

Wagner's *Parsifal* - A partial survey of the discography

by Ralph Moore

There are in the CLOR catalogue over a hundred recordings of *Parsifal*, Wagner's Christian-Buddhist *Schwanengesang*. I review twenty here in this survey, including the only five studio versions and the first recording of excerpts, obviously not aiming for comprehensiveness but trying to consider the most significant and estimable versions. Extraneous noise and poor sound quality are particularly vexing in an opera which is often quiet and meditative in character, so I imagine that most listeners will want at least one studio recording, free of coughs and thumping.

Parsifal is a "Marmite opera"; some are devoted to it, others repulsed. It's slow, stately progress and relentless sententiousness require reserves of concentration greater than those which the average Wagner acolyte is prepared to devote to its appreciation. Twenty-five years elapsed between its germination and its realisation as Wagner's last opera, and for some that inordinate period of gestation and creation is a metaphor for how they feel when sitting through its entirety, which typically takes well over four hours on CD, let alone attending a live performance with intervals. James Levine managed to extend his live 1985 performance in Bayreuth to an agonising four hours and forty minutes, and Reginald Goodall, the Celibidache of Wagnerian opera, even takes five minutes longer than that - whereas Herbert Kegel's live performance in Berlin is a whole hour shorter, which is still too long for those who find Gurnemanz to be a frightful old bore and the eponymous hero hardly more alluring. I confess to having abandoned an open-air performance at Orange many years ago when the chill of the Mistral and its ability to mask the music dimly emanating from the distant figures on stage banished me to the back seat of my car where I slept out the remainder of the performance - yet I am now older and wiser, and one of that select band who finds the cumulative power of the work to be deeply moving when it is adequately performed.

Just as he wanted to avoid calling the component parts of his *Ring* anything as vulgar as "operas" and applied to them the term *Gesamtkunstwerke* ("Total Work of Art", synthesising the various forms), Wagner designated *Parsifal* as *Ein Bühnenweihfestspiel* ("A Festival Play for the Consecration of the Stage") and it is still received with such quasi-mystical and religious reverence at Bayreuth that it is the custom to avoid applause at its conclusion, even though that was not Wagner's intention. Furthermore, he banned its performance outside of Bayreuth lest it degenerate into a mere public entertainment, so it was not until after his death that it was exported elsewhere; following an American court case challenging the Bayreuth monopoly, it was lifted in 1914, resulting in an explosion of performances in fifty European houses that year. The preciousness surrounding attitudes to the opera is enough to give the modern pundit a terminal case of the screaming adjabs but *Parsifal* is now firmly established in the repertoire despite its length and solemnity.

Its use of explicitly Christian symbolism and its elevation of the virtues of chastity and compassion appear to make it an irrefutably religious work, although Wagner himself was certainly no orthodox Christian and was at pains to explain that he was borrowing and transmuting those tropes for aesthetic and artistic purposes, to reveal "the profound truths they contain". I have little time for, or indeed interest in, the accusation that the work is anti-Semitic; its first conductor, Hermann Levi, was the son of a rabbi - although it is true that Wagner was initially reluctant to permit a Jew to conduct it. While Wagner's antisemitism is an inescapable fact, there is nothing in the libretto which specifically reflects that; ultimately, I am content to let the music and text do the talking.

Being through-composed, *Parsifal* is not a work which lends itself to excerpts - or "bleeding chunks" - although Wagner himself prepared arrangements of orchestral passages such as the Prelude and the Good Friday Music, and there are one or two solos suitable for concert performance, such as Amfortas' lament and Kundry's narration. These, in conjunction with key passages such as when, in perhaps the

one digression from the unremittingly sombre and reflective music of the work, at the beginning of Act 2 in Klingsor's castle, we hear him rant and plot, then witness the Flowermaidens' failed attempt to seduce Parsifal, and Gurnemanz' "Gesegnet sei" culminating in the glorious "entnimm nun seinem Haupt!", all form key points for assessing the success of any recording. The opera contains four great roles for different voice-types which have attracted singers of the highest calibre, from Martha Mödl's many appearances as Kundry and Maria Callas' early assumption of the role, to Kónya's, Domingo's and Vickers' Parsifal, to bass-baritones such George London and Thomas Stewart singing Amfortas, to the cream of basses such as Christoff, Hotter and Moll singing Gurnemanz. The conductor most frequently associated with the work is Hans Knappertsbusch, whose name appears in the discography fourteen times, the last dozen of which are live recordings at Bayreuth, over a period of twenty-seven years – I review five of those live performances here, but he never made a studio recording.

The Recordings

Karl Muck - 1928 (Acts 1 & 2 excerpts; Act 3; mono) Naxos

Orchestra - Berliner Staatsoper

Chorus - Berliner Staatsoper

Amfortas - Cornelius Brongeeest

Gurnemanz - Ludwig Hofmann

Parsifal - Gotthelf Pistor

It is not for its aesthetic qualities - which are in any case great - that I give this double CD set five stars, nor indeed for its sonics - although they are in fact excellent for so venerable a recording and greatly enhanced as a result of expert remastering by Mark Obert-Thorn but they are merited by this set simply by virtue of what it is: a window on to a performance tradition far closer to Wagner's own than that of our own time. Indeed, there is a special historical interest in hearing Wagner's son Siegfried conduct the "Good Friday Magic" in 1927, having stepped in to replace the principal conductor here, Karl Muck, who first refused to record that music split into three sections but caved in and did so a year later in the almost complete recording of Act 3 here on CD2.

The most interesting voice here is that of Gotthelf Pistor, whose Heldentenor has the power, sweetness, steadiness and a boyish quality which make him an ideal Parsifal. Ludwig Hoffmann is a fine, grave Gurnemanz even if he ducks providing the full impact of his top E's hit square on but instead slides up to them. The Amfortas is a steady, sonorous Dutch baritone, Cornelis Bronsgeest. For me, the vocal highlight is provided by the Ukrainian (later US citizen) Alexander Kipnis, who demonstrates how those top notes should be sounded and whose magisterial bass provides a special and illicit glamour not entirely suitable to that severe old ascetic Gurnemanz. Fritz Wolff is impressively soulful as Parsifal and we may marvel afresh at how much vocal and instrumental detail we are able to hear in recording now ninety years old - and in the case of the Orchestral Suite which opens CD1, an astonishing 100 years old - the most ambitious acoustic recording of its era.

It is also wonderful to think that in those earliest recordings we are hearing, "albeit through a glass darkly" as the note puts it, more or less the same Berlin orchestral sonority that Wagner would have recognised, he having died only thirty years before. Some reviewers elsewhere have slightly overstated the case for this being the "greatest ever" recording; in the end most of us still want to hear this music in beautiful, flawless, digital sound, insofar as it is hard to achieve a suitably rapt quality with a constant "frying tonight" background, but it is still possible to be moved by the poise and sincerity of the music-making here. The likes of Levine, Knappertsbusch and Goodall will have been heartened by the leisureliness of Muck's tempi, but he displays the requisite mastery of the long line

and the musical line never sags. Alfred Hertz in the Suite is if anything even more ponderous but his control is mesmerising and evidently authentic.

While not a set for the casual listener, it is one which should be heard by every true Wagnerite.

Artur Bodanzky/Erich Leinsdorf (Act 2) – 1938 (live; mono) Myto; NB: on Guild Immortal Performances: Act 2 only + extract from Act 3 with Herbert Janssen
Orchestra - Metropolitan Opera
Chorus - Metropolitan Opera

Amfortas - Friedrich Schorr
Titurel - Norman Cordon
Gurnemanz - Emanuel List
Parsifal - Lauritz Melchior
Klingsor - Arnold Gabor
Kundry - Kirsten Flagstad
Alto Stimme - Doris Doe
Knappe 1 - Natalie Bodanya
Knappe 2 - Helen Olheim
Knappe 3 - Giordano Paltrinieri
Knappe 4 - Karl Laufkötter
Blumenmädchen 1 - Susanne Fisher
Blumenmädchen 2 - Irra Petina
Blumenmädchen 3 - Helen Olheim
Blumenmädchen 4 - Hilda Burke
Blumenmädchen 5 - Thelma Votipka
Blumenmädchen 6 - Doris Doe
Ritter 1 - George Cehanovsky
Ritter 2 - Louis D' Angelo

The Guild issue of Act 2 has already been helpfully [reviewed](#) on MWI by Jonathan Woolf; we must be grateful for having at least one Act in good sound for the era; Acts 1 and 3 may be heard in very inferior sound on the Myto release or on YouTube. Guild also provides a fourteen-minute extract covering the end of Act 3, recorded on 23 March 1948, Melchior's final performance at the Met, with Herbert Janssen as Amfortas.

In truth, the Myto issue is all but unlistenable, even to aficionados hardened to historical sound, although the voices emerge somewhat more audibly than the dim orchestra, which often comes across as little more than a distorted mush, and you can hear the sheer, unrivalled vocal quality of the soloists – but to hear them revealed in glory, turn with relief to the vastly superior Guild transfer of Act 2 from a set of acetates made privately from the radio broadcast. Considering that this recording is ninety years old as I write, its preservation is miraculous. Swish and distortion have been minimised, even if the last three minutes of track 11 are badly marred by surface noise. Leinsdorf's typically energised direction – helpfully compatible with the manner of Bodansky, for whom Leinsdorf deputised in Act 2 so the ailing Bodansky could be rested – ensures that tension is maintained.

