

**Verdi's *Don Carlo*: a partial survey of the discography**  
**by Ralph Moore**

***Introduction***

The CLOR discography lists 165 recordings of *Don Carlo* (or should that be *Don Carlos*? - more of that anon). A couple of live recordings in German were made before the first one in Italian, live from the Met 1950, with a cast headed by Jussi Björling, then there was a whole slew of live and radio recordings throughout the 50's from the Met and various Italian opera houses, punctuated by the first studio account conducted by Santini in Rome in 1954, with a stellar (and Stella) cast including Gobbi and Christoff. This still stands up remarkably well despite its age and some casting weakness. Santini was again at the helm for the next studio recording in 1961 with an even finer cast, then Solti recorded the Five Act version for Decca in 1965. For so great and popular an opera, *Don Carlo* has received very few studio recordings; Giulini followed in 1971, Karajan in 1978, Abbado in 1983-84, Levine in 1992 and Haitink in 1996. Only Abbado's was in French, and Richard Farnes recorded an English version for Chandos in 2009. Thus, so far, we have had a grand total of only nine studio versions: seven in Italian, one in English and only one of the original French version, yet the catalogue is teeming with live performances.

No survey can encompass so many, nor have I considered DVDs. However, I assess below some twenty-seven audio accounts, having restricted my choice to the nine studio recordings plus a sampling of live performances, including the three live recordings of original Five Act versions in French; the rest are variously either of the Four or Five Act versions in Italian. My selection is inevitably subjective; I have tried to include any which, in my estimation, are of sufficient artistic and technical merit to warrant consideration, but in truth, three of the nine studio recordings, from Abbado (Five Acts, in French), Levine (Five Acts, in Italian), and Farnes (Four Acts, in English) cannot be considered to be among the best. However, salvation is at hand with the 1967 ORTF live radio broadcast of an admittedly incomplete, but still Five Act, version of the French original conducted by Pierre-Michel Lecomte.

The opera was first performed in French with the title *Don Carlos*. If every note Verdi wrote is included, with the ballet and cuts restored, the opera stretches to Wagnerian proportions: just under four hours. Verdi started making those cuts during rehearsals, even before the first performance in 1867, otherwise it would not have finished before midnight and the Parisian patrons would have missed their trains home to the suburbs. Covent Garden staged its own version in Italian later the same year with various unauthorised cuts and changes. Further cuts, involving the excision of Act 1 and the ballet, but with Carlo's aria "Io la vidi" salvaged and repositioned, were authorised by Verdi for the 1883 Milan performances in Italian; the 1886 Italian "Modena version" restored Act 1 but omitted the ballet.

Thus no one recording can claim to be definitive and ultimately, a favourite recording is very much a matter of personal choice. The 20C movement towards authenticity and fidelity to a composer's first wishes resulted in the revival of the original, French, Five Act version but some conductors such as Karajan retained a preference for the Four Act version in Italian, known by its Italianised title *Don Carlo*, and to this day that is the version preferred by many an operaphile. Given that the experience of playing a recording at home is different from attending a performance, the modern listener might welcome the chance to hear as much of Verdi's original music as possible, if it is well performed; on the other hand, the Five Act version can sprawl in comparison with the tauter Four Act one. Perhaps four Acts is best for attending live performances and five is best for a recording? To hear it in a fuller edition, a very viable option is the live La Scala recording from 1977 under Abbado, in Italian, with Carreras, Freni and a stellar cast, but so many others claim my loyalty, especially if singers such as sopranos Janowitz, Tebaldi and Freni, mezzos Cossotto, Verrett and Bumbry, tenors Björling, Labò and Corelli, baritones Merrill, Bastianini and Milnes, and basses Siepi, Hines and Ghiaurov, are involved. It is an opera which has always attracted the biggest and best names and has perhaps been

most challenging to sopranos. Recordings are often decidedly stronger on the staff, rather than the distaff, side; the demands of tessitura, range and flexibility made on Elisabetta and Eboli are truly fearsome.

My own attachment to the opera, in whatever form, is based on my conviction that it is Verdi's most "adult" work: dark, complex and psychologically acute; I rank it alongside *Otello* and *Falstaff* as one of Verdi's greatest operatic masterpieces. As with Schiller's play, which provided basis for the libretto, it has little to do with historical fact but presents an enthralling depiction of personal turmoil set against a background of political conflict, and contains some of his most striking and memorable music. The plot is largely free of absurdities, unless you balk at the surreal ending when a mysterious monk, who appears to be the shade of the deceased Carlo Quinto, rescues his grandson Carlo from King Philip's wrath by pulling him back into the safety of the cloister. There never has been, and now never will be, a perfect recording, but several are supremely satisfying.

### ***The Recordings***

#### **Fritz Stiedry (live 1950, Myto/ West Hill Radio Archive: Four Acts, in Italian)**

Jussi Björling, Delia Rigal, Fedora Barbieri, Robert Merrill, Cesare Siepi, Jerome Hines, Luben Vichey. Metropolitan Opera Chorus and Orchestra

This live Metropolitan set has been circulating in various guises ever since the performance on 11th November 1950. Its manifestation on Myto is in dim but listenable sound; the West Hill Radio Archive version is better. The voices are mostly to the fore and Stiedry's unobtrusive, rhythmically steady direction permits a direct, unfussy performance to unfold - but be warned: on Myto, the side break allowing this to fit on two CD's comes right in the middle of the *Auto-da-fé* scene in Act 2, requiring a clumsy fade-out. Furthermore, this is a cut Four Act version and thus valuable primarily for its historical significance and for having brought together four of the finest male voices of the era.

The contrast between Delia Rigal's matronly, wobbly Elisabetta - she really does sound like Carlo's mother, which is wholly inappropriate - and Björling's impassioned, finely focused Carlo makes one regret all the more that finer female voices were not in the cast of this important production, which opened the season. If you have never before heard of Delia Rigal, her plodding, poetry-free account of "Non pianger, mia compagna" and the tepid applause it arouses will give you a clue why; I am afraid that she was not a front-rank artist (what a shame that Eleanor Steber and Blanche Thebom or Giulietta Simionato were not singing that November evening). Fedora Barbieri was, and she manages some imposing moments, but as she lumbers through Eboli's first aria you wonder what possessed her frequently to undertake a role to whose technical demands she was manifestly unsuited: it requires a fleet mezzo who, as well as having a dark contralto sound, can negotiate hairpin bends just the way she can't. Vocal balm and welcome relief comes with the rich tones of both Robert Merrill, who once more displays his beautiful bronze tone and perfect legato - but, unforgivably, his showpiece, "Per me giunto" is cut - and the sonorous young Cesare Siepi, who assumes the role of King Philip as if he had been singing it for a lifetime; it is barely inferior in pathos and vocal beauty to, for example, his 1972 live Metropolitan performance over twenty years later. As if the presence of those three were not enough, we also get to hear the rotund bass of the great Jerome Hines as *Il Grande Inquisitor*. Björling is in its finest voice, with clarion top-notes and great energy, such that, contrary to some performances where he merely (!) stands and sings, he really inhabits the part. One or two doubtful moments of intonation apart, forgivable in a live performance, this was clearly one of his finest evenings - and although his voice was never huge, it seems to come across the footlights without any difficulty. Finally, it is only fair, in order to redress the balance regarding the comparative inadequacy of the women's voices, to mention Rigal's lovely, floated top C in the concluding duet "Ma lassù" and Lucine Amara's ethereal *voce dal cielo*; she was one of Bing's favourite and most dependable artists.

This cannot be a first choice set for this inexhaustibly subtle and moving opera but you might well want it as a supplement or a record of four great, favourite male voices in the production with which Rudolf Bing opened his tenure as manager of the Metropolitan Opera.

**Fernando Previtali (live radio broadcast 1951, *Cetra: Four Acts*, in Italian)**

Mirto Picchi, Maria Caniglia, Ebe Stignani, Paolo Silveri, Nicola Rossi-Lemeni, Giulio Neri, Albino Gaggi.

Orchestra Sinfonica e Coro di Roma della RAI

In decent mono sound and featuring a notable cast, this *Don Carlo* holds considerable interest for fans both of this opera and the singers in question. I cannot agree with some previous reviewers that it surpasses the more celebrated 1954 recording with Gobbi and Christoff, especially as both Caniglia and Stignani, great artists both in their time, are past their prime despite being only in their mid-forties, but Previtali's conducting is more energised and idiomatic than Santini's and the two big bass roles are taken by impressive singers, with the incomparable Neri as a black-voiced Grande Inquisitore and Rossi-Lemeni far steadier and more imposing than was sometimes the case - even if he hasn't Christoff's vocal personality and presence.

