

Turandot – the last great Italian opera.
An analysis and survey of audio and DVD recordings by Lee Denham.

On the fiftieth anniversary of the release of Decca's legendary recording of Turandot featuring an all-star cast and conducted by Zubin Mehta, and to mark in 2023 a brand-new studio recording of the work from Santa Cecilia in Rome, conducted by Antonio Pappano.

Background

In spite of the range and breadth in Ralph Moore's series of Opera [Conspectuses](#), from Mozart's da Ponte operas to twentieth century masterpieces, such as *Duke Bluebeard's Castle*, there are one or two omissions. One day his much-anticipated survey of Schoenberg's masterpiece, *Moses und Aron*, may appear (Ed. *Don't hold your breath*), but there are also other more notable absentees, such as Puccini's *Turandot*. This is because, as Ralph quite rightly asserts, this opera is the recipient of what many would argue as one of the most perfect opera recordings ever made, by Decca in August 1972, featuring Dame Joan Sutherland and Luciano Pavarotti - so what is the point of doing a Conspectus when everyone already knows what the best recording is going to be? This survey therefore - ****spoiler alert****- is not one that is going to challenge that conclusion, but will rather consider some of the other different recordings and films of this opera featuring other artists who did not appear on that Decca recording, the roll call of which is quite staggering and includes: Maria Callas, Elisabeth Schwarzkopf, Eva Turner, Birgit Nilsson, Mirella Freni, Magda Olivero, Nicola Zaccaria, Giovanni Martinelli, Jussi Björling, Mario del Monaco, Franco Corelli, Plácido Domingo and Herbert von Karajan, all of whom have contributed to the recorded history of Puccini in immeasurable ways. Of course, Decca's recording first released in 1973 is also included and retains Ralph's 'untouchable' accolade, but there are other recordings of significance that shine almost as brightly.

History

On 25 April 1926, a year and five months after the death of Puccini, his final opera was premiered at La Scala, Milan. It was a high-profile event, led by the most famous conductor in the world at the time, Arturo Toscanini, along with a star-studded cast. It was a success that propelled the work towards international fame, with premieres at the Met in the same year (with Maria Jeritza as Turandot and Giacomo Lauri-Volpi as Calaf and Tullio Serafin in the pit, no less), while the Covent Garden premiere took place less than twelve months after. The opera was also received with much respect by the critics, noting how the composer had "*all but completely dismissed the sugariness that made so much of his earlier work too easily palatable and too quickly cloying*" [Eric Bloom, *The Guardian*, London 8 June 1927]. However, what nobody realised was that they were witnessing the final opera of the great Italian tradition. Of course, there have been other fine operas by Italian composers since, worthy efforts by Ferruccio Busoni, Ottorino Respighi and Ildebrando Pizzetti, to name three, but nothing which has claimed even a tenuous foothold in the operatic repertory, which had been largely dominated by Italian composers since 1598. In that year, a certain Jacopo Peri presented a work performed at the Palazzo Corsi in Florence named *Dafne*, based upon the eponymous Greek legend, which incorporated both melodic speech set to music and recitatives as a central part of the drama for the first time in a manner modern-day listeners would recognise as 'opera'. Thereafter, opera dominated Italian musical life and Italian opera dominated opera, from the works of Claudio Monteverdi (1567-1643), through to foreign composers such as Gluck, Händel and Mozart who also wrote operas in Italian, until the nineteenth century when the geniuses of Rossini, Donizetti, Bellini and then Verdi blazed away, creating an operatic style that became known as *bel canto*. Ironically, it took a non-Italian, namely Richard Wagner, to shake the foundations upon which Italian opera, with its reliance on set-pieces and recitatives, was built, when his opera *Lohengrin* was premiered at Bologna in 1871. Despite Wagner being a vocal critic of the *bel canto* style, when his opera was translated into Italian, ironically, it revealed itself to be a continuation of that very *bel canto* tradition he had so criticised and the Italians embraced it as if it were their own (one of Luciano Pavarotti's unfulfilled wishes was to have sung and recorded *Lohengrin* – in Italian of course).

However, its use of leitmotifs as well as its demonstration of new methods for harmonic and lyrical expansion, enabled dramatic continuity as well as symphonic expansion in opera. Wagner's ideas were eagerly taken up by Verdi in his later works, as well as the emerging 'giovane scuola' (young school) of contemporary Italian composers who seized upon Wagner's radical rethinking of the genre and fused it to their own idea, which was to apply it to dramas of everyday people in real-life situations devoid of symbolism, in seamless, through-composed music; they called it *verismo*. This final blossoming of Italian opera burst onto the scene with Pietro Mascagni's *Cavalleria Rusticana* in 1890 and Ruggero Leoncavallo's *I Pagliacci* in 1892, followed by works from Alfredo Catalani, Francesco Cilèa, Alberto Franchetti, Umberto Giordano, Alberto Zandonai – and Giacomo Puccini.

Puccini's first great success, *Manon Lescaut*, was premiered in 1893, ironically in the same month as Verdi's final opera *Falstaff* was first performed. However, he first started to work on what would become his final opera, *Turandot*, in 1919, when he became interested in the German playwright Friedrich von Schiller's (1759-1805) adaptation of a dramatized fairy tale by the eighteenth-century Italian playwright, Carlo Gozzi (1720-1806) of the same name. This, in turn, was based upon one of the tales from late seventeenth and early eighteenth-century translations of *The Arabian Nights*, in particular, the story of the daughter (dokht) of Turan, whose suitors had to navigate a route full of hidden swords to the princess's palace before having to answer four riddles to win her hand in marriage.

Most people reading this will know of the story of *Turandot*, a tale set in Ancient China of a young princess who possessed an icy beauty, sharp and crystalline, but one who is haunted by the murder of an ancestor and consents to marry only the man who can successfully answer three riddles. Her glamour and unattainability attracts men of royal blood from the world over, all of whom are unable to solve the riddles and so are beheaded until, Calaf, the deposed prince of Tartary, accepts and is successful at the challenge, much to the despair of the princess, who begs her father, the Emperor, to be released from her oath. He refuses, so Calaf offers his own solution – discover his own name by dawn and his life will be forfeit to Turandot and she will be free from the oath. As the action shifts into the final act, two individuals seen with Calaf at the beginning of the opera are seized violently by Turandot's guards: Timur, Calaf's father, and his slave girl, Liù. They are brought to the princess and to spare Timur's torture, Liù says that only she knows the unknown prince's name, but refuses to divulge it, even when she herself is tortured. Turandot asks Liù, why she will not reveal the name, to which the slave girl answers simply "for love", before seizing the sword of one of the guards and killing herself, thus taking Calaf's secret with her to the grave. The final scene witnesses Calaf confronting Turandot alone, admonishing her for her cruelty, before kissing her, the burning passion of which thaws the Icy Princess, whose uncompromising hatred is transfigured into universal love, a point proven when Calaf reveals his true identity to the Princess who then tells the Emperor that she has indeed learned the name of the Unknown Prince and "His name is Love!" ("*Il suo nome è Amor!*"). The opera then ends in general rejoicing, with the corpse of Liù still warm.

Puccini was also inspired by an acquaintance who was a foreign diplomat and a collector of Oriental art and had in his possession a Chinese music box that provided Puccini with some of the themes for his opera, including fragments of the Chinese national anthem which underscore the music of the Three Ministers, as well as the authentic Chinese folksong "*Mo-li-hua*" ("The Jasmine Flower") - the music identified with Princess Turandot. He required a huge orchestra to evoke the barbaric majesty of Ancient China, which includes a full complement of strings and harps, triple woodwind, two alto saxophones, four French horns, three trumpets (plus six onstage), four trombones (and a further four onstage), a whole battalion of percussion with assorted gongs and tam-tams, as well as at the end of Act II (and possibly in homage to Wagner who also used the same instrument at the same point in his opera, *Lohengrin*), an organ. It marked a significant departure from the more modest resources required for his previous operas that had all featured those ordinary folk of *verismo* – poets, painters, seamstresses, singers, sailors and barmaids, and was certainly a break from tradition for him to be setting a story that was essentially a mythical tale. Some critics have pointed out that as a result, he

was out of his depth, hence his struggles to finish it, he being dissatisfied and uninspired by its ending. Perhaps that is not surprising when in this opera, *verismo* crashes into exactly what it was trying to get away from – fairy-tales, this one being set in the exotic, far-away land of Ancient China, with a murderous princess who can be ‘humanised’ only by the kiss of a man. No wonder Puccini couldn’t finish it and as a result *Turandot* was destined to be the last of the great Italian operas, whereby *verismo* self-immolated, hurling itself into the flames in its very own *Operadämmerung*.

Art imitating Life

Except it was more true-to-life than perhaps many may have thought at the time. In 1884, Puccini started a relationship with a married woman named Elvira Gemignani who, two years later, bore him a son out of wedlock. Catholic Italy was scandalised, but Puccini persevered and soon after, when Elvira’s husband was killed (ironically, by the jealous husband of *his* lover) they married. The irony was that after having persisted through so much scandal, the union was not a happy one; Elvira became jealous and aloof, a situation that worsened when she suspected (quite rightly) that her husband was having affairs. Many have speculated that these illicit liaisons were the inspiration behind much of Puccini’s music, with possibly each opera inspired by a different woman whom Puccini had loved – indeed, in the first six operas, when the heroines die, the opera dies with them: Anna (*Le Villi*), Fidelia (*Edgar*), Manon Lescaut (*Manon Lescaut*), Mimì (*La bohème*), Tosca (*Tosca*), and Cio-Cio-San (*Madama Butterfly*). *La rondine* ends as Magda/Pauletta finishes her love affair and abandons Ruggero. Only in *La fanciulla del West* does Puccini find a bittersweet happy ending, albeit with a parting of a different kind.

In 1909, Elvira became convinced that her husband was having another affair, this time with one of their maids, Doria Manfredi and publicly accused her of doing so. Once again, Catholic Italy was scandalised, so much so that Doria could not cope with the humiliation and committed suicide. The subsequent autopsy revealed that Doria was *virgo intacta* and could not have committed adultery with Puccini, or indeed anyone for that matter, which resulted in the composer having to pay the Manfredi family significant compensation to save his wife from going to jail. However, the significance of a story whereby a beautiful woman could not be loved and whose reputation is saved by the ultimate sacrifice of a servant girl, is surely not lost on a fairy tale such as *Turandot*. Furthermore, Puccini died having completed the final score all the way up to, and including, the death of the slave girl, so once more with the death of a woman an opera written by Puccini ends – except this time it would need to be finished by another composer.

The Final Scene

It is a point that was inadvertently reinforced by Arturo Toscanini at the premiere in 1926, when he stopped the performance at the death of Liù, turned to the audience and said: “*A questo punto termina l’opera per la morte del compositore*” (“Here the opera ends, because at this point the composer died”) and the curtain was lowered. There has been some speculation as to whether Toscanini conducted any of the following nights, but newspaper reports appear to confirm that he probably conducted the following two performances, which included the Alfano completion – however, there is no disputing that he never conducted the opera again, even if nobody appears to know why. Perhaps he was dissatisfied with the ending – or maybe, even his role in it.

There is no doubt that the conclusion of this opera is problematic; a happy ending so soon after the self-sacrifice of the slave girl is about as dramatically knuckleheaded as having Isolde contentedly walk off stage on the arm of King Mark after her *Liebtestod*, as well as being in as much bad taste as having a love duet between Pinkerton and Kate, cradling their new son, after the suicide of Butterfly – except that is exactly what happens. Composition sketches indicate that Puccini was having the same doubts and was clearly struggling to find a suitable ending. Had he lived, maybe between him and his librettists, a different conclusion may have been worked out – after all, it took three significant revisions after failed live performances before *Madama Butterfly* became the work we are

familiar with today (and which the distinguished British music critic Alan Blyth called “one of the three greatest operas of the twentieth century”); in addition, there are sketches indicating that the composer was considering composing a revised ending for *La rondine* at his death, one that ends with the suicide of Magda/Paulette rather than her walking away on the arm of her rich ‘protector’ Rambaldo and abandoning her lover Ruggero (that potential revised ending has indeed been staged in the US by the director Marta Domingo). So there is a precedent for revisions, and the original libretto supplied to Puccini by Giuseppe Adami and Renato Simoni was seriously flawed, a point that was clearly evident even at the London premiere, when Eric Blom in his review for the *Guardian* newspaper observed that “*the whimsical fantasy of the original, which, of course, is one of Carlo Gozzi’s dramatic fairy-tales, has all but evaporated*”. This is significant, for not only are the trio of government ministers no longer the humorous observers of the original but are, instead, presented by Puccini more as colourful *scherzandi* in between the blood and thunder of the main action, but the libretto of *Turandot* does not have the final soliloquy/aria crucial for all tragi-comedies to work, whereby the main protagonist has an “It’s a fair cop, guv’ – I was wrong all along” speech, apologises to all for his behaviour and appeals for forgiveness, which is granted, for all to end in general, bitter-sweet rejoicing. In short, the failure is because Adami and Simoni were unable to properly transition the tale of *Turandot* from its roots in *commedia dell’arte* into grand opera.

At his death, Puccini left thirty-six pages of sketches for the final scene, containing occasional hints of melody and orchestration, but with much missing. He had hoped that Riccardo Zandonai would complete the work, but after objections from Puccini’s son, Franco Alfano was eventually chosen, since his own opera *La leggenda di Sakuntala* was similar to *Turandot* both in setting and heavyweight orchestration. His first draft of the completion [ALFANO I] was severely criticised by Toscanini, ostensibly since he had the temerity to orchestrate some of the passages where Puccini had left no instructions and even added a few lines of his own to the libretto, which was considered incomplete even by Puccini. He was therefore forced to submit a revised version that followed Puccini’s sketches with a narrow-minded dogmatism which meant that some of the libretto was subsequently omitted, merely since Puccini had left no indication of how he wanted it to sound; it is this version [ALFANO II] that is most commonly heard today.

It is clear to my ears that Alfano took his cue for the final scene from the very opening chords of the work, where the two unrelated keys of C-sharp major and D minor are superimposed in an attempt to evoke the executioner’s falling axe, as the three chords which open the final scene seem to echo. In Alfano I, the additional passages seem to be orchestrated from the same cloth and lend the music a more savage and barbaric hue than the more familiar Alfano II. It is difficult, too, to understand quite why Toscanini would think the revised version preferable, not just since much of the libretto, which helps explain Turandot’s actions, was omitted, but (and in particular) the final chorus, for which Puccini just left some vague mention of the reprise of Calaf’s third act aria, is now the toe-curlingly banal ‘Let’s-hear-it-from-y’all-one-more-time: *Nessun dorma*’, instead of Alfano’s inspired adaption of it, which finds both Turandot and Calaf soaring above the chorus on the word “*amor*”. When Alfano’s original version was finally premiered at London’s Barbican Centre in 1982, by the London Symphony Orchestra and Chorus conducted by Owain Arwell Hughes, with Sylvia Sass as Turandot and Franco Bonisolli as Calaf, the distinguished Austrian musicologist and Puccini specialist Mosco Carner wrote in the programme notes: “*For all those who have studied Alfano’s original score there cannot be the faintest doubt that it is far better balanced than the shortened second version and that the change in Turandot from an ice-cold princess to a loving woman is made to appear more gradual and psychologically far more plausible than is the case in the revised version.*” This conclusion needs however to be offset by the *Guardian* critic at the London premiere of the entire opera some half a century prior, who wrote of the Alfano II revised ending: “*A curious fact is that the concluding pages finished after the composer’s death by Franco Alfano, have more of the authentic Puccini flavour than anything else in the score*”. However, from this point on it is up to readers to decide for themselves which version is the more authentic, since the original Alfano completion has now been recorded both as a standalone scene for Decca (featuring Josephine Barstow), as well as part of the

latest complete set from Warner Classics (featuring Kaufmann and Pappano) and both are reviewed below.

Also reviewed are several performances of the completion made by Luciano Berio, who was commissioned by the Puccini Estate at the beginning of this century to try to provide a more nuanced and less triumphalist conclusion to the opera. In part he succeeds, allowing the union of Calaf and Turandot to triumph by acknowledging that it is only so at a cost of much bloodshed and at a cost to others, with the opera now ending quietly. On the other hand, the musical language is closer to that of Berg's *Wozzeck* than anything Puccini ever wrote and means that by the time the curtain falls at the end, you have forgotten how it has all began.

There have been other endings too, albeit not recorded, most notably by the American musicologist Janet Maguire, who believed Puccini coded his intentions for the finale in the sketches and in the score beforehand and so produced her own completion that was premiered in 2010, as well as from the Chinese composer Hao Weiya, that was premiered in 2007. Neither has garnered much success. It is of some irony, then, that an opera that is driven along by a tale of solving riddles should therefore be one where the final riddle of all - how it should have ended - remains unsolved.

Turandot – A survey of audio and selected live recordings on CD

Excerpts by early interpreters

- **Giacomo Lauri-Volpi Nimbus Prima Voce recital (Nimbus) Arias**
- **Anne Roselle & Fritz Busch Edition Staatskapelle Dresden - Volume 30 (Profil) Excerpts**
- **Richard Tauber: The Gentleman Tenor (Warner Classics) Arias**
- **Turandot & Opera Arias – Eva Turner (Turandot), Giovanni Martinelli (Calaf), London PO, Chorus of the Royal Opera Covent Garden, John Barbirolli (John Barbirolli Society) Excerpts**

It is quite unusual for a work premiered as late as 1926, particularly an opera, to have no extant recordings made by the principals who took part in its premiere who could, perhaps, lay claims for some authenticity. Of course, Toscanini never conducted it again after the initial run, but nor is there anything from the opera sung by the first Turandot, Rosa Raisa, or her Calafs (who alternated the part), Miguel Fleta and Franco lo Giudice. One of the best we have is **Giacomo Lauri-Volpi** who sang Calaf at the Metropolitan Opera premiere and whose voice Puccini apparently had in mind for the role.

It is interesting that Lauri-Volpi was regarded as a lyric tenor, rather than a spinto, or drammatico, with a bright and focussed sound which could cut through the densest orchestral accompaniment. We can hear him in a live *Non piangere, Liù* from 1941, in which he weeps buckets, but far better is a *Nessun dorma* from the same year in the recording above, where his bright sound is especially well captured.

Bianca Scacciati was the Turandot of the London premiere (with **Francesco Merli** as Calaf, who appears on the Gina Cigna complete recording below) and a recording of them singing *In questa reggia* was taped by Columbia, but has rarely been available on compact disc. At the Covent Garden premiere, her voice was described as “ice cold” by the London critics, but she was hugely popular at La Scala between 1925 and 1932 and was a favourite singer of Toscanini.

Anne Roselle gave the premiere of the opera in Germany at the Dresden State Opera, with Fritz Busch conducting and **Richard Tauber** as Calaf, a late replacement when the scheduled tenor fell ill. Tauber had three days both to learn the music and to prepare for the premiere.

There are brief snippets from the opera recorded as early as 1926, sung in German, where Roselle is accompanied by Busch and reveals herself to be a warm and sympathetic interpreter. It is a pity that nothing was captured at the time of her singing with Tauber but he did record both '*Nessun dorma*' and '*Non piangere, Liù*' in the same year. Like Lauri-Volpi, he too had an essentially lyric tenor voice, but his focus and elegance of execution meant he could often sing spinto roles such as Calaf. Somewhat predictably, there is an Austrian restraint in '*Non piangere, Liù*' especially when compared to Lauri-Volpi but intriguingly, like Merli, he takes the end of *Nessun dorma* strictly in time, whereas Lauri-Volpi some fifteen years later decides he is going to hang on to the top B and A of '*Vincerò*' for as long as he can.

