

***Tristan und Isolde: A Partial Discographical Conspectus***  
**by Ralph Moore**

*Tristan und Isolde* represents both the highpoint of Romantic opera and the gateway to a new world of harmonic invention, epitomised by the famous “Tristan chord”. Despite its length and nearly insurmountable vocal challenges for its principal singers, it has established and maintained a central place in the operatic repertoire worldwide. For some, its popularity and appeal are inexplicable; they are likely to share Rossini’s verdict that “M. Wagner a de beaux moments, mais de mauvais quart d’heures” or, even worse, agree that, like *Parsifal*, *Tristan* “is the kind of opera that starts at six o’clock and after it has been going three hours, you look at your watch and it says 6:20.”

I for one am not such a purist that I become very exercised if a few judicious cuts are made in this work, but at the same time I do not find that it drags, as long as the artists performing it can rise to its demands and sustain the requisite intensity. If I follow the work with a libretto I am apt to think that not a note is wasted; the intensity of Wagner’s vision is all-consuming if the listener can sustain concentration and be swept along by those glorious, through-composed melodies. I know of few more searingly dramatic moments in opera than “Er sah mir in die Augen” or “Rette dich, Tristan!”; this is grown-up music, devoid of stock gestures and tired platitudes, which instead explores the complexities of adult sexuality and relationships in the most extraordinarily subtle and profound manner, both musically and psychologically.

Successful live performances I have attended exercise a kind of spell over the audience; testifying to its draw is the fact that there are well over 150 recordings in the catalogue – far too many for me to encompass – of which only eleven are studio recordings; the vast majority are therefore live or live composite. I consider all those studio recordings below, plus twenty live performances, listed in chronological order. I appreciate that in total that constitutes only a fifth of the number of recordings made, but I have tried to include the most notable.

### **The Recordings**

#### **Karl Elmendorff – 1928 (studio mono) Naxos**

Orchestra - Bayreuth Festival

Chorus - Bayreuth Festival

Tristan - Gunnar Graarud

Isolde - Nanny Larsen-Todsen

Brangaene - Anny Helm

Marke - Ivar Andresen

Kurwenal - Rudolf Bockelmann

Melot - Joachim Sattler

Hirt - Hanns Beer

Stimme eines jungen Seemanns - Gustav Podin

The sound here is extraordinarily good for so old a recording; it was recorded electronically by Columbia in the Bayreuth Festival House. The overture is grand yet propulsive without sounding as if the conductor is rushing to fit the work onto 78s. Act 1 is complete, Act 2 slightly cut and Act 3 severely reduced by about half, so it isn’t really a complete recording. The cast is strong: interestingly, four of the principals are Scandinavian, the Brangaene is Austrian and the forthright Kurwenal is the celebrated German dramatic baritone Rudolf Bockelmann. I do not find the voices of either Larsen-Todsen or Anny Helm particularly attractive; they sound oddly plaintive and occasionally the Isolde’s voice turns hooty and tremulous, but they do have the stamina and power required. Gunnar Graarud is a strong, sensitive, if not especially memorable or charismatic Tristan and he, too, sometimes has a bit of a whine in his tone. He is especially moving in the terrible

dénouement of Act 2. Ivar Andresen is superb as King Marke, cavernous and anguished; Joachim Saettler a weak Melot.

Elmendorff handles key moments such as the recognition scene at the close of Act 1 with really telling phrasing; rubato and pauses are used very effectively and the orchestral is very fine. I love the drive of the opening of Act 2 – very similar to Böhm.

As compensation for the evisceration of Act 3, Naxos append a more complete version made by Columbia less than a year before in two different sites, Berlin and London, with two orchestras (the London Symphony and the Berlin State Opera). Göta Ljungberg is an admirable Isolde and Walter Widdop is a fine Tristan.

This cannot be a prime recommendation for obvious reasons but will act as a supplement for anyone tolerant of historical recordings.

### **Fritz Reiner – 1936 (live mono) Naxos**

Orchestra - London Philharmonic Orchestra

Chorus - Covent Garden

Tristan - Lauritz Melchior

Isolde - Kirsten Flagstad

Brangaene - Sabine Kalter

Marke - Emanuel List

Kurwenal - Herbert Janssen

Melot - Frank Sale

Hirt - Octave Dua

Steuerman - Leslie Horsman

Stimme eines jungen Seemanns - Roy Devereux

This is the Covent Garden performance which became confused with Beecham's from the following year and was issued as an unwitting hybrid by EMI (see the next review, below). Inevitably it is not so different artistically or technically, being performed and recorded by nearly the same teams in the same location but obviously with different conductors. However, it presents certain advantages, in that it is an unadulterated performance with the same performers throughout as opposed to being an amalgam and furthermore Naxos' remastering is audibly often somewhat better than the patchwork recordings of Beecham's performances. Even the standard of singing is arguably better here; for example, Flagstad sings a better "Liebestod", hitting the top G square on without the scooping we hear a year later. As in her recording under Bodansky, her "Er sah mir in die Augen" is simply exquisite. She is in freshest voice, singing with laser-like intensity and her co-singers are scarcely less impressive: Kalter's mezzo is so rich and flexible, Melchior is the conflicted hero incarnate, Janssen is the perfect Tristan puppy-dog and List is a magnificent, infinitely grave and sad Marke.

Both Reiner and Beecham were great Wagner conductors but there is a massive certainty to Reiner's conducting and he is no sense inferior to Beecham. The orchestral prelude to Tristan's first tentative approach to Isolde on board ship is played with the just the right nervous foreboding, for example, and the fear in Melchior's voice is palpable; he was a fine actor as well as possessing the greatest Wagner tenor ever to grace the stage. The usual cuts are made, standard in the era, but that is a small price to pay to be able to hear the best ever singing, superior to anything since. The voices are simply stunning and we are fortunate to have so clear a record of a bygone age.

**Thomas Beecham – 1937/Fritz Reiner – 1936 (live composite, mono) EMI**

Orchestra - London Philharmonic Orchestra

Chorus - Covent Garden

Tristan - Lauritz Melchior

Isolde - Kirsten Flagstad

Brangaene - Sabine Kalter / Margarete Klose

Marke - Emanuel List / Sven Nilsson

Kurwenal - Herbert Janssen

Melot - Booth Hitchin

Hirt - Octave Dua

Steuerman - Leslie Horsman

Stimme eines jungen Seemanns - Parry Jones

A mislabelling resulted in EMI sound engineer Keith Hardwick re-mastering and issuing this set in 1991 under the impression that it was all the performance of 18 June 1937 conducted by Beecham, whereas in fact it is an amalgam of that, another Beecham performance and another Covent Garden performance from the previous year, conducted not by Beecham but Fritz Reiner. Thus Act 1 and the second part of Act III is under Reiner and Act 2 and the first twenty minutes of Act III under Beecham. (Proof that the overture and probably all off Act 1 is conducted by Reiner and not Beecham resides in the fact that just before the prelude concludes at around 10'30" you can hear a singer – probably Kalter – very audibly warming up.) Furthermore, even the sections definitely conducted by Beecham are from two separate evenings, the 18<sup>th</sup> and the 22<sup>nd</sup> June, with Klose and Janssen on the former, and Karin Branzell and Paul Schöffler on the latter – a keen ear for voices will pick this up. I'm not sure that this matters too much, in that we have here a convincing and integrated-sounding performance made up from good live recordings featuring three great singers in Flagstad, Melchior and Herbert Janssen. Brangaene is shared between Sabine Kalter in Act I and Margarete Klose in Act II, King Mark is divided between distinguished basses Emmanuel List in Act II and Sven Nilsson in Act III. It may well be that the buyer needs to be alerted to this fact but it is surely still a great listening experience and a worthy record of how *Tristan* was performed in London for two years running in the mid-thirties. Anyone who wants either or both of the complete Reiner or Beecham versions may now buy them on other labels such as Naxos and Immortal Performances (Beecham); meanwhile, this still preserves great artists in good sound for the 1930s.

Despite it being a bit muddy and intermittently slightly crackly, we are permitted to hear both Flagstad and Melchior in their magisterial prime; she is certainly in easier voice than under Furtwängler, rising nobly too the high notes which gave her trouble by 1952 and soaring easily over the orchestra; he is heroic and impassioned, sounding rather heftier and more baritone than the subtle Janssen as Kurwenal.

I have no complaints about Reiner's handling of the score; he seems completely at home with its ebb and flow and the climax to Act I packs the requisite punch. Beecham is alive to every nuance of the Love Duet, bringing a fervent urgency to the lovers' embrace.

The limited sound means that this will not be anyone's first recommendation for a recording but it is a worthy and fascinating supplement if you want to hear the indisputably greatest exponents of the two eponymous roles. However, the integral Reiner recording is a marginally better option and sonically superior to Leinsdorf in 1941, too.

**Artur Bodanzky – 1937 (live mono) Walhall**

Orchestra - Metropolitan Opera

Chorus - Metropolitan Opera

Tristan - Lauritz Melchior

Isolde - Kirsten Flagstad

Brangaene - Kerstin Thorborg

Marke - Ludwig Hofmann

Kurwenal - Julius Huehn

Melot - Arnold Gabor

Hirt - Hans Clemens

Steerman - James Wolfe

Stimme eines jungen Seemanns - Karl Laufkötter

There must be many *Tristan* lovers like me who have never been able to recognise the perfection others claim to hear in the classic 1952 Furtwängler studio recording for all that it is an absorbing monument to his and Flagstad's talents. Her voice there is distinctly matronly and she has less of the brilliance, clarity and soaring ease of production that she exhibits here in her absolute prime at the Met in 1937, despite the majesty and amplitude of tone she continued to command late in her career.

You can hear the same pairing of Flagstad and Melchior in the EMI Covent Garden recording from the same year but it's not a unity, being a hybrid, combining live performances by Beecham and Reiner with different casts. Nor is the sound for EMI as consistent as it is here. This will never be an audiophile paradise but it's listenable with a will and one must be grateful for how well the voices of the two greatest Wagner singers ever emerge through the crackle and fizz. Let's take a key moment mostly flubbed by modern Isoldes in recent state-of-the-art recordings: Flagstad's "Er sah mir in die Augen" is simply sublime in its wistful, rapt steadiness; nobody can approach her effulgence of voice. This is a young woman in the grip of conflicting passions too great for her heart to contain, passions conveyed in the vibrant voice of a goddess. The top notes are effortless; Flagstad's voice floats over the auditorium into the ether. The Liebestod is sublime, the final "höchste Lust" on a perfectly poised G.

Melchior is a phenomenon of virile tenor stamina, tender and heroic, desperate and ecstatic - again, no-one approaches him, not even the next-greatest Tristans such as Ramon Vinay or Jon Vickers. The supporting cast is really very good, a tremolo-ridden Young Sailor notwithstanding; none apart from the known quantity of Thorborg's sweet and powerful Brangaene is especially celebrated but they are very fine. Ludwig Hoffmann doesn't really have the big, black bass ideal for Mark but he has a lovely, steady voice and is a fine vocal actor.

