

Mozart's *Die Zauberflöte* – a partial discographical survey

by Ralph Moore

There are 128 recordings of *Die Zauberflöte* listed in the CLOR catalogue, of which around twenty are studio versions. I have tried any number of recordings and long despaired of ever finding one in acceptable sound which does the opera full justice. There are some good mono recordings from the 50's, sometimes shorn of all dialogue as per Karajan's, but most collectors understandably want a good stereo version, with the dialogue perhaps cut to manageable proportions for non-German-speakers.

That which comes closest is Böhm's 1964 recording starring Fritz Wunderlich as an ideal Tamino, but the perceived inadequacies of the female singers soon led to the observation that the ideal recording could have been produced by combining the men from Böhm's recording with the women in Klemperer's exactly contemporaneous studio recording. As they stand, both are arguably flawed but revisiting them has softened my own objections and few since have offered anything better. At almost every turn, some problem has compromised subsequent studio versions of the stereo and digital eras, such as the presence of throaty, constricted tenors as Tamino like Schreier, blighting all three recordings conducted by Suitner, Sawallisch and Davis, or Araiza for Karajan and Marriner. Finding a good Queen of the Night has been problematic, too; HIP influence has tended to encourage the casting of voices too small and flimsy to do justice to Mozart's deceptively simple writing, and produced some really inadequate efforts, such as Harnoncourt's, Norrington's, Jacobs' and Christie's recordings, all of which I have excluded from the reviews below, as their mostly weak casting and small-scale or reduced forces approach render them of little merit as far as my own taste goes. You may feel differently, in which case, I advise sampling them on YouTube and if you like them you may safely ignore what may be regarded as my prejudices.

Even though *Die Zauberflöte* has its roots in a combination of Masonic ritual and *Singspiel* and there are some comic "patter songs", it still requires operatic voices with special gifts for both legato and coloratura singing. When contemplating the vocal challenges of the opera, most people naturally think first of the double display of pyrotechnics in the Queen of the Night's arias, but the arias for Tamino, Pamina and Sarastro and lovers' duets all demand the ability to spin a long line without losing tonal lustre. For me, the real "trial by fire" test of the singers' mettle comes not in their walk through the chambers but in the passage for Tamino and Pamina beginning, "Wir wandeln durch des Feuresgluten" – as sublime a phrase as Mozart ever wrote.

Big, resonant, properly registered voices can and should sing Mozart; many of the great Mozartian singers who excel in recordings of *Die Zauberflöte* below, such as Talvela, Della Casa, Janowitz, Berry, Moser and Moll also successfully sang Verdi, Wagner and Strauss. Mozart should not be the preserve of "baroque" singers; recordings like Kuijken's live composite concoction (again, not reviewed here) are a joke, the voices are so light, falsetto-biased and unable to do justice to the sublime music.

The Recordings:

Thomas Beecham - 1937-38 (studio; mono) Naxos; Nimbus Prima Voce; EMI
Orchestra - Berliner Philharmoniker; Chorus - Favres Solisten Vereinigung

Tamino - Helge Roswaenge
Papageno - Gerhard Hüsch
Königin der Nacht - Erna Berger
Sprecher - Walter Großmann
Pamina - Tiana Lemnitz
Sarastro - Wilhelm Strienz
Monostatos - Heinrich Tessmer
Papagena - Irma Beilke

1er Geharnischer - Heinrich Tessmer
2er Geharnischer - Walter Großmann
Erste Dame - Hilde Scheppan
Zweite Dame - Elfriede Marherr(-Wagner)
Dritte Dame - Rut Berglund
Erster Knabe - Irma Beilke
Zweiter Knabe - Carla Spletter
Dritter Knabe - Rut Berglund

This is the granddaddy classic of *Flute* recordings. The Prima Voce booklet details the difficulties Walter Legge had in assembling an ideal cast in the Berlin of 1937 under Hitler; several first choice singers were either Jewish and obviously "unavailable" or, like Ludwig Weber, reluctant to risk compromising the recording because the repeated "Doch" was too low for him (yet he recorded the role satisfactorily for Karajan after the war). Yet the assemblage of singers here is very good indeed, entirely idiomatic, relaxed, immersed in the Viennese tradition and able to transfer their acumen to Berlin. For me, the star of the show is not Tiana Lemnitz, who is a shade tremulous and mature for the role despite the beauty of her tone and floating top notes, but Erna Berger, whose pinpoint accuracy and sustained evenness of vocal production as the Queen of the Night are a just ideal. I have come increasingly to appreciate Wilhelm Strienz's Sarastro for its warmth and humanity and the naturalness of his phrasing, despite his not having the deepest, blackest German bass ever. Naturalness is the principal feature of Gerhard Hüsch's Papageno, too; he makes him a genial, lovable figure. Many have objected to Roswaenge's rather strenuous Tamino: he scoops and sounds more heroic than boyish, but it's a pleasure to hear such a robust tenor - Jonas Kaufmann will no doubt have listened to him and noted how a big voice can sing Tamino if it retains its flexibility. The smaller roles are cast from strength and although a modern listener might regret the lack of dialogue and libretto, many conductors of the old school, including Klemperer, were of the opinion that for home listening by non-German speakers the dialogue was a mere irritant. So we have here a concert performance which still hangs together owing to the way Mozart so cunningly balanced the light entertainment with deeper themes and allowed the music to reflect both without incongruity.

