

Verdi's *Otello* - A partial discographical survey

by Ralph Moore

Before I began this survey, I had little idea just how many recordings of *Otello* were available. There are in fact well over two hundred, so I cannot even begin to aim for comprehensiveness, and while I am always happy to learn of an especially well-performed version, I hope any readers will refrain from castigating me for not being more inclusive. There was an explosion of live recordings from the 1960's onwards, many of which are similar and in mediocre sound, making it all but impossible to differentiate meaningfully amongst them all, but there is also a total of twelve studio recordings, making consideration of those, at least, perfectly feasible, in combination with an assessment of what I hope is a judicious selection of live performances and radio broadcasts. In my pruning, I have applied certain criteria: they must be sung in Italian and in reasonable sound, and I have excluded any made by artists before they reached artistic maturity or which duplicate recordings made earlier in their career when they were in better, fresher voice. There are, for example, scores of live recordings of Del Monaco; buried in his *Otello* costume when he died in 1982, the "Brass Bull of Milan" supposedly claimed to have sung the role 427 times during a career of thirty-five years, which is surely an exaggeration. The true figure is probably something over two hundred, but, in any case, still points to the necessity of being selective and even ruthless in identifying the best. Vickers, similarly, sang the role over a hundred times in more than twenty years, but both tenors also made two studio recordings each, which should theoretically help narrow the field a little.

There were great exponents before the advent of the recording era and during its infancy when it was not practicable to record the opera in its entirety and those who have left us excerpts are names to conjure with: Tamagno, Zenatello, Zanelli – and Caruso, who, when he died, was studying it for the new production the Met was planning to mount for him; he would surely have been the greatest *Otello* ever. Fortunately, he left us two tantalising recordings, "Ora e per sempre addio" and "Sì, pel ciel marmoreo, giuro!", the latter made with the great Titta Ruffo. Another priceless excerpt is the love duet with Francesco Merli and Claudia Muzio, but I am concerned here with complete recordings. The most celebrated and frequently encountered *Otellos* in that category are Martinelli, Vinay, Del Monaco and Vickers; others might add McCracken, Cossutta and Domingo. The latter performed it prolifically, like Del Monaco singing it over two hundred times, and made three studio recordings; I greatly respect both him and his *Otello* but am not convinced that his was ever the definitive performance, as much as I enjoy his recordings. To that roll call of the best, I would add Giacomini, and, on the evidence of clips on YouTube of two live performances in the 80's, Franco Bonisolli; the failure to record his *Otello* in its entirety is posterity's loss.

Otello is the Everest of dramatic tenor roles and an exponent the equal of those illustrious forebears has not emerged in our own age. Its undertaking is fraught with peril, as demonstrated by Carlo Bergonzi's attempt late in his career – admittedly at the age of 75, he having previously wisely avoided it. José Cura made the role his own for a few years from the late 90's but his voice did not endure; even though he continues to sing the role it long ago started to resemble the noise an old car trying to start on a winter's morning, the pulse is so exaggerated – and he is still only in his mid-fifties. Ben Heppner took the mantle upon himself for a brief while and made a creditable job of it when I heard him live, but vocal problems, including cracking, soon made him drop it; I heard Jonas Kaufmann in a respectable but, like Heppner, not especially involving performance at Covent Garden (available on DVD) and a studio recording is not now likely. Their experience makes the longevity and achievement of such as Del Monaco, Vickers and Domingo all the more remarkable.

The opera is not all about the eponymous anti-hero; a great Iago is an indispensable prerequisite of a satisfying performance. Those baritones with the heft, charisma and acting skill to qualify include: Granforte, Tibbett, Valdengo, Warren, Taddei, Gobbi, Milnes and Manuguerra. While a pretty and affecting Desdemona who is also a good actor is undoubtedly an asset, the role is not as much of a gift as it might appear; she is not just a wilting flower and the vocal demands upon her range from the

declaratory, in the ensembles, to the supremely lyrical, as in the “Willow Song” and “Ave Maria”. Great sopranos attracted by it feature such stellar names as Rethberg, Tebaldi, Freni and Margaret Price.

We are fortunate in that *Otello* has attracted the greatest conductors, including some who had direct links with Verdi and its premiere; Barbirolli's father and grandfather played in the La Scala orchestra alongside Toscanini on cello in its 1887 with the composer conducting, although unfortunately his studio recording was not a success; much better are the live performances from Ettore Panizza, who conducted alongside Toscanini at La Scala and Votto, who was long Toscanini's assistant at La Scala; Alberto Erede studied at the Verdi Conservatory in Milan and so on; performance traditions were bound to be continuous with such connections.

The libretto is a masterly adaptation by Boito of Shakespeare's original; it is taut, spare and poetic; the additions, such as Iago's “Credo”, devised to strengthen his motivation, are very intelligently conceived. The opera requires no cuts to maintain tension, although Karajan habitually did so in the Act 2 children's chorus – which I regret, as it is a pretty tune and provides some contrasting light relief – and again in the Act 3 ensemble, but the opera is perfect in pacing and duration as it stands – in my experience, providing an ideal entertainment of an albeit unavoidably harrowing tale.

I consider thirty-five recordings below. The last studio recording was made as long ago as 1996; everything since – forty or so recordings - is live and in my estimation nothing much in that subsequent output competes with what came before, least of all recordings by tenors Cura, Galouzine, Heppner or Botha, not because they are necessarily bad (although Cura is) but more because they are often no more than competent – no mean feat in itself in such a challenging opera – and generally neither very exciting nor especially well partnered compared with preceding recordings. I appreciate that makes me look like a moaning old curmudgeon, but there it is. I want to be thrilled by my favourite Verdi opera, not mildly diverted or simply grateful that a performer can sing the notes.

The Recordings

Carlo Sabajno - 1931-32 (studio; mono) Opera d'Oro; Preiser

Orchestra - Teatro alla Scala

Chorus - Teatro alla Scala

Otello - Nicola Fusati

Desdemona - Maria Carbone

Iago - Apollo Granforte

Cassio - Piero Girardi

Rodrigo - Nello Palai

Lodovico - Corrado Zambelli

Montano - Enrico Spada

Emilia - Tamara Beltacchi

In surprisingly good sound – very little worse than a live, mono recording from the 50's with good, audible bass (coming through clearly, for example, in Iago's “Bevi con me!” chorus) and not much distortion on high notes – this is really enjoyable if you listen with a will. There are cuts and it runs very fast, but given that Sabajno was a La Scala regular as well as the Gramophone Company's chief conductor, this tense, hard-driven performance is presumably how audiences were accustomed to hearing the work played by an orchestra already habituated to ways of Toscanini and Panizza. Many passages, including the love duet, are a bit rushed for modern tastes, but better than undue soupiness.

It might be argued that the splendidly named Apollo Granforte has too noble a sound for Iago but his is the stand-out performance here - smooth, subtle and insidious with an easy top and wonderfully controlled soft singing, as in his repeated advice to Otello, "Vigilate!" or his sinister reminder "il fazzoletto" – but he is equally capable of rolling out big phrases as in "Ecco il Leone!". The rest of the cast is estimable, even their names are hardly remembered. A well-drilled chorus and a really sharp, well-coordinated orchestra complete a thoroughly expert ensemble; try the orchestral prelude to Act 3, which is so beautifully gauged. Fusati is not the baritone type of Otello we have become increasingly accustomed to: he has a rather hard, nasal tenor and he occasionally snatches at top notes and phrases but he has plenty of penetration and is clearly immersed in the role. Maria Carbone is a well-schooled soprano, with a voice even throughout its range, lovely of tone with a fast vibrato, even if she is not especially individual.

This is rather obviously a studio recording, with Emilia bellowing "Aprite!" standing right next to Otello when she is supposed to be telling him to open the door and let her in, but the upside of that is the immediacy of the voices and even the orchestra is surprisingly detailed. If you are tolerant of vintage sound, this is very rewarding.

Ettore Panizza – 1938 (live; mono) Myto; Naxos

Orchestra - Metropolitan Opera

Chorus - Metropolitan Opera

Otello - Giovanni Martinelli

Desdemona - Elisabeth Rethberg

Iago - Lawrence Tibbett

Cassio - Nicholas Massue

Rodrigo - Giordano Paltrinieri

Lodovico - Nicola Moscona

Montano - George Cehanovsky

Emilia - Thelma Votipka

Un Araldo - Wilfred Engelman

This being live, the recording quality is not as good as the preceding studio recording under Sabajno; the orchestral and choral music is very harsh and blaring with swish and uncomfortable shatter on loud, high passages of ensemble but this preserves one of the great performances of the century and as such will appeal to those habituated to vintage sound. Tibbett is barely audible in the opening storm scene – not the fault of his voice – but Martinelli's "Esultate" comes through.

Panizza's electrifying, Toscanini-style conducting – actually absurdly fast in the "Vittoria!" and the "Fuoco d gioia!" of the opening scene - Martinelli's steely, trumpeting tenor, Rethberg's pure-voiced Desdemona and Tibbett's sly, sonorous arch-villain, his persuasiveness amplified by Tibbett's unique ability to vary and grade the speed of his vibrato according to the colour and emotion he wanted to inject into his tone, make this an *Otello* for the ages. Even the supporting roles are superlative, including a properly virile Cassio.

Martinelli's very hard sound is an acquired taste and for me the greater glories of this recording are Tibbett's incomparably seductive Iago and Rethberg's limpid tone coupled with seamless *legato*; this is the best cast and sung of the four Met live recordings with Martinelli, although the Guild "Immortal Performances" issue of the one from 1940 is in better sound; the only caveats here are Panizza' haste and the trying sound, which reduce this to the oxymoronic status of "indispensable supplement."

