

Wagner's *Die Meistersinger*: A partial discographical survey
by Ralph Moore

There are around ninety recordings of *Die Meistersinger*, of which only seven were studio-made and the last of those was recorded nearly twenty years ago; a handful are composite recordings from radio broadcasts or live performances but the majority are simply live recordings of one performance, with all the hazards, extraneous noises and potential for errors that the presentation of such a long and complex work entails.

I review here some 24 recordings in all, including all seven studio versions, some live or radio broadcast performances, a couple of early recordings of excerpts and Böhm's 1939 recording of Act 3, for reason of its exceptional quality. Two are in English: the 1923 pioneering effort and Goodall's Sadler's Wells performance in 1968.

Some understandably esteem this opera above all Wagner's other works, even the *Ring*. Certainly my experience in recent years of having seen two excellent productions, one at Glyndebourne and the other at the ENO confirms the validity of that assessment; not only is it musically deeply satisfying but it provides an absorbing dramatic spectacle and Beckmesser's antics can even be genuinely funny – not a quality we necessarily associate with Wagner. The riot scene concluding Act 2, the cacophonous confusion melting away to leave the sole figure of the Nightwatchman intoning the hour, is one of the most thrilling in all opera; it must surely have influenced or even inspired Strauss in his use of three Nightwatchmen to provide a consoling conclusion to the end of Act 1 of his own Act 2 to *Die Frau ohne Schatten*. The famous vocal quintet in Act 3 is for me a touchstone for assessing any recording; it has to be right and in addition has to measure up against the exquisite 1931 recording conducted by Barbirolli with singers Schorr, Melchior and Schumann; unfortunately, it is not part of a complete recording – hardly surprising considering that the opera lasts four and a half hours and it would probably have taken something over fifty 78s to record it in its entirety.

It is in a sense Wagner's most original work, different in that it has a specific historical setting and is uniquely concerned with human interaction without any supernatural elements. It has great roles for six different voice-types and requires a first-rate chorus. It makes a change to go on holiday away from the usual operatic world of death, despair disaster and betrayal and luxuriate for a while in a work which celebrates the power of music and its place in human culture. The characters in it are generally likeable, although David can easily become a tedious whiner if he is not sung by a singer with an attractive voice. There is a central problem to be overcome in the characterisation of Hans Sachs: he must be old enough to convey a certain gravitas but not so much of an old buffer that any attraction between him and Eva, who is considerably younger than the widower, becomes implausible. In the productions I saw and referred to above, both Gerald Finley and Iain Paterson proved vocally and dramatically ideal; too many Sachs'es sound more geriatric than avuncular.

I do not propose to enter into the anti-Semitic/Nazi debate regarding the work but whatever the background, there is no need today to play Beckmesser as anything other than a humorous caricature of the sterile pedantry exhibited by critic Eduard Hanslick or to interpret Sachs' peroration to "holy German Art" as other than a plea for artistic integrity.

There are so many first rate, vintage recordings of *Die Meistersinger*, dating back to live excerpts conducted by Blech (1926) and complete performances by Bodansky at the Met (1936) and Toscanini (1937), with luminaries such as Friedrich Schorr – arguably the greatest Hans Sachs – and Hans Hermann Nissen respectively. The early 1950's was a golden age for Wagner voices and saw a slew of excellent recordings under some great conductors. 1951 in particular produced a bumper crop of recordings; Knappertsbusch's first studio recording with the great Paul Schöffler, Karajan's live composite performance from Bayreuth, starring Otto Edelmann and Kempe's radio broadcast from the same year with another superb Sachs in Ferdinand Frantz. A trio of studio recordings in the 1970s from

the three big recording companies adds to our choice but some like me might still prefer live, wild card versions, such as Kubelik's 1967 radio broadcast. (It seems to be an advantage for conducting *Die Meistersinger* if your name begins with "K", although the name of Böhm also features prominently in the discography.)

There is a distinct shortage of recommendable modern, stereo or, especially, digital, sets of *Die Meistersinger*; it could not be said to have had the charmed recording history that some other Wagner operas enjoy. It is a difficult opera to bring off because although it is often very conversational, the writing for the voice still demands really impressive singers who can suddenly take off and spin out a great, glorious, cantabile line; then there are the momentous set pieces such as the entry of the Guildsmen and the finale, which need extraordinary heft and stamina on the part of both the choir and the soloists. Not much in recent years excites me; the age of great Wagner singing is, at least for the time being and the foreseeable future, past.

The Recordings

Albert Coates - 1923 (studio; mono) in English; Aria Recording Grane Orchestra and chorus unknown

Hans Sachs - Robert Radford
 Veit Pogner - Robert Radford
 Sixtus Beckmesser - William Michael
 Fritz Kothner - Edward Halland
 Walther von Stolzing - Tudor Davies
 David - Tudor Davies
 Eva - Florence Austral
 Magdalena - Doris Lemon

This is in English and is only extended excerpts amounting to about half the music, so is obviously not a prime recommendation, but it has vitality and historical interest enough to engage the committed Wagnerian and the sound is surprisingly good for so primitive a recording approaching a hundred years old; it can thus be regarded as a desirable supplement. The voices are first class singers of the era of international quality – although Radford's chronic ill-health curtailed his career and he sang exclusively in the UK. He has a beautiful voice and sounds ideal apart from a few weak top notes. Welsh tenor Tudor Davies had a true Heldentenor despite the lightness of its timbre – far more so than pretenders today such as Klaus Florian Vogt. William Michael's Beckmesser is easy on the ear and amusingly characterised. Australian diva Florence Austral makes a strong, pure Eva. The conducting is lean and propulsive but sensitive. The glorious quintet rivals Barbirolli's famous version. You may order this from the Barcelona-based company above but also hear it in its entirety on [YouTube](#) which helpfully includes the English text. Here are the extracts:

0:00:00 — Prelude to Act 1
 0:08:31 — Church scene
 0:11:42 — Meeting of Walther and Eva
 0:16:55 — David and the apprentices
 0:20:49 — Entrance of the Mastersingers
 0:25:37 — Pogner extols the art of singing
 0:29:31 — Walther confesses Nature his only teacher
 0:34:09 — Kothner explains the rules of singing
 0:38:53 — Walther's first trial
 0:43:48 — Walther's song displeases the Masters
 0:48:28 — The apprentices celebrate Midsummer day
 0:52:53 — The scent of the elder blossoms inspires Sachs

- 0:57:20 — Sachs' love for Eva
- 1:02:01 — Walther tells Eva of the Masters' injustice
- 1:07:40 — Sachs sings at his work
- 1:11:10 — Beckmesser's serenade
- 1:15:44 — Prelude to Act 3
- 1:20:11 — Sachs laments the folly of mankind
- 1:24:42 — Walther tells Sachs of the song he dreamt
- 1:29:05 — Beckmesser limps into Sachs' workshop and obtains Walther's song
- 1:38:13 — Sachs recognises Eva's love for Walther
- 1:42:38 — Sachs bestows his blessing
- 1:46:52 — Quintet of Sachs and the lovers
- 1:51:39 — Interlude and procession of the guilds
- 1:56:43 — Dance of the apprentices
- 2:04:50 — Walther's prize song
- 2:09:28 — Sachs' panegyric on German art

Leo Blech – 1928 (live excerpts) Pearl

Orchestra - Berliner Staatsoper

Chorus - Berliner Staatsoper

Hans Sachs - Friedrich Schorr

Veit Pogner - Emanuel List

Sixtus Beckmesser - Leo Schützendorf

Walther von Stolzing - Robert Hutt

David - Karl Jöken

Eva - Elfriede Marherr(-Wagner)

Magdalena - Lydia Kinderman

This is another collection of excerpts; I would like to be a little more enthusiastic about them considering that they feature one of the greatest Wagnerian bass-baritones ever, but in truth the sound is pretty dim and the excerpts are oddly arbitrary - in addition to simply fading out frustratingly, such as track 5, which gives us a full twenty, continuous minutes but then ends just before the proper conclusion to Act II.

Apart from the sonorous bass Emanuel List, a famous Hunding, Ochs and Rocco, none of the other singers' names has endured in the memories of collectors but they are all clearly very competent artists, even if the Eva is a little "tweety" and even squawky, and the Beckmesser is of the old-school "comical" type. We hear very little of the Walther, in any case, as in these excerpts he is given only "Morgenlicht leuchte" from the beginning of Act III when he is Sachs' workshop; there is no quintet, no "Was duftet doch der Flieder" or "Wahn! Wahn!" - but we do get those twenty minutes beginning with "Jerum!", Pogner's "aria" "Nun hört, und versteht mich recht!" and the touching little duet between father Pogner and daughter Eva, among other things.

We must make allowances and remember that we are hearing a recording from 1928, and thus made considerably closer to the opera's premiere than to our own time; it is really quite remarkable that we can hear it at all but I do wish the chunks that have come down to us were more representative of the work's best music. The preceding album of excerpts in English recorded ten years earlier is in fact superior. You can supplement this with the collected studio excerpts Schorr made between 1927 and 1931, also available on Pearl with a fragment from *Der fliegende Holländer*.

