

Puccini's *Manon Lescaut*: A discographical survey
by Ralph Moore

Manon Lescaut, Puccini's third opera, premiered in 1893, was his first big success. However, its origins were not auspicious; the libretto was cobbled together by input from no fewer than seven contributors, including the composer himself, the librettist for his "Big Three", Luigi Illica, his publisher, Ricordi, and the composer of *I Pagliacci*, Leoncavallo. *Manon Lescaut* tells a good, solid story, as previous settings of Abbé Prévost's novel of 1731 had already demonstrated, but the narrative undoubtedly has its flaws and it certainly has some structural weaknesses incurred by the omission of significant events. As a result, the action is rather episodic: for example, we leap from the young lovers' escape to Paris at the end of Act 1 to the start of Act 2 depicting Manon already having ditched des Grieux for the comfort of Geronte's wealth. Motivation is questionable, too; one might wonder why the same Lescaut who in Act 1 was prepared to facilitate Geronte's abduction of his sister supposedly en route to a convent, suddenly in Act 2 feels moved to help reunite his sister with her ex-lover des Grieux - although one might argue that he is moved and convinced by the sincerity of Manon's empty misery as Geronte's trophy. Finally, Puccini resorts to the faintly absurd expedient of inventing a non-existent Louisiana desert as the location for Manon's demise rather than the wilderness depicted in the novel - while Massenet dispensed with the New Orleans episode altogether and has his Manon die more credibly on the road to Le Havre.

Not only was the final libretto the result of some skilful interventionist rescue work by Illica, but the music too, was something of a patchwork, including borrowings from earlier works back to Puccini's student days. Nonetheless, the opera is brimful with good tunes and Puccini's confidence in the potential of his opera was not misplaced; it continues to hold its place in the repertoire. Fully aware of the popularity of Massenet's setting, Puccini could see no problem with following the older composer's example and using more or less the same story (here I quote shamelessly from Wiki):

"Manon is a heroine I believe in and therefore she cannot fail to win the hearts of the public. Why shouldn't there be two operas about Manon? A woman like Manon can have more than one lover." He added, "Massenet feels it as a Frenchman, with powder and minuets. I shall feel it as an Italian, with a desperate passion."

I'm not sure that it is a wholly accurate characterisation of Massenet's version or fair to either composer and perhaps Puccini was being a bit tongue in cheek. This opera is a winning amalgam of Italianate passion and Gallic refinement: in the second Act, for example, Puccini contrasts the rococo elegance and formality of the drawing room with the verismo passion of the lovers' renewed encounter, pitting a baroque musical sensibility against unbridled verismo emotionalism - and the result is captivating rather than incongruous. *Manon Lescaut* begins in an ironic, light-hearted and good-humoured style which is strong on charm but short on sincerity but concludes in a high tragic vein of bleak, honest, brutally frank intensity.

Even though there is a significant role for a baritone as Manon's brother, really this opera depends upon the lovers for its impact; the soprano-tenor pair must be able to encompass both elation and despair. There has been no shortage of star singers prepared to perform and record the opera; Caruso gave the work its Metropolitan Opera debut in 1907 and since then tenor luminaries such as Björling, Di Stefano, Domingo, Pavarotti and Carreras have embraced the role of des Grieux, while Manon has been sung by sopranos of the calibre of Callas, Tebaldi, Olivero, Caballé, Freni and Te Kanawa.

I consider here sixteen recordings in total, including all nine of the studio recordings made in Italian, five live performances, one radio broadcast and a composite live film soundtrack on CD. There are three live recordings featuring the great Magda Olivero as Manon; two of those are on the Opera d'Oro label, the first being from Verona in 1970 with Plácido Domingo in marvellous voice, not yet thirty and thus making an incongruous pairing with a sexagenarian Olivero; the second is with Tucker in Caracas

in 1971. The singing in both is superlative and their dramatic impact unrivalled – perhaps Kiri should have modelled herself more, in her studio recording, on how Olivero lives and animates Manon's torment in Act 4 - but unfortunately the sound in the former is so congested that I must reluctantly discard it as unrecommendable except to die-hard aficionados inured to lousy sonics. The recording of the Caracas performance, however, is in bearable sound, if still hard on the ear, so I have included it here in this survey. Also included is a third live performance with Olivero from Amsterdam in 1964, again in better sound but with considerably less stellar co-singers.

You can drop in on all three of those via YouTube, to hear the phenomenon that was Olivero and decide for yourself. They are perhaps more curiosities than prime recommendations, but I derive great pleasure from them and find myself talking them up as I write. They preserve some remarkable artistry; if only they had been captured on better equipment.

Manon Lescaut has from the start has been quite fortunate on record, making choice difficult. Some consider this to be the tenor's opera, others the soprano's, but there's no shortage of beautifully sung, dramatically successful options, so personal taste in singers must dictate a preferred version. The main difficulty has been in casting a Manon who has the vocal maturity and artistic skill to carry off the demands of the role but still sound like a teenager. No-one has quite succeeded, but some come closer than others. Tenors can, if they choose, simply to "stand and sing" and some, like De Monaco and Tucker, successfully deploy their best "can belto" mode, but Puccini was very specific in his markings and considerable subtlety is required if he is to be obeyed; perhaps the closest we come to the ideal des Grieux may be found in any one or all three of Björling's performances here, two live and one studio-made.

I should add that my MWI colleague Ian Lacey posted [a comparative review](#) of seven audio recordings and the Glyndebourne video version of *Manon Lescaut* back in 2001. My survey complements his and we are by no means much at odds in our conclusions.

