

Joan Sutherland

Art of the Prima Donna

alto

Legendary
Recordings



Art of the Prima Donna

[1]	Thomas Arne (text: Thomas Arne) <i>Artaxerxes</i> : The Soldier Tir'd	4:03
[2]	George Frideric Handel (text: Newburgh Hamilton) <i>Samson</i> : Let the Bright Seraphim	5:53
[3]	Vincenzo Bellini (text: Felice Romani) <i>Norma</i> : Sediziose voci	12:46
[4]	Bellini (text: Carlo Pepoli) <i>I Puritani</i> : Son vergin vezosa	3:05
[5]	Gioachino Rossini (text: Gaetano Rossi) <i>Semiramide</i> : Bel raggio lusinghier	6:37
[6]	Bellini (text: Carlo Pepoli) <i>I Puritani</i> : Qui la voce sua soave	6:59
[7]	Bellini (text: Felice Romani) <i>La Sonnambula</i> : Care compagne	8:25
[8]	Charles Gounod (text: Jules Barbier and Michel Carré) <i>Faust</i> : Air des bijoux: O Dieu, que de bijoux	4:35
[9]	Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (text: Christoph Friedrich Bretzner and Gottlieb Stephanie) <i>Die Entführung aus dem Serail</i> : Martern aller Arten	8:44
[10]	Léo Delibes (text: Edmond Gondinet and Philippe Gille) <i>Lakmé</i> : Bell Song: Où va la jeune Indoue	7:51
[11]	Giacomo Meyerbeer (text: Eugène Scribe) <i>Les Huguenots</i> : O beau pays	5:44

Joan Sutherland

Orchestra of the Royal Opera House, Covent Garden
Francesco Molinari-Pradelli, *conductor*

THE PRIMA DONNA

Joan Sutherland was born in Sydney in 1926 and received singing lessons first from her mother and then at the Sydney Conservatory. In 1949/50 she won both the Sydney 'Sun Aria' and the Mobil Quest competitions singing arias from *Aïda*, *Cavalleria rusticana* and *Tannhäuser*. The prize money enabled her to travel to London in 1951 where she studied further at the Royal College of Music with Clive Carey. Her student performance as Giorgetta *Il tabarro* was noted in the musical press: Arthur Jacobs in *Opera* wrote 'Here is a dramatic soprano of high quality and well- controlled power...one may confidently look forward to hearing more of her'. She auditioned for Covent Garden and was given a contract for the 1952/3 season. Initially she sang a variety of roles ranging from Clotilde *Norma* (alongside Callas and Stignani), Amelia *Ballo*, Countess *Figaro*, Lady Penelope Rich *Gloriana* and Overseer *Elektra*. Her next major role was Agathe *Freischütz* (May 1954) about which Cecil Smith in *Opera* wrote that 'her voice is a true lyric soprano...large enough to carry across the orchestra all the time in all registers...there is nothing about her basic method of singing that should keep her from developing all the flexibility in the world'.

In 1954 she married Richard Bonyngue, a friend from her days in Sydney and a leading expert in 19th century opera, and also Sutherland performed the title role in Weber's *Euryanthe* for the BBC. The following season she carried off with aplomb the technically demanding role of Jenifer in the premiere of Tippett's *The Midsummer Marriage*. Like Elisabeth Schwarzkopf, Sutherland discovered that to be part of the Covent Garden ensemble one had to sing anything and everything, and between 1955 and the end of 1957 she also performed such diverse roles as the three soprano characters in *Hoffmann*, Gilda, Micaëla, Pamina, Eva, Desdemona and Mme Lidoine in the British premiere of Poulenc's *Carmelites*.

Sutherland had spent the summer of 1956 (Mozart's bi-centenary year) at Glyndebourne, sharing the Countess *Figaro* with Elisabeth Grümmer and singing the First Lady *Zauberflöte*. Returning the following year, she played Mme Herz *Schauspieldirektor*, having electrified London audiences the previous March singing Alcina for the Handel Opera Society.

