

Johan Strauss II's *Die Fledermaus* **A survey by Ralph Moore**

Having recently written a survey of recordings of Flotow's light opera *Martha*, I turned my thoughts to this equally famous comic operetta which is similarly frothy and tuneful. It was premiered in Vienna in 1874 and thus next year as I write is its sesquicentennial. I am by no means an operetta specialist or devotee but this is a special work, a repertoire staple, brimful of memorable numbers - and genuinely funny when acted well. It was supposedly Offenbach who suggested to the "Waltz King" Strauss that he try his hand at operetta and as the cliché goes, the rest is history...

A sparkling abridged version was first recorded in surprisingly listenable acoustic sound as long ago as 1907 and the most recent recording reviewed here is a live-composite performance from 2018. It was originally performed by what we might call "musical-theatre" singers but has increasingly become the province of classically trained opera singers. Performances usually take a couple of hours but that can be reduced by whether the ballet or "party entertainment" music is included, and the abridgement, re-writing, extension or even omission of the dialogue (as per Krauss' 1950 classic recording - but then Decca insert the *Voices of Spring* ballet and append a New Year Concert as bonuses) - and Karajan's 1960 recording lasting 143 minutes, because in the Act II ball at Prince Orlofsky's villa, provision is made for guest singers to perform an eclectic assembly of gala numbers. Some people love that bonuses, others skip them; the opera is in any case so stuffed with hit tunes from the overture onwards that pointing out highlights is almost superfluous, but probably the best-known are the mock-rueful trio "O je, o je, wie rührt mich dies!", the great, schmaltzy "Brüderlein und Schwesterlein" chorus opening Act II, Adele's "Mein Herr Marquis", and Rosalinde's showpiece "Klänge der Heimat" (the *czárdás* or *csárdás*).

Another potential pitfall is the casting of Orlofsky, which can often prove to be the Achilles' heel of a recording. The role was originally written for a mezzo-soprano *en travesti* but a Viennese tradition has developed of employing a tenor. Three options are tried out below: mezzo, tenor...and four-octave exponent Ivan Rebroff for Carlos Kleiber singing in a ghastly mixed falsetto.

Given its popularity, there aren't as many complete studio recordings as one might have thought – a dozen or so. I have not covered quite all of them but discuss the best, and included the pioneering abridged recording, one vintage radio broadcast and that single, latest, live performance referred to above, so in total fifteen recordings are assessed below. I have restricted my scope to those in the original German; there are a few English recordings but none of them is anywhere near as good as the best of those performed in the language Strauss intended – for example, I refer you to my rather acid [review of this version](#) conducted by Ormandy at the Met in 1950. This [review](#) by my perceptive colleague JW of this four-CD set convinced me that the double recording by Gustav Kuhn was not a contender, either; besides, I have not been able to hear it. Virtually everything here may first at least be sampled on YouTube – and most are available complete, even if they are broken up into separate tracks.

The recordings:

Bruno Seidler-Winkler – 1907, mono, abridged; Preiser
Grammophon-Orchester
Chorus - Königliche Hofoper Berlin
Eisenstein - Robert Philipp
Rosalinde - Emilie Herzog
Alfred - Julius Lieban
Blind - Adalbert Lieban
Falke - Max Begemann
Adele - Marie Dietrich

Orlofsky - Ida von Scheele-Müller
Frank - Alfred Arnold
Frosch - Hermann Vallentin
Ida - Elisabeth Dommel

Shorn of its overture but including the brief Entr'acte and a comic turn from Frosch, this is essentially highlights of eighty minutes – still a substantial selection and if you listen through the surface noise you will hear that it could hardly be livelier; the dialogue crackles along, obviously delivered by seasoned actors, with lots of “audible facial expression”. The singing is not operatic – it is still much more in the music hall tradition – which is hardly surprising given that this was recorded a mere generation after the premiere so many years ago. The most recognisably “classical” singer is the Dr Falke – although Marie Dietrich as Adele exhibits an astonishing extended trill and admirable coloratura expertise in her aria at the beginning of Act III. The Rosalinde is decidedly piping and shrill and the tenors tend to fake top notes but they still have quite developed voices and it is all so vividly characterised that interest is sustained. The Orlofsky is especially strong-voiced and enjoyable. Inevitably, the choruses are a bit distant but their verve comes through; the ensembles, such as the paean to “His Majesty Champagne” are delivered at a breathless rate. The highly versatile Bruno Seidler-Winkler, shows himself to be entirely at home in this genre even if modern listeners probably know him as a Wagner conductor.

This is obviously a supplement for the historical vocal buff but it is a fascinating record of a vanished tradition and enjoyable in its own right.

