

Verdi's *Simon Boccanegra*: A survey of the discography

by Ralph Moore

I think of *Simon Boccanegra* as something of a connoisseur's opera, insofar as it surely contains some of Verdi's most inspired music, yet has from its premiere rightly been criticised for its labyrinthine plot – a caricature of typically operatic complications – and its consequent lack of accessibility for audiences. For that reason, the first version soon fell out of favour after its 1857 premiere, but Verdi, no doubt with justification, thought highly enough of the music to undertake a revision twenty-three years later with the help of Arrigo Boito, and the result, the 1881 version, is the one almost invariably performed today. The most important addition was the Council Chamber Scene; the opera would be much the poorer without it, but Verdi also revised a good deal of the music to render it far more ductile and atmospheric.

The opera presents an admixture of personal and political turmoil such as we encounter in other mature operas like *Les vêpres siciliennes* and *Don Carlos*, but also capitalises on two archetypal themes very prevalent in Verdi's operas and to which he frequently returned, both of which prompted the best of his music: the depiction of a loving but tortured father-daughter relationship of the kind we also see in *Luisa Miller*, *Rigoletto* and *Aida* and his concern for statesmanship, as exhibited in the appeals for peace, patriotism and brotherhood, rallying calls stretching right back to his earliest operas, such as *Nabucco*, *I Lombardi*, *Attila* and *La battaglia di Legnano*. This is very "grown-up" Verdi, politically aware yet subtle and melancholy in its presentation of the human condition; remember, Verdi had lost his wife and two daughters by the time he was only 26 years old and that trauma of loss surely marked him personally and artistically throughout his long life. Like Shakespeare, who also lost a child, he mines the seams of death, separation and reunion to great emotional effect in this work.

Apart from the high drama of the Council Chamber scene, gentler sea breezes waft through the score, in the orchestral prelude to Act 1 as Amelia awaits the arrival of her lover to the opening of Act 2 where the Doge, already poisoned, tries to clear his fevered head by breathing in the cool sea air and rapturously apostrophises "Il mare". The sophistication of the new, through-composed music Verdi wrote for the revision does not seem to jar with the earlier, Risorgimento mode of scoring with its set pieces and more formal structure, especially as Verdi jettisoned some of the most egregious 'rum-ti-tum' stuff in his new version. The fusion of styles is highly effective; Wagner, for example, had considerably more difficulty and arguably less success in attempting to graft new music onto the original Dresden score in his ongoing revision of *Tannhäuser* over thirty years.

There are over eighty recordings of this opera in the catalogue of which I review thirteen below. There are only seven studio recordings to date, all of which I consider; there are unlikely to be more. I have additionally reviewed six significant live accounts, including two of the original 1857 version. While they are undoubtedly of interest to the committed Verdian, who can enjoy playing "spot the difference" and evaluate the success of the newer material relative to what it replaced, it is widely acknowledged that the revision is superior, so a recording of the original version can be only a supplement to one of the later, improved scores.

The Recordings:

Ettore Panizza – 1939 (live; mono) Myto; Arkadia
Orchestra and Chorus - Metropolitan Opera

Simon Boccanegra - Lawrence Tibbett
Jacopo Fiesco - Ezio Pinza
Amelia Grimaldi - Elisabeth Rethberg
Gabriele Adorno - Giovanni Martinelli
Paolo Albiani - Leonard Warren

Pietro - Louis D' Angelo
Un'ancella - Pearl Besuner
Un capitano dei balestrieri - Giordano Paltrinieri

The role of Simon fitted Tibbett like a glove which resulted in his giving what are perhaps his finest performance and best recording; the thrust and resonance of his baritone, in combination with an artfully calibrated vibrato, enabled him both to dominate the stage in the great crowd scene but also generate great pathos in the intimate exchanges between him and the angelically-voiced Rethberg. Just as he was one of the finest baritones ever to grace a stage, she was undoubtedly as soprano of extraordinary artistic and technical acumen; add to those two singers Pinza and Martinelli and there was no greater quartet in the operatic firmament. As if that were not sufficient as an *embarrass de richesses*, we also enjoy the presence of Leonard Warren, early in his career and in his Met stage debut as Paolo, who would himself become a Boccanegra of huge distinction; no doubt he watched and learned from Tibbett's example. Finally, the conductor Panizza was of course in many ways an operatic Toscanini clone, with the same dramatic instincts and taut control; the result is that this live recording maintains its place as one of the greatest historic documents in the record of opera performances.