No-one understood better how to elicit the innate charm of this music than Beecham, and he had the finest orchestra available to realise his vision. His delicacy and subtlety with the score are extraordinary and the Berlin Philharmonic respond with unfailing sensitivity and virtuosity; we hear lovely playing from individual instrumentalists and ensembles are both tightly knit and dynamically graduated.

I like what Nimbus does to these old 78's and have no problem with a little air and space around the sound; it reduces hiss without obscuring detail. This set is available so cheaply that it might appeal beyond the confines of the historical opera recording buffs and open a window onto a vanished age of elegance.

Herbert von Karajan – 1950 (studio; mono) EMI; Zyx; Membran
Orchestra - Wiener Philharmoniker; Chorus - Wiener Singverein

Tamino - Anton Dermota
Papageno - Erich Kunz
Königin der Nacht - Wilma Lipp
Sprecher - George London
Pamina - Irmgard Seefried
Sarastro - Ludwig Weber
Monostatos - Peter Klein
Papagena - Emmy Loose
1er Geharnischer - Günther Treptow
2er Geharnischer - Ljubomir Pantscheff

Erste Dame - Sena Jurinac
Zweite Dame - Friedl Riegler
Dritte Dame - Else Schurhof
Erster Knabe - Hermine Steinmassi
Zweiter Knabe - Eleonore Dörpinghans
Dritter Knabe - Annelies Stückl
Erster Priester - Erich Majkut
Zweiter Priester - Harald Pröglhoff

Although this was obviously first issue on EMI, I have the Zyx issue in a slimline double-disc set which makes an attractive and economical way of acquiring a famous recording - infamous, in some ways, in that its allocation behind the scenes by EMI producer Walter Legge to Karajan outraged Furtwängler, who rightly believed that he and Legge had a gentlemen's agreement with first option on the recording, even if no contract had been signed. There is no doubt that Karajan did a good job, however; his conducting is sensitive and nuanced. It's by no means perfect: the overture is a bit lumpen by modern standards and there is the occasional eccentric choice of tempo. The cast might have been the best available at that time but it has its weaknesses. The dialogue was omitted by necessity but that allows the recording to be fitted on to two CDs today. The dry, slightly constricted mono sound presents no problems to a tolerant listener. Considered more as extended excerpts than the whole dramatic experience, it is most easily compared with Beecham's classic, controversial, pre-war recording in Nazi Berlin and offers about the same balance of strengths and weaknesses.

The Vienna Philharmonic of course plays warmly and idiomatically, although the strings sound wiry here. Nearly all the principals are rather light and wispy of voice but also often fleet and charming. Dermota's distinctive, virile, slightly hoarse tenor is oddly engaging as Tamino; he is lovely in the magical "Wir wandeln" quartet with Pamina and the Two Armed Men. Wilma Lipp impresses with her coloratura if not with the strength of her characterisation (there is an irony in the fact that she had recorded the Queen of the Night's arias virtually identically under Furtwängler earlier in Vienna that same year). The three ladies are distinguished by the presence of Sena Jurinac as First Lady but are otherwise workaday if acceptable. Erich Kunz chunters and croons his way amiably through the role of Papageno without being either memorable or objectionable. Irmgard Seefried as Pamina, is, like Kunz, simply competent, unexciting and rather thin of tone. George London briefly impresses as the Speaker, as if Wotan had strayed in to the wrong opera. Ludwig Weber had declined to sing Sarastro for Beecham as he was worried about his low notes; here, towards the end of his career, he sounds fine - wise and avuncular - if just a little unsteady. Emmy Loose is pert and pretty as Papagena.

Recorded using the new technology of magnetic tape and of real historical interest owing to the presence of Legge and Karajan and the spat with Furtwängler, this set is rather more than the sum of its parts.

Karl Böhm – 1955 (studio; stereo) Decca

Orchestra - Wiener Philharmoniker; Chorus - Wiener Staatsoper

Tamino - Léopold Simoneau
Papageno - Walter Berry
Königin der Nacht - Wilma Lipp
Sprecher - Paul Schöffler
Pamina - Hilde Güden
Sarastro - Kurt Böhme
Monostatos - August Jaresch
Papagena - Emmy Loose
1er Geharnischter - Joseph Gostic
2er Geharnischter - Ljubomir Pantscheff

Erste Dame - Judith Hellwig
Zweite Dame - Christa Ludwig
Dritte Dame - Hilde Rössl-Majdan
Erster Knabe - Dorothea Siebert
Zweiter Knabe - Ruthilde Boesch
Dritter Knabe - Eva Boerner

I had previously ignored this, the earlier of Böhm's two recordings of *Die Zauberflöte* in favour of his more celebrated version ten years later but despite the presence of Wunderlich in the latter as Tamino there are certain weaknesses in it, especially on the female side, and reasons to favour this 1955 recording. The sound is good (very) early stereo and Böhm's conception changed little in the succeeding ten years.

