

Opera on Video

A Personal Review

The accessibility of opera has increased markedly in the decades since video recorders became available in the home. It seems appropriate to essay this highly personal review of the materials to which I have access. My definition of “opera” has been broadened to include any work generally so classified whether staged or not, and any classical vocal work presented in a staged performance. I have included concert performances of operas and stagings of oratorios. The reviews reflect my personal opinions and should not be taken as more. I hope that they provide you with enough information to select among performances or to seek out items of interest.

The intent of the Evaluation entry is to provide a one-word summary opinion of the recording.

Excellent	Solid representation of the work in all significant respects; flaws may be noted in the text.
Very Good	Recording adequate for appreciation of the opera by one not familiar with it.
Good	Fundamentally valid reading lacking significant elements; not recommended for novices.
Fair/Adequate	Tolerable performance with elements worth seeing but not satisfying overall.
Inadequate	Although unacceptable overall, acceptable if no alternative is available.
Poor	Unacceptable performance overall; elements may be worth seeing.

Other terms such as Unique and Idiosyncratic apply to performances of particular value in specific senses but which should not be regarded as generally representative of the opera. Those recordings should be sampled before purchase; traditionalists may find them unacceptable, but those new to opera in general or to the particular work may find them revelatory.

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Così fan Tutte Mozart

Conductor: Smith
Company: Sellars

Fiordiligi: Larson
Dorabella: Felty
Ferrando: Kelley
Guglielmo: Maddalena
Despina: Kozma
Alfonso: Sylvan

LaserDisc
Italian / English subtitles
Director: Sellars

Date: 1990
Evaluation: Idiosyncratic

PRODUCTION

Italian comedy of manners mis-set in upstate New York. Despite interesting ideas, the production so interferes with and contradicts both the music and the text that the performance cannot be recommended. The single set is Despina's diner, honestly represented and suitably appointed. Costumes are tawdry but colorful. The idea of focussing on Alfonso and Despina is viable and balances the six characters beautifully.

PERFORMANCES

Smith disappoints here, with leaden tempos and no trace of wit. Even with little to do, the chorus is a deficit. Larson's Fiordiligi is a delight to hear, but her performance fits Sellars, not Mozart or da Ponte. Felty is almost as good vocally, and less objectionable dramatically. Neither Kelley nor Maddalena has as fluid an instrument as one would like, but they are capable. Sylvan and Kozma are superb dramatically and pleasant vocally.

TECHNICAL COMMENTS

Brilliant video and audio convey every nuance of the production and all that Sellars allows of the musical invention. Camera work seems somewhat overactive, especially since the production is so busy already. This performance may be enjoyed often for the singing, but should be seen only once, and then simply to provoke thought about Sellars' ideas.

Così fan Tutte Mozart

Conductor: Muti
Company: Scala

Fiordiligi: Dessi
Dorabella: Ziegler
Despina: Sarabelli
Fernando: Kundlak
Guglielmo: Corbelli
Alfonso: Desderi

Broadcast
Italian / English subtitles
Director: ?

Date: 1989
Evaluation: Very Good

PRODUCTION

Bright, Italianate live performance. Sets are conventional but bright and upbeat. Costumes are similarly unsurprising and almost colorless. Stage movement is well choreographed and pleasant.

PERFORMANCES

Muti approaches perilously close to Rossini. The orchestra also provides 19th-century playing, albeit of high order. Dessi is far too careful in producing notes to convey the spirit of Fiordiligi. Ziegler more nearly suits her rôle though she lacks technical facility. Kundlak's technical weaknesses make one wish that more than the traditional cuts had been made—although his tone quality and characterization are pleasant. In practice, only Desderi both sings and characterizes with facility. The ensembles are consistently far more successful than the arias.

TECHNICAL COMMENTS

Video is clear and lighting is sufficient (though it appears unaugmented). Sound is excellent, resolving voices and instruments easily without sacrificing ensemble. Taken as a 19th-century, Italian transposition of Mozart, this is a satisfying performance.

