

Berlioz's *Les nuits d'été* - A survey of the discography
by Ralph Moore

The song cycle *Les nuits d'été* (Summer Nights) Op. 7 consists of settings by Hector Berlioz of six poems written by his friend Théophile Gautier. Strictly speaking, they do not really constitute a cycle, insofar as they are not linked by any narrative but only loosely connected by their disparate treatment of the themes of love and loss. There is, however, a neat symmetry in their arrangement: two cheerful, optimistic songs looking forward to the future, frame four sombre, introspective songs. Completed in 1841, they were originally for a mezzo-soprano or tenor soloist with a piano accompaniment but having orchestrated "Absence" in 1843 for his lover and future wife, Maria Recio, Berlioz then did the same for the other five in 1856, transposing the second and third songs to lower keys. When this version was published, Berlioz specified different voices for the various songs: mezzo-soprano or tenor for "Villanelle", contralto for "Le spectre de la rose", baritone (or, optionally, contralto or mezzo) for "Sur les lagunes", mezzo or tenor for "Absence", tenor for "Au cimetière", and mezzo or tenor for "L'île inconnue". However, after a long period of neglect, in their resurgence in modern times they have generally become the province of a single singer, usually a mezzo-soprano – although both mezzos and sopranos sometimes tinker with the keys to ensure that the tessitura of individual songs sits in the sweet spot of their voices, and transpositions of every song are now available so that it can be sung in any one of three - or, in the case of "Au cimetière", four - key options; thus, there is no consistency of keys across the board. When the cycle is sung by sopranos, the second and third songs are usually transposed back to their original pitches; when lower voices sing it, some songs are often transposed downwards, which can have the undesirable effect of making the first and last songs sound too dark for the light-hearted nature of their words and music.

Although the original piano version has been recorded a few times, as per five of the recordings reviewed below, most listeners will surely want the added dimension that the sonorities of orchestration provide. Furthermore, as much as I love the searing song cycles of Schubert, Schumann and Ravel, this is surely the most languorously beautiful of all in that genre and requires the steadiest, most velvety, expressive and sensuous of voices, hence shrill sopranos, constricted tenors or gravelly baritones will not do. There has been some debate about whether the songs suit just one voice at all, and several recordings use two, three or even five different singers. Complete recordings by men are rare but the following have done so:

- two countertenors, David Daniels and Marco Lazzara (see below)
- three tenors, Nicolai Gedda (again, see below), Jean-Paul Fouchécourt (whose small, reedy, mixed-falsetto tenor lacks tonal depth and variety is very closely recorded and is not at all to my taste; he sings the cycle with the Quator Manfred in their own viola player's arrangement for string quartet; an interesting idea, not reviewed; [you may hear clips here](#) and very nasty they are) and Ian Bostridge (whose absurdly affected mixed-falsetto crooning and mannerisms I abhor; not reviewed to save my blood pressure)
- two baritones, Gérard Souzay and Stéphane Degout (the latter already very positively [reviewed](#) by my MWI colleague John Quinn earlier this year, and
- two by bass-baritone José van Dam (both reviewed below), in the piano and orchestrated versions respectively.

It seems that ultimately Berlioz himself did not much mind which voice category sang them, even if musically they seem best suited to the mezzo voice, which I much prefer. However, the texts overwhelmingly indicate that we are hearing expressed the thoughts and emotions of almost exclusively male personae, as written by the male poet. Berlioz adapted and modified the poems but left their essence unchanged and the "gender identities" break down as follows: the narrator of "Villanelle" is male, as he addresses his companion as "ma belle"; "Le spectre de la rose" is neutral in that a rose (albeit of linguistically feminine gender in French) is speaking to a woman; in "Sur les lagunes" the singer is presumably male, and definitely talking of a deceased female lover; in "Absence", he is again male, asking his "bien-aimée" to return; in "Au cimetière": the reflections are "gender-neutral", being

essentially philosophical in nature; finally, in “L'île inconnue”, the persona is again definitely male, addressing “la jeune belle” - none of which has discouraged mezzo-sopranos from making this cycle their own, just as women have successfully sung *Die schöne Müllerin* and *Winterreise*.

These are the options; the original keys and voice categories are given first and the transpositions to keys available only in Bärenreiter scores, are denoted by square brackets:

1. Villanelle (mezzo or tenor—A, G, F)
2. Le spectre de la rose (alto—B, D [C])
3. Sur les lagunes (mezzo, alto, or baritone—f, g [e])
4. Absence (mezzo or tenor—F#, Eb, Db)
5. Au cimetière (tenor—D, C, B, Bb)
6. L'île inconnue (mezzo or tenor—F, E, D)

If I were restricted to only one song cycle on my desert island, this would be it, although I would yearn, too, for the two Schubert song cycles mentioned above. It crystallises the essence of French Romanticism, and its depth of feeling is typically enhanced by the originality of Berlioz' orchestration. I do not know how many complete recordings of it have been made since the first in 1953, but it must be at least fifty; it would seem that every mezzo-soprano of note has wanted to sing and record it – a notable omission in the catalogue being Tatyana Troyanos (who certainly sang it); how I would have liked to have heard her sing it. I review below forty-two recordings, most of which are studio-made and all are stereo or digital, bar the three earliest; as the first complete recording was made in 1953, for once we do not have trawl through vintage accounts in poor sound in order to find the best.

The Recordings

Suzanne Danco, soprano; Cincinnati Symphony Orchestra/Thor Johnson (Eloquence; Pearl; BnF; Diapason; mono) 1953

Originally recorded for L'Oiseau-Lyre long before it was absorbed into the Decca label, this was apparently the first complete recording of Berlioz' *Les nuits d'été* and is as such a landmark – especially as it is so beautifully sung here by Belgian lyric soprano Suzanne Danco, who exhibits her trademark crystalline diction and exceptional musicality of phrasing. Collectors will perhaps know her as a rare soprano Cherubino in Kleiber's 1955 *Le nozze di Figaro*, Donna Anna in Krips' 1955 *Don Giovanni*, Rosbaud's *Orphée et Eurydice* and as Mélisande in Inghelbrecht's and Ansermet classic recordings. Her soprano had a fast vibrato and a very light, bright timbre but was by no means devoid of lower register, coping easily with the low tessitura of “Sur les lagunes”, even though she avoids a low E on “comme un linçeu”. Just occasionally there is a touch of the soubrette about her delivery and the lack of variety in her tone can make her delivery of high-lying passages too insistently piping but such moments are fleeting. The combination flowing tempi and her classical restraint do not preclude feeling and her use of legato is especially impressive. This is yet another superb account of a cycle which has enjoyed more successful recordings than most, making choice difficult; my solution is to acquire as many versions as possible, as I find these songs inexhaustible.

