

Sherrill Milnes

In the year of the great American Verdi baritone's 80th birthday, James Inverne pays tribute

Perhaps more than any other in the acknowledged 'royal line' of American Verdi baritones (Lawrence Tibbett, Leonard Warren, Robert Merrill and Cornell MacNeil), Sherrill Milnes is the image of the all-American star. He grew up on a farm in Illinois, where he got to know his voice by singing to the cows in the barns – and learnt his work ethic from having to milk 20 of them at a time. Vocally, too, he epitomised the American sound, with a voice that was broad and powerful, rolling out from his barrel chest with seeming ease and pouring over even the largest orchestras. Yet Milnes – who turned 80 in January and celebrates the 50th anniversary of his Met debut this month – had something the others didn't. With all the power, there was a rich, velvety quality that allowed him a more rarefied range of vocal colours than his peers; he could personify nobility or, with a subtle darkening, nobility perverted.

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This, of course, was perfect for his beloved Verdi, whose baritones tend to be either heroes, fallen heroes or uncompromisingly, anti-heroically evil. And not only could Milnes be relied upon, night after night at the Met, to produce his incredible stream of glorious sound, but also there seemed no end to his upper range. He knew it, and he made sure that audiences knew it. Sometimes complaining that Verdi gave his tenors the high notes, he was not above the odd unwritten, unlikely high-wire act. Plácido Domingo has written of a *La traviata* at the Hollywood Bowl where a frustrated Milnes asked conductor James Levine if he might take the usual high option to end Germont's Act 2 cabaletta. The answer was a stern no, so Milnes, unchastened, instead reached even higher, for an astounding high B flat (check it out on YouTube).

Such abandon had its price, and Milnes's voice began to wear relatively early. Not for

him the prolonged Indian summer of Falstaffs and *buffa* roles usually afforded to ageing Verdi baritones; his was a star that burned brightly – brightest of all; and in his latter years he has returned to his early love, teaching.

Yet Milnes was always a singer who knew who he was and what he was put on this earth for. His discography, enormous at more than 50 recordings of mostly complete operas, is remarkably well defined – consisting almost entirely of works by Verdi or other Italian fare. His prime coincided with a stable of great stars at ease in that demanding repertoire, and it was either to Milnes or to his Italian rival Piero Cappuccilli

that the studios usually turned when looking for a match with, variously, Domingo, Pavarotti, Mirella Freni, Leontyne Price and Montserrat Caballé.

In every single one of those recordings you know what you will get with Milnes. That magnificent voice is always present, always at its best (he refused to allow first takes, to give the colours time to emerge) and always wielded with

a swagger that ensures no colleague steals the spotlight. Which is not to say that he doesn't find depth – this best comes from the roles where he can intertwine the characterisation with the voice's innate characteristics, as with his unsurpassed *Macbeth*, whereby the listener can almost hear the character's spirit decay as the shades fall across his voice (just listen to the tortured layering of textures after *Macbeth* kills Duncan in "Tutto è finito!" on the EMI recording under Muti).

Outside the Italian repertoire, his Jokanaan for Leinsdorf's grievously underrated *Salome* recording (RCA) also pumps charisma. Those 'Du bist verflucht!' curses wallop you between the eyes – yet contrast with the sudden ardour he finds when trying to turn *Salome* to God. Incidentally, in case Milnes's stardom should ever

DEFINING MOMENTS

• 1960 – Professional debut

Professional debut as Masetto, following which he joins the Boris Goldovsky Opera Company, with which he gains invaluable, intensive experience, travelling more than 100,000 miles and singing in more than 300 performances

• 1965 – Joint Met debut with Caballé

December Met Opera debut as Valentin in Gounod's *Faust*. The same night features the debut of Montserrat Caballé, already famous in Europe, whose presence guarantees that every newspaper reviewer is there – quite a break for the baritone

• 1970 – European debut

European opera house debut at the Vienna State Opera in *Macbeth*. Milnes later points to this as the moment he feels he has 'arrived', as 'Americans are taught to believe everything is better in Europe' (an unofficial recording of the occasion, available on the Opera d'Oro label, reveals an electric performance under Karl Böhm)

• 1977 – Presidential engagement

Sings at the service for President Carter's inauguration, on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial – the first of several such important occasions at which he performs (one later outdoor concert, also in Washington DC, draws an audience of more than half a million)

• 2001 – Singer turns nurturer

Co-founds the VOICEperience Foundation to train young singers, pointing the way forward for his career today as nurturer of young talent



Sherrill Milnes as Sheriff Jack Rance in Puccini's *La fanciulla del West* – a role he recorded twice for DG

PHOTOGRAPHY: WINNIE KLOTZ / METROPOLITAN OPERA ARCHIVES

be confused with any sense of preciousness, that recording – made at Walthamstow Assembly Hall in 1968 – involved the singer gamely performing in the kitchen while kneeling precariously atop a large commercial oven with his head up the extractor fan, doors all open leading to the studio, to get the desired underground effect!

There is the odd recorded anomaly – a jaunty collection of light songs with Beverly Sills; a curious but rather compelling *Monna Vanna* (Rachmaninov's unfinished opera) for Chandos. But he stuck close to his beloved Verdi, and recording after recording are among the best available – *Il trovatore* (conducted by Mehta, on RCA), *Attila* (Gardelli, Decca), *Otello* (Levine, RCA), the Muti *Macbeth*, *Rigoletto*

(Bonyngé, Decca), *La forza del destino* and *Andrea Chénier* (both Levine, RCA), *La gioconda* (Bartoletti, Decca) and *La fanciulla del West* (DG, Mehta: a *Gramophone* Award winner).

In some ways, perhaps the greatest testament to Milnes's art is a late recording, a filmed 1984 performance of *Simon Boccanegra* (Levine, DG). By this time, his voice had

lost much of its glamorous sheen, that luxurious opening out was no longer to be counted on. So here is Milnes naked, as it were. And he finds instead a deep humanity in the role that is unforgettable – his plea for peace is not the command of the charismatic star, but the profound understanding of a man who has lived, who feels innately the yearnings of this music. And that is the mark of a truly great artist. **G**

THE ESSENTIAL RECORDING



Verdi: Macbeth
Ambrosian Opera Chorus, New Philharmonia Orchestra / Riccardo Muti
EMI Ⓟ 319270-2 (12/76⁸; 5/89⁹)
With fond glances to his *Otello*, *La fanciulla del West*, *Don Carlo*, *Lucia di Lammermoor* and many more, Milnes's defining role and finest recording is *Macbeth*. With

a conductor who mines a glinting darkness in the score which matches his leading man's timbre, a brilliantly intelligent Lady *Macbeth* in Fiorenza Cossotto and an on-fire Milnes, there's simply no other *Macbeth* in the catalogue to match this recording.