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Così fan Tutte Mozart

Conductor: Harnoncourt
Company: film

Fiordiligi: Gruberova
Dorabella: Ziegler
Despina: Stratas
Fernando: Lima
Guglielmo: Furlanetto
Alfonso: Montarsolo

LaserDisc
Italian / English subtitles
Director: Ponelle

Date: 1984
Evaluation: Good

PRODUCTION

Overdone, undersung film. Sets are exterior garden and interior of a period manor, beautifully conceived and implemented. Costumes are also period and eschew the extremes for the Armenians and for Despina seen in alternatives. Movement in general is reminiscent of silent films: exaggerated and simplistic. The production makes the opera into *buffo*, ignoring its designation as *giocosa* (as in Don Giovanni) and the drawing-room comedies that it anticipated. Lip sync is unusually fine, even for Ponelle. The device of leaving the wagger in view works well even when the viewer's attention is not drawn to it.

PERFORMANCES

Harnoncourt is surprisingly heavy-handed, playing Mozart as minor Rossini. The orchestra is not large but seems ponderous in following his direction. Gruberova is imprecise in phrasing, though accurate in pitch. Ziegler's attributes are similar. Lima and Furlanetto have more substantial voices than their counterparts, but lack both the style and the technique for their rôles. Montarsolo is particularly crude in his reading. Stratas has the best comic material and both plays and sings it superbly; she provides the only true grace, style, and wit in the performance.

TECHNICAL COMMENTS

Video is clear and well lighted so all visual detail is preserved. Audio quality can be faulted only for a bit of muffling which further contributes to the overall dullness of the performance. Camera work and video direction are superb, maintaining concentration on relevant elements without excessive changes of viewpoint. Stereo is used to excellent effect, with elements of surround when appropriate and with good imaging of both stage and pit. One can only regret that the performance is not up to the technology.

Così fan Tutte Mozart

Conductor: Robinson
Company: film

Fiordiligi: Putnam
Dorabella: Rigby
Fernando: Rolfe-Johnson
Guglielmo: Hampson
Despina: Ashe
Alfonso: Rawnsley

Broadcast
English
Director: Miller

Date: 1985
Evaluation: Problematic

PRODUCTION

Unique, apparently live performance filmed without an audience. Sets either constitute or emulate beautifully a real villa in bright sunlight. The costumes appear to be 18th-century British, rather than Italian, but work well. Acting is outstanding, giving the feeling of a persuasive stage play with music. Enunciation is reasonably good, but not enough to replace subtitles in the arias and ensembles. Editing is somewhat more severe than customary, cutting all the men's arias except for *Un'aura amorosa*.

PERFORMANCES

Robinson's reading is stodgy and conventional, but without substantial specific flaw. The orchestra is romantic in size and style, the chorus is overloud in its brief stints, and neither conveys the feel of Mozart any more than the conductor does. Putnam is visually delightful but vocally no more than adequate, approximating the range and technical demands and lacking the requisite dramatic fire. Rigby's instrument is darker and more plummy than desirable, but she does complement Putnam rather well. The men sing what music is left to them adequately and act quite naturally. The ensembles are a pleasure to see and to hear.

TECHNICAL COMMENTS

The broadcast (from A&E) suffers from video and audio flaws which may not characterize the master tape. Video is well lighted and in sharp focus except for a pointlessly murky wedding scene. Stereo is hardly used at all, but the review copy's sound suffers from excessive expansion, so that quiet sounds are inaudible, loud ones overwhelming. Direction is excellent, with admirable framing and camera movement. Overall, the performance is a frustrating mix of successful translation and inadequate enunciation; satisfying singing and sluggish conducting; delightful video direction and marginal audio.

Così fan Tutte Mozart

Conductor: Östman
Company: Drottningholm

Fiordiligi: Biel
Dorabella: Höglind
Fernando: Tibell
Guglielmo: Linden
Despina: Severin
Alfonso: Florimo

Broadcast
Italian / English subtitles
Director: Olofsson

Date: 1984
Evaluation: Unacceptable

PRODUCTION

Candy-box presentation at the court theater. Concept is the only similarity to Bergman's *Zauberflöte*, which might have been the intended model. Sets and costumes are uniformly dull in earth tones brightened only by an occasional flash of intense blue. The performers appear to be reciting lines and make little effort to move (though they pose regularly).

PERFORMANCES

Östman probably bears most of the blame for a colorless, dull reading of an inherently spritely work. The orchestra seems leaden, with modern sounds from a small band compounding the stolid interpretation. The fragment of choral work is well handled in the same vein. None of the singers is notable in a positive sense; in general, they sing the indicated notes without style or inflection. Fiordiligi and Dorabella are vocally indistinguishable, Fernando and Guglielmo very nearly so. Severin's wobble provides (unpleasant) distraction, while Florimo makes Alfonso a lout with his dry instrument and simplistic reading.