The Recordings

Lorenzo Molajoli – 1930 (studio; mono) Arkadia; Quadromania (paired with *Madama Butterfly*)
Orchestra and Chorus - Teatro alla Scala

Manon Lescaut - Maria Zamboni
des Grieux - Francesco Merli
Lescaut - Lorenzo Conati
Geronte - Attilio Bordonali
Edmondo - Giuseppe Nessi
Una voce sola - Anna Masetti-Bassi
L'oste - Aristide Baracchi
Il maestro di ballo - Giuseppe Nessi
Un sergente degli arcieri - Aristide Baracchi
Lampionaio - Giuseppe Nessi
Un comandante di Marina - Natale Villa

I know how tedious are those collectors who bang on about the good old days of singing, but even a cursory listen to this recording is enough to give you pause for thought about just how good the standard of singing and conducting was back in the earlier part of the 20C – once you get over a rather thin, hard-voiced Edmondo, who is Giuseppe Nessi, the first Emperor in *Turandot* and who takes three comprimario roles. Few apologies need to be made for the quality of the – admittedly edgy, quavery - sound, as long as you listen with a pinch of good will. The soloists are very clear and there is only minimum distortion in the ensembles; one soon forgets the venerable age of the recording and is caught up in the sweep of the drama. Merli's fast vibrato and intense, vibrant vocal production were

not to refined British tastes - the Covent Garden critics finished him - but the Italians loved him, as do I. If he were singing today, he would be a superstar.

Maria Zamboni immediately displays the winning combination of a healthy lower register and a clear, ringing tone suggestive of youth. Baritone Lorenzo Conati – wrongly designated in the bargain 4 CD Quadromania issue as tenor – has a nice, clean, resonant voice. Molajoli's direction borders on the hectic and an enthusiastic chorus adds to the zest of proceedings.

Its sonic limitations exclude this from being recommendable except as a supplement for those who enjoy historic accounts but the aficionado will want to hear it.

Giuseppe Antonicelli – 1949 (live; mono) Naxos
Orchestra and Chorus - Metropolitan Opera

Manon Lescaut - Dorothy Kirsten
des Grieux - Jussi Björling
Lescaut - Giuseppe Valdengo
Geronte - Salvatore Baccaloni
Edmondo - Thomas Hayward
Una voce sola - Jean Madeira
L'oste - George Cehanovsky
Il maestro di ballo - Alessio De Paolis
Un sergente degli arcieri - Clifford Harvuot
Lampionaio - Paul Franke
Un comandante di Marina - Osie Hawkins

Neatly cleaned up, although still susceptible to a bit of blare and distortion, the mono sound here is acceptable, allowing us to hear not only Jussi Björling in his youthful prime but also a cast of distinguished Met regulars, including Jean Madeira as the madrigal soloist, an elegant Thomas Hayward as Edmondo and various other luminaries. Björling was new to the role of des Grieux here – the only other new role he learned after leaving the Royal Swedish Opera was Don Carlo - having made his operatic debut as the Lamplighter in *Manon Lescaut* a decade earlier. He is virility incarnate without being too macho for a lovestruck aristo, and you could hardly find two singers better suited to their roles than Valdengo and Baccaloni. Dorothy Kirsten has a pretty, rather shallow soprano and is one of the few singers able to sound authentically fresh and alluring; she has some approximation of a lower register to call on in her desperate last scene and is no mean actor. She could surely make a bit more of the deeper emotion in “In quelle trine morbide” but is slightly harried there by Antonicelli's swift tempo, even though her line is beautiful.

I am not at all familiar with conductor Antonicelli; he generally directs in a brusque, no-nonsense manner typical of the era.

The brittle sound and the existence of two more recordings featuring Björling prevent this from being a primary recommendation but it affords much pleasure.

Federico Del Cupolo – 1953 (radio broadcast; mono) Warner Fonit; Cantus
Orchestra and Chorus - RAI Torino

Manon Lescaut - Clara Petrella
des Grieux - Vasco Campagnano
Lescaut - Saturno Meletti
Geronte - Pier Luigi Latinucci
Edmondo - Tullio Panè

Una voce sola - Ortensia Beggiato
 L'oste - Mario Anselmi
 Il maestro di ballo - Tommaso Soley
 Un sergente degli arcieri - Piero Poldi
 Lampionaio - Tullio Panè
 Un comandante di Marina - Mario Anselmi

The first pleasant surprise is that, despite being a radio broadcast rather than a studio recording, this has rather better mono sound than the RCA recording with Björling the following year. None of the names in the cast here is especially famous, with the possible exception of Clara Petrella, who should in any case be better known and remembered today. The tenor, Vasco Campagnano, made three recordings for Cetra and is considerably better here than he was as Dick Johnson. There he sounded under-powered, but here he is, if anything, a bit strenuous and lachrymose. However, like Del Monaco, what he lacks in subtlety he makes up for with energy, attack and volume and he is certainly passionate. Bass-baritone Saturno Meletti was another Cetra regular and recorded an excellent Ford to Taddei's Falstaff; I like his fast vibrato and genial, incisive manner. I do not know the singer who tackles Edmondo but he has a neat, attractive voice and is a good foil to Campagnano; he also doubles up as the Lamplighter. The Geronte is a bit weak – after all, Verdi asked for a “basso brillante” in the role - but not damagingly so and he is characterful.