Perhaps the closest we can get to 'authenticity' then is with **Eva Turner**, who was present during the premiere of the opera in 1926, albeit as part of the audience.

These tantalising excerpts from two London performances at the Royal Opera finds Turner partnered with Giovanni Martinelli as Calaf and John Barbirolli in the pit, leading the London Philharmonic Orchestra. Liù's '*Signora, ascolta*', Calaf's '*Non piangere*' and '*Nessun dorma*', Turandot's '*In questa reggia*' and the Riddle scene are heard from two performances, each recorded twice. The Liù of one performance was Mafalda Favero and of the other Licia Albanese – and before you start looking for your time-machine, don't forget that you will have to stay a little longer, for in that same season at Covent Garden Furtwängler led an entire *Ring Cycle*, featuring Flagstad and Melchior.

Brief they may be, but these excerpts also tantalisingly answer three riddles of their own. The first is what the voice of Eva Turner, one of the first great Turandots, was like, as it is caught spectacularly well – and, indeed, it is like a tsunami of sound, enormous in its power, crushing all in its path; she achieves the near impossible, by making even Birgit Nilsson sound small-scaled and shrill in comparison. It is interesting that she is partnered with Martinelli who is, to my ears, one of the greatest Otellos of all (partnered with Tibbett and Panizza in an electrifying live recording from the Met in 1941), who is of course more of a spinto-drammatico tenor compared to Tauber and Lauri-Volpe – he is naturally, infinitely more heroic sounding than his distinguished colleagues, yet still opts for the high C in '*Non, non principessa altera*', and thrillingly hangs on to the top B in '*Nessun dorma*', thereby answering the second riddle of when tenors started to use the aria to showcase their spectacular lung-power. The third riddle is whether Eva Turner was influenced by the usually fluid Toscanini at the premiere, since the tempos adopted in these excerpts are marginally faster than usual - but John Barbirolli was always a passionate and convincing conductor of Puccini anyway, so that could be just coincidental. Either way, these fifty-five minutes of excerpts are essential listening.

The Year 1938

**Turandot - Gina Cigna; Il Principe ignoto (Calaf) - Francesco Merli; Liù - Magda Olivero; Timur - Luciano Neroni; Ping - Afro Poli; Pang - Gino del Signore; Pong - Adelio Zagonaro; L' Imperatore Altoum - Armando Giannotti, Un mandarino – Giuseppe Bravura
Orchestra Sinfonica e Coro dell' EIAR di Torino Conductor: Franco Ghione – 1938 (studio, mono)
Cetra/Naxos**

**La principessa Turandot – Maria Cebotari, Calaf – Carl Hauß, Liù – Trude Eipperle, Timur – Georg Hann, Ping – Fritz Harlan, Pang – Werner Schupp, Pong – Robert Kiefer,
L'imperatore Altoum – Hubert Buchta, Un mandarino – Heinrich Hölzlin**

Stuttgart Radio Chorus, Children's Chorus; Stuttgart Radio Orchestra – Joseph Keilberth, Conductor – 1938 ([radio]studio, mono) Koch Schwann

It is astonishing to note that the first two complete recordings in this survey are from 1938, only a dozen years after the opera's premiere and enjoy very fine sound, not just for the era, but probably in comparison to the early 1950s too.

The most famous of them is the work's first studio recording by Cetra made in Turin, which is conducted lovingly by **Franco Ghione** and indeed, the immediacy of Giuseppe Bravura's voice as the Mandarin is quite startlingly. Of course, thereafter the sound is somewhat limited, with fuzzy timpani, but it is more than listenable, even if the decision to have a Chinese gong, pitched on A, at the end of the first act rather than a usual tam-tam, does rather make it sound as if Calaf is whacking the bottom of a saucepan to summon the Icy Princess. The Calaf on this recording is one Francesco Merli, who took on the role at the Covent Garden premiere in June 1927 (and not without some criticism from newspaper reviews at the time) – his voice has certain baritone hues, almost Otello-like at times and his interpretation is heroic in outlook, although some listeners may be disappointed that he takes the final '*Vincerò*' of *Nessun dorma* strictly in time, with none of the lingering on the final high B and A. That said, his '*Non piangere, Liù*' is warm and leisurely, before Ghione injects some urgency into the proceedings to end the Act. His father, Timur, is sung by Luciano Neroni, one of the leading Italian basses during the inter-war years and even if I rather suspect the recording does not do his voice justice, there is little to complain about his performance. As the slave girl, Liù, is Magda Olivero – readers will need to stop for a moment to consider that she made her debut at the Met as Tosca some thirty-seven years later at 65 years young (it is well worth seeking out the '*Vissi d'arte*' from that performance on YouTube – you most certainly would have never heard anything like it). Pre-war, her voice had a quick vibrato that fell out of fashion shortly afterwards, but she inhabits the role like few others – her scream when being tortured is hair-raising, the best by far in the recorded history of *Turandot*, if that's your kind of thing.

As *Turandot*, Gina Cigna was, alongside Eva Turner, the most famous exponent of the role before the war, even if the two singers' approaches could hardly be more different, with Turner powerful like a huge glacier crushing all before her, whereas Cigna is more a ball of fire. Her singing thrilled audiences for its no-holds-barred abandon that was totally subservient to the action of the moment, even if critics were often sniffy about its technical execution; ultimately, they rather proved to be correct, as Cigna quickly burnt her voice out before its time, like a blazing comet disappearing into the heavens. On this recording and at her peak, she is perhaps somewhat more restrained than legend would lead us to believe, but the power of her voice and her smouldering intensity do come across in such a way that many believe her to be the finest *Turandot* of all and it is perhaps this reason why listeners should investigate this recording, even if the inevitable deficiencies in the sonics means it can never be a first choice.

Turning to the radio broadcast from 10 December 1938 conducted by **Joseph Keilberth**, is to encounter surprise after surprise. In the first place, the sound is astonishing, even when compared to the commercial Cetra recording above – occasionally the odd singer may sound a bit too close to the listener than they should be - for example, the Emperor for most of his entries, and Calaf with his soft *piano* entry at the start of '*Nessun dorma*', or rather '*Keiner schlafe*', since this account is also sung in German - however, it is infinitely better than a radio broadcast from 1938 has any right to be. Moreover, it is cast in strength, and features two participants who elevate the whole enterprise to something approaching greatness. The great tragedy, ironically just like the opera itself that was incomplete at the time of Puccini's death, is that this recording is also incomplete with some of the original acetates missing, which means the final scene of the opera contains only around six minutes of the central Calaf-Turandot duet, plus the final chorus.

With all of the minor roles taken strongly, the spotlight shines on the main quartet. Georg Hann may have been a leading *buffo* interpreter during his time, but his Timur sounds majestic – he would have been in his early forties at the time of this recording and may have been subsequently better known had he not died only a dozen or so years later, after which his presence would almost certainly have graced many of the opera recordings of the 1950's. His Liù is Trude Eipperle, who not only sings the part of the slave girl beautifully, but whose sense of involvement in the part makes much more of the role than usual – in the final act, you really sense the terror before her torture, as well as the love she explains to Turandot; it is a fine assumption. The Calaf is Carl Hauß, a name unfamiliar to all but the most diligent of voice connoisseurs, possibly because he spent his career in all the major German opera houses apart from Berlin, Munich and Dresden. His voice is warm and bright, as well as large, but is used with great sensitivity, as with '*Non piangere, Liù*', as well as the opening of '*Nessun dorma*.' Readers may be surprised to discover that he possesses far more ping and squillo than Jonas Kaufmann, for example and, overall, he is far better than many other native Italian tenors in this survey.

Maria Cebotari's Turandot is the thing though – it is quite astonishing. Most people reading this would know that she was a singer with an extraordinary repertoire, who was as comfortable singing coloratura, as she was Mimi in *La Bohème*, as well as the title role of Richard Strauss's *Salome*. Her Turandot reminded me of comparing Frieda Leider's Brünnhilde with Kirsten Flagstad's – the latter used to soar effortlessly over the Wagnerian orchestra, majestic and stately, whereas Leider's smaller voice used to instead burn through the orchestral fabric with an intensity that was white-hot in its brilliance. Cebotari's Turandot has that identical fire, plus the fact that she sounds like a *young* girl, rather than a fully grown woman who should know better, also adds a dramatic dimension to the character that no other singer in this survey can match - there are parallels here with Salome, both young princesses whose youth causes them to act with irrational cruelty. It just makes the missing parts of the final scene all the more disappointing, since you do not get to hear her 'transformation' properly.

She is aided and abetted by the conductor Joseph Keilberth, a name most readers would be familiar with by his involvement in the 1955 Bayreuth Festival *Ring Cycle* that has been released on the Testament label. When comparing that particular cycle with the others performed in Bayreuth around the same time, I have always found while Keilberth was not able to match the fiery incandescence of Clemens Krauss, or epic majesty of Hans Knappertsbusch, it was instead the manner by which he unfolded the action in the Tetralogy that made it dramatically just as satisfying as his two colleagues; in short, he told the story better. It is the same with this *Turandot*. Not everything works – the transition between the two scenes in the second act contains a few clunking gear changes, but that has to be offset by the electricity he and Cebotari generate in the Riddle Scene, where the sparks genuinely fly and the sense of jeopardy, of Calaf walking the tightrope between victory and disaster each time he attempts a riddle, is palpably real. Similarly, at the beginning of Act III, the feeling that both Timur and Liù are in significant danger when captured by Turandot's guards is greater than with any other version – Keilberth really tells the story with his conducting and the playing and singing of the Stuttgart Radio forces leave nothing to be desired.

Ultimately, this set may already be ruled out for some people with its (comparatively) primitive sound, being sung in German and also for not being complete. However, with its strong set of principals and, in particular the dramatic conducting of Keilberth, as well as the astonishing Maria Cebotari, it is a recording that in my opinion deserves the highest respect.

The wooden spoon

La principessa Turandot – Gertrude Grob-Prandl, Calaf – Antonio Spruzzola-Zola, Liù – Renata Ferrari-Ongara, Timur – Norman Scott, Ping – Marcello Rossi, Pang – Angelo Mercuriali, Pong – Mariano Caruso, L'imperatore Altoum – Angelo Mercuriali, Un mandarino – Marcello Rossi

**Chorus and Orchestra of the Teatro La Fenice di Venezia, Franco Capuana, Conductor – 1953
(studio, mono) Remington**

Long forgotten and for many years unavailable were a series of opera recordings made in Italy during the early 1950's, mainly of Verdi, but also of other composers' works, often by Fonit Cetra who employed second-string native Italian singers whose quality would surely make them stars today, but whose names are now only familiar to the most dedicated voice aficionados. One of the reasons these recordings quickly disappeared from the catalogues was often their very poor sonics, largely due to cheap vinyl pressings, although in recent years many have had their sound cleaned-up and transferred to compact disc with very impressive results. This studio recording of *Turandot* from 1953 is from those group of recordings, except it was made by the US company, Remington Records, and the end results are ultimately rather disappointing, even if eagle-eyed readers would have already spotted a couple of names in the cast list that promise much, namely Franco Capuana, who was also the conductor on the legendary Decca-Tebaldi *La fanciulla del West*, as well as Gertrude Grob-Prandl, an extremely fine Wagnerian soprano who was the Brünnhilde in Rudolf Moralt's legendary *Ring Cycle* with the Vienna Symphony Orchestra from around the same time.

Very often with *Turandot*, the opening few minutes give us clues to how good the overall performance is going to be and the scene set for this particular recording is not a good one, with Puccini's gongs sounding for all the world as if the pots and pans of the Venice opera's canteen have been requisitioned by the orchestra for this purpose, while the entrance of the singers does not inspire further confidence, all three being balanced far too close to the microphones. As always with these ancient recordings, the passage of time means that documentation can be sparse, and there is nobody left alive to ask about these things; however, in the same year of this recording, Remington produced the first stereo recording in the USA (of Dvořák's Eighth Symphony with the Cincinnati Symphony Orchestra) and I am left wondering if the engineers were also experimenting with stereophonic techniques during this recording too, such are the alarming shifts in perspective. These vary from the hugely impressive depth of sound during the full ensembles, to the ridiculously close balance of all the singers (apart from one) where often the orchestra just disappears altogether, while offstage choruses (such as the crowds and heralds at the opening of Act III) are anything but; indeed, there is a huge, if unintended, whiff of Gilbert and Sullivan cat-like tread at the way Turandot's handmaidens appear at her balcony in Act I to command the crowd "*Silenzio*" sounding as loud as a gaggle of Valkyries. To compound the issue, readers need to be wary of the Walhall compact disc issues which contrive to exaggerate these problems to further comedic extremes.

Perhaps this would not matter so much, if the singing was as legendary as the era promises, but the cast is a very mixed bag. Unsurprisingly, the Ping, Pang and Pong are a superb bunch and perhaps have to be, since Ping and Pong are doubling-up as the Herald and Emperor too (not that you would know this from any of the documentation and I am instead relying on my ears, as well as the Operadis website to work this out), as is Norman Scott's noble and sonorous Timur. The Liù is sung decently by Renata Ferrari-Ongara, but Antonio Spruzzola-Zola's Calaf is simply awful – a wimpier Unknown Prince would be hard to find, his tone weak with little of the squillo you would expect from an Italian tenor. Unsurprisingly, he ducks all the high notes and the "*Vincerò*" at the end of *Nessun dorma* do not inspire any confidence that he is going to be victorious at all. When you are hard pressed to distinguish between the Emperor and Calaf during their exchanges before the Riddle Scene, you know you have a problem.

No such problems for Gertrude Grob-Prandl, even if I do wonder if she actually was *the* problem, if inadvertently so. A hugely respected Wagnerian singer in her time, this stately lady had an equally huge and stately voice, warm with an attractive vibrato that gives a hint of vulnerability. In this recording, she is the only soloist who is not balanced close to the microphone and so the cynic in me wonders if the engineers had to make allowances to the other singers so they could actually be heard, or at least had some kind of parity with their Icy Princess. Quite possibly, though, Grob-Prandl

is this set's *raison d'être* for she possesses a true Turandot voice, big and powerful enough to ride the largest of orchestral tsunamis, yet warm enough to suggest vulnerability as well. It is a pity then to report that she is slightly uninvolved in this recording, with little character development, a fault exaggerated by the recording observing the (then) traditional cut of *'Del primo pianto'*, but this does sound like a very studio-bound performance, for all the hints of orchestral and choral glory under Capuana, when you can actually hear them. A better alternative would surely be the live *Turandot* from the Vienna State Opera in 1956 where the Viennese Grob-Prandl singing in German at her 'home house', sounds much more involved; hard to find, but well worth it nonetheless, especially when compared to this Remington set. In a survey where the competition for worst recording is fiercer than usual, this one sadly gets the wooden spoon.

Callas and Tebaldi

**La principessa Turandot – Inge Borkh, Calaf – Mario del Monaco, Liù – Renata Tebaldi, Timur – Nicola Zaccaria, Ping – Fernando Corena, Pang – Mario Carlin, Pong – Renato Ercolani, L'imperatore Altoum – Gaetano Fanelli, Un mandarino – Ezio Giordano
Chorus and Orchestra of the Accademia di Santa Cecilia, Rome, Alberto Erede, Conductor – 1955 (studio, mono) Decca**

**La principessa Turandot – Maria Callas, Calaf – Eugenio Fernandi, Liù – Elisabeth Schwarzkopf, Timur – Nicola Zaccaria, Ping – Mario Borriello, Pang – Renato Ercolani, Pong - Piero De Palma, L'imperatore Altoum – Giuseppe Nessi, Un mandarino – Giulio Mauri
Milan La Scala Chorus & Orchestra, Tullio Serafin, Conductor – 1957 (studio, mono) EMI/Warner**

It is amusing to note how in the 1950s the rivalry between Decca and EMI resulted in near simultaneous releases of the same opera, every new recording being a vehicle for each of their star sopranos, namely Maria Callas and Renata Tebaldi. It resulted in a tremendous legacy that can only be looked upon with some dismay in light of today's current deprived times, even if it did mean on occasions other, often equally deserving sopranos, were unceremoniously shunted out of the limelight (such as Gigliola Frazzoni). However, for our own purposes it resulted in two *Turandots* from 1955 and 1957, even if (of course) Tebaldi is singing Liù for Decca, whereas Callas is the Icy Princess on the rival EMI set.

Turning to Decca's 1955 recording from Rome first, it is a pleasure to hear that the skewed balances that so beset the Remington recording from two years earlier are most certainly not a problem here. Indeed, the sound is full and warm and my only criticism is that the gongs are probably now a bit too prominent in the sound picture, something I rather suspect has been exaggerated by digital remastering, but one which now produces an effect more comical than exotic. No such problems for EMI, but working in the dry and boxy acoustic of La Scala Milan means that there is less bloom on the sound than the results captured by the Decca engineers (NB: this recording has been reissued in 2023 by the Pristine record label, no doubt in much improved sound).

Unsurprisingly, in both sets the minor roles are cast in strength; you would be hard pressed to find a better contrasted Ping, Pang and Pong than Decca's line-up, but EMI's are almost as good and Giuseppe Nessi's Emperor gives a thoughtful nod to the past, as it was he who created the character of Pang for the Toscanini premiere. Surprisingly, for such a time of vocal splendour, both sets share the same Timur, the mighty Nicola Zaccaria. The biggest contrasts are in the main roles though.

On Decca, Renata Tebaldi's Liù sounds anything but a frail slave girl, but the voice is so rich and beautiful, you can almost forgive her. Her opposite number on the EMI set though, is a piece of daring casting which, on paper, you would think should not work, but Elisabeth Schwarzkopf is a far better Puccinian 'little woman' than you would expect (and I had remembered), fining down her tone to one of fragile purity, a Sophie to Callas's Marschallin, which she does far better than Tebaldi on

the rival Decca set. She brings a Lieder singer's attention to Puccini's many markings, which occasionally makes her sound like a Prada-clad slave girl with a PhD, and nobody could claim she sounds Italianate, but there is also no doubt about her dramatic involvement in creating a character of hidden sighs and veiled tears; overall, hers is a most distinguished assumption, for me one of the best in the survey.

The Calafs, too, could hardly be more different. Mario del Monaco's assumption on Decca is that of the ultimate alpha-male, who not only wants to answer Turandot's three riddles, but thereafter sounds as if he also wants to have a crack at the rest of them in her quizbook, before then wooing and marrying all the other females, young and old, in China. It comes as something of a shock then that he does not take the optional, but infinitely more heroic high C, with "*No, no Principessa altera! Ti voglio ardente d'amor!*". In short, you get much magnificent noise, but little nuance, even if there is nobody alive today who could match such vocal elan. To say that Eugenio Fernandi's Calaf is the polar opposite of Mario del Monaco's is, unfortunately, not meant as a compliment. He sounds as if he does not have the *cojones* to ask for the telephone number of any girl at the bar, let alone risk his life for the hand of a murderous, man-hating princess, especially one with the dangerous, flashing eyes of Maria Callas. That said, his interpretation of the Prince of Tartary is most elegant and he does not duck the high notes, even if you are left wondering what Franco Corelli would have brought to the party had he been engaged instead.

