

**Ponchielli's *La gioconda* – A partial survey of the discography
by Ralph Moore**

Let's hear no more nonsense about *La gioconda* being second-rate entertainment; it's brimful with a succession of great melodies and stirring confrontations, and there is no doubt that when it is adequately performed, it is a real audience-pleaser. Apart from the derogatory comments from snobbish critics, the more obvious reasons for its neglect are that you need to cast six world-class singers - one from each of the major voice categories – who can do justice to the demands the score makes upon them, and you must have the financial and production resources to fund and stage a carnival scene, a masked ball, dancers, sailors, and ships ablaze before sinking - the whole operatic kit and caboodle. The libretto is more than serviceable, having been penned by Arrigo Boito (librettist for Verdi's *Otello* and composer-librettist of *Mefistofele*) under the pseudonym "Tobia Gorria". True, the plot is hyper-melodramatic and merely a device to frame a stream of glorious melody and dramatic confrontations - but that's not unusual in the world of opera and the music speaks emotional truth. I am addicted to it; for me it typifies everything I love about opera at its most excessive and indulgent. It is by no means the subtlest or necessarily the best crafted of works but it provides a magnificent vehicle for six great voices and is packed with dramatic conflict and stage spectacle.

It is no accident that several great divas have regarded it as the ideal vehicle for their gifts not just in their prime but as their careers were winding down; indeed, several could be accused of having pushed their luck by performing it beyond when was advisable. In that category, I would venture to place Zinka Milanov whose reputation is not enhanced by her later recordings; there is considerable difference between her 1939 and 1957 recordings here. Tebaldi, too, continued to perform the role on stage when her voice was not what it had been but managed a wonderful Indian summer recording in 1967. Like the role of Norma, *La Gioconda* represents a supreme challenge to the spinto-drammatico soprano and artists such as Montserrat Caballé are audibly pushed to, and beyond, their limits by its demands. One singer ideally suited to the role but noticeably absent from the list of studio recordings, is Leyla Gencer, so shamefully neglected by recording companies; at least, she features in three, live, mono recordings here – although they can be hard to find and all have flaws.

La gioconda is not just a diva showcase, however; it requires five more singers who can capitalise on their moment in the spotlight, each being given at least one famous aria, and also contribute to potentially thrilling duets and ensembles of the most vocally exposed and extravert nature. A seasoned opera conductor is needed to keep it all together: names such as Cleva, Guadagno, Bartoletti, Gardelli and Patanè recur frequently in the discography, suggesting that they did not share any snooty critical disdain for this opera.

La gioconda is essentially Italian Grand Opera at its zenith with verismo leanings; it is Ponchielli's masterpiece and he never came close to equalling it with his other operas. Apart from being derided in some quarters, it has suffered the further indignity of primarily being remembered solely for the one musical number which makes a lovely concert piece but can also safely be cut without harming the action: the celebrated ballet sequences the "Dance of the Hours", so memorably and amusingly animated in Disney's *Fantasia*. It is now quite beyond most listeners to hear it without envisaging impossibly delicate hippos and dastardly crocodiles. The arias "Suicidio" and "Cielo e mar" feature regularly in sopranos' and tenors' live or recorded concert programmes respectively but otherwise the opera is rarely heard.

However, there are seventy-plus recordings in the CLOR catalogue and I consider twenty-two of those here (plus excerpts from a twenty-third, attached to a complete performance), spanning seventy-five years from the first complete version in 1931 to 2006: they comprise ten extant studio versions and a fairly arbitrary selection of twelve of the best live performances. No fewer than four of those studio recordings are on the Decca label and three on EMI/Warner.

Lorenzo Molajoli - 1931- studio mono; Naxos

Orchestra - Grande Orchestra Sinfonica di Milano
Chorus - Teatro alla Scala

La Gioconda - Giannina Arangi-Lombardi
Enzo - Alessandro Granda
Barnaba - Gaetano Viviani
Laura - Ebe Stignani
Alvise - Corrado Zambelli
La Cieca - Camilla Rota
Zuàne - Aristide Baracchi
Isèpo - Giuseppe Nessi

This milestone first recording features in the title role a great soprano who should be better known even to modern collectors. Giannina Arangi-Lombardi (teacher of Leyla Gencer) had one of the most beautiful voices of all time: a rich, velvety lower register (she retrained from mezzo) and sonorous top notes. She was a classically elegant singer, sometimes a tad placid but unfailingly musical. There is bell-like clarity to her sound without a hint of shrillness and the selection of arias in the recital following the opera is alone worth the modest price of the three discs. Her one fault is that she occasionally sings slightly flat but she has so many virtues, including a perfect trill. It is also a pleasure to hear the great Ebe Stignani early in her long career,

Previous reviewers have been a little harsh in their verdict on the male singers: if we had today a tenor and baritone of the incisiveness and calibre of, respectively, Alessandro Granda and Gaetano Viviano we would be celebrating. Granda succumbs too often to the "Gigli gulp" but is otherwise extraordinarily capable, often sounding like Jan Peerce. Despite the prominence of his fast vibrato and the occasional uninspired patch of singing, the now forgotten Viviano creates a really vivid character of Barnaba, who emerges as Iago's equally nasty cousin - just as he should. He has that vibrancy peculiar to baritones of the era such as Amato, Ruffo, Stracciari et al. The Alvise, La Cieca and supporting cast are merely ordinary, but that matters little.

The orchestral playing, choral singing and conducting are of a much higher standard than one might expect; Lorenzo Molajoli (whoever he was - and there is some conjecture that he was really a better-known conductor recording under a sobriquet to avoid violating contractual obligations, though others deny this) knows exactly how this opera should go and the performance is suitably impassioned.

The sound is remarkably good for its age. Ward Marston has remastered the opera from 38 78's which were obviously in pristine condition. He has retained some of the surface hiss, obviously, as to do otherwise would remove too many upper frequencies. This could not be a primary recommendation for a first-time listener when there are so many excellent modern sets available in stereo but it is a wonderful supplement for someone already familiar with the opera or for the many "canary-fanciers" out there.

