

Richard Strauss' *Capriccio* - A survey of the discography
by Ralph Moore

Strauss' swansong opera *Capriccio* is not especially well represented in the catalogue; of the 22 complete recordings listed in the CLOR catalogue, only around a dozen have ever been available on CD and the rest were on video. Of those CD issues, several are no longer available and only three are studio recordings; two are radio broadcasts and the remainder are live or live composite stage performances. I consider here ten recordings, including all three of those studio accounts.

The libretto was based on an original concept by Stefan Zweig, who had fled to the USA after the rise of the Nazis and committed suicide earlier in the year of the opera's premiere, 1942. It was further developed by his successor as Strauss' librettist, Josef Gregor, then Strauss himself took it over before passing it to his conductor friend Clemens Krauss – incidentally, possessor of one of the most blatant comb-overs in history - who completed it with continued input from the composer. The text is witty and more enjoyable if the libretto is to hand or you speak German. Like Strauss' domestic comedy *Intermezzo*, *Capriccio* is wordy and conversational, but its intellectual and philosophical content is certainly higher and couched in some of the most sublime music Strauss ever penned. As a result, it is more popular and frequently performed than other of his late works.

It is a vehicle for a supreme singer-actress with a creamy voice and a gift for enlivening text; noted performers who made recordings include Krauss' second wife, Viorica Ursuleac, Lisa Della Casa, Elisabeth Schwarzkopf, Gundula Janowitz, Kiri Te Kanawa and, more recently, Renée Fleming. Karl Böhm, another of Strauss' close conductor-friends, is at the helm for four recordings, including one studio version. The fact that he is often heard at his best in live Strauss opera performance is offset by the poor sound in the live recordings available; fortunately, we have his 1971 studio account with Janowitz. Other estimable conductors strongly associated with it are Georges Prêtre and Horst Stein, some of whose live recordings feature below.

In *Capriccio*, Strauss picks up on the metatheatrical debate expounded in *Ariadne auf Naxos*; the Countess' inability to choose between her two suitors is a metaphorical representation of her inability to choose between words and music and the debate about how best to create an opera becomes the substance of the collaboration between composer and poet to constitute the opera we are watching and whether it is "Prima la musica, dopo le parole" or the other way round is permanently shelved as an otiose dichotomy. The elegant, eighteenth-century salon setting of *Capriccio* seems like a retreat from the harsh realities of the war during which Strauss was composing it but it deals with timeless philosophical and aesthetic issues and the scene in which the servants discuss their "betters" and one remarks, "I have a notion that they will soon be introducing servants into their operas" is a nice subversive touch. The yearning, melancholy and ambiguity of the final scene are profoundly moving without offering any certainties and the delicious irony of answering the Countess' question, "Is there an end that is not trivial?" with the ultimate cliché – "Frau Gräfin, das Souper ist serviert" – provides the perfect, wry conclusion.

I have of late noticed an increasing and modish tendency among online reviewers to make, in passing, gratuitously disparaging comments about great works of art presumably under the mistaken impression that this enhances their pretensions to having great critical acumen; thus we read that *Capriccio* suffers from numerous defects: it is garrulous, prolix, over-long, boring, frothy and pretentious. I beg to differ, although I grant that, as I suggest above, a non-German speaker will need to follow with a libretto. The perfect performance must, as well as being sublimely sung, be urbane, witty and subtle, yet beneath that urbanity must seethe a passion for intellectual and artistic ideas. After all, as the Count remarks, "Eine Oper ist ein absurdes Ding" – but it remains a marvel when it's done right.

The recordings

Karl Böhm – 1950 (live, mono) Omega Opera Archive*

Orchestra - Wiener Philharmoniker

Gräfin - Lisa Della Casa

Graf - Willy Wolff

Flamand - Anton Dermota

Olivier - Hans Braun

La Roche - Paul Schöffler

Clairon - Elisabeth Höngen

Taupe - Peter Klein

Eine italienische Sängerin - Wilma Lipp

Ein italienischer Tenor - Karl Friedrich

Der Haushofmeister - Franz Bierbach

* NB: the CDs are no longer available but the performance may be heard on YouTube.