(You may view the whole of it on [YouTube](#))

Ferenc Fricsay – 1949, radio broadcast; mono; Membran; Audite
RIAS Sinfonieorchester Berlin
RIAS Kammerchor
Eisenstein - Peter Anders
Rosalinde - Anny Schlemm
Alfred - Helmut Krebs
Blind - Edwin Heyer
Falke - Herbert Brauer
Adele - Rita Streich
Orlofsky - Anneliese Müller
Frank - Hans Wocke
Frosch - Fritz Hoppe
Ida - Silvia Menz

Göran Forsling [reviewed](#) this very favourably back in 2008. Far fewer allowances have to be made for sound than for the ancient first recording above, and as such it is real contender, especially with a cast and conductor of this quality – and it even includes dialogue, unlike the Krauss recording from the following year (see next below) – spoken so clearly that anyone with even a smattering of German can follow. In fact, Göran pretty much says everything I want to say about the sound and performance, so please click on that link – this is simply splendid; among the most idiomatic, uplifting and life-enhancing recordings I know; Fricsay's feel for the delayed beat and swinging rhythms of the Viennese waltz is unbeatable and I am captivated from the first notes. The cast is stellar, especially Peter Anders' passionate Eisenstein, Rita Streich's *kecke* Adele and Anneliese Müller's languid, drawling Orlofsky. My only reservation is that I would have welcomed a more imposing voice than Herbert Brauer's baritone to sing “Brüderlein und Schwesterlein”. The element of distortion in loud or concerted passages is tolerable, especially when set against such artistic excellence. I do not miss stereo sound in the slightest, so vivid and immediate is this performance. (The vibrant Rosalinde, Anny Schlemm, is happily still with us and in her mid-nineties as I write.)

(This, too, is available in its entirety in [YouTube](#). No libretto.)

Clemens Krauss – 1950, mono; Decca; Nimbus; Naxos; Pearl; Regis; Cantus; Opera d'Oro

Wiener Philharmoniker

Chorus - Wiener Staatsoper

Eisenstein - Julius Patzak

Rosalinde - Hilde Gueden

Alfred - Anton Dermota

Blind - August Jaresch

Falke - Alfred Poell

Adele - Wilma Lipp

Orlofsky - Sieglinde Wagner

Frank - Kurt Preger

Göran Forsling very favourably [reviewed](#) the Nimbus transfer of this in 2008 which, in addition to the *Frühlingstimmen* party entertainment, offers this gala anthology, recorded in 1953:

Johann STRAUSS

Eijen Magyar [3:06]

Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra/Clemens Krauss

Franz LEHÁR

Die lustige Witwe: Vilja [5:14]

Elisabeth Schwarzkopf (soprano)

Das Land des Lächelns: Immer nur lächeln [4:31]

Nicolai Gedda (tenor)

Zigeunerliebe: Lied und Czárdás [3:57]

Ljuba Welitsch (soprano)

Johann STRAUSS

Der Zigeunerbaron: Als flotter Geist [2:43]

Julius Patzak (tenor)

Franz LEHÁR

Der Zarewitsch: Das Leben ruft ... Liebe mich, küsse mich [3:57]

Lisa Della Casa (soprano) & Helge Roswaenge (tenor)

Johann STRAUSS

Eine Nacht in Venedig: Ach, wie so herrlich [3:23]

Erich Kunz (baritone)

Wiennese Heurigen Songs

Mei' Muatterl war a Wienerin [3:20]

Das hat kein Goethe g'schrieb'n [2:42]

Wie mein Ahnl zwanzig Jahr [3:11]

Erst wann's aus wird sein [3:05]

Ich muss wieder einmal in Grinzing sein [2:55]

Fein, fein schmeckt uns der Wein [3:20]

Die Stadt der Lieder [3:18]

Wiener Fiakerlied [3:06]

Julius Patzak (tenor)

Schrammel Quartet

Decca, on the other hand (on the original issue, not on Eloquence), appends a New Year Concert recorded in 1953:

Geschichten aus dem Wienerwald (Stories from the Vienna Woods), Op. 325

Mein Lebenslauf ist Lieb' und Leben (My résumé is love and life)- waltz, Op. 263

Die Libelle (The Dragonfly) - Polka mazur, Op. 204
Jockey Polka, Op. 278
Im Krapfenwald'l, Polka française, Op. 336
Eljen a Magyar Schnell-Polka, Op. 332
Pizzicato Polka
Ägyptischer Marsch (Egyptian March), Op. 335
Vergnügungszug (Train polka), Op. 281

Regis provides as a bonus excerpts from *Der Zigeunerbaron* and *Eine Nacht in Venedig*, Pearl has excerpts from *Der Zarewitsch* and *Reinshagen*; Cantus, Opera d'Oro and Naxos offer none.

I endorse everything Göran says about this wonderfully vivacious recording and won't bother to reproduce what he has already eloquently asserted, just refer you to that link. It has two marginal drawbacks: the crisp, thin, mono sound (but happily devoid any rumble in my Decca transfer) and the absence of any dialogue, as per my introduction above - although some listeners might understandably even prefer not to have to sit through it. However, if you are tolerant of those disadvantages, that indefinable "Viennese spirit" which so animates the performance and the quality of the singing by a stellar cast both make this highly attractive, even if it cannot be a first choice for completists and audiophiles - but I would not be without it.

