

## Saint-Saëns' *Samson et Dalila*: A discographical survey

by Ralph Moore

You may regard it as a private eccentricity that *Samson et Dalila* is one of my favourite operas but I cannot understand why it has been labelled static and is not more performed; the music is extraordinary throughout with some really spectacular set-pieces such as Dalila's three great arias, Samson's "Vois ma misère, hélas!", the Bacchanale and the heavenly trio made famous by the recording from Caruso, Louise Homer and Marcel Journet, "Je viens célébrer la victoire". I am baffled by claims that it is just an oratorio in drag, as it seems to me to be a true "Grand Opera" – complete with two ballets in the Dance of the Philistine Maidens and that famous, thrilling Bacchanale - and to have just as much, if not more, drama, spectacle and theatrical tension as any other opera based on a biblical subject, such as Massenet's *Hérodiade*, Strauss' *Salome*, Rossini's *Mosè in Egitto* and Verdi's *Nabucco*. Perhaps the composer himself fuelled the accusation by later recalling how he had first conceived the work as an oratorio but was soon persuaded by his librettist to turn it into an opera. It was premiered not in Paris but Weimar as a result of Liszt's enthusiasm, and it took years for its worth to be acknowledged in Saint-Saëns' homeland. An initial hindrance to its gaining popularity were puritanical objections to its staging of a biblical subject, which now seems strange to modern sensibilities. The plot is wholly coherent, the balance between spectacle and intimacy ideal, and the music inspired. Saint-Saëns was a master orchestrator and this, his most popular opera, has long attracted the greatest singers, despite some public indifference. I hesitate to sound precious by labelling it "a connoisseur's opera" but I certainly think it deserves wider appreciation; no other of Saint-Saëns' dozen operas has survived in the repertoire, although *Henry VIII* has been sporadically revived. It was once among the most performed of French operas and seems gradually to be regaining some of that status - at least in part.

*Samson et Dalila* offers principal roles for four main voice-types but, unusually, no soprano and all the parts except Dalila are for male voices: three tenors, three basses and a baritone, giving the opera a darker hue. Samson and Delilah are gifts to two singers sufficiently vocally endowed and immersed in the French style, although the opera has always attracted big-name tenors like Del Monaco, Vickers, Vinay and Domingo – who made two studio recordings and any mezzo-soprano who made a celebrated Carmen invariably gravitated towards Saint-Saëns' *femme fatale*. Among early recorded excerpts such as the trio referred to above, we may hear the voices ideal for those roles such as Caruso – who premiered the role in New York - the heroic-lyric French tenors George Thill and César Vezzani, and mezzo-sopranos like Louise Homer and Jeanne Gerville-Réache, but unfortunately those artists left no complete recordings. Foremost among the more recent conductors who have specialised in French repertoire and specifically this opera, are Georges Prêtre and Colin Davis, whose recordings feature prominently below.

There are, however, eight studio recordings, only one of which, from Romania in 1972, I have not been able to hear; otherwise, I review below the remaining seven and a selection of live performances and two of excerpts, included for their exceptional quality, making nineteen recordings in all.

### The Recordings:

**Maurice Abravanel – 1936** (live radio broadcast; mono) Guild  
Orchestra - Metropolitan Opera  
Chorus - Metropolitan Opera

Samson - René Maison  
Dalila - Gertrud Wettergren  
Le Grand Prêtre de Dagon - Ezio Pinza  
Abimélech - John Gurney  
Le Vieillard Hébreu - Emanuel List

Le messenger philistin - Angelo Bada  
Premier philistin - Max Altglass  
Deuxième philistin - Wilfred Engelman

Some other reviewers are much more enthusiastic about this issue than I feel I can be. The music is sublime but the relative unsatisfactoriness of some recordings often starts with the principals being unidiomatic in the language or in their sub-consciously buying the idea that it's more oratorio than opera and lacking temperament in their delivery. Ironically, it is the bonus on this Guild set which highlights what is missing in the complete recording from 1936; it is all the recordings of Act II Scene 3 and excerpts from the beginning of Act III, made by Vezzani and the otherwise almost forgotten Marie Duchêne in around 1930 when she was already about fifty but still in magisterial voice. Vezzani is a truly impassioned-sounding tenor, vibrant and heroic yet still sweet of tone, and a mezzo-soprano Duchêne has real heft in her lower register and sufficient voluptuousness and sensuousness to sound seductive without seeming vampish. Neither René Maison, with his harsh, metallic sound, nor Gertrud Wettergren, with her schoolbook French and strangely bland, neutral delivery, cut it for me. Emmanuel List is lumpy as the Old Hebrew and although Ezio Pinza's appearance in an unexpected role as the High Priest certainly adds the otherwise absent star quality, it's not enough to lift the recording out of mediocrity. I should, however, praise the energy and sensitivity of Maurice Abravanel's conducting, which is another decided bonus.