Fritz Stiedry – 1950 (live; mono) Myto; Preiser
Orchestra and Chorus - Metropolitan Opera

Simon Boccanegra - Leonard Warren
Jacopo Fiesco - Mihály Székely
Amelia Grimaldi - Astrid Varnay
Gabriele Adorno - Richard Tucker
Paolo Albiani - Giuseppe Valdengo
Pietro - Lorenzo Alvary
Un'ancella - Maxine Stellman
Un capitano dei balestrieri - Paul Franke

This is a wonderfully vibrant performance, although Stiedry's conducting is at times decidedly heavy-handed, especially in the supposedly lilting, tripping music of Amelia's entrance aria, where her huge, slightly unwieldy voice makes Varnay sound more like Lady Macbeth than a sensitive orphan, but as sheer sound her soprano is extraordinary and she has the technical armoury, including laser top notes and a great trill at the end of the big chorus at the end of Act 1, "Plebe! Patrizi! Popolo!". She is surely a soprano to be mentioned in the same breath as Birgit Nilsson when it comes to amplitude of voice – whether she should have been singing Amelia is another matter.

Mihály Székely is similarly vast of voice and again rather clumsy and occasionally unsteady, but the resonance and heft of his voluminous, true basso profondo are most impressive. The sonority of his low notes is remarkable and he portrays Fiesco's anger, sorrow and ultimate compassion very effectively with great gravitas.

A youthful Tucker makes a virile, impetuous lover, ideally conveying Adorno's fiery, impulsive nature and the sincerity of his remorse when he discovers the truth. Valdengo is, as always, beautiful of voice and highly expressive in his delivery of the text. However, the star in an already starry cast, is, of course, Leonard Warren, and his inimitable tones suit the role very well: a true successor Tibbett, his ringing baritone is impassioned and tender, even when singing with a daughter who often sounds more like his Wicked Stepmother.

The sound is passable but obviously not as grateful on the ear as a modern, stereo recording; nor is a true Verdian style always apparent in the singing of Varnay and Székely, but I revel in the vocal amplitude of an exceptional cast.

Francesco Molinari-Pradelli – 1951 (live radio broadcast; mono) Cetra; Warner Fonit
Orchestra and Chorus - RAI Roma

Simon Boccanegra - Paolo Silveri
Jacopo Fiesco - Mario Petri
Amelia Grimaldi - Antonietta Stella
Gabriele Adorno - Carlo Bergonzi
Paolo Albiani - Walter Monachesi
Pietro - Giorgio Giorgetti
Un'ancella - Bianca Furlai
Un capitano dei balestrieri - Walter Collo

In most discussions of the few extant studio recordings of *Simon Boccanegra*, this one is overlooked, but if it were not for the boxy, congested mono sound it would be as good a choice as any other. It was broadcast to commemorate the fiftieth anniversary of Verdi's death. There are lots of reasons for preferring it, not least the first appearance of Carlo Bergonzi in his debut tenor recording role, having re-trained from baritone. You can still hear more than a trace of baritoneal heftiness in his sound - the voice was to acquire more squillo a few years later – and on first hearing I confess that I strained to recognise the Bergonzi we know, excellent though his singing already is. This is also the recording debut of that estimable soprano Antonietta Stella, who, at 22, sounds a little nervous and tentative at her entry but soon gains in confidence - this was a radio broadcast - and sings with real passion. She tends to be slow starter in all her recordings but the voice is far from ordinary.

