

Mascagni's *Cavalleria rusticana*
A survey of the major studio recordings in Italian
by Ralph Moore

Cavalleria rusticana is the slightly elder brother of another classic, *Pagliacci*; the two operas are almost invariably paired for an evening's entertainment and have a great deal in common. Together, "Cav 'n' Pag" are credited with being in the vanguard of the verismo movement which changed the face of Italian opera for ever. *Cavalleria* isn't quite as violent, insofar as *Pagliacci* culminates in two on-stage murders, whereas the demise of the anti-hero Turiddù, although it is once again the result of a stabbing, occurs off-stage and is announced to that audience via the blood-curdling scream of a horrified spectator, "Hanno ammazzato compare Turiddù!" ("Friend Turiddù's been murdered!"). It is perhaps, even more melodic and possessed of an even more beautiful *Intermezzo* than *Pagliacci*, but both depict the lives of southern Italian "everyday country folk" in the Mezzogiorno going to church, drinking and celebrating, loving and quarrelling – and both have adultery as the spur to the plotline. However, the importance of the soprano and tenor lead roles is reversed: in *Pagliacci*, Nedda's personality is fairly sketchily drawn and the focus is more upon Canio as a jealous husband – justifiably as it turns out - whereas in *Cavalleria*, Santuzza takes central stage. Nor is there a real villain as such in *Cavalleria* - unless it is Turiddù himself, who seduces and abandons one woman, only to move on to an affair with another, married woman. The preservation of the classical dramatic unities of time, place and action, in combination with ordinariness of the characters and the words they speak, consolidates the opera's veristic nature. Its title, "Rustic Chivalry", was originally that of a short story by Giovanni Verga's of 1880, which was adapted in 1884 to become a very successful play and in turn served as the basis for the libretto. I wonder if others are, like me, puzzled by that title, insofar as while I can see a code of honour and the desire for revenge demand that Alfio's cuckoldry be settled via a duel, there is little else about the action which suggests any values pertaining to the true chivalric tradition – unless it is meant to be ironic.

As in *Pagliacci*, there is no bass role and the bulk of the music is shared amongst the three other principal voice categories of soprano, tenor and baritone – although Santuzza may easily be sung by a proper mezzo-soprano with an upper extension. In the recordings below, the role is split pretty evenly between those two voice-types. The tenor must both have an heroic, full-blooded voice and if he can sing Canio he can certainly sing Turiddù. The baritone role is less interesting, having only one, rather banal, showpiece aria, whereas Turiddù has three big showstoppers (the first being a *siciliana* sung offstage even before the action commences) and a belter of a duet with Santuzza. Two tenors, Mario Del Monaco and Plácido Domingo, have each recorded it no fewer than three times.

Mascagni had no such comparable success after this enormous hit, although *L'amico Fritz* and *Iris* have retained a toe-hold in the repertoire; recordings by Pavarotti and Domingo respectively of those two works have helped keep them in currency and they are fine works but neither has the same sustained melodic flow as *Cavalleria rusticana*. The aged Mascagni must have looked back on his youthful self and wondered what divine spirit of invention had temporarily inhabited him and enabled him to compose what is essentially a flawless work with never a dull moment.

I survey twenty-one recordings below, of which the first six are mono. All, bar one radio broadcast, are studio-made and in Italian. There is a studio recording on the Opus label from 1989 with Obraztsova and Dvorsky which I have been unable to hear. As is increasingly the case now that studio recordings are no longer commercially viable – or perhaps more are no longer even desirable – the last was made neatly thirty years ago. Many come in the typical dual package paired with *Pagliacci*, but some are also available as single CDs.

The Recordings

Pietro Mascagni – 1940 (mono) EMI; Nimbus; Arkadia, Naxos; Membran
Orchestra & Chorus - Teatro alla Scala

Santuzza - Lina Bruna Rasa
Turiddù - Beniamino Gigli
Alfio - Gino Bechi
Lola - Maria Marcucci
Lucia - Giulietta Simionato

Lina Bruna Rasa was, according to the judgement of the composer himself, and remains, by common consent, the best ever exponent of the role of Santuzza. Both she and the conductor, who is Mascagni, are even more animated and energised in their 1938 live performance recorded at Dutch Royal Theatre, The Hague, than in this 1940 studio recording, but this studio recording still bears witness to how and why she created such a sensation before her declining mental state sadly curtailed her career. The real glory of this recording is the combination of a really biting lower register and shining top notes, components of a voice which she deploys with reckless abandon - so much so that she is occasionally wild in pitch and too often a bit flat but the excitement she generates is more than enough compensation for a few intonation issues. She absolutely throws herself into the characterisation and exploits her fast, almost rattling vibrato to create real tension.

Responses to Gigli's very open, gung-ho and sometimes lachrymose vocal production vary; his is obviously a great voice but I do not personally always much warm to it. He is recorded too near in the opening *siciliana* to be off-stage, tends to over-sing – as per its concluding note, where he is clearly pressing too hard – and sounds a bit old for the role; he was, after all, born in the year of the opera's composition. There is a certain irony in the young (thirty-year-old) Giulietta Simionato singing his Mamma in her first commercial recording, as she herself would be a celebrated Santuzza in due time. An additional bonus is the presence of the brazen-voiced Gini Bechi as Alfio, sounding really menacing, especially compared with Gigli's plaintive, "honeyed" timbre; no wonder Alfio wins the knife-fight. Gigli sings impressively but his tenor doesn't carry the visceral, virile thrill of Del Monaco or Corelli.

