

**A survey of major recordings of Mozart's *Idomeneo*
by Ralph Moore**

Idomeneo was one of only two mature *opere serie* Mozart composed, the other being *La clemenza di Tito*. It was not a success either at its premiere or subsequently until well into the 20C but is unquestionably the first of his seven great operas, written when Mozart was 25. (Trivia snippet: it is also the first opera to include a clarinet in the scoring.)

There are around sixty recordings in all; I review here fourteen accounts, of which no fewer than four are conducted by Colin Davis and three by John Pritchard. Nine are studio recordings, and two of the five live performances are in mono. I have ignored several recordings in the catalogue simply on the grounds that they are too flawed by being badly played or under-cast, such as those by Maag and Guidarini, which are often euphemistically described as being “a mixed bag” - and I don't see that we need to settle for that if we can have better. Any regular readers will know that I am not a great fan of Nicolai Gedda's tenor but he was the *Idomeneo du jour* in the early 70s and features in a superior broadcast from Rome conducted by Colin Davis and another studio recording conducted by Schmidt-Isserstedt, so he is properly represented. I draw the line, however, at contemplating a review of Ian Bostridge as *Idomeneo* in Mackerras' 2001 studio recording on EMI; his voice, such as it is, is wholly inadequate to this heroic role and he had no business recording it (or, to my mind, anything else, for that matter...)

You will note a preponderance below of recordings of Germanic and English-speaking origin; there is only one from Rome with no Italian principals; it seems that the Italians are not quite as keen on Mozart as other nations but productions of *Idomeneo* have been mounted at La Scala from time to time (as in 2005 and 2019, for example). Similarly, Pavarotti is the only Italian in this survey to essay the role but we have a German, an Austrian, two Englishmen, a Welshman, two Americans, a Pole, a Swede, a Spaniard and a Mexican here – quite a range of nationalities. (I can imagine Bonisolti singing it very successfully, but I don't think he ever did.)

In both the structure and content of this opera, Mozart seems to have emulated Gluck's classical style of writing for his Parisian audience; even its theme of a sacrifice demanded by the gods is similar to that of *Ipighénie en Aulide* and *Alceste*. Complying with French taste, Mozart even composed some extra ballet music for it but it is rarely included. Like its companion piece, *Idomeneo* can seem a little stilted today; its language is flowery and formal and there is rather too much *recitativo secco* for modern tastes. Even the *recitativo stromentato* can become tedious if it is not well inflected by the singers but when well done it propels the action forward efficiently enough, delineating superbly dramatic situations. For reasons of improving that drama, following Gluck's example, Mozart deliberately blurred the boundary between recitative and set pieces and concentrated upon presenting raw emotion. Finally, while some of its music is, by Mozart's standards, fairly conventional, the opera also contains some of his finest arias, ensembles and choruses, as sublime as anything in his later masterpieces; for example, “Fuor del mar” is justly famous and an anthology favourite, nearly all of Ilia's arias are like self-contained concert pieces, and among the many highly melodic choruses “Sidonie sponde” from Act II, with Elettra joining, is especially lovely.

Apart from the pioneering Harnoncourt in 1980, pre-1990 recordings invariably used the later, Vienna version made by Mozart in 1786 in which the role of Idamante was transposed from that for a castrato to one for a tenor. More recently, the usual practice has been to employ a mezzo-soprano as being closer the original casting. Both can be satisfying and I have no bias either way – on one hand, a tenor might seem more dramatically apt to us today, and on the other, a mezzo-soprano might be considered more faithful to Mozart's original intentions – but that's by no means certain,

given that the first Idamante was a 16-year-old castrato, not a woman. Apparently, Mozart was obliged to write the role for him when in fact he had originally intended Idamante to be a tenor; certainly, he seized the opportunity to revert to that idea with the new arrangement for Vienna – so perhaps, after all, there is a case for claiming that the tenor version as written by Mozart himself is both the better and even more authentic option.

I am not going into all the options arising from the tinkering Mozart did with the score when trying to accommodate the vagaries of the various performers and venues he had to deal with; such information is readily available online and the Gardiner edition, in particular, comprehensively, indeed exhaustively, provides all those variations.

John Pritchard – 1956 – studio, stereo; Brilliant. EMI

Glyndebourne Festival Orchestra & Chorus

Idomeneo - Richard Lewis

Idamante - Léopold Simoneau

Arbace - James Milligan

Ilia - Sena Jurinac

Elettra - Lucilla Udovich

Gran sacerdote - William McAlpine

La voce - Hervey Alan

The Glyndebourne *Idomeneo* under Fritz Busch in 1951 was the first ever professional performance in Great Britain. John Pritchard played the harpsichord continuo then; here, five years later, he takes the helm.

Not having played this for a while, I had forgotten, first, how good the stereo sound is; sample the storm and sea-monster scene at the close of Act II for evidence of that. Secondly, I was reminded how sharp, sparky and modern Pritchard's conducting is, even though this recording isn't far off seventy years old. The third surprise – or reminder - is how beautiful Sena Jurinac is as Ilia - as appealing as any other singer in this role, if not more so. Simoneau's Idamante is somewhat nasal and a little effete for a warrior-hero but elegantly sung. He and Jurinac are especially touching in their Act III duet "Spiegarti non poss'io" (which replaced the earlier duet "S'io non morro", still encountered in some recordings such as Pritchard's second studio version). Lucilla Udovich as Elettra is generally strong-voiced with more than a welcome touch of the termagant in her tone but she is not especially distinctive; her Italian diction is a bit flabby and her low notes tend to fade out. Richard Lewis really has the wrong vocal lay-out for Idomeneo, being a light, grainy, very "English" tenor, but he makes a success of the role through intelligent vocal management of the kind he applied to sing successfully such unlikely repertoire as the tenor songs in Mahler's *Das Lied von der Erde*. It is slightly problematic that both tenors are of a similar, silvery voice-type, so there is a lack of contrast and variety when they are singing together but they are excellent, as are all the male supporting roles. The chorus, too, is first class and the recording bears all the marks of a tight, well-rehearsed ensemble – indeed, the cast had already performed this at Glyndebourne.

