

Leoncavallo's *Pagliacci* - A survey of the major studio recordings

by Ralph Moore

Given the continued popularity of this most enduring of operatic warhorses, it is surprising how few studio recordings it has received compared with other major crowd-pleasers. I have restricted my survey to studio-made, post-war recordings in Italian on the grounds that the average modern collector will want fair (mono) to excellent (digital) sound in the original language; there are only fourteen of those, plus a radio broadcast and two film soundtracks featuring names so famous I thought it best to include them, and, finally, a live concert performance which was a prime recommendation from 'Gramophone', the 'Penguin Guide' and the 'Classical Good CD Guide', so I could hardly ignore it - making eighteen recordings in total. The most recent studio recording in Italian was made nearly thirty years ago in 1992; perhaps that points to a continuing shortage of singers able to do justice to the brief but very demanding role of Canio. All the great tenors of the 50's and 60's - Del Monaco, Björling, Tucker, Corelli and Bergonzi - recorded it in the studio, sometimes twice, each of the "The Three Tenors" made his recording in the 70's, and there is a handful of mostly lesser accounts before Rahbari conducted that final studio version - and that's it. Doubtless there are other, worthy, live recordings but, as I always say when doing these surveys, I can consider only a sampling of approximately 140 available and have to start - or rather finish - somewhere, so I use studio provenance and quality of singers and sound combined as my criteria for inclusion and mostly exclude live versions, which still permits me to consider five recordings from the 50's in fair mono sound.

Interestingly, this was the opera which lent itself most readily to being recorded at the dawn of the recording age and was the first to be so, as it is a one-Act opera lasting only seventy or so minutes and thus more easily accommodated on 78s: no fewer than seven studio versions were made between 1907 and 1934. It was also the first opera to be recorded in sound, in 1931. Those early studio recordings feature many singers whose names are now largely forgotten, but a few are more famous, such as Apollo Granforte, Francesco Merli and, most renowned of all, Beniamino Gigli. His studio account was made in 1934, in the company of other distinguished singers such as Iva Pacetti and Mario Basiola, so it is obviously in the historical category and I have considered it here only as an appendix.

Despite the excellence of the music given to Nedda and Tonio, this opera is primarily a showpiece for an Italianate tenor. Featuring in innumerable recitals and highlight discs is his highlight aria "Vesti la giubba" - or as the rather quaint, to modern ears, 1893 translation by Frederic Edward Weatherly would have it, "On with the motley"; perhaps "Put on your costume" is more accurate, if prosaic. However, Tonio's opening "Prologo" aria is also a celebrated anthology item, as is Nedda's "Stridono lassù"; all the principals are given their chance to shine and there are nice items for the secondary roles of Silvio and Beppe, too. The action of the opera is melodramatic, meaty stuff, based on a real event which formed the background to a murder investigation presided over by the composer's father, who was a magistrate and the concluding "play within a play" is an almost Shakespearian device - a gift for singers with good acting skills, its irony being both funny and fearsome.

The sordid nature of the plot is typical of the *verismo* genre, concerned with the everyday lives of ordinary folk instead of kings and queens, ranging over a gamut of emotions from broad humour to murderous rage. The immediacy of its emotional impact is complemented by a sustained melodic invention with no longueurs. It is of course invariably coupled with the similarly earthy *Cavalleria rusticana* for performance; "Cav 'n' Pag" are staples of the operatic repertoire and perhaps I shall survey "Cav" later.

Incidentally, the concluding line of the opera, "La Commedia è finita!" is, according to Leoncavallo's manuscript, supposed to be sung by Tonio, which is appropriate as he is the wicked controlling force in the action, but since as early as 1895 tenors singing Canio have appropriated it to leave themselves

in the spotlight as the curtain falls. However, in age devoted to “authenticity”, increasingly numerous exceptions below include those conducted by Cellini (as early as 1953), von Matačić, Muti – always a stickler for such things – Prêtre and Chailly.

Finally, for true devotees, I recommend three films: the first two are vintage and one modern. The first is from 1948, in which the music, presented virtually complete, is frenetically conducted by Giuseppe Morelli ([Youtube](#)). It stars Tito Gobbi in finest, youthful voice, singing and acting both the roles of Tonio and Silvio (which would not be possible on stage, as they meet), Gina Lollobrigida (lip-synching Onelia Fineschi's prettily-sung Nedda) and, weirdly, baritone Afro Poli miming stentorian tenor Galliano Masini's Canio. It is also available on a Gala CD in harsh, mono sound which is nonetheless considerably superior to the wavery soundtrack for this second – pretty hammy! – film from 1954 ([Youtube](#)). The third is Franco Zeffirelli's 1982 version ([Youtube](#)). The soundtracks of the latter two are reviewed below.

The recordings

Alfredo Simonetto – 1951 (mono; radio broadcast) Warner Fonit Cetra

Orchestra - RAI Torino

Chorus - RAI Torino

Canio - Carlo Bergonzi

Nedda - Carla Gavazzi

Tonio - Carlo Tagliabue

Beppe - Salvatore De Tommaso

Silvio - Marcello Rossi

Christopher Howell [reviewed](#) this approvingly back in 2003 and I broadly agree with his judgment. The sound here is crisp, peaky mono, the voices a bit covered by the prominent orchestra. The first of those we hear is that stalwart baritone Tagliabue, secure and even with a tremendous top A flat. Bergonzi, having only recently converted from baritone to tenor, is in equally impressive voice, rougher and more robust and resonant than for Karajan fourteen years later, so more appropriate to playing a middle-aged husband, despite being so much younger. (This is his third recorded outing for Cetra as a tenor, the first being in *Simon Boccanegra* and the second in *I due Foscari*.) There is still a baritonal tinge to his timbre and he is both considerably more animated and less patrician here than for Karajan, perhaps liberated by a more energised conductor; Simonetto is clearly wholly at home on this music, flexible and liberated. Mario Rossi is a similarly full-throated, attractively-toned Silvio, virile and youthful.

