

A guide to the best recordings of Gluck's operas – by Ralph Moore

Gluck is something of an enigma, in that there are things about him which are unclear, down to such basics as whether his mother tongue was German or Czech. He straddled two stylistic eras, aiming to replace the stale tropes of Baroque opera with a more naturalistic form which gave the text and acting the same status as the music and purged it of superfluous gestures. He travelled widely throughout Europe, in Italy, Germany, France and to Vienna and London, absorbing disparate influences and writing works first in Italian then French. Despite his being a German speaker, none of his operas was set to a German text; although there had been operatic style entertainments in German for a couple of centuries, the tradition, beginning with Singspiel, became established only later by Mozart, then Weber - and in 1847 Wagner produced a German *Iphigenia in Aulis* in Dresden, which is discussed below.

There is such a melodic fecundity, a nobility of line and a dramatic intensity in Gluck's best music that I have no hesitation in placing him among my favourite opera composers. For instance, I know of no more thrilling opening to any opera than the beginning of *Iphigénie en Tauride* or a simpler, yet more profound outpouring of grief than Orfeo's lament for his lost wife. It is no surprise to me that he was admired by, and served as a source of inspiration to, other great composers such as Berlioz and Wagner.

He is essentially a Neo-Classical composer whose operas are distinguished by a rejection of artificiality such as the *da capo* aria and characterised by the adoption of a new simplicity of utterance – qualities apparent in that one, immortal work with which his name will for ever be associated and indeed the only one of his operas familiar even to the seasoned opera-goer: *Orfeo ed Euridice*, the first of his "reform" operas, written for Vienna in 1762. It is still regularly staged and recorded but of his twenty surviving operas, only four others in addition to Orfeo are occasionally heard today: *Alceste*, *Armide*, *Iphigénie en Aulide* and *Iphigénie en Tauride*. The last three are now usually performed in French, having been written in the 1770s after Gluck had been invited to Paris by Marie-Antoinette; the earlier versions of *Orfeo* and *Alceste* are in Italian, but both were later heavily revised and re-cast in French.

Orfeo ed Euridice in fact exists in several forms: originally the eponymous title roles were written in Italian for a castrato and soprano respectively, then the opera was revised in 1774 as *Orfée et Euridice* in French for an haute-contre (high) tenor and soprano and expanded from two to three acts, and finally in 1859 Berlioz transposed it for mezzo-soprano. (There is even an adaptation made by Gluck in 1769 for Parma altering Orfeo from an alto castrato to soprano castrato, which has been performed by a modern countertenor but not, to my knowledge, recorded.) Some "editions" - if we may dignify such a mish-mash with that name - pick and mix to assemble a confection which offers the best and most of Gluck's music but which can result in a clash of styles and tonalities. Owing to the current shortage of castrati, the Italian version is now sung usually by either a mezzo-soprano or a countertenor – and for some time in the second half of the 20C a version transposed for a baritone Orfeo was quite frequently staged and recorded, but that is a fashion which, thankfully, has now passed. To complicate matters further, additions of further dance numbers to the score made for the French version, such as the "Dance of the Furies" and the "Dance of the Blessed Spirits" – Parisians demanding ballet interludes in their operas – and an additional trio in Act III are often incorporated into the original in a "mixed version", so what we hear is a back-formation amalgam of the Italian and French versions of the kind Berlioz produced. I do not propose to get bogged down in clarifying what precisely is going on in each recording I discuss but I do denote its broad category. My main concern is musical quality, not academic, musicological niceties.

I discuss below twenty-five important recordings but some supreme Gluck specialist singers do not feature because they are not best represented by their complete recordings. One such is Kathleen Ferrier ([review](#)) and I urge you at least to hear excerpts.

I do not pretend that my list of recordings is comprehensive, but my selection has been narrowed down by the fact that I am not usually fond of baritones or countertenors singing Gluck roles – good as they might be in other things – and if we agree that no more than half a dozen of Gluck's operas are “essential” in even the keen operaphile's collection, that depletes the field yet more. The Italian *Orfeo ed Euridice* has by far the greatest number of recordings in the catalogue – sixty or more, of which fifteen or so are studio-made – and around twenty-five of the French version, whereas even a masterpiece like *Iphigénie en Tauride* has far fewer and only three studio accounts, while *Iphigénie en Aulide* is in single figures and has but one, sole studio recording – fortunately, it's the best (see below). There aren't that many recordings of *Alceste*, either, but something about it clearly entices operatic divas of the calibre of Kirsten Flagstad, Maria Callas, Jessye Norman, Janet Baker and Anne Sofie von Otter, all of whom sang it on stage; of those, only Flagstad and Norman made a studio recording, of the Italian and French versions respectively.

I am aware that as a hardened adherent of historically significant but technically deficient recordings, I might recommend some which are something of a trial to listen to but preserve performances of note; that, for example, applies to Callas' live performances of Gluck operas in Italian from the 50s at La Scala, refurbished by Warner in their “Callas Live Remastered” box set, which I include but with a caveat.

The recordings:

Orfeo ed Euridice (in Italian)

I very much like John Eliot Gardiner's early recordings of the two *Iphigénie* operas but do not enjoy his recording of *Orfeo* with the hooty, pouty countertenor Derek Lee Ragin, so instead opt for mezzo-sopranos in that role. The first five recordings in Italian that I review span four different versions, and the three recordings in French cover two, so the Gluck devotee like me might want all of them. Reacquaintance with *Orfeo* for the purposes of this survey has reminded me what an endless stream of melody it contains, so owning more than one version is hardly any cross to bear. The additional ballet music - devised to placate a bevy of lascivious Parisian male regulars who just wanted to ogle the ballerinas - might be thought something to skip when it just holds up the drama, but it falls gratifyingly on the ear, even without its visual complement of dancers.

Renato Fasano – 1965 (mixed composite version 1889 ed. Ricordi) studio, stereo – RCA [129]

Orchestra - Collegium Musicum Italicum

Coro Polifonico di Roma

Orfeo - Shirley Verrett

Euridice - Anna Moffo

Amor - Judith Raskin

This has long been a favourite, especially with an older generation who might have come to know the work through this recording, and for good reason. It is tastefully performed, without undue Romantic excess and features three lovely voices. Fasano's direction is lively and alert when that is required and his strings are suitably lean - surprisingly in line with more modern notions about this music should be performed for a recording made in the mid-60s – but also affectionate and leisurely in the lyrical passages. The “Dance of the Furies” is thrillingly played, then the “Dance of the Blessed Spirits” (amusingly mis-labelled “spiriti dannati” – damned spirits instead of “beati” - in the track-listing) is all repose and tranquility.

Shirley Verrett's voice, so beautiful here without sounding too feminine, is warm and even throughout its range with a lovely, burnished lower register. Her smooth legato and liquid vocalisation in "Che puro ciel!" contrast delightfully with the pungent solo oboe. Raskin's Amor is light, bright and surprisingly powerful but without shrillness. Anna Moffo's inimitable, trilling tones are ideal for Euridice – sunny, girlish and somehow Mediterranean; she sounds entirely at ease in Elysium.

The stereo sound is first-rate with excellent separation, Verrett's lamenting cry of "Euridice" enters from the right then centres effectively; the chorus is nicely positioned behind her at a slight distance but clear and full – the listener could be in the front row of the theatre – and it is a pleasure to hear Italian so clearly articulated. They make a splendidly implacable band of Furies in the beginning of Act II, contrasting powerfully with Verrett's pleading, her desperation conveyed through phrasing and the timbre of her voice rather than any histrionics.

Good as it is, twelve minutes of additional ballet music after the final trio "Divo amore" – also an addition for Paris - seems superfluous but you don't have to play it; it is almost like an appendix.

If I could have only one *Orfeo* in only one version, this is it.

George Solti – 1969

(mixed composite version of the 1762, 1773 & 1889 editions) – studio, stereo – Decca [107]

Covent Garden Orchestra & Chorus

Orfeo - Marilyn Horne

Euridice - Pilar Lorengar

Amor - Helen Donath

Solti uses a strange, random confection of a score derived from an admixture of the 1762 and 1889 Ricordi editions and bits of the 1774 French version but sung in Italian; no matter - it's all great music and this recording looks like an attractive proposition. He starts off with an overture played *con spirito* then in the slow lament which follows Marilyn Horne immediately notifies us of her range and the weight of her lower register – but also reminds us that she can sing in a soft, controlled manner.

Solti had by this time long made Covent Garden into a world-class opera house with an excellent orchestra and chorus, which is apparent from this recording. The chorus is especial nuanced throughout. Nonetheless, for modern tastes, after a promising overture his manner for much of Act I becomes really leaden and plodding – yes, Solti! – in the slow sections; ten minutes in and I want to put a rocket up their backsides, it is all so marmoreal. Horne's singing is steady and sensitive and decorates her line attractively - but at half-speed. There is a nice effect of distancing the second band and cor anglais in "Chiamo il mio ben così" but otherwise this is soporific music-making – and I never thought I would ever say that about any Solti recording.

