Donizetti: *Lucia di Lammermoor* – a survey of the major recordings
by Ralph Moore

[Some reviews below have previously been posted on MusicWeb. I have variously edited them but there is some repetition of content.]

I consider here twenty recordings of Donizetti's most popular opera by far which is a fair sampling but only 10% of those available, and I have in any case to some extent pre-empted my findings by declaring the 1971 recording with Joan Sutherland and Pavarotti to be the best as one of my "untouchables". Nonetheless, these recordings span the Lucias of some of the greatest coloratura sopranos of the last ninety years. While I still find the three "Opera on Record" tomes edited by Alan Blyth to be a useful reference for critiques of older recordings, the chapter on *Lucia di Lammermoor* is extraordinarily sour and hypercritical, so I offer this survey as what I hope is a more balanced corrective.

The first studio recording was made in in 1929 and the last in 2002, a reflection of what has happened to the industry and also the shortage of sopranos able and prepared to undertake it. When the greatest among your predecessors include Callas, Sills and Sutherland, the challenge is understandably daunting. I have confined myself mainly to studio versions but cannot ignore a few of the best live performances, especially if they are in tolerable sound.

There is some debate surrounding the correct key and pitch for the soprano's arias. Pitch was generally lower in Donizetti's day, between A432 and A435 Hz and even varied between Italy (lower) and France (higher). For that reason, although Lucia's Mad Scene was written in F many modern sopranos sing it transposed down to E or E flat major; Caballé was one of the few to sing and record it in that original higher key – which is now even higher according to modern pitch usually being A440 or even A443 - but she avoids interpolated high notes. Most performances below transpose down at least a semitone and I do not think it a crucial issue. Another consideration is that some sopranos are very florid and elaborate in their ornamentation, while others adhere to the *come scritto* score; cadenzas are left to the performer but some attempt to replicate "historically informed" versions while others are more "modern" and inventive.

There is also the question of whether for the Mad Scene the glass harmonica Donizetti specified in the score should be used, or the more practical flute. Sills and Schippers below were one of the first to comply with the composer's intent and some modern performances use the verrophone. Again, I don't think this makes or breaks a recording but there is no doubt that the glass harmonica has an eerier, more atmospheric sound.

Finally, there is the issue of cuts. Mid-20C performances almost invariably cut repeats and second verses of arias, and sometimes whole sections such as the Act II duet between Raimondo and Lucia following her confrontation with her brother, and the entire Wolf's Crag scene which opens Act III. The former scene isn't crucial dramatically or especially interesting musically but the latter is the most "gothic" and Verdian in the opera and it sets up the finale; I think its excision is undesirable. Karajan opened some of these cuts in the 1955 live recording with Callas in Berlin including that scene, but even her last recording with Serafin in 1959 retains them; by contrast, the studio recordings with Sills and Schippers in 1970 and Sutherland and Bonynge in 1971 are virtually complete.

Listeners will decide for themselves whether issues of pitch, cuts, ornamentation and instrumentation are of importance; my own criteria centre more upon the artistic excellence and dramatic effect of a recording.

There is no doubt that the tenor takes second place to the leading lady, but it is still a substantial role. It is surely written for a lyric tenor with proper *bel canto* technique, even if spinto tenors with rather too much verismo heft seem to dominate the catalogue, especially among earlier recordings. Di Stefano, for example, favoured it and he began as a honeyed lyric tenor but became coarser in his delivery as his relatively short performing career advanced and he pushed into spinto and dramatic roles; I much prefer tenors such as Pavarotti and Bergonzi for their style and elegance and some will favour Kraus.

The baritone is as important as the tenor and again, a lyric, *bel canto* voice is required but one with bite and an easy upper extension. The bass is less important but must be of the basso cantante category, noble and authoritative without being too heavy.

Please excuse my omission here of any recordings featuring Edita Gruberova as the leading lady, as with all due respect to a late artist beloved by many, hers was not a voice to my taste at all. If you are a fan, you have my blessing but not, for what it's worth, my guidance…

Finally, a "singers' conductor" is needed, flexible of beat and willing to give his singers time to caress the long legato lines; rigidity needs to be avoided. While the generation of tension and excitement is not the prime requisite, the crowd scenes have to go with a swing.

The Recordings:

Ugo Tansini – 1939 (studio; mono) Warner Cetra; Naxos; Membran
Orchestra & Chorus - EIAR Torino
Lucia - Lina Pagliughi
Edgardo - Giovanni Malipiero
Enrico - Giuseppe Manacchini
Raimondo - Luciano Neroni
Arturo - Muzio Giovagnoli
Alisa - Maria Vinciguerra
Normanno - Armando Giannotti

The cleaned-up sound here is really perfectly listenable for so old a recording; there is a bit of blare, shatter and distortion and some background rustling, but the voices emerge cleanly and even the orchestra and chorus are much more forward than we have any right to expect. The conducting is brisk but not insensitive and we are hearing an earlier style of *bel canto* singing, not emotionally charged but very accomplished. I love Manacchini's incisive baritone with its fast vibrato and easy, expansive top. Pagliughi isn't the most compelling vocal actor but her vocalisation per se is impressive. Her pure, flexible, childlike tones are in many ways ideal for portraying Lucia's wounded innocence but she can summon up great power for climaxes, including a thrilling top E and E♭. Malipiero is surely just what Donizetti had in mind for Edgardo; his tenor is a little nasal but agile and penetrating and his final scene is impassioned. The bass singing Raimondo is resonant and authoritative; unfortunately, the Arturo is a tremolo-ridden bleater; otherwise, you can just sit back and enjoy some superlative singing.

A word of warning: this is quite savagely cut to an hour and three-quarters, so as such can hardly be called a complete recording, but the main scenes are here and it is a fine supplement for those interested in the evolution of singing styles. I refer you to this previous MusicWeb review for a pithy summary of its virtues.

Tullio Serafin – 1953 (studio; mono) EMI/Warner; Pristine – Ambient Stereo
Orchestra & Chorus - Maggio Musicale Fiorentino
Lucia - Maria Callas
Edgardo - Giuseppe di Stefano
Enrico - Tito Gobbi
Raimondo - Raffaele Ariè
Arturo - Valiano Natali
Alisa - Anna Maria Canali
Normanno - Gino Sarri

This is the usual version of the era, quite heavily cut to 110 minutes. Callas is in the plenitude of her vocal powers and opts for a considerably showier display compared with the second studio recording six years later, where she has deepened her portrayal to give us a darker, sadder Lucia and tamed the coloratura ornamentation to take on a simpler form – which some find more direct and affecting. It is, as my colleague GF observes, "a softer, inward portrait." Here, however, she goes for overt drama and pyrotechnics. She is partnered by company stars Di Stefano and Gobbi, also in more youthful vocal estate; the one casting weakness is Raffaele Ariè's bland, woolly Raimondo; Ivo Vinco and, to a lesser extent, Bernard Ladysz are both superior. Valiano Natali makes an especially positive and vibrant Arturo – a role too often undercast. The disadvantage of being recorded in mono when stereo was already available but dismissed by Walter Legge as a passing fad – by 1959 he was forced to relent – is countered by Pristine's rendering it into "Ambient Stereo" which is just a tad muffled and reverberant but much fuller and more revealing than the Warner mono issue.

Gobbi's bite and dramatic flair are apparent in his first notes; he is so much more interesting than, for example, the smooth Cappuccilli and while his top notes are as ever a bit dry, that is not really bothersome. He is very adept with the gruppetti and his hard tone and fast, regular vibrato lends his utterances real nervous tension; just occasionally his vigour threatens to spill over into yelling and his attempt to cap that first appearance with a final top G is ill-advised. Likewise, not everything Di Stefano does is vocally or stylistically admirable but he is brimful of youthful ardour and more convincing than Tagliavini as Lucia's rash lover. "Fra poco a me ricovero" may sound almost verismo in its abandon but it is a fine example of how to convey desperation while still maintaining vocal control.