Like the Viennese Gertrude Grob-Prandl above, the German-Swiss Inge Borkh had a huge voice, that was also warm and vulnerable; hers is a very womanly Turandot and one you believe Calaf can win over with the power of love from the very beginning of '*In questa reggia*'. Comparing Maria Callas in the same aria from her 1954 Puccini recital with her eventual assumption of the whole role three years later shows significant decline in her vocal estate and makes you understand how she had dropped the part from her repertoire as soon as she could. Next to Borkh, her high notes are acidic and thin, but to compensate she does bring some interesting insights into the character, which she presents as something like a cornered tigress – a Tosca-on-steroids, if you like. In particular, she makes more of the oft-discarded third act aria '*Del primo pianto*' than nearly every other soprano, her repeated '*Straniero*' (Stranger) is just as scornful this late in the opera as it was in the Riddle Scene, while during '*In questa reggia*' she sings: "*Il regno vinto! E Lou-Ling, la mia ava, trascinata da un uomo come te, come te straniero,*" (Her reign was defeated! And Lou-Ling, my ancestor, was dragged before a man like you, like you stranger); you can practically see Callas's finger pointing at Calaf, such is the intensity with which she invests the words. She makes you understand that her Turandot is one not just haunted by her past, but also one scared for her present. It is a remarkably rounded portrayal, probably the most interesting of all, except the recording comes a couple of years too late in her career for her to do the role justice vocally.

In the pit for both recordings are reliable veterans of Italian opera, Alberto Erede in Rome and Tulio Serafin in Milan. Both pace the action well, but neither are above criticism, letting the tension occasionally slip – Erede's handling of the transition between the first and second scenes of Act II has none of the frisson and mounting excitement required when anticipating the arrival of Turandot for the Riddle Scene, while Serafin is somewhat dull in the closing chorus of the same act, perhaps not helped by the boxy sound at that point.

Overall, on this occasion, the superb contributions of Callas and Schwarzkopf, along with the remainder of an exceptional cast, mitigate the dull mono sound and rather ineffectual Calaf to make it a set worthy of everybody's attention - and the Decca set is almost as good.

Die Prinzessin Turandot und der schreiende Schädel (the Screaming Skull)

**La principessa Turandot – Christel Goltz, Calaf – Hans Hopf, Liù – Teresa Stich-Randall, Timur – Wilhelm Schirp, Ping – Horst Günter, Pang – Peter Offermanns, Pong – Jürgen Förster, L'imperatore Altoum – Karl Schiebener, Un mandarino – Heiner Horn
Kölner Rundfunkchor, Knabenchor des Humboldt-Gymnasiums Köln, Kölner Rundfunk-Sinfonie-Orchester - Georg Solti, Conductor – 1956 ([radio]studio, mono) Cala/Capriccio**

As mentioned before, very often the opening few minutes of a *Turandot* are enough to alert the listener to the quality of the remainder of the performance – except not on this occasion which starts badly with the Mandarin, announcing the laws of the land, sounding too close in the sound picture, his phrasing choppy, the German vernacular jarring.... however, thereafter it is one surprise after another.

This is a radio recording, made during May 1956 and while the sound may lack the depth and impact of the finest modern ones, it is not bad at all, with plenty of detail (and perhaps a slight trace of tape pre-echo) and maybe just the small criticism that the voices are balanced just a little bit too close. This presents us with the unusual conundrum of being able to hear the words very clearly, although perhaps since on this occasion when the opera is being sung in German, it is a rather mixed blessing.

What we also get to hear though is Georg Solti (whose nickname at Covent Garden in the 1960's was 'The Screaming Skull') conducting an opera he did not record commercially, nor one he was particularly associated with (when in charge at Covent Garden, he delegated the task of conducting *Turandot* to a certain Reginald Goodall). Indeed, you may have thought that Solti was less suited to the charm and sparkle of *La bohème*, or the passion and sensuousness of *Tosca* (the two Puccini operas he did record), than the colourful extravaganza that is *Turandot* - and you would be right. This is a surprisingly broad reading (contrary to Solti's reputation), with perhaps the only criticism being that the Ping, Pang, Pong music is taken a little too slowly, but even there and everywhere else, Solti and his orchestra relish the exotic orchestration and the sense of spectacle that Puccini uses to depict the barbarity of Ancient China. The low brass growl magnificently throughout and Solti is particularly successful at conjuring a sense of disquiet at the beginning of Act III, which of course is exactly how it should be. Time and time again, my ear caught incidental details and an imagination at work that delighted and, I must confess, surprised me. An example; in the Riddle Scene, the moment Calaf successfully answers each question, Solti and his orchestra accelerate away ever so slightly, capturing the sense of excitement that would have been felt by all as one riddle after another is successfully answered. The final Act III duet, long thought as perhaps musically the weakest part of the work due to the Alfano conclusion, is also despatched very well and with almost as much white-heat as Karajan, who conducts this section of the opera better than anyone. The problem with Karajan's set though is that he left his Icy Princess out of the freezer overnight, so by the time she appears on his recording, she is already thawing very badly

No such problems for Solti's protagonist, one Christel Goltz, famous in the 1950's for her portrayals of Salome and Elektra, amongst others; a mere Chinese princess therefore holds no vocal terrors for her. From all accounts, she learnt the role of Turandot specifically for this recording and whilst she handles its technical hurdles with aplomb, she also brings much imagination to the part. I have always thought the opening of '*In questa regia*', so often trumpeted out by the incumbent Turandot like an air-raid siren, should be much more reflective - and so it proves here, Christel providing a degree of sadness, rather than anger, when reminiscing about the rape and murder of her ancestress, largely because she faithfully follows Puccini's dynamic markings. Hers is a most intelligent performance and is one that ranks alongside those of other German speaking Wagnerian sopranos, Gertrude Grob-Prandl and Inge Borkh.

Her voice, maybe not the most beautiful but still full and rich, is well contrasted with the silvery tones of Teresa Stich-Randall's Liù. Hers is a dignified and slightly restrained reading of the role, with none of the overt crying of Tebaldi on the RCA/Leinsdorf, for example. If she is not quite as characterful as Schwarzkopf is for Serafin, or as vocally extraordinary as Caballé is for Mehta in 1973, then that is because few are. That said, she manages to float some absolutely exquisite pianissimo high notes, even if the last one of *'Signore, ascolta'* seems to lose its pitch ever so slightly.

Calaf is Hans Hopf, who can usually be relied upon to have great odds down the betting shops as being the embodiment of the kind of tenor Puccini used to routinely dismiss as a *'squadrate'*, except on this occasion he is actually rather good - very good in fact, the tone surprisingly Italianate, he is clearly engaged with the text and engaging. Okay, he does sometimes sound as if he is negotiating the vocal line with a none-too-cooperative voice, although I suspect singing in German does not help his cause in this music, but he does not avoid any of the high notes and all in all gives a most satisfactory performance.

The remainder of the cast is quite fine as well, the Mandarin apart maybe, although they are all unknown to me. Which kind of leads to a surprising conclusion - that this *Turandot* is really rather good. Indeed, had it been in Italian, I daresay it could even be one of the top recommendations. Overall, then, a big surprise; much, *much* better than you'd expect.

The Seven Nilssons of the Apocalypse

**La principessa Turandot – Birgit Nilsson, Calaf – Jussi Björling, Liù – Renata Tebaldi, Timur – Giorgio Tozzi, Ping – Mario Sereni, Pang – Piero de Palma, Pong – Tommaso Frascati, L'imperatore Altoum – Alessio De Paolis, Un mandarino – Leonardo Monreale
Chorus and Orchestra of the Rome Opera- Erich Leinsdorf, Conductor – 1959 (studio, stereo) RCA**

**La principessa Turandot – Birgit Nilsson, Calaf – Franco Corelli, Liù – Renata Scotto, Timur – Bonaldo Giaiotti, Ping – Guido Mazzini, Pang – Franco Ricciardi, Pong – Piero de Palma, L'imperatore Altoum – Angelo Mercuriali, Un mandarino – Giuseppe Moressi
Chorus and Orchestra of Rome Opera – Francesco Molinari-Pradelli, Conductor – 1966 (studio, stereo) EMI/Warner**

**La principessa Turandot – Birgit Nilsson, Calaf – Giuseppe di Stefano, Liù – Rosanna Carteri, Timur – Giuseppe Modesti, Ping – Renato Capecchi, Pang – Mario Ferrari, Pong – Piero de Palma, L'imperatore Altoum – Angelo Mercuriali, Un mandarino – Luigi Testa
Chorus and Orchestra of La Scala Opera, Milan – Antonino Votto, Conductor – 7 December 1958 (live, mono) Opera d'Oro**

**La principessa Turandot – Birgit Nilsson, Calaf – Franco Corelli, Liù – Anna Moffo, Timur – Bonaldo Giaiotti, Ping – Frank Guarrera, Pang – Robert Nagy, Pong – Charles Anthony, L'imperatore Altoum – Karl Schiebener, Un mandarino – Calvin Marsh
Chorus and Orchestra of the Metropolitan Opera, New York – Leopold Stokowski, Conductor – 4 March 1961 (live, mono) Pristine Classics**

**La principessa Turandot – Birgit Nilsson, Calaf – Giuseppe di Stefano, Liù – Leontyne Price, Timur – Nicola Zaccaria, Ping – Kostas Paskalis, Pang – Ermanno Lorenzi, Pong – Murray Dickie, L'imperatore Altoum – Peter Klein, Un mandarino – Alois Pernerstorfer
Chorus and Orchestra of the Vienna State Opera – Francesco Molinari-Pradelli, Conductor – 22 June 1961 (live, mono) Orfeo**

La principessa Turandot – Birgit Nilsson, Calaf – Dimiter Uzunov, Liù – Montserrat Caballé Timur – Viktor de Narké, Ping – Ricardo Catena, Pang – Nino Falzetti, Pong – Virgilio Tavini, L'imperatore Altoum – Italo Pasini, Un mandarino – José Crea
Chorus and Orchestra of the Theatre Colón, Buenos Aires – Fernando Previtali, Conductor – 1965
(live, mono) Living Stage

La principessa Turandot – Birgit Nilsson, Calaf – Franco Corelli, Liù – Mirella Freni, Timur – Bonaldo Giaiotti, Ping – Theodor Uppman, Pang – Robert Nagy, Pong – Charles Nagy, L'imperatore Altoum – Mariano Caruso, Un mandarino – Robert Godloe
Chorus and Orchestra of the Metropolitan Opera, New York – Zubin Mehta, Conductor – 12 March 1966 (live, mono) Living Stage

Perhaps even more than Brünnhilde or Isolde, the role of Turandot seems inextricably linked with that of Birgit Nilsson - it is arguable that no other singer made more money from a single operatic role than she did with the Icy Princess. There are two studio recordings featuring her, plus a number of live radio recordings listed above, which I have selected for comparative purposes, but every admirer of *Turandot* needs at least one recording featuring La Nilsson.

Her first recording was the 1958 RCA taping from Rome, with **Erich Leinsdorf** conducting. Readers need to be aware that the initial releases of this recording, both on vinyl as well as compact disc, contained extremely disappointing sound, so it is the hybrid SACD issue that needs to be sought to experience this performance at its best. Perhaps the main *raison d'être* of this recording though is not Nilsson, but Jussi Björling in what sadly turned out to be his last recorded role. He is of course very much a Calaf in "caring-sharing" mode, his concern and warmth to Liù in Act I is most touching, as is the first part of his *Nessun dorma*, more reflective than usual. I'm not so sure about the more heroic dimensions of the part however - Corelli, Domingo and Pavarotti, to name but three, are all much better with this element, although you have to say that few, if any, tenors today would be able to match Björling's all-round achievement. The supporting cast is exceptionally strong; Tebaldi is at times touching and exquisite as Liù, even if she sounds a tad more Tosca than slave girl and Giorgio Tozzi is a sonorous Timur. With a Ping, Pang and Pong of Sereni, de Palma and Frascati, this is a production cast from strength. It also finds Nilsson in freshest voice too, warmer than on some other assumptions, her transformation at the end *almost* believable. I found the conducting of the usually reliable Erich Leinsdorf though somewhat earthbound, especially when compared to many others in this survey.

On the other hand, some seven years later with **Francesco Molinari-Pradelli** conducting the same Rome Opera forces, this time for EMI, my ear was more beguiled and charmed by Puccini's fantastic score and orchestration. Aided and abetted by some big, beefy EMI sound, he opens the work with a slightly more deliberate tread than Leinsdorf and as a consequence is more successful in bringing out the savagery of Puccini's Ancient China as well as the blood-lust of the crowd. Likewise, during Turandot's opening '*In questa reggia*', there is a tenderness and warmth to his conducting, plus a wealth of detail, seemingly beyond the more prosaic Leinsdorf (to be fair, Leinsdorf could be electrifying in the recording studio, just not so much on this occasion). I think the secondary roles on this EMI set - the Ping, Pang and Pong of Mazzini, Ricciardi and de Palma, as well as the Timur of Giaiotti - are slightly less well cast than on RCA, but that means little in light of the extraordinary high standards available at the time. Liù is Renata Scottò though; she's never going to win any prizes for most beautiful voice, but her torture and death scene is very moving, putting her marginally ahead of RCA's Tebaldi, in my estimation at any rate. Which brings me to the tenor ...

It was something else to encounter Corelli's Calaf, especially after the warmth and charm of Björling and, to a slightly less extent, di Stefano (below). As presented here, the Prince of Tartary arrives on the scene in Act I all but swinging in on a rope, dressed like Errol Flynn's Robin Hood – Corelli's assumption is that of a swashbuckling, testosterone-fuelled warrior. The clue can be found in his aria

"*Non piangere, Liù*" which has none of the honeyed warmth and tenderness of Björling's grateful acknowledgement to the devotion the slave-girl has shown towards his deposed father, Timur. Rather, on this occasion it is more about the final lines, "*chiede colui che non sorride più*" ("the one who doesn't smile anymore") - himself in other words. You could argue quite convincingly that since this is the climax of the aria and that these are the only lines repeated twice, therefore with an implied emphasis, that Corelli is closer to Puccini's true intentions here ... however, I am not convinced. To my mind, Corelli isn't Björling's "everyman" Prince, inspired by overwhelming ardour to dare take on the riddles and overcome seemingly impossible odds to succeed; rather, it is the thrill of the chase, the challenge of it all that seems to inspire him. So of course, the Act II confrontation with Nilsson's Icy Princess is like a clash of the titans - and yes, it is thrilling, in its own way. The problem though is Nilsson naturally responds to her Calafs and this vocal jousting match; it is still happening at the end of Act III on this recording, as if Turandot has not so much been conquered by love, but has instead met her match

Overall, it is still very difficult to choose which Nilsson's studio recordings is the best one. EMI's sound is marginally fuller, if slightly less detailed than RCA's. EMI has the slightly better Liù, RCA the better Timur. Ping, Pang and Pong are better on RCA, Molinari-Pradelli on EMI is better than Leinsdorf. Björling and Corelli are complementary - their strengths and weaknesses being virtual opposites. So the casting vote goes to Turandot - who offers a marginally more complete portrayal in the earlier recording on RCA. However, when I last listened to the two versions back-to-back, it is the EMI one that I enjoyed the most. Ah, curses – I suffer so much for you, fair reader. So I wondered if the live performances would be any different...

(With regard to the live recordings, two things have to be made clear at the outset and that is that Turandot's Third Act aria, "*Del primo pianto*" was omitted every time La Nilsson took the role onto the stage. She was not one for much thawing. The other point is for the reader to exercise caution with regards to the two live recordings with Nilsson conducted by Gavazzeni from 1964, one from La Scala with Corelli and Vishnevskaya that has never been issued at the correct pitch [my thanks to Ralph Moore for his help in confirming that it is a semitone sharp, to Corelli sings a top C, not a B, at the climax of '*Nessun dorma*'], the other when the La Scala company were on tour at the Bolshoi, featuring Mirella Freni and Bruno Prevedi, where unfortunately the radio engineers treat everyone to a traditional Soviet recording experience, complete with swimming pool acoustic that renders it virtually unlistenable. A pity, for the Corelli performance especially, is spectacular.)

The earliest of the live recordings which therefore needs to be considered is from La Scala in 1958, conducted by **Antonino Votto**; many (including the soprano herself) claim this to be her greatest assumption of the role of all and in some respects, it is. Captured in decent (for its time) sound, it is the opening night of the La Scala season and the Milanese crowd are at their most excitable and vocal best. However, it seems to me that they are in town not so much to see Nilsson, but rather her Calaf that night, Giuseppe di Stefano - and we are left in no doubt about this throughout the evening. Disappointingly the microphones do not pick up his voice that well and he consequently sounds rather puny; okay, maybe Calaf is a role just slightly too big for him, but he copes with its demands far better on other occasions. He is not helped either by Nilsson being in imperious form; she is quite stupendous in Act II and the microphones have no choice but to pick up her voice here! Unfortunately, the impression I got was of the Princess standing on the steps leading up to the Emperor's throne, laser beams coming out of her eyes zapping il popolo di Pechino at will - I was amazed that Calaf was left standing at the end of the first riddle, let alone was able to answer all three of them correctly. As pure singing, it is astonishing; as characterisation though, it is neither convincing nor subtle - Calaf is too consistently outsung and outgunned. Throw in a rather overacted Liù of Rosanna Carteri and some over-excitably conducting from Votto, veering from very slow one minute and then accelerating into very fast the next, and I did not really rate this, whatever the great lady herself thought.

Three years later comes a further live relay, this time from the Met. The production was supposed to have been conducted by Dimitri Mitropoulos, but sadly he died only a few weeks prior; instead, one **Leopold Stokowski** stepped in and saved the day. It is slightly difficult for us to appreciate quite the significance of this in New York during 1961. At that time Stokowski was one of the most famous and celebrated conductors in the world and was the frontrunner, along with Bernstein, to succeed Mitropoulos for the Principal Conductorship of the New York PO. That he was actually available is therefore quite a surprise; doubly so, since this was his debut at the Met and he rarely, if ever, conducted in the opera house, looking down on such activities as beneath him, no doubt because he was hidden away from the audience's view in the pit, whereas as far as Stoki was concerned, he was the star. In spite of that, he did not escape criticisms from some in the cast, who found his baton-less gestures from the pit to be too vague to follow in opera and ensemble is not as razor sharp as you may expect.

One of the reasons Stokowski's name has subsequently been reduced to the footnotes of musical history nowadays is his somewhat cavalier attitude towards the score, a style much out of favour now, which often resulted in reorchestrations that bordered on recomposing. On this occasion, he is not too bad; however, *Turandot* opens with four massive chords for orchestra and as early as the fourth one, Stoki has the tam-tam play tremolo with a crescendo, instead of crashing at the end; he does the same when the same motif reappears a little later on in this scene, leading into the section where the chorus falls to its collective knees to worship the moon. I also detected many more cascading harps than usual at the close of Act III, Stoki pushing the score out of the Met and dangerously close to Broadway, I thought. He is treated to a fine cast, though: Calvin Marsh announcing the laws of the land in the opening bars is very fine and thereafter the remainder does not disappoint, either. Anna Moffo is Liù, touching throughout, although her death aria '*Tu che di gel sei cinta*' sees her stretch her final top A to somewhat unsubtle lengths - "Look at me, New York," she seems to be saying. Bonaldo Giaiotti is an excellent Timur again and Franco Corelli even more exciting as Calaf than on the EMI studio account, above - the close of Act I when he strikes the gong is thrilling beyond words and one is grateful that for once, be it thanks to the conductor or otherwise, he is very disciplined in his singing, with virtually none of the 'elaborations' he was so fond of when live onstage. However, as on the EMI recording, he's better at jousting with the Icy Princess than sympathising with a slave girl and likewise Nilsson has only partially thawed by the end. An exciting night at the opera, then, albeit with a few caveats. The sound is surprisingly good, but no transfer matches that of the excellence of Pristine – and so that would be the one to get.