Fortunately, matters pick up and there is no denying that there is much beautiful singing here, not just from Horne who makes the most of the coloratura possibilities of the number ending Act I, "Addio, I miei sospiri", elaborating it as Gluck's star singers might have done, but also from the crystalline-voiced Helen Donath, as pert and pretty as you could wish. There are no more over-leisurely episodes in Act II – in fact, the first "Ballo" (Andante??) is a whirlwind of virtuoso playing; Horne booms impressively and the chorus is suitably implacable before yielding to Orfeo's entreaties. Some are bothered by Pilar Lorengar's fast-trilling, shimmering vibrato but I find it attractive and rather otherworldly - apt for Euridice in Elysium. She invokes considerable pathos in "Che fiero momento" but Horne's "Che farò" is a bit too hearty. In common with Ewa Podles, below, she lacks the pathos that Verret and Baker command.

This is an odd mixture of the thrilling and the faintly frustrating, but the best of it should be heard – and you may listen to the whole of it on [YouTube](#).

Riccardo Muti – 1981 (1762, Vienna) studio, digital – EMI [103]

Philharmonia Orchestra
Ambrosian Opera Chorus
Orfeo - Agnes Baltsa
Euridice - Margaret Marshall
Amor - Edita Gruberova

Muti is a purist so this is the only one of my favourite versions which adheres to the original performing edition. There is indeed a classic purity about it but you get nearly half an hour's less music than in Fasano's recording. Muti, like Solti, is characteristically sometimes hard-driving, creating tension and excitement, yet I am surprised by how often he adopts almost leisurely tempi, especially in order to let Baltsa's sumptuous voice expand in her grand, sweeping assumption. The digital recording is somehow harder-edged than Fasano's and Solti's warmer analogue accounts, too, yet there is considerably more resonance and space around the voices and instruments; you can hear that they were in the now-demolished Kingsway Hall.

The moment Baltsa's voice rings out you know you are hearing a major voice; in a "blind test" sampling with a "knowledgeable music-loving friend" of as many recordings of "Che farò senza Euridice" as I could find, Baltsa came out top and I would stand by that - although Verrett runs her very close. The tessitura of that famous aria sits right in the "meat" of her voice. Muti's choice of tempi is just right and she sings with power and intensity without pulling the music about. The orchestra and chorus sound large-scale, too – HIP adherents won't like it; there is a golden glow to the Philharmonia's playing and the Ambrosians are always first-class, but there is an element of soupiness to the acoustic which results in the occlusion of the singers' consonants and one somehow feels as if one is listening more to the choir in a Victorian oratorio rather than tormented or blessed souls actively participating in the drama.

I am a great admirer of Margaret Marshall's lyric soprano but Euridice's contribution is considerably less here in this original version than in the later editions; the chorus is the more important interlocutor with the protagonist Orfeo. Nonetheless, she sings as beautifully as Anna Moffo for Fasano – albeit that she has less to do – with that special vibrancy which distinguished her voice and acts both as a complement and a foil to Baltsa's darker sound when they are singing together in thirds. She makes much of her set-piece aria "Che fiero momento" complete with a trill. I am not usually a fan of Gruberova but she is young, fresh voice here and her role is both the least important and the most suitable for her voice.

Reacquaintance with this recording has refreshed my appreciation of it but for a more complete experience I default to the Fasano/Verrett version above.

Raymond Leppard – 1982 (1762, Vienna) - studio, digital – Erato [127]

London Philharmonic Orchestra
Glyndebourne Festival Chorus
Orfeo - Janet Baker
Euridice - Elisabeth Speiser
Amor - Elizabeth Gale

This studio recording was made shortly after Janet Baker's last appearance on the operatic stage at Glyndebourne as Orfeo, following her final operatic role at Covent Garden as Alceste (see below for the live recording) and as Mary Stuart at the ENO, all in the same year, 1982. Only in her late 40s, she is in her mature prime; just the occasional scratchiness and discoloration in her tone indicates some

wear but for the most part the famous golden tone is intact. She generally sings "straight", incorporating a few discreet decorations in repeated strophes, but as well as giving Orfeo's lamentations great pathos, she emphasises his heroic strength, fortifying his determination to descend into hell to reclaim his wife by the vigour of her bravura singing in "Addio, addio o miei sospiri", with strong top notes, trills and pin-point runs and divisions. "Che puro ciel" is tenderly, raptly sung with pure tone and ideal inflection of the text, and she finds a myriad shades of dynamics and colours in "Che farò" to prevent it sounding hackneyed.

Elizabeth Gale's perky Amor channels Lucia Popp; at times even an acute ear would declare them indistinguishable – which must be a compliment. She provides the only cheerful element in the tale (until the celebratory finale) so it doesn't much matter that she is so worldly.

Elisabeth Speiser's Euridice, however, comes as a disappointment, as her voice is rather shallow, edgy and undistinguished; nor, despite all the coaching and rehearsal from Sir Peter Hall which went into the preparation for the Glyndebourne performances, does she sound very involved – though that is probably a function of her shrill, tremulous sound, which hardly permits of nuance, especially compared with the depth of Baker's timbre.

The well-drilled chorus is faultless and they are suitably vehement as the infernal spirits. The LPO are by no means too weighty under Leppard: they make a crisp, lean sound and rhythms are well-sprung; after all, Leppard was a baroque revivalist specialist. Yes; his tempi are sometimes a bit leisurely compared with what we have become used to and, for example, with Muti, who uses the same score, but he infuses the music with great feeling. The "Dance of the Blessed Spirits" is exquisitely ethereal.

The sound is excellent; I especially like the distancing of the off-stage orchestra and solo clarinet in the verses of "Chiamo/Cerco/ Piango il mio ben così".

The relative disappointment of Speiser's Euridice here dissuades me from making this a top choice but that's a secondary role and Dame Janet's Orfeo is treasurable, so I still want this in my collection.

Peter Maag – 1998 (mixed 1762 Vienna & 1778 Paris version) live, digital – Arts [104]

Orquesta Sinfónica de Galicia

Coro de la Comunidad de Madrid

Orfeo - Ewa Podles

Euridice - Ana Rodrigo

Amor - Elena de la Merced

This is a live recording employing more of a "period" sensibility in the size, sound and style of the orchestral playing – which is excellent, especially the raw horns (sample the "Danze delle furie" track 11, CD 2). Maag was a hugely experienced, versatile and, I would say, under-rated conductor. Set pieces are beautifully paced and played. Apart from his spirited, generally sprightly direction, the main attraction here must – with no disrespect intended towards her co-singers – be the presence of the fiery Polish contralto superstar Ewa Podles whose distinctive, smoky voice spanning three octaves and slight lisp make her instantly recognisable. Its dusky timbre certainly adds a masculine quality to her characterisation – and the resonance of her lower register is something to savour; just listen to her plunge deep into it at the end of track 13, "Piango il mio ben, così" and the coloratura pyrotechnics at the end of "Addio, addio, o miei sospiri" – extraordinary and greeted by thunderous applause. I'd own this set for those moments alone. I certainly drink in her sound while acknowledging that it is...unusual and the problem is that she is just so...formidable. I wonder if the true castrati sounded like her – poor things...

There is nothing wrong with the Amor and Euridice – they sing prettily but inevitably sound a bit small-scale when set against the force of nature which is La Podles...the chorus is fine, too.

The recording quality is unexceptionable; you would hardly know this is live apart from the applause mentioned above and at the end.

This performing version omits all the ballet music except for the “Dance of the Furies” and the “Dance of the Blessed Spirits”, concentrating on the vocal music, which might well suit some punters. If you love Podles, you must have this for her vocal pyrotechnics, but to be moved, look to Baker and Verrett.

Hans Rosbaud – 1956 (in French for high tenor, 1774) studio, mono – Philips [116]

Orchestre des Concerts Lamoureux

Chorus - Ensemble Vocale Roger Blanchard

Orphée - Léopold Simoneau

Eurydice - Suzanne Danco

L'Amour - Pierrette Alarie

Une ombre heureuse - Suzanne Danco

There was an absolutely awful recording of this version issued in 2010 and starring Juan Diego Flórez sounding entirely ill at ease in the very high tessitura accompanied by a poor duo of co-singers; it deservedly sank without trace. This venerable mono recording, however, has become something of a classic. It is not flawless, and there are some downward transpositions for Simoneau in Act II which sound odd but much about is both noble and touching.

This is “complete and unabridged”, as heard in Paris in 1774, and the mono sound is crisp and pleasant, with voices well forward but with the orchestra set back in a very resonant acoustic. Rosbaud was a fine Mozart conductor and is here equally adept in Gluck; his way with the overture reminds me of the *Magic Flute*. His shaping of phrases and grading of dynamics are very carefully modulated so that lines surge but do not bulge; that you may immediately hear in the slow, pacing *Pantomime des bergers et des nymphes* and numbers like the *Danse des Furies* are played with great vigour and virtuosity. The chorus has a major role and the ensemble hear rises to all the demands made upon it, even if, like the orchestra, they are recessed in the sound perspective. They are suitably brutal and assertive as infernal spirits – “spectres, larves, ombres terribles” (spectres, ghosts, dreadful shades).

