

## **“Untouchable” and “Most Recommendable” Opera Recordings: a very personal guide**

by Ralph Moore

My handful of regular readers might have noticed some glaring omissions in the list of thirty-seven major operas whose discographies I have surveyed over the last couple of years - operas whose quality and popularity are such that one might reasonably have expected me to have included them in my labours. There are, after all, probably around fifty truly first-rate operas which have been most often performed and recorded and I have by no means covered them all. I received requests to survey some of the following but on consideration, I realised that there were good reasons for my reluctance to do so.

The most obvious omissions are these twelve operas: Verdi's *La traviata* and *Il trovatore*; Wagner's *Lohengrin* and *Tannhäuser*; Mozart's *Don Giovanni*; Puccini's *La bohème*, *Tosca*, *Madama Butterfly* and *Turandot*; Rossini's *Il barbiere di Siviglia*; Donizetti's *Lucia di Lammermoor* and Beethoven's *Fidelio*.

My reason for not having reviewed them collectively is that either the opera in question has received one or two recordings of such definitive quality that consideration of the others is otiose or there are so many good recordings of it in the catalogue that making a helpful or meaningful recommendation becomes difficult.

I have therefore decided to circumvent the problem by making some brief, annotated recommendations and guidance for those major operas hitherto neglected. Obviously, my selections are highly subjective and controversial, and other collectors will be dismayed that I have ostensibly rejected their own candidates for recordings of classic status or nominated one they loathe but at the same time I think I may fairly claim that these are, in general, recordings which have stood the test of time. I have not included some unarguably classic recordings on the grounds that while they are superbly performed, they are in vintage or even historic sound, and hence of interest mainly to buffs and aficionados rather than the general listener who quite reasonably demands modern sound – or at least in the best mono of the early 50's.

It is perhaps easiest to start with the first group of seminal recordings which might not be perfect but, for me, mark such a highpoint or touchstone in the catalogue that others must always be found wanting in comparison - which is not to say that other recordings of great merit do not exist. The most obvious in that small group begin with the first Callas *Tosca*, Beecham's *La bohème* for EMI and the trio of Puccini recordings made by Decca in the early 70's, all starring Pavarotti in his absolute prime. It is interesting to note a) how most of my choices were made in the early 1970's and b) that they originate almost exclusively from either EMI or Decca.

### **I. “The Untouchables”**

This is by far the largest category of recordings which for their special quality and status stand apart and unchallenged.

#### **Puccini: *Tosca***

**Victor de Sabata – 1953** (studio; mono; remastered, electronically reprocessed stereo\*; Ambient Stereo†) EMI; Naxos; Membran; Brilliant; EMI 1972\*; Pristine†  
Orchestra & Chorus - Teatro alla Scala

Floria Tosca - Maria Callas  
Mario Cavaradossi - Giuseppe di Stefano  
Il barone Scarpia - Tito Gobbi  
Il Sagristano - Melchiorre Luise  
Cesare Angelotti - Franco Calabrese

Spoletta - Angelo Mercuriali  
Sciarrone - Dario Caselli  
Un pastore - Alvaro Cordova  
Un carceriere - Dario Caselli

I especially like the stereo reprocessing, either by EMI or Pristine. Such things are not always successful, but both of these are especially well done and, apart from a little faint pre-echo on the EMI version audible only on headphones, give new life and great presence to what was already reasonable mono sound.

There are no fewer than 250 recordings of *Tosca* in the catalogue; I have ten or so other recordings which I esteem, but none approaches this for drama or indeed the standard of singing. I certainly enjoy Leontyne Price and Carol Vaness as Tosca; Colin Davis' 1976 recording has the advantage of a young Carreras partnering Caballé in her prime, and some Scarpias, such as Taddei and Zancanaro, begin to rival – but never equal – Gobbi. However, for ensemble, nuance, power and theatrical impact they are left in the dust by this tour de force. The weakest link here is Di Stefano, already experiencing some vocal stress, but they are relative and he brings an animalistic passion to his portrayal matched only by Corelli in the studio and live performances where he is less well partnered.

Callas has a myriad shades of expression at her disposal and is vocally intact, doing wonderful things with her portamenti and chest voice. Couple this with watching her Covent Garden video of Act 2 from 1964, when she was vocally less secure but riveting as an actress and you have the essence of opera at its finest.

### **Puccini: *La bohème***

These are two very different recordings but the point is that both are splendid and either will provide as rewarding an experience of this most approachable of operas as the listener could wish. Both have star tenors of the highest quality, the most loveable of sopranos and conductors whose charisma and expertise enlivened works in a measure well beyond the ordinary. Beecham's recording came about almost by accident, as a result of Beecham's agent noticing an unplanned “window of opportunity” to record it in New York and there are imprecisions in comparison with Karajan's control, but Beecham welded and melded his artists into producing a thing of wonder. I refer readers to my colleague [Christopher Fifield's review of 2002](#) for more detail and an enthusiastic endorsement of its manifold virtues.