Even the supposed “comprimario” baritone Arnold Gabor is superlative: powerful and incisive – but of course our attention must be focused on the pairing of the two greatest Wagnerian singers. Flagstad's Kundry is a surprise, it is so feminine and alluring, despite the effulgence of her voice. She had first sung the role at the Met in 1935 and is completely under the skin of the role; her first invitation to “Parsifal” is suffused with warmth; an irresistible siren-call. She pours forth a stream of

golden tone and has no difficulty with the tessitura – including the fearsome and famous downward leap of nearly two octaves from a high B to low C on “lachte”. Melchior's Parsifal is a mature and sensitive portrayal, his voice matching Flagstad's for power and steadiness.

The Act 3 extract is in good sound and finds both singers in finest voice ten years later, so you are getting a sizeable sample of Melchior's superb Parsifal here on this Guild disc, complementing Flagstad's contribution. My advice is to acquire it and pass on the rest; great as it is, as a whole it cannot be a first choice for the whole opera, only a supplement.

Vittorio Gui – 1950 (live; mono) sung in Italian; Warner Classics; Verona; Arkadia; Cantus Classics; Melodram; Membran; Mondo Musica; Opera d'Oro; Frequenz
Orchestra - RAI Roma
Chorus - RAI Roma

Amfortas - Rolando Panerai
Titurel - Dmitri Lopatto
Gurnemanz - Boris Christoff
Parsifal - Africo Baldelli
Klingsor - Giuseppe Modesti
Kundry - Maria Callas
Knappe 1 - Miti Truccato Pace
Knappe 2 - Silvana Tenti
Knappe 3 - Aldo Bertocci
Knappe 4 - Mario Frosini
Blumenmädchen 1 - Lina Pagliughi
Blumenmädchen 2 - Renata Broilo
Blumenmädchen 3 - Anna Maria Canali
Blumenmädchen 4 - Liliana Rossi (Perino)
Blumenmädchen 5 - Silvana Tenti
Blumenmädchen 6 - Miti Truccato Pace
Ritter 1 - Aldo Bertocci
Ritter 2 - Mario Frosini

While I am not seriously proposing that this should be your principal recording of *Parsifal*, there are still a number of advantages to owning it - indeed I treasure it for a number of reasons, not least for the beauty of four great voices bringing a special evenness and sonority to Wagner sung in Italian. It is included in the new “Callas Live” Warner box set and there are numerous bargain issues, but only the Verona label provides an Italian libretto – no English translation, unfortunately – which makes it easier to follow, as it is quite heavily cut.

I suggest buying this as a supplement to your main set. The sound is clean, thin mono, and very listenable. The RAI orchestra plays far better for Gui here than it did for Furtwängler in his *Ring* three years later and Gui displays a real feeling for maintaining the shape of Wagner's grand and sombre line.

Helping him to do so are some seriously legendary singers, not least Maria Callas early in her career bringing an animal passion to Kundry of a kind scarcely heard anywhere else and she is here of course in finest vocal estate. Boris Christoff brings grave authority, smooth tone and sustained legato to the role of Gurnemanz; contrary to the assertion of another reviewer, he by no means roars his way through the part but often sings in that inimitably tender Christoff *mezza voce*. After a rocky, nervous start, a very young Rolando Panerai is both febrile and vocally commanding as Amfortas, and a surprise

is in store for the uninitiated when they hear the virile, gleaming tenor of Africo Baldelli, who gives us a portrait of Parsifal involving both psychological insight and vocal heft.

Wagner himself would not have minded hearing his opera in Italian - it often sounds surprisingly graceful in that language - and would probably have put up with the cuts as long as he got paid. If you can find this radio broadcast on offer at reasonable cost, it provides a fascinating and rewarding insight into the adaptability of Wagner's most profound work.

Hans Knappertsbusch – 1951 (live composite; mono) Zyx; Naxos; Teldec

Orchestra - Bayreuth Festival

Chorus - Bayreuth Festival

Amfortas - George London

Titirel - Arnold Van Mill

Gurnemanz - Ludwig Weber

Parsifal - Wolfgang Windgassen

Klingsor - Hermann Uhde

Kundry - Martha Mödl

Alto Stimme - Ruth Siewert

Knappe 1 - Hanna Ludwig

Knappe 2 - Elfriede Wild

Knappe 3 - Günther Baldauf

Knappe 4 - Gerhard Stolze

Blumenmädchen 1 - Lore Wißmann

Blumenmädchen 2 - Erika Zimmermann

Blumenmädchen 3 - Hanna Ludwig

Blumenmädchen 4 - Paula Brivkalne

Blumenmädchen 5 - Maria Lacorn

Blumenmädchen 6 - Elfriede Wild

Ritter 1 - Walter Fritz

Ritter 2 - Werner Faulhaber

The adulation accorded this recording in previous reviews and elsewhere mystifies me; it strikes me that some of it is couched in terms which approach the obsessively unhinged. Don't misunderstand me; I love Wagner and do indeed find "Parsifal" to be a truly spiritual experience, even (especially?) on disc - but this recording is not the one to do it for me.

First, it's in slightly dim, but perfectly listenable mono. Fine; I listen happily to many recordings of lesser sonic quality - but if I can have a *Parsifal* in beautiful, clear, stereo sound, I'd prefer it. Furthermore, I prefer a Gurnemanz of the kind delivered by Kurt Moll, whose beauty of voice, tonal splendour and understanding of the text inevitably put the wobbly Ludwig Weber in the shade. He is on stage for so long that this role is really crucial to our enjoyment - and I find Weber's vocal failings and unsteadiness a bit of a trial when I have the aural image of Moll's sonorous bass in my head. Windgassen, too, is perfectly adequate, but he always sounded elderly even when he wasn't, whereas James King, for example, sounds really boyish and his carefully thought out characterisation matches his superior vocalisation. Minton is almost Mödl's equal vocally and almost as good interpretatively. It is true that no-one except perhaps Thomas Stewart and, to a lesser extent, José van Dam, matches George London's great anguished, black-voiced Amfortas but that's the only real casualty if, for example, you opt for Kubelik on the Arts & Archives label.

This 1951 Kna recording is now available very cheaply on the Zyx and Quadromania labels and it sounds as good as you could hope for given its age; the Zyx issue has a particularly attractive presentation and its mono sound sounds warmer to my ears than on other labels. I love the Zyx cover picture, too: "The Temptation of Sir Percival" by Arthur Hacker; it is the same picture as the one used on the latest re-issue of the Barenboim set.

Hans Knappertsbusch – 1952 (live; mono) Andromeda

Orchestra - Bayreuth Festival

Chorus - Bayreuth Festival

Amfortas - George London

Titirel - Kurt Böhme

Gurnemanz - Ludwig Weber

Parsifal - Wolfgang Windgassen

Klingsor - Hermann Uhde

Kundry - Martha Mödl

Alto Stimme - Ruth Siewert

Knappe 1 - Herta Töpper

Knappe 2 - Hanna Ludwig

Knappe 3 - Gerhard Unger

Knappe 4 - Gerhard Stolze

Blumenmädchen 1 - Rita Streich

Blumenmädchen 2 - Erika Zimmermann

Blumenmädchen 3 - Hanna Ludwig

Blumenmädchen 4 - Paula Brivkalne

Blumenmädchen 5 - Maria Lacorn

Blumenmädchen 6 - Herta Töpper

Ritter 1 - Karl Terkal

Ritter 2 - Werner Faulhaber

This live performance from 1952 is fairly slow even by conductor Hans Knappertsbusch's usual standards; elsewhere he settles on timings around 250 minutes. It is still marginally faster than the recording of the inaugural performance of this production at Bayreuth the year before and certainly does not noticeably drag - although the following year Clemens Krauss went for a considerably leaner, more propulsive *Parsifal*. That 1953 season also benefitted by the arrival of Rita Streich as First Flowermaiden and the replacement of Wolfgang Windgassen by Ramon Vinay. Windgassen here reprises the role with considerable success, even if he is not ideally suited to the role of Parsifal by timbre or temperament.

There are few changes here from the more celebrated issue of the recording from the previous year. That was in fact a composite recording devised from two live performances, patched from the general rehearsal; this one is simply a faithful recording of how it was on the night of the 1st August, 1952.

The only important cast change here from 1951 is the substitution of Kurt Böhme for Arnold Van Mill as Titirel, a relatively small role. Böhme is adequate if rather rough. Martha Mödl, Ludwig Weber, George London and Hermann Uhde are common to all three seasons from 1951-53 and thus, apart from noting the pace of Krauss compared with the profundity of Knappertsbusch and the relative merits of two rather different *Parsifals*, we are largely comparing like with like when looking at all three consecutive Bayreuth runs.