Simoneau could hardly be more elegant and plangent; he manages to negotiate the high lines very steadily in *voix mixte* without squawking and still sounds masculine. Perhaps he does not sound entirely comfortable in “Quel nouveau ciel” but he does it as well as one could reasonably expect. There is a touch of the “tweety-bird” in the fluttery, soubrette soprano of his wife Pierrette Alarie as L'Amour, but she is charming. Suzanne Danco is very similarly voiced but that fits the generally light, refined atmosphere of this recording. She sings “Fortune ennemie” very dramatically and with great agility, making it sound like a concert display piece. Interestingly, none of the three principal singers is from France, being a Canadian couple and a Belgian, but of course French was their mother-tongue, hence their diction is perfect.

This surely a clear first recommendation for this version.

Orphée et Eurydice (in French, arr. Berlioz 1859)

John Eliot Gardiner – 1989 – studio digital – EMI []

Orchestra - L'Opéra de Lyon

Monteverdi Choir

Orphée - Anne Sofie von Otter
Eurydice - Barbara Hendricks
L'Amour - Brigitte Fournier

This was the last of the trilogy of Gluck operas Gardiner made with the same orchestra and choir between 1985 and 1989, all of which are superior to his *Alceste* a decade later (see below).

Anne Sofie von Otter has an attractive voice but I happened to play her "J'ai perdu mon Euridice" straight after listening to Dame Janet Baker in "Che farò" and it made me realise how bland and uninvolved von Otter sounds compared with Baker – rather similar to her *Alceste*, which is not a success. The same is true comparing their renderings of "Addio, addio o miei sospiri"/"Amour, viens rendre à mon âme". Von Otter is in some ways fleetier and more adept but I find Baker more moving. That is not the case with von Otter's *Clytemnestra* for Gardiner only two years earlier but that very inconsistency in her performances has always puzzled me.

Barbara Hendricks is rather more characterful as Euridice, sounding fearful, confused and vulnerable when mystified by her husband's apparent indifference to her entreaties to turn and look at her. Her smoky timbre is always sensuous but that isn't such a bad thing here and she has strong top notes. I find her contribution the most absorbing of the three singers here, as Brigitte Fournier is a rather weak, breathy Amor, with a sound more reminiscent of choir girl rather than the son of the Goddess of Erotic Love – very strange casting.

Everything else – choir, orchestra, conducting - is fine but my reservations about two of the three principals here and the option of Runnicles' recording, reviewed next, mean this is not a contender.

Donald Runnicles – 1995 – studio, digital – Teldec [109]

Orchestra & Chorus - San Francisco Opera
Orphée - Jennifer Larmore
Eurydice - Dawn Upshaw
L'Amour - Alison Hagley

Great digital sound, instant aural notification from the attack, phrasing and sonorities that Runnicles is getting his orchestra to play with "period sensibility", a nuanced chorus and the glorious richness of Jennifer Larmore's mezzo-soprano all set the listener up for a thoroughly satisfying account of Berlioz' homage to Gluck.

I love this recording. By all accounts, the celebrated Pauline Viardot, the singer for whom Berlioz made the transposition of Orfeo to mezzo-soprano as the nearest equivalent in terms of tone and tessitura to an alto castrato, was something of a 19C Maria Callas. Larmore might not have quite that quality but her tough, "cupped" sound has, like contralto Ewa Podles (see above), more of the masculine about it and she has the temperament, range and agility to encompass all the demands of the role. Her delivery of the *bravura air* "Amour, viens rendre à mon âme" (of disputed authorship, hence included only at Berlioz' discretion) is mightily impressive.

Alison Hagley is a most attractive, bell-toned Amor and the chorus is almost scarily forceful in the opening of Act II, as is the orchestra's rendering of the *Danse des Furies*. (Having just surveyed Berlioz' *La damnation de Faust* I am reminded of how Gluck's infernal music must have inspired him in writing his and there are definite cross-references, especially in the use of bellowing lower brass instruments to instil fear.) The Elysium music, by contrast, is silky, with a delightfully mellow flute solo. I have never much enjoyed Dawn Upshaw's breathy, "little girl" soprano and affected mannerisms; for me, she constitutes the only weakness of this recording and I would have preferred a simpler, much less affected impersonation of the kind Anna Moffo or Margaret Marshall provide – but after her first aria, compensation is immediately forthcoming in the form of "Quel nouveau ciel",

sung with exquisite poise by Larmore – and both the final trio - written for Paris and kept by Berlioz – and the new finale make a charming conclusion to the drama (you may choose whether to listen to the five concluding ballet movements).

Berlioz improved some text, replaced the banal final chorus “L'Amour triomphe” by importing the finale from Gluck's *Echo et Narcisse*, and implemented most of the additions that Gluck himself had made for the Paris revision – and of course transposed. His work was a huge success, resulting in 138 performances at the Opéra over the next four years – all of which builds a very strong case for preferring this version over any other.

Paride ed Elena (in Italian)

Lothar Zagrosek – 1986 – live radio broadcast, digital – Orfeo [141]

Orchestra & Chorus - ORF-Symphonie-Orchester (Wien)

Paride - Franco Bonisolli

Elena - Ileana Cotrubas

Amore - Sylvia Greenberg

Pallade - Gabriele Fontana

My first acquaintance with this opera was through the most recent recording – well, now twenty years old – by Paul McCreesh with what looked like an attractive cast but turned out to be terribly dull. This may be Gluck's “reform opera” but to my ears it marks no real progress over *Orfeo* and *Alceste*, which strike me as better integrated, more cohesive and musically more innovative. Undeterred, I turned to this radio broadcast featuring two favourite singers in what is no doubt a bastardised version, whereby the role of Paris, written for castrato, has been transposed for tenor – and found it much more enjoyable. To listen uniquely to four soprano/mezzo-soprano voices of similar timbre and manner with no variation is a bit much to demand of an audience, so hearing the under-rated Bonisolli display his subtler gifts is a welcome alternative. In any case, I am with Gluck's contemporary Parisians, who found castrati parading as Alpha males ridiculous – and the hairy-chested Bonisolli is certainly rather more credible as a Trojan warrior, albeit a very inauthentic one from the HIP stance.

The opera opens with a charming chorus over pizzicato strings, then immediately we hear another lovely melody, Paris' "O del mio dolce" declaring his love for Helen, sung suavely by Bonisolli and typical Gluck's lyric invention. The catchy pizzicato tune returns for strings only – and so, too, unfortunately the weak solo soprano – “Una voce”, for which we needed “una voce migliore”. That requirement of “a better voice” is fulfilled by Bonisolli singing a second aria, apostrophising somewhat fruitlessly the “beloved shores”, asking for news of his beloved, a request answered by the arrival of Eros in disguise, sung by the vibrant soprano Sylvia Greenberg - and very much in the same mould as Amor from *Orfeo*.

There is rather too much accompanied recitativo in this work, such as when Paris decides to tell us the story of his famous “Judgement” when he declares in favour of Aphrodite in return for her granting him Helen, the most beautiful woman in the world. The arias, duets and trios, however, are delightful. Whether Ileana Cotrubas' slightly husky, plaintive timbre is ideal is an open question but she is certainly characterful. She becomes more vocally released as the opera unfolds and matches Bonisolli for passion, making a very good job of her big display aria “Lo potrò!”, but the burden of this work is upon Paris, who has the lion's share of the most challenging and appealing music. The most beautiful of his solos is his Act III aria encomium of Helena " Quegli occhi belli" (Those lovely eyes), punctuated by asides from Helen and Eros. Bonisolli's reputation as a beefy belter is easily refuted by so many of his recordings, not least this cantilena; he was often a very refined singer and in that regard is similar to Corelli. The last trio is brilliantly sung.

We do not hear quite the same musical inspiration in this work as in the very best of Gluck's operas but in a performance this well cast there is still enough to entertain.

Iphigénie en Aulide (in French, 1774/5)

John Eliot Gardiner – 1987 – studio, digital – Erato [132]

Orchestra - Opéra de Lyon

The Monteverdi Choir

Iphigenie - Lynne Dawson

Agamemnon - José van Dam

Clytemnestra - Anne Sofie von Otter

Achille - John Aler

Patrocle - Bernard Deletré

Calchas - Gilles Cachemaille

Arcas - René Schirrer

Diane - Guillemette Laurens

First Greek Lady - Ann Monoyios

Second Greek Lady - Isabelle Eschenbrenner

Slave - Ann Monoyios

This is one of two Gluck recordings by JEG which are indispensable – not least for the greatest of Gluck's overtures, often played as a concert piece. Klemperer's monumental account of it is a classic but Gardiner here takes it rather more urgently – and José van Dam's singing of Agamemnon's recitative and aria "Diane impitoyable", with which the opera opens, is wonderful. He is equally impressive in the extended *récitatif* and aria which closes Act II. Gardiner has four top-notch soloists in this sole studio recording and nothing else comes close to it. Van Dam's portrayal of the tortured king obliged to sacrifice his daughter to appease the gods' wrath is one of his great roles. Lynne Dawson has a clear, pure soprano, Anne Sophie von Otter is her usual wholly dependable, intelligent, warm-voiced self – and becomes suitably impassioned and grief-stricken as a mother lamenting the prospect of seeing her daughter sacrificed - while John Aler has long been one of my favourite lyric tenors, having a voice of rare beauty and range, particularly sweet in its upper extension.

