

Verdi's *Macbeth* - A Survey of the Major Recordings

by Ralph Moore

Although *Macbeth* was still a product of his *anni di galera*, Verdi was able to expend more time, care and effort over it than he had had for his previous operas, working closely with Piave, his first librettist, then the poet Maffei to ensure that the spirit and even precisely some of the language (translated into Italian, obviously) of his beloved Shakespeare infused the work, and giving his singers close instructions regarding how he wanted it performed. As such, it was a watershed opera, representing a great leap forward in both his music and dramaturgy. He had the further advantage of a star baritone playing the lead role; Felice Varesi enjoyed the greatest success of his career at its premiere in 1847. As a result, despite some stylistic infelicities and a certain incongruity between the earlier, rum-ti-tum style of its original form and the sophistication of the later additions, *Macbeth*, having largely dropped out of sight until it was revived post WW2, is now deservedly popular and frequently staged. It is today almost invariably heard in the revision which Verdi made for Paris in 1864. One live performance and one studio recording below present the 1847 original; the latter is included here merely for its comedy value. There is also a recording of a live performance given at the Valle d'Itria Festival, Martina Franca in 1997 which I have not heard but by all accounts is not as well sung as the 1978 live recording on Opera Rara.

Verdi's revisions for Paris included new and re-written arias for Macbeth and his Lady and a new duet replacing Macbeth's cabaletta "Vada in fiamma" after he faints following the succession of visions granted him in the witches' cavern, a chorus to begin Act 4, a new finale whereby a fugue describes the final battle, after which Macbeth flees when he learns that "Macduff was from his mother's womb/Untimely ripp'd" and dies offstage, and a concluding "Vittoria!" chorus. With the possible exception of the Act 3 ballet invariably imposed upon composers by the Paris Opéra and that rather weak, conventional final chorus, the additions are almost invariably improvements, especially Lady Macbeth's Act 2 aria "La luce langue", but some performances, like Abbado's, also like to restore the excellent final aria for Macbeth, "Mal per me che m'affidai", which Verdi dropped in the revision. To be fair, the only reason that Verdi first gave the mortally wounded Macbeth a death aria was because that was how the play was performed on the London stage at the time; only later did he discover that the final speech was a spurious concession to 19C actors who wanted to milk their death scene, so he cut it when he discovered it was not part of Shakespeare's intent.

I personally have a great affection for *Macbeth*, as it contains some of the best of Verdi, especially the great sleep-walking scene, even if some of the earlier music, such as that in the witches' scenes, can be a bit banal and hokey. Beyond one big aria each, there isn't much for the bass and tenor to do, so the opera stands or falls by the contributions of the baritone and soprano/mezzo-soprano. Many have opined that the opera should more properly be entitled *Lady Macbeth*, as in its necessarily simplified form for the opera, she clearly emerges as the dominant decision-maker and indeed the main character with the best music. Despite the substantial nature of the role of Macbeth himself, he is essentially shown to be a weak man manipulated by strong women, personified in his wife and the witches.

There have been only nine studio recordings and apart from the last disastrous effort, the last one was made for a film as long ago as 1986. Additionally, I consider seven live performances, making sixteen in total. As usual, I have confined my survey to CD versions in Italian, excluding any in English or German. The failure to leave for posterity a studio recording of Gobbi's Macbeth and Callas' Lady, a role to which her gifts were ideally suited, was one of opera's great missed opportunities; we have a decent live recording of him but it is missing the final aria, and of Callas there is just the one live recording in poor sound - but at least there is also a magnificent recital of her singing the major arias, conducted by Rescigno. However, almost as compelling was Leyla Gencer and I urge hearing one of her performances, albeit that they are recorded in indifferent sound.

Victor de Sabata – 1952 (live; mono) EMI; Membran; Myto; GOP; Warner
Orchestra & Chorus - Teatro alla Scala
Macbeth - Enzo Mascherini
Lady Macbeth - Maria Callas
Banco - Italo Tajo
Macduff - Gino Penno
Malcolm - Luciano della Pergola
Dama - Angela Vercelli
Medico - Dario Caselli
Domestico - Attilio Barbese
Sicaro - Mario Tommasini

While I treasure the aforementioned arias Callas recorded with Rescigno as part of a studio recital relatively late in her career but while she was still in excellent voice, this dreadful live recording is all we are ever going to get in the way of her complete performance, so we must make the best of it.