In truth, all are monuments to the supremacy of Bayreuth following its post-war revival in 1951 and for me their greatest drawback resides in the Gurnemanz. I can not only tolerate but positively enjoy the old boy's extended monologues if they are delivered by a bass of sufficient beauty such as Kurt Moll, Robert Lloyd or Hans Hotter in his prime, but I find Ludwig Weber rather dull and rocky. He barely copes with Gurnemanz's highest notes, as on "seinem Haupt" when he baptises Parsifal. Having said that, I concede that he is at his best in 1952, steadier and presiding here with grave authority. Windgassen barks and strains a bit, too often employing guttural emphasis where Vickers and Vinay have the strength of voice to suggest extreme emotion without resorting to the Bayreuth Bark. However, Windgassen copes more easily than they with the higher, gentler passages such as when Parsifal blesses Kundry. Mödl's performance remains a tour de force, the slightly curdled and husky tone not being inappropriate to the bestial Kundry. The close of Act 2 is electrifying and Windgassen rises nobly to do justice to Parsifal's destruction of Kingsor's enchanted fortress.

About George London's Amfortas I can only recycle superlatives: he maintains great beauty of tone whole sounding utterly distraught, first with guilt and secondly with grief over his father's death. His cries of "Erbarmen!" are heart-rending and yet strangely lovely. Uhde is crazed, febrile and utterly compelling as Klingsor. The Bayreuth chorus is terrific - much better than ten years later for the same conductor.

The 24-bit re-mastered sound is really very good for so old a live recording and the coughing less aggravating than a year later with Krauss at the helm. This remains a wonderful memento of a golden age at Bayreuth but for me does not rise to the heights of the greatest performances, which field a better Gurnemanz and Parsifal.

Clemens Krauss – 1953 (live; mono/ambient stereo*) Pristine Audio*; Naxos; Membran
Orchestra - Bayreuth Festival
Chorus - Bayreuth Festival

Amfortas - George London
Titirel - Josef Greindl
Gurnemanz - Ludwig Weber
Parsifal - Ramón Vinay
Klingsor - Hermann Uhde
Kundry - Martha Mödl
Alto Stimme - Maria von Ilosvay
Knappe 1 - Hetty Plümacher
Knappe 2 - Gisela Litz
Knappe 3 - Hugo Kratz
Knappe 4 - Adele Stolte
Blumenmädchen 1 - Hetty Plümacher
Blumenmädchen 2 - Gisela Litz
Blumenmädchen 3 - Rita Streich
Blumenmädchen 4 - Erika Zimmermann
Blumenmädchen 5 - Anna Tassopolus
Blumenmädchen 6 - Gerda Wismar
Ritter 1 - Eugene (Gene) Tobin
Ritter 2 - Theo Adam

This is one of the few uncut performances of *Parsifal* with a timing under four hours, and as such ranks as one of the fastest on record. Karajan at Bayreuth in 1961 comes in at about the same time and only Kegel (3 hrs 40) and Boulez in 1966 (3 hrs 49 mins.) and 1970 (3 hrs. 39mins.) are faster, but whereas

to some Boulez sounds detached, scrambled and even perfunctory, Krauss never feels rushed or dismissive; he has a real grasp of the ebb and flow of this piece and is also alive to its poetry. His more lithe and responsive approach is certainly preferable to the sclerotic and marmoreal readings of Levine in 1985 and Goodall in 1971, both of whom, absurdly, take just under four-and three-quarter hours. To take Knappertsbusch, as a reasonable comparison, even he generally takes another quarter of an hour in his various accounts, but another favourite version of mine by Armin Jordan in 1981 takes just five minutes over four hours. While I concede that a crude comparison of duration does not necessarily indicate the relative merits of performances, you will have by now gathered that I am not in favour of *Parsifal* as a cure for insomnia and am in favour of a more forward narrative momentum as opposed to the petrified stasis that passes for spirituality in some conductors' interpretations.

Several of the cast in this 1953 performance are the same who sang in *Parsifal* the previous two years at Bayreuth but conducted by Knappertsbusch. The big changes are the substitution of Ramon Vinay for Wolfgang Windgassen in the title role and the inheritance of the conductor's baton by Clemens Krauss. The 1951 broadcast has generally been the more admired, but I would suggest that the arrival of Vinay represents a marked improvement over his predecessor, that both Weber and Mödl sing better than in previous performances and that Krauss's propulsion is preferable to Knappertsbusch's reflection and restraint.

Parsifal is ideally heard in sumptuous stereo sound, but I am tolerant of live, historical mono, especially when the performance is first class. However, I return again and again to two modern recordings, not just to be able to hear the musical nuances but because in both Kurt Moll is an ideal interpreter of Gurnemanz; these are the 1980 Kubelik and the 1979/80 Karajan sets. Ludwig Weber has his moments; he has a big, authoritative, paternal voice and is clearly vastly experienced in the part, but his frequent unsteadiness and approximate pitching mean that he cannot really deliver the shiver down the spine that Moll provokes when he rolls out his huge, smooth black voice in climaxes such as "Gesegnet sei, Du reiner" through to "die letzte Last entnimm nun seinem Haupt!", at the anointing of Parsifal. Robert Lloyd for Jordan is another bass whose sheer beauty of sound seduces the ear during those long narrative monologues; I do not really look forward to them with Weber, as when the vocalisation is less than perfect, they can drag. There is no doubt that he understands the text on a profound level, but his vocal resources are not always able to produce the effects he is aiming for. Hotter, for all his verbal acuity, has similar vocal limitations; I'm afraid I do not find his voice especially beautiful here but rather "woofy".

An unwelcome side-effect of any audio restoration of this performance is that it reveals just how persistently bronchial the supposedly reverential Bayreuth audience were that night; I know it's absurd to feel homicidal towards an audience member of nearly sixty years ago who has now probably long since passed over, but there is one I would happily throttle; he invariably saves his throatiest blasts for the most tender moments. Perhaps his interventions partially explain why some crucial moments remain earthbound; I don't think any other conductor emulates the ecstasy Karajan generates at key points, yet at other times Krauss manages to create a suitably elevated and weighty ambience, such as in the Transformation music. The orchestra, some iffy intonation in the woodwind and flutes apart, is generally more comfortable than in previous years, having already been put through their paces by Knappertsbusch. The chorus trained by Wilhem Pitz is superb. Krauss's approach is certainly less internalised than his predecessor but there are benefits to his more dramatic treatment of the score, especially in Act 2, at Klingsor's magic castle, which is charged with evil tension.

Hermann Uhde repeats his nonpareil of a Klingsor; he is to this role what Gustav Neidlinger was to Alberich - although the latter also sang Klingsor well, too. His biting, febrile, almost hysterical characterisation of the magician is thrillingly voiced and we can well believe that this sinister Klingsor "laid violent hands upon himself". He is aptly partnered by Martha Mödl's coruscating Kundry. No

wonder the Flowermaidens - led by a lovely Rita Streich - quail before her. She underscores her reputation as a splendid singing actress; she is wholly uninhibited in how she growls and yowls to emphasise the sensual and bestial side of Kundry's nature and the result is compelling; she is a complete stage animal and here delivers a seminal performance to stand alongside her Isolde for Karajan a few years earlier.

Windgassen's *Parsifal* was arguably vitiated by the querulous whine in his voice which compromised his otherwise admirable Tristan and always made him sound too old. Vinay is an improvement vocally; he is a true Hedentenor and sings beautifully, but there is no denying that his big, dark, baritone tenor also sounds too old for the naïve *Parsifal*, but for different reasons. Nonetheless, he is in good company here with other mature-voiced *Parsifals* like Vickers and Baldelli (in Italian alongside Callas and Christoff) and he sing as if he is really living *Parsifal's* painful journey towards enlightenment; just listen to the torment in his outburst "Amfortas! Die Wunde!" It's a fine, deeply involving performance.

George London's bleak, world-weary Amfortas is the best of his various incarnations, certainly far superior to the "big, black bawl" of his performance for Knappertsbusch some years later in his sadly curtailed career, in 1961. His huge, resonant, rock-solid voice grandly embodies Amfortas' grief and anguish, although I still think José van Dam's account for Karajan is both the most beautifully vocalised and the most subtly characterised on disc. Resident Bayreuth cave-man Josef Greindl is suitably sonorous and sepulchral (sic) as Titurel.

Be aware that Andrew Rose at Pristine has performed another miraculous re-mastering of the dim mono sound of the original broadcast tapes in the same way that he recently revitalised Krauss's *Ring* but Pristine issues are pricey.

