

Beethoven's *Missa solemnis*: A Partial Survey of Recordings by Ralph Moore

A survey of all available recordings of this gigantic sung Mass is impossible without some preliminary pruning of the field surveyed. There are scores of recordings but, as with previous surveys I have undertaken where the number is daunting, I have endeavoured to whittle it down to a manageable size by considering only the most celebrated by the best conductors and, for the most part, those in better sound. That excludes a lot of live recordings, although I have made a number of exceptions for reasons of both artistic and/or sonic quality, especially as its scale and challenges mean that it has enjoyed fewer studio recordings than might have been expected of so important a work.

The work is unforgiving of anything but the highest professional standards of execution and makes stringent demands on all the performers. Any of my readers of previous surveys will know that in general I have little patience with zippy, reduced-force period performances of large-scale, heavily scored and orchestrated Romantic works performed by under-powered bands and small-voiced soloists and have thus discounted recordings by Norrington and Harnoncourt – but HIP practitioner Herreweghe is here twice for reasons I explain. Devotees of a different aesthetic must excuse me and look elsewhere for guidance. Of course, the same dilemma applies here as it does to performing other quasi-liturgical works such as Verdi's or Berlioz' *Requiem*; some will object that an operatic manner is inappropriate to an ostensibly devotional composition, but I want grandeur and solemnity in this Mass, as its title implies. Besides, Beethoven himself made it clear that he was happy for the Mass to be performed outside a religious context, writing, "'My chief aim was to awaken and permanently instil religious feelings not only into the singers but also into the listeners.'" Furthermore, its martial aspects – trumpets, roof-raising fortissimo in the ensembles and a general sense of titanic struggle – all imply a setting beyond the confines of a liturgical setting.

It is not typical of Beethoven's mature style in that it is traditional in form, even recalling in part the practice of Renaissance polyphonic composers and evincing in his treatment of the choral sections the influence of Baroque works such as Handel's *Messiah*. There is very little repetition or development and variation of themes; the narrative is linear and there is a constant sense of space and time suspended; for me, the centre of the work is the ethereal, floating Benedictus with its extraordinary violin solo, although the two great fugues concluding the two longest movements, the Gloria and Credo are also crucial. My particular attachment to proper singing means that I have felt justified in demoting any recording where vocal standards fall short; conversely, I have allowed great singing to mitigate the disadvantages of mediocre sound.

Originally commissioned for the installation of Beethoven's friend, pupil and patron Archduke Rudolf of Austria as archbishop of Olomouc, the Mass was begun by him in 1819. He worked intermittently on it over four years, thereby missing the deadline; its premiere was eventually given in St Petersburg in April 1824. Not conventionally pious, Beethoven nonetheless clearly believed in a Divine Being, first translating himself the Latin of the Mass Ordinary into German, then pouring his heart and soul into the composition of the work, hence its dedication to Rudolf: "Von Herzen - möge es wieder - zu Herzen gehen" (From the heart; may it return to the heart). As ever with Beethoven, however, seemingly irreconcilable conflicts are embedded in his writing, doubt and fear are reflected in the rhythmic jerkiness of the "Quoniam" in the Gloria and any performance which domesticates or minimises that uncertainty misses the point.

I consider here nineteen recordings (twenty-two if you include the Karajan recordings I dismiss below), of which eight are live; three of those are the "historical", mono performances by Toscanini which are hard to ignore in any survey. Three more live recordings are by "old school" Beethovenians of the highest rank, Bernstein, Kubelik and Levine, and both sets conducted by period revivalist Philippe Herreweghe. His second recording is included for completeness and purposes of comparison but it's really not in the running; the earlier one is far preferable.

Among the eleven studio versions, I include Pristine's remastering of Toscanini's RCA recording, begun two days after the live performance (which has also been issued in remastered form by Pristine). It is inevitably still in relatively dated sound but was always the best of Toscanini's studio output – much better, for example, than his contemporaneous studio recording of Beethoven's *Choral Symphony* – and is much improved by the application of Pristine's Ambient Stereo treatment.

My survey is thus divided into two main sections: the four vintage recordings under Toscanini and those in more modern sound. Unless I indicate that it is from a live performance, you may assume that a recording here is stereo or digital and made under studio conditions. I could argue that this survey embraces three more of Karajan's recordings, insofar as I mention them briefly and in passing but only to dismiss them in comparison with his 1966 account which, I maintain, is supreme. Regarding those three which I have discounted, if you are in doubt, I suggest that you listen to samples for yourself; otherwise you will simply have to take my word for it that if you want Karajan conducting a favourite work, that is the one to have.

The four Toscanini recordings

Arturo Toscanini live, mono 1939 radio broadcast – ICA BBC Legends; Immortal Performances
Zinka Milanov (soprano); Kerstin Thorborg (mezzo-soprano); Koloman von Pataky (tenor); Nicola Moscona (bass)
BBC Choral Society, BBC Symphony Orchestra

This, the earliest of the four Toscanini recordings considered here, demands serious consideration both for its excitement and, surprisingly, because it is in better sound than the live performance from the following year. Nonetheless, it is acoustically still fairly primitive, with hiss, a "wind-tunnel" effect and some shatter and distortion. It is, however, intense and beautifully shaped, conveying a sense of overarching mastery and intense involvement. Toscanini is inevitably usually more urgent than, for example, Klemperer and big moments like "Et resurrexit" come off thrillingly but their impact is somewhat vitiated by the distant mono sound. On the other hand, he is not reluctant to ease up and let the music breathe in the more lyrical passages, such as the Sanctus and Benedictus which are lovingly moulded.

