

Humperdinck's *Hänsel und Gretel*: A survey of the studio recordings

by Ralph Moore

Hänsel und Gretel exercises a strange fascination over the devotees of this wonderful opera in that its apparent simplicity and naivety conceal a powerful myth with a grim core that, for all its undoubted charm, resonates strongly in an age where child-abuse is all too common a theme. It has of course been seized upon by practitioners of *Regietheater* and subjected to all kinds of modish distortions and interpretations, but I prefer to encounter it in the form and spirit for which it was originally conceived, as a somewhat sanitised version of the Brothers Grimm *Märchenoper* (fairy-tale opera). Its performance is now traditionally associated with Christmas and its family-friendly dénouement, whereby all the kidnapped children are redeemed and brought back to life, never fails to move me if it is done even halfway well. (Question: as that miserable old grump of a critic Eduard Hanslick first pointed out, why does the witch Rosina Leckermaul just turn all the children she has captured into gingerbread figures to serve as a fence for her cottage instead of eating them? Never mind; maybe they are a kind of edible boundary pantry.) There are no longueurs in its 100 minutes of music; from its delightful pot-pourri overture onwards it proves to be an ingenious concoction of Wagnerian grandeur and folksy charm. Repeated listening reveals what a skilful orchestrator Humperdinck was and its highlights are many.

It was premiered in Weimar in 1893, conducted by no less a figure than Richard Strauss, who much admired the work, and the following year Mahler conducted the Hamburg premiere – quite an introduction to the world and it was an instant success. It is strange that for all their virtues his other works remain obscure and the composer himself is consigned to the quite populous “one-hit-wonder” category.

I am smitten by this work and am familiar with all the dozen studio versions, many of which have so many virtues that choice between them is difficult; I have solved that problem by acquiring almost every studio recording, excluding only those in French, Italian, English and even Japanese, as although for many years it was invariably performed in translation outside Germany, I want the authentic late 19C German Romantic experience of hearing it in the original language. Very few of those studio recordings are unsuccessful; the nearest to a disappointment is the one conducted by Fritz Lehmann in the same year as the classic mono version under Karajan - and even that has the redeeming presence of Rita Streich in an otherwise undistinguished cast.

Thus, I consider below only those twelve studio recordings on CD, all sung in the original German; the first two are mono and the rest are in modern sound. The 70's saw a glut of studio recordings with no fewer than four in the decade and there is a preponderance of recordings from EMI - four in all - but the last studio-made version was a generation ago. Fortunately, so many are so good that we have no reason to feel deprived of options.

The Recordings

Herbert von Karajan – 1953 (studio; mono) EMI; Naxos; Membran
Orchestra - Philharmonia Orchestra
Chorus - Loughton School

Peter - Josef Metternich
Gertrud - Maria von Ilosvay
Hänsel - Elisabeth Grümmer
Gretel - Elisabeth Schwarzkopf
Die Knusperhexe - Else Schürnoff
Sandmännchen - Anny Felbermayer
Taumännchen - Anny Felbermayer

This 1953 mono recording is a little edgy and shrill but otherwise comes up really nicely in Membran's 94 bit and Naxos' remasterings. Its real joys are Karajan's spacious conducting and the glowing playing of the Philharmonia in its early prime; I love the sheen of their horns in the Wagnerian passages such as the famous orchestral set pieces but also in moments such as the beginning of "Wie duftet's von dorten" (CD2, track 5). Others will warm more than I to Schwarzkopf's slightly arch Gretel but she is steady and beautiful of tone, blending ideally with Grümmer's Hänsel. The rest of the cast is very fine; I especially like Josef Metternich's cleanly sung Peter. Else Schürhoff's rich-voiced witch is richly and amusingly characterised - one of the best on disc, with a great cackle. Anny Felbermayer is straightforwardly appealing and unadorned in the dual roles of Sandman and Dew Fairy without reaching the distinction of starrier singers in later recordings such as Lucia Popp, Kiri Te Kanawa and Barbara Bonney.

This matches more modern recordings for artistry but doesn't displace them, for reason of its comparatively restricted mono sound. The bargain issues from Membran and Naxos are attractively packaged but contain no libretto.

