

Verdi's *Aida*: A partial survey of the discography by Ralph Moore

I emphasise the word “partial” here, as there are over 260 recordings of *Aida* in the catalogue; however, the bulk of these are live and as there are “only” just under thirty studio recordings to choose from, and I have concentrated on those. Although there are some superb live performances, the average collector will want one in good sound without distracting, extraneous noise. I have discounted two studio accounts from the very earliest days of acoustic recording as of specialist interest only, but included two from 1928 for reasons of their historical importance and vocal quality, and for purposes of comparison. A total of twenty-one recordings are considered below, of which two are radio broadcasts and the rest products of the recording studio.

Given my own affection for *Aida*, its wide popularity and the frequency with which it is performed, I have been surprised upon occasionally encountering a real disdain for it among some operaphile friends. Perhaps it is a case of over-familiarity or “too many elephants” which leads them to regard it as clichéd, but to me *Aida* represents another of those successful operas, like *Don Carlo*, where private passions are strikingly portrayed against a backdrop of epic events in superlative music. I certainly vividly recall the first time I heard the otherworldly incantations of the chorus to “Immenso Ftà” and the soaring, keening desolation of Aida’s lament; Verdi creates a special, exotic soundworld for this opera and skilfully exploits the clash of love and loyalty to generate maximum dramatic tension. As well as the spectacle provided by the ceremonial and triumphal scenes of Acts 1 and 2 and the effectiveness of the theatrical device of our hearing Radamès’ trial take place offstage, the opera is especially strong in confrontation scenes: between Aida and Amneris, Aida and her father, and Amneris and Radamès; then of course there are two desperate, extended love duets between Aida and Radamès by the Nile in Act 3 and in the tomb at the end. The only real absurdity in the plot – there usually is one – is when, for the purposes of setting up a magnificent trio, Verdi’s librettist Ghislanzoni has Amonasro declare himself to Radamès, having heard him reveal the location of the attack his army is to make the following day, instead of just sneaking off and engineering an ambush.

Otherwise, Ghislanzoni, Verdi and Mariette, the designer of the premiere, went to great lengths to recreate a generically authentic impression of Old Kingdom Egypt 3000 BC and this is one of those operas which most successfully defies even the most determined Regietheater producer to relocate it in a multi-storey carpark – so bring on those elephants, say I and excuse me if I cannot express unbridled enthusiasm for Opera North’s latest effort which “updates *Aida* to a middle eastern war zone, with added sex and PTSD”...yeah, yeah; Verdi really needs that.

Voice, voice and more voice is the chief requirement in an opera which is fraught with pitfalls for the unprepared singer, not least the perilous opening aria for the tenor with its sustained, concluding B flat marked “pp morendo” (soft, “dying” or fading away). Few tenors accomplish that feat; Verdi apparently gave his blessing to singing it full voiced then dropping an octave to mutter “vicino al sol” piano, but most just roar it and hope for the best. Notable exceptions include, Corelli, in an extraordinary but vocally fraught accomplishment, Rosvaenge (singing the aria in ungainly German) and Jonas Kaufmann in the most recent studio recording. Lirico-spinto tenors who can fulfil all the demands of the role are rare indeed; even Caruso, to whom the role was central in his career, ignored Verdi’s demands for ‘Celeste Aida’; Gigli was pushed by it and Domingo usually just belted the top B flat which was, in any case, at the upper limits of his tenor which never really had the notes above it for long, and he sometimes took the octave-drop option. Turning to the eponymous soprano role, probably the most famous incident in the performance history of this opera was in Mexico City 1950, when a young Maria Callas, having had enough of her tenor, Kurt Baum’s grandstanding, put him in his place with the most thrilling live note on record, a huge, sustained top E-flat above high C at the conclusion of the Act 2 Triumphal Scene, “Gloria al'Egitto”. She retained it for subsequent performances in that run and the following year, again in Mexico, when Mario Del Monaco was her partner; you may hear it on the Warner, Myto and Opera d’Oro labels. No other soprano matches that

feat but some have achieved a startlingly beautiful combination of power and delicacy, such as Caballé's exquisite pianissimi in her big arias as recorded for Muti. The four other big roles provide stern tests for the three other voice categories; it takes a proper Verdi baritone to tackle Amonasro, a powerful mezzo with a formidable lower register and gleaming top notes to sing Amneris and two resonant, voluminous basses to undertake the High Priest Ramphis and the Egyptian Pharaoh.

Italian conductors, orchestras and choruses steeped in Verdian tradition predominate in the discography, although Karajan and Solti must also be considered as among the frontrunners.

(Several of the reviews below have already been posted on MWI under the individual recordings.)

The Recordings

Carlo Sabajno – 1928 (studio; mono) Arkadia; Romophone; Opera Magna; Phonographe; Vocalarchi; Grammofono 2000
Orchestra & Chorus - Teatro alla Scala

Aida - Dusolina Giannini
Radamès - Aureliano Pertile
Amneris - Irene Minghini-Cattaneo
Amonasro - Giovanni Inghilleri
Ramphis - Luigi Manfrini
Il Re di Egitto - Guglielmo Masini
Un Messaggero - Giuseppe Nessi

The two rival companies of HMV and Columbia each recorded *Aida* in late 1928. This one from HMV was originally issued on 19 double sided 78 rpm records, a month before the rival Columbia version. The main attraction here is Toscanini's favourite tenor, Aureliano Pertile. His fast vibrato and light timbre can sometimes be suggestive of a bleat, but the power and accuracy of his delivery soon dispenses any hint of the tenorino in his voice. His 'Celeste Aida' is belted out without a hint of nerves, concluding with a ringing B flat. He dominates ensemble heroically. Every voice here has that fast pulse characteristic of the age and I like it; it's very satisfying to hear two basses devoid of wobble. Minghini-Cattaneo was a major artist, better remembered today than the *Aida* here; I love the way she dives into her lower register and like Pertile sings with complete confidence and security, with nary a slide or nudge. That cannot be said of the violins we hear first in the prelude, which are screechy and portamento-indulgent, but I tend to think of that as different kind of period authenticity. The trumpets and chorus in the Triumphal Scene are really impressive and the conclusion is thrilling. You have to stop and think: we are hearing something over ninety years old recorded a mere fifty-seven years after the premiere.

American soprano Dusolina Giannini was from a musical Italian immigrant family and raised in Philadelphia. She has a big, mostly very even voice which occasionally turns rather unsteadily shrill and piping up top – or perhaps that is the result of the electrical acoustic, which is surprisingly clear for so old a recording, some surface noise and hiss notwithstanding. She is rather harried by Sabajno's sometimes insanely impatient but exciting tempi, but she is completely on top of the role, particularly impressive when she deploys her lower register to convey *Aida*'s desperation. The clarity, power and precision of her singing in 'O patria mia' are a joy and the duet between *Aida* and Amonasro is a model of its kind.

What a clean, powerful, beautiful baritone Giovanni Inghilleri possessed, too. He sings expressively without affectation or exaggeration, with the emphasis upon legato and line. Everyone here is fully immersed in the idiom and delivers a thoroughly integrated, deeply felt performance. This really is a remarkable document.

