

Strauss' *Salome*: A partial survey of the discography

by Ralph Moore

There are around eighty recordings of *Salome*, of which a dozen are studio recordings; I review all of the latter here plus what I hope is a reasonably representative selection of thirteen live, live composite and radio broadcast recordings, making a total of twenty-five in all. There are two live recordings of the 1907 French version and one in an Italian translation; the rest all use the original 1905 German libretto, which the composer wrote as a stripped-down version based on the German translation of Oscar Wilde's play.

Salome quickly established itself in the repertoire of German houses but provoked resistance elsewhere from censors and an establishment who, just as Puccini's *Tosca* had been condemned as a "shabby little shocker", were outraged by its immorality, violence and lasciviousness. It took a generation before earning its rightful place in the regular operatic canon of the big houses in the Anglo-Saxon world. For more on this, see [Len Mullenger's short article](#). Today, it is one of Strauss' most popular and performed operas.

The casting of its central role was problematic from the start: as Strauss famously said, Salome should be sung by "a 16-year old princess with the voice of an Isolde." She needs to have the affect and body of, respectively, a spoilt and lissom teenager, in order to convince both vocally and physically, especially when she performs her erotic Dance of the Seven Veils at Herod's behest, yet she must have the power and endurance typical of a Wagnerian dramatic soprano, able to sing a role sustaining a high tessitura above a huge orchestra throughout most of the one act opera which typically last 100 minutes. Operatic sopranos combining those aptitudes are understandably rare; some have followed the example of the first Salome, Marie Wittich, who initially refused – "I won't do it, I'm a decent woman" - and had a ballerina substitute for her. Of course, unless the dancer is a body-double, which is unlikely, especially if, like Wittich, the soprano is of "traditional build", this becomes highly unconvincing and even risible, because of the disparity between their physiques. Wittich eventually made things worse by swallowing her principles and insisting on doing the dance herself despite being physically ill-suited to it. Others have more wisely abandoned performing the role live, confining themselves to recordings. Montserrat Caballé was just such a one; she was vocally surprisingly suited to it and performed it in her younger years but abandoned the role on stage while still in her vocal prime for obvious reasons. A few singers, however, such as Malfitano, Mattila and Ewing, have been able to continue encompassing both the song and the dance elements, even going so far as to court notoriety by dancing virtually naked, without even the vestige of modesty provided by a body-stocking such as Mary Garden wore in 1908, presumably on the "if you've got it, flaunt it" principle. On recording that becomes irrelevant, of course; only the vocal dilemma remains.

Jochanaan (sometimes "Jokanaan" for reasons I cannot discover – one French one German? - but it's with a "k" in some German texts) is not the easiest role, either: it requires a beautiful baritone voice with the smoothest legato and a kind of other-worldly quality that suggest spirituality, yet he must be comely enough of voice and person to justify Salome's obsession with him – a presence suggestive of sensuousness without sensuality, if you like. Herodias is a gift of a part for a chesty mezzo with attitude and even a good Narraboth can leave his mark before his shocking, self-inflicted demise in a pool of blood in front of his goddess.

The temptation to cast Herod as some kind of biblical Mime has resulted in some notably ear-grating performances but, just as Mime benefits from being properly sung and characterised rather than caricatured by relentless screech and whining, in my estimation the best singers in that role are proper Heldenentors prepared to slum it a bit, such as Set Svanholm or Jon Vickers.

The Recordings

Joseph Keilberth – 1948 (live radio broadcast; mono) Berlin Classics
Orchestra - Dresdner Staatskapelle

Salome - Christel Goltz
Jochanaan - Josef Herrmann
Herodes - Bernd Aldenhoff
Herodias - Inger Karén
Narraboth - Rudolf Dittrich
Ein Page - Ruth Lange
Erster Nazarener - Kurt Böhme
Zweiter Nazarener - Walter Hiebl
Erster Soldat - Manfred Hübner
Zweiter Soldat - Martin Tietze
Ein Cappadocier - Erich Handel
Ein Sklave - Edith Hellriegel
Erster Jude - Erich Zimmermann
Zweiter Jude - Heinrich Tessmer
Dritter Jude - Hans Delenda
Vierter Jude - Johannes Kemter
Fünfter Jude - Heinrich Pflanzl

The mono sound is remarkably good here, very clean and forward; apparently the whole thing was recorded using only one microphone! Some of the voices among the supporting cast are a bit homespun; Josef Herrmann is distinctly lacking in charisma and resonance, being too light and weak as Jochanaan and the Narraboth sounds too elderly. Christel Goltz was a celebrated Salome: she is a brilliant and lustful, with big, steady top notes but may be heard to advantage in superior company in subsequent recordings for Krauss and Mitropoulos. Bernd Aldenhoff enjoys time out from Heldentenor roles as a very characterful, full-voiced, if rather strenuous, Herod; Inger Karén makes a grating harridan of Herodias. Keilberth pushes the action onward in thoroughly confident and idiomatic style and the orchestral playing is very tight and euphonious - but this is not a prime contender.

Fritz Reiner – 1949 (live; mono) Gebhardt; Guild Immortal Performances; Golden Melodram
Orchestra - Metropolitan Opera

Salome - Ljuba Welitsch
Jochanaan - Herbert Janssen
Herodes - Frederick Jagel
Herodias - Kerstin Thorborg
Narraboth - Brian Sullivan
Ein Page - Hertha Glaz
Erster Nazarener - Dezsö Ernster
Zweiter Nazarener - Emery Darcy
Erster Soldat - Jerome Hines
Zweiter Soldat - Philip Kinsman
Ein Cappadocier - Osie Hawkins
Ein Sklave - Inge Manski
Erster Jude - Leslie Chabay
Zweiter Jude - Thomas Hayward
Dritter Jude - Alessio De Paolis

Vierter Jude - Paul Franke
 Fünfter Jude - Gerhard Pechner

This is rightly hailed by some as the better sung of Ljuba Welitsch's two live recorded performances at the Met conducted by Reiner, yet on balance I prefer the 1952 one for all that there is some (slight) deterioration in her voice three years after this classic 1949 version.

My reasons are several: first, even though it is very listenable, after re-mastering, the 1949 sound remains inferior to my Walhall issue of the 1952 account; both are 24-bit but the three years improvement in recording equipment technology seems to have made a difference. Secondly, Reiner is equally good in both performances, so it doesn't matter which you buy to hear him in his element as a great Strauss conductor. Thirdly, the supporting cast in 1949 is markedly inferior to their later counterparts: both Frederick Jagel and Kerstin Thorborg were estimable singers in their day but even though they are here only in their early fifties they sound rather worn and wobbly compared with Set Svanholm and Elisabeth Höngen. Similarly, Herbert Janssen was a great Wagnerian but here in his late fifties sounds more like Salome's elderly uncle, mildly miffed by her inappropriate behaviour rather than a virile object of teenage desire; his under-powered "Du bist verflucht!" really doesn't chill as it should. Hans Hotter three years later, is much more imposing, even if he, too, sounds rather mature. My ears pricked up at the first notes of the First Soldier and sure enough, in 1949, it's the young Jerome Hines, but Norman Scott is pretty good in 1952, too, doubling as the Fourth Jew. Brian Sullivan repeats a terrific Narraboth - the best on record - in both versions.

Welitsch is wonderful in both - the most credible and arresting Salome ever, sounding like a crazed ingénue with her pure, piping sound and unexpectedly trenchant lower register. But on balance I'd go for the 1952 recording.

Fritz Reiner – 1952 (live; mono) Walhall; Myto
 Orchestra - Metropolitan Opera

Salome - Ljuba Welitsch
 Jochanaan - Hans Hotter
 Herodes - Set Svanholm
 Herodias - Elisabeth Höngen
 Narraboth - Brian Sullivan
 Ein Page - Hertha Glaz
 Erster Nazarener - Alois Pernerstorfer
 Zweiter Nazarener - Emery Darcy
 Erster Soldat - Norman Scott
 Zweiter Soldat - Luben Vichey
 Ein Cappadocier - Osie Hawkins
 Ein Sklave - Paula Lenchner(-Schmidt)
 Erster Jude - Gabor Carelli
 Zweiter Jude - Thomas Hayward
 Dritter Jude - Alessio De Paolis
 Vierter Jude - Paul Franke
 Fünfter Jude - Gerhard Pechner

One is immediately struck by the attack and immediacy of Reiner's direction in this 1952 live performance from the Met; Reiner was a master Strauss conductor and galvanises the orchestra into delivering a remarkably vibrant and supple account of this classic shocker. The brass are especially virtuosic and the performance surges ahead in an uninterrupted torrent of sound, sweeping the

listener along with it. The recorded sound is really good for live mono: clean and undistorted, permitting a fair amount of instrumental detail to emerge; Jochanaan's noble theme on the brass is electric.

