

Verdi's *Un ballo in Maschera* - A survey of the studio and selected live recordings

by Ralph Moore

Given the popularity of *Un ballo in maschera*, it is surprising how relatively few studio recordings it has received: only a dozen, considered below. I have added to those, for their worth and interest, five live radio broadcasts and two recordings of live performances. The most recent was recorded twenty-five years ago. I have excluded any not sung in Italian.

It is performed and recorded under two guises: its original version, narrating the assassination of Gustavus III of Sweden and, recast to avoid the spectacle of a monarch being assassinated on stage, its adaptation under pressure from the Roman censors to a new location in Boston, Massachusetts, with the characters' names changed accordingly; thus Gustavus rather absurdly becomes Riccardo, Earl of Warwick, governor of Boston during the British colonial period. Modern stage productions tend to revert to the Swedish setting but the only recordings below to do so are Karajan's in 1989 and the live production with Pavarotti in Vienna in 1986.

It is expertly structured, paced and balanced – close to flawless as operas go and nowhere as far-fetched in the action or as unbelievable in motivation as some others, as long as you make allowance for a bit of jiggery-pokery to do with fortune-telling and magic herbs. Its trio of main characters are credible and sympathetic; Riccardo/Gustavo is a likeable tenor-hero whose character is portrayed in some depth; he evinces the usual romantic ardour but also a sense of humour; Amelia is passionate and principled without being sentimentalised; Renato/Anckarström is not the vengeful monster of the type we see in Don Carlo in *La forza del destino* but a man wracked and tormented by the betrayal of his wife and best friend. We even have a little gay undercurrent going – with which some modern producers have of course had a field day – in that the historical Gustavus was homosexual and the portrayal of Riccardo's relationship with his travestito pageboy Oscar can be made to raise eyebrows, despite the plot hinging upon his unconsummated love for Amelia. Verdi actively disapproved of that tradition of having male roles sung by women and nowhere else does he embrace a practice exemplified by his predecessors Mozart, with Cherubino, and Gluck, with Orpheus, so we are prompted to wonder why he did so here. Perhaps he was initially portraying the liberal atmosphere of an Enlightenment court - but that certainly went to pot when it was forcibly relocated to British colonial Boston, where having a pageboy prance about in attendance upon the governor would surely have been viewed as unacceptably camp.

Musically, the opera is interesting for its mix of light, French-style coloratura, as typified by Oscar's music, and the grander, heavier, Italian opera seria style; the range of emotions and the engineering of emotionally super-charged confrontations are, however, typical of Verdi's mature output.

The Recordings

Tullio Serafin – 1943 (studio; mono) EMI; Arkadia; Preiser; Naxos
Orchestra & Chorus - Teatro dell'Opera di Roma

Riccardo - Beniamino Gigli

Renato - Gino Bechi

Amelia - Maria Caniglia

Ulrica - Fedora Barbieri

Oscar - Elda Ribetti

Silvano - N. Niccolini

Samuele - Tancredi Pasero

Tom - Ugo Novelli

Un Giudice - Blando Giusti

Un servo - Blando Giusti

This classic, first complete recording of one of Verdi's most melodious and approachable operas continues to appear very cheaply on a variety of labels, but in whatever incarnation you hear it - and presumably Pristine will eventually get around to remastering it best of all - you must put up with what is inevitably elderly mono sound with some constant background hiss and a limited dynamic range but otherwise a perfectly acceptable quality for its vintage, hardly worse than early 50's mono.

It was made during a time when the Allies were poised to ensure Italian capitulation; it is a fascinating historico-musicological fact that some wonderful recordings were being made contemporaneously in Nazi Germany regardless of the implosion of the Fascist state and its war aims.

For all his vocal splendour, Gigli has never been my favourite tenor but his irritating mannerisms of gulping and over-emoting are hardly in evidence here and he sounds considerably more boyish than his actual 53 years, chuckling winningly in "È scherzo od è follia" and rising magnificently to the desperation of "Forse la soglia attinse". His regular partner Maria Caniglia is already evincing signs of decline despite not yet being forty, yet hers was a grand, passionate spinto soprano which, while never perfect nor always sweet on the ear nor even completely under control, was, to be fair, apparently never recorded as gratefully as the tenor's voice. Her lower register is striking and she is not yet singing too often under the note, a fault which later crept in. She is never less than wholly committed to the emotional import of her music and her moving "Morrò, ma prima in grazia" is an example of singing in the old, grand manner. The thirty-year-old Gino Bechi tears a passion to tatters as Renato, exhibiting one of the most sheerly exciting Italian baritones ever to stride stage - and I include Ruffo, Stracciari and Amato in that category. He doesn't attempt much in the way of variety of colour or subtlety of expression, so he is a bit of a pantomime villain right from the word go - but what a sound he makes. An even younger Fedora Barbieri at 23 completely and commandingly inhabits the role of Ulrica, displaying extraordinary vocal maturity and artistic confidence as the prophetess. Elda Ribetti is no more shrill or annoying than most coloratura sopranos as Oscar; in my experience the best has been Reri Grist in Leinsdorf's highly recommendable recording. It is odd to see the great basso Tancredi Pasero cast in the minor role of Samuel the conspirator but his presence lends vocal glamour.

Tullio Serafin is of course completely at home conducting this archetypal Verdi opera and the Rome Opera forces sound as though they are enjoying their part in proceedings, singing and playing *con gusto*.

Angelo Questa – 1954 (radio broadcast; mono) Warner Fonit; Cetra
Orchestra & Chorus - RAI Torino

Riccardo - Ferruccio Tagliavini
Renato - Giuseppe Valdengo
Amelia - Maria Curtis Verna
Ulrica - Pia Tassinari
Oscar - Maria Erato
Silvano - Alberto Albertini
Samuele - Marco Stefanoni
Tom - Vito Susca
Un Giudice - Emilio Renzi
Un servo - Emilio Renz

(Modified from [my previous review](#))

This radio broadcast performance was one of the many issued by Cetra in the 1950's which still form a valuable repository of some of the best Italian voices of that era singing mainstream and even somewhat rarer repertoire. Many tended - and understandably still tend - to be overshadowed by the

EMI and Decca output of the day yet they cannot be overlooked by any serious collector, being of great artistic and historical interest. One or two, in the estimation of some, even lead the field despite their mono sound - I am thinking here of Taddei's *Rigoletto* also conducted by Angelo Questa and featuring the same elegant tenor as here, Ferruccio Tagliavini. For some reason I previously long overlooked this 1954 recording but now wonder why; perhaps it was because the *Gramophone* was decidedly lukewarm in its reception back in its 1957 review and Lord Harewood cursorily dismisses it in few words in *Opera on Record*, but with the current dearth of true Verdi singers, we are surely now disposed to be more appreciative of its considerable merits.

