

Wagner's *Der fliegende Holländer*: A discographical survey
by Ralph Moore

There are over eighty recordings of *The Flying Dutchman* in the catalogue, of which only a dozen are studio recordings. I review below sixteen versions, including eight made in the studio, three live composite and two radio broadcasts; in order to restrict my scope to those with at least acceptable sound quality, only three are unedited live recordings, as audiences seem to become – unaccountably? perhaps not – bronchial and restless, especially if the opera is performed in accordance with Wagner's wishes and played straight through without intervals.

I first heard it performed that way by the Welsh National Opera on tour and visiting Oxford in 1974 and was impressed; I don't think I have heard it live on stage since! It's not especially popular compared with Wagner's later works; indeed, it is a strange, dour tale, gloomy and intense in atmosphere despite the apotheosis of the Dutchman and Senta ascending heavenwards. The most sympathetic character is the tormented Dutchman himself: Daland is venal, Erik whines and Senta is weird. However, the music is stunning and clearly marks a huge advance on the conventional – and, frankly, dull - operas of his early period, employing *Leitmotiven* and a much bolder harmonic language.

For some reason, Erik is nearly always badly sung in recordings, perhaps because the part makes fearsome demands of the tenor but is not really perceived as a leading, heroic role, so is often under-cast. Both Levine's and Barenboim's studio recordings are too turgid and poorly sung to merit inclusion. *Hors concours* is the Minkowski recording of the original 1843 Paris version, included purely for its curiosity value; it is emphatically not a prime recommendation. I don't think a really outstanding recording in good sound exists; selecting a favourite involves more compromise than usual and we certainly won't get anything better now than what I review below.

The Recordings:

Clemens Krauss – 1944 (live radio broadcast; mono) Arkadia; Membran; Preiser; Cantus; Grammfono 2000; Opera d'Oro; Bravissimo/Allegro (as part of a set)
Bayerische Staatsoper Orchestra & Chorus

Holländer - Hans Hotter
Senta - Viorica Ursuleac
Daland - Georg Hann
Erik - Karl Ostertag
Mary - Luise Willer
Steuermann - Franz Klarwein

This is of important historical interest and presents perhaps the greatest Dutchman on record in Hans Hotter in his prime, but Viorica Ursuleac's mature soprano is not to all tastes and the mono sound, while perfectly tolerable for its age and provenance, is of course a bit harsh and wiry and subject to some shatter in loud ensembles and deteriorates noticeably for the start of Act 2 then improves. Having said that, reacquaintance with the recording has made me appreciate afresh its immediacy and the drive of that great Wagnerian Clemens Krauss' conducting immediately comes through in those first arresting chords with the horn, then the brass, pinning back the listener's ears; one can only imagine the mixed emotions and excitement of the listeners gathered round the wireless in the dark days of Germany in 1944. There are a few brass blips inevitable in a live performance but nothing worrisome.

The conducting is highly animated and flexible throughout and the singing is of a remarkably high standard. Franz Klarwein is excellent as the Steersman, if more assertive and forthright than we usual in this role – but he was, after all, a lyric tenor who became a Strauss and Heldentenor. George Hann

is a big, bluff, resonant Daland – a “proper old school” voice; he would be a major star today. The Mary has a big, steady contralto. Karl Ostertag's Erik is strenuous but devoid of the whine which too often afflicts German tenors and presents a more virile lover than usual.

Hotter is in superb voice, devoid of the nasality and “woofiness” which crept in as the years passed, almost restrained but so subtle and expressive in his use of the text; you have only to listen to how he delivers the both the words and the music in the difficult chromatic passage beginning “Dich frage ich, gepriesner Engel Gottes” in his extended opening aria to know that you are listening to a great singer.

Viorica Ursuleac, wife of the conductor and at fifty years old having already had a long career, is not ideal as Senta; she sounds too old for the dreamy young idealist but she is by no means a disaster, as she has lower register heft and intact top notes even if they are a bit shrill. However, the contrast between Hotter's steadiness and her wavery entry in “Wie aus der Ferne” emphasises her inadequacies.

I have this as one of the five complete operas in the 14 CD box set “Bravissimo Opera Library - The Best of Wagner: Beyond the Ring” which is a sub-label of Allegro, otherwise Opera d'Oro; no further details but the sound is just about acceptable. If there were no other record of Hotter's majestic Dutchman, this would be more recommendable, but we have...

