

***Così fan tutte*: A Review of the Discography** by Ralph Moore

The opera discography CLOR lists 116 recordings of *Così fan tutte, ossia La scuola degli amanti* (variously translated as “Thus do all women, or, the School for Lovers”, or even “All Women are Like That”) but does not include the latest studio recording. I know of twenty-four studio recordings in Italian of which I review below twenty-one below plus a limited selection of nine live - and live composite - recordings. I have not reviewed the two English versions as they are for a more limited market and this is surely an opera that must be heard in the original Italian libretto, so skilfully devised by Lorenzo Da Ponte. I have been unable to hear three studio recordings: two from the 50’s (Joseph Dünnwald 1951 and Rudolf Moralt 1955) and one made in Monte Carlo in 1974 conducted by Pierre Colombo but I think it unlikely that any of those is essential, as by all accounts they are all flawed in some way. The earliest under review is the classic 1935 Glyndebourne recording under Fritz Busch; the most recent is by Currentzis in 2015 – and the less said about that the better.

Despite the claims of *Don Giovanni* and *Le nozze di Figaro*, *Così* remains my personal favourite of Mozart’s Big Three, for reason of its virtually uninterrupted stream of heavenly music and the subtle ironies of its plotline, which, as some modern productions have demonstrated, is by no means as clunkingly sexist as its detractors suggest, even allowing for the differences between late 18C and early 21C sensibilities and attitudes towards women. Neither the male nor female lovers escape mockery or emerge unscathed in Da Ponte’s ostensibly misogynistic libretto, yet the music transmutes and transcends its inherent cynicism.

The opera is further enriched by the same covert, Revolutionary class-war theme that pervades *Figaro*; the working-class Despina may be the tool of Don Alfonso’s Machiavellian stratagems but she is far more pragmatic and switched on than the dippy, aristocratic sisters and of course it is possible to play her as immediately seeing through the absurd disguises of the “Albanian” interlopers and simply playing along. We have to accept the disguise ploy in the same way as we regard it in Shakespeare’s plays: a trope or metaphor for the very human tendency towards self-deception and a device to facilitate highly entertaining comic situations whereby deeper truths are revealed. Those who try to reduce it to crude misogyny miss its gentle good humour and affectionate mockery. How often in this opera, if it is performed with due attendance to its subtlety, is the audience unsure whether to laugh or cry; we are both moved to mirth and discomforted by the gentle exposure of the frailties inherent in human nature - and all the time the music whispers to us of a transcendent state where all manner of things shall be well.

For me, beauty of voice is paramount in this above all other Mozart operas and like all canary-fanciers I have my prejudices and preferences. Thus I do not want to hear as Ferrando a throaty, constricted tenor such as Peter Schreier or Francisco Araiza and therefore do not recommend the recordings in which they appear; others might well feel differently but I hope I make my reasons clear enough and dissent from my opinion is always the reader’s optional privilege. I want a clean, free, open tenor sound of the kind Léopold Simoneau gives Karajan, and that’s rarer than you might think. My other prejudice is an aversion to period recordings which are taken so fast that words are garbled, or which insist upon, squawky, vinegary string tone; some older recordings demonstrate that it is perfectly possible to inject pace and vigour into proceedings without those faults. My Fiordiligi needs to be a creamy-voiced soprano of the Te Kanawa/ Della Casa/Margaret Price school – with more than a nod towards Schwarzkopf at her best; it is no accident that Fiordiligi was a favourite Te Kanawa role and she features in three recommendable studio recordings. Finally, vocal ensemble must be sufficiently smooth, homogeneous and tonally beautiful to be able to do justice to the showpiece trios and quartets such as “Soave sia il vento” and the Brindisi.

It was long standard practice to trim recitatives and cut Nos. 7 and 24 from the score: they are the Ferrando-Guglielmo duet “Ah fato dan legge” in Act I and Ferrando’s Act II aria “Ah, lo veggio

quell'anima bella". Their omission does not much harm the opera either musically or in terms of the plot, but further excisions, such as snips out of the big ensembles and finales, and even complete, crucial arias in Act 2 - Ferrando's "Tradito, schernito" and Dorabella's "È amore un ladroncello" – are more damaging and the prospective buyer needs to be alerted to their absence. Of course, virtually all recordings from the early 1980's onwards are complete – with the odd exception of Barenboim's 1989 recording, which retains the two standard cuts. However, the problem with many more recent recordings is that the score might be complete but too often the standard of performance does not match earlier accounts. Hence, I should perhaps not be too embarrassed to confess – spoiler alert – that none of my prime recommendations is more recent than 1988 – or perhaps the embarrassment should more properly belong to a modern opera industry that can no longer assemble a cast to rival those of a generation ago.

The 30 Recordings (in chronological order)

Fritz Busch – 1935 studio, Naxos mono

Fiordiligi - Ina Souez

Dorabella - Luise Helletsgruber

Despina - Irene Eisinger

Ferrando - Heddle Nash

Guglielmo - Willi Domgraf-Fassbaender

Don Alfonso - John Brownlee

Glyndebourne Festival Chorus and Orchestra

It comes as a shock to think that this recording is more than eighty years old and as such is the equivalent of a window on a past which virtually no-one alive today now remembers, yet in some way it remains fresh and sounds almost contemporary in its adherence to clipped, sprung tempi and a refusal to linger sentimentally. I do not think this urgency was a consequence of needing to fit the opera on to the forty 78's it took to preserve the performance – especially as there are cuts a-plenty - but rather more a result of conductor Fritz Busch's artistic conception of the piece and the slick certainties which bind a small company used to performing it as a repertoire piece in a small venue. Busch is certainly capable of a more leisurely tenderness when the score demands it; in fact, his urgency in general permits by contrast a greater expressive impact to those moments where he caresses the music.

The sound here is the best available and presumably the best we shall ever have, given Ward Marston's wizardry and aesthetic judgement. An overlay of slight hiss is a small price to pay for his preserving so much detail and atmosphere. Despite the cuts and excisions, what remains certainly preserves the spirit and virtually all that is important.

The sense of ensemble and crispness of execution are astonishing. The interplay between the singers in the recitative cannot be faulted: they are witty, responsive and pointed. Their decidedly Anglo-Saxon/Teutonic Italian can be faulted, especially Domgraf-Fassbänder's "qvesto piede", Brownlee's potato-mouthed vowels and the like, but the voices themselves are so young, fresh and vibrant. I especially like Nash's plangent, pleasing tenor and the blending of all singers in ensembles. Their characterisation, from Irene Eisinger's pert and pretty Despina (with the best Italian, incidentally) to Brownlee's acerbic and insinuating Don Alfonso, is vivid. The use of a piano for the continuo bothers me not a jot and the orchestral playing is generally secure and well-tuned.

While listening to this ancient version I realised that I was in no wise yearning for more modern sound despite its primitive acoustic but tyros should be aware that this is decidedly historic, for all that Naxos have done their best. I still want to hear the divine set pieces like the Brindisi quartet in No.31 in best sound but must bear in mind that my favourite recordings are themselves mostly

venerable. No libretto is provided but there is an indexed plot synopsis, and historical and biographical notes.

Herbert von Karajan – 1954 studio, EMI mono

Fiordiligi - Elisabeth Schwarzkopf
Dorabella - Nan Merriman
Despina - Lisa Otto
Ferrando - Léopold Simoneau
Guglielmo - Rolando Panerai
Don Alfonso - Sesto Bruscantini
Philharmonia Chorus and Orchestra

I have lived for years with the Böhm recording as my favourite *Così*, always with a sideways longing glance towards the neglected Lombard set on Erato, but the latter really is too languorous at times. That might be what you would expect of Karajan, too, but you would be wrong. He starts in sprightly manner and so it continues: never rushed but taut and beautifully pointed, whereas Böhm can sometimes lack subtlety. At first, one wonders whether some of the singing and playing might be a little understated; everything is so subtly and delicately underscored without any hint of vulgarity - and of course, the orchestral playing is of the highest quality, the Philharmonia of this period comprising some of the greatest wind players of their era, including Denis Brain on horn. If you like your Mozart on period instruments rattled off at breakneck speed, this recording is not for you, but I must emphasise that there is no lack of pace or tension in this performance.