Of course, this is somewhat cut: 143 minutes compared with Pritchard's later recording with Pavarotti nearly thirty years later, which is forty minutes longer - but I dare observe that a few cuts in the recitative, missing out some of the minor arias such as those for Arbace and internal excisions in the arias of main characters are for most people tolerable – even welcome - losses.

I would always want this recording just for Jurinac's Ilia alone, but it has many other virtues besides.

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

Ferenc Fricsay – 1961 – live; mono - DG

Orchestra - Wiener Philharmoniker

Chorus - Wiener Staatsoper

Idomeneo - Waldemar Kmentt

Idamante - Ernst Haefliger

Arbace - Renato Capecchi

Ilia - Pilar Lorengar

Elettra - Elisabeth Grümmer

Gran sacerdote - Eberhard Wächter

La voce - Gyorgy Littasy

Due cretesi - Irmgard Stadler & Margret Nessel

Due troiani - Kurt Equiluz & Robert Kerns

Here's a very starry cast in a live performance from the Großes Festspielhaus, Salzburg in wiry, but clear and decent mono sound with a bit of coughing and an audible prompter. The sadly short-lived Ferenc Fricsay was a great conductor; I don't think I have ever heard anything directed by him that I do not admire. There are cuts; for example, Idamante loses "Il padre adorato" and Arbace his arias, and Idomeneo his final pyrotechnical aria "Torna al pace", but oddly the ballet music K.367 in its entirety is included at the end of Act I – and is rather nice, even without the visual accompaniment.

Every voice here is firm, well-schooled and free of wobble. First among the famous names to sing is Pilar Lorengar, who has a vibrant, very feminine, slightly fluttery sound which rather suits the character of the long-suffering Ilia. She sings her arias with great poise and tenderness, especially "Zeffiretti lusinghieri". Ernst Haefliger's warm, slightly woolly tenor is a bit lacking in low notes but very distinctive. He sounds passionate as Ilia's lover and can negotiate the ornamentation. It's unfortunate that he often sounds so like his father; without a libretto or familiarity with the score, it would sometimes be hard to tell them apart. Given that Renato Capecchi sang Rigoletto successfully, it is something of a luxury to have him as Arbace. Waldemar Kmentt was similarly versatile, singing everything in a very long career from Mozart, as per here, to Strauss and Wagner. He has sufficient heft, complemented by the agility necessary to sing Idomeneo and is thus another of the few tenors I have encountered who sound right for this role. He is, however, a bit disappointing in "Fuor del mar" – percussive, unsteady and blustery; it doesn't seem to sit in the meat of his voice. He still gets warm applause and as compensation, his delivery of the recitative defying the gods, "Eccoti in me, barbaro Nume!" is very powerful.

I was surprised to see Elisabeth Grümmer here as Elettra, but she had a voice of great penetrative power and she, too, sang the "lighter" Wagnerian roles such as Elsa very successfully. (She comes in a bar early in "Tutte nel cor vi sento" but just repeats the first words and recovers instantly – maybe Fricsay singing along with the intro put her off...anyway, this is live, so we forgive...). She is absolutely lovely in "Soavi Zeffiri", which is the best of the choruses – the equivalent of "Soave sia il vento" in *Così fan tutte*. Her Mad Aria is moved from the end to before the dénouement when the Oracle pardons Idomeneo his vow, which seems odd.

The Viennese choir and orchestra are first-rate, if rather distantly recorded. Despite the limitations of sound and the excisions, there is much to enjoy here. You may hear it on [YouTube](#).

John Pritchard – 1964 – live, mono; Glyndebourne

London Philharmonic Orchestra

Glyndebourne Festival Chorus

Idomeneo - Richard Lewis

Idamante - Luciano Pavarotti
Arbace - Neilson Taylor
Ilia - Gundula Janowitz
Elettra - Enriqueta Tarrés
Gran Sacerdote - David Hughes
La Voce - Dennis Wicks

This was the fifth and final revival of the Glyndebourne revival since the 1951 premiere. It is of course the “Vienna version” for a tenor Idamante and there are cuts in the recitative, even some short scenes are excised, no arias for Arbace and no ballet music – all of which is fine with me and probably most listeners, too.

The attractive booklet-style digipack contains atmospheric black and white photographs of the venue and production – the sea-monster on the cover is hilarious - a synopsis in English, French and German, a quadrilingual libretto and background notes. The biggest surprise of all, however, is the excellence of the sound; it is one of many recordings made by John Barnes according to the best technical standards of the time, albeit in mono – but it is so full and vivid that one hardly notices that. Aside from a few slight pitch variations due to damage to the original tapes, it is remarkably free of flaws. There is some audience applause but it is not intrusive.

It gets better. We have the rare and enticing opportunity of hearing Pavarotti and Janowitz singing together before their respective international careers took off and the listener will not be disappointed; Janowitz soars divinely in her set-piece arias and is pin-point accurate in her coloratura. This was the homesick Pavarotti’s sole Glyndebourne appearance and he is in sappiest, most youthful voice, making the most virile and compelling of tenor Idamantes in this survey – an absolute joy, singing with both bravura and delicacy, coping easily with the high tessitura of the role and displaying an instinctive grasp of Mozartian style. The notes contain an amusing anecdote; he was at the time still unsure whether to be a footballer or an opera singer, so the Assistant Stage Technician used to take him out on the front lawn to kick a ball about to keep him amused and distracted. (From the look of the photos, Lucky Luciano was already becoming a little chunky to be a professional soccer player, so perhaps he made the right choice...)

In addition, Richard Lewis reprises his elegant, stylish and deeply felt Idomeneo. His noble demeanour means that he always sounds like a king – although I could wish that his Italian were more idiomatic. Of course, he sings the shortened version of “Fuor del mar”, very well. Neilson Taylor makes a refreshingly robust Arbace (even though he has lost his arias). Sadly, Enriqueta Tarres is the weak link in this otherwise admirable performance; she is droopy, with weak low notes and often uncertain of pitch in the *recitativo* but, oddly, more competent in the fiery arias; the first, “Tutte nel cor vi sento”, isn’t bad, although she slides and squeezes out high notes in “D’Oreste d’Ajace” rather than hitting them dead centre – and frankly, “Soavi Zeffiri” is a bit painful and embarrassing, she is so unsteady. Something goes horribly wrong with her voice in the Trio, “Pria di partir”; she is all over the place*. Such a pity, especially as her contribution to the other exquisite ensemble, the Quartetto in Act III, “Andrò ramingo e solo” with Pavarotti, Janowitz, and Lewis, is fine.