Eleanor Steber, soprano; Columbia Symphony Orchestra/Dimitri Mitropoulos (Sony; Urania; Retrospective; Praga; mono) 1954

Eleanor Steber was the possessor of truly great voice, with two fully opened-up registers and great breath control at the service of a profound musical sensibility. Her French is excellent, too. However, there are a few things about this recording which mark it out as certainly different and possibly less than ideal for many listeners: the first is the very hollow, over-resonant mono sound; the second is Mitropoulos' eccentrically slow speeds in several of the songs; the third is the rather insistent, even strident quality of Steber's soprano, not because of poor vocal technique but because of a combination

of that reverberant sound and the high keys required to suit a lyric-dramatic soprano. I still very much enjoy the hypnotic quality conferred on the music by those speeds and Steber's impressive ability to ride her conductor's etiolated tempi. Indeed, I love this recording and would not be without it; in many ways I find her vocalism and interpretation transcendent but as much as I like it, ultimately the poor sound and the wilfulness of Mitropoulos' conducting is too unconventional in its effect to justify my recommending it to others as a first choice. Sample it on YouTube first, if you are curious.

Victoria de los Ángeles, soprano; Boston Symphony Orchestra/Charles Munch (RCA Victor; BnF; Naxos - as a bonus to "Manon"; mono) 1955

De los Ángeles' sensitive and sensuous account of Berlioz song-cycle, while not erasing memories of Eleanor Steber or Janet Baker, finds her in melting voice. There is something especially charming and winning about her timbre, even if the mono sound she is given is a bit thin and crumbly. She always sang idiomatic French and cunningly manipulates the keys to accommodate the strengths of her voice. For example, she exploits her mezzo-ish quality in the second song by dropping the key a semitone beneath most mezzos and sings the third a whole tone down – and it works. Yet she still sounds like a true soprano in the two outer, lighter songs and manages to sing the fifth, "Au cimetière", higher than most sopranos.; such flexibility is admirable and pays dividends. Steady, plangent and moving, her soprano evinces none of the frailty which had crept into her voice by the 60's and she musters considerable power for the climaxes.

This remains one of the most winning accounts, despite its sonic deficiencies.

Leontyne Price, soprano; Chicago Symphony Orchestra/Fritz Reiner (RCA Victor; HDTT; stereo) 1960

Your reactions to this recital will largely depend upon whether you like a big, smoky, "grande dame" of a voice like that of Leontyne Price giving the songs the operatic treatment. I do. I would place Price very high indeed in my ranking, although "Gramophone" critic Andrew Porter was uncomplimentary about this release, preferring Crespin, but this is consistent with the stance of that venerable organ. For what it's worth, this 1964 recording (coupled with *El Amor Brujo*) by Price and Fritz Reiner with the Chicago Symphony Orchestra won a Grammy the following year but seems to have dropped out of the running since.

Price's account here is similar in many ways to that by Kiri Te Kanawa; if you like one, you will probably like the other, despite the individuality of their voices. Price is at her peak here: at this stage of her career, that big, large-scale voice is absolutely secure in all areas, especially in the husky middle which eventually dropped out. It would be disingenuous not to remark that at times it is like hearing Aida perform these delicate songs. Nonetheless, Price inflects the text in well-schooled, if not especially idiomatic, French and she produces the grand effect that Crespin aims for but cannot achieve with less effulgent vocal resources. Although I compared her with Te Kanawa, she is least successful where Te Kanawa scores, in the opening song; "Villanelle", whose delivery borders on the hectic rather than the merely sprightly, and thus does not form the best possible introduction to the cycle. After that, however, it gets better and better. My favourite song, "Le Spectre de la Rose" – or is it "Absence"? I can never decide – is caressed in luscious, dreamy tones, the accompaniment beautifully articulated by the orchestra. Price produces a wonderful crescendo on "j'arrive du paradis", just like Jessye Norman. She has a great conductor and orchestra to accompany her: just listen to the beginning of the third stanza where there is a lovely tremolo on the strings, which then sigh exquisitely in thirds and fifths on "Et sur l'albâtre"; perfect. In "Absence", Price uses a delicate half voice in her cry "Reviens", and achieves a desperate, searing melancholy exactly where you need it in "à lasser les pied des chevaux"; in "Sur les lagunes" she assumes a suitably ghostly, blanched, washed-out tone; "Au cimetière" benefits from the profundity and resignation implied by her sonorous lower register. So much of what she does is right and there is a surprising variety of tonal colouring; this is a real interpretation, not a perfunctory sing-through.

The sound is superb, expertly remastered from RCA's original 4-track tape. There is barely a hint of hiss and a wholly satisfying depth and warmth suffuses the whole performance.

Régine Crespin, soprano; Orchestre de la Suisse Romande/Ernest Ansermet (Decca; stereo) 1963

I'll risk being shot down in flames for criticising this much-reviewed and often-praised version of Berlioz' wonderful song cycle. I really do not think it is as good as some say and I am heartened to find that David Cairns - as famous and trustworthy a critic of the voice as you can get - agrees with me in "Song on Record", edited by Alan Blyth. First of all, Crespin is often rather imperious and detached in manner; secondly, the essential tone of her voice is not either perfectly pure or steady: it often has a rather strained, scratchy, grainy or gritty quality which is not at all pleasing when compared with the warmth and roundness of singers such as Janet Baker, Frederica Von Stade or Lorraine Hunt Lieberson. All bring more emotion and beauty of tone to their interpretations. I first bought this record in great expectation and ultimately gave it away because I found I did not want to listen to it when I could hear those other artists. So I'll stick my neck out and say caveat emptor; listen before you buy, and if you like her - well, fine, but I'd recommend a dozen performances over this one.

Janet Baker, mezzo-soprano; New Philharmonia Orchestra/Sir John Barbirolli (EMI; stereo) 1967

I confess an irrational attachment to this recording as it was the one whereby I came to know these wonderful songs but I also believe it to be superlative in its own right. It is not perfect; Baker makes both textual and musical slips in her celebrated Barbirolli version (for example, despite her generally excellent French, "faîtes" for "fait", and coming in a beat early in "Au cimetière") and some find her just a little arch in the two lighter, outer songs, but hers remains the gold standard recording for most listeners and I am not inclined to argue.

The voice is just right in timbre, weight and colour and the New Philharmonia is a superb outfit, responding to Barbirolli as it did to Klemperer around this time. If I am imprinted with Baker's and Barbirolli's conception of these songs, that is no bad thing when it is so sensitive and responsive – and there is simply no voice more beautiful than that of the young Baker in her prime – she had just turned 32 years old two days before this recording. Furthermore, her lower register is rich and dark – as per the low E on "linceul" – but she can lighten her voice without going into constriction. Listen to her ecstatic piano singing of the concluding bars of "Le spectre de la rose" or the pulsing passion of "Sur les lagunes" and marvel.