Mirto Picchi had an important career, singing frequently with Callas and Gencer. His tenor is hard and somewhat "bottled", with something of a tremolo in his production, but he had considerable stamina, power and volume. Paolo Silveri was always a reliable, if routine, baritone with the right, if slightly cloudy, Italianate sound and good dramatic instincts. Graziella Sciutti makes a charming impression in the small role of the page Tebaldo and a singer unknown to me, Albino Gaggi, is firm and sonorous as the Monk - a part too often under-cast. Sciutti doubles as the Heavenly Voice and the Lerma, Manfredi Ponz de Leon, is also an excellent Herald; this is a performance cast in depth.

There are a few bloopers and wrong entries from the Rome orchestra and Caniglia, for all that she still has power both up top and in her lower register, no longer has the smooth line and legato required for Elisabeth. Stignani sounds too mature but she's still a class act; her "O don fatale" is terrific.

This is the cut, Four Act version, of course; no-one was doing the Five Act version in 1951. Those who do not relish the Wagnerian proportions of the full score and prefer the compactness of the revised reduction, will be content. There is a little audience coughing in this radio broadcast but also much good, old-fashioned singing and, as I never tire of observing, if such a cast could be assembled today, we would count ourselves more than grateful.

**Fritz Stiedry (live 1952, *Walhall: Four Acts*, in Italian)**

Richard Tucker, Delia Rigal, Fedora Barbieri, Paolo Silveri, Jerome Hines, Hans Hotter, Luben Vichey. Metropolitan Opera Chorus and Orchestra

Delia Rigal is an artist transformed in this 1952 live performance compared with her disappointing outing in the 1950 production debut. Her tone is still a little matronly but she is so much firmer and fuller toned as Elisabetta and worthy of her cast-mates, whereas two years earlier both she and Barbieri were outshone by Bjórling, Merrill, Siepi and Hines. Hines is here promoted to Filippo and fully justifies that promotion, already sounding fully immersed in the role despite the youthfulness of his tone. Barbieri, too, is a singer inspired, dealing very much better with the pyrotechnics of Eboli's first aria which essentially defeated her in 1950. She revels in the high drama of "O don fatale" which suits her vocal profile more comfortably; her top notes sound free if a tad flat and of course her lower register is formidable.

Tucker is hardly a poor substitute for Bjórling; he is in finest voice, ringing, plangent and mostly devoid of irritating mannerisms such as the glottal catch which later sometimes intruded into his line.

Paolo Silveri might not be a baritone with the star profile of Gobbi or Bastianini, and it is true that he does not have their bite or presence but his is a light, flexible, very agreeable sound with a lovely legato, which blends well with his co-singers and always fall gratefully on the ear. The supporting cast is fine and there is an unexpected and unusual bonus in the presence of Hans Hotter as the Grand Inquisitor, his big, grave, sepulchral voice suiting the role very well.

Stiedry's conducting is rather staid but not damagingly so and the mono sound, while afflicted with some hiss, buzz and crackle, is nonetheless acceptable to listeners inured to the trials of historical recordings. What a treat it must have been to take such casts for granted.

**Gabriele Santini (studio 1954, Naxos/EMI/Regis/Documents: Four Acts, in Italian)**

Mario Filippeschi, Antonietta Stella, Elena Nicolai, Tito Gobbi, Boris Christoff, Giulio Neri, Plinio Clabassi.

Rome Opera Chorus; Teatro dell'Opera di Roma Orchestra

Let me say straight away that I prefer to this by a considerable margin the recording also conducted by Santini, with the same Elisabetta and Filippo and recorded for DG seven years later; that has stereo sound, is more complete, being the Five Act version, and has better co-stars for Stella and Christoff. However, this venerable old recording still has claims on our attention for the contributions of those two great artists plus Gobbi. It really has a lot going for it despite being in peaky, sonically compromised mono; it was the first Four Act studio recording and is available at very low cost on several budget labels.

Santini is a conductor who knows what he's doing, even if I often find him too leisurely compared with his later account; he takes the Saracen Song at a plod, so it lacks sensuousness – but perhaps he is accommodating his less than agile Eboli. We first hear Pino Clabassi as a grave, sonorous, if slightly cloudy-voiced Monk; next is tenor Filippeschi, who is less grateful on the ear, being loud, rather clumsy and lachrymose- but he has all the notes. Gobbi is of course patrician, that fast vibrato and constant illumination of text so pleasing, even if his top is always a bit forced. Elena Nicolai is more than competent with a large sound but without the ease and elegance we ideally hear in the seductress Eboli. (Incidentally, her Tebaldo is Mrs Corelli!) She is impassioned and convincing in "O don fatale" if a bit matronly. I have always thought Antonietta Stella under-rated but she had the misfortune to be the exact coeval of greater soprano colleagues and her career, like that of Anita Cerquetti, was relatively short - barely ten years of prominence and no major recordings after the superb "Andrea Chénier" in 1963. She has an oddly appealing, husky timbre and phrases beautifully but is somehow not very memorable. The contrast between her subtlety and Filippeschi's attempts to soften his blare in the lovely final duet is almost comical but he just about manages it. Christoff gives us his famous tortured King, his mezza-voce singing heart-rending and his reserves of power all the more striking when he lets go at the end of his long aria on "Amor per me non ha", then collapses once more.

So this is not the best recording but certainly one which commands respect and enshrines two major performances. Filippeschi is perhaps the weakest link, but he does not compromise the whole so badly; we'd be glad to hear him on stage today.

**Antonino Votto (live 1956, Myto/Melodram: Four Acts, in Italian)**

Angelo Loforese, Anita Cerquetti, Fedora Barbieri, Ettore Bastianini, Cesare Siepi, Giulio Neri, Paolo Washington.

Orchestra and Chorus Maggio Musicale Fiorentino

This comes in listenable but indifferent, distant mono sound. Votto was a dependable conductor, usually more exciting in the theatre than in the studio and often with Maria Callas in both. The appreciative audience is vociferous and intrusive, often breaking into the music with applause.

The main attraction here, despite the quality of her co-singers, is the chance to hear that estimable artist Anita Cerquetti in a major role, especially given that her active career lasted a brief ten years – but she is also partnered by a cast of extraordinary quality. The name Angelo Loforese might be unfamiliar even to seasoned opera-buffs; he was essentially a good second-rank tenor with a strong middle and lower range which strongly reminds me of Franco Bonisolli, but with “whiter” high notes which were easy and secure but piercing. He is yet with us as I write at the ripe old age of 98, still specialising in demonstrating how his top E flat is intact! He has all the notes but lacks individuality. As in the Metropolitan recording, Barbieri is large of voice, but cumbersome and inaccurate in the Veil Song, avoiding top notes, sometimes going flat and often sounding more of a harridan than a seductress, Bastianini is the ideal heroic Verdi baritone with his fast vibrato, dark incisive tone and ringing top notes, and Siepi demonstrates why, before Ghiaurov and alongside Christoff, he was the supreme Filippo. He has the ideal adversary in aptly-named Neri's cavernous Grande Inquisitore. Cerquetti had a very large, rounded voice, which was even throughout its range, with a strong lower register and only occasionally shrill top notes; she really was the complete dramatic Verdi soprano. She is exquisite in the concluding duet, floating notes sweetly and Loforese does well to match her. This live recording is the only way to hear her Elisabetta and revel in her ample, ductile tone, so it's a pity that the sound is a bit woolly.

**Carlo Maria Giulini (live, 1958, Myto/Royal Opera House Heritage Series: Five Acts, in Italian)**

Jon Vickers, Gré Brouwenstijn, Fedora Barbieri, Tito Gobbi, Boris Christoff, Michael Langdon, Antonio Zerbini.

Orchestra and Chorus of the Royal Opera House, Covent Garden

I have only the Myto issue of this historically momentous live recording in distant, murky, muddled mono but still listenable to any lover of this opera who brings a will and some tolerance to its audition. The official Covent Garden issue is by all accounts in improved sound but this will never be an aural treat.

It is of course cut and incomplete in comparison with the full Five Act versions that purists demand but it is nonetheless surprisingly full for so early a pioneering performance. We get a bit of the opening Fontainebleau scene and even though the insurrection scene is missing, most of the best music is present.

Chief glory is the sappy, youthful Carlo of Jon Vickers, smoother and lighter of voice than he was to become and offering a convincing and seductive combination of ease with the high tessitura and passion in his delivery. Brouwenstijn is good but occasionally unsteady and over-parted, lacking the amplitude of tone belonging to a real Verdi soprano. Unfortunately, she is denied the second verse in the aria where she plays her strongest suit, which is pathos, when she bids farewell to her companion. I don't understand all the talk in some previous reviews about Barbieri here singing Eboli too late in her career; she is only 38 here and the truth is she never had the flexibility and upward extension required for the part, although she attacks it with gusto and makes the most of the notes she can sing. Christoff is as authoritative, inward and impressive as expected. Tito Gobbi, while evincing his trademark technical deficiencies, simply lives the part of Rodrigo and sweeps the listener along by dint of his sincerity and intensity. Rouleau gives us a rough ride as the Monk/shade of Carlo Quinto, singing clumsily.

