

Puccini's *La fanciulla del West* - A discographical survey

by Ralph Moore

There are sixty recordings in the catalogue but only four of those are studio-made. Discounting Puccini's first, tentative efforts, the comparative neglect of *La fanciulla del West* is matched only by *La rondine*, which has also been given only four studio recordings and even fewer live performances. They were both composed in the middle of Puccini's creative maturity after the premieres of the "Big Three", yet have struggled to maintain a foothold in the operatic repertoire. There are reasons for that, but devotees of both operas are puzzled by their neglect. *Fanciulla* could hardly have a more auspicious premiere, being launched in 1910 on the stage of the Metropolitan Opera starring no less a lead singer than the greatest tenor of all time, Enrico Caruso, alongside the great dramatic soprano Emmy Destinn, both in roles created by Puccini especially for them – and for good measure, Pasquale Amato was Jack Rance, Toscanini conducting. Time machine, anybody?

Although I do not share Puccini's belief that *Fanciulla* is his greatest work it contains a wealth of lovely music, not least big, well-known arias and some tender love music. It's true that the Americanisms – everyone bawling "Hello!" and randomly singing "Dooda day!" – and the rather ghastly, patronising depiction of Native Americans going "Ugh!" are rather grating and even embarrassing to a modern audience, and there is more than a hint of sentimentality about the plot, but it can be hugely enjoyable when performed by a great cast.

The opera's sound-world has a peculiar and unique individuality to it as a result of Puccini's two main areas of interest: first, exploiting the possibilities of the whole-note and New World, pentatonic scales, applying leitmotifs and innovative musical effects such as the unresolved chord at the end of Act 1 depicting Minnie's yearning and uncertainty; secondly, creating a sense of ambience; no other composer, except perhaps Verdi in his mature works, so successfully conjures up in his operas so vivid and specific a sense of locality and era. In the case of *Fanciulla*, the local colour element was inspired by Puccini seeing David Belasco's play *The Golden Girl of the West* – and of course the Wild West has had an enduring, mythical appeal.

I evaluate ten recordings below, including all four made in the studio.

The Recordings

Arturo Basile – 1950 (live radio broadcast; mono) Warner Fonit; Cantus
Orchestra - RAI Milano
Chorus - RAI Milano

Minnie - Carla Gavazzi
Dick Johnson - Vasco Campagnano
Jack Rance - Ugo Savarese
Nick - Aldo Bertocci
Ashby - Dario Caselli
Jake Wallace - Dario Caselli
Billy Jackrabbit - Aristide Baracchi
José Castro - Aristide Baracchi
Wowkle - Jole Farolfi
Sonora - Pier Luigi Latinucci
Trin - Giulio Scarinci
Sid - Giovanni Privetera
Bello - Aristide Baracchi
Harry - Tommaso Soley
Joe - Giulio Scarinci

Happy - Pasquale Lombardo
Jim Larkens - Renato Pasquali
Un postiglione - Tommaso Soley

Just as we must be tolerant of the patronising racial stereotyping here, enjoyment of this recording requires us to overlook the fact that despite the really good mono, studio sound, a slight, intermittent ticking permeates proceedings on both discs. Otherwise, it is a simultaneously uplifting and sobering thought that today when all the participants are long gone, we may hear in very acceptable sound a recording made nearly seventy years ago, and just 34 years after Puccini's death.