Arturo Toscanini – 1947 (live, composite radio broadcast; mono) RCA; Guild; Urania; Cantus, Naxos; Aura
Orchestra - NBC Symphony Orchestra
Chorus - NBC Chorus

Otello - Ramón Vinay
Desdemona - Herva Nelli
Iago - Giuseppe Valdengo
Cassio - Virginio Assandri
Rodrigo - Leslie Chabay
Lodovico - Nicola Moscona
Montano - Arthur Newman
Emilia - Nan Merriman

Clean, undistorted, slightly removed mono sound with no virtually no hiss or extraneous noise and considerably better sound than the live Met recordings, proves no barrier to appreciating the drive and mastery of this composite recording which has long enjoyed cult status among devotees of *Otello*; it was certainly one which captured my imagination the first time I heard it. It provides one of two opportunities to hear Ramón Vinay in a signature role long before his reversion to the baritone *Fach*. Not everyone likes Vinay's cloudy, forceful Otello but I like its virile, heroic quality and think his slightly effortful production conveys the nervous tension and internal conflict of the character. In both live recordings, Vinay is partnered by baritones of superlative quality in Valdengo, here giving the performance of his life, and Warren under Busch, reviewed next. Valdengo's baritone is not as big and steely as that of Tibbett or Granforte but he was clearly coached and inspired by Toscanini into giving an interpretation of great nuance and his clean, focused tone with its fast vibrato is a joy. It is also true that in neither recording is the Desdemona of the highest quality, but Nelli is never less than satisfactory. Toscanini's unswerving attachment to her was questionable when he could have his pick of great, contemporaneous sopranos but she is secure and touching and gives one of her best performances here, sounding youthful and vulnerable but not without backbone. The supporting cast is first-rate.

Toscanini is as equally capable of moulding the lyrical sections with lyrical passion as he is of injecting the *stretto* passages with thrilling intensity. This remains a prime recommendation.

Fritz Busch – 1948 (live; mono) Preiser; Arkadia; Membran
Orchestra - Metropolitan Opera
Chorus - Metropolitan Opera

Otello - Ramón Vinay
Desdemona - Licia Albanese
Iago - Leonard Warren
Cassio - John Garris
Rodrigo - Thomas Hayward
Lodovico - Nicola Moscona
Montano - Clifford Harvuot
Emilia - Martha Lipton
Un Araldo - Philip Kinsman

This really is very similar to the almost exactly contemporaneous recording by Toscanini, and not just because it stars Ramón Vinay and is from New York. Conductor Fritz Busch might have been a product of the German tradition but he conducts with the thrust typical of his Italian peers. Vinay is if anything in even finer voice than he was for Toscanini and his interpretation has deepened, and Warren is every bit as interesting as Valdengo but with a rather more glamorous and individual voice; on the other

hand, the live stage sound here is inferior to Toscanini's concert broadcast, there seems constantly to be someone chatting in the background apart from the prompter, and Licia Albanese's Desdemona, although very steadily vocalised, with lovely *legato* has a rather brittle quality and she doesn't sound as youthful as Nelli, who is more touching.

On balance, therefore, Vinay's performance from the previous year is just preferable, although fans of Leonard Warren, in particular, will want to hear this.

Antonino Votto – 1950 (live; mono) Myto
Orchestra - Teatro Colón (Buenos Aires)
Chorus - Teatro Colón (Buenos Aires)

Otello - Mario Del Monaco
Desdemona - Delia Rigal
Iago - Carlos Guichandut
Cassio - Eugenio Valori
Rodrigo - Umberto di Toto
Lodovico - Jorge Dantón
Montano - Pindaro Hounau
Emilia - Emma Brizzi
Un Araldo - Dulio de Matthaëis

This was Del Monaco's first *Otello*, so I include it for purposes of comparison and historical interest but must straight away say that the sound quality is such as to disqualify it as a recommendation; it can be of interest only to the opera buff as a supplement to another recording by Del Monaco in better sound.

That sound here is distorted – so much so that harp at the close of the love duet sounds like a glass harmonica - and wavering, with pitch all over the place, very like Delia Rigal's soprano in the love duet; she's awful and doesn't improve much. I found her to be something of a liability in the Met "Don Carlo" with Björling, and here her lack of line and steadiness is again a liability. There is a big cut in Act 3 and the first bar of music in Act 4 has been lost. Del Monaco is intent upon displaying the power of his voice, shouting "sibilante STRAL" most unmusically and hanging on to the big notes. Baritone Carlos Guichandut – himself an *Otello* when he retrained a few years later - takes his cue from Del Monaco and goes for broke; his manner of delivering "in man di CASSIO" suggests that he is indeed a tenor in disguise and the vibrancy of his vocalisation means that his voice keeps threatening to get away from him and turn sharp. As noise, it's thrilling and it must have been exciting to have been there; as artistry, the performance is more questionable. Eventually, Del Monaco would bring considerably more refinement and subtlety to his portrayal without sacrificing vocal amplitude. His death is simply hammy. I wonder whether Votto resisted or was complicit in all this. Judging by his conducting of the later performance at La Scala in 1954, the former, but to no effect. Moving on...

Wilhelm Furtwängler – 1951 (live; mono) EMI; Opera d'Oro; Orfeo
Orchestra - Wiener Philharmoniker
Chorus - Wiener Staatsoper

Otello - Ramón Vinay
Desdemona - Carla (Dragica) Martinis
Iago - Paul Schöffler
Cassio - Anton Dermota
Rodrigo - August Jaresch
Lodovico - Josef Greindl
Montano - Georg Monthy
Emilia - Sieglinde Wagner

Great admirer of Furtwängler though I am, I account this performance as mainly a misfire, if not a dud. It is not helped by the distant, scratchy sound, even on the Orfeo remastering, which just smooths it out by making it duller and even more remote. The conducting is portentous and lacks spring; Verdi was not Furtwängler's strong suit and here sounds like Wagner. The great Paul Schöffler is totally miscast as Iago, sounding labouring, ponderous and – well, Germanic. Carla Martinis makes a poor start as Desdemona, singing with poor breath control and nasal tone and making rhythmical errors in the duet; she gradually warms up to deliver a better Willow Song and Ave Maria, but there is no creaminess in her voice. Vinay is Vinay but he clearly wants to inject more pace into proceedings than his conductor will allow and you may hear him to far greater advantage – indeed he is partially inaudible in the love duet – and in better company in the other two recordings reviewed above.

I refer you to my MWI colleague [Simon Thompson's review](#), as we are in agreement and I need not belabour the point.

Moving on again...

Alberto Paoletti – 1951 (studio; mono) Preiser
Orchestra - Teatro dell'Opera di Roma
Chorus - Teatro dell'Opera di Roma

Otello - Gino Sarri
Desdemona - Anna La Polla
Iago - Antonio Manca Serra
Cassio - Athos Cesarini
Rodrigo - Mino Russo
Lodovico - Carlo Platania
Montano - Virgilio Stocco
Emilia - Ada Landi

Only the second studio recording since the first appeared twenty years before it, this is typical of Italian productions of that era, many of which appeared on the Cetra label but in this case the recorded on the Urania label in close, rather shrill mono which can overload. It employs good house singers, whose names have not necessarily endured; the only one I recognise is Athos Cesarini who makes a really positive, manly Cassio, rather than the usual fey fop. Everyone has first-rate diction, as one might hope and expect from an all-Italian cast.

Turning to the principal singers, Sarri is a decent, powerful tenor with the right sound but a rather unvaried manner and at times his vibrato almost turns into a tremolo; he certainly has his moments, though. The Iago has an attractive, aptly sinister, "old-fashioned" timbre which sometimes reminds me of Rolando Panerai. He is short on top notes and the voice, like Sarri's, can turn fluttery – but I prefer that to a beat or a wobble. Anna La Polla has a big, grainy soprano which sounds as if she was more of a verismo specialist, and, like both Sarri, and Manca Serra, she lacks nuance. She also tends to edge south of the note as soon as she attempts to sing softly but she makes a successful effort to grade and vary her tone in her two big arias at the end and thereby rises in my estimation.

The orchestra and chorus are sharp and lively, and Paoletti's direction is highly competent, very much in the Italian tradition to which you will be accustomed if you know other recordings of the era. There are cuts in Acts 2 and 3. This would once have formed a fair introduction to the opera but has long been superseded by superior alternatives.

Antonino Votto – 1954 (live; mono) Melodram

Orchestra - Teatro alla Scala

Chorus - Teatro alla Scala

Otello - Mario Del Monaco

Desdemona - Renata Tebaldi

Iago - Leonard Warren

Cassio - Giuseppe Zampieri

Lodovico - Giorgio Tozzi

Emilia - Anna Maria Canali

If it were not for the studio recordings and just one or two tolerable live recordings featuring the artists here, I would yet again be crying into my prosecco; this is yet another muddy, distorted live recording in which you can just about hear that the trio of principals of Del Monaco, Tebaldi and Warren is virtually unbeatable - furthermore, Votto has been able to restore the cuts made in Buenos Aires four years earlier. The consistency of Del Monaco's numerous performances, once he had achieved artistic maturity, is remarkable and Votto is more energised than I recall hearing him anywhere, backed by a really committed chorus and orchestra. Giuseppe Zampieri makes a strong, if rather over-vibrant, Cassio and Tozzi is luxury casting as Lodovico. Insofar as I can hear him clearly, Warren is just a little lumpen in the vibrato department compared with earlier outings but his tone is sonorous and his characterisation intrinsically devious and insidious. The singing is sublime – especially Tebaldi in freshest voice - but considerable detail is lost in the sonic mush here and you can hear the same artists in a considerably better sound under Stiedry and Cleva at the Met in subsequent years (see below).

Alberto Erede – 1954 (studio; stereo) Decca

Orchestra - Santa Cecilia

Chorus - Santa Cecilia

Otello - Mario Del Monaco

Desdemona - Renata Tebaldi

Iago - Aldo Protti

Cassio - Piero De Palma

Rodrigo - Angelo Mercuriali

Lodovico - Fernando Corena

Montano - Pier Luigi Latinucci

Emilia - Luisa Ribacchi

Un Araldo - Dario Caselli

I'm never quite sure why this recording doesn't get a look in when critics compare it to the later, 1960, Karajan set with the same principals. Yes, it's rough in parts but that's precisely what gives it the feeling of a live performance and you get the advantages of studio sound – so welcome after so many frustrating, live, mono recordings - with all the spontaneity of a stage production; it's all thrills and visceral emotion. All three main singers here are six years younger, hence fresher and more powerful than in the Karajan studio recording. The occasional unsteadiness in del Monaco's emission of tone could be said to anticipate Otello's eventual mental breakdown and Tebaldi is sweeter at the top of her voice than she was to become. Protti's no Gobbi - still less a Tibbett – and is habitually compared to his coevals much to his disadvantage, but the basic quality of voice is attractive and he does characterize successfully; he certainly does not let the side down. This recording is in bright 1954 stereo and really delivers. Erede is under-estimated as journeyman; his conducting here has the same driven quality as his live performance in Tokyo five years later. This set is cheap and strongly sung, too; furthermore, the score is uncut. This deserves high praise as a direct, honest and compelling realisation in the best Italian tradition.

