

Massenet's *Werther* - A discographical survey
by Ralph Moore

Massenet was a prolific composer of operas; he wrote over thirty and had his fair share of flops, as he sometimes fell into a maudlin mode which smacks of trying too hard to please with easy sentimentality. As a result, he is still mildly scorned in some quarters, but I am with Beecham regarding the beauties of his best operas, even if I would not go so far as to make his frivolous and disparaging comparison, "I would give the whole of Bach's Brandenburg Concertos for Massenet's *Manon*". Only two – *Manon* and *Werther* - have secured a regular place in the repertoire and along with *Thaïs* they are among my favourite operas for their sheer sumptuousness of sound, coherence as drama and distillation of French elegance. Several more of his operas may fitfully be encountered on stage, and as long as a diva of sufficient vocal brilliance and charisma has been found to undertake one of the gamut of roles for the *femmes fatales* who obsessed the composer both on stage and in his private life, performances of *Esclarmonde*, *Thaïs*, *Hérodiade* and *Cléopâtre* can prove highly satisfactory.

Werther is rather different in mood from those, nor is its eponymous hero much like the principal character of *Le Cid*; *Werther* has more in common with two male characters in the almost contemporaneous *Eugene Onegin*, Tchaikovsky's most naturalistic opera: one, a gloomy young man yearns for a woman whom he loses to a sensible marriage and the other a poet who succumbs to a pistol shot as a consequence of a duel born of despaired love – although *Werther's* sensibilities seem more akin to those of Lensky than *Onegin*.

Nor is there anything about *Werther* which smacks of the "oriental exotic-erotic" atmosphere then so much in vogue and encountered in several of Massenet's operas such as *Le roi de Lahore* and the "fallen women" operas mentioned above. It does, however, afford some thunderously melodramatic incidents, such as when Charlotte's father announces Albert's return or when Albert sends the suicidally despaired *Werther* his pistols and I find it to be as effective on disc as it is on stage. The libretto is based upon Goethe's proto-Romantic novel *Die Leiden des jungen Werthers*, whose doleful plot was so neatly skewered by Thackeray in his satirical poem *Sorrows of Werther*:

Werther had a love for Charlotte
Such as words could never utter;
Would you know how first he met her?
She was cutting bread and butter.

Charlotte was a married lady,
And a moral man was *Werther*,
And, for all the wealth of Indies,
Would do nothing for to hurt her.

So he sighed and pined and ogled,
And his passion boiled and bubbled,
Till he blew his silly brains out,
And no more was by it troubled.

Charlotte, having seen his body
Borne before her on a shutter,
Like a well-conducted person,
Went on cutting bread and butter.

Werther is a dour tale but it remains one of my favourite Romantic operas; I am surprised that its music and drama continue to exercise such a hold over my imagination given that the "hero" is a weak, selfish, self-indulgent stalker who harasses a married woman and uses the threat of suicide as moral

blackmail. However, Massenet's special melodic gift combined with his ability to imbue those melodies with profound emotion transfigure these unpalatable realities into something hauntingly beautiful; Werther's four big arias in particular have long been the cornerstones of concert recitals and recordings by eminent lyric tenors and I can never hear Werther's opening apostrophe to Mother Nature without welling up. The tender plangency of that aria has burned itself into my consciousness and several other arias in this comparatively short work share that memorability.

In addition to Werther's worship of Nature, another example of how this opera is suffused with Romantic sensibility resides in his idealisation of Charlotte as Woman Incarnate. The role of Charlotte is a gift for a sensitive mezzo-soprano – or at least a soprano with a dark timbre - and the right performance can have a profoundly moving effect; I cherish memories of the ENO's production from the late 1970's starring Janet Baker in one of her greatest roles and enhanced by beautiful, natural atmospheric sets which traced the seasons from summer to Autumn to a wintry Christmas. Unfortunately, that was sung and recorded in English, which does the music few favours, but I would not part with it and its merits cause me to suspend my general rule of recommending only recordings made in the opera's original language.

There are five principal roles in *Werther* – one for each broad voice category – and a mini-chorus of six children, but they are merely supportive and inevitably the spotlight is upon the two main singers in my assessments. That is not to neglect Massenet's orchestral effects, such as – to take but two examples - the exquisite musical depiction of the falling snow as Charlotte reads Werther's letter written in his lonely room earlier that December, or Massenet's evocation of a balmy summer's night as Werther and Charlotte return from the ball.