This recording has the bonus of a spoken introduction by the composer at 76 years old and conducting in fairly leisurely fashion the opera he composed fifty years earlier. He tends to be slow and pull tempi about too much but that doesn't much matter; it's the voices which count here, especially as the orchestra is recessed.

Arturo Basile - 1952 (mono, radio broadcast) Warner Fonit Cetra
Orchestra Lirica & Coro della Cetra di Torino

Santuzza - Giulietta Simionato
Turiddù - Achille Braschi
Alfio - Carlo Tagliabue
Lola - Fernanda Cadoni
Lucia - Liliana Pellegrino

Fair mono sound, a good orchestra, an enthusiastic chorus, a generally fine cast and an experienced conductor who caresses the music lovingly make this an attractive prospect for the punter – with one problem: Achille Braschi has a strong, penetrating tenor but also a very "bottled" tone and a nasty, "caprino" tremolo-vibrato which surely proceeds from excessive tension on his vocal muscles and might explain both his limited recorded legacy and the fact that he is virtually forgotten today. What might have been tolerable and even thrilling live becomes irritating in a recording.

Simionato is vibrant and thrilling – a great voice in (relatively – she was forty) youthful splendour. She sings with such verve and involvement; the sheer size and resonance of her mezzo are exhilarating. Tagliabue is similarly loud and energetic if a bit harsh and dry of tone; the supporting singers are fine.

The choir and orchestra are quite distant in the aural picture – physically removed but emotionally clearly very involved and authentic-sounding.

This would be a prime mono recommendation were it not for the tenor's vocal tics and flaws.

Renato Cellini – 1953 (mono) RCA; Regis; Naxos
RCA Victor Orchestra; Robert Shaw Chorale

Santuzza - Zinka Milanov
Turiddù - Jussi Björling
Alfio - Robert Merrill
Lola - Carol Smith
Lucia - Margaret Roggero

I am wary of recordings featuring Zinka Milanov in her latter years, as her soprano turned sour and bumpy but the presence of Björling and Merrill will be enough to turn many a collector's head. Two MusicWeb colleagues reviewed this back in 2004 ([review](#) ~ [review](#)). I pretty much agree with everything they said – although Bob Farr is kinder about Milanov than I would be - and refer you to their reviews for more detail. Milanov remains no asset and despite the silvery beauty of his voice and the elegance of his legato, it is questionable whether Björling is anyone's ideal of a Turiddù – or, rather, not *despite* but *because* of those virtues he seems too refined, even though he does manage to apply some convincing vocal acting. Besides, you can hear him in darker voice and much better recorded in stereo under Erede four years later with a superior Santuzza and a baritone in Bastianini as good as the excellent, bronze-voiced and expressive Merrill here. The cramped, overloaded mono sound, even if it has been revitalised by Mark Obert-Thorn for Naxos and is considerably better than the Regis transfer (see Tony Haywood's [review](#) from the same year), remains a disadvantage and is harsh on the ear.

Fausto Cleva – 1953 (mono) Sony
Orchestra & Chorus - Metropolitan Opera Association

Santuzza - Margaret Harshaw
Turiddù - Richard Tucker
Alfio - Frank Guarrera
Lola - Mildred Miller
Lucia - Thelma Votipka

Tucker has just the right voice and temperament for Turiddù here; I am less convinced by Margaret Harshaw, whose Italian sounds syllabically learned, characterisation is generic, and voice is shrill, so the two singers sound as if they come from different worlds. Rather the same can be said for the Lola and the chorus, whose Italian, insofar as we can hear it in the congested sound, is unidiomatic; you would never mistake them for native Italians. Guarrera is good enough as Alfio and has better Italian, too, but Cleva rushes his aria – and the opera in general, in fact. The chorus member who announces Turiddù's death first does an incongruous imitation of an air-raid siren. Tucker apart, it all sounds too genteel WASP American to my ears - hardly surprising, as this is a 100% Met cast from the 50's.

The mono sound is harsh and boxy. Tucker is terrific, but he can't carry the whole show. You can do much better.

Franco Ghione – 1953 (mono) Decca, GOP; Urania; Cantus
Orchestra & Chorus - Orchestra di Milano

Santuzza - Elena Nicolai
Turiddù - Mario Del Monaco
Alfio - Aldo Protti
Lola - Laura Didier-Gambardella
Lucia - Anna Maria Anelli

This was my first exposure to *Cavalleria* many years ago on LP; it has recently been released in an Australian Decca Eloquence double CD set along with the Del Monaco/Petrella *Pagliacci* conducted by Erede which I praised in my survey of that opera. Del Monaco is in ringing, youthful voice. His characterisation of Turiddù changed little between this first recording and the third and final one in 1966 (see below), though I think his tonal projection became steadier and his interpretation subtler as he aged, as he does tend to yell a bit here.

Bulgarian Stoyanka Nikolova took the Italian stage name Elena Nicolai and was the resident mezzo-soprano at La Scala for twenty years, singing many Verdi roles. Unjustly, she is now somewhat forgotten, yet she was an important and gifted artist who sang alongside Callas and Gobbi; collectors will know her from her having recorded Eboli in the 1954 EMI studio recording of *Don Carlo*. She has a strong, very well-schooled voice with a fast vibrato and plenty of power and she is a passionate vocal actor, putting her in the bracket of superior mezzos who sang Santuzza which includes Simionato, Cossotto, Obraztsova and Baltsa, but perhaps she hasn't quite their intrinsic beauty of tone.