The next pleasant surprise is the quality of the singing. I had never heard of either singer taking the roles of Narraboth and the Page respectively when I first heard this recording, but Brian Sullivan in particular has a big, pliant tenor and Hans Hotter is in finest voice as the prophet, his declamatory outbursts noble and powerful with very little of the "woofiness" which soon afflicted his voice. He is able to suggest the other-worldly fanatic and has the vocal resources of a celebrated Wotan to sustain his characterisation – although obviously that militates against his sounding like the young man he is supposed to be. Set Svanholm creates a grippingly credible, neurotic and, degenerate Herod without adopting the whine which too many exponents of this role resort to as a default-position in order to characterise the demented Tetrarch. Elisabeth Höngen is a convincing Herodias and the rest of the cast is packed with first-rate singers.

Of course, the *raison d'être* of this set is Ljuba Welitsch's famous *Salome*, of which surprisingly few records remain. She is fine voice even if not quite as secure as she was with the same conductor in 1949 and a few hints of vocal difficulties are beginning to manifest themselves, particularly with regards to erratic pitch. Nonetheless, hers remains one of the most convincing *Salomes* by far; of the many assumptions of this role, very few divas have the right vocal qualities to create convincing portrayal of a hysterical, over-sexed 16-year-old - but Welitsch can do it. The combination of her piping, white sound and the sheer power of her vocalisation is almost ideal and of course on stage this lissom red-head looked the part, too. She even has a steady, chilling lower register.

This classic performance is available here on the Walhall for very little compared with some comparatively expensive issues and as a bonus offers Welitsch's 1949 recording of Brahms' eight *Zigeunerlieder*. Any devotee of this opera should own it; you haven't heard perhaps the best *Salome* ever if you haven't heard Welitsch – although Behrens runs her close.

Kurt Schröder – 1952 (live radio broadcast; mono) Myto
Orchestra - Sinfonie-Orchester des Hessischen Rundfunks

Salome - Inge Borkh
Jochanaan - Ferdinand Frantz
Herodes - Max Lorenz
Herodias - Margarete Klose
Narraboth - Franz Fehringer
Ein Page - Christa Ludwig
Erster Nazarener - Aage Poulsen
Zweiter Nazarener - Fritjof Sentpaul
Erster Soldat - Georg Stern
Zweiter Soldat - Ludwig Welter
Ein Cappadocier - August Heimpel
Ein Sklave - Eugen Willmann
Erster Jude - Hans Bert Dick
Zweiter Jude - Herbert Hess
Dritter Jude - Rudolf Kraft
Vierter Jude - Oskar Wittazscheck
Fünfter Jude - Hans Dahmen

The first pleasant surprise here is the forward clarity of the mono sound, at least for the voices – the orchestra is somewhat more recessed, as you may hear in the Dance - and the excellence of those voices. The Narraboth is exceptionally virile of timbre and when the Page pipes up, you quickly recognise the lovely tones of a very young Christa Ludwig. Ferdinand Frantz in his cistern sounds like the voice of God Himself rather than his prophet - or rather, Wotan, which is what he usually was on stage and thus, as such, not especially suggestive of the youthful eye-candy he appears in Salome's eyes. He is magnificent but completely lacking in nuance and all wrong. Borkh's soprano is vibrant if sometimes a touch shrill in alt; she's a great verbal actress and her slightly "cupped" sound in the middle and lower regions of her voice is very seductive. The great Wagnerian mezzo Margarete Klose puts in an energetic cameo as Herodias and Max Lorenz, only in his early fifties but by then on the brink of retirement, is still the possessor of a big Heldentenor sound, despite some wobble, and has a high old time camping it up as Herod.

This is not a first choice but affords the listener considerable pleasure if allowances are made for the unsuitability of Frantz' Jochanaan.

Rudolf Moralt – 1952 (studio; mono) Philips; Cantus Classics; BnF Collection; Classical Moments
Orchestra - Wiener Symphoniker

Salome - Walburga Wegner
Jochanaan - Josef Metternich
Herodes - László Szemere
Herodias - Georgine von Milinkovic
Narraboth - Waldemar Kmentt
Ein Page - Dagmar Hermann
Erster Nazarener - Oskar Czerwenka
Zweiter Nazarener - Walter Berry
Erster Soldat - Adolf Vogel
Zweiter Soldat - Harald Pröglhoff
Ein Cappadocier - Oskar Czerwenka
Ein Sklave - Dorothea Fraß
Erster Jude - August Jaresch
Zweiter Jude - Fritz Sperlbauer
Dritter Jude - William Wernigk
Vierter Jude - Erich Majkut
Fünfter Jude - Ljubomir Pantscheff

This is the first studio recording as opposed to a broadcast: it first appeared on CD only briefly on Philips in a limited edition but is now available via several labels.

It really is a surprise: Walburga Wegner was unknown to me as I suspect she must be to most collectors. Born in 1913, she had an important international career but apparently made only this one commercial recording. She has a light, shimmering sound, better suited to incarnating a Lolita than some sopranos, but power a-plenty, too, singing with febrile intensity. The supporting cast is full of star names, including a young Walter Berry as the Second Nazarene, Waldemar Kmentt making an especially apt Narraboth, similarly ardent and youthful, and Josef Metternich really impressive as Jochanaan; for once, we hear – yet again – a really youthful, virile sound, not a middle-aged or even elderly prophet; his growled "Niemals, Tochter Babylons, Tochter Sodoms" (Never, daughter of Babylon, daughter of Sodom) is wonderful; he introduces the slightly crazed demeanour of a fanatic – or is he simply struggling so hard to resist the teenage vamp? I love what is surely an effect demanded by the text: Salome, leaning into the cistern, wonders what it must be like to be imprisoned down

there – “Es ist wie eine Gruft” (It’s like a tomb) – and an eerie echo surrounds her voice. The whole recording is close and rather cramped but very clear and mostly undistorted. Metternich is nicely distanced and submerged in the aural picture without being obscured. Szemere is a grainy-voiced, suitably hysterical Herod, like a creepy uncle and von Milinkovic gives us a pleasingly raddled Herodias, cackling at Herod’s desperate offer to Salome of his white peacocks as a substitute for the Baptist’s head.

Moralt’s direction is fast, taut and no-nonsense, nothing ever drags - and the orchestra is more than adequate. There are only two studio recordings in mono sound, but I enjoy this as much as, if not more than, the other one conducted by Krauss two years later.

Nino Sanzogno – 1952 (live radio broadcast; mono) in Italian; Myto Orchestra - RAI Torino

Salome - Lily Djanel
Jochanaan - Tito Gobbi
Herodes - Fiorenzo Tasso
Herodias - Maria Benedetti
Narraboth - Angelo Mercuriali
Ein Page - Maria Teresa Massa Ferrero
Erster Nazarener - Franco Calabrese
Zweiter Nazarener - Aldo Bertocci
Erster Soldat - Dario Caselli
Zweiter Soldat - Giannetto Zini
Ein Cappadocier - Giuliano Ferrein
Erster Jude - Mario Carlin
Zweiter Jude - Cesare Masini-Sperti
Dritter Jude - Tommaso Soley
Vierter Jude - Luigi Fort
Fünfter Jude - Giuliano Ferrein

The first obvious attraction here is the presence of Tito Gobbi in unusual guise as the prophet Jokanaan and a cast featuring several well-known names of Italian singers of that era. Belgian soprano Lily Djanel sings Salome. She has the right sound: silvery, vibrant and sensual yet with a powerful lower register - and she seems at home in Italian. The following is from the *Montréal Gazette*, 25 July, 1946:

“...Miss Djanel was regarded by Richard Strauss as one of the leading interpreters of his *Salome* and she sang the rôle many times under the master’s personal direction.”

Be that as it may, I had not previously heard her in this or any other role but can hear her skill and suitability as Salome; she is wholly credible and her vocal acting is electric.

The track listing in this Myto issue is peculiar in that it is in the original German, even though the opera is sung in Italian – which works rather well; “O quanta è bella Salome questa notte!” really sounds quite nice as an alternative to “Wie schön ist die Prinzessin Salome heute Nacht!” especially when it is sung so mellifluously by tenor Angelo Mercuriali, followed by Gobbi’s unmistakable baritone, so lithe and penetrating if a bit dry, belting out his imprecations with formidable venom and sounding surprisingly free in his top notes, reining in the decibels momentarily only at the start of his “Galilee” narrative.

The Herod and Herodias have bright, clean voices, very Italian in quality with excellent diction and a highly animated delivery; he, if anything, sounds too wholesome and heroic for the seedy Tetrarch – hardly surprising considering that Fiorenzo Tasso (an American of Italian parentage who had sung Tristan to Callas' Isolde in Venice in 1947/48) had a very successful career as a Wagnerian tenor, bearing out my assertion in the introduction that Herod is often best served by such a voice.

