

**Mozart: *Die Entführung aus dem Serail***  
**- a selective survey of recordings**

I have surveyed recordings of five of Mozart's seven mature operas, but not *La clemenza di Tito* - for which I included a recommendation in my "[Untouchables](#)" survey – or *Die Entführung aus dem Serail*. My reasons for not doing more exhaustive conspectuses of both operas are that neither has received anywhere near as many studio recordings in comparison with the other five and of those they have been given, many are, in my estimation, sub-standard, automatically narrowing the field of choice. For me, one recording of *La clemenza* continues to stand out, whereas, sadly, I find that *Die Entführung* has a much more chequered recording history and no one recording fulfils my hopes and expectations, for reasons most often to do with casting.

Despite being the most light-hearted of Mozart's masterworks and, like *Die Zauberflöte*, a *Singspiel* rather than what we think of as a "proper opera", the music is often complex – which, perhaps, is what occasioned Emperor Joseph's II's (probably apocryphal) comment, "Too many notes, my dear Mozart, too many notes" – and it is in fact very tricky to cast. First, for the most vivid comic character Osmin, we need a great *basso profundo* with a sonorous low D but also easy top notes, a trill and the nimbleness to negotiate the coloratura and leaps of interval in his set pieces; let me say right away that in my experience no bass – not even great singers like Gottlob Frick or Martti Talvela – begin to approach Kurt Moll for Karl Böhm in 1973, who has a good cast marred by the presence of my tenorial *bête noire*, Peter Schreier, whose nasal, constricted tones so make me wish Fritz Wunderlich had lived to a ripe old age. Konstanze, too, is an awkward role to cast because Mozart makes extreme demands upon her ability to deliver pyrotechnics *in alt* in her long set-piece aria "Martern aller Arten" (Torture of all kinds), but she must also be capable of spinning a long, legato line in "Traurigkeit" (Sorrow). There has to be something noble or aristocratic about her, too, to distinguish her from the more plebeian Blonde – a role scarcely less virtuosic and a mere *soubrette* "tweety-bird" of what my old singing teacher used to call (please excuse the vulgarity) of the "tit and flutter" variety will not do. There is also a tendency to under-cast the second-string tenor Pedrillo with a weedy voice, yet he, too, has a fair amount of demanding music to sing. In other words, all five major singing roles must be carefully allocated - and virtually every recording falls down somewhere here. Another major pitfall is the employment of actors for the dialogue rather than using the singers themselves; there is often a jarring mismatch between the singing and speaking voices.

The other thing which lends this work a special character is its "exotic" setting, capitalising on the then current fad for "Orientalism" and especially Turkey. I shamelessly lift from Wikipedia here, as it summarises its attractions well: "The Pasha's titular harem, for example, reprised themes of sexual libertinage...[a]nd the comically sinister overseer, Osmin, is a send-up of earlier stereotypes of Turkish despotism...However, the opera also defies the stereotype of despotic Turkish culture, since its climax entails a selfless act of forgiveness on the part of the Pasha." The "Janissary music", too reflects that fascination, incorporating two martial choruses and some percussive passages employing a tambur, cymbals, triangles, and a piccolo.

I consider here only those recordings in German which are available on CD, not those in English or on video. There are several live, mono, radio broadcasts from the 50s, seven studio recordings in stereo, ten digital, studio accounts and a lot of live recordings. However, as I remark above, so many are in my estimation fatally flawed, especially many in the more recent, digital batch. I cannot contemplate recommending the 1978 live radio broadcast conducted by Wallberg when it has two of my least favourite voices - Gruberová and Araiza - in the lead roles, nor Christie's 1997 studio recording horribly blotted by the presence of Ian Bostridge. Mackerras' 1999 studio recording has a weak pair of leads, too. Schreier again graces us with his Belmonte in Harnoncourt's 1985 recording; not for me. Hogwood in 1990 on whining original instruments also has a weak Belmonte in a cast of no great distinction; best is Lynne Dawson, who sings often with bell-like purity but sounds thin, pressed and a bit flat on sustained high notes. There are enjoyable aspects to Peter Maag's live recording from

1958 but it is disqualified by the fact that his Konstanze, Teresa Stich-Randall is wholly defeated by her big aria – rather embarrassingly so, in fact. A good few more recent recordings, such as those conducted by Sieghart (1996/97) are either merely adequate, with second-rank casts compared with the best, or worse - and as usual, very few from the last forty years and more begin to compare with pre-1980 versions, imperfect though they might be.