Lorenzo Molajoli – 1928 (studio; mono) Pristine
Orchestra & Chorus - Teatro alla Scala

Aida - Giannina Arangi-Lombardi
Radamès - Aroldo Lindi
Amneris - Maria Capuana
Amonasro - Armando Borgioli
Ramphis - Tancredi Pasero
Il Re di Egitto - Salvatore Baccaloni
Un Messaggero - Giuseppe Nessi

This recording has always tended to be overshadowed by the more celebrated HMV version above, mainly perhaps because that starred Toscanini's favourite tenor Aureliano Pertile, who was frankly a more talented singer than his rival here for Molajoli, Aroldo Lindi. Any neglect of this Columbia set is certainly not because of an inferior *Aida*, however: Arangi-Lombardi is maybe the most neglected and truly great soprano I know – and this recording provides ample evidence of her stellar artistry.

As far as I understand it, the HMV version was recorded a month earlier in October 1928 and appeared on the market considerably before the Columbia set, so I am not quite sure why Pristine has discreetly labelled each CD "World premiere full recording" unless they mean that this is the first properly re-mastered, digital CD version of this particular recording, as there don't seem to be any cuts in the HMV set. It doesn't really matter.

The sound quality that Ward Marston - his name is mis-spelt on the reverse of the CD - has achieved in his re-engineering is extraordinarily good and now quite the equal of many a recording a decade or two later. Most punters will be buying this to hear the voices rather than the orchestra and will not be disappointed, although the Milan chorus and band emerge perfectly satisfactorily and Marston has added just a little reverberation to provide some welcome sonic ambience. The ear soon adjusts to the papery sound and the opening strings intoning that plaintive, exotic love motif followed by the descending cello riff are all remarkably immediate, even if things do then get a bit congested when more instruments enter. But let's get real here; we are listening comfortably to a studio recording made only twenty-seven years after the composer's death and a mere fifty-seven years after the premiere of the opera in Cairo. As such, it provides an invaluable souvenir of a performing tradition which would presumably have been familiar to Verdi and provides aural evidence of that same performance practice being alive and well in inter-war Italy. It is also worth recalling that complete recordings of that time were not necessarily and invariably always entrusted to the opera super-stars of the era. They recorded best-selling extracts and arias and usually left the complete recordings to excellent, but nonetheless, second-rank artists. We are thus all the luckier to be able to hear three very great singers in Arangi-Lombardi, Maria Capuana and Tancredi Pasero. I do not say that this Columbia set is superior to the HMV, but I think it its equal on a number of counts.

While I know that some will welcome the chance to hear Aroldo Lindi, there is no denying that his contribution sometimes constitutes a definite weakness. He had an unvarying, stentorian *tenore di forza* of a kind once more common and recognisable in such singers as Tamagno, Zenatello and Martinelli but now increasingly rare if not extinct – perhaps Corelli was its last exponent. While his brazen top notes and vocal stamina are admirable he does himself no favours by launching into a 'Celeste Aida' characterised by a lumpen delivery and a most unalluring tendency to yell his beloved's name, but he improves considerably as the opera unfolds and wouldn't be the first tenor to fall foul of that most demanding of entries. Born Gustav Harald Lindau he was in fact a Swede who made a good career worldwide and sang frequently in the United States, dying on-stage singing in *I Pagliacci* in San Francisco in 1944. His solid, tireless and sterling virtues are shown to better advantage in the

concluding duet where, despite his occasional unsteadiness, he partners Arangi-Lombardi worthily, producing exciting top notes.

Arangi-Lombardi's lirico-spinto soprano is a beautiful and expressive instrument, with a dark, honeyed timbre, haunting oboe-tones in her lower register - indicative of her previous vocal incarnation as a mezzo before her switch upwards in 1921 - and exquisite, almost disembodied pianissimo B-flats and top Cs that make you catch your breath. To hear her at her best, sample her 'O patria mia'; her steadiness of line, impassioned utterance and faultless technique are all the more remarkable when you consider that her comparative restraint and economy of means were unfashionable in an age newly enamoured of the more demonstrative verismo style. I put her up there with similar rich-voiced sopranos such as Ponselle and Muzio.

Almost as impressive and representative of another vanished voice-type is Capuana's Amneris. Occasionally, there is evidence of a lack of integration between the two registers but her sound is powerful, dramatic and incisive without forcing. Armando Borgioli is inclined to bark and is certainly not the peer of Stracciari or Ruffo but he is a proper Italian baritone who has a clean, long-breathed tone and makes the most of his impassioned confrontation with Aida. Like Lindi, his life was prematurely cut short, not by a heart-attack but in an Allied air-raid on a train in 1945. Tancredi Pasero deploys that darkest, silkiest and most elegant of basses to present us with an authoritative, implacable High Priest. A young Salvatore Baccaloni is a firm, vibrant King. The admirable soprano who sings the priestess in the invocation to the god Ftà is not credited.

I can understand a prospective buyer's hesitation to invest in so venerable a recording when there are so many deeply satisfying modern, stereo recordings available but this set has a special historical value and aesthetic quality which have been greatly enhanced by Pristine's superb remastering.

Tullio Serafin – 1946 (studio; mono) EMI; Cantus; Arkadia; Naxos
Orchestra & Chorus - Teatro dell'Opera di Roma

Aida - Maria Caniglia
Radamès - Beniamino Gigli
Amneris - Ebe Stignani
Amonasro - Gino Bechi
Ramphis - Tancredi Pasero
Il Re di Egitto - Italo Tajo
Una Sacerdotessa - Maria Huder
Un Messaggero - Adelio Zagonora

A recording of this vintage with a cast and conductor like this cannot be anything other than an event, although neither of the two principle singers is my favourite, they combined in the 30's and 40's to record some classics, such as the Verdi *Requiem*, *Un ballo in maschera*, *Andrea Chénier*, *Tosca* and this recording. I have never warmed to the later Gigli's mannerisms, such as scooping, his lachrymose delivery or his rather "white" sound but I recognise his artistry; likewise, Caniglia could be gusty and shrill, so I find myself more interested in the inky black bass of Tancredi Pasero, the grand, stately mezzo of Stignani and the extraordinary baritone of Gino Bechi, dubbed by no less than Corelli "the vocal phenomenon of our age".

In fact, everyone here is in excellent voice, even if Italo Tajo sounds momentarily short of breath on his entrance, but he recovers. Caniglia makes especially trenchant use of her lower register, and although she occasionally sounds a little matronly for Aida, her top notes are secure, less shrill than was sometimes the case and less prone to flatness, which became a flaw as she aged. She is not the most characterful of singers and is prone to stridency but her singing is impassioned in a generalised way. The stand-out performances here for me are Pasero's noble Ramphis and Bechi's hard-voiced,

searingly intense Amonasro; Stignani is impressive but like Caniglia with *Aida*, does not make Amneris an especially vivid character.

Because I do not especially warm to either lead singer, I do not prefer this over other vintage versions such as Erede's, and of course as it was originally released on forty 78's, its sound is scratchier and hissier all round than those recorded on tape, even in the skilful Naxos remastering from RCA shellacs, which diminishes harshness and boosts lower frequencies.

