

## Richard Strauss's *Ariadne auf Naxos* - A survey of the major recordings

by Ralph Moore

*Ariadne auf Naxos* is less frequently encountered on stage than *Der Rosenkavalier* or *Salome*, but it is something of a favourite among those who fancy themselves connoisseurs, insofar as its plot revolves around a conceit typical of Hofmannsthal's libretti, whereby two worlds clash: the merits of populist entertainment, personified by characters from the burlesque Commedia dell'arte tradition enacting Viennese operetta, are uneasily juxtaposed with the claims of high art to elevate and refine the observer as embodied in the *opera seria* to be performed by another company of singers, its plot derived from classical myth. The tale of Ariadne's desertion by Theseus is performed in the second half of the evening and is in effect an opera within an opera. The fun starts when the major-domo conveys the instructions from "the richest man in Vienna" that in order to save time and avoid delaying the fireworks, both entertainments must be performed simultaneously. Both genres are parodied and a further contrast is made between Zerbinetta's pragmatic attitude towards love and life and Ariadne's morbid, death-oriented idealism – "Todgeweihtes Herz!", *Tristan und Isolde*-style.

Strauss' scoring is interesting and innovative; the orchestra numbers only forty or so players: strings and brass are reduced to chamber-music scale and the orchestration heavily weighted towards woodwind and percussion, with the result that it is far less grand and Romantic in scale than is usual in Strauss and a peculiarly spare and spiky mood frequently prevails. The casting is skewed towards higher voices, with little for alto or bass; even the travestito role of the Composer may be sung by a soprano rather than a mezzo and the tenor is given considerably more to do than is often the case in Strauss' operas - but all his music comes at the end and is written in a murderously high tessitura. However, the Ariadne needs to have a dark quality to her soprano as, after her cameo in the prologue as an impossible *grande dame*, she spends most of her time lamenting her lost love.

I quote from Wikipedia: "The opera was originally conceived as a 30-minute divertissement to be performed at the end of Hofmannsthal's adaptation of Molière's play *Le bourgeois gentilhomme*. Besides the opera, Strauss provided incidental music to be performed during the play. In the end, the opera occupied ninety minutes, and the performance of play plus opera occupied over six hours." Obviously that was impractical for a number of reasons and the 1916 revision is the one invariably heard today, but one recording below resolves the problems inherent in the earlier version by presenting a judicious edition of the original 1912 music linked by short narrative passages spoken by M. Jourdain; as such, it is *hors concours* and must be seen as a supplement to a recording of the 1916 version.

The opera has always attracted singers of the first rank, beginning with sopranos such as Maria Jeritza and Lotte Lehmann and even the ungrateful role of Bacchus has been tackled by some big tenor names; James King, for example, was evidently a glutton for punishment and features three times below – and by the 80's the wear in his voice is palpable. My own experience of seeing it at Covent Garden with Deborah Voigt and Diana Damrau when both their voices were in prime condition, before the former's rather premature retirement and the latter's rapid decline, was that it makes a delightful and absorbing entertainment.

There are over sixty recordings in the catalogue; I consider sixteen of the most prominent and widely available here, including all eight studio recordings, the last of those being of the 1912 version in 1994. The other eight recordings are live radio broadcasts or live/live composite stage performances. Karl Böhm is the conductor perhaps most associated with Strauss; he conducts no fewer than four of the recordings below and they all have great merit.

## The recordings

**Karl Böhm – 1944** (live; mono) Myto; Preiser

Orchestra - Wiener Staatsoper

Ariadne - Maria Reining

Komponist - Irmgard Seefried

Zerbinetta - Alda Noni

Bacchus - Max Lorenz

Musiklehrer - Paul Schöffler

Harlekin - Erich Kunz

Truffaldin - Marjan Rus

Brighella - Peter Klein

Scaramuccio - Richard Sallaba

Najade - Emmy Loose

Dryade - Melanie Frutschnigg

Echo - Elisabeth Rutgers

Haushofmeister - Alfred Muzzarelli

This is a recording of the performance given in the presence of the composer on his eightieth birthday. It enshrines the mercurial, nuanced Composer of the young Irmgard Seefried and the regal, yet warm and feminine, Ariadne of Maria Reining still in her prime; too many people know her from her recording of the Marschallin for Erich Kleiber made a decade later and rather too late in her career. Here, she is steady and creamy-voiced, with full, easy top notes and the hint of vulnerability the role requires. Alda Noni makes a brilliant, if slightly shrill Zerbinetta, rather missing the deeper aspect of her character, and Max Lorenz obligingly mostly yells his way rather effortfully through the killer role of Bacchus but is capable of the occasional tenderness. Along with Ben Heppner and Jess Thomas, he is one of the few tenors who just about conquers the role.

Böhm was a master of the Straussian idiom; he never drags but applies subtle rubato and gets his orchestra to phrase beautifully.

The sound is remarkably good for its era and provenance – hardly distinguishable from any good mono recording made in the 50's, apart from a little more congestion in the concerted orchestral passages.

This is inescapably in the “historic” category but if you are habituated to that and would like to hear how the composer himself indubitably wanted his work to sound, this is irresistible. You can sample it on YouTube.