Fritz Reiner – 1950 (live; mono) Naxos; Sony; Cantus
Orchestra - Metropolitan Opera
Chorus - Metropolitan Opera

Holländer - Hans Hotter
Senta - Astrid Varnay
Daland - Sven Nilsson
Erik - Set Svanholm
Mary - Hertha Glaz
Steuermann - Thomas Hayward

Ward Marston has done his usual sterling work in cleaning up this live performance, having had access to three tapes, but of course, as with the preceding radio broadcast, there is still a fair amount of distortion and shatter, and it cannot be a first recommendation, despite its stellar cast.

This was Hotter's house début and the first appearances of Astrid Varnay and Set Svanholm in their respective roles at the Met, under the very experienced baton of eminent Wagnerian Fritz Reiner, who always delivered sharp, finely sculpted readings of Wagner's scores; his drive right from the start is phenomenal – an irritating, obtrusive and very artificial-sounding wind machine notwithstanding.

Good as he was in 1944, Hotter is even more compelling here, understandably more demonstrative on stage in front of an audience rather than a microphone as in a broadcast – and he is generally better partnered, even though Sven Nilsson's Daland, acceptable though it is not as authoritative and beautiful as Georg Hann's and the Steersman here, Thomas Hayward – usually a fine singer and Lawrence Tibbett's cousin - is clumsy compared with Franz Klarwein, belting out his supposedly tender apostrophe to the South Wind. Svanholm was a genuine Heldentenor and well up to the demands of the role of Erik even if his tone isn't always grateful and can pulse. The big gain, of course is a young Astrid Varnay over Ursuleac, in fresher voice than in Bayreuth five years later. She and Hotter inspire each other and rise to great heights in their Act 2 duet, singing so raptly that we believe their mutual infatuation.

Reiner's superb conducting and the wonderful partnership of Hotter and Varnay make this live recording treasurable, even if the sound is merely acceptable.

Wilhelm Schüchter – 1951 (live radio broadcast; mono) Walhall; Cantus; Preiser
Orchestra - Sinfonieorchester des Nordwestdeutschen Rundfunks; Chorus - Chor des
Nordwestdeutschen Rundfunks

Holländer - Hans Hotter
Senta - Helene Werth
Daland - Kurt Böhme
Erik - Bernd Aldenhoff
Mary - Res Fischer
Steuermann - Helmut Krebs

This is the third of live recordings starring Hotter and is in fair, rather distant, mono sound without distortion. Schüchter might have been something of a second-rank conductor but he was clearly highly competent, working under Karajan and Schmidt-Isserstedt; his directing here is lean and propulsive.

Not all the casting here is ideal, however, despite the presence of Hotter. Kurt Böhme is rather thin and unsteady compared with the best, Krebs is a weak, windy Steersman, Fischer a fruity Mary, Aldenhoff a strenuous Erik whose vibrato was loosening and Helene Werth a strident Senta, with an unpleasant edge in her soprano. As we may hear Hotter in two other recordings from the same era, there is no particular reason to opt for this one, especially as his delivery is more subdued and he is beginning to sound a bit hollow here nasal here – the onset of a bout of his asthma, or hay fever, perhaps. He is definitely not as vocally resplendent nor as dramatically compelling here as at the Met or in the last days of the war.

Not a prime contender.

Ferenc Fricșay – 1952 (studio; mono;) DG; Preiser; Aura
Orchestra - RIAS Symphonie-Orchester Berlin; Chorus - Verstärkter RIAS-Kammerchor

Holländer - Josef Metternich
Senta - Annelies Kupper
Daland - Josef Greindl
Erik - Wolfgang Windgassen
Mary - Sieglinde Wagner
Steuermann - Ernst Haeflinger

This recording has tended to be overlooked, perhaps because it is in mono and doesn't star as big a name as Hans Hotter in the somewhat forgotten Josef Metternich, who had a much lighter voice than the usual bass-baritone but is so incisive, expressive and musical. His fast vibrato and lean timbre convey nervy desperation and intense yearning very convincingly. Greindl, could sometimes be lumpen, but is here in excellent form, in as fine a voice as I have ever heard him and ideal as a venal but strangely likeable Daland, providing an excellent contrast to Metternich. Haeflinger is a youthful, lyrical Steersman. Fricșay provides superb, dynamic conducting and the orchestral playing is first class. The sound is really good for so old a mono recording, clean and well-defined; the animated chorus comes through in a big, broad acoustic and the orchestra is well to the fore, with plenty of detail emerging.