Artur Bodanzky – 1936 (live; mono) Music & Arts; Guild Immortal Performances
Orchestra - Metropolitan Opera
Chorus - Metropolitan Opera

Hans Sachs - Friedrich Schorr
Veit Pogner - Emanuel List
Sixtus Beckmesser - Eduard Habich
Fritz Kothner - Julius Huehn
Walther von Stolzing - René Maison
David - Hans Clemens
Eva - Elisabeth Rethberg
Magdalena - Karin Branzell
Nachtwächter - Arnold Gabor
Kunz Vogelgesang - Marek Windheim
Konrad Nachtigall - Louis D' Angelo
Ulrich Eisslinger - Giordano Paltrinieri
Balthasar Zorn - Angelo Bada
Augustin Moser - Max Altglass
Hermann Ortel - Arnold Gabor
Hans Schwarz - Dudley Marwick
Hans Foltz - James Wolfe

This is a hard one to call; it is obviously first class and of prime historical importance you have to be a listener hardened to veteran sound and also put up with a Walther who is somewhat trying on the ears, with his hard, bleating tenor. Furthermore, the performance is subject to some fairly swingeing cuts, especially in the third Act; the only advantage to that is that it reduces the amount of time you need to endure the harsh, distant sound.

However, it also preserves for posterity the greatest Hans Sachs in Friedrich Schorr's warm, wise, infinitely tender portrayal, a few laboured top notes notwithstanding. He is noble, poetic, and so intelligent in his characterisation of Wagner's by far most likeable creation. Only a little less impressive is the pure, womanly Eva of the wonderful Elisabeth Rethberg in her later prime. Eduard Habich displays his versatility by moving from impersonating a truly sinister Alberich to being a very rounded and musical Beckmesser, funny without exaggeration.

The bonus tracks on the Immortal Performances label present a selection of the commercial, studio excerpts from *Die Meistersinger* made by Schorr; you can get the complete set on a Pearl label issue but what we have here includes enough to make you realise how primitive the live sound is, despite Richard Caniell's best efforts, and to appreciate how much better this recording could have been had Melchior been the tenor rather than René Maison. Still, the latter is at his best in the quintet, which compares quite well with the famous Barbirolli recording of that sublime set piece from 1931; his metallic tone is actually quite similar to that of Rudolf Laubenthal, who made a recording of "Abendlich leuchtend" with Schorr in 1925. Rethberg is only marginally less magical than Elisabeth Schumann here and is throughout a joy.

I think you need to be something of an historical recording aficionado to last the full four hours of this cut broadcast, especially if you enjoy some of the best modern recordings in good stereo such as that by Kubelik, but everyone who loves this opera should know Schorr's Sachs, even if only via excerpts.

Arturo Toscanini – 1937 (live; mono) Eklipse; Andante
Orchestra - Wiener Philharmoniker
Chorus - Wiener Staatsoper

Hans Sachs - Hans Hermann Nissen
Veit Pogner - Herbert Alsen
Sixtus Beckmesser - Hermann Wiedemann
Fritz Kothner - Viktor Madin
Walther von Stolzing - Henk Noort
David - Richard Sallaba
Eva - Maria Reining
Magdalena - Kerstin Thorborg
Nachtwächter - Carl Bissuti
Kunz Vogelgesang - Georg Maikl
Konrad Nachtigall - Rolf Telasko
Ulrich Eisslinger - Ekkerhard Fritsch
Balthasar Zorn - Anton Dermota
Augustin Moser - Hermann Gallos
Hermann Ortel - Alfred Muzzarelli
Hans Schwarz - Carl Bissuti
Hans Foltz - Karl Ettl

It would hardly be fair to give this recording a ringing endorsement given the inevitably relatively primitive sound quality, but the Andante label issue in particular convinces the listener that this is more than a vintage buff's delight, as quite often the sound approaches something you'd expect to hear from the post-war mono stable rather than 1937 - and live, to boot. Yes, there are drop-outs and rough spots with interference and some prominent swishing at the end of Act 2, but in general, and making allowance for the undue prominence given the brass (presumably the result of the microphone placement), this remains very listenable.

Furthermore, it is one of only three complete opera recordings by Toscanini at Salzburg, and the last before he departed in protest never to return; the Anschluss was only a year later and Toscanini made a new life in the USA. The singing ranges from very fine to averagely good but the glory of this performance is the rhythmic tautness and propulsion of Toscanini's conducting; the music is always going somewhere, and the flexibility and clarity of his direction mean that longueurs are eschewed. This is a comparatively fast but never frenetic account.

The best singing comes from Hans Hermann Nissen, whose rich, sonorous bass-baritone rides the long lines effortlessly. He is expressive without having quite the individuality of the most famous exponents of this role; the same is true of several singers here, who are accomplished but a tad anonymous. Reining is pure and winning but not especially memorable; Noort has rather a light timbre for Walther but all the notes and the stamina to sing them; Thorborg is warm and apt, with a proper trill and plenty of presence; the David avoids the usual whine and sings accurately with an old-fashioned fast vibrato; Alsen is a big, bluff, weighty Pogner with some snatched top notes but a paternal manner; the chorus is necessarily a bit distant but very lively; everyone seems swept along by Toscanini's famously infectious and inspirational musicality. The seminal quintet is very satisfying: Toscanini relaxes completely to let the music breathe; Reining dominates the balance, soaring aloft, but the individual vocal lines may all be heard despite some "aural mush" from a bit of overload.

Karl Böhm – 1938 (NB: ACT 3 only; studio; mono) Pearl; Preiser; Malibran; Profil
Orchestra - Sächsische Staatskapelle
Chorus - Chor der Dresdener Staatsoper

Hans Sachs - Hans Hermann Nissen
Veit Pogner - Sven Nilsson
Sixtus Beckmesser - Eugen Fuchs
Fritz Kothner - Arno Schellenberg
Walther von Stolzing - Torsten Ralf
David - Martin Kremer
Eva - Margarete Teschenmacher
Magdalena - Helene Jung
Kunz Vogelgesang - Rudolf Dittrich
Konrad Nachtigall - Robert Büssel
Ulrich Eisslinger - Klaus Hermanns
Balthasar Zorn - Rudolf Schmalnauer
Augustin Moser - Hanns Lange
Hermann Ortel - Ludwig Eybisch
Hans Schwarz - Hermann Greiner
Hans Foltz - Serge Smirnoff

This is simply the best and greatest cast in *Die Meistersinger* that you could possibly ever hope to encounter, a feat made all the more astonishing by the clarity of the 1938 sound, almost devoid of hiss, and mercifully free from excessive blare or distortion for such a venerable recording.

If I say that the great bass-baritone Hans Hermann Nissen reminds me most of Thomas Stewart as Hans Sachs, I mean that as the highest compliment: he combines a credibly youthful tone with a wise, genial and avuncular manner sufficient to suggest wisdom and maturity without turning him into an old buffer. Good Lord, he even has a trill in his armoury - the rarest feat amongst singers of Sachs. The voice is intrinsically beautiful and he lives every word he sings; this is Sachs incarnate, rivalled in that era only by Friedrich Schorr and Paul Schöffler at their best.

Everybody else in the cast is perfect: the David is a likeable young man, not a boring whiner. Pogner is sung by the great Sven Nilsson (distant relation of Birgit), Beckmesser is pompous but sympathetic and unexaggerated, Margarete Teschemacher and Torsten Ralf (who both sang in the premiere of Strauss's *Daphne* in that same year) make ideal lovers, she vibrant and girlish with her big, pure, open lirico-spinto soprano and he credibly virile and impulsive, but sweet, too, the silver gleam in his elegant but powerful tenor sometimes reminiscent of fellow-Swede Jussi Björling.

Sample the famous quintet: it goes like a dream, generating those tell-tale goose-bumps all true aficionados experience and similar in impact to the celebrated recording with Melchior, Schorr, Schumann et al under Barbirolli. The finale is simply stupendous, the chorus raucous and rumbustious, having a high old time, and the Festival trumpets blaring joyously.

Böhm has a wonderful feel for the ebb and flow of this music, keeping it all together without imposing any brake on his artists' spontaneity and the orchestral playing is first class. Perfect with one caveat: you must be able to tolerate good but historical sound. Sadly, this is only Act 3, however.

Wilhelm Furtwängler – 1943 (live; mono) Walhall; Arkadia; Music & Arts
Orchestra - Bayreuth Festival
Chorus - Bayreuth Festival

Hans Sachs - Jaro Prohaska
Veit Pogner - Josef Greindl
Sixtus Beckmesser - Eugen Fuchs
Fritz Kothner - Fritz Krenn
Walther von Stolzing - Max Lorenz
David - Erich Zimmermann
Eva - Maria Müller
Magdalena - Camilla Kallab
Nachtwächter - Erich Pina
Kunz Vogelgesang - Benno Arnold
Konrad Nachtigall - Helmut Fehn
Ulrich Eisslinger - Gustav Rödin
Balthasar Zorn - Gerhard Witting
Augustin Moser - Karl Krollmann
Hermann Ortel - Herbert Gosebruch
Hans Schwarz - Franz Sauer
Hans Foltz - Alfred Dome

This is not in fact complete: the exchange between Walther and Eva in church in Act 1 is missing, as is the climax of Act 3 including – horrors! – the quintet. Presumably tapes went AWOL and none was available from any other Bayreuth performance. The sound is rough with some drop-outs and only Maria Müller is really good. Lorenz sounds tired and effortful; both his soft singing and legato are poor. He tends to have two gears: loud and shouty, soft and unsupported. Several other singers sound superannuated. Greindl is in powerful, youthful voice but is sometimes unsteady and sings at an unremitting forte. Prohaska barks and bleats, and, like Greindl, is often wobbly, even though he is very expressive. Furtwängler's genius melds it all into a wonderful performance but it cannot be a first recommendation for obvious reasons.