Belmonte's most testing aria, "Ich baue ganz", is too frequently cut from performances and recordings because it is so long and difficult - essentially a concert piece - and is often substituted by the easier "Wenn der Freude Tränen fließen", shifted from the second act. This is taking a horrible liberty with Mozart's music and an admission of adequacy. I indicate below where this has occurred and it must be a major factor influencing choice, as the aria itself is one of the gems of Mozart's oeuvre.

There is also the issue of the dialogue, which is somewhat too long and indigestible for non-German speakers; judicious pruning seems to be the answer - one ignored by René Jacobs who also fiddles with it, adds redundant fortepiano twiddlings and has it overlapping the music – not a successful strategy and one which further compromises an insufferably weakly cast recording which I do not review.

I believe, however, that among the following thirteen recordings may be found the best options for the prospective purchaser, while duly acknowledging that they represent only a fraction of those available.

### The Recordings

**Josef Krips – 1950** (studio; mono) Decca Eloquence  
Orchestra - Wiener Philharmoniker  
Chorus - Wiener Staatsoper  
Konstanze - Wilma Lipp  
Belmonte - Walther Ludwig  
Blonde - Emmy Loose  
Pedrillo - Peter Klein  
Osmin - Endré Koréh  
Bassa Selim - Heinz Woester

I previously [reviewed](#) this and reproduce here an adapted extract from that review:

This was the first nearly complete recording of *Die Entführung* and the first to be issued by Decca on LP. It is nearly complete in that it includes some of the spoken recitative, makes a few internal cuts, common in stage performances of that era, and "Ich baue ganz" is replaced by "Wenn der Freude Tränen fließen", a less challenging option for the principal tenor.

The elegant, spirited orchestral playing is not really matched by equally stylish singing. The lead tenors are distinctive of timbre: Ludwig is grainy and robust, but both singers, especially Peter Klein are marked with that peculiar throatiness that sometimes afflicts Germanic tenors — a sound completely absent in Fritz Wunderlich's tone. Wilma Lipp has a sweet, tweety soprano, accurate but a tad wearing and her voice is very similar to Emmy Loose's, who, to quote William Mann, is given to "chirping and pecking" at her notes. Neither is unattractive but the effect of having two essentially soubrette voices is rather twee. "Traurigkeit" is touching but more body in the voice would be welcome. "Martern alle Arten" is fearlessly negotiated within the limitations of a small voice. The Osmin seems to have the right voice but then cannot manage the coloratura, has an odd habit of crooning his high notes and is unable to do more than groan the low D in "Oh! wie will ich

triumphieren". His characterisation, too, is generally too jolly and sentimental, lacking the core of menace required.

Inevitably the early 50's sound is thin, glaring mono with the voices very forward and the orchestra quite recessed and some faint pre-echo in the opera, but there is plenty of clarity and the playing is stylish and spritely, such that the ear is still beguiled.

Krips remade this opera in stereo in 1966 with the same orchestra and a rather starrier cast (see below); that is superior, I think to this earlier version in almost every respect.