Petrella, yet another established Cetra artist, is clearly the star here, for all Campagnano's histrionics. She has an “old-school” voice, clear and even throughout its two well-developed registers and sounds young without pouting or wheedling – in fact, no other *Manon Lescaut* impersonates our eponymous heroine so successfully, but Petrella was renowned as an outstanding verismo singer-actress. Her vocal technique, too, is so perfect as to make the listener forget it and she pierces the heart of the drama in her big death scene.

I love the swing and release of the conducting here – again, I know next to nothing about Del Cupolo except that he had an inordinately long career and is at the helm of a couple of vintage recordings I esteem. He specialised in opera and it shows. The Intermezzo is the most passionate of any I have heard, including Sinopoli; indeed, the whole performance burns with conviction.

Francesco Molinari-Pradelli – 1954 (studio; stereo) Decca
 Orchestra and Chorus - Santa Cecilia

Manon Lescaut - Renata Tebaldi
 des Grieux - Mario Del Monaco
 Lescaut - Mario Borriello
 Geronte - Fernando Corena
 Edmondo - Piero De Palma
 Una voce sola - Luisa Ribacchi
 L'oste - Antonio Sacchetti
 Il maestro di ballo - Adelio Zagonora
 Un sergente degli arcieri - Antonio Sacchetti
 Lampionaio - Angelo Mercuriali
 Un comandante di Marina - Dario Caselli

It had been a while since I had heard this recording when I began this survey, but I have to say that revisiting it reminded me that it really is a knock-out. Despite a little rawness or shrillness on the odd top note from Tebaldi and the occasional roughness in Del Monaco's delivery, they are both in pristine voice; time and again I found myself thinking, “That's what I call operatic singing”. It's true that Del Monaco is too stentorian in his opening arioso “Tra voi belle, brune e bionde” – hardly as per Puccini's marking “Con grazia” – and Björling finds much more poetry in des Grieux's music, but we can revel in

the sheer sound Del Monaco makes and he is by no means without feeling. The supporting cast is a very strong bunch of regulars and Molinari-Pradelli strikes me as very much at home on the Puccinian idiom, as good as Serafin, if less inclined to employ rubato and more intent on generating propulsion. Tebaldi never had Callas' acuity with the text, but she simply has so much voice; "In quelle trine morbide" is a delicate, then full-voiced, highpoint of her considerable art. Del Monaco's tenor is decidedly more resonant, effulgent and secure than Di Stefano, who was beginning to over-sing by 1957. Neither Tebaldi nor Callas sounds especially like a headstrong teenager but that is an almost impossible requirement for this role.

On balance, for singing per se, I don't think this vintage recording has ever been surpassed, even if others have found more subtlety and expressivity in the use of the words.

Ionel Perlea – 1954 (studio; mono) RCA
Orchestra and Chorus - Teatro dell'Opera di Roma

Manon Lescaut - Licia Albanese
des Grieux - Jussi Björling
Lescaut - Robert Merrill
Geronte - Franco Calabrese
Edmondo - Mario Carlin
Una voce sola - Anna Maria Rota
L'oste - Plinio Clabassi
Il maestro di ballo - Mario Carlin
Un sergente degli arcieri - Franco Calabrese
Lampionaio - Mario Carlin
Un comandante di Marina - Plinio Clabassi

The obvious caveat here is the harsh, mono sound – all the more of a pity given that the contemporaneous Decca recording was already being made in good stereo. The other drawback is the mature sound of Licia Albanese's Manon; she can sound a bit like des Grieux's auntie although she was only in her mid-forties here. That is a disadvantage she shares with Caballé but much of her singing is rich, warm and characterful; she was among the most expressive and intense of singers. Both "In quelle trine morbide" and "Sola, perduta, abbandonata" are suffused with deep emotion and the presence of a developed lower register and singing top notes help to explain why she sang successfully in a career spanning over five decades. One might equally argue that Robert Merrill's magnificently resonant baritone is too heroic for Lescaut, who is in fact something of a weak and flaky individual, being first being prepared to pack his sister off to a life as a high-class prostitute rather than deliver her to the convent, then has a change of heart only to be instrumental in her downfall when she is caught absconding alongside des Grieux with the jewels given her by her elderly keeper. Still, as well as singing marvellously, Merrill is humorous and ironic in his exchanges; there really is no better Lescaut to be heard.

Nonetheless, as soon as we hear the leading male voices here, we are in operatic heaven, peaky sonics notwithstanding; the listener's ears prick up every time Merrill opens his mouth, Mario Carlin is a melodious Edmondo and basses Franco Calabrese and Plinio Clabassi are rich and sonorous; furthermore, all four combine to take on the other minor roles, too. Above all those, however, soars the virile, plangent tenor of Jussi Björling, as winning a des Grieux as any on record.

Perlea's conducting is fluid and affectionate, managing to enhance subtleties without drawing attention to itself.

I hesitate to identify this as a front-runner but if you are tolerant of its sonic limitations there is none better – unless it is one of the other two, vintage recordings starring Björling, as anyone who loves this opera will want to hear him sing it.

