

Bellini's *Norma* - A discographical survey **by Ralph Moore**

There are around 130 recordings of *Norma* in the catalogue of which only ten were made in the studio. The penultimate version of those was made as long as thirty-five years ago, then, after a long gap, Cecilia Bartoli made a new recording between 2011 and 2013 which is really hors concours for reasons which I elaborate in my review below. The comparative scarcity of studio accounts is partially explained by the difficulty of casting the eponymous role, which epitomises bel canto style yet also lends itself to verismo interpretation, requiring a vocalist of supreme ability and versatility.

Its challenges have thus been essayed by the greatest sopranos in history, beginning with Giuditta Pasta, who created the role of Norma in 1831. Subsequent famous exponents include Maria Malibran, Jenny Lind and Lilli Lehmann in the nineteenth century, through to Claudia Muzio, Rosa Ponselle and Gina Cigna in the first part of the twentieth. Maria Callas, then Joan Sutherland, dominated the role post-war; both performed it frequently and each made two bench-mark studio recordings. Callas in particular is to this day identified with Norma alongside Tosca; she performed it on stage over eighty times and her interpretation casts a long shadow. Artists since, such as Gencer, Caballé, Scotto, Sills, and, more recently, Sondra Radvanovsky have had success with it, but none has really challenged the supremacy of Callas and Sutherland. Now that the age of expensive studio opera recordings is largely over in favour of recording live or concert performances, and given that there seemed to be little commercial or artistic rationale for producing another recording to challenge those already in the catalogue, the appearance of the new Bartoli recording was a surprise, but it sought to justify its existence via the claim that it authentically reinstates the integrity of Bellini's original concept in matters such as voice categories, ornamentation and instrumentation.

Dead at only thirty-three, Bellini nonetheless left us half a dozen masterpieces of which *Norma* and *I puritani* are the best, replete with the long, flowing melodies which sent Verdi into ecstasies. Greatest of those melodies is that showpiece aria "Casta diva", performable only by a soprano of supreme gifts; if it does not come off, the opera is fatally compromised. The simplicity of Romani's poetic utterance is couched in long, florid lines of melismata and ornamentation and it requires both power and delicacy to encompass its demands.

Despite the allure of its principal role, *Norma* also offers juicy and highly dramatic parts to tenors, mezzo-sopranos and even basses – although Oroveso is not perhaps among the plum bass role in the operatic repertoire, the choruses are positively banal and there is nothing for a baritone. Adalgisa's arias, however, are enchanting and the duets between Norma and Adalgisa offer some of the most beguiling singing in thirds in the whole operatic repertoire. The trios concluding Act 1, too, are splendidly melodic and dramatic; the female voices entwine with a tenor who must be a singer of the highest quality; great tenors who have evidently enjoyed displaying their trumpeting tones as Pollione include Martinelli, Del Monaco, Vickers and Corelli, all of whose voices are beefier than what Bellini had in mind, but Pollione's martial arias and opportunities for grandstanding have proved irresistible to a big-voiced tenors who must have the nerve to hit a resounding top C and a B flat within a few minutes of his entrance – even though many cravenly duck it - as well as sounding like a hero while essentially portraying one opera's greatest ratfinks...

Sympathetic, flexible, idiomatic conducting and a fine orchestra matter, too, as some of the instrumental writing is exquisite; I think particularly of the atmospheric prelude to Adalgisa's first entrance with "Sgombra è la sacra selva" or the sinuous introduction to the opera's most famous aria, "Casta diva".

I assess below all ten studio recordings plus a selection of fourteen live performances. As with previous surveys, I plead that I cannot begin to encompass everything available, but have aimed to include here at least a sample of the most notable and interesting versions.

The recordings

Vittorio Gui – 1937 (studio mono) Cetra, Grammofono 2000, Opera d'Oro

Orchestra - EIAR Torino

Chorus - EIAR Torino

Norma - Gina Cigna

Adalgisa - Ebe Stignani

Pollione - Giovanni Brevario

Oroveso - Tancredi Pasero

Clotilde - Adriana Perris

Flavio - Emilio Renzi

The first voice we hear is that of one of the great basses of that era, Tancredi Pasero whose, vibrant, flickering voice with its fast vibrato pins backs the listener's ears. Vittorio Gui, who also conducts an excellent performance starring a young Callas in 1952 and reviewed next, really keeps things moving so that the opera does not degenerate into a series of set pieces but relaxes during the most affecting passages such as the duet "Mira, O Norma" to accommodate his singers and allow their music to breathe. Tenor Giovanni Brevario has not the subtlest or most beautiful voice but he gives a strong, virile account of Pollione. Cigna has none of Callas' verbal acuity with the text but she has a big, ductile soprano with a mezzo-ish tint and some slight squalliness up top betraying its origins in that tessitura. She conveys a regal grandeur, albeit in a generalised way, and the pyrotechnics hold no terrors for her. She is matched by a young Ebe Stignani in majestic voice, with a resonant lower register and the steadiest of lines; she blends beautifully with Cigna.

Until the slurring inherent in the original 78s has been corrected via a Naxos or Pristine-type of remastering this cannot be a strong recommendation as the constant slips and slides in pitch are disconcerting, but it remains recommendable as a supplement for the enthusiast tolerant of historical recordings, as the quality of performance is high.

Vittorio Gui – 1952 (live mono) Warner, EMI

Orchestra - Covent Garden

Chorus - Covent Garden

Norma - Maria Callas

Adalgisa - Ebe Stignani

Pollione - Mirto Picchi

Oroveso - Giacomo Vaghi

Clotilde - Joan Sutherland

Flavio - Paul Asciak

On first listening, I was immediately struck by the firm, vibrant Oroveso, Giacomo Vaghi, then the neat, virile tone of the Pollione, Mirto Picchi - a pity he completely shirks the opening top C and even ducks the concluding B flat in "Me protegge". Callas is never less than stellar in all the extant recordings, both live and the two studio versions, and here she is once more in best voice for a role which surely resonated more with her than Tosca, a character she actively disliked for all that her assumption was definitive. With Stignani's entrance we enter operatic heaven; her duets and trios with Picchi and Callas are sheer delight.

Gui conducted the first complete recording fifteen years earlier and is completely at home in this music.

The sound is too poor – brash, tinny and a bit papery up top – for this to be a prime recommendation but it's listenable if you are habituated to historical sound. (This was for me the discovery of the whole collection in the "Callas Live" set from Warner.)

Antonino Votto – 1953 (live mono) Divina

Orchestra - Teatro Verdi di Trieste

Chorus - Teatro Verdi di Trieste

Norma - Maria Callas

Adalgisa - Elena Nicolai

Pollione - Franco Corelli

Oroveso - Boris Christoff

Clotilde - Bruna Ronchini

Flavio - Raimondo Botteghelli

It needs to be emphasised that this Divina issue is as authentic and complete a record of the live 1953 performance as can be bought, whereas the Melodram issue from 1991 is a complete hodgepodge of a fabrication, patching the final result with snippets from recordings made between 1949 and 1958; thus, less than half the music there is from that evening of 19th November, 1953. No doubt Melodram aimed simply to produce as close a representation as possible of that evening of November 19th but it isn't an honest product insofar as the labelling gives no indication of the disparate sources or of the fact that less than half of the music is from Trieste - it was in fact ultimately withdrawn.

This Divina issue, however, is the real thing, having collected and re-mastered all the surviving excerpts of the Trieste recording as could be found. It is thus almost complete, running to 100 minutes; notable omissions are the overture and practically two thirds of the music from the Act I duet "Oh rimembranza!" but it would seem that this is as good as we are ever going to get unless more supposedly lost material emerges.

