

Wagner's *Lohengrin* - a survey of the major recordings

By Ralph Moore

I included two recordings of *Lohengrin* in my "Untouchables and Most Recommended" [survey](#) of 2019 but recent discussion on the MusicWeb Notice Board has urged me to return to it and consider some other recordings of merit.

For one of Wagner's more popular works, it hasn't received so many "modern" studio accounts – especially if I use the term "modern" loosely, meaning "stereo" rather than "digital", as the earliest dates from 1962/3, well over sixty years ago as I write. In addition to that earliest stereo recording from Kempe we have studio recordings from: Leinsdorf, made in Tanglewood in 1965; Hans Swarowsky in 1968; Karajan 1970-72; Solti in Vienna in 1985/6; Abbado 1990/91 again in Vienna; Colin Davis in 1994; Barenboim in 1998 and finally Semyon Bychkov in Cologne in 2008.

That is not to say that there aren't live and/or vintage recordings offering great enjoyment but I incline towards reviewing and recommending those for the general listener rather than the buff and that predicates decent sonics. I have nonetheless included a few older, mono recordings of note. Of course, more recent live recordings such as that assembled in a composite from Levine's live performances at the Met in 1998 will offer excellent sound, but sadly, the more recent the date, the more likely it is that the singers will be inadequate.

So here are nineteen recordings: ten studio (actually nine and a half – see the Swarowsky entry) and nine live, which are sufficiently representative, I think, of the best of what is available – although no doubt someone's favourite live performance will have been missed. The eponymous role has attracted tenors of various vocal categories, as it isn't necessarily exclusively for a Heldentenor like Melchior, even if I categorically refuse to countenance newer live accounts featuring mixed-falsetto crooners like Klaus Florian Vogt; strong-voiced lyric-dramatic-spinto tenors like Sándor Kónya with stamina and good technique can manage it just as well and indeed are perhaps preferable in such a lyrical role. It is a pity that neither Jussi Björling – who had just started to prepare for it before his death – nor Fritz Wunderlich lived long enough to sing it, as they could both have been ideal in the role – although there is a lovely recording of "In fernem Land" from Björling's last concert in Sweden and sung in Swedish, which works surprisingly well. Mario Del Monaco – who hardly lacked either heft or technique - liked to sing the arias in Italian, but only in concert. He of course had a heroic sound but he could encompass another essential aspect of the role, which is to sing softly and sweetly. (Interestingly, Jon Vickers never sang it on stage; maybe he felt his voice was too bluff and weighty, and when he fined it down too much he could start to croon.)

Likewise, as you may see from the casting of the various recordings below, a variety of soprano voice-types from the dramatic to the lyric can make a success of Elsa, although I prefer a naïve, silvery-shimmering-voiced Elsa to weightier sopranos, hence favour singers like Grümmer, Steber, Bjoner and Janowitz as the ideal. The crucial role of Ortrud may be sung by dramatic soprano, a mezzo-soprano or even a properly developed contralto with a secure top, such as Kerstin Thorborg. The other roles are less flexible when it comes to casting; a dramatic baritone with stamina and good top notes is required for Telramund, a noble, paternal basso cantante for the king and for the herald – a part too often poorly or under-cast, as per the otherwise near-perfect Kempe recording – a really good baritone or bass-baritone with ringing tones; no wonder the Met cast the young Sherill Milnes for it. The conductor must be capable of caressing and moulding the delicate melodic lines; there are many moments of great stillness whereby a first-rate orchestra is required to create a halo of sound around the singers. The chorus has quite a lot to do but that is generally not a problem.

Often when doing these surveys, I get a sinking feeling once I embark upon listening to recordings post 1990, as the standard of singing almost invariably evinces the decline from its post-war peak in the 50s and 60s, especially when it comes to studio recordings of Wagner operas. I would like my pessimistic expectations to be more often confounded; that rarely happens but I was pleasantly surprised by several of the digital recordings below, especially those conducted by Solti and Barenboim.

I first reproduce here my findings regarding my two top versions; please excuse an element of repetition in some of the following reviews as they are quoted in full and make comparative reference to recordings also covered elsewhere here:

Rudolf Kempe - 1962-63 (studio; stereo) EMI

Orchestra - Wiener Philharmoniker; Chorus - Wiener Staatsoper

Lohengrin - Jess Thomas

Elsa - Elisabeth Grümmer

Ortrud - Christa Ludwig

Friedrich von Telramund - Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau

König Heinrich - Gottlob Frick

Der Heerrufer des Königs - Otto Wiener

A kind of poised, otherworldly serenity pervades this recording, apparent from the very first bars of the Prelude. Kempe had a special gift for capturing and creating atmosphere and the glow on the Vienna strings is exquisite, despite some inevitable analogue hiss. The casting is immaculate with one indisputable exception – Otto Wiener's nasal, unlovely Herald - and one question mark over whether Fischer-Dieskau's Telramund is too craven and intellectualised for a bluff, ambitious soldier. Nonetheless, he convincingly suggests that he is under the thumb of Ludwig's blazing Ortrud. She might not be as vocally visceral as Astrid Varnay but she exudes wilful malevolence. Frick is a mighty, sonorous King Henry, Jess Thomas is in sweetest, cleanest voice and Elisabeth Grümmer's shimmering, silvery soprano is a dream, rivalled only by Janowitz, who is of similar voice type.

It is one of two essential recordings; the other being...

Rafael Kubelik – 1970 (studio; stereo) DG

Orchestra & Chorus - Bayerischer Rundfunk

Lohengrin - James King

Elsa - Gundula Janowitz

Ortrud - Gwyneth Jones

Friedrich von Telramund - Thomas Stewart

König Heinrich - Karl Ridderbusch

Der Heerrufer des Königs - Gerd Nienstedt

Having been slightly disappointed by the live 1954 Jochum and 1953 Keilberth recordings (see below) - mainly because of deficiencies in Windgassen's assumption of the eponymous hero and even in some of the deeper voices - turning to this recording was balm to my ears. In the reviews of this recording I have read, no-one has much remarked on its beauty of sound: a slight reverberance, real depth, crisp detail and a proper sense of theatre without the Bayreuth hackers who blight the quieter moments in the live recordings, especially the Jochum.

The next thing to emphasise is the beauty of the voices. Several performances here are definitive;

Kubelik was always so sympathetic to his artists and he gives them space to make their points without dragging. One first hears Nienstedt, Ridderbusch and Stewart as the Herald, the King and Telramund respectively - and what a joy it is to hear such firm, characterful, resonant, virile voices. Stewart in particular surprised me - though I was already familiar with his lovely Sachs in Kubelik's equally recommendable *Die Meistersinger*; he is every bit as expressive and grateful on the ear as the great Uhde and more so than Fischer-Dieskau in his nonetheless estimable performance for Kempe. The chorus is terrific; the orchestra precise and energised, and Kubelik confirms his status as perhaps my favourite of all conductors. As for Janowitz, she is a dream. That silvery, plangent tone is ideally suited to the ethereal (slightly loopy!) Elsa. Just listen to her exchange with Ortrud in Band 5 of the second disc if you need convincing - which brings me to the most controversial piece of casting in this recording: Gwyneth Jones' Ortrud. Jones had a huge voice and the vibrato became obtrusive too early in her career, but here I think her malignancy and subtlety of characterisation carry the day. The occasional squalliness is not inappropriate and she is mostly dead on the note and really exciting; I think that others have exaggerated the wobble and their repugnance for it - I've certainly heard much worse and I admire her vehemence and intelligence. If you're unsure, try her "Entweihte Götter" (the chilling invocation to demonic powers à la Lady Macbeth); I think it's great. Rather than play safe, she goes for it. You will notice that I have not mentioned James King. His is a fine, often gently sung, performance, preferable to the bleatiness of Windgassen - at least to my ears - though I would not say he is here at his very best; elsewhere, in other recordings, his voice sounds less grainy.