Callas is simply marvellous – her singing is far removed from the crystalline perfection of, say, Pagliughi's, but so human and present, bringing out for the first time Lucia's personality and still astonishing the listener with its variety of colour and flexibility – with the top E♭ in place. Just occasionally she is a little harsh or shrill but such blemishes are negligible and as well as soaring skyward she makes judicious use of her lower register in a way which eludes some improperly developed sopranos.

We may take Serafin's idiomatic and authentic way with the score for granted. Ensembles are ideally realised – the sextet goes with real lilt and momentum; I hate it when it is delivered like a motet; it is meant to be a maelstrom of conflicting emotions.

Most Callas devotees will want this regardless of whether they also have one or both the other two recordings.

Fausto Cleva – 1954 (studio; mono) Sony; Archipel
Orchestra & Chorus - Metropolitan Opera Association
Lucia - Lily Pons
Edgardo - Richard Tucker

Enrico - Frank Guarrera
Raimondo - Norman Scott
Arturo - Thomas Hayward
Alisa - Thelma Votipka
Normanno - James McCracken

This was the recording whereby I first encountered this music on LP but I can't say it has worn very well. Lily Pons was 54 years old when this recording was made and can sound mature, especially in the middle of the voice which lacks body and firmness of line. She had already sung this role many times – more than any other – and while her soprano is intact and she can negotiate the coloratura easily enough her soprano often sounds fluttery and shallow with quite a pronounced vibrato. She makes a virtue of prolonged top notes and sings stratospheric top Fs which are shrill but impressive; we are almost into Mado Robin territory. Both Norman Scott and Frank Guarrera, too have quite a pronounced pulse and the latter's tone is a bit bottled; the Alice is tremulous and even wobbly. The best voices here belong to the three tenors: the excellent Thomas Hayward, a young James McCracken and the forty-year-old Richard Tucker in his prime. Cleva's conducting is adequate but not very invigorating; the sextet plods and the solo voices aren't well integrated.

The mono sound is somewhat dull and over-reverberant and the voices are very forward while the orchestra and the sloppy chorus lurk in the background - but the Sony issue better than the Archipel.

There are better options than this.

Herbert von Karajan – 1955 (live; mono) EMI/Warner; Minuet; Opera d'Oro
RIAS Orchestra (Berlin)
Chorus - Teatro alla Scala
Lucia - Maria Callas
Edgardo - Giuseppe di Stefano
Enrico - Rolando Panerai
Raimondo - Nicola Zaccaria
Arturo - Giuseppe Zampieri
Alisa - Luisa Villa
Normanno - Mario Carlin

Karajan restores some cuts here, including the Wolf's Crag scene, so we get two hours of music. I reviewed the Minuet re-issue of this and reproduce here an edited version of that, which includes comment on the other two Callas recordings:

This re-issue of a classic Callas recording is presumably the result of its having come out of copyright. The neatly presented, 16-page booklet provides track-listings, some nice photographs from the stage production, a new biographical appreciation by Arnold Jason and the original "Turnabout" LP liner notes, but no libretto or access to one and only a brief, partial plot summary, not even a synopsis. It has been effectively re-mastered but sounds to my ears virtually identical to the 1997 EMI issue, which has the advantage of a full libretto. I do not believe that Warner has yet re-mastered this is in their ongoing survey of Karajan's recordings* but this new Minuet issue represents good value as long as you can do without the text.

The sound was in fact always very acceptable for a live, mono 1955 stage recording, hardly any less listenable than Callas' first 1953 studio recording under Serafin apart from the occasional cough. That has rightly long been highly regarded, not only for Callas' compelling assumption of the eponymous role but also for the intensity of Gobbi's Enrico and the vigour of Di Stefano's singing, which although

never entirely stylish or idiomatic is very affecting despite his tendency to shout, and is faithfully reproduced here two years later for Karajan. To be fair, he also sings softly and tenderly in his final big scene, so he is not all can belto. Panerai's artistry is hardly a step down from Gobbi's and he has better top notes, including a high G. Zampieri is a virile, effective Arturo. Furthermore, some prefer the extra energy Karajan generates in a live performance to Serafin's steadier direction. Either way, both performances remain highly desirable, featuring all-Italian casts (with the exception of Greek bass Zaccaria, who was the adopted primo basso at la Scala and preferable to a rather woolly Raffaele Arié in 1953) and it is undeniable that by the time Callas came to make the second studio recording with Serafin in 1959 she was vocally in less secure form and less aptly partnered by an aging Tagliavini and a competent but bland Cappuccilli – and yet, it has special qualities.

Of course, every one of Callas' recordings suffers from what we would now regard as disfiguring cuts; for the complete score we may turn to the excellent 1971 recording with Joan Sutherland, Pavarotti, Milnes and Ghiaurov under Bonynge, but all her recordings are thrilling theatrical experiences. Callas' exploitation of portamento is a marvel of liquid fluency, her top Ds are secure and the poignancy of her portrayal unparalleled. The famous sextet is terrific – and encored for good measure.

* Warner remastered it for the 2017 issue.

Erich Leinsdorf – 1957 (studio; stereo) RCA; GOP
Orchestra & Chorus - Teatro dell'Opera di Roma
Lucia - Roberta Peters
Edgardo - Jan Peerce
Enrico - Philip Maero
Raimondo - Giorgio Tozzi
Arturo - Piero De Palma
Alisa - Miti Truccato Pace
Normanno - Mario Carlin

A little hiss notwithstanding, this is in good stereo sound. It has the expected "traditional" cuts. Unfortunately, after the sweet-voiced Mario Carlin as Normanno, whom we may encounter in a good few comprimario roles in that era, the baritone of Philip Maero does not impress, being wobbly and throaty – in contrast to the firm, black-voiced Giorgio Tozzi. Maero has a most peculiar *ingolato* tremble in his vocal production which for me renders it unpleasant – if not close to unlistenable. After a fine harp solo, Roberta Peters makes her entrance and the listener might be surprised by the rather thin, wiry tone of her middle voice – in fact, her timbre becomes warmer and more ingratiating as she goes up but one cannot help feeling that she simply doesn't have the right sound for Lucia – or indeed enough voice. This is a pity especially as it makes a change to hear a fine Alice in Miti Truccato Pace – like Carlin, another reliable comprimario singer. Jan Peerce sounds as ever very like his brother-in-law Richard Tucker – which is a compliment – but his burly, Verdian tenor sounds odd juxtaposed with Peters' twittering and he tends to over-emote with gulps and sobs instead of maintaining elegance of line. Leinsdorf does not seem to be especially in sympathy with the Donizettian *bel canto* idiom and rushes his fences, encouraging some very robust orchestral playing. In truth, the only thing that sounds right to me here is Tozzi's Raimondo. Nope.

