

Verdi's *Rigoletto* - A discographical conspectus

by Ralph Moore

It is hard if not impossible, to make a representative survey of recordings of *Rigoletto*, given that there are 200 in the catalogue; I can only compromise by compiling a somewhat arbitrary list comprising of a selection of the best-known and those which appeal to me.

For a start, there are thirty or so studio recordings in Italian; I begin with one made in 1927 and 1930, as those made earlier than that are really only for the specialist. I then consider eighteen of the studio versions made since that one. I have not reviewed minor recordings or those which in my estimation do not reach the requisite standard; I freely admit that I cannot countenance those by Sinopoli in 1984, Chailly in 1988, Rahbari in 1991 or Rizzi in 1993 for a combination of reasons, including an aversion to certain singers – for example Gruberova's shrill squeak of a soprano and what I hear as the bleat in Bruson's baritone and the forced wobble in Nucci's – and the existence of a better, earlier version by the same artists (as with the Rudel recording with Milnes, Kraus and Sills caught too late) or lacklustre singing in general from artists of insufficient calibre (Rahbari and Rizzi). Nor can I endorse Dmitri Hvorostovsky's final recording; whether it was as a result of his sad, terminal illness or the vocal decline which had already set in I cannot say, but it does the memory of him in his prime no favours and he is in any case indifferently partnered.

The role of *Rigoletto* presents the ultimate challenge to the Verdi baritone and only the greatest singers can do it justice. Riccardo Stracciari, surely had the voice best suited to its demands but other singers of exceptional gifts have triumphed in it, too: Tibbett, Warren, Gobbi, Merrill, Taddei and Bastianini all come to mind. However, it has plum roles for the three other voice categories, too. Even if Sparafucile is only little more than a cameo role, a really imposing bass can make quite an impact as the mercenary assassin. Gilda may be a teenage ingenue, but the role is not written for a tweety-bird soubrette; the coloratura soprano needs to have a proper lower register to express the depth of her pain, suffering and humiliation; likewise, the tenor needs to be agile and brilliant but essentially virile - a testosterone-pumped cad. An aging tenor with a dry or reedy voice is not an appetising prospect as the libidinous Duke.

With the exceptions of Serafin and Solti, I would not say that the best recordings have been led by the most famous names in conducting; unfortunately, we have only Acts 3 and 4 of a *Rigoletto* from Toscanini in wartime concerts and, oddly, Karajan eschewed it almost completely. He certainly never recorded it and, as far as I know, he conducted it only once in Ulm as early as 1929 then dropped it. Furthermore, those led by more celebrated conductors are often not especially successful – for example, recordings by Giulini, Muti and those I mention above as excluded from this survey. Maybe their refined sensibilities are as repulsed by its violence and vulgarity as the first Austrian censors in Venice with whom Verdi battled to secure a premiere.

Inevitably my selection will antagonise readers whose personal favourites I have scanted or ignored; I can only plead *privilège de critique* (I have just invented that) and invite them to submit their own corrective comments and suggestions. There are undoubtedly many more tantalising live recordings with which I am unfamiliar but we already have so many in good sound with major casts that I am confident that at least one to suit most tastes may be found below. In line with my confession to having chosen somewhat idiosyncratically, is my inclusion of one studio version in French, as I have a special attachment to the singers in it, but I have discounted all other studio recordings not in Italian. In addition, there are two film soundtracks and five live recordings of particular quality and interest, making a total of twenty-five recordings in all.

(Some reviews here have been reproduced or adapted from previous postings on MusicWeb and Amazon.)

The Recordings

Lorenzo Molajoli - 1927 & 1930 (studio; mono) Arkadia; Aura

Orchestra and Chorus - Teatro alla Scala

Rigoletto - Riccardo Stracciari
Gilda - Mercedes Capsir
Duca di Mantova - Dino Borgioli
Sparafucile - Ernesto Dominici
Maddalena - Anna Masetti-Bassi
Giovanna - Ida Mannarini
Monterone - Duilio Baronti
Marullo - Aristide Baracchi
Borsa - Guido Uxa
Conte di Ceprano - Eugenio Dall' Argine
Contessa di Ceprano - Ida Mannarini
Un paggio - Anna Novi

I am always pleasantly surprised by how listenable some of these ancient recordings can be; apart from the slight rustling underlay, my copy on the Arkadia label is little worse than many a mono recording from the 50's and anyone who wants to hear one of the greatest Verdian baritones ever, who had already made his debut while Verdi was still alive, will be rewarded. Stracciari's co-singers are distinguished: refined, bright, but powerful lyric tenor Dino Borgioli and brilliant Spanish coloratura soprano Mercedes Capsir, who specialised in roles such as Gilda. The rest of the cast are Milanese regulars and uniformly fine, including a fine Sparafucile from bass Ernesto Dominici who pops up regularly in recordings with Gigli. When the choir and orchestra are singing and playing in unison the sound becomes boomy and hollow, obscuring detail, but solo voices emerge particularly cleanly.

Stracciari had an especially rich, sonorous quality to his baritone – it really was a unique, miraculous sound of extraordinary resonance; no other *Rigoletto* except Titta Ruffo approaches its depth and power. He was already a veteran performer in his early fifties here, having sung professionally for thirty years, but the voice is still in marvellous condition and he uses the text so expressively. Sadly, the only other complete recording he made (in 1929 with the same two co-singers and conductor as here) was of his other signature role, Figaro, which he sang over a thousand times.

What little we know about Molajoli is through the excellence of the recordings he made for Columbia; everything about his conducting is right here. You will not hear a better assumption of the eponymous leading role and he is more than adequately partnered.

Ettore Panizza – 1935 (live composite; mono) Naxos

Orchestra and Chorus - Metropolitan Opera

Rigoletto - Lawrence Tibbett
Gilda - Lily Pons
Duca di Mantova - Frederick Jagel
Sparafucile - Virgilio Lazzari
Maddalena - Helen Olheim
Giovanna - Thelma Votipka
Monterone - Alfredo Gandolfi
Marullo - George Cehanovsky
Borsa - Giordano Paltrinieri
Conte di Ceprano - Hubert Raidich

Contessa di Ceprano - Charlotte Symons
Un paggio - Paolina Tomisani

So old a recording cannot be more than a supplementary recommendation for historical buffs, nor are the singers here uniformly excellent, but I include it for one over-riding reason: the performance of America's greatest baritone, Lawrence Tibbett, whose ability to alter the frequency of the vibrato of his lean, resonant voice added so much to its expressiveness and marked firmly as being in the tradition of great Italian exponents such as Scotti, Ruffo, Stracciari, Amato and De Luca.

His co-singers are less impressive: Jagel had a rather plaintive, "shouty" tone and Lily Pons comes close being the dreaded "tweety-bird" I mentioned in my introduction; comparisons with Capsir in the earliest recording here are not to Pons' advantage. The Monterone is tremolo-ridden and the Sparafucile rather short on menace. Naxos have cleaned up the sound as best they can but it's still scratchy and papery. No; it's for Tibbett – and of course Panizza's skilful conducting - that the aficionado will turn to this, otherwise it's slim pickings.

Cesare Sodero – 1945 (live; mono/Ambient Stereo*) Naxos; Melodram; Pristine*
Orchestra and Chorus - Metropolitan Opera

Rigoletto - Leonard Warren
Gilda - Bidù Sayão
Duca di Mantova - Jussi Björling
Sparafucile - Norman Cordon
Maddalena - Martha Lipton
Giovanna - Thelma Votipka
Monterone - William Hargrave
Marullo - George Cehanovsky
Borsa - Richard Manning
Conte di Ceprano - John Baker
Contessa di Ceprano - Maxine Stellman
Un paggio - Thelma Altman

We must remember that this set is that it is taken from a live radio broadcast from over seventy years ago and the mono sound is relatively poor, but the issue on the Pristine label has benefited from being the product of selection from the best of four different source tapes. Wow and pitch issues have been corrected and gaps patched from other sources, then the final product has been subjected to the Pristine XR Ambient stereo remastering effect, just as was done for the classic Callas-Gobbi-Di Stefano version made ten years later

The careers of Björling and Leonard Warren ran in parallel: both were born in 1911, sang frequently at the Metropolitan Opera and died before they were fifty. Warren may also be heard in the 1950 studio recording under Cellini and of course Björling recorded the Duke to Robert Merrill's jester in 1956, but this is the only opportunity to hear both singers together in one *Rigoletto*, liberated from the sometimes restrictive effect of recording in a studio. I once owned it in the Naxos issue but discarded it as I found the sound to be pretty dim and quite frequently distorted, despite the valiant re-engineering. This new release is decidedly an improvement over that Naxos, but, as the notes confess, "it will never resemble a true high fidelity recording." It remains very acceptable as a souvenir of three great artists singing in their prime and at full throttle. Just the way Björling hangs on to and belts the climactic B flat in "Questa o quella" tells you that the audience were in for a great night of full-throated opera. I have never heard him sing with such abandon as he does here; any doubts about the size or penetration of his voice will be quelled by listening to this performance. Sodero's conducting is spirited yet flexible.