It was in fact the first recording ever, made in 1950, forty years after the premiere in New York. Nobody here approaches that kind of eminence or star quality of the artists who first presented it, but conductor Arturo Basile directs a detailed, well-paced and unobtrusive recording in which all the details emerge and nothing grates. The best singer here is undoubtedly Carla Gavazza, whom I found miscast as Donna Elvira in the contemporaneous Cetra recording of "Don Giovanni" but here she finds a vehicle suited to her spinto-verismo talents. Some top notes are wild and even out of tune but she has a big, vibrant sound with a fast vibrato and acts very convincingly, if rather broadly, as the lonely, feisty bar-keeper Minnie. She is in good company with a host of big-voiced sopranos who also chose to sing Minnie both on stage and in recordings in the 50's, when it was staged throughout Italy: Tebaldi, Olivero, Frazzoni, Caniglia and Steber all made a success of it. Ugo Savarese was a decent second-rank baritone whose timbre is too cloudy to capture fully the virile menace and allure of the fractious Sheriff and must yield to superior interpreters such as Milnes and Gobbi - but he will do. The weakness here is the gentle, soft-grained tenor of Vasco Campagnano, whose rather lachrymose and even whining delivery - especially in the showpiece aria "Ch'ella mi creda" - does little to portray the glamour of the romantic, reluctant bandit; we must turn to Del Monaco and Corelli for that. The notes are a little kind in comparing him to Gigli; he has the notes and he's no comprimario but he's not in that league.

In truth, the cast contains hardly a name remembered today even by aficionados, but rich-toned bass Dario Caselli makes an affecting Jake Wallace even if Giorgio Tozzi and Gwynne Howell in rival recordings have more beautiful voices and the rest of the cast, doubling and even trebling up in roles, are more than adequate.

Furthermore - and rather unusually in this remastered Warner Fonit series - there are notes, a synopsis and even the complete Italian libretto (no translation) in this box set.

Dimitri Mitropoulos – 1954 (live; mono) Walhall; Regis; Myto

Orchestra - Teatro Comunale di Firenze

Chorus - Teatro Comunale di Firenze

Minnie - Eleanor Steber
Dick Johnson - Mario Del Monaco
Jack Rance - Giangiacomo Guelfi
Nick - Piero De Palma
Ashby - Vito Susca
Jake Wallace - Giorgio Tozzi
Billy Jackrabbit - Paolo Washington
José Castro - Mario Frosini
Wowkle - Laura Didier-Gambardella
Sonora - Enzo Vioro
Trin - Breno Ristori
Sid - Lido Pettini
Bello - Virgilio Carbonari

Harry - Valiano Natali
Joe - Enzo Guagni
Happy - Agostino Ferrin
Jim Larkens - Giorgio Giorgetti
Un postiglione - Alberto Lotti-Camici

This is one of two classic live performances from the 50's which make the best possible case for this uneven opera, the other being the 1957 La Scala production with Corelli, Gobbi and Frazzoni, ably conducted by Votto. The sound here in this 1954 performance is marginally better, but you should be warned that neither of these is suitable as your sole recording or to introduce a novice to what Puccini (inexplicably) thought of as his masterpiece. It's in dim, fizzy mono, I'm afraid, so if you want decent sound, you will have to go for a studio recording or at least de Fabritiis' stereo recording from 1967.

Having said that, no Minnie except Olivero below touches Steber for her pathos, security and conviction. She has seemingly no difficulty with this fiendish role; hers was never a huge voice yet there is never any sense of her being under-powered or under-dramatised. She sings tirelessly and thrillingly with that peculiarly vibrant timbre which is so individual. Needless to say, Del Monaco matches her and by no means just belts his way through his part. Guelfi – solid, resonant and reliable, as in so many recordings of this period – is more ordinary than Gobbi, in his characterisation, but the voice is more intrinsically beautiful, with a more secure top, and he by no means underplays Jack Rance. His "Minnie dalla mia casa" is touching and passionate; you really believe that he loves Minnie - and the audience responds appreciatively.

This performance has been in and out of the catalogue in many guises for many years, and there are bargain editions from Walhall and Regis. As long as you are tolerant of the sound and are fond of this opera, you need it as a supplement to one in better sound - and it is especially recommendable to fans of Eleanor Steber who, in my opinion, is one of the two greatest post-war American sopranos - the other being Eileen Farrell. This is a fitting tribute to her.

