

Puccini's *La rondine* - A survey of the recordings

by Ralph Moore

Despite the continued popularity of "Il sogno di Doretta" and the magnificent quartet and chorus "Bevo al tuo fresco sorriso" in the finale of Act 2, *La rondine* remains something of a Cinderella among Puccini's mature output. He himself was never entirely satisfied with it, revising it three times following the premiere in 1916 and providing two different endings; upon his death in 1924, it still wasn't clear which version he preferred. It is supposedly a comic opera, in the sense that much of the action is light-hearted and no-one dies at the end, but the conclusion – whichever ending is adopted – is decidedly down-beat, with the lovers parting in shame and sorrow. Some even followed the lead provided by Puccini's editor and publisher, Tito Ricordi, who dismissed it as "Bad Lehár", and denigrate it as sub-standard fluff, but it is self-evidently weightier than the average operetta and contains some of Puccini's loveliest music. The Act 2 crowd scenes in particular contain some of the most joyously uplifting music in his whole oeuvre.

Thirty recordings are listed in the CLOR catalogue, although that has some omissions; I consider nine here, including one it does not include. There have been only four studio versions, the first of which is on two mono LPs and has never been released on CD. Fortunately, all three of the other stereo studio recordings are of high quality. One great singer who has made something of a speciality of the role of Magda in recent years is Angela Gheorghiu; my experience of hearing her perform it live at Covent Garden and the success of her studio recording with Alagna confirm her suitability for the part to which she brings great delicacy and allure; before her, other famous lyric sopranos who favoured it include Anna Moffo, Kiri Te Kanawa and two more Romanian divas, Ileana Cotrubas and Nelly Miricioiu.

The lack of a big aria for the tenor lead – although Puccini added one in his revision – plus the anticlimactic ending and the uncertain tone of the opera perhaps partially account for its comparative neglect but I would hardly call it second-rate Puccini; certainly, a fine performance or recording leaves a highly favourable impression. It is possible that some critics viewed it as retrospective or even retrograde in character, in that Puccini is apparently borrowing musical devices and situations from earlier works, especially *Madama Butterfly* and *La bohème*; nonetheless, it is far more "through-composed" than those works and at certain points introduces a new, chromatic harmonic musical language. Perhaps, too, the fact that it was launched during the Great War, when frivolity was deemed inappropriate, compromised its reception, especially as it had been commissioned by the enemy city of Vienna, home of all those decadent three-quarter-time tunes. Ultimately, in any case, having been snaffled by Ricordi's publishing rival Sonzogno, it was diplomatically premiered in Monte Carlo, where, yet by all accounts, audiences and critics responded quite positively; people always need respite from gloom. Nonetheless, it never really established itself in Italy; Milan remained hostile and justifiable doubts persist that that the dénouement in the final Act is something of a damp squib.

Performances of the standard 1917 edition often incorporate that aria which Puccini wrote for the tenor in 1920, "Parigi! È la città dei desideri". I like to see its inclusion, although the only studio recording to do so is on EMI in 1996, conducted by Pappano.

I have not included an assessment of the Naxos live recording on the grounds that my colleague Nick Barnard ([review](#)) makes it abundantly clear that it is too poor to merit consideration. Let me quote but one line from his review: "This recording is an unmitigated disaster without a single redeeming feature." Enough said. Nor have I considered recordings sung in any language other than Italian. Otherwise I selected five other live recordings for their potential merit, although I might as well declare straight away that none of those competes with the best studio accounts, either technically or artistically.

Another MWI colleague, Ian Lace, produced an excellent appreciation, historical presentation and comparative review of three recordings of *La rondine* back in the year 2000 and I commend that to the

interested reader as complementary to my survey ([review](#)). Like Ian, I have a special affection for this work, even if I acknowledge it as problematic.

The Recordings

Federico Del Cupolo – 1953 (studio, mono) NB: streamed and LP only; Columbia & Harmonia