Gilles Cachemaille in the secondary role of the High Priest Calchas was in much better voice in those days before he shifted tessitura and even the comprimario singers here are first-class, even if Guillemette Laurens as the *dea ex machina* goddess Diane - an addition to the work in the year after its premiere to underline the happy ending Parisians demanded – rather lacks the vocal gravitas to portray a deity. There is a weird "splice" (but this is digital, so?) at 0:54 in her declaration of a cease-fire, but let that pass.

As is so often the case in Gluck's best work, the succession of melodies seems endless; this is especially apparent in the extended exchanges between Achilles and Iphigénie in the last scene of the first act and the Act II Trio "C'est mon père, Seigneur" is another highlight.

Gardiner's affinity with Gluck's music is always in evidence and there is nothing of the hurry and inflexibility – a fault for which I long ago coined the now trade-marked phrase "Brisk Efficiency" – which could afflict his conducting, and the presence of the Monteverdi Choir is an obvious asset; clearly, some of the soloists for the minor roles were produced from within its ranks. The reduced Opéra de Lyon orchestra neatly adapts its style to period performance criteria.

Iphigenia in Aulis (in German, arr. Wagner 1847)

Christoph Spering – 2013 – studio, digital – Oehms Classics [114]

Das Neue Orchester

Chorus Musicus Köln
Iphigenia – Camilla Nylund
Klytämnestra – Michelle Breedt
Achilles – Christian Elsner
Agamemnon – Oliver Zwarg
Kalchas – Raimund Nollte
Artemis – Mirjam Engel
Patroklos/Anführer – Richard Logiewa
Arcas – Tilo Dahlmann

I [reviewed](#) this back in 2014 and quote from that here:

In a rather grudgingly admiring review of this set, which is being issued to mark the tercentenary of Gluck's birth, the music critic of a major broadsheet called this recording "a wasted opportunity". The claim was that "Wagner's Iphigenia is just not as good as Gluck's, a new recording of which would have been infinitely preferable", insofar as this follows the hybrid score of Wagner's arrangement of the opera set to his own translation and first performed in Dresden in 1847.

There is, however, a long tradition of *Iphigénie en Aulide* being performed in Germany in Wagner's version as "Iphigenie" – or, sometimes, as here, "Iphigenia" – "in Aulis". A young Otto Klemperer was inspired by hearing Gustav Mahler own staging and conducting of it in 1907. There are only four recordings in the catalogue of this Wagner "over-painting" of Gluck's score, dating back to excerpts of a live performance conducted by Leopold Ludwig in 1942. The other three are live or radio broadcasts and for the most recent of those, we must go back to 1972 for a performance conducted by Karl Eichhorn with a starry cast including Anna Moffo, Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau, Trudeliese Schmidt, Ludovic Spiess, Thomas Stewart, Bernd Weikl and Arleen Augér. Unlike this, new issue, none of those provides the complete score, so we are hardly overburdened with recordings and there must be room for one as good as this.

The original French version was first performed in 1774 and revised by Gluck in 1775 to introduce the goddess Diana in person to absolve Agamemnon and permit Iphigenia and Achilles to marry. No doubt this ending would have scandalised authorial plot sources Euripides and Racine; Gluck himself dismissed the dancing in the wedding ceremony as "capering about" and indeed in the sequel he reverts to the illogical non sequitur of Iphigenia's still being a virgin; clearly he was exasperated by the need to provide a "happy ending" to pander to the taste of the French court. If you want to hear that first, authentic version, turn to John Eliot Gardiner's superb 1987 recording headed by José van Dam's noble Agamemnon.

However, Wagner rewrote the ending to conform to his own aesthetic philosophy, following neither tragic nor comedic conventions but instead providing a logical conclusion to his depiction of Iphigenia's dilemma. Rather like Senta, Iphigenia becomes less of a victim and more a symbol of transfiguration through self-abnegation, although instead of sacrificing herself on the altar or devoting herself to Achilles in marriage, she is granted an apotheosis, Semele-style, whereby Artemis (Diana) whisks her off to be her eternal acolyte in some unspecified ethereal location. Wagner's libretto is in fact rather closer to Euripides than Racine and he echoes Berlioz's *Les troyens* and his *Tannhäuser* ("Nach Rom!"), premiered two years earlier, by having Agamemnon, Achilles and all proclaim, "Nach Troja!" in an heroic peroration.

The extent of Wagner's interference has led some critics and academics to consider this adaptation of Gluck to constitute essentially a new work, although only about 10% of the music is newly written by Wagner. He was of course a great admirer of Gluck, even if he did not totally understand him, and certainly *Iphigenia* is the opera amongst Gluck's oeuvre which most readily lent itself to accommodating Wagner's own ideas about dramaturgy. He simplifies and tightens up the plot by

deleting the ballet and three minor characters, and virtually eliminating Patroclus, thereby concentrating on Iphigenia's psychomachia. Although about a quarter of the score is jettisoned, he then wrote link passages to effect a kind of "through-composed" impression whereby recitative and aria are merged. He re-wrote roles to accommodate the tessituras of different voice categories – thus Agamemnon is no longer a lyric baritone but a bass-baritone and the haut-contre tenor Achilles for whom Gluck wrote becomes a dramatic tenor. He re-scored virtually every bar, thickening and stiffening textures by doubling the violas, enhancing the woodwind, timpani and the brass lines and constantly adding horns. The result is not uniformly felicitous: the extra horns in the overture can sound overbearing and bombastic in the context of Gluck's stately elegance and at times his translation does not always sit neatly on the music, German having too many consonants to crowd into Gluck's melodic line. Broadly speaking, however, what we hear is Gluck's melodies and harmonies adapted to Wagner's manner and orchestration, which are often reminiscent of the three works written during his seven years in Dresden: *Der fliegende Holländer* (1843); *Tannhäuser* (1845) and *Lohengrin* (premiered in Weimar in 1850, after he had fled).

Christoph Spering is one of a handful of Historically Aware conductors whose work I invariably find interesting and usually admire; the others include Philippe Herreweghe and Nikolaus Harnoncourt. The booklet includes a transcription of an informative and stimulating conversation between him and musicologist editor Dr. Norbert Bolín, to which I am indebted for help in writing this review. For this recording, Spering adopts a very slightly lower than modern pitch of 437 Hz and deliberately chose singers with large, dramatic voices, presumably to reflect Wagner's intentions and match his beefed-up orchestration.

In general, his two leading ladies are superior to the male singers: both have vibratos which can be rather too pronounced but their big, vibrant voices convey the drama and tension of their plights. Camilla Nylund makes a lovely job of Iphigenia's beautiful aria "Bald von Fürchten" which opens Act II and Michelle Breedt's Klytämnestra is compelling in the depth of her maternal feeling. A word of praise, too, for the silvery soprano of the aptly named Mirjam Engel, who makes the most of her brief appearance as the "dea ex machina".

I am less impressed by the sturdy but rather ordinary Agamemnon and Kalchas both of whom lack glamour of tone, especially when compared with the sublime van Dam for Gardiner; how I miss the soaring nobility of his opening "Diane impitoyable" for Gardiner compared with the prosaic "O Artemis, Erzürnte!" of Oliver Zwarg. Zwarg's bass lacks steadiness and legato in his early aria "Kann vom Vater" and in his big number at the end of Act II the top of his voice lacks ease; the tone thins and dries out too readily.

Christian Elsner has turned into a Heldentenor in the ten years since he recorded *Das Lied von der Erde* with Fischer-Dieskau (a previously celebrated, young Agamemnon in 1951 for Arthur Rother) conducting. As written by Wagner, Achilles is a very tricky part; indeed, Elsner is on record as saying that he would be reluctant to perform it on stage, as it alternates so between lyrical passages and heroic declamation. There are certainly moments of clumsiness in his singing and he struggles with his Third Act aria, "Der Priester", but his weight of voice is elsewhere appropriate.

Spering's chorus and orchestra, both founded by him in the 80s, are terrific; you have only to listen to the opening of Act II to hear their quality. His conducting is excellent, steering the line between the polar extremes of tempi for which Wagner's own conducting was criticised without sacrificing tension. This recording ultimately derives from a German radio production in April last year and Spering's experience with the music shows.

As a bonus, we are given the concert version of the overture which otherwise segues straight into Agamemnon's opening lament. I first heard this wonderful music in Klemperer's majestic, stately account. Impressive as that is, Klemperer lingers over its cadences to elongate the timing to eleven

and half minutes, whereas Sperring more reasonably shaves three minutes off that without sacrificing grandeur.

A German libretto only is provided. I would urge all admirers of both Gluck and Wagner to acquire this recording for both its historical interest and intrinsic musicality; purists may revert to the French version.