Unfortunately, the sound is crummy mono with a lot of swish, just about listenable but no treat. Conductor Sanzogno is clearly very much at home with the music and kindly supports his cast and orchestra by singing along with them very audibly throughout, and although at times his direction sounds simply rushed to the point of being garbled, it is never boring and to their credit the RAI Torino orchestra keep up with him as if they, too, were wholly familiar with the score.

This cannot be a first recommendation but the *Salome* devotee will find it to be great fun and you won't hear another like it; just as I love Callas and Christoff in their Italian *Parsifal*, I recommend this Italian *Salome* as a supplement to an echt German version.

(As a bonus, Myto offers four arias each sung by Gobbi and unjustly neglected soprano Rosanna Carteri in a live concert performance from 1956 in excellent sound.)

Hermann Weigert – 1953 (live radio broadcast; mono) Bella Voce; Orfeo Orchestra - Sinfonieorchester des Bayerischen Rundfunks

Salome - Astrid Varnay
 Jochanaan - Hans Braun
 Herodes - Julius Patzak
 Herodias - Margarete Klose
 Narraboth - Hans Hopf
 Ein Page - Herta Töpfer
 Erster Nazarener - Carl Hoppe
 Zweiter Nazarener - Max Proebstl
 Erster Soldat - Adolf Keil
 Zweiter Soldat - Benno Kusche
 Ein Cappadocier - Hans Hermann Nissen
 Ein Sklave - Hildegard Limmer
 Erster Jude - Karl Ostertag
 Zweiter Jude - Peter Kaussen
 Dritter Jude - Emil Graf
 Vierter Jude - Walter Carnuth
 Fünfter Jude - Georg Wieter

The eternal problem with *Salome* is finding a singer with the necessary heft and staying-power who can still sound like a teenage voluptuary. That dilemma is rarely solved but one has to make allowances. Astrid Varnay does wonderful things with her large, sometimes cumbersome voice, fining it down for pianissimi and really making the most of the words. She must have cut a striking figure on stage with her height and physique, as the cover photo confirms, and she has all the notes within her compass. The drawback, of course, is that she rarely sounds young but it is still a compelling portrayal.

Her husband Hermann Weigert conducts unadventurously but competently and the orchestral interlude between Jochanaan's cursing of Salome and the appearance of Herod is beautifully played by the Bayerischen Rundfunks, as is the famous Dance. The sound is extraordinarily good for a 1953 mono radio broadcast; I checked a couple of times that I wasn't hearing stereo, it is so full and detailed.

The cast is interesting: Patzak gives us an oily, unhinged Herod - a very convincing portrayal of a demented pervert sung in almost too sweet a voice - which is what makes it so eerie (he does the same with Mime for Krauss.) The great Margarete Klose is a rich-voiced, scornful Herodias. Hans Hopf's stentorian tenor is too clumsy for Narraboth but he is perfectly acceptable. Hans Braun's workaday baritone does not have the easy sheen of star singers such as Van Dam, Terfel or Wächter as the Baptist; his top notes are a bit windy and his legato indifferent, but he is immersed in his role. Some of the voices in the supporting cast are a bit provincial but they, too, act well.

Devotees of this most disturbing, dramatic and demented of operas will want to hear this account.

Clemens Krauss – 1954 (studio; mono) Naxos
Orchestra - Wiener Philharmoniker

Salome - Christel Goltz
Jochanaan - Hans Braun
Herodes - Julius Patzak
Herodias - Margareta Kenney
Narraboth - Anton Dermota
Ein Page - Else Schürnoff
Erster Nazarener - Ludwig Weber
Zweiter Nazarener - Harald Pröglhoff
Erster Soldat - Walter Berry
Zweiter Soldat - Herbert Alsen
Ein Cappadocier - Ljubomir Pantscheff
Ein Sklave - Hermann Gallos
Erster Jude - Rudolf Christ
Zweiter Jude - Hugo Meyer-Welfing
Dritter Jude - Kurt Preger
Vierter Jude - Murray Dickie
Fünfter Jude - Franz Bierbach

This is the first of Christel Goltz' two studio recordings and much the more recommendable, although she is not in such good form as she was for Keilberth's earlier radio broadcast; she has the right vocal make-up, being febrile and youthful in timbre, but she is too frequently wobbly and tremulous, and she tires in the final scene, singing a little flat. Surprisingly, she is better live for Mitropoulos the same year. Dermota makes a refined, rather effete Narraboth and the Page sounds too matronly. Hans Braun sometimes sounds remarkably like an older Walter Berry without his glamour of tone; he sounds too mature and I don't get much of a sense of Jochanaan's other-worldly fanaticism or fantasy from his straightforward delivery. Patzak reprises his oleaginous, splendidly acted Herod but I still prefer a singer-actor with more voice. Krauss conducts with considerable subtlety and the patrician VPO is superb, but I find some lack of impact and swagger in Krauss' lyrical, detailed and carefully phrased direction – strange, for a conductor whose *Ring* is so propulsive. Naxos has done a fine job in cleaning up the mono sound, which remains a bit detached and distant, lacking the immediacy of, for example, Moralt's studio account. In truth, for all that some hail this as a classic version, I found it a little disappointing.

Dimitri Mitropoulos – 1955 (live; mono) Walhall
Orchestra - Metropolitan Opera

Salome - Christel Goltz
Jochanaan - Paul Schöffler

Herodes - Ramón Vinay
Herodias - Blanche Thebom
Narraboth - Brian Sullivan
Ein Page - Mildred Miller
Erster Nazarener - Nicola Moscona
Zweiter Nazarener - Calvin Marsh
Erster Soldat - Norman Scott
Zweiter Soldat - Lorenzo Alvary
Ein Cappadocier - Osie Hawkins
Ein Sklave - Vilma Georgiou
Erster Jude - Gabor Carelli
Zweiter Jude - James McCracken
Dritter Jude - Alessio De Paolis
Vierter Jude - Paul Franke
Fünfter Jude - Gerhard Pechner

Salome was a "succès de scandale" from the word go and still has the power to shock. That moment when, after the hesitant staccato violin mutterings, the timpani roll and roar and the spotlight falls on to the severed head of John the Baptist dangling from the executioner's arm, is pure Grand Guignol theatre - and Mitropoulos, as you would expect, squeezes every ounce of drama out of it.

The live mono sound from 1955 is pretty good here; what a pleasure it is immediately to hear the secure, heroic tones of Narraboth as sung by Brian Sullivan, reprising the role he had previously sung on stage for Reiner in the celebrated Welitsch performances. Unfortunately, that fine singer Paul Schöffler sounds about as virile and sexy as a bank clerk but he is firm of voice and if it's unbridled lust you want, it is provided in abundance by Christel Goltz. In truth, her voice is too broad and wobbly to suggest a delinquent teenager with a nasty case of erotic fixation but the intensity and power of her soprano go a long way to disguise that. She is frighteningly single-minded and can whop those high notes dead centre in a way that clearly pins the New Yorkers to the back of their plush, velvet seats.

For me, the other stand-out performance is baritone-tenor-baritone (it's a long story - look it up) Ramón Vinay as Herod; he is simply wonderful at suggesting how unhinged that neurotic monarch is and he can really sing what is in fact another Strauss tenor role almost as murderous as Bacchus or Menelaus. Apart from his general vocal security - he was, after all, a premier Heldentenor - to give just one example of the detail he brings to the role, he is chillingly hectic and hectoring when he misses his ring. Blanche Thebom is predictably strong as Herodias and there are some famous names - including James McCracken - in the supporting roles, just starting out on their careers.

The Met orchestra had already shown under Reiner how they could convey the shimmering luminescence of Strauss's score and although the recording places them too far back in the sound picture we can still hear their virtuosity; they rise magnificently to the climaxes under Mitropoulos's taut, nervy direction.

In sum, this is another worthy *Salome* to add the long list of recordings and performances with something to say about this stupendous music.