John Pritchard repeats his fluid and responsive direction of a favourite Mozart opera; the orchestra is first-rate and the chorus is as dynamic as in the 1956 studio recording above. The supporting roles are excellent.

If the Elettra here were more impressive, I could easily make this a top recommendation but an *Idomeneo* without a virtuoso Elettra is a dud; as it is, I still want to hear this, primarily for Janowitz and Pavarotti – and it clearly has other virtues.

NB: this has previously appeared on the Opera d'Oro and BBC labels and may be ordered from the Opera Depot website but I am sure those issues are markedly inferior to this official Glyndebourne remastering.

* Ian Julier's notes tell us "On the particular night of this recording, the young Spanish soprano Enriqueta Tarrés briefly ran into difficulties towards the end of the Terzetto in the closing scene of Act Two, but was promptly covered from the wings."

Colin Davis – 1968 - studio, stereo; Philips
BBC Symphony Orchestra & Chorus
Idomeneo - George Shirley
Idamante - Ryland Davies
Arbace - Robert Tear
Ilia - Margherita Rinaldi
Elettra - Pauline Tinsley
Gran sacerdote - Donald Pilley
La voce - Stafford Dean

This recording on LP was how I came to know *Idomeneo* and I have a soft spot for it. However, it doesn't crave any indulgence, being typically full-blooded and engaged with a young Colin Davis in charge. The overture sets the tone: grand, large-scale playing from the BBC Symphony Orchestra who yield nothing in sonority to their supposedly superior London coevals and there is nothing ploggy or old-fashioned about Davies' conducting despite this being recorded so long ago. Margherita Rinaldi's bright, febrile Ilia immediately gives further pleasure; she is as good as any other singer undertaking this challenging role – challenging because it requires bel canto singing of several beautiful arias complete with the battery of coloratura skills, including a trill, and pinging top notes, requiring the eliciting of pathos and often infused with anxiety and tension – and Rinaldi, with her shining timbre and neat, attractively fast vibrato is unexpectedly wholly convincing, one of my favourite singers in this role. Sadly, she made only two commercial recordings, of which this is one, the other being *Rigoletto* with Panerai and Bonisolti conducted by Molinari-Pradelli, which unfortunately did not display her gifts to the same advantage as does Mozart's music here – see my [survey](#).

English spinto soprano Pauline Tinsley was equally under-recorded but left us a great [Il corsaro](#) (see my survey of early Verdi operas) and here she shines again as a wild-cat Elettra, putting to shame some of the assumptions of others who have attempted and under-played and under-sung this most demanding of Mozartian roles. She has the voice as well as the temperament – listen to the lower-register engagement and fearless top notes – and there is no hole in the centre of her voice, either.

You will note from the cast list that we have no fewer than four tenors here (Donald Pilley being one, too) which, by any reckoning, might seem like a poor choice, inconducive to tonal variety. However, some recitatives and Robert Tear's arias are cut – which I consider a blessing, because the contrast between his bleating and the mellifluousness of the other tenors when he joins them is marked. Tenor George Shirley has a distinctively dark, haunted sound, much more apt for the paternal ruler than the lighter-voiced, silvery tenors who feature in this survey. Having a heavier voice, he is not quite as fleet as some in "Fuor del mar" but he manages the runs well enough and is still grand and powerful, with crystalline Italian diction; he crowns the aria with a top B. and makes a fine job of his

concluding aria, “Torna la pace” with a long line, a trill and plangent top B-flats. Ryland Davies’s tenor is rather tight but he is very musical and easily distinguished from the others. He makes a virile, incisive Idamante, singing his arias with a blazing attack, sailing up to top notes, executing a trill and negotiating all the vocal ornaments his music requires with great confidence – it is probably the best thing he ever recorded. Try his opening aria for a demonstration of those skills.

So much about this recording is ideal; to take a random example, the lovely Act III quartet, “Andrò ramingo e solo” is done here as well as in any recording I know. Donald Pilley is a steady, incisive, attractively-voiced High Priest and the ever-reliable Stafford Dean intones the voice of the Oracle more sonorously and hieratically than any other singer other than Bryn Terfel in this brief but important role.

The BBC chorus could not be more engaged and vital and there are some effective passages of crowd-singing in the excellent stereo recording, placing one group in the distance with the other simultaneously very present in the sound picture. I like the bold harpsichord accompaniment to the *recitativo secco*. This is a recording which belies its age and as far as I am concerned is infinitely more energised and involving than Gardiner’s tidy account of the work (see below). I just wish it were more readily available, having been supplanted by Davis’ later, digital recording; high time for a remastered issue.

Colin Davis – 1971 – live radio broadcast, stereo; Opera d’Oro
Orchestra & Chorus – RAI Roma
Idomeneo – Nicolai Gedda
Idamante – Jessye Norman
Arbace – Andrea Snarski
Ilia – Heather Harper
Elettra – Rae Woodland
Gran sacerdote – Antonio Liviero
La voce – Franco Pugliese

In excellent sound, this live broadcast from Rome has a lot going for it, not least the presence of an attractive trio of leading ladies, especially a young Jessye Norman in an unusual role for her.

The first voice we hear is Heather Harper, singing with great feeling, attack and purity of tone, easily negotiating the wide-ranging coloratura demands of Ilia’s “Padre, germani, Addio!” Norman’s dark, rich “mezzo voice” – often billed as a soprano Falcon, she could essentially sing in either Fach – is suitably “masculine” of timbre and contrasts ideally with Harper. Her first aria, too, is deeply impressive; there is nothing staid or constrained in her characterisation of the young prince. She is equally adept in the ornamentation and already displaying her prodigious breath control. Rae Woodland had a powerful dramatic coloratura soprano well suited to the Queen of the Night – and hence Elettra, too. Her “rage” aria right at the end before she storms off deservedly receives a round of applause from an audience mostly very quiet, throughout, a few stray coughs notwithstanding. You could not ask for these three female roles to be better sung.

