

Cherubini's *Medea/Médée* - A discographical survey

by Ralph Moore

There are some thirty-five recordings of Cherubini's sole masterpiece in the catalogue and the first was made as relatively late in recording history as 1953 from a live production devised as a vehicle for Maria Callas, conducted by Wunderkind – well, actually a mature thirty-five years old - Leonard Bernstein. Only four of those are studio recordings, of which the first was made by Callas again; the next two were conducted by Lamberto Gardelli and the final one is an “authentic”, period-instrument recording of the original French version in “opéra-comique” form, i.e. with spoken recitatives.

Despite being originally composed to a French text and thus properly entitled *Médée*, the circumstances of its revival and any popularity it continues to enjoy mean that it is fixed in the opera-going public's mind in its Italian incarnation, its spoken dialogue replaced by recitativo not written by Cherubini. He did, however, produce the Italian translation, *Medea*, premiered in Vienna in 1802, but the version performed by Callas is a hybrid first performed in 1909, formed by an Italian translation of a German text with rather stodgy recitatives made by Franz Lachner in the mid 19C. It was a role which particularly suited Callas in what we might designate supposedly as her declining years; in addition to her studio recording there five live performances to consider. The eponymous principal role has been a magnet for leading sopranos ever since, among whom, after Callas, the most prominent include Eileen Farrell, Leyla Gencer, Gwyneth Jones, Montserrat Caballé, Sylvia Sass, Shirley Verrett and Iano Tamar. The latter two are of interest in that they participate in live recordings on CD of performances in the original French. (I have passed over the 1989 recording with Caballé and Carreras, as by that stage of their careers appearing in those roles did neither of them any favours – not to mention Obraztsova's stentorian wobbling as Neris. Furthermore, it is available only on DVD, which lets me off the hook from having to tell you just how bad they are, this survey being restricted to CD issues.)

This is emphatically not a “one-tune-opera” but a Medea will stand or fall by her performance of “*Dei tuoi figli*”, with its wonderful combination of lyrical outpourings punctuated by outbursts of “*Crudel!*”, typifying Cherubini's ability to meld conflicting emotions in an aesthetically satisfying unity – and perhaps the finale, too; they are the touchstone moments. In my experience, no soprano begins to approach Callas' power, pathos and vocal dexterity here – which is, I suppose, rather to pre-empt the conclusions to this survey.

In comparison, the contribution of Medea's co-singers is negligible. The leading tenor role of Jason/Giasone is reasonably meaty and somewhat akin to that of Pollione, in that his portrayal requires an essentially weak and unattractive adulterer to sing heroically, but musically the role is relatively unvaried. What what you don't want is a light-voiced, comprimario-type tenor; its most famous exponent, Jon Vickers, was certainly no such thing and he often sang it alongside Callas at her behest. Glaucis, Creonte and Neris have their moments: Glaucis can make her mark with the one coloratura showpiece, but is otherwise a cipher; Creonte is marginally more interesting, being like Oroveso, another role from *Norma*, in that he is a paternal figure of moral authority outraged by disordered behaviour but torn by feelings of compassion; however, the risk with such a character is of appearing one-dimensional; Neris, in particular, has one lovely aria forming the central, still point in the opera – an axis around which violence revolves. However, none of these four roles has anything like the same musical variety and dramatic impact of Medea, such that it is tempting to concede that *Medea* is essentially a monodrama – although I doubt whether Jon Vickers would have agreed.

The discography of the last twenty or so years has been scanty but a return to the original French version was inevitable in our age concerned with authenticity. There are two live recordings from the mid 1990's and the last studio recording in 1997 conducted by Bart Folse, all potentially of great interest because they re-instate the original language with spoken dialogue. Unfortunately, that latter version is under-cast, but happily there is also an excellent live recording from the Festival Martina

Franca. The fact remains that for some for some voice-fanciers their default position will be favour of the old, familiar, inauthentic recordings of the Italian version.

Listening to all these recordings again, I was newly struck by Cherubini's debt to Gluck rather than, for example, to Mozart; there is a rhythmic rigour and formal rigidity coupled with powerful *stretto* passages of great, cumulative, emotional intensity to Cherubini's neo-Classical style that is reminiscent of the Bohemian master. At the same time, it looks forward to the spectacle of Meyerbeer and the Romanticism of Berlioz.

As a footnote, the final 500 bars of Medea's final aria, No. 14 "Du trouble affreux qui me dévore", which Cherubini, in a snit, blacked out with charcoal in response to criticism after the opening night that his opera was too long, was uncovered in 2013 using advanced X-ray techniques. The aria is yet to be recorded in its new, complete form, I believe.