**Karl Böhm – 1954** (live; mono) DG; Gala

Orchestra - Wiener Philharmoniker

Ariadne - Lisa Della Casa

Komponist - Irmgard Seefried

Zerbinetta - Hilde Güden

Bacchus - Rudolf Schock

Musiklehrer - Paul Schöffler

Harlekin - Alfred Poell

Truffaldin - Oskar Czerwenka

Brighella - Murray Dickie

Scaramuccio - August Jaresch

Najade - Rita Streich

Dryade - Hilde Rössl-Majdan

Echo - Lisa Otto

Haushofmeister - Alfred Neugebauer

Ein Lakai - Franz Bierbach  
Ein Offizier - Georges Müller  
Ein Perückenmacher - Walter Berry  
Ein Tanzmeister - Peter Klein

I think Karl Böhm's live performances of Strauss operas represent some of his best work; this is a companion piece to his live *Daphne* which has yet to be bettered despite being another elderly, live recording, albeit in narrow stereo. It is in comparatively restricted mono but one soon forgets that, given the quality of the performance.

Indeed, the cast is extraordinary, headed by Lisa Della Casa's beautiful Ariadne. She is in the Janowitz mould: delicate, silvery, yet powerful when required. Irmgard Seefried is impassioned and touching as the Composer, Hilde Güden is pert and wonderfully fluid in Zerbinetta's coloratura, and Paul Schöffler suitably avuncular and rich-voiced as the Music Master. Once you have heard Ben Heppner as Bacchus in Sinopoli's modern set you are spoilt for any other tenor, but Rudolf Schock is more flexible and rounded of tone than he was for Karajan in the studio recording of the same year and makes a very acceptable job of a difficult part with a killer tessitura; he is certainly the equal of James King for Kempe. The trio of nymphs is of exceptional vocal quality; famous names here later graduated to bigger roles, including Rita Streich who sang Zerbinetta for Karajan later the same year.

Ensemble is pretty good for a live opera; not too many slips and much lovely playing from the Vienna Philharmonic., despite some flubs in the brass. Böhm has a very attractive way of keeping up pace and tension without bombast or undue haste and he certainly has the measure of this chamber opera.

As long as you do not require modern, stereo sound of the kind you get in the highly recommendable Sinopoli set, this is a very attractive option.

**Herbert Kegel – 1954** (radio broadcast; mono) Walhall

Orchestra - Rundfunk-Sinfonieorchester Leipzig

Ariadne - Brünnhilde Friedland

Komponist - Christa Maria Ziese

Zerbinetta - Jutta Vulpius

Bacchus - Kurt Schöffler

Musiklehrer - Hans Wocke

Harlekin - Robert Lauhöfer

Truffaldin - Wilhelm Klemm

Brighella – Paul Reinecke

Scaramuccio – Hans-Peter Schwarzbach

Najade – Hella Jansen

Dryade – Angelika Unger-Täschner

Echo – Helene Rackotz

Haushofmeister – Alfred Schelske

Ein Lakai – Helmu Eyle

Ein Perückenmacher – Rainer Lüdecke

Ein Tanzmeister – Lothar Anders

I confess that before acquiring this to include in my survey, I had not heard of a single artist participating in this recording save for the conductor, perhaps because this was made in the days of the GDR and the Cold War, when singers made few forays into the West. The sound is comparable to, indeed marginally better than, the other radio broadcast here below, conducted by Keilberth, some faint pre-echo – discernible primarily on headphones - notwithstanding. The orchestra is very able, even if their sound is sometimes wiry. Most of the voices are competent, but the soprano singing the Composer is unsteady, with an incipient wobble and thin top notes, and the nymphs are not the most

mellifluous. The swift, easy interaction of the cast suggests that they were part of a regular ensemble but none is especially individual and a number of voices sounding too similar can be an obstacle to appreciating this opera, which demands vivid characterisation. The Ariadne is ordinary, with something of an edge in her tone, without the plushness of timbre the best in this role can bring to it and much the same is true of the Zerbinetta. The most successful assumption is that of the tenor who sings Bacchus – always a pig of a role, and he does well, providing firm, virile singing.

Kegel sets off at such a pace that I was taken aback on first listening and the ensuing dialogue between the Music Master and the Major Domo is lively but equally rushed. That urgency is maintained throughout, with the result that this is the fastest performance I know, at 1 hour 49 minutes.

To sum up, this a wholly adequate but rather bland and unmemorable recording - not a front-runner.

