

Mozart's *Le Nozze di Figaro*: A Selective Discographical Survey
by Ralph Moore

There is a ridiculous number of recordings of *The Marriage of Figaro*; the CLOR discography lists 167 until 2009 and there have been a few more releases since then. No reviewer can hope to do more than present a highly selective snapshot of some favourites – and perhaps indicate a few to avoid. There are about thirty studio recordings in Italian and you would normally expect the most recommendable to be among those, yet to my surprise that category includes an unusually high number of duds, supporting the idea that there is something about the comic vitality of this opera which benefits from the advantage of a live performance. (For example, Karajan's 1974 live recording is clearly preferable to his studio account made four years later, despite their having several singers in common.) That makes the reviewer's task all the harder, as it is difficult to discern which recordings out of so many offer the right combination of animation, fine singing, conducting and playing and good technical quality in the sound and engineering.

I have accordingly selected below twenty-three recordings on what is admittedly a fairly subjective basis. Eighteen are studio-recorded and five are live or live-composite; six of the earlier recordings are mono. The conductor who most frequently features in the discography is Mozart specialist Karl Böhm with ten recordings, and I consider three of his here. Some might be surprised that I have excluded all three of Barenboim's recordings (two studio and one live) but his casts are flawed in all cases: either too mature or simply vocally disappointing and inconsistent.

As with [my previous survey of *Così fan tutte*](#), I have confined myself to recordings in the original Italian, and have thus excluded versions in English, German, French, Russian – and Arabic! - with one exception for reason of its great quality : Otmar Suitner's 1964 studio recording in German. I have also come to the same melancholy conclusion that very few recordings from the last thirty years match those made in what I now see as a Golden Age of Mozart recordings made in the post-war years up until the 80's. I actively dislike the last four, most recent, recordings in my survey; this has nothing to do with any objection to period-aware practice, as in fact the last recording I really rate is Arnold Östman's pioneering HIP version from 1987, which is typically lean and pacy with a small, period orchestra and lighter voices. But *Figaro* is a comedy – and still comes across as a highly entertaining one when performed – so it must sparkle and not plod; this is where for many Klemperer's approach fails. He just about got away with it in *Così* but his *Figaro* tanks; despite the occasional soulful interlude such as the Countess' two arias, this music must dance a merry, whirling jig through four long Acts of some of the most inspired music Mozart ever wrote.

Some recordings interrupt the flow of the great Act 2 Finale by spreading it across two discs, which is regrettable, but I haven't let that influence my judgement. Cuts are more problematic; the earliest two recordings here are very fine but shorn of the recitative and the omission of Marcellina's ("Il capro e la capretta") and Basilio's ("In quegli anni") Act 4 arias was long the norm before the modern reverence for adherence to the composer's first wishes.

The Recordings

In chronological order, denoted by conductor

Fritz Busch - 1934-35; studio mono, Pearl/Naxos

Glyndebourne Festival Chorus & Orchestra

Figaro - Willi Domgraf-Fassbaender

Susanna - Audrey Mildmay

Conte Almaviva - Roy Henderson

Contessa Almaviva - Aulikki Rautawaara

Cherubino - Luise Helletsgruber

Marcellina - Constance Willis

Bartolo - Norman Allin (1934)/Italo Tajo (1935)
Basilio - Heddle Nash
Curzio - Morgan Jones
Antonio - Fergus Dunlop
Barbarina - Winifred Radford

The first thing that strikes the listener about this vintage, composite recording is its fleetness and Busch's lightness of touch. Only the crackly but clean sound, not the style, gives away its age – and it remains very listenable. The verve and drive of Busch's conducting "a tempo" is infectious. The voices, too, are light and agile; we hear some pretty, supple singing from the ladies and the men are suave and elegant. Fast vibrato, purity of tone and singing trippingly, "off the words", are qualities shared by all; the performance remains very fresh and appealing. Technically speaking, I should not include this in my survey, as all the *recitativo secco* is omitted and some arias, including Barbarina's "L'ho perduta", are cut but it is a recording milestone and will be a supplement to a complete recording which should be on the shelves on any devotee of this opera.

Herbert von Karajan – 1950; studio mono, EMI/Warner/Membran

Chorus - Wiener Staatsoper;
Orchestra - Wiener Philharmoniker
Figaro - Erich Kunz
Susanna - Irmgard Seefried
Conte Almaviva - George London
Contessa Almaviva - Elisabeth Schwarzkopf
Cherubino - Sena Jurinac
Marcellina - Elisabeth Höngen
Bartolo - Marjan Rus
Basilio - Erich Majkut
Curzio - Erich Majkut
Antonio - Wilhelm Felden
Barbarina - Rosl Schwaiger

I love the urgency of Karajan's direction here; right from the overture, taken at breakneck speed, he suggests the madcap, farcical nature of the entertainment we are given. particularly admire the way here George London as Almaviva frequently reins in his big voice to sing delicately then lets rip; Erich Kunz sings with subtlety and sweetness as a slightly understated but very attractive Figaro; Seefried is cute, sharp and adorable as Susanna; Schwarzkopf sings aristocratically as the Countess; Jurinac is boyish and lovely of tone as Cherubino; and Marjan Rus makes a bluff, black-voiced Bartolo. The supporting cast is generally more than adequate, although Antonio is feebly sung by Wilhelm Felden.

The thin, clean, clear mono sound is very acceptable but there is one big caveat: at Walter Legge's insistence, this pioneering recording was shorn of all dialogue so you have continuous music without the recitativo links and thus will need to be familiar with story. The VPO strings perform wonders keeping up with their conductor, truly exhilarating - and he knows when to relax, as you may hear in the tender moments. For reasons of the sound and cuts, this cannot be a first recommendation but it makes a lovely supplement.

Hans Rosbaud – 1955; live mono, Walhall

Chorus - Chorale Elisabeth Brasseur
Orchestre de la Société des Concerts du Conservatoire (Paris)
Figaro - Rolando Panerai
Susanna - Rita Streich
Conte Almaviva - Heinz Rehfuss
Contessa Almaviva - Teresa Stich-Randall

Cherubino - Pilar Lorengar
Marcellina - Christiane Gayraud
Bartolo - Marcello Cortis
Basilio - Hugues Cuénod
Curzio - Gérard Friedman
Antonio - André Vessières
Barbarina - Madeleine Ignal

Fresh from the delights of Rosbaud's *Così* recorded two years later than this but also at the Aix Festival, I was looking forward to hearing this recording and was far from disappointed. This is one of the most beguiling live performances I know, hence my five stars, despite its being in rather brittle mono and having the usual cuts of Marcellina's and Basilio's arias - hence the two CD format. Were it a studio recording which retained its liveliness, it would rival Solti et al, both for its exuberance and the sheer quality of the singing.