All the principal artists are close to ideal except perhaps for Kurt Böhme's lumbering Sarastro - but he has the low notes and sounds suitably authoritative. I love all the lead female voices; they were established favourite Viennese artists and even if none has a particularly large voice, they are all so true and musical, especially Wilma Lipp's agile Queen of the Night, complete with spectacular coloratura and ringing top F's. There are a few throaty voices in the supporting roles - an undistinguished Monostatos, for example - but both Simoneau and Berry are boyish and charming in different ways, the former elegant, the latter witty – although Simoneau's German could be better.

Cheap as chips with no libretto but a cued "Listening Guide" synopsis, this is a great bargain - but be warned: no dialogue, just the music (I don't much mind myself).

Ferenc Fricsay – 1955 (studio; mono) DG; Membran
Orchestra - RIAS-Symphonie-Orchester; Chorus - RIAS Kammerchor

Tamino - Ernst Haefliger
Papageno - Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau
Königin der Nacht - Rita Streich
Sprecher - Kim Borg
Pamina - Maria Stader
Sarastro - Josef Greindl
Monostatos - Martin Vantin
Papagena - Lisa Otto
1er Geharnischter - Howard Vandenburg
2er Geharnischter - Kim Borg
Erste Dame - Marianne Schech
Zweite Dame - Liselotte Losch
Dritte Dame - Margarete Klose
Erster Knabe - Margot Guillaume
Zweiter Knabe - Maria Reith
Dritter Knabe - Diana Eustrati

There is plenty of drive and energy about this recording. Fricsay secures excellent playing and balances light-heartedness and gravitas appropriately. Obviously it is a reading of its time and given Romantic weight, but it's not ponderous. The mono sound is clean with only some slight overload on climaxes. Haefliger is an elegant if slightly understated and plaintive Tamino. Fischer-Dieskau is humorous and pleasant-toned but already beginning to exaggerate his diction. Greindl's Sarastro is a little lugubrious and unsteady but suitably authoritative. Rita Streich's light, pure style isn't really scary or imposing enough to make her a memorable Queen but she has the notes – even if she tends to peck at them. Stader is not ideally pure or youthful as Pamina but she's no milksop and sings with feeling. Lisa Otto is a charming Papagena but in a rare misjudgement, Fricsay takes her duet with Papageno

too fast, at a jog-trot so it loses pathos and simplicity. Monostatos' aria is sung in a pathetic little half-voice, making him more pitiable than villainous.

Unlike some contemporaneous versions, edited dialogue is included but goodness knows why actors were used when all the singers were native German speakers; that almost always introduces an element of incongruity, especially if, as in this case, the actors aren't especially engaging compared with the characterful team of singers.

Nothing about this recording except perhaps the conducting makes it a first choice but there is a coherent sense of ensemble about it rather than the impression some more modern recordings give of delivering set pieces or "numbers".

George Szell – 1959 (live; mono) Gala; Orfeo

Orchestra - Wiener Philharmoniker; Chorus - Wiener Staatsoper

Tamino - Léopold Simoneau

Papageno - Walter Berry

Königin der Nacht - Erika Köth

Sprecher - Hans Hotter

Pamina - Lisa Della Casa

Sarastro - Kurt Böhme

Monostatos - Karl Dönch

Papagena - Graziella Sciutti

1er Geharnischter - Robert Charlebois

2er Geharnischter - Alois Pernerstorfer

Erste Dame - Friederike Sailer

Zweite Dame - Hetty Plümacher

Dritte Dame - Sieglinde Wagner

Erster Knabe - Wiener Singerknabe

Zweiter Knabe - Wiener Singerknabe

Dritter Knabe - Wiener Singerknabe

Despite its starry cast, fairly basic mono sound limits the appeal of this live performance; otherwise, the pleasure provided here is consistent. Nobody here, except the lovely, silvery Lisa della Casa, is perhaps the very best exponent of his or her respective roles but neither does anyone let the side down. I was a bit taken aback by Simoneau almost yelling "Zu Hilfe!" at his first entrance instead of singing the notes properly but otherwise he is his usual suave and sappy self, even if nobody is as winning as Wunderlich as Tamino. The Three Ladies are fine, a young Walter Berry is bluff and engaging in what was to become a famous incarnation of Papageno. Erika Köth is thrilling and very precise if not very large of voice as the Queen of the Night and she avoids here the shrillness which she and coloratura sopranos in general can evince. Greindl is a bit lumpen without the nobility I like to hear in a Sarastro but he has an echt basso profundo and thus has presence.

Szell's conducting is, as you might expect, sharp, swift and pointed with plenty of bounce and no lingering; I like it. He punches out accents and insists on absolute unity of purpose from the excellent VPO. In fact, there is a really strong company feeling to this performance; everyone is listening to each other and thus the ensembles are really exact.

A fair amount, but thankfully not all, of the dialogue is included and I soon forget the limitations of the sound when listening to such a vibrant, dramatic account.

This is available in better sound on the Orfeo label but that will cost twice or three times as much as this bargain Gala double CD and no re-mastering of even superior tapes will ever make it an aural treat.

Fortunately, the music-making is a huge compensation and justifies its purchase by any lover of this magical opera.