Hans Knappertsbusch – 1956 (live; mono) Walhall

Orchestra - Bayreuth Festival

Chorus - Bayreuth Festival

Amfortas - Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau

Titurel - Hans Hotter

Gurnemanz - Josef Greindl

Parsifal - Ramón Vinay

Klingsor - Toni Blankenheim

Kundry - Martha Mödl

Alto Stimme - Martha Mödl

Knappe 1 - Paula Lenchner

Knappe 2 - Elisabeth Schärtel

Knappe 3 - Gerhard Stolze

Knappe 4 - Alfred Pfeifle

Blumenmädchen 1 - Ilse Hollweg

Blumenmädchen 2 - Friedl Pöltinger

Blumenmädchen 3 - Paula Lenchner

Blumenmädchen 4 - Dorothea Siebert

Blumenmädchen 5 - Jutta Vulpius

Blumenmädchen 6 - Elisabeth Schärtel

Ritter 1 - Josef Traxel

Ritter 2 - Alfons Herwig

More hissy mono and the habitual Bayreuth hackers, but also an immediate and palpable sense of occasion, with an indefinable spirituality about the music-making emblematic of Kna's ability to

transmute a score into “something rich and strange”. The cast is as impressive as could be mustered at that time, although there is always the question of whether D-F-D has the weight, volume and resonance to carry off a role owned by bigger-voiced bass-baritones like London and Thomas. He managed it for Konwitschny three later as the Dutchman but that was a studio recording and I definitely miss some heft in his typically detailed and verbally acute characterisation. He is adept at conveying the pathos, shame and vulnerability of the wounded king but still tends to pounce and bark and to my ears sounds over-parted in the loudest outbursts. Greindl is in good voice, authoritative and only occasionally rocky, but he never had the “purring” quality I prize in smoother voiced basses like Moll. His diction and expression are excellent. Mödl’s husky, voluptuous soprano is ideally poised between mezzo and true soprano; she was essentially a *soprano Falcon* and thus, like the young Callas, ideally equipped to sing a role which has troubled voice-types suited to operating within a slightly higher or lower tessitura. She is also billed as the alto voice from on high, but I’ll wager that’s not Mödl; the timbre is completely different. Ramón Vinay repeats the excellent Parsifal he gave Krauss. He has the right voice-type, too; again, an intermediate category between tenor and baritone, which is why he sang in both tessituras at different points in his career. He is of the virile, Vickers-type of Parsifal yet sings sensitively and is in many ways ideal, apart from sounding too mature. Hotter has progressed from singing Amfortas and is taking time out from Gurnemanz which he had already sung at the Met to sing Titurel beautifully. Toni Blankenheim makes an enervated, placid Klingsor with a slow vibrato which makes him sound bovine rather than the requisite vulpine; he’s really dull compared with contemporaries such as Uhde and Neidlinger.

The orchestral playing, chorus and conducting here are superlative, making this one of the better live, mono recordings from Bayreuth in the 50’s, but not the best, owing to the weak Klingsor and Fischer-Dieskau’s dubious Amfortas.

André Cluytens – 1960 (live; mono) Andromeda

Orchestra - Teatro alla Scala

Chorus - Teatro alla Scala

Amfortas - Gustav Neidlinger

Titurel - Silvio Maionica

Gurnemanz - Boris Christoff

Parsifal - Sándor Kónya

Klingsor - Georg Stern

Kundry - Rita Gorr

Knappe 1 - Clara Foti

Knappe 2 - Stefania Malagù

Knappe 3 - Mario Ferrara

Knappe 4 - Angelo Mercuriali

Blumenmädchen 1 - Montserrat Caballé

Blumenmädchen 2 - Ursula Kerp

Blumenmädchen 3 - Susanne Will

Blumenmädchen 4 - Colette Lorand

Blumenmädchen 5 - Hilde Koch

Blumenmädchen 6 - Maria Graf

Ritter 1 - Rinaldo Pelizzoni

Ritter 2 - Giuseppe Morresi

So why would anyone buy a live, mono recording of a 1960 performance when we are blessed with so many great recordings with superior sonics? You must first, admittedly, be tolerant of historic sound which is subject to distortion when the ensemble or high, loud notes overload the microphone and

you must endure both some radio interference and the prompter's starring role, but if you are of that stripe then you will find a rich reward here, starting with six of the finest voices ever to undertake the principal roles. They are complemented by excellent playing from La Scala orchestra under a great Wagnerian conductor in André Cluytens, not usually associated with Wagner but evidently sympathetic to his idiom, as his *Lohengrin* at Bayreuth, also with Sandor Konya the previous year, confirms. You have only to listen to the orchestral introduction to Act 3 to realise that he knows exactly what to do with this wonderful music. His pacing is just right and the whole opera, with just three small cuts in Gurnemanz's narratives (two in Act 1, one in Act 3) comes in at a sensible timing of three and three-quarters of an hour, excluding applause and announcements. Andromeda provide absolutely no timings for tracks, individual CDs or total duration, just some nice photographs and the track cues; it's all very minimal so you'll need a libretto.

However, in addition to the superb conducting, the cast is stellar, as good as any other set I know. Boris Christoff is as fine as my favourite Gurnemanz Kurt Moll, his gravely beautiful voice being perfectly suited to conferring interest upon monologues that become tedious when sung by a less gifted and charismatic singer. He sings in good German; ten years earlier you would have heard him at La Scala singing an already mature Gurnemanz in Italian opposite the young Callas, but obviously by 1960 the tide had turned and Wagner was being performed in Italy in the original language and almost complete.

Likewise, Sandor Konya's Parsifal is near ideal; he has just the right heroic weight, unflagging stamina and youthful tenderness of voice to impersonate the Pure Fool. Rita Gorr's big, brazen mezzo is similarly ideal for Kundry and she negotiates the roles challenges with ease, including the terrific downward interval of a semitone less than two octaves on "lachte", perfectly suggesting Kundry's desperate world-weariness. Gustav Neidlinger's lean, incisive bass-baritone depicts Amfortas' agony vividly and we have a real bonus in Montserrat Caballe's First Flowermaiden, as sweet and enticing as Gundula Janowitz for Knappertsbusch. The sixth singer is the big surprise to me: I had never heard of Georg Stern but he proves to be quite the best Klingsor I have heard on disc: hard, biting and venomous.

I thoroughly enjoyed this performance once I had inured myself to its sonic limitations; it is Wagner performed just as it should be - would we could field such a cast today.

Hans Knappertsbusch – 1962 (live; stereo) Philips

Orchestra - Bayreuth Festival

Chorus - Bayreuth Festival

Amfortas - George London

Titurel - Martti Talvela

Gurnemanz - Hans Hotter

Parsifal - Jess Thomas

Klingsor - Gustav Neidlinger

Kundry - Irene Dalis

Alto Stimme - Ursula Böse

Knappe 1 - Sona Cervená

Knappe 2 - Ursula Böse

Knappe 3 - Gerhard Stolze

Knappe 4 - Georg Paskuda

Blumenmädchen 1 - Gundula Janowitz

Blumenmädchen 2 - Anja Silja

Blumenmädchen 3 - Elsa Margaretha Gardelli

Blumenmädchen 4 - Dorothea Siebert
Blumenmädchen 5 - Rita Bartos
Blumenmädchen 6 - Sona Cervená
Ritter 1 - Niels Moeller
Ritter 2 - Gerd Nienstedt

I return regularly to this more celebrated version to test whether my reactions were the same as when I first listened to it so many years ago. I find that I am now much more tolerant of things about it which once irked me: the intrusive coughing - which somewhat abates after the Prelude but nonetheless is a feature throughout - and the supposed obtrusiveness of Hotter's infamous wobble. I have to say that although I still maintain that Hotter was, surprisingly, in better voice two years later (for reasons I suggest in my review below) he is by no means markedly inferior here and brings the same gravitas and spirituality to his assumption of Gurnemanz.

Others have complained about Knappertsbusch's leisurely tempo. Well, timings for 1964 and 1962 are virtually identical and compared with other famous accounts, Kna's is squarely in the middle: much slower than Krauss and Boulez and considerably faster than Levine or Karajan; I find his pacing ideal and have no quarrel with his grasp of the work's architecture.

In 1964, he has the possible advantage of Jon Vickers' debut as the eponymous hero but Jess Thomas here assumes one of his finest roles deploying his strong, clear tenor to marvellous effect - so nothing either way there. Surprisingly, Heinz Hagenau is the equal of Martti Talvela as Titurel and both Irene Dalis and Barbro Ericson are terrific as Kundry. Although George London's career was prematurely over by 1964, his replacement, Thomas Stewart, was no slouch as Amfortas and thus both singers take the palm for their strikingly vivid and beautiful singing as the suffering king. Finally, Gustav Neidlinger repeats his searing Klingsor.

The one great advantage this Philips set has over the clean mono of the 1964 Orfeo recording is the benefit of stereo sound, allowing us to hear more atmospherically the great transition passages and the tolling of the bells summoning the knights to the ritual. Chorus and orchestra remain superb in both versions - presumably because, obviously, we are hearing the same conductor with the same forces - but Gundula Janowitz's heavenly soprano stands out from the group of Flowermaidens in 1962.

You will read the occasional review informing us that neither of these recordings is a patch on the renowned 1951 performance with which post-war Bayreuth re-opened. I don't buy it, myself, because I do not respond to Ludwig Weber's dull, wobbly Gurnemanz where others hear only perfection; *de gustibus*. Certainly London's portrayal of Amfortas has deepened in its anguished intensity ten years on and, again, the stereo sound in 1962 is far preferable.

For a modern performance, I still favour Karajan, Solti or Kubelik, but this one is also a mightily impressive, deeply moving account.

Hans Knappertsbusch – 1964 (live; mono) Orfeo

Orchestra - Bayreuth Festival
Chorus - Bayreuth Festival

Amfortas - Thomas Stewart
Titurel - Heinz Hagenau
Gurnemanz - Hans Hotter
Parsifal - Jon Vickers

Klingsor - Gustav Neidlinger
Kundry - Barbro Ericson
Alto Stimme - Ruth Hesse
Knappe 1 - Ruth Hesse
Knappe 2 - Sylvia Lindenstrand
Knappe 3 - Dieter Slembek
Knappe 4 - Erwin Wohlfahrt
Blumenmädchen 1 - Anja Silja
Blumenmädchen 2 - Liselotte Rebmann
Blumenmädchen 3 - Elsa Margaretha Gardelli
Blumenmädchen 4 - Dorothea Siebert
Blumenmädchen 5 - Rita Bartos
Blumenmädchen 6 - Sylvia Lindenstrand
Ritter 1 - Hermann Winkler
Ritter 2 - Gerd Nienstedt

The main reason for preferring later recordings is, of course, that this is in mono. Good, clean, remarkably clear and detailed mono, it's true and one soon forgets any sonic limitations given the manifold attractions of this performance, but I can understand anyone wanting to hear this music in digitalised, studio stereo sound free of coughs and giving proper spacious amplitude and breadth to proceedings.

