

Strauss' *Die Frau ohne Schatten* – A survey of the discography
by Ralph Moore

There are over forty recordings of FROSCH (as Strauss and his librettist jocularly nicknamed it, being German for “Frog” and also the nut on a violin bow) of which only three are studio-made. As I wished to consider complete or near complete recordings, I have not included the wartime performance of extended excerpts from Vienna conducted by Böhm, with a starry cast including Torsten Ralf, Hilde Konetzni, Elisabeth Höngen and Josef Herrmann, or another heavily cut version again conducted by him in 1953 with Set Svanholm, Eleanor Steber, Elisabeth Höngen again, Karl Kamann and Christel Goltz. Otherwise, I review fifteen recordings below, including all three studio versions and what I hope are the best of the live recordings including the latest, which is live and complete.

The stock of this opera has steadily risen over the years and has become the favourite of many a Strauss aficionado, even over *Der Rosenkavalier*. Its abstruse plot and even pretentious libretto have hindered its appeal; perhaps, too, its stance as a hymn to married love and procreation as a woman's fulfilment does not sit easily with the modern Zeitgeist, although it also underlines the importance of tolerance, forgiveness and reconciliation, especially via the humane and benign presence of the long-suffering Barak and the repentance of his shrewish young wife who comes to value his humdrum but saintly qualities. It also embraces a counter-cultural morality in its implicit condemnation of the Emperor's excessive carnal attachment to his wife; here is a husband who visits his wife every night for the purposes of conjugal union only to abandon her all day long while he goes hunting. The Empress, too, lacks psychological health and wholeness; both must grow up mentally, morally and spiritually in order to earn the right to parenthood and married contentment through self-abnegation. Her desperate desire for children is juxtaposed with the Wife's apparent refusal to welcome motherhood; in a sense, they are Doppelgänger and their respectively polarised stances regarding fertility give rise to some wonderfully whacky episodes, such as the eerie, haunting event when the voices of Barak's Wife's “Ungeborene” (Unborn children) sing through the mouths of the little fishes frying in the pan for Barak's supper, or in the paean to marital love which concludes the opera, where the two couples sing a quartet against the background of the same unseen, ethereal, angelic voices, representing the children who will spring from the loins of what will now doubtless be two fruitful marriages. And if that doesn't provoke the progressive feminist, I don't know what will...

But of course, it was written over a hundred years ago and it is the music which matters above all - and Strauss' most sumptuous score does indeed contain some extraordinary music. The aforementioned singing frying fish, the sinuous, soaring melodies such as Barak's “Mir anvertraut” and the Nightwatchmen's hymn to marital love concluding Act 1, the high drama of the Nurse's loathing for humankind (“Menschendunst ist uns Todesluft” – “The air of mankind for us breathes death”), Barak's fury when he discovers that his wife has sold her shadow and threatens to slay her with a sword which miraculously appears in his hand, or the Empress' refusal to succumb to temptation and drink from the Fountain of Life in order to claim the Wife's shadow for herself – “Ich will nicht!” – the glorious cacophony of that concluding quartet, constantly ratcheting up the tension and mounting ever higher – these are theatrical masterstrokes in a remarkable work which really has no parallel in the operatic canon.

However, I readily concede that at three hours FROSCH has its longueurs and am thus not opposed to some judicious cuts, especially if they are made in the Nurse's extensive diatribes; nor can I get too worked up about, for example, Karajan's re-jigging of the order of scenes in the live recording of his 1964 production in Vienna; apparently it enrages some listeners. The complete score is found only in the very first recording made in 1950, the two later studio recordings by Sawallisch and Solti and the most recent live recording on Oehms; all the others feature cuts.

One conductor predominates in the catalogue and that is Strauss' friend and latterly most favoured conductor, Karl Böhm; I consider three of his recordings here. I don't know how many times he

conducted it but he certainly took it all over the world for a quarter of a century, having been instrumental in its post-war revival, first in a concert performance in Vienna in 1953, then in a stage production at the rebuilt Staatsoper in 1955, which resulted in the first studio recording for Decca.

Just as Böhm dominates the conducting category, Leonie Rysanek is the soprano most associated with the role of Empress, which she sang so many times over her unfeasibly long career. Any lover of this opera will want a recording featuring her and there is plenty of choice as she sings in no fewer than seven here.

As a final point of interest, Strauss' love affair with the soprano voice and disdain for the tenor voice is well documented; very few of his operas have a major role for a heroic tenor. He wheels one in for the concluding scene of *Ariadne auf Naxos* and punishes him cruelly with music of a wickedly high tessitura, mocks him by giving him preening "Italian tenor" cameo appearances – but admittedly wonderful music – in *Der Rosenkavalier* and *Capriccio*, makes Herod a leering pervert in *Salome*, devotes a few minutes to depicting Aegisth as a weak, bleating victim in *Elektra* and so on. Only in *Die ägyptische Helena* and possibly *Daphne* are tenors given substantial, quasi-heroic – but still morally dubious – roles; the Emperor here is certainly no role-model for aspiring the New Male but at least he has a really meaty part with some sustained singing in heroic mode, so his contribution is crucial and of considerably more importance than in most of Strauss' operas.

The recordings

Winfried Zillig – 1950 (live radio broadcast; mono) Ponto; Cantus Orchestra - Sinfonie-Orchester des Hessischen Rundfunks Frankfurt

Kaiser - Heinrich Bensing*
 Kaiserin - Annelies Kupper
 Amme - Diana Eustrati
 Barak – Karl Kronenberg
 Färberin - Erna Schlüter
 Geisterbote - Günther Ambrosius
 Erscheinung eines Jünglings - Joachim Stein
 Stimme des Falken - Christa Ludwig
 Stimme von Oben - Käthe Lindloff
 Einäugige - Rolf Heide
 Einarmige - Sanders Schier
 Bucklige - Joachim Stein
 Ein Hüter der Schwelle des Tempels - Maria Madlen Madsen
 *misprinted as Behsing in both issues

This is the first complete recording and furthermore it is absolutely complete, which does not happen again until the Solti and Sawallisch sets. The mono sound is harsh and boxy but clean and acceptable for its provenance and era. The cast is great – not one wobbler among them all. Several of the singers were celebrated in their day but are now rather forgotten; they all have firm, resonant voices, even if Schlüter is occasionally a little shrill and strained, ducking some high Bs and Cs. Kupper sometimes lacks weight and depth but has stamina and penetration – and pinging top notes She reminds me of Deborah Voigt at her best for Sinopoli and really nails the Judgement Scene. Greek mezzo Diana Eustrati, of whom I have never heard, is one of the best Nurses on record and tenor Heinrich Bensing is sturdy and secure, if not the most tonally alluring of Emperors, with a rather wide vibrato. Karl Kronenberg is a baritone of the Josef Metternich type: clean, powerful and attractive of timbre. One Günther Ambrosius – another singer whom I have never previously encountered - is a splendid Spirit Messenger. The cast list tells us that the Voice of the Falcon is Christa Ludwig, who would have been 22 at the time – but even allowing for her youth, it sounds nothing like her and I'm

sure that's wrong. Zillig is a very competent conductor, inclined to keep things moving fast, which is no bad thing. The Frankfurt Radio Orchestra is phenomenal - extraordinarily good, and not just for a "regional" or "provincial" band.