Ettore Panizza – 1939 – live mono; Arkadia/Cantus/Symposium

Orchestra - Metropolitan Opera
Chorus - Metropolitan Opera

La Gioconda - Zinka Milanov
Enzo - Giovanni Martinelli
Barnaba - Carlo Morelli
Laura - Bruna Castagna

Alvise - Nicola Moscona
 La Cieca - Anna Kaskas
 Zuàne - Wilfred Engelman
 Un Cantore - Giordano Paltrinieri
 Isèpo - Giordano Paltrinieri
 Un Pilota - Carlo Coscia

The sound here is really no worse than most of the live, 1960s recordings considered here; there's a little rustle but minimal distortion. It is all the more extraordinary to think that this was a live recording; many a studio account of the time is inferior. Furthermore, you can hear Milanov in her youthful prime rather than in her twilight years, partnered by the great Martinelli and conducted by that Toscanini clone, Ettore Panizza. Milanov is more animated and obviously freer of voice than nearly twenty years later in her studio recording; indeed, she is phenomenal. The other voices are very fine, too: Morelli has a hard-edged, penetrating baritone in the best Italian tradition and very capable of conveying the baser emotions typical of the wicked Barnaba; his clash with Martinelli's Ezio becomes the dramatic highlight it should be. Anna Kaskas is a superb La Cieca, her two vocal registers properly defined in old-fashioned style and the Laura is the same Bruna Castagna who made such striking contributions to live recordings of the Verdi Requiem conducted by Toscanini, as did Moscona, a favourite Toscanini bass for good reason. Perhaps the main reservation will centre on responses to Martinelli's steel-hard tenor. His is not a young man's voice – he was already fifty-four here and had three decades of hard singing behind him – and at times his sound does blare but he is marvellously responsive to the text. You will surely not hear any of the six great roles here much better sung, nor the drama more effectively heightened.

Armando La Rosa Parodi – 1952 – studio mono; Urania/Preisner

Orchestra - Teatro alla Scala
 Chorus - Teatro alla Scala

La Gioconda - Anita Corridori
 Enzo - Giuseppe Campora
 Barnaba - Anselmo Colzani
 Laura - Miriam Pirazzini
 Alvise - Fernando Corena
 La Cieca - Rina Cavallari
 Zuàne - Guido Pasella
 Un Cantore - Guido Pasella
 Isèpo - Angelo Mercuriali
 Un Pilota - Gino Calò

You hear straight away in the overture both how affectionately and responsively this music is conducted by La Rosa Parodi and also how warm and clear the mono sound is; really very good for its era. This does not boast a roster of first-rank artists, just wholly reliable regulars on the Italian scene in the 50's; you will have seen their names in various Cetra and Decca recordings alongside bigger stars, the exception being the lead soprano, Anita Corridori, of whom I admit I had never heard and whose career doesn't seem to have left much of a trace. She has a good-sized, slightly edgy soprano; she has the notes but not the temperament, so her duelling with Pirazzini's competent Laura is tame and "Suicidio" lacks desperation. Tenor Campora is probably the best-known singer here, especially for his recordings of *Tosca* and *Madama Butterfly* on Decca with Tebaldi; his grainy tenor is up to the demands of the of role of Ezio without making any great impression. Cavallari and Corena are fine but others eclipse them in their roles. Baritone Colzani had an important career, singing at the Met; he has a handsome voice, but his delivery is rather bland and enervated; in fact, one can say much the same thing about all the singers and the performance as a whole: nobody is especially memorable and everything here sounds a little too comfortable and studio-bound, missing the

tension the music demands and making it harder for the listener to engage. One thing you don't want is a low-key *La gioconda*, so I would pass on this worthy but dull recording.

**Antonino Votto – 1952 - studio mono; Naxos/Warner Fonit
Cetra/Hommage/Andromeda/Regis/Intense Media**

Orchestra - RAI Torino
Chorus - RAI Torino

La Gioconda - Maria Callas
Enzo - Gianni Poggi
Barnaba - Paolo Silveri
Laura - Fedora Barbieri
Alvise - Giulio Neri
La Cieca - Maria Amadini
Zuàne - Piero Poldi
Isèpo - Armando Benzi
Un Pilota - Piero Poldi

The relatively poor sound quality and rather second-rate cast - Callas apart, of course – long disinclined me to listen to Callas' first recording when there were so many good alternatives; I have always favoured Callas' later account with the same conductor, insofar as she is still in great voice but recorded in stereo with a cast superior to this 1952 mono studio version.

However, on returning to this one, I find it more rewarding than I had remembered. The differences in Callas' interpretation are minimal - but so they are in her singing, in purely vocal terms as opposed to interpretation; even in 1952 some top notes flapped a bit but that's a small price to pay in exchange for the intensity of her interpretation and she leaves even worthy rivals like Tebaldi in the dust, as much as I like her recording with Bergonzi. Votto directs with great élan in both and his orchestra in 1952 is very fine, even if his chorus is a bit rustic.

Her fellow singers are more variable. Silveri - largely forgotten today but a major singer in that era - has a big, husky baritone and sings with great confidence, but his characterisation is rather unvarying and monochrome compared with more nuanced baritones such as Milnes and Merrill. Maria Amadini is a true contralto but is rather quavery up top and has a peculiarly hooded tone; Companeez is better in 1959. Neri's huge bass is impressive but unwieldy and he is definitely less elegant than Ivo Vinco. Barbieri is similarly generically impressive but Cossotto gave one of the performances of her life for Votto in 1959. The real blot on the recording is the bleaty, effortful and lachrymose Poggi who can sing the notes but makes Pier Miranda Ferraro sound subtle. Surely EMI could have found somebody better - but there we are.

Otherwise, this is mostly very enjoyable, but I still cannot see why anyone would favour it over the later recording.

Emidio Tieri – 1956 – live mono; Myto

Orchestra - Teatro Comunale di Firenze
Chorus - Teatro Comunale di Firenze

La Gioconda - Anita Cerquetti
Enzo - Gianni Poggi
Barnaba - Ettore Bastianini
Laura - Ebe Stignani
Alvise - Giuseppe Modesti
La Cieca - Lucia Danieli

Zuàne - Mario Frosini
Un Cantore - Alberto Lotti-Camici
Isèpo - Piero Setti

At first glance, the cast list here is encouraging: a comparatively rare recording from the vibrant dramatic soprano Anita Cerquetti accompanied by two of the greatest singers of their generation, Ebe Stignani and Ettore Bastianini - but if there's a proverbial fly in this operatic ointment, it's going to be the tenor, Gianni Poggi, who blights this recording just as he did Callas' first recording. His hard, whining tone is uningratiating; indeed, the comparative success of his career, including singing at the Met, remains a mystery. Maybe he sounded better live, but for collectors he is a liability.