Herbert von Karajan – 1955, mono, EMI; Naxos

Philharmonia Orchestra & Chorus
Eisenstein - Nicolai Gedda
Rosalinde - Elisabeth Schwarzkopf
Alfred - Helmut Krebs
Blind - Erich Majkut
Falke - Erich Kunz
Adele - Rita Streich
Orlofsky - Rudolf Christ
Frank - Karl Dönch
Frosch - Franz Böheim
Ida - Luise Martini

Both Goran ([review](#)) and Robert McKechnie (recently re-posted in our [Déjà Review](#) series) have already extensively discussed this much-lauded recording and I refer you to their observations. Its main drawback is that it was made in mono when stereo technology was already available, but as with the three preceding recordings, I do not find that to be much of an obstacle to enjoyment. I am not personally always as big a fan of the two lead singers as my colleagues but they are certainly at their best here. I do not find Schwarzkopf as charming as Gueden but she is fully immersed in the role. I find Helmut Krebs a tad vocally effete as Alfred but he, too, characterises so well. I completely understand adherence to this, even if it is not my absolute favourite.

There is no libretto; rather, a track-linked synopsis.

Otto Ackermann – 1959, stereo; EMI

Philharmonia Orchestra & Chorus
Eisenstein - Karl Terkal
Rosalinde - Gerda Scheyrer
Alfred - Anton Dermota
Blind - Erich Majkut
Falke - Eberhard Waechter
Adele - Wilma Lipp
Orlofsky - Christa Ludwig

Frank - Walter Berry
Frosch - Erich Kunz
Ida - Luise Martini

John Phillips neatly [reviewed](#) this back in the millennium – a quarter-century ago, but I find nothing to disagree with reassessing it now: the sound is excellent – this was another Walter Legge production in the Kingsway Hall, this time in stereo, of course; it was a bargain issue on CFP with no libretto but a usefully detailed synopsis and it is still available on the Warner label. The cast is first-rate; I like Christa Ludwig's drawling, laconic, heavily-Russian-accented Orlofsky and Anton Dermota and Wilma Lipp once more give us an elegant Afred and a pert, beautifully sung Adele, respectively. The presence of such singers as Walter Berry and Eberhard Wächter can only be a bonus. If the leading pair of Gerda Scheyrer and Karl Terkal is not quite the equal of Gueden or Schwarzkopf and Anders or Patzak in voice or charisma, they are still very acceptable – but there is no doubt that Scheyrer does not have magnetic glamour of her predecessors. Otto Ackermann was the Viennese king of operetta and conducts confidently, if not quite Karajan's style; the ironic "O je, o je" trio doesn't quite have the swing others find in it – but on the other hand, "Brüderlein", led by the smooth-voiced Wächter's Falke, is either delectably languorous or, some might say, a tad slow, depending on your taste.

On balance, good as this is, it does not quite have the verve and charm of the very best versions.

Herbert von Karajan – 1960, stereo; Decca; Alto; Pristine (no gala)

Wiener Philharmoniker
Chorus - Wiener Staatsoper
Eisenstein - Waldemar Kmentt
Rosalinde - Hilde Gueden
Alfred - Giuseppe Zampieri
Blind - Peter Klein
Falke - Walter Berry
Adele - Erika Köth
Orlofsky - Regina Resnik
Frank - Eberhard Wächter
Frosch - Erich Kunz
Ida - Hedwig Schubert
Lord Barrymore (an English nobleman) - Omar Godknow*
Ivan (butler to Prince Orlofsky) - B. Fasolt*
Carikoni (an influential man) Andre von Mattoni

*"Omar Godknow" ("O my God, no") was Christopher Raeburn (one of the producers and eventually head of Decca Opera Recordings) and "B. Fasolt" is an anagram of the words "Fat slob", referring to Terry McEwen, who ran Decca/London's New York office.

Ian Lace [reviewed](#) the bargain Alto issue of this very favourably back in 2011 and the following year I [reviewed](#) Pristine's remastering of it, as per here:

This is a pioneering stereo recording done by some of the best sound engineers in the business. The fifty-one year old recording was already a sonic marvel which could only be improved by Andrew Rose giving it the usual Pristine XR re-mastering treatment. It remains my favourite version despite some stiff competition from Krauss, again with Gueden in 1950, and Karajan with Schwarzkopf in 1955. There is here a joie de vivre from a matchless ensemble which is all the more apparent in its new incarnation. About this Rose writes that it has "more immediacy, vibrancy and sense of dimension [and] really does breathe new life into a classic." It's a dashing performance with a

breathless, heady excitement about it that convinces me afresh that this is the most tuneful music ever written.

Gueden is foxy charm itself. She sings enticingly with sparkling élan; Köth is a winning soubrette, witty and sharp; Kmentt, Berry, Wächter and Zampieri are all Vienna regulars with lovely voices. They are happy to camp it up just a little to bring out the full, farcical fun. Resnik is a rich-voiced and rather butch, convincing Orlovsky. Erich Kunz's ludicrous, echt-Viennese accent and drunken clowning as Frosch are the best on record.

