

Puccini's *Il tabarro* - A survey

by Ralph Moore

I consider here ten versions of *Il tabarro* available on CD: eight studio recordings and two radio broadcasts; the three earliest are mono, then four stereo and three digital. As is so often the case nowadays when only live performances are preserved exclusively on film, the last studio recording was over twenty years ago. I have excluded the forty or so live recordings, insofar as some are in German, there are too many to be evaluated and they are almost invariably not of the same artistic or sonic quality; however, I am sure that any admirer of this searing melodrama will find a satisfactory performance among the ten below.

Il tabarro is the first opera in Puccini's *Il trittico* and like all three lasts less than an hour. It is a triumphant exercise in Grand Guignol, a gloomy, highly charged work with the one of the most atmospheric openings in all opera - and it is the closest Puccini came to the true verismo genre in that it depicts the hard lives of folk at the bottom of the social order, offering little in the way of light relief and certainly no comfort or redemption. The stevedores scrape a living, drown their troubles in drink and dream of escaping the grind into a rural idyll. Even La Frugola's arietta about her old tomcat has something of the desperate about its forced gaiety and is crowned by her manic laugh. The characters' register is not that of the impoverished intellectuals of *La bohème* or the drawing room sophisticates of *La rondine* but has the unvarnished directness of the speech of ordinary people.

The opera has only three big arias and they are brief; the first aria Puccini wrote for Michele, the bitter, contemplative "Scorri, fiume eterno", he later replaced with the vengeful, more dramatic "Nulla!...Silenzio!". Both Leinsdorf and Gardelli include the original aria as a welcome, bonus addendum in their recordings. For me, apart from the shocking dénouement – spoiler alert - when Michele whisks away his cloak to reveal the body of his wife's lover whom he has strangled, the highpoint in the opera is the impassioned duet between Luigi and Giorgetta – "'E ben altro il mio sogno" - when they glimpse a better future just as Tosca and Cavaradossi envisage fleeing to a new life and the best exponents of that are Tebaldi and Del Monaco in full flight. As with all three components of the triptych, the quality of the music redeems any schlocky element and it's great entertainment. Puccini deploys fleeting Wagnerian leitmotifs and, as in *Suor Angelica*, Debussyan orchestration to enhance and soften the cruelty of the tale; musically, nothing is obvious or overt.

Sometimes in early recordings the distant lovers go uncredited but their brief off-stage interjection, like the fleeting quotation from *La bohème*, is important as an ironic commentary on and counterbalance to the on-stage misery.

(There is also available on DVD a RAI film in mono sound made in the mid-50's. It is of particular interest because it stars Carlo Tagliabue, Mirto Picchi and the great Clara Petrella. I have not seen it issued on CD but it can be viewed on YouTube.)

The Recordings

Giuseppe Baroni – 1949 (radio broadcast mono) Cetra; Warner Fonit; Preiser
Orchestra & Chorus: RAI Torino

Michele - Antenore Reali
Luigi - Glauco Scarlini
Il Tinca - Giuseppe Nessi
Il Talpa - Dario Caselli
Giorgetta - Clara Petrella
La Frugola - Ebe Ticozzi
Venditore di canzonette - Aldo Bertocci