Furthermore, there is little incentive to prefer this live recording over the studio version made a year in that its strengths are either reproduced or equalled in far superior stereo sound by Decca. We have there the same Gioconda and Barnaba and an equally celebrated Laura in Giulietta Simionato, and a better conductor, La Cieca, Alvise and, above all, Ezio, in Sacchi, Siepi and Del Monaco respectively. So pass over this and see immediately below.

Gianandrea Gavazzeni – 1957 - studio stereo; Decca

Orchestra - Maggio Musicale Fiorentino
Chorus - Maggio Musicale Fiorentino

La Gioconda - Anita Cerquetti
Enzo - Mario Del Monaco
Barnaba - Ettore Bastianini
Laura - Giulietta Simionato
Alvise - Cesare Siepi
La Cieca - Franca Sacchi
Zuàne - Giorgio Giorgetti
Isèpo - Athos Cesarini

Cerquetti recorded very little - only a recital record and this one - so this is a valuable memento of a great singer. But not only that; she is supported by a dream cast - especially by today's standards, where voices of this amplitude and splendour are rare.

I do not say that this is the best *La gioconda* of all; I would still favour Tebaldi's or Callas' later version as my overall recommendation - but I would not wish to be without this riveting account. Virtually anything Gavazzeni directed was worth hearing and this is certainly no exception.

I am frequently amused by the number reviews you can encounter whereby people seem to be surprised to report that Del Monaco sings quietly and subtly. This is the result of (mainly British) critics moaning about Del Monaco's "incessant bawling", as they phrase it. In fact, despite his clarion tones, he often attempted to refine his huge sound often and frequently succeeded. If anything, Bastianini was guiltier of singing excessively loudly - but with a voice like that, who cares? None of the singers here is exactly small voiced - thank goodness; this is Italian singing of the kind to raise the rafters. Everyone is a major star, yet this recording captures a not-so-unusual night at the opera house in mid-fifties Italy. A special mention, too, for the boys in the Fiorentino choir; they sing with a real zest and abandon which is both moving and exhilarating.

Perhaps it is finally possible to mention *La gioconda* without making any apologies for it. It is jam-packed with wonderful tunes and hair-raising dramatic confrontations; I consider the magnificent spat between Gioconda and Laura on board ship, which concludes Act 2, to be one of the great duets in opera. It brought out the best in Callas, who said that if we wanted to know what she was all about we needed only to listen to the last act of her second recording - but Cerquetti need fear no invidious

comparisons with her celebrated contemporary; her huge, dark, spinto soprano is fully up to the demands of the role, even if she cannot provide Callas' verbal insights and range of colour.

A perspective of fifty years permits us to give this recording its proper due, whereas when it appeared it was either rather taken for granted or even dismissed as second rate. Not any more.

Fernando Previtali – 1957 - studio stereo; Decca

Orchestra - Santa Cecilia

Chorus - Santa Cecilia

La Gioconda - Zinka Milanov

Enzo - Giuseppe di Stefano

Barnaba - Leonard Warren

Laura - Rosalind Elias

Alvise - Plinio Clabassi

La Cieca - Belen Amparan

Zuàne - Fernando Valentini

Un Cantore - Virgilio Carbonari

Isèpo - Giacomo Cottino

Un Pilota - Fernando Valentini

Among so many live recordings in trying sound, it's a pleasure to listen to this early Decca stereo studio recording. Unfortunately, it was made a little late in Milanov's career and even Di Stefano is past his best – at least for this role. The cast is generally a fine one but the chorus is a bit ragged and some of the orchestral playing could be better tuned. Chief among its attractions is Leonard Warren, a fine vocal actor as well as a great voice; his Barnaba reminds me of his Iago – he has the right sound for portraying villains. Milanov begins well; she sounds mature, but not worn, and floats a lovely B flat on "Come t'amo" at the end of the passage expressing her gratitude for her mother's salvation; indeed, many a quiet phrase is very beautiful. However, louder top notes start to suggest that she is labouring somewhat, as a beat and harshness become apparent; "Suicidio" is rather cautious but the lower register is impressive.

Bella Amparan's veiled-sounding La Cieca is suitably dignified and world-weary if not very firm and the presence of Rosalind Elias is always a bonus in any recording. Her entrance alongside Plinio Clabassi as Alvise introduces two resonant voices which rather show up how dry Di Stefano sounds; he has lost some of the sap in the top of his voice and Warren overpowers his "E tu sia maledetto" at the end of the duet which is their first encounter. "Cielo e mar" evinces the near-shouting and whiteness of tone which crept into his tenor during the late 50's and his dislike of rehearsal is betrayed by some uncertain rhythm. He is impassioned and committed but the dryness of tone is apparent.

I find Previtali's direction rather languid; in fact, the whole recording is a little lacking in energy. There is still much to enjoy here, but also better to be had.

Antonino Votto – 1959 - studio stereo. EMI/Warner

Orchestra - Teatro alla Scala

Chorus - Teatro alla Scala

La Gioconda - Maria Callas

Enzo - Pier Miranda Ferraro

Barnaba - Piero Cappuccilli

Laura - Fiorenza Cossotto

Alvise - Ivo Vinco

La Cieca - Irene Companeez
Zuàne - Leonardo Monreale
Un Cantore - Carlo Forti
Isèpo - Renato Ercolani
Un Pilota - Carlo Forti

This recording is by no means perfect or flawlessly cast: better tenors than the stentorian, satisfactory but rather plaintive and unvaryingly toned Pier Miranda Ferraro have tackled Enzo Grimaldo and Piero Cappuccilli, at the beginning of his considerable career, displays his trademark qualities of even, long-breathed phrasing and rather bland characterisation without much of the bite that a really great Barnaba like Milnes, Merrill, Bastianini or Manuguerra - yes, Manuguerra - can bring to the role.

But, but, but...we may hear La Divina in perhaps her greatest recorded role partnered by another great singer also at the outset of her career in Fiorenza Cossotto and also perhaps conductor Votto's best outing. There are some great names in the supporting cast: especially the black-voiced bass Ivo Vinco and the rich contralto of Irene Companeez.

I have many times propounded the case that the decline in Callas' voice was by no means linear and that you may hear her at her superb best supposedly late in her relatively brief glory years. In 1959 her difficulties with Onassis had much the same effect as her spat with Bing when she sang a glorious Medea in Dallas; they spurred her to pour her rage and pain into her singing and the results are clear, with very little of the flap, wobble, sourness or tiredness which could afflict her later singing. She herself considered this her finest recording, declaring, "It's all there for anyone who cares to understand or wishes to know what I was about." If you don't respond to her Gioconda, you don't like Callas. Try the cat-fight with Laura towards the end of Act II for real goosebump singing - two great voices hurling insults at each other in Ponchielli's version of the bitchfest which made famous the confrontation scene between the queens in Donizetti's *Maria Stuarda*. Both deploy their shining top and massive lower register to spine-tingling effect, leaning into some of the most melodramatic text ever provided to a composer:

"Ed io l'amo siccome il leone
ama il sangue ed il turbine il volo
e la folgor le vette, e l'alcione
le voragini, e l'aquila il sol!"