The sound is what you'd expect for a live radio broadcast of this era, neither better nor worse and perfectly listenable.

**Wilfred Pelletier – 1941** (live radio broadcast; mono) Immortal Performances

Orchestra - Metropolitan Opera  
Chorus - Metropolitan Opera

Samson - René Maison  
Dalila - Risë Stevens  
Le Grand Prêtre de Dagon - Leonard Warren  
Abimélech - Norman Cordon  
Le Vieillard Hébreu - Nicola Moscona  
Le messenger philistin - Emery Darcy  
Premier philistin - John Dudley  
Deuxième philistin - Arthur Kent

This recording was derived from a private transcription made for the French-Canadian conductor Wilfred Pelletier and provides another opportunity to hear the Belgian tenor René Maison in a favourite role, in considerably better sound and voice than in 1936. I remark in my review above of that performance upon his metallic timbre which is not to all tastes but he is in fine form and identifies completely with the demands of the role, singing both tenderly and powerfully, as required. A fresh-voiced Risë Stevens is decidedly preferable to Gertrud Wettergren and sings in better French, combining power with seamlessly integrated registers and considerable nuance of expression. An equally youthful Leonard Warren is similarly impressive, relishing an early opportunity at the Met to excel in the carpet-chewing role of the High Priest, Norman Cordon sings a strong Abimélech and Nicola Moscona deploys his sonorous bass as the Old Hebrew. French-Canadian Pelletier is entirely at home in this work and creates momentum without undue haste, while the Metropolitan orchestra and chorus are both admirable; indeed, the hallmark of this recording is the sense of unanimity amongst all the performers, all co-operating to create high drama of a work which can seem static if underplayed. Of the excellence of Steven's smoky mezzo there is no question, and as long as you enjoy Maison's individual timbre, this would be the prime historical recommendation, were it not for the existence of the Fourestier studio recording, reviewed next.

The bonus tracks are the same as on the 1936 recording on Guild above. This 2 CD set is available only via the Immortal Performances website at \$14.50 per disc plus postage and packing, so is relatively expensive.

**Louis Fourestier – 1946** (studio; mono) EMI; Naxos; Preiser

Orchestra - L'Opéra de Paris

Chorus - L'Opéra de Paris

Samson - José Luccioni

Dalila - Hélène Bouvier

Le Grand Prêtre de Dagon - Paul Cabanel

Abimélech - Charles Cambon

Le Vieillard Hébreu - Henri Médus

This was made surprisingly late for a first commercial recording and has become the benchmark for later versions. It is in remarkably fine sound for its era, despite a rather blurry chorus and recessed orchestra is the only studio mono version to offer wholly French authenticity in style of playing and singing, with all the performers drawn from the Paris Opéra. José Luccioni's clean, clear sound is very different from the Samsons of Vickers and Vinay, who have a more effortful, huskier sound but as a real lyric-dramatic tenor, he has great reserves of power, even if to my ears he sounds too youthful and clean-cut for the Nazirite strong man. There is a touch of "stand and sing" about his traversal of Samson's travails compared with the innerness of Vickers and Cura, but he makes a such a glorious sound and his pellucid diction is always a joy. Hélène Bouvier does not bring the largest mezzo-soprano to the role of Dalila but she sings with great subtlety of phrasing and colourific nuance, creating a truly seductive portrayal. Two great singers in Cabanel and Cambon could not be bettered as Samson's enemies and bass Henri Médus makes a mellow Old Hebrew. Fourestier conducts in a taut, no-nonsense manner, rising magnificently to the high drama of the last Act.

This is the clear historical front-runner.

**Fausto Cleva – 1953** (live radio broadcast; mono) Walhall

Orchestra - Metropolitan Opera

Chorus - Metropolitan Opera

Samson - Ramón Vinay

Dalila - Risë Stevens

Le Grand Prêtre de Dagon - Sigurd Björling

Abimélech - Norman Scott

Le Vieillard Hébreu - Luben Vichey

Le messenger philistin - Emery Darcy

Premier philistin - Paul Franke

Deuxième philistin - George Cehanovsky

In reasonable, if rather muddy, mono, radio sound, this recording permits the listener to hear perfectly well the suitability of the principals to their roles. Vinay is rather similar to Jon Vickers, effortful but powerful – his B flat rings out – and he sings in decent French. Risë Stevens' has the right smoky allure as Dalila, which was probably her second most celebrated role after Carmen – a role in the same mould. She is rather formidable but that's not at odds with her domineering, vengeful nature despite her surface flirtatiousness and her voice is in fine estate. It's pleasure to hear the bronze-voiced and under-recorded Sigurd Björling although his French is horrible. Norman Scott makes a sonorous Abimélech. Cleva conducts crisply and briskly.