Despite my declared resistance to Nicolai Gedda’s vocal charms, he sounds firmer, darker and more even here, as good as I have heard him anywhere. His crisp Italian diction is always an asset and he encompasses the ornamented runs and long held notes cleanly. His big display aria, “Fuor del mar”, exposes the constriction in his tone that irks me but he delivers it very competently – and his concluding top B-flat and ensuing trill in that aria is impressive.

The chorus is wonderfully enthusiastic but not ragged and sound as if they are really enjoying their part in proceedings. The orchestra, too, is really fine and we may take Colin Davis' dynamism in this music for granted while thoroughly appreciating it; he never lets this music drag despite its scope for occasional longeurs.

If Gedda pleases you, this is a very strong option for the tenor version. You may hear it on [YouTube](#).

Hans Schmidt-Isserstedt – 1971 – studio, stereo – EMI (& in a 6 CD set on the Brilliant label)

Orchestra – Dresdener Staatskapelle

Chorus – Leipziger Rundfunk

Idomeneo – Nicolai Gedda

Idamante – Adolf Dallapozza

Arbace – Peter Schreier

Ilia – Anneliese Rothenberger

Elettra – Edda Moser

Gran sacerdote – Eberhard Büchner

La voce – Theo Adam

Excellent stereo sound and a fleet, precise lightness of touch are immediately apparent in this recording, despite it being half a century old – but then this is the Dresden Staatskapelle, no less, and the under-rated conductor is one whose work I almost invariably enjoy.

I also invariably enjoy Anneliese Rothenberger's neat, agile soprano. She straddled the worlds of opera and operetta and has the weight and the coloratura facility (including a trill) to do justice to the role of Ilia – her Italian is better than some German singers, too – although even she occasionally cannot escape the suspicion of making a sound nearer to "qvel" than "quel"...

This is another performance that risks having no fewer than four tenors in the cast, including Eberhard Büchner – and, in short, none really comes up to standard.

Adolf Dallapozza has a light, grainy tenor which isn't especially heroic. He tends to be unsteady and has some bad habits such as squeezing and shouting notes for emphasis when his intonation becomes suspect; to me, he doesn't sound comfortable in Mozart, which requires poise, tonal evenness and steadiness above all – qualities which are noticeably absent from Idamante's opening aria, "Non ho colpa", which verges on the weedy. I take little pleasure in his singing.

We then come to Idomeneo. My MWI colleague Göran Forsling refers to this set in his [review](#) of the patchy and inadequate Naxos recording and kindly but unwittingly reinforces – well in advance, as he was writing in 2010 – my own reservations about two of the tenors here. I quote him: "Gedda was a great Mozart singer, as can be heard on several sets: Krips' *Entführung*, Klemperer's *Don Giovanni* and *Zauberflöte* to mention three but on this *Idomeneo* he is uncharacteristically strained...Peter Schreier's credentials as a Mozart singer are well known: not the most ingratiating of tenor voices but singing with deep insight".

He is right; Gedda sounds strained, tired and unsteady here; he is much, much better for Davis the same year in Rome. Maybe the pressures of being a jet-setting tenor had got to him or he was just having an off-day – and thankfully Schreier is here relegated to the brief role of Arbace but gets his arias - which he murders as only he can...

Which, of the principal singers, leaves Edda Moser. She is certainly powerful and has plenty of temperament but sounds uncharacteristically cloudy and gusty, nor is her lower register very

defined; again, other exponents of this role give a more convincing account of this most challenging of roles.

The chorus is a bit heavy and doesn't field soloists as good as may be heard in several other recordings. Theo Adam's Voice of the Oracle is very distantly recorded and sounds a bit light and wobbly compared with, say, Stafford Dean, Nikita Storojew, Bryn Terfel or Siegfried Vogel. All in all, this is a bit of a non-starter, given the competition. You may hear this on [YouTube](#) – but I wouldn't bother, unless you simply want to check up on whether I am just an operatic grinch.

Karl Böhm – 1977 – studio, stereo – DG
Orchestra – Dresdner Staatskapelle
Chorus – Leipziger Rundfunkchor
Idomeneo – Wieslaw Ochman
Idamante – Peter Schreier
Arbace – Hermann Winkler
Ilia – Edith Mathis
Elettra – Julia Varady
Gran sacerdote – Eberhard Büchner
La voce – Siegfried Vogel

My regular readers will know that the very presence of Peter Schreier in any recording gives me palpitations but when he is situated in a cast of this calibre with eminent Mozartian Karl Böhm at the helm, I can hardly ignore this studio recording. Schreier notwithstanding – and he is given a lot of music including an “insertion aria” “Non temer, amato bene” KV.490 with a solo violin introduction which Mozart re-worked for tenor for a private performance in 1781 - there are some other minor problems, such as Teutonic Italian – but it is again Schreier who is the guiltiest of that failing, even singing “qvesta” - and even these eminent singers are sometimes audibly taxed by this demanding music. The secco recitatives are accompanied by a rather obtrusive, heavyweight harpsichord – not a big deal, though. Finally, although the recording runs to 169 minutes, there are frequent – if mostly minor - cuts to everyone's role except Ilia, including both Arbace's arias - and the inclusion of KV.490 accounts for ten minutes of its length.

However, a spritely overture followed by Edith Mathis' spirited, febrile, penetrating Ilia starts off proceedings very well. She has an intrinsically lovely voice and sings with great passion and feeling. She is then joined by Schreier who expertly bleats and croons in falsetto his way through Idamante's opening – how CAN people who profess to love the voice stand his nasal whine? Fortunately, that splendid chorus “Godiam la pace” soon soothes my troubled mind, vigorously sung by the large, full-voiced Leipzig Radio Choir. Enter Julia Varady and we hear another “proper voice”, a spinto soprano similar to that of Carol Vaness (see the Levine recording below) very well suited to singing Elettra, being vibrant and powerful, with lower register reserves and ringing top notes. Her shimmering “Soavi Zeffiri” and slightly more effortful “D'Oreste, d'Aiace” are highlights. Wieslaw Ochman's Idomeneo was a surprise; I had forgotten how attractive and versatile his tenor was. It has a slightly hard edge but considerable heft and a certain dark timbre which suits the role. He sings the less-taxing version of “Fuor del mar” but displays nuanced control. The minor roles are well taken, including a splendidly resonant Oracle.