Karl Böhm – 1964 (studio; stereo) DG

Orchestra - Berliner Philharmoniker; Chorus - RIAS Kammerchor

Tamino - Fritz Wunderlich

Papageno - Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau

Königin der Nacht - Roberta Peters

Sprecher - Hans Hotter

Pamina - Evelyn Lear

Sarastro - Franz Crass

Monostatos - Friedrich Lenz

Papagena - Lisa Otto

1er Geharnischter - James King

2er Geharnischter - Martti Talvela

Erste Dame - Hildegard Hillebrecht

Zweite Dame - Cvetka Ahlin

Dritte Dame - Sieglinde Wagner

Erster Knabe - Antonia Fahberg

Zweiter Knabe - Rosl Schwaiger

Dritter Knabe - Raili Kostia

Erster Priester - Martin Vantin

Zweiter Priester - Manfred Röhrli

I returned to this classic recording after an interval of many years to discover that yet again the passage of time and the lamentable demise in standards of singing have rendered it very much more attractive than I had remembered. The sound is excellent and although Böhm's conducting is not of the zingy-springy period style now de rigueur, he had a good pedigree in Mozart and the playing of the BPO is simply gorgeous.

You may find among the encomiums some weird and grouchy criticism of virtually every cast member here with the obvious exception of a flawless Wunderlich, whose performance as Tamino is perfection and cannot be bettered, even if Simoneau and Burrows do almost as well. Otherwise, there are brickbats from everyone if you trawl through the reviews - but no-one can quite agree with anyone else who it is who has let the side down. Admittedly, the two principal ladies - with all due respect to a fellow reviewer who eccentrically opines that the First Lady has the most important female role in the opera - are not as good as Klemperer's, in a recording made the same year by EMI, when - imagine! - companies were vying with each other to issue top-rate operas, but there is no really substantial sense in which Evelyn Lear or Roberta Peters fail to please as Pamina and The Queen respectively. Lear is occasionally shrill up top and a little below the note, and her voice is rather more mature than is ideal, but the middle notes are creamy and she sounds genuinely distraught, not just a tweety-bird. She is particularly good in the "Tamino mein" passage. The same goes for Roberta Peters who is light of tone but very accurate and genuinely exciting. Lisa Otto's pert and charming Papagena completes a lovely trio. Mozart sopranos of real quality abounded in the 50's and 60's: Wilma Lipp, Rita Streich, Cristina Deutekom and Edda Moser all did the Queen proud on disc, while Hilde Güden, Maria Stader, Irma Seefried, Pilar Lorengar and Anneliese Rothenberger made delightful Paminas; I think Lear and Peters may hold their heads high in that distinguished crowd. Only Dorothea Röschmann today wears that mantle.

I warm more to D-F-D's Papageno; his voice was still smooth and mellow in 1964, without the barking or graininess which some over-singing in inadvisable roles too heavy for it imparted later. Not especially renowned for his humour, he nonetheless sounds light and witty without being too

sophisticated; significantly, he never performed the role on stage. I simply love the warmth and resonance of Frantz Crass' mellifluous bass and cannot comprehend how anyone can call him "bored-sounding" or "lacking weight". True, he's no Talvela, but nobody is and you may hear that great Finn in partnership with James King as a starry pair of Armed Men.

Otto Klemperer – 1964 (studio; stereo) EMI

Orchestra - Philharmonia Orchestra; Chorus - Philharmonia Chorus

Tamino - Nicolai Gedda
Papageno - Walter Berry
Königin der Nacht - Lucia Popp
Sprecher - Franz Crass
Pamina - Gundula Janowitz
Sarastro - Gottlob Frick
Monostatos - Gerhard Unger
Papagena - Ruth-Margret Pütz
1er Geharnischter - Karl Liebl
2er Geharnischter - Franz Crass
Erste Dame - Elisabeth Schwarzkopf
Zweite Dame - Christa Ludwig
Dritte Dame - Marga Höffgen
Erster Knabe - Agnes Giebel
Zweiter Knabe - Anna Reynolds
Dritter Knabe - Josephine Veasey

There is a wonderful confidence about Klemperer's conducting here; he knows how he wants the music to go even if you don't and the Philharmonia is surely the warmest, most virtuosic and animated of any orchestra on record. The overture is majestic but not slow or draggy and it segues enchantingly into a lively depiction of the dragon's guest appearance quickly curtailed by its death and a deliciously lilting debate amongst the Three Ladies. So much about this recording is attractive and right; the problems for me – and others – are an off-form Gedda, sounding tight and tired, especially in comparison with Wunderlich on the exactly contemporaneous Böhm recording, a similarly off-form, wobbly and lugubrious Frick, and the excision of all the dialogue. That matters; Tamino is the biggest role in the opera and the plot has a thread which needs linkage – and the humour that the spoken passages provide, even when cut. Fortunately, compensations are many, not least a young Popp and an equally young Janowitz both excelling in roles just made for their voices. Popp is given the time to hit each note squarely and the sheer size of her lyric soprano makes you realise why you want a voice of some heft for the Queen's music to make its impact. Janowitz is simply gorgeous, pure and bell-like, revelling in the space Klemperer gives her. Berry repeats his beguiling Papageno, this time somewhat heavier of voice than he was for Szell but still very engaging. Furthermore, this is cast in depth, with many famous singers taking comparatively minor or secondary roles – just look at the Three Ladies or the Three Boys.

Yes; tempi are slow but not pretentiously so; despite its flaws, this is a performance of great integrity.