Oliviero De Fabritiis – 1957 (live; mono) Bongiovanni
Orchestra & Chorus - Teatro Verdi di Trieste
Lucia - Leyla Gencer
Edgardo - Giancinto Prandelli
Enrico - Nino Carta
Raimondo - Antonio Massaria

Arturo - Lorenzo Sabatucci
Alisa - Liliana Hussu
Normanno - Raimondo Botteghelli

Abysmal sound (complete with heedless, loud coughing especially throughout the Mad Scene) means that this can be recommended only to die-hard Gencer fans who – as is so often the case with this greatest and most neglected of singers – can be heard only in poor-quality live recordings which would once have been called "pirate". It's a shame because the direction and cast are very good: De Fabritiis was among the most reliable of conductors, steeped in Italian tradition and he gives his singers all the time in the world to make their points without proceedings going slack; the baritone Nino Carta, unknown to me, is splendid; Giancinto Prandelli – familiar to most collectors for his studio recording of *Il tabarro* with Gobbi but which is atypical of his repertoire – is an ardent if slightly lachrymose and over-parted Edgardo; bass Alessandro Massaria is solid; but of course the main attraction is hearing Gencer's large, flexible soprano, with its trademark glottal catch, execute delicate runs, Caballé-like high pianissimi, tripping coloratura figures – the whole gamut of *bel canto* tricks topped off with a secure E♭; it's enough to make you forget the trials of the sound quality. She really is wonderful and not just vocally; her expressive use of text is striking, too. It is both criminal and baffling that she was never – as far as I know - invited make a single commercial studio recording. She really is the only reason to acquire this. (It has the usual standard cuts.)

Tullio Serafin – 1959 (live; mono) Royal Opera House
Orchestra& Chorus - Covent Garden
Lucia - Joan Sutherland
Edgardo - João Gibin
Enrico - John Shaw
Raimondo - Joseph Rouleau
Arturo - Kenneth MacDonald
Alisa - Margreta Elkins
Normanno - Robert Bowman

Originally issued on the Royal Opera's own label (and still available online if you look hard) in excellent, remastered mono sound made from a recording from a private source, this live performance documents the explosion of Joan Sutherland upon the operatic world as an international star, and as we approach the tenth anniversary of her death, that seems like a good excuse to look back on her first big triumph.

In truth, nobody else on stage matches her quality. Australian baritone John Shaw is sturdy, capable Enrico of no especial vocal glamour compared with such as Robert Merrill, Rolando Panerai or Sherrill Milnes, but I have distinct memories of hearing him sing an excellent Rigoletto on my first visit to Covent Garden and he was a fine artist. The Enrico, however, is a distinct liability: Brazilian tenor João Gibin has a forced, unlovely tone, tends to sing consistently sharp and is lachrymose of manner – and I can further damn him with that ultimate example of faint phrase by observing that "he has all the notes". I particularly dislike the way he delivers the recitativo at the beginning of his final big scene sounding as if he is constantly on the brink of bursting into tears; there are better ways to suggest deep, desperate emotion than sounding like a petulant thirteen-year-old. Collectors will probably be familiar with him only because he replaced Franco Corelli in EMI's recording of *La fanciulla del West* with Birgit Nilsson (and she, too, was a replacement for Maria Callas who was to be paired with Tito Gobbi as Jack Rance – imagine!) where he is heard to considerable advantage compared with this live showing. Margreta Elkins, the third Australian in the cast, is a tremulous Alisa and Joseph Rouleau is a resonant if rather leaden Raimondo but by far the best singing apart from the prima donna comes from tenor Kenneth MacDonald. It should be noted, too, that the opera is

disfigured by the standard cuts of the era, including the complete excision of the Wolf's Crag scene which should open Act 3, so some twenty minutes of music is lost.

However, all of that is of very secondary significance compared with the preservation of Sutherland's first Lucia. She was not yet La Stupenda – that title came after triumph in Venice as Alcina – but her singing is already stupendous. Her characterisation deepened over the next decade and her top Ds and Es became, if anything, easier but here is the performance which stunned the operatic establishment and wowed the opera-going public. The centre-piece of this recording is of course her Mad Scene, where her vocalisation is purer, more vulnerable and innocent than in later recordings; despite the power of her voice, she really does sound like a teenage bride which is not often the case with exponents of this role. The fleetness of her coloratura runs is astonishing, and her diction is clearer, too, than was later the case. Of course, some goon has to be the first to yell "Bravo" almost before her top E concluding the flute duet has died away but the audience's enthusiasm for what they are hearing is understandable.

Another great advantage is the conducting of veteran Tullio Serafin, who sounds in no way lethargic or tentative, despite being in his early eighties. He controls everything expertly, introducing pleasing nuances in dynamics and injecting plenty of life into proceedings, aided by an enthusiastic chorus.

A better bet might be Pristine's remastering into Ambient Stereo of Sutherland's 1961 performance at the Met (see review below) which is just as exciting and has a superior cast but of course that is not the sensational historical debut we get on this Covent Garden release.

Nino Sanzogno – 1959 (studio; stereo) Pristine
Orchestra & Chorus - Teatro alla Scala
Lucia - Renata Scotto
Edgardo - Giuseppe di Stefano
Enrico - Ettore Bastianini
Raimondo - Ivo Vinco
Arturo - Franco Ricciardi
Alisa - Stefania Malagù

According to the notes provided by sound engineer Mark Obert-Thorn, this recording, now well over sixty years old, was originally made by Mercury Records for the music publisher Ricordi. It has often mistakenly been attributed as a live recording but it is studio-made and has until now never been satisfactorily remastered for issue on CD; this certainly does so. There is still a fair amount of background rustle but the stereo separation is pleasingly apparent and some warmth and ambiance have been imparted to what was a dry recording.

We first hear Ettore Bastianini in spectacular voice – gloriously loud and sometimes almost crude but the role of the brutal, sneering Enrico is itself not subtle and the music demands to be trumpeted; two excerpts from this recording were included in Urania's issue of arias sung by him, which I reviewed back in 2009; remarking that he "might not always have been the most nuanced of artists but the splendour of his baritone carries all before." He lets fly with top Gs and sings with complete abandon. Despite the splendour of his voice, he could sometimes sound bored and routine, but that is not the case here.

Scotto makes her entrance after some lovely harp-playing. She is in her best youthful period here at only twenty-five years old, when she was still a coloratura soprano and before she moved into the verismo roles which eventually rendered her voice raw and unsteady. Her voice is rather piping and disembodied and her characterisation is perhaps a bit anonymous but that conveys Lucia's other-

worldliness and there is some lower register development to balance the rather thin top Ds. She was of course always a fine vocal actress and there is a nice touch in the production where the tearing open of the forged letter is audible, followed by Scotto singing of her despair in blanched, plaintive tones. Her Mad Scene is flawlessly vocalised in that unearthly manner which misses the individuality of Callas, Moffo and Sutherland but constitutes admirable singing, as long as you respond to her persistently bright timbre – and I would not say that her concluding top E is pretty.

For Giuseppe Di Stefano, this was a stereo remake of his mono studio recording of Lucia six years previously with Callas and Gobbi – and probably the latest he should and could have done justice to the role of Edgardo, as although he was only in his late thirties, his voice was fast hardening and coarsening through over-singing, so while he would go on to sing Calaf and Cavaradossi successfully for a few years more, his suitability for bel canto parts was beginning to desert him. His tenor was never as intrinsically honied or refined as Pavarotti's or Tagliavini's, but he certainly sounds to be in confident voice here, with very little forcing apparent and his first aria, "Sulla tomba" is virile yet delicate, with secure, ringing B-flats and his outrage in the wedding scene is convincingly impassioned, without undue strain. The final, dismal tomb scene finds him again in fine, plangent voice, investing the words with deep emotion and managing the high-flying passages by the "beautiful shouting" which typified Di Stefano's inimitable manner.

Sanzogno does everything right, the chorus is lusty and the orchestral playing is excellent. The famous sextet is a complete success.