So if you want a studio alternative to the famous Kempe, rather than a historically important live recording, this is it. I have known the Kempe for years and particularly admire Ludwig's Ortrud and Thomas' Lohengrin; his is probably the best assumption of all of the lead role. I'm glad to own both - but I shall return again and again to Janowitz's Elsa.

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Next, I consider here the other studio recordings and a selection of live and historical performances:

Erich Leinsdorf – 1940 (live; mono) Pristine
Orchestra & Chorus - Metropolitan Opera

Lohengrin - Lauritz Melchior
Elsa - Elisabeth Rethberg
Ortrud - Kerstin Thorborg
Friedrich von Telramund - Julius Huehn
König Heinrich - Emanuel List
Der Heerrufer des Königs - Leonard Warren

I reviewed this in 2019:

The Guild issue of this live radio broadcast was positively [reviewed](#) by my MWI colleague Bob Farr back in 2004. It now benefits from being transferred by Pristine from ... er ... pristine acetates but it is still somewhat harsh and scratchy, with rustling from the end of track 5, through track 6 and the beginning of track 7 on CD 3, distortion in choruses and a sometimes remote orchestra, for all Andrew Rose's wizardry in reviving historic recordings. As such, it remains an issue of a performance for the historical voice buff - but what vocal treasures lie within, fielding a far finer cast than we could assemble today. The only caveat – and it is a significant one – is that in accordance with standard Met practice sanctioned by the then recently deceased Artur Bodanzky, there are forty minutes of cuts from the full score.

I not much impressed by Leinsdorf's impatient delivery of the famous Prelude, which lacks flow and gravitas compared with the serenity of Kempe's or Kubelik's direction; perhaps he was nervous, having only just taken over at the Met. Nonetheless, compensation is soon at hand in the form of the young Leonard Warren's virile Herald, even if List's King is less than ideally steady and Julius Huehn's Telramund, although energised and very competent, lacks the tonal effulgence and intensity the best singers bring to this role. Kerstin Thorborg was standing in for indisposed compatriot Karin Branzell; as a true contralto, she struggles a little with the higher-lying passages in Ortrud's part but has lovely, rich full tone. However, by far the main attractions here are Melchior's Lohengrin and Rethberg's Elsa. Only two years before her retirement, she is not in the first flush of youth and there is some diminution in resonance, but she is still in firm, silvery, powerful voice and he, as ever, is miraculously consistent, at fifty years old his tireless tenor ringing out in ensembles but also capable of admirable tenderness. He is not just a vocal phenomenon but acts well with his voice, too; he is especially moving in his farewell to Elsa. Leinsdorf manages to relax for their crucial first encounter and the lovely Act 3 duet "Das süße Lied verhallt", but also generates sufficient tension for the *faux rapprochement* of Elsa and Ortrud in Act 2.

As ever, the inclusion of Milton Cross' commentary adds colour, atmosphere and information to the broadcast, providing a little incident at the end of the Act 1 bows when he gets a frog in his throat – and including a funding appeal, begging for at least \$1 from every listener! I love the cover design here, too, depicting the Great Dane looking for all the world more like a cuddly blond toddler than Parsifal's noble warrior son. There is also a very audible racket from (presumably) chattering, laughing scene-shifters during the brass fanfares at the end of track 7 – all part of what microphones pick up in a live performance.

Sonic limitations and comparative deficiencies in the secondary roles mean this cannot be a first-choice recording, but Melchior and Rethberg are superb.

Joseph Keilberth – 1953 (live composite; mono) Teldec; Naxos; Membran
Orchestra & Chorus - Bayreuth Festival

Lohengrin - Wolfgang Windgassen
Elsa - Eleanor Steber
Ortrud - Astrid Varnay
Friedrich von Telramund - Hermann Uhde
König Heinrich - Josef Greindl
Der Heerrufer des Königs - Hans Braun

I always feel that Windgassen's success as a Heldentenor illustrates the importance of the application of intelligence and technique over a naturally beautiful voice, as his tone was never exactly seductive but he had the stamina and sensibility to carry off the most demanding roles in the repertoire. He was only 39 here and thus fresher than in any subsequent performances, and he is starrily partnered by some of the greatest singers of their generation under the baton of a great Wagner conductor, who is immediately so expressive in the Prelude; he engages me in a way which eludes Jochum below. Having said that, neither of the first two voices we first hear is as impressive as we encounter elsewhere: Hans Braun's Herald is acceptable but a bit woolly and nasal, and Greindl's King Henry clearly labours over the loudest top notes. To offset those disadvantages, we have a trio of superlative voices in Uhde, Varnay and Steber. Uhde suggests the underlying weakness and hysteria which colour Telramund's character without compromising vocal quality; Varnay is as dominant as ever – "Entweihte Götter" is terrifying - and Steber is for me perfect as Elsa: one of the trio of great lyric sopranos who perfectly embody her otherworldly personality. "Euch Lüften" is just balm to the ears – perfectly sung. Her Act III love duet with Windgassen is meltingly lovely; he relaxes and stops

pushing ahead even if his tone is never as ingratiating as that of Kónya, Thomas or Domingo. For some reason, the sound at the start of his gentle, delicately sung "In fernem Land" is a little muffled but in general the mono sound here is excellent – better than the set next reviewed regardless of label.

Eugen Jochum – 1954 (live; mono) Opera d'Oro; Andromeda
Orchestra & Chorus- Bayreuth Festival

Lohengrin - Wolfgang Windgassen
Elsa - Birgit Nilsson
Ortrud - Astrid Varnay
Friedrich von Telramund - Hermann Uhde
König Heinrich - Theo Adam
Der Heerrufer des Königs - Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau

My colleague PCG [reviewed](#) this in 2013; I agree with virtually every one of the opinions he expresses there and refer you to his review for more detail. For all her virtues, the young Birgit Nilsson in her Bayreuth debut isn't right for Elsa – a wonderful voice of course but already too assertive, too much of a Valkyrie, and her voice takes on an oddly plaintive, lachrymose quality when she attempts to soften it. Windgassen is better partnered by Steber above and I don't think he can ever be anyone's favourite Lohengrin, given his grainy, less-than-heroic timbre and tendency to push ahead of the beat. He begins in somewhat matter-of-fact manner but finds more poetry for his delivery of "In fernem Land". The supporting cast is first rate, however, even if Theo Adam's tone is already lacking bite compared with more incisive basses. Hermann Uhde is a vibrant Telramund – my favourite of all the distinguished bass-baritones who have undertaken this role. Varnay is as usual a tower of strength but we may hear her elsewhere. I am often in two minds about Eugen Jochum as a conductor; he is fine here, but I could do with a little more tenderness and affection in the quieter moments.

Ultimately the mild deficiencies in the two leads make this less attractive than the similar contemporary live, mono recordings reviewed here. As a clincher for me, for some reason the sound on the recording from the previous season at Bayreuth reviewed immediately above is a little cleaner and crisper and I prefer Keilberth's more detailed, carefully shaped phrasing to Jochum's direct manner.