Dimitri Mitropoulos – 1956 (live; mono) Melodram; West Hill Archives; Walhall; Pristine
Orchestra and Chorus - Metropolitan Opera

Manon Lescaut - Licia Albanese
des Grieux - Jussi Björling
Lescaut - Frank Guarrera
Geronte - Fernando Corena
Edmondo - Thomas Hayward
Una voce sola - Rosalind Elias
L'oste - George Cehanovsky
Il maestro di ballo - Alessio De Paolis
Un sergente degli arcieri – Calvin Marsh
Lampionaio - James McCracken
Un comandante di Marina - Osie Hawkins

Newly released by Pristine in their splendid XR remastering, this recording has claims to superiority over the famous studio recording of two years previously, especially now that its refurbished sound allows us to hear more vividly the drama and immediacy of a live, stage performance which clearly caught fire. Mitropoulos always brought a special energy to his conducting – he brings a swing and lilt to the score like no other conductor - and his cast is inspired. However, his account of the famous Intermezzo is a bit choppy and lacks the grand Romantic thrust brought to it by Sinopoli and Levine – and of course the mono sound, however well refurbished, robs it of velour.

Fine artist though Met regular Frank Guarrera was, his substitution for Robert Merrill must give some cause for regret, as Merrill was an incomparable Lescaut in that studio version under Perlea. Nonetheless, the supporting cast is really first-rate and features half a dozen famous – or soon to be famous – names, like Rosalind Elias and James McCracken – very noticeable as an Otello-voiced Lamplighter. Thomas Hayward is once more an elegant Edmondo, as he was in the 1949 recording, Corena is a burly, vivid Geronte and Björling is in gleaming, voice, as he was right up until his untimely death. For some reason, although this is two years after their studio recording, both he and Albanese sound more youthful here, live on stage, although she cannot shake off a certain matronliness of tone, intrinsic to her voice – but what a lovely “In quelle trine morbide” she sings, earning deserved applause. She has such great technique, too: pinging top notes, secure trills, lovely integration of registers – a proper singer. You can hear just how big their voices are when they reach the climax of their duets; neither drowns out the other, both are very audible and it’s thrilling.

There is not so great a difference between what we hear in 1956 and the 1954 studio version that I would urge anyone to replace that with this – both are splendid but certain things like Björling’s top notes are even more striking live and I like the extra Romantic indulgence Mitropoulos brings to proceedings. It is also gratifying to hear the ecstatic audience reaction to highlights like “Donna non vidi mai” even if they do interrupt the action – and I know some people like the extra atmosphere imparted by the inclusion of Milton Cross’ announcements. On the other hand, the clarity of the studio recording and Merrill’s presence might swing it for others. Just make sure you hear one of the three souvenirs we have of one of Björling’s greatest, favourite roles.

Angelo Questa – 1956 (live composite audio recording of a television film; mono) Great Opera Performances

Orchestra and Chorus - RAI Milano

Manon Lescaut - Clara Petrella
des Grieux - Giacinto Prandelli
Lescaut - Enzo Sordello
Geronte - Vito de Taranto
Edmondo - Ezio De Giorgi
Una voce sola - Miti Truccato Pace
L'oste - Christiano Dalamangas
Il maestro di ballo - Gino Del Signore
Un sergente degli arcieri - Bruno Cioni
Lampionaio - Walter Artioli
Un comandante di Marina - Salvatore Catania

This has been transferred from a RAI film made for television which you may see on YouTube and was broadcast on the BBC in 1957 – and it's pretty hammy! The mono sound here is somewhat harsh and distant with some background interference - not quite as good as the radio broadcast starring Petrella three years earlier but perfectly listenable, even if everything sounds rather removed.

Petrella is here partnered by Giacinto Prandelli, whose tenor is subtler than Vasco Campagnano's but also has an oddly "white", plaintive timbre which I do not find wholly attractive. Nonetheless, he rises to the drama of the last scene, keeping up with one of the great "singing actresses" of the 50's. Enzo Sordello makes a sound, vivid Lescaut and Petrella is as fine as ever, but on balance I think her earlier recording is superior both in terms of sound and co-singers. However, that Cetra recording is currently expensive everywhere I have looked and it might be that you can find this one more cheaply, in which case you will still have Petrella, who is vocal gold.

Tullio Serafin – 1957 (studio; mono) EMI

Orchestra and Chorus - Teatro alla Scala

Manon Lescaut - Maria Callas
des Grieux - Giuseppe di Stefano
Lescaut - Giulio Fioravanti
Geronte - Franco Calabrese
Edmondo - Dino Formichini
Una voce sola - Fiorenza Cossotto
L'oste - Carlo Forti
Il maestro di ballo - Vito Tatone
Un sergente degli arcieri - Giuseppe Morresi
Lampionaio - Franco Ricciardi
Un comandante di Marina - Franco Ventriglia

This was Callas' last La Scala recording, made in July 1957 after a punishing recording schedule including *Turandot*; we are fortunate to find her and Di Stefano in such splendid voice knowing how soon they would both start running into more serious and frequent vocal difficulties. Callas' mentor Serafin is in good form, too; fleet and light in the bustling crowd scenes and indulgently permissive of rallentandos for his singers in plush outpourings like "Donna non vidi mai". This technique of placing intimate reflective revelations of inner thoughts against frenetic action is almost a cliché - or at least a trademark trope - in Puccini's operas, but he is such a skilled craftsman it works every time, whether in *La Bohème*, *La rondine* or *Turandot*, and here it exercises its magic as he homes in on the feisty protagonist and the naive hero gamely battling against worldly cunning.