Barely known outside Britain and her native Australia Sutherland triumphed as Donna Anna in Vancouver following the 1957-8 Covent Garden season. About these performances Rita Ubriaco wrote in *Opera* 'After so many *spinto* Annas who sound like refugees from Brünnhilde's riding club, it was a revelation to hear a fresh, young lyric voice of

uncommon purity at the command of an impeccable musician...She did not stun with *bravura*; she captivated with humanity'. However her major international breakthrough occurred during the 1958-9 Covent Garden season when she sang Lucia to triumphant notices. The following from Harold Rosenthal of *Opera* was typical: 'Her singing of the extremely difficult coloratura made it all sound so easy; her runs, trills and ornaments were marvellous and breath-taking. Without changing her name to Giovanna Miss Sutherland's success should take her to the opera houses of the world'. To help her prepare for the role of Lucia, Sutherland had been sent to Tullio Serafin in Italy. Serafin, who had previously coached Ponselle and Callas, and the director Franco Zeffirelli coaxed her into producing a fully formed character, and if it were not quite equal to Callas' interpretation, nonetheless it was superbly acted. Overnight she became a sensation and as Rosenthal had predicted, the floodgates opened with offers from numerous opera houses: Vienna cast her as Donna Anna and Desdemona; Venice and Dallas invited her to repeat Alcina. But Sutherland was now focussing on Italian Romantic opera, a specialist area of her husband's. Having proved her worth as Lucia, she sang this role in Paris, Venice and Palermo whilst Glyndebourne mounted a new production of Bellini's *Puritani* especially for her, as did Barcelona and Genoa.

On the first night of Covent Garden's new production of *Sonnambula* (21 October 1960) Sutherland was stricken with tracheitis. She recovered sufficiently to delight the critics with her vocalism, less perhaps with her acting which was compared rather unfavourably with Callas, with whom she was now sharing much of her repertoire. Her La Scala debut occurred during the 1960/1 season in which she sang the title role in Bellini's *Beatrice di Tenda*, swiftly followed by further performances of Lucia and, in 1962, the title role in Rossini's *Semiramide*. Lucia became her calling-card role and during 1961 she sang this demanding part in Edinburgh, Paris, London, Dallas, San Francisco, New York and Chicago.

It was during this exciting era that Decca signed her to record the two recital records *The Art of the Prima Donna* from which this collection is chosen. Throughout it shows the guiding hand of Richard Bonyngé in its careful choice of repertoire in which Sutherland pays tribute to her operatic forebears and roles they made famous as follows: Mrs Elizabeth Billington (1765-1818), Angelica Catalini (1780-1848), Giuditta Pasta (1797-1865), Henriette Sontag (1806-54), Maria Malibran (1808-36), Giulia Grisi (1811-69), Jenny Lind (1820-87), Adelina Patti (1843-1919), Christine Nilsson (1843-1921), Emma Albani (1847-1930), Lilli Lehmann (1848-1929), Marcella Sembrich (1858-1935), Nellie Melba (1861-1931),

Luisa Tetrazzini (1871-1940), Amelita Galli-Curci (1882-1963) and Frieda Hempel (1885-1955). The idea for such a project might have been planted back in November 1957 when Rosenthal presented a talk on the history of Covent Garden and Sutherland was called upon to sing *Regnava nel silenzio* as an illustration of Melba's Covent Garden debut as Lucia.

Having sung in Handel's *Samson* in November 1958 in which she 'enlivened its last part with her assured bravura in *Let the Bright Seraphim*, which literally stopped the show in all those performances in which she appeared' (Lionel Dunlop *Opera*), much of the music within *The Art of the Prima Donna* was either already in Sutherland's repertoire or was shortly to feature, although at the time of these recordings she had yet to perform roles such as Semiramide, Marguerite *Faust*, Norma, Lakmé and Marguerite de Valois *Les Huguenots*. So complete were her interpretations on these LPs however that critics doubted whether anyone would be aware of the fact, whilst of her renditions of *Let the Bright Seraphim* and the Bell Song *Lakmé Opera* noted that Sutherland 'sets a standard by which future generations may well judge their own prima donnas' performances'. Only one criticism emerged: her diction was rather poor and her verbal phrasing put an unnatural emphasis at odd points.

In an interview dating from this time, Sutherland set out her plans for future roles which largely revolved around the Italian Romantic era, and until the end of her distinguished career she generally concentrated on this part of the repertoire. There were just a few surprising choices, the biggest of which (but also in my view one of the most successful) was her stunning performance as Turandot in Decca's famous recording alongside Pavarotti. Wisely however she never sang this on stage. A labour of love that also raised eyebrows was her recording of Noel Coward songs.

Later in life one was as likely to encounter her as Rosalinde *Fledermaus* and Hanna Glawari *Merry Widow* as Donizetti's Mary Stuart and Cilea's Adriana Lecouvreur. She and Bonyngé turned down many roles (it is rather shocking to think that Covent Garden considered her for Lady Macbeth so soon after her first Lucia) and it was that common sense which undoubtedly enabled her to retain her voice for so long. She was still singing Lucia in Barcelona almost thirty years after she first sang the role. For her services to music Joan Sutherland was awarded the DBE in 1979, twenty years after her international breakthrough.

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