Distinguished Austrian contralto Sieglinde Wagner makes a fine, rich-voiced Mary and Annelies Kupper is a wonderful Senta, pitching notes dead centre and mostly sustaining lovely, even tone throughout her range, even if the occasional top note is a tad sour. She sounds young, vulnerable and somewhat distraite, as she should, but has plenty of power at her disposal for the big moments. As ever, Windgassen sounds a bit querulous and elderly even though he is quite young here - but he's a good stylist and has stamina.

Every survey I do turns up a surprise – this is it.

Joseph Keilberth – 1955 (live composite; mono/stereo/Ambient Stereo*) Testament; Pristine*
Bayreuth Festival Orchestra & Chorus

Holländer - Hermann Uhde
Senta - Astrid Varnay
Daland - Ludwig Weber
Erik - Rudolf Lustig
Mary - Elisabeth Schärtel
Steuermann - Josef Traxel

This classic live recording, assembled from various rehearsals and performances conducted by Keilberth at Bayreuth in July and August in 1955, is self-recommending in that it features the superbly vocalised, deeply anguished Dutchman of the great Hermann Uhde and a tour de force from Astrid Varnay. I always considered it to be the best available even when I owned it only on mono CD's rather than the three stereo LP's issued in 1976. Now that it has been made available in Ambient Stereo by Pristine it takes its place more readily at the head of the field.

Uhde seems to be able to sound almost demented without losing tonal beauty and Varnay, despite a little trademark scooping, manages to rein in her Brünnhilde soprano to give us a mystical Senta who really does sound as if she already has one foot in another world. Some of the supporting cast are less impressive; the ungrateful role of Erik seems to be cursed on recordings but Rudolf Lustig is at least tolerable. Ludwig Weber is a bit woolly but aptly bluff and venal as Daland and Josef Traxel's light, flexible tenor is very attractive as the Steersman. The Festival Chorus under Wilhelm Pitz is terrific. There is nothing in the least of the Kapellmeister in Joseph Keilberth's assault on this marvellous score; he cranks up the tension relentlessly and inspires his performers.

Franz Konwitschny – 1959 (studio; stereo) Berlin Classics
Berliner Staatsoper Orchestra & Chorus

Holländer - Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau
Senta - Marianne Schech
Daland - Gottlob Frick
Erik - Rudolf Schock
Mary - Sieglinde Wagner
Steuermann - Fritz Wunderlich

This excellent studio recording was in fact made in a church in 1959 and issued in 1960.

There has never been an absolutely ideal recording and this doesn't break the mould - but it comes close, as long as you respond to Fischer-Dieskau's Dutchman. I have never been a D-F-D fan but enjoy his voice most in its youthful years. Here he is only 35 and although he doesn't really have the bass-baritone heft the role requires, he has - just - the low notes, a surprising amount of power and evinces a minimum number of mannerisms while articulating the text really dramatically, with a minimum of "bark". He really rises to the challenge of the last few minutes, summoning up vocal authority even though he is clearly singing at the upper limits of his capacity; this is a performance to set alongside his other Wagnerian success as Telramund for Kempe. Schech is not the most glamorous of Sentas and sometimes scoops a little - but so does Varnay, and Schech more easily suggests youthful feminine idealism and naivety. She has a brilliant, steady voice with ringing top notes. Rudolf Schock's grainy tenor sounds in best heroic form - too many recordings are ruined by an Erik yelling or bleating; Gottlob Frick's jet-black bass is ideal as the jovial Papa Daland prepared to sell his daughter in exchange for

treasure; Sieglinde Wagner is wholly apt as Mary and as the bonus of bonuses, we hear Fritz Wunderlich as the ideal Steersman.

However, the best thing of all is Konwitschny's totally assured conducting and some excellent - if at times raucous and unbuttoned - playing from the Staatskapelle Berlin, whose brass are positively riotous.

The recorded sound is phenomenal: really vivid and spacious. This is the one-Act version and it is now available remastered on the Brilliant label at super-bargain prices; no admirer of this, Wagner's "transitional" opera and the herald of his mature genius, should resist.

Thomas Schippers – 1960 (live; mono; ambient stereo*) Walhall; Pristine*
Metropolitan Opera Orchestra & Chorus

Holländer - George London
Senta - Leonie Rysanek
Daland - Giorgio Tozzi
Erik - Karl Liebl
Mary - Belen Amparan
Steuermann - William Olvis

NB: this review applies to the Pristine issue, not the cheaper Walhall one.