All the soloists have exceptionally fleet, light, sweet voices with that old-fashioned, quick, flickering vibrato now out of fashion and they are masters of the text. Bruscantini is much lighter of voice than the Don Alfonsos to which we have become accustomed today and his characterisation is beautifully shaded, cynical yet affectionate. I am not always fond of Schwarzkopf, but here she is in freshest, purest voice, largely free of mannerisms and even better than ten years later with Böhm. Merriman is a perfect foil, with her warm, vibrant mezzo, and Simoneau is simply the best Ferrando on record. Panerai provides wonderful support, and even though I still marginally prefer the perfect Steffek as Despina in the later set, Otto is pert, pretty and funny.

Recitatives are cut but only the standard two numbers (Nos.7 and 24) are otherwise missing from the complete score.

The mono sound on EMI is clean and forward without distortion. However, the alternative Naxos issue is even cheaper than this "Great Recordings of the Century" version, nor can I not imagine that the EMI is any better re-mastered - and you have a bonus selection of Schwarzkopf arias to boot. So go for the Naxos and enjoy a connoisseur's performance of some of the most sublime music ever written.

Karl Böhm – 1955 studio, Decca stereo

Fiordiligi - Lisa Della Casa
Dorabella - Christa Ludwig
Despina - Emmy Loose
Ferrando - Anton Dermota
Guglielmo - Erich Kunz
Don Alfonso - Paul Schöffler
Vienna Philharmonic Chorus and Orchestra

This was the first stereo recording and the sound is still very good. Böhm's conducting is swift and vivacious, but he relaxes nicely for the dreamy, "Neapolitan" passages, like the sisters' first duet. The faintly Teutonic Italian is better than some Germanic recordings of that era – although Schöffler is

guilty of the odd “*quello*”. The cast is one of distinguished and distinctively voiced Viennese regulars, unlike too many more modern “assembly line” recordings. Della Casa’s fluting soprano may be short on lower register but she is otherwise ideally delicate and seductive, sounding, in fact, very similar to Schwarzkopf at her best. The young Ludwig is more restrained and reticent than in her studio for Böhm seven years later but that complements Della Casa’s aristocratic poise. Kunz is genial if unremarkable. Emmy Loose is pert and pretty as Despina and restrained in her adoption of silly voices as the doctor and lawyer – although I never mind that as long as it’s diverting; this is, after, like Shakespeare, a farcical comedy, albeit one with dark undertones, not a bit of froth. Dermota’s slightly husky tenor is very attractive and Schöffler, a few lapses in intonation apart, makes a suitably avuncular Don Alfonso in an essentially good-humoured, if not very humorous, performance. There are quite a few cuts in both arias and recitatives; nos. 7, 24, 27 and 28 are missing altogether and the loss of the psychologically crucial “*Tradito, schernito*” is especially regrettable - all of which makes it difficult to make this a top recommendation - but I retain a great affection for this beautifully sung account.

Guido Cantelli – 1956 live, mono

Fiordiligi - Elisabeth Schwarzkopf
Dorabella - Nan Merriman
Despina - Graziella Sciutti
Ferrando - Luigi Alva
Guglielmo - Rolando Panerai
Don Alfonso - Franco Calabrese
Teatro alla Scala Chorus and Orchestra

This live performance from La Scala was recorded a couple of years after the Karajan studio recording with several of the same cast-members. The team of Schwarzkopf and Merriman is profoundly satisfying: the former is firm and free from affectations, the latter rich and vibrant. Panerai is his usual dependable self, his baritone light and beautiful. Luigi Alva is perhaps not quite as smooth and elegant as Simoneau but he is still very, very good and I actually prefer the rich-toned Calabrese to Bruscantini as I think his voice has more character, although he finds higher-lying passages a strain and omits the top E at the close of “*Tutte accusan le donne*”. Sciutti makes a pert, charming Despinetta; what a pleasure to hear the Italian banter without the intrusion of the Teutonisms which afflict German recordings of the same era. Set pieces like the famous trio “*Soave sia il vento*” are sublime; it's only a pity that the end of the first CD breaks into the extended finale of Act I. The cuts are only two: the same as in Karajan’s studio recording.

All the voices here are “old-fashioned” in that they have fast vibratos, not a trace of wobble, even tone throughout their range and the ability to “sing off the words” without mouthing them unduly. Cantelli’s tempi seem to me ideal; he is sharp and driven in the ensembles but knows when to relax. The only real drawback is inevitably the boxy mono sound and it crumbles for a while at the start of CD 2, which is inferior to the sound on CD 1, but is perfectly listenable unless you must have stereo. (It’s a live performance, so forgive Alva coming in a bar early at 1' 27", track 20, in the finale of the whole opera - but the preceding quartet is simply delicious.)

Hans Rosbaud – 1957 live, Walhall mono

Fiordiligi - Teresa Stich-Randall
Dorabella - Teresa Berganza
Despina - Mariella Adani
Ferrando - Luigi Alva
Guglielmo - Rolando Panerai
Don Alfonso - Marcello Cortis
Choeurs du Conservatoire; Membres de l'Orchestre de la Société des Concerts du Conservatoire (Paris)

This is a lovely live performance from the Aix Festival in 1957. The sound is faintly muffled, perfectly pleasant mono without blemishes and as such wholly unobjectionable.

The opening takes you by surprise, as the overture is heralded by strokes from a bass drum then takes off like a rocket, with I swear what sounds like recorders instead of flutes and some fiddling with the orchestration. After that, everything about the under-rated Rosbaud's direction is as you would hope, wish and expect apart from an oddly stilted accompaniment to Dorabella's "Smanie implacabile". The ensemble, typified by the sublime Brindisi quartet, is lovely, and everything gels in this performance, even if the prompter is occasionally too present and the piano continuo sometimes a bit irritating. The orchestra is rather homespun at times, especially in the woodwind, but the singing compensates.

Individually, the voices are close to ideal, as long as you respond to Stich-Randall's slightly tremulous, piping sound; she certainly despatches "Come scoglio" with aplomb and draws deserved applause. She is matched by the richer, warmer toned mezzo of the young Berganza. Alva is as fine as he is on the live La Scala *Così* under Cantelli the year before; Panerai is occasionally a little rough of voice but sings himself in and the Despina is pretty and amusing. I'm not so keen on Marcello Cortis as Don Alfonso; the voice is too light and dry, lacking gravitas, and he mugs too much but he doesn't spoil anything even if Calabrese at La Scala is much better.

The standard two cuts are made. If you want a recording from this era, for its sound quality and as a performance overall, I would recommend the almost contemporaneous (1954) studio recording by Karajan, but this one is still first rate.

Karl Böhm – 1962 studio, EMI stereo

Fiordiligi - Elisabeth Schwarzkopf
Dorabella - Christa Ludwig
Despina - Hanny Steffek
Ferrando - Alfredo Kraus
Guglielmo - Giuseppe Taddei
Don Alfonso - Walter Berry
Philharmonia Chorus and Orchestra

This was the first complete Mozart opera I ever bought and it was through this version that I learned to love it. Böhm's earlier studio recording in excellent stereo is commendable, especially for Lisa Della Casa's Fiordiligi and of course Christa Ludwig's first Dorabella, but some of the Italian, apart from Della Casa's, obviously, is a bit Germanic and I don't think the men are as elegant; this 1962 recording, however, was blessed and for many remains unsurpassed.

Oddly enough, I don't especially like either Elisabeth Schwarzkopf or Alfredo Kraus in other repertoire, but here her patrician archness and pellucid technique are perfect for depicting the prim Fiordiligi and his slightly reedy, delicate tones are just right for suggesting Ferrando's starchy smugness before the teenage Angst of his rude awakening. Ludwig is of course delightful: warm and passionate of voice. Taddei sounds a bit old but is a sharp, biting, vocally acute Guglielmo and Berry's knowing, cynical humorousness as Don Alfonso is ideal. Hanny Steffek makes a pert, funny Despina. Furthermore, all their voices combine ideally, so ensembles are a joy, especially the famous "Soave sia il vento" and the exquisite Brindisi quartet.