There are ten studio recordings in French but I discount the last, made in 2004, on the grounds that *Werther* is sung by Andrea Bocelli. I make no excuses for that omission; he does not have an operatic tenor voice and that recording belongs in a different, light or crossover, category if not in the bin. *Werther* continued to be performed in Italian into the 1970's, of which there are some attractive live recordings, but their sound is generally mediocre and Massenet surely deserves to be heard sung in the language to which he matched his music so skilfully. For the purposes of recommendation, most collectors will want a studio recording in French, unless a live performance is of exceptional quality both in terms of sound and artistry. Nor, as usual in my surveys, have I included DVDs, only audio releases. I consider below a sixteen recordings: nine studio versions and seven live accounts of which three are radio broadcasts, one the ENO performance in English, and three modern, digital, live-composite performances, one of which is from the Festival della Valle d'Itria, in an arrangement of the lead role for baritone purportedly based on the one made by the composer for the celebrated singer Mattia Battistini – and the only one here sung in Italian, but included because it is a curiosity.

The Recordings

Elie Cohen – 1931 (studio; mono) EMI; Naxos; Opera d'Oro
Orchestra & Chorus - Opéra-Comique de Paris

Werther - Georges Thill
Charlotte - Ninon Vallin
Sophie - Germaine Féraldy
Albert - Marcel Roque
Le Bailli - Armand Narçon
Johann - Louis Guénot
Schmidt - Henri Niel

This matchless classic of French singing and style has long been a benchmark recording. It excels every subsequent recording in artistry and style, even though it cannot compete in terms of sheer recorded

sound, all opera aficionados worthy of the name learn to listen through the swish and hear singing of near superhuman elegance and passion. The performance - both singing and playing - is of such quality as to defy the years and make one forget its venerable provenance. In any case, the sound is now perfectly acceptable: clean and undistorted, especially as remastered by the wizard Ward Marston in the Naxos issue.

It is one of the great operatic in-jokes that Georges Thill and Ninon Vallin cordially loathed each other yet performed and recorded together frequently with immense success. Their voices are everything we expect from the French tradition: crystalline diction with a hint of pleasing nasality, seamless legato, smooth gradations of dynamics and just a pinch of acidity in the climaxes. Thill remains the ideal of a French tenor who could sing operetta and Wagner with equal aplomb. Vallin, although a soprano, has a beautifully registered voice which has no trouble with the lower reaches of the role. Her tone is limpid and warm with the fast but unobtrusive vibrato typical of many voices of the period; like Thill, she was a superb stylist who does nothing without a reason and makes her singing sound almost simplistic in its directness. Conductor Elie Cohen takes the right liberties with the score, steering a course between French elegance and restraint and verismo excess.

As a bonus, Naxos offers Thill singing six celebrated arias from other Massenet operas displaying the both the heroic and tender qualities of his extraordinarily versatile tenor. This is an indispensable issue of a true classic but its historical nature restricts it to being a set for specialists.

My MWI colleague [reviewed this set](#) back in 2001.

Jules Gressier – 1948 (live radio broadcast; mono) Malibran
Orchestra - Orchestre Radio-Lyrique
Chorus - Choeurs Radio-Lyrique

Werther - Georges Noré
Charlotte - Suzanne Juyol
Sophie - Jane Rolland
Albert - Roger Bussonnet
Le Bailli - Charles Clavensy
Johann - André Basquin
Schmidt - Marcel Génio

Both dramatic soprano Juyol and lyric-dramatic tenor Noré retired somewhat prematurely in 1960, when she was forty and he fifty. Seen as a successor to his namesake Thill, Noré had an important career and recorded *Faust* with Beecham but is now largely forgotten. His voice is of extraordinary metallic precision, like a Gallic Martinelli, no sliding or fudging but not without nuance and the voice seemingly floating on a raft of pellucid diction and sustained tone. Juyol is similarly precise and vibrant with a firm, resonant lower register; they are well matched but their singing is also somehow redolent of a vanished vocal style, especially as the crude transfer from noisy 78's with lots of residual surface noise makes the recording sound older than it is. Gressier is an energised, even wild conductor who supports his singers heroically. This expensive, hard-to-find set isn't a library recommendation - which hardly matters, as it's virtually unobtainable at present - but it does preserve some of the greatest French singing of this opera that you will ever hear.

Georges Sébastian – 1952 (studio; mono) Urania; Andromeda
Orchestra & Chorus - Opéra-Comique de Paris

Werther - Charles Richard
Charlotte - Suzanne Juyol
Sophie - Agnès Léger

Albert - Roger Bourdin
 Le Bailli - Michel Roux
 Johann - Marcel Depraz
 Schmidt - Camille Roquetty

The harsh, peaky mono sound accentuate the scratchiness of the strings here but the ear soon adjusts. You may hear immediately in the prologue that Georges Sébastian does not apply the dreamy, rubato-laden approach more commonly heard but is Boulez-like in the attack and unsentimentality of his direction; I could do with a little more flexibility. The advantages of a 100% French cast soon become apparent in the ease and elegance of the exchanges among the cast; there is simply a world of difference between an international and a home-grown speaker/singer – though I could do without the aptly named Agnès Léger as a Minnie Mouse Sophie and compared with Georges Noré, Charles Richard is a distinct disappointment; his tenor is rather colourless and strained and it thins out as it ascends; there is little of the lyric-heroic in his sound. Albert may already be rather colourless but Robert Bourdin makes him more so. Suzanne Juyol is as vocally lovely here as she is for Gressier and may be heard in marginally better, if still boxy, sound; she may be treasurable but she is still inadequately partnered.

