

Ernest Chausson's *Poème de l'amour et de la mer*, op. 19 (1882-90; rev. 1893)

A survey by Ralph Moore

Chausson's slow working pace and perfectionism combined with a lamentably premature death at only 43 resulted in his leaving a relatively small œuvre. Had he not ridden his bike downhill and had a losing argument with a stone wall, we might have had considerably more of his compositions. As it stands, he wrote some lovely songs, two symphonic tone poems, some chamber pieces and a sole opera, but his three most enduring works are his only symphony, his *Poème* for solo violin and orchestra and this ternary song cycle, *Poème de l'amour et de la mer* ('Poem of Love and the Sea' – the punning sonority of the original French is lost in translation and I wonder, too, whether the play on words extends to embracing the word "amer", meaning "bitter", this being a tale of lost love). It was composed over a decade to a text by the poet Maurice Bouchoir and dedicated to fellow-composer Duparc, both friends to Chausson. Although it was premiered in 1893 by a tenor with the composer at the piano, I much prefer to hear it sung by a female voice in the full, orchestrated version, as it was performed by a soprano a year later, so I have not included here any male-voice recordings. There are one or two recordings from tenors, but usually baritones record it; those who want that can choose from amongst tenor Steve Davislim, positively [reviewed](#) by Dominy Clements and William Kreindler and baritones Souzay, Fischer-Dieskau, Hampson et al but I think the music is considerably better served by women singers – and preferably a dusky mezzo.

Chausson's music forms a kind of hybrid or bridge between 19C Romanticism and early 20C French Impressionism; the influences of his predecessor Wagner, his teachers Franck and Massenet and his slightly younger friend Debussy are very apparent. The *Poème* is a favourite work of many a devotee of lush, dreamy, fin de siècle decadence and sensuality, and its mood is reminiscent of Berlioz' *Nuits d'été*, with which Chausson was undoubtedly familiar. The Symbolist text is hyper-Romantic and morbidly self-indulgent – but somehow apt when set to music such as this and couched in French, which is a language forgiving of an over-heated poetic sensibility. It is suffused with the operation of pathetic fallacy: Nature becomes a mirror to the suffering of the tormented lover's soul.

The structure of the work is that of two vocal passages separated by a moody, introspective orchestral interlude; the emotional journey is one of moving from passionate desire through alienation and forgetfulness to bitter loss and regret, reminiscent of Schubert's song cycles narrating the fate of a young lover, whose pursuit of the unattainable woman ends in doom, gloom and despair. Its voluptuous, heavily-perfumed yearning is the direct descendant of Isolde's "Liebestod" with a French delicacy grafted onto it. The final section, "Le temps des lilas" was originally conceived as separate song and is still performed that way in recitals but is so dark and melancholy that it is probably better situated in the dramatic context of its being the climax of this narrative of lost love. True mezzo-sopranos like Janet Baker, Linda Finnie and Vesselina Kasarova sing it in F, a whole tone lower than sopranos, who can get away with a higher key as long as their voices have sufficient warmth, like those of Jessye Norman and Victoria de los Ángeles; it is more of a challenge for the lighter, shimmering style of soprano like Soile Isokoski and Véronique Gens but can still be carried off.

This work has fared well on record and, as it takes only half an hour to perform, is often paired with either Chausson's symphony or his *Chanson perpétuelle* and more of his own *mélodies*, or other songs by contemporary French composers such as his friends Duparc, Fauré and Debussy - so check the couplings if you want a certain combination. I review below twenty recordings, presented in chronological order and featuring a notable roster of singers, of whom only five are native francophones. I am not especially a fan, but, given her repertoire, a notable omission is Régine Crespin, who must have performed it but does not appear to have made a commercial recording; nor am I aware of any live recordings. (No doubt someone will put me right if I am mistaken.) I include only one smaller-scale recording, in which the singer is accompanied by a chamber ensemble; the rest are in the full, orchestrated version I favour.

The Recordings

Kathleen Ferrier 1951, Urania; Decca; GOP; Praga; Barbirolli Society (mono)
Hallé Orchestra/Sir John Barbirolli

First, let me be up front and warn the reader that the sound here is hissy, distant and crackly, being a private, off-air recording, yet the beauty of Ferrier's deep, vibrant voice still emerges intact. The affectionate detail of the orchestral playing, too, is just about discernible, but no-one could claim that this is of sufficient quality to be a prime recommendation. Furthermore, there are five bars missing from the first section, so the whole the line "Et du ciel entr'ouvert pleuvaient sur nous roses" but unless you are following the text or know it well it is hardly noticeable owing to the way the music unfolds.

