

Richard Strauss's *Der Rosenkavalier*:
A survey of all ten studio recordings and selected live performances
by Ralph Moore

Der Rosenkavalier is Strauss' most popular opera by far, regularly performed worldwide and maintaining a secure place in the repertoire since its premiere in 1911. Nonetheless, many of its most dedicated admirers will admit that it has its longueurs and tolerate a few judicious cuts, as long as the lollipops remain intact.

Given that there are over a hundred recordings in the catalogue, it is surprising that there have been only ten studio accounts made since the first, abridged recording under Robert Heger in 1933 and the last of those was made as long as nearly thirty years ago by Haitink. Since then, a number of live, digital recordings have been issued, but, just as we are experiencing a dearth of great voices, the age of studio recordings is largely over, so many of my preferred versions are now quite venerable.

The three leading female roles are among the most attractive in the repertoire. Although the roles of the Marschallin and Sophie are for dramatic and lyric soprano respectively and technically the part of Octavian is for a mezzo-soprano, many singers have performed both the soprano parts at different stages of their career and some have even sung all three. The other great role is Baron Ochs, written for a basso profondo – or at least a basso cantante with good low notes, and, as is so often the case with Strauss given his disdain for tenors, the Italian Singer is given the merest cameo in a demanding, but mockingly ironic, aria which lasts only a few minutes.

In some regards, the opera was already unashamedly retrospective and nostalgic in character when it was first performed, yet it contains modernist elements and, as was so often the case with Strauss' output, was rather daring in its depiction of sexual mores, beginning with an overture which provides a musical narration of uninhibitedly energetic coitus followed by a curtain-up revealing an aristocratic married woman in flagrante, pursuing an adulterous affair with an equally noble-born teenager. An extra, quasi-Lesbian frisson is provided by the fact that Octavian is played by a woman in a "breeches" or "travestito" role who then, in true Shakespearean style, dresses up to impersonate a peasant maid, thus making for a splendidly gender-bender admixture.

Baron Ochs is a lecherous oaf – indeed, as the German indicates, an "ox" - but Strauss was careful to insist that he should not be portrayed as a bumpkin and he is given so much beautiful music that too much Sprechstimme and mugging compromises the effect – although an authentic Upper-Austrian accent is a distinct advantage. He is a member of the degenerate aristocracy, desperately trying to fund a vanishing lifestyle via an advantageous marriage with a scion of the new, self-made, bourgeois merchant class. Faninal and his daughter Sophie are representative of the wealth, vigour and independence of that class; Strauss and Hofmannsthal clearly pay tribute to Molière and Mozart's *Marriage of Figaro* here in their depiction of the interaction amongst the various social categories.

It is surely a mistake, too, to portray the Marschallin as too old; she is still a young woman, perhaps in her early thirties, not in the first flush of youth like Sophie but far from middle-aged; her poignant monologues indicate that she is simply aware of the passing of time, the mutability of all things and the inevitability of the Triumph of Young Love. She must look and sound beautiful; this has provided many sopranos - Schwarzkopf, Crespin, Della Casa, Te Kanawa, Janowitz and Fleming - with the ideal opportunity to display their gifts.

Sophie must be pert and feisty but still vulnerable and confused; too pushy, "keck" and assertive and she becomes unattractive. Faninal is too often sung by a singer who, to put it kindly, has seen better days, but his music needs a decent voice. The venal "Italian spies" are a gift to accomplished comic actors. Above all, this opera needs a great conductor to encompass the wide range of musical styles Strauss deploys, from the swooning Viennese waltzes to the spiky shrieking in the chaotic inn scene.

Ultimately, *Der Rosenkavalier* contains some of the most sublime music known to man and the highlights, such as the “Presentation of the Silver Rose” scene and the concluding trio and duet, when the Marschallin renounces any claim on Rofrano and yields him to the ecstasy of love for Sophie, feature frequently on “Desert Island Discs”. The opera is in many ways a quintessentially classical comedy displaying all the traditionally tropes associated with that genre, in that social order is restored, the wrong-doer is humbled and banished, and the promise of a marriage for love with a new beginning is in the air as the curtain falls. As with all great comedies, there are moments of great pathos and bitter-sweet realisation amid the slapstick action, and although the setting may be that of Empress Marie Theresa’s Vienna in the 1740s, the moral landscape is timeless.

I consider below all ten studio recording plus sixteen live performances, in chronological order; my selection is fairly arbitrary but notionally based on quality and availability:

Robert Heger – 1933 (studio, mono) Naxos, Pristine Audio

Orchestra - Wiener Philharmoniker
Chorus - Wiener Staatsoper

Marschallin - Lotte Lehmann
Octavian - Maria Olszewska
Sophie - Elisabeth Schumann
Der Baron Ochs auf Lerchenau - Richard Mayr
Faninal - Viktor Madin
Valzacchi - Hermann Gallos
Annina - Bella Paalen
Marianne Leitmetzerin - Aenne Michalsky
Polizeikommissar - Karl Ettl
Der Wirt - William Wernigk

Strictly speaking, this famous recording should be excluded from my survey as it is not complete but consists of extended excerpts originally issued on thirteen 78's amounting to about half of the full, three-hour opera. However, it is the first recording of note and one which has set the standard for all subsequent versions.

Strauss was originally lined up to conduct it but HMV balked at the fee he demanded and Robert Heger, whose demands were less exorbitant, was drafted in. His conducting is wonderfully idiomatic and released; the waltzes lilt delightfully and the pacing throughout is ideal.

Until Pristine Classical remastered it, the Naxos issue was certainly the best available in terms of sound, but Andrew Rose's re-engineering, using his XR remastering method, exceeds others' efforts without undue interference. He has greatly reduced swish and opened up the sound to render it clearer and cleaner. Nonetheless, he cannot do magic and neither the Naxos and Pristine issues can remedy the shatter and distortion that inevitably intrudes, especially in the concluding trio. Thus, some tolerance of historical sound must be presumed if you are to appreciate the enduring supremacy of the interpreters.

All three leading ladies are very celebrated singers and it's not hard to hear why: Lehmann is considered to be the epitome of aristocratic poise and seamless legato; she never has to strain or swoop and it is noticeable how all the singers can reach and sustain top notes, such as the climactic top C's in that trio, without having to belt them out as some in other, later recordings do. Her fast vibrato, her security in both registers, her purity of tonal emission and her intelligence with the text are all a joy. Maria Olszewska has a slightly plummy tone but is a marvellously resolute Octavian and Elisabeth Schumann's girlish, silvery sound is ideal as the teenage ingénue Sophie.

Richard Mayr does not have the fruity bass with the gravelly notes usually associated with Ochs but it is an intrinsically beautiful sound and he characterises sufficiently. After all, he was the creator of the part and perhaps we have become too habituated to a caricature of Ochs rather than simply a bluff, womanising country cousin. His is the role which suffers most from the cuts but enough remains to enable us to hear his mastery in a signature role.

(A little historical curiosity: it is Elisabeth Schumann who here sings the Marschallin's poignant, final words, "Ja, ja", as Lotte Lehmann, who had accidentally omitted to sing them when recording her part, had already retired back to her country house near Vienna.)

Rudolf Kempe – 1950 (studio, mono) Profil, Gala

Orchestra - Dresdner Staatskapelle

Chorus - Dresdner Oper

Marschallin - Margarete Bäumer

Octavian - Tiana Lemnitz

Sophie - Ursula Richter

Der Baron Ochs auf Lerchenau - Kurt Böhme

Faninal - Hans Löbel

Valzacchi - Franz Sautter

Annina - Emilie Walter-Sacks

Ein Sänger - Werner Liebing

Marianne Leitmetzerin - Angela Kolniak

Ein Notar - Erich Handel

(For some reason Profile dates this performance in 1951, but it was in fact recorded between 21-23 December, 1950)

I didn't necessarily expect to like this early radio broadcast but in general I love anything conducted by Kempe and am especially fond of his live recording from the Met six years later with Della Casa, and this live Dresden performance evinces the same exuberance and affection. The wiry sound isn't too much of an obstacle but voices are very forward and the orchestra correspondingly recessed. Tiana Lemnitz was already a veteran at only 53 but her smoky soprano with its mezzo tints suits Octavian well, only occasionally sounding a tad matronly and "lowing" a little in the concluding trio. Margarete Bäumer was Konwitschny's Isolde in the first major post-war recording of that opera; she deploys her big, vibrant voice skilfully and is very lively and expressive in her delivery of the text.

This is the earliest and best of Kurt Böhme's recordings of Ochs: his low notes are in better shape and the variety of verbal inflection is achieved without resorting to too much Sprechstimme or growling. His delivery of the text is slick and funny but he also sings neatly, without clumsiness or exaggeration.

I was unfamiliar with the German soprano Ursula Richter who sings Sophie. She reminds me of Erna Berger – very girlish but also a touch arch and shrill. She has all the notes and sounds fully engaged, however.

I like the raucous orphans but the Italian tenor is a bit laboured, with too much vibrato. However, the supporting cast is generally strong and this is such a lively account, completely free of the glacial inertia which can afflict studio versions; this all hangs together very satisfactorily and Kempe's conducting is a dream.