Nicolai Gedda, tenor; Swedish Radio Symphony Orchestra/Silvio Varviso (Bluebell; live, stereo) 1968

My few regular readers will be aware that I sometimes have to hold my nose when I praise Nicolai Gedda, who, despite being such a versatile, talented stylist, possessed what I always hear as a rather tight tenor with too much whine in its essential timbre. This was surely the first time a tenor recorded these songs complete and to my knowledge only one or two others have done so since.

Surprisingly for a usually refined artist, his approach in the earlier songs is occasionally too "gung-ho" for these subtle songs; sometimes, at climactic points, he is almost yelling - but at least he is not crooning and when not over-doing the volume he produces much careful shading of dynamics, particularly in "Sur les lagunes" – although I find his attempt at sustaining a mezza-voce in "Au cimetière" less grateful on the year, as his tone sometimes becomes whining and unsupported. He displays throughout his habitual linguistic mastery and ability to "inhabit" diverse emotional states. A few low notes could be firmer and there is the odd slip in intonation but by and large this a typically professional performance; his success as a tenor interpreter makes one wonder why more tenors have not undertaken it – perhaps that's the result of the dearth of authentic tenors and the challenge to non-native speakers of singing French convincingly.

There's some persistent coughing to alert listeners to the fact that this was a live, concert. Admirers of his voice and artistry will want this; it's not for me.

Sheila Armstrong, soprano; Josephine Veasey, mezzo-soprano; Frank Patterson, tenor; John Shirley-Quirk, baritone; London Symphony Orchestra/Colin Davis (Philips; stereo) 1969

This is obviously an unusual recording in that it uses four different singers, not exactly as Berlioz specified on publication but at least offering a variety of vocal categories. I can't say I much like it. Frank Paterson has a nasty, constricted little voice with a wavering vibrato and sings entirely through his nose, like a caricature of a Gallic tenor; unfortunately, he is given two songs. Furthermore, Colin Davis, usually impeccable in his championing of Berlioz, chooses a draggy tempo for "Villanelle" of the kind which Mitropoulos got away with – but he has Steber as a soloist and in any case invested the phrasing with more spring. Josephine Veasey was a distinguished singer of Berlioz and makes a nice, if slightly low-key, job of her one song; others find more passion in its arcing, swelling phrases. Shirley-Quirk sings his lament beautifully but I do not find his baritone especially apt for the song; then the leap from his dark sound to Sheila Armstrong's pure, high soprano is quite jarring, but she, too, sings beautifully in idiomatic French, if in rather detached fashion. Were it not for the tenor contribution I could think more highly of this but, in any case, I think it needs the unity conferred upon it by one voice.

Janet Baker, mezzo-soprano; London Philharmonic Orchestra/Carlo Maria Giulini (BBC; stereo) 1975

Janet Baker was in her absolute vocal prime in 1975 when these Berlioz and Chausson live recordings were made; the voice is unbelievably voluptuous and powerful and she is under the care of two very great conductors in Svetlanov and Giulini.

Svetlanov is considerably more energised and emphatic in the Chausson than is Previn in the studio recording made the same year, good though that is and Baker seems to have found even more steadiness and amplitude than in that account. Some have objected to Giulini's leisurely tempi but to me they simply give the singer the opportunity to luxuriate in the breadth allowed her by her conductor and exploit her extraordinary breath control. I still treasure the Barbirolli recording but there is an increased warmth and depth to Baker's mezzo-soprano ten years later and she sounds totally at home in both the language and the musical idiom. The only drawbacks are the occasional intrusive cough and the slightly muddy sound which takes the edge of details in consonants and upper frequencies; otherwise this is a master-class in expressivity and interpretation. Particularly impressive is the contrast between Baker's full voice and her long, held pianissimo notes, sustained on a thread of tone.

Were it not for her earlier recording in studio sound with Barbirolli, this would lead the field, owing the sincerity of Janet Baker's artistic vision and the individuality of her burnished timbre.

Yvonne Minton, mezzo-soprano; Stuart Burrows, tenor; BBC Symphony Orchestra/Pierre Boulez (Sony; stereo) 1976

I thought I was familiar with most recordings of this, my favourite French song cycle, but I had overlooked this bargain Sony Essential Classics disc comprising of two mid-70's recordings combined in a 1997 issue.

I was first attracted by the two solo voices and I was not disappointed: both sing in good French and the allocation of songs suits them. Stuart Burrows makes a much better job of "Villanelle" than Frank Paterson for Colin Davis and his plangent tone is ideally suited to the yearning, long lines of "Absence" otherwise almost invariably given to a female voice, even though just occasionally his vibrato becomes a little obtrusive. Yvonne Minton's rich, velvety sound is just what I like in Berlioz even if there is once

or twice a clumsy gear change up to the higher notes. Given his reputation for speed and efficiency, I was, however, surprised by the tender flexibility and lingering affection of Pierre Boulez's conducting, far preferable to his recording with Diener twenty-four years later in 2000. I especially like the way he brings out the harmonic lines complementary to the main melody; I found myself hearing details and harmonies I had not registered before.

Not a first choice perhaps, but very fine, especially if you like the singers in question, as I do.

Jessye Norman, soprano; London Symphony Orchestra/Colin Davis (Philips; stereo) 1979

As with Colin Davis' earlier recording with a team of four singers, his tempo for "Villanelle" is rather stately and enervated, although here he has Norman's equally majestic soprano Falcon at his bidding, fully able to ride the long phrases and expand over great arcs of sound. The effect is impressive but also too soothing; luxuriating in velvet swathes of sound can be soporific. Norman did the same when she recorded Carmen and drama went AWOL. I like the way orchestra details emerge from so much time and space lavished on the music, especially when Berlioz uses chamber effects such as the tinkling harp, but in general the listener needs to guard against nodding off. To be fair, sometimes the pace does pick up and Norman opens her throat, but we soon lapse into a default position of trance-like stasis. Interesting but neglectful of the songs' variety. The final song attempts more vivacity but we are still hearing Marie Antoinette pretending to be a shepherdess.

Kiri Te Kanawa, soprano; Orchestre de Paris Daniel/Daniel Barenboim (DG; stereo) 1981

I find this recording to be hugely under-rated; as a Berlioz devotee, I have long counted this among my favourite Berlioz recordings since CDs arrived on the scene and re-acquaintance with it reminded me why. Kiri Te Kanawa's purity of tone and exploitation of a surprisingly resonant lower register combine with a really sensitive response to the lovely texts in a manner which belies the habitual lazy accusations of her detractors that she is a bland, canary voice, all lovely, luminous beauty of tone but expressionless. That charge does not stand up to an unbiased listening: first, she and Barenboim get just the right combination of tempo and phrasing to ensure the requisite lightness and insouciance in the notoriously tricky "Villanelle". In "Sur les lagunes", she deploys that aforementioned rich lower register (which was not always present, but she worked hard at it) to take a low F-sharp option on "linceul", and really lives the anguish of "Absence" before assuming a wonderfully apt "child-voice" in "Au cimetière". The final song returns to a mode ideally suited to her fresh, glowing sound; she achieves the kind of variety of mood and tone that is missing in Jessye Norman's account.

