

## ***Elektra* by Richard Strauss: A discographical survey**

by Ralph Moore

There are more than eighty recordings of *Elektra* in the catalogue, which, along with *Salome*, makes it the most recorded of Strauss' operas after the obvious *Der Rosenkavalier*; *Capriccio* enjoys only a quarter of that number. That popularity is perhaps surprising, given that the work is grim and frequently dissonant compared with the more obviously melodic and approachable *Ariadne auf Naxos*, for example, but it obviously exercises a strong fascination over audiences – and, in my judgement, not without reason. It took me a while to appreciate its allure; it is by no means “comfortable” listening but it is one of the most dramatically compelling and thrilling of Strauss' stage works, with all the action compressed into a single act of a duration of under two hours, without any break. After an intensive listening session, you won't necessarily be humming the tunes but for days after you can find yourself intoning the triadic D-A-F-D leitmotiv – in either its three or four-note form - that opens, recurs throughout and closes the opera: A-ga-MEM-non! - and lots of luck trying to sing the “Elektra chord” in the shower...

However, there are only six studio recordings and half a dozen or so radio broadcasts up until the early 70's; the great majority of recordings are live stage performances. I consider twenty-three below, including all six studio versions and seven of those radio broadcasts. I have included the earliest, a concert performance recording from 1937, but it is very heavily cut (thereby fitting onto one CD) so not strictly eligible and obviously in what we are pleased to call “historical sound” My MWI colleague Marc Bridle reviewed it as part of [his own admirable survey](#) back in 2000; mine supplements and updates his conspectus. He also provides a synopsis. I hope he will forgive me for re-cycling one of my favourite musical anecdotes, which he uses as his foreword:

After the band of the Grenadier Guards had played an Elektra potpourri, a note was sent via an equerry to the Bandmaster: “His Majesty does not know what the Band has just played, but it is never to be played again.”

The compact, skilful and intelligent libretto contributes much to its impact. It was the first collaboration between the composer and playwright Hugo von Hofmannsthal, who adapted his own play of the same name, in turn based on Sophocles and written in 1903, six years before the opera's premiere. Hofmannsthal presents a gripping Freudian projection of opera's most dysfunctional family; the bloodthirsty action shocked audiences even more than the overt sexuality and barbarism of the licentious *Salome*, first performed in 1905 but it is Strauss' modernist-expressionist score which most compels attention; the raw brutality of both the cacophonous music, employing a huge orchestra of 112 players and the disturbing plot still shock today. However, alongside the shrieking excesses of the music may be heard all kinds of beauties and subtleties, when Strauss foregoes exploiting the resources of that enormous band and suddenly explores the possibilities of much reduced forces, alternating violently dissonant episodes with more lyrical and conventionally harmonised passages. Remember, the same partnership between Strauss and von Hofmannsthal had made a complete volte-face only two years later to produce *Der Rosenkavalier*, an equally deliberate bit of snook-cocking which apparently turned its back on verismo and the current progressive musical trends, evincing instead a yearning to “stroke the faded velvet curtains of Romanticism”.

For all the supposed differences between *Der Rosenkavalier* and *Elektra*, both operas contain remarkably similar passages: you have only to hear the lyrical episodes in Elektra's and Chrysothemis' monologues to register that this is the same composer who could caress our ears with Viennese waltzes, while simultaneously writing music for the tavern scene in *Der Rosenkavalier* every bit as spiky and chaotic as the opening scene in *Elektra*, when the maids discuss the princess' feral demeanour. Although there are no arias as such in *Elektra*, and the opera is through-composed, employing lots of near Sprechstimme, there are also many sustained melodic passages incorporating

ear-tickling leitmotifs. In addition, are splashes of grim humour, such as the music imitating the jangling of Clytemnestra's bangles and jewellery, the absurd, tripping "Laurel and Hardy" woodwind theme introducing Aegisthus, Chrysothemis' deadpan observation after the blood-curdling screams indicating that her brother has just murdered their mother: "Es muß etwas geschehen sein" (Something must have happened), Elektra's sly, ironic insinuation to her mother that she herself is the sacrificial victim required, and her pandering to Aegisthus in order to cajole him into entering the house where death awaits him at the hands of Orestes.

Another disgruntled monarch and Edward VII's nephew, Kaiser Wilhelm II, had disapproved of *Salome*, advising the composer after its premiere, "This Salome will do you no good", but as Strauss later observed in his diary, the opera which was 'no good' "enabled me to build my house in Garmisch." *Elektra* was just such another calculated triumph. Ever the canny publicist and a thoroughly practical man of business, the versatile Strauss was always one step ahead of the critics; he understood how to please and titillate his public with something new in order to turn a tidy profit. Hence, he re-invented himself several times during a long career which encompassed an astonishing variety of operatic styles, culminating in the beautiful conversational chamber-opera *Capriccio*.

The three principal female roles are stuffed with challenges, requiring an incisive dramatic soprano with a shining top C for Elektra, a penetrating lirico-spinto soprano for Chrysothemis capable of arousing sympathy, and a mature mezzo-soprano or contralto of supreme histrionic gifts for Klytämnestra. Hofmannsthal's play and libretto removed all extenuating motives for the latter's assassination of her husband, turning her into a she-monster, but it's a gift of a part for an experienced character-actress mezzo-soprano with plenty of voice left. It is important that the subsidiary male roles for (bass-)baritone (Orest), tenor (Aegisth) and bass (the Tutor) be well cast, but they are almost cameo appearances in comparison with the trio of leading ladies. It is often fun, too, to spot among the serving maids the names of singers in the early stage of their careers, many whom will go on to become stars in their own right: for example, Marilyn Horne, Lucia Popp and Gundula Janowitz.

The text is exceptionally subtle and literate, especially by operatic standards, containing some of the most memorable, chilling and moving lines in the canon; I think here of Clytemnestra's ostensibly casual, but revealing, complaint, "Ich habe keine gute Nächte" (I have no good nights, i.e. I never sleep well), Orestes' heart-rending, "Die Hunde auf dem Hof erkennen mich, und meine Schwester nicht?" (The farmyard dogs recognise me, but my sister does not?), Chrysothemis' "Kinder will ich haben" (I want to have children!) and Elektra's, "Ich habe ihm das Beil nicht geben können!" (I could not give him the axe!) – shades of "Here's Johnny!" crossed with *Psycho*. Like Bartok's *Duke Bluebeard*, the macabre spectacle of *Elektra* is oddly compelling, like a road accident. Opera's most dysfunctional family is given some utterly astonishing music; there is something sly and knowing about this opera, as if Strauss were deliberately assuming a modernist idiom "pour épater la bourgeoisie". For all that I recognise a degree of conscious artifice in Strauss's determined modernism, I find the spectacle wholly absorbing.

The opera has a decidedly fortunate recording history. As you might expect, recordings conducted by Karl Böhm feature prominently but Mitropoulos also looms large. A deciding factor for some listeners will be whether it is presented whole, without the half a dozen or so standard stage cuts disliked by Strauss himself; only Solti, Sawallisch and Bychkov in their studio recordings give us *Elektra* absolutely complete but there are also cut performances which no devotee will want to be without.

#### **Artur Rodzinsky – 1937 (live; mono) Eklipse**

Orchestra - New York Philharmonic-Symphony Orchestra

Elektra - Rose Pauly

Chrysothemis - Charlotte Boerner

Clytemnestra - Enid Szánthó  
 Aegisth - Frederick Jagel  
 Orest - Julius Huehn  
 Der Pfleger des Orest - Abrasha Robovsky

This abridged concert performance at Carnegie Hall begins with Hungarian soprano Rose Pauly's intense and steady account of Elektra's "Allein" monologue; her voice is even throughout its range up to top C and burns like an acetylene flame, conveying both anguish and pathos. She is wonderfully wheedling and ironic in her exchange with Aegisthus. Neither of the two other singers matches her: Charlotte Boerner is accurate but pale and twittery; Enid Szánthó has the right, genuine contralto sound but attempts little in the way of characterisation. The Orestes and Aegisthus are sung by two justly famous Americans and neither disappoints, but their contributions are of course relatively small: Huehn is grave and sonorous, Jagel firm yet craven-sounding. There are no maids and Elektra's exchanges with her mother and sister are both heavily cut; however, we do get the whole of the final section of the opera from Orestes' entrance to the end. What we can hear that Robovsky's conducting is very satisfactory: both lyrical and exciting by turns. The sound is pretty grim and distant – lots of crackle, radio interference and drop-outs, but the *Elektra* aficionado will want to hear this.