Orchestra - Antonio Guarnieri Orchestra

Chorus - Coro di Milano

Magda de Civry - Eva de Luca

Ruggero Lastouc - Giancinto Prandelli

Rambaldo Fernandez - Vladimiro Pagano

Lisette - Ornella Rovero

Prunier - Luciano della Pergola

Yvette - Tatiana Bulgaron

Bianca - Angela Vercelli

Suzy - Vittoria Mastropaoletti

Perichaud - Teodoro Rovetta

Gobin - Alfredo Nobile

Crebillon - Teodoro Rovetta

Until this appears on CD, I include this for LP and aficionados and adherents to downloading or streaming, as you can still get it cheaply streamed on Amazon and various other websites - or hear it for free in its entirety on YouTube, too. The slightly peaky mono sound is perfectly listenable, if no aural treat. I never fail to be surprised by the quality in depth of Italian voices making recordings in the immediate post-war years; the only name known to me here is Giacinto Prandelli, a fine, plangent tenor with a lovely tone who had an estimable career, but he is partnered by some equally fine singers. The Prunier has a much bigger, beefier voice than light lyric tenor that is usually the case and is none the worse for that; the Lisette is pert and lively, with a lovely pure sound. I very much like Eva de Luca as Magda, too; she a very expressive, "old-fashioned", slightly piping soprano – a touch of Toti Dal Monte without being so arch - that soars deliciously and has plenty of power in reserve – and she phrases so musically. She apparently had some success in the USA on tour in Philadelphia with La Scala but why she never became a major star, I do not know. The conducting is very perky and alert, and the orchestra is one assembled by the prominent La Scala conductor Antonio Guarnieri, so presumably contains many members from that theatre here moonlighting.

The Act 2 crowd scene is lilting and vivacious by turns and the sense of ensemble strong. The duets between the lovers are enchanting and the Brindisi quartet sublimely sung – only just a little too fast. The singing in the third Act, if anything, gets even better; the tenderness of Prandelli's reading of his mother's letter is very moving. I love this recording; if it were in stereo, it would easily compete with the best.

Vincenzo Bellezza – 1961 (live, mono) Myto

Orchestra - Teatro dell'Opera di Roma

Chorus - Teatro dell'Opera di Roma

Magda de Civry - Giovanni di Rocco

Ruggero Lastouc - Franco Bonisolli

Rambaldo Fernandez - Emilio Salvodi

Lisette - Leyla Bersiani

Prunier - Manlio Rocchi

Yvette - Gianna Lollini

Bianca - Maria Huder

Suzy - Corinna Bozza
 Perichaud - Graziano de Vivo
 Gobin - Gabriele de Julis
 Crebillon - Carlo Platania

The mono sound in what I take, given the faint background interference, to be a radio broadcast of a stage performance from Spoleto, complete with prominent prompter, is really very good here, allowing us to hear straight away some iffy intonation – at least until they warm up – and screechy strings throughout in the Rome orchestra. The conductor was very experienced and was invited annually to the Met between 1926 and 1935; he knows what he's doing here and the ebb and flow of the music is effortless. Some of the singing is in fact very acceptable if not always refined; the Lisette is especially vibrant and personable. Few, if any, of the cast names here will be recognised even by seasoned operaphiles, with the obvious exception of the twenty-three-year-old Franco Bonisolli and, possibly, Giovanna di Rocco, both making their debuts. She has a pretty lyric soprano but in some high-flying passages she tends to run out of substance in her tone; at other times she floats the line affectingly. The main interest here, however, lies in hearing what Bonisolli does with Ruggero. His tenor has heft and he sings with melting tone and considerable delicacy, although he is a little too prone to the Gigli "sob in the voice". His is already a voice of substance and distinction; his admirers might want to invest in this memento of his gifts, even if this isn't necessarily a top choice.

Francesco Molinari-Pradelli – 1966 (studio, stereo) RCA
 Orchestra - RCA Italiana
 Chorus - RCA Italiana

Magda de Civry - Anna Moffo
 Ruggero Lastouc - Daniele Barioni
 Rambaldo Fernandez - Mario Sereni
 Lisette - Graziella Sciutti
 Prunier - Piero De Palma
 Yvette - Sylvia Brigham-Dimiziani
 Bianca - Virginia De Notarisefani
 Suzy - Franca Mattiucci
 Perichaud - Mario Basiola jnr.
 Gobin - Fernando Iacopucci
 Crebillon - Robert Amis El Hage
 Georgette - Sylvia Brigham-Dimiziani
 Gabriella - Virginia De Notarisefani
 Lolette - Franca Mattiucci
 Rabonnier - Robert Amis El Hage
 Uno Studente - Fernando Iacopucci
 Maggiordomo - Robert Amis El Hage
 Un uomo che fischia - Alessandro Alessandroni

Anna Moffo made so many lovely recordings in the 60's before her sudden vocal decline and hers is nearly always my preferred version, despite strong competition, of such operas as *La Traviata*, *Luisa Miller* and, here, *La Rondine*. She is beautifully matched with the aristocratic baritone Mario Sereni and the under-recorded Daniele Barioni, plus a supporting cast of comprimario singer stalwarts such Piero De Palma and Graziella Sciutti. All have such immediately recognisable, individual voices: Sereni, slightly grainy; Moffo with that seductive hint of huskiness; Barioni deploying a hefty but sensitive tenor con gusto - it's a pity that he isn't here given the extra entrance aria Puccini later inserted. Molinari-Pradelli knows exactly how Puccini should go; his tempi are flexible and affectionate - although just occasionally I feel that Pappano, in the most recent set, keeps things going with just a little more vivacity and energy.