Wagner singing was still in a fine state in the early 60's and this live broadcast from the Met has competition, but apart from the usual problem of finding the right juncture at which to place the break when transferring a through-composed opera onto two CDs, which is no more successfully handled here than in virtually every other transfer, this set emerges as a truly electrifying and thus highly recommendable option. Pristine sound engineer Andrew Rose might have had the advantage of excellent source tapes to begin with but he has excelled himself with the clarity and immediacy of the sound he has achieved here, greatly enhanced by his editing and application of Ambient Stereo; this is surely the best result from this era that Pristine has yet issued – and there was obviously nothing more that could be done to minimise the passing radio interference in track 9, CD 1.

Secondly, both principals are in finest voice, ably supported by a superb, if rather too refined and aristocratic Daland from Giorgio Tozzi, who is very different from the usual gruff old buffer, and a good contribution from Karl Liebl, even if his tenor is hardly the Erik of one's dreams. Apparently his Tristan to Birgit Nilsson's Isolde met with her approval, but he has his work cut out her surviving alongside the equally huge-voiced Rysanek. He is far from the usual leather-lunged bawler in what is surely the most ungrateful tenor role Wagner and is certainly less strained than most and quite appealing in his bafflement at Senta's fixation, even if he does miss the climactic top B in his aria "Willst jenes Tags", whereas Rysanek's concluding top B blows everyone off the stage. The other supporting singers are first rate, too: William Olvis makes a strikingly vibrant Steersman – though like Wunderlich, hardly sounds sleepy - and Belén Amparan is a rich-voiced Mary. The chorus is lusty if occasionally over-exuberant and ill-disciplined, while Schippers' direction is, as one might expect of this conductor, highly energised; he infuses the opera with a compelling dynamism from the very first notes. Apparently, according to early reviews, this run at the Met had a rocky start in the New Year but was evidently in the groove by March.

The duets between Daland and the Dutchman avoid longueurs, indeed I found them for once wholly gripping, but the glory of this performance resides in the partnership of Rysanek and London. He is mesmerising in "Wie aus der Ferne" and brings his great, black bass-baritone to bear upon portraying the Dutchman's agony with enormous intensity. Rysanek is similarly intense; yes, there are moments of bald, curdled or cloudy tone in the middle of the voice and she is occasionally ungainly when

swooping up to notes but little of that matters when set against the thrilling animal magnetism of her assumption of the role of Senta; her scream when she first claps eyes on the Dutchman is chilling.

Pristine – not Walhall – include additional musical and historical bonuses: an introductory tribute to Leonard Warren, who had died on stage the night before, the exquisitely shaped and shaded Prelude to Act III of *La traviata* played in his honour, Milton Cross's commentaries and the rapturous applause at the final curtain. Truly a night to remember.

Antal Dorati – 1960 (studio; stereo) Decca; Urania
Covent Garden Orchestra & Chorus

Holländer - George London
Senta - Leonie Rysanek
Daland - Giorgio Tozzi
Erik - Karl Liebl
Mary - Rosalind Elias
Steuermann - Richard Lewis

The cast here is impressive but there is a real weakness in Dorati's rather uncertain conducting. He was never a natural Wagnerian and from the slack overture onwards it is clear that he doesn't seem to know how to generate much tension or excitement but tends to take a default position of either remaining non-interventionist or pulling the tempi about randomly. Fortunately, he has stage animals as singers in the persons of George London and Leonie Rysanek. Things certainly pick up a bit when London delivers his monologue and the singers carry their conductor quite often. London isn't subtle but his big, black bawl carries its own thrill; Rysanek's big, hooty tone is really too unwieldy and mature-sounding but she matches London for thrills and is almost as good as Varnay. Richard Lewis is a little throaty but reasonably sweet-toned as the Steersman, Tozzi's neat, elegant bass is almost too civilised for the bluff, venal Daland, Elias is a class act as Mary and Karl Liebl preferable to many an Eric - an ungrateful role at the best of times - even if he bleats a bit.

This has no libretto, although in the Decca issue the plot summary is linked to the tracks in the "Easy Listening Guide".

Wolfgang Sawallisch – 1961 (live; stereo) Philips; Decca
Bayreuth Festival Orchestra & Chorus

Holländer - Franz Crass
Senta - Anja Silja
Daland - Josef Greindl
Erik - Fritz Uhl
Mary - Res Fischer
Steuermann - Georg Paskuda

The live Bayreuth recording from 1961 is under a youthful, more energised Wolfgang Sawallisch with the rich-voiced Franz Crass as the Dutchman and Anja Silja, a year after her debut, as a febrile Senta. Downsides are a blowsy Mary and a characterful, but nasal, rocky and blaring Josef Greindl as Daland - and I don't much like Paskuda's constricted, effortful Steersman, either; surely Bayreuth in 1961 could have found a better tenor. Uhl is an adequate Erik, if a bit throaty.

