

The Verdi Requiem
Part II: A Partial Survey of the Mono Discography
by Ralph Moore

Introduction

[My survey](#) last October of the Verdi Requiem was exclusively of stereo recordings suitable as an introduction for the modern listener; I have since been requested to evaluate both those made prior to the stereo era and also those live recordings made late enough to have been stereo but, for whatever reason, were not accorded that advantage. These will inevitably appeal only to those who have an interest in, and tolerance of, historical sound and performance. Nonetheless, if sound is not an absolute priority, a good few of them emerge as being worthy of serious consideration as a top choice for the quality of their singing and conducting.

I include thirty-one recordings in the list below, all of which I own or have at least heard, apart from two conducted by Toscanini; I have included those with comments from other sources, as a Verdi Requiem conducted by him must be of significance. There are no fewer than six live recordings with Toscanini; three made in the same year of 1938 in London, Milan and Carnegie Hall, then three from 1940, 1948 and 1951. Other conductors are at the helm for numerous pre-stereo recordings: de Sabata conducts four, two of which were made within two days of each other in December 1940 and feature the same team of extraordinary soloists but they are abridged and thus inadmissible; there are three from Fricsay, two studio and one live, and, as you might expect, given that he favoured the work throughout his long career, four from Karajan.

As with my survey of stereo recordings, I make no claims to absolute comprehensiveness but have considered a good, broad sample and hope not to have excluded any of major quality. Unlike the later, stereo recordings, the majority are live; only a half a dozen or so are studio-made and some of those would probably have been recorded in long takes without much in the way of patching. Recording live lends immediacy, of course, but also allows for the possibility of more errors

The Recordings

Carlo Sabajno (studio 1929, Pristine Audio)

Maria Luisa Fanelli, Irene Minghini-Cattaneo, Franco Lo Giudice, Ezio Pinza.
Chorus and Orchestra of La Scala, Milan.

This is the first recording of the work and the remastering has been done very well, too, especially considering the distortion, pitch problems and noise both extraneous and inherent in the primitive electrical recording process; it has been cleaned up to the extent that we can hear a faithful account of what went on in La Scala nearly ninety years ago, which is essentially a live performance, as re-takes and splicing were out of the question. This recording reveals individual vocal lines among the soloists and the quality of the choir and orchestra; the chorus is full of highly committed, very Italianate voices pulling together very expressively and capturing both the drama of the “Dies Irae” and the skipping nature of the “Sanctus”. The orchestra is clearly up to the demands of the score, working under the assured hand of conductor Carlo Sabajno, the Gramophone Company's chief conductor and artistic director in Italy. He is master of the idiom; the “Offertorio”, for example, goes with just the right swing and momentum too often missing in subsequent recordings.

The soloists feature two singers of such quality that they have almost never been equalled, let alone surpassed. Pinza's unmistakable bass is ideal and he is scrupulous in his attention to dynamics and phrasing; he is a model of noble authority – and he has a trill. The mezzo-soprano is much less acknowledged but she was a great singer, even if at times she could be more nuanced. Her lower register injects great gravitas into her sibylline utterances.

The tenor has the right timbre but is too lachrymose, with a compulsion to over-emote, especially in the “Ingemisco”, and he is occasionally both flat and unsteady. His best moments come in the “Lux aeterna”, and the excellence of that movement is in no small part due to the fact that the soprano is absent from it. She is of the variety encountered more frequently in that era and easily mocked today: a piercing “Minnie Mouse”, with a trilling vibrato and a tendency to shriek which are unfortunate, but she is always audible, able to sing the notes without too many errors and contrasts well with her mezzo partner, so she is not always “frankly very bad”, as distinguished critic Alan Blyth is quoted as grumpily calling her in the notes. Part of the problem with her sound could be attributable to the microphone of the time but not her tendency to pounce and scream. To be fair, she is quite effective when it counts at the beginning of the “Liberate me” and she has the breath and stamina to ride easily the combined forces pitted against her in the “Requiem aeternam”. If she sounds a tad hysterical in the concluding section that just adds tension to her entreaty; her lower register is impressive and for me her contributions to this final movement go a good way towards redeeming her role here overall.

The main raison d’être of this recording resides in Pinza’s contribution, but of course you can hear him again in the recording conducted by Serafin ten years later, partnered with a better soprano and tenor in Caniglia and Gigli (see below).

Arturo Toscanini (live 1938, Testament)

Zinka Milanov, Kerstin Thorborg, Helge Rosvaenge, Nicola Moscona
BBC Symphony Orchestra and Chorus

Recorded in the Queen’s Hall, this is just about listenable given its age but still rather trying, with a fair amount of distortion. Toscanini begins very deliberately but of course generates tremendous tension as the performance unfolds; the timpani are especially ferocious and the brass resplendent. A young Milanov is in fine voice, without the swooping and sourness in alt of later years, Thorborg is commanding and Rosvaenge sappier and more flexible than for Karajan eleven years later; Moscona is fine but his bass is not really black enough. Very good, but sonically hard work and not the best of Toscanini’s legacy.

Arturo Toscanini (live 1938, Immortal Performances/Archipel)

Zinka Milanov, Bruna Castagna, Charles Kullman, Nicola Moscona
Schola Cantorum Chorus; NBC Symphony Orchestra

I have not been able to hear this one, so I quote, with acknowledgements, the Amazon.com Editorial Review, whose opinions I cannot personally verify but which sound reliable: “Toscanini was often criticized for inflexible, fast performances. This performance will have to cause that opinion to be revised. Tempi invariably just feel “right”, and Toscanini allows his soloists plenty of space for expressive rubati. Every Toscanini Requiem is towering in its drama - this one also does full justice to the spiritual aspects of the work with a moving, hushed reverence in the appropriate sections. Milanov has rarely been caught in better voice, and Castagna is exquisite; Kullman is excellent (though not a match for Di Stefano or Björling), and Moscona is, as always, a solid professional with the very good, if not quite world-class bass voice. A major contribution to the both the Verdi Requiem and Toscanini discographies.”