Erich Kleiber – 1952 (live, mono) Myto

Orchestra - Bayerisches Staatsorchester
Chorus - Bayerische Staatsoper

Marschallin - Maria Reining
Octavian - Elisabeth Grümmer
Sophie - Erna Berger
Der Baron Ochs auf Lerchenau - Kurt Böhme
Faninal - Karl Kamann
Valzacchi - William Wernigk
Annina - Ina Gerhein
Ein Sänger - Lorenz Fehenberger

The sound is rather too distant and venerable for this to be a prime recommendation and some might prefer a more mezzo-ish tint to Octavian's voice than the silvery Elisabeth Grümmer can provide, both for purposes of characterisation and to distinguish her from Reining's lightish Marschallin, but she is always such a lovely singer. Erna Berger is delightfully girlish as Sophie but again, the sopranos' voices are all perhaps rather too similar and Reining is occasionally squawky and stretched – more so than in her studio recording for Kleiber two years later. Böhme was a frequent and skilled exponent of the role of Ochs but sometimes too coarse and lumpen – and he misses some low notes. Obviously Kleiber senior is master of the score but it makes more sense to go for that next studio version.

Clemens Krauss – 1953 (live, mono) Guild, Golden Melodram

Orchestra - Wiener Philharmoniker
Chorus - Wiener Staatsoper

Marschallin - Maria Reining
Octavian - Lisa Della Casa
Sophie - Hilde Güden
Der Baron Ochs auf Lerchenau - Kurt Böhme
Faninal - Alfred Poell
Valzacchi - László Szemere
Annina - Sieglinde Wagner
Ein Sänger - Karl Terkal
Marianne Leitmetzerin - Judith Hellwig
Polizeikommissar - Franz Bierbach
Der Wirt - August Jaresch
Ein Notar - Oskar Czerwenka
Der Haushofmeister bei der Feldmarschallin - Georges Müller
Der Haufhofmeister bei Faninal - August Jaresch

This is a “house production” from a post-war Viennese company of singers used to performing on stage together under a great Strauss conductor who died too young, directing a great orchestra – what could go wrong?

The sound quality is good for so old a radio broadcast – obviously a bit shrill and “toppy” and still “historical” but you soon pass over that once under the spell of Krauss’ unerring direction. I normally prefer a mezzo-soprano as Octavian but Lisa Della Casa has a firm, slender tone of great beauty which suggests youthful passion – she had already progressed from singing Sophie for Karajan and Ludwig the previous year and would of course go to sing the Marschallin frequently and superbly, occasionally reverting to Octavian. Reining sounds in fuller, finer, firmer voice here than on either her live performance for Erich Kleiber two years earlier, her studio recording again with Kleiber the following year or live for Knappertsbusch the year after that; you may hear her at her plangent best here,

youthful-sounding, and infinitely touching in her monologues. Güden is wonderful in a role she made her own for years, soaring stratospherically with unerring accuracy.

As was usually the case, there is too much Fafner in Böhme's Ochs but he is good value, living the part and fully drawing out the comedy of the role, with plenty of lubricious chuckles. Terka's Italian Singer is excellent, as he is for Knappertsbusch.

There is a real energy about this recording, and despite the relatively primitive sound it affords much pleasure; Krauss works a kind of magic here.

Erich Kleiber – 1954 (studio, mono) Decca, Naxos

Orchestra - Wiener Philharmoniker

Chorus - Wiener Staatsoper

Marschallin - Maria Reining

Octavian - Sena Jurinac

Sophie - Hilde Güden

Der Baron Ochs auf Lerchenau - Ludwig Weber

Faninal - Alfred Poell

Valzacchi - Peter Klein

Annina - Hilde Rössl-Majdan

Ein Sänger - Anton Dermota

Marianne Leitmetzerin - Judith Hellwig

Polizeikommissar - Walter Berry

Der Wirt - Erich Majkut

Ein Notar - Franz Bierbach

Der Haushofmeister bei der Feldmarschallin - Harald Pröglhoff

Der Haufhofmeister bei Faninal - August Jaresch

Tierhändler - Erich Majkut

Modistin - Berta Seidl

Die drei Waisen: Wilfriede Loibner; Elfriede Hochstätter; Maria Trupp

Although we are spoilt for choice when it comes to choosing just one recording of "Der Rosenkavalier", now that it has been so beautifully remastered and issued in a bargain edition (unfortunately without a libretto), this 1954 mono classic can be in everyone's collection, at the very least as a supplement to a stereo version.

Its glory is undoubtedly the conducting of Erich Kleiber, so light and subtle in its phrasing, truly echt Viennese in its lilt and delicacy. All the VPO are virtuosos; you have only to listen to the instrumental introduction to Act 3 or the clarinet solo opening Band 3 on CD 1 to hear it. The sound might be mono but it simply glows. Try, too, the close of Act 2 to hear the finest version on disc, where Anna reads the "love letter" from "Mariandel" to the preening Ochs. Ludwig Weber is ideal with his treacly bass, witty inflections, heavy Upper Austrian accent and booming low E; Hilde Rössel-Majdan is sharp and firm-voiced as Anina, instead of the slightly past-it mezzo we too often hear.

Maria Reining, heard here towards the end of a long and successful career but still only in her early fifties, has been identified as the weakness in this set. It is true that she is not as resplendent as some celebrated exponents of Die Feldmarschallin but she brings a light, experienced touch, crisp diction and real pathos to the role. Sena Jurinac is a firm, boyish Octavian, Hilde Güden predictably pert, bright and charming, her top notes clean and in tune. Anton Dermota is a little dry as the Italian singer but he always seems able to make any role he undertakes a success by the sincerity and phrasing of his singing. Alfred Poell is also firm-voiced; no barking or wobbling. The teamwork amongst cast-members is much in evidence here so timing and humour are spot-on.

(Avoid the Regis issue which is not a success as it has been transferred from faulty LPs: the sound is afflicted by wow which makes it fade in and out disconcertingly, nor are peaking and distortion mitigated. Buy instead the Decca Heritage Masters or the Naxos remastering.)

Hans Knappertsbusch – 1955 (live, mono) RCA, Golden Melodram

Orchestra - Wiener Philharmoniker

Chorus - Wiener Staatsoper

Marschallin - Maria Reining

Octavian - Sena Jurinac

Sophie - Hilde Güden

Der Baron Ochs auf Lerchenau - Kurt Böhme

Faninal - Alfred Poell

Valzacchi - László Szemere

Annina - Hilde Rössl-Majdan

Ein Sänger - Karl Terkal

Marianne Leitmetzerin - Judith Hellwig

Polizeikommissar - Adolf Vogel

Der Wirt - Fritz Sperlbauer

Ein Notar - Ljubomir Pantscheff

Der Haushofmeister bei der Feldmarschallin - Harald Pröglhoff

Der Haufhofmeister bei Faninal - William Wernigk

Tierhändler - Erich Majkut

Modistin - Berta Seidl

Die drei Waisen: Alberta Kolm; Elfriede Hofstetter; Maria Trupp

Most collectors will be familiar with the famous and classic studio recording from 1954 under Erich Kleiber; this live recording from a year later marked the re-opening of the Vienna State Opera House and features several of the same singers, including the same trio of leading ladies but the substitution of Kurt Böhme as Ochs. I would say he is as amusing and characterful as Weber without the latter's low notes but with the same thick Upper Austrian accent and endearing roguishness; there's not much in it between the two. The ladies are a dream team except some have some understandable reservations about Maria Reining's Marschallin. What I said about her and her co-singers in the Kleiber recording applies equally here. A few scratchy top notes and an element of thinness in the voice notwithstanding, Reiner certainly doesn't let the side down and her experience and depth of identification with the role are apparent in the manner in which she brings a real person to stand before our aural imagination; she is especially touching in her monologues. Karl Terkal is fine as the Italian singer.

Both are mono recordings but of course the live one has some coughing and balance issues; on the other hand, there is an even greater sense of the theatre about it - everyone involved sounds wholly at ease in the idiom as if determined to demonstrate that Viennese opera was back as great as ever. There is the odd slip and proceedings are a bit more distant but this is live; allowances must be made. Knappertsbusch's relaxed, flexible baton directs a truly satisfying performance which exudes joy from the very opening notes.

Rudolf Kempe – 1956 (live, mono) Walhall

Orchestra and Chorus of the Metropolitan Opera

Marschallin - Lisa Della Casa

Octavian - Risë Stevens

Sophie - Hilde Güden

Der Baron Ochs auf Lerchenau - Otto Edelmann
Faninal - Ralph Herbert
Valzacchi - Alessio De Paolis
Annina - Martha Lipton
Ein Sänger - Thomas Hayward
Marianne Leitmetzerin - Thelma Votipka
Polizeikommissar - Osie Hawkins
Der Wirt - Paul Franke
Ein Notar - Lawrence Davidson
Der Haushofmeister bei der Feldmarschallin - James McCracken
Der Haufhofmeister bei Faninal - Charles Anthony
Tierhändler - Gabor Carelli
Modistin - Emilia Cundari
Die drei Waisen: Vilma Georgiou; Shakeh Vartenessian; Sandra Warfield

I don't usually recommend sixty-year-old live, mono recordings but I am really taken with this one; I certainly listen to it all the way through with enormous pleasure - and without bothering to refer to a libretto (none is provided), so I cannot tell you if there are any stage cuts, but I don't think so. If there are, I didn't notice and in truth it's an opera that can stand a little judicious pruning, especially when it's this well sung and played.