I consider below fifteen recordings, including one of extended excerpts; the rest are (more or less) complete and four of those are studio-made. Callas' role in its revival, her relationship with the opera and her legacy of six recordings justify a separate assessment of that legacy, as per the overview given first below.

The Recordings

(in Italian unless designated as *Médée*, thus sung in French)

Overview of Callas' six recordings

Medea was a role which permitted Callas to capitalise upon her vocal gifts and temperament. She sang it thirty-one times, made a studio recording of it in 1957, and kept it in her repertoire over the glory years of her career from its first revival in Florence in 1953 until the 1962 La Scala performances under Thomas Schippers. No artist knew the score better than Callas - intimate knowledge of her own part and everyone else's was the norm for her - and she clearly identified closely with the tortured complexity of a character which offered maximum scope for her histrionic gifts as "la tigre" without unduly exposing her voice to undue wear and tear, despite its difficulty. The singularity of her stage presence, in combination with her sheer technical expertise in negotiating both the classical restraint of the music and its pyrotechnical outburst, gave her the opportunity to generate a kind of mesmeric poise and concentration. Medea does not appear on stage until forty minutes or so into the opera, yet henceforth, from the moment of her baleful intrusion, her presence looms over the whole proceedings - or it does if the role is interpreted by a great singing actress such as Callas. It was also her role as a screen actress directed by Pasolini in the film *Medea*, made in 1969-70, when her singing career was over.

Thus a recording of Callas in one of her most celebrated and seminal roles is something most serious opera-lovers will want to own and listen to, but the choice among the six sets isn't straightforward. The Bernstein version, for example, has poor sound but is historically important and exhilarating; the Dallas performance is the rawest and most liberated; the Pristine remastering of the Covent Garden performance means that it is both thrilling and enjoys markedly improved sound; the studio set is the "safest" and the most enjoyable and comfortable to listen to; I find much to commend them all, although none is perfect. Callas tended to undersing in front of the microphone: her voice was very big and she needed the galvanising effect of an inspirational conductor and similarly gifted collaborators to avoid taking a more calculated, intellectualised interpretative stance.

If only one recording is required, that could depend more on the quality of her co-singers and sound, given that she is superb in them all. She is well supported by her tenors: Carlos Guichandut, Gino Penno, Mirto Picchi and Jon Vickers were all class acts; they had big, dramatic voices of a kind virtually extinct. Vickers is pre-eminent amongst them for the intensity of his commitment but none disappoints. Otherwise, the rest of the casts matter less. By that, I mean no disrespect to singers such

as the young, pretty-and-powerful Scotto, Barbieri, Berganza, Cossotto, Pirazzini, Modesti et al who are all very good but it's all about Callas and, to a lesser extent, her Giasone.

Most of her live recordings are available very affordably these days on various labels but the Pristine issue is at premium price.

I append some mostly brief notes to each, individual Callas recording below.

Vittorio Gui – 1953 (live; mono) IDIS; Encore

Orchestra - Maggio Musicale Firenze

Chorus - Maggio Musicale Firenze

Medea - Maria Callas

Glauce - Gabriella Tucci

Neris - Fedora Barbieri

Giasone - Carlos Guichandut

Creonte - Mario Petri

Capitano - Mario Frosini

Prima ancella - Liliana Poli

Seconda ancella - Maria Andreassi

This was one of three performances in the May 1953 La Scala revival for Callas with an Italian translation done by Carlo Zangarini and an adaptation of the score with the Lachner recitatives done by Vito Frazzi and Tullio Serafin, who conducted the five performances, again with Callas the following December of the same year. The sound is quite poor, remote and reverberant, and the coughing persistent, but even from the distance of sixty-five years, the power and intensity of Callas' singing are manifest. The supporting cast is impressive, although Fedora Barbieri's Neris is surely too butch.

Leonard Bernstein – 1953 (live; mono) EMI/Warner

Orchestra - Teatro alla Scala

Chorus - Teatro alla Scala

Medea - Maria Callas

Glauce - Maria Luisa Nache

Neris - Fedora Barbieri

Giasone - Gino Penno

Creonte - Giuseppe Modesti

Capitano - Enrico Campi

Prima ancella - Angela Vercelli

Seconda ancella - Maria Amadini

This is not necessarily the greatest recording of Callas' live accounts of Medea, but there is no doubt that Bernstein, stepping in for an indisposed de Sabata (whose heart attack marked his retirement from opera) and riding by the seat of his pants conducting an opera he learned in the five days prior to the opening night, and Callas as Medea in prime vocal estate, combine to provide a thrilling performance. The new Warner issue is a remastering success and a big improvement over the poor, original EMI CDs: pitch is correct, the saturation has been attenuated and the overall acoustic is warmer and easier on the ear, although it is still no audiophile dream.