Georg Solti – 1961 (studio; stereo) Decca
Orchestra - Wiener Philharmoniker

Salome - Birgit Nilsson
Jochanaan - Eberhard Wächter

Herodes - Gerhard Stolze
 Herodias - Grace Hoffman
 Narraboth - Waldemar Kmentt
 Ein Page - Josephine Veasey
 Erster Nazarener - Tom Krause
 Zweiter Nazarener - Nigel Douglas
 Erster Soldat - Zenon Kosnowski
 Zweiter Soldat - Heinz Holecek
 Ein Cappadocier - Theodor Kirschbichler
 Ein Sklave - Liselotte Maikl
 Erster Jude - Paul Kuën
 Zweiter Jude - Stefan Schwer
 Dritter Jude - Kurt Equiluz
 Vierter Jude - Aron Gestner
 Fünfter Jude - Max Proebstl

Given that they share three of the same principal singers, this studio recording exhibits the same manifest qualities of Georges Sébastian's live performance four years later (see below) but of course the sound is superior here. On the other hand, Nilsson is arguably even more dynamic and released performing live and some are irritated here by Stolze's grating tenor and what may reasonably be perceived as over-egging his characterisation of the randy, semi-demented Tetrach. I find him riveting, even if I prefer a less histrionic approach and a purer voice. Otherwise, there is greater strength in depth in the supporting cast here for Solti, with Waldemar Kmentt contributing a fervent Narraboth and several famous names in relatively minor roles, such as Josephine Veasey, Tom Krause, Paul Kuën and Kurt Equiluz, all of whom make their mark. Eberhard Wächter is more atmospherically positioned in the aural field here, too and his Jochanaan remains a model of its type, combining youth, steadiness, resonance and intensity.

It is also reasonable to be of the opinion that Nilsson's slight restraint compared with the later recording is more apt to depicting a teenager, as her problem with this role was always the overpowering nature of her vocalism. She is more youthful and silvery here, with pianissimi worthy of Caballé, whereas live, despite still often singing quietly, she is simply overwhelming in a manner which is mightily impressive but perhaps not as dramatically appropriate.

I have no problem with the dynamism of Solti's direction; it seems to me that it is precisely this kind of music that he does best and the virtuosity of the VPO is rivalled only by Karajan's BPO in their two recordings considered below.

Otmar Suitner – 1963 (studio; stereo) Berlin Classics
 Orchestra - Dresdner Staatskapelle

Salome - Christel Goltz
 Jochanaan - Ernst Gutstein
 Herodes - Helmut Melchert
 Herodias - Siw Ericsson
 Narraboth - Heinz Hoppe
 Ein Page - Eva Fleischer
 Erster Nazarener - Theo Adam
 Zweiter Nazarener - Johannes Kemter
 Erster Soldat - Rainer Lüdeke
 Zweiter Soldat - Helmut Eyle

Ein Cappadocier - Fred Teschler
Ein Sklave - Friederike Apelt
Erster Jude - Harald Neukirch
Zweiter Jude - Helmut Goldman
Dritter Jude - Guntfried Speck
Vierter Jude - Hans-Joachim Rotzsch
Fünfter Jude - Günther Leib

I am an admirer of Otmar Suitner and nothing he does here alters that; in fact, his conducting in combination with the simply gorgeous playing of the Staatskapelle Dresden is riveting. The recorded sound is warm and hiss-free, extraordinary for its vintage and the orchestral music is easily the best - played I have ever heard, despite competition of the highest level.

But o my best-beloved, the singers, the singers...where do I begin?

At the beginning: the dreaded Heinz Hoppe bawls and yells hoarsely as Narraboth, who should sound like a very young, naive, love-struck subaltern, not a wheezy recovering alcoholic and heavy-smoker in advanced middle age. Speaking of which, the wobbly, matronly Page is matched by Christel Goltz' equally wobbly, breathless singing. She was once a great Salome but here can scarcely sustain a note and mostly avoids singing on the right one, preferring to give up somewhere near a quarter-tone beneath the one required. She is close to unlistenable most of the time - and all the while Suitner is accompanying her divinely, with such beautiful instrumental tone. The supporting cast sound similarly vocally-challenged and includes an undistinguished, hoarse-voiced but at least characterful pair in Herod and Herodias. Best of the bunch is Ernst Gutstein as Jochanaan - I like the way he is placed deep within an echoing, atmospheric cistern acoustic - but he has a throaty sound with an unfortunate disjuncture between his middle voice and top notes and is hardly the noble prophet of one's dreams (think of van Dam, Wächter in his prime or Sherrill Milnes in his pomp). Moving on...

Georges Sébastian – 1965 (live; stereo) House of Opera; Opera depot
Orchestra - Teatro Colón - Buenos Aires

Salome - Birgit Nilsson
Jochanaan - Eberhard Wächter
Herodes - Fritz Uhl
Herodias - Grace Hoffman
Narraboth - Renato Sassola
Ein Page - Isabel Casey
Erster Nazarener - Juan Zanin
Zweiter Nazarener - Enzo Betti
Erster Soldat - Victor De Narké
Zweiter Soldat - Jorge (Giorgio) Algorta
Ein Cappadocier - Mario Verazzi
Ein Sklave - Sofia Schultz
Erster Jude - Eugenio Valori
Zweiter Jude - Carlos Giusti
Dritter Jude - Per Drewsen
Vierter Jude - Ernesto Gasco
Fünfter Jude - Guerrino Boschetti

This live recording from Buenos Aires is very strongly cast, something immediately apparent from a glance at the roster, Narraboth's first notes and the subsequent interventions from the Page and the

soldiers. Birgit Nilsson, as a searing Salome, Eberhard Wächter, as a blazing, authoritative Jochanaan, and Grace Hoffman, as a mocking, experienced Herodias, are the same three principals as in the famous studio recording from four years earlier under Solti and are still obviously voices of the highest quality. Fritz Uhl's Herod confirms my preference for a Heldentenor in the role. Conductor Georges Sébastien presides confidently over a fleet performance from a good orchestra, despite some minor flubs in the brass; what a company the Teatro Colón was in those days. The stereo sound is good if a little blowsy and over-resonant, and there is sometimes quite a lot of stage thumping, especially during Herod's wheedling appeals to Salome to dance for him.

Nilsson never sounded much like a teenage girl but her vocalism and handing of the text are so impressive as to stifle objection; she is if anything more confident and unbuttoned here than in that studio version where just occasionally she is restrained, suggesting that she was being more careful there than she needed to be performing live. I have never heard her deliver bigger, more penetrating top notes than here; her repeated demands for "den Kopf des Jochanaan!" are like a laser-bolts and the last fifteen minutes is a tour de force of singing. However, she also produces some exquisitely sweet and steady pianissimi, as in "Und das Geheimnis der Liebe." Just for her performance alone, I would strongly recommend this recording, even though it has other, great merits.

Erich Leinsdorf – 1968 (studio; stereo) RCA Red Seal
Orchestra - London Symphony Orchestra

Salome - Montserrat Caballé
Jochanaan - Sherrill Milnes
Herodes - Richard Lewis
Herodias - Regina Resnik
Narraboth - James King
Ein Page - Júlia Hamari
Erster Nazarener - Michael Rippon
Zweiter Nazarener - Gwyn Griffiths
Erster Soldat - Neil Howlett
Zweiter Soldat - David Kelly
Ein Cappadocier - Dennis Wicks
Ein Sklave - Elizabeth Bainbridge
Erster Jude - Kenneth MacDonald
Zweiter Jude - Robert Bowman
Dritter Jude - David Lennox
Vierter Jude - John Brecknock
Fünfter Jude - George Macpherson

This is clearly one of Leinsdorf's best recordings, worthy to rank alongside his *Die Walküre* but he keeps the "pedal to the metal" throughout and thus creates a febrile atmosphere which leaves little room for the kind of subtleties that Karajan finds in his account. The LSO respond to his insistence on momentum and plays superbly; the result is a big, crude, exciting, indulgent, Expressionist splurge of sound. Fortunately, this generalised, gung-ho onslaught on the score is counter-balanced by the nuance and delicacy of the young Caballe's interpretation of Salome. I worried that she might not find the right voice as she can sometimes sound matronly - but not here; she floats her trademark pianissimi to suggest the chilling faux-naïveté of the twisted teenager - and of course, given her early experience performing in Germany, her German is very convincing. Milnes gives us a Jochanaan of the kind I like and which compares with Van Dam in the Karajan: a noble, soaring-voiced prophet whose diatonic music and stern warnings sound like the voice of divine judgement when set against the crazed decadence of Herod's court. Unfortunately, the dramatically convincing and justified sound-

effect of placing Milne's voice deep in the cistern-prison means that we cannot hear him as well as I would have liked. Richard Lewis' Herod is a tour de force, very well sung and bringing out all the craven nastiness of the most unhinged monarch in opera. James King gives us a suitably neurotic and angst-ridden Narraboth and although Regina Resnik's Herodias is a bit worn, this is not unsuitable for that raddled old whore and she characterises skilfully. (I always enjoy Herodias' cackling mockery of Herod when he attempts to bribe Salome by offering her his collection of milk-white peacocks: "...du bist lächerlich mit deinem Pfauen."). The rest of the cast consists of some of the best British singers around in the late 60's; particular mention must go to Michael Rippon's rich-toned First Nazarene.

This set has been neglected in favour of the Solti and Karajan versions; I like very much all three as they all offer a valid and absorbing take on this wonderfully concise and concentrated opera. (One wonders whether Strauss could not have been so rigorous and economical in other of his works, which have more than their fair share of "mauvais quarts d'heure".)