Stage noises and indifferent sound bar this from being a top choice but if you like the artists in question and are tolerant of live, "historic" mono, it can be confidently recommended.

**Leopold Stokowski – 1954** (studio; mono: excerpts) RCA

Orchestra - NBC Symphony Orchestra

Chorus - Robert Shaw Chorale

Samson - Jan Peerce

Dalila - Risë Stevens

Le Grand Prêtre de Dagon - Robert Merrill

A sneaky love for Stokowski is still something some "serious" music-lovers feel the need to apologise for, as if he were not a "proper" conductor - but of course he was a scrupulous musician who breathed life into everything he conducted, even if occasionally he produced a Frankenstein's monster. His musicians loved him and this selection of excerpts from a great, and somewhat neglected opera, does him proud. The best singers of their day on the RCA roster were used for this recording; although none was a native French singer, Risë Stevens was already very experienced in the role of Dalila and both Peerce and Merrill sound fine to me, even though I have read complaints that their French is not idiomatic. I am not French but I speak the language and they sound pretty good to me. Peerce is not the heldentenor the role of Samson requires - his is more of a spinto - but he injects great feeling into his interpretation, has all the notes and enunciates beautifully, the odd slightly distorted French vowel apart. (Never, incidentally, has he sounded so like his great contemporary Richard Tucker.) Similarly, Stevens' assumption of Dalila is deeply satisfying, though ultimately her lower register is less effulgent and her top notes slightly less free than the greatest exponents of the role, such as Rita Gorr and Oralia Dominguez; there is always a slight cloudiness in her voice. I always listen to Robert Merrill with pleasure and his French is quite serviceable. Stokowski's conducting is so sympathetic: plenty of rubato when required, great sympathy for his singers and the ability to generate the febrile passion so much of this music requires in this, one of his very few, operatic recordings. The sound is clear, intense mono; one quickly forgets its limitations. This makes a splendid supplement for fans of the artists here.

**Thomas Beecham – 1958** (live; mono)

Orchestra - Teatro Colón - Buenos Aires

Chorus - Teatro Colón - Buenos Aires

Samson - Ramón Vinay

Dalila - Blanche Thebom

Le Grand Prêtre de Dagon - Giuseppe Taddei

Abimélech - Fernando Corena

Le Vieillard Hébreu - Giuseppe Modesti

Le messenger philistin - Alvaro Bandini

Premier philistin - Carlos Giusti

Deuxième philistin - Guerrino Boschetti

I include this here in case anyone is understandably tempted by the line-up. Unfortunately, it is so poorly recorded that it cannot be recommended except to the hardiest fans of historical performances or the artists here: distant, crumbly and distorted, it barely affords the listener much pleasure, especially as the balance is tipped towards the efforts of what must be accounted a poor and under-rehearsed orchestra. The soloists are set so far back from the microphone that they are essentially inaudible. Vinay is always worth hearing - except you barely can, here - but he is straining and was in fresher voice and better recorded five years earlier in New York under Cleva. Blanche Thebom was a mezzo-soprano of volume, substance and beauty of tone, but again you cannot properly hear her - except you can hear that her vibrato sounds rather too broad. The supporting singers are also voices of quality, including Taddei in an unusual role, but...

**Fausto Cleva – 1958** (studio; stereo: excerpts) Urania

Orchestra - Metropolitan Opera

Chorus - Metropolitan Opera

Samson - Mario Del Monaco

Dalila - Risè Stevens

Le Grand Prêtre de Dagon - Clifford Harvuot

Abimélech - Ezio Flagello

These fifty minutes of excerpts were always just that, never a complete recording, so cannot be anything other than a supplementary recommendation, but I mention them for the excellence of the stereo sound and performances and as compensation for the fact that Del Monaco never made a complete studio recording. He makes an ideally heroic, virile Samson to Risè Stevens' experienced, darkly seductive Dalila, only just occasionally she sounds more harridan than priestess. Del Monaco's French is really not too fractured and he is in clarion voice – surely the tenor who most easily dominates and encompasses the vocal challenges of this deceptively straightforward role. His final "Trahison!" in the duet is stunning, his "Vois ma misère, hélas!" poignant yet strong and steady, and his sustained top B flat accompanying the climactic tumbling down of the temple thrilling. The two supporting singers and chorus are splendid, too; in their brief contributions, Ezio Flagello is properly cavernous and hieratic of utterance and Clifford Harvuot makes a vibrant High Priest. What a pity that the Act 1 trio is missing.