The soloists are as good as any, with an especially fine female team in a younger Milanov and the great Kerstin Thorborg. Milanov soars impressively without too much of her trademark scooping – or shall we call it portamento? – and produces some exquisite high pianissimi. Thorborg is as impressive as you would expect a great Brangäne to be. So many tenors are under-powered and while von Pataky is no Björling he is firm and virile. Sonorous bass Nicola Moscona was a Toscanini stalwart. Unfortunately, they are all set rather far back in the sound picture – as is Paul Beard's highly accomplished violin solo, although the booklet makes specific mention of the conductor's particular concern not to let him be obscured.

In the end, we must allow for the age of the recording and the fact that it is live, and instead acknowledge its flawed beauty.

Arturo Toscanini, live, mono, 1940 radio broadcast – Magic Talent; RCSA; IDIS; Music & Arts - (single CD); CD3 of the Membran Documents Artone "Björling" 4 CD set; Pristine Audio - Ambient Stereo
Zinka Milanov (soprano); Bruna Castagna (mezzo-soprano); Jussi Björling (tenor); Alexander Kipnis (bass)
Westminster Choir, NBC Symphony Orchestra

This cannot be anyone's first choice or a prime recommendation with such venerable, "historical"

sound*, which is adequate for its provenance and era but obviously dry, peaky and boxy, with drops in pitch in the Gloria and a serious early false entry in the brass at the start of the Credo - which no doubt earned one of the Maestro's famous looks if not a bark. Yet the ear soon adjusts and is beguiled by the beauty of the solo singing, the commitment of the Westminster Choir and the attack of the NBC Symphony Orchestra. Mention must be made of Mischa Mischakoff's exquisite and unaffected violin solo in the Benedictus. Above all, we hear the mastery of Toscanini's direction, which achieves a febrile intensity that combines drive with devotional fervour. He is by no means driven throughout but often introduces judicious rubato and dramatic pauses.

Yes, Milanov swoops a bit but she is far more secure and sweet in alt than we hear in her later 1950's and the other soloists are ideal. You will never hear "Et homo factus est" sung with greater power, passion and ringing confidence than Björling brings to it; Kipnis is massively steady and authoritative; Bruna Castagna is as rich and grand as we hear her in the previous month's broadcast of the Verdi *Requiem*, with the same team, except Moscona was the bass there, not Kipnis. The team here is certainly superior to Toscanini's later, 1953 recording, even if that enjoys rather better sound - but this earlier one is surely more thrilling, too, and the voices blend better.

This is a hard work to pull off successfully but Toscanini strikes the balance between spirituality and thrills and really delivers - in around 79 minutes and all on one disc, without sounding rushed, just exciting.

*However, there is, apparently, a superior SHM-CD (Super High Material CD) remastering available from Japan, which is no doubt expensive - and Pristine have also worked their usual magic on it, transforming it via an Ambient Stereo remastering.

Arturo Toscanini, 1953 live, mono, radio broadcast – Pristine Audio (single CD)

Lois Marshall (soprano); Nan Merriman (mezzo-soprano); Eugene Conley (tenor); Jerome Hines (bass)
Robert Shaw Chorale; NBC Symphony Orchestra

The following is adapted from my [previous review of this issue](#).

This is a live NBC radio broadcast from Carnegie Hall, made on 28 March 1953, its source being a "recording from the private collection of Christophe Pizzutti". As such, it inevitably invites comparison with the RCA recording reviewed next, made with the same forces, in the same venue, begun only two days later on 30 March and completed over 31 March and 2 April. I note that Pristine concede that no modern remastering can address the main shortcoming of that RCA recording, which is that the soloists are placed too far back. The remedying of that defect is the main virtue of this live broadcast – but that comes at a price, which is a prominent hiss. The slightly dull ambience of the RCA version, even in its sharpened up 1998 incarnation (in a 2 CD BMG Classics set with the "Choral Symphony") is certainly easier on the ear but orchestral details are submerged and the solo voices less immediate. The disciplined but impassioned chorus emerge intact in both recordings and both convey not only the greatness of the work itself but the supremacy and conviction of Toscanini as its supreme interpreter.

The radio announcements and audience applause have been edited in order to fit CD duration limit and one peculiarity is noted: "An organ malfunction during the Kyrie rendered it inoperable for the rest of the performance." This results in some diminution in the heft of the continuo but it is scarcely noticeable except just before the return to the main subject of the "Kyrie", otherwise the double-basses carry the burden adequately and I really don't think it should be a factor.