Those vocal attractions of this recital are complemented by the excellence of Barenboim's direction. He is in my estimation amongst the most inconsistent of conductors and some of his outings have been very disappointing, but he has long had an affinity with Berlioz and this is one of his happiest recordings from the point of view of sonorities, balance, tempos and phrasing; there is even some welcome and appropriate hint of Gallic acerbity in the woodwind.

Elly Ameling, soprano; Robert Shaw/Atlanta Symphony Orchestra (Telarc; digital) 1983

I normally very much like Elly Ameling; she sings here with great commitment and feeling in superb French, but I don't think this is the ideal repertoire for her voice, as her soprano sometimes emerges as rather piping and fluttery, not helped by Shaw's low-key accompaniment with the orchestra caught in a fairly remote acoustic. Perhaps it is simply inescapable that unless a lyric soprano has the kind of lower register heft that Steber commanded, she will not be sufficiently trenchant in the grander moments of this cycle, hence Ameling is often charming but not always imposing. Having said that, I am not impugning her technique; she digs deeper for phrases such as "Ah! Sans amour s'en aller sur la mer" and courageously and successfully takes the low option of "linceul"; she is in no sense vocally deficient. Those who want a lighter, more insouciant affect here will not agree with me and relish her

vocalism. There is no denying Ameling's artistry and expertise, but I am imprinted in these songs by mezzos with velvety tones and that is not the what she has at her disposal, so I acknowledge her achievement and find this to be one of the best soprano versions but ultimately prefer the best mezzo accounts.

Hildegard Behrens, soprano; Wiener Symphoniker/Francis Travis (Decca; digital) 1983

A rather breathy, tremulous, plaintive quality to her soprano and a certain indistinctness in her French diction militate against making this recording from Behrens recommendable. A problem frequently encountered when sopranos sing this cycle is that the higher tessitura causes them to come across as unvaried and piping of timbre – in fact the very girlish qualities which made her such a convincing Salome for Karajan are less of an asset here when greater steadiness and gravitas are required; I'm afraid I soon tire of her bell-like tone, whereby she sounds perpetually on the brink of tears.

As I say quite frequently of several of the sopranos who sing these songs, it is not that they do it badly but that they begin with an inbuilt disadvantage compared with darker-voiced mezzos. For Behrens completists only.

Frederica von Stade, mezzo-soprano; Boston Symphony Orchestra/Seiji Ozawa (Sony; digital) 1984

My MusicWeb colleague Christopher Howell's [review](#) of this recital is fairly scathing about this disc; he claims to have been "plain bored stiff" by it. Well, it would be a funny old world if we all agreed but I am pained and mystified by his verdict, especially as he admits that it could very well be the best sung of all the recordings out there - and he is surely right about that; Von Stade is in freshest voice, deploying rich, plaintive, plangent and wholly even tone throughout the extraordinary range of her lovely voice – yet also injecting profound feeling into key moments such as the great *cri de cœur* in "Absence" (my favourite song) lamenting how the immense distance separating the lovers is enough to tire the horse's feet ("à lasser le pied des chevaux"). To my ears, her flickering vibrato, vibrant top notes and strong lower register – complete with a secure low F sharp on "linceul" - are all so attractive in this music. I admit to being in love with her voice and think this disc wonderful, one of her finest.

Ozawa's accompaniment has likewise been accused of being "soporific"; again, I do not find it so; merely measured and gently moulded, nothing showy or extreme - but plenty of detail and delicacy – and the opening song is taken considerably faster than most, at a speed which I find far more apt for its mood and words.

Some critics consider Crespin's reading on Decca Legends to be peerless; it is true that of course her treatment of the words is wonderfully nuanced but her basic quality of tone has often more than a touch of rasp in it. Von Stade is no slouch in French, either - and she has a much more beautiful voice. It seems to me that a mezzo with warm tone and a soprano's range is best suited to do this music justice, so for me this takes pride of place alongside Janet Baker's lovely, slightly cooler, version and Eleanor Steber's tour de force.

Gérard Souzay, baritone; Dalton Baldwin, piano (Decca; stereo) 1984

Neither of the two sacred cows (if I may use so uncomplimentary a term) of Lieder/mélodies singing, Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau and Gérard Souzay, has ever afforded me much pleasure in that repertoire but at least I can discern the merit of both in their prime. However, this recital should never have seen the light of day, and how Universal/Decca had the nerve first to release it in the place then re-release under the sobriquet "Most Wanted" defies all taste and sense. In his sixties here, Souzay sang way beyond his sing-by date and this effort ranks with the very worst of its kind, alongside the legendary effusions of Nimbus' Shura Gehrman and Florence Foster Jenkins – who are at least entertaining. Souzay heaves, groans and whines his way through the music, cannot hold a note steady and is at best

approximate in his intonation; his voice is devoid of resonance and Dalton Baldwin's accompaniment seems to have been infected by the general malaise, as he plonks his way hesitantly through the broken phrases of his singer's attempts to sustain a line. My advice: do not approach this within a country mile.

Agnes Baltsa, mezzo-soprano; London Symphony Orchestra/Jeffrey Tate (Philips; digital) 1985

The distinctiveness of Baltsa's tangy, resinous mezzo is certainly the antidote to the slew of rather anodyne performances out there; lack of individuality, in both vocal timbre and delivery, is not an issue here. Her French is idiosyncratic, with some jarring vowels (e.g. "printemps" is wrongly pronounced) and consonants (lots of unvoiced s's where they shouldn't be) and an almost erotic inclination to slur and draw out syllables gives this account more than a touch of her gypsy Carmen. Interestingly, she completely changes her voice colour from the first to the second song, switching from a perky, gamine persona to a smoky, seductive femme fatale, then reverting to the first voice for the opening of "Au cimetière" and the final ironic outpouring of joy – and more Carmen. Tempi in that second song and all the slower ones are decidedly leisurely but that carries its own sensual allure. I would sooner that than, say, the timid reserve of singers such as Karneus or Graham but Baltsa and Tate really do indulge themselves excessively with all that swoopy, etiolated phrasing.

Consequently, I advise that you "try before you buy"; it's a grand voice with a ringing top and a proper chest voice but something of a break between the registers and the interpretation is probably too indulgent for refined sensibilities. At least it isn't dull, however.

José van Dam, bass-baritone; Jean-Phillipe Collard, piano (EMI; digital) 1987/88

I would not have said that van Dam's dark sound was ideally suited to Berlioz's *Nuits d'été* but he always sings so beautifully, even if a certain lightness is inevitably absent and the limitations of a piano accompaniment restrict the drawn-out languor the slower songs demand. Nonetheless, this is magisterial singing and van Dam brings such power to key moments such as "À lasser le pied de chevaux!" in "Absence" that the advocacy of a bass-baritone is almost convincing. Unsurprisingly, he is perhaps most successful in the sombre third song which Berlioz designated for a baritone. It helps, of course, that van Dam brings Francophone authenticity and finesse to his delivery but ultimately it remains primarily recommendable to his admirers and those who want to hear a different take on these wonderful songs, in terms of unusual voice category and accompaniment/arrangement. Collard plays most sensitively.