Tullio Serafin – 1954 [live radio broadcast; mono] Myto; GOP

Orchestra - RAI Milano

Chorus - RAI Milano

Otello - Mario Del Monaco

Desdemona - Onelia Fineschi

Iago - Renato Capecchi

Cassio - Mario Carlin

Rodrigo - Vittorio Pandano

Lodovico - Dario Caselli

Montano - Leonardo Monreale

Emilia - Bruna Ronchini

Un Araldo - Piero Poldi

Once again, we run up against the problem of distorted sound and a lot of background radio interference effectively disqualifying this as a recommendation, no matter how good the performance – and it really is good, with Del Monaco in sovereign voice, the under-rated Capecchi commanding, if with a baritone rather tipped towards bass colouring, and the relatively unknown Onelia Fineschi singing a surprisingly strong Desdemona. She vocalises very competently with great poise and control, injecting considerable pathos and tenderness into her singing but with, at times, a vibrato just a touch too broad for my taste and displaying nothing like the transcendent artistry of Tebaldi the following year at the Met. Del Monaco has now been singing *Otello* for four years and has made his first studio recording, so as a result is far more attentive to the composer's markings, singing softly as required and being less inclined to grandstand indiscriminately: his line is steadier, the gradations of tone smoother and more controlled. Capecchi matches him in the care he bestows upon enunciation and inflection of the text; m problem with him is that he simply sounds too grand and authoritative, more high priest or king than slimy schemer. Attractive *secondo tenore* Mario Carlin makes a strong Cassio and Serafin is more animated than he was to become in his studio recording with Jon Vickers six years later, by which time he was over eighty.

Neither Capecchi nor Fineschi, as good as they both are, conforms precisely to my ideal and Del Monaco may be heard in just as fine voice and in better sonics elsewhere, although it is always surprising how quickly the listener can adapt to and listen through the mediocre sound. Serafin includes the Act III ballet music here.

Fritz Stiedry – 1955 (live; mono) Opera Lovers; Cantus; Walhall

Orchestra - Metropolitan Opera

Chorus - Metropolitan Opera

Otello - Mario Del Monaco

Desdemona - Renata Tebaldi

Iago - Leonard Warren

Cassio - Paul Franke

Rodrigo - James McCracken

Lodovico - Luben Vichey

Montano - Osie Hawkins

Emilia - Martha Lipton

Un Araldo - Arthur Budney

Despite, some blare and shatter in loud, ensemble passages, this is in rather better sound than most of the recordings of Del Monaco's live performances in the 50's but is still no aural treat. This was Tebaldi's New York debut, too in a dream cast, more than competently directed by Fritz Stiedry, who is steadier than some of his predecessors, but not dull, even though the orchestra is quite recessed

compared with the voices. Del Monaco is rapturously applauded on his entrance and proceeds to do it again, as he did literally hundreds of times; he is in sovereign voice but also increasingly refined in his manner of encompassing the succession of Otello's moods, notably shading and grading his volume with a skill which negates the accusation that he was just a belter. Warren is sonorous and points the text persuasively, although, as I have remarked elsewhere, his vibrato is quite marked. He switches neatly from emollient flattery of Cassio to the venom of the "Credo" and his top notes are splendid. Paul Franke is clean-voiced, if hardly martial-sounding, Cassio and it is a surprise to hear the unmistakable tenor of a young James McCracken as Rodrigo, himself of course a celebrated Otello in later years if not much to my taste. Tebaldi's big, plush soprano pours out golden tone - never exactly subtle or verbally acute in the manner of Callas, but nor is she just a sound-machine; a kind of warmth suffuses her singing, and she was one of the few voices which could partner Del Monaco and match him for amplitude. Her "Willow Song" is a master-class in vocalism and channelled emotion; perhaps the most beautiful thing of hers on record.

Franco Capuana – 1955 (live radio broadcast; mono) Cetra/Warner Fonit
Orchestra - RAI Torino
Chorus - RAI Torino

Otello - Carlos Guichandut
Desdemona - Cesy Brogini
Iago - Giuseppe Taddei
Cassio - Angelo Mercuriali
Rodrigo - Tommaso Soley
Lodovico - Marco Stefanoni
Montano - Alberto Albertini
Emilia - Rina Corsi
Un Araldo - Mario Conti

You would hardly think that a mono recording from an essentially provincial Italian source sung - with the exception of Taddei - by lesser-known and certainly hardly remembered artists would merit serious consideration but this Cetra recording has a great deal going for it, especially when one considers that at least two of the voice types required here - the heroic Italian tenor and a true Verdi baritone - are in short supply today if barely extant.

Subtle it ain't - but it delivers this miraculous score with complete conviction. Everyone knows what he is doing and why; the listener is immediately struck by the verve and gusto of both the playing and singing, from the utterly secure orchestra whipping up enormous tension in the opening storm to the lusty chorus to soloists who act as an integrated team in service to the drama. Remember this is no studio recording but a one-off radio broadcast; as such, it is of extraordinary quality and the conductor Capuana is clearly completely at ease with the Verdian idiom.

For a recording sixty years old, the sound is remarkably good in this re-mastered release: no distortion in ensembles, plenty of heft in the power frequencies when sometimes recordings of this provenance are edgy and treble-biased. The acoustic is quite distant but reproduces the ambiance of the theatre.

This is an all-Italian production with the exception of Argentinian Carlos Maria Guichandut who, in good *Otello* tradition, had two years earlier retrained from baritone to tenor; he had previously sung Iago to del Monaco's Otello in the Teatro Colón in 1950. He had a big, powerful voice, is utterly secure and at times even introduces his own inflections into what is never a subtle performance but emerges as wholly convincing. He is anguished in his rage and stentorian in his declamation; the famously terrifying "Esultate" holds no fear for him. His tone can be a bit "throttled" but not unpleasantly so; the main weakness is in soft music, where he finds it difficult to soften and modulate his big voice.

Nonetheless, he amply demonstrates that despite del Monaco's pre-eminence in this role, he was not the only tenor to be able to deliver it very satisfactorily.

His Desdemona is the more than adequate Cesy Broggin, whose voice is on occasion just a little thin and tremulous and whose acting is rather anonymous, but she is musically scrupulous and also at times touching, singing softly and sweetly in her big scene opening the fourth Act. The supporting cast is adequate, too, if nothing special.

However, the real star here is Taddei in a role he never otherwise commercially recorded, although there are various live recordings, such as one in poor sound with del Monaco in Mexico City in 1951 (where singer-orchestra co-ordination goes badly awry in the "Sì, pel ciel") and another with Vinay in the Teatro Colón under Beecham in 1958. This is a masterly performance to rank alongside those of Tibbett, Warren, Gobbi and Valdengo. The voice itself is of course a beautiful instrument, biting and mellifluous by turns. His acting prowess meant that, like Gobbi, he was also singing Falstaff at this time: the combination of wonderful diction, an insinuating *mezza voce*, terrific bite and power in the big moments and admirable agility in passages such as the repeated "Beva" refrain in the Act I drinking song makes him a *lago* to relish.

This is a fast, driven account at 125 minutes. I hesitate to give it the highest recommendation but it has real artistic and historical worth, enshrining the only recording by an almost forgotten tenor and the only *lago* of a great baritone in very acceptable sound.

Tullio Serafin – 1958 (film soundtrack; mono) Gala
Orchestra - RAI Milano
Chorus - RAI Milano

Otello - Mario Del Monaco
Desdemona - Rosanna Carteri
Iago - Renato Capecchi
Cassio - Gino Matterna
Rodrigo - Athos Cesarini
Lodovico - Plinio Clabassi
Montano - Nestore Catalani
Emilia - Luisella Ciaffi Ricagno
Un Araldo - Bruno Cioni

This is the soundtrack for a film; you may buy the DVD on the Hardy label or the CDs on Gala. It is considerably cleaner and clearer than the many live recordings, though obviously not as good as the two stereo, studio options. The more intimate acoustic of film seems to have encouraged Del Monaco to give a more restrained portrayal and, as a consequence, more subtlety and artistry, too. His manner suits Carteri's warm, delicate Desdemona. She remains an under-rated artist, I think; her singing is of the unshowy kind which commands respect but does not necessarily much excite. Capecchi repeats the bluff, strong-voiced *Iago* we may hear in the RAI Milan live recording also under Serafin four years earlier (see above for my comments about him which equally apply here).

You may see clips of the black and white film on YouTube; Del Monaco and Carteri make a handsome couple, their personal allure matching the effulgence of their voices. I do not much enjoy watching filmed stage performances but this is a different matter, being properly filmed - albeit in fuzzy black and white - with closeups and proper sets, and discrete, mostly successful lip-synching; watching it with good headphones might be the most satisfying way of appreciating it, unless you prefer just the CDs.

Thomas Beecham – 1958 (live; mono) Golden Melodram; IDIS

Orchestra - Teatro Colón (Buenos Aires)
 Chorus - Teatro Colón (Buenos Aires)

Otello - Ramón Vinay
 Desdemona - Antonietta Stella
 Iago - Giuseppe Taddei
 Cassio - Italo Pasini
 Rodrigo - Umberto di Toto
 Lodovico - Giuseppe Modesti
 Montano - Guerrino Boschetti
 Emilia - Zaira Negroni
 Un Araldo - José Crea

I include this in my survey simply to warn off prospective buyers, understandably attracted to it by the cast and conductor. You can just about hear the verve and fierce, raw energy Beecham brings to the score but the sound is so fuzzy, distant and distorted as to disqualify it immediately. All orchestral and choral detail is subsumed into aural porridge; you cannot even hear Vinay's "Esultate" properly – although you can tell that Vinay, although still impressive, is labouring rather more than when he performed *Otello* for Toscanini and Busch a decade earlier. Stella makes a surprisingly forthright and full-voiced Desdemona, but of course she was a true spinto soprano, at home in verismo and the bigger Verdian roles like Elisabetta; I have always liked the smoky tang of her sound. The main attraction is Taddei's incisive Iago but that can be heard to much greater advantage in the 1955 broadcast under Capuana. This really isn't worth encountering unless you have a specific interest in hearing Beecham's electrifying conducting or Stella's admirable part in proceedings; it cannot be a general recommendation.

