

Canadian University Music Review Revue de musique des universités canadiennes

Canadian Tenors on the Rise

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Ben Heppner Sings Richard Strauss: Ben Heppner, tenor, with the Toronto Symphony Orchestra conducted by Andrew Davis (CBC Records SMCD 5142)

French and Italian Arias / Arias françaises et italiennes: Richard Margison, tenor, with the Canadian Opera Company Orchestra conducted by Richard Bradshaw (CBC Records SMCD 5158)

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Volume 17, Number 1, 1996

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1014706ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1014706ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Canadian University Music Society / Société de musique des universités canadiennes

ISSN

0710-0353 (print)

2291-2436 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Rice, P. F. (1996). Review of [Canadian Tenors on the Rise / *Ben Heppner, Great Tenor Arias*: Ben Heppner, tenor, with the Munich Radio Orchestra and the chorus of the Bavarian Radio conducted by Roberto Abbado (BMG/RCA 09026-62504-2) / *Ben Heppner Sings Richard Strauss*: Ben Heppner, tenor, with the Toronto Symphony Orchestra conducted by Andrew Davis (CBC Records SMCD 5142) / *French and Italian Arias / Arias françaises et italiennes*: Richard Margison, tenor, with the Canadian Opera Company Orchestra conducted by Richard Bradshaw (CBC Records SMCD 5158)]. *Canadian University Music Review / Revue de musique des universités canadiennes*, 17(1), 149–152. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1014706ar>

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RECORD REVIEWS/ COMPTES RENDUS DE DISQUES

Canadian Tenors on the Rise

- 1) *Ben Heppner, Great Tenor Arias*: Ben Heppner, tenor, with the Munich Radio Orchestra and the chorus of the Bavarian Radio conducted by Roberto Abbado (BMG/RCA 09026-62504-2)

Leoncavallo: *La bohème*, "Musetta! O gioia della mia dimora!," Verdi: *Luisa Miller*, "Quando le sere al placido," *La forza del destino*, "Oh, tu che in seno agl'angeli," *Aida*, "Celeste Aida," *Il trovatore*, "Ah sì, ben mio," "Di quella pira," Puccini: *Manon Lescaut*, "Donna non vidi mai," *Turandot*, "Nessun dorma," *La fanciulla del West*, "Ch'ella mi credo," Bizet: *Carmen*, "La fleur que tu m'avais jetée," Meyerbeer: *L'Africaine*, "Ô Paradis," Massenet: *Hérodiade*, "Adieu donc, vains objets," *Le Cid*, "Ô souverain, ô juge, ô père," Giordano: *Andrea Chénier*, "Come un bel dì di maggio," "Un dì all'azzurro spazio."

- 2) *Ben Heppner Sings Richard Strauss*: Ben Heppner, tenor, with the Toronto Symphony Orchestra conducted by Andrew Davis (CBC Records SMCD 5142)

Guntram: "Ewig einsam/Wenn du einst die Gauen," *Feuersnot*: Love Scene*, *Die Frau ohne Schatten*: Act II scene change leading into "Falke, Falke," *Intermezzo*: Träumerei am Kamin*, Fröhlicher Beschluß*, *Die Liebe der Danae*: Introduction to Act III and "In Syriens Glut," *Daphne*: "Was erblicke ich?," *Die schweigsame Frau*: Potpourri*, *Der Rosenkavalier*: "Di rigori armata il seno."

- 3) *French and Italian Arias/Arias françaises et italiennes*: Richard Margison, tenor, with the Canadian Opera Company Orchestra conducted by Richard Bradshaw (CBC Records SMCD 5158)

Meyerbeer: *L'Africaine*, "Ô Paradis," Gounod: *Roméo et Juliette*, "Ah! lève toi, soleil," Bizet: *Carmen*, "La fleur que tu m'avais jetée," Massenet: *Werther*, "Pourquoi me réveiller," *Thaïs*, Méditation*, Delibes: *Lakmé*, Entr'acte*, Ponicchielli: *La Gioconda*, "Cielo e mar," Boito: *Mefistofele*: "Dai campi, dai prati," Cilea: *Adriana Lecouvreur*: "La dolcissima effigie," Mascagni: *Guglielmo Ratcliff*: Intermezzo*, Giordano: *Andrea Chénier*, "Come un bel dì di maggio," "Un dì all'azzurro spazio," Puccini: *Manon Lescaut*: "Donna non vidi mai," Intermezzo*, *Madama Butterfly*, "Addio, fiorito asil," *Tosca*: "Recondita armonia," "E lucevan le stelle," *Turandot*: "Non piangere, Liù," "Nessun dorma."

* = orchestral selection

Neil Crory, project producer for the two CBC recordings, makes the following comments on Canadian tenors in the booklet accompanying the recording of Ben Heppner singing the music of Richard Strauss.

Throughout the century, Canada has been blessed with an amazing array of internationally-acclaimed singers. Looking specifically at tenors, the list includes such distinguished artists as Edward Johnson, Raoul Jobin, Léopold Simoneau, André Turp, Richard Verreau, Jean Bonhomme, Ermanno Mauro, Jon Vickers and Paul Frey. Today we appear to be in a new 'golden age' of singing in Canada with a younger generation of tenors such as Ben Heppner, Richard Margison, Michael Schade and Benjamin Butterfield currently making their mark—each in a different *Fach*—upon the international scene.