**Joseph Keilberth – 1954** (radio broadcast; mono) Walhall

Orchestra - Kölner Rundfunkorchester

Ariadne - Hilde Zadek

Komponist - Sena Jurinac

Zerbinetta - Rita Streich

Bacchus - Hans Hopf

Musiklehrer - Alfred Poell

Harlekin – Hörst Gunter

Truffaldin - Fritz Ollendorf

Brighella – Walter Jenckel

Scaramuccio – Alfred Pfeifle

Najade – Gerda Sommerschuh

Dryade – Maria von Ilosvay

Echo – Käte Möller-Siepermann

Haushofmeister – Eduard Marks

Ein Lakai – Heiner Horn

Ein Perückenmacher – Werner Engelhardt

Ein Tanzmeister – Peter Offermanns

There are some famous names in the cast here, including Rita Streich, now promoted from a Naiad to Zerbinetta, noted soprano Sena Jurinac, and Hilde Zadek, who died last year aged 101. The sound is really very good for mono of this vintage with a minimum of distortion. Furthermore, this is its first and only release on the Walhall label and the conductor is the oft-under-rated Joseph Keilberth. He makes a lovely job of this: everything unfolds naturally without haste and he is most considerate to his singers, letting them relish the long lines. The orchestra is superb – listen to the lovely woodwind playing in the Introduction to the opera proper. The first voice we hear is the fine Alfred Poell, whose strong, resonant baritone really credibly inhabits the role of the Music Master. Eduard Marks makes a perfectly dry, supercilious Major Domo. Jurinac has a warm, flickering, mezzo-tinged soprano – ideal for the Composer. There is a pleasing contrast amongst all three leading sopranos; they are all attractive yet each is instantly tonally discernible from the other: Streich pure, piping and absolutely captivating, Zadek grand and imposing. She hasn't the most intrinsically beautiful voice but it is big and secure, with impressive pianissimi and she commands the role while singing impeccably in tune. The supporting cast is really first-rate – the trio of nymphs blend exquisitely, Rheinmaiden-style and Hörst Gunter, a singer with I am unfamiliar, sings as good and elegant a Harlekin as any. Only Hans Hopf is a bit stodgy and earthbound as Bacchus, but he has a strong, reliable Heldentenor able to encompass the demands of the role, and is also intermittently capable of singing with some tenderness and expression.

I thoroughly enjoy this performance and the excellence of the ensemble makes me forget the limitations of the mono – albeit perfectly tolerable - sound. Every survey I do reveals a surprise contender of which I was previously unaware – this is it.

**Herbert von Karajan – 1954** (studio; mono) EMI

Orchestra - Philharmonia Orchestra

Ariadne - Elisabeth Schwarzkopf

Komponist - Irmgard Seefried

Zerbinetta - Rita Streich

Bacchus - Rudolf Schock

Musiklehrer - Karl Dönch

Harlekin - Hermann Prey

Truffaldin - Fritz Ollendorf

Brighella - Helmut Krebs

Scaramuccio - Gerhard Unger

Najade - Lisa Otto

Dryade - Grace Hoffman

Echo - Anny Felbermayer

Haushofmeister - Alfred Neugebauer

Ein Lakai - Otakar Kraus

Ein Perückenmacher - Erich Strauss

Ein Tanzmeister - Hugues Cuénod

This has long been a prime recommendation, despite being in narrow, mono sound. (It could have been recorded in stereo but for Walter Legge's resistance to it as anything other than a gimmick.) Karajan's direction is sharp and witty, his conducting of the Philharmonia in its prime is as light as thistledown in the comic passages, and the opera is cast from strength. Having said that, virtually every singer, however accomplished, is exceeded by another elsewhere; Seefried is charming but rather light and girlish of voice for the Composer – she excels herself here in her two other live performances - and all the sopranos sound very similar. Reactions to Schwarzkopf's typically arch Ariadne will vary from enchantment to exasperation; I find her breathy, twittering vocalisation affected and her inflections over-cooked, even if – in the Prologue at least – she is meant to be a parody of a *diva*. Hugues Cuénod is a characterful but thin-voiced Dancing Master; Dönch rather light and bland as the Music Master. The three nymphs, headed by Lisa Otto, yet another light, silvery soprano, sing beautifully. Best of all is Rita Streich as a coquettish, small but shimmering-voiced Zerbinetta. Schock, like so many tenors who essay the role of Bacchus, is a bit strained by its demands but copes and the evident homogeneity of the ensemble makes this recording more than the sum of its parts, if not a first choice.

**Erich Leinsdorf – 1958** (studio; stereo) RCA

Orchestra - Wiener Philharmoniker

Ariadne - Leonie Rysanek

Komponist - Sena Jurinac

Zerbinetta - Roberta Peters

Bacchus - Jan Peerce

Musiklehrer - Walter Berry

Harlekin - Walter Berry

Truffaldin - Gunter Adam

Scaramuccio - Kurt Equiluz

Najade - Mimi Coertse

Dryade - Hilde Rössl-Majdan

Echo - Liselotte Maikl

Haushofmeister - Kurt Preger

This 1958 studio recording - the first of this opera in stereo - features some of the best artists to be found singing in Vienna at that time, including a young but weighty, dark-voiced Walter Berry in two roles, Sena Jurinac playing a charming, boyish Composer sung in the correct soprano Fach and a luscious, dusky-voiced Leonie Rysanek as the eponymous heroine, forming a pleasing contrast to the brighter-voiced Jurinac. As ever, Rysanek is a little ungainly and cloudy in the lower reaches of her voice but her big top notes are thrilling and her plaintive tone makes her a very credible afflicted prima donna. Roberta Peters is as ever rather pert and shrill but she makes a delightfully alert and characterful Zerbinetta, rattling through the part confidently but abruptly as if she is not exactly relishing its difficulties.

The supporting roles are sung by some first-rate singers, including Mimi Coertse, Kurt Equiluz and Murray Dickie. The killer tenor/tenor-killer role of Bacchus is more than adequately sung by Jan Peerce who has enough ring and steel in his voice to sound heroic and is able to cope with the high tessitura without barking or undue straining. The speaking part of the Haushofmeister is delivered with pointed wit and irony by the nasal, preening Kurt Preger; he ensures that speaks with condescendingly clarity to the performer underlings beholden to the "richest man in Vienna" and that is a great help to non-native listeners who'd like to follow the German dialogue.

The VPO play gorgeously but Leinsdorf is unimaginative and even occasionally pedestrian in his handling of the score compared with Karajan, Sinopoli or Kempe. It's not bad conducting, just a tad dull; he makes comparatively little, for instance, of the alternately languorous and impassioned Overture to the opera proper. The sound is excellent for so early a stereo recording.