I did not much care for Carla Gavazzi's foray into Mozart for Cetra as Donna Anna but she was a formidable Minnie in *La fanciulla del West* and a good Adriana Lecouvreur; her powerful, flexible voice is better suited to verismo roles. She is decidedly “old school” in manner and all the better for it, with a quick vibrato and a nice, rounded, hooty top.

The pinched sound disqualifies this from being a prime recommendation but for the collector tolerant of historical sound it's lovely example of really Italianate verismo singing and playing.

Fausto Cleva – 1951 (mono) Sony, Preiser, Cantus

Metropolitan Opera Association Orchestra & Chorus

Canio - Richard Tucker

Nedda - Lucine Amara

Tonio - Giuseppe Valdengo

Beppe - Thomas Hayward
 Silvio - Clifford Harvuot

Very well conducted. Tucker and Valdengo superb – Amara average.

Göran Forsling [reviewed](#) this recently and I partially share his enthusiasm for it, even if I am less enamoured of Amara's Nedda and have more reservations about the sound. Richard Tucker is one of those tenors whom you would expect to be vocally and temperamentally suited to portraying Canio – and so it proves. The hardness in his tone and the amplitude of his top notes contribute virility to his characterisation but he is also able to spin a legato line, as in “Un tal gioco”. With the glottal catch in his voice and the odd sob he is closest to Gigli in manner although his tenor is not as honeyed.

Toscanini's favourite Valdengo is another baritone with an intrinsically elegant timbre, making it more difficult for him to suggest evil, but he gives a very animated performance and can inject a snarl as he did in his celebrated Iago. He is a little weak at the bottom of his voice but the money notes are there. Lucine Amara is better here than her older self with Corelli nine years later but her rather squeaky, cramped soprano is still not ideal; she does not sound like a young woman and there is not much colourific variation in her voice. There are many better exponents. Her duet with Clifford Harvuot's Silvio goes well enough but there's not much bloom on either voice; his baritone is rather hoarse. Thomas Hayward is a playful, fresh-toned Beppe.

The conducting is sometimes hard-driven but I don't mind that as long as the overture, Intermezzo and the lyrical sections in general are allowed to swoon. The hissy, mono sound is a bit distant and boxy compared with better-engineered, contemporary recordings such as RCA's with Björling, which is a pity, especially as the chorus sounds harsh and distorted and as such that consigns this to the historical category. This is worth hearing for Tucker's Canio but it is generally surpassed in its other departments.

Renato Cellini – 1953 (mono) RCA, EMI, Membran, Urania, Naxos
 RCA Victor Orchestra; Robert Shaw Chorale

Canio - Jussi Björling
 Nedda - Victoria de los Ángeles
 Tonio - Leonard Warren
 Beppe - Paul Franke
 Silvio - Robert Merrill

My MusicWeb colleague Bob Farr [reviewed](#) this back in 2004, comparing the EMI and Naxos remasterings; his conclusion was “[w]hichever version you choose you will enjoy a worthwhile and well sung performance”.

The mono sound is remarkably clear and present – better than the comparable EMI mono recording with Callas reviewed below – but on the other hand the performances here are rather more restrained and polite, featuring artists who mostly avoided verismo roles on stage and whose gifts were not necessarily skewed towards vocal amplitude and dramatic fervour, but more to vocal beauty and refined characterisation. As a result, by comparison with, say, Del Monaco's recordings, this risks being more of a canary-fancier's feast than a thrill-junkie's destination. The first voice we hear confirms this: Leonard Warren singing absolutely beautifully but about what could be virtually anything; when he sings “Bisogna fingere per reuscir”, his oily, scheming Iago is brought more readily to mind than a vindictive sexual predator. Similarly, it would be a churlish clod indeed who did not respond to the shining, silver tone and flawless legato of Björling's tenor and he musters considerable

vocal power combined with real depth of feeling in his big moments – but does he successfully incarnate a murderous, jealous, possessive brute with a short fuse? Continuing in the same vein, de los Ángeles' Nedda is a pretty, wilting little thing but is she really the feisty street-orphan who whacks Tonio across the gob with a horse-whip? The irony is that Robert Merrill, the one singer who might have brought more animal intensity to the role of Tonio (as he does for Gardelli in 1967), is relegated to that of Silvio – which indeed, he sings very nicely, even if he is a bit avuncular for an ardent lover. Paul Franke is an unusually robust Beppe. Cellini conducts efficiently but, as Bob succinctly puts it, “with élan rather than passion.”

The Robert Shaw Chorale and a decent pick-up orchestra try to put a bit of hair on this recording's chest but - and even if I feel a bit ungrateful saying this about four great singers - in the end, this is insufficiently gutsy to be a front-runner. If you prefer vocal mayonnaise to mustard, you might well feel differently.