Ferrier is especially expressive in the dark, hushed passage leading up to "L'oubli" and preceding the orchestral interlude which, in turn, is so feelingly played by Barbirolli and the Hallé, with a lovely cello solo.

It is a pity that the recording quality isn't better, as Ferrier and Barbirolli both have such feeling for the music, but the technical flaws are such that this can be recommended only to devotees of the singer and/or conductor. For more information, I refer you to [John Quinn's review](#) of the Barbirolli Society issue.

Gladys Swarthout 1952, Archipel; RCS Victor (mono)
RCA Victor Symphony Orchestra/Pierre Monteux

I include this studio recording despite the fact that it is in quite poor mono sound because Monteux is so revered, so it might attract potential purchasers. Unfortunately, it is wholly scuppered by the inadequacy of its soloist, whose husky, quavery voice with its frequent glottal breaks makes her sound elderly, even though she was only in her mid-fifties. You can hear from the surge and swell of the orchestra in the background that Monteux was indeed a master of the score, but that's all one; this is frankly embarrassing and simply will not do; it can hold no interest for anyone apart from die-hard fans of the conductor who are completist collectors. Look elsewhere.

Irma Kolassi 1955, Decca Eloquence; Les indispensables de Diapason (mono)
London Philharmonic Orchestra/Louis Froment

Greco-French singer Irma Kolassi has been somewhat forgotten, yet she was a distinguished recitalist and Callas' sometime teacher in Athens. Three years ago Decca Eloquence issued an anthology of her recordings which must have helped to revive interest; it is very positively [reviewed](#) by Stephen Greenbank. Despite being a mezzo-soprano, her light, forward, refined sound is closer to that of many a lyric soprano, and its fast vibrato and floating quality reminds me of Soile Isokoski. Her delicate, beautifully modulated way with *mélodies* informs her delivery of the music here; she relies more on dynamic variety, careful phrasing and clear diction than colouring her voice. That lack of variety and rather distant, papery sound here, making the orchestra sound thin and astringent, disincline me to recommend this but it is very much in the lost, French 'Old School' tradition and something of a neglected curiosity well worth hearing.

My MWI colleague Jonathan Woolf also [reviewed](#) her admirably fifteen years ago.

Victoria de los Ángeles 1969, EMI (stereo)
Orchestre de l'Association des Concerts Lamoureux/Jean-Pierre Jacquillat

This is a singer who inspires great affection, especially in collectors "of a certain age" and I, too, appreciate her soft, plangent manner but also note certain vocal and manneristic weaknesses, such as

a tendency to sound droopy and over-plaintive, some fleeting unsteadiness in her vocal line and a certain scratchiness in her top notes. Having said that, I still acknowledge the appeal of her almost child-like, "Pélisande" manner. She might have been Spanish, but like all the performers in this recording, she is fully immersed in the required Gallic idiom, singing idiomatic French as she always did, responding to the words acutely. The orchestra, too, has an equally authentic, grainy timbre, very French in atmosphere. Jacquillat's conducting is sympathetic to his singer and the prevailing moods of the music; he doesn't rush the more languid sections but is quick to up the tempo and conjure intensity during the narrator's more agitated outpourings.

The sound is slightly hissy and antiquated but quite full and very acceptable. This is not quite my favourite account, but I can well understand some listener's loyalty to a recording which for many will have been their introduction to this lovely music.

Janet Baker 1975 (live), BBC Legends (stereo)
London Symphony Orchestra/Evgeny Svetlanov

Most of what I say below about Janet Baker's studio recording applies equally to this live performance. The differences are minimal: Svetlanov is marginally more languorous than Previn in the first two movements and more overtly passionate in the last section; the orchestra is the same and superb, despite one or two little slips in the strings which are permissible live. The sound is fine but obviously a little more removed than in the studio with acceptable extraneous noise – a few coughs, but minimal. Baker is, if anything, in finer, fresher voice than in the studio – grand and voluptuous, sustaining the long melodic lines with ease, but some nuances are lost in the more generous acoustic of the Royal Festival Hall.

In truth, it doesn't much matter which of her accounts you have, but if you love this music, you must have at least one; perhaps the coupling will be the deciding factor when it comes to choice.