This is not my favourite account, being more anonymous than the Kempe or live Böhm sets, but it is certainly very satisfactory and has grown on me with repeated listening.

**Rudolf Kempe – 1967** (studio; stereo) EMI

Orchestra - Dresdener Staatskapelle

Ariadne - Gundula Janowitz

Komponist - Teresa Zylis-Gara

Zerbinetta - Sylvia Geszty

Bacchus - James King

Musiklehrer - Theo Adam

Harlekin - Hermann Prey

Truffaldin - Siegfried Vogel

Brighella - Hans-Joachim Rotzsch

Scaramuccio - Peter Schreier

Najade - Erika Wustmann

Dryade - Annelies Burmeister

Echo - Adele Stolte

Haushofmeister - Erich-Alexander Winds

I have always favoured this studio recording over Karajan's, mainly for reason of its excellent stereo sound and my firm preference for Janowitz over Schwarzkopf; furthermore, Kempe was always a fine Straussian, bringing out all the wit, delicacy and grandeur of the score. He hasn't Böhm's drive and propulsion but elucidates so much detail. The cast in general is sparkling, featuring several famous names very apt for their roles. For such a light, silvery soprano, Janowitz finds real depth – literal and metaphorical – in her portrayal of Ariadne; Geszty is sparkling and charming; Teresa Zylis-Gara has the ideal warm, *travesti* soprano which can alternate puppydog boyishness with a rapt, soaring line. As is so often the case, James King's Bacchus is a weakness and some strain is all too obvious in his often-unlovely tone and unimaginative phrasing; the best one can say is that at least he manages to get through the part without serious mishap.

That reservation apart, there is not a lot more to say; everything about this recording makes it thoroughly recommendable.

**Karl Böhm – 1969** (studio; stereo) Decca Eloquence

Orchestra - Bayerischer Rundfunk  
Ariadne - Hildegard Hillebrecht  
Komponist - Tatiana Troyanos  
Zerbinetta - Reri Grist  
Bacchus - Jess Thomas  
Musiklehrer - Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau  
Harlekin - Barry McDaniel  
Truffaldin - Richard Kogel  
Brighella - Friedrich Lenz  
Scaramuccio - John van Kesteren  
Najade - Arleen Augér  
Dryade - Unni Rugtvedt  
Echo - Sigrid Schmidt  
Haushofmeister - Franz Stoss  
Ein Lakai - Herbert Lackner  
Ein Offizier - Friedrich Lenz  
Ein Perückenmacher - Heinz Friedrich  
Ein Tanzmeister - Gerhard Unger

Recently remastered and re-issued by Australian Decca Eloquence to remove the original imbalances between voices and orchestra, this is one of those “should have been great” recordings but unfortunately has a hole in the middle where Gundula Janowitz should have been. Instead, we have the strained, cloudy-toned and matronly Hildegard Hillebrecht; she has volume and lower register but her tone is scratchy, her phrasing ungainly and her intonation often flat. Perhaps it was off-day, as she had a good career, but her *Ariadne* seriously compromises this recording.

That is all the more regrettable given that several performances here are admirable: Jess Thomas makes a virile, clean and sweet-toned Bacchus, artfully distanced on his entrance with a bit of reverb but still very audible and he is one of the very few tenors to make poetry of the top A on “Bist du auch solch eine Zauberin?”; Tatiana Troyanos makes a vibrant Composer, even if at times her fast vibrato mutates into a flutter; there is lovely trio of nymphs including Arleen Augér; Reri Grist is another rather shrill, “tweety” Zerbinetta who has all the notes but doesn’t really dig very deeply into her character; Fischer-Dieskau hasn’t the right voice for the Music Master, sounding too light and grey, and he overeggs the verbalisms; the excellent Barry McDaniel heads a great troupe.

Böhm is busy and energised without being rushed – he hasn’t the elegance of Kempe but his élan – not always a word one associates with this conductor - works in this vaudeville piece. If only...

**Karl Böhm – 1976** (live; stereo) Orfeo

Orchestra - Wiener Staatsoper  
Ariadne - Gundula Janowitz  
Komponist - Agnes Baltsa  
Zerbinetta - Edita Gruberova  
Bacchus - James King  
Musiklehrer - Walter Berry  
Harlekin - Barry McDaniel  
Truffaldin - Manfred Jungwirth  
Brighella - Gerhard Unger  
Scaramuccio - Kurt Equiluz

Najade - Hilde de Groot  
 Dryade - Axelle Gall  
 Echo - Sona Ghazarian  
 Haushofmeister - Erich Kunz  
 Ein Lakai - Alfred Sramek  
 Ein Offizier - Peter Weber  
 Ein Tanzmeister - Heinz Zednik

This is a live recording of the premiere of a Wiener Staatsoper production. It has several significant advantages over the later one under Sawallisch, not least the lighter, sprightlier touch of its conductor who, in my opinion, shone brightest in Strauss. His manner with the music is almost instantly recognisable in comparison with Sawallisch's more earthbound, less mercurial direction and makes all the difference to the mood of the proceedings. Other great improvements include three singers in possession of younger, more flexible and tonally more alluring voices than was the case in 1982: Walter Berry, James King and Edita Gruberova. Agnes Baltsa, with her gutsy and impassioned Composer, brings real distinction to a part in which Trudeliese Schmidt is merely pleasant and the supporting cast of Commedia dell'arte characters comprise several celebrated singers who were far more than mere comprimario artists, such as Kurt Equiluz, Gerhard Unger, Manfred Jungwirth and Barry McDaniel. Furthermore, even the spoken role of Haushofmeister is more wittily and pointedly played by veteran singer Erich Kunz than by his 1982 Salzburg equivalent.