Bodanzky's conducting strikes me as simply ideally paced; he is I think under-rated and that his mastery here is no fluke is confirmed by other Wagnerian triumphs such as his *Siegfried* from the same year, again with Flagstad and Melchior - what a season!

There are the customary cuts and the sound is limited but if you can tolerate its limitations, this is a set which demands to be heard if you are to claim that you know what Wagner had in mind when he penned these near-impossible roles for superhuman voices. It's nice to have the ecstatic applause and closing announcement by Milton Cross, too, even if it does – unforgivably - cut across the final notes.

**Erich Leinsdorf – 1941 (live mono) Walhall**

Orchestra - Metropolitan Opera

Chorus - Metropolitan Opera

Tristan - Lauritz Melchior

Isolde - Kirsten Flagstad

Brangaene - Kerstin Thorborg

Marke - Alexander Kipnis

Kurwenal - Julius Huehn

Melot - Emery Darcy

Hirt - Karl Laufkötter

Steerman - John Gurney

Stimme eines jungen Seemanns - Emery Darcy

What an array of majestic voices here; Flagstad in particular is huge and commanding. Melchior, too, has a power and intensity unmatched by any other Tristan but makes a point, as he always did when singing this role, of sounding tired and strained in his Act 3 delirium; it is not vocal fatigue but acting, as his voice rings out later, for example, on the first sighting of Isolde's ship.

Unfortunately, the listener must throughout put up with some intermittent noises on the original discs which sound like metallic twittering, chains rattling and spade-work! Sometimes, too, both the distortion of in concerted passages and the poor balance means that solo voices, no matter how large, are subsumed into the orchestral blare - but that is passing.

Leinsdorf never hangs about and extracts the maximum drama from proceedings; fortunately, neither Flagstad nor Melchior has any trouble keeping up with him. Passages such as the build-up to the extinguishing of the lights as the signal to Tristan in the beginning of Act 2 are breathless and thrilling. The sheer size of Flagstad's voice does not prevent her from singing quietly when needs be and Leinsdorf knows when and how to give the music more breathing space without sacrificing tension: a prime example is the orchestral narrative when they drink the potion, which retains breadth and nobility and is still riveting.

Kerstin Thorborg's response here is thrilling and in general she presents acts as a fine foil to Flagstad's gleaming Isolde, her voice big, warm and dark. Julius Huehn gives us a bluff, straightforward Kurwenal, satisfactory, if of no great distinction. The Melot is excellent and Kipnis' Marke is superlative: enormous and agonised, intensely beautiful of tone and deeply tragic. Melchior responds to Kipnis' intensity with such poignancy in his delivery of words such as, "Wohin nun Tristan scheidet, willst du, Isold', ihm folgen?".

Despite his urgency in the previous Acts, Leinsdorf sustains an essentially lyrical approach in Act 3, then the protracted dénouement is very powerful. What a pity, then, that applause breaks the spell before the final chords have finished sounding and that the sound itself is so tinny and flawed – yet this remains a record of some of the greatest singing ever heard.

**Erich Leinsdorf – 1943 (live mono) Naxos**

Orchestra - Metropolitan Opera

Chorus - Metropolitan Opera

Tristan - Lauritz Melchior

Isolde - Helen Traubel

Brangaene - Kerstin Thorborg

Marke - Alexander Kipnis

Kurwenal - Julius Huehn

Melot - Emery Darcy  
Hirt - Karl Laufkötter  
Steerman - John Gurney  
Stimme eines jungen Seemanns - John Garris

The sound here is considerably better than Leinsdorf's 1941 performance, having been expertly remastered from superior, original source tapes but of course we hear Helen Traubel instead of Flagstad, as the latter had gone home to be with her husband. Like her Norwegian counterpart, the American Traubel was a real Wagnerian dramatic soprano of great strength and passion, lacking only a high C – omitted here – and also, perhaps, the nuance, pathos and vulnerability of the complete Isolde, which is where Flagstad scores over her. Nonetheless, she has great stamina, nobility and brilliance, Leinsdorf once again demonstrates his surprising pre-eminence as a Wagner conductor, and Melchior, Thorborg, Huehn and Kipnis repeat their superlative assumptions, so this must be a front-runner in the live, mono stakes. I say that Traubel lacks some subtlety, yet she conjures up magic in her delivery of "Er sah mir in die Augen" and I can understand why some might prefer her clean, incisive timbre to Flagstad's - hers is more silver compared with Flagstad's golden sound.

**Robert Heger – 1943 (studio mono) Preiser**

Orchestra - Staatskapelle Berlin  
Chorus - Berliner Staatsoper

Tristan - Max Lorenz  
Isolde - Paula Buchner  
Brangaene - Margarete Klose  
Marke - Ludwig Hofmann  
Kurwenal - Jaro Prohaska  
Melot - Eugen Fuchs  
Hirt - Erich Zimmermann  
Steerman - Felix Fleischer(-Janczak)  
Stimme eines jungen Seemanns - Benno Arnold

I endorse this on the understanding that allowances must be made for the sound of historical recordings of this artistic quality - yet you do not have to be unduly indulgent towards this 1943 studio recording, as it compares very favourably with classic live recordings from the 50's such as those by Karajan and Knappertsbusch. In any case, such is the standard of the singing and playing that the listener is soon lost in that peculiarly intense and archetypal world of Wagner's creation and minor sonic imperfections, such as the occasional drop-out or a little distortion, are tolerable. Unfortunately, there is some damage to the original during the latter part of the love duet in Act 2, but generally this is as good as many a mono recording from ten years later.

Apart from the sound quality, the other immediately noticeable surprise is the absolute rightness of Robert Heger's conducting. In my review of the 1953 live Jochum recording from Bayreuth, I am full of praise for the two principal singers but have reservations about Jochum's sometimes pale and erratic contribution; it is straight away apparent even in the Prelude that Heger has a much better grasp of the requisite ebb and flow of this music. The pace, intensity and sweep I hear in the greatest readings, such as those by Böhm in 1966 or the aforementioned 50's performances, are here in abundance - and the decent balance here between voices and orchestra gives you ample opportunity to savour it.

Both principals have very bright, clean voices blessed with pure top notes and great power. Lorenz can justly be grouped within the select group of the four greatest Tristans, the others being Vinay, Vickers and, of course, Melchior. His diction is the best you will ever hear from a Tristan and his voice, while not exactly beautiful and slightly hard of tone, has a virile ring. He brings a long line and

a desperate pathos to his visionary narrative of Isolde's approaching ship in Act 3, despite a tendency to sing too loudly. Paula Buchner will not be known to many current collectors yet we would be so grateful to hear such an Isolde today: womanly, intense, clean of attack if not with quite the command of nuance brought to the role by the most celebrated exponents of this most taxing of roles for a dramatic soprano alongside Brünnhilde. Her vibrato can obtrude on occasion; there is the odd wobble, scoop and sour note but by and large she is admirable. Jaro Prohaska delivers a bluff, honest account of Kurwenal; Margaret Klose is similarly forthright and sure of voice, as you would expect from a famous Ortrud. Ludwig Hoffmann's warm, steady, nutty bass gives us a fatherly Marke, touching and detailed in his use of the words with the same pellucid diction typical of singers of the time.

Any lover of *Tristan und Isolde* will want to own this time capsule recording.

### **Hans Knappertsbusch – 1950 (live mono) Orfeo, Andromeda**

Orchestra - Bayerische Staatsoper

Chorus - Bayerische Staatsoper

Tristan - Günther Treptow

Isolde - Helena Braun

Brangaene - Margarete Klose

Marke - Ferdinand Frantz

Kurwenal - Paul Schöffler

Melot - Albrecht Peter

Hirt - Paul Kuen

Steuerman - Fritz Richard Bender

Stimme eines jungen Seemanns - Fritz Richard Bender

The swirling, fluid phrases of the overture announce that this will be a performance of rare energy - Knappertsbusch introduces a flavour of Tchaikovsky's *Francesca da Rimini* in his free handling of the obsessive, repetitive figure building to the climax which almost threatens to become derailed but instantly suggests the destructive passions that lead inexorably to disaster. This is not speedy but always nervy, biting and intense, no stately concert performance.

The big, fresh voices of the protagonists have more vigour and youth than the more marmoreal Flagstad or the mighty Melchior; Helena Braun's bold soprano in particular burns with an intense, slender flame contrasting nicely with Klose's big, warm mezzo as Brangaene. Paul Schöffler is very fine and warm as Kurwenal. Günther Treptow's tenor is a little throaty and "Germanic" but this must be one of his finest performances, his sterling work in Moralt's *Ring* from the year before notwithstanding; he is firm and strong, riding the orchestra easily without barking. To cap a very fine cast, we have the great Ferdinand Frantz as a sonorous, desperate, very touching King Mark. The sound is clean mono and one soon forgets its limitations, so absorbing are Knappertsbusch's moulding of the orchestral lines and the intensity of his accents.

In short, I agree with late "Gramophone" opera critic Alan Blyth that this is something of a sleeper amongst the extant recordings of *Tristan* and it takes its place amongst my favourites.

### **Franz Konwitschny – 1950 (studio mono) Walhall, Archipel**

Orchestra - Gewandhausorchester (Leipzig)

Chorus - Mitteldeutsche Rundfunkchor (Leipzig)

Tristan - Ludwig Suthaus

Isolde - Margarete Bäumer

Brangaene - Erna Westenberger

Marke - Gottlob Frick  
Kurwenal - Karl Wolfram  
Melot - Theodor Horand  
Hirt - Aloys Kühnert  
Steuerman - Reinhard Kibel  
Stimme eines jungen Seemanns - Gert Lutze

This 1950 recording bears natural comparison with a whole clutch of live performances from Germany in the early 50's; it is easily comparable with the excellent Knappertsbusch and Kleiber recordings, both with the Bavarian Staatsoper in 1950 and 1952 respectively, and with Karajan at Bayreuth, also in 1952. The fact that it is a studio recording does not necessarily make it immeasurably superior to those live performances which are all very listenable for their provenance, but obviously it does mean that going off mike is avoided and even if the orchestra and chorus are rather distant, they are at least always present and accurate. My 24-bit Archipel issue is clean and distortion free. We are clearly listening to first-rate voices singing with a first-rate ensemble; I was not previously familiar with any of the singers except the two principals and of course Gottlob Frick but they are all very fine: steady, secure, expressive and clearly utterly at home with the text and the Wagnerian idiom. The Kurwenal might be a bit prosaic but he is a simple, bluff, honest and prosaic man; we may dispense with any sophistication. We may also take for granted the sensitivity and impetus of Konwitschny's conducting and of course he is at the helm of one of the world's great orchestras - so no problem there. As an example of his mastery, take the opening of Act 2, where everything from the distant horns to Isolde's febrile expectation is beautifully paced and balanced. The lovers' meeting is electric and the "telegramme duet" unfolds flawlessly, complete with great top Cs from Bäumer.

