-class choir. I appreciate the importance of accurate performance practice, and understand, up to a point, the musical zealots who insist upon the period instruments, herky-jerky rhythms and ornaments so much in fashion today, but to me, the wonderful melodies written by Handel, that most vocal of composers—Italian-trained, don't forget—are often spoiled by too many dotted rhythms which are hard to sing without chopping up the vocal line. A little bit of string tone colour is OK too. Go on. Call me old-fashioned. The next selection from *Messiah* is dedicated to anyone who may disagree!

James Milligan's rise to international fame was meteoric. He studied in Toronto, and began his career there, often alongside Lois Marshall, who was only four years older. He was a soloist with the Mendelssohn Choir and performed operas in Toronto before the formation of the Canadian Opera Company, most famously as *Scarpia* in *Tosca*. He moved to England for more opportunities, and quickly became a leading baritone in oratorio, at Glyndebourne and in the many high quality Gilbert and Sullivan productions and recordings made at that time. He made his debut at Bayreuth as the Wanderer in *Siegfried*, and became a member of the Basel Opera: all this by the age of thirty-two. But Milligan had

a chronic heart condition, and knew he was living on borrowed time. He died in Basel at the age of thirty-three. He was, as the few recordings testify, a magnificent singer. By all accounts he also had a powerful stage presence and could have become one of the great singing actors of his generation. If he were singing today he would certainly give Bryn Terfel a run for his money.

Here's an example of Milligan's lighter side, as the Pirate King in *Pirates of Penzance*.

As always, these podcasts are designed to encourage the curiosity of listeners. The three singers I've chosen to put on show today deserve to be better known and celebrated for their art. If you hunt around you'll find more examples, which will lead you to other singers. It's a most enjoyable quest.