Alberto Erede – 1953 (mono) Decca, GOP, Urania
Santa Cecilia Orchestra & Chorus

Canio - Mario Del Monaco
Nedda - Clara Petrella
Tonio - Afro Poli
Beppe - Piero De Palma
Silvio - Aldo Protti

I first had this recording on LP nearly forty years ago and I remember marvelling at the open-throated freedom Del Monaco and Petrella displayed in their singing. I still think his second recording five years later displays more artistry and steadiness, and rounder vowels – here they are sometimes distorted - but here he is in his youthful prime, making a stunning noise.

The peculiarity of this recording is that Aldo Protti, who otherwise sings Silvio, delivers the Prologue instead Afro Poli. I have no idea why, as the veteran Poli was only fifty at the time and continued singing for some after this but maybe he didn't feel that he still had the top A flat and G for the Prologue. Protti isn't bad, but was always a bit heavy-going, with an over-emphatic vibrato and a rather dull timbre; however, he was a good, serviceable singer with splendid top notes and is to be found alongside Del Monaco in three other studio recordings conducted by Erede, who remains an under-rated conductor.

Although somewhat neglected today, Clara Petrella had a big, vibrant, properly registered voice which sounds properly youthful, unlike too many Neddas, though in fact she was here already in her late thirties. Known as the “Duse of singers” for her acting skills, her dramatic acumen, so vividly on display here, is complemented by a voice which is beautiful throughout its range but has especially lovely, rounded high notes - and she can match Del Monaco in the concluding on-stage slanging match so the last few minutes are electric. Unfortunately, she and Protti make a rather staid pair of lovers, as his tone is never as glamorous as hers and she needs a brighter, more elegant foil to her large, pharyngeally pure sound.

Poli is rather cloudy-toned but makes a surprisingly sympathetic Tonio before he turns nasty and he summons up surprising vocal penetration at points of high drama such as when Nedda strikes him with the whip. He is amusing in the play, deploying a range of vocal tricks and inflections in the same manner as Gobbi. Piero De Palma – of course – is Beppe. He's fine, but again I think he's even better five years later.

The mono sound is what it is – free of distortion but rather cavernous with a bit of echo, so some detail is lost in ensemble, but it is perfectly listenable.

There is plenty to enjoy here, especially for recording nearly seventy years old; it is an “old school” recording and I love it, but Del Monaco’s second recording is evidently a more complete and satisfactory package.

Alfredo Simonetto – 1954 (mono; film soundtrack) Opera d’Oro, Archipel, Hardy, Bongiovanni, Standing Room Only
RAI Milano Orchestra & Chorus

Canio - Franco Corelli
Nedda - Mafalda Micheluzzi
Tonio - Tito Gobbi
Beppe - Mario Carlin
Silvio - Lino Puglisi

Superb voices and masterly conducting are the main attraction here, despite the muffled, vintage sound. Corelli’s trumpeting tenor is intermittently vitiated by the “caprino” (goatish) tremolo which he gradually eliminated throughout the 50’s in response to the mocking nickname – “Pecorelli” (little sheep) bestowed upon him by critics but he is thrilling in his big moments; nobody, not even Del Monaco, sings the top B on “A ventitre ore!” or “Ridi, Pagliaccio” with such power and impact. Gobbi is inimitable for bite and beauty, just occasionally going a little flat and straining somewhat on top notes as was his wont but he is otherwise compelling. Mafalda Micheluzzi might not be especially remembered today but here she displays a rich, properly registered voice, with a soft, rounded sound to her vowels and an integrated lower register in service of some very expressive vocal acting. Tenor Mario Carlin is frequently encountered in comprimario roles from this era and sings Beppe very attractively. However, Lino Puglisi is weak and unsteady as Silvio – a disappointing blot on the cast; the role is too often undercast like this but Silvio is important as a counterbalance to the brutality of Canio and Tonio and has some lovely, lyrical music which needs to be well sung.

Its severe sonic limitations of course prevent this from being a top recommendation and both Corelli and Gobbi can be heard to advantage in other recordings below but it’s a great supplement if you can tolerate the awful, cramped sound.

Tullio Serafin – 1954 (mono) EMI, Regis, Naxos; Pristine Audio (Ambient Stereo)
Teatro alla Scala Orchestra & Chorus

Canio - Giuseppe di Stefano
Nedda - Maria Callas
Tonio - Tito Gobbi
Beppe - Nicola Monti
Silvio - Rolando Panerai

Göran Forsling [reviewed](#) this approvingly in 2011. Its main disadvantage from a modern collector’s point of view is that it is in mono sound but it is good, clean, undistorted mono, produced by Walter Legge and has, in any case, since appeared in an Ambient Stereo remastering from Pristine Audio.

Gobbi is, if anything, in better voice than in his previous recording and the concluding A flat in the Prologue is secure. His textual inflections are subtler, too, the comedy more comical and the nastiness nastier. The only danger is that his suavity rivals that of Panerai as the young clandestine lover – but

fortunately he can of course turn on the vindictiveness and deploy a suitably hard, sneering tone. Di Stefano is in finest form, too, singing with power and sensitivity, deploying excellent diction and making his words drip with portentous irony but not overdoing the Schmalz. He does not appear to be over-singing or straining, even if he does not quite have Corelli's or Del Monaco's resonance, and the sparks really fly in his on-stage confrontation with Callas. Nedda might not be a prime Callas role – she never sang it in stage – but as in her *Rigoletto* with the same team, she lightens her sound and brings real pathos to her assumption; “Stridono lassú” is delicately ornamented with lovely portamento and arresting plunges into her lower register, even if top notes are starting to flap a little. The instant switch in the colouring of her tone from her disgusted “Lurido” to a melting “Silvio” is a paradigm for her versatility and responsiveness to the words and music; she can do venom as well as tenderness. For the latter, she and Panerai make something really beautiful of their love duet. Nicola Monti's light tenor is luxury casting as Beppe.