All this and more regarding other Callas "fakes and forgeries" is explained in detail by Callas enthusiasts and experts Milan Petkovic and Dr Robert E. Seletsky in the extensive and fascinating CD-ROM support material, which includes articles regarding Callas in *Norma*, *Tosca* and *Turandot*, photographs, reviews, audio samples, discographies and a catalogue.

Having said all that, it must be admitted that even after expert clean-up the muddy, distorted, mono sound, plagued by interference, is such that it can only appeal to historical buffs. Ensemble is a murky mess; Individual voices, however, emerge comparatively unscathed and with a cast such as this it is there that most interest will be concentrated, opening with Christoff's grand, steady and imposing Oroveso - his only one on record and easily the best of all accounts of the High Priest. Corelli is in his sappiest, most ringing voice, the youthful tremulousness in his vibrato now under control; despite the sheer size and voluptuousness of his sound he employs some pleasing subtleties such as careful diminuendos - which became his trade mark and which perhaps contributed to his decline. As is so often the case with a role which demands vocal heft and a trenchant lower register, Elena Nicolai sounds too mature and stentorian for the supposedly young and vulnerable Adalgisa, but she shares that minor handicap with many a successful exponent of that role such as Stignani, Cossotto and Tourangeau - and the voice per se is splendid.

Callas is in her finest vocal estate, just during her dramatic weight loss period and the onset of insecurities. This is arguably her best "Casta diva" and virtually everything goes as she intends it to. The later refinements which accompanied encroaching frailties are missing; she sings "straight" and very beautifully. Were the sound better, I would unhesitatingly recommend it as her best outing as Norma, but I still return to the 1955 performances with the same conductor and the other with

Serafin, and even to the 1960 studio recording for the benefits of enhanced insight and more grateful acoustics.

This is perhaps the best sung of all Callas' various recordings of *Norma* even if it is still in trying, albeit re-mastered, sound. It also offers a lot of fascinating support material on CD-ROM.

Tullio Serafin – 1954 (studio mono) Warner, EMI, Naxos, Brilliant

Orchestra - Teatro alla Scala

Chorus - Teatro alla Scala

Norma - Maria Callas

Adalgisa - Ebe Stignani

Pollione - Mario Filippeschi

Oroveso - Nicola Rossi-Lemeni

Clotilde - Rina Cavallari

Flavio - Paolo Caroli

I cannot give this recording an unqualified recommendation when there is competition of far greater quality provided by Callas herself in her other recordings. No other artist, including Sutherland or Caballé, can touch her from interpretative point of view, but if you want to hear her worthily partnered, too, you need to go elsewhere

In truth, that great artist Ebe Stignani was sounding too mature for Adalgisa by this stage of her career, Filippeschi is very ordinary and blaring as Pollione and Rossi-Lemeni is gruff, gritty and unsteady of line compared with the smooth production of Zaccaria. I readily admit that if no other recordings with Callas were available, I'd probably be happy with it. I keep the highlights disc, just to hear Callas in best, youthful voice, but there are better options for a complete recording.

Tullio Serafin – 1955 (radio broadcast, mono) Frequenz, Opera d'Oro

Orchestra - RAI Roma

Chorus - RAI Roma

Norma - Maria Callas

Adalgisa - Ebe Stignani

Pollione - Mario Del Monaco

Oroveso - Giuseppe Modesti

Clotilde - Rina Cavallari

Flavio - Athos Cesarini

Callas is again in superb voice here but her performance for Votto later the same year is marginally even better; furthermore, the later recording at La Scala, reviewed immediately below, now enjoys the considerable advantage of Pristine's remastering as well as having a better cast all-round. Stignani's mezzo sounds rather too mature for Adalgisa - indeed, her majestic delivery rather negates any impression of vulnerability or naivety - and there is audible wear in her tone. Serafin moulds the music more effectively than the passive Votto but that is not enough to swing the balance in favour of this recording compared with the RAI/Pristine issue.

Antonino Votto – 1955 (live mono/Ambient Stereo) Pristine

Orchestra - Teatro alla Scala

Chorus - Teatro alla Scala

Norma - Maria Callas

Adalgisa - Giulietta Simionato

Pollione - Mario Del Monaco
 Oroveso - Nicola Zaccaria
 Clotilde - Gabriella Carturan
 Flavio - Giuseppe Zampieri

Pristine Sound Engineer Andrew Rose tells us in the liner-notes that his research into which Callas *Norma* to re-master indicated that this live 1955 performance was the best candidate - and I agree with him. This performance probably enshrines the best of all Callas' many assumptions of this role and Simionato's Adalgisa, in particular, is a performance to treasure. Del Monaco is a real Helden-Pollione but not brutal or insensitive, nor necessarily inferior to Corelli's equally virile Roman in the studio recording. Votto is a relaxed, pliant accompanist, reluctant to impose himself upon four such experienced and musical soloists - and the supporting roles are well taken, too.

The RAI broadcast from earlier the same year is also estimable; it has the same two principals and the advantage of Serafin's more flexible conducting over the rather staid Votto but it must also be said that the great Ebe Stignani was by that stage of her career rather mature for the youthful Adalgisa, Giulietta Simionato's impassioned singing is more apt, and Zaccaria is marginally preferable over Modesti as Oroveso.

Rose tells us that his investigations revealed that the tapes of both this and that RAI performance were sharp. He has corrected this fault here with the result that the voices sound fuller, richer and altogether easier on the ear. Flutter has been removed and individual sound strands emerge more cleanly and better differentiated instead of melding into the familiar orchestral mush. Following the practice of previous issues, Rose has resorted to substituting the overture missing from the original recording with that from the RAI broadcast and no-one is likely to complain or hear any difference. The Pristine "Ambient Stereo" treatment also lends added presence to the rather thin, scratchy sound whose relative inadequacy is more noticeable in purely orchestral rather than vocal passages. This will never be an aural treat but Pristine's re-mastering has given us the best we are ever going to hear.

As the years go by, it is increasingly apparent that we shall not hear the likes of either Callas or Del Monaco again. Even if their emphatic and even stentorian delivery is sometimes rather removed from what we might expect from a quintessential bel canto opera we hear great delicacy and some lovely divisions from Callas in her big arias. There will always be some flap and wobble even in her finest recordings but these flaws are negligible alongside her peerless ability to inflect the music with unforgettable intensity and pathos; this cleaned-up recording remains the finest memorial to her most famous role.

Gabriele Santini – 1958 (live mono) Opera d'Oro, Myto, Living Stage, GOP

Orchestra - Teatro dell'Opera di Roma
 Chorus - Teatro dell'Opera di Roma

Norma - Anita Cerquetti
 Adalgisa - Miriam Pirazzini
 Pollione - Franco Corelli
 Oroveso - Giulio Neri
 Clotilde - Giannella Borelli
 Flavio - Piero De Palma

Anita Cerquetti's career was very short, so any addition to the two commercial recordings she made is welcome, and this is the most famous of her live performances, made at her peak while only twenty-six years old. Her career was to last only four more years and one can only wonder what she might have done had she been able to continue but it was not to be.

The fame of this performance is enhanced by the fact that she took over from an ailing Maria Callas and triumphed as Norma. Italian audiences loved her and you can clearly hear why here. I say "clearly" but in fact the sound is pretty dismal and it makes little difference which label you buy - Opera d'Oro, Myto, Living Stage or GOP - they are all the same as the sound is irredeemably dim and distant and I doubt whether even Andrew Rose could work much Pristine magic on it, although he has yet to try. It is dry, peaky and boomy, the orchestra and chorus badly recessed, so that we can only just hear how energised the choral singing and conducting are; Santini was of course a safe pair of hands.