**Eugen Jochum – 1944 (live radio broadcast; mono)** Arkadia; Acanta

Orchestra - Hamburgische Staatsoper  
 Chorus - Hamburgische Staatsoper

Elektra - Erna Schlüter  
 Chrysothemis - Annelies Kupper  
 Klytämnestra - Gusta Hammer  
 Aegisth - Peter Markwort  
 Orest - Robert Hager  
 Ein alter Diener - Hermann Siegel  
 Ein junger Diener - Fritz Göllnitz  
 Die Schleppträgerin - Käthe Lange  
 Die Vertraute - Elisabeth Schwier  
 Der Pfleger des Orest - Gustav Neidlinger  
 Die Aufseherin - Claire Autenrieth  
 1. Magd - Maria von Ilosvay  
 2. Magd - Hedy Gura  
 3. Magd - Martina Wulf  
 4. Magd - Lisa Bischof  
 5. Magd - Senta Mirtsch

First, the sound here is extraordinarily good for a recording made in Hamburg, during the dark days of June 1944; it must have been committed to metal tape as few allowances have to be made in comparison with good mono recordings of the 50's and there is no audible distortion at high volume.

Second, although the average collector might wonder who the singers are, s/he may be assured that they are major voices entirely up to the demands of their roles; the listener is immediately struck by the strength, precision and immediacy of the singing of the Five Maids, amongst whom probably only Maria von Ilosvay is known and remembered today – she was a famous Erda. However, the standard of singing from all concerned is phenomenal, prompting yet again speculation regarding what has happened to voices and vocal training in recent years. Provincial German orchestras today are, in contrast better than ever but the Hamburg band here is first rate.

I am generally no great fan of Eugen Jochum but his conducting here is superb, bringing out both the hysteria and lyricism of this extraordinary score; climactic points such as the slaughter by Orest of Klytämnestra and Aegisth are thrilling.

Perhaps Erna Schlüter would have had a bigger career had she not thrown in her lot with her Nazi masters, but she also experienced a rapid, post-war vocal decline, as she was one of those artists like Giuseppe Di Stefano who “committed suicide every night”. As it stands, she remains one of the greatest exponents of the eponymous role I have heard on disc. Her sound is rather mature and grainy but she is secure, passionate and powerful - and her cackles in track 10 are terrifying. Annelies Kupper also had a major voice and makes a vibrant, animated Chrysothemis, more positive than is sometimes the case; she is especially moving in her expression of her desire for a husband and children. Gusta Hammer's rich contralto is apt for the portrayal of Clytemnestra and she sings beautifully, if not with quite the trenchant sense of haunted suffering which the greatest portraits convey. In contrast to another reviewer, I love Robert Hager's deep, weighty bass as Orest and find his gloomy, gnomic utterances to be very effective; the Recognition Scene is especially touching. The Aegisth was a Mime specialist and makes that unattractive character a craven, hysterical first cousin to Strauss' Herod in *Salome*. The instantly recognisable Gustav Neidlinger – forever associated with Alberich – makes much of his few phrases as the Tutor.

There are two standard cuts as reluctantly sanctioned by the composer; otherwise this is very high on the list of recommendable recordings and all devotees of the opera will want to hear it.

**Thomas Beecham – 1947 (live radio broadcast; mono)** Myto; Opera d'Oro

Orchestra - Royal Philharmonic Orchestra

Chorus - BBC Chorus

Elektra - Erna Schlüter

Chrysothemis - Ljuba Welitsch

Klytämnestra - Elisabeth Höngen

Aegisth - Walter Widdop

Orest - Paul Schöffler

Ein alter Diener - Eric Goldie

Ein junger Diener - George Chitty

Die Schlepptägerin - Gwladys Garside

Die Vertraute - Mildred Watson

Der Pfleger des Orest - Ernst Erbach

Die Aufseherin - Ruth Packer

1. Magd - Maud Heaton

2. Magd - Gwladys Garside

3. Magd - Monica Warner

4. Magd - Sylvia Patris

5. Magd - Marion Davies

Beecham was always a champion of Strauss; not only did he conduct the British premiere of *Elektra* 1910 but that was the first Strauss opera ever to be performed in this country – and what an introduction. Beecham is master of the score, delivering a thrilling performance and galvanising the RPO into playing with manic intensity while maintaining a crisp ensemble. The ghastly screams from both Klytämnestra and the orchestra accompanying the grisly unseen murders of the crinkly lovers are frightening and no moment of drama is under-played.

Some slight unsteadiness was beginning to creep into Erna Schlüter's voice but the nobility and beauty of tone and the impact of her acting are intact. The supporting cast is very strong with no less a singer than Ljuba Welitsch in a role which is too often the relative weakness in recordings. Elisabeth

Hängen is a powerful Klytämnestra; a deep-voiced Paul Schöffler and a vivid Walter Widdop are Orest and Aegisth respectively.

This was made in a BBC studio and the sound is remarkably clean and clear for its age. No lover of this psycho-psychotic drama will want to miss it. (The final scenes Beecham recorded at the same time for EMI with the same cast may also be heard on the Naxos issue, along with extracts from *Ariadne auf Naxos*.)

**Dimitri Mitropoulos – 1949 (live radio broadcast; mono)** Guild Immortal Performances

Orchestra - New York Philharmonic Orchestra

Chorus - New York Philharmonic Chorus

Elektra - Astrid Varnay

Chrysothemis - Irene Jessner

Clytemnestra - Elena Nikolaidi

Aegisth - Frederick Jagel

Orest - Herbert Janssen

Der Pfleger des Orest - Michael Rhodes

1. Magd - Miriam Stockton

2. Magd - Edith Evans

3. Magd - Elinor Warren

4. Magd - Beverly Dame

I wonder what twisted or perhaps just mischievous mentality was behind the New York Philharmonic's programming of *Elektra* for broadcast from Carnegie Hall in its subscription concert series as an entertainment for Christmas Day. It's hard to think of a less appropriate offering for such a day – unless, of course, it's a deliberate attempt to recreate the sense of shock and outrage generated by the premiere in some quarters.

First, three caveats: this is severely cut, moreso than the average performing version, and indeed so much so that I would hesitate to recommend it at all as a "complete" recording' at only 87 minutes. The role of Chrysothemis is particularly savaged and thereby greatly reduced, including the loss of her entire second scene with Elektra. Let me refer you to three MWI colleagues' reviews from 2002 here for further details: [review 1](#) ~ [reviews 2 & 3](#).

They also provide so much useful information and critical expertise that any elaboration on my part beyond a summary of my response as per below would be otiose.

Secondly, the constricted sound, while perfectly acceptable for a live radio broadcast from so long ago, can hardly stand comparison even with decent mono recordings from the 50's.

Thirdly, no-one apart from Varnay is especially notable or memorable. Three singers here, Irene Jessner, Herbert Janssen and Frederick Jagel are all nearing the end of their careers and sound, to put it kindly, rather too mature and dry of voice for their roles. Elena Nikolaidi as Clytemnestra has a vibrant, attractive mezzo and eschews all exaggeration; indeed, I could sometimes do with just a few more histrionics as occasionally she sounds a bit polite for one of opera's more louche characters. Her firm voice falls easily on the ear but her German is rather Mediterranean.

However, this is the first of five recordings starring perhaps the greatest Elektra ever in Astrid Varnay, and the first recording of that opera we have conducted by Mitropoulos, who many would also consider to be the greatest exponent of the score, so we cannot so easily discount it on the grounds of cuts and sound. Varnay is in blazing form: no wobble, searing, soaring top notes and not a hint of fatigue right up to the devastating dance climax; the only vocal flaw is that particular tendency she

had of squeezing and swelling notes too much, while Mitropoulos brings out both the subtlety and the savagery of the score, responding with a sensitivity always attuned to the mood of the moment and his orchestra follow his every indication, playing with furious dedication.

In the end, even if it cannot be a first choice, there are two overriding reasons for hearing this recording, encapsulated in two words: Varnay and Mitropoulos – but both may be heard elsewhere in better sound, but not together.