Protti is as he always is: solid, dependable, with good top notes and a strong presence, but hardly glamorous – indeed he is a bit lumpen, with a rather pronounced vibrato and a percussive manner. Laura Didier-Gambardella is a blowsy Lola (as she is an unsteady Beppe in the recording of *L'amico Fritz*) and unfortunately there are some dreadful lady wobblers who come to the fore in the *Regina coeli*, when the women have their own prayerful line, but otherwise the chorus is lusty.

Ghione is a relaxed, idiomatic conductor with a fine orchestra at his disposal, able to execute rallentandi and dynamic variation as he requires them to be done. He makes an especially nice job of the *Intermezzo* and in truth I have always measured subsequent recordings of it against his; he brings a special glow and swing to that exquisite tune. The recording is in clean, rather distant mono – the chorus, in particular, sound a long way off - with good bass depth and is free of distortion. Sentimental attachment to this does not blind me to its sonic and vocal limitations and I would not make it a top recommendation, especially as Del Monaco may be heard to advantage in his two other recordings.

Tullio Serafin – 1953 (mono) EMI; Naxos; Cantus; Pristine (Ambient Stereo)
Orchestra & Chorus - Teatro alla Scala

Santuzza - Maria Callas
Turiddù - Giuseppe di Stefano
Alfio - Rolando Panerai
Lola - Anna Maria Canali
Lucia - Ebe Ticozzi

Stephen Vasta [reviewed](#) the Pristine Ambient Stereo remastering of this classic recording three years ago and found that although the newly enhanced sound enhances enjoyment, it also reveals quite a few faults in both the original engineering and the singing more explicitly than had been the case with the mono issue. Certainly Callas is in fine vocal estate, the top of her voice largely free of wobble and her portrayal evincing more pain and pathos than almost any other exponent of the role of Santuzza. Di Stefano, too, is impassioned, “clarion and refulgent”, especially in his final adieu to his mother,

where he injects real feeling into the words and sings with impressive power, but it is also true that he is already forcing and the tic of both sliding and stepping up to high notes from a minor third beneath is a worrying indication of undue tensions on his vocal apparatus. Panerai is not especially well cast as Alfio, having a rather refined, patrician timbre – though I always enjoy his singing for its elegance. Serafin's conducting is generally splendid – just occasionally too leisurely but it is true that the chorus could be more committed and is a bit slovenly – their coordination with the orchestra and conductor often goes astray; both they and the lower strings are often lagging behind the beat.

One tends to overlook or at least forgive these flaws when confronted with the passion of Callas' searing portrayal of Santuzza and sparks fly in her confrontation with Di Stefano's Turiddù. I want this account on my shelves just for those advantages but overall there are recordings which are more satisfactory all-round.

Alberto Erede – 1957 (stereo) Decca
Orchestra & Chorus - Maggio Musicale Fiorentino

Santuzza - Renata Tebaldi
Turiddù - Jussi Björling
Alfio - Ettore Bastianini
Lola - Lucia Danieli
Lucia - Rina Corsi

There is a plethora of excellent recordings of this old war-house out there but you cannot go wrong with this one. It is conducted by the ever-reliable Erede, somewhat disregarded today but a man who presided expertly over a number of thrilling, blood 'n guts renditions of operatic favourites in the 50's for Decca. His orchestra has the music in its blood and although the lusty chorus is afflicted by some screechy sopranos, their raucousness is not out of place in this rustic melodrama. The sound is terrific: a model of clarity but with strings rather too much to the fore. Erede permits plenty of rubato and the score swaggers and lilts just as it should in an entirely authentic manner.

Björling is anything but raucous but that does not mean that he is lacking fire or passion; the voice (at least in this recording - I don't know if he could have managed quite the same effect live) rings out magnificently and he manages to keep up with La Tebaldi. (Björling once remarked that being on stage with her was "like singing with two sopranos", such is the amplitude of her tone.) To complete the starry trio, we have the inimitable, bronze-voiced Bastianini roaring away melliflously as Alfio. What a cast, what an opera, what a recording. The author of the liner notes manages to be disparaging both about Björling's top notes and Del Monaco's "loudness" elsewhere for Decca (impudently suggesting that Bastianini's artistry compensated for Del Monaco's lack of it) - otiose and irrelevant criticisms both.

Tullio Serafin – 1960 (stereo) Decca; Belart
Orchestra & Chorus - Santa Cecilia

Santuzza - Giulietta Simionato
Turiddù - Mario Del Monaco
Alfio - Cornell MacNeil
Lola - Ana Raquel Satra
Lucia - Anna Di Stasio

Just as Del Monaco and MacNeil participated in the most recommendable *Pagliacci* as per my last survey, here again they feature in a front-runner, especially as they are paired with a great Santuzza in Giulietta Simionato. She had previously been outstanding in her 1958 broadcast but was not as well recorded or partnered as she is here. Twelve years on, her voice is richer and bigger than before; at

fifty years old she is still in cracking form, plunging into the inky depths of her lower register and soaring recklessly aloft, the very embodiment of feminine abandon. Her "Sono scomunicata" is heart-breaking. She is well-matched by Anna Di Stasio's solid, sonorous mezzo as Mamma Lucia and Cornell MacNeill is ideally macho and strong-voiced as Alfio. Ana Raquel Satra is a pretty-voiced Lola.