Francesco Molinari-Pradelli – 1953 (live radio broadcast; mono) Warner Fonit; Cetra
 Orchestra & Chorus - RAI Torino

Werther - Ferruccio Tagliavini
 Charlotte - Pia Tassinari
 Sophie - Vittoria Neviani
 Albert - Marcello Cortis
 Le Bailli - Giuliano Ferrein
 Johann - Pier Luigi Latinucci
 Schmidt - Tommaso Soley

This was [reviewed for MWI](#) by Christopher Fifield in 2002. We agree that the two principal singers here – then husband and wife, prefiguring the Alagna-Gheorghiu alliance, both in being married and in eventually divorcing - were among the finest of their era but I must demur regarding his condemnation of Tagliavini's supposedly bad French accent as to my ears it is really perfectly acceptable, as is Pia Tassinari's - although I concede that the French of the nasal, twittery Sophie, Vittoria Neviani, is poor, which does not help us to warm to what can be an irritating character. Another criticism is that their style is so gung-ho-Italianate that one would do well to forget any ideas of an authentically Gallic style. Again, I do not hear it; they seem to me to be perfectly respectful of the idiom and actually for the most part very restrained, gauging and saving their emotive outbursts for when the score merits and authorises them. Of course, Tagliavini was a great vocal stylist and his tenor always had the most interesting and unusual combination of sweetness and power; he frequently employs his tender falsetto to generate real pathos but can instantly switch to top notes in a ringing lower register. Tassinari has the right voice for Charlotte, dusky and ductile, despite the odd harsh high, loud note – and she delivers the text with real feeling. Cortis makes what he can of Albert, singing neatly, again in good French and Giuliano Ferrein brings a warm bass to singing Le Bailli. The reliable Molinari-Pradelli conducts with warmth and affection for the music, bringing out its sinuous, sensuous quality. The orchestral playing, especially the rich strings and the prominent harps, is surprisingly fine.

The mono sound is excellent – clean and clear. Apparently there are a few, small cuts, but I don't notice them. That and the mono sound disqualifies this from being a prime recommendation, but credit is due for swimming against the tide of the early 50's and recording this opera so beautifully in French.

Jésus Etcheverry – 1964 (live radio broadcast; stereo) Adès; Accord
Orchestra - Orchestre de l'O.R.T.F.
Chorus - Maîtrise de l'O.R.T.F.

Werther - Albert Lance
Charlotte - Rita Gorr
Sophie - Mady Mesplé
Albert - Gabriel Bacquier
Le Bailli - Julien Giovannetti
Johann - Jacques Mars
Schmidt - Robert Andreozzi

In good stereo sound, this radio broadcast fields a first-rate cast including Albert Lance, who many will know as partner to both Joan Sutherland and Maria Callas and was a leading French tenor for over two decades; but he is by no means the only famous name here as a glance at the cast-list confirms. Albert Lance, despite being Australian-born, has a really French sound, light, elegant and powerful with a laser-like purity and plenty of heft despite its sweetness. Like Lance, Rita Gorr, an artist of formidable range and power, was somewhat neglected by the recording studios although she left us a few celebrated studio recordings such as her Amneris in Solti's *Aida*, her Dalila with Vickers conducted by Prêtre, Ortrud for Leinsdorf and her Geneviève in Fournet's *Pelléas et Mélisande*. It might reasonably be thought that her voice is simply too big and hard for Charlotte; there are times when some edge creeps in, especially on strident top notes, and Lance is in danger of being over-powered but hers was a major voice and she is moving and impassioned in her big moments of distress, such as "Va! laisse couler mes larmes!". A forty-year-old Gabriel Bacquier sounds just right as Albert and makes him far less faceless than is often the case. Mady Mesplé is charming without being arch, contrasting strongly with the formidable Gorr. Le Bailli is sung by a very pleasing baritone unknown to me, and the two old bon viveurs are a humorous, engaging pair.

I love Etcheverry's conducting and his Office de Radiodiffusion-Télévision Française Orchestra is superb; it seems to me that he gauges tempi and phrasing perfectly, with great awareness of both his singers' needs and Massenet's long melodic line.

This is another CD set which is hard to track down and purchase affordably, although it can easily be downloaded or streamed. Ultimately, for all its merits, the lack of tenderness in Gorr's tone inclines me to favour more sympathetic portrayals by such as Frederica von Stade or Janet Baker.