The surprise of the recording is Paolo Silveri. I have always enjoyed his fine, easy top notes and the smoothness of his vocal production, but here he finds an interpretative edge which makes him every bit the equal of Cappuccilli in both his studio recordings - and frankly I think he has the more purely beautiful voice, too. Nobody approaches Gobbi in either his studio recording or the live Gavazzeni performance for really inhabiting the role; Silveri rather throws away the dramatic possibilities of the cursing of Paolo in the Council Chamber scene, but his singing per se in the great "Plebei! Patrizi! Popolo" aria is superlative. I enjoy Silveri's performance in the old *L'Arlesiana* with Tagliavini but this is the best I have ever heard him sing and I feel that it is time to revalue him alongside great contemporaries like Gobbi and Bastianini. In addition, we have Mario Petri in sonorous voice as Fiesco and the skilful, sensitive direction of the ever-reliable Molinari Pradelli at the helm. The admirable Paolo is the same singer as in the Gobbi studio set, but Walter Monachesi is here in considerably fresher voice.

There is one small cut in which Paolo is refused the hand of Amelia (Maria) and decides to abduct her, but the text of that scene (in Italian only) is in the libretto; otherwise the opera is complete on two cheap discs (if you get the latest "Cetra Opera Collection" from Warner Fonit). It is a worthy addition to any collection as long as you don't mind the congested sound.

Gabriele Santini – 1957 (studio; mono) EMI; Naxos. Regis
Orchestra and Chorus - Teatro dell'Opera di Roma

Simon Boccanegra - Tito Gobbi
Jacopo Fiesco - Boris Christoff
Amelia Grimaldi - Victoria de los Angeles
Gabriele Adorno - Giuseppe Campora
Paolo Albiani - Walter Monachesi
Pietro - Paolo Dari
Un'ancella - Silvia Bertona
Un capitano dei balestrieri - Paolo Caroli

The many merits of this classic recording are too obvious and well-rehearsed to make it worthwhile detailing them - but it's not without a few minor flaws. First, the dated mono sound - but that's crisp and clear and for many simply isn't an issue when the singing and playing are as good this, but it's frustrating that Walter Legge did not see fit to record it in stereo when the technology was already available. The singing of the male principals is superlative – and that includes Campora, even though he is usually accorded a very subordinate place in the honours list in comparison with Tito Gobbi and Boris Christoff. Gobbi remains its greatest asset, giving one of his most detailed, nuanced and sympathetic portrayals on record and Christoff's black-voiced Fiesco is riveting. Some may have reservations about de los Angeles, touching and charming though she is; mine concern her voice in general, not with her assumption of this particular role, as the top of her soprano is always a touch strained and acid, not ideally floated as Te Kanawa used to do in this role. But these are minor cavils, wholly negligible when you consider the performance as a whole; she is really credible, making the listener believe in her love for both father and her hot-headed suitor. Minor drawbacks are that Santini's conducting sometimes lacks tension, there are minor cuts and the recording is certainly not in spacious sound – but it is still one of the best characterised and most expressively sung accounts in the catalogue and if it is not, perhaps, as uniformly well-cast as some, the special qualities of the lead singers carry the day.

Gianandrea Gavazzeni – 1961 (live; mono) Opera d'Oro; Gala
Orchestra - Wiener Philharmoniker; Chorus - Wiener Staatsoper

Simon Boccanegra - Tito Gobbi
Jacopo Fiesco - Giorgio Tozzi
Amelia Grimaldi - Leyla Gencer
Gabriele Adorno - Giuseppe Zampieri
Paolo Albiani - Rolando Panerai
Pietro - Vito Susca
Un capitano dei balestrieri - Glade Peterson

The reputation of the soloists is a guarantee of quality as long as the sound is passable. Especially valuable is the presence of Gencer, who, along with Olivero, the "Queen of Pirate Recordings", were grievously neglected by the big companies; she is in fine form - her pianissimo B flat alone in her first solo is to die for. Although Gobbi can also be heard in the lovely 1957 EMI studio recording, this has the added zest of a live performance. The cast is completed by more famous names: Zampieri, Vienna's favourite resident Italian tenor at that time, whose sturdy, baritone, but sensitive, tones are very apt for the role of Adorno, the noble-voiced Tozzi as Fiesco and Panerai as Paolo - whose opening few minutes are wobbly and frankly almost disastrous, but he fortunately he soon warms up to give a typically incisive performance.