However, the clincher here is the sublime Gundula Janowitz, here so much more impressive than the merely adequate Anna Tomowa-Sintow. Her silvery soprano makes such a pleasing contrast to Baltsa's vibrant, resinous mezzo; those two artists alone make this set essential to any Strauss aficionado. Of course, you can hear Janowitz in the excellent Kempe studio recording but I think this live performance has the edge over even that one. Listening to Janowitz here in live performance, one is reminded that for all the delicacy of her voice, she had the power to sing the more lyrical Wagner roles. Being usually no fan of Gruberova's acidic, pulsing vocal production, I must overcome that involuntary resistance to her charms in order to recognise her pre-eminence in the role at Salzburg over many years and applaud her virtuosity.

This is an *Ariadne* which seems more completely than any other I know to capture the bitter-sweet spirit of this extraordinary and original opera. The sound is marvellous; so good that you don't give it a thought, so absorbing is the theatrical experience. It certainly compensates for the disappointment of Böhm's studio recording.

**Georg Solti – 1977** (studio; stereo) Decca  
 Orchestra - London Philharmonic Orchestra  
 Ariadne - Leontyne Price  
 Komponist - Tatiana Troyanos  
 Zerbinetta - Edita Gruberova  
 Bacchus - René Kollo  
 Musiklehrer - Walter Berry  
 Harlekin - Barry McDaniel  
 Truffaldin - Manfred Jungwirth  
 Brighella - Gerhard Unger  
 Scaramuccio - Kurt Equiluz  
 Najade - Deborah Cook  
 Dryade - Enid Hartle  
 Echo - Norma Burrowes  
 Haushofmeister - Erich Kunz  
 Ein Lakai - Alfred Sramek  
 Ein Offizier - Peter Weber

Ein Perückenmacher - Georg Tichy  
 Ein Tanzmeister - Heinz Zednik

Solti made many opera recordings, a surprising number of which have come out on top in my surveys but this one is less successful, with the exception of Troyanos' peerless Composer – however, fortunately that may be heard in Böhm's live 1969 performance on Orfeo. Otherwise, there are problems in the singing here: although she was only fifty, Leontyne Price was by this stage of her career already beginning to sound hoarse, hollow and husky in the middle and lower stretches of her voice and top notes can be squally and screamy. Having said that, there are of course some lovely moments. Kollo, however, was going through a bad patch and is coarse and throaty, and I never much enjoy Gruberova's piercing, pulsing, gulping style of vocal production, much preferring the purer, more delicate style of lyric sopranos such as Kathleen Battle or Sumi Jo. The supporting cast is very fine, the LPO plays beautifully, having been schooled by playing this opera at Glyndebourne, and Solti's direction once again belies his reputation for being too hard-driven, but the flaws and failings of the lead singers disqualify this from receiving my recommendation.

**Wolfgang Sawallisch – 1982** (live; stereo) Orfeo

Orchestra - Wiener Philharmoniker  
 Ariadne - Anna Tomowa-Sintow  
 Komponist - Trudeliese Schmidt  
 Zerbinetta - Edita Gruberova  
 Bacchus - James King  
 Musiklehrer - Walter Berry  
 Harlekin - Dale Duesing  
 Truffaldin - Siegfried Vogel  
 Brighella - Murray Dickie  
 Scaramuccio - Kurt Equiluz  
 Najade - Majorie Vance  
 Dryade - Rohangiz Yachmi  
 Echo - Olivera Miljakovic  
 Haushofmeister - Peter Matic  
 Ein Lakai - Alfred Sramek  
 Ein Offizier - Peter Weber  
 Ein Perückenmacher - Robert Riener  
 Ein Tanzmeister - Horst Hiestermann

This is a live recording in the Kleines Festpielhaus (now renamed the Mozart Haus) of an opera which has long been a favourite at the Salzburg Festival and the Vienna Philharmonic could surely play it in their sleep. Fortunately, Sawallisch does not induce them to do so and is mostly in swift, light, responsive mode - although I find the tripping dance ensemble "Es gilt, ob Tanzen" which concludes the Prologue to be decidedly heavy-footed. The first surprise to my ears was the warm but light mezzo-soprano of Trudeliese Schmidt as the Composer; she has lovely timbre and makes much of a part which has been sung by many a celebrated singer but not necessarily to much greater effect - except occasionally there are moments of unsteadiness.

Tomowa-Sintow has a similarly full of tone and is thus almost indistinguishable from Schmidt, which is unfortunate, but as nothing to the fact that she takes a breath in the middle of "schönes" in her first big aria "Ein schönes war" (just as she breathes in the wrong places in both "September" for Karajan in *Four Last Songs* and also the "Three Kings" song by Strauss). This is a pity as at her best she has a lovely voice, but it is prone to tonal drop-outs and discoloration which are perhaps themselves also the product of that faulty breath control. Her top notes shine but she is a little flat at the climax of "Es gibt ein Reich". Nonetheless, she brings a passion to the part that compensates for the few technical failings.

The third big voice here is that of Edita Gruberova in perhaps her most celebrated role. I admit a personal dislike of both the pulsing beat and the actual timbre of her voice, which I find unpleasantly harsh and bleating, often too close to a whine; others, I know, find differently and I am prepared to put up with her.