Crass is superb, though, such a beautiful voice. He reminds me, in vocal quality, of fellow bass Kurt Moll, but with a bass-baritone colouring; great line, smooth legato, sleek power, evenness throughout the range. His is a Dutchman to rival the best from Uhde and Hotter.

Silja is bright, pure with scorching top notes and plenty penetration even if the voice per se isn't especially alluring and there is sometimes a suggestion of her being under the note but she is captivating in her intensity; it's a pity that the CD break comes right in the middle of her first big aria – such poor placement. She and Crass make magic in their big Act 2 duet "Wie aus der Ferne"

The live, stereo sound is good but there is a lot of stage-clumping and the audience coughing distracting; I don't know where the myth arose that Bayreuth audiences are respectfully attentive. This is the three-Act version, with repetitions omitted so that Act 2 begins with the Spinning Chorus and a cut permitted in the Act 3 trio. Despite the excellence of the leading pair, the failings of the supporting cast prevent me from making it a first choice.

Wolfgang Sawallisch – 1961 (live composite; mono) *Andromeda*
Bayreuth Festival Orchestra & Chorus

Holländer – George London

Senta - Anja Silja

Daland - Josef Greindl

Erik - Fritz Uhl

Mary - Res Fischer

Steuermann - Georg Paskuda

I thought I'd try this bargain recording of a radio broadcast - complete with an introduction in four languages by the polyglot German lady announcer - to see how it compared with the better-known recording from the same season with the same cast except the Dutchman is Franz Crass rather than George London.

This is a more fiery and urgent interpretation than Konwitschny's grand concept but it has to be said that, whatever its merits, the mono sound - albeit well re-mastered here - does not compare with the stereo recording and the opera suffers from the cramped atmosphere the rather brittle, peaky mono affords. There is also some distortion at the beginning of the rumbustious "Steuermann, lass die Wacht" chorus opening Act III. Finally, there is considerably more stage stomping and audience coughing in the mono broadcast, so no contest there.

Apart from that, although Greindl's laboured, rocky Daland is not a patch on singers such as Talvela or Frick, he is actually in better voice - or at least sounds it - in the stereo recording. Little pleasure is to be gained from George Paskuda's Steuermann either; he is throaty and yells and blares with little feeling, just as the luxury-cast Wunderlich does not for Konwitschny. Wilhelm Pitz's chorus is lusty and committed in both, as you would expect, although there is momentary disagreement about the tempo between Sawallisch and the women's chorus at the start of "Summ' und brumm". Fritz Uhl is more than adequate in an ungrateful role in both recordings if nothing special. Anja Silja is superb in both and, as far as I can hear, delivers identical performances, with a true, searing, if slightly shrill top and real emotional commitment. Her "Wie aus der Ferne" duet with London goes superbly.

Sawallisch directs a consistently pacy, thrilling account in both recordings but again, is better served the stereo sound.

However, for all that I greatly admire George London and enjoy his Dutchman here, I have to say that Crass delivers the superior performance. London starts off a little unsteady but soon warms up and as always has great presence and intensity, but I warm to the burring sonority of Crass' beautiful bass-baritone and unlike London, he does not tire towards the end of the opera. His voice is not as big or powerful as London's but it is tight and focused and he always rides the dense orchestration successfully.

So the choice is clear: of the two go in preference for the stereo version with Crass – not that that is necessarily the overall best choice.

Otto Klemperer – 1968 (studio; stereo) EMI

Orchestra - New Philharmonia Orchestra; Chorus - BBC Chorus

Holländer - Theo Adam

Senta - Anja Silja

Daland - Martti Talvela

Erik - Ernst Kozub

Mary - Annelies Burmeister

Steuermann - Gerhard Unger

Superb analogue sound without the distractions and vagaries of live performance and a great orchestra in combination with Klemp in best form immediately lend this recording over many another. He draws out a really weighty, majestic sound from his band, with especially secure and sonorous brass. 'Gramophone' praises him for treating the score symphonically, like Karajan; I am not sure what that means unless it is to favour or even neglect the instrumentation over the voices – which is a problem with HvK – but the orchestral passages and accompaniments have a vivid, elemental power beyond most other recordings. I like the production touch of adding thunder to the opening

