

Cilea's *Adriana Lecouvreur* - A Partial Survey of the Discography
by Ralph Moore

Of nearly seventy extant recordings of this opera, a mere four have been made in the studio, so choice in that regard is limited, especially as most punters would regretfully concede that the last studio recording – made fully thirty years ago – is not in the running, as the pair of veteran singers who made it, Joan Sutherland and Carlo Bergonzi, were sadly both past their prime. Everything since has been live; especially commendable are performances by that fine singer Nelly Miricioiu but they are mostly in poor to average sound and available only on websites which make copies of “private” recordings to order. The first recording was made in 1949 and is thus in relatively primitive, vintage sound; that leaves the field open to only two studio, stereo versions conducted by Capuana and Levine respectively. Fortunately, both of those are superb; we can cast our net wider by including some excellent, live, mono recordings starring singers of the calibre of Olivero, Corelli, Scotto, Caballé, Domingo and Carreras, but inevitably compromises have to be made regarding the quality of their sound.

Critics have been exceptionally patronising about the music and I am amused by the number of times I have read the death-sentence pronounced upon this verismo opera as an absurd, cheesy, one-tune vocal slug-fest, yet it remains a perennial favourite amongst some opera cognoscenti and great singer-actresses, and it is still possible to find tenors who want to sing the relatively ungrateful role of Maurizio. That accusation that it is musically “short-winded” with only one big tune, endlessly recycled, is absurd but contains a grain of truth, in that “La dolcissima effigie” does recur in many guises. However, there are some other great arias, from the brief but deeply poignant “L’anima stanca” to the barnstorming “Acerba voluttà”, and of course the two lovely arias for Adriana at the opening and close of the opera. It contains some unusual items, too, like Michonnet’s heart-breaking, quasi-parlando narrative as from the wings he watches Adriana perform.

A more justified criticism is of the storyline, culminating in the death of the heroine by sniffing a bunch of poison violets. Given that novichok was probably in short supply in 1902, the idea remains fanciful, but theatrically effective, while the impenetrability of the plot was apparently exacerbated by the cuts Cilea felt obliged to make during rehearsal. In truth, I don’t much care because the situations thereby set up are musically so satisfying, but I admit to sometimes not really understanding the motivation behind the behaviour of the characters - or indeed much caring. Shocking, I know. Just sit back and enjoy the ride.

I consider twelve recordings below: all four studio recordings and a selection of live, stage performances plus two radio broadcasts and a film track.

Federico Del Cupolo – 1949 (studio, mono)

Orchestra - Teatro alla Scala

Chorus - Teatro alla Scala

Adriana Lecouvreur - Mafalda Favero

Maurizio - Nicola Filacuridi

Principe di Bouillon - Giannetto Zini

Principessa di Bouillon - Elena Nicolai

Michonnet - Luigi Borgonovo

Quinault - Ottavio Serpo

Poisson - Giulio Scarinci

Mlle. Jouvenot - Renata Villani

Mlle. Dangeville - Maria Marcucci

L'Abate di Chazeuil - Gino Del Signore

Despite the peaky, acid, vintage sound, the listener can clearly hear the quality of the singing and, especially, the vividness with which the singers use the Italian text; the exchanges between Favero and Nicolai are highly dramatic, Nicolai making a good foil to Favero and her "Acerba voluttà" is powerful, with trenchant low notes and a fearsome top. Favero was a great actress with a fine spinto voice but some might find her delivery melodramatic. Nicola Filacuridi has a comparatively light, attractive tenor and maintains a good legato; the distortion at climaxes spoils their passionate duets. Forgotten baritone Luigi Borgonovo – teacher of Corelli and Pavarotti – has a light, flexible voice and sings sensitively.

This cannot be recommendation for reasons of the sound, but historically-minded opera buffs will enjoy it, as do I.