Alceste (in Italian, 1767, Vienna version)

The plot of this opera could hardly be simpler and perhaps dafter to modern sensibilities but its themes of love, sacrifice and mercy are couched in music of a stately beauty and an emotional directness representative of everything Gluck wanted to do to make opera a human, relatable, yet uplifting art form. The Italian and French versions are really quite different, so the enthusiast will want both.

Geraint Jones – 1956 (ed. Jones) – studio, stereo – Decca Eloquence [169]; Hänssler Profil [173]

Geraint Jones Orchestra & Singers

Alceste - Kirsten Flagstad

Admeto - Raoul Jobin

Evandro - Alexander Young

Ismene - Marion Lowe

Il Sommo Pontifice - Thomas Hemsley

Apollo - Thomas Hemsley

Infernal Spirit - Thomas Hemsley

Eumelo - Joan Clark

Aspasia - Rosemary Thayer

Herald - James Atkins

Oracle - James Atkins

Göran Forsling reviewed ([review](#); [review](#)) both issues of this recording on the two different labels above and I refer you to them for a great deal of detail regarding their relative merits and the nature of the recording itself. He also makes useful comparisons with the Östman and Baudo recordings I discuss below. I am happy to gratefully acknowledge, endorse and confirm his findings and opinions which I need not reiterate: this is a much grander, heavier account, makes no concession to period practice and has several cuts; Östman is much lighter and “authentic” in manner, with voices nowhere near as imposing. At least the sound, however, while obviously not of digital perfection, is in good stereo – and compared to the live Callas recording below is as Elysium to Hades - good enough, too, to pick up the conductor’s Barbirolli-style grunting and groaning plus some of his own singalong prefiguring the aging Colin Davis.

We are soon treated to some very Britannic-sounding Italian and vocalisation, beginning with an awfully polite Herald who sounds like a butler – or perhaps a major domo: “Frau Gräfin, das Souper ist serviert”? Maestro Riccardo Muti would have had a fit and sent most of them off to a language coach; I really cannot take some of it seriously, it is so unidiomatic and “drawing room” – albeit well sung. Alexander Young’s Evandro has better Italian but still sounds very English.; we are more in the world of Handel’s oratorios.

Flagstad is still in magisterial, if matronly voice, and the sheer size of her sound is impressive but not the swooping and scooping between notes. For example, “Ombre, larve” (a less effective variant of “Divinità infernal”) is steady, some sliding apart, but very slow and doesn’t show her at her best; she sounds a bit squawky (the heavy cold GF refers to, perhaps – it might even have been tonsillitis) and although she reaches the top notes, they aren’t rounded or pleasant.

Rather than contribute anglicised Italian, Raoul Jobin makes his gallicised – or is he channelling Cesare Siepi's Milanese accent? Otherwise, he sounds mature and rather hefty for someone at death's door.

Ultimately, the stylistic anomalies and leisurely speeds render this less than recommendable compared with other options. I am hardly a HIP zealot or one wedded to the *Zeitgeist* of our sound-bite age but it does make for a rather leaden three hours – especially in an opera in which not a lot happens.

Carlo Maria Giulini – 1954 – live, mono - Warner [115]

Orchestra & Chorus - Teatro alla Scala

Alceste - Maria Callas

Admeto - Renato Gavarini

Il Sommo Sacerdote d'Apollo - Paolo Silveri

Evandro - Giuseppe Zampieri

L'araldo - Enrico Campi

Apollo - Rolando Panerai

La voce dell'Oracolo - Nicola Zaccaria

Tanato (il Dio della morte) - Silvio Maionica

This noblest of opera is ideally served by Giulini and Callas, who both understood how intensely the fires burn beneath the icy perfection of Gluck's classical style. The cast is extraordinary – almost everyone in addition to Callas is a star and one cannot help but note how baritonal the two tenors are compared with so many modern, white voices – but I also cannot emphasise enough how frustratingly poor the sound is: crumbly, distorted, distant and shallow, with an audible prompter and occasional interference in what was presumably a radio broadcast which sounds like a puttering two-stroke engine - yet no-one who loves Callas will want to be without this monument to her art. All I can say is that the ear adjusts as the opera unfolds and there is some satisfaction to be derived from how one first-class voice enters after another (I have no idea why a couple of older reviews elsewhere complain about them). Unfortunately, the chorus is little more than a mush; the orchestra is muddy but registers marginally better. The pizzicato tune in “Benigni Dei”, track 5 CD 2 comes through nicely, though, and is a real ear-worm. Even the relatively unknown Renato Gavarini sings sweetly in what is actually quite a difficult role because Admeto is meant to be mortally ill but must still sing his gentle music firmly, then rise to many moments of desperate, declamatory appeal to his wife – which Gavarini manages to do convincingly. Callas is of course in sovereign voice in 1954, especially impressive in a favourite aria, “Divinità infernal”, which she later sang in recital as “Divinités du Styx”.

Just be warned: the dire sound means that this can only be a supplement for the Callas/Gluck devotee.

Vittorio Gui – 1967 – live, mono – Opera d'Oro [134]

Orchestra & Chorus - Teatro dell'Opera di Roma

Alceste - Leyla Gencer

Admeto - Mirto Picchi

Oracle - Luigi Roni

Evander - Giuseppe Baratti

Ismene – Renza Jotti

Apollo – Maurizio Piacenti

High Priest - Attilio D' Orazi

Herald – Guido Guarnera

Two Coryphae – Lidia Nerozzi & Fernanda Cadoni

In excellent sound - so good that I am still unsure whether it not might be narrow stereo - this finds Gencer in better voice than the La Scala performance five years later on the Foyer label. It is a really passionate, typically Italian, hot-blooded performance in which Gencer pays no heed to classical restraint but pulls out of her vocal bag all her verismo tricks of gasping, sobbing, glottal catches, scarily reckless chest voice, floated high notes and the rest; she often goes off the rails but it's a thrilling ride. She wrings every drop of emotion and drama from her music and an outrageous "Divinità infernal" elicits a storm of applause. She is the star but the first singer we hear sounds like another major voice – and turns out to be a singer I have never heard of, Guido Guarnera as Herald. The High Priest is another great voice and now largely forgotten, baritone Attilio D'Orazi. *Tenore robusto* Mirto Picchi was no slouch either; he had a long and successful career but is probably best remembered today for recording Cherubini's *Medea* with Callas. Of course, he sounds far too healthy but I don't care; he is the best Admeto I know by a mile - and makes me realise that only a dramatic tenor will do (which rather disqualifies, Gedda, Lavender, Groves and, especially, Robert Tear...). Renza Jotti is a vibrant, strong-voiced Ismene. I love the way everyone here sings out fearlessly, regardless of good taste or period awareness; they do it because they can. Even the orchestra gives the music some Romantic welly. Those of delicate sensibilities, look away now.

It's not all smash-and-grab, however; the pizzicato "Benigni Dei" number is exquisitely played and sung by the comprimario ladies and chorus. Luigi Roni is a sepulchral, black-voiced Oracle, the "death music" with underlying thundering timpani and spooky woodwind is chilling and the chorus intones in an otherworldly manner as Alceste dies.

Sorry, but I absolutely love this totally inauthentic performance and in the end being moved and entertained is all that matters. I am only sorry that it is hard to get one's paws on a copy these days; however, you can hear it on [YouTube](#).

Arnold Östman – 1998 – studio, digital – Naxos [147]

Orchestra & Chorus - Drottningholm Court Theatre

Alceste - Teresa Ringholz

Admeto - Justin Lavender

Evandro - Jonas Degerfelt

Ismene - Miriam Treichl

Il gran sacerdote - Lars Martinsson

Apollo - Lars Martinsson

Eumelo - Adam Giertz

Aspasia - Emile Clausen

Un banditore – Mattias Nilsson

L'oracolo - Johan Lilja

We are instantly in the world of period practice and its lithe, grainy sound is faithfully rendered by digital engineering - a welcome antidote to soupy Romantic excess and mushy old recordings, and literally decades away from Geraint Jones's rather cumbersome 50s account above. I generally esteem Östman's opera recordings and recommended his *Così fan tutte* as the HIP option in my [survey](#), likewise his Don Giovanni in that [survey](#). I also readily concede that we are here much closer to what Gluck had in mind - but if only some of the voices were more imposing; immediately, Mattias Nilsson's Herald has so little authority – maybe that is why he is alternately listed with his original title of "Il banditore", Italian for "Town Crier", which is somewhat more banal and domesticated. On the other hand, Teresa Ringholz has a really beautiful voice – albeit much lighter than von Otter and light-years away from Callas, Norman and Flagstad – and presents a wholly credible tormented, loving spouse, singing in perfect Italian and finding the emotional heart of her recitativo and arias. "Ombre, larve" is not the dramatic event we hear when Callas sings it as "Divinità infernal", but it wholly credibly within Ringholz's sympathetic characterisation. Her soft singing is particularly attractive; try "Oh casta, oh caro" in Act II. Justin Lavender as Admeto has a similarly light but

pleasant voice and animates his arias – but after hearing Mirto Picchi the contrast is almost comical. The chorus is excellent – clearly very well drilled and beautifully balanced. They do sterling work during Alceste's death scene with the repeated chorus "Piangi, oh Patria". A nice touch is the restoration of brief singing roles for the royal couple's children.

