

Puccini's *Suor Angelica* - A survey of the studio recordings
By Ralph Moore

There are only ten studio recordings of *Suor Angelica*, all considered below. I have limited my survey to those with the sole addition of the 1951 radio broadcast – the first considered below – as a kind of halfway house between a live and a studio performance; it is one of only two mono recordings here, the other being the early EMI one. Two conductors - Bartoletti and Gardelli - have recorded the opera twice with a twenty-year interval between their interpretations, which is interesting. Post 1980, there are half a dozen live DVD recordings available which I have not considered, having confined myself to CD issues of studio recordings, the last of which was made as long ago as 1998 by Antonio Pappano – the final review here.

In some quarters, my love of *Suor Angelica* will probably be considered the equivalent to expressing an attachment to André Rieu or to cherishing a collection of “My Little Pony” merchandise, as anything smacking of overt sentimentality is anathema to the modern, cynical Zeitgeist. However, one of opera’s most potent attributes is its ability to exploit the transformative power of music to ennoble or validate that which might otherwise appear trite or mawkish. It was Puccini’s favourite of the three works which make up *Il trittico*, and forms the climax of that triptych of one-Act operas. It is much gentler and more contemplative than the melodrama *Il tabarro* and the robust comedy *Gianni Schicchi* which precede it but if performed by a great singer-actress can produce an overwhelmingly heartrending effect, provided the listener surrenders to its power to move rather than exercising ironic detachment. This is why it has attracted some of the greatest sopranos from Geraldine Farrar, who sang in its premiere, to singers of the stereo recording era such as de los Ángeles, Tebaldi and Sutherland but has never been especially popular with audiences or indeed hard-nosed critics. The plotline was heady and daring for its time: an illegitimate birth, the banishment to a convent of the disgraced mother by her aristocratic family, her mortal sin of committing suicide via poison, her immediate, frenzied repentance and desperate pleas for mercy resulting in a miraculous vision of the Blessed Mother who grants forgiveness, divine redemption and apotheosis into Paradise where Angelica is reunited with her child who runs to his mother’s arms; this is meaty stuff and perhaps the best way of savouring it all is in the armchair, wearing headphones and snivelling into a handkerchief, even if that does entail missing out on the producer’s visual conception of a rose-tinted Heaven.

The opera is under an hour long with an all-female cast. Despite the requirement for a good ensemble of characterful nuns and a cameo appearance of the frosty Aunt, the spotlight is throughout on Sister Angelica, whose voice is first heard off-stage before she makes her entrance a few minutes in and remains before the audience for the duration. While she must deliver much soft, gentle singing, she must also rise to tragic heights and not be a tweety-bird. For the most part, the scoring is subtle, diaphanous and atmospheric, reflecting the influence of Debussy, while its harmonic ambiguities are more suggestive of Richard Strauss; the orchestration of the passage accompanying Suor Angelica's preparation of her suicide potion, for example, is clearly innovative and experimental. Puccini stimulated his creativity by visiting his elder sister in her convent and even entertained the nuns by singing and playing operatic excerpts, before basing his musical ideas on what he witnessed there.

Suor Angelica has been quite lucky on record and I am sure most punters susceptible to its charms and undeterred by its Latin sentiment will find a recording to their taste among those below, regardless of my recommendations. This is a product of Puccini’s masterful maturity, so the orchestration, melodies and music in general are sublime. As much as I admire Poulenc’s masterpiece, give me Puccini’s nuns any day.

The Recordings

Fernando Previtali – 1951 (radio broadcast; mono) Warner Fonit Cetra
RAI Milano Orchestra & Chorus

Suor Angelica - Rosanna Carteri
La Zia Principessa - Miti Truccato Pace
La Badessa - Marta Solaro
La Zelatrice - Amelita Minniti
La Maestra delle novizie - Lia Ceri
Suor Genovieffa - Wanda Strappo
Suor Osmina - Gilda Capozzi
Suor Dolcina - Carla Pozzi
La Sorella Infermiera - Lita Donati

The limited, distanced, mono sound disqualifies this from being a recommendation other than for historical recording enthusiasts but many of us love the atmosphere of these old Cetra recordings and they often contain a bevy of semi-forgotten voices of real quality – here under a conductor of proven expertise.