But the cast is stellar: Corelli is in finest, most ringing and heroic voice, the vibrato attractively fast but not irksome or obtrusive in the way that early in his career earned him the cruel nickname "Pecorelli" ("Little sheep" or perhaps better, "Baa-lamb"). He is impassioned and virile; surely the best Pollione ever. Giulio Neri's bass is impressively cavernous, if rather "woofy" to my ears; a mere four months later this great artist was dead from a heart attack at only 49. Miriam Pirazzini is very good, if not quite in the same class as the greatest exponents of the role of Adalgisa, such as Stignani, Simionato, Cossotto, Ludwig and Horne. The supporting cast features the ubiquitous comprimario tenor Piero De Palma and Sumi Jo's teacher, Gianella Borelli.

But what of Cerquetti? Hers was a huge, clear, bright, steady soprano, utterly even throughout its range (if with a slightly "short" top with the occasional slightly screamed top C), tackling the coloratura with ease, evincing no strain in sustaining long legato lines and bringing plenty of temperament to her characterisation. Perhaps all she lacks is the last ounce of individuality which marks out the Normas of Callas and Ponselle, but her Norma is still mightily secure and satisfying. She brings surprising delicacy to the conclusion of "Casta diva" and the enraptured audience moos with pleasure, awarding her an ovation which lasts over two minutes and is included in its entirety here. The series of duets between Norma and Adalgisa at the beginning of Act 2 is sublime.

This cannot be a first recommendation but it is surely a desirable supplement for the *Norma* aficionado, as long as the trying sound can be endured.

Tullio Serafin – 1960 (studio stereo) Warner, EMI

Orchestra - Teatro alla Scala

Chorus - Teatro alla Scala

Norma - Maria Callas

Adalgisa - Christa Ludwig

Pollione - Franco Corelli

Oroveso - Nicola Zaccaria

Clotilde - Edda Vincenzi

Flavio - Piero De Palma

This recording has the advantage of being studio recorded in good stereo sound – very welcome after all those tinny, live mono recordings - and also partners Callas with superlative singers in Corelli, Ludwig and - for the third time - Zaccaria. Callas' voice had not so much deteriorated by the time of this recording, apart from a few flapping top notes; the decline in her voice was not a linear process, as her later recordings of *La gioconda* and the 1960 *Norma* testify. Furthermore, there are huge compensations in the delicacy of her characterisation; she introduces new subtleties and even when her voice does not quite do her bidding you can sense the emotions guiding it.

The cast here is glamorous and indeed there is an air of glamour about the whole thing, starting with Corelli's glorious tenor. I just drink in Corelli's voice and when he obliges us by sailing up to the top C that occurs a few bars into his first aria, "Meco all'altar di Venere", I can't stop grinning. There is a

such pathos, such tenderness, such a depth of suffering in Callas' vocalisation that I can easily forgive the odd wobble and a little loosening. Ludwig was a clever and unexpected choice; she has depth of tone without sounding the least bit too old and the role sits squarely in the middle of her lustrous mezzo-soprano and the fervent feeling with which she invests "Deh, proteggemi, O Dio!" matches Callas for intensity.

Serafin has the advantage of an orchestra which plays beautifully and he supports his singers ideally without unduly lingering. The cumulative combination of the advantages of this recording makes it highly desirable.

Richard Bonyngue – 1964 (studio stereo) Decca

Orchestra - London Symphony Orchestra

Chorus - London Symphony Orchestra Chorus

Norma - Joan Sutherland

Adalgisa - Marilyn Horne

Pollione - John Alexander

Oroveso - Richard Cross

Clotilde - Yvonne Minton

Flavio - Joseph Ward

It is true that I sometimes find Bonyngue's beat here a bit limp and I concede that to love this set you must have a taste for Sutherland's soprano. To some, she was and remains the prima donna assoluta in her chosen territory and even if she sometimes lacks the variety of a soprano sfogato like Callas, her singing per se is often simply breath-taking. What trills, what legato, what agility. As always, the power as she rises up and above the stave is astonishing and she is worthily partnered, especially by Marilyn Horne who, despite being neither the soprano for whom the role was written or having a voice which sounds as if it would complement her Norma, seems to match Sutherland perfectly. One reason is the complete unity of their phrasing; they listen carefully and match each other perfectly in those passages in thirds.

Both Americans John Alexander and Richard Cross, despite having distinguished careers, were relatively little recorded but they really shine here, having refined, passionate, properly registered voices of the old school. Alexander is especially virile and impressive, avoiding the clumsiness which sometimes afflicted the Pollione of tenors like Del Monaco and Corelli without ever sounding effete.

You can find some very strange, absurd and off-base reviews of this landmark recording. It was Norma, along with Lucia and Alcina which put Sutherland on the map as one of the greatest dramatic-lyric coloratura sopranos ever and enabled her to consolidate what Callas had begun in wresting such roles away from tweety-birds to big-voiced singers able to do them proper justice. One of the daftest things I read too often is the "theory" that she was a pushed-up mezzo; I am quite certain that no singer whose true Fach lay in a lower tessitura could expand the way she does as she soars up to top C, D and E-flat.

The later recording has its merits but this is closer to perfection and captures Sutherland in her youthful prime shortly after she burst upon the operatic world.

Gianandrea Gavazzeni – 1965 (live mono) Myto

Orchestra - Teatro alla Scala

Chorus - Teatro alla Scala

Norma - Leyla Gencer

Adalgisa - Giulietta Simionato

Pollione - Bruno Prevedi
 Oroveso - Nicola Zaccaria
 Clotilde - Luciana Piccolo
 Flavio - Piero De Palma

Recording companies lamentably neglected Leyla Gencer, so we invariably have to hear her in what used to be called "pirate" recordings. This one is in excellent mono sound, conducted in spirited fashion by the ever-reliable Gavazzeni. This was obviously a prestigious production with a star cast of La Scala regulars. Matters open promisingly with Zaccaria's instantly-recognisable bass although the potential weak link is the tenor, Bruno Prevedi – a good but never quite front-rank singer. He had an attractive, baritonal timbre which reminds me of Bonisolti and no unpleasant mannerisms. He is not especially stylish and sometimes a bit effortful, edging just under the note, but he is just about competent. The trouble is, much better tenors like Corelli ring in the ears.

Of course, Gencer is wonderful; she, too, has an inimitable tone: rich, flexible, with a little glottal catch in it which is always suggestive of tears and the audience clearly approves. She is matched by Simionato whose powerful mezzo negotiates Adalgisa's music easily even if she sounds too smoky, stentorian and sophisticated for the role. Their partnership will appeal to many, Gavazzeni allows them to linger over the cantilena passages in their duets and their voices blend and entwine deliciously. However, there are some intonation issues there, too, and other recordings offer a more completely satisfying experience.

Silvio Varviso - 1967(studio stereo) Decca Eloquence

Orchestra - Santa Cecilia
 Chorus - Santa Cecilia

Norma - Elena Souliotis
 Adalgisa - Fiorenza Cossotto
 Pollione - Mario Del Monaco
 Oroveso - Carlo Cava
 Clotilde - Giuliana Tavalaccini
 Flavio - Athos Cesarini

My own copy of this 2CD set was expertly and privately re-mastered for personal use and not as a commercial issue, but this Decca recording has now once more become available to both lovers of the opera and of Elena Souliotis (spelled "Suliotis" in her earliest public incarnation), whose career and indeed life were both sadly curtailed; she died of heart failure aged 61 having long previously retired.

I am indebted to my skilled amateur sound engineer friend who provided me with the CDs for the following information: originally released in 1968, it was one of the last LPs to be issued in both mono and stereo versions, although the latter was available only in the US, on the London label. It remained available through the early 70's after only one pressing batch and then disappeared, apart from the highlights discs on both Decca and London.

