

Humperdinck's *Hänsel und Gretel* – an analysis and survey of recordings and DVDs by Lee Denham

Introduction

It has never failed to amuse me that, with regards to opera, I appear not to like those which fail to finish with at least half a dozen dead bodies piled high on the stage at the end, then to be washed away by a river bursting its dams, or at least being flung off the ramparts of a castle, so *Der Rosenkavalier*, *Falstaff* and *Die Meistersinger*, whilst undoubtedly having their moments, all fail to excite me as much as their darker, immediate siblings. I am therefore always surprised at how enchanted I am by *Hänsel und Gretel*, that one-off miracle from the pen of Engelbert Humperdinck; okay, a couple of children do admittedly cook a witch who then explodes, but their 'crime' is one of self-defence so surely doesn't count!

For this survey, then, brought to you as a *MusicWeb International* Christmas Special, I've been in Humperdinck Heaven over the past few months, listening to as many recordings and watching as many DVDs of this opera as I could get my hands on. It has been a lucky work, especially in the recording studio and I have shared my thoughts on them below. It is also an opera that has already enjoyed its own survey courtesy of *MusicWeb International*, by Ralph Moore (see [here](#)) and so it seems pertinent that my own should appear at the same time when a discussion has appeared on the [Message board](#) examining why reviewers often disagree on the merits of certain recordings. Now, I have known Ralph for a long time and more often than not we do agree on the best recordings of particular works, but we listen to opera in different ways. Ralph is a self-confessed 'canary fancier' (his words) who can often tolerate an opera recording that features sublime singing but with bland conducting better than I can. On the other hand, I am perhaps influenced by my younger years when I worked at the Royal Opera House in Covent Garden, where I was often allowed to sneak in to the auditorium to watch the evening performances, albeit only at a vantage point from the side of the orchestra-pit. I am therefore fascinated by the interaction between stage and orchestra and so can enjoy an opera recording featuring average singing, but with revelatory conducting a little more than Ralph can. However, that does not mean that of our views one is more valid than the other's and I'm afraid you will have to read on to the end of this article to discover if we actually agree on anything at all with regards to this particular opera.

So as always, in the spirit of Christmas, I offer my apologies now for any errors below and acknowledge them as my own. Similarly, the ordering of the reviews is somewhat random, as befitting selecting whichever present I fancied to open at any given moment from under the Christmas tree - and if I have offended anyone with my nominated favourites, or you think I have had too much mulled wine by slighting one of your own, then in the season of goodwill, I hope you will be forgiving.

Background

In late 1890, Engelbert Humperdinck's sister Adelheid Wette approached her brother with the request to compose music for some Christmas songs she had written for her children, based on the Grimm Brothers' fairy tale *Hänsel und Gretel*. These modest sketches then grew over the following couple of years into a fully developed *Märchenoper* (fairy-tale opera), which received its first performance in Weimar on 23 December 1893 as a work of many perfectly balanced opposites: an opera using simple folk melodies, but cloaked within the heavy-duty orchestral garb of Wagner; a story about children, but sung by adults; a tale with dark and very sinister undertones, that has a happy ending. It is a delicate balance of perfectly weighted parts that opera producers need to treat carefully, if not to upset the magic of this well-crafted spell.

Synopsis

Act 1:

Hänsel and Gretel, the children of a poor broom-maker, are at home while their parents are out working. Hungry and bored, they accidentally break a milk jug meant for their supper. Their mother, frustrated, sends them into the forest to pick strawberries. Later, their father returns home, bringing food and warning of a witch who lives in the woods.

Acts 1 and 2 are linked by the *Witch's Ride*, enabling them to be performed without a break.

Act 2:

In the forest, Hänsel and Gretel gather strawberries but lose their way as darkness falls. They encounter mysterious spirits and, frightened, pray for protection. The Sandman puts them to sleep, and they are visited by 14 guardian angels in a dream (the *Dream Pantomime*).

Act 3:

The Dew Fairy awakens the siblings, who discover the witch's gingerbread house. The witch lures them inside, intending to fatten Hänsel and bake Gretel in her oven. However, the clever children outwit her, pushing her into the oven instead. The witch's spells are broken, freeing children she had turned into gingerbread. Their parents arrive, and the family joyfully reunites.

There are some subtle differences between the fairy tale of the Grimm Brothers and the fairy-tale opera of Humperdinck. In the first instance, the Grimm Brother's portrayal of the Mother (or, more pertinently, step-mother in later editions) is of a much more cruel individual and it is she who persuades the Father to abandon the children in the forest to starve, since their poverty is so acute. The children overhear this, which is why they then drop bread-crumbs on their journey so they can find their way back; they get lost when they discover the birds have eaten them all. Further on with the Grimms, after 'defeating' the Witch, the children discover treasure in her house which they return home with, thus solving the problem of the family's poverty. Not only that, but their cruel mother/step-mother has abandoned their father in the interim, so all live happily ever after.

Cast

Hänsel: A young boy, usually a mezzo-soprano

Gretel: Hänsel's sister, soprano

The Witch (Rosina Leckermaul): Often a mezzo-soprano, but in some more modern productions, a tenor

Father (Peter): A broom-maker, baritone

Mother (Gertrud): Their mother, mezzo-soprano

Sandman: The Sleep Fairy, soprano

Dewman: The Dew Fairy, soprano

Sometimes, the role of the Witch, Rosina Daintymouth/Strawberry Lips (the translation of Leckermaul is varied) is taken by a tenor, perhaps to introduce variety to the mainly feminine voices; occasionally, too, albeit in none of the productions in this survey, the role is played by the same singer as Gertrud, when the Witch becomes the children's fantasy version of their mother, representing everything their mother isn't. For practical reasons as much as anything else, the roles of The Sandman and Dew Fairy are also often taken by the same singer.

There has been some criticism of the work over the decades since it was first performed – usually, and rather sniffily, that it is second-rate Wagner. This, of course, is a little silly; Humperdinck was of course hugely influenced by Wagner, as were so many other composers too – for example, the same

criticism was levelled at Debussy with his own opera, *Pelléas et Mélisande*, but I would argue that Humperdinck is as close to the sound-world of Richard Strauss as he was to Richard Wagner. Curiously too, the *Dream Pantomime* has come in for some criticism – ‘curiously’ since musically it is one of the high points of the whole opera, but dramatically it is a scene that is rather difficult to pull-off convincingly in the theatre. That said, the thirty-odd sets below, both on DVD and in audio-only sets (the full cast listings for which are listed at the end of the article), is testimony to its enduring popularity.

The recordings

Like all good fairy stories, or indeed anything for that matter, starting at the beginning is always a sensible thing to do. So the first recording we encounter in this survey is the earliest, from a long-forgotten set made at the New York Met in 1947, sung in English but conducted by a German, **Max Rudolf** who emigrated to the USA in 1940 and became a nationalised US citizen in 1945. With a running time of ninety-two minutes, this is also the sprightliest interpretation available, too fast sometimes - as with a very swift *Dream Pantomime*, where elsewhere both orchestra and soloists are left scrambling to keep up with their conductor's beat. That said, curiously, it was also the most ‘Wagnerian’ to my ears, evoking the world of *Das Rheingold* in particular like no other set in this survey.

Of the singers, perhaps Risë Stevens as Hänsel is the best remembered today since she is also the Carmen of the celebrated Fritz Reiner's RCA recording of that opera. Here, she sings very well with her rather shrill Gretel of Nadine Conner, who is part of an ensemble that, if mostly unremembered today, doubtlessly sang the parts at The Met; this especially shows with the Witch of Thelma Votipka, who first sounds like a tiny old lady before slowly turning into an evil old hag, which is surely how it should be done, as opposed to appearing in a puff of green smoke right at the outset. It is slightly disappointing, then, to report just how matronly the “children's” chorus at the end sounds, as if the venerable ladies of the Women's Institute have stumbled into the action as part of their annual Christmas woodland walk.

The sound is decent radio-quality mono, noteworthy for its fine balance between orchestra and soloists, who articulate the text better than anywhere else, and if Peter does sound if he has wandered in from a Hollywood western at the end, then we also need to acknowledge that John Brownlee was born and educated in Australia.

Overall, with its hasty conducting, decent if unexceptional cast, dated sound, as well as being in English, this is one for completists only, or for those US readers who may have encountered it in their youth, but they will have to make do with it on vinyl since it has never made it onto compact disc.

If the conducting of Max Rudolf was disappointing above, then we are in safer hands with another radio broadcast fifteen years later with yet another German conductor, this time the much-under-rated **Carl Schuricht**. Indeed, his conducting is a notable strength of this set, with him hardly putting a foot wrong, with the possible exception of a rather too lively tempo for the Dew Fairy, but he does achieve a real sense of exultation for the closing pages of the whole work. It is a shame then to report how backwardly the orchestra is placed in the overall mix, but with a solid ensemble of native German singers, even his Sandman is never going to send anyone to sleep with their voice, this is a decent performance as well as an important entry in the conductor's discography, although it does not supplant most of the other recordings in this survey.