Böhm's pacing is just so for extracting the comedy and the orchestra's playing is impeccably stylish. OK; there are one or two ugly tape joins - notably thirty seconds into "Fra gli amplessi" - but otherwise the early stereo sound is beautifully clear and balanced. The cuts are the standard Nos. 7

and 24 plus a small one in the Act 1 finale. If you love this opera as I do you will want this version in your collection.

Eugen Jochum – 1962 studio, DG stereo YT excerpts

Fiordiligi - Irmgard Seefried
Dorabella - Nan Merriman
Despina - Erika Köth
Ferrando - Ernst Haeflinger
Guglielmo - Hermann Prey
Don Alfonso - Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau
RIAS Kammerchor; Berliner Philharmoniker

This is a mixed bag: sadly, by this stage of her career Irmgard Seefried sounds elderly, even though she was only in her early forties, her tone had soured, her intonation wavers and she struggles with the technical demands of her big arias; top notes are nasty. I like Nan Merriman's fast vibrato and her smoky tone. Köth is in the Minnie Mouse school of shrill, unsteady Despinas. Haeflinger and Prey are the best things here but neither is better than the best elsewhere and I always find Prey's timbre oddly lachrymose. Fischer-Dieskau is wry and pointed but I hear him and not Don Alfonso. Jochum's conducting is bland and charmless.

This has the standard cuts of nos. 7 and 24 and is otherwise complete, but really, there is nothing to detain us here.

Erich Leinsdorf – 1967 studio, Decca stereo

Fiordiligi - Leontyne Price
Dorabella - Tatiana Troyanos
Despina - Judith Raskin
Ferrando - George Shirley
Guglielmo - Sherrill Milnes
Don Alfonso - Ezio Flagello
Ambrosian Opera Chorus; New Philharmonia Orchestra

There was a time when I dismissed this, the first wholly complete recording, as "heavy going" but am now happy to eat my words and say that I now thoroughly enjoy it.

For a start, it's not afraid of treating the opera broadly as a genuinely funny comedy yet the humour is not generated at the expense of the vocal line. Secondly, despite its venerable age, it's as full an account of the score as you can find on disc. Thirdly, each of the American voices here is wholly distinguishable from the others; no small-scale HAP homogeneity here but instead half a dozen big vocal personalities. Fourthly, while Leinsdorf might not be the last word in fleet finesse, he keeps everything buzzing along without sounding rushed.

Leontyne Price is not an ideal Mozart soprano - her lower register is too cloudy and there are times when she approaches the ungainly - but she triumphantly achieves a convincing facsimile of one and her smoky soprano is very beautiful. Troyanos is a very forthright Dorabella whose intensity, precise diction and fast vibrato made me listen afresh to the role; she is very aptly contrasted with the creamier-voiced Price. George Shirley's grainy tenor can be hard of tone, especially when he is guying as an Albanian and he lacks the last grain of elegance ideal for Ferrando but he can decidedly sing the music and does not let the side down. Milnes is a young, virile-voiced baritone, luscious in sound and alive to every verbal nuance. Raskin is not perhaps as pure-toned as the perfect soubrette Despina should be and she does the usual squawky stuff when in disguise but she does it well and entertains me. I have always thought rich-voiced bass Ezio Flagello under-rated but his characterisation is sharp and his voice mellifluous. Together they make a great team, really holding the opera together as a

proper ensemble. The lovers all ornament their melodic lines from time to time, as Mozart's own singers doubtless did, and they do so tastefully, without excess. It's good to have a harpsichord accompany the recitatives in so early a recording and the New Philharmonia is as accomplished as you would expect in this period.

The recording is clear, with voices well centred against a spacious orchestral background from which individual instruments emerge without looming too close. I am very happy to have this in my collection of *Così* recordings, even if no singer here is as striking as certain individuals on other sets.

Otmar Suitner – 1969 studio, Berlin Classics stereo

Fiordiligi - Celestina Casapietra (Kegel)

Dorabella - Annelies Burmeister

Despina - Sylvia Geszty

Ferrando - Peter Schreier

Guglielmo - Günther Leib

Don Alfonso - Theo Adam

Berliner Staatsoper chorus; Berliner Staatskapelle orchestra

The presence of Schreier's whining tenor here is enough to counteract my confidence in the under-rated Suitner's direction and when I first encountered this recording I knew that if Theo Adam was in wobble-mode the whole enterprise would be doomed. He is and so it is; not only does he wobble alarmingly but it often renders his intonation so arbitrary you're not sure what note he is on. Wisely, the recording engineers keep him well in the background and give him some reverb to prevent him compromising "Soave sia il vento". To add insult to injury he sings "Quanti". As the other singers are at best ordinary, it avails nothing that Suitner reveals that he knows just how this music should go, abetted by a fine orchestra and excellent analogue sound. Sylvia Geszty is grating and squeaky. Highlights are few, low-lights abound. Act 1 is complete but No 24 is cut and, astonishingly, "Per pietà" is among the Act 2 excisions; this one is firmly out of the running.

Otto Klemperer – 1971 studio, EMI stereo

Fiordiligi - Margaret Price

Dorabella - Yvonne Minton

Despina - Lucia Popp

Ferrando - Luigi Alva

Guglielmo - Geraint Evans

Don Alfonso - Hans Sotin

John Alldis Choir; New Philharmonia Orchestra

"Everybody knows" that this is a slow, ponderous recording devoid of life - but is it? Yes, overall it takes ten minutes more than the average three hours but one's first impressions are of a nicely sprung overture played by a superb orchestra. Perceptions of this set were skewed by the undoubtedly sour and vindictive recollections of Walter Legge, sore at how Klemperer revived as the New Philharmonia the orchestra Legge wanted to disband. Thus his verdict: "No sun shines through it; the laughs and heartaches and tenderness and jealousies are swamped under Schopenhauer."

Nonetheless, there are problems – more to do with the casting than Klemperer's deliberate manner. Luigi Alva is older and looser of voice; the tone is still attractive but the vibrato is too broad and he is stretched by Klemperer's tempo, less comfortable than he was for Cantelli/Rosbaud live in 1956 and 1957 respectively. He wobbles in "Volgi a me" and that spoils the Brindisi, too. Geraint Evans's gruff bass-baritone sounds like someone's elderly uncle and he should have been Don Alfonso; it's an egregious example of mis-casting. Hans Sotin has a lovely voice but is rather disengaged and dull – perhaps a little "Germanic". There are cuts, including the standard two arias and, most damagingly, to the recitative so that, for example, Act 2 starts bluntly with Despina's aria, and the omissions

obscure motivation and psychological complexity. Finally, there is more than a grain of truth in Legge's observation: Klemperer plays down the comedy in favour of high seriousness.

But the ladies, the ladies! What a glorious trio of voices, unencumbered by breathless tempi; Klemperer's leisurely but loving phrasing gives them the space to soar like eagles over Mozart's melodic landscape. The story goes that in reply to Lucia Popp's complaint that his tempi were too slow, the libidinous Klemp replied, ""When I make love, it has to be very slow!". This certainly applies to "Come scoglio" but when Margaret Price sings it like a goddess you want it to last as long as possible. He isn't uniformly slow; "E voi ridete", for example, is taken at a good, swift pace but on the other hand both the finales don't fizz, they drag.

Price is certainly one of the best Fiordiligi on record, her silvery, powerful, fluting soprano blending beautifully with Yvonne Minton's mellow mezzo; "Ah, che tutto in un momento" and "Soave sia il vento" are both sublime, Sotin's velvety bass melding beautifully with the sisters' voices without sacrificing the individuality so often missing in period recordings. Minton has all the temperament required, her smoky timbre and flickering vibrato ideally conveying Dorabella's hysteria in "Smanie implacabile". Popp is a delight as Despina; again, her voice is immediately identifiable and unique and she is all sparkle and vivacity as the feisty maid and makes you realise how ordinary some other singers are in this role – and she sees no need to do much of a funny voice for the doctor or the notary beyond some slight adjustment, which might come as a relief to some – perhaps that was under Klemperer's orders.