I say "dreadful" referring only to its technical quality. Thin, papery, distorted sound complete with pre- and post-echo which obtrudes throughout takes non-audiophile grit to surmount but artistically it is top-class. I think more highly than some commentators of Callas' co-singers, beginning with Mascherini's sturdy baritone, through Tajo's magnificent, dark bass, to Gino Penno's virile, stentorian, heroic tenor, but it is she who dominates proceedings. Her portrayal is the quintessential "she-devil" Verdi wanted and proceeds from an ideal match between the demands of the role and her own temperament. At first, she sounds almost disarmingly youthful but she is in confident voice and takes the stage by storm as a devil incarnate. Verdi would have been delighted by her, and despite some admirable accounts since, no-one except perhaps Leyla Gencer has approached her mastery.

The score is in safe hands with de Sabata, of course, and his pacing and control are exemplary, complete with daringly Italianate use of rubato.

Most punters will want a sensible modern recording in good sound, but for hardy souls resistant to audio onslaught and addicted to Callas' special dramatic gifts, this lousy recording is mandatory. The remastered issue by Warner for the "Maria Callas – Live" box set, also available separately, brought some noticeable improvements over the original EMI set: there is less pre-echo and distortion, and fewer drop-outs, but it is still distant and depressing from a sonic point of view.

Erich Leinsdorf – 1959 (studio; stereo) RCA
Orchestra & Chorus - Metropolitan Opera
Macbeth - Leonard Warren
Lady Macbeth - Leonie Rysanek
Banco - Jerome Hines
Macduff - Carlo Bergonzi
Malcolm - William Olvis
Dama - Carlotta Ordassy
Medico - Gerhard Pechner

This was the first studio recording of an opera which has not been that much recorded since. If you don't mind some rather disconcerting early stereo placements of voices (which, for example sometimes start left then swoop in to the right) and a bit of peaking at loud points, this remains highly recommendable, especially given the strength of the casting. Warren was becoming somewhat throatier as his voice aged but he is still highly dramatic and committed and his top notes are thrilling. As the Lady, Rysanek of course replaced Callas at the Met in 1959 who withdrew after her spat with Rudolf Bing. Rysanek enjoyed a triumph and fully justifies her selection for this recording. I still think that nobody voices this role like Callas but Gencer, Sass, Verrett and here Rysanek at least approach

her for excitement. Her big voice manages to sound both beautiful and evil. She makes heavy weather of the coloratura, occasionally "moons" and swoops in that typical Rysanek fashion and some top notes are tremulous to the point of being out of control - but that only adds to the edge-of-seat sense of tension. Add to those two principals the great Jerome Hines as Banquo and a vibrant young Bergonzi delivering Macduff with real panache and you have a very satisfying ensemble.

Leinsdorf is typically taut, tense and propulsive but that works in this very condensed opera. The witches are great cacklers and the whole is suffused with the kind of energy you expect only from a live performance.

Later studio recordings are "safer" stereo choices by a small margin but despite its less than opulent sound this in some ways remains more thrilling.

Vittorio Gui – 1960 (live; mono) GOP; Living Stage
Orchestra & Chorus - Teatro Massimo di Palermo
Macbeth - Giuseppe Taddei
Lady Macbeth - Leyla Gencer
Banco - Ferruccio Mazzoli
Macduff - Mirto Picchi
Malcolm - Franco Ricciardi
Dama - Stefania Malagù
Medico - Guido Malfatti
Domestico - Leonardo Ciriminna
Sicario - Ugo Miraglia

First a caveat: the sound here could be considered to be between poor and execrable, depending on your tolerance. Furthermore, this is a hard recording to find these days; I got mine via OperaLovers in Quebec but it re-appears in various guises from time to time, mainly because, despite that indifferent sound quality, the performance is stupendous. Gencer is a marvel of both nuance and excitement and displays incredible agility and power; hers wasn't so much a large, as an incisive, voice and she also colours it so variedly. The break in her registers serves to enhance a certain hysterical intensity in her portrayal of the Lady.

Taddei presents Macbeth as a real human being, full of fear and weakness and very much dominated by his demonic wife. He uses word-painting in a manner which rivals his great Italian contemporary, Tito Gobbi.

Gui's direction is masterly of pace and the supporting cast is excellent. Stereo/studio sound it ain't, but the intensity of this performance is such that you soon forget the sonic limitations. I swear, too, that occasionally you can hear what sounds like a dog barking in the background - but that's probably motor noise and at least that shows that the 1960 tape machine picked up some good background detail! Don't buy this if you require studio sound but if you want to hear a supreme - and neglected - dramatic soprano at her best in a great blood and fire performance of one of Verdi's most thrilling and approachable operas, go for Gencer in this live recording.