Panerai is superb as Figaro: clean and agile of voice with that fast, flickering vibrato, easy top notes and incisive delivery of the Italian text. Rita Streich is the most charming Susanna I know - and that includes some formidable rivals such as Lucia Popp. Stich-Randall is in pure, affecting voice, infinitely touching and vulnerable as the Countess and singing without the slightest affectation or artifice. Pilar Lorengar is just lovely as Cherubino, somehow more boyish through not attempting to sound butch. It's a pleasure to hear Marcellina's music - especially the duelling duet with Susanna - sung by a younger, firmer-voiced mezzo instead of the usual old bag. Cortis is rather too light for Bartolo, as he is for Don Alfonso, but sings nimbly and Hugues Cuénod is ideal as a piping, oleaginous Basilio. Some have found Heinz Rehfuss less than ideal as the Count: he has a dark, beautiful, menacing voice, with the attractively quick pulse common to so many singers of that era, is at home in Italian being a multi-lingual Swiss, and to my ears embodies very successfully an essentially rather unattractive character, earning enthusiastic applause from the audience.

Rosbaud was surely the most natural of Mozart conductors; everything is ideally paced and his orchestra - surprisingly, for a festival band? - is virtuosic, immediately blitzing the scurrying passages in the overture and playing throughout with great precision and alertness.

Vittorio Gui – 1955; studio stereo, EMI

Glyndebourne Festival Chorus & Orchestra
Figaro - Sesto Bruscantini
Susanna - Graziella Sciutti
Conte Almaviva - Franco Calabrese
Contessa Almaviva - Sena Jurinac
Cherubino - Risë Stevens
Marcellina - Monica Sinclair
Bartolo - Ian Wallace
Basilio - Hugues Cuénod
Curzio - Daniel McCoshan
Antonio - Gwyn Griffiths
Barbarina - Jeannette Sinclair

I believe that this is the first stereo studio recording of this evergreen opera and the sound remains very good, with its very slightly subdued ambience and slightly undercooked bass frequencies compensated for by the lift and drive of an ensemble which always pushes the drama onward rather than linger over the beauties of the music. Indeed, the listener is taken aback by the speed Gui adopts for the overture and he never looks back.

It is unfortunate that there are a few cuts, which enable the opera to be fitted onto two CDs for the Classics for Pleasure issue (not that the original producers had CDs in mind...), especially as the cuts include the arias for two excellent singers in the robust Monica Sinclair's Marcellina and Hugues Cuénod's light, oily Don Basilio. The latter's aria was recorded and appears on CD3 where it should in the currently unavailable three CD EMI "Great Recordings" issue, where the opera is oddly coupled with the two symphonies 38 and 39 at the end of CDs 1 and 2 respectively, thus twice interrupting proceedings, but Marcellina's aria must never have been recorded.

The cast in general is first rate, even if the pure, dignified Countess of Sena Jurinac is just a bit anonymous and languid, in contradiction to Gui's general paciness, yet her restraint is paradoxically touching in "Dove sono". Bruscantini hasn't the juiciest voice but he sings so naturally, elegantly and intelligently as Figaro and bass Calabrese is saturnine and incisive as the Count, even if he sounds rather "senior" in tone; both are singers of the old school, neat, agile, with the slightly faster vibrato typical of Italian singers of that pedigree.

Risè Stevens has a lovely voice but also something of Calabrese's disadvantage in that she sounds too fruity and "bosomy" to be a lovesick boy; this was, after all, the same year as she was triumphantly singing Carmen at the Met, but she sounds more apt in "Voi che sapete", where she somewhat tames her voluptuous tone, than in "Non so più". Sciutti is absolutely charming as Susanna and the cast is completed by a couple of old stagers with big, firm voices in Ian Wallace and Monica Sinclair. As a result, the ensemble numbers are especially satisfying; try the magical Terzetto, track 28, CD 1 and the famous "Canzonetta sull'aria" is sheer delight.

Erich Kleiber – 1955; studio stereo, Decca

Chorus - Wiener Staatsoper
Orchestra - Wiener Philharmoniker
Figaro - Cesare Siepi
Susanna - Hilde Güden
Conte Almaviva - Alfred Poell
Contessa Almaviva - Lisa Della Casa
Cherubino - Suzanne Danco
Marcellina - Hilde Rössl-Majdan
Bartolo - Fernando Corena
Basilio - Murray Dickie
Curzio - Hugo Meyer-Welfing
Antonio - Harald Pröglhoff
Barbarina - Anny Felbermayer

This is the second stereo recording ever made and still sounds fine. Kleiber was a true Mozartian and is yet another of those old-time conductors who attacks the music with almost sounds like period zeal; nothing soupy or cloying here it's sharp-edged satire. This is the same chorus and orchestra that gave Karajan such a lively and beautifully played recording five years earlier but now we have stereo sound, the recitatives, an almost complete score - and a terrific cast headed by the great Cesare Siepi who has the perfect voice for Figaro: a beautiful basso cantante with an upper extension. Gueden is marvellously neat and pointed as Susanna with both the agility and the firm lower register so often missing in sopranos who undertake this role. Hilde Rössl-Majdan makes a perfect Marcellina. Then we have the divine Lisa Della Casa as the Countess who in her first aria sounds a little tremulous but that delicacy adds to her vulnerability; "Dove sono" is firmer of line and wonderfully pure of tone but I think she is even better for Leinsdorf in their studio recording three years later. It is true that some other individual performances are less than ideal; Suzanne Danco sings charmingly but her light trilling soprano does not in the least suggest a lovestruck teenage boy; Corena is satisfactory as Bartolo, comic and characterful without having the ideal basso resonance; Poell's Count Almaviva is blustery and dry of voice, his Italian intermittently Teutonic - a flaw occasionally apparent in other

singers, too. And goodness knows why the decision was made to give Susanna Marcellina's aria – it's wholly inappropriate – but the only other textual oddities are two cuts in "Aprite presto"; it is otherwise complete.