**Dimitri Mitropoulos – 1950 (live; mono/electronically reprocessed stereo)** Fonit Cetra; Hommage Orchestra - Maggio Musicale Fiorentino  
Chorus - Maggio Musicale Fiorentino

Elektra - Anny Konetzni  
Chrysothemis - Daniza Ilitsch  
Clytemnestra - Martha Mödl  
Aegisth - Franz Klarwein  
Orest - Hans Braun  
Ein alter Diener - Ljubomir Pantscheff  
Ein junger Diener - Josef Schmidinger  
Die Schlepptägerin - Aenne Michalsky  
Die Vertraute - Dorothea Fraß  
Der Pfleger des Orest - Wilhelm Felden  
Die Aufseherin - Charlotte Markus  
1. Magd - Gertrud Schuster  
2. Magd - Polly Batic  
3. Magd - Katja Sabo  
4. Magd - Dagmar Schmedes  
5. Magd - Friedl Riegler

The harsh but clear mono sound of this live performance from the 1950 Florence May Festival label has, on my Hommage set, been electronically reprocessed to give a vivid stereo effect but the result – especially as heard on headphones – is odd, as the focus keeps shifting, the stereo is intermittent and the voices wander around the aural picture, fading in and out. Nonetheless, proceedings can be heard here with a lot more immediacy than other live recordings of this era; I haven't heard the Cetra/Fonit Warner issue. The conducting is of course superlative and the orchestra really vibrant, if occasionally approximate and scrappy.

Anny Konetzni has the right size of voice and was doubtless exciting on stage but tends to swoop and lunge at high, sustained notes, not always hitting, let alone sustaining, them.; this in combination with the erratic sound makes for a disconcerting experience but I am nonetheless swept along by the intensity of her commitment and Mitropoulos' energy; it's a pity her very last note fails her, as the dance climax is exciting. Ilitsch's voice, unfortunately, is shrill, squally and nasal, essentially a size too small, so her ranting is sometimes covered by the orchestral racket. Martha Mödl, however, is simply wonderful; her declamatory manner – often close to Sprechstimme – and rich, purring mezzo with its glottal emphases capture both the sensuality and the hysteria of the aging queen Clytemnestra - and the way she spits out her words is spellbinding; she is by far my favourite singer in this role, as much as I admire Madeira et al. Hans Braun is a grim, saturnine, firm-voiced Orestes and Strauss' friend Franz Klarwein a vivid Aegisth. Unfortunately, the Tutor is barely audible.

The Hommage label issue comes with a German only libretto. Its sonic peculiarities, vocal deficiencies and cuts disqualify it from being a top choice but Mitropoulos directs a highly dramatic account, even if you can hear him to better effect with a generally superior cast in the 1957 Vienna performance – and Mödl is phenomenal.



**Fritz Reiner – 1952 (live; mono)** Guild Immortal Performances

Orchestra - Metropolitan Opera

Chorus - Metropolitan Opera

Elektra - Astrid Varnay

Chrysothemis - Walburga Wegner

Clytemnestra - Elisabeth Höngen

Aegisth - Set Svanholm

Orest - Paul Schöffler

Ein alter Diener - Lubomir Vichogonov

Ein junger Diener - Paul Franke

Die Schlepptägerin - Paula Lenchner(-Schmidt)

Die Vertraute - Jean Madeira

Der Pfleger des Orest - Alois Pernerstorfer

Die Aufseherin - Thelma Votipka

1. Magd - Martha Lipton

2. Magd - Hertha Glaz

3. Magd - Lucine Amara

4. Magd - Mildred Miller

5. Magd - Genevieve Warner

This is recorded in amazingly clear mono sound, much cleaner and more vivid, for example, than Carlos Kleiber's live performance at Covent Garden a generation later - and who better to animate Strauss' dynamic score than the equally dynamic conductor, Fritz Reiner? He proves to be ideal, infusing the two superb off-stage murder scenes, for example, with a demonic intensity.

Varnay, too, was the *hochdramatischer Sopran* par excellence du jour (excuse the linguistic admixture) before Nilsson and gave us several treasurable recordings, including the one made a year before this under Mitropoulos and another the following year in Cologne. The warmth, power and colouring of her soprano are ideal, especially for those who find Nilsson too steely, and she is immense in the final scene, the odd swoop and sour note notwithstanding. Schöffler's sonorous Orestes is a known quantity from his recording for Beecham and Svanholm makes a strong-voiced but querulous Aegisthus. However, Walburga Wegner's Chrysothemis is tremulous and not especially ingratiating, while Höngen as Clytemnestra is only generically good, as she was for Beecham, without being anywhere near as striking or memorable as the best; for this reason and despite the excellence of the contributions of Varnay and Reiner, I would steer you towards either of Varnay's other recordings if you want to hear her Elektra.

**Richard Kraus – 1953 (live radio broadcast; mono)** Capriccio

Orchestra - Orchester des Westdeutschen Rundfunks

Chorus - Chor des Westdeutschen Rundfunks

Elektra - Astrid Varnay

Chrysothemis - Leonie Rysanek

Klytämnestra - Res Fischer

Aegisth - Helmut Melchert

Orest - Hans Hotter

Ein alter Diener - Arno Reinhardt

Ein junger Diener - Hasso Eschert

Die Schlepptägerin - Helen Petrich

Die Vertraute - Gertie Chorlent

Der Pfleger des Orest - Heiner Horn

Die Aufseherin - Kaethe Tatzmann

1. Magd - Ilse Ihme-Säbich
2. Magd - Trude Roesler
3. Magd - Marianne Schröder
4. Magd - Marlies Siemeling
5. Magd - Käthe Möller-Siepermann

The sound is so good on the re-mastered tape of this Westdeutschen Rundfunks radio recording made in Cologne in 1953 that one quickly forgets that it is not stereo; indeed, in sonic terms alone it can compete with and even surpass live stereo recordings from the 50's; there is no hiss and remarkable depth of sound for mere mono. Unfortunately, there are some cuts but what remains is compelling.

Add to this Astrid Varnay's Elektra, malevolent, huge-voiced and laser-accurate with very little of the scooping which sometimes marred her line, and you have a recording to be reckoned with. I know nothing of the conductor, Richard Kraus, but he directs a powerful, deliberate account of this terrifying opera and the Cologne Radio Orchestra sounds very competent, too, although they are recorded rather distantly, while the voices are very forward.

The young Leonie Rysanek, eventually no stranger to the eponymous leading role herself, gives us an intense Chrysothemis, typically slightly husky and cloudy-voiced in the middle of her range but with great thrust and power; this is not the Shrinking Violet sister we sometimes hear but a desperate, hysterical woman.

Res Fischer is a dark-voiced, tortured, slightly matronly Klytämnestra who does not exaggerate but still conveys the character's paranoia through her detailed enunciation of the text; her "sleepless nights" monologue is eerily haunting. All three leading ladies have big, juicy, penetrating voices able to pierce Strauss's denser orchestration - although much of the time there is that chamber-music quality which Kraus's clear, unmannered presentation renders as oddly and perversely beautiful.

Smaller roles are very persuasively sung; Hotter as Orestes is wonderfully sepulchral, although he was evidently having one of his hoarse, hay-fever days; he presents a really imposing presence whose arrival and gnomic pronouncements intensify the pall of foreboding hanging over the House of Agamemnon.

The classic analogue stereo version by Nilsson and Solti, and the two digital recordings by Sinopoli and Sawallisch, might provide more aural thrills but admirers of Varnay and Rysanek in particular will want this.

#### **Karl Böhm – 1955 (live; mono) Walhall**

Orchestra - Bayerische Staatsoper

Chorus - Bayerische Staatsoper

Elektra - Christel Goltz

Chrysothemis - Leonie Rysanek

Klytämnestra - Jean Madeira

Aegisth - Franz Klarwein

Orest - Hermann Uhde

Ein alter Diener - Adolf Keil

Ein junger Diener - Walter Carnuth

Die Schleppträgerin - Anny Fischer-Walgreen

Die Vertraute - Annie van Kruyswyk

Der Pfleger des Orest - Rudolf Wünzer

Die Aufseherin - Ina Gerhein

1. Magd - Ruth Michaelis
2. Magd - Annie van Kruyswyk
3. Magd - Lilian Benningsen
4. Magd - Antonia Fahberg
5. Magd - Gerda Sommerschuh

In good, clean mono sound, this recording of a live performance, its audible stage noises adding to the atmosphere, features some very promising names in the cast. Böhm's trademark urgency is immediately in evidence. Goltz is powerful, dramatic and even charismatic but her voice becomes pulsing and unsteady under pressure. However, it has to be said that she is extraordinarily effective in passages such as the climax to her long monologue, "Was bluten muß?" just before Chrysothemis announces Orestes' supposed death; she dominates the music.

The young Rysanek again gives us a riveting Chrysothemis of a voice-type deeper and earthier than usual: smoky, powerful and impassioned – it's great singing. American Jean Madeira, who died far too young, is similarly wonderful as Klytämnestra; the entry of her deep, vibrant mezzo with its true contralto resonance instantly makes the listener sit up and pay attention to her - she is simply one of the best on record and may be heard in similar form for Mitropoulos two years later (see the next review). Sample "Ich habe keine gute Nächte" with its eerie, tripping glockenspiel accompaniment – chilling.