Arturo Toscanini – 1949 (radio broadcasts of concert performances; mono) RCA
Orchestra - NBC Symphony Orchestra
Chorus - Robert Shaw Chorale

Aida - Herva Nelli
Radamès - Richard Tucker
Amneris - Eva Gustavson
Amonasro - Giuseppe Valdengo
Ramphis - Norman Scott
Il Re di Egitto - Dennis Harbour
Una Sacerdotessa - Teresa Stich-Randall
Un Messaggero - Virginio Assandri

The thin mono sound here of this TV-radio simulcast concert performance is slightly edgy but presents no real barrier to enjoyment. You immediately notice the care and precision with which Toscanini shapes phrases and secures the right sonorities and balances in the orchestra. Nothing drags, nor does it sound rushed. He was a stickler for correct Italian pronunciation and his cast all enunciate and project the text cleanly. With the exception of Tucker – and arguably Valdengo - there are no major voices in the cast but they were Toscanini regulars, coached and drilled by him to his exacting standards, making a coherent ensemble. A youthful Tucker himself is in slender, clarion voice, singing lyrically with refinement and without exaggeration – although that is equally true of all his co-singers; there's not a wobbler in sight, down to the brief interjection from a neat-voiced Messenger. Valdengo, who had already triumphed as Iago and would do likewise under Toscanini as Falstaff the following year, here sings a virile, intense Amonasro. Herva Nelli lacks something of the dark, burnished sound an *Aida* ideally requires, sounding half a size too small but she sings neatly, accurately and with feeling, even if her voice lacks tonal variety. The weakest link here is the anonymous and rather under-powered Amneris from Eva Gustavson; she isn't bad but makes a limited impact in a gift of a role for a real scenery-chewing mezzo. Considering the limited acoustic, the chorus on and offstage are atmospherically recorded and the cameo from "Stitch" as the Priestess is a decided success.

Sonic limitations, the lack of a star-quality *Aida* and comparative weaknesses in other singers prevent this from being a front-runner, but there is a special value in hearing the greatest Verdi conductor pace this opera perfectly.

Vittorio Gui – 1951 (radio broadcast; mono) Warner Fonit/Cetra
Orchestra & Chorus - RAI Roma

Aida - Caterina Mancini
Radamès - Mario Filippeschi
Amneris - Giulietta Simionato
Amonasro - Rolando Panerai
Ramphis - Giulio Neri
Il Re di Egitto - Antonio Massaria
Un Messaggero - Salvatore De Tommaso

At a time when *Aida* could be sung by Callas or Tebaldi and Radamès by Del Monaco, Björling or Tucker, the casting of the two principle roles here looks decidedly B-list, but both Mancini and Filippeschi were justly celebrated artists with important careers, and the presence of three more great singers in Simionato, Panerai and Neri under distinguished conductor Vittorio Gui lifts this set further. Indeed, this is another of those early 50's sets which assembled a cast quite beyond what we can field today. Simionato was vocally as generously endowed as her compatriot Barbieri, but sing here which more feeling for the text than Barbieri does in her recording with Callas for Perlea three years later and her plunges into her lower register and the "Morire!" in the duet with Radamès are thrilling. There hasn't been a bass of such deep, rich, blackness of sound since Giulio Neri succumbed unexpectedly to a heart attack at only 48 years old. The young Panerai – still with us, aged 94, as I write – in what is possibly his first commercial recording, has a baritone similar to Valdengo's: clean, incisive, with a fast vibrato and considerable penetration. Filippeschi had a huge, metallic voice, unsurprisingly admired by Lauri-Volpi as Filippeschi's voice-type is similarly to Lauri-Volpi's and to Martinelli's, with especially powerful, ringing top notes. He sings Radamès straightforwardly as a conventional war hero, his heart torn between fierce patriotism and Romantic passion. He rarely phrases gracefully and his timbre is not the most grateful, turning plaintive and irritatingly lachrymose – especially in the concluding Tomb Scene – but the money notes are there; the concluding B flat of 'Celeste Aida' can rarely have been belted out more emphatically. Mancini is similarly large-voiced; a proper dramatic-coloratura soprano who made some valuable recordings for Cetra in the 50's. There is no danger here of her being eclipsed by the tenor or orchestra, yet she sings delicately in the Tomb Scene, even if she is sometimes shrill. Like her coevals Neri and Cerquetti, her career was short but brilliant; ill-health forced her premature retirement. Even the King has a major-sounding bass. It is noticeable how nearly every singer here has a command of legato and all have a properly registered, "opened" voice, down to the uncredited Priestess. The chorus is excellent.

This is a live broadcast; Filippeschi misses his cue on "Dessa" but Simionato carries on. Gui knows exactly what to do with the music; it is grand and lyrical by turns. The sound is clear mono which gives the violins a screechy edge and some slight distortion when those powerful voices open up, but there is reasonable bass depth, too, and this isn't really an issue. The Warner Fonit reissue reproduces the original, garish Cetra format so redolent of the 50's. The genuine *Aida* devotee will find a place for it alongside the other Cetra recording with Corelli – which is rather similar; indeed, one wonders how and why Cetra thought it feasible to re-record *Aida* so soon after this one – presumably the young Corelli was its main draw.

My MWI colleague Göran Forsling [reviewed](#) this in detail back in 2005, and we are broadly in agreement about its manifest merits.

Alberto Erede – 1952 (studio; mono) Decca
Orchestra & Chorus - Santa Cecilia

Aida - Renata Tebaldi
Radamès - Mario Del Monaco
Amneris - Ebe Stignani
Amonasro - Aldo Protti
Ramphis - Dario Caselli
Il Re di Egitto - Fernando Corena
Una Sacerdotessa - Suzanne Danco
Un Messaggero - Piero De Palma

This is not necessarily the best *Aida* but considering that I can choose from so many recordings in my collection, it surprises me how often I choose to pull this one down from the shelves. It's opera of the old Italian school and its shortcomings – mono sound which is nonetheless quite spacious and some rough orchestra ensemble – are negligible compared with its glories. Tebaldi is here more secure and

sweet-toned than in the later Karajan recording, Del Monaco is thrilling, clarion voice and not by any means wholly without subtlety, pace his detractors, Stignani is still, to my ears, a tower of strength and Caselli's rich, robust bass is more than adequate, whereas only Corena sounds a bit rocky. The reliable Protti may not be the greatest of post-war Verdi baritones and is sometimes a bit lumpen, but he seems to me to be wholly on top of his role and embodies the irascible, percussive Amonasro well while still occasionally mustering sufficient vocal smoothness in the more lyrical passages; his confrontation with Aida in Act 3 is very effective. If you're unsure, try to listen to an extract from that duet and I think you'll be convinced. We'd queue round the block to hear an *Aida* this well cast today; it is available cheaply and the purchaser is assured of an opera performed authentically in the Grand Tradition.

Ionel Perlea – 1955 (studio; mono/ambient stereo*) RCA; Pristine*
Orchestra & Chorus - Teatro dell'Opera di Roma

Aida - Zinka Milanov
Radamès - Jussi Björling
Amneris - Fedora Barbieri
Amonasro - Leonard Warren
Ramphis - Boris Christoff
Il Re di Egitto - Plinio Clabassi
Una Sacerdotessa - Bruna Rizzoli
Un Messaggero - Mario Carlin

There is such a cornucopia of excellent *Aida* recordings available that to claim absolute superiority for any of them is to give hostages to fortune. I am going to enter the lions' den by saying that I have long struggled in my attempts to hear in Milanov's *Aida* the paragon referred to by so many previous reviewers. To me, she frequently sounds wobbly, screechy and elderly - yet she was not yet fifty at the time of the recording. Listen to her in the first trio with Björling and Christoff (both superb); her first aria, 'Ritorna vincitor' is full of swoops and slides. Listen to the attempt to hit the A at 2:08 or the G at 2:29; they are pretty gruesome. Yes, I know that singing *Aida* is not just about hitting a few notes correctly but to my ears she is struggling throughout, compared with the vocal sumptuousness and security of Price or Caballé. In fairness, Milanov's "Patria mia" goes better but she still slides and loses tonal quality too often. The concluding Tomb Scene finds her and Björling striking sparks off each other but it is often a bumpy ride.