Anne Sofie von Otter, mezzo-soprano; Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra/James Levine (DG; digital) 1988

I admit that when I encounter von Otter I often have first to suppress a kind of inward sigh, as I am always aware that I should enjoy and appreciate her smooth mezzo more than I invariably do; for some reason, I have always found her to be a curiously faceless and uninvolved singer, but that is not the case here. Levine's lively, sprung accompaniment in "Villanelle" starts things off well and von Otter matches his sprightliness. Her creamy vocalisation in "Le spectre de la rose" is impressive; Levine maintains a gently rocking tempo there but drives it slightly faster than usual, which creates tension but deprives it of the mesmeric, hallucinogenic quality other interpretations find. "Sur les lagunes" and "Absence" also project an emotionalism more overt than the numbed grief some interpreters adopt; it helps that von Otter uses lower key transpositions for four of the songs, as that confers upon them a darker-hued sobriety, enhanced by the Berlin Philharmonic's plush sound and the warm recording acoustic.

This is certainly one of the finest things I have heard von Otter do and if I maintain that my own taste is for a slightly more individual timbre, I do not intend that to be perceived as any attempt to detract from the beauty of her singing here.

Bernadette Greevy, mezzo-soprano; Ulster Orchestra/Yan Pascal Tortelier (Chandos; digital) 1989

Recorded in January 1989, this album represents a lovely souvenir of the art of renowned Irish mezzo-soprano Bernadette Greevy, who died in 2008.

She had a rich, smooth, voluptuous sound and although a slight scratchiness sometimes obtrudes around F and F sharp at forte, she is mostly a model of warm, evenly produced tone. She does not have quite the individuality of utterance and variety of tone that Janet Baker brings to this repertoire - who does? - but there is a great deal of pleasure to be derived from such an outpouring of generous voice. She does a few things I have not heard any other mezzo, such as in "Absence, where in the refrain "Reviens, reviens" she employs a thin thread of sound on the top F's without vibrato to give them a specially haunting quality. The first song in the Berlioz cycle, "Villanelle" is always tricky for her voice category as it's hard for a mezzo to achieve the requisite lightness of touch and the tessitura can be awkward if, as is the case here, the original higher a key is chosen: Janet Baker takes it in F, not A, with results easier on the ear but inevitably involving some sacrifice of some of the joie de vivre the higher key affords. Greevy's French is excellent and she always sounds as if she understands and is feeling what she is singing.

Yan Pascal Tortelier is clearly in sympathy with the music and secures finely detailed, superbly paced playing from the Ulster Orchestra, whom I have admired playing Dvorak under Vernon Handley. The original "Gramophone" review complained about a "middle-distance" quality to the voice in the recorded sound; it seems fine to me here but there is certainly a fair degree of spacious ambience around it, suggestive of a hall. Individual instrumental details emerge very clearly.

Janice Taylor, contralto; Dalton Baldwin, piano; (Dorian; digital) 1989

The notes to this recital begin with the unpromising assertion that, "One would not expect such a blustering romantic to be drawn to the intimate genre of song, but Berlioz was." Hmm; it seems that one can write almost any slander in sleeve notes with impunity. This is the piano arrangement; unfortunately, the cavernous recording acoustic and clangorous piano sound does neither the voice nor (especially) the piano any favours. Taylor's well-integrated contralto is a fine instrument but some tonal variety is lacking and she often traverses these songs without sufficient emotional engagement; however, the third song displays greater involvement and includes a fine low D. If the recorded sound were better tamed and balanced, the overall impression would be more favourable, but, in any case, I much prefer an orchestral version with a more expressive, assertive singer.

Diana Montague, mezzo-soprano; Catherine Robbin, mezzo-soprano; Howard Crook, tenor; Gilles Cachemaille, baritone; L'Orchestre de l'Opéra national de Lyon/John Eliot Gardiner (apex; digital) 1989

As with Colin Davis' earlier recording, four different singers share the six songs, this time exactly in accordance with Berlioz' indications in the published edition of the orchestrations, with the singers in this order: Crook, Robbin, Cachemaille, Montague, Crook, Montague.

I am always prepared for discomfiture when Gardiner ventures into the Romantic repertoire. I am not enamoured of Howard Crook's white, weedy tenor – very much in the Bostridge line – so it does not start off well for me, especially as I know he must return for a breathy "Au cimetière"; he also has a vocal tic I dislike of starting a note unpulsed, then swelling it, bringing in a bleaty vibrato – the effect is lumpy and not good singing. I have always liked the warm but delicate mezzo-soprano of Diane

Montague, whose two songs are elegantly delivered. Catherine Robbin, whose timbre is uncannily similar to that of Janet Baker without her velvety top, contributes an unexceptionable but also unexceptional "Le spectre de la Rose"; Gilles Cachemaille is similarly competent and pleasant without being memorable – although in fact he rather overdoes the agony factor in his delivery – and his low E flat is groaned.

The instrumentation here is of course, spare and reedy, with no special affection for the music from the conductor coming through and with some peculiarly self-conscious and not very effective additions, like the sudden heavily accented *stringendo* string chords on "Ô sort amer! Ô dur absence!" in "Absence".

I find no particular reason to endorse this version.

Barbara Hendricks, soprano; English Chamber Orchestra/Colin Davis (EMI; digital) 1993

I really like Barbara Hendricks' instantly recognisable lyric soprano, with its trilling, throbbing pulse and slightly husky timbre. Her special affinity with French language and music has been recognised in France by the affection of the French public and was made a Chevalier of the Légion d'honneur in recognition of that; this recital shows why. I am, however, disappointed by the rather stolid tempo Colin Davis adopts for the opening song; he seems to favour that pace in all three of his recordings, and I think it requires a lighter, brisker touch. This is a small flaw; otherwise his direction is alert, sensitive and deeply felt, with the ECO providing a lovely clarity in the instrumental lines.

A handicap common to many voices like Hendricks' is a lower register which isn't especially dark or strong but like Steber before her she finds considerable heft, even reaching down to the low F, and in alt her voice, again like Steber, soars over the lines above the stave; I am really impressed by the power and intensity of her singing and think this one of the very best soprano versions.