N.B. This is also available on a super-budget 3CD set on ALTO (ALC 2501)

Karl Böhm – 1956; studio mono, Philips/Guild

Chorus - Wiener Staatsoper
Orchestra - Wiener Symphoniker
Figaro - Walter Berry
Susanna - Rita Streich
Conte Almaviva - Paul Schöffler
Contessa Almaviva - Sena Jurinac
Cherubino - Christa Ludwig
Marcellina - Ira Malaniuk
Bartolo - Oskar Czerwenka
Basilio - Erich Majkut
Curzio - Murray Dickie
Antonio - Karl Dönch
Barbarina - Rosl Schwaiger

I normally love Walter Berry in anything but I find his Figaro to be a bit too bluff, coarse and clumsy. Czerwenka is similarly crude and Schoeffler sounds elderly, Germanic (the odd "quando") and "fruffly". The biggest advantages here are in the female cast, headed by Jurinac's serene, poised Countess; she is also more animated here than for Gui. The young Christa Ludwig sings a rather careful but beautifully vocalised Cherubino, Rita Streich is typically charming as Susanna and Ira Malaniuk ideal as Marcellina: mature-sounding but not wobbly. Böhm confirms his reputation as a real Mozart stylist. Unfortunately, the sound on this set is tubby, foggy and bass-heavy - perfectly listenable but no aural treat.

Arias are sung "straight" without appoggiaturas apart and the usual two arias are missing. This is valuable for the women's contribution but not a real contender.

Karl Böhm – 1957; live mono, Gala

Chorus - Wiener Staatsoper
Orchestra - Wiener Philharmoniker
Figaro - Erich Kunz
Susanna - Irmgard Seefried
Conte Almaviva - Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau
Contessa Almaviva - Elisabeth Schwarzkopf
Cherubino - Christa Ludwig
Marcellina - Sieglinde Wagner
Bartolo - Georg Stern
Basilio - Murray Dickie
Curzio - Erich Majkut
Antonio - Alois Pernerstorfer
Barbarina - Anny Felbermayer

The basic mono sound here is to be regretted but it does not prevent the listener from appreciating the vitality of this live performance; words are clear and there is little distortion. Erich Kunz was a Viennese favourite but is perhaps better caught in the studio recording under Karajan seven years earlier. He brings a warm, genial quality to his Figaro reminding us that he was also celebrated as both Papageno and Guglielmo – and he is able to inject some edge into his portrayal, just as

Guglielmo turns sour. His ma and pa are vividly sung by Sieglinde Wagner and Georg Stern; in fact, the whole cast is strong, drawn from Viennese regulars, whose names feature in many classic recordings of live performances of the era; they are experienced character actors. Irmgard is caught here in her prime before her premature vocal decline but I think it a pity she momentarily transforms into a screeching harridan when slapping Figaro in the last scene. A young, lean-voiced Fischer-Dieskau barks and grits his teeth too much but creates a suitably priapic Almaviva.

The Italian intermittently turns slightly Teutonic but for the most part this is an engaging performance; I prefer it to Böhm's live recording above from the previous year in the same venue, especially as the sound is superior, Christa Ludwig repeats her passionate Cherubino and the exchange of Schwarzkopf for Jurinac is a fair trade, both being superlative. Schwarzkopf is the most recorded Countess, appearing on nine recordings between 1950 and 1961, including the Karajan and Giulini studio versions ten years apart; it is easy to hear why as the role ideally suits her vocal make-up, drawing on her gift for delicacy and pathos; like Lisa Della Casa, she can spin the long lines of her lament arias on a thread of tone. Anny Felbermayer sings Barbarina's aria prettily and feelingly.

Böhm's competence as a Mozartian is never for a moment in doubt but there are a few peculiarities: he takes the "Canzonetta sull'aria" (wrongly labelled in the booklet "su l'aria") at such a plodding pace that it is robbed of its delicious irony.

This would be more recommendable if it were not for its indifferent sound, its incidental infelicities and the strength of the competition in general.

(Oddly, Marcellina's and Basilio's arias, Nos. 24 and 25, are in the track listings of CD3 with the note "This aria has not been recorded", which reminds me of the joke "Please do not read this sign".)

Erich Leinsdorf – 1958; studio stereo, Decca

Chorus - Wiener Staatsoper
Orchestra - Wiener Philharmoniker
Figaro - Giorgio Tozzi
Susanna - Roberta Peters
Conte Almaviva - George London
Contessa Almaviva - Lisa Della Casa
Cherubino - Rosalind Elias
Marcellina - Sandra Warfield
Bartolo - Fernando Corena
Basilio - Gabor Carelli
Curzio - Gabor Carelli
Antonio - Ljubomir Pantic
Barbarina - Anny Felbermayer

This classic 1958 Decca recording has long been unavailable except in a cheap issue on the German Cantus Classics label, fitted economically on two rather than three discs by the expedient of cutting a few minutes recitative - a press well worth paying, I think to obtain an otherwise unaffordable companion piece to Leinsdorf's excellent, equally recommendable "Don Giovanni", recorded the following year. Unfortunately, however, the Cantus issue introduces an untamed edginess into the sound which was not present on the beautifully engineered original and is certainly not present in the 1996 re-mastering, so get this on Decca if you can find it affordably.

Leinsdorf was clearly on a roll during this period and his direction is sharp, sprung and propulsive with none of the heaviness which could afflict pre-HIP Mozart. The VPO is simply marvellous and the cast consists mainly of old hands who are sometimes inclined to ham it up - Sandra Warfield is the worst offender here - but on the other hand really bring the recitativo alive; you have only to listen

to the first exchange between Figaro and Susanna to hear how Tozzi and Peters take every opportunity to characterise and bring out the light comedy of their relationship. Warfield's "Old Bag" Marcellina is a bit of a blot on the set and some of her singing is clumsy but she doesn't ruin it. I was surprised by how the excellent American bass Giorgio Tozzi could lighten his big, black voice and impersonate a charming, lively Figaro while I was equally pleased by the absence of squawk in Roberta Peters' pert and perky Susanna. Rosalind Elias is a rich-toned, boyish, impassioned Cherubino and Fernando Corena does his usual reliable shtick as a bluff, idiomatic Bartolo. Gabor Carelli is an amusingly toady Basilio and, doubling up, sings neatly as Don Curzio, too.