Fritz Lehmann – 1953 (studio; mono) DG; Brilliant

Orchestra - Münchner Philharmoniker

Chorus - Knabenchor des Wittelbacher Gymnasiums München - Damen aus dem Chor des Bayerischen Rundfunks

Peter - Horst Günter

Gertrud - Marianne Schech

Hänsel - Gisela Litz

Gretel - Rita Streich

Die Knusperhexe - Res Fischer

Sandmännchen - Elisabeth Lindermeier

Taumännchen - Bruno Brückmann

Poor recording quality is the flaw least tolerable in an opera such as this, so dependent upon a fairy-tale atmosphere, and unfortunately the 1953 processed mono sound on this reissue is dull and spongy. However, I suspect that the general air of "flatness" about this recording it is not just the result of the recorded sound; this is a dutiful, faithful account which manages to eschew almost completely any sense of magic. The one notable exception to this is Rita Streich's charming, sweetly vocalised Gretel, yet even she seems hardly inspired when it comes to acting - perhaps not surprising given that she is paired with the rather matronly mezzo-soprano Hänsel of Gisela Litz. Neither of the singers playing the parents is especially characterful or distinguished compared with their counterparts on competitive sets and although I am quite taken by Res Fischer's unexaggerated but convincing witch, she hardly takes the part by the scruff of the neck the way Elisabeth Söderström does for Pritchard or, best of all, Christa Ludwig for Eichhorn; both are far more sinister. Elisabeth Lindermeier's Sandman is prettily sung with a tone somewhat reminiscent of a young Kiri Te Kanawa but while I concede that casting a boy to sing the Dew Fairy is perfectly legitimate, I still prefer a more ethereal voice to Bruno Brückmann's slightly gusty treble.

The Wagnerian heft of the Witches' Ride and the Dream Pantomime doesn't really come across under Fritz Lehmann's literal direction and it's hard to detect much change in mood or ambience when we enter the dark forest. The key moment when the witch is shoved into her own oven is lively but hardly climactic.

There being so many satisfying alternative versions available, I cannot in all conscience recommend this dull account, despite its bargain price - unless you are a Rita Streich completist.

André Cluytens – 1964 (studio; stereo) EMI

Orchestra - Wiener Philharmoniker

Chorus - Wiener Sängerknaben

Peter - Walter Berry

Gertrud - Grace Hoffman

Hänsel - Irmgard Seefried

Gretel - Anneliese Rothenberger

Die Knusperhexe - Elisabeth Höngen

Sandmännchen - Liselotte Maikl

Taumännchen - Liselotte Maikl

This is clearly one of the most fluid, and affectionate readings of the score you could ever hope to hear, its excellence compounded by simply gorgeous playing from the VPO. There is a warmth and naturalness about this version which is endearing, especially when two such beautiful sopranos as Seefried and Rothenberger are singing together in their subtle, perfectly inflected German, acting with their voices and blending angelically. Neither is perhaps the most individual of singers and they aren't especially differentiated in tone but everything they do is unforced and sounds right.

This joins the select company of the best recordings even if it still has distinct weaknesses – but certainly not in sound, which is clear, full, transparent stereo with some good effects such as the distancing of the witch's voice for the "Hokus pokus". Veteran Elisabeth Höngen is very characterful but unsteady and no match for Ludwig or Söderström, and the soprano who sings both the Sandman and the Dew Fairy is adequate but very ordinary. Best of all are Grace Hoffman as a touching Mother, despite her screechy top and Walter Berry, his jolly, genial baritone apt as the irrepressible Father - and of course the fluty Vienna Boys' Choir.

There is something very appealing about this recording despite its flaws; it is wholly immersed in Humperdinck's very personal idiom.