André Cluytens – 1958 (live; mono) Walhall
Orchestra & Chorus - Bayreuth Festival

Lohengrin - Sándor Kónya
Elsa - Leonie Rysanek
Ortrud - Astrid Varnay
Friedrich von Telramund - Ernest Blanc
König Heinrich - Kieth Engen
Der Heerrufer des Königs - Eberhard Waechter

The usual reservations regarding vintage live performances apply here: regardless hacking - which starts in the Prelude but gradually abates and surfaces only periodically - and fairly anaemic mono sound which nonetheless remains listenable and actually begins to sound more and more tolerable as the music swells towards a wondrous climax at 5:46 – dark, grand and brooding. Cluytens was a wonderful – and often under-rated - conductor and the music heaves and breathes like some great Leviathan. Furthermore, look at the cast – sheer luxury - starting with the young Eberhard Waechter

pinning back our ears as the King's Herald. American bass Kieth (he changed the spelling to conform to German phonetics as he lived there) Engen hasn't the juiciest bass and his vibrato can spread a bit but he is firm and assertive. I always loved French baritone Ernest Blanc's bright, vibrant voice and he had a successful Wagnerian career at Bayreuth, learning to sing German phonetically; here, he was making his debut. He makes a viciously animated Telramund, hectoring without ever barking. As ever, Leonie Rysanek takes a while to warm up; her voice was huge and occasionally unwieldy as opposed to the silvery Grümmer, Steber or Janowitz and she can swoop and "low", but she brings great emotional intensity and power to her Elsa. I know some object to the slight glottal catch in Sándor Kónya's tenor but it doesn't bother me and it has such beautiful timbre. The chorus is inevitably a bit distant but perfectly audible.

If you are tolerant of clean mono sound and are a fan of Rysanek, this is an absolute winner – but like me you may prefer a more ethereal Elsa and there are other options from that era:

Lovro von Matačić – 1959 (live; mono) Orfeo
Orchestra & Chorus - Bayreuth Festival

Lohengrin - Sándor Kónya
Elsa - Elisabeth Grümmer
Ortrud - Rita Gorr
Friedrich von Telramund - Ernest Blanc
König Heinrich - Franz Crass
Der Heerrufer des Königs – Eberhard Waechter

This features changes in three cast members and conductor from the preceding year but is even more attractive if you favour Elisabeth Grümmer and Franz Crass over their excellent predecessors as more vocally suited to their roles. Lovro von Matačić's conducting is very similar to that of Cluytens' and their timings are virtually identical. The chorus is obviously made up of virtually the same personnel. One difference, however, is that Orfeo's sound is marginally fuller, less hissy and easier on the ear. Then there is the question of which singer you prefer as Ortrud. Both are matchless, although Gorr is just a little more comfortable with her sustained top notes, while Varnay is the slightly more ferocious, abandoned actress. Otherwise, there is little to add to what I say above about the Cluytens performance and Grümmer for Kempe. On balance, this has the strongest cast all-round, especially as Kónya's tenor is a better fit than Windgassen's.

Wolfgang Sawallisch – 1962 (live composite; stereo) Decca
Orchestra & Chorus - Bayreuth Festival

Lohengrin - Jess Thomas
Elsa - Anja Silja
Ortrud - Astrid Varnay
Friedrich von Telramund - Ramón Vinay
König Heinrich - Franz Crass
Der Heerrufer des Königs - Tom Krause

Here is a third consecutive Bayreuth performance, again retaining two Bayreuth regulars in the cast and introducing newcomer Anja Silja and Jess Thomas who has made his debut there the previous year in *Parsifal*. There really isn't much to differentiate the three performances beyond personal preference in voices; they are all from what now looks like a "Golden Age" of Bayreuth and any of them is wholly satisfactory within the limitations of a live, vintage recording; this one, however, despite its relatively early date and unlike the others, was captured in stereo.

Mike Parr and I jointly reviewed this in one of our "Vocal Retrospective" posts in 2021:

I have always pitied the singer who takes on Telramund as it is a role that is essentially shouted through much of the opera. Ramón Vinay sings splendidly, if a touch gruff sounding, but ultimately I find his sound is still too much that of a tenor and not really that of a baritone to make the maximum effect of all of those bellowed high notes that Wagner demands.

Ralph: Jess Thomas, given the demands of a live performance, is not quite as sweet and poised as he is in the Kempe studio recording, but he is still very good indeed

Mike: Jess Thomas is quite the ideal swan knight. I far prefer him to any of Lauritz Melchior's earlier recordings of the role. While Thomas may be better captured in the EMI studio recording, I really like hearing him in the live acoustic of Bayreuth which proves just how heroic and effective his sound really was. I would swim behind this knight's swan boat wherever he ends up going.

Ralph: Anja Silja turns in a major performance as Elsa: tender, pure and touching, despite the occasional hint of shrillness - no doubt it helped that the singer herself was only 21 at the time. She also acts well with her voice, audibly delineating Elsa's development from naïve ingenue to the sadder, wiser, abandoned wife of Act 3.

Mike: Returning to Silja after all of the intervening years proved to be the revelation of this set for me. While I know that many listeners do not warm to her distinctly Nordic sound, I find myself riveted every time she opens her mouth. Her Elsa is so dramatically assured for such a young performer that any other criticisms are blown away. The other crucial thing about her Elsa is that she is the only soprano I have ever heard whose voice actually sounds like that of a naïve and youthful girl; one who is audibly troubled right from her first entry. It was these same qualities which made Ms Silja's Senta arguably the finest on records.

Ralph: The firm tone of Franz Crass' King Henry is a joy and Tom Krause's Herald is a major improvement over Kempe's nasal veteran, Otto Wiener. There is nothing especially striking about Sawallisch's efficient conducting but the performance gains over the famous Kempe studio version by virtue of the fact that it is live and generates more momentum and excitement, benefitting from the special "Bayreuth atmosphere". The only drawback is the continuous hacking from the audience, once again belying the reputation of the Bayreuth crowd for rapt attention.

Mike: I would rate Sawallisch's reading a little higher than Ralph does. His reading is filled with dramatic excitement and fervour; also, he doesn't try to superimpose a totally misguided sense of spirituality on what is essentially a rollickingly good comic book story with some glorious music. I should add that thanks to Sawallisch this recording is the only one in the entire catalogue that gets an uncut Act Two on a single CD. There is however, a large cut in Lohengrin's Third Act farewell scene that was at one time traditionally made in almost all performances of the opera.

There is a hidden member of the cast who makes a singular stamp on this recording and that is director Wieland Wagner. His production was quite unique in that he conceived the opera as a sort of medieval mystery play. The soloists were very much to the foreground and the huge Bayreuth chorus was arrayed in circular tiers like an ancient Greek play. This meant the chorus spent long periods standing around motionless without much to do, which according to all accounts was particularly hard on the stamina of chorus members. What one hears on this recording is the absolute excellence of the Wilhelm Pitz trained chorus caught by the microphones in a vividness that is just astounding for a live performance. Wagner's stage production on this occasion seems to have created studio-like conditions for a live recording.

Hans Knappertsbusch – 1963 (live; mono) Orfeo

Bayerisches Staatsorchester

Chor der Bayerischen Staatsoper

Lohengrin: Hans Hopf

Elsa: Ingrid Bjoner

Friedrich von Telramund: Hans Günter Nöcker

Ortrud: Astrid Varnay

König Heinrich: Kurt Böhme

Der Heerrufer des Königs (Herald): Josef Metternich

I reviewed this in 2016:

Although Knappertsbusch conducted “Lohengrin” many times, until now no recording by him has been issued, so the welcome discovery of this live performance from Munich fills a gap in the discography.