Astonishingly, on the same year comes another *Turandot*, this time the Vienna State Opera in a performance released on Orfeo in close, but thrillingly immediate sound. Next to Moffo's Liù, Leontyne Price sounds super-refulgent, scarcely believable as a frail slave girl, but is equally as moving, with none of the grand-standing from Moffo in New York. Timur is Nicola Zaccaria, reliably proud and noble as a deposed King should be and in the pit is **Francesco Molinari-Pradelli**, even better live than he is on the EMI recording, I thought, with the Vienna PO in its opera-guise at his command. Nilsson is also more "human" here than in any other of her recordings, possibly partly thanks to her conductor - for example, take the passage after Calaf has successfully answered the third riddle, when Turandot begs her father to be released from her vow; here, it is taken a fraction slower than usual, Nilsson emphasising the vulnerability of the princess as she pleads, to no avail. The other reason could be di Stefano. His voice is caught far better here than at La Scala in 1958 and he sounds all the more "heroic" for it; on this occasion, it does not sound as if he has been outsung during '*Figlio del cielo*' and perhaps more importantly, the two principals' final confrontation in Act III shows both of them attempting (vocally at any rate) to make it all sound convincing. He is almost charming in his interactions with Liù as Björling and in other words, is an effective middle way between the Swedish tenor and Corelli.

Four years later, this time at the Theatre Colón, Buenos Aires under the reliable baton of the Italian veteran **Fernando Previtali**, comes yet another Nilsson *Turandot* – the reality is she was just so

consistently amazing in this role and this performance is no better, or worse really, than any of the others. Opposite her that night was the Liù of a young Montserrat Caballé - apparently the administration wanted to sack Caballé (for reasons no longer remembered), but Nilsson came to her defence with her own Turandotesque riddle to the Buenos Aires management of: "You can find another Liù, but can you find another Turandot?", which was somewhat disingenuous since she was sharing the role with Gladys Kuchta for that particular run of performances (indeed, there exists a live broadcast recording from one of the other evenings, too, that finds Caballé in even better form). As was her wont, Caballé demonstrates that her soft B flats are the perfect riposte to Nilsson's Turandot's laser guided nuclear missiles, but it is clear that she was not about to upstage Birgit on those nights with her (quite frankly) stunning breath control – she would save that for the dubious honour of the other nights of the run with Kuchta and the Decca recording. Timur is the black-toned Argentinian bass-baritone Victor de Narké, a favourite singer of mine – how I wish he had had a bigger voice as what a career he would have had then; here his Timur is dark and grave, his legato generous and expertly applied. All the smaller roles are taken wonderfully and the sound is especially good for 1965, if a shade boxy.

The pity is the Calaf of the Bulgarian born tenor, Dimiter Uzunov – he is not the worst tenor you will encounter in the survey (often sounding like Carreras on a bad night, without the beauty of tone in the middle register), but after Björling, di Stefano and Corelli he will be a significant disappointment and, somehow, this Calaf completely forgets to strike the gong at all at the end of Act I, leading you to wonder how Turandot knows he wants to have a crack at her pub quiz.

No such problems the following year at the Met under **Zubin Mehta**, during the inaugural season in the new house at Lincoln Centre, where Nilsson is once more reunited with Franco Corelli and although the tenor is not quite in his finest form, he still manages to send the crowd wild with his *Nessun dorma*, enough for Mehta to have to stop the orchestra to allow everyone to calm down. It has to be said that the young Mehta conducts extremely well, the pit and stage coordination far better and tighter than it was with Stokowski, with particularly brilliant Ping, Pang and Pong scenes. Needless to say, Nilsson is once more imperious and opposite her is the beautifully sung Liù of Mirella Freni, surprisingly more forthright as a slave girl than you may have expected. The Timur of Bonaldo Giaiotti is a known quantity of excellence and the remainder of the cast is very similar to the one from a few years before with Stokowski, which is to say they are very fine. The sound is very good for its time and on balance this is probably better than the Stokowski performance, except maybe Corelli is in slightly better voice in the earlier recording.

There is no doubt that Birgit Nilsson is one of the very finest exponents of Turandot and what is quite remarkable is just how consistently great she was in the role. Indeed, this may mean that your choice of a Nilsson *Turandot* may well instead rest upon personal choice for her various Calafs and Liùs, but for me two recordings led by Francesco Molinari-Pradelli, in the studio for EMI and, even better, live at the Vienna State Opera in 1961 would be my picks of the bunch.

Cape Town and Bucharest

La principessa Turandot – Joyce Barker, Calaf – Gé Korsten, Liù – Désirée Talbot, Timur – Robert Garcia, Ping – Albie Louw, Pang – Ernest Dennis, Pong – Helmut Holzappel, L'imperatore Altoum – Gideon Hugo, Un mandarino – Donovan Alexander University of Cape Town Choir, Cape Town Municipal Orchestra – David Tidbould, Conductor – June 1965 (live, mono) Claremont (EXCERPTS)

La principessa Turandot – Maria Slatinaru, Calaf – Ludovic Spiess, Liù – Teodora Lucaciu, Timur – Nicolae Florei, Ping – Octav Eingaescu, Pang – Valentin Teodorian, Pong – Corneliu Finateanu, L'imperatore Altoum – George Mircea, Un mandarino – Dionisea Konya Chorus of Romanian Television & Radio, Studio Symphony Orchestra – Carol Litvin, Conductor –

1970 (live, stereo) Electrecord

It may be of some surprise to many to see the Claremont recording mentioned in this survey, not least since it is of excerpts, but it was recommended to me (with significant enthusiasm) by an opera-singing friend and, as such, it is included for those readers who consider themselves connoisseurs of great singing, as well as those who thrill to recordings of *Turandot* as I do.

It has to be admitted at the outset that the Cape Town chorus is an amateur one (the men try their best, but really they are a bit Pythonesque at times), but the orchestra plays and sounds rather well, under the baton of **David Tidbould**. However, since this recording excited an opera singer, it is for the principals that you should hear this set and they are all good, with one particularly outstanding. Gé Korsten is an exciting, if provincial, Calaf – a fine voice but no brains; if he is a fit for Puccini's dismissive '*squadrato*' epithet, then be warned for there are far worse to come on these pages. I liked Robert Garcia's concerned, sympathetic Timur, and Désirée Talbot's Liù is a reading of some distinction.

However, the reason for hearing this recording is for the Principessa of South African soprano Joyce Barker (1931-92); on the evidence from this recording, the fact that she holds her own easily in this survey is something to behold. She is at a bit of a disadvantage balance-wise by being placed at the back of the stage (or so it sounds) for most of the opera, but it seems to make her voice sound absolutely huge. '*In Questa Reggia*' is quite superb and she charts Turandot's character arc as well as anyone, genuinely and movingly melting in the third act. It is a remarkable achievement and, despite the slightly homespun nature of the performance, you are aware that you are eavesdropping on a really exciting event in a way that eludes some more stellar performances.

The excerpts seem to cut out all of the Ping, Pang and Pong music, presenting the main scene and arias in the score for a duration of seventy-four minutes. This release is easily available at budget price and is worth seeking out. I was riveted.

From one 'unknown provincial' recording to another, this time courtesy of Romanian Radio and Television is this concert performance of the opera conducted by **Carol Litvin**, which can also be found on DVD in a rather grainy black and white picture from the usual specialist dealers, that is in surprisingly full (for its time) stereo sound. As usual with live performances, there are both gains and losses, which on this occasion includes the usual shot of adrenaline, it being live, even if occasionally it all sounds somewhat earthbound for it only being in concert, rather in a theatre; the chorus can sometimes come across as a bit "stand 'n deliver", while there is no perspective with any of the singers who, standing in a line in front of the orchestra, occasionally sound as if they are singing an oratorio. Likewise, it needs to be noted that the tam-tam strokes at the beginning of Act III sound more like a crashing pair of metal dustbin lids than I am sure anyone ever intended.

With those caveats out of the way, this was also one very enjoyable performance, with an exceptional quartet of principals. Nicolae Florei's Timur is a noble-sounding deposed king and while Teodora Lucaciu's Liù takes a little while to warm up (the top A in her answer to why she is so devoted to Timur – '*Perché un dì nella reggia m'hai sorriso*' [Because one day, in the royal palace, you smiled upon me] - is taken without vibrato and almost loses pitch, but both are significant reasons why the performance is such a success. Moreover, the two main protagonists are magnificent. The Calaf is Ludovic Spiess, who had recently scored his first major success as Gregori, the Pretender in Karajan's Salzburg Festival performances of *Boris Godunov*. Here he sounds magnificent, a large voice, with a generous amount of squillo plus a certain plaintive hue, he sounds both heroic, as well as caring. Indeed, in his wonderfully nuanced '*Nessun dorma*', he ends the phrase '*No, no, sulla tua bocca lo dirò, quando la luce splenderà*' ([But my mystery is locked within me, and no one will learn my name!] No, no, your mouth will say it, when the light shines) singing pianissimo, cleverly linking the aria back to the moment Calaf posed the question to Turandot at the

end of the previous act with the same music. It is at once both heroic, as well as sensitive and hugely enjoyable. However, it is at the entrance of Turandot in Act II that you realise just how good this performance really is.

Personally, I ended up wondering where the soprano Maria Slatinaru had been all of my life. At her first entrance with '*In questa reggia*' the ears are immediately alerted to a remarkable Turandot voice that possesses the power and warmth of those great German sopranos who took on the role in the 1950's (Inge Borkh, Gertrude Grob-Prandl and Christel Goltz) allied to the laser-like focus of Birgit Nilsson. What is genuinely remarkable is how there is also a hint of vulnerability in those opening phrases that does not seem out of place and makes one understand how Calaf believes he can overcome her resistance using the overwhelming power of love alone. As such, the dramatic arc of the character now becomes all the more believable and Slatinaru's singing retains its focus and warmth, as well as genuine involvement, all the way to the end of this performance. Even in the exalted company of so many other great Turandots in this survey, I was ultimately left musing if Slatinaru was the finest of them all. Her presence elevates this recording almost to a must-hear.

Carol Litvin directs the orchestra and chorus competently and with great respect for his singers, if perhaps without any special insights. However, this is a recording which, in spite of my caveats, is one that more than equals the sum of its considerable parts and, somewhat to my surprise, is possibly one of the finest of all in this survey.

La Stupenda and La Superba

**La principessa Turandot – Joan Sutherland, Calaf – Luciano Pavarotti, Liù – Montserrat Caballé, Timur – Nicolai Ghiaurov, Ping – Tom Krause, Pang – Pier Francesco Poli, Pong – Piero de Palma, L'imperatore Altoum – Peter Pears, Un mandarino – Sabin Markov
London Philharmonic Orchestra, John Alldis Choir– Zubin Mehta, Conductor – August 1972 (studio, stereo) Decca**

**La principessa Turandot – Montserrat Caballé, Calaf – José Carreras, Liù – Mirella Freni, Timur – Paul Plishka, Ping – Vicente Sardinero, Pang – Remy Corraza, Pong – Ricardo Cassinelli, L'imperatore Altoum – Michel Sénéchal, Un mandarino – Eduard Tumagian
Maitrise de la Cathédral, Choeurs del'Opéra du Rhin, Orchestre Philharmonique de Strasbourg - Alain Lombard, Conductor - 1977 (studio, stereo) EMI**

I have often wondered what people's expectations must have been when news of this Decca recording of *Turandot* conducted by **Zubin Mehta** was first made public, not least with its daring casting for the title role. In the event it was a triumph, indisputably one of the greatest opera recordings of all, whose supremacy still remains unchallenged some half a century later, mainly because (somewhat unusually) there is absolutely no weak link in the line-up.

Of course, at the beginning of her career, Sutherland initially trained as a Wagnerian soprano, but by the 1970s she was chiefly known for her *bel canto* roles, with a large, but warm voice which could operate over the stave fearlessly and whose coloratura was as smooth as running a string of pearls through your fingers. That said, the power was always there and her assumption of the title role on this recording is a formidable achievement, the power of the voice wrapped within a velvet warmth that makes the Icy Princess's change of heart all the more believable. Only at the climax of '*Figlio del cielo*', when Mehta seem to need to hold back his forces in a way that he did not need to at the Met in 1966 with Nilsson in the title role, is there any hint of treading carefully with *La Stupenda*, but even then, as the orchestra lets rip after the first top C, it is still thrilling. Opposite her is Montserrat Caballé; many wondered if the two prima donnas might have clashed in the studio, not least since Caballé herself would later take the role of Turandot onto the stage, something Sutherland refused to do, but in the end the two ladies got on very well (and of course would resume the partnership

many years later with Bellini's *Norma*). Indeed, Caballé's Liù is also something to be celebrated, spinning acres of ethereal beauty which, allied to astonishing breath control in '*Tu che di gel sei cinta*', is enough to make any self-respecting Icy Princess grab the dagger and do the deed herself, such is the unfairness of the competition.

As the Unknown Prince, Pavarotti's Calaf combines the virility of del Monaco with the charisma of Corelli and the tenderness of Björling. As always, his combination of boyish enthusiasm and charm, allied to the sheer panache of his singing, papers over the darker and more complex aspects of the character in a way that he would also do with other roles, such as Lieutenant Pinkerton and the Duke of Mantua, to produce a nonetheless thrilling reading. I am sure every reader knows that his rendition of '*Nessun dorma*' in this recording, complete with a slight wobble on the final '*Vincerò*', was chosen to be used as the soundtrack for the 1990 Football World Cup Finals in Rome and sold millions as a standalone CD-Single at the time. This fact seems to encapsulate the greatness of this recording – and it continues.

Nicolai Ghiaurov's Timur on this recording sounds as if he could part the Red Sea, as well as the Yangtze River in the same afternoon and one can only wonder how on earth a man in possession of such a magnificent voice could ever be deposed of his kingdom. In contrast as The Emperor, Peter Pears leers down from high, clearly of the opinion that everyone has lost their chopsticks, which may well have been his attitude towards Italian opera in general, but on this occasion is just another inspired bit of casting. Tom Krause makes a magnificent Ping and leads the trio of government ministers that includes the great comprimario, Piero de Palma, with much style.

Mehta conducts excitingly, as he did for Nilsson at the Met in 1966, relishing the score's exotic colourings and galvanising the crack London Philharmonic Orchestra to produce some glorious sounds, alongside some swaggering playing. If he is unable to match the later Karajan recording for intensity and grandeur at times, then that is only because nobody else does either – but he is everything else and it is all captured in vintage Decca sound. As I said at the beginning, this opera recording has barely a weak link.

Five years later in 1977, with a move reminiscent of the 1950's, EMI responded to Decca's ace by issuing their own starrily cast *Turandot* conducted by **Alain Lombard**, in what should have been a trump card; that it did not prove to be so was not for the reason you would think.

The opening promises much about the performance – the low gongs are caught tummy-wobblingly well, Lombard taking the music at a fare lick, which adds to the menace and bloodthirsty impact of the crowd, until the soloists enter and later at the chorus of the moon, when he relaxes the pace making the contrasts all the more memorable. As the performance progresses, though, doubts begin to rise – the sound veers between spectacular to overblown, with the organ at the end of Act II balanced far too close, for example. At the entrance of the soloists in Act I, it is clear that José Carreras may be in fine voice, but this is also role a size too big for him – his '*Nessun dorma*' is sensitively shaped with a nice ringing top B at the end, while he is due much credit for taking the optional top C during "*No, no Principessa altera! Ti voglio ardente d'amor!*" at the end of the second act, even if it sounds as if he is hanging on for dear life. However, in the end, his earnest approach is somewhat one-dimensional. You would have thought Mirella Freni, usually so shy and charming, would be a perfect fit for Liù, but as in the 1966 performance at the Met (opposite Nilsson, with Mehta directing), this is a slave girl with some back-bone – when she grabs the dagger in Act III, you are left momentarily wondering if she is going to stab the princess rather than herself; it is an unusual reading. As Timur, Paul Plishka is good for the time, no more. However, it is only at the entry of the Icy Princess that this reading loses its bearing.

Montserrat Caballé is one of the few sopranos to have taken the role of both Liù, as well as Turandot onstage (Grace Bumbry was another, I believe), but this recording took place shortly before she was due to take on the role live for the first time and in many respects, it shows. Too often the conductor has to slow things down, or quieten the orchestra unnaturally to accommodate Caballé's decision to sing a phrase in one breath, or pianissimo. For example, in her opening aria '*In questa reggia*' she sings the phrase "that shriek and that death" (of her ancestress Lou Ling) as a diminuendo, which as a technical feat of singing is extraordinary, but dramatically leads you wondering why the Icy Princess is thawing already. Further on with Turandot's confrontation with Liù, Caballé's tendency to sing certain phrases quietly against Freni's assertive slave-girl, starts to confuse the dramatic trajectory of the action, not to mention to disrupt the natural flow of the music. In the end, I rather felt it was an interpretation that was over-thought more than anything; overall, this recording does not fulfil its early promise.

Ultimately, it is somewhat sobering to note how on probably every level, this EMI set is outclassed by the Decca version, which for me, is still the benchmark recording.

Herbert von Karajan

**La principessa Turandot – Katia Ricciarelli, Calaf – Plácido Domingo, Liù – Barbara Hendricks, Timur – Ruggero Raimondi, Ping – Gottfried Hornick, Pang – Heinz Zednik, Pong – Francisco Araiza, L'imperatore Altoum – Piero de Palma, Un mandarino – Siegmund Nimsgern
Chorus of the Vienna State Opera, Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra – Herbert von Karajan,
Conductor - 1981 (studio, digital) DEUTSCHE GRAMMOPHON**

When Deutsche Grammophon decided that they were going to record their own version of *Turandot* in the early 1980's, they turned to their star conductor, Herbert von Karajan, to head the project. He of course had led a number of classic Puccini recordings over the years, starting with one of the finest of all recordings of *Madama Butterfly* in 1955 featuring Maria Callas at La Scala and a long-time benchmark recording of *Tosca* made in Vienna with Leontyne Price a few years later in 1962 for Decca, before the legendary pair of *Bohème* and *Butterfly* with Freni and Pavarotti were set down in the early 1970's. These were followed by the end of that decade by another *Tosca*, an interesting and intensely beautiful reading, with Katia Ricciarelli in the title role presented more as Mimi's bossy older sister rather than Callas's flashing-eyed firebrand, along with a *Te Deum-meets-the-1812 Overture* at the close of the first act. So what could possibly go wrong?

Expectations were high, not least since it was being recorded digitally and certainly, in spite of DG's early struggles with the medium, and even if it was not perfect, there is a depth and amplitude to the sound that the earlier Decca and EMI recordings from the 1970's could not match. The cast assembled, too, was a stary one, with Plácido Domingo taking on the role of Calaf on record for the first time. It is a fine assumption, presenting a more complex character than that of Pavarotti, even if he was never going to be able to match the panache and high notes of his distinguished rival. Barbara Hendricks as the slave-girl sings in the most seductive tones, as well as providing an enchanting warmth little short of glorious. If Ruggero Raimondi's Timur is a little light-toned, especially when compared to Ghiaurov, Giaiotti and Zaccaria, he is still noble, beautiful and proud and the remainder of the line-up is cast from strength.