In addition to this embarrass de richesses we have Hermann Uhde bringing his Wotan voice to Orestes, giving him an uncommon air of nobility, and Strauss regular Franz Klarwein, who was the Italian tenor in the Munich world premiere of *Capriccio*. The final ten minutes are thrilling, with Rysanek, Goltz and Böhm really delivering.

The usual stage cuts apply; no matter.

### **Dimitri Mitropoulos – 1957 (live; mono) Orfeo**

Orchestra - Wiener Philharmoniker

Chorus - Wiener Staatsoper

Elektra - Inge Borkh

Chrysothemis - Lisa Della Casa

Klytämnestra - Jean Madeira

Aegisth - Max Lorenz

Orest - Kurt Böhme

Ein alter Diener - Gyorgy Littasy

Ein junger Diener - Erich Majkut

Die Schlepptägerin - Karol Loraine

Die Vertraute - Anny Felbermayer

Der Pfleger des Orest - Alois Pernerstorfer

Die Aufseherin - Audrey Gerber-Candy

1. Magd - Kersten Meyer

2. Magd - Sonja Draksler

3. Magd - Sieglinde Wagner

4. Magd - Marilyn Horne

5. Magd - Lisa Otto

The first surprise about this elderly, live recording is that the mono sound is so full and clear that one is momentarily fooled into thinking it is early, narrow stereo, so good is the Austrian radio engineering. Secondly - and perhaps less surprising - the conducting of Mitropoulos is a wonderfully judicious admixture of passion and lyricism; he extracts every ounce of drama and excitement out of

this score, alternating between menace, pathos and suavity such that the music pulses with inner life. The extended orchestral passage after "Orest!" is a case in point and the VPO plays like a bunch of very talented demons.

The cast has many strengths: an exceptionally good team of maids including some famous and soon-to-be famous names like Marilyn Horne, Sieglinde Wagner and Lisa Otto. The three principal women are stupendous: Borkh's big, powerful, smoky soprano easily rides the orchestra and she has vibrant top notes to spare; she also creates a fully rounded portrayal of the quasi-demented Elektra. The casting of Lisa Della Casa is unexpected in that you might have supposed her lyric soprano to be too light, but she brings plenty of weight and penetration to her music and makes for a particularly touching and beautiful Chrysothemis. Jean Madeira is wonderfully sepulchral as Klytämnestra, haunted and neurotic with a booming lower register, one of the best on record.

The weaknesses are Kurt Böhme's elderly sounding Orest - he lacks the virile edge and sounds more like his own elderly tutor - and former favourite Heldentenor of the Third Reich Max Lorenz, who sounds like the veteran he is by this stage of his career, hardly able to sustain a line and doing more barking and shouting than singing - although he was in fact only in his mid-fifties here. Those failings are a pity given the quality of everything else.

*Elektra* has had a charmed life from the point of view of recordings and there are many to choose from, including highly successful assumptions of that killer role by Varnay, Nilsson, Jones and Marton, and some stereo, studio releases which are sonically vastly superior - but few are as compelling artistically as this one, which is in mono sound but nonetheless very acceptable.

**Fernando Previtali – 1957 (live radio broadcast; mono) Myto  
Orchestra - RAI Roma**

Elektra - Inge Borkh  
 Chrysothemis - Hilde Zadek  
 Klytämnestra - Elisabeth Höngen  
 Aegisth - Herbert Handt  
 Orest - Tomislav Neralic  
 Ein alter Diener - Ugo Trama  
 Ein junger Diener - Tommaso Frascati  
 Die Schlepptägerin - Irene Callaway  
 Die Vertraute - Luisa Ribacchi  
 Der Pfleger des Orest - Ugo Trama  
 Die Aufseherin - Nina De Courson  
 1. Magd - Giovanna Fioroni  
 2. Magd - Miti Truccato Pace  
 3. Magd - Luisa Ribacchi  
 4. Magd - Irene Callaway  
 5. Magd - Ester Orel

Amid all the Germanic recordings this Roman radio live broadcast in front of an audience and conducted by Verdi specialist Previtali seems an unlikely recommendation, but one immediately hears the Italian maids doing a creditable job with the text and it soon becomes clear that the principal singers are all first-rate, native exponents of their roles. Inge Borkh – who died only this year aged 97 – had a beautiful, powerful voice and was famous in the eponymous role; she never sounds as if she is straining. From the perspective of her performance, it matters little whether you listen to this, the other live recording from the same year under Mitropoulos or the studio recording under Böhm; they are all great, as Borkh was obviously in prime form around this period; furthermore, the mono sound is very good. I have to say that the Rome orchestra sounds as though it

was really enjoying itself and had adapted remarkably well to the Teutonic idiom in music with which they cannot have been too familiar,

Hilde Zadek, coming up to her hundred and first birthday as I write, did not record a lot so it's good to hear her taut, accurate, finely focused Chrysothemis. Even though she was only fifty, Elisabeth Höngen as Klytämnestra sounds elderly, rocky and squawky, especially when compared with Jean Madeira's searing performances from around the same era, but she is characterful and acute in her delivery of the text. Croatian bass-baritone Tomislav Neralic makes a satisfactory but stolid Orestes; one Herbert Handt is the best Aegisthus I have heard but his name is new to me; Ugo Trama makes a powerful intervention as the Tutor. The off-stage screams are a bit weedy compared with some of the more spine-chilling death-cries on rival recordings but overall this a highly dramatic and competitive performance, even if not a first choice.

### **Karl Böhm – 1960 (studio; stereo) DG**

Orchestra - Dresdner Staatskapelle

Chorus - Dresdner Oper

Elektra - Inge Borkh

Chrysothemis - Marianne Schech

Klytämnestra - Jean Madeira

Aegisth - Fritz Uhl

Orest - Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau

Ein alter Diener - Siegfried Vogel

Ein junger Diener - Gerhard Unger

Die Schlepptägerin - Hermi Ambros

Die Vertraute - Renate Reinecke

Der Pfleger des Orest - Fred Teschler

Die Aufseherin - Ilona Steingruber(-Wildgans)

1. Magd - Cvetka Ahlin

2. Magd - Margarethe Sjöstedt

3. Magd - Sieglinde Wagner

4. Magd - Judith Hellwig

5. Magd - Gerda Scheyrer

Kudos to the Eloquence label for continuing to re-master and issue recordings otherwise unavailable from Universal.

This famous recording is now decidedly venerable but has scrubbed up well: the voices and orchestra are in proper balance and we can hear both the virtuosity of the Dresdners - just try Elektra's triumphal dance, band 16, CD2 - and the details of the singers' characterisations.

Böhm is always at his best in Strauss's operas and this recording is a winner. He plays Strauss hard and fast but always with an impeccable sense of rhythm and phrasing and the ability to caress the melodies when they suddenly emerge from the pandemonium; the Dresden orchestra, so wholly at home in the idiom, is always with him. In her famous recital album conducted by Reiner four years earlier, Inge Borkh had given a taste of her Elektra and her performance here is virtually identical. If you want to sample her at her very best, try the Recognition Scene; her sustained A on the first "Orest!" is of unearthly beauty and she is in finest voice throughout: there is the sweetest, steadiest B flat at 2' 40" and a superb top A flat at 3' 43", warm and yearning where Nilsson, for all her greatness, can be unremittingly chilly and cannot quite convey vulnerability in the same way. It is certainly a lighter voice but still sizeable. I would not call the vibrancy in her soprano a tremolo; it very occasionally approaches unsteadiness but is mostly simply a shimmering sound of great

expressivity. It's a pity that the re-mastering cannot disguise an ugly splice on that first "Orest!", however.

Schech is sometimes a bit shrill but very believable as the weaker sister, contrasting well with Borkh. Jean Madeira delivers a star performance as Clytemnestra: baleful and dark-voiced. Fischer-Dieskau is in the "sing everything" phase of his earlier career and apart from some over-rolled r's does well as Orestes: noble and steady at first, then nervy and craven before the tutor shames him into action. Fritz Uhl harshens his Heldentenor to make Aegisth sound weak and contemptible. This is surely the best of the three recordings available in which Borkh takes the lead, especially as it is her only studio version.

There is no libretto in this bargain issue, only a synopsis and an interesting essay by Böhm. Previous reviewers are wrong to refer to this as a complete recording; it has some fifteen minutes or so of cuts sanctioned by the composer which will nonetheless render it inadmissible today for some punters.