Thus, this is by no means the best cast you've ever heard but Giulini's dedicated conducting, hardly different from his 1970 studio recording but marginally more invigorated and less languid.

In truth, I think an understandable affection for this performance has inflated its objective worth. Gobbi and Christoff may be heard to advantage elsewhere in better recorded sound and several

recordings remain preferable to this one, but the true devotee will want to own it, primarily for Vickers' *Don Carlo*, which is something to hear again and again.

**Herbert von Karajan (live 1958, DG: Four Acts, in Italian)**

Eugenio Fernandi, Sena Jurinac, Giulietta Simionato, Ettore Bastianini, Cesare Siepi, Marco Stefanoni, Nicola Zaccaria.

Chorus of the Wiener Staatsoper; Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra

For so old a live recording, this Salzburg Festspiel Dokumente set is very acceptable. The overall sound picture is good: clear, undistorted mono, but there is a bit of coughing and the voices are sometimes too recessed. Karajan brings out plenty of detail in the score but is rather low-key, and at times his tempi are oddly draggy; he is unusually anonymous here. It has a great cast: I find the little-known Fernandi to be excellent; he was good enough to be cast alongside Callas in their recording of "*Turandot*". Bastianini and Siepi are superb, even if the former is a little cumbersome and lacking in nuance, and the latter has moments of rocky production - but both make such a magnificent noise. The ladies are distinguished - Jurinac is vibrant and pure, and Simionato is one of the few mezzos who can cope with the inordinate demands and range of the role of Eboli. Zaccaria makes a noble Monk. I still prefer the 1970 Vienna version with Corelli, Janowitz, Ghiaurov, Talvela and Verrett, conducted by Horst Stein - a fuller version than this production, which is heavily cut and thus contained on only two discs.

**Fausto Cleva (live 1959, Walhall: Four Acts, in Italian)**

Giulio Gari, Leonie Rysanek, Blanche Thebom, Robert Merrill, Jerome Hines, Hermann Uhde, Louis Sgarro.

Metropolitan Opera Chorus and Orchestra

I admit to some disappointment with this 1959 live broadcast. This reservation is only relative, as this is a cast very much better than we could hear today; Jerome Hines and Blanche Thebom in particular reprise their regular Met roles marvellously. The sound is very good and Cleva's conducting very similar to Adler's.

However, Leonie Rysanek is not as suited to the role as Eleanor Steber, Hermann Uhde, as much as I love him in Wagner, does not sound to be in especially good voice and does not have the inky depth to his bass-baritone to impersonate the Grand Inquisitor with sufficient weight, and Giulio Gari - who? - is simply not a major voice - although he is competent enough. He skips some high notes, cannot really soar like Corelli or Tucker, is rather cloudy and throttled of tone, tends to gulp and pant and is rhythmically all over the place, especially in his opening recitative and aria, "*Io l'ho perduta*". There is a tonal cloudiness, too, to Rysanek's soprano which contrasts unfavourably with the purity and clarity of Steber's ringing spinto soprano, and she occasionally defaults into mooning, swooning and sliding which can be irritating. On the credit side, the voice is very big and the top thrilling but she is so much better in Strauss and not really a Verdi soprano. The great joy here is Robert Merrill's firm, virile baritone and Louis Sgarro once again makes an imposing Monk.

As was so often the case at the Met in the 50's secondary and minor roles are filled by singers who will later be stars, such as Martina Arroyo as the Heavenly Voice.

So, if you can tolerate a merely satisfactory Carlo and a rather matronly-sounding Elisabetta, this recording will afford you pleasure. I cannot imagine I shall return to it often except to hear Merrill, as the other singers I admire here also feature in the earlier, better performance. Of course, Merrill features in the famous performances of the first production at the Met in 1950 with Björling and conducted by Stiedry but unforgivably his "*Per me giunto*" is cut there. You can catch him elsewhere in the live Met performances from 1952 and three from the Met in the early 70's but none is readily available or as consistently well cast as the finest recordings and sadly Merrill never commercially recorded his Rodrigo complete.

**Nello Santi (live 1960, *Bella Voce: Four Acts, in Italian*)**

Eugenio Fernandi, Sena Jurinac, Regina Resnik, Ettore Bastianini, Boris Christoff, Raffaele Arié. Nicola Zaccaria.

Chorus of the Wiener Staatsoper; Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra

The sound here is somewhat boomy, hollow and muffled but acceptable, especially when the first thing you hear is the comfortably imposing sound of Nicola Zaccaria's warm bass as the Monk (Carlo Quinto). This is followed by a more than competent Fernandi and the great Ettore Bastianini, so vocally we are on safe ground. Fernandi handles the text very expressively and is vocally secure with a good top. Regina Resnik is powerful, big-voiced Eboli, just a tad ungainly but an impressive and sultry presence; "O don fatale" is quite an event. Bastianini reminds us of a vanished breed of Verdi baritones: hardly subtle but simply thrilling, oozing virile charisma. I had forgotten how intrinsically beautiful Sena Jurinac's soprano was – large, too, with pure, secure, ringing top notes and she can float a line beautifully; this is an Elisabetta of substance. Raffaele Arié is surprisingly effective as Il Grande Inquisitore, deep-voiced and steady. Then, joy of joys, we hear one of the two or three greatest King Philips: Boris Christoff, who is mesmerising in his big scene; this is one strong Salzburg cast. There are plenty of vocal highlights, such as the thrilling trio in Scene One of Act 2 and the auto-da-fé scene comes through surprisingly well considering the limitations of the sound here. We'll pass over some squawky sopranos in the chorus in favour of remarking upon its enthusiasm and of course the orchestra is fine. This is a great performance; how I wish the sound were just a bit better.

(This issue also provides a bonus of excerpts in excellent sound – if only the main offering here had been that good! - from a live performance conducted by Bernard Haitink at the 1966 Holland Festival, starring Gré Brouwenstijn, who is in best voice, some intonation issues in "Tu che la vanità" notwithstanding. Sadly, the orchestra is sometimes provincial-sounding and her co-singers are mostly poor, especially the weak, strained Don Carlo, but British baritone Hugh Beresford is firm and sonorous as Rodrigo, his voice reminding me of a fellow British baritone, the late Peter Glossop. Interestingly, although according to the track listings, this was supposedly a Four Act version, the first three tracks are from the discarded first Act of the original Five Act opera, so it's not clear to me what exactly the edition being performed here was.)

**Nino Verchi (live 1961, *Walhall: Four Acts, in Italian*)**

Franco Corelli, Maria Curtis Verna, Irene Dalis, Mario Sereni, Jerome Hines, Hermann Uhde, Louis Sgarro.

Metropolitan Opera Chorus and Orchestra

Recorded in very full, immediate mono with the voices well to the fore and a bit of distortion in loudest passages, this live broadcast of the Met's standard, somewhat cut Four Act version of "Don Carlo" is very similar to the release on the Met's own label of the performance with Corelli, Rysanek and Herlea three years later, conducted by Kurt Adler who is here the Chorusmaster. Jerome Hines is Filippo in both and had been singing the role since the Met's new production way back in 1950 with Björling. Several members of the supporting cast were regulars, too, including Hermann Uhde as Il Grande Inquisitore, Martina Arroyo as an ethereal Heavenly Voice and Louis Sgarro as an imposing Monk.

What voices were on hand in that era and this is one of Corelli's best outings in a role he loved but never commercially recorded. He is in superb, clarion voice, hanging on to top notes shamelessly and throwing in two very unmusical top C's at the end of both duets with the Sereni in Acts 1 and 2, just as he did with Herlea in 1964, as if to rub their baritonal faces in tenorial supremacy.

Not that Sereni need feel compromised; I have always thought he was under-rated and here he sings at his very best, deploying his very vibrant, incisive, true Italian baritone to great effect. Uhde was

out of sorts in 1964 - after all, he died of a heart attack on stage at only 51 a year after that performance - but sounds much better here. Hines is terrific and Irene Dalis in finest voice as Eboli: smoky, agile and thrilling. Mary Curtis-Verna was always the Met's best understudy but is a fine artist in her own right, preferable here, I think, to Leonie Rysanek's imposing but rather laboured Elisabetta. She was never perhaps very distinctive or individual of tone but does everything right and is technically up to the demands. Her shimmering soprano matches well with Corelli's fast vibrato; her "Tu che le vanità" experiences a few pitch problems but passes the test.

All in all, a fine souvenir of a great era in the Met's history.