The tinny, crumbly, hissy sound here is decidedly “vintage”, nowhere near as good as the two recordings from three years later, reviewed next, but the cast features half a dozen famous names and Böhm was always at his best conducting live Strauss.

There is not much to choose between Schöffler and Hotter as La Roche; both are ideal. Dermota makes an especially positive and individual impression as Flamand, who is sometimes sung by a tenor either too pale or too hefty; his vocal layout offers the ideal combination of refinement and ardour. I am not familiar with either of the baritones who sing the Count and Oliver, but both are fine. Della Casa is, as ever, a shimmering, silvery delight; her top notes in the final scene are especially free. Viennese regular Elisabeth Höngen makes a positive, rather fruity Clairon. Under-casting the Italian Singers is always a mistake; no danger of that here with the superb lirico-spinto tenor Karl Friedrich and lyric soprano Wilma Lipp – the only pair to rival Wunderlich and Popp (live for Prêtre in 1964) for vocal élan.

The question of whether this recording is recommendable is currently rendered academic by its unavailability but despite the excellence of the performance the sound in any case disqualifies it from being a top choice. But if you are a historical opera buff and can listen through the sound barrier it is a joy.

Johannes den Hertog – 1953 (studio/radio broadcast? mono) Mitridate Ponto

Orchestra - Omroeporkest

Chorus - Klein Omroepkoor

Gräfin - Lisa Della Casa

Graf - Renaat Verbruggen

Flamand - Chris Scheffer

Olivier - Leo Ketelaars

La Roche - Guus Hoekman

Clairon - Annie Woud

Taupe - Dago Meybert

Eine italienische Sängerin - Henriette Mandel

Ein italienischer Tenor - Henk Meyer

Der Haushofmeister - Anton Eldering

The excellence of the mono sound in this Dutch recording took me by surprise but even more surprising is the standard of singing, even if there is nary a name I recognise in the cast save the leading lady; all

the voices are lean, flexible and attractive. Despite it being a signature role, Lisa Della Casa never made another studio recording – if this is a studio production; I am more inclined to think that it is a radio broadcast in front of an audience, as it was made all on one day and there is the occasional, slight cough or sneeze. There are live performances with Della Casa, such as the 1964 Prêtre recording below, but this is the sole version which enjoys such good sound. True, the orchestra has the odd scrawny, ill-tuned moment and cannot measure up to the best, there are also some little slips, like an early entry by La Roche, quickly corrected, at the start of the third scene, betray the fact that it was hurriedly recorded, but it is well conducted and exquisitely sung, preserving the momentum of a live performance.

Della Casa is in freshest voice – enchanting and wholly credible as a young, aristocratic widow. Hoekman makes a nimble, sonorous La Roche – the quality of his bass reminds me of Karl Ridderbusch - and makes a fine job of his extended defence of the theatre. The Clairon has a rich, vibrant mezzo and she characterises her role in lively fashion. The tenor Flamand is rather thin of tone but sings sensitively and feelingly; the baritones who sing the Count and Olivier are both excellent. Sadly, as is so often the case when, instead of the singers also intoning the spoken passages, different actors are used for them, there is a total mismatch between the speaking and singing voices; presumably this was done because Dutch singers can sing but not necessarily speak German convincingly. A pity, too, that the Italian singers are weak; she is shrill and he is weak and wavery - especially if one has Fritz Wunderlich ringing in one's head – and immediately messes up his words. The horn in the *Mondscheinmusik* is a bit watery and again, the strings are not always ideally tuned but Della Casa is so vibrant.

Despite some negligible weaknesses, this remains a thoroughly enjoyable account.

**Clemens Krauss – 1953 (radio broadcast, mono) Walhall
Orchestra - Sinfonieorchester des Bayerischen Rundfunks**

Gräfin - Viorica Ursuleac
Graf - Karl Schmitt-Walter
Flamand - Rudolf Schock
Olivier - Hans Braun
La Roche - Hans Hotter
Clairon - Herta Töpfer
Taupe - Emil Graf
Eine italienische Sängerin - Ilse Hollweg
Ein italienischer Tenor - Ratko Belorka
Der Haushofmeister - Georg Wieter

Ursuleac and Hotter were in the cast for the opera's premiere in 1942 and also feature in some radio broadcast excerpts from the same year, but this is the only complete recording with them and again conducted by Krauss. It enjoys excellent sound and Krauss' characteristically propulsive style is instantly in evidence in the introductory sextet which is beautifully phrased and played; indeed, the orchestra is noticeably better than in the Dutch recording made in the same year and the conducting is more skilful.