Böhm's conducting is a little stolid and uneventful, perhaps so much so that I hardly notice it while listening – but staid and unobtrusive is fine – until you hear how the young Davis tears into the music.

My antipathy to Schreier – especially as he has the lion's share of the singing - prevents me from making this a personal recommendation. Regardless of him, while I do not think it among the very best recordings, much about it remains highly satisfactory, especially Mathis' and Varady's contributions. You may sample it for yourself on [YouTube](#) and decide.

Colin Davis – 1978 – live radio broadcast, mono – Oriol Music Society
Orchestra & Chorus – Covent Garden
Idomeneo – Stuart Burrows
Idamante – Janet Baker
Arbace – John Lanigan
Ilia – Yvonne Kenny
Elettra – Magdalena Cononvici
Gran sacerdote – Thomas Allen
La voce – Gwynne Howell

Allowances have to be made for the sound here; it is a live Radio 3 broadcast with some occasional interference, but it is so good I was not at first sure whether it was mono or narrow stereo. The cast is starry, if not perfect: Stuart Burrows is as mellifluous, but also as impassioned, as ever; Janet Baker is a fiery, energised Idamante – even if, just occasionally, the part seems to lie a little high for her and the one or two top notes are strained; Yvonne Kenny is sweet-toned and touching as Ilia. Two famous singers grace the minor roles of the High Priest and the voice of the Oracle, and only John Lanigan's bleating Arbace disappoints – but it is a small role. About Magdalena Cononvici, I am not sure; she has a round, hooty tone which seems to fall slightly on the flat side and is occasionally unwieldy but she is certainly a committed, large-voiced Elettra, well-contrasted with the two other leading ladies.

The young Colin Davis was peerless as a conductor of Mozart; this performance evinces the same restless drive and energy which so animates his superb studio recording of *La clemenza di Tito*, also starring Burrows and Baker.

Unfortunately, although I have this in my collection, I am unable to ascertain whether this is still available from the OMS.

Nikolaus Harnoncourt – 1980 – studio, stereo – Teldec
Orchestra – Mozartorchester des Opernhauses Zürich
Chorus – Opernhaus Zürich
Idomeneo – Werner Hollweg
Idamante – Trudeliene Schmidt
Arbace – Kurt Equiluz
Ilia – Rachel Yakar
Elettra – Felicity Palmer
Gran sacerdote – Robert Tear
La voce – Simon Estes

Here, over fifty years ago, is Harnoncourt at the cutting edge of HIP practice, using a period orchestra and casting a mezzo as Idamante. It's pretty lean, raw and scrawny-sounding after the Big Bands employed by Pritchard, Davis and Böhm, with hard drum-sticks, whining strings and farty brass but I know some people like that crudeness. I find it rather wearing. Harnoncourt tends to push on, so choruses such as that "Placido è il mar" sound rushed.

Werner Hollweg is a decent Idomeneo, slightly nasal and of no special charisma; “Fuor del mar” is neatly sung but is not the event it can be. Trudeliese Schmidt is a strong, slightly fruity Idamante but a lack of breath support and a wavering vibrato often make her sound to be singing slightly flat. Rachel Yakar is a little pale, too, and both singers have something of a hoarse, windy edge marring the purity of their tone. Kurt Equiluz has a neat little tenor and is given Arbace’s arias. Robert Tear is simply ghastly as the High Priest, bleating, crooning and groaning in a vain attempt to inject expressivity into his exhortation to Idomeneo. The brightest spot here by far is Felicity Palmer as Elettra, who is many ways my ideal - she has such a rich, characterful timbre and was always great at portraying vengeful, demented harridans. Some do not like the slight “pulsing” of her vibrato, however, and a certain cautiousness approaching top notes signals her imminent switch to mezzo roles. The chorus is enthusiastic but there are co-ordination problems between on and off-stage choruses.

This is complete and in addition, the fifteen minutes of ballet music is appended, making this set run to 195 minutes; however, the provision of that bonus does not change my decidedly lukewarm reaction to this set as a whole. The analogue recording is OK but rather blurry with some odd balances. There is much better to be had. You may hear this on [YouTube](#).

(There is also a supplementary CD containing nearly forty minutes of the alternative and discarded arias and duets are provided, with the same cast except Francisco Araiza is singing Idamante in those arranged for tenor, which is of interest to the more academically minded but I do not like his strangled voice at all.)

Sir John Pritchard – 1983 – studio; digital – Decca
Orchestra – Wiener Philharmoniker
Chorus – Wiener Staatsoper
Idomeneo – Luciano Pavarotti
Idamante – Agnes Baltsa
Arbace – Leo Nucci
Ilia – Lucia Popp
Elettra – Edita Gruberova
Gran sacerdote – Timothy Jenkins
La voce – Nikita Storojew

Despite the presence of three favourite singers in Pavarotti, Baltsa and Popp, for a while I postponed acquiring this recording on the grounds that neither the addition to the cast of Gruberova nor Nucci presented me with any incentive to do so; quite the reverse. As it turns out, I should not have let that deter me, as Nucci was still young and relatively free of the bad habits such as scooping and over-singing which soon compromised his voice and induced an intolerable bleat into his vocal production; he is fine here. Similarly, although Gruberova always evinced vocal tics which held trouble in store – especially neglect of a developed lower register and a kind of pulsing, gulping in her line – she, too, is young here and her ability to negotiate demanding coloratura passages is evident. Having said that, there are half a dozen singers who have more heft and temperament, and make more impact as Elettra – Tinsley, Woodland, Palmer and Vaness all come to mind – but she’ll do, and to be fair, she makes a lovely job of her contribution to the sublime chorus “Sidonie sponde”.