Karl Böhm – 1970 (live composite; stereo) Brilliant; DG; Decca Eloquence
Orchestra - Hamburgische Staatsoper

Salome - Gwyneth Jones
Jochanaan - Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau
Herodes - Richard Cassilly
Herodias - Mignon Dunn
Narraboth - Wieslaw Ochman
Ein Page - Ursula Böse
Erster Nazarener - Hans Sotin
Zweiter Nazarener - Horst Wilhelm
Erster Soldat - Kurt Moll
Zweiter Soldat - Carl Schultz
Ein Cappadocier - Franz Grundheber
Ein Sklave - Willy Hartmann
Erster Jude - Peter Haage
Zweiter Jude - Jürgen Förster
Dritter Jude - Kurt Marachner
Vierter Jude - Heinz Kruse
Fünfter Jude - Heinz Blankenburg

This live DG recording has now been repackaged on the Brilliant label at their usual bargain price and even if you already have other recordings of *Salome*, this one earns the right to your consideration by virtue of the one of the most convincing Salomes on record in Gwyneth Jones' monstrously sensual and vocally overwhelming performance.

There is virtually none of the wobble or bumpiness which disfigures some of her recordings, although there is still an occasional slight tendency to spread on the loudest, longest notes - but that's all. She is a superb vocal actress with the lower register and the intensity to enthral the listener, and unlike the great but stentorian Nilsson, she sounds young and vulnerable, big, pure and thrilling of sound in an assumption closest to that of Rysanek.

Indeed, there is an array of the finest voices here, from the young Kurt Moll's immediately noticeable First Soldier, to Franz Grundheber as a Cappadocian, to Hans Sotin as First Nazarene; these and other singers here were soon to become opera stars. The Hamburg Opera here fields an extraordinarily impressive cast with Heldentenor Richard Cassilly's almost-too-beautiful but intensely acted Herod

and Mignon Dunn as a powerful Herodias. Wieslaw Ochmann's elegant, silvery tenor is ideal as Narraboth and the rich-voiced Ursula Boese is a stand-out as the Page - a role often under-cast.

As other reviewers have remarked, the balance between stage and pit was always too biased in favour of the former but that means we get great dramatic immediacy in the exchanges between the singers. The Hamburg Staatsoper orchestra may not be as sumptuous as the VPO but they are precise, flexible and energised. They are expertly directed by Böhm who, as the interesting booklet note explains, despite being at his best in Strauss never conducted as many performances of his operas as one might have thought, often choosing instead to concentrate on championing contemporary work. Nonetheless, this shows him shaping and phrasing with wonderful subtlety, getting the balance between the jaggedness and lyricism of the score just right and building to a chilling climax. The celebrated Dance of the Seven Veils begins in a deceptively leisurely and languorous fashion but its effectiveness was no doubt enhanced by the Salome's legendary comeliness and her willingness to disrobe.

So; the caveat? D-F-D, of course. I wonder why he thought this role was suitable to his talents. His ego was prodigious and often led him into acts of hubris such as thinking that he had the vocal heft and glamour to tackle Jochanaan – just as he fondly imagined that he could sing Wotan for Karajan. All the old mannerisms are there: he barks, lunges and strains at top notes, rolls his r's ferociously, over-emphasises text and generally sounds as if he is stretching every tendon to sing the thing. I know this bothers others less than it does me and I concede that he performs with conviction, but there are so many more vocally alluring and equally dramatic assumptions of the role and I always object when he strays into the territory of others, as with his excursions into Verdi. Nuff said; I still recommend this extraordinary live recording for all the other reasons above.

(I wonder why Brilliant puts this into a chunky double case when it fits neatly into a slimline double case, given that it has only a thin booklet.)

Karl Böhm – 1972 (live; stereo) RCA Red Seal
Orchestra - Wiener Philharmoniker

Salome - Leonie Rysanek
Jochanaan - Eberhard Wächter
Herodes - Hans Hopf
Herodias - Grace Hoffman
Narraboth - Waldemar Kmentt
Ein Page - Rohangiz Yachmi(-Caucig)
Erster Nazarener - Peter Wimberger
Zweiter Nazarener - Siegfried Rudolf Frese
Erster Soldat - Tugomir Franc
Zweiter Soldat - Frederick Guthrie
Ein Cappadocier - Reid Bunger
Ein Sklave - Ewald Aichberger
Erster Jude - Murray Dickie
Zweiter Jude - Heinz Zednik
Dritter Jude - Kurt Equiluz
Vierter Jude - Karl Terkal
Fünfter Jude - Herbert Lackner

I am by no means an uncritical admirer of Karl Böhm but I maintain that he is usually heard at his best in live Richard Strauss operas, especially with the VPO; his *Daphne* is just such another triumph as this *Salome*.

I have similar theoretical reservations about beloved Austrian soprano Leonie Rysanek; her voice is often odd, cloudy, with pronounced breaks and bouts of unsteadiness - yet when I hear her, I am invariably caught up by the intensity of her singing, and this *Salome* is no exception. The stereo sound is excellent for a live 1972 performance, especially as it is, an Austrian Radio recording issued by RCA rather than the poor Opera d'Oro version and the odd cough is tolerable. Rysanek was in her mid-forties but she preserved a voice far longer than most hochdramatische sopranos and although she might not sound much like a teenager, she is a consummate vocal actress and no more or less nubile than other successful exponents of this murderous role like Varnay, Nilsson and Gwyneth Jones; perhaps only Behrens, Studer and Welitsch have approached the ideal but none of those had Rysanek's vocal amplitude.

Hans Hopf, never a subtle artist, bawls and bellows his way through Herod convincingly enough and Eberhard Wächter's lightish baritone is clearly pushed to its limits by the declamatory demands of the role of Jochanaan, such that he sometimes almost wobbles, but he just about gets away with it. Grace Hoffman is suitably raddled and demented as the harridan Herodias. That versatile Viennese tenor stalwart Waldemar Kmentt is stylish as Narraboth; the Page is poor. The rest of the cast is made of Vienna Opera regulars.

No; the stars of the show are the superb orchestra under Böhm and Rysanek in a searing portrayal; they make the purchase of this set, now available ridiculously cheaply, mandatory for devotees of this opera like me who already have too many recordings. This is thrilling live theatre; the moment when the Executioner produces the head is electrifying and Rysanek's vocalising a force of nature.

(I suggest you do what I always do with these issues and save shelf space by transferring it from a double CD case into a slimline case, as the booklet - no libretto - fits easily inside.)

Rudolf Kempe – 1974 (live; stereo) Golden Melodram
Orchestra - Orchestre National de l'ORTF

Salome - Leonie Rysanek
Jochanaan - Thomas Stewart
Herodes - Jon Vickers
Herodias - Ruth Hesse
Narraboth - Horst R Laubenthal
Ein Page - Marga Schiml
Erster Nazarener - Peter Lagger
Zweiter Nazarener - Klaus-Jürgen Küper
Erster Soldat - Victor von Halem
Zweiter Soldat - Xavier Tamalet
Ein Cappadocier - Vladimir de Kanel
Ein Sklave - Thérèse Cédelle
Erster Jude - Gérard Friedman
Zweiter Jude - Jürgen Förster
Dritter Jude - Willy Müller
Vierter Jude - Stan (Stass) Unruh
Fünfter Jude - Horst Schäffer

This is a big-scale performance in the spacious acoustic of the Orange Festival in 1974, well recorded and highly dramatic. Kempe was a superb Strauss conductor; he manages to support his singers and bring out both the subtlety and the raw passion of this extraordinary score. I am especially impressed by the quality of the orchestral playing and the balance which allows details to be heard without too many extraneous stage noises.

The singers constitute a major attraction; there is a live recording under Böhm with the VPO two years earlier and I may as well repeat here what I said about Rysanek in that recording as it equally applies here: ...“her voice is often odd, cloudy, with pronounced breaks and bouts of unsteadiness - yet when I hear her I am invariably caught up by the intensity of her singing, and this *Salome* is no exception...Rysanek was in her mid-forties but she preserved a voice far longer than most hochdramatische sopranos and although she might not sound much like a teenager, she is a consummate vocal actress and no more or less nubile than other successful exponents of this murderous role like Varnay, Nilsson and Gwyneth Jones; perhaps only Studer and Welitsch have approached the ideal but neither had Rysanek's vocal amplitude.”

Vickers is chilling as Herod - an inspired piece of casting. He does a fair amount of shouting but his big voice and distraught manner effectively convey the sheer, manic intensity of the lecherous Tetrarch. I am quite surprised that, given Vickers' well-known strict moral stance, he was prepared to play this unbalanced despot when he wouldn't touch Tannhäuser, but he is very successful here. Horst Laubenthal is a fine, plangent Narraboth and Thomas Stewart deploys his Wotan voice to suggest a prophet who is young, virile and obsessive. He struggles a bit with top notes but his essentially heroic tone is preferable to too many Jochanaans who lack heft and penetration. Ruth Hesse is a sardonic, dark-voiced Herodias - I like her mocking guffaws when her hapless husband fails first to cajole Salome into doing his perverted will then to dissuade her from the desired severed head of the Baptist. Bayreuth bass Victor von Halem is an impressive First Soldier.