Despite its attendant frustrations and weaknesses, this set remains in my shelves purely so that I can hear the best trio of female singers ever to sing *Così* – albeit rather slowly...

Georg Solti - 1973-74 studio, Decca stereo

Fiordiligi - Pilar Lorengar
Dorabella - Teresa Berganza
Despina - Jane Berbié
Ferrando - Ryland Davies
Guglielmo - Tom Krause
Don Alfonso - Gabriel Bacquier
London Opera Chorus; London Philharmonic Orchestra

Pilar Lorengar's fast, wide vibrato might bother some listeners in the same way that Cristina Deutekom's sometimes bordered on a "gargling" sound, but she has the range and power, with excellent technical mastery of the coloratura passages in her big arias. Bacquier is dry of tone but brings Gallic subtlety and suavity to the part. Berganza is good as Dorabella but for me lacks mezzo weight and richness. Jane Berbié has an oddly mature and cloudy voice for Despina but sounds very knowing and street-wise. Ryland Davies does not have the ideal Mozart tenor but he is decidedly preferable to some bigger names. Tom Krause's firm baritone is always an asset. As you might suspect from Solti, the conducting is of high intensity, but not lacking poetry when required. This is a complete performance – no cuts. It might not be a front-runner but it is preferable to Solti's later live recording, whose singers are all less engaging except for Renée Fleming.

(Incidentally, this is the recording employed by the Salzburg Marionette Theatre in their entertaining 1995 film, skilfully using puppets as the actors.)

Karl Böhm – 1974 live, DG stereo

Fiordiligi - Gundula Janowitz
Dorabella - Brigitte Fassbaender
Despina - Reri Grist
Ferrando - Peter Schreier

Guglielmo - Hermann Prey
Don Alfonso – Rolando Panerai
Vienna Philharmonic Chorus and Orchestra

It is strange how in only a dozen years Böhm could decline from his sparkling 1962 studio recording to this glutinous stage performance. Perhaps his advancing years – he was nearly eighty at the time – had something to do with it. Apart from the luminous presence of Gundula Janowitz, this recording has little going for it; just about everything else is wrong, from Schreier's absurdly squawked, nasal Ferrando – honestly, I have never heard him worse – to the stolid conducting, to the ponderous humour, to the irritating stage and audience noises – clinking, clunking and coughing – to the excess of cuts: nos. 7, 24, 27 and 28 are gone entirely and recitatives are pruned. Fassbaender – usually one of my favourite singers – sounds matronly, strident and stentorian, Reri Grist is rather too pert and squeaky, Prey is lugubrious, and Panerai sounds constricted and out of sorts. Even Janowitz is not as pure as usual and often sings on a disconcertingly thin thread of tone without vibrato – was it something in the air? Move on.

Colin Davis – 1974 studio, Philips stereo

Fiordiligi - Montserrat Caballé
Dorabella - Janet Baker
Despina - Ileana Cotrubas
Ferrando - Nicolai Gedda
Guglielmo - Wladimiro Ganzarolli
Don Alfonso - Richard Van Allan
Covent Garden Chorus and Orchestra

I have never warmed to this recording. Davis' conducting is impeccable but despite the august presence of such celebrated singers as Montserrat Caballé and Janet Baker, there is no doubt that they sound rather stately and mature compared with the youthful and vivacious sisters of Kiri Te Kanawa and Agnes Baltsa in Davis' later, live recording and Stuart Burrows' Ferrando, too, represents a considerable advance over Nicolai Gedda, who was not in good voice here, sounding whiny and unsteady. Finally, I have no doubt at all that "Britain's favourite baritone", Sir Thomas Allen, is vocally infinitely more suave and alluring in 1981 than the gruff and rather clumsy Ganzarolli. The bass is the same in both: a saturnine and knowing Richard Van Allan. He is rich of tone, idiomatic and fluent in his delivery of text, even if he is, on occasion, vocally ungainly in more delicate vocal manoeuvres. These weaknesses, especially in the male casting, disqualify it from my list of recommendations. The recording is complete.

Alain Lombard – 1977 studio, Erato stereo

Fiordiligi - Kiri Te Kanawa
Dorabella - Frederica Von Stade
Despina - Teresa Stratas
Ferrando - David Rendall
Guglielmo - Philippe Huttenlocher
Don Alfonso - Jules Bastin
Opéra du Rhin chorus; Orchestre Philharmonique de Strasbourg

This Erato re-issue is perhaps a dark horse recording but it inspires a deep affection amongst its adherents, not least as it enshrines virtually perfect performances by two beloved artists in their vocal prime: Kiri Te Kanawa's Fiordiligi and Frederica von Stade's Dorabella. I would also add an encomium to David Rendall's Ferrando as being his finest achievement in a chequered career. Teresa Stratas, equally renowned in Puccini, Strauss, verismo and Berg, was also a highly accomplished Mozartian, and treats us here to a richly comic, pertly vocalised Despina. Perhaps the time she took out of her long career to do charity work in Calcutta and Romania in combination with her

maintaining a low profile in retirement resulted in a little collective amnesia regarding her true worth; this re-issue might jog a few memories. The other two lower-voiced male singers, Swiss baritone Philippe Huttenlocher as Guglielmo and Belgian basse chantante Jules Bastin as Don Alfonso, are less celebrated and neither is endowed with a particularly rich or characterful voice, but they by no means let the side down in a production strong on ensemble and teamwork; this is a fresh, youthful version full of high spirits and meltingly beautiful singing.

Lombard's direction of the Strasbourg Philharmonic Orchestra is relaxed but never slack - whereas it has to be said that at times in some recordings Böhm's pacing can be frustratingly four-square, despite the brilliance of his casts; too often a certain Germanic doggedness blights the momentum, although I admire the arching control he exerts over that extraordinary, extended, twenty-minute finale to Act 1. Nobody approaches Karajan's sparkle and élan in 1954 - but his is not the only way to do Mozart; Lombard's spaciousness gives his singers more time to make their points and there is a benefit in being able to savour the creamy beauty of the singing here. However, he does not let matters drag when momentum is required; his Finale is just as urgent and absorbing. He uses a relatively small, fleet orchestra which is light on its feet, and thus successfully counteracts any suggestion of heaviness arising from his unhurried tempi. The standard two cuts are made here, plus some cuts in recitative and one in the Act 2 finale.

Te Kanawa has absolutely everything in her vocal armoury required for the role of Fiordiligi: trills, runs, soaring top notes, seamless legato, breathtaking loveliness of tone, clear, idiomatic enunciation of the Italian text. Nor can she be criticised for any lack of involvement - a favourite accusation of her detractors; this is a performance to stand alongside her Countess for Solti and is the recording which I think best preserves her virtues as a lyric soprano. The only problem is that Te Kanawa makes an aria like "Come scoglio" sound almost too easy. Von Stade is not far behind in quality; her tone is golden and she manages to suggest Dorabella's coquettishness without sounding arch. This is a partnership to set beside that of Schwarzkopf and Ludwig, even if the older singers have the edge in verbal acting.

Both Bastin and Huttenlocher have slightly woollier voices than is ideal; we have become accustomed to a certain Italian bite provided by the likes of Taddei or Panerai, which gives Guglielmo's outbursts of rage and hurt betrayal more impact. Similarly, Walter Berry and even the lighter-voiced Bruscantini for Karajan suggest more of the wily old fox than Bastin can summon up with his soft-grained bass, but his comic timing and artful inflection are that of a seasoned basso buffo.

Reactions to David Rendall's tenor vary; I love it. The very individual, slightly constricted tone, the fast vibrato and easy top with just a hint of steel when required, seem to me to be ideal. Singers such as Simoneau give us a gentler soul, but I like the hint of passion, volatility and even potential violence with which Rendall invests his Ferrando. No other tenor creates so rounded a character or sings with such a winning combination of mellifluousness and virility.

Huttenlocher almost over-compensates for the lack of edge in his tone by consistently ensuring that he is acting with voice. Just occasionally he could be accused of over-egging the pudding but he manages to be both droll and sly; better this close attention to verbal nuance than a mere dutiful sing-through. His baritone is otherwise warm and steady.

