

## **Wagner's *Tannhäuser*: a survey of the major recordings**

[Some of the content here has previously been posted on MusicWeb International; it has been collated and synthesised here for ease of reference.]

In the context of the canon of Wagner's works, *Tannhäuser* has had a problematic history and has a relatively small discography; indeed, it is something of a Cinderella of the recording studio. There have been only six post-WW2 studio recordings in stereo: Konwitschny (1960), Gerdes (1968), Solti (1970), Haitink (1985), Sinopoli (1988) and Barenboim (2001) – and we may safely disregard Robert Heger's workaday mono, studio recording of 1951. Many conductors have made some ill-advised cuts while almost randomly cobbling together an admixture of the so-called Dresden or Paris versions – yet the composer himself, ever practical, authorised just such an amalgam to ensure a performance. Three of those studio recordings opt for the original Dresden version, shorter by a quarter of an hour or so, while Barenboim imports the longer Venusberg duet for *Tannhäuser* and Venus into Act I as per the Paris premiere and expunges the ballet music; only two, conducted by Solti and Sinopoli, employ the so-called Paris 1861 edition - actually published in Vienna in 1875.

Matters are further complicated by the fact that many of the so-called Dresden versions actually incorporate snippets from Act II of the Paris and often the Bacchanal music, too; Konwitschny includes only the former in his Dresden recording. Brian Wilson's 2011 [review](#) of Haitink's recording provides a useful overview of the various alternatives and I agree with his ranking; I have long thought Solti's account way out in front in terms of cast, content and conducting which is why I included it in my "[Untouchables](#)" list, but doing this survey has certainly opened my eyes to other recordings of merit, especially Sinopoli's.

The exploration of some familiar Wagnerian tropes, such as the tension between the sensual and the spiritual, a yearning for death, and redemption through love, confers a degree of unity on *Tannhäuser* but any blending of the two editions results in some musically inconsistency, as the original Dresden version evinces the influence of Beethoven, Weber, Schumann, Mendelssohn and, above all, Berlioz, whereas the later additions are pure, mature Wagner in *Tristan* mode grafted onto the earlier style. On the other hand, there is an argument that the change and resultant disjuncture in musical idiom between the Dresden and Paris versions can be viewed as a metaphorical representation of the clash between the carnal and spiritual which forms the thematic basis of the operatic plotline; besides, the music from both creative eras is so good that it needs to be heard, which explains why amalgams are favoured.

The sample of recordings here is necessarily includes fewer than is normally the case in my surveys, as the normal plethora simply isn't there in the catalogue and as usual my attention is skewed towards the requirements of the average punter, not the historical buff or specialist, so decent sound is a prerequisite. All but the first three of the thirteen here are in stereo sound and I have made sure to assess all six studio stereo accounts plus a few of the best live recordings.

**Erich Leinsdorf – 1941** (live; mono) Pristine Audio  
Orchestra & Chorus - Metropolitan Opera

*Tannhäuser* - Lauritz Melchior  
Elisabeth - Kirsten Flagstad  
Wolfram von Eschenbach - Herbert Janssen  
Venus - Kerstin Thorborg  
Hermann, Landgraf von Thüringen - Emanuel List  
Walther von der Vogelweide - John Dudley

Biterolf - Mack Harrell  
Heinrich der Schreiber - Emery Darcy  
Reinmar von Zweter - John Gurney  
Hirt - Maxine Stellman

Paul Steinson [reviewed](#) this very positively in 2016 and I quote his conclusion here in full as I completely agree: "This is a performance I cannot recommend too highly; even if you already have the Met box or any other previous incarnation, buy it – you will find the improvement in sound quality worth every penny. The only disadvantage is that it will make anything you are likely to encounter today seem very small beer."

The remastered sound now from Pristine really is preternaturally good for so old a recording – certainly more listenable than the other, considerably later, Met recording immediately below – and the cast is generally superior, too, beginning with the Great Dane's nonpareil of a *Tannhäuser*. Just the first time he opens up on nothing higher than an F in "Tage, Monde" the power and penetration are stunning. Nobody else sings *Tannhäuser* with such energy and precision, but more germane is the fact that nobody suggests such depth of anguish and remorse in the third act; he almost channels the mortally wounded Tristan on his litter. Whether the equally great Flagstad is suited to singing Elsa is open to debate, but she gets a huge round of applause when she enters the stage and proceeds to sing the bejusus out of "Dich teurer Halle". That's where I ditch petty objections that she is too armour-plated for the vulnerable Elisabeth and sit back, slack-jawed, to enjoy her vocalisation. "Allmächt'ge Jungfrau" is in any case actually rather delicately and sensitively sung; she pares back her big sound and remains admirably steady. Those two operatic demigods apart, the rest of the cast consists of ordinary human beings who were also top-flight singers. Kerstin Thorborg might not be as overtly slinky, sultry and sexy as later exponents but damn, she has the right voice: a stream of dark, voluptuous, commanding tone and she is certainly imperious when she dismisses her homesick paramour from Paradise. Herbert Janssen, a great Wagner and Strauss dramatic baritone, makes a sincere, elegant Wolfram; Emmanuel List is a little rocky as the Landgraf but warm and avuncular.

Leinsdorf is typically energised, sufficient to challenge and indeed match Solti in this vigorous music; furthermore, he is using the Paris edition which I prefer and contains some of the best passages. At under three hours it has undergone the "standard cuts" normal then at the Met and in opera houses in general, but the impact of that is negligible. You won't hear a better sung or more vividly dramatised *Tannhäuser*.