The sound is very present, forward mono, rather wiry and glaring but clear and recorded at high volume so you have to turn it down for comfortable listening. The conducting is superb: optimistic Strauss was Kempe's forté and each Act surges forward in one great sustained curve so there are no longueurs or any dragging. Time stands still as it should in key moments such as the Marschallin's "Clock Aria"; she is wonderful delivering those chilling lines: "Manchmal steh' ich auf, mitten in der Nacht und lass' die Uhren alle stehen." and of course the crucial "Presentation of the Silver Rose" scene, whose Introduction is first thrilling then melds into sublimity, is beautifully done. Kempe revels in the waltz music, too, and the Met orchestra is on top form.

But the cast, the cast! Lisa Della Casa is ideal as the Marschallin: silvery, poised and elegant with crystalline diction - so alluring yet poignant in her relinquishment of her young lover to Sophie. Hilde Gueden is very much a known quantity in that latter role; indeed, she was its reigning exponent for at least fifteen years before Helen Donath and Lucia Popp, and her trilling, girlish assumption features in half a dozen recordings to prove it. I was pleasantly surprised by the suitability of Risë Stevens' Octavian: her tough lower register, heft of voice and the dark colour of her mezzo are actually considerably more aptly boyish than many a more celebrated singer and she sings with real bravado.

Otto Edeleman was a famous Ochs for good reason: he is funny - as you may hear from the audience reaction, has terrific top Fs and a G, and although he only just manages the low notes he generally impersonates the old rogue very successfully with what is clearly a lubricious and authentic Upper Austrian accent. There are young singers soon to be of distinction in supporting roles, such as James McCracken, Sandra Warfield and Gabor Carelli and as a bonus Thomas Hayward as the Italian Singer is one of the best I have ever heard - although to my shame I thought I had never heard of him, but then I remembered that he was Rodrigo in the Vinay "Otello" conducted by Busch. His Wiki entry reveals him to have been an important artist and I am now better informed. Another singer new to me is Ralph Herbert as Faninal - and very good he is, too.

In short, sonic limitations notwithstanding, I would as soon listen to this recording of *Der Rosenkavalier* as almost any other; my only reservation is that the audience are a bit bronchial when they should be rapt - but it was winter in New York and this recording was either the 18th of January or February, depending on whether you believe Walhall here or other discographical sources.

Herbert von Karajan – 1956 (studio, stereo) Warner EMI, Brilliant

Orchestra - Philharmonia Orchestra

Chorus - Philharmonia Chorus - Choruses of Loughton High School for Girls and Bancroft's School

Marschallin - Elisabeth Schwarzkopf

Octavian - Christa Ludwig

Sophie - Teresa Stich-Randall

Der Baron Ochs auf Lerchenau - Otto Edelmann

Faninal - Eberhard Wächter

Valzacchi - Paul Kuen

Annina - Kersten Meyer

Ein Sänger - Nicolai Gedda

Marianne Leitmetzerin - Ljuba Welitsch

Polizeikommissar - Franz Bierbach

Der Wirt - Karl Friedrich

Ein Notar - Harald Pröglhoff

Der Haushofmeister bei der Feldmarschallin - Erich Majkut

Der Haufhofmeister bei Faninal - Gerhard Unger

Tierhändler - Paul Kuen

Modistin - Anny Felbermayer

Die drei Waisen: Elisabeth Schwarzkopf; Christa Ludwig; Kersten Meyer

This is surely the most famous and frequently recommended of *Der Rosenkavalier* recordings, especially now that it has been very successfully remastered by Warner and it has been many people's introduction to the opera. To a large degree your response to it will be governed by how much you like Schwarzkopf's highly detailed, inward and sensitive portrayal of the Marschallin. While I respect and even have some affection for it, I find it is not my favourite or the one for which I most readily reach on my shelves, for a number of reasons. I prefer Schwarzkopf elsewhere, as in her live recording for Solti three years later where she is more pointed and less mannered, and I prefer Karajan's live 1960 recording with the same Ochs – Edelmann, whose neater bass I prefer to the ubiquitous Böhme - but an otherwise generally superior cast and the advantage if the impetus of a live performance. That is not to say that this one is without great merit; Ludwig's Octavian is splendidly forthright; Stich-Randall's bright, white sound suits Sophie admirably and she is laser-precise in her intonation. I do not care for Gedda's Italian Singer when placed alongside the glorious -outpouring of Pavarotti for Solti but there is little to choose between Ludwig and her best rivals such as Minton, von Stade and Troyanos; all are ardent, boyish and vocally resplendent.

Karajan is master of the score, often quite restrained and classical until the final vocal apotheosis which is the trio. Some will prefer Solti's more Romantic, large-scale approach, others will appreciate Karajan's subtler and more forensic interpretive stance; both have leading ladies who invest their portrayal with pathos and intelligence. As paradigms of each style, listen to how they deliver those final words of resignation, "Ja, ja"; they are both great vocal actresses and both recordings are treasurable.

Karl Böhm – 1958 (studio, stereo) DG Originals, Eloquence

Orchestra - Sächsische Staatskapelle Dresden

Chorus - Chor der Staatsoper Dresden

Marschallin - Marianne Schech

Octavian - Irmgard Seefried

Sophie - Rita Streich

Der Baron Ochs auf Lerchenau - Kurt Böhme

Faninal - Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau

Valzacchi - Gerhard Unger
Annina - Sieglinde Wagner
Ein Sänger - Rudolf Francel
Marianne Leitmetzerin - Ilona Steingruber(-Wildgans)
Polizeikommissar - Albrecht Peter
Der Wirt - Helmut Goldman
Ein Notar - Fred Teschler
Der Haushofmeister bei der Feldmarschallin - Jürgen Krasemann
Der Haufhofmeister bei Faninal - Johannes Kemter
Tierhändler - Harald Neukirch
Modistin - Hermi Ambros
Die drei Waisen: Edith Hellriegel; Elfriede Zimmermann; Margot Karasek

I don't much warm to this performance: the two lead sopranos are rather anonymous and almost indistinguishable; Seefried is too light and Schech breezes prettily through the role without much depth in her characterisation. Both have rather child-like, piping voices, hardly suggestive of nobility or passion, but Rita Streich's Sophie is intermittently delectable, sounding very similar to Hilde Güden but rather slimmer of tone and without her ease on top notes. Kurt Böhme is funny and characterful as Ochs but musically deficient: his voice seems to have aged - he barks and growls his way through the part and, oddly for a Wagner bass, appears not to have the low notes. The Italian tenor, sung by the forgotten Rudolf Francel is rather good and Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau makes more of Faninal than is usually the case.

Böhm barrels through the score as if worried that its potential longueurs will be apparent if he doesn't rush. The sound is supposedly stereo but thin and barely distinguishable from a good mono recording, with considerable hiss and hum in the background and little depth or bloom.

I look for a recording with more substance and sonority than this; Böhm's later live recording in 1969 is preferable.

Georg Solti – 1959 (live, Ambient Stereo) Pristine Audio

Orchestra and Chorus of the Covent Garden Opera

Marschallin - Elisabeth Schwarzkopf
Octavian - Sena Jurinac
Sophie - Hanny Steffek
Der Baron Ochs auf Lerchenau - Kurt Böhme
Faninal - Ronald Lewis
Valzacchi - Raymond Nilsson
Annina - Monica Sinclair
Ein Sänger - Kenneth MacDonald
Marianne Leitmetzerin - Judith Pierce
Polizeikommissar - Rhydderch Davies
Der Wirt - David Tree
Ein Notar - Rhydderch Davies
Der Haushofmeister bei der Feldmarschallin - David Tree
Der Haufhofmeister bei Faninal - John Dobson
Tierhändler - Paul Kuen

It is immediately evident from the first few minutes into the introduction of this opera that Solti here in his Covent Garden debut was already the master of both the energy and the lyricism of the score when this live performance was broadcast by the BBC from the Royal Opera in 1959. The horns whoop ecstatically to portray the lovers' union, then we ease gracefully into the three-quarter-time cosiness of the domestic breakfast scene and we are set fair.

Sena Jurinac is a slightly lighter Octavian than the true mezzos such as Christa Ludwig or Yvonne Minton who sang the role – Jurinac herself was singing the Marschallin a few years later – but she has all the boyish impetuousness and vigour required and sings with a steady, luminous intensity in the crucial Presentation Scene. Elisabeth Schwarzkopf repeats her minutely detailed Marschallin; her word-painting is delicious. The Marschallin in another of my favourite recordings, the live Metropolitan performance under Kempe starring Lisa Della Casa, may be more restrained, refined and silvery, but Schwarzkopf's variety of inflection is not necessarily incongruous with that strong-willed character. She is if anything earthier and less “arch” (yes, always that word when discussing her singing) than in her studio recording for Karajan three years earlier and I was pleasantly surprised by the heft of her voice as it comes across in this broadcast. Her singing at the conclusion of Act 1 is exquisite, suffused with wistful, resigned sadness at the inevitability of Octavian's eventual departure for pastures new – and younger. The poised solo violin matches her in tenderness and the orchestral playing in general is first rate, despite a bit of poor tuning at the start of Act 2.

