

Strauss's *Arabella* - A survey of the major recordings

by Ralph Moore

Arabella has received relatively few recordings compared with Strauss' most popular operas: about thirty in the catalogue of which only two were made in the studio, which is really surprising, as it contains some of Strauss' most sublime music. However, it also has its longueurs and less-inspired stretches, and an absurd interlude in the form of a yodelling song for Die Fiakermilli, "the cabmen's mascot", which seems to be Strauss' only partially successful homage to his namesake predecessor Johann and was really a remnant of the original intent to put the Fiakerball (Coachmen's Ball) centre-stage, an idea which was largely discarded as Straus and Hofmannsthal worked out the plot. It thus lends itself to excerpts; there are recordings of selections from the opera made by Elisabeth Schwarzkopf and Renée Fleming as part of her "Strauss Heroines" album with Susan Graham and Barbara Bonney, which remains one of my favourite recitals. However, Fleming has made a film but not a studio version, and I am considering only complete recordings in German. The queen of recorded Arabellas remains Lisa Della Casa, who made one of the two studio versions and may otherwise be heard in half a dozen live performances, some of which I review below. I quote from her obituary in Opera News, 2012: "Della Casa received an enormous professional boost in 1946, when she was cast as Zdenka to the *Arabella* of Romanian soprano Maria Cebotari, an important star in postwar Europe who had been hired as a guest in Zurich. Della Casa sang so well that the composer himself, who was present at the Zurich *Arabella* rehearsals, predicted, 'One day [she] will be the *Arabella*.'"

Schwarzkopf was her only contemporary rival in the role; Gundula Janowitz should have been but she did not make a commercial recording except for the film-track for the 1977 video conducted by Solti ([review](#)) which, as far as I know, has not been issued on CD. I hardly need therefore to issue a spoiler alert if I say that she must feature among the recommended recordings; the question is, which one? In latter years, the pre-eminent *Arabella* was undoubtedly Kiri Te Kanawa, who thankfully made a studio recording while still in her prime.

This was to be Strauss' and von Hofmannsthal's final collaboration; Strauss even suggested to "his Da Ponte" friend, "You can even make me a second *Rosenkavalier* if you don't have anything better in mind". However – and here I quote again, from Hugo Shirley writing in *Gramophone*: "the librettist died tragically in 1929 having finalised the text of the first act only. Hofmannsthal never saw Strauss's enthusiastic telegram thanking him for that revised text: he died of a massive stroke as he readied himself to go to the funeral of his son, who had committed suicide. Strauss went on to set the rest of the libretto as it stood." As a result, the final two acts are less skilfully written and devices which worked in *Der Rosenkavalier*, such as the cross-dressing and love-at-first-sight, seem less ironic, plausible and amusing. Although the waltzes, the introduction to Act 3 and theme of love blossoming and winning through are all features reminiscent of *Der Rosenkavalier*, there is a desperation and decadence inherent in Franz-Josef's Vienna which is absent from the Marschallin's milieu, a century before. In the end, we have an uneasy mix of "Rosenkavalier-lite", complete with a ball-scene, pink champagne and farcical confusion, with the more recognisable Strauss idiom. Nonetheless, this time – perhaps rather surprisingly - the boorish man from the sticks gets the girl, there are some deeply moving and beautiful passages - especially the Act 1 duet between the two sisters and *Arabella*'s solo, "Aber der Richtige" - and the rapprochement between *Arabella* and Mandryka resolving their misunderstanding in a sentimental conclusion, all of which make this an opera which can still succeed in the theatre or on recording.

I compare eight recordings below, including the two studio versions – somewhat fewer than usual, as *Arabella* is comparatively neglected. A live recording of the opera's premiere at the Met in 1955 has a promising cast – Eleanor Steber, Hilde Güden, George London, Roberta Peters et al – but is unfortunately both in vile sound and in English. There is another, recent recording: a live performance from the Dutch National Opera conducted by Marc Albrecht which has its minor merits, but it is not as well sung as its predecessors and I cannot countenance a Mandryka with a dreadful wobble, so I have

accordingly dismissed it. Most recordings since the last studio recording in 1986 have been video productions rather than CD releases and very few promise much.