TECHNICAL COMMENTS

Video is flat in tone, but sharply focussed. Sound is too good, exposing the dull performances through clear reproduction. Lighting is quite uniform so that there is as little visual as audible contrast. Camera work is routine. This performance is a fine opportunity missed due to lack of talent all around. Until this recording, an uninteresting *Così* would have seemed unthinkable; now it is in hand.

Don Giovanni **Mozart**

Conductor: Furtwängler
Company: Salzburg

Giovanni: Siepi
Leporello: Edelmann
Anna: Grümmer
Elvira: della Casa
Ottavio: Dermota
Zerlina: Berger

Beta
Italian
Director: Czinner

Date: 1954
Evaluation: Excellent

PRODUCTION

Historic live staging. Sets and costumes are strictly traditional, preserving a generation of performance no longer accessible otherwise. Acting is exaggerated in the style of that earlier era. Lip sync is often quite poor, confirming that the images were recorded without an audience while the sound was captured during a live performance.

PERFORMANCES

Furtwängler's concept antedates the modern effort to be authentic; it derives from a century or so of performance practice that established Don Giovanni as the masterwork of the all-time master of music. The orchestra and chorus are impeccable. Siepi has the voice, elegance, and style of the Don, not a swaggering oaf but a self-assured nobleman. Edelmann sings reasonably well but makes Leporello a buffoon; he cannot be believed when he impersonates Giovanni. Grümmer is definitive in every way. Della Casa lacks Elvira's fire but sings well. Berger sounds ideal and moves beautifully, but is in fact some decades too old for the rôle; it doesn't matter: she's perfect. Dermota is good enough for the usual unimaginative interpretation; the supporting soloists are superb—as they should be when Masetto is taken by Berry and Ernster provides the sepulchral sounds of the Commendatore.

TECHNICAL COMMENTS

Video shows its age despite augmented lighting. Monaural sound is quite good, although fidelity is not sufficient to show the orchestra to best advantage. Film direction is fine. A LaserDisc transfer might well make this recording indispensable.

Don Giovanni Mozart

Conductor: Smith
Company: Sellars

Giovanni: E. Perry
Leporello: H. Perry
Anna: Labelle
Elvira: Hunt
Ottavio: Freeman
Zerlina: Zhu

LaserDisc
Italian / English subtitles
Director: Sellars

Date: 1991
Evaluation: Idiosyncratic

PRODUCTION

Unique contemporary interpretation set in Harlem. Using identical twins for Giovanni and Leporello and making the “nobility” that of the ghetto creates an extraordinary reading. There is little joy in this version, but a great deal to think about. The characters generally become logical and meaningful (e.g., Ottavio) where weak in conventional readings. Setting is overly compact and depressingly dreary. Costumes fit the concept. This version must be seen to be loved—or despised.

PERFORMANCES

Smith’s reading is consistently heavy, in agreement with the concept but leading to a difficult evening. The orchestra is well drilled and compliant; the chorus is often ragged. The brothers Perry sing and act superbly; Freeman and Patterson (Commendatore) are excellent. Labelle is provocative, where Hunt is more petulant; both sing well enough. The Masetto is vocally weak, and Zerlina could use a bit of sparkle to offset the gloom.

TECHNICAL COMMENTS

Again, a stage production without an audience seems almost ideal. There is evidence of some lip-sync, but it is subtle and does not interfere with the viewer’s enjoyment. Subtitling is idiomatic, but appropriate to the production. Video is generally excellent with occasional smearing; audio is impeccable.

Don Giovanni **Mozart**

Conductor: Ludwig
Company: Berlin

Giovanni: Fischer-Dieskau
Leporello: Berry
Anna: Grümmer
Elvira: Lorengar
Ottavio: Grobe
Zerlina: Köth

LaserDisc
German / Japanese subtitles
Director: ?

Date: 24 Sep 1961
Evaluation: Excellent

PRODUCTION

Historic live performance. Sets are minimal but literally consistent with the text. Costumes are conventional and minimize class differences. Stage direction (Ebert) has little character, though the individual singers move easily and appropriately with little posing except in the set pieces. The German translation does not violate the flow of the music, but is more than a little distracting.