Del Monaco is steady and heroic – and properly distanced in his opening aria. I cannot help preferring his trumpeting, red-blooded sound to the more refined tones of Gigli and Björling; surely his basic timbre is better suited than theirs to portraying the crude Turiddù. The Santa Cecilia orchestra sounds like the Berlin Phil, here, too; despite being in his early 80's here, conductor Serafin works his magic to release the steamy eroticism and southern sunshine of this music; it is just a tad short on drive and momentum in the most dramatic exchanges.

There's a little bit of hiss but the stereo sound is otherwise fine.

Gabriele Santini – 1962 (stereo) EMI
Orchestra & Chorus - Teatro dell'Opera di Roma

Santuzza - Victoria de los Ángeles
Turiddù - Franco Corelli
Alfio - Mario Sereni
Lola - Adriana Lazzarini
Lucia - Corinna Vozza

I do not agree with a respected fellow-reviewer that Santini is slack here; the music swoons and swaggers just as it should, and he maintains a lovely lilt in the dotted rhythm tunes. Sample the unctuous bliss of the *Intermezzo* to hear what I mean; it's three minutes of sheer delight, down to the placement of those pizzicato double bass chords a fifth apart at the end of the big melody.

Corelli is simply phenomenal in both roles; indeed, nor do I hear, as another reviewer opines, that he is having any kind of an off day. His trumpet tones and sheer animal energy are incomparable and unapproachable except by Björling, who always seemed to become more unbuttoned when he sang Turiddù; the climaxes of both operas are simply thrilling. He is partnered by three first-rate Italian baritones: Mario Sereni, a menacing, handsome-toned Alfio. The all-Italian supporting cast graces an ensemble which would be wholly satisfying except for some doubts regarding the suitability of the leading lady here.

De los Angeles does very much better than I would have expected as Santuzza, certainly generating some force and passion in her cursing of Turiddù, even if that kind of vulgarity does not come naturally to a singer whose gentle, plaintive voice was better suited to Mimì and Manon. She nonetheless produces an impressively full-voiced top B and C and her vulnerability lends a new pathos to Santuzza's plight, even if she is on occasions clearly taxed.

The early sixties sound is excellent, some slight hiss apart.

Herbert von Karajan – 1965 (stereo) DG
Orchestra & Chorus - Teatro alla Scala

Santuzza - Fiorenza Cossotto
Turiddù - Carlo Bergonzi
Alfio - Giangiacomo Guelfi
Lola - Adriane Martino
Lucia - Maria Grazia Allegri

I returned to this having just listened to a bunch of mono recordings as per above and was immediately struck by the power, beauty and refinement of both the sound and the performance – and had to do a double-take in case I had misremembered and Karajan was conducting his own orchestra rather than La Scala. What sumptuous sounds he coaxes out of them here, from the first swooning bars. Just as he was a master of Johann Strauss waltzes, Karajan finds the melting, lilting beauty in Mascagni's 6/8 and three-quarter-time melodies – but then listen to the punch of the timpani and the controlled blare of the brass in the outburst after the *siciliana* and you realise that he can generate all the heft the authentic *verismo* idiom needs, too.

Bergonzi is in prime form, ostensibly perhaps too light and elegant for the coarse Turiddù, but there is some steel and visceral passion in his tone, too, so he mostly pulls it off. He has to, when he is up against the stentorian might of Fiorenza Cossotto's Santuzza, although in truth he makes his drinking song sound too much like a drawing room ballad instead of a drunken knees-up – the chorus put him right, though. This is nonetheless a much more successful assumption than his Canio recorded in the same year; indeed, the whole recording is far superior to the *Pagliacci*, where Karajan overdoes the schmaltz and the casting is less successful. Another bonus is the under-recorded Giangiacomo Guelfi, who had a huge, resonant baritone and makes Alfio sound properly threatening.

What a lovely voice Cossotto had: rounded and even throughout its huge range, coping easily with the high notes but descending with equal facility into her magnificent lower register. Her exchanges with Bergonzi are alternately fiery and poignant but in truth there are occasions when he is drowned out by his Santa in a manner that never happens to Del Monaco...

The two supporting singers aren't big names but both are excellent, too. My only reservation here is that Bergonzi occasionally lacks the heft to assert his line in duets, whereas Guelfi has no such problems, but so much else is superb.

Mircea Popa – 1966 (stereo) Carlton; World of Opera; Gramofonové Závody
Orchestra & Chorus - National Opera of Bucharest

Santuzza - Marina Krilovici
Turiddù - Cornel Stavru
Alfio - David Ohanesian
Lola - Viorica Cortez
Lucia - Milka Nistor

This is the companion piece to the recording of *Pagliacci* the same year with the same conductor and tenor which was scuppered by a poor Nedda, and this is decidedly better. Unfortunately, the sound here is strangely cramped for a mid-60's stereo recording so you have to turn up the volume to boost it but then it's acceptable. The first voice we hear is the robust sound of Bucharest's long-time resident *primo tenore* Cornel Stavru. He has a stentorian, if slightly constricted, voice reminiscent in timbre of Richard Tucker's, and he is rather unvaried but certainly has enough voice to encompass the demands of the music. He is a dominant presence throughout, singing out magnificently in his big arias, especially the final, desperate plea to his mother on behalf of Santuzza. As in the *Pagliacci*, the chorus is properly lusty – so many choruses are too genteel to be peasants - and the conducting is serviceable if hardly uninspired – he could certainly bring more affection to his phrasing in the *Intermezzo*.