I turned my attention to some more modern studio recordings next, starting with one conducted by **John Pritchard** on *Sony/CBS*, in very decent sound for 1978, I thought, and a quite fabulous cast. Hänsel is Frederica von Stade and Gretel is Ileana Cotrubas, who are absolutely exquisite as the two

children, perfectly matched and blended. Christa Ludwig and Siegmund Nimsgern are Ma and Pa, whilst Elisabeth Söderström is a most characterful witch, wheedling and charming the children almost as well as anyone. To then have Kiri Te Kanawa and Ruth Welting as The Sandman and The Dew Fairy is luxury casting indeed. Since Te Kanawa doesn't need to act with this role, only sound beautiful, I'm tempted to nominate this as her finest role on record but, more seriously, I do have to say she does sound quite astonishingly ethereal here, as if one of those angels who are supposed to be guarding the children has turned up early to help send them to sleep; I would keep this set just for her contribution alone. However, as much as I admire the work of John Pritchard, I found him inconsistent on this occasion; inspired when accompanying his singers, lacklustre when on his own, such as during the *Overture*, the *Dream Pantomime*, etc. For me, this is a serious blot on an otherwise wonderful recording, although some may be more forgiving.

The only previous occasions I have come across **Kurt Eichhorn's** conducting has been in Bruckner symphonies with his orchestra from Linz, so I was rather surprised with his conducting of the Munich RSO courtesy of fine 1971 *Eurodisc/RCA* sound, as it is one of the swiftest performances of all, even if nothing ever sounds rushed and you only really discover this fact when you compare the overall timings with everyone else. Like Pritchard, he is blessed with a wonderful cast; the voices maybe balanced just slightly too close, but they all put in a real performance. If I say that I rather find Anna Moffo a bit too feminine for Hänsel, I am nit-picking - but then the standard of performances in this survey are very high. She does, though, sing very well and partners Helen Donath's Gretel to great effect. Charlotte Berthold is the Mother, a decent performance of what I rather consider a somewhat ungrateful part, while Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau's Father is quite simply extraordinary - the colours he finds in Peter's music is something to behold, as makes the character sound funny, slightly tipsy, concerned and, ultimately, loving. In short, he's probably the finest exponent of the role on disc and listening to this you would think he'd make a brilliant Falstaff - but then that's another story altogether. Yet even he is upstaged, as is everyone else here, by Christa Ludwig's crazy, funny and ultimately hugely engaging Witch - she's clearly having the time of her life and we are all the beneficiaries of such a masterful interpretation. To then have Arleen Augér and Lucia Popp as The Sandman and Dew Fairy, respectively, is almost too good to be true and neither disappoints. Of all the sets in this survey, this is the one where the sense of fun prevails the most.

Turning to **Georg Solti** next though did not do him any favours - he sounds comparatively earth-bound, slow and prosaic compared to Eichhorn, in spite of wonderful playing from the Vienna Philharmonic and glorious sonics from *Decca*; it all sounded to me like a rather stodgy bedtime story from one of the Meistersingers rather than a piece by Humperdinck. Solti too has a very fine cast - on paper that is, but I rather found them (in the company of this survey) a little disappointing, with Brigitte Fassbaender's Hänsel and Lucia Popp's Gretel sounding surprisingly mature, their father, Walter Berry, on this occasion, a rather shouty Peter and their mother, Julia Hamari, just bland, as is Norma Burrowes' Sandman. Edita Gruberová is the Dew Fairy who sounds so lively that she could wake even me up on a New Year's Day morning. However, worst of all is Anny Schlemm's Witch; apparently, she and Solti went back a long way and the conductor was insistent upon her participation in this recording. In some respects her performance is a *tour de force*, the likes of which you won't hear elsewhere, so if you want Widow Twanky as your Witch with a voice as wobbly as the finest party jelly, then she's your girl; however, I found her far too over the top. For me though, when you are thinking that the best contribution on this set are the seraphic tones of the Vienna Boys Choir at the end, then there are problems.

It's surprising to find Solti re-recording the work a few years later with a slightly changed cast for a film; I found him to be on rather better form here, the orchestral line often bubbling over the vocal one in good-humoured charm, even if the overall quasi-Wagnerian approach remains the same. The cast is a rather better than on the audio-only recording, Gruberová 'promoted' to Gretel to better

effect than Popp and Herman Prey drafted in to be a very fine father. Be warned though that Fassbaender's Hänsel looks disconcertingly boyish and the 1970's special effects are toe-curlingly embarrassing by today's standards. The film begins with the *Overture* being played as children take their seats in the opera house in a manner reminiscent of 1950's Disney at their most twee; the action mainly takes place in a studio in an attempt to realistically represent Grimms' tale, but occasionally scanning the audience, for example during the *Dream Pantomime*, where the open-mouthed faux-amazement of the children is enough to tempt any self-respecting witch to chuck them all into the oven. For all its limitations and although I rather prefer this approach to any of Regie Theatre's usual deconstructions, I am not sure this is recommendable.

For his 1969 recording, **Otmar Suitner** has the inestimable advantage of the Dresden Staatskapelle, whose authentic German sound is just so right for this most German of fairy tales. However, the conductor signals his intentions in the opening bars with the phrasing of the horns rather precious and so it proves with the conductor being somewhat fussy elsewhere. His cast is the least stary so far, with Ingeborg Springer as Hänsel, Renate Hoff as Gretel, Theo Adam as Peter and Gisela Schröter as Gertrud, his wife - nothing wrong with that you may think, except no-one make any attempt to recreate the magical fantasy world of Humperdinck; I found it all to be rather earthbound. Except for one, noteworthy performance - that of the witch by Peter Schreier. On record, if not DVD, this is the one of only two occasions that a tenor does take on the role of this hocus pocus character and I have to say that if it is to be done this way, then Schreier's performance is about as good as it's going to get, even if he doesn't efface memories of Ludwig, Lipovšek, or Schwarz elsewhere.

One set which does strive to enter the magical childlike world of Humperdinck is **Heinz Wallberg** on *EMI Elekrola* from 1974, who goes as far as having actual children taking the parts of Hänsel and Gretel, as well as the Dew Fairy and Sandman; unfortunately, that's about as commendable as it gets. The two principals just about have pleasant voices and there is a sense of innocence with the *Evening Prayer* which is touching; elsewhere though there is a seriousness of purpose, so typical of children, that seems at odds with the sparkle of the drama and there really isn't anything good to say about the two youngsters singing The Sandman and Dew Fairy; why anyone would want to listen to them after Te Kanawa, Popp, Auger, Hendricks et al is anyone's guess. To his credit, Wallberg (an excellent conductor, in my view) doesn't make any concessions to them in his pacing of the work, although as early as in the *Overture* the seemingly close balance of the horns and trombones indicate that maybe he is using a smaller body of strings in the Gürzenich Orchester Köln, perhaps in acknowledgement of his smaller than usual voiced soloists. Further controversy concerns the casting of a young Edda Moser as the Witch, more Queen of the Night than ancient contralto, but still very characterful - this daring casting did pay off. Hermann Prey as the Father is wonderful again I thought, the best in this survey after Fischer Dieskau. To summarise, I rather feel that this set is something of a curate's egg.

A few years ago, I was a member of a music forum that comprised of many wise opera aficionados, the 'grey-beards' I used to call them since they were all much older than I and all of whom were vastly more knowledgeable in their fields than I can ever hope to be. In one discussion everyone was asked for nominations for what they considered to be the most perfect opera recordings ever made and the one which garnered the most number of votes was not Solti's *Ring Cycle*, as certain other music publications would have you believe, but rather **Herbert von Karajan's** 1953 recording of *Hänsel und Gretel*. They are in good company, for Wolfgang Wagner no less, took Karajan to task over his Philharmonia recording with: '*This is a truly terrible opera and your recording will only serve to popularise it!*'

In my view, it is a set that has perhaps been taken for granted down the years, in part due to the excellence of other recordings made after it, but also because it is in early 1950s mono, with inevitably

limited sound. That said, I have a good friend who has an LP pressing of it by the *World Record Club*, who plays it through his, admittedly extremely fine, set up in his music room and swears that it sounds amazing; on the other hand, readers would be well-advised to avoid the early *EMI* CD transfer of it though, however sophisticated their music room may be set up, since it contrived to make it sound even older than it actually was. Listening to this recording via a decent playback, though, one notices that the voices are forward, with the orchestra in the background, but the engineers' care over balance means that you hear everything that needs to be heard; even the spotlit harp in the *Dream Pantomime* seems acceptable, because it must be heard, it's vital and the echoing cuckoo is a justly famous minor miracle of mono sound.