Francesco Molinari-Pradelli – 1960 (live; mono) Bella Voce
Orchestra & Chorus - Covent Garden
Macbeth - Tito Gobbi
Lady Macbeth - Amy Shuard
Banco - Forbes Robinson
Macduff - André Turp
Malcolm - John Dobson
Dama - Noreen Berry

Medico - Rhoderick Davies

While it would seem that *Macbeth* was a role ideally suited to Tito Gobbi's vocal and dramatic talents, he recognised that its tessitura, sustained legato and declamatory content required a very high level of vocal stamina and was wary of taking it on – which is surprising for a singer who could successfully sing roles such as Simon Boccanegra and Iago – and delayed performing it until he felt at least half way comfortable in the undertaking. Sadly, *Macbeth*'s concluding lament, “*Pieta rispetto amore*”, is missing here; apparently, Gobbi omitted it because he was ill but did not want to withdraw from the performance and indeed he does sound tired by the end. He recorded that aria in a separate recital and would have recorded the role in its entirety for Decca but had to withdraw, again because of illness, and was substituted by Fischer-Dieskau, just as an unavailable Callas was replaced by an out-of-sorts Elena Souliotis – oh the woe of missed opportunities.

That omission of the final aria notwithstanding, Gobbi is one good reason for acquiring this recording, as he never recorded it; the other attraction is to hear the sadly short-lived British dramatic soprano Amy Shuard in one of her best roles. It is true that Gobbi does always not sound in best voice; there is some strain and thin tone, but the incisive timbre and quick, flickering vibrato delineate *Macbeth* vividly. Shuard's big, clear voice creates an immediate impact; she lacks the lower, smoky tones mezzos lend the role and her intonation can be dubious but the top of her voice is thrilling. She fluffs the attack on the high pianissimo D-flat but recovers the note; at least

The rest of the cast is British, with the exception of Canadian André Turp; they do a good enough job, the witches cackling hammily and the chorus generally demonstrating more enthusiasm than refinement, which doesn't matter too much in this rambunctious opera. Forbes Robinson is a rather lumpen Banquo, hardly glamorous of tone compared with more distinguished rivals, but he makes a sound job of his big aria. The live, mono sound is acceptable; a bit boomy but undistorted; there is a fair amount of stage noise and coughing. Turp had just made his London breakthrough singing with Joan Sutherland in *Lucia di Lammermoor*. He sings neatly enough but it's not a very exciting voice and oddly he draws no applause for his aria – it seems the audience weren't especially impressed.

Molinari-Pradelli directs flawlessly – he was an old hand in Verdi and is so good that you never think about what's happening in the pit because everything is unfolding as it should.

This cannot be a first recommendation but, as was the case with Callas and the Lady, Gobbi never recorded *Macbeth*, so anyone who loves this opera will want to hear him and Shuard in it.

Mario Rossi -1961 (radio broadcast; mono) House of Opera; Live Opera Heaven; YouTube
 Orchestra & Chorus - RAI Torino
 Macbeth - Mario Sereni
 Lady Macbeth - Nora López
 Banco - Nicola Zaccaria
 Macduff - Augusto Vicentini
 Malcolm - Angelo Marchiandi
 Dama - Maria Bertolini
 Medico - Piero Fernandez

Enjoying remarkably good sound, this radio broadcast comes as a pleasant relief after the trials of the de Sabata and Gui live recordings. It might only be mono but it's so remarkably clear and present that one barely misses stereo. The next equally agreeable surprise is the presence of two fine voices in Sereni and Zaccaria – both highly distinctive and individual, each easily distinguished from and contrasting with the other. I have long had a weakness for the under-rated Sereni's lean, grainy baritone and he is a fine, subtle vocal actor, with a real command of *Macbeth*'s long lines (his voice is very similar to that of the more celebrated Rolando Panerai) but admittedly his voice at times lacks

some weight. Chilean soprano Nora López was unknown to me but even her first-heard speaking voice is arresting and when she starts singing, one is compelled to listen. It is a large, powerful voice with a serviceable lower register but also an uncomfortable shrill edge to its top notes, However, she has the top D to conclude the Sleepwalking scene. Given that Verdi did not want *una bella voce*, I suppose we cannot complain too much about that but I find her sometimes to be uncomfortable listening. I had not heard of the tenor who sings Macduff either; he is very fine, with ringing tone if just a little unsteady, reminding me of Flaviano Labò.

Rossi is a propulsive, nervy conductor who never lets proceedings drag – indeed he rushes his singers, especially López, through their music as if he doesn't want to miss the last train home, but that works quite well with this fast-moving work. The scene in which Duncan's murder is revealed is especially taut and dramatic.

