



Pilar Lorengar: A portrait in live and studio recordings from 1959-1962

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RECORD REVIEW
In an era full of superb lyric sopranos, Spain's Pilar Lorengar (1928-1996) stood out. She was special not only for the breadth of her repertoire, radiant beauty and gracious stage presence but also her unerring musicality and, above all, her unmistakable, utterly personal sound.

Depending on what recordings you listen to, your response to Lorengar depends to a great extent on your feelings regarding the degree of vibrato in a voice. It was, in fact, what put me off much of what Lorengar recorded in many of her best-known discs. Happily, though, in Audite's set (performances dating from 1959-62 by a singer still in her early thirties, after only a few years of stardom), not one of the 60 tracks is compromised by excessive vibrato. In these recordings, Lorengar's sound is not merely clear – it gleams (especially at the top, always Lorengar's greatest strength). Her singing invariably accentuates sincerity and femininity, with no reaching for effect. One warms to Lorengar's expressiveness immediately, and her appeal throughout the set remains irresistible.

Some surprises occur in the operatic material, which includes a few arias from roles not associated with Lorengar. One of those is Norma, whose 'Casta diva' begins the set. The RIAS Kammerchor sounds unexpectedly amateurish, and the Berlin Radio Symphony is conducted funereally by Arthur Rother. Lorengar, however, rises above all that, with fresh, shining sound, always sensitively used. The arias proceed with splendid performances of more suitable repertoire: Liu's 'Signore, ascolta!', with the Puccini style instinctively right and the characterization most touching; and Cleopatra's 'Piangero la sorte mia', where the thick, heavy orchestral contribution does not hinder emotion communicated through eloquent directness of address.

Excepting a cabaletta-less 'Ernani, involami' (another odd choice, lacking the necessary expansiveness), the other arias are treasurable. Among them are 'Un bel di' (perfection on the opening soft attack, missing only a bit more interpretative detail later); 'Mi chiamano Mimi' (utterly natural in delivery, with elegant portamento); 'Le Violette' from Scarlatti's Pirro e Demetrio (the essence of charm); and 'Ach, ich fühl's' (Pamina's misery emerges through expert control of the leaps and long phrases). Lorengar was a Donna Elvira, not a Donna Anna, but the latter's 'Non mi dir', although not as magisterial as some, shows no fear in the awkward tessitura of the first section or the tricky coloratura of the second. Violetta's scena has all the heart one could desire and absolute security throughout. Best of all is 'La Maja y el Ruisenor' from Granados's Goyescas; even if Montserrat Caballé's unearthly pianissimo and Victoria de los Angeles's plum-luscious richness don't figure in Lorengar's performance, she lets go gloriously above the stave when needed, and one can appreciate the unaffected sweetness that was entirely her own.

The other two discs recall a time not very long ago when a generation of Spanish divas – Lorengar, Caballé and Teresa Berganza – all felt a passionate compulsion to follow the example of their immediate predecessor, de los Angeles, by excelling in their native song literature. One cannot choose between these four singers, for all have something unforgettable to offer. Lorengar, like the others, thoroughly understands the value of simplicity of expression, and she haunts the listener with an innate sense of melancholy.

Rodrigo's four 'amorous madrigals' – sung here with orchestra – are beautifully done, with Lorengar's gaiety in the third of these being particularly delectable. She also responds strongly to the quintessentially Spanish rhythms and melisma of the final song of this group. Two Nin pieces (with Hertha Klust, one of the singer's early mentors, giving firm support at the piano) are done with Lorengar's usual charm.

The discs then move into material by lesser-known twentieth-century Spanish composers, Leoz and Guridi. The final three of the latter's *Seis Canciones castellanas* reveal a richness in the middle range seldom heard from Lorengar, and the sheer buoyancy of the third song makes it one of the gems of Audite's set. Few can match Caballé in Granados's *Tonadillas*, but Lorengar has a special way with these wonderful pieces, three of which are heard here. One especially relishes the knowingness of 'El Majo discreto', while another jewel of a song, 'El tra la la y el punteado', bursts with the confidence of the girl who knows that a certain young man will soon be hers. Three of Toldrà's *Seis Canciones* are finely done, with the warmth of 'Después que te conocí' making an especially fine impression.

Singing 11 Renaissance songs (with Siegfried Behrend's skilful guitar accompaniment aptly substituting for a vihuela), Lorengar is plaintive and intimate where required. She proves even more bewitching with the sunnier numbers – for example, 'De los álamos vengo', where the light voice seems to belong to a girl barely a day over 15.

The second disc ends with five Verdi songs. Lorengar is the ebullient gypsy to the life in 'La zingara', aptly soulful in 'Ad una stella' (decidedly second-drawer Verdi), delightful as the pert lover in Stornello and the liveliest of chimney-sweeps in 'Lo spazzacamino'. Greater variety of colour and dynamic is needed in 'Perduta ho la pace', Verdi's setting of the text we know better as 'Gretchen am Spinnrade'.

On the third disc Lorengar is rather too closely recorded for Bellini's *Dolente immagine di Figlia mia*, but this lament – again with Behrend's guitar finds her entirely comfortable in what is, in effect, mezzosoprano tessitura. Her purity of tone enhances four Mozart songs, of which the finest is a ravishing *Ridente la calma*. A real rarity, Handel's cantata of 1707 *Nò se emendará jamás*, with Richard Klemm's viola da gamba joining Lorengar and Behrend, gives one further evidence (following the *Giulio Cesare* aria on the first disc) for regret that this composer did not figure more prominently in Lorengar's career.

The set ends with nine of the Old Spanish Songs and Romances collected by Federico Garcia Lorca (Behrend is once again a strong partner). Like the Renaissance material, they are best listened to a few at a time – I'd say the same thing of anyone singing them but individually they can be savoured for Lorengar's superb breath control. In several of these songs more smoulderingly seductive tone can be heard from the marvellous Berganza, but Lorengar is often even more vivid in her textual delivery. Her infectious joy in singing gives immense pleasure in 'Las reyes de la baraja', one of the set's major highlights.

Audite's booklet offers an essay providing not only details of Lorengar's career but

also much-needed information on some of the more obscure material heard here.
Texts are available on Audite's website.

Given the significant gaps in Lorengar's commercial discography, this set can be warmly welcomed by all who cherish the memory of this captivating artist, still greatly missed.