Received 'wisdom' can taint the memory of a performance, only to be shown to be lacking on actual re-acquaintance, as I found when completing this survey; therefore the '*Schwarzkopf is unbearably arch*' as Gretel trope which gets repeated all the time just isn't true. She and Grümmer are great fun, playing off each other with seeming spontaneity and the *Evening Prayer* is absolutely exquisite. Else Schürhoff is an excellent Witch, if not displacing Christa Ludwig, Marjana Lipovšek, or Hanna Schwarz in my affections and, crucially, there is no weak link in the cast. Karajan's conducting is like no other as well - you may think he'd be similar to Solti and Runnicles (see below) in highlighting the Wagnerian elements of the score but, rather, I found his approach to be more "Straussian", his palette richer and more sophisticated than others elsewhere, yet at all times light and charming. At certain moments his tempos are daringly slow, as with the *Evening Prayer*, which as a result has a sense of rapture simply unmatched elsewhere, while the sense of time standing still in the silent forest at night between the prayer finishing and the *Dream Pantomime* starting is just a minor conducting miracle amongst many others in this set. Curiously, Karajan's timings elsewhere are considerably faster than Solti, Suitner and Runnicles, to name but three, yet not a note seems out of place. Everything is helped by the playing of the Philharmonia Orchestra, which is quite simply glorious and together with Karajan they also manage to find a sense of wondrous exaltation in the score, as at the climax of the *Dream Pantomime*, that escapes all others. All in all, there's certainly a sense of black magic from the podium here which even Rosina Leckermaul would have been proud of.

Ultimately, though, one does have to concede that this is an early mono recording and even in the best CD transfer, probably being the one achieved by *Pristine Classics* in 2024, there is no getting away from the fact that this opera cries out for glowing orchestral sonorities which is going to be almost impossible to recreate from a recording made at the beginning of the 1950's, for all of its producer's, Walter Legge, sonic marvels. A further point to note is how obviously the children's chorus at the end is made up of children, rather than those of angelic choirboys elsewhere.

In Richard Osborne's biography on Karajan, he reveals that the *EMI* recording was the first time he conducted the work. It wasn't to be the last for the following year, in conjunction with Italian Radio, he put down another performance which was broadcast on Christmas Day 1954 in Italy. If anything, the cast this time is even better than the one Legge put together, with Sena Jurinac taking the role of Hänsel to (once again) Schwarzkopf's Gretel; Jurinac is as good as Grümmer but has an even darker voice, leading greater contrasts. Rolando Panerai, who made a career singing comedy side-kicks such as Ford and Leporello, is a more humorous Father than Metternich on *EMI*, as is Rita Streich (as The Sandman and Dew Fairy) better than Anny Felbermayer. Vittoria Palombini as the Witch is more than a match for Schürhoff on *EMI*, so on balance you could argue that the singing is even better than in the studio for *EMI*. Of course, the Rome *RIAS* Orchestra cannot match the Philharmonia, nor are the sonics quite as good as Legge's production, but it is still in clear mono sound. Karajan conducts as well as before, yet since the production is in Italian, which is clearly obvious from the very beginning with different note values and phrasing necessary to accommodate the different vernacular, this is probably no more than a release for native Italian speakers as well opera specialists

interested in hearing the listed singers in these particular roles, as well as those who must own everything conducted by Karajan.

As a young, upcoming something, **Jeffrey Tate** played the harpsichord in Karajan's late performances and recording of *Don Giovanni*, so it seems somewhat apt that he should also be in charge when *EMI* decided to make a digital recording of *Hänsel und Gretel* with the Bavarian RSO in 1996. His performance is sprightlier than the norm, fresh even, although he is unable to match Karajan's overall magic. He also has a very good cast, with Anne Sofie von Otter and Barbara Bonney as a very fine - and young sounding - Hänsel and Gretel, with Andreas Schmidt and Hanna Schwarz their likewise very young sounding parents. I thought Barbara Hendrick's Sandman dreamily beautiful, the best after Te Kanawa, with Eva Lind a rather sprightly Dew Fairy. However, the best performance of this set is Marjana Lipovsek's witch who, with echo-chamber spookiness, really brings this character to life, whispers and all. There are many who count this to be the finest of modern versions and if I beg to differ, it is not to diminish the achievements of this set.

When in 2008 the Philharmonia decided to celebrate what would have been Karajan's 100th birthday, they chose **Charles Mackerras** to conduct the commemorative concert, featuring works by Richard Strauss; Karajan would have approved of both choice of repertoire and conductor, I feel. And it is Mackerras who conducts the Philharmonia when they finally recorded the work again in 2006, this time made for *Chandos* in their '*Opera in English*' series. I must say he and the Philharmonia are very good indeed and are captured in glowing *Chandos* sound - in particular, the *Witch's Ride* is thrilling. For English language speakers, this release could be memorable for David Pountney's very realistic translation of the libretto, which reminds you just how grim the Brothers Grimm could really be. His cast has been wisely assembled and while Jennifer Larmore and Rebecca Evans could sound a trifle mature for their roles for some, it is a marginal call. The 'reinvented' Rosalind Plowright is a characterful Mother and Robert Hayward a decent father, likewise is Jane Henschel's witch. Indeed, individually, all the cast have been bettered elsewhere, but collectively led by Mackerras's fine baton, they exceed the sum of their parts. If this set was sung in German it would be an extremely strong contender for finest modern recording overall, since there is not a weak link anywhere; as it is, it is the best English language version by far and a strong match for any other set - a genuinely impressive achievement.

Somebody at *EMI* must really like this opera for in between the recordings made with Karajan and the later ones with Wallberg and Tate, there were two more, the most high-profile one being with the Vienna Philharmonic led by **André Cluytens**. There's much to commend this echt-Viennese set featuring a performance you probably would have seen at the Vienna State Opera during that era, with stalwarts of the House at that time, Elisabeth Höngen as the Witch and Liselotte Maikl singing both roles of The Sandman and Dew Fairy. As the main protagonists, Irmgard Seefried and Anneliese Rothenberger are very good, as are Grace Hoffman and Walter Berry's Mother and Father. The sound I thought was a little "boxy" (the recording was apparently made in the Musikverein, rather than the Sofiensaal, scene of the more resplendent-sounding Decca recordings from the 1960's) and Cluytens conducts wisely, if not quite with the magic of others elsewhere. For me, the latter point sums this recording up - so whilst there are some who consider this recording the finest of all - and perhaps when listening to it, you may agree - but for me it falls slightly short. A strong entry, but in a super-competitive field not quite rising to the top.

During the same year, *EMI's* budget arm in the UK, *Classics for Pleasure*, also recorded the work with the forces of the Saddler's Wells Opera, under their music director of the time, the Canadian-born **Mario Bernadi**. This was an experimental recording using multi-channel techniques, under the supervision of Norman Newell who was more experienced with popular music than opera, which may explain the rather mixed results. The sound is actually very good, full and detailed, but unfortunately

the voices are balanced extremely close, which is a mixed-blessing since this performance is sung in English using a rather old-fashioned text by Constance Bache, that is enunciated by the singers in a way that would make the British Royal Family extremely proud. Newell clearly delights in his ability to move his witch around the aural spectrum, as she switches from left to right channel during her "*Hurr, hopp, hopp, hopp*" number with added witch's cackles and laughter, aided and abetted by an echo-chamber. He also clearly has a lot of fun with the explosion of the oven since it sounds impressively of nuclear proportions, yet restrained enough for the listener to believe that the forest just about remains standing afterwards. If at times it sounds as if Newell is trying to out-*Ring Cycle* John Culshaw. more prosaically, the overall effect is wearing with the singers in your ears.

This is a pity, for musically, the performance has much going for it. Bernadi conducts with great affection and if he cannot quite match the magic of Karajan and Mackerras, amongst others, he nonetheless draws tremendous warmth and character from his orchestra; I was especially impressed with their interaction with the singers which clearly indicated experience of performing the work in the pit. The singing cast too is very strong indeed, as many a vocal connoisseur with long memories would testify, the fact they are hardly remembered today is an indication of just how good 'second-rank' singers were during this era. An example of this are the two parents of Rita Hunter and Raimund Herincx who went on to have notable careers, especially in Wagner, while the title roles are more than effectively taken by Patricia Kern, as Hänsel and Margaret Neville as Gretel. Apparently Ann Howard would have been well-known in London at the time for playing the Witch in this opera; impressively, she sings more of the part than most who resort to *Sprechstimme*, although the English vernacular means that she can sometimes sound like a market-trader from London's East End – "*Cor Blimey – it's a ginger-bread man, innit ? 'Ave a banana!*"

Overall, this was much better than I expected and if the voices weren't balanced so close, would have received a much stronger recommendation from me. There is also something of a rarity with the CD-issue, that has a coupling, of Wagner's *Siegfried Idyll*, with the London Sinfonia passionately conducted by the young Colin Davis.