Tullio Serafin – 1957 (studio; stereo) EMI

Orchestra - Teatro alla Scala

Chorus - Teatro alla Scala

Medea - Maria Callas
 Glaucé - Renata Scotto
 Neris - Miriam Pirazzini
 Giasone - Mirto Picchi
 Creonte - Giuseppe Modesti
 Médée - Alfredo Giacomotti
 Dircé - Lidia Maripietri
 Néris - Elvira Galassi

The solitary studio version made under Serafin's measured baton might have been the winner but it is a rather more staid affair; on the other hand, Cherubini would probably not have recognised Bernstein's and Rescigno's hyper-expressive way with the score and much preferred Serafin's more severe and classical restraint.

It suffers from scratchy string sound, some odd balances and, despite Callas' artistry, a certain lack of voltage compared with the quasi-verismo excitement of the live recordings lacking both the best cast and the electricity of a live performance. However, it still merits consideration, in that it is the only option in good, if relatively primitive, stereo sound. Callas was tired when she made it, following a punishing performance and studio recording schedule including *La sonnambula* and *Turandot* (what a range she had) and it sometimes shows, but she is still uniquely plaintive, plangent and stirring in her assumption of Medea.

Nicola Rescigno – 1958 (live; mono) Gala

Orchestra - Dallas Civic Opera
 Chorus - Dallas Civic Opera

Medea - Maria Callas
 Glaucé - Elizabeth Carron
 Neris - Teresa Berganza
 Giasone - Jon Vickers
 Creonte - Nicola Zaccaria
 Capitano - Peter Binder
 Prima Ancella - Judith Raskin
 Seconda Ancella - Mary Mackenzie

Callas' voice is still in very good shape here and she has more experience of the role behind her, having already previously sung it fifteen times. She is ably and sympathetically supported by Rescigno, Callas' friend, mentor and confidant. As is so often the case with Gala, they provide a generous bonus in the form of the whole of Act 3 of Callas in Florence in 1953 conducted by Gui with the stentorian Guichandut, so you can have the essence of that in addition to the whole of the Dallas performance. It's in boomy sound but it's worth persevering to hear such command.

Nicola Rescigno – 1959 (live; mono/Ambient Stereo*) ICA; Pristine*

Orchestra - Covent Garden
 Chorus - Covent Garden

Medea - Maria Callas
 Glaucé - Joan Carlyle
 Neris - Fiorenza Cossotto
 Giasone - Jon Vickers
 Creonte - Nicola Zaccaria
 Capitano - David Allen
 Prima ancella - Mary Wells

Seconda ancella - Elizabeth Rust

I glowingly [reviewed this live radio broadcast](#) performance on the ICA label when it appeared for its stellar cast and recreation of the excitement of live theatre, despite the fact that it is marginally the most muffled of all the other mono recordings, with both voices and orchestra rather too distant.

However, this latest incarnation from Pristine, is a remastering into Ambient Stereo of a previously unavailable recording of the FM broadcast on high-speed, open reel tape. As a result, and after a little audible patching of tape changes and the remedying of a few drop-outs towards the end of Act I, this issue far surpasses in quality what has previously been on offer. There is virtually no hiss and acres of space around the voices and instruments, revealing hitherto inaudible detail and nuance.

Callas' soprano Falcon was in exceptionally good shape that evening in 1959. She gives little evidence of any vocal deterioration; her vibrato in 1953 was marginally tighter and top notes slightly less inclined to flap but really differences over the six years covered by the recordings I mention above are negligible. Now that the sound has been revitalised by Pristine, it is now more clearly revealed as, with the Dallas performance one of her two most impassioned accounts. If you sample her lovely Act One aria, "Dei tuoi figli" from all of them, you will simply hear an amazing interpretative and artistic consistency. Callas encompasses all the tortured anti-heroine's moods, from her chilling first entry to the heart-breaking intensity of her plea to Giasone to return to her in "Torna a me!". All the while she maintains the loveliest legato and an immediacy of utterance that no singer since has ever emulated. Her B flats on "Perché Giasone è mio", the top B on "senti" just before "Dei tuoi figli" and "Dell'Orco", and even a slightly effortful top C at the end of Act Two all remain secure and stupendous - she is suffering womanhood incarnate.