The supporting roles don't have so much to do but Ivo Vinco's big, black bass is always a welcome presence and his singing of "Dalle stanze" is a masterclass of firm tone and seamless legato. Stefania Malagù was always a reliable singer. Franco Ricciardi is an excellent, clear-voiced Arturo - but curiously, the role of Normanno is not credited. The CLOR opera discography notes "It is sometimes stated the Giuseppe di Stefano also sings Normanno" but anyone with half an ear can hear that is not the case. My ears suggest that as this was a studio recording and not, as was often thought, a live performance, Franco Ricciardi simply doubled up the roles, which makes sense – and to confirm that, the 2009 Myto issue does indeed name him as Normanno, while Wikipedia names both roles as being in his repertoire.

This is subject to most of the "standard cuts" of the era, hence its running time of well under two hours but must at least be considered as a supplement to complete, modern versions such as my own favourite, the Decca issue with Sutherland and Pavarotti.

Tullio Serafin – 1959 (studio; stereo) EMI/Warner; Pristine
Orchestra & Chorus - Philharmonia Orchestra
Lucia - Maria Callas
Edgardo - Ferruccio Tagliavini
Enrico - Piero Cappuccilli
Raimondo - Bernard Ladysz
Arturo - Leonard Del Ferro
Alisa - Margreta Elkins
Normanno - Renzo Casellato

Pristine remastered Callas' first, mono, studio recording over a decade ago; now comes the stereo remake with the same conductor but a new, then up-and-coming baritone and a supposedly veteran tenor, recorded in London rather than Florence. Pristine's choice of cover photograph for this new release is thus rather odd, as it is of the pre-weight-loss Callas as Lucia, taken during the rehearsals at the Teatro Comunale in Florence, 1953 – whereas a picture of a slimmed-down Callas was used for

the cover of that first studio recording made early that same year; it should have been the other way round.

In general, the advantages to the second recording were of course stereo sound and a deepening of Callas' portrayal. Disadvantages include some deterioration in her vocal estate, Serafin's regrettable persistence in maintaining the standard cuts – the second verses of some arias and the Wolf's Crag scene – and the substitution of Ferruccio Tagliavini for Giuseppe Di Stefano. That last objection is more questionable, insofar as although it is true that signs of wear were appearing in Tagliavini's tenor, people talk of him as if he was a veteran at the time of this recording, when he was in fact only forty-five and Di Stefano, despite being eight years younger, had also begun to decline vocally by the late 50s – although he continued to perform very well through the early 60s, too, such as in his 1961 *Turandot* in Vienna in 1961.

But first let us consider Pristine's sonic refurbishment through XR Remastering. There is still a little residual hiss but the aural landscape is so much fuller, richer, cleaner and more detailed compared with the Warner release as per the Callas "Big Box" I reviewed last year; there is much more air and space around the voices, too. It is not that the Warner issues are poor – it is simply that Pristine has managed to improve markedly on something already perfectly listenable.

Turning to the voices, we can surely have no complaints about Cappuccilli's firm, expressive singing, attractively light-toned but full of "bite"; he was still only in his early thirties and his baritone is sappy and flexible. Having said that, he is not as dramatically intense as Gobbi or Panerai – but vocally he is very satisfactory. Renzo Casellato makes an attractive Normanno and the little-recorded Polish bass Bernard Ladysz is certainly a big improvement over Raffaele Arié, Leonard del Ferro is a reedy but vibrant Arturo and a full-voiced Margareta Elkins makes a brief impact as Alisa. More importantly, there is very little about Callas' singing here which may be termed inferior to her earlier assumption of the role. This was the same year in which she recorded her definitive *La gioconda* – a great recording evincing few signs of problems apart from some slight pulsing on the highest notes – and those high Ds and E♭s, and even a top E, are still there. Many moments such as the way she launches into "Soffriva nel pianto", are heart-stopping. This is a gentler, more poignant and touching Lucia than her earlier assumptions and her coloratura in the flute duet is flawless. She uses the shorter version of the cadenza in the Mad Scene but that is dramatically more compact.

Which leaves Tagliavini. His tenor is quite lean and top notes are somewhat grainy but he is an immaculate stylist. He isn't the ardent lover Pavarotti and the young Di Stefano portray but he doesn't let the side down and after a dry start he becomes increasingly impassioned and vocally effulgent. After the great Act II sextet, he has definitely "sung himself in" and is in fine form for the last, desperate scene. He sounds both fuller and sweeter-toned; his soft singing is meltingly beautiful yet there is plenty of heft in his top notes.

Many consider the Callas-Karajan live recording to be the best documentation of her prowess in that role. While I concede its dramatic impact and the excellence of Callas' co-singers, its sound is for some a barrier to enjoyment, especially now that we may hear this second studio recording in this new incarnation. Despite my love for, and admiration of, Callas' recorded performances of Lucia, I have always considered the Bonynge-Sutherland-Pavarotti-Milnes-Ghiaurov recording superlative and best all round, hence I designated it one of the "Untouchables" in my survey – but of course these things are subjective and I would certainly never want to be without Callas in one of her seminal roles, even if her co-singers are not on quite the same level as Sutherland's.

John Pritchard – 1961 (studio; stereo) Decca
Orchestra & Chorus - Santa Cecilia

Lucia - Joan Sutherland
Edgardo - Renato Cioni
Enrico - Robert Merrill
Raimondo - Cesare Siepi
Arturo - Kenneth MacDonald
Alisa - Ana Raquel Satra
Normanno - Rinaldo Pelizzoni

This has some small, "traditional" cuts but includes the Wolf's Crag scene – with good thunder-claps - so runs to 137 minutes.

I know this remains many people's favourite, especially among older collectors, and there are a lot of good reasons why: Sutherland is in most youthful voice, fresh into stardom, she has two first-rate co-singers in Robert Merril and Cesare Siepi, and a conductor sympathetic to the *bel canto* style directing an authentic Italian orchestra and chorus who play and sing respectively with considerable fervour. On the debit side, despite her extraordinary vocal pyrotechnics Sutherland would introduce more dramatic fervour and nuance into her portrayal and as ever in her early days, her diction is indistinct; there are times in her first duet with her lover when not a word can be discerned. Her Edgardo is, in comparison with Pavarotti, a distinctly second-rank. It's not that Cioni is exactly poor but he has a relatively small, unimposing, slightly pinched tenor and is utterly dwarfed by his soprano partner. Another lesser liability is a shouty Normanno – although Kenneth MacDonald's Arturo is pleasing, if a bit tight-throated. The stereo sound is rather over-resonant and brittle but good enough.

Certainly, Robert Merrill's Edgardo is of the most virile and ringing variety – he caps "La pietade in suo furore" with a great top A-flat; only Ettore Bastianini and Sherill Milnes offer similar vocal health. Siepi's grave, kindly, sonorous Raimondo is another bonus. The power and agility of Sutherland's singing are a joy and she has a warmer sound than many - the diametric opposite of, for example, Roberta Peter's narrow, undernourished sound and certainly ampler than Sills, while still equalling that great singer's flexibility and technique. She makes what can only be described as a *column* of sound – and that comes through even on disc as opposed to hearing her live; it is huge, pure and all-enveloping. The final top E♭ of "Quando, rapito in estasi" is unearthly in its sheer volume and tonal amplitude. In the Mad Scene, the same virtues I adumbrate in the next review are present here, so I won't repeat them – but it is miraculous; I love the way she floats the melisma on "ah" while duetting with the flute, concluding on a glorious E♭, then "Spargi d'amaro pianto" is of ethereal beauty, climaxing on a final top E.

For me, despite the brilliance of Sutherland's singing, the lack of truly heroic lirico-spinto tenor here is a disappointment.