[And I love him as the lion loves blood, the whirlwind its flight, the lightning the peaks, the halcyon the whirlpool and the eagle the sun!]

Other singers and recordings are certainly well worth the time and investment but this is still a prime recommendation for Callas alone.

Carlo Felice Cillario – 1960 – live mono; Walhall/Bongiovanni

Orchestra - Teatro Colón (Buenos Aires)
Chorus - Teatro Colón (Buenos Aires)

La Gioconda - Lucilla Udovich
Enzo - Flaviano Labò
Barnaba - Aldo Protti
Laura - Mignon Dunn
Alvise - Norman Scott
La Cieca - Luisa Bartoletti
Zuàne - Tulio Gagliardo

Un Cantore - Guerrino Boschetti
Isèpo - Italo Pasini

The cast here might not look as starry as some more celebrated recordings and indeed certain singers are merely good rather than great; furthermore, the sound is acceptably clear, undistorted, but intermittently wavery mono. Still, it is very well conducted by Cillario and chief among its attractions are that pint-sized powerhouse tenor Flaviano Labò. I am a big admirer of this neglected singer; he is passionate, lyrical and produces a steady stream of beautiful sound; his heroic "Cielo e mar" brings the house down and he receives an extended, two-minute ovation, here recorded in full. He gives a better account of Enzo Grimaldi than either of Callas' tenors in her two commercial recordings and is on the same level as the best (Del Monaco, Tucker, Corelli, Pavarotti and Carreras).

Mignon Dunn is a known - and estimable - quantity as Laura; she sings, very effectively, the same role with Corelli in Philadelphia. She has a strong, vibrant mezzo, able to generate the kind of passion needed to compete with the soprano in their Act 2 cat fight. Aldo Protti is his usual entirely dependable self - never very exciting but wholly on top of and inside his role with all the notes; he, too, produces a consistently pleasing tone. Throw in a good La Cieca, and the sound bass Norman Scott - who lacks some black heft but is nonetheless, once again, vocally very healthy - and that leaves the prima donna, Lucilla Udovich (sometimes Italianised to "Lucilla Udovick"), an excellent American soprano whose career was based in Italy and of whom I had never heard - but must say surprised me somewhat, especially as she is so often reminiscent of Callas in timbre. Like Callas, she can occasionally be a bit unsteady and squally but she also has the same tigerish, dramatic quality in the aforementioned duet and commands the sweep of the role, so a little wildness is by no means inappropriate, but her intonation can be approximate and she seems to run out voice a bit towards the end of "Suicidio".

The bronchial audience is very appreciative of what is clearly much more than a routine performance by circuit singers; what's more the third CD offers a substantial bonus in the form of extended excerpts from a *Madama Butterfly* from the previous year in the same theatre.

Fausto Cleva – 1962 – live mono; Cantus/Living Stage

Orchestra - Metropolitan Opera

Chorus - Metropolitan Opera

La Gioconda - Eileen Farrell

Enzo - Franco Corelli

Barnaba - Robert Merrill

Laura - Nell Rankin

Alvise - Giorgio Tozzi

La Cieca - Mignon Dunn

Zuàne - George Cehanovsky

Un Cantore - John Trehy

Isèpo - Alessio De Paolis

Un Pilota - Peter Sliker

This live performance has been issued on several labels (Arkadia, Grand Tier et al); currently the "Living Stage" edition is available at a reasonable price but you'll need to watch out for it in its latest incarnation as it pops in and out of view like a magician's bunny. It will continue to be issued in some guise or other as this is a terrific version, explaining why *La gioconda* featured quite regularly on the roster of the Met in the 50's and 60's but is now much more rarely heard: we simply cannot so easily put together the six voices to do it proper justice. Voices comparable even to those belonging to the likes of Nell Rankin are now harder to come by; she makes a wonderful job of Laura, bringing as much passion to that underestimated role as Farrell's Gioconda and matching her triumphantly in

their famous "Anyone you-can-love, I-can-love-better" slanging match. Farrell herself has a very large, beautiful, slightly unruly voice, whose on-the-edge quality works well in conveying the instability of this tormented character, although compared with Callas, in her shattering 1959 studio recording, she is a tad anonymous. Tozzi is a tower of strength as Alvise, bested only by Siepi and Vinco, perhaps. Luxury casting is Mignon Dunn as La Cieca, more often found singing Laura, as in the famous Philadelphia performances with Corelli on Bel Canto. The best singing of all here comes from Robert Merrill and the great Franco Corelli, in a favourite role. Favourite, perhaps, because it's actually quite brief but can make maximum impact sung as it is here, in incredibly free, open, ringing voice. A celebrated aria, a couple of wonderful duets with the baritone and mezzo and a superb trio, as Enzo and Laura ride off into the sunset (rather like *La Fanciulla del West*) unwittingly leaving Gioconda to her gruesome sacrifice - all this suits Corelli ideally and he is in very finest, heroic voice; reason enough to buy this set. Merrill is peerless in what I think is best role, even alongside baritones such as Bastianini and Milnes. He leers, snarls and fires off salvos of top notes to ram home the frightening intensity of Barnaba, as remorseless a villain as Iago.

Cleva is vastly experienced and elicits a taut, vibrant account from the excellent Metropolitan Opera Orchestra, even if just occasionally there are a few blips in co-ordination (but this is a live performance, don't forget). The audience can be maddeningly bronchial the sound is only what you'd expect for a live mono recording from 1962 - acceptable when the performance is as enthralling as this. Another reviewer elsewhere refers to cuts; I admit that, following with only a libretto but not a score, I have not detected any - though as the timing comes in a few minutes shorter than most versions and allows the opera to be fitted onto two discs instead of the usual three, I imagine that this is not attributable only to Cleva's brisk pace.

For Corelli aficionados, this live 1962 set is unmissable.

