

Boito's *Mefistofele*: A survey of the studio recordings

by Ralph Moore

Mefistofele is one of a clutch of operas still routinely disdained by critics and cognoscenti alike for its supposed lack of quality. Like *La gioconda* - on which he worked as librettist under the pen-name of "Tobia Gorrio" - and *La rondine*, Boito's masterpiece is too often unfairly excoriated as patchy and amateurish. I don't hear it; it is admittedly a little fractured and episodic (largely owing to Boito withdrawing it after the first performances and feeling obliged to impose large cuts and re-writing) but I love its impulsive, free-flowing originality. In addition to its grateful vocal writing, there are also some wonderful purely orchestral passages, such as the growling, serpentine introduction to Margherita's desperate aria, and Boito's unexpected key changes constantly add piquancy to the harmonic palate. The monumental Prologue, at least, has long been acknowledged as superlative, in the way it builds chromatically to provide an overwhelming, cosmic climax; it is one of the great scenes in opera and Toscanini made a famous recording of it. The Epilogue is similarly rousing, recalling and capitalising on the effect of that introduction.

I recently had an online discussion with some MusicWeb colleagues some of whom postulated that its only merits lay in a few brief extracts, but by the time we had finished collating the best arias and the beautiful choral scenes, they easily amounted to more than half of the work - which cannot be said for every opera which is more firmly established in the repertoire or more frequently performed. Celebrated basses like Chaliapin, then Neri, Christoff, Siepi, Ghiaurov and Ramey all chose it as a favoured vehicle to show off their talents and the tenor arias have always featured in recitals; the role of Faust has attracted some very big names: Caruso (who sang it with Chaliapin in 1901), Tagliavini, Di Stefano, Del Monaco and Pavarotti. The soprano has only forty minutes or so of music and only one, admittedly superb, aria, but also the opportunity to make a very powerful and touching impact if she has the voice for it.

Indeed, some opera buffs will quietly maintain that *Mefistofele* has it all: a mythic tale, a literate libretto, stirring music and opportunities for great voices to shine, which explains why the work has held its place on the edges of the standard operatic repertory. I for one am invariably swept along by this most exuberant and even excessive of scores, which takes a few risks with questionable results, but is never boring. In terms of scale and colouring, the music has much in common with Berlioz but it is a matter of speculation how much input Verdi had in assisting his best librettist; Boito certainly learned much from him, directly or by osmosis, especially in terms of how to write for the voice, even if he did not have the master's inventive capacity to develop melodic ideas.

The majority of the forty or so complete recordings available are live; only nine were made in the studio. These go back to the 1931 beginning with a celebrated recording from La Scala starring Nazzareno De Angelis as Mefistofele and Giannina Arangi-Lombardi as Elena. The most recent was made as long as thirty years ago under Patanè, with Domingo as Faust; otherwise, there has been no studio recording since and nothing much live to get excited about. The tenth and final recording considered here is not studio-made but a composite, live, digital recording assembled from performances at La Scala starring Samuel Ramey, which thus appears superficially attractive, but I'm afraid that my inclusion of it is meant to serve more as a warning to the unwary buyer than as a recommendation.

The recordings

Lorenzo Molajoli – 1931 (mono) Naxos.

Orchestra - Teatro alla Scala

Chorus - Teatro alla Scala

Mefistofele - Nazzareno De Angelis
Faust - Antonio Melandri
Margherita - Mafalda Favero
Elena - Giannina Arangi-Lombardi
Martha - Ida Mannarini
Wagner - Giuseppe Nessi
Pantalis - Rita Monticone
Nereo - Emilio Venturini

The sound here is surprisingly good for so old a recording and of course Naxos has done its usual, thorough but not interventionist, remastering job. There is inevitably some wow and background flutter but, with a will, the ear adjusts.

Speculation that the mysteriously undocumented “Lorenzo Molajoli” was Toscanini incognito is specifically fuelled by the fieriness of the conducting style apparent here and generally by Toscanini’s well-known attachment to this work.