Pristine here omits the ballet music and Gala concert (with contributions from Renata Tebaldi, Fernando Corena, Birgit Nilsson, Mario del Monaco, Teresa Berganza, Joan Sutherland, Jussi Björling, Leontyne Price, Giulietta Simionato, Ettore Bastianini and Ljuba Welitsch) although these are available on a separate Pristine disc with four other Johann Strauss II overtures and waltzes from the early 1940s as a bonus. Pristine chose to do so on the grounds that although that music was on the original premium-price opera label issue then being launched, it was omitted from the 1962 SXL set. As the "Gramophone" critic noted in 1960, for some listeners its inclusion would surely constitute "a very considerable disruption of the kind of mood so far established".

Timings are very slightly faster than the Decca Originals issue as, in Andrew Rose's words, "Viennese tunings traditionally tend to be slightly sharper than the standard A4=440Hz. The recording came off the Decca LPs at A=449.24, but close analysis of residual electrical hum suggested an original tuning of A=445.67, and my restoration therefore adopts this pitch."

If you already own, as I do, that Decca Originals set with the Gala music and a physical libretto and are resistant to being required to download, I wouldn't rush off to buy this Pristine issue. That said, the improvement in the quality of sound certainly justifies the extra expense if you want to buy this recording for the first time. Links to further notes, information on the score and a libretto may be found on the Pristine website. However, the Pristine remastering omits this half-hour gala of Decca's international star singers, which for some might be a deal-breaker, while others in the habit of skipping it or playing it separately, will not care:

Renata Tebaldi: a creamily sung 'Vilja-Lied' from Lehár's *The Merry Widow*, in Italian.

Fernando Corena: Ferrari's waltz-song 'Domino' delivered in idiomatic French with café-atmospheric piano and accordion accompaniment.

Birgit Nilsson: 'I Could Have Danced All Night' from *My Fair Lady* (Lerner and Lowe), in iffy English, reining herself in until she belts out the climactic final top C.

Mario del Monaco: Valente's 'Passione' (Valente) – sung to mandolin accompaniment with – well, *passion*.

Teresa Berganza: Lavilla's 'Lullaby', gently intoned.

Joan Sutherland: Ardit's 'Il Bacio' – in youthful, glittering voice, trilling and soaring to the heights.

Jussi Björling: 'Dein ist mein ganzes Herz' from Lehár's *The Land of Smiles*, sung impeccably first in Swedish, then German, only three months before his untimely death.

Leontyne Price: 'Summertime' from Gershwin's *Porgy and Bess* – wonderfully pure but paradoxically also sultry.

Giulietta Simionato and Ettore Bastianini: 'Anything You Can Do' from Irving Berlin's *Annie Get Your Gun*, having fun in amusingly appalling English, even if Ettore compliments Giulietta on it as "wundareful"... (I can be gretter...Yes ay yam...I can sing switter...etc.)

Ljuba Welitsch: Sieczynski's 'Wien, wien nur du allein', in smoky voice.

There is a special allure to the cast, conducting and playing here; Karajan might not have been born Viennese but he had a long association with Vienna and Salzburg and comes across as thoroughly idiomatic here - nothing sternly "Germanic" or "Prussian" about this glittering recording.

Oscar Danon – 1964, stereo; RCA

Orchestra & Chorus: Wiener Staatsoper

Eisenstein - Eberhard Wächter

Rosalinde - Adele Leigh

Alfred - Sándor Kónya

Blind - Erich Majkut

Falke - George London

Adele - Anneliese Rothenberger

Orlofsky - Risë Stevens

Frank - Erich Kunz

English highlights:

Eisenstein - Richard Lewis

Rosalinde - Anna Moffo

Alfred - Franco Franchi

Falke - George London

Adele - Jeanette Scovotti

Orlofsky - Risë Stevens

Frank - John Hauxvell

This recording was a kind of double issue with the complete opera in German accompanied by just over forty minutes of highlights in English with the same conductor, choir orchestra, Falke and Orlofsky. Dialogue is reduced to a minimum and there is no Frosch scene in this version.