As for the conducting, Karajan once more brings qualities to his interpretation that lead some people to conclude that he was the finest Puccini conductor of all. For example, the accumulation of tension that closes the end of Act I is little short of astonishing, so much so that one wonders what Calaf has actually summoned by striking the gong. The intensity is so unbearable that maybe he has awoken a real fire-breathing dragon, rather than just a human representation of one in the form a princess consumed with fury about the murder of her ancestor. No other version in this survey comes remotely close to this, nor either do they match the grandeur and exhilaration with which he closes

the second act either. Furthermore, nobody conducts the Alfano conclusion with as much white-heat as Karajan generates, elevating what is possibly the weakest part of the score onto a level with the rest of the work. Apparently, the recording sessions were tense affairs and one does have to note that occasionally ensemble is not as tight as you would expect from this conductor. There is also one other rather big problem, inasmuch that this recording features not just one, but two slave girls – and no princess.

When news of Karajan's recording of Turandot was first made public, he was challenged on a number of occasions about his casting of Ricciarelli as the princess, to which he responded by explaining he was looking for a more 'feminine' Turandot for his production, reasoning that how could Calaf (or anyone) be attracted to a man-hating foghorn? 'Vocione' was the actual word he used (this could also have been a sly dig at Birgit Nilsson, since the pair never got on). Part of his rationale could have been his plans to film the opera too and negotiations with the Chinese authorities for a production in the Forbidden City were at a very advanced stage (Ingmar Bergman, no less, had agreed to direct and produce it), until the Chinese were tempted more by the value of green backs than artistic endeavour and instead let Hollywood take over the site for the film *The Last Emperor*. In this respect, it must be borne in mind that part of Karajan's casting decisions was often based upon a singer's looks as much as how they sounded and to be sure, Ricciarelli certainly had the looks for the part at the time, if not the voice. Legend also has it that Karajan had asked Mirella Freni to take on the role beforehand, to which she quite obviously declined – there is no evidence of this, aside from the fact they never worked together again, the usual result when a singer declined such an invitation from the Austrian maestro.

Perhaps in another time, Karajan's choice would have been the more appropriate Josephine Barstow, had he known about her earlier, or even Anna Tomowa Sintov with whom he worked very closely and who became a surprisingly fine Tosca, as well as Turandot (albeit the latter in the late 1990's). However, on this recording, there is no disputing that the role of Turandot is far too taxing for the lyric soprano voice of Katia Ricciarelli. Whenever her music falls within her middle-range and is not loud, she can often sound ethereal and other-worldly, but she is hopelessly ill-equipped when Puccini unleashes the full forces of his orchestra mercilessly against his Icy Princess. To his credit, Karajan supports her as best he can, but that only means compromises, such as at the climax of *Figlio del cielo* which is rushed to give his soprano half a chance of actually being able to sing anything. While this is not the vocal disaster many wags contend and, indeed, there are some Turandots in this survey that are much less pleasant to listen to, ultimately, there is no denying that Ricciarelli's assumption of the title role means this set can only come with qualified approval. In my opinion, at its best, this recording is unmatched by any other; however, at its worst, you also have a recording with a princess who clearly is not up to the task. As such, this can only ever be a 'wild card' recommendation.

Éva I & Éva II

**La principessa Turandot – Éva Marton, Calaf – José Carreras, Liù – Katia Ricciarelli, Timur – Jean-Paul Bogart, Ping – Robert Kerns, Pang – Helmut Wildhaber, Pong – Heinz Zednik, L'imperatore Altoum – Waldemar Kmentt, Un mandarino – Kurt Rydl
Chorus of the Vienna State Opera, Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra – Lorin Maazel, Conductor - 1984 (live, digital) SONY**

**La principessa Turandot – Éva Marton, Calaf – Ben Heppner, Liù – Margaret Price, Timur – Jan Hendrik-Rootering, Ping – Bruno de Simone, Pang – Robert Swenson, Pong – Ulrich Röss.
L'imperatore Altoum – Claes-Håkan Ahnsjö, Un mandarino – Orazio Mori
Chorus of the Bavarian State Opera, Munich Radio Symphony Orchestra – Roberto Abbado, Conductor - 1992 (studio, digital) RCA**

During the last twenty years of the twentieth century, the reigning Turandots were Ghena Dimitrova and Éva Marton, two ladies in possession of huge, dramatic voices. Dimitrova did not get the opportunity to take the role into the studio (although is featured on one of the DVDs below), but there are two commercial audio recordings with Éva Marton.

It says much for her that she was recorded in the part twice in ten years, as well as in a major filmed performance at the Met with Levine (see below). With her striking looks and almost guaranteed decibels and stamina, she brought much to the role – unfortunately she did not have the most beautiful voice, the tone often being harsh which, allied to its power, made for uncomfortable listening, which is more than evident on both of these recordings, even if she is in marginally fresher voice for Maazel. The acidic notes of her voice inevitably also meant none of her Turandots thawed very convincingly (at least not on record – the live San Francisco DVD being a notable exception). Neither of her Calafs on these two recordings are ideal either– Ben Heppner matches her in power and sings cleanly, but his voice is devoid of any Latin warmth or passion, which results in a somewhat bland and under-characterised interpretation. Carreras is clearly more involved in a live performance but is missing all squillo, and was in fresher voice in the EMI Lombard recording he now ducks all the high notes in a role that was always just a size too big for him, especially when he is placed next to the gigantic voice of Marton. That said, nobody matches his warmth and compassion when he sings *'Dimmi il mio nome prima dell'alba, e all'alba morirò'* (Tell me my name before sunrise, and at sunrise I will die) to Turandot at the end of Act II.

Jan Hendrik Rootering's Timur is nobly sonorous, whereas Jean-Paul Bogart in Vienna is all bluster, and his Liù, Katia Ricciarelli, somehow repeats her studio Turandot for Karajan, alternating between sounding exquisitely beautiful and floating glorious pianissimos one moment, to sounding shrill and out of sorts the next. On the other hand, for RCA the role is taken by Margaret Price, who genuinely sounds like Toscanini's *'voce d'angelo'*, her tone exquisitely poised and limpid throughout, allied to real dramatic intensity; this is one of the finest assumptions of the part you will ever encounter.

In the pit at the Vienna State Opera is Lorin Maazel, who made something of a speciality conducting and recording the operas of Puccini throughout his career, none of which, though, are of any particular note. I do not think this Turandot does anything to alter that conclusion, either, since he conducts it with a certain monolithic massiveness. He would not be the first to conduct the opera so slowly - Karajan is similarly leisurely, but his tempos are leavened with layers of infinite grandeur, intensity and dream-like allure, whereas Maazel is just enervatingly slow. However, it does need to be mentioned that at the great climax of *'Figlio del cielo'* he does not hold back the Vienna Philharmonic, who let rip while Marton effortlessly riding the tidal wave of orchestral and choral sound; it's a thrilling moment, in which the listener is immediately brought back down to earth with a bump when Carreras fails to take the high C in the following *'No, no, Principessa altera.'* That said, next to Roberto Abbado on the RCA, Maazel's conducting is the stuff of genius – on the evidence of this recording, Roberto may well be the nephew of Claudio, but has no business leading a major operatic studio recording, where he directs the action with as much enthusiasm as a traffic cop during the Friday evening rush-hour. His contribution really drags the whole recording down to the level of bitter disappointment.

In the end, if you must have an Éva then the filmed performance available on DVD under Levine is far preferable than both of these. Likewise, Carreras is in better voice on the rather eccentric studio Lombard performance, and Maazel – and indeed, the whole performance – is better experienced in the DVD issue, not least since then you can understand why there is a significant amount of applause, as well as clumps and bumps onstage, none of which a buyer would previously be aware of, since the current issue on compact disc scandalously fails to mention anywhere that it is a live performance. Curiously, the DVD issue is also in better sound, a different performance, albeit from the same run, to the one issued by CBS/Sony. The Abbado set is a major disappointment and I am

tempted to say is to be avoided at all costs, but that would be to overlook the exquisitely sung Liù of Margaret Price, one of the very finest interpretations of this part of all, whose account of the slave-girl not only teaches her Turandot the meaning of true love, but also saves the RCA set from total oblivion.

An English Turandot

**La principessa Turandot – Jane Eaglen, Calaf – Dennis O’Neill, Liù – Mary Plazas, Timur – Clive Bayley, Ping – Peter Sidhom, Pang – Mark le Brocq, Pong – Peter Wedd, L’imperatore Altoum – Nicolai Gedda, Un mandarino – Simon Bailey
Geoffrey Mitchell Choir, Philharmonia Orchestra – David Parry, Conductor – April 2001 (studio, digital) Chandos**

It says much for the Peter Moores Foundation that they have sponsored so many fine opera recordings sung in English – the Humperdinck *Hansel and Gretel* with Charles Mackerras is an example of one that can hold its own with any other recording whatever the language, while the Reginald Goodall *Ring Cycle* from the English National Opera is the stuff of legends. This *Turandot* is not quite up to those exalted standards, but it does nonetheless have some strengths.

One of them is most certainly not William Radice’s poor and droopy translation: ‘*Oh Princess who in caravans of splendour*’ is belted out by the chorus with about as much comprehension of its meaning as if it had been in Mandarin. It is curious state of affairs when the cast assembled is a fairly prestigious one with Jane Eaglen, the reigning Brünnhilde and Turandot at the Met of the time, along with the legendary Nicolai Gedda as The Emperor, as well as the Philharmonia Orchestra.

It may then be a little strong to label this enterprise as a failure, when the libretto is so weak and the protagonist has little engagement with it, but then, what is the point of it being sung in English if nothing makes sense? This is exemplified by Jane Eaglen, whose voice is indeed powerful and dramatic, but it is impossible to decipher any of the words she is singing and maybe as a consequence, she sounds somewhat disengaged (curiously, reports of her performances of the part from the Met that same year, seem to suggest the same thing, even when singing in Italian – as if it was enough to just turn up and power through the music impressively, with little dramatic differentiation [*NY Times 20 Oct 2000*]). Dennis O’Neill as Calaf is infinitely clearer with his diction, but singing in English seems to emphasise that he is a British tenor, complete with anglicised vowels, not an Italian one and as such he rarely thrills – indeed, his ‘*Nessun dorma*’ (or rather, “None shall sleep now”) is disappointingly limp, more a British bobby observing the streets of London in the middle of a particularly rowdy night, than a man on the verge of winning the hand of a beautiful princess.

That said, I enjoyed the Ping, Pang and Pong, who also sounded as if they were also enjoying themselves in their music, and Clive Bayley’s Timur is stentorian and sympathetic; all are real assets. Mary Plaza’s Liù is almost as good, even if you will hear better elsewhere, a judgement that could be levelled at the whole set were it not for Chandos’s typical widescreen sonics which could easily lay claim to being the finest in all the survey. They do the Philharmonia and David Parry proud, but are not able to save the chorus from sounding too small in their great ensembles at the end of the second and third acts.

In short, if you must have a *Turandot* in English, this is a decent representative example – however, it is far from being the most thrilling account in this survey.

The Great Wall of China

La principessa Turandot – Giovanna Casolla, Calaf – Lando Bartolini, Liù – Masoku Deguci, Timur – Felipe Bou, Ping – Armando Ariostini, Pang – Javier Más, Pong – Vincenc Esteve, L'imperatore Altoum – Francisco Heradia, Un mandarino – José A Garcia-Quijada
Choral Society of Bilbao, Malaga Philharmonic Orchestra – Alexander Rahbari, Conductor – October 2001 (studio, digital) NAXOS

Much credit needs to be given to Naxos for their endeavour in the early digital era and onwards for recording and releasing both well-known, as well as rare, recordings of opera to be released at budget price, including this one of *Turandot*. Indeed, the sonics and the conducting deserve much praise, as does the orchestral and choral work, even if the Malaga Philharmonic is not quite the equal of their colleagues in London, Vienna or Milan. It is a pity, then, to have to report that virtually all the soloists in this set are sub-par, some significantly so.

To be fair, Masoku Deguci's Liù, as well as Felipe Bou's Timur are listenable, as well as all the minor roles, even if none of them is especially memorable. However, it is the two lead singers who significantly let this set down. I suspect Lando Bartolini, as Calaf, has, or once had, the basis of a nice tenor voice, but too often in this recording it degenerates into coarseness and, in parts of the Riddle Scene, almost into Sprechgesang; a huge disappointment. That said, next to this Turandot – Giovanna Casolla – he sounds like Caruso. I am finding it slightly difficult to find the words to do justice to a voice that is quite unremittingly awful from first note to last, other than to say that you do rather suspect that all her potential suitors probably deliberately got their questions wrong once they had heard this Icy Princess start singing the riddles.

It is something of a disappointment for me therefore not to be able to endorse an endeavour that attempts to promote great operas at budget-price, but this set is to be avoided at any price-point.

Bilbao or bust

La principessa Turandot – Alessandra Marc, Calaf – Ignacio Encinas, Liù – Ainhoa Arteta, Timur – Erwin Schrott, Ping – Lluís Sintes, Pang – Edouardo Santamaria, Pong – Pedro Calderón, L'imperatore Altoum – José Manuel, Un mandarino – José Manuel Díaz
Choral Society of Bilbao, Orquesta Sinfónica de Euskadi – José Collado, Conductor – 21, 24 September 2002 (live, digital) RTVE

This set has enjoyed something of a cult following since its release, largely because it is relatively unknown and a little hard to find. However, as often with these things, closer scrutiny reveals a somewhat mixed bag.

In the first instance, this a live performance from Spanish radio over one, possibly two, nights, with all of the attendant strengths and weaknesses such a venture brings with it. So while there is some excitement that can be generated only when a performance takes wing, there are also many faulty entries from the soloists, audience noises (coughs as well as clapping) and stage movements, all of which requires a certain amount of tolerance from the listener. The overall sound is therefore a little disappointing, somewhat dry and lacking bloom, with the orchestra very much in the background, the chorus even more so – the latter may be due to their standing further back on the stage, but the result just makes them sound small-scaled and underpowered. From what you can hear, the conductor José Collado paces the action sensibly, without any particular insights.

It has to be said that three of the four principal singers are actually rather good. I was surprised at how impressive Erwin Schrott's Timur is: he is not just how genuinely involved in the action, but also sings beautifully; if he sounds a little young to be the deposed king, rather than the overblown

wobbliness that you occasionally encounter elsewhere. Ainhoa Arteta's Liù is another surprise – her voice is perhaps a little fuller than you would normally encounter for the slave-girl, but she sings with such heartfelt tenderness that this criticism is dismissed. However, it must also be noted that she comes in a whole bar early for '*Signora, ascolta*', and is often out of synch with the pit during '*Tu che de gel sei cinta*', both of which are a pity. On the other hand, Ignacio Encinas as Calaf is something of an acquired taste – he has potentially quite a nice voice and I had high hopes during the first act, not least with his sensitively phrased '*Non piangere, Liù*', but he seems to have a change of heart thereafter, resulting in a coarse performance, where phrases are chopped-up in a vain attempt to showboat and hit the high notes, disrupting the rhythm and flow of the performance. His contribution can only be considered as a negative.

That said, Alessandra Marc's Turandot is most certainly a success, even if on this occasion, a qualified one. I was reminded of those great Germanic sopranos of the 1950's who essayed the role with large, rich, feminine voices, riding over the orchestra with tireless ease and Marc's Principessa is cut from those same blocks of ice. Moreover, perhaps because it is live, the listener can actually sense her horror as Calaf triumphantly solves the third riddle; she also makes almost as much of '*Del primo pianto*' in explaining the princess's plight as does Callas. There are moments when, live and without retakes, the voice can occasionally sound dangerously close to being out of control, not least when Puccini unleashes his mightiest orchestral tsunamis upon his Icy Princess, but there is no doubting Marc's Turandot is something of considerable note.

In short, a better-balanced studio recording with improved sonics and a better Calaf, or at least with Encinas on his best behaviour, might have resulted in something very special. However, as it stands, this recording is something of a near miss, but perhaps one for voice connoisseurs to hear the fine Timur, Liù and Turandot.

Zubin The Third

**La principessa Turandot – Jennifer Wilson, Calaf – Andrea Bocelli, Liù – Jessica Nuccio, Timur – Alexander Tysmbalyuk, Ping – German Olvera, Pang – Valentino Buzzza, Pong – Pablo Garcia Lopez L'imperatore Altoum – Javier Agulló, Un mandarino – Ventseslav Anastasov
Orquestra e Choro de la Comunitat Valenciana- Zubin Mehta, Conductor - 2014 (studio, digital)
DECCA**

It is quite something to be able to report how one conductor could lead three different major recordings of this opera, but that is the case with Zubin Mehta who not only leads this recording, but also the filmed version from the Forbidden City, as well as the legendary Sutherland/Pavarotti recording from 1972. It has to be said that he conducts a decent performance here with a cast that has much going for them, albeit with one significant exception, namely this set's *raison d'être*, the Calaf of Andrea Bocelli.

Now, there may be some people reading this who might think that after having been relatively kind to Katia Ricciarelli in the earlier Karajan set that I am being unduly harsh here, but there is a significant difference where one artist is a fully trained opera singer and the other quite clearly is not. To reinforce this point, just listen to Ricciarelli's account of '*Vissi d'arte*' from her complete recording of *Tosca* with Karajan ([here](#)) to witness singing of ethereal beauty and heart-stopping emotion, or her account of Suor Angelica in the complete set for RCA under Bruno Bartoletti to hear Puccinian singing of indisputable greatness. By contrast, Andrea Bocelli once possessed a fairly attractive light tenor voice, which by the time of this recording had thinned out considerably to the point no amount of technical wizardry on the part of sound engineers can disguise the fact that this is a voice which lacks the requisite technique to support and project its sound plus, along with poor breath control, means his phrasing is often 'choppy'. As a consequence, you get the impression that all of Bocelli's concentration is being channelled in being able to just sing the notes (and not very well, either), with

any attempts of characterisation just falling by the wayside. In short, it is as if Tamino has turned up for work at the opera house on the wrong night.

However, there is no denying that Bocelli, having sold over twenty-five million albums in the US alone, has a significant following of fans, all of whom would already know '*Nessun dorma*', with no doubt many less being familiar with '*In questa reggia*'. So if this recording serves to introduce even some of those people to the glorious art form that is opera, that ultimate human expression where music, drama and words become one, then Decca could not have done a better job than here. That said, I do not include any person reading this article within that category and so on that note, a discrete veil needs to be drawn over this recording and we move on...

A Story with Many Endings

Alfano I

OPERATIC FINALES: Josephine Barstow, Lando Bartolini, Scottish Opera Orchestra & Chorus, John Mauceri – October 1989 DECCA

[Cherubini: Eh quoi! Je suis Médée (from *Médée*)/Janáček: *Ona pije whisku* (from *The Makropulos Case*)/ Strauss, R: Es ist kein Laut zu vernehmen (from *Salome*)/ Puccini: Principessa di morte! (from *Turandot*)]

For those listeners who are not familiar with the original Alfano ending and do not wish to invest in the new Pappano set, this recording of finales from the late 1980's may well be the answer, especially since you are now able to download just the *Turandot* excerpt, rather than having to acquire the whole album, not least since in my opinion, the Strauss, Cherubini and Janáček sections are not quite on the same level as the Puccini.

To my ears, in 1989 Josephine Barstow may have been past her prime, the voice now showing signs not just of strain, but also wear and tear when the music gets especially stormy, but she was always a great dramatic soprano and is on good form throughout this album. In the Puccini excerpt, her Calaf is Lando Bartolini, who is in rather better voice than on the complete set from Naxos (see above) – he has a nice Italianate-sounding voice, but just does not use it very subtly. However, it is for the music of the original Alfano conclusion, not the singing, that you should hear this set, for there is a blazing sense of discovery in the performance which, as the final chorus brings the work to its close, this time as Alfano originally envisaged it (and which is so much better than the usual Tocanini-ised version), results in a genuine sense of exaltation and elation which is just thrilling beyond words. Much credit needs to go to John Mauceri and his forces for this, as well as for Decca who capture it all in such fine sound. Highly recommended.