Antonino Votto – 1956 (live; mono) Opera d'Oro

Orchestra - Teatro alla Scala

Chorus - Teatro alla Scala

Minnie - Gigliola Frazzoni
Dick Johnson - Franco Corelli
Jack Rance - Tito Gobbi
Nick - Franco Ricciardi
Ashby - Ugo Novelli
Jake Wallace - Nicola Zaccaria
Billy Jackrabbit - Rando Coda
José Castro - Vittorio Tatozzi
Wowkle - Maria Amadini
Sonora - Enzo Sordello
Trin - Athos Cesarini
Sid - Michele Cazzato (Casato)
Bello - Pier Luigi Latinucci
Harry - Gino Del Signore
Joe - Angelo Mercuriali
Happy - Carlo Forti
Jim Larkens - Giuseppe Morresi
Un postiglione - Erminio Benatti

Votto is, as ever, reliable here but it is the singers who astonish: Corelli is clearly in spectacular voice; no other tenor, even Del Monaco, provides such visceral thrills. Gobbi is both snarling and subtle as the sheriff, while Gigliola Frazzoni turns in a truly startling performance as Minnie; wild and wonderful, with the occasional mis-fire but some of the most heartfelt and gutsy singing you'll ever hear from a dramatic soprano. She lives the part and has the right voice, too: warmer than Nilsson's, very similar to Tebaldi, with similar power; it's a crime that neither EMI nor Decca made a studio recording with her, as, unfortunately, the live sound is pretty wretched compared with Tebaldi and Del Monaco's and Nilsson's and Gibin's excellent studio, stereo issues. It is perhaps no better than what you'd expect for a 1956 stage performance but hard going when the harshness, distortions and fuzziness so obscure the sound picture. Buy this only as a supplement - it's cheap enough, especially on Marketplace - but don't expect much aurally; it's pretty dim and disappointing. If only the sound quality had been a bit better, it could have been a first choice, at least for mono recordings. You can sample it on YouTube, too.

Franco Capuana – 1958 (studio; stereo) Decca

Orchestra - Santa Cecilia

Chorus - Santa Cecilia

Minnie - Renata Tebaldi

Dick Johnson - Mario Del Monaco

Jack Rance - Cornell MacNeil

Nick - Piero De Palma

Ashby - Silvio Maionica

Jake Wallace - Giorgio Tozzi

Billy Jackrabbit - Dario Caselli

Wowkle - Biancamaria Casoni

Sonora - Giorgio Giorgetti

Trin - Enzo Guagni

Sid - Virgilio Carbonari

Bello - Ezio Peruzzi

Harry - Mario Carlin

Joe - Angelo Mercuriali

Happy - Michele Cazzato (Casato)

Jim Larkens - Giuseppe Morresi

Un postiglione - Athos Cesarini

This should have been conducted by Votto with his favoured Minnie, Gigliola Frazzoni but Decca wanted their house singers; Votto demurred and was replaced by Capuana; the resultant cast was hardly inferior but I regret that the opportunity to record Frazzoni's Minnie was lost. Capuana is no less competent than Votto, but both miss some of the tension and excitement generated by von Maticic at key points such as Minnie's entrance and the card game. There is a slight danger of Capuana loving the score to death in the lyrical passages, too, but how lovely the cowboy chorus is their nostalgia song – and Capuana sings along so nicely in the love duet.

There are some welcome, recognisable names in the supporting cast – De Palma, Maionica, Caselli (a previous Jake Wallace for Basile), Carlin, Mercuriali et al were all La Scala regulars – and chief among them is the luxurious casting of Tozzi as Jack Wallace – “Jeck Wull-ahse” (sic) – why does no-one ever tell the Nick how to pronounce that English name? - as warm smooth and sonorous as his finest rivals Zaccaria and Howell.

The sole non-Italian here is Cornell MacNeil. There is no doubting the rich quality or volume of his baritone; the question is whether it and his characterisation fit the role? Here, I quote with permission, as I have in my previous *Ring* survey, a bon mot from my “learned friend”: “The problem

with MacNeil is that his sound is too "nice" - at the end of Act II, having lost that all important card game with Minnie, Rance bids her "Buona notte"; MacNeil sounds for all the world as if he is bidding the vicar good night after midnight mass."