What a pity that this was recorded in mono just as stereo production was about to get going, but the sound is clean, clear and well-focused. Casting is from strength, the diction of all concerned is a joy. Baritone Giulio Fioravanti is little remembered but he was also very fine in Tebaldi's *Adriana Lecouvreur* recorded in 1961. Dino Formichini is good but not as charming as De Palma for Decca – but Fiorenza Cossotto makes her mark in her little cameo role. The two principal singers are in good form: Di Stefano is a really credible, impassioned des Grieux, making the most of the words and singing out thrillingly, although occasionally his tone turns “white” and “shouty” – unlike the young Del Monaco, who is vocally phenomenal. It is also apparent that Callas is singing carefully and even holding back a little in the earlier two Acts but this could be as attributable to characterisation as caution; she is a credible ingénue; the morbidezza of “in quelle trine morbide” is enchanting, the flap on the B flats less and some curdled high notes less so. Her lower register is brought in to devastating effect in the final scene and the culminating tragedy is deeply affecting, both singers giving it their emotional all. However, I don't see that the flaws are any more salient than recordings Walter Legge sanctioned for immediate release and in many ways this one is artistically superior.

Despite my enthusiasm for this recording, reacquaintance with it just after having played the equivalent studio recording from Decca with Tebaldi and Del Monaco, brought into focus the leading pair's vocal blemishes and the inadequacy of its mono sound compared with Decca's excellent early stereo set – stereo, even though it was recorded three years earlier, owing to Walter Legge's absurd resistance to the new technology. On balance, my inclination is towards Decca rather than EMI, but personal preference is subjective.

Fulvio Vernizzi – 1964 (live; mono) Eklipse; Bella Voce; House of Opera
Orchestra - Omroep Amsterdam
Chorus - Groot Omroep Amsterdam

Manon Lescaut - Magda Olivero
des Grieux - Umberto Borso
Lescaut - Fernandino Lidonni
Geronte - Giovanni Foiani
Edmondo - Mario Carlin
L'oste - Jo Bruivencamp
Il maestro di ballo - Mario Carlin
Un sergente degli arcieri - Giovanni Fojani
Lampionaio - Mario Carlin
Un comandante di Marina - Giovanni Fojani

The first indications here are promising: the mono sound is clean and clear, with only a little hiss, the conducting is spritely and the ubiquitous comprimario tenor Mario Carlin sings a neat Edmondo. Giovanni Foiani makes a resonant, sturdy Geronte, too; additionally, both sing two more minor roles each. Much less welcome is the laboured, throaty singing of tenor Umberto Borso and a weak, wobbly Lescaut, who between them pretty much puts paid to the attractions of this live recording, despite the presence of a positively youthful – at 54 – Magda Olivero. After all, we are fortunate to have her later recording from Caracas in fair sound and with a superior cast, when she sounds very little different despite the passage of time. Unless you are an Olivero completist, skip this.

Bruno Bartoletti – 1971 (studio; stereo) EMI
Orchestra - New Philharmonia Orchestra
Chorus - Ambrosian Opera Chorus

Manon Lescaut - Montserrat Caballé
des Grieux - Plácido Domingo

Lescaut - Vicente Sardinero
 Geronte - Noel Mangin
 Edmondo - Robert Tear
 Una voce sola - Delia Wallis
 L'oste - Richard Van Allan
 Il maestro di ballo - Bernard Dickerson
 Un sergente degli arcieri - Robert Lloyd
 Lampionaio - Ian Partridge
 Un comandante di Marina - Gwynne Howell

A fleet, nimble overture sets a pleasing tone, then we are brought down to earth by the nasal bleat of Robert Tear's horribly constricted tenor. Edmondo is a sizeable secondary tenor role and it is either sung by a gifted comprimario or a young tenor on the up; several promising singers, such as Robert Gambill and Ramón Vargas, have recorded it at the outset of their careers. It matters that Edmondo should be blithe and charming; Tear isn't. Aural balm and compensation arrive in the person of a young Domingo only he doesn't sing "Tra voi belle, brune e bionde" with much charm; it is a laboured account but he is much better in "Donna non vidi mai" which soars passionately. Further disappointment occurs on first hearing Caballé; the matronly tone and glottal catch in her soprano are completely inimical to portraying a flighty teenager - she makes a sixty-year-old Olivero sound youthful. Obviously she does some lovely things, especially the famous floated top notes and she sings a gorgeous "In quelle trine morbide" "à la grande dame", but dramatically she is quite inert. Nor do I find Bartoletti especially expressive; in fact, the Intermezzo, for example, is a bit stilted and his conducting in general uninspired.

As in his live recording the following year, Vincente Sardinero is an exemplary Lescaut, making the most of an ungrateful part and the smaller, supporting roles benefit from some luxury casting employing some fine British singers such as three basses Robert Lloyd, Richard Van Allan and Gwynne Howell and tenor Ian Partridge, while New Zealander Noël Mangin makes a fine, fruity Geronte.

I am aware that others rate this much more highly than I do, but for me it doesn't really "click" and remains dull and studio-bound.

Michelangelo Veltri – 1972 (live; stereo) Opera d'Oro; Opera Depot
 Orchestra and Chorus - Teatro Teresa Carreno (Caracas)

Manon Lescaut - Magda Olivero
 des Grieux - Richard Tucker
 Lescaut - Vicente Sardinero
 Geronte - Eugene Green
 Edmondo - Bernard Fitch
 Una voce sola - Aurora Cipriani
 L'oste - Alfredo Izquierdo
 Il maestro di ballo - Bernard Fitch
 Un sergente degli arcieri - Boris Serdoz
 Lampionaio - Bernard Fitch
 Un comandante di Marina - José Montenegro

I was initially prepared to discount this recording for reasons of its relatively poor, harsh sound but became so absorbed listening to it that I had to relent. Olivero was over sixty when this performance was recorded and hardly sounds like a teenage ingenue, but the control and intensity of her singing are simply remarkable and you would not say that she sounds as mature as, for example, Albanese. The famous floated pianissimi and diminuendi are breathtaking and she absolutely nails her top C. One reason why she kept her voice well into old age was that she had a developed lower register, which she uses to telling effect in the final scene. Some find the histrionics and willingness there to sacrifice

vocal beauty to dramatic impact overdone, but it was clearly highly effective on stage – pity about the vile tuning in the brass in the last four chords, though....