Fausto Cleva – 1958 (live, 8/3/58; mono/Ambient Stereo*) Myto; Pristine Audio*

Orchestra - Metropolitan Opera
 Chorus - Metropolitan Opera

Otello - Mario Del Monaco
 Desdemona - Victoria de los Ángeles
 Iago - Leonard Warren
 Cassio - Paul Franke
 Rodrigo - Charles Anthony
 Lodovico - Nicola Moscona
 Montano - Clifford Harvuot
 Emilia - Rosalind Elias

The mono sound here is a marked improvement over contemporaneous live recordings starring Del Monaco: remarkably full – so much so that you would think it was stereo, and indeed, if you buy Pristine's remastering, you can hear it in their "Ambient Stereo" which makes it sound even better, although it is still very good on the Myto mono release. The balance between voices and orchestra is excellent; instrumental detail comes through very acutely, and in general this considerably clearer, too, than the great Tokyo performance the following year. The prompter and applause occasionally intrude, as after Del Monaco's terrific "Esultate", but if you want one live performance of Del Monaco in best voice and you like his co-singers, this is by far the best option. I am torn between this and that recording conducted by Erede, but with regards to the conducting, there is nothing in it; both are thrilling and the chorus here is as sharp and animated as any I have heard anywhere. Personally, I marginally prefer Gobbi to Warren, whose Iago is vividly characterised but whose vibrato I find a little broad and loose compared with Gobbi's tight, finely focused sound; likewise, I find Victoria de los Ángeles, in a rare Met appearance, occasionally just a little limp and wavery in line and slightly shrill in higher-lying passages compared with Tucci or Tebaldi, but she gives a touching, very feminine portrayal

of the hapless Desdemona and the warmth in the middle of her voice is beguiling. Paul Franke repeats his sharply delineated, if hardly virile, Cassio and the rest of the cast is made up of Met regulars and a young Rosalind Elias as a rich-voiced Emilia. Del Monaco is, as ever, in sovereign voice; his consistency through his many live performances is extraordinary and he continually worked throughout his career on refining his depiction of Otello, so you find more subtleties here than earlier in the 50's. His B flat on "O gioia!" following "Dio! Mi potevi scagliar" is outrageously and thrillingly prolonged, then rapturously acclaimed by the audience.

Margarida Mota-Bull recently [reviewed the Pristine issue of this recording](#) admirably here. She confirms the excellence of both the performance and Pristine's remastering.

Fausto Cleva – 1958 (live, 20/12/58; mono) Omega Opera Archive

Orchestra - Metropolitan Opera

Chorus - Metropolitan Opera

Otello - Mario Del Monaco

Desdemona - Renata Tebaldi

Iago - Leonard Warren

Cassio - Paul Franke

Rodrigo - Charles Anthony

Lodovico - Nicola Moscona

Montano - Clifford Harvuot

Emilia - Martha Lipton

Un Araldo - Calvin Marsh

The mono sound here is nowhere near as good as the performance also conducted by Cleva earlier the same year; it is harsh and distant, and for some reason very biased towards the left channel. The cast is almost the same, except that Renata Tebaldi returns as Desdemona; I prefer her true spinto to de los Angeles' gentler, smaller soprano, but as you can have Tebaldi - in similarly mediocre sound - either in the 1955 live Met recording, also with Del Monaco and Warren, or indeed in either of Del Monaco's studio recordings, there is little point in opting for this one, especially as Del Monaco is in even finer, more secure voice in the March performance.

Alberto Erede – 1959 (live; mono) Opera 'Oro; Frequenz; Andromeda

Orchestra - NHK Symphony Orchestra

Chorus - Tokyo Broadcasting Chorus - NHK Italian Opera Chorus - Fujiwara Opera Chorus - Tokyo Boys' Choir

Otello - Mario Del Monaco

Desdemona - Gabriella Tucci

Iago - Tito Gobbi

Cassio - Mariano Caruso

Rodrigo - Gabriele De Julis

Lodovico - Plinio Clabassi

Montano - Takao Okamura

Emilia - Anna Di Stasio

Un Araldo - Giorgio Onesti

After years of listening to a wide variety of *Otello* recordings, studio and live, modern and historical, I was surprised and delighted to alight upon this classic performance – but that was before I had found the Met recording conducted by Cleva from the year previous to this, reviewed above.

First, although it's elderly enough to be classed as "historical", the sound is excellent, if rather too resonant, early stereo: full, spacious, vivid and immediate - you could be sitting in the front row stalls. (In fact, it's so good you find yourself admiring the prompter's contribution rather too often....)

Thus, it combines the drama and spontaneity of a live performance with close to (old) studio quality sound. There are stage noises, some sneezing, and the intrusion of our friend the prompter, but for the most part the audience are quiet except for some crass and inappropriate applause - for example, before the last exquisite notes of the love duet have finished. But this is all part and parcel of a live recording and the audience clearly appreciated that they were hearing something special.

Secondly, we have two of the greatest exponents of the roles of Otello and Iago at the peak of their form. I have never heard Gobbi so free and full of voice; even the often-quoted relative weakness of his top notes is not an issue here - he sings with total abandon and confidence and is in finer voice than his performances in the mid 60's, when intonation problems began to be very apparent. Del Monaco is as good as, if not better than, his 1954 studio recording with the same conductor, and certainly more thrilling than in the 1960 set with Karajan. Both artists take some liberties with the score in order to make dramatic points - but who cares when they are as effective as this? The chemistry between them makes those heart-wrenching exchanges between Iago and Otello more exciting than any other I have ever heard - and certainly a great deal more exciting than the rather subdued 1960 studio set under Serafin, with Vickers rather too controlled and Gobbi vocally past his best or out of sorts, or uninspired, only a year later than this flawless night. I still admire that recording - but this one is something else.

Tucci, too, is surprisingly good; touching and believable, with a lovely floated top to her voice, occasionally reminding me of Janowitz. The voice, per se, is undoubtedly beautiful; listen to her "Salce" - haunting and very tenderly controlled. Supporting parts are more than adequately cast. The chorus are vigorous and engaged. Erede - always under-rated - conducts a driven, whirlwind performance not unlike that of Toscanini.

OK; it's by no means flawless: ensemble sometimes goes to pot (both in the opening storm and in the "Si pel ciel", for example, when both singers and the orchestra are at odds with each other) and the orchestra isn't the Berlin Phil (very shaky 'cello and woodwind intonation for Otello's entrance in Act 4) - but these problems are only to be expected in such a pacy live performance and they add to the sense of danger. Indeed, I know of no other account of this masterpiece which propels you so inexorably and ineluctably towards the final catastrophe; the atmosphere is consistently febrile until that last, terrible Act, when, after the ominously beautiful interlude with Desdemona's prayer before bed, the pace picks up again, Otello suffocates Desdemona and suddenly, like a thunderbolt, the absurdity and horror of his actions strike Otello.

As long as you can tolerate the mediocre sound, you need to hear this wholly thrilling theatrical memento, showcasing three great voices on one very exciting night in Tokyo.

Tullio Serafin – 1960 (studio; stereo) RCA

Orchestra - Teatro dell'Opera di Roma

Chorus - Teatro dell'Opera di Roma

Otello - Jon Vickers

Desdemona - Leonie Rysanek

Iago - Tito Gobbi

Cassio - Florindo Andreolli

Rodrigo - Mario Carlin

Lodovico - Ferruccio Mazzoli

Montano - Franco Calabrese

Emilia - Miriam Pirazzini

It had been quite a few years since I had last listened to this recording when I re-acquainted myself with it, but it was an unexpected pleasure. It is perfectly possible to criticise the contribution of all three principal singers yet they sing with such conviction and dedication that it would be churlish to complain. Despite some vocal shortcomings, Vickers and Gobbi are at times so passionate, intense and committed that they sweep the listener along, but it is also true that occasionally Vickers seems oddly restrained. Leonie Rysanek, great artist though she was, is no-one's ideal Desdemona; her dusky, mature tone wavers and she sounds heavy in a manner that might make one wonder why RCA chose to cast her here, but she conveys the character's pain so feelingly and movingly that she convinces.

Serafin and the Rome Opera forces play to the manner born but that element of restraint in Vickers' singing also applies to Serafin's conducting which, while musical and admirable in its way, diminishes the visceral impact this work can generate. The supporting cast is not ideal: the Cassio is weedy sounding - Anthony Rolfe-Johnson is the most successful singer in that role in my experience - but that hardly matters. Nobody has ever inflected the text with such subtlety and flair as Gobbi even if his top notes are dry and although there are blips and stumbles in Vickers' declamation, he is searingly involving as the tortured anti-hero.

Herbert von Karajan – 1961 (studio; stereo) Decca

Orchestra - Wiener Philharmoniker

Chorus - Wiener Staatsoper - Wiener Kinderchor

Otello - Mario Del Monaco

Desdemona - Renata Tebaldi

Iago - Aldo Protti

Cassio - Nello Romanato

Rodrigo - Athos Cesarini

Lodovico - Fernando Corena

Montano - Tom Krause

Emilia - Ana Raquel Satra

I enjoy this excellent performance but I do not find it to be as thrilling as either of Erede's widely scorned interpretations. His earlier Decca account (initially issued in mono; now re-issued in stereo) and the live 1959 Tokyo recording (see my review above) find Del Monaco in fresher, fuller voice and there is more sense of live theatre in both, too, despite some roughness in sound and ensemble. Apparently, Del Monaco was disappointed by this recording, having been urged to more restraint by the conductor. It is true that all three principals find more subtlety in their roles under Karajan and in neither of Erede's recordings can the orchestra match the superb Vienna Philharmonic, but I still think that the excitement of those earlier performances outweighs the need for precision. The great Tebaldi sings beautifully without being as moving as Mirella Freni in the second Karajan recording. Protti has been unfairly maligned as the "weakness" in both his recordings. He was brought in to replace Bastianini (ah - missed opportunities) who did not know his part, and thus recorded Iago for the second time with the same partners. His is a stolid and solid delivery; he has an excellent upper extension to his baritone and has introduced some refinements to his interpretation since he first recorded it in 1954. He has none of Gobbi's insinuating slyness but he is a proper Verdi baritone.