Montserrat Caballé 1977, Collins (stereo)
Symphonica of London/Wyn Morris

As much as I admire Caballé in the right *Fach*, she does not make a success of this and I find it disappointing. Despite this being recorded when she was in her prime, she simply has the wrong voice and manner for it: swoopy, scoopy and edgy both up top and in the lower regions of her voice, without the elegance of line or depth of tone the music demands and with a tendency for her vibrato to flap on louder notes. She occasionally injects some of trademark pianissimi but they sound just that – applied and contrived. She also sings in poor French, so for "et mon cœur" we hear "lh monn care" – awful; that nasal French sound of "mon" is the Waterloo of many a Latin singer.

I wonder why she attempted this piece, as most sopranos who do so successfully have the intermediate Falcon/mezzo type of voice but Caballé was so in demand in the 70's and had such a facility for learning parts quickly, or even just sight-reading them, that she was on a production line of recordings and some, as with this one, sound perfunctory.

Wyn Morris conducts his own orchestra very broadly and indulgently but the failings of the usually dependable soloist disqualify this for me.

Janet Baker 1977, EMI (stereo)
London Symphony Orchestra/André Previn

This is one of Previn's most successful conducting outings. He is aided by the LSO on top form and Janet Baker in her prime, singing with warmth, power and expressive subtlety, pouring out phrase after phrase in a dreamy ecstasy. Yes, at times a slight edge creeps into the voice on the fortissimo top Gs,

yet for me that adds an element of drama and desperation to these passionate outpourings; Baker sings out fearlessly when the music demands it. When she sings softly, the voice has a husky languor about it which is perfect for conveying the dreamy beauty of these yearning songs couched in Wagnerian harmonies and she "floats a note" so beguilingly. Her habitual attention to text is much in evidence and her French is excellent - yet vocally, too, this is a tour de force; I love it when she mines the resonance of her lower register as in the almost menacing "La mer roule sur le rivage".

The analogue sound here is not as full and immediate as later, digital recordings, but such a minor flaw is insignificant when set against the artistry of all concerned.

Shirley Verrett 1981, Italia Fonit Cetra (stereo)
Orchestra Sinfonica di Torino della RAI/Gabriele Ferro

It comes as something of a shock to realise that this recording is nearly forty years old and the singer herself departed this world ten years ago, but she left many treasurable recordings. As a *soprano sfogato*, her voice was in many ways ideally suited to this music but it is a big, Italianate, slightly blowsy sound with quite a pronounced vibrato which for some might be too beefy for such wispy music. I find that I luxuriate in the amplitude of her voice while still acknowledging that it is hardly delicate and she tends to sing out strongly without much subtlety. She adopts a grand, operatic, very emotionally demonstrative style which does not, I think, reflect the inward neuroticism of the text and music. (Indeed, the late Terry Barfoot in his review back in 2002 remarked that "there is much to be said in praise of the vocal quality of the performance, although the subtleties of the text are not always so convincingly conveyed" ([review](#)).

Verrett's French is quite good but some diphthongs are not impeccable – for example, the "bien" in "ma bien-aimée" is mispronounced as "bienne".

Ferro produces a passable facsimile of French style with the Turin orchestra; indeed, I have not encountered any objectionable conducting or orchestral playing in the course of reviewing all twenty versions here in this survey.

Ultimately this recording is admirable but not a front-runner. It is, in any case, quite hard to find, although second-hand copies of the CD and LP issues are to be found knocking around on eBay.

Jessye Norman 1982, Apex (digital)
Orchestre Philharmonique de Monte-Carlo/Armin Jordan

Jessye Norman's sumptuous voice glides over the Wagnerian chromatic side-shifts in these exquisite songs and reminds us that she is among the best non-French singer of French melodies. By "glide", I do not mean to suggest that there is anything superficial in her singing; she subtly suggests a whole, wide range of emotions, sometimes fining her huge voice down to beautifully controlled pianissimi, sometimes opening up gloriously, always changing the colour to suit the narrative of this melancholy tale. Only Janet Baker matches Norman for beauty of tone and depth of expression. Jordan and the Monte-Carlo orchestra play beautifully; nothing is rushed, but nothing drags.