**Thomas Beecham – 1956** (studio; stereo) EMI; Naxos  
Orchestra - RCA Victor Orchestra; Chorus - RCA Chorus and Columbus Boys Choir

Rodolfo - Jussi Björling  
Schaunard - John Reardon  
Marcello - Robert Merrill  
Colline - Giorgio Tozzi  
Mimi - Victoria de los Ángeles  
Musetta - Lucine Amara  
Benoit - Fernando Corena  
Alcindoro - Fernando Corena  
Parpignol - William Nahr  
Sergente dei doganieri - George Del Monte  
Un doganiere - Thomas Powell

**Herbert von Karajan – 1972** (studio; stereo) Decca  
Orchestra - Berliner Philharmoniker; Chorus - Deutsche Oper (Berlin)

Rodolfo - Luciano Pavarotti  
Schaunard - Gianni Maffeo  
Marcello - Rolando Panerai  
Colline - Nicolai Ghiaurov  
Mimi - Mirella Freni  
Musetta - Elizabeth Harwood  
Benoit - Michel Sénéchal  
Alcindoro - Michel Sénéchal  
Parpignol - Gernot Pietsch  
Sergente dei doganieri - Hans-Dieter Appelt  
Un doganiere - Hans-Dietrich Pohl

I have loved this recording since I bought it on LP in 1973. As with the MWI review by Christopher Fifield, another colleague, Göran Forsling, dubs this “one of the greatest opera recordings of all [time]”; I refer you to [his review](#) and I see no reason to elaborate.

Devotees will have both Beecham and Karajan on their shelves. All others pale in comparison – even Votto’s earlier recording with Callas.

### **Puccini: Madama Butterfly**

**Herbert von Karajan – 1974** (studio; stereo) Decca  
Orchestra - Wiener Philharmoniker; Chorus - Wiener Staatsoper

Cio San - Mirella Freni  
Pinkerton - Luciano Pavarotti  
Sharpless - Robert Kerns  
Suzuki - Christa Ludwig  
Kate Pinkerton - Elke Schary  
Goro - Michel Sénéchal  
Il principe Yamadori - Giorgio Stendro  
Lo zio Bonzo - Marius Rintzler  
Il commissario imperiale - Hans Helm  
Yakusidè - Wolfgang Scheider  
L'ufficiale del Registro - Siegfried Rudolf Frese  
La madre di Cio San - Evamaria Hurdes  
La zia - Erna Mühlerberger  
La cugina - Martha Heigl

I have heard complaints that “Karajan conducts Puccini as if it were Wagner”, and as far as I’m concerned, if that is true, so much the better in this case – but in fact, the slow speeds and lush playing wring every ounce of emotion from Puccini’s score and the singing is divine; Pavarotti was never more subtle and sensitive, adding a dimension to his characterisation of the prize cad Pinkerton too often missing in the depictions by other tenors.

It's a sobering thought that this recording, now forty-five years old, remains the most recommendable and is the most recent of those that offer real competition; we are essentially talking about vintage recordings although Decca's analogue sound is absolutely first class, allowing us to hear the beauty of the VPO under Karajan.

Yes, there was a studio recording in 2008 conducted by Pappano - indeed, there hasn't been a complete recording since - and it had much to offer, but there were weaknesses in the secondary casting and, as much as I admire Gheorghiu and Kaufmann, neither is ideally suited to their roles, especially compared with Freni and Pavarotti here. Of the rival versions, two conducted by Leinsdorf with Anna Moffo and Leontyne Price, two recordings by Victoria de los Angeles with Di Stefano and Björling respectively, and Scotto's two accounts - especially the first with Bergonzi and Barbirolli conducting - all have their attractions, but none comes close to matching the glamour or indeed the sound quality of this 1974 recording.

Both the star Modenesi, Freni and Pavarotti, were only 38 years old at the time (they shared the same wet nurse!) and both in tip-top voice. Pavarotti does the impossible by making that irredeemable swine Pinkerton dashing, alluring, charming and sympathetic; the sheer bravura of his singing suspends our judgement and his ability to combine the sweetest mezza voce with ringing top notes make this what I think is his best recording. Fortunately, his Sharpless, Robert Kerns, who could be a lumpy singer, is also in finest voice here, even if he's no Gobbi, and their duets go with a real swing. Michel Sénéchal's obsequious Goro is perfect and of course Christa Ludwig lightens her big mezzo to make Suzuki a warm, sympathetic handmaid. Even the Bonzo is given luxury casting with that excellent Romanian bass Marius Rintzler declaiming imperiously against his niece's marriage.