Obviously its relatively primitive sound quality precludes this from being a first choice but the clean, if boxy, mono is perfectly listenable and allows us to hear one of the great, quasi-forgotten spinto sopranos of the mid-twentieth century, Clara Petrella, whose voice and acting prowess were on a par. She has a huge, clear voice, vibrant, firm and even throughout its developed registers, with a ringing top and trenchant low notes; her one issue was with a certain wildness in pitch but that was the product of her vocal expressive abandon and her neglect today is criminal. Her Luigi is one Glauco Scarlini about whom I know nothing; he is more than adequate, sounding young, passionate and nervous, if occasionally a bit thin and nasal. Antenore Reali was only in his early fifties at the time of recording but sounds something of a veteran. He has an intermittent wobble and yells a bit - ill health forced him to retire shortly after - but that suits the aging Michele, who is meant to be twice Giorgetta's age and otherwise his baritone is really powerful and impressive. The other singers will be familiar to only to aficionados but they are excellent: Nessi was the first Emperor in *Turandot*, Caselli a fine - mostly comprimario - bass; the strong-voiced mezzo-soprano Ebe Ticozzi turns up frequently in recordings from the 50's singing alongside the likes of Callas and sings the same role six years later in the recording reviewed next. The playing of the Turin orchestra is vivid and Baroni's conducting masterful; he captures the sweep, drama, atmosphere and pathos of the score in all its moods. This is something of a museum piece but devotees of Petrella and historical recordings of merit will enjoy it; there is always something spiritedly unfettered about those old Cetra recordings, redolent of a vanished age.

Mario Cordone – 1955 (radio broadcast mono) Andromeda; Myto; Cantus, Great Opera Performances Sinfonieorchester des Norddeutschen Rundfunks (Hamburg)

Michele - Ettore Bastianini
 Luigi - Salvatore Puma
 Il Tinca - Angelo Mercuriali
 Il Talpa - Eraldo Coda
 Giorgetta - Nora De Rosa
 La Frugola - Ebe Ticozzi
 Venditore di canzonette - Luigi Alva

This recording has also been issued on the Myto and GOP labels but I don't know if the sound is as good on those as it is on the Andromeda remastering I own; it's easy to forget that this is only mono, the sound is so remarkably clean, immediate and atmospheric right from the start, with lovely sound effects evoking the river traffic on the Seine. The conducting and orchestral playing are first rate but I admit never to having previously encountered conductor Mario Cordone. The whole cast is Italian despite this being a recording - presumably a radio broadcast? - from Hamburg in 1954.

Of course, the main draw is the presence of Ettore Bastianini, prince of post-war Italian baritones whose career roughly paralleled that of Maria Callas and who died of throat cancer at only 44 years old in 1965. His dark, vibrant voice with its thrilling top notes and deep timbre inherited from his years as a bass before the upward shift of tessitura is always a feast for the ears and he is also engaged in his portrayal of the tormented Michele, allowing us to empathise with his anguish at being in a failing marriage. He is partnered with two decent, second-rank singers who share a rather obtrusive tremolo-vibrato but throw themselves into their roles con gusto. Sicilian tenor Puma - who may also be heard in a recommendable recording of Mascagni's "Iris" with Magda Olivero - has a tight, penetrating voice which matches that of Nora De Rosa well. Her top notes are shrill but secure. Ultimately, I prefer better pairing of lovers such as Price and Domingo in Leinsdorf's recording or Tebaldi and Del Monaco for Gardelli but De Rosa and Puma will definitely do. The supporting cast is also certainly good enough, including Luigi Alva in his debut year and veteran Ebe Ticozzi as a worn but fruity, characterful Frugola, with a great belly-laugh. The distant lovers are uncredited but good.

Bastianini is riveting; the voice is the equal of, or better than, any other baritone who has undertaken this gem of a role, to be compared with Merrill, Milnes and Gobbi. The latter is almost too aggressive and violent to secure our sympathies but Bastianini is heart-breaking - especially as an artist he could on occasion sound bored or routine, despite the splendour of his voice. I wish we had been given the original, replaced aria for Michele, "Scorri, fiume eterno" as an addendum, too.