**Mario Rossi (live radio broadcast 1961, Walhall: Four Acts, in Italian)**

Luigi Ottolini, Margherita Roberti, Anna Maria Rota, Ettore Bastianini, Boris Christoff, Ferruccio Mazzoli, Leonardo Monreale.  
Orchestra and Chorus RAI Torino

The cover of this vintage recording rightly features Boris Christoff in perhaps his most celebrated role, and he is indeed the star of this live performance, presumably a radio broadcast from RAI Turin. It is extravagantly spread over three CDs instead of the usual two for the standard Four Act performing edition in Italian, which is convenient but means that the opera does not fit into a slimline case. His co-star is the superb baritone Ettore Bastianini, recorded in the year before his diagnosis with the throat cancer from which he died only six years later. His great bronze sound is a joy to hear, not only in his arias but also in ensembles like the Act trio and the confrontation scene with Christoff, which really takes off. However, you may hear both artists to advantage in other recordings with superior co-singers.

The sound is acceptable mono with some slight pre-echo and a bit of tape flutter, with the voices well forward and not much distortion. Christoff and Bastianini apart, the cast is not especially distinguished but certainly very competent. The Tebaldo is one of those irritating Minnie Mouse soubrette sopranos but Anna Maria Rota is impressive as Eboli. She begins in slightly matronly voice with rather heavy vibrato but soon gets into her stride and makes a good job of the melismata and coloratura of her opening aria. Her "O don fatale" is dramatic and amply voiced even if she is not always quite steady. Both supporting basses, Monreale as the Monk and Mazzoli as the Grand Inquisitor, have sturdy, solid voices without being especially memorable or charismatic in the manner of the best exponents of these two relatively small but important roles. Margherita Roberti has an attractive soprano with plenty of vitality and flexibility but her fast vibrato is sometimes obtrusive to the extent of beginning to become a minor tremolo and that tends to drain her voice of any variety of expressive colour. Despite her delicacy and command of portamento, she lacks the amplitude and grand manner this part requires. For me, the weakest link here is tenor Luigi Ottorino, who can negotiate the fearsome demands of the role but has something of a whine in his tone which militates against heroism and his effortful top notes can turn sharp. Carlo is a bit of a wimp, I know, but the music demands heroic tone in the Vickers and Corelli mode.

Mario Rossi was a very experienced operatic conductor and a stalwart on the Italian scene during the 50's and 60's; he knows what to do here, giving his singers plenty of space and phrasing very flexibly.

Ultimately, then this performance fields a cast which can only partially fulfil the requirements of this grandest of Grand Operas and I need to return to recordings with more robust voices in at least two of the principal roles.

**Gabriele Santini (studio 1961, DG: Five Acts, in Italian)**

Flaviano Labò, Antonietta Stella, Fiorenza Cossotto, Boris Christoff, Ettore Bastianini, Ivo Vinco, Alessandro Maddalena.  
Coro e Orchestra Teatro alla Scala

Unavailable for many years this 1961 La Scala was formerly available only via Arkiv, or as one of the operas in this Verdi: Great Operas from La Scala/Variations (Ltd) or here on the Urania label; now finally re-issued on DG, it offers many compelling reasons why it deserves to be a first choice.

First, it is the Five Act version, not absolutely complete by the standards of modern scholarship but the fact that it's not shorn of Act 1 adds so much to the pathos of the plight of Elisabetta and Carlos. Secondly, it is sung and played almost exclusively by Italians who are utterly idiomatic and immersed in Verdian style - only Christoff is non-native and as Tito Gobbi's brother-in-law, he spoke Italian fluently. Thirdly, those voices are peerless. Flavio Labò's relatively diminutive frame was no bar to his possessing one of the largest, most resonant and stentorian tenors ever heard on stage, yet he is capable of subtlety and restraint. Occasionally, especially at the beginning of Act 1, there is rather too much vibrancy in his vocal production and his vibrato seems to be getting away from him but he soon settles. The concluding duet with Stella is the stuff of which operatic dreams are made. Stella's smoky tones and rich lower register are full of passion. Bastianini's singing has to be heard to be believed; his confrontation with Christoff's King Philip presents us with two of the most darkly burnished lower male voices on record. Christoff's depiction of the tormented monarch is one of the most striking and vocally alluring ever heard; he makes Philip's emotional pain audibly tangible. As if these three singers did not present riches enough, we also hear the fabulously secure and accomplished Cossotto despatch Eboli's difficult and diverse music with power and aplomb, while her then husband Ivo Vinco uses his blackest of basses to invest Il Grande Inquisitore with immense authority - even if he hardly sounds old.

Santini's conducting is highly fluid, fluent and sensitive, constantly shaping and phrasing the music without sounding fussy. The playing of the La Scala orchestra is first-rate, especially the horns and brass in general.

This is Italian Grand Opera at its most compelling.

**Kurt Adler (live 1964, Sony: Four Acts, in Italian)**

Franco Corelli, Leonie Rysanek, Irene Dalis, Nicolae Herlea, Giorgio Tozzi, Hermann Uhde, Justino Díaz.

Metropolitan Opera Chorus and Orchestra

Even allowing for the cuts so often made during this era at the Metropolitan Opera, this is one of the swiftest of the live Four Act versions and the sound is really very good for a mono radio broadcast; consequently, it gives you a compelling sense of the excitement of the occasion under the experienced baton of Kurt Adler, who had conducted a similarly distinguished cast in this opera in 1955. The cuts - the whole of the Fontainebleau Act, of course, this being the Four Act version, plus excisions in the Third Act auto-da fé and the final sublime duet - are all the more regrettable considering that Corelli never made a studio recording of *Don Carlo* but we must be grateful for what we have. It was a favourite opera that saw him through the seventies until he had virtually retired; he clearly identified with the haunted, neurotic Carlos.

The cast features five Met stalwarts in Corelli, Leonie Rysanek, Irene Dalis, Giorgio Tozzi and Hermann Uhde, whereas Posa was distinguished Romanian baritone Herlea's debut role at the Met. Many consider this to be the best of the available live performances of Corelli as Don Carlo, although both the 1961 Met and 1970 Vienna recordings also have much to recommend them; the latter also has a superlative cast and gives little sign of Corelli's supposed vocal deterioration by that date. Here in 1964, the famous bronze squillo in the tone and the expressive diminuendo are both much in evidence, as is Corelli's artistic licence - which some call sloppiness - and his pronounced lisp, which on the evidence of the duet from *Aida* he made around the same time with Callas seemed

particularly pronounced that year. There is an awkward pause just before the Flemish deputies issue their plea to Philip when Corelli missed his cue, then they carry on.

Apart from the expected pre-eminence of Corelli in the eponymous leading role, the special pleasure for me in this performance is Herlea's vibrant, Italianate baritone as Posa. He was evidently determined not to be over-awed either by the occasion or his temperamental tenor colleague and matches Corelli in volume and intensity, sustaining a nobility of line and brilliance of tone which is well-nigh perfect for this heroic baritone role. He has splendid top notes and even a good trill. Corelli seems to fear that he is in danger of being upstaged by his stage-mate and consequently throws in a slightly precarious and not very musical high C to conclude their duet in Act 1, "Dio che nell'alma infondere."

Irene Dalis, despite not having the largest or most refulgent of mezzo-sopranos is clearly a very intelligent and able singer who has the resources to manage both the "Veil Song" and "O don fatale" - not always the case with this role. She has a vibrant, smoky, seductive timbre which is ideal and handles the coloratura adeptly and agilely. She is also a good vocal actress who sounds both vindictive then truly remorseful without resorting to over-emoting.

Giorgi Tozzi was originally a baritone and occasionally that shows in a lack of sonorousness in his low notes, such as on the low F at the end of his monologue and some loss of resonance in his soft singing. He is more impressive in louder passages when his steady, imposing tone cuts through the surrounding textures. I find his characterisation of the weary king a little applied and blustery; he too often sounds angry rather than melancholy and thus lacks the massive inwardness found in the Philip of Christoff, Siepi and Ghiaurov. He also has a tendency to drift sharp in the soliloquy but his confrontations with Il Grande Inquisitor and Rodrigo are both stirring and dramatic, if not very subtle. Uhde is black and menacing of voice but struggles with his top E and F.

Justino Diaz is noble, steady and implacable as the Friar/Carlo Quinto; it's a part which although brief must not be under-cast if the opening and ending of the opera are to make the required impact.