The Recordings

Karl Böhm – 1947 (live; mono) Melodram; DG

Orchestra - Wiener Philharmoniker; Chorus - Wiener Staatsoper

Arabella - Maria Reining

Zdenka - Lisa Della Casa

Mandryka - Hans Hotter

Waldner - Georg Hann

Adelaide - Rosette Anday

Fiakermilli - Herma Handl

Matteo - Horst Taubmann

Elemer - Julius Patzak

Dominik - Josef Witt

Lamoral - Alfred Poell

Eine Kartenaufschlägerin - Ruth Michaelis

Welko - Franz Szkokan

The sound in this “Festspiele Dokumente” issue is surprisingly and indeed extraordinarily good for its age, clear, undistorted and presumably recorded on high-quality tape (with some faint pre-and post-echo for those listening on headphones), such that one soon forgets any slight sonic limitations. Furthermore, there are a lot of famous names in the cast: Della Casa, in her late twenties, is light, vibrant and girlish and Patzak’s dry, grainy tenor is both ardent and elegant as Elemer but he hardly convinces as one of Arabella’s three young suitors – indeed, he was nearly fifty here, and sounds it. Maria Reining is in fresher voice here than for her famous studio recording of *Der Rosenkavalier* under Erich Kleiber seven years later. She soars aloft, is firm of line and handles the text very expressively but hasn’t quite the warmth of the tone of the finest Arabellas. It’s a pity, too, after sustaining the arcing phrase ending her solo “Aber der Richtige”, she completely falls off the concluding phrase “wie ein Kind”, losing breath and support; such are the vagaries of live performance. Nonetheless, much of her magic as a singer and performer comes through very strongly; she is very touching and Della Casa’s silvery sound blends beautifully with hers.

George Hann isn’t always very steady but throws himself into characterising vividly the spendthrift gambling addict with a broad Viennese accent. I am not sure that Hotter’s rounded, noble timbre, so apt for the Dutchman and Wotan, is right for portraying the awkward Mandryka but he sings attractively, even if the part often clearly lies high for him. He sings particularly smoothly and passionately in passages such as in Act 2 when he recounts the story of his short-lived previous marriage then woos Arabella and I prefer him to more celebrated exponents of the role such as Fischer-Dieskau. (His squeaky boots, as he moves across the stage, are distracting!) Herma Handl as Fiakermilli delivers the usual gruesome Schreifest but does her best – moving on...

Böhm was invariably a superlative Strauss conductor, closely associated with the composer and having a natural affinity for his friend’s music. He knows how to indulge its long lines without letting proceedings drag and the VPO are quite at home with all those lilting waltzes. How beautifully he shapes the long orchestral prelude to the final aria and duet, “Das war sehr gut, Mandryka”. There are a few cuts, as per the start of Act 2 – nothing major.

Apart from Della Casa, none of the principal singers here is necessarily the best in his or her role, yet I find myself enjoying this performance increasingly as it unfolds. All the singers are very good and make such a pleasing ensemble; this recording certainly does honour to the work and a full libretto with an

English translation is provided. However, Della Casa was soon to progress on to singing the eponymous heroine of the opera...and it is perhaps to those performances we should turn...

Rudolf Kempe – 1953 (live; mono) Testament
Orchestra & Chorus - Bayerische Staatsoper

Arabella - Lisa Della Casa
Zdenka - Elfride Trötschel
Mandryka - Hermann Uhde
Waldner - Max Proebstl
Adelaide - Ira Malaniuk
Fiakermilli - Käthe Nentwig
Matteo - Lorenz Fehenberger
Elemer - Franz Klarwein
Dominik - Carl Hoppe
Lamoral - Albrecht Peter
Kartenaufschlägerin - Ruth Michaelis
Welko - Walther Matthes

Kempe was a great Straussian and here directs an all-German-speaking cast with the Bavarian Radio Orchestra who were imported to Covent Garden for a performance which was also broadcast on the "BBC Third Programme" (now Radio 3). The sound is tolerable for a mono radio transmission of that era, but still hissy and distant and in no wise comparable with the studio recording reviewed next, especially as the voices often sound very detached. Given that we have no fewer than four options to hear Della Casa in her most celebrated role and two of those are in stereo sound, I was a little surprised that the Testament label though this worth issuing – but then noticed that on the reverse cover the inducement: "2 CDs for the price of 1". The cast is without weaknesses – even die Fiakermilli is impressive - once again Della Casa sings divinely and fans of the sadly short-lived bass-baritone Hermann Uhde – another of those singers who expired from a heart attack on stage, aged only 51 – may hear him in an unusual role, as he was most renowned for his Wagner singing. Like George London, his dark timbre and cutting edge makes him a rather menacing Mandryka, but that certainly sets him apart from the Viennese sophisticates.