In fact even that "complete" recording was not: in order to fit it onto four LP sides rather than the normal six, the producers opted to trim it by adopting the regular, small stage cuts and some of what must admittedly be adjudged the more banal music, such as the first rum-ti-tum Druid march before "Casta diva", which is in any case repeated later, some cabaletta repeats, an internal cut in "Qual cor tradisti, qual cor perdesti" and, more substantially, the whole first scene of Act II, "Ah! del Tebro". This reduces the role of the chorus and considerably shortens Oroveso's part to that of an "extended comprimario". It is strongly sung by Carlo Cava but the reduction in his music is no great loss and what remains is priceless: three great voices giving it their all. For me, as so often in this opera, the

highlight is the extended trio at the climax concluding Act I; we shall not again hear three voices like theirs singing out with such wild abandon.

Del Monaco was in his early fifties when this recording was made and beginning to slide in his attack on top notes but still in typically marvellous, trumpeting voice, even if he may be heard to greater advantage in live recordings with Callas in the mid 1950's.

Souliotis' good fortune was to arrive on the operatic scene just as Callas' star was dimming; her mistake was to attempt and give too much too soon. Only 24 at the time - under half her tenor's age - she clearly lacks a finished technique: the registers are disjointed and she sometimes resorts to a strange, disembodied and unsupported crooning when trying to sing high-flying passages softly, as in "teneri figli", and yet it is too easy to carp when so much else is simply wonderful. I find that her voice exercises a strange fascination, it is such an individual instrument. Comparisons with Callas are inevitable, not to the detriment of either singer, but because both have such a gift for enlivening and declaiming text and both make such telling use of their trenchant lower registers at such points as in her recitative before "Casta diva" on "Romani" and "morra", and "ed odio" at the beginning of Act II. Vocal production can be lumpy and vibrations fluttery, yet she can cope with the fioriture of "Ah! bello a me ritorna" and the sheer size of the instrument matches that of her fellow singers.

We are blessed in the presence of the young Fiorenza Cossotto in one of her most celebrated roles, which she sang alongside Callas; she is simply flawless, easily encompassing the wide tessitura of Adalgisa's part and absolutely thrilling when singing her duet with Del Monaco.

The recording is excellent, made in a big, broad acoustic rather than the over-miked sound we hear too often today which is presumably engineered to compensate for voices being too small. Varviso's conducting is wonderfully energised; he takes quite a few passages a little faster than is normal - for example, the glorious harmonised-in-thirds music whose soft tread accompanies Adalgisa's first entrance - but he also knows when to relax and give his singers space - and sometimes Souliotis evidently really needs it simply to get the notes out; this is one of the killer roles of all opera. This was, Souliotis apart, an all-Italian production and it is infused with dramatic energy. The cuts mean it cannot be a first recommendation but I love it.

Richard Bonyngé – 1969 (live mono) Opera d'Oro

Orchestra - Teatro Colón (Buenos Aires)

Chorus - Teatro Colón (Buenos Aires)

Norma - Joan Sutherland

Adalgisa - Fiorenza Cossotto

Pollione - Charles Craig

Oroveso - Ivo Vinco

Clotilde - Tatiana Zlatar

Flavio - Orazio (Horacio) Mastrango

This set is a terrific bargain; not only do you get the finest of extant recordings, live and studio, of Sutherland's Norma but you get it in excellent sound and with a superb supporting cast. Sutherland sounds both more vocally "released" and more profound in characterisation; I think the process of studio recording and the difficulties inherent in capturing her vast voice inhibited her and here you can hear her let rip free of constraint. That's just as well, because in 1969 the stentorian Cossotto is just entering upon her default grandstanding mode of singing everything con gusto - great for Amneris but hardly apt for the passive, suffering Adalgisa. Still, her singing as vocalisation per se is thrilling, even if her audible gasps of breath intake, her "life begins at forte" approach and the way she signals then pounces on a high note can all be distracting mannerisms; she was obviously intent upon avoiding being upstaged by Sutherland and takes every opportunity to plunge thunderously

into her lower register and belt out the B's to match Sutherland's higher top notes, even when it's not very musical. Meanwhile, Sutherland's coloratura is perfect, better than in any other account of hers I have heard; this, combined with that greater depth of feeling, makes this performance her best.

Bonynghe, too, sounds more relaxed and pliant, yet also energised, in this live performance. He has the advantage of first-rate singers even if the Colon orchestra is not always sweetly tuned. While Corelli will always be my benchmark for Pollione, the under-rated and under-valued (in the UK, at least) Charles Craig runs him close, a little scooping and the occasional hard top note apart. He sounds like a great tenor - which I think he must have been. Cossotto's then husband, Ivo Vinco, makes a great job of Oroveso; he had a beautiful, Italianate bass with plenty of bite and rises to the company he is in on stage.

I still return to the 1960 Callas recording for the ultimate *Norma* but this one preserves the miracle that was Sutherland's Norma without your having to compromise on the performance as a whole, as everything else is so good. Audience noise is minimal except for vociferous applause. I suspect that either the transfer or the original tape is slightly sharp but it doesn't bother me. The sound is good, clear mono – so full that at first I thought it was primitive stereo.

NB: be aware that a faulty copying process resulted in earlier Opera d'Oro issues of this recording suffering from two faults: unwanted gaps between tracks when the music was supposed to be continuous and a transfer a whole tone too high; this was apparently a flaw peculiar to a particular batch, now mostly corrected apart from the minimal sharpness I note above, so check that you have one of the later issues if you buy it.

Oliviero De Fabritiis – 1971 (live stereo)

Orchestra - NHK Symphony Orchestra

Chorus - Chorus

Norma - Elena Souliotis

Adalgisa - Fiorenza Cossotto

Pollione - Gianfranco Cecchele

Oroveso - Ivo Vinco

Clotilde - Anna Di Stasio

Flavio - Franco Castellana

For fans of Souliotis and the opera in question, the main advantage of this live recording over the abridged studio recording she made four years earlier lies in the fact that it delivers the whole score and Souliotis is, if anything, in marginally more secure voice despite all her failings and frailties and the fact that her career was virtually over a mere couple of years later.

It is still a Marmite voice; listening to proceedings here I felt like a shuttlecock battered between two extremes of delight and frustration. At times the intensity of Souliotis' singing is mesmerising; sample the opening of Act II from the recitativo "Dormono entrambi" through to "Teneri figli". Yet I advise no-one to listen to the first minute of track 21, CD1, "Ah sì, fa core, m'abbracciami" unless you want to hear some really poor and squally singing from our wayward heroine. There are perhaps too many ugly moments for repeated listening but to offset that, there are also many moments when she sounds uncannily like Callas and plumbs the same emotional depths. Hers was a huge, commanding voice with a pronounced break between the registers which, again like Callas, she exploits for great emotional effect. Sometimes her fioriture are clean, sometimes sloppy and laboured; at certain key points she sings precisely and at others she sounds laboured and unwieldy - all over the place but always so committed. Her tone can be hoarse and harsh, yet again sweet and pure, depending on where she is in the score and she invariably sings in tune. It makes for a thrilling ride.

It helps that she is accompanied by a distinguished cast, headed by the great Fiorenza Cossotto, repeating a role which was her mainstay throughout the 60's and 70's with a host of prime donne from Callas to Sutherland to Caballé. She is extraordinary; at the point referred to above at the end of Act I when Souliotis fouls up, she repeats the same musical phrases immaculately like a singing lesson. Her top notes tend to be better, too, although to be fair the best of the singing here is in the duets when Souliotis is on song; "Mira, o Norma" is exquisite.

To complete this trio of can belto singers we have baritone tenor Gianfranco Cecchele, singing in a wholly reliable, stentorian and unvaried manner, rather like a slightly sub-par Mario del Monaco at his best. I don't mean to be snide; he's very good and had the misfortune to be overshadowed by a glut of great Italian tenors in his day. He is sometimes a bit clumsy but prolific of voice and a match for his ladies.