Hanna Schwarz, the Gertrude in Tate's set above, is promoted/relegated to the Witch in **Donald Runnicles's** recording on *Teldec* also with the Bavarian RSO, this time from 1994. Runnicles directs another grand and slow performance of the work, bringing out the latent Wagnerisms perhaps slightly more successfully than Solti and also in superb sound, which I thought was the finest I encountered on this survey, along with that of the Chandos set with Mackerras - the echoes in the forest are very realistic indeed. Personally though, I did find his conducting to be ever so slightly earth-bound. On a more positive note, I also found Hanna Schwarz's witch to be the scariest of all, although don't worry, it can still be listened to before the watershed - her scream as she gets shoved into the oven is hair-raisingly super! Jennifer Larmore and Ruth Ziesak are the protagonists, very good rather than banishing memories elsewhere, as are Rosemary Joshua's and Christine Schaffer's Sandman and Dew Fairy. Bernd Weikl and Hildegard Behrens are the parents, one fairly bland the other's voice wobbly and unpleasant.

You would have thought Gwyneth Jones' portrayal of Gertrude on **Colin Davis'** set to be just as wobbly, but actually she is surprisingly steady and possibly my favourite portrayal of the character in this survey; she and Franz Grundheber make a very good set of parents - their laughter at the end of their scene in Act I had me grinning along stupidly too. Davis is very fortunate to have the wonderful echt-German sonorities of the Dresden Staatskapelle for this 1993 recording, originally on *Philips*, but now re-released on *Decca* and while the sound is rich and full, there is a surprising amount of digital 'spotlighting' - the sound on Tate and (especially) Runnicles, as well as Mackerras are much better. I liked Ann Murray and Edita Gruberova's portrayals of Hänsel and Gretel; in spite of being at the later stages of their careers, they did not sound old to me and, even crucially, they are especially

well contrasted. Christa Ludwig once again hilariously reprises the role of the Witch, if without quite the never-to-be-beaten degree of success she achieved some twenty years previously with Eichhorn, whilst Barbara Bonney's Sandman and Christiane Oelze's Dew Fairy are again more than fine. Colin Davis conducts somewhere between the stateliness of Runnicles and sprightliness of Tate, in many respects ideally.

After this flurry of high-profile recording activity in the late 1980s and 1990s with this work, it is unfortunate that there is very little I can really say about the 1996 recording from Masuria in Poland, with the Masurische Philharmonie conducted by **Paul Kantschneider**. The digital sound is modern and decent, if no match for that provided by *Chandos* for Charles Mackerras, or *Teldec* for Donald Runnicles, which kind of sums everything up. The singing, with the exception of Almut Wilker's rather shrill Gretel, is decent if hardly memorable and the conducting is serviceable without coming close to effacing memories of Karajan, Mackerras, Eichhorn and many others. I am not really sure why anyone would be interested in this recording at all.

Occasionally the task of the intrepid reviewer, especially those who insist upon listening to everything, is challenged by trying to find something interesting to say about recordings a good friend of mine likes to call 'worthy, but dull'. I find myself faced with this very challenge for my next recording conducted by **Martin Hoff**, in spite of the significant advantage of having the presence of the venerable Weimar Staatskapelle, which is not only arguably the oldest orchestra in Germany, but was also the orchestra entrusted with the premiere of *Hänsel und Gretel* itself. Alas, that is about as noteworthy I can be about this performance – I could almost repeat the entire previous paragraph, merely changing the names of the performers involved and my entire opinion of this set would be conveyed to you, except I would add that it's a pity as this orchestra deserves better.

On the other hand, I can be a little more positive about the next sound-only recording made of this work from 2003. I first encountered the work of **Andreas Delfs** in my [Mahler Seventh Symphony survey](#), where his account with the Milwaukee Symphony Orchestra, which is the same ensemble on this live Humperdinck set, impressed me greatly, earning it the distinction of a final 'dark horse' mention. This team's recording of *Hänsel und Gretel*, sung in English, was made around the same, taken from live performances at the end of November in 2003, where the audience is astonishingly quiet. Although the orchestral contribution is distinguished, unfortunately, and crucially, at key moments such as the *Dream Pantomime* and the ending of the whole work, they remain a little earthbound, although the *Witch's Ride*, aided and abetted by impactful sonics, is very exciting and is the best alongside Mackerras's in this survey. The all-American cast is very good rather than great, but special mention is needed for the two protagonists, the Hänsel of Suzanne Mentzer and Heidi Grant Murphy's Gretel; they may not have the most glamorous voices in this survey, but their intrinsic colourings are so different, yet at the same time so exquisitely well matched and contrasted in their performances, that it is worth hearing this set just for their contributions alone. I was less convinced by Judith Forst's Witch who, in truth, sounds like a crazed Valkyrie on the loose in the forest and Robert Orth's very American sounding Peter may sound jarring to non-US ears, but in spite of some notable achievements here, overall if you want to hear this opera sung in English, then Mackerras on *Chandos* is still the one to have.

A quick dash back in time now to the early 1950's, this time to 1953 for a recording that is often overlooked nowadays and which nearly befell the same fate in this survey, the only time *Deutsche Grammophon* took this work into the studio, with the Munich PO conducted wisely by **Fritz Lehmann**. There's nothing particularly wrong about this recording, indeed it is a fine representation of the opera, but it has to be said that if you are going to accept limited mono sound, then the Karajan on *EMI* from the same year is just infinitely better. Still, Rita Streich's Gretel is very fine indeed,

certainly one of the best in this survey, but the remainder of the cast aren't on this level at all and so, ultimately, with a sub-par cast and underwhelming sonics, I would pass on this one.

After excesses of the eighties and nineties, there was an understandable lull in opera recordings made in the studio; instead it was videos (now DVDs) of live performances that took centre stage with the release schedules. We have already discussed the rather underwhelming Georg Solti film of the opera, so first let's consider another rather unusual one. The 2007 production from the **Salzburg Marionette Theatre** continues a rather curious tradition of puppets in opera (there is one of *Parsifal* too, amongst others) and, on the face of it, this film where a pre-recorded soundtrack is then played into a rather cavernous sounding theatre, as the puppets act-out the action complete with 'clomping' noises as the dolls' wooden feet hit the ground, does not promise much at all. However, its saving grace is not the musical performance which is decent, if no match for any of the audio-only sets, but rather the fact that the directors 'get' the work. So rather than trying to shoe-horn the story into any weird conception involving supermarkets or shanty towns (as I have to forewarn you, with a heavy-heart, that both are coming below), they realise that gentle humour is enough to bring out the full magic of this tale. So as early as the first scene, set in a modest wooden hut where little money means that since only one picture can be afforded by Peter and Gertrude's family, it then hangs pride of place on the main wall and features the unmistakable head of none other than Richard Wagner! Further on, when the witch appears, complete with one of her eyes as a laser-beam, she is suitably evil-looking and funny, whizzing across the stage on a broomstick as only a puppet-witch can, before singing her showpiece number "*Hurr, hopp, hopp, hopp*" while dancing the can-can, showing-off her frilly underwear with all the hedonistic abandon of a Parisienne burlesque artiste, who has drunk too much Christmas brandy (or so I am led to believe!). In short, this film is more enjoyable than you may have initially expected and although it cannot be seriously considered a contender for anything in this particular survey, if it introduces more people to the marvellous magic that is the genre of opera, then who am I, merely a humble scribe, to criticise it?

There is some poetic neatness, then, that the earliest live film we have of this opera is from the then thirty-three year old **Thomas Fulton** at The Metropolitan Opera of New York, who was a one-time pupil of Max Rudolf, the conductor on the first audio-only recording of the work that was also from The Met. Sadly, it also turns out to be something of a posthumous tribute, since Fulton passed away tragically young, barely ten years later. We see him often in this film, with the cameras in the orchestra-pit for both the *Overture* and *Witch's Ride* and he gets sumptuous playing from the Met Orchestra, while leading a nicely paced performance. This is obviously a night at the opera, where the audience is not just occasionally audible, clapping after the *Overture*, for example, but who are also clearly enjoying the lavish and traditionally realistic production that were common-place at The Met around this time. So the opening scene features a wooden hut, with straw lofts for the bedrooms, before the remainder of the work is set in the forest, rather dark and large at first until an enormous ginger-bread house rises from backstage later on, a bit like the Christmas Tree in *The Nutcracker*, which then dominates the proceedings visually. This is clearly a 'family show' – the opera is sung in Norman Kelley's very fine English translation, or more precisely American-English since the ginger-bread house tastes of 'frosting', for example, which I'm pretty sure is neither very Grimm, nor German, but it must be said the results are otherwise always witty and amusing. There are also simply dozens of extras of young children in costumes representing woodland creatures such as squirrels, as well as toadstools, who inadvertently scare Hänsel and Gretel when they get lost in the forest, before The Sandman arrives and puts everyone to sleep. The *Dream Pantomime* sees the ballet corps dressed as the kind of angels you will see in Renaissance paintings - that is with long blonde hair and golden halos, occasionally descending and ascending rather too swiftly on zip-wires and if the whole scene is a little static, it is infinitely better than the Solti film with all its perceived studio advantages. The cast is a strong one, especially Frederica von Stade's Hänsel who compliments Judith Blegen's charming Gretel nicely, if comment needs to be made that they, as well as the other cast members,

are clearly 'singing out' into a large auditorium, which occasionally means the subtlety you encounter on studio recordings just isn't there. Michael Devlin's Peter and the Gertrud of Jean Kraft are good, but Betsy Norden's Dew Fairy is rather shrill.