Silvio Varviso – 1961 (live; ambient stereo) Pristine
Orchestra & Chorus - Metropolitan Opera
Lucia - Joan Sutherland
Edgardo - Richard Tucker
Enrico - Frank Guarrera
Raimondo - Nicola Moscona
Arturo - Charles Anthony
Alisa - Thelma Votipka
Normanno - Robert Nagy

Following her sensational debut as Lucia at Covent Garden in 1959, Joan Sutherland toured and conquered the world, in typically modest fashion, with the role she sang most often during her career – 233 times, according to Decca - and with which, alongside Callas, she set a standard to which her successors still aspire.

This live radio broadcast, in excellent sound rendered even better by the usual Pristine treatment, catches her on the wing in one of her five Met performances accompanied by a strong cast and excellent, flexible energised conducting from a young Silvio Varviso. Given that Andrew Rose has remastered it into Ambient Stereo, the only disadvantages reside in the bronchial audience, hacking and sneezing for example through the lovely harp solo introduction to "Regnava nel silenzio", and the standard cuts of that era: in Act 1, the repeat of Enrico's "La pietade in suo favore" has gone, the close of Act 2 is truncated by the snipping of the remainder of his duet with Lucia, and of course there is no Wolf's Crag scene opening Act 3; overall we lose over twenty minutes of music compared with Sutherland's 1971 studio recording for Decca with a stellar cast.

There are more elegant portrayals of Edgardo than Richard Tucker's, but his verve, vocal solidity and commitment are not in doubt and he at least has the clarion volume to match Sutherland in their duets. Met stalwart Frank Guarrera's sturdy baritone provides thrilling top notes and plenty of volume but also a fairly pronounced beat and some intermittent unsteadiness where we really need a smoother line of the kind Milnes or Panerai offer. Veteran Nicola Moscona here bows out after a twenty-five-year Met career as a weighty, sonorous, slightly rocky Raimondo. Tenors Charles Anthony and Robert Nagy sing attractively as Arturo and Normanno respectively; Thelma Votipka is a matronly Alisa.

But, with a nod to Tucker, this is all about La Stupenda, who justifies her sobriquet with a phenomenal performance, her pearlescent soprano utterly even throughout the two-octave tessitura, capped with utterly secure top Ds and a stratospheric high E flat to conclude the Mad Scene. Her trills are rock-steady and properly executed rather than fluttered and fudged, her intonation is flawless, and her downward staccati, roulades and portamenti all astound. Her duet – duel? – with the flute is mesmerising. Of course, the voice is huge and mellow; this is no tweety-bird Lucia but suffering flesh-and-blood with a soul; even her characterisation and diction - areas which sometimes attracted criticism - are more than satisfactory. So stunning is her singing that, as the announcer Milton Cross observes in his commentary, the often noisy audience falls absolutely silent throughout the Mad Scene before erupting both at the mid-point and at the end in tumultuous applause.

The Decca studio recording remains the standard recommendation, but there is a special thrill and atmosphere in hearing the youthful Sutherland live and in freshest voice – and she has a better tenor partner here than in the studio recording of the same year.

Georges Prêtre – 1965 (studio; stereo) RCA
Orchestra & Chorus - RCA Italiana Opera Orchestra
Lucia - Anna Moffo
Edgardo - Carlo Bergonzi
Enrico - Mario Sereni
Raimondo - Ezio Flagello
Arturo - Pierre Duval
Alisa - Corinna Vozza
Normanno - Vittorio Pandano

This edition and duration of this are the same as the Pritchard recording so we have the Wolf's Crag scene and a few small cuts. Prêtre could be over-driven as a conductor but not here. He is directing an all-Italian outfit thoroughly versed in the right idiom and in fact I note how often he pulls back, giving his singers time to caress the line, especially when accompanying Bergonzi. The best example of his flexibility is in the concluding ten minutes of Act I Part One with Edgardo's aria followed by a duet with Lucia. The cast features some of my favourite voices, beginning with Sereni's neat, incisive voice: the Panerai-type of true Italian baritone, agile, with real bite, an attractively fast vibrato, smooth legato and exciting top notes. His attack is sometimes so energised that he goes a little sharp but that's not too unsettling. Ezio Flagello was always under-rated but had such a beautiful dark bass; he is many ways the best Raimondo of all along with Samuel Ramey. As Arturo, Pierre Duval is in much better voice than he was when as another Arturo he partnered Sutherland in her first studio recording of *I Puritani*. Bergonzi's affinity with the role of Edgardo is well documented and as the virtues of his singing are covered in the next review below, I won't re-iterate them here, except to say that his being five years younger means that his tenor is even sappier and more flexible. He is especially impassioned in the scene where he accuses Lucia of treachery, just after the sextet, which goes swimmingly.

Moffo was phenomenal in her short prime: such a limpid, bell-like tone with utterly secure top notes – which she instantly demonstrates by the interpolation of top D into her opening aria and several more thereafter, plus a top E towards the end of Act I Part One and an E♭ at the end of the whole act - great facility with the ornamentation – again illustrated in that opening aria with a perfect crescendo and the ability to convey Lucia's girlish fragility with complete command of the demands of the score. I knew from her Violetta that she had great technical command but I had fully registered before just how impressive she is here. She blends ideally with Bergonzi.

The sound is good for its vintage but there is a little, very faint, tape pre-echo on my CDs, just audible on headphones.

I had forgotten how good this is.

Thomas Schippers – 1970 (studio; stereo) Urania; Westminster
London Symphony Orchestra
Chorus - Ambrosian Singers
Lucia - Beverly Sills
Edgardo - Carlo Bergonzi
Enrico - Piero Cappuccilli
Raimondo - Justino Díaz
Arturo - Adolf Dallapozza
Alisa - Patricia Kern
Normanno - Keith Erwen

The opening of this recording could hardly be more promising: a brooding introduction then a highly energised chorus from the Ambrosians led by the clear-voiced tenor Keith Erwen as Normanno, followed by the entry of the elegant Cappuccilli as Enrico, then the smooth bass-baritone of Díaz as Raimondo, all in excellent, spacious sound. Schippers' early death was a great loss to conducting as his direction here confirms; he is alive to every mood and nuance, driving on and pulling back as necessary. Sills' bright, sparkling, slightly edgy soprano is not to all tastes but her agility and expressivity are wonderful; like Gencer, she has the complete portmanteau of bel canto techniques: she has trills, runs, portamenti, gruppetti at her command and her top notes are effortless; she conveys innocence and charm while ornamenting the vocal line spectacularly. I note, too that she occasionally dips into her lower register – as she should. The Mad Scene is immeasurably enhanced

by the use of an eery glass harmonica and both her vocalisation and characterisation are remarkable. Her Alisa is the pleasantly fruity mezzo-soprano Patricia Kern. Carlo Bergonzi's Edgardo has been universally praised for its combination of power and elegance; he had already demonstrated his mettle here for Prêtre and indeed, of all the tenors in the recordings under review, alongside Pavarotti, his is probably the voice best suited to the role, as he has both spinto thrust and lyric stylistic grace. His singing is passionate and beautiful and he combines well with Sills; in recognition of that, Schippers' beat is noticeably indulgent towards them when they are duetting to close Act I and they cap it with her taking a top E♭ and him on top C. She has Cs and Ds a-plenty. Bergonzi's death scene is a grand piece of singing, even if his top notes are not the most effulgent.

Cappuccilli sings sensitively, making Enrico less of a brute than some but generates some heat in the Wolf's Crag scene, which is introduced with thunderclaps; both his and Bergonzi's energy justify its inclusion. The cast is thus excellent with one exception: Dallapozza's Arturo is weak and wavery. Fortunately, he does not spoil the sextet, which Schippers takes slowly and as a result imparts extra emotional weight to it.