I cannot resist, too, quoting at some length from the "100 Singers" posting about MacNeill on YouTube:

"It was a voice of huge size and "volcanic top notes"...but perhaps this exuberance blinds us for some flaws. He never was a sensitive singer. Rightly a critic once remarked, the baritone always has sung with an all-purpose expression; it was as if he relied only on the richness of his voice...In the late 1950's, producer John Culshaw chose MacNeil for the role of Amonasro in the DECCA production of AIDA with Tebaldi and Bergonzi. After the first rehearsals with the baritone, Herbert von Karajan asked: "Who has just hired this cowboy?" It seemed the Maestro didn't like unsophisticatedness..."

Ironic that MacNeil plays a cowboy here; he has the ardour and nobility for the passage when he is wooing Minnie, but can he do nasty? He certainly sounds tough enough challenging Johnson and interrogating Castro and his "Ah, sfacciato!" just after Johnson's plea is properly snarled, but yes, the "Buona notte" is pathetically inadequate.

Whenever I listen to the great Renata Tebaldi, I cannot help but recall an unkind comment by a previous prominent reviewer (I forget which) that he always hears "a hint of fishwife" in her tone, which seems an odd statement to make about the soprano whom Toscanini dubbed "la voce d'angelo" (whereas Johnson leaves her pondering his remark that she has "un viso d'angelo"), but as she matured an edge did creep into her voice, especially on high notes. So much of her singing is balm, with admirable legato, but the scratchiness is there; I have the same problem with Régine Crespin, but apparently some others don't hear it. When she expands into "S'amavan tanto", I don't like the sound she makes. On the other hand, she is lovable in "Io non son che una povera fanciulla", very moving and controlled in her appeal to the miners to spare Johnson and her top B on "come le stelle" is spot on. I cannot be one of those voice-fanciers who decides whether a singer stands or falls by whether his or her sour top C is sour; by that criterion, singers like Domingo and Vickers would be discounted. In the end I acknowledge Tebaldi's artistry in a favourite role but still prefer Olivero or Neblett; you decide for yourself.

Which leaves Del Monaco. I am weary of the old debate regarding whether he is "too loud and unlovely"; we'd murder for a tenor of his heft and refulgence today and it is simply untrue that he could not sing quietly or subtly – you have only to listen to the love duet, where Tebaldi, too, is her most winning - although, like Corelli, he had no qualms about grandstanding and hanging on to the money notes. He's wonderfully explosive in "Amal la vita" but tender and steady as can be in "O Minnie non piangete", complete with cheesy background humming – lovely!

There are a few traditional stage cuts; Decca's early stereo sound is warm and detailed; such a relief after the other two ropey live, mono recordings from the 50's.

Lovro von Matacic – 1958 (studio; stereo) EMI

Orchestra - Teatro alla Scala

Chorus - Teatro alla Scala

Minnie - Birgit Nilsson

Dick Johnson - João Gibin

Jack Rance - Andrea Mongelli

Nick - Renato Ercolani

Ashby - Antonio Cassinelli
Jake Wallace - Nicola Zaccaria
Billy Jackrabbit - Carlo Forti
José Castro - Carlo Forti
Wowkle - Gabriella Carturan
Sonora - Enzo Sordello
Trin - Florindo Andreolli
Sid - Giuseppe Costariol
Bello - Dino Mantovani
Harry - Dino Formichini
Joe - Antonio Costantino
Happy - Leonardo Monreale
Jim Larkens - Giuseppe Morresi
Un postiglione - Angelo Mercuriali

This was supposed to be EMI's answer to the Decca recording with an equally starry line-up of Callas, Corelli and Gobbi, which must surely top the list of great recordings never made, along with the Callas-Gobbi Macbeth that never happened. Callas being unavailable, you would think that EMI would have snapped up Gigliola Frazzoni, cynically bumped by Decca along with Votto in favour of their own artists on contract, but instead they opted for rising star Birgit Nilsson, who learned the part especially, never having sung it on stage. Instead of Corelli, Brazilian tenor João Gibin was recruited to make his sole commercial recording and Andrea Mongelli, another singer who was hardly a household name, was engaged to sing Rance. You might say that the whole project was a bit of a gamble.