Pappano, Kaufmann & Radvanovsky

**La principessa Turandot – Sondra Radvanovsky, Calaf – Jonas Kaufmann Liù – Ermonela Jaho, Timur – Michele Pertusi, Ping – Mattis Olivieri, Pang – Gregory Bonfiatti, Pong – Siyabonga Maqungo L'imperatore Altoum – Michael Spyres, Un mandarino – Michael Mofidian
Orchestra e Coro dell'Accademia Nazionale di Santa Cecilia, Antonio Pappano, Conductor - 2022 (studio, digital) Warner**

This new recording allows us to hear the original conclusion for the first time as part of a complete performance, rather than the standalone torso featured on the Barstow-Decca final scenes album. Recorded in the summer of 2022 under Covid restrictions that saw the chorus needing to stand two metres apart and with the orchestra spread out over the enlarged Santa Cecilia concert hall stage,

which had the soloists standing in between the orchestra and chorus, there is no compromise to the sound that is wonderfully resplendent and clear. Indeed, some may find that the orchestra is recorded a little too close when compared to the singers, but since this is an opera by Puccini, I am not complaining.

If Sir Antonio Pappano had never conducted this opera before the recording was made, it matters not a jot when he brings all his considerable experience of the opera house to bear with his conducting in this recording. He is especially good at telling the story with his baton, which is evident as early as the opening pages with the chorus's responses to the Mandarin reading the laws of the land, that are thrillingly involved and alive to the action, as they are in their proclamations during the Riddle Scene. He is also particularly good at evoking the majesty of Ancient China, be that whenever the Icy Princess appears on the scene, or with the massive chords which punctuate the Emperor's initial exchanges with Calaf. Needless to say, he conducts the final scene with great commitment, although – and somewhat to my surprise – it is Mauceri who captures the greater sense of blazing discovery with his standalone recording of the final scene only on Decca.

That said, he is treated to a starry cast, especially in today's parsimonious times. Indeed, it may be of come surprise to many to see the name of the forty-two-year-old Michael Spyres singing the role of the Emperor, which is usually reserved for a cameo appearance by some great from the past (in the 1987 live recording on DVD from the Metropolitan Opera, James Levine cast the eighty-five-year-old Hugues Cuénod in the role, giving him his debut in New York). Spyres is unable to disguise the fact that his is a young voice, but his exchanges with Calaf are most entertaining and he certainly conveys the Emperor's exasperation at all the blood being spilt merely for the hand of a princess. The trio of government ministers, Mattia Olivieri, Gregory Bonfatti and Siyabonga Maqungo, aided and abetted by Pappano's colourful conducting, make a characterful bunch, while no-one can have any grumbles with any of the other minor roles.

One who may have reason to grumble though is the Timur of Michele Pertusi, who is not afforded the usual honour of his name on the front cover as befitting most of the previous deposed kings of Tartary. Alas, although he articulates the text cleanly, his tone is grey and woolly and cannot be counted a success.

As his slave-girl, Ermonela Jahò's is presented as more womanly and fuller-toned than usual, her voice having hints of darker hues, with a hint of contralto. She is certainly most involved in the action, but she does not banish memories of previously great Liùs on record, lacking the fragility of Schwarzkopf, the sweetness of Barbara Hendricks, the nobility and pure tones of Margaret Price, or the frankly astonishing breath control of Caballé on the legendary Decca-Mehta recording, to name just a handful of my favourites. Hers is a fine appraisal, just not a great one.

Reviews of the concert performances that took place the week following the recording sessions were overwhelmingly positive, but did add one caveat; Jonas Kaufmann. In particular it was noted how his voice sounded "*gutteral, small and lacked squillo*" (Mauricio Villa, *Operawire*, 30 March 2022), often failing to be heard at all (for example, for long stretches of the ensemble which closes the end of Act I). Certainly, those listeners used to the sweetness of Björling, the charisma of Corelli and the panache of Pavarotti in this role may not initially react positively to Kaufmann's smokier, baritone tenor, although thanks to recording engineers, or otherwise, he is thankfully present in the sound-picture throughout the recording. His is a sensitive portrayal of Calaf, often singing very softly with smooth legato, even if he comes dangerously close to crooning in parts of '*Non piangere, Liù*' and sounding mannered as a result. That said, he does not duck any of the high notes, unlike the more golden-toned Plácido Domingo on the Karajan recording. For me, once again it is a fine, rather than great assumption.

The Turandot of Sondra Radvanovsky reveals all her credentials at her entrance with '*In questa reggia*' which is both commanding, as well as, crucially, having a hint of warmth too. In particular, she is especially observant of Puccini's dynamic instructions in this aria, something many sopranos

disregard, powering through the music like air-raid sirens – for me this is important, as it gives hints that this Icy Princess is capable of thawing even at this point in the opera, which then lends credence to Calaf's belief he can persuade her to love him. It is a delicate balancing act of fire and ice, rage and vulnerability, which if you observe the *piano* markings too exaggeratedly (as Montserrat Caballé did on her EMI recording in 1977) can sound mannered. Radvanovsky sails through the test with aplomb, as she does later on, riding the orchestra majestically at the climax of '*Figlio del Cielo*'. In my opinion, this is another of the current century's great Turandot portrayals to set alongside those of Lise Lindstrom and Alessandra Marc.

Ultimately, this is a fine entry to the Turandot discography, rather than a great one.

Berio 2001

Puccini: Turandot. Cast - Turandot -- Gabriele Schnaut, Altoum -- Robert Tear, Timur -- Paata Burchuladze, Calaf -- Johan Botha, Liù -- Christina Gallardo-Domas, Ping -- Boaz Daniel, Pang -- Vicente Ombuena, Pong -- Steve Davislim, Mandarin -- Robert Bork - Vienna State Opera Chorus, Tolz Boys' Choir, Vienna Philharmonic conducted by Valery Gergiev, director – David Pountney (Live, Salzburg Festival 2002) TDK DVD

It has to be noted that the cast assembled for this 2002 performance was a pretty strong one - for its time, that is. In other words, you will not be sending any of your Nilssons or Sutherlands down to the charity shop in favour of anything here. Most of it is predictable - Gabriele Schnaut's Turandot and Botha's Calaf are not the most beautiful on record, although the latter's voice does have a pleasant enough ring to it, and on occasion they seem to be swamped by the orchestra; however, to be fair, this could have been due to the technical challenges of recording anything on the large Salzburg stage. Gallardo-Domas is a touching Liù and Burchuladze a decent, if un-Italianate Timur. In the pit, Valery Gergiev conducts the Vienna PO efficiently and with consideration to his singers - however, you will listen in vain to the excitement of Mehta (Decca), the grandeur of Karajan (DG), the red tooth-and-claw of Molinari-Pradelli (EMI); musically, it can be given a miss then.

On the other hand, there is the production. David Pountney has transposed/updated it into a period of time in the future - it seems to take its cue from the film world of Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner*, with the characters randomly plucked from *Mad Max*, *Willy Wonka's Chocolate Factory* and *Edward Scissorhands*; in the second act, the chorus reminded me of the "playing card" soldiers of Disney's *Alice in Wonderland*. The only nod in the direction of Ancient China is the chorus which in the first two acts, resemble something from the Terracotta Army - no attempt is made to make the main protagonists look anything remotely "oriental" at all. It certainly works in the sense of creating an oppressive atmosphere, however it makes a mockery of Puccini's orchestral effects which to my ears cleverly attempts to evoke the grandeur, majesty and colour of the Forbidden City. Ears and eyes are also out of synch - with "*Perché tarda la luna*" where one wonders what is going on in this post-nuclear city that seemingly has no sky (so where's the moon?); similarly, when Ping, Pang and Pong sing of their gardens and forests during their scene at the beginning of Act II, one wonders how/if any of Nature's beauties are left. The opening of the Riddle Scene in Act II sees Turandot emerging from a giant gold head, perched on top of a ledge some twenty feet above the stage as she also did in her brief appearance in Act I (close ups by the camera reveal her to leaning back against a ledge, that Schnaut nervously grabs now and again). When Calaf answers the third riddle correctly though, she descends down to earth, the gold dress stripped away to reveal her merely in a plain white one, which is coincidentally just like the one Liù is wearing in this production. What it therefore lacks is a certain "human dimension", a warmth that is so crucial to fully appreciate Puccini's masterpiece; it is all too artificial and cold - the death of Liù (achieved by her approaching Turandot with a pair of scissors and forcing the Princess to stab her) does not have the emotional pull that it should. By chance, "artificial and cold" were the words that sprang to my mind when thinking of Gergiev's conducting.

What this production does have though is the premiere of the completion by Luciano Berio, who was asked to revise the final scene at the behest of the Puccini estate. For me I have to say I am not sure if it is a success - after the death of Liù, those three majestic orchestral chords that lead into "*Principessa di morte*" are instead replaced by a collection of ancient-sounding bongs and clunks, as jolting a gear change from Puccini's orchestral world as you can imagine. And so it continues, with fleeting glimpses of the more familiar music joined together with oriental-sounding dissonance. It all sounds as if Turandot has suddenly found its way into the world of *Wozzeck* and while I accept that they were written and premiered at around the same time, I am not convinced. So this is not a "completion" as such, more a re-imagining - as is the stage production. Liù's dead body is left onstage as the chorus departs, on top of a hospital trolley to be precise, and Calaf sings of lifting Turandot's "veil" (which she isn't wearing) as the two of them sit either side of the slave girl's corpse. There is no kiss - rather the thawing of Turandot begins as she takes a bowl of water and starts to wash Liù's body. There is no final chorus either, neither the rather cheesy one from the usual production, nor the more spectacular "original Alfano" completion - rather it all ends quietly, with the chorus reappearing shorn of their faux futuristic garb and instead all wearing shabby peasant costumes - men and women pair up and hug each other chastely, as do Turandot and Calaf centre stage at the front. And all live happily ever after.

The sound and picture quality of this DVD are both spectacular and credit must be given to both the producer and Berio for such a different take on Puccini's *Turandot* - however, musically and dramatically I suspect it has gone too far to be credible.

Puccini Discoveries: Orchestra Sinfonica e Coro di Milano Giuseppe Verdi - Riccardo Chailly (Decca)

Puccini: Turandot. Cast - Turandot – Nina Stemme, Altoum – Carlo Bosi, Timur – Alexander Tsymbalyuk, Calaf – Alexsandr Antonenko, Liù – Maria Agresta, Ping – Angelo Veccia, Pang – Roberto Covatta, Pong – Blagoj Nacoski, Mandarin – Gianluca Breda. Orchestra & Chorus of La Scala Milan conducted by Riccardo Chailly, director – Nikolaus Lehnhoff (Live, 2015) Decca DVD

Perhaps a better way for most people to get acquainted with this new Berio completion would be via this disc of "Puccini Discoveries" from the following year with Riccardo Chailly and his Milan orchestra on Decca. It is superbly played and recorded with great dedication with the role of Turandot taken by Eva Urbanova, Calaf by Dario Volonté and Liù by Maria Fontosh. Intriguingly, Chailly starts it with "*Tu che di gel sei cinta*", as if to really emphasise the slave-girl's more interventionist role here, but to be honest it only serves to further highlight the jarring gear change between Puccini and when Berio takes over with "*Principessa di Morte*". On a positive note, I cannot really imagine a stronger case for the completion being made - Chailly clearly believes in the cause.

Additionally, the rest of the disc is full of other curios, which make for a rather mixed bag. Puccini's *Requiem Mass* promises much, with Verdi's own work perhaps lurking at the back of our minds, but in fact is a rather dreary piece for chorus accompanied by organ and solo viola. The *Inno di Roma* I have heard before, sung with tremendous ardour and gusto by Gigli with chorus and orchestra - Chailly's decision to opt for the version without tenor is a pity with the presence of Joseph Calleja elsewhere on this disc and he does not make a very good case for it to be frank. Calleja is heard though in the cantata "*Cessato il suon dell'armi*" from 1877, a score long thought to have been lost and has had to undergo substantial reconstruction to assemble a performing version from the parts they have found. It was a work Puccini used to enter a competition for which he did not get awarded a prize; I cannot say I am surprised. Elsewhere on this disc is a Prelude to *Manon Lescaut*, which was subsequently discarded, as well as a piece for brass band called *Scossa elettrica*, which literally means "electric shock" and features snippets of *La bohème* woven into a five-minute whole that Puccini dismissed as a "bit of rubbish"; it's worth hearing once, I suppose. Strangely enough, the disc opens with the earliest work from 1876, an orchestral *Preludio* that has all the hallmarks of verismo

and is charm itself - for me, it was the only pleasant "discovery" here (a rather more pleasurable disc of 'Unknown Puccini' would have been the one recorded by Chailly some thirty years prior in Berlin that includes the *Preludio Sinfonico* and *Capriccio Sinfonico*, two genuine verismo gems)

As a measure of Chailly's dedication to the 'Berio completion cause' he chose to perform *Turandot* with the revised ending to open the La Scala season in 2015, his first as its Music Director. For the production, he used Nikolaus Lehnhoff's modernist vision from the Dutch National Opera, with sets designed by Raimund Bauer and costumes by Andrea Schmidt-Futterer. Visually, it is very extravagant, but the viewer may struggle to equate much of it to Puccini's opera without any of the music.

Part of the issue here appears to be a total disregard to the musical values of Puccini's score, where he – and countless other composers – spent much effort composing music to reflect what is happening onstage. So in *Tosca*, it is the exact pitch of St Peter's bells that awaken Rome in Act III; in *La bohème* you can hear in the music the fire crackling as Rodolfo's manuscript burns in the wood-burner, plus how in *La fanciulla del West* the pizzicato strings imitate the trotting of a horse as Jake Wallace arrives at the Polka Saloon to make all the miners homesick with "*Che faranno i vecchi miei*". In this production of *Turandot* you will struggle to find any connection to China, ancient or otherwise, which often means eyes and ears are completely out of synch.

"Once upon a time, a long time ago...." begins many fairy tales – except with this production, the viewer is never quite sure of the 'when' such is the confusion of all the different visions onstage. The set stays the same during the entire performance, a high wall with a huge gold door in the middle. The Emperor looks down from above, while the chorus move around below, robotic and all dressed in black 1920's raincoats and trilbys, all the men and women indistinguishable with phantom of the opera face masks. The armed guards are similarly attired, except they have top hats and have the ends of their arms chopped off, so they "arm-less" and so cannot be 'armed' at all (no doubt a 'clever' director joke). The Mandarin announces the laws of the land dressed as a ring master and there is no Executioner, just a huge naked flame spouting out from centre stage, around which the chorus march. When the Prince of Persia arrives, stripped naked and ghostly white, the crowd take off their hats and bow their heads, revealing large red blobs on top of their skulls for which no explanation is offered either then or at any other time in the production. The appearance of *Turandot* is several pages of music earlier than usual, thus negating its impact by totally ignoring Puccini's carefully constructed orchestration that builds up the tension and she appears in weird futuristic outfit high upon the ramparts, her face whitened with black eyes and shaven hair – she hardly looks human let alone something Calaf would fall in love with and she carries a weird red stick. The government ministers are dressed in black and white costumes throughout and looked more disturbing than amusing, closer to Pennywise than Ping, Pang and Pong, while Calaf announces he is to answer the riddles by banging on the huge golden door at the bottom of the wall, that opens and allows him to enter.

When *Turandot* appears in the following acts, she looks nothing like her appearance in Act I (you doubt if it was even her), more human now and dressed in a black outfit with huge dark feathers sprouting out of it – whether she is supposed to represent a 1920's femme fatale, or a vulture feasting on human flesh, I could not tell you. Nor could I tell you what her red stick is for, that she is still carrying, using it like a force shield to wield off Calaf during the Riddle Scene. Once he has answered the third riddle correctly, he tears it out of her hands and tosses it to the floor, before stalking around the clearly distressed princess menacingly as she begs her father to be released from her oath, laughing at her mockingly. I cannot pretend that I needed the influence of #MeToo to find this rather disturbing and, once again, eyes and ears are out of synch since moments later he answers the Icy Princess's question of: "Do you wish me in your arms by force, cold and unwilling?" with "*No, no, Principessa altera! Ti voglio ardente d'amor!*" (No, no, proud Princess! I want your love to be ardent!), which is hardly matching his actions on stage at this point. At the end of the second

act, Calaf is allowed to leave the courtyard via the gold door at the back, which closes and refuses to open for the princess – presumably this is supposed to help us all think she is trapped. Except she is not, for if she answers her riddle, then she is free.

The final act sees more of the same. Liù stabs herself by using Calaf's sword whilst looking at him, clearly the implication being that he has indirectly killed her. Unlike in the Pountney production, there is still a kiss between the lovers, as the final scene once more revolves around the corpse of the slave girl, this time mercifully not on a hospital trolley. There is no Emperor at the end, Turandot singing the familiar text to herself or no-one, while Calaf and Turandot walk off hand in hand through the gold door that is now open for the opera's ending.

Musically, it is rather better. Chailly leads his players and chorus in a rousing performance, that seems to seek out the more modernistic side of Puccini's score, rather than its blazing splendour. The Turandot, Nina Stemme, was rather good, able to muster the requisite power as well as retain richness of tone, even if she did sound small-scaled when compared to some of her illustrious forebears in the role. Her Unknown Prince is Aleksandrs Antonenko, a tenor with a large enough voice and lung power to essay Otello with confidence, even if the voice itself is hardly a thing of beauty. Liù is sung by Maria Agresta who, quite rightly, receives the greatest ovations of the night; she sings with a purity of tone and acted with an innocence that is most touching, with very fine, floated pianissimos. Timur is Alexander Tsymbalyuk whose outfit is a pair of dark glasses and a woolly hat, which I took to represent his equally woolly tone and blindingly-dull acting. The remaining cast members were decent, no more.

For readers who wish to experience the Berio conclusion, I would have to say this production is marginally better than the Salzburg performance, largely thanks to the fine contributions of Stemme, Agresta and Chailly. The sound and sonics are absolutely first class, but this still comes with a health warning.

Alfano!?

**La principessa Turandot – Luana De Vol, Calaf – Franco Farina, Liù – Barbara Frittoli, Timur – Stefano Palatchi, Ping – Lluís Sintes, Pang – Francisco Vas, Pong – David Alegret, L'imperatore Altoum – Josep Ruiz, Un mandarino – Philip Cutlip
Chorus & Orquestra Simfónica del Gran Teatre del Liceu – Giuliano Carella, Conductor – 2005. Dir Nùria Espert (live, digital) TDK DVD**

This filmed production of *Turandot* was first seen in 1999 as it was used for the inauguration of the Gran Teatre del Liceu at Barcelona, when it reopened, having been burnt down five years earlier. The score used is the traditional one, Alfano II, but bear with me here, as there is one huge difference, largely as a result of a 'creative decision' by the director Nùria Espert.