Georg Solti – 1969 (studio; stereo) Decca

Orchestra - Wiener Philharmoniker; Chorus - Wiener Staatsoper

Tamino - Stuart Burrows
Papageno - Hermann Prey
Königin der Nacht - Cristina Deutekom
Sprecher - Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau
Pamina - Pilar Lorengar

Sarastro - Martti Talvela
Monostatos - Gerhard Stolze
Papagena - Renate Holm
1er Geharnischer - René Kollo
2er Geharnischer - Hans Sotin
Erste Dame - Hanneke van Bork
Zweite Dame - Yvonne Minton
Dritte Dame - Hetty Plümacher

My default position has been to return to this, the earlier of Solti's stereo recordings and now fifty years old. It is decidedly superior to the 1990 version, which is patchily cast, although we have the same superlative orchestra in both and the presence of Kurt Moll and Sumi Jo to sway some in favour of the later recording, especially if you object to Cristina Deutekom's idiosyncratic vocal technique as Queen of the Night. I don't, as despite the slight peculiarity of her coloratura divisions, whereby she produces a striking warbling or slight gargling effect, her intonation is flawless, her involvement compelling and the ease with which she soars up to those high F's thrilling. Instead of Moll we have another grand old bass - although in fact only 32 at the time of recording - in the Finn Martti Talvela who sounds smooth, paternal, sonorous and authoritative.

Solti's direction, despite his mostly unwarranted reputation for pressing too hard, is leisurely; he allows his singers the time to make the most of their beautiful voices. I wonder if we could cast a *Magic Flute* today with such an array of bel canto specialists? I love Stuart Burrows' heady, fluid tenor; he is in my judgement the best since Wunderlich. Pilar Lorengar, despite a little of her trademark flutteriness, is pure and touching. Prey is a smiling, amusing, unfussy Papageno, entirely at home in the part without mugging. Star names, or the names of those soon to be stars (such as Yvonne Minton as one of the Three Ladies, or Rene Kollo and Hans Sotin as the Armed Men), fill supporting roles. I can never hear Gerhard Stolze citric tenor without thinking of Mime but I suppose it matters little when he is playing Monostatos, another mean little pest.

This version still holds its prime place amongst the most recommendable analogue recordings, without being perfect; a particular flaw is the motley collection of German accents – but the singing is great.

Wolfgang Sawallisch – 1972 (studio; stereo) EMI
Orchestra & Chorus - Bayerische Staatsoper

Tamino - Peter Schreier
Papageno - Walter Berry
Königin der Nacht - Edda Moser
Sprecher - Theo Adam
Pamina - Anneliese Rothenberger
Sarastro - Kurt Moll
Monostatos - Willi Brokmeier
Papagena - Olivera Miljakovic
1er Geharnischer - Wilfried Badorek
2er Geharnischer - Günter Wewel
Erste Dame - Leonore Kirschstein
Zweite Dame - Ilse Gramatzki
Dritte Dame - Brigitte Fassbaender
Erster Knabe - Walter Gampert
Zweiter Knabe - Peter Hinterreiter
Dritter Knabe - Andreas Stein
Erster Priester - Wilfried Badorek
Zweiter Priester - Günter Wewel

There is a lot to be said for this recording, but I wouldn't start with Peter Schreier's strangulated Tamino and once you have heard Fritz Wunderlich, you might be spoiled for others. I wouldn't mind so much about the basic unattractiveness of his tone as I do about the fact that he also introduces glottal gulps and is none too steady at key points; not my kind of Mozart tenor at all. The other gripe is about the roughness of the woodwind here; that's a marginal and negligible disadvantage.

Otherwise, as long as you don't mind Schreier, Sawallisch's relatively leisurely tempi and the necessarily curtailed dialogue, this set is a winner all the way. Oddly enough, completely successful recordings of this opera are not so common; I have eight or so and this is certainly not perfect, nor is its cast so special, but chief amongst its attractions is Edda Moser's Queen of the Night - one of whose arias was of course included on Voyager I's Golden Record. Walter Berry repeats his warm, pally Papageno that we heard for Böhm and Klemperer (in a patchy recording) and we hear a distinguished trio of Ladies who sing beautifully. Rothenberger's Pamina is very warm and vibrant and of course Kurt Moll is hieratic dignity personified as Sarastro, singing music ideally composed for his resonant, nut-brown bass.

I cannot recommend this over favourite versions but it is certainly one of the best available, as long as you can get along with Schreier's Tamino.

James Levine – 1980 (studio; stereo) RCA

Orchestra - Wiener Philharmoniker; Chorus - Wiener Staatsoper

Tamino - Eric Tappy

Papageno - Christian Boesch

Königin der Nacht - Zdzisława Donat

Sprecher - José van Dam

Pamina - Ileana Cotrubas

Sarastro - Martti Talvela

Monostatos - Horst Hiestermann

Papagena - Elisabeth Kales

1er Geharnischter - Karl Terkal

2er Geharnischter - Helge von Bömches

Erste Dame - Rachel Yakar

Zweite Dame - Trudeliese Schmidt

Dritte Dame - Ingrid Mayr

Erster Knabe - Markus Huber

Zweiter Knabe - Thomas Paulsen

Dritter Knabe - Christian Baumgartner

Erster Priester - Peter Weber

Zweiter Priester - Horst Nitsche

Levine's recording, which looks good on paper is a dud. There's a simple reason why you neither hear much about this recording nor find it mentioned as a recommended version: as a whole, it's not very good, although it has a couple of very bright spots, starting with the lovely playing of the VPO, with echt Viennese affection.