**Rudolf Kempe – 1955** (live; mono) Walhall; Andromeda  
Orchestra & Chorus - Metropolitan Opera

*Tannhäuser* - Ramón Vinay  
Elisabeth - Astrid Varnay  
Wolfram von Eschenbach - George London  
Venus - Blanche Thebom  
Hermann, Landgraf von Thüringen - Jerome Hines  
Walther von der Vogelweide - Giulio Gari  
Biterolf - Clifford Harvuot  
Heinrich der Schreiber - Paul Franke  
Reinmar von Zweter - Norman Scott  
Hirt - Heidi Krall

I include this for obvious reasons: Kempe was a legendary Wagner conductor and the cast includes some very famous names. Unfortunately, the sound is fairly dim and primitive, and Kempe begins the

overture at such a snail's pace that I wondered if I had got the wrong conductor, although that is just an idiosyncrasy; he eventually picks up for the second Venusberg section and is otherwise fine even if he is stronger on structure and elegance than he is on sheer drama. I am not sure that the great Astrid Varnay is right for the role of the saintly Elisabeth; she is commanding but perhaps too much so, being wild, inclined to yowl and indulge in scenery-chewing. I can't help thinking that her vocal character is more suited to Venus – or Ortrud. Her apostrophe to the hall is more Brünnhilde uttering a battle cry than a *Grußarie*. Blanche Thebom has a sensuous mezzo but sounds more refined and proper than Elisabeth which can't be right. Ramón Vinay is not in his best voice and occasionally sounds a bit hoarse and stretched, and his pitch goes astray in his first duet with Venus. The chorus is excellent and with singers on the roster of the calibre of Thebom, Jerome Hines and George London all on great form this recording can hardly be considered negligible – London's "Abendstern" aria is lovely - but given that the sonics are less than pleasant and neither lead singer ideal, for a vintage recording from the 50s I would incline towards the next performance below, whose sound is still mono but demonstrably superior.

**André Cluytens – 1955** (live; mono) Orfeo  
Orchestra & Chorus - Bayreuth Festival

Tannhäuser - Wolfgang Windgassen  
Elisabeth - Gré Brouwenstijn  
Wolfram von Eschenbach - Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau  
Venus - Hertha Wilfert  
Hermann, Landgraf von Thüringen - Josef Greindl  
Walther von der Vogelweide - Josef Traxel  
Biterolf - Toni Blankenheim  
Heinrich der Schreiber - Gerhard Stolze  
Reinmar von Zweter - Alfons Herwig  
Hirt - Volker Horn

I reviewed this in 2018 and reproduce an extract from that review here:

My MWI colleague Colin Clarke [reviewed](#) this live Orfeo recording back in 2005 and found it virtually flawless as a representative of the Dresden version (albeit with the Bacchanal imported into Act 1 and some of the later instrumentation), declaring it to be "one of the wonders of the Wagner discography". The performance score used here is a slightly cut hybrid of Dresden and Paris, and as good a compromise as any.

Cluytens stepped in when Eugen Jochum withdrew following his son's unexpected death and introduced a new, Gallic sensibility to Bayreuth. He starts very steadily but his textures are essentially light and luminous, and tempi are swift; he comes closest to Solti in capturing the spirit of Dionysian revelry the Bacchanal demands and the orchestra is equal to his demands, playing the fiendish, Bacchic runs impeccably, while the instrumental prelude to "Dich, teure Halle" opening Act 2 - the passage in *Tannhäuser* most obviously inspired by, and indebted to Berlioz - is suffused with energy and passion. He is both lyrical and driven as the score demands. The mono sound presents little or no barrier to appreciating the thrust, grandeur and urgency of Cluytens' conception.

I have always had an ambivalent response to Wolfgang Windgassen's tenor: I admire his stamina, musicality and the subtlety of his delivery, while always regretting his rather dry, occasionally bleating tone, which never possessed the bronze effulgence of a true Heldentenor but compensated for that lack with every other virtue. For me, even at only 41 years old, relatively early in his career, he never sounds youthful, and he is audibly stretched by the cruel tessitura of his line at the

conclusion of Act 2, but he is generally stylish and in his best voice here – indeed better than I have ever heard him. I still prefer the extra virility of Kollo's assumption of the role, despite his vocal tics, and even the vocal heft and security of Hopf, despite his lack of subtlety.

I had never heard Herta Wilfert before; she strikes me as a very competent artist, perhaps lacking the velvet allure of timbre we hear in Ludwig or Bumbry – but she has all the notes and assumes a suitably seductive manner in the Act 1 duet, knocking out some cracking top B flats.

Treble Volker Horn overcomes a noisy scene-change to sing a really impressive Shepherd Boy; his musicality is complemented by the stealing in of that wonderful Pilgrims' Chorus, beautifully intoned by the chorus. Indeed, the first entry of the chorus in "Naht euch dem Strande" is magical and heralds their quality throughout.

Gré Brouwenstijn as the saintly Elisabeth sings her opening aria radiantly, her voice powerful yet delicate, with fluting top notes. She and Windgassen make an ardent pair in their Act 2 duet, and in her Act 3 Prayer 'Allmächt'ge Jungfrau' she capitalises on the slight tremolando in her tone to enhance its pathos. Only Elisabeth Grümmer and Gundula Janowitz rival her for suitability of their sopranos to the role.