What Ms Espert captures quite superbly is the fairy-tale atmosphere of Puccini's Ancient China, with sets designed by Ezio Frigerio that are dazzling and magnificent, as well as traditional and sumptuous costumes by Franca Squarciarino. Of particular note is the first appearance of Turandot in Act I, that is only surpassed when the Emperor appears the same way for the Riddle Scene, when the clouds seemingly part at the back of the stage to reveal a huge gold throne, adorned by two mighty dragons with the Emperor sitting on top, surrounded by mist and swirling clouds. It achieves what many have long thought was impossible to do, by making the same moment in Franco Zeffirelli's New York Met production look positively modest and small-scaled in comparison and is worth the entry-price alone. Beneath him there is a huge mirrored floor from which all the action over the three acts take place. The whole production is visually stunning, as are the lighting effects by Vinicio Cheli.

However, there are hints early on that Ms Espert is not going to go completely down the traditional route. When the executioner arrives, carried aloft on a platform made of human skulls by lookalikes, all impossibly slim, ghostly white with long black hair and dressed only in mawashis, you realise that it is not the muscle-bound Mr Universe of Metropolitan Opera fame who is wielding the executioner's axe, but rather a lean and lithe female, who then proceeds to carry-out the killing of the Persian Prince onstage. When Ping, Pang and Pong arrive, they all look the same, with long black hair tied back and wearing off-the-shoulder evening gowns; eunuchs, or in this gender-fluid age, non-binary? I'll let you decide. Further on, Turandot clearly has her own small battalion of armed guards, all of whom are old women sporting the same hairstyle as their princess. They, as well as Turandot's (much younger looking) handmaidens, are very obviously devoted to her and are as devastated as the princess when Calaf answers the third riddle correctly. All this is very clever, if hardly ground-breaking, but everything comes together at the death of Liù when, of course, the executioner has just been summoned once more. As the corpse of the slave-girl is carried offstage followed by the crowds, the executioner hangs back and with immense sorrow hands the princess a large knife – a symbolic moment, reminiscent of Suzuki doing the same to Madama Butterfly. For the final scene, the stage goes dark and it appears as if Turandot and Calaf are duetting in the night's sky, until right at the end, still alone, the stars and clouds magically part and the Emperor appears upon his throne, seemingly from the heavens. Turandot tells him she knows the stranger's name, it is 'love' – and then promptly stabs herself with the knife. It has to be said that having the final chorus sung offstage, with Calaf alone and kneeling in front of the corpse of the demi-goddess Turandot at the opera's end, was quite something – a sensation not unlike seeing a lion laid low on the Serengeti as a result of a catastrophic hunting trip, with the offstage *Nessun Dorma* chorus reminiscent of the *Toréodor* song ringing out in the background as Carmen lays dying at the feet of Don José. Yet somehow it worked – and, paradoxically, seemed to make more sense than the two Berio productions listed above.

Musically it is not quite on the same level. Barbara Frittoli is a beautiful looking and sounding slave-girl once more, while the Timur of Stefano Palatchi is decent and strong. The performance of the US-born Franco Farina's Calaf has come in for some criticism over the years, but there are far worse in this survey – he has a decent Italian-sounding voice, a little weak on top maybe, but he sings with some panache and looks the part – unless you are going to compare him with another Franco, specifically Corelli. Luana de Vol's Turandot is not helped by the make-up department that somehow contrives to make her look more like Klytämnestra than a heart-stoppingly beautiful princess, nor does she possess the most seductive sounding voice, but she sings strongly and is thoroughly involved in the action – this is no stand-and-deliver Turandot assumption, but one that also carefully observes Puccini's copious dynamic markings, which often means she is singing softly with admirably smooth legato. Giuliano Carella leads his forces in the pit wisely – if the Barcelona band are not quite the equal of their colleagues from Vienna and Milan, they still play very well and few will have any complaints.

Overall, then, this is a surprise and one of the best of the DVDs, in spite – and maybe even because – of the different ending. If you recoil from the flamboyance of Zeffirelli and feel like holding your nose with David Pountney or Nikolaus Lehnhoff, then this may well be a good option for you. There is a thoughtfulness running through the production that seems to be encapsulated by the appearance of the Principessa for the Riddle Scene, through an ornamental gold door, looking for all the world like a toy princess emerging from a wind-up musical box, which of course was what gave Puccini the idea for the music for this opera in the first place. Highly recommended.

Turandot on DVD – A short survey of selected recordings

**La principessa Turandot – Lucille Ludovich, Calaf – Franco Corelli, Liù – Renata Mattioli, Timur – Plinio Clabassi, Ping – Mario Borriello, Pang – Mario Carlin, Pong – Renato Ercolani
L'imperatore Altoum – Nino del Sole, Un mandarino – Teodoro Rovetta**

Orchestra e Coro di Milano della R adio e Televisione, Fernando Previtali. Dir, Mario Lanfranchi, 1958 (mono) VAI

This film was originally made for television and was first broadcast on 23 December 1958. It starts unpromisingly, with crashes on the tam-tam each time a new member of the cast list is announced on screen, while a dancer poses in the background. As the main action starts in a dark and grainy black and white picture in dull mono sound, the camera wobbles and the Mandarin appears to announce the laws of the land with very poor lip synching and looking for all the world like Ming the Merciless, until Flash Corelli appears on the scene as Calaf. Thereafter things pick up superbly to produce something quite special indeed.

What is especially noticeable, as well as notable, about this production is how the director choreographs the chorus and government ministers, incorporating the elements of dancing commonplace in Chinese opera to synchronise their actions superbly with the music. I have to say it is very imaginative and impressive, a neat fusion of Chinese opera into a Western opera about China. It is clear much thought has gone into the costuming of the chorus too; they all looking authentically Chinese, complete with hakka bamboo hats for the peasants, as well as terracotta army battle gear for the soldiers. The sets are realistic and used imaginatively by the director to produce both moments of public grandeur and spectacle, as well as private intimacy. Unusually for this opera since it is a made for television film, some of the scenes featuring the Principessa find her in closer proximity to the other characters than the usual distanced aloofness, presumably so she can be incorporated within the camera shot. It adds a rather unique dimension to the film, but also makes it all the more regrettable that *'Del primo pianto'* is cut.

Musically, it is led by the experienced Fernando Previtali with a strong cast, in particular Franco Corelli, in what could be his freshest sounding and most subtle performance as Calaf, even if he does rather look bored and wooden on screen, only coming to life in his scenes with Ping, Pang and Pong who are superb. Once more the imagination of the director has to be admired in creating characters for the government ministers who appear to be a cross between *commedia dell'arte* and Chinese opera, but also credit to the singers who not only act superbly, lip-synch brilliantly and sing wonderfully – they even manage to rouse Corelli into something more than just standing and looking magnificent.

Plinio Clabassi's Timur is sung and acted very well, even if he does look and sound rather too young, and while both the voices of Renata Matteoli's Li  and Lucille Udovich's Turandot are not sympathetically caught by the microphones, often sounding strident, they both act well. In particular, the American (of Croatian parentage) Lucille Udovich has a powerful voice and makes a good icy Princess and one can only wonder about her career if the back problems she encountered throughout her life has been cured (in the end she was wheelchair-bound, with her voice still magnificently intact).

Ultimately, this film is more than just a historical curiosity, thanks to the direction of Mario Lanfranchi, as well as the musical production led by the fine Previtali and a magnificent Corelli. It certainly has its limitations, but these are outweighed by its strengths elsewhere.

**La principessa Turandot – Birgit Nilsson, Calaf – Gianfranco Cecchele Li  – Gabriele Tucci, Timur – Boris Carmeli, Ping – Claudio Strudthoff, Pang – Mario Ferrara, Pong – Carlo Franzini, L'imperatore Altoum – Luigi Pontiggia, Un mandarino – Franco Bordoni
Orchestra e Coro di Torino della R adio e Televisione, Georges Pr tre. Dir, Margherita Wallman, 1969 (mono) ENCORE**

The next film, once more from Italian television, is once again in black and white and mono, although there is a quantum leap in terms of sound and picture quality. It appears as if the director Margherita

Wallman was familiar with the earlier film from 1958 since the opening is virtually identical, each individual member of the cast being presented with a celebratory crash on the tam-tam as before.

Musically, it is very good. Nilsson, as ever, delivers the goods as Turandot, as she seemed to do on virtually every occasion. Gabriele Tucci is a full and rich toned Liù, while Boris Carmeli's Timur is richly sonorous. Readers may be somewhat amused to note the irony of having an "unknown" tenor selected to assume the role of the Unknown Prince, but Gianfranco Cecchele was actually something of a minor sensation at the time. Born in 1938 at Padua in Italy, he took up singing only in 1963 and was soon taking significant heavy-weight tenor roles such as Rienzi, Radames, Don Carlo, Turridù, Don Alvaro and Calaf, as well as starring opposite Maria Callas in *Norma*. Of course, and somewhat unsurprisingly, a meteoric rise in such demanding repertoire resulted in major vocal problems, meaning that by 1970 he had to take a significant break to recover from swollen and seriously strained vocal cords. Thereafter, his career never quite regained its earlier lustre, the tenor seemingly content to be singing less-demanding roles within his native Italy, but on this recording of *Turandot* we encounter him in his early prime, at around thirty years old. His bright and shining tenor, rich throughout all the registers with a bright and gleaming top, contrasts nicely with the more powerful and heroic one of Corelli in the earlier film and is a pleasure to listen to. If there is a small criticism it is that the characterisation is a little underdeveloped, but that may have been due to his inexperience, both with the role and with his profession. One can only wonder how things could have worked out differently had he been a little more careful in the early years of his career, but he is on DVD one of the best sounding tenors in the survey.

With the rest of the singing parts taken well and with Georges Prêtre in the pit, leading the forces of the Turin Radio and Television in fine style, with an eye kept firmly on the drama (the drum roll leading into the final chorus of the second act is almost as long and earth-shattering as those leading into the Death March of Mahler's *Resurrection Symphony*), musically this is a quite a distinguished account. It is a pity then that visually it is quite the opposite.

If Margherita Wallman showed signs of being influenced by the earlier film by Mario Lanfranchi in her introduction, thereafter she decidedly does not. Whereas Lanfranchi brilliantly fused concepts of Chinese opera into a Western opera set in China, Wallman seems hell-bent on erasing any such suggestions. So none of the principals' dress and make-up have any hints of Ancient China, and the chorus look as if they had been imported from any random village from a Mussorgsky or Janáček opera. The sets, while large, look as if they have been borrowed from a production of a low-budget sci-fi movie, a point only reinforced with some badly dated special-effects, such as Turandot's eyes being superimposed upon the picture as Calaf ponders the answer to the final riddle. The lip-synching to the pre-recorded music track is genuinely bad, plus Timur (who looks as if he has wandered out of the Old Testament) seems to forget that he is blind at the end of Act I, with both his eyes and head faithfully following Calaf around the stage, while the latter paces about deciding whether or not to strike the gong. When he does, though, a huge object that Rank Films would have been proud of, he does so with his hands and on the third strike, it slowly falls back and huge drawbridges are released in its place leading to the Emperor's palace; it has to be acknowledged that this is a genuinely spectacular moment in the production and one which is totally at one with the music. Another neat idea was to have an ornamental dagger hidden within the Icy Princess's sleeve during her final duet with Calaf that she dramatically drops to the floor when he kisses her, when this Turandot's Plan A (kill Calaf) rapidly morphs into her Plan B (marry him instead). There are possibly others, but you would struggle to notice them in the dark and murky picture that in the first act seems to suggest it is night-time, except the skyline is noticeably absent and there is most certainly no moon.

At the very end, as Turandot and Calaf grin at the camera like a couple of awkward teenage newly-weds and the chorus rejoices, you may conclude (as I do) that this film has dated very badly. It is of course good to see, as well as hear, Nilsson in one of her great roles, even if she was never the

greatest actress and she is lip-synching badly, and it is wonderful to hear Cecchele in the early bloom of his career, but overall this film is more notable for its curiosity value than for being a great *Turandot* experience.

**La principessa Turandot – Ghena Dimitrova, Calaf – Nicola Martinucci, Liù – Cecilia Gasdia, Timur – Ivo Vinco Ping – Giancarlo Ceccarini, Pang – Tullio Pané, Pong – Piero da Palma, L'imperatore Altoum – Angelo Casertano, Un mandarino – Alfredo Giacomotti
Orchestra e Coro del Teatro Comunale dell'Opera di Genova, Maurizio Arena. Dir, Giuliano Montaldo, 1983 (stereo, live) Castle**

It must be quite daunting for any singer to perform opera at the Arena di Verona; not only is it outside, but its capacity of 22,000 people makes the audience both noisy, as well as far away. Ghena Dimitrova herself has spoken about how at Verona she had to concentrate more on voice projection, at the expense of legato, but these performances from 1983 were famous in their time and deserve much respect.

The production is a traditional one, with a huge flight of stone steps from which Turandot and the Emperor appears, with much of the choral work swirling at the bottom around it. Part of the chorus as well as the onstage brass fanfares are taken from the ramparts that stretch around both sides of the stage from the top of the steps, from which flags are waved during the celebratory crowd scenes at the end of the second and third acts. Being 1983 though, production values are still a little basic. Turandot emerges for the first time in Act I just by stepping out at the top of the steps into a spotlight, while the Forbidden City is just painted on to large frescos stuck behind the ramparts. It probably looked magical at the back of the Arena, but on DVD has the whiff of am-dram about it, even if the lighting does bathe everything in a moonlit blue that is quite effective.

Much of the acting is also a bit larger than life – probably stock gestures that were designed to be seen in the arena that now look vaguely comical close up, such as the grinding of the axe at the beginning of the opera that clearly goes nowhere near the spinning stone wheel. The problem of distances also affects the technical aspect of the musical performance too, with synchronicity between pit and stage often going awry, especially during the Riddle Scene. This is a pity for musically it does have much going for it, with a fine Liù by Cecilia Gasdia, as well as a powerful Timur by Ivo Vinco. Sometimes Nicola Martinucci's Calaf can sound small next to the huge sound of Dimitrova, but he has a nice Italianate voice with a commendable elegance of execution. The crowd shows its appreciation of his sensitively shaded and spectacularly closed *Nessun dorma* and, especially, at the end of the first Act when he hangs onto the final "Turandot" forever before striking the gong. He cuts a dapper Unknown Prince, while the government ministers that include that ultimate comprimario, Piero de Palma, are clearly having a ball.

It does not promise much to describe Dimitrova's Turandot as wearing a billowing white outfit with black hair down to her ankles, but she does look suitably goddess-like, plus as a pupil of one of the first Turandots in this survey, Gina Cigna, she also sounds magnificent too, with a huge and darkly rich voice. Hers is a haughty and aloof Icy Princess, but the warmth in her voice as well as the way she attacks the top notes, also makes her assumption a formidable one too. It is just a pity she did not get the opportunity to take it into the studio with a good supporting cast, orchestra and production, as my conclusions at the end of this survey may then have been different.

On DVD though, the picture and sound are very good, if not quite with the crystalline clarity achieved with today's more modern equipment, but entirely watchable nonetheless. I found the sound captured of the orchestra rather favoured the strings, but since this opera is by Puccini, that is not entirely a bad thing and Giuliano Montaldo overall leads an exciting night at the opera. For all of its flaws, this is still highly enjoyable and is probably the best *Turandot* with Dimitrova, if not her best Turandot.

La principessa Turandot – Éva Marton, Calaf – José Carreras, Liù – Katia Ricciarelli, Timur – Jean-Paul Bogart, Ping – Robert Kerns, Pang – Helmut Wildhaber, Pong – Heinz Zednik, L'imperatore Altoum – Waldemar Kmentt, Un mandarino – Kurt Rydl
Chorus of the Vienna State Opera, Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra – Lorin Maazel, Conductor – 1984. Dir Harold Prince (live, digital) Arthaus Musik

This is the same cast and orchestra as with the audio only release by CBS Sony, reviewed above. It is however, not the same performance, as Katia Ricciarelli is in better voice for the audio recording, and the sound for the DVD release paradoxically favours the orchestra, which we of course cannot see, over the singers, that we can now.

The production by Harold Prince is a traditional one, with an oppressive, dark and gloomy atmosphere which allows the elaborately colourful, yet traditional, costumes to glitter magically as and when they catch the light. The very opening is clever: Liù leads Timur, who is tied to her by a rope, in front of the stage curtains as the opening bars ring out from the pit, then goes through a door in the curtain which is raised to reveal the set dominated by a huge staircase with a terrifyingly steep gradient from floor to ceiling, upon which much of the action takes place, while the crowds swirl underneath.

My reaction to the musical performance rarely changes when I switch from the audio performance to DVD, but if I do end up preferring it visually, it is, ironically, because of the better sound. However, my misgivings over Maazel's grindingly slow tempos remain, even if I do thrill still to the climax of *Figlio del cielo*, when he lets his orchestral and choral forces off the leash with no mercy for his icy Princess, who cuts effortless through the musical storm he has conjured up. The irony is that Éva Marton was a late replacement for Hildegard Behrens, who was originally lined up to sing the part. It was Marton's first assumption of the role of Turandot and as such this DVD documents an historic night at the opera for perhaps that reason alone, even if overall, this is very good, if hardly outstanding.

La principessa Turandot – Éva Marton, Calaf – Michael Sylvester, Liù – Lucia Mazzaria, Timur – Kevin Langan, Ping – Theodore Baerg, Pang – Dennis Peterson, Pong – Craig Estep, L'imperatore Altoum – Joseph Frank, Un mandarino – Chester Patton
Chorus & Orchestra of the San Francisco Opera– Donald Runnicles, Conductor – 1994. Dir Peter McClintock (live, digital) Arthaus Musik

Ten years on from the Vienna performance, it is disappointing to note the deterioration in Marton's voice, the top now being thin and unpleasant, and taking a little time to warm up as well, even if the decibels remain. To offset this, there is clearly a significant effort at characterisation, not just with '*In questa reggia*' where there is now greater nuance and emphasis with the words, but in her acting, too. So now when she first appears in Act I to command the execution of the Prince of Persia, there is a very obvious moment of *noticing* Calaf standing in the crowd, linking it to '*Del primo pianto*' when she sings how she loved the Unknown Prince the first time she set eyes upon him. Further on, there is a hint that she is almost pleased that it is Calaf, not the other suitors, who is victorious with the third riddle, while at the death of Liù she turns her back on the action, almost as if she is overcome with grief and shame. Symbolically for the final scene, the handmaidens remove her robes and she is then dressed in white, the Chinese colour for mourning, until she is kissed by Calaf, very naturally, almost gently. Much credit therefore needs to be given to Marton and the director, Peter McClintock, for attempting such a persuasive transformation, which almost persuades you to forgive Marton's acidic top notes.

Note must also be made about the sets, designed by David Hockney, lit boldly in bright primary colours, red for much of Act I (with huge black shadows) and blue for the night scenes, with imposing

silhouettes of ancient Chinese outbuildings in the background. In Act II there is a massive zig-zag staircase leading from the Emperor's palace from which many dignitaries emerge, accompanied by acrobats for the transition between the first and second scenes. It is certainly spectacular, even if the richly-hued and very colourful costumes combine to push it dangerously close to the world of Marvel comics – I have to confess that I have never before encountered anything quite like it in the opera house and suspect that some will enjoy it more than others; I am very much in the former group.

Musically, it is a bit of a mixed bag. Sylvester's Calaf is clean and accurate, little more – his top is thin, but he is watchable nonetheless. You could say the same for Lucia Mazzaria's Liù; however, Kevin Langan's Timur sounds magnificent, even if his costuming and wig does bear more than a passing resemblance to Hagrid, of Hogwarts fame. Donald Runnicles, as always, leads a fine performance in the pit and if the strings of the San Francisco opera are not quite the equal of their colleagues at the Met or Vienna, then the bass drum is the match of any. As an operatic experience of *Turandot*, this performance deserves much respect, with picture and sound quality of the highest order.