The conducting is generally good except even Martti Talvela is stretched by the lugubrious tempo for "O Isis und Osiris" and in truth that wondrous artist was in better voice eleven years earlier for the very superior Solti studio recording; here is just that bit less resonant, less steady and given to little breaks and catches in his tone which spoil the legato. The other bonus is the plaintive and so feminine Ileana Cotrubas as Pamina - but her German is mushy and isn't she just a bit too droopy? The Three Ladies are excellent, too - two deservedly became quite famous. Some would add Zdisława Donat's Queen of

the Night to the bonus list; she certainly has all the notes and a nice full tone, but she isn't very animated or exciting compared with Sumi Jo or the eccentric-voiced Deutekom, whom I love in Solti's set, because she sounds plain weird - as the Queen actually is. Donat isn't exactly lacklustre but there's not enough torque - to borrow a fellow reviewer's favourite metaphor – to her delivery.

After that qualified praise, it's downhill all the way. Eric Tappy has a harsh, nasal tenor sometimes reminiscent of an aging Richard Tucker without his heft and squillo; nothing heroic or princely here. Christian Boesch as Papageno is very ordinary in every sense of the word compared with charming rivals such as Tom Allen or Hermann Prey.

Really; don't bother.

Bernard Haitink – 1981 (studio; stereo) EMI

Orchestra - Sinfonieorchester und Chor des Bayerischen Rundfunks

Tamino - Siegfried Jerusalem
Papageno - Wolfgang Brendel
Königin der Nacht - Edita Gruberova
Sprecher - Norman Bailey
Pamina - Lucia Popp
Sarastro - Roland Bracht
Monostatos - Heinz Zednik
Papagena - Brigitte Lindner
1er Geharnischter - Peter Hofmann
2er Geharnischter - Aage Haugland
Erste Dame - Marilyn Richardson
Zweite Dame - Doris Soffel
Dritte Dame - Ortrun Wenkel
Erster Knabe - Tölzer Singerknabe
Zweiter Knabe - Tölzer Singerknabe
Dritter Knabe - Tölzer Singerknabe
Erster Priester - Waldemar Kmentt
Zweiter Priester - Erich Kunz

This recording is a non-starter for me. Haitink's conducting is typically dull and weighty, and I cannot abide Gruberova's gulping, pulsing soprano. The Tamino is a hefty but effortful and dry-toned Jerusalem and many of the voices here lack charm; nothing sparkles and the voices are generally second-rung, including a wobbly Bracht, whose Sarastro cannot hold a candle to such as Moll and Talvela, and Brendel, who is hampered by Haitink's plodding tempo. Lucia Popp's trilling, piping Pamina doesn't sound right for the role; she was a much better "Sternflammende Königin" for Klemperer. Another one to pass over.

Neville Marriner – 1989 (studio; digital) Philips

Orchestra - Academy of St-Martin-in-the-Fields; Chorus - Ambrosian Opera Chorus

Tamino - Francisco Araiza
Papageno - Olaf Bär
Königin der Nacht - Cheryl Studer
Sprecher - José van Dam
Pamina - Kiri Te Kanawa
Sarastro - Samuel Ramey
Monostatos - Aldo Baldin

Papagena - Eva Lind
1er Geharnischer - Edmund Barham
2er Geharnischer - Harrie Peeters
Erste Dame - Yvonne Kenny
Zweite Dame - Iris Vermillion
Dritte Dame - Anne Collins
Erster Knabe - Christian Fliegner
Zweiter Knabe - Markus Baur
Dritter Knabe - Christian Günther
Erster Priester - Edmund Barham
Zweiter Priester - Harrie Peeters

I have always shied away from this recording because Araiza's constricted tone with its constant nasal twang gives me no pleasure; his vocal technique was always fundamentally wrong and I am baffled by those who admire the strangulated sound he makes; the same is true for me of Peter Schreier and apparently some people actually enjoy the sound they make.

This is a shame, as Marriner on form with the ASMF is a treat: fleet, energised, with transparent textures and perpetual lift to proceedings viz. the spring of the overture. The cast is otherwise full of famous names from the Three Ladies onwards. Olaf Bär is a lively, warm-toned Papageno. Cheryl Studer, in the "I can sing anything" stage of her career, deploys a big voice with a generous vibrato skilfully and Marriner gives her time to negotiate the coloratura; she hits all the notes and the effect is impressive if a tad unwieldy. She is particularly effective, even thrilling, in her second aria, ""Der Hölle Rache". Kiri Te Kanawa is beautiful, pallid, enervated Pamina, floating notes like feathers on a bed of cream in manner close to crooning but they fall so dreamily on the ear. Sam Ramey joins the elite band of truly hieratic Sarastros with the deep low notes and richness of sound to beguile the ear – just lovely. Aldo Baldin as Monostatos is voiceless and awful; fortunately, it doesn't matter much.

If you like Araiza, I could see you favouring this most musical and entertaining of recordings being a first choice, but I don't and how I wish either I did or they had found another tenor.