Otmar Suitner – 1969 (studio; stereo) Berlin Classics; Brilliant

Orchestra - Dresdner Staatskapelle

Chorus - Knaben des Dresdner Kreuzchors

Peter - Theo Adam

Gertrud - Gisela Schröter

Hänsel - Ingeborg Springer

Gretel - Renate Hoff

Die Knusperhexe - Peter Schreier

Sandmännchen - Renate Kraemer

Taumännchen - Renate Kraemer

I esteem Otmar Suitner as the conductor of many fine recordings. Operating as he did mostly within the old DDR meant that he was frequently engaged to direct the great Dresden Staatskapelle which could hardly be said to constitute any handicap – as their lovely playing in the overture immediately demonstrates. Suitner provides alert, animated conducting throughout and the many orchestral set pieces in this opera are given an ideal rendition; the Dresdeners are just spectacular, especially in the glorious Prelude to Act 3 – what an orchestra!

However, his choice of singers for operas was often restricted to a limited pool, among whom was Theo Adam, whose baritone could be wobbly, and Peter Schreier, whose nasal, constricted tenor featured all too regularly. The novel and adventurous casting of the latter as the witch rather than the

usual female voice might seem to equate to the dispensing of rough justice and obviates the need for him to try to sound mellifluous, but the results are surprisingly successful.

Neither of the singers portraying the siblings sounds particularly child-like but they both sing very nicely: Renate Hoff has a sweet, breathy tone even if her vibrato is rather too pronounced, and Ingeborg Springer is lively and full-voiced, if a bit womanly. He may have become inconsistent later in his career but here a young, fresh-voiced Theo Adam, partnered by a characterful Gisela Schröter is sympathetic; they make attractively honest, harassed parents. Renate Kraemer is pure and ethereal in the two cameo roles...which leaves Schreier.

Well, the casting works. He doesn't over-do it and the reverberation added to his appearances enhances his eeriness. He sounds like a crone and inflects the words amusingly, even if at times we might feel as if Mime has strayed on stage.

The analogue sound is warm and atmospheric. I thoroughly enjoy this recording; it was the – by now expected – surprise in this survey.

Kurt Eichhorn – 1971 (studio; stereo) RCA
Orchestra - Sinfonieorchester des Bayerischen Rundfunks
Chorus - Tölzer Sängerknaben

Peter - Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau
Gertrud - Charlotte Berthold
Hänsel - Anna Moffo
Gretel - Helen Donath
Die Knusperhexe - Christa Ludwig
Sandmännchen - Arleen Augér
Taumännchen - Lucia Popp

This still has the edge over others both for performance and atmosphere- and it has the cleanest recorded analogue sound; I particularly like the touch of reverb surrounding the witch's "Hokus-pokus" and its higher recording sound level often gives more lift to proceedings - as indeed does Eichhorn's conducting, which is the most alert, animated and responsive of the four contemporary recordings from the 70's. He is rather brisker than others by some six minutes, reflecting his overall care to ensure taut shaping and his concern to maintain propulsion.

Furthermore, there is strength and subtlety in the key characterisations. While I am often no fan of Fischer-Dieskau, I readily concede his superiority as an amiable Peter to a bluff Walter Berry for Solti and a slightly barking but jolly Nimsgerg; his famous word-painting really brings this likeable character alive. Above all, we have Christa Ludwig's witch – in her own choice for her best recorded performance; she is funny, engaging and vocally on top form. The other casting is very apt: the contrast between Moffo's darker, boyish Hänsel and Donath's crystal-voiced Gretel is perfect. The less well-known Charlotte Berthold represents the happy medium between the two extremes of shrieking harridan (Ludwig for Pritchard) and downtrodden doormat (Varady for Solti). Auger and Popp are ideal; two silvery, top-class sopranos in cameo roles.

This remains a leader in the pack.