PERFORMANCES

Ludwig has problems, especially early on, getting entrances and tempi to conform to his wishes; the appearance is of his changing interpretation between rehearsal and performance. The orchestra responds to him more precisely than the singers and phrases impeccably. Fischer-Dieskau's Don is more mischievous youth than licentious adult; that it is exquisitely sung and impeccably phrased goes without saying. Berry eschews buffoonery (cf. Edelman in the Czinner film) for genuine singing of admirable quality and no mannerisms. Grümmer disappoints, but only in comparison with her own better recordings. Some high notes are ill focussed and pressed at forte and above, suggesting vocal indisposition for this performance. Lorengar lacks fire for Elvira but is audibly distinct and makes only beautiful sounds. Grobe is conventional but with admirable technical skill and good tone. Köth is lovely but shares with Lorengar a wider vibrato than we expect in such rôles. Greindl's Commendatore is solid if not commanding; Sardi makes fine sounds and as much of Masetto as can be expected.

TECHNICAL COMMENTS

Monochrome video is brilliant and fully detailed. Monaural audio retains every detail and is virtually free of noise. There are a few places with what appear to be poor splices, including one at which pitch instability is briefly serious. Lighting is ample and camera work is simplistic but sufficient. Overall, this recording is a fine alternate reading, differing essentially from every other encountered to date in each respect. Of those differences, language may be the least significant.

Don Giovanni
Mozart

Conductor: Levine
Company: Metropolitan

Giovanni: Ramey
Leporello: Furlanetto
Anna: Vaness
Elvira: Mattila
Zerlina: Upshaw
Ottavio: Hadley

Broadcast
Italian / English subtitles
Director: Large

Date: 1990
Evaluation: Very Good

PRODUCTION

Reasonably lively live staging from the Met. Sets are effected primarily with backdrops and fragments of architecture; the effect is satisfying if a little odd for that literal venue. Costumes are strictly traditional. Acting ranges from burlesque from Ramey and Furlanetto to static from the other major players to effective from the minor characters and chorus.

PERFORMANCES

Levine conducts studiously and accurately. Orchestra and chorus are precisely in sync with that reading. Ramey conveys neither nobility nor sensuality, but sings accurately. Furlanetto blusters through the role with pleasant sounds. Vaness and Matilla are almost indistinguishable by voice or style, while Upshaw lacks the spirit and wise simplicity of the peasant girl. Everyone sings so well one feels guilty at faulting the lack of spirit.

TECHNICAL COMMENTS

Video is fine, though the broadcast would have benefited from augmentation of the stage lighting. Audio is up to the usual superb standards of the house. Video direction is exemplary. Overall, it is painful to recognize this characterless reading as the best of the modern options.

Don Giovanni **Mozart**

Conductor: Bernardi
Company: Montreal

Giovanni: Monk
Leporello: Pola
Anna: Pusar
Elvira: Soldh
Ottavio: Power
Zerlina: Bokor

Broadcast
Italian / French subtitles
Director: Dormeyer

Date: 1988
Evaluation: Very Good

PRODUCTION

Live performance with unaccustomed brio. Sets are large, simple, and effective although too dark. Costumes are colorful and help to differentiate the characters; the peasants are overdressed, but stylistically differentiated from the nobility. Staging is more active than usual, approximating Verdi style rather more than Mozart, but not unpleasantly. Some oddities of stage business are irrelevant and therefore somewhat distracting.

PERFORMANCES

Bernardi is surprisingly brisk and Mozartean. The orchestra and chorus almost follow him and provide rich, romantic sound. Monk provides a lyric and effective Don. Pusar handles both the dramatic and technical demands particularly well. Pola sings (well) instead of hamming his rôle. Soldh's instrument is raw, so she conveys Elvira's fury better than her tenderness. Except for excessive vibrato, Power would be an outstanding Ottavio. Bokor is shrill and Rouleau inaccurate, but they and the rest of the cast sing well enough and characterize admirably.

TECHNICAL COMMENTS

Video is clear though lighting needed augmentation to be sharp and to show detail. Monaural sound is good except when overmodulated by the Canadian engineers. Video direction is a bit busy, but generally sound and unobtrusive. In all, this is a fine performance without significant failing.