Comparisons with Toscanini's earlier performances might be artistically enlightening but the sound of the famous 1940 version places it beyond any but the most enthusiastic historical buff when looking for a recording to live with. One thing is clear: once Toscanini had assimilated this monumental work into his concert repertoire, he performed it more and more frequently and at an increasingly brisk pace

without sacrificing any expressiveness, such was his care for rhythm, dynamics, phrasing and balance. The 1953 NBC recording is a full five minutes faster than that of 1940 and this live one sits exactly in between the two, mainly the result of the first two movements being more leisurely, at a minute and a half and a minute longer respectively, than that NBC version. I prefer the immediacy of the NBC tempi, but this being Toscanini, he makes all three work. In any case, the "Kyrie" has no metronome markings to act as a guide, even if one were to take any notice of such things. One thing is for sure: the Robert Shaw Chorale must have at first been terrified by the tempo he set for the notoriously challenging "Et vitam venturi" – but they hang on and it makes for a thrilling ride. Timings for the last three movements are otherwise pretty much identical for both 1953 versions. Toscanini remains the quickest out of Karajan, Klemperer and Bernstein, and despite his "Gloria" being, for example, three minutes shorter than Giulini's slightly turgid version, there is never any sense of undue hurry, merely a massive momentum and certainty of purpose. Even the most fervent admirer of Bernstein might concede that his evident reverence for this music occasionally tempts him into too etiolated and, yes, "indulgent" an interpretation compared with Toscanini's more virile directness. I still love Karajan's rapt account of the "Sanctus" and "Benedictus" with his ideal team of soloists, but find nothing lacking in Toscanini's poised control here, which is ably enhanced by the beautiful playing of Daniel Guilet, the NBC concertmaster. Having said that, no violinist quite approaches Karajan's legendary Michel Schwalbé for eloquence and purity of tone, even if the delicacy of Krebbers in the Bernstein set is also very beguiling. Overall, the closest comparison for precision, energy and attack is to be found, somewhat surprisingly, in Klemperer's celebrated 1965 recording with the redoubtable New Philharmonic Chorus trained by Wilhelm Pitz.

Key moments in this account come off so well owing to Toscanini's famed combination of discipline, rhythmic precision and overt emotionalism. Hence the attack of the strings at "crucifixus" is heart-wrenching, contrasting tellingly with the beatific sense of the awe and mystery of the Incarnation, so powerfully conveyed by Conley at the words "homo factus est".

Given that one of Toscanini's many strengths was securing balance between orchestral voices, we must assume that he consciously made the decision to place the soloists further back from the microphone than we now find ideal. Certainly Jerome Hine's sonorous, thunderous bass could overpower other voices and one of the pleasures of this live recording is that we can now hear both him and that grossly under-rated tenor, Eugene Conley, much more clearly. It is in fact the men who most benefit from the sharper acoustic of this recording; the gentler ambience of the NBC recording softens Nan Merriman's rapid, flickering vibrato and prevents it sounding too close to a flutter. Similarly, it flatters Lois Marshall's occasional impurity and slight scratchiness of tone compared with the almost otherworldly, disembodied flutiness of Gundula Janowitz's soprano. Nonetheless, Marshall delivers a courageous and generous performance; her pitch is true and her fervour wholly convincing.

This issue amply demonstrates the advantages of different microphone placement and forms a desirable adjunct to the commercial recording. Both provide ample evidence that in performance Toscanini was guided by the composer's fervent superscription to this great Mass.

Arturo Toscanini, 1953 studio, mono – Pristine Audio (single CD)

Lois Marshall (soprano); Nan Merriman (mezzo-soprano); Eugene Conley (tenor); Jerome Hines (bass)
Robert Shaw Chorale; NBC Symphony Orchestra

This is an "Ambient Stereo" remastering of the RCA recording, which, they claim, "is not the addition of reverberation or an attempt to make a 'stereo' spread of the recording itself - rather it is the extraction of the natural reverberation as captured in the original recording and the opening of this out onto a stereo soundfield. The effect here is truly sensational."

The main shortcoming of that RCA recording was the placement of soloists in the sound picture; again, I quote from Andrew Rose's note: "...there is no doubt that in many places the soloists are simply too

far back in the mix. Their sound is distant, quiet and at times thin. Alas this is something for which nothing can currently be done, any more than one can un-bake a cake in order to add more sugar. Short of finding a multitrack master tape (which doesn't exist) it's simply not possible to separate out performers and instruments and re-balance the mix, especially when working from a mono source.

What we can tackle are a number of other aspects of the recording: correcting the pitch so that A=440Hz; using XR processing to counteract the tonal shortcomings of the original recording equipment; using the latest amazing digital noise reduction technology to clean up residual tape hiss and noise."

Comparison with the RCA recording reveals that despite Andrew Rose's disclaimer, Pristine have indeed worked wonders with the original, removing all background hiss – which is still quite prominent, bringing the voices forward into extraordinarily clear focus and making space around the sound without it sounding in the least unnatural or artificial. Of course, this studio version was able to remedy a flaw in the live recording above, which was the break-down and consequent absence of the organ early on. I would also say that much of the solo singing sounds even stronger and more secure here than it was live – although that might be the result of the additional bloom and prominence Pristine have conferred upon the recording in general. Certainly, Lois Marshall, who is sometimes identified as the relative weakness in the line-up comes through not only better than I remember but sufficiently well to be ranked among the best sopranos undertaking that most demanding of parts. Nan Merriman's vibrant sound is better defined than ever and Eugene Conley confirms his claim as an under-rated tenor. I believe that Toscanini had to ask Jerome Hines to tone it down, his bass was so cavernous; he sounds richly resonant but still quite recessed here.