The overture fairly bursts upon the listener; the 60s analogue sound from RCA on this recording is terrific – the richest by far in this chronological survey - and the playing evinces the energy I thought I would hear in the Ackermann recording, given his background, but Oscar Danon provides it in abundance. There is so much lilt, swing, rubato and whatnot to the overture alone, you now you are in for a great ride. Danon may have been a Jewish Bosnian by birth but he seems wholly immersed in what we recognise as the Viennese idiom – carefree and driven, played *con slancio*. I had actually forgotten how good this was until embarking on this survey. The first voice we hear is Sándor Kónya's heroic tenor as Alfred; I know the occasional, little gulps and breaks in his tonal emission irritate some listeners but he makes a glorious sound. We next hear Anneliese Rothenberger's Adele, which is a treat: brilliant, bubbly and cheeky. English soprano is likewise brimful of character as Rosalinde. The vocal feast continues with high lyric baritone Eberhard Wächter having migrated from the role of Frank for Karajan to Eisenstein and Erich Majkut is a hoot as the lawyer Blind. More vocal pleasure is derived from the rich-voiced and multilingual George London taking time out from singing Wotan to have fun as Falke – although whether he is the right voice-type for operetta is debatable. Vienna State Opera regular Erich Kunz displays his rich voice and comic timing as Frank. The biggest question mark over this cast is the aptness of the casting of Risë Stevens as Orlofsky; she sounds suitably "masculine" in the lower regions of her music but the voice moves uneasily and clumsily between registers and she seems to resort to a lot of near Sprechstimme and rather hoarse barking – and her characterisation is rather crude; she is close to being a blot on the set. To be fair, as I mention above, it is also perhaps questionable whether George London is smooth and urbane enough of voice to lead the "Brüderlein" ensemble – but let that pass.

The English excerpts are somewhat more of a mixed bag. First, the translation in couplets is rather stilted, but Anna Moffo and Jeanette Scovotti are both charming – Moffo in particular sings a sultry *czárdás* – and John Hauxvell sings a strong, handsome-voiced Frank. However, Franco Franchi's Alfred is mediocly sung and oddly accented. Risë Stevens sounds rather better in English but her portrayal of the Prince as an old roué is still a little laboured. The selection of excerpts does not give Richard Lewis as Eisenstein much to do but he sounds oddly weak and very "British" – he is simply

miscast. London again nobly intones the Friendship ensemble, bestowing the blessing of Wotan upon the company – but when Stevens enters she sounds next to voiceless.

Some people love this combo recording, others are dismissive. It is very well conducted, is in superb sound and some of its performances are treasurable, but I don't think it is "safe" first recommendation given the competition; I suggest you sample it on YouTube to decide for yourself.

Willi Boskovsky – 1971, stereo; EMI, Warner

Wiener Symphoniker
Chorus - Wiener Staatsoper
Eisenstein - Nicolai Gedda
Rosalinde - Anneliese Rothenberger
Alfred - Adolf Dallapozza
Blind - Jürgen Förster
Falke - Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau
Adele - Renate Holm
Orlofsky - Brigitte Fassbaender
Frank - Walter Berry
Frosch - Otto Schenk
Ivan - Gerd W. Dieberitz
Ida - Senta Wengraf

There are a lot of very familiar names in the cast of Viennese regulars here in EMI's third studio recording. Gedda returns as Eisenstein sixteen years after singing the role for Karajan, Anneliese Rothenberger is promoted from Adele for Danon to Rosalinde, Walter Berry repeats the Frank he gave Ackermann and Karajan over a decade earlier and Brigitte Fassbaender records Orlofsky for the first time; the second will be nearly two decades later for Previn.

Furthermore, of all conductors, you would expect Willi Boskovsky to emanate Viennese *joie de vivre* and style – and the overture certainly confirms that: as with Clemens Krauss, we can revel in the richness and dexterity of the VPO's playing – but now in decent analogue stereo. However, it immediately becomes apparent that Viennese fixture Alfred Dallapozza is a little thin-toned, constricted and unsteady as Alfred and Gedda – well, any of my regular readers will know that I almost invariably have reservations about his voice and the intervening years have not been kind to his tone since his youthful assumption of the role for Karajan; like Dallapozza, he is throaty-sounding and yells a bit. Renate Holm is pleasant but nothing outstanding. Rothenberger, as much as I usually love her, sings purely and prettily but is sometimes a little shrill and not as characterful as Gueden; her "Klänge der Heimat" lacks some weight and her final D-sharp isn't pretty. I feel she was better suited to Adele. Berry is his usual, dependable self, Fischer-Dieskau genial as Falke and Fassbaender is splendid – tough and assertive - but nobody prioritises Frank, Falke and Orlofsky over Rosalinde, Adele and Eisenstein in choosing a recording, so this despite the conducting this does not make the cut.

Karl Böhm - 1971-72, film, stereo; Decca

Wiener Philharmoniker
Chorus - Wiener Staatsoper
Eisenstein – Eberhard Waechter
Rosalinde - Gundula Janowitz
Alfred - Waldemar Kmentt
Blind - Erich Kuchar
Falke - Heinz Holecek
Adele - Renate Holm
Orlofsky - Wolfgang Windgassen

Frank - Erich Kunz
Frosch - Otto Schenk
Ida - Sylvia Lukan

Excellent sonics lifted from the film soundtrack are immediately a bonus, as is the singing of the first voices we hear: both Waldemar Kmentt – moving from Eisenstein for Karajan in 1960 to Alfred here - and Renate Holm are in fine voice – she rather better than for Boskovsky the same year – or perhaps she is better recorded, and she is neat and charming even if she is still rather placid as Adele. Pleasure is compounded by the entrance of Gundula Janowitz – but I am one of those who would happily listen to her sing virtually anything; I love the way she soars above everyone in ensembles and her “set pieces” are a dream. We already know from Danon’s recording that Waechter (his name is spelt variously in recordings with an e or an umlaut) is ideal as Eisenstein, as is Erich Kunz as Frank, already demonstrated in his recordings for Karajan and Danon – and he is still in great voice in his sixties. Heinz Holecek is a fine Falke.