Of course it is Rosalind Elias' Witch who steals the show, combining Margaret Hamilton's Wicked Witch of the West from the *Wizard of Oz* with a large cauldron-full of humour, all the time sporting a very green tongue; there is a marvellously theatrical moment when, somehow, her broomstick 'flies' across the stage before she snatches it out of mid-air, much to everyone's delight. At the final curtain call, she arrives last of all on her broomstick via one of the angels' zip-wires, where this time the speed seems appropriate, before standing in front of the audience and sticking her tongue out – it is very hard not to chuckle at the sense of fun it all engenders, which is surely this how this opera is supposed to be. This recorded transmission wears its years lightly with fine sound and excellent camera work.

I am less convinced by the 1999 film from Zurich Opera, in spite of it being very well conducted by **Franz Welser-Möst**. The opening scene features not just Hänsel and Gretel, but a load of other children in their parents' house too, along with a couple of black cats who prove to be a constant fixture throughout the show. In spite of that, this is a traditional production set in a period of time that the Grimm Brothers would have recognised, even if the sets are mainly just cartoonish paintings on boards, although the ginger-bread house is clever inasmuch that it resembles an 'evil face' made out of various foods. Of the singers, the Hänsel of Liliana Nikiteanu and Gretel of Malin Hartelius, are very good, as is the Father of Alfred Muff. Unfortunately the witch of Volker Vogel, a tenor, is neither particularly evil or funny and, frankly, the presence of the two black cats who have followed Hänsel and Gretel into the forest and then 'help' the Witch in the kitchen is just plain silly. This is stronger musically than visually, but overall as a film of the opera I feel is outclassed elsewhere.

The 2015 television transmission from the Vienna State Opera conducted by **Christian Thielemann** promises much, but is let down by dry sonics, especially when compared to those from Zurich and New York. Thielemann conducts well with great consideration towards his singers, but Welser-Möst is quite simply better, often finding an extra degree of magic and wonder in the score whereas Thielemann is simply content to lie back on generalised Wagnerisms. Vocally too, it is weaker than what has come before – the Hänsel and Gretel of Daniela Sindram and Ileana Tonca, are good without being memorable, but the Peter of Adrian Eröd is too light-toned to convey a rounded-portrayal of a slightly tipsy, if ultimately loving father, while Janina Baechle's Mother just goes through the motions. Sadly, the Witch of Michaela Schuster is simply miscast and is not helped either by the producer's choice of outfit for her – in a production that seeks to recreate the times of the Brother Grimm, having a Witch who just looks like Su Pollard from *Hi-de-Hi* is bizarre (for non-UK readers, *Hi-de-Hi* was a British television sitcom set at a seaside holiday camp, where Ms Pollard played the part of a scatty compere). Overall, musically this weaker than Fulton at The Met and Welser-Möst in Zurich.

This is a pity since the actual production by Adrian Noble has some nice touches. As the *Overture* begins, we are in the pit with Thielemann and his players but soon the cameras shift to the stage where we find ourselves in the drawing room of a well to do family from the late nineteenth century. It is Christmas time and along with a large, lavishly decorated tree, a family of grandmother, parents and multiple siblings are enjoying a slide show from a magic lantern that projects pictures of the Eiffel Tower, the Great Wall of China and other wonders unconnected to the world of the Grimm Brothers onto a screen on the back wall. It quickly ends and all the family exit leaving just a brother and sister who make shadows using the light of the projector before, magically, a huge shadowy silhouette of a witch appears on the screen (a traditional type, not a Michaela Schuster one) – the children pull down the screen and then, Narnia-like, walk through the wall behind it into a forest scene with a hut

which, as they peer through one of its windows, shows Hänsel and Gretel playing; the hut then swivels around and Act I, scene I begins.

So a 'traditional' production, with some 'magical' twists – the action seems to be set in the era of the Grimm Brothers, with much use being made of back projections which shows the forest, along with the sky with a cartoon-faced moon who, predictably, falls to sleep after The Sandman has been to visit. The *Dream Pantomime* is just a load of children standing around waving white balloons, before the two children from the *Overture* re-appear and then float away up into the sky on a cloud full of bubbles/white balloons. When the action moves on to the ginger-bread house, it is more a small cake in the shape of a house rather than anything that could be lived in, even if you were in possession of a book of spells, which I presume was a mandatory requirement of all witches employed by the Grimm Brothers. In many respects, the production is seductive to the eye, if not especially logical to the brain, nor particularly loyal to the story. Personally, I would have made more of the family from the drawing room, who could have in turn re-appeared as characters in the opera – if that was the case, it is not made obvious at all. Ultimately, if I saw this production in the opera house, I would have gone home pleased; however, it is not a DVD I will watch again.

It is interesting to note how these three opera films are the most 'traditional' productions of the work, of which the earliest is by far the best. What follows next is a selection of DVDs that present productions that are decidedly less 'traditional'

The first of these could not have started any more traditionally than if it tried, with the wondrous horns of the Dresden Staatskapelle conducted by **Michael Hofstetter** opening the performance with a sonorous warmth. Further on, a large screen appears on the stage which shows the silhouettes of Hänsel and Gretel clearly bickering, before the curtain rises to a minimalist scene that is clearly a kitchen set in some time in the past hundred years or so. Katharina Thalbach's production from the Dresdner Semperoper in 2006 has some clever ideas, so when the first Act ends, the Witch's Ride sees the large screen reappear, this time to see silhouettes walking past of Snow White and the Seven Dwarves, as well as Little Red Riding Hood and the Big Bad Wolf which, of course, are also stories from the Grimm Brothers. It is they, during the following scene in the forest, who inadvertently scare the children, as a huge black curtain is drawn across the stage that has slits in it spaced apart, imitating tree trunks; illuminated from behind by a bold light, this is effective. However, it is at this point that the drama begins to lose itself when we start to see that these 'other' characters have grotesque heads and start behaving in a charmless way – Little Red Riding Hood, for example, is swigging from a wine bottle, before revealing her hugely pregnant belly; Snow White gives the rosy-red apple to one of the dwarves, who in turn pass it down the line to his six comrades until the last one passes it to the Big Bad Wolf, who takes a bite and then clearly indicates he needs to go to the toilet because of it. The *Dream Pantomime* does actually contain 'angelic figures' which descend onto the stage via a huge slide; these angels though are fat and bald, with stubby wings and they just stumble around the stage aimlessly. There are fifteen of them, the last being the Big Bad Wolf who wears a long white petticoat and also sports a couple of wings; regretfully, I cannot offer anything insightful regarding his presence. In Act III, the Witch initially appears in a figure-hugging red cocktail dress, with long glamorous red hair who flashes one of her legs towards Hänsel; temptation of a different kind maybe, as Gretel puts her hands over her brother's eyes? Perhaps, although since the camera pans across some very young audience members, one wonders who this production is aimed at. To be fair, the house is made of biscuits and the 'ginger-bread' children are 'frozen' in boiled sweets, which is a good idea, but when the Witch then whips off her red wig to reveal a bald head with huge ears, before then donning a huge pair of glasses and donning the most unflattering house-coat imaginable, before riding her 'broomstick' that is actually a space hopper, I begin to feel the urge to put myself into her oven...

Musically, the performance is on a higher level with fine, if not outstanding singing. Hänsel (Antigone Papoukas) and Gretel (Anna Gabler) have clear, bright voices, and Hans-Joachim Ketelsen as the Father and Irmgard Vilsmaier as the Mother sing strongly; special mention must go to Iris Vermillion as the Witch, who has to cope with space-hoppers and wigs on top of bald caps, whilst doing a creditable job. A curious take on the work that rather gets lost amongst too many ideas.

There is no chance of Richard Jones' production getting lost in itself from the following year at the New York Met, beautifully conducted by **Vladimir Jurowski**, as each act features a 'table' of some kind. In Act I, this is a tiny table in the middle of the kitchen from around the mid-twentieth century. The second act, the forest is represented by another room that is covered in wallpaper with leaves on, with 'footman' dressed in pin-stripe suits and heads of branches with, this time, a huge table placed in the middle from front to back, whereas the final act has it turned left to right in the huge industrial-style kitchen of the Witch. The keynote for this production, with its various tables featured through each act, is gluttony; so there is no food in the first act, just hunger, whereas the *Dream Pantomime*, instead of featuring fourteen angels, has fourteen chefs with huge heads presenting a feast for the children hosted by a fish dressed as a butler. The final act sees the Witch cooking in the kitchen to fatten-up Hänsel at her kitchen table, aided by a scowling Gretel, with the "*Herr, Hopp, Hopp, Hopp*" number seeing doughnuts, flour and icing sugar being chucked into a blender, before force-feeding Hänsel. So, no food, a lot of food, too much food; very clever, you might think. On a positive note, this 'theme' is consistent all the way through; however, I do have a significant issue with all of this. In a production where the executive decision by the Met Manager at the time, Peter Gelb, was to have it sung in English so to not just attract a younger audience, but to also then help them understand what is going on, which perhaps they wouldn't had it been sung in German, then why have what is happening onstage contrary to what is being sung? So when the two children sing the *Evening Prayer*, one of the most iconic moments in nineteenth century German opera, where they wish for fourteen angels to guard them against the dangers of the forest at night and then wake-up the following morning saying that is exactly what they dreamt had happened, what is the audience to make that actually it wasn't fourteen angels, but instead fourteen chefs and a fish who didn't exactly guard them, but rather fed them? Further on, at the first appearance of the Witch with "*Little, little mousey, Who is nibbling at my house-y?*", what is the audience supposed to think of this 'house' being in fact a large chocolate cake balanced on the end of a tongue sticking out of a fanged mouth painted on a blood red screen that covers the whole of the stage? In the end I felt that in this production, it was Richard Jones' *Hänsel and Gretel* that we were experiencing, rather than Humperdinck's or the Brothers Grimm's - and it's not a very good version either.