**Ferenc Fricsay – 1954** (studio; mono) DG

Orchestra - RIAS Symphonie-Orchester Berlin & Kammerchor

Konstanze - Maria Stader

Belmonte - Ernst Haefliger

Blonde - Rita Streich

Pedrillo - Martin Vantin

Osmin - Josef Greindl

Bassa Selim - Walter Franck

Fricsay's conducting is preternaturally "period" in its spring and clarity, years before the movement arrived; sometimes he is almost too brisk but that keeps things moving. He has a very adept, if not especially charismatic cast; Haefliger's Belmonte is very like Simoneau's for Beecham: elegant, smooth and patrician; he sings an abridged version of "Ich baue ganz" adroitly but I could wish for a bit more steel in his light voice. Greindl is a surprisingly grand, steady Osmin, sonorous and sometimes biting with decent top and trenchant low notes. He sounds suitably menacing without going too far down that route. "Oh! wie will ich triumphieren" is taken absurdly fast but he copes – aspirates notwithstanding. Martin Vantin's Pedrillo is a bit throaty – more than a touch of the "Kermits" - but that distinguishes him from Haefliger and he is characterful. Maria Stader's soprano is not large and her top notes are thin, but she is refined, controlled singer with some warmth in her tone to distinguish her from Rita Streich's perter, more *keck* manner; to a large degree she reminds of Auger for Böhm. There is a nobility to her manner which lends credibility despite the relative smallness of her sound – and she can mostly handle the coloratura of "Martern aller Arten", albeit in a rather small-scale manner – and after a lovely crescendo on a top G followed by some neat coloratura, she falls off a subsequent top E-flat. Greindl and Streich voice their own dialogue so that goes especially well – as does their combative "face-off" opening Act II - whereas with the other singers, the usual actor-singer voice-discrepancy problem obtains.

Both the singers' ensemble and the orchestra are sharp and precise, responding to Fricsay's drive and energy.

The sound is clean mono with a minimum of distortion - very listenable if obviously a bit dry. This set has no obvious flaws even if no one performance stands out the best; it is one of those "sum of the parts" successes.

**Sir Thomas Beecham – 1956** (studio; stereo)

Royal Philharmonic Orchestra

Beecham Choral Society

Konstanze - Lois Marshall

Belmonte - Léopold Simoneau

Blonde - Ilse Hollweg

Pedrillo - Gerhard Unger

Osmin - Gottlob Frick

Bassa Selim - Hansgeorg Laubental

You would not think that this recording could be so celebrated, given that it suffers from an inordinate number of problems – not least that “Ich baue ganz” is replaced by “Wenn der Freude Tränen fließen”, Beecham capriciously moves “Martern aller Arten” to Act 3, there is the usual actor-singer vocal mismatch and the female leads are generally considered to be something of a let-down.

On the other hand, Beecham's energy infuses every bar, so much so that he makes many other conductors sound lazy and listless. The fact that he recorded so few operas makes this one all the more valuable. Secondly, he has decent mid-50s stereo sound. Thirdly, Simoneau delivers a typically elegant, aristocratic Belmonte, Gerhard Unger is a lively, likeable Pedrillo and Frick in his vocal prime, gloriously gloating and Grand Guignol – even if he does tend to skip and croon top notes.

If only the ladies were as impressive. Ilse Hollweg sounds peculiarly pale, wavery and detached – more an old-fashioned school-mistress than a spirited firebrand – frankly, sexless. Lois Marshall sounds weak and out of sorts, singing in a strange, breathy half-voice. She is simply never jolted out of that mode; “Traurigkeit” is a limp disaster and “Martern aller Arten” is more neatly and effectively vocalised but still a bore – a damp squib.

Despite its merits, this cannot be a library recommendation it is too fundamentally flawed in too many ways.

**István Kertész – 1961** (live; mono) Myto

Orchestra - Mozartium Orchester

Chorus - Wiener Staatsoper

Konstanze - Ruth-Margret Pütz

Belmonte - Fritz Wunderlich

Blonde - Renate Holm

Pedrillo - Erwin Wohlfahrt

Osmin - Gyorgy Littasy

Bassa Selim - Andreas Wolf

Given my supposed criteria, strictly speaking I should not include this. It is at first a bit scappily played, as is evident right from the overture, in slightly fuzzy mono with some faint pre-echo and tape print-through, and appears to be unevenly cast. However, the presence of Renate Holm and Fritz Wunderlich, conducted István Kertész – both men lamentably short-lived - elevates its desirability and even if the other three principal singers here are not especially famous, they all sing beautifully. I had previously thought the Buenos Aires production reviewed next would be markedly better, but I was wrong.