This is an opera whose exalted crowd scenes demand to be heard in spacious stereo, so when it was previously available only in elderly mono I would certainly not have opted for it over the Muti or the Leinsdorf recordings if you wanted to enjoy the grandeur of this opera at home. Despite the fact that it has now been re-mastered into Ambient Stereo by Pristine to their usual excellent standard, this could still never be my favourite *Aida*. If anything, the re-mastering emphasises the inadequacy of Milanov's singing as opposed to the glory of Björling's and Christoff's contributions. Just listen to the climactic conclusion of Act I; it is riveting, with both artists singing like gods, making the newly apparent revelation of Milanov's limitations all the more regrettable.

My problems with the supposed unrivalled excellence of this set continue with the hoarse, woolly King of Plinio Clabassi and the rather monochromatic account of Amneris from Fedora Barbieri. She is a singer I nonetheless usually admire and she is in opulent voice but she does little with her words and just barrels through the part. There are huge compensations in Björling's gleaming Radamès, Warren's incisive Amonasro and Christoff's implacable Ramphis - but *Aida* needs a better, all-round ensemble to take off - which is precisely what Karajan, Muti and Solti provide. Even Warren sounds throatier here than I am used to hearing him - and I am a huge fan.

Perlea takes a very leisurely view of the score and at times comes across as a rather lax, indulgent conductor. He doesn't generate much tension at key points although the more lyrical passages go more successfully. He gives his singers all the time in the world to grandstand; even Björling, usually a musically disciplined singer, for our guilty pleasure hangs on to top notes way beyond their proper notational value.

I do not generally find myself standing out against received wisdom - but I am genuinely puzzled by the accolades for this set, the obvious merits of Björling and Christoff apart. If you want an *Aida* of the type Milanov essays then Caballé does it so much better; meanwhile, in my dream-world I wish I could hear Björling here and Leontyne Price in her pomp singing this opera together, with Merrill as Amonasro, Cossotto as Amneris and either Christoff or Ghiaurov as Ramphis. I will still play this recording just to hear Björling and Christoff and to luxuriate in Pristine's revitalised sound, but skip over Milanov's arias.

Tullio Serafin – 1955 (studio; mono) EMI; Regis
Orchestra & Chorus - Teatro alla Scala

Aida - Maria Callas
Radamès - Richard Tucker
Amneris - Fedora Barbieri
Amonasro - Tito Gobbi
Ramphis - Giuseppe Modesti
Il Re di Egitto - Nicola Zaccaria
Una Sacerdotessa - Elvira Galassi
Un Messaggero - Franco Ricciardi

Only two or three *Aida* recordings really pierce the heart of this most venerable of war-horses; chief amongst them are the famous Muti version and this one - now available absurdly cheaply on Regis - a bit hissy and rumbly but in vivid, immediate mono. OK, Callas' top C in "O patria mia" wobbles a bit but otherwise no other soprano begins to inflect the text with the degree of subtlety and pathos she achieves - and when Gobbi joins her, we are listening to a master class on how to enact Ghislanzoni's text. Gobbi makes fellow baritones sound merely bland and workaday - especially Cappuccilli in the otherwise striking Muti set. In addition, both have such recognisable and intense vocal personalities, Gobbi with that inimitable, Italianate "bite" and flickering vibrato, Callas with her melting portamenti and sudden, powerful surges.

Barbieri is a tower of strength in a role made for her and Tucker, while not the subtlest of tenors is rock-steady and heroic of tone; certainly few tenors have his vocal capability in this cruelly taxing role - only Del Monaco and the young Corelli in the 1956 Cetra recording capably conducted by Questa provided more thrills. Ultimately my favourite *Aida* remains the Muti set in excellent stereo sound but this 1955 recording, which benefits from Serafin's readiness to sacrifice the metronome to dramatic exigency, will always be amongst my favourites.

Angelo Questa – 1956 (studio; mono) Warner Fonit/Cetra; Opera d'Oro; GOP
Orchestra & Chorus - RAI Torino

Aida - Maria Curtis Verna
Radamès - Franco Corelli
Amneris - Miriam Pirazzini
Amonasro - Giangiacomo Guelfi
Ramphis - Giulio Neri
Il Re di Egitto - Antonio Zerbini
Un Messaggero - Athos Cesarini

I hesitate to give this recording an unqualified endorsement, insofar as it is only in mid-fifties mono and not exactly populated by household names apart from Corelli (I mean opera-fancying households, obviously). However, re-listening to it reminded me how thrilled we would be to have singers of this calibre making such a satisfying recording of a Verdian staple which still fills opera houses.

I barely noticed that the sound is mono, it is so clear, full and detailed, without peaking or shatter. The performers are utterly at ease in the idiom, singing with real, uninhibited abandon as singers confident in the reliability of their vocal apparatuses. All are Italian, apart from Maria Curtis Verna who is the sole American and who made a substantial career for herself in Italy. She is not especially individual but has a large, flexible voice which does its owner's bidding and experiences no difficulty in negotiating her fiendishly difficult music. Corelli is in finest vocal youthful estate, still under the guidance of Lauri-Volpi and taming the incipient bleat such that it is merely an attractively fast vibrato and displaying free, heroic, open tone. His Radamès is mercifully free from exaggeration and mannerism. Miriam Pirazzini is an old-school mezzo with both registers opened up and resonant, Guelfi is similarly large of voice if a tad raw and to complete the cast we hear two first-class basses in Neri and Zerbini. Even the uncredited priestess shares the stars' confidence and effulgence.

Yet more delight derives from Questa's wholly apt conducting, the excellence of the Turin orchestra and chorus and the fact that this splendidly re-mastered issue from Warner-Fonit of what was originally on the Cetra label comes with the original, funky fifties artwork, an intelligent and perceptive essay by one Luigi Bellingardi which sheds light on how Verdi so vividly portrays the psyches of the main characters, and an Italian-only libretto, all at a bargain price.

My own first experience of *Aida* was the rather starrer and more sophisticated Muti recording with Caballé and Domingo but I can imagine this being someone's introduction to this lovely opera and their retaining an affection for it for a lifetime. It is now sixty years old and everyone involved has passed on, but this remains as a testament to the strength of provincial Italian singing in that era.