And what of Freni? The miracle here is that she is the most credible, delicate and affecting Butterfly since Renata Scotto yet she never essayed the role on stage. She has the heft to carry off the big moments - after all, she was persuaded to sing Aida for Karajan with considerable success - but also the legato and evenness of line to caress Puccini's achingly beautiful melodies. Her first entry, as she climbs the hill and finishes with a long, poised, floated C sharp is simply heavenly. She never sounds coy (cf. Toti dal Monte) or too hearty (cf. Renata Tebaldi) but simply authentic as a naive teenager.

This recording remains expensive and extravagantly spread over three CDs - and it's worth every penny.

### **Puccini: *Turandot***

**Zubin Mehta – 1972** (studio; stereo) Decca  
Orchestra - London Philharmonic Orchestra; Chorus - John Alldis Choir

La principessa Turandot - Joan Sutherland  
Calaf - Luciano Pavarotti  
Liù - Montserrat Caballé  
Ping - Tom Krause  
Pang - Pier Francesco Poli  
Pong - Piero De Palma  
Timur - Nicolai Ghiaurov  
L'imperatore Altoum - Peter Pears  
Un mandarino - Sabin Markov

Eyebrows were raised when Sutherland undertook a role she would and did not sing on stage, but she had a large voice and the advantage of the recording studio microphone placement.

It is astonishing that this remains the principal recommendation for a stereo, studio recording after so long. There are plenty of others I value highly, including Nilsson and Corelli live with Stokowski or the vintage Leinsdorf recording with Björling and Tebaldi, but none has the advantage of the big, warm analogue sound we are given here and none fields a quartet of great singers like this; they are all at their very best in 1972. Furthermore, we hear Mehta conducting the recording of his career before he became a slack, lazy, global-celebrity conductor. What promise he showed in those days but only a few

subsequent recordings ever lived up to it; this was his finest hour. Similarly, Pavarotti was not yet the caricature of tenor ego that he later became and is in freshest, most ringing voice. Joan Sutherland was already very much an established star but here cast to the surprise of many in a role with which she was hardly associated, but the amplitude of her voice and her famous breath control made her selection as the eponymous ice-princess an inspired one. Caballé would later essay Turandot with mixed results but was always better suited to portraying the delicate Liù. A young Nicolai Ghiaurov completes a foursome of the greatest singers of their era, giving us a sincere and moving Timur of grave beauty. The minor character roles are filled by singers of distinction like Tom Krause, comprimario of the 20C Piero de Palma and Sir Peter Pears - another inspired choice. The LPO, the John Alldis Choir and the Wandsworth School Boys Choir provide ideal support. This was a Wilkinson and Lock recording in the ideal location of the long-gone Kingsway Hall and still sounds great.

I have a soft spot for two studio recordings with Nilsson as a more conventional yet vocally thrilling Ice Princess in the 1960 Leinsdorf recording with Tebaldi, Björling and Nilsson and 1965 conducted by Molinari-Pradelli with Corelli, and three live performance. Two are from 1961: in Vienna with Di Stefano and Leontyne Price and in New York, again with Corelli and conducted by Stokowski. The third is from 1964 at La Scala and conducted by Gavazzeni, once more with Corelli as Calaf. Every lover of this opera should hear Nilsson and Corelli in those roles but Nilsson's studio recordings miss something of the frisson we hear in the live recordings and none has sound to match this one.

### **Donizetti: *Lucia di Lammermoor***

**Richard Bonyngé - 1971**(studio; stereo) Decca  
Orchestra & Chorus - Covent Garden

Lucia - Joan Sutherland  
Edgardo - Luciano Pavarotti  
Enrico - Sherrill Milnes  
Raimondo - Nicolai Ghiaurov  
Arturo - Ryland Davies  
Alisa - Huguette Tourangeau  
Normanno - Pier Francesco Poli

This is the obvious next choice as it belongs to the group of Decca recordings made in the 70's starring Pavarotti.

This magnificent recording was in fact made in the summer of 1971 in virtually the same session as the *Rigolletto* with the same conductor, principal cast members, sound engineer and venue, so artistically and sonically it is superb. The only difference is that the orchestra and chorus of the Royal Opera are employed rather than the LSO and the Ambrosians, which entails no loss, just a maintenance of high quality.

I am bewildered by carpers who complain about the lack of atmosphere, Sutherland's diction and Pavarotti sounding too little like Edgardo and too much like himself. Their complaints are, as far as I'm concerned, either highly subjective or illusory; this recording makes others look under-powered and is so much better than either Sutherland's first version under Pritchard ten years before or Bonyngé's forgettable remake twenty years later. She might sound rather more mature - she was only 44 - but technically she is absolutely extraordinary, her voice huge, agile and powerful up to a top E. Pavarotti is very involved - I hear no coasting - and produces singing to set alongside his Duke of Mantua. I remember being thrilled by Milnes' opening two arias the first time I played the LPs and in many ways this recording finds him in the best voice I have ever heard, complete with snarl and ringing top G. Ghiaurov is in smoothest chocolate voice, a perfect foil to the sibling hysteria displayed by Enrico and

Lucia. Ryland Davies and Sutherland's most frequent mezzo partner, Huguette Tourangeau, complete a very strong cast.