She is matched by a cast even better than that of the live Dallas performance the year before, which included the same Giasone, Jon Vickers, in finest youthful voice, singing smoothly and heroically and displaying great beauty of tone and admirable legato. He is better than either the stentorian Gino Penno or the less imposing Mirto Picchi, good as they both are. The replacement of the excellent Berganza by Cossotto as Neris is no loss as you may hear from Cossotto's poised account of her beautiful "Solo un pianto". This aria forms the emotional still point at the heart of this most turbulent of operas.

The quality of the Royal Opera's cast is immediately established by the delightful voices of two British unknowns as the maidservants. Especially notable is the under-recorded Joan Carlyle, who is in purest voice as Glaucis and is preferable even to Scotto in the studio recording. Zaccaria adds his big, smooth, incisive bass to the mix as an impressive Creonte. The whole is expansively and dramatically conducted by Rescigno, always the most sensitive accompanist to Callas in her latter years.

If you don't already own the Dallas performance, this is the one to have if you want to hear La Divina in finest form in a favourite role and worthily accompanied. The rejuvenated and revitalised remastering by Pristine reveals it to be one of her greatest triumphs, indispensable to her admirers.

Thomas Schippers – 1961 (live; mono) Myto; Opera d'Oro

Orchestra - Teatro alla Scala

Chorus - Teatro alla Scala

Medea - Maria Callas

Glaucis - Ivana Tosini

Neris - Giulietta Simionato

Giasone - Jon Vickers

Creonte - Nicolai Ghiaurov

Capitano - Alfredo Giacomotti

Prima Ancella - Edith Martelli
 Seconda Ancella - Maddalena Bonifaccio

This 1961 Scala live recording looks promising, especially with such a cast, but unfortunately it is not an option for several reasons: first, Callas was going through a bad patch vocally from which she partially recovered and sang better for a couple of years after that recovery; she is still dramatically – and, at times, even vocally – imposing, but her vibrato has loosened, there is more flap on high notes and she occasionally loses resonance in the middle of her voice, then exaggerates her lower register to compensate. Worse, however, is the pitching problem: the performance was apparently taped on a machine which gradually sped up as it heated up, with the result that when the tape is played on normal, properly calibrated equipment, such that by the time Callas enters forty-five minutes in, it plays a semitone flat. This could of course be remedied by remastering, but none of the labels which has issued it has done so, and Pristine are now highly unlikely to undertake that task, Andrew Rose having released his superb refurbishment of the Covent Garden performance.

Georges Prêtre – 1961 (studio excerpts; stereo) *Médée* in French; EMI
 Orchestra - Théâtre National de l'Opéra
 Chorus - Théâtre National de l'Opéra

Médée - Rita Gorr
Dircé - Andrée Esposito
Jason - Guy Chauvet
Créon - René Bianco

Despite the harsh element in her powerful mezzo-soprano, Rita Gorr is gripping as the crazed eponymous heroine in these excerpts in the original French from Cherubini's masterpiece rather than the Italian version made famous by Callas. She is ably partnered by heroic French tenor Guy Chauvet and abetted by the driven, super-charged direction of Georges Prêtre conducting an excellent Parisian orchestra.

Usually classified as a mezzo-soprano with a range of over two octaves and a repertoire ranging from Wagner to Verdi to French roles as per this bargain-priced compilation, Rita Gorr's voice was comparable to that of Maria Callas and really more of a soprano Falcon. Gorr never ventured into the high lyric coloratura roles that Callas mastered earlier in her career but her spinto capability allowed her to take on Eboli in London and New York, and Kundry at Bayreuth, with great success.

Her sound is very large, distinct and even metallic, somewhat reminiscent of Flagstad's soprano. It did not always take well to recording, especially in the rather harsh sound here provided by HMV. In this regard, she is comparable to other big-voiced singers of her era like Mario del Monaco, and listening uninterrupted to a recital such as this from Guild can result in her clarion tones becoming wearing on the ear. Gorr attacks high notes and murders them; her bronze timbre can make her characters seem uniformly formidable.

It is above all a Medea voice; comparison with Callas is otiose as both are marvellous and the strain on top notes which was characteristic of both singers merely adds to the excitement, although there are moments in "Perfides ennemis" when her effortful production of top notes verges on a piercing scream. One always feels that Gorr is pushing her voice to its limit and would be happier if her music were transposed a semitone lower; perhaps this is what contributed to her vocal crisis some three years after the last of these recordings. She recovered somewhat and eventually switched Fach; indeed, her career eventually spanned some fifty years but this collection presents her in her greatest French roles in her young prime.