Indeed, Canada has produced voices of great distinction (not only in the tenor range) which have been heard in the major operatic theatres of the world. Some have also made highly successful recordings for major international labels. It has only been in recent years, however, that the CBC has recorded some of these singers for commercial distribution.¹ Even here, the series has proceeded with great caution, choosing senior artists at the end of distinguished careers, or younger artists who are well established. In the present case, it would be difficult to characterize either Heppner or Margison as being "emerging" talent. Both are seasoned professional singers in the fourth decades of their lives; each has sung in Canada and abroad to critical acclaim.

Richard Margison began as a lyric tenor, and has now begun to sing heavier, "spinto" roles. Ben Heppner is a dramatic tenor who is viewed as the *helden-tenor* hopeful of the future. Of the two singers, it has been Ben Heppner who has enjoyed the greater international attention, likely because of the current shortage of dramatic voices on the international vocal scene. He has also made far more recordings, including complete performances of *Turandot*, *Lohengrin*, *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg*, *Oberon*, and *Hérodiade*. Richard Margison has also appeared on the major operatic stages of the world with success, and he recently signed a long-term contract with the Metropolitan Opera Company in New York. This will provide him with considerable prestige, and may make his career more centred in North America. Indeed, the prospects appear to be very bright for both of these highly talented singers.

For performers in the public eye, recordings are an important part of their professional activities, both as documents of their abilities and as promotional tools. Given the potential impact that such recordings have on careers, success in this field has become highly desirable. Such success, however, is frequently elusive and dependent upon a variety of factors. Even a contract with a major label does not guarantee success. Although Heppner's contributions have been praised in both his complete opera recordings on the BMG/RCA label, *Turandot* and *Lohengrin*, these sets have been spoiled by the erratic singing of

¹ In fairness, it must be said that the CBC has also introduced a retrospective line of recordings which features an earlier generation of singers whose careers flourished before the company entered into the commercial recording field.

Eva Marton. While the BMG/RCA recording of Italian and French arias under present review does not suffer in the same way, it cannot be deemed to be an unqualified success. Certainly, Heppner sings well, with attractive tone and an attention to interpretive details. By nature, however, his voice is more suited to the German repertoire and, although his diction is clear, French and Italian words don't seem to mean as much to him as do German ones. Furthermore, an occasional stiffness intrudes upon his performances, especially in the Italian arias on this disk. This is most noticeable in the excerpts from *Andrea Chénier*, but it is present in some of the Verdi examples as well. Whether this is inherent in Heppner or is a result of the excessively rigid conducting of Roberto Abbado is difficult to determine. The young Abbado secures precise playing from the orchestra, but little else. Sterile to the point of being sanitized at times, these accompaniments only make the fact that some of the music on the disk is the wrong repertoire for this singer stand out in greater relief. To be fair, both artists appear to be happier in some of the French music on the disk, and it becomes clear why Heppner has enjoyed success on stage in works such as Massenet's *Hérodiade*. It would not surprise me if Heppner became the pre-eminent Samson of his generation.

The premise behind the two CBC recordings would appear to be rather different from the majority of recital disks on other labels. Here, not only the accomplishments of the singers are highlighted, but also those of the orchestras and conductors who accompany them. In each case, the recital of arias is interspersed with orchestral selections from operas. There is a place for such national pride in Canadian musicians; however, both disks suffer from poor planning.

The disk, *Ben Heppner Sings Richard Strauss*, misnamed as it is, at least presents the artist in congenial repertoire.² Heppner responds with finely detailed performances that are both powerful and sensitive. Yet, when over 40% of the total time of the recording is given over to orchestral performances of instrumental interludes, act preludes and scene-changing music, surely there is room for complaint. Admittedly, there is far less music in Strauss's operas for the tenor voice that can be excerpted for recital disks than there is for sopranos. But there are orchestral settings of many of Strauss's songs that would have suited Heppner's voice admirably. In their place, the disk contains decently-played, albeit rather cautious performances of orchestral passages rarely excerpted from complete performances of the operas. The very rarity of the orchestral music may make this disk attractive to some purchasers; for those who only want to hear Ben Heppner doing what the title of the disk promises, they must surely be an annoyance.

Less of the total playing time of the disk featuring Richard Margison is given over to orchestral passages—in this case, about 26%. Yet, the works that have been chosen are very well known, and all can be easily found on other recordings which feature better performances than the rather rough-edged

²There is one exception here—the excerpt from *Der Rosenkavalier*—which is not suited to Heppner's voice, and with which he struggles.

ones that Richard Bradshaw and the Canadian Opera Company Orchestra present. Nor are Margison's performances completely without blemish. Several of the arias are sung with great distinction; however, it can only be hoped that the move to heavier repertoire has not taken its toll on this lyric voice of great beauty. While Margison's fine diction remains undiminished, there are danger signs in the more dramatic arias. Here, the pushed top notes are often under pitch and effortful in production. Hopefully, this is the result of a temporary situation such as fatigue, and not an indication of a premature vocal decline. Comparison of the arias which both tenors have recorded produces predictable results. Stylistically, Margison is on more secure ground in the Italian arias, although he struggles with the climactic passages which pose few problems for Heppner. In the French arias, the two singers are more evenly matched perhaps, although the Margison disk scores extra points for the excellence of the singer's legato singing and diction, and the sympathetic conducting of Richard Bradshaw.

While none of these recordings is so flawed as to likely damage the career of either artist, there are no unqualified recommendations here either. Hopefully, future issues in the CBC series will demonstrate better planning and repertoire choices, and BMG/RCA will find a conductor who can produce more idiomatic results in the operatic repertoire.

Paul F. Rice