The first surprise is the sonorous bass of Hungarian Gyorgy Littasy, who has a big, black, well-integrated voice; he has much better low notes than most other Osmins here, approximates a trill, and also handles the text well. The low Ds in “Oh! wie will ich triumphieren” resonate satisfyingly and the audience appreciate his efforts. Ruth-Margret Pütz has a nice, full soprano of considerable size and tonal amplitude, with a slightly pulsing vibrato but not objectionably so; she is in command of the fearsome coloratura passages and it makes a change to hear a voice hit those treacherous top notes without going into “bat-squeak” mode. For the virtues of Holm's Blonde, see the next review below – but her top Es in “Durch Zärtlichkeit” here are especially virtuosic and she is given prolonged applause. Erwin Wohlfahrt is as good a Pedrillo as any here, lively, humorous and sufficiently differentiated in timbre from Wunderlich but still reasonably full-voiced. He sings “Im Mohrenland” with more nuance, dynamic variety and sensitively than some Pedrillos, too. Wunderlich himself, of course, sings Belmonte – including a superb “Ich baue ganz” – impeccably; there is no tenor to touch him, even the best like Burrows. Belmonte is a role made for him, showcasing everything about his voice which makes it peerless.

Kertész seems completely at home in the Mozartian idiom, imparting drive, verve and energy to the score, the quality of the playing picks up - some very occasional, intermittent wavering intonation in the violins apart - and ensemble is tight. The abridged dialogue is just sufficient to keep the plot together and no more, which is probably what most of us want – and for once Bassa Selim sounds like a plausibly amorous man in middle age instead of a gravel-voiced heavy-smoker on his last legs.

Cumulatively, the number of boxes ticked keeps mounting as this opera unfolds until realisation dawns that this is easily the best cast, played and sung recording here and were it not for the limited sound, it would easily be the most recommendable.

**Heinz Wallberg – 1961** (live; mono) Myto  
Orchestra & Chorus - Teatro Colón (Buenos Aires)  
Konstanze - Anneliese Rothenberger  
Belmonte - Fritz Wunderlich  
Blonde - Renate Holm  
Pedrillo - Eugenio Valori  
Osmin - Kurt Böhme  
Bassa Selim - Victor Parlaghy

The sound here is a bit tubby and blurred, and suddenly develops an annoying hiss during the orchestral introduction to “Martern aller Arten”, but it is acceptable for a live mono recording over sixty years old; it is clear enough to hear the pit orchestra turning their pages and voices are nicely forward.

The cast is promising, with the same top-quality Belmonte and Blonde as in the live Salzburg performance the same year. Wunderlich's excellence goes without saying and I discuss Anneliese Rothenberger's Konstanze in the 1966 Krips studio recording below. Renate Holm was a Vienna and Salzburg regular over three decades; the only problem with her charming, steady, warm-voiced Blonde is that her voice is barely distinguishable from Rothenberger's – but both are very good. The advantage to hearing Kurt Böhme here over his later studio recording with Jochum reviewed next below is that he has more voice and more inclined to sing rather than indulge in compensatory, “comic” Sprechgesang. He is amusing in a broad manner and obviously feels liberated by this being live rather in-studio so he gets away with a lot of funny business – but he is still crude and blustery with a rather laboured vibrato but and only just about in possession of some of the low notes – in fact he completely skimps them in “Oh! wie will ich triumphieren” and tries to cover that lack with mugging and cackling. Buenos Aires regular comprimario Eugenio Valori makes an attractive Pedrillo – but he should sing his “Mohrenland” arietta softly.

Fritz Wunderlich was an extraordinarily reliable and consistent artist – and by that I do not mean that he dull or predictable; far from it – simply that every one of his three performances reviewed here is of the highest standard and superior to every other Belmonte. It is noticeable, too, that the live acoustic reveals his voice to have been by no means small, explaining why at the time of his early death he was moving into lighter Wagner roles and singing *Das Lied von der Erde*. The strength, beauty and stamina of his voice are constantly in evidence even in this lyrical music; his “Konstanze! dich wiederzusehen” rightly elicits warm applause. Nor for that matter does Rothenberger's soprano sound too small on stage and she sings with considerable power, agility and accuracy, also winning audience acclaim after her big arias.