If there are weakness here, they lie in the casting – certainly not with Talvela's massive Daland or Kozub's excellent Erik – perhaps the best of record - but with the Dutchman of Dresden's favourite singing son, Theo Adam. I personally do not much rate him, but others seem to like him much more; for me, he simply hasn't enough voice. He makes only fleeting appearances as the dreaded Mr Wobble but compared with the great Dutchmen his sound hasn't enough heft or gravitas and he is outsung by Talvela, whose Daland – perhaps inappropriately – has many of the qualities lacking in Adam's singing. Nor am I at all keen on Unger's peculiar, piercing, grating timbre as the Steersman. Although most tenors have to give precedence to Wunderlich, they can at least sound young, elegant and romantic like Krenn or Haefliger rather than a bleating comic turn.

Which leaves, Silja. Her Senta has the same virtues as adumbrated above in the two Sawallisch recordings which also have casting issues but she is younger and better partnered there by London and Crass. Some beat is creeping into her voice here and her intonation is less secure.

This is the best played and conducted of all but the deficiencies in its singing rule it out.

Karl Böhm – 1971 (live composite; stereo) DG

Bayreuth Festival Orchestra & Chorus

Holländer - Thomas Stewart

Senta - Gwyneth Jones

Daland - Karl Ridderbusch

Erik - Hermin Esser

Mary - Sieglinde Wagner

Steuermann - Harald Ek

I am a great fan of Thomas Stewart, which is why I bought this recording; I think his Wotan for Karajan and his Sachs for Kubelik are true monuments to his lovely voice and interpretative skills, but this "Holländer" simply does not hit the spot. I wondered why I was not previously aware of it and having played it, I can see why it is somewhat disregarded compared with other, classic accounts such as the live 1955 Bayreuth recording conducted by Keilberth. Sure, with Keilberth, you have to put up with relatively congested mono sound but it is now available in stereo on the Pristine label; they used the

Eclipse stereo issued in the 70's as the basis for their own re-mastering which is well worth the extra cost. However, even in mono the intensity of the drama of the piece really emerges vividly when you have the voices and acting skills of two such performers as Uhde (who died prematurely) and Varnay.

Stewart never really gets under the skin of the tormented Dutchman and barely hits his stride vocally - maybe Bohm's rather rushed conducting harried him. As for Gwyneth Jones, that infamous wobble seems to be more prominent here than it is in her superlative Ortrud in Kubelik's studio "Lohengrin", recorded around the same time as this live performance; it is too obtrusive to allow me to admire her customary commitment to characterisation. Ridderbusch is his usual smooth, rotund self (the voice, not the man), Harald Ek as the Steersman is very good, displaying a fine, robust voice and really differentiating amongst the three verses of his ballad before succumbing to sleep - but a tenor called Hermin Esser, the Erik, is truly awful.

So I reluctantly give this the thumbs down even though I wanted to like it.

Georg Solti – 1976 (studio; stereo) Decca
Chicago Symphony Orchestra & Chorus

Holländer - Norman Bailey
Senta - Janis Martin
Daland - Martti Talvela
Erik - René Kollo
Mary - Isola Jones
Steuermann - Werner Krenn

I decided to revisit this recording after some years of neglect and found that I had gradually imbibed prejudices against it on the basis of many negative reviews, starting way back with the Penguin Guide - which, as we all know, while magisterial, is also as frequently as fallible as any collection of subjective - even if well-informed - responses. In addition, several respected fellow reviewers seem to be - shall we say? - hardly taken by it.

I can only report that when I first played it straight through again I found myself swept along by its impetus and commitment. While it is clearly not attempting to recreate the atmosphere of a stage performance, and sonically it is a bit overblown, nor is it dull or prosaic and I did not detect the studio-bound sterility some excoriate. Nor could I find fault with the two lead voices: Wagner specialist Norman Bailey has a beautiful bass-baritone which he uses with great intelligence and intensity; the central duet "Wie aus der Ferne" is rapt and exquisitely sung by both artists. Bailey really makes us believe in the anguish of the Dutchman's plight and I find him to be the best since Uhde and Crass.