Alfredo Simonetto – 1950 (radio broadcast, mono) Warner Fonit, Cetra
Orchestra - RAI Milano
Chorus - RAI Milano

Adriana Lecouvreur - Carla Gavazzi
Maurizio - Giacinto Prandelli
Principe di Bouillon - Plinio Clabassi
Principessa di Bouillon - Miti Truccato Pace
Michonnet - Saturno Meletti
Quinault - Pasquale Lombardo
Poisson - Tommaso Soley
Mlle. Jouvenot - Loretta Di Lelio
Mlle. Dangeville - Jole Farolfi
L'Abate di Chazeuil - Aldo Bertocci
Un maggiordomo - Remo Rossetti

Excellent mono sound belies the age of this recording and helps us appreciate the high quality of the voices here; the broadcast sounds as polished as a studio recording and if it was made in front of a studio audience, there is no noise. This is an all-Italian cast, vocally acute, with superb diction, and dramatically homogeneous in the ensembles; if you have some Italian you won't need a libretto to follow the action. Meletti, with his fast vibrato and fleet delivery, is very characterful and somewhat younger-sounding than usual; he is immensely touching in his monologue watching Andrea's performance. Gavazzi is instantly a real presence, even in her spoken entrance before she sings, with a voice vibrant and both extremes of its compass. She is helped by the flexible, nuanced conducting of Simonetto, who clearly understands and helps his singers.

Giacinto Prandelli isn't so much remembered these days and is probably known to most collectors as Luigi in Tito Gobbi's famous first recording of *Il Tabarro*. He was obviously highly regarded and I keep coming across his name in the surveys I have been making of recordings of important works: for example, he partnered Tebaldi in her live, 1951 Verdi *Requiem* under De Sabata and starred as Faust in Boris Christoff's 1956 recording of *Mefistofele*. His voice is light and attractive, if just a touch constricted, and he sing with great passion and intelligence; his dynamic gradations in "L'anima ho stanca" are simply

Miti Truccato Pace as the Princess does not have as stentorian a voice as Cossotto, Simionato or Obratzova; she has good top and bottom notes but lacks firmness in the centre of her tone. As such, she is the weakest link in the quartet of leading roles and only just convinces but she is a good vocal actor and still generates tension in her duets with Prandelli and Gavazzi.

Music critic David Hamilton's dismissal of this recording in *Opera on Record 2* strikes me as nasty, mean-spirited and inaccurate. I very much like it.

Alfredo Simonetto – 1955 (film soundtrack, mono) Great Opera Performances

Orchestra - RAI Milano

Chorus - RAI Milano

Adriana Lecouvreur - Marcella Pobbe
Maurizio - Nicola Filacuridi
Principe di Bouillon - Carlo Badioli
Principessa di Bouillon - Fedora Barbieri
Michonnet - Otello Borgonovo
Quinault - Eraldo Coda
Poisson - Edda Vincenzi
Mlle. Jovenot - Sandra Ballinari
Mlle. Dangeville - Miti Truccato Pace
L'Abate di Chazeuil - Gino Del Signore
Un maggiordomo - Walter Artioli

You can watch the fuzzy black and white film on YouTube but the obvious lip-synching and hammy acting by all concerned, geared more to the more expansive gestures of the operatic stage than the camera, are irritating. However, you do notice how good the voices are, even of the comprimarios. Apart from the stentorian Fedora Barbieri, who of course went on to have a long and brilliant international career, the names of the other principal artists will be known only to seasoned operaphiles, but they are fine singers, without being especially characterful. Bright, vibrant lirico-spinto soprano Marcella Pobbe will also be known to collectors for a couple of recordings she made for Cetra, including *Mefistofele* with Tagliavini and Neri. Tenor Nicola Filacuridi had a very successful career until he retired early; he has a somewhat tight, penetrating voice and sings sensitively but does not always thrill. The baritone, Otello Borgonovo, is equally serviceable without being memorable. We already know how well Simonetto conducts this opera.

The sound on CD is as woolly as the picture on film but listenable. This is a pleasant but ultimately dispensable version, given the alternatives.

Mario Rossi – 1959 (live, mono) Opera d'Oro, Hardy, Melodram

Orchestra - Teatro di San Carlo di Napoli

Chorus - Teatro di San Carlo di Napoli

Adriana Lecouvreur - Magda Olivero
Maurizio - Franco Corelli
Principe di Bouillon - Antonio Cassinelli
Principessa di Bouillon - Giulietta Simionato
Michonnet - Ettore Bastianini
Quinault - Augusto Frati
Poisson - Renato Ercolani
Mlle. Jovenot - Rossana Zerbini
Mlle. Dangeville - Anna Di Stasio
L'Abate di Chazeuil - Mariano Caruso