The first voice we hear after the spirited overture is Lucia Popp, who is of the Yvonne Kenny type of soprano: light, pure and trilling with a gift for pathos. Occasionally, I wish she had less “squeal” in her tone and a bit more warmth of the kind Jurinac and Harper produce but she is engaging and vulnerable-sounding. Baltsa is perfect as Idamante, having a tough, flexible timbre with plenty of

attack and a great top extension – and her voice is intrinsically attractive. The real draw here, however, is Pavarotti himself, who at 48 years old has moved on from singing the young lover Idamante in 1964 (see above); his gift for subtly inflecting text and shading his vocal line was always under-estimated and here he is at his most sensitive; you have only to hear how he delivers his first passage of recitative, “Eccoci salvi alfin”, to know this is a singer who understands how to marry words and a beautiful voice – and his voice is indeed beautiful: honied and flexible. The way he opens “Tranquillo è il mar” in a whispered mezza-voce is lovely, then he negotiates the long-breathed lines of “Vedrommi intorno” effortlessly. Likewise, his soft singing of the extended phrases in “Accogli, oh re del mar” is so seductive. Of course, he also has both the agility and the reserves of power for declamatory music such as “Fuor del mar”. Mozart is not by any means the first composer we associate with him but he is a masterful Mozartian tenor.

Timothy Jenkins is a fluid, expressive High Priest and Nikita Storojew is a suitably sepulchral Oracle, nicely distanced in a reverberant acoustic. The chorus is a bit grand and unwieldy when you really want to hear a band of citizens, warriors and mariners, not a choral society.

There isn't much to say about Pritchard's conducting because he knows exactly what to do and avoids both undue friskiness and being too reverential. He might be directing a large, plush orchestra but they don't sound unduly weighty at all. This is the full, uncut, tenor version.

John Eliot Gardiner – 1990 – live composite*; digital – Archiv

Orchestra – English Baroque Soloists

Chorus – Monteverdi Choir

Idomeneo – Anthony Rolfe-Johnson

Idamante – Anne Sofie von Otter

Arbace – Nigel Robson

Ilia – Sylvia McNair

Elettra – Hillevi Martinpelto

Gran sacerdote – Glenn Winslade

La voce – Cornelius Hauptmann

*presumably with patching from other sessions for the appendices

This is a super-complete, composite version of the 1781 score with appendices providing thirteen minutes of alternative versions of recitatives and orchestrations and the K.367 ballet music, and thus runs to 211 minutes – which is nearly half an hour's music more than Pritchard's second recording and should be enough *Idomeneo* for anybody. I have owned it for years and confess that I rarely felt the impulse to play it before embarking on this survey. Reacquaintance with it reminded me why that is. Being such a good conductor of Gluck, Gardiner could be expected to be similarly adept with *Idomeneo*. The overture is certainly lively enough but now, over thirty years later, I am increasingly dubious about the certainty of HIP practitioners that Mozart's contemporaries eschewed vibrato and still don't relish those whining strings and squeezed phrases and perhaps the fact that the opera is so long and there is an appendix to be added into the bargain induced Gardiner to default into the trademark briskness which characterises his less-interesting performances - and encourages him to rush his singers, too.

Let me deal with the distaff side of the cast first. Sylvia McNair is a wispy-voiced Ilia, making her sound girlish but rather pale; it is pretty, trilling singing but somewhat bloodless. Other singers give Ilia a more robust profile. Anne Sofie von Otter's fine, neat voice is even throughout its range with an attractively fast vibrato but not in the least suggestive of masculinity and again, I find her a tad bland compared with richer-voiced mezzo-sopranos like Baker, Baltsa and Norman. She is sometimes a correct, anonymous singer; I find that she does nothing wrong I can put my finger on – except

engage me. Hillevi Martinpelto sounds very similar to her co-singers; none is especially distinctive or distinguished and she hardly throws herself into her furious arias, approaching high notes cautiously and squeezing them out, not finding much lower register and coming across as generally underwhelming.

Moving to the men, I always enjoyed Anthony Rolfe-Johnson's mellow, gentle, mellifluous tenor – but there is none of the steel, bite or passion I hear in George Shirley's or Luciano Pavarotti's Idomeneo. He sings much of the role in a dreamy mezza-voce or even falsetto. He negotiates his coloratura runs in "Fuor del mar" with admirable aplomb – more neatly and accurately than virtually any other singer in this survey – but hardly sounds the least perturbed. Nigel Robson is the possessor of one of those mild English tenors so beloved of the authentic movement. The High Priest and Oracle are likewise ordinary. The Monteverdi Choir is as involved as the rather boomy acoustic permits but the live sound is generally good – just the occasional cough – and the balance between voices and orchestra perfectly fine.

In truth, nothing, but nothing about this performance excites me and I shan't listen to it again when there are so many preferable alternatives. Academics and musicologists might want it for the appendix; to me it's a snooze-fest. You may hear it on [YouTube](#).

Sir Colin Davis – 1991 – studio; digital – Philips
Sinfonieorchester und Chor des Bayerischen Rundfunks
Idomeneo – Francisco Araiza
Idamante – Susan Mentzer
Arbace – Uwe Heilmann
Ilia – Barbara Hendricks
Elettra – Roberta Alexander
Gran sacerdote – Werner Hollweg
La voce – Harrie Peeters

Despite my attachment to Colin Davis' 1968 account, I can understand why this, his remake nearly a quarter-century later, has put that earlier recording in the shade. First, it is digital - although the analogue sound of that first studio recording was perfectly satisfactory - and secondly the casting of a fine mezzo-soprano as Idamante was more in line with modern practice.

However, for me there is one insuperable obstacle to my recommending it, and that lies in the casting of Francisco Araiza as Idomeneo. I simply cannot abide his constricted vocal production, or the glottal bleat with which he often begins phrases, so as with the presence of Schreier in Böhm's recording and, to a lesser extent, Gedda when he is off form, I go elsewhere. His whine intrudes into the vocal fabric of ensembles and spoils such potentially sublime passages as the Act 2 Trio "Pria di partir". However, if, to my bafflement, you like him, you will find much to enjoy in this recording, as it is otherwise quite well cast, so let me adumbrate its three great virtues.