Serafin is master of the score; it swaggers and swoons as a verismo masterpiece should and he gives full rein to the raucous orchestration. The La Scala chorus and orchestra are responsive to his beat and give a truly exuberant performance. This is a dead cert for anyone's shortlist but Del Monaco trumps Di Stefano for visceral thrills.

Francesco Molinari-Pradelli – 1958 (stereo) Decca
Santa Cecilia Orchestra & Chorus

Canio - Mario Del Monaco
Nedda - Gabriella Tucci
Tonio - Cornell MacNeil
Beppe - Piero De Palma
Silvio - Renato Capecchi

This was one of Del Monaco's most significant roles after *Otello* and he sang it often and widely. It obviously suited his vocal and histrionic talents and he is here partnered with an estimable cast, including the usually under-rated Gabriella Tucci. Cornell MacNeill was another large-scale, big-voiced singer not averse to grandstanding, and he immediately puts his mark on the role of Tonio, relishing the concluding high notes but also singing with considerable pathos and subtlety. You could not ask for a more thrilling curtain-up than his Prologue. There is enough edge and menace in his beefy tone to make him a convincing Tonio but paradoxically, the voice is invariably beautiful.

Decca's early stereo sound is very acceptable, a bit of tape hiss notwithstanding and once again – as in three of the recordings considered here, the Santa Cecilia forces are ideally rumbustious and committed, but also singing and playing the gentler, more melodious passages with great warmth and charm. Molinari-Pradelli was frequently Del Monaco's conductor and does everything right, caressing the melodies but letting his instrumentalists and singers off the leash during the passages of high drama. The Intermezzo is a dream.

Del Monaco is of course easily MacNeil's equal for vocal heft and amplitude and has a whale of a time assaulting our timpanums (timpani?) I rather think that Del Monaco's voice is more what Leoncavallo had in mind and his music demands rather than the Johnsonian dog-trick that Björling and Bergonzi carry off. Del Monaco's “A ventitre ore!” is enough to wake the dead, never mind remind his audience. He makes Canio a truly violent, frightening figure yet his raw grief also elicits – indeed compels - our sympathy.

Tucci was a frequent partner to Del Monaco, singing, for example, a lovely Desdemona to his *Otello*, but sadly this is one of only two commercial recordings she made – presumably she was squeezed out

by Tebaldi and Callas. She is absolutely ideal here: pure, youthful, her fast vibrato and vibrant tone bringing Nedda alive with only a few brushstrokes. Silvio is sung by a young Renato Capecchi, no mean baritone in his own right, making the love duet the haven of romantic calm in this turbulent opera that it should be. You can hear from his passionate singing how he progressed to sing Rigoletto and the big Verdi roles. A virtually perfect cast is completed by that favourite, ubiquitous comprimario tenor Piero De Palma as Beppe – even more elegant than he was with *Del Monaco* five years before.

In the process of re-listening to all the recordings here, I have to say that this was the one which most readily swept me along, despite my attachment to the later Santi version with Caballé, Domingo and Milnes. This is *verismo comme il faut*.

Lovro von Matačić – 1960 (stereo) EMI

Teatro alla Scala Orchestra & Chorus

Canio - Franco Corelli

Nedda - Lucine Amara

Tonio - Tito Gobbi

Beppe - Mario Spina

Silvio - Mario Zanesi

You may be sure that with von Matačić at the helm, the conducting will be first class and the sound engineering of this 1960 recording is under the supervision of Walter Legge – now reconciled to new-fangled stereo, so we can all breathe easy there, too. Then we have the chance to hear Tito Gobbi's unmatched Tonio in that stereo sound while his voice still in fine condition – even if this time the optional, climactic A flat in the Prologue was ill-advised and a certain dryness is very evident up top. Mario Zanesi as Silvio was a stylish baritone, good enough to be Germont to Callas' Violetta at Covent Garden two years previously. The icing on the cake, is the great Franco Corelli at the peak of his career, trumpeting top notes and tearing a passion to tatters.

So all's well, right? Hmm. The fly in the ointment is Lucine Amara's undistinguished Nedda. She was a fine Musetta in Beecham's *La bohème* and made a just about acceptable Nedda for Clevea with Richard Tucker back in 1951 (see above) but she is not the same singer here. She's not exactly bad; her top notes are quite pure but otherwise she has a funny little voice which most of the time sounds nasal, bottled and "ingolata"; there's not much variety on colour or dynamic and she simply sounds too old for the flighty Nedda and more like someone's auntie. The contrast with Zanesi's youthful, supple Silvio is almost comical – and tests our credulity. She is better in the "play within a play" but still too shrill and shallow.

That compromises this recording too much for me, for all that I love to hear Corelli in full flight.