(Beware: avoid the issue of this on the red BnF label in inferior mono sound and look for the stereo versions as per above.)

Georges Prêtre - 1968-69 (studio; stereo) EMI
Orchestra - Orchestre de Paris
Chorus - L'ORTF Children's Chorus

Werther - Nicolai Gedda
Charlotte - Victoria de los Ángeles
Sophie - Mady Mesplé
Albert - Roger Soyer
Le Bailli - Jean-Christophe Benoit
Johann - Christos Grigoriou
Schmidt - André Mallabrera

Two lyric tenors of huge reputation whose voices are problematic to my ears are Alfredo Kraus and Nicolai Gedda, the Werther here. I invariably hear something of a whine in Gedda's tone which I do

not find pleasing, even though I acknowledge his artistry; I am happy to accept that I might be in a minority here but it's my survey and I'll cry if I want to, and I am much happier with a tenor of the vocal characteristics of, say, Georges Thill, César Vezzani (whose extracts are wonderful but sadly he never made a complete recording) or even the young José Carreras, whose sound is fuller and more pharyngeal but who can still sing quietly and delicately. Gedda – like de los Ángeles – sings in impeccable French and phrases beautifully but the essentially edgy, lachrymose quality of his voice does not delight me, and I hear more Gedda than *Werther*. My problems with this set are compounded by the casting of a soprano Charlotte – admittedly one of warm, mezzo-ish tint but without the requisite lower register. She seems oddly passive and detached in the first half, although I suppose the point is that she deliberately and heroically resists emotional engagement until the crisis beginning in the third Act, where I find her a tad unsteady and, like Gedda, more tearful than profound.

Christopher Howell [reviewed this recording](#) for MWI back in 2004, and has a lot to say about the wilfulness of Prêtre's beat and the nature of de los Ángeles' fading soprano – this was her last commercial recording.

I have to say that although I agree with him about de los Ángeles' voice which has lost fullness of tone and sounds harsh – although the vagaries of Prêtre in his typical “hurry-up” mode can grate in some recordings, I love his free, rhapsodic and, yes, wilful, conducting here. His orchestra follow him willingly and right away plays the lovely *Prélude* with deep affection; the “Clair de lune” music, too, unfolds elegantly. The supporting cast is fine – especially the beautiful bass-baritone of Roger Soyer who makes something special of his arioso “Au bonheur don't mon âme est pleine” and the bird-like Mady Mesplé as Sophie is attractive – but in the end the deficiencies of both lead singers preclude a whole-hearted recommendation.

Charles Mackerras – 1977 (live; stereo) Chandos - **N.B. in English**
Orchestra & Chorus - English National Opera

Werther - John Brecknock
Charlotte - Janet Baker
Sophie - Joy Roberts
Albert - Patrick Wheatley
Le Bailli - Harold Blackburn
Johann - John Tomlinson
Schmidt - Terry Jenkins
Brühlmann - Nigel Waugh
Kätchen - Janice Andrew

I have already explained above the reason for my bias towards, and inclusion of, this live recording but concede that the listener must be willing to tolerate some coughing, some less than stellar voices among the minor roles and the inevitable bathos resulting from rendering the original French in English – we cannot escape the occasional Gilbert and Sullivan moment. Some also consider John Brecknock's *Werther* to be a weakness; I cannot agree. His tenor is light and reedy, yes, and perhaps half a size too small for the role but the tone is pleasing, his top notes secure and his diction pellucid. Furthermore, he is such an intelligent, sensitive singer; he very successfully conveys *Werther's* hypersensitive personality. Patrick Wheatley has a neat, pleasant baritone and makes a suitably decent, upright, dry old stick of Albert, then transforms credibly into the stern husband who makes his wife hand of over the pistols with which *Werther* will kill himself, while Joy Roberts is a sweet, bubbly Sophie with a crystalline soprano. Mackerras conducts very well and the playing of the ENO orchestra is admirable – but it is Janet Baker's portrayal of Charlotte which sets the seal on this recording. Her warm, shimmering sound is ideal and she somehow makes sense even of the clumsier moments of the English text. She is so moving in “Ah! Now let my tears flow freely!” (well translated from “Va! laisse couler

mes larmes!") and lives the role as only she could, managing perfectly the transition from placid mother-substitute to torn, desperate lover.

This cannot be a prime recommendation but I do endorse it as a highly desirable supplement to a French, studio recording.