Rosanna Carteri – still with us at 89 as I write – debuted very young and had a successful career but retired early, still in her thirties. She is only twenty years old here, thus fresh and appealing and her vocal acting is effective even if she isn't the most demonstrative of singers in this role. She had a powerful, slightly shrill lirico-spinto soprano which, given the sound, doesn't come over as well as it should; indeed, the sound becomes congested in ensemble and places a veil between the listener and the performance. Carteri is well supported by an able cast of singers whose names - apart perhaps from Miti Truccato Pace who here sings the Princess Aunt and the Sister Monitor with Tebaldi a decade later – will not be familiar. They characterise vividly and sing sweetly. If you can pick up a copy for a reasonable price and you enjoy these period recordings, do so – but it's currently scarce and there are plenty of modern options. Clips are available on YouTube if you want to sample it.

Tullio Serafin – 1957 (mono) EMI
Teatro dell'Opera di Roma Orchestra & Chorus

Suor Angelica - Victoria de los Ángeles
La Zia Principessa - Fedora Barbieri
La Badessa - Mina Doro
La Zelatrice - Corinna Vozza
La Maestra delle novizie - Mina Doro
Suor Genovieffa - Lydia Marimpietri
Suor Osmina - Santa Chissari
Suor Dolcina - Anna (Maria) Marcangeli
La Sorella Infermiera - Teresa Cantarini
La Cercatrice 1 - Lydia Marimpietri

This *Suor Angelica* has achieved classic status, its appeal enhanced by being packaged with two equally celebrated recordings starring Tito Gobbi in EMI's *Il trittico* and because it preserves one of the most touching performances by a beloved soprano when she was still in freshest voice. It surely should and would have been in stereo were it not for Walter Legge's resistance to new-fangled technology but we must put up with that, and even though it's in much better mono sound than the previous recording, it again regrettably puts a barrier between us and the performance – however, its quality soon makes us forget that.

In many ways, Victoria de los Ángeles has the ideal voice for the eponymous lead role: warm, feminine with a hint of vulnerability and always the suggestion of tears. As ever with this singer, the highest, loudest notes are a little strained but the pathos of her portrayal is so winning. Despite the tenderness of her singing, she rises magnificently to the desperation of “Ah! Son dannata!”, summoning up considerable power. Fedora Barbieri's hard, imperious Aunt provides the perfect foil to de los Ángeles; the other singers are forgotten comprimarii but very satisfactory; Lydia Marimpietri is particularly charming as Suor Genovieffa.

Serafin conducts with leisurely affection, caressing this gentlest of music and giving his singers plenty of time to fill out Puccini's long, lyrical lines. If modern sound is not a priority, this recording is a prime recommendation; only the young Ricciarelli rivals de los Ángeles for pathos.

Lamberto Gardelli – 1962 (stereo) Decca
Maggio Musicale Fiorentino Orchestra & Chorus

Suor Angelica - Renata Tebaldi
La Zia Principessa - Giulietta Simionato
La Badessa - Lucia Danieli
La Zelatrice - Miti Truccato Pace
La Maestra delle novizie - Anna Di Stasio
Suor Genovieffa - Dora Carral
Suor Osmina - Yeda Valtriani
Suor Dolcina - Giuliana Tivolaccini
La Sorella Infermiera - Anna Di Stasio