A potential pitfall is Stratas' assumption of very obviously comical "funny voices" for her disguises as doctor and notary. Personally, I find her hilarious even on repeated listenings; she could be an extra on the "Goon Show" - and she is hardly the first to seize enthusiastically upon the comic possibilities of such a golden opportunity to ham it up.

One oddity about the newer issue is that the sound, while perfectly acceptable, is slightly duller than on my original 1995 recording which has more definition in upper frequencies without harshness. Another reason for my hanging on to my older issue resides in that penny-pinching practice, now standard amongst recording companies, of directing you either to a website (as in this case) or a CD-ROM for the libretto; inconvenient and irritating - although I shall not miss the absurdly precious and pretentious essay which appeared in the original booklet.

If you need convincing of the merits of this set, I direct you to the sublime Brindisi quartet in Scene 16 of Act 2, "E nel tuo, nel mio bicchiere". No matter how many times I hear it, I am transfixed by this little gem: it affords the most extraordinary combination of ethereal beauty, dramatic irony and vivid characterisation, especially when sung with such purity, as it is here. It encapsulates the bewildering allure and fundamental ambivalence of this extraordinary work.

Colin Davis – 1981 live, Opus Arte stereo

Fiordiligi - Kiri Te Kanawa
Dorabella - Agnes Baltsa
Despina - Daniela Mazzucato (Meneghini)
Ferrando - Stuart Burrows
Guglielmo - Thomas Allen
Don Alfonso - Richard Van Allan
Covent Garden Chorus and Orchestra

This being a live performance from almost forty years ago, a few allowances have to be made for a bit of background rumble and some - but not much - audience intrusion in the form of laughter (not objectionable) and the occasional cough, as ever perfectly timed to coincide with tender moments. The sound is slightly tubby and the orchestra somewhat recessed but none of this is likely to trouble the seasoned listener who likes the atmosphere of live theatre and wants to hear a classic account of what might now be Mozart's most popular opera.

I have already made comparison favourable to this recording with the earlier 1974 studio version; direct comparison might also be made with a neglected recording for which I have a great affection and which I review immediately above: the 1977 studio set conducted by Alain Lombard. Te Kanawa delivers a similarly superlative performance here, although she is more animated, being, as you might expect, more attentive to word-painting when performing live. Her creamy, flawless voice - which blends beautifully with that of Baltsa - makes light of the parodic coloratura in "Come scoglio", nailing the runs and trills with consummate ease and sailing from note to note neatly on the vibrato. It is another glorious account to be savoured by her legion fans.

Baltsa is scarcely less accomplished: this is an impulsive, impassioned, spitfire of a Dorabella; her vibrancy of voice occasionally results in a little passing sharpness but it is a winning impersonation, as chuckles from the audience confirm.

Daniella Mazzucato is a tad shallow and over-bright of voice as Despina, but her background in operetta makes an accomplished comedienne, pert and characterful, if neither as funny as Stratas in the Lombard nor as vocally alluring as Hanny Steffek in the famous 1962 Böhm recording. Clearly the audience enjoys her mugging and stage-business.

Despite the slightly odd, occluded nature of his vocal production - a certain almost Russian, liquid plummy which I nonetheless like - Stuart Burrows reminds us of what an elegant tenor he possessed; he gives us plangent, melting accounts of his arias to put most other interpreters in the shade.

Allen as Guglielmo is in fine, velvet voice, capable of oscillating between oleaginous charm when he is playing the seducer and gritted-teeth venom when betrayed.

I love the way Davis injects pace into the "E voi ridete" exchange between the three plotters but can relax for the most famous number, "Soave sia il vento", which at a leisurely 4:14 is permitted to hover, suspended in the air, producing a timeless moment of beauty just as it should. The orchestra is very fine - especially the euphonious woodwind and horns.

The set is in an attractive clam-shell box, the 3 discs in cardboard sleeves. No libretto is provided except via a link on the Opus Arte website and the two usual cuts are made. This does not bother me but I can understand how it irritates others.

This is, in short, an attractive set, not in the very best sound but nonetheless a really satisfying souvenir of a great night at the opera and perhaps also a version to live with if you follow the artists in question.

Riccardo Muti – 1982 live composite, EMI stereo

Fiordiligi - Margaret Marshall

Dorabella - Agnes Baltsa

Despina - Kathleen Battle

Ferrando - Francisco Araiza

Guglielmo - James Morris

Don Alfonso - José van Dam

Vienna Philharmonic Chorus and Orchestra

I bought this on cassette when it came out in the early 80's and have loved the three ladies' voices ever since; likewise, I have since had no taste for either Araiza's squeezed tenor or James Morris' hollow, nasal bass-baritone and nothing is going to change now. For me this opera runs counter to the usual pattern of the men outperforming the ladies, although van Dam is here in rather fresher, more resonant voice than he was when he recorded the same role for Marriner towards the end of the decade. I could listen all day to Margaret Marshall's pearlescent soprano, with its tonal purity, fast vibrato and absolute security of pitch, and she contrasts so nicely with Baltsa's pungent, smoky mezzo. Battle is delightful, even if just occasionally she overdoes the pertness; all three women's voices are so identifiably unique and full of character – no problem with faceless, identikit sopranos here.

Muti's conducting is sharp and driven but he can relax; "Soave sia il vento" is a dream, with all singers producing lovely legato and perfectly even tone – a pity about the cougher in the audience.

It has the standard two cuts.

Arnold Östman – 1984 studio, L'Oiseau-Lyre digital

Fiordiligi - Rachel Yakar

Dorabella - Alicia Nafé

Despina - Georgine Resick

Ferrando - Gosta Winbergh

Guglielmo - Tom Krause

Don Alfonso - Carlos Feller

Drottningholm Court Theatre Chorus and Orchestra

The Overture here instantly puts my hackles up with its charmless, breathless haste and playing at the lower Baroque pitch further robs it of light and air. Good lord, what is the reason for what a friend of mine calls this "indecorous velocity"?

This is a pity as there are some fine voices on offer here, beginning with Gösta Winbergh's robust, virile tenor and veteran Tom Krause's fruity baritone. The latter was only fifty here but a bit mature for a young lover. Carlos Feller makes a sonorous, authoritative, Don Alfonso. Georgine Resick's Despina is winningly sung but sung rather "straight" – perhaps preferable to the excessive comic business applied by some Despinas – but she reverts to tradition when squeaking her way through the notary's curtailed preamble. The sisters have lovely – and distinguishable - voices – but so much is taken at such a clip that there's no time to feel, let alone think. Yes, it's the antidote to Klemperer and, to a less acute extent, Lombard, and there's something absurdly invigorating about hearing the Act 1 finale sung on amphetamines but it's perverse to drive this opera along as if otherwise everyone will turn into pumpkins before midnight. Despite my irritation at the rush, I find myself enjoying much of this but there's an element of watching a dog dance on its hind legs about it. Blink and you'll miss "Soave sia il vento". Oddly, Fiordiligi's showpiece aria "Come scoglio" and Ferrando's "Un'aura amorosa" provide some respite from the incessant hurry but it's a pity that Yakar rather screams her top notes and she doesn't "float" in the Brindisi as she should.

The score is complete – we even get the buffo aria for Guglielmo, "Rivolgete a lui", that Mozart scrapped, superbly sung by Krause - but it's fifteen minutes faster than most. It's not as though this period performance suffers from the usual excesses which annoy traditionalists; it's not clipped or whined and the music is so divine that it often not only survives but prospers at speed – but sometimes it is simply too fast.

Bernard Haitink – 1986 studio, EMI digital

Fiordiligi - Carol Vaness
Dorabella - Delores Ziegler
Despina - Lilian Watson
Ferrando - John Aler
Guglielmo - Dale Duesing
Don Alfonso - Claudio Desderi
Glyndebourne Festival Chorus; London Philharmonic Orchestra

Lovely, rich sound and playing with the same qualities from the LPO are immediately apparent in Haitink's weighty overture. The first voice we hear is John Aler's and I have long loved his clean, clear, light tenor; he sings "Un'aura amoroso" with great elegance and poise. Unfortunately, his excellence is not complemented by his fellow male singers; Duesing has a rather gritty baritone and Desderi's voice is husky and lacking tonal centre with an incipient, underlying tremolo – although I like the chuckle which always lurks behind his words. Their voices don't actually blend very well: Aler cuts through but the others are blurry. Furthermore, Haitink's conducting is rather ponderous and this becomes something of a trudge through, instead of a sparkling traversal of, the score. It's all a bit po-faced and, well, dull.