Questa is not especially celebrated today but he conducts a thoroughly idiomatic performance, just as he does in the Cetra *Aida* with a young Corelli and spinto soprano Mary Curtis in the title role. She was American-born but began her considerable career in Italy, having married her teacher Ettore Verna and Italianised her name. She has a smooth, powerful, but not very distinctive voice which is quite up to the demands of the part without providing many thrills. Had she not been active at the same time as Callas and Tebaldi she might have been more celebrated but she is still an estimable artist who sang a formidable Gioconda to Corelli's Enzo in Philadelphia in the 60's.

Ferruccio Tagliavini, whose 70th birthday party I attended at Asti's in 1983 in the company of various Met luminaries such as Jerome Hines, is a glamorous, stylish Riccardo very much in the Bergonzi mould, with a sweetness and delicacy typical of one renowned for his "honeyed mezza voce" but the heft to convey passion in "Forse la soglia attinse". He incorporates a charmingly infectious chuckle into his voice for "È scherzo od è follia" and is in many ways a very attractive singer of the old school.

Baritone Giuseppe Valdengo will chiefly be known to aficionados as a superb Falstaff for Toscanini; he has a firm, vibrant, authentically Italianate baritone with a fast vibrato, a slightly strained top and superb diction. His legato in "Eri tu" is exemplary.

Pia Tassinari is a surprisingly successful Ulrica with a booming lower register while the Oscar - a part Verdi always feared would be under-cast - is a singer previously unknown to me, Maria Erato, who has a slightly husky, boyish timbre and considerable coloratura facility, thus ideally suited to the role.

The sound is clear, clean, undistorted mono. No libretto but the evocative original LP cover artwork is reproduced.

Arturo Toscanini – 1954 (composite recording from two radio broadcasts; mono) RCA; Myto; GOP; Pristine (Ambient Stereo)
NBC Symphony Orchestra; Robert Shaw Chorale

Riccardo - Jan Peerce
Renato - Robert Merrill
Amelia - Herva Nelli
Ulrica - Claramae Turner
Oscar - Virginia Haskins
Silvano - George Cehanovsky
Samuele - Nicola Moscona
Tom - Norman Scott
Un Giudice - John Carmen Rossi
Un servo - John Carmen Rossi

It is one of the great blessings of opera history that Toscanini had so long a career and was in a position to commit his Verdi interpretations onto disc with a first-rate orchestra, excellent singers and (for its time) perfectly good mono sound, now much improved by the last RCA remastering to afford both greater warmth and clarity but even better in Pristine's Ambient Stereo (very positively [reviewed](#) by

my MWI colleague Rob Maynard), to the point whereby one hardly notices the dry sound. He knew Verdi well, played through his music with him and must be credited with both authority and authenticity when it comes to matters of tempi and fidelity to the score; this is as close as we shall ever get to hearing what Verdi himself demanded in the theatre (even if he did not always get it).

This was the last opera Toscanini conducted, just weeks before his retirement. Unbelievably, he had first conducted it at La Scala in 1903 and after the second broadcast on January 24th 1954, he told a friend, "This was my last opera performance. I began by hearing a performance of *Un Ballo in maschera* at the age of four, up in the gallery; and I've finished by conducting it at eighty-seven." (In fact, he had misremembered; he heard his first performance aged three!) All his renowned virtues are still on display: passion, rhythmic solidity, attack and tenderness. He conducts with unparalleled vigour, exhorting his orchestra to attack phrases where necessary.

Jan Peerce had a rather tight, but powerful tenor quite similar to that of his brother-in-law Richard Tucker. He was a late replacement for Jussi Björling and sings with spritely, forthright fervour. He has ringing top notes and sings with particular ardour in the "Teco io sto" duet, thereby also bringing out the best in his soprano partner. Nuances which Björling might have found are passed over. His mostly straightforward manner is replicated by Robert Merrill, who often simply "stands and sings", pouring out a stream of glorious tone but also manages to inject emotional nuance into his showpiece aria. Toscanini admired Merrill and was always able to bring out the best in his performances, raising his level of interpretative subtlety to match the splendour of his singing. The two basses are fine company regulars.

The distaff side of the casting is a little less impressive. Virginia Haskins as Oscar is somewhat small-voiced and tweety but perfectly pleasant; she is, however, understandably harried by Toscanini's extreme speeds. Claramae Turner is likewise more than adequate, with a good lower register but something of a hole in the middle of her voice, where resonance is lost. Herva Nelli was always an excellent, if not quite front-rank, soprano; she has a well-schooled, properly registered soprano and completes a trio of female singers, all of whom are bested by singers elsewhere but are nonetheless up to the demands of the music.

This is not, then, perhaps a first choice but it is what I perversely like to call "an essential supplement" for the drive of Toscanini's conducting and the homogeneity of the ensemble.

Antonino Votto – 1956 (studio; mono) EMI; Naxos
Orchestra & Chorus - Teatro alla Scala

Riccardo - Giuseppe di Stefano
Renato - Tito Gobbi
Amelia - Maria Callas
Ulrica - Fedora Barbieri
Oscar - Eugenia Ratti
Silvano - Ezio Giordano
Samuele - Silvio Maionica
Tom - Nicola Zaccaria
Un Giudice - Renato Ercolani

I prefer this to the much-vaunted alternative live recording from the following year featuring Bastianini rather than Gobbi; I do not think the added electricity of that live performance outweighs the pleasure derived from hearing the opera in the clear sound of the studio version and dramatically there really isn't that much difference. However, all four principals here, for all that they are impassioned and vivid in their acting, evince their usual vocal flaws and must all yield to better, more complete Verdian singers elsewhere: Callas mixes velvety tone and trenchant lower register with some strident top

notes, Barbieri is stentorian and her registers are not fully integrated, Di Stefano often sounds sharp and yelps a bit, and Gobbi, while displaying his habitual and formidable insight and artistry, also strains on top notes. In comparison, for Leinsdorf, for example, Price is often as magnificent as Callas with her smoky, soaring spinto, Verrett is more characterful than Barbieri and has a more integrated voice, Bergonzi is much more at ease than Di Stefano with both Riccardo's yearning phrases and the lighter, more humorous sections of the score, and Merrill, while not matching Gobbi for nuance, nonetheless gives one of his subtlest performances.