Gobbi is, of course, incomparably detailed and affecting in this, one of his most celebrated interpretations. As ever, his top notes are a bit dry but his verbal inflections and nuances are a delight, the tone, with that characteristic flickering vibrato, firm and incisive. Gencer is wonderful: that warm, spicy sound bringing a Callas-like electricity and drama to her interpretation without sounding the least like Callas. The ubiquitous Gavazzeni brings an experienced ear to the score - he is always so reliable but never dull and he has the warmth and richness of the VPO to give Verdi's dark score extra impact.

That question of sound is always a crucial with Opera d'Oro – I have not heard the Gala issue - but the good news is that it is really quite acceptable for an old, live recording. I got excited when I heard the first few notes of the Prologue; it's clear and present with little fuzziness, but then something happens about half way through and it suddenly becomes less distinct - or more opaque, if you prefer. It seems to recover by the beginning of Gencer's opening of Act 1 - or maybe my ears adjust; in any case, it's very listenable and has the atmosphere of the live theatre; there is plenty of space around the voices without their being too recessed.

Gianandrea Gavazzeni – 1973 (studio; stereo) RCA; Lyrica
Orchestra and Chorus - RCA

Simon Boccanegra - Piero Cappuccilli
Jacopo Fiesco - Ruggero Raimondi
Amelia Grimaldi - Katia Ricciarelli
Gabriele Adorno - Plácido Domingo
Paolo Albiani - Gian-Piero (Giampietro) Mastromei
Pietro - Maurizio Mazzieri
Un'ancella - Ornella Jachetti
Un capitano dei balestrieri - Piero De Palma

This 1973 RCA recording was for a while available at a super-bargain price on the "Brilliant" label but that seems to have disappeared. Fortunately, you can still find affordable copies under the RCA Lyrica label and it is in many ways as attractive as the more celebrated, award-winning recording by Abbado for DG four years later, also with Cappuccilli but with Freni instead of Ricciarelli and Carreras substituting for Domingo.

I like almost everything conducted by Gianandrea Gavazzeni, who was vastly experienced in the Verdi repertoire and sympathetic to his star singers; this is no exception. We catch four star singers in their very youthful prime and, Cappuccilli apart, obviously, which you prefer will largely be dependent on your taste in voices. Even regarding Cappuccilli, there is a case for arguing that he is somewhat fresher here and the famous breath-span is much in evidence, even if he is on occasion a bit windy of tone; otherwise Ricciarelli is a tad droopy but very affecting, her pianissimi floating over the melodic lines and her limpid soprano blending most sensitively with Cappuccilli and Domingo in their duets. She is also able to produce a fair amount of heft in the great ensemble concluding Act I without any screeching - and she attempts a passable trill with a lovely downward portamento at the conclusion. Raimondi's bass is not as imposing as Ghiaurov's but of course he is completely in sympathy with the required Verdian style with a fine legato. I prefer Carreras' plaintive timbre to Domingo's more generalised, all-purpose, but heroic, singing - but then, I always did, until Carreras over-stretched his lovely, lyric tenor; Domingo is still very fine.

The supporting cast sports some well-known names and the sound is excellent analogue. It might not be quite as striking as Cappuccilli's recording four years later, but if you favour the artists here, there is no need to hesitate.

John Matheson – 1975 (live concert performance; stereo) Mitridate Ponto; Opera Rara.