There are plenty of highly recommendable recordings of this opera, especially those made by Karajan with Behrens (both in the studio and live) and of course Solti's studio recording, but fans of the singers and conductor here need not hesitate.

Herbert von Karajan – 1977 (live; stereo) Opera Depot; Celestial audio
Orchestra - Wiener Philharmoniker

Salome - Hildegard Behrens
Jochanaan - José van Dam
Herodes - Karl-Walter Böhm
Herodias - Agnes Baltsa
Narraboth - Wieslaw Ochman
Ein Page - Helgä Angervo
Erster Nazarener - Jules Bastin
Zweiter Nazarener - Dieter Ellenbeck
Erster Soldat - Gerd Nienstedt
Zweiter Soldat - Kurt Rydl
Ein Cappadocier - Helge von Bömches
Ein Sklave - Horst Nitsche
Erster Jude - Michel Sénéchal
Zweiter Jude - David Knutson
Dritter Jude - Martin Vantin
Vierter Jude - Gerhard Unger
Fünfter Jude - Erich Kunz

This is a recording of the premiere of the production whose cast is almost identical to the subsequent studio recording – the only difference is the substitution in the latter of Heinz Zednik for Michel Sénéchal. Many consider it to be more vivid and dramatic than the studio version, although it is harder and more expensive to obtain and the live stereo sound is not as warm and full as the EMI issue, with some ambient noise and balancing issues.

For its strengths, read below; in truth, I do not hear much interpretative difference between the live and studio versions but inevitably the latter has the edge sonically.

Herbert von Karajan - 1977-78 (studio; stereo) EMI
Orchestra - Wiener Philharmoniker

Salome - Hildegard Behrens
Jochanaan - José van Dam
Herodes - Karl-Walter Böhm
Herodias - Agnes Baltsa
Narraboth - Wieslaw Ochman
Ein Page - Helgä Angervo
Erster Nazarener - Jules Bastin
Zweiter Nazarener - Dieter Ellenbeck
Erster Soldat - Gerd Nienstedt
Zweiter Soldat - Kurt Rydl
Ein Cappadocier - Helge von Bömches
Ein Sklave - Horst Nitsche
Erster Jude - Heinz Zednik
Zweiter Jude - David Knutson
Dritter Jude - Martin Vantin
Vierter Jude - Gerhard Unger
Fünfter Jude - Erich Kunz

I love the sensuality and languorous mystery of this recording; Karajan has a gift for conjuring up an atmosphere of lyrical beauty which morphs swiftly into Expressionist violence. Karajan was able to assemble a near-ideal cast, featuring two of the most beautiful voices in opera in the young Behrens and van Dam in their prime, before she encountered problems and his bass-baritone began to grey. Not even Wächter intones the prophet's pronouncements with the van Dam's poetry, fervour and nobility; Behrens has a bell-like clarity and a stage-animal's relationship with the text, delivering a portrayal of Salome which is both alluring and repulsive - and horribly credible. Her top notes aren't Nilsson's laser shafts but rather glittering and slightly tremulous, indicative of Salome's hysteria and derangement, and her lower register evinces the grim, inflexible determination of the indulged teenager who will not be denied. She is the most successful of all Salomes in suggesting youth and faux-naïveté. Karl Walter Böhm has a distinctive, slightly raspy tenor and acts impeccably without the element of caricature some object to in, for example, Stolze's Herod. Baltsa is luxury casting as Herodias and the tough edge in her mezzo enhances her portrayal of a hard, vulgar woman.

The conducting and orchestral playing are beyond reproach; this is truly a "Great Recording of the Century".

Zubin Mehta – 1990 (studio; digital) Sony Classical
Orchestra - Berliner Philharmoniker

Salome - Éva Marton
 Jochanaan - Bernd Weikl
 Herodes - Heinz Zednik
 Herodias - Brigitte Fassbaender
 Narraboth - Keith Lewis
 Ein Page - Gabriele Schreckenbach
 Erster Nazarener - Victor von Halem
 Zweiter Nazarener - Keith Lewis
 Erster Soldat - Julien Robbins
 Zweiter Soldat - Victor von Halem
 Ein Cappadocier - Reinhard Beyer
 Ein Sklave - Karl Markus
 Erster Jude - James O'Neal
 Zweiter Jude - Peter Maus
 Dritter Jude - Karl Markus
 Vierter Jude - Donald George
 Fünfter Jude - Reinhard Beyer

I'm afraid that I can't get very excited about this performance, especially as the sound is bit dim and the emotional temperature generally tepid. Mehta can usually be relied upon to give it all he's got in a score he is familiar with and which doesn't demand subtlety as its first ingredient, but everything sounds oddly refined and decorous to me, typified by Salome's Dance which is a paradigm for Mehta's generally lacklustre approach. I keep missing either Solti's drive or Karajan's luscious eroticism in this music; it's as if Mehta was content to go onto autopilot and rely upon the sleek professionalism of the world's finest orchestra - but it's simply not enough.

Some will want to judge this recording primarily on the quality of Eva Marton's Salome, although that would be unjustly to ignore the quality of the supporting singers: Keith Lewis' Narraboth immediately caresses the ear, Zednik continually impresses as the neurotic Herod and Fassbaender turns the wear in her voice to her advantage, using it to intensify the raddled, degenerate nature of Herodias. Weikl acts well but now has more than a hint of bleat in his baritone, lacking the smooth nobility of tone that Van Dam or Terfel have at their disposal to depict Jochanaan's otherworldly aloofness.

Although Marton's infamous wobble is not too prominent here she is still a tad laboured and deliberate in a role which demands a true singing actress such as Behrens for Karajan or even Nilsson, who of course shared the common disadvantage of sounding nothing like a demented teenager - but then, almost no singer can accomplish that given the vocal demands made upon Salome. Nilsson gives us a large-scale but nuanced account; Marton just belts it out - her final demand for Jochanaan's head sounds more like the exasperation of a PE teacher at the end of her tether with a particularly unruly class - there is absolutely nothing pervertedly seductive in her portrayal. The great moment when the executioner's arm extends into the light with the prophet's head dangling from his fist by the hair is pretty effective, but it would be hard for such forces as we have here to play such music without generating a certain raw thrill - and the climax to Salome's final triumphant paeon over the head is also certainly thrilling. Nonetheless, I cannot help thinking that Mehta hasn't really got the measure of this opera; he seems to have divided it up into manageable chunks and I am not very convinced by Marton despite the overall strength of her singing and the quality of her co-singers. My preference remains for really integrated and dramatically coherent accounts.

Seiji Ozawa – 1990 (studio; digital) Philips; Decca
 Orchestra - Dresdener Staatskapelle

Salome - Jessye Norman
Jochanaan - James Morris
Herodes - Walter Raffeiner
Herodias - Kerstin Witt
Narraboth - Richard Leech
Ein Page - Annette Markert
Erster Nazarener - Frank Schiller
Zweiter Nazarener - Harrie Peeters
Erster Soldat - Jürgen Commichau
Zweiter Soldat - Rolf Tomaszewski
Ein Cappadocier - Matthias Henneberg
Ein Sklave - Andreas Schmidt
Erster Jude - Andreas Conrad
Zweiter Jude - Karl-Friedrich Hölzke
Dritter Jude - Peter Kuechler
Vierter Jude - Andreas Schmidt
Fünfter Jude - Günter Dreßler

This recording stymies me, it is such a mixture of the admirable, the puzzling and the downright poor.

Let's start with the Salome herself. I am full of praise for the tonal variety and range of colour Jessye Norman brings to her characterisation of the teenage "Ungeheuer". She can wheedle, cajole, affect naïveté, lighten her big tone delicately then call on ringing power and generally encompass every emotional nuance to depict Salome; her vocal acting before the apparition of the Baptist's head is a tour de force and in many ways hers is the most successful impersonation I know. There is no stately restraint here; she takes risks and throws herself into the part in a way that she could not do on stage owing to her physical limitations of build. Her top notes shine and her lower register is trenchant without her ever sounding matronly.

Similarly, I love Richard Leech's Narraboth, which is youthful, ardent and mellifluous, fully conveying his hopeless obsession with the poisonous princess. Kerstin Witt's big, hard-voiced Herodias is powerfully vocalised and suitably scornful.