This is one of my "desert island discs"; I cannot imagine hearing four greater voices in a vehicle more suitable for them than this neglected verismo masterpiece. We have four of the post-war superstars of Italian opera singing to the manner born: Olivero, so sadly under-recorded, shows why she is one of the top half dozen voices in any opera connoisseur's list of dramatico-spinto sopranos, producing among so many other wonderful moments, a stunning crescendo in "Io sono l'umile ancella" (almost as good as her 1938 version); Corelli often cavalier as usual with note values but trumpeting those

squillo top notes while also achieving a remarkable degree of tenderness when required, Bastianini in full control of that beautiful, nut-brown voice and Simionato chewing the scenery with both vocal registers uninhibitedly wide open - this is a dream cast that makes one wish time travel were possible. The Neapolitan audience knows its hearing something special and I don't find their raucous appreciation irritating; it just adds to the riotous sense of occasion. Rossi lets this piece go exactly the way it should: not too much subtlety, plenty of fire and pace, allowing one glorious melody after another to roll out.

The sound is remarkably clear for a live recording fifty years old; there is a little congestion in ensembles but the voices are to the fore while orchestral details emerge clearly. There could not be a more persuasive advocacy for this opera than this recording; a studio performance would probably not have been so viscerally thrilling in any case. This recording, indispensable to lovers of *Adriana Lecouvreur*, used to be available cheaply in Opera d'Oro's standard issue or you could splash out on the deluxe version with libretto; unfortunately, both have become scarce and expensive.

Franco Capuana – 1961 (studio, stereo)

Orchestra - Santa Cecilia

Chorus - Santa Cecilia

Adriana Lecouvreur - Renata Tebaldi

Maurizio - Mario Del Monaco

Principe di Bouillon - Silvio Maionica

Principessa di Bouillon - Giuletta Simionato

Michonnet - Giulio Fioravanti

Quinault - Giovanni Foiani

Poisson - Angelo Mercuriali

Mlle. Jouvenot - Dora Carral

Mlle. Dangeville - Fernanda Cadoni

L'Abate di Chazeuil - Franco Ricciardi

Un maggiordomo - Angelo Mercuriali

The attractions of this recording are obvious: excellent, early Decca stereo sound, three superstar artists in favourite roles and a conductor highly experienced in verismo idiom. In addition, we hear an unexpectedly excellent Michonnet from the lesser-known baritone Giulio Fioravanti and the all-Italian supporting cast is first-rate, featuring singers who regularly recorded in that era.

Tebaldi luxuriates in a part made for the grand scale of her voice and her affinity with the verismo affect. Yes; some harshness creeps into her top notes but the sheer heft and volume of her sound are seductive. "Poveri fiori" is powerfully and emotionally sung. She and Del Monaco sang together in this opera frequently and both milk the opportunities to display voice, voice and more voice. Del Monaco is brash but not ugly in his generous outpouring of big tenor tone and he can refine it when necessary, as on the phrase "Bella tu sei" in his first aria and on its repeat in the ensuing love duet, but really, such music does not require refinement but thrills, which he provides regularly. "L'anima ho stanca" is a tour de force, in every sense of the word.; Del Monaco provides a stream of pure, steady tone, controlling the dynamics in masterly fashion. Simionato completes a trio of can belto specialists, repeating the electrifying portrayal of the Princess she delivered live in Naples in 1959, but of course here we may enjoy it in studio, stereo sound. Her voice resonates freely at both ends of its range; her plunges into a lower register are arresting and all the more so because, bafflingly, in subsequent interviews she denied that she ever employed that portion of the mezzo voice.

Fioravanti has a light, but incisive, slightly nasal baritone and sings most sensitively, even if he does not rival Gobbi for nuance or Bastianini for vocal splendour. His exchanges with Adriana when he tentatively broaches the subject of marriage are touching.

When listening to this recording, I imagine that it is my favourite version, but if I then switch to the Levine studio recording, I think the same about that. You cannot go wrong with either.