Karl Böhm – 1944 (live radio broadcast composite; mono) Preisler; Arkadia; Cantus Classics
Orchestra - Wiener Philharmoniker
Chorus - Wiener Staatsoper

Hans Sachs - Paul Schöffler
Veit Pogner - Herbert Alsen
Sixtus Beckmesser - Erich Kunz
Walther von Stolzing - August Seider
David - Peter Klein
Eva - Irmgard Seefried
Magdalena - Else Schürnoff
Nachtwächter - Viktor Madin
Kunz Vogelgesang - Anton Dermota
Konrad Nachtigall - Viktor Madin
Ulrich Eisslinger - Josef Witt
Balthasar Zorn - Georg Maikl
Augustin Moser - William Wernigk
Hermann Ortel - Alfred Muzzarelli
Hans Schwarz - Alfred Jerger
Hans Foltz - Marjan Rus

It might be a bit over-enthusiastic to wax lyrical over a 1944 recording but wait until you hear it: it was recorded on the cunning German invention of metal tape and sounds every bit as good - if not better - as early mono recordings of quality from the 1950's. So good, in fact, that the coughing throughout the Prelude to Act II is faithfully reproduced; otherwise, you will hear the cream of Wagnerian voices from that era giving an entirely satisfying account of a great masterwork. I do not propose to enter into the moral minefield of whether we can listen with pleasure to a composite radio performance made during the twilight period of the Third Reich, especially one which concludes with Sachs' peroration upon the supremacy of German Art; all I will say is that from an aesthetic point of view it is entirely idiomatic and laudable.

We already know from his superlative 1968 live recording on Orfeo that Böhm always had the measure of this score. This is a superb *Meistersinger*, cast in depth, and were it not for the rather strenuous and even occasionally ugly-toned August Seider as Walther, I would rate it as close to perfect. Seider isn't bad; he has a powerful Heldentenor but his vibrato sometimes borders upon a bleat, he doesn't really sound young enough to pass as the young knight, and he is not especially sweet-toned or integrated into what is otherwise a beautiful quintet - always my first touchstone for assessing this opera. Irmgard Seefried, girlish and charming throughout. launches into it in a very delicate and poised manner, guided by Böhm's very steady and moderate tempo.

Otherwise, the casting is perfect, as long as you like a more mature Sachs. Schöffler is resonant and characterful; his bass-baritone has a warm "buzz" to it and he fulfils everyone's idea of Sachs as a wise uncle. He falters slightly on his concluding top E in "Hab Acht" but is otherwise strong to the end and consistently in finest voice; his "Was duftet doch der Flieder" is a masterclass of detail and lyricism. He is matched by the great Herbert Alsen as Pogner, whose steady, powerful bass is as grainy as old oak. Erich Kunz makes for a surprisingly subtle Beckmesser and has an intrinsically beautiful voice to boot - always a help considering how much music Wagner actually devotes to that part. It is always a pleasure to hear an attractively-voiced Magdalena who is not too matronly and the David is no whiner but a light-voiced tenor of considerable agility.

The clarity of everyone's diction is exemplary and the playing of the VPO is energised and vibrant. You may hear their virtuosity from the very start of the overture and the moment when the chorus breaks in with their unusually leisurely yet dignified hymn, is exquisitely judged. Voices are rather forward, yet the sound is so detailed that the listener may hear pages in the score being turned.

NB: owing to there being a section missing from the original recording, music from the beginning of Act III to "Grüss Got, mein Junker" has been spliced in from the Abendroth performance at Bayreuth in 1943 to fill the gap.

Hans Knappertsbusch - 1950-51 (studio; mono) Decca; Cantus Classis; Naxos
Orchestra - Wiener Philharmoniker
Chorus - Wiener Staatsoper

Hans Sachs - Paul Schöffler
Veit Pogner - Otto Edelmann
Sixtus Beckmesser - Karl Dönch
Fritz Kothner - Alfred Poell
Walther von Stolzing - Günther Treptow
David - Anton Dermota
Eva - Hilde Güden
Magdalena - Else Schürnoff
Nachtwächter - Harald Pröglhoff
Kunz Vogelgesang - Hugo Meyer-Welfing
Konrad Nachtigall - Wilhelm Felden

Ulrich Eisslinger - William Wernick
Balthasar Zorn - Erich Majkut
Augustin Moser - Hermann Gallos
Hermann Ortel - Harald Pröglhoff
Hans Schwarz - Franz Bierbach
Hans Foltz - Ljubomir Pantscheff

My MusicWeb colleague Göran Forsling glowingly reviewed this recording in its Naxos incarnation, and I can happily endorse his encomium for this most life-affirming of Wagner's – or indeed anybody's – operas.

The mono sound is very acceptable, despite a bit of hiss and pre-echo. Paul Schöffler, is the Sachs in this 1950-51 studio recording conducted by Hans Knappertsbusch – the first ever made – and must surely be counted among the greatest interpreters of that role. This recording is certainly preferable in sonic terms to his live 1952 Bayreuth performance and for many the earlier cast will have the edge, too. The same is true of Kna's live 1955 performance in Munich, which is less desirable despite the presence of Lisa Della Casa and Frantz, again in fine form.

With so many great singers and conductors turning their attention to this masterwork, it is hard to sift and rank them according to taste and merit; I for one simply revel in them all yet have my preferences, such as for a softer, more naturally sung David of the kind we are given by Anton Dermota here, rather than the hard, nasal – if still very characterful – portrayal by such as Gerhard Unger and Paul Kuen. I also prefer celebrated Tristan Günther Treptow as Walther to the brazen-voiced and ubiquitous Hans Hopf, even if Treptow's timbre is rather edgy; he has all the notes and does his best to sound the young, ardent lover - which is a stretch for him, despite his being only in his early forties at the time of recording. He is really good, however, in his last delivery of the Prize Song. Indeed, with a silvery, shimmering Hilde Güden and Edelmann this time singing Pogner, accompanied by a team of highly experienced Viennese regulars, Knappertsbusch's recording has in many ways a claim to offering the best cast of all, especially when the relaxed flexibility of the conductor's beat and the virtuosity of the VPO are counted in the mix. Edelmann's noble bass is perhaps ultimately better suited to Pogner than Sachs and Harald Pröglhoff doubles as Hermann Ortel and the Nightwatchman; his clean bass is lighter than I would prefer for the latter but he sings beautifully.

Perhaps it is a rather crude approach, but I am fond of using the famous quintet as a means of discriminating between recordings, simply because this sublime ensemble lies at the heart of the music and is inevitably a highlight. Certainly it is beautifully sung and paced here, but the voices do not blend as seamlessly as the very best: Gueden is a little "keck" compared with purer-voiced sopranos such as Della Casa and Grümmer, Treptow a tad harsh of tone and the strings rather piercing.

Otherwise, Treptow is, as I say above, generally fine if rather mature, as is the Magdalena, fruity contralto Else Schürhoff. Schöffler is warm, avuncular and very expressive in his monologues and his top E and F are still intact if not exactly full and fresh. His duets with Güden's pure, piping Eva are a joy. I do not necessarily prefer him to Frantz or Nissen, and Schorr in his prime remains supreme, but his assumption of the role remains treasurable. Karl Dönch's musical Beckmesser makes a welcome change from the mugging and exaggeration all too common among interpreters who lack confidence in Wagner's capacity to convey his absurdity in purely musical terms.

Knappertsbusch's conducting is wonderful: energised, pointed and sprung – not a hint of lethargy. The climax of the opera really delivers a punch, as it should, and both the orchestral playing and choral singing are really tight and homogeneous. The impact of the riotous conclusion to Act 2 might be somewhat compromised by the narrow mono sound but is otherwise enormous fun, while the Prelude to Act 3 is as tender as one could wish.