There is a host of famous singers in the secondary roles, all very individual and recognisable, headed by the imposing bass Josef Greindl - occasionally rocky but always benign and authoritative - the expressive and versatile tenor Josef Traxel, and a young Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau. The latter is in sweetest, least affected voice with more resonance in his tone than was later the case; he sings most sensitively and attractively, with a superb sense of line and an acute, unexaggerated inflection of the text, making his 'Evening Star' a highlight. His Wolfram here, along with his Dutchman for Konwitschny four years later and his Telramund for Kempe in the studio recording of 1962-63, make up a fine trio of Wagnerian portrayals and, in my estimation, represent his best operatic work.

Mono sound notwithstanding, this remains a highly competitive and satisfying performance of an often-elusive opera.

**Franz Konwitschny – 1960** (studio; stereo) EMI  
Orchestra & Chorus - Berliner Staatsoper

Tannhäuser - Hans Hopf  
Elisabeth - Elisabeth Grümmer  
Wolfram von Eschenbach - Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau  
Venus - Marianne Schech  
Hermann, Landgraf von Thüringen - Gottlob Frick  
Walther von der Vogelweide - Fritz Wunderlich  
Biterolf - Rudolf Gonszar  
Heinrich der Schreiber - Gerhard Unger  
Reinmar von Zweter - Reiner Süß  
Hirt - Lisa Otto

My colleague Mike Parr has revisited this vintage recording to [review](#) it and as I pretty much agree with him on every count regarding the qualities of the sound, cast, conducting and playing, there is little point in my reiterating his findings, so I will just add a few comments. There are relative weaknesses among the lead singers - and a wobbly Biterolf - but this *Tannhäuser* shares many of the virtues of Konwitschny's *Der fliegende Holländer* recorded the previous year – including having four of the cast in common. He has a drive and energy similar to Solti's, evident from the overture. The

sound is really remarkably good for so old a recording. I am usually more reliably curmudgeonly than MP about singers and voices but for once am inclined to be slightly more indulgent than he about the stolid, sometimes effortful Hopf's eponymous hero, Schech's somewhat thin-toned Venus and the incongruity of Frick's black-toned Landgrave. They are all arguably mild deficiencies: Hopf is monotonous compared to Tannhäusers with voices as different as Melchior and Seiffert but he has baritonal weight; Schech has the notes but none of the heft and sensuality of Varnay, Ludwig or Bumbry; Frick is imposing – glorious-voiced but almost scary, and hardly kindly like Sotin, Moll or Pape. However, the old cliché may be employed to describe this recording in that it is “better than the sum of its parts”, especially as Konwitschny is a strong, binding presence. Lisa Otto is charming as the Shepherd Boy, singing very prettily but also more boyishly than most sopranos. The chorus is first-rate – in fact, I don't think there's a bad one in any of the recordings here.

Some might like this recording just for the pleasure of hearing Elisabeth Grümmer's lovely, vibrant Elisabeth, Fritz Wunderlich as a flawless, lyrical Walther and the young DFD on best behaviour, but it has even more than that to offer.

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

Tannhäuser - Wolfgang Windgassen  
Elisabeth - Anja Silja  
Wolfram von Eschenbach - Eberhard Waechter  
Venus - Grace Bumbry  
Hermann, Landgraf von Thüringen - Josef Greindl  
Walther von der Vogelweide - Gerhard Stolze  
Biterolf - Franz Crass  
Heinrich der Schreiber - Georg Paskuda  
Reinmar von Zweter - Gerd Nienstedt  
Hirt - Elsa Margaretha Gardelli

This another amalgam of the Dresden and Paris versions. The cast looks impressive, with talent in depth and a celebrated conductor, although some listeners' responses will primarily depend upon how agreeable they find Windgassen's Tannhäuser. An additional factor is the presence of extraneous noise, as this is a live performance but that is hardly a problem, a few stray coughs notwithstanding. From an historical point of view, special features are the appearance of Grace Bumbry as “Black Venus” and the twenty-two-year-old Anja Silja.

Sawallisch's drive, rhythmic spring and flexibility and general authority are immediately apparent; he rarely gave a bad performance or made a poor recording over his long career of nearly sixty years, and I find that he has often been under-rated and taken for granted. The overture is highly energised and he is first-rate throughout. The first voice we hear is Bumbry's and having already listened to so many recordings before I came to this one, I can honestly say that for the first time my reaction was, “That's the voice needed for Venus”. Her top notes shine and her lower register is solid. For all that other singers are good in the role, Bumbry as a young mezzo was simply ideal; no wonder she created a sensation. Windgassen is as ever a tad querulous and occasionally his timbre turns whiny but he is inside the role and his singing is admirable within its tonal limitations.

The supporting cast is good but a qualification may be applied to virtually every one of them. The Shepherd Boy is too feminine but sings neatly. Greindl is kindly but hardly smooth and somewhat nasal. Waechter is virile but inclined to indulge in bluff over-emphasis where legato is required; nonetheless, he sings his “Evening Star” aria smoothly with attractive tone. Gerhard Stolze's

distinctive “Mime” tenor hardly rivals Fritz Wunderlich for elegance. Two of the best singers – Crass and Nienstedt – are confined to relatively minor roles but Silja’s Elisabeth is captivating – so fresh, girlish and youthful, far removed from the matronly characterisation we hear from the “dramatic sopranos” who have undertaken the role. It’s a pity that at times her errant knight sound like her uncle.