The other consideration centres upon personal responses to the Gurnemanz, veteran Hans Hotter. It is undoubtedly true that he is in more secure voice here than he was for the more celebrated Bayreuth performance under Kna two years earlier, perhaps because he was free that season from undertaking the other even more taxing role of Wotan, whose higher-lying tessitura aggravated the dreaded wobble which afflicted his voice by this stage of his career. Perhaps, too, even though the performances took place during an unprecedented heat-wave, his hay-fever was less troublesome than was sometimes the case, making his voice hoarser and hollower. Whatever the case, he is here at his gravest, wisest and noblest - and steadiest, with just the occasional waver.

Otherwise, the cast is superlative, including debutant Jon Vickers as an ideally youthful and heroic Parsifal, Barbro Ericson as a coruscating Kundry with a telling lower register, Thomas Stewart filling George London's shoes as a deeply moving Amfortas, Heinz Hagenau - a great bass previously unknown to me - wonderfully trenchant as Titurel and Gustav Neidlinger a scorching, black-voiced Klingsor.

Knappertsbusch's tempi are neither especially fast nor slow compared with other famous versions; I cannot fault his pacing and if anything, he is often quite driven. He is ideally served by chorus and orchestra. I hesitate to say it, but to me this is clearly better than the widely acclaimed '62 live recording. It's a pity this isn't in stereo sound but the mono sound is surprisingly full and warm and artistically it is the best of Kna's many excellent performances.

Pierre Boulez – 1970 (live composite; stereo) DG

Orchestra - Bayreuth Festival
Chorus - Bayreuth Festival

Amfortas - Thomas Stewart
Titurel - Karl Ridderbusch
Gurnemanz - Franz Crass
Parsifal - James King

Klingsor - Donald McIntyre
 Kundry - Gwyneth Jones
 Alto Stimme - Marga Höffgen
 Knappe 1 - Elisabeth Schwarzenberg
 Knappe 2 - Sieglinde Wagner
 Knappe 3 - Dieter Slembek
 Knappe 4 - Heinz Zednik
 Blumenmädchen 1 - Hannelore Bode
 Blumenmädchen 2 - Margarita Kyriaki
 Blumenmädchen 3 - Inger Paustian
 Blumenmädchen 4 - Dorothea Siebert
 Blumenmädchen 5 - Wendy Fine
 Blumenmädchen 6 - Sieglinde Wagner
 Ritter 1 - Hermin Esser
 Ritter 2 - Bengt Rundgren

I think *Parsifal* is similar in just one regard to certain of Bach's greatest works such as the *Goldbergs*, in that it can withstand a considerable variety of interpretative approaches. Boulez clearly set out here to blow away some cobwebs and the hieratic accretions of Bayreuth tradition to present a more cohesive, propulsive and essentially dramatic conception. In this regard, he is furthest away from Levine, Karajan and Knappertsbusch in eschewing the "spiritual-liturgical" presentation and closer to Clemens Krauss. In my review of the latter's 1953 performance, I wrongly criticised in passing Boulez's account here as "sounding detached, scrambled and even perfunctory"; I would now hereby like to retract my rash judgement and confirm that I am won over by Boulez's stance. He is on record as saying that he would have liked to have introduced more flexibility into his beat to combat a certain "stiffness" should he conduct it again, though it's hard to see how he could do so without considerably adding to the running time. I have to say that I hear little other than magic in the Prelude, which is at least two or three minutes shorter than most; his phrasing is magical and the orchestra glows - and so it goes on throughout; I am entirely convinced by the naturalness of his pacing and glad to hear a version which for once avoids undue portentousness - not to mention the possibility of tedium.

The sound is excellent, too: a little "stagey", with air around the voices but complete clarity, a quiet audience and a slightly too prominent prompter.

Now to the singing: we hear four absolutely beautiful lower voices in the key roles. Crass has a steady, "purring" bass, without the leonine gravitas of Moll or the Olympian authority of Hotter but rather a very human Gurnemanz with crystalline diction, whose narratives are enlivened by Boulez's pace. Thomas Stewart repeats the commanding, agonised, magnificently vocalised Amfortas he gave us if the 1964 Knappertsbusch recording. Ridderbusch is wonderfully otherworldly as Titurel, intoning like the Oracle from the shadows. McIntyre is at his best as Klingsor in a vivid, almost hysterical characterisation to rival Uhde, Neidlinger and Nienstedt.

James King repeats his celebrated *Parsifal* and is as good as he is in the Kubelik studio recording - which remains, by a whisker, my favourite of all. He summons up real power and anguish at the moment of his epiphany at the end of Act 2 and from "Amfortas! - Die Wunde!" is inspired beyond what some hear as his competent but pedestrian norm.

I am tired of the application of retrospective standards to Gwyneth Jones' singing. It is true that later in her career the infamous "wobble" could be fearsome but throughout the 60's and 70's she delivered some superb performances, being a formidable stage actress, personally alluring and vocally secure; the voice here is characterised more by vibrancy than any wobble; her top B at the end of Act 2 is

wholly in place and the voice is both powerful and expressive throughout. Furthermore, as BBC Radio 3's Record Review pointed out, she makes the best job of all sounding mysterious and seductive when she summons our foolish hero by intoning his name, "Parsifal".

The rest of the cast is fine, although Hannelore Bode as First Flowermaiden is no Gundula Janowitz or Kiri Te Kanawa.

Finally, this comes conveniently on only three CDs, with both the second and third acts intact on one disc each. So; I am happy to eat humble pie and announce myself as a convert to the Boulez way with Wagner.

Georg Solti - 1971-72 (studio; stereo) Decca

Orchestra - Wiener Philharmoniker

Chorus - Wiener Staatsoper

Amfortas - Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau

Titirel - Hans Hotter

Gurnemanz - Gottlob Frick

Parsifal - René Kollo

Klingsor - Zoltán Kéléman

Kundry - Christa Ludwig

Alto Stimme - Birgit Finnilä

Knappe 1 - Rotraud Hansmann

Knappe 2 - Marga Schiml

Knappe 3 - Heinz Zednik

Knappe 4 - Ewald Aichberger

Blumenmädchen 1 - Lucia Popp

Blumenmädchen 2 - Alison Hargen

Blumenmädchen 3 - Kiri Te Kanawa

Blumenmädchen 4 - Gillian Knight

Blumenmädchen 5 - Anne Howells

Blumenmädchen 6 - Margarita Lilowa

Ritter 1 - Robert Tear

Ritter 2 - Herbert Lackner

I am not sure that spirituality or transcendentalism were ever Solti's strong suit, so tackling *Parsifal* was always going to be a gamble for him; he was on much safer – even home – ground with *Die Meistersinger*. However, the first thing you notice in the overture is the shimmering beauty of the VPO strings then the splendour of their brass; a definite sense of repose pervades proceedings – this is not Solti in gung-ho mode. Indeed, I find him one of the most reliable of Wagner conductors in his ability to encompass both the thrills and the serenity of Wagner's music, hence the strength of his track-record, with successes in his recordings of virtually every one of the Bayreuth Ten. Having listened to so many worthy but sonically deficient recordings, I felt much more inclined to appreciate the beautiful analogue sound of this one, and the first voice we hear, Gottlob Frick's rounded, black bass, further enhances the both the experience and one's expectation of something fine. After all, not only do we have one of the great Wagner conductors directing a top-flight orchestra captured in Decca's renowned analogue sound, but we also benefit from the having in the cast the cream of German opera singers of that era. Frick's bass does not have the smoothness of Moll but the weight, size, gravitas, inflection of text and sheer authority are all there, he sounds the right age and sings feelingly, even if he is occasionally less than ideally steady. Christa Ludwig has the sensual, sultry tone and range the role of Kundry demands and she was always a compelling vocal actress, with some steel in her voice

when required; she is certainly better than Karajan's Dunja Vejzovich, bringing to Kundry something of a combination of her Venus for Solti and her Klytämnestra for Ozawa – and her “lachte” is stunning. I am less keen on the Amfortas Fischer-Dieskau recorded back in 1956 live for Knappertsbusch, but here he is less inclined to push and bark and his legato, and even depth of tone, are superior, even if he will never have the power of London or Thomas, especially on top notes. Hotter has returned to the role of Titurel, which he had sung alongside Fischer-Dieskau in that 1956 Bayreuth season, which was once again right for his voice at this late stage of his career, sonorous, world-weary and sorrow-laden. Then we come to René Kollo's *Parsifal*. This is early in his career before his tone coarsened and a beat obtruded in his vocal production. Sometimes a gritty, “grabbing” quality mars his singing but for the most part he sounds youthful and naïve, with good legato. The sadly short-lived Zoltán Kéléman is a sinister, incisive Klingsor, bringing an enormous range of expression to his characterisation and almost over-doing it, and even the minor roles feature some star – or soon-to-be star – names, such as Kiri Te Kanawa and Lucia Popp; their contributions are audibly prominent and individual among the seductive and sickly-sweet Flowermaidens, who make the best team on record. The chorus is wonderful on every level, too, but the Vienna Boys at the end of Act are especially ethereal.