Herbert von Karajan – 1959 (studio; stereo) Decca; Membran; Lyrica
Orchestra - Wiener Philharmoniker
Chorus - Singerverein der Gesellschaft der Musikfreunde Wien

Aida - Renata Tebaldi
Radamès - Carlo Bergonzi
Amneris - Giulietta Simionato
Amonasro - Cornell MacNeil
Ramphis - Arnold Van Mill
Il Re di Egitto - Fernando Corena
Una Sacerdotessa - Eugenia Ratti
Un Messaggero - Piero De Palma

This has long been a recommended version but it comes from outside the usual Italian stable, as it were, despite its predominately Italian cast, and some detect a more Germanic weightiness in Karajan's conducting. It is also true that two of the principals, Tebaldi and Simionato, excellent as they are, must yield to their younger selves in recordings they made in the early 50's. On the other hand, here we have the advantage of Decca's stereo sound and what a lovely, shimmering bloom is on those Viennese strings as the overture starts, compared with some of the more raucous Italian efforts you can hear. This is not "Karajanesque smoothification" just lovely playing and, just as Karajan, produces beautiful orchestral sounds in his recording twenty years later with the same orchestra, he can generate tension and excitement without it getting scrappy. The first voices we hear inspire confidence: Van Mill's smooth, rolling bass and Bergonzi's clean, trumpeted sound, phrasing so elegantly but expanding satisfyingly on top notes, if not with the visceral heft of Del Monaco. One

immediately registers the sheer size of Tebaldi's soprano on her entry and if there is occasionally some incipient scratchiness on high notes, the compensations in terms of weight and beauty of tone are many; one is reminded of Björling's famous observation that "singing with Tebaldi was like singing with two sopranos". She might not have Callas' way with the text but her dramatic commitment is not in doubt; her soft singing is a dream and she floats a lovely line. Apparently she was at odds with Karajan regarding his slower tempi but she rose to his challenge. MacNeil makes a powerful, straightforward Amonasro, magnificently vocalised; again, the sheer amplitude of his baritone amazes. Simionato is a fierce Amneris, especially now that she is a more mature artist than she was for Gui, but manages to soften her tone for her more lovelorn moments and her mezzo is in fine shape. Corena as the King is firmer here than he was for Erede and it's good to have the ubiquitous Piero De Palma as the Messenger; Eugenia Ratti, too, is much better here as the off-stage Priestess than she was as Oscar in Votto's "Un ballo in maschera" with Callas.

Balances between the voices and orchestra are excellent; some of the original slight overload seems to have been removed via remastering. This has held its place in the hierarchy for the sixty years since its issue.

Georg Solti – 1961 (studio; stereo) RCA
Orchestra & Chorus - Teatro dell'Opera di Roma

Aida - Leontyne Price
Radamès - Jon Vickers
Amneris - Rita Gorr
Amonasro - Robert Merrill
Ramphis - Giorgio Tozzi
Il Re di Egitto - Plinio Clabassi
Una Sacerdotessa - Mietta Sighele
Un Messaggero - Franco Ricciardi

Leontyne Price was arguably the pre-eminent Aida of her era and made two studio recordings to prove it in 1962 and 1970 when she was in peak voice and worthily partnered. This earlier recording has endured as the most celebrated of the two and certainly from the perspective of fifty years later the singing is impossibly starry by today's standards - and the sound is still pretty good too.

The young Jon Vickers here is in best voice and conveys great anguish and a sense of spiritual conflict which is really absorbing, although some will want a more overtly Mediterranean tenor. Rita Gorr has a hard, ringing, voluminous mezzo which she deploys to almost scary effect, so Amneris the haughty Princess predominates over the needy, vulnerable young woman; Bumbry for Leinsdorf does that better without being vocally as dominant. Tozzi makes an emphatic Ramphis and Plinio Clabassi lends great heft and drama to his role as King.

Surprisingly, Solti gives the score considerably more time and space here than his reputation would have it; he finds both depth and verticality, generating great weight in the big Act 2 processional scene. The Rome orchestra and chorus are energised and idiomatic – as one would expect in this opera, given their history with it.

As long as you respond to Vickers, this emerges as one of the most gripping and strongly cast recordings on the catalogue.

Zubin Mehta - 1965-66 (studio; stereo) EMI
Orchestra & Chorus - Teatro dell'Opera di Roma

Aida - Birgit Nilsson
Radamès - Franco Corelli
Amneris - Grace Bumbry
Amonasro - Mario Sereni
Ramphis - Bonaldo Giaiotti
Il Re di Egitto - Ferruccio Mazzoli
Una Sacerdotessa - Mirella Fiorentini
Un Messaggero - Piero De Palma

My friend and MWI colleague Bob Farr, whose taste often concurs with mine, briefly [refers to this recording](#) as “an ill-fated attempt”; I’m not sure why as he does not elaborate. However, in his review of the 4 CD EMI box set *Franco Corelli - The Tenor as Hero*, another MWI colleague Göran Forsling, calls it “superb”; I quote him in full here:

“Corelli’s ‘Celeste Aida’ is a reading to treasure, not least for final B flat, starting fortissimo and then being gradually and seamlessly fined down to a beautiful pianissimo. The end of the Nile scene finds him in heroic form and Birgit Nilsson seems almost like a soubrette by his side to begin with. The confrontations between Nilsson and Corelli in the opera houses are legendary and it seems they have brought this rivalry into the Rome studio as well. Sparks are really flying when Ms Nilsson lets loose and the trio is completed with Mario Sereni’s strong-voiced and sonorous Amonasro” ([review](#)).

On the other hand, there is a broad consensus that Nilsson’s steely, Wagnerian dramatic soprano was never quite right for *Aida* and it is always possible to find fault with Corelli’s grandstanding, hence maybe there’s room for an opinion which reflects a compromise between those extremes.

Aida was Corelli’s first commercial recording for Cetra in 1956; to quote Göran again, “A dozen years later when he recorded the opera complete again, with Birgit Nilsson as his Aida, he had matured stylistically and makes a superb diminuendo. Corelli was an exhibitionist, whether showing off his volume or his diminuendo, but in that particular case his artistic sense had deepened – and the voice is just as glorious.”

I agree; Corelli was in his absolute prime when this recording was made. His lisp can be mildly distracting but the vocal quality is astounding. He has a fine legato, impressive command of dynamics and top notes which ring like no other tenor; furthermore, he employs a considerable degree of subtlety and sings quietly on occasion. All of those qualities are immediately apparent in his opening aria, ‘Celeste Aida’, which he concludes with a remarkable – and very musical - diminuendo on the final B flat, just as Verdi stipulated but almost never gets. Grace Bumbry was still in her first mezzo-soprano phase and in best, velvety voice, and even if in the earlier scenes I find her temperamentally a little cool compared with Fiorenza Cossotto, she is really vibrant and impassioned in her final, pleading confrontation with Radamès. The under-rated baritone Mario Sereni is instantly recognisable from his husky timbre; he provides a firm, but febrile Amonasro, even if he is not quite the equal of the many star baritones such as Gobbi, Warren, MacNeil, Bastianini, Guelfi, Bechi London, Merrill and Milnes - the list seems endless – who performed that role with distinction in the 50’s and 60’s. Bass and Verdi specialist Bonaldo Giaiotti is, in my view, another singer whose real worth was never properly acknowledged; he is excellent in everything I have heard him in and is a fine Ramphis here. Ferruccio Mazzoli makes a sturdy King. Even the Messenger is voiced by the world’s best comprimario tenor, Piero De Palma. Reactions to Nilsson’s *Aida* are diverse. I love the way she hits top notes powerfully dead centre and if her slender vibrato can sometimes make her sound a little plaintive in the middle of her voice, she still invests the text with sincere emotion. Her confrontation with Bumbry is electric, the latter digging into her lower register and Nilsson emitting laser-like top notes in her distress but

also singing softly with great control, as at its conclusion on “del mio soffrir”. She soars above the ensemble at the climax of the Triumphal Scene and her poise in “O patria mia” is phenomenal. The scene with her father is highly dramatic; Sereni is certainly more involved than Cappuccilli in my favourite studio recording of *Aida* under Muti and with the arrival of Corelli we are in operatic bliss; the pair blaze through the extended love duet-come-argument until joined by a triumphant, scheming Amonasro in the trio before the whole concludes with Corelli's outrageously prolonged and thrilling top A on “Io resto a te!” The Tomb Scene shows Nilsson at both her worst and best: her quiet, quasi-parlando singing of the dialogue between the doomed lovers at first sounds whiny and unsupported but as it progresses and their voices open out, the duet becomes a thing of great beauty.