Which leaves the two aristocrats, George London as a dangerous Count and the divine Lisa Della Casa as his Countess Rosina. London, like Tozzi, can take the Wagner out of his voice and achieve the requisite Mozartian sprightliness without blanching his imposing tone. Della Casa has the same kind of poise and purity shared by all the great Countesses - Te Kanawa, Margaret Price, Gundula Janowitz - and suggests a welcome modicum of pain and vulnerability.

This recording has tended to be overlooked but it is in many ways as recommendable as more celebrated, vintage versions.

Carlo Maria Giulini – 1959; studio stereo, EMI/Warner

Philharmonia Chorus & Orchestra

Figaro - Giuseppe Taddei

Susanna - Anna Moffo

Conte Almaviva - Eberhard Wächter

Contessa Almaviva - Elisabeth Schwarzkopf

Cherubino - Fiorenza Cossotto

Marcellina - Dora Gatta

Bartolo - Ivo Vinco

Basilio - Renato Ercolani

Curzio - Renato Ercolani

Antonio - Piero Cappuccilli

Barbarina - Elisabetta Fusco

This recording has long enjoyed classic, cult status, not without reason. The listener is immediately made aware of the sheer élan of the Philharmonia, the snap and drive of Giulini's direction – he could be listless as he aged – and the individuality of the singers' voices and characterisation, not to mention their sheer tonal beauty. The sharp precision and variety of verbal inflection in Taddei's Figaro make him a force to be reckoned with – and he has a bass note to call on in his baritone when he wants to parody the count or assume a more menacing air. Moffo's slightly plaintive soprano is very pert and appealing. Ivo Vinco is my ideal of a rich, rotund Italianate bass and is the best Bartolo on record alongside Kurt Moll. Dora Gatta makes a lively, catty Marcellina. Cossotto, this early in her career, can lighten her voice without losing the oboe tones which suggest boyishness and conveys perfectly Cherubino's confusion and impetuosity; listening to her warhorse arias makes one realise how dull some singers are in this role and Giulini's flexible phrasing adds greatly to their interest. It is no accident that Eberhard Wächter's macho Count is so successful, as he had also made a superb Don Giovanni for Giulini in the studio recording the previous year to this and their vocal and dramatic demands are similar; just occasionally he barks a bit but not as often as Fischer-Dieskau for Böhm. Schwarzkopf is in finest form, providing in her portrayal of the Countess yet another ideal portrait of a Mozartian woman to stand alongside her Elvira and Fiordiligi, all recorded around the same time. We even have the luxury of a young Piero Cappuccilli in the cameo role of Antonio the gardener – but the Barbarina is weak in her one brief aria.

It certainly helps to bring the comedy alive having so many native Italians and fluent Italian speakers in the cast; along with the live Glyndebourne performance this is the recording which perhaps best

conveys a sense of ensemble. The stereo sound is bit thin and papery but also correspondingly clean and clear, if bass-light. Marcellina's and Basilio's arias are cut.

Silvio Varviso – 1962; live mono, Glyndebourne

Glyndebourne Festival Chorus
Royal Philharmonic Orchestra
Figaro - Heinz Blankenburg
Susanna - Mirella Freni
Conte Almaviva - Gabriel Bacquier
Contessa Almaviva - Leyla Gencer
Cherubino - Edith Mathis
Marcellina - Johanna Peters
Bartolo - Carlo Cava
Basilio - Hugues Cuénod
Curzio - John Kentish
Antonio - Derick Davies
Barbarina - Maria Zeri

In surprisingly fine sound for a live 1962 recording, this Glyndebourne performance affords more surprises than just the quality of the sonics - not least, the fluid, affectionate, unrushed conducting of distinguished Swiss opera conductor Silvio Varviso, who is hardly a household name but was good enough to be regularly invited to the Met. Then there is the grand, passionate Countess of Turkish diva Leyla Gencer, whose big, luscious soprano is sometimes more suggestive of a verismo heroine than a Mozartian lady - but what a glorious voice she had – even if occasionally she sings a little flat. I hardly recognised the smooth baritone singing Figaro, knowing Gabriel Bacquier from recordings in his later years; the elegance and delicacy of his singing here is a revelation. Similarly, the light, neat, incisive baritone of Heinz Blankenburg - of whom, I freely admit, I had never heard - is a treat compared with some of the gruff, woolly basses who have attempted Figaro. His tone is totally Italianate, as is his way with the text; I wonder why he didn't have a bigger career. Mirella Freni, in purest and most youthful voice, is utterly charming as Susanna; her Letter Duet with Gencer is the bel canto highlight it should be and "Deh vieni non tardar" is simply sublime in its unhurried pathos; Varviso gives Freni all the time in the world to show off the limpid purity of her tone and the smoothness of her legato. Carlo Cava is suitably cavernous as Bartolo without being special and I have my doubts about the suitability of casting Edith Mathis as a soprano Cherubino - the voice lacks the velvety lower reaches to suggest boyishness - but she sings as well as ever. Supporting roles are characterfully taken by such as Hugues Cuénod as an oily Basilio and Maria Zeri as a sweet, touching Barbarina. He gets his aria, whereas Marcellina's is cut.

There are more modern recordings in better sound but none which convey so effortlessly the wit and charm of this opera while simultaneously honouring so completely its sublime musical qualities. As you may hear, the audience is enraptured by the singing, laughing frequently and thoroughly enjoying the comic moments. What a treat.

Otmar Suitner – 1964; studio stereo, EMI

Chor des Staatsoper Dresden
Orchestra - Dresdener Staatskapelle
Figaro - Walter Berry
Susanna - Anneliese Rothenberger
Conte Almaviva - Hermann Prey
Contessa Almaviva - Hilde Güden (Gueden)
Cherubino - Edith Mathis
Marcellina - Annelies Burmeister
Bartolo - Fritz Ollendorf

Basilio - Peter Schreier
Curzio - Jürgen Förster
Antonio - Siegfried Vogel
Barbarina - Rosmarie Rönisch

I am no enemy of standard repertoire operas in the vernacular and merely have two mild reservations about this superb ensemble recording: first, that the diphthongs and consonants of German cannot always accommodate the elegance of Da Ponte's libretto, especially at the speeds Suitner adopts, and secondly to signal that for all that I am usually a great admirer of Hilde Güden in almost anything, here she does not quite achieve the ethereal poise, purity and steadiness of the finest Countesses and seems slightly over-parted; her voice is too thin and soubrettish for the role and she sometimes sounds marginally under the note, but she is nonetheless touching. The Letter Duet finds both her and Rothenberger in sweetest voice and Suitner knocks on the door of sublimity without any undue portentousness; his tempo is typically propulsive.