You will gather that despite my recognition of its strengths, I am inclined to think that this performance has been over-rated – yet I would not be without Bumbry or Silja, especially as their roles have ever proved hard to cast and they are so apt. (There is an alternative recording from the previous year on the Orfeo label ([review](#)) with Victoria de los Ángeles as a warmer, more “Mediterranean” Elisabeth and Fischer Dieskau as Wolfram, which is substantially the same but in inferior mono sound so this remains the better option.)

**Herbert von Karajan – 1963** (live; mono) DG  
Orchestra & Chorus - Wiener Staatsoper

Tannhäuser - Hans Beirer  
Elisabeth - Gré Brouwenstijn  
Wolfram von Eschenbach – Eberhard Waechter  
Venus - Christa Ludwig  
Hermann, Landgraf von Thüringen - Gottlob Frick  
Walther von der Vogelweide - Waldemar Kmentt  
Biterolf - Ludwig Welter  
Heinrich der Schreiber - Kurt Equiluz  
Reinmar von Zweter - Tugomir Franc  
Hirt - Gundula Janowitz

I [reviewed](#) this in 2021 and reproduce my findings here, slightly edited:

This live performance is primarily of note because Karajan never made a studio recording of this opera and this is the only memento of him conducting it. It amply demonstrates his mastery of the score; he is particularly adept at revealing orchestral detail which can be obscured in Solti’s superb, but flashier studio recording seven years later. He begins with an overture in a typically grand manner compared with the febrile Solti, building to culminate in a splendidly weighty climax.

There is no doubt, however, that the mono sound here presents a distinct disadvantage compared with competitive recordings of the Paris version. Christa Ludwig again sings a scintillating Venus for Solti but here sounds rather muted and a long way upstage. Similarly, special effects such as the approach and retreat of the pilgrims are severely limited and the Viennese strings frequently sound screechier than I am sure they were in actuality; in fact, I suspect that the performance came across much better than the sound permits us to hear, especially as audience applause is enthusiastic. Occasionally, either singers come on mike or the recording volume is turned up and the difference is marked; this happens, for example at 2:07 in track 3 of CD 2 in Elisabeth’s and Tannhäuser’s exchange, making one wish for the same improved clarity throughout.

Encountering the young Gundula Janowitz as a pure, piping shepherd boy opening the third scene of Act 1 is a pleasant surprise and Eberhard Wächter sings a smooth, passionate Wolfram but as Ludwig is so far back in the sound picture, at first there isn’t much here to excite the listener. Beirer is at first clearly labouring, singing under the note with a heavy, pulsing vibrato. He may have a smoother tone than Kollo and more heft than Windgassen but the lack of light and lift in his baritonal tenor makes him a dull dog. Apparently he was unwell but bravely persevered and he warms up a bit as the act

unfolds but essentially continues to make an unlovely sound. I defy anyone to listen to Tannhäuser's "Auch ich darf mich" (track 11, CD 2) and tell me that falls pleasantly on the ear, especially when contrasted with the following aria, "Den Bronnen", well sung by Waldemar Kmentt. Brouwenstijn's entrance lifts proceedings; she makes a brilliant, shimmering Elisabeth, really otherworldly, even if every so often her tone turns tremulous.

This would perhaps be a more valuable issue were it not for the fact that several of the principal artists here may be heard in other recordings in better sound. As I say above, Ludwig may be heard to advantage in Solti's studio version, Brouwenstijn shines in Cluytens' 1955 *Tannhäuser* on Orfeo, reviewed above and Gottlob Frick is a better Hermann in Konwitschny's excellent 1960 studio account of the Dresden version where he is in steadier, fuller voice; here he has frequent problems with maintaining pitch and frankly, he frequently sings out of tune.

A fair amount of unrestrained coughing may be heard in quieter orchestral passages, especially throughout the introduction to Act 3. The weakness of the eponymous lead singer and the limited mono sound here mean that my strong preference for Solti's studio recording remains unshaken.

(This is mostly the Paris version with a little bit of the Dresden – the three singers in the song contest – grafted on.)

**Otto Gerdes – 1968** (studio; stereo) DG  
Orchestra & Chorus - Deutsche Oper Berlin

Tannhäuser - Wolfgang Windgassen  
Elisabeth - Birgit Nilsson  
Wolfram von Eschenbach - Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau  
Venus - Birgit Nilsson  
Hermann, Landgraf von Thüringen - Theo Adam  
Walther von der Vogelweide - Horst R Laubenthal  
Biterolf - Klaus Hirte  
Heinrich der Schreiber - Friedrich Lenz  
Reinmar von Zweter - Hans Sotin  
Hirt - Catarina Alda

This is the original Dresden version with a starry cast featuring the gimmick of the great Birgit Nilsson singing both Elisabeth and Venus. There is no ostensible vocal, practical or indeed dramaturgical reason why she should not, as her voice could encompass both roles and it lends a rather intriguing twist to the idea that Tannhäuser is torn between two polar opposites of Womanhood, the holy and profane. On the other hand, it can be argued that Nilsson's hard, bright voice isn't especially well suited to either role, being neither light and sweet enough for Elisabeth nor sufficiently sensual for Venus. It is also true that Windgassen was coming towards the end of his career; he succumbed to a heart attack four years later aged only sixty.