Rudolf Kempe – 1951 (radio broadcast; mono) Gebhardt; Profil
Orchestra - Dresdner Staatskapelle
Chorus - Sächsische Staatsoper

Hans Sachs - Ferdinand Frantz
Veit Pogner - Kurt Böhme
Sixtus Beckmesser - Heinrich Pflanzl
Fritz Kothner - Karl Paul
Walther von Stolzing - Bernd Aldenhoff
David - Gerhard Unger
Eva - Tiana Lemnitz
Magdalena - Emilie Walter-Sacks
Nachtwächter - Werner Faulhaber
Kunz Vogelgesang - Johannes Kemter
Konrad Nachtigall - Kurt Legner
Ulrich Eisslinger - Heinrich Tessmer
Balthasar Zorn - Karl-Heinz Thomann
Augustin Moser - Gerhard Stolze
Hermann Ortel - Theo Adam
Hans Schwarz - Erich Handel
Hans Foltz - Werner Faulhaber

This earlier radio broadcast from Dresden by Kempe has understandably been over-shadowed by his Berlin recording but it has an impressive cast. Despite its echoing acoustic, the sound of the Gebhardt issue is tolerable for its provenance and era, but avoid that, and go for the immeasurably superior Profil version, which has the voices far closer and the sound much fuller, even if the orchestra is still very recessed. Frantz is in firm, youthful, indeed sovereign voice, sounding virile and plausible as Sachs; I like the bronze edge to his bass-baritone and his top notes are more secure than in the later recording. The authority of his monologues and sweep of his final address reminds me what a fine Wotan he made for Moralt, Furtwängler and Stiedry before his untimely death. Lemnitz, sounds fairly fresh despite being in her mid-fifties, with a gift for pathos, although top notes can turn sour and there are cloudy patches in the middle of the voice. Heldentenor Bernd Aldenhoff's voice is in fine shape, despite a bit of bleat; he is inclined to over-sing and force but it's a healthy instrument. Gerhard Unger gives us his familiar, David; he is boyish and appealing. Kempe is of course sensitive, flexible and very supportive of his singers; co-ordination is excellent.

Somewhat distant mono is never ideal for this opera and the later recording is preferable in that it still has Frantz but in studio sound, now expertly reprocessed by Pristine Audio, and a young Elisabeth Grümmer is preferable to a mature Lemnitz, but this is still a satisfying account.

Herbert von Karajan – 1951 (live composite; mono) EMI; Myto; Naxos; Membran
Orchestra - Bayreuth Festival
Chorus - Bayreuth Festival

Hans Sachs - Otto Edelmann
Veit Pogner - Frederick (Friedrich) Dalberg
Sixtus Beckmesser - Erich Kunz
Fritz Kothner - Heinrich Pflanzl
Walther von Stolzing - Hans Hopf
David - Gerhard Unger
Eva - Elisabeth Schwarzkopf
Magdalena - Ira Malaniuk
Nachtwächter - Werner Faulhaber

Kunz Vogelgesang - Erich Majkut
 Konrad Nachtigall - Hans Berg
 Ulrich Eisslinger - Karl Mikorey
 Balthasar Zorn - Josef Janko
 Augustin Moser - Gerhard Stolze
 Hermann Ortel - Heinz Tandler
 Hans Schwarz - Heinz Borst
 Hans Foltz - Arnold Van Mill

This 1951 live composite recording has always been compared, perfectly reasonably, with the recording from the same year conducted by Kempe and that conductor's studio recording from 1956. They all represent the best of German singing, revived at Bayreuth after the hiatus of the Second World War and to my ears both, despite certain differences, are equally recommendable.

Both Karajan and Kempe were masters of the pacing of Wagner's operas; their tempos and phrasing are virtually always ideal and they had a roster of superb Wagnerians from which to cast this most genial and lovable of Wagner's operas. Neither is ideal but both remain highly recommendable: both Ferdinand Frantz and Otto Edelmann were bass-baritones of the highest quality, the former having rather more nobility of tone and more experience in word-painting, the latter, in his first essay of a role which he went on to sing worldwide for a decade and more, is easier in the top notes - often a weakness in even very celebrated singers of Sachs such as Schorr and Schoeffler - and always exuding warmth and charm. He has a rich, steady, flexible voice capable of a range of colours and despite a few hesitant entries, forgivable in a singer essaying this role for the first time, and one big mistake, this is already a fully rounded assumption.

Hans Hopf is a stentorian, unimaginative singer with inexhaustible reserves of heroic tone and the ability to sustain the murderous tessitura of the role. His top A's are the sound a true Heldentenor makes and he is intermittently splendid, already engaging the listener's attention with his first big test in "Fanget an!" Schock is more poetic for Kempe, having the notes but not quite the size of voice the role of Walther demands.

Taste will always remain divided over Schwarzkopf's Eva as to whether her tone is tremulous or shimmering and whether she is highly intelligent in her inflection of the text or arch and coy. I must say that as a not-unswerving fan I think she does the role proud here and I enjoy her contribution; she certainly passes the poise test in the great quintet which is simply heavenly, even if I still prefer the purity of Janowitz or Grümmer. Celebrated character tenors Unger and Stolze excel in two roles for which they were both renowned, even if I like a "straighter" tenor voice with a more ingratiating tone as David. I find the two basses who sing the two supporting bass roles of Pogner and Kothner to be a bit lumpen and inelegant compared with the very best like Moll or Ridderbusch but they'll do fine. Erich Kunz's Beckmesser is more sung than gayed without sacrificing the comedy and even the pathos of that absurd man.

The finale really packs a punch and the audience respond ecstatically; the supposedly icy Karajan surprisingly was often at his best in comic operas (in truth he had a sharp sense of humour - think of the success of his recordings of *Così fan tutte*, *Falstaff* and *Der Rosenkavalier*).

If you get this in the Naxos remastering you will hear warm, slightly muffled, bass-heavy sound with the pitch anomalies and clunking edits and joins ironed out, but some of the distortion at climaxes cannot be spirited away. That's not much of a bar to enjoyment, however. That edition has notes, brief biographies and a summary provided Tully Potter, who takes an unwarranted swipe at Karajan but is otherwise most helpful and informative. Other labels have retained more treble in the remastering but the editing and pitch issues are not addressed. It would be good if Pristine got to remaster this recording just as they have revitalised the Kempe studio version.

Hans Knappertsbusch – 1952 (live; mono) Music & Ars; Golden Melodram; Cantus Classics; Archipel
Orchestra - Bayreuth Festival
Chorus - Bayreuth Festival

Hans Sachs - Otto Edelmann
Veit Pogner - Kurt Böhme
Sixtus Beckmesser - Heinrich Pflanzl
Fritz Kothner - Werner Faulhaber
Walther von Stolzing - Hans Hopf
David - Gerhard Unger
Eva - Lisa Della Casa
Magdalena - Ira Malaniuk
Nachtwächter - Gustav Neidlinger
Kunz Vogelgesang - Karl Terkal
Konrad Nachtigall - Walter Stoll
Ulrich Eisslinger - Karl Mikorey
Balthasar Zorn - Josef Janko
Augustin Moser - Gerhard Stolze
Hermann Ortel - Theo Adam
Hans Schwarz - Heinz Borst
Hans Foltz - Max Kohl

You may rest assured that Kna's direction is flawlessly paced and the orchestral playing testimony to the speed with which post-war Bayreuth got back on track. The sound is no better than it should be: distant, acceptable mono which can get a bit tiring on the ear and obscures detail - the famous quintet, although beautifully sung, is a particular casualty of this remoteness - but it's all perfectly congenial to the more experienced ear tolerant of historical recordings.

Otto Edelmann here graduates to the role of Hans Sachs from Pogner in Kna's studio recording the previous year. His smooth, resonant bass acts as balm to the ear in comparison with the rather coarse and lumpen Pogner which Kurt Böhme gives us. His top notes seem to inhabit a different tonal milieu than the rest of his voice but he is resonant and expressive; his monologues are a highlight and do not outstay their welcome as can sometimes be the case. Hans Hopf as usual sounds better than I remember him; despite a certain reliance upon his default mode of wooden, stentorian dependability, he sings tenderly in the quintet and is more than serviceable with his even, tireless tone and reliable top notes. The two principal female roles are superb; Della Casa and Malaniuk were already tried and tested as thoroughly capable Wagnerians, despite the apparent delicacy and fragility of the former's essential vocal make-up. Della Casa is especially touching in her long duet with Edelmann; they make a lovely, subtle pair. Gerhard Unger's whining tone can grate but he is a very characterful David, a role in which he specialised. The Beckmesser is of the usual caricatured type and rather wearing in its relentlessly hearty guying but that was the norm then. The casting of secondary roles is mediocre but Gustav Neidlinger makes a lovely Nightwatchman.

This isn't anyone's dream performance but remains very satisfying if the dim sound is no barrier.

Hans Knappertsbusch – 1955 (live; mono) Orfeo
Orchestra - Bayerische Staatsoper
Chorus - Bayerische Staatsoper

Hans Sachs - Ferdinand Frantz
Veit Pogner - Gottlob Frick
Sixtus Beckmesser - Heinrich Pflanzl

Fritz Kothner - Albrecht Peter
 Walther von Stolzing - Hans Hopf
 David - Paul Kuen
 Eva - Lisa Della Casa
 Magdalena - Herta Töpper
 Nachtwächter - Willy Schmitz
 Kunz Vogelgesang - Franz Klarwein
 Konrad Nachtigall - Carl Hoppe
 Ulrich Eisslinger - Emil Graf
 Balthasar Zorn - John Kuhn
 Augustin Moser - Karl Ostertag
 Hermann Ortel - Adolf Keil
 Hans Schwarz - Walter Bracht
 Hans Foltz - Rudolf Wünzer

This is in fact in exceptionally good mono sound for its era, free of distortion with voices and orchestra in balance, the only minor irritation being an occasionally prominent prompter. Anything and everything conducted by Knappertsbusch at Bayreuth or in Munich in the 1950's is worthy of serious consideration, and while this might not be anyone's ideal performance it certainly affords many pleasures, not least the Eva of Lisa della Casa, whose purity of voice and pathos of utterance places her alongside the best exponents of the role such as Gundula Janowitz and Elisabeth Grümmer. She is just occasionally a little tremulous of tone but in general her performance is a joy; she soars effortlessly in the famous quintet, the crucial Act II exchange with Ferdinand Frantz's wise Sachs is charmingly handled and she is radiant in "O Sachs! Mein Freund!" Frantz, despite a few effortful top notes, is a noble, generous-voiced Sachs, especially convincing in his big "Wahn!" monologue - and we can forgive him a few strained top notes when even the greatest exponent of that role, Paul Schöffler, sometimes had that problem, too.