Francesco Molinari-Pradelli – 1971 (live, mono) Opera d'Oro

Orchestra - Teatro Comunale di Bologna
 Chorus - Teatro Comunale di Bologna

Magda de Civry - Jeanette Pilou
 Ruggero Lastouc - Aldo Bottion
 Rambaldo Fernandez - Guido Mazzini
 Lisette - Cecilia Fusco
 Prunier - Piero De Palma

I include this as it is superficially attractive, being available cheaply, conducted by someone whom we know, from his studio recording, is master of the score and fields an attractive cast, including the charming and woefully under-recorded Jeanette Pilou, who made so few commercial recordings – as far as I know, only one as Micaëla, to Régine Crespin's Carmen. She has a lovely, full, but silvery, sound and is really alluring. Aldo Bottion is slightly throaty but still very good as an ardent, youthful-sounding Ruggero and we know that Piero De Palma makes a winning Prunier; he is well partnered by a vivacious Cecilia Fusco as Lisette. Unfortunately, the recording seems to have been by someone in the audience considerably removed from the stage with a mono tape-recorder on his lap, so the sound is vile; applause and coughing are better caught than what's happening on stage. Unless you are a die-hard fan who must have a souvenir of Pilou, this cannot be recommended.

Nino Verchi – 1971 (live, mono) Premiere Opera

Orchestra - Teatro del Giglio di Lucca
 Chorus - Teatro del Giglio di Lucca

Magda de Civry - Virginia Zeani
 Ruggero Lastouc - Luciano Saldari
 Lisette - Gabriella Ravazzi
 Prunier - Angelo Marchiandi

Unfortunately, the terrible sound and – insofar as I can hear – an even worse orchestra, of comical ineptitude – completely negate the attraction of being able to hear the woefully under-recorded Virginia Zeani. Some of the singing sounds pretty provincial, too, and Zeani sounds clumsy, using too much lower register and over-singing, with excessive vibrato. It is difficult to understand how a performance made in 1971 can be so poorly recorded, even on amateur equipment, but there it is; don't be tempted by this one.

Lorin Maazel - 1981(studio, digital) CBS

Orchestra - London Symphony Orchestra
 Chorus - Ambrosian Opera Chorus

Magda de Civry - Kiri Te Kanawa
 Ruggero Lastouc - Plácido Domingo
 Rambaldo Fernandez - Leo Nucci
 Lisette - Mariana Nicolesco
 Prunier - David Rendall
 Yvette - Lilian Watson
 Bianca - Gillian Knight
 Suzy - Linda Finnie
 Perichaud - Lindsay Benson
 Gobin - Vernon Midgley
 Crebillon - David Beavan

Georgette - Maryetta Midgley
 Gabriella - Mary Thomas
 Lolette - Ursula Connors
 Rabonnier - Bruce Ogston
 Uno Studente - Alan Byers
 Maggiordomo - Oliver Broome

My, how I love this opera and this recording in particular confirms that attachment. The role of Magda is one Kiri Te Kanawa was born to inhabit; she sings "Il sogno di Doretta" with such ethereal, floating beauty that not even Angela Gheorghiu, whose timbre is similar, in her excellent, more modern recording under Pappano, can approach her.

Domingo is perhaps a tad beefy of timbre for the role and he doesn't have much to do, especially as he isn't given Ruggero's "Parigi" aria, which could surely at least have been included as an appendix, but he lavishes his golden tones on the music he is given; he and Te Kanawa make an enchanting couple. Leo Nucci as Rambaldo is in the pre-bleat and wobble stage that all too soon afflicted his singing and amongst the excellent British supporting cast in David Rendall, whose distinctive and very individual tenor with its fast vibrato I have always enjoyed; he makes Prunier witty and charming as well as being a little jaded and cynical, as befits the poet Rodolfo twenty years on. I like Mariana Nicolesco's vibrant Lisette; she makes a good foil to Rendall's Prunier.