Vesselina Kasarova, mezzo-soprano; ORF Symphonie-orchester/Pinchas Steinberg (RCA; digital) 1994

Vesselina Kasarova, has enjoyed a successful but relatively low-key career, both on stage and as a recording artist. Here, in her first solo recording, she was 29 and possessed of a distinctive, vibrant mezzo with a fast vibrato, a smoky timbre but also a rather "bottled" quality and a distracting tendency to gasp her intakes of breath. Her resonant lower register was quite resonant but not fully developed – she ducks the low E on "linceul", repeating the higher B instead. Perhaps that was a sign of problems to come, as she has since hit trouble. She is here offering a programme to tempt any lover of French Romantic and Impressionist mélodies, combining three classic compositions. She was yet to develop a more expressive way with texts but the vocalisation is seductive and her French good if not wholly idiomatic, with not too many inauthentic vowels. She gets key moments, such as "Ah! Sans amour s'en aller sur la mer!" in the Berlioz cycle, just right and is capable of producing a steady, delicate pianissimo to complement her forte outbursts.

The experienced Pinchas Steinberg leads the accomplished ORF-Sinfonieorchester (now the Vienna Radio Symphony Orchestra); Steinberg has long had an affinity with Romantic French music.

However, a certain monotony of expression and even an unwarranted tendency towards undue restraint sometimes prevent these songs from coming as alive as they do when sung by more seasoned or adventurous interpreters such as Lorraine Hunt Lieberson or Janet Baker.

Lorraine Hunt Lieberson, mezzo-soprano; Philharmonia Baroque Orchestra/Nicholas McGegan (Philharmonia Baroque; digital) 1995

I took me a while to "get" Lorraine Hunt Lieberson but this recital made me a wholehearted convert. Perhaps I was perversely resistant to the hagiography that inevitably surrounds a great artist who has met a premature demise but this is singing of such delicate voluptuousness and graded nuance to disarm any criticism.

Let me get drawbacks out of the way first. These are live recordings with a bit (not much) of audience coughing and, which is more germane, a lot of space around the sound. The microphones are placed a way back from the performers and you must get away from the expectation of the usual proximity which registers creates an artificial intimacy. The advantage, however, is that you feel that you are present at an actual live performance and the ambience conveys the immediacy and thrill of a beautiful voice filling a large space.

And what a beautiful voice it is: the flickering vibrato of Von Stade, the velvet warmth of Janet Baker, the flexibility of Te Kanawa - she has it all, including superb French and extraordinary sensitivity to words and dynamics. Her lower register is plush and trenchant. The subtlety of her interpretation is greatly enhanced by the reedy, grainy quality of the strings in the McGegan's Philharmonia Baroque Orchestra. While some might miss the silky allure of a more cushioned, Romantic sound, I love the way orchestral details emerge, such as the harp arpeggios in the climax of "Le spectre de la rose", and the slight edge on the strings and the grainy tone of the oboe adds poignancy and bite to what can sometimes sound a tad sentimental in the wrong hands. But these are not the wrong the hands: McGegan's tempi are perfect; no unseemly rush but music which breathes and sighs. I have rarely heard my favourite song, "Le spectre de la rose" performed with more yearning plangency. I don't think any other recording amongst the many I own is quite so completely satisfying when it comes to capturing the intensity of this song cycle, nor does any other singer quite so completely rise to its technical and interpretative challenges. Both singer and conductor are such sensitive musicians: listen to how they pick up the three-quarter-time tempo at "La colombe oubliée" in "Sur les lagunes" before defaulting back to the emotional blankness and despair of "Que mon sort est amer". The singer is a great communicator of the kind who creates the impression of living wholly inside the songs.

Susan Graham, mezzo-soprano; Orchestra of the Royal Opera House/John Nelson (Sony; digital) 1996

My first reaction on listening to this disc was one of genuine appreciation for such a steady, secure, even voice, essentially beautiful and mellow in production and capable of tackling these wondrous songs in their original key even though it is a genuine mezzo-soprano with a light, vibrant but tonally dark centre. However, contrary to a previous reviewer, I did not find Graham's voice to be especially large or resonant in the challenging space of the Royal Opera House, Covent Garden and I wonder if that is why the balance here is slightly too tipped towards her rather than being equally balanced with the orchestra; hence some instrumental detail is slightly recessed or obscured.

I have previously admired John Nelson's Berlioz but here he seems slightly restrained to match the classical poise and understatement of his elegant singer; hence there is little especially striking in these performances beyond a generalised loveliness. No song is particularly differentiated from another and to be honest, I found my attention wandering when usually I am riveted by these most engaging of melodies.

José van Dam, bass-baritone; Orchestra della Svizzera Italiana de Lugano/Serge Baudo (Forlane; digital) 1996

This second of van Dam's recordings was made perhaps a little late in his career when his voice had considerable beauty of tone in the middle but had also turned cloudier and evinced a kind of hoarse and effortful rasp in his loudest notes, but he still has that command of legato and verbal acuity which made him such an alluring singer and he has here the advantage of the full orchestral version.

Baudo unfortunately is here one of those self-indulgent conductors who, despite providing accompaniment exemplary in its musicality, apparently cannot prevent himself from humming and groaning along tunelessly and all too audibly; one singer – and a great one just past his prime – is quite enough, thank you, Serge.

Van Dam's many admirers will want to hear this, although I think Baudo's ill-discipline, the evidences of aging in his voice and the inherent disadvantage of its category, which makes him sound rather avuncular or hieratic in this music, mean that this is not a top recommendation.

Brigitte Balleys, mezzo-soprano; Champs-Élysées Orchestra/Philippe Herreweghe (harmonia mundi; digital) 1999

Brigitte Balleys' shares with a few sopranos a mannerism which I dislike, of starting a note without vibrato then swelling it winsomely into a broad pulse; it becomes twee, especially in combination with the whining strings of Herreweghe's period band. Her essential tone is rather harsh and her lower register artificial; the low D on "en deuil" and lower E on "cerceuil" in "Absence" are manufactured and peculiar sounds. Herreweghe – usually a subtle conductor – over-emphasises some rhythmic effects. The joint interpretation of singer and conductor is essentially under-powered and even reserved; I am baffled by the extravagant praise heaped on this recording and can hear nothing special in it; indeed, I find it irritating and of no special vocal or instrumental quality.

Katarina Karneus, mezzo-soprano; BBC Philharmonic Orchestra/Vassily Sinaisky (BBC Music; digital) 1999

Nicely, neatly sung though it is, this performance leaves me underwhelmed. Karneus has a fresh, light, pleasing mezzo-soprano but too often it takes on a plaintive note and exhibits a rather deficient lower register. Her understated manner leaves little impression and her interpretation is not enhanced by the silly little voice she adopts for "Au cimetière"; instead of emerging as spookily chilling it just seems affected. These songs need a more animated advocacy than this.

Melanie Diener, soprano; Kenneth Tarver, tenor; Denis Sedov, bass; The Cleveland Orchestra/Pierre Boulez (DG; digital) 2000

This recording presents an unusual combination of singers but is inconsistent in its delivery. Melanie Diener's slightly scratchy, unsteady soprano doesn't give my ears much pleasure and her tonal palette is monochrome. Having a bass sing both "Le spectre de a rose" and "Sur les lagunes" is a surprise and a novelty; Denis Sedov has a smooth, sonorous voice and his low E is impressive, but his top notes lose that sonority, shut off and turn a tad windy.; my suspicion, too, not having heard him live, is that his bass isn't that big. Kenneth Tarver sings prettily but in a rather detached manner, with touch restraint, a lack of body to his tenor and not investing the words with any great passion or import – but it must be said that no singer is much helped by Boulez' stolid conducting, which conveys little delight; he is resolutely, even doggedly, literal throughout. Not a contender.