She is ably partnered by tenor Guy Chauvet. Not all listeners will respond to her daring, almost relentlessly vibrant affect but to have heard her in the theatre must have been an event.

This has not been available for a long time but I obtained mine from my usual source on eBay of high-quality transfers from LP for private use. The three arias for Medée and two duets with Jason are also available on the Gorr recital on the Guild label but this also offers the overture and items with the excellent Andrée Esposito, if she is slightly over-stretched by the demands of the coloratura in her aria "Hyman, viens dissiper".

Nicola Rescigno – 1967 (live; mono) GOP

Orchestra - Dallas Civic Opera

Chorus - Dallas Civic Opera

Medea - Magda Olivero

Glauce - Graziella Sciutti

Neris - Biancamaria Casoni

Giasone - Bruno Prevedi

Creonte - Nicola Zaccaria

The phenomenon that was Magda Olivero found herself here on the scene of one of Callas' greatest triumphs, with the same conductor and a first-rate cast, including accomplished soubrette Graziella Sciutti as Glauce, the versatile mezzo Biancamaria Casoni, ringing tenor Bruno Prevedi who recorded the role same year with Gardelli and La Scala regular Nicola Zaccaria, whose unmistakable timbre lends Creonte a grave authority. The mono sound is a bit thin and peaky – as is Sciutti's rather shrill, warbly soprano, but she's not as irksome as the tweety Glauce singing with the Gencer the following year. We know from the previous performances with Callas that Rescigno already has complete command of the score - all of which is secondary importance to whether the Medea captures our interest. Although she is of course mistress of expressive nuance, I don't think her shimmering tone and delicate, bel canto manner is right for the role, nor does she have the requisite heft in her lower register. She makes something different of Medea from the usual vengeful harridan, that is certain, but it's not convincing and there are moments of doubtful intonation. I like Olivero in the correct part and am aware that some will think differently from me, but the unsuitability of her casting and the peaky sound disincline me to recommend this. Interestingly, there is no audience response after her big aria, "Dei tuoi figli", just complete silence, which suggests that the audience agrees with me.

Lamberto Gardelli – 1967 (studio; stereo) Decca

Orchestra - Santa Cecilia

Chorus - Santa Cecilia

Medea - Gwyneth Jones

Glauce - Pilar Lorengar

Neris - Fiorenza Cossotto

Giasone - Bruno Prevedi

Creonte - Justino Díaz

Capitano - Giovanni Foiani

Prima ancella - Giuliana Tivolaccin

Seconda ancella - Dora Carrai

Excellent stereo sound and a first-class conductor directing a really energised orchestra are the virtues first encountered in this recording. The cast is promising; Pilar Lorengar's fast vibrato, bordering in tremulousness, is rather appealing in her portrayal of the wilting Glauce and the two maids who open the work are no slouches, either. Even if Bruno Prevedi was never quite in the front rank of tenors, he had a big, robust tenor which makes a welcome change from the under-powered bleaters

who sometimes blight the role. The problem is that he is unvarying, so his Giasone risks being dull; Justino Díaz is similarly robust but also rather monochromatic – whereas the Captain of the Guard, Giovanni Foiani, sounds like Ramfis or King Philip, and a glance at his discography confirms that he sang important Verdi bass roles. The chorus is enthusiastic. Gwyneth Jones' entrance completes the vocal riches on offer. The infamous wobble makes a ghost of an appearance on her loudest, highest notes, but for the most part this is simply a thrilling dramatic soprano in full flight. Her Italian is a bit mushy, but let that pass; the main problem is the lack of heft in her lower register – such a notable feature in Callas' and Gencer's performances – and that imbalance in her voice might account for a certain shrillness in alt. I noted the same deficiency in her recitals discs. However, the voice is huge and she is a stage animal, relishing the dramatic opportunities the role offers.

A bonus is the presence of Fiorenza Cossotto, the same Neris who sang with Callas in Dallas (nice rhyme), who in passing gives Jones a lesson in the deployment of lower register for dramatic effect. She once again makes a lovely thing of her big moment.

Gardelli's conducting is lithe and vivid; he really invests the score with a kind of nervy hysteria such that it reflects the tormented psyche of its protagonist – and the Santa Cecilia orchestra sounds really good, in the kind of form to which Pappano has recently restored it. It's a pleasure, too, to enjoy the sonic benefits of a studio recording whereby the chorus is, for example, during the wedding scene, properly distanced offstage but also properly audible.