This was part of Decca's response to the EMI issue of *Il trittico* and naturally their star house-soprano took the lead, but by this stage of her career Tebaldi was losing the top notes so she avoids high Cs here and those high notes she does essay are sometimes harsh or, in the case of the floated top A on “amor” in “Senza mamma”, a little flat; otherwise her voice is in excellent condition and the power of her cries of “Salvami!” is formidable, reminding us that even if she was never credited with having Callas' dramatic intensity, certain of her roles such as La Gioconda give that judgement the lie. Here, despite the intrinsic unsuitability of her voice - which could veer towards harshness of tone - to portray the fragile Angelica, she lightens it most successfully and is aptly matched with the formidable, trumpet-voiced Giulietta Simionato as la Zia Principessa, but ultimately her sound is often too hearty and robust to conjure up credibly the vulnerable, lachrymose quality which comes so easily to de los Ángeles, Ricciarelli and Gallardo-Domás. The supporting cast is very strong: Miti Truccato Pace, who sang the Princess Aunt in the previous, rather dim Cetra recording, is here an attractively-voiced Sister Monitor, Lucia Danieli is a firm Abbess and Dora Carral is a light and spirited Sister Genovieffa.

The playing from the Florentine orchestra is lovely and Gardelli's conducting is fluid and sensitive; ensemble is excellent. So much of the singing is beautiful that I certainly want to have it on my shelves but fine though this is, it must yield to the more ethereal delights of such as Pappano's version.

This is available only as part of the triplet CD set of Decca's first *Il trittico*; *Il tabarro* with Tebaldi and Del Monaco is great but Corena's Gianni Schicchi is coarse and best avoided.

Bruno Bartoletti – 1973 (stereo) RCA
Santa Cecilia Orchestra & Chorus

Suor Angelica - Katia Ricciarelli
La Zia Principessa - Fiorenza Cossotto
La Badessa - Maria Grazia Allegri
La Zelatrice - Anna Di Stasio

La Maestra delle novizie - Maria Grazia Allegri
Suor Genovieffa - Rosanna Lippi
Suor Osmina - Margherita Benetti
Suor Dolcina - Miwako Matsumoto
La Sorella Infermiera - Anna Di Stasio
La Cercatrice 1 - Margherita Benetti
La Cercatrice 2 - Anna Di Stasio
Una novizia - Rosanna Lippi
La conversa 1 - Miwako Matsumoto
La conversa 2 - Maria Grazia Allegri

First, if you see a physical CD copy of this recording rather than the reasonably priced download, grab it, as it has been largely unavailable for many years - so I was delighted to get a copy from Germany for just a tenner, especially as it is otherwise on sale at silly prices.

Secondly, I advise taking with a pinch of salt the observations in the more critical reviews elsewhere of this lovely account; one or two listeners hear what I can only call highly subjective if not imaginary flaws in the sound, the singing and the orchestral playing. There is no sense in which Bartoletti's direction lacks shape or drama or is over-lush - in any case, how could there be in a work such as this, the ultimate Romantic and sentimental opera? Yes, the passage describing how Suor Angelica gathers and prepares by moonlight the herbal suicide potion is absolutely lovely in its swooning indulgence but Bartoletti is equally capable of generating the requisite drama in the great confrontation scene; the playing of the Santa Cecilia Academy orchestra is fully flexible.

Nor do I hear any problem with any imbalance or fade-outs in the analogue sound, remastered in 2008; to my ears everything is spacious, proportionate and highly atmospheric.

Finally, the singing itself is a marvel: we hear a twenty-seven years old Ricciarelli at her pure, limpid, delicate best, floating top As and Cs but summoning up impressive power in her cries of despair - "Ah! son dannata!" - and in her frantic supplication to the Blessed Mother, "Salvami!". There is nothing breathy and there is no lack of lower register heft in her big aria, "Senza mamma", which is deeply moving. Her vulnerable soprano finds the perfect foil in Fiorenza Cossotto's hard, steady, stentorian Zia Principessa; their meeting is riveting. The assertion that she is past her best in 1973 is patently absurd.