Herbert von Karajan – 1965 (stereo) DG

Teatro alla Scala Orchestra & Chorus

Canio - Carlo Bergonzi

Nedda - Joan Carlyle

Tonio - Giuseppe Taddei

Beppe - Ugo Benelli

Silvio - Rolando Panerai

The first time I started listening to this recording, I had no idea that the opening number – Tonio's Prologue – would be such a shock. The truth is that Giuseppe Taddei – an artist I usually much admire

– is in absolutely terrible voice: weak, wobbly, nudging and prodding notes and phrases all over the place to cover for his lack of breath and sustained tone, resorting to hammy, “actorish” vocal inflections to try to divert the listener’s attention away from his parlous vocal state. He wasn’t particularly old here, just in poor voice. Oh my; I wonder what Karajan was thinking.

Likewise, Bergonzi is another singer whom I rate among my favourites but his neat, refined, slightly lisping tenor is not really an ideal fit with the role of Canio, good and impassioned though he is. He rises well to the histrionic demands of his big aria but Karajan’s tempi are so slow that it almost grinds to a halt; the subsequent Intermezzo is likewise hugged to death.

To cap it all, for once I find myself – very unusually - in the anti-Karajan camp by agreeing that this whole treatment of the score is too lush and languorous; Leoncavallo’s music becomes a kind of Puccini-Massenet amalgam.

However, I *do* like Joan Carlyle’s vibrant, full-throated, youthful-sounding Nedda, even though she is pretty rather than especially characterful and again, Karajan makes her Ballatella drag; she sounds genuinely nervous when she is attempting to cover for Canio’s raging on stage, and her duet with Panerai’s typically neat Silvio forms the most enjoyable part of this recording. Ugo Benelli sings a sweet but tremolo-ridden Beppe.

I was surprised, given its reputation, to rediscover that there are too many bothersome and ill-suited aspects to this recording to make it a front-runner.

Mircea Popa – 1966 (stereo) Carlton, World of Classics
National Opera of Bucharest Orchestra & Chorus

Canio - Cornel Stavru
Nedda - Arta Florescu
Tonio - Nicolae Herlea
Beppe - Valentin Teodorian
Silvio - Ladislau Konya

The first great joy of this recording is the chance to hear Nicolae Herlea, the best baritone ever to come out of Romania, in a role which ideally suits his rich, chocolate-brown voice. He is the Romanian equivalent of Ettore Bastianini: he has a huge, thrilling voice with a fast vibrato – which admittedly occasionally leads him a little sharp - and splendid Italian diction. He delivers the best top A flat and G out of all of the recordings here, period (as our transatlantic friends say). The baritone singing Silvio, too, turns out to be another fine singer with a big, handsome voice of the same ilk but unfortunately also an aggravating pulse in his vibrato when he puts any pressure on it. The Canio is Cornel Stavru, who was *primo tenore* at the Bucharest Opera for many years; he has an impressive voice, large and penetrating, if hardly subtle – but who needs subtlety in this opera? Then I love the raucous chorus, embellished by enthusiastic children and the unfettered cries of singers who sound like peasants and sing *con gusto*; well done to the Bucharest opera of that era.

So far so good, but here’s the rub: the soprano singing Nedda, as in the Corelli/von Matačić recording above, lets the side down badly; she sounds like Canio’s granny – unbelievable; I couldn’t believe my ears on first hearing. She screeches loudly and essentially ruins what could have been a surprise contender. (The Beppe-Arlecchino isn’t much fun either, but let that pass...)

The conducting is just occasionally odd, too: rather slow, deliberate and metrical but that would not have been such an issue had everything else been in order. Moving swiftly on, with a regretful backward glance toward Herlea...

Lamberto Gardelli – 1967 (stereo) Decca, Belart
Santa Cecilia Orchestra & Chorus

Canio - James McCracken
Nedda - Pilar Lorengar
Tonio - Robert Merrill
Beppe - Ugo Benelli
Silvio - Tom Krause

I find Gardelli to be a very reliable conductor of opera and here, with an Italian orchestra and chorus which have the work in their blood, he delivers as I might have expected and is captured in excellent, wide-spread, Decca stereo sound. The first voice we hear is a great one: Robert Merrill, who retained the authentic pharyngeal, Italianate ring throughout his long career. There is enough robustness about his sound to prevent him from sounding too refined or aristocratic – a problem with some other baritones in this role. He wasn't always especially expressive with text but relied upon the sheer effulgence of his voice to carry him through – and it does here, even though he does in fact use the words well. His victim is the then rising tenor James McCracken, whose slightly throttled but powerful timbre is an acquired taste for some and he always sounds hysterical – which is not necessarily inappropriate for the volatile Canio. The trouble is that, as with his *Otello*, he starts off sounding unhinged and has nowhere to go. His vocalisation per se is often impressive however, especially when he is belting out top notes at full throttle; I can only say try before you buy.

I often think that Pilar Lorengar is in the process of being unjustly...if not forgotten, at least overlooked. She was an important Spanish singer, somewhat overshadowed by her slightly later near-contemporary Montserrat Caballé, with a fast, distinctive, slightly fluttery vibrato suggestive of vulnerability and concealed passion – ideal for Nedda, as too few sopranos have voices which adequately suggest the combination of qualities indicated by her admittedly sketchily-drawn character. I find her performance here to be lovely: vibrant and febrile with splendid top notes. Her cruel mockery of Tonio is particularly well done and just as she and Merrill make good antagonists, her love duet with Tom Krause's Silvio is most enjoyable. Krause was in the baritone rather than bass-baritone phase of his career here and even if he is a bit beefy, he sounds ardent and youthful; that duet forms a highlight, as it often can in this opera: along with the Ballatella, it is a ray of light amidst the pervasive gloom.