In my survey of the singers thus far, you will note that I have left Leonie Rysanek till last. This is because I cannot quite decide what I think about her Elisabetta. I am used to the fact that in live performance she usually took a while to warm up and that the strange, hoarse croon in the lower ranges of the voice would ease off as the opera progressed. I continue to be delighted by her shining top notes and the amplitude of the sound she makes but equally irritated by her habitual swoop and scoop in to phrases. The dark colouring and occasional hoarseness in her tone is in many ways redolent of the unrelenting sorrow and suffering undergone by Elisabetta, that most doleful of Verdi heroines. She rises to her last great aria, floating notes exquisitely on "Francia" and "Fontainebleau" and delivers superb top B's and B flats which sound almost disjointed from the main body of her voice. She certainly creates a rounded character and always delivers the text convincingly but listening is not always comfortable when she is "wallowing" into a note. She was always a favourite with the Met audience which responds enthusiastically to all the artists here.

The standard of instrumental playing is variable; neither of the introductions to Acts 3 and 4 constitutes the orchestra's finest hour and intonation can waver alarmingly, but by and large Adler directs a tight ship.

This, alongside the 1968 *Die Walküre*, is probably the most desirable issue so far in this Sony Metropolitan series. It certainly represents the best of Corelli in this particular opera but is more than that, in that it enshrines a thrilling performance by a first-rate cast recorded in mono sound so good that one forgets it's almost "historical". There are many good recordings of this opera but none encompasses all its demands and most serious collectors will want several versions of both the Four

and Five Act versions in Italian and the French recording conducted by Pappano. In that context, there is certainly room for this slim and very affordable issue on your shelves.

There is a synopsis and cues but obviously no libretto, this being a budget set.

**Georg Solti (studio 1965, Decca: Five Acts, in Italian)**

Carlo Bergonzi, Renata Tebaldi, Grace Bumbry, Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau, Nicolai Ghiaurov, Martti Talvela, Vincenzo Bello.

Orchestra and Chorus of the Royal Opera House, Covent Garden

Solti's taut yet flexible direction here moulds his experienced cast into a dramatically convincing ensemble. The orchestra of the Royal Opera House are wonderful - the prelude to Act 3 absolutely sings and sighs - and the sound is terrific for so old a recording, broad and spacious with merely a hint of hiss. Fischer-Dieskau's Rodrigo has always been the focal point of any negative reactions to this set: his cloudy baritone was never really a Verdi voice; he barks, yells and strains in moments of high drama, particularly during the confrontation with Filippo, which is emotionally gripping but vitiated by the sad contrast between Ghiaurov's big, black bass and his windy posturing; he simply has none of the Italianate bite and power provided by real Verdi baritones like Gobbi or Bastianini, but is better in the lyrical exchange with Eboli in the garden in Act 2, and I suppose this is as good as he got singing the music of a composer for whom he was ill-equipped.

Other vocal drawbacks are minimal and the strengths are manifest. Bergonzi, never large of voice, compensates with beauty of tone and shading of dynamics and he makes an excellent match for Tebaldi, then in the closing stages of her career but still able to float a line and swell her voice impressively. Ghiaurov and Talvela remain the most imposing and gripping bass duo ever to record their scene, with the possible exception of Cesare Siepi and Jerome Hines. Eboli, a fiendishly difficult and disparate role with its requirement of two essentially different voices for the two big scenes, has nonetheless been well served on disc and Bumbry is up there with a roster of the finest mezzos of the last fifty years: Cossotto, Verrett, Baltsa, Simionato, Borodina et al. Hers is a seductive yet weighty sound and she really inhabits the part. Joan Carlyle is superb as a soaring "voce dal cielo".

I would not place this above other favourite recordings of the Five Act version such as the 1961 studio recording by Santini with Labò, Stella, Bastianini, Cossotto and Christoff (an admittedly offbeat choice of a very hard-to-obtain set), the live 1977 La Scala set with Abbado or Giulini's famous studio recording. There are equally indispensable Four Act versions, too: the other classic Santini set of 1954 and the interesting Karajan version from Berlin in 1978 - but this Solti performance remains amongst the best.

**Pierre-Michel Lecomte (live radio broadcast 1967/68?\*, Audio Encyclopedia)**

Georges Liccioni, Suzanne Sarroca, Lyne Dourian, Matteo Manuguerra, Jacques Mars, Marc, Vento, Pierre Chau.

Orchestre et Chorale Lyrique de l'O.R.T.F.

\* two sources give 1967; another is specific: "recorded in May, broadcast 9/20&27/68".

What balm to hear this opera sung in authentic French style by native speakers in a "Revised Five Act version" which is by no means wholly intact, in that it is half an hour shorter than Abbado's ultra-complete studio recording; no "Lacrimosa" lament for Rodrigue, for example, but it does have the crucial, opening Fontainebleau Act. Not all the voices here are absolutely first class; as is so often the case, the two leading ladies are perhaps less impressive; the soprano Suzanne Sarroca, in traditional Gallic style, sometimes has "more needle than thread" in her grainy tone and sounds too mature, but she is expressive and touching; her "Toi qui sus le néant" ("Tu che la vanità") is impressive, despite some edginess, with some soft, floated top notes and her concluding duet with Carlos is seductively dreamy, before the hammer-blow of the King's interruption. The mezzo-soprano Lyne Dourian is a

little blowsy but has a tough lower register and secure top notes. However, the Don Carlos of Georges Liccioni – not one of the three famous “French-Corsican tenors” Vezzani, Micheletti and the confusingly similarly-named José Luccioni, but also a Corsican and a regular at the Opéra - is superb: flexible, vibrant and penetrating. Of the tenors singing this role in the French he is by far the most convincing and idiomatic along with Roberto Alagna in the otherwise mostly unsatisfactory Pappano recording.

The presence of a young trio of lower men's voices in Matteo Manuguerra, Jacques Mars and Pierre Thu assures further assures high quality of singing. Manuguerra's fluent, slightly nasal baritone in particular is a joy: long-breathed, sustaining a lovely legato and so very elegant; sample “C'est mon jour suprême” (“Per me giunto”) for evidence of those qualities. Mars is sonorous and authoritative as Philippe, if rather stolid. His confrontation with Marc Vento's competent but insufficiently menacing Grand Inquisiteur is not among the most riveting but is still effective. There are passages of sour tone and dodgy intonation in the orchestral playing and the mono sound is slightly hissy, occasionally with some audible pre-echo on the tape and drop-outs, but it's bright and up-front; much better than many live recordings of this period.

**Claudio Abbado (live 1968, Frequenz/Melodram/Opera d'Oro/Claque: Four Acts, in Italian)**

Bruno Prevedi, Rita Orlandi Malaspina, Fiorenza Cossotto, Piero Cappuccilli, Nicolai Ghiaurov, Martti Talvela, Antonio Zerbini.

Coro e Orchestra Teatro alla Scala

Variouly available as three discs in indifferent mono sound on the Frequenz, Melodram, Opera d'Oro and Claque labels, this Four Act version of *Don Carlo* is emphatically not the best recording of an opera of which Abbado made something of a speciality over the years but it still commands the attention of committed fans of the grandest, darkest and deepest of Verdi's mature operas.

The best of Abbado's live recordings is also from La Scala but from nine years later in 1977, especially as that is in better sound, is the most complete, Five Act version available and features a soprano in Mirella Freni and a tenor in Carreras both of whom are superior to those here in 1968, although Talvela is preferable to Nesterenko as Il Grande Inquisitore. In many ways, Solti's studio recording of the Five Acts is preferable to both, depending on your reaction to Fischer-Dieskau's unidiomatic Rodrigo, Tebaldi's slightly squally Elisabetta and Bergonzi's patrician Carlo.

But let's first address the strengths of this recording, beginning with Abbado's flexible, sympathetic conducting. He easily encompasses both the lyricism and the drama of the opera where Giulini, for example, in his Five Act EMI studio recording, rather neglects the latter in favour of the former. Ghiaurov and Talvela are stupendous in their great bass roles, their confrontation riveting; both virtually owned their roles and are uniquely imposing. Cappuccilli is as ever impressively long-breathed, slightly grey of tone but more involved here than in subsequent performances. Cossotto is one of the most complete and imposing Ebolis on record, effortlessly encompassing the extremes of a notoriously challenging role and deploying her rich lower register to great effect.

The two principals are more problematic. Prevedi rarely sings below mezzo forte, and his tendency to blare explains the relative brevity of his career. His tone is a little harsh and vocal production can be effortful but he is suitably anguished and heroic, without the legato and beauty of sound associated with the best in this role. He ducks the top B in the auto-da-fé scene but is capable of considerable heft.

Rita Orlandi-Malaspina was a good second-string spinto soprano, with a big, rich, dark, slightly unwieldy voice. Pace fellow-reviewers, I do not think she was ever a real star but she was certainly a fine singer. Delicacy is not her strong point and she screeches a bit in her big aria, but she offers

volume and commitment. She and Prevedi make a good job of the great concluding duet, sustaining their tone admirably over its punishing long lines.

The sonic and vocal limitations here prevent me from sharing the unbridled enthusiasm of some fellow-reviewers for this, insofar as I think there are too many superior rival versions, but it certainly has its interest and attractions for devotees and completists like me.