Marie-Nicole Lemieux, mezzo-soprano; Daniel Blumenthal, piano (Cypres; digital) 2000

Recorded very early in her career, this recital does not present Marie-Nicole Lemieux as the mature artist she became and there seems to be more emphasis on maintaining a pure, steady line and plush tone than enhancing expressivity. Her French is accurate but not especially crisp or penetrating; consonants are smoothed over. The piano accompaniment is somewhat bland and placed in too resonant an acoustic relative to the closely caught voice. Lemieux' ease and beauty of voice are pleasing but tempi are rather brisk and that, in combination with the boomy piano and lack of word-

pointing makes for a rather indifferent listening experience; despite the other recordings offer considerably more.

Véronique Gens, soprano; Orchestre national de l'Opéra de Lyon/Louis Langrée (Virgin Classics; digital) 2001

The advantage of Gens being a native French-speaking lyric soprano is most obvious in the two light songs which frame the collection but her voice is simply too light, thin and frail to fill out the four slower, more soulful songs satisfactorily and I derive little pleasure from hearing a twittery rose announce its arrival from paradise; Gens is all too typical of the modern idea that a lyric soprano devoid of a proper lower register can do these songs justice. She croons and whispers her way through these lovely songs in superficial manner. No thank you.

Elsa Maurus; mezzo-soprano; Orchestre National de Lille-Région Nord/Pas-de Calais, Jean-Claude Casadesus (Naxos; digital) 2003

The very first ten seconds of tremolo-wobble sung flat to Casadesus's plodding accompaniment were enough to make me decide that I had no desire to listen to this all through, but I forced myself and thereby lost half an hour of my life. To add to my joy, the conductor is one of several reviewed here who feels no need to restrain himself from adding his own vocal obbligato to that of the soloist. To be fair, the second song goes rather better than "Villanelle" but the gasping for breath and loss of tone over sustained phrases does not further endear it to me. Balance between the orchestra and voice is poor and the latter is sometimes overwhelmed. The suggestion of flatness in Maurus' vocal production rarely recedes, unfortunately and for a voice with a low tonal centre her lower register is surprisingly weak and cloudy. I must part company from my MWI colleague who [reviewed](#) this back in 2005. Moving on...

David Daniels, countertenor; Paris Ensemble Orchestra/John Nelson (Virgin Classics; digital) 2003

There is a plethora of recommendable versions by mezzo-sopranos but here is something different.

I am not necessarily always a fan of the countertenor in all repertoires but I have loved the sound of Daniels' voice since first I heard it in his Handel recital years ago. The mellow, fluty timbre, the effortless top notes, and the smoothness of the production throughout its range without a hint of squawk or bluster: these are such seductive qualities allied with a supremely sensitive interpretative intelligence. He is my go-to singer if I want to convince anyone of the beauties of this voice category and he eschews the archness or preciousness which some countertenors affect and which make you think of a male singer in drag - fatal, given those comic associations, in music of such emotional profundity. His vocal identity is closest to genuine contraltos like Nathalie Stutzmann: dark and ductile, with perhaps a hint too much vibrato for some tastes but which is not inappropriate for music which is both upper and lower case "romantic".

Steadiness of line is vital in songs such as "Le spectre de la rose" and "Absence" and Daniels provides it. This, combined with the faintly plaintive quality imparted by conductor John Nelson's eschewing excessive vibrato in the strings, creates the suitably rapt atmosphere the song demands. The climax of "J'arrive du paradis" makes it impact as it should and the shimmering strings of the Ensemble Orchestral de Paris sound authentically French (hardly surprisingly), with some astringency in their tone, just as the slightly grainy woodwind avoid sounding too lush.

Daniels' French is excellent and Nelson's phrasing and tempi wholly convincing; in many ways this performance is closest in character to Lorraine Hunt Lieberson's with McGegan, especially as both discreetly adopt some HAP practice, but this studio sound here is better than her live version. You may gauge the concentration and sincerity of this recording by watching it on YouTube.

P.S. Also on YouTube is a version with piano by countertenor Marco Lazzaro – and believe me, that is best quickly passed over...

Bernarda Fink, mezzo-soprano; German Symphony Orchestra, Berlin/Kent Nagano (Harmonia Mundi; digital) 2006

Comparison with von Otter is revealing: they have very similar vocal lay-outs yet Fink is considerably more animated and interesting and her French is admirable. She generates considerable pathos and her legato is flawless. Nonetheless, she doesn't have the variety of colouring or depth of intensity of the greatest interpreters of this music. This is a very competent, even enjoyable, recital, yet it lacks that spark of originality and individuality which enliven the most absorbing versions

We could also do without Nagano's intrusive supporting groans and grunts constantly punctuating proceedings, however...his interjections are really irritating, especially on headphones; it is as if we are hearing two singers, one of whom is a tone-deaf groaner. For me, that, in combination with the lack of *frisson* in Fink's singing makes this an also-ran.

Francoise Pollet, soprano; Monte Carlo Philharmonic/Armin Jordan (Fnac; digital) 2006

Pollet has a big, weighty, somewhat unwieldy voice with too wide a vibrato to accommodate any of the delicate effects Berlioz surely intended. Singing out is surely to be welcomed in comparison with the tweeting and crooning of voices too small and undeveloped to encompass the demands of these songs but not if the result is like bad Wagner. Armin Jordan, a conductor I usually like and admire, has a fine orchestra at his disposal but he aids and abets his soloist with lush, over-egged phrasing and an excess of bass input from the brass and low strings. I have never heard these songs performed quite like this and I'm not sure I want to, either.

Isabelle Druet, mezzo-soprano; Johanne Ralambondrainy, piano (Aparte; digital) 2010

By and large Isabelle Druet's rich, expressive mezzo is ideally suited to this music as she belongs to the rare category of coloratura mezzo-soprano, and is able to bring excellent intonation and evenness of tonal emission throughout her range to its execution. She has something of the vocal tic I have identified and complained of regarding other singers above, which is an occasional habit of "squeezing" sustained notes as an expressive device but I certainly enjoy her voice – and she has beautiful diction.

Piano versions tend, for obvious reasons, to be swifter than the orchestral arrangements, but this does not sound rushed and Johanne Ralambondrainy provides fluid, impassioned support, especially in "Le spectre de la rose", which enjoys some gorgeous playing and singing. However, an over-resonant, echoing acoustic does the piano here no favours and brings her voice too far forward in comparison to her accompanist. I would rate this recording even higher if its engineering were better, especially as it is probably the best piano version available.