I admit to being disappointed by the weak sound quality which disqualifies this from being a prime recommendation, but there are still some lovely singing and conducting to be (rather dimly) heard here. The libretto is available in pdf form from the Testament website.

Georg Solti – 1957 (studio; stereo) Decca
Orchestra - Wiener Philharmoniker; Chorus - Wiener Staatsoper

Arabella - Lisa Della Casa
Zdenka - Hilde Güden
Mandryka - George London
Waldner - Otto Edelmann
Adelaide - Ira Malaniuk
Fiakermilli - Mimi Coertse
Matteo - Anton Dermota
Elemer - Waldemar Kmentt
Dominik - Eberhard Wächter
Lamoral - Harald Pröglhoff
Kartenaufschlägerin - Judith Hellwig
Welko - Wilhelm Lenninger

Lisa Della Casa is here 38 years old and in her prime, her silvery, fluid voice soaring over the orchestra and only rarely compromised by a certain lack of body in her middle voice or lower register. She is partnered by a cast close to ideal, featuring stalwarts on the Viennese scene in the 50's; I could not have imagined being able to assemble such an array of "house" talent today yet, to be fair, the later Decca recording with Kiri Te Kanawa offers almost as fine an ensemble. Hilde Gueden always excelled in Strauss (c.f. her live Salzburg Festival *Daphne* under Böhm): impetuous, impassioned and secure of intonation even in the high reaches of the travestito role of Zdenka. South African Grande Dame Mimi Coertse has fun and copes admirably with the absurd yodelling coloratura of Die Fiakermilli. Ira Malaniuk is expressive and rich-voiced as the harassed mother and Otto Edelmann equally characterful and firm of voice as the impecunious father desperate to marry off the beautiful Arabella into money. An array of tenors and baritones who were stars in their own right are her suitors; the sticking point for some comes with George London's big Croatian bear of a bass-baritone. I think it works; the voice itself is beautiful and he is still capable of softening it, as in "Das ist ein Fall von anderer Art". His being somewhat coarse, clumsy and unrefined works in contrast to the band of effete poseurs who court Arabella and whom she rejects; Mandryka's unadorned passion speaks in his favour as "der Richtige" - as does his being exotically rich, too, of course....

Solti's conducting is invariably characterised as rushed and bombastic, yet I keep coming across recordings which are anything but - and this is another; he caresses the music, applies plenty of Viennese rubato, lets the VPO strings sing and seems to me to maintain the balance between tension and lyricism perfectly. There are quite a lot of conversational passages in this opera and he never lets them drag.

Remastering can only improve what was already a superbly engineered recording in the grateful ambience of the Sofiensaal by John Culshaw, although some issues do not include a libretto - so watch out for that, as having the words of Hofmannsthal's subtle, clever text in the first act and even the less skilful prosody of the second two, is crucial to appreciation of this lovely opera.

Joseph Keilberth – 1958 (live; mono) Orfeo

Orchestra - Wiener Philharmoniker; Chorus - Wiener Staatsoper

Arabella - Lisa Della Casa

Zdenka - Anneliese Rothenberger

Mandryka - Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau

Waldner - Otto Edelmann

Adelaide - Ira Malaniuk

Fiakermilli - Eta Köhre

Matteo - Kurt Ruesche

Elemer - Helmut Melchert

Dominik - Georg Stern

Lamoral - Karl Weber

Kartenaufschlägerin - Kersten Meyer

Welko - Wilhelm Lenninger

This is a live alternative to the Decca studio recording made under Solti the year before, in that it fields three of the three same leads in Lisa Della Casa and Arabella's parents. All are excellent but it has to be said that the advantage remains very much with the Decca set because it is in stereo and obviously devoid of audience noise with much better balance and all three of Arabella's suitors are sung by artists superior to those here at the Festspielhaus in July 1958; for example, Elemer, the role sung by Dermota for Solti is here taken by a terrible bleater and Mimi Coertse for Solti far exceeds one Eta Köhrer for Keilberth here. Then the other big issue is which singer you prefer as Mandryka, the honest country pretender to Arabella's hand. Personally, I much prefer him to have a more virile, even slightly boorish voice of the London or Grundheber type, whereas Fiacher-Dieskau always sounds too refined. For my