This is a great cast, too, headed by three superstars in Nazzareno De Angelis, Mafalda Favero and Arangi-Lombardi; the tenor, Antonio Melandri, who taught Gianni Raimondi, is now largely forgotten, but he had a big, open sound and a fine voice, despite some occasional unsteadiness. De Angelis’ bass has an “old school” vibrancy and incisiveness to its dark tone reminding us of Italian contemporaries like Pasero and Pinza and his is among the liveliest of characterisations. The sheer energy he invests in making his loudest top notes resonate crazily is astonishing. The supporting cast is great, too; Ida Mannarini is a hoot as Martha. I generally like a darker soprano sound than Mafalda Favero provides but she is a winning singer and the strength of her lower register, as ever with classically trained singers of her era, helps enormously to enhance the gravitas and pathos of her depiction of Margherita’s suffering. Notable and noticeable, too, is the security of her technique in the trills and coloratura.

The presence of the great Arangi-Lombardi, as with Caballé in the De Fabritiis recording much later, adds real glamour to the depiction of Elena. She had in fact made her debut at La Scala as Elena under Toscanini; her velvety voice immeasurably enhances the music and validates the indulgence of engaging a diva to make such a fleeting contribution.

Perhaps this can only be a supplementary recording for the enthusiast tolerant of historical sound but the excellence of the singing and the liveliness of the performance are compelling.

Franco Capuana – 1952 (mono) Preiser, Cantus Classics

Orchestra - Teatro alla Scala
Chorus - Teatro alla Scala

Mefistofele - Giulio Neri
Faust - Gianni Poggi
Margherita - Rosetta Noli
Elena - Simona Dall' Argine
Martha - Ebe Ticozzi
Wagner - Gino Del Signore
Pantalis - Ebe Ticozzi
Nereo - Gino Del Signore

In listenable, if somewhat fuzzy and distant, mono sound, this is a time capsule, preserving a typical, all-Italian performance from La Scala in the early 50's. The conducting is wholly idiomatic, the chorus lusty and committed – the cherubim sound more like street urchins - the orchestra likewise; the cavernous, black-voiced Giulio Neri is the star and one of the two artists here who successfully repeated their roles in Questa's recording two years later. (But why does Neri here omit the whistling that traditionally follows the repeated cry "Fischio!") Rosetta Noli was a second-rank soprano who had a good career; she has a neat, bright, somewhat fluttery voice and acts well with her voice but her portrayal lacks weight; it sounds as if Norina or Nedda has dropped by. Simona Dall' Argine gives us a nice cameo as Elena. Poggi is just ghastly and knocks this one on the head for me; I never understand how he apparently made a career with his throaty, whining, tearful tenor.

This need not detain us, especially as Neri, by far the best singer here, can be heard in a superior recording under Questa, much better partnered and in better sound.

Angelo Questa – 1954 (mono) Warner, Fonit Cetra

Orchestra - RAI Torino

Chorus - RAI Torino

Mefistofele - Giulio Neri

Faust - Ferruccio Tagliavini

Margherita - Marcella Pobbe

Elena - Disma de Cecco

Martha - Ebe Ticozzi

Wagner - Armando Benzi

Pantalis - Ede Marietti Gandolfo

Nereo - Armando Benzi

In clean mono sound (in a slightly cavernous acoustic which suits the grandiose Prologue but seems slightly too distant for the more intimate scenes), nicely re-mastered to remove the original shrillness and permit reasonable clarity without much congestion in climaxes - this is another very desirable historical set from Cetra which could quite easily be your only *Mefistofele* if you're not too bothered about having spacious stereo and are on a budget - otherwise I would suggest either the superb Siepi/Del Monaco/Tebaldi issue or the later Decca offering with Ghiaurov, Pavarotti, Freni and Caballé. However, this has the tang of authenticity and Neri's rotund bass is probably more what Boito had in mind rather than Ghiaurov's Slavic snarl (which is mightily beautiful and impressively demonic, nonetheless); Siepi probably incarnates the best demon of all, in that he combines beauty, sensuality and incisiveness of tone, whereas Neri is rather woollier but his big, black voice is still imposing. (However, once again, there are no mocking whistles following "Fischio!")