I have read some disapproval of Böhm’s manner with this music as lacking charm and being too weighty – the VPO certainly makes a full sound but as we hear in that Boskovsky recording made at the same time, they know how to make it swing and smile and I hear nothing leaden about this, despite the conductor being in his late seventies, even if I concede that his phrasing is occasionally a little deliberate; they build to a terrific climax in the overture, for a start and the trio concluding Act I goes at quite a lick.

So far, so good – first-rate, in fact – but then we come to what will be an obstacle for some: Wolfgang Windgassen as the Russian prince, Orlofsky. He is sounding very rusty here, although he was only in his late fifties, but soon to succumb to a heart attack aged sixty, and there’s not much charm to spare as he groans his way through the music. It really does compromise the set and one wonders what the producers were thinking. Although I want this – at least the highlights – for Janowitz, I don’t think it can be a first choice.

Carlos Kleiber – 1976, stereo; DG
Bayerisches Staatsorchester
Chor der Bayerischen Staatsoper
Eisenstein - Hermann Prey
Rosalinde - Júlia Várady
Alfred - René Kollo
Blind - Ferry Gruber
Falke - Bernd Weikl
Adele - Lucia Popp
Orlofsky - Ivan Rebroff
Frank - Benno Kusche
Frosch - Franz Muxeneder
Ivan - Nikolai Lugowol
Ida - Evi List

Let’s straight away confront the Elephant in the Room– and it’s the “Orlofsky problem” again; Ivan Rebroff is simply grotesque here; his voiceless squeak is not singing – and you can hear from his speaking voice that his vocal chords are ruined and he is absurdly closely recorded to compensate for the lack of true registration or resonance. There are otherwise some great voices here, especially Julia Varady but Rebroff’s contribution renders this unlistenable.

Obviously so much else here is top quality – not least Kleiber’s ability to bring out orchestral detail and nuance – that makes its disqualification all the more disappointing – but it is not as if we are short of good recordings, so go this must – and whoever was responsible for the gross miscasting

should hang his head in shame. To sample what we are missing, try the Hungarian Júlia Várady's "Klänge der Heimat" on YouTube – stupendous in its passionate, fearless vocalisation enhanced by the abandon of Kleiber's accompaniment; it puts every other version to shame. In addition, we have the delectable Lucia Popp as Adele, and both Kollo and Prey are fine, too; Kollo's beefy tenor makes a change from the usual near-comprimario and Prey is typically elegant, joining Wächter in the ranks high baritones who have successfully undertaken Eisenstein. I suppose you could buy this and skip Orlofsky – but that wrecks those lovely Act II ensembles. The casting of Rebroff to fatally compromise an otherwise desirable set constitutes one of my "Musical Crimes of the (20th) Century".

Plácido Domingo – 1986, digital; EMI

Münchner Rundfunkorchester
 Chor des Bayerischen Rundfunks
 Eisenstein - Peter Seiffert
 Rosalinde - Lucia Popp
 Alfred - Plácido Domingo
 Blind - Heinz Zednik
 Falke - Wolfgang Brendel
 Adele - Eva Lind
 Orlofsky - Agnes Baltsa
 Frank - Kurt Rydl
 Frosch - Helmut Lohner
 Ivan - Cornelius Ilgen
 Ida - Ulrike Steinsky

Plácido Domingo apparently overdubbed the role of Alfred to permit him to stay at the helm of a first-class orchestra in this fourth recording from EMI. As conductor, seems to have a pretty good grasp of the requisite sparkle and rubato here and he makes quite a good job of the pompous would-be lover of Rosalind but his tone is already turning more nasal than is ideal. Eva Lind is a rather shrill, twittery and wearing Adele but Wolfgang Brendel is smooth and silky as Falke – especially seductive in the "Brüderlein" introduction and the "Duidu" chorus - and Peter Seiffert is an attractively ardent, youthful Eisenstein, while Lucia Popp is successfully promoted from Adele to Rosalind and Baltsa's Orlofsky is in the class and mould of the equally excellent and apt Fassbaender – two of the most convincing of the many mezzo assumptions here.

However, for me, this recoding doesn't quite cohere or catch fire, despite of the proficiency of the orchestral playing and most of the singing; I don't get the sense of a company enjoying itself and it does not help that that the re-written dialogue is so evidently recorded in a different, closer acoustic – it feels like a series of concert numbers, despite the crowd "rhubarb noises" and things like the importation of the *Zigeunerbaron* duet sung by Popp and Seiffert in the party scene – or perhaps because of them; they seem grafted on.