Warren's tone is always slightly throaty to some ears, including mine but the intensity of his vocal acting and the ringing firmness, security and variety of his singing are captivating. This is a large-scale, extrovert assumption of the eponymous lead role. You can hear how he was Sherrill Milnes' inspiration in this role, Milnes' performance being similarly unbuttoned and belonging to what is still perhaps the most recommendable of stereo recordings. Warren is by no means without subtlety or tenderness; for example, his floated "Il pianto" in "Pari siamo" - or, later the diminuendo on the sustained F of "taci" in his plea to Marullo in "Cortigiani" - is simply lovely, then he concludes that aria with a top G on "È follia" to match Björling's big notes.

Norman Cordon's Sparafucile is serviceable without being especially chilling and comprimario roles in general are similarly no more than adequate but that is of no importance in a performance starring three such singers as we have here. Bidu Sayão's Gilda is girlish, vulnerable and exquisitely vocalised without quite the stamp of individuality some sopranos such as Callas and Maffei bring to the role. Her faintly tremulous timbre is very attractive and contrasts neatly with the virile forthrightness of Björling's glamorous Duke; it isn't hard to understand how he overcomes any resistance on her part. It's a pity about the cuts in their duets, but that was standard practice.

There's nary a hope in hell of hearing a performance of *Rigoletto* sung this well today; it is truly a souvenir of a bygone age.

Tullio Serafin – 1946 (film soundtrack; mono) Bongiovanni
Orchestra and Chorus - Teatro dell'Opera di Roma

Rigoletto - Tito Gobbi
Gilda - Lina Pagliughi
Duca di Mantova - Mario Filippeschi
Sparafucile - Giulio Neri
Maddalena - Anna Maria Canali
Monterone - Marcello Giorda
Marullo - Virgilio Gottardi
Borsa - Roberto Bruni
Conte di Ceprano - Giuseppe Varni

I didn't know about this rare recording until I began this survey. The crumbly "cellophane" mono sound distorts climaxes and affords the ear little pleasure, so it is out of the question to recommend it as a recording of choice but the names of the four principals in cast-list is enough to make any opera buff go weak at the knees. We can forget the off-key Monterone and concentrate on the great Tito Gobbi in pristine voice alongside luminaries such as Giulio Neri, whose inky-black bass contrasting with Gobbi's vibrant, multi-coloured baritone makes their duets riveting; he sustains the low F concluding their first encounter for ever – what a sound. Pagliughi is a proper coloratura soprano with a developed lower register but a light, clear upper voice; she has all the sweetness and vulnerability required to depict Gilda successfully without sounding twee. Filippeschi remains an under-rated *tenore di forza* with a remarkable upper extension and Anna Maria Canali is sound, solid Maddalena. As we know from the classic 1955 EMI recording, Serafin knows just what to do with the score.

What a pity that the sound isn't more approachable, as so much about this recording is admirable. You can watch the lavishly produced black and white film on YouTube; the portly Pagliughi does the voiceover for the comely actress portraying Gilda (although everyone is synched, which can make uncomfortable viewing).

Renato Cellini – 1950 (studio; mono) RCA; Preiser; Naxos; Membran; Quadromania (coupled with *Il trovatore*)

Orchestra - RCA Italiana; Chorus - Robert Shaw Chorale

Rigoletto - Leonard Warren
Gilda - Erna Berger
Duca di Mantova - Jan Peerce
Sparafucile - Italo Tajo
Maddalena - Nan Merriman
Giovanna - Mary Krete
Monterone - Richard Wentworth
Marullo - Arthur Newman
Borsa - Nathaniel Sprinzena
Conte di Ceprano - Paul Ukena
Contessa di Ceprano - Joyce White
Un paggio - Joyce White

This *Rigoletto* is a dream. I have it as one of the two recordings on the Membran 4 CD "Quadromania" set (paired with an *Il trovatore* from twenty years earlier). It is not for audiophiles, but that does not mean that you have to put up with distant squawking overlaying someone having an almighty fry-up; I was not expecting much and this is very much better than I could have hoped. It is very listenable as long as you do not demand modern, stereo sound. In any case, the quality of the performance silences all criticism: here are some of the finest voices from the 50's, conveying the drama and immediacy of a live performance without the attendant disadvantages of live recording.

Indeed, it must be Warren's best recorded performance and that thrilling, slightly throaty baritone is caught at its height. Berger completely suggests the ingenue and sings very prettily and affectingly, more in the Pagliughi school than the modern Callas style and Peerce (another Toscanini favourite) once again proves that he is under-rated today; this is a heroic and stirring assumption of the wicked Duke, properly callous and oleaginously sentimental during "Parmi veder le lagrime", as if he temporarily actually believed that he is capable of tender feelings - in typical "sentimental bastard" fashion. Cellini is an efficient, somewhat rushed and unyielding conductor, as he is in the roughly contemporaneous Björling *Il Trovatore*. This is still many people's favourite *Rigoletto* -and I can see why, although I would not be without the famous EMI set either.

Umberto Mugnai – 1952 (live; mono) Warner; Opera d'Oro; Urania; Mondo Musica; Archipel
Orchestra and Chorus - Palacio de las Bellas Artes

Rigoletto - Piero Campolonghi
Gilda - Maria Callas
Duca di Mantova - Giuseppe di Stefano
Sparafucile - Ignacio Ruffino
Maddalena - María Teresa García
Giovanna - Ana María Feuss
Monterone - Gilberto Cerda
Marullo - Alberto Herrera
Borsa - Carlos Sagarminaga
Conte di Ceprano - Francisco Alonso
Contessa di Ceprano - Edna Patoni

The sound here is primitive on most labels, but we must be grateful to Warner for improving and tidying it in their recent issue. Di Stefano is in blazing form apart from some regrettable flatness on the top Bs in his big - and encored - aria and Campolonghi is fine, apart from a tremulous vibrato and

suffering the disadvantage of not being Tito Gobbi. He is nonetheless a stage animal and makes a great show of prolonging “È follia!”. Ignacio Ruffino is an imposing Sparafucile but he, too, is uncertain of intonation, too often turning sharp. The Monterone is weak. The ensemble falls apart in the trio just before Gilda enters Sparafucile's house but that is not Callas' fault. Callas is delicate, vulnerable and infinitely touching, lightening her essentially full tone even more so than her studio recording. The prompter intermittently assumes a starring role. It is included in the “Callas Live” collection and is one of the better sets there.

The flaws and poor sound mean that this isn't a library recommendation but fans of La Divina will want to hear it.

Alberto Erede – 1954 (studio; mono) Decca
Orchestra and Chorus - Santa Cecilia

Rigoletto - Aldo Protti
Gilda - Hilde Gueden
Duca di Mantova - Mario Del Monaco
Sparafucile - Cesare Siepi
Maddalena - Giulietta Simionato
Giovanna - Luisa Ribacchi
Monterone - Fernando Corena
Marullo - Pier Luigi Latinucci
Borsa - Piero De Palma
Conte di Ceprano - Dario Caselli
Contessa di Ceprano - Christiane Castelli
Un paggio - Lina Rossi

Unlike its companion recording of *Aida* with regulars Del Monaco, Protti, Caselli, Corena and the same conductor, this *Rigoletto* has never had a good press and has been overshadowed by the other mono sets from RCA, Cetra and EMI recorded in the same era. It is true that on the debit side Del Monaco is a bit relentlessly macho, Protti is reliable and routine rather than exciting and Erede conducts this less interestingly than he does *Aida*; it also contains the “traditional” cuts.