The chorus and orchestra are excellent and conductor Heinz Wallberg was something of a Mozart specialist.

**Eugen Jochum – 1965** (studio; stereo) DG; Decca Eloquence

Orchestra & Chorus - Bayerische Staatsoper  
Konstanze - Erika Köth  
Belmonte - Fritz Wunderlich  
Blonde - Lotte Schädle  
Pedrillo - Friedrich Lenz  
Osmin - Kurt Böhme  
Bassa Selim - Rolf Boysen

This is yet another set which suffers from what I have come to think of as “The Curse of *Die Entführung*”: under-casting on the distaff side. Lotte Schädle is chirpy and charming enough without being very memorable and her intonation becomes questionable in faster passages. Erika Köth is rather tremulous and piping, insufficiently the *grande dame* and too much the soubrette, thus sounding more like Blonde, especially in her squeaky high notes. It is not that she is a bad singer so much as she is inappropriately cast.

The problems are not all in the female casting. Friedrich Lenz is a rather dull, weedy Pedrillo. Kurt Böhme barks and growls breathlessly, crude and shouty, the low notes are now growled, divisions are aspirated and the voice sounds rough and disjointed. As is so often the case, the actor-singer voice mismatch prevails. So far so bad.

On the other hand, Jochum's conducting is among the most energised and the incomparable Fritz Wunderlich is Belmonte; for once he is caught in excellent studio, stereo sound. “Ich baue ganz” is included, superbly – indeed, virtually flawlessly - sung by him, - and it is properly paced; so many conductors let it drag, whether out of consideration for their tenor or simply a mis-judgement borne of excess affection for the music, I do not know. I keep this set purely for his contribution but it cannot be a first choice, for obvious reasons.

**Josef Krips – 1966** (studio; stereo) EMI; Warner  
Orchestra - Wiener Philharmoniker  
Chorus - Wiener Staatsoper  
Konstanze - Anneliese Rothenberger  
Belmonte - Nicolai Gedda  
Blonde - Lucia Popp  
Pedrillo - Gerhard Unger  
Osmin - Gottlob Frick  
Bassa Selim - Leopold Rudolf

This remake by Krips is superior to his earlier, mono recording (see above). His conducting is typically fleet and skilful and every one of his cast is, I think, better - even if I am in a minority in finding Gedda's tone a bit pinched – but he is in clearest, most youthful voice here. Sadly, he ducks “Ich baue ganz” which is replaced, as usual, by “Wenn der Freude Tränen fließen” and he is never completely comfortable in the decorative passages. Frick is in best voice and definitely an improvement over Koréh; his vocal acting and cavernous sound lets us easily picture the lugubrious, cantankerous Osmin, even though he is not always ideally steady. Likewise, Gerhard Unger is an improvement over Klein, boyish and appealing, even if he is not quite as fresh-voiced here as he is for Beecham, and both Anneliese Rothenberger and the young Lucia Popp are more clearly differentiated, more accomplished and lovelier of voice than their earlier equivalents. About Rothenberger, I am in two minds: she does not really seem to have the heft for Konstanze, perhaps being more a Blonde herself, but she is accurate, in tune, has a trill and injects her singing with considerable verve, managing the coloratura commendably. Given that virtually no soprano in the recordings surveyed here is any better, I am inclined to award her the palm.

Thankfully, the singers speak their own dialogue and it is delivered with relish; the exchanges between Blonde and Osmin, for example, are suitably animated and amusing.

This recording evinces the usual admixture of strengths and weaknesses, while still providing considerable pleasure. As no recording is ideal, this could be a first choice overall if you don't mind the fact that "Ich baue ganz" is missing – furthermore, the first, 1989 CD issue comes with a physical German-English libretto and the newer, 2010 Warner Classics one has it on a "bonus disc".