**Francesco Molinari-Pradelli – 1959** (live; mono) Hardy; Melodram

Orchestra - Teatro di San Carlo di Napoli

Chorus - Teatro di San Carlo di Napoli

Samson - Mario Del Monaco

Dalila - Jean Madeira

Le Grand Prêtre de Dagon - Lino Puglisi

Abimélech - Plinio Clabassi

Le Vieillard Hébreu - Iginio Riccò

Le messenger philistin - Attilio Flauto

Premier philistin - Athos Cesarini

Deuxième philistin - Enzo Felicitati

This is very strange and frankly a non-starter, despite its apparent attractions, for two reasons: the live mono sound is a blaring, distorted mess, by far the worst in this survey, and although Del Monaco and Madeira sing in French, the rest of the cast sing in Italian – not that you can hear what language is being used, in any case.

The microphone seems to be much closer to the orchestra than the singers, who are mostly virtually inaudible – and when that is the case with voices like these, it is time to throw up your hands and move on.

**Georges Prêtre – 1962** (studio; stereo) EMI

Orchestra - L'Opéra de Paris

Chorus - Chorale René Duclos

Samson - Jon Vickers

Dalila - Rita Gorr

Le Grand Prêtre de Dagon - Ernest Blanc

Abimélech - Anton Diakov

Le Vieillard Hébreu - Anton Diakov  
Le messenger philistin - Rémy Corazza  
Premier philistin - Jacques Pottier  
Deuxième philistin - Jean-Pierre Hurteau

I love how Prêtre manages the nervous, brooding menace of the orchestral introduction to this opera, the wiry strings punctuated by grumbling woodwind, then the authentic French choir creeping in with its supplicatory prayer; this is great music and great music-making and he sustains his inspiration over the entire recording. Vickers is in his element as Samson, singing in good French a role which could have been written for his youthful voice – and no doubt as devout Bible Christian he was drawn to the role. He is deeply moving in the opening to Act 3. Rita Gorr's huge, metallic mezzo is not the most sensual of instruments but the power and personality offer singing carry their own thrill and conviction, and the opening trio sets a high standard which is maintained throughout. She sings her arias with restraint and a good line, often reining in her vibrant tone and singing softly, and she deploys her lower register tellingly, although the occasional top note can be harsh. I have always enjoyed Ernest Blanc's distinctive, somewhat grainy baritone and depicting a charter like the High Priest who is permanently in a rage suits him, just as he had made a fine raging Telramund a few years earlier at Bayreuth.

Some might prefer the live recording of Vickers with Dominguez and the same High Priest two years later, especially as a rather woolly, throaty Anton Diakov sings both bass roles here and is surpassed by his counterparts in the Dutch performance, but the three principal roles and a typically energised, urgent Prêtre provide a very satisfying account.

The early stereo sound is peaky and shows its age but that detracts very little from the experience, as balances are good.

**Jean Fournet – 1964** (live; mono) Gala; Opera d'Oro  
Orchestra - Radio Filharmonisch Orkest  
Chorus - Groot Omroepkoor

Samson - Jon Vickers  
Dalila - Oralia Domínguez  
Le Grand Prêtre de Dagon - Ernest Blanc  
Abimélech - Henk Driessen  
Le Vieillard Hébreu - Peter van der Bilt  
Le messenger philistin - Fred Bongers  
Premier philistin - Bert van't Hof  
Deuxième philistin - Aad de Rijk

You can buy this recording in the special edition Opera d'Oro Grand Tier packaging, complete with a libretto, but that is much more expensive than the standard issue and could hardly improve upon its sound quality, which is clear and full, being a radio broadcast of a live concert performance before a fairly quiet and appreciative audience - just the odd bronchial interjection but not too much to complain about. This is a great performance, well conducted by Fournet with not, perhaps, a top-flight orchestra at his command - hence the Bacchanale lacks a little in thrills and sparkle - and two famous singers, ably supported by the estimable Ernest Blanc and a capable Dutch cast. I don't think I have ever heard Vickers sound better; his inimitable tone, not to everyone's taste, is best heard in the more declamatory passages and he misses some of the anguished inwardness achieved by Jose Cura in the Davis set, but it's a great assumption of a favourite role, even better than the contemporary commercial recording with Rita Gorr and the same baritone. Dominguez is wonderful - just occasionally a little hollow of tone in the middle of the voice but often thrilling, both in her cavernous lower register and on top; this was grand voice which held its own as a riveting Amneris alongside Callas' Aida in the famous 1951 Mexico City performance. It's a pleasure to hear a really French voice in Blanc's High

Priest, even if he lacks the low notes. There is so much lovely music in this opera, not least the three great arias for Dalila, here searingly delivered by Dominguez. You really cannot go wrong with this set; it's one of Opera d'Oro's best, hence their decision to re-issue it in the de luxe format but if you already have a libretto from another set or can do without it, the regular issue will do nicely.