Maazel catches the sweet melancholy of this strange tale just right and the Ambrosian Opera Chorus and LSO are first rate. The real test of ensemble is the Bullier scene in Act 2 and it certainly comes off; I like the intermittent atmospheric crowd background noise and even if Pappano manages more élan, the brindisi quartet is divine.

The early digital sound is fine. A peculiarity, however, is in this transfer on to two CDs, the first has only two tracks (38:20 + 29:45) – one for each Act – and the second has but one (35:17), for Act 3 – maddening.

Gianluigi Gelmetti – 1981 (live radio broadcast, stereo) Warner Fonit Cetra

Orchestra - RAI Milano
 Chorus - RAI Milano

Magda de Civry - Cecilia Gasdia
 Ruggero Lastouc - Alberto Cupido
 Rambaldo Fernandez - Alberto Rinaldi
 Lisette - Adelina Scarabelli
 Prunier - Max René Cosotti
 Yvette - Monica Berghi
 Bianca - Ilaria Galgani
 Suzy - Luisa Gallmetzer
 Perichaud - Vinicio Cocchieri
 Gobin - Gianfranco Bertagna
 Crebillon - Savino Di Ciommo
 Maggiordomo - Lucio Foliela

The sound in this live performance is very good: immediate and well-balanced – a relief after the three, preceding live, mono recordings and there is as a real sense of energy and spontaneity about the performance as a whole – although |I could do without the lady who is discreetly but persistently clearing her throat at intervals throughout the performance – and someone cannot refrain from humming an accompaniment to the unvoiced phrases of Prunier's first rendering of the Big Tune! Cecilia Gasdia is clearly on top the role of Magda: she has a full creamy, tone and excellent top notes,

although I do not find that she has the touch of airy, dreamy fantasy that makes Te Kanawa and Gheorghiu so appealingly touching. She sounds a touch cloudy in "Doretta's Dream", as if she hasn't warmed up – this is live, after all. Her farewell to Ruggero is very moving.

He is Alfredo Cupido: a good, robust, slightly coarse tenor. There are times when I could wish for more tenderness in his manner but he gives a strong, likeable performance. His diction is exceptionally clear, too. The secondary pair of lovers are attractive, too: Max René Cosotto is similar to De Palma, characterising and singing strongly; Adelina Scarabelli is likewise forthright and assertive as Lisette. The Rambaldo is the same singer who successfully reprised the role for Pappano fifteen years later.

I liked this recording more than I had expected; it is the best of the live performances, even if the best studio recordings are more refined and delicate.

Antonio Pappano – 1996 (studio, digital) EMI

Orchestra - London Symphony Orchestra

Chorus - London Voices

Magda de Civry - Angela Gheorghiu

Ruggero Lastouc - Roberto Alagna

Rambaldo Fernandez - Alberto Rinaldi

Lisette - Inva Mula(-Tchako)

Prunier - William Matteuzzi

Yvette - Patrizia Bicciré

Bianca - Patrizia Ciofi

Suzy - Monica Bacelli

Perichaud - Riccardo Simonetti

Gobin - Toby Spence

Crebillon - Enrico Fissore

Georgette - Patrizia Bicciré

Gabriella - Patrizia Ciofi

Lolette - Monica Bacelli

Rabonnier - Enrico Fissore

Uno Studente - Andrew Busher

Maggiordomo - Enrico Fissore

While nothing shakes my loyalty to the older recording conducted by Maazel with a youthful Domingo and Te Kanawa, this is still splendid and in slightly better sound than that recording from the early 80's. It's not perfect: while the three principals are superb, the supporting cast is weaker than in that Maazel recording or indeed in the excellent 1966 RCA one starring Anna Moffo, which is obviously less brilliant sonically but also has much to commend it.

Particular weaknesses here are the white, whining tenor of William Matteuzzi, who acts well but whose successful career in vocal terms remains a perennial mystery to opera buffs of my acquaintance and the dull, workaday baritone of Alberto Rinaldi. Strengths, in addition to the three leads and the digital sound, are the flexibility of Pappano's phrasing and the playing of the LSO - the same orchestra who did such a fine job for Maazel. I much prefer David Rendall as Prunier and Leo Nucci made a pleasant Rambaldo before the scoop and bleat set in. Mario Sereni for Molinari-Pradelli is the most elegant and distinguished of all. Both Inva Mula and Mariana Nicolescu are charming as Lisette and there isn't much to choose between the performances of Kiri Te Kanawa and Angela Gheorghiu, who are both enchanting as Magda, floating their top Cs and B flats exquisitely in a role made for them both; for all her charms I don't think Anna Moffo quite matches either of them for steadiness and purity.