Vincenzo Bellezza – 1956 (studio; mono) EMI; Regis; Naxos
Orchestra & Chorus: Teatro dell'Opera di Roma

Michele - Tito Gobbi
Luigi - Giacinto Prandelli
Il Tinca - Piero De Palma
Il Talpa - Plinio Clabassi
Giorgetta - Margaret Mas
La Frugola - Miriam Pirazzini
Venditore di canzonette - Renato Ercolani
Due amanti - Silvia Bertona; Piero De Palma

The raison d'être of this set is the gripping characterisation of Michele, the cuckolded bargee, by the great Tito Gobbi. He brings both pathos and venom to his performance; a desperate man, desperately unhappy, driven to commit a desperate act. The only problem is that he is so aggressive and miserable that some might find it hard to empathise with him, as his capacity for violence is signalled too strongly from the start. His Giorgetta is richly sung by Margaret Mas. She's a little mature sounding compared with other singers in this part but that adds a poignancy to the "last chance for happiness" feel to her fling with Luigi and the loss of her child. Luigi himself is a tad throatily sung by Prandelli; he cannot hold a candle to Del Monaco or Domingo in this role but he is nonetheless a convincing actor. Supporting roles are well sung and although most of Puccini's requests for atmospheric sound effects (so effectively honoured in the modern Pappano set) are ignored, the feel is authentic.

The Regis issue is clearly taken from clean LP's; there is a continuous swoosh and a papery quality to the sound which is not entirely owing to the original EMI recording. It's not too disturbing and this is certainly a cheap way to get to know this classic 1956 performance. Furthermore, you get six excerpts from four other Puccini operas, sung by distinguished singers Olivero, Tucker, Welitsch and Sayao, thrown in for good measure - but the best bet now is the Naxos remastering. Given its sonic limitations, vocal deficiencies and the lack of tenderness in Gobbi's characterisation despite its vocal and dramatic adeptness, this is surely at best a supplement to a first choice.

Lamberto Gardelli – 1962 (studio; stereo) Decca; Alto
Orchestra & Chorus: Maggio Musicale Fiorentino

Michele - Robert Merrill
Luigi - Mario Del Monaco
Il Tinca - Renato Ercolani
Il Talpa - Silvio Maionica
Giorgetta - Renata Tebaldi
La Frugola - Lucia Danieli
Venditore di canzonette - Piero De Palma
Due amanti - Dora Carral; Gianfranco Manganotti

This is in excellent 60's Decca sound and remains my favourite blood-'n-guts-verismo performance. By this stage of her career Tebaldi was losing the top notes so she avoids high C's here and those high notes she essays are sometimes harsh - yet otherwise her voice is in excellent condition. She is mightily impressive here, spurred on by Del Monaco's fabulous histrionics. Her evident maturity making her

characterisation of Giorgetta as a bored housewife - more accurately, a bargewife - all the more convincing; Luigi is her passport to freedom and romance, an escape from the stultifying oppressiveness of her life on the river with an older husband. Del Monaco is really too forceful and heroic for the young stevedore so easily subdued and strangled by Michele but his "crudeness" is consonant with the rawness of their passion and his "meglio non pensare" aria and duet with Tebaldi are thrilling. Merrill uses his beautiful baritone aptly to portray Michele's smouldering jealousy and violence; he is touching in his misery as when enacting *Rigoletto* and is closer in timbre to Milnes (another successful recorded performance for Leinsdorf) than Gobbi, whose incisive tone and dramatic inflections remain inimitable but who is also too relentless and is saddled both with so-so co-singers and mono sound.

Fans of Tebaldi and the vastly experienced Gardelli need not hesitate. As this performance seems not to be available separately you must find the 3 CD set at an affordable price or buy the bargain Alto issue of *Il tritico* on 2 CDs.

Erich Leinsdorf – 1971 (studio; stereo) RCA
New Philharmonia Orchestra & John Alldis Choir

Michele - Sherrill Milnes
Luigi - Plácido Domingo
Il Tinca - Piero De Palma
Il Talpa - Robert Amis El Hage
Giorgetta - Leontyne Price
La Frugola - Oralia Domínguez
Venditore di canzonette - Philip Langridge
Due amanti - Elizabeth Gale; Nigel Rogers