Anton Guadagno – 1964 – live mono; Bel Canto Society

Orchestra - The Lyric Opera of Philadelphia

Chorus - The Lyric Opera of Philadelphia

La Gioconda - Maria Curtis Verna

Enzo - Franco Corelli

Barnaba - Cesare Bardelli

Laura - Mignon Dunn

Alvise - Bonaldo Giaiotti

La Cieca - Gladys Kriese

Excerpt (1966):

La Gioconda - Renata Tebaldi

Enzo - Franco Corelli

Barnaba - Anselmo Colzani

Laura - Mignon Dunn

Alvise - Joshua Hecht

La Cieca - Aurora Woodrow

Zuàne - John Darrenkamp

Un Pilota - Aldo Marra

Corelli never sang in *La gioconda* outside of the Met apart from these two performances from 1964 and 1966 in Philadelphia, both ably conducted by Guadagno. He is obviously in his prime and the recording is remarkably satisfactory, given that it was made with only one mike suspended in front of the stage. The remastering has removed a great deal of hiss, wobble, pitch fluctuation and distortion such that we have a realistic and absorbing reproduction of two first rate performances. The first

performance is complete on two discs; the third disc gives us 71 minutes of the second performance starting half way through Act 2 to the end apart from a couple of cuts whereby we miss Alvisè's arias.

Corelli's co-singers in both performances are by no means also-rans: Mignon Dunn repeats her powerful, creamy-voiced Laura, Gladys Kriese in 1964 gets a wholly merited tumultuous burst of appreciative applause for her big aria "Voce di donna", both pairs of baritones and basses are excellent and in Mary Curtis-Verna and Renata Tebaldi we have two sopranos of star quality. Tebaldi's middle voice and lower register are astounding in their power; her top is little shrieky but vehement. Curtis-Verna, somewhat disregarded today, was a Met stalwart from the mid-fifties to the mid-sixties, having a big, dark dramatic-soprano and displaying impeccable musicianship. She was renowned for salvaging performances and also as a prima donna in her own right - there is, for example, a commendable 1956 recording of *Aida* on Cetra with Corelli.

Apart from some very obvious flubs in co-ordination such as in the duet with Barnaba in Act 1 when Corelli is singing a whole bar ahead of the orchestra, he is in top form, interpolating two high C's and sounding every inch the desperate piratical hero. Byronic roles such as Don Carlos and Alvaro in *La forza del destino* brought out the best in him; this is another key signature role although like Don Carlos he never made a studio recording, so this is the best we'll find alongside the excellent 1962 Met live recording with Farrell and Merrill under Cleva (see my review). His trumpeted, heroic tones are simply inimitable, his controlled diminuendi heart-stopping and he lights up the stage when he is on it as the audience reaction confirms. Having said that, applause is deservedly frequent and generous for the other artists here; they all sing with intensity and passion, each igniting the other. I wonder if the Philadelphians knew how lucky they were to be hearing voices of the kind we can only dream about today.

I love this opera and have a good few recordings but no-one else apart from Del Monaco with Cerquetti brings quite the animal energy to the role that Corelli musters. Tebaldi's studio recording with Bergonzi is my all-round favourite and I cherish Callas' second studio set for the searing truthfulness and pathos of her characterisation of Gioconda but this set from the Bel Canto Society is a very desirable supplement, preserving not just Corelli's prowess as Enzo but also a really integrated, dramatic company realisation of a stirring opera.

Bruno Bartoletti – 1966 – live mono; House of Opera/Premiere Opera

Orchestra - Teatro Colón (Buenos Aires)

Chorus - Teatro Colón (Buenos Aires)

La Gioconda - Elena Souliotis

Enzo - Richard Tucker

Barnaba - Cornell MacNeil

Laura - Rosalind Elias

Alvisè - Paolo Washington

La Cieca - Luisa Bartoletti

Zuàne - Pino de Vescovi

Un Cantore - Guerrino Boschetti

Isèpo - Nicolás Cuttone

Un Pilota - José Crea

This is an interesting recording; Elena Souliotis' career was meteoric and brief and catching her on a good night such as this can be very rewarding; furthermore, she is partnered by a really first-rate cast, Tucker's voice at this stage of his career was especially well suited to the role of Enzo; it was large, tireless and effulgent and he is sparing with the mannerisms – sobs, gulping, glottal catches and the like - which sometimes marred his performances. Cornell MacNeil – also Barnaba to Leyla Gencer's best *Gioconda*, the live 1972 recording – has an inherently sinister, powerful voice, ideal for

the role and his top notes are thrilling. Rosalind Elias repeats her excellent Laura that she gave us in the 1957 studio recording with Milanov, Paolo Washington makes a saturnine Alvisè and Luisa Bartoletti (no relation) is a steady, expressive La Cieca – the audience are enthusiastically appreciative of her big aria. The presence of regular *La Gioconda* conductor Bartoletti guarantees good pacing and the mono sound is good – dynamically “flat” but very clear and largely undistorted – so clear, in fact, that the prompter is sometimes rather too audible.

Attention must centre of the two principals. Both have big, steely, clarion voices; Tucker’s impassioned “Cielo e mar” displays his lovely legato and reserves of power admirably; the audience goes wild. Souliotis is typically reckless in her attack, far removed from the rather too polite or slightly under-powered Giocondas we hear from, say, Caballé or Corridori. There are faults – improperly integrated registers, lack of control, difficulty bringing of the famous floated B flat in the First Act – but her on-the-edge quality properly conveys the frequent desperation of the heroine’s various trials and plights. Her uninhibited use of her lower register and searing top notes really enliven her characterisation. Her Act 2 duelling duet on board ship with Elias’s Laura is a thrilling highlight. “Suicidio” is similarly riveting, powerful, full of pathos and emotional variety, rivalling Callas; “fra le tenebre” is a tour de force. The audience response is ecstatic – rightly so.

This is a deeply satisfying, large-scale account, never guilty of undue restraint but performed in the true and generous spirit of the piece.

Giuseppe Patanè – 1967 – live mono; The Opera Lovers

Orchestra - San Francisco Opera

Chorus - San Francisco Opera

La Gioconda - Leyla Gencer

Enzo - Renato Cioni

Barnaba - Chester Ludgin

Laura - Grace Bumbry

Alvisè - Ara Berberian

La Cieca - Maureen Forrester

Zuàne - Allan Monk

Un Cantore - John Beauchamp

Isèpo - David Clements

Un Pilota - Richard Styles

The sound here is cloudy, cavernous, distorted mono and compromises what looks a - partially, at least – promising line-up, conducted by the ever-reliable Patanè, who made something of a speciality of this opera. The presence of a trio of great women singers in Gencer, Bumbry and Forrester is a cheering prospect; that of Cioni less so and the other two male singers are probably unknown to modern listeners. They are in fact quite adequate but nothing special and Cioni’s odd, strangulated sound is wholly inappropriate. Bumbry and Gencer tear the stage up, but otherwise the sound and casting weaknesses rule this out.