Another great advantage to this recording is that Alagna is given Ruggero's "Parigi!" aria, extolling the excitement of the capital, missing in the Maazel and Molinari-Pradelli recordings and a real highlight here. In addition, he sings the first version, set to a different text, as an appendix, along with an excerpt from "Le villi". His slightly grainy tenor is ideally suited to portraying the callow, naive Ruggero - although both the honeyed Domingo and the more baritonal and occasionally slightly unsteady Barioni are very attractive.

If you doubt the attractions of this recording, sample the quartet "Bevo al tuo fresco sorriso", set against the chorus; it is surely one of the most beautiful and uplifting melodies Puccini ever wrote and Pappano catches its swagger perfectly.

A final bonus is the inclusion of some lovely excerpts for Alagna and symphonic interludes from Puccini's first opera *Le villi* and the song "Morire" derived from Puccini's first attempt at an entrance aria for Ruggero. Given the unavailability of the Maazel recording and the slightly less accomplished level of the old RCA one, this remains a very attractive option to acquaint yourself with an unjustly neglected opera.

Ivan Repušić - 2015 (live composite, digital) CPO

Orchestra - Münchner Rundfunkorchester

Chorus - Chor des Bayerischen Rundfunks

Magda de Civry - Elena Mosuc

Ruggero Lastouc - Yosep Kang

Rambaldo Fernandez - Jan-Hendrik Rootering

Lisette - Evelin Novak

Prunier - Álvaro Zambrano

Yvette - Siobhan Stagg

Bianca - Elbenita Kajtazi

Suzy - Stephanie Lauricella

Perichaud - Matthias Ettmayr

Gobin - Taro Takagi

Crebillon - Wolfgang Klose

Georgette - Siobhan Stagg

Gabriella - Elbenita Kajtazi

Lolette - Stephanie Lauricella

Rabonnier - Matthias Ettmayr

Maggiordomo - Wolfgang Klose

Despite supposedly being recorded live from what is presumably two performances in the Prinzregententheater, Munich, the sound here is as good as, and indistinguishable from, a studio production, with almost no extraneous noises—indeed, were it not for a couple of stray coughs, I would find it hard to believe that this was not recorded in rehearsal or separately from the performances; balances are ideal and the ambience rich and full. The orchestral playing is superb and the conducting alert and flexible; the rumbustious opening to Act 2 is splendid and the swooning string strings just prior to the great quartet are especially seductive.

This would give much pleasure if you attended it in the theatre, but compared with the preceding studio recordings, there are some snags. The voices in this predominately young cast are fine and fresh, but only one is of the real star-quality or as individual as the roster of sopranos and tenors on the best versions; most worryingly, despite possessing a big, warm, beautiful tone, Elena Mosuc cannot float her notes with the ease required and a worrying pulse sometimes obtrudes on sustained high notes; the last top A of her Act 1 Romanza “Fanciulla, è sbocciata l’amore” is not very pleasant. She also has a habit of approaching those high notes by attacking the semitone below then “lifting” up to them; it’s

not really a grace-note or an appoggiatura, but more of a vocal crutch. Elsewhere she is highly expressive and affecting, and some will mind the beat in her voice less than I do. Lyric tenor Álvaro Zambrano makes a fluent, idiomatic Prunier; his basic sound is somewhat grainy but he is certainly preferable to the whining Matteuzzi for Pappano, but he is not as characterful or impassioned as David Rendall for Maazel. Evelin Novak makes a lively Lisette but her soprano has a scratchy edge to it. The veteran Rootering contributes an elderly-sounding, again slightly wobbly, Rambaldo. Best of all is Korean tenor Yosep Kang as Ruggero; he has a clean, bright sound and his Italian diction is admirable—and he is given his extra entrance aria, too. His appearance lifts the quality of the whole performance and in his duets with Mosuc they sing with great passion and intensity – although his is not the biggest voice and he is sometimes drowned out by her. His Act 3 arioso “Dimmi che vuoi seguirmi” is another highlight, sung with exemplary control and delicacy.

An Italian-German libretto is provided in the booklet, but not in English; the notes, synopsis and biographies are translated into English, however.

For all its virtues, this is not quite on the same level as the best but still presents Puccini's neglected opera in a highly favourable light.

Recommendations

All four are studio recordings.

First choice: Maazel, 1981(digital)

Second choice: Pappano 1996 (digital)

Third choice: Molinari-Pradelli 1966 (stereo)

Fourth choice: Del Cupolo 1953 (mono)

The best live recording is Gelmetti, 1981 (stereo).

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