Hanny Steffek has a slender, silvery voice and makes a lovely, light Sophie, girlish and “keck,” very much like Hilde Güden in timbre and manner, her soprano floating sweetly through the high tessitura of her part even if occasionally she sounds a little too plaintive and slightly flat in the final duet with Octavian, but the three star sopranos combine to sing a final trio of ineffable poise and refinement, with none of the beat in the top notes sometimes encountered.

About Kurt Böhme's Ochs, I am less happy. There is no doubting the humour and vitality of his portrayal, but his voice is not intrinsically attractive in the manner of Kurt Moll or Otto Edelmann, his bottom notes are groaned and there is a lot of coarse bawling and Sprechstimme, so much of the sheer beauty of his music is subsumed into rather too oafish a characterisation, complete with the requisite Upper Austrian accent.

I like the generous tone and fast vibrato of Kenneth MacDonald as the Italian Singer and it makes a change to hear in Ronald Lewis a Faninal with some voice instead of an over-the-hill character actor. Judith Pierce is a singer unknown to me, but she is a pleasant duenna to Sophie and the supporting cast is generally fine.

Of course, Solti went on to make a studio recording ten years later which, despite its age, continues to vie with Karajan's as the classic account but this live broadcast goes a long way to explain why he was seen as the man to revitalise the Covent Garden opera on his appointment as Music Director eighteen months later.

The sound quality is excellent, especially now that the tape has been subjected to Pristine's usual XR remastering into Ambient Stereo, and first reveals the presence of a rather bronchial audience which eventually settles down.

Herbert von Karajan – 1960 (live, mono) DG, Gala

Orchestra - Wiener Philharmoniker

Chorus - Wiener Staatsoper

Marschallin - Lisa Della Casa

Octavian - Sena Jurinac

Sophie - Hilde Güden

Der Baron Ochs auf Lerchenau - Otto Edelmann

Faninal - Erich Kunz

Valzacchi - Renato Ercolani

Annina - Hilde Rössl-Majdan

Ein Sänger - Giuseppe Zampieri

Marianne Leitmetzerin - Judith Hellwig

Polizeikommissar - Alois Pernerstorfer
Der Wirt - Fritz Sperlbauer
Ein Notar - Josef Knapp
Der Haushofmeister bei der Feldmarschallin - Erich Majkut
Der Haufhofmeister bei Faninal - Siegfried Rudolf Frese
Die drei Waisen: Liselotte Maikl; Ute Frey; Evelyn Labruce

Despite its being only in mono and live, thus evincing a few noises and imbalances, there is a case for preferring this 1960 performance to Karajan's celebrated 1956 studio recording with Schwarzkopf, especially if you favour the superb cast here and value the spontaneity of a live performance. Rhythms are more pointed, Edelmann is broader and freer in transmitting the comedy inherent in the character, speech - with a fruity Upper Austrian accent - and behaviour of Ochs and there is altogether more life to proceedings than the coolly poised, beautifully gauged studio set.

Personally, I much prefer Lisa Della Casa's delicate, silvery sound to Schwarzkopf's more calculated delivery and Jurinac's Octavian seems to me to be every bit the equal of Christa Ludwig's; her clear, strong, pure-voiced tone is ideal for the boyish Count. Gueden was already very experienced in the part of Sophie without sounding too old; she hits and floats every note ideally. Zampieri is better and more aptly voiced than Gedda as the Italian singer. What a cast it is in general: star names abound and all are perfectly suited to their roles. The VPO plays voluptuously and the sound is remarkably good for so venerable a recording.

Heinz Wallberg – 1961 (live, mono) Walhall

Orchestra and Chorus - Teatro Colón (Buenos Aires)

Marschallin - Régine Crespin
Octavian - Kersten Meyer
Sophie - Anneliese Rothenberger
Der Baron Ochs auf Lerchenau - Kurt Böhme
Faninal - Hans Friedrich
Valzacchi - Eugenio Valori
Annina - Noemi Souza
Ein Sänger - Fritz Wunderlich
Marianne Leitmetzerin - Marta Benegas
Polizeikommissar - Victor De Narké
Der Wirt - Italo Pasini
Ein Notar - Eduardo Ferracani
Der Haushofmeister bei der Feldmarschallin - Umberto di Toto
Der Haufhofmeister bei Faninal - Virgilio Tavini
Tierhändler - Virgilio Tavini
Modistin - Consuelo Ramos
Die drei Waisen: Corrada Malfa; Maria De Benedictis; Carmen Burello

Rather muddy mono sound with peaking on loud, high notes and some out-of-tune playing from a less-than-stellar orchestra somewhat compromise this live performance but it's just about listenable and it's good to hear a young Régine Crespin, slightly fresher than for Solti nine years later in the studio recording. Kersten Meyer here graduates from Annina and one of the three waifs in Karajan's studio recording to Octavian; she has a fine voice but sounds a bit matronly for the teenager. Böhme does his usual, reliable turn as Ochs – he is in half a dozen recordings in this survey alone – and, as always, I find him acceptable without being the best. As an unexpected bonus we hear Fritz Wunderlich sing divinely as the Italian tenor – was there nothing he could not sing? - although he does take an illicit breath before “fuoco”! Anneliese Rothenberger makes a fleet, silvery Sophie; despite specialising in lighter, operetta-type roles, she was a fine Zdenka in *Arabella* and recorded a lovely *Four Last Songs* – so she

quite at home herein Strauss. Wallberg is equally idiomatic and presides over a performance which improves as the orchestra plays itself in. This is not a first choice recording but equally it is not without great merit.

Georg Solti - 1968/69 (studio, stereo) Decca, DG Originals

Orchestra - Wiener Philharmoniker

Chorus - Wiener Staatsoper

Marschallin - Régine Crespin

Octavian - Yvonne Minton

Sophie - Helen Donath

Der Baron Ochs auf Lerchenau - Manfred Jungwirth

Faninal - Otto Wiener

Valzacchi - Murray Dickie

Annina - Anne Howells

Ein Sänger - Luciano Pavarotti

Marianne Leitmetzerin - Emmy Loose

Polizeikommissar - Herbert Lackner

Der Wirt - Anton Dermota

Ein Notar - Alfred Jerger

Der Haushofmeister bei der Feldmarschallin - Herbert Prikopa

Der Haufhofmeister bei Faninal - Kurt Equiluz

Tierhändler - Karl Terkal

Modistin - Rosl Schwaiger

Die drei Waisen: Arleen Augér; Rohangiz Yachmi; Ingrid Mayr

For many, Karajan's earlier recording is an automatic first choice, but I am one who sometimes finds Schwarzkopf's mannerisms irritating, despite her obvious skill with word-painting. Crespin, because of the very slight wear in her rich, lovely voice, is perfect to depict a beautiful, still young woman who is just slightly past her prime. The sound in this Decca recording is also superior to the EMI and Solti belies his reputation for harshness in an affectionate and detailed interpretation which gives his singers plenty of time to make their points. There isn't much to choose between the other principal singers: both Octavians, Ludwig and Minton, are boyish and impassioned, both Stich-Randall and Donath have silvery, soaring voices which handle the arcing line of Sophie's music with consummate ease, both Ochs (Ochses? Oxes?) are rude, crude, humorous and rich of voice; I haven't much time for a "refined" Ochs; he's meant to be a glorious boor of the type you can find only among a spoilt, provincial aristocracy who have little to do with urban civilisation; big fish in their rural pond and I love the way he pretentiously lards his discourse with expressions borrowed from Latin and other European languages, sometimes getting them wrong. The clincher for me, apart from the better sound in the Decca, is the Italian tenor of Pavarotti, so much more glamorous and vainglorious than Gedda's rather pinched effort. I admire many of the older, mono sets, but this is the one to choose if you want modern sound.

Karl Böhm – 1969 (live, stereo) DG

Orchestra - Wiener Philharmoniker

Chorus - Wiener Staatsoper

Marschallin - Christa Ludwig

Octavian - Tatiana Troyanos

Sophie - Edith Mathis

Der Baron Ochs auf Lerchenau - Theo Adam

Faninal - Otto Wiener

Valzacchi - Gerhard Unger

Annina - Cvetka Ahlin

Ein Sänger - Anton De Ridder
 Marianne Leitmetzerin - Kari Lövaas
 Polizeikommissar - Klaus Hirte
 Der Wirt - Robert Licha
 Ein Notar - Ljubomir Pantscheff
 Der Haushofmeister bei der Feldmarschallin - Alfred Pfeifle
 Der Haufhofmeister bei Faninal - Siegfried Rudolf Frese
 Tierhändler - Ewald Aichberger
 Modistin - Olga Warla
 Die drei Waisen: Gabriele Fuchs; Gunda Spilutini; Reinhild Linder

For many, Solti's studio recording of *Der Rosenkavalier* made for Decca in the same year as this live performance remains the recording of choice, although Karajan's 1956 recording understandably also has its adherents. Live recordings like this one are more problematic, especially in an opera which often has a lot of people on stage and can get noisy and suffer from balance issues. There is indeed a bit of coughing and the occasional abrupt shift in aural perspective as the singers move about the stage, but for the most part this is in really excellent sound for so venerable a recording – nearly fifty years old. It does not appear to have been remastered since its first appearance on CD in 1994 but it doesn't need it. There are a few cuts standard at that time – only Solti's is absolutely complete – but I don't mind that in an opera which can be prolix. Furthermore – joy of joys – it is re-issued with a full German English libretto separate from the other booklet with notes, synopsis and lovely photographs of the handsome, traditional Salzburg production.