Suthaus is in slightly younger, fresher voice than he is for Furtwängler in his famous studio recording, also from 1952, and his baritone tenor is tireless, if not as alluring as Vinay or as expressive as Treptow, but I like his virile sound. He is superb in "So starben wir" in the Love Duet. My main complaint about the casting is that the powerful Isolde, Margaret Bäumer, has a darker voice than her Brangaene, who is nonetheless a fine singer and one who carries her vocal line with ease in the "warning from the watchtower" passage. Both have a slightly matronly, "old-fashioned" sound, strong, vibrant, with an expressive vibrato - the product of a well-schooled technique that tended to produce very similar sounding voices. Indeed, at times the mistress and maid are indistinguishable in timbre. Bäumer certainly passes my big Isolde test, which is how "Er sah mir in der Augen" is intoned; she uses a piano thread of tone with a neatly controlled vibrato to support the tone - perfect. For good measure, she does the same on "Dies süsse Wortlein - und...".

It is a bonus to have a comparatively young Frick as King Mark in magnificent voice - black as pitch and deeply moving in its terrible beauty.

The final comparison I would make is with the wartime studio recording conducted by the hugely under-rated Robert Heger, starring Max Lorenz and Paula Buchner, which is in sound virtually as good as this one and equally inspired. The *Tristan* devotee with a tolerance for vintage sound is spoiled for choice. (Be aware, however, that this features the then standard cut in the Love Duet.)

PS: Jed Distler in his "Classics Today" review of this recording is disparaging about both the sound quality and the playing of the Leipzig Gewandhausorchester, "notably the dog-eared wind intonation on long, sustained notes and scrawny brass tone elsewhere". I don't hear a problem with either beyond the limitations of a 1950 studio recording; to me they sound like the orchestra we know them to be. He advises, "[a]void Archipel's wretched transfer at all costs." and complains that "Archipel's remastering genius has taken an already mediocre sonic specimen and made it sound worse, by basically removing all tape hiss, treble, high end transients, and overtones. It's like listening to the Preiser in an umpteenth generation, low-fidelity tape dub." Well, that's the issue I have and

while I agree that top frequencies have been removed, I find it much easier to listen without the shrill peakiness and hiss. I think he got out of bed the wrong side that day.

**Herbert von Karajan – 1952 (live mono) Orfeo, Membran, Walhall**

Orchestra - Bayreuth Festival

Chorus - Bayreuth Festival

Tristan - Ramón Vinay

Isolde - Martha Mödl

Brangaene - Ira Malaniuk

Marke - Ludwig Weber

Kurwenal - Hans Hotter

Melot - Hermann Uhde

Hirt - Gerhard Unger

Steuerman - Gerhard Stolze

Stimme eines jungen Seemanns - Werner Faulhaber

This is the same 1952 live Bayreuth performance that we have seen in various incarnations on different labels - but much cheaper than most; the new Orfeo label edition is good but three times the price for the same thing and the only competitor pricewise is the inferior Opera d'Oro set. This is a good, clean transfer with minimal distortion in what will never be a sonic extravaganza, but its limitations are well worth enduring in return for an incandescent performance which catches the two great principal singers in top form. There is something peculiarly immediate and vibrant about Mödl's assumption of the role of Isolde which puts the magisterial but bland Flagstad in the shade and even outdoes Nilsson in the famous live Bohm performance. She has a Callas-like manner of getting to the heart of the role by an especially intelligent inflection of the text and affecting use of her lower register combined with some thrilling (if slightly "scooped") top notes. Vinay's baritone tenor is both heroic and tender; the exchange between the lovers just after their discovery in flagrante by the king is particularly moving. Ludwig Weber is past his best and a bit wobbly, but knows how to wring the heart and Hotter, typically woofy and heavy on the vibrato, nonetheless creates a vivid character in his Kurwenal. Despite the limited sound you can hear how Karajan caresses the music without dragging it out or distorting the pacing of the work; he really is good here, free of the later affectations and mannerisms. Uhde turns in another typically incisive vignette as the vicious, obsessive Melot. Malaniuk is just average as Brangaene but sings strongly and expressively where it counts in her offstage warnings during the great love duet. This recording takes its place alongside my other favourite recordings.

**Erich Kleiber – 1952 (live mono) Walhall**

Orchestra - Bayerische Staatsoper

Chorus - Bayerische Staatsoper

Tristan - Günther Treptow

Isolde - Helena Braun

Brangaene - Margarete Klose

Marke - Ferdinand Frantz

Kurwenal - Rudolf Großmann

Melot - Albrecht Peter

Hirt - Paul Kuen

Steuerman - Rudolf Wünzer

Stimme eines jungen Seemanns - Richard Holm

Erich Kleiber was an important and very experienced conductor of this opera; two other live recordings in Buenos Aires are extant with artists such as Kirsten Flagstad, Set Svanholm and Max

Lorenz and as you might expect of the conductor of a famous recording of *Der Rosenkavalier*, the love music of Act II and the ecstatic passages such as the "Liebestod" go especially well, but I miss some of the drive and fire of Karajan in the same year at Bayreuth or, especially, of Hans Knappertsbusch with almost the same cast in the same venue two years earlier in 1950.

As well as bringing more zip to the dramatic points, despite being two years older than Knappertsbusch recording is in rather better, crisper sound, too: clearer and more forward, whereas here it is rather muddy and recessed - although still quite listenable. I would also say that the commanding Helena Braun is in rather better voice for Kna; here, despite still being very good, she is occasionally a little shrill and just a little wobbly in Act II. The other big cast difference is the casting of one Rudolf Grossmann as Kurwenal. I had not previously heard of him and although he is perfectly serviceable he is not as good as Paul Schöffler as Kurwenal, tending to labour and shout a bit in his demanding, declamatory music. Otherwise, the only changes of cast are in the small roles of the Steersman and the Young Sailor, here sung very well by two tenors whereas Kna employs only one, doubling up - and also very good.

There is also more coughing and iffy tuning from the woodwind - especially in the Prelude - for Kleiber. Otherwise, Margarete Klose reproduces her rich, eloquent Brangaene and Braun's husband, Ferdinand Frantz is once again a superlative King Mark: deep, rich, resonant and very expressive in his agony of betrayal. Gunther Treptow is if anything even better for Kleiber; occasionally his voice can lose tonal lustre and turn metallic but he is tireless and very touching in his extended dying scene and his tenor is at its best there: both baritone and penetrating with a suitably youthful tone, rather than the ageing lover we sometimes have to tolerate. I think he sings the best "dream-vision" - my favourite passage in the whole opera, just before the ship is sighted - on record.

For some impenetrable reason, both Walhall and Myto have inserted a fade-break at the climax of Act I when the effects of the potion oblige the lovers to acknowledge their mutual passion and it concludes at the start of CD2 - really bad timing and surely totally avoidable.

### **Wilhelm Furtwängler – 1952 (studio mono/Ambient Stereo) Pristine, Naxos, EMI**

Orchestra - Philharmonia Orchestra  
Chorus - Covent Garden

Tristan - Ludwig Suthaus  
Isolde - Kirsten Flagstad  
Brangaene - Blanche Thebom  
Marke - Josef Greindl  
Kurwenal - Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau  
Melot - Edgar Evans  
Hirt - Rudolf Schock  
Steerman - Rhoderick (Rhydderch) Davies  
Stimme eines jungen Seemanns - Rudolf Schock

NB: the Pristine Audio restoration is really by far the best way to experience this recording, although the Naxos and EMI remasterings are also commendable. Avoid the others, especially the very flawed Regis botch-job. Papery sound, pre-echo, slight pitch fluctuation, some clicks and whooshes, underlying rumble and patches of distortion - all point to the self-evident truth that this Regis issue is the result of a rushed and none-too-fastidious transfer from LPs as soon as this legendary recording came out of copyright fifty years after its creation in 1952.

This landmark recording – the first by EMI using the new technology of recording tape – nearly didn't happen. Furtwängler was smarting under what he saw as producer Walter Legge's betrayal in giving the *Die Zauberflöte* recording contract to Karajan, while Legge was busy undermining Furtwängler as

yesterday's man in order to promote Karajan as the new face of EMI classical. It had been fifteen years since Furtwängler had first conducted Kirsten Flagstad and fallen in love with her voice. Alongside Frieda Leider, Flagstad was considered the reigning Isolde of the century, but she was now 57 years old and already showing the first signs of poor health. Time was running out to catch her famous interpretation for the first and last time in a studio recording. Her top notes above B-flat had always been insecure and she doubted whether she could reproduce a top C often enough to provide the two required in the Act II "telegramme duet" when the lovers ecstatically greet each other. It was proving difficult to find a suitable and available Brangaene; in the end Flagstad repaid a debt of gratitude to her Swedish friend Blanche Thebom who was thus cast to no-one other than Flagstad's great satisfaction. Flagstad's natural partner, Lauritz Melchior had left the Metropolitan in a huff, having been denied his Silver Anniversary celebration by new General Manager Rudolf Bing, and gone into semi-retirement exile in Hollywood – so who was to be Tristan?

However, all these difficulties were either overcome or circumvented in order to produce a recording which did honour to both the conductor and the producer. Its glory is Furtwängler's unrushed, magisterial conducting, which inexorably and ineluctably propels the drama towards tragedy but as Furtwängler said to Legge, "My name will be remembered for this, but yours should be." In truth, the honours are evenly divided.

There were, after all, despite the difficulties, many advantages which augured well for the success of the enterprise. The Philharmonia Orchestra, formed by Legge in 1945 from the finest British players available was in superb shape and enjoyed an excellent symbiotic relationship with Furtwängler. They clothe Wagner's chromaticism in great swathes of sound as luscious as Legge could make it within the limitations of 1952 mono. The new tape technology allowed the conductor to mould the shape and sustain the momentum in great arcs instead of the four-minute takes demanded by 78s in music with which he was intimately acquainted and of which he had vast experience. From the soaring, yearning sweep of the overture to the ethereal "Liebestod", the conductor's grasp of pulse and flow of this wondrous music is a perfect organic marvel. If you want to hear the conductor and orchestra making great art in harmony, sample the "Sühnetrank" scene where Isolde proffers Tristan the supposedly poisoned goblet, or the delicate "Nachtmusik" as the hunt recedes into the forest prior to Tristan's arrival for the lovers' tryst. Big moments in this recording such as these have always been praised but listening to them again in the revealing, detailed sound provided by these newly remastered Pristine discs, reminded me how skilfully Furtwängler does other things so well, too; for example, how he crafts and sculpts the conversations between Isolde and Brangaene and Isolde and Tristan in Act I. The whole drama pants and breathes just as Tristan alternately raves and philosophises in his febrile delirium.

It is probably heresy to say it but Flagstad does sometimes sound too old and matronly - although she was still in huge, rich voice there is much compensation in the power and amplitude of her tone, which usually rides the orchestra despite being set further back in the recording picture (presumably to prevent microphone shatter). Legge's new wife, Elisabeth Schwarzkopf was engaged to sing the two brief high Cs which were seamlessly spliced in such that no-one could tell – and only pedants care today. Listen to the rage and scorn of Flagstad's voice as she sings the words "Zerschlag es dies trotzige Schiff" and "Er schwur mit tausend Eide".