taste, Keilberth conducts in rather too leisurely a fashion compared with Solti but that gives us time to savour Della Casa's legato in the dreamier passages and Fischer-Dieskau has no trouble with the slower beat, even if he still doesn't sound urgent enough compared with the rougher, more passionate London and Grundheber.

Having said that, you still hear a superb partnership between Della Casa and the lovely Anneliese Rothenberger who is the equal of Hilde Gueden for Solti. The main disadvantage is the sound, inferior to both Solti's studio recording and Keilberth's live, Bavarian performance five years later.

Joseph Keilberth – 1963 (live composite; stereo) DG
Orchestra & Chorus - Bayerische Staatsoper

Arabella - Lisa Della Casa
Zdenka - Anneliese Rothenberger
Mandryka - Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau
Waldner - Karl Christian Kohn
Adelaide - Ira Malaniuk
Fiakermilli - Eva Maria Rogner
Matteo - Georg Paskuda
Elemer - Fritz Uhl
Dominik - Carl Hoppe
Lamoral - Horst Günter
Kartenaufschlägerin - Caecile Reich
Welko - Walther Matthes

In Della Casa's fourth outing here as *Arabella*, we have the same singers as her sister, mother and lover, and all are once again very fine, but this time Karl Christian Kohn, dark and incisive of voice, characterises the scheming Count Waldner very effectively. If, as some have claimed, Della Casa is marginally less fresh than in her three previous recordings, I cannot myself hear it; she still commands the role with all the shimmering beauty of voice she always brought to it. Her Zdenka – a role generally blessed by fine exponents – matches her; Anneliese Rothenberger is as delightful as ever and her duetting with Della Casa is goosebump stuff. Their first, famous duet attracts polite applause; I think I'd be standing on my seat. As before, Fischer-Dieskau comes across as too smooth and refined for the simple, somewhat uncouth Mandryka; the coarser London and even the noble, patrician Hotter are more credible. His neat, tenorish baritone, precious r-rolling and clipped, over-emphatic diction is surely not apt for depicting a wrestler of bears. Polish-born Georg Paskuda has a typically Germanic, throttled sound, considerably less attractive than predecessors like Dermota. Fritz Uhl is a bumptious, fuller-voiced Elemer. The ungrateful role of Die Fiakermilli might not permit the singer to aspire to the coloratura sublimity of Lucia di Lammermoor but Eva Maria Rogner still makes a hash of it – worse than Eta Köhre for Keilberth five years earlier and much inferior to Mimi Coertse in Solti's studio recording.

Keilberth was always reliable and sometimes inspired; with him, the listener tends to be listening to the music rather than the interpretation, which is surely a good indication. The orchestra is superb, producing a warm, golden, burnished sound.

So this recording is a case of swings and roundabouts compared with others. Its advantage over Keilberth's live recording five years earlier is, above all, the stereo sound, even if overall I think the cast of Solti's stereo, studio version is more consistent and preferable.

Some earlier issues have a full libretto, whereas the later ones do not. You need one.

Wolfgang Rennert – 1973 (live radio broadcast; mono) Opera d'Oro; Bella Voce
Orchestra & Chorus - RAI Roma

Arabella - Montserrat Caballé
Zdenka - Olivera Miljakovic
Mandryka - Siegmund Nimsgern
Waldner - Kurt Moll
Adelaide - Oralia Domínguez
Fiakermilli - Jeanette Scovotti
Matteo - René Kollo
Elemer - Carlo Gaifa
Dominik - Renato Borgato
Lamoral - Leonardo Monreale
Kartenaufschlägerin - Licia Falcone
Welko - Osvaldo Alemanno

It is sometimes forgotten that Caballé spent an earlier, formative part of her career in Switzerland and Germany, singing roles such as Salome in German, and thus in general had a good grounding in singing in German and Strauss in particular, eventually singing the Marschallin and *Arabella*, as per here. As ever, she sounds rather mature, grand and knowing for the ingenue *Arabella* but much of her singing is lovely. The pearly roulades and spun soft notes are as beguiling as ever.