You can be almost certain that anything conducted by von Matacic will be superlative – and sound very Italian, too, despite the conductor being Croatian. He is fluid, flexible, urgent and expansive by turns; for excellence, this is conducting to set alongside that of de Fabritiis below. At key moments, he is unafraid to court sentimentality by really slowing down and pausing, whereas Capuana can be a bit brisk. Von Matacic sounds as if he loves the music.

The right note is set by the warm, rolling delivery of his ballad, by Zaccaria, introduced by Renato Ercolani's Nick as another "Jeck Wull-ahse". The three principals are the only non-Italians in the cast – although the Greek Zaccaria was virtually naturalised as the resident La Scala principal bass for fifteen years - so the dialogue and interplay sound as authentically Italian as the conducting. I have never encountered Mongelli in any other recordings, but he has a big, black sound, apt for the sheriff, but his handsome baritone hasn't much finesse or variety, and his legato could be better, but he is impressive in a generalised kind of way. His "Buona notte" is supposed to be intoned "coldly", by a man "absolutely dumbfounded", but he growls like a pantomime villain.

Nilsson's soprano in this role has, and always will, divide opinion. There is rather a plaintive quality to her softer singing but of course she dominates the big moments with her massive, pure tone – without, I must say, sounding too much like a Valkyrie on the loose in Gold Rush California; she sounds more like the woman tough enough to claim that anyone wanting to steal the barrel containing all the miners' gold would have to do so over her dead body. Olivero and Neblett move me more than Nilsson, though and I don't find her acting of hysteria very convincing in the crucial gambling scene.

Gibin is obviously not a big, bronze-voiced tenor like Del Monaco or Corelli, nor does he have Domingo's golden tone. What he does have is a nice, well-schooled voice, with an attractive, reedy quality to it and good penetration on top notes. I hadn't heard him in this recording for many years before embarking on this survey and must say that my re-encounter with him revealed him to be much better than I had remembered, even if still lacks the heft ideal for the most dramatic moments

such the narration of how he embarked on his life of crime and in the climax of "Ch'ella mi creda", beautifully sung though it is.

EMI's sound is close and immediate, not as rich as that given to Capuana by Decca but admirably detailed. As with that Decca studio recording, there are a few cuts. This is a fine recording and will satisfy most listeners, even if one or two more provide that bit more warmth, glamour and excitement in the singing.

Oliviero De Fabritiis – 1967 (live; stereo) Myto; Opera Fanatic

Orchestra - Teatro la Fenice di Venezia

Chorus - Teatro La Fenice di Venezia

Minnie - Magda Olivero
Dick Johnson - Daniele Barioni
Jack Rance - Giangiacomo Guelfi
Nick - Mario Guggia
Ashby - Angelo Nosotti
Jake Wallace - Alessandro Maddalena
Billy Jackrabbit - Uberto Scaglione
José Castro - Franco Federici
Wowkle - Anna Lia Bazzani
Sonora - Giuseppe Zecchillo
Trin - Vittorio Pandano
Sid - Bruno Tessari
Bello - Bruno Grella
Harry - Augusto Pedroni
Joe - Mario Carlin
Happy - Gianni Socci
Jim Larkens - Francesco Signor
Un postiglione - Augusto Veronese

Magda Olivero's unique voice will always divide opinion; responses are diverse. I myself find that I love in her in certain roles (Francesca, Iris, Fedora, Adriana) but find her all wrong for others (Medea, Manon Lescaut). She's great here. She began as a soprano leggero with a tight, fluttery vibrato more typical of the pre-war era when she embarked upon the first phase of her career, but on her comeback in her fifties she developed a bigger, steadier sound and moved into dramatico-spinto roles. Her way of inflecting text, the little glottal catch, her delicate, floated pianissimi and the thrust of her voice on the money notes are so individual and captivating, even if she doesn't especially sound like a young woman - yet her top C is a dream, like a shaft of light.