If you are tolerant of the rather crude sound and can find an affordable copy, I recommend this as thoroughly enjoyable, especially as it gives the score complete, but its sonic and vocal limitations perhaps restrict its appeal to the collector of vintage accounts.

Rudolf Kempe – 1954 (live; mono) Walhall (and can be ordered from www.vocal-classics.com)

Orchestra - Bayerische Staatsoper

Chorus - Bayerische Staatsoper

Kaiser - Hans Hopf

Kaiserin - Leonie Rysanek

Amme - Lilian Benningsen

Barak - Josef Metternich

Färberin - Marianne Schech

Geisterbote - Kurt Böhme

Erscheinung eines Jünglings - Howard Vandenburg

Stimme des Falken - Gerda Sommerschuh

Stimme von Oben - Ina Gerhein

Einäugige - Carl Hoppe

Einarmige - Rudolf Wünzer

Bucklige - Karl Ostertag

Ein Hüter der Schwelle des Tempels - Erika Köth

The mono sound here is clear if rather resonant – rather like the voices. I am not familiar with Lilian Benningsen, but she sings a secure Nurse; her voice sometimes turns shrill but she is more animated and an improvement, I think, over Elisabeth Höngen for Karl Böhm the following year, when three of the principal singers here performed and recorded for Böhm, but they all sound even fresher and firmer here for Kempe in 1954. Kurt Böhme in particular is much steadier here and both Hans Hopf and Leonie Rysanek sound more youthful – although he has some passing intonation problems in the last scene. Her big scene in Act 3 where she appeals to her unseen father and resists temptation is riveting, and her top notes have a thrilling, laser-like intensity to rival Nilsson's. This is surely the best of her seven assumptions of the role of Empress, all considered in this survey.

Metternich and Schech were almost exact contemporaries and in their considerable prime here: his elegant baritone is a beautiful, smooth instrument with impeccable legato and an easy top, imparting real nobility to the humble Dyer, while she for once makes his Wife sound suitably youthful and portrays her vividly without making her sound too shrewish. So often in recordings the pair sound too middle-aged, so their characterisation here is refreshing. The supporting cast and chorus are first-rate, whether they be feuding brothers, serving maids, "Ungeborene" sizzling in a pan or serenading us from the ether, or Nightwatchmen; all are impeccable. Kempe of course has the measure of the score; the "hymn to marital love" surges and soars beguilingly under his direction – but then, I have never heard anything he recorded which was less than superlative and the Munich orchestra is excellent.

This was decidedly for me a "dark horse" recording, which I had not encountered before embarking on this survey, but if you make allowances for the cuts and the limited sound, it is as fine as any of the live, mono accounts.

Karl Böhm – 1955 (live; mono) Orfeo
Orchestra - Wiener Staatsoper
Chorus - Wiener Staatsoper

Kaiser - Hans Hopf
Kaiserin - Leonie Rysanek
Amme - Elisabeth Höngen
Barak - Ludwig Weber
Färberin - Christel Goltz
Geisterbote - Kurt Böhme
Erscheinung eines Jünglings - Karl Terkal
Stimme des Falken - Judith Hellwig
Stimme von Oben - Hilde Rössl-Majdan
Einäugige - Harald Pröglhoff
Einarmige - Oskar Czerwenka
Bucklige - Murray Dickie
Ein Hüter der Schwelle des Tempels - Emmy Loose
3 Wächter der Stadt - Ljubomir Pantscheff; Alfred Poell; Eberhard Wächter

The big difference between this live, stage performance and the studio recording made just after it is the substitution of Paul Schöffler for Ludwig Weber, who is miscast as Barak; his big Wagnerian bass is too unsteady, clumsy and hollow compared with Schöffler's neat, warm sound; frankly, I found much of his singing embarrassing and am not in the least surprised that he was replaced for the recording. The cast is otherwise identical and so, unsurprisingly, is the performance, but of course there are audience coughs and stage noises to contend with in the live recording and there is no advantage to favouring it.

Karl Böhm – 1955 (studio; stereo) Decca (also in the 10 CD Documents Strauss Anniversary Edition Part II, where it is wrongly designated as mono)
Orchestra - Wiener Philharmoniker
Chorus - Wiener Staatsoper

Kaiser - Hans Hopf
Kaiserin - Leonie Rysanek
Amme - Elisabeth Höngen
Barak - Paul Schöffler
Färberin - Christel Goltz
Geisterbote - Kurt Böhme
Erscheinung eines Jünglings - Karl Terkal
Stimme des Falken - Judith Hellwig
Stimme von Oben - Hilde Rössl-Majdan
Einäugige - Harald Pröglhoff
Einarmige - Oskar Czerwenka
Bucklige - Murray Dickie
Ein Hüter der Schwelle des Tempels - Emmy Loose

This opera has pretty much led a charmed life as far as recordings go and many are highly recommendable. However, this was the first complete one and the first thing to say is that the clean, slightly narrow and fuzzy stereo sound is superb for its era, constituting no real technical barrier to the prospective purchase. There are moments when the definition goes and distortion reigns; fortunately, the aural landscape comes into focus for passages such as that which depicts Barak's paeon to marital love in Act I, when the Vienna Philharmonic plays divinely; indeed, chief among its many glories is the playing of the VPO under Böhm, it is simply glorious under a leader whose violin is so important in

passages such as the opening of Act III (no doubt someone can confirm his identity but presumably it's Willi Boskovsky). An excellent balance between voices and orchestra is maintained and even if there isn't great depth, instrumental and vocal lines emerge very cleanly. A minor quibble is that the engineers don't distance the voices of Barak and his wife in the last scene before they are re-united; there is a touch of the "recording session" atmosphere - but maybe that's explained by the fact that apparently the artists were in overcoats huddled over the microphones in the freezing hall, owing to Decca's refusal to heat it!