Lamberto Gardelli – 1967 - studio stereo; Decca

Orchestra - Santa Cecilia

Chorus - Santa Cecilia

La Gioconda - Renata Tebaldi

Enzo - Carlo Bergonzi

Barnaba - Robert Merrill

Laura - Marilyn Horne

Alvisè - Nicola Ghiuselev

La Cieca - Oralia Domínguez
Zuàne - Silvio Maionica
Isèpo - Piero De Palma
Un Pilota - Silvio Maionica

La gioconda has been extraordinarily fortunate and successful on record, but this one goes to the top of my list of recommendations by virtue of both the sound quality - warm, spacious, with a hint of reverb around it to provide theatricality - and the superlative quality of the performances. This might have been relatively late in Tebaldi's career but you can hear here how closely she studied and modelled herself on Callas without sacrificing her individuality. There is no screaming; the top is simply laser-like and she takes risks with her lower register: her baleful cry of "Fuggi" would intimidate the most determined and courageous Laura. This is clearly one of her most involved and powerful recorded performances, completely blowing away any accusation that she was a bland singer. Similarly, I have never heard Bergonzi sound closer to a true dramatic tenor; sometimes the voice was a tad light for roles such as Enzo - but certainly not here; he is in clarion voice. Merrill is simply the best Barnaba of them all: leering, sardonic and in superb, brazen form. In the lower female voices, Dominguez and Horne contrast well, the former bringing pathos and gravitas to La Cieca and Horne combining a rip-roaring lower register in the great vocal cat-fight with Tebaldi in Act 2 with a certain vulnerability which really suggests a wronged and frightened woman. I was worried that Ghiuselev would prove to be a weak Alvisè but he is in tremendous voice, his black bass exclaiming vengefully. The orchestra and chorus are vigorous and assured; Gardelli knows exactly how this block-buster should go.

Tebaldi's vast voice and temperament - when inspired - suited her ideally to this role, which is why she continued to perform it late - perhaps too late - into her career. It is a crying shame that this Decca set (released on CD in 1991) has been out of the catalogue for so long; inexplicable, too. If you see a second-hand copy available at a reasonable price, snap it up. If you can lay your hands on it, this Gardelli set is the one to have; it's a complete operatic experience.

Oliviero De Fabritiis – 1971 – live mono; Mondo Musico

Orchestra - Teatro La Fenice di Venezia
Chorus - Teatro La Fenice di Venezia

La Gioconda - Leyla Gencer
Enzo - Umberto Grilli
Barnaba - Mario Zanasi
Laura - Maria Luisa (Bordin) Nave
Alvisè - Ruggero Raimondi
La Cieca - Mirna Pecile
Zuàne - Paolo Badoer
Un Cantore - Giovanni Antonini
Isèpo - Guido Fabbris
Un Pilota - Uberto Scaglione

This is another chance to hear Gencer in a favourite role ably partnered by Maria Luisa Nave, but neither the distant mono sound nor the cast here is as compelling as the festival performance from the following year. La Cieca is tremulous, Zanasi has a very attractive lyric baritone but not the heft required and the same goes for Grilli, whose tenor is too light, tight and white to represent entirely adequately the heroic sea-captain-prince - and often sounds flat to me. A young Raimondi sounds just that, lacking some of the gravitas beefier basses provide; this need not detain us, given the alternatives.

Giuseppe Patanè – 1972 – live stereo; Live Opera Heaven

Orchestra - Macerata Opera Festival
Chorus - Macerata Opera Festival - Pueri Cantores di Macerata

La Gioconda - Leyla Gencer
Enzo - Carlo Bergonzi
Barnaba - Cornell MacNeil
Laura - Maria Luisa (Bordin) Nave
Alvise - Carlo Cava
La Cieca - Fedora Barbieri
Zuàne - Giuseppe Morresi
Isèpo - Athos Cesarini
Un Pilota - Elvio Marinangeli

The stereo sound here in the third chance to hear Leyla Gencer's Gioconda is edgy and there's a fair amount of exterior traffic, stage and audience noise – especially constant, intrusive coughing and even some talking, but it's considerably better than some live recordings and the cast is impressive. Gencer's voice has acquired quite a bit of a beat in her vibrato and the glottal catch in her tone is either intrusive or seductive, depending on your response (mine inclines to the latter), but she still has the power, the lower register is strong and she can float her top notes exquisitely; she remains a compelling vocal actor. It might be said that Bergonzi never had quite enough a voice for Enzo but he always made most of what he did have and his top rings out. "Cielo e mar" is a master-class in impassioned control and the audience go wild, so he encores to more frenzied approval. Maria Luisa Nave made a speciality of the role of Laura, appearing in three recordings in this survey, and she matches Gencer in their on-board slanging match; it's thrilling stuff. MacNeil always had the right, biting baritone for the role of the evil Barnaba. Its sound means that it can't be a first recommendation but it preserves a live, red-blooded performance of Italian opera at its best and by far the most satisfying of Gencer's three live recordings.

Bruno Bartoletti – 1979 – live stereo; Gala

Orchestra - San Francisco Opera
Chorus - San Francisco Opera

La Gioconda - Renata Scotto
Enzo - Luciano Pavarotti
Barnaba - Norman Mittelman
Laura - Stefania Toczyska
Alvise - Ferruccio Furlanetto
La Cieca - Margarita Lilowa
Zuàne - John Del Carlo
Isèpo - Tonio di Paolo
Un Pilota - Winther Andersen
Due cantori - Boris Martinovich, Richard Halle

This is a recording from the production run which occasioned an irreparable rift between long-time friends and singing partners Renata Scotto and Luciano Pavarotti. I quote from the *Los Angeles Times* in 1985: "The moment of conflict, when Pavarotti took a final - some say unscheduled - solo bow and Scotto retired to her dressing-room and uttered an Italian obscenity, was recorded on television."