**Karl Böhm – 1973** (studio; stereo) DG

Orchestra - Dresdener Staatskapelle

Chorus - Leipziger Rundfunkchor

Konstanze - Arleen Auger

Belmonte - Peter Schreier

Blonde - Reri Grist

Pedrillo - Harald Neukirch

Osmin - Kurt Moll

Bassa Selim - Otto Mellies

Böhm's tempi are sometimes a bit leaden and deliberate compared with the snappier rhythms we have become accustomed to since the advent of period awareness. Auger is a precise, appealing singer with slightly thin top notes and rather an absence of the "face" which, for example, gives Callas' rendition of "Martern aller Arten" such individuality. Grist is charming and alert, if occasionally a little shrill. Harald Neukirch's cloudy, insufferably weak tenor is especially inadequate for the lower tessitura of his brief aria "In Mohrenland". My views on Schreier have already been made clear and I won't belabour the point. I laud Moll's Osmin as incomparable in my introduction.

The stolidity of the conducting and the unevenness of the cast rule this out for me as a top choice but I must have Moll's Osmin.

**Sir Colin Davis – 1978** (studio; stereo)

Orchestra - Academy of St Martin-in-the-Fields

John Alldis Choir

Konstanze - Christiane Eda-Pierre

Belmonte - Stuart Burrows

Blonde - Norma Burrowes

Pedrillo - Robert Tear

Osmin - Robert Lloyd

Bassa Selim - Curd Jürgens

Sir Colin Davis is very much a known quantity in Mozart and we may rely upon his drive and energy, which are immediately evident from the crisp, sprung overture. A fine orchestra and choir and several British principal singers of distinction add to a fine line-up, very well recorded. My reservations regarding vocal quality centre on Robert Tear's pinched, piercing tenor and Christiane Eda-Pierre, often a lovely singer with a distinctive, plaintive tone but also a tendency to sound slightly under the note - more noticeable in slow, melancholy music, but any intonation problems in Konstanze's music are passing and she is agile and powerful in her big showpiece aria, displaying excellent breath control. Meanwhile, Tear is less grating than usual here and Robert Lloyd contributes a fruity, strongly characterised Osmin, perhaps the bass who comes closest to Kurt Moll for both vocal and acting excellence but also too young-sounding – because he was then only 38 at the time of recording. I always love Stuart Burrows in Mozart and he despatches "Ich baue ganz" with ease, negotiating the coloratura with elegance and aplomb – although it has to be admitted that Davis goes very easy on him, tempo-wise. Norma Burrowes is a pretty, spirited Blonde, avoiding the shrillness which often afflicts sopranos in this role.

However, the usual problem applies to recruiting actors for the dialogue: the sound of the elderly, gravelly-voiced actor speaking Osmin's dialogue obviously has no relation to Lloyd's rotund, robust timbre; nor does the Belmonte actor sound anything like Burrows.

Much about this recording is deeply satisfying; it has to be among the top choices.

**Sir Georg Solti - 1984-85** (studio; digital) Decca

Orchestra - Wiener Philharmoniker

Chorus - Wiener Staatsoper

Konstanze - Edita Gruberová

Belmonte - Gösta Winbergh

Blonde - Kathleen Battle

Pedrillo - Heinz Zednik

Osmin - Martti Talvela

Bassa Selim - Will Quadflieg

Things start well here with a fleet, lively overture, suavely played by the VPO – and I am sorry, I just like the sound of a modern orchestra which doesn't parp and whine like aggressively "period" outfits. I also enjoy Solti's way with Mozart in general; he never "prettifies" the music but gives it a coruscating gleam.

Having summarily rejected Edita Gruberová's and Francisco Araiza's recording under Wallberg as more than I could face, I had to overcome my antipathy to the soprano's voice to listen to this, as she is accompanied by a tenor I like and admire; the presence of Kathleen Battle and Martti Talvela present further compensations and attractions. Unfortunately, Talvela is not on form; he is blustery, unsteady and uneven in vocal emission, not even sounding secure in those all-important low notes. Heinz Zednik is a neat, firm-voiced Pedrillo; his singing is attractive even if his top notes are a bit windy. Gösta Winbergh has a slightly large, unwieldy voice for Belmonte but he copes well, often sounding both sweet and virile, being able to sing softly as well as finding some heft for his more passionate outpourings of love. Overall, his is one of the most satisfying assumptions of the role. Battle is as pure and charming as ever – a delight.