Having said that, I am surprised by the warmth Nilsson still manages to find in her tone for Venus in the first act; she is certainly more seductive than Schech or Meier. As Elisabeth, she is hardly the only bigger-voiced soprano to undertake the role and she does soften and round her metallic timbre quite successfully. Even if her vocal profile isn't ideal, her singing is undoubtedly impressive. Occasionally - particularly at the climactic close of Act 1, when he bleats and strains – Windgassen, who never had the juiciest tone, sounds a little tired, but he is mostly still able to negotiate the awkward, very demanding music with which Wagner tasks Tannhäuser. The exchange when he declares his intent to leave Venus makes for an impressive outburst from both singers.

Catarina Alda makes the best soprano Shepherd Boy on disc, surpassed only by Solti's employment of a true boy treble. Laubenthal makes a sweet-voiced Walther. The contributions of the chorus, both the male and female contingents, are ideal, falling as gratefully on the ear as any – and the DG engineers skilfully gauge the approach and distancing of the pilgrims. There is, however, already a touch of wobble in Theo Adam's Landgrave and the rest of the supporting cast of *Tannhäuser's* fellow courtiers isn't the best, merely adequate. Reactions to Fischer-Dieskau's Wolfram will as ever vary; I prefer a warmer, darker, more resonant sound than his lighter, grainier baritone but others swoon.

Conductor Otto Gerdes† directs a very taut and propulsive performance, somewhat perfunctory and workaday, perhaps, but perfectly satisfactory, especially as he can sit back and let his soloists, chorus and orchestra take charge.

Despite its patent virtues, this recording will for some have its drawbacks: If you want to hear *Windgassen* then a performance featuring his younger self is preferable; some will balk at the doubling of Nilsson's roles; not everyone will favour DFD; there are better supporting casts and more interventionist conducting – yet this remains an enjoyable set.

† Gerdes is the subject of a revealing anecdote as narrated in Richard Osborne's biography of Herbert von Karajan. Appointed artistic director of Deutsche Grammophon in 1963 and already producing and conducting recordings, Gerdes was supposedly dismissed from that post after addressing Karajan as "Herr Kollege" (my dear colleague), a breach of etiquette which gravely offended the status-conscious supremo.

**Georg Solti – 1970** (studio; stereo) Decca  
Orchestra - Wiener Philharmoniker  
Chorus - Wiener Staatsoper

*Tannhäuser* - René Kollo  
Elisabeth - Helga Dernesch  
Wolfram von Eschenbach - Victor Braun  
Venus - Christa Ludwig  
Hermann, Landgraf von Thüringen - Hans Sotin  
Walther von der Vogelweide - Werner Hollweg  
Biterolf - Manfred Jungwirth  
Heinrich der Schreiber - Kurt Equiluz  
Reinmar von Zweter - Norman Bailey  
Hirt - Mitglied Wiener Knabenchor

I repost here this section of the review in my "Untouchables" survey:

While I enjoy the Dresden version, I do not want to miss Wagner's later musical additions, even if they introduce a certain incongruity between his early and mature styles. Of the two Paris versions available, after nearly fifty years, the 1970 Solti recording endures as most collectors' favourite by virtue of a superior cast and the fact that Domingo rather mangles the German for Sinopoli in 1988. It is by no means perfect, but it pretty much kicks everything else into touch by virtue of the extraordinary vibrancy and erotic ambiance of Solti's direction - I believe this to be his finest achievement in terms of pure conducting. I have listened to countless versions of the Overture and Bacchanal, for example, and none begins to rival his for febrile energy and propulsive drive; he is able to insinuate a kind of erotic frenzy and compulsive desperation in his sonic depiction of the orgies

taking place in Venusberg. The VPO is peerless, its rich, burnished glow ideal for conveying the sound-world of this opera.

The engineering effects, such as the gradual approach and retreat from left to right of the pilgrims' chorus, are very effective and the sound remains exemplary. The cast is as good as could be assembled in 1970, from Hans Sotin's noble Landgrave, to Victor Braun's affecting Wolfram, Helga Dernesch's sensitive, womanly Elisabeth, to Christa Ludwig's powerful, sensuously sung Venus. René Kollo's rather guttural, ungainly tenor has always been open to criticism and constitutes the main weakness here, especially when he aspirates, growls throatily to emphasise passion, and fails to produce a decent legato but the voice is strong and steady, amply conveying the kind of manic, bi-polar obsessiveness which afflicts Tannhäuser when he is attempting to resist (or not) the lures of the flesh - and Wagner knew all about that....

The use of the boy sopranos of the Viennese Boys' Choir for the shepherd boy and young pilgrims was an inspired choice and the adult singers from the Vienna State Opera Chorus are also ideal.