Apart from her, there are plenty of big names in the cast, including the great Oralia Domínguez as her mother, Kurt Moll in sonorous voice as the spendthrift Count complete with a strong Viennese accent, René Kollo as an unusually powerful, large-voiced, if effortful, Matteo and distinguished German baritone Siegmund Nimsgern as Mandryka, sounding forceful and singing as well as I have ever heard him do, but the break and bleat which tended to disfigure his voice creeps in as the opera unfolds and he becomes more emotionally demonstrative. He is a fine vocal actor and the top of his voice rings free; nonetheless, his nasal timbre is not as virile and compelling as some baritones in that role. American soprano Jeanette Scovotti is one of the best Fiakermillis, despatching her pyrotechnics with consummate ease and warm tone, despite the stratospheric tessitura. Carlo Gaifa is an impassioned Elemer, although his German could be better. Least satisfactory is Olivera Miljakovic, who is rather ordinary as Zdenka, a bit pinched and unsteady of tone and without the shimmering ease in the high-lying passages of her music; the climax to their first duet is particularly disappointing and conductor Rennert could give their music more affectionate treatment there – otherwise, he is a first-rate Straussian. The duet between *Arabella* and Mandryka opening Act 2, “Und du wirst mein Gebieter sein” is simply superb, featuring not only sublime singing but excellent orchestral playing and conducting – I shall keep this on my shelves just for that.

Unfortunately, the sound here is only clean, tolerable mono; I don't know why, when as late as 1973 one might have hoped for stereo and there is a bit of papery, background interference. This was performed in front of a live audience which is mostly quiet, one prominent lady cougher notwithstanding (she persists throughout).

Despite its incidental beauties, this is not a front-runner unless you especially want to hear Caballé singing gloriously in a role unusual for her but you will find much to enjoy here.

Wolfgang Sawallisch – 1981 (live; stereo) Orfeo
Orchestra & Chorus - Bayerisches Staatsoper

Arabella - Julia Varady
Zdenka - Helen Donath
Mandryka - Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau

Waldner - Walter Berry
Adelaide - Helga Schmidt
Fiakermilli - Elfriede Höbarth
Matteo - Adolf Dallapozza
Elemer - Hermann Winkler
Dominik - Klaus-Jürgen Küper
Lamoral - Hermann Becht
Kartenaufschlägerin - Doris Soffel
Welko - Arno Lemberg

I am pretty clear in my mind regarding what I do and don't like about this recording and I offer my opinion as purely what it is - opinion - without prejudice.

I am clear that Sawallisch is an excellent Strauss conductor, as he has amply demonstrated in both studio and live recordings. He understands the ebb and flow of Strauss's idiom and has at his command a first-rate band in the Bavarian Radio Orchestra. The sound on this set is lovely, as one would expect from Wolfgang Gülich. The two soprano leads are exquisite, Varady's flickering gold both contrasting with and complementing Helen Donath's silvery sheen. Neither for me eclipses their equivalents in Solti's earlier recording but they work magic in their duet and soar above an orchestra almost chamber-sized by Strauss's standards. The superfluous Fiakermilli is amazingly adept within the constraints of that ridiculous role.

About the male cast-members I am far less enthusiastic. Walter Berry and Fischer-Dieskau were almost contemporaries but neither sounds in freshest voice for singers only in their fifties. D-F-D was of course the Marmite (Vegemite) of singers and I cannot budge from my entrenched position of disliking his baritone, finding it windy, unlovely, with a weak top and little true pharyngeal resonance; I would sooner hear George London's bigger, boomier, clumsier sound any day as the bearish Mandryka. Fischer-Dieskau sounds to me precious, laboured and under-powered. The Elemer is throaty and Dallapozza has an unpleasant gulping/bleating habit when he attacks notes.