Given the excellence of Kna’s conducting and the high quality of both the mono sound and the artistry of the performers, I wish I could say that this is an indispensable purchase. For Kna admirers, perhaps it is anyway, but a more holistic survey of the competition reveals that it is just one of a whole slew of desirable live recordings from this era, all of which have some claim to be preferred.

First there is Cluytens’ 1958 Bayreuth performance, in even better mono sound with a slightly unwieldy but affecting Elsa from Leonie Rysanek and the same tremendous Ortrud from Varnay. It also sports the further advantages of a better Lohengrin in Konya and Ernest Blanc, a more characterful and vocally superior Friedrich in comparison with the nonetheless very acceptable Hans Günter Nöcker. Then there is the von Matačić recording from the following year, again with Konya and Blanc but with the added attractions of the incomparable Elisabeth Grümmer as Elsa and such sterling co-artists as Rita Gorr, Franz Crass and Eberhard Waechter – with Nöcker perhaps understandably relegated to being one of the four Brabantine nobles. The 1962 Bayreuth “Lohengrin” yielded a famous recording conducted by Sawallisch with a 21-year-old Anja Silja and another great exponent of the role of Lohengrin, Jess Thomas. Crossing the Atlantic, we encounter a slew of recordings from the Metropolitan in the 1960s featuring the ubiquitous Konya and, Jess Thomas again, in performances variously conducted – a tad prosaically - by Rosenstock and Böhm. The dream-team of Bjoner and Konya for Böhm at the Met in 1967 is slightly compromised by the fact that Bjoner’s vibrato sounds looser than for Knappertsbusch here in 1963, although she still sings a lovely Elsa. Finally, for those who find the coughing of live audiences irksome, there is the celebrated studio recording from 1962-3 conducted by Kempe, again with Grümmer and Thomas.

In short, recommending a pre-eminent recording from the ten years between 1958 and 1968 is inadvisable. I do know that for all that I esteem Knappertsbusch as a wonderfully flexible, fluid and even inspirational conductor, I cannot prefer Hans Hopf over his rivals. It may be that, as reviews of this performance quoted in the booklet attest, he made a better impression live than in this recording but here he sounds stolid and solid, inclined to scoop and unvaryingly baritone in vocal colouring. You have only to compare his sturdy “In fernem Land” with Konya’s to hear the difference between competence and poetry. He produces some fine, steady top notes and essays some delicacy in “Mein lieber Schwan” but his vibrato is often too pronounced and there is something about it which invariably causes the ear to hear every note he sings as sitting slightly under the centre, producing the effect of being marginally flat.

Yet so much else in this performance is striking and first class. We first hear Knappertsbusch pushing

the Prelude on, refusing to linger but instead urging the singing strings to create what is almost a sense of tension and expectation, culminating in the great chordal climax by the brass. The Act II Prelude, too, is wonderfully played, the orchestra producing a dark, brooding sound proleptic of Ortrud's calling upon the "Entweihte Götter!"

As the reviews next day remarked, the vocal honours belong primarily to the women. Bjoner's Elsa is a thing of beauty; she is pure, even and powerful, her top notes pinged without a hint of scooping in a portrayal to rival Grümmer's in its delicacy and pathos. Varnay repeats her habitual *tour de force* as Ortrud, projecting, to borrow Verdi's wish for his Lady Macbeth, "the voice of a she-devil", dripping with scorn and malice.

The chorus is superb, too, but apart from the fine Josef Metternich, who immediately pins back our ears with a splendid Herald, the male singers are less complete. Kurt Böhme gives us a rather effortful King Henry the Fowler, just about getting the notes out. While, as I have already suggested, Nöcker is more than adequate as Friedrich, he is hardly very distinctive of voice or especially dramatic in his delivery in comparison with Blanc, Vinay or even Fischer-Dieskau in the Kempe studio recording. He finds it hard to keep up with Varnay's terrifying Ortrud in their oath duet just before Elsa's entrance and is reduced to yelling at the climactic points of "Mein Ehr is hin".

Something odd happens to the sound around 3:30 in track 8, CD 1, coinciding with a spell of sagging pitch from Hopf, but both recover. The notes are full and informative but there is no libretto.

Whether you want this issue will depend upon the degree of your allegiance to the great Knappertsbusch and whether you can appreciate Hopf's *Lohengrin*. For all its merits, I prefer Cluytens or von Matačić.

Joseph Rosenstock – 1964 (live; mono) Gala
Orchestra & Chorus - Metropolitan Opera

Lohengrin - Sándor Kónya
Elsa - Régine Crespin
Ortrud - Nell Rankin
Friedrich von Telramund - Walter Cassel
König Heinrich - Ernst Wiemann
Der Heerrufer des Königs - Calvin Marsh

Bonuses, also from the Met:

Karl Böhm – 1967
Excerpts from Acts I & III [46]
Lohengrin - Sándor Kónya
Elsa – Ingrid Bjoner
Friedrich von Telramund - Walter Berry
König Heinrich – John Macurdy
Der Heerrufer des Königs – Sherrill Milnes

Karl Böhm – 1968
Excerpts from Act I & Act III [47]
Lohengrin - Sándor Kónya
Elsa – Martina Arroyo
Friedrich von Telramund - Walter Cassell
König Heinrich – John Macurdy

Der Heerrufer des Königs – Sherrill Milnes

Joseph Rosenstock – 1967

Excerpt from Act III [23]
Lohengrin - Sándor Kónya
Elsa - Elisabeth Grümmer

The sound here is in fact better than any of the Bayreuth recordings, being derived from a live, matinee, radio broadcast and the cast(s) look hardly inferior. I say “cast(s)” as in fact this four-disc Gala issue contains not only the complete 1964 performance but excerpts from three more, equally starrily-cast performances from the 60s, two of which were conducted by Karl Böhm and the last by the same conductor as per the main offering here. The depth of talent is amazing: even relatively forgotten singers such as German bass Ernst Wiemann – actually a Met regular for a decade - as the king are splendidly firm and in those excerpts we are able to hear singers of the calibre of Martina Arroyo and the young Sherrill Milnes. Furthermore, as they are the same selections we may compare the different performers in the same music. Nell Rankin is up to the vocal demands of singing Ortrud but she doesn't summon up the malevolence of either Varnay, Gorr or Ludwig and fails to horrify at key moments such as “Gott?” (prompting Telramund's appalled response, “Entsetzlich!”). The chorus is emphatic and well-drilled and the orchestral playing splendid; I find no fault with Rosenstock's conducting and the coughing is no worse than most.

These are all very positive indications but then comes the debit side. Crespin is in best voice but unfortunately for me she conveys none of the tremulous, innocent vulnerability I seek in the most compelling characterisations of Elsa and I almost always hear a kind of scratchiness in her tone which I find off-putting. She is too mature and knowing-sounding. Arroyo in the excerpts on CD 4 has a much more beautiful voice but is too voluptuous, while Bjoner on the extracts on CD 3 is not invariably as pure as steady as is ideal and she was previously for Kna. Good as they are, none of the supporting male singers has the personality or vocal charisma we hear from the Bayreuth regulars. Cassell is more than competent but there is no special gleam or bite to his baritone. Konya, however, is as pleasing as ever - but we can hear him better partnered in several other recordings, including the studio version next, unfortunately compromised by a similarly mis-cast Elsa.

The excerpts have many virtues but are of passing interest only if we are looking at complete recordings and ultimately nothing about the complete performance is superior to what may be encountered elsewhere. Frankly, re-visiting it for the purposes of this survey was disappointing.