Tullio Serafin (studio 1939, Naxos)

Maria Caniglia, Ebe Stignani, Beniamino Gigli, Ezio Pinza
Chorus and Orchestra of the Opera House, Rome

No-one could reasonably suggest that this is the perfect introduction to this music for a novice but at a super bargain price for a performance of this quality in quite reasonable sound for its era, it's a

steal. One soon screens out the residual hiss and a surprising amount of detail emerges, even though the chorus in particular can seem distant and there is a bit of blare at climaxes.

This is perhaps the fastest good performance on record at just under 73 minutes. I do not find it rushed (except perhaps in the rather breathless "Dies Irae") because a gravitas permeates the interpretation; this is that rare combination in versions of this most recorded of pieces: one which combines reverence with drama. It is comparable in pace and attack to Toscanini's 1951 recording, whereas Serafin's 1959 studio recording is considerably more reflective. The Rome forces are wholly idiomatic and the chorus sounds fully committed.

Although they are far from flawless as a team, the soloists could hardly be more characterful and they are totally authentic in style. Caniglia may have the occasional intonation problem and the odd moment of squawkiness but she maintains a wonderful, soaring, Verdian line and terrific intensity, sustained by a solid lower register. The great Stignani is fearless and assured but mars her delivery with some odd Latin pronunciation, whereby every "eh" becomes "ah" as in "sedahbit" rather than "sedebit"; a curious and regrettable tic. Gigli is of course famously sweet-toned and indulges in his extensive repertoire of reprehensible mannerisms, including aspirates, scoops, glottals and sobs - and his trill is pants. Yet his is a memorable, sincere performance and the voice is intrinsically beautiful. The greatest, near-perfect singing here is to be found in Pinza's grand bass; his flickering vibrato, ability to expand the voice blackly and trenchant low notes make for a chilling, imposing impact.

Every lover of this inexhaustibly absorbing music should own this, which is among the most dramatic and compelling of accounts.

Arturo Toscanini (live 1940, Membran Documents/ Music & Arts)

Zinka Milanov, Bruna Castagana, Jussi Björling, Nicola Moscona
Westminster Choir; NBC Symphony Orchestra

I don't think this 1940 recording, exciting as it is, is superior to the 1951 one for a number of reasons: obviously the sound here, despite being perfectly listenable for so venerable a live recording, is going to be tinny and not even as good as the later one - which itself was never an audiophile's dream. Secondly, none of the soloists, with the possible exception of Björling, is the equal of their 1951 counterparts: Milanov exhibits her trademark creaminess of tone but also, even as early in her career as this, her other marked and less welcome characteristics of swooping, going flat and squawking on the highest, loudest notes; she is absolutely awful in the central, piano, solo section of the "Libera me" and I don't know what other reviewers are hearing. Herva Nelli might be no-one's ideal Verdi soprano but she produces her not inconsiderable best in 1951. Björling is not in his absolute finest voice, sounding occasionally a bit detached and getting a frog in his throat a few times - maybe he had a cold? - but even second-rate Björling is superb, Di Stefano sings his heart out eleven years later and is at his best, before vocal troubles kicked in, so both are great. Moscona is more than acceptable but his problem, as is that of almost every bass who sings this part, is that he is not Cesare Siepi. I like Bruna Castagna who seems to my ears to be as good as Barbieri. Toscanini is his usual manic self and drives the performances on with shouts and barked orders. It's undoubtedly a great document but its flaws incline me to return to the later recording for repeated listening (see below).

Arturo Toscanini (live 1948, Music & Arts)

Herva Nelli, Nan Merriman, William McGrath, Norman Scott
Collegiate Chorale (Robert Shaw); NBC Symphony Orchestra

Again, I have not been able to hear this, so quote from the booklet notes by Harris Goldsmith: "This 1948 version is almost completely without mishap. Indeed, there is ample reason to consider it the

finest of the Maestro's achievements with this monumental Masterpiece. The pacing resembles that of the November 23rd, 1940 performance in its nobility and unhurried breadth. A few sections of the 'Dies Irae' are a shade tauter, less rhetorical and more flowing. A comparison between the 1938 BBC Requiem, which seems to me overly beefy and sectionalized, with the 1940 broadcast (Music & Arts CD 4240) affords striking evidence of Toscanini's quest for greater classicism and economy. By the 1948 performance that transition had been carried a step further still. But happily, there is nary a trace of that "late-Toscanini" impatience so characteristic of the 1950 La Scala and 1951 NBC Requiems (whether live or doctored recordings)".

Herbert von Karajan (live 1949, Audite/Urania)

Hilde Zadek, Margarete Klose, Helge Rosvaenge, Boris Christoff
Singverein der Gesellschaft der Musikfreunde Wien; Wiener Philharmoniker

The Verdi Requiem was one of Karajan's signature pieces; according to Richard Osborne's informative and evocative notes, he became acquainted with it first as a child prodigy, then as an apprentice conductor in the Salzburg Mozarteum. He first conducted it in Ulm in 1933 and introduced it at the Salzburg Festival in 1949 - despite disapproving opposition from its director, Joseph Messner - and performed it frequently after he became festival director in 1957. Fittingly, it was also the last work he conducted with the Berlin Philharmonic shortly before his death in 1989.

His approach to the music changed little over fifty-five years: he always managed a judicious balance between the majestically devotional and the urgently dramatic elements, although by the time of the live Salzburg performance of 1970, again with Ghiaurov as bass, the overall timing had slowed from the convenient one-CD-fit here of just over eighty minutes to nearly ninety - and thus it remained in his famous 1972 DG studio recording, once again with Ghiaurov.

The sound here is surprisingly clean, clear and immediate for so old a live recording, with some pleasing bass depth and minimal distortion in loud passages. Karajan's direction is alert and highly dramatic, with lots of detail and variation in dynamics and phrasing; this performance manages to combine a profound spiritual quality with a grand sense of occasion; the "Tuba mirum" is stunning, especially when it is followed by such a chilling, distinctive "Mors stupebit" from Christoff.

Rosvaenge has a heroic, baritone Wagnerian tenor even if his vocal production is sometimes clumsy and intonation approximate; he just about tames his voice sufficiently to manage the "Hostias" in as close as he can get to a mezza-voce. Klose deploys her rich, almost plummy but powerful mezzo to impressive effect and the young Boris Christoff purrs and intones magisterially like some high priest; he gives Rosvaenge a lesson on how to execute a messa di voce in that "Hostias".