This time, our lead soprano is much better. Marina Krilovci is a singer unknown to me; she has a powerful soprano with a fast vibrato – and a hint of flutter – and a good range, secure *in ahas* *It* but also rich in its middle and demonstrating a useful lower register which she deploys at key moments such as in her sarcastic rejoinder to Lola's enquiry about whether she is going to Mass and when she curses Turiddù. She depicts Santuzza sympathetically, if without any special individuality.

I can only regret that Nicolae Herlea did not move over from Tonio to Alfio; David Ohanesian isn't bad but his hard, nasal voice lacks nuance and beauty of tone compared with Herlea's magnificent baritone. Still, he makes a suitably implacable, vengeful cuckold. Distinguished mezzo-soprano Viorica Cortez, only thirty and at the outset of her career, sings a smoky, lush-voiced Lola, sounding more like the seductive Carmen she eventually sang so many times to acclaim.

This is an estimable, enjoyable performance without being particularly distinguished.

Silvio Varviso – 1966 (stereo) Decca
Orchestra & Chorus - Teatro dell'Opera di Roma

Santuzza - Elena Souliotis
Turiddù - Mario Del Monaco
Alfio - Tito Gobbi
Lola - Stefania Malagù
Lucia - Anna Di Stasio

This recording was a BBC Radio 3 CD Review top recommendation, and with every justification. It is true that by 1966, Del Monaco's voice was somewhat diminished since his near-fatal road accident in 1963 and in some ways I prefer his fresher recording from 1960 where he is worthily accompanied by the great Simionato and a menacing Cornell MacNeil, but Souliotis and Gobbi, even at this relatively late stage of his career, are even better than their earlier counterparts and both the sound and even the conducting are superior to the earlier Decca recording, where Serafin is very good but a tad lethargic compared with Varviso's urgency - and I find the playing of the Rome orchestra absolutely lovely.

The fact that Del Monaco is rather hard-voiced and stentorian more readily conveys what a selfish cad Turridu is; there is no point in transmuting him via honeyed singing from callous brute into a likable victim. Del Monaco has authentic Italian bite and he is matched by Souliotis in typically vibrant, reckless voice, singing her heart out, exploiting her ferocious lower register and sounding, febrile, hysterical and desperate - as well she might. She has never sounded more thrilling or like Callas in the middle of her voice. When she and her ex-lover argue it is a truly scary dog-fight. Gobbi is no deceived buffoon or passive cuckold, but a dangerous opponent – and his way with words is as acute as ever. The chorus is lusty and committed; even Stefania Malagù's Lola is gutsier and more formidable than is usually the case. Anna di Stasia repeats her rich Mamma Lucia and Varviso ensures that the music swings and swoons as it should.

This might be a bit too strong and earthy for some tastes, in which case I would suggest Sinopoli or Karajan as more thoughtful and refined but I love the raw passion of this recording.

Gianandrea Gavazzeni – 1976 (stereo) Decca
National Philharmonic Orchestra; London Opera Chorus

Santuzza - Julia Varady
Turiddù - Luciano Pavarotti
Alfio - Piero Cappuccilli
Lola - Carmen Gonzales
Lucia - Ida Bormida

Each of the “Three Tenors” made his recording of *Cavalleria rusticana* in the late 70's; Pavarotti's was the first. They were all starrily cast and each had a true soprano rather than a mezzo as Santuzza but I am not sure that any of them really had the right voices in the right tessitura and Fach and the

recording which perhaps nearest to having the right mix was the next one conducted by Levine with Domingo and Scotto as leads.

I certainly find Pavarotti more convincing than other essentially lyric tenors such as Bergonzi, for example, as a Sicilian innkeeper; there is a red-blooded passion to his singing which trumps Bergonzi's essential elegance and the voice per se is so beautiful. He delivers his big numbers with enormous involvement and the voice rings out splendidly.

Varady at first seems an incongruous, even strange, choice for Santuzza: her light, flickering, even girlish sound comes as a surprise after more stentorian impersonations by such as Cossotto and Simionato but the characteristics of her voice render her more vulnerable and sympathetic. She injects huge passion into her singing, soaring angelically above the chorus in the ensembles and deploying a very serviceable lower register; I like her very much.

Cappuccilli is a bit of a dull stick as Alfio and while his soft-edged baritone was fine for more reflective roles, here it lacks the edge and bite that singers such as Gobbi, MacNeil, Bastianini and Guelfi bring to the role.

I love Gavazzeni conducting any opera and he pulls out all the stops here, aided by the then great team for operatic recordings of the National Philharmonic and the London Chorus, recorded in superb Decca analogue stereo sound. The *Regina Coeli*, however, beautiful though it is, sounds as if it is being sung by a professional church choir rather than a bunch of peasants. It's a pity, too, that the crowd's scream upon Turiddù's killing sounds more like Alberich's fleeing dwarves in the famous Solti *Das Rheingold* – and whoever they plucked from the chorus to deliver the concluding line must have ruined her throat for the day.

Reservations notwithstanding, this is just so much better than its companion recording of *Pagliacci* under Patanè, which is, frankly, a bit of a lemon.