Despite knowing that Böhm is invariably at his best in Strauss operas, I had hitherto avoided this recording as a result of my supposed aversion to Hans Hopf. However, I was wrong; here in 1955 he is very fine; powerful and able to maintain a good line and he even manages a degree of controlled subtlety as the Emperor, even though by the early sixties he had become a bawler. Leonie Rysanek is in finest voice, both delicate and powerful by turns, with very little of the "lowing" mannerism which occasionally afflicted her voice later and she acts so vividly in the "Golden Water of Life" scene. Christel Goltz could be vocally awkward, even plummy and cloudy of tone, with a vibrato that often threatens to obtrude, but we catch her here as the Wife in best voice before her vocal decline; mostly accurate, intense and impassioned. Veteran Paul Schöffler is a warm, deeply humane; if slight nasal, Barak. The supporting cast consists of Vienna stalwarts of the era; slight disappointment comes from Kurt Böhme and Elisabeth Höngen. Both are somewhat under-powered: he is imposing as the Spirit Messenger but also a bit rocky and blaring and she, despite presenting a credibly creepy, odious Nurse and mostly coping with her hideously difficult music, lacks resonance and heft at big moments such as when she declaims "Weh über dich" and the Empress rejects her in Act III. Supporting roles are strongly cast, as you might expect from Vienna in the mid-fifties.

This has special virtues in that it finds Rysanek in most youthful voice and historical value, too, as a monument to the greatness of the Viennese opera operating under trying conditions in the mid-50's.

Joseph Keilberth – 1963 (live; stereo) Brilliant; DG
Orchestra - Bayerische Staatsoper
Chorus - Bayerische Staatsoper

Kaiser - Jess Thomas
Kaiserin - Ingrid Bjoner
Amme - Martha Mödl
Barak - Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau
Färberin - Inge Borkh
Geisterbote - Hans Hotter
Erscheinung eines Jünglings - Georg Paskuda
Stimme des Falken - Gerda Sommerschuh
Stimme von Oben - Herta Töpper
Einäugige - Carl Hoppe
Einarmige - Max Proebstl
Bucklige - Paul Kuen

Although it is a live performance from 1963, this titanic - some would say overblown - opera, is in excellent stereo sound with an occasionally audible prompter, some slight crackle and pre-echo here and there, not too much coughing until Act II and the singers only occasionally going off mike or crowding to the left of the aural picture. The sound of the Bayerisches Staatsorchester, in particular, emerges as warm and detailed. Furthermore, it is now available in a super-bargain "Brilliant" label issue and is highly recommendable, despite a few drawbacks.

Keilberth's masterful conducting, close to Karajan's for sheer beauty, is apparent from the extended orchestral interludes; they play Barak's love theme with ineffable tenderness and passages such as the

long cello and violin solos are intensely moving. True, the horns tire towards the end but this is live, after all.

There are cuts, pretty much standard practice in most performances as this work proves unwieldy and prone to longueurs on stage. In principle, I can tolerate this, especially if I appreciate that I am listening not to a studio recording but to the record of an entertainment devised for the pleasure of a live audience; however, after a few permissible snips mostly to the Nurse's role, the excisions in the last Act are savage, losing nearly a quarter of an hour's music compared with the full score that Solti and Sawallisch give us in their studio recordings. The confusions and misdirections of Act III are considerably simplified to allow the production to concentrate on the main focus of the drama: the Empress' epiphany - although her spoken passage and even the Emperor's song on awakening from petrification are heavily cut. Furthermore, most of the cuts help Martha Mödl to get through her role as Nurse; despite her dramatic intensity and ability to suggest that character's innate depravity, by this stage of her career she is struggling with a pronounced beat in her voice which worsens as the evening proceeds.

Hans Hotter, too, has a touch of wobble but brings great, hieratic authority to his role - again cut - as the Spirit Messenger and the cast in general consists of first -rate singers, although, as ever, I have my reservations about Fischer-Dieskau simply having enough voice to fulfil the demands of the part. Still, he is in his best period before greyness crept into his tone and although he is no Walter Berry or José van Dam, he avoids sounding too windy up top and creates a really human Barak. The two soprano leads are stupendous: Bjoner starts quietly and delicately but grows in stature and she rises nobly to find enormous intensity and power for her last great scene, her voice becoming increasingly penetrating and powerful; Borkh is similarly vibrant and intense; using her quick vibrato to colour her tone and permit her to encompass both the biting scorn and the anguished penitence required of the Dyer's Wife. In many ways, she reminds me of Deborah Voigt's equally convincing performance for Sinopoli. Jess Thomas is in finest voice as the Emperor, only the merest hint of bleat occasionally creeping in to disrupt his line; he is exceptionally powerful and tormented in his "Falke, Falke" outburst when he believes he has been betrayed by his wife.

For a recording over fifty years old, cuts and all, this remains a splendid introduction to an opera which requires some forbearance for its length and convolutedness but remains enormously rewarding as long as one buys into the underlying philosophy regarding the fulfilment of marital love in fecundity - and although this might not be a first recommendation, at Brilliant's prices anyone can afford to experiment.

Herbert von Karajan – 1964 (live 11/6/64; mono) DG

Orchestra - Wiener Philharmoniker

Chorus - Wiener Staatsoper

Kaiser - Jess Thomas

Kaiserin - Leonie Rysanek

Amme - Grace Hoffman

Barak - Walter Berry

Färberin - Christa Ludwig

Geisterbote - Walter Kreppel

Erscheinung eines Jünglings - Fritz Wunderlich

Stimme des Falken - Lucia Popp

Stimme von Oben - Margarita Lilowa

Einäugige - Siegfried Rudolf Frese

Einarmige - Ludwig Welter

Bucklige - Erich Majkut

Ein Hüter der Schwelle des Tempels - Lucia Popp

This is the live recording of the 11 June 1964 premiere and as such is the alternative to the recording of the 17 June, which was Karajan's last collaboration with the Viennese State Opera as artistic director. The premiere cast is even starrer than the subsequent performance, the greatest gains being Christa Ludwig instead of Gladys Kuchta as the Dyer's Wife and Walter Berry as Barak the Dyer instead of Otto Wiener. Although Kuchta is perfectly fine, Ludwig brings greater lustre of voice and more nuance in her acting as she moves from downtrodden malcontent to shrewish harridan to grateful penitent. Berry is far preferable to Wiener, having a much richer, more beautiful voice and a manlier presence, although Wiener characterises Barak sympathetically. The other big casting difference is that here Leonie Rysanek is the Empress rather than Gundula Janowitz. As much as I love the latter's shimmering sound, Rysanek brings more authority and presence to the role. After a slightly uncertain start her top notes soar thrillingly and she acts with her voice tellingly. Jess Thomas, Grace Hoffmann and Lucia Popp are first class in their roles as the selfish Emperor and malevolent nurse respectively. Typically, Karajan spared no expense in importing the finest singers, so we enjoy the bonus of stars like Fritz Wunderlich and Lucia Popp in relatively minor but crucial roles.