Otherwise, the observations I make above about the live performance three days earlier apply equally to this studio account but interestingly, even allowing for the announcements in the live performance, Toscanini is still faster here by five minutes than he was in 1940 and by some three minutes than he was live in Carnegie Hall two days earlier, so injects proceedings with even more drive and urgency; indeed the passage towards the end of the Credo from 14:14 onwards on the words "Et expecto resurrectionem" is sung by the game Robert Shaw Chorale at a positively insane speed – and it is thrilling, especially as it contrasts so effectively with the serene Sanctus which succeeds it.

This is still very listenable in the RCA issue, but given the superiority of the sound as refurbished here by Pristine and the general excellence of the performance - even if the soloists aren't quite as stellar as in the two, earlier accounts from 1939 and 1940 - this surely represents the best option for anyone wanting to hear that special Toscanini magic.

Modern stereo/digital recordings

Leonard Bernstein, 1962 – Alto, Sony (single CD)

Eileen Farrell (soprano); Carol Smith (contralto); Richard Lewis (tenor); Kim Borg (bass)

The Westminster Choir; The New York Philharmonic

By the time Bernstein came to record his second *Missa solennis*, he was in the deep-and-searching, some would say indulgent, phase of his career, whereas here he is still the firebrand, more like Solti in his quest for excitement, so this first recording is marginally faster and more urgent – not that it sounds in the least rushed, as the dignified opening Kyrie immediately establishes. Furthermore, it fields a more impressive quartet of soloists than in 1978, headed by Farrell's huge, gleaming hochdramatische soprano; she soars fearlessly into the stratosphere. Richard Lewis' tenor is rather effete and soft-grained but he is always audible and phrases sensitively and Carol Smith is a vibrant mezzo – although I would not say that bass Kim Borg, warm, clear and secure though he is, is superior to the young Kurt Moll. The choir is excellent – just slightly reckless its attack, resulting in occasional untidiness, which I

much prefer to too buttoned-up an approach. The tenors positively yell "Et resurrexit" in the Gloria, no doubt at Bernstein's exhortation – and I love it.

This was originally issued on Sony; I have not that first incarnation but assume that it is in standard 60's stereo. It now seems to be available only on the Regis bargain label and the problem for some might be that it is apparently transferred from the original LPs. The lovely violin solo in the Benedictus is a bit recessed and the sound in general is a little muddy, with hints of distortion and the occasional swish, but I have to say that compared with my MusicWeb colleague David R Dunsmore, who [reviewed](#) it back in 2014, I find it more than acceptable.

Mild sonic limitations notwithstanding, this is a splendid, thrilling account.

Otto Klemperer, 1965 – EMI (single CD)

Elisabeth Söderström (soprano); Marga Höffgen (contralto); Waldemar Kmentt (tenor); Martti Talvela (bass)

New Philharmonia Chorus and Orchestra

EMI's choice of recordings for their GROC series sometimes raises the odd eyebrow, but there can be little doubt about the inclusion of this one. Klemperer, recovered from the travails of the previous decade, was in incandescent form despite his advanced age and partial paralysis. So many reviewers have adumbrated the virtues of this noble, majestic account that I won't rehearse them here but will make a few, brief observations. It's not perfect: the fugue concluding the "Quoniam" section of the "Gloria" lumbers somewhat; the soloists are not as starry as Karajan's or Bernstein's; the sound, while good for its age, is inevitably a bit congested - but these are minor cavils set against the transcendence of Klemperer's vision.

In an ideal world, Marga Höffgen would be less matronly, although she manages much of her part magnificently; Kmentt would be able to muster more heft and steadiness for the "et homo factus est", Talvela would blend better with his co-singers. However, Söderström's soprano is a joy, soaring effortlessly in a manner which almost rivals the peerless Janowitz for Karajan. The greatest glory of this set, apart from Klemperer's direction, is the bite and energy of the New Philharmonia Chorus, expertly drilled by Wilhelm Pitz, and the unaffected mastery of the violin solo in the Benedictus, which goes straight to the heart without being quite as soupy as Karajan's Schwalbe.

This is perhaps not the only version of this work to have but its virtues are sufficient to convert any waverer to the Klemperer school, as he imparts a special transcendence to proceedings.

Herbert von Karajan, 1966 – DG (2 CDs: coupled with the Mozart Coronation Mass)

Gundula Janowitz (soprano); Christa Ludwig (mezzo-soprano); Fritz Wunderlich (tenor); Walter Berry (bass)

Wiener Singverein; Berliner Philharmoniker

Karajan was devoted to this work and clearly understood it; he made no fewer than four recordings, one in each of four decades (1958, 1966, 1974 and 1985) but this second is by far and away the most successful as to begin with none of his soloists in the previous and subsequent two recordings, with the exception of José van Dam in 1974, can begin to match up to his 1966 team, nor is their sound as good. Karajan understands both the agony and the ecstasy of Beethoven's music; the unease and the exaltation are equally encompassed and whatever a "spiritual" atmosphere is, he engenders it, helped enormously by the unearthly, instrumental purity of Janowitz' fluty, soaring soprano. What a relief it is to hear Wunderlich's clean, open tone as opposed to Peter Schreier's throaty sound and you could hardly ask for better back-up than Ludwig and Berry.