Heinz Wallberg – 1974 (studio; stereo) EMI
Orchestra - Gürzenich Orchester Köln
Chorus - Knabenchor Köln

Peter - Hermann Prey

Gertrud - Ilse Gramatzki
Hänsel - Eugen Hug
Gretel - Brigitte Lindner
Die Knusperhexe - Edda Moser
Sandmännchen - Ursula Roleff
Taumännchen - Thomas Frohn

The charm of this opera is enhanced by the daring casting decision here to have real and very talented children sing not only the siblings but also the two fairies, one of whom sings them to sleep and the other awakens them. This does away with the debate regarding whether adult voices sound too mature and knowing, and eschews the risk of their becoming arch and precious in attempting to sound winsome. A further surprise is the allotting of the role of Rosina Leckermaul the witch to the premier coloratura lirico-drammatico soprano of the 70's, Edda Moser, instead of the usual slightly superannuated, cackling mezzo. Both choices pay dividends: the children are highly musical, very convincing and lend credibility to moments such as when children's voices echo Hänsel when he calls into the darkening forest; somehow, their voices return the opera to the fairy tale domain where it belongs. Nor do they ever sound cutesy. Moser still squawks and cackles entertainingly but her prowess and flexibility mean that we also avoid any vocally embarrassingly or inadequate moments – and as she is clearly having fun, so do we, too. One must forget that star singers like Kiri Te Kanawa have recorded the Sandman and revel in the artistic unity the casting confers upon the whole enterprise. Indeed, I sometimes wonder whether this is not my favourite recording of the many extant versions.

The Cologne orchestra plays beautifully; one has only to hear their opulent playing of the dream pantomime at the heart of the opera to be content. The singing of Prey and Gramatzky as the parents is warm and idiomatic without being the most characterful on record, but they are more than adequate. The sound is excellent and the whole set is a joy.

John Pritchard – 1978 (studio; stereo) Sony
Orchestra - Gürzenich Orchester (Köln)
Chorus - Kölner Oper

Peter - Siegmund Nimsgern
Gertrud - Christa Ludwig
Hänsel - Frederica Von Stade
Gretel - Ileana Cotrubas
Die Knusperhexe - Elisabeth Söderström
Sandmännchen - Kiri Te Kanawa
Taumännchen - Ruth Welting

The greatest advantage of this recording is its wonderful cast. Söderström as the witch is wheedling, clever and subtle - no mugging but relying upon a wide variety of vocal colours without sacrificing vocal quality and Pritchard has two of the loveliest voices ever to grace a stage in Frederica Von Stade and Ileana Cotrubas, whose oboe tones and plangent sweetness combine with melting beauty; they are especially touching in their duet before settling down to sleep in the open. However, I have reservations about Pritchard's conducting; his literal direction constitutes this recording's greatest weakness, as he fails to find the lift and colour in the score so ably brought out by Eichhorn. You have only to listen to the great orchestral set pieces such as the Prelude, the Pantomime or the Witch's Ride to hear how stiff and stolid both Pritchard and even Solti are alongside Eichhorn's lift, flexibility and drive.

Ludwig is too much the shrill harridan here and much better cast as the witch for Eichhorn. Te Kanawa's Sandman is gorgeous but almost too aloof and exquisite, but Ruth Welting's Dew Fairy is

charming. Despite the eminence of the singers concerned, I do not think that overall it prevails as a theatrical experience.

Georg Solti – 1978 (studio; stereo) Decca

Orchestra - Wiener Philharmoniker

Chorus - Wiener Sängerknaben

Peter - Walter Berry

Gertrud - Júlia Hamari

Hänsel - Brigitte Fassbaender

Gretel - Lucia Popp

Die Knusperhexe - Anny Schlemm

Sandmännchen - Norma Burrowes

Taumännchen - Edita Gruberova

On revisiting this set, which I had long considered to be a favourite, I found, to my surprise, that my old allegiance to it needed reconsideration. First, the sound is good - superior to the Sony version - but inferior to the RCA recording and Solti adopts a rather grand, Wagnerian manner which is a tad static - effective on its own terms but lacking the charm and thrills of Eichhorn's more animated approach.

I also found Solti's sibling pair here rather too mature: Fassbaender is just a little blowsy as Hänsel and Popp is too sophisticated and glamorous in timbre for the child Gretel – she is much more aptly cast as the Dew Fairy for Eichhorn, whereas Edita Gruberova's is rather hyper. Anny Schlemm as the witch is wobbly and irritating, resorting to hammy excesses. Julia Hamari has a lovely voice but is a little bland compared with the mothers in other recordings and Norma Burrowes' Sandman is ordinary in comparison with Arleen Augér's bell-like purity for Eichhorn.