Carole Farley 1988, ASV (French Songs vol. 2) (digital)
Orchestre Symphonique de la RTBF/José Serebrier

Sometimes, if you are familiar with a singer, you can almost predict how a recording will sound before you hear it. You can, of course, be wrong but in this case, that applies. This is in many ways quite satisfying, but of no special distinction. Carole Farley sings much more than competently, but her voice is a little too shallow, especially in its middle zone, to encompass and fill out the warm sensuality of the long lines and she can turn arch and fluttery. She sings the piece in the soprano key and but also

opts almost to shriek the climactic top B on the first note of "Toi que transfiguraient" and, just after that, again over-does the emoting on the A flat of "tu le pris", imparting a degree of hysteria which I do not find apt. Other singers convey passion and torment more economically and less histrionically. However, she does exploit some resonant low notes and her French is generally good, even if the vowels on high notes can distort and she makes the odd slip, as per the mispronunciation in "ce matin d'été". The conducting and orchestral playing are fine but the Brussels orchestra is not as refined as some. Ultimately, I see no reason to favour this above more seductive versions.

Linda Finnie 1990, Chandos (digital)
Ulster Orchestra/Yan Pascal Tortelier

There is a radiant, sun-dappled atmosphere to the opening here and Tortelier's speeds are a little brisker and more urgent than most. That lends lightness to music that can border on the oppressive, especially as the psychological gloom progressively deepens. Scottish mezzo Linda Finnie might not have quite the verbal acuity of Janet Baker but her French is good and she has a lovely voice of admirable evenness and range which she uses expressively and which rides the orchestra effortlessly. She manages the despair of the concluding passage expertly, with some telling dynamic and tonal gradation, from full-voiced declamation, to a melancholy *mezza voce*, to a whispered *fil di voce*. The orchestral playing is deft and sonorous, with some especially pungent woodwind.

This might not have the distinction or individuality of the very best but everything is done well and right and it is very satisfying. I invariably uncover a "dark horse" recording in my surveys, and this is the first of two discoveries for me.

Françoise Pollet 1993, Erato Warner; fnac music (digital)
Orchestre Philharmonique de Monte-Carlo/Armin Jordan

I have never before much warmed to Pollet's voice but this is certainly the best thing I have heard from her. She has an ample, well-upholstered-tone with smoky notes, and the middle of her voice is reminiscent of Caballé (who is generally not suited to this music; see above). She deploys her lower register boldly and fearlessly, injecting anguished drama into lines such as "Que ce soit l'heure de l'adieu" and "Raïlle de l'angoisse de mon cœur". Her top notes are powerful and vibrant. The desolate "L'oubli" is beautifully steady. It helps that she is a native French-speaker and her projection of the text is admirable, rendering the text clearer than most singers, whose diction can sound mushy when subsumed within Chausson's dense orchestration – but not here. It helps that she has at the helm a conductor who is more than any other associated with this work. This, his second recording with the Monte-Carlo orchestra, replicates the excellence of the one with Jessye Norman a decade earlier; if anything, it is even better. Kudos to the solo bassoonist, too.

It is strange and almost amusing that everything I like about the singing and conducting of this Chausson work militates against the success of its pairing on this CD, which is Berlioz' *Nuits d'été*, about which I was dismissive in my survey of that song cycle. This is the second and most unexpected of the two welcome surprises I encountered while making this conspectus.

Vesselina Kasarova 1994, RCA Red Seal (digital)
ORF Symphonieorchester/Pinchas Steinberg

Kasarova possesses a distinctive, vibrant voice with a fast vibrato, a smoky timbre and a resonant lower register which she uses particularly effectively. Her vocalisation is sensuous, seductive and capable of sustaining a steady, delicate pianissimo to complement the forte outbursts. However, there is sometimes a slightly "bottled" quality to her tone in the middle of her voice and being just short of 29 years old at the time of this, her first solo recording in 1994, she was yet to develop a more expressive way with texts, so a certain monotony of expression and even an unwarranted tendency towards

undue restraint sometimes prevents this music from coming as alive as it does when sung by more seasoned or adventurous interpreters such as Janet Baker. Nonetheless, her French is good, if not wholly idiomatic, with not too many inauthentic vowels, and there are definite moments of emotional release when she gets the expression just right.

The experienced and ever under-rated Pinchas Steinberg has long had an affinity with French Romantic music and leads the accomplished ORF-Sinfonieorchester (now the Vienna Radio Symphony Orchestra) most sensitively.