Ivo Vinco makes a fine job of Oroveso - always a bit of a bore - with his clean, incisive bass. The La Scala forces under de Fabritiis - a conductor very experienced in this opera - are excellent here in Tokyo. Unfamiliarity with operatic conventions results in some ill-timed audience applause which is increasingly edited out as the opera progresses, but the stereo sound is really first rate for a live recording and there is otherwise virtually no noise from the audience.

Richard Bonyngne – 1972 (live mono) Gala

Orchestra - San Francisco Opera

Chorus - San Francisco Opera

Norma - Joan Sutherland

Adalgisa - Huguette Tourangeau

Pollione - John Alexander

Oroveso - Clifford Grant

Clotilde - Gwendolyn Jones

Flavio - Erik Townsend

There are several great live performances of *Norma* to be found on the Gala label. None of them is, in my view, preferable to the later Callas studio recording, but they are excellent second or supplementary sets. A preference very much depends upon the kind of voices you like; I admire Sutherland enormously and here she is found at her very peak, singing superbly in the higher keys rather than the versions transposed down a tone as preferred by most singers who undertake this cruelly taxing role. She is here partnered by first rate singers - not the usual suspects but they are wholly up to the demands of their roles. John Alexander sings better than I have ever heard him elsewhere (including the studio version of ten years earlier); he has real steel in his voice. Tourangeau employs her impressive range and booming lower register to characterise Adalgisa formidably without making her seem matronly; she makes some rather grinding gear changes between registers, but it is nonetheless an exciting sound - and she matches Sutherland note for note in the passages sung in thirds, complete with a great top C. I always enjoy Clifford Grant's splendid bass. The sound is not that wonderful for so comparatively recent a recording - a bit boxy and limited - but it is perfectly listenable. This set is available ridiculously cheaply and commemorates what was obviously a great occasion at the San Francisco opera.

Carlo Felice Cillario – 1972 (studio stereo) RCA

Orchestra - London Philharmonic Orchestra

Chorus - Ambrosian Opera Chorus

Norma - Montserrat Caballé

Adalgisa - Fiorenza Cossotto

Pollione - Plácido Domingo
 Oroveso - Ruggero Raimondi
 Clotilde - Elizabeth Bainbridge
 Flavio - Kenneth Collins

This is a complete recording of *Norma*, without the usual stage cuts which disfigure most other recordings including all of those featuring the singer who is for many the ultimate High Priestess, Maria Callas. The cuts are not large but for completists that is recommendation enough, especially given the starry nature of the 1973 cast.

However, the singing per se is good enough reason to acquire it, even if there is for me some small taint of the assembly line approach to recording which could afflict the industry in its heyday, when complete recordings were being churned out with gay abandon to a receptive and increasingly affluent LP market. There is no doubt, for example that there is more excitement, glamour and allure to be found in Caballé's live recording a year or so later when she faces down the Mistral in Orange, partnered by Jon Vickers, but the sound there is nowhere near as good, of course and as a studio recording this one could hardly sound better for its era. It is on three CDs when it could have been fitted on to two, has been well remastered and comes with a libretto which for some reason ascribes four Acts to the opera (it has but two) and gets confused about the scene numbers; never mind.

Not everything about Caballé's singing is ideal, she can sound generalised compared with Callas' exquisitely subtle and thrillingly dramatic word-painting and when she sings forcefully her tone can turn harsh and some of those irritating little glottal catches intrude, but of course her floated, soft singing is a dream. Domingo is in youthful, sappy voice, only just squeezing out his one top C in his opening aria but otherwise very acceptable, if hardly as visceral as Corelli or Del Monaco. Cossotto as Adalgisa consciously and effectively softens her naturally big, brazen tone in order to convey her naivety and vulnerability; she blends well with her co-star in those vital duets, although in "Opera on Record", reviewer Andrew Porter waspishly but not entirely inaccurately describes their partnership as the sound of "two big, healthy girls jogging along in full, splendid cry"! Raimondi is a fine Oroveso, a little lighter than the usual bass in that role but affecting and authoritative. The two British supporting singers are ideal, especially Kenneth Collins as Flavio, who was a celebrated tenor in his own right.

Cillario's conducting is unobtrusive and he gives his singers space to bring out the beauty of Bellini's long, legato line. The Ambrosian Chorus - ubiquitous in major label recordings for twenty years from the mid-sixties onwards - do their usual impeccable job.

James Levine – 1973 (studio stereo) Deutsche Grammophon

Orchestra - New Philharmonia Orchestra
 Chorus - John Alldis Choir

Norma - Beverly Sills
 Adalgisa - Shirley Verrett
 Pollione - Enrico Di Giuseppe
 Oroveso - Paul Plishka
 Clotilde - Delia Wallis
 Flavio - Robert Tear

Sills comments about some parts of the role "making her want to giggle" might suggest too lightweight and flippant an approach to it; furthermore, her decision to sing her arias, like Sutherland, in the original higher keys and to adopt very slow tempos, in combination with bird-like timbre of her lyric coloratura soprano means that to some ears she will sound all wrong as Norma. The slight beat in her voice is not too pronounced and does not bother me, especially as she sings so

intelligently. Despite not having the largest voice, she sang the role live successfully – she, too was very instrumental in the bel canto revival - and displays exceptional breath control and agility, even if she has little of the gravitas Sutherland brings to her portrayal; her forte is melancholy and pathos. It helps that she is partnered with Shirley Verrett, who, like fellow mezzo Grace Bumbry, eventually sang the title role herself when she moved up into dramatic soprano roles, and has a nicely contrasting sound which nonetheless blends well.

I cannot help feeling that those very slow tempi are rather laboured and self-conscious and prevent the music from generating sufficient drama and momentum, for all that the singing per se is lovely and it is a pleasure to hear singers whose intonation is so accurate; so often it can be hit and miss in *Norma*. However, the pace picks up in duets like “Si, fino all’ore”, sung in the original F major rather than a tone down as we usually hear it; Verrett copes well with that higher key but brings a grave, steady beauty to her own arias, again delivered at a slow tempo. In truth, the more I listen to them, the more I enjoy luxuriating in the sheer beauty of their sound but I can’t really defend Levine’s leisureliness which at times becomes lugubriousness.

On the staff side, the casting is less impressive. Enrico Di Giuseppe has a smaller, lighter tenor than we have become accustomed to, even though he is probably closer to what Bellini would have heard. His low notes are weak and his plaintive, nasal timbre is of no great distinction. Paul Pliska is much better but he hasn’t the rolling splendour of the best Italian basses.

The sound is excellent and the New Philharmonia plays elegantly. Sills fans will want this for her exquisite singing but she does not scale the tragic heights as do the greatest exponents of the role and the ensemble does not match the best recordings.

Giuseppe Patanè – 1974 (live mono) Opera d’Oro

Orchestra - Teatro Regio di Torino

Chorus - Teatro Regio di Torino

Norma - Montserrat Caballé

Adalgisa - Josephine Veasey

Pollione - Jon Vickers

Oroveso - Agostino Ferrin

Clotilde - Marisa Zotti

Flavio - Gino Sinimberghi

OK; let's be positive and start with the good news: this enshrines the most wondrous performance of Caballé's career. Her melismata, breath control, diction, downward runs and sheer beauty of tone are indeed things of wonder. Something about the prospect of cancellation, once the Mistral began to whip down the Rhone valley, inspired her to become one with the elements and deliver an elemental interpretation. The gale chilled the audience and audibly buffets the microphones. You may see Caballé on the video (either on YouTube or you may buy the poor-quality DVD), standing immobile and braced against the wind, yards of chiffon billowing behind her and singing as if she were in the comparative comfort of a recording studio but upping the intensity and volume of her voice as if to defy the wind to carry her voice away. Her legendary floated pianissimi are often in evidence yet always audible; her delicacy is breath-taking yet there is power aplenty when she furiously denounces the faithless Pollione. This is nonetheless a gentler, more feminine Norma than Callas gives us; on these discs the scene in which she briefly contemplates stabbing her own children is cut but I believe it is extant on the filmed version. However, I also recall reading that it was sometimes excised from her performances of *Norma* because she played the kind of woman who could not conceivably contemplate committing such a dreadful act; be that as it may, this is a characterisation for posterity.