This is all the more a pity, then, since musically, this is very good. Jurowski, as I have mentioned, secures very fine playing from The Met orchestra – when the Father arrives, the subtle slides he secures from his violins, suggesting Peter's tipsy condition is just one of many examples of his fine direction. The two protagonists of Hänsel (Alice Coote) and Gretel (Christine Schäffer) are as good as any, while the tenor Witch of Philip Langridge, tottering around in stilettos and pearl necklace, with nary a broom stick in sight, does amazingly well with all the flour, chocolate powder and icing sugar flying around his kitchen.

The sound is magnificent and the camera work expert, switching from the orchestral pit in the *Overture*, to behind the scenes during the *Witch's Ride* showing the stagehands moving the sets around. So if Richard Jones's 'concept' sits easier with you than it does with me, this could otherwise be a good recommendation; it just is not my own.

The following year finds a filmed performance from the Royal Opera House, Covent Garden conducted by **Colin Davis** – its first new production since 1937. The Royal Opera has a curious relationship with Humperdinck's opera, with *The Nutcracker* and *La bohème* usually pushing it off of the

Christmas schedules although, ironically, it is being revived again as I am writing this in 2024 in a rather misguided production where the Witch's ginger-bread house is a replica of Bates Motel from the film *Psycho*, where nothing is edible except, perhaps, a giant cherry that sits on top of its chimney, that has a huge knife stuck in it; subtlety with a sledgehammer, delivered as only an opera producer can conceive it.

The 2008 production of Moshe Leiser and Patrice Caurier is different, if not necessarily much better. However, musically it is a triumph with a cast featuring Angelika Kirchschrager and Diana Damrau as the protagonists, along with Thomas Allen as one of the best Peters in this Survey. To then have the legendary Anja Silja as the Witch is something of a coup and if there is nothing left of her voice, she is still commanding in her dramatic presence onstage. In the pit, Colin Davis conducts gloriously, with warmth, charm, grandeur, terror and, ultimately elation – quite rightly, he gets the biggest ovations at the final curtain calls.

The production, unfortunately, is only moderately successful. The opening scene shows a very cramped bedroom, possibly from the mid-twentieth century, with two single beds - so cramped, in fact, that Hänsel and Gretel can barely execute their dances. More to the point, it is squeaky clean and does not give any hint of poverty, nor how hungry the children must be. However, it is clever insofar that it is able to be quickly transformed into a forest-like setting for the Second Act, similarly minimalist with mainly huge green coloured screens with painted tree trunks on the them, which later on slide out of the way to reveal the Witch's kitchen, complete with giant ovens and bodies of children hanging in the background like dead gamebirds, presumably waiting to be cooked and eaten. For the *Dream Pantomime* the 'angels' are represented by woodland creatures, curiously with angelic wings, who build a festive scene complete with a roaring fire in a traditional fireplace next to a decorated Christmas tree and two armchairs, at which point the children's parents enter, sit in the chairs and then turn to the children as they wake up to give them each a Christmas present; as the music reaches its climax, the children open their presents which turn out to be half a sandwich, that they proceed to eat. Aside from the fact the action bears no resemblance to what is being sung about, since the real sense of hunger has not already been established, the episode fails to have the impact I suspect it was striving to achieve. Similarly in the following Act, I fail to understand why on the first appearance of this 'kindly little lady', that it was deemed appropriate for her to have her (prosthetic!) bosoms hanging out. Anja Silja gives a powerful performance, which is both very intense and frightening, if lacking any humour – her scream as she is pushed into the oven is also more chilling than funny. She is so scary that when she is removed from it at the end in the form of a biscuit, Hänsel and Gretel are still frightened of her – as was I! In the end, I rather felt it was all dramatically a little confused, even if individually every scene was beautifully executed and musically it was wonderful. I have no complaints at all about the quality of the sound, picture and camera work that are all excellent, but it is something of a mixed bag overall, I feel.

It is of some irony in the same year as the Royal Opera revival, that just along the road at Glyndebourne the same opera should have been produced there too, in a production featuring the London Philharmonic Orchestra, conducted by **Kazushi Ono**. Musically this is no match for the more prestigious London shows, with a decent rather than great cast who nonetheless do themselves justice in the smaller house at Sussex. It is, however, more noteworthy for the production of Laurent Pelly, who sets the action in the present day.

As the *Overture* begins, we see a large cardboard box that is labelled with '*Hänsel und Gretel, Glyndebourne Opera*' which we see is then carried towards the opera house, before entering via the stage door, before being passed around the individual dressing rooms of the cast members, who are each introduced and named on-screen. Quite what was in the box is never revealed, except in the opening scene we see it is set not just in the present day, but in a cardboard city 'house' made of

cardboard boxes; Hänsel and Gretel are clearly homeless. Unlike in the Royal Opera production, the audience is therefore left in no doubt about the level of extreme poverty facing the children in this interpretation, before fleeing their mother when she returns home. The forest is also very grim and 'run down' – there is nothing green in this landscape, just trees with few branches and no foliage, many of which have toppled over. As Hänsel und Gretel fall asleep, the *Dream Pantomime* see loads of children dressed all in white skip through the landscape, before surrounding Hänsel und Gretel and shaking them, trying unsuccessfully to wake them up. The following morning, they stumble upon the Witch's house which looks like a modern supermarket, complete with shelves neatly filled with branded boxes of sweets and biscuits, as well as shopping trolleys and roller-cages, one of which Hänsel is put into. Wolfgang Ablinger-Sperrhacke's tenor-witch is a nasty piece of work from the outset, manhandling the children in 'her' bright pink dress and similarly coloured hair which, further on, is discarded, as is, perhaps more disturbingly, her clothes; wielding knives at the children in its underwear, this is a positively sinister take on the role. Needless to say, it ends happily ever after, the 'freed' children turning out to be the self-same individuals who were the angels – perhaps in trying to awake Hänsel und Gretel, they were attempting to warn them.

I suppose this is one way to present this opera – there is no attempt to create anything charming, or humorous, but the dramatic aim is pretty sure. Musically it is no more than good, in spite of predictably fine playing from the London PO and the sound and picture are both excellent. I am not sure it is quite one for repeatedly viewing though.

The final DVD takes us back to 2007 for a production given at the Anhaltische Theater, Dessau which is conducted by **Markus L. Frank**. In this 'conception' by Johannes Felsenstein, the mood is set during the *Overture* which accompanies a black and white film that is projected onto a screen in front of the stage which depicts the grim history of Germany from the first half of the twentieth century – the two wars, the rise of dictatorships and the terrible consequences of both. Visions of tanks from both wars crushing the landscape abound, along with marching soldiers as well as dead bodies of adults, before concluding with footage of children looking pitifully emaciated and starving. Similar footage is then shown throughout the *Witch's Ride*, with a different one for the start of Act III, where the more uplifting music accompanies the rebuilding of Germany after the war, the hope of international cooperation with the Berlin airlift, before it all comes crashing down again with images of Vietnam, especially those of children looking scared, tired and hungry. The message is clear: the suffering of children is due to the stupidity of adults.

There is nothing at all charming about Peter and Gertrude's home in this production – it is dark and grim, as both children are sitting at a table centre-stage making broomsticks, a more than passing nod to child-labour. Of course, they get bored and muck around as in the story, until the Mother returns home; as she chases Hänsel around the table with a leather belt, the violence is shocking and visually it all seemed as if I was watching an opera by Leoš Janáček, rather than a fairy-tale opera. In the end, the children do not flee into the forest but rather hide under their two beds where they witness the bickering of their parents, along with their stupid superstitions about witches in the woods. They are still there at the start of the Second Act, but the fear of the forest is replaced by the fear of their parents in their own home; as they fall asleep, they dream of fourteen angels, who do come to visit them in the form of children dressed in native costumes of individual countries, along with their Mother and Father who now appear well-dressed and loving, as they gently pick the children up and place them in to their beds, tucking them in. When they wake up in Act III they are still in their beds, except the room has been transformed into one of middle-class affluence complete with a Christmas Tree surrounded by presents. Their parents turn up at the beginning of this act, rather than the end, the Father happily playing with the children in a way he had never done previously. using dolls to represent two children and a witch as they act out the Brothers Grimm tale together, the Witch's vocal line being sung by Peter. At the climax of the story, the witch's doll is thrown into the hearth with

its roaring fire, before the whole family sits down to eat Christmas dinner that has been prepared by the Mother, of roast turkey and trimmings. At the point in the score that the oven blows up, there is an explosion in the fireplace and the 'angels' that were the children of many nationalities reappear. The point is this: are Hänsel und Gretel still dreaming, yearning for the life they could have had with loving parents who were financially solvent? Or are they dead and this represents their ideal of Heaven?