Decca has now transferred these 140 minutes of music from an unnecessarily extravagant three discs to two but this is a complete, uncut version. There have in fact been very few studio recordings in the last fifty years and even fewer of any note. Others may prefer accounts by Callas, Maffei and Sills but both Callas versions are cut and vocally flawed. This, however, is the full version and a truly large-scale, Grand Opera concept of remarkable quality.

### **Beethoven: *Fidelio***

**Otto Klemperer – 1962** (studio; stereo) EMI  
Orchestra & Chorus - Philharmonia Orchestra

Leonore - Christa Ludwig  
Florestan - Jon Vickers  
Pizarro - Walter Berry  
Rocco - Gottlob Frick  
Marzelline - Ingeborg Hallstein  
Jaquino - Gerhard Unger  
Fernando - Franz Crass  
Erster Gefangene - Kurt Wehofschitz  
Zweiter Gefangene - Raymond Wolansky

I am well aware that some find Klemperer's conducting too marmoreal and ponderous compared with the supposed dynamism of Karajan – surely the only real competition, given that Bernstein's recording is somewhat compromised by Kollo's vocal deficiencies and Janowitz being too cool as Leonora, a role not entirely suited to her lovely voice. Nonetheless, another listen to Karajan's recording made me think that he misses some of the grandeur of this music and that at times he seems simply to be hustling and rushing the music for effect rather than building the kind of tension Klemperer achieves. This is not to denigrate Karajan's *Fidelio*, which has many of the same or similar virtues as Klemperer's recording including, of course, Vickers' mighty and moving Florestan. Nor is there much difference between the voices of Christa Ludwig and Helga Dernesch, both of whom migrated between vocal categories and tessituras during their careers but Ludwig is the more vibrant and intense, and avoids the plaintive, feminine quality which renders Dernesch's voice less convincing *in travestito* as Fidelio, a young man. A sonorous Gottlob Frick is so much earthier and more credible as the venal, practical, but essentially decent, Rocco than the beautifully-voiced but over-refined Ridderbusch. Compared with the more percussive and tremulous Zoltan Kélémán, Walter Berry is steadier and sterner as Pizarro and Karajan's Prisoners' Chorus is decidedly feeble compared with Klemperer's; I don't really know why, as he seems to be doing everything right. Vickers is, if anything, in better voice for Karajan than for Klemperer, but there is little in it. A young José van Dam is a treat as Don Fernando for Karajan, if a bit short on low notes, but fortunately Franz Crass is even more impressive for Klemperer. The BPO plays wonderfully but they are no better than Klemperer's Philharmonia. More importantly, there is overall in Klemperer's recording what I can only call an intangibly spiritual quality which eludes Karajan and I find more menace in Klemperer's Act 2 dungeon scene during the grave-digging. In fact, blow by blow, point by point, Klemperer scores over Karajan, confirming the status of the former's recording as an "untouchable".

### **Rossini: *Il barbiere di Siviglia***

**Alceo Galliera – 1957** (studio; stereo) EMI  
Orchestra & Chorus - Philharmonia Orchestra

Figaro - Tito Gobbi  
Il Conte Almaviva - Luigi Alva  
Rosina - Maria Callas  
Dr. Bartolo - Fritz Ollendorf  
Don Basilio - Nicola Zaccaria  
Berta - Gabriella Carturan  
Fiorello - Mario Carlin

Like many of my generation, I was indelibly imprinted with this performance as it was the first I encountered and still the best I know, despite the fact that it employs illegitimate orchestration and implements several cuts such that it now fits onto two CDs. Those cuts are not that damaging and were standard in that era; the only serious omission is Almaviva's last big aria, "Cessa di piu resistere"; otherwise it is only recitativo scenes which are missing and we still get Bertha's perky aria, so often cut. For the complete score in a scholarly edition with the instrumentation Rossini actually wanted, the super-bargain Naxos issue remains the best bet although there is also a nice modern one starring Elina Garanča, Nathan Gunn and Lawrence Brownlee which is beautifully sung but perhaps a little po-faced compared with this one – and Garanča hasn't Callas' lower register.

This recording was made in London in 1957 following the troubled La Scala production the previous year - although you would hardly guess that there had been difficulties, as it exudes fun and high spirits. As ever, Gobbi exhibits some dryness on his top notes and Callas wobbles a bit in the stratosphere - perhaps unwisely singing a high D at one point which is true of intonation but shakes somewhat; otherwise, they give a masterclass in how to inflect comic Italian text. Gobbi's verbal dexterity is a marvel and Callas' single word "Ma" in her first big aria and "Un biglietto - eccolo qua" are similar cases in point; I can never understand how people could accuse her of being a humourless singer. She is certainly sharp and waspish but also charming and flirtatious - and her coloratura is superb, especially when she exploits her gift for perfectly even portamento. The dialogue/recitativo leaps out of the speakers, it is so animated; the exchange between Figaro and "Lindoro" just before Rosina's first appearance and the famous "Dunque io son" duet between Figaro and Rosina are both further instances of great comic pace and timing.