Having said that, the odd flap on a top note is as nothing to Callas' emotional involvement and I still want to own this for her unique plangency and psychological insight even if, overall, this is not perhaps quite the winner it would appear to be, especially as the sound is still mono.

Gianandrea Gavazzeni – 1957 (live; mono) Opera d'Oro; Arkadia; Melodram; EMI; Urania; Premiere; Regis; Myto
Orchestra & Chorus - Teatro alla Scala

Riccardo - Giuseppe di Stefano
Renato - Ettore Bastianini
Amelia - Maria Callas
Ulrica - Giulietta Simionato
Oscar - Eugenia Ratti
Silvano - Giuseppe Morresi
Samuele - Antonio Cassinelli
Tom - Marco Stefanoni
Un Giudice - Angelo Mercuriali
Un servo - Antonio Ricci

I am surprised that so many previous reviewers are so tolerant of the gruesome sound of this set - clearly a recording from off the radio: thin, boxy and constricted. The cast is outstanding; Callas is marginally even more animated and secure of voice – especially in her production of three stunning top Cs - than in the studio recording made the previous year (see directly above), recorded before she had sung the role on stage as per here; Bastianini is in leonine voice if sometimes a little unsteady (as in "Eri tu") and Di Stefano is once again a model of involvement if somewhat stretched. Simionato is more vibrant here than Barbieri in 1956, though there isn't much in it; on the other hand, although he strains to manage the top notes, Gobbi offers an incomparably nuanced Renato on the Votto set compared with Bastianini's more forthright performance here. The aptly named Ratti is irritating in both, but recorded live her squeals set the teeth even more on edge. However, Gavazzeni's direction is more vibrant live than Votto's rather more anonymous studio recording.

On balance, however, I still prefer that studio version to this live recording on the grounds that orchestral detail and vocal subtleties emerge much more clearly there, the sound here being so poor.

Emidio Tieri – 1957 (live; mono) Andromeda; Premiere
Orchestra & Chorus - Teatro Comunale di Firenze

Riccardo - Gianni Poggi
Renato - Ettore Bastianini
Amelia - Anita Cerquetti
Ulrica - Ebe Stignani
Oscar - Maria Manni-Jottini
Samuele - Giulio Neri
Tom - Paolo Washington
Un Giudice - Enzo Guagni

Un servo - Breno Ristori

It's not for nothing that the cover of the Andromeda issue features the lead soprano and baritone here, in the hope that you might overlook the presence of the dire Poggi, whose bald, uningratiating whine is unfortunately sufficient to negate the attractions of hearing four absolutely peerless artists in Cerquetti, Stignani, Bastianini and Neri. There's only so much sliding up to a note the voice-lover can take; one wonders how and why he was engaged alongside such sterling co-performers -perhaps he sounded better live but somehow I doubt it...

Funnily enough, as with the broken clock syndrome, occasionally Poggi hits a nice top note, as in the conclusion to "La rivedrò nell'estasi", or negotiates a line or two pleasantly – after all, he was engaged by top opera houses – but for the most part the pleasure he affords the ear is limited. Given the squeaky, nasal Oscar, things don't improve until Bastianini hits the stage, then proceeds to roar as if to distract the audience from Poggi's presence. I have never heard a baritone pounce upon the concluding top G in his first aria with such ferocious abandon – it's "beautiful shouting" *par excellence*. He proceeds to sing throughout in rough, cavalier style but the audience love him.

Of course, Stignani was still very much a class act in 1957 although she is clearly in the mature twilight of her career (she retired the following year after thirty years on stage). Then we hear the rich amplitude of Cerquetti's voice in a role which really suited her gifts. Her career was short, she recorded so very little and this is the only account of her Amelia. She does beautiful things with the music as well bringing real dramatic temperament to the role. Searing fortissimi on high notes followed by delicate diminuendi, a secure lower register, arcing, floated phrases – a lot is thrilling, even if intonation sometimes goes awry, such is the intensity of pressure she puts on her vocal cords. The audience adore her and rightly so; she gets ovations.

I have not heard of the conductor who conducts sedately and steadily.

The sound is good for its provenance and era; the prompter and audience are noisy. We can only dream of what this might have been had the Florentine management been able to engage Di Stefano, ubiquitous as Riccardo at this time. Cerquetti groupies like me will want this just to skip to her bits; otherwise, moving on...

Gianandrea Gavazzeni – 1960 (studio; stereo) DG

Orchestra & Chorus - Teatro alla Scala

Riccardo - Gianni Poggi

Renato - Ettore Bastianini

Amelia - Antonietta Stella

Ulrica - Adriana Lazzarini

Oscar - Giuliana Tivolaccini

Silvano - Giuseppe Morresi

Samuele - Antonio Cassinelli

Tom - Silvio Maionica

Un Giudice - Angelo Mercuriali

Un servo - Enzo Guagni

Although you can hear Bastianini in half a dozen live recordings, they are unfortunately of variable sonic quality, and even more unfortunately the one studio recording he made was this one with the wretched Poggi (see the review above). He is on much better behaviour here than in the live performance three years earlier and a joy to listen to. I have never heard anything conducted by Gavazzeni which is less than entirely convincing and authentically Italian in spirit and execution – and he has La Scala forces to do his will.

The rest of the cast is just fair to middling. Best by far is Antonietta Stella, who had a strange soprano with a husky, cloudy middle but, incongruously, an impressively clear and powerful top (she's a great Maddalena with Corelli in the studio EMI *Andrea Chénier*). Lazzarini is generically convincing as Ulrica but is having an off-night; she lacks penetration in her lower register, turning throaty, and her top is screechy; there are many better. Giuliana Tivolacci as Oscar has a fluttery, tweety-bird soprano leggero.

This recording, despite being a DG production, seemed to drop out of sight and you, like me, can hazard a guess why. Again, if only they'd engaged Bergonzi. Moving on again...