Otherwise the singing is simply phenomenal, both individually and in consort. The cast is a who's who of German singing in the early 60's - except there is no role for Fritz Wunderlich. Walter Berry, in addition to having a beautiful bass-baritone with the top and flexibility to do justice to Figaro's music, also characterises with the just the dangerous edge this class-rebel requires. Anneliese Rothenberger is simply perfect as Susanna: pert, pretty and perky. Veteran German buffo bass Fritz Ollendorfer is great fun as Bartolo, a young Edith Mathis is a dream as Cherubino, Hermann Prey is suave and alert as the Count and the sadly short-lived Anneliese Burmeister makes a great Marcellina. Even a youthful Peter Schreier has not yet acquired the strangulated quality in his tenor which I find so repellent in his later recordings.

Suitner's direction consolidates his reputation amongst cognoscenti for unerring aptness in his choices of tempi and phrasing. He begins the overture at a tremendous lick, but the Dresdeners keep up with him and throughout he never lets proceedings drag. Ensembles are wonderfully fleet, energised and slick; take the trio "Cosa sento!" as a paradigm of his approach.

If Mozart auf Deutsch is your bag, don't hesitate.

Karl Böhm – 1967; studio stereo, DG

Chorus & Orchestra: Deutsche Oper Berlin
Figaro - Hermann Prey
Susanna - Edith Mathis
Conte Almaviva - Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau
Contessa Almaviva - Gundula Janowitz
Cherubino - Tatiana Troyanos
Marcellina - Patricia Johnson
Bartolo - Peter Lagger
Basilio - Erwin Wohlfahrt
Curzio - Martin Vantin
Antonio - Klaus Hirte
Barbarina - Barbara Vogel

This recording offers some of the best performances of the best arias and duets Mozart ever wrote for the female voice in the exquisite singing of the three great ladies here, Gundula Janowitz, Edith Mathis and Tatiana Troyanos, who compose a totally unbeatable trio. It is hard to mention this recording without some brief reference to the Letter Duet as featured in "The Shawshank Redemption" and I for one am delighted that it turned so many people onto opera. Besides, that track was selected for good reason: it's heavenly.

So why only four stars when the women's singing is clearly five and beyond? Well; Böhm's conducting, while elegant and detailed, does not quite have the drive, zip and tingle which Solti or Karajan inject into this music; you can hear that from the start in the neatly negotiated overture. Secondly, the men are not up to the same standard as the women: Hermann Prey has a rather plaintive, over-refined sound for the working-class hero Figaro and could do with a bit more backbone; compared with the best, Peter Lager is distinctly workaday and lacks the rolling relish a really fruity bass confers upon the role of Bartolo, while Fischer-Dieskau's dry tone is hardly impressive as he barks his way through the Count's coloratura at the end of "Vedrò, mentr'io sospiro". Some might opt to acquire only the highlights disc as his contribution is restricted to that one aria and his part in the Finale, while the ladies are rightly given the lionesses' share and room is found even for Barbarina's arietta, prettily trilled by Barbara Vogel.

Colin Davis – 1970; studio stereo, Philips

BBC Symphony Chorus & Orchestra

Figaro - Wladimiro Ganzarolli

Susanna - Mirella Freni

Conte Almaviva - Ingvar Wixell

Contessa Almaviva - Jessye Norman

Cherubino - Yvonne Minton

Marcellina - Maria Casula

Bartolo - Clifford Grant

Basilio - Robert Tear

Curzio - David Lennox

Antonio - Paul Hudson

Barbarina - Lilian Watson

Colin Davis was always a fine Mozartian; there's a lightness, drive and energy about his conducting right from the overture which augurs well and indeed that quality and is sustained throughout. There is, however, something too menacing about Ganzarolli's hard, nasal bass-baritone to make him the ideal Figaro and he sounds rather mature, too, like Geraint Evans, whom he resembles in voice and manner, in the same role for Klemperer. He was, however, a skilled buffo performer and injects life and meaning into the text, even if he was better suited two years later to Leporello in Davis' *Don Giovanni*, also with Wixell, who brings a virile, distinctive baritone to depict an ardent, dangerous Count, rather like his Giovanni. I like his vibrant sound with its fast vibrato. The women once more constitute a strong team: Yvonne Minton has a warm, boyish mezzo, making a very attractive Cherubino; Freni is her usual, charming self, rivalling Lucia Popp, singing with limpid, melting beauty of tone, similar to her Zerlina, especially in "Deh vieni non tardar" where she is infinitely touching but also able to inject a hint of archness into her tone to let us know that she knows Figaro is lurking nearby, overhearing her supposed protestations of love for the Count; and it's a treat to hear Jessye Norman repeatedly lighten her Rolls Royce soprano to give us a nobler, more imperious Countess than usual without jettisoning the requisite pathos of her plight. Maria Casula is just right as Marcellina: a bit blowsy and maternal without sounding past it. Lilian Watson contributes a sweet, soubrette Barbarina. The concluding "Ah! Tutti contenti" ensemble is sublimely sung by all.

The recording is complete, even including the full version of the letter duet, No. 15. Reacquaintance with this recording for purposes of my survey has made me value it more highly than ever, even if Ganzarolli is not ideal as Figaro.

Otto Klemperer – 1970; studio stereo, EMI

John Alldis Choir

New Philharmonia Orchestra

Figaro - Geraint Evans

Susanna - Reri Grist

Conte Almaviva - Gabriel Bacquier
Contessa Almaviva - Elisabeth Söderström
Cherubino - Teresa Berganza
Marcellina - Annelies Burmeister
Bartolo - Michael Langdon
Basilio - Werner Hollweg
Curzio - Willi Brokmeier
Antonio - Clifford Grant
Barbarina - Margaret Price

The measured pace and weightiness of the overture sets the tone for the whole recording here, but you also hear the beauty of the orchestral playing and the calm control behind the phrasing; this is what Klemperer wants whether the listener likes it or not. "Voi che sapete" really is funeral; Berganza's warm, even-voiced Cherubino struggles against Klemperer's lugubrious tempo. The cast is distinguished but allowances have to be made for the fact that Bacquier is rather older since he performed the same role of Almaviva in the splendid Glyndebourne live performance eight years earlier and a roughness has crept into his voice; he sounds past it and the concluding top G flat in his aria is very poor. Geraint Evans, too, makes a mature, rather effortful and ponderous Figaro, similar to his Guglielmo for Klemperer on EMI the following year; the vocal layout is wrong. Reri Grist has a pretty, piping soubrette soprano which makes Susanna sound too child-like. The undoubted star is Elisabeth Söderström, sounding very like Schwarzkopf at her best, with a neat, trilling soprano and a pronounced sense of pathos to her delivery.