First, it features one of the finest orchestras in the world and a splendid chorus directed by a Mozart specialist who is not yet constantly grunting his way loudly through the music, as increasingly happened as he aged – although the habit is just beginning to show – or rather, sound – here. He knows exactly how to pace this music. Secondly, we hear a fine Ilia from Barbara Hendricks, whose sweet, trilling, but husky, sound is perhaps an acquired taste; I can imagine that some would like a little more heft and steel in the voice but she is expressive and touching, top notes are full and pure and she executes coloratura confidently. Her "Se il padre perdei" is lovely. Thirdly, she is aptly paired with yet another warm-voiced mezzo-soprano in Susan Mentzer; they make an attractive, well-contrasted couple. I find that Mentzer has more personality than, for example, von Otter; she is

well-known for her “trouser roles” (though I doubt whether Idamante wore those) and has all the right vocal techniques under control. She was under-recorded, so it is good to have such a lovely performance as this preserved.

Not everything else is ideal. Roberta Alexander is suitably violent and impassioned as Elettra and it is good to hear her plunge into her lower register, but the tremolo in her tone is intermittently bothersome and top notes can be thin and harsh. Uwe Heilmann as Arbace has a small, rather effete tenor and also exhibits a tremolo; I am not in ecstasies when he and Araiza are singing together, but his role is small, especially as his arias are cut. Werner Hollweg, a former Idomeneo for Harnoncourt, here sings the minor role of High Priest and Harrie Peeters is a suitably imposing Oracle.

For me, this is another Hamlet without the Prince. You may hear this on [YouTube](#) and judge for yourself.

James Levine – 1994 – studio; digital – DG
Metropolitan Opera & Chorus
Idomeneo – Plácido Domingo
Idamante – Cecilia Bartoli
Arbace – Thomas Hampson
Ilia – Heidi Grant Murphy
Elettra – Carol Vaness
Gran sacerdote – Frank Lopardo
La voce – Bryn Terfel

More than a decade after Pavarotti gave us his definitive Idomeneo for Decca, here it is Domingo’s turn for DG, in a full, uncut account running to 176 minutes. This is a typically bold, extrovert reading from Levine; his conducting is typically energised and well-sprung; rhythms are taut, balances are excellent and tempi are just as they should be. He directs an unashamedly Big Band orchestra, which plays superbly, and a full-throated chorus; of all the recordings I listened to, this created the most drama in the choral and orchestral outburst “Qual nuovo terrore!” and they sound truly terrified in “Corriamo, fuggiamo!”, all caught in ideal digital sound.

The cast is interesting. My immediate concern was that both Heidi Grant Murphy and Cecilia Bartoli had voices too light and small for their roles and certainly the former has a very breathy, soubrettish timbre verging on a mannered, “little girly” sound - she generally sang lighter Mozart roles such as Susanna from *Le nozze di Figaro* and Pamina in *Die Zauberflöte*, and in that regard reminds me of Sunhae Im for Jacobs (next below); my idea Ilia has more much depth and heft in her tone. She sings expressively and accurately but her actual voice is not very varied and in truth I find its squeakiness a little irritating. Bartoli is more distinctive with her fast, almost rattling vibrato and warm, smoky tone; she certainly contrasts strongly with Ilia and sounds suitably masculine. She is of course very adept with the text and does not exaggerate the breathy expressivity which sometimes mars her characterisations. I happily concede that any doubts I had about her proved to be unfounded. The final – and vital – member of the trio of female virtuosos required here is Elettra, and just as Vaness was a wonderful Iphigénie a couple of years earlier at La Scala, she is my ideal: hysterical, tinged with craziness, exhibiting a strong lower register as well as powerful top notes but also singing her gentler numbers attractively, despite a slightly excessive pulse in her vibrato, most noticeable in “Idol mio”. She metaphorically tears up the scenery in “D’Oreste, d’Aiace”; its challenges hold no terrors for her and she joins the elite club of singers who nail this role. Thomas Hampson is an elegant, sensitive Arbace and gets both his arias, which he sings very well, incorporating the decorative elements adeptly, including a trill. Having Bryn Terfel as the stentorian voice of the Oracle is a real bonus. I do not like Lopardo’s throaty tenor but his is a small role.

So we must come finally to the lead role. Not having too many high notes and a generally lower tessitura, it suits Domingo. His strength was never *in alt*, but his warm, slightly plaintive timbre, care over long-breathed phrasing and skill with words to match Bartoli's all make him ideally suited to singing Idomeneo at this stage of his career, aged 53; their scene together when he rejects his son is touchingly done. He sings the plainer version "Fuor del mar" but that is the version of the aria Mozart adapted for tenor and it suits his larger, heavier voice better, just as it does Pavarotti – and he does it very well. In all honesty, as the old saying goes, I cannot put a cigarette paper between him and his coeval Pavarotti in terms of quality; vocally, of course, they are not so similar but both are noble and thrilling, delivering entirely credible, highly enjoyable performances.

My reservations about the Ilia apart, I am surprised at how taken I am by this recording; I had not encountered it before and lazily assumed the superiority of the Pavarotti/Pritchard account, but that is not the case – which is the whole point of doing these surveys. The only downside is that such discoveries further complicate the difficulty of choosing the best.

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

René Jacobs – 2008 – studio; digital – harmonia mundi

Orchestra – Freiburger Barockorchester

Chorus – RIAS Kammerchor

Idomeneo – Richard Croft

Idamante – Bernada Fink

Arbace – Kenneth Tarver

Ilia – Sunhae Im

Elettra – Alexandrina Pendachanska

Gran sacerdote – Nicolas Rivenq

La voce – Luca Tittoto

This recording is a frustrating concoction of the sublime and the ridiculous; Jacobs does nothing by halves and quite often I wish he would.