Riccardo Chailly – 1979 (studio; stereo) DG

Orchestra - Radio-Sinfonie-Orchester Köln

Chorus - Kölner Kinderchor

Werther - Plácido Domingo

Charlotte - Elena Obraztsova

Sophie - Arleen Augér

Albert - Franz Grundheber

Le Bailli - Kurt Moll

Johann - Ladislaus Anderko

Schmidt - Alejandro Vazquez

Brühlmann - Wolfgang Vater

Kätchen - Gertrud Ottenthal

There is much which is pleasing about this recording: the young Plácido in honeyed voice as Werther, luxury casting in the young Kurt Moll as Charlotte's father – even if his French vowels are dodgy and he tends to sound like Gurnemanz - a silvery Arleen Augér as her sister and sensitive conducting by Chailly, who gives the score Wagnerian weight, revelling in its sensuous, Romantic quality - and the Cologne orchestra sounds like a crack outfit.

Domingo does not have a French-sounding tenor but his accent is really quite good and he pays great attention to the text, but top notes are strained. I am a great admirer of the late Elena Obraztsova in the right context, but the decision to cast her opposite Domingo here was inexplicable: here, Charlotte is a booming, virago-voiced Amneris or Azucena who is more likely to boil her siblings in oil than serve them sandwiches. Her French is occluded, too. To be fair, she occasionally lightens her voice successfully in scenes such as when Charlotte and Werther return from the village ball, and her "Va! laisse couler mes larmes" is dramatically effective, but much of the time her essential tone is too hard and abrasive to portray the gentle Charlotte convincingly.

Grundheber is a gritty, under-stated Albert, insufficiently elegant of tone and none too steady – really quite unsatisfactory. All in all, in terms of style, no-one would mistake this for an authentic French version, both from the point of view of singing and orchestral playing and despite Domingo's refinement, other tenors are more suited to the eponymous role.

Michel Plasson – 1979 (studio; stereo) EMI

Orchestra - London Philharmonic Orchestra

Chorus - Covent Garden Singers

Werther - Alfredo Kraus

Charlotte - Tatiana Troyanos

Sophie - Christine Barbaux

Albert - Matteo Manuguerra

Le Bailli - Jules Bastin

Johann - Jean-Philippe Lafont

Schmidt - Philip Langridge

Brühlmann - Michael Lewis

Kätchen - Lynda Richardson

As I explain in my review of the Prêtre studio recording above, I do not always share the general admiration expressed for Kraus' reedy tenor but I do like him in some things; at his best, his voice is reminiscent of that of Schipa and he never sounds too beefy or Latinate - although he can occasionally be too lachrymose and rather nasal. He was still only in his early fifties here and accompanied by the great Troyanos and the hugely under-rated Manuguerra, making this recording an attractive prospect. Furthermore, Plasson is surely the best conductor of French music of recent times; he is often surprisingly relaxed and leisurely in his pacing and tempi but this allows the sensuous beauty of the score to emerge and he knows how to crank up the tension at key dramatic points. The analogue sound here is superb: full, clean and beautifully balanced.

The special warmth and vibrancy of Troyanos' unmistakable voice is ideally suited to the role of Charlotte; she brings a poignancy and delicacy to her portrayal matched only by Janet Baker in English and Frederica von Stade for Colin Davis. She deploys her naturally fast vibrato pianissimo to suggest repressed emotion, then opens up on the big phrases to devastating effect.

Manuguerra is ideally neat and poised as Albert, the virility of his tone softened by an underlying tenderness, and Jules Bastin's bass is a much better match with the role of Le Bailli than, say, the more formal, forbidding timbre of Kurt Moll. A special word, too, for the sweetest of singing from the children in this recoding – the best I know. Barbaux is an appealing, chirpy Sophie without being a tweety-bird.

Ultimately, tenors such as Carreras and Luccioni bring considerably more beauty and fullness of tone to the role of Werther but Kraus' experience and artistry still provide much satisfaction and Troyanos is a dream.

Colin Davis – 1980 (studio; stereo) Philips
Orchestra - Covent Garden
Chorus - Children from the Royal Opera House Production

Werther - José Carreras
Charlotte - Frederica von Stade
Sophie - Isobel Buchanan
Albert - Thomas Allen
Le Bailli - Robert Lloyd
Johann - Malcolm King
Schmidt - Paul Crook
Brühlmann - Donaldson Bell
Kätchen - Linda Humphries

Now nearly forty years old, this recording inspires in me the same affection and admiration as when I first heard it. It helps to be a francophile/phone but I honestly think anyone who loves the human voice in its most refined form would succumb to Carreras's opening recitative and aria, "Je ne sais si je veille"; it is the apotheosis of Romantic adoration of Nature and melodically exquisite. His French is passable to pretty good and his plangent voice is at its very peak: warm, vibrant always suffused with a hint of tears - perfect for the arch-idealist Werther.

Von Stade is hardly less moving as Charlotte; she, too, has the ideal voice for the heroine with her rich, oboe sound and flickering vibrato. I am invariably moved to tears by the restrained passion of the duet for Werther and Charlotte at the end of Act 1. The supporting cast provides an *embarras de richesses* with such distinguished and elegant singers as Thomas Allen and Robert Lloyd; even the children are delightful. Colin Davis is not yet groaning obtrusively along with his performers and directs a sensitive and wholly idiomatic account of this grimly gorgeous tale; the Covent Garden orchestra plays

wonderfully, caressing the score. The analogue sound is exemplary, as was so often the case from Philips in this era.