**La principessa Turandot – Éva Marton, Calaf – Plácido Domingo, Liù – Leona Mitchell, Timur – Paul Plishka, Ping – Brian Schexnayder, Pang – Allan Glassman, Pong – Anthony Laciura, L'imperatore Altoum – Hugues Cuénod, Un mandarino – Arthur Thompson
Chorus & Orchestra of the Metropolitan Opera, New York– James Levine, Conductor – 1987. Dir Franco Zeffirelli (live, digital) Deutsche Grammophon**

**La principessa Turandot – Maria Guleghina, Calaf – Marcello Giordani, Liù – Marina Poplavskaya, Timur – Samuel Ramey, Ping – Joshua Hopkins, Pang – Tony Stevenson, Pong – Eduardo Valdes, L'imperatore Altoum – Charles Anthony, Un mandarino – Keith Miller
Chorus & Orchestra of the Metropolitan Opera, New York– Andris Nelsons, Conductor – 2009. Dir Franco Zeffirelli (live, digital) Decca**

Midway between the performances in Vienna and San Francisco, Marton appeared at the Met in 1987 for the opening run of Franco Zeffirelli's famous production of *Turandot*. Certainly the cast assembled at the time was a spectacular one; she was joined by Plácido Domingo as Calaf, Paul Plishka as Timur and Leona Mitchell as Liù, and the 85-year-old Hugues Cuénod, making his Met debut as the Emperor. **James Levine** was in the pit leading a fluid performance, Mehta-like in seeking colour and drama in the score, rather than sensuousness and claustrophobic intensity. However, it is the production that steals the show and probably for all the right reasons – unless you happen to be a hopelessly devoted disciple of Regietheater.

The first thing to note is just how large the sets are – and they are absolutely huge. If in the opening scene of Act I it appears as if you cannot get any more actors onto the stage, there is still room to be found for a Conan-the-Barbarian lookalike executioner, plus a Chinese dragon and when the Principessa first makes an appearance, to order the execution of the Prince of Persia, appearing mystically on an elevated platform behind the action and surrounded by her handmaidens, the effect is as visually spectacular as the music is accompanying it. That said, it is not just the big gestures which impress either – the viewer's eyes are constantly catching many incidental details such as the pathway leading up to the Princess's quarters, traversed by both the doomed Principino di Persia, as well as Calaf at the end of the Act when he accepts the challenge, which is lined by spikes topped with the rotting heads of previous failed suitors. The lighting by Gil Wechsler plays a pivotal role too, creating a darkly oppressive atmosphere in the outer acts, while the scenes in court dazzle in their sumptuous splendour, highlighting the stunningly opulent sets, with buildings covered in gold and the costumes by Anna Anni and Dada Saligeri, tastefully oriental without being patronising, that have the members of court dressed in whites, silver and gold, making the maximum contrast with the shabbily dressed crowds of locals. In the midst of all this stands Turandot in ice blue, as cold and beautiful as an icicle – with a pointed edge to match. All are marshalled by Chiang Ching's choreography, which places the government ministers Ping, Pang and Pong, complete with

numerous costume changes and Chinese fans at the centre of every scene, driving the action along. At times it was almost like watching a ballet within an opera, such is the coordination between movement and music.

It is quite astonishing how, nearly a quarter of a century later, so little has changed in the 2009 production conducted by **Andris Nelsons**, including the choreography of the dancers, with merely the smallest of details of difference - with which I would bore you if I listed them here. Indeed, the production looks as pristine as it did during its opening run, way back in 1987. It is rather sobering to report however that on virtually every level musically, things have regressed.

The exception is Marina Poplavskaya's Liù, who produces a great performance of fragile beauty both vocally, as well as an actress. Timur is taken by the Met veteran, Sam Ramey, who also acts superbly and looks suitably old – except that he also sounds old too and his breath control no longer strong enough to sing phrases in one breath. Marcello Giordani is a pleasant enough Calaf who is happy to take the high notes, but it is clear in this performance that he is pacing himself carefully and too often in the final act resorts to shouting. Maria Guleghina's Icy Princess is decent enough, matching Marton for decibels along with acidic high notes, but without her predecessor's laser-like focus of tone. The final duet between the two principals comes dangerously close to a slanging match between a mismatched husband and wife. Andris Nelsons conducts with an ear for the inner-detail, particularly the woodwinds, but at the expense of the inherent grandeur of the score and its excitement, missing virtually all of the blood and thunder Levine brought to the earlier performance.

There are a couple of points to note – Guleghina clearly sees the Principessa as a nasty piece of work, openly mocking and laughing at Calaf as he struggles to find the answer to the third riddle, while Nelsons asks his bass drum to effect soft crescendos and diminuendos just before he answers, like gusts of wind breaking the silence before his final triumphant response. Charles Anthony is the forthright Emperor – he made his debut at the Met in 1954 as an 'unknown' singer using a stage-name since, as with the Prince of Tartary, he had to hide from the management his true family name in case they did not take him seriously; it was Caruso.

In the end, if this was the only representative performance of the Zeffirelli production, then perhaps it would merit some attention, However, with the exception of Marina Poplavskaya (and who listens to *Turandot* just for the Liù, unless it is Montserrat Caballé?) on every level this is roundly outclassed by 1987 production. With that performance we have Domingo as everything you need a great Calaf to be except a couple of ducked high notes, Paul Plishka sounding even better as Timur than he was on the Lombard EMI recording and if Leona Mitchell is not quite as good as Poplavskaya's Liù, she is still very fine and acts superbly. Éva Marton is never going to sound as if she possesses the most beautiful voice in the world, but brings to the part a haughty intensity that is very appropriate and is able to ride the mightiest orchestral storm whipped up by Levine and the magnificent Met Orchestra in the pit, both of whom are on top form. To cap it all, sound and picture as superb, yielding very little to the remake in 2009. I suspect for many people the earlier performance will be the representative *Turandot* on DVD and, whilst I acknowledge the unique insights of Marton in San Francisco, as well as the early Corelli film, I am not going to disagree.

**La principessa Turandot – Giovanna Casolla, Calaf – Sergei Larin, Liù – Barbara Frittoli, Timur – Carlo, Ping – José Fardiha, Pang – Francesco Piccoli, Pong – Carlo Allemano, L'imperatore Altoum – Aldo Bottion, Un mandarino – Vittorio Vitelli
Chorus & Orchestra di Florence Maggio Musicale – Zubin Mehta, Conductor – 1998. Dir Zhang Yimou (live, digital) RCA**

Perhaps the only way anyone was ever going to attempt to trump the flamboyance and spectacle of New York's production by Zeffirelli, was to actually stage *Turandot* in the Forbidden City itself, as with this film from 1998. It was Herbert von Karajan's intention to do just that, using his audio

recording as the soundtrack, but even though he was often criticised for being somewhat static as a director of his own operas, it is hard to think he could do a worse job than what the viewer experiences from this moribund production directed by Zhang Yimou. In the first instance, it is not actually staged in the Forbidden City, but on an especially constructed platform in the courtyard within it, with the buildings in the background. This platform consists of huge tiers of steps, with an orchestra pit at the bottom, while the chorus all stand (and sit) on the steps facing the conductor. The first entry of the principals, Timur, Liù and Calaf really sums it up, pushing through the chorus to the steps in between more like a trio of latecomers trying to find their seats, then attempting to act in the gangway between the chorus. Dramatically, it never really gets much better and *Del primo pianto* is inexplicably cut too.

Of course, it looks spectacular, as you would expect for something costing US\$15 million – there were 900 people involved, including members of the Chinese army, all in equally spectacular costumes, with much marching, dancing and banner-waving, occasionally interspersed with film interludes of the Great Wall of China, as well as the buildings actually in the Forbidden City – but it is opera as presented as a museum piece and is dramatically vacant.

Perhaps it would not matter so much if musically it was something, but alas things just get worse. The Calaf of Sergei Larin is clearly out of his depth, a light-voiced lyric tenor trying to be heroic, whilst the Principessa is Giovanna Casolla who, while it has to be acknowledged is in infinitely better voice when compared to her assumption of the part on the Naxos recording, is still a soprano with a poor lower register and a wild top. Barbara Frittoli brings some vocal credibility to the proceedings as the slave girl and the Timur of Carlo Colombara is good, even if he sounds far too young. In the pit, Zubin Mehta directs his forces with much expertise, but little inspiration.

Musically, then, this is a dud and visually it is a good effort for the Chinese tourist industry – personally, I just cannot understand why any music-lover would want to watch it.

Conclusion

It has become customary with these surveys for reviewers to end with a small list of their own favourite recordings which, in their opinion, include the most recommendable version(s). My own list below contains those which in my view have provided me with the most pleasure over the very many years I have been listening to *Turandot* and so if I offend anyone by selecting a version that they disagree with, or have slighted a favourite, then I am getting my apologies in now. Likewise for any errors in the main text, which are mine and mine alone, with apologies for those recordings reviewed that have currently succumbed to the deletions axe, or are only available currently via downloads.

That said, it is always difficult to recommend just one version of an oft-recorded opera, not least since there are so many different working components, each of which may be individually bettered in other recordings. It must be said, however, that the Decca account released in 1973 has no wink leak in the cast and is supported by a top orchestra led by a young conductor at the top of his game, in wonderful sound – it genuinely sweeps the board.

However, there are some for whom Joan Sutherland is not the ideal Turandot, even if she is a superb interpreter of it, perhaps preferring other singers. I am one of these and, much to my surprise, my favourite Icy Princesses are not those by Birgit Nilsson or Eva Turner either, but rather two Romanian Marias, namely Slatinaru and Cebotari, whose voices seem to fuse that impossible combination of fire and ice in their interpretations, both of whose recordings are included below as 'wildcards'. If pushed to choose between them though, Maria Cebotari would get the nod – Herbert von Karajan once said of her that she was the finest Cio-Cio San he ever conducted and when you think that would have included the likes of Maria Callas as well as Mirella Freni, then you start to get the measure of her greatness.

That said, perhaps the most famous Icy Princess of them all is Birgit Nilsson and so therefore I have selected what I consider to be the best of her numerous recordings, both live and in the studio: the live performance from the Vienna State Opera, conducted by Francesco Molinari-Pradelli where, aided and abetted by the presence of her Calaf, she thaws more convincingly than in any other of her recordings. That her Unknown Prince in those performances was Giuseppe di Stefano, rather than Franco Corelli may disappoint some *vocalistas* and, indeed, the EMI studio recording featuring both singers and Molinari-Pradelli once again, runs it close, but I think Corelli sounds in even better voice in the film from 1958. That is, of course, on DVD, where visual considerations begin to play an important role in any assessment and, happily, under the direction of Mario Lanfranchi who cleverly infuses the action with choreography from Chinese opera, it is a much better experience than you would expect from an opera film from the 1950s.

It is probably not that surprising to find that the most recommendable DVD is the 1987 Metropolitan Opera production where, once more with a strong cast, orchestra and conductor and a production which, for once, seems to match the spectacle of Puccini's score, the whole exceeds the sum of its excellent individual parts. Éva Marton is the Icy Princess in that performance, but even though she is captured in far worse vocal estate, with a less satisfactory supporting cast, several years later at the San Francisco Opera, that performance proves revelatory for other unexpected reasons as, in combination with her director Peter McClintock, she produces a 'traditional' interpretation of the role which is amazingly convincing on a purely acting level and just has to be seen. The sets in that production by David Hockney are also hugely imaginative and unique, while not losing sight that this is a tale set in Ancient China; I recommend it highly. There is, of course, much that is not 'traditional' about the 2005 performance from Barcelona, but its spectacular sets and stunning lighting effects demand to be seen, in a thoughtful production by Núria Espert that throws a different light on the opera and somehow 'works' in ways that the more obviously revisionist productions of Pountney and Lehnhoff most certainly do not.

Perhaps one day the very fine production from Orange in 2012 may appear on DVD that features a vocally slightly over-parted, but superbly acted, Calaf of Roberto Alagna alongside the stunning Turandot of Lise Lindstrom, as well as some thrilling lighting effects. Maybe too, Anna Netrebko's better-than-you-would-expect Turandot from Franco Zeffirelli's Arena di Verona production in 2022 may appear as well (although you would need to put up with the as-bad-as-you-would-expect Mr Netrebko as Calaf), but the four DVDs listed below are all very good – as is the latest audio-only recording from Warner Classics with Antonio Pappano conducting the original Alfano conclusion, although I suspect it is still better to have that conclusion, as well as the Berio, from the two excerpt discs listed below. Either way, this survey has shown there is much to enjoy with recordings and DVDs of this magnificent, if flawed opera, the last in the line of the great Italian operatic tradition – and echoing the Popolo di Pekino at the end of Act II, may there be many more for the next 10,000 years too!

Recommended Recordings

Historical: Callas/Schwarzkopf – La Scala/Serafin

Modern: Sutherland/Caballé/Pavarotti – London PO/Mehta

Nilsson: Nilsson/Price/di Stefano – Vienna State Opera/Molinari-Pradelli

Completions: Barstow/Bartolini – Scottish Opera/Mauceri (Alfano I)
Urbanova/Fontosh/Volonté – Orchestra & Chorus Giuseppe Verdi/Chailly (Berio)

DVD: Maton/Mitchell/Domingo – Metropolitan Opera/Levine

Wildcards: Cebotari/Eipperle/Hauß – Stuttgart Radio/Keilberth
Slatinaru/Lucaciu/Spiess – Romanian Radio/Litvin
Ricciarelli/Hendricks/Domingo – Vienna PO/Herbert von Karajan
Ludovich/Mattioli/Corelli – Milan Radio/Previtali (DVD)
Marton/Mazzaria/Sylvester – San Francisco Opera/Donald Runnicles (DVD)
De Vol/Frittoli/Farina – Gran Teatre del Liceu/Giuliano Carella (DVD)

A Selected Discography of Turandot

Please help support Musicweb International financially by purchasing any of the recordings that interest you from the links below. Thank you.

Soloists listed as Turandot, Calaf

- 1926 Anne Roselle (Arias) [Buy from Presto](#)
- 1926 Richard Tauber (Arias) [Buy from Presto](#) [Buy from Amazon](#)
- 1937 Turner, Martinelli, London PO/ Barbirolli (Excerpts) [Buy from Presto](#) [Buy from Amazon](#)
- 1938 Cebotari, Hauß, Stuttgart RSO/ Keilberth [Buy from Amazon](#)
- 1938 Cigna, Merli, Turin RAI Orch / Ghione [Buy from Presto](#) [Buy from Amazon](#)
- 1941 Giacomo Lauri-Volpi (Arias) [Buy from Presto](#) [Buy from Amazon](#)
- 1953 Grob-Prandl, Spruzzola-Zola, Teatro la Fenice/ Capuana [Buy from Presto](#) [Buy from Amazon](#)
- 1955 Borkh, Del Monaco, Santa Cecilia Academy Orch / Erede [Buy from Presto](#) [Buy from Amazon](#)
- 1956 Goltz, Hopf, Cologne Radio SO/ Solti [Buy from Presto](#) [Buy from Amazon](#)
- 1957 Callas, Fernandi, La Scala Orch / Serafin [Buy from Presto](#) [Buy from Amazon](#) [Pristine](#)
- 1958 Ludovich, Corelli, Orchestra di Milano della Rádio e Televisione / Previtali (DVD) [Buy from Presto](#) [Buy from Amazon](#)
- 1958 Nilsson, di Stefano, La Scala Orch/ Votto [Buy from Amazon](#)
- 1959 Nilsson, Björling, Rome Op Orch / Leinsdorf [Buy from Presto](#) [Buy from Amazon](#)
- 1961 Nilsson, Corelli, Metropolitan Op / Stokowski [Buy from Presto](#) [Pristine](#)
- 1961 Nilsson, di Stefano, Vienna PO / Molinari-Pradelli [Buy from Presto](#) [Buy from Amazon](#)
- 1965 Nilsson, Corelli, Rome Op Orch / Molinari-Pradelli [Buy from Amazon](#)
- 1965 Barker, Korsten, Cape Town Municipal Orchestra / David Tidbould (Excerpts) [Buy from Amazon](#)
- 1965 Nilsson, Uzunov, Theatre Colón, Buenos Aires / Fernando Previtali [Buy from Presto](#) [Buy from Amazon](#)
- 1966 Nilsson, Corelli, Metropolitan Op / Mehta [Buy from Presto](#) [Buy from Amazon](#)
- 1969 Nilsson, Cecchele, Turin Radio SO / Prêtre (DVD)
- 1970 Slatinaru, Spiess, Romanian Television & Radio SO / Carol Litvin [Buy from Amazon](#)
- 1972 Sutherland, Pavarotti, LPO / Mehta [Buy from Presto](#) [Buy from Amazon](#)
- 1977 Caballé, Carreras, Strasbourg PO / Lombard [Buy from Presto](#) [Buy from Amazon](#)

- 1982 Ricciarelli, Domingo, VPO / Karajan [Buy from Presto](#) [Buy from Amazon](#)
- 1983 Dimitrova, Martinucci, Arena di Verona Orch /Arena (DVD) [Buy from Amazon](#)
- 1984 Marton, Carreras, Vienna St Op / Maazel [Buy from Amazon](#)
- 1984 Marton, Carreras, Vienna St Op / Maazel (DVD) [Buy from Presto](#)
- 1987 Marton, Domingo, Metropolitan Opera Orch / Levine (DVD) [Buy from Presto](#) [Buy from Amazon](#)
- 1989 Barstow, Bartolini, Scottish Opera Orch / Mauceri (Excerpt) [Buy from Presto](#) [Buy from Amazon](#)
- 1992 Marton, Heppner, Munich Rad Orch / R Abbado [Buy from Presto](#) [Buy from Amazon](#)
- 1994 Marton, Sylvester, San Francisco Op / Runnicles [Buy from Presto](#) [Buy from Amazon](#)
- 1998 Casolla, Larin, Maggio Musicale Fiorentina Orch / Mehta (DVD) [Buy from Presto](#) [Buy from Amazon](#)
- 2001 Eaglen, O'Neill, Philharmonia Orch / Parry [Buy from Presto](#) [Buy from Amazon](#)
- 2001 Casolla, Bartolini, Malaga PO / Rahbari [Buy from Presto](#) [Buy from Amazon](#)
- 2002 Schnaut, Botha, Vienna PO /Gergiev (DVD) [Buy from Amazon](#)
- 2002 Marc, Encinas, Orquesta Sinfónica de Euskadi / Collado [Buy from Amazon](#)
- 2003 Urbanova, Volonté, Giuseppe Verdi Orch / Chailly (Excerpts) [Buy from Presto](#) [Buy from Amazon](#)
- 2005 De Vol, Farina, Orquesta Simfónica del Gran Teatre del Liceu / Carella (DVD) [Buy from Presto](#) [Buy from Amazon](#)
- 2009 Guleghina, Giodani (C) Metropolitan Opera Orch / Nelsons (DVD) [Buy from Amazon](#)
- 2014 Wilson, Bocelli, Orquesta de la Comunitat Valenciana / Mehta [Buy from Presto](#) [Buy from Amazon](#)
- 2015 Stemme, Antonenko, La Scala Milan Orch / Chailly (DVD) [Buy from Presto](#) [Buy from Amazon](#)
- 2022 Radvanovsky, Kaufmann(C) Orchestra dell'Accademia Nazionale di Santa Cecilia / Pappano [Buy from Presto](#) [Buy from Amazon](#)