Her interpretation is complemented by a powerful, virile, but somehow likeable Pollione from Vickers. He does not take the thrilling top note options like Corelli but comes across as less of a thoughtless cad. The ever-under-rated Josephine Veasey is a plausible and musical Adalgisa and the supporting cast is fine. Conductor Patanè performs the near impossible feat under the conditions of mostly keeping it all together despite a few disjunctures between orchestra and singers and he never lets proceedings drag.

So, the bad news? Mostly the cut mentioned above and above all the hollow mono sound, of course: it sounds for much of the time as if the singers are in a wind tunnel. The boomy, echoing acoustic is not just the result of the performance taking place in the Orange amphitheatre; it's just done on poor equipment. (Opera d'Oro gives the location of this recording as being Torino; of course, it isn't but that is the origin of the orchestra and chorus.)

This isn't one for audiophiles or opera neophytes but all canary-fanciers will want to own it.

Carlo Felice Cillario – 1975 (live mono) Gala

Orchestra - San Francisco Opera

Chorus - San Francisco Opera

Norma - Cristina Deutekom

Adalgisa - Tatiana Troyanos

Pollione - Robleto Merolla

Oroveso - Clifford Grant

Clotilde - Janice Felty

Flavio - Gary Burgess

Tempted into trying this by some enthusiastic reviews, I find my own enthusiasm for it to be tempered by some drawbacks which its admirers seem not to hear or remain untroubled by. The main issue here for me is Deutekom's tuning. She has a surprisingly strong powerful voice for a singer who was a famous coloratura and sang lyric roles such as the Queen of the Night to great acclaim (as per her account in Solti's earlier *Magic Flute*), especially in her lower register. She attacks the music with real confidence and vigour. The warbling vibrato which bothers many is not too obtrusive here but there is an odd change of gear in her vocal production as the voice ascends and in the mid-range the vibrato seems to be permanently centred under the note to produce an effect decidedly flat - and I'm afraid I find it painful to listen to for all her accomplishment. Indeed, in the famous duet with Adalgisa in which the singers shadow each other in thirds Deutekom pulls Troyanos down with her to end very flat indeed, nearer a B than the tonic C. That's a negligible flaw in a live performance but again makes for uncomfortable listening. I admire so much that Deutekom does: the delicacy and poise of her soft singing and the clarity of her divisions - but I cannot get over her intonation.

Troyanos' velvety sound is a real bonus; what a lovely singer she was, and here she is more impassioned than was sometimes the case with an artist who could be temperamentally cool. The other vocal treat here is Clifford Grant's rich, flexible bass with its distinctive timbre.

The Pollione - a second rank tenor now largely forgotten - is a crude, unsteady belter without much tonal allure and an effortful production; too many better tenors come to mind when he is pounding away: Corelli, Del Monaco, Vickers, even Charles Craig and John Alexander.

The sound is tolerable mono, perfectly listenable without too much distortion and some wobbling background noise/print-through on the tape. The conducting is unexceptional/unexceptionable and workmanlike without subtlety. Not for me; I offloaded this one.

Michael Halász – 1977 (live mono) Dynamic

Orchestra - Orchestra Sinfonica di Bari
 Chorus - Amici della Polifonia - Voce per la Musica

Norma - Grace Bumbry
 Adalgisa - Lella Cuberli
 Pollione - Giuseppe Giacomini
 Oroveso - Robert Lloyd
 Clotilde - Eugenia Cardano
 Flavio - Paolo Todisco

The mono sound here is rather hollow, with some wavering, background twittering and drop-outs in the tape, but it's tolerable.

Obviously, the main interest here is Grace Bumbry's brief assumption of the title role in her dramatic soprano phase; she soon reverted to Adalgisa, but the first impression we receive is of Robert Lloyd's sonorous, strongly sung Oroveso. The under-recorded Giacomini, too, makes an impact with his large, bronze tenor; he is a singer to revival Corelli for amplitude of tone but he eschews some top notes and can be rather unvarying in his delivery, rarely attempting beneath mezzo-forte. Lella Cuberli sings a capable Adalgisa of no great distinction.

Ensemble and synchronisation among the soloists and chorus can be precarious, the orchestra has its share of rough moments and bloopers and Halász' conducting is rather stolid and uninspired. Despite some lovely moments from Bumbry, such as the last scene where the lie of the music, as in "In mia man", most suits the darker colour of the centre of her voice, one gets the impression that she hasn't fully digested the part (her coeval and possessor of a similar voice-type, Shirley Verrett, made the transition more successfully). There is no question whether Bumbry has enough voice; she sings a strong, direct, rather formidable Norma mostly without great nuance and occasionally her vibrato becomes obtrusive. Ultimately, this performance emerges more as an enjoyable sideshow of historical interest compared with the most gripping competition.

Riccardo Muti – 1978 (live mono) Myto, Legato Classics

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

Norma - Renata Scotto
 Adalgisa - Margherita Rinaldi
 Pollione - Ermanno Mauro
 Oroveso - Agostino Ferrin
 Clotilde - Giuseppina Arista
 Flavio - Giancarlo Turati

In good, clean, if limited, mono sound (but a muttering prompter is constantly audible) this recording immediately makes a good impression with an energised overture followed by the entry of Ferrin's imposing bass. Ermanno Mauro will be no-one's favourite Pollione; he is similar to Prevedi above in that he is rather stentorian and unvaried, without finesse but able to encompass the notes - and to his credit he takes the top C in his opening aria powerfully, head on - then ducks the concluding top note in "Meco all'altar". Scotto is in vibrant voice - better than in her studio recording for Levine the following year - always tending towards the harsh and flapping at volume above the stave but also enlivening the text and singing out fearlessly. Some of her coloratura work is impressive and she also produces some lovely pianissimo and portamento effects to rival Caballé. I find her arty, artful manner in "Casta diva" too close to crooning, however, and there is a suspicion of her being under the note throughout as a result of the lack of support in her tone. Rinaldi's lyric soprano is insufficiently differentiated from Scotto's - there is a reason why the role is usually given to a mezzo

even though the indications are that Giulia Grisi, who created it, was a lyric soprano – but she sings most feelingly, sounds more like a young girl than many a tough mezzo, and there are some interesting moments when her voice soars above Scotto's as per the original score. This recording contains some lovely things but ultimately emerges as a bit anonymous, lacking the charisma and distinction of the best versions.

Paolo Peloso – 1978 (live mono) Gala

Orchestra - San Francisco Opera

Chorus - San Francisco Opera

Norma - Shirley Verrett

Adalgisa - Alexandrina Milcheva(-Nonova)

Pollione - Nunzio Todisco

Oroveso - Clifford Grant

Clotilde - Gwendolyn Jones

Flavio - Barry Busse

As you might expect, given that she had a voice that could sing practically anything, Shirley Verrett makes a strong, positive Norma and here she sings out confidently in live performance – no fudging or nudging but every note hit head on and cleanly articulated, although don't look for much vocal nuance in the form of anything floated or piano. Her range is extraordinary: she has a secure top C, her lower register has a Callas-like bite and she enunciates the text clearly - but with a peculiar tendency to distort the "e" vowel, turning it into an "l", so "queste" becomes "quiste" and "terra" is "tirra". In many respects, she is similar to her great Afro-American, mezzo-soprano coeval Grace Bumbry, who made the same upward transition but wisely abandoned the role much sooner than Verrett, who is more comfortable there and kept it in her repertoire from 1976 right towards the end of her career., singing it for the last time in Messina in 1989.