Everything about this performance except the sound has a rather heavy-handed, "vintage" feeling to it; the lack of sparkle is problematic and ultimately damaging.

Herbert von Karajan – 1974; live stereo, Opera d'Oro

Chorus - Wiener Staatsoper
Orchestra - Wiener Philharmoniker
Figaro - José van Dam
Susanna - Mirella Freni
Conte Almaviva - Tom Krause
Contessa Almaviva - Elizabeth Harwood
Cherubino - Frederica Von Stade
Marcellina - Jane Berbié
Bartolo - Paolo Montarsolo
Basilio - Michel Sénéchal
Curzio - Willy Caron
Antonio - Zoltán Kéléman
Barbarina - Elke Schary

Given that Karajan's studio recording turned out for some reason to be a dull, chilly, strait-laced affair, admirers of his fiery way with Mozart need turn to live recordings. There is an excellent, live Salzburg performance from 1977, three years later than this one with almost as good a cast and in considerably sound but it is much more expensive and not everyone warms to Anna Tomowa-Sintow's Countess. The Countess here, Elizabeth Harwood, sounds as if she is fighting a cold as the middle of her voice is a little hoarse, but otherwise gives us poised, aristocratic singing. José van Dam is lithe and lively as Figaro, his beautiful voice dealing easily with those passages in a higher tessitura but also able to descend to suggest a more menacing character. Mirella Freni, also occasionally a little croaky - something in the air that night? - is otherwise delightful and charming as you would expect. Tom Krause occasionally suggests a little too much of Wotan in his stern, brazen Count Almaviva but he is a predator after all. Frederica von Stade proves a crowd-pleaser as Cherubino, marvellously warm and touching, yet still boyish. the supporting cast features luminaries such as

Zoltan Kelemen as the gardener Antonio; Michel Sénéchal is a hoot as Basilio and Jane Berbié does her regular old bag shtick as Marcellina. The Bartolo is a bit hammy and rocky but adequate.

The sound is decent stereo radio, perfectly listenable if a bit curdled. Karajan is by no means absurdly fast but he certainly injects proceedings with an urgency comparable to Solti's superb studio recording, which remains my favourite by virtue of its voices, although some find it too unsmiling - presumably they will think the same of this hard-pressed performance.

Karajan here adopts the theory that the Act 3 Sextet should come after the Countess' aria "Dove sono".

A fine cast, the VPO and Karajan on form - what more could you wish unless it be better sound?

Georg Solti – 1981; studio digital, Decca

London Opera Chorus

London Philharmonic Orchestra

Figaro - Samuel Ramey

Susanna - Lucia Popp

Conte Almaviva - Thomas Allen

Contessa Almaviva - Kiri Te Kanawa

Cherubino - Frederica Von Stade

Marcellina - Jane Berbié

Bartolo - Kurt Moll

Basilio - Robert Tear

Curzio - Philip Langridge

Antonio - Giorgio Tadeo

Barbarina - Yvonne Kenny

Although this has long been my favourite recording for reasons of the quality of singing and the zest of Solti's conducting, listening to other classic accounts has confirmed that there is validity in the criticism of those who find it too driven and unsmiling. The same applies to the almost equally well sung Marriner recording of the same era; this is a "dramma giocoso" and, as to English ears there is almost an oxymoronic element in the combination of those two words making up the Italian descriptive term, obviously a balance needs to be achieved between the two, superficially paradoxical, extremes. Perhaps Solti and Marriner lean too far towards the dark side, but the voices here are so stellar that I am won over. Both Ramey and Allen have ideal voices for their roles: the former a fleet but still trenchant bass, the latter a lean, focused baritone with a dangerous edge – and both are masters of text. Popp is better suited to Susanna than the – nonetheless excellent – Countess she sang four years later for Marriner as there is a "keck", soubrettish quality to her soprano. Kurt Moll, my favourite lyric basso cantante-profondo (he could do everything) rumbles magnificently as Bartolo and "Flicka" von Stade remains my favourite Cherubino with her plangent, oboe-tones and suitably androgynous sound. Jane Berbié is ideally cast as a slightly scratchy, bumptious Marcellina with the right mature sound and the minor comic roles are well taken. To cap the best cast on record, we have the creamy, serene Countess on Kiri Te Kanawa in her absolute prime; Solti certainly relaxes for her dreamy arias and she is sublime.

It's ironic, given that the producer here is Christopher Raeburn, that Solti ignores the theory Raeburn advanced in 1965 that the Sextet in Act 3 was originally intended to come after the Countess's 'Dove sono' and reverts to the traditional order. That is of little consequence; this remains my *Figaro* of choice.

Neville Marriner – 1985; studio digital, Philips

Ambrosian Opera Chorus

Orchestra - Academy of Saint-Martin-in-the-Fields
Figaro - José van Dam
Susanna - Barbara Hendricks
Conte Almaviva - Ruggero Raimondi
Contessa Almaviva - Lucia Popp
Cherubino - Agnes Baltsa
Marcellina - Felicity Palmer
Bartolo - Robert Lloyd
Basilio - Aldo Baldin
Curzio - Neil Jenkins
Antonio - Donald Maxwell
Barbarina - Catheryn Pope

The Solti all-star-cast *Figaro* has long been my favourite but this one runs it very close and is similar in manner, in that it brisk and doesn't "smile" much - but some might feel that a performance which does so risks sentimentalising the serious themes underlying the comedy: class struggle, female independence, adultery and infidelity - they are all in the plot and underpinning the action, adding tension to what was and remains a provocative comedy. This recording also boasts another cast as fine as could be assembled in 1985.