On the other hand, it is a cohesive performance featuring some major voices like a young Siepi, mightily impressive as Sparafucile – one of the best on record - and for some, just the size and heft of Del Monaco's voice is reward enough; I thoroughly enjoy his duetting with Gueden, which is surely not devoid of nuance. “Parmi veder le lagrime” is really quite refined as well as powerful. Protti might not be very imaginative or especially adept with the text but he has a big, steady voice and rises to the big moments in Act 3, like “All'onda!”. Gueden is a bright, steely, pure and piercing Gilda; she is accurate, musical and has a trill. It's a bonus to have the great Simionato in the comparatively small role of Maddalena.

This will never be anyone's first choice but is certainly not without merit and we would be a lot more grateful for it had it not had the misfortune to appear in train with a virtual glut of fine recordings but it still does the music honour.

Angelo Questa – 1954 (studio; mono) Cetra/Warner Fonit; PSC
Orchestra and Chorus - RAI Torino

Rigoletto - Giuseppe Taddei
Gilda - Lina Pagliughi
Duca di Mantova - Ferruccio Tagliavini
Sparafucile - Giulio Neri

Maddalena - Irma Colasanti
Giovanna - Tilde Florio
Monterone - Antonio Zerbini
Marullo - Alberto Albertini
Borsa - Tommaso Soley
Conte di Ceprano - Mario Zorghiotti
Contessa di Ceprano - Ines Marietti
Un paggio - Mario Giacobini

I am surprised to find myself recommending this whole-heartedly, even in comparison with the now legendary Gobbi-Callas-Di Stefano set or more recent favourites such as the Milnes-Sutherland-Pavarotti Decca version (which is not to all tastes, I know); there remain many strong reasons for my advocacy of this rather ancient Cetra recording.

First, the 1954 mono sound has now been immeasurably improved from earlier issues, when it was harsh and strident. It is now clean, with the voices well forward and offers little distortion in climaxes. Then we have the quality of both the singing and the conducting. Angelo Questa presided over many admirable Cetra recordings, including a very recommendable 1956 *Aida* with a young Corelli; here he directs a subtle, unfussy, wholly idiomatic performance with an orchestra and chorus who have the music and language in their blood.

Many collectors and opera buffs will want this recording for both Taddei and Tagliavini. Taddei is heard at his best and Tagliavini, a *tenore di grazia*, famous for his honeyed *mezza voce* and head tones, nonetheless had steel in his tone when he needed it. The frequency with which he resorts to those quieter effects might take a modern listener, more used to the Pavarotti approach to this role - all brilliance and verve - a little by surprise. It is musically and dramatically very effective and perhaps preferable to Di Stefano's more effortful delivery.

Taddei's characterisation is less biting than Gobbi's but richer of voice and just as subtle. He is very moving in his appeal to the courtiers and capable of powerful scorn, too. I love both his and Gobbi's assumptions. Pagliughi was then approaching the end of her career and is at times a mite breathless and tweety. Some runs are smudged, some top notes unsteady, but she is a skilled, experienced and affecting singer who effectively voices the naive Gilda. Callas, wonderfully dramatic as she is, doesn't quite capture that quality of girlishness.

The all-Italian supporting cast, headed by the aptly-named, black-voiced Giulio Neri, is wholly idiomatic.

The test of any recording of *Rigoletto* is often in that wondrous last Act. While this one doesn't quite match the thrill of the Serafin, it still sweeps the listener along with its relentless tension and the terrible pathos of its conclusion. If you had only one *Rigoletto*, there is no reason why it should not be this one, as long as you do not demand more modern sound.

There are a few, brief cuts as was the standard practice at the time; no libretto.

Tullio Serafin – 1955 (studio; mono/Ambient Stereo*) EMI; Naxos; Brilliant; Regis; Zyx; Pristine*
Orchestra and Chorus - Teatro alla Scala

Rigoletto - Tito Gobbi
Gilda - Maria Callas
Duca di Mantova - Giuseppe di Stefano
Sparafucile - Nicola Zaccaria
Maddalena - Adriana Lazzarini

Giovanna - Giuse Gerbino
 Monterone - Plinio Clabassi
 Marullo - William Dickie
 Borsa - Renato Ercolani
 Conte di Ceprano - Carlo Forti
 Contessa di Ceprano - Elvira Galassi
 Un paggio - Luisa Mandelli

My MusicWeb International colleague Göran Forsling has provided [a fine comparative survey](#) of the four mono recordings from the 50's and concluded that this EMI issue always had the best recorded sound, the quality of performance notwithstanding. Of course it is now out of copyright and has appeared in numerous incarnations; however, this Pristine remastering into Ambient Stereo gives it even more of an sonic edge and the opportunity to appreciate afresh just how good the singers here are; its warmth and depth confer renewed presence and immediacy on proceedings, while minor irritations and blemishes have been minimised by Andrew Rose.

Fortunately they are accompanied by a conductor, chorus and orchestra entirely immersed in the Verdian idiom, providing ideal support. Serafin does nothing eccentric or flashy but simply knows how this music should go and does it, giving his singers plenty of time to make their points without undue self-consciousness.

Little more can be said about the principals which has not already been observed in the sixty or so years since its issue after the miraculously busy recording year of 1955. For some Di Stefano for all his élan, is a touch crude and shouty and the too open vowels presage troubles to come, but his is a highly energised, winning assumption with many splendid moments. Gobbi's voice might have been a little lean in tone for the ideal Verdi baritone but his range of colour and expression is miraculous; no singer since has so completely embodied this most complex of characters. Even Taddei, Warren or Milnes, all of whom are evidently deeply immersed in their portrayals and had more conventionally apt voices with stronger upper extensions, could not rival Gobbi for involvement. It might be true that Callas was not naturally suited to the role of Gilda but she was such a consummate vocal actress and technician that she entirely convinces as the waif whose obsessive love imbues her with a will of iron – enough to defy her father and sacrifice her life for a rake. Her downward portamento remains a thing of ineffable beauty. All three singers live their parts, providing a thoroughly satisfying synthesis of music and drama.

The supporting cast is splendid, especially Zaccaria's saturnine Sparafucile. Lazzarini is not the most compelling or individual of mezzo-sopranos to record Maddalena but she is much more than adequate.

This restoration and revitalisation from Pristine ensures that the current generation can hear what remains, despite the cuts standard for the time, artistically the most complete *Rigoletto* on record. The only drawback is that a libretto must be accessed elsewhere.

Ionel Perlea – 1956 (studio; stereo) RCA; Naxos
 Orchestra and Chorus - Teatro dell'Opera di Roma

Rigoletto - Robert Merrill
 Gilda - Roberta Peters
 Duca di Mantova - Jussi Björling
 Sparafucile - Giorgio Tozzi
 Maddalena - Anna Maria Rota
 Giovanna - Silvana Celli
 Monterone - Vittorio Tatzoli
 Marullo - Arturo La Porta

Borsa - Tommaso Frascati
 Conte di Ceprano - Leonardo Monreale
 Contessa di Ceprano - Lidia Grandi
 Un paggio - Santa Chissari

This early stereo studio recording has long been a classic despite the cuts and being overshadowed by Callas/Gobbi/Di Stefano set on EMI made the year before this. Perlea's conducting is a little bland but he is very supportive of his singers and the playing of the Rome Opera Orchestra is acceptable if occasionally a bit scratchy. The important orchestral passages such as the brooding opening to Act 4 and the subsequent storm music make their impact; Perlea lends intensity by groaning along (loudly, in the famous quartet) like Barbirolli and a few other vocal conductors I could name.

Of the principal singers I have my doubts about only Roberta Peters. She has a true, suitably girlish sound but can be piercing in alt and there is something windy in her tone where more fullness would be welcome. Her trill is a little laboured and the melodramatic scream as she is stabbed ill-advised. Nonetheless, hers is a convincing Gilda and her pyrotechnics, including a steam-whistle top E, might please others more than they do me. About Björling's Duke there can be no reservations: he is in glorious voice to rival Pavarotti and sounds half his true age; such a pity he wasn't given the cabaletta "Possente amore" to sing, too. Merrill displays one of the richest, most resonant baritones ever to grace the stage and does not here seem susceptible to the accusation sometimes made against him that he is dramatically inert; his palpable grief during "Ah! Deh non parlare al misero" is very touching.