The combination of great sound, lovely, if smaller scale, singing and dramatic immediacy in this recording keeps me much more entertained over an opera which is quite long - perhaps over-long, being so complete. I can understand why some would find this whole recording under-dramatised, but it is internally consistent and coherent.

Alceste (in French, 1776 Paris version)

Charles Mackerras – 1981 – live, stereo – Royal Opera House Heritage Series; Mitridate Ponto [147]

Orchestra & Chorus - Covent Garden

Alceste - Janet Baker

Admète - Robert Tear

Grand Prêtre d'Apollon - John Shirley-Quirk

Evandre - Maldwyn Davies

Un Héraut - Phillip Gelling

Hercule - Jonathan Summers

Apollon - Phillip Gelling

La voix de l'Oracle - Matthew Best

Dieu infernal - John Shirley-Quirk

There is but one obstacle to my enjoyment of this live recording, one of the trio of roles with which Dame Janet Baker bade farewell to the stage, and it is not the imperfect – but hardly objectionable – live sound, or Mackerras' surprisingly inert conducting – you can hear how it lacks energy compared to more animated accounts - or the rather flabby choral singing, or the rather sedate Herald, but rather the presence of Robert Tear as Admète. I find his voice nasal and constricted, as only some Cambridge-trained "English tenors" can be; his wailing top notes are no treat. Having said that, I have exactly the same objection to the Admète in Jessye Norman's studio recording (see next, below) yet that is still a favourite, as I steel myself to tolerate Gedda in a trade-off for the excellence of the rest. John Shirley-Quirk is firm and resonant in two roles and Matthew Rose does an impression of the Stone Guest from *Don Giovanni* as the Oracle. Jonathan Summers thunders around as Hercules, bawling Italianate French, rolling his r's ferociously and generally over-doing it – which is fine, as his music is banal and his appearance superfluous, so he might as well make the most of it. (One brave soul says "Bravo!" when he concludes his entrance aria, eliciting a spatter of desultory applause...quite.)

In the end, however, this is all about one of Janet Baker's noblest portrayals. She is still in her prime, deploying a voice of imitable timbre and expressivity and hurling out top notes, hence the wisdom of her decision to retire from opera and leave us with the best memories. She has the perfect voice for Alceste: rich, warm, with that fine upper extension – although she sings the role a semitone down except for the showpiece "Divinité du Styx". She is thrilling there, delivering a performance to equal her thrilling account of Vitellia's "Vengo...aspettate" in her recording of *La clemenza di Tito* and earning an ovation thereby. There is a special plangency to her tone and her way with text is always so sensitive and nuanced, apart from the sheer quality of her sound. Although Mackerras' conducting is sometimes limp his manner actually enhances Baker's delivery of slow, soulful music such as the ravishing "Ah! Divinités implacables!"

There is some coughing and the recording is a tad thumpy and muddy – the chorus could be more distinct and are occasionally unwieldy and imprecise – and occasionally the sound generally wanders out of focus, but the solo voices emerge clearly. Despite the rather fusty orchestral playing and

choral singing, this is primarily a tribute to a beloved artist who gets right inside the eponymous lead role and gives us singing of incomparable accomplishment. Were it not for Baudo's studio recording, I would hold my nose regarding Tear and make this the prime recommendation.

Robert Hugill [reviewed](#) this back in 2008 and his views broadly echo my own. There is also an issue on 2 CDs on the Mitridate Ponto label, reviewed [here](#) by Christopher Howell, in which he writes of some sound problems, so it seems that should be avoided.

You may hear this in its entirety on [YouTube](#).

Serge Baudo – 1982 – studio, digital - Orfeo; Elite Classics [151]

Symphonieorchester und Chor des Bayerischen Rundfunks

Alceste - Jessye Norman

Admète - Nicolai Gedda

Grand Prêtre d'Apollon - Tom Krause

Evandre - Robert Gambill

Un héraut - Peter Lika

Hercule - Siegmund Nimsgern

Apollon - Bernd Weikl

La voix de l'Oracle - Roland Bracht

Dieu infernal - Kurt Rydl

It is evident from the very start of the overture that this account is grand and imposing - rather like the leading lady herself. Serge Baudo might be French but there is something stately and Germanic in his manner here – but that could also just be his application of a courtly French style. His tempi might be leisurely but there is always a pulse and momentum to his direction and he moves seamlessly into strettis without any jarring change of pace. Jessye Norman was always a painstaking and dedicated linguist, so her sung French is impeccable; she is the queenliest Alceste alongside Callas and Flagstad. Her voice is in prime condition: powerful and sustained on endless breath, a fast, even but unobtrusive vibrato, easy top notes cushioned on her lower register. I have read contradictory pronouncements on her characterisation, from “uninvolved” and “bland” to “deeply moving”. For me, her delivery of the récitatif is impassioned and highly responsive and her arias are highlights not just of vocalism but of expressive art. She scores precisely where Gencer does and von Otter (next, below) does not; to take too cool an approach to Gluck's music is more akin to brushing it with the icy hand of death. “Divinités du Styx” – so much more effective than “Ombres, larves” - is magnificent and “Ah! Divinités implacables” (5:45 in track 5 of CD 2) is some of the most breathtakingly beautiful singing I have heard emerge from the human throat; only Janet Baker (singing a semitone lower in the latter aria) rivals her.

The supporting cast is generally: Peter Lika is a smooth Herald; I like Robert Gambill's unusual timbre in the days before he moved into the Heldentenor repertoire; the gravelly-toned Tom Krause as the High Priest is suitably hieratic and commanding, as is Roland Bracht's Oracle. Bernd Weikl and Siegmund Nimsgern, both in pre-bleat days, are fine as Apollo and the redundant Hercules, respectively. Kurt Rydl is a sonorous Dieu infernal.

We then come to the one aspect of this recording which disappoints: Nicolai Gedda's strained, nasal Admète, He was only just past his mid-50s here yet sounds older – although I could say that, to my ears, he never possessed a very ingratiating timbre; even in his supposed prime it was constricted with something of a bleat and I am mystified that some do not hear it. Fortunately, I can make the mental reservation that he is playing a man supposedly mortally ill – hence the need for Alceste's sacrifice – but compared with Raoul Jobin, Renato Gavarini and, above all, Mirto Picchi, he already has more than one foot in the grave. At least he perks up vocally for the bravura aria “Bannis la crainte et les alarmes” and sings quite forcibly but thereafter often resorts to squawking. I have

exactly the same problem with Janet Baker's more variable live recording from her farewell year at Covent Garden the year before this recording (see above); she is wonderful, of course, but Robert Tear as Admète I simply cannot bear.

The sizeable chorus is flexible and expressive; the orchestra, too, is of course bigger than period bands we have become habituated to but play with finesse and beautiful tone.

That the French revision of *Alceste* is demonstrably better musically and dramatically than the original is generally accepted (except for the gratuitous appearance of Hercules) but this recording can be adduced as evidence to remove all doubt – especially as the alternative below is so disappointing.

(Note: the Orfeo issue is on three discs, although I acquired a Russian set on "Elite Classics, Opera Collection 46" which is on two discs and therefore has an awkward fade and break between Scenes Two and Three in Act II; I hope it is not some sort of illegal pirate...)

John Eliot Gardiner – 1999 – live, digital – Philips [134]

The English Baroque Soloists

The Monteverdi Choir

Alceste – Anne Sofie Von Otter

Admète - Paul Groves

Grand Prêtre d'Apollon – Dietrich Henschel

Evandre - Yann Beuron

Un héraut - Ludovic Tézier

Hercule - Dietrich Henschel

Apollon – Ludovic Tézier

La voix de l'Oracle – Nicolas Testé

Dieu infernal - Nicolas Testé

Coryphées – Joanne Lunn, Katharine Fuge

This might be well over twenty years old but it has the "authentic" sonority we became used to with modern HIP bands: lean, keening, vibrato-free strings, snarling brass, snappy tempi – it makes for a tense, dramatic atmosphere typified by the monitory overture which sets the listener up for the ensuing psychomachia. It's pleasure to hear the young Ludovic Tézier launch into the Herald's announcement so firmly; less so – for me, anyway – to hear Yann Beuron's weedy tenor. The Monteverdi Choir, with whom Gardiner has worked so long, could not be better; plenty of heft and bite but also lovely tone in the gentler passages the pizzicato "Parez vos fronts" is delightful.

However, I soon run out of things to extol. My response to Anne Sophie von Otter has been variable over the years of her long career, as I find her to be an inconsistent artist. Sometimes she is too "correct" and faceless, without the marks of individuality which engage me – and this is one of those occasions. Compared with Callas, Gencer, Norman and even - in her own way – Teresa Ringholz, von Otter offers clean, even vocalisation and hardly an iota of charisma. She seems unperturbed by crises which drive those previously named stage animals into a frenzy; I smiled when I found a review which describes her unflatteringly as "a cold fish". Gardiner seems to collude with her restraint; his accompaniment is faultless and dull. He weaves between two extremes of tempo in "Ombres, larves" to no great effect and von Otter sounds thin. Dietrich Henschel is no more characterful or interesting – and at the risk of becoming wearisomely repetitive, I have to say that I can't help but find Paul Grove's Admeto similarly bland - perhaps Mirto Picchi was still ringing in my ears.