This might not touch the mystic heights Karajan achieves but so much here is right and absorbing that it must make anyone's shortlist even if, like me, you'd prefer a more robust and pharyngeal Amfortas than DFD can provide.

Herbert Kegel – 1975 (live; stereo) Berlin Classics; Brilliant
Orchestra - Rundfunk Sinfonie Orchester Leipzig
Chorus - Rundfunk Chor Leipzig - Rundfunk Chor Berlin - St Thomaner Chor Leipzig

Amfortas - Theo Adam
Titurel - Fred Teschler
Gurnemanz - Ulrik Cold
Parsifal - René Kollo
Klingsor - Reid Bunger
Kundry - Gisela Schröter
Alto Stimme - Ingeborg Springer
Knappe 1 - Elisabeth Breul
Knappe 2 - Gisela Pohl
Knappe 3 - Horst Gebhardt
Knappe 4 - Hans-Jürgen Wachsmut
Blumenmädchen 1 - Elisabeth Breul
Blumenmädchen 2 - Regina Werner
Blumenmädchen 3 - Gisela Pohl
Blumenmädchen 4 - Hermi Ambros
Blumenmädchen 5 - Helga Termer
Blumenmädchen 6 - Ilse Ludwig(-Jahns)
Ritter 1 - Horst Gebhardt
Ritter 2 - Hermann Christian Polster

A *Parsifal* which is nearly forty-five years old and recorded in the old East Germany with a cast and conductor nowhere near as starry as rival versions - can this really be worth considering as a first choice? Perhaps not, especially when pitted against the majesty and might of established classic versions by Knappertsbusch, Karajan, Solti and Kubelik but I am convinced that any devotee of Wagner's last masterpiece will want to hear and own it, as it offers a true "Gesamtkunstwerk" with an unrivalled sense of unity and purpose, unified by the vision of a conductor prepared to eschew the

increasingly "spiritual" approach and look instead for the dramatic thrust *Parsifal* can generate when unhampered by a quasi-religious reverence.

That is not to say that this account is rushed or perfunctory; the important dialogues such as that between Parsifal and Kundry are given proper weight and it is mainly the choral and orchestral "liturgical" passages which are given greater spring and impetus. Hence the whole performance takes a mere three hours and forty minutes - the shortest on record. This was a live concert, so there are a few coughs and the minor irritation of a conductor who sings along with the Flowemaids; otherwise this is sonically superb for its date. Furthermore, it is sumptuously packaged on only three CDs with very full notes, history, synopsis, biographies, photos and a German libretto in a faux-leather slip-case, for a bargain price on Berlin Classics and even cheaper if you buy the no-frills Brilliant label set.

Of course, none of this would be of any account if the singing and playing were sub-standard. However, the Leipzig Radio Orchestra is remarkably good; just occasionally a little wiry in the strings and typically grainy in the woodwind but extraordinarily expressive and responsive to Kegel's subtle variations in phrasing and tempi. I do not say that any of the singers here is better than those on more celebrated recordings but this is another of those "the whole is better than the sum of its parts" phenomena.

Ulrik Cold is decidedly too light of voice compared with the majestic, organ-toned Kurt Moll but he sings so intelligently and sensitively, making Gurnemanz far less of an old bore or buffer. René Kollo is slightly drier of voice than of yore but he is never less than involved and affecting and he does not bleat or scoop. Reid Bunger's Klingsor is vocally apt and craven, even if he is no Hermann Uhde. Theo Adam is a bit rocky to start with but his Amfortas is something of a tour de force, horrible yet paradoxically vocally beautiful in his agony. The Titurel is suitably firm and grave and the Flowermaids vibrant and alluring of tone. More controversial is Gisela Schröder; personally, I like her dark, nervous, slightly tremulous soprano which manages to suggest simultaneously remorse, vulnerability and dangerous, erotic passion - and she is another excellent vocal actor. She doesn't quite nail the famous drop of almost two octaves on "lachte" but she is truly chilling as Kundry.

If you like this "sacred opera", you can surely risk trying this version which offers so much quality at so low a price; you will not have heard another quite like it.

The super-bargain "Brilliant" label has picked up on what was already a bargain on "Berlin Classics" and made it available at an even more ridiculously economical price. The difference, however, is that there will be no libretto or indeed anything much beyond cast and track lists.

Rafael Kubelik – 1980 (radio broadcast; digital) Arts Archives
Orchestra - Symphonieorchester des Bayerischen Rundfunks
Chorus - Chor des Bayerischen Rundfunks - Tölzer Knabenchor

Amfortas - Bernd Weikl
Titurel - Matti Salminen
Gurnemanz - Kurt Moll
Parsifal - James King
Klingsor - Franz Mazura
Kundry - Yvonne Minton
Alto Stimme – Jukia Falk
Knappe 1 – Regina Marheineke
Knappe 2 – Claudia Hellmann
Knappe 3 - Helmut Holzapfel

Knappe 4 – Karl Heinz Eichler
Blumenmädchen 1 – Lucia Popp
Blumenmädchen 2 – Carmen Reppel
Blumenmädchen 3 – Suzanne Sonnenschein
Blumenmädchen 4 – Marianne Seibel
Blumenmädchen 5 – Marga Schiml
Blumenmädchen 6 – Doris Soffel
Ritter 1 – Norbert Orth
Ritter 2 – Roland Bracht

I thought that the Karajan was unbeatable until I discovered this recording, long held in the DG vaults for reasons of petty jealousies and politicking. It is superior to every other account by virtue of Kubelik's masterly pacing; he achieves both a spiritual dimension even beyond (what now seems now, by comparison) Karajan's exquisitely played and rather more polished achievement.

Kurt Moll possessed surely the most beautiful post-war Wagnerian bass and he is caught here in his absolute prime; there is more nuance, more resonance and more drama than in his slightly later assumption of the role with Karajan. The orchestra are superb and although other reviewers have found the sound wanting, I do not; it seems to me incomparably clear and spacious. Again, some reviewers have found fault with the singing; I find that Minton's Kundry, one or two strained top notes apart, achieves the perfect balance between vulnerability and animal passion. King achieves the miracle of making believable Parsifal's transition from boyish oaf to a hero, enlightened by compassion; he is very careful in how he enunciates and inflects the text and sings both softly and heroically. Frank Mazura's Klingsor sounds uncannily like Gustav Neidlinger's Alberich in the famous Solti *Ring* - and that is meant to be a high compliment. The Flowermaidens, headed by Lucia Popp, are a seductive bunch; perhaps the only slight disappointment comes from Weikl's rather exterior Amfortas, but his was a fine voice at that time - not too much of the bleat which now intrudes - and he makes a fine job of the three climactic utterances of "Erbarmen" in his big aria.

I still miss the sheer beauty of van Dam in Karajan's set, or perhaps the heft of London - a different approach from van Dam's inward, lyrical interpretation, but mightily impressive, nonetheless - but as a whole this recording is by far the most moving, authoritative and absorbing of this towering masterpiece.

Herbert von Karajan – 1980 (studio; digital) DG

Orchestra - Berliner Philharmoniker
Chorus - Deutsche Oper (Berlin)

Amfortas - José van Dam
Titirel - Victor von Halem
Gurnemanz - Kurt Moll
Parsifal - Peter Hofmann
Klingsor - Siegmund Nimsgern
Kundry - Dunja Vejzovic
Alto Stimme - Hanna Schwarz
Knappe 1 - Marjon Lambriks
Knappe 2 - Anne Gjevang
Knappe 3 - Heiner Hopfner
Knappe 4 - Georg Tichy
Blumenmädchen 1 - Barbara Hendricks
Blumenmädchen 2 - Janet Perry

Blumenmädchen 3 - Inga Nielsen
 Blumenmädchen 4 - Audrey Michael
 Blumenmädchen 5 - Doris Soffel
 Blumenmädchen 6 - Rohangiz Yachmi
 Ritter 1 - Claes H. Ahnsjö
 Ritter 2 - Kurt Rydl

This was the first recording of *Parsifal* I ever listened to on its release back in 1981 and it has always set a gold standard for me acoustically, if not artistically, too. Certainly it leads the field sonically amongst stereo recordings; as much as I love versions by Barenboim and Jordan, and am happy to go from the extremes of Levine's marmoreal timing to the propulsion of Boulez and Kegel, when it comes to choosing one desert-island stereo recording this earliest digital account by Karajan remains my first choice alongside Kubelik. The spatial effects of the tolling bells and the distant boys' choir up in the dome of the abbey are extraordinarily atmospheric and there are several spine-tingling moments in this reading which are unequalled; I think particularly of the Transformation Music, the Good Friday Music and the moment of Parsifal's baptism when Gurnemanz intones the anthem "Gesegnet sei". Karajan achieves a cumulative intensity and, yes, a sense of spirituality which no other conductor, not even my beloved Knappertsbusch, engenders. This set was not remastered until its issue recently as part of the big Karajan Opera box; presumably DG saw no reason to do so given the depth, richness and balance of the sound achieved by Karajan's regular team of producers and engineers headed by Michael Glotz and Günter Hermanns. Oddly, nowhere in the booklet, despite its comprehensiveness, including many photos, essays and a libretto, are the recording dates and venue given: they are December 1979 and January/April/July 1980 in the Philharmonie.