Oliviero De Fabritiis – 1963 (live, mono) Testament

Orchestra - Teatro di San Carlo di Napoli

Chorus - Teatro di San Carlo di Napoli

Adriana Lecouvreur - Magda Olivero

Maurizio - Juan Oncina

Principe di Bouillon - Enrico Campi

Principessa di Bouillon - Adriana Lazzarini

Michonnet - Sesto Bruscantini

Quinault - Augusto Frati

Poisson - Vittorio Pandano

Mlle. Jouvenot - Elena Barcis

Mlle. Dangeville - Anna Di Stasio

L'Abate di Chazeuil - Piero De Palma

I am not sure why the Testament label saw fit to issue this 1963 live recording, as if you want to hear Magda Olivero in this, her greatest, signature role, there are already several better options where she is either better partnered or recorded in better sound, or both. The mono sound here is thin and dry, and distorts in climaxes, but is also plagued by a constant rushing background noise almost like the sound of a blow-torch; strange. There is also a fair amount of ill-timed clapping, often covering the music.

Two superior options are the famous 1959 live recording from Naples also starring Corelli, Simionato and Bastianini and the stereo recording from Amsterdam in 1965, where the fifty-five-year-old diva is still in finest voice and gives what is possibly her finest rendition of Adriana. However, that recording shares a major disadvantage with this Edinburgh performance in the presence of a weak tenor as Maurizio. Admittedly, the competition is daunting if we look to Corelli, Del Monaco and a young Domingo in warmest voice in the superb 1976 Levine studio recording with Scotto, but the role demands a verismo tenor of real heft and presence - and that isn't Juan Oncina. He was an excellent lyric tenor who in the latter years of his career attempted to move up from Rossini and Donizetti to meatier roles; apparently, he was here a last-minute replacement for Flaviano Labò, who would have been far preferable, as in truth Oncina simply cannot fill the swelling lines of Maurizio's music and ends up sounding like breakfast for Olivero's grand Adriana. Too often he sounds more like a comprimario than the heroic lead; the start of "L'anima ho stanca" is really limp and he fails to inject sufficient power into big phrases like "Bella tu sei, tu sei gioconda". I cannot conceive of anyone fully enjoying this beefiest of verismo operas without the presence of a tenor of the Corelli type with ringing top notes and a real swagger in his sound; Oncina's pleasant *tenore di grazia* is always a size too small. The otherwise all-Italian cast imported into Scotland does not let the side down but is bettered elsewhere, especially in Naples and for Levine. The sound on that Naples performance isn't hugely better but I find it preferable to this Testament set, as it is more immediate and without the background noise - and of course it has the unparalleled cast as listed above.

When it comes to assessing the relative merits of baritones who have recorded the role of the gentle, quietly despairing Michonnet, the honours are more even. Many a great baritone has included this part in his repertoire for its lyrical line and opportunities to generate pathos. Sesto Bruscantini here may honourably stand shoulder to shoulder with Bastianini, Capecchi and Milnes; he did not possess the amplest voice compared with the likes of that cohort but he is sensitive, sonorous and subtle, even if no-one approaches Gobbi's tour de force in his delivery of "Ecco il monologo" in his 1963 recital album for EMI.

The role of the Princess of Bouillon has attracted big-voiced, stentorian mezzo-sopranos of the carpet-chewing variety and there is no shortage of high-voltage assumptions in the catalogue, starting with the great Giulietta Simionato who is present in both the live Naples and Tebaldi studio recordings. Just as imposing are Fiorenza Cossotto with Caballé and Obratzova for Levine; it must be admitted that neither Mimi Aarden in Amsterdam nor Adriana Lazzarini here in Edinburgh is as good as those three famously voluminously-voiced singers. Both are more than adequate but Lazzarini's big mezzo is rather blowsy, with scratchy top notes that tend to flap.

The supporting cast, headed by veteran Piero de Palma, is fine and de Fabritiis alternately drives and caresses Cilea's lovely score with an appearance of utter ease and familiarity. The Neapolitan orchestra is excellent apart from some sour tuning from the oboe in track 17 on CD1.

Returning to the *raison d'être* of this issue, Olivero's voice is by no means conventionally beautiful but her legendary presence and intensity as an actress in combination with her wonderful control over dynamics, exquisite *messa di voce* and sheer commitment to the role make ownership of at least one of her recordings of *Adriana Lecouvreur* compulsory for the opera buff. However, I would not advise that this relatively expensive Testament issue be a first choice when the Naples performance is available on the Opera d'Oro budget label, offering rather better sound and a considerably more impressive cast. Furthermore, Testament provides in the notes biographies and three personal reminiscences, including one by Olivero herself, but bafflingly not even a synopsis, let alone a libretto.