NB: original 1857 version

Orchestra - BBC Concert Orchestra; Chorus - BBC Singers

Simon Boccanegra - Sesto Bruscantini
Jacopo Fiesco - Gwynne Howell
Amelia Grimaldi - Josella Ligi
Gabriele Adorno - André Turp
Paolo Albiani - William Elvin
Pietro - Paul Hudson
Un'ancella - Patricia Taylor

This is to some extent *hors concours*, as it presented the original version for what might have been the first time in well over a hundred years. It is rarely done – another, markedly inferior, live performance from 1999 is reviewed below – so as long as it is even passably performed, it will be of interest to the Verdi aficionado, just as Matheson's presentation of the original 1847 *Macbeth* is fascinating. For some

details of the differences between the 1857 and 1881 versions, I refer readers to the review by my colleague Bob Farr written back in 2004 ([review](#)).

The first welcome surprise – after the listener has recovered from the shock of the martial introduction instead of the sombre mood-painting we are accustomed to - is the clarity of the stereo sound; there is virtually no extraneous sound in this concert performance and balances are excellent. The second is the quality of the first voices we hear. William Elvin – who was a regular performer at Covent Garden for ten years but whose career seemed to terminate prematurely - has a vibrant, powerful baritone and is neatly contrasted with Paul Hudson's darker, rougher Pietro and the lighter, more refined sound of Bruscantini's Simon. Bruscantini baritone is not as imposing an instrument as we are accustomed to hear sing that role – he was more celebrated for his Mozart and bel canto roles - but he was a vastly experienced and versatile singer and by careful husbanding of his resources could sing bigger, darker roles like Rigoletto, Ford and Archibaldo in *L'amore dei tre re*. He was also an excellent vocal actor, so he creates both a credible character and summons up enough heft and penetration to be convincing as Simon, even if he not the archetypal Verdi baritone ideal for the part. Gwynne Howell's entrance really makes an impact, too; what a voice he had in his prime: rich, ductile and resonant – one of the best basses to record Fiesco. The BBC Singers chorus is really sharp. Matheson's tempi are fluid and propulsive, keeping things moving in that dark opening first Act (which later became the Prologue). So far, so good – that leaves only the lovers among the principal singers, and the news there is less encouraging.

Josella Ligi has a hefty voice and makes welcome excursions into her lower register but she also phrases gustily, wails some high-flying phrases and has a mature, curdled tone; she hardly sounds virginal and it is noticeable that her opening aria elicits no applause from the audience. Nor is André Turp very refined, either; he is passionate but betrays some strain in alt and blares a bit. Still, both have their moments and are distinctly better than their counterparts in the other performance of this earlier version (see below).

This is really the only option if you want to hear Verdi's first thoughts and much of it affords considerable pleasure; I only wish the Amelia and Adorno had been more accomplished.

Claudio Abbado – 1977 (studio; stereo) DG
Orchestra and Chorus - Teatro alla Scala

Simon Boccanegra - Piero Cappuccilli
Jacopo Fiesco - Nicolai Ghiaurov
Amelia Grimaldi - Mirella Freni
Gabriele Adorno - José Carreras
Paolo Albiani - José van Dam
Pietro - Giovanni Foiani
Un'ancella - Maria Fausta Galamini
Un capitano dei balestrieri - Antonio Savastano

I have heard claims that this is a virtually perfect opera recording and I am not inclined to dispute that assertion. The analogue sound is superb – broad, spacious, with great depth - the casting ideal and Abbado conducts with great sensitivity and versatility, bringing out its dark, brooding qualities of the Prelude then contrasting those with the moments of serenity, such as the prelude to Act 1, depicting the morning sun glinting on the shimmering ocean: the aural depictions are so evocative. And what a cast! We have here an array of voices to rival the famous vintage Panizza recording, the only possible reservation being over the relative blandness of Cappuccilli's Simon in comparison with more vivid characterisations by Gobbi. He is by no means inert or dull, just not as incisive, either in voice or affect – although he is much more engaged and involved than he could be in recordings and his famed ability to sustain the long-breathed line is much in evidence and he generates real power in the Council Scene.