Don Giovanni Mozart

Conductor: Haitink
Company: Glyndebourne

Giovanni: Luxon
Leporello: Dean
Anna: Branisteanu
Elvira: Yakar
Ottavio: Goeke
Zerlina: Gale

Broadcast
Italian / English subtitles
Director: Heather

Date: ~1985
Evaluation: Good

PRODUCTION

Dark, brooding live performance. Sets are sketches of nondescript buildings. Costumes approximate 18th century British and are remarkably drab to match the sets. The performers move well enough, but in a formalized, static production that gives them little to do.

PERFORMANCES

Haitink impels the score effectively but provides no clearer musical image than Hall does a dramatic one. The orchestra is responsive and of intermediate size. The chorus is small and accurate. Luxon is inaccurate and almost devoid of personality. Dean is more attractive physically and vocally, though his anachronistic vibrato approaches tremolo in the aria. Branisteanu provides some colorature in a voice of moderate size and brittle character. Yakar is miscast, lacking the fire but amply supplying the voice of Elvira. The supporting cast traverses the strange production competently.

TECHNICAL COMMENTS

Video is reasonably clear and well defined, but low light levels combine with dark, dull staging to obscure any details. Audio is competent, emphasizing the stage over the pit and providing no resolution of detail. Video direction is capable, but special effects seem out of place; they do provide some life to the visual experience. Overall, this is a curious and competent production recommended to lovers of umbrellas (which appear inexplicably, shading the protagonists from neither sun nor rain).

Don Giovanni **Mozart**

Conductor: von Karajan
Company: Salzburg

Giovanni: Ramey
Leporello: Furlanetto
Anna: Tomowa-Sintow
Elvira: Varady
Ottavio: Winbergh
Zerlina: Battle

Broadcast
Italian / English subtitles
Director: Viller

Date: 1987
Evaluation: Good

PRODUCTION

Live, non-festive festival staging. Sets are representational and airy, but lighting is so dark that they cannot be exploited. Costumes are basically traditional, but with oddities that divert the attention. Acting is conventional and stilted except where it becomes buffo.

PERFORMANCES

Von Karajan seems distant from the music, leading a stock performance with neither color nor style. The orchestra and chorus are precise and careful. Ramey walks and prances through the rôle without apparent involvement. Furlanetto caricatures Leporello and growls half of his lines. Tomowa-Sintow is accurate and haughty. Varady sings accurately and moves well, but provides no character at all. Even Battle, with an ideal instrument and fine technique, cannot enliven her part. The other characters seem uniformly intimidated into doing almost nothing, hence nothing wrong.

TECHNICAL COMMENTS

Video is sharp and well focussed, but so badly underlighted that even major elements of the action are lost. Sound is clear and provides some imaging of the stage as well as resolving orchestral detail. Camera work is routine and unobtrusive. Were it not for the Furtwängler, this performance might be a contender in a weak field; as it is, it can be recommended only to von Karajan's devotees.

Don Giovanni **Mozart**

Conductor: Maag
Company: Canada

Giovanni: G. Quilico
Leporello: L. Quilico
Anna: Vaness
Elvira: Yakar
Ottavio: Outland
Zerlina: Brown

Broadcast
Italian / English subtitles
Director: Campbell

Date: 1989
Evaluation: Inadequate

PRODUCTION

Live staging before an appreciative audience. Set and costumes are strictly conventional. The single set is used cleverly so it does not seem monotonous. Acting is in a more nearly contemporary style but is hardly convincing.

PERFORMANCES

Maag is tediously correct, without inflection or drama. The orchestra is competent but far from international standards (or its own); the chorus manages its bits well enough. Gino Quilico is admirable vocally, physically, and athletically. His father leaves much to be desired, demonstrating that a singer who eschewed Mozart in his prime is unlikely to acquire the needed skills approaching retirement. Vaness is a fine if petulant Anna. Yakar disappoints with sloppy technique and lackluster interpretation. The other soloists approach competence at best.

TECHNICAL COMMENTS

Video is sharp and spotlighted elements are clear; unfortunately, the contrast is excessive and there is no detail in the shadows. Monaural sound is clear, emphasizing the singers and harpsichord. Video direction is good. Engineering is completely out of hand, with video overmodulation that disrupts the picture almost continuously and distortion from excessive audio level. One might seek corrective measures if the performance were better, but this one hardly justifies the effort.