As much as I admire Carol Vaness, I rather think her big, vibrant voice is temperamentally better suited to roles other than Fiordiligi and her timbre is very similar to Ziegler's. I like her Mozart's Elettra, Vitellia and Donna Anna but the wildness in her full tone does not suit the cool, aristocratic Fiordiligi. Lilian Watson is charming as Despina, with just the right voice and although she doesn't overdo the lawyer's voice, I rather miss the usual high jinx.

So, complete and worthy as this is, with many incidental beauties, it cannot be the choice for a recording that really brings this scintillating music alive.

James Levine – 1988 studio, DG digital

Fiordiligi - Kiri Te Kanawa
Dorabella - Ann Murray

Despina - Marie McLaughlin
Ferrando - Hans Peter Blochwitz
Guglielmo - Thomas Hampson
Don Alfonso - Ferruccio Furlanetto
Vienna Philharmonic Chorus and Orchestra

This is a big-boned performance the complete score presented in typical Levine style and he has a deluxe orchestra to do his bidding and provide lush sounds. Despite the depth and richness of the playing – matched by splendid digital sound – Levine is never listless or ponderous; numbers bounce along buoyantly. I have to say that at first glance little about the casting except the presence of Kiri Te Kanawa set my pulse racing but as soon as I heard the male trio in the first number I was hooked. Blochwitz lightish voice might not be the last word in tenor charisma but he sings neatly and vivaciously and he maintains a pleasing timbre. Hampson is in best, youthful voice and Furlanetto's bass is flexible enough to encompass the higher-lying lines but always fruity and funny. I've never been a great fan of Ann Murray's mezzo, which I find hard-edged and over vibrant but she is in the best voice I have heard her in here and creates a strong impression. Marie McLaughlin is a charming, lively Despina who avoids the archness which overtakes some in that role, the only problem being that she sounds as full-voiced and aristocratic as her mistresses. Te Kanawa is in fine voice, a little looser and more mature-sounding than in her two previous assumptions of Fiordiligi but her soprano is bigger and her characterisation more assertive than before, making more of the text. It's nice to have Guglielmo's discarded aria expertly negotiated by a smooth-voiced Hampson and he manages "Donne mie" without grabbing or grunting. The Brindisi is exquisite – perhaps the finest on record alongside Lombard's. While this might not be the most individual or star-studded *Così* in the catalogue, it all hangs together and has no weak links; it is surely the best of digital era. This was the greatest surprise I encountered in my survey.

Neville Marriner - 1988-89 studio, Philips digital

Fiordiligi - Karita Mattila
Dorabella - Anne Sofie von Otter
Despina - Elzbieta Szmytka
Ferrando - Francisco Araiza
Guglielmo - Thomas Allen
Don Alfonso - José van Dam
Ambrosian Opera Chorus; Academy of Saint-Martins-in-the-Fields orchestra

Marriner kicks off with a big, bold account of the overture, going to extremes of tempo and those who fear he will be guilty of too much polite, British reserve will be reassured. The orchestra is animated with plenty of bass underlay and the sound is first rate. How I wish I liked Araiza's cloudy, husky tenor more, as the men make a lively trio, interacting well in the recitative. As always, Thomas Allen adds a touch of class with his smooth vocalisation and van Dam is suitably wily, if a bit grey-toned. However, I do not like Mattila's Fiordiligi at all, finding her blowsy and laboured, her voice unsuited to the role. Von Otter is simply ordinary, her voice lacking distinction and Szmytka is shrill with a pronounced vibrato - so for me this recording is a non-starter.

This is the complete score.

Daniel Barenboim – 1989 studio, Erato digital

Fiordiligi - Lella Cuberli
Dorabella - Cecilia Bartoli
Despina - Joan Rodgers
Ferrando - Kurt Streit
Guglielmo - Ferruccio Furlanetto
Don Alfonso - John Tomlinson

RIAS Kammerchor; Berliner Philharmoniker orchestra

The plush, well-upholstered sound of the Berlin Phil falls gratefully on the ear though some who want bit more period grit might find it all too comfortable. Barenboim's conducting is predominately measured and laboured; "Per pietà" simply drags. At the other extreme, Bartoli over-emotes and does that gasping thing in "Smanie implacabile" but of course she is a big personality and the voice, although never large, is incisive. Lella Cuberli is very good – in the Kiri mode and very similar in timbre without quite her creaminess or amplitude. Technically she is superb but does not dominate the part and remains a tad anonymous. She easily negotiates the coloratura of "Come scoglio" and blends well with Bartoli. Joan Rodgers is able as Despina, if - as is so often the case with this role – a little shrill.

The men are somewhat less satisfactory. Best is Kurt Streit, who also recorded Ferrando for Rattle; his reedy tenor is pleasing but rather anonymous. The two lower voices are problematic: Furlanetto's bass is naturally much better suited to Don Alfonso for Levine than to the baritone role of Guglielmo here and he makes heavy weather of its fleet patter. He sounds like Dorabella's papa or Padre Guardiano in "Il core vi dono". My dislike of John Tomlinson's growly, gravelly bass is a personal foible perhaps, but, like Furlanetto, he lacks the urbane, adroit bass-baritone required to convey adequately the sly charm of the old cynic. I quote Alan Blyth from the original "Gramophone" review: "Tomlinson as Alfonso is often clumsy, occasionally flat. He certainly has the measure of the part and suggests all the man's cynicism and subtlety, but at this stage of his career his bass is simply too unwieldy for Mozart." Nuff said.

Unusually for its era, it has the two previously standard cuts, other strike against it.

Johannes Wildner – 1990 studio, Naxos digital

Fiordiligi - Joanna Borowska
Dorabella - Rohangiz Yachmi(-Caucig)
Despina - Priti Coles
Ferrando - John Dickie
Guglielmo - Andrea Martin
Don Alfonso - Peter Mikulás
Slovak Philharmonic Chorus; Capella Istropolitana orchestra

A bargain edition of the complete score from Naxos. None of the singers here is a major Mozart artist; the female leads are a bit fruity and even occasionally ungainly but they blend nicely, as in the famous Trio with husky, gentle-voiced bass Mikulás, and the Brindisi is lovely. Borowska copes very well with "Come scoglio". Yachmi has a mature, occluded tone but sings confidently. John Dickie and son of Murray, also a tenor, is competent but undistinguished with something of a plaintive beat in his sound. The baritone is a bit gruff and charmless. The Despina is rather good. – vivacious and not squally, as too many are. We know that Wildner is a fine conductor from his other recordings for Naxos, CPO, Marco Polo et al; he directs a very natural, free-flowing account. This is by no means as poor as some commentators have made out and I enjoy it more than I thought I would; it makes a good introduction to the music but at the same time it's pity that the tenor and baritone aren't really more satisfying. There are better to be heard.