Alva starts off just a little waveringly but soon shows his mettle, singing in honeyed tone and his divisions become firmer and better articulated. The supporting cast has a genuinely funny Bartolo in Fritz Ollendorff, a neat, richly voiced Gabriella Carturan as Bertha and a suitably sly, saturnine and oleaginous Bartolo in Nicola Zaccaria. Galliera galvanises the Philharmonia to play beautifully; everything is perfectly gauged and never dull.

More recent remasterings have made the sound a bit brittle and reproduced at too high a volume; by all accounts the earliest CD manifestation is the most successful but these things trouble me less than some audiophiles. I have the 1993 remastering and am happy with it. No other recording comes close to capturing the sheer, quicksilver fun of this score.

### **Wagner: *Lohengrin***

For me, two recordings stand apart and all others are flawed – or at least much more flawed, in comparison:

#### **Rudolf Kempe - 1962-63 (studio; stereo) EMI**

Orchestra - Wiener Philharmoniker; Chorus - Wiener Staatsoper

Lohengrin - Jess Thomas  
Elsa - Elisabeth Grümmer  
Ortrud - Christa Ludwig

Friedrich von Telramund - Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau  
König Heinrich - Gottlob Frick  
Der Heerrufer des Königs - Otto Wiener

A kind of poised, otherworldly serenity pervades this recording, apparent from the very first bars of the Prelude. Kempe had a special gift for capturing and creating atmosphere and the glow on the Vienna strings is exquisite, despite some inevitable analogue hiss. The casting is immaculate with one indisputable exception – Otto Wiener's nasal, unlovely Herald - and one question mark over whether Fischer-Dieskau's Telramund is too craven and intellectualised for a bluff, ambitious soldier. Nonetheless, he convincingly suggests that he is under the thumb of Ludwig's blazing Ortrud. She might not be as vocally visceral as Astrid Varnay but she exudes wilful malevolence. Frick is a mighty, sonorous King Henry, Jess Thomas is in sweetest, cleanest voice and Elisabeth Grümmer's shimmering, silvery soprano is a dream, rivalled only by Janowitz, who is of similar voice type.

It is one of two essential recordings; the other being...

**Rafael Kubelik – 1970** (studio; stereo) DG  
Orchestra & Chorus - Bayerischer Rundfunk

Lohengrin - James King  
Elsa - Gundula Janowitz  
Ortrud - Gwyneth Jones  
Friedrich von Telramund - Thomas Stewart  
König Heinrich - Karl Ridderbusch  
Der Heerrufer des Königs - Gerd Nienstedt

Having been slightly disappointed by the live 1954 Jochum and 1953 Keilberth recordings - mainly because of deficiencies in Windgassen's assumption of the eponymous hero and even in some of the deeper voices - turning to this recording was balm to my ears. In the reviews of this recording I have read, no-one has much remarked on its beauty of sound: a slight reverberance, real depth, crisp detail and a proper sense of theatre without the Bayreuth hackers who blight the quieter moments in the live recordings, especially the Jochum.

The next thing to emphasise is the beauty of the voices. Several performances here are definitive; Kubelik was always so sympathetic to his artists and he gives them space to make their points without dragging. One first hears Nienstedt, Ridderbusch and Stewart as the Herald, the King and Telramund respectively - and what a joy it is to hear such firm, characterful, resonant, virile voices. Stewart in particular surprised me - though I was already familiar with his lovely Sachs in Kubelik's equally recommendable *Die Meistersinger*; he is every bit as expressive and grateful on the ear as the great Uhde and more so than Fischer-Dieskau in his nonetheless estimable performance for Kempe. The chorus is terrific; the orchestra precise and energised, and Kubelik confirms his status as perhaps my favourite of all conductors. As for Janowitz, she is a dream. That silvery, plangent tone is ideally suited to the ethereal (slightly loopy!) Elsa. Just listen to her exchange with Ortrud in Band 5 of the second disc if you need convincing - which brings me to the most controversial piece of casting in this recording: Gwyneth Jones' Ortrud. Jones had a huge voice and the vibrato became obtrusive too early in her career, but here I think her malignancy and subtlety of characterisation carry the day. The occasional squalliness is not inappropriate and she is mostly dead on the note and really exciting; I think that others have exaggerated the wobble and their repugnance for it - I've certainly heard much worse and I admire her vehemence and intelligence. If you're unsure, try her "Entweihte Götter" (the chilling invocation to demonic powers à la Lady Macbeth); I think it's great. Rather than play safe, she goes for it. You will notice that I have not mentioned James King. His is a fine, often gently sung, performance, preferable to the bleatiness of Windgassen - at least to my ears - though I would not say he is here at his very best; elsewhere, in other recordings, his voice sounds less grainy.