I have read accusations of Janis Martin sounding strained and over-parted; I cannot hear that beyond the slightly shrill but still thrilling top B with which she concludes and I detect no unsteadiness in her tonal emission. She has heft and presence and matches Bailey well; they are wonderful together. Werner Krenn, more often heard in a lighter Fach such as Bach and Mozart, is excellent as a young, vulnerable Steersman, singing freshly and exquisitely. Talvela repeats his paradigm of a Daland that he gave Klemperer, making him likable and even sympathetic rather than a grasping old codger - which Wagner emphatically did not want - and the sheer beauty of his bass is balm to our ears.

Solti is swift and propulsive - some ten minutes faster than Karajan, whose account from the early eighties suffers from the very fault others have found in this Solti recording, being too subdued and having casting issues, Both Karajan and Solti have first-rate orchestras and choruses but the latter puts them to better use. The drawback in Solti's recording here is Kollo as Erik, the obtrusive beat and snarl in his tenor often sounding coarse and ugly-toned - although he has his moments and few Eriks are any better; the role is by and large cursed.

That flaw apart, much else here is very successful.

Herbert von Karajan - 1981-83 (studio; digital) EMI
Orchestra - Berliner Philharmoniker; Chorus - Wiener Staatsoper

Holländer - José van Dam
Senta - Dunja Vejzovic
Daland - Kurt Moll
Erik - Peter Hofmann
Mary - Kaja Borris
Steuermann - Thomas Moser

I do not enjoy Karajan's weirdly low-key, "symphonic" treatment of the score here which seems to me to mean a subordination of the singing to the instrumental playing; furthermore, this recording is severely undercast, with van Dam singing intelligently but essentially lacking the weight of voice for the role and in any case being kept severely under wraps by Karajan's restraint; he is clearly hampered by Karajan's oddly low-key approach and any sense of dramatic tension was further compromised by its being recorded over three years, shuttling between Berlin and Salzburg, and Karajan's insistence upon van Dam playing the Dutchman as an introvert.

Its troubled genesis is not necessarily apparent in any sense of discontinuity or fragmentation but more in that two normally involved and sensitive singers like José van Dam and Kurt Moll, both with beautiful voices, give the impression of phoning in their interpretations. They are too refined and subdued to fulfil the requirements of characterisation and as such come close to being dull dogs in comparison with distinguished Dutchmen predecessors such as Hermann Uhde or George London, or the genial Martti Talvela or Gottlob Frick as Daland.

The conducting and orchestral playing are undoubtedly superb but too often the imbalances in the slightly harsh digital sound, with its over-resonant acoustic, result in the singers being overwhelmed, as can happen in stage performances. The choir is good but a bit thin and it doesn't generate as much excitement as it should; I had to smile at the reviewer who aptly complains that the "Summ' und brunn'" chorus sounds more like G & S than Wagner, it is so twee and polite.

After those few kind words, it's downhill all the way, with two over-stretched singers as the young lovers. They are both vocally embarrassed by the demands made upon them. Dunja Vejzovic is dreadful as Senta: yowling, wavery, tremulous and unsteady with a weak top, the voice lacking all heft and tonal centre. She screeches high notes and fudges passage meant to be in a sustained lower register; this explains the sad brevity of her career and her rapid disappearance from the international scene. You have only to compare her with Astrid Varnay in her prime to hear the difference, but comparison with other Sentas such as Silja, Rysanek or even Janis Martin for Solti, will do as well to confirm her inadequacy. Peter Hofmann is lumpy, coarse and bleating as Erik - that most cursed of Wagnerian tenor roles - with an exceptionally unattractive, strangulated tone and he is matched in wobbliness by Thomas Moser, on the brink of a long career during which he murdered more tenor parts than I care to enumerate.

Ultimately what we have is a great instrumental account let down by poor singing. Having listened to this back-to-back with the Solti set from a few years earlier, I can in all conscience recommend that over what essentially amounts to a failure here in comparison with Karajan's many resounding successes.

Pinchas Steinberg – 1992 (studio; digital) Naxos

Orchestra - ORF Symphonieorchester, Wien; Chorus - Budapest Radio Chorus

Holländer - Alfred Muff
Senta - Ingrid Haubold
Daland - Erich Knodt
Erik - Peter Seiffert
Mary - Marga Schiml
Steuermann - Jörg Hering

Appraisals of Naxos' complete opera recording often contain the same litany of qualified virtues: excellent price; good production values and sound quality; a recommendable introduction for the novice; sound, praiseworthy performances from not necessarily front-rank but more-than-competent singers.