The supporting cast comprises merely five excellent comprimario voices, all of whom either double or even triple up in their subsidiary roles and I hear nothing "mis-cast" about the Genovieffa, even if it's true that a star like Cotrubas is even better. The angelic choir with audible trebles is the best I've heard - simultaneously ethereal in tone and visceral in impact.

When this intimate opera is performed with such skill and sincerity it easily eschews mawkishness and instead makes an extraordinary effect; no-one could surrender themselves to that ending and not yield to tears.

A libretto is supplied in pdf form on the CD itself - never much use to anyone, I'd say, but better than nothing.

Lorin Maazel – 1976 (stereo) CBS/Sony

New Philharmonia Orchestra; Ambrosian Opera Chorus & Desborough School Choir

Suor Angelica - Renata Scotto
La Zia Principessa - Marilyn Horne
La Badessa - Patricia Payne

La Zelatrice - Gillian Knight
La Maestra delle novizie - Ann Howard
Suor Genovieffa - Ileana Cotrubas
Suor Osmina - Doreen Cryer
Suor Dolcina - Margaret Cable
La Sorella Infermiera - Elizabeth Bainbridge
La Cercatrice 1 - Shirley Minty
La Cercatrice 2 - Gloria Jennings
Una novizia - Della Jones
La conversa 1 - Ursula Connors
La conversa 2 - Amy Gunson

I admit to qualified rapture for this set, somewhere in between the two extremes of raves and the moans it seems to attract from other reviewers. It is certainly very good value and admirable in many respects, not least -the commitment of the great and large-voiced vocal actress Renata Scotto and the delightful, plangent soprano of Ileana Cotrubas.

Maazel's conducting is decidedly relaxed throughout, hence he gives his singers plenty of space to make their points but there is sometimes a lack of tension and excitement which slightly compromises the atmosphere of these most specifically and uniquely atmospheric of Puccini's works. Some will also lament the lack of a proper libretto – a standard omission in more recent bargain boxes - but the synopses are quite detailed.

In many ways, I would like this recording even more if I were not familiar with others which are even better. Scotto's admirers need not hesitate: they will overlook the incipient beat on loud notes and the added-on screech on the highest, including uncomfortable high Cs in favour of her searing delivery of text and ability to ride an orchestra; she also cunningly exploits the little break between her registers to powerful emotive effect.

This is delicately played and sung until Scott lets rip in the harrowing and, ultimately very moving, miracle scene; she is terrific at suggesting desperation and hysteria - the flap in her voice even enhances the intensity of those kinds of emotion - but she can also still float a high note as she did years before as Madama Butterfly. Cotrubas is enchanting as Suor Genovieffa. Marilyn Horne must make her impact in what is almost a ten-minute cameo as the implacable Princess Aunt, and she matches Christa Ludwig for Bonyngé for severity and vocal splendour.

While I can cope with the lack of libretto, I am more irritated by Sony's absurd tracking arrangements: a mere two; goodness knows why.

If you value Scotto's histrionic talent and the virtues of her vocal layout over its failings, don't mind the absence of texts and the daft tracking, this bargain set still has much to offer but it is not the very finest option and is available only as part of the complete *Il trittico* three CD set.

Richard Bonyngé – 1978 (stereo) Decca

National Philharmonic Orchestra; London Opera Chorus - Finchley Children's Music Group

Suor Angelica - Joan Sutherland
La Zia Principessa - Christa Ludwig
La Badessa - Anne Collins
La Zelatrice - Elizabeth Connell
La Maestra delle novizie - Enid Hartle
Suor Genovieffa - Isobel Buchanan
Suor Osmina - Marie McLaughlin

Suor Dolcina - Della Jones
 La Sorella Infermiera - Janet Price
 La Cercatrice 1 - Elizabeth Gale
 La Cercatrice 2 - Hannah Francis
 Una novizia - Miriam Bowen
 La conversa 1 - Helen Walker
 La conversa 2 - Doreen Walker