Armin Jordan - 1990? (studio; digital) Erato

Orchestra - Ensemble Orchestral de Paris; Chorus - Choeur de Chambre Romand et Pro Arte de Lausanne

Tamino - Gosta Winbergh
Papageno - Håkan Hagegård
Königin der Nacht - Sumi Jo
Sprecher - Alfred Muff
Pamina - Luba Orgonosova
Sarastro - Franz-Josef Selig
Monostatos - Volker Vogel
Papagena - Martina Bovet
1er Geharnischer - Hans-Peter Graf
2er Geharnischer - Reinhard Hagen
Erste Dame - Charlotte Margiano
Zweite Dame - Brigitte Balleys
Dritte Dame - Nathalie Stutzmann
Erster Knabe - Christian Fliegner
Zweiter Knabe - Markus Baur
Dritter Knabe - Christian Günther
Erster Priester - Hans-Peter Graf
Zweiter Priester - Alfred Muff

This studio recording from Jordan went under the radar then disappeared and now seems to be unavailable except as highlights. Jordan's tempi are quite wilful and extreme, with a first solemn opening to the overture then a frenetic but admittedly exciting development and a generally speedy approach throughout. There are a lot of fine singers here: Håkan Hagegård is light and attractively voiced, Gosta Winbergh sings absolutely beautifully, with weight of tone without sounding heavy; for me he is the best Tamino since Wunderlich. Sumi Jo is perhaps small of voice but better here than for Solti and her vibrant, trilling tone suits a gentler, more sympathetic interpretation of the Queen, in keeping with the tenor of the recording as a whole and her coloratura is neat if tiny. She is better in her first aria; in the second, she becomes squeaky. Vocal ensemble work is lovely and pointed, with singers of the quality of contralto Nahalie Stutzmann underpinning it. Luba Orgonosova and Hagegård are light and touching in "Bei Männern", and she sings winningly in "Ach, ich fühl's" with full but girlish tone – although the recording volume drops there, for some reason. It's a pity that Franz-Josef Selig is so ordinary as Sarastro compared with the great ones; he's not bad but forgettable.

Dialogue is minimal but most listeners won't mind that. Clean, well-balanced digital sound-engineering puts the cap on a recording which isn't the best but is nonetheless very pleasing.

Georg Solti – 1990 (studio; digital) Decca

Orchestra - Wiener Philharmoniker; Chorus - Wiener Staatsoper

Tamino - Uwe Heilmann
Papageno - Michael Kraus
Königin der Nacht - Sumi Jo
Sprecher - Andreas Schmidt
Pamina - Ruth Ziesak
Sarastro - Kurt Moll
Monostatos - Heinz Zednik
Papagena - Lotte Leitner
1er Geharnischer - Wolfgang Schmidt
2er Geharnischer - Hans Franzen
Erste Dame - Adrienne Pieczonka
Zweite Dame - Annette Küttenbaum
Dritte Dame - Jard van Nes
Erster Knabe - Max Emanuel Cencic
Zweiter Knabe - Michael Rausch
Dritter Knabe - Markus Leitner
Erster Priester - Clemens Bieber
Zweiter Priester - Hans-Joachim Porcher

Reacquaintance with this recording has prompted me to re-evaluate it somewhat more favourably but central casting weaknesses severely limit its appeal. With the obvious exceptions of the great Kurt Moll who is absolutely marvellous here and perhaps Sumi Jo, who is rather small and shrill of voice but accurate and exciting, some of the singing is really rather ordinary: Uwe Heilmann is pleasant enough but his tenor is also small and a bit pinched as he ascends; Ruth Ziesak is similarly tight and scratchy-toned with a beat in her soprano; I have heard her in better voice. Michael Kraus has an odd, throaty, tremulous baritone; I am not entirely surprised that he did not have a particularly prominent career. By and large, Solti's earlier recording had a much better cast; the supporting and comprimario singers here feature too many throaty, "Germanic" voices, too. His conducting here is fleet and relaxed; none of the freneticism of which his detractors accuse him. But opera is first about voice and *The Magic Flute* without first-rate singers across the board won't do.

Charles Mackerras – 1991 (studio; digital) Telarc; Brilliant
Orchestra & Chorus - Scottish Chamber Orchestra

Tamino - Jerry Hadley
Papageno - Thomas Allen
Königin der Nacht - June Anderson
Sprecher - Gottfried Hornik
Pamina - Barbara Hendricks
Sarastro - Robert Lloyd
Monostatos - Helmut Wildhaber
Papagena - Ulrike Steinsky
1er Geharnischter - Peter Svensson
2er Geharnischter - Alastair Miles
Erste Dame - Petra Maria Schnitzer
Zweite Dame - Gabriele Sima
Dritte Dame - Julia Bernheimer
Erster Knabe - Daniel Ison
Zweiter Knabe - Nathan Watts
Dritter Knabe - John Dawson
Erster Priester - Peter Svensson
Zweiter Priester - Gottfried Hornik

This Scottish recording has its charms but also its deficiencies – primarily, in charm, in fact! – and emerges as rather bland. In his first Mozart recording, Mackerras has no especially individual mark to put on the score but is simply concerned to deliver a lithe, nimble, pacy account. He coaxes delightful playing from the Scottish Chamber Orchestra on modern instruments but with a minimum of vibrato and Romantic weight, and has an innate sense of Mozartian style. The original *Gramophone* review by Alan Blyth complained of over-reverberant sound; I find it ideal, so perhaps it has been tamed in some mild remastering; I don't know.