Georg Solti - 1960-61 (studio; stereo) DG
Orchestra & Chorus - Santa Cecilia

Riccardo - Carlo Bergonzi
Renato - Cornell MacNeil
Amelia - Birgit Nilsson
Ulrica - Giulietta Simionato
Oscar - Sylvia Stahlman
Silvano - Tom Krause
Samuele - Fernando Corena
Tom - Libero Arbace
Un Giudice - Piero De Palma
Un servo - Vittorio Pandano

Decca could hardly have assembled a starrier cast for this recording than we have here, but it should, in fact, have featured Björling. However, almost as soon as the sessions began, he fell out with Solti, was replaced by Bergonzi and sadly three months later he was dead. That substitution was no disaster, given how good Bergonzi is and it is speculated that Björling's alcoholism was at the root of Solti's frustration with him, as he was sadly incapable of performing. Beyond that, the over-riding question is whether Birgit Nilsson's huge, laser-voice is suited to the role of Amelia. A smart singer well aware of the limitations her voice imposed upon her suitability for certain parts, in Verdi she generally confined herself to Aida and Lady Macbeth, so the gentler Amelia, although still a spinto role, could be viewed as an experiment for the recording studio. As it turns out, the results are mixed. You can hear her deliberately reining her voice which tends to result in it having a plaintive, hooty, almost wailing quality which leads to some wavering intonation and makes the listener grateful when she opens up her sound again for the climaxes. Splendid though those wonderful top notes are, the ideal Verdi soprano must also have a firm, beautiful middle-voice sound and Nilsson just isn't comfortable in that region in this music; she never sounds completely steady or settled.

Something about this opera brought out the lyrical side in Solti; as with his later, second studio recording, his tempi are often leisurely and his phrasing leisurely, especially in the individual arias, but being Solti, there is no lack of drive or urgency in the more dramatic moments. The Santa Cecilia orchestra and chorus are on great form.

Bergonzi is in supple, youthful voice, with a faster vibrato and weaker low notes than later became the case but he sings with all the suavity and elegance we associate with him at his best. He also sings with great sincerity and passion in the famous Act 3 renunciation aria. MacNeil's big, bronze voice always carries a threat – I inevitably picture Amonasro or Jack Rance whatever he sings – but that makes Renato's homicidal tendencies more credible and MacNeil was always the real Verdian baritone McCoy – with ringing top notes but also the ability to lighten his voice when necessary.

Simionato is of course in many ways ideal as Ulrica, repeating the sterling performance she gave in the Callas recording. She, too, always has danger in her tone and she is fleetier than Barbieri in negotiating the leaps in her music. Silvia Stahlman is a neat, pretty, pleasing Oscar – one of the best, vivacious without being shrill or irritating.

So much about this recording is right that it seems churlish to jettison it because of Nilsson – an artist I adore, like all right-minded operaphiles, but in the right repertoire – and this isn't it.

Oliviero De Fabritiis – 1961 (live radio broadcast; stereo) Urania; Myto; Arkadia
Orchestra & Chorus - Teatro Comunale di Bologna

Riccardo - Carlo Bergonzi

Renato - Mario Zanasi

Amelia - Leyla Gencer

Ulrica - Adriana Lazzarini

Oscar - Dora Gatta

Silvano - Franco Bordoni

Samuele - Alessandro Maddalena

Tom - Giovanni Foiani

Un Giudice - Angelo Mercuriali

Bergonzi, in yet another recording of perhaps his favourite role, is as pleasing and dependable as ever, giving a performance virtually identical to his first studio recording above. In truth, excellent though he is here, you won't buy this just to hear him as Riccardo when you have the option of the later RCA studio version. No; the great and neglected Leyla Gencer must be the main attraction here for the opera aficionado. As she made so few commercial recordings, it is always wise to consider her live performances, as long as the sound is acceptable – and this is, supposedly being very narrow stereo, which is surprising for so early a live recording – but in my Urania issue it sounds more like doctored mono to me and is still nothing like as good as contemporary studio recordings, of course. It also seems to be a tape from a radio broadcast, as some crackle and airwave interference from other stations are intermittently audible – if you listen on headphones, unfortunately, in the background you can hear very faintly a band incongruously playing Riccardo out as he expires - and something happens about three minutes into track 2 of the second CD when the sound level suddenly drops and everything sounds distant – then it defaults to the previous reasonable level. Balances are sometimes a bit odd – the flute shrieks in your ear in the Prelude and the voices are recessed compared with the orchestra but it's by and large acceptable.

Gencer, is like Callas, not just in the sense that they were both great dramatic singing actresses but also in that they had predictably recurrent vocal flaws which pale into insignificance when considered alongside their impact on the listener. With Gencer, a glottal break and a vibrato which gets away from her to the detriment of intonation are occasionally problematic, but they are negligible when set against the soaring amplitude of her voice, the finely spun *fil di voce* pianissimi to rival Caballé and the intensity of her expression.

However, I could with some justification add another reason for acquiring this set and that is to hear the fine, virile Renato of Mario Zanasi. His is a neat, clean, youthful sound with that essentially lean, resonant sound peculiar to true Italian baritones. He is barely remembered now yet had a very successful career and sang at The Met; I first encountered him as Germont to Callas' Violetta in the live 1958 *La Traviata* from Covent Garden where, for all the beauty of his singing, he sounds too young to be Alfredo's father; here he is ideal and lends credibility to the idea of Riccardo and Renato being friends from boyhood. He is a real asset here and even gets a round of applause bigger than that given to Bergonzi for their first arias, then goes on to receive the biggest accolade of the evening for his scintillating "Eri tu". He sings it not as a baritone showpiece but like a man whose soul has been

wrenched from his body – superb vocal acting while retaining vocal integrity. Bergonzi seemed spurred on by his colleague's success to give an almost equally searing account of his big Act 3 aria – as intense as any and again, the audience responds accordingly.

There are no weaknesses in the supporting cast. The bass conspirators are very good. Dora Gatti is a pretty-voiced Oscar of no special distinction or character but perfectly pleasing and I was pleasantly surprised to find that Adriana Lazzarini is here in considerably better, steadier voice than she was the year before in the distinctly mediocre live performance under Gavazzeni (see above), even if her vibrato still spreads a bit on loud, high notes.

Oliviero de Fabritiis in the pit does everything right. Like Solti, he gives his singers time to breathe and emote. There are a few slips in co-ordination but nothing too serious; otherwise this is a beautifully gauged piece of conducting and the Bologna forces sound little inferior to their counterparts in Milan or Rome.