Thebom was neither the first nor second choice as Brangaene but Furtwängler loved her and she is a good foil to Flagstad, certainly not letting the side down, even if the voice lacks body in the "watchtower music". Ludwig Suthaus gave the performance of his life as Tristan, his baritone sound first suggesting virility and heroism, then in Act III collapsing into the agony of almost bestial incomprehension. A 27-year-old Fischer-Dieskau is far less gritty of voice and mannered in delivery than he was to become, giving a subtle, yet virile and convincing portrayal of Kurwenal as a noble, bewildered soul, loyal to the point of naivety. Rudolf Schock sings mellifluously as both the Seaman and the Shepherd, while veteran Bayreuth regular Josef Greindl delivered a cavernous, slightly nasal,

but deeply moving, King Mark, crumpling effectively even if the role has been sung more beautifully by Talvela, Moll, Ridderbusch et al.

Remember, this recording is now over sixty-five years old, yet it is here given new life in Pristine's "Ambient Stereo". The effect is not at all unnatural or artificial: Andrew Rose has removed pre-echo, enhanced top and bottom frequencies, corrected pitch fluctuations and added just enough ambience to an engineering job which was already superb in its day such that you would swear this was early, narrow stereo. There is still a hint of fizz in the strings yet by and large the sonic detail is both spacious and detailed and the original bloom on the sound remains intact. One can even hear Furtwängler gently hissing and exhaling in rhythm with the music as he labours to infuse his musicians with his vision of the score.

Before the issue of the Pristine remastering, the reason for the legendary status of this recording had previously eluded me, but Andrew Rose's revitalisation finally allowed me to understand exactly how and why it is as good as its reputation would have it; it This will never be my favourite recording of Tristan but any devotee should own it; in its "pristine" reincarnation it really is a revelation.

### **Eugen Jochum – 1953 (live mono) Arkadia, Archipel**

Orchestra - Bayreuth Festival

Chorus - Bayreuth Festival

Tristan - Ramón Vinay

Isolde - Astrid Varnay

Brangaene - Ira Malaniuk

Marke - Ludwig Weber

Kurwenal - Gustav Neidlinger

Melot - Hasso Eschert

Hirt - Gerhard Stolze

Steerman - Theo Adam

Stimme eines jungen Seemanns - Eugene (Gene) Tobin

In reasonably listenable, clean, clear, mono sound with some peaking on loud notes, this live *Tristan* is graced by two of the greatest post-war Wagner singers - indeed, in my estimation the best Tristan of all after Melchior in the heroic, baritone tenor Ramon Vinay and an Isolde to rank with the very finest in the warm and powerful dramatic soprano Astrid Varnay. The rest of the cast is interesting in that most listeners will have difficulty hearing a singer eternally associated with evil dwarf Alberich as vocally suited to the warm-hearted simpleton Kurwenal; although he is energetic, the voice is metallic and he tends to shout. Celebrated bass Ludwig Weber was always a bit rocky, unsteady and blaring as Mark and does not favourably compare with the greatest exponents of the role, but his is a sincere and moving portrayal. Malaniuk's experienced Brangaene can be somewhat acidic of tone but she is a powerful presence.

My main reservation lies with Jochum's conducting. He is not a conductor I have ever warmed to in anything much and I find that the same capricious jumpiness and a certain arbitrariness in tempi which for me afflict his Bruckner also, but to a lesser extent, mar his Wagner. I miss the inexorable pulse and steady certainties of Karajan and Knappertsbusch; the sweep isn't there for me and too many moments pass without the climactic resolution I crave in this mighty music - but he makes a fine job of the concluding "Liebestod".

Vinay sang with so many great Isoldes such as Nilsson, Mödl and Traubel and never disappoints; he has the stamina, intensity and, above all, the legato to do the role justice. Varnay's big, sometimes blowsy, tireless yet womanly Isolde provides the antidote to those who find Nilsson too "stainless steel" in quality or Flagstad too matronly. The trademark scoops and swoops are there but it is a

fundamentally beautiful sound and we shall not hear her like again, I fear. The last truly great Isolde was Linda Esther Gray and although current artists such as Nina Stemme and Anja Kampe give creditable performances they cannot sing on the same scale as Varnay. As for current Tristans...well...

As a confessed *Tristan* devotee, I welcome this addition to my collection; it's a grand souvenir of a Bayreuth Golden Age.

**Rudolf Kempe – 1955 (live mono) Walhall**

Orchestra - Metropolitan Opera

Chorus - Metropolitan Opera

Tristan - Set Svanholm

Isolde - Astrid Varnay

Brangaene - Blanche Thebom

Marke - Jerome Hines

Kurwenal - Josef Metternich

Melot - James McCracken

Hirt - Paul Franke

Steuerman - Calvin Marsh

Stimme eines jungen Seemanns - Albert Da Costa

Kempe was one of the better conductors Rudolf Bing managed to engage and he here gives us a limpid, alert account of this extraordinary psycho-drama without quite capturing the transcendence and grandeur which characterises the very finest recordings. The Met orchestra plays very well for him but the harsh mono sound doesn't always allow us to hear much sumptuousness of tone and the performance as a whole doesn't have the sweep of Karajan or Furtwängler.

Varnay is almost as much a force of nature as Nilsson; her top notes shine, she has power aplenty and rarely resorts to scooping. She encompasses the range of emotions required in Act 1 and gives us a febrile, impassioned heroine. It is quite untrue to remark, as one reviewer does, that Svanholm was "way past his best" in 1955; he was only fifty here and at his peak - any whine in the voice was always present and intrinsic to its quality. He is in fact very similar in timbre to Windgassen at Bayreuth a decade later; neither was ideal or approached predecessors such as Melchior, Treptow or even Suthaus at his best but both were the best we were going to get in their time and dwarf current exponents. As Kurwenal, Metternich is strong, direct and somewhat unsubtle with no special distinction of voice while Thebom repeats the worthy assumption of Brangaene that we know from the Furtwängler recording. The smaller roles are well filled by Met stalwarts (including a young James McCracken) and Jerome Hines graces the part of King Mark with his noble, resonant bass without really piercing the heart in his desperate sorrow.

The indifferent sound, more-than-adequate but unremarkable Tristan, cuts to ease his path and the good if uninspired conducting make this essentially a fine historical recording mostly memorable for the contribution of Varnay in her mid-thirties prime.

**Wolfgang Sawallisch – 1957 (live mono) Orfeo, Walhall**

Orchestra - Bayreuth Festival

Chorus - Bayreuth Festival

Tristan - Wolfgang Windgassen

Isolde - Birgit Nilsson

Brangaene - Grace Hoffman

Marke - Arnold Van Mill

Kurwenal - Hans Hotter  
Melot - Fritz Uhl  
Hirt - Hermann Winkler  
Steuerman - Egmont Koch  
Stimme eines jungen Seemanns - Walter Geisler

The obvious advantage to this 1957 recording in comparison to the more widely known and celebrated live recording from 1966 with the same two principals is that the singers are considerably younger. This applies particularly to Windgassen, who, while he never really had the necessary heroic ring to his tenor to qualify as an absolute Heldentenor, sang with such stamina, sensitivity and intelligence that before Jon Vickers arrived on the Bayreuth scene and after Vinay reverted to baritone, he established himself as the foremost Wagnerian tenor of his era. Here he is somewhat sappier, easier up top and less inclined to tire so we are hearing him at his considerable best. I am not so convinced that Nilsson is heard to advantage here compared with her more mature self; there are bald patches in the middle of her voice when she sounds rather plaintive and even a tad whiny but the laser top was already in full working order and her sheer volume and heft are things of wonder. She is immediately so impressive in her ravings, when she curses the ship she is travelling in and she launches her top notes fearlessly.

Some will also consider the presence in the pit of a young Sawallisch to present an advantage over the considerably more hectic and propulsive Karl Böhm in 1966. While I like the sheer excitement Böhm generates, Sawallisch creates more intensity and moulds phrases more tellingly; there is no lack of drive in the famous "Telegramme Duet" but his more leisurely approach is often preferable; hence this recording spills over onto four sides and begins with a swooning Prelude that lasts over twelve minutes. The orchestral playing is superb: sample the prelude in Act I to "Herr Tristan trete nah", where the progression of massive chords is so dramatic.

However, the supporting cast cannot measure up to that 1966, even if the little recorded but excellent tenor Walter Giesler is impressive as the Young Sailor and Fritz Uhl - later Nilsson's Tristan in a rather one-sided recording of the same opera under Solti - makes an impact as Melot. Grace Hoffmann is vocally very fine, her mezzo rich, steady and vibrant but her tone is also too often indistinguishable from that of Nilsson, whereas Christa Ludwig is a much more distinct character. Hans Hotter is grand but rather burly, effortful and a little clumsy as Kurwenal, sounding more grandfatherly, whereas Waechter is more the boyhood companion and retainer to Tristan. Arnold van Mill is grave, noble and moving as King Mark but simply hasn't the vocal; depth and presence of Martti Talvela for Böhm; Talvela's Marke is simply shattering.

Finally, there is the consideration of sound. Here it is good, clear mono with excellent balance between voices and orchestra even if the former is slightly too favoured but there is considerably more coughing and scraping of those wooden chairs and at first you would swear that a herd of rampaging elephants is still taking their seats as the first notes strike up. Fortunately, things soon settle down and apart from the occasional intrusive hack in quiet moments such as when the lovers have drunk the potion and realisation is dawning, it remains very acceptable.

Thus, on balance, while I very much like this 1957 performance I do not actively prefer it to the later recording and I still turn to Vickers and Vinay for a more heroic Tristan.

### **Ferdinand Leitner – 1959 (live mono) Ponto**

Orchestra - Concertgebouworkest  
Chorus - Die Haghessingers

Tristan - Ramón Vinay  
Isolde - Martha Mödl

Brangaene - Ira Malaniuk  
Marke - Josef Greindl  
Kurwenal - Gustav Neidlinger  
Melot - Jos Borelli  
Hirt - Wim Koopman  
Steuerman - Gé Genemans  
Stimme eines jungen Seemanns - Wim Koopman

This mono recording from the 1959 Holland Festival sounds pretty good, some audience coughing apart; there is no distortion and an excellent balance between voices and orchestra. Experienced old-hand Ferdinand Leitner knows just how the pulse of this music should go, although I imagine he was on occasions wincing at the scrawny woodwind and the intonation and articulation of the strings in the Preludes to both Acts I and III. Karajan or Reiner would probably have sacked them on the spot. They get better and even if their tone is never ideally rich and full enough, they otherwise do a mostly very acceptable job. The ominous progression of chords before the lovers' first meeting on board is done to perfection and the love-potion music wonderfully poised.