Some critics have huffed and puffed about the cuts and rearrangements of scenes effected Karajan in Act 2 but they are not really serious or damaging; the best music is retained and the scene-shifting was done to try to clarify and streamline the over-complex and abstruse plot. It is an opera which can stand some cutting, although I agree that some of Karajan's excisions in Acts 2 and especially 3 come close to disfigurement. The Vienna Staatsoper Orchestra plays as well as you would expect the Vienna Phil in disguise to do and Karajan totally has the measure of the fiendishly complex score: ensemble and co-ordination is excellent throughout, while the sheen on the strings and the beauty of woodwind and brass playing are exemplary. The cello solos in the Second Act "Falke" scene and on Band 6 of Act 3/CD3 are exquisite.

The sound is surprisingly good for a mono recording of the era; very acceptable and only slightly muddy.

Herbert von Karajan – 1964 (live 17/6/64; mono) Gala
Orchestra - Wiener Philharmoniker
Chorus - Wiener Staatsoper

Kaiser - Jess Thomas
Kaiserin - Gundula Janowitz
Amme - Grace Hoffman
Barak - Otto Wiener
Färberin - Gladys Kuchta
Geisterbote - Walter Kreppel
Erscheinung eines Jünglings - Ermanno Lorenzi
Stimme des Falken - Lucia Popp
Stimme von Oben - Margarita Lilowa
Einäugige - Siegfried Rudolf Frese
Einarmige - Ludwig Welter
Bucklige - Erich Majkut
Ein Hüter der Schwelle des Tempels - Lucia Popp

DG have made available the live recording of the 11 June 1964 premiere of this blockbuster among Strauss operas and Karajan's last collaboration with the Viennese State Opera as artistic director. This is the cast which featured in the subsequent performances and is a live recording of the performance of 17 June - Karajan's last with the Wiener Staatsoper. It is, as such, a notch below the first night in that we have Gladys Kuchta instead of Christa Ludwig as the Dyer's Wife and Otto Wiener as Barak the Dyer instead of Walter Berry. Kuchta is in fact perfectly good but does not have Ludwig's amplitude or

lustre of tone; Wiener is most definitely something of a liability with his pinched, nasal baritone compared with Berry's vocal splendour but he characterises very well and is touching. Jess Thomas, Grace Hoffmann and Lucia Popp repeat their successful assumptions of their roles as the selfish Emperor, malevolent nurse and three different characters in Popp's case. The big and most interesting change of personnel is the substitution of the very young (27) Gundula Janowitz for the more experienced and bigger-voiced Leonie Rysanek. She gives us a gorgeously vocalised, vulnerable Empress who engages our sympathies easily and entices our ear with the laser-beam purity and security of her tonal emission. She sings within her limitations and is still impressive because the sound is so incisive and bright. "Vater, bist du's" in Act 3 is superbly controlled; the combination of the warm cello and her silvery tone creates a musical highlight. The cast list credits Fritz Wunderlich as the Apparition of the Young Man. He certainly sang that role in the premiere but I'm sure he does not here; his voice is unmistakable and the tenor we hear is one Ermanno Lorenzi.

Please see above, what I write in my review of the premiere of this production regarding the cuts and changes Karajan made to the running order.

As a generous bonus typical of Gala, we are given at the end of each Act/disc excerpts from the celebrated 1974 production conducted by Böhm (see the next review of the complete performance on Opera d'Oro) which concentrate on scenes featuring Berry and Ludwig - particularly apt and welcome given that they compensate for the relative ordinariness of the contributions of Wiener and Kuchta to the main item here - and thus mostly avoid illustrating how Rysanek is heard to advantage in the recording of the 1964 premiere, where she is in better, fresher voice.

Karl Böhm – 1966 (live; mono) The Opera Lovers - and included in the box set: The Inaugural Season: Extraordinary Met Performances From 1966-67

Orchestra - Metropolitan Opera

Chorus - Metropolitan Opera

Kaiser - James King

Kaiserin - Leonie Rysanek

Amme - Irene Dalis

Barak - Walter Berry

Färberin - Christa Ludwig

Geisterbote - William Dooley

Erscheinung eines Jünglings - Robert Nagy

Stimme des Falken - Carlotta Ordassy

Stimme von Oben - Belen Amparan

Einäugige - Clifford Harvuot

Einarmige - Lorenzo Alvary

Bucklige - Paul Franke

Ein Hüter der Schwelle des Tempels - Mary Ellen Pracht

Release of this performance was apparently long delayed by the refusal of a minor cast-member to grant permission so it was available only via unofficial collectors' websites until its inclusion in the above Metropolitan Opera Inaugural Season box set. It is in fairly shallow, peaky mono remastered from analogue tapes of the Saturday matinee radio broadcasts, but is very listenable and of course has Böhm showing his usual mastery of the score conducting the Famous Four members of the Strauss Family in best, most youthful voice plus Irene Dalis in blazing form. Everything I say about the singers in their later performances from the 70's below applies here but even more so given that time has not yet begun to erode their vocal prowess; my only reason for marginally preferring those later recordings is that they are in stereo and some feature my favourite Nurse in Ruth Hesse and/or Birgit Nilsson as the Dyer's Wife, who is different from Christa Ludwig but an equally riveting interpreter of that role –

and of course those performances are easily and affordably available, whereas this is more difficult and expensive to acquire.

Karl Böhm – 1974 (live; stereo) Opera d'Oro

Orchestra - Wiener Philharmoniker

Chorus - Wiener Staatsoper

Kaiser - James King

Kaiserin - Leonie Rysanek

Amme - Ruth Hesse

Barak - Walter Berry

Färberin - Christa Ludwig

Geisterbote - Martin Egel

Erscheinung eines Jünglings - Martin Schomberg

Stimme des Falken - Maria Haug

Stimme von Oben - Ingrid Mayr

Einäugige - Zoltán Kéléman

Einarmige - Lorenzo Alvary

Bucklige - Murray Dickie

Apparently earlier issues on the Opera d'Oro label had a problem with having been transferred a semitone sharp. I have checked mine and the bonus excerpts on the preceding Gala recording above against other recordings and it seems that the pitch issue was subsequently resolved in later issues. The sound is remarkably clear and the voices emerge vividly, even if the orchestra is less immediate. This fields for the last time the dream team, shortly before Ludwig wisely abandoned all her soprano roles, which wowed the Met in the 60's and toured the world in this opera as the "Strauss Family". Both she and Rysanek struggle a bit with the top notes and it is true that they tire a little towards the end; Rysanek may be heard to advantage in her youthful prime twenty years earlier for Kempe and in Böhm's studio recording but she and Ludwig are still mightily impressive here, both in blazing form. We simply do not hear voices like theirs any more, such that a few skimmed top notes fade into insignificance. Berry is ideal as Barak, and it matters little whether you hear him here or in any of the other four recordings in which he sings that role; he is invariably tender, powerful and touching. James King battles manfully with the killer-role of the Emperor and mostly triumphs. Ruth Hesse always was one of the best exponents of the role of the Nurse: malevolent, assured and secure of voice; I wonder why she was not more widely celebrated as a singer.