Carlo Franci – 1968 (live; mono) Gala
Orchestra - Teatro La Fenice di Venezia
Chorus - Teatro La Fenice di Venezia

Medea - Leyla Gencer
Glauce - Daniela Mazzucato (Meneghini)
Neris - Giovanna Fioroni
Giasone - Aldo Bottion
Creonte - Ruggero Raimondi
Capitano - Alessandro Maddalena
Prima ancella - Rina Pallini
Seconda ancella - Anna Lia Bazzani

Scratchy, crumbly mono sound once again frustrates fans of the greatest, most under-recorded post-war soprano in Leyla Gencer, but Callas' earlier live recordings aren't much better so we must grin and bear it; it's listenable. Fifty years old and to our astonishment, a young Ruggero Raimondi appears here as Creonte, in very sappy voice. Carlo Franci conducts like a man possessed, not always, I think to the benefit of Cherubini's grand music; it's all a touch too frenetic but undeniably exciting - in an inappropriately verismo manner. Then a cohort of Minnie Mice enter as the chorus, one of whom steps forward in the person of Daniela Mazzucato and we begin to lose patience; it's a squealathon. Unfortunately, Glauce has more to do and does an impression of a leaky Li-Lo all the way through her aria "O Amore". She makes the infelicitously named Eugenia Ratti, who blighted a couple of Callas' recordings, sound like Dame Clara Butt. Were it not for Raimondi's sepulchral tones, once the chorus has squawked and Aldo Bottion's strangulated tenor kicks in, I would swear the whole cast were breathing helium. Fortunately, Raimondi and the Neris restore balance and vocal normality.

With all due respect to a sonorous Raimondi and one Giovanna Fiorini - who sings her sole aria very well in a rich, expressive mezzo - in what are essentially very secondary roles, the main reason to encounter this recording is to hear Gencer. Glottal emphases, swoops and a pronounced vibrato are not necessarily alluring aspects of her voce, yet her performances are always more than the sum of their parts and she is among the most compelling, individual and instantly recognisable of artists, qualities she shares with Callas. She throws herself into the role, plunging into her lower register and

attacking high notes fiercely, takes risks and deliberately sounds hysterical; she is incapable of being bland or boring and her pleas to Creonte are heart-rending, just as, when she is rejected, she turns tigress. Pitted against such a creature, Bottion's poor Jason sounds feeble.

The atmospheric Prelude to Act 3, which begins moodily then morphs into storm music is thrillingly barrelled through. Gencer really goes into overdrive but we are deprived of No. 14 which is cut and there is another cut in No. 15 "E che? Io son Medea!"

Cut, in iffy sound, with a poor Giasone, this is still worth hearing for Gencer's visceral portrayal – but a prime recommendation recording, it is not.

Serge Baudo – 1976 (live; mono) Opera Depot

Orchestra - Orchestre de Lyon

Chorus - Choeur

Medea - Leonie Rysanek

Glauce - Costanza Cuccaro

Neris - Nadine Denize

Giasone - Veriano Luchetti

Creonte - Dimiter Petkov

Capitano - Alain Perraton

Prima ancella - Hélène Garetti

Seconda ancella - Danielle Frima

Muddy mono sound isn't very helpful, but there are some big names here and one Costanza Cuccaro, of whom I have not heard, sings very well as Glauce. I enjoy Petkov's grainy, Slavonic bass, even if it's very non-Italianate and Veriano Luchetti is a proper Italian spinto tenor with a ringing tone and fine legato. Nadine Denize sings a fine, warm, steady Neris. But then we run into trouble: Rysanek starts in typically clumsy, "lowing" mode; she always took a while to warm up when singing on stage and she has terrible pitching problems on her first entrance and her lower register is cloudy. The voice was always huge but rarely beautiful. To me, she sounds at first in poor voice and, like Magda Olivero, all wrong for the role; in "Dei tuoi figli" her sliding, swooping, approximate intonation, squeezing and moaning are painful on the ear – and I am usually a fan when she is singing in the right Fach. Inevitably, after such a poor start, she improves markedly and parts of "O fatal vello d'or" are thrilling but it takes a while to get there and her final aria is a mess as she cannot negotiate its fiendish divisions cleanly and is often just screaming. The audience are clearly more impressed than I and applaud vociferously.