James Levine – 1978 (stereo) RCA; Sony; Brilliant
National Philharmonic Orchestra; Ambrosian Opera Chorus

Santuzza - Renata Scotto
Turiddù - Plácido Domingo
Alfio - Pablo Elvira
Lola - Isola Jones
Lucia - Jean Kraft

This is the first of Domingo's three studio recordings, made in his young heyday. He and Scotto made a clutch of very successful recordings for RCA under Levine, who had a particular gift for this kind of operatic repertoire. However, here, he does not bestow upon this music the last ounce of flexibility and affection it ultimately requires - thus the *Intermezzo* does not "swoon" as it should.

Domingo has the power and Italianate warmth to swell Mascagni's long lines with passion; he sounds young, brash and ardent, matching the fervour of Levine's direction but he does not have the animal passion that Del Monaco bestows on this music.

The caveat with recordings from this regular team is always the wildness of Scotto's raw top notes which must be set against her dramatic gifts as a vocal actor – she brings wonderful variety of colour, phrasing and dynamics to the words. Yes, the intrusive glottal catch and wobble on loud, high notes can grate but she is so involved and compelling – comparable to Callas in every sense, really.

Unfortunately, Pablo Elvira is a bit underwhelming and under-powered as Alfio compared with stronger-voiced singers such as Merrill and Guelfi; his baritone is grainy, his top notes are thin and he even sounds a bit prissy for a dangerous opponent.

The RCA sound is rich and warm, a little hiss notwithstanding; the clarity of the individual instrumental lines is particularly pleasing. The participation of the Ambrosian Opera Chorus invariably guarantees excellence.

This is by no means perfect, especially vocally, but its verve and intensity make it very worth considering as long as you can tolerate Scotto's technical flaws.

Riccardo Muti – 1979 (stereo) EMI

Philharmonia Orchestra; Ambrosian Opera Chorus + Southend Boys Choir

Santuzza - Montserrat Caballé

Turiddù - José Carreras

Alfio - Matteo Manuguerra

Lola - Júlia Hamari

Lucia - Astrid Varnay

This is more successful than I had feared: a really cohesive sense of drama emerges and the concluding "Hanno ammazzato compare Turiddù!" is wonderfully raucous and chilling.

However, Caballé has the wrong voice for Santuzza; she is not a dramatic soprano and is both pushing her lower register and screaming loud top notes, as in "Sono scomunicata!", to encompass the demands of the role. She is also often rather precious and "arty" where she needs to embrace the verismo wallop of the score. I much prefer her as Nedda in her excellent studio recording under Nello Santi, a role to which she is much more suited, vocally and temperamentally.

That once great Wagnerian soprano Astrid Varnay as Mamma Lucia is, as is almost traditional with this role, wobbly and laboured, but Julia Hamari makes a smoky, sexy Lola. Manuguerra's baritone is lean and incisive – ideal as the dangerous, vengeful Alfio – even if his whip cracks are far too near and present in the sound picture. Carreras is impassioned and free-voiced as Turiddù and his "S'io non tornassi" is splendidly full-throated, but even this early in his career you sense he is pushing his lovely instrument and he doesn't have the red-blooded swagger and heft of Del Monaco, Tucker or Corelli.

A good version, therefore, but not a leader.

Lamberto Gardelli – 1981 (digital) BMG-RCA

Orchester und Chor des Bayerischen Rundfunks

Santuzza - Martina Arroyo

Turiddù - Franco Bonisolti

Alfio - Bernd Weikl

Lola - Livia Budai

Lucia - Juliana Falk

Recordings by Bonisolti are not so numerous that we can pass over this one, especially as he is partnered with the consistently under-valued spinto soprano Martina Arroyo. He has the right voice – hefty and baritonal – as does she: smoky and weighty enough to match Bonisolti. Their duets – rows, really – are events: real, old-fashioned, "stand and sing" beltfests but enhanced by beautiful Italian diction and great expressivity. He never experiences a moment's difficulty with the music and indulges himself - and us – with an outrageous, prolonged, unwritten top C in "Viva il vino spumeggiante", which

no other tenor does and I love it. Then, for good measure, he makes a meal of the top B at the end that chorus, bursting through the ensemble. Both singers have the kind of voices you can drink in.

Livia Budai makes more of a mark with her large, slightly unwieldy but characterful mezzo-soprano than many a Lola; she was, in fact a wise choice as her two co-singers have such large voices, too. Bernd Weikl was the standard go-to baritone for these RCA recordings made in Munich in the 80's and does a fine job, injecting bite and venom into his tone, although I wouldn't say he sounds exactly like an *echt* Italian baritone and the pronounced vibrato is always slightly disconcerting. It's a pity, too, that the Mamma Lucia is so weak and unsteady but she is meant to sound old.

Gardelli is always reliable; he was an Italian opera specialist and knew how to pace correctly to accommodate his singers and maximise drama. He does not disappoint in the *Intermezzo*, either, where some distinguished conductors fail to milk that lovely tune properly – and how sumptuous the Bavarian Radio Orchestra sounds, too. That orchestra and chorus made so many operatic recordings in this era that they, too, are effortlessly idiomatic.

The early digital sound is very good, even if the voices are rather forward. Every survey I do, I stumble across a recording previously unknown to me which turns out to be surprisingly enjoyable – and this is it.