That juicy piece of gossip has nothing to do with the quality of the performance. The first pleasant surprise here is that it is in good stereo sound for its era and provenance. It's a bit tubby but quite bearable. Nonetheless, the prospect of Renata Scotto this late in her career is sufficient raise doubts in the minds of seasoned listeners. Yes; the top spreads a little at forte but not offensively and she sounds far, far better than I expected. She often sounds very similar, vocally and temperamentally, to

her senior by ten years, Leyla Gencer. Despite some shrillness and beat, "Suicidio" is riveting. Pavarotti is in ringing, confident voice in a role which, like the Duke in *Rigoletto*, suited his extravert style but gave him opportunities, as in the close of the first verse of "Cielo e mar" to employ his famous "honeyed" mezza-voce.

La Cieca is very good, one of the best on record. Furlanetto makes an authoritative sonorous Alvisè, though a bit rocky even at only thirty years old. Canadian baritone Norman Mittelman, was hitherto unknown to me; he delivers a sturdy, stolid Barnaba of no special distinction or imagination. I have always liked Stefania Toczyńska and she makes a thrilling, vibrant Laura, wholly able to keep up with Scotto terms of voice and histrionics.

Bartoletti is another of those regular *La gioconda* conductors, soon to make the studio recording with Pavarotti, and he knows how to pace proceedings. This is certainly one of the most recommendable live recordings.

Jesús López Cobos – 1979 – live stereo; Opera d'Oro

Orchestra - Grand-Théâtre de Genève

Chorus - Grand-Théâtre de Genève

La Gioconda - Montserrat Caballé

Enzo - José Carreras

Barnaba - Matteo Manuguerra

Laura - Maria Luisa (Bordin) Nave

Alvisè - Bonaldo Giaiotti

La Cieca - Patricia Payne

Zuàne - Michel Bouvier

Un Cantore - Rémo Cambiati

Isèpo - Jaume Barò

Un Pilota - Michel Bouvier

This live Opera d'Oro bargain set is a good way to get to know the calorific pleasures of this opera, in that it is in decent stereo sound without too much audience intrusion beyond the odd cough and some appreciative applause. It ticks the box for six top-rank voices, even if one senses that both Caballé and Carreras are pushing their fundamentally lyric sound to do justice to roles a size - well, half a size - too big for them. Caballé occasionally squawks and doesn't really have the lower-register solidity required - but she fakes it convincingly and throws herself into the part whole-heartedly, deploying her trademark floating top movingly. Carreras is occasionally on the verge of a wobble but this was 1979 and he was singing a whole slew of roles too big for him, including *La forza del destino*, *Il trovatore* and Enzo as per here; the sound is still plaintive, plangent and beautiful. I always enjoyed Matteo Manuguerra's firm, resonant baritone and he was a good vocal actor. The lesser-known Maria Luisa Nave had a big, penetrating mezzo ideal for the part while the recently late Bonaldo Giaiotti has a big, smooth, rolling black basso cantante. It is always a mistake to cheese-pare on the casting in this opera so Patricia Payne's voluminous contralto is very welcome; she makes something really satisfying of her big moments. The conducting, singing and playing are just fine: flexible, lusty and expert respectively.

I have other versions of this opera that I might prefer - indeed, there aren't many recordings which are not recommendable - but this one belongs up there with the best.

A good starting point for comparison is the second Act, which distils the none-too-subtle virtues of the work; if the central cat-fight between the two divas in competition for the hero's love doesn't grab you, this one's not for you. It certainly works here, with Caballé and Nave snarling at each other like two vixens and almost putting their instruments in peril in the process. Try it.

Bruno Bartoletti - 1981- studio stereo; Decca

Orchestra - National Philharmonic Orchestra

Chorus - London Opera Chorus

La Gioconda - Montserrat Caballé

Enzo - Luciano Pavarotti

Barnaba - Sherrill Milnes

Laura - Agnes Baltsa

Alvise - Nicolai Ghiaurov

La Cieca - Alfreda Hodgson

Zuàne - John Del Carlo

Un Cantore - Stephen Varcoe

Isèpo - Regolo Romani

Un Pilota - Neil Jenkins

Some previous reviewers have found this recording slack and drawn out but its conductor, Bartoletti, was an experienced and skilled practitioner of this opera, having conducted it many times live and to my ears he simply gives some beautiful voices more space to make what some hear as self-conscious effects. In truth, however, perhaps neither of the principals is ideal for the lead roles: Pavarotti's lyric tenor is a little light and lacking in heft for Enzo - although he makes a lovely job of "Cielo e mar" - and in this regard he is similar to Bergonzi in the Gardelli set. Both, however, deliver performances of distinction. Caballé is similarly perhaps a voice-size too small for the part and sometimes a tad matronly, but her floated pianissimi are a dream; less attractive are her sometimes awkward and forced excursions in to her lower register and the edge her top notes take on when she is going for volume. Yet the other three main roles are ideally cast: Milnes in particular makes a leering, virile, bullying and sardonic Barnaba, relishing the villainy and rolling his tongue round the text with relish, exploiting the Italianate gleam in his baritone at every occasion. Ghiaurov makes superb Alvise, saturnine and domineering, huge of tone, and Agnes Baltsa is a very strong, impassioned Laura. In what is essentially a cameo role, Alfreda Hodgson is absolutely superb as La Cieca: often billed as a mezzo she was of course a true contralto, rich, seamless and trenchant of utterance - really special. (What a loss she was at only 51 years old, dying the year before the annus horribilis of 1993, when we lost Troyanos, Popp and Auger, all to cancer and all similarly young, in their fifties.) By the by, kudos to the London Opera Chorus for their spirited contribution.

Some listeners have found that this recording exudes a whiff of the production line too common in the golden age of opera recording but I think it's much better than that. It was made in Walthamstow Town Hall and is first class. It's not the most thrilling of performances but it is balm to the ears and does honour to an opera which is still sometimes sneered at.

Giuseppe Patanè – 1987 – studio digital; CBS

Orchestra - Hungarian State Opera

Chorus - Hungarian State Opera

La Gioconda - Éva Marton

Enzo - Giorgio Lamberti (Casellato-Lamberti)

Barnaba - Sherrill Milnes

Laura - Livia Budai

Alvise - Samuel Ramey

La Cieca - Anne Gjevang

Zuàne - Tamás Bátor

Un Cantore - János Tóth

Isèpo - Gábor Kállay

This set immediately has a lot going for it: a promising cast full of celebrated singers, good – if slightly distant, over-reverberant – digital sound, an experienced conductor, a first-rate orchestra and chorus, and a complete, quadrilingual libretto.

The last bonus is also indicative of, and the consequence of, a drawback: this was issued in 1990 when recording companies were more generous about such things but it hasn't been re-issued since, so you have to look out for an old or used copy.