Michel Schwalbé 's violin solo is simply exquisite: poised and piercingly sweet, a perfect match with Janowitz' voice.

I came to know this work via two means: the vinyl LP box set of the 1953 Toscanini studio recording with the lovely Dürer "Praying Hands" cover and this one. They could hardly be more different but I am indelibly imprinted with both – for good reason, I think.

Eugene Ormandy, 1967 – Sony (single CD)

Martina Arroyo (soprano), Maureen Forrester (contralto), Richard Lewis (tenor), Cesare Siepi (bass)
Singing City Choirs; Philadelphia Orchestra

This 1967 recording took me by surprise. It has received its (un)fair share of brickbats in its time, having been labelled "almost offensive" by the Gramophone for its supposed lack of spirituality and the supposed inadequacy of its massed chorus drawn from the city's various choirs, but I found it thoroughly enjoyable on its own terms.

It is true that there is a certain deliberateness in Ormandy's determination to hold things together by keeping the fugues a bit foursquare and old-style Bachian but the commitment of the singers to such demanding writing is admirable and they do not sound under-powered even if there is a decided lack of finesse. The orchestra is of course superlative and the sound they are given allows us to hear just how good they are. The soloists are equally impressive; I would give this performance five stars for Martina Arroyo alone, whose vast, voluminous and luscious sound soars over the ensemble in a manner which almost upstages her three colleagues. Even her coloratura is large-scale without a note out of place in her runs in the "Gloria". Maureen Forrester produces a rich, noble sound and Siepi is of course as steady and sonorous as ever. Only Richard Lewis is a little light on the heft required to deliver "Et incarnatus est" with sufficient gravitas - but his slightly windy tenor is fleet and incisive.

This is a big-boned, bravura account with little of the verticality achieved by Klemperer or Karajan, closer to Solti's version. The big test for "soul" is of course the "Sanctus". The choir are too loud, the beat too lacking in agogic sensitivity, Arroyo too sensuous compared with Janowitz's ethereal poise - but the lead violinist (Norman Carol?) is glorious and Ormandy's conception is all of a piece even if it comes at the expense of any metaphysical content.

This is not by any means a perfect performance but I remain attached to it for so many reasons, headed by the young Arroyo's star turn – and it is available on one super-bargain disc.

Karl Böhm, 1974 – DG (single CD)

Margaret Price (soprano); Christa Ludwig (mezzo-soprano); Wieslaw Ochman (tenor); Martti Tavela (bass)
Konzertvereinigung Wien; Wiener Philharmoniker

For some reason, this recording has never been on my radar or featured much in reviews, perhaps because it hasn't the personality of Toscanini or Karajan behind it, Böhm playing a pretty straight bat in this interpretation. Its relative neglect can hardly be a consequence of the personnel involved, with soloists, choir, orchestra and a conductor like this, so I was keen to become acquainted with it.

Böhm, like Giulini, takes a leisurely 88 minutes over the work. Unfortunately, whereas we might forgive Giulini's slow speeds as "rugged, granitic and majestic" here Böhm, whose speeds are similar, at times just seems...slow. That's permissible up to a point but this mass is a highly dramatic, conflicted work and needs momentum, too. This is all the more regrettable given the beauty of the solo singing and orchestral playing, underpinned by Böhm's obvious dedication.

Price is the soprano who comes closest to Janowitz for soaring purity of tone; she sails angelically and effortlessly above the stave and is particularly lovely in the conclusion of the Credo and the sublime "Qui venit" of the Benedictus. She is well-matched by a trio of fine artists. Ochman's tenor is a tad nasal but he is very steady and expressive and makes a good job of key moments like "Et homo factus est". The excellence of Ludwig's and Talvela's voices hardly needs any pleading from me; both cut through the dense choral and orchestral layers easily.

Response to Böhm stateliness will be diverse but there is no denying that at times the music courts stasis rather than timelessness or the eternal suspension of time. I shouldn't overdo the point: the start of the Gloria is far from lethargic and the big choir is energised, if rather distantly and murkily recorded, but then Böhm slows down markedly for "gratias agimus tibi" and "qui tollis peccata mundi", the concluding fugal "Amen" plods and the final movement, the Agnus Dei, distinctly loses momentum; the stop-go contrasts are quite jarring. On the other hand, there is plenty of heft in the big ensembles in the Credo and the singing is so good, especially in the Sanctus, as to deflect criticism – nor do any of the singers seem to be troubled by Böhm's slow tempo.

I remain in two minds about this one; there is much I admire and enjoy here despite my reservations concerning Böhm's conducting.

Carlo Maria Giulini, 1975 - EMI, Brilliant (2 CDs – coupled with the Mass in C)

Heather Harper (soprano); Dame Janet Baker (mezzo-soprano); Robert Tear (tenor); Hans Sotin (bass)
New Philharmonia Chorus; London Philharmonic Orchestra

I hesitated to give this an unqualified recommendation, my reservation stemming from a dislike of Robert Tear's bleating tenor, but his part is not so large or obtrusive. Another drawback in the Brilliant issue is the sparse documentation and absence of any libretto, but EMI provides that and it's accessible online, so my minor cavils are surely counterbalanced by the splendours of this grand performance.