Of course, Böhm and the VPO are right at home here and the playing is magnificent, even if the orchestral sound is a bit opaque. This is a very satisfying, indeed thrilling, recording.

Karl Böhm – 1975 (live; stereo) Link; Opera Depot

Orchestra - Wiener Philharmoniker

Chorus - Wiener Staatsoper

Kaiser - James King

Kaiserin - Leonie Rysanek

Amme - Ruth Hesse

Barak - Walter Berry

Färberin - Ursula Schröder-Feinen

Geisterbote - Robert Kerns

Erscheinung eines Jünglings - Martin Schomberg

Stimme des Falken - Maria Haug

Stimme von Oben - Ingrid Mayr

Einäugige - Zoltán Kéléman

Einarmige - Lorenzo Alvary
Bucklige - Murray Dickie

I confess to having heard only extensive excerpts of this live Salzburg recording - some of which are appended to the *Bella Voce* issue of Ursula Schröder-Feinen's 1977 live Elektra - rather than the recording in its entirety but they are so good that I have chosen to include it in this survey as it is available on order from Opera Depot.

It has an impressive cast, including the very under-recorded Ursula Schröder-Feinen who gives us a powerful, pure-toned, neatly vocalised Empress. Walter Berry is a familiar Barak, deeply expressive if somewhat more nasal than of yore and Rysanek defies the years with a shining Empress – apart from only just making the high C in the Fountain Scene – Ruth Hesse is a formidable Nurse and James King a virile Emperor.

However, unless you specifically want Schröder-Feinen as the Dyer's Wife, you also have the option of live recordings featuring the Famous Four of King, Rysanek, Hesse and Berry with Böhm conducting, either with Ludwig in 1974 or Nilsson in 1977, so we are spoilt for choice.

Berislav Klobucar – 1975 (live: stereo) Sterling
Orchestra - Kungliga Hovkapellet Stockholm
Chorus - Kungliga Hovkapellet Stockholm

Kaiser – Matti Kastu
Kaiserin – Siv Wennberg
Amme – Barbro Ericson
Barak – Walter Berry
Färberin – Birgit Nilsson
Geisterbote – Bo Lundberg
Erscheinung eines Jünglings – Tord Slättergård
Stimme des Falken – Birgit Nordin
Stimme von Oben – Ileana Peterson
Einäugige – John-Erik Jacobsson
Einarmige – Carl-Johan Falkman
Bucklige – Rolf Cederlöf
Ein Hüter der Schwelle des Tempels – Hillevi Blyloods
3 Wächter der Stadt – Björn Asker; Gunnar Lundberg; Håkan Hagegård

This FROSCH is a difficult recording to assess, in that it is a complex admixture of enormous strengths and some inescapable disadvantages. It is also a permanent record of a live performance in a run which the Stockholm music critic called “the greatest in 200 years”, and indeed it must have been a privilege indeed to attend such a powerful representation of an opera which has always been considered among the most challenging to stage successfully. Strauss considered it to be his greatest work, but its fantastical setting, obscure plot and abstruse, prolix libretto baffled audiences at its premiere in 1919 and its place in the mainstream repertoire has only relatively recently been established, since when it is often cited by hardcore Straussians as their favourite of his operas, despite the claims of *Der Rosenkavalier*.

It is rare to encounter this work uncut, either live or recorded, and this performance is no exception; there are cuts in all three Acts amounting to around fifteen or twenty minutes. Most of them are made in the Nurse's music: there are a few minor snips in Acts 1 and 2 but they are mostly in Act 3 where she pleads with the Empress, curses mankind and argues with the Spirit Messenger. The passage where Barak and his wife wander in search of each other is also truncated and this is this cut I most regret. Only the individual listener can decide whether these are substantially damaging; I have never much

mind ed a few judicious excisions in this long opera and still consider Sinopoli's composite live recording to be its greatest realisation despite them. Thankfully, the last two great scenes leading to the triumphant climax, are left uncut.

However, if you want the entire work unadulterated, your options are now Solti's lavish recording for Decca, Sawallisch on EMI and the recent issue conducted by Sebastian Weigle. All have their merits and critics: the casting is starrer and the singing consequently better on the first two but Weigle's conducting in particular has been commended by knowledgeable commentators; I have not heard it.

But back to this recording: the provision of a full German-English libretto, shrink-wrapped with the box set, is rare and welcome, even though the cuts employed here are not indicated in it, which makes following the text slightly hard work when the singers appear suddenly to jump ahead. As this is presented as a joint tribute to Swedish diva Siv Wennberg and Birgit Nilsson, a long and quite interesting interview with the former and an evaluation of the latter, along with biographical notes, a synopsis, track and cast lists have all been included in the booklet which fits into the box (as opposed to the separate libretto).

The live sound is excellent for 1975, with few coughs and the orchestra well forward without drowning the voices. The string playing is occasionally lean compared with the more sumptuous sound of the VPO but there are some lovely individual contributions, such as the cello solos in the Transformation Scenes. Applause at the end of Acts is enthusiastic. Klobucar was a seasoned Strauss conductor and paces the work ideally.

For me, there are two main areas of contention in the performance: both centre on my personal response to the voices of Wennberg and the primo tenore, Matti Kastu. About Nilsson, there is no doubt: despite being 57 at the time, she is blazing form, dominating the stage and perhaps profiting from the fact that at this stage of her career the Dyer's Wife suits the fit of her voice better than the Isolde she was to sing a year later in Vienna, which betrays wear and tear. She was still successfully singing the Wife for Böhm in 1977 but she is marginally better here, two years earlier. The laser top is secure, the middle steady and she is especially impressive in the last scene of Act 2, where she and Wennberg are electric, and in her lament opening Act 3, which is powerful, nuanced and deeply felt. She is both shrewish and touching, even if evidently rather mature for the role of the young wife.