So if you want a studio alternative to the famous Kempe, rather than a historically important live recording, this is it. I have known the Kempe for years and particularly admire Ludwig's Ortrud and Thomas' Lohengrin; his is probably the best assumption of all of the lead role. I'm glad to own both - but I shall return again and again to Janowitz's Elsa.

**Wagner: *Tannhäuser***

**Georg Solti – 1970** (studio; stereo) Decca  
Orchestra - Wiener Philharmoniker  
Chorus - Wiener Staatsoper

Tannhäuser - René Kollo  
Elisabeth - Helga Dernesch  
Wolfram von Eschenbach - Victor Braun  
Venus - Christa Ludwig  
Hermann, Landgraf von Thüringen - Hans Sotin  
Walther von der Vogelweide - Werner Hollweg  
Biterolf - Manfred Jungwirth  
Heinrich der Schreiber - Kurt Equiluz  
Reinmar von Zweter - Norman Bailey  
Hirt - Mitglied Wiener Knabenchor

Studio recordings of *Tannhäuser* are thin on the ground; there have been only half a dozen post-war recordings of the original Dresden version and a mere two of the so-called Paris 1861 edition - actually published in Vienna in 1875. Matters are further complicated by the fact that most Dresden versions actually incorporate snippets from Act II of the Paris and often the Bacchanal music, too; Konwitschny includes only the former in his Dresden account and it remains the prime recommendation for that version. Others make stranger choices; Barenboim uses the Dresden version but imports the longer duet for Tannhäuser and Venus into Act I and expunges the ballet music.

While I enjoy the Dresden version, I do not want to miss Wagner's later musical additions, even if they introduce a certain incongruity between his early and mature styles. Of the two Paris versions available, after nearly fifty years, the 1970 Solti recording endures as most collectors' favourite by virtue of a superior cast and the fact that Domingo rather mangles the German for Sinopoli in 1988. It is by no means perfect, but it pretty much kicks everything else into touch by virtue of the extraordinary vibrancy and erotic ambiance of Solti's direction - I believe this to be his finest achievement in terms of pure conducting. I have listened to countless versions of the Overture and Bacchanal, for example, and none begins to rival his for febrile energy and propulsive drive; he is able to insinuate a kind of erotic frenzy and compulsive desperation in his sonic depiction of the orgies taking place in Venusberg. The VPO is peerless, its rich, burnished glow ideal for conveying the sound-world of this opera.

The engineering effects, such as the gradual approach and retreat from left to right of the pilgrims' chorus, are very effective and the sound remains exemplary. The cast is as good as could be assembled in 1970, from Hans Sotin's noble Landgrave, to Victor Braun's affecting Wolfram, Helga Dernesch's sensitive, womanly Elisabeth, to Christa Ludwig's powerful, sensuously sung Venus. René Kollo's rather guttural, ungainly tenor has always been open to criticism and constitutes the main weakness here, especially when he aspirates, growls throatily to emphasise passion, and fails to produce a decent legato but the voice is strong and steady, amply conveying the kind of manic, bi-polar obsessiveness which afflicts Tannhäuser when he is attempting to resist (or not) the lures of the flesh - and Wagner knew all about that....

The use of the boy sopranos of the Viennese Boys' Choir for the shepherd boy and young pilgrims was an inspired choice and the adult singers from the Vienna State Opera Chorus are also ideal.

## II. “Too Many to Choose from”

This category comprises of a trio of operas which have been so copiously performed and recorded that establishing any kind of hierarchy is beyond my scope and capability. I can only point to a few favourites and observe that while perhaps none is ideal, we are now very unlikely to get anything better, so we had best be content with, and grateful for, what we have. I emphasise that neither of the recordings of *La traviata* is up to much sonically compared with a modern, stereo recording but that is the compromise which has to be made in order to hear them and the ear soon adjusts.

### **Verdi: *La traviata***

Navigating the sea of over 250 recordings is tricky, a task compounded by the oft-repeated truism that the role of Violetta requires a singer with three different voices, one for each Act. There are of course estimable recordings from Caballé, Cotrubas, Moffo, Freni, Sutherland, Lorengar et al in superior sound, but my conviction is that, as with *Tosca*, no-one has pierced the heart of this character like Callas, so I recommend recordings of her which despite suffering the double disadvantage of being both live and mono, are still very listenable and offer an experience unparalleled for depth of emotion. I am unable to decide between two; both are as close as we shall ever get to the-recording-that-never-was-but-should-have-been. Much of what is true of one performance is true of the other, as they occurred within three months of each other.