Zubin Mehta has, especially latterly, presided over some workaday operatic recordings. His best recordings were made earlier in his long career and his conducting here is irreproachable. Furthermore, he has a really excellent chorus and orchestra to do his bidding; sometimes they really let rip.

The sound is excellent; the trumpets in the Grand March leap out at the listener and the balances between voices and orchestra are ideal. If you favour Nilsson's unusual voice-type as *Aida*, this could be for you but I prefer something warmer and less steely.

Erich Leinsdorf – 1970 (studio; stereo) RCA

Orchestra - London Symphony Orchestra

Chorus - John Alldis Choir

Aida - Leontyne Price

Radamès - Plácido Domingo

Amneris - Grace Bumbry

Amonasro - Sherrill Milnes

Ramphis - Ruggero Raimondi

Il Re di Egitto - Hans Sotin

Una Sacerdotessa - Joyce Mathis

Un Messaggero - Bruce Brewer

This, the second of Leontyne Price's recordings of *Aida*, has always had a slightly odd aural perspective, being somewhat studio-bound, a bit tubby, congested and lacking sharpness, whereas the earlier Decca is both much more immediate and paradoxically more spacious. The sound here is not exactly poor, but there is an ugly tape splice at 56 seconds in track 29 of CD3, right at the end of the opera.

From a vocal point of view, Price's soprano has grown in volume eight years later but conversely is a little cloudier and heavier than in Rome in 1962, where she had a slightly purer, more ethereal timbre - although the differences are not great. Domingo in the first of his four complete recordings is almost boyish in tone, showing little or no strain in the higher tessitura of the most demanding passages but lacking the intensity which an equally young Jon Vickers brings to Radamès; Domingo is smoother but less stirring. Milnes here and Merrill for Solti were both great American baritones and I can't really separate them beyond personally slightly preferring Merrill's more Italianate ring over Milnes hollow tone, but both are first-rate. Bumbry is superb as Amneris, with a warmer, more feminine sound than Gorr, also sounding more distraught. Raimondi's bass is rather too soft-grained but he vocalises beautifully and his companion bass; similarly, Hans Sotin sings beautifully but is rather under-stated as the King. On balance, Price was partnered by a more assertive cast in her earlier recording but her co-singers here are still of the highest quality.

The conducting is fine although Leinsdorf really pushes the drama along; he also has the benefit of a really superior orchestra in the LSO, then in best shape. I find Leinsdorf's direction to be fluid and mercurial, in line with Verdi's own markings but some consider him perfunctory.

On balance, I prefer Price's earlier recording not just for the additional freshness of her own voice but also for the intensity of the performance, but there's not much in it

Ivan Marinov – 1971 (studio; stereo) Laserlight; Capriccio

Orchestra - Sofia National Opera

Chorus - Sofia National Opera

Aida - Julia Wiener-Chenisheva

Radamès - Nikola Nikolov

Amneris - Alexandrina Milcheva

Amonasro - Nikolai Smochevski

Ramphis - Nicola Ghiuselev

Il Re di Egitto - Stefan Tsiganchev

Una Sacerdotessa - Maria Dimchevska

Un Messaggero - Verter Vrachovski

This super-bargain studio recording is from an unlikely source but begins well enough with the imposing tones of bass Nicola Ghiuselev, sounding very like his compatriot Nicolai Ghiaurov. His companion bass is perfectly acceptable as the King, if a bit grainy. Tenor Nikola Nikolov presents a less alluring prospect, as he first demonstrates with his unlovely belting out of 'Celeste Aida', sliding and groaning, lachrymose and short of breath and pulsing alarmingly. Alexandrina Milcheva's entry as Amneris injects more class into proceedings but she has a rather bottled tone. Julia Wiener-Chenisheva's squawky, laboured Aida puts the cap on a doomed venture; she has some power but her tone is permanently curdled and occluded and she wobbles; she sounds like Aida's granny. Nikolai Smochevski's baritone is generically acceptable but it isn't properly "released" up top, so high notes are cloudy and his execution of the *staccati* in the duet with his daughter is comically incompetent.

The conducting here is oddly lethargic and the acoustic a bit "bathroom" although that doesn't bother me. This is a non-starter.

Riccardo Muti – 1974 (studio; stereo) EMI

Orchestra - New Philharmonia Orchestra - Trumpeters of the Royal Military School of Music

Chorus - Covent Garden

Aida - Montserrat Caballé

Radamès - Plácido Domingo

Amneris - Fiorenza Cossotto

Amonasro - Piero Cappuccilli

Ramphis - Nicolai Ghiaurov

Il Re di Egitto - Luigi Roni

Una Sacerdotessa - Esther Casas

Un Messaggero - Nicola Martinucci

There are so many good recordings of *Aida* available, but I keep coming back to this one as my favourite. This might partly be for purely personal reasons: it was one of the first sets I bought when as a nineteen year old I was just discovering opera and I still recall the sense of transported wonder I first experienced listening to that magical, moonlit Nile music; then just after that I was able to hear most of the artists on this recording live at Covent Garden and that cemented my preference for this version. Even though Caballé did not much look the part of a lissom Ethiopian princess, her voice did all the work as she spun those delicate pianissimi to every corner of the auditorium. And those almost unearthly high notes, sung "con un fil di voce" are still the chief glory of this set, despite all its other merits. Domingo is here more animated and richer voiced than in his other two recordings and the

supporting cast is very fine, even if Cappuccilli, for all his long-breathed eloquence, cannot match Gobbi for nuance or Merrill for vocal splendour. He could at times be a lazy singer who simply went through the motions, but Muti's taut, detailed direction clearly inspired him here to provide more expressive detail. Cossotto produces precisely the kind of searing tour de force I recall so vividly from the live performance. The intensity of her singing is almost scary; she is anguished and terrifying in her rage and grief. Ghiaurov is sonorous, grave and implacable as the High Priest; Roni sturdy and regal as the King.

It is true that Caballé is not really entirely vocally suited to the eponymous leading role - it is a little big for her and she is occasionally clearly stretched at the grandest moments - but her artistry and commitment are such that she makes you believe she is right for it. The orchestra play with both power and delicacy for Muti who skilfully balances the intimate sections of the score against the massive exaltation of the crowd scenes. I like other sets very much, too, such as Price's and Tebaldi's two sets each, but this is my favourite in a crowded field - and it's in superior analogue sound, too.