Speaking of Karajan, it would be reasonable to assume that the two principals would not be in as fine voice as their magnificent live recording for him seven years earlier but in fact we hear them both in excellent voice. Mödl's soprano was always individual and for some an acquired taste that remains unacquired. She is a "zwischenfach" soprano of oddly hoarse and rasping quality, with a pronounced glottal attack and something of a beat - but she has the stamina, the power, the biting lower register and searing top notes - and what intensity and commitment she brings to the role of Isolde, who emerges as a vehement Irish firebrand, brimful of passion. She gets the emotional colour just right at key moments, such as "Er sah mir in die Augen" and "Ungeminn't". At times, she almost overwhelms Vinay - shades of Nilsson and Uhl - who is nonetheless in superb, baritone voice, singing his second most famous role (the first was Otello) touching in his dream-vision of Isolde waving to him from the ship bearing her to him, and anguished in his deathbed ravings. The pair are tireless in the love duet and build up a real head of steam, despite a few shrieks from Mödl, culminating in a rivetingly dramatic "Rette dich, Tristan!" to rival Böhm's 1966 live recording.

The supporting cast is drawn from strength, with Neidlinger, despite a bit of shouting, successfully subduing and modifying the biting, "Alberich", quality of his bass-baritone to create a portrait of Kurwenal rather less bluff, hale and hearty and more saturnine and sophisticated than usual; of course, he does irony well but needed to tone down the Sprechgesang. Distinguished Austrian mezzo-soprano Ira Malaniuk repeats her more than serviceable Brangaene, providing a steady, seamless backdrop of tone during the love duet. Greindl is a typically rather rocky, cavernous-voiced King Mark, as he was for Furtwängler in his studio recording, but is suitably grave, distraught and moving. The minor roles of Melot, Shepherd and Young Sailor and are filled with distinction by presumably local Dutch singers.

As the proud and slightly obsessed possessor of some twenty recordings of this, my favourite opera, I can heartily recommend this recording as an eminently listenable record of a vanished age of Wagnerian singing - and it is currently available very reasonably.

**Karl Böhm – 1960 (live mono/Ambient Stereo) Pristine, Walhall**

Orchestra - Metropolitan Opera  
Chorus - Metropolitan Opera

Tristan - Ramón Vinay  
Isolde - Birgit Nilsson  
Brangaene - Irene Dalis  
Marke - Jerome Hines

Kurwenal - Walter Cassel  
Melot - Calvin Marsh  
Hirt - Paul Franke  
Steuerman - Louis (Luigi) Sgarro  
Stimme eines jungen Seemanns - Charles Anthony

For those who think Böhm's more celebrated live recording from Bayreuth in 1966 is too fast, this performance from the Met six years earlier will come as a shock: excluding Milton Cross's radio announcements it is a mere three hours and seventeen minutes, compared with just under three and a half hours in 1966 and 3:20 at Bayreuth, with the same two principals, in 1962.

The latter certainly benefits from somewhat more relaxed speeds, as the review by my MusicWeb colleague Paul Godfrey points out but for some the febrile excitement of Böhm's attack on the score will carry its own thrill. To be fair, the love music of Act II does not sound too rushed, climaxes are skilfully paced and weighted, and key orchestra passages such as the one in Act I following "Herr Tristan trete nah" are beautifully judged, but for those who prefer a more temperate approach the 1962 Bayreuth performance will suit. Unfortunately, as with the Met relay here, the audience there is maddeningly bronchial; the 1966 recording is composite so the engineers were able to edit out the worst intrusions and select the best passages from both performances and rehearsals; here in 1960, you get what you get, as it was broadcast, persistent hacking and all. The coughing through the cor anglais solos opening Act III is especially irritating and the Met orchestra is perhaps lacking a tad in weight and "grunt" compared with its Bayreuth counterpart but it is still very fine.

However, there are distinct advantages to this recording, not least the usual superb Pristine XR remastering which enormously improves upon the original tapes and provides a realistic, unobtrusive Ambient Stereo effect. The sound is well balanced although a little brittle and peaky on higher, louder notes; nonetheless it is miraculous for its age and provenance. Furthermore, for those who like me admire Windgassen's artistry but find his tone rather whining, we hear a more virile, heroic Tristan from Ramon Vinay, still at his peak two years before he reverted to baritone roles. Finally, the thrill of Birgit Nilsson's debut as Isolde is captured in full; her actual debut which created a front-page sensation was three weeks earlier but she was partnered by a lesser tenor than either Vinay or Windgassen in Karl Liebl, subbing for an indisposed Vinay, so this is a more desirable memento of her Isolde in her youthful prime. Nilsson herself is of course phenomenal, the top C's effortless, the narratives full of bite and the concluding "Mild und leise" transcendent. Of course, she also made a studio recording under Solti later that same year but while Fritz Uhl is serviceable and musical, there is something of the same imbalance between the lovers' voices which mars Nilsson's live performances with Windgassen. By all accounts, she preferred him above all as her Tristan but my preference remains for Vinay, whose baritonal heft and agonised delivery of the text rival Melchior and Vickers for animal passion. He was the pre-eminent Tristan for whole of the 1950's, taking over from Melchior, Lorenz, and Svanholm and his powerful voice matches Nilsson's in amplitude, whereas other tenors tend to be swamped by her laser-like intensity. The erotic intensity generated in the extended Act II love duet is electric and hardly compromised by Böhm pressing on the tempo.

The supporting cast has no weaknesses but few are as good as the 1966 Bayreuth recording. Irene Dalis' Brangaene is vocally not as beguiling as Christa Ludwig's – there are some slides and glottal mannerisms, and her rich tone can be a little "clotted" but the sound is voluminous, she has a splendid lower register and can keep up with Nilsson in their exchanges. Walter Cassel as Kurwenal cannot match Waechter or Hotter in his prime; he is rather blustery in Act I but smoother in Act III, even if again he occasionally barks a bit. Charles Anthony makes a lovely Sailor, better than Georg Paskuda in 1962 or Peter Schreier in 1966 and Jerome Hines delivers a big, warm stream of sonorous bass tone. His nobility and steadiness are admirable but his characterisation is rather generalised compared with the superb Martti Talvela, whose anguish is more touchingly palpable.

To sum up, this remains a highly desirable memento of a great occasion, compromised by audience coughing but greatly enhanced by Pristine's splendid remastering.

**Georg Solti – 1960 (studio stereo) Decca**

Orchestra - Wiener Philharmoniker

Chorus - Wiener Singerverein

Tristan - Fritz Uhl

Isolde - Birgit Nilsson

Brangaene - Regina Resnik

Marke - Arnold Van Mill

Kurwenal - Tom Krause

Melot - Ernst Kozub

Hirt - Peter Klein

Steuerman - Theodor Kirschbichler

Stimme eines jungen Seemanns - Waldemar Kmentt

If you peruse previous reviews, there is quite a range of response to this recording. Some reviewers are merely unreasonably splenetic and ungrateful, whereas others are excessively enthusiastic about an account which undeniably has virtues but also flaws; I am more inclined to join the cheerers than the jeerers.

There are some obvious and undeniable reasons to cheer, not least the sound of La Nilsson in full, youthful cry repeating an Isolde we can hear in many other treasurable incarnations but this is the only studio recording. Favourite among her live recordings and in excellent sound is the famous Bayreuth performance under Böhm and for me there is still nothing to rival its thrilling propulsion despite shortcomings in Windgassen's Tristan. But there are in fact some twenty or so live recordings of her Isolde made in the twenty years following the first in 1957 with Rodzinsky and Sawallisch and the last under Horst Stein in 1976. Many are neither better nor inferior to her singing here; she was amazingly consistent and enjoyed extraordinary vocal health throughout her career but obviously the technical quality of the recording, the calibre of her Tristan and supporting cast and a preference for Nilsson in her absolute artistic and vocal prime in the 60's will be important factors determining which recording you choose. She sang again for Solti in 1963 and 1971 and, if you want Solti conducting, is in the latter partnered by Jess Thomas, who will for many be considered an improvement over Fritz Uhl here.

Which leads us to one of the main gripes about this set. Uhl was a substitute for Jon Vickers - ah! missed opportunities! - who could not get along with Solti. He is clearly too light of voice and pretty ordinarily endowed vocally speaking but he doesn't disgrace himself within his limitations even if he tends to disappear at key moments such as the celebrated "Telegramme Duet" when Nilsson is belting out top C's and he is struggling to compete - or in fact abandoning the effort as pointless. (Björling once observed that being on stage with Tebaldi was "like singing with two sopranos"; Uhl also has a vocal giantess to contend with.) He at least sounds more youthful than Windgassen who invariably sounded avuncular for all his talents and is at certain points, such as "Dem Land das Tristan meint", rather effective. His vision of Isolde's ship is poetically sung and he satisfies as long as he isn't stretched. There is no doubt that one longs for Vinay or Vickers and I have to say based on his brief appearance as Melot I would have preferred Ernst Kozub to have substituted for Vickers but there it is.

Regina Resnik's Brangaene is a tad matronly and there are some intonation problems in her warning during the duet but she is an experienced artist and I like the contrast her dusky mezzo makes with Birgit's shining steel. Tom Krause is as virile and forthright a Kurwenal as you would expect and

Arnold van Mill brings pathos, gravitas and a beautiful, slightly gravelly voice to his King Mark; his "Dies wundervolle Weib" is truly moving.

Another undoubted advantage of this recording is that we can hear the glorious playing of the VPO but that is inextricably linked with the complaints about John Culshaw's knob-twiddling. It is true that occasionally there are some irritating "left to right" movements and balances (such as in the opening Sailor's Song which is virtually shunted out of the sound picture, it's so "hard stage left") but the carpers are exaggerating; for the most part this is in excellent "Sonicstage" sound and a treat for the ears after the many live and/or vintage recordings in my collection.

Regarding yet another grouse, this time about Solti's supposedly splashy and bombastic conducting: that's the usual, lazy default-position insult and a fair listening will establish that he in fact delivers a considerably more measured, reflective and lyrical reading than the driven and almost febrile Böhm performance. While it doesn't have the poise of Karajan, nor perhaps that conductor's spiritual breadth and overview it is eminently sensitive and buoyed up by the simply gorgeous VPO woodwind in particular.

I do have one real bugbear, however and that is the absurdly inappropriate positioning of the breaks over the four discs. The music just cuts out in mid-flow at crucial points; infuriating.

Otherwise, if you read this and a few other reviews more concerned with providing as objective an assessment as is possible within so subjective a sphere as Wagner recordings rather than venting spleen, you will know what you are getting before you buy this. I obtained my copy very reasonably and happy with my lot, despite the drawbacks.

(P.S. I am as mystified as a previous reviewer by one peculiarity on this recording: why did Solti and/or Culshaw ask the chorus to sing "Deil" with a percussive "D" instead of the proper aspirate on "Heil" at the end of Act 1? For impact? Weird.)

As a previous reviewer has helpfully pointed out, despite the continued and inexplicable unavailability of this early digital 1980/81 recording, it can be ordered from ArkivMusic who issue it under licence.