Now that the 1954 recording is available in stereo, if you want Del Monaco and Tebaldi you might well prefer it over this later version, as I do, especially as the secondary and minor roles are, surprisingly, much better sung on the earlier Erede version; Nello Romanato's Cassio for Karajan is particularly wet and Athos Cesarini's Roderigo is scarcely any better. However, unlike his second studio recording, Karajan performs this one uncut and even includes the ballet that Verdi was obliged to write for the Paris performances in 1893 and usually dropped.

Allen Jensen – 1966 (live; mono) House of Opera; Premiere Opera; Opera Depot
Orchestra - Pasadena Opera Company
Chorus - Pasadena Opera Company

Otello - Giuseppe di Stefano
Desdemona - Marcella Pobbe
Iago - Tito Gobbi
Cassio - Burl Dean Smith
Rodrigo - Dino Allotti
Lodovico - Eugene Brundage
Montano - Bruce Tuthill
Emilia - Kathleen de Spain
Un Araldo - Bruce Tuthill

This 1966 recording from the Santa Barbara Opera in Pasadena is a curiosity: Giuseppe Di Stefano in what almost amounts to, and is sometimes listed as, a complete performance whereas it is in fact a dress rehearsal. Here I quote from the Opera Depot website: "Marcella Pobbe takes sections of the concertante down an octave (Di Stefano on the other hand holds back nothing.) There is a small break in the music at the beginning of Act III, scene ii and the entire first scene of Act IV is missing so I have substituted another recording featuring Marcella Pobbe.". Despite some mistakes and hard top notes Di Stefano sounds surprisingly good, even if the undertaking of such a role was symptomatic of how he ruined his lyric tenor; his gift for intense characterisation is intact, as is, to a surprising degree, his voice. Gobbi, too, still sounds impressive and Pobbe makes a good, vibrant, positive Desdemona, but this obviously cannot be a first recommendation, just a supplement for Pippo fans.

Zubin Mehta – 1967 (live; mono) GOP; Celestial; House of Opera; Living Stage
Orchestra - Metropolitan Opera
Chorus - Metropolitan Opera

Otello - James McCracken
Desdemona - Montserrat Caballé
Iago - Tito Gobbi
Cassio - Ermanno Lorenzi
Rodrigo - Gabor Carelli
Lodovico - Raymond Michalski
Montano - Clifford Harvuot
Emilia - Shirley Love

Rather muddy crumbly mono sound obscures upper frequencies and there is a fair amount of swooshing in and out of focus from the tape, and some break-up at the end of Act 2 on "Dio vendicator". However, this would ultimately be no worse than many a live mono recording from a similar source, were it not for the fact that it runs *a semitone flat throughout*. That's enough to disqualify it completely for most listeners. However, I should add that I can confirm this to be the case only for the Living Stage and House of Opera issues; it is possible that the Great Opera Performances CDs have been transferred at the correct pitch as apparently their LPs were fine. I would appreciate confirmation from anyone who knows the truth of the matter.

Young firebrand Zubin Mehta – still only thirty – directs a sharply sprung performance here. Good tests of *Otello* conducting are the opening storm scene and the stringent orchestral introduction to Act III; Mehta passes both with flying colours. At times, it is true, his gung-ho, stop-go, anything-to-keep-this-exciting approach suggests that he doesn't really have an overview of the opera but with such principals singing it matters little; his style matches theirs. The chorus is crude, lusty and committed.

Before listening to this, one might worry about Tito Gobbi at this comparative late stage of his career, but despite already having sung professionally for over twenty years, he is only 53 here. He at first comes across as being in strong, secure voice, if rather darker-toned of yore, occasionally given to barking, with top notes a little dry. However, worse problems appear as the performance progresses; he forces at the beginning of "Credo in un Dio crudel", and as a result both loses tonal centre and goes badly sharp - and that fault recurs intermittently, as in "Era la notte". Furthermore, although his vocal acting remains compelling and the audience are audibly very appreciative, his voice is surely too obviously malevolent and hard-edged, and his tone too overtly sardonic, to have fooled anyone for a moment that Iago was anything but a scheming brute.

Whether McCracken has the right sound for *Otello*, too, is debatable. His tenor is certainly powerful but also peculiarly throttled. Nor do I like the way his voice hardens and his vowels constrict as his voice goes up the scale – thus we get "Vin...Vinire splindi" (I exaggerate) for "Vien...Venere splende!" He doesn't struggle to encompass the high notes but sounds permanently hysterical and full-on, making Del Monaco sound positively relaxed. He tones that down for the love duet, but when Caballé enters the listener gets another mini-shock. The voice per se is beautiful, I suppose, but sounds too sophisticated and knowing for the naïve Desdemona and there is always that mature, glottal catch and that expressive swooping mannerism typical of Caballé's vocalisation. On the other hand, much of her singing is touching and tender, enhanced by her trademark pianissimi. The Act 2 duet when Desdemona begs her husband's pardon for any fault she might unconsciously have committed - "Se inconscia, contro te" - which then morphs into a quartet is gorgeously sung and grippingly acted.

The combination of increased acquaintance with this recording and encountering others has inclined me to view it less favourably than when I first heard it. Its flaws grate on repeated listening and none of the three principal singers here really conforms to my aural picture of the characters they are portraying – any more, I suspect, than Caballé convinced as Desdemona on stage, even though that is irrelevant here. Thus, despite its incidental virtues, this is not a library version, for reasons of both the performance and the pitch transfer problem on certain labels.

John Barbirolli – 1968 (studio; stereo) EMI

Orchestra - New Philharmonia Orchestra

Chorus - Ambrosian Opera Chorus - Upton House School - Hammersmith County School

Otello - James McCracken

Desdemona - Gwyneth Jones

Iago - Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau

Cassio - Piero De Palma

Rodrigo - Florindo Andreolli

Lodovico - Alfredo Giacomotti

Montano - Leonardo Monreale

Emilia - Anna Di Stasio

This recording had a very mixed reception and continues to divide opinion, for obvious reasons centred on the casting and the lack of tension, as some perceive it, in Barbirolli's conducting.

My comments immediately above regarding McCracken's *Otello* apply equally here; if anything, the comparative immediacy of the recording process amplifies his tendency to over-emote and brings into focus the question of the suitability – some would say peculiarity – of his powerful but constricted timbre. The same concern applies to the other two principal singers: there is some suggestion of a beat in Gwyneth Jones' vocal production and she has a tendency to squeeze and swell notes. Nor does she ever actually go into a fully developed lower register, hence, as a reciprocal function, there is always a scratchiness or impurity in her high notes; her voice was never properly registered.

However, doubts over McCracken and Jones are as nothing compared with objections to Fischer-Dieskau's grainy, very un-Italianate Iago, which carries very little real threat; the villainy sounds applied and stagey. I always sigh over his ventures into this repertoire; he just about gets away with his noble Rodrigo for Solti but here he is in his "verbal pouncing" stage and his tone is grey; he barks for emphasis in his solo arias and I do not find him compelling or convincing. If you want to hear definitive evidence of why many cannot tolerate DFD as a Verdi baritone, play his Iago back-to-back with recordings by Riccardo Stracciari or Titta Ruffo.

Barbirolli hugs the score to death and leaves an oddly inert, enervated impression compared with the attack of Beecham, Toscanini, Cleva et al – and he does that audible, groaning accompaniment thing that some conductors develop as they age; Colin Davis did it, too and apparently it irritates choleric listeners like me more than more tolerant punters. The opening storm is almost listless and time and again proceedings sag.

The stereo sound is excellent but that's no asset when the performance as a whole is so flawed.

Herbert von Karajan – 1971 (live; stereo) Opera d'Oro

Orchestra - Wiener Philharmoniker

Chorus - Wiener Staatsoper & Salzburger Festspiel Kammerchor

Otello - Jon Vickers

Desdemona - Mirella Freni

Iago - Peter Glossop

Cassio - Ryland Davies

Rodrigo - Hans Wegmann

Lodovico - Luigi Roni

Montano - Siegfried Rudolf Friese

Emilia - Stefania Malagù

Un Araldo - Helge von Bömches

This live Salzburg recording, with the same three principal singers as the studio recording two years later but the Vienna Philharmonic instead of the Berliners, offers a rather different experience – more immediate, with brighter, less plushly upholstered sound – not necessarily a bad thing when the stereo sound is still so atmospheric and wonderfully captured by the Austrian Radio engineers. There is virtually no audience noise and few mishaps; Glossop momentarily gets a frog in his throat just before "Si, pel ciel" but for the most part this is indistinguishable from – in fact in many ways better than – the studio recording. Obviously there are some losses in balance between the singers and the orchestra – the singers' first words in the storm scene are all but inaudible against the impressive din, complete with thunder and wind - but the chorus is well focused to the fore and you can hear just how good they are. Furthermore, the protagonist, Jon Vickers, is decidedly in even better, fuller, more secure and more powerful voice than in the studio version where, surprisingly, quite a few slips were allowed to pass - and even more intense and animated as an actor. His soft singing, too, is a dream and his final aria is desperately moving.

I have always liked Glossop's alternately bluff and insinuating Iago; he gives a performance virtually identical to the one I praise below, with even more bite and edge in his tone without sacrificing legato; how grand he and the VPO sound in the famous "Credo" and how sinister in "al verme dell'avel"; that's Karajan magic. His exchanges with Vickers' Otello are riveting.

Mirella Freni is no less captivating; every one of performances of Desdemona on record is treasurable. Her special combination of warmth, melting tone and power means that she remains my favourite singer in that role and I am sure comes closest to what Verdi had in mind. The love duet is sublime,

especially as Vickers is himself in smoother, more refined voice than in the EMI recording, and Freni's big scene before Desdemona is murdered is exquisitely sung.