**Wolfgang Sawallisch – 1972** (live; stereo) Opera d'Oro; Allegro Bravissimo box set

Orchestra - RAI Roma

Prague Philharmonic Choir

Tannhäuser - René Kollo

Elisabeth - Gundula Janowitz

Wolfram von Eschenbach - Wolfgang Brendel

Venus - Mignon Dunn

Hermann, Landgraf von Thüringen - Manfred Schenk

Walther von der Vogelweide - Karl-Ernst Mercker

Biterolf - Jef Vermeersch

Heinrich der Schreiber - Martin Finke

Reinmar von Zweter - Mario Chiappi

Hirt - Elke Schary

As with Sawallisch's live Bayreuth performance a decade before, this has a starry cast led by the same tenor as in Solti's studio recording of two years earlier. The obvious question is whether it is superior - and in many ways it is preferable: Kollo is in very good voice, sounding as sweet and pliable as I have ever heard him, barking very little and eschewing the guttural emphases which occasionally mar his recording for Solti; Mignon Dunn makes an excellent Venus, warm and shimmering; Janowitz as Elisabeth is a dream: ideally pure and virginal; Manfred Schenk and Wolfgang Brendel both have neat, dark, steady voices with attractively fast vibratos and excellent diction, Schenk sounding mellow and paternal, Brendel spinning a lovely, long, legato line in his "Evening Star" aria; several singers unknown to me fill the supporting roles admirably with hardly a weak link - even if the Walther is rather tremulous. The Czech choir sings enthusiastically in good German. Sawallisch is master of all the moods in the score and really keeps the drama moving without rushing, while the RAI orchestra seems surprisingly at home in Wagner - although of course a little Italianate lyricism never goes amiss in his music - and the whole thing hangs together without longueurs, in the way of all the best performances.

The main obstacle to favouring this over the earlier recording, however, is that although it is derived from RAI broadcast tapes, the stereo spread is very narrow and the acoustic is rather muddy; to my ears it still sounds like good mono. It is nonetheless perfectly listenable and the performance so attractive that one soon stops noticing that. Thus, if you are tolerant of that sonic deficiency, it has claims to being the best live "stereo" version. You may sample it on YouTube to test your response.

**Bernard Haitink – 1985** (studio; digital) EMI/Warner  
Sinfonieorchester und Chor des Bayerischen Rundfunks

Tannhäuser - Klaus König  
Elisabeth - Lucia Popp  
Wolfram von Eschenbach - Bernd Weikl  
Venus - Waltraud Meier  
Hermann, Landgraf von Thüringen - Kurt Moll  
Walther von der Vogelweide - Siegfried Jerusalem  
Biterolf - Walton Grönroos  
Heinrich der Schreiber - Donald Litaker  
Reinmar von Zweter - Rainer Scholze  
Hirt - Gabriele Sima

I recently reviewed this:

The recent passing of Klaus König and subsequent discussion of his career prompted me to revisit this recording. I confess that my expectations were not high, despite bright spots in the cast such as Lucia Popp and Kurt Moll; I have never found Bernard Haitink to be especially distinguished in Wagner and in fact, apart from this *Tannhäuser*, his only other Wagner studio recordings are his Ring cycle (1988-90) which in my estimation has less than stellar casts compared with the best.

Immediate advantages, however, include digital sound and a first-rate orchestra and chorus – and even if Haitink's direction isn't as driven as Solti's, the shorter Dresden overture goes with a real swing and the conclusion is very grand, then the sirens are beautifully distanced and ethereal. We also have an entirely German-speaking cast – even the Slovakian-born Lucia Popp was fluent; a flaw in Sinopoli's recording is Domingo's heavily accented German (which later improved). As the opera unfolds, we may hear that the strengths of Haitink's conducting are poetic refinement and precision – but the big moments hardly hit home.

I wish I were more enamoured of the lovers; I find the young Waltraud Meier's timbre somewhat thin and tremulous, without the depth and colour we hear in the voices of singers such as "die schwarze Venus" Grace Bumbry and Christa Ludwig. For me, her somewhat twittery, piping utterance lacks allure and sensuality. Klaus König has the notes and stamina but his basic tone, too, isn't very attractive; it is rather "bottled" in the less attractive Germanic manner and tends to monotony. I found him better suited to, and vocally more impressive in, the *Das Lied von der Erde* he recorded for Tennstedt four years earlier. Kollo may growl and blare occasionally, resorting too often to guttural emphasis, but he is more convincing than König as an impassioned, tormented lover. I might not often chime with the critical opinions of BBC Music Magazine, but must agree that "'hefty but bland" is an apt summing up of König's *Tannhäuser*. There is little sexual tension between him and Venus; to my ears they sound like a little sister berating an oafish elder brother.

Casting a womanly soprano as the shepherd boy opening the third scene of Act I is a big mistake – just plain wrong – then surely the pilgrim chorus should move more obviously across the auditory plain instead of just approaching then receding. The Landgrave and his huntsmen-minstrels are mostly a fine bunch, headed by the ever-sonorous Kurt Moll and featuring some famous names – though the Biterolf is a weakness. The bleat which began to obtrude in Bernd Weikl's baritone as he aged is barely apparent and his Wolfram is typically expressive. Ensemble is tight and the horns at the climax to the act are glorious.

The contribution of Lucia Popp constitutes the principal attraction of this set; she rivals the great Elisabeth Grümmer for Konwitschny, being similarly silvery, shimmering, powerful and sensuous. Her uniquely individual voice draws the listener in – which is all the more surprising given that Elisabeth was one of the few roles she recorded which she did not perform on stage. Her duetting with König tends to show him up as rather lumpen but the exchanges with Moll's warm, purring bass are a delight. The chorus again makes an impressive impact and the orchestral playing continues to be flawless.