**Georges Prêtre – 1970** (live; mono) Opera d'Oro

Orchestra - Teatro alla Scala

Chorus - Teatro alla Scala

Samson - Richard Cassilly

Dalila - Shirley Verrett

Le Grand Prêtre de Dagon - Robert Massard

Abimélech - Giovanni Foiani

Le Vieillard Hébreu - Leonardo Monreale

Le messenger philistin - Piero De Palma

Premier philistin - Gianfranco Manganotti

Deuxième philistin - Silvio Maionica

Not even the very close, blaring sound here can prevent me from recommending this; it is by no means unlistenable with a will and the sheer brilliance and vitality of what must have been a stunning evening at La Scala persuades me to give this searing performance the most enthusiastic endorsement.

Indeed, the cast here is a dream team: a thirty-nine-year-old Shirley Verrett in finest form and most voluptuous voice, her lower register trenchant and her top notes coruscating, bringing enormous power and sensuality to the femme fatale Dalila. Just the occasional guttural over-emphasis when attacking notes mars her line but that is the result of her immersion in her role. Similarly, I have never heard Richard Cassilly in better voice; his bright, open, secure tenor encompasses all the demands of his heroic role and his French, as with all the principals, is excellent. My bliss is made complete by the presence of my favourite French baritone Robert Massard as the High Priest - which was his début role back in 1952 - and a fine, steady, grave Old Hebrew in Leonardo Monreale. Giovanni Foiani's Abimélech has a rather quavery vibrato but he doesn't let the side down.

To cap it all, I have never heard Georges Prêtre conduct better. He is yielding and languorous in Dalila's arias but really fired up in the Bacchanale and he pushes the whole drama along without defaulting into his habitual brusqueness.

If you love this opera as I do, you need to hear this.

[Opera d'Oro has mislabelled the tracking: CD1 has ten tracks, not eight, thus going into Act II; CD2 has only six tracks, not eight.]

**Kurt Adler – 1972** (studio; stereo) Electrecord; House of Opera

Orchestra - Romanian Radio-Television

Chorus - Romanian Radio-Television

Samson - Ludovic Spiess

Dalila - Elena Cernei

Le Grand Prêtre de Dagon - Dan Jordachescu

Abimélech - Constantin Dumitri

Le Vieillard Hébreu - Nicolae Florei

Le messenger philistin - Vasile Moldoveanu

Premier philistin - Constantin Dumitri

Deuxième philistin - Alexandru Tassian

I include this to alert readers to its existence; it looks interesting insofar as I have found recordings of this provenance to be of quality and stars two important singers. You may hear excerpts of Elena Cernei singing Dalila on YouTube, some of those with Adler conducting at the Metropolitan Opera and some apparently from this recording; she is wonderful, the best Dalila I know: I love her cello-voice with its deep lower register and secure top notes. YouTube also has the aria "Vois ma misère, hélas!" apparently from the same recording sung by Spiess, who is also superb, but the conductor is given as Constantin Petrovivi.

**Giuseppe Patanè – 1973** (studio; stereo) RCA; Denon  
Orchestra - Münchner Rundfunkorchester  
Chorus - Chor des Bayerischen Rundfunks

Samson - James King  
Dalila - Christa Ludwig  
Le Grand Prêtre de Dagon - Bernd Weigl  
Abimélech - Alexander Malta  
Le Vieillard Hébreu - Richard Kogel

I confess to having bought then given away this recording as unsatisfactory, but enthusiastic reviews drove me to reassess it, in case, as sometimes happens, re-acquaintance proved a happier experience. I am generally an admirer of all the artists here but found the recording to be oddly sterile and studio-bound, despite the distinguished singers, gifted conductor and fine orchestra. Second impressions were indeed more favourable but essentially unchanged: first, we hear a superb, if rather polite, chorus then a virtuosic orchestra but Patanè does not generate much excitement at key points such as the Bacchanale, where the climax sounds rushed and frenetic rather than overwhelming. James King makes an impassioned entrance as Samson but his tenor is rather occluded and cloudy compared with the bright tones of lyric-dramatic tenors. That effortfulness is not necessarily at odds with his strenuous music but his big scene when, blinded and humiliated, he begs for God's mercy, doesn't reach the vocal heights or plumb the emotional depths of the finest in that role. Alexander Malta makes a rich, sonorous Abimélech, the young, vibrant Weigl has not yet developed the bleat which later marred his baritone and Richard Kogel makes a hieratic but rather throaty Old Hebrew. Christa Ludwig sings beautifully in excellent French and is impressive in set pieces like "Amour, viens aider ma faiblesse", but I'm not sure that she has the right voice for Dalila; she sounds somehow rather staid and matronly and her timbre doesn't blend ideally with King's harsh sound.