Tagliavini is a prince among lyric tenors and this role suits him perfectly; he is both ardent and tender, and his soft singing and use of falsetto are very attractive, even if he cannot provide the visceral thrills Del Monaco supplies on top notes. I noticed for the first time in re-visiting this recording how much he often sounds like Jaime Aragall, another great tenor. The orchestra, chorus and conductor have the music in their blood, although I find Questa's direction a little too leisurely at moments of tension. Pobbe, overshadowed by her more celebrated contemporaries such as Callas and Tebaldi, sings plaintively and movingly; the voice is a big, pure sound with a slightly pronounced vibrato - and I like it. The supporting cast is good; Disma de Cecco and Ede Marietti Gandolfo are not singers I know, but they have lovely, old-fashioned voices and blend beautifully in the number opening Act 4. The climax of the opera is especially powerful, despite the limitations of the mono sound.

This issue is attractively packaged with, like all in this series, the original 50's artwork on the cover, a short introductory essay, a synopsis and an Italian libretto.

Vittorio Gui – 1956 (mono) EMI, Urania – NB: no Act 4

Orchestra - Teatro dell'Opera di Roma

Chorus - Teatro dell'Opera di Roma

Mefistofele - Boris Christoff

Faust - Giacinto Prandelli

Margherita - Orietta Moscucci

Martha - Amalia Pini

Wagner - Piero De Palma

This is in cleaner, clearer, less distorted mono sound than the 1952 Capuana recording and is better balanced, allowing details to emerge even in passages where the orchestration is more congested. It also preserves the Mefistofele of a great bass in Boris Christoff. He was such an individual artist and the edge, bite and inimitable timbre of his voice are faithfully captured. I have never forgotten hearing him live and no singer since has ever sounded remotely like him. His top notes, diabolical snarl and unique way with the words make this among the most vivid of portrayals of evil on disc – but I wonder why he omits the two low Gs in his arias? He was perfectly capable of singing them.

Prandelli has rather too light a lyric tenor and there's a constriction in his tone which limits his appeal, but he is far preferable to Poggi. Orietta Moscucci is a touching Margherita, but like Prandelli, too delicate of voice and also a tad shrill; she is touching but lacks the voluptuousness of tone which makes sopranos like Tebaldi and Freni so memorable. Gui is dynamic and responsive and his Rome forces are fully up to the demands made upon them.

Unfortunately, what disqualifies this recording from recommendation is the omission of the whole of Act 4, the Walpurgisnacht, which means that Helen of Troy and some twenty-five minutes of lovely music have been needlessly excised.

Tullio Serafin – 1958 (stereo) Decca

Orchestra - Santa Cecilia

Chorus - Santa Cecilia

Mefistofele - Cesare Siepi

Faust - Mario Del Monaco

Margherita - Renata Tebaldi

Elena - Floriana Cavalli

Martha - Lucia Danieli

Wagner - Piero De Palma

Pantalis - Lucia Danieli

Nereo - Piero De Palma

In this classic recording, *Mefistofele* emerges as thoroughly arresting, absorbing and memorable and one of my favourite recordings in this genre. In addition to the assemblage of three of the greatest Italian voices of their era in top form, we have a masterly conductor and absolutely demonstration quality sound - so good that a friend tells me it was often broadcast in record shops (remember those?). Margherita was in many ways an ideal role for Tebaldi who, despite a little harshness up top, is both moving and vocally resplendent, while Siepi luxuriates in a role that seemed tailor-made for his manifold gifts.

The project to record the entire opera began with a different tenor, Giuseppe Di Stefano, who recorded nearly the whole role but withdrew, citing "a terrible atmosphere" in the recording sessions. However, John Culshaw in "Putting the Record Straight" writes that di Stefano "had little respect for most of his fellow artists", then simply got bored and stopped showing up for recording sessions - or, as Di Stefano nonchalantly put it, "I went out for a coffee and didn't come back."

He was replaced with Del Monaco which was in fact no disaster at all, as by 1958 Di Stefano was already in decline and having to snatch and yell his top notes, which emerge marginally flat, and the "whiteness" in his voice is now more apparent, whereas Del Monaco was still in prime condition and sings quite sensitively in the complete recording, with what is otherwise nearly the same cast and certainly the same two co-principals, Tebaldi and Siepi. The duets between Del Monaco and Tebaldi are real events: two of the largest and most effulgent voices ever letting rip for our pleasure.