There are other bonuses, in addition to being able to listen in on what was obviously one of the great nights at the opera: Ryland Davies make an attractive Cassio and it's a pleasure to hear Luigi Roni's rotund bass as Lodovico, even if we are hardly slumming it with José van Dam in the studio version.

Much has been written about how Vickers' colours his voice when he intones "Niun mi terma" - blanched of life, in shock - and we hear this live onstage better than on either of his studio recordings. What follows is a death scene more moving than I have heard elsewhere in this survey, Karajan and Vickers combining to create a real sense of a "fallen hero". As Vickers sings "Desdemona ... Desdemona ... ah, morte", his voice actually cracks, not as a result of an Italianate "sob", but through genuine identification with the role and the moment - it is all hugely moving.

I take the liberty of quoting here an anecdote courtesy of "my learned friend" regarding the effect of this live performance on one young conductor: "From all accounts these were very special nights in the theatre - the young Maris Jansons was in the audience for one of them and has recounted that afterwards he walked for hours in the rain of Salzburg, so bowled over was he by what he had seen."

Karajan makes the same cuts here that he made in his studio recording but in a performance of this quality, we have to let that pass; this is mandatory listening and a top recommendation.

Herbert von Karajan - 1973-1974 (studio; stereo) EMI

Orchestra - Berliner Philharmoniker

Chorus - Deutsche Oper (Berlin)

Otello - Jon Vickers

Desdemona - Mirella Freni

Iago - Peter Glossop

Cassio - Aldo Bottion

Rodrigo - Michel Sénéchal

Lodovico - José van Dam

Montano - Mario Macchi

Emilia - Stefania Malagù

Un Araldo - Mario Macchi

This recording was made as the soundtrack for Karajan's film and simultaneously released on CD. It captures Vickers in more dramatic and compelling form than his earlier, rather restrained, set with Serafin but on a frustrating number of occasions his voice cracks or falters, and in his very first declamatory passage he mispronounces "trasfusa". Given Karajan's clout and search for perfection, I wonder why these flaws were not corrected or edited out - but this is nonetheless a truly dramatic performance, anguished and wholly convincing; his was the ideal "Otello" sound and he gets better as the opera unfolds. I do not agree with some commentators that Peter Glossop is weak as Iago; while his is not the perfect Verdi voice, he has a great upper extension, plenty of bite and his exchanges with Vickers are riveting - he oozes venom. I do not hear "wobble" - just vibrancy. He is not Gobbi, true - but Gobbi was not in best voice when he recorded his Iago, despite the many subtleties of his assumption; for Gobbi at his best, try the live Tokyo performance with Del Monaco. The vocal glory here lies above all in Freni's meltingly beautiful Desdemona; her pianissimi rival those of Caballé.

Unfortunately and inexplicably, given that this a studio recording, Karajan makes his habitual but, to some, crucially damaging, cut of forty bars in the chorus "Dove guardi splendono raggi" in Act 2 and again in the Act 3 ensemble. As was increasingly the case at this stage of his career, his tempi are too languorous at times - but again, at others, he injects great drama and tension. The recording suffers

from his excessive manipulation of the sound planes so that often voices seem recessed or surrounded by a haze but the singers are good enough to make this flaw less noticeable. The Berlin Phil plays wonderfully; never has this score sounded so sonorous and Karajan moulds passages like the love duet so feelingly. The supporting singers are fine - especially the young José van Dam's commanding Lodovico.

This is by no means perfect but it cannot be ignored. Fortunately, however, an even better experience providing proof of Karajan's mastery of this score is enshrined in the live Salzburg recording.

Carlos Kleiber – 1976 (live; mono) Opera d'Oro; Myto

Orchestra - Teatro alla Scala

Chorus - Teatro alla Scala

Otello - Plácido Domingo

Desdemona - Mirella Freni

Iago - Piero Cappuccilli

Cassio - Giuliano Ciannella

Rodrigo - Dano Raffanti

Lodovico - Luigi Roni

Montano - Orazio Mori

Emilia - Jone Jori

Un Araldo - Giuseppe Morresi

The chance of hearing the elusive Carlos Kleiber conduct anything is not to be passed up but it's galling to have to endure distant, mono sound as late as 1976; it seems to have been recorded by someone in the audience, judging by the proximity of occasional coughs and the remove of the microphone from the stage action, which immediately makes this at best a desirable supplement to a good, stereo version. Just occasionally a singer approaches the recording source and becomes more distinct but generally events are too remote. It is at least good enough to hear the quality of the cast, even if I have reservations. Cappuccilli was sometimes cavalier in his attitude and could even default to a lazy "stand and sing" mode. He does not do that here, but he was never a very charismatic singer; he relied more upon imperious vocalisation, with fine legato, full tone and exceptional breath-control, so the variety of tonal colour and verbal nuances provided by such as Gobbi or Tibbett are few and there are times when he could be singing – albeit – beautifully – about almost anything. His acting is generalised; the manic laugh he employs to conclude the "Credo" seems incongruous and applied - but he is nonetheless a strong vocal presence. Domingo is in youthful, sappy voice, immediately making a positive impact with a secure "Esultate" - and "Abbasso le spade!" is similarly impressive. He sings throughout with power and confidence, only occasionally sounding a little pinched; for example, there is surely a lack of pharyngeal heft in his "Tutti fuggite Otello!" - but this is surely his best sung Otello and despite it coming relatively early in his career, it is also convincingly acted; his moments of disintegration are agonising but still beautifully vocalised. Mirella Freni's affecting lirico-spinto soprano is a known quantity from her performances with Karajan; she is really lovely and her Desdemona here differs in no perceptible manner from those recordings – which is no criticism; quite the reverse. She is wonderful in the ensembles, huge of voice – one forgets just how big her voice became as she moved into spinto roles - desperate in her suffering, and deeply moving in her big solo arias just before her murder.

The supporting cast is excellent; it's good to have the sonorous Luigi Roni as Lodovico and even the Rodrigo is distinguished lyric, bel canto tenor Dano Raffanti.

Kleiber is in full control of the score's complexities and kaleidoscopic changes of moods. His caressing of the love music and the bitter-sweet clashes between husband and wife are magical, but there is also no shortage of tension in the moments of high drama. This is a valuable memento of a great occasion

and I love listening to it; the audience rightly goes wild in its appreciation at the end of arias and Acts - but for reasons of sound, and the fact that Domingo, for all his accomplishment, is surpassed by such as Del Monaco, this is not a library version.

Georg Solti – 1977 (studio; stereo) Decca

Orchestra - Wiener Philharmoniker

Chorus - Wiener Staatsoper

Otello - Carlo Cossutta

Desdemona - Margaret Price

Iago - Gabriel Bacquier

Cassio - Peter Dvorsky

Rodrigo - Kurt Equiluz

Lodovico - Kurt Moll

Montano - Stafford Dean

Emilia - Jane Berbié

Un Araldo - Hans Helm

Excellent stereo and atmospheric sound effects in the opening storm scene bode well until Gabriel Bacquier starts to sing and you hear a somewhat grey, cloudy Iago, without the pharyngeal resonance and bite provided by the best in this role. He was always an excellent actor but no Verdi baritone and resorts to all sorts of verbal tics to cover up the basic lack of voice and he yells top notes. I appreciate that's a bit damning, especially as the rest of the cast is promising, right down to fine voices such as Kurt Moll and Stafford Dean in the smaller bass roles and two distinguished tenors as Cassio and Rodrigo and Jane Berbié as Emilia, but a weak Iago is intolerable (Solti has the same problem in his 1991 recording).

This is all the more regrettable given that Cossutta is a fine, if not especially memorable or sonorous, Otello and Desdemona was one of Margaret Price's best roles. (She wasn't as well suited to the part on stage; I have never forgotten giggling at Clive James' cruel but accurate observation in his critique of a televised performance that while Otello had been away fighting the Turks, Desdemona had clearly spent most of her time visiting the refrigerator.) He has a big, robust, slightly grainy tenor and his vibrato has just a hint of incipient bleat to it while Price's pure, piping soprano is, aurally at least, very attractive, if rather lacking lower register heft. Best of all, is Solti's conducting: refined, flexible, affectionate and dramatic by turns – as far as away as you can get from the caricature of his style posited by his detractors; there is nary a hint of bombast, just beautifully gauged dynamics and phrasing – the love duet is a case in point, where he achieves a kind of serenity to match Karajan.

Admirers of his conducting style will want this for that alone, but all round it cannot challenge the best.

James Levine – 1978 (studio; stereo) RCA

Orchestra - National Philharmonic Orchestra

Chorus - Ambrosian Opera Chorus

Otello - Plácido Domingo

Desdemona - Renata Scotto

Iago - Sherrill Milnes

Cassio - Frank Little

Rodrigo - Paul Crook

Lodovico - Paul Plishka

Montano - Malcolm King

Emilia - Jean Kraft

Un Araldo - Malcolm King

I returned to this recording after a thirty-year absence to check whether my remembered response had altered - and went for the earlier CD issue as it comes with a libretto and the sound was always in any case excellent, regardless of subsequent re-mastering.

Oddly, little has changed in my opinion, except perhaps, in line with my reaction to virtually everything recorded at this time in comparison with more recent issues, I find myself having greater respect for a standard of singing we once took for granted. But before considering that aspect of this performance, let me first say that I know of no recording of "Otello" which combines such good sound with such effective conducting and playing; kudos to the fiery, young James Levine and the superb National Philharmonic Orchestra, especially assembled from London players by RCA for recording purposes and since disbanded. Try the Prelude to Act II for a sample of his subtlety and their sound - it's electric. The Ambrosian Opera Chorus and its boys' wing do a splendid job, too. I should add that for all Levine's propulsion, he also very successfully brings out the pathos and tenderness of the quieter moments.

I must also clear the air by stating unequivocally that I think this by far the best of Domingo's three studio Otellos; although he never had quite the depth of tone and heft to encompass fully the demands of the role in the manner of Vickers, Vinay, Giacomini and - of course - Del Monaco - he is in freshest, freest and most ringing voice here, even if just occasionally his tone turns a little thin and whiny. In a sense, I think he demonstrates how a very intelligent singer with good technique can manage this role without quite having the right voice for it, but I enjoy his artistry and commitment and he is wholly convincing in his mental anguish and agony. His two later recordings are respectively vitiated by weaker conducting and singing and his voice having lost its youthful ring.