Veterans James King and Walter Berry do their time-honoured shtick as they had already been doing for many years in this opera and to be honest, sometimes it sounds like it. Bacchus is a beast of a part and very few tenors have been able to bring to it the ease of Ben Heppner in his prime, so we must be grateful that King can still hit most of the notes - although the top A on "eine Zauberin" is a trifle embarrassing (even if King tries to disguise his inability to nail it by pretending it is an artistic pianissimo) and he is yelling at the end.

I have heard many a more comical, subtle Major Domo than Peter Matic, who rather rushes and throws away the sardonic possibilities of his spoken lines. The Commedia dell'arte troupe is comprised of decent artists but there are too many throaty voices there and better are to be heard elsewhere.

Ultimately, I find this recording rather underwhelming; there are several more live recordings superior to it, particularly those conducted by Böhm, who invariably had better and younger singers, and that by Sinopoli in his modern digital studio version.

**James Levine – 1986** (studio; digital) DG

Orchestra - Metropolitan Opera

Ariadne - Anna Tomowa-Sintow

Komponist - Agnes Baltsa

Zerbinetta - Kathleen Battle

Bacchus - Gary Lakes

Musiklehrer - Hermann Prey

Harlekin - Urban Malmberg

Truffaldin - Kurt Rydl

Brighella - Hans Sojer

Scaramuccio - Josef Protschka

Najade - Barbara Bonney

Dryade - Helga Müller(-Molinari)

Echo - Dawn Upshaw

Haushofmeister - Otto Schenk

Some previous reviewers seem monumentally satisfied with this recording whereas I have significant reservations, starting with the lead singer, Anna Tomowa-Sintow. I have listened and relistened to a lot of versions of this fascinating opera for this survey and am fairly sure that this is by no means the most satisfying available. Never the most characterful singer, by this stage of her career Tomowa-Sintow is swooping up to most top notes and there are bald patches in the middle of the voice where the pitch sags and the tone becomes threadbare; she is heard to better advantage in the live 1982 Salzburg recording under Sawallisch - yet always yields to really vibrant exponents of the role such as Janowitz and Voigt. It is also the case that Agnes Baltsa is feeling the strain of the tessitura by 1986 and again sounds freer and more comfortable in that live recording - although she is still gutsy and impassioned, making an excellent contrast to the stately Ariadne and the vivacious Zerbinetta. And "vivacious" is exactly what we get from Kathy Battle's Zerbinetta; even if she is a tad too light and small of voice, she remains enchanting - preferable, according to my taste, to Gruberova but not as delightful as Sumi Jo in the original version for Nagano; she is perfect.

Nor do I find the supporting cast as impressive as the Kempe studio recording and the 1976 live Böhm. I have never been a fan of Prey's lugubrious baritone and the Harlekin here is faceless - although the

trio of sprites is very good and headed by no less than Barbara Bonney. I also like very much the superciliously slurring Haushofmeister of Otto Schenck.

Many an *Ariadne* is compromised by a strained Bacchus. Gary Lakes does nothing to break the mould; he is weedy and throaty with a most inappropriate bleaty and unheroic sound - I find him barely listenable. How anyone can hold him up as competition to Ben Heppner or Jess Thomas flummoxes me.

Levine is light and mercurial of touch, giving the lie to his detractors who accuse him of bombastic heavy-handedness; the VPO play with all the tenderness and power you would expect of them. The recording is excellent: warm, spacious and detailed.

Its comparative weaknesses mean that while this is pleasant, it cannot rival the best versions.

**Kurt Masur – 1988** (studio; digital) Philips; Eterna  
Orchestra - Leipziger Gewandhaus Orchestra  
Ariadne - Jessye Norman  
Komponist - Julia Varady  
Zerbinetta - Edita Gruberova  
Bacchus - Paul Frey  
Musiklehrer - Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau  
Harlekin - Olaf Bär  
Truffaldin - Gerhard Wolf  
Brighella - Andreas Conrad  
Scaramuccio - Martin Finke  
Najade - Eva Lind  
Dryade - Marianne Rørholm  
Echo - Julie Kaufmann  
Haushofmeister - Rudolf Asmus

Obsessed as I am by this opera, I have listened to a good many recordings and while so many have great merit very few even approach the ideal I have in my mind's ear. It's a fiendishly difficult thing to bring off but has attracted every diva with the vocal lay-out to encompass the demands of the role of Ariadne, and every coloratura soprano knows that to succeed as Zerbinetta is to reach a kind of pinnacle, not to mention securing engagements world-wide.

This version is rather staidly but affectionately conducted by Kurt Masur directing a very fine orchestra with an impeccable sense of Straussian style. There are decidedly patches where the temperature drops to tepid but it's all very musical and elegant. Chief glory is the grand, sweeping Ariadne of the stately but impassioned Jessye Norman, who sings as richly as I have ever heard her here, displaying an ease with top notes which sometimes eluded her - but they are "only" B-flats. Gruberova, very slightly heavier on the vibrato and more inclined to swoon and swoop than in earlier recordings, repeats her world-famous assumption of the flirtatious Zerbinetta - and she still has the trill and money-notes despite that incipient whine creeping into the voice. The supporting cast is certainly not as impressive as I have heard: one Martin Fink as the Tanzmeister and Scaramuccio has a small, weedy tenor and other minor roles are mostly undistinguished except for Olaf Bär's smooth Harlekin, while Fischer-Dieskau is grey-voiced and effortful as the Musiklehrer. Particularly fine, however, is the vibrant soprano of Julia Varady who surprises as the Composer with the strength and silvery beauty of her singing - so that's three lady principals of real quality.

