

Montserrat Caballe – Puccini Arias (1990)

Written by bluesever

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01. Turandot - *Signore, ascolta!* 02. Turandot - *Tu che di gel sei cinta* 03. Madama Butterfly - *Un bel di vedremo* 04. Madama Butterfly - *Tu, tu piccolo iddio! (Death of Butterfly)* 05. Manon Lescaut - *In quelle trine morbide* 06. Manon Lescaut - *Sola, perduta, abbandonata* 07. Gianni Schicchi - *O mio babbino caro* 08. Tosca - *Vissi d'arte* 09. La Boheme - *Mi chiamano Mimi* 10. La Boheme - *Donde lieta usci (Mimi's Farewell)* 11. Le Villi - *Se come voi piccina* 12. La Rondine - *Chi il bel sogno di Doretta* London Symphony Orchestra Sir Charles Mackerras - conductor

For the sheer pleasure of enjoying one of the most beautiful soprano voices ever, this disc is hard to beat... This may not be the best operatic recital on disc but it definitely enters the finals.

Having made her debut at the Basle Opera in Switzerland in 1956 as Mimi, Montserrat Caballé went on to sing at several other opera houses including the Vienna State Opera and La Scala. However it was not until 1965 that her great breakthrough came in New York, where she sang Lucrezia Borgia with the American Opera Society. It was “a smashing success”. After that she conquered the operatic world. Recordings, both complete operas and recitals, were released in a never-ceasing stream. The current anthology appeared on LP in 1970 when she was at the height of her powers. The booklet and the jewel-case give 1987 as the publication year, which refers to its first release on CD. This was quite early in the Compact Disc era and there is a metallic edginess to the sound that afflicts both the voice and the orchestra – typical of early transfers to the new digital medium. This can be tamed and once the appropriate settings have been found one is in for practically unalloyed listening pleasure.

Caballé's trademarks included her ravishing pianissimo, her velvety tone in the mid-register and a ringing top that was powerful enough to allow her to sing even dramatic roles. Among her early parts in Vienna was Salome. She was a great Aida and Norma and even sang Turandot.

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On this disc she sticks to the lirico and lirico-spinto roles that suited her best of all in this all-Puccini programme. The parsimonious playing-time is evidence of the early provenance of the recording but during these 45 minutes we are treated to soprano singing of a kind that few - past, contemporaneous or latter-day – have been able to muster. Some singers, notably Callas, have penetrated deeper into the individual characters, but even though Caballé's Tosca, Mimi and Butterfly could be musically identical triplets, there is dramatic truth and insight in her readings. Several of these roles she recorded complete within a few years – Liu, Manon Lescaut, Tosca, Mimi and also Madama Butterfly – with ravishing results and possibly even deeper identification. However for the sheer pleasure of enjoying one of the most beautiful soprano voices ever, this disc is hard to beat.

After this general panegyric I can identify some features that will prove my point better than any deep analysis:-

- * the final pianissimo in Signore ascolta! – like a long, thin silver thread that disappears into the distance
- * the exquisite shadings in Un bel di vedremo, heartfelt and not playing to the gallery
- * the deep involvement in the two Lescaut arias
- * the caressing of every phrase in O mio babbino caro and the final note again ethereal
- * the inwardness of her conversation with the Lord in Tosca's prayer
- * the innocence of Mi chiamano Mimi, and
- * the weightless floating of the pianissimo in the lovely aria from La rondine

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The booklet has a short biography and a longer essay on the music, the latter by Gramophone's legendary W.A. Chislett. If I remember correctly they were each culled from the original LP sleeve. The sung texts for each aria are preceded by a short description of the dramatic situation in the opera. Splendid. For the last aria, Doretta's Song from La rondine the text could not be reprinted owing to copyright difficulties. --- Göran Forsling, MusicWeb International

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