The same might be said of his two principal co-singers: Milnes has essentially too noble a tone for Iago, without the bite and snarl exponents such as Gobbi, Tibbett or Manuguerra bring to the role, but as usual his enunciation, articulation and shading of the Italian text is superb. "Era la notte" is a master-class in how to colour and project words. Similarly, Renata Scotto is deficient vocally, in that the beat has already taken hold in her voice on the highest, loudest notes, but she is the most moving Desdemona on record, deploying portamento, lower register and the even the break between her registers to masterly effect and making her plight desperately immediate. Her soft singing is exquisite and there is something particularly heart-breaking about her plaintive tone.

The supporting cast is nothing special - the Cassio is weak, as is so often the case (try Anthony Rolfe Johnson on the Pavarotti recording to hear the role properly sung) - but that matters little in the context of the strengths of the recording as a whole. I cannot recommend this as a first choice but it is eminently satisfying as drama.

Lorin Maazel – 1985 (studio; stereo) EMI

Orchestra - Teatro alla Scala

Chorus - Teatro alla Scala

Otello - Plácido Domingo

Desdemona - Katia Ricciarelli

Iago - Justino Díaz

Cassio - Ezio Di Cesare

Rodrigo - Constantin Zaharia

Lodovico - John Macurdy

Montano - Edward Toumajian

Emilia - Petra Malakova

This is not to be confused with the soundtrack for Zeffirelli's film of the opera made around the same time, which is heavily cut and re-arranged. Apparently, Maazel recorded separate sections of the score destined for the recording release alone, and not the soundtrack.

Proceedings sound oddly low-key to me; compared with his live recording for Kleiber, for example, Domingo sounds careful and restrained. He had sung over a hundred performances by the time of this recording and the experience shows in his verbal inflections but he hardly sounds inspired. Ricciarelli sings very beautifully, in a kind of limply sweet way, but with that obtrusive pulse in her vibrato which worsened as her career progressed and she has no lower register. Justino Diaz has mostly the right voice for Iago, if rather bass-weighted, but also gives an under-stated performance, vocally secure but not very interesting; Maazel's direction is plodding and nothing takes off – and I am thus astonished to read the *Gramophone* review which says, "This is probably the most exciting *Otello* since Toscanini's". Er, no. There is so little tension in the build-up to *Otello*'s murder of his wife and even "Sì, pel ciel" generates few sparks; especially as Maazel pulls the tempi around instead of going for broke. You can do so much better.

Alain Lombard – 1991 (live composite from concert performances; digital) Forlane
Orchestra - Orchestre National Bordeaux Aquitaine
Chorus - Slovak Philharmonic Choir - Les Petits Chanteurs de Bordeaux

Otello - Giuseppe Giacomini
Desdemona - Margaret Price
Iago - Matteo Manuguerra
Cassio - Dino Di Domenico
Rodrigo - Alain Gabriel
Lodovico - Luigi Roni
Montano - Vincent Le Texier
Emilia - Martine Mahé
Un Araldo - Anton Kurnava

This is a wonderful recording of "*Otello*" despite - or perhaps because of - its being a live recording; the engineering is so good that we get the clarity of the studio combined with the electricity of live singing, with any flaws minimised by being able to draw upon the best of two concert performances. The balance between voices and orchestra is ideal and the Bordeaux Aquitaine orchestra sounds as fine as many a more celebrated band. Lombard's approach could sometimes be too leisurely but here there is a real sense of pace and drama; it is not as frenetic as Toscanini, but timings are apt and convincing and Lombard gives his singers time to breath. Everything seems right in this performance, including Giacomini's baritone, yet thrilling timbre, Manuguerra's oily, insinuating Iago - none the worse for being slightly nasal at times - and Margaret Price's delicate, subtle Desdemona with floated, fluting top-notes of remarkable poise and purity. Giacomini is not the first tenor you think of in this role but he has power, squillo, refinement and intensity; this is the performance of a lifetime. Being a *tenore di forza robusto* with secure top notes, his nearest predecessor is Vinay and he has the Chilean tenor's ability to convey visceral engagement with *Otello*'s torment. The comprimario roles are very well filled.

This is one of the very best versions of this masterpiece and is uncut; unfortunately, it goes in and out of the catalogue like the cuckoo in the clock and is often unavailable, so sometimes the best bet is to look for a used copy.

Georg Solti – 1991 (live composite from concert performances & studio; digital) Decca
Orchestra - Chicago Symphony Orchestra
Chorus - Chicago Symphony Chorus and Metropolitan Opera Children's chorus

Otello - Luciano Pavarotti
Desdemona - Kiri Te Kanawa
Iago - Leo Nucci
Cassio - Anthony Rolfe-Johnson
Rodrigo - John Keyes
Lodovico - Dimitri Kavrakos
Montano - Alan Opie
Emilia - Elzbieta Ardam
Un Araldo - Richard Cohn

I came late to this recording, having paid, I now think, too much attention to its detractors. Even if Pavarotti's vocal lay-out is fundamentally wrong, he does not come a cropper as poor old Carlo Bergonzi did in his one attempt and I find much which is very musical and moving - especially, of course, the love duet. And key moments like "Abasso le spade!" are pulled off pretty well, because he has so much squillo in his voice.

My bugbear should be Leo Nucci, whose rise to fame I have never understood. He was actually quite good when I first heard him live at Covent Garden in the early 80's then the voice quickly deteriorated; however, he is much better here than I have heard him elsewhere since: the customary bleat and slide and the weak top are less in evidence than normal and he characterises really intelligently, inflecting the Italian as acutely as usually only a native speaker can. He bellows a bit in the "Credo" and often sounds rocky, but he could have been worse.

Both Te Kanawa's lovely Desdemona and Rolfe Johnson's vivid, elegantly sung Cassio are distinct advantages - the latter a huge improvement over the habitual whiners who seem always to be cast in this role, which really needs a virile, military voice, if Cassio is to be a credible rival. Te Kanawa always sang beautifully for Solti and delivers a tender, moving performance, spinning her famous pure tone to very touching effect and soaring wonderfully in the ensemble concluding Act 3. Unfortunately, the Emilia is blowsy and screechy.

Solti and the Chicago forces are great. I cannot conceive why people say that the Chicago S.O. could not "do" opera; under Solti's steady, yet propulsive, beat they play wonderfully and the climactic moments really come off because Solti in his latter years became better at avoiding the cheap thrill approach and went more for the slow build.

Audience noise at this live performance, a bit of carking and nose-blowing notwithstanding, is minimal and the sound is excellent, with the voices slightly too much to the fore but not annoyingly so.

This would never be my first choice "Otello"; there are too many great contending sets waiting in the wings and featuring true Otellos with the requisite baritone heft, but as a devotee of both Pavarotti and Te Kanawa, I am still happy to make room on my shelves for this performance.

Myung-Whun Chung – 1993 (studio; digital) DG
Orchestra - Orchestre de l'Opéra-Bastille
Chorus - Choeur de l'Opéra-Bastille - Maîtrise des Hauts-de-Seine

Otello - Plácido Domingo
Desdemona - Cheryl Studer
Iago - Sergei Leiferkus

Cassio - Ramón Vargas
 Rodrigo - Michael Schade
 Lodovico - Ildebrando d' Arcangelo
 Montano - Giacomo Prestia
 Emilia - Denyce Graves
 Un Araldo - Philippe Duminy

This was Domingo's third studio recording in superb sound with a fine cast. *Gramophone* is surely quite wrong in claiming that his voice has "darkened" in the intervening years since his first studio recording; if anything, some of the resonance and power has gone out of his voice by the time of this one and he is clearly husbanding his resources more carefully than of yore, but his consistency and stamina are still admirable. There should be compensations for the slightly thinner sound in the depth of his characterisation but, to be honest, I have never noticed much deficiency in that department even as early as his live performance for Kleiber, reviewed above; my reservations regarding his *Otello* are invariably about his vocal aptitude for the role. There are some notable high-points: for example, his more restrained but somehow more moving account of "Dio, mi potevi scagliar", where he easily passes what Alan Blyth used to call "the A flat test" and avoids any undue over-emoting. In general, however, he is not necessarily greatly improving upon earlier achievements here.

Cheryl Studer was in her "sing everything and anything phase" and although her shimmering oboe tones are beautiful, I don't think she has the sweetness and innocence of sound to impersonate Desdemona wholly successfully – and there are tell-tale signs of a beat in her vibrato. She does not move me the way Freni can; sometimes I feel as if I am listening to a skilful vocalisation rather than a singer living the part. Furthermore, as I have often remarked when trying to assess singers in this role, she skimps plunging into her lower register and her "Tarda è la notte" is unpleasantly unsupported.

The extreme individuality of Leiferkus' nasal, metallic baritone and his Slavonic Italian certainly distinguish him from the pack of Iagos and he certainly exudes a kind of obvious, all-purpose evil without encompassing much in the way of tonal or expressive variety; he is technically excellent and aesthetically rather monochrome.

Chung's conducting is similarly lean and swift but I never feel that he gets under the skin of the score; there is to borrow a phrase, a kind of brisk efficiency about it and it tends to sound more rushed than propulsive, Toscanini or Panizza-style.

A fine comprimario cast includes two distinguished tenors and the young, rising star Ildebrando d'Arcangelo in the small but important role of Lodovico. I have made mention of the views of a trusted "learned friend" in a previous survey and conclude with his verdict on this recording, as it succinctly reflects mine: "Gloriously sung, well recorded, blandly conducted."