Nikolaus Harnoncourt – 1991 studio, Teldec digital

Fiordiligi - Charlotte Margiono
Dorabella - Delores Ziegler
Despina - Anna Steiger
Ferrando - Deon van der Walt
Guglielmo - Gilles Cachemaille
Don Alfonso - Thomas Hampson

De Nederlandse Opera (Amsterdam) chorus; Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra

It is interesting that period specialist Harnoncourt records this, the complete opera, with a “Big Band” rather than an original instrument group but they are fleet and neat, able to deliver his very fast tempi. However, Harnoncourt frequently goes off the rails wildly: for example, both “Bella vita militar” and “Soave sia il vento” are absurdly rushed, yet “Non siate ritrosi” is equally absurdly lugubrious. It must straight away be said that his singers are not the best team: Margiono is rather grainy and windy as Fiordiligi, where a searing purity of tone is required. She simply does not have a Fiordiligi voice. Ziegler repeats the serviceable, workaday Dorabella she gave Haitink in his 1986 studio recording but goes into overdrive for “Smanie implacabile” as if she were a verismo heroine, with a wobble to boot. Deon van der Walt had a rather throaty tenor; “Un’aura amorosa” is sung sweetly enough but in a throttled, low-key manner. Anna Steiger makes an elderly sounding Despina with a screech in the top of her voice and she, too, verbally overacts to the detriment of vocal line and tone, constantly squawking out her words. It seems as if Harnoncourt must be responsible for encouraging his singers to compromise their beauty of their singing in favour of dramatic expression but it doesn’t work. Hampson here makes the transition from the Guglielmo he sang for Levine in 1988 but not successfully. He doesn’t really have the weight or profundity of tone adequately to depict Don Alfonso and his light baritone sounds like Guglielmo’s slightly older brother, which is not, I think, what was intended. Cachemaille is oddly emollient, over-smoothing his phrasing to make Guglielmo sound oleaginous – again, not, I think, what was intended; he is the one muttering ferociously in the Brindisi about how he wished the sisters were drinking poison rather than wine. Pass over this one.

John Eliot Gardiner – 1992 live, DG Archiv digital

Fiordiligi - Amanda Roocroft

Dorabella - Rose Mannion

Despina - Eirian James

Ferrando - Rainer Trost

Guglielmo - Rodney Gilfry

Don Alfonso - Carlos Feller

Monteverdi Choir; English Baroque Soloists

The prelude to this performance is the male actors arriving on stage arguing among themselves – quite daring considering no-one in this cast is Italian - and there is ample, sometimes distracting, evidence that this is live. I do not much like tenor Rainer Trost’s bland, white tone but Gilfry has a pleasingly light, neat, flexible baritone. Carlos Feller repeats the characterful Don Alfonso he gave us in Östman’s recording, but the voice has noticeably aged and is now less steady and much gruffer. All three female singers share similar qualities: a warm, generous sound with, occasionally, too generous a vibrato, too, which contrasts oddly with the vibrato-free, somewhat whiny strings of the English Baroque Soloists, which I do not enjoy. Eirian James makes a darker-voiced Despina than is often the case because she is, unusually, a mezzo-soprano, whereas Dorabella is here sung by a true soprano, so our normal expectations are reversed. James avoids camping it up as the doctor, in keeping with the generally sober demeanour, but achieves something of a tour de force by singing the notary in her tenor, lower register – something I have never heard before nor since and it really works. Amanda Roocroft’s rather strange, fruity, even “bottled”, tone is apparent from the start of “Come scoglio” but that is not necessarily unattractive and the amplitude of the voice is impressive, even if her negotiation of the coloratura is a shade careful. She and fellow-soprano Rosa Mannion blend beautifully. Mannion is a little under-stated in her characterisation of Dorabella but again, that chimes with the prevailing serious mood; this is a rather humourless account. There are too many points in this recording where I feel that the action does not catch fire as it should; it is all rather small-scale and “baroque” in feel and I like something a bit grander. I am indebted to a perspicacious friend who pointed out the real flaw here: it is largely devoid of eroticism – although the Brindisi is

lovely. For that reason, and for what is merely the general competence of the singing as opposed to thrilling vocalisation, my reaction to this recording is one of admiration rather than enthusiasm.

Sigiswald Kuijken – 1992 live, Accent Live/Brilliant digital

Fiordiligi - Soile Isokoski
Dorabella - Monica Groop
Despina - Nancy Argenta
Ferrando - Markus Schäfer
Guglielmo - Per Vollestad
Don Alfonso - Huub (Hubert) Claessens
La Petite Bande Chorus and Orchestra

This is a live performance recorded in Hungary, complete with a few coughs and some passing imbalances between the voices and orchestra. It's available at super-bargain price so easy to consider as a supplement but not, I think, as a first choice. Its strengths are the two leading ladies, especially the silver-voiced Soile Isokoski, a natural successor to Schwarzkopf and Te Kanawa as Fiordiligi, the driven but flexible conducting and the vitality and virtuosity of the orchestral playing, despite the smallness of the band. There are relative weaknesses in the rest of the singing: Claessens is rather woolly and unvarying of tone, Vollestad is competent but ordinary and rather anonymous. The Ferrando, Markus Schäfer has a warm tenor and begins well enough but begins to tire during "Un'aura amorosa" and his tone starts to blare as the opera progresses, so "Tradito, schernito" is strained. Fortunately, he recovers somewhat for the finale.

Monica Groop has a rich, secure mezzo-soprano which contrasts yet still blends well with Isokoski's lovely soprano; she injects just enough hysteria into her delivery of "Smania implacabile" to ensure that we do not take her apparent distress too seriously. Nancy Argenta's soprano is certainly sufficient differentiated from her mistresses but she sounds tentative and not entirely comfortable or under Despina's skin, her tone rather lachrymose and plaintive. Her disguised voice as the doctor is not a success – in fact it's rather embarrassing and the notary voice is half-hearted. Nor is she helped by Kuijken's uncharacteristically slow tempo for "Una donna di quindici anni". All the singers are permitted occasionally to decorate their arias in ad lib fashion which I don't think adds much of value. It's often done well but I find it superfluous and irritating.

Despite the paces of some sections, Kuijken relaxes into the lyrical numbers such as the Quintet "Di scrivermi" and of course the famous Terzettino, which provides three minutes of pure, serene calm, just as it should, so he is by no means prone to the humourless, unyielding haste which afflicts some period practitioners.

The score is given absolutely complete. A libretto is supposedly available on the Brilliant website. For some, at so little outlay, this will be worth purchasing just to hear Isokoski's Fiordiligi alone.

Charles Mackerras – 1993 studio, Telarc, digital

Fiordiligi - Felicity Lott
Dorabella - Marie McLaughlin
Despina - Nuccia Focile
Ferrando - Jerry Hadley
Guilelmo* - Alessandro Corbelli
Don Alfonso - Gilles Cachemaille
Edinburgh Festival Chorus; Scottish Chamber Orchestra
* as per Da Ponte's spelling

I always find Lott's soprano a little gritty and impure of tone, and her top can be shrill - although her legion admirers will be cross with me for having that opinion. She sings in the modern manner,

frequently introducing appoggiaturas into the vocal line – not to my taste and in any case I do not find her vocal lay-out ideally suited to the role. I remarked above of Marie McLaughlin's Despina for Levine that she sounded rather too aristocratic, so I can hardly complain that here she has switched to Dorabella, as it suits her full, dark soprano but I still prefer a mezzo. Nuccia Focile makes a neat, slight, shallow-toned Dorabella. Hadley is not in good voice: his delivery is rather hyper, often lumpy and gusty, with throaty top notes, his singing generally lacking repose and the true Mozartian line. Generally good soloists but all surpassed elsewhere; neither Corbelli nor Cachemaille, making the switch here from Guglielmo for Harnoncourt to Don Alfonso for no good reason I can hear, is especially captivating, both being rather generic.

Mackerras' approach in his later years became increasingly hard-driven and I find that this recording lacks affection for, or engagement with, the music; it's too glib and lightweight for me and the orchestra is small. The score is complete, with Hadley giving a strenuous account of "Ah, lo veggio", pushed by Mackerras' fast tempo. Given the alternatives, this is not really competitive.

Georg Solti – 1994 live composite, Decca digital

Fiordiligi - Renée Fleming

Dorabella - Anne Sofie von Otter

Despina - Adelina Scarabelli

Ferrando - Frank Lopardo

Guglielmo - Olaf Bär

Don Alfonso - Michele Pertusi

London Voices; Chamber Orchestra of Europe

I like Solti's sharp, energised way with Mozart and by this stage of his career he had relaxed a little and acquired greater flexibility in his conducting to permit more poetry in his direction. The problem here is that the divine, creamy-voiced Renée Fleming is in a class of her own, not adequately matched by her fellow singers. I positively dislike Frank Lopardo's throaty, constricted vocal production; I am astonished that the "Gramophone" critic finds him to be a paragon among Mozart tenors; have we really forgotten what Wunderlich or Dermota sounded like? His male co-singers are also-rans in the world of Mozartian Super League singers and I am no more impressed by von Otter's Penny Plain Dorabella than I was in her recording for Marriner five years earlier. Scarabelli is OK, if a bit thin-voiced and wobbly as Despina but tries too hard to inject expression into her music; in any case, nobody buys *Così* for the Despina. There's a lot stage business, applause and the singers sometimes decorate their phrases but the whole thing sounds oddly applied and soulless.

