

# Ettore Bastianini

Mark Pullinger celebrates the artistry of the short-lived Italian baritone, celebrated for his Verdi, but well represented on many recordings in a wide-ranging operatic repertoire

Every opera fan has their favourite singer whom they never saw live but wished they had. My operatic hero died before I was even born – although, by rights, that's when he should have been in his vocal prime. Ettore Bastianini was the reigning Italian baritone of the late 1950s and early 1960s, singing regularly at La Scala, Milan, the Metropolitan Opera, New York, and the Wiener Staatsoper until his career was tragically cut short. In November 1962 he was diagnosed with throat cancer (kept a closely guarded secret), and he died on January 25, 1967, aged just 44.

Bastianini actually started out as a bass, but the baritone Gino Bechi, on a tour to Egypt, hinted that he was singing in the wrong register.

Rehearsing the final trio in *La forza del destino* with Luciano Bettarini, Bastianini continued singing the role of Padre Guardiano but to the tenor's line, soaring – causing his teacher to exclaim, 'I don't think you are a bass at all!'

Bastianini retrained, making his baritone debut as Germont in *La traviata*. He scored successes in Russian repertoire in Italian translation, singing Yeletsy, Mazeppa and Prince Andrey (in the Western premiere of Prokofiev's *War and Peace*) at Florence's Maggio Musicale. His La Scala debut (as a baritone) was as Onegin opposite Renata Tebaldi's Tatyana. Rumour had it that Tebaldi owned a private recording, but it never surfaced.

Verdi formed the core of Bastianini's repertoire and it's where I discovered him in my teens, purchasing a boxed LP set of *Il trovatore* on DG conducted by Tullio Serafin which was full of blood and fire. Carlo Bergonzi's honeyed tenor impressed; Fiorenza Cossotto's Azucena astonished; but it was Bastianini's Conte di Luna that blew me away – a burnished, rich baritone, as dark as espresso, but with a top that bloomed. It was truly 'a voice of bronze and velvet', as described in the title of Marina Boagno's book *Ettore Bastianini: Una voce di bronzo e di velluto* (1991).

For my 18th birthday, I was given a CD player. My first

purchase was Decca's miraculous 1958 *La bohème*. I swiftly explored further. Decca was Bastianini's first 'home', although he had recorded Amonasro for Remington (released in 1955, since reissued on Preiser). In *La forza del destino* (also 1955) he joined Tebaldi's glorious Leonora and Mario Del Monaco's exciting (but stentorian) Alvaro. *La favorita* was recorded the same year, followed by Figaro in an *Il barbiere di Siviglia* full of the kind of 'big voices' who'd never get cast in Rossini today. His Carlo Gérard (*Andrea Chénier*) and Barnaba (*La Gioconda*)

are simply magnificent.

There followed a brief dalliance with Dischi Ricordi which resulted in Enrico (*Lucia di Lammermoor*, later released on DG) and Rigoletto, both singing

opposite a very young Renata Scottò. The *Rigoletto*, recorded in Florence's Teatro della Pergola, is ridiculously good. However, it was damned in these pages by Philip Hope-Wallace, who found Bastianini 'loud and quite exciting' but accused him of a lack of subtlety compared with Tito Gobbi: 'He hangs on to top notes in a showy way as if exhibiting the Jester as a young Turk in love' (10/61). The recording has appeared on CD (Andromeda and Urania) but in constricted, boxy sound. Last year I stumbled upon an early LP pressing in the Wiener Staatsoper shop, and it sounds wonderful. It's time for a company to do some major remastering for CD, please.

Four Verdi operas followed for DG, all recorded with La Scala: *Un ballo in maschera*, *Don Carlo*, *La traviata* and *Il trovatore*, with voices very much in the foreground (Decca

favoured more distant placement). Apart from the stylish Bergonzi, the tenors aren't great but the much underrated Antonietta Stella is very good as Amelia, Elisabetta and Leonora, while Scottò is a superb Violetta. The *Don Carlo* boasts Boris Christoff's magnificent Philip II. Bastianini is outstanding in all four and would doubtless have been lined up for a *Rigoletto* remake, but by the summer of 1964 his voice was shot to pieces so DG drafted in the unlikely Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau.

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## DEFINING MOMENTS

- **1945 – November**  
Stage debut (as a bass) as Colline in *La bohème* in Ravenna
- **1952 – January 17**  
Debut as a baritone – Germont in *La traviata* in Siena
- **1955 – May 28**  
Legendary first night of Luchino Visconti's new production of *La traviata*, with Maria Callas, Giuseppe di Stefano and conductor Carlo Maria Giulini
- **1958 – July 26**  
Salzburg Festival debut – Rodrigo in *Don Carlo* under Karajan
- **1962 – February 23**  
Covent Garden debut – Renato in *Un ballo in maschera*, his only Royal Opera House performance
- **1965 – December 11**  
His final performance, as Rodrigo in *Don Carlo* at the Met Opera