All that's missing, perhaps, is the sense of Gallic authenticity native speakers bring to their singing, although von Stade in particular and the cast in general sing decent French. Musically, this recording remains the most satisfying of all.

Kent Nagano – 1996 (studio; digital) Erato
Orchestra & Chorus - L'Opéra National de Lyon

Werther - Jerry Hadley
Charlotte - Anne Sofie von Otter
Sophie - Dawn Upshaw
Albert - Gérard Thérue
Le Bailli - Jean-Marie Frémeau
Johann - Frédéric Caton
Schmidt - Gilles Ragon
Brühlmann - Gilles Ragon
Kätchen - Geneviève Marchand

Here is a role which really suits Anne Sofie von Otter, who can be a cool artist; Charlotte's deliberate reserve and enforced control followed by their sudden abandonment lie snugly within her emotional ambit and her slim voice sits equally neatly bang in the centre of the tessitura of the role; she also sings in excellent French. Jerry Hadley was for two decades one of the finest and most versatile tenors on the circuit, and is in fine voice even if he doesn't have the elegance of the best, as some of the youthful sheen has worn of his tenor so his essential tone is rather hefty and he is inclined to yell. His French is correct rather than idiomatic. I have never much enjoyed Dawn Upshaw's pouty, "little girl" voice but she understands the character of Sophie well and her sound fits it. Gérard Thérue, the only native French-speaker among the principal singers here, has a light, neat, amiable baritone that actually has rather less weight than Hadley's tenor. The supporting cast very warm and natural. Nagano certainly has the measure of the score and the Lyon Opera, which he directed for a decade, is evidently a very fine band, but I wish he wouldn't punctuate his conducting with such very audible grunts and groans.

This places me in an awkward position as a reviewer, as I must objectively acknowledge the excellence of the performers here while confessing that neither star singer here much moves me and I don't really respond emotionally or aesthetically to them as I do when listening to other recordings such as those by Davis or Mackerras. This undoubtedly a fine – perhaps rather "worthy" - recording but for me not a favourite.

(There is an additional and rather lurid irony to this recording in the horrible fact that Jerry Hadley died in 2007 by his own hand in exactly the same manner as *Werther*.)

Vladimir Jurowski – 1998 (studio; digital) RCA
Orchestra - Deutsches Sinfonieorchester
Chorus - Berliner Knabenchor

Werther - Ramón Vargas
Charlotte - Veselina Kasarova
Sophie - Dawn Kotoski
Albert - Christopher Schaldenbrand
Le Bailli - Umberto Chiummo
Johann - Roman Trekel
Schmidt - Christoph Genz

Brühlmann - Frank Baer
Kätchen - Arndis Halla

The crystalline digital sound and warm acoustic greatly enhances the pleasures of this recording, headed by two voices which are superficially both of the ideal weight and type: Vargas' lirico-spinto tenor and Kasarova's warm mezzo-soprano, very much in the same mould as Troyanos and von Stade, with a quick, flickering vibrato and a smoky lower register. The supporting cast-members are rather less starry than rival modern recordings, however: Umberto Chiummo, for example, is characterful but has an odd, slightly tremolo-ridden bass, Dawn Kotoski's penny-plain Sophie lacks somewhat of the requisite gamine charm and Christopher Schaldenbrand sings a neat but bland Albert.

Vargas' tone can turn a little dry and windy under pressure compared with effulgence of Carreras' tone or Tagliavini's honeyed timbre and his use of the text, although effective, is less subtle than Kraus'. Similarly, Kasarova's tense vocal production precludes the variety of expression of the best in the role of Charlotte and the emotions she expresses tend to sound rather all-purpose and generalised.

Jurwoski's manner is brisk and unsentimental, in direct contrast to, say, Plasson's affectionate approach, and he is clearly concerned to emphasise above all the music's elegance rather than its dramatic content - which is all very well but surely this music requires a more indulgent manner in its most Romantic, yearning sections; Davis's heart-on-sleeve manner is more visceral than both conductors.

Given that no-one here is French, the language is pretty well delivered but Vargas begins to sound Hispanic in passages of intense emotion such as his most hysterical outpouring, "Un autre son époux!"

Good as this, the number of slight but cumulative disadvantages it presents incline me to default to my preferred recordings from Davis and Plasson.