On paper, this recording should have been a winner, but it fails to gel.

**Georges Prêtre – 1975** (live; stereo) Bella Voce  
Orchestra - L'Opéra de Paris  
Chorus - L'Opéra de Paris

Samson - Guy Chauvet  
Dalila - Fiorenza Cossotto  
Le Grand Prêtre de Dagon - Robert Massard  
Abimélech - Joseph Rouleau  
Le Vieillard Hébreu - Jules Bastin  
Le messenger philistin - Duilio Baronti  
Premier philistin - Jean Sabignot  
Deuxième philistin - Alain Dileur

Supposedly recorded in stereo, the sound here is nonetheless narrow, distorted and crumbly, which is a pity given the big names in the cast. The prospect of hearing my favourite French baritone, Robert

Massard and Fiorenza Cossotto is a role surely unusual for her was an attractive one, although I was quite sure that Jules Bastin would not have the requisite weight and resonance of voice to satisfy as the Old Hebrew – and so it proved. The orchestra seems to have been having an off-night, too; their playing is scrappy and scrawny. Prêtre's mastery of the score is not in question but he may be heard in better sound in his previous, studio recording. Both Cossotto and Chauvet have the right voices but they are very distantly recorded and he sounds strained at times, given to shouting, while she lacks delicacy. She sounds much more convincing at the start of Act 2, when her lower register comes into play and she plots with Massard, who is as vivid and sturdy as ever; similarly, Chauvet is at his best in the opening of Act 3. Rouleau makes a strenuous Abimélech.

The poor sound and too many inadequacies in the singing disqualify this from recommendation.

**Daniel Barenboim – 1978** (studio; stereo) DG

Orchestra - Orchestre de Paris

Chorus - Choeur de l'Orchestre de Paris

Samson - Plácido Domingo

Dalila - Elena Obraztsova

Le Grand Prêtre de Dagon - Renato Bruson

Abimélech - Pierre Thau

Le Vieillard Hébreu - Robert Lloyd

Le messenger philistin - Gérard Friedman

Premier philistin - Constantin Zaharia

Deuxième philistin - Michel Hubert

At first sight, there seems to be quite a lot going for this recording, not least the good, analogue sound, some famous names in the cast, a French orchestra, chorus and supporting singers. However, less attractive aspects soon become apparent: Barenboim's flaccid conducting, some hoarse tenors in the chorus and the unsuitability of Obraztsova's stentorian mezzo-soprano to depicting a seductress. We know that Dalila has a cold, hard heart beneath her superficial charms but here she sounds like Cruella de Vil on acid. I like Obraztsova in the right role; this isn't it. She does manage to soften her timbre for "Printemps qui commence" and it's good to hear a genuinely developed lower register but her pronounced vibrato and hard, glottal sound are not conducive to depicting a voluptuous priestess. Nor does Domingo's soft, ductile, Latinate tone sound right for Samson – and he is clearly marginally over-parted by its demands; there is a mis-match here as bad as that between the male and female Australian Redback spider. He sings well enough but in the last scene does not approach the visceral intensity of such as Vickers or Cura in Samson's agony. I have never warmed to Bruson's nasal, bleating baritone, despite his fame among certain aficionados; to me, like Domingo he sounds too smooth and not really inside his role. Pierre Thau makes a muddy-voiced Abimélech. Vocal relief comes in the person of Robert Lloyd's noble Old Hebrew but no-one buys this opera for that fleeting appearance. The Bacchanale generates almost no heat, apart from an artificially hyped conclusion. Nope.