The supporting cast, including a strong Maddalena from Anna Maria Rota and a black-voiced Tozzi as Sparafucile, is excellent, even if Monterone could be steadier. This is a *Rigoletto* that should be in every Verdi-lover's collection, unless you prefer Kraus to Björling (I don't) or Moffo to Peters (which I do), in which case you might prefer the later, 1963 RCA recording by Merrill with Solti.

Francesco Molinari-Pradelli – 1959 (live; stereo) Philips; Walhall
 Orchestra and Chorus - Teatro di San Carlo di Napoli

Rigoletto - Renato Capecchi
 Gilda - Gianna D' Angelo
 Duca di Mantova - Richard Tucker
 Sparafucile - Ivan Sardi
 Maddalena - Miriam Pirazzini
 Giovanna - Aurora Cattelani
 Monterone - Vito Susca
 Marullo - Giorgio Giorgetti
 Borsa - Vittorio Pandano
 Conte di Ceprano - Guido Pasella
 Contessa di Ceprano - Anna Di Stasio
 Un paggio - Carmen Marchi

Many commentators agree that this is something of a neglected sleeper in the canon of *Rigoletto* recordings. It is rarely mentioned in surveys which might explain why I had forgotten all about it, having listened to and frequently enjoyed in the early 80's on LP then moved on to more celebrated versions.

First, the sound is excellent: clean, clear, undistorted early stereo with just enough space around the voices to suggest a stage. It is not "live" as the Walhall back cover states, but a studio recording. Presumably the orchestra is the resident San Carlo Opera band and Molinari-Pradelli does a wholly efficient, unobtrusive job conducting them idiomatically so that you never give it a thought. There are the standard cuts to endure but otherwise this is a completely recommendable version, so long as you respond to the voice types here. Capecchi has a very dark, expressive baritone but displays no difficulty

with top notes. His legato is somewhat sacrificed to ensuring variety of vocal inflection but he is dramatically compelling. Tucker is far from "charmless" as some have complained; he is in superb, secure, ringing voice and every inch the rake. Gilda is sung by the American soprano Gianna d'Angelo with a purity to suggest the true ingénue. The voice lacks the palette of tones and colours brought to the role by more accomplished singer-actresses but she succeeds within the narrower scope common to singers of her vocal type such as Pagliughi and Berger. Sardi is a fine, black Sparafucile and Pirazzini an experienced Maddalena.

This is a recording closest in type to those of the same decade starring Warren and Taddei; any of them is recommendable and as a Verdi nut I'm happy to have all three. It seems to me that Capecchi in particular has been undeservedly neglected and this powerful depiction of the hunchback is a timely reminder of his talents.

Gianandrea Gavazzeni – 1960 (studio; stereo) BMG; Andromeda; Urania
Orchestra and Chorus - Maggio Musicale Fiorentino

Rigoletto - Ettore Bastianini

Gilda - Renata Scotto

Duca di Mantova - Alfredo Kraus

Sparafucile - Ivo Vinco

Maddalena - Fiorenza Cossotto

Giovanna - Clara Foti

Monterone - Silvio Maionica

Marullo - Virgilio Carbonari

Borsa - Enzo Guagni

Conte di Ceprano - Giuseppe Morresi

Contessa di Ceprano - Clara Foti

I completely gave up on this splendid recording when it first appeared on CD on the BMG/RCA label, as they had totally botched the remastering; it was so muddy and distant that it was unlistenable. Fortunately it then appeared on the Andromeda label in excellent 24-bit sound, with just some slight edge or distortion in the loudest passages but generally sounding really good for 1960. I have not heard what the Urania version sounds like but usually things of that provenance are wholly recommendable.

This recording has a stellar cast with quality in depth down to the chilling Sparafucile of black-voiced bass Ivo Vinco and the rich, vibrant Maddalena of his then wife Fiorenza Cossotto. Not everyone responds to the reedy sound of Alfredo Kraus's Duke but at thirty-two he was in sappiest, most youthful voice and plays the suave rake to perfection, despite some lack of ping in his top notes. Nevertheless, he hits a top D at the conclusion of the oft-omitted cabaletta "Possente amor" and is matched in winning youthfulness by a twenty-seven-year-old Renata Scotto, before her voice took on a shrill edge and a beat. She is just occasionally a little squally but often touchingly delicate and girlish, floating some lovely top C's, D flats and even a top D of her own; there are money notes a-plenty from both artists.

But of course the *raison d'être* here is the magnificent Rigoletto of Ettore Bastianini. Never an especially subtle artist he does not rival Gobbi for verbal nuance but instead produces a glorious stream of noble tone, throwing in top A's and providing a biting intensity which is wholly apt to portray the Jester's desperation.

I don't know of any performance from Gavazzeni, either live or studio, which is less than excellent; he strikes me as one of the most under-rated opera conductors of the 20C and he does everything right here as ever. Singers must have loved him as he never rushes them but always maintains tension and momentum.

This is a thrilling, wholly satisfying recording. It might not displace Serafin or Bonyngé but deserves to sit alongside them.

Nino Sanzogno – 1961 (studio; stereo) Decca
Orchestra and Chorus - Santa Cecilia

Rigoletto - Cornell MacNeil
Gilda - Joan Sutherland
Duca di Mantova - Renato Cioni
Sparafucile - Cesare Siepi
Maddalena - Stefania Malagù
Giovanna - Anna Di Stasio
Monterone - Fernando Corena
Marullo - Giuseppe Morresi
Borsa - Angelo Mercuriali
Conte di Ceprano - Giulio Corti
Contessa di Ceprano - Luisa Valle
Un paggio - Maria Fiori

Available at bargain prices and in good sound for a recording over fifty years old, this would be a sound introduction to any novice but they would be missing one important thing, and that is the impact a really dashing tenor such as Pavarotti or Björling can make in his music. Renato Cioni had a pleasant enough lyric tenor voice but it is somewhat throaty and decidedly a size too small for the priapic Duke who thus emerges as a bit - well, if you'll excuse the choice of word - limp. His top notes are often white, strained and snatched and he is a cipher dramatically. He enjoyed some favour with Decca around this time, recording twice with Sutherland and performing in *Tosca* with Callas and Gobbi at Covent Garden in 1964, but his bleaty sound is not very grateful.

After that, it's nearly all gain. MacNeil had one of the most sheerly beautiful baritones in a generation which included Bastianini, Merrill, Bechi, Capecchi, Gobbi, Guelfi, Herlea, Lisitsian, Taddei, Valdengo and Warren - where are such baritones today? MacNeil's top notes, legato and honeyed mezza voce are all things of wonder and if he is not the dramatic equal of Gobbi nor is anyone else and he is still no slouch. A young Joan Sutherland demonstrates the kind of generalised melancholy and pathos Gilda demands and deploys her large, fruity soprano judiciously to showcase an amazing trill, some seamless cantilena and thrilling top notes. Her diction - always a problem with her - isn't so bad and she's not too droopy or swoopy. Cesare Siepi's chocolate bass is a joy even if doesn't exactly suggest evil - but that's the pattern with this recording: generally gorgeous singing which is short on characterisation. Corena lets down the side with a woofy, bland Monterone; Stefania Malagù's Maddalena is fine.

Sanzogno's conducting is similarly what you'd expect from a seasoned pro steeped in Verdian tradition: nothing special, nothing unobjectionable, considerate to his singers and able to keep up the requisite momentum.

This should never be anyone's favourite *Rigoletto* with its tendency towards blandness and a sub-par tenor, but it's nonetheless very enjoyable as sheer singing.