A young Carreras is in meltingly beautiful voice and Freni is in the plenitude of her considerable powers; Ghiaurov's mighty, rolling bass is the acme of implacable disdain until the truth is revealed, van Dam's Paolo is malevolent yet so smoothly voiced and fine supporting bass Foiani is excellent as Pietro – there are no weak links.

This has been the go-to recommendation for over forty years and even though I would not want to be without other, supplementary sets, if you want only one, this is the prime candidate.

Giuseppe Patanè – 1981 (studio; stereo) Hungaroton
Orchestra and Chorus - Hungarian State Opera

Simon Boccanegra - Lajos Miller
Jacopo Fiesco - József Gregor
Amelia Grimaldi - Veronika Kincses
Gabriele Adorno - János B Nagy
Paolo Albiani - István Gáti
Pietro - Balázs Hantos
Un'ancella - Klári Jász
Un capitano dei balestrieri - Attila Fülöp

Patanè was an experienced Neapolitan conductor who knew his way around Verdi and made some good recordings before his premature death at only 57. Here he conducts competently, but without much personality, an all-Hungarian outfit including several singers who were well-known on the international circuit and a supporting cast presumably from the Hungarian opera; the Pietro is a wobbler but the rest are voices of fair quality, headed by distinguished baritone with a firm, flexible baritone, as is the voice of István Gáti, the Paolo, a singer unknown to me. József Gregor is similarly-voiced and rather lacking in weight for a bass; his cursing of Simon suffers from weak top notes - in fact, one problem here is that the lower-voiced male singers all sound pleasant but rather alike.

Veronika Kincses is a hard, shrill, light-voiced Amelia and her vocal production is *ingolata* - the role demands a big, open voice shot-through with warm Mediterranean sun like Freni or de los Angeles. Her Gabriele is similarly constricted of tone; it is this pairing which decisively rules out this recording for me. In the end, this is decent enough in its own way but without the individuality or vocal distinction to compete with the best; in any case, it appears to be currently largely unavailable.

Georg Solti – 1989 (studio; digital) Decca
Orchestra and Chorus - Teatro alla Scala

Simon Boccanegra - Leo Nucci
Jacopo Fiesco - Paata Burchuladze
Amelia Grimaldi - Kiri Te Kanawa
Gabriele Adorno - Giacomo (Jaume) Aragall
Paolo Albiani - Paolo Coni
Pietro - Carlo Colombara
Un'ancella - Anna Zoroberto
Un capitano dei balestrieri - Ernesto Gavazzi

This recording seems to have had a lambasting from all quarters ever since it appeared. Perhaps, as the *Gramophone* says, it's a case of "the better being the enemy of the good", as it's true that both Gobbi's recordings, Gavazzeni's earlier studio set and the 1977 prize-winning set conducted by Abbado all offer a more dramatic, better sung experience of this dark and fascinating opera - but I still find much to enjoy in this version. I made a point of listening to, and comparing key points from, these

different versions very carefully, and I honestly do not believe that it's as bad as various other critics have made out.

Let's start with its virtues, chief among which is the pure, gleaming, tender Amelia of Kiri Te Kanawa - one of the best things she has done on disc. Then there is Solti's sensitive direction; he makes a lovely job of the "sea music" and a direct comparison with Abbado's opening to Act 1 will bear me out. Contrary to his popular image of driving hard, he could, at times, inject a little more tension and momentum into the action, but he is very considerate of his singers. Another bonus is the chance to hear the under-recorded Aragall singing very expressively. Both his timbre and his characterisation (in an admittedly rather limited role) are very similar to that of his great compatriot, Carreras, and there's not much to choose between them, although Carreras is perhaps more animated. Then there are the supporting roles: Paolo Coni and Carlo Colombaro are stand-outs as Paolo and Pietro respectively - real, ringing, Italianate voices. In fact, I agree with a previous reviewer that I would perhaps have preferred to hear Coni in the title role.