Erich Leinsdorf – 1966 (studio; stereo) RCA
Orchestra & Chorus - RCA Italiana

Riccardo - Carlo Bergonzi
Renato - Robert Merrill
Amelia - Leontyne Price
Ulrica - Shirley Verrett
Oscar - Reri Grist
Silvano - Mario Basiola jnr.
Samuele - Ezio Flagello
Tom - Ferruccio Mazzoli
Un Giudice - Piero De Palma
Un servo - Fernandino Jacopucci

This was the first LP box set of opera I ever bought and I am imprinted with it, hence I am unable to assess it objectively but I think I was fortunate in my random choice, insofar as I remain convinced that it features the best exponents of every role, from the five principal singers down to the comprimario roles sung by such as Piero De Palma.

In his second studio recording, Bergonzi is both impassioned and refined in what was, perhaps, his best and favourite role, He chuckles urbanely in the laughing song, declaims his love for Amelia with real ardour and laments giving her up with deep sensitivity and plangent tone. Price is still in finest, smoky, soaring voice, Verrett grabs the role of Ulrica by the throat in an astonishing display of vocal bravura, Grist remains the finest Oscar on record, sounding pert and boyish while deploying her bright soprano to impeccable effect in her roulades, Merrill repeats the Renato he gave Toscanini twelve years earlier but with even more depth of characterisation and emotional involvement and the splendidly fruity bass Ezio Flagello reappears as one of the two conspirators.

While he could be routine, at his best, Leinsdorf was an inspirational conductor – witness key opera recordings such as his *Die Walküre* and several others, often with Leontyne Price – and this another unqualified success, even though Muti in 1975 (see below) perhaps pips him at the post for drama and variety.

This is in many ways a companion piece to another equally blessed recording also made by RCA a couple of years before with the same star soprano, mezzo and baritone under Schippers: the 1964 *La forza del destino*, which must always feature among the best versions of that opera. This is the recording I first reach for when I want to hear this opera.

Bruno Bartoletti – 1969 (radio broadcast; mono) Premiere; Omega; Opera Depot
Orchestra & Chorus - RAI Roma

Riccardo - Flaviano Labò
Renato - Mario Sereni
Amelia - Montserrat Caballé
Ulrica - Erszébet Komlóssy
Oscar - Valeria Mariconda
Silvano - Giorgio Giorgetti
Samuele - Mario Rinaudo
Tom - Giovanni Gusmeroli
Un Giudice - Gabriele De Julis

This is a hissy, cavernous-sounding radio broadcast in mono sound and is thus immediately disqualified from being a prime recommendation, but I include it for the excellence of the three principal singers. Every opera-lover knows Caballé, of course, but the excellent heroic tenor Flaviano Labò is perhaps familiar to collectors through one of only two commercial recordings he made of complete operas, the 1961 *Don Carlo* under Santini on the DG label (I am indebted to Jan Neckers for alerting me to the existence of the other, his *Lucia di Lammermoor* for Supraphon in 1968), which was in fact, which was in fact my top recommendation in [the survey](#) I did a couple of years ago. The stentorian power and ringing resonance of his tenor are a joy but he doesn't quite pull off the "Laughing Song" as he lacks a whimsical chuckle and a smile in the voice.

I am also very fond of Mario Sereni's cultivated baritone; he made quite a few studio recordings, amongst which the best known are Serafin's *La Traviata*, Mehta's *Aida* and Schippers' *Ernani* – then there is the live Callas *La traviata* in Lisbon. He delivers a splendidly saturnine "Eri tu" to rival Bastianini and Merrill. Despite the poor sound, you may still straightaway hear from their opening arias that both tenor and baritone have terrific voices with startlingly good and powerful top notes. We just don't hear singing like that any more. The Oscar is new to me but she is a very lively, positive singer who really goes full-voice for her coloratura and thus in her enthusiasm occasionally nearly falls off – but I much prefer that to a mechanical, small-voiced tweety-bird playing safe. Everybody here is singing out as if there were an audience in front of them and Bartoletti's direction, too, is much more animated and expansive than in his studio recording, reviewed next below.

Unfortunately, the Ulrica is not up to their standard. Erszébet Komlóssy is a wobbly belter – quite a disappointment and indeed something of an embarrassment, in fact. At least her lower register is as scary as her singing.

So how about our diva? She is at her absolute vocal peak and could sing most things, but is this the role for her? She makes her first entrance as if it is, sweeping in and singing in the grand manner, complete with her characteristic glottal break and not for one minute do I hear Amelia, only Montserrat and after hearing in this role so many creamy-voiced sopranos, I find Caballé chesty and matronly for all her skill. She makes freer use of her lower register than I have heard her do elsewhere, her breath control in "Morrò" is admirable and the famous pianissimi top notes are judiciously applied. In the face of such vocal accomplishment, others may feel differently but, in any case, this can only be a supplement for fans.

Bruno Bartoletti – 1970 (studio; stereo) Decca
Orchestra & Chorus - Santa Cecilia

Riccardo - Luciano Pavarotti
Renato - Sherrill Milnes
Amelia - Renata Tebaldi

Ulrica - Regina Resnik
Oscar - Helen Donath
Silvano - José van Dam
Samuele - Leonardo Monreale
Tom - Nicola Christou
Un Giudice - Pier Francesco Poli

Sadly, this was an ill-advised recording as neither Tebaldi nor Resnik were any longer up to their roles by this stage of their respective careers, and while Pavarotti was of course in splendid voice – ideal for portraying callow rogues such as the Duke of Mantua - his interpretation of Riccardo had not yet matured to the level we hear in his 1983 recording for Solti, where he delineates the character's complexities with much more subtlety. We can still luxuriate in the youthful brilliance of his tenor, however, even if his expression is a bit rudimentary. Otherwise, that leaves Milnes and Donath to provide the main vocal pleasure here. Milnes' effulgent baritone is in similarly sappy condition – after all, this was fifty years ago as I write – and he revels in the long line, sustained high note and opportunities for both rage and pathos on the role of Renato; his "Eri tu" is a passionate outpouring, concluding tenderly - Pavarotti could have taken some lessons from him in vocal acting; his later recording is much better in that regard. Donath is light, bright and charming – warm and devoid of the shrillness which too often afflicts this role.