Erich Leinsdorf – 1965 (studio; stereo) RCA

Boston Symphony Orchestra
Boston Pro Musica Chorus

Lohengrin - Sándor Kónya
Elsa - Lucine Amara
Ortrud - Rita Gorr
Friedrich von Telramund - William Dooley
König Heinrich - Jerome Hines
Der Heerrufer des Königs - Calvin Marsh

My colleague Mike Parr recently [reviewed](#) this set; I agree with his verdict and refer you to that review as I don't need to elaborate much here on his findings; it isn't a first choice, mainly because it features an unidiomatic Elsa and some dodgy German pronunciation, nor does it much stir the blood in the few moments of high drama – surprisingly; given Leinsdorf's gift for galvanising performances

such as in his 1961 recording of *Die Walküre* and his long experience of the score going back to the historical performance with Melchior and Rethberg above. I also agree that the recording acoustic is rather over-reverberant and Jerome Hines, although grand and authoritative, also sounds a bit woofy and wobbly compared with tighter-voiced basses. However, William Dooley is an especially striking, virile, clean-voiced Telramund – but perhaps he was really a tenor and not craven enough given the dominance of his wife? – and Rita Gorr is indeed heard to somewhat better voice in the earlier live performance for von Matačić as she rather screams here, although she is still a mighty presence. Sándor Kónya is utterly consistent in all the various recordings in which he features – the best Lohengrin of his era.

It is not Lucine Amara's fault that she does not quite fit the role, as she was a late replacement for the proposed Leontyne Price but she is nonetheless a blot on what might have been a success. She simply sounds as if she belongs in another operatic genre – and that is because she does...

Hans Swarowsky – 1968 (studio; stereo) Koch; Denon; Profil
Großes Symphonieorchester
Chorus - Wiener Staatsoper

Lohengrin - Herbert Schachtschneider
Elsa - Leonore Kirschstein
Ortrud - Ruth Hesse
Friedrich von Telramund - Heinz Imdahl
König Heinrich - Walter Kreppel
Der Heerrufer des Königs - Hans Helm

NB: this is bizarrely labelled "Complete Opera" but is in fact 93 minutes of extended highlights, i.e. less than half the average performance length. I include this in case anyone is duped into purchasing it under the impression that it is a complete recording; both the truncation and some of the singing will prove to be disappointments.

As with his (truly) complete *Ring* cycle (see my [survey](#)), this was originally a bargain issue – hardly mainstream and not featuring the best singers but still very listenable. Swarowsky was a straightforward, non-interventionist, no-nonsense conductor who delivered the score *come scritto* and the results were often much better than one might expect from a hastily assembled cast for a budget production. For instance, the first voice we hear is the fine bass Walter Kreppel as the king; he will be familiar to collectors as Fasolt in Solti's *Das Rheingold* in the Decca cycle. In truth, he sounds a bit rocky and venerable here but the tone is still sonorous. As Elsa, Leonore Kirschstein has a pleasant soprano and may stand comparison with much more famous singers. Probably the best-known and indeed most impressive singer here is Ruth Hesse as Ortrud; she sings Magdalene for Karajan in his 1970 studio recording of *Die Meistersinger* and was Brangäne for Karl Böhm and Horst Stein - but she isn't given a lot to do in this selection. Hans Helm is fine as the herald. The chorus is lusty and committed. Unfortunately, the Telramund has something of a flap in his baritone and the tenor is not at all up to snuff – so we move on...

Herbert von Karajan – 1975-81 (studio; stereo) EMI
Orchestra - Berliner Philharmoniker
Chorus - Deutsche Oper (Berlin)

Lohengrin - René Kollo
Elsa - Anna Tomowa-Sintow
Ortrud - Dunja Vejzovic

Friedrich von Telramund - Siegmund Nimsgern
 König Heinrich - Karl Ridderbusch
 Der Heerrufer des Königs - Robert Kerns

This was made over a protracted period for the combined reasons of contractual obligations, Karajan's meticulous preparation and perfectionism and his habit of making recordings in separate, disparate takes rather than chronologically straight through. It features some of his favourite singers of that era – and his taste in voices could be eccentric, even puzzling – although I suspect that had something to do with the degree to which they would do his bidding*. Fortunately, the venue of the Philharmonie remained unchanged, so there is no perceptible jarring between sessions.

It seems that, surprisingly, this recording has never been reviewed on this site. Responses elsewhere include the usual accusation that what I hear as grandeur in Karajan's conducting is perceived as "mannered" and "ponderous"; certainly, the prelude is languorous but the playing of the BPO is of unearthly beauty and later episodes in the opera are convincingly dramatised without undue lethargy, especially as the chorus is great – highly energised. We immediately hear two fine voices in Robert Kerns as the emphatic, resonant-toned herald and Karl Ridderbusch as a noble, sensitive king and the sound is excellent. Good as he is for Solti a decade later, Siegmund Nimsgern is in somewhat sappier voice for Karajan here although the glottal catch in his baritone is still prevalent. Criticism has been levelled at the remaining singers in the cast: Anna Tomowa-Sintow is accused of being too matronly but here we come up against the split between soprano types cast as Elsa that I have already several times encountered while doing this survey: should she always be of the light, silvery girlish timbre we hear in the voices of Grümmer, Steber and Janowitz, or can she be effectively characterised by a heavier, more dramatic Wagnerian soprano like Nilsson, Rysanek and Norman lightening their tone? It is not a question of power – Steber had a large voice, for example – but rather colour. I find Tomowa-Sintow perfectly acceptable; she had a lovely voice, even if she is not as individual of utterance here as Grümmer or Norman – who were of different voice types and move me in different ways.

So far, so good, then, when it comes to sound, chorus, conducting, orchestra and several cast members. Only the malevolent witch Ortrud and the Knight of the Holy Grail remain to be discussed and if they satisfy, we are home and dry.

Our Knight duly arrives drawn by the swan. I find Kollo's reining in of his tenor in a slightly unsupported falsetto croon for his entrance rather odd, and am quite relieved when he reverts to his usual full-voice – but then the rough tone and pulsing vibrato are less pleasing. He sounded considerably better for Solti in his recordings of *Tannhäuser* and *Parsifal* a few years earlier; now he is grabbing, swooping and stretching a bit in a manner which makes one wish for the purer vocal production of Kónya or Thomas, or the warmer sound of Domingo. Maybe the overdubbing required by the disjointed schedule was done too late in his career. His great cry of "Elsa, ich liebe dich!" is in fact masked by the orchestra to the point of inaudibility, either by poor engineering or, more likely, his lack of resonance. He has his moments but is insufficiently unearthly.

The peaks of Dunja Vejzovic's recording career as a hand-picked Karajan favourite came with her Kundry and Senta along with live performances at Salzburg and Bayreuth; the former role was a great success, the latter much less so. A tendency in her voice to screech and turn thin is too much in evidence; she is certainly vibrant and impassioned but the basic tone is insufficiently dark and differentiated from Tomowa-Sintow's soprano – which in fact sounds much warmer than hers when they don't sound indistinguishable. She is not the proper dramatic soprano or dark mezzo with upper extension required, which fatally vitiates the musical effects Wagner intended.

So there you have it: a gritty Lohengrin, a screaming Ortrud and a somewhat anodyne Elsa put this recording out of court – and I write as a Karajan devotee.