Der Rosenkavalier has in fact been fortunate in both live and studio recordings, making choice very much a matter of taste. For instance, my priority in this opera is always for a rich-voiced bass with beautiful tone and a proper low D who is comical without caricaturing Ochs as a growling pumpkin, so I was immediately concerned that Theo Adam's bass would be too rocky and light in timbre to be ideal – although the rest of the cast looks tantalising (apart from Otto Winer's predictably nasal Faninal). In fact, the wobble that sometimes afflicted his tone is almost completely in abeyance and he is very amusing, with a good low D, even if his bass does not have the nut-brown depth of Kurt Moll. Along with Kurt Böhme, Otto Edelmann virtually owned the role for twenty years from the early 50's and is of course the excellent Ochs in the famous Karajan studio recording, but Adam shows that he, too, is a master of it. He is clearly vastly experienced in how to bring out the comedy of his role, exuding the avuncular ease of a wholly good-humoured sexist pig rather than a caricatured monster. This portrayal is certainly superior to the clumsy, mugging Ochs Böhme gives us for Böhm in his 1958 studio recording and Adam also much better here than in his assumption of the role for Hans Vonk in his very mediocre 1984 Dresden set.

Karl Böhm was of course a major Strauss conductor and in my opinion always at his best live in Salzburg, so that augured well here. Never one to “do a Bernstein” in Strauss, he sets off like a rocket in the introduction but phrases the swooning “Viennese” passages lovingly. However, I was unprepared not just for the sheer all-round excellence of this performance but for the way it helped me to re-connect with this masterwork opera, as a really great recording can. Not least instrumental in that process is the sensitivity and pathos of Christa Ludwig's Marschallin. She gives Schwarzkopf a run for her money in terms of attention to textual nuance but in a manner which I find more natural and touching than her colleague's sharper demeanour. I have never heard the “time” and “clocks” passages delivered with more conviction; Ludwig invests her naturally robust tone with a slight tremulousness, such that her bewilderment when she observes, “Die Zeit, die ist ein sonderbar Ding”, and her fear when she relates how, “Manchmal steh' ich auf mitten in der Nacht” to stop all the clocks, are both palpable. Her warmer soprano, still with its mezzo-ish tint, before her vocal crisis, after which she wisely reverted to lower tessitura roles, is ideally suited to portray an older, wistful, vulnerable yet resigned Marschallin.

Tatiana (charmingly credited here Germanically as “Tatjana”) Troyanos’ oboe tones are suitably boyish for the impetuous Octavian and a young Edith Mathis is silvery but feisty as Sophie. All three female leads have the vibrancy and fast vibrato of a vanished era of singing; I found that the beat in Sophie Koch’s voice in the recording starring Renée Fleming and conducted by Thielemann utterly spoiled it for me.

Dutch tenor Anton de Ridder provides yet another pleasant surprise. He doesn’t do the usual walk-on, stand-and-sing Big Name Tenor shtick but instead really acts what Strauss and Hofmannsthal wanted: a send-up of the vainglorious Italian primo tenore, hammily gulping and sighing while simultaneously displaying a grand voice.

The supporting cast is stuffed with first-rate Salzburg regulars and the Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra demonstrates the they had clearly come on since George Szell, after the first few bars of a rehearsal of this opera, reputedly observed, “Gentlemen, you evidently don’t know this score.”

Any recording of *Der Rosenkavalier* must slay the listener with the concluding trio and duet and this one delivers, although it’s a pity that at first the singers seem to be upstage right and too far from the microphones; fortunately, that gradually rights itself, after a minute or so presumably as they move. Mathis soars, Ludwig nails her top B without shrieking and Troyanos blends seamlessly with the two sopranos, providing a warm underblanket of sound.

This might not topple favourite studio recordings but the very acceptable live sound and the beauty of the singing make it a *Der Rosenkavalier* to treasure.

Alexander Gibson – 1971 (live, stereo) Ponto

Orchestra - Scottish National Orchestra

Chorus - Scottish Opera

Marschallin - Helga Dernesch

Octavian - Janet Baker

Sophie - Elizabeth Harwood

Der Baron Ochs auf Lerchenau - Noel Mangin

Faninal - Thomas Hemsley

Valzacchi - Nigel Douglas

Annina - Joan Davies

Ein Sänger - Derek Blackwell

Marianne Leitmetzerin - Judith Pierce

Polizeikommissar - William McCue

Der Wirt - Alexander Morrison

Ein Notar - John Graham

Der Haushofmeister bei der Feldmarschallin - John Robertson

Der Haufhofmeister bei Faninal - Clifford Hughes

Tierhändler - Alexander Morrison

Modistin - Ann Baird

Die drei Waisen: Patricia Hay; Movra Paterson; Claire Livingstone

Despite her fame in Strauss Lieder, Dame Janet Baker did not sing in more than two Strauss opera productions and this mono, off-air recording is one of them, made for the Scottish National Opera in the King's Theatre, Glasgow, in 1971. It features two other very fine international singers, Helga Dernesch (singing excellent English) and Elizabeth Harwood. The playing of the orchestra is not the most sumptuous but it's surprisingly idiomatic under conductor Alexander Gibson and the horns in particular are very secure and sonorous. The waltzes lilt engagingly and tempi are affectionate without dragging.

There is a fair amount of hiss, proceedings are rather remote and there are some tape slurs, drop-outs and interference but it's all listenable enough and it's the only way we shall ever have to hear a distinguished cast singing a beloved opera in the vernacular. Janet Baker is in sovereign voice, impassioned and boyish - and as "Mariandel" she displays a sense of humour we don't always associate with this serious artist. Noel Mangin, the versatile New Zealander bass-baritone makes a characterful Ochs without really having sufficient rotundity of voice for the part even though the basic quality of his tone is very attractive. Dernesch has just the right womanly maturity of sound for the Marschallin and Harwood acquits herself admirably as Sophie, having the requisite steady, silvery, if hardly girlish, tone. Derek Blackwell tackles the Italian singer valiantly if a little strenuously and Joan Davis is the most musical and attractive Annina I have heard in a role often given to a singer with too blowsy a voice. The rest of the supporting cast is adequate, even if Thomas Hemsley as Faninal muffs the climactic note in his "A solemn day!" opening Act 2.

No performance can be satisfactory unless the big moments work: the Presentation of the Rose delivers febrile tension and delicate rapture while the it is immediately clear that the conclusion to Act 3 is in safe hands - or rather larynxes - when Baker launches into "Marie-Therese" so richly to be joined by Dernesch's peculiarly dark, plangent soprano, so it's a pity that the sound is so distant. The top B climax to the trio provides the goosebumps we crave and Gibson sustains a magical, fairy-tale mood through the teenage lovers' duet until the little pageboy trips in and out.

Georges Prêtre – 1971 (live radio, stereo) Opera d'Oro

Orchestra and Chorus - RAI Napoli

Marschallin - Gundula Janowitz

Octavian - Brigitte Fassbaender

Sophie - Ileana Cotrubas

Der Baron Ochs auf Lerchenau - Karl Ridderbusch

Faninal - Thomas Hemsley

Valzacchi - Sergio Bertocchi

Annina - Carmen Gonzales

Ein Sänger - Veriano Luchetti

Marianne Leitmetzerin - Dora Carral

Polizeikommissar - Andrea Snarski

Der Wirt - Gino Sinimberghi

Ein Notar - Alfredo Giacomotti

Der Haushofmeister bei der Feldmarschallin - Aronne Ceroni

Der Haufhofmeister bei Faninal - Antonio Pirino

Tierhändler - Tommaso Frascati

Modistin - Gianna Lollini

Die drei Waisen: Giovanna di Rocco; Anna Maria Balboni; Rosetta Arena

I admit to getting excited when I saw this; the cast is a dream, headed by that peerless Straussian soprano, Gundula Janowitz. However, when the set actually arrived, I was immediately disappointed by the muddy, fuzzy sound and the lack of higher frequencies. However, on further listening using headphones I came to appreciate the beauty of the singing despite the sonic limitations of the live recording. Prêtre confirms his reputation as an efficient, matter-of-fact conductor; there is little affection for the ebb and flow of that glorious music and he rushes much of the score. Yes, you can still hear those wonderful voices: Janowitz' creamy, soaring soprano; Cotrubas' plangent, girlish tones; Fassbender's clear, boyish Octavian; Ridderbusch's rotund, focussed Ochs, Luchetti's virile Italian singer - they're all as good as I had hoped, but that makes it even harder to put up with the recording quality in an opera that really cries out for clean sound. Of course, there are some blips in ensemble and one or two sour notes from the two sopranos, but that is only to be expected in a live performance.

Nonetheless, I'm going to stick with my favourite *Der Rosenkavalier* sets such as the Solti and the marvellous excerpts disc by Fleming, Graham and Bonney, but if you must have these singers then caveat emptor: this is not one of Opera d'Oro's best even though it's still quite listenable.