The supporting cast is generally mediocre but my main reservations centre on the Herod, the Jochanaan and Ozawa's conducting. The Dresden Staatskapelle is mellow and melodious but sometimes the direction is so slack as to sound enervating, undercutting the tension at key moments and turning Salome's dance into a faintly titillating sashay instead of the orgy it should be. The playing aspires to grandeur but is often dull and dutiful, in the worst Ozawa mode, eschewing thrills.

About the Herod, sung by the (to me, unknown) hoarse-voiced tenor Walter Raffeiner, opinions are divided. He certainly sounds unhinged but spends so much time barking, howling and growling that the part is barely sung and he emerges quasi-voiceless.

Which leaves the Jochanaan. I have never much warmed to James Morris's nasal baritone but he was here in his best period. He lacks the sonorous resonance of Van Dam, Terfel, Milnes and Wächter but sounds suitably fervent and upright without exactly tickling my ears - in other words, OK but not really virile...

Some hear this *Salome* as a vehicle for Norman which fails to cohere but I can see myself listening again and again to her purple passages simply to relish her virtuosity and beauty of sound, even if I skip other sections.

Giuseppe Sinopoli – 1990 (studio; stereo) DG
Orchestra - Deutsche Oper Berlin

Salome - Cheryl Studer
Jochanaan - Bryn Terfel
Herodes - Horst Hiestermann
Herodias - Leonie Rysanek
Narraboth - Clemens Bieber
Ein Page - Marianne Rørholm
Erster Nazarener - Friedrich Molsberger
Zweiter Nazarener - Ralf Lukas
Erster Soldat - William Murray
Zweiter Soldat - Bengt Rundgren
Ein Cappadocier - Klaus Lang
Ein Sklave - Aimée Willis
Erster Jude - Uwe Peper
Zweiter Jude - Karl-Ernst Mercker
Dritter Jude - Peter Maus
Vierter Jude - Warren Mok
Fünfter Jude - Manfred Röhr

It might seem perverse to start a review by commenting on the supporting and comprimario voices but having listened to a good few different recordings recently, going back to Welitsch's classic live recording at the Met under Reiner in 1952, I am very aware that for all that the lead voices are vital, it also matters that the ensemble should be musically and dramatically convincing in an opera so reliant upon sustaining an eerie and menacing atmosphere - and for the most part, Sinopoli's cast here is inadequate compared with the classic versions. There is a high preponderance of wobbly voices whose inadequacy is thrown into relief by the excellence of the lead singers, Studer and Terfel. The Narraboth is weedy, the basses rocky, Horst Hiestermann's tenor is distinctly irritating with his bleat, beat and hoarse approximations; plenty of tenors of varying voice categories - Gerhard Stolze, Set Svanholm, Richard Lewis - have sung this part convincingly without tiring the ears so comprehensively. Leonie Rysanek - one of the great Salomes for Böhm - has by this stage of her career stepped down to the role of Herodias, and does so very credibly.

I have not always responded to Cheryl Studer's voice but she is here to be heard at her most persuasive in a part very apt for her warm, shimmering, oboe tones; after Welitsch, she comes closest to the sound appropriate to a sixteen-year-old vamp of dubious sanity - a part almost impossible to cast adequately. She is delicate and chilling but also has the penetrating power to suggest passion and ecstasy; her top notes are pure and thrilling and this is the best work I know by her. Bryn Terfel is virile and impassioned as Jochanaan without quite catching the hieratic, visionary quality required for the prophet.

The sound is of course gorgeous, as is the playing of the Berlin Opera Orchestra. Just listen to the extended orchestral passage on track 16 after "Du bist verflucht" to hear how gloriously they play for Sinopoli. He encompasses all the mercurial demands of the score from the haunted, ethereal opening to the great, orchestral splurges. In some ways I prefer his more luxuriant approach over the hard-driven impetus preferred by Reiner but both work superbly.

So for sound, conducting, playing and the singing of the two principals this is a very valuable recording; it's a pity that it lacks casting in depth.

Kent Nagano – 1991 (live; digital) Virgin Classics; *Salomé*: in French
Orchestra - Opéra de Lyon

Salome - Karen Huffstodt
Jokanaan - José van Dam
Herodes - Jean Dupouy
Herodias - Hélène Jossoud
Narraboth - Jean-Luc Viala
Ein Page - Hélène Perraguin
Erster Nazarener - Jules Bastin
Zweiter Nazarener - Andrée Gabriel
Erster Soldat - Vincent Le Texier
Zweiter Soldat - Fernand Dumont
Ein Cappadocier - Yves Bisson
Ein Sklave - Christopher Goldsack
Erster Jude - Georges Gautier
Zweiter Jude - Léonard Pezzino
Dritter Jude - Guy Fletcher
Vierter Jude - Roger Pujol
Fünfter Jude - Antoine Garcin

"Karen Huffstodt lacks both power and allure as Salome, and the Opera de Lyon orchestra never catch fire under Nagano's direction." (Gramophone)

"The performance is adequate although little more. Karen Huffstodt's voice has neither the power or the stamina the role demands, and is sometimes off-pitch. Conductor Kent Nagano's concept of this volatile score is tame and leisurely when it should be dynamic and propulsive, and the live recording favors the voices."
(CD Review).

Hmmm. Funny how people hear things so differently. I had ignored this recording for years because of reviews like these and yet having finally heard it, I am thrilled. True, Huffstodt is occasionally a little wild but that's the result of the manner in which she throws herself into her depiction of a crazy teenager and some mild off-pitch excursions are excusable; her voice is in timbre remarkably similar at times to Beverly Sills and as such is theatrically much more convincing than some of the grandes dames who have successfully undertaken the role. True, Nagano does sometimes go for more clarity and delicacy than weight but key moments such as Jokanaan's Galilee narrative are marvellously moving and lyrical; *Salome* does not have to be all slam-bam and of course Nagano's approach is more in keeping with a more refined, Gallic style. For me, the drama is still there; the confrontations between Salome and Jokanaan are riveting.

That of course owes much to José van Dam's famed way of nuancing text and the sheer beauty of his voice, only marginally greyer of tone than when he made the studio and live recordings for Karajan twelve years before. He sounds young and virile as he should, and the rapt smoothness of his legato somehow conveys other-worldliness - perfect. The French supporting cast is first-rate, especially Jean-Luc Viala's desperate Narraboth and Jean Dupouy's oily Herod; they were surely the two best French tenors of their era.

This is one of only two recordings of the French version; the other option is the live Festival recording conducted by Massimiliano Caldi and headed by Ukrainian soprano Sofia Soloviy with an otherwise all-Italian cast (see below). She is excellent but the rest mangle the French and thus Nagano's account here appeals far more to me.

Christoph von Dohnányi – 1994 (studio; stereo) Decca
Orchestra - Wiener Philharmoniker

Salome - Catherine Malfitano
Jochanaan - Bryn Terfel
Herodes - Kenneth Riegel
Herodias - Hanna Schwarz
Narraboth - Kim Begley
Ein Page - Randi Stene
Erster Nazarener - Peter Rose
Zweiter Nazarener - Martin Gantner
Erster Soldat - Frode Olsen
Zweiter Soldat - Georg Paucker
Ein Cappadocier - Walter Zeh
Ein Sklave - Rannveig Braga
Erster Jude - Uwe Peper
Zweiter Jude - Robin Leggate
Dritter Jude - Uwe Schönbeck
Vierter Jude - Ferdinand Seiler
Fünfter Jude - Andreas Kohn

I found this recording underwhelming in many ways.

Dohnányi's way with the score is certainly different in that he brings a cool, forensic manner to bear upon the score, often imposing a kind of silvery glow over this incandescent score - but incandescence is exactly what goes out of the window as a result. Although orchestral details emerge cleanly in the rather dry acoustic there is no rush or thrill in his interpretation. The VPO is never let off the leash and plays neatly without passion. The orchestral preludes to Jochanaan's declamatory outbursts and Salome's dance go for little compared with the sensuous allure of Karajan's account and Dohnányi never emulates Solti's drive.

None of the voices here is a match for the formidable competition on other, earlier recordings. Although Malfitano's lighter sound might theoretically be more appropriate to portraying a libidinous sixteen-year-old, the persistent beat by this stage of her career is obtrusive in her tone and quite reverses the potential gains, suggesting exactly what it is - an over-stretched, aging lyric soprano. Virtually every phrase wobbles and her top notes squawk; too often she sounds more like her mother should and I take little pleasure in her singing.

Problems continue with Terfel's Jochanaan. He sounds oddly inert and small-scale - indeed, as if he could be singing scales, beautifully, it's true but where is the prophet with one foot in the next world in this interpretation? Wächter, Van Dam and Milnes all convey so much more of the virility and passion of the voice from the cistern that denounces sinners.