Georges Prêtre – 1982 (stereo, film soundtrack) Philips; Decca
Orchestra & Chorus - Orchestra di Milano

Santuzza - Elena Obraztsova
Turiddù - Plácido Domingo
Alfio - Renato Bruson
Lola - Axelle Gall
Lucia - Fedora Barbieri

I have long shied away from this recording, not because I do not enjoy the two principal singers but because I have an aversion to what I always hear as the bleat in Bruson's baritone, similar to that which afflicted Bernd Weikl's voice as he aged. However, Alfio is a relatively small role and Bruson is at his best here, making a virile, assertive, wronged and vengeful husband, even if those top notes still grate a little on my ear. Otherwise, I am a great admirer of Obraztsova and Domingo gives here the second of his three accounts of Turiddù, and very good it is, too, even if his voice isn't quite as sappy as in the first version four years earlier and he is not necessarily as memorable as Del Monaco. A final advantage is that you have the option of buying just the soundtrack without the incidental noise in the film or you can watch Zeffirelli's typically beautiful, authentic and atmospheric video realisation.

Obraztsova had a huge, intermittently edgy and strident, voice and sometimes her vibrato, too, becomes obtrusive, but it was a properly registered instrument and she easily rides the ensemble in the *Regina Coeli*. Her powerful top notes can be a tad shrill but that lower register really hits home to convey Santuzza's agonies. Her volume and intensity are almost unremitting; if I were Lola I would quail before her baleful accusations.

It is fun to hear a sixty-year-old Fedora Barbieri as Mamma Lucia, her upper register a bit croaky but that famous chest voice as intimidating as ever; she sounds right in the role. Forgive me if I ungallantly suspect that Axelle Gall got the role of Lola more for the aptness of her physical charms to the film than the quality of her voice, as she's nothing special.

Prêtre could be a wilful conductor but I think his direction here is as good as any, including Karajan; his pacing is unerring and he does not default into his occasional bad habit of rushing and over-egging.

Every number unfolds as it should and his La Scala forces – especially the sonorous chorus – are excellent. The climactic scream is chilling.

This is indubitably a big, even coarse, performance but we are not talking about Bellini or Donizetti here; this is *verismo*, folks, and subtle it ain't.

I should add that naturally the Gramophone disliked this: too coarse and red-blooded for English sensibilities - and Robert Levine on Classics Today was scathing about both the singing and conducting. Such are the vagaries and vanities of criticism – and I include myself in that observation. Nonetheless, listen to the *Intermezzo* and tell me it's poorly played.

Giuseppe Sinopoli – 1989 (digital) DG
Philharmonia Orchestra; Covent Garden Chorus

Santuzza - Agnes Baltsa
Turiddù - Plácido Domingo
Alfio - Juan Pons
Lola - Susan Mentzer
Lucia - Vera Baniewicz

Sinopoli has been criticised in other quarters for pulling tempi about and generally being too indulgent. I find it hard to imagine how that is possible with a score like this, especially as I so enjoy approaches like Karajan's velvet-pile treatment, and Sinopoli has such spacious, sumptuous digital sound and a superb orchestra to enhance his vision. I love the swooning beauty of the sound he elicits from the forces at his disposal – and that includes a lovely Covent Garden chorus.

You can hear from the outset in the *siciliana* that a little of the velour has worn off Domingo's tone by the time of this, his third recording but he is only in his late forties and has plenty of voice left to give. He doesn't have the heft of Del Monaco or Bonisoli but his is still a powerful, expressive and intelligent performance. (Occasionally Sinopoli helps him out by obligingly singing along, as in "Bada, Santuzza!" and he does likewise in the ridiculously slow, wonderfully soupy and hugely enjoyable *Intermezzo*).

The cast in general is a starry one; Baltsa belongs in the true mezzo category and has both the range and amplitude of voce and the dramatic temperament to bring Santuzza vividly alive. She is in her prime here and has the perfect "*Carmen* voice": sultry, plangent and vibrant, her lower register trenchant and her top notes rich and flickering. Unusually, both she and Domingo opt to sing the concluding phrase of dismissal and curse in their "flaming argument" duet on the note as written instead of the yelling parlando (*urlando?*) we are used to. My only criticism is that I wish Baltsa didn't approach some high notes too cautiously, as she does in her first aria, and some of her phrasing is too consistently careful where some Simionato or Obraztsova-style mordancy is required. Sinopoli gives her all the time in the world to make her expressive points and she uses it well – though I can imagine that some will find the slow tempi excessive.

Juan Pons impressed as a magnificently vocalised, if rather too urbane, Tonio in the 1983 film of *Pagliacci* and is perhaps somewhat better suited to the role of Alfio here, although his timbre is by now a bit husky and lacking in Italianate resonance of the kind Bastianini and Merrill bring to the role – and if he still sounds a bit polite for a vengeful peasant carter, he nonetheless brings as much venom to his swearing of revenge as he can. Susan Mentzer makes a seductive Lola with a warm timbre, an attractively fast vibrato and lovely semi-yodel in her arietta. Vera Baniewicz is a very satisfactory Mamma Lucia.

This was the top recommendation from Radio 3 Record Review in January 2016.