Leonard Bernstein – 1971 (studio, stereo) Sony

Orchestra - Wiener Philharmoniker

Chorus - Wiener Staatsoper

Marschallin - Christa Ludwig

Octavian - Gwyneth Jones

Sophie - Lucia Popp

Der Baron Ochs auf Lerchenau - Walter Berry

Faninal - Ernst Gutstein

Valzacchi - Murray Dickie

Annina - Margarita Lilowa

Ein Sänger - Plácido Domingo

Marianne Leitmetzerin - Emmy Loose

Polizeikommissar - Herbert Lackner

Der Wirt - Karl Terkal

Ein Notar - Ljubomir Pantscheff

Der Haushofmeister bei der Feldmarschallin - Harald Pröglhoff

Der Haufhofmeister bei Faninal - Ewald Eichberger

Tierhändler - Mario Guggia

Modistin - Laurence Dutoit

Die drei Waisen: Erna Mühlerberger; Hermine Saidula; Johanna Herndl

I approached this 1971 recording with some trepidation as I was aware of some very adverse reactions to Jones' singing and Bernstein's conducting. I do not claim that it is perfect or that it necessarily supersedes previous admired versions, but it takes its place amongst my favourites as it things to offer found nowhere else. It will not suit all tastes, but as a Bernstein fan I was neither surprised by nor disappointed with Lennie's treatment of this miraculous score: he does what I had hoped and expected him to do, which is to milk it for all its worth without allowing it to become so soupy that it loses its edge or charm.

Let's start with its undoubted strengths: first and above all, the enchanting, silver-voiced Sophie of the incomparable Lucia Popp. Hers is simply the finest Sophie on disc. For those of us unable to accept the somewhat muddy sound and the infamous, very flat last, climactic note from Popp in the concluding trio on the live Salzburg set conducted by Dohnányi, this is the answer if you want a souvenir of her artistry in this role. Secondly, and if you like it, Bernstein's coaxing of the Vienna Philharmonic to produce a gorgeous noise. The fifteen- minutes performance cuts traditional at that time are duly observed and I cannot say that I am too bothered by that in such a long score; all the moments of heart-stopping schmaltz are there intact and this operaphile hippo is happy to wallow along with Bernstein. Finally, the sound is superb for its - or any - era.

We enter more controversial territory with the casting of the other two leading ladies. Personally, I like Ludwig's Marschallin almost as much as I do her Octavian; the slightly matronly smokiness in her tone makes her as apt as Crespin for the role, even if she doesn't have quite the same allure. Her voice is in top condition and despite the richness of her middle and lower range, the high notes come easily, too. She does not play with the words with the same subtlety as Schwarzkopf or Crespin but it's a grand performance. Walter Berry is not the first bass-baritone to make a success of Ochs: his bumpkin accent and lubricious inflections are very characterful. Even though he can hit the low notes reasonably comfortably, they do not resonate and rumble as they do with a true bass like Kurt Moll, but that is a minor complaint. The supporting cast are terrific, featuring some Viennese regulars. Casting Placido

Domingo as the Italian tenor ought to have been a coup, but he sounds stretched and a bit grey of tone compared with Pavarotti in the 1969 Solti and 1979 Dohnányi recordings, for all that he is perfectly acceptable.

Finally, we come to what is for me the real crux of the debate regarding the merits of this recording: Gwyneth Jones' Octavian. Frankly, after all the hoo-hah I had read, I was expecting her to sound much rockier and more worn than is in fact the case here. Yes, the voice spreads a bit at times but she brings a very welcome masculine toughness, and is often very expressive indeed; it would be absurd to claim as some commentators do that she utterly ruins the ensembles. It is a very big voice, intrinsically lovely of tone, and I derive much pleasure from her sincere, open-hearted singing, the odd wobble notwithstanding. Lennie grunts and groans throughout but his vocal obbligato is not as obtrusive as the contributions of Barbirolli or the Colin Davis of latter years and I can live with it.

This reissue on the bargain Sony Opera House series label is absurdly cheap and the recent remastering renders it even better; it thus constitutes a painless addition to my various versions of this seminal Richard Strauss opera. Of course, there is no libretto. In other moods, I shall still want to hear the brilliant Solti set, the classic Kleiber and the superb and sophisticated Karajan but this is a worthy account which sits very well with a glass of wine and a penchant for indulgence.

Carlos Kleiber – 1974 (live, stereo) Living Stage, Opera d’Oro

Orchestra - Bayerisches Staatsorchester
Chorus - Bayerische Staatsoper

Marschallin - Claire Watson
Octavian - Brigitte Fassbaender
Sophie - Hilde de Groote
Der Baron Ochs auf Lerchenau - Karl Ridderbusch
Faninal - Benno Kusche
Valzacchi - David Thaw
Annina - Margarethe Bence
Ein Sänger - William Holley
Marianne Leitmetzerin - Anneliese Waas
Polizeikommissar - Albrecht Peter
Der Wirt - Lorenz Fehenerberger
Ein Notar - Hans Wilbrink
Der Haushofmeister bei der Feldmarschallin - Georg Paskuda
Der Haufhofmeister bei Faninal - Franz Klarwein
Tierhändler - Wolfgang Pirke
Modistin - Waltraud-Isolde Eichlepp
Die drei Waisen: Evi List; Doris Linswe; Judith Auer
Hippolyte - Karl Schrader

Kleiber goes off like a rocket – driven, impassioned then relaxing beautifully into the post-coital languor – what a wonderful tune that love music has and how Kleiber caresses it as the early-morning birdsong trills. He has a fine orchestra to do his bidding. Brigitte Fassbaender made a speciality of the role of Octavian and is ideal; meanwhile Kleiber reminds us that the “was heißt das «Du»” conversation is almost a parody of “Tristan”. If only Watson were as alluring; her soprano is edgy and squawky, lacking the creamy poise of the best Marschallins and she too frequently affects a kind of knowing whine in her tone. Ridderbusch like Fassbaender made a speciality of his role; he has the smoothest of basses – rather too noble but such a pleasure to hear. The Italian tenor and Faninal are both really weak but Hilde de Groote makes a very fine Sophie, very much in the Lucia Popp mode but smaller voiced. However, the attractions of Kleiber’s peerless conducting, Fassbaender’s Octavian and Ridderbusch’s Ochs are not enough to offset the central disadvantage here of Watson’s Marschallin.

Edo De Waart – 1976 (studio, stereo), Philips, Decca

Orchestra - Rotterdam Philharmonic Orchestra
Chorus - Netherlands Opera Chorus - Helmond Concert Choir

Marschallin - Evelyn Lear
Octavian - Frederica von Stade
Sophie - Ruth Welting
Der Baron Ochs auf Lerchenau - Jules Bastin
Faninal - Derek Hammond-Stroud
Valzacchi - James Atherton
Annina - Sophia Van Sante
Ein Sänger - José Carreras
Marianne Leitmetzerin - Nelly Morpurgo
Polizeikommissar - Henk Smit
Der Wirt - Adriaan van Limpt
Ein Notar - Henk Smit
Der Haushofmeister bei der Feldmarschallin - Wouter Goedhart
Der Haufhofmeister bei Faninal - Matthijs Coppens
Tierhändler - Matthijs Coppens
Modistin - Renée Van Haarlem
Die drei Waisen: Angela Bello; Marianne Dieleman; Thea Van der Putten

A couple of names in the cast list of this Dutch recording make it instantly attractive, not least the enchanting Frederica von Stade, who to my knowledge has never made a recording anything less than superlative and whose honeyed mezzo-soprano with its shimmering vibrato and vibrant top graces the role of Octavian irresistibly; her soft singing alternating with passages of boyish impetuosity make this a complete characterisation - admirers like me will want this for her alone.

A bonus is the Italian Singer of José Carreras in best, youthful voice, ardent and sensuous, and among the best to undertake that perilous aria. Alas, *Der Rosenkavalier* demands a great ensemble and a virtuoso conductor, and neither Evelyn Lear's pallid, grainy Marschallin nor De Waart's nerveless, anonymous conducting really do much to bring the opera alive. Jules Bastin's light, baritonal, rather scratchy Ochs lacks the rumbling rotundity of sound singers such as Moll being to the role, even if he inhabits the role convincingly enough; he tends to groan rather than intone. Ruth Welting easily suggests a bewildered teenage girl with her thin lyric soprano, but it turns shrill and edgy in alt, and during "Mir ist die Ehre widerfahren", instead of time standing still I begin to wonder whether De Waart has stopped beating altogether as all momentum is lost; the magic fails to descend and stasis takes over. The whole thing emerges as – dare I say – very sensible, prudent and Dutch, without a hint of sensuality, despite von Stade's contribution.