Which leaves Gruberová. I am aware that others are not allergic as I am to her shrill, squeezed emission and the lack of lower-register integration into her tone – but there it is. She chirps and pecks and trills and swoons and apparently some people like it. To me she sounds like a steam whistle.

The singers speak their own dialogue, which sounds natural. This is a very mixed bag of a recording but if Talvela's lumpiness and Gruberová's manner and tics do not irk you as they do me, you might well consider it.

**Sir John Eliot Gardiner – 1991** (studio; digital) Archiv

Orchestra - English Baroque Soloists

Monteverdi Choir

Konstanze - Ľuba Orgonášová

Belmonte - Stanford Olsen

Blonde - Cyndia Sieden

Pedrillo - Uwe Peper

Osmin - Cornelius Hauptmann

Bassa Selim - Hans-Peter Minetti



The brilliance of the English Baroque Soloists “on authentic instruments” and Gardiner’s penchant for briskness and lend this recording plenty of tension. Instrumental lines are neat and clear but there is no lack of weight in their sound and the hard, prominent percussion are a real asset in the “Janissary music” passages. Stanford Olsen’s neat penetrating tenor fits that model well, too; it is not a big sound and it is a tad constricted, which is why his voice sounds small alongside his co-singers, but it is expressive and flexible – and he sings “Ich baue ganz”, albeit rather cautiously and nasally. Cornelius Hauptmann is another of those basses whose voice does not sound properly integrated; he has two modes – a crooning light tone and a growling lower range. He is a good vocal actor but sometimes I could wish that he would sacrifice bluster for more vocal smoothness and pharyngeal resonance instead of trying to inject every phrase with a new inflection. He has a whole range of vocal tics and tricks but would sometimes do better just to sing.

The full-voiced contribution of the Monteverdi choir in the two choruses tends to emphasise how restrained are some of the individual vocal contributions. That is not the case with the rich-voiced Ľuba Orgonášová, who is easily my favourite exponent of the role of Konstanze. She has the depth, heft and resonance missing in virtually every other soprano in this survey has undertaken that role; the weight of her voice travels right up throughout its range so for once – as with Ruth-Margret Pütz in the Kertész recording above - high notes are not bat-squeaks and her coloratura is flawless. American soprano Cyndia Sieden, too, has a rounder, warmer, voice than is often the case with the soubrettes who undertake Blonde; she is vocally both sensual and appealing. Uwe Peper has a mild, unobjectionable little tenor of no great distinction but he handles the text expressively and sings his arietta “In Mohrenland” sweetly, *mezza voce*.

For once we have no wrenching disjuncture between dialogue and singing as the soloists speak their own dialogue.

I could wish the lightweight Belmonte had more impact here and that Hauptmann’s Osmin, too, were weightier and more vocally ingratiating but as an ensemble and an integrated dramatic experience, this recording sits alongside Colin Davis’ recording as one of the most successful.

**Bruno Weil – 1991** (studio; digital) Sony Classical

Orchestra - Wiener Symphoniker

Chorus - Wiener Staatsoper

Konstanze - Cheryl Studer

Belmonte - Kurt Streit

Blonde - Elzbieta Szmytka

Pedrillo - Robert Gambill

Osmin - Günther Missenhardt

Bassa Selim - Michael Heltau

Alert, pacy conducting, superb orchestral playing, the finest digital sound and one of the best Konstanzes in a young Cheryl Studer constitute the main advantages of this uneven recording. True, Studer tends to “squeeze” loud, high notes and allow the sifter ones to thin out excessively, and she could also deploy more lower register but she is still mostly powerful and impressive in the vocal fireworks department, even if her performance as a whole is not especially distinguished. Kurt Streit’s sweet-toned Belmonte is sweet-tone lacks strength and nobility; in truth, Robert Gambill’s Pedrillo sounds considerably more heroic – the reverse of what is required. Streit sings “Ich baue ganz” but it is something of a non-event. The relatively unknown Günther Missenhardt’s Osmin is rather odd and disappointing; he has two distinct registers: a rather grey, unsteady top and a better, but gravelly, bottom. Likewise, Elzbieta Szmytka is not among the best Blondes; her soprano is somewhat shrill and squeezed and her delivery of her dialogue is bland.