Don Giovanni **Mozart**

Conductor: Maazel
Company: Paris

Giovanni: Raimondi
Leporello: van Dam
Anna: Te Kanawa
Elvira: Moser
Ottavio: Riegel
Zerlina: Berganza

LaserDisc (videotape)
Italian / English subtitles
Director: Losey

Date: 1978
Evaluation: Poor

PRODUCTION

A film that inadvertently approaches parody of opera. The setting is a bawdy 18th-century Spain, which is well represented in the scenery. Costuming also appears authentic if unimaginative. Losey's conceits are so numerous as to be ludicrous, and his exaggeration of the story is inexcusable. Given the vocal limitations and dramatic vagueness, it may be preferable to wonder at the visual absurdities rather than to dwell on the audible ones.

PERFORMANCES

Maazel leads a dull, overblown, exaggerated performance without redeeming virtue. The orchestra and chorus are well drilled. Raimondi is crude and essentially unattractive in voice and person. Van Dam stands out for style and voice, making a more effective Don when they switch cloaks than the "real" one. Te Kanawa and Moser are both accurate and dull; neither even rises to substantial petulance. Riegel's Ottavio is well sung; dramatically, he is a cipher. Berganza is vocally and visually a decade beyond the rôle, although she commits no overt error. Minor characters (both da Ponte's and Losey's) merge into the general murk.

TECHNICAL COMMENTS

Audio is impeccable, pointing every detail of the heavy, uninspired reading. Video is frequently fogged for incomprehensible effect; otherwise it is satisfactory. The format is "letterboxed" to show all of the unimportant peripheral detail. Subtitles are in-frame (for no discernible reason), and are frequently illegible; the jacket calls them "undistracting." Van Dam's and Riegel's singing are the only discernible virtues of the recording.

**Entführung aus dem
Serail
Mozart**

Conductor: Stein
Company: Salzburg

Konstanze: Nielsen
Belmonte: van der Walt
Blondchen: Watson
Pedrillo: Zednik
Osmin: Rydl

Broadcast
German / English subtitles
Director: Schaaf

Date: 1989
Evaluation: Excellent

PRODUCTION

Lusty, faithful, ebullient live performance. The single set is sparse with occasional illogical props; some are anachronistic, others diversionary. Costumes are colorful and of mixed eras and styles, appropriate for a timeless work. Stage movement is natural and fully coordinated with the music and the text. Especially notable is the abundance of wit and appreciated humor, while slapstick and gross effects are missing.

PERFORMANCES

Stein does not pull the forces together in a concept, but does lead an accurate and coordinated performance. The orchestra and chorus are bright and accurate. The soloists are uniformly well cast; each is notable for performing the rôle fully while singing accurately and passionately. It is superfluous to note their individual virtues beyond that generalization. The contrast with the Solti, relying on much the same cast, is dramatic and probably largely attributable to the small house, the bright production, and a responsive audience.

TECHNICAL COMMENTS

Video and audio are models of modern recording: bright, clear, and well captured. Lighting is ample except where deliberately inadequate in the abduction scene. The cameras are somewhat more active than might be preferred, but overall direction is satisfying. One might hope for more precise intonation from singers and orchestra in places, but no more enjoyable realization of the opera as a whole is likely to appear.

**Entführung aus dem
Serail
Mozart**

Conductor: Böhm
Company: Munich

Konstanze: Gruberova
Belmonte: Araiza
Blondchen: Grist
Pedrillo: Orth
Osmin: Talvela

LaserDisc
German / English subtitles
Director: Hundorf

Date: 1980
Evaluation: Good

PRODUCTION

Studious, joyless live performance. The single set features movable, indeed excessively motile, structures which individually represent elements of the scene and collectively set it well. Costumes are traditional but relatively subdued. Stage business tends to the cute and diverting (e.g., Osmin's onstage bath) but cannot enliven the overall effect. Acting is generally in the worst tradition: static most of the time, slapstick on occasion.

PERFORMANCES

Böhm is precise but conveys little of the delight in the score. The orchestra is large and romantic in sound; the chorus is small, precise, and admirable. Gruberova is dramatically at a loss and vocally hard pressed; she does manage all the notes, but clearly strains at many of them and is underpowered for the climaxes. Araiza is fine, with a bright sound and a free instrument; his passionate reading of the notes does not fully compensate for the lack of colorature, but it is admirable in itself. Grist is a delight visually and vocally. Orth is better than average, but is the most earthbound of the quartet of lovers. Talvela is disappointing both in failing to reach all the notes and in avoiding even an attempt at the written colorature. One begins to wonder whether the ornamentation that only Grist provides is truly essential to brightening the score, and whether Böhm might not have preferred it on the heavy side.