The other great virtue is the exuberance and Schwung of Kna's conducting, directing a very accomplished Bavarian orchestra and chorus. He goes off like a rocket in the overture but soon settles down to preside over a moderately paced, but never slack, four and a half hours. He immediately establishes a telling contrast in mood between that rambunctious overture and the austere Lutheran hymn which breaks in upon it. The ensemble work is really lusty and energised, creating an appropriate sense of festivity and fun. What a pity that the terrific climax to Act II is ruined by the weediest-voiced Night-Watchman I have ever heard!

The other star name in the cast apart from Frantz and Della Casa is Gottlob Frick, of a similarly sturdy timbre to Frantz but one never suited to the role of Sachs which is for a bass-baritone - which Frick never was. He makes a lovely Pogner, in the mode of his great successor Kurt Mol, who would also never have attempted Sachs.

More dubious casting issues arise with the assumption of the role of Walter by the baritonal, bronze-voiced Heldentenor Hans Hopf, who is seemingly unable to soften, colour or dynamically vary his sturdy tone regardless of what he's singing. He's not so bad insofar as he has the notes and stamina, and despite the small bleats and breaks in his vocal production, he actually makes quite a nice job of both "Fanget an!" and "Morgenlicht leuchtend" but his vibrato is intermittently obtrusive. Paul Kuen, a famous Mime, is rather harsh voiced but characterful as David and his Magdalena is a bit matronly. The Beckmesser is musical and unexaggerated but like Hopf sometimes has an unfortunate wobble in his vibrato.

For me, a recording of *Die Meistersinger* must pass the "quintet test". Nothing matches Barbirolli's famous recording except perhaps Kubelik's; here, Frantz's quasi-recitative to that set piece is rather rough, rocky and lacking legato but he quickly finds steadiness to match Della Casa's ease of tonal

emission. Kuen's harsh tone doesn't blend but Hopf sings tastefully here - indeed he is too reticent for once. Overall, this is a thoroughly enjoyable, if imperfect, account.

Rudolf Kempe – 1956 (studio; mono) EMI; Pristine Audio XR remastering

Orchestra - Berliner Philharmoniker

Chorus - Städtische Oper Berlin - Staatsoper Berlin - St. Hedwigs Kathedrale Berlin

Hans Sachs - Ferdinand Frantz

Veit Pogner - Gottlob Frick

Sixtus Beckmesser - Benno Kusche

Fritz Kothner - Gustav Neidlinger

Walther von Stolzing - Rudolf Schock

David - Gerhard Unger

Eva - Elisabeth Grümmer

Magdalena - Marga Höffgen

Nachwächter - Hermann Prey

Kunz Vogelgesang - Horst Wilhelm

Konrad Nachtigall - Walter Stoll

Ulrich Eisslinger - Leopold Clam

Balthasar Zorn - Manfred Schmidt

Augustin Moser - Herold Kraus

Hermann Ortel - Robert Koffmane

Hans Schwarz - Anton Metternich

Hans Foltz - Hanns Pick

NB: this review is based upon listening to the re-mastering in Ambient Stereo by Pristine.

...not that even the original mono sound is by any means bad; it merely means that one may listen in greater detail with increased enjoyment as a result of the Pristine treatment, which is by no means gimmicky but simply enhances what was always there.

I have long been a fan of Ferdinand Frantz's dark, burnished bass-baritone and he is one of those Sachs who really bring out the man's warmth and humour as well as his authority. As is so often the case with this very demanding role, he has moments of unsteadiness and occasionally strains a little on top notes - that was Schöffler's Achilles' heel, too - but it matters little when the performance as a whole is so winning, human and humane. I have also found cause to re-assess Schock's Walther von Stolzing: it really is very competent and there is very little to complain about when a tenor can maintain a beautiful tone and good legato while singing such demanding music. It goes without saying that Grümmer is one of the great Evas, up there with Rethberg, Janowitz and Della Casa and amongst the supporting cast we have great singers like Frick and Neidlinger. For once, Marga Höffgen's Magdalena is not too matronly but a believable fiancée for David, who is sung with great verve and spirit by Unger in what is for many a definitive, if slightly harsh-voiced, characterisation. I am not so keen on Benno Kusche's typically caricatured Beckmesser; this is old-school hamming and we are perhaps now habituated to a subtler - and in fact funnier - Town Clerk of the kind Johannes Martin Kränzle gave us at Glyndebourne - but it will do.

Kempe can be just a little too soft-grained in Wagner but both Lohengrin and this opera suit his gifts for bringing out the warmth and joy of those scores and he judges everything here perfectly; nothing lingers or drags yet the big moments have great import and dignity. The playing of the BPO is a dream, only made more apparent by the increase depth, breadth and clarity of Pristine's sound. The crucial high-point of the opera, the sublime quintet in Act III, soars rapturously as it should, by virtue of the poise and shimmer of Grümmer silvery tone, the affection of Kempe's phrasing, the steady gravity of

Frantz's baseline and good support from the other singers, who blend well. The climax is overwhelmingly moving, an essential shivers-down-the spine moment.

This vintage account deserves a place amongst the top few recommendations.

André Cluytens – 1957 (live; mono) Walhall; Melodram

Orchestra - Bayreuth Festival

Chorus - Bayreuth Festival

Hans Sachs - Gustav Neidlinger

Veit Pagner - Josef Greindl

Sixtus Beckmesser - Karl Schmitt-Walter

Fritz Kothner - Toni Blankenheim

Walther von Stolzing - Walter Geisler

David - Gerhard Stolze

Eva - Elisabeth Grümmer

Magdalena - Georgine von Milinkovic

Nachwächter - Arnold Van Mill

Kunz Vogelgesang - Fritz Uhl

Konrad Nachtigall - Egmont Koch

Ulrich Eisslinger - Erich Benke

Balthasar Zorn - Heinz-Günter Zimmermann

Augustin Moser - Hermann Winkler

Hermann Ortel - Hans Habietinek

Hans Schwarz - Alexander Fenyves

Hans Foltz - Eugen Fuchs

The great and under-rated André Cluytens conducted this work three years running and this is the middle one of the three with what I suspect is the best cast. It has good, clean mono sound, an excellent chorus and orchestra and casting in depth with many Bayreuth regulars including luxuries such as Arnold van Mill as a superb Nightwatchman and one of the most appealing in an age of great Evas, Elisabeth Grümmer, charming and spirited as the heroine.

There are perhaps two surprises here: a warm, genial, if slightly stretched Gustav Neidlinger as Hans Sachs. His essential sound is rather hard and he yells a bit in Act 3 but is mostly very appealing in a role hardly associated with this arch-portrayer of malevolence. The other is the virtually forgotten Walter Geisler as Walther von Stolzing: firm, virile and tireless if at times a little ungainly and stentorian, in the mode of his contemporary Hans Hopf but with rather more sensitivity and a more appealing tone. He is stretched by his Act 1 showpiece, "Fanget an" but rises bravely to "Morgenlicht leuchte" in Act 3. A fruity Magdalena and a cavernous-voiced Josef Greindl as Pagner make this a very characterful performance, even if the latter is almost too imposing in his vocal massiveness. I have to put up with hard, nasal tone of the standard David of that era, Gerhard Stolze, who alternated the role with Gerhard Unger and wholly inhabited the character. The Beckmesser is amusing and not too caricatured; the riotous conclusion to Act 2 is sheer joy. This performance also passes the crucial quintet test; it is sublime, the voices beautifully balanced and soaring sweetly, with Geisler sounding especially fine there.

Rafael Kubelik – 1967 (live radio broadcast; stereo) Arts Archives; Calig; Myto

Orchestra - Symphonieorchester des Bayerischen Rundfunks

Chorus - Chor des Bayerischen Rundfunks

Hans Sachs - Thomas Stewart

Veit Pagner - Franz Crass

Sixtus Beckmesser - Thomas Hemsley
 Fritz Kothner - Keith Engen
 Walther von Stolzing - Sándor Kónya
 David - Gerhard Unger
 Eva - Gundula Janowitz
 Magdalena - Brigitte Fassbaender
 Nachtwächter - Raimund Grumbach
 Kunz Vogelgesang - Horst Wilhelm
 Konrad Nachtigall - Richard Kogel
 Ulrich Eisslinger - Friedrich Lenz
 Balthasar Zorn - Manfred Schmidt
 Augustin Moser - Peter Baillie
 Hermann Ortel - Anton Diakov
 Hans Schwarz - Karl Christian Kohn
 Hans Foltz - Dieter Slembek

I made a point recently of listening to four versions of the sublime quintet in Act Three, as I find that this acts as a kind of touchstone for the whole performance; it has to be right or nothing else falls into place quite as it should. Two came out way in front: the famous and venerable 1931 recording conducted by Barbirolli with Schorr, Schumann and Melchior - just one of a selection of excerpts in your standard "frying tonight" sound but with superlative voices - and the version from this complete set. So if you want a complete *Meistersinger*, look no further; this recording is far superior to the Solti or the Sawallisch, good as they both are. Kubelik was a kind of magician; his Mahler, his Dvorak and his Wagner (among many others) are peerless. Nobody can touch Stewart or Janowitz in the lead roles of Sachs and Eva; his rich, humane voice is alive to every nuance of the text and she soars like an angel. Konya is as good as Heppner in the Sawallisch and Solti sets and the recorded sound is extraordinarily full, clear and balanced; amazing for a studio radio broadcast. Neither Studer nor Mattila has Janowitz's poise and purity of tone; Weikl is already sounding bleaty in the Sawallisch and Van Dam left it too late; his beautiful voice has lost some of its sheen and is beginning to sound grey and underpowered. No, once you've ruled out the Jochum set, with Fischer Dieskau hopelessly overparted, barking his way through the role of Sachs, and Domingo singing beautifully but mangling the German (it got much better later), this is the one to buy, in the newer, mid-price Calig edition.