Georg Solti - 1985-86 (studio; digital) Decca
Orchestra - Wiener Philharmoniker
Chorus - Wiener Staatsoper

Lohengrin - Plácido Domingo
Elsa - Jessye Norman
Ortrud - Eva Randová
Friedrich von Telramund - Siegmund Nimsgern
König Heinrich - Hans Sotin
Der Heerrufer des Königs - Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau

This was positively [reviewed](#) by John Philips back in 2003. The perfect digital sound here from Decca is such a treat after all those live, mono, “historical” performances and the prelude is a dream, followed by magnificent heraldic trumpets properly distanced. DFD’s somewhat dry and laboured herald is less of a treat by this stage of his career when he was sixty years old; he had over the previous thirty years been promoted from the herald to Telramund and is here demoted back again but compensation instantly comes with Hans Sotin’s grand, mellow bass as the king and the chorus is terrific, especially the male contingent. Siegmund Nimsgern’s distinctive baritone, with its glottal catch and nasal twang was always something of an acquired taste but he specialised in villains like his Klingsor for Karajan and was a good vocal actor even if top notes are a little rocky. I prefer a more ingratiating voice like that of Uhde, Blanc or Stewart – or indeed the young DFD – but he is strikingly involved, both weak and malevolent.

I adore both Georg Solti in opera and Jessye Norman generally but both were humanly fallible and could make some questionable choices; I am thinking here of Jessye as Leonore in *Fidelio*, Carmen and Salome – though the latter works for me, even if she never sang it on stage for reasons of her physical stature, and I agree that she is temperamentally unsuited to the first two. She refused to be vocally categorised and sang several Wagnerian roles to acclaim; whether Elsa is one of them is debatable, as some find the voice too round and noble, and insufficiently girlish. However, she lightens her tone and manner appreciably such that I am happy to encounter her Elsa as a kind of *sui generis* success. Beginning with “Einsam in trüben Tagen” she really does sound innocent and virginal despite the amplitude of her sound – which is thrilling in itself when the voice expands. “Euch Lüften” is delicately lovely, too. Her German is perfect – she learned and spoke it fluently – and in fact she sounds more suited to the role than similarly big-voiced sopranos such as Leonie Rysanek.

Domingo had first sung Lohengrin relatively early in his career in the late 60s but then stepped away from Wagnerian roles until the mid-80s as per here. His Hispanic German was at first something of an obstacle but that improved to the extent that he made a fine recording of Tristan for Pappano released on EMI in 2005 and I was impressed by his Siegmund when I heard him at Covent Garden in the same year. His accent is indeed imperfect: consonants are insufficiently sharp and vowels can sound Italianate but the virtues of his singing such as the fine legato and his rounded, lyrical tone compensate and probably only native or fluent German speakers will demur.

That leaves the role of Ortrud and Solti’s conducting to consider. Eva Randová emerges as one of the best Ortruds on record. Her German is first rate and vocally the declamatory passages hold no fears for her. Her voice rings out powerfully, although – a small but arguably crucial point from a dramatic perspective - I wish her cry of “Elsa!” were a little weirder and more disembodied; it is too closely recorded and they sound as if they are standing next to each other rather Ortrud’s voice rising as it

should to Elsa from the murky depths below her balcony. Her "Entweihte Götter" is magnificent, however and the contrast between Elsa's naïve benevolence and Ortrud's feigned repentance is pointedly drawn by both artists. Solti is noticeably relaxed during this exchange and the orchestra really sings in the postlude to it.

Elsewhere and when needs be, his conducting is typically electric; sample the duel and hubbub concluding Act I as evidence (the whole recording is available on YouTube). Nor is he wanting when it comes to the tenderness which so much of this opera requires, and the brooding introduction to Act II is excellent.

I readily admit to being taken unawares at how good this is, having for decades been satisfied with older recordings. If modern sound and singing combined are a priority for you, this is one to have.

Claudio Abbado - 1991-92 (studio; digital) DG

Orchestra - Wiener Philharmoniker

Chorus - Wiener Staatsoper

Lohengrin - Siegfried Jerusalem

Elsa - Cheryl Studer

Ortrud - Waltraud Meier

Friedrich von Telramund - Hartmut Welker

König Heinrich - Kurt Moll

Der Heerrufer des Königs - Andreas Schmidt

Abbado was a fine opera conductor especially in the earlier stage of his long career and he has one of the best orchestras in the world at his disposal, very well recorded in finest digital sound and a splendid chorus; the end of Act II is monumental with a really prominent organ. A fine prelude promises much... then Andreas Schmidt's weak, vanilla-voiced herald disappoints. Thank goodness the next voice we hear is the great Kurt Moll – rich, firm, burring and resonant with ringing top notes. Sadly, Hartmut Welker's Telramund is tonally undistinguished with an over-pronounced vibrato, his characterisation evidently sustained by the belief that Sprechgesang is a substitute for singing through the notes. I soon lost patience on first listening; there is a reason why I had never heard of him and I wonder what Abbado and the DG moguls were thinking of; they had engaged some of the best singers in the world for a very expensive enterprise and skimmed on this major role.

Cheryl Studer has had a very inconsistent career: a meteoric rise to fame, a spell of singing everything and anything, vocal difficulties if not a crisis and as a result a profile which has proved hard to pin down. I have thoroughly enjoyed some of her recordings and been less entranced by others when her voice seems under pressure. She is rather thin and tremulous here, which is suggestive of a certain desirous vulnerability but not especially grateful on the ear and at times – such as at the end of "Euch Lüften" - it is unsteady and lacking body.

I have never much warmed to Siegfried Jerusalem's cloudy, even husky, tenor. Nonetheless, he has pursued a successful career singing Wagnerian Heldentenor roles even if I would not place him in the top rank. He is mildly pleasant-toned, correct, and to my ears utterly bland and unengaging, without heroic ring. I hear little sensuality in "Das süße Lied verhallt" and meanwhile Studer pulls the line about too much in search of expressiveness.

Waltraud Meier has many ardent fans but her voice rarely pleases me and I am puzzled by how it has long seemed to hover uncertainly between the soprano and mezzo Fach without settling on either. As with Dunja Vejzovic's Ortrud for Karajan above, she sounds too similar to Elsa and I am bothered

by what I hear as a constant, incipient tremolo in its line. Having said that, that very shimmer is thrillingly hysterical in "Entweihte Götter" and the top B-flat is terrific, so maybe the problem is mine.

Abbado makes much of the lyrical sections of the score but also rises to the more stirring passages – although surely the outer sections of the Prelude to Act III are rushed? You will have gathered by now that this is hardly going to feature among my recommendations; there is just so much more to be savoured in Solti's recording.

Colin Davis – 1994 (studio; digital) RCA
Orchestra & Chorus - Bayerischer Rundfunk

Lohengrin - Ben Heppner
Elsa - Sharon Sweet
Ortrud - Éva Marton
Friedrich von Telramund - Sergei Leiferkus
König Heinrich - Jan-Hendrik Rootering
Der Heerrufer des Königs - Bryn Terfel

A fine, flowing prelude is succeeded by an arresting announcement from the young Bryn Terfel as the herald, a steady, confident address from Dutch-German bass Jan-Hendrik Rootering as the king, and an incisive, extended complaint from the metallic, villainous-sounding Sergei Leiferkus. A fine male chorus completes a very apt and satisfactory start to this recording. (In fact, so large-scale and emphatic is Terfel's contribution to this opening and throughout that he threatens to overshadow his co-singers and steal the show – indeed, some might feel that he is making a bit of a meal of it.)