This is a fine account which affords much pleasure for both the conducting and singing. As a bonus, a particularly good English translation by Sue Rose is provided alongside the original text.

Felicity Lott 1994 (live), Audite (digital)
Orchestre de la Suisse Romande/Armin Jordan

This live performance is part of a compilation of French works conducted by Armin Jordan recorded at the Lucerne Festival. It was recently [reviewed](#) by my MusicWeb colleague Stephen Vasta and I reproduce his comments here with acknowledgements, as I mostly concur with his opinion, apart from the fact that I never experienced Lott's voice as having a "deep, burnished timbre"; I have always found it to be rather shallow and edgy:

"Jordan...does well with Chausson's shimmering palette; he's sensuous in the undulating orchestral passages, projecting an affirmative mood the brief central interlude. Dame Felicity Lott's deep, burnished timbre should have been ideal - despite a relatively quick vibrato - and she inflects the French text comfortably and expressively. But she sounds hard-pressed in the climaxes - literally, as if she's "pressing hard." Gradually, the upper tones "hit a ceiling," without climbing quite all the way up; then, one starts noticing iffy tuning in some of the passing chromatics. Lott draws uplift and mystery from the third movement, but her attempts to float high notes turn tight and throaty. Had I actually heard her in Lucerne, I'd have been impressed; at home, I was less so."

I couldn't have put it better myself, so I won't try. For me, despite the excellence of the conducting – this is the third recording by Jordan considered here – this is no contender.

Amanda Roocroft 1999 (live), BBC music (digital)
BBC National Orchestra of Wales/David Atherton

I believe it is possible for a voice to take less kindly to a microphone than it sounds live, and I have heard and enjoyed Amanda Roocroft in roles such as her Desdemona at Covent Garden without especially noting the flaw in her singing here, which is a pronounced, over-developed vibrato which often approaches a wobble. Her tone is rich, warm and full, but the amplitude of oscillation is too wide and it disturbs what should be a seamless legato in Chausson's long melodic lines. When she sings softly, things go much better but under pressure her soprano spreads. The playing, conducting and sound – especially for a live recording, as the Proms audience are mostly silent - are exemplary here, but I cannot recommend it.

Susan Graham 2004, Warner (digital)
BBC Symphony Orchestra/Yan Pascal Tortelier

Yan Pascal Tortelier had already demonstrated how sensitively he could conduct this music in his recording a decade earlier with Linda Finnie (see above), so distinguished mezzo-soprano Susan Graham was in safe hands. She is a specialist in French song and her voice has a warm, melting and even timbre with a fast vibrato which, unlike some voices of that type, is never obtrusive or fluttery. However, as I recall from hearing her live, hers is not a large sound and the recording level sounds a

little recessed; that, in combination with a certain restraint in her manner, means that for me there is some lack of impact. However, there are many lovely touches, such as her floated, pianissimo top G flat on "ce matin d'été" and similarly on the top G of "Jeunesse et l'Amour". She intones "L'oubli" with chilling, mesmeric steadiness and her French is impeccably enunciated. Interestingly, unlike most mezzo, she chooses the higher key but her beautiful voice has sufficient warmth and depth to justify that.

If you want the most delicate and refined version of this work, elegantly played and beautifully sung, this is for you.

Elsa Maurus 2004, Naxos (digital)

Lille National Orchestra/Jean-Claude Casadesus

Lovely, full, digital sound enhances the appeal of this recording but reactions to Elsa Maurus' light, bright voice will vary, because her fast vibrato borders on a flutter and despite her supposed vocal category, she sounds purely like a soprano, without the darker colours of a true mezzo-soprano, as her top notes twitter and her lower register notes lack weight and penetration; she is surely not singing in the correct Fach. At the beginning of the second vocal section, she produces a terrible moment of very flat singing a full-semitone under the note on the words "De tant me souvenir/Bientôt..." which can happen to any singer but should have been retaken. Furthermore, conductor Casadesus is determined to move things along which creates a sense of urgency but results in this recording being nearly five minutes faster than most, and thus the music lacks the floating, mesmeric quality it demands, no matter how well it is played. No to this one.

Salomé Haller 2009, Zig-Zag Territoires; (digital) **NB: chamber ensemble version**

Nicolas Kruger (piano); Le Quatuor Manfred

Nick Barnard [reviewed](#) this a decade ago. Obviously it is *hors concours* as it uses an arrangement of the work for a chamber ensemble of voice, piano and string quartet, and although the soloist is a soprano, she sings in the mezzo key of F rather than the score of G major as per the full score.