The surprise is Hilde Zadek, forced as a Jewish soprano to leave Hitler's Germany in 1934 and here returning in triumph; as I write she is still with us, having turned 100 years old last December. She has a big, pure soprano and excellent intonation, which may also be heard in the recording of *Don Giovanni* conducted by Rudolf Moralt where she sings a strong Donna Anna. Her vibrant tone can turn shrill but that is not inappropriate to the supplicatory nature of the "Libera me"; too many sopranos ignore the element of desperation in favour of making beautiful sounds. She floats the E and E flat on her entry in "Sed signifer" exquisitely, then soars up to the A flat with perfect legato. Karajan makes the "Quam olim Abrahae" go with the perfect swing, too.

The downside consists of Teutonic Latin, with all the "u's" pronounced as "v's" as in "qvid", and a mistake Zadek makes in the "Libera me". A reviewer on Amazon claims that this error, a matter of a couple of seconds, "spoil[s] the whole thing", but surely a passing flaw such as this is forgivable in a live performance and I still love this red-blooded account, despite its blemishes.

Arturo Toscanini (live 1950, IDIS)

Renata Tebaldi, Cloe Elmo, Giacinto Prandelli, Cesare Siepi
Chorus and Orchestra of La Scala, Milan

The sound is really too poor to warrant selection, despite the strength of casting, so pass on this and hear Tebaldi in the de Sabata recording made a year later. However, remember that it was Toscanini who dubbed her “voce d’angelo”.

Arturo Toscanini (live 1951, commercial issue: RCA/Opus Kura/Regis) mono

Arturo Toscanini (live 1951, unedited: Pristine Audio) – “stereo”

Herva Nelli, Fedora Barbieri, Giuseppe Di Stefano, Cesare Siepi
Robert Shaw Chorale, NBC Symphony Orchestra

I am considering all the issues of this famous 1951 Carnegie Hall performance together, as, while the Pristine version is in much improved sound, it uses the unedited recording of this famous performance complete. The Opus Kura remastering of the latter is by all accounts in warmer, less distorted sound, superior to the various RCA issues, but more expensive – and the Regis version is budget priced. The commercial issues are mono, whereas Pristine’s is in “accidental stereo”, achieved by combining two, separate, simultaneously taped mono recordings, independently made on microphones placed in different locations, to create a stereo effect. Sound engineer Andrew Rose used the latest technology to synchronise the two recordings, remove extraneous noises, correct drop-outs and address the pitch fluctuations resulting from tape deterioration. It retains a high level of hiss but has far greater warmth and clarity; the blare and shatter of the mono release has been tamed and many more details emerge.

There is, however, one big caveat. Although the sound here is much less boxy, this is not the commercial NBC version which benefits from RCA's later patch-up sessions and bars snipped from rehearsals, but rather the original, unedited live recording containing many mistakes, including several quite serious errors by soprano Herva Nelli, which were patched for the commercial issue. Pristine warn the prospective buyer of this on the cover - indicating that this is the concert of 27 January 1951 “live at Carnegie Hall”. On their website they inform us that the source is an “unedited NBC broadcast recording” and “a tape made directly from the Hall supplied by private collectors”. Prospective buyers are thus made aware of this as otherwise it might be only natural to assume that this is the same as the commercial recording with which we are familiar. Apart from quite a few minor glitches of ensemble and pitching there's a really obvious fortissimo bass drum entry a bar early in the first “Dies Irae”, Di Stefano quite often indulges his tendency to run ahead of the beat, Herva Nelli attempts a false entry a bar early on “sed” (but is quickly quelled by Toscanini) and, most damning of all, temporarily falls apart completely in the “Libera Me”: first she sags horribly in pitch, then she loses her place and omits the B-flat at the close of “requiem aeternam”. Even allowing for the vagaries and vicissitudes of live performance, these are fairly major flaws, and constitute significant disadvantages in comparison with the official, mono issue, despite the sonic advantages of this stereo confection.

Nonetheless, it is possible to listen with enormous pleasure to long stretches of this most impassioned of performances. The attack of both choir and orchestra is stunning – especially the thunderous impact of the bass drum specially commissioned by Toscanini, supposedly the biggest ever made. Despite the mistakes, Nelli gives one of her most radiant and convincing impersonations of a true Verdi soprano; she employs portamento most artistically, delves into a trenchant lower register and allows her vibrant top notes to expand thrillingly; she positively soars above the ensemble. Barbieri is stern and monumental, combining beautifully with Nelli. The ever-reliable Siepi is in superb, saturnine voice, intoning his music balefully with absolute security of pitch and rhythm. Di Stefano is virile and highly expressive, and attempts the requisite tender mezza-voce in the “Hostias”, even if he cannot trill like Pavarotti. Despite the prominence of the orchestra owing to

Toscanini's preferred placement of his soloists behind them, all four singers achieve tremendous "face" and really impose themselves on the music.

My advice is to acquire the Pristine version if you want to hear this benchmark performance in unprecedentedly fine sound, but do not throw out your original Toscanini edition mono disc, as the trade-off between accepting a more error-strewn version in exchange for stereo sound might not always satisfy. (Apparently, there is also a "stereo version" on the Memories Reverence label, but I have not heard it.)

Ferenc Fricsay (live 1951, Andromeda)

Elisabeth Grümmer, Johanna Blatter, Helmut Krebs, Josef Greindl
RIAS Kammerchor & Chor des St Hedwigskathedrale; Orchester der Städtischen Oper, Berlin

This is a real dark horse; I prefer it to either of Fricsay's later studio recordings, insofar as it has a superb duo of female singers in the wonderful Elisabeth Grümmer and now forgotten but splendid mezzo-soprano Johanna Blatter. Grümmer's pure, shimmering soprano is a joy and Blatter is imperious. Krebs' tenor is neat and musical, albeit rather too light and white to be entirely satisfactory and "Resident Bayreuth Caveman" Joseph Greindl's bass is rough and rocky but he brings immense weight and presence to his contributions. Italianate, he ain't. Teutonic Latin pronunciation prevails, with hard g's in "gere" and plenty of v's in "qvasi" etc. but the spirit of the music-making is magnificent. The "Dies irae" is electric and Fricsay generates a real sense of occasion, driving "Quam olim Abrahae" onward as far too few conductors do.