José van Dam seems to realise this too. He has a naturally smooth, noble, beautiful bass-baritone so he chooses to make Figaro dark, angry and even vengeful, an adequate foil to Raimondi's predatory but equally smooth-voiced Count. All the singers here are very fluent and adept with the text, especially given that of the major parts only Raimondi is a native Italian; this is maybe the most vividly acted and dramatically inflected of all the recordings out there. Marriner uses a smaller orchestra to facilitate fleetness; the rhythms are sharp and pointed, the action bowls along almost savagely at times. To offset any lack of charm, we have two very sweet, pert voices singing the Countess and Susanna in Lucia Popp and Barbara Hendricks respectively. Neither is mopey or too melancholy; their voices entwine delectably in the Letter Duet and Popp sings her two big arias with poise and feeling - no lack of presence or power despite the essentially lyric character of her tone, even if you have to be tolerant of her little tic of "squeezing" a note; ultimately, I think she is vocally better suited to Susanna as for Solti. Agnes Baltsa's Cherubino is bold and boyish - richly and expressively sung yet delicate when required despite the amplitude of her voice.

I respond particularly positively to two basses as Bartolo: one is the great Kurt Moll and the other is Robert Lloyd here, whose deep, chocolaty voice caresses the malicious text of his "vendetta" aria. The smaller parts are equally vivacious and apt: Felicity Palmer's big, slightly blowsy manner is perfect for Marcellina; Aldo Baldin conveys graphically his cretinous relish in watching others' embarrassments.

A striking aspect of this recording, now well over thirty years old, is not just the quality of the solo singing but also how individual and instantly recognisable each voice is; they exude personality. As long as you accept the darker focus of this rather po-faced reading, you might agree that Marriner here gives us a *Figaro* to rival any. The score is complete, with the two arias usually cut included.

Riccardo Muti – 1986; studio digital, EMI

Chorus - Wiener Staatsoper
Orchestra - Wiener Philharmoniker
Figaro - Thomas Allen
Susanna - Kathleen Battle
Conte Almaviva - Jorma Hynninen
Contessa Almaviva - Margaret Price
Cherubino - Ann Murray

Marcellina - Mariana Nicolesco
Bartolo - Kurt Rydl
Basilio - Alejandro Ramírez
Curzio - Ernesto Gavazzi
Antonio - Franco De Grandis
Barbarina - Patrizia Pace

Muti's restless, driven account fields a good cast but there are oddities: for example, most of the time, as in the "Canzonetta sull'aria" he rushes sufficiently to rob the music of charm, yet he allows Ann Murray to make a meal of "Non so più" with excessive pauses and rubato and still she is not especially engaging. The Countess' pardon of her philandering husband should be a moment of sublimity and goes for nothing.

Thomas Allen exchanges the splendid Almaviva he sang for Solti for Figaro while the excellent baritone Jorma Hynninen takes that role – but one wonders whether their voices would not have been better suited the other way around, as Allen does not have the ideal dark sound and sounds too refined, whereas Hynninen has the tonal colour of a bass-baritone but is still agile. Kurt Rydl's Bartolo is wobbly, Mariana Nicolesco as Marcellina gargles marbles and Alejandro Ramirez as Basilio has far too piercing a tenor but Kathleen Battle makes a pert, perky Susanna, one of the best and her characterisation, unlike that of several of co-singers, always has "face". Margaret Price sings a poised, cool, Countess – in fact the whole performance is a bit chilly and humourless, despite the quality of the singing.

There are no cuts.

Arnold Östman – 1987; studio digital, L'oiseau Lyre

Drottningholm Court Theatre Chorus & Orchestra

Figaro - Petteri Salomaa
Susanna - Barbara Bonney
Conte Almaviva - Håkan Hagegård
Contessa Almaviva - Arleen Augér
Cherubino - Alicia Nafé
Marcellina - Della Jones
Bartolo - Carlos Feller
Basilio - Eduardo Giménez
Curzio - Francis Egerton
Antonio - Enzo Florimo
Barbarina - Nancy Argenta

Just as I respond positively to Östman's *Così fan tutte*, I thoroughly enjoy the verve and drive of this, the first and by far the best of period instrument recordings. The orchestra is small and the voices light to the point of sounding small-scale but the performance does not feel under-powered, just intimate and very musical. Textures are bright and transparent but the strings whine in the instrumental introduction to "Porgi amor". The first voices we hear are those of Petteri Salomaa and Barbara Bonney and they make a delightful couple: his bass-baritone is right for Figaro and has a fast, slightly fluttery but not unattractive vibrato and she of course has a soprano of purest quicksilver. Vocal ornamentation is discrete and the swift tempi do not become excessive or result in garbled delivery. Carlos Feller makes a very characterful, if cloudy-voiced Bartolo and Della Jones is perfect as Marcellina, sounding slightly mature and fruity without being the least harsh on the ear in the manner of too many in that role and she manages the divisions in her aria very impressively. Alicia Nafé is competent but anonymous as Cherubino without much velvet in her tone or anything suggestive of boyishness. The Gardener Antonio is feebly sung. Nancy Argenta sings simply and attractively, making a rather better job of Barbarina than she did her Despina for Sigiswald Kuijken.

The aristocrats are voiced by two fine singers but I find Håkan Hagegård's Count to be rather understated and restrained; similarly, Arleen Augér in her arias sometimes seems almost to be marking her role as if communing with herself but her muted style conveys pathos and vulnerability. The Letter Duet is rather fast but enchantingly sung. Östman is rarely guilty of the kind of rushed insensitivity some period performances evince; he slows right down and employs rubato for the great reconciliation and pardon scene before the ebullient final chorus and in general paces events convincingly.

Not only is the opera presented absolutely complete but the appendices provide the extra and alternative numbers Mozart wrote for the Prague production in the same year as its Vienna premiere in 1786 and for the 1789 revival; none is especially important or desirable but they are interesting.

Those who want a traditional, Grand Opera performance will not be persuaded by this cool, subdued but entirely coherent recording; its biggest resides in the lack impact of the big vocal ensembles that conclude Acts 2 and 4, but it is still affords a worthwhile and enjoyable experience.