Now nearly fifty years old, this recording presents three great artists who are vocally at their absolute youthful peak. Leinsdorf, although typically driven, is a skilled, flexible and expressive conductor here, so anyone concerned that he might be in one of his periodic fits of perfunctory hastiness need not be concerned; he negotiates the swiftly alternating moods of this dark little melodrama sensitively and this responsiveness is neatly complemented by some judicious sound effects such as the tug-boat horns so that the mood-painting this opera requires emerges effectively. Price is smokily seductive as the unhappy Giorgetta, although I could wish her Italian to be more pointed and incisive and her delivery at key moments of drama is sometimes too cool and detached. Domingo is in sappiest, most youthful voice and Milnes is darkly brooding - he always did festering menace rather well - yet his baritone per se remains smoothly burnished and beautiful.

While this does not displace my favourite sets such as Gardelli with Tebaldi and Del Monaco singing their hearts out or the Pappano version with its sustained, crackling tension, it is nonetheless a deeply satisfying performance.

(This has been issued paired with Santi's *I Pagliacci* and also separately.)

Lorin Maazel – 1977 (studio; stereo)
New Philharmonia Orchestra & Ambrosian Opera Chorus

Michele - Ingvar Wixell
Luigi - Plácido Domingo
Il Tinca - Michel Sénéchal
Il Talpa - Dennis Wicks
Giorgetta - Renata Scottò
La Frugola - Gillian Knight

Venditore di canzonette - John Treleaven
 Due amanti - Yvonne Kenny; Peter Jeffes

This is still available only as part of the complete set of *Il trittico* or as a download and I admit to qualified rapture for the set as a whole, somewhere in between the two extremes of raves and the moans it seems to attract. It is admirable in many respects, not least in the presence of a young(ish) Domingo repeating his glamorous Luigi and the commitment of the great and large-voiced vocal actress Renata Scotto.

Maazel's conducting is decidedly relaxed throughout, hence he gives his singers plenty of space to make their points but there is sometimes a lack of tension and excitement which slightly compromises the atmosphere of these most specifically and uniquely atmospheric of Puccini's works.

In many ways, I would like these recordings even more if I were not familiar with others which are even better. Scotto's admirers need not hesitate: they will overlook the incipient beat on loud notes and the screech on the highest, including uncomfortable high Cs in favour of her searing delivery of text and ability to ride an orchestra; she also cunningly exploits the little break between her registers to powerful emotive effect. Her rather mature tone is not so inappropriate to Giorgetta if you envisage her as a woman disillusioned, no longer in the first flush of youth, who has lost a child and, trapped in an unhappy marriage to a middle-aged man, is seeking solace in the arms of a handsome young lover; this is how Margaret Mas in the 1956 *Bellezza* recording and Guleghina for Pappano play her, too. Domingo makes a lovely sound but is not as virile and visceral as Del Monaco and strains a bit in the passionate duet between his Luigi and Scotto's Giorgetta, where Maazel lets things go a bit slack. Wixell, while he has a lovely, if slightly woolly, baritone and arouses our sympathy is simply not in the same league as Gobbi, Milnes or Merrill in the dark menace stakes. The supporting cast is generally very good and I enjoy the contribution in particular of Gillian Knight as La Frugola but in general there are even better ensembles in rival sets.

Some will also lament the lack of a proper libretto - standard in more recent bargain boxes - but the synopses are quite detailed. While I can cope with the lack of libretto, I am more irritated by Sony's absurdly allotting only one track for the whole opera (and only two tracks for each of the other operas in the box set); goodness knows why. However, if you value Scotto's histrionic talent and the virtues of her vocal layout over its failings, don't mind the absence of texts and the daft tracking, this still has much to offer, even if it is not perhaps the obvious top choice.