Victor de Sabata (live 1951, Urania/Decca)

Renata Tebaldi, Nell Rankin, Giacinto Prandelli, Nicola Rossi Lemeni
Orchestra and Chorus of La Scala, Milan

Decca secured all the permissions necessary to issue this in a newly remastered limited release in 2005 shortly after Renata Tebaldi's death in December 2004, then re-issued it in 2009 to commemorate the five-year anniversary of her passing. It was a work so dear to her that she stipulated in her will that the "Libera me" from this recording be played at her funeral. She always regretted not having made a studio recording of the work, and as the sound here, while not by any means perfect, is markedly superior both technically and aesthetically to the one made the year before with Toscanini, obviously this is the one to have if you want to hear a youthful Tebaldi in spectacularly secure and ringing voice, with a resonant lower register and a secure top. Decca append an apology for the sound quality not conforming to their normal high standard and rightly justify its issue by virtue of its artistic and historical importance. This recording is highly desirable for Tebaldi's performance alone, but we also have the great and under-recorded de Sabata at the helm. The surprise is how good all her co-artists are here, too: I have always greatly esteemed Nell Rankin but did not expect Prandelli to sound so good, nor Rossi Lemeni to be free of the woolliness that marred his tone as his career progressed. He is also one of the most expressive of basses when it comes to use of text. Prandelli is better than I have ever heard him, varying his tone and singing with both heft and tenderness in the "Ingemisco" and intoning the "Hostias" sweetly. All seem inspired by de Sabata, but Tebaldi is something else: huge of voice when required as in "Cum vix justus sit securus" but floating gossamer tones in the "Lux aeterna" and the "Libera me".

Ferenc Fricsay (studio 1953, DG)

Maria Stader, Marianna Radev, Helmut Krebs, Kim Borg
Berlin St Hedwig's Cathedral Choir, Berlin RIAS Chamber Choir; RIAS Symphony Orchestra

Ferenc Fricsay (studio 1960, DG)

Maria Stader, Oralia Dominguez, Gabor Carelli, Ivan Sardi
Berlin St Hedwig's Cathedral Choir; Berlin RIAS Symphony Orchestra

Fricsay made two mono, studio recordings of the Verdi Requiem, the first in 1953 and the second in 1960 with the same forces and the same soprano, so I am temporarily departing here from considering recordings in chronological sequence and comparing the two. Both are very good but seem to me to be rather over-praised. The earlier recording was made in the famous, warm acoustic of the Jesus-Christus Kirche, Berlin. I had always heard of it as being some kind of gold standard recording by virtue of its drive and passion and I am happy to agree with a previous reviewer that the conducting is "white-hot". It takes off and carries on like a rocket, enabling it, at only 75 minutes, to be contained on one CD. Opinion is divided about which of the two recordings is the better; on balance, most plump for this one by virtue of its having the same soprano in younger, fresher voice and a far more propulsive approach. When the time came to record the work again – his last recording - Fricsay was perhaps regrettably already conscious of his own mortality, as he died of cancer a mere three years later at only 48, and in 1960 he extends the Requiem to a leisurely 93 minutes. It is thus far less of a hectic scramble; neither, to be fair, does it ever sound unduly slow, but the earlier, more urgent recording is surely preferable.

Neither recording boasts the best team of soloists; tenor Helmut Krebs, is very musical but comparatively small-scale, white-voiced and inclined to aspirate. The bass Kim Borg is rather windy and hollow, not especially Italianate in the required black-browed fashion, but he is expressive. The mezzo is the very sturdy, slightly plummy Marianna Radev, who is certainly up to the demands of the part without being very imaginative. She, like Oralia Dominguez for Fricsay in 1960, is almost the star of the show by virtue of the amplitude of her voice. Stader, as I said, is in good voice but I like my Verdi sopranos to be somewhat meatier and more dramatic of tone. Nonetheless, she soars as she should in her high-flying passages, despite her rather "little-girly" sound. It is the vigour of the choral contribution and the drive of Fricsay's direction which lend real distinction to this performance. He is somehow less overt and crude than Solti while being equally aggressive. This is a fine vintage recording without being quite the paradigm some reviewers have dubbed it and the mono sound, good as it is, is inevitably rather too constricted to do full justice to such an epic work. Still, the spirit of Fricsay's aesthetic stance emerges intact and he gives us a compact, thrilling ride.

In 1960, the orchestra and choir in both are placed a good way off in a piece that really cries out for full, stereo surround-sound and Stader is distinctly thinner of voice than seven years earlier, too often sounding childlike and on occasion distinctly flat. Carelli is a ham, sobbing and bleating in a rather white, unattractive tenor which reminds me of a caricature of the elderly Gigli although at least he doesn't bawl his way through the role in verismo style. The bass Sardi is merely adequate, being rather rough of tone. The stars of the show are the great mezzo-soprano Oralia Dominguez, bringing real depth of voice and a touch of class to proceedings - she even dominates the vocal quartet in a way I have never heard the mezzo be able to do - and of course the conductor himself, who brings enormous intensity to bear, despite the odd bit of scrappy ensemble.

A word of caution: some might be irritated in both recordings by the Teutonic Latin pronunciation in an "Italian-Latin" work; it takes a little getting used to.

Victor de Sabata (studio 1954, Naxos)

Elisabeth Schwarzkopf, Oralia Dominguez, Giuseppe Di Stefano, Cesare Siepi
Chorus and Orchestra of La Scala, Milan

De Sabata was never afraid to take risks with slow tempi, as his recording of the Verdi Requiem testifies; the opening is very stately, deliberate and emphatic, comparable to Reiner's studio recording but the Dies Irae is ferocious and the choir responds accordingly, with terrific attack and unrestrained passion. This has long been many people's go-to version and it's not hard to hear why with a cast and pedigree like this. If there is any controversy, apart from an objection to his slow speeds, it surrounds the suitability of Schwarzkopf to the soprano part. She does occasionally mew

and scream a little but in truth just about convinces – much more so than in the Giulini studio recording ten years later; she brings great vibrancy and security to her vocalisation. The other three singers are also on top form; Siepi matches Pinza for intensity and resonance; Di Stefano gives us both honied sweetness and that on-the-edge generosity of voice which shortened his career; Dominguez make the same kind of visceral impact with her trenchant lower register and shining top notes as she does on Fricsay's recording six years later. De Sabata's ear for orchestral balance, colour and detail is acute as always; this is a prime candidate for best mono version.