Guelfi has a big, brazen baritone; you would not think that subtlety was his forte but in fact he sang some bel canto roles successfully. He studied with Ruffo and some of that superlative artist's glamour rubbed off. In any case, depicting the snarling, bullying Jack Rance plays to his strengths; I just revel in the amplitude of his sound. He's a good actor, too - better than the equally sumptuously vocally- endowed MacNeil; his "Buona notte" when defeated by Minnie cheating in their card game to decide Johnsons's fate is a distillation of rage and frustration, whereas MacNeil flunks it. Daniele Barioni will mainly be known to collectors as partner to Anna Moffo in her studio recording of *La rondine*; he has very attractive timbre, perhaps lacking the last ounce of personality and without quite the heft of Del Monaco or Corelli, but like Domingo, capable of both tenderness and passion and he makes a real impact with his first big outburst, "Amai la vita", going on to caress "Quello che tacete" delectably; audience approval has to be suppressed by others "shushing".

I recognise very few of the names among the supporting cast but they are excellent, a proper ensemble which blends beautifully. For once, even the Jake Wallace isn't a disappointment; Alessandro Maddalena has a proper Italian bass of the Pinza type: rich, deep with a fast vibrato. We are in safe hands with de Fabritiis in charge; both he could be relied upon to follow and faithfully interpret Puccini's score while Olivero is more inclined to follow its spirit; anyway, between them, they make magic and thus the music surges and sings without undue exaggeration. This is the best conducted of all the versions I know. The sound is a bit hissy and tinny but not at all bad for its age and provenance – and it's primitive stereo, too, miles better than, say, Sinopoli's live recording fifteen years later; unfortunately, it often catches the prompter well, too and the chattering, chuckling racket made by some audience members for some time into the start of Act 3 is enough to give you palpitations (they do eventually settle down). Never mind; this is as fine a performance as you could wish for. (It has the standard small cuts.)

Whenever I do one of these surveys, there's always a pleasant surprise; this is it.

Zubin Mehta – 1978 (studio; stereo) DG

Orchestra - Covent Garden

Chorus - Covent Garden

Minnie - Carol Neblett

Dick Johnson - Plácido Domingo

Jack Rance - Sherrill Milnes

Nick - Francis Egerton

Ashby - Robert Lloyd

Jake Wallace - Gwynne Howell

Billy Jackrabbit - Paul Hudson

José Castro - Eric Garrett

Wowkle - Anne Wilkens

Sonora - Jonathan Summers

Trin - John Dobson

Sid - Malcolm Rivers

Bello - Tom McDonnell

Harry - Paul Crook

Joe - Robin Leggate

Happy - William Elvin

Jim Larkens - Malcolm King

Un postiglione - Handel Owen

I bought this set on LP when it first came out, as a souvenir of the excellent -and at the time revelatory - Covent Garden production, which had arrived via Turin and Vienna and I had seen and much enjoyed. The cast in the recording is identical to the stage performances except that poor old Silvano Carroli - who was very good - was edged out by a bigger star: Sherrill Milnes. I do not much hold that against Milnes as he here delivers one of his most subtle and thrilling performances on disc; the part of the snarling sheriff with romantic leanings fits him like a glove. Similarly, Domingo gives a performance to rank alongside his Manrico (also for Mehta) and his Radames for Muti. I don't always think he is ideal when more spinto heft is required, but he is here golden-toned and in clarion voice, singing tenderly, too, when required. Carol Neblett made Minnie a signature role in her career, proving to be one of the few sopranos able to stay the course in that cruelly taxing role, and although she does not quite deliver the excitement provided by Tebaldi, Olivero, or Frazzoni - any more than Domingo can rival Del Monaco or Corelli for sheer vocal glamour - she makes a complete, touching character out of the lonely camp-girl, has all the notes and is in vibrant voice, with gleaming top notes – her top C is a stunner. She has the right sound, too: girlish with steel when necessary