Jésus Etcheverry - 1961 (studio; stereo) Music Memoria; Walhall. **NB: sung in French**
Orchestra symphonique et Choeurs, Paris

Rigoletto - Robert Massard
Gilda - Renée Doria
Duca di Mantova - Alain Vanzo

Sparafucile - Adrien Legros
 Maddalena - Denise Scharley
 Monterone - Jean-Pierre Laffage
 Borsa - Camille Rouquetty
 Conte di Ceprano - Jacques Scellier
 Contessa di Ceprano - Micheline Dupré
 Un paggio - Agnes Adam
 Johanna - Agnes Adam
 Marcello - Michel Forel

Robert Massard has long been one of my favourite half a dozen baritones and he remains hugely under-valued, mainly perhaps because he sang mostly in French and in France, so did not sing so many of the big Italian roles in the big international houses. No matter; he still has one of the most elegant, flexible and powerful baritones to grace the operatic stage, clean in line, flawless in legato and always beautiful in tone. Nor is he short on dramatic punch, as you may hear in his monologues.

In addition, we hear the foremost lirico-spinto tenor of his day, Alain Vanzo, another graceful and infinitely subtle singer with thrust and ping to spare without ever compromising the essential sweetness of his voice. Vanzo's career, like that of Massard, was largely confined to France despite some celebrated international appearances. Renée Doria was a foremost French coloratura soprano with a touch of the soubrette in her voice which is not unsuitable to the depiction of the innocent Gilda. She has top notes to spare; both she and Massard take with ease the traditional high options, she even hitting D sharp at the end of her duet with her father. Their "Piangi, piangi" (or rather, "Pleure, pleure") duet is wonderfully sung with the ideal long Verdian line and some really moving use of portamenti from Doria. The famous quartet, led with such aristocratic restraint by Vanzo's seductively sung Duke, is unusually delicate and again, exquisitely sung. The splendid bass Adrien Legros makes a black-browed Sparafucile and the Madeleine is a first-rate artist with a gratifying lower register.

The supporting cast is all francophone and the opera is really very successfully translated into French, with many phrases echoing the original Italian gratefully but introducing a touch of Gallic piquancy to proceedings, just as the grainy French woodwind lend distinction to the playing.

Etcheverry's conducting is never rushed but equally never lacks tension; he has a superb ear for rallentando and rubato, such that the pacing of the opera seems just right. The taped storm sound effects played over the music are quaint and superfluous but the mood of menace is unerringly built, culminating in the terrifying climax when Gilda enters the den to her death. If this had been recorded in Italian it would be one of the top few recommendations for a standard recording. If these artists were singing today, they would be internationally acclaimed stars yet this is essentially a domestic French in-house recording. The stereo sound is good for 1961, although voices are very forward and the orchestra too recessed.

Rigoletto in French? Why not? I love it and for me this recording is up there with those starring Gobbi, Merrill and Warren.

Georg Solti – 1963 (studio; stereo) RCA; Sony BMG
 Orchestra and Chorus - RCA Italiana Orchestra

Rigoletto - Robert Merrill
 Gilda - Anna Moffo
 Duca di Mantova - Alfredo Kraus
 Sparafucile - Ezio Flagello
 Maddalena - Rosalind Elias
 Giovanna - Anna Di Stasio

Monterone - David Ward
 Marullo - Robert Kerns
 Borsa - Piero De Palma
 Conte di Ceprano - Mario Rinaudo
 Contessa di Ceprano - Corinna Vozza

Rigoletto has been well served on disc but the best recordings tend now to be venerable; I do not find that more recent recordings reach the same standard as those of fifty and even sixty years ago. You certainly find plenty of excitement here, with Merrill turning a performance just as stirring vocally and perhaps even better acted than his earlier Perlea set with Bjorling. He is in tremendous form, that great, bronze voice caressing Verdi's beautiful melodies and his engagement with the role is matched by the technically flawless, girlish, touching Gilda of Moffo, her voice in its liquid, open-hearted prime. She makes judicious use of portamenti and floats top notes without any strain. I have read elsewhere that Solti drives hard - too hard - but I hear no inappropriate rush in the more introspective moments such as Gilda's "Tutte le feste" and he can certainly be relied upon to maximise the horror and pathos of that terrible thunderstorm scene. As ever, I have minor reservations about Kraus' Duke. I admit that I do not much like the essentially reedy quality of his voice and having watched him sing and conduct master classes, I think I can see how his insistence upon the "letter-box" shaped mouth makes his vocal production flawed and white - hence the squeezed nature of his ill-advised top D at the climax of "Possente amor" - but (as I have said in other reviews) you either like him or you don't and he certainly delivers an impassioned, caddish Duke, even if he cannot match the virile beauty of Bjorling or Pavarotti. (I must also concede that his top B at the end of "La donna e mobile" is a cracker.) The supporting cast is fine, even if others elsewhere are marginally preferable.

For me, the twin glories of this set are Solti's direction and Merrill's peerless vocalisation. As much as I love the way Gobbi matchlessly inflects the text, Merrill is altogether more secure and thrilling, vocally. This set is available cheaply in the new Sony "Masterworks Opera" series with a downloadable libretto and the sound is marvellous - you'd never guess it was recorded in 1963.

Fausto Cleve – 1964 (live radio broadcast; mono) Sony
 Orchestra and Chorus - Metropolitan Opera

Rigoletto - Robert Merrill
 Gilda - Roberta Peters
 Duca di Mantova - Richard Tucker
 Sparafucile - Bonaldo Giaiotti
 Maddalena - Mignon Dunn
 Giovanna - Carlotta Ordassy
 Monterone - John Macurdy
 Marullo - Calvin Marsh
 Borsa - Arthur Graham
 Conte di Ceprano - Robert Patterson
 Contessa di Ceprano - Joy Clements
 Un paggio - Junetta Jones

I try to avoid being too picky and a little voice tells me that I should be more grateful for this recording than I feel. That said, this is in many ways standard fare from the Metropolitan Opera of the 1960s. If we had no other souvenir of Robert Merrill in one of his best roles it would be more treasurable but he made two fine studio recordings with Perlea in 1956 and Solti in 1964. His interpretation here barely differs in any respect from either of them. He is musically utterly dependable and wholly secure of voice, moving both in his solos and when duetting with Gilda, if never displaying the nuances or variety of vocal colour that Gobbi or Taddei find in the role. It is a noble, beautiful voice in all three of the recordings I compared but to hear him at his most expressive and refulgent the 1963 set under Solti is

the pick, especially as that is in excellent stereo and generates more excitement than Cleva's competent but routine direction achieves.

There are other advantages to the Solti set, not least Anna Moffo's vulnerable, gorgeously vocalised Gilda. Roberta Peters had Gilda in her repertoire for thirty years, recording it first with Merrill, to whom she had been briefly married, in the Perlea set for RCA. It was also her farewell role at the Met in 1985. Her fans will find her in freshest voice in that earlier recording with Merrill and Björling but for me there was too much of the soubrette in her tone. I find that as early as 1964 her voice sounds rather piercing and shrill and I do not much enjoy her excursions in alt to hit D flat and even E flat at the conclusions of "Bella figlia" and Act 2 respectively. She is an affecting actress despite the monochromatic tendency of her voice and the chemistry between her and Merrill is palpable, especially in that heart-breaking concluding duet.

It is good to have a souvenir of Richard Tucker as the Duke: ebullient and in clarion voice, he sounds rather mature but his lovely legato and exemplary diction make him a credible libertine, even if he's no young Pavarotti or Björling. Although I am not always a fan of Alfredo Kraus, his Duke for Solti is possibly his best recorded role and his elegant tones are certainly more apt for the part. Tucker doesn't take the optional B flat on "agli angeli" at the end of "Parmi veder le lagrime" and his cabaletta "Possente amor" is cut, as was standard practice at that time. The only other cut is the first appearance of "Ah! veglia, o donna"; Rigoletto and Gilda sing only the duet, not their initial verse each.

Unless you particularly want Tucker as the Duke or Peters as Gilda, the Solti recording remains sonically and interpretatively superior to this mono radio broadcast. The sound here is perfectly acceptable but for that stupendous Third Act to make its impact, you really want Solti's drive and atmospheric sound. Both Perlea and Cleva are rather stodgy by comparison. Peters' sustained squeal as she enters Sparafucile's den is hammy and melodramatic; she does the same in the Perlea recording to no advantage.

Giaiotti is a splendidly saturnine Sparafucile with the low notes required and Mignon Dunn is an appropriately luscious-voiced Maddalena who sounds genuinely appalled by her brother's plan to murder her lover - not that it stops her suggesting an equally reprehensible Plan B.