**Sylvain Cambreling – 1988** (live; digital) Koch Schwann

Orchestra - Wiener Symphoniker

Chorus - Chor der Volksoper Wien - Kammerchor Sofia - Bregenzer Festspielchor

Samson – Carlo Cossutta

Dalila - Marjana Lipovsek

Le Grand Prêtre de Dagon - Alain Fondary

Abimélech - Yves Bisson

Le Vieillard Hébreu - Harald Stamm

Le messenger philistin - Constantin Zaharia

Premier philistin - Jérôme Engramer

Deuxième philistin - Ionel Pantea

I generally find Cambreling to be reliable and rewarding in the French repertoire – so much so that I can forgive him his ponytail - and he has at his disposal an excellent orchestra and chorus. He gives Barenboim a lesson in how to maintain a steady tempo in the opening sombre lament without dragging or sacrificing tension and if we take the Bacchanale as a litmus test of how to conduct this opera he passes with distinction – but the hoofing of the dancers is also very audible. Unfortunately, Cossutta's cloudy tenor is afflicted by too pronounced a beat at this stage of his career, and he does not convince as Samson, while Lipovsek sounds uncomfortable as Dalila; her mezzo sounds like an edgy soprano without warmth or proper lower-register depth and their encounters are about as erotic as a job interview. The supporting voices are undistinguished: Fondary has intonation issues proceeding from forcing; the Abimélech is wobbly.

This is live and recorded too distantly, unfortunately also picking up stage and audience noise. Not recommendable.

**Colin Davis – 1989** (studio; digital) Philips  
Orchestra - Sinfonieorchester des Bayerischen Rundfunks  
Chorus - Chor des Bayerischen Rundfunks

Samson - José Carreras  
Dalila - Agnes Baltsa  
Le Grand Prêtre de Dagon - Jonathan Summers  
Abimélech - Simon Estes  
Le Vieillard Hébreu - Paata Burchuladze  
Le messenger philistin - Robert Swensen  
Premier philistin - Donald George Smith  
Deuxième philistin - Urban Malmberg

This recording has generally received a bad press and, not having heard it prior to undertaking this survey, I wholly expected to find it wanting; now I only wonder why it has not been more acclaimed. Davis gives notice immediately that he has the measure of this score and the sound is so “in-yer-face” that you cannot miss the detail and fervent intensity of his interpretation – already, even at this stage of his career – punctuated by the conductor's all-too-audible grunts and growls. Still this is far more involving than the distance or flaccidity of, for example, Patanè or Barenboim, who really don't get under the skin of this music the way Davis does. His Bavarian orchestra and chorus are the best on record and as soon as I began to listen, I found myself infinitely more absorbed by the music than in so many other accounts; this is streets ahead of most other recordings in terms of excitement. So many passages ooze the kind of exoticism that escapes too many conductors; as an example, the dance after the wonderful trio “Je viens célébrer la victoire” is as spicy as a Casablancon bazaar and the Bacchanale is a sinuous, sensuous riot.

I have read rude assessments of Simon Estes' Abimélech which equally mystify me; I think he sounds terrific: a big, black, powerful sound in an essentially one-dimensional role which just needs to make an impact. Likewise, Jonathan Summers as the High Priest does “Mr Angry” very successfully, maintaining fullness of timbre throughout the constant, full-on ranting the part demands; it is by far the best thing I have heard him do, so for once the in Act 2 “Vengeance Duet” with Dalila is thrilling. Burchuladze's French isn't great but it's passable and here is another imposing voice matching Davis' technicolor conception if an opera too often dismissed as thin-gruel oratorio.

The element of strain in Carreras' immediate-post-leukaemia tenor lends edge and tension to his portrayal; he is very far from voiceless and the role doesn't lie too high. Even if his tenor does not have the ease or lustre it possessed before his illness, it still has a heroic ring and beauty of tone and there is nothing wrong with his top B flat on “Trahison!” and the top B at the end of “Mon cœur s'ouvre à ta

voix". Yes, it has its wobbly moments but his is a deeply felt and committed characterisation, very far from the "stand-and-sing" approach. He is deeply moving in his monologue aria at the start of Act 3, "Vois ma misère, hélas!"; in this, he matches Cura for Davis in his second recording. The pathos of his timbre was always a strength, as he demonstrated in his *Werther*, again for Davis. Finally, I love the combination of beauty and toughness in Baltsa's Dalila; she is in superb voice and her vibrant mezzo with its pinging top notes and trenchant lower register suggests both her allure and the zealotry of her patriotism.

As always occurs when I undertake one of these semi-comprehensive surveys, a dark horse recording emerges – and this is it; I suggest that you ignore its detractors.

**Myung-Whun Chung – 1991** (studio; digital) EMI

Orchestra - Opéra-Bastille

Chorus - Opéra Bastille

Samson - Plácido Domingo

Dalila - Waltraud Meier

Le Grand Prêtre de Dagon - Alain Fondary

Abimélech - Jean-Philippe Courtis

Le Vieillard Hébreu - Samuel Ramey

Le messager philistin - Christian Papis

Premier philistin - Daniel Galvez-Vallejo

Deuxième philistin - François Harismendy

The verdict on this recording of the late Alan Blyth, doyen of opera reviewers for that august organ *Gramophone*, was that "[w]ithout doubt this is the most subtly and expertly conducted performance of this work to appear on CD, excellent as others have been in this respect, and also the best played and sung." As much as I revere his legacy, I think he was too dismissive of competitive recordings and his verdict on Carreras and Baltsa in particular was too harsh, so I beg to differ, about both this recording and Davis' first.