As ever, one must do a little precautional buttock-clenching before the tenor appears to try to tackle the vicious part of Bacchus. Ben Heppner has spoiled me for all others but Paul Frey is, well, just about adequate, despite a rather pale and unheroic timbre - something which becomes all the more obvious

when Norman answers his call of "Circe" in her great Rolls-Royce of a voice. At least Frey doesn't try to push too hard; he wisely opts make Bacchus' music as lyrical as possible.

So, again, by no means flawless but a recording to keep for that fine trio of leading ladies.

**Kent Nagano – 1994** (studio; digital) Virgin Classics **N.B. original 1912 version**

Orchestra - L'Opéra de Lyon

Ariadne - Margaret Price

Zerbinetta - Sumi Jo

Bacchus - Gösta Winbergh

Harlekin - Thomas Mohr

Truffaldin - Alfred Kuhn

Brighella - Markus Schäfer

Scaramuccio - Steven Cole

Najade - Brigitte Fournier

Dryade - Doris Lamprecht

Echo - Virginie Pochon

Sängerin - Veronica Cangemi

Shepherd - Doris Lamprecht

Shepherdess - Brigitte Fournier

Monsieur Jourdain - Ernst Theo Richter

This is an enterprising recording of the 1912 version of an opera invariably heard in its 1916 version with the Prologue substituted for Hofmannsthal's original intention: an adaptation of Molière's play *Le bourgeois gentilhomme*. As it stands, Nagano has here opted on Virgin to provide all 11 musical numbers - about half an hour's music, some of which was retained in the revision - with the merest thread of spoken dialogue from M. Jourdain to link them. That was surely a wise decision; no-one today really wants to sit through the play in order to hear the ninety-minute opera any more than they did in 1912, hence the continued preference for the revision. Nonetheless, it's marvellous to get the chance to hear the original and it emerges by no means as a poor cousin.

There are gains and losses of course: the non-appearance of the Composer here is the most regrettable omission but on the other hand, apart from the delicate and pleasing incidental music for the play, we have for Zerbinetta an extended "Großmächtige Prinzessin" and a new aria at the end combining motives from "Komm der neue Gott gegangen" and "So war's mit Pagliazzo und Mezzetin!". When this extra music is sung by a lyric coloratura as enchanting and accomplished as Sumi Jo, this is a great advantage. She sings extraordinarily difficult music written in a very high tessitura with amazing insouciance and facility - and no screeching, just warm, full tone. There is also an ironic ending whereby Jourdain returns as the fireworks are starting; this follows the Big Bang for Ariadne, Bacchus and full orchestra that we are used to hearing as the conclusion.

Another welcome feature is the chance to hear Margaret Price in one of her great Strauss roles, caught a little late to be entirely secure in either intonation or her top B-flats, which are negotiated tentatively, but still producing lovely, creamy tone and sustaining a smooth legato. I was prepared to hear an aging diva struggle but she is much, much better than that. She is best in the concluding duet with Bacchus but impressive throughout, her famous, fluting tones largely intact.

Supporting roles are not as starrily taken as in recordings of the later version but special mention must be made of Veronica Cangemi's un-named singer and Gösta Winbergh's smaller-scale but beautifully sung Bacchus. His grainy, very attractive voice often sounds like one of those vanished, French, lirico-robusto tenors like Vezzani or Alain Vanzo who had sweetness and delicacy but also the heft to take on heavier roles. The reduced orchestration with its quirkily prominent harmonium permits the tenor

to lay off the belting and sing what is already fearfully demanding music with more attention to nuance and steadiness of line.

Nagano's conducting is lively and alert and the orchestral playing professional.

This cannot really be compared with recordings of the later version; it is perhaps more for Strauss aficionados who want to hear the fascinating first thoughts of one of the most famous composer-librettist duos, lovingly performed.

**Gustav Kuhn – 2000** (live composite; digital) Arte Nova

Orchestra - Teatro San Carlo di Napoli

Ariadne - Elisabeth-Maria Wachutka

Komponist - Ildiko Komlósy

Zerbinetta - Aline Kutan

Bacchus - Alan Woodrow

Musiklehrer - Andrea Martin

Harlekin - Ludwig Wolfrum

Truffaldin - Franco Lufi

Brighella - Patrizio Saudelli

Scaramuccio - Alessandro Cosentino

Najade - Anna Chierichetti

Dryade - Natascha Petrinsky

Echo - Charlotte Leitner

Haushofmeister - Fritz Hörtenhuber

Ein Lakai - Ezio Maria Tisi

Ein Offizier - Daniele Zanfardino

Ein Perückenmacher - Claudio Ottino

Ein Tanzmeister - Roberto Bencivenga

The only singer with whom I was familiar before listening to this super-bargain set from Arte Nova was the sturdy tenor Alan Woodrow, who has tackled other Wagner and Strauss roles for the same label with the same conductor, including a game but essentially doomed *Guntram*, the opera itself being such a bore and written by a young Strauss before he had found his voice. Woodrow claims to relish high-lying tenor roles and copes well enough with the tessitura - although his "Circe, Circe!" entrance off-stage is barely audible and his tone can turn "bottled" and strained; he also has an irritating habit of beginning phrases with a glottal catch.