Overall, re-acquaintance with this set has resulted in my down-grading my assessment of its appeal, for all that I admire and enjoy the artists in it; it has too many cumulative minor weaknesses to be a front-runner.

Jeffrey Tate – 1989 (studio; digital) EMI

Orchestra - Sinfonieorchester des Bayerischen Rundfunks

Chorus - Tölzer Sängerknaben

Peter - Andreas Schmidt

Gertrud - Hanna Schwarz

Hänsel - Anne Sofie von Otter

Gretel - Barbara Bonney

Die Knusperhexe - Marjana Lipovšek

Sandmännchen - Barbara Hendricks

Taumännchen - Eva Lind

This recording has many strengths: the brother and sister are lovely, especially for Bonney's predictably silvery, charming Gretel. I sometimes find Anne-Sofie Otter a tad bland but she is a very convincing Hänsel, her darker tone contrasting nicely but still blending with Bonney's. Hanna Schwarz is characterful but a bit screechy as Mother and the young Andreas Schmidt makes a youthful, attractively toned Father before the premature decline in his baritone set in. There is, however, something too sensual in Barbara Hendricks' smoky soprano to make her an ideal Sandman and Eva Lind is an adequate, if ordinary, Dew Fairy; Eichhorn's Arleen Augér and Lucia Popp are magical in comparison. Marjana Lipovšek is fine as the witch, without being especially memorable but she doesn't wobble like Solti's Anny Schlemm or sound unsteady like Cluytens' Elisabeth Höngen, even if she doesn't captivate like Ludwig or Söderström. Tate's direction strikes me as flawless, although for some

reason the Bavarian Radio Symphony Orchestra comes across as slightly dim in the recorded picture. Having the Tölzer Knabenchor on hand can only be a bonus - and of course they are lovely.

In short, this is yet another highly recommendable version.

Colin Davis – 1992 (studio; digital) (originally Philips); Decca
Orchestra - Dresdner Staatskapelle
Chorus - Dresdner Operchor - Dresdner Kinderchor

Peter - Franz Grundheber
Gertrud - Gwyneth Jones
Hänsel - Ann Murray
Gretel - Edita Gruberova
Die Knusperhexe - Christa Ludwig
Sandmännchen - Barbara Bonney
Taumännchen - Christiane Oelze

The presence of the Dresden Staatskapelle obviously promises orchestral playing of the most glowing, sumptuous kind, and Colin Davis conducts in relaxed, genial fashion, bringing out the grandeur and lyricism of the music, so no problems there. Given his professed antipathy to Strauss' and Wagner's music, his empathy for the idiom of the score is surprising but welcome. The central Pantomime is glorious, like a Bruckner chorale.

Doubts creep in over the casting: I confess to never having been able much to enjoy Gruberova's gulpy, pouting, pulsing soprano and I find Ann Murray to be unexceptionable but also unmemorable, with a rather pronounced vibrato; I also think they overdo the vocal acting without managing to sound much like convincing children. Franz Grundheber contributes a rough, gruff Peter and Gwyneth Jones a big, flapping-voiced Mother. I suppose an amiable, rustic Father is fine even if he gives little aural pleasure with his vocalisation per se, but a Gertrud who sounds more like a raddled Elektra with a megaphone than a careworn Hausfrau is plain wrong.

Yes; the fleeting star turns from the two young, pure-voiced sopranos are highly enjoyable and over twenty years on Christa Ludwig reprises the role in which she triumphed for Eichhorn in his studio recording, but the earlier assumption is superior for obvious reasons and her screeching becomes wearing. When an opera recording is primarily recommendable for its instrumental interludes and showpieces, we are in trouble...