Speaking of Kna, my favourite among his many live recordings is the last 1964 performance from Bayreuth with Jon Vickers on the Orfeo label, but that is, sadly, even at this late stage, in mono and this is an opera which ideally demands that time and space be conveyed via the stereo medium. Furthermore, no orchestra rivals the Klang and virtuosity of the BPO under Karajan at their peak.

Some of the singing here is ideal, too: Kurt Mol's warm, resonant, buzzing sound effortlessly conjures up the nobility and avuncular wisdom of Gurnemanz; his dark bass is far steadier than Ludwig Weber, never gusty or wobbly, and more similar to my other favourite bass in this role, Robert Lloyd. He is matched by José van Dam's agonisingly beautiful singing of Amfortas; he does not have George London's power but his intensity of his suffering, when conveyed in such a lovely tone, is almost disturbing. The other low male voice is Siegmund Nimsgern, who uses the slight break in his vocal production to suggest that Klingsor is himself cracked. Controversy regarding Karajan's casting usually centres on Dunja Vejzovic and Peter Hofmann. It is true that she is tremulous and sometimes shrill but her vocal acting is superb and she effectively conveys Kundry's constant hysteria and torment more effectively than any other singer apart from Callas in the Italian version under Gui and Yvonne Minton, another seasoned Wagnerian who is unafraid to writhe vocally and scream. Hofmann's tenor is always threatening to begin wobbling but it is still mostly under control here, even if a times you can hear the strain; he is certainly no worse than, say, Kollo, and nowhere near as bad as his detractors claim, even if he is no Vickers. His "Amfortas! Die Wunde!" is actually very good: clean, clear and heroic. It is not even a very long part, in any case. The supporting cast, headed by an imposing Titirel from Victor van Halem, is very good; I love Barbara Hendricks' sultry sex-kitten of a First Flowermaiden.

Perfect this is not but it is still a deeply satisfying, profoundly moving account in first rate sound.

Armin Jordan – 1981 (film track; digital) Erato
 Orchestra - Orchestre Philharmonique de Monte Carlo
 Chorus - Prague Philharmonic Chorus

Amfortas - Wolfgang Schöne
Titirel - Hans Tschammer
Gurnemanz - Robert Lloyd
Parsifal - Reiner Goldberg
Klingsor - Aage Haugland
Kundry - Yvonne Minton
Alto Stimme - Gertrud Oertel
Knappe 1 - Tamara Herz
Knappe 2 - Hanna Schaer
Knappe 3 - Christer Bladin
Knappe 4 - Michael Roeder
Blumenmädchen 1 - Britt Marie Aruhn
Blumenmädchen 2 - Eva Saurova
Blumenmädchen 3 - Jocelyne Chamonin
Blumenmädchen 4 - Tamara Herz
Blumenmädchen 5 - Hanna Schaer
Blumenmädchen 6 - Gertrud Oertel
Ritter 1 - Paul Frey
Ritter 2 - Gilles Cachemaille

I was pleased to see this 1982 recording reissued more cheaply, as I have never been interested in the highly controversial film version by Hans-Jürgen Syberberg for which this is the soundtrack, nor am I especially interested in opera on DVD in general, as I prefer either to be present at a live performance or to use my own mind's eye to supply the visuals. I was, however, very interested in the cast and conductor assembled here to make a recording to celebrate the hundredth anniversary of Wagner's death, as it includes some very fine singers.

It is true that the Orchestre Philharmonique de Monte-Carlo cannot rival the Berlin Philharmonic and other great orchestras which have recorded this masterpiece with Karajan, Solti, Kubelik, Knappertsbusch and Krauss; they lack the sumptuousness, depth and virtuosity to give the orchestral passages the kind of sheen and impact a superior band imparts, but they are very well directed by Jordan and are by no means negligible in their dedication and professionalism. Nor is the Prague Philharmonic Choir to be sniffed at; unlikely though it seems, they sing with idiomatic conviction; the Knabenchor singing from the dome sounds pure, ethereal and very well-tuned. I have read complaints about muddy, distant sound; this is early digital and I don't think it has been remastered, but apart from some very faint hiss, it sounds very good to me.

Jordan has a superb sense of pacing and shape; no undue lingering, but nor is there any unseemly haste and the great orchestral set pieces such as the end of Act 1, the Transformation and Good Friday music all make their mark without quite reaching the apotheosis such as Karajan achieves in his recording a couple of years earlier.

The biggest weaknesses here are vocal, beginning with the rather exterior and unsubtle Amfortas of Wolfgang Schöne; his vibrato is too broad and both his tone and expression ordinary compared with two such different, but equally successful interpreters as José van Dam and George London. In fact, a case could be made for every singer here being surpassed by another elsewhere, but as a team they make up an excellent ensemble. My main motive in wanting to acquire this set was to hear a favourite singer in Robert Lloyd singing one of the great Wagnerian bass roles. I grew up listening to Lloyd as the resident principal bass at Covent Garden and have never understood those who do not respond to his rich, resonant sound, or call it "nasal". He is relatively young here, but sings with great authority,

his oiled-teak bass rolling out magnificently. He is perhaps to be compared only with Kurt Moll for sheer beauty and incisiveness of voice, although he does not use the text with quite the same subtlety. Reiner Goldberg has just the right bright, boyish tenor sound and acts well with his voice; he is easier on the ear than either Hofmann or Windgassen even if he lacks the necessary heft at climactic points - whereas the great Ramon Vinay for Krauss sounds too mature and hefty. Yvonne Minton makes a characterful, vibrant Kundry; her mezzo is intrinsically beautiful and her "Ich sah das Kind" is especially tender and poignant, though perhaps her younger self is even better in the Kubelik set. Aage Haugland's febrile bass with its quick vibrato is very apt to portray the hyper-reactive Klingsor, even if he cannot rival Hermann Uhde in this role.

The supporting cast and minor roles are more than adequate, although again, other recordings variously feature better. Particularly good are the Knights, Paul Frey and Gilles Cachemaille, both at the outset of distinguished careers - and bass-baritone Cachemaille as a bass here sounds more impressive to me than as the baritone he was to become.

In sum, a *Parsifal* which is more than the sum of its parts. I certainly would not place it above my own favourites in Karajan, Solti and Kubelik and others will cling to their Knappertsbusch or Krauss recordings, but this one still does Wagner justice and is particularly recommendable for those who are fans of the singers in question and like a fleeter, leaner *Parsifal*.

Reginald Goodall – 1984 (studio; digital) EMI

Orchestra - Welsh National Opera

Chorus - Welsh National Opera

Amfortas - Phillip Joll

Titirel - David Gwynne

Gurnemanz - Donald McIntyre

Parsifal - Warren Ellsworth

Klingsor - Nicholas Folwell

Kundry - Waltraud Meier

Alto Stimme - Kathryn Harries

Knappe 1 - Mary Davies

Knappe 2 - Margaret Morgan

Knappe 3 - John Harris

Knappe 4 - Neville Ackerman

Blumenmädchen 1 - Elizabeth Ritchie

Blumenmädchen 2 - Christine Teare

Blumenmädchen 3 - Kathryn Harries

Blumenmädchen 4 - Rita Cullis

Blumenmädchen 5 - Elizabeth Collier

Blumenmädchen 6 - Catriona Bell

Ritter 1 - Timothy German

Ritter 2 - William Mackie

The mid-80's saw the two longest recordings of *Parsifal* by Goodall and Levine. Goodall here seems to me to be the more successful practitioner of the patient approach; the WNO plays beautifully and Goodall always had a gift for leisurely yet portentous phrasing so that the sonority and rich harmonisation of Wagner's music are constantly to the fore. The cast is generally strong, especially the unusually young-sounding yet resonant Gurnemanz of Donald McIntyre, who had long been coached by Goodall to maximise the expressive impact of both the music and the text; his narratives are vivid, despite the slow pace, and his voice beautiful even if he lacks some of the weight of Hotter, Moll or Lloyd. I do not

find the wiry tone and incipient tremolo of Waltraud Meier's Kundry especially seductive compared with forebears such as Mödl or Callas and Philip Joll's Amfortas is problematic for some ears: his vibrato is too broad, approaching a wobble, loosening more under pressure, and he over-emphasises both consonants and the emotive content of the text but his contribution is by no means ruinous. Warren Ellsworth, sadly doomed to succumb to lymphoma at only 42, does not make his entrance until nearly an hour has elapsed; he sounds youthful but his tenor has an odd vocal palette in that it shifts from sounding baritone in the lower half of the voice to a more piercing timbre in its upper regions - and the frequent glottal break is uncongenial. David Gwynne's smoothly sung Titirel is recorded too far back in the aural perspective to make much impact but his interventions are atmospheric. Nicholas Folwell's Klingsor lacks the heft and bite of the best in this role, such as Hermann Uhde, George London and Thomas Stewart but he has a finely focused voice and generates some intensity; he's not much helped in his ranting scenes by Goodall's flaccid tempi. The Flowermaidens and chorus are excellent.