There is much to commend this but even if I don't demand a Lady who is balm to the ears, I would prefer one who doesn't put my teeth on edge.

Thomas Schippers – 1964 (studio; stereo) Decca; Urania

Orchestra & Chorus - Santa Cecilia

Macbeth - Giuseppe Taddei

Lady Macbeth - Birgit Nilsson

Banco - Giovanni Foiani

Macduff - Bruno Prevedi

Malcolm - Piero De Palma

Dama - Dora Carral

Medico - Giuseppe Morresi

Whatever the merits of this recording, one obstacle will always be the damaging cuts imposed and sanctioned by Schippers, such as in the scene of Duncan's arrival and elsewhere, mainly in choral ensemble sections.

There is also no disguising the fact that some find the great Birgit Nilsson to be miscast as the Lady; to press into service a tired and obvious cliché, she sounds as if Brünnhilde has married Macbeth and turned nasty. Her occluded Italian diction and the plaintive, swoopy quality of her soprano in its middle range in combination with the steely gleam of those thrilling top notes mean that she lacks the dark, ductile quality one associates with truly Italianate dramatic sopranos or mezzos who have triumphed in this role. She never sounds at ease with the coloratura, the attempt to float the D flat in "un fil di voce" at the end of the Sleepwalking aria is a failure and her intonation is wayward. Finally, her characterisation is generalised and all-purpose rather than acute. Having said that, there are moments in her singing, such as the great Act 2 ensemble "Sangue a me" which must make listeners catch their breath, the vocalism is so striking – but overall, perhaps she isn't right here.

All of which is a pity, because Prevedi sings an impressive Macduff, sounding very much like an amalgam of Bergonzi and Aragall at their best and even if the Banquo is merely serviceable - Foiani having a rich tone but an oddly fast vibrato - Schippers was an exciting conductor and Taddei – who could have his off-days – is caught in excellent voice and delivering a moving Macbeth. His declamatory outbursts are firm and thrilling, the more introspective passages vocalised stirringly and subtly acted, confirming Taddei's status as Gobbi's only rival in many respects.

If you respond more positively to Nilsson's Lady and can disregard the cuts, you will find this still to be a recording with many attractive virtues. I want it as a supplement but not the main event.

Gianandrea Gavazzeni – 1968 (live; mono) Mondo Musica; Premiere

Orchestra & Chorus - Teatro la Fenice di Venezia

Macbeth - Giangiaco^mo Guelfi
Lady Macbeth - Leyla Gencer
Banco - Lorenzo Gaetani
Macduff - Giorgio Lamberti
Malcolm - Giampaolo Corradi
Dama - Mirella Fiorentini
Medico - Alessandro Maddalena

The sound here is muddy but somewhat clearer than in Gencer's 1960 Palermo recording above; at first, a noisy audience coughs and chatters away but they eventually settle – and they applaud her vociferously. However, the racket before the Sleepwalking scene is something else.

This is the other option to hear Gencer in one of her finest roles, unfortunately again in poor sound but also once again partnered by a baritone of the first rank, making you wish she had been allowed to commit her performance to studio recording. Guelfi has a very large, slightly cumbersome but essentially beautiful voice; his timbre is more bass than baritone so his voice is hardly different from the sonorous bass Lorenzo Gaetani who sings Banquo, but their first duet goes well, serving as a promising prelude to the main event: Gencer's entrance reading the letter in her deep speaking voice and launching viciously into "Vieni! t'affretta!" Her vibrato is broad and the top wild but Verdi didn't want a bel canto specialist in this role; she is thrilling in her abandon. She acts particularly with her voice in Act 3, successfully suggesting how Lady Macbeth's is trying to disguise her panic as she simultaneously attempts to re-establish a celebratory mood while Macbeth hallucinates – or actually sees, as you please - seeing Banquo's ghost. However, I have to say that despite some lovely singing, she misses the chilling stillness Callas generates by a hint over-acting and over-emoting in the Sleepwalking scene; she does it better eight years earlier in Palermo.

Giorgio Lamberti disappoints by delivering a squeezed, nasal and lachrymose account of Macduff's one aria, garnering lukewarm applause except from an identifiable and isolated claue and his aria is followed by a passage in which the on-stage drums are hopelessly out of synch with the offstage band. Oh well; this is live.

In my experience, Gavazzeni was never less than superlative as Verdi conductor, so no problem there. This cannot be a first choice but it demands to be heard.