All these remain largely true of this account but, despite claiming that it "virtually" (sic – what does that "virtually" do to the sense?) "jumps to the top of the pile at a single leap," 'Gramophone' then rather gave the game away and damned it with faint praise by then remarking on its "no-nonsense" quality, which as far as I am concerned equates to being nothing special – which it should be if it's "virtually" the best. The 'New York Times' puts the final nail in the coffin by describing it as "respectable".

To be specific: Steinberg is a conductor generally neglected but much-respected within the profession by his fellow-musicians, and he secures elegant but soft-edged playing from the ORF; the overture is rather slack compared with energised versions by Klemperer, Schippers and Sawallisch. The recording is clear and well-balanced but rather dull and studio-bound, lacking the drive and thrill of the best accounts. Erich Knodt is a windy Daland without much tonal centre to his bass; the tenor Steersman is weedy; Muff's tonally lightweight Dutchman reminds me of Theo Adam's in that it is well-enough sung but never grabs me by the throat and convinces me of his desperation and anguish; it's just not the right voice for the role. The choral singing is neat and disciplined but far too polite.

By far the best things here are Peter Seiffert's strong-voiced, sympathetic, even tragic Erik – although his incipient tremolo is bothersome - and Ingrid Haubold's gleaming, slightly manic Senta. Her soprano is a little edgy but that's no bad thing when portraying an unbalanced visionary - although she, too, has steadiness issues from time to time. However, in the end a first recommendation must offer a compelling ensemble, not just two fine singers.

Marc Minkowski – 2013 (studio; digital) Naïve N.B. – the 1843, Scottish version, coupled with Dietsch: *Le vaisseau fantôme* ou *Le maudit des mers*

Orchestra - Les Musiciens du Louvre Grenoble; Chorus – Eesti Filharmoonia Kammerkoor

Holländer – Evgeny Nikitin
Senta – Ingela Brimberg
Donald – Mika Kares
Erik – Eric Cutler
Mary – Helene Schneiderman
Steuermann – Bernard Richter

This is a peculiarity: a recording of the original 1843 Score, not the second revision of 1845 that we normally hear, set in Scotland, with Daland named Donald – but Senta retains her most un-Scottish name.

There are, for me, two insurmountable obstacles to my finding much pleasure in this recording. While I am interested to hear the original 1843 version of the "Holländer", it is in no way preferable to the revised item we hear performed today, published in 1860.

I found this original version conducted by Minkowski very disappointing not because of the smaller orchestra, the period practice or even the musical content but more because of the quality of the singing. I found all the singers with the exception of Eric Cutler to be inadequate or at best undistinguished. Nikitin is grey-toned and weak above the staff so that he is sometimes yelling and even fails to cut through the band of 50 instrumentalists; his "Niemals der Tod" is a non-event. Ingrid Brimberg is shrill and monotonous as Senta. The small Estonian chorus seems underpowered although the ladies sing beautifully.

The orchestra plays well but there are problems with synchronising between it and the off-stage horns. The sound is first-rate but the whole enterprise leaves me wondering whether it was all worth it and I wonder how many punters will be tempted to buy this set. The official review organs went overboard to praise it but I cannot imagine anyone wanting to listen to the Dietsch very often and the earlier version of Wagner's first masterpiece - the earliest to be admitted into the canon of the Bayreuth Ten - only serves to stress how much better his second, third and many more thoughts were right through to the time of his death when he was still considering revisions.

My MWI colleague Simon Thompson [reviewed](#) this back in 2014 and declared it "rather unexciting...lightweight...principally for the historically minded."

Recommendations:

As much as I esteem Hotter's Dutchman, especially when he is more than worthily partnered by such as Varnay, considerations of sound incline me to recommend the almost equally vocally impressive partnerships of London and Rysanek and Uhde and Varnay. The conducting by Reiner, Keilberth and Schippers is much better than Dorati's; then we have to reflect on the quality of the supporting singers, which further complicates selection of just one live mono recording. In the end, Pristine's revitalising of the sound for our aural comfort and pleasure convinces me to endorse Uhde, Varnay and Keilberth but I want to be able to hear Hotter, London and Rysanek, too.

For a more modern recording, originally recorded in stereo and not reprocessed from mono, I am surprised to find myself favouring the Solti, despite its flaws, which are fewer than in rival sets. If you like Di-Fi-Di, then the Konwitschny is also a good choice.

Live mono: Schippers – 1960 - remastered into ambient stereo by Pristine

Studio mono: Fricsay – 1952

Live stereo: Keilberth – 1955*

Studio stereo: Solti – 1976; Konwitschny – 1959

First choice*

Ralph Moore