Wennberg's voice is a conundrum to me. Her soprano suggests a combination of Gundula Janowitz and Elisabeth Schwarzkopf: it is often almost childlike and slender, with a minimum of vibrato which can sound fluttery and lends it a slightly "flat", narrow quality. That permits her soprano to penetrate the thick orchestral textures but top notes sometimes thin out alarmingly. The last Act brings out her best and she is in some ways more convincing as the ethereal Empress than more generously vocally endowed exponents of the role such as Rysanek. As with the other two singers with whom I compared her, some swoon over her sound, others find it unsettling. Her commitment is not in doubt and she certainly rises to the challenges of this extraordinarily demanding role. However, her German diction is at times decidedly indistinct and approximate; she gabbles her spoken dialogue in Act 3 which is, in any case, heavily cut to just a few lines. It is also regrettable that during the spoken "Ich will nicht" scene, in an otherwise virtually unflawed live recording, there is audible talking in the background, presumably from stage hands, all of which rather lowers the dramatic tension usually generated at that point in performance.

My other reservation arises from Matti Kastu's voice. I have previously encountered him only in what I frankly consider to be his inadequate contribution to Dorati's *Die ägyptische Helena* and find him to be only marginally more impressive here. He simply has little of the heroic quality we hear best in Ben Heppner's and Hans Hopf's Emperors and which James King, Plácido Domingo and René Kollo all bring to that role; his tenor is pinched and uningratiating, like Windgassen on a very bad night. He is not a disaster but certainly represents the weakest point in the cast, especially in the exalted company of

Walter Berry, the Barak of his generation, and Barbro Ericson, a Nurse of great strength and presence. She is intermittently a bit hooty and glottal, but she dominates what remains an Everest among mezzo roles, despite the cuts. Berry has both the warm lyricism and the touch of nobility in his tone that Barak requires; he and Nilsson make a wonderful team. The cast is otherwise excellent; I note the presence of a young Håken Hagegård as a Watchman.

The jubilant final quartet does not reach the exalted heights of Sinopoli's account, mainly because neither the Emperor nor the Empress has quite the power to match the Barak and Wife but it still makes it mark as one of the most stirring conclusions in all opera. As a souvenir of a great occasion, this live recording certainly satisfies and despite its deficiencies and cuts, is still worthy of consideration as a collector's choice.

Karl Böhm – 1977 (live composite; stereo) DG

Orchestra - Wiener Staatsoper

Chorus - Wiener Staatsoper

Kaiser - James King

Kaiserin - Leonie Rysanek

Amme - Ruth Hesse

Barak - Walter Berry

Färberin - Birgit Nilsson

Geisterbote - Peter Wimberger

Erscheinung eines Jünglings - Ewald Aichberger

Stimme des Falken - Lotte Rysanek

Stimme von Oben - Gertrude Jahn

Einäugige - Hans Helm

Einarmige - Lorenzo Alvary

Bucklige - Murray Dickie

Whether this is the best recording available is a subjective decision. I readily acknowledge that several of the great artists here were past their best years but that does not invalidate its cumulative impact of this live performance, which is immensely vivid and touching, informed by the singers' long stage experience and a vocal technique which allows them to defy the years.

I happened first to listen to this back to back with Böhm's pioneering studio recording from twenty-two years earlier, in 1955. Of course, the astonishing thing is that we hear the same Empress in both versions, and apart from slight clouding and curdling of the lower regions of her voice, Leonie Rysanek remains astonishingly intense and able to let rip with soaring top notes. So large a voice needed a counterpart and Birgit Nilsson in her late fifties still had the amplitude and "cutting edge" required to cut through Strauss's dense orchestration, even if a little of the gleam had faded. She is simply stunning in first her defiance of Barak then in the moment of her realisation that she loves him. But for me the biggest improvement over 1955 is Ruth Hesse as the Nurse; she has the heft and bite to convey real malice where I found Elisabeth Höngen eerie but a littler pale. One Peter Wimberger - a singer unknown to me - is also a big improvement over Kurt Böhme as the Spirit Messenger; he is much steadier and nobler of tone. James King strains a little and the occasional bleat escapes his larynx but generally he copes manfully with the desperately challenging wide tessitura of the role of Emperor; he is especially impressive in his Act II - aria, can I call it? - anyway, the moment when he doubts the Empress's fidelity to him. Walter Berry has the ideal vocal lay-out for Barak - warm, kindly and powerful when required, Understandably, all the singers flag occasionally in such a huge, long sing as this and in truth the final great quartet is a bit ragged - nor do the two sopranos finish together! - but their endurance is superhuman by modern standards and all the big moments make their mark under Böhm's unerring direction. He was always at his best in live Strauss and he presides over playing from the Vienna State Opera Orchestra which is both meltingly poetic and truly stirring, especially in the

Transformation interludes. The end of Act II, when the Nurse invokes "higher powers" gave me goosebumps. (Incidentally, I note that in both recordings Böhm "cheats" by supplementing the five unborn children with an extra singer, rounding them up to half a dozen!)

The sound is remarkably clean, clear full and well balanced for a live recording. I enthusiastically endorse it as it could easily be your first or only set, confident as I am that it conveys the authentic Straussian thrill of what many consider to be his greatest work.

Wolfgang Sawallisch – 1987 (studio; digital) EMI

Orchestra - Sinfonieorchester des Bayerischen Rundfunks

Chorus - Chor des Bayerischen Rundfunks - Tölzer Sängerknaben

Kaiser - René Kollo

Kaiserin - Cheryl Studer

Amme - Hanna Schwarz

Barak - Alfred Muff

Färberin - Ute Vinzing

Geisterbote - Andreas Schmidt

Erscheinung eines Jünglings - Paul Frey

Stimme des Falken - Julie Kaufmann

Stimme von Oben - Marjana Lipovsek

Einäugige - Jan-Hendrik Rootering

Einarmige - Kurt Rydl

Bucklige - Kenneth Garrison

Ein Hüter der Schwelle des Tempels - Cyndia Sieden

No version of this gargantuan masterpiece is perfect and there are a couple of niggles here; I have also found on revisiting this recording that I am somewhat less impressed with it than I was on my first encounter. However, four contributors shine brightly here: Cheryl Studer as a silvery, scintillating Empress, giving a performance to sit alongside her Salome for Sinopoli, the sound engineers Wilhelm Meister and David Groves who give EMI near perfection, the superb Bayerischen Rundfunks orchestra and, above all, the conductor, Wolfgang Sawallisch. Let's once and for all do away with his lingering reputation as a competent Kapellmeister; yes, he could be routine but so could almost any great conductor, including Furtwängler, Karajan and even Toscanini but it is the best of their work that we should judge them by - in which case, Sawallisch is up there with the best if his mastery of this score is any indication. His pacing is superb; he melds this sprawling behemoth into a coherent work - at least musically speaking, even if the synthetic fairy-tale libretto remains obscure, despite the composer's claim that the significance of the characters and events in *FROSCH* were "things that anyone can see and understand.". Karajan fiddled a bit with the order of scenes in his Salzburg production in an attempt to clarify proceedings but it remains fairly arcane.