Tucker was in his late fifties here and singing thrillingly, all-out, with little subtlety but sounding suitably rakish in “Tra voi belle, brune e bionde” and bringing the house down in “Donna non vidi mai”, as does Olivero with “In quelle trine morbide” - and Sardinero is a superb Lescaut, better than I have ever heard him and almost the equal of any other, with the exception of Merrill for Perlea. The conducting from a conductor unknown to me is excellent – fluid, warm and impassioned and the orchestra, if rather edgy, is perfectly audible throughout its range. The supporting cast is first-rate, too – some lovely, if unknown (to me) voices.

Only Callas equals Olivero for intensity and her voice isn't quite as secure. Don't shoot me for recommending this, ropey sound notwithstanding, but put it down to my whim and be prepared to exercise tolerance.

Giuseppe Sinopoli – 1983 (studio; digital) DG

Orchestra - Philharmonia Orchestra

Chorus - Covent Garden

Manon Lescaut - Mirella Freni

des Grieux - Plácido Domingo

Lescaut - Renato Bruson

Geronte - Kurt Rydl

Edmondo - Robert Gambill

Una voce sola - Brigitte Fassbaender

L'oste - George Macpherson

Il maestro di ballo - John Fryatt

Un sergente degli arcieri - Handel Thomas

Lampionaio - Mark Curtis

Un comandante di Marina - John Tomlinson

Two peculiarities which militate against the impact of this recording are that to my ears the voices are sometimes set too far back in the sound picture – but no-one else seems to mind or, at least, has remarked on that – and Sinopoli makes constant vocal interjections and accompaniments – although again, no-one else has voiced any irritation in the reviews I have encountered. Sinopoli is, as ever, very free and flexible with his use of rubato and point-making, which is for some obtrusive and others expressive. If you add to those factors my personal inability to get along with what I hear as Bruson's windy, bleating baritone and Rydl's lumpy bass, then you will appreciate that my response to this recording, which otherwise has much going for it, includes reservations.

Freni is obviously in somewhat more youthful and fresher voice than for Levine almost a decade later and sings beautifully; she holds her own for voice and drama against any other Manon. However, I do find that Domingo's tenor, compared with his earlier performance for the otherwise dull Bartoletti set, too frequently sounds rather thin, nasal and even a tad strained, especially on top notes, when, surprisingly, he is drowned out by Freni at climactic points in their big duets. Gambill is a pleasant, lightweight Edmondo and Fassbaender gives us a fine cameo in the madrigal; otherwise the supporting cast is mediocre.

You may feel differently and I advise you to test your reactions by sampling this on YouTube before committing to a purchase; despite my admiration for Freni, who really is the star here, and the energy of Sinopoli's conducting, my taste does not extend to recommending it over several other recordings which fall more gratefully on my ear.

Riccardo Chailly – 1987 (studio; digital) Decca
Orchestra and Chorus - Teatro Comunale di Bologna

Manon Lescaut - Kiri Te Kanawa
des Grieux - José Carreras
Lescaut - Paolo Coni
Geronte - Italo Tajo
Edmondo - William Matteuzzi
Una voce sola - Margarita Zimmermann
L'oste - Ledo Freschi
Il maestro di ballo - Piero De Palma
Un sergente degli arcieri - Giorgio Tadeo
Lampionaio - Carlo Gaifa
Un comandante di Marina - Natale de Carolis

Some reviewers have been fairly uncomplimentary about this recording. Chief among the complaints are three accusations: that Kiri Te Kanawa lacks temperament, that Carreras shouts and that overall the enterprise feels “studio-bound”.

I would add to that list of putative objections my own certain aversion to the first voice we hear: William Matteuzzi's nasally bleating tenor; as far as I am concerned, Carreras' entrance marks a welcome improvement in tenorial quality and his voice continues to give me pleasure throughout, despite moments of ungainliness and forcing. The incipient beat is largely unobtrusive and the tone is secure, although it is true that he is rather stentorian of delivery; there isn't so much lilt or wink in his opening assault on “Tra voi belle, brune e bionde” – although it is impressive as sheer vocalisation. He has moments of tenderness, as in his first approach to Manon, “Cortese damigella” and his “Donna non vidi mai” is impassioned.

Regarding the supposed lack of “desperate passion” from Te Kanawa, she was never going to bring to Manon's plight the kind of verismo attack and spinto heft we hear from the likes of Callas and Olivero in the final scene, but my goodness, so much of what she does is so sheerly beautiful and her phrasing so exquisite, that I can forgive her any deficiencies in vehemence. Hers is a sad, vulnerable, loveable Manon; no other soprano has sung the role so movingly. The real deficiency in her singing is her under-developed lower register, but she had sung the role successfully on stage at Covent Garden previous to recording it here and it shows.

The supporting cast is strong, led by a firm-voiced Paolo Coni, and the veteran Italo Tajo certainly sounds like an aging beau.