Despite some highpoints, the lack of that almost indefinable "Viennese spirit" – maybe something to do with it being recorded in Munich! – leads me to relegate this set to the "pleasant but unremarkable" category compared with more vivacious accounts.

Nikolaus Harnoncourt – 1987, digital; Teldec

Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra
 Netherlands Opera Chorus
 Eisenstein - Werner Hollweg
 Rosalinde - Edita Gruberová
 Alfred - Josef Protschka
 Blind - Waldemar Kmentt
 Falke - Anton Scharinger

Adele - Barbara Bonney
Orlofsky - Marjana Lipovšek
Frank - Christian Boesch
Frosch - André Heller
Ida - Elisabeth von Magnus

Göran Forsling [reviewed](#) this in 2009 and found it to be a mixed bag, chiefly because Harnoncourt's direction lacks lift, lilt and magic. I have to say that not having previously encountered it, my own expectations were not high, as I have an aversion to Edita Gruberová's gulpy, squeezed, pulsing soprano, devoid of lower register – even Göran, who is a fan, remarks that she is badly off form here - and the cast in general does not have the same starry promise as many of the recordings here. Furthermore, I rather feared that Harnoncourt would go into iconoclastic mode when tackling such a cosy, traditional work – and while he hardly does that, he is hardly convincing – in fact, if anything, he is dull. Göran details several major problems, and I refer you to his review to avoid my redundantly re-hashing them, but in brief, they are a misguided re-writing of the narrative, slow tempi and a taxed Rosalinde.

It is an oddly sterile, pedestrian account which mostly just trundles along uneventfully – although it occasionally perks up in the Party. No singer sounds much at ease; Marjana Lipovšek is undistinguished with a choppy line, Anton Scharinger is plummy and hooty, Josef Protschka is a weak, weedy Alfred, and Gruberová is frankly awful here, pouting and swooping. Hollweg isn't bad but quite hard-voiced and hardly distinguished. The singer who gives the greatest pleasure here is Barbara Bonney but she can hardly carry the burden of the whole thing – and even she sounds a bit small and twittery, making me realise that Adele is a role which requires rather more voice than the average soubrette possesses.

You may safely give this a miss.

André Previn – 1990, digital; Philips
Wiener Philharmoniker
Chorus - Wiener Staatsoper
Eisenstein - Wolfgang Brendel
Rosalinde - Kiri Te Kanawa
Alfred - Richard Leech
Blind - Anton Wendler
Falke - Olaf Bär
Adele - Edita Gruberová
Orlofsky - Brigitte Fassbaender
Frank - Tom Krause
Frosch - Otto Schenk
Ida - Karin Götting

Ye; I know; having been most ungallant about the late Edita Gruberová in the previous review immediately above, here is another opportunity for me to complain about her poor vocal technique – but this is otherwise such an attractively cast and presented box set, recorded in the Musikverein in beautiful digital sound, with a quadrilingual libretto and a conductor in his prime directing what is surely the world's best orchestra for this repertoire. Previn is more relaxed than some of the earlier Viennese accounts, going for a sumptuous elegance reinforced by the VPO's savoir-faire and experience in this music – all of which means I am prepared to tolerate Ms Gruberová, who is in any case in much better voice here than she was for Harnoncourt and more aptly cast. Richard Leech's pure, light, but strong, lyric tenor is ideal for Alfred and Kiri Te Kanawa – like Janowitz - is a dream as Rosalinde: smoky, sultry and sexy, sometimes dipping seductively into her lower register, and I like the way a little tweak to the dialogue covers any objection to Kiri's no doubt very good but not

necessarily entirely authentically accented German when Eisenstein remarks to Falke, "Spricht sie nicht schon fabelhaft Deutsch?" (Isn't her German marvellous now?). Her "Klänge der Heimat" is a real *tour de force*, wonderfully – and powerfully – vocalised, oozing exotic fascination, ending on a sustained D-sharp, not just touching it.

Wolfgang Brendel is promoted to Eisenstein from Falke for Domingo and Olaf Bär steps into that role; two neat, light, thoroughly idiomatic baritones again ideally cast. Tom Krause is a bluff, burly-voiced Frank with a nice ironic edge to his tone, amusing in the Melodram. Brigitte Fassbaender is once again the perfect Orlofsky, this time characterising even more strongly and still in lovely voice. Anton Wendler is an amusing Blind.

The background party noise in Act II aren't intrusive, just atmospheric. The company spirit mysteriously missing in Domingo's account is present here in abundance and the lilt of the "Brüderlein und Schwesterlein" passage sweeps the listener away – Previn gets everything right – tempo, phrasing, rubato. The only "entertainment interlude" is the splendidly dramatic, three-minute "Thunder and Lightning" polka – so no gala guest artists and such, which allows the comedy to unfurl only briefly interrupted by that engaging showpiece.

Virtually everything about this production pleases; it is easily the best recording of the digital era – and I like the amusing little touch when right at the end of the concluding chorus you clearly hear the celebratory pop of a bottle of champagne being opened.