So, what isn't perfection? Well, Kollo's throaty Emperor for a start, but only in comparison with Heppner, Jess Thomas, James King and yes, even Domingo for Solti - but he has stamina and doesn't let the side down, even if his voice has loosened noticeably since his excellent *Tannhäuser* for Solti in 1970; this was 1987 and his tone had turned gritty and the bleat was becoming noticeable. Nonetheless, he'll do and he keeps his end up in the final rousing quartet. Not even Sawallisch reaches Sinopoli's heights there but it's still wonderfully uplifting conclusion. Bear in mind, too, that this is one of only two absolutely complete recordings; everything else has live performance cuts, many of which were sanctioned by the ever-pragmatic Strauss and some of which don't much matter; I cannot otherwise get too excited about those excisions especially as they are in live recordings featuring great Straussians like Rysanek and the aforementioned Thomas.

Otherwise the only choice for a complete stereo recording is the mega-budget Solti and, good as that is, on balance, I think the Sawallisch is marginally superior. For a start, no single cast-member for Solti had previously sung the role on stage and that sometimes shows in their inflection of the text; Kollo is better at that than Domingo (being German of course must have helped and his German was never Domingo's strong card, for all that it improved markedly). Sawallisch does not have the most mellifluous Dyer's Wife; as with Sabine Hass for Sinopoli, there is too much of the shrew in Ute Vinzing's voice to be convincing. Her soprano is in fact decidedly odd: she had already successfully been singing hochdramatische for twenty years but by this stage the middle of her voice was hoarse and gone, even though the Nilsson-like laser top was still very much intact.

Hannah Schwarz is marvellous as the Nurse: her voice does everything she wants it to and she suggests malevolence without hamming it up via deployment of a trenchant lower register. As Barak, Alfred Muff shares something of José van Dam's blandness without quite having his beauty of tone - as the only named character in the opera, he is evidently required to stand out from the mythical crowd as more vividly and sympathetically human - but he is sturdy and musical. In my judgement, Walter Berry, combining textual acumen with a beautiful voice is the ideal Barak but despite a slightly gritty baritone, the bluff Franz Grundheber for Sinopoli is also very engaging. Andreas Schmidt's baritone Messenger is a bit light but he's better than most, if not as imposing as bass-baritone Albert Dohmen for Solti; the supporting cast is made up of Munich stalwarts. A particular triumph is Sawallisch's use of the Tölzer Knabenchor instead of women to sing the Five Fishes in the Frying Pan (if you don't know the opera, don't ask) and the "Ungeborene" children at the end; they lend a special pathos and tonal purity. A special mention, too, for the beauty of the Nightwatchmen's chorus here; it is absolutely lovely.

All in all, there is a strong case for presenting this as the most successful of all recordings and the preferable one of the two complete studio versions but I retain a loyalty to the cut Sinopoli set, based on live recordings from 1996, for the magnificence of Heppner and Voigt in their prime.

Georg Solti - 1989/1991 (studio; digital) Decca
Orchestra - Wiener Philharmoniker
Chorus - Wiener Staatsoper

Kaiser - Plácido Domingo
Kaiserin - Julia Varady
Amme - Reinhild Runkel
Barak - José van Dam
Färberin - Hildegard Behrens
Geisterbote - Albert Dohmen
Erscheinung eines Jünglings - Robert Gambill
Stimme des Falken - Sumi Jo
Stimme von Oben - Elzbieta Ardam
Einäugige - Gottfried Hornik
Einarmige - Hans Franzen
Bucklige - Wilfried Gahmlich

This was one of the last big, expensive studio recordings from Decca and was beset by scheduling difficulties, hence it was stretched over several sessions in 1989 and completed in 1991. It is certainly the last studio recording made of this opera but many of the most recommendable accounts are live and this one does indeed suffer a little from that indefinable studio-bound quality which robs a performance of a sense of both drama and spontaneity and also, perhaps, the homogeneity of purpose which an on-stage cast feels and conveys to the audience. For me, the most enjoyable recordings remain the composite live one from Sinopoli in Dresden in 1996 and the 1987 studio recording from Sawallisch but this one still has many merits.

First, it is the most complete version available and in superb sound. The Barak is the noble-voiced José van Dam, beginning to sound just a little grey-voiced by this stage of his career but who sings as steadily as Walter Berry and whose still beautiful voice and seamless legato compensate for some lack of involvement. His wife is Hildegard Behrens, occasionally a little unsteady but large-voiced and deeply expressive - and able to suggest an erotic element that escapes Nilsson, even if she does not erase memories of her and Ludwig in a role they both owned. The Empress is the slimmer Janowitz-Studer kind, being the unusually light, vibrant soprano Julia Varady, whose quick vibrato and penetrating tone gives her utterances real drama and urgency even if she cannot sing on the same scale as Rysanek or Voigt. It is slightly unfortunate that her sound should be so very similar to that of the lovely Sumi Jo, who is the Falcon. The Nurse is Reinhild Runkel, more than competent but hardly memorable compared with singers such as Hanna Schwarz or Grace Hoffman. Albert Dohmen makes a strong, resonant Spirit-Messenger.

For many the rub will be Domingo's Emperor. His German might not be very idiomatic with its soft consonants and the occasional Latin "e", but it is nowhere near as bad as some commentators would have you believe; he certainly encompasses the vocal demands of this killer role with some ease even if he tends to sound like Plácido Domingo singing the role exteriorly rather than a singer-actor embodying it for us.

Solti clearly loves the score and has the VPO do his bidding, producing gorgeous tone and mostly playing in a very direct, precise manner, in accordance with the conductor's reputation; the recording acoustic matches his precision, being very clean and clear without much warmth but certainly conveying a sense of space. Solti's vision is one of drive, drama and momentum but the cello solo before the Empress's "Vater, bist du's?" is ravishing, as the soloist is given space. No recording of this opera can be a success unless the final temptation scene and concluding paean to marital love generate tension and it must be said that even if they do not quite emulate Sinopoli and Voigt, Solti, the VPO and Varady are superb together in the climactic "Ich will nicht" moment; Varady in particular is a riveting actress in her parlando passage which always gives me the chills when done properly. Unfortunately - and surprisingly given Solti's generally propulsive manner - the tension drops towards the end of the opera during the quartet; perhaps it was recorded in the later session after too long a gap, whereas Sinopoli just keeps cranking it up to make an overwhelming impact.