Semyon Bychkov - 1990 (digital) Philips
Orchestre & Choeurs de Paris

Santuzza - Jessye Norman
Turiddù - Giuseppe Giacomini
Alfio - Dmitri Hvorostovsky
Lola - Martha Senn
Lucia - Rosa Laghezza

Everything about this recording looks promising: three celebrated singers, an equally famous conductor on a pedigree label – what could go wrong? Well, just about everything. Bychkov's manages the near-impossible which is to make this music dull; there is no flickering of Latin fire or – to change metaphors – heaving bosom in his phrasing and his Parisian orchestra sounds as if it would sooner be playing Delibes. Giacomini is a robust tenor of the kind I can admire if he is in the right Fach – his “L'anima ho stanca”, for example, is stunning – but he sings his *siciliana* without a shred of expression, just a blare of big, hectoring tone, occasionally making a noise which – if you will excuse my indelicacy – sounds as if he is reversing Caruso's dictum that “when-a you go to the bathroom, you push-a down, but when-a you sing, you push-a up” (OK; that anecdote is probably apocryphal, but you get my crude point). The chorus is distantly recorded and sounds as bored as I am; weak tenors, screeching sopranos and under-powered basses complete a disappointing ensemble. I have never heard such an uninspiring “Ineggiamo il Signor!”

Please understand that I adore Jessye Norman - I wrote the [MusicWeb appreciation](#) on her passing – and theoretically she has the right soprano Falcon for this role but she made a few recordings such as *Fidelio* for Haitink, *Carmen* for Ozawa and this one, where there is no correlation between her grand, stately temperament and the demands of the role. Hvorostovsky was newly unleashed on the operatic world at the time of this recording, having recently won the BBC Cardiff Singer of the World competition, but he sounds oddly subdued, as if he is singing Lieder, and even more oddly, his top notes are a bit cloudy. Martha Senn is an unmemorable Lola with an unpleasant vibrato; Mamma Lucia is wobbler.

Avoid, I implore you.

Alexander Rahbari – 1992 (digital) Naxos
Czecho-Slovak Radio Symphony Orchestra; Slovak Philharmonic Choir

Santuzza - Stefka Evstatieva
Turiddù - Giacomo (Jaume) Aragall
Alfio - Eduard Tumagian
Lola - Anna di Mauro
Lucia - Alzbeta Michalkova

Pavarotti hailed him as “the greatest of us all” but Aragall didn't make many recordings and indeed his stage career was limited by nerves. Already in his early 50's here, the bloom of his earlier years has gone, the vibrato has loosened, the top notes are thin and the tone is husky - a shame, because in his youth the voice was pure silver. Things start badly with a laboured, charmless *siciliana* and don't improve much, though he finds a bit of tone and charisma for the *Brindisi*. His Santuzza has a rich centre to her mezzo but she has a Scotto-type flap up top without that singer's compensatory technical and textual nuance and although I don't want to be unkind here, she also has what sounds like a speech impediment whereby she cannot pronounce her sibilants properly – and surely that matters in a singer. Frankly, under stress, she too often sounds more like Mamma Lucia.

The Lola is acid-toned and devoid of allure. The best singing by far here comes from the lean, incisive baritone of Eduard Tumagian. He is the only singer with truly Italianate resonance and style – but even he sometimes pushes his voice until it flaps. This reminds me of the Chailly *Pagliacci*, where the best singing came from Simon Keenlyside's Silvio – and nobody buys *Cavalleria* for the Alfio any more than they buy the *Pagliacci* for Silvio.

Rahbari is a fine opera conductor, as his series of recordings for the Naxos and Discover labels have shown. He conducts the Prelude and *Intermezzo* con brio but he needed a better cast here. This is another one to pass over.

Roberto Paternostro – 1993 (digital) Empire; Disky; Companions Classics;
Budapest Opera Orchestra & Chorus; Budapest Children's Chorus

Santuzza - Gisella Pasino
Turiddù - Corneliu Murgu
Alfio - Claudio Otelli
Lola - Ellen Bollongino
Lucia - Hélia T' Hézan

I did not come to this recording from Budapest with any great expectations, except that I knew Roberto Paternostro (actually Viennese but of Venetian descent) to be a fine conductor of Bruckner and Wagner! I also knew Corneliu Murgu to be an estimable tenor; after that, I was on new territory.

Beautiful sound and a sensitive, idiomatically moulded account of the Prelude form a promising start – and indeed, Paternostro proves to be a thoroughly reliable guide throughout; his tempi are slow, like Karajan and Mascagni himself, and he caresses the music in the lyrical sections; the *Intermezzo* goes just as it should. The orchestra is fine and the chorus alert and responsive to their director's request for dynamic gradation.

Murgu's robust, rather hard-toned and shouty *siciliana* is less ingratiating. His voice suits the more declamatory music better but the timbre per se is a little strange and wearing, needing more lower register heft integrated into it. Gisella Pasino has a powerful, but rather "cupped" or even nasal, restricted sound to her voice as if it needs to be freed; in truth I find it rather odd and unpleasant and the top of her voice is shrill with a beat. Both the Lola and the baritone are ordinary if mostly unobjectionable – though he has effortful high notes. If the two lead voices were more attractive, I would be more inclined to endorse this recording but the competition above is much too stiff.

Recommendations

As is so often the case with these surveys, my choices are mostly at least thirty years old; I simply cannot agree that standards of singing today are as good as those of the past. Having said that, it is hard to separate the five below in more modern sound but, as ever, that has to be according to personal taste.

Mono historical: Mascagni – 1940

Mono: Serafin – 1953 Pristine (Ambient Stereo remastering)

Stereo: Varviso – 1966*; Karajan 1965; Erede 1957

Digital: Sinopoli, 1989; Gardelli 1981

*First choice overall, closely followed by Sinopoli.