In short, this is a wholly creditable souvenir of a good night at the Met but for repeated listening you really want more resplendent sound and more inspired conducting.

Jean Bobescu – 1965 (studio; stereo) Gramofonové závody; Carlton; Vox Box
Orchestra and Chorus - Rumanian National Opera

Rigoletto - Nicolae Herlea
Gilda - Magda Ianculescu
Duca di Mantova - Ion Buzea
Sparafucile - Nicolae Rafael
Maddalena - Dorothea Palade
Giovanna - Valeria Savu
Monterone - Nicolae Florei
Marullo - Stefan Petrescu
Borsa - Dimitrie Scurtu
Conte di Ceprano - Jean Banescu
Contessa di Ceprano - Victoria Draganescu

The state of opera in Bucharest in the 1960's was obviously much healthier than the state of the country in general; as in the Soviet Union and other former Eastern bloc countries, great consolation was evidently found in the high quality of the nation's musical life. This recording, made in excellent if

slightly reverberant stereo in the Marble Hall Studio, is cast with strength in depth from home-grown singers. Pre-eminent is the under-recorded international baritone Nicolae Herlea, whose powerful, vibrant voice with its quick vibrato and ringing top notes had been much appreciated at the Met when he made his debut as Posa the year before this recording was made. There is also an excellent all-Romanian 1970 *Forza del destino* with him as a formidable Don Carlo.

While Herlea's vocal splendour and biting characterisation as Rigoletto are clearly the main reasons to acquire this set, his co-singers are more than competent. Tenor Ion Buzea has a big, slightly clumsy, throaty voice but he sings easily and ardently. He doesn't have the rakish charm the part requires but he does have all the notes including free top B's and B flats and sings them pretty straight in an open-hearted and committed manner that remains pleasing. The often-omitted cavatina "Possente amor" after "Parmi veder le lagrime" is included - in fact this is a complete performance, no cuts. There are two more Nicolaes and two good basses in Nicolae Rafael, who is an imposing Sparafucile with a good low F, and Nicolae Florei, a powerful Monterone. Magda Ianculescu, who reminds me a little of Antonietta Stella, gives us a rather large-scale and mature Gilda, who is supposed to be an ingénue, but she is thoroughly dependable with a big, luscious, evenly-produced voice. Her tone turns a bit acid in the famous quartet, when a purer, floatier sound is required. She is affecting in "Tutte le feste". The Giovanna and Maddalena are rather blowsy.

This, as you might expect, is an old-fashioned performance: tempi are somewhat deliberate and the final Act could be tenser compared with Serafin or Solti's mastery of the drama. Nevertheless, I cannot imagine either a novice or an admirer of Herlea being disappointed with this account. Orchestral playing and the singing of the chorus are excellent and idiomatic although sometimes the singers' - even Herlea's - Italian vowels could be more open. It cannot be a first choice but almost every recorded *Rigoletto* has drawbacks and this has fewer than most.

Rafael Kubelik – 1964 (studio; stereo) DG
Orchestra and Chorus - Teatro alla Scala

Rigoletto - Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau
Gilda - Renata Scotto
Duca di Mantova - Carlo Bergonzi
Sparafucile - Ivo Vinco
Maddalena - Fiorenza Cossotto
Giovanna - Mirella Fiorentini
Monterone - Lorenzo Testi
Marullo - Virgilio Carbonari
Borsa - Piero De Palma
Conte di Ceprano - Alfredo Giacomotti
Contessa di Ceprano - Catarina Alda
Un paggio - Catarina Alda

I never tire of excoriating Fischer-Dieskau's hubris in tackling roles such as this for which he was devoid of the vocal resources required to do them justice. His hoarse, windy tone lacks the bite, resonance and Italianità needed to do justice to the portrayal of so kaleidoscopic and volcanic a personality as Rigoletto and finicky word-pointing is no substitute for baritonal splendour. His voice simply cannot expand to fill out sufficiently the vocal line; he croons, top notes are weak and too often he resorts to barking. Scotto's Gilda is here below par and shrill; she can, in any case, be heard to better advantage in her earlier recording under Gavazzeni. The main regret here is that the elegant Bergonzi was not paired with a better co-singer than DFD. I like his Duke, which is beautifully vocalised, if rather too refined. Then husband and wife team Vinco and Cossotto repeat their admirable incarnations of Sparafucile and Maddalena done seven years previously for Gavazzeni in his studio recording – where they were in superior company, Bergonzi apart.

Kubelik conducts this opera in grand, stately fashion, thereby missing the drive and fire required to keep things on the move; you can hear that straight away in the prelude. This is the first time I have heard anything conducted by him which misfires. That and the Polo casting with a big hole in the middle for me rules out this recording.

Francesco Molinari-Pradelli – 1967 (studio; stereo) EMI

Orchestra and Chorus - Teatro dell'Opera di Roma

Rigoletto - Cornell MacNeil
 Gilda - Reri Grist
 Duca di Mantova - Nicolai Gedda
 Sparafucile - Agostino Ferrin
 Maddalena - Anna Di Stasio
 Giovanna - Limbania Leoni
 Monterone - Ruggero Raimondi
 Marullo - Benito di Bella
 Borsa - Franco Ricciardi
 Conte di Ceprano - Alfredo Giacomotti
 Contessa di Ceprano - Mirella Fiorentini

Molinari-Pradelli had a proven track-record in Verdi operas, so we are in safe hands here; both the conducting and the orchestral playing are excellent. Cornell MacNeil possessed a fine instrument, of huge volume and with a thrilling upper extension, although he was not perhaps as expressive with text or as varied in vocal colour as the best contemporary exponents of *Rigoletto*; he is paired here with the under-recorded Reri Grist and a Nicolai Gedda who already sounds past his prime despite being only 42 – although I for one never warmed to the whine in his voice even when he was at his peak. Here he bleats and sounds both under-powered - hardly macho – and decidedly dry in the famous quartet where the blending of the four voices is poor. There are so many wonderful performances as the Duke from the likes of Björling, Di Stefano and Pavarotti that I cannot see why anyone should feel obliged to compromise by settling on Gedda. Although MacNeil is more exciting, his vibrato comes over as rather pronounced here, so his line and tone lack the tight focus of neater-voiced baritones like Gobbi, Taddei, Warren and Merrill, even though its heft and bite are impressive. He surely sounded better and steadier for Sanzogno six years earlier. Grist has a bright, attractive voice with a distinctive, smoky timbre, which I like, and a soaring purity in her top range but there's not much power down below.

A young Ruggero Raimondi – only 26 - makes an impact in his brief appearance as Monterone but in general the supporting cast isn't especially striking: Ferrin is a lightweight Sparafucile, for example. In the end, this isn't a real contender.

Richard Bonyngue – 1971 (studio; stereo) Decca

Orchestra - London Symphony Orchestra; Chorus - Ambrosian Opera Chorus

Rigoletto - Sherrill Milnes
 Gilda - Joan Sutherland
 Duca di Mantova - Luciano Pavarotti
 Sparafucile - Martti Talvela
 Maddalena - Huguette Tourangeau
 Giovanna - Gillian Knight
 Monterone - Clifford Grant
 Marullo - Christian Du Plessis
 Borsa - Ricardo Cassinelli

Conte di Ceprano - John Gibbs
 Contessa di Ceprano - Kiri Te Kanawa
 Un paggio - Josephte Clement

Despite now being forty-five years old, this *Rigoletto* enjoys superb analogue sound, full, rich and spacious with an excellent balance between voices and orchestra and retaining a sense of theatre rather than the confines of a studio - but of course it was made in the Kingsway Hall. Secondly, Bonyngue belies any reputation he might have for being bland and injects real tension and brio into the LSO's playing; this is surely his best outing.