The first takes were eventually issued as highlights which are still highly recommendable, as despite some vocal issues, Di Stefano is still very fine and his flaws negligible. Tebaldi is, if anything, slightly steadier and sweeter of voice there. Siepi was always extraordinarily consistent and sings magnificently. Best of all are the terrific Prologue and Epilogue, intoned by a superb chorus with especially resonant basses and reaching empyrean heights. The highlights here really do include "the best bits", so although I cannot include it here as a recommendation for a recording of the whole opera, it is a great supplement.

Julius Rudel – 1973 (stereo) EMI

Orchestra - London Symphony Orchestra

Chorus - Ambrosian Opera Chorus

Mefistofele - Norman Treigle

Faust - Plácido Domingo

Margherita - Montserrat Caballé

Elena - Josella Ligi

Martha - Heather Begg

Wagner - Thomas Allen

Pantalis - Delia Wallis

Nereo - Leslie Fyson

All the studio recordings are safely recommendable but I would not put this one at the head of the list for a number of reasons, excellent though it is. It is one of many recordings churned out by EMI in the early 70's with the same team of Domingo and Caballé supported by a variety of sterling British musicians. Some of those recordings, like Muti's *Aida* are special, others betray just a touch of the production-line feeling to them, which is hardly surprising given just how often the same artist found themselves in the Kingsway Hall. I find it slightly odd that the young, rising baritone Thomas Allen was cast in the tenor role of Wagner as he evinces some understandable strain in the top half of the tessitura. Josella Ligi is good but hardly special as Elena; she's a little blowsy. Still, both Domingo and Caballé are lovely, especially in their dreamy duet "Lontano, lontano, lontano", even if I find more depth and hardly less vocal effulgence in Domingo's later Faust in Hungary.

Reactions to Norman Treigle's Mefistofele vary; he was undoubtedly charismatic on stage but I find him quite rough vocally and given to a fair amount of shouting and snarling when Ramey and Siepi convey evil through purely vocal means without sacrificing tonal suavity. I think he actually sings better while still chilling the listener in the multiple, evil roles for the lead bass in Rudel's *Tales of Hoffmann*, but his gravelly, gritty sound is imposing and certainly does the job.

The LSO plays superbly under Rudel but the recorded sound is slightly bland, toned-down and lacking brilliance compared with Decca and Sony. Thus, this remains highly satisfactory but if forced I would choose the Decca and Sony recordings over it in terms of sound, drama and artistic quality - and the older, all-Italian sets retain a visceral thrill not inappropriate to a tale of the titanic struggle for human souls, while this EMI version seems just a little polite.

Oliviero De Fabritiis – 1980/82 (digital) Decca
Orchestra - National Philharmonic Orchestra
Chorus - London Opera Chorus

Mefistofele - Nicolai Ghiaurov
Faust - Luciano Pavarotti
Margherita - Mirella Freni
Elena - Montserrat Caballé
Martha - Nucci Condò
Wagner - Piero De Palma
Pantalis - Della Jones
Nereo - Robin Leggate

That this recording has a great deal going for it is immediately obvious: the first advantage is the conducting of the eighty-year-old Oliviero de Fabritiis, directing with all the flair and understanding derived from decades as a man of theatre; he died at the end of the same year that this recording was completed in the perfect venue of the Walthamstow Town Hall, London. The cast is as impressive as could be found at that time, backed up by a first-class chorus, the expertly drilled Trinity Boys' Choir and a superb orchestra. The early digital sound from Decca is ideal; the Walpurgisnacht scene is thrillingly sung and recorded.

Pavarotti is in ardent, shining voice, singing sensitively but rising to deliver ringing top notes. Ghiaurov sneers and snarls demonically without compromising the beauty of his beautiful bass, even if he is not the smooth basso cantante we hear in Siepi or Ramey; his is a grainier, more Slavic sound but the resonant growl is beguiling and he is suitably sardonic in his delivery of the text. Freni has occasionally to push her lovely lyric soprano into the spinto category but she was always such an expressive singer and makes the most of her big aria.; the size and weight of her voice once she had moved into bigger roles is here much in evidence. It's a bonus to have singers of the calibre of Nucci Condò, Piero De Palma – repeating the excellent Wagner he recorded for Decca well over twenty years earlier - and Della Jones in the secondary roles and an even bigger bonus to have Caballé make a brief appearance as a sensuous Elena – a role requiring only twenty-five minutes on stage and often doubled by the soprano singing Margherita, who is conveniently freed up to sing Elena by Margherita's demise in Act 3, but Margherita and Elena are very different characters and the contrast between Freni's big, pure sound, and Caballé's more artful and sophisticated timbre is apt. Caballé makes the most of her cameo, deploying all the best features of her vocal technique and turning her narration of the sack of Troy into a showpiece.