The ensemble is generally good, but unfortunately, there is an ugly beat in Ildiko Komlósy's large mezzo-soprano which makes her sound frumpy rather than gamine. In the central, eponymous role, Elisabeth-Maria Wachutka has a rather edgy, constricted, soprano, without much velvet in it and a weak lower register; she has a good patch in the centre of her voice but generally is not my ideal of Ariadne at all. Coloratura soprano Aline Kutan is much better as Zerbinetta: pure of tone and aptly pert of manner with a fine trill – indeed she is one of the best exponents of the role in this survey and deserves to be in better company.

Kuhn is an experienced and able conductor who brings energy and momentum to his direction – and he directs a Neapolitan orchestra, which is unusual for Strauss recordings. I don't think it is my imagination if I say that I detect a sunny, Italianate glow to their playing.

The live, digital sound is first-rate and this comes with a German libretto, but there is a bit of loud coughing and the regrettable deficiencies in the cast as detailed above compromise this recording. There is no special reason to acquire this when much better alternatives are on offer.

**Giuseppe Sinopoli – 2000** (live composite; digital) DG; Brilliant  
Orchestra - Dresdner Staatskapelle  
Ariadne - Deborah Voigt  
Komponist - Anne Sofie von Otter  
Zerbinetta - Natalie Dessay  
Bacchus - Ben Heppner  
Musiklehrer - Albert Dohmen  
Harlekin - Stephan Genz  
Truffaldin - Sami Luttinen  
Brighella - Christoph Genz  
Scaramuccio - Ian Thompson  
Najade - Christiane Hossfeld  
Dryade - Angela Liebold  
Echo - Eva Kirchner  
Haushofmeister - Romauld Pekny  
Ein Lakai - Jürgen Commichau  
Ein Offizier - Klaus Florian Vogt  
Ein Perückenmacher - Matthias Henneberg  
Ein Tanzmeister - Michael Howard

I have read some pretty sour and begrudging previous reviews of this set but I think you have to be rather spoiled not to appreciate the standard of singing, playing and interpretation here in Sinopoli's operatic recording swansong. I am not saying that you should endorse it simply because it was the final opera recording of a great conductor; I think it can stand on its own without sentimentality. The *Gramophone* reviewer was similarly snooty about the supposed "coldness" of this interpretation, (even though he admitted that that the cast was as spectacular as you could assemble twenty years ago) but I don't hear it that way. I love the old Kempe recording of this entrancing opera, with Janowitz, Zylis-Gara and Sylvia Geszty, and Janowitz again for Böhm live in 1976, but not even the divine Gundula sings the highest notes with the ease and purity that Voigt brings to this majestic role. The orchestra here and in Kempe's recording is the Staatskapelle and it is wonderful in both - but the extra clarity and depth of sound in the newer recording really permits the listener to hear the nuances and detail of Sinopoli's direction; for such a small band, they make such a full, rich sound in those magical closing pages.

Similarly, as much as I admire James King for Kempe, he does not bring Ben Heppner's refulgence of tone to the killer tenor role of Bacchus. Heppner and Dessay, like Voigt, almost make it sound easy - and perhaps that is why some reviewers accuse them of being "faceless" in their characterisation. I don't find it so; it's such a pleasure to hear three great voices in top form and Heppner, in particular, is the best Bacchus is by a considerable measure the best on record. Perhaps Dessay is too gentle and seductive as Zerbinetta - a tad more acid would not go amiss - but she is witty and knowing, as she should be. The supporting roles are beautifully taken, too; Von Otter sounds more vivid than I have ever heard her elsewhere; there is an artist whom I admit to finding bland, sometimes - but not here; she encompasses every facet of the mercurial, hyper-sensitive Composer. Particularly fine are Stefan Genz's pointed, elegant singing as Harlekin and Albert Dohmen's rich tones as the Music Master.

The advantage of the aforementioned 1976 Böhm recording over both studio recordings by Kempe and Sinopoli respectively is that it has the sparkle of a live performance but this remains a deeply satisfying account.

### **Recommendations**

By and large, this opera has been lucky on record; 1954, in particular, was a vintage year for mono versions. There are no absolutely poor recordings – the humdrum Kegel is the weakest - making a firm first choice tricky and indeed largely unnecessary and which is why I make so many recommendations below. The pioneering Karajan studio recording o has long held sway among the critic but I am no great fan of Schwarzkopf's mannered, over-pointed style and its mono sound means that you cannot enjoy the orchestra colours as fully as in a recording in modern sound. I love the 1968 Kempe account, mainly for the creamy, soaring purity of Janowitz and Zylis-Gara's adorable Composer, and would not be without it; I also want at least one recording featuring Seefried's Composer - but either Sinopoli or the live 1976 Böhm is the best recommendation if you want only one set. The Nagano remains a curiosity – more of a supplement essential only to Strauss completists but notable for Sumo Jo's Zerbinetta.

#### **1916 version:**

Live mono: Karl Böhm – 1954; Keilberth – 1954

Live stereo/digital: Giuseppe Sinopoli\* – 2000; Karl Böhm – 1976

Studio mono: Herbert von Karajan – 1954 (the only one, in any case)

Studio stereo/digital: Rudolf Kempe – 1967

#### **1912 version:**

Kent Nagano – 1994 (again, the only one)

\*First choice

### ***Ralph Moore***