So much is right here that your response will hang upon whether you enjoy McCracken's idiosyncratic tenor; I do. (It might help to know that this is paired with a top-choice *Cavalleria rusticana* on a Decca twofer.)

Nello Santi – 1971 (stereo) RCA, Brilliant
London Symphony Orchestra; John Alldis Choir

Canio - Plácido Domingo
Nedda - Montserrat Caballé
Tonio - Sherrill Milnes
Beppe - Leo Goeke
Silvio - Barry McDaniel

I have long loved this recording; it represents the standard dream team of the early 70's with the three finest singers available to RCA for recordings at that time. Caballé plays Nedda with more delicacy than some but thereby manages to suggest a youthful vulnerability which sometimes eluded her, as her voice could sound matronly. Her pianissimi in the famous Ballatella are simply ravishing and she also characterises very convincingly, playing the humorous business in the play with a light touch and using subtle inflections to convey how hard she is finding it to hold the performance together as her husband's digressions become increasingly manic. Domingo is in finest youthful voice, with a ringing top and the ability to suggest mounting hysteria, even if he doesn't erase memories of Corelli's, el Monaco's or Di Stefano's visceral performances. Milnes is a leering, brutal Tonio with absurdly showy, but thrilling, top notes; Leo Goeke as Arlecchino sings a lovely ballad. The chorus is lusty, the LSO in finest form.

I like Santi's direction; wise and experienced he paces it all beautifully and, to contradict one or two critics, I do not find him lacking in any sense of drama. Now nearly fifty years old, I think this recording has withstood the test of time.

Giuseppe Patanè – 1976 (stereo) Decca

National Philharmonic Orchestra; London Voices & Finchley Children's Music Group

Canio - Luciano Pavarotti

Nedda - Mirella Freni

Tonio - Ingvar Wixell

Beppe - Vincenzo Bello

Silvio - Lorenzo Saccomani

In typically beautiful Decca stereo sound, expertly conducted by Patanè and fielding a trio of famous principals, superficially, this recording has everything going for it...but there are "issues", not least surrounding the casting of those famous singers. First of all, while Wixell can be fine in certain roles, Tonio is not right for him: his light, grainy baritone is not in the least Italianate and his manner is far too refined and, well, "northern European", and the optional top A flat in his opening aria is thin and only just there. Pavarotti is similarly too elegant for the earthy, violent Canio, although he is obviously in fine voice at this stage of his career – rather too "fine" in fact; as singing, it is lovely but hardly dramatically convincing as an aging cuckold – it is as if the Duke of Mantua has dropped by to slum it. Mirella Freni sings beautifully, even if occasionally an uncharacteristically prominent beat – at least, for this stage of her career – creeps into her line and her singing is rather heavy-footed for the young, flighty, frustrated Nedda. The under-casting of Silvio is another problem; the role may be relatively brief but it needs a glamorous, youthful-toned baritone of the kind singers like Bo Skovhus, Tom Allen and Simon Keenlyside possessed at the outset of their careers; the unknown Lorenzo Saccomani is dry and windy of tone. Finally, the chorus is too polite and bourgeois-sounding to be convincing Calabrian peasants. Nope; surprisingly, this prissy rendition is a non-starter.

Riccardo Muti – 1979 (stereo) EMI

Philharmonia Orchestra; Ambrosian Opera Chorus

Canio - José Carreras

Nedda - Renata Scotto

Tonio - Kari Nurmela

Beppe - Ugo Benelli

Silvio - Thomas Allen

I [reviewed](#) this as half of Muti's "Cav & Pag" box set, so here is the redacted version of that:

This is a red-blooded performance by a distinguished cast, but it is not ideal from a characterisation point of view and has certain weaknesses which become more apparent in comparison with other celebrated recordings. The greatest attraction here is José Carreras in finest voice in a seminal tenor role; of additional, somewhat more academic, interest is the chance to hear the "authentic" version of *Pagliacci*.

Let's first acknowledge the lovely, lyrical playing from the Philharmonia and superb choral singing under Muti's sensitive conducting, who is not the least driven as he sometimes can be but very flexible. I love the speed and pace of his direction on the "Don-din" choral number before Nedda's big aria and the riotous crowd scene before the play draws terrific singing and playing from the chorus and orchestra.

The problem here is that Muti is in purist, spoil-sport mode, using an edition which returns to the original autography score, ignoring and eschewing the accretion of illicit top notes, different markings, textual changes and upward transpositions of phrases which has accrued over the years and giving back to Tonio the final verdict "La commedia è finita!"; the result, to quote the notes, is the "lighter, cleaner performance" Leoncavallo actually wanted instead of the more grandstanding style we hear customarily hear. However, I still miss Tonio's top A flat and G at the end of his Prologue.

That role is sung by Finnish baritone Kari Nurmela, whose life was cut short by a cerebral haemorrhage at fifty years old, a mere five years after this, and I think this is his only major, commercial recording. He has a firm, flexible voice but is not especially vivid compared with such as Gobbi, Warren or Milnes, rather under-playing both the menace and the comedy. Carreras is on fire, inhabiting his role as the aging, jealous husband with an adulterous young wife, played by Renata Scotto. Even at this stage of her career, her soprano was starting to spread alarmingly at the top end of its range but she has wonderful control over expressive portamenti and the dynamics of her phrasing, making her Nedda very touching, even if the listener winces at some high notes.