Of course there is no point in my rehearsing the usual gripes that what is being sung not matching what I am seeing, nor that there is virtually no charm or humour in this production at all. However, it is a much more powerful and coherent experience than you may have expected, as far away from the New York Met in 1982 as you could possibly get. Musically, it is unexceptional, although the Gretel of Cornelia Marschall is very good, while the Peter/Witch of Ludmil Kuntschew has no voice left by the end. It appears that the audience at the filmed performance were made up of young adults and so are suitably irreverent, so you would need to tolerate a little more audience noise than elsewhere, while the orchestra sounds smaller than usual and is no match for the pit bands of Vienna, New York and London. Still for those who profess to loathe this opera and do not have a sweet tooth, this may be the production which changes their mind.

The final set of all in this Survey nearly takes us back to the recording studio, albeit specifically for a live, one-off concert performance given by **Marek Janowski** and the very excellent Berlin Radio Symphony Orchestra on 23 December 2016 that has been released as an audio-only recording. Much credit needs to be given to the *Penatone* engineers for producing such warmth and depth for the sound, not least since the concert took place at the Berlin Philharmonie, a venue that has always challenged even the best engineers, for this vies with the Runnicles/Teldec set for having the best sonics of all, even if this also means the odd audience noise being picked up too. This recording took place at the end of a number of years when Janowski had set down all the Wagner operas of the Bayreuth canon for *Penatone*, with this Humperdinck opera a final, Christmassy appendix.

In the end, Janowski's conducting is a mixture of revelatory orchestral textures – the sifting orchestral colours and sonorities he finds in the score, for example in his accompaniment when The Sandman appears, is remarkable; unfortunately, he can also be rather too relaxed and somnambulant elsewhere, although the witch's "*Herr, Hopp, Hopp, Hopp*" is taken at a tremendous lick, with additional stomps from what could have been a broomstick.

Actually, the Witch on this recording is a tenor, Christian Elsner who was also the Parsifal in Janowski's recording of that opera. He does better than most tenors in this part, doing his best to actually sing, rather than declaim, the notes, even if I would still be pointing to Peter Schreier if you really wanted to hear this role sung by a tenor. The Peter of Albert Dohmen is also quite strong, but unfortunately Alexandra Steiner's Gretel and Ricarda Merbeth's Gertrude are too shrill, whilst the offstage Sandman of Annika Gerhards is done no favours whatsoever by the microphones. Ultimately, this set is no match for the established favourites from the recording studio.

Conclusion

Overall, this is a lucky opera on record; even if none of these sets is absolutely perfect, like any of those magical sacks that have fallen off of Santa's sleigh stuffed full of goodies, there really is something for everyone here.

If you want it on DVD, then the very 'traditional' New York Met production from 1982 wears its years lightly, has a tremendous cast and is really good fun, as well as being ultimately moving too. On the other hand, if you hate Humperdinck, *Hänsel und Gretel* and don't believe in Santa Claus, then the

Johannes Felsenstein production from Dessau could fit the bill, having the singular achievement of out-grimming even the Brothers Grimm. If I am pushed to recommend a more modern production midway between the two, then Colin Davis at Covent Garden may just get my vote, albeit with the caveats detailed above.

On the other hand, with audio-only performances, there is a much wider choice. If it is a feast of fine singing you want, then I would say the Pritchard on *Sony* just about nudges into top spot for me. For a sizzling sense of fun, then Eichhorn's set on *RCA* is the one for you. Want a Witch sung by a tenor - then Schreier on the Suitner recording is your man. Want to hear the work in English? - then the Mackerras *Chandos* account is very good indeed. Karajan's fabled *EMI* recording has the best conducting and a magical performance to boot. If you see the work as quasi-Wagnerian, then Solti and Runnicles should be for you, the latter enjoying the finest sonics of all the sets here as well.

However, if I am pushed to nominate a favourite, then it is hard not to get past the Karajan-Philharmonia account; it is special, as if Merlin had popped in to Kingsway Hall during those recording sessions in 1953 and casually waved his wand around over the proceedings. However, if you insist upon more modern sound, then with wise conducting and excellent singing, I would probably choose Sir Colin Davis's on *Philips/Decca* with the wonderful Dresden Staatskapelle, or the Mackerras on *Chandos*, if you don't mind it being sung in English. Intriguingly, neither recording is rated well in Ralph Moore's survey !

Index of Recordings

1947: **Max Rudolf** (studio; mono) Columbia Masterworks. **IN ENGLISH**

HANSEL - Risë Stevens GRETEL - Nadine Conner PETER - John Brownlee GERTRUD - Claramae Turner WITCH - Thelma Votipka SANDMAN - Thelma Votipka DEW FAIRY - Lillian Raymondi Metropolitan Opera Orchestra, 1947

1953: **Herbert von Karajan** (studio; mono) EMI; Naxos; Membran; Pristine.

Philharmonia Orchestra, Loughton School Choir. Peter - Josef Metternich; Gertrud - Maria von Ilosvay; Hänsel - Elisabeth Grümmer; Gretel - Elisabeth Schwarzkopf; Die Knusperhexe - Else Schürnoff; Sandmännchen - Anny Felbermayer; Taumännchen - Anny Felbermayer

1953: **Fritz Lehmann** (studio; mono) DG; Brilliant Classics

Münchner Philharmoniker Orchester, Knabenchor des Wittelbacher Gymnasiums München & Damen aus dem Chor des Bayerischen Rundfunks. Peter - Horst Günter; Gertrud - Marianne Schech; Hänsel - Gisela Litz; Gretel - Rita Streich; Die Knusperhexe - Res Fischer; Sandmännchen - Elisabeth Lindermeier; Taumännchen - Bruno Brückmann

1954: **Herbert von Karajan** (radio broadcast; mono), Walhall. **IN ITALIAN**

Chorus & Orchestra of La Scala Milan; Peter – Rolando Panerai; Gertrud – Bruna Ronchini; Hänsel - Gisela Litz; Gretel – Sena Jurinac; Die Knusperhexe – Vittoria Palombini; Sandmännchen – Rita Streich; Taumännchen – Rita Streich

1962: **Carl Schuricht** (radio broadcast; mono), Archipel.

NDR Sinfonieorchester & Knabenchor; ; Peter – Marcel Cordes; Gertrud – Gertrud Burgstehler-Schuster; Hänsel - Barbara Scherler; Gretel – Gisela Pohl; Die Knusperhexe – Lilian Benningsen; Sandmännchen – Gisela Knabba; Taumännchen – Oda Balsborg

1964: **André Cluytens** (studio; stereo) EMI

Wiener Philharmoniker, Wiener Sängerknaben. Peter - Walter Berry; Gertrud - Grace Hoffman; Hänsel - Irmgard Seefried; Gretel - Anneliese Rothenberger; Die Knusperhexe - Elisabeth Höngen; Sandmännchen - Liselotte Maikl; Taumännchen - Liselotte Maikl

1964: **Mario Bernadi** (studio; stereo) EMI/Classics for Pleasure **IN ENGLISH**

Saddler's Wells Opera Orchestra and Chorus, the London Boy Singers: Peter – Raimund Herinx; Gertrud – Rita Hunter; Hänsel – Patricia Kern; Gretel – Margaret Neville; Die Knusperhexe – Ann Howard; Sandmännchen – Elizabeth Robinson; Taumännchen – Jenifer Eddy

1969: **Otmar Suitner** (studio; stereo) Berlin Classics; Brilliant Classics

Dresdner Staatskapelle, Knaben des Dresdner Kreuzchors. Peter - Theo Adam; Gertrud - Gisela Schröter; Hänsel - Ingeborg Springer; Gretel - Renate Hoff; Die Knusperhexe - Peter Schreier; Sandmännchen - Renate Kraher; Taumännchen - Renate Kraher

1971: **Kurt Eichhorn** (studio; stereo) RCA

Sinfonieorchester des Bayerischen Rundfunks, Tölzer Sängerknaben. Peter - Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau; Gertrud - Charlotte Berthold; Hänsel - Anna Moffo; Gretel - Helen Donath; Die Knusperhexe - Christa Ludwig; Sandmännchen - Arleen Augér; Taumännchen - Lucia Popp