### **Karl Böhm – 1962 (live mono) Myto, Golden Melodram**

Orchestra - Bayreuth Festival

Chorus - Bayreuth Festival

Tristan - Wolfgang Windgassen

Isolde - Birgit Nilsson

Brangaene - Kersten Meyer

Marke - Josef Greindl

Kurwenal - Eberhard Wächter

Melot - Niels Moeller

Hirt - Gerhard Stolze

Steuerman - Hanns-Hanno Daum

Stimme eines jungen Seemanns - Georg Paskuda

This live Bayreuth recording from 1962 is inevitably overshadowed by the celebrated performances with the same two principals in 1966 in the same venue. There are two from that year: a composite recording drawing on various performances and rehearsals, enabling the engineers to avoid the curse of constant hacking which mars this broadcast by mixing and patching and the other an unpatched recording of one August evening. There are however, some advantages to listening to this earlier recording, not least the fact that Windgassen is in younger, sappier voice and does not tire in Act III.

His tone was never especially juicy or heroic but he sings with huge commitment, subtlety and passion, surpassing his achievement four years later. He gives his all in his Act III ravings; nonetheless, there are times when his voice is once again dwarfed by Nilsson's, especially in the "Telegramme Duet".

Nilsson is once more in sovereign voice and has deepened her interpretation since her debut at the Met two years earlier. The laser top notes are as thrilling as ever but she has found more tenderness; "Er sah mir in die Augen" is steadier and more trenchant, while the final note of her "Liebestod" on "höchste Lust" is even more poised and ethereal. Another great advantage is that this is more leisurely than the thrilling but decidedly frantic Met performance from 1960. The extra time he takes brings often lends greater rapture and intensity to the surge of the music- something you will have to hear and discover for yourself, as Myto irritatingly supply no track or total CD timings at all. For the record, the total timing is about 3'20". Unfortunately, it's not all gain, especially if one compares the mono sound here with either the 1960 Met recording, superbly mastered into Ambient Stereo by Pristine or the standard DG issue of the stereo 1966 performance. Nor is the casting uniformly better than either the earlier or later of the Böhm's other recordings: Georg Paskuda's Seaman is not as impressive as Charles Anthony's in 1960 and Vinay is assuredly more heroic than Windgassen; holding his own against Nilsson's huge sound. Josef Greindl is moving but also gravelly and unsteady, not a patch on the great Martti Talvela or even the less expressive but far more sonorously-voiced Jerome Hines. Kerstin Meyer has a rather light mezzo-soprano, sometimes too similar in timbre to Nilsson's but she is steady and pure-toned and I can appreciate her gentler, more womanly interpretation. Gerhard Stolze makes an oddly plaintive and affecting Shepherd; indeed, the whole of Act III is the highpoint of this performance, from the beautiful cor anglais solos opening the Act – marred by inconsiderate coughing – and graced by Eberhard Waechter's particularly noble and intelligent Kurwenal, different from the usual bluff, witless bumpkin.

This remains a very rewarding and listenable recording but for all its virtues is still perhaps overall the least recommendable of the four Böhm performances under discussion here.

### **Karl Böhm – 1966 (live stereo) Deutsche Grammophon**

Orchestra - Bayreuth Festival

Chorus - Bayreuth Festival

Tristan - Wolfgang Windgassen

Isolde - Birgit Nilsson

Brangaene - Christa Ludwig

Marke - Martti Talvela

Kurwenal - Eberhard Wächter

Melot - Claude Heater

Hirt - Erwin Wohlfahrt

Steuerman - Gerd Nienstedt

Stimme eines jungen Seemanns - Peter Schreier

This has long been the go-to version for many and not without reason. Virtually everything I say about the single, live performance reviewed immediately below applies equally here, as the singing is remarkably consistent across the run; the advantage of this DG set over the cheaper Frequenz issue is that more coughs and blips are eliminated, it being a composite recording drawing on at least three evenings and rehearsals, and that it provides a booklet with texts and translations, whereas Frequenz is no-frills but offers the advantage of the extra electricity generated during one live, unedited performance. Otherwise, there's not much in it; the casts and Böhm's conducting style are identical

**Karl Böhm – 1966 (live stereo) Frequenz**

Orchestra - Bayreuth Festival

Chorus - Bayreuth Festival

Tristan - Wolfgang Windgassen

Isolde - Birgit Nilsson

Brangaene - Christa Ludwig

Marke - Martti Talvela

Kurwenal - Eberhard Wächter

Melot - Claude Heater

Hirt - Erwin Wohlfahrt

Steuerman - Gerd Nienstedt

Stimme eines jungen Seemanns - Peter Schreier

Like several previous reviewers and no doubt a good few purchasers, I previously owned this "Frequenz" label issue and gave it away when I acquired what I thought was a better re-mastering of the performance on DG Originals or the complete Wagner "Great Operas" Decca box set, only to discover later that in fact they are not the same at all. This is a complete, live recording of one performance in August 1966. There is some dispute as to whether it is the 13th, as per the information on the back cover, or the 4th, as per other, probably correct, sources; either way, it is not the same as the DG issue, which is an amalgam or composite drawn from at least three performances. This one was transmitted complete as a radio broadcast on 23rd August; furthermore, it is in good stereo and the sound quality is indistinguishable from the DG set.

Otherwise, it is of course the same cast and if anything benefits from the electricity and sweep of one, continuous evening without the interruptions of the editing process. I have not made a detailed comparison to enable me to tell which sections from this evening made it through to the DG cut but I do know that I immediately sensed an even more palpable and gripping sense of drama in this recording. Especially thrilling is the "Telegramme Duet" at the beginning of Act 2 and nobody - not even Karajan either in his live 1952 Bayreuth performance or in his studio recording - handles the phrasing of the waves of sound in the overture with such devastating impact; even the emphatic chords preceding the sailor's ballad seem to carry a weight of emotion which pervades the whole opera.

Some might carp about the steeliness of Nilsson's assumption of the role of Isolde but that assertiveness, in combination with a certain tempering of Tristan's supposed heroism which is inevitable given the more vulnerable timbre of Windgassen's reedy tenor, underlines Wolfgang Wagner's concept of the drama hinging upon Isolde's dominance and Tristan's weakness - an idea reinforced by the manner in which Windgassen portrays Tristan as essentially a victim; thus his bewildered confession, "O König, das kann ich dir nicht sagen" becomes even more poignant. The same dynamic can usefully be applied to Nilsson's studio recording under Solti, where Fritz Uhl's Tristan seems almost to be a helpless spiderling, devoured by the female in the act of mating - but let me drop that biological analogy before it is stretched too far...Windgassen's ravings are not overwhelmingly tortured in the same way as those of more overtly virile Tristans such as Melchior, Lorenz, Vinay or Vickers; his voice was always intrinsically going to have less heroic heft than those most celebrated Heldenotenoren, but his intelligence and feeling amply compensate and his depiction of Tristan's sufferings are nonetheless vivid. Very occasionally his voice is overwhelmed by the orchestra but he is by no means regularly swamped.

The virtues of the other cast-members are too well known to require re-rehearsal and you will know if you respond as I do to the tireless magnificence of Nilsson's voice - although I do not accept that she is incapable of tenderness, as her delivery of key moments such as "Er sah mir in der Augen" and

“Dies süsse Wortlein – und...” will attest. The Act 2 Love Duet is especially intense and Nilsson's top Cs are terrific.

The final attraction of this Frequenz issue is that it is frequently available absurdly cheaply - as long as you can cope with minimal documentation, no libretto etc.

**Herbert von Karajan - 1971-72 (studio stereo) EMI Warner**

Orchestra - Berliner Philharmoniker

Chorus - Deutsche Oper (Berlin)

Tristan - Jon Vickers

Isolde - Helga Dernesch

Brangaene - Christa Ludwig

Marke - Karl Ridderbusch

Kurwenal - Walter Berry

Melot - Bernd Weikl

Hirt - Peter Schreier

Steuerman - Martin Vantin

Stimme eines jungen Seemanns - Peter Schreier

Beauty of sound dominates this performance - not necessarily at the cost of dramatic intensity, as there is a kind of hypnotic concentration to the approach Karajan takes. You will never hear an orchestra play this music with more nuance, sheen of tone, control of dynamics or intensity than the Berlin Phil in their prime - and much of the singing is controlled, detailed and similarly intense. I have read many reviews of this recording some scathing, and it all comes down, ultimately, to taste: I am as likely to take this down from the shelves as any, as it offers another viable interpretation of this inexhaustibly fascinating masterpiece, even if I acknowledge that some find Karajan's control glacial or calculated.

The weakness for me is the occasional discolouration of Dernesch's voice - not always at loud, climactic points; sometimes these are fine but her voice can lose firmness at more low-key moments, too. Having said that, hers is a warm, vulnerable antidote to the steelier, more sheerly impressive assumption of the role by Nilsson. By comparison, Mödl is more intense, Flagstad grander, Stemme youthful, Gray gleaming - there's room for them all. Vickers' interpretation is hors concours; you like him or you don't - but many might be surprised by the subtlety of his singing and his mezza-voce is genuinely beautiful. Of course, his ravings are incomparably distraught - interesting to compare him with Domingo, always smooth and beautiful of tone but very expressive, or Vinay, so haunted and yet rounded of voice. There's little to criticize in the supporting cast: Ludwig is one of the very best Brangaenes, as she is in the pacier live Bohm set, and Berry is, to my ears, far preferable to Hotter, if not Wächter - and by comparison Baer's Kurwenal is the disappointment in the Pappano recording. Ridderbusch has such a beautiful voice, even if he cannot rival Talvela's searingly dramatic rendering of King Mark in the Bohm. One annoyance is the fact that the performance is spread over four discs so you cannot take in one Act in one sweep, as you should. Nonetheless, this recording suits my taste for a grandly sung and played *Tristan*, even if I also appreciate the fierier interpretations of Böhm, Solti and Knappertsbusch.

**Horst Stein – 1976 (live mono) Myto**

Orchestra - Wiener Staatsoper

Chorus - Wiener Staatsoper

Tristan - Jon Vickers

Isolde - Birgit Nilsson

Brangaene - Ruth Hesse

Marke - Hans Sotin  
Kurwenal - Hans Günter Nöcker  
Melot - Reid Bunger  
Hirt - Gerhard Stolze  
Steuerman - Harald Pröglhoff  
Stimme eines jungen Seemanns - Anton Dermota

Goodness knows what cold virus was haunting the cobbled back alleys of Vienna that December in 1976 - or was it just a collective case of mass pig ignorance? - but I have never heard such a gratuitously inattentive and inconsiderate audience hack its way through an entire performance almost without respite - it's absolutely maddening. I expect to be tolerant of some audience noise but this is ridiculous.

My disappointment is compounded by the fact that contrary to my hopes and expectations, Nilsson and Vickers do not here constitute the dream-team partnership we might have envisaged. Despite the amplitude of her voice and her continued ability to hit the top notes, Nilsson is clearly labouring as she lows and heaves her way unsteadily through the part, quite without the ease and gleam we hear in earlier recordings from the 60's and early 70's; at times it is almost painful. The Brangaene is harsh and wobbly and rather ordinary; the Kurwenal similarly competent but unmemorable. It is a surprise to hear the inimitable tones of veteran tenor Anton Dermota as the Sailor here at 66 years old and still singing well and the equally unmistakable tenor of Gerhard Stolze is a characterful asset as the Shepherd. The noble sonority of Hans Sotin's rich bass lends pathos, dignity and gravitas to King Mark's lament.