Good conducting, it's hard to get very excited about this one.

**Yannick Nézet-Séguin – 2014** (live; digital) DG

Chamber Orchestra of Europe

Vocalensemble Rastatt

Konstanze – Diana Damrau

Belmonte – Rolando Villazón

Blonde - Anna Prohaska

Pedrillo - Paul Schweinester

Osmin - Franz-Josef Selig

Bassa Selim – Thomas Quasthoff

This *Entführung* from Yannick Nézet-Séguin on DG is poor, as are most of the live Mozart recordings in this series he conducts from Baden-Baden. After a meteoric rise to stardom, Diana Damrau soon wrecked her voice and its pulse and bleat are already by the time of this recording intolerable. Nézet-Séguin goes off like a rocket in the overture such that it is gabbled and garbled and he frequently rushes the music to the extent that it sounds coarse and vulgar. Villazón has tried to re-invent himself as a Mozart tenor but often sounds very nasal and his expression is generalised and melodramatic. He sometimes sings attractively but does not sound the least stylistically or vocally apt, especially when alongside the Pedrillo, Paul Schweinester. He opts to sing “Ich baue ganz” – very cautiously, which was perhaps wise; the coloratura sounds very constricted. Franz-Josef Selig is sonorous but mild and lacking menace; he sounds like a benevolent uncle. Anna Prohaska makes a shrill, charmless Blonde – something of a harridan - of no vocal distinction or individuality; her predominate manner of vocal emission is to “squeeze out” the notes. The chorus sounds absurdly under-staffed and the CEO very “bangy” and nervy. The best vocal quality is to be found in Thomas Quasthoff’s contribution in the spoken role of Pasha Selim.

The recording balance is odd, too: the voices are placed too far forward, a continuo fortepiano tinkles somewhere in the background and can only intermittently be heard.

This is one to avoid.

**Recommendations**

I have spent the last fifty years hoping to find the perfect recording and am fairly sure that isn’t going to happen now. Ultimately, very few, if any, casts have consistently risen to the demands of some of the most difficult vocal music Mozart ever penned. As is so often the case, that ideal cast exists only as an amalgam in my head: Fritz Wunderlich is Belmonte; Kurt Moll is Osmin; Ľuba Orgonášová is Konstanze; Renate Holm, Kathleen Battle or Cyndia Sieden is Blonde and Erwin Wohlfahrt or Robert Gambill is Pedrillo, all conducted by Krips, Fricsay or Kertész – but as you will not be surprised to learn, that recording doesn’t exist and all but two of those artists feature in different recordings.

Ironically, by far the best cast I have encountered is in a relatively primitive live, mono recording (see my recommendations below). If one desires modern sound, no one recording is completely satisfactory, hence, we must compromise: it may well be that no bass approaches Moll and no tenor rivals Wunderlich but they could never have been recorded together and that means I have to have two recordings, each featuring one of them, as supplements. One way to do that, of course, is to buy a highlights disc; there is one for the Jochum recording, but I don’t think there is one of the Böhm. Besides, there is still the option of one of Wunderlich’s live performances, even if it is in indifferent mono sound.

Orgonášová is my favourite Konstanze, but Pütz and Rothenberger run her close and the latter proves her worth in both a live and a studio recording. She is partnered with the best Belmonte in the former with an excellent Blonde and a fine conductor, which makes it tempting, but it is vitiated

by an Osmin with weak low notes. However, the partnership of Wunderlich and Pütz is even better – and Kertész's Osmin is far superior to Wallberg's Böhme or Gardiner's Hauptmann.

The best I can do is to make these tentative suggestions:

Live mono: Kertész 1961\*

Studio mono: Fricsay 1954

Studio stereo/digital: either Davis 1978 or Gardiner 1991 according to your taste.

\* First choice. Despite its mono sound, as a canary-fancier I make no apologies for choosing this above all other recordings. Wunderlich is indispensable and his fellow-cast members evince no weaknesses, unlike the other three recommendations; the nearest in quality and offering the bonus of modern stereo sound, is Davis.

**Ralph Moore**