Chailly conducts in a spritely and propulsive fashion. He is less interventionist than Sinopoli which will be good news for some and I hear nothing claustrophobic or stilted in the sound or production; to my ears it is a typical product of Decca's habitually first-rate engineering. The orchestra might not be first rank but they play *con amore*.

If you want a more extrovert and demonstrative Manon in combination with a conversely more refined des Grieux, this will not be for you, but I certainly relish the combination here as it stands.

James Levine – 1992 (studio; digital) Decca
Orchestra and Chorus - Metropolitan Opera

Manon Lescaut - Mirella Freni
des Grieux - Luciano Pavarotti
Lescaut - Dwayne Croft

Geronte - Giuseppe Taddei
Edmondo - Ramón Vargas
Una voce sola - Cecilia Bartoli
L'oste - Federico Davià
Il maestro di ballo - Anthony Laciura
Un sergente degli arcieri - James Courtney
Lampionaio - Paul Groves
Un comandante di Marina - Federico Davià

After listening to so many artistically superb and sonically deficient recordings, I found it such a pleasure and relief to re-encounter Decca's unimpeachable digital sound here. It makes a change simply to pronounce it perfect and move on to its aesthetic virtues.

This is a production cast in depth, albeit with four veteran singers, three of whom take leading parts - you have to smile at the "team photo" with Levine, as in truth, the fragrant Miss Freni apart, it looks like a reunion of the front row of a rugby team - but we also have the youthful tenor Ramón Vargas singing with charm and admirable legato as Edmondo and baritone Dwayne Croft as a similarly sappy, lean-voiced Lescaut, as good as Sardinero and suaver, if less virile, than Merrill. There is no particular reason why he should not sound young though of course that jars a little with Freni's older voice, as they are playing siblings. It doesn't matter too much; Freni hardly sounds as mature as other exponents of *Manon*, such as Olivero, Caballé and Albanese.

Freni is in fact in remarkable voice and always had a gift for conveying charm, vulnerability and pathos – all qualities central to *Manon*. There is some loosening of her vibrato and a little cloudiness in her lower register, but otherwise she sounds very much as she did in the 70's. Her characterisation of *Manon* is actually more pointed and detailed than it was for Sinopoli almost a decade previously and her chemistry with Pavarotti is palpably more erotic than it was with Domingo. Her death scene is riveting; both artists give it everything.

Pavarotti - Freni's almost exact contemporary - is also a singer rejuvenated here: right from "Tra voi, belle, brune e bionde" he sounds virtually ideal, belying his 56 years, singing with cocksure confidence and the vocal equivalent of a twinkle in his eye. When he launches into "Donna non vidi mai" it is almost as if the clock has been turned back twenty years to his "La bohème" for Karajan. As with Freni, his tone has lost a little of its pristine, limpid freshness and might not be quite as pure and ringing as of yore, but the deterioration is negligible. As ever, his diction is pellucid and his way with the words telling. He signals des Grieux's mounting passion for *Manon* by increasingly allowing his voice to open up and become suffused with quivering emotion; their duets are thrilling highlights.

Taddei is decidedly dry of tone – indeed, virtually voiceless and hardly the "basso brillante" Verdi specified – but that is hardly surprising given that he was 75 at the time of recording and was never anything other than a baritone. Of course, he was a brilliant vocal actor, so he carries it off. Bartoli is a bit of luxury casting in the madrigal, Paul Groves is a mellifluous Lamplighter, Davià a weak, hoarse, unsteady Captain – ships and a ha'porth of tar come to mind.

Levine attacks the first Act with his customary drive and élan, faster than most but he relaxes for Act 2, giving Freni all the time she needs to express her wistful longing for her lost love before whipping up excitement for their reunion. He makes a sumptuous job of the Intermezzo; the Met orchestra sounds the equal of any in the world. This recording is perhaps closest to that of Sinopoli, in that both recordings star Freni and have conductors given to big gestures, but I think Levine's is the more strongly cast and considerably more successful.

If you want to hear this opera in best sound sung by three principal artists at the top of their game, this is it.

Alexander Rahbari – 1992 (studio; digital) Naxos
Orchestra - Belgian Radio and TV Orchestra
Chorus - Belgian Radio and TV Gregor Choir

Manon Lescaut - Miriam Gauci
des Grieux - Kaludi Kaludov
Lescaut - Vicente Sardinero
Geronte - Marcel Rosca
Edmondo - Donald George
Una voce sola - Lucienne van Deyck
L'oste - Henk Lauwers
Il maestro di ballo - Ludwig Van Gijsegem
Un sergente degli arcieri - Henk Lauwers
Lampionaio - Ludwig Van Gijsegem
Un comandante di Marina - Henk Lauwers