Serge Baudo is not the most galvanised of conductors but holds it all together with a decent orchestra. The chorus is poor and squeaky. This is not very high up my list of preferred recordings.

Lamberto Gardelli – 1976 (studio; stereo) Hungaroton

Orchestra - Hungarian Radio and Television Symphony Orchestra

Chorus - Hungarian Radio and Television Chorus

Medea - Sylvia Sass

Glauce - Magda Kalmár

Neris - Klára Takács

Giasone - Veriano Luchetti

Creonte - Kolos Kováts

Hungary is a most musical country and in the 70's several very good opera recordings emerged from Hungaroton conducted by Verdi specialist Lamberto Gardelli. He also recorded some classics with

Decca, Philips and Orfeo. The lead soprano was often Sylvia Sass in her heyday and here she braves comparison with Callas by undertaking one of the latter's most celebrated roles.

This is essentially a classical opera and as such requires of the heroine a very precise, steady line in addition to histrionic power. Its *raison d'être* is Medea herself, for all that we need a good Giasone and preferably a strong supporting cast. Veriano Luchetti was always a favourite, top-second-rank tenor of mine and he sings with full, Italianate tone and of course beautiful diction, without really rivalling singers such as Jon Vickers who sang that role several times with Callas. Rich-voiced mezzo-soprano Klára Takács is a class act as Neris and there is a lovely, resinous bassoon solo in the introduction to her centrally-placed aria; the same instrument then entwines sinuously with her voice through the aria itself.

I love Sylvia Sass; she was always a wholly committed risk-taker with a big, compelling, vibrant sound, despite some clumsiness in production. Her first entry is unpromising: too much scooping and sliding and some curdled tone but by the time she has got through the recitative to "Taci, Giasone" and starts to deliver the great, showpiece aria "Dei tuoi figli" she has warmed up and singing with her habitual impressive range of dynamics from melting pianissimi to whopping top B flats. In truth, her voice is really too dark and heavy, especially when Sass deliberately intensifies Medea's histrionics to suggest her potential malignancy but it works. She has Callas' trick of using portamento to exceptionally beautiful effect and has the lower register to provide thrills. Like Callas, too, her vibrato can be obtrusive but not excessively so. Her last scene is the cumulative tour de force it should be.

Disappointments here include Magda Kalmár's rather shrill and acidic Glauce - not a patch on the lovely Joan Carlyle in the Covent Garden release of one of Callas' triumphs - and Kolos Kovács' throttled, "ingolato" bass; I have heard him sing better elsewhere although his Italian was always cloudy. There are one or two clumsy edits but the sound is excellent. Gardelli conducts an elegant yet impassioned account with a first-rate orchestra and a chorus slightly less so.

Pinchas Steinberg – 1986 (live; stereo) *Médée* in French; The Opera Lovers

Orchestra - L'Opéra National de Paris

Chorus - L'Opéra National de Paris

Médée - Shirley Verrett

Dircé - Anne-Marie Rodde

Néris - Nadine Denize

Jason - Werner Hollweg

Créon - Jean-Philippe Lafont

This is a live recording of a performance in the Palais Garnier, Paris and its interest resides in hearing that great artist Shirley Verrett and its being in French. The sound is stereo but still poor, echoey and crumbly - better at picking up audience noise than the details of what is happening on stage, as the microphone is clearly in the audience. On the other hand, it's good enough to hear that the Medea is a major voice; Verrett at 55 years old is still in fine form. Her top notes, although always powerful, are sometimes evidently a stretch, while her vibrato has clearly loosened, too, but her lower register is functioning well and she is such an engaged, committed artist, full of fiery temperament and her "Chers enfants" Act 3 aria is suffused with deep emotion - and here her high notes are hit head on and are thrilling. Her co-singers are good, too: Hollweg's tenor is nasal but steady; Denize repeats the Neris she gave for Baudo ten years previously in Lyon but is this time singing in her native language, and Lafont is fine without being anything special. Steinberg was always thoroughly reliable; I have never heard anything by him where I have not liked his conducting.

The limitations of sound mean this cannot be anything other than a supplementary curiosity but Verrett's performance is well worth a hearing.