Given that we have three Americans and two British singers in the principal roles delivering the full Schikaneder spoken text and, ironically, mostly Germans in the subsidiary parts, there is a risk of the whole enterprise having too Anglo-Saxon an accent. Blyth complained of unidiomatic German from the Americans and the three Scottish boys who sing "Die drei jungen Knaben" while complimenting the two British linguists. It is true that Thomas Allen and Robert Lloyd sound most at home in the language but I doubt whether most listeners care that much; all sing beautifully and sound good enough to me.

No-one can touch Wunderlich in the role, but the late Jerry Hadley sings a lovely, boyish, flexible Tamino apart from little bleats in the approach to some higher notes. I love Barbara Hendricks' slightly grainy, flickering soprano and do not at all agree with Blyth that she sounds anonymous; this is a vulnerable, girlish Pamina with a soaring top. June Anderson surprises as the Queen of the Night. Her smoky timbre and an incipient beat make her sound uncannily like a more mature Joan Sutherland; she is a fierce Queen with all the notes even if she isn't Lucia Popp. Allen rivals Fischer-Dieskau for geniality, cunning inflection of the text and suavity of voice; this is a part ideally suited to his vocal and theatrical gifts. Robert Lloyd is authoritative as Sarastro. The supporting cast is excellent, especially Peter Svensson and Gottfried Hornik doubling up as First Priest and First Armed Man, and Speaker and Second Priest, respectively.

This recording has been available as a super-bargain Brilliant issue and on Telarc; it is a cheap, delightful account of a perennial favourite, light-hearted and charming but still encompassing the darker undertones, balancing the comedy with the mystical, metaphysical implications.

As a bonus, a duet of dubious authenticity for Tamino and Papageno is provided; "Pamina, wo bist du?". It was first sung in a production by Schikaneder in 1802; Mackerras suggests that its gaucheries imply that it was elaborated from Mozart's sketch by an unknown hand, possibly the local Kapellmeister. It doesn't sound anything like echt mature Mozart to me.

Claudio Abbado – 2005 (studio; digital) DG

Orchestra - Mahler Chamber Orchestra; Chorus - Arnold Schönberg Chor

Tamino - Christoph Strehl
Papageno - Hanno Müller-Brachmann
Königin der Nacht - Erika Miklosa
Sprecher - Georg Zeppenfeld
Pamina - Dorothea Röschmann
Sarastro - René Pape
Monostatos - Kurt Azeberger
Papagena - Julia Kleiter
1er Geharnischter - Danilo Formaggia
2er Geharnischter - Sascha Borris
Erste Dame - Caroline Stein
Zweite Dame - Heidi Zehnder
Dritte Dame - Anne-Carolyn Schlüter
Erster Knabe - Tölzer Singerknabe
Zweiter Knabe - Tölzer Singerknabe
Dritter Knabe - Tölzer Singerknabe
Erster Priester - Danilo Formaggia
Zweiter Priester - Tobias Beyer

I admit to considerable surprise upon reading several enthusiastic reviews for this recording from contributors whose views I tend to share; on the other hand, there are several from listeners like me who were less than captivated and I can relate to their reservations. It is not by any means that I object in principle to a period style orchestra and conducting - although there are times when I wish for more affection and expression in this somewhat freeze-dried account; it is more that I am struck by the sheer ordinariness of proceedings. There is little sense of fun or variety in this live performance; there is little electricity and everything jogs along nicely - although the horrible fluffed entry sixteen seconds into the orchestra remarked upon by a fellow reviewer really needed patching and the under-nourished tone of the strings tends to sap the music of real warmth.

Let's dispose of some gripes about the singing: Strehl is a pleasant, slightly hoarse and dry-toned Tamino who hardly recalls the ease and bloom of Wunderlich's golden tones despite the claims of commentators. The Three Ladies don't blend very well and the soprano of the First Lady is distinctly unappealing. The Monostatos is typically poor-voiced. The Papageno is competent with no real vocal distinction or character. The Queen of the Night has a nice, small coloratura soprano with a quick vibrato and bright top notes but weak low ones and she aspirates her runs in her first aria - has no-one else noticed or cared? To be fair, she is much better in "Der Hölle Rache", if a bit small scale and tweety.

However, we hear three sweet treble voices and have a class act in Dorothea Röschmann as Pamina, her rich, flexible soprano filling her music gratefully. She and Strehl make a lovely job of the gorgeous "Wir wandeln durch des Tones Macht" quartet but the squawking, ugly-voiced tenor singing an Armed Man spoils the ensemble. Georg Zeppenfeld, on the brink of increased prominence in a burgeoning career, is impressive as the Speaker. René Pape is fine but nothing special as Sarastro; he sounds bored and uninvolved in his first aria but is warmer and more involved in the second, if without the sepulchral tones of the great Sarastros. The Papagena is good although she doesn't have a lot to do.

In sum, inconsistency in quality and the absence of a sense of occasion combine to leave me distinctly underwhelmed with a recording which has been met by superlatives in some quarters.

Recommendations:

Studio mono: Herbert von Karajan – 1950

Studio stereo: Karl Böhm – 1964*; Georg Solti – 1969

*First choice

Ralph Moore