Hotter is ideal as La Roche and the cast in general is admirable, but I am not keen on the wavery, even wobbly quality of Ursuleac's soprano. She might well once have been Strauss' favourite soprano but her tone was never very beautiful and by the time of this recording she was almost sixty and sounds it. Thus, regardless of the merits of the recording as a whole, I cannot recommend it.

**Wolfgang Sawallisch - 1957-58 (studio, mono) EMI Warner
Orchestra - Philharmonia Orchestra**

Gräfin - Elisabeth Schwarzkopf
Graf - Eberhard Wächter (Waechter)
Flamand - Nicolai Gedda
Olivier - Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau
La Roche - Hans Hotter
Clairon - Christa Ludwig
Taupe - Rudolf Christ
Eine italienische Sängerin - Anna Moffo
Ein italienischer Tenor - Dermot Troy
Der Haushofmeister - Karl Schmitt-Walter
Diener 1 - Wolfgang Sawallisch
Diener 2 - Edgar Fleet
Diener 3 - Ian Humphries
Diener 4 - Edward Darling
Diener 5 - Leslie Fyson
Diener 6 - John Hauxvell
Diener 7 - Geoffrey Walls
Diener 8 - Dennis Wicks
Diener 9 - David Winnard

It might be sixty years old but this is still the favourite many Strauss aficionados. For me, as much as I esteem and admire it, there are caveats: not everyone warms to Schwarzkopf's hyper-detailed way with the text or her vocal mannerisms; I have never responded that enthusiastically to Nicolai Gedda's tenor, for all that for many he can do no wrong - I find his tone tight and constricted, if definitely preferable to such as Peter Schreier; you have to be a DFD fan, too, as, like Schwarzkopf, his own way with words and timbre can divide listeners; Dermot Troy is not as accomplished as Böhm's Anton de Ridder but there is little to choose between Anna Moffo and Arleen Augér as the Italian prima donna; both are exquisite.

There can be no complaint about Hotter repeating his splendid La Roche, even if he is a tad hollower of timbre than in the earlier live recording for Krauss, or Christa Ludwig's lovely Clairon and, nit-picking apart, this recording is more than the sum of its parts, especially when you acknowledge the sense of ensemble and the mastery of Sawallisch's direction. If you do like Schwarzkopf, there is little doubt that this recording finds her at her best: silvery, fluid and ethereal enough to rival Janowitz for sheer vocal allure. I have to say that I succumb entirely to her in the last scene, despite the hint of tremulousness in her soprano.

Yes, it is unfortunate that Walter Legge's obduracy in the face of new-fangled recording technology deprived us of the opportunity to hear this in stereo but one hardly notices its absence, the mono sound is so warm and well-balanced.

Karl Böhm – 1960 (live, mono) Golden Melodram, Cantus Classics

Orchestra - Wiener Staatsoper

Gräfin - Elisabeth Schwarzkopf
Graf - Hermann Uhde
Flamand - Anton Dermota
Olivier - Walter Berry
La Roche - Paul Schöffler
Clairon - Christel Goltz
Taupe - Peter Klein
Eine italienische Sängerin - Erika Köth

Ein italienischer Tenor - Giuseppe Zampieri
 Der Haushofmeister - Alois Pernerstorfer

Despite the obvious attractions of the cast this recording cannot be recommended because the sound is so poor, regardless of what label you hear it on. It may also be heard as part of the box set Strauss: Complete Operas, Part 1, Documents but unfortunately, that box set – or at least, some of them in circulation - has numerous transfer problems. When I reviewed it elsewhere I used the epithet “vile” to describe the sound; there is no compelling reason to acquire it, when you can hear most of the artists here in other recordings in considerably better sound.