Guido Cantelli (live 1955, Archipel)

Herva Nelli, Claramae Turner, Richard Tucker, Jerome Hines
Westminster Choir, New York Philharmonic

A noisy audience is more apparent as the recorded sound is really quite good. Steady, purposeful direction from Cantelli, whose slow, spacious opening reminds me of Reiner's. The whole performance is a tad careful.

The choir is very good without sounding the least bit Italianate; I don't think I am imagining that there is something open and American in their timbre, just as Tucker's hard, incisive tenor hardly sounds Italian but rings out confidently. The quartet in general is fine without being especially idiomatic, and the experienced Nelli is in best voice. She never had the most beautiful sound but she is secure and expressive, floating notes and finishing strongly despite some passing intonation problems. She matches well with mezzo Claramae Turner who is also steady but slightly edgy of tone. Hines is sonorous but the role sounds a little high for his basso profundo and he struggles with "Gere curam". But this is a performance which improves as it progresses and the quartet is especially impressive in the "Offertorio".

Paul van Kempen (studio 1955, Eloquence)

Gré Brouwenstijn, Maria von Ilosvay, Petre Munteanu Oskar Czerwenka
Coro ed Orchestra dell'Accademia Nazionale di Santa Cecilia

Previously issued on the Preiser and now available on Decca Eloquence, this vintage recording will no doubt be welcomed by some for nostalgic reasons but I have to say, as a faintly obsessed collector of recordings of this seminal masterwork, that this will be joining the small cohort of giveaways, as it is too flawed to remain on my shelves and stand a chance of a re-airing.

First, the sound is not the clean, clear, sharp kind that characterizes the best of mono recordings but very dim, hissy and boxy - however, thankfully without distortion. The impact of the "Dies Irae" is severely limited by the excessive distancing of the choir, which, like the orchestra, is superb, but remote. Secondly, so many sections are very turgidly conducted; Fritz Reiner proved in his superb recording that slow speeds can work very well indeed but not slack phrasing; the "Offertorio" lumbers along and Sanctus lacks bounce. However, thirdly and most damagingly, there are persistent intonation problems with two of the soloists. I had long known and admired Gré Brouwenstijn's matchless Sieglinde in the Leinsdorf recording of "Die Walküre" and as the excellent soprano soloist in Cluytens' recording of Beethoven Choral Symphony, but have otherwise invariably been disappointed by her elsewhere, as in an operatic recital album re-issued by Newton. She is often tremulous and somewhat "disembodied" in tone, and in several crucial passages is painfully flat, as in the first notes she sings and on the floated B flat ending the slow section preceding the conclusion of the last movement. She is also prone to shrieking top notes in that "Libera me"; I don't think this was good day for her. She is better in the "Agnus Dei" with the sturdy Wagnerian contralto Maria von Ilosvay but is in general vocally out of sorts.

Bass Oskar Czerwenka is no asset, either; his nasal, laboured tone is far from the great rolling sound of such as Siepi or Ghiaurov, and both he and von Ilosvay persist in using the Germanic "qvem" "qvasi" and "qvi" in an Italianate Latin work. To cap it all, he begins "Mors stupebit" absurdly sharp.

The best singer here is Romanian lyric tenor Petre Munteanu - but notice I call him a lyric tenor, and ultimately he lacks the spinto heft to excite the listener, despite the sweetness and delicacy of his singing in the "Ingemisco". We need the kind of gutsy italianità which his lovely voice intrinsically lacks; he was best in Donizetti and bel canto roles.

Eugene Ormandy (live 1957, Standing Room Only)

Leontyne Price, Nan Merriman, Richard Tucker, Giorgio Tozzi
Unnamed chorus; The Philadelphia Orchestra

As you might suspect, some great singing here – but, as an editorial note on Amazon explains, for whatever reason, "This recording omits the "Sanctus" (for chorus) as it is missing from all transcriptions of the performance" - so that's that; it cannot be recommended as a complete performance. The choir is unnamed.

Herbert von Karajan (live 1958, EMI)

Leonie Rysanek, Christa Ludwig, Giuseppe Zampieri, Cesare Siepi
Wiener Singverein; Wiener Philharmoniker

Karajan was more urgent and less monumental in his earlier performances of this favourite work, and he is backed up by a really galvanised choir, who whisper and roar like the possessed. As is so often the case with her, Rysanek begins in rather hooty, cloudy voice with too much scooping – or is simply that the listener becomes habituated to her idiosyncratic vocal make-up and increasingly appreciates her artistry? She can be intermittently plaintive and unsteady, and I find her mannerisms rather grating in the "Recordare" compared with Ludwig's classical style, yet the best of her singing is compellingly intense, as in "Tremens factus sum ego". It's a pity her final B flat on "Requiem" before the final "Libera me" fugue is so flat and tremulous. Siepi is immense as always, his rolled, guttural Milanese "r" more pronounced than later in his career, his chocolaty bass in prime condition. Christa Ludwig, too, always excelled in this piece, her distinctive mezzo with its fast vibrato always suggestive of an almost hysterical fervour which keeps the listener riveted to her every note. As with the 1962 recording below, Viennese house tenor Zampieri is perhaps the least satisfying soloist, occasionally sounding rather thin and bleaty, but he is perfectly adequate and sings with great commitment.

The sound engineers successfully tamed the open acoustic of the venue, the Felsenreitschule, to reproduce a clean, clear, spacious acoustic.

I cannot sufficiently reconcile myself to Rysanek's timbre here, which is largely inappropriate for this music, or the comparative ordinariness of the tenor to recommend this recording whole-heartedly, but it is undoubtedly a satisfying dramatic experience.