The digital sound is of course excellent, if rather over-reverberant, and the presence of a French opera orchestra, chorus and supporting cast always an advantage, but I find Chung's management of the opening lament to be too leisurely; were it not for the agitated underlying string accompaniment the chorus could be singing a lullaby. Things soon pick up but quite often throughout I find Chung lacks the grip this opera needs to maintain momentum. Prêtre's urgency has its critics but I think he is right to keep the pedal to the metal except for the more languorous interludes, which still need underlying tension.

Domingo sounded bland for Barenboim thirteen years earlier; here his Samson has more bite and his French has further improved. I still find that his lovely voice is too warm and Latinate for the role without the element of ferocity or struggle I hear in the best and – as was nearly always the case with him - the top never quite rings out as it should, as his tone thins the higher he goes. Courtis' bass-baritone is also rather soft-grained for such an aggressive role and the same cloudiness of tone is apparent in Alain Fondary's baritone as High Priest, but he is better here than for Cambreling, not surprisingly sounding very idiomatic and uncannily like Gabriel Bacquier. It is luxury casting to have Samuel Ramey's rich bass as the Old Hebrew, exuding authority. His delivery of the last, great, arcing phrase of the wonderful Act 1 Trio rivals the sweep of Journet in the old Caruso recording.

Finally, we come to Meier's Dalila and for me, here's the rub. Response to voices is very personal and subjective, but I do not like her tremulous vibrato, bottled, edgy tone and under-developed lower-register. She sounds like what she is: a halfway-house voice between – what? – a dramatic soprano and a mezzo-soprano and for me that's all wrong; I want a much more velvety, voluptuous sound. If

you like her more than I, and do not share my finicky objections to the voices and conducting here, sample it and feel free to go with a recording which has garnered praise – but I much prefer both of Davis' recordings.

**Colin Davis – 1998** (studio; digital) Erato  
Orchestra - London Symphony Orchestra  
Chorus - London Symphony Orchestra Chorus

Samson - José Cura  
Dalila - Olga Borodina  
Le Grand Prêtre de Dagon - Jean-Philippe Lafont  
Abimélech - Egil Silins  
Le Vieillard Hébreu - Robert Lloyd  
Le messenger philistin - Rémy Garin  
Premier philistin - Gilles Ragon  
Deuxième philistin - Olivier Lallouette

This must be the best thing Cura has done on disc. If you need convincing, listen to the heart-breaking intensity and pathos of his soft singing over the pulsing orchestral accompaniment, simulating the treadmill to which the blinded Samson is chained, in "Vois ma misère, hélas!" at the beginning of Act 3: sublime. He has reserves of power, too, for the more declamatory sections and there is none of the patchiness which at times has affected his singing; sadly, his voice has since declined until it is a shadow of its former self. Borodina has a luscious mezzo-soprano, and while she cannot muster the erotic intensity of Callas or the Gallic frisson and clarity with the text of Hélène Bouvier in the classic 1946 recording, she has the stage experience and enough temperament to carry it off. Colin Davis treats this scorned, carefully wrought, music with respect and brings to it the same energy he evinces in his Berlioz recordings, such that the variety and passion of this supposedly cool score have every chance to make their mark.

Given its strengths, it is frustrating to note the inadequacy of the supporting roles, with the honourable exception of Robert Lloyd's predictably sonorous Old Hebrew. Both Silin's Abimélech and Lafont's High Priest are blustery and unlovely of tone; a pity, especially as orchestra and chorus are on top form under Davis. The recorded sound is excellent.

### **Recommendations**

I have long advocated the second Davis recording as the best modern option, but re-acquaintance with both his earlier account and the classic 1962 Prêtre studio recording has made me reassess that preference, despite the less than resplendent sound of the latter. Ultimately, I am torn, as I think all three to be equally fine and none perfect. In the end, you must go with your taste in voices. The mono recordings and excerpts can only be supplementary to a main, modern recording but they contain some lovely things, too.

Live mono: Jean Fournet 1964; Georges Prêtre 1970  
Studio mono: Louis Fourestier 1946  
Studio stereo/digital: Georges Prêtre 1962; Colin Davis 1989\*; Colin Davis 1998  
\*First choice

### **Ralph Moore**