There is so much lovely, innovative and unusual music in this opera that I can forgive the moments of crassness and sentimentality in all that cowboy stuff - and some things are genuinely moving. The supporting cast is especially strong and they are clearly a wholly integrated group with the kind of ensemble and rapport that come from performing live together. The tone is set early on when Gwynne Howell (as Jake Wallace, "il cantastorie del campo") sings a meltingly beautiful account of the ballad "Che faranno"; the dignity of his singing quite redeems its dangerous sentimentality and he is the best on record.

Mehta's direction is fluid and flexible; he lingers where he should and whips up the tension when it's needed. I hear no lack of warmth or affection in his conducting. The sound is beautifully rich, clear and balanced; the best of all the recordings here. I am not saying that this is the only, or even the finest, studio recording in that I still love the gung-ho glory of the singing in the earlier Decca set and Olivero's special, live performance, but this a very cohesive and satisfying account of this oddly patchy work.

Giuseppe Sinopoli – 1982 (live; mono) Premiere Opera; The Opera Lovers

Orchestra - Deutsche Oper Berlin

Chorus - Deutsche Oper Berlin

Minnie - Ghena Dimitrova

Dick Johnson - Franco Bonisolli

Jack Rance - Silvano Carroli

Nick - Loren Driscoll

Ashby - Tomislav Neralic

Jake Wallace - William Murray

Wowkle - Kaja Borris

Sonora - Rolf Kühne

Trin - Karl-Ernst Mercker

Sid - Otto Heuer

Bello - Barry McDaniel

Harry - Peter Maus

Joe - William Pell

Poor sound with the voices too remote suggests a very amateur recording – and I wonder why it is mono, as late as 1982. The supporting cast are generally undistinguished, too, but not helped by the placement of the recording equipment; the orchestra tends to overpower them. This compromises the liveliness of the opening and the arrival of Jake Wallace, far too distantly placed, constitutes another disappointment; the unknown bass has no charisma, but he does have a wobble. We must look for consolation in the quality of the conducting and of the singing of the principal trio. Silvano Carroli specialised in the role of Jack Rance and I always feel sorry he was bumped in the DG recording in favour of a bigger name in Sherill Milnes; Bonisolli and Dimitrova were big names in their day and they had big voices, too, as did Carroli, which you can hear in the climax of his "Minnie, dalla mia casa" but the sound both vulgarises and diminishes their contributions. I am usually a fan of what Sinopoli does with the score but insofar as I can judge through the veil of sound, he is in one of his "pulling about" modes; tempi and phrasing are excessively distorted. You can hear, however, that both Dimitrova and Bonisolli are simply phenomenal, vocally; just listen to her top C in "s'amavan tanto", describing her parents' love for each other. I just wish this recording did them justice. The prolonged attempt by a few determined audience-members to applaud Bonisolli after his splendid - if absurdly etiolated by Sinopoli – "Ch'ella mi creda" is hushed by others; that admixture of admiration and frustration sums up my reaction to this recording. You might want to hear the extraordinary vocalisation here but it cannot possibly be a first recommendation.

Lorin Maazel – 1991 (live composite; digital) Sony

Orchestra - Teatro alla Scala

Chorus - Teatro alla Scala

Minnie - Mara Zampieri
Dick Johnson - Plácido Domingo
Jack Rance - Juan (Joan) Pons
Nick - Sergio Bertocchi
Ashby - Luigi Roni
Jake Wallace - Marco Chingari
Billy Jackrabbit - Aldo Bramante
José Castro - Claudio Giombi
Wowkle - Nella Verri
Sonora - Antonio Salvadori
Trin - Ernesto Gavazzi
Sid - Giovanni Savoiardo
Bello - Orazio Mori
Harry - Francesco Memeo
Joe - Aldo Bottion
Happy - Ernesto Panariello
Jim Larkens - Pietro Spagnoli
Un postiglione - Umberto Scalavino