I agree with virtually everything Nick has written in his review and refer you to it, although I am perhaps marginally less bothered than he by its small scale – as long as it is clearly understood, as he emphasises, that this is no substitute for the orchestral version, but only a supplement to a fine recording of it. Salomé Haller does not have the richest of voices but she sings musically and the lighter scoring allows her perfect, native French diction to emerge clearly. The virtuosity of the instrumentalists is apparent – as is a bit too much closely miked heavy breathing. The brief instrumental Interlude is especially beguiling and effective, reminiscent of the reduced version of *Verklärte Nacht* and there is a kind of raw, astringent passion to the accompaniment which underlines the Angst of the narrative persona. Interesting but not essential.

Soile Isokoski 2014, Ondine (digital)

Helsinki Philharmonic Orchestra/John Storgårds

(This is adapted from my previous review on MWI.)

Soile Isokoski continues to delight with her silvery, lyric soprano. She was in her late fifties when she recorded this and her vibrato has loosened ever so slightly such that it occasionally flutters, but she still maintains a seamless legato and the purest of tones. Hers is not perhaps the ideal timbre to convey the dark passion of this music but it is certainly valid on its own terms and its shimmering quality is appropriately "sea-soaked".

It is almost amusing that a Nordic orchestra such as the Helsinki Philharmonic under John Storgårds' relatively restrained but sensitive direction can provide such an authentic facsimile of Gallic sensuousness. You have only to listen to the transparency of their playing of the brief Interlude to hear how completely they have absorbed the correct style.

It's a pity about the literal, tin-eared English translation here, but let that pass, as at least the French text is provided.

Véronique Gens 2018, Alpha (digital)
Orchestre National de Lille/Alexandre Bloch

Two MWI colleagues have already quite recently reviewed this recording ([review](#) ~ [review](#)) and some of my acquaintances have declared it to be their favourite account. I am less convinced. It should first be noted that this is the fastest version here; just over 24 minutes for a work which usually has a timing just short of half an hour. For me, as with the Naxos recording above, that imparts freshness and urgency but there is an element of undue haste which detracts from the kind of dreamy ecstasy I prefer. I note that fellow-reviewer Paul Corfield Godfrey seems to agree, as he remarks that Gens "is aided and abetted by the generally flowing speeds set by Alexandre Bloch. Initially I felt that these were slightly too rapid for the composer's indication *Calme* at the outset of *La fleur des eaux* but, since Chausson has given no more precise direction (and no metronome mark), the music does gain in fluency what it loses in grandeur at the climaxes. Only at the outset of the second song *La mort de l'amour* did I feel that a sense of greater solemnity could have been conveyed at a slightly less headlong speed but then, Chausson does specify a tempo of *Vif et joyeux* and later on in the same movement, Bloch is properly sombre at the chromatically wayward chorale marked *Lent et solennel*. On a personal level, I miss the sense of mystery that one finds with Baker or Norman. At the same time this marvellous music responds with affection to a variety of different interpretations. The approach of Gens and Bloch has a clear validity that sheds new light on the music." I quote him in full as his observations mirror mine exactly and his closing suggestion allows for alternative responses.

Is it just co-incidence, I wonder, that both of the recordings here which stand out for their speed feature the same Lille orchestra? They certainly play with a kind of crystalline transparency which I am not sure suits the music ideally. Similarly, both the sound and Gens' voice are fresh and clear, and again, if that is what you like as opposed to a darker, smokier, more mysterious vocal timbre, this is for you. Gens' French is of course perfect and her articulation of it pellucid, especially as her voice is placed so far forward in the sound-picture.

If you respond to that approach, this is for you; I prefer something darker, grander and more mysterious of the kind Norman, Baker and Pollet provide.

Recommendations

Janet Baker 1977, Previn*
Jessye Norman 1982, Jordan
Françoise Pollet 1993, Jordan
*First choice

In addition to my top three, I could easily add Janet Baker live in 1975 and Linda Finnie. You will gather from those five choices that I favour large, warm, mezzo-tinted voices singing on a grand scale over lighter, leaner, faster accounts, but there are excellent options if the latter is more to your taste, such as those by Susan Graham, Soile Isokoski, Irma Kolassi and Véronique Gens.

Ralph Moore