### **Herbert von Karajan – 1964 (live; mono) Orfeo**

Orchestra - Wiener Philharmoniker

Chorus - Wiener Staatsoper

Elektra - Astrid Varnay

Chrysothemis - Hildegard Hillebrecht

Klytämnestra - Martha Mödl

Aegisth - James King

Orest - Eberhard Wächter

Ein junger Diener - Siegfried Rudolf Frese

Die Schlepptägerin - Anja Van Vrooman

Die Vertraute - Hildegard Rütgers

Der Pfleger des Orest - Tugomir Franc

Die Aufseherin - Judith Hellwig

1. Magd - Helen Watts

2. Magd - Margarethe Sjöstedt

3. Magd - Cvetka Ahlin

4. Magd - Lisa Otto

5. Magd - Lucia Popp

This is Karajan's sole recording of this gothic horror masterpiece and is as such of historical interest regardless of its intrinsic worth, but there is certainly no deficiency in the conducting. As with his recordings of *Salome*, Karajan typically manages to elicit the maximum beauty from the more lyrical sections of the score, shaping phrases sensuously but also extracting the requisite drama and tension with razor-sharp ensemble from the VPO.

The sound is good, re-mastered and undistorted mono, now over fifty years old and only occasionally losing the voices at the back of the stage, such as when Orestes enters the palace to slay his errant mother and her weak lover.

This is a starry cast; even the five maids feature famous names such as the young Helen Watts, Lisa Otto and even Lucia Popp as the sole sympathiser of Elektra. It is a pleasure to hear Eberhard Wächter as a virile, tense and menacing Orestes; too often this role is sung by a singer too old to convey his nervousness. Similarly, having Heldentenor James King as a full-voiced Aegisth makes a change, especially as he still manages to convey his craven disposition.

Which leaves the three leading ladies. Hildegard Hillebrecht as Chrysothemis is merely adequate and does not in herself constitute any reason for hearing this live recording; others have done better. The

two other sopranos were both leading Brünnhildes in their day and command respect. Nonetheless, Astrid Varnay although big and commanding and successfully opting for the high B at the end, sounded better for Richard Kraus in 1953 when she was in fresher voice minus the scooping and some shrill top notes and must here yield to her younger self and later exponents such as Gwyneth Jones or Birgit Nilsson. As Clytemnestra, Martha Mödl had considerably less voice by this stage of her career, sounding raw and hoarse with a pronounced beat and break between registers but the baleful intensity of her nightmare aria "Ich habe keine gute Nächte" is again riveting, as it was when she sang the role for Mitropoulos fourteen years earlier.

So, not my favourite *Elektra* by any means but a worthy version, with many merits.

**Karl Böhm – 1965 (live radio broadcast; mono) Orfeo**

Orchestra - Wiener Philharmoniker

Chorus - Wiener Staatsoper

Elektra - Birgit Nilsson

Chrysothemis - Leonie Rysanek

Klytämnestra - Regina Resnik

Aegisth - Wolfgang Windgassen

Orest - Eberhard Wächter

Ein alter Diener - Ljubomir Pantscheff

Ein junger Diener - Gerhard Unger

Die Schleppträgerin - Margarita Lilowa

Die Vertraute - Margarethe Sjöstedt

Der Pfleger des Orest - Frederick Guthrie

Die Aufseherin - Danica Mastilovic

1. Magd - Margarita Lilowa

2. Magd - Margarethe Sjöstedt

3. Magd - Margarete Ast

4. Magd - Gundula Janowitz

5. Magd - Gerda Scheyrer

Given the established supremacy of Solti's 1966-67 studio recording featuring two of the principals here, it would be unreasonable to recommend this live, mono, radio broadcast over that landmark issue. However, despite the low transfer level and muddier sound, it has many things going for it, not least the extra intensity and charge which the atmosphere of a live performance can bring and also the presence of Leonie Rysanek in a role she owned for thirty years. Furthermore, Karl Böhm was always at his best in live Strauss and this is no exception. It contains the two sizeable cuts standard at the time in "Wie stark du bist!" up to "Sei verflucht", when Elektra is attempting to recruit her sister into participating in her murderous schemes and that track of 4'27" has been accidentally missed off the liner notes - but no matter; the music is still present on the disc.

Rysanek gives us a much more powerful and impassioned Chrysothemis than Marie Collier's weaker, more vulnerable creature for Solti; she swoops a bit but is extraordinary in the climax. Nilsson simply has no equal in the role, from the searing top C on "königliche" in her first aria to the delicate ppp A flat on "Göttin" when she is sweet-talking Klytämnestra, this is a tour de force. Resnik is equally affecting as the anguished, guilt-racked queen, the tessitura of the role lying right in the meat of her voice, allowing her to exploit the dark resonance of her lower register. Good as she is for Solti, she finds an extra frisson here and the results are chilling. Wächter is surprisingly fine as Orest, able to find the darker places in his baritone to convey the character's implacable determination. The intensity of Böhm's conducting is memorable, especially Elektra's final, frenzied ecstatic dance.

Despite its low recorded level, the sound is clear for enough for us to hear instrumentalists turning the pages of the score. The VSO strings are occasionally a little sour but that does not matter in a score as violent as this; what is important is that the score should thrill and chill. As ever, the Orfeo issue is superior to previous incarnations.

**Georg Solti - 1966-67 (studio; stereo) Decca**

Orchestra - Wiener Philharmoniker

Chorus - Wiener Staatsoper

Elektra - Birgit Nilsson

Chrysothemis - Marie Collier

Klytämnestra - Regina Resnik

Aegisth - Gerhard Stolze

Orest - Tom Krause

Ein alter Diener - Leo Heppe

Ein junger Diener - Gerhard Unger

Die Schlepptägerin - Margarita Lilowa

Die Vertraute - Margarethe Sjöstedt

Der Pfleger des Orest - Tugomir Franc

Die Aufseherin - Pauline Tinsley

1. Magd - Helen Watts

2. Magd - Maureen Lehane

3. Magd - Yvonne Minton

4. Magd - Jean Cock

5. Magd - Felicia Weathers

Having listened again to the superb Sinopoli recording, I turned immediately to re-visit this classic version from Solti. The sound is almost as good as the modern digital set and I was instantly struck by the quality of the five singers who sing the Maids, who include some famous names such as Helen Watts, Yvonne Minton and Felicia Weathers; they really lend distinction to that opening cacophony. Nilsson's steely sound does not suggest the same lascivious sensuality as Alessandra Marc's tremendous performance but the heft and brilliance of her vocalisation constitute a phenomenon in themselves.

I do not enjoy Marie Collier's vibrant, even faintly tremulous Chrysothemis as much as Deborah Voigt's marvellously strong and steady assumption of the role but it is still a dramatically convincing performance; spookily, her voice is often oddly reminiscent of Elisabeth Schwarzkopf. Regina Resnik is not perhaps as vocally secure as, say, Hanna Schwarz or Madeira, but her Clytemnestra is a tour de force of characterisation; her burnished lower register is especially thrilling, especially when it contrasts with Nilsson's pure tones.

Tom Krause makes a fresher, more virile-voiced Orestes than the aging Ramey's account and the imitable Stolze is ideal as the weak, neurotic Aegisthus.

Solti is by no means all drive and nervous energy; he makes the most of the sinuous melody which follows Elektra's appeal to her deceased father half way through her opening tirade. Of course, both his and Sinopoli's recordings have the huge advantage of the Vienna Philharmonic for orchestra and Solti plays the whole opera uncut, as was his habit.

Hence, in comparison with Sinopoli's recording, this has both advantages and demerits, but both are indispensable to lovers of this ghoulfest with its incongruous admixture of spiky discordance and sensuous melodiousness.