Alexander Rahbari – 1996 (studio; digital) Koch Discover
 Orchestra - Orquesta Sinfónica de Barcelona
 Chorus - Teatro Liceo (Barcelona)

Otello - Nicola Martinucci
 Desdemona - Miriam Gauci
 Iago - Eduard Tumatjan
 Cassio - Mauricio Septien
 Rodrigo - José Ruiz
 Lodovico - Marcel Rosca
 Montano - Enric Serra
 Emilia - Mabel Perelstein

Oh dear. Not a promising start: with a very laboured vibrato, strained top notes and Hispanicised (word?) Italian, Nicola Martinucci really ought to know better – being Italian-born himself - than to sing, “Ethultate! L'orgoglio muthulmano thepolto è in mar. Nothtra e del thel è gloria! Dopo l'armi lo vinthe l'uragano!” I know this is billed as “*Otello in Barcelona*”, but still – you don't hear Domingo mangle the text thus. His – admittedly intermittent - lisp makes the young Corelli's pale by comparison and sadly renders too much of his declamation risible. This would matter less if his vocal production were more elegant but –and I know I am stultifyingly repetitive in my complaint here about modern singers – the pulse in his voice is disturbing and unlovely. He has his moments – “*Abbasso le spade!*” is impressive and “*Niun mi tema*” is moving - but his *Otello* is mostly bluff and unvaried. Miriam Gauci makes a prettier sound but – guess what? – her vibrato is too pronounced, as well. Eduard Tumagian has the right voice and is mercifully free of...you know what...singing manfully without great individuality. The Cassio is absurdly weedy.

Rahbari does a workmanlike job of conducting but he cuts the Act 3 ensemble and there are plodding moments, such as introduction to “*Non ti crucciar*”. The digital sound is as good as you could wish, apart from some strange balances from time to time and a bad edit in the big duet at 1'52” just before the of Act 2. In the end, this is a routine, mostly unobjectionable and negligible recording which cannot challenge the best.

Friedrich Haider – 2007-2009 (live composite; digital) Naxos
Orchestra – Oviedo Filarmonía
Chorus – Orfeón Donostiarra/ los 'Peques' del León de Oro

Otello – Robert Dean Smith
Desdemona – Rafaella Angeletti
Iago – Sebastian Catana
Cassio – Luis Dámaso
Rodrigo – Vicenç Esteve
Lodovico – Kristjan Mõisnik
Montano – Michael Dries
Emilia – Marifé Nogales
Un Araldo – Enrigue Sánchez

The recorded here sound is excellent but it immediately reveals how precise and well-behaved the chorus is: beautifully neat and well-tuned like a church choir – and miles away from the frenetic hysteria and Italianate fervour required. They are like that all the way through: homogeneous, euphonious and polite to a fault. Robert Dean Smith's entrance doesn't help raise the temperature one jot, and his loose vibrato and cloudy tone further undermine any impact. His top notes are thin, constricted and lack resonance; sample the “*Sì, pel ciel*” to hear what I mean; it really is an unpleasant sound and his is simply not an *Otello* voice. “*Dio mi potevi*” is something of a non-event, it is so understated. Rafaella Angeletti applies some welcome lower register heft and has a rich, full sound in the middle of her voice but anything above A flat turns sour and windy as she goes up, as at the end of “*Dio to giocondi*” and “*Ave Maria*”. Worse, she suffers from the same, pervasive, modern fault of a vibrato which is too broad in amplitude and borders on a wobble. Compared with predecessors' recordings, the fateful exchanges between husband and wife often proceed a little more than crooning level; there is simply no tension. Sebastian Catana is the best of the three principals; he at first sounds like the “*pushed-up-bass*” type of *Iago* we hear from Pons and Capecchi, but gruffer and growlier in timbre and his fast vibrato occasionally hints at a tremolo to his tone. He has something of *Leiferkus*' energy and vocal quality, and is quite a good vocal actor – more varied, in fact, than *Leiferkus*. “*Era la note*” goes well with a good, hissed “*Lo vidi in man di Cassio!*” but Dean Smith's weak response and weaker “*Sangue!*” negates the excitement.

I can think of no reason to prefer this low-key, indifferently sung recording over a dozen other options, but my [MWI colleague Göran Forsling's review](#) is considerably kinder than mine, so I provide the link here for purposes of balance.

Colin Davis – 2009 (live; digital) LSO Live
Orchestra – London Symphony Orchestra
Chorus – London Symphony Chorus

Otello – Simon O'Neill
Desdemona – Anna Schwanewilms
Iago – Gerald Finley
Cassio – Allan Clayton
Rodrigo – Ben Johnson
Lodovico – Alexander Tsymbalyuk
Montano – Matthew Rose
Emilia – Eufemia Tufano
Un Araldo – Lukas Jabowski

I was present on the evening of this recording, and although I can testify that it delivered all the excitement you could desire of a live performance of this superlative music, I was simultaneously wholly aware that as much as I was enjoying it, it would no way stand up as a recording in comparison with established, classic versions.

But let's start with the advantages: extraordinarily fine playing from the LSO, fiery conducting from Colin Davis, who really has the measure of the score and infuses it with the kind of nervy, febrile brilliance the many moments of high drama demand, yet also commands the poise and poetry passages such as Desdemona's prayer require. The recorded sound is wonderfully spacious and the crackling electricity of a live performance is wonderfully conveyed. But...

None of the three principals has the right voice for the part. Best by far is Gerald Finley; he has all the notes and serpentine subtleties to portray Iago and acts superbly with the voice he has - but it is not a voice with sufficient Italianate ring or bite; listen to Gobbi or Valdengo or even Warren for that. Schwanewilms is anonymous and even vapid compared with such famous previous exponents as Freni, Tebaldi or, going further back, Muzio; she is a lyric soprano without the creamy amplitude required and her performance remained cool. Simon O'Neill deserves all praise for stepping in at the last minute to replace the indisposed Torsten Kerl; he had never sung a public performance yet is virtually note perfect and sings with passion and conviction. But the voice is far too light and throaty for the role and it is one thing to do a sterling job as an understudy and another to set yourself up in direct competition with live recordings by Del Monaco and Vinay. No competition, in fact. In addition, Colin Davis's habit of crooning along loudly with the singers might be considered endearing or eccentric by some but for me it soon becomes an intrusive and embarrassing distraction.

The recording is acceptable but, considering it is modern digital and as is typical of the Barbican, rather dead and airless, with some poor passages so quiet that you have to turn up the volume, only to be blasted by ensuing *tutti*.

This is a fine souvenir of an enjoyable evening - but no more than that; certainly not a prime recommendation.

Riccardo Muti – 2011 (live composite concert; digital) CSO Resound
Orchestra – Chicago Symphony Orchestra
Chorus – Chicago Symphony Chorus

Otello - Aleksandrs Antonenko
Desdemona – Krassimira Stoyanova
Iago – Carlo Guelfi
Cassio – Juan Francisco Gatell
Rodrigo – Michael Spyres
Lodovico – Eric Owens
Montano - Paolo Battaglia
Emilia - Barbara di Castri
Un Araldo – David Goyertsen

The opening is certainly impressively large-scale, with its thundering bass drum ostinato, juicy orchestral sound, blaring trumpets and hearty chorus; this is worlds away from the pusillanimous precision of, for example, the almost contemporaneous Haider recording. So what a disappointment when Iago comes in and proves to be – you've guessed it – an egregious wobbler. Guelfi is poor: the line and tonal centre of his voice has gone and pitching can be approximate. He compensates with a lot of growling and Sprechstimme. Why would a conductor of Muti's seniority and experience tolerate such casting? Antonenko's firm "Esultate" brings some consolation but again the vibrato is too broad; the voice has the right timbre and weight without being particularly beautiful but also an uncomfortably wide pulse. Please don't accuse me of being obsessed with this aspect of the operatic voice: for a hundred and fifty years the typical Grand Opera voice had an optimal vibrato of six to eight times a second, which owing to poor training and an enforced tolerance of, or ignorance of what constitutes, poor technique, has now ceased to be the norm and we are now accustomed to hearing a slower, more laboured pulse which is indicative of the voice being under unnecessary strain. Listen to Antonenko sing "Temo" on A flat in the love duet and you will hear that it is too slow to be attractive - Stoyanova does not suffer from that fault. His "Venere splende" is poor, too: a weak mixed falsetto bleat and a good few top notes are eased in to with a little glottal bleat and an ensuing loss of resonance. His best passages are those such as "Dio ti giocondi", when he accuses Desdemona of infidelity; his interaction with the excellent Stoyanova generates real heat. His is not a very memorable or affecting Otello but is probably as good as we will hear today.

Stoyanova has a big, rich, spinto sound and to my ears is the best singer here. Her "Ave Maria" is sublime: poised, even, ethereal and deeply moving; great singing. Top notes are full and clear without screaming and she regularly plunges into her lower register – always a good sign. Her creamy sound is mature but delicate, too; really lovely.

The comprimarii are generally adequate, although Michael Spyres' tenor does not make Cassio sound as if he could be the least bit of a threat or rival to Otello; it's a thin, squeaky sound, not the voice of a soldier.

The Chicago orchestra is superb and I admire Muti's conducting here; he has thought about every phrase and moulds the music thoughtfully and individually – but also makes one or two idiosyncratic decisions, like his strange prolongation of the chord before "Sì, pel ciel". An additional point of interest here is his use of the alternative version of the big Act III ensemble, which Verdi produced for the Paris premiere in 1894. It is briefer than the usual one which was in any case quite often made to undergo the "traditional" cut, presumably because it was deemed to hold up the action but, as the "learned friend" says, "it lacks the sweep and grandeur of the original."

Stoyanova and Muti's conducting of a great orchestra, the odd quirk apart, are the strengths here, not enough to recommend it over more consistently cast recordings.

Recommendations

The many recordings of this miraculous opera are paradoxical in that almost all of them have something of great merit about them, with the exception of the Haider recording on Naxos - yet none, I think, aspires to the "classic recording" status of, say, Callas' *Tosca*, Karajan's *La bohème* or Solti's *Ring*. The closest we come are the Panizza or Toscanini recordings but they are vintage and not without flaw, whether it be in the sound or the singing. There never has been a perfect recording but I would not be without several. I would also suggest that, unless you are allergic to his voice, you own at least one recording starring Mario Del Monaco, yet my own first choice is the live Salzburg recording with Vickers. The three mono recordings I recommend must surely be only supplements to one in superior, stereo sound. To help you decide, virtually everything here may be sampled or indeed heard in full on YouTube.

Live mono: Alberto Erede – 1959; Stiedry – 1955; Cleva – 1958: Pristine Ambient Stereo

Live stereo/digital: Alain Lombard – 1991; Karajan – 1971*

Studio stereo/digital: Alberto Erede – 1954

First choice*

Ralph Moore