The entry of Sharon Sweet introduces an element of uncertainty, however. She has a large, slightly pulsing soprano with something of an edge or catch in its tone which is not exactly suggestive of youthful innocence or purity. In truth, her characterisation and singing are perfectly good but somewhat mature and generic; the same might be said of Ben Heppner's Lohengrin compared with the vividness of, for example, Leiferkus' characterisation of Telramund or more sympathetic exponents of the role of Lohengrin. He sings beautifully – much more so than, say Kollo for Karajan or Jerusalem for Abbado and his first address the king – "Heil, König Heinrich!" – is really impressive but at times later on he is rather staid. He is less bland for Levine (see immediately below) but that recording has other issues. Éva Marton is impressive in the excerpts from the live Met performance of 1985 included in the Levine recording below but nearly a decade later her vibrato has loosened rather alarmingly and she no longer sounds so steady and although of course she still has plenty of power her singing is rocky – and even Sweet's voice takes on a flap during their Act II "reconciliation", so the scene becomes a bit of a trial.

I have read two main – and perhaps linked – criticisms of this recording: that Davis' conducting is restrained and precise and lacks as a whole a "vertical", transcendent or spiritual sense – whatever that might mean. That perhaps partly stems for the lack of "chemistry" between the couple whose marriage is unconsummated as a result of Elsa breaking her vow and also from the fact that Davis was not especially immersed in the Wagnerian idiom or tradition despite conducting several Wagner operas during his stint at Covent Garden.

While this recording is accorded respectful admiration for its measured clarity, we need to look elsewhere both for a more vivid theatrical experience and better singing on the distaff side.

James Levine – 1998 (live composite; digital) Met Opera
Orchestra & Chorus - Metropolitan Opera

Lohengrin - Ben Heppner
Elsa - Deborah Voigt
Ortrud - Deborah Polaski
Friedrich von Telramund - Hans-Joachim Ketelsen
König Heinrich - Eric Halfvarson
Der Heerrufer des Königs - Eike Wilm Schulte

Bonus disc: extracts from Met performances of 1985 & 1976

I fear that this recording in the Levine "40 Years at the Met" series is no longer widely available although used copies may be tracked down. Whatever the justifiable ruin of his reputation, Levine made some great recordings and he is not the first very flawed artist to have done so. This is not one of those, being a mixed bag. The usual wholly oblivious and reckless coughers, who need gently hoiking out and garrotting, blight the start of the Prelude to Act I which is beautifully shaped and paced, building magnificently – the Met orchestra sounds simply lordly. If I were a conductor, I would stop the music and turn round to fix the offender with a gimlet eye or use the Jon Vickers method of shouting, "Shut up with your damn coughing!" Moving on... Eike Wilm Schulte makes a decent Herald without being anything special but Eric Halfvarson's woolly, wobbly, constricted king is a decided liability, making me long for Kurt Moll, Hans Sotin, Karl Ridderbusch, Jerome Hines – well, anybody else, really...then we hear an indifferent Telramund from Hans-Joachim Ketelsen who is unimposing and thin-voiced.

By this stage, then, you might be pondering what could possibly induce the acquisition of this live performance. The first answer is the shimmering, feminine, vibrant Elsa of Deborah Voigt, who bids fair to rival any of her distinguished predecessors despite being up against another determined lady cougher in her first aria. Secondly, Levine's accompaniment is often typically leisurely but I find he has the knack of spacious but not sluggardly direction, allowing the music to breathe and letting us hear what a fine orchestra he has at his command. A third reason is Ben Heppner's sweet but powerful delivery of his music. All do battle against the persistent coughers and emerge partially triumphant unless you are as easily irritated as I am by the constant intrusions.

A really compelling Ortrud could sway the balance in favour of acquiring this but the TB Ward contingent strikes up again during the introduction to Act II and does its best to break the mood of glowering resentment conjured up by the lower strings and Ketelsen proves sadly inadequate when it comes to suggesting Telramund's burning despair, sounding merely irked and petulant. None of this exactly paves the way ideally for Deborah Polaski's first big moment as Ortrud with "Entweihte Götter!" but she is really rather good, even if she doesn't have quite the depth and heft of voice of the greatest exponents of that role and her top can turn shrill.

In Act III, the coughers adorn the Wedding March but mostly manage to stifle themselves during the love duet, in which we hear the best of this recording – but is that enough to advocate recommendation, given that it is not exactly cast in depth? An additional inducement is the bonus CD containing extracts from the 1985 Met performance strongly cast with Domingo, Tomowa-Sintow, Marton – who is a really powerful, steady Ortrud - and McIntyre, and from 1976 with Kollo and Lorengar, but the same stricture as with the bonuses to the 4 CD Gala issue above operate: we are looking for the best complete performance, not excerpts. Admirers of the two leads here might be tempted but those desirous of a recording which satisfies all round must look elsewhere.

Daniel Barenboim – 1998 (studio; digital) Teldec
Orchestra - Berliner Staatskapelle

Chorus - Deutsche Oper Berlin

Lohengrin - Peter Seiffert

Elsa - Emily Magee

Ortrud - Deborah Polaski

Friedrich von Telramund - Falk Struckmann

König Heinrich - René Pape

Der Heerrufer des Königs - Roman Trekel

Daniel Barenboim is a great and distinguished artist who has had a glittering career as both pianist and conductor, while I am nobody, but I regret to report that according to my taste Barenboim's operatic recordings have a dismal history; so many are blighted by weak casts and his ponderous, lacklustre delivery. His Mozart opera recordings are uniformly disappointing; then, for some reason, he felt that his *métier* lay at the opposite end of the operatic spectrum and he recorded all Wagner's oeuvre – again, often with dull and deary results. Having got that nasty little observation off my chest, let me discuss whether this recording is any different -and I am happy to report that I need to ingest a large helping of crow.

Things start well with a finely played prelude, a decent, if rather too light-voiced, herald in Roman Trekel and an excellent, resonant king in René Pape, whose bass here has none of the woolliness it later acquired; he makes a more youthful, virile, Heinrich than most but lacks nothing in gravity. He is in many ways the best since those of a previous generation like Frick, Crass and Ridderbusch. Falk Struckmann is a vivid, brassy-voiced Telramund; his delivery of text especially fluent and incisive but just occasionally his vibrato threatens to become obtrusive even if it is mostly under control. The fine male chorus is nicely placed in the aural perspective and the orchestral playing is sonorous. As I first listened to this, I began to hope that it would prove more rewarding than other Wagner operas conducted by Barenboim that I had previously encountered – but of course, that would be dependent upon the portrayal of the three remaining main characters.

Emily Magee's Elsa conforms to the second category of Elsa now familiar if you have followed me so far: a bigger, blowsier soprano of beautiful rounded tone but no great delicacy; indeed, she seems determined to expunge any hint of vulnerability from "Einsam in trüben Tagen" and sings out like Brunnhilde. As singing *per se*, it is quite impressive but devoid of pathos. It is really quite puzzling; while I am primarily concerned with vocal quality, text, emotion and characterisation do matter if a performance is to emerge complete and touch the listener and Ms Magee leaves me unmoved; she might as well be hailing a taxi as proclaiming her innocence. Nor does it help my willing suspension of disbelief that Barenboim is vocalising loudly through the chorus that heralds Lohengrin's arrival by swanogram.