Fulvio Vernizzi – 1965 (live radio broadcast, mono) Opera Fanatic
Orchestra - Netherlands Radio Orchestra
Chorus - Netherlands Radio Chorus

Adriana Lecouvreur - Magda Olivero
Maurizio - Fernando Ferrari
Principe di Bouillon - Franco Ventriglia
Principessa di Bouillon - Mimi Aarden
Michonnet - Renato Capecchi
Quinault - Max von Egmond
Poisson - Simon van der Geest
Mlle. Jouvenot - Elisabeth Lugt
Mlle. Dangeville - Else de Graaf
L'Abate di Chazeuil - Mario Carlin

Having raved about the 1959 live Naples recording with a dream cast, I am almost as enthusiastic about this Amsterdam performance six years later. Certainly the sound is better - very good indeed, in fact, for so old a live recording and Olivero, far from having deteriorated in the intervening six years, at 55 years old sounds as good as ever, finding even more nuance and intensity in her portrayal of the role she was born - and then re-born, coming out of retirement at Cilea's request - to sing.

Furthermore, Renato Capecchi matches Bastianini as Michonnet, in a very touching, beautifully vocalised characterisation. The secondary parts are very well taken; the conducting and orchestral playing are superb.

However, there is no disguising that tenor Ferrando Ferrari, while perfectly adequate, is no Franco Corelli and cannot summon up the heft and visceral thrill at the disposal of his more celebrated compatriot. He is a little dry and husky up top, sometimes bleats and is not always steady; Corelli simply has so much more voice. Nonetheless, he makes a very creditable job of his two big arias,

especially the fleeting arioso "L'anima ho stanca". Mimi Aarden is not as sensuous or voluptuous of voice as Simionato; she is a tad matronly and also marginally unsteady - but she has a dark, powerful voice and throws herself into the part of the jealous Princess.

Gian-Franco Masini – 1975 (live, mono) Opera d'Oro, Gala
Orchestra - Orchestre Lyrique de Radio France
Chorus - Choeurs National de Radio France

Adriana Lecouvreur - Montserrat Caballé
Maurizio - Plácido Domingo
Principe di Bouillon - Orazio Mori
Principessa di Bouillon - Janet Coster
Michonnet - Attilio D'Orazi
Quinault - Jacques Villisech
Poisson - Gérard Friedman
Mlle. Jouvenot - Claudie Saneva
Mlle. Dangeville - Emmy Greger
L'Abate di Chazeuil - Piero De Palma

Caballé is in her prime here, floating those exquisite pianissimi across the auditorium and delighting the audience but also occasionally sounding shrill on loudest, highest notes. Domingo is similarly on form and makes a lovely job of "L'anima ho stanca", but he, too, evinces some signs of strain when required to belt. Attilio D'Orazi is a fine vocal actor but hasn't quite enough heft in his neat baritone to carry off the big moments completely satisfactorily. Janet Coster makes a powerful, fruity-voiced Principessa, deploying a rich lower register and a ringing top – she had quite a voice; her encounter with Caballé at the end of Act 2 is thrilling.

Caballé herself is in finest voice, with her lower register in good shape and melodramatically throws herself into the chesty parlando recital of the speech from *Phèdre* at the end of Act 3. Likewise, she milks "Poveri fiori" for all its worth but achieves a kind of transcendent beauty by taking it so slowly.

If you want her in the lead role, her performance from the following year is marginally more attractive, being in stereo and with a more glamorous cast – as long as you like Carreras rather than Domingo as Maurizio.

Gian-Franco Masini – 1976 (live, stereo) Legato, Myto, House of Opera
Orchestra - NHK Symphony Orchestra
Chorus - NHK Italian Opera Chorus

Adriana Lecouvreur - Montserrat Caballé
Maurizio - José Carreras
Principe di Bouillon - Ivo Vinco
Principessa di Bouillon - Fiorenza Cossotto
Michonnet - Attilio D'Orazi
Quinault - Paolo Mazzotta
Poisson - Pietro di Vietri
Mlle. Jouvenot - Scilly Fortunato
Mlle. Dangeville - Nella Verri
L'Abate di Chazeuil - Piero De Palma