Act III evinces more of the same strengths and weaknesses. In the end, despite the excellence of Popp and Moll and the quality of the orchestra and chorus, the politeness of Haitink's direction and the manifold weaknesses in the casting of the eponymous anti-hero and his good-time-gal militate against recommending this whole-heartedly – and certainly do not shake my adherence to the Solti recording. On balance, too, if you want the Dresden version, I would still plump for Konwitschny over Haitink; Hans Hopf might also be a bit leaden as Tannhäuser but his tenor is essentially more attractive than König's, and we hear a superb Elisabeth and Landgrave, a better Venus, a young DFD on best behaviour and in sappy voice as Wolfram – and even Fritz Wunderlich as Walther.

(N.B. the earlier CD issue on the EMI label was a box set with a full German libretto with English and French translations in book form; the later Warner Classics set offers that on a fourth CD.)

**Giuseppe Sinopoli – 1988** (studio; digital) DG  
Orchestra - Philharmonia Orchestra  
Chorus – Royal Opera House, Covent Garden

Tannhäuser - Plácido Domingo  
Elisabeth - Cheryl Studer  
Wolfram von Eschenbach - Andreas Schmidt  
Venus - Agnes Baltsa  
Hermann, Landgraf von Thüringen - Matti Salminen  
Walther von der Vogelweide - William Pell  
Biterolf - Kurt Rydl  
Heinrich der Schreiber - Clemens Bieber  
Reinmar von Zweter - Oskar Hillebrandt  
Hirt - Barbara Bonney

This being a studio recording of the Paris version, it presents the main competition to Solti's account; which is a mostly Germanic affair, whereas this is one of those multinational productions, presided over by an Italian conductor with a penchant for eccentric gestures. Hence, straight away, the overture is abnormally slow, emphatic and deliberate; we have to go back to Kempe for its like. The transition into the music heralds a brisker tempo but the whole approach – at least in the first two acts - is more lyrical and refined than the gung-ho Solti's and the recording runs to ten minutes longer overall. The Philharmonia respond to Sinopoli's caressing manner with playing of the utmost subtlety and warmth; typical is the Introduction to Act III, the most sensitively played of any recording here, and the long, subsequent orchestral passage leading into Wolfram's "Evening Star" aria. One frequently notices the sheer elegance of the contribution of solo instruments, too; the horns in particular are sumptuous - sample the end of track 10, just before the courtiers recognise Tannhäuser and again at the close.

Both Agnes Baltsa and Plácido Domingo are much gentler, more reflective lovers than is usual; they are not so much bickering as sorrowing over their falling out. Both, too, have the most beautiful voices of any such pair and if Domingo's German is occasionally a little Hispanic, it is no great

hindrance. Baltsa can spit fire with the best of them in certain roles but here she makes Venus a much more sympathetic figure, more puzzled by than angry with Tannhäuser's desertion – although she can still plunge into her lower register and hurl out top B flats and Bs thrillingly. Domingo is certainly not as visceral as Melchior or Kollo but he does not lack passion and unlike the latter, his voice never growls or discolours – although under pressure his tone can turn a little nasal and at times one could wish for a bit more temperament, as his care to preserve the line and emit glorious tone slightly undermines the full expression of Tannhäuser's tormented dilemma.

As ever, I prefer a boy treble singing the shepherd boy, as per Wagner's wish, but Barbara Bonney sings attractively and is sufficiently distanced to dampen some of the obviously "feminine" element – but Solti got it right with a Vienna Boys' Choir member and I am baffled as to why most conductors do not follow suit. The courtiers are not the best I have heard: I always feel that Matti Salminen, while properly paternal, has a strangely hollow timbre and an odd manner of delivery; Andreas Schmidt, while very elegant, is so light, diffident and self-effacing in manner that he almost fades into the background, but the fact that he often sounds very like a young, toned-down DFD will be a recommendation to many. The other members of the Landgrave's court do not match those we hear in Solti's or Konwitschny's recordings as they recruited star singers even for the secondary roles, whereas Sinopoli's are ordinary.

I can sometimes be in two minds about Cheryl Studer's singing but her Elisabeth here is of the same high calibre as her recordings of Strauss roles such as Salome and the Empress. The pure, delicate, spun tone, fearless, shining top notes and – paradoxically - sense of vulnerability make her one of the best in the field; only some slight unsteadiness in the middle of her voice and a certain monotony or plaintiveness of expression evince any weakness but her singing is mostly glorious. "Allmächt'ge Jungfrau!" in particular is feelingly and beseechingly sung. I don't necessarily prefer her to Grümmer or Janowitz but she runs them close.

The Covent Garden chorus rise to their big, set-piece moments nobly, matching the stature of the orchestral playing; they are especially overwhelming in the "Entry of the Guests" in Act II and the Pilgrims' Chorus at the beginning of Act III. For some reason, the sound here, while perfectly acceptable, isn't the juiciest, in that there's not much sense of depth or movement and the perspective is sometimes a bit "flat", but balances are fine.

For those who like Sinopoli's stately, grander manner, this is a wholly viable alternative option for the Paris version, even if the singing isn't quite as uniformly impressive in depth as Solti's recording.