There is a strange hoarseness in the middle Tebaldi's voice and some top notes are harsh and effortful, but at other times – in the first half of "Ma dall'arido stelo divulsa" and the last melancholy duet with Riccardo, for example - she recovers some of her old form and she still has a serviceable lower register to delve into. Resnik, too, evinces traces of the voice "which once moved heaven and earth" but even though neither she nor Tebaldi was yet fifty, they sound superannuated and when they are in ensemble juxtaposed with Pavarotti, the contrast is not pretty.

Bartoletti doesn't sound very interested or involved in proceedings, providing routine, rum-ti-tum accompaniments. The sound is fine if at times a bit over-resonant in ensemble. That matters little because this is not in the running.

Riccardo Muti – 1975 (studio; stereo) EMI

New Philharmonia Orchestra; Chorus of the Royal Opera House Covent Garden & Haberdashers' Aske's School Girls Choir

Riccardo - Plácido Domingo
Renato - Piero Cappuccilli
Amelia - Martina Arroyo
Ulrica - Fiorenza Cossotto
Oscar - Reri Grist
Silvano - Giorgio Giorgetti
Samuele - Gwynne Howell
Tom - Richard Van Allan
Un Giudice - Kenneth Collins

First, the playing of the New Philharmonic here is especially praiseworthy: impassioned, sonorous and vigorous. Muti hasn't made so many Verdi recordings but they are nearly always vibrant and I particularly admire the way he so often applies rubato judiciously but is also able to whip up excitement in the faster passages. He even finds more poetry in the music than, say, the otherwise excellent Leinsdorf. The Chorus of the Royal Opera House, too, are really committed, especially the male voices. Final evidence of Muti's ability to inspire and bring out the best in his artists is how he galvanises Cappuccilli, who could often be a bland and lazy singer, into injecting both passion and nuance into his portrayal of Renato. He might not have the most beautiful of baritones and his vocalism

doesn't make the heart sing like Merrill but this is a more deeply felt performance than he sometimes delivered: sturdy, impassioned and long-breathed.

In fact, all the cast members are excellent. Riccardo fits Domingo like the proverbial glove and his voice was in finest estate in 1975. He doesn't quite inflect the text with Bergonzi's memorability but his rich, plangent tones caress Verdi's melodic lines and I have never heard his top notes more ringingly secure. Grist repeats her assumption of the strangely sexless Oscar with slightly less assurance than in 1966 for Leinsdorf - the voice is a little shriller and more brittle - but it is still a charming, vivacious account. A pity she isn't permitted the reprise of "Saper vorreste". Gwynne Howell contributes the best conspirator Samuel on record and Cossotto is as formidable, stentorian (it must be admitted) monochrome an Ulrica as might be expected, with terrific low notes.

Previous reviewers have complained of a certain facelessness about Arroyo's Amelia. I can't deny that she is marginally less involved than Leontyne Price and certainly pales alongside Callas (who doesn't?) but the sheer amplitude of her spinto soprano, filling Verdi's long phrases, is hugely satisfying and it is untrue to claim that she is bland. The voice per se is in some ways peerless and sounds better and better as the years pass - but I'm an inveterate devotee. Her final agonised duet with Domingo just before his stabbing with the solo violin trilling its waltz blithely and the viola groaning its warning underneath is superb. The concluding ensemble is the most effective I have heard.

I was weaned on the Leinsdorf recording but I recognise that Leinsdorf is both less subtle and even less thrilling than Muti here, so this set represents an excellent option and no-one who had it as their sole version would need feel short-changed. The sound of this 1975 recording was always excellent and was even that was improved by its latest remastering for CD.

Colin Davis – 1978 (studio; stereo) Philips
Orchestra & Chorus - Covent Garden

Riccardo - José Carreras
Renato - Ingvar Wixell
Amelia - Montserrat Caballé
Ulrica - Patricia Payne
Oscar - Sona Ghazarian
Silvano - Jonathan Summers
Samuele - Robert Lloyd
Tom - Gwynne Howell
Un Giudice - Robin Leggate

I suggest in my comments above on the Bartoletti recording that Caballé and the role of Amelia are not an ideal fit and there is nothing about this studio version nearly a decade later which changes my mind. Similarly, Ingvar Wixell, although a fine singer, never had a real Verdi baritone. Nonetheless, not everybody will be of my opinion and this appears to have all the hallmarks of a quality production plus lovely analogue stereo sound, two star singers supported by a fine cast including the two best British basses of their generation making a perfect pair of villains.

Furthermore, this is one of those roles which does not unnecessarily tax Carreras' lovely tenor; like Bergonzi and Pavarotti, his was not a trumpet sound but more lyrical and here he is at his youthful best, evincing that special note of pathos and warmth which distinguished his singing. His top notes are secure and there is none of the strain or loosening of vibrato which later afflicted his voice; the music suits his vocal lay-out ideally.

My problems start with Wixell's Renato; he sings neatly and expressively but his tone is by no means Italianate, with its fluttering vibrato and hard, nasal timbre and constricted top notes; compare him

with Bastianini or Merrill and you'll surely hear what I mean. As I say above, nor, once again, am I at all convinced by Caballé as Amelia; she sounds positively matronly here and is off form, beginning "Ecco l'orrido campo" all over the shop, intonation-wise, her glottal break is pronounced and her top notes harsh – at times, she simply shouts. Frankly, she sounds sloppy and ill-prepared, as if she is winging it. Compared with the soaring purity of the two Prices' singing, she is not at all satisfactory.

Patricia Payne is a dull, laboured, unsteady Ulrica with poor intonation and very indistinct Italian diction. Ghazarian is arch and clumsy. Neither is up anywhere up to the standard of singers such as Verrett and Simionato or Battle and Grist respectively.

I like Davis' flexible, mercurial conducting; he applies *rallentando* quite often in the arias but Verdi can take that and he's no slouch in the *stretti*. Otherwise, this is a disappointing set, one only for Carreras' admirers; you can do better.

Claudio Abbado - 1979-80 (studio; stereo) DG
Orchestra & Chorus - Teatro alla Scala

Riccardo - Plácido Domingo
Renato - Renato Bruson
Amelia - Katia Ricciarelli
Ulrica - Elena Obraztsova
Oscar - Edita Gruberova
Silvano - Luigi De Corato
Samuele - Ruggero Raimondi
Tom - Giovanni Foiani
Un Giudice - Antonio Savastano

A combination of my abiding aversion to Renato Bruson's baritone (see my review of his performance in the second Solti recording, below), my dislike of Gruberova's squeezed, pouty sound and my fear that even by this comparatively early stage of her career Ricciarelli would be overparted as Amelia, long prevented me from sampling this but embarking on this survey obliged me to make its acquaintance.