Sawallisch remains the principal studio version and for me nobody beats Sinopoli's ability to create thrills in his live composite recording but I value Solti's account, especially for Varady, Behrens and van Dam and the beauty of the VPO.

Giuseppe Sinopoli – 1996 (live composite; digital) Teldec

Orchestra - Dresdner Staatskapelle

Chorus - Dresdner Staatsoper

Kaiser - Ben Heppner

Kaiserin - Deborah Voigt

Amme - Hanna Schwarz

Barak - Franz Grundheber

Färberin - Sabine Hass

Geisterbote - Hans-Joachim Ketelsen

Erscheinung eines Jünglings - Werner Güra

Stimme des Falken - Sabine Brohm

Stimme von Oben - Nadja Michael

Einäugige - Andreas Scheibner

Einarmige - André Eckert

Bucklige - Roland Wagenführer

No other recording - not even Solti's - lifts off the way Sinopoli's does in that stunning quartet which concludes this opera; he controls the huge orchestral forces and intricate vocal lines to engineer the most heart-wrenching climax before the ethereal voices of the unborn children send us off to bed, amazed and delighted. So it's a thousand pities that Sinopoli permitted cuts; however, they amount to only a few minutes and are standard to allow singers to survive the gruelling demands made upon them.

My respect for Sabine Hass, who succumbed to cancer not long ago, does not prevent me from observing that while she conveys great intensity in her performance it is also too often a strident pain in the ears. Grundheber is gruff compared with the mellifluous Van Dam in the Solti, though that suits the character; Voigt and Heppner, however, are in unbeatable voice: powerful, lyrical and true; as good as, if not better than, their counterparts in the Solti, Varady and Domingo. Voigt is especially moving in the statue scene -again, horribly pruned but still very effective. I have four recordings of this masterpiece: Karajan 1964 Salzburg set, the Solti, the Bohm on the Opera d'Oro label (in indifferent sound but it enshrines some wonderful performances) and this one - and I wouldn't want to be without any of them, especially the Sinopoli if only for that last scene.

Sebastian Weigle – 2014 (live composite; digital) Oehms
Orchestra - Frankfurter Opern- und Museumsorchester
Chorus - Choir and Ensemble of Oper Frankfurt

Kaiser - Burkhard Fritz
Kaiserin - Tamara Wilson
Amme - Tanja Ariane Baumgartner
Barak - Terje Stensvold
Färberin - Sabine Hogrefe
Geisterbote – Dietrich Volle
Erscheinung eines Jünglings – Michael Porter
Stimme des Falken – Brenda Rae
Stimme von Oben – Katharina Magiera
Einäugige – Franz Mayer
Einarmige – Björn Bürger
Bucklige – Hans Jürgen Lazar
Ein Hüter der Schwelle des Tempels – Brenda Rae
3 Wächter der Stadt – Franz Mayer; Björn Bürger; Dietrich Volle

The foreknowledge that this is that rare thing, a complete, uncut recording in combination with immediately apparent spectacular digital sound and the excellence of the first strong and steady voice we hear, the strong and steady-voiced Nurse of Tanja Ariane Baumgartner, are all signs of great promise for this latest recording. Unfortunately, we then hear a poor, woolly, wobbly Spirit Messenger to bring us down to earth with a bump and the listener begins to wonder if this will be yet another recent recording evincing the usual combination of excellent engineering, top-quality orchestral playing and conducting, and mediocre to downright poor singing.

The entry of the Emperor leaves that question still in the balance. Burkhard Fritz certainly doesn't have the ideal heft and ring we hear in the voices of singers such as Ben Heppner, James King or Jess Thomas, but he sings with sweetness and fair penetration. He makes a nice job of his aria opening Act 2 but audibly tires in the concluding quartet as his tenor is essentially too small and throaty. However, the arrival of Tamara Wilson as the Empress gives further cause for optimism: she is up to all the demands of a killer role; her bright, clear soprano can turn shrill but she evinces little sign of strain and her powerful voice rides the ensembles easily. She sings a beautifully rapt and controlled "Vater, bist du's," and manages the wide leaps in the Transformation Scene impressively but her tone does not have the

silvery beauty or the weight we hear in Studer's and Voigt's voices and she lacks the capacity to create the excitement generated by Rysanek.

Sabine Hogrefe is similarly powerful but shrill in alt, with an odd, cupped tone in the lower half of her voice, and her wide vibrato under pressure becomes wearing, just as, for the same reason, Sabine Haas is the weak link in Sinopoli's principal quartet of two married couples. The entry of Terje Stensvold completes the line-up and despite some obtrusive beat, his slightly nasal baritone strikes the listener as warm, avuncular and pleasing – extraordinary in a singer seventy years old at the time of recording. He husbands his resources wisely, preserving legato and using the text expressively. He is not as affecting or effective as Schöffler, Berry or van Dam but he by no means lets the side down. This, incidentally, was his farewell to the stage.

The supporting cast is variable: the women's chorus singing the "Ungeborene" is harsh and wobbly, and thus nowhere as sweet and ethereal as Strauss wanted. Nor are the Nightwatchmen sufficiently smooth and homogeneous, so their wonderful hymn remains stubbornly earthbound; is the vocal wobble ubiquitous today?

My observations about both the singing and conducting are of a piece, in that everything is bright and clear, with nothing overdone – but neither is anything especially exciting or individual. The emphasis on delicacy and transparency permits us to hear the details in Strauss' instrumentation but also militates against the kind of visceral thrills more expansive conductors generate. There is no performance here which lodges in the memory. Ultimately, this recording elicits respect and even admiration but not the affection or elation I experience when listening to the best accounts.

A libretto in German only is included in the booklet.

Recommendations

Given that there are only three studio recordings, the Strauss junkie will want them all although if you want only one then I think Sawallisch is marginally preferable in terms of sound and performance combined, even if it has vocal frailties and lacks some personality – and of course it is one of only three absolutely complete recordings.

Among the live recordings, I retain a special affection for the thrill of Sinopoli's but must have Rysanek's Empress with either Kempe, Böhm or Karajan; likewise, I want to hear Nilsson or Ludwig as Barak's wife, and the earlier Karajan recording offers both Rysanek and Ludwig together.

Live mono: Karajan 11/6/64; Kempe 1954

Live stereo: Sinopoli 1996*; Böhm 1977 or 1974

Studio stereo/digital: Sawallisch 1987; Böhm 1955

*First recommendation

Ralph Moore