Karl Böhm – 1970 (live; stereo) Legato; Opera d'Oro; Orfeo
Orchestra & Chorus - Wiener Staatsoper
Macbeth - Sherrill Milnes
Lady Macbeth - Christa Ludwig
Banco - Karl Ridderbusch
Macduff - Carlos Cossutta
Malcolm - Ewald Aichberger
Dama - Gildis Flossmann
Medico - Ljubomir Pantscheff

The Orfeo issue of this is somewhat superior in sonic quality to that on the Opera d'Oro label but both are fine. Apart from the voice occasionally going off microphone, the recording is in good, albeit narrow, stereo, slightly tipped towards the voices but still reasonably balanced. There is a bit of coughing but for the most part the audience are exceptionally quiet. Böhm's approach is taut, speedy and perhaps occasionally rather too refined, but key moments such as the general consternation at Duncan's murder are replete with tension and excitement.

His singers suffer from no sense of restraint; Milnes and Ludwig are both in finest voice and obviously prepared to dispense with caution and takes risks. Ludwig in particular is more unbuttoned than I have

ever heard her, wild, dangerous and neurotic. Even if she hasn't got a trill and does not cap the Sleepwalking scene with the pianissimo top D-flat Verdi requested, she announces her intent to amaze by hitting that note to conclude her very first bit of recitativo in Act 1 and again at the end of the opening aria, again when Duncan's murder is revealed and then caps Act 1 with a whopping top D. Such pyrotechnics make the couple of top Cs she deploys elsewhere sound almost routine for her and of course she still has the deep lower register heft; she manages to sound simultaneously evil, unhinged and beautiful. Her abandon on that evening of 18th April, 1970 in Vienna confirms why for a while she flirted – perhaps unwisely but nonetheless temporarily successfully – with dramatic soprano roles. The strength of vocalisation and the way she manipulates her husband are reminiscent of her depiction of another harridan, Ortrud, in the *Lohengrin* she recorded for Kempe; both portrayals are masterly psychologically as well as vocally.

Macbeth is a role which suits Milnes' extrovert, declamatory style and he relishes interpolating and holding high notes like the A flat in his Act 4 soliloquy. Despite his vocal stamina, his acting suggests a weak, easily panic-stricken man dominated by his overbearing wife and he is more animated here than in his studio recording for Muti, obviously stimulated by singing live under Böhm's urgent baton. He sings that last regretful aria magnificently, his voice suffused with anguish and bitterness, making the murderous usurper almost sympathetic, especially as his hysterical despair becomes apparent, his breakdown confirmed by manic laughter.

It is a novelty to hear Ridderbusch in an Italian role; his distinctive, purring bass is rich, soft-grained and expressive but the amplitude of his fast vibrato is sometimes broader than is normally the case with this singer and occasionally causes his intonation to sound imprecise. Nonetheless, he makes a fine job of his sombre aria and it's a pity that deserved applause obscures its orchestral postlude. Cossutta had a big but rather cloudy, "choked" tenor; he nonetheless makes an impact with his lament for his slaughtered family.

The chorus and orchestra are, of course, first-rate, galvanised by Böhm into matching the soloists for energy and élan. However, an issue which cannot be ignored is the performing edition employed here, which seems to be Böhm's own concoction whereby he cuts the orchestral prelude, omits all the dances and the cauldron scene - which is no great loss - excises any repetitions in vocal numbers and reverts to the 1847 ending, permitting Milnes a longer death scene but truncating the conclusion. On the other hand, the final "Vittoria" chorus is the weakest of Verdi's later revisions, so perhaps we should respect Böhm's judgement in effecting a kind of amalgam of the original and revised versions. This is one of the most thrilling performances under consideration, crackling with energy and showcasing some coruscating singing, especially from Ludwig.

Lamberto Gardelli – 1970 (studio; stereo) Decca

London Philharmonic Orchestra; Ambrosian Opera Chorus - Wandsworth School Choir

Macbeth - Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau

Lady Macbeth - Elena Souliotis

Banco - Nicolai Ghiaurov

Macduff - Luciano Pavarotti

Malcolm - Ricardo Cassinelli

Dama - Helen Lawrence

Medico - Raymond Myers

Much about this recording is attractive, not least having Gardelli at the helm, as he was an early Verdi specialist and could always be relied upon to get the pacing right. The presence of Ghiaurov and Pavarotti in the subsidiary roles guarantees vocal quality; both sing their arias wonderfully: Ghiaurov intones "Studio il passo" with grave beauty and only the young Pavarotti (34 here) rivals the even younger Carreras (29, for Muti) for pathos and passion in "Ah, la paterna mano". Decca hoped to repeat the success of their Nabucco with Souliotis and Gobbi, but he called off ill and Fischer-Dieskau was

substituted. He once again demonstrates his unsuitability for heroic Verdi baritone roles, being too grey of tone. He needs to force to try simulate the requisite resonance and amplitude but ends up barking and shouting, then for further emphasis he affects a pernickety manner, pouncing on words as was his wont, rolling his r's furiously and over-emoting.