Herbert von Karajan – 1979 (studio; stereo) EMI

Orchestra - Wiener Philharmoniker

Chorus - Wiener Staatsoper

Aida - Mirella Freni

Radamès - José Carreras

Amneris - Agnes Baltsa

Amonasro - Piero Cappuccilli

Ramphis - Ruggero Raimondi

Il Re di Egitto - José van Dam

Una Sacerdotessa - Katia Ricciarelli

Un Messaggero - Thomas Moser

Despite having got away with *Don Carlo* the previous year, this recording with the same team really was a bridge too far for the principal singers, Freni and Carreras. Both had fundamentally lyric voices which were too stretched by the dramatico-spinto demands of their roles and the strain shows. Furthermore, neither Raimondi nor van Dam had the rich, rolling bass required for their parts so despite the beauty of much of the playing and singing, heft is in short supply and it is left to Baltsa and Cappuccilli to provide the vocal breadth and amplitude required. However, Cappuccilli, for all that he produces stream of fine tone, is less expressive and fresh-voiced than he was for Muti and has none of the verbal acuity of predecessors like Gobbi; furthermore, his voice per se lacks the squillo of really big-voiced exponents like Bechi, Guelfi, Merrill and MacNeil. The best thing about this recording is the beautiful orchestral playing; under Karajan's guidance the score emerges new-minted. Some of the singing is exquisitely shaded - although Carreras could surely have given us a fading B flat to conclude 'Celeste Aida', given that his is the more lyrical style of Radamès. This is nowhere near as unsatisfactory as the later Harnoncourt or Pappano recordings but in the end, it is too low-key and small-scale to deliver the punch this opera demands.

Claudio Abbado – 1981 (studio; stereo) DG

Orchestra & Chorus - Teatro alla Scala

Aida - Katia Ricciarelli

Radamès - Plácido Domingo

Amneris - Elena Obraztsova

Amonasro - Leo Nucci

Ramphis - Nicolai Ghiaurov

Il Re di Egitto - Ruggero Raimondi

Una Sacerdotessa - Lucia Valentini-Terrani

Un Messaggero - Piero De Palma

With a conductor, orchestra, chorus and cast like this, high expectations are reasonable and a sumptuously, elegantly played *Preludio* followed by Ghiaurov's noble intoning of the gods' will and Domingo's golden toned 'Celeste Aida' all augur well for the performance as a whole. Obraztsova certainly has the amplitude, range and booming lower register to negotiate the role of Amneris successfully, even if her timbre is rather plummy; like Cossotto, she presents a formidable Princess but can lighten her tone for key points such as, for example, her initial appeal to Aida to open her heart to her. Raimondi makes a light but grave and steady, King. Even the minor, supporting roles are taken by celebrated singers – but then, we hit trouble. Unfortunately, Aida was never Ricciarelli's role; despite the sweetness of her tone she never developed her lower register sufficiently to anchor the voice in the spinto mode and her small soprano sounds alarmingly over-parted when required to soar aloft and dominate chorus and orchestra, when a tell-tale beat obtrudes. She is often reduced to piping and warbling as opposed to open, full-throated singing and the contrast between her feeble instrument and Obraztsova's stentorian delivery is marked. Her top C in 'O patria mia' is a quavery embarrassment. Nucci is tolerable but also over-sings and even at this early stage of his career has already begun to acquire the habit of approaching high notes by starting a fifth beneath them then hoisting up his vocal cords like baggy drawers until he eventually hits the required pitch.

That central casting weakness compromises an otherwise promising and admirable enterprise, and cannot be overlooked. Hamlet without the Prince.

Lorin Maazel - 1985-86 (studio; digital) Decca
Orchestra & Chorus - Teatro alla Scala

Aida - Maria Chiara
Radamès - Luciano Pavarotti
Amneris - Ghena Dimitrova
Amonasro - Leo Nucci
Ramphis - Paata Burchuladze
Il Re di Egitto - Luigi Roni
Una Sacerdotessa - Madelyn Renée
Un Messaggero - Ernesto Gavazzi

A syrupy overture provokes impatience in the listener, lovely though the orchestral playing is and one wonders of Maazel is going to be in one of his wilful, stop-go, making-a-point moods; he does tend throughout to be too leisurely and make a meal of phrasing when more propulsion is in order, then he sometimes accelerates alarmingly and self-consciously; it's not too irksome but certainly everything first seems a bit low-key and even dreary. It doesn't help that the voices are placed so forward in the soundscape.

We first hear Burchuladze's in big, imposing voice but his occluded Italian and wayward pitch contrast tellingly with the brightness of Pavarotti's tenor and articulation. Pavarotti's tenor isn't really the right voice for the role, but he is on record as saying that he took Björling's example as an indication that he, too, could sing it in that manner with his leaner, lighter timbre, and he has a point. I certainly enjoy his sound, even if a few mannerisms by this stage of his career are creeping into his singing; the clarity of his diction and the penetrating quality of his tone are still a joy, and he is one of the tenors to hit that top B flat square on then rein back his voice in a beautifully controlled "morendo" as Verdi stipulated. He does many beautiful things, especially in the Acts 3 and 4 duets with Aida, including some lovely soft singing.

I'm not sure about Dimitrova's Amneris: the vibrato has loosened a little and she doesn't really have the mezzo depth required, being essentially a dramatic soprano – although she definitely has a

developed lower register. Her lisped “s” is a little distracting, too, but let that pass; she’s not the first singer to have that minor handicap. She makes little of her words at first, but, in common with the performance as a whole, becomes more animated as the opera proceeds and by Act 4 is much more involved, such that her confrontational duet with Radamès and subsequent bitter lament are dramatically and vocally very effective.

The size and volume of Chiara’s voice on her first entry takes the listener by surprise. Some have observed that she might better have been recorded as *Aida* some ten years or so earlier, but she is only in her mid-forties here and vastly experienced, even if she never quite made the front rank of international sopranos. She is unafraid to dip into a sizeable lower register and has a proper *Aida* voice; her manner is grand and impassioned. Her timbre is very similar to that of Mirella Freni but she has more heft at her command and makes particularly adept use of portamenti. Luigi Roni is a mite rockier and hoarser than when he recorded the King for Muti over a decade earlier but he’ll do. But then Leo Nucci is on hand to blot proceedings. The tell-tale flaws in his singing were already beginning to be in evidence when he recorded *Amonasro* for Abbado four years earlier; the scooping before high notes is now entrenched, the sound is now very woolly and the bleat becoming more pronounced; it is also noticeable how much bigger than his Chiara’s voice sounds when they duet in Act 3, despite the forward placement, he is drowned by the orchestra and her soprano.

In short, this is a mixed bag; the waywardness of the conducting and the dullness of some of the singing militate against the commitment and beauty of Pavarotti’s and Chiara’s contribution, but for some that will be attraction enough.

James Levine – 1990 (studio; digital) Sony
Orchestra & Chorus - Metropolitan Opera

Aida - Aprile Millo
Radamès - Plácido Domingo
Amneris - Dolora Zajick
Amonasro - James Morris
Ramphis - Samuel Ramey
Il Re di Egitto - Terry Cook
Una Sacerdotessa - Hei-Kyung Hong
Un Messaggero - Charles Anthony

Fine sound, energised conducting and the best cast which could then be assembled gave this set every advantage but ultimately it falls short of the best and remains strangely unmemorable. Domingo, still in fine voice, essays his third and final studio recording of Radamès, this time shortening the B flat at the end of his opening aria and dropping the octave. He displays remarkable consistency, although the voice is more mature than of yore, with a little of the gleam gone and a tendency to turn edgy at climactic points like “Sacerdote, io resto a te”, but it is still attractive, even if I don’t like the way he croons the first part and much else of the Tomb Scene. Aprile Millo is competent, with considerable heft but still oddly anonymous as *Aida*, and has something of a beat in her tone, with a bumpy line and a screechy top – except when she sings *pianissimo*, when the high notes float nicely. Dolora Zajick was feted as Amneris but I can’t hear what the fuss was about. She hasn’t the fullest tone, singing too often in a cloudy mixed register instead of a properly defined and resonant upper or lower voice, hence top notes are squeezed and low ones “phoney dark”, as if grafted on rather than properly integrated. As with Millo, I find her bland compared with fruitier voiced predecessors. Ramey makes a sonorous Ramphis but both Terry Cook and James Morris sound woolly; Morris’ nasal bass-baritone and wooden characterisation are all wrong for *Amonasro*, lacking the Italianate edge and bite required. Charles Anthony is briefly dreadful as the Messenger. All in all, despite Levine’s sensitive and well-paced conducting, this is a disappointing recording of little distinction.