**Franco Ghione – 1958** (live; mono) EMI; Pearl; Myto

Orchestra - Orquesta Sinfónica Nacional; Chorus - Teatro Nacional São Carlos (Lisboa)

Violetta Valery - Maria Callas

Flora Bervoix - Laura Zannini

Annina - Maria Cristina de Castro

Alfredo Germont - Alfredo Kraus

Giorgio Germont - Mario Sereni

Gastone - Piero De Palma

Dottore Grenvil - Alessandro Maddalena

Barone Douphol - Álvaro Malta

Marchese d'Obigny - Vito Susca

This is one of the two sets I take down from my shelves when I want to hear Callas' incomparable characterisation of Violetta in all its lacerating pity and pathos; for me, it renders the other two pirated recordings and the Cetra studio recording obsolete. I had previously always favoured the London performance three months later until I encountered this, newly remastered by Warner, and I still prefer Valletti's purer, more boyish tenor to Kraus' reedier timbre but Kraus is also in best voice here, the sound is marginally better and Callas is slightly steadier and more secure, too - though there's not much in it. “Ah! dite alla giovine” is spun on a thread of sound, suffused with conflicted emotion – just one example of Callas' supremacy in portraying the Fallen Woman as a deeply tragic figure, not just a “Tart with a Heart”. Sereni sings neatly without much involvement; there are the usual imperfections and imprecisions associated with live performance and an audible prompter, but...

**Nicola Rescigno – 1958** (live; mono) Arkadia; Melodram; Myto; IDIS

Orchestra - Covent Garden

Chorus - Covent Garden

Violetta Valery - Maria Callas

Flora Bervoix - Marie Collier  
Annina - Leah Roberts  
Alfredo Germont - Cesare Valletti  
Giorgio Germont - Mario Zanasi  
Gastone - Dermot Troy  
Dottore Grenvil - David Kelly  
Barone Douphol - Forbes Robinson  
Marchese d'Obigny - Ronald Lewis

Callas is again in good voice here; I would add only that it would be dishonest to fail to remark that Callas' top notes are indeed a bit screamy - but they pale into insignificance when set against the depth and brilliance of her Violetta. She maintains such poise and control in key moments such as "Dite alla giovane" that it is easy to forgive the odd instance of vocal frailty - of which, in any case, there are surprisingly few.

For once she is worthily partnered; Valletti especially is in perfect voice; youthful, boyish, unaffected and impassioned. He never makes an ugly sound but there is no shortage of commitment to his Alfredo. The sound is perfectly adequate: a bit hissy and congested but, unlike the La Scala recording, consistent throughout. It is true that Zanasi sounds far too young as Germont - turn to Bruscantini for an authentic sounding father - but he sings honestly and expressively with more sensitivity than either the detached Sereni or the rather boorish Bastianini (much as I love both in other roles and recordings). Rescigno supports Callas unobtrusively with flexible, unhurried tempi and his calm control obviously allowed the diva to feel as comfortable as possible.

P.S. A mild curiosity: just after the overture has begun, you can hear Callas warming up quietly in the wings, accompanying the orchestra. Presumably this is something the mike picked up but the audience could not. This detail is not audible, however, in the disappointing ICA label issue, which has simply shaved off the top frequencies with the result that it sounds opaque, muddied and veiled - you are listening through a blanket of filtering. Nor is there more ambience, despite their claims to have engineered an improved sense of space; the Myto issue, for example, has more hiss and rumble but you can hear the details and upper frequencies of the performance.

### **Verdi: *Il trovatore***

The existence of around 200 recordings suggests that it should be possible to find at least one or two which fulfil Caruso's celebrated criterion that the only thing required for its success is "the four greatest singers in the world".

**Zubin Mehta – 1969** (studio; stereo) RCA  
Orchestra - New Philharmonia Orchestra  
Chorus - Ambrosian Singers

Manrico - Plácido Domingo  
Azucena - Fiorenza Cossotto  
Leonora - Leontyne Price  
Conte di Luna - Sherrill Milnes  
Ferrando - Bonaldo Giaiotti  
Ines - Elizabeth Bainbridge  
Ruiz - Ryland Davies  
Un vecchio zingaro - Stanley Riley  
Un messo - Neilson Taylor

For many years, I have had an attachment to Mehta's recording, as it was the one whereby as an eighteen-year-old I was introduced to this opera but, trying to assess it objectively, I still think it has a youthful zest and energy which make it special.

There has, however, over the years, been a fair amount of hoo-hah concerning two aspects of this recording which fail to satisfy: one is the element of distortion inherent in the master tapes as a result of miking too close by the original recording engineer and the other is that Mehta drives the music too hard. Otherwise, there can be little doubt that we are hearing some of the best singing of its era which harkens back to a previous Golden Age in its scope and amplitude; there is no way any contemporary opera house could field voices like these in a modern production.