Fritz Reiner (live 1958, Archipel)

Leonie Rysanek, Regina Resnik, David Lloyd, Giorgi Tozzi
Chicago Symphony Orchestra and Chorus

A lot of hiss and rustle here and a bronchial audience but Reiner exerts a kind of majestic authority over this score as he does in his celebrated studio version two years later with the VPO and a stellar quartet. His splendid bass, Giorgio Tozzi, is the same here; otherwise his singers perhaps are not quite so exalted. However, Rysanek starts off in richer, fuller voice than she does for Karajan in the same year and sounds more secure all round, her top notes less screamie and she slides less. A slip in

the “Recordare” and some dodgy tuning in the high, pianissimo conclusion to the “Lux aeterna” notwithstanding, this serves as a much better memento of her singing this part than the Karajan performance. Resnik matches her for opulence of tone; she is absolutely riveting in “Liber scriptus”. Welsh tenor David Lloyd’s lean, distinctive timbre with its fast vibrato might lack variety and an optimum fullness of tone, but he is secure and expressive. I could wish Reiner took “Quam olim Abrahae” with more of a swing, though; he speeds up considerably in the studio recording.

The orchestra and chorus are superb as you might expect; the brass in particular are thrilling; if prone to the occasional blip.

Despite its limitations of sound, I like this a lot more than I first expected to; it has a real sense of occasion. Reiner, like Karajan, is one of those conductors who knows how to find and present a proper balance between the spiritually “vertical” and the earthily dramatic in this work.

Georg Solti (live 1958, IDIS)

Gre Brouwenstijn, Oralia Dominguez, Giuseppe Zampieri, Nicola Zaccaria
Sinfonie Orchester und Chor des WDR Köln

More very distant sound, making it difficult to become involved; cranking up the volume exaggerates the somewhat muffled, echoing acoustic, with a lot of metallic print-through in the background, especially on headphones. The intermittent thumps and rustle get more pronounced towards the end. There is nothing outré about Solti’s conducting – in fact, it rather lacks the bite and tension of his subsequent excellent recordings, as if he had not yet quite got under its skin. Solti – tame? Neither the orchestra nor the chorus is as accomplished as in some contemporaneous recordings.

I was disappointed in Gré Brouwenstijn's contribution to the van Kempen recording but here she is much better; her pitch is much more secure and her voice steadier. She sounds febrile yet focused. As she is for Fricsay and de Sabata, Oralia Dominguez is a mighty force of nature – what a singer she was. Zampieri is much the same as in his two recordings for Karajan: slightly piercing and throttled but committed. La Scala stalwart Zaccaria is as reliable as ever, grave and sonorous. The ropey sound is all the more regrettable, given the overall quality but I still think Solti needed a puppy-upper that day.

Bruno Walter (live 1959, IDIS)

Zinka Milanov/Heidi Krall, Rosalind Elias, Carlo Bergonzi, Giorgio Tozzi
Metropolitan Opera Orchestra and Chorus

This was Bruno Walter's last Met appearance. He was supposedly already enfeebled, yet you would hardly know it from the pace and drive of this performance. It is one of the fastest on disc, yet it hardly sounds rushed. In his autobiography, Leinsdorf snipes at Walter as being hardly able to keep the chorus together, which is clearly untrue, even if it must be admitted that the Metropolitan Opera Chorus was not exactly stellar at this period – there is a fair amount of obtrusive wobbling and an inhomogeneous sound, especially amongst the women - and neither does the orchestra cover itself in glory, with a number of bloopers. The live sound, albeit cleaned up by IDIS, is rather congested and muffled mono with a fair amount of post-echo, extraneous noise and interjections presumably from the conductor, but the voices emerge very clearly. To cap it all, Milanov, who, owing to ill health, had ceded the previous performance to understudy Heidi Krall, appeared on stage clutching her purse as if she expected to have to depart, and sure enough she fainted and had to be revived with a cognac from a bar across the street, while the young Krall stepped in from (as far as I can tell) the “Offertorio” onwards. With all due respect to Ms Milanov and her fans, this was no by means a disaster. As ever by this stage of her career, Milanov does some lovely things but she also swoops and screams, and by the time we reach the “Recordare” her indisposition is resulting in some vocal embarrassment.

So why would one invest in this disc, given those disadvantages, when there are already available so many wonderful recordings in superb sound?

Well, apart from the significance of this being the last Met appearance of one of the greatest 20C conductors in repertoire he loved, we have some stupendous singing to enjoy, especially from Carlo Bergonzi and, above all, Rosalind Elias, whose singing here puts even her recording for Reiner in the shade. She sings with power, authority and admirable control, delivering one of the best accounts of this music on disc that I know, to rank alongside those of Cossotto, Dominguez and Ludwig. Bergonzi repeats the same glories and the same mistakes (repeated aspirates in runs such as "Kyri-hay") in an otherwise penetrating and elegant performance. Tozzi is as dependable and saturnine as ever without having the weight of tone to chill the marrow as can the greatest basses (Pinza, Siepi and Christoff). The surprise is Krall, who arrives to relieve Milanov's evident vocal distress but is also very good in her own right, despite being lighter of voice. She is ardent, impassioned and secure; her Latin pronunciation is eccentric - she pronounces the "g" as hard in "sed signifer" - but her entry there on a floated crescendo provides a magical moment, eclipsing the efforts of many a more celebrated soprano. I am surprised that she did not come to enjoy greater fame.

I cannot endorse this as a first choice but it is self-recommending for a combination of unusual and even bizarre reasons, both artistic and circumstantial.

Carlo Maria Giulini (live 1960, Myto)

Joan Sutherland, Fiorenza Cossotto, Luigi Ottolini, Ivo Vinco
Philharmonia Orchestra & Chorus

With a cast, chorus and conductor like this, it's a pity that the radio sound here is so distant and hissy, with pre-echo and tape slur; it's no better - possibly worse - than some pre-war recordings, so it's hard to appreciate just how good this team is. This is possibly overall the best quartet on any mono recording; even the relatively unknown tenor was a major voice. Vinco's bass is extraordinarily black, dense and focused, the epitome of that really Italian sound typified by the likes of Pasero, Pinza and Neri; Cossotto is at her blazing, youthful peak, as she is in the Karajan film from La Scala, her lower register almost scary and her top ringing; Sutherland's huge soprano soars aloft, steady and gleaming. Ottolini is a bit plaintive and hardly subtle but he has plenty of voice with the authentic Italian squillo. Giulini is again on fire, so the inadequacy of the recorded sound is a real cause for regret. But there is also something else which virtually disqualifies this recording: it could be a source tape problem but it sounds more as if Sutherland really does come in a whole bar - two triple-beats - early on "Sed signifier" and everything falls apart for a few seconds. Very odd but anyone can make a mistake and she is wonderful in the concluding "Libera me."