Some would prefer Goodall's live 1971 performance at Covent Garden as having greater impetus and in part a superior cast in Norman Bailey as Amfortas and Jon Vickers a formidable Parsifal, but that has a dull Gurnemanz and is in radio broadcast stereo sound, rather than studio digital. Ultimately, for all its merit and interest, there are too many flaws, idiosyncrasies and passages where momentum is lost here to make this a prime recommendation.

James Levine – 1985 (live composite; digital) Philips
Orchestra - Bayreuth Festival
Chorus - Bayreuth Festival

Amfortas - Simon Estes
Titirel - Matti Salminen
Gurnemanz - Hans Sotin
Parsifal - Peter Hofmann
Klingsor - Franz Mazura
Kundry - Waltraud Meier
Alto Stimme - Ruthild Engert(-Ely)
Knappe 1 - Ruthild Engert(-Ely)
Knappe 2 - Sabine Fues
Knappe 3 - Helmut Pampuch
Knappe 4 - Peter Maus
Blumenmädchen 1 - Deborah Sasson
Blumenmädchen 2 - Susan Roberts
Blumenmädchen 3 - Minika Schmitt
Blumenmädchen 4 - Alison Browner
Blumenmädchen 5 - Hilde Leidland
Blumenmädchen 6 - Margit Neubauer
Ritter 1 - Michael Pabst
Ritter 2 - Matthias Hölle

The weaknesses here in James Levine's first "live composite" Bayreuth recording are his agonisingly etiolated tempi and relatively weak cast - however, for me, he gets away with slow timings in the similarly etiolated but somehow more "vertical" 1991/2 studio recording. The best thing here by far is Hans Sotin's beautifully sung, if somewhat detached, Gurnemanz, but whatever sheen there was on Peter Hoffman's tenor when he recorded the role for Karajan has worn off and he is here decidedly gritty and blaring. Mazur and Estes make estimable contributions but once again, I do not find that Meier's light-voiced Kundry has the necessary power and allure, so I pass over this recording.

Daniel Barenboim - 1989-90 (studio; digital) Teldec

Orchestra - Berliner Philharmoniker

Chorus - Berliner Staatsoper

Amfortas - José van Dam

Titurel - John Tomlinson

Gurnemanz - Matthias Hölle

Parsifal - Siegfried Jerusalem

Klingsor - Günter von Kannen

Kundry - Waltraud Meier

Alto Stimme - Waltraud Meier

Knappe 1 - Marianne Rørholm

Knappe 2 - Annette Küttenbaum

Knappe 3 - Helmut Pampuch

Knappe 4 - Peter Maus

Blumenmädchen 1 - Edith Wiens

Blumenmädchen 2 - Constance Hauman

Blumenmädchen 3 - Daniela Bechly

Blumenmädchen 4 - Hilde Liedland

Blumenmädchen 5 - Pamela Coburn

Blumenmädchen 6 - Sally Burgess

Ritter 1 - Kurt Schreibmayer

Ritter 2 - Cornelius Hauptmann

Kurt Moll remains my beau idéal of a Gurnemanz and therein lies the rub here with this recording: Matthias Hölle is undoubtedly a fine singer, grave and steady but clearly in the lighter-voiced mould and in comparison with the greatest, he is, well, just ordinary, without Hotter's psychological profundity and warm humanity or Moll's sheer, purring fluency of voice. Similarly, Jerusalem is singing to the limits of his voice and is somewhat dry of tone at climactic points, nor does he provide the impassioned involvement of Vickers or even James King at his best - but I have no real complaint about him. Otherwise, this is still a first-rate cast, with a young Waltraud Meier providing a subtle and intelligent Kundry, von Kannen a rather hollow, dry-voiced but clearly psychotic and very dramatic Klingsor and van Dam repeating his peerlessly vocalised Amfortas, combining beauty of sound with desperate anguish and perhaps even an enhanced maturity since his recording for Karajan.

Speaking of which, this is the BPO just post-Karajan and it retains the aureate glow he cultivated in them over the years. The orchestral passages, especially the Transformation Music and Preludes, are simply stunning and enhanced by the acoustic of the Jesus-Christus-Kirche being so roundly caught by the engineers. I love Barenboim's trick of implementing barely perceptible rallentandos just before the climax. He has here shaken off the sclerotic tempi which marred his Bayreuth performances and which caused controversy; this is a "normally" paced "Parsifal" and his manner is closest to Karajan's hieratic treatment of this work as a combination of staged ritual and intense drama.

It would be churlish indeed to denigrate to a recording which gets so much right and is clearly more than the sum of its parts, even if it not my first choice. The curious, tolerant of a more propulsive approach to Parsifal, could also sample the super-bargain Kegel and the Boulez, while, for a wild ride, you could also try the heavily cut version starring a surprisingly apt Callas, Christoff, Panerai and Baldelli singing in Italian under Gui.

(NB: there is no libretto in the bargain re-issue.)

James Levine - 1991-92(studio; digital) DG

Orchestra - Metropolitan Opera

Chorus - Metropolitan Opera

Amfortas - James Morris

Titirel - Jan-Hendrik Rootering

Gurnemanz - Kurt Moll

Parsifal - Plácido Domingo

Klingsor - Ekkehard Wlaschina

Kundry - Jessye Norman

Alto Stimme - Hitomi Katagari

Knappe 1 - Heidi Grant Murphy

Knappe 2 - Jane Bunnell

Knappe 3 - Paul Groves

Knappe 4 - Anthony Laciura

Blumenmädchen 1 - Heidi Grant Murphy

Blumenmädchen 2 - Kaaren Erickson

Blumenmädchen 3 - Jane Bunnell

Blumenmädchen 4 - Korliss Uecker

Blumenmädchen 5 - Joyce Guyer

Blumenmädchen 6 - Wendy White

Ritter 1 - Allan Glassman

Ritter 2 - Julien Robbins

I first came to this recording with some trepidation, having read some scathing reviews and knowing that James Levine's earlier recording of "Parsifal" with Bayreuth forces was a fairly turgid and under-cast affair - but this is decidedly different, with a much more "vertical" dimension.

Levine is America's greatest conductor since Bernstein, responsible for revitalising the Met and some spectacularly good recordings, yet he consistently received a bad press from some quarters, especially in Britain; the recent revelations concerning scandals in his private life have not helped. His tenure with the Munich Philharmonic was very successful and again produced some wonderful but undersold recordings and he has for decades been a guest conductor at the Salzburg Festival. He is a master of Brahms, Schumann, Mahler, Schoenberg and Wagner and a wonderful accompanist to Lieder singers. So let's not condescend to accuse him of not knowing what he is doing. If you don't like his approach to this work, it is because you do not see it as a mystical ritual but need more propulsion to stop yourself dozing off. Some people just don't get *Parsifal* - and they are the critics most likely to sneer at his interpretative choices here.

It is true that in crude terms of timings this is slow - but not in the same way that the 1985 Bayreuth performance dragged. It, in any case, was hampered by its casting, whereas here we have an array of voices to savour and which can sustain a glowing tone no matter how slow Levine's beat. In any case, it is quite untrue that it is uniformly leisurely throughout: the moment when Kundry reveals to Parsifal that his mother Herzeleide is dead is highly dramatic and the opening to Act 2 with Klingsor's ravings and the seduction attempt by the Flowermaidens is full of movement and tension. Levine certainly pushes it with Kundry's narrative "Ich sah das Kind" but he has the plush, sumptuous vehicle of Jessye Norman's dramatic soprano to ride the hypnotically etiolated beat - and what a beautiful sound she

makes, even if she sacrifices characterisation to producing sheer, glorious tone. The moment in Act 2 when she calls out to Parsifal by name is absolutely magical, the voice resonating nobly for what seems an age, like that of a disembodied goddess.

Domingo, too, is the most mellifluous of Parsifals, obviously not a Heldentenor as such but bringing Italianate warmth and glow to the role, singing in much improved German and rarely exhibiting any strain. Just as he made a fine job of Siegmund, Parsifal suits him. I have never been keen on James Morris's nasal bass-baritone but he sounds better here than I have ever before heard him, even if he cannot rival José van Dam or George London for either anguish or beauty of voice. Ekkehard Wlaschiha is an excellent Klingsor, his slightly gruff, "evil-sounding" baritone reminding me of Gabriel Bacquier.

This is the third and last of Kurt Moll's recorded assumptions of Gurnemanz and the voice is still in finest condition, just a little drier on top but incomparable for steadiness, richness and subtlety of expression; I am never bored by his interpretation of an infamously risky role and as far as I am concerned, his is still the greatest Gurnemanz, as much as I greatly admire Hotter, Lloyd and Christoff.

Yet for all that the singers are stellar, the real star of the recording is the Metropolitan Orchestra, which plays with extraordinary warmth and virtuosity - a testament to Levine's insistence upon unanimity and refinement. The Good Friday Magic music is exquisitely played: grand, stately and suffused with an underlying joy. The DG sound is the best I have heard: perfectly balanced and solid throughout the range of frequencies.

I do not say that this recording replaces Karajan, Solti or Kubelik in my affections but it is certainly worthy to be considered alongside them. None is perfect but all are glorious.

Recommendations

Live mono: Knappertsbusch – 1964; Cluytens – 1960; (Gui 1950 and Leinsdorf Act 2 1938 as supplements only)

Live stereo: Kubelik – 1980*; Knappertsbusch – 1962

Studio stereo/digital: Karajan – 1980; Georg Solti – 1971-72

* First choice

Ralph Moore