It helps that we have a very fine orchestra, the regular go-to chorus of the day in the Ambrosian singers and Mehta in his youthful Wunderkind stage; he was at the helm for several recordings dating from the 70's which have stood the test of time, especially his *Turandot*, *La fanciulla del West* and this one. The peaking problem notwithstanding, the venue of the Walthamstow Town Hall contributes to a big, warm, spacious ambiance which suggests the theatre. I also find that the remastering, without being able to eliminate entirely the crackle on the loudest, highest notes, in combination with listening on headphones, have resulted in a much less troubling listening experience.

As for Mehta's conducting, it seems to me that he allows his artists ample time in the more lyrical passages but simply goes for broke just as this opera demands in the most dramatic scenes. Price has all the time in the world to float her long, arcing phrases in her opening aria and "D'amor sull'ali"; the results are ravishing. As for the odd suggestion that she is past her peak in 1969, the proponents of such an outlandish proposal need new ears; the voice is supreme: velvety, ample, warm and vibrant, filling Verdi's music with passion and pathos.

Indeed, all the voices here are in stellar form. Gaiotti opens the opera with what remains the best Ferrando on record; he is sonorous, saturnine and biting of tone, enunciating the text beautifully and providing exactly the start we need if this opera is grab us by the scruff of the neck and never let go until its absurdly melodramatic climax. Milnes is as good as you will ever hear him; if you don't like him here you don't like his voice in any case. I remember on first hearing his "Il balen" trying to emulate his gorgeous tone and broad, long-breathed phrasing. Cossotto is the power-house I recall her as live in the theatre; she is simply a force of nature, mad as a box of frogs and riveting in her obsession. OK; Domingo lacks the last ounce of glamour at the top of his voice, straining a little with his top C but he is otherwise every inch the hero, combining emotional pathos with vocal allure.

While I am attached to other recordings, especially the live Salzburg one under Karajan with Price, the same conductor's studio recording with Callas, Serafin's later recording for DG and Domingo's second recording under Giulini, none offers the glamour of this vocal quartet or the same propulsive élan - indeed Giulini and Karajan can seem too sedate alongside Mehta's urgency.

### **Mozart: *Don Giovanni***

Around 200 recordings attest to the popularity and allure of an opera which surely approaches perfection. It gains an extra and very modern edginess via its moral ambiguity in placing an anti-hero centre-stage. I rate highly the recordings conducted by Giulini and Davis, but ultimately favour above all this vintage set:

**Josef Krips – 1955** (studio; stereo) Decca; Membran  
Orchestra - Wiener Philharmoniker; Chorus - Wiener Staatsoper

Don Giovanni - Cesare Siepi  
Donna Anna - Suzanne Danco

Don Ottavio - Anton Dermota  
Donna Elvira - Lisa Della Casa  
Leporello - Fernando Corena  
Il Commendatore - Kurt Böhme  
Masetto - Walter Berry  
Zerlina - Hilde Güden

This has long been considered a classic recording and is unlikely ever to be surpassed now; a bonus is the fact that it is recorded in very early and very acceptable stereo sound, clean, crisp and beautifully balanced. This enshrines arguably the greatest exponent of the eponymous role alongside Ezio Pinza in Cesare Siepi's suave, saturnine Giovanni. His big, warm voice - a proper basso cantante - was ideally suited to portraying the libidinous Giovanni in that he could sound both seductive and menacing. I like the way his boundless over-confidence points towards his defiant downfall.

His co-singers include some of the most refined and elegant artists ever to grace a stage, including Anton Dermota, who, with a very different but in some ways equally seductive, reedy tenor not so different tonally from Schipa's, follows John McCormack and demonstrates his breath control by delivering the long phrase of "cercate" in "Il mio tesoro" without break. You could not name two more agile, precise, silvery Mozartians than Suzanne Danco and Lisa Della Casa and Hilde Güden's pert Zerlina completes an ideal soprano trio. Corena's knowing Leporello is steadily sung with sustained, resonant tone and it's a pleasure to hear how cleanly he enunciates his words in his lively interactions with Siepi; we are free of the Germanic Italian which afflicts some contemporary accounts. A young Walter Berry is ideal as Masetto - who can be a bit of a bore if the buffo "peasant" style is overdone. A minor weakness resides in Kurt Böhme's Commendatore which could be steadier and more imposing of tone in the manner of Frick, Moll or Crass, but he will do. All the participants blend to make a wonderful ensemble. I would like a little more spring and momentum in the overture, but after that and Krips' conducting, lyrical and exuberant by turns but essentially non-interventionist, ensures sparkling playing from a great orchestra as he simply lets the music flow at the right pace.

### ***Ralph Moore***

#### **Note**

Having covered as best I can the top fifty or so operas in the standard repertoire, this is my last opera survey. My thanks to those who have kindly commented and provided feedback via the Message Board.