Whining, droning strings apart, I am surprised by how leaden and heavy-handed the overture is here. It's good that Jacobs is avoiding the undue skittishness which mars too many "period" recordings, but does he have to go so far to the other extreme? The contrast with Sunhae Im's very breathy, light-weight Ilia when she starts to sing is striking; it is debatable whether she simply has enough voice for the role, as she is essentially a soubrette and a bit squeaky. She has a particular facility for sustained pianissimi, however, which is rather engaging and her Italian is excellent but the fortepiano and cello accompaniment to her recitativo, recorded very close, is overpowering and irritating; the recording itself is very boomy and amplifies Jacobs' emphatic grunting. He has a penchant for choosing very fast or very slow tempi – a mannerism of some period practitioners which has become a cliché - so after the lugubrious overture we get a rushed "Godiam la pace"; likewise, the March in Scene 10, Act I is more of a sprint followed by a gabbled chorus. As I have previously observed, haste does not necessarily equate to tension.

Bernada Fink is yet another of the many first-class mezzo-sopranos with which we are currently blessed. She is very assertive and thus as convincingly "masculine" and princely as any female singer in this role. One issue is that all the singers have obviously been coached to ornament their music quite extensively which will not be to all tastes; it is not especially to mine. One can have too many appoggiaturas.

Alexandrina Pendachanska wields a big voice skilfully; “Tutte nel cor vi sento” is taken at another absurdly fast pace but she keeps up and injects some pleasing lower register into her vocal line. She has both the voice and the temperament for the role but is pushed to and beyond reasonable limits in terms of both speed and decoration - but that all reinforces her lunacy (she is, after a matricide and has seen horrors).

I am not enamoured of Richard Croft’s throaty tenor; there is more than a touch of the Bostridges about him and for me his voice lacks gravitas and beauty of timbre. Alongside properly developed tenor voices, his sounds small-scale and constricted, for all his agility. I also do not understand why he has been told to speak his recitative in an almost unrelieved half-voice conveying wide-eyed wonderment – he couldn’t sound less regal. “Fuor del mar” is sung in the elaborate version with all the runs neatly in place but is vocally underwhelming.

Kenneth Tarver is a lissom, agile Arbace who gets both his arias. His voice is similarly small but more pleasing than Croft’s. Nicolas Rivenq is a light but incisive High Priest. Luca Tittoto doesn’t sound especially hieratic or sepulchral as the voice of the Oracle but sing his brief part well enough.

As you see, I find this recording to be a baffling amalgam of contradictions, with a balance sheet as full of debits as credits; some lovely voices and fine singing but also some typically wilful choices by Jacobs. In the end, it is too inconsistent to merit recommendation for all its incidental merits – and if the central, eponymous lead is not satisfactory, it must yield to one in which he is. However, you may find it more to your taste and can test that by listening to it in its entirety on [YouTube](#).

Recommendations:

In some surveys I find that one or two recordings leap out as self-evidently the most recommendable; others throw up a whole host of possibilities, and which should be acquired has to be down to the prospective purchaser’s taste. The latter is the case here; at least half a dozen of the fourteen recordings I review are top candidates.

It is clear to me, however, that that four tenors stand above the rest as near ideal exponents of the eponymous leading role: Luciano Pavarotti, Plácido Domingo, Stuart Burrows and George Shirley - and you may add Gedda live in Rome, if he is your cup of tea; Richard Lewis is very good, too, if rather “English”; Ochman is also pleasing.

Even more singers excel as Idamante. In the mezzo category, literally every one of the eight singers above is thoroughly enjoyable but if pushed, I favour Baker, Norman and Baltsa. Of the six tenors in that role, for me, the young Pavarotti reigns supreme but there’s not much to distinguish Léopold Simoneau from Ryland Davies from Ernst Haefliger; all are very good – but please, spare me Schreier and Dallapozza.

We are similarly spoilt for choice when it comes to Ilia. My favourites are Jurinac and Janowitz, but Lorengar, Rinaldi, Harper, Kenny, Mathis and Bartoli, are all also very fine.

The hardest role to cast satisfactorily is Elettra, yet several singers here are mightily impressive. For me, the virulent virtuosity of Pauline Tinsley, Julia Varady, Felicity Palmer, Carol Vaness and Alexandrina Pendachanska marks them out as admirable exponents of that part, but Palmer, Varady and Pendachanska are the bright spots in either poor – or, at least, flawed – recordings and Tinsley is in one hard to find.

Regarding conducting, Davis is evidently pre-eminent but all three of Pritchard's recordings are wholly satisfactory. I like Levine, Fricsay and Schmidt-Isserstedt very much, too, but the latter has a deficient cast. Harnoncourt, Jacobs and Gardiner are too brisk and superficial - and Jacobs is wilful into the bargain. Böhm is just a bit dull.

Which leaves me in a quandary. No recording stands out as entirely satisfactory and as usual I fantasise about a non-existent composite, so we must compromise according to taste.

If you want Colin Davis:

I recommend Davis' 1978 radio broadcast but I am not even sure of its availability and in any case, there are recordings with equally impressive casts in better sound. I would like to endorse his 1968 recording above all, it being well cast and in good stereo, but it, too, is hard to obtain, with used copies of the 3 CD set currently going for high prices. Given my distaste for Araiza's tenor, in my view the best and most easily obtainable of Davis' recordings is the live 1971 broadcast – and bear in mind that I must thereby grit my teeth and acclaim Nicolai Gedda.

If you want Pritchard:

All three of his recordings have much to offer, but my preference is for Pavarotti as Idomeneo in the latest, digital version over the earlier two, those both being cut and the second being in mono – albeit very good mono – and featuring a poor Elettra.

My own choices embrace no fewer than eight of the fourteen recordings here, demonstrating the depth of the catalogue, despite there not being as many as of his subsequent masterpieces:

First: Davis 1968 or Davis 1978 – if you can find either affordably or at all.

Joint second: Pritchard 1983/Levine 1994 – both have a superb Idomeneo and an excellent mezzo Idamante but a less than ideal Elettra.

Third: Davis 1971 – a great cast - but Gedda is not my ideal Idomeneo.

I would always want Pritchard's 1964 Glyndebourne recording as a supplement, despite its flawed Elettra, especially as of these recommendations, only this and the earliest Davis recording have a tenor Idamante, which some prefer, so failing those two, the earliest Pritchard and Fricsay recordings are good tenor options.