**Wolfgang Sawallisch – 1971 (live radio broadcast; mono) Opera d'Oro**

Orchestra - RAI Roma

Chorus - RAI Roma

Elektra - Birgit Nilsson

Chrysothemis - Ingrid Bjöner

Clytemnestra - Viorica Cortez

Aegisth - Timo Callio

Orest - Thomas Stewart

Ein alter Diener - Ettore Geri

Ein junger Diener - Gino Sinimberghi

Die Schlepptägerin - Marisa Zotti

Die Vertraute - Anna Maria Balboni

Der Pfleger des Orest - Ivo Ingram

Die Aufseherin - Helga Merkl-Freivogel

1. Magd - Margarethe Bence

2. Magd - Ingeborg Schneider

3. Magd - Gudrun Wewezow

4. Magd - Anneliese Waas

5. Magd - Lotte Schädle

This is one impressive cast assembled here in Rome, including the foremost exponent of the eponymous role and the Bayreuth Wotan *du jour* as Orestes. It's a pity that as late as 1971 the sound is boomy mono with background radio interference, which somewhat compromises its desirability, despite the quality of the performance. It also somewhat reduces the impact of Nilsson's searing portrayal but its intensity and vocal prowess still come through; she is in top form. I like Ingrid Bjöner's strong Chrysothemis despite a bit of beat in her tone; she is no milksop, just desperate. Viorica Cortez is similarly effective – it's a pity that shortly after her first appearance, a minute into track 6 CD 1, some of that background interference, in the form of distorted speech, obtrudes right the way through tracks 7 and more than a minute into track 8. She is not the most histrionic or riveting of vocal actresses to undertake Clytemnestra but her rich mezzo-soprano is secure, powerful and expressive enough to give great pleasure and create a convincing character; the intensity her portrayal increases noticeably as her the nature of her tortured psyche is revealed. Having Stewart as a brooding, gorgeous-voiced Orestes is a real bonus; he carries real menace in his dark tones. The Aegisthus is fine.

Sawallisch wasn't always sufficiently animated as a conductor but I love the best of his work and he is one fire here; the frenzied orchestral interlude just before Chrysothemis erroneously announces Orestes' death is superb and the whole performance is alive, if not as driven as Solti's.

This not perhaps the best recording in regard to any of the criteria whereby such things may be judged but anything with Nilsson in best voice is worth hearing and, in its totality, it makes for a very satisfying account.

**Karl Böhm – 1977 (live; mono) Bella Voce; Opera Depot**

Orchestra - Bayerische Staatsoper

Chorus - Bayerische Staatsoper

Elektra - Ursula Schröder-Feinen

Chrysothemis - Leonie Rysanek

Clytemnestra - Astrid Varnay

Aegisth - Hans Hopf

Orest - Theo Adam

Ein alter Diener - Gerhard Auer  
 Ein junger Diener - Georg Paskuda  
 Die Schleppträgerin - Karl Christian Kohn  
 Die Vertraute - Antonia Fahberg  
 Der Pfleger des Orest - Gertrud Freedman  
 Die Aufseherin - Charlotte Berthold  
 1. Magd - Gudrun Wewezow  
 2. Magd - Helena Jungwirth  
 3. Magd - Lilian Benningsen  
 4. Magd - Leonore Kirschstein  
 5. Magd - Lotte Schädle

The first unpleasant surprise is how poor the narrow stereo sound here is, crumbly, fading in and out as if on a very worn tape with the voices often distant, suggesting that the tape recorder was located some way back from the action. The second is that the maids sound like a geriatric witches' coven; the Third Maid is especially dreadful. Consolation arrives in the form of Ursula Schröder-Feinen's firm, powerful soprano, with its brilliant timbre and flickering vibrato. Her career was equally brilliant and flickering and her recordings are few. She evinces no difficulty with the tessitura, sustained intensity or range of the role – even concluding on a top B in the finale - but some might find her interpretation on the cool side – or at least slightly under-characterised and simply sung too straight compared with more histrionic Elektras. By this stage of her career, Rysanek's voice is a little cloudy with an incipient beat and a tendency to "low", so her Chrysothemis sounds considerably more mature than her sister and her singing does not always make comfortable listening, but the power and expressive gifts are intact; she rises admirably to the climax of the opera. The veteran Varnay is nearly sixty and her voice has too much of a pulse to it but that is no great obstacle to portraying Clytemnestra successfully and she is pretty chilling, even if, again, she isn't always as easy on the ear as steadier interpreters. Theo Adam, too, is in grave but unsteady voice and to complete a quartet of wobblers, Hans Hopf in his early sixties barks his way through the role of Aegisthus, all of which throws into relief the lean youthfulness of Schröder-Feinen's soprano.

The Bavarian orchestra plays with verve and of course Böhm conducts with his customary drive and propulsion. There are flaws of the kind that happen in live performances: an early entry from Adam in the Recognition Scene and another by a clarinet just before the end; ultimately, this can be recommended only to anyone who wants a rare souvenir of the under-recorded Schröder-Feinen; otherwise, there are better recordings to be had and Varnay and Rysanek may be heard in their prime elsewhere.

**Carlos Kleiber – 1977 (live; stereo) Golden Melodram**

Orchestra - Covent Garden  
 Chorus - Covent Garden

Elektra - Birgit Nilsson  
 Chrysothemis - Gwyneth Jones  
 Clytemnestra - Márta Szirmay  
 Aegisth - Charles Craig  
 Orest - Donald McIntyre  
 Ein junger Diener - Paul Crook  
 Der Pfleger des Orest - Michael Langdon  
 Die Aufseherin – Ludmilla Andrew  
 1. Magd - Anne Wilkens  
 2. Magd - Elizabeth Bainbridge  
 3. Magd - Teresa Cahill  
 4. Magd - Jean Bailey

## 5. Magd - Margaret Curphey

Although I welcome the advantages of modern, digital recordings, I am equally tolerant of old mono if the performance is sufficiently captivating; however, it is disappointing to encounter as late as 1977 such ropery old sound as we have here, especially given the roster, starting with the elusive Carlos Kleiber and a host of famous names. There is hiss throughout, a fair amount of distortion, some drop-outs and a final bad edit mars the concluding bars; furthermore, it is so muddy and distant one can barely register that it was recorded in stereo.

The only singer here with whom I am unfamiliar is the Hungarian mezzo-soprano Márta Szirmay who is fine but not as memorable as the best, such as Mödl and Madeira. This is relatively late in Nilsson's career and she is clearly labouring a bit – although she nails the high C in her first "aria" and at the close. She also had an increasing tendency to sing – or perhaps just sound – flat when she was performing live and there was no possibility of a re-take, so I see little reason to opt for this when you can hear her in her prime and in first-rate sound either in her studio recording or live for Böhm or Sawallisch. Jones matches for her heft but she is vocally better suited to the lead role, as her later assumption for Tate proves and, as always with this singer, you never know whether her unpredictable wobble will be under control or too prominent; here it is noticeable. All the singers give fine, committed performances but that is neither here nor there given the sonic issues. Nor, in fact, do I for once much like Kleiber's rather heavy-handed way with a score that needs to be hustled along not under-lined; the music is already powerful enough.

In my judgement, you can safely pass over this. I distinctly part company in this from Marc Bridle ([review](#)). Such is the subjectivity of taste.

**Seiji Ozawa – 1988 (live composite; digital) Philips**

Orchestra - Boston Symphony Orchestra

Chorus - Tanglewood Festival Chorus

Elektra - Hildegard Behrens

Chrysothemis - Nadine Secunde

Klytämnestra - Christa Ludwig

Aegisth - Ragnar Ulfung

Orest - Jorma Hynninen

Ein alter Diener - Brian Matthews

Ein junger Diener - Brad Cresswell

Die Schlepptägerin - Dominique Labelle

Die Vertraute - Emily Rawlins

Der Pfleger des Orest - Brian Matthews

Die Aufseherin - Marita Napier

1. Magd - Joan Khara

2. Magd - Wendy Hillhouse

3. Magd - Diane Kesling

4. Magd - Emily Rawlins

5. Magd - Cynthia Haymon

This enjoys good, live, digital sound, which could be more sharply focused but its quality is enhanced by it being a composite recording whereby the best sections of concerts were spliced together. I am always encouraged by that first scene if the maids are cast in strength as per here; the overseer is aptly shrewish and it's good to have Cynthia Haymon strongly voice the Fifth Maid who is set upon for sympathising with the Elektra. Hildegard Behrens might have sung Salome successfully for Karajan ten years previously but she never really had a genuine Elektra voice. She was a fine vocal actress with considerable power, especially in the searing top notes, but her shining soprano often

turns raw in the middle of the voice and her lower register is husky. She is not matched for intensity by Nadine Secunde's workaday Chrysothemis, who hardly sounds desperate or even that involved. The 60-year-old veteran Christa Ludwig compensates for Secunde's blandness and Ozawa's pusillanimity – he is fine in the more lyrical passages but a bit leaden in the more frenetic sections – by delivering a searing account of the role of Clytemnestra, unfailingly bringing out the textual nuances. She doesn't have quite the unhinged, off-the-wall quality of Mödl or the vocal richness of Madeira, but it is nonetheless a towering performance. Her manic laughter when she believes Orestes to be dead and blood-curdling scream and death-rattle when she is despatched by Orestes must have been quite a sight – and sound – being delivered in isolation on the concert platform rather than on stage. Hynninen is an excellent Orestes, youthful-sounding and full of brooding menace, and Ulfung is appropriately weedy and whining as Aegisthus - and also does a good death gasp.