This is the complete, uncut score although I don't think the restored first scene of the second act between Lucia and Raimondo contains by any the best music in the opera. It is often excised and maybe Sills thought so, too, as she spices up its climax with a top F.

Richard Bonynge – 1971 (studio; stereo) Decca
Orchestra & Chorus - Covent Garden
Lucia - Joan Sutherland
Edgardo - Luciano Pavarotti
Enrico - Sherrill Milnes
Raimondo - Nicolai Ghiaurov
Arturo - Ryland Davies
Alisa - Huguette Tourangeau
Normanno - Pier Francesco Poli

This magnificent recording was in fact made in the summer of 1971 in virtually the same session as the *Rigoletto* with the same conductor, principal cast members, sound engineer and venue, so artistically and sonically it is superb. The only difference is that the orchestra and chorus of the Royal Opera are employed rather than the LSO and the Ambrosians, which entails no loss, just a maintenance of high quality.

I am bewildered by carpers who complain about the lack of atmosphere, Sutherland's diction and Pavarotti sounding too little like Edgardo and too much like himself. Their complaints are, as far as I'm concerned, either highly subjective or illusory; this recording makes others look under-powered and is so much better than either Sutherland's first version under Pritchard ten years before or Bonynge's forgettable remake twenty years later. She might sound rather more mature - she was only 44 - but technically she is absolutely extraordinary, her voice huge, agile and powerful up to a top E. Pavarotti is very involved - I hear no coasting - and produces singing to set alongside his Duke of Mantua. I remember being thrilled by Milnes' opening two arias the first time I played the LPs and in many ways this recording finds him in the best voice I have ever heard, complete with snarl and ringing top G. Ghiaurov is in smoothest chocolate voice, a perfect foil to the sibling hysteria displayed by Enrico and Lucia. Ryland Davies and Sutherland's most frequent mezzo partner, Huguette Tourangeau, complete a very strong cast.

Decca has now transferred these 140 minutes of music from an unnecessarily extravagant three discs to two but this is a complete, uncut version. There have in fact been very few studio recordings in the

last fifty years and even fewer of any note. Others may prefer accounts by Callas, Moffo and Sills but both Callas versions are cut and vocally flawed. This, however, is the full version and a truly large-scale, Grand Opera concept of remarkable quality.

Juan Emilio Martini – 1972 (live; stereo) West Hill Radio Archives
Orchestra & Chorus - Teatro Colón (Buenos Aires)
Lucia - Beverly Sills
Edgardo - Alfredo Kraus
Enrico – Gian Piero Mastromei
Raimondo - Victor De Narké
Arturo - José Nait
Alisa - Lidia de la Merced
Normanno - Horacio Mastrango

A musical friend tipped me off regarding the merits of this live performance and he was right. The WHRA remastered sound is remarkably good; obviously not as clear and immediate as Sills' studio recording for Schippers two years earlier, but no hiss and just a bit of coughing - and the vociferous applause from the audience just lends atmosphere. It is virtually complete at 136 minutes – only four minutes short of the truly complete recording Bonynge 1971 - with the Wolf's Crag scene included a just a few tiny cuts.

Sills' prowess here is as astounding as in that studio recording; in fact, singing live seems to have lent her even more daring and release in her vocal exploits. She sends that signal by cutting loose in the ornamentation of the opening number, "Quando rapita in estasi" and immediately sends the audience wild. Likewise, she ornaments the flute duet and "Spargi d'amaro pianto" more profusely and elaborately than I have ever heard her or any other soprano do; it is quite some display.

Any of my regular readers will know that I esteem and respect Alfredo Kraus without especially liking his slightly nasal, reedy sound. He is his usual elegant, stylish self here, but a little dwarfed by the amplitude of Sills soprano (not that it was particularly large). His partnership with Sills clearly delights the audience, who roar their approval after they conclude "Verrano a te", with a held top minor third (he on C, she on E♭). His death scene is nowhere near as passionate as, for example, Di Stefano's or Bergonzi's because his vocal resources are not as ample – and the forward horns tend to occlude him - but it is classically restrained and expressive within a more refined palette.

Mastromei is a proper Italian baritone: firm, robust, dark and biting of tone with a great upper extension. He will be otherwise best known to collectors for his Paolo in the studio recording *Simon Boccanegra* conducted by Gavazzeni; unlike Kraus, he is not refined but he is satisfyingly direct. The supporting cast is nothing special: Normanno is small-voiced but adequate, the Alisa is wobbly, the tenor singing Arturo is a bit squeezed and Victor De Narké's Raimondo is lumpen and unexciting but the sextet is the clear highlight it should be – witness again the audience reaction. I know nothing of the conductor but he does a fine job here, as does the chorus.

This preserves a great night at the opera, conveying the excitement of a live performance which really gels. You may hear the whole thing on YouTube

Jesús López Cobos – 1976 (studio; stereo) Philips
New Philharmonia Orchestra
Ambrosian Opera Chorus
Lucia - Montserrat Caballé
Edgardo - José Carreras

Enrico - Vincenzo Sardinero
Raimondo - Samuel Ramey
Arturo - Claes H. Ahnsjö
Alisa - Ann Murray
Normanno - Vincenzo Bello

This is supposedly the "authentic" version: the complete score sung plainly, undecorated, with no high notes - but in the original higher keys. We immediately three voices of high quality in two Vincenzos, Bello and Sardinero, and Samuel Ramey – even if the last sounds too young. The calibre of the cast is further enhanced by the presence of the light, elegant tenor Claes H. Ahnsjö, fine Irish mezzo Ann Murray and the then ubiquitous Ambrosian Chorus. Occasionally Sardinero's vibrato broadens too much on loud, high notes but he has a robust, handsome baritone, without being especially characterful.

Whether Montserrat Caballé is ideally suited to singing Lucia is debatable. She is rather grand and stately, with the trademark glottal catch which militates against her sounding youthful and innocent; in fact, sometimes she sounds positively matronly - but of course her singing as vocalisation *per se* is also often marvellous. She can certainly negotiate the requisites of *bel canto* technique but her manner is surely more Verdian and López Cobos accompanies her rather cautiously; for example, I find the deliberate pace of "Quando, rapito in estasi" a bit laboured and her loud top notes are hard on the ear, verging on screechy even when she singing "only" a D♭. Naturally, however, she excels in the high pianissimi when portraying the distracted Lucia in the Mad Scene. The extended "flute duelling" and cadenza ornamentation that some performances feature is toned down and comparatively modest – indeed, cut to a minimum, which some who find it needlessly ostentatious might prefer; I miss it.

I have no such doubts regarding the Edgardo of Carreras in his prime; his youthful brio and plangent timbre sit ideally with the role. His death scene is a model of its kind and matches, if not exceeds Bergonzi and Pavarotti for passion, power, elegance and vocal control.

My reservations regarding Caballé's suitability prevent me from recommending this unreservedly. I do not say this is by any means a poor recording, especially as Carreras and Ramey make such distinguished contributions but the conducting lacks sparkle and there are more apt and engaging exponents of the lead role. I also miss the thrill of interpolated high notes – not that Caballé was ideally equipped to execute them.

Constantin Petrovici – 1984 (studio; stereo) IMPS Classic; Carlton; Vox; Cantus; World of the Opera (sic)
Orchestra & Chorus - National Opera of Bucharest
Lucia – Silvia Voinea
Edgardo - Florin Georgescu
Enrico - Nicolae Herlea
Raimondo - Pompei Harasteanu
Arturo - Gabriel Nastase
Alisa - Lucia Cicoara

A main attraction for me here in this all-Romanian production was the presence of Nicolae Herlea, a favourite and generally neglected baritone. Unfortunately, by the time of this recording, while his voice is still large and resonant, he was getting on towards sixty, his vibrato has loosened, his divisions are clumsy and aspirated and in his arias he is sometimes rhythmically all over the shop. It does not help that Constantin Petrovivi's conducting is leaden and has little of the alternating spring

and rubato the idiom music demands; too often it just plods doggedly. The analogue recording is disappointing, too – rather muddy and indistinct, leaving the chorus marooned in the mid-distance. Those are already three strong strikes against this recording.