Giuseppe Patanè – 1987 (studio; stereo) Eurodisc; RCA
 Münchner Rundfunkorchester & Chor des Bayerischen Rundfunks

Michele - Siegmund Nimsgern
 Luigi - Giorgio Lamberti
 Il Tinca - Tullio Panè
 Il Talpa - Gerhard Auer
 Giorgetta - Ilona Tokody
 La Frugola - Vera Baniewicz
 Venditore di canzonette - Ulrich Reß
 Due amanti - Karin Hautermann; Heinrich Weber

Nice orchestral playing and sensitive conducting are what we might expect from this conductor and orchestra. Sound effects are minimal – no foghorns but only a brief interjection of what sounds more like the motorcar horns Puccini requested. Both the principals we first hear have an odd, characterful glottal catch in their voices but whereas Tokody – who sounds uncannily like Renata Scotto, with the same intensity but also the same spread up top – exploits that tic to plangent effect, I always find the break in Nimsgern's baritone a bit irritating and not especially suggestive of menace when that is

required. He makes Michele sympathetic in that he always sounds on the verge of tears but the bleat in his timbre is not grateful on the ear. He yells and barks in his rage and cannot summon up the leonine power of Bastianini or Merrill. Lamberti has a hard, nasal tenor which is not particularly heroic or alluring of tone and he cannot rise to the big, sustained climaxes of his arioso passages like Del Monaco or Giacomini but he gives freely of what vocal resources he has (Tokody drowns him out). The supporting cast is nothing special: la Frugola is a bit blowsy and inclined to sound under the note and the song-pedlar's tenor is weedy.

The analogue sound is somewhat over-spacious – odd that it isn't digital as late as 1987. This is an adequate performance and to its credit has proper tracking cues and an Italian libretto but apart from Tokody's ample-voiced Giorgetta, there is no compelling reason to prefer it over other, better recordings.

Bruno Bartoletti – 1991 (studio; digital) Decca
Orchestra & Chorus: Maggio Musicale Fiorentino

Michele - Juan Pons
Luigi - Giuseppe Giacomini
Il Tinca - Piero De Palma
Il Talpa - Franco De Grandis
Giorgetta - Mirella Freni
La Frugola - Gloria Scalchi
Due amanti - Barbara Frittoli; Romano Emili

This recording was made relatively late in Freni's career and both the depth of her characterisation and the amplitude of her voice are somewhat compromised by its encroaching beat and neither she nor the dark-toned, stentorian Giacomini really convinces as a young lover for all the conviction of their singing. Giacomini's baritone tenor – essentially an Otello - is an impressive instrument and he sounds suitably rough and desperate, but his timbre is uncannily similar to that of Pons. His duets with Freni make a visceral impact. On the other hand, Pons offers a subtle, almost too noble and beautifully sung Michele and his grief is heart-breaking; he doesn't make Gobbi's mistake of making Michele repellent. Veteran Piero De Palma makes a vivid Tinca and Gloria Scalchi an unusually – perhaps improbably - youthful, if richly-voiced Frugola. Bartoletti's direction is refined and carefully gauged; Puccini's cunningly devised orchestral textures are transparent and beautifully balanced. The sound is perfect; Decca's best. There is a great deal to enjoy here but it's not my top choice.

Alexander Rahbari – 1994 (studio; digital) Discovery
Belgian Radio and TV Philharmonic Orchestra and Chorus

Michele - Eduard Tumagian
Luigi - Nicola Martinucci
Il Tinca - Antonio Leonel
Il Talpa - Marcel Rosca
Giorgetta - Maria Slatinaru
La Frugola - Lucienne van Deyck
Due amanti - Diane Verdoodt; Antonio Leonel