This is an interpretation in the mode of Karajan rather than the more rugged and granitic approach of Klemperer. I like all three very much and don't especially want to choose a leader from amongst them. Giulini's tempi are mostly massive but not usually ponderous; I refer above to his being "slightly turgid" in the Gloria but only occasionally does he risk sounding lethargic and for the most part he is simply steadily intense. He immediately ensures in the opening "Kyrie" that the singers and orchestra sustain Beethoven's long, swelling lines without any sense of dragging or trailing off. In this regard Giulini reminds me of Tennstedt; both had an impeccable sense of the architecture of a piece and could sustain a huge arc of sound impressively. The climax of the Gloria with its ecstatic repeated cries of "Amen" and "Gloria" is a triumph of controlled passion, building and building until the final glorious release. Yet Giulini manages to sustain that tension through the following "Credo" before relaxing into the sublime transcendence of the "Sanctus"; this recording is a magnificent example of the conductor's work at his best.

Giulini's soloists are almost as impressive as Karajan's dream team (the exception being Tear, who is no Wunderlich...let's pass over that): Heather Harper soars angelically to rival the divine Janowitz, Janet Baker is no second-best to her fellow mezzo and coeval Christa Ludwig and the young Hans Sotin's noble bass doesn't disappoint. The choir are superb - alert and energised; the LPO equally virtuosic and it's a crime that the solo violinist in the Sanctus - presumably Rodney Friend - is not acknowledged; he plays as well as Michel Schwalbé for Karajan.

Minimalist presentation on Brilliant notwithstanding, this is an unmissable super-bargain purchase, especially with its coupling.

This was the John Deathridge's first choice in the December 2012 Record Review on BBC Radio 3.

Rafael Kubelik, live 1977 – Orfeo (single CD)

Helen Donath (soprano); Brigitte Fassbaender (mezzo-soprano); Peter Schreier (tenor); John Shirley-Quirk (bass)

Chor und Symphonieorchester des Bayerischen Rundfunks

There are two potential caveats to get out of the way: first, you might, like me, not much like Peter Schreier's constricted tenor and you will have to accept the rather mushy, indistinct acoustic given to the choir, whose words and accents are indistinct. Nonetheless, I accept that Schreier sings most musically and sensitively and the soloists and orchestra are sufficiently forward to constitute no barrier to the listener's pleasure.

Kubelik conducts an interpretation of white-hot intensity, daring to stretch the tempi of the Kyrie almost to stasis and then going hell for leather in the Gloria. His dedication is never in doubt and he carries his performers with him. Especially impressive is the radiant, soaring, silvery soprano of the great Helen Donath who sings fit to rival Janowitz for Karajan. Matching her is Brigitte Fassbaender, whose very different, firm, stentorian tones underpin the soprano line. John Shirley-Quirk's plangent, experienced bass is also an asset in the ensembles. At times, I find Kubelik's treatment of the chorales a tad foursquare but this is mostly a very grand but unbuttoned account.

The limitations of boomy sonics notwithstanding, Orfeo have cleaned up their radio tapes very satisfactorily and there is no blare or distortion. This does not knock established classic versions off their perches but it joins them as a singularly stirring account, both thrilling and spiritual. I would value it highly for Donath's contribution alone, even if the other performers were not as impressive as they are.

Leonard Bernstein, live 1978 – DG (single CD)

Edda Moser (soprano); Hanna Schwarz (mezzo-soprano); René Kollo (tenor); Kurt Moll (bass)

Netherlands Broadcasting Foundation Chorus, Hilversum, Concertgebouworkest Amsterdam

The biggest and most welcome surprise here is the way that Bernstein takes a broad overview of the music and sits back, letting it speak eloquently without his imposing any self-regarding or self-aggrandising gestures. It is a broad, grand interpretation but never lacks excitement at key moments.

The orchestra is magnificent and the choir hardly less so, so it is the greater pity that there is a certain muddiness in the way they are recorded, whereas the soloists remain prominent in the sound picture. My reservations centre on their quality and homogeneity as a team; all are impassioned and committed but Edda Moser is decidedly shrill and edgy in the higher reaches of her voice, especially if you compare her with Gundula Janowitz for Karajan, Söderström for Klemperer or Margaret Price for Böhm, to name the chief competition. Similarly, Kollo is no Wunderlich, and can be rather whiney and bleaty as is his wont. Hanna Schwarz is unexceptionable and unexceptional in the alto part. The best voice in the quartet is the great Kurt Moll, then in his young prime, but the very distinctiveness of his sound - a rich, penetrating "buzz" if I can put it that way - makes him stand out in ensemble.

The violin solo in the Benedictus is exquisitely played by Herman Krebbers - but Michael Schwalbé for Karajan is equally rapt. This is a beautiful account which gives Bernstein the orchestra and choir he deserved and did not always get. The sound quality, apart from the slight fuzziness around the choir, is barely distinguishable from a studio recording yet it conveys the frisson of a live performance. Bernstein is in full control of a world class orchestra and a choir better drilled and disciplined than some of those he directed in the latter part of his career and here infuses this monumental work with both an autumnal glow and a yearning supplication worthy of Beethoven's most devotional work.