Her co-singers make a surprisingly strong team, given that they do not feature the biggest names. Booming Australian bass Clifford Grant is superb – as he is in virtually everything I have heard him in. The young Bulgarian Alexandrina Milcheva is equally excellent, with a warm, rich, even mezzo, ringing top notes and a timbre reminiscent of Tatiana Troyanos. She blends well with Verrett; it's a pity that they go flat in the a cappella coda to "Oh! rimembranza!"

Pollione is sung by the Neapolitan tenor Nunzio Tedesco, a singer unknown to me, now retired and apparently largely forgotten today but he had a good career, He has a strong, incisive tenor of the Bonisolti type and is never in danger of being drowned out by Verrett's voluminous soprano falcon/sfogato. His vibrato is rather too pronounced but the volume and firmness of tone are welcome, even if, in line with this performance as a whole, refinements are few.

I really like the contribution of conductor Paolo Pelosi – again, an artist previously unknown to me - he does everything right, giving his singers rein when they need it but always driving the performance forward.

This is a grand, large-scale performance which deserves wider circulation. It's not subtle and the sound is merely acceptable, but it enshrines some great singing.

James Levine – 1979 (studio stereo) Sony

Orchestra - National Philharmonic Orchestra

Chorus - Ambrosian Opera Chorus

Norma - Renata Scotto

Adalgisa - Tatiana Troyanos

Pollione - Giuseppe Giacomini
 Oroveso - Paul Plishka
 Clotilde - Ann Murray
 Flavio - Paul Crook

This recording is promising in many ways: it restores many cuts, including passages where Adalgisa's line is higher than Norma's, the original ending to the first Act and some additional music in the famous duet "Mira, O Norma"; it is studio-made and in excellent stereo sound; it fields a superb orchestra and chorus; its distinguished cast of singers includes favourite, velvety mezzo Troyanos and the under-recorded Giacomini; finally, it is conducted by a young James Levine in typically energised, up-and-at-'em mode, giving full rein to the proto-Romantic sweep of the music but less inclined to wallow than in his other studio recording six years earlier with Sills.

Plishka, too, is more resonant and imposing than for Levine in that earlier recording and his Italian is excellent, even if a slight cloudiness in his tone is not so "Italianate". Giacomini, too, doesn't have the squillo ideally heard in a Pollione, but his hefty tenor is big and handsome without a hint of bleat or wobble and an attractively fast, flickering vibrato; he makes a good job of his opening aria, whacking out a slightly effortful but convincing top C and sounding like a proper military Roman, not the potboy we sometimes get from weedier tenors. His vocal production does not lend itself to great tonal variety but it's still a pleasure to listen to such a virile sound; the contrast when tenor Paul Crook squeakily announces Norma's arrival is comical.

Troyanos is ideal as Adalgisa because although her mezzo-soprano is rich and honeyed, the Supervia-like fast vibrato makes her sound young, nervous and vulnerable, not a vengeful termagant. She has a mellow lower register but a light, easy top range, enabling her to encompass those aforementioned higher-lying lines.

You might have noticed that I have left my assessment of Scotto to last. As ever, you can hear how much she consciously or unconsciously modelled her Norma on Callas. There is a lot of edge and glottal catch in her tonal emission which can catch both the microphone and the ear ungratefully and, as ever, top notes spread, but the floated pianissimi are intact and her passion and commitment are never in doubt. "Casta diva" is decidedly better than in her live recording under Muti from the previous year but the pulsed and squeezed sustained top A is frankly ugly and the cabaletta, transposed down a tone, is clumsy, especially from a singer who previously specialised in coloratura roles. She improves after that but there are still some harsh and squally moments.

If the central performance were more consistent, this would be a more recommendable option.

Richard Bonyngé – 1984 (studio stereo) Decca

Orchestra - Welsh National Opera
 Chorus - Welsh National Opera

Norma - Joan Sutherland
 Adalgisa - Montserrat Caballé
 Pollione - Luciano Pavarotti
 Oroveso - Samuel Ramey
 Clotilde - Diana Montague
 Flavio - Kim Begley

Sutherland had just turned 58 at the time of her second studio recording, so it is fair to note that her voice had lost some of its resonance in its middle and acquired something of a pulse, but it was still a thing of wonder and beauty. The cast assembled around her could hardly have been bettered. Pavarotti's youthful glory years, too, were behind him but he was only in his late forties and his voice

was still resplendent. Additional interest is provided by the fact Caballé, a true soprano - and a great one, too - is singing Adalgisa - and a soprano Adalgisa appears to have been Bellini's original intent. Ramey was the basso cantante du jour and even the very minor roles of Clotilde and Flavio are sung by the excellent Diana Montague and Kim Begley respectively. We hear lovely playing from the WNO, relaxed, flexible conducting from Bonyngé and the usual first-rate Decca sound and the off-stage band effects are neatly managed. The original issue was on three CDs with an introductory essay, a synopsis, illustrations and a four-language libretto to complete a prestige project; the re-issue offers an online libretto.

Samuel Ramey's Oroveso is a little lighter than normal but his lean, resonant tone cuts through the chorus and orchestra. Pavarotti doesn't have the heft of Corelli or Del Monaco, but, like Ramey, the beauty and incisiveness of his timbre prove very satisfying and his careful inflection of the recitativo is a noticeable feature of his singing - pleasing from a tenor who was sometimes satisfied merely to "stand and sing". The top C is duly delivered without fuss. He benefits from Bonyngé's sympathetic tempi and willingness to permit rubato in the phrasing, nor, contrary to some reports, does he sound bored or uninvolved.

Sutherland's voice is still clearly very large and flexible; the slight huskiness at its centre and encroaching beat do not really much compromise its beauty and it remains impressive. She does not sing her big arias in the original keys as she did twenty years earlier but the coloratura of "Ah! bello a me ritorna" is thrilling and the top C concluding the first scene and the top D at the end of Act 1 are still very much in place - indeed powerful and prolonged.

It is fascinating to hear how Caballé - a great Norma herself - adapts her voice to both the role of Adalgisa and to Sutherland's Norma. This is a performance full of vocal delicacy and textual nuance that shows up how plain some mezzos are in their delivery of the part; right from her first recitative, "Sgombra è la sacra selva", Caballé puts her mark on the role and creates a sympathetic, fully rounded character. I actually prefer her Adalgisa to her Norma and would go as far as to say that it is the best on record. To take but one example, her floated G flat on "Ah! perduta io son" is simply exquisite and such felicities abound. The duets between the two ladies are delectable and it is noticeable how crisp Sutherland's diction is here following her consonant-swallowing phase. Similarly, the great Act 2 trio "Norma! de' tuoi rimproveri" goes with a swing, actually benefitting from a tempo slightly more relaxed than usual.

Given the bad press this has received from some quarters, I had not expected my reacquaintance with it to be such a positive experience but I enjoy it very much and cannot agree that it was made too late in Sutherland's long career. I suggest that to experience her performance at its best, this recording should be played loud to recreate the undoubted impact of her voice in the theatre.

Giovanni Antonini – 2011-13 (studio digital) Decca

Orchestra - La Scintilla

Chorus - International Chamber Vocalists

Norma - Cecilia Bartoli

Adalgisa - Sumi Jo

Pollione - John Osborn

Oroveso - Michele Pertusi

Clotilde - Liliana Nikiteanu

Flavio - Reinaldo Macias

Nearly everything about this recording is different, which is why I think it has almost to be considered as a thing apart from mainstream recordings.