Cheap as chips, in excellent digital sound, with an Italian libretto and fielding a good, young cast, this is typical of Naxos' opera output. The signs are instantly promising with an energised introduction, a musical, if lightweight, Edmondo, a lively chorus and a des Grieux who pins back your ears with a confident, ringing "Tra voi belle, brune e bionde". He is not especially varied in tone or expression and his tenor tightens somewhat as it ascends but the basics of his voice are so attractive that he presents an essentially dashing hero – and I am grateful for his omission of the usual embarrassing faux-sobbing in "Guardate come io piango". Further assurance of quality is guaranteed by the presence of veteran Vicente/Vincenzo Sardinero as Lescaut returning to a role he first recorded for Bartoletti two decades earlier and still in fine voice at 55 years old. Miriam Gauci sounds young – which indeed she was here, at 34 – and easily encompasses the wide range of emotions exhibited by Manon as she moves from perky adventurer to worldly, world-weary kept woman to doomed and desperate pioneer. She has a big, warm, unforced tone somewhat reminiscent of a combination of that of Mirella Freni and Ileana Cotrubas, although she does not quite have their distinctive vocal personalities and I wish she would plunge more whole-heartedly into her lower register for her big death scene. Her partnership with Kaludov makes me realise how often we have to compromise when it comes to the credibility of more celebrated superstars as the young lovers; this recording in many ways most successfully recreates dramatic verisimilitude. The mature skill of Sardinero's portrayal of Manon's brother, Marcel Rosca's fruity depiction of that old roué Geronte and – apart from a terrible tremolo-ridden tenor doubling up as the Lamplighter and the Dancing Master - a fine supporting cast, including a lovely madrigal singer; all help to consolidate that wholly convincing impression.

Sometimes Rahbari is a little extreme in his choice of tempi, but for the most part his direction is intelligent and sensitive; it's a pity that the famous Intermezzo is flaccid. The BRT Philharmonic (subsequently the Flemish Radio Orchestra and now the Brussels Philharmonic) might not be a world-renowned outfit but they sound fine to me.

Whenever I do one of these surveys now, I expect a wild card to turn up – and this is it; in many ways it avoids the flaws and pitfalls of more prestigious efforts and despite the principal singers not having the charisma of illustrious predecessors such as Björling and Callas, it more successfully presents a cohesive, aesthetically pleasing account of the opera without necessarily being a top choice.

Riccardo Muti – 1998 (live composite; digital) DG
Orchestra and Chorus - Teatro alla Scala

Manon Lescaut - Maria Guleghina
des Grieux - José Cura

Lescaut - Lucio Gallo
 Geronte - Luigi Roni
 Edmondo - Marco Berti
 Una voce sola - Gloria Banditelli
 L'oste - Orazio Mori
 Il maestro di ballo - Mario Bolognesi
 Un sergente degli arcieri - Silvestro Sammaritano
 Lampionaio - Ernesto Gavazzi
 Un comandante di Marina - Ernesto Panariello

It is often now the case that, in the context of sixty-five years of stereo recording, a half-way decent digital recording has little to offer beyond its sound quality which is superior to its predecessors. Thus the principals here have to withstand comparison with the greatest singers and inevitably are found wanting; carrying "the burden of the past" imposes on them an unfair disadvantage.

The digital sound here preserves the atmosphere of a live performance with hardly any of the drawbacks, and Muti is in one of his more flexible moods, accommodating his singers but also driving the music forward with his customary élan – and the orchestra and chorus could not be more vivacious. Doubts immediately creep in, however, regarding the singing; the first two singers we hear are tenors: Marco Berti as Edmondo has an irritating, lachrymose quality in his voice and the beginnings of a beat, then when Cura joins him, despite the wit and humour in his delivery of "Tra voi belle, brune e bionde" you can detect the same, incipient beat which eventually turned into a blaring, on-off pulse and essentially rendered his voice unbearable. That illegitimate vocal production is one of the curses of modern singing and Guleghina's *Manon*, too, evinces more than a touch of it. She has a huge, vibrant sound, but little purity or steadiness of tone, bringing a kind of generalised vehemence to her death scene but little pathos. The aptness of casting Guleghina and Cura is highly questionable, too: Tosca has strayed into the drawing room and her lover is more Manrico than an aristocratic, lovestruck student; neither has the ease, sparkle or charm in their timbre that we hear in more elegant, preceding exponents of their roles. Cura is an intelligent artist who sings off the text sensitively but, in plain terms, his voice is deficient; top notes flap and are even ugly and he is far less sensitive when it comes to following Puccini's markings and grading dynamics. One listens in vain for the poetry found so abundantly by superior singers. When Lucio Gallo and Luigi Roni enter as Lescaut and Geronte respectively, we cannot but hear them as two coarse, woolly singers, especially if you have Merrill and Sardinero or Calabrese and Foiani ringing in your ears.

Other reviewers are much more enamoured of this recording than I, but I cannot recommend it, given the competition; I would not choose to play it when there are several versions which capture the spirit of Puccini's invention much more faithfully and successfully.

Recommendations

As is so often the case with these surveys, I find that the best sung performances clump around the extraordinarily prolific era of recording in the 50's and there is no recording from the last thirty years or so competes with earlier accounts, except, of course, in terms of recorded sound. However, one relatively recent recording in particular offers superlative artistry in digital sound, and that is Levine's 1992 set on Decca; otherwise, my choices all hail from an earlier age.

Forgive me for making what are really too many recommendations below, rather than homing in on one or two, but as I said in my introduction, this opera has been lucky on record; choose according to your own taste in voices and the degree to which you need audio-enthusiast-quality sound. Most of these can be sampled on YouTube. Whatever you choose, I would urge you to own at least one of the three recordings with Björling, who is even better than any other tenor as des Grieux; unfortunately, all three are vintage mono. Indeed, of the choices below, only two are stereo, so the devotee of this opera might like to own at least one of those plus one with Björling as a supplement.

Live mono: Mitropoulos – 1956; Del Cupolo – 1953
Live stereo: Veltri – 1972 (with a caveat for its poor sound)
Studio mono: Perlea – 1954; Serafin – 1957
Studio stereo: Levine – 1992*; Molinari-Pradelli – 1954
First choice*

Ralph Moore