**Daniel Barenboim – 2001** (studio; digital) Teldec

Orchestra - Berliner Staatskapelle

Chorus - Berliner Staatsoper

Tannhäuser - Peter Seiffert

Elisabeth - Jane Eaglen

Wolfram von Eschenbach - Thomas Hampson

Venus - Waltraud Meier

Hermann, Landgraf von Thüringen - René Pape

Walther von der Vogelweide - Gunnar Gudbjörnsson

Biterolf - Hanno Müller-Brachmann

Heinrich der Schreiber - Stephan Rügamer

Reinmar von Zweter - Alfred Reiter

Hirt - Dorothea Röschmann

As the booklet makes clear, "The present recording is based on the Dresden version. However, Act I Scene II is based on the Paris version." Terry Barfoot [reviewed](#) this admiringly in 2002 while not according it the top spot but I have more specific objections than he. It begins in very grand, stately fashion with a typically slow overture, if without the snap and bite of Solti's account, but the frantic Venusberg music of the central section still has plenty of momentum and there is real spring in the music opening the act. The sound is excellent and immediately the distancing of the sirens' chorus is perfect, the women's chorus very seductive.

However, of the five principal singers here – one of each major voice type – I find only two to be wholly satisfactory – and three to be partly problematic. Seiffert, as he was for Barenboim's *Lohengrin* three years earlier, is clean powerful and heroic of tone, with hyper-clear enunciation and an expressive delivery of the text. He is in fact better than Kollo for Solti as he doesn't grunt and growl for emphasis but is still intense. Just as for Haitink above, Waltraud Meier is not ideal; she is as good here as I have heard her but doesn't have the smoky, sultry timbre of the best in the role of Venus, such as Ludwig and Bumbry, as her voice can sound a bit thin and curdled. Bass René Pape is in best voice: firm and sonorous and many will prize Thomas Hampson's gentle, soft-grained baritone as Wolfram von Eschenbach; for me he is a little too effete but he is an intelligent singer and sings feelingly. Ensemble and the supporting cast are good; the horns closing the Act I are terrific. Elsa does not appear until the opening of Act II and although I appreciate the size of Jane Eaglen's soprano I do not relish its pulsing production, her harsh top notes and lack of lower register. Her delivery tends to monotony she really has only one colour to her voice and is unyieldingly matronly.

Of course there are many bright spots. I always prefer a boy treble as the shepherd boy in Act I Sc. iii but if a soprano is to sing it then Dorothea Röschmann is a good choice despite a bit too much womanly vibrato and the cor anglais and chorus are in that scene are lovely. Seiffert is actually the best modern *Tannhäuser* on record; nonetheless, he needs to be better partnered as for me, Eaglen's and – to a lesser extent - Meier's contributions fatally vitiate this recording.

**Marek Janowski – 2012** (live; digital) Pentatone  
Rundfunk-Sinfonieorchester Berlin  
Rundfunkchor Berlin

Tannhäuser - Robert Dean Smith  
Elisabeth - Nina Stemme  
Wolfram von Eschenbach - Christian Gerhaher  
Venus - Marina Prudenskaya  
Hermann - Albert Dohmen  
Walther von der Vogelweide - Peter Sonn  
Biterolf – Wilhelm Schwinghammer  
Heinrich der Schreiber – Michael McCown  
Reinmar von Zweter – Martin Snell  
Hirt - Bianca Reim

This is essentially what was first heard in Dresden, hence intrinsically less interesting to me than the Paris or mixed versions. In his review, my colleague Simon Thompson rightly made several uncomplimentary observations about it yet still generously nominated it as a [Record of the Month](#) in 2013 so I refer you to his review as a counterbalance to my response. It is in beautiful sound but right from the overture I find it too tame, careful and underpowered. It is not an auspicious start; Janowski's direction is so lacklustre and I do not care for Robert Dean Smith's windy tonal emission; he struggles with high notes such that they sound forced and constricted and I often fear for his throat as he does not sound at all at ease. Marina Prudenskaya's Venus is somewhat anonymous and

I hardly understand a word of her occluded German; I also dislike the pulse she injects into her vibrato as she squeezes out each phrase. Christian Gerhaher croons his way through Wolfram's music in a sweet, precious mezza voce such that "O, du mein holder Abendstern" becomes a lullaby. The tenor singing Walther is pinched. Albert Dohmen's formerly firm bass has developed a beat and lost tonal centre. The soprano singing the shepherd boy is twittery and clearly feminine. To cap it all, Nina Stemme's soprano is now unwieldy and horribly wobbly with flapping, screamed top notes – and she is vocally and temperamentally all wrong for Elisabeth. The chorus is good, though...but need I go on? Sorry, but given the alternatives, I would not give this shelf – or hard drive - space.

**Recommendations:**

For those tolerant of vintage sound, Leinsdorf is "an essential supplement". Otherwise, despite the comparative shortage of recordings, many of those we have give real pleasure and do justice to this, one of Wagner's most consistently melodic works. The choice of Cluytens for a live mono recording is relatively straightforward and for a live stereo version either of Sawallisch's will suffice, as the other, more recent live recording from Janowski is inadequate. Konwitschny remains the best studio, stereo, Dresden option and choice of the best modern studio recording of the Paris version is surely between Sinopoli and Solti; for me, the latter still prevails for its sheer drive, while Sinopoli will serve for the listener who wants something subtler.

Historical, Paris version (cut): Leinsdorf 1941

Live mono, Dresden (mostly) version: Cluytens 1955

Live stereo, "mixed" version: Sawallisch 1972

Studio stereo, Dresden version: Konwitschny 1960

Studio stereo, Paris version: Solti 1970\*; Sinopoli 1988

\*First choice

**Ralph Moore**