First, its format: it is lavishly presented in bound, hardback book form with the CDs at each end, numerous photographs, many depicting Bartoli as a tousled, distraught Norma, some with heaving cleavage on display suggestive of verismo torment, several short essays and transcriptions of conversations, in three languages, explaining the rationale behind the edition used here, track listings, a synopsis and – mirabile dictum – a complete, quadrilingual (the original Italian, with English, French and German translations) libretto.

Secondly, the edition: it is the product of a critical study of the manuscript and other sources by musicologist Maurizio Biondi and conductor-violinist Riccardo Minasi, which attempts to re-create the authentic vocal style and instrumental sonorities of what would have been heard at the opera's premiere. Original instruments are employed, playing at 430Hz, about a quarter tone lower than modern pitch. Cuts dating back to the 1950's have been restored and some additional musical material has been inserted, including a coda extension to the chorus "Guerra, guerra" and additional solo verses in the confrontational trio ending Act 1. The return to a soprano Adalgisa and Bellini's original keys for her and Norma's music aims to restore the composer's concept. This is not, however, strictly speaking the first attempt to return to the original score; a performance on DVD was issued in 2001 using an edition prepared by scholar Philip Gossett and there are several precedents for a soprano Adalgisa, including Caballé, Margherita Rinaldi and Lella Cuberli as per above, but this is by far the most radical.

The result is a version sounding very different from traditional recordings: everything conspires towards producing a brighter, leaner sound. The period specialist orchestra, drawn mostly from the Zurich Opera, has gut strings, a recorder and a soft-toned, wooden transverse flute, harder timpani and natural horns; the voices are lighter, more flexible and agile in coloratura and repeats are ornamented and often surprisingly embellished; the conducting is swift and incisive, but Antonini employs rubato in slower passages.

So much for the facts; the question is, how good is it? Let me narrate my responses as the opera unfolds.

I am initially put off by the clangorous, echoing acoustic of the Swiss church recording location, and seems that microphones have been placed very close to sources to compensate for the reverberance, but the ear soon adjusts and obviously it suits the thrust of the enterprise as a whole. The buzzing timbre of the double basses and cellos, too, is disconcerting, but again, one adjusts and appreciates the novelty.

I am less impressed by Michele Pertusi's pedestrian, woofy Oroveso; his intonation and resonance go astray in the lower regions of his bass and one longs for the rolling ease of Siepi or Zaccaria. Nor do I like John Osborn's bleaty, throaty tenor; he sings with a permanently strangled tone which cannot accommodate much variety of expression because of a fundamentally wrong vocal adjustment; hence the vibrato starts to flap and the sound sounds more and more restricted as he ascends. Like Pertusi, when he goes low, the notes disappear as he swallows his tongue – always a telling flaw. What I think Bartoli was aiming for when she hand-picked her associate cast was a tenor of the type typified by John Aler, another American now in his late sixties and presumably mostly retired, who has the flexibility and upper extension without the constriction. I was surprised when I read the following judgment in a review published in "Opera Today":

"Possessing one of the most thrilling voices heard in bel canto repertory during the last decade, American tenor John Osborn joins the ranks of recorded Polliones that include Franco Corelli, Plácido Domingo, and Luciano Pavarotti. In the context of this performance, it might be said that Mr. Osborn combines the best qualities of all three of these illustrious forbears."

I can only say that I derive little pleasure from Mr Osborn's petulant Pollione.

So far so bad.

Enter Bartoli, enunciating her recitativo with trilled r's exploding like a Gatling on steroids and much busy huffing and puffing. She sings "Casta diva" very quietly, as she says in her notes, "sung as a prayer" and nothing wrong with that, especially as she preserves the legato winningly. The second verse is ornamented supposedly in accordance with what Bellini's diva would have been expected to do and it is rather beautiful; she certainly vindicates her assertion that a mezzo with an upper extension can encompass the role and I like the alternative, descending ending. Nonetheless, I have heard Bartoli live and know that her voice is not very big; the aforementioned close miking is in play and artificially exaggerates her carrying power, especially when she appears to drown out her fellow singers. Nor am I keen on the chorus basses groaning the lowest line in the background. Antonini scrambles through the reprise of the march acting as a postlude to "Ah! bello a me ritorna" as the best way to despatch such an embarrassing little tune, then makes a nice job of the gorgeous introduction to Adalgisa's "Deh! proteggimi, o Dio".

Sumi Jo is certainly more like the young, naïve victim of a wily seducer than some of the viragos who have belted their way in stentorian fashion through the role (think Horne or Cossotto at their most formidable); she sings with great pathos and delicacy and there is virtually no wear in her silvery but warm tone, even though she was nearly fifty at the time of recording. So it is all the more of a pity that she must soon be joined by her ardent Kermit who sadly still does not sound to my ears like the avatar of Corelli, Domingo and Pavarotti combined...

Miss Jo valiantly perseveres and provides much aural pleasure. Her Italian is superb and she is a fine verbal actor. How I wish she were adequately partnered. Still, she has plenty of duetting to do with Norma, so we move on.

It is odd that having extolled the desirability of rediscovering the characteristics of the true bel canto style, Bartoli her recitativo opening the final scene of Act 1 with such verismo fervour and attack; it sounds mannered and over-worked - and the close miking exaggerates those faults. Surely more detached, imperious, Norma-as-goddess manner would have been preferable to the harassed harridan mode? "O! rimembranza!" inevitably sounds rushed to ears accustomed to a more flowing lyricism than Antonini permits but the autograph score is apparently marked "andante agitato" and the singing from both ladies is blissful. When Pollione bursts in with his bleated "Misera te! Che festi?" the spell is broken, and the tripping, oompah-oompah start to "Oh! di qual sei tu vittima" in combination with Osborn's unheroic whine nearly scupper the terzetto finale for good but the fire-breathing Bartoli injects some starch into proceedings from "Perfido!" onwards with her intensity and rescues it.

There is a raw immediacy to the superb prelude to Act 2; I like everything about the way Antonini paces and plays the music; Bartoli picks up on the suspense of the moment and delivers a riveting narrative of her internal torment in "Dormono entrambi" and there is great pathos in her entrusting her sons to Adalgisa. "Mira, o Norma" is similarly delightful, both singers entwining their voices exotically but without artifice, vindicating the "less is more" approach which is not always the rule here. "Sì, fino'all'ore" is very fast but thrilling; in fact, Bartoli gets better and better as the opera proceeds but then really throws away the pivotal line "Son io", where Callas makes so much of so little, then Osborn croons his rejoinder to her sublime "Qual cor tradisti".

What an odd experience of a mixed bag this recording is. I love certain things about this recording and if it had a better tenor I could bring myself to compromise and recommend it for its many virtues and refreshing surprises, but...

Recommendations (second choices in brackets):

My first choices are hardly novel or surprising. Nothing shakes my primary attachment to Callas' second studio recording, although I would not want to be without at least one other of her four live performances, above all the Pristine remastering of the 1955 Votto. I would also want to have at least one with Sutherland, hence the frequency of the occurrence of Bonyngé's name in my list below. I would also suggest that whatever version of *Norma* you prefer, Caballé's Adalgisa, and not her Norma, is the more essential; for her Norma, you may go to the Cillario studio recording or the live Orange performance, trying sound and all.

Live mono: Votto/Callas 1955 - Pristine: reprocessed as Ambient Stereo
(Bonyngé/Sutherland 1969)

Live stereo: Bonyngé/Sutherland 1972 (Patanè/Caballé, – 1974)

Studio stereo: Serafin 1960* (Bonyngé/Sutherland 1984; Cillario/Caballé, 1972)

*overall first choice

Ralph Moore