Some will like Behrens' Elektra more than I and will be able to overlook the stage cuts, the indifferent Chrysothemis and Ozawa's lack of drive in favour of her intensity and Ludwig's chilling Clytemnestra. This is still a very satisfying account and at the end the audience certainly demonstrates its appreciation forcibly with its applause.

**Wolfgang Sawallisch – 1989 (studio; digital) EMI**

Orchestra - Symphonieorchester des Bayerischen Rundfunks

Chorus - Chor des Bayerischen Rundfunks

Elektra - Éva Marton

Chrysothemis - Cheryl Studer

Klytämnestra - Marjana Lipovsek

Aegisth - Hermann Winkler

Orest - Bernd Weikl

Ein alter Diener - Alfred Kuhn

Ein junger Diener - Ulrich Reiß

Die Schleppträgerin - Dorothea Geipel

Die Vertraute - Carmen Anhorn

Der Pfleger des Orest - Kurt Moll

Die Aufseherin - Victoria Wheeler

1. Magd - Daphne Evangelatos

2. Magd - Shirley Close

3. Magd - Birgit Calm

4. Magd - Julia Faulkner

5. Magd - Caroline Maria Petrig

This recording has not been well received in some quarters but I believe it to be one of a number of wholly gripping performances in modern sound, worthy to stand alongside the classic Solti and the superb accounts by Tate and Sinopoli.

All four operate on a high interpretative, aesthetic and sonic level and I would not wish to choose amongst them, but they are not necessarily that similar, especially in their characterisation of the eponymous protagonist: Birgit Nilsson is all cold steel and fury, Gwyneth Jones multifaceted intensity, Alessandra Marc hysterical obsession - and Eva Marton? - the tragic heroine, very human and tormented. Of course, all three have almost superhuman vocal resources; no soprano without them would attempt the role (which is perhaps where the admirable Hildegard Behrens and Deborah Polaski are lacking in their versions). There is a slight beat in Marton's huge voice but it is not troublesome and she enunciates the text with admirable clarity. Her outbursts are simply thrilling and her greeting to her brother on his return is tender and moving despite the size and heft of her voice.

Her Chrysothemis is Cheryl Studer in peak form, her slightly piping tone and flickering vibrato being ideal to convey her womanly longings and fragility, and always suggestive of incipient panic. Lipovsek brings a powerful mezzo-soprano to the meaty role of Clytemnestra; her lower register is telling and although she is less overtly histrionic than some, she is wonderfully intense in her tortured ramblings; her account of her fears that her body is crumbling from the inside - indicative of her guilt and moral decay - is riveting.

Add to this the mastery of Sawallisch's conducting and the beauty of the playing of the Bayerischen Rundfunksorchester under his direction, and you have a clear winner. My admiration for Sawallisch, whom I once foolishly dismissed as "a mere Kapellmeister" increases as the years go by and I hear more of his recorded work. He knows when to apply the brakes and when to build, and when to let voices take precedence. The orchestral depiction of Orestes' entry into the house to avenge Agamemnon by murdering his mother and her lover is stupendous, the effect compounded by the two blood-curdling from the dying Clytemnestra. Under Sawallisch, more than Solti or Sinopoli, this opera gains a sense of shape and unity; he is in complete control of the ebb and flow of this extraordinary music and it all hangs together as a cohesive drama rather than a series of isolated crises. Furthermore, Sawallisch, like only Solti and Bychkov, has here recorded the opera in its entirety, without the standard stage cuts.

Relative weaknesses are Weikl's somewhat nondescript Orest, its virility compromised by the slight bleat beginning to creep into his baritone and a weedy Aegisth - only the latter does not much matter, given that he is meant to be a poor thing compared with the great man he murdered. A mini-bonus is Kurt Moll in the tiny role of the Tutor, whose sepulchral tone gives him real authority.

I am genuinely puzzled by negative reviews of this set; for me it holds an honourable place in the catalogue and could easily be anyone's introduction to this uniquely audacious work.

**Jeffrey Tate – 1990 (live; digital) Claves**

Orchestra - Orchestre de la Suisse Romande

Chorus - Grand Théâtre de Genève

Elektra - Gwyneth Jones

Chrysothemis - Anne Evans

Klytämnestra - Leonie Rysanek

Aegisth - Ronald Hamilton

Orest - Wolfgang Schöne

Ein alter Diener - Léonard Graus

Ein junger Diener - Neil Jenkins

Die Schleppträgerin - Antoinette Faes

Die Vertraute - Janeen Franz

Der Pfleger des Orest - Michael Pavlu

Die Aufseherin - Evangelia Antonini

1. Magd - Jacalyn Bower

2. Magd - Vessela (Vesselina) Zorova

3. Magd - Ursula Weber

4. Magd - Marit Sauramo

5. Magd - Antoinette Faes

*Elektra* has been fortunate on disc but this live performance from Geneva in 1990 has a number of claims to be one of the most desirable of all, even above classic recordings by such as Borkh, Varnay and Nilsson.

The balance between voices and orchestra sound is first rate and very few coughs disturb proceedings, so even if it isn't quite as spectacular as, say, Sinopoli's recording on DG, it is still excellent and the climaxes really make their mark. Jeffrey Tate's conducting is superb: there is a diamantine clarity and precision about his direction which permits all the beauties and nuances of the quieter passages amid the prevailing jaggedness of Strauss's score to emerge – remember, Strauss only half-jokingly told Böhm that his music needed conducting as if it were operetta - yet the big moments are stunning. The Suisse Romande orchestra is wonderful; you have only to listen to their solo moments when nobody is singing, such as the link passage between the two halves of Elektra's first extended lament to hear their quality; I have never found this opera so lyrical, despite its violence. Anne Evans sings what I hear as the best Chrysothemis ever: she is warm, vulnerable and feminine but rises powerfully in the last stages of this terrifying tragedy. Leonie Rysanek, in the twilight years of her career, is still a formidable stage presence; the voice might be a little hoarse and hollow but that suits her character and she is absolutely chilling in her "nightmare" monologue, her tone haunted and sepulchral. The five maids are first rate, too.

But the star of the production is inevitably Gwyneth Jones; she sings like a force of nature. At 53 years old she has moved up from the role of Chrysothemis to Elektra, singing with unremitting steadiness and power and encompassing the vast range of Elektra's kaleidoscopic moods and modes, from biting scorn, murderous intent, to wheedling flattery, to wild hysteria, to ironic calm - she is simply phenomenal. There is virtually no wobble, just sheer laser-like intensity and at times a voice which is simply beautiful, as in the repeated A flats in the scene where she recognises Orestes.

Not all is perfection. Wolfgang Schöne is typically bluff and a bit unsteady, but a suitably masculine presence. The one short arioso of the Tutor in that cameo role makes little vocal impact, unlike singers like Kurt Moll. Ronald Hamilton's Aegisth is weakly vocalised but that suits the role; he is meant to be hysterical and despicable, confirming Elektra's scorn for his lack of manliness.

The usual stage cuts are made. I won't be jettisoning my favourite recordings but this must sit honourably alongside them; it is perhaps Dame Gwyneth's finest hour and a great, theatrical tour de force.

**Daniel Barenboim – 1995 (studio; digital) Teldec**

Orchestra - Berliner Staatskapelle

Chorus - Berliner Staatsoper

Elektra - Deborah Polaski

Chrysothemis - Alessandra Marc

Klytämnestra - Waltraud Meier

Aegisth - Johan Botha

Orest - Falk Struckmann

Ein alter Diener - Fritz Hübner

Ein junger Diener - Endrik Wottrich

Die Schleppträgerin - Magdalena Falewicz

Die Vertraute - Carola Nossek

Der Pfleger des Orest - Gerhard Wolf

Die Aufseherin - Magdaléna Hajóssyová

1. Magd - Mette Ejsing

2. Magd - Borjana Matewa

3. Magd - Katharina Kammerloher

4. Magd - Ulla Gustafsson

5. Magd - Carola Höhn

This starts very promisingly with excellent maids, and we immediately hear both first-rate sound and a sonorous orchestra, Polaski is good but her German diction is occluded, her tone can get turn scratchy at volume and her delivery is rather unvaried. The top C in her first monologue is only just there; she is generally audibly stretched by the music and there is always an edge in her tone. She improves in the second half of the opera - or perhaps the listener becomes habituated to her voice; her best passage is the Recognition Scene, whose lyrical line lies mostly in the middle of her soprano and does not require so much loud singing. However, Alessandra Marc, heard here the year before she herself recorded the leading role, makes a richer-voiced Chrysothemis than usual; indeed, she sounds much more like an Elektra than Polaski – more beautiful, powerful and secure. It's a grand, hysterical performance; her own first extended "aria" is riveting and hers is the stand-out piece of singing here.