It is perhaps slightly regrettable that Joan Sutherland did not record this opera around the same time as "Vissi d'arte", the aria included as a welcome bonus on this single disc (also issued paired with "L'oracolo" on Double Decca), as by 1978 a slight beat has begun to obtrude in her tone but the voice is still big, weighty and flexible, able to ride the very few orchestral climaxes Puccini demands. Furthermore, her diction is better than it sometimes was and although she is a little mature for the role, it is attractively and plangently sung. She is supported by a mini-galaxy of British stars, including a lovely Suor Genovieffa from Isobel Buchanan in her first major recording, who might not surpass the sweetness and simplicity of Ileana Cotrubas in that role but certainly rivals her. The recording is crowned by the formidable Christa Ludwig's imperiously voiced Princess: steady, implacable and granitic with more than a hint of Fricka or Waltraute about it.

Bonyng and the National Philharmonic do a fine job with this gentle, delicate score; they are abetted by the warm analogue recording in the Kingsway Hall which suffuses the whole enterprise with a golden glow. Fans of *La Stupenda* need not hesitate.

Lamberto Gardelli – 1982 (digital) Hungaroton
 Hungarian State Opera Orchestra & Chorus

Suor Angelica - Ilona Tokody
 La Zia Principessa - Eszter Póka
 La Badessa - Zsuzsa Barlay
 La Zelatrice - Maria Teresa Uribe
 La Maestra delle novizie - Tamara Takács
 Suor Genovieffa - Katalin Pitti
 Suor Osmina - Magda Pulveri
 Suor Dolcina - Zsuzsa Misura
 La Sorella Infermiera - Janka Bekás
 La Cercatrice 1 - Janka Bekás
 La Cercatrice 2 - Margit Keszthelyi
 Una novizia - Ildikó Szönyi
 La conversa 1 - Zsuzsa Misura
 La conversa 2 - Zsuzsa Barlay

Some great recordings have come out of left field, as it were, from Hungaroton rather than the usual recording stables; sadly, this is not one of them. It is Gardelli's second recording and despite having an overall timing virtually the same as his first, much more successful recording with Tebaldi, seems too "stop-go": alternately at times rather listless then at others too swift and spritely to permit the dreamy, languorous atmosphere suggested by Puccini's gauzy orchestration. Nor am I impressed by the assemblage of supporting singers here, amongst whom number some throaty, hooty, wobbly and squawky voices which do not cohere or blend, especially the Suor Genovieffa who makes a weird sound and has very occluded diction including what unfortunately sounds like a pronounced lisp in her poor Italian. Finally, Eszter Póka's Zia Principessa is scratchy and wobbly, lacking tonal warmth and centre – although she has a serviceable lower register.

All this is unfortunate as the sound is first-class and I have always enjoyed Ilona Tokody's smoky, grainy timbre – particularly in her *Iris* with Domingo and conducted by Patanè – but while the success of his opera depends heavily upon the contributions of only two or three singers, it still needs a strong ensemble free of ill-produced voices. In any case, Tokody's own, big sound isn't particularly suited to portraying Suor Angelica; it is too mature, gutsy and sophisticated and her top can start to flap alarmingly in the manner of late Scotto and Callas.

Pass on this one; you can do far better.

Giuseppe Patanè – 1987 (digital) RCA

Münchner Rundfunkorchester; Chor des Bayerischen Rundfunks

Suor Angelica - Lucia Popp
La Zia Principessa - Marjana Lipovšek
La Badessa - Marga Schiml
La Zelatrice - Diane Jennings
La Maestra delle novizie - Birgit Calm
Suor Genovieffa – Maria Gabriella Ferroni
Suor Osmina – Maria Gabriella Ferroni
Suor Dolcina - Mechthild Georg
La Sorella Infermiera - Valerie Errante
La Cercatrice 1 - Ellen van Lier
La Cercatrice 2 - Karin Hautermann
La conversa 1 - Monika Schmitt
La conversa 2 - Adelheid Schiller

Even buffs like me might recognise only two names in the cast list here in the two leading ladies – or rather the one big part and the cameo role of the Princess. The other singers are sweet and pleasant, if rather anonymous, perhaps as one might expect; a bigger problem is one that other reviewers have remarked upon, which is that it is recorded - or reproduced – at very low volume, so the listener must crank it right up to a satisfactory level, then all is well enough but a lack of presence remains.