Marton's soprano has the right dramatic-spinto lay-out with the requisite lower register. The voice is large, even huge, without yet the beat which later obtruded and she injects real pathos and passion into the delivery of her words. Delicacy is not her forte but instead she brings massive security to her singing and makes glorious sounds. Some slight rockiness is creeping into Milnes' baritone by this stage of his career but it is still resonant and he, too, is still a master of verbal inflection, oozing malevolence. Anne Gevang is a steady, pleasing La Cieca, but rather placid and thus unmemorable. Samuel Ramey in his prime is splendid as Alvisè, even if ideally one wants a touch more basso growl and snarl in his beautiful voice. Livia Budai is adequate but rather generalised as Laura – and I could certainly do with more animation on her part in her competitive duet with Marton who decidedly overshadows her. Giorgio Lamberti, eighty this year, stood in for the scheduled Domingo, who cancelled. He has an open, cutting-edge tenor and is careful with the text, bothering to act vocally "Scoperto son", for example, but the basic timbre has a whine in it and is without the heroic heft such as Tucker, Corelli or Del Monaco bring to the role of Ezio. "Cielo e mar" is carefully graded dynamically but rather scooped and slurred and the climax less than overwhelming. His contribution is by no means poor but constitutes the closest we come to any weakness here.

This is a good studio account, with some excellent singing but ultimately lacking the impetus and excitement which drive the best versions.

Marcello Viotti – 2001 – studio digital; EMI/Warner

Orchestra - Münchner Rundfunkorchester

Chorus - Bayerische Rundfunkchor - Münchner Kinderchor

La Gioconda - Violeta Urmana

Enzo - Plácido Domingo

Barnaba - Lado Atanelli

Laura - Luciana D'Intino

Alvisè - Roberto Scandiuzzi

La Cieca - Elisabetta Fiorillo

Zuàne - Paolo Battaglia

Un Cantore - Paolo Battaglia

Isèpo - Kristian Benedikt

Un Pilota - Tim Hennis

The first great advantages here are the lovely digital sound, the playing of the Bavarian Radio Orchestra, the excellence of the chorus and, above all, the sure touch of Viotti's conducting. The cast is more variable: Domingo is here nearly sixty and one wonders if he has been caught early enough for his first recording of this heroic role. He sounds much as he always does but the voice is audibly thinner and sometimes even pinched; his delivery of "Cielo e mar" is thoroughly professional but I miss the pharyngeal heft of a tenor like Tucker or Del Monaco can bring to the aria – or Bergonzi's or Pavarotti's beauty of tone.

Lithuanian mezzo/dramatic soprano Violeta Urmana is in her prime at forty; in fact, this recording was made just as she was making the change in vocal tessitura. She is vocally very impressive,

sounding like a proper dramatic soprano and not a pushed-up mezzo, with easy, floated top notes and very little shrillness, but she is somehow rather anonymous, especially if you are habituated to the kind of individual touches afforded by the characterisation we hear in Callas' or Milanov's portrayals.

The rest of the cast is less starry: Lada Atanelli is a good baritone whose tone sounds remarkably similar to Cappuccilli's, but his voice tends to spread and is not as steady; nor does he do much at all with the words – far too many opportunities slip by without his making any impression. D'Intino is good; she often sounds very similar to Urmana but their battle is not really one of equals, in that Urmana has the greater weight in her lower register, which creates a peculiar imbalance and a reversal of what's required. Their joint top B flat concluding their cat-fight is a laser-blast, however.

The decline in Scandiuzzi's once promising bass is already very apparent: it is rocky and blaring. Fiorillo's La Cieca is fine.

Ultimately, this has much to recommend it but what's really missing here is a cast which gets under the skin of characters which can remain rather two-dimensional if they are not animated by consummate singer-actors with great voices. For that, look to a recording more consistently cast with singers of greater dramatic gifts.

Donato Renzetti – 2005 – live, digital; Dynamic

Orchestra - Arena di Verona

Chorus - Arena di Verona

La Gioconda - Andrea Gruber

Enzo - Marco Berti

Barnaba - Alberto Mastromarino

Laura - Ildiko Komlósy

Alvise - Carlo Colombara

La Cieca - Elisabetta Fiorillo

Zuàne - Francesco Palmieri

Un Cantore - Graziano Polidori

Isèpo - Mauro Buffoli

Un Pilota - Giovanni Bellavia

Voce interna - Alessandro Calamai

This live recording from the Arena di Verona is in excellent digital sound and, unusually in more recent recordings, an English-Italian libretto is provided in a handsome package. There are stage thumps and various extraneous noises but nothing distracting; balances are good. The first solo voice we hear is that of Alberto Mastromarino, who makes a sound, gruff Barnaba; he hasn't much line but characterises strongly. Elisabeth Fiorillo is an impressively fruity-voiced, assertive La Cieca who steals the show with the big aria. Andrea Gruber a large-voiced, almost excessively vibrant Gioconda with a lot of pulse in her soprano, similar to Marton – she doesn't bother to float "Come t'amo" but just whacks it out. She has a great lower register and a laser top; "Suicidio" is intermittently ungainly but also thrilling. Marco Berti has a rather coarse tenor without much intrinsic beauty but he has the stamina to keep up with his co-singers and his Act 1 confrontation with Barnaba draws deserved applause. "Cielo e mar" is a bit rustic and he milks it, but it works in the context of an arena performance and its climax is stirring. Ildiko Komlósy as Laura is very similarly voiced to Gruber in timbre and generous vibrato – but not wobble; they make a well-matched pair of rivals. Carlo Colombara is a sonorous, authentically Italian Alvise in the Siepi school; these are voices chosen to fill the arena and the musical phrases alike, even at the cost of refinement – but this is not a refined opera. Renzetti' conducting is finely paced and sympathetic to his singers without indulging them too much.

This turned out to be far superior to my expectation. It's hard not to succumb to such a committed "can belto" approach to the opera.

Recommendations in summary:

We really are spoilt for choice here and rather than make one overall recommendation I make the following, multiple and tentative suggestions with the proviso that your taste might lead to a preference for other, equally worthy, recordings.

Historical, live mono: Panizza 1939

Live analogue mono: so many to choose from - Cleva 1962; Guadagno 1964; Bartoletti 1966

Live analogue stereo: Patanè 1972; Bartoletti 1979

Studio analogue stereo: Votto, 1959 (mainly for Callas); Gavazzeni 1957 and Gardelli 1967

Studio digital: Patanè 1987

Live digital: Renzetti 2005

Ralph Moore