Georges Prêtre – 1964 (live, mono) Orfeo

Orchestra - Wiener Staatsoper

Gräfin - Lisa Della Casa
 Graf - Robert Kerns
 Flamand - Waldemar Kmentt
 Olivier - Walter Berry
 La Roche - Otto Wiener
 Clairon - Christa Ludwig
 Taupe - Peter Klein
 Eine italienische Sängerin - Lucia Popp
 Ein italienischer Tenor - Fritz Wunderlich
 Der Haushofmeister - Alois Pernerstorfer

This is in clear, if rather distant and thin, mono sound and fields a splendid cast with one regrettable exception: the La Roche of the inexplicably highly esteemed Otto Wiener. He is by no means terrible and he handles text masterfully, but the basic quality of his nasal voice is never very pleasing; however, one becomes accustomed to it. Otherwise the roster is extraordinary, headed by a silvery Della Casa down to Fritz Wunderlich and Lucia Popp, no less, in the minor roles of the Italian Singers, singing marvellously; some would consider acquiring this for their contribution alone. Kmentt could sometimes be more elegant as he comes across as a rather strenuous Flamand but he better than tolerable. The young Christa Ludwig makes a suitably alluring and histrionic Clairon and we hear two star baritones in Berry and Kerns. Della Casa is all wistful charm in the final scene and her voice soars rapturously. Furtwängler's Alberich, Alois Pernerstorfer, is the major-domo. There is a strong sense of ensemble in this performance and I find Prêtre's conducting to be as idiomatic as Böhm's. This is certainly one of the most attractive live, mono recordings.

Karl Böhm – 1971 (studio, stereo) DG

Orchestra - Sinfonieorchester des Bayerischen Rundfunks

Gräfin - Gundula Janowitz
 Graf - Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau
 Flamand - Peter Schreier
 Olivier - Hermann Prey
 La Roche - Karl Ridderbusch
 Clairon - Tatiana Troyanos
 Taupe - David Thaw
 Eine italienische Sängerin - Arleen Augér
 Ein italienischer Tenor - Anton De Ridder
 Der Haushofmeister - Karl Christian Kohn

A witty, subtle and refined text matched with glorious music makes this opera a connoisseur's delight. This is the second of the two superb German studio recordings separated by 13 years which have long

vied for our attention: this and the earlier set conducted by Sawallisch, both have distinguished casts and each shares a potential disadvantage in the casting of the tenor role of Flamand, as neither Peter Schreier nor Nicolai Gedda is ideally mellifluous whereas a voice of the Fritz Wunderlich type would have been ideal. Both are such intelligent artists, however, it might seem perverse to complain. Personal preference will dictate whether you want voice, voice and more voice with Gundula Janowitz as the Countess or the sharper word-painting of Elisabeth Schwarzkopf with a slighter, less opulent instrument; frankly I love both.

Despite leaner sound, Sawallisch's Philharmonia principals bring a little more poetry to the introductory String Sextet than Böhm's Bayerischen Rundfunks, but both are such fine orchestras that, again, comparisons seem redundant. Both are classic recordings and I would not want to be without either.

This music brings out the best in Karl Böhm, whose finest work is, I believe, represented in live Strauss operas from the Salzburg festivals - and this studio recording shares much of the spontaneity and drive of those live recordings, such as "Daphne". The cast-list reads like a compendium of the greatest names of the era. I am never the greatest Fischer-Dieskau fan but concede the beauty and intelligence of his singing both as Olivier for Sawallisch and as the Count for Böhm and Hermann Prey's outing here as Olivier is one of his happiest. Karl Ridderbusch deploys his rotund bass most engagingly as La Roche and even the smaller roles are cast from strength, especially the rich, vibrant Clairon of Troyanos. Given that Strauss called this "A Conversation Piece", varied, subtly inflected delivery of the wordy dialogue is crucial and the largely German-speaking singers here animate the text admirably.

The culminating glory of this set is that last scene, beginning with the "Mondscheinmusik", surely one of the loveliest and most atmospheric preludes in all opera. Böhm does not tarry sentimentally over this luminous music but his love for it pervades every bar with the passion of true adoration. Sawallisch, by comparison, is a tad lethargic here and not helped by the thinner sound.

Despite my admiration for both sets, forced to choose, the ampler acoustic, more sensuous soprano of Janowitz and the greater urgency brought to the score by Böhm incline me to this DG recording as my favourite.