The great drawback here is Mara Zampieri; she often sings softly very “straight”, without any vibrato, sounding like a treble choirboy, especially in the quasi-parlando passages, and when she opens up the sound is blaring and acidulous, developing what is almost a tremolo. Her lower register is weak, too; this is an improperly integrated voice and often simply an unpleasant sound. The contrast with Domingo’s rounded, golden tone and strong sense of line is marked. His top B is poor, but he is otherwise almost as good as he was for Mehta. Pons manages to draw more colours out of his baritone than was often the case, but his vibrato becomes excessive and he hasn’t the resonance of Milnes, Guelfi or MacNeil. The supporting cast is strong, especially Luigi Roni’s Ashby, but once again, Jake Wallace is not sung by a voice of great distinction – which is essential if his ballad is to make the requisite impact.

The recording balance is generally too much in favour of the orchestra; the voices, especially in the crowd scenes, are too recessed. The orchestra is fine and Maazel’s conducting is animated but I do not find myself much moved by this performance; that special Puccinian “golden glow” is missing. All that is irrelevant in any case, if, as I do, you find the Minnie insufferable.

Leonard Slatkin – 1991 (studio; digital) RCA

Orchestra - Münchner Rundfunkorchester

Chorus - Chor des Bayerischen Rundfunks

Minnie - Éva Marton
Dick Johnson - Dennis O'Neill
Jack Rance - Alain Fondary
Nick - Walter Planté
Ashby - Jan-Hendrik Rootering
Jake Wallace - Brian Montgomery
Billy Jackrabbit - Franz Hawlata
José Castro - Helmut Berger-Tuna
Wowkle - Cornelia Wulkopf
Sonora - Jean-Marc Ivaldi

Trin - Robert Swensen
Sid - Danilo Serraiocco
Bello - Max Cooke
Harry - Jan Vacik
Joe - Heinrich Weber
Happy - Ludwig Baumann
Jim Larkens - Rainer Scholze
Un postiglione - Roland Kandblinder

There's a slight want of energy in those daft but charming opening pages compared with the best versions and it's a big mistake to under-cast the role of Jake Wallace whose sentimental ballad forms such a contrast with the busy-ness that precedes it, so Brian Montgomery's bland account cannot compete with, or erase memories of, Giorgio Tozzi and Gwynne Howell. Alain Fondary is a decent Jack Rance but without the black snarl in his tone that the character demands. He makes a nice job of his "Minnie, dalla mia casa" but lacks the ringing top of Milnes or MacNeil to provide the perfect conclusion. Éva Marton's soft singing is touching but there is always the danger of a beat creeping in as soon as she puts that big voice under any pressure and even that famous top sounds a bit worn. Dennis O'Neill's refined, rather constricted tone is wholly unsuitable to the role of the romantic cowboy; he barely makes an impact on his first entrance and his top B on "e ancor bella m'appar" is weak compared with, say, Del Monaco. Slatkin's conducting continues to be dutiful and dull, although the orchestral playing is first-rate. Despite the advantage of digital sound – which is itself nonetheless odd, as it keeps switching perspective from distant to up-close - you can do so much better than this on so many levels.

Recommendations:

In the end, the choice must be made on balance as there is no clear winner. Corelli is the best Johnson of all, but the recorded sound is hopeless. Del Monaco is my next favourite in that role but I don't think that Tebaldi, MacNeil or Capuana are as good as Frazzoni – again, poor sound – Olivero or Neblett. The best conducting comes from von Matacic but his cast isn't the best. For all-round satisfaction, I default to Mehta but Olivero, Barioni, Guelfi and de Fabritiis make a formidable team, even if the live, stereo sound cannot compete with the studio sound for Mehta on DG.

Live mono: Antonino Votto – 1956

Live stereo: Oliviero De Fabritiis – 1967

Studio stereo: Zubin Mehta – 1978*

*First choice

Ralph Moore