Sir Georg Solti, 1978 – Decca (2 CDs)

Lucia Popp (soprano); Yvonne Minton (mezzo-soprano); Mallory Walker (tenor); Gwynne Howell (bass)
Chicago Chorus and Symphony Orchestra

Solti's being burdened with an impossibly weedy tenor in an otherwise stellar line-up of soloists always struck me as one of those "What were they thinking?" moments. In addition, despite my habitually defending Solti from accusations that he was too rough and gung-ho, on this occasion I do think he misses some of the poise and serenity of the quiet moments here, even if of course he generates drama a-plenty. This was the recording whereby I came to know the work and even my first exposure had me shaking my head at the pallor of the tenor's contribution. Lucia Popp is sweet and steady, Yvonne Minton her usual, reliable self and Gwynne Howell suitably grave – although the part lies a tad high for him. Otherwise, this is a splendid account, whose worth is greatly enhanced by the attack and precision of the Chicago chorus and orchestra. Solti doesn't plumb the depths but the moments of serenity such as the Benedictus are reposeful enough and where Solti lets rip his bombast certainly provides sonic thrills.

John Eliot Gardiner, 1989 – Archiv (single CD)

Charlotte Margiono (soprano); Catherine Robbin (mezzo-soprano); William Kendall (tenor); Alastair Miles (bass)

The Monteverdi Choir; The English Baroque Soloists

A quick scan of the many reviews this disc has attracted reveals a clear split between those who worship at Gardiner's shrine and those like me who remain underwhelmed. If you like your Beethoven clean, clear, pacy and energised, this is for you, but a comparison with Klemperer, Karajan or Giulini soon reveals what is lacking. There is little of the sublime in Gardiner's humanistic approach, little of the spiritually elevated, no real vertical sense; everything is efficient and well-controlled. The choir of 35 is far too small to convey any sense of their offering up the supplicatory prayer of a suffering mass of humanity and the soloists, while perfectly accomplished, cannot begin to rival the splendour of those on the sets I cite above. To me, this is like a brisk run-through to ensure that everyone knows his part before the Maestro arrives to teach how to inject feeling into the text and notes. My response could well offend and outrage Gardiner's fans, but the point of reviewing is to try to draw on one's experience to tell it the way one hears it - and I know I shall not be returning to this cold, soulless account when I can hear Karajan's soaring Benedictus or Klemperer's monumental Kyrie. I need a *Missa solemnis* which helps me "touch the face of God", not learn the score.

Jeffrey Tate, 1989 – EMI (single CD)

Carol Vaness (soprano); Waltraud Meier (mezzo-soprano); Heinz Blochwitz (tenor); Hans Tschammer (bass)

Tallis Chamber Choir; English Chamber Orchestra

In such distinguished company as the best rival recordings provide, this might not be expected to compete. Certainly, the line-up is not as starry as some, although Carol Vaness and Waltraud Meier may be accounted major singers. There is nothing exceptional or exceptionable about it; timings are conventional, the sound is good and Vaness dominates the quartet of soloists, with her big, vibrant soprano, as I would have expected; her role here is similar to that of Margaret Price in Böhm's recording, in both timbre and that dominance. Tate's tempos all seem mostly right to me - although the fugues are a bit stolid and mechanical – and there is plenty of tension and momentum to balance the sustained passages of repose and contemplation. However, the choir sounds a little small for my taste, even though - being the Tallis - they are fleet, responsive and very homogeneous. Tenor Heinz Blochwitz is of the small, light variety where I prefer a meatier sound and I always find Meier's mezzo a bit grainy. I was unfamiliar with bass Hans Tschammer, whose singing is dependable if rather bland.

In the end, this is a good, recommendable version but lacks the last ounce of passion and personality to sway me from more gripping accounts.

James Levine, live 1991 – DG (2 CDs)

Cheryl Studer (soprano); Jessye Norman (mezzo-soprano); Placido Domingo (tenor); Kurt Moll (bass)
Leipziger Rundfunkchor, Schwedischer Rundfunkchor, Eric Erikson Kammerchor, Wiener Philharmoniker

Just as I enjoy large-scale, "operatic" accounts of the Verdi and Mozart *Requiems*, I am very happy with the breadth and amplitude of this live Salzburg performance - and a "performance" it is, rather than a devotional avowal. It could hardly be otherwise given the contribution of four of the greatest opera singers in the world, one being Cheryl Studer in purest voice before her decline - although nobody rivals Karajan's ethereal Gundula Janowitz in this work, good as Studer is. The other three singers were always models of consistency and when each of the four enters the listener undergoes that thrill of recognition that only a great voice elicits. Domingo in particular is in stellar form and I don't much mind that his vibrant tenor is not exactly a sound we associate with "vertical", spiritual works when he sings this well. Levine's tempi are decidedly deliberate and in in this regard he resembles Giulini, who perhaps achieves a more numinous quality in his three recordings but doesn't generate quite the same febrile splendour that, for example, we hear at the conclusion of the Gloria.