Horst Stein – 1985 (live, stereo) Orfeo

Orchestra - Wiener Philharmoniker

Gräfin - Anna Tomowa-Sintow

Graf - Wolfgang Schöne

Flamand - Eberhard Büchner

Olivier - Franz Grundheber

La Roche - Manfred Jungwirth

Clairon - Trudeliese Schmidt

Taupe - Anton De Ridder

Eine italienische Sängerin - Adelina Scarabelli

Ein italienischer Tenor - Pietro Ballo

Der Haushofmeister - Lorenz Minth

Despite good, if slightly distant, remastered stereo sound and Stein's wholly reliable conducting, the ensemble here, which includes Manfred Jungwirth's characterful La Roche, is let down by the slightly charmless Madeleine of Anna Tomowa-Sintow, who has neither Elisabeth Schwarzkopf's acuity with the text nor the vocal sheen of Gundula Janowitz and in general both rather too much wobble and also too much of that constricted quality which sometimes afflicts Germanic voices in the case of several of the singers here; in fact both tenors in particular, one of whom is Italian, suffer from that.

In the end, this is a decent performance that has little of the glamour of the best recordings, so cannot be a first choice.

Ulf Schirmer – 1994 (studio, digital) Decca

Orchestra - Wiener Philharmoniker

Gräfin - Kiri Te Kanawa

Graf - Håkan Hagegård

Flamand - Uwe Heilmann

Olivier - Olaf Bär

La Roche - Victor von Halem

Clairon - Brigitte Fassbaender

Taupe - Werner Hollweg

Eine italienische Sängerin - Anna Rita Taliento

Ein italienischer Tenor - Roberto Saccà

Der Haushofmeister - Gottfried Hornik

This third studio version of *Capriccio* gives the punter another welcome option, as all three recordings undoubtedly have great merit. The first great advantage is the splendid sound, of course; we have progressed from good, clean mono for Sawallisch, to excellent analogue stereo for Böhm, to the finest digital engineering here and it is nice not to have to make any allowance for it. The effect of distancing the septet as the operatic dialogue begins is beautifully managed and the singers conduct their first conversation in hushed tones as La Roche slumbers in his chair.

The voices here are mostly admirable: Olaf Bär makes a passionate, impetuous Olivier; Håkan Hagegård gives us a typically refined, light-voiced but intense Count and Victor von Halem is wonderfully deep and rotund of tone as La Roche, making much of his words and reminding me of Kurt Moll – the highest compliment. I am less happy with Heilmann's neat, light but rather constricted Flamand. I have yet to encounter the perfect embodiment of that role but he sings the sonnet sweetly and his sound is preferable to that of Schreier. Brigitte Fassbaender enjoys camping it up as the actress Clairon and makes much of her spoken recitation as well as singing richly and it is nice to see veterans Gottfried Hornik, Werner Hollweg and Hans Hotter – the first Olivier in the 1942 premiere and La Roche for Sawallisch – in cameo roles (Hotter has one line!). The pair of Italian singers are very good, adding a touch of Latin allure to the serious, Teutonic discourse. The complex vocal ensembles are sharp and tight.

Another bonus is having the Vienna Philharmonic as the orchestra; their glowing tone is ideal for this music and Schirmer is more relaxed than Böhm or Sawallisch, managing the ebb and flow of the mercurial score skilfully. He controls the arcing momentum of the "Mondscheinmusik" skilfully, building it inexorably without bombast, although it seems at first dangerously slow compared with Böhm.

So far, so good, but central to the success of *Capriccio* is the Countess; here it is Kiri Te Kanawa in her fiftieth year, and it seems at first as if some of the velour in her soprano has worn off to be replaced by a huskier timbre but it is still a supremely beautiful voice, with breath control and top notes intact and nary a hint of beat or bleat; the main issue is whether she is too detached and placid in her characterisation. She would certainly never have aspired to emulate Schwarzkopf's pointed manner; in any case, she is more of the Janowitz type of singer, cooler in manner and reliant on a stream glorious, glamorous tone. She certainly uses the text vividly in her closing scene and her soprano is as rich, warm and glowing as ever, floating notes and rising easily to the climaxes.