Antonio Pappano – 1998 (studio; digital) EMI

Orchestra - London Symphony Orchestra
Chorus - Tiffin Children's Choir

Werther - Roberto Alagna
Charlotte - Angela Gheorghiu
Sophie - Patricia Petibon
Albert - Thomas Hampson
Le Bailli - Jean-Philippe Courtis
Johann - Jean-Marie Frémeau
Schmidt - Jean-Paul Fouchécourt
Brühlmann - Pierre Dupont
Kätchen - Sophie Boulanger

This *Werther* is now available in any of three different EMI issues frequently offered at bargain prices, so there is no obstacle to any admirer of either the singing duo here or the opera itself acquiring it.

I have a few reservations about it, however, and I'll state them briefly. First, for all her consummate artistry and gorgeous voice, the tonal centre of Angela Gheorghiu's assumption of Charlotte is too high; the tessitura of the part requires a mezzo-ish soprano or the real thing. Secondly, while I absolutely love the authentic sound of Alagna's native French, his grainy tenor is not as beautiful as that of Carreras or Thill and little bleats and gulps sometimes disrupt the line. Finally, Pappano hugs the score to death; Massenet can easily descend into mawkishness and a little starch in proceedings is necessary to eschew indulgence and at times I felt things going slack where Davis keeps more tension in the warp and woof of the musical fabric.

Nonetheless, this is lovely singing, the LSO plays beautifully, Thomas Hampson typically provides rather bland and tasteful support, Petibon is charming as Sophie. I particularly enjoyed the lovely voice and acute characterisation provided by bass-baritone Jean-Philippe Courtis as Le Bailli and it's a blessing that so many of the cast are either French or at home in the language; however, the Tiffin Children's Choir, while good, is audibly not French.

This is a fine recording of Massenet's masterpiece but it does not supplant the best.

Jean-Claude Casadesus – 1999 (live composite; digital) Naxos
Orchestra - Orchestre National de Lille-Région Nord/Pas-de-Calais
Chorus - Maîtrise Boréale

Werther - Marcus Haddock
Charlotte - Béatrice Uria-Monzon
Sophie - Jaël Azzaretti
Albert - René Massis
Le Bailli - Jean-Philippe Marlière
Johann - Sébastien Bou
Schmidt - Jean Delescluse
Brühlmann - David Roubaud
Kätchen - Mathilde Jacob

This recording has already been twice reviewed here on MusicWeb ([review](#) ~ [review](#)) receiving a guarded welcome for the idiomatic cast but expressing some reservations regarding the lack of emotionalism in singing, the swift conducting and the rather dull, removed aural perspective, with the volume set too low.

I have enjoyed Marcus Haddock elsewhere; his tenor is especially suited to the Italian style but he is sometimes also rather tight-sounding here and he is given to punctuating his line with little, Italianate, lachrymose interjections which spoil his line. He sings in excellent French but is so over-wrought to start with that he doesn't really have anywhere to go as things get worse for him. Béatrice Uria-Monzon has a warm, dark mezzo-soprano which makes her sound too fruity, mature and maternal on the opening scenes; indeed, her father is pleasantly sung by a young-sounding Jean-Philippe Marlière who could be her brother. Neither she nor Haddock has the range, variety or delicacy of the finest interpreters, yet both have essentially fine voices. Jaël Azzaretti is a less irritating Sophie than usual, having a light, pretty soprano and a correspondingly natural manner; she is one of the best on record. René Massis has a neat, but rather throaty, baritone and doesn't sound like a young man. A francophone cast – the leading role apart – is decidedly an advantage when it comes to matching the words to the music.

This makes an economical, admirable introduction to the opera but better options are available.

Jean-Luc Tingaud – 2003 (live composite; digital) Dynamic
N.B. this is the version Massenet prepared for a baritone Werther and is sung in Italian
Orchestra - Orchestra Internazionale d'Italia
Chorus - Coro di voci bianchi del Festival della Valle d'Itria

Werther - Luca Grassi
Charlotte - Eufemia Tufano
Sophie - Rosita Ramini
Albert - Gabriele Spina
Le Bailli - Domenico Colaianni

Johann - Gianfranco Cappelluti
 Schmidt - Salvatore Cordella
 Brühlmann - Juraj Nociar
 Kätchen - Eva Katrencinova

The Dynamic label has issued some really interesting and valuable operatic novelties and rarities, some of which have been world premieres, particularly French versions of operas more typically sung in Italian or German, such as Donizetti's reconstructed *Le duc d'Albe*, Verdi's *Le trouvère* and Strauss' *Salomé*, so it's hardly out of their line to issue this recording made from live performances during the Festival della Valle d'Itria.

This is by no means the first time in recent years that we have heard a baritone reprise the version made by the composer for his friend Mattia Battistini, the "King of Baritones". As well as singing Albert, Thomas Hampson sang an arrangement of *Werther* for baritone under Donald Runnicles at the Met and Michel Plasson in concert; those live performances, both with Susan Graham as Charlotte, are available on the Australian label Celestial Audio and as a Virgin Classics DVD respectively and I have heard only the YouTube clips from the latter. This Dynamic set, then, is the only commercially recorded one on CD.