The climax of the opera is here overwhelming, recapturing the splendour of the Prologue; you will gather that I like this recording very much; to my ears it is virtually flawless: a feat of lovely singing and playing impeccably recorded.

Ivan Marinov – 1985 (digital) Capriccio, Laserlight Classics
Orchestra - Sofia National Opera
Chorus - Sofia National Opera

Mefistofele - Nicola Ghiuselev
Faust - Kaludi Kaludov
Margherita - Stefka Evstatieva
Elena - Roumyana Bareva
Martha - Evelina Stoitzeva
Wagner - Mincho Popov
Pantalis - Reni Penkova
Nereo - Boris Bogdanov

My bargain Laserlight edition of this recording, first issued on Capriccio, is oddly packaged in two single CD cases tucked into a cardboard slipcase with brief, trilingual notes, a track-list and a synopsis, but it can easily be transferred into a slimline double CD case.

The spacious digital sound has good depth and I like the background thunder at the beginning and end of the Prologue, which is suggestive of a stage production. Previous reviewers have complained about balances and extremes in the recorded volume; I have no such problems. Yes, the acoustic is cavernous but this is appropriate to the cosmic scenes being narrated and orchestral details, such as the pizzicato accompaniment to Mefistofele's entrance, are still perfectly audible. Nonetheless, the impact of the celestial choir remains rather muted compared with the best recordings and the words in the crowd scenes of Act 2 are indistinct.

The voices, as evinced by Ghiuselev's entrance, are considerably closer to the microphone. He is in good, confident voice, maintaining an Italianate legato and inflecting text with aplomb. He is a rougher customer. not as suave or insinuating as Siepi but he has a splendid, rich, resonant bass and a strong presence. I like the way he can inject a sardonic chuckle into his tone and play the rogue. He was always in the shadow of his bass compatriot Nicolai Ghiaurov, who of course also excelled in the role of Mefistofele, but here demonstrates that he was a fine artist in his own right. He was hardly the first Slavonic bass to make a success of the role; we may think back to Chaliapin, Reizen, Christoff and the aforementioned Ghiaurov.

Kaloudi Kaloudov has a typical Eastern European tenor: a little hard, tight and plaintive and occasionally his tone turns a little husky, but his voice is powerful and expressive and he has ringing top notes. His Italian is good, too. He manages a nice, lyrical line in "Se tu mi doni" and his Wagner has a similarly pleasant – and pleasantly similar – voice; he sounds as though he equally could have sung Faust. Stefka Evstatieva's Margherita is perhaps a tad mature-sounding but she has warm, flexible voice. Her account of "L'altra notte" is grand and moving and despite the ample size of her soprano, she negotiates the coloratura very deftly and her top notes are huge. The duet "Lontano, lontano, lontano" is dreamily sung; her timbre when she is singing softly often reminds me a great deal of Katia Ricciarelli at her best and I like her very much. Evelina Stoitzeva makes a fruity Martha. Rumjana Bareva as Elena could have a sweeter, more seductive tone but like Evstatieva, she has big, vibrant voice, sings firmly, throws herself into the love duet with abandon and certainly doesn't let the side down.

Marinov's conducting is wholly unobjectionable, although just occasionally proceedings lose tension; for example, the Garden Scene in Act 2 goes a little slack; however, he mostly does the job and chorus is lively and engaged.

While this is not necessarily the most desirable recording compared with glitzy offerings, its all-round excellence and bargain price definitely make it an attractive purchase and anyone on a budget will not be disappointed.