Soprano Silvia Voinea has a big, healthy voice with a secure upward extension although she does execute any stratospheric top notes beyond a faintly tentative top D. She is somewhat generalised in expression but attractive and able to handle the coloratura more than competently. Florin Georgescu's sizeable tenor has a nasal bark which might sit better with more robust music such as *verismo* or big Verdi roles but his attack on phrases borders on the hysterical. There is little sense of line but he nails the big notes. The Arturo has a similar voice – a bit shouty and crude. The bass Raimondo is imposing but heavy and woolly; these are not voices which coalesce harmoniously in the sextet, especially as Georgescu has another fit of the vapours and over-emotes riotously.

You may safely pass over this one – which is a shame as sometimes recordings of this provenance are gems.

Ion Marin – 1990 (studio; digital) DG
London Symphony Orchestra
Ambrosian Opera Chorus
Lucia - Cheryl Studer
Edgardo - Plácido Domingo
Enrico - Juan Pons
Raimondo - Samuel Ramey
Arturo - Fernado De La Mora
Alisa - Jennifer Larmore
Normanno - Anthony Laciura

We move from an all-Romanian recording to a Romanian-born conductor. This is the complete score. Something made me put off listening to this recording almost until last – and not just its place in the chronology of recordings here; I feared it would have a DG "production line" feeling about it. I was completely wrong.

First, the sound is superb – the best of any under review – big and spacious. Secondly, as is the case with their contributions to three recordings here, the Ambrosian Chorus is really energised and striking. Thirdly, from the start, every voice we hear is apt or indeed impressive: the Normanno is clean and incisive, Juan Pons utilises the upper-tessitura facility of his bass-baritone to give us a powerful Enrico and makes a good job of Enrico's remorse – "È mio sangue! L'ho tradita!" – "She is of my blood! I have betrayed her!" - Sam Ramey repeats the sonorous Raimondo he sang for López Cobos back in 1976 but now has more gravitas, appropriately sounding a little older. Pons' voice might not have the Italianate mordancy of Merrill, Milnes or Bastianini but his highly energised manner successfully intimates Edgardo's obsessive, desperate nature.

We have luxury casting in Jennifer Larmore's Alisa and Cheryl Studer is in best voice as Lucia: vibrant, shimmering, dynamically nuanced and with mellow, oboe tones rather different from the "tweety-bird" Lucias prevalent here. Occasionally her tone turns a little tremulous but that only adds to the sense of Lucia's fragility. This is possibly the best thing I have heard from Studer and her timbre offers something new, yet she is as agile as many a Lucia, choosing to sing the role transposed down so that she sings top D but not the climactic E♭ in her Mad Scene. Her cadenza there is new, different, very effective and very beautiful and the vocalisation in "Spargi d'amaro pianto" truly remarkable.

Which leaves Domingo. Does he turn in one of his good-but-generalised – even "phoned-in" - performances? He was not yet fifty when this was recorded and in fine voice even if occasionally it turns nasal. I do not find him to be as characterful as some but he is by no means bland and he injects real feeling into some passages such as in the sextet when Edgardo's pain and indignation really come through clearly and he is very emotionally and vocally animated in the Wolf's Crag scene. Marin, too, makes real drama out that. Domingo's final scene, however well sing, lacks the last of degree desperation.

Marin's conducting generally is splendid; he urges the action onward when necessary but applies rubato judiciously to accommodate his singers and the LSO expertly do his bidding.

You may hear this in its entirety on YouTube and make up your own mind. It took me by surprise.

* * * * *

Finally, there have been no new studio recordings of the Italian Lucia since 1990 but there are two of the French version, *Lucie de Lammermoor* - which must be considered *hors concours*.

Evelino Pidò – 2002 (studio; digital) Virgin
Orchestra & Chorus - L'Opéra National de Lyon
Lucie - Natalie Dessay
Henri - Ludovic Tézier
Edgard - Roberto Alagna
Arthur - Marc Laho
Gilbert - Yves Saelens
Raimond - Nicolas Cavallier

I refer you to my review below for some background information regarding this version made for Paris. I made a track-by-track comparison between this and that newer recording and found it quite revealing. Pidò's is a considerably grander conception all round, being a studio recording with a modern orchestra, whereas Dumoussaud's is a live festival performance with a period band. I straight away prefer his Gilbert to Yves Saelens here, as Saelens' tenor is throatily constricted and develops a beat under pressure. With regard to the baritone role of Henri there is little to choose between Ludovic Tézier and Vito Priante; both have sizeable, flexible, authoritative voices with good top notes. Both choruses are animated and both conductors drive matters on – Pidò just a little too much, in fact. While I like plenty of flexibility in conducting this music, for me, Pidò pulls it about rather too much – a danger I refer to in the review below as the "pushme-pullyou" tic. Marc Laho as Arthur here is pleasant toned in the light, faintly nasal, Gallic style and again there is little to choose between him and Dumoussaud's Julien Henric. The bass-baritone role of Raimond is much reduced in this French version; for what it's worth, Nicolas Cavallier here is considerably weaker than Roberto Lorenzi – although neither exactly nails their low notes – but that cannot be a deciding factor.

So far, then Dumoussaud is ahead on points by virtue of a superior Gilbert and better conducting – but of course the clincher is the quality of the two lovers. Pidò has two, big established stars in Natalie Dessay and Roberto Alagna; Dumoussaud has two young, fresh relative newcomers. Both sopranos sing their opening aria, filched from *Rosmonda d'Inghilterra*, with great élan and for all that I admire Caterina Sala's account, Dessay is the better stylist. On the other hand, the pulse in her soprano on loud, high notes will not please all listeners and I do not care for it. Alagna is also stylish but somewhat cloudy of timbre and I feel that the consistently high tessitura strains him; it does not lie in the "meat" of his tenor. The grey tone and strain persist in the finale; I find Patrick Kabongo's

more virile and youthful tenor more attractive and apt; he sounds more at ease with the high-lying phrases and when he and Sala are duetting, their vibrancy generates much more erotic tension than Dessay and Alagna and his death scene is far more satisfactory.

If we take a key point such as the sextet, one of the most celebrated ensembles in opera, I find it pleasant but dull here; Dumoussaud manages it better and Sala takes the exciting high D♭ at the end that Dessay tamely ducks. The Mad Scene is obviously another important decider: Dessay is often impressive, but the pulse in her vocal production still obtrudes and she and Pidò take "L'autel rayonne" *very* slowly – too slowly, in fact. The idea, I guess, is to create a hypnotic, mesmeric ambiance but in truth it just drags. Sala and Dumoussaud do not lose the pulse of the music and her vocalisation is, if anything, more affecting. She has more lower register, a firmer, faster vibrato and creates a frisson which eludes Dessay in her lethargic delivery, as her vocal acting is every bit as vivid.

It would seem, then, that further examination confirms the conclusion I came to in my review below of the live performance: that is the better option.