Given that Patanè was always reliable – although I could do without his grunting – and the orchestral playing equally so, the presence of Lucia Popp must be the main attraction here. The issue is whether her voice is ample enough to rise to the big moments. Its silvery, shimmering quality is always gratefully heard, her little tic of “squeezing” notes sometimes less so. I don't think her voice is ideally suited her role; it lacks Italianate warmth and sensuousness, evincing too much of the soubrette quality which marked the beginning of Popp's career. Sometimes she is tonally too thin and shrill, but she rises to her big, final scene, finding extra heft for top Bs and her repeated cries of “*Salvami*”, although the two high Cs are rather squeaked and the soft top A on “*amor*” is precarious. Lipovšek sings steadily and gravely but does not chill the marrow as a really haughty, frigid Princess can and her imprecations lack impact.

In the end, this recording sounds low-key and – well – a bit bland and *German* compared with more overtly histrionic and Italianate accounts.

(This is another recording which irritatingly supplies only three tracking points but conversely at least the booklet provides an Italian-only text.)

Bruno Bartoletti – 1991 (digital) Decca
Maggio Musicale Fiorentino Orchestra & Chorus

Suor Angelica - Mirella Freni
La Zia Principessa - Elena Souliotis
La Badessa - Gloria Scalchi
La Zelatrice - Ewa Podleś
La Maestra delle novizie - Nicoletta Curiel
Suor Genovieffa - Barbara Frittoli
Suor Osmina - Valeria Esposito
Suor Dolcina - Olga Romanko
La Sorella Infermiera - Debora Beronesi

Freni's voice was still in excellent condition in her mid-fifties when this was recorded but inevitably she sounds rather mature and there are undeniably hints of scratch, spread and beat on her loudest high notes - and unfortunately the final soft top A in "Senza mamma" is unsteady and goes a little flat. She cannot really sustain a thread of tone without pushing too hard; however, she brings great intensity and commitment to communicating Angelica's desperate plight in the closing scene where she is supported by an excellent chorus and a vastly experienced conductor. They are recorded in sumptuous Decca sound, with a slight aura or "halo" around it, which intensifies the rarefied atmosphere of this unusual opera. Her co-singers are mostly fine but it wasn't a good idea to bring the threadbare-voiced Elena Souliotis out of retirement to sing the implacable Princess Aunt.

I was especially interested in revisiting this recording given Freni's recent passing and once again delighted in her uniquely beautiful sound, despite the signs of wear. Even if it is not the very best available, devotees could do much worse than acquire this; unfortunately, I have not seen it available separately but only as part of the three CD *Il trittico* set marred by Leo Nucci's dry, bleating Gianni Schicchi.

(I note that YouTube provides clips of Freni singing "Sour (sic) Angelica" - hardly fair...)

Alexander Rahbari – 1993 (digital) Discovery International
Belgian Radio & TV Orchestra and Chorus

Suor Angelica - Miriam Gauci
La Zia Principessa - Lucienne van Deyck
La Badessa - Michaela Karadjian
La Zelatrice - Rachel Fabry
La Maestra delle novizie - Dina Grossberger
Suor Genovieffa - Bernadette Degelin
Suor Osmina - Diane Verdoodt
Suor Dolcina - Marianne Vliegen
La Sorella Infermiera - Michaela Karadjian

Rather like Gardelli's second recording and several others above, this one isn't in the running, but whereas the Hungaroton recording, for example, has manifest flaws, this one isn't objectionable, it simply overall lacks the distinction of the best alternatives. Ensemble is good and we hear some nice voices but their opening exchanges lack verve and sparkle and the delivery of the text is pedestrian. Gauci sings well enough but her vibrato is broader than I recall hearing in her recordings elsewhere and at times her characterisation lacks personality; her voice has little "face" – indeed, too many singers here sound indistinguishable from each other. The acoustic of the recording is a touch cavernous, too, and sometimes voices move out of focus – unusual in digital recordings.