However, it has to be said that by this stage of her short career, the singing of Souliotis, too, is already wayward; she goes off the rails frequently and rarely finds form. Her unsteadiness and approximate intonation are unfortunate; the centre of her voice seems to have blown and she is no the singer whose *Norma*, *Santuzza* and *Abigaille* were so impressive. (A sad, but amusing, anecdote from the CLOR discography regarding a live performance of this opera the same year as this recording sheds some light on her vocal state at this time: "According to the review in *OPERA* June 1970, Elena Souliotis «clearly annoyed by the whistling and booing that had greeted her unfortunate opening aria, she promptly turned her back on the audience and swept off to her dressing room, leaving poor Mario Zanasi who had just begun the duettino preceding the arrival of King Duncan alone on the stage»".)

Macbeth with two flawed leads is a non-starter, despite the quality of everything else here.

Claudio Abbado – 1976 (studio; stereo) DG

Orchestra & Chorus - Teatro alla Scala

Macbeth - Piero Cappuccilli

Lady Macbeth - Shirley Verrett

Banco - Nicolai Ghiaurov

Macduff - Plácido Domingo

Malcolm - Antonio Savastano

Dama - Stefania Malagù

Medico - Carlo Zard

This was one of the two important studio recordings made in 1976; the other was for EMI under Muti with Milnes and Cossotto. I like the latter but despite the beauty of its singing, I do not find that it has the bite or drama of this recording, one of Abbado's very best operatic outings.

Of course the definitive *Lady* has been and always will be Callas but we have only studio-recorded scenes and a 1952 live recording in poor sound by which to remember that portrayal; nobody manages to conjure up so completely and chillingly as she the "voice of a she-devil" Verdi wanted but Verrett, despite being audibly stretched by the high tessitura, comes close with her dramatic flair and ability to colour the text. As a French critic said of her, she had "une voix qui peut pratiquement tout faire", and she demonstrates that versatility from the coloratura in the post-coronation party scene to the dramatic, declamatory parts of the role to the floated high D-flat at the close of the Sleepwalking scene.

Cappuccilli is a touch placid but suitably haunted and certainly does not coast his way through the role in the manner of which he must stand convicted in some other recordings. His was never the most resonant baritone but his masterly, long-breathed phrasing and acute response to two great partners in Verrett and Ghiaurov makes for some great exchanges. A young Domingo makes an impressive job of his one aria and brief contribution, while the La Scala forces are ideally galvanised under Abbado, who, in typically detailed fashion, brings out the colours and finds the nuances in order to conjure up the brooding menace in this dark score.

In brief, this remains the most recommendable of all the studio recordings.

Riccardo Muti – 1976 (studio; stereo) EMI

New Philharmonia Orchestra; Ambrosian Opera Chorus

Macbeth - Sherrill Milnes

Lady Macbeth - Fiorenza Cossotto

Banco - Ruggero Raimondi
 Macduff - José Carreras
 Malcolm - Giuliano Bernardi
 Dama - Maria Borgato
 Medico - Carlo Del Bosco

Despite many critical recommendations, this set has always been somewhat overshadowed by the Abbado recording. Both versions feature equally starry casts and conductors, and both convey more than adequately the inspiration of this most faithful of Verdi's Shakespearian adaptations, and both evince exemplary orchestral playing and choral singing. Muti directs briskly, as is his wont in Verdi but although he finds the fire in the music, he doesn't suggest the same dark colours as Abbado and occasionally seems to place more emphasis on smooth vocalisation than on the drama.

Indeed, Milnes sings beautifully, enunciating the text with passion and clarity, but without quite capturing the angst found in Cappuccilli's characterisation, Raimondi sings a smooth, sonorous but placid Banco and as much as I admire Cossotto, her Lady can seem perfunctory - not to mention a little squeezed at the top of the voice and she cannot erase memories of Callas' inimitable depth and power as the Lady; Callas etches certain phrases indelibly on the mind. Verrett, too, for Abbado inhabits her role more vehemently than Cossotto, as does Rysanek for Leinsdorf in the excellent old RCA recording and Gencer recorded live. In the relatively small role of Macduff, Carreras really shines, producing one of his most eloquent and arresting performances on disc; better than any other Macduff, including Domingo and Bergonzi - both of whom are also terrific – except perhaps Pavarotti.