**Horst Stein (live 1970, Opera d'Oro/Myto/Orfeo: Four Acts, in Italian)**

Franco Corelli, Gundula Janowitz, Shirley Verrett, Eberhard Wächter, Nicolai Ghiaurov, Martti Talvela, Tugomir Franc.

Chorus of the Wiener Staatsoper; Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra

Horst Stein is a conductor for whom I have great respect and I love his pacing of this performance here.; he knows he has the best team of singers in the world and gives them space without dragging. The stereo sound is absolutely fine, some passing, intermittent radio interference apart.

Corelli's nerves and vocal insecurity were just beginning to curtail his career at the time of this live performance but it was still a glorious, if self-indulgently employed, instrument. You can hear him working hard but the voice is still in superb condition; he reminds me of Giuseppe Di Stefano, "committing suicide every night" for the public and it's thrilling. Tugomir Franc is a fine, noble Monk, setting the right tone with his first contribution. Eberhard Wächter is working hard, too, in an opera which is perhaps not his natural Fach but everyone here is committed to giving a Grand Opera performance, not a small-scale run-through. His voice is certainly not too small to match Corelli's and I just wallow in the vocal exuberance on display here. Having Janowitz, Verrett, Ghiaurov, Talvela and Blegen on the roster means that voice mavens like me have died and gone to heaven – and the audience thinks so, too. Verrett is wonderful as Eboli: smoky, sexy and risk-taker with her vocalisation, never holding back. Janowitz is a slim, fluty dream, with plenty of power and penetration despite the delicacy of her sound. We even have future stars like Edita Gruberova as Tebaldo. The confrontation between Ghiaurov's Philip and Talvela's Grand Inquisitor is a Clash of the Titans; finally, we hear an Inquisitor with the right black, chilling voice to contrast with Ghiaurov's smoother, more regal sound. The final duet for Elisabetta and Carlo is ethereal and heart-rending. Here we are in 2018 with nothing – and I mean absolutely nothing – to compete with a line-up like this, so buy it and listen to the best cast ever to have sung this opera.

NB: as good as the sound here is, you will have to tolerate a drop-out of a second or so in the penultimate track (no. 8 on Opera d'Oro) of CD3, just as Corelli is singing "Eterno addio": this is present in all issues and downloads and no-one has seen fit to remedy it with what would be an easy edit.

**Carlo Maria Giulini (studio 1971, EMI: Five Acts, in Italian)**

Plácido Domingo, Montserrat Caballé, Shirley Verrett, Sherrill Milnes, Ruggero Raimondi, Giovanni Foiani, Simon Estes.

Orchestra and Chorus of the Royal Opera House, Covent Garden

Even to hint that this has flaws and is not perhaps the best available is to give hostages to fortune and invite abuse, but not everyone is convinced by this famous recording.

Some people like their opera to be first and foremost a matter of the "bella voce" and dramatic tension as an optional bolt-on extra. I usually belong primarily to the first camp as for me quality of voice is paramount but especially in the case of this opera I need a concomitant sense of theatre to be communicated.

There is no doubt that we hear two absolutely stunning voices in their prime in the lead roles but it is equally clear to me that Giulini's staid tempi and concern for the long line to a degree eviscerates the personal and public drama inherent in this masterpiece. I don't think Domingo has ever sung more mellifluously but I don't feel Don Carlo's hysterical pain in the way that Björling, Carreras or Corelli convince me of our weedy hero's torment. Similarly, Caballé is placid and matronly as she spins those fabulous pianissimi tones. The first singer to bring his character to life is Sherrill Milnes in his prime; Raimondi is a skilful bass who somehow frequently convinced us that his light basso cantante was the real thing in Verdi - but it never really was; you have only to listen to Pinza, Christoff or Ghiaurov to confirm this. I enjoy Shirley Verrett's big, forthright Eboli but she is hampered by Giulini's stodgy pacing in her bolero; she is stupendously desperate in the "O don fatale" with a great Top B and good legato - one of the few singers able to encompass the demands of both arias. The supporting cast is adequate although Simon Estes' workaday monk/Carlo Quinto mangles his Italian vowels and hardly realises the potential for frisson in this brief role.

So I cannot bow to received opinion that this is first choice. It is recommendable for the beauty of singing and playing, the nuance and detail in the conducting and, above all, the completeness of the Five Act version which the true *Don Carlos* devotee always demands but Solti, Santini in his later DG recording and Abbado live in 1977 all draw blood while Giulini soothes.

**John Matheson (live radio broadcast 1976, Opera Rara/Ponto: Five Acts, in French)**

André Turp, Edith Tremblay, Michelle Vilma, Robert Savoie, Joseph Rouleau, Richard Van Allan, Robert Lloyd.

BBC Singers; BBC Concert Orchestra

In sound surprisingly good for a concert performance dating back to 1976, this is an essential purchase for anyone like me who considers *Don Carlos* to be Verdi's greatest work. You have nearly four hours of an original score which was never actually performed. Opened up to five Acts with some music you will probably not have heard before, the main pleasures here are the restoration and inclusion of passages too good to lose and also of hearing mainly francophone (actually mostly French-Canadian) singers demonstrate how well Verdi devised the music to fit the original language.

None of the voices here will cause the aficionado to forsake a preference for the many truly great Verdi singers who have undertaken the six - seven, counting the Monk - big roles in this opera. Their lack of heft is partially disguised by the elegance conferred on proceedings by their being in French but nothing can disguise the fact that all are to some extent sorely tried by the demands of Verdi's monster score. André Turp's grainy lyric tenor is audibly strained in his opening number and you can hear him struggle in declamatory passages, but he is impassioned, phrases very intelligently and battles manfully and for the most part successfully against the murderous tessitura. Edith Tremblay has a very pretty voice a size too small but again really throws herself into the role of Elisabeth, managing to float some lovely sounds when she doesn't push her voice into shrillness. Robert Savoie's beefy, unwieldy baritone is honest and committed, darker than the normal lyric Rodrigue; at times he sounds on the verge of swallowing his tongue but he just about holds it together, even though at times a fearsome wobble threatens to derail the line. Michèle Vilma has a bigger voice than her colleagues and although like most Ebolis she nearly falls off the coloratura in her first big number she is impressive when chest-beating in "O don fatale", her account vibrant and thrilling, just on the edge of wild. Bass Robert Lloyd declaims nobly as the Monk; Joseph Rouleau is in finer voice than I have ever heard him: rich and imposing as King Philip. Richard van Allan's Grand Inquisitor is grandly sung in iffy French and he sounds too sprightly; nonetheless, the great, central confrontation between him and the King comes off as it must if this opera is to make its impact. Another crucial passage is the final ethereal, otherworldly parting duet between the step-mother-stepson lovers which brings the opera to its heart-rending close; both singers assume a melting mezza voce and make magic before Philip's brutal intrusion, some extra busy music for chorus usually excised and the miraculous apparition of the Monk as Charles Quint, sonorously voiced by Robert Lloyd.

The BBC Orchestra and Chorus under John Mathison acquit themselves creditably despite some flatulent brass and occasional intonation problems in the strings. The conducting and playing are more than adequate and we get the feeling of real ensemble despite this having been only a concert performance. There is no audience noise apart from some polite applause and just a hint of pre-echo in the tape.

If you are on a budget and can do without a libretto, this same recording is available on the Ponto label for a fraction of the cost of this expensive Opera Rara issue.

**Claudio Abbado (live 1977, Legato Classics: Five Acts, in Italian)**

José Carreras, Mirella Freni, Elena Obraztsova, Piero Cappuccilli, Nicolai Ghiaurov,  
Evgeny Nesterenko, Luigi Roni.  
Coro e Orchestra Teatro alla Scala

The main drawback to this splendid live performance is that the sound is a bit woolly and lacking definition; it's not at all bad for a live recording but not as clear as other comparable live sets such as the 1970 Vienna performance conducted by Stein, the 1972 Metropolitan broadcast conducted by Molinari-Pradelli (both with Corelli and in clean mono), or, above all for live sound, the 1992 La Scala set with Pavarotti, conducted by Muti - but the latter is only the Four Act version. There is no doubt that the singing, playing and conducting here is first rate but perhaps the muddy sound contributes to a certain lack of sparkle; just occasionally there is a hint of dullness in the proceedings. However, I don't think I have heard Freni sing better; her beautiful lirico-spinto soprano is ideal for conveying the quiet desperation of the hapless Elisabetta. She manages to suggest "les larmes dans la voix" without ever sounding maudlin and she has sufficient power to phrase broadly and grandly. Carreras is in his best pre-1980 form, plangent and affecting, although his reluctance to sing quietly and a tendency to push might be pointing forward to future difficulties. Obraztsova really is such a ham; that big, booming voice is suggestive more of a harridan than a seductress who could have caught the eye of a refined, sensitive monarch, but her voice is undeniably handsome and thrilling in a crude kind of way - and she can actually sing all the notes, unlike some Ebolis (although she runs out of breath at the climax of "O don fatale"). Nesterenko is not especially idiomatic as the Grand Inquisitor; he goes through a strange, strained, semi-parlando patch in the famous exchange with Philip and pales beside interpreters such as Talvela or Hines. Cappuccilli is as he always is: dependable and nobly long-breathed without any special insights or beauty of tone - and as with Obraztsova, there is more than a whiff of ham about some of his artistic choices - though the audience likes him. Ghiaurov successfully reprises his most famous role but you can hear him sing just as well in several comparable recordings, especially the studio set conducted by Solti.