Karl Böhm – 1968 (live; stereo) Orfeo
 Orchestra - Bayreuth Festival
 Chorus - Bayreuth Festival

Hans Sachs - Theo Adam
 Veit Pogner - Karl Ridderbusch
 Sixtus Beckmesser - Thomas Hemsley
 Fritz Kothner - Gerd Nienstedt
 Walther von Stolzing - Waldemar Kmentt
 David - Hermin Esser
 Eva - Gwyneth Jones
 Magdalena - Janis Martin
 Nachtwächter - Kurt Moll
 Kunz Vogelgesang - Sebastian Feiersinger
 Konrad Nachtigall - Dieter Slembek
 Ulrich Eisslinger - Erich Klaus
 Balthasar Zorn - Günther Treptow
 Augustin Moser - William Johns
 Hermann Ortel - Heinz Feldhoff
 Hans Schwarz - Fritz Linke

Hans Foltz - Hans Franzen

There are several surprises in store for you in this recording. First the sound is terrific: full, very slightly peaky stereo as if you had a stalls seat with a minimum of audience noise and the only distraction being the sound of heavy-footfalls when the apprentices are cavorting or the townsfolk are dancing in the last scene.

Secondly, none of the principal voices is quite what you might expect, either from the point of view of previous knowledge of them as singers or regarding their suitability to their roles. Instead of the usual weedy-voiced David, we have the fairly hefty-voiced Hermin Esser, who was a dreadful Erik in Böhm's studio *Der Fliegende Holländer* but gives us here a more virile and assertive character than normal, despite some unwieldy moments. Conversely, Waldemar Kmentt gives us a lighter Walther than we are accustomed to, somewhat lacking in the requisite cutting-power at the climaxes of his "Morgenlich" stanzas and audibly over-stretched in the final scene but nonetheless very musical and with enough stamina to avoid bawling. Continuing the theme of voice-type reversals, we hear a young dramatic soprano Gwyneth Jones as a much larger-voiced Eva than normal, a little gusty and over-vibrant at times but able to fine down her voice for the celebrated quintet and very passionate in her portrayal of a spirited young woman, especially credible in "O Sachs! Mein Freund". Magdalena, however, is not the usual fruity matron but another young woman, appealing sung by Janis Martin as a suitable companion to Eva and match for David.

Casting is otherwise more conventional with Ridderbusch as a noble Pogner, Kurt Moll luxury casting as the Night-watchman and Bayreuth stalwarts such as Gerd Nienstedt (eternally associated with Donner) and onetime eminent Tristan Günther Treptow among the Mastersingers. Thomas Hemsley repeats his famous portrayal of Beckmesser as a fussy, pedantic gasbag and does so without over-playing him or making heavy weather of what is, after all, a big sing despite being a comic, satirical turn. The chorus trained by Wilhelm Pitz is superlative and the orchestral playing beautiful with very few blips. The central role of Hans Sachs is taken by Theo Adam who here far surpasses his assumption for Karajan, often considered the serious flaw in that set. His was never the ideal bass-baritone for Sachs in that he always lacked the sonority of the greatest exponents of the role such as Norman Bailey and Thomas Stewart but for a singer who later, and not unjustly, gained the sobriquet "Mr Wobble", he keeps that tendency under control (apart from some brief lapses such as at the beginning of his "Wahn!" monologue) and delivers a warm, wise characterisation with a chuckle in the voice and a glint in his eye.

Finally, Böhm's conducting is deeply satisfying: never rushed as his *Ring* and, occasionally, *Tristan*, are; everything is beautifully paced and very natural, minimising the longueurs inherent in David's Music Rules narrative and bringing out the rich humanity of the work. Crucial passages such as the Prelude to Act III and the quintet are perfectly judged and for quality I place this with his best Strauss recordings.

I have reservations because Kmentt is not Heppner, Jones isn't Janowitz and Adam isn't Stewart but this is more than the sum of its parts and that rare thing of the kind I saw at Glyndebourne, even with an indifferent pair of lovers: a performance to convince you afresh that Wagner wrote by far the most complete, absorbing and inspired music dramas ever penned by a composer.

Reginald Goodall – February 1968 (live radio broadcast; stereo) Chandos
Orchestra - Sadler's Wells Opera
Chorus - Sadler's Wells Opera

Hans Sachs - Norman Bailey
Veit Pogner - Noel Mangin
Sixtus Beckmesser - Derek Hammond-Stroud

Fritz Kothner - David Bowman
 Walther von Stolzing - Alberto Remedios
 David - Gregory Dempsey
 Eva - Margaret Curphey
 Magdalena - Ann Robson
 Nachtwächter - Stafford Dean
 Kunz Vogelgesang - David Kane
 Konrad Nachtigall - Julian Moyle
 Ulrich Eisslinger - David Morton-Gray
 Balthasar Zorn - John Brecknock
 Augustin Moser - Louis Browne
 Hermann Ortel - James Singleton
 Hans Schwarz - Gerwyn Morgan
 Hans Foltz - Eric Stannard

Despite being stereo, the sound here is relatively poor but many of us are used to listening with pleasure to vintage recordings in far worse sound and I find little difficulty, especially on headphones, in following the English without the libretto, especially given the crystalline diction of Bailey, Dempsey et al. Furthermore, the singing, conducting and playing is of such a high order and I am so captivated by Goodall's pacing that I find consideration of mere sonics does not even enter my head.

I was already familiar with Gregory Dempsey's exemplary Mime in Goodall's English "Siegfried" but was still unprepared for the success he makes of David the apprentice, who is frankly often a real bore. Here Dempsey not only makes him sympathetic and interesting through his vivid characterisation, he also gives us much singing which is lovely as singing per se; he has a bright, clear, unforced tenor with ringing top notes - a voice which both matches contrasts ideally with Remedios's famous heroic timbre. All the male voices here are exemplary in their roles. Noel Mangin's beautifully fruity bass is perfect for Pogner; a previous reviewer rightly describes it as "old-fashioned", meaning it, I trust, as a compliment. Derek Hammond-Stroud's light baritone Beckmesser is amusingly inflected but unexaggerated and invariably sung rather than barked. Remedios and Dempsey I have already praised; both have never since been bettered, even if some like Ben Heppner might have been Remedios' equal and certain of their even predecessors have excelled them. I have always loved Norman Bailey's grainy, resonant bass-baritone; already experienced in singing the role in German, he seems utterly relaxed and apt singing in English as a genial, avuncular Sachs, brimful of old-fashioned wisdom and common sense. Stafford Dean is ideal as the Nightwatchman.

About the two ladies I am slightly less enthusiastic; Margaret Curphey is a little shrill and Ann Robson a tad wobbly. Neither is blessed with a major voice but they certainly do not let the side down. The chorus are lusty, in tune and very characterful, the orchestra remarkably at ease.

The miracle is Goodall's conducting. There is no hint of the extreme slowness for which he is (in)famous; in fact, I have never heard this opera unfold with such lightness, flexibility and spring; no longueurs, no dragging, just a perfect realisation of the Gesamtkunstwerk as Wagner would have dreamed of it - despite this most patriotic of his operas being sung in English (though Wagner would in any case most certainly have approved of its being sung in translation; he was clear about the importance of the text). Wagner works well in English compared with Verdi, because the rhythms and vocabulary of English and German are more similar given their common Anglo-Saxon roots; that is particularly evident in this very workable translation – and of course Wagner's musical idiom does not have the same rum-ti-tum rhythmic patterns as Verdi's earlier works.

The sublime quintet here is sung in a gentle, flowing andante which really lifts off in a way that not every performance can manage. Its poise and serenity represent a complete vindication of Goodall's

masterful way with the score; this is the only occasion I know of when it elicits the audience's spontaneous applause.

This being in English and in mediocre sound with stage noises, it might not perhaps be your only recording of this joyous, humane work but it remains a valuable and immensely enjoyable supplement; I would almost as soon listen to it as to any other version.