Giuseppe Patanè – 1988 (digital) Sony Classical
Orchestra - Hungarian State Orchestra
Chorus - Hungaroton Opera Chorus & Nyiregyházi Boys' Choir

Mefistofele - Samuel Ramey
Faust - Plácido Domingo
Margherita - Éva Marton
Elena - Éva Marton
Martha - Tamara Takács
Wagner - Sergio Tedesco
Pantalis - Éva Farkas
Nereo - Antal Pataki

This recording has attracted mixed reviews for a variety of reasons, some of which puzzle me. For example, I have read criticism of the brass of the Hungarian State Orchestra, who to me sound raucously splendid in that blockbuster opening scene with its massed angelic choir, the Hungaroton Opera Chorus singing with extraordinary gusto. I was also astonished at how idiomatically Italian the Nyiregyházi Boys' Choir sounds until I saw that the choir director was Piergiorgio Morandi. However, I agree that one serious blot, which early becomes apparent, is the aged, wobbly singing of Sergio Tedesco as Wagner. He might once have been the voice of Tarzan but here at only sixty years old he is, sadly, all washed up. Passing over that, we hear Domingo in his mid-forties and he is of course just fine, if not as thrilling as Del Monaco or as sparkling as Pavarotti, but he sings legato passages like "Se tu mi doni" with great beauty.

A second criticism is that Ramey is faceless in comparison with Siepi. For some, Ghiaurov was too Slavic in tone for De Fabritiis, but others agree that he excelled in Italian roles. Ramey, too, has the heft and suavity for Mefistofele and I certainly don't hear that he just sings through it; it was a role tailor-made for him, temperamentally, vocally and even physically: he sang it bare-chested à la Chaliapin to huge acclaim world-wide. For me, it's one of those great voices I simply drink in and I also hear him pointing the verbal comedy during the double-wooing scene.

Eva Marton has quite a large, weighty soprano for Margherita but she lightens it convincingly and is pure of tone even if the vibrato is at times a little too pronounced. She is moving and impassioned in her big prison-cell scene and her "Lontano, lontano" duet with Domingo is exquisite. As Elena, she sings beautifully and sensitively, belying her reputation (sometimes merited) for being "klaxon-voiced".

The opening and closing scenes are simply overwhelming; only the music of Berlioz and Wagner at their most grandiose approaches them in scale and Giuseppe Patanè conducts it most sympathetically and effectively, encompassing both the tender and the spectacular; the playing of his Hungarian orchestra is first rate.

Whether for a modern, digital recording you prefer this or the Decca will depend upon your taste in voices; Freni is marginally over-parted for all the beauty of her voice and Marton here is just a tad blowsy but both are excellent; the comparative merits of the bass and tenor in each I briefly discuss above. I am happy to have both sets.

A libretto in four languages is provided, alongside good notes.

Riccardo Muti – 1995 (live composite, digital) BMG RCA

Orchestra - Teatro alla Scala
Chorus - Teatro alla Scala

Mefistofele - Samuel Ramey
Faust - Vincenzo La Scola
Margherita - Michèle Crider
Elena - Michèle Crider
Martha - Eleonora Jankovic
Wagner - Ernesto Gavazzi
Pantalis - Eleonora Jankovic
Nereo - Ernesto Gavazzi

I am including this among this survey of studio recordings as it is live composite and digital, and should thus be both artistically and sonically competitive, but despite those apparent potential advantages, the sound is still relatively poor and the performance overall mediocre.

I cannot think how or where the microphones were placed; the sound is muddy, muffled, distant and obscured by ambient noise from the audience, orchestra pit, auditorium and the production on stage – you would scarcely believe this to be digital – and despite the undoubted attraction of the presence of Samuel Ramey in one of his key roles, no-one else here rises to his standard. Muti directs a grand, rather stolid account of the score.

Ramey is of course terrific and his set pieces are the highlights – but this dull, distant recording takes the edge off even his mordant basso cantante. La Scola has a tenor two sizes too small for the role of Faust and makes a tight sound, always rounded off with a glottal blip. In the “Grey Friar” scene, Wagner sounds beefier than Faust. Then the constant wobble in Crider’s unwieldy soprano makes her, for me, unlistenable; she is better as Elena but it’s not a voice I want to hear twice, let alone in both roles. Her technique is poor – she has no trill and croons in her lower register; her sound is big and crude. I cannot say she blends poorly with La Scola as their voices do not complement each other at all.

The presence of Ramey cannot redeem this mess, but you can – and should – hear him in his 1988 recording for Patanè where everything – sound, singing and conducting – is superior, rendering this one redundant.

Recommendations:

Mono: Questa 1954

Stereo: Serafin 1958*

Digital: De Fabritiis 1980/82*

*joint primary choices

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