John Eliot Gardiner – 1993 live composite, digital, Archiv

Chorus - Monteverdi Choir

Orchestra - English Baroque Soloists

Figaro - Bryn Terfel

Susanna - Alison Hagley

Conte Almaviva - Rodney Gilfry

Contessa Almaviva - Hillevi Martinpelto

Cherubino - Pamela Helen Stephen

Marcellina - Susan McCulloch

Bartolo - Carlos Feller

Basilio - Francis Egerton

Curzio - Francis Egerton

Antonio - Julian Clarkson

Barbarina - Constanze Backes

Offering neat, mordant playing with the energy derived from a live, semi-staged performance, this recording is superficially attractive – the audience is audibly entertained - but actually not that interesting and vocally very uneven. By far the best singing comes from Bryn Terfel's Figaro – he has the right, robust bass-baritone and twenty-five years ago his voice still had considerable flexibility; he delivers the text clearly with imagination and vitality. Rodney Gilfry is firm and attractive as the Count. After that, the singing is more variable: Hillevi Martinpelto makes an oddly blank Countess; she lacks the special, elegiac quality brought to the role by the greatest sopranos and her vibrato can obtrude. Alison Hagley as Susanna is pleasant but unmemorable compared with the best and her lower register is weak. Similarly, Pamela Helen Stephen's Cherubino lacks distinction: her voice is somewhat acidic and lacking in bloom. Whoever had the idea that she should sing the first verse of "Voi che sapete" in a tremulous voice to convey nervousness needs shooting. The Marcellina is your usual old bag; I prefer to hear a more attractive voice and other recordings demonstrate that this can be done without sacrificing apt characterisation. Carlos Feller's bass is by this late stage of his career cloudy, rocky and essentially shot and Francis Egerton's doubling up as Basilio and Curzio offers amusing but clearly veteran singing.

For those who care, Gardiner here adopts the theory that the Act 3 Sextet should come after the Countess' aria, but this does not offer anywhere near as convincing a period performance as the Drottningholm recording.

Michael Halász – 2002; studio digital, Naxos

Hungarian National Chorus
Orchestra - Nicolaus Esterházy Sinfonia
Figaro - Renato Girolami
Susanna - Judith Halász
Conte Almaviva - Boje (Bo) Skovhus
Contessa Almaviva - Marina Mescheriakova
Cherubino - Michele Breedt
Marcellina - Gabriele Sima
Bartolo - Janusz Monarcha
Basilio - Michael Roider
Curzio - Alexander Klinger
Antonio - Peter Köves
Barbarina - Orsolya Sáfár

This is a lively, well-paced and well-played bargain issue in good, well-balanced digital sound. Unfortunately, the characterisation is wooden and studio-bound and the casting is deficient: the Figaro is rather woolly-voiced, the Count – sung by the best-known cast-member here, Bo Skovhus - is too aggressive and his vibrato had already started to loosen at the time of recording, even though he was only forty. the Countess seriously miscast, being clumsy with a big flap in her sound so that she cannot “float a note” – and the acidular Susanna is hardly more graceful; she sounds more elderly than the Marcellina, who provides the best singing here - but nobody buys *Figaro* for his mother. The Cherubino is better but still gusty. This is the full score with alternative arias provided in the appendix but there is much better to be had than this provincially sung recording.

René Jacobs – 2003; studio digital, Harmonia Mundi

Orchestra - Concerto Köln
Chorus - Collegium Vocale de Gand (Gent)
Figaro - Lorenzo Regazzo
Susanna - Patrizia Ciofi
Conte Almaviva - Simon Keenlyside
Contessa Almaviva - Véronique Gens
Cherubino - Angelika Kirchschrager
Marcellina - Marie McLaughlin
Bartolo - Antonio Abete
Basilio - Kobie van Rensburg
Curzio - Kobie van Rensburg
Antonio - Antonio Abete
Barbarina - Núria Rial

I am decidedly disenchanted with this studio recording from René Jacobs. Despite the presence of Simon Keenlyside’s elegant Count, so much else is wrong: otherwise indifferent voices - Gens conveys no sense of line in her bulging, twittery, poorly tuned arias - superfluous, over-elaborate ornamentation, persistent over-use of appoggiaturas, hammy “funny” voices, whining strings, and a refusal to give the singers’ long phrases time to breathe, yet an insistence upon redundant pauses within the recitative. It’s not how I want my *Figaro* to sound and my copy has gone to the charity shop.

Teodor Currentzis – 2012; studio digital, Sony

MusicAeterna
(The Chorus and Orchestra of the Perm Opera and Ballet Theatre)
Figaro - Christian Van Horn
Susanna - Fanie Antonelou
Count Almaviva - Andrei Bondarenko

Countess Almaviva - Simone Kermes
Cherubino - Mary-Ellen Nesi
Marcellina - Maria Forsström
Bartolo - Nikolai Loskutkin
Don Basilio - Krystian Adam
Don Curzio - James Elliott
Antonio - Garry Agadzhanian
Barbarina - Natalya Kirillova

This is the latest studio recording from Teodor Currentzis in Siberia; it has been received in some quarters with a rapture that I do not share. In fact, as with his *Così fan tutte* and *Don Giovanni*, I find it intolerable: absurdly small-scale; breakneck speeds and extremes of accelerandi; over-acted recitativo; wilful playing and poor singing – “Porgi amor” is a disgrace and singers with undistinguished voices peck at notes. There are no star names in the cast and to my ears you can tell. Vocal embellishments are liberally applied but sung without vibrato, which makes an odd combination. To cap it all, the prominent, clattery fortepiano accompanying the recitativo is very obtrusive, irritating and self-regarding. An excess of enthusiasm in the application of deliberately provocative “period practice” is typified by the absurdly exaggerated comic business and sound effects, such as Cherubino’s descent from the balcony into the glass-frame, which sounds like an explosion in a bottle factory. Period instruments or modern replicas are employed, playing at A = 420kHz, of course; everything about this is redolent of a self-conscious attempt designed “pour épater la bourgeoisie”. As with the Jacobs’ recording, feel free to seek this out and sample it online if your taste does not chime with mine.

Recommendations in summary:

The ideal recording of *Le nozze di Figaro* should be superbly sung in good Italian, with as few cuts as possible and convey a sense of fun as a true *opera buffa*. With those criteria in mind, ultimately, I didn’t find it too hard to arrive at a personal hierarchy of quality:

In the vintage category, I would choose the live, mono Glyndebourne performance with Kleiber’s stereo, studio recording in reserve.

For a live, stereo performance, Karajan’s 1974 recording.

For a period account, Östman easily leads the pack.

For a modern but traditional, stereo, studio recording, my prime recommendation is Solti’s digital account with either Giulini’s or Davis’ analogue versions in reserve – or Marriner, if you don’t mind his greater seriousness.

Ralph Moore