Herbert von Karajan – 1970 (studio; stereo) EMI

Orchestra - Dresdner Staatskapelle

Chorus - Dresdner Operchor - Leipziger Rundfunkchor

Hans Sachs - Theo Adam

Veit Pogner - Karl Ridderbusch

Sixtus Beckmesser - Geraint Evans

Fritz Kothner - Zoltán Kéléman

Walther von Stolzing - René Kollo

David - Peter Schreier

Eva - Helen Donath

Magdalena - Ruth Hesse

Nachtwächter - Kurt Moll

Kunz Vogelgesang - Eberhard Büchner

Konrad Nachtigall - Horst Lunow

Ulrich Eisslinger - Peter Bindzsus

Balthasar Zorn - Hans-Joachim Rotzsch

Augustin Moser - Horst Hiestermann

Hermann Ortel - Hermann Christian Polster

Hans Schwarz - Heinz Reeh

Hans Foltz - Siegfried Vogel

This celebrated recording is now nearly fifty years old but the sound holds up remarkably well: spacious, well balanced, rich, clear and full, without distortion - a model of analogue recording at its best, as are the playing of the Staatskapelle and the conducting of Karajan, who brings his customary ear for detail, sonority and sense of sweep to the proceedings; this is instrumentally peerless.

The singing offers some of the best casting available in 1970, given that it was an inviolable rule that any recording made in East Germany Dresden in that era had to feature favourite son, bass-baritone Theo Adam, bothersome wobble and all. He cannot hope to emulate the authority and beauty of tone of such as Thomas Stewart for Kubelik but at least he does not let the side down, being an otherwise sensitive and intelligent singer who can bring some of the gravitas of an experienced Wotan to his Sachs plus something of a twinkle. His tonal emission is not always, by any means, unsteady and the basic sound is attractive. Any Sachs who can carry the listener with him during the great peroration of the opera to German Art has conquered the part; Adam rises to the shameless nationalistic exaltation and exultation the sentiments demand and he is ably supported by a lusty Staatsoper Chorus, underpinned by terrific timpani.

In certain moods and depending on the state of his voice, I find myself irked by Kollo's dry tenor but the bleat is under control in these, his earlier glory years, and although he is no Heppner or Konya, he suggests youthful ardour without too much discolouring or forcing. The firm beauty of Karl Ridderbusch's bass as Pogner is a distinct advantage, while Helen Donath's pure, sweet, girlish soprano is very apt for Eva, with just about enough power and penetration to sustain her long lines. Her exchanges with Sachs are delightful, steering the right course between arch humour and some slight erotic frisson whereby the possibility of romantic interest between the widower Sachs and the marriageable girl still hovers in the background. Zoltan Kéléman makes a very characterful, positive

Fritz Kothner and there are a good few soon-to-be-famous names in the Dresden cast, including a thirty-two-year-old Kurt Moll as a typically sonorous Night Watchman. The acid-test of any *Meistersinger* is the serenity of the Act 3 quintet; Karajan and his singers certainly weave magic here.

On the debit side, Geraint Evans's Beckmesser is a clumsy, whining caricature of a role which may be both beautifully sung and remain very funny without resorting to the verbal equivalent of mugging. It was, however, how Beckmesser was usually sung before the advent of a subtler school of acting. Peter Schreier, *pace* the claims of one reviewer elsewhere, would hardly ever have made a suitable von Stolzing but as I have never liked his voice and have always found Wagner's David something of a bore with his over-written, etiolated role, I suppose I am pre-disposed to find him harsh and shrill (as his surname might suggest); nonetheless, he certainly gets inside the role.

Obviously in much better sound than Karajan's mono recording of twenty years earlier, and blessed with a Walther in Kollo in best, youthful voice, this is a clear first choice for any Karajan fan who can tolerate the vocal defects. Personally, although I liked this more than I had predicted and find that it is more than the sum of its parts, I still would not make it my first choice.

Silvio Varviso – 1974 (live composite; stereo) Philips (also in the 32 CD set from Decca, Wagner: The Great Operas)

Orchestra - Bayreuth Festival

Chorus - Bayreuth Festival

Hans Sachs - Karl Ridderbusch

Veit Pogner - Hans Sotin

Sixtus Beckmesser - Klaus Hirte

Fritz Kothner - Gerd Nienstedt

Walther von Stolzing - Jean Cox

David - Frieder Stricker

Eva - Hannelore Bode

Magdalena - Anna Reynolds

Nachtwächter - Bernd Weikl

Kunz Vogelgesang - Heribert Steinbach

Konrad Nachtigall - József Dene

Ulrich Eisslinger - Wolf Appel

Balthasar Zorn - Robert Licha

Augustin Moser - Norbert Orth

Hermann Ortel - Heinz Feldhoff

Hans Schwarz - Hartmut Bauer

Hans Foltz - Nikolaus Hillebrand

This benefits from the presence of two beautiful, purring bass voices in Ridderbusch and Sotin, although they sound rather too alike. Ridderbusch is a joy but perhaps too refined for the workman Sachs and he tires towards the end. The Beckmesser is fine but unmemorable. The sound is satisfactory for a live performance if a bit fuzzy and recessed. The conducting and supporting cast are mostly satisfactory, too, but the performance is let down by a weak, anonymous Eva and a wooden, ugly-voiced Walter in Jean Cox who bawls his way unpleasantly through the role; his vocal production is constricted and his expression is monochromatic. For those reasons, this is simply not in the running.

Georg Solti - 1975-76 (studio; stereo) Decca

Orchestra - Wiener Philharmoniker

Chorus - Chor der Wiener Staatsoper - Gumpoldskirchner Spatzen

Hans Sachs - Norman Bailey

Veit Pogner - Kurt Moll
 Sixtus Beckmesser - Bernd Weikl
 Fritz Kothner - Gerd Nienstedt
 Walther von Stolzing - René Kollo
 David - Adolf Dallapozza
 Eva - Hannelore Bode
 Magdalena - Júlia Hamari
 Nachtwächter - Werner Klumlikboldt
 Kunz Vogelgesang - Adalbert Kraus
 Konrad Nachtigall - Martin Egel
 Ulrich Eisslinger - Wolf Appel
 Balthasar Zorn - Martin Schomberg
 Augustin Moser - Michel Sénéchal
 Hermann Ortel - Helmut Berger-Tuna
 Hans Schwarz - Kurt Rydl
 Hans Foltz - Rudolf Hartmann

This finds Solti justifying his reputation as a great Wagner conductor: it is warm, relaxed, vigorous and beautifully recorded, in Decca's best stereo sound. He is matched by a Sachs of similar warmth and humanity in the great Norman Bailey, giving us the most vocally and dramatically accomplished of portrayals; he has exactly the right voice for the role: avuncular yet virile. The supporting cast is generally strong; it includes the lovely Julia Hamari as Magdalena, Dallapozza as a feisty, slightly thin-voiced David, Kurt Moll as a sonorous, almost too elegant Pogner and Bernd Weikl, before the beat and bleat began to obtrude in his baritone, as a plausible, restrained but amusing Beckmesser. I quote Alan Blyth in *Gramophone*: "For those unaware of the fact, strange name of the Nightwatchman hides a mixed identity; it is the anagram of Kurt Moll and Bernd Weikl who share the part; one of Decca's little jokes." The downside is Hannelore Bode repeating her rather blank and vocally undistinguished Eva and Kollo bringing his rather gritty, leathery tenor to Walther; his line is often bumpy, although he acts well with his voice. He also tends to croon at key points and rather spoils the quintet; he was considerably better for Karajan only five years earlier. Neither he nor Bode is by any means bad and they sound young enough but there are better lovers; I believe Gundula Janowitz and Alberto Remedios were originally scheduled to sing those roles – what a missed opportunity.

This is a large-scale, sumptuously played recording, to my ears far more satisfying than Jochum's contemporary recording for reasons I adumbrate below.

Eugen Jochum – 1976 (studio; stereo) DG

Orchestra - Deutsche Oper (Berlin)
 Chorus - Deutsche Oper (Berlin)

Hans Sachs - Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau
 Veit Pogner - Peter Lagger
 Sixtus Beckmesser - Roland Hermann
 Fritz Kothner - Gerd Feldhoff
 Walther von Stolzing - Plácido Domingo
 David - Horst R Laubenthal
 Eva - Catarina Ligenzda
 Magdalena - Christa Ludwig
 Nachtwächter - Victor von Halem
 Kunz Vogelgesang - Peter Maus
 Konrad Nachtigall - Roberto Bañuelas
 Ulrich Eisslinger - Karl-Ernst Mercker
 Balthasar Zorn - Loren Driscoll

Augustin Moser - Martin Vantin
 Hermann Ortel - Klaus Lang
 Hans Schwarz - Ivan Sardi
 Hans Foltz - Miomir Nikolic

Fischer-Dieskau might in his youth have got away with singing big, Wagnerian bass-baritone roles - such as the Dutchman in the 1960 Konwitschny recording - but seventeen years later his light, grainy baritone was dry-sounding and no more suited to encompassing the weight and gravitas of our cobbler than it was apt for the dramatic Verdi roles he insisted on essaying; he was never one to know his limitations. Consequently this is a Polo recording and he is the hole in the middle. I became especially disinclined to grant him any slack in this regard when I learned that through his petty objections, citing some kind of contractual exclusion, for thirty years DG were unable to release one of my favourite recordings conducted by Kubelik and starring Thomas Stewart, as DFD understandably saw it as competition to his own meagre effort. So he barks and declaims his way through the role of Hans Sachs without affording us much aural pleasure and bringing his usual pernickety diction to the text, pouncing on syllables like a thrush on a snail. He would, of course, vocally have made a perfect Beckmesser – which is just what he sounds like.