This was clearly DG's answer to Muti's EM recording and they share the same lead tenor. Domingo is thus in competition with himself and simply repeats his sterling assumption of the role of Riccardo. He makes a lovely job of his "Laughing Song", is deeply moving and impassioned when he renounces any claim upon Amelia and is generally in finest voice throughout. After that, not a single one of the cast is as good as Muti's. To be fair, Bruson sounds better here than he does for Solti a few years later (see next review) but I still do not warm to his cloudy baritone. Obraztsova is often accused of being crude and aggressive but Ulrica is hardly a role which calls for finesse and her hard tone matters little here; her scary lower register is apt but her shrieky top notes are more problematic and her registers are not as smoothly integrated as Cossotto's or Verrett's.

I am often in two minds about Ricciarelli. The limpid beauty of her soft singing makes her a sympathetic, touching Amelia but there is a fundamental weakness to her vocal production, resulting in thin, under-nourished tone with a slow, pulsing quality, preventing her from being able to soar aloft on those long, legato phrases in the way creamier, more powerful sopranos can. Thus, she sings "Morrò" very beautifully and affectingly but earlier the more taxing and dramatic aria, when she is seeking the herb of forgetfulness, betrays her fallibility and the climax stretches her painfully; the top A is flat, the ensuing phrase is off-key and her voice is simply not big and grand enough to carry it off.

On the credit side, you immediately notice the sensitivity and subtlety of Abbado's conducting and the warmth of both the orchestral playing and the recorded sound – but that is not enough.

Georg Solti - 1982-83 (studio; digital) Decca

National Philharmonic Orchestra; London Opera Chorus - Junior Chorus of the Royal College of Music

Riccardo - Luciano Pavarotti
Renato - Renato Bruson
Amelia - Margaret Price
Ulrica - Christa Ludwig
Oscar - Kathleen Battle
Silvano - Peter Weber
Samuele - Robert Lloyd
Tom - Malcolm King
Un Giudice - Alexander Oliver

As with the previous recording above, my lack of taste for Bruson's baritone long kept me away from this recording but the allure of the conductor and the rest of the cast eventually overcame my reluctance. Once again, Solti confounds the lazy aspersion cast on him by the prejudiced that he is all "slam-bam" and hyperactivity by conducting in a much more careful and reflective manner than – to take an obvious example of a supposed speed-merchant – Muti. This gives his two supremely lyrical lead singers time to caress the music with their voices. Both Pavarotti and Margaret Price are at the top of their game and must have appreciated Solti's consideration. The opening of "Ma dall'arido stelo divulsa" is arrestingly slow – until you hear how Price takes advantage of the pace to wring every ounce of feeling from the music. The contrast with fast sections, when Amelia fears being interrupted in her mission and Riccardo's arrival, is telling. Solti also has the brilliant and charming Kathleen Battle, whose Oscar rivals Reri Grist's, and a very interesting choice of Ulrica in Christa Ludwig. I have expressed my personal reservations concerning Bruson's baritone elsewhere – in particular his obtrusive vibrato, weak low notes, husky timbre and suspect intonation – but others seem not to hear what I perceive as flaws.

It is immediately apparent that Pavarotti now inhabits the role of Riccardo in a manner which escaped him a dozen years earlier; he might not have been the best stage-actor but he brings his words emotions alive so much more vividly here simply through vocal means. There is much more of a lilt and chuckle in his lighter arias but he rises magnificently to the moments of high drama. My only gripe is that habit he acquired of ending some phrases with an emphatic "uh"!

Margaret Price did not have the biggest soprano but the vibrancy of her tone gives her soprano wings, her top notes are lasers, and she can float a long, Verdian line. Her pure, lyrical timbre matches Pavarotti's well; she is much better to the role of Amelia than Caballé, I think.

Christa Ludwig is here in her mid-50's and makes a distinctive Ulrica. She is aided by one of the most massively dark and brooding introductions to her opening incantation I have heard – and again, Solti gives her time to relish the text. There is a bit of wear and beat in her tone but she carries it off with distinction, displaying a resonant, intact lower register. Two British basses are fine conspirators. The Silvano is undistinguished but that matters little.

If I liked Bruson more this would be among my top choices. If you do, there is nothing to prevent you preferring this above virtually any other recording, especially as the Decca sound is so fine.

Claudio Abbado – 1986 (live radio broadcast; digital) Orfeo

Orchestra & Chorus - Wiener Staatsoper

Gustavo III - Luciano Pavarotti
Renato - Piero Cappuccilli

Amelia - Gabriele Lechner
Ulrica - Ludmilla Schemtschuk
Oscar - Magda Nador
Cristiano - Georg Tichy
Horn - Franco De Grandis
Ribbing - Goran Simic
Un Giudice - Alexander Maly
Un servo - Franz Kasemann

(Modified from [my previous review](#))

Clearly the most attractive aspect of this live broadcast is the presence of Luciano Pavarotti in fine, ringing voice, but also often singing softly to adumbrate the pathos and dignity of the protagonist's sensibilities. This is the "Swedish version", as Verdi and librettist Somma intended before the censors forced them to switch the location to colonial Boston.

This also marked the debut of Austrian soprano Gabriele Lechner at only 25 years old. According to the booklet essay by Oliver Láng, critics declared that a new star had been born and hailed her "brilliant top register and her beautiful piano singing"; I am less comfortable with that encomium mainly because I find her sometimes shrill and her intonation often variable, although she certainly throws herself into the role convincingly. Piero Cappuccilli was evidently something of a favourite with the Viennese public and receives thunderous applause for an "Eri tu" which to my ears, is relentlessly bawled and typical of his bland, default approach throughout; perhaps you had to be there. Magda Nádor is a poor Oscar- flat, unsteady and charmless.

In compensation, Ludmila Schemtschuk sings a solid, steady Ulrica and Pavarotti crowns his performance with a touching death scene in which he deploys a beautifully controlled piano and proves that he was still in best voice just past his fifty-first birthday. Abbado conducts with sweep and sensitivity and the orchestra and chorus sound first class.

