

ETTORE BASTIANINI IN DALLAS

by Bill Park for a Music Magazine

May 7, 1955 (Metropolitan Opera on tour in Dallas, Texas)

Saturday afternoon I was back in the theater to experience for the first time the joys of ANDREA CHENIER. I had, of course, heard the broadcast performance and enjoyed it, but that scarcely prepared me for what I experienced. In all my years of opera going a few performances stand out as "supreme". You never know when they will happen, but you certainly recognize them when they do occur and remain grateful always to have been part of the "experience". The first indication that this afternoon was going to be something special was the first appearance of the Italian baritone, Ettore Bastianini. He was a very handsome man with wonderful stage presence. In addition he possessed a rich, darkly colored voice that was completely individual and recognizable in timber. Up until that afternoon, Leonard Warren had been my "ideal" of how a baritone should sound and in many ways he was just that. But the sound that Bastianini produced was sensuous and compelling, not just beautiful and effortless, though it was both of those also. He received a tremendous ovation for his first aria, and indeed I had never heard anything like it. Then came Richard Tucker at the absolute zenith of his powers and sang an "Un di all'azzurro" with vocal eloquence that I remember to this day. Once again the performance was stopped by applause. In Act 2 Milanov and Tucker sang the great duet with vocal "gold" and the electricity in the audience continued to build. Bastianini was absolutely glorious in Act 3, singing "Nemico della patria?" with such dramatic fervor, such richness of voice that one scarcely dared to breath. Clearly this was baritone singing of the absolute "first clas". Then it was Zinka Milanov's turn to "steal the show" with a wonderfully dramatic, beautifully phrased "La mamma morta" that absolutely broke your heart and thrilled at the same time with the beauty of that great voice at its very best. The vocal range was from a delicate pianissimo-just a thread of tone to the full cry of anguish. What an ovation she had. Act 4 began well with Tucker delivering a fine "Come un bel di" and steadily built toward that exciting climax beginning "Vicino a te". By the time the two lovers concluded that grand duet with "Viva la morte insieme" and the great chords of the orchestra crashed with that dramatic conclusion, we-the audience-had been completely overwhelmed with the drama and great music making. Almost as a "unit" the audience immediately rose to its feet, shouting bravos and applauding wildly. There was a surge of humanity toward the footlights, and the ovation continued for many minutes...truly one of the most thrilling experiences I have ever encountered. Treasure times like this. They don't happen often!! I was as exhausted as if I had sung myself!

That afternoon I had first seen and met Bastianini at the third intermission. He was outside the auditorium near the dressing rooms, still in costume. (I have a snapshot of

him, very seriously signing autographs.) In spite of the huge ovation he had received, he was quiet and reserved but very gracious. He spoke little English at this time-or at least was not comfortable with the language-so he said very little. Amusingly enough, the critic for the Dallas News, John Rosenfield in reviewing the performance gave only a so-so review to Bastianini. He had so much “protest” the following day that he wrote another article, saying that he was obviously wrong in his evaluation of the young Italian baritone, and setting the “record” straight. First and only time I ever knew Rosenfield to retract anything! In spite of the fact that all three singers were in fantastic voice, Bastianini’s sumptuous voice and vocal acting remain for me the highlight of the afternoon. I am still inclined to think “Carlo Gerard” was Bastianini’s finest role and doubt that anyone ever sang it better than he.)

May 11, 1957 (Met on tour in Dallas, Tx.)

La Traviata I looked forward to this performance with great anticipation for two reasons – my second opportunity to hear “my favorite”, Ettore Bastianini and my first time to hear Tebaldi “in the house”. I was not disappointed by either. I must begin by saying that Giorgio Germont is not my favorite baritone role at all, though I love the opera. It is also not my favorite role for EB. But...The opera had been given a new production for Tebaldi this season. It was not an attractive production at all. Warren had sung the Germont role at the first performance in New York, otherwise we had the “first cast with Campora, Tebaldi, Bastianini & Cleva, conducting. (I was thrilled to have EB rather than LW.)

Tebaldi’s voice was clearly not a “first act” voice though she sang the “Ah fors’è lui”. (Hers was a gigantic voice with a rich, creamy sound in these days.) It was the second act that was incredible. I believe that Tebaldi must have been “conducting” rather than Cleva as the tempo was extremely slow. But to hear the voice of Tebaldi and Bastianini in the great duets beginning “Dite alla giovine” was something to remember. To begin with, the voices complemented one another beautifully and the legato singing by both was sublime. I sat hardly daring to believe my ears, trying to breathe as the singers did. I must have been turning quite “purple” from lack of oxygen in the process! Bastianini’s sound was like a great cello, with tone so smooth, even and beautiful in color. They made a very sympathetic “picture” together on stage. The audience seemed to be holding its collective breath also, but there was a storm of applause at the conclusion of the duet. Bastianini sang a broadly phrased and eloquent “Mio figlio...di provenza il mar” to his “son”-incredibly beautiful and moving. Again, singing to be remembered!

I had seen Bastianini talking outside to Rudolf Bing before he went in to the theater. He seemed is a more jovial mood than he often was as he spoke to his “Boss”. After the performance, I went, of course, to his dressing room along with a “crush” of other “fans” For a quick “visit”.