The young Tom Allen as the ardent Silvio adds a touch of class and elegance in his smooth vocalisation; his love duet with Nedda is a highlight. Ugo Benelli is a similarly elegant Beppe.

The violent climax of the opera certainly makes its mark, with Carreras and Scotto throwing themselves into full verismo mode and the sneering epilogue sounds right coming from Tonio's mouth. This might not surpass other classic recordings but it catches Carreras in peak form before his regrettable decline.

Georges Prêtre – 1983 (stereo; film soundtrack) Philips
Teatro alla Scala Orchestra & Chorus

Canio - Plácido Domingo
Nedda - Teresa Stratas
Tonio - Juan Pons
Beppe - Florindo Andreolli
Silvio - Alberto Rinaldi

You have two options here: to listen to the soundtrack of the film, complete with crowd noises and all the attendant ambient noise – which, of course, as always with Zeffirelli, is satisfying naturalistic, faithful to the spirit of the original and beautiful to look at, without the need for gimmickry – or simply sit back, listen to the audio release on Philips and use your mind's eye.

The beauty and control of Pons' Prologue takes the listener aback; it is such a refined sound that it is ill-suited to portraying the brutal Tonio, instigator of the tragedy, but as singing per se it is a treat. It is evident on his entrance that Domingo is in typically fine voice, if just a tad thinner of tone than when he first recorded the role for Santi twelve years earlier. Unfortunately, there is a constant, edgy acidity in Stratas' soprano and weirdly she comes in late on the first beat of the vocal line in "Stridono lassú", which should have been re-taken; vocally, she is the weak link, although in the film her personal charm and excellent acting cover that flaw. She is not exactly poor and she deploys her lower register to inject some venom into her confrontation with Tonio but compared with the best she is hardly balm on the ear. Nor is Alberto Rinaldo as Silvio especially engaging; the beat in his baritone is annoying and his singing very ordinary.

Prêtre is on his best behaviour and in any case this music suits his temperament; the whole thing bowls along when required but he relaxes properly for the lyrical sections. However, if you want Domingo as Canio, a more properly menacing Tonio and a sweeter-toned Nedda, Domingo's earlier recording is a better bet.

Lamberto Gardelli – 1983 (stereo) RCA

Münchner Rundfunkorchester Orchestra & Chorus

Canio - Vladimir Atlantov

Nedda - Lucia Popp

Tonio - Bernd Weikl

Beppe - Alexandru Ionita

Silvio - Wolfgang Brendel

Gardelli's second recording is in good, stereo sound and sports an interesting cast. Weikl was the go-to baritone of the era, before his voice started to develop the wobble which is already incipient in his vibrato here. There is plenty of incisiveness in his sound and he was always a characterful singer but there is something applied and self-conscious about his impersonation of Tonio which means that the ease and naturalness of Gobbi in that role evades him. Similarly, the Munich chorus doesn't have the élan or *slancio* of their Italian counterparts, but they are lively enough and sing with real charm and beauty in their "Din don" number, for example. Atlantov was an inconsistent performer who wasn't always caught at his best but here he is mightily impressive in a role tailor-made for his gifts – he was also a great Otello, with a big, meaty, resonant tone, marked by occasional harshness and a frequent glottal catch. His spinto-heroic tenor is tireless and his "Recitar!" is undoubtedly one of the best on record. Popp, too, is something of a natural fit for the role of Nedda, with her girlish, shimmering tone, pinging top notes and surprising reserves of heft, I like her very much. True, she sometimes resorts to a "squeezing" effect on notes but so much of her singing is really winning and she creates a credible persona. She is matched by a Silvio whose sound is oddly similar to Weikl's, with the same faults and virtues. Alexandru Ionita is a weak Beppe.

Gardelli's conducting is the fruit of long acquaintance with the score and his pacing is immaculate, alternately lilting and urgent, always supportive of, and in harmony with his singers. The Intermezzo is lovingly delivered without sentimentality by the superb Munich orchestra. Somehow, however, rather like the individual performances here, for all its charms, this set as a whole never sounds authentically Italian verismo. I thus remain in two minds about this one and in the end am inclined to give it a worthy mention and default to more mainstream recommendations.

Alexander Rahbari – 1992 (digital) Naxos

Czecho-Slovak Radio Symphony Orchestra; Slovak Philharmonic Choir

Canio - Nicola Martinucci

Nedda - Miriam Gauci

Tonio - Eduard Tumagian

Beppe - Miroslav Dvorsky

Silvio - Boje Skovhus

This is the standard team of three principal singers from this stable under Rahbari, apart from the guest appearance of a young Bo Skovhus as Silvio. It is recorded in good, atmospheric, “stereo-spread” digital sound and splendidly conducted. A stand-out here is Gauci’s Nedda; she is rich-toned and flexible. Martinucci is in the best voice I have heard him. There is always a certain windiness to his tonal emission and his tearful outburst is a bit hammy but his passion and commitment carry the day; the role clearly suits both his temperament and vocal lay-out. Tumagian is always a solid, reliable baritone, singing Tonio well and sometimes almost too beautifully, without introducing those comic touches that make him really characterful. Miroslav Dvorsky’s Beppe could be sweeter but he’s good enough.