Christoph von Dohnányi – 1978 (live, stereo) Gala

Orchestra - Wiener Philharmoniker
Chorus - Wiener Staatsoper

Marschallin - Gundula Janowitz
Octavian - Yvonne Minton
Sophie - Lucia Popp
Der Baron Ochs auf Lerchenau - Kurt Moll
Faninal - Ernst Gutstein
Valzacchi - David Thaw
Annina - Doris Soffel
Ein Sänger - Luciano Pavarotti

Marianne Leitmetzerin - Liselotte Rehmann
Polizeikommissar - Kurt Rydl
Der Wirt - Karl Terkal
Ein Notar - Alfred Sramek
Der Haushofmeister bei der Feldmarschallin - Horst Hiestermann
Der Haufhofmeister bei Faninal - Josef Köstlinger
Tierhändler - Horst Nitsche
Modistin - Zsófia Peterdy
Die drei Waisen: Sylvia Herman; Margaretha Hintermeier; Cheryl Kanfoush

The cast here is enough to make any *Der Rosenkavalier* aficionado slaver then swoon with anticipation. Some have complained of poor, muffled sound but I think that's an exaggeration - it sounds OK even on YouTube, where you can hear the whole thing. I cannot think of four voices I would sooner hear in the principal roles here, even if I would like a more characterful conductor Dohnányi's conducting is decidedly "straight" and non-interventionist; some will prefer more Viennese schmaltz, whereas some will like his directness; I could do with a little more overt affection. Still, he has the best Strauss orchestra and Luciano Pavarotti is parachuted in for his cameo as the Italian Singer; it doesn't matter that he sounds out of place, as that's the point – and he sings like a god.

Janowitz' pure, fluting soprano is aristocratic yet young-sounding; she is so moving in her crucial aria-monologues concerning the inexorable passage of time. Minton is tough and boyish in the Fassbaender-Troyanos mode with an equally beautiful voice; Popp is dreamy yet spirited as Sophie, and Moll is both vocally and theatrically the best Ochs imaginable. his chestnut-brown bass purring through the music, then plummeting into sepulchral low notes and even cooing in a pure falsetto.

So why can this not be a primary recommendation, my reservations about the sound and conducting notwithstanding?

Woe, woe and thrice woe: uncharacteristically, Popp sings her concluding B in the final duet with Octavian a whole semitone down on B flat and gamely holds it, which means that, instead of it crowning a memorable performance, it descends into bathos and leaves an indelible impression of wholly the wrong kind. Should one, pardonable duff note really matter that much? How I wish Gala had resorted to illicit but surely justified trickery and interpolated a snippet from rehearsal or another source. Otherwise, this is a wondrous performance; if you can pass over that flaw, I recommend it highly.

Herbert von Karajan – 1982 (studio, digital) DG

Orchestra - Wiener Philharmoniker
Chorus - Wiener Staatsoper

Marschallin - Anna Tomowa-Sintow
Octavian - Agnes Baltsa
Sophie - Janet Perry
Der Baron Ochs auf Lerchenau - Kurt Moll
Faninal - Gottfried Hornik
Valzacchi - Heinz Zednik
Annina - Helga Müller(-Molinari)
Ein Sänger - Vinson Cole
Marianne Leitmetzerin - Wilma Lipp
Polizeikommissar - Victor von Halem
Der Wirt - Karl Terkal
Ein Notar - Carlos Feller
Der Haushofmeister bei der Feldmarschallin - Kurt Equiluz

Der Haufhofmeister bei Faninal - Franz Kasemann
Tierhändler - Horst Nitsche
Modistin - Gabriele Sima

Let me clarify immediately that my approbation of this recording is no way intended to signify that it is perfect or even the best but I do love it for a number of reasons despite its flaws - and there are some, so let's clear those out of the way first.

The biggest disappointment here is Janet Perry's rather thin, twittery Sophie. She is adequate and suitably shrewish - as she should be; she's no pushover - but I am spoilt by familiarity with the more beautiful voices of singers such as Gueden, Bonney, Popp and Stich-Randall. Karajan's brief attachment to her and his propensity for casting her in major roles remain rather puzzling - but the same could be said about his commitment to Tomowa-Sintow, always an excellent but hardly stellar singer. She is, however, notably better here as the Marschallin than she is thirteen years later in the live Covent Garden performance I recently reviewed; the voice is fresher, more distinctive and silvery with a faster vibrato and more body to her tone, so her presence here is no demerit, especially as she is adept in delivering the text without over-egging it. Other flaws include a poorly placed break in the middle of Act 1, just after Moll, for some ill-advised reason, decides to shriek "Als Morgengabe!" in falsetto, and a weak Faninal in Gottfried Hornik. Vinson Cole - another faintly puzzling Karajan favourite - sings the brief but crucial Italian tenor part sweetly but weedly, without the requisite heft and virility his aria requires; the singer needs to sound like a puffed-up peacock - or at least a matinee idol. Finally, in the first Act, that are too many of the extreme variations in dynamics that plagued Karajan's later recordings when he took fiddling with the control panel, so that I found myself alternately straining to hear then being blasted by my speakers.

So, after that list of moans, why still recommend this? Well, Karajan is, as ever in Strauss, a master of pacing and phrasing and the VPO plays magnificently, right from the start with the most glorious horns you could imagine. Sample the violin solo which concludes Act 1 - simply exquisite. Then there is Agnes Baltsa's vocally slim, tough and boyish Octavian - no matronly, bosomy wobble there, I'm delighted to report. She brings out the best in Perry in their Act 3 exchanges, too. But best of all is the Ochs of the recently late Kurt Moll; he is in even better voice than he is in the 1995 live recording I referred to above, with no hint of rustiness and the most extraordinarily resonant low notes. At the end of Act 2, where he lies nursing his wound, he delivers simply mesmerising singing and of course he is amusing, too. The VPO plays him out with that ear-worm of a waltz that pervades the opera and the listener is in Strauss heaven. With all three singers at their best, the ethereal conclusion to the whole opera works its magic, too.

I still love several other recordings, too, including Karajan's earlier classic account, Solti's sumptuous version, Kempe live in New York with Lisa Della Casa, and a good few more - but this hardly disappoints despite the niggles.

Hans Vonk – 1984 (live, digital) Denon
Orchestra - Dresdner Staatskapelle
Chorus - Dresdner Staatsoper

Marschallin - Anna Pusar-Joric
Octavian - Ute Walther
Sophie - Margot Stejskal
Der Baron Ochs auf Lerchenau - Theo Adam
Faninal - Rolf Haunstein
Valzacchi - Karl Heinz Koch
Annina - Annette Jahns
Ein Sänger - Klaus König

Marianne Leitmetzerin - Andrea Ihle
Polizeikommissar - Jürgen Commichau
Der Wirt - Armin Ude
Ein Notar - Günter Dreßler
Der Haushofmeister bei der Feldmarschallin - Jürgen Hartfiel
Der Haufhofmeister bei Faninal - Ralph Eschrig
Tierhändler - Johannes Kemter
Modistin - Birgit Fandrey

First class conducting from the late Hans Vonk in excellent live sound, marred by very ordinary, mediocre solo singing. There are many better sung versions of this masterpiece, performed by singers of real character and distinction. This is enjoyable as a provincial live performance but never as a recording to be repeatedly played, Mr Wobble is no Ochs alongside Moll, Edelmann, Jungwirth or Berry and the sopranos are merely competent. The tenor is poor, too.

Bernard Haitink – 1990 (studio, digital) Warner EMI

Orchestra - Dresdner Staatskapelle
Chorus - Dresden Oper

Marschallin - Kiri Te Kanawa
Octavian - Anne Sofie von Otter
Sophie - Barbara Hendricks
Der Baron Ochs auf Lerchenau - Kurt Rydl
Faninal - Franz Grundheber
Valzacchi - Graham Clark
Annina - Claire Powell
Ein Sänger - Richard Leech
Marianne Leitmetzerin - Julia Faulkner
Polizeikommissar - Bodo Schwanbeck
Der Wirt - Heinz Zednik
Ein Notar - Alfred Sramek
Der Haushofmeister bei der Feldmarschallin - Ferry Gruber
Der Haufhofmeister bei Faninal - Michael Kraus
Tierhändler - Armin Ude
Modistin - Sabine Brohm
Die drei Waisen: Birgit Bonitz; Monika Harnsch; Heike Liebmann

Bernard Haitink's recording has the advantage of being uncut, featuring a wonderful orchestra and enjoying first-rate sound but according to some listeners shares the same handicap as that of his compatriot Edo De Waart in that proceedings are too sober and polite. I quote from the "Gramophone" survey (only I've corrected the typo in it): "Bernard Haitink goes to a mellifluous extreme with a radiant orchestra that engulfs his singers, turning the opera into a dramatically inert tone-poem." That seems to me to be rather over-stating the case; there are some wonderful voices here, not least the trio of leading ladies headed by Kiri Te Kanawa, whose Marschallin is warmth, elegance and class personified, but in the end, it is true that this account lacks somewhat in pizzazz. While acknowledging the beauty of von Otter's voice I have always found her mezzo a tad bland; nor is this one of Te Kanawa's most animated performances, although her monologue arias are touchingly delineated. Barbara Hendricks' Sophie is distinguished by her highly individual timbre; it is rather smoky and sophisticated for an ingenue but I like it very much and she floats her top notes beguilingly.

Re-acquaintance with Kurt Rydl's Ochs revealed it to be much better than I had remembered it: he has good low notes and none of the rockiness which afflicted his tonal emission as time went on is in evidence but his characterisation is tonally and verbally rather monochromatic compared with masters

of the role. Richard Leech makes a more than competent Italian Singer but his voice is lacking in Latin warmth and sensuousness.

The clarity of the singers' diction is impeccable and comprimario roles are very well taken, some exhibiting rather more character than the principals. The lack of passion and propulsion here reduces this recording to something more admirable and polished than viscerally involving but Haitink and his singers rise to ecstasy in the big set numbers and as we have not had as good a performance since, I can confidently endorse it.