In sum, I can think of no compelling reason for preferring this recording – it is irredeemably dull.

Armide (in French)

I admit to being a bit bored by Tasso's endlessly recycled Crusaders' tale with its magical hokum – Monteverdi, Lully, Handel, Vivaldi, Haydn, Rossini and Dvořák all had a crack at it as well as Gluck. This was written after the trio of “reform operas” but at times seems retrograde and bombastic compared with the subtleties of *Alceste* and has never been as popular. The music is not top-drawer Gluck throughout and it is a long opera. No aria quite stands out in the way individual numbers capture the imagination in, for example, *Alceste*; probably the best-known is “Le perfide Renaud me fuit”, which concludes the opera. Obviously there are still highlights and even extended passages, such as most of Act III, which are highly entertaining, but there are also occasional longueurs.

There is no studio recording and neither of the two live performances below is ideal but we are hardly spoilt for choice with so few options in the catalogue.

Richard Hickox – 1982 – live composite; digital – EMI [167]

City of London Sinfonia

Chorus - Richard Hickox Singers

Phénice/Lucinde - Sally Burgess

Sidonie/Mélisse - Marie Slorach

Armide - Felicity Palmer

Hidraot - Raimund Herincx

Aronte - Yaron Windmuller

Artémidore - Adrian Thompson

Renaud - Anthony Rolfe-Johnson

Une naiade - Lynda Russell

La Haine - Linda Finnie

Le Chevalier Danois - Keith Lewis

Ubalde - Stephen Roberts

Une autre naiade - Dinah Harris

Une amante heureuse - Lynda Russell

Simon Thompson's [review](#) back in 2011 was fairly damning of this recording but I do not share his antipathy towards it. First, it features some big, powerful voices – but emphatically not Raimund Herincx, whose strained and laboured contribution is an embarrassment; he makes some terrible sounds. Otherwise, I love Felicity Palmer's very individual voice, which is quite heavy on vibrato but ample and expressive with a hard streak in its dark, burnished timbre which enhances her portrayal of the predatory, conflicted and volatile Armide. This was recorded just before she switched from soprano to mezzo roles and you can hear where the voice is going. Anthony Rolfe-Johnson was one of our best and most virile lyric tenors; the role of Renaud lies high even for him, especially at modern pitch, but both he and his sidekick Adrian Thompson sing sweetly with greater lower register integration in their tone than their equivalents in the Minkowski recording. There is no lack of sensuality in the duets between Armide and Renaud, especially that opening Act V, and Palmer makes the recitative and main body of the concluding aria, “Le perfide Renaud me fuit”, a real dramatic event. I have never heard Sally Burgess sing better and she is ideally partnered by Marie Slorach in their duets; Linda Finnie has a star turn as La Haine; Dinah Harris contributes a lovely cameo as a naiad. The chorus is excellent.

Secondly, I find Hickox' direction to be typically crisp and energetic and the Sinfonia's playing perfectly nimble and nuanced, devoid of undue heaviness, albeit that these are modern instruments.

One of the best passages in the opera comes at the end of Act III when Armide in vain summons up the incarnation of Hatred to cast out of her heart her love for Renaud. Linda Finnie does not have Ewa Podles booming heft but still provides fine, firm, declamatory singing. This is followed by one of those spells of music so typical of Gluck whereby driven, moto perpetuo passages alternate with

stately declamation then lyrical, amatory melodies to which the orchestra, the chorus, Burgess and Slorach, and Keith Lewis and Stephen Roberts as the two knights all make effective contributions.

The main problem for me, apart from Herinx and the hackneyed plot, is, as I say above, that the music lacks the sustained invention of Gluck's best work. For example, Rolfe-Johnson sings Renaud's "pastoral idyll" "Plus j'observe ces lieux" with rapt concentration and admirable control but it's not actually very memorable as music, despite the charming solo flute accompaniment. Nonetheless, it is all given the best advocacy, being directed with enthusiasm and featuring voices mostly superior to Minkowski's below.

Marc Minkowski – 1996 – live composite; digital – Archiv [139]

Orchestra et Choeur des Musiciens du Louvre

Phénice - Françoise Masset

Sidonie - Nicole Heaston

Armide - Mireille Delunsch

Hidraot - Laurent Naouri

Aronte - Vincent Le Texier

Artémidore - Yann Beuron

Renaud - Charles Workman

Mélisse - Françoise Masset

Une naiade - Valérie Gabail

La Haine - Ewa Podles

Le Chevalier Danois - Yann Beuron

Ubalde - Brett Polegato

Lucinde - Nicole Heaston

Un plaisir - Magdalena Kozemá

Une bergère - Nicole Heaston

Owing to the relative paucity of Gluck recordings, the two by Marc Minkowski have probably gained greater prominence than might have been the case, especially as they are period aware, but in truth my heart does not leap when I first hear the scrawny tone of the overture here, and my firmly held dictum regarding how far too long the HIP movement tolerated small, twittery, second-rate voices over proper operatic singers is borne out by the contributions which ensue. For the most part, too, with the exception of the guest cameo appearance by Ewa Podles, even the principal singers are hardly stars of the calibre of those who grace the best recordings. I appreciate that such singers have been in increasingly short supply and that the attachment to supposedly "authentic" practice requires an adjustment in taste and sensibility, but I don't see how that requires a tolerance of weedy, hooty voices devoid of lower register development and no-one is going to tell me that Mireille Delunsch, decent singer though she may be, is as effective an Armide or an Iphigénie (see below) as some of the ladies who have undertaken the leading roles in Gluck operas. We hear an array of tweety sopranos, rocky, woolly basses and tenors of the Charles Workman variety, whose tremolo-ridden, falsetto-biased *voix mixte* makes him sound as much like a comprimario in a comic role such as Offenbach's Dapertutto as a Crusader knight. He makes Anthony Rolfe-Johnson sound like Gigli. The introduction of Podles as La Haine serves only to magnify the disjuncture between singing styles.

It's all so light, bright, clipped and tasteful, typified by the twittery arioso sung by the naiade here. If you like, you like it and you can call me a dinosaur; half an hour into to this recording and I am sighing and bored, as uninterrupted, lightweight Gallic charm wears very thin. As you may read in my review of the Naxos *Alceste* above, I am not by any means in principle opposed to period-aware performances but everything about Minkowski's approach grates on me. Rant over – and to be fair, I find Minkowski's *Iphigénie en Tauride* (see last, below) considerably more successful.

(Try it for yourself on [YouTube](#).)

Ifigenia in Tauride (in Italian)

Nino Sanzogno – 1957 – live, mono – Warner [109]

Orchestra & Chorus - Teatro alla Scala

Ifigenia - Maria Callas

Oreste - Dino Dondi

Pilade - Francesco Albanese

Toante - Anselmo Colzani

Diana - Fiorenza Cossotto

Prima sacerdotessa - Stefania Malagù

Seconda sacerdotessa - Eva Perotti

Una scita - Franco Piva

Ministro del tempio - Constantino Ego

Una donna greca - Edith Martelli

The sound here has been improved by the latest Warner remastering; it is a little fuller and less “papery” allowing the voices to be more present, but overall still rather harsh, so the same warning I gave regarding *Alceste* applies. Having said that, either I was steeled to expect the worst or it really is considerably better than *Alceste*, as on reacquaintance with this recording I was first more struck by the beauty of its overture than any inadequacy in the sound – and Callas’ entrance pins back our ears, just as Vaness does for Muti (see below). Even the chorus isn’t too recessed or distorted; this is really quite listenable especially as the music increasingly exerts its fascination.

I know of no more arresting introduction to an opera than this; a brief minute of serene “calm before the storm” music before one of the most thrilling storm scenes in opera, then *Ifigenia/Iphigénie* in full cry beseeching the gods’ clemency. Gluck suited Callas’ best manner; as with *Medea*, she is always particularly convincing portraying noble, imperious women whose souls are in torment. After that splendid opening, we are then treated by Callas to a masterclass by in delivering *recitativo accompagnato* and then Gluck’s long, limpid melodic lines in the *arioso* passages. She is mesmerising, in the same way as Janet Baker completely absorbs the listener. “O sventurata *Ifigenia*” is heartbreakingly beautiful; five minutes of bliss - Callas at her best.

Unfortunately, except for Cossotto in the small role of Diana, her co-singers are not up to her standard, but Sanzogno’s conducting is wonderfully driven in the fast sections and serene and responsive in the slow passages. Both Colzani and Dondi are a bit lumpen and shouty but adequate; Albanese as Pilade is hardly the last word in elegance when I think of how for Gardiner (see below) John Aler caresses “Unis dès la plus tendre enfance” – here, “Un sol desio mi preme” –but this is live and I suppose needs more heft. “Divinità de l’alme grandi” is similarly clumsy. Dondi is more collected in “La calma torna nel mio cor” but his grainy sound is no rival to Thomas Allen’s silky-smooth “La calme rentre dans mon cœur”.