Anne-Catherine Gillet, soprano; Orchestre Philharmonique Royal de Liège/Paul Daniel (Aeon; digital) 2011

Yet another tweety-voiced soprano with a quick, rattling vibrato and a deficient lower register trills her way at some speed through these songs in a voice which is almost a caricature of the French soubrette. Some will find these sweet and pretty but I really don't think this cycle deserves this kind of voice or treatment; listen to Danco, Steber, Ameling or Steber if you want a true lyric soprano in this cycle. Paul Daniel gives the impression of not being able to get through the supposedly slower songs fast enough and the effect is rushed and breathless. The good, grey "Gramophone" calls "Le spectre de la rose" "well-paced" which is just what it isn't; another review says "Gillet literally charms us with her fruity

timbre" – and "fruity", again, is exactly what her thin, bright timbre is not. A pure, girlish sound, spot-on intonation and neat French diction - Gillet is Francophone Belgian - are merits, I suppose, but for me they diminish the impact of these languorous songs.

You might well disagree with me and find her refreshing, so listen and decide for yourself; I want something more trenchant than this.

Anne-Sofie von Otter, mezzo-soprano; Mark Minkowski/Les Musiciens du Louvre (naïve; digital) 2011

There is no doubt that here von Otter's voice is not as secure, steady or pure of tone as her recital with Levine nearly a quarter of a century previously; you can hear at times that her vibrato has loosened alarmingly and the velvet is worn. Nor do I relish Minkowski's matter-of-fact accompaniment, or the squawky strings of his period band. It is not that this is a bad performance or that von Otter's voice can no longer afford the listener pleasure, but there is no compelling reason to prefer this over her earlier account. I also feel that she is at times interpretatively over-emphatic and comes across as a little arch – unusual for an habitually restrained artist.

Stella Doufexis, mezzo soprano; Deutsche Staatsphilharmonie Rheinland/Karl-Heinz Steffens (Berlin Classics; digital) 2013

This strikes me as a crashingly dull recording by a singer of no particular vocal distinction, while the orchestral accompaniment is lifeless and the conducting largely inert. Doufexis had another of those modern voices which wallows into a note then eventually introduces a slowly pulsing vibrato; compared with the great mezzo interpreters of this cycle, her top is scratchy, she has no tonal allure in the middle of the voice and the lower register is disappointing. Her French is correct but does not sound idiomatic.

(Critical objectivity is inevitably compromised by the sad fact that this singer died of cancer in 2015, aged only 47, but my scope here is merely to assess the artistic merit of available recordings, so please excuse my frankness.)

Karen Cargill, mezzo-soprano; Scottish Chamber Orchestra/Robin Ticciati (Linn; digital) 2013

As I say above, I seem to be in a minority - although by no means alone - in not much enjoying the classic recording by soprano Régine Crespin, whose voice I find grainy and even scratchy, whereas Scottish mezzo-soprano Karen Cargill's delivery is as smooth and smoky as a Laphroaig single malt. She is the most subtle of artists, and whereas I found the smaller-voiced Susan Graham a little too understated in her interpretation, I hear a pulsing passion and intensity in Cargill's interpretation. Key moments, such as the concluding lament of the wordless "Ah!" in a key song like "Sur les lagunes", are delivered with great intensity and a boundless, yearning melancholy. She can plumb the depths for "comme un linceul" in the same song but also lighten her voice credibly for "Villanelle". The flickering vibrato is a delight - never a wobble or a slide - and as a listener, one never experiences a moment's uneasiness about her ability to encompass the tessitura or the expressive range of these immensely varied songs. This is an account to stand beside those by Janet Baker, Frederica Von Stade, Lorraine Hunt Lieberson and Jessye Norman - as you might have gathered, I prefer my *Nuits d'été* with the unity conferred upon the songs when sung by a great mezzo-soprano or a soprano falcon. Cargill's French sounds flawless to me; it is certainly very confident and idiomatic.

About young Robin Ticciati's direction I am marginally less enthused, not because I object to anything about his tempi, phrasing or balances but because he is so evidently a convert to the kind of period practice which dogmatically eschews vibrato in his strings, despite the voluptuousness of Berlioz'

orchestration. Were the orchestral accompaniment more enticing, I would place this among the very best.

Soile Isokoski, soprano; Helsinki Philharmonic Orchestra/John Storgårds (Ondine; digital) 2014

With her silvery lyric soprano Soile Isokoski continued to delight even here in her late fifties when her vibrato has loosened ever so slightly but she still maintained a seamless legato and the purest of tones.

These songs are often sung by a richer, more voluptuous soprano or even a darker mezzo-soprano of the Janet Baker-Jessye Norman type. *Nuits d'été* is the most often recorded of the works here and the competition is strong, but it is perhaps more suited to a lighter soprano than the works by, for example, Chausson and Duparc, and singers such as Eleanor Steber and Kiri Te Kanawa have made a success of recording it. Even if the four slower, more dolorous songs sandwiched between the upbeat opening and closing items benefit from a smokier timbre and just occasionally one feels that the voice could do with a bit more heft in order to ride the densely orchestrated Wagnerian chromaticism, Isokoski sustains such a long line and expands so gloriously on key phrases such as "j'arrive du paradis" in "Le spectre de la rose" and "Reviens, reviens, ma bien-aimée!" in "Absence", that the vibrancy, intensity and tremulous beauty of her soprano convince the listener of the suitability of her sound to this music.

It is almost amusing that a Nordic orchestra such as the Helsinki Philharmonic under John Storgård's relatively restrained but sensitive direction can provide such an authentic facsimile of Gallic sensuousness; you have only to listen to the transparency of their playing to hear how completely they have absorbed the correct style.

Recommendations

For once I am genuinely stumped when it comes to making any definitive recommendations; there really are too many deeply satisfying options, so it is easier to eliminate the duds – of which in truth, there are very few, so the best I can do is indicate the less successful and identify personal favourites. I would definitely discard the two versions with teams of singers from Davis and Gardiner and soloists with whom I can dispense include Souzay, Behrens, Maurus,

I do find it interesting, however, that the further I move out of the 50's, through the decades to relatively recent, modern recordings, the less interesting, developed and individual voices become; there is no reason to choose essentially less vocally endowed singers like – to cite several randomly - Pollet, Graham or Gens over more characterful artists with more beautiful voices and better technique of an earlier vintage like de los Angeles, Baker or von Stade. Very few of the recordings from the late 90's onwards can compete on any level with what precedes them.

This is my shortlist of half a dozen recordings, which is almost arbitrary in that I could easily add others, so it is offered without prejudice:

Sopranos:

Steber/Mitropoulos, 1954

Te Kanawa/Barenboim, 1982

Hendricks/Davis, 1994

Mezzo-sopranos:

Baker/Barbirolli 1967

Frederica von Stade/Ozawa 1984*

Lorraine Hunt Lieberson/McGegan 1995

First choice*