This was the version recommended by Radio 3 CD Review but I maintain that the Abbado recording is superior; both are vocally superb but the Abbado continues to have the edge in terms of characterisation.

[NB: The original issue on LP contained an appendix on side 6 featuring the arias Verdi cut or replaced, but those were lopped to allow this to fit onto two CDs]

John Matheson – 1978 (live; stereo) Opera Rara. **NB: the 1847 original**

Orchestra - BBC Concert Orchestra
 Chorus - BBC Singers
 Macbeth - Peter Glossop
 Lady Macbeth - Rita Hunter
 Banco - John Tomlinson
 Macduff - Kenneth Collins
 Malcolm - Richard Greager
 Dama - Ludmilla Andrew
 Medico - Christian Du Plessis

This recording features some of the finest British voices of the 70's and 80's in an enterprising account of the earlier version and thus holds both great artistic and musicological interest. Fans of Rita Hunter might have fond memories of her stunning performances in Wagnerian roles; she had a voice of formidable size and laser-like penetration and here applies it tellingly to create a truly demonic Lady Macbeth - exactly as Verdi wanted it: "the voice of a she-devil". Instead of "La luce langue", we hear the original cabaletta "Trionfai! Secure alfine" and Hunter's penetrating tone is ideal for conveying the Lady's ruthlessness.

Peter Glossop never had the juiciest Verdi baritone but he used his sizeable voice judiciously and expressively; his breath control rivals that of Cappuccilli and despite a certain dryness of tone really inhabits the character of Macbeth. The supporting cast is strong, especially the under-rated and under-recorded Kenneth Collins, who had a real spinto Verdi tenor; I retain a vivid aural memory of his

impressive Manrico in the ENO *Il Trovatore* and here he makes a plangent Macduff. John Matheson's conducting is lean and incisive, the chorus more than adequate.

This is well enough performed to make it desirable, if not indispensable, to anyone who enjoys this opera and making comparisons with Verdi's revisions provides considerable additional attraction.

Giuseppe Sinopoli – 1983 (studio; digital) Philips

Orchestra & Chorus - Deutsche Oper Berlin

Macbeth - Renato Bruson

Lady Macbeth - Mara Zampieri

Banco - Robert Lloyd

Macduff - Neil Shicoff

Malcolm - Claes H. Ahnsjö

Dama - Lucia Aliberti

Medico - Petteri Salomaa

I must submit an opinion very different from some other fellow reviewers, yet I find that I am not alone; it seems that others, too, agree with what I have for years been saying about Bruson. I cannot understand the idolatry he enjoyed from eminent critics such as the late Alan Blyth; to me his voice is both bleaty, with an over-prominent vibrato, and otherwise ordinary both vocally and dramatically. I thus have no time for this set, the honourable exception to objections my being the always innovative Sinopoli and the magnificent Robert Lloyd as Banquo. Zampieri might be wild but it's usually in the wrong way; she is hooty, unsteady, often thin of tone and uncoordinated – and like Bruson, characterisation is minimal. Any one of the other studio, stereo versions is far preferable to this.

My MusicWeb colleague Bob Farr was somewhat kinder but no more impressed than I by this recording ([review](#)).

Lamberto Gardelli – 1984 (studio; digital) Hungaroton

Budapest Symphony Orchestra; Hungarian Radio-Television Chorus

Macbeth - Piero Cappuccilli

Lady Macbeth - Sylvia Sass

Banco - Kolos Kováts

Macduff - Péter Kelen

Malcolm - János Bándi

Dama - Katalin Pitti

Medico - István Gáti

Domestico - János Tóth

Sicario - Tamás Bátor

I will stick my neck out and say that for fans of that great singer-actress Sylvia Sass, this set is worth acquiring for her alone. There are other versions of *Macbeth* which I prize and I do not mean to denigrate the contribution of any other singer here, but an older Cappuccilli, while still very effective, is not a match for his younger self with Abbado; the voice is rockier and greyer than of yore, even if the famous breadth of line and smooth legato are still apparent. Tenor Peter Kelen is no Bergonzi or Carreras but he sings a virile, impassioned, if slightly throaty, Macduff. Kolos Kovats is a sonorous Banquo and the vastly experienced Gardelli of course knows just what he's doing with Verdi's score.

However, the glory of the set is Sass. What that woman dared to do with her voice, the risks she takes and usually pulls off, put more pusillanimous, technically correct sopranos to shame. She is simply riveting in the sleepwalking scene; the terror in her voice, the floated pianissimi, the crescendi and diminuendi on the vibrato are the tools of a tragedienne to rival Callas, with whom she was often

compared and to whom she is vocally similar, both in virtues and vices - to wit, her volume and intensity, use of portamento and the incipient wobble, respectively.