This is a solid *Pagliacci* without perhaps the sparkle and star-quality which distinguishes the best but it’s a faithful rendering of the score which will not disappoint the new-comer, even if there is better to be had.

Riccardo Chailly – 1999 (digital; live concert performance) Decca

Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra; Netherlands Radio Chorus

Canio - José Cura

Nedda - Barbara Frittoli

Tonio - Carlos Álvarez

Beppe - Charles Castronovo

Silvio - Simon Keenlyside

As mentioned above in my introduction, this recording has won numerous accolades. It was made long before the voices of all four – including Simon Keenlyside - principal singers faded. Nonetheless, I would utter a note of caution: you can hear straight away that despite its sonority and his being only in his early thirties, Álvarez’ baritone is already betraying an uncomfortable beat heralding trouble ahead and his top notes are forced. Furthermore, to my ears, he always sounds like one of those stern, avenging Verdi baritones trying to be funny. Then there is Cura’s hoarse, coarse tenor, similarly betraying signs of the nagging pulse – especially on loud top notes – and which all too soon deteriorated until it sounded like an old car trying to start on a frosty morning. He is impassioned in his big aria but his singing is vitiated by his cloudy, improperly resonated tone. Barbara Frittoli is much better and characterises Nedda touchingly but her delivery lacks lightness and sparkle and even she employs too much vibrato, with too wide an oscillation in its amplitude. I can only iterate a truism: great voices do not evince this fault.

It is interesting to hear a young Charles Castronovo as Beppe, making a pleasing job of his serenade but still sounding like a comprimario tenor. By far the most attractive and appealing singing here comes from Simon Keenlyside’s glamorous, refined Silvio but even he does not possess the ideal Italianate effulgence. He combines winningly with Frittoli’s mostly gentle singing in their love duet – but nobody buys *Pagliacci* for the Silvio.

Those vocal failings are all the more regrettable given Chailly's drive in the passages of high drama and sensitivity in the lyrical passages such as Nedda's Ballatella. Furthermore, we may enjoy the usual excellent Decca sound (despite this being recorded live) and both the orchestra and chorus eschewing sensible Dutch restraint, playing and singing respectively *con gusto*.

I part company with a host of critics here - but I hear what I hear, and think this is substandard.

Recommendations

As a result of doing this survey, I have come to the conclusion is that despite its brevity, ubiquity and popularity, this is in fact a hard opera to bring off. There are more lemons above than in any other survey I have made so far and the best recordings do not always feature those performers you would have expected to be able to succeed in it. In the end, this is the verismo opera *par excellence*, so vocal amplitude and dramatic passion must trump refinement.

Mono: Serafin 1954

Stereo: Molinari-Pradelli 1958*; Santi 1971

*First choice

Ralph Moore

Appendix

Franco Ghione – 1933-34 (mono; studio) EMI, Nimbus, Naxos, Arkadia, Pearl, Membran
Teatro alla Scala Orchestra & Chorus

Canio - Beniamino Gigli

Nedda - Iva Pacetti

Tonio - Mario Basiola

Beppe - Giuseppe Nessi

Silvio - Leone Paci

This is in remarkably good sound for its vintage, hardly less approachable than the mono recordings above from the early 50's if you allow for a bit of swish and distortion. The strings are wiry bit vivid and the voices well forward. The first of those we hear is that of the great baritone Mario Basiola, whose career was somewhat overshadowed by more famous contemporaries like Ruffo and Stracciari but he was almost their equal vocally, his baritone being free, open, mellow and capable of ringing top notes – as you may hear in the Prologue. He may be too noble of timbre to portray the odious Tonio but there is no comparison between the magnificent sound he makes and that of say, Alvarez.

Franco Ghione was already an old hand at opera conducting and does almost everything right here, except the final Commedia dell'Arte scene proceeds a little sluggishly; the Intermezzo is piercingly lush and sweet, and the double basses come through very satisfyingly. The La Scala orchestra and chorus are on fire throughout, full of fervour and attack, such that their excitement compensates for some of the aural mush resulting from an overwhelmed microphone.

I am not always a fan of Gigli, finding his mannerisms – especially the gulping and sobbing – irritating but he is in his middle-period and on good behaviour here, despite a bit of sliding and crooning. His was, of course, an intrinsically beautiful tenor, honeyed yet powerful – perhaps too sweet and plangent to be ideal for the rough Canio but he injects considerable passion into his portrayal, and even if it is lachrymose that hardly conflicts with the character. "Vesti la giubba" is a tour de force of both soft and declamatory singing, his open "ah" vowels ringing out magnificently and the post-aria "Infamia!" embellishments adding to its intensity. If some might like a bit more steel in the sound to

reinforce Canio's raging in the last scene, Gigli nonetheless makes Canio a poignant, pitiful figure, despite his violence, and "O meretrice abietta" is terrific.

Iva Pacetti is rather staid and matronly-sounding but she has a dark, properly registered soprano with a useful lower register which is always preferable to a tweety-bird; it is unusual to hear a Nedda whose voice is centred more in a mezzo-soprano tessitura. Her vocal acting is convincing. Her lover is sung pleasantly enough by one Leone Paci but he's not exactly anyone's idea of a vocal matinée idol. For nearly forty years La Scala's leading comprimario tenor (if that isn't an oxymoron) Giuseppe Nessi is a mellifluous, neat-voiced Beppe.

This is the obvious historical recommendation.