Igor Markevitch (live 1960, ICA)

Galina Vishnevskaya, Nina Issakova, Vladimir Ivanovski, Ivan Petrov
Russian State Academy Choir; State Symphony Orchestra of Moscow

The first thing you notice is the wonderful, resonant Russian basses who make Verdi sound like Rachmaninov and choir pounds the rhythm as if it were Orthodox liturgy. The stately opening is mightily impressive; unfortunately, the soloists' entries are not - they all yell and wobble alarmingly, sing heavily Slavonic-accented Italian and really have no idea of Verdian style. The tenor is execrable and Vishnevskaya is all over the place with her plaintive swooping and very "straight" vibrato-less singing. Markevitch directs a thrillingly daring performance with some extremes of tempo, including the fastest "Dies Irae" on record, but otherwise - no thank you.

Hans Müller-Kray (live 1960, Myto)

Maria Stader, Marga Höffgen, Fritz Wunderlich, Gottlob Frick
Stuttgart Lehrergesangverein, Südfunkchor, Bach-Chor Stuttgart; Südfunk-Sinfonieorchester

This live recording from 1960 will be no-one's first choice as a recording but it is surprisingly powerful and authentic. The choir is impassioned and committed - although of course their Latin is Germanic - Müller-Kray's conducting propulsive and subtle and the soloists feature some big names on German singing scene of the period. The orchestra is hardly immaculate - the trumpets in particular struggle to avoid blips - but plays well enough and there is very little audience noise to distract the listener. The mono sound is certainly acceptable for a live recording already over fifty years old and is by no means under-powered or small-scale.

Maria Stader will already be familiar to collectors from her celebrated recordings of the Requiem with Fricsay. She wasn't really a true Verdi soprano being more of a lyric with some heft but she manages a convincing facsimile of the real thing and is very musical, if a bit "little-girly" in timbre. Marga Höffgen struggles with breath and pitch problems in her solos - she is distinctly under the note at the beginning of "Liber scriptus" - but has a large, mostly solid voice. Gottlob Frick is grave and sepulchral if not exactly resonant and occasionally lacks steadiness but he by no means lets the side down. Both he and Wunderlich are guilty of the odd intrusive aspirate but it is for the latter singer that most listeners will be attracted to this issue.

One wonders if there was anything Wunderlich couldn't and wouldn't have sung had he lived longer. As it is, this is a virile, very expressive piece of singing by a singer who never gave less than everything in his performances; he even fakes a trill. His tone is unfailingly beautiful and this recording provides another priceless memento of a great artist.

Herbert von Karajan (live 1960, Gala)

Gundula Janowitz, Christa Ludwig, Carlo Bergonzi, Ruggiero Raimondi
Chor der Gesellschaft der Musikfreunde Wien; Wiener Philharmoniker

It's surprising what you can find on bargain live labels like Gala if you dig around and this Requiem is well worth its modest asking price as long as you can tolerate indifferent AM broadcast mono sound. The compensations are many: not least a stellar quartet of soloists and magisterial conducting by Karajan of the splendid Vienna Philharmonic Choir and Orchestra. This recording reminds me of how I really like the Verdi Requiem to sound: no small-scale, pared-back performance this, but a real belter of the old school.

Karajan's timings come in at just under 90 minutes; by no means especially slow compared with other favourite versions and speeds certainly justified by the weighty impact of the interpretation. I am again reminded that Christa Ludwig is perhaps the finest interpreter of the mezzo part: her voice is rich, velvety, plaintive, pleading and ecstatic by turns. Raimondi repeats his saturnine assumption of the bass line which can otherwise be heard in better sound from around the same time with Bernstein but there he scoops a bit more. Bergonzi can also be heard in better sound on the Leinsdorf set with Nilsson and here again he spoils his first entrance by coming in early and singing "Kyr-i-HEY" but it is still a wonderful, heroic performance. However, I suspect that the main attraction of this 1970 broadcast will for many be the chance to hear the sublime Gundula Janowitz soaring through music which I confess I did not know she ever sang. I don't why I am surprised, given that I am well aware that around the same time she was giving beautiful performances of Elisabetta in "Don Carlo" in Vienna. She certainly has enough voice to dominate the ensembles; some do not respond to the strange, fluting, almost instrumental sound of her voice with its quick vibrato; I love it and it seems to suit Verdi to a T.

The limited recorded sound means that this will not be your first or only Verdi Requiem but it should find a place on your shelves - only make it fit better by transferring the two CD's into a slimline case; goodness knows why Gala needlessly package the way they do in a cumbersome box, as there's only a thin booklet with good performance notes, biographies and no libretto.

Hans Schmidt-Isserstedt (studio 1961, Archipel)

Stefania Woytowicz, Christa Ludwig, Nicolai Gedda, Boris Carmeli
WDR Rundfunkchor, NDR Rundfunkchor; NDR Sinfonieorchester

It's a relief to turn to a good studio version – albeit mono – after so many recordings which are aurally trying. The chorus and orchestra are rather removed in the aural picture but conductor takes the music by the scruff of the neck; this is a sharp, alert account, devoid of Germanic solidity and one of the fastest on record. The chorus is very good.

I am not keen on the beat in the soprano's big sound; she is a singer I have never encountered elsewhere and strikes me as a confident artist but with little subtlety and her final attempt to float a top B flat on "Requiem" is not a happy one. Similarly, I had never heard of the Polish-born bass but he has a gnarled, grainy, imposing sound and sings without necessarily erasing memories of the best basses in this role. The presence of the ever-reliable Christa Ludwig guarantees quality in the mezzo role and her fine performance is very similar to how we hear her in more celebrated recordings. I am never much of a fan of Gedda in this music; to me his tenor, with its slight bleat and whine, has nothing Italianate about it but he is in best, youthful voice. This is not one to change my loyalties elsewhere, decent though it is.