The cast is superlative - more so with the passing of time. There have been half a dozen studio recordings since this one, but none of the same quality. This is a cast to cherish: Milnes in robust echt-Verdian voice but acting up a storm and paying great attention to the text; Pavarotti in perhaps his finest recording, still fresh, subtle and absolutely thrilling up to a ringing top D to conclude "Possente amor"; Sutherland, partnered by a much better Duke than in her 1961 studio outing (although MacNeil and Siepi are great) and still only 44 years old, for all the guff about her sounding "too old" for Gilda. Technically she is extraordinary and of course although there is the mushy diction issue that has been unfairly exaggerated by some critics; the sheer amplitude and beauty of her sound carry the day and she is moving in her plight. Add Martti Talvela as a truly chilling, black-browed Sparafucile and Clifford Grant as a powerful, hectoring, noble-voiced Monterone then you have one great roster; you even have a young Kiri as La Contessa di Ceprano. Some object to regular Sutherland partner Huguette Tourangeau's odd, hooty vocal production but I love it and she makes a very alluring Maddalena. The famous quartet is splendid and the finale bristles with crackling, electric energy in a way that not all recordings manage.

This is by no means the only option but many of the others are older and either in sound inferior to this vintage Decca production, not as well conducted or not quite as uniformly well cast. It has stood the test of time.

Francesco Molinari-Pradelli – 1977 (film soundtrack; stereo) Acanta
 Orchestra - Dresdner Staatskapelle; Chorus - Dresdner Staatsoper

Rigoletto - Rolando Panerai
 Gilda - Margherita Rinaldi
 Duca di Mantova - Franco Bonisolli
 Sparafucile - Bengt Rundgren
 Maddalena - Viorica Cortez
 Giovanna - Ilona Papenthin
 Monterone - Antonin Svorc
 Marullo - Horst Lunow
 Borsa - Henno Garduhn
 Conte di Ceprano - Peter Olesch
 Contessa di Ceprano - Maria Corelli
 Un paggio - Sylvia Pawlik

This recording, made in 1977 for a film of *Rigoletto*, is usually overlooked in surveys and by cognoscenti but it is certainly worthy of note for several reasons, not least the excellent Dresden Staatskapelle Orchestra and Chorus and the experienced conducting of Molinari-Pradelli, also at the helm for the recording above with Cornell MacNeil and a young Joan Sutherland. He knows just what to do with Verdi warhorse; his conducting here is flexible, pacy and responsive to the singers' needs.

The other advantages are a superb Duke from the clarion voiced Franco Bonisolli and Rolando Panerai's biting hunchback. Every time I encounter Bonisolli in a recording I say the same stupid thing about how

subtle and nuanced his singing is here, how he seems to have kept bad habits under control and never approaches his can belto reputation. I understand that he is celebrated for a few famous incidents in which he demonstrated temperament (chucking swords at Karajan in *Il trovatore*, for instance) but whenever I hear him, whether it be in Rossini, Berlioz or Verdi, he is a model of fine style and executes important little matters like the turn on "punge" in his opening aria with great skill and taste. Apart from that, he has terrific tenor voice which sails up to a C sharp in his duet with Rinaldi without any strain at all.

Panerai has a very handsome, Italianate baritone with a tight, fast vibrato and a tendency towards unsteadiness which is usually under control but occasionally results in disturbance in his legato. He doesn't colour his words or inflect the text with Gobbi's dramatic acumen, but very few baritones can or do.

Rinaldi is nothing special: the soprano is not especially beautiful and inclined to shrillness but she is a competent artist who acts well with her voice, has the range and suggests wounded innocence. Viorica Cortez brings her rich, dusky mezzo-soprano to Maddalena in a manner that encompasses both seductiveness and "tart with a heart" charm. Bengt Rundgren is an acceptably saturnine Sparafucile without making a great impression of the kind a really black bass can create. A blaring, wobbly Monterone is a weakness and some comprimario parts are decidedly weedy with poor Italian accents.

Panerai is good but I value this issue primarily for Bonisolti, whose refulgent tenor conveys raffish insouciance and masculine "sex on legs" personified; he tends to dominate ensembles such as the famous quartet but I don't mind that when the voice is so luscious.

Julius Rudel – 1978 (studio; stereo) EMI

Philharmonia Orchestra; Ambrosia Opera Chorus

Rigoletto – Sherrill Milnes

Gilda – Beverly Sills

Duca di Mantova – Alfredo Kraus

Sparafucile – Samuel Ramey

Maddalena – Mignon Dunn

Giovanna – Ann Murray

Monterone – Samuel Ramey

Marullo – John Rawnsley

Borsa – Dennis O'Neill

Conte di Ceprano – Malcolm King

Contessa di Ceprano – Sally Burgess

Un paggio – Jennifer Smith

(NB: although I discounted this recording in my introduction, I subsequently added this review.)

Seven years after the famous Decca recording, Sherrill Milnes re-recorded his *Rigoletto*; likewise, Alfredo Kraus had already made two studio recordings with Gavazzeni in 1960 and Solti in 1963 but here in his early 50s returns for a third time. Beverly Sills was nearing fifty years old at the time of this recording and her voice was beginning to show signs of wear.

In some ways, Milnes's performance is the most valuable, in that while his voice his not quite as young and sappy as it was for Bonyngé, it is not much changed and he has refined his interpretation to include more variety and nuance in his expression. Regarding Kraus, however, the decline is noticeable; he was always a refined artist but his voice now has less of the ping, spring and volume of

his younger years; top notes are dry. He is no match for the young Pavarotti. The same is true of Sills, whose soprano is occasionally given to a throbbing shrillness – and I speak as an admirer.

Rudel was always a thoroughly reliable conductor and delivers a subtle, refined account, but I miss the whiff of greasepaint I detect in Bonyngé's famous version. A real peculiarity is the double casting of the great Sam Ramey as both Monterone and Sparafucile. Yes; the voice is beautiful and trenchant but the listener is confronted with hearing his distinctive tones at the end of Act I cursing the Duke, only to have him reappear almost immediately as the cut-throat-for-hire Sparafucile – an odd decision.

The supporting cast is rich in famous or soon-to-be-famous names but no one buys *Rigoletto* for them.

Carlo Maria Giulini – 1979 (studio; stereo) DG

Orchestra - Wiener Philharmoniker; Chorus - Wiener Staatsoper

Rigoletto - Piero Cappuccilli

Gilda - Ileana Cotrubas

Duca di Mantova - Plácido Domingo

Sparafucile - Nicolai Ghiaurov

Maddalena - Elena Obraztsova

Giovanna - Hanna Schwarz

Monterone - Kurt Moll

Marullo - Luigi De Corato

Borsa - Walter Gullino

Conte di Ceprano - Dirk Sagemuller

Contessa di Ceprano - Olive Fredricks

Un paggio - Audrey Michael

Unfortunately, I do not particularly rate this recording by Giulini; as much as I admire him and the artists here in other things, this set seems to me to lack the edge and theatricality of earlier recordings - and the voices are simply not as exciting and tempi drag. Some find Giulini's careful elucidation of the score refreshing and revealing, but frankly, the best word to describe this recording is "dull". That is a pity, as the opening Prelude is really dramatic. Time and again, when listening to this I find myself pointlessly urging Giulini to pick up the tempo.

Cappuccilli sometimes needed a fire lighting under him to avoid routine singing – Abbado managed to do that in their *Simon Boccanegra* and his Amonasro for Muti was much more animated – but here he often goes through the motions and is not helped by Giulini's over-refined manner. His timbre is naturally quite smooth and even bland, with the emphasis on long-breathed line and legato, but *Rigoletto* also needs to express fury and frustration. Much of Domingo's contribution is warm and elegant, but his characterisation is similarly generic and his tenor is stretched by the high tessitura. Cotrubas always had a gorgeous voice but she, too, is afflicted by the general lethargy and droopiness of proceedings – "Caro nome" seems interminable - and coloratura was never her strongest suit. This recording rarely takes off; the first meeting between Sparafucile and Rigoletto almost grinds to a halt, there is so little tension, despite the weight of Ghiaurov's saturnine voice. That the dramatic high point is the fleeting moment when the splendid Kurt Moll's Monterone curses Rigoletto tells you all you need to know.

I simply cannot recommend a *Rigoletto* so lacking in excitement.