Donald Runnicles – 1994 (studio; digital) Teldec
Orchestra - Symphonieorchester des Bayerischen Rundfunks
Chorus - Tölzer Singerknaben

Peter - Bernd Weikl
Gertrud - Hildegard Behrens
Hänsel - Jennifer Larmore
Gretel - Ruth Ziesak
Die Knusperhexe - Hanna Schwarz
Sandmännchen - Rosemary Joshua
Taumännchen - Christine Schäfer

This excellent version has been re-issued very cheaply: being, digital, it boasts the best sound, of course: rich and lush - in perfect accord with Runnicles' indulgent treatment of the score in what is evidently a Wagnerian manner which courts high seriousness - or at least, the mock heroic. This is not necessarily inappropriate; his longer line and grand phrasing, complemented by the sumptuous playing

of the Bayerischen Rundfunks Orchestra, by no means excludes the charm and lightness of touch the music sometimes demands.

The singing is first rate, especially the contrast between Ziesak's sparkling, soaring, slender-voiced Gretel and Larmore's tougher, yet still velvety Hänsel, more boyish in the Fassbaender manner. They duet wonderfully. I have a few reservations about the parents; the growing bleat in Weikl's voice has already started making an unwelcome appearance in 1994 and neither he nor Hildegard Behrens is ideally steady but they characterise vividly and make a believable pair, he presenting a kindly soul and she a care-worn Mother who still retains a hint of mischief and fun in her. Both the cameo roles of the Sandman and Dew Fairy are really sweetly sung but in a rather generic way which is less engaging than previous exponents such as Popp, Te Kanawa and Augér. Hannah Schwarz's witch is something of a tour de force without eclipsing memories of Ludwig or Södeström. Although I found all the vocal versatility - cackling, whispering, intoning, wheedling, squawking and screaming - great fun, it can come across as a little self-conscious and "applied" - but I quibble; she really throws herself into a great comic-macabre role and rightly concentrates our attention upon the witch through her force of character. Having the sweet, powerful, bell-like tones of Tölzer Knabenchor greatly adds to the pathos of the children's resurrection.

As much as I like this - and there really is nothing wrong with it – the very best recordings have just that bit more all-round charm and personality.

Paul Kantschnieder – 1996 (studio; digital) RS/DARPO

Orchestra - Masurische Philharmonie

Chorus - Fuldaer Mädchenkantorei - Fuldaer Domsingknaben

Peter - Joachim Klüft

Gertrud - Esther Lee

Hänsel - Tina Hörhold

Gretel - Almut Wilker

Die Knusperhexe - Johanna Rutishauser

Sandmännchen - Martina Ramin

Taumännchen - Birgit Nath

This is a worthy but essentially provincial recording from region of Masuria in the northern Polish Lake District, which has a German-speaking population and strong, historical Prussian-German links. The orchestra sounds like a good second-rank outfit and is well conducted. The voices are mostly of the small, serviceable, unremarkable kind, with a piping Gretel, a windy Peter and a witch with a voluminous but rather wobbly voice. The best voice here by far is Korean soprano Esther Lee as the Mother. Martina Ramin sings a tweety, tremulous Sandman but the Dew Fairy is apparently sung by Minnie Mouse. The two principal singers make a nice of the Evening Prayer and sing their little set piece arias with sincerity and commitment, although they are bettered by artists in more prestigious versions. It is in good digital sound. It would be surprising indeed if this excelled the best of those recordings above preceding it; no doubt seeing such a performance live could be enjoyable but as a recording it cannot be in the running.

(You can listen to clips of this on YouTube.)

Recommendations

Individual taste must dictate a choice from several recommendable recordings of this lovely opera even if it is equally sure that none is wholly without flaw. Wallberg is *hors concours* in that he employs children to sing the lead voices which pays dividends for me in emotive impact but may disappoint those who want a more "operatic" affect from the singers. Cluytens offers fluid, affectionate conducting and he has one of the most idiomatic casts; Karajan, too, is superb, as are the Philharmonia,

but his recording is inescapably in mono being from 1953; Pritchard has the starriest assembly of singers but conducts too stolidly, without lift; both Solti and Runnicles adopt the grand, Wagnerian manner and have rather mature-sounding siblings, but the latter is in the best sound. Overall, my first choice is the vintage 1971 studio recording from Kurt Eichhorn, which seems to me to offer the best combination of sound, cast and conducting; close runner-up is the dark horse Suitner.

Ralph Moore