If the two main voices are inadequate then the quality of the supporting cast is rendered almost irrelevant but it just so happens that the Narraboth is weak, the Herodias blowsy and ordinary, and

Riegel's Herod very dry of voice. Perhaps the vocal quality of the latter two matters little from the point of view of dramatic verisimilitude but for home listening one doesn't necessarily want voices as unattractive as the characters they are portraying.

Given the superior quality of rival versions, I see no reason for preferring this one and I shall return to the three superlative, tried and tested recordings above.

(Incidentally, if you actually want this recording, there is little point in buying it in its latest bargain incarnation as the DDD sound won't have been improved given that it was recorded as recently as 1994 and you can get the older issue with a full libretto for a fiver as opposed to undergoing the inconvenience and irritation of having to download it.)

Michael Schönwandt – 1998 (studio; digital) Chandos
Orchestra - Danish National Radio Symphony Orchestra

Salome - Inga Nielsen
Jochanaan - Robert Hale
Herodes - Reiner Goldberg
Herodias - Anja Silja
Narraboth - Deon Van Der Walt
Ein Page - Marianne Rørholm
Erster Nazarener - Bent Norup
Zweiter Nazarener - Morten Frank Larsen
Erster Soldat - Per Høyer
Zweiter Soldat - Stephen Milling
Ein Cappadocier - Anders Jakobsson
Ein Sklave - Henriette Bonde-Hansen
Erster Jude - Gert Henning-Jensen
Zweiter Jude - Ole Hedegaard
Dritter Jude - Mikael Kristensen
Vierter Jude - Peter Grønlund
Fünfter Jude - Sten Byriel

For those of us constantly looking for the perfect recording of this macabre masterpiece, there is already a number of very successful and complementary versions, not least those by Karajan, Solti, Leinsdorf and Sinopoli - yet this one still stands out for Inga Nielsen's totally convincing and ultimately chilling assumption of the eponymous role. Despite being over fifty at the time of recording, she has a shimmering, youthful tone which always suggests a precocious teenager and her inflections of the text are constantly nuanced in such a way as to bring it newly alive. Her high notes are like shafts of silver light cutting through the dense orchestration - and she can draw upon a passable lower register when digging in over her demands for the head of the Baptist. Her final scene cradling the head is rivetingly acted and sung.

The other great strength here is the conducting of Michael Schönwandt and the playing he elicits from the Danish National Radio Symphony Orchestra. They are hardly a world-renowned band but they clearly have the measure of the music and play exquisitely. It might be that the resonant acoustic lends an artificial lusciousness to their sound but the results are stunning. That acoustic by no means obscures detail and balances between voices and instruments is ideal.

I am less happy about the Jochanaan. Robert Hale has a large, bluff, rocky bass-baritone which makes him sound more like Salome's elderly uncle than the remote, handsome young man she so erotically

depicts. Still, he is a powerful presence with all the notes for all that he cannot suggest the youth and virility conjured up by van Dam, Terfel or Milnes. His cursing of Salome and the subsequent extended orchestral passage is a mighty moment, greatly helped by the intensity of the orchestra's confident playing. I have never warmed to the late Deon van der Walt's white, pinched tenor but he certainly suggests the neurotic obsessive who kills himself over the princess and in whose blood Herod slips in one of the many startling moments in an opera which still has the power to shock and disturb when it is performed with this kind of authority.

Reiner Goldberg and veteran Anja Silja make a superb Mr and Mrs Herod even if she too blares and wobbles on top notes: his grainy tenor is ideal for voicing Herod's ranting, her powerful mezzo replete with scorn and derision for her disturbed husband. The interplay between him and the orchestra when he is attempting to persuade Salome to dance for him is really absorbing; Salome's coolly indifferent spurning of his advances is perfectly contrasted with his increasing fervour and desperation. Marianne Rørholm is fine as the Page.

Despite some vocal imperfections this is one of the most dramatically riveting versions I know.

Massimiliano Caldi – 2007 (live composite; digital) *Salomé*: in French; Dynamic Orchestra - Orchestra Internazionale d'Italia

Salome - Sofia Soloviy
 Jokanaan - Costantino Finucci
 Herodes - Lennardo Gramegna
 Herodias - Francesca Scaini
 Narraboth - Vincenzo Maria Sarinelli
 Ein Page - Francesca De Giorgi
 Erster Nazarener - Emanuele Genovese
 Zweiter Nazarener - Giuseppe Ranoia
 Erster Soldat - Giuseppe Ranoia
 Zweiter Soldat - Marcello Rosiello
 Ein Cappadocier - Michele Aurelio Bruno
 Ein Sklave - Nicola Amodio
 Erster Jude - Nicola Amodio
 Zweiter Jude - Massimiliano Silvestri
 Dritter Jude - Domingo Stasi
 Vierter Jude - Giovanni Coletta
 Fünfter Jude - Michele Aurelio Bruno

As a devotee of this opera, I could not resist the chance of hearing it in the French language revival version, set to Oscar Wilde's original script; a libretto with an English translation is provided to help the listener appreciate the differences between the German version with which Strauss aficionados are familiar.

I was immediately grateful for the quality of the live sound, the assured playing of the excellent orchestra assembled for the festival, the drive and purpose of Maestro Caldi's swift tempi and his sense of the dramatic and, above all, the very acceptable standard of singing. However, although this performance is indeed very well sung and acted, the biggest drawback is the very Italianate French employed; mispronunciations are legion, beginning with everyone bar one singer insisting on pronouncing "Princesse" as "Pron-cesse" instead of "Pran-cesse" and the usual Italian difficulties with the French "me" pronounced as "may". "Fille" is italianised as "feelya", closer to the Italian "figlia",

and so on; what a pity that they didn't hire a French coach to iron this out - I would happily have done it in return for board and lodging...

OK; enough precious linguistic moaning; let's acknowledge the many virtues here. This is a really gripping performance, running to only 95 minutes but not sounding rushed, just tense. Orchestral highlights such as the dance and the Interlude before Herod's entrance are beautifully gauged and the appearance of Jokanaan's head on a platter held aloft by the executioner as he exits the cistern is riveting, chilling, explosive - as it should be. The orchestra manages to sound a little grainy in true French style -appropriately, given that Strauss was recognising Debussy's idiom in his re-composition.

In general, the scoring is lighter and fleeter than the German version and one realises that it all actually works rather better in French. Ukrainian soprano Sofia Soloviy's Salomé is a revelation, too: finally, a Salome who sounds like a teenage vamp - "monstrueuse" yet so seductive, with a sensual, flickering vibrato, rich tone, great reserves of power, a shimmering top and heft both in the middle and at the bottom of the voice - simply sensational. Given that this was recorded in 2007, why haven't we heard more of her since? Her French is a bit indistinct and mushy but better than her co-singers who are otherwise all Italian. Her final scene is a tour de force, as good as any I know, her B flats shining out like beacons. Her Jokanaan is a strong-voiced baritone with a commanding presence (and the usual ropery French). Leonardo Gramagna as Herod is ideal: neurotic yet precise in his singing of this deceptively difficult music, presenting a really credibly creepy Herod and dominating the stage when he is present. His Herodias is suitably nasty, raddled and vocally adept. The Narraboth is a funny, throaty little tenor, rather weedy and effete, more like a French chanteur, but that's not inappropriate for that befuddled, lovestruck youth, probably little older than the sixteen-year-old Salomé. The Page is a firm, expressive mezzo.

Extras such as the prolonged argument about the Messiah amongst the Jews and Nazarenes, much truncated in the German version, provide additional motivation to acquire this recording. There is a bit of thumping and clumping across the stage but the audience is inaudible until they break out into enthusiastic and well-deserved applause at the end and the sound is otherwise remarkably full and clear, to the extent that you can hear the turning of pages in the score but not the prompter.

In fact, for all its little (mainly linguistic) flaws, as soon as I had finished listening to it the first time around, I immediately started playing the first CD again - and I can't say that about every version here.

Recommendations

This is the fifth survey I have undertaken of Strauss' most popular operas and I have hitherto been struck by the number of really recommendable recordings they have received. However, its peculiar combination of specific qualities and requirements makes *Salome* trickier in the recording studio and I would recommend avoiding several of those above in favour of the handful of recordings which tick all the boxes. The automatic, go-to recommendation for a recording of *Salome* has long been Solti's recording with Birgit Nilsson, and I see no reason to contradict that general consensus, while acknowledging that it has its drawbacks and imperfections. However, there is definitely another option in Karajan's miraculous studio version. Among older recordings, none can compete with the sonic splendour and detail of my first recommendations, but 1952 was clearly a vintage year.

Live mono: Reiner 1952

Studio mono: Moralt 1952

Live stereo: Karajan 1977; Georges Sébastian 1965

Studio stereo/digital: Solti 1961*; Karajan 1977*

French version (live, digital): Nagano 1991

Italian version (live radio broadcast, mono): Sanzogno 1952

*Joint first choices