This in many ways looks similar to the Patanè recording as a decent, second-rank performance of no special distinction which is inevitably over-shadowed by starrier versions. However, the sound here is better, the orchestral playing and conducting more varied and nuanced and the voices generally superior to those of the RCA recording; Gauci often sounds very similar to Scotto and the mature Freni for Bartoletti, with the same amplitude but also the same encroaching beat and spread. It's a pity she muffles the words and ducks the optional top C on her "strana nostalgia" preceding the impassioned

love duet but she is very involved - as his Tumagian as her cuckolded husband. He has a lean, clean, resonant baritone with plenty of bite – again, much more striking than Nimsgerm's cracked instrument. As with Gauci's failing, it's unfortunate that "Squadrina" goes for almost nothing – more like a plaintiff observation than a curse. He makes up for it by the powerful delivery of his aria "Nulla!..Silenzio!". Spinto tenor Martinucci has considerably more voice than Giorgio Lamberti, even if he is not the equal of Domingo, Del Monaco et al; his grainy timbre is to that of Shicoff. Special kudos goes to Lucienne van Deyck as La Frugola; she was the singer whose Zia Principessa added a note of distinction to the otherwise mediocre *Suor Angelica* made by the same forces on the same label.

The digital sound is very good, a dozen cues are provided, Puccini's desired sound-effects are included and the booklet contains an Italian libretto. This is really very enjoyable, despite not being first choice and I want it on my shelves, whereas the Patanè will go to the charity pile as superfluous to requirements.

Antonio Pappano – 1998 (studio; digital) EMI
London Symphony Orchestra & London Voices

Michele - Carlo Guelfi
Luigi - Neil Shicoff
Il Tinca - Ricardo Cassinelli
Il Talpa - Enrico Fissore
Giorgetta - Maria Guleghina
La Frugola - Elena Zilio
Venditore di canzonette - Barry Banks
Due amanti - Angela Gheorghiu; Roberto Alagna

Antonio Pappano has by and large over the years triumphantly justified his preferential treatment by EMI in being allowed to record large-scale works where other eminent conductors have gone begging. This is one of the trilogy recorded in 1997 must be accounted a success even in the light of stiff competition going back fifty and more years, but of course one area where it trumps all others is the clarity and spaciousness of the sound, especially in such places as the atmospheric opening, with the lapping waters of the Seine, the distant tugboat sirens or Maria Guleghina's absolutely blood-curdling scream when Michele reveals Luigi's corpse to Giorgetta - and the orchestral playing from one of London's finest orchestras is superb.

Not least of the virtues of this recording are Carlo Guelfi's strong performance as Michele and Guleghina's convincing depiction of a bored and slightly blowsy woman who yearns to escape her mundane existence. Nonetheless, for sheer vocal thrills they yield to Del Monaco, Tebaldi and Merrill for Gardelli; Del Monaco's "Hai ben ragione; meglio non pensare" aria followed by his passionate duet with Tebaldi are among their greatest moments and I wouldn't be without them. On the other hand, Neil Shicoff, with his lighter, throatier tenor, is dramatically more convincing as a young man easily subdued by the enraged, wronged bargee, whereas Del Monaco sounds as though he could rip his head off.

Pappano directs an arresting performance of this melodrama and all round it is very satisfying - although, again, I wouldn't want to be without Gobbi's searing Michele in the classic mono version and only Milnes manages to growl "Squadrina!" (slut) through his teeth almost as feelingly as Gobbi. It's a pity, too, that Michele's alternative aria "Scorri, fiume eterno!" wasn't included, either within the opera or as an appendix.

This is available only as part of the box set of *Il trittico*. Note the luxury casting for the two, far-off lovers...

Recommendations

Il tabarro has been fortunate on record, so a first choice is hard, as there are no lemons here; even superficially less promising recordings such as the bargain Discovery version under Rahbari are first-rate. Pappano arguably has the best ensemble and sound (along with the Bartoletti on Decca) but has decidedly less starry principal singers than Gardelli. No one set has a completely satisfactory trio of lead singers; either vocal perfection is compromised by a lack of dramatic impact or conversely superior expressiveness is vitiated by some vocal deficiencies.

On balance, I recommend the following for different reasons, explained above but all offer something very worthwhile; make a choice according to your own taste and priorities.

Equal first:

Antonio Pappano – 1998

Lamberto Gardelli – 1962

Second:

Erich Leinsdorf – 1971

Historical mono:

Giuseppe Baroni – 1949

Mario Cordone – 1955