The live sound doesn't help, being echoing and distant. This is the complete score but it's another non-starter for me

Simon Rattle – 1995 live, EMI digital

Fiordiligi - Hillevi Martinpelto

Dorabella - Alison Hagley

Despina - Ann Murray

Ferrando - Kurt Streit

Guglielmo - Gerald Finley

Don Alfonso - Thomas Allen

Choir and Orchestra of the Age of Enlightenment

For me, the main drawback here is Rattle's wilful conducting; tempi are often extreme, sometimes ridiculously so, such that passages are gabbled. There's little affection in his plonky style; he is heavy on the beat and light on rubato. The effect is hard and unyielding; the listener is wearied by what is essentially a flashy, self-conscious style that results in an uningratiating atmosphere in an opera which demands our empathy with the characters. The singing is never less than competent but not in

the same class as the best. Sometimes both sopranos indulge in a kind of sobbing, plaintive, over-acted style of delivery which is unfortunate; the music doesn't need it. Having a soprano as Dorabella is unusual; Alison Hagley is pleasant but lacks the character and contrast afforded by a mezzo. Ann Murray is sweeter of voice than later in her career but there is still some edge in her voice, especially up to; she is much better in the Levine recording seven years earlier. Thomas Allen is in fine voice but hurried by Rattle's tempi, and we hear some nice singing from the dependable Finley. This is complete, with Guglielmo's optional, discarded aria as an appendix. Sir Simon, you have to love the music more than this if you're going to conduct it.

René Jacobs – 1998 studio, Harmonia Mundi digital

Fiordiligi - Véronique Gens
Dorabella - Bernarda Fink
Despina - Graciela Oddone
Ferrando - Werner Güra
Guglielmo - Marcel Boone
Don Alfonso - Pietro Spagnoli
Kölner Kammerchor; Concerto Köln

Jacobs sets out his stall immediately with an overture so fast that it makes Östman look leisurely. It becomes a demonstration of the musicians' prestidigitation but is devoid of charm or finesse. We are then introduced to the three principal male voices and their very lack of distinction or individuality confirms that this will be a recording more about the conductor and his orchestra than a voice-Fest. These are smaller, lighter voices which are quite often dominated by the orchestra, and miked very closely as if to compensate; I feel as if the baritone is muttering in my right ear during "Secondate, aurette amiche". The singers frequently decorate their lines with elaborate ornamentation accompanied by exaggerated ritardandi from Jacobs and a plonking *pub* (*forte*)piano in both the recitative and musical numbers; this might be just your thing in *Così fan tutte* but it's not mine.

The trio of women's voices is more appealing, especially Bernarda Fink's warm mezzo, but I find that I am distracted from listening to them by Jacobs' constant search for novelty in the balances, sonorities and phrasing of the music which ruptures the flow and mood of the music. That problem is compounded by the fact that all six voices are relatively lacking in "face"; regardless of register or tessitura both groups of three male and female voices are often interchangeable in their generic anonymity and they fail to engage the listener through force of personality. I find Werner Güra's tenor to be bland; Boone has a rather weak, unimpressive baritone and Spagnoli lacks presence as Don Alfonso. The same lack of eroticism I note in the Gardiner recording is apparent here, especially in "Soave sia il vento" and the Brindisi does not flow or soar as it can and should owing to Jacobs too insistently leaning on the beat.

Certainly, some of the best singing here comes from Fink as Dorabella, but that is because she is the singer with the voice that most aspires to some amplitude and stature; she is no baroque miniaturist. Graciela Oddone is a good Despina; she avoids being arch or shrill but has a habit of dragging out a phrase then clipping it smartly – a mannerism which becomes wearisome when over-applied. I like her assumed croaky voice for the doctor and the notary's quavering is in line with most Despina's who take the opportunity to go over the top for comic effect. Gens has an intrinsically beautiful voice with a low tonal centre which is attractive but also unfortunately exacerbates the impression of flatness in her intonation. She manages the triplets of "Come scoglio" but not with ease or élan – and she does not have a proper trill, but her essential sound is winning. "Per pietà" is taken too slowly and plods but I have to say that I enjoy Gens' dark, smoky tone there.

There is a vitality about Jacob's direction which will persuade some but I do not care for whining strings and I want more imposing voices, especially among the men. Those who desire otherwise might enjoy this; it's not my idea or ideal of a *Così* and I am not by any means generally a fan of

Jacobs' conducting style but a nagging voice in the back of my head makes me admit that this is different and interesting, if wilful.

The score is given complete.

Teodor Currentzis – 2015 studio, Sony digital

Fiordiligi – Simone Kermes

Dorabella – Malena Ernman

Despina – Anna Kasyan

Ferrando – Kenneth Tarver

Guglielmo - Christopher Maltman

Don Alfonso – Konstantin Wolff

MusicAeterna (Chorus and Orchestra of the Perm Opera and Ballet Theatre)

What an abomination. Currentzis is a conundrum: some of his output - such as his Rameau compilation and Rite of Spring - is admirable and refreshing, other things - especially his abuse of Mozart's operas, which he clearly despises - are risibly poor. This one of course belongs to the second category; apart from Kenneth Tarver, who has a beautiful voice but is wasted and all at sea in this tub - the usual assemblage of third-rate voices, crooning and twittering ineffectually, is enough to reduce the seasoned Mozart lover to tears or laughter. Currentzis has an inexplicable attachment to a white-voiced soprano who cannot remotely cope with the fioriture, coloratura or long-breathed phrases of Fiordiligi's music and simply wheezes her way through the part sotto voce, never once singing out. She huffs and aspirates her way through her showpiece aria which is no longer a satirical parody of a diva's big number but rather a failed trial by fire. Dorabella sounds like Marcellina from *Figaro* - someone's querulous old auntie, the archetypal old bag. All three female singers sound like over-parted boy trebles and are interchangeable in their mediocrity and anonymity - and the two lower male voices are equally unmemorable.

The warnings are there straight away in the breathless frenzy of the overture and throughout Currentzis hacks and chops his way through the choruses and orchestra passages without the slightest concession to line or legato, asking his strings to yowl along in vibratoless sympathy with singers who cannot sustain sufficient resonance to carry the musical burden. An obtrusively loud and insistent piano in the recitativo accompagnato and numerous cuts complete the hatchet job.

Reviewers who love this are entitled to their taste but I cannot conceive of their having any real acquaintance with the operatic and vocal traditions which have developed over the last two hundred and more years. You will gather I didn't like this much.

Recommendations

My favourite recordings of *Così* are Karajan 1954, Böhm 1962, Alain Lombard 1977, Davis 1981 and Levine 1988. The first is virtually historical mono, while the Böhm and the Lombard recordings are of course stereo, but none except the most recent could be said to reflect modern performing practice and only that Levine recording uses the absolutely complete score. No matter; the others represent to me the essence of how this miraculous music should be performed and I would be hard pressed to choose one from amongst them. I appreciate that my advocacy of Alain Lombard's languorous 1977 recording remains an eccentric and controversial preference; if I were constrained to pick only one, it would have to be Karajan, cut and antiquated as it is, but then I would endorse any and all of the other four.

My general lack of enthusiasm for anything more recent than the Levine recording, is, as I said in my introduction, mostly a reflection of the decline in Mozart singing as I see it – or hear it. Of the fourteen digital recordings above made since the early 80's, five use period bands and are more

“historically aware”; the rest use modern orchestras; from the period camp I would choose Östman for its sheer verve and daring, despite what are sometimes frenzied speeds, Otherwise, despite some fine individual performances, among more modern recordings only Levine particularly claims my attention.

Ralph Moore