1974: **Heinz Wallberg** (studio; stereo) EMI

Gürzenich Orchester Köln, Knabenchor Köln. Peter - Hermann Prey; Gertrud - Ilse Gramatzki; Hänsel - Eugen Hug; Gretel - Brigitte Lindner; Die Knusperhexe - Edda Moser; Sandmännchen - Ursula Roleff; Taumännchen - Thomas Frohn

1978: **John Pritchard** (studio; stereo) Sony

Gürzenich Orchester Köln, Kölner Oper Chorus. Peter - Siegmund Nimsgern; Gertrud - Christa Ludwig; Hänsel - Frederica Von Stade; Gretel - Ileana Cotrubas; Die Knusperhexe - Elisabeth Söderström; Sandmännchen - Kiri Te Kanawa; Taumännchen - Ruth Welting

1978: **Georg Solti** (studio; stereo) Decca

Wiener Philharmoniker, Wiener Sängerknaben. Peter - Walter Berry; Gertrud - Júlia Hamari; Hänsel - Brigitte Fassbaender; Gretel - Lucia Popp; Die Knusperhexe - Anny Schlemm; Sandmännchen - Norma Burrowes; Taumännchen - Edita Gruberova

1981: **Georg Solti** (DVD) Universal

Wiener Philharmoniker, Wiener Sängerknaben. Peter – Hermann Prey; Gertrud – Helge Dernesch; Hänsel - Brigitte Fassbaender; Gretel - Edita Gruberova; Die Knusperhexe - Sena Jurinac; Sandmännchen - Norma Burrowes; Taumännchen - Elfriede Hobarth

1982: **Thomas Fulton** (DVD) Universal. **IN ENGLISH**

Metropolitan Opera New York Orchestra, Chorus & Ballet. Peter – Michael Devlin; Gertrud – Jean Kraft; Hänsel – Frederica von Stade; Gretel – Judith Blegen; Die Knusperhexe – Rosalind Elias; Sandmännchen – Diane Kesling; Taumännchen – Betsy Norden

1989: **Jeffrey Tate** (studio; digital) EMI

Sinfonieorchester des Bayerischen Rundfunks, Tölzer Sängerknaben. Peter - Andreas Schmidt; Gertrud - Hanna Schwarz; Hänsel - Anne Sofie von Otter; Gretel - Barbara Bonney; Die Knusperhexe - Marjana Lipovšek; Sandmännchen - Barbara Hendricks; Taumännchen - Eva Lind

1992: **Colin Davis** (studio; digital) Philips/Decca

Dresdner Staatskapelle, Dresdner Operchor, Dresdner Kinderchor. Peter - Franz Grundheber Gertrud - Gwyneth Jones Hänsel - Ann Murray Gretel - Edita Gruberova Die Knusperhexe - Christa Ludwig Sandmännchen - Barbara Bonney Taumännchen - Christiane Oelze

1994: **Donald Runnicles** (studio; digital) Teldec

Symphonieorchester des Bayerischen Rundfunks, Tölzer Sängerknaben. Peter - Bernd Weikl; Gertrud - Hildegard Behrens; Hänsel - Jennifer Larmore; Gretel - Ruth Ziesak; Die Knusperhexe - Hanna Schwarz; Sandmännchen - Rosemary Joshua; Taumännchen - Christine Schäfer

1996: **Paul Kantschnieder** (studio; digital) RS/DARPO

Masurische Philharmonie, Fuldaer Mädchenkantorei, Fuldaer Domsängerknaben. Peter - Joachim Klüft; Gertrud - Esther Lee; Hänsel - Tina Hörhold; Gretel - Almut Wilker; Die Knusperhexe - Johanna Rutishauser; Sandmännchen - Martina Ramin; Taumännchen - Birgit Nath

1999: **Franz Welser-Most** (DVD) Arthaus Musik

Orchestra and Children's Chorus of the Zurich Opera House; Peter – Alfred Muff; Gertrud – Bagreiele Lechner; Hänsel – Liliana Nikiteanu; Gretel – Malin Hartelius; Die Knusperhexe – Volker Vogel; Sandmännchen – Martina Jankova; Taumännchen – Milena Jotowa

2003: **Andreas Delfs** (live digital) Avie. **IN ENGLISH**

Milwaukee Symphony Orchestra, Chorus and Children's Choir. Peter – Robert Orth; Gertrud – Janice Taylor; Hänsel – Susanne Mentzer; Gretel – Heidi Grant Murphy; Die Knusperhexe – Judith Forst; Sandmännchen – Anna Christy; Taumännchen – Anna Christy

2006: **Charles Mackerras** (studio; digital) Chandos. **IN ENGLISH**

Philharmonia Orchestra, New London Children's Choir. Peter – Robert Hayward; Gertrude – Rosalind Plowright; Hänsel – Jennifer Larmore; Gretel – Rebecca Evans; Die Knusperhexe – Jane Henschel; Sandmännchen – Diana Montague; Taumännchen – Sarah Tynan

2006: **Michael Hoffsteter** (DVD) Euroarts

Dresdner Staatskapelle, Dresdner Operchor, Dresdner Kinderchor & Ballet. Peter – Hans Joachim Ketelsen; Gertrude – Irmgard Vilsmaier; Hänsel – Antigone Papoukas; Gretel – Anna Gabler; Die Knusperhexe – Iris Vermillion; Sandmännchen/Taumännchen – Lydia Teuscher

2007: **Vladimir Jurowski** (DVD) EMI **IN ENGLISH**

Metropolitan Opera New York Orchestra, Chorus & Ballet. Peter – Alan Held; Gertrude – Rosalind Plowright; Hänsel – Alice Coote; Gretel – Christine Schäfer; Die Knusperhexe – Philip Langridge; Sandmännchen – Sasha Cooke; Taumännchen – Lisette Oropesa

2007: **Markus L Frank** (DVD) Arthaus Musik

Anhaltische Philharmonie Orchestra, Dessau, Chorus and Children's Chorus of the Anhaltisches Theater Dessau. Peter – Ludmil Kuntschew; Gertrude – Alexandra Petersamer; Hänsel – Sabine Noack; Gretel – Cornelia Marschall; Die Knusperhexe – Ludmil Kuntschew; Sandmännchen – Viktorija Kaminskaite; Taumännchen – Viktorija Kaminskaite

2007: **Andreas Schuller** (DVD) Naxos

Inbocallupo Orchestra and Children's Choir. Peter – Jörg Gottschick; Gertrude – Martina Hamberg-Möbius; Hänsel – Kristina Naudé; Gretel – Annette Dasch; Die Knusperhexe – Giedré Povilaitytė; Sandmännchen – Akiko Hayashida; Taumännchen – Bini Lee

2008: **Colin Davis** (DVD) Opus Arte

Orchestra of the Royal Opera House Covent Garden, Tiffin Boys' Choir. Peter – Thomas Allen; Gertrude – Elizabeth Connell; Hänsel – Angelika Kirchschrager; Gretel – Diana Damrau; Die Knusperhexe – Anja Silja; Sandmännchen – Pumeza Matshikiza; Taumännchen – Anita Watson

2008: **Kazushi Ono** (DVD) Decca

London Philharmonic Orchestra, Glyndebourne Opera Chorus, Trinity Boys' Choir. Peter – Klaus Kuttler; Gertrude – Irmgard Vilsmaier; Hänsel – Jennifer Holloway; Gretel – Adriana Kučerová ; Die Knusperhexe – Wolfgang Ahlinger-Sperrhacke; Sandmännchen – Amy Freston; Taumännchen – Malin Christensson

2013: **Martin Hoff** (Studio;Digital)

Staatskapelle Weimar; Schola Cantorum Weimar, Ladies of the Opera Chorus of the National Theatre Weimar. Peter – Uwe Schenker-Primus; Gertrude – Rebecca Teem; Hänsel – Sayaka Shigeshima; Gretel – Elisabeth Wimmer; Die Knusperhexe – Alexander Günther; Sandmännchen – Caterina Maier; Taumännchen – Hyunjin Park

2015: **Christian Thielemann** (DVD) Euroarts

Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra; Children of the Operschule der Wiener Staatsoper; Students of the Balletakademie der Wiener Staatsoper; Bühnenorchester der Wiener Staatsoper. Peter - Adrian Eröd; Gertrud - Janina Baechle; Hänsel - Daniela Sindram; Gretel - Ileana Tonca; Die Knusperhexe - Michaela Schuster; Sandmännchen - Annika Gerhards; Taumännchen - Annika Gerhards

2016: **Marek Janowski** (live; digital) Pentatone

Rundfunk-Sinfonieorchester Berlin; Kinderchor der Staatsoper Unter den Linden. Peter - Albert Dohmen ; Gertrud - Ricarda Merbeth; Hänsel - Katrin Wundsam; Gretel - Alexandra Steiner; Die Knusperhexe - Christian Elsner; Sandmännchen - Annika Gerhards; Taumännchen - Alexandra Hutton

Lee Denham