There is insufficient variation in voice types among the three leading roles: Waltraud Meier is by no means poor but her mezzo hasn't the dusky hue I like in a Klytämnestra; and I do not find her narrative as compelling or chilling as the best; how I would have liked to hear the great Ernestine Schumann-Heink sing that role in the premiere in Dresden in 1909!

Falk Struckmann makes a gruff, gravelly Orest, sounding more like the Tutor than a young warrior and the Tutor himself is unimpressive in his brief interjection. Botha is excellent as the craven Aegisth.

Another problem here is not in the singing but in Barenboim's adoption of the standard stage cuts in this recording. There is a big one of two and a half minutes in Elektra's long rant, "Was bluten muß?", another, smaller one in "Wie stark du bist!", another quite large one when Elektra tries to force her sister to join her in murdering her mother and Aegisth, and another in "Orest!". Why, in a studio recording of an opera lasting only two hours? However, even without the cuts, this would not be a first choice.

#### **Giuseppe Sinopoli – 1995 (studio; digital) DG**

Orchestra - Wiener Philharmoniker

Chorus - Wiener Staatsoper

Elektra - Alessandra Marc

Chrysothemis - Deborah Voigt

Klytämnestra - Hanna Schwarz

Aegisth - Siegfried Jerusalem

Orest - Samuel Ramey

Ein alter Diener - Walter Zeh

Ein junger Diener - Michael Howard

Die Schlepptägerin - Karin Wieser

Die Vertraute - Christiane Hossfeld

Der Pfleger des Orest - Goran Simic

Die Aufseherin - Helga Termer

1. Magd - Annette Jahns

2. Magd - Gabriele Sima

3. Magd - Elisabeth Wilke

4. Magd - Anne Schwanewilms

5. Magd - Katerina Beranova

You certainly have to be in the mood to listen to *Elektra*; easy-listening, both in terms of the content and the music, it ain't - but goodness, it's thrilling, even for those of us whose tastes are a tad conservative. The sheer size of the orchestra constitutes an aural experience in itself and Sinopoli throws himself into the drama without any of the fussy point-making or annoying gear-changes

which his critics find in some of his recordings. The three lead female voices are stunning: Alessandra Marc has a very big, creamy voice with an exciting upper extension. Her vowels are sometimes occluded but her smoky tones are replete with coiled passion and repressed violence. Given the stupendous challenge of the role, how anyone can criticise her singing in sheer vocal terms, I cannot comprehend. She is absolutely wonderful in that most sensual of passages where Elektra tempts her sister into being her murderous accomplice by dangling an image of nuptial bliss before her. Or try her "Orest! Orest! Orest!" aria; voluptuous Strauss singing at its most mesmerising with languorous *Rosenkavalier*-style orchestration in the accompaniment. She uses the break in her voice between registers to spine-chilling effect; true, she occasionally scoops a bit but the top notes are gleamingly secure. Deborah Voigt is in gleaming, youthful voice and makes Chrysothemis more vital and less pusillanimous than some interpreters. Hannah Schwarz is the epitome of crazed, tormented malevolence as Klytämnestra; she is a superb vocal actress.

As Orestes, bass Sam Ramey's is a little mature and rocky by this stage of his career but his is still a noble sound. His faintly somnambulistic delivery of Orestes' words to his sister before his identity is revealed is actually very effective, as it conveys his deliberate attempt at restraint and concealment. Siegfried Jerusalem is in rather hoarse voice in the relatively small role of Aegisthus.

Comparisons with the famous Solti recording are otiose, except it must be noted that Sinopoli presents the cut version, which will be a deciding factor some; both are otherwise superb and there is surely also room for a more recent version in modern, digital sound with three of the best Strauss singers ever to grace the stage.

(The CLOR catalogue lists this recording as live but it is studio-made in the Musikverein, Grosser Saal, Vienna.)

**Semyon Bychkov – 2004 (studio; digital SACD) Profil**

Orchestra - Orchester des Westdeutschen Rundfunks

Chorus - Chor des Westdeutschen Rundfunks

Elektra - Deborah Polaski

Chrysothemis - Anne Schwanewilms

Klytämnestra - Felicity Palmer

Aegisth - Graham Clark

Orest - Franz Grundheber

Ein alter Diener - Lars Woldt

Ein junger Diener - Arnold Bezuyen

Die Schleppträgerin - Karen Foster

Die Vertraute - Christiane Hossfeld

Der Pfleger des Orest - Alfred Walker

Die Aufseherin - Irmgard Vilsmaier

1. Magd - Birgitta Svendén

2. Magd - Viola Zimmermann

3. Magd - Susanne Resmark

4. Magd - Margarita de Arellano

5. Magd - Twyla Robinson

This is one of only three uncut studio recordings, giving it an immediate advantage; another bonus lies in its having by far the best sonics of all those in this survey – audiophile standard. Its depth and transparency are really startling and Bychkov manages to ensure clarity without losing tension or encouraging a mush of sound; this is great conducting, as long as you like a more "humanised" approach rather than the hell-for-leather Solti treatment. (It has hitherto been issued only in SACD format and I have listened to it only in regular CD sound, which is still superb.)

Deborah Polaski sang Elektra throughout her long career with great success but I cannot say that I have found her as compelling in it as the greatest exponents. I am not that taken by her recording with Barenboim and here, nearly a decade later, having sung the role literally hundreds of times, her voice betrays the fact that time has inevitably taken its toll. Not that she is by any means bad, but compared with the visceral power of singers such as Nilsson, Borkh, Varnay et al she lacks impact, not making much of the drama inherent in the text. In some ways she is similar to Behrens but without her shining top; her high notes tend to thin out, flap and turn harsh – and Behrens is never dull. Ultimately, her vocal shortcomings are problematic.

A young Anne Schwanewilms makes an interesting, vulnerable Chrysothemis but like Polaski lacks the heft in her voice to dominate the music and doesn't really ecstatically ride the orchestral swell when, for example, she is dreaming of motherhood and bewailing her lonely, barren lot. The stand-out performance here is from that riveting artist Felicity Palmer; her tangy, powerful mezzo with its trenchant lower register and her way with words make her the equal of the best – she is the ideal hysterical harridan. Yes; the role is a Grand Guignol gift for a singer of a certain age with plenty of voice left and a gift for histrionics, and some might find her antics over-done, but she compensates for Polaski's blandness, and not everyone hits the mark the way she does. "Ich habe keine gute Nächte" is a treat, especially juxtaposed with Polaski's sweetly phrased question, "Träumst du, Mutter?"

The maids are an excellent bunch and the orchestral playing is superb; it has clearly been drilled and coached exhaustively. Veteran Graham Clark is a febrile Aegisthus but another veteran, Franz Grundheber, here in his late 60's, gives us a gruff Orestes who sounds like Elektra's grandfather rather than her brother; it is a ridiculous piece of casting - he should have been singing the Tutor and vice versa.

A German-English libretto is provided. I can recommend this for presenting the full, uncut score and the cumulative quality of the sound, conducting and playing, and Palmer's coruscating Clytemnestra all combined - but you must surely have a bigger, more secure, beautiful and resonant voice in the central role.

### **Recommendations**

There are so many recommendable recordings that any meaningful suggestions are difficult. As always, a stereo recording is surely preferable, even though that means discarding some truly splendid mono versions, so I include that category in my shortlist, but they are all live and cut; there is no complete, mono, studio recording. I differentiate between cut and full performances, as that matters to some, especially as Strauss disliked it when excisions were made in his score, even though he grudgingly sanctioned them. I have mentioned above several recordings of excerpts by Pauly, Schlüter and Borkh, but they can be considered only as supplements. I make six suggestions here but there are many more which are highly rewarding. It might be easier to suggest which to avoid, yet virtually all of the recordings above have merit; I have not previously encountered an opera with such a consistently successful discography.

Live mono (cut): Böhm -1965; Dimitri Mitropoulos -1957; Sawallisch -1971

Studio stereo/digital (uncut): Georg Solti 1966-67\*; Sawallisch -1987

Studio digital (cut): Sinopoli -1995

Live digital (cut); Tate -1990

\*First choice

### **Ralph Moore**