Nikolaus Harnoncourt – 2001 (studio; digital) Teldec

Orchestra - Wiener Philharmoniker

Chorus - Arnold Schönberg Chor

Aida - Cristina Gallardo-Domás

Radamès - Vincenzo La Scola

Amneris - Olga Borodina

Amonasro - Thomas Hampson

Ramphis - Matti Salminen

Il Re di Egitto - László Polgár

Una Sacerdotessa - Dorothea Röschmann

Un Messaggero - Kurt Streit

With the exception of Borodina, who has somewhat of the heft to sing Amneris, even though she seems cowed here and needs to apply more lower register to key phrases, the casting and orchestral playing here produces the aural equivalent of looking at Everest through the wrong end of a telescope; everything is diminished and small-scale, yet this is undeniably an opera with epic qualities and cannot be played as intimate, kitchen-sink drama. The thin, vibrato-free strings of the Prelude belie that we are hearing the VPO but then suddenly the whole orchestra kicks in forte and the contrasting effect is rather startling. The Baroque-style playing throughout is plain weird and so are the first two voices we hear: Salminen's lumpy, nasal, dull-toned Ramphis is all wrong and La Scola's husky whispering is wholly unheroic; his top flaps, his vibrato is too loose and his tone lacks centre. There is little tension in his first, jockeying encounter with Amneris, as Harnoncourt keeps pulling the tempo about strangely. It's all stop-go and that is his approach throughout, resulting in the listener being jostled and jolted from phrase to phrase. Cristina Gallardo-Domás starts badly, clucking sounding like a worried hen with occluded vowels, a wobbly top and a scooping attack on phrases; hers is no true Aida voice. László Polgár's woolly tone is un-Italianate and Thomas Hampson is a disaster as Amonasro: he sounds more like Germont père than a grizzled warrior, with nary a hint of steel in his plaintive croon. My advice is to avoid this unidiomatic oddity like the proverbial; it's a travesty.

Antonio Pappano – 2015 (studio; digital) Warner

Orchestra e Coro dell'Accademia di Santa Cecilia

Aida – Anja Harteros

Radamès – Jonas Kaufmann

Amneris – Ekaterina Semenchuk

Amonasro – Ludovic Tézier

Ramphis – Erwin Schrott

Il Re di Egitto – Marco Spotti

Una Sacerdotessa – Eleonora Buratto

Un Messaggero – Paolo Fanale

This release was greeted with enthusiasm in some quarters but equally some reviewers took a much broader, more historical, comparative and contextual approach to evaluating it and sounded a note of caution - and I find myself among them. For all that I have admired Jonas Kaufmann, especially in his recital albums, I have for some years now thought that his true Fach no longer lies in Verdi: the sound is too thick, without the squillo of a true Verdi tenor and which Jon Vickers, whom Kaufmann partially resembles, retained longer into his career. He can still sing Radamès admirably, especially in the context of today's dearth of similarly voiced tenors, but the cloudiness and heft of his tone point increasingly towards greater suitability for Wagnerian roles. There is a special pleasure in hearing his successful execution of the diminuendo B flat closing 'Celeste Aida' but I actually miss the excitement of hearing it belted and understand why generations of tenors have ignored Verdi's instructions. There is also a danger of Kaufmann's soft singing approaching the dreaded crooning, which big voices are

tempted into when they want to avoid sounding too unsubtle and the glottal catch which sometimes breaks his line is too often apparent.

This is a very human *Aida* and absolutely beautifully played by Pappano and the orchestra dell'Accademia Nazionale di Santa Cecilia; time and again Pappano finds nuances of colour and dynamics missed by more gung-ho conductors - but we do need the gung-ho element, too, and sometimes proceedings are just a bit polite. It is also the case that the recording favours the voices quite unnaturally, masking the orchestra too much and artificially pumping up what are in all honesty several voices a size too small for their roles - Harnoncourt had the same problem in his controversial recording.

Regarding Kaufmann's co-singers, I'm afraid none can hold a candle to illustrious predecessors for vocal splendour, amplitude or intensity. Harteros is feeling and committed but the essential quality of her sound is rather grainy and even screechy; she is clearly taxed by the legato and long line of Pappano's leisurely tempo in 'O patria mia' and the sheer size of what is one Big Sing; her top C is nasty, too. Turn to Price or Tebaldi or Caballé to hear what is missing.

The same goes for Ekaterina Semenchuk, who is a competent Amneris with a serviceable lower register but sounds decidedly B-list in comparison with great exponents like Cossotto, Dalis, Bumbry, Gorr, Simionato, Dominguez, Stignani et al. Ludovic Tézier is a decent but wholly bland and rather windy Amonasro, hardly memorable when you have Cornell MacNeill, Bastianini, Milnes and Merrill ringing in your ears and singing out with much greater energy. The King is a somewhat undistinguished wobbler. Finally, the same goes for Ramfis: Schrott hasn't the heft or vocal personality to rival Ghiaurov, Vinco and Giaiotti and cannot roll out those big phrases as smoothly as they, even if he is suitably grave and steady - but who buys a new recording of *Aida* primarily for the High Priest?

Perhaps it is unfair to modern singers to play this constant game of ongoing comparison but this *Aida* demands to be assessed as a recording, not a live performance; as such, it's only fair to inform prospective purchasers that unless they either must have Kaufmann, as today's premier tenor, or somewhat perversely want a more intimate approach to what is to me the archetypal "Grand Opera" in every sense, then there are many preferable alternatives.

Recommendations

There was a glut of mono *Aida* recordings made in Italy in the 50's, beginning with a studio version conducted by Alberto Paoletti made in 1950, which I have not yet been able to hear, then those reviewed above: Gui in 1951, Erede in 1952, two from Perlea and Serafin in 1955 and another under Questa in 1956. Every one of them has great merit, although the collector will ideally want stereo sound. That section of the catalogue has long been dominated by accounts made on the EMI and RCA labels in the prolific mini-Golden Age of studio recording in the 60's and 70's. There are no singers today capable of matching the artists we hear in those recordings, so I am hardly required to issue a spoiler alert before saying that, as so often in these surveys, my short list of recommendations features nothing later than 1974, which was when my top choice was recorded, forty-five years ago as I write, and none of my selections will be a surprise to anybody.

As an appendix, I mention three live recordings of great merit, worthy of consideration as supplements to a studio account; they, too are from that same era.

Historical mono: **Molajoli 1928**

Studio mono: **Erede 1952; Serafin 1955**

Studio stereo: **Muti, 1974***; **Solti 1961; Karajan 1959**

First choice*

Live (not reviewed here): **Capuana 1954** (mono) La Fenice, Preiser; **Schick 1962** (mono), New York, Walhall, Myto; **Abbado 1972** (stereo), Milan, Frequenz, Opera d'Oro, Myto