Andrew Davis – 1995 (live, digital) Opus Arte

The Orchestra and Chorus of the Royal Opera House

Marschallin - Anna Tomowa-Sintow

Octavian – Ann Murray

Sophie - Barbara Bonney

Der Baron Ochs auf Lerchenau - Kurt Moll

Faninal – Alan Opie

Valzacchi – Paul Crook

Annina – Leah-Marian Jones

Ein Sänger – Bonaventura Bottone

Marianne Leitmetzerin – Jennifer Rhys-Davies

Polizeikommissar – Eric Garrett

Der Wirt – Jeffrey Lawton

Ein Notar – Gordon Sandison

Der Haushofmeister bei der Feldmarschallin – John Dobson

Der Haufhofmeister bei Faninal – John Marsden

Tierhändler – Neil Griffiths

Modistin – Glenys Groves

Die drei Waisen: Alison Rayner; Beth Michael; Andrea Hazell

I am very enamoured of at least three of the performances here in this live recording and it is in very good sound for a radio broadcast, with excellent balances and very little audience noise. It enjoys excellent playing from the ROH orchestra, especially the horns, but it has its flaws and the competition is strong. Davis' direction is more than competent, if hardly distinctive; although he doesn't linger like Bernstein, there are times when I could do with more momentum of the kind Solti generates. The same could be said of the lead performance from Anna Tomowa-Sintow; while I esteem her as an artist I have never found her to be an especially distinguished singer or understood Karajan's preference for her over all other sopranos in his latter years. She sings well and her experience in the role of the Marschallin - she recorded it for Karajan thirteen years earlier - tells in her delivery of text, especially in her stop-the-clocks aria. Her tone is mostly creamy and she does some lovely things, such as the floated pianissimo on "die silbene Rose" at the end of Act 1, but she is not as vocally alluring as Della Casa, or Fleming (whom I heard recently singing as well as ever in this role at Covent Garden).

I am also not wild about Ann Murray's Octavian, as she is one of too many mezzo-sopranos whose vibrato flaps - I find that Sophie Koch in Thielemann's live recording shares the same fault - but she is engaged, forceful and suitably boyish, without too much of the harshness which could disfigure her tone as her voice travels upwards; this is the best I have heard her.

Bonaventura Bottone does a good job in his Italian tenor aria without erasing memories of Pavarotti, who has more gleam, sheen and glamour to his voice.

But the best singing here comes from Kurt Moll, Barbara Bonney and, in a smaller role, Alan Opie. I mention the latter because it is too often sung by a clapped-out, superannuated baritone or a simply

inadequate singer; it is a joy to hear the part sung so firmly. Some have observed that Moll takes a while to warm and starts off a bit rusty; I don't hear that although it's a pity he misses his top F in Act 1. Otherwise he is the Platonic ideal of an Ochs: pachydermal low notes, a nice "cutting edge" to his purring bass, long experience in the role enabling him to bring out the comic nuances and a lovely little evil, grumbling chuckle. Bonney is sublime: silvery, girlish yet feisty; she is far preferable to Janet Perry in Karajan's second studio recording and brings out the best in Murray the final duet which is a dream but I do wish that Agnes Baltsa had been on hand to sing Octavian.

Available very reasonably priced this recording will not disappoint even if it is not the very best option, given the attractions of alternatives.

Christian Thielemann – 2009 (live, digital) Decca

Orchestra - Münchner Philharmoniker

Chorus - Philharmonia Chor Wien - Kinderchor des Badischen Staatstheater Karlsruhe

Marschallin - Renée Fleming

Octavian - Sophie Koch

Sophie - Diana Damrau

Der Baron Ochs auf Lerchenau - Franz Hawlata

Faninal - Franz Grundheber

Valzacchi - Wolfgang Ablinger(-Sperrhacke)

Annina - Jane Henschel

Ein Sänger - Jonas Kaufmann

Marianne Leitmetzerin - Irmgard Vilsmaier

Polizeikommissar - Andreas Hörl

Der Wirt - Jörg Schneider

Ein Notar - Lynton Black

Der Haushofmeister bei der Feldmarschallin - Wilfried Gahmlich

Der Haufhofmeister bei Faninal - Jörg Schneider

Tierhändler - Jörg Schneider

Modistin - Bernarda Bobro

Die drei Waisen: Catherine Veillerobe; Angela Rudolf; Nina Amon

This most elegant and sumptuous of Grand Operas demands the finest of orchestras and the most silkily vibrant of soprano voices. There haven't been too many recordings of note, either studio or live, in the digital era, hence this reviewer finds himself referring back to the established classics by Karajan, Solti, Bernstein and Kleiber (*père et fils*) to establish a benchmark against which this latest issue from Decca may be judged.

Certainly, we may gauge the quality of the Münchner Philharmoniker in such passages as the extended Prelude and Pantomime opening Act III. They do not have the quite the lush, voluptuous heft of the Vienna Philharmonic under Solti but they play under Thielemann with nuance, drive and wit, and in moments such as the orchestral introduction to the Presentation of the Silver Rose they capture beautifully the requisite shimmering quality and otherworldly poise, despite the rather flat acoustic of the Festspielhaus as recorded. Thielemann's direction is not unduly indulgent; he gave notice of his affinity with operatic Strauss in his excellent rendition of the suite from "*Der Rosenkavalier*" as an adjunct to a truly impressive his "*Ein Alpensinfonie*" on DG in 2000 and here he brings out both the contrapuntal brilliance and the gorgeous, swooning harmonies of Strauss's writing in a performance which demonstrates his mastery of the idiom. The audience is quiet and the aural picture here is clean, clear and well-balanced if rather "neutral" and lacking ambience, allowing us to hear details without being very "present".

So already in terms of conducting, orchestral playing and recorded sound, this recording is competitive without necessarily jumping to the head of the queue. That leaves the voices...and that's where my doubts creep in.

Yet two singers are simply glorious. Just in time, we finally have a commercial recording, albeit live rather than studio, of today's premier Strauss soprano in her best role. To my ears there is little indication of wear in Renée Fleming's smoky, creamy soprano and long experience as the Marschallin has lent her interpretation more depth of expression. She sounds mature but never middle-aged. The Marschallin should still be a young woman in a loveless marriage dallying with a toyboy; Fleming's rich, long-breathed tones capture all her wry, wistful, rueful resignation without turning her into a caricature of a desperate matron. She is warm and poignant, often capitalising on the tangy resonance of her lower register to balance the floated top notes and she is especially touching at key moments such as when she narrates getting up in the night to stop all the clocks in her attempts to halt the march of time.

Just as impressive is Jonas Kaufmann's preening Italian singer, effortlessly delivering an impassioned account of the retrospective aria in that wonderfully virile, baritonal tenor - it's a shame about the intrusive on-stage applause which cuts across the end of his commanding command performance.

Hawlata's Ochs is, for all its comic inventiveness, vocally a disappointment. I am glad that he doesn't take the modern route of turning him into a menacing thug; he is essentially a risible buffoon, somewhat broadly characterised in a manner which is often coarse, whereas previous celebrated exponents such as Jungwirth, Ridderbusch and, above all, Moll, allow us to remember that he is still an aristocrat, albeit a boorish one. The heavy Oberösterreich accent is amusing but his bass is dry, lacking the rotund low notes and either straining at or crooning his top F's and F sharps.

Likewise, the veteran Franz Grundheber's Faninal is amusing but vocally close to an embarrassment, his baritone being so rocky and hollow. Supporting roles are adequate without being striking or especially pleasing on the ear.

However, the real problems start with the dreaded wobble which afflicts the voices of both Sophie Koch and, more intermittently, Diana Damrau. When I reviewed Damrau's Donna Anna in the concert performance "Don Giovanni" from the same venue as this recording, 2011, I remarked that her vibrato had begun to loosen distressingly. Here, two years earlier, the tendency is merely incipient; she is true and musical but without purity and steadiness of tonal emission still cannot hold a candle to the likes of Kathleen Battle, Lucia Popp or Barbara Bonney. Similarly, the continuous, obtrusive beat in Koch's mezzo-soprano makes her sound excessively womanly in a bosomy fashion rather boyishly impetuous. When Octavian launches the famous concluding trio, we should be swept along on a warm raft of steady sound, not bothered by lumpy tone. There is an egregious contrast between the sweet pulse of Fleming's voice and the puttering of her soprano companions. This is not a constant issue and some may be far less sensitised to than I; I readily admit that the great climaxes still worked their magic for me and I often forgot my objections.

Attractively packaged with a full libretto in two sections, ultimately this is not another classic set but one which will appeal primarily to the many admirers of Fleming.

Recommendations in summary

There are so many excellent recordings that any outright recommendations are inevitably subjective. However, a studio recording in good sound must surely take priority over the many excellent live, mono accounts. Those from the pre-digital era, in my estimation, generally offer more than most digital recordings, live or studio, although I do like the last of those under Haitink. Secondary recommendations are in brackets.

Studio mono: Kempe, 1950 (Kleiber, 1954)

Live mono: Kempe, 1956 (Kraus, 1953)

Studio stereo: **Solti, 1969*** (Karajan, 1956)

Live stereo: Böhm, 1969 (von Dohnányi, 1978 - with a health warning re Popp's final note)

Studio digital: Haitink, 1990

***overall recommendation**

Ralph Moore