Never mind; this is Callas’ show.

Iphigénie en Tauride (in French)

Georges Sébastian – 1964 – live, mono – Gala; Le Chant du Monde; Opera Depot [118]

Orchestra & Chorus - Teatro Colón (Buenos Aires)

Iphigénie - Régine Crespin

Oreste - Robert Massard

Pylade - Guy Chauvet

Toas - Victor De Narké

Diane - Marta Benegas
Un scythe - Guy Gavardo

I reproduce here my review of this in Part II of my [survey](#) of Robert Massard's recordings:

The distant, somewhat distorted, live mono sound seems at first as if it will be something of a trial but this is the only souvenir we have of roles important in the careers of the three principal singers here all in very good voice, and it is strange how the ear soon adapts to the sonic limitations. Tempi are leisurely by modern standards but one can hardly expect period awareness from performances of this era and Sébastien secures playing from the Argentinian orchestra which preserves both the stately dignity and emotional directness of Gluck's music – even if Iphigénie's "D'une image, hélas! trop chérie" comes close to dragging. Crespin is not a singer I always enjoy but here is in the best voice I have ever heard her, in a role which suits it perfectly; the notes in the Gala issue confirm that she felt a special affinity with it.

This was approvingly [reviewed](#) by Robert Hugill back in 2004 but he found fault with Massard's "sense of line", which is surprising, especially as it became something of a signature role for him over a number of years. I concede that he is sometimes a little over-virulent in his vocalisation and pounces on words too vehemently to accommodate Gluck's classical style; Chauvet's restraint is more apt. On the other hand, Massard brings Oreste vividly to life and vocalises as impressively as ever; he is particularly powerful in the récitatif "Dieux! Protecteurs de ces affreux rivages" then touching in "Le calme rentre dans mon cœur", in that the agitation detectably perturbing his smooth vocal line effectively illustrates Gluck's own observation that Oreste is unsuccessfully trying to convince himself that he has steadied his emotions.

John Eliot Gardiner – 1985 – studio, digital - Philips [102]

Orchestra - Opéra de Lyon
The Monteverdi Choir
Iphigénie - Diana Montague
Oreste - Thomas Allen
Pylade - John Aler
Thoas - René Massis
Diane - Colette Alliot-Lugaz
Première prêtresse - Nancy Argenta
Deuxième prêtresse - Sophie Boulon
Un ministre - René Schirrer
Une Grecque - Danièle Borst

This was the first of a pair of *Iphigénie* recordings by Gardiner in the mid-80s which have ever since set standards for successors. The principal singers, supporting cast and choir could hardly be better as an ensemble and the style has worn well despite the recording being close to forty years as I write. The Lyon orchestra is obviously not a period band but it is period-informed-and-directed, with very immediate, thundering timpani, shrieking woodwind and blaring brass, a small, vital choir and urgent tempi when required, as per in the opening. Diane Montague is not quite as much a stage animal as Callas and Vaness; hers is a gentler, more touching Iphigénie who palpably connects with her desperation - and she has a beautiful, even voice with plenty of power and great warmth. She might not attack "Je t'implore et je tremble" with Vaness' virulence but it is still fine singing. Gardiner has the best supporting cast, too – which is where the Callas' recording fails. John Aler's tenor has both strength and sweetness and the young Thomas Allen's manly but elegant baritone copes effortlessly with the high tessitura and fleet tempi of his music; their bromance is entirely convincing. René Massis is a bit throaty of tone as Thoas but dramatically very involved.

This is somewhat smaller-scale than Muti's La Scala "Grand Opera" performance but is an entirely coherent, stylistically unified and musically satisfying account of what is probably considered Gluck's masterpiece among cognoscenti, despite the popularity of *Orfeo*.

Riccardo Muti – 1992 – live composite, digital – Sony [117]

Orchestra & Chorus - Teatro alla Scala

Iphigénie - Carol Vaness

Oreste - Thomas Allen

Pylade - Gösta Winbergh

Thoas - Giorgio Surjan

Diane - Sylvie Brunet

Première prêtresse - Anna Zoroberto

Deuxième prêtresse - Michela Remor

Un scythe - Angelo Veccia

Le ministre du sanctuaire - Enrico Turco

Une femme grecque - Svetla Krasteva

This live recording challenges the Gardiner in my loyalties, not least for the sheer venom of the opening storm scene, which for tension and excitement rivals Callas and Sanzogno, again at La Scala, but perhaps falls slightly short of the Philips recording in a number of ways. Thomas Allen repeats his moving, suavely sung Oreste; his voice is marginally dryer than of yore but still a delight, and while Gösta Winbergh might not sing quite as sweetly as Aler, he makes a virile, sympathetic Pylade and his clear, bright tenor is infallibly agreeable. His heroic "Divinités des grandes âmes" rightly elicits a round of applause. As Thoas, Giorgio Surjan, like Massis for Gardiner, is dramatically effective, even if his vibrato is rather too obtrusive. Given their energy in the opening, it is odd that the Furies of Muti's chorus are rather muted compared with those sung by the Monteverdi Choir, but there is nothing much else to choose between the two recordings except their sound quality; both Muti and Gardiner are digitally recorded, but obviously the latter has the advantages of a studio recording, being better balanced and more detailed without extraneous noise.

Carol Vaness is Muti's trump card, just as Callas is for Sanzogno; indeed, this opera stands or falls by the quality of the lead role. I don't think I have heard her sing better; she is inspired; her big, vibrant voice rings out fearlessly and her top notes are thrilling. There are many lovely moments here such as the trio "Je pourrais du tyran" and "Je t'implore et je tremble", with its repeated top As and A-flats, in its declamatory style singing at its best – really stirring.

The orchestra of La Scala is obviously bigger than we are now used to in this music but they make a sumptuous sound and play beautifully.

Marc Minkowski – 1999 – live composite; digital – Archiv [95]

Orchestre et Choeur des Musiciens du Louvre

Iphigénie - Mireille Delunsch

Oreste - Simon Keenlyside

Pylade - Yann Beuron

Thoas - Laurent Naouri

Diane - Alexia Cousin

Une prêtresse - Claire Delgado-Boge

Une prêtresse - Nicky Kennedy

Un scythe - Laurent Alvaro

Ministre de Thoas - Laurent Alvaro

Une grecque - Michelle Norman-Webb

I refer you to the opening diatribe of my review of *Armide* above. I shall not belabour my stance but simply reiterate that the comparison of the Iphigénie here with the assumptions of Régine Crespin, Maria Callas, Carol Vaness or even the somewhat gentler Diane Montague is not to the advantage of Mireille Delunsch, who has a nice, warm voice but neither has as much volume as her predecessors nor is encouraged to sing out, so much of the time she is essentially crooning. Gentle numbers such as “O malheureuse Iphigénie”, however, are beautifully sung.

The keening sound of the strings in the first notes of the overture, the mellow “classical” flutes sounding like recorders and frantic speed set the tone; compared with the beginning of the four preceding recordings it is small-scale but crisp and sharp. Sometimes Minkowski does that irritating “very fast to very slow” cheap trick which HIP conductors used to do a lot, as per in the trio “Je pourrais du tyran”.

To my ears Minkowski's cast in his *Armide* consists mostly of an array of comprimarios singing against the backdrop of a toy orchestra but it is better here, beginning with Simon Keenlyside, whose elegant baritone may be heard here at its best before over-singing in a number of roles too big for him, such as Verdi's Macbeth, took their toll on his lovely voice and it turned rocky and blaring. However, he, too, is clearly encouraged to sing “Le calme rentre dans mon cœur” in a crooned half-voice which, albeit that this is a live performance, smacks of microphone singing. Laurent Naouri is pretty good as Thoas; his first aria has an aptly aggressive feeling to it, with the pounding timps underlining his barbarism and that of his tribe. Yann Beuron's Pylade is pleasant on the ear, if a bit constricted and hardly as stirring as Aler or Winbergh.

On balance, I like this, the later of Minkowski's Gluck recordings, much more than the earlier one but still prefer those by Gardiner and Muti, who don't undersell the opera's dramatic potential.

This is available on [YouTube](#), so you may test out your reactions against mine and feel free to demur.

Prime recommendations:

If you are new to Gluck and want some where to start, I would recommend the Fasano *Orfeo ed Euridice*, followed by Gardiner's (or Muti's) *Iphigénie en Tauride* and *Iphigénie en Aulide*, then Runnicles' *Orphée et Eurydice*, as being the most accessible, melodic and well-sung of all the recordings above.

I have tried to make clear the merits or otherwise of other recordings but I suggest that if you want a basic Gluck collection you will have at least one recording of *Alceste* in addition to the four works above; my preference is for Baudo. *Parmide ed Elena* and Hickox' *Armide* are surely additional options for the enthusiast – and Callas fans should try that superb *Ifigenia*, mediocre sound and all, to hear what singing opera is all about.