Patrick Fournillier – 1995 (live; digital) *Médée* in French; Nuova Era
Orchestra - Orchestra Internazionale d'Italia Opera
Chorus - Bratislava Chamber Chorus

Médée - Iano Tamar
Dircé - Patrizia Ciofi
Néris - Magali Damonte
Jason - Luca Lombardo
Créon - Jean-Philippe Courtis

This is a World Premier Recording of the original French version, live from the Festiva Martina Franca. The Lachner recitatives were excised and replaced with the original declaimed, spoken text but judiciously cut to avoid longueurs. There is a fair amount of stage noise and page-turning, and the prompter plays a prominent role, too – but let that pass, as the performance is really good. The tone is set with a frenetic overture bursting with sharply articulated phrases and the experienced Fournillier's conducting continues to be incisive, energised and lyrical by turns throughout. String tone is rather thin and acerbic but that suits both the aesthetic and the subject matter; there is some especially good wind playing, especially a lovely flute accompanying Dircé's opening aria. In his introductory note to a booklet containing the whole French text (but no translations), the artistic director refers to the "pessima traduzione italiana" which has hitherto been the norm; I can't say I think it's that bad – "Ingrat!", for example, doesn't have the bite of "Crudel!" - and it has certainly served its purpose from the time when Callas revived the opera, but it's good to have the rhythms and vowels of the original French to which Cherubini deftly fitted his music. The French pronunciation is good, even in the spoken dialogue, usually a trial and miles better than the New York performance two years later, where the opera is performed as a baroque drawing-room exercise; here it is done on a properly epic scale without overblown Romanticism.

The first voices we hear are strong but with an excess of vibrato, especially for a performance which aims for authenticity but in general the singing is first class. Tamar is terrific – a vocal powerhouse, making a compelling case for the original French version with spoken dialogue. Her vehemence suggests that she must have absorbed the lessons derived from studying the performances of predecessors such as Callas and Sass – and she has the tireless vocal resources to implement them, including a good lower register as well as a ringing top. She doesn't have Callas' uniquely intense accents, but nobody does and Tamar sings beautifully on her own terms.

There is just a touch of the *tenorino* about Luca Lombardo's neat, rather nasal voice compared with bigger-voiced predecessors but he generates a fair amount of tonal penetration and power, and there is something of the authentic French tenor sound about his voice, in the tradition of opéra comique. I was thinking that his French was superb, especially for an Italian, then discovered that he was born in Marseilles. If he is rather dominated by Tamar's volume, that is at least dramatically apt and their confrontation duet "Perfides ennemis" is really exciting. Jean-Philippe Courtis gives us an excellent Créon, with perfect French diction and an attractively rapid vibrato in his warm, slightly woolly, bass. The Neris has a lovely voice, too. Singing her aria with real poise and control – and an attractively fast, flickering vibrato. A young Patrizia Ciofi – only 28 here - contributes a sweetly voiced Dircé, avoiding the shrillness which is too often a feature of this role and making much of the sole coloratura aria.

This was the surprise item in my survey and is a performance to convert any sceptic to acceptance of the validity and desirability of the original French version as Cherubini conceived it. Kudos to Nuova Era for such a satisfying World Premier Recording.

Bart Folse – 1997 (studio; digital) *Médée* in French; Newport
Orchestra - Brewer Chamber Orchestra
Chorus - Chorus Quotannis

Médée - Phyllis Treigle
Dircé - Thais St Julien
Néris - D'Anna Fortunato
Jason - Carl Halvorson
Créon - David Arnold
Le coryphée*: John Ostendorf
Une femme de Dirce: Jayne West
Une autre femme de Dirce: Andrea Matthews
*the chorus leader in ancient Greek tragedy

This should in principle be of great interest, but a whining, poorly tuned orchestra of only ten violins and thirty-three musicians in total, awful singing and bad French accents – nobody has a command over an authentic French 'r' - which are all the more apparent in the spoken dialogue, all driven at break-neck speeds, effectively scupper the enterprise. The maids have sweet voices but the Dirce is a wobbly squawker singing in an incomprehensible approximation of French. The tenor is a throaty little bleater about as heroic as Homer Simpson. The Créon can sing after a fashion but an obtrusive beat never sits well with a noble bass voice. Phyllis Treigle delivers her dialogue like a menu and her singing is primarily characterised by a pronounced vibrato rendering it devoid of variety and hence innocent of menace – or indeed charisma. The chorus is about the same size as the orchestra and acquits itself better but without pleasing soloists this was never going to fly. Two and a half hours pass very slowly, I suggest that you pass over it, too, in favour of the Fournillier recording.

Recommendations

Callas is essential but surely anyone who loves this work must also hear it more as the composer intended, in French.

Italian: Live; Ambient Stereo; Nicola Rescigno – 1959; Pristine

French: Live; stereo/digital; Patrick Fournillier – 1995

Ralph Moore