That puts the seal on a thoroughly enjoyable, successful recording, presenting the listener who wants only one studio recording with a happy dilemma.

Georges Prêtre – 1999 (live composite, digital) Forlane

Orchestra – SWR Radio-Sinfonieorchester Stuttgart

Chorus - Südwestdeutsche Vokalensemble

Gräfin - Felicity Lott

Graf - Thomas Allen

Flamand - Gregory Kunde

Olivier - Stephan Genz

La Roche - Günter von Kannen

Clairon - Iris Vermillon

Taupe - Oskar Pürgstaller

Eine italienische Sängerin - Mónica González

Ein italienischer Tenor - Matthias Klink

Der Haushofmeister - Markus Eiche

Here is committed Straussian Georges Prêtre conducting *Capriccio* again a mere thirty-five years after the fine 1964 already discussed above. This live recording is in fact a composite assembly from the concert performance patched with supplementary recording sessions in the following three days. The sound is excellent; virtually indistinguishable from a studio recording and Forlane provides two booklets: one with the libretto in four languages – although separately so you cannot simultaneously see the English alongside the German but have to turn between the two – and the other with notes, the track and cast listings, synopsis and biographies – all very thorough, and unusually so.

Prêtre has long been known for driving performances along and the opening Sextet seems to bears that out; it is more direct, less serene and autumnal than either Sawallisch or Böhm. However, the performance as a whole is slower and more reflective than either of those preceding recordings and the witty debates often sound more like serious arguments; some will miss the bantering mood of Sawallisch's recording. The SWR orchestra plays beautifully sounding darker and denser than usual despite the comparative lightness of Strauss' scoring; obviously that matches and reflects Prêtre's concept of the opera. The gorgeous orchestral interlude at the end of Act 1, following the arrangement of Madeleine's tryst with Flamand – "Morgen mittag um elf!" – is especially richly played but the *Mondscheinmusik* seems a bit listless and funereal, without the requisite inner pulse and soaring ecstasy; Böhm is much better.

Günter von Kannen's bass is neither as beautiful, nor as authoritative as his predecessors, Hotter, Ridderbusch and von Halem, but he is characterful, even if his long apologia for his role as an impresario is not as gripping or impassioned as others have made it. It makes a change to have a more virile voice than the usual small lyric tenor sing Flamand, but Kunde's tone is sometimes rather grainy and harsh, Genz is a cool, elegant, if rather anonymous, Olivier, almost tenorial in timbre. Thomas Allen's baritone has lost some of its bite by this stage of his career and is a tad cloudy but he is such a precise, intelligent singer with excellent German; however, good as his German is, that is surely not Allen who recites the drama script with her, but an actor? He lusts credibly after Clairon, who is rather blowsily sung by Iris in the Fassbaender "luvvie" mode, rather than the haughtier assumptions by Ludwig and Troyanos. The Italian singers are adequate but decidedly underwhelming, making little impact, especially in comparison with the pairs in the three studio recordings. In short, the cast here is good but not great, so for that we must look to the central role.

Where some commentators are wholly convinced by Felicity Lott's Countess, I have my reservations, mainly because I simply do not find her vocally as beautiful or individual as Janowitz or Te Kanawa, for all her technical accomplishment and acuity with the text. Nonetheless, she is in her best voice and it is the final, crucial scene where a Madeleine makes the greatest impression. Prêtre's conducting is masterly, if sombre; however, for me Lott does not have the voluptuousness of tone I want and hear

in Janowitz and, for example, Renée Fleming, who has not made a studio recording but may be heard in live performances on CD and DVD, and in excerpts; I always hear a kind of scratchiness or impurity of tone which it seems others do not. There is no doubt that she sings intelligently, with nuance and feeling, but she does not move me – and that is a personal response, I know.

In the end, Flott's admirers may ignore me and get this for her alone; otherwise, I do not think anything about this recording is necessarily superior to the best alternatives, for all its merits.

Recommendations:

Live mono: Prêtre 1964

Studio mono: Sawallisch 1957-58

Studio stereo/digital: Böhm 1971*; Schirmer 1994

***First choice**

Ralph Moore