Vickers, too is below par; perhaps it is fair to say that both principal singers are here past their legendary best, although Vickers is here only 50 while Nilsson is already 58. His tone is often hoarse, grey and lacking centre; he frequently lapses into his besetting fault of crooning.

Horst Stein was an excellent conductor and often paces matters aptly without generating much excitement; there is a certain slackness where we need more dramatic tension but the prelude is replete with yearning (insofar as you can ignore the relentless hacking) famous, the climax to Act 1 exciting, and the extended love duet in Act 2 goes well, with Vickers using a tender mezza voce.

The mono sound is quite distant; voices are often too recessed but not too damagingly so. It's perfectly acceptable for a live recording of that provenance but nothing special. Unfortunately, this is not the collector's item all *Tristan* obsessives will have been searching for.

### **Reginald Goodall - 1980-81 (studio stereo) Decca**

Orchestra - Welsh National Opera  
Chorus - Welsh National Opera

Tristan - John Mitchinson  
Isolde - Linda Esther Gray  
Brangaene - Anne Wilkens  
Marke - Gwynne Howell  
Kurwenal - Phillip Joll  
Melot - Nicholas Folwell  
Hirt - Arthur Davies  
Steuerman - Geoffrey Moses  
Stimme eines jungen Seemanns - John Harris

No matter how many recordings of this opera you own, you need to add this one to your collection to hear a truly different and original interpretation which will never leave you bored or indifferent.

As is so often the case with Reginald Goodall's Wagner, at first the tempo seems unduly indulgent or leisurely but a very short way into the overture you are gripped by Goodall's firm command of the pulse and Schwung of the music and ten minutes later you find yourself wholly transported body, mind and soul into Wagner's febrile and mystical alternative universe. The second surprise comes with the timbre of Linda Esther Gray's Isolde: she has a rich, fruity sound in the middle and lower regions of her voice, ample power and sparkling top notes. She makes particularly telling use of frequent, shimmering portamento effects which ride on her quick vibrato. This is a young woman of great will-power and undaunted courage; there is none of the maternal tinge or steely glare which mars some famous accounts and unlike Nina Stemme, she can convey irony and sarcasm. I find her plunges into those lower reaches heart-stoppingly beautiful; tellingly employed in her "Tantris" narrative, they bespeak of suppressed passions; she also has a superb command of both upward and downward portamento to suggest repressed emotion. The key point "Er sah mir die in die Augen" is just the still point that Wagner's score demands; she triumphs exactly where Stemme fails (so what a pity the accompanying viola is squawky). Immediately afterwards, "Er schwur mit tausend Eiden" and her hurled-out top B's ooze desperate scorn and fury. No-one else in the cast comes up to her standard and it gives one greater cause than ever for regret that her career was curtailed. I have no hesitation in calling hers one of the greatest and most complete Isolde I know in that she is capable of encompassing all the aspects of her character.

Not that the supporting cast is inadequate - although Philip Joll's Kurwenal comes nearest to letting the side down in the first Act with a somewhat dry, laboured taunting song, he certainly picks up in Act III, adopting a suitably plaintive and plangent tone as he ineffectually nurses Tristan. Anne Wilkens makes a strong, direct Brangaene, a bit squeezed and throttled of tone in sustained passages but contrasting well with Gray - which is not the case in the Pappano recording. Mitchinson's Tristan is firm and manly, baritonal in the Vinay tradition, if occasionally a little broad in the vibrato department and a little grating in tone. His all-important vision of the ship bringing Isolde scudding over the waves towards him is rather prosaically delivered in an uncomfortable croon but Goodall's conducting is gorgeous. Gwynne Howell's King Mark is simply perfect - a beautiful voice used with exceptional sensitivity to convey the pathos of betrayal by those one loves. He crumples at the end of his monologue, employing a crushed mezza-voce while still sustaining beauty of utterance; this is a portrayal to set alongside that by Talvela even if Howell cannot command that great artist's mighty scale of voice. And his German is very good – better than some of his co-singers.

And throughout the whole recording Goodall maintains and unerring sense of the proper weight and pacing to release the full drama of this extraordinary work. He has drilled the Welsh National Opera Orchestra and his singers in every nuance and detail until any deficiency is inherent in the practical limitations of their artistry and technique, not his. Despite his reputation for weightiness, the Act II music leading up to the "Telegramme Duet" is fleet and cleanly articulated with a tremendous sense of erotic tension and the distancing of the hunting horns is keenly judged.

Even though Pappano's *Tristan und Isolde* - EMI's last studio recording - was in many ways a success, I would give the palm to this account as among the best from the modern era, despite some weaknesses.

### **Reginald Goodall – 1981 (live stereo) – in English; Oriol Music Trust**

Orchestra - English National Opera

Chorus - English National Opera

Tristan - Alberto Remedios

Isolde - Linda Esther Gray

Brangaene - Felicity Palmer

Marke - John Tomlinson

Kurwenal - Norman Bailey  
Melot - Geoffrey Chard  
Hirt - Stuart Kale  
Steuerman - Sean Rea  
Stimme eines jungen Seemanns - Adrian Martin

This live radio broadcast – complete with some maddening coughing - cannot be a first recommendation, being in English, nor should I really include it in this survey as it is not a commercially available recording (the Oriol Music Trust is a charity and proceeds go to The Musicians Benevolent Fund) but I mention it for the excellence of the cast: an assembly of the cream of British singing in the early 80's under Goodall, whose studio recording in German I so much admire and who brings the same qualities to the performance here with what is arguably a superior cast – the substitution of an adequate but lumpy John Tomlinson for the great Gwynne Howell being the exception. His fans will love to hear the tireless, mellifluous tenor of Alberto Remedios in more Wagner other than the “Ring” and he is partnered by the best Isolde of her generation, before her premature retirement, Linda Esther Gray, repeating her gleaming Isolde. Remedios is as good as any tenor excepting Melchior and brings a special tenderness and passion to the narration of his ecstatic vision of Isolde waving to him from the approaching ship. A bonus, too, to hear another great Wagnerian, Norman Bailey as Kurwenal and the tangy mezzo of Felicity Palmer, in a portrayal of Brangaene which resembles that of the similarly voiced Brigitte Fassbaender. Avid collectors of a certain taste will want to know about this but for a mainstream first choice, we need to look elsewhere.

**Leonard Bernstein – 1981 (live composite) Philips**

Orchestra - Sinfonieorchester des Bayerischen Rundfunks  
Chorus - Chor des Bayerischen Rundfunks

Tristan - Peter Hofmann  
Isolde - Hildegard Behrens  
Brangaene - Yvonne Minton  
Marke - Hans Sotin  
Kurwenal - Bernd Weikl  
Melot - Heribert Steinbach  
Hirt - Heinz Zednik  
Steuerman - Raimund Grumbach  
Stimme eines jungen Seemanns - Thomas Moser

I pass swiftly over this recording, being one of Bernstein's least recommendable. Despite the luminous presence of Yvonne Minton and a sonorous, if rather stolid, Hans Sotin, much of the singing, from Hofmann's gritty Tristan, Behrens' unsteady Isolde and Weikl's bleaty Kurwenal down to Moser's strangulated Seaman, is frankly unpleasant and unacceptable - and that is without throwing Bernstein's gluey, self-indulgent conducting into the mix. Everything is excessively underscored and to add insult to injury, Bernstein's extreme and lugubrious tempi mean that it comes on four expensive CDs.

To be fair, even if the general consensus was that this recording was a failure, some – especially those less concerned with vocal quality - respond more positively to Bernstein's applications of a painstaking, forensic exposition of the score interspersed with moments of extreme drama and violence, so you might like to sample it yourself before you accept my opinion.

**Carlos Kleiber - 1980-82 (studio digital) Deutsche Grammophon**

Orchestra - Dresdener Staatskapelle

Chorus - Leipziger Rundfunk

Tristan - René Kollo

Isolde - Margaret Price

Brangaene - Brigitte Fassbaender

Marke - Kurt Moll

Kurwenal - Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau

Melot - Werner Götz

Hirt - Anton Dermota

Steuerman - Wolfgang Hellmich

Stimme eines jungen Seemanns - Eberhard Büchner

I think that in order to avoid getting bogged down in debate over whether singers such as Margaret Price have any business singing a role which they would not - and indeed, in her case never did - attempt on stage, this recording is best viewed as a product of the recording studio rather than an attempt to replicate a live performance, and devised in order to enshrine the conception of a great conductor making the best of the resources available to him. Undoubtedly the DG engineers' adjustments are enabling lighter voiced artists to be heard but the same could be said of the covered pit at Bayreuth and to this day true Wagner singers who may be properly heard over the orchestra are as rare as hen's teeth.

This is undoubtedly beautifully played and directed; Kleiber's sensitivity and lyricism infuse every bar but he also packs a punch at the climactic conclusions of Acts 1 and 2. Being a devotee of the live 1966 recording at Bayreuth conducted by Böhm, I miss a certain propulsion in passages such as the "O sink hernieder" duet and too often his singers are almost crooning not just because they lack vocal heft but because a Lieder-like restraint and delicacy are clearly what the conductor has demanded of them. That can pay dividends: this is clearly the most minutely prepared of recordings with every textual and musical nuance thought through for maximum impact; nothing is skimmed or blandly performed.

Fischer-Dieskau croons and fakes notes because by this stage of his career - the set was recorded between August 1980 and April 1982 - the juice has gone out of his voice and he no longer has the resources but he creates a bluff, credible Kurwenal. Kollo's voice is always an odd assemblage of incongruities: he has little legato and can quickly lose tonal lustre, either yelling or almost marking, but he rarely defaults into the guttural emphasis or pronounced bleat which sometimes marred his singing and he sounds suitably youthful, delivering the words with exemplary expression. His ravings aren't painful in the way some Tristans can be. Vinay, Heppner, Treptow, Vickers or - least of all - Melchior he ain't - but he's nonetheless better than passable. Fassbaender keeps her wide vibrato under control and rises to the fierce, sustained tessitura of a role which often lies as high as Brangaene's mistress; she brings a master Lieder recitalist's acuity to her text. The smaller parts of the Young Sailor and Melot are taken by mediocre singers, the former glottal and the latter making little impact in his tiny but crucial interventions.

The glories of this set, however, apart from Kleiber's concept and the playing of the Dresdeners, are Kurt Moll's predictably moving and sonorous Marke and Margaret Price's shining Isolde. Her voice has qualities similar to those of Gundula Janowitz, whose predominately lyrical and fluting soprano had sufficient spinto power, stamina and legato to undertake "lighter" Wagnerian roles on stage. She may be artificially boosted but the result is thrilling; I haven't enjoyed a "recent" (comparatively, in terms of recorded history) Isolde as much since Linda Esther Gray's superlative recording for Goodall - and she could pull it off live on stage, too. Price's flawless German and thrilling top, honed in her celebrated Strauss roles, in combination with a serviceable lower register and a real actress's delivery

combine to enable her to deliver the recorded performance of a lifetime, regardless of her practical limitations. There is nothing matronly (Flagstad?) or chromium-plated (Nilsson?) about her vulnerable, passionate, wild and almost girlish Isolde; she's terrific.