This 1976 live performance by mostly Italian singers on tour in the Far East is better known as a grainy video but has had various incarnations on a variety of labels. Three of the principal singers are mega-stars; we have two Spaniards in José Carreras and Montserrat Caballé, and the Italian

supporting cast includes many a fine comprimario voice such as the unmistakable Piero di Palma as the l'Abate and Cossotto's husband, bass Ivo Vinco, as Il Principe. Caballé, Cossotto and Carreras are all in barn-storming form; wherever Cossotto was singing at this stage of her career, you could guarantee that it was not going to be a night of subtle singing and her co-singers also indulge in some splendid scenery-chewing, viz. Caballé's gloriously OTT spot of chesty parlando when she uses the extract from "Phèdre" to attack the Princess (track 5 of disc 2). She is sometimes a bit harsh or matronly of tone at forte, but swoops are rare, the trademark pianissimi are floated for our delight and she is wholly inside the part. It is always a pleasure to hear Carreras in his youthful prime before the wobble, even if he hasn't quite the heft of a true verismo belter like Del Monaco.

Baritone Attilio d'Orazi as Michonnet did not record much and while his was not a major voice like that of Gobbi or Bastianini, being on occasion a bit woolly and unsteady, he is a convincing actor and makes a touching Michonnet. The NYK Symphony Orchestra once more proves itself to be a more than competent band under the expert direction of Gianfranco Masini. He can do nothing to disguise just how shamelessly at the beginning of Act 4 Cilea cribbed the rippling, rising Rhine theme that opens *Das Rheingold* - rather fun in its homage to the Master, especially as it works, even in this totally different context. The stereo recorded sound is excellent for the circumstances and audience intrusion is minimal - apart from an unfortunate outburst of premature, enthusiastic applause by some wretch after a dramatic pause in the lovers' first big duet, just before the Big Tune is reprised, presumably occasioned by ignorance of how the music goes.

This does not replace the classic 1959 live Naples performance with Olivero, Corelli, Simionato and Bastianini, but is in considerably better sound – better, too, than the live performance starring Caballé and Domingo from the previous year. There are also two superb studio recordings: the 1961 Decca set starring Tebaldi, Del Monaco, Simionato (again) and the largely unknown but excellent Fioravanti, and the 1977 CBS classic version with Scotto and Domingo, but it makes a lovely supplement or alternative for followers of the singers in question.

This remains a pleasing souvenir of a favourite role that Caballé never recorded.

Gianandrea Gavazzeni – 1977 (live, stereo) Myto

Orchestra - San Francisco Opera

Chorus - San Francisco Opera

Adriana Lecouvreur - Renata Scotto

Maurizio - Giacomo (Jaime) Aragall

Principe di Bouillon - James Courtney

Principessa di Bouillon - Elena Obraztsova

Michonnet - Giuseppe Taddei

Quinault - John Davies

Poisson - Robert Johnson

Mlle. Jovenot - Pamela South

Mlle. Dangeville - Mildred Tyree

L'Abate di Chazeuil - Joseph Frank

Un maggiordomo - Winther Andersen

This radio broadcast from San Francisco – incidentally, on the same day that Maria Callas died - fields a very starry quartet of principals and a great opera conductor. Opportunities to hear Aragall are relatively rare as, owing to stage nerves and career breaks, he is the most under-recorded of a generation of famous tenors; Pavarotti generously acknowledged him as “the greatest of us all”. The beat in Scotto's voice is apparent but so are the amplitude, intensity and beauty of tone; her portamenti and soft notes are ravishing. The delicacy of “Poveri fiori” is heart-breaking and Scotto's plunges into her lower register intensify the pathos, earning her rapturous applause. Of course, both

she and Obraztsova may be heard in far better sound in the studio recording made in the same year as this live performance and the substitution of Domingo and Milnes for Aragall and Taddei will hardly seem like a disadvantage, but all are great artists, so it is more the question of sound which advantages the Levine studio recording over this one.

Aragall is boyish, passionate and moving; his beautiful tenor had the interesting property of being both voluminous but silvery, never losing its lyrical quality despite its heft. Taddei is typically incisive and acute with the text, sounding more like a desperately lovestruck, world-weary, middle-aged man than the youthfully vigorous Milnes. Obraztsova – her name misspelled by Myto on the CD cover – wins an ovation for her scenery-chewing aria opening Act 2, demonstrating what a really big mezzo-soprano sounds like when both registers are fully developed, booming low notes and murdering top ones; subtle she ain't, but she's thrilling.