Pierre Dumoussaud -2023 (live; digital) Naxos
Orchestra Gli Originali
Coro dell'Accademia Teatro alla Scala
Lucie - Caterina Sala
Henri - Vito Priante
Edgard - Patrick Kabongo
Arthur - Julien Henric
Gilbert - David Astorga
Raimond - Roberto Lorenzi

I reproduce here my review of this recent issue:

Just occasionally, even a veteran reviewer such as I can have the interesting experience of encountering a recording of a work with which I am wholly unacquainted – at least, in this form – performed by artists none of whom I have heard before. That confession may tell you more about my ignorance than the performance in question, but it at least means that I am approaching it without prejudices or preconceptions – which is surely desirable in a critic.

This is the French version of Donizetti's greatest success, which he revised for Paris four years after the Italian premiere. It was appreciatively received but did not become established and subsequently French theatres invariably opted simply to perform the French translation of the Italian version rather than Donizetti's adaptation and it is rarely heard today except in festivals – in this case, as part of the Donizetti Opera Festival in Bergamo, in 2023. Just as Verdi later bowed to the conventions of French Grand Opera when adapting his works for "la grande boutique", Donizetti made many concessions and changes, some of which were dictated by the more limited means of the Théâtre de la Renaissance in Paris, as compared with the state-subsidised theatre in Naples. It is in essence a streamlining or simplification of the original. The libretto by Alphonse Royer and Gustave Vaëz compresses and reshapes the story to match French tastes; there is less emphasis on religious or political elements and more on personal and emotional drama, thus the reasons that Lucie's brother forces her into an arranged marriage, are more financial and dynastic. The opera is shorter and more tightly structured, focussing more on the love story between Lucie and Edgar, and the rivalry between Edgar and Henri is mostly eliminated, so there is no Wolf's Crag scene. Alisa, Lucia's handmaid and confidante, is eliminated so the spotlight now is entirely upon the one, female, central character, who is more naïve than Lucia. Normanno has been replaced by the more obviously evil and corrupt Gilbert. The wedding scene and the famous mad scene remain but are re-shaped, the

latter with a simplified cadenza for Lucie. Musically, the changes are to do with lightening the orchestration to suit a more lyrical, "through-composed" Gallic style, adjusting phrasing and vocal lines to fit the French language, introducing new recitatives and cutting some arias. Some major, set-piece numbers familiar to those used to the original Italian version are now missing; e.g., Lucia's "Regnava nel silenzio" is replaced by an aria from *Rosmonda d'Inghilterra* and the French equivalent of Edgardo's final scene "Tu che a Dio spiegasti l'ali" is truncated and altered.

In brief, there are enough changes to validate considering this to be another work – or at least a major revision. I listened to it reading the libretto online. The sound is very good and extraneous noise is minimal, some inevitable footfall apart and the applause included is not obtrusive; it just adds to the ambience. It is instantly evident that Gli Originali, as the name indicates, are a leaner, period band; just occasionally the raw tone of the original instruments slightly grates. Only two of the cast are French but their diction and accents are excellent and so are the first two voices: firm, wobble-free and even throughout their range. Costa Rican tenor David Astorga makes a suitably evil Gilbert and Vito Priante as Henri sings his first aria confidently; he has a dark, vibrant baritone of quality with ringing top notes. "Cruda, funesta smania" becomes "D'un amour qui me brave" and works very well, as does the cabaletta; the chorus is lusty and the scene receives deserved applause.

The second tenor is Julien Henric, also pleasing of voice, and the trio of tenors is completed by Patrick Kabongo as Lucie's illicit lover – and thank goodness that he, too, bucks the trend too prevalent among modern French tenors of crooning in nasal, mixed falsetto. His tenor is clean, light and open and he sings his first aria very sweetly: "Sur la tombe de mon père" – which old hands will instantly recognise as "Sulla tomba, che rinserra"; this of course evolves into a passionate duet with Lucie, crowned with a top C from the soprano and an astonishing, harmonising top E flat from Kabongo.

The young soprano Caterina Sala bears a heavy burden as the only female solo voice and the eponymous, doomed heroine. She has a most interesting voice: a fast, flickering vibrato, evident lower register development, great agility with a proper trill, flawless pitch and an intrinsically attractive timbre. Her first aria is the import from *Rosmonda* and she sings it in highly accomplished fashion.

The final soloist is the firm, sonorous bass-baritone Roberto Lorenzi, which completes a fine ensemble. Having reviewed too many operatic recordings in which the dreaded wobble rules, this release scores by featuring voices all completely free of that egregious vice, every one falling gratefully on the ear.

Pierre Dumoussaud directs unobtrusively but is alive to the moments of high drama such as when Henri deceives Lucie by presenting her with a copy of the ring she gave Edgard, supposedly proving his infidelity (replacing a forged letter in the Italian version); he is unafraid to pause and slow the pace right down for dramatic effect then ramp up the tension once more without sounding self-consciously "pushme-pullyou". I like his style very much; he gives Sala plenty of space for her heartbreaking lament "Pleurant son absence" – so much so that I immediately replayed it the first time. That, too, mutates into a duet and is perfectly sung by Sala and Priante.

Of course, one of the great highlights of this opera is the Act II sextet. Dumoussaud begins by pacing it surprisingly cautiously but knows what he is doing and gradually builds to a rip-roaring climax to the act. The other most famous passage is Lucie's mad scene — here in F major, whereas most sopranos singing the Italian version sing "Il dolce suono" in E♭ major. Sala's vocalisation is silvery, skittish, aptly hysterical but avoiding shrillness despite the high tessitura. Her control in the cadenza ending with a high D on track 7 is very impressive and her duet – duel? – with the flute (no glass

harmonica here) is riveting; she soars aloft in the stratospheric tessitura with astonishing ease. It really is a tour de force.

Kabongo gives us an impressively sung death scene, earning warm applause – though why the producer has the chorus audibly chuckle at his agonies is beyond me. If his tenor hasn't the ping and glamour of Pavarotti, he nonetheless sings with great feeling and suppleness, providing a fitting conclusion to what was a memorable night at the opera in Bergamo.

This is not the first recording of this version: there is an excellent disc of excerpts from 1960 conducted by Georges Sébastian, starring Mady Mesplé, Alain Vanzo and Robert Massard, another live festival recording of the complete score in 1997 by Maurizio Benini on the Dynamic label with Patrizia Ciofi, Alexandru Badea and Nicolas Rivenq, then two conducted by Evelino Pidò with Natalie Dessay as Lucie, one the sole studio account from 2002 on EMI with Roberto Alagna and Ludovic Tézier (reviewed immediately above), the other live with the same cast except Marcelo Álvarez substitutes for Alagna. Personally, from what I know of those, I would say that this new issue is now the best option for a complete recording.

Recommendations:

I have already designated the 1971 studio recording from Decca as the best option overall but there are plenty of recommendable alternatives and supplements for the collector, mostly dependent upon taste in sopranos - and I am happy to concede that both Sills' recordings here run Sutherland's later recording close, especially as she is so well partnered. Two Callas recordings might seem excessive but for all her vocal flaws she is uniquely compelling. The question of which her three accounts is preferable is always open; I opted for the last one in my review of it but in the end, it is down to personal taste – and you must have at least one. The inevitable surprise in doing this survey came with my re-acquaintance with the Prêtre recording and Anna Moffo's sparkling assumption of the eponymous lead role and although overall I still recommend the two studio recordings below, this is a personal favourite. However, a second surprise came with Ion Marin's 1990 studio recording: if digital sound is a priority, and you are looking for something a little different and do not demand stratospheric top notes and pyrotechnical coloratura of your Lucia, it is a real possibility. In short, we are spoiled for choice.

Historical: Tansini – 1939
Studio mono: Serafin – 1953
Live mono: Karajan 1955
Live stereo: Martini – 1972
Studio stereo: Bonynge 1971*; Schippers 1970
French version: Dumoussaud 2023
*first choice