In short, for reasons of sound, the performances of individual artists and the extra material, I am happy to have this La Scala recording as the most complete Five Act version of "Don Carlo" available (including the great extended ensemble lamenting Rodrigo in Act 4, using the same music as in the "Requiem"), but more as an adjunct to other sets, in that it does not displace other favourite recordings.

**Herbert von Karajan (studio 1978, EMI: Four Acts, in Italian)**

José Carreras, Mirella Freni, Agnes Baltsa, Piero Cappuccilli, Nicolai Ghiaurov, Ruggero Raimondi, José van Dam.  
Chorus of the Deutsche Oper Berlin; Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra

Returning to this 1978 recording after quite a long interval, I must say that the recollection I had of its two principal roles being under-cast, with singers whose voices were too lyrical, was mistaken; I don't think I have ever heard a more moving pair of doomed lovers than Carreras and Freni, who both

still had the steel in their voices enough to carry off the spinto passages but are also deeply melancholy and touching in their plight.

However, let's dispense with one valid objection, that there is often too much of an imbalance between orchestra and voices, with the singers occasionally struggling to be adequately heard; this is particularly noticeable in the first Act. It is also true that there are too many dynamic extremes which mean the listener feels obliged to do some knob-twiddling (or remote-pressing) so as not to miss detail or be blasted about the ears. On the other hand, the opening minutes with the horns, off-stage chorus and the voice of the Monk intoning above them are very satisfyingly mysterious and atmospheric and the problem retreats as the recording proceeds.

Otherwise, this is very recommendable for the quality of playing and singing. Karajan opts for the shorter, tauter Four Act version but thereby clearly feels that he has time to linger a little more over the arcing, long-breathed phrase of the darker music; however, the massed scenes lack no punch.

Ghiaurov is immense reprising his most celebrated role and is well matched by Raimondi; the two strike sparks off each other in the confrontation scene and both vocalise beautifully, Raimondi's saturnine tone contrasting with Ghiaurov's velvety magnificence. Raimondi starts quietly then build to an explosive climax when he challenges the King. Cappuccilli has not the rounded, juiciest baritone but his breath-control is extraordinary and he lives the role of Posa convincingly, especially for a singer who could be rather bland and externalised in his characterisation. Agnes Baltsa is extraordinary, the complete Eboli: vibrant, thrilling and almost hysterical, with laser-like top notes. She is wonderfully seductive in her bolero, which benefits from not being taken too fast. Freni is singing to the limits of her voice but without being over-stretched; she is no Tebaldi but floats high notes exquisitely and amply fills the long, high-flying lines of "Non pianger, mia compagna". Carreras's plangent tenor is ideal for suggesting the obsessive, maudlin nature of the prince and his last duet with Elisabetta is deeply felt, creating the requisite ethereal, otherworldly ambiance. José van Dam's Monk is nobly voiced.

All in all, acoustic eccentricities notwithstanding, this is a complete experience of the Four Act version.

#### **Claudio Abbado (studio 1983-84 DG: Five Acts, in French - of a kind...)**

Plácido Domingo, Katia Ricciarelli, Lucia Valentini Terrani, Leo Nucci, Ruggero Raimondi, Nicolai Ghiaurov, Nikita Storozhev.

Coro e Orchestra Teatro alla Scala

This ambitious recording is superficially desirable for its completeness but is compromised by substandard singing and the lack of a single French speaker in the main roles. With Raimondi – a fine linguist - and Ghiaurov that is not so much of a problem, and Domingo, to some extent, copes reasonably well but still sounds Hispanic. The rest sing in poor, unidiomatic French, sounding very Italianate – for example, Nucci and Ricciarelli: sounds the “n” in “mon” and vowels are often distorted by all the singers, as in “éclateint” for “éclatant” and “monn care” for “mon coeur”.

Ricciarelli sounds over-parted: the beat in her tone at forte is troublesome, her diction is cloudy and her manner is predominantly droopy - although sometimes her soft singing is touching and beautiful. Domingo sometimes sounds surprisingly thin-toned higher up; this was not his best recording. Raimondi lacks the black incisiveness the role demands; his tone turns opaque and woofy. Nikita Storozhev's Monk is throaty and muffled and he is artificially boosted in a halo of reverberation. Lucia Valentini-Terrani as Eboli is more animated than her co-singers but she could be singing anything as far as the French goes – and her ornamentation is flat in the “Veil Song”. Nucci as usual slides, but earlier in his career, as per here, he wasn't yet too bleaty, even if the voice per se is undistinguished; he sounds under-powered in the Friendship Duet.

The best thing here is the orchestra, but Abbado's conducting is too careful and languid, such that the whole performance is under-energised, with the singers sounding uninvolved; there is no sexual tension in the encounter between Carlos and his former-fiancée-stepmother.

**James Levine (studio 1992, Sony: Five Acts, in Italian)**

Michael Sylvester, Aprile Millo, Dolora Zajick, Vladimir Chernov, Ferruccio Furlanetto, Samuel Ramey, Paul Plishka.

Coro e Orchestra Teatro alla Scala

The prospect of the largely complete Five Act version in Italian from distinguished Verdian conductor James Levine was attractive but this is another studio recording, like Abbado's, that refuses to take off. It is woefully under-casted compared with the best: Michael Sylvester has a large, well-schooled voice with good technique but the essentially hard, lustreless timbre of his voice is not attractive, and he sounds pushed. Aprile Millo makes little impression; the voice spreads too often and her carefully sung Elisabetta sounds phoned in. Zajick is mostly wobbly and stentorian, devoid of allure, though her soft ornamentation in the Veil Song is well negotiated. The mediocrity of this recording applies to Furlanetto's King Philip; his singing is competent enough but lacks focus and sounds exterior when compared with the greats; in truth, I find his delivery more bovine than searing. Plishka's bass sounds fuzzy by this stage of his career, so the Monk fails to make much impact in his brief but crucial interjections. The most attractive voice here is that of baritone Vladimir Chernov, whose career never hit the heights predicted, and perhaps deserved, by such a noble instrument and he, too, sounds uninvolved.

Levine's conducting is uncharacteristically inert and the whole performance somehow resolutely refuses to take off. Voices are very forward which emphasises their ordinariness and minimises the good orchestral and choral contributions

**Riccardo Muti (live 1992, EMI: Four Acts, in Italian)**

Luciano Pavarotti, Daniela Dessì, Luciana d'Intino, Paolo Coni, Samuel Ramey, Alexander Anisimov, Andrea Silvestrelli.

Coro e Orchestra Teatro alla Scala

On its release, this set received a bad press and some very lukewarm reviews but I have to say that I am mystified by the accusation that it is at best mediocre. I would by no means place it at the bottom of the heap in any hierarchy of quality. It is by no means perfect - nor will there ever be such a recording of this monumental work - but there is so much going for it, not least the excellent sound, which provides a perfect balance between the voices and orchestra.

Of course, that would not count if the singing were poor - but it isn't. Pavarotti, in what I believe to be the last role he learnt, seems rejuvenated; his singing is impassioned, nuanced and frequently delicate as well as thrilling. He often sings quietly, especially in that heavenly concluding duet, and there are few of the mannerisms or flaws which dogged his declining years. For heaven's sake, he is only in his fifties here, in any case - hardly in his dotage. Nor is there any appearance of the single, infamous cracked note which prompted boos from the boorish La Scala audience. Again, I have read stinging criticisms of the other singers here and just don't hear why. The weakest in the cast is probably the late Daniela Dessi but to my ears she frequently sounds very similar to her superior compatriot, Mirella Freni, even though her top spreads a bit. Likewise, Paolo Coni often sounds like, and is as good as, Cappuccilli - though he, too, tends to let top notes spread. However, the voice as such is dark and handsome - and a proper Verdi baritone, far preferable to wobblers such as Nucci and Bruson. The lesser-known Luciana d'Intino lacks star-quality but is a very capable Eboli, Ramey is magnificent as the King and there are two first-class basses in the roles of the Monk and the Grand Inquisitor. Muti's direction is sharp and urgent but he gives his singers time, too, without indulging

them. Despite his reputation for grim literalism, I often find myself enjoying his Verdi - not least his wonderful *Aida*.