Lamberto Gardelli – 1985 (live radio broadcast; digital) RCA/BMG

Orchestra - Münchner Rundfunkorchester
 Chorus - Chor des Münchner Rundfunks

Rigoletto - Bernd Weikl
 Gilda - Lucia Popp
 Duca di Mantova - Giacomo (Jaume) Aragall
 Sparafucile - Jan-Hendrik Rootering
 Maddalena - Klára Takács
 Giovanna - Helena Jungwirth
 Monterone - Alexander Malta
 Marullo - Robert Riener
 Borsa - Alexandru Ionita
 Conte di Ceprano - Gerhard Auer
 Contessa di Ceprano - Renate Freyer
 Un paggio - Karin Hautermann

I avoided this recording for years because although I had always been an admirer of Popp and Aragall, and had enjoyed the young Weikl in some classic recordings such as Solti's *Eugene Onegin*, his voice soon developed a beat which compromised its beauty and I had, in any case, never thought of him as a Verdi baritone. On the other hand, the comparative rarity of Aragall's recordings and the eminence of Gardelli as a Verdi conductor directing a fine orchestra, always intrigued me, so I returned to it. On first listening, the excellence of analogue sound, with the offstage band well balanced, and the plangent lyricism of Aragall's tenor made me sit up – although it's a pity about the weak Countess Ceprano, albeit a tiny role.

Weikl's bold, vivid characterisation confirmed those promising impressions. His vibrato is already a tad too pronounced and his tone can turn plaintive; he isn't really one of those big, biting baritones like Bastianini best suited to singing Rigoletto but he makes a much better case for his undertaking of this role than Fischer-Dieskau and colours his words vividly without the affectation and over-emphasis that mars DFD's assumption. Alexander Malta makes an imposing Monterone and fellow bass Rootering is a sound, subtle, strong-voiced Sparafucile. Klára Takács is a rich-voiced Maddalena – a part too often under-cast. However, some of the other supporting roles are Germanically throaty and the Giovanna is afflicted with an irritating tremolo.

Popp has one of those trilling, vibrant lyric coloratura voices which easily suggests innocence and vulnerability and she has no trouble ornamenting high-flying phrases. Occasionally she indulges in a "squeezing" manner of treating notes but in general she is both charming and touching. Aragall isn't as dashing as Pavarotti or Björling but the voice is so beautiful. This has some of the "traditional" cuts but "Possente Amor mi chiama" is included, which is good if like me you are buying this particularly for Aragall. In the end, this is a very satisfying recording and certainly one of the best in more modern sound but not, perhaps, a first choice in the context of all the post-war recordings.

Riccardo Muti – 1988 (studio; digital) EMI
Orchestra and Chorus - Teatro alla Scala

Rigoletto - Giorgio Zancanaro
Gilda - Daniela Dessi
Duca di Mantova - Vincenzo La Scola
Sparafucile - Paata Burchuladze
Maddalena - Martha Senn
Giovanna - Francesca Franci
Monterone - Giorgio Surjan
Marullo - Lucio Gallo
Borsa - Ernesto Gavazzi
Conte di Ceprano - Michele Pertusi
Contessa di Ceprano - Nicoletta Curiel
Un paggio - Valeria Esposito

There is really only one reason to hear this recording and that is to appreciate the last of the great Italian baritones, Giorgio Zancanaro in his pomp as a wonderful Rigoletto, with smooth legato, biting inflection of text and ringing top notes - yet even this last virtue is compromised because Muti is in purist, killjoy mode, following the new scholarly edition of the score and insisting on his singers eschewing all the traditional interpolated top notes we have come to expect. Hence Rigoletto gives voice to no thrilling top G flat on "All'onda!" and the Duke is not allowed to end the cabaletta "Possente amor" with a satisfying B flat.

Otherwise Muti's conducting is typically taut and rhythmically alert but really rather inflexible and the last Act never really generates the requisite excitement for all the singers' efforts. The rest of the cast is good to adequate; best is Burchuladze's saturnine Sparafucile, which despite being, as ever with this artist, too Slavic, is menacing and sonorous with a great low F. The Monterone is firm and impressive, the Maddalena anonymous and outshone by Dessi in the quartet as the latter has a richer voice than the mezzo-soprano. Dessi herself, at her best, in the creamy middle of her voice, sounds like Freni but there is some shrillness up top, a lack of vocal colouring and an excess of vibrato creeps in. She has a good trill and is technically adept but the overall impression is never one of any great distinction compared with the really characterful exponents of the role of Gilda. Vincenzo La Scola has a small, neat tenor which thins and tightens alarmingly as he goes up the scale and he has an annoying habit of ending phrases with a little glottal bleat. He is at his best in the quartet but compared with really dashing Dukes like Pavarotti or Björling he is vocally pale and small-scale.

In short, the cognoscenti who recognise Zancanaro's pre-eminence will want this for his artistry, shorn though he is of the top notes he potentially had in plenty; otherwise there is no compelling reason to buy this recording or prefer it over established classics.

James Levine – 1993 (studio; digital) DG
Orchestra and Chorus - Metropolitan Opera

Rigoletto - Vladimir Chernov
Gilda - Cheryl Studer
Duca di Mantova - Luciano Pavarotti
Sparafucile - Roberto Scandiuzzi
Maddalena - Denyce Graves
Giovanna - Jane Shaulis
Monterone - Ildebrando d' Arcangelo
Marullo - Dwayne Croft
Borsa - Paul Groves

Conte di Ceprano - Yanni Yannisis
 Contessa di Ceprano - Heidi Grant Murphy
 Un paggio - Elyssa Lindner

Excellent digital sound and equally impressive conducting and playing from Levine and the Met orchestra are the first great virtues of this recording. The cast, too, is probably as good as could be found then: the Russian Vladimir Chernov was the next great hope for a baritone star but his career never really took off in the manner expected. His timbre isn't really Italianate, being rather hard and "flat" in the manner of his somewhat older compatriot Sergei Leiferkus but he works hard to vary his vocal colours and inflects his words intelligently. He is not always absolutely steady but he is certainly expressive and powerful; "Cortigiani" is a tour de force. Cheryl Studer's beacon burned brightly for a decade or so, but then she hit vocal troubles, perhaps as a result of singing too wide a repertoire, forcing her technique and spreading herself too thinly; her voice here is inconsistent, sometimes oddly *ingolata* ("bottled") and tremulous, occasionally turning shrill, at other times intense and convincing as the wounded Gilda. Meanwhile Pavarotti was nearing the end of his productive years and, having recorded a superb *Manon Lescaut* with Freni the year before, here gave hostages to fortune by reprising perhaps his most successful recorded role over two decades after his Duke for Bonyng. This was in fact his third studio recording of the Duke and perhaps a bridge too far. The problem is not that he sings badly – very far from it – but that he is up against his younger self, where he has greater ease – yet in truth he still sounds marvellous, his diction is as crisp as ever, he sings "off the words" immaculately and he sounds more ebulliently youthful than any tenor of his age has any right to. Roberto Scandiuzzi's sonorous bass is caught at its best before a wobble set in but the vowel on his concluding low F in the scene where he accosts Rigoletto is peculiarly distorted from "I" in the last syllable of "Sparafucile" to "ah". Another basso, the young Ildebrando d'Arcangelo, sings beautifully as Monterone but sounds just that – too youthful. More good, young (American) singers fill in the comprimario roles but Denyce Graves' rather cloudy, woolly mezzo is no great asset.

I would not make this a primary recommendation, as Chernov doesn't really have the right voice for *Rigoletto*, Studer's singing is inconsistent and Pavarotti is outshone by his younger self, but this remains the best of the more recent, digital versions.

Recommendations

As usual, my selections veer towards those made before the digital era, when we enjoyed a plethora of greater operatic voices in comparison to today's dearth. There is no shortage of studio, stereo, recordings starring big names; I would also always want to hear Björling and Merrill as the Duke and the jester respectively even though they do not feature in the first-choice recordings suggested below. Among the more modern recordings however, the two which stand out are Gardelli's and Levine's; the former is a fine ensemble and the latter has many "old-fashioned" virtues couched in superb digital sound, but neither is as compelling as older versions.

Historical, studio mono: Molajoli - 1927 & 1930

Studio mono: Tullio Serafin – 1955 (preferably in the Ambient Stereo issue from Pristine)

Studio stereo: Richard Bonyng – 1971*

Live stereo: Molinari-Pradelli – 1959

*First choice

Ralph Moore