The sound is a bit cavernous and fuzzy but the voices are well caught, even if the orchestra is more recessed.

James Levine – 1977 (studio, stereo) Sony Classical

Orchestra - Philharmonia Orchestra

Chorus - Ambrosian Opera Chorus

Adriana Lecouvreur - Renata Scottò

Maurizio - Plácido Domingo

Principe di Bouillon - Giancarlo Luccardi

Principessa di Bouillon - Elena Obraztsova

Michonnet - Sherrill Milnes

Quinault - Paul Hudson

Poisson - Paul Crook

Mlle. Jovenot - Lilian Watson

Mlle. Dangeville - Ann Murray

L'Abate di Chazeuil - Florindo Andreolli

Despite my loyalty to Olivero, Corelli and Bastianini in the live 1959 Naples recording - one of the greatest documents of its kind - I have to give this 1977 studio recording pride of place. First, the sound is amazingly clear and atmospheric; secondly, Levine's direction is so sensitive and fluent, wholly responsive to the ebb and flow of this rip-roaring verismo classic; thirdly, the singers surpass themselves: Milnes creates a fully rounded, subtly sung Michonnet and really draws out the character's pathos; Domingo is heroic and nuanced, Scottò sublime in the depth of her characterisation and the delicacy of her quieter singing, Obraztsova stupendously powerful and stirring as the jealous Princess - and even the supporting cast is flawless; especially good is the bass who sings the Prince, Giancarlo Luccardi, a singer unknown to me but who ought to be more famous. OK, the beat in Scottò's voice in louder, higher passages, just slightly bothers me, but her artistry virtually silences criticism.

I still love the old Naples version and have time, too, for Tebaldi and Del Monaco in their barn-storming performance, but this is the set to introduce anyone frightened of opera to a truly memorable, melodic, dramatic experience - a wonderful recording which makes me wonder why this most tuneful and gripping of operas (despite its hokey denouement) is not more often performed.

P.S. Be warned – the budget “Sony Opera House” issue has no libretto, only a synopsis.

Richard Bonyngé – 1988 (studio, digital) Decca

Orchestra - Welsh National Opera

Chorus - Welsh National Opera

Adriana Lecouvreur - Joan Sutherland
Maurizio - Carlo Bergonzi
Principe di Bouillon - Francesco Ellero d'Artegna
Principessa di Bouillon - Cleopatra Ciurca
Michonnet - Leo Nucci
Quinault - Bryn Terfel
Poisson - Peter Bronder
Mlle. Jovenot - Frances Ginzer
Mlle. Dangeville - Deborah Stuart-Roberts
L'Abate di Chazeuil - Michel Sénéchal

Here is a recording which some think should never have been made or released. Both principal artists are in their sixties and clearly husbanding diminishing resources. The warbling beat in Sutherland's voice is now pronounced and her middle voice and lower register is cloudy, so notes are very husky or almost disappear, although she still has power aplenty higher up. The great Carlo Bergonzi seems less afflicted but there is a bit of wobble in his voice, his intonation tends towards the flat and he has to stretch for top notes. Neither singer is terrible and for extended passages they do sound like their old selves but there is no getting away from the fact that anno domini has taken its toll. It does not help that Leo Nucci's tonal production is similarly laboured; by the late 80's his bleat was habitual, any previous elegance of line he possessed had gone and he had already begun the dreadful habit of leading into high notes with an exaggerated appoggiatura a fifth below the desired pitch. I had not previously encountered Romanian mezzo Cleopatra Ciurca. She has a big, steely, somewhat edgy voice and is certainly more than adequate. The supporting cast is fine, including a very young Bryn Terfel and the inimitable and elegant Michel Sénéchal as a characterful, pointed Abbé.

The orchestral playing is lush, although Bonyngé could be more energised at times. There is some interest in the restoration of remarks and an aria for the Prince of Bouillon which somewhat clarify the poisoning aspect of the absurd plot but their appeal is peripheral.

Recommendations; second choices in brackets:

Live mono: Rossi 1959 (Simonetto 1950)

Live stereo: Masini 1976 (Gavazzeni 1977)

Studio stereo: Levine 1977 (Capuana 1961)

Ralph Moore