However, it gets better as it progresses and the second half eclipses the first. The best thing here is Lucienne van Deyck's richly-intoned Zia Principessa. Her mezzo is even and powerful throughout its range with secure top notes and a trenchant lower register; she brings beauty, power and intensity to her brief appearance and her entrance marks the upturn in this recording. Her presence brings a response from Gauci who comes alive in her reaction to her aunt's intransigence. She has a large, flexible voice and it gives much pleasure if you don't mind the slight beat; her floated top C is impressive, too, and I thoroughly enjoyed the last ten minutes or so, when the orchestra seems to move into a more sumptuous zone, acquiring more depth and sheen. Rahbari's direction is certainly competent but overall this is performance which for too long leaves me unmoved compared with my response to other, more arresting, individual and involving interpretations.

Antonio Pappano – 1998 (digital) EMI

Philharmonia Orchestra; London Voices - Tiffin Boys' School Choir

Suor Angelica - Cristina Gallardo-Domás
 La Zia Principessa - Bernadette Manca Di Nissa
 La Badessa - Felicity Palmer
 La Zelatrice - Elena Zilio
 La Maestra delle novizie - Sara Fulgoni
 Suor Genovieffa - Dorothea Röschmann
 Suor Osmina - Judith Rees
 Suor Dolcina - Rachele Stanisci
 La Sorella Infermiera - Francesca Pedaci
 La Cercatrice 1 - Anne Maria Panzarella
 La Cercatrice 2 - Susan Mackenzie-Park
 Una novizia - Rosalind Waters
 La conversa 1 - Anne Maria Panzarella
 La conversa 2 - Deborah Miles-Johnson

Antonio Pappano has by and large over the years triumphantly justified his preferential treatment by EMI in being allowed to record large-scale works where other eminent conductors have gone begging. This *Suor Angelica* is part of the trilogy recorded in 1997 must be accounted a success even in the light of stiff competition going back fifty and more years - but of course one area where it trumps all others is the clarity and spaciousness of the sound.

If *Suor Angelica* is sometimes regarded as the Cinderella of the trilogy, that perception is confounded here. I can only say that I find this version one of the two or three most genuinely moving among those I have been listening to. Cristina Gallardo-Domas sings exquisitely, floating top A's and C's and I can never listen to it without tears welling up and my throat going into spasm. The supporting cast is very strong, particular bonuses being Dorothea Röschmann's delightful Suor Genovieffa and Bernadette Manca di Nissa's implacable Zia Principessa; veteran Felicity Palmer makes a telling contribution with her tangy mezzo and I was impressed by Elena Zio. We also hear singers like Sara Fulgoni who were spotted and recruited early by Pappano and are now well-known. Finally, the playing of this light, airy, ethereal score by the Philharmonic Orchestra is enchanting.

This *Suor Angelica* is decidedly "best in class" and has every claim to being my favourite account of this tricky work.; the problem is that it is available only as part of the three CD set of *Il trittico* – or as a download.

Recommendations

Some of the above are available as separate, single CD issues but the earlier Gardelli, Maazel, later Bartoletti and Pappano recordings come only, as far as I know, as part of the set of *Il Trittico* or as downloads.

I cannot decide between these two first-equal choices (although the Bartoletti is hard to obtain and the Pappano available only as part of a set):

Bartoletti 1973

Pappano 1998

If you want a single CD issue, Victoria de los Ángeles, too, although in mono sound, comes a close third, offering a deeply moving portrayal. Finally, Bonyngé and Sutherland are a definite option for their fans.

Ralph Moore