So don't be put off by the carping; this set would be a cheap and enjoyable introduction to anyone who wanted the Four Act performing edition rather than the full five acts which purists demand. Pavarotti fans, in particular, need not hesitate.

**Bernard Haitink (studio 1997, Philips: Five Acts, in Italian)**

Richard Margison, Galina Gorchakova, Olga Borodina, Dmitri Hvorostovsky, Roberto Scandiuzzi, Robert Lloyd, Ildebrando d' Arcangelo.

Chorus and Orchestra of the Royal Opera House, Covent Garden

Having it on my conscience that I am rarely complimentary about Bernard Haitink's conducting, I returned to what I recalled as one of his most successful recordings here. In my estimation, he can be routine and even dull – “too Dutch” – as he himself sometimes jokes; this recording is certainly restrained and sometimes even leisurely in the same manner as Giulini's celebrated version a quarter of a century earlier, but Haitink finds more grandeur and pathos in the score without sacrificing the drama that I find missing in Giulini's account.

We do not find the usual selection of cast members of that era: instead, we hear three excellent Russian singers, a Canadian tenor and then rising Italian bass Roberto Scandiuzzi. The latter did not go on to fulfil his promise, mainly because the rockiness already incipient in his tone became more pronounced but here, even if he cannot rival the most celebrated exponents of the role of Filippo such as Siepi, Christoff and Ghiaurov, he is imposing and moving, without quite the black-browed intensity and authority those predecessors brought to the part of the tortured king.

Hvorostovsky is superb as Posa: virile, vibrant and impassioned; there has been none better since. Gorchakova has a large, powerful, mezzo-tinted sound rather similar to the equally impressive Borodina, whose voluptuous tone is able to encompass the demands of her two big disparate arias. Both Gorchakova and Margison occasionally scoop but otherwise make a touching doomed couple and he rivals more famous tenors for the commitment and technical skill of his assumption of Carlo, even producing a trill and plenty of plangent top notes. A young Ildebrando d'Arcangelo is suitably steady and impressive as the Monk and Robert Lloyd as Il Grande Inquisitore demonstrates with his chilling, black-browed characterisation why he could have easily - and perhaps preferably - sung the King.

We have here the 1886 Italian translation of the French five Act version; no woodcutters' scene at the beginning and no "Lacrimosa" lament for Philip over the assassinated Rodrigo, but pretty complete otherwise. The Royal Opera House orchestra covers itself with glory: just listen to the immaculate horns at the start of Act II or the Prelude to Act III. The big crowd scenes pack a punch and Haitink gives us a gloomy, intense reading.

The sound is excellent: offstage choruses are atmospherically separated from the main action and there is a real warmth and bloom to the acoustic.

**Antonio Pappano (live composite 1996, EMI: Five Acts, in French)**

Roberto Alagna, Karita Mattila, Waltraud Meier, Thomas Hampson, José van Dam, Eric Halfvarson, Csaba Airizer.

Théâtre du Châtelet Chorus; Orchestre de Paris

As some previous reviewers have already documented, it is somewhat disingenuous of EMI to allow the unwary to suppose that this is the full, original, Paris version as first conceived in 1866 or indeed the version as it was actually performed with cuts on the first night of 1867. True, it restores items such as: 1) the short scene explaining why Eboli is disguised as Elisabeth and thus mistaken by Carlos

for his stepmother, formerly his fiancée; 2) a small part of the duet between Eboli and Elisabeth and 3) the ensemble over the assassinated Posa whose music was recycled for the "Lacrimosa" of the Requiem. However, it includes only a fraction of the Prelude and Introduction and none of the ballet music - for which relief, much thanks. For the most part, I have no particular quarrel with the choices made but I regret some of the changes, especially the format of the Philip-Posa duet which seemingly randomly uses some music from the Italian 1884 revision and some from 1867. It is subtler psychologically but certainly less dramatic than the versions we are more used to hearing. None of this matters too much if it hangs together but I do think that the notes should have detailed and clarified the rationale behind Pappano's performing edition. To be fair, nowhere does it actually claim to be the original Paris version and we do at least get five Acts - always a bonus musically and dramatically - but it is nonetheless guilty of sins of omission and allows the purchaser to make wrong assumptions.

More pertinently, the truth is that the cast does not really feature true Verdi singers, for all their merits. The best by far is Alagna, who is stretched but not strained; he creates a credible, sympathetic portrait of a vulnerable, sensitive Infant and his singing per se is admirable - he even has a real trill - as is his pellucid French diction. He strikes a plaintive note which very convincingly conveys Carlos's neurotic nature.

Nobody else reaches this standard of Verdian singing. It is just about justifiable to maintain that a more Gallic account of this opera calls for smaller scale singing and playing but I do miss the big bow-wow thrill of more celebrated Italian recordings such as those by Santini. The auto-da-fé scene is frankly under-powered and no singer beyond Alagna really has the measure of the music.

Mattila does well as the unhappy princess; her voice is often quite rich and expressive but her diction is occluded, she makes mistakes in her French and she is simply nowhere as beautiful, delicate or indeed powerful as more famous exponents such as Caballé, Tebaldi or Stella. Meier is out of her depth as Eboli; her vibrato is obtrusive and she lacks both agility and Italianate fire. Neither she nor Mattila have the kind of voices which soar and gleam. She makes a creditable stab at the Veil Song but is constantly lagging behind Pappano's beat; he is trying to inject pace while she drags him back in order to get the notes out. Her tone is often unsteady and the essential quality of her sound is not sufficiently rounded; she is gusty as a default position when trying to inject passion. Hampson has excellent French and a pleasing legato but insufficient heft to be a true Verdi baritone. It is a delight to hear van Dam sing French so stylishly. He is a singer I much admire and he makes Philip's torment palpable with fine vocal acting, but by this stage of his career a bass-baritone which was always too light for this role is now also a little grey; his confrontation with the rocky, blaring Halfvarson's Grand Inquisiteur is Lilliputian if you retain aural memories of the likes of Ghiaurov and Talvela or Siepi and Hines.

The sound is good allowing for the fact that this recording was assembled from live performances: there is little audience noise and rarely are the singers off mike. If you want to hear a *Don Carlos* in the original language, this presents some advantages over the Abbado version which is sung in generic French and also has serious casting issues, but the Abbado recording actually offers a fuller version of the score, with appendices. I still much prefer the 1967 ORTF broadcast.

Ultimately, I do not find much here to inspire affection or arouse excitement apart from Alagna's ringing, febrile Don Carlos - one of the best things he has done.

**Richard Farnes (studio 2009, Chandos: Four Acts, in English)**

Julian Gavin, Janice Watson, Jane Dutton, William Dazely, Alastair Miles, John Tomlinson, Clive Bayley.

Opera North Chorus and Orchestra

I conclude this survey with a brief review of this, the most recent of those recordings I have considered, because it is the only one of its kind. This is a recording of a Four Act version, in a very serviceable English translation by Andrew Porter, made in Leeds Town Hall – but there are occasional infelicities; “within the vaults of the Escorial” sounds very clumsy as it is sung by the King Philip here.

Other disadvantages include a very ordinary, matronly Eboli and Janice Watson's shrill, edgy Elisabeth. Julian Gavin's tenor is distinctive but slightly strained, hoarse-toned and not really Italianate as Carlos; this recording was made the year before he was stricken by a severe and complex illness which, sadly, has apparently ended his singing career. William Dazely is smooth and elegant, if somewhat small-voiced, as Rodrigo. Alastair Miles fine as the King but some slight beat is beginning to obtrude into his tone and he lacks the real inky blackness the best exponents of this role bring to it. John Tomlinson's Grand Inquisitor is powerful but rocky, as one might expect. Thus, the voices are all a bit small-scale and under-powered, but the orchestra is magnificent. However, he only real attraction resides in the novelty of its being in English – for those who want that.

***My preferred recordings and recommendations:***

Studio Italian, Five Acts: Santini in 1961, with Haitink or Solti in reserve.

Studio Italian, Four Acts: Karajan 1978.

Live Italian, Five Acts: Abbado 1977.

Live Italian, Four Acts: Stein in 1970; Santi 1960.

Live French, Five Acts: Lecomte 1967 radio broadcast. (This can be played on, and downloaded free and legally from, the internet here: <http://parterre.com/2017/12/07/don-carlos-more-or-less/>; the Matheson recording is also there.)

Honourable mentions/supplements (all live): Muti 1992; Verchi 1961; Stiedry 1952; Votto 1956; Karajan 1958.

***Ralph Moore***