Herbert von Karajan (live 1962, Testament)

Leontyne Price, Giulietta Simionato, Giuseppe Zampieri, Nicolai Ghiaurov
Chor der Gesellschaft der Musikfreunde Wien; Berliner Philharmoniker

I like the extra urgency of Karajan's pacing here, especially as it never feels rushed and Karajan is, as ever, very considerate to his singers, giving them the space to make their points - noticeably so to his favourite bass in the "Confutatis".

If only the mono, radio sound here lived up to the artistic standard - or this had been recorded in stereo. It's by no means bad: the audience is very quiet and it is clear, mostly undistorted and uncongested, with some hiss and wiry strings but very acceptable by live, mono, early 60's standards. However, there are too many silly little flaws that should and could have been sorted out by a more punctilious re-mastering: glitches at 4:09 in track 12, and at 3:12 and 5:41 in track 17. More pardonably, given that this was live, Simionato appears to make a false entry, quickly corrected, at 3:02 in the quartet in track 13 and Zampieri appears at several points to have a tussle to prevent his tenor cracking. There is also a comical little alien bleep at 1:49 while Price is singing divinely in the "Requiem aeternam", track 19; goodness knows whether it's an extraneous live noise or engineering blip. These things don't matter too much but I mention them to alert the fussier listener to potential irritations.

It goes without saying that the orchestral playing from the BPO and the choral singing by the splendidly named "Singverein der Gesellschaft der Musikfreunde Wien" are both excellent; Karajan would tolerate no less. The soloists are a starry bunch, the least known today being Viennese "house tenor" Giuseppe Zampieri. He is good enough, his virile, slightly hard tone having some heft and presence. He just manages a credible mezza voce in the "Hostias" and indeed frequently sounds like the excellent Veriano Luchetti, the tenor from the succeeding generation who died in April 2012. However, as I have hinted above, in such exalted company he remains the weakest of the quartet. He is rather strenuous, sometimes bleating and allowing a peculiar little tremolo to creep into sustained

notes, especially at the end of phrases. He is dynamically the least varied of the singers and has a tendency to sing marginally flat.

The other three soloists sing like gods. Price is glorious, faultless, especially in the concluding "Libera me". Karajan was always keen on clarity of diction, the ability to sing quietly and the expressiveness of the text; this is just as well, as no libretto is provided, although it can be downloaded from the Testament website. Simionato is simply the best mezzo-soprano I have heard sing this music. Her rich, vibrant voice and Price's effulgent soprano were properly registered, so they are both clearly differentiated yet they blend beautifully - unlike too many recent recordings, where soprano and mezzo-soprano are virtually indistinguishable. Listen to how she plunges into her lower register - whose existence in interviews she quixotically denied - on the last "proferetur" in the "Liber scriptus"; thrilling. Ghiaurov is so imposing throughout, his bass velvety and magisterial, with no bumps, slides or groans; no wonder Karajan stuck by him for years.

Verdi Requiem completists, admirers of Karajan or the soloists here, or anyone interested in the performance history of the Salzburg Festival will want this disc despite the flaws in the sound and the less than ideal tenor soloist.

Carlo Maria Giulini (live 1963, BBC Legends)

Amy Shuard, Anna Reynolds, Richard Lewis, David Ward
Philharmonia Chorus and Orchestra

While they were fine singers in their own right, the four soloists here are not in their correct Fach and simply cannot do justice to the long cantilena lines and ringing tones the music demands. There are also some persistent pitch problems which are, I think, tape drag or slips which have gone uncorrected rather than being the fault of the singers. Giulini's direction is powerful and driven – he was a master of this score and conducted it frequently in the 60's - but that is not enough to compensate for the inadequacy of the individual vocal contributions, which tend to be alternately hooty and woolly. It is quite absurd, but sadly typical, that *Gramophone* should in 2008 have rated this as the most desirable recording; I suspect the usual Brit-biased chauvinism from that organ.

Carlo Maria Giulini (live 1964, BBC Legends)

Ilva Ligabue, Grace Bumbry, Sándor Kónya, Raffaele Arié
Philharmonia Chorus and Orchestra

Some excellent singing here, including bass Arié who might not have the most resonant voice but sings with surprising authority. Grace Bumbry is magnificent – on fire. Ilva Ligabue makes a vibrant soprano soloist, despite some occasional grittiness of tone, floating top notes and maintaining a fine line. The balance amongst the quartet is excellent. Konya is a little cloudy but is really inside the music. He hasn't a trill but he sings softly when required. The sound is perfectly acceptable, without distortion, and everything hangs together; Giulini's conducting is impassioned and expressive, without a hint of the torpor which infected some later performances. Both choir and orchestra are on top form. This is undoubtedly the most satisfying of Giulini's recordings – and I include the famous studio recording, for which I do not much care.

Zubin Mehta (live 1967, Myto)

Gwyneth Jones, Grace Bumbry, Franco Corelli, Ezio Flagello
Los Angeles Philharmonic Orchestra & Chorus

A dream team but unfortunately in execrable sound with lots of rustling interference and Mehta goes off like a rocket in ridiculously rushed fashion in the opening then rarely lets up. Corelli is self-indulgent, ill-disciplined, rhythmically uncertain in ensuring that we hear "the voice" and loses his

way at the end of the “Ingemisco”. Somewhere in the murk is some great, if unsubtle, singing, but this is not for comfortable listening and cannot be recommended.

Summing up:

Most Verdi Requiem enthusiasts will already have a favourite modern recording and regard the best of those above as desirable supplements, especially for their raw energy and the contribution of key soloists such as Tebaldi, Wunderlich, Pinza or Siepi, who did not make a stereo recording of their roles. Leaving aside the inevitable comparative inadequacy of the sound, many of them are indispensable for more than historical reasons if you love this work; my own short-list includes Serafin (1939), de Sabata (1951 and 1954) and three (1949, 1960 and 1962) of Karajan’s four. I would include Giulini in 1960 but for the sound and the problem in the Offertorio. The surprise of my survey was that 1951 Tebaldi/de Sabata recording; it doesn’t feature the best four soloists – only Tebaldi is superlative - but it provides a wholly satisfying experience. However, so many of those mono recordings are recommendable in terms of artistry and excitement, if not sonics, that you could stick in a thumb and pull out a plum.

Ralph Moore