It is unreasonable to expect either Hampson or, still less, Luca Grassi here to rival Battistini, surely one of the most elegant and admired singers ever to have graced a stage, but as he sang it first in 1901, revivals a century later hardly seem premature. His performance is known only via the two solos he recorded: "Ma come dopo il nembo" ("J'aurais sur ma poitrine") from Act 2 and the Song of Ossian, "Ah! non mi ridestar" ("Pourquoi me réveiller?"), included on CD 2 as an addendum, so any modern arrangement is perforce subjective and notional. The idea that any such version may be authentically reconstructed at all is rejected by Massenet's estate, especially as there are differences even between Battistini's recordings and the surviving fragments of the re-arrangement and the same passages as they are sung on this Dynamic recording. Furthermore, the booklet is mute concerning the source of the arrangement used here.

However, that is hardly the problem; more germane is simply the fact that the concept per se is odd and falls strangely on the ear, as does Italian after listening to so many versions in French. Contrary to expectations, perhaps, there is no key transposition of Werther's role, just a downward adjustment of the upper half of vocal line to eschew the high notes which would be sung by a tenor. Even when sung by a voice of Battistini's quality, the result is really unsatisfying, especially if one is accustomed to hearing them; their loss compromises the melody and enfeebles the music; it also means that we have two baritones and no principal tenor, reducing variety and throwing out the vocal balance.

I had previously read uncomplimentary assessments of Luca Grassi's singing. He has a pleasant, grainy tone and considerable volume, but is intermittently afflicted with a fault increasingly ubiquitous among modern singers: a vibrato which threatens to obtrude and spoil the line. The same flaw is apparent in the mezzo-soprano of Eufemia Tufano, who apparently bravely stepped in at the last movement to replace an ailing singer and had to re-learn the role of Carlotta in Italian, having previously performed it as Charlotte in French. She has a warm sound and sings steadily but does nothing much with the music that is distinctive to bring it alive. Grassi makes an especially good job, gaining spontaneous applause, of "Ah non mi ridestar", which nonetheless sounds odd in its baritone arrangement. Gabriele Spina delivers a rather weak, bland, under-vocalised Alberto – a character who needs all the starch the performer can give him. Rosita Ramini sings Sofia in a rather heavy, hooty fashion – again, with excessive vibrato.

This is very closely recorded, which highlights some occasional poor tuning in the orchestra and a good few stage noises – creaks, thumps and some bird song which is not necessarily out of place! - but there is no denying its clarity and immediacy. The booklet might not tell us what edition is used but it

otherwise provides an Italian libretto with the English translation, a background essay, photographs and a plot synopsis.

In 2012, this was subject to what I can only call a really dyspeptic one-star review on Classical-music.com, the website of BBC Music Magazine. It really isn't that bad by any reasonable criteria, and it's interesting to hear it sung this way even if it is rather ordinary and will be nobody's first choice.

Antonio Pappano – 2009 (live composite; digital) DG
Orchestra & Chorus – The Royal Opera House, Covent Garden

Werther – Rolando Villazón
Charlotte – Sophie Koch
Sophie – Eri Nakamura
Albert – Audun Iversen
Le Bailli – Alain Vernhes
Johann – Darren Jeffery
Schmidt – Stuart Patterson
Brühlmann – Zhengzhong Zhou
Kätchen – Anna Devin

I have one, over-riding objection to this otherwise admirable live performance which disqualifies it for me: I cannot endure the pronounced beat in both Sophie Koch's mezzo-soprano and Eri Nakamura's soprano. The pulse in Koch's voice is what for me spoils the recording of *Der Rosenkavalier* starring Renée Fleming and conducted by Thielemann; a vibrato should never be that obtrusive and no other Charlotte in this survey – except perhaps the miscast Obratzova - here evinces that egregious technical fault.

Villazón had by this stage largely recovered from his vocal crisis and his grainy, highly individual tenor conveys sincerity and passion without the forcing which obviously precipitated his previous difficulties but I don't think it is very French in timbre or affect, and there is clearly some loss of resonance on top notes. The rest of the supporting cast is good and Pappano is certainly more animated than in his studio recording over a decade before, directing a terrific Covent Garden orchestra, but that does not negate the wobble issues.

Recommendations:

My firm favourite recording has long been the Colin Davis set with the honeyed voices of Carreras and Frederica von Stade, and having now listened and re-listened to a dozen versions, my loyalties remain unshaken - unless it is to acknowledge the supremacy of the 1931 Thill/Vallin recording, but that is obviously a vintage choice.

Studio mono: Cohen 1931
Live mono: Molinari-Pradelli 1953
Studio stereo: Davis 1980*; Plasson 1979
Live digital:
*First choice

Ralph Moore