Unfortunately, this set has long been deleted. Used copies at a reasonable price turn up on eBay and Amazon Marketplace, which is how I acquired mine - and it was worth every penny. The recorded sound is excellent. Don't confuse this with the very cheap Laserlight highlights disc which criminally omits the Sleepwalking scene or the live performance with Bruson as Macbeth; they are inferior.

Riccardo Chailly – 1986 (studio; digital – film soundtrack) Decca

Orchestra & Chorus - Teatro Comunale di Bologna

Macbeth - Leo Nucci

Lady Macbeth - Shirley Verrett

Banco - Samuel Ramey

Macduff - Veriano Luchetti

Malcolm - Antonio Barasorda

Dama - Anna Caterina Antonacci

Medico - Sergio Fontana

As my regular readers know, alarm bells go off in my head the moment I see Leo Nucci's name on a cast list, as I find his forcing, sliding and obtrusive vibrato intolerable, but for a brief span following his international debut his voice was moderately pleasing before those faults kicked in all too soon. Here, he is still in his early forties and the bleat on top notes is only incipient but a tendency to sing flat is also creeping in. He is a good vocal actor and, as the rehearsal clips on YouTube attest, his interaction with Verrett is intense but compared with her younger self, impressive as she still is, Verrett's mezzo has lost some resonance, turned husky in its lower regions and shrill and edgy in alt.

A fine supporting cast includes the ever under-rated Veriano Luchetti - always a superb, authentic Italian tenor with proper squillo and bags of temperament – and Samuel Ramey in majestic voice as a saturnine Banquo. I cannot fault Chailly's taut, energised conducting and the Bologna chorus never holds back – the sopranos screech manically – while the orchestra plays beautifully, producing a really dark, atmospheric sound.

This never received much attention when it was released on CD but it is in finest Decca digital sound. It is undoubtedly a satisfying experience to watch the film but purely as an audio recording it is not as desirable as Verrett's earlier outing with a superior baritone. Bob Farr was much of my opinion ([review](#)).

Fabio Biondi – 2018 (studio; digital) Glossa; **NB: the 1847 original**

Podlasie Opera and Philharmonic Chorus, Europa Galante

Macbeth - Giovanni Meon

Lady Macbeth - Nadja Michael

Banco - Fabrizio Begg

Macduff - Giuseppe Valentino Buzza

Malcolm - Marco Ciaponi

Dama - Valentina Marghinotti

Medico - Federico Benetti

It is a mystery how anyone could have authorised the release of this most recent recording, as it is fatally marred by the singing of its main soprano lead and the ridiculous application of vibrato-less instruments under some HIP delusion that this is somehow "authentic". Nadja Michael has a flap – you cannot call it a vibrato, it is so far gone – through which you could drive a coach and horses and such that you cannot tell what note she is singing; to put the cap on a horror show, she sings permanently flat throughout - it is truly excruciating. The baritone is passable, if a bit windy, the tenor has a

“caprino” bleat, the bass is cavernous and unsteady - and the sound is excellent, allowing us to hear the car-crash of Michael’s singing in glorious, digital splendour. Florence Foster Jenkins eat your heart out.

What an ignominious conclusion to my survey. Sample it on Amazon or YouTube for its sheer comedic value; you’ll laugh if you don’t cry.

Recommendations

While there have not been that many studio recordings, we still have a core clutch of highly recommendable versions in those conducted by Leinsdorf, Muti, Abbado, and Gardelli’s second recording. Most of the live performances were recorded in poor sound; the exception is the 1970 Böhm recording from Vienna; some will think it unfortunate that he makes cuts and reverts to the 1847 ending but for me it works. Otherwise, for the aficionado, the recording conducted by Matheson of that original version will be essential. Some of the live performances are difficult to obtain but many can also be heard on YouTube. My two live mono recommendations are made for the sake of hearing Gencer - although the sound in both is horribly compromised. Once again, I note that all my recommendations – with the exception of the last special case – are anything from over forty to sixty years old. Such a phenomenon charts the decline in the standard of operatic singing.

Live mono: Vittorio Gui – 1960; Gianandrea Gavazzeni – 1968

Live stereo: Karl Böhm – 1970

Studio stereo: Claudio Abbado – 1976*

Original 1847 version: John Matheson – 1978

Entertainment value: Fabio Biondi – 2018

*First choice:

Ralph Moore