Having said that, Nucci is not that bad. He has something of the bleat up top that (for me) disfigures Bruson's voice and a most irritating habit of approaching every higher, louder note with a slide up a full fifth of an octave - a terrible, insecure tic - but he is not totally outsung and can certainly be heard in the ensembles. He could be more tender in the exchanges with Amelia - soft notes elude him and one longs for Gobbi - but he compares reasonably well with Cappuccilli as Italian baritones go. Burchuladze has a vast, cavernous voice and some impressive moments - again, I do not hear that he is so much less sensitive than, say, Ghiaurov, in "Il lacerato spirito" - but his Italian is a trial. Every open "ah" sound becomes an "aw", which grates on repeated listening. In addition, he pronounces "angeli" in Slavonic style with a hard "g", such that we get "Awngheli" - couldn't someone have picked him up on this? At least the infamous wobble is well under control here and he sings with conviction.

So, a disaster this is not, and I am particularly happy to have Te Kanawa and Aragall in their respective roles - though the inadequacy of the eponymous principal role rules it out as a first choice.

Alexander Rahbari – 1994 (studio; digital) Discovery

Orchestra - Belgian Radio & TV; Chorus - Belgian Radio & TV Chorus and Jaak Gregoor Chorus

Simon Boccanegra - Eduard Tumagian

Jacopo Fiesco - Peter Mikulás

Amelia Grimaldi - Miriam Gauci

Gabriele Adorno - Giacomo (Jaume) Aragall

Paolo Albiani - Vincenzo Sardinero

Pietro - Vladimir de Kanel

Un'ancella - Gonzalo Tomckowiack

Un capitano dei balestrieri - Marijke Pieck

Rahbari has been at the helm of some fine budget opera recordings for Naxos and this label which have several times involved Miriam Gauci, Giacomo/Jaume Aragall, Eduard Tumagian and Vincenzo/Vicente Sardinero, as per here. Both Aragall and Sardinero were veterans in their mid-fifties here; both are still in decent voice even if neither sounds exactly youthful: Sardinero's baritone develops something of a beat under pressure and Aragall's tenor has lost its pristine fresh, sappy quality. Tumagian has a very capable, attractive baritone of no special distinction but he acts with conviction and feeling; his big Council Chamber aria is strong and effective. I would pay Gauci the compliment of observing that she sounds similar to Freni: a big, warm soprano with the ability to fine her voice away tenderly. The recognition duet with Tumagian goes very nicely, as does the powerful ensemble closing Act 1. For me, the weakest contribution here is from Peter Mikulas, who is competent but lacks the dark, massive tone required for a truly imposing Fiesco; he tends to groan low notes, is too light and baritone of timbre and his Italian could be more distinct.

Rahbari's conducting is expert but the "sea music" introduction to Act 1 lacks somewhat of the delicacy and fantasy other conductors such as the young Abbado bring out. His chorus and orchestra are both exemplary, but given the competition, there is no compelling reason beyond economy and the assurance of hearing a merely pleasing, unobjectionable account to favour this over starrer, more characterful recordings. However, if you happen across a copy, playing it will certainly give pleasure.

Renato Palumbo – 1999 (live composite; digital) Dynamic. **NB: original, 1857 version**
Orchestra Internazionale d'Italia and chorus

Simon Boccanegra - Vittorio Vitelli
Jacopo Fiesco - Francesco Ellero d'Artegna
Amelia Grimaldi - Annalisa Raspagliosi
Gabriele Adorno - Warren Mok
Paolo Albiani - Nikola Mijailovic
Pietro - Massimiliano Chiarolla
Un'ancella - Songhu Liu