Johannes Wildner – 1991, digital; Naxos

Bratislava Radio Symphony Orchestra

Bratislava City Chorus

Eisenstein - John Dickie

Rosalinde - Gabriele Fontana

Alfred - Josef Hopferwieser

Blind - Erich Wessner

Falke - Andrea Martin

Adele - Brigitte Karwautz

Orlofsky - Rohangiz Yachmi-Caucig

Frank - Alfred Werner

A bargain issue of the complete work - but no "party numbers" - in digital sound with a full German-only libretto, this looks attractive but had the disadvantage of following hard on the heels of the superior Philips production, which is much more luxuriously cast. It is immediately fatally compromised by the effortful and strangulated tenor singing Alfred - and the constriction comes through even in his speaking voice. The tenor singing Eisenstein is hardly better but uncongenial in a different way, being very small and cloudy – his vocal estate indicative of the premature curtailment of his career whereby he was soon restricted to character comprimario roles before his lamentably early death following a long and serious illness. Brigitte Karwautz is a good vocal actor but very shrill and Gabriele Fontana's soprano is scratchy and pulses uncomfortably. The Orlofsky is wobbly, shrieky and matronly, with an insecure lower register and approximate of intonation. Andrea Martin's Frank is strained and unsteady, with no tonal centre.

It is however, very well played and conducted, and the dialogue is amusingly delivered – but that is hardly sufficient recommendation, given the complete absence of vocal distinction. I couldn't believe my eyes when I read this recent comment on the Operetta Research Center website: "This is the *Fledermaus* I return to most frequently." Sorry, but this is a non-starter.

Lawrence Foster 2018, live-composite, digital; Pentatone

Orchestra - NDR Radiophilharmonie

Chorus - WDR Rundfunkchor Köln
 Eisenstein - Nikolai Schukoff
 Rosalinde - Laura Aikin
 Alfred - Christian Elsner
 Blind - Alexander Kaimbacher
 Falke - Matthias Hausmann
 Adele - Annika Gerhards
 Orlofsky - Elisabeth Kulman
 Frank - Jochen Schmeckenbecher
 Ida - Alice Waginger
 Frosch - Kurt Rydl

As with the Naxos recording, I have no complaints about the lively playing and conducting here – the NDR from Hanover is a fine orchestra – and the sound is ideal, but again mirroring the previous Naxos version, the problems – surprise, surprise – are with the singing and, to a lesser extent, the tinkering and tampering with the Urtext. This production features updated dialogue by Nikolai Schukoff who also sings Eisenstein and includes lots of snippets from other operas and operettas – which strikes me as gimmicky, as I don't see what's wrong with the original libretto – but there has long been a tradition of a bit of ad-libbing and insertion of some topical reference, and the new jokes aren't bad – but I find Jochen Schmeckenbecher's rendering of Frank's comic business opening Act III a bit overdone – and the audience are hardly rolling about at his antics.

This is certainly better sung than the Naxos one, although the first voice we hear, tenor Christian Elsner as Alfredo, is hardly elegant and I do not find Schukoff's grainy, cloudy tenor ingratiating. Then virtually all the singers here are afflicted with the curse of modern singing - an excess of vibrato, so slow that it approaches a wobble; once again, I wonder what conservatories are doing to permit students to retain that fault – though of course poor technique often results in its appearance after performing for a while. Compare Laura Aikin with Gueden, Schwarzkopf, Schlemm, Janowitz, Popp or Te Kanawa to hear what I mean; her soprano is full but pulses. Exactly the same flaw is apparent in Annika Gerhards' edgy, shrill Adele and I don't like it at all. Matthias Hausmann's very ordinary, tonally bland Falke cannot hold a candle to the sophisticated singing of that role by the likes of Kunz, Berry, Wächter and Bär. Elisabeth Kulman's Orlofsky is considerably better but not as striking as the best exponents.

I would not fork out for this full-price recording when you can acquire any number of superior vintage versions for much less, offering much better singing.

Recommendations

Die Fledermaus has been blessed on record and we really are so spoilt for choice – with one or two notable exceptions - that selecting a “best” recording is arbitrary, unless based on whim, mood or an attachment to a particular singer or singers. My own top choices are hardly surprising; once again, the now often-reviled – or at least dismissed – Karajan comes up trumps but I am torn between his and Previn's recordings. Devotees of the work will in any case want two or three versions; so many are good that I have kept no fewer than eight on my shelves following completion of this survey, the last and latest (but already thirty-three years old as I write) being Previn's, retained primarily for Kiri Te Kanawa's creamy Rosalinde, but the cast is generally excellent all-round.

Mono: Fricsay 1949; Krauss 1950
 Stereo: Karajan 1960*; Previn 1990*

*Joint first choices – you will have to decide which you want or both – and for Karajan whether you want the very best sound on Pristine without the gala, or still very good sound on Decca with the guests included.

Ralph Moore