Yet the sisters are simply dreamy and Sawallisch a master of Straussian mood, so you might well overlook any flaws to buy this somewhat over-looked recording.

Jeffrey Tate – 1986 (studio; digital) Decca
Orchestra & Chorus - Covent Garden

Arabella - Kiri Te Kanawa
Zdenka - Gabriele Fontana
Mandryka - Franz Grundheber
Waldner - Ernst Gutstein
Adelaide - Helga Dernesch
Fiakermilli - Gwendolyn Bradley
Matteo - Peter Seiffert
Elemer - Alexandru Ionita
Dominik - Gilles Cachemaille
Lamoral - Kurt Rydl
Kartenaufschlägerin - Reinhild Runkel
Welko – Hof Rätzel

Beautiful Decca digital sound, recorded in the grateful acoustic of the Walthamstow Assembly Hall, is an immediate advantage here; then we hear two first-rate mezzo-sopranos in the persons of Reinhild Runkel and Helga Dernesch, both rich and ample of tone. Similarly big-voiced – especially for a Zdenka who, if anything, is often lyric-coloratura heading towards soubrette – is Gabriele Fontana. There is

also, unfortunately something of a pulse and a certain impurity in her vocal production which work against her portrayal of a sweet, vulnerable girl but she is by no means unpleasing – she just cannot soar as ethereally as Günden, Rothenberger or Donath. The object of her affections is Matteo, here sung by the neat-voiced Peter Seiffert, whose tenor is characterised by an agreeably fast vibrato and an incisive timbre. Alexandru Ionita makes an excellent, virile Elemer and Viennese stalwart Kurt Rydl completes a fine trio of lovers aspiring to Arabella's hand. Ernst Gutstein is a vivid, warm-voiced Count Waldner. A predominately German-speaking cast helps the enliven what is quite a "talky" opera. Franz Grundheber makes a very appropriate Mandryka, as there is a rough edge to his dark baritone; his portrayal comes somewhere in between that of the over-refined Fischer-Dieskau and the bearish George London and, despite the occasional unsteadiness, as such I find it close to ideal. This is a performance to match his superb Barak for Sinopoli in *Die Frau ohne Schatten*. To cap a fine cast, American soprano Gwendolyn Bradley makes a fine fist of the dreaded Fiakermilli.

However, the focal point of this recording is of course the lovely Kiri Te Kanawa singing the music of a favourite composer in one of the roles which best suited her and added to the lustre of her fame. Not only does she sing divinely but her delivery of the text is sharp and precise, showing that she is not just "all about voice". Creamy-voiced, yet with that hint of cool poise Arabella must have as she manages her entourage of suitors, Te Kanawa rivals Della Casa for mastery; her final, through-composed aria before the last duet with Mandryka is supremely vocalised. This is a classic performance.

Jeffrey Tate was, I think, often under-rated as a conductor. His beat is often leisurely to the point of indulgence à la Bernstein but he had a peaches-and-cream-voiced soprano to accommodate and we operaphiles will not complain – besides, he can also be spritely when it is required, such as in the thrilling orchestral prelude to Act 3. The Covent Garden forces are irreproachable.

This is nicely set out with one act per disc and the earlier issue provided a full libretto; with the later one you must go online, which I find useless but is all one can expect now.

Recommendations:

None of the above recordings is bad; most are excellent and I enjoy them all. There is no mono, studio version, but of the live performances, for stereo sound either Keilberth or Sawallisch will do, with reservations, and there is not much to separate the four, live, mono recordings, but the best mono sound is found in the performance conducted by Rennert – although the earliest recording here under Böhm is also very enjoyable and for me just edges Rennert out.

I am torn between the two studio, stereo versions insofar as both offer the pre-eminent Arabella of its era supported by an excellent cast of co-singers. Either will surely satisfy and, in the end, you must choose according to your preferences. Grundheber is the most credible Mandryka but Günden is a Zdenka superior to Fontana; there's little in it. Both enjoy very good sound.

Live mono: Karl Böhm – 1947

Live stereo: Joseph Keilberth – 1963

Studio stereo: Jeffrey Tate – 1986*; Georg Solti – 1957

*First choice

Ralph Moore