The choir is superb, too, and to cap it all this is the best digital sound I have heard from DG: sumptuous, beautifully balanced and spacious. I must also commend the contribution of the violin soloist in the Benedictus, Gerhart Hetzel, whose exquisite playing rivals that of Michel Schwalbé for Karajan. (His life was sadly cut short in a hiking accident the following year, whereas Schwalbé lived to reach 92, dying in 2012.)

Sir Georg Solti, 1994 - Decca (single CD)

Julia Varady (soprano); Iris Vermillion (mezzo-soprano); Vinson Cole (tenor); René Pape (bass)
Rundfunkchor Berlin; Berliner Philharmoniker

This, the second of Solti's recordings enjoys lovely digital sound but is oddly low-key and polite, especially given that this is the firebrand Solti at the helm. The solo voices, apart from Varady's shimmering soprano, are not especially distinguished, nor do they blend well – perhaps because of Varady's quick vibrato compared with Vermillion's slower pulse and because Vinson Cole's tenor is rather plaintive and lacking in heft – the second time Solti has failed in this department. Pape has Gwynne Howell's problem that the bass line lies high – it is really more for a bass-baritone. A good choir and of course a superb orchestra are bonuses, of course, but the whole enterprise lacks spark and conviction to my ears, compared with really energised accounts.

Philippe Herreweghe, live 1995 – harmonia mundi (single CD)

Rosa Mannion (soprano); Birgit Remmert (mezzo-soprano); James Taylor (tenor); Cornelius Hauptmann (bass)

La Chapelle Royale, Collegium Vocale; Orchestre des Champs Élysées

This, the earlier of Herreweghe's recordings, seems to me to be by far the more successful, with generally bigger, weightier solo voices - although the tenor is too sweet and effeminate in that he is almost indistinguishable in timbre from the mezzo – and a stately, grand manner, exhibiting no lack of heft in the period band despite transparent textures. Herreweghe's tempo for the opening Kyrie sets out his stall; Klemperer would not complain. I particularly like Rosa Mannion's rounded tone and amplitude, Birgit Remmert has a full, dark mezzo of the old school and Hauptmann, while not possessing the juiciest of basses, is smooth and musical, more at ease with the tessitura than some.

Obviously, the choir is correspondingly smaller in number and the performance remains small-scale in comparison with than the big, Romantic versions reviewed above but everyone makes quite a row when required, singing and playing *con gusto*, and the listener is rarely conscious of any deficit. The climax of the Gloria is thrilling. The opening of the Credo is a bit speedy and perky for my taste but its propulsion carries its own conviction and the ensuing Incarnatus is rapt – as is the Benedictus, of central importance in any recording of this work.

The sound is excellent; there is no audience noise except for applause at the end. Some HIP recordings are manifestly only for the fastidious; not this one.

Philippe Herreweghe, live, 2011 – harmonia mundi (single CD)

Marlis Peterson (soprano); Gerhild Romberger (mezzo-soprano); Benjamin Hulett (tenor); David Wilson-Johnson (bass)

Collegium Vocale Ghent; Orchestre des Champs Élysées

This is less satisfying than Herreweghe's 1996 account: the solo voices are decidedly not as good and slowness of opening is excessive, such that it drags – in fact, the whole performance is too staid, which is not usually a complaint regarding period performances like Gardiner's – perhaps Herreweghe is over-compensating for that possibility. The soprano is thin-toned, hooty and unsteady – sometimes really poor and a comparison with a predecessor like Margaret Price is frankly embarrassing - the tenor is small-voiced and strained, Wilson-Johnson lacks bass resonance. A lot of the time their intonation, especially in ensemble, is suspect, too. A peculiarity: the choir has been coached to attack the fricative "K" of "Kyrie with a kind of aspirated, glottal sound; it simply sounds weird and reminds me of how the chorus in Solti's *Tristan und Isolde* sing "Deil" for "Heil"!

The acoustic is too resonant and hollow. Ultimately, this is a rather dull, inert account; drama and anguish are under-played and domesticated. I wonder why Herreweghe so radically ratcheted down the tension fifteen years after such a successful approach in 1996.

Recommendations

At least one of Toscanini's four recordings above must be heard, if only as a supplement. Although the 1939 recording might be the best artistically, the sound will never be a treat and it is available only as part of a double CD BBC Legends set, whereas the 1940 broadcast may be found on many labels cheaply and has better soloists than in 1953. On the other hand, Pristine have seriously cleaned up both the live and studio recordings from 1953 and that 1940 broadcast, so one of those is also very desirable.

Otherwise, a recording in modern sound is obviously preferable: for the period performances I have heard, the earlier Herreweghe is way out in front and for a "traditional" account I recommend the tried and tested routes of Karajan, Klemperer and Giulini, with a sidelong glance at the inconsistent but intermittently wonderful Böhm recording. Please note that most recordings are on a single CD, two (Karajan and Giulini) are in a double set because they have couplings, and the first Solti and the Levine are both on two CDs with no couplings because their length is just over the standard 80-minute CD limit.

Toscanini: 1953 studio on Pristine

Period: Herreweghe 1996

Traditional: Karajan 1966

Ralph Moore