Setting aside the fact that this live performance has intrinsic interest in offering the original version, it would be idle to pretend that either the vocal contribution or the sound quality can compete with the best recordings, especially as the older, 1976 broadcast of the 1857 edition is superior. The wavering pulse in Annalisa Raspagliosi's shrill soprano will be enough to deter some canary-fanciers like me; the amplitude of her vibrato is simply too wide and constitutes an in-built technical fault in her voice – and an attempt at a sketchy trill does little to enhance her appeal; the desultory applause in response to her opening aria is an appropriate response to value. Baritone Vittorio Vitelli in all honesty sounds like a tenor manqué to me, with little resonance in the middle and bottom of his vocal range and a tremolo obtrudes on his top notes. Hong Kong tenor Warren Mok has a small, windy tenor with a vibrato which also often defaults into a tremolo and neither his nor Raspagliosi's intonation is above reproach in their duets. Francesco Ellero d'Artegna has an odd groan in his tone and also evinces an encroaching beat; I do not find his bass attractive and made the mistake of listening to this shortly after I had been playing Giulio Neri singing "Il lacerato spirito" ...

The voices are quite removed in the aural perspective and often quite far off to the left or right if you are listening on headphones. There is a lot of stage noise, especially pounding feet. Choral work is thin and sketchy. Really, this need not detain you; it is all very third-rate.

Constantine Orbelian – 2013 (studio; digital) Delos
Kaunas City Symphony Orchestra and Kaunas State Choir

Simon Boccanegra - Dmitri Hvorostovsky
Jacopo Fiesco - Ildar Abdrazakov
Amelia Grimaldi - Barbara Frittoli
Gabriele Adorno - Stefano Secco
Paolo Albiani - Marco Caria
Pietro - Kostas Smoriginas
Un'ancella - Eglė Šidlauskaitė
Un capitano dei balestrieri - Kęstutis Alčauskis

I include this review as a caveat, as prospective punters without prior knowledge will understandably be drawn to this recording.

Trying to review it dispassionately is difficult, as response to it is inevitably coloured by the knowledge that when it was made Hvorostovsky had only four years to live before he succumbed to brain cancer;

this applies even more acutely to an equally problematic *Rigoletto*, made only the year before his premature death. Nonetheless, we have to assess it in the context of many other recordings made by artists no longer with us, and here I find myself somewhat at odds with my MusicWeb colleagues - ([review](#)) - particularly with regard to the quality of Hvorostovsky's singing but, to be fair, they do acknowledge and identify other flaws.

To my ears, the velvet had clearly begun to wear off Hvorostovsky's baritone by the time he came to record this, as a result of forcing and poor breathing. Sadly, I find him here to be unrecognisable as the elegant singer who had delighted us so often since winning Cardiff Singer of the World twenty-four years previously. He went down the same route as another great and now sadly vocally compromised baritone, Simon Keenlyside, in over-singing and sacrificing beauty of tone to sheer noise. His intake of breath is now painfully and audibly laboured, he virtually shouts his way through some passages and his tone is hoarse, coarse and woolly. I understand why people wanted to hear his singing as better than it is, but to elevate his performance to being the equal of exponents such as Tibbett, Warren, Gobbi and Cappuccilli seems to me to require the sacrifice of necessary objectivity.

The rest of the cast is equally mediocre. The soprano wobbles, the Adorno is a tenorino without the vocal heft or distinction to do justice to the Verdian line, the bass light and pleasant but without the vocal gravitas to challenge proper exponents of the role of Fiesco like Ghiaurov and Christoff, and the Paolo a thunderously dull comprimario baritone. Add to this one rushed conductor with an under-powered orchestra and it is unfathomable that some Amazon reviewers have been able to ignore the discography so completely as to call this "the BEST Boccanegra of them all." It just ain't so.

Recommendations

As is so often the case with these surveys, the melancholy fact is that nothing later than 1977 can begin to offer the standard of operatic singing we encounter in earlier recordings. Thank goodness that the technology was sufficiently advanced by then to bequeath us first-rate analogue accounts of an opera which remains neglected.

Historical: Panizza – 1939

Live mono: Gavazzeni – 1961

Studio mono: Santini – 1957

Studio stereo: Abbado – 1977*

(Original version - live stereo: Matheson – 1975)

*First choice

Ralph Moore