However, Peter Seiffert quells my indignation by making a splendid entrance. He doesn't emulate Jerusalem's mistake of crooning in a weird little head voice but instead sings out while still sounding sweet yet alien; the chorus responds in kind and things really pick up. He then summons up heroic tone for his "Heil, König Heinrich" and is rewarded with some lovely legato singing from Pape in the king's reply - but then Ms Magee yells at him such that I am surprised he doesn't take the next swan home and she just carries on like that, resolutely defying the possibility of any smidgin of tenderness softening her demeanour. She apostrophises the evening breezes peremptorily in "Euch Lüften" but I persevered with this recording because so much else about it impressed me and I was keen to cast off any lingering and unjust aversion to Barenboim's Wagner.

That's just as well, as Seiffert is revealed as quite simply the best Lohengrin since Konya, combining elegance with bright, heroic strength of voice, beauty of tone and impeccable diction. The love duet

of Act III goes well as there is no doubting Magee's ability to negotiate the music and she softens her voice a little while still being inclined to shout her endearments at him. Every so often she drops in a piano top note or a well-executed diminuendo, confirming that all that would have been required during rehearsals or takes was for someone to whisper, "Emily, remember you *love* him; tone it down a bit." "In fernem Land" gets both verses – most recordings follow the practice of the premiere sanctioned by Wagner and cut it – and it gets a flawless performance, punctuated by the occasional groan from the conductor. The top notes ring out, the orchestra swells magnificently and Seiffert's stamina is a thing of wonder. I am all the more pleased to be able to heap praise on Seiffert's performance here as I was obliged to be very unkind in my review of his *Tristan* of 2013, by which time his voice had sadly deteriorated.

The remaining casting element here is of course Ortrud. Deborah Polaski repeats the portrayal she had given Levine live at the Met earlier the same year. She is very good but again a little shrill and lacking in venomous weight of voice when set alongside Ludwig, Varnay, Gorr and Gwyneth Jones.

Let me also briefly and finally address another paradox: the singers are very near the microphones and the recording is so clear and immediate that it somewhat militates against any sense of mystique and the "otherworldliness" which permeates Kempe's old recording. That is perhaps a minor and subjective point but might explain why there is something mythical and timeless about Kempe's account, whereas this sounds very "modern".

So this recording turns out to be something of a conundrum: there is a real sense of drama and momentum in Barenboim's conducting and the singing is very much better than I had expected – including a fine-voiced soprano who is totally wrong. The nearest comparison perhaps is Birgit Nilsson back in 1953 in her Bayreuth debut. If Magee's implacably vocalised Elsa does not bother you this recording could be for you; I require something more mysterious and fragile but love almost everything else about it.

Semyon Bychkov – 2008 (studio; digital) Profil
Orchester und Chor des Westdeutschen Rundfunks
NDR Chor; Prager Kammerchor

Lohengrin - Johan Botha
Elsa - Adrienne Pieczonka
Ortrud - Petra Lang
Friedrich von Telramund - Falk Struckmann
König Heinrich - Kwangchui Youn
Der Heerrufer des Königs - Eike Wilm Schulte

What a fine sound the WDR Symphony Orchestra makes here, affirming the indisputable fact that the standard of orchestral playing has risen inexorably and ubiquitously over the last fifty years such that bands which would once have been considered "provincial" are now of international standing. Bychkov's conducting is fluid, sensitive and instrumental in generating real passion in the big dramatic moments - really responsive to the various moods required and I like it very much.

Eike Wilm Schulte reappears as the herald a decade after singing the same in the live Levine recording above and is once again serviceable without exactly pinning back our ears the way Terfel and many predecessors do. Likewise, Falk Struckmann repeats his vibrant Telramund a decade after he sang it for Barenboim but his vibrato has now noticeably loosened to the point whereby it has become obtrusive. Kwangchui Youn is a pleasingly firm, paternal king, but his tone is slightly bottled compared with more open-throated singers like Frick and Pape. The combined choruses, as has

invariably been the case in the recordings I review here, are excellent: really strong and unified, making a great impact in the more stirring passages.

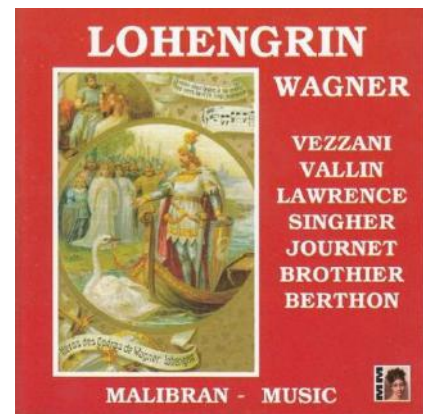
I fear, however, that Adrienne Pieczonka's Elsa does little for me. Her tone is ordinary, there is a squeeze and pulse in her vocal production, and she emerges as something of a non-entity compared with sopranos whose vocalisation and characterisation engage me. She is of the gentler, more innocent Elsa school but also rather "wet". Vocally speaking, Johan Botha's smooth, ductile tenor is the best thing here, of a quality to rival Seiffert's when singing gently but without his incisive, heroic ring in the louder, more declamatory passages. Petra Lang's somewhat hooty, screechy Ortrud also suffers from a deficiency common to several more modern recordings: a lack of lower register weight to differentiate her voice from Elsa's and her vibrato, too, evinces quite a heavy beat on louder, sustained notes. Her malicious outbursts are really quite tame compared with those by Gorr, Varnay et al.

You see the pattern here: every singer is not necessarily by any means poor but is surpassed by another in other recordings, so there is little point in recommending this recording over Solti or Barenboim, even though the sound, orchestra, chorus and conducting are all very satisfactory.

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As an afterthought, I must just mention this single-disc anthology of vintage highlights on the historic Malibran label, "*Lohengrin en français*":

Obviously it is just a supplement and that only if you can track down a used copy but it contains some wonderful singing and Wagner in French can work surprisingly well. (It would seem that the Malibran label has ceased trading or is at least dormant, not having issued any new recordings for some years, but its status has not been confirmed.)



Recommendations

No recording above is vocally flawless but nothing I have heard while researching this survey has induced me to change my mind about my brace of favourites; Kempe and Kubelik remain my joint top recommendations and if pushed I would plump for the former for its special atmosphere. Did I encounter the usual surprise (excuse the paradoxical oxymoron) in doing this survey? Yes, two: Solti once again comes up trumps in opera and pushes those two older recordings close; his recording may be forty years old but is easily the best in the digital category. I endorse Barenboim, too, for the beauty of Seiffert's *Lohengrin* in particular and an excellent cast in general - but only as a wild card if Emily Magee's Elsa is to your taste.

Historic: Leinsdorf 1940

Live mono: Lovro von Matačić 1959 (with Keilberth 1953 in reserve)

Live stereo: Wolfgang Sawallisch 1962

Studio stereo: Kempe 1962-63*; Kubelik 1970

Studio digital: Solti 1985-86, Barenboim 1998

*first choice

Ralph Moore

* I append here a little anecdote courtesy of the recently late Robert Massard regarding Karajan's

attitude to, and dealings with, singers: he received a phone call from Karajan's secretary asking if he could substitute for a sick singer the next day. He politely declined on the grounds that he was already engaged to sing in an opera in France; it was clear that once refused, Herbie would never again extend an invitation and indeed Massard did not hear from him again...

I should in fairness add that many singers adored him and owed their careers to him, even if he was instrumental in some making some questionable and even disastrous choices in their repertoire; Christa Ludwig – who had her own vocal crisis from which she recovered by wisely scaling back her ventures into the dramatic soprano *Fach* - was just such a one and tells an amusing story of how he suggested that she undertake *Isolde* with him. When Karl Böhm learned of that proposal he was outraged, but after a moment's thought leaned in conspiratorially to her, saying, "But with *me*, you could do it..."