Lucia di Lammermoor - Dallas Opera, Nov. 6 & 8, 1959

For these performances, Dallas borrowed the production/costumes that Zeffirelli had created for Covent Garden (when Joan Sutherland became a “star”!). Zeffirelli was in Dallas to direct these performances. (These were the glorious days when FZ did not “over-do” everything, but created really wonderful productions.) Callas was possibly experiencing the most difficult time of her life (up to that point) at this time and only arrived in Dallas in time for the final rehearsal. Gianni Ramondi and Nicola Zaccaria were in the cast with Rescigno, of course, conducting. The first act opened and we first saw Bastianini standing in front of a large fireplace in the castle. (Beautiful set.) EB had a tartan “scarf” (maybe there’s a better word for it) over his shoulder, and looked really wonderful in the costumes. His opening aria, “Cruda, funesta smania” was absolutely magnificent! The voice was in absolutely prime condition and he made the drama of the aria something to remember, almost frightening in its delivery. I will say that it was the finest bit of baritone singing that I ever experienced in the opera house. (And he sang it just as well the second performance as he had the first.) I still see this magnificent stage picture in my mind and hear the sound of that voice. Never let anyone tell you he couldn’t act! It was obvious from her first notes that Callas was in serious trouble, vocally the first evening. (Raimondi was excellent.) She did not play “safe” and avoid the high notes, but several of them “cracked” in a way that I have never heard in the opera house. (Fortunately the one at the conclusion of the “Mad Scene” became part of the “drama” as she sank to the floor. She was said to have been furious with herself, saying “I had that note” and proceeded to prove it in the dressing room. I didn’t see her afterwards that night.) In the second act duet with EB, Callas seemed to be pleading with EB those large eyes of hers as if to say, “Please don’t hold on to the high notes, let’s just get through this.” He was a complete gentleman, but it must have been difficult since he was in such stunning voice. No high note trouble from him. The Sextette was memorable from all, once again with EB taking full honors. Callas, of course, sang the role well, but this was clearly not her night. At the second performance, she cut all the high notes-no shattered E-flats in this performance! So it was more “careful” from her standpoint-moving, but not my favorite Callas role anyway. (My ears were still too attuned to Lily Pons & Roberta Peters in that music.) But these are still very memorable performances from almost every standpoint. And certainly the best I ever heard EB sing. (I recall how disappointed I was when I heard the complete recording with Scotto...not that he didn’t sign his big aria well in that recording. It was just not the sensation that the live performances were.

Il Barbiere di Siviglia – Dallas Opera, Nov. 12 & 14, 1959

Teresa Berganza had originally been the scheduled Rosina, but because she was expecting a baby, she had to bow out. Then Callas agreed to sing the role. The Callas

said she did not want to sing the role again-probably due at least in part to the personal crisis she was facing. So Eugenia Ratti was brought in. She was charming in appearance and Zeffirelli costumed her attractively (see the picture in the EB book). It was not a great voice, but she was attractive and clever and she sang capably.. The real surprise was Bastianini. Figaro is as far removed from his personality as any role that I can imagine. (He was a very “reserved” gentleman.) But he skipped and jumped around as if he were having the time of his life and sang a wonderful Figaro in the process. Of course, he had the most of his big aria but also the duet with Rosina etc. He was sly, he was charming, he was funny-all the qualities that make up a first class “Figaro”. And that voice... He sang as well as he did in Lucia-which is to say at his very best. I think he also liked playing opposite Miss Ratti. You will note the pleased look in his eyes in the photo. It was great fun getting to visit back stage after all these performances. From a personal standpoint, “Barbieri” is not in my top 10 favorites, but those were excellent EB performances.

Lucia di Lammermoor – Dallas Opera, Nov. 16 & 18, 1961

Same production; new Lucia... Joan Sutherland had, of course, made her US debut the season before in Alcina in a “blockbuster” Zeffirelli production. I shall never forget the high note at the end of “Let the Bright Seraphim” which fairly “bounced” off the walls of that large auditorium and lighted the entire theater. Something of absolute incredible beauty. She had also sung Donna Anna in the FZ production of Don Giovanni with no less than Elisabeth Schwarzkopf as Donna Elvira. ES’s was a performance that remains memorable after all these years. She was the star!! And looked so beautiful in the FZ costumes. Luigi Alva was an excellent Ottavio (and a very charming man), Eberhard Waechter was the Don and Giuseppe Taddei the Leporello. JS sang Anna probably better than anyone else in years. So these were performances to remember. I had attended the dress rehearsal which lasted so late-primarily because the massive sets were so difficult to manipulate-that I couldn’t imagine how it could possibly all come together for the performance, but it did. Sorry for the “aside” back to the Lucia performances... EB and the sets looked just as great as they had in the earlier performances and he was in good voice, but clearly there was something “missing”. (It would have been wonderful had I not had the earlier performance for comparison.) This is when I asked the question following the performance. Sutherland sang wonderfully well-in fact I doubt that anyone had ever sung the music better, but clearly she didn’t have the stage “electricity” that Callas had-even in “poor” voice. EB responded to my rather impertinent question quite honestly, “Callas always inspired one to give his best”. I suppose we had visited with one another enough by this time that he didn’t mind my asking a frank question, nor did he “hold back” with a truthful answer. Truthfully, these were excellent performances though Cioni did not sing as well as had Raimondi. By the way, a certain young tenor, Placido Domingo, sang the role of Arturo. I am sorry to say that I would never have imagined his

later success. (Even after I saw him opposite Lily Pons in her farewell Lucia performances, I still wouldn't.) I drove EB back to his hotel after one of the performances, likely the last, never dreaming that this would be the last time I would hear in person or visit with my favorite baritone singer. I have never wavered in my "support". He's still my favorite!

By the way, on another subject-The final 6 selections on the recent King CD of Italian Songs had been a great mystery. I had had them on tape for years, but no one seemed to know the source. Because the voice was in such fine sounding estate, they were presumed to be much earlier. It is wonderful that at this late date he could sing as well as he did-after all the treatments, and the mental anguish he had to be going through. He obviously was happy in these performances in Japan. Oh, this lovely and kind man-such a sad finale.