Additional problems reside first in the youthful Domingo's unidiomatic German – although his voice is glorious, if, according to some taste, too Latin for the role. I suspect, however, that Wagner would have approved of his lyricism. Secondly, the Eva is ungainly; Ligenzda's voice by this stage of her career retained little charm or sense of line – and contained more needle than thread. Another disappointing and perhaps unexpected feature of this recording is that the voices do not integrate well; the quintet fails to lift off. As is so often the case with Jochum, the conducting is adequate - stolid and unexciting. Peter Lagger's Pogner is dull and lumpy. There is a piece of luxury casting in Christa Ludwig as Magdalena and Horst Laubenthal sings a neat, unexaggerated David and Hermann is a similarly understated Beckmesser but nor is he very funny. In general, nothing apart from Domingo's vocal – but not linguistic – quality is special. Moving on...

Wolfgang Sawallisch – 1993 (studio; digital) EMI

Orchestra - Bayerische Staatsoper
 Chorus - Bayerische Staatsoper

Hans Sachs - Bernd Weikl
 Veit Pogner - Kurt Moll
 Sixtus Beckmesser - Siegfried Lorenz
 Fritz Kothner - Hans-Joachim Ketelsen
 Walther von Stolzing - Ben Heppner
 David - Deon Van Der Walt
 Eva - Cheryl Studer
 Magdalena - Cornelia Kallisch
 Nachtwächter - René Pape
 Kunz Vogelgesang - Michael Schade
 Konrad Nachtigall - Hans Wilbrink
 Ulrich Eisslinger - Hermann Sapell
 Balthasar Zorn - Ulrich Reiß
 Augustin Moser - Roland Wagenführer
 Hermann Ortel - Rainer Büse
 Hans Schwarz - Guido Götzen
 Hans Foltz - Friedmann Kunder

The digital sound here is really excellent and Heppner vocally very fine, better than for Solti two years later yet bland and not very involved from the point of view of characterisation. Sawallisch is

unfortunately rather – well, Kapellmeisterlich and lacklustre compared with Kubelik and Karajan and his turgid reading lacks charm and humour. Weikl might have been good but the bleat in his voice which gradually became increasingly pronounced over the years had already become apparent in his voice and he is audibly over-parted, so, as with the Jochum recording, it is hard to endorse a recording in which the central role is flawed. Studer is often pure and pretty but you can hear, creeping in, problems that became more acute later with over-singing and “running out of gas” in some key phrases, including the concluding high note of the quintet. I find Deon van der Walt’s David a bit weedy and irritating and Cornelia Kallisch’s Magdalena is sung with excessive vibrato. Kurt Moll’s Pogner is the really superior performance here, but nobody buys *Die Meistersinger* for that alone. Moving on again...

Georg Solti – 1995 (live composite; digital) Decca

Orchestra - Chicago Symphony Orchestra

Chorus - Chicago Symphony Chorus

Hans Sachs - José van Dam

Veit Pogner - René Pape

Sixtus Beckmesser - Alan Opie

Fritz Kothner - Albert Dohmen

Walther von Stolzing - Ben Heppner

David - Herbert Lippert

Eva - Karita Mattila

Magdalena - Iris Vermillion

Nachtwächter - Kelly Anderson

Kunz Vogelgesang - Roberto Sacca

Konrad Nachtigall - Gary Martin

Ulrich Eisslinger - Richard Byrne

Balthasar Zorn - John Horton Murray

Augustin Moser - Steven Tharp

Hermann Ortel - Kevin Deas

Hans Schwarz - Stephen Morschek

Hans Foltz - Kelly Anderson

Having come back to this recording after an interval of several years, I was hoping to find it better than I remembered - but in fact it's not even as good I had recalled, and that was only mediocre.

Apart from the general slackness of Solti's conducting - who would have thought the firebrand would have mellowed so much to merit that accusation? - the voices he has at his disposal are not the finest or most appropriate with the honourable exception of Ben Heppner - but Heppner may be heard in even fresher voice for Sawallisch, who is unfortunately similarly lacklustre compared with Kubelik and Karajan. Or take the David here; having been spoilt by the zest and penetration of Gregory Dempsey's David for Goodall in the superb English, mono broadcast version from 1968, I found Herbert Lippert's weedy little falsetto bleat very trying and tiring - and the role reverts to being a tiresome bore when there isn't sufficient vocal interest. Karita Mattila has a big, sound voice but sings as if she has little interest in the nuances of text and certainly doesn't conjure up either the charming innocent or the feisty lass; she just sings through the role. Alan Opie is fine as Beckmesser: not too much caricature and very good with the German. René Pape brings a fine voice and of course excellent delivery of the text but I was surprised to find his high notes weak and his expression bland; Kurt Moll is superior for Sawallisch and so is Franz Crass for Kubelik - and both have even more beautiful voices. Which leaves José van Dam as Sachs. I am a huge fan, but even at his peak he would not have been ideal for the cobbler and here he sounds grey, underpowered and strained. I do not subscribe to the opinion that that's fine because he's supposed to be "an old man"; no, he's not; he's still young enough to entertain fleetingly the idea of marrying Eva and to flirt very delicately with her and vice versa. Thomas Stewart

for Kubelik has just the right avuncular yet virile sound; Weikl for Sawallisch might have been good but the bleat was already prominent in his voice and he is audibly over-parted.

On balance, the main reason for listening to this is to hear a superlative Walter, but one who can be heard in even better voice for Sawallisch with a slightly superior, though by no means perfect, cast. My preferences lie elsewhere; Solti's earlier recording, for one.

Daniel Barenboim – 1999 (studio; digital) Teldec

Orchestra - Bayreuth Festival

Chorus - Bayreuth Festival

Hans Sachs - Robert Holl

Veit Pogner - Matthias Hölle

Sixtus Beckmesser - Andreas Schmidt

Fritz Kothner - Hans-Joachim Ketelsen

Walther von Stolzing - Peter Seiffert

David - Endrik Wottrich

Eva - Emily Magee

Magdalena - Birgitta Svendén

Nachtwächter - Kwangchui Youn

Kunz Vogelgesang - Bernhard Schneider

Konrad Nachtigall - Roman Trekel

Ulrich Eisslinger - Peter Maus

Balthasar Zorn - Torsten Kerl

Augustin Moser - Helmut Pampuch

Hermann Ortel - Sándor Sólyom-Nagy

Hans Schwarz - Alfred Reiter

Hans Foltz - Jyrki Korhonen

The star of this recording is undoubtedly Peter Seiffert. His tenor is in great shape: free, ringing and confident and he can really handle the music; unfortunately, his contribution to the quintet is uncharacteristically a bit clumsy and hard-toned. His final "Morgenlicht" aria, however, is thrilling. Barenboim at times conducts the excellent Bayreuth Festival Orchestra with great precision and sensitivity - clarity and transparency are the watchwords – but then he gets bogged down or indulges in his old trick of trying unsuccessfully to ape Furtwängler by playing fast and loose with speeds and it unravels. I also miss the pomp this majestic music exudes when a steadier hand is on the tiller, like Kempe's or Karajan's. Andreas Schmidt is in good voice before trouble set in and gives us a sweetly sung, unexaggerated Beckmesser who remains foolish but not caricatured. I like Endrik Wottrich's attractive David, with its easy top notes and clean, boyish sound; he is no bleater but sings strongly.

I am less keen on the rest of the cast; virtually every other singer suffers from the Dreaded Wagnerian Wobble. Robert Holl sounds more like – I was going to say Gurnemanz, but in fact he's closer to Tituleu; his bass is big, hollow, nasal and laboured, without any suggestion of vigorous middle-age. Matthias Hölle has a very similar voice – too similar, in fact - and even if that is more apt for Pogner, I still don't like its laboured pulse. The Magdalena is far too heavy and ponderous for her chirpy David. Emily Magee's big soprano is also marred by a heavy beat and she sounds not in the least young and virginal but more as though Brünnhilde is bored and having time on her hands has dropped by for tea to keep the Magdalena-Fricka company. She keeps trying to slow her music down and Barenboim hustles her until she gives in; this is particularly evident at the start of the quintet.

The chorus is admirable and the digital sound is as good as you might hope and expect but there are too many vocal deficiencies and infelicities here for it to merit recommendation, despite Seiffert's superb Walther; ultimately this lacks the requisite vertical dimension.

Recommendations

It might be surprising that I do not include either Knappertsbusch or Karajan, but as much as I admire and even love aspects of their recordings, I am looking for the best balance between the sound and the cast, which is found elsewhere. Perhaps even more surprising is the lack of a recommendation for a digital recording, but as I explain above, I do not find as much to value in more recent issues.

Live mono: André Cluytens – 1957; Karl Böhm – 1944

Studio mono: Rudolf Kempe – 1956

Live Stereo: Rafael Kubelik – 1967*; Karl Böhm – 1968 (and Goodall in English)

Studio stereo: Georg Solti - 1975-76

*First choice overall

Ralph Moore