The sound is very good, slightly reverberant and redolent of a large theatrical space rather than the rather close studio we are perhaps too used to.

Unless you particularly want to hear "Lucky Luciano" in top form singing a favourite role live, this cannot in all conscience be recommended over other live broadcasts and, in any case, Pavarotti made two, previous studio recordings reviewed above.

Herbert von Karajan – 1989 (studio; digital) DG
Wiener Philharmoniker; Wiener Staatsoper

Gustavo III - Plácido Domingo
Anckarström - Leo Nucci
Amelia - Josephine Barstow
Ulrica - Florence Quivar
Oscar - Sumi Jo
Cristiano - Jean-Luc Chaignaud
Ribbing - Kurt Rydl
Horn - Goran Simic
Minister for Justice - Wolfgang Witte
Amelia's servant - Adolf Tomaschek

I came very late to this recording, having been put off it by some very lukewarm reviews, my abiding dislike of Leo Nucci and my experience of Josephine Barstow's abysmal recital album made shortly after this record, about which my review was decidedly ungallant.

I am happy to recant regarding her Amelia here: yes, the voice is very dark and sometimes her Italian is a bit occluded, but the beat which sometimes marred her singing is mostly absent or subdued and she is, as one might expect of a "singing actress", highly involved and dramatic. Her soft singing is often beautiful in its own right, especially in "Morrò", where she floats a lovely, final top B. She might not have the amplitude and tonal gleam of Arroyo, Callas or Leontyne Price but this is surely no mean account of a seminal Verdi role and her flaws have been exaggerated by some previous reviewers - presumably those who dislike the Callas style of voice and delivery and prefer a singer of the Margaret Price type, both of which I have time for.

Another - almost undisputed - success here is the warmth and expressiveness of Domingo's Gustavo, surely one of his finest recordings. The top B flat is ample, the legato fluid and the involvement exemplary. He might not convey desperation as successfully as predecessors like Di Stefano and Bergonzi but as singing per se this is really admirable. His duet with Barstow near the gallows is a highlight; both are on top form.

The final indubitable winner is Sumi Jo's pure, sparkling Oscar in what can be an irritating role especially when sung too winsomely. She is a delight without being saccharine and of course despatches her coloratura with crystalline aplomb.

We enter more debatable territory with Nucci's Renato. He has already acquired the terrible habit of approaching most of his high notes with a fourth or even a fifth interval hoick up to them and seems congenitally incapable of meeting a big note head on, almost always sliding up to it - a wearisome tic. He gets to his top F or G eventually, then bleats it ferociously, the vibrato loosening alarmingly. He also tends to yell when he wants to convey rage and misses the coiled intensity of singers like Merrill and Gobbi. As such he is never more than barely adequate and a blot on the set. The comprimario tenor who sings the Judge is terrible, too. The brace of villainous basses is fine and the brief appearance of elegant French baritone Jean-Luc Chaignaud as Cristiano a welcome one.

Which, in the roster of singers, leaves Florence Quivar's Ulrica. OK, she does not have the heft and amplitude of Cossotto, Ludwig, Barbieri or Verrett but she sings neatly, steadily and intelligently, with considerable focus in her lower register, characterising credibly and by no means letting the side down; this is certainly the best I've heard her. She was, after all, a constant presence at the Met for many years and no slouch in big mezzo roles.

Regarding Karajan's conducting, the VPO plays exquisitely and although there are times when proceedings really are too leisurely and lingering, much of the time one is struck by the shaping of the phrasing. Low points are the Johann Strauss swooning in the oddly dreamy, rhapsodic overture and "Di' tu se fedele", which drags, but mostly the playing reaches the standard typified by the three immensely dramatic, wholly together, punched chords which open Ulrica's scene - thrilling.

Buy the original issue with the terra cotta-Harlequin packaging if you can; it provides a quadrilingual libretto, missing in later issues.

Carlo Rizzi – 1995 (studio; digital) Teldec
Orchestra & Chorus - Welsh National Opera

Riccardo - Richard Leech
Renato - Vladimir Chernov
Amelia - Michele Crider

Ulrica - Elena Zaremba
Oscar - María Bayo
Silvano - Roberto Scaltriti
Samuele - Peter Rose
Tom - Gwynne Howell
Un Giudice - Peter Bronder
Un servo - Barry Banks

Rizzi conducts very flexibly here, opening lyrically in the brief Prologue but quickly changing up through the gears to create a tight, light and driven sound. What's missing is a really dark, menacing mood when that is required; there is a lack of weight and theatrical tension in his approach.

Richard Leech has rather a light, bland sound for the lead role; he sings well enough but there is a permanent lachrymose intrusion into his timbre and he doesn't have the weight or indeed the charisma of a star tenor. Regarding the object of his amorous attentions, the undue, generous amplitude Michele Crider's vibrato makes it hard for me to enjoy much else about her singing; for me her line is all wobble. Vladimir Chernov does a credible facsimile of a true Italian baritone, with a fast vibrato and plenty of bite in his tone; he isn't especially expressive but is like Merrill and Bastianini in his effulgent sound. Another Russian, Elena Zaremba, has a fruity mezzo with rather a pronounced vibrato and a strong lower register the problem is that she sounds more like one of those nannies in a Russian opera than a dark sorceress. María Bayo has a neat, pretty voice but isn't especially memorable and Rizzi rushes her. I wasn't surprised when baritone Roberto Scaltriti, who sings the sailor Silvano here, dropped out of sight after a brief international career, as his vocal production is strangulated – all wrong.

This is a negligible account compared with the best.

Recommendations

Sometime when it comes to picking a winner at the end of these surveys, I find myself spoilt for choice and even in a quandary regarding which to endorse, so I resort to making too many recommendations. That is hardly the case here; nearly every recording is compromised either by poor sound, a weak performance in a key role, and sometimes both. Furthermore, I am often dismayed by how old my suggested preferred versions are and this survey is no exception.

In October 2013, BBC Radio 3'S CD Review - Building a Library recommended the **1975 Muti** recording. I like that one very much, too, and agree that it is highly enjoyable, especially for Muti's conducting, but it must yield to my first choice: the **1966 Leinsdorf**, a recording now well over half a century old whose combination of excellent sound and sheer vocal splendour sweeps the board.

For a live, mono recording, I recommend the **1961 DeFabritiis** which fields three great soloists in Gencer, Bergonzi and Zanasi.

Ralph Moore