Its faults notwithstanding, being now available in superb sound at a bargain price on three discs with a full, trilingual libretto, this set should be in the collection of any devotee of this greatest of operas.

**Daniel Barenboim – 1994 (studio stereo) Teldec**

Orchestra - Berliner Philharmoniker

Chorus - Berliner Staatsoper

Tristan - Siegfried Jerusalem

Isolde - Waltraud Meier

Brangaene - Marjana Lipovsek

Marke - Matti Salminen

Kurwenal - Falk Struckmann

Melot - Johan Botha

Hirt - Peter Maus

Steuerman - Roman Trekel

Stimme eines jungen Seemanns - Uwe Heilmann

The standard of casting here simply isn't up to the best. Good as they are, neither lead singer has the ideal voice for their roles here: Jerusalem has a gritty sound with something of an obtrusive bleat in its pulse and Meier sounds like a pushed-up mezzo, with a certain harshness and a tremolo in her tone when she is under pressure to produce power. Neither has the epic sweep and power required. Falk Struckmann, too, has a wobble and his baritone blares. Lipovsek's Brangaene is undistinguished and I don't care for the whining Shepherd. Only Salminen impresses as an agonised Marke, but his hollow timbre is a tad odd.

Barenboim's conducting is rather slow and stately without always generating much tension; I find it a bit nerveless. The orchestral playing is lovely but that isn't reason enough to swing the appeal of this recording in its favour.

**Antonio Pappano – 2004 (studio digital) EMI Warner**

Orchestra - Covent Garden

Chorus - Covent Garden

Tristan - Plácido Domingo

Isolde - Nina Stemme

Brangaene - Mihoko Fujimura

Marke - René Pape

Kurwenal - Olaf Bär

Melot - Jared Holt

Hirt - Ian Bostridge

Steuerman - Matthew Rose

Stimme eines jungen Seemanns - Rolando Villazón

Despite my having acquired it on its appearance, I found that this "Last of the Studio Recordings" languished on my shelves or was the last to be selected from the many I own, and I realised that I needed to examine my subconscious reluctance to listen to this recording first.

Well, that faint lack of enthusiasm does not primarily stem from any problem with the orchestral playing or conducting. It's in beautiful sound, the Royal Opera House Orchestra plays magnificently

and Pappano has a vision for the work, which is to bring out the burnished glow and languorous beauty of the score without sacrificing tension. A lot of the time it works, the overture heaves like the ocean, the stately chords heralding Tristan's ominous appearance when summoned by Isolde to leave the helm and present himself as "die Sitte" (according to Isolde) demands are grand and ominous, the love potion music just before the hectic conclusion of Act I pulses and yearns. Pappano manages to sustain the necessary poise and poignancy in the Act III Prelude - always a difficult challenge. Orchestrally, it is a concept which is nowhere near as magisterial as Furtwängler achieves or as passionate as Knappertsbusch's or Karajan's concept but it is of a piece in its Lieder-like attention to detail and commands respect.

No, the problem lies in my response to the voices themselves, inevitably up against others of legendary status. Nina Stemme has a big, vibrant voice and certainly conveys youthful passion. Unfortunately, at emotional moments at high volume that vibrancy can spill over into a marked tremolo or even an incipient wobble in a role which calls for absolute steadiness. Hence at key moments such as "Er sah mir in die Augen" she cannot maintain a firm line and defaults into a thin trembling sound which lacks intensity; "mild und leise" is powerful and has the right, rapt, "otherworldly" quality but is wobbly. And while she can certainly do anger, desperation and scorn; she has not the experience to bring out biting irony.

Otherwise, Stemme's co-singers are afflicted by what I can only describe as a kind of blandness. Mihoko Fujimura has a fine, steady mezzo of virtually faultless intonation but she brings little individuality to her Brangaene and her voice is often indistinguishable from Stemme's. Olaf Bär lacks low notes, barks a bit and is frankly a bit of bore - always a danger with this puppy-dog role. I remarked of René Pape's previous Wagner recital that he had lost a lot of the vibrancy the voice had in his youth and again here as King Mark his top notes are weak and the tone is comparatively grey here, with neither the heart-breaking intensity nor the effulgence of voice that such as Talvela or Ridderbusch find in the role. Having said that, his "Tod denn alles!" and "Erwache!" right at the end is rather good; he finally finds some real depth of feeling. Villazon gives us a lovely, impassioned cameo as a virile Young Sailor; let's hope he has recovered from his recent vocal trials. I can just about tolerate Ian Bostridge here as the Shepherd; just don't press me on the point...

Which leaves Domingo. A knee-jerk criticism is to scoff at his German but I wonder how many of those who do so actually speak the language and have noticed how much it had improved by the time of this recording? It's still a bit Hispanic but no disaster. He can certainly manage this role without strain in studio takes and brings all his stage experience and much rich, intelligent singing to bear on it. The weight and colour of voice are right; he is touching in his Third Act raving, more musical than Melchior's wayward if compelling moaning or Vickers' effortful agonisings. Always a key point for me is when Tristan has his quasi-mystical vision of the ship scudding over the waves and bringing the waving Isolde to him, first lilting in 3/4 time: "Und drauf Isolde, wie sie winkt". Domingo catches the other-worldly desperation of his illusion and Pappano supports him nobly; "Ach, Isolde, Isolde! Wie schön bist du" is sung with the requisite poetic stillness.

On balance, therefore, this is a *Tristan* I admire but would rank middlingly. For fire, passion and the kind of integrated, visionary quality that sweeps you up into its world and which is missing from this careful account, I return to a batch of recordings from fifty and sixty years ago.

### **Leif Segerstam – 2004 (studio digital) Naxos**

Orchestra - Royal Swedish Opera

Chorus - Royal Swedish Opera

Tristan - Wolfgang Millgramm

Isolde - Hedwig Fassbender

Brangaene - Martina Dike

Marke - Lennart Forsén  
Kurwenal - Gunnar Lundberg  
Melot - Magnus Kyhle  
Hirt - Ulrik Qvale  
Steuerman - John Erik Eleby  
Stimme eines jungen Seemanns - Ulrik Qvale

As diva Luisa Tetrazzini reputedly and so eloquently said, “You either gotta da voice, or you don’t gotta da voice” (I suspect that quotation is apocryphal, but never mind – it suits my purpose). Like the Barenboim “Tristan” suffers from under-casting; the voices simply aren’t of sufficient quality. Nobody is actually awful but nor is anyone that good. In fact, the Melot is poor and Brangaene’s breath in the middle of her wobbly warning is enough to give me hives. Indeed, in too many voices here, wobble rules. The Marke is cloudy and lightweight, with a weak top. Furthermore, the limp manner in which the wonderful succession of chords preceding Tristan’s “Begehrt, Herrin” is played is symptomatic of this pale, small-scale recording. “Tristan” is an epic-Romantic blast-Fest, not a baroque chamber opera. The feeble prelude is enough to warn the listener that this is going to stir no-one’s loins. This simply will not do. Moving on...

**Vladimir Jurowski – 2009 (live digital) Glyndebourne**

Orchestra - London Philharmonic  
Glyndebourne Chorus

Tristan - Torsten Kerl  
Isolde - Anja Kampe  
Brangaene - Sarah Connolly  
Marke – Georg Zeppenfeld  
Kurwenal - Andrzej Dobber  
Melot - Trevor Scheunemann  
Hirt - Andrew Kennedy  
Steuermann - Richard Mosley-Evans  
Stimme eines jungen Seemanns – Peter Gijes Bertsen

I was present at one of these performances and recall it as a great operatic experience even if its impact as it was heard live did not transfer quite so convincingly into the recorded medium, as can often be the case.

It is contained on three discs and one reason is Jurowski’s swift speeds; the other is that ten minutes of music is cut from the opening section of the Love Duet in Act 2, dealing with the dichotomy between light and dark; this was standard practice until the 60’s but it is surprising to encounter this in a recording from 2009. To quote my MWI colleague Paul Corfield Godfrey in his review of 2013: “The discussion between the two lovers - how the daylight blinded them to their mutual attraction, and how their love could only blossom in the world of night - is central to the whole of the plot as it develops: their reference to the realm of night as a consummation devoutly to be wished, and Tristan’s continual agonies in the realm of light in the Third Act.”

Jurowski’s propulsiveness is in the Böhm mode, and he keeps a light hand on the tenor. Occasionally he is guilty of too obvious and self-conscious a pulling about of tempi but for the most part he moves the score on and engineers transparent orchestral textures which allow us to hear both the individual instrumental lines and the singers; no “Karajan soup” here. This is just as well, as all the singers here might battle against the acoustic of a bigger house and the sonority of an orchestra not kept in check as much as the LPO is here; they play beautifully. Peter Gijes Bertsen’s Young Sailor’s elegantly delivered song sets the tone for some excellent singing and Anne Kampe immediately makes a positive impression with her lyrical, vibrant but steady Isolde even if she sometimes lacks the

imperious side commanded by a complete Isolde; however, she has the high Cs in the Love Duet. Sarah Connolly's Brangaene is lighter than usual but she sings most intelligently and feelingly and can capitalise upon a fundamentally lovely tone despite the suspicion that the role is a size too big for her; her voice from the watchtower is rather too distant. But she phrases sensitively. Andrzej Dobber is similarly rather stretched by Kurwenal's music and is a little bland from a characterisation point of view. Torsten Kerl is a manly, incisive Tristan with a nice baritonal timbre to his lower notes but he is stretched by Jurowski's swift speeds, occasionally has some intonation issues, sounding slightly flat, and is occasionally drowned out.

George Zeppenfeld's bass sounds rounder and more resonant here than I have heard him elsewhere even if he is not the most charismatic or rich-voiced of King Marks.

This is in many ways a very attractive performance even if its relative intimacy edges it towards what one might call chamber proportions rather than the grand, epic scale of the greatest recordings.

### **Recommendations:**

I make no prime recommendation for any recording from the digital era, as in my estimation none reaches the standard of previous stereo accounts. There are numerous, live mono recordings at the opposite, bottom end of the sound-quality hierarchy which are nonetheless superbly sung and conducted, and the *Tristan* devotee has to have one with Flagstad and Melchior singing together, so I plump for one here almost arbitrarily. I recommend a total of ten recordings below – rather too many for practical purposes – but if you want only one set in modern sound, pick one of the three stereo recordings below according to your taste; my second choices are in brackets.

Studio mono: Furtwängler 1952 (reprocessed as Ambient Stereo); (Heger 1943)

Live mono: Reiner 1936 (Knappertsbusch 1950; Leinsdorf 1943)

Studio stereo: Goodall 1980-81 (Karajan - 1971-72; Kleiber 1980-82)

Live stereo: either Böhm 1966 (DG) or Böhm 1966 (Frequenz)

### **Ralph Moore**