TECHNICAL COMMENTS

Video is reasonably sharp and always in focus. Sound is accurate but heavy, perhaps because of interpretation, perhaps due to recording quality. Lighting appears not to have had augmentation that might have filled in shadows and otherwise brightened the scene. Since there are performances that combine precision with wit, this reading is particularly disappointing.

**Entführung aus dem
Serail
Mozart**

Conductor: Solti
Company: Royal

Konstanze: Nielsen
Belmonte: van der Walt
Blondchen: Watson
Pedrillo: Magnusson
Osmin: Moll

LaserDisc
German / English subtitles
Director: Burton

Date: 1987
Evaluation: Good

PRODUCTION

Essentially conventional live performance which gives the impression of being cramped on the stage. Staging and costumes are in an 18th-century style. Settings and business often divert attention from the music; some of the more athletic moments become involving in themselves. Those effects may work better in the house than in the home.

PERFORMANCES

Solti leads a heavy but fully satisfying reading. The orchestra is well drilled and responsive; the chorus is occasionally ragged. Nielsen is overmatched by the rôle and makes no significant attempt at colorature. Van der Walt is insecure, but basically good as Belmonte and does occasionally make a pass at the ornaments. Watson is fine dramatically and vocally; she alone finds it unnecessary to chew the scenery although her part would encourage it. Magnusson is pleasant to watch, but not up to the vocal demands. Moll handles all aspects of the rôle well if with a heavy hand; inevitably, he dominates his scenes inappropriately, if inadvertently. Other parts are competently covered.

TECHNICAL COMMENTS

Excellent, transparent sound is the great asset of this recording, capturing Solti at his mature best. Video quality is very good throughout. Lighting appears exaggerated, underlining subtleties which Solti integrates into the whole. Camera work is confined by live performance; some angles are odd enough to be distracting. The video direction overall is distracting and ineffective.

Finta Giardiniera
Mozart

Conductor: Östman
Company: Drottningholm

Sandrina: Aruhn
Belfiore: Croft
Armanda: Pilat
Ramiro: Skoglund
Serpetta: Biehl

Broadcast
Italian / English subtitles
Director: Olofsson

Date: 1988
Evaluation: Good

PRODUCTION

Live performance in the style of an 18th-century court. Sets and costumes are drab and dark. Movement is generally admirable except when buffoonery takes over. Given the absurdity and simplicity of the libretto and the beauty and quality of the score, that sort of confusion might be expected.

PERFORMANCES

Östman leads his small, period band with his usual neutral correctness. The chorus does its bits competently enough. The singers collectively and individually manage the score well enough without particularly illuminating it. Each would have significant problems competing against the members of a major cast, but that contest is unlikely to be offered.

TECHNICAL COMMENTS

Video is sharp but so underlighted that most detail (and many major elements) must be inferred. Monaural sound is reasonably clear but somewhat dull for the small forces and late recording date. Direction is unobtrusive and effective. Overall, this is a satisfactory video introduction which should whet one's appetite for a more satisfying performance.

Idomeneo
Mozart

Conductor: Levine
Company: Metropolitan

Idomeneo: Pavarotti
Ilia: Cotrubas
Electra: Behrens
Idamante: von Stade

LaserDisc
Italian / English subtitles
Director: Large

Date: 6 November 1982
Evaluation: Very Good

PRODUCTION

Unique, immense, live staging. Sets are stylized, relying on drops and a massive staircase for all scenes. Costumes are commingled ancient Greek and eighteenth century. Somehow, it all works in its way to create Grand Opera a century or so before it really arrived.

PERFORMANCES

Levine directs a quasi-romantic Mozart performance on a scale the composer would never have recognized. The orchestra and chorus are oversize and overloud, but not for that house. Pavarotti is grossly miscast, distorting the line in timbre and style while producing lovely, inappropriate tones. Cotrubas and Behrens sing and act superbly in unaccustomed rôles. Von Stade makes a mezzo Idamante seem right in a way that tenor portrayals do not; in particular, the contrast with Idomeneo is natural and credible. "Minor" roles in the hands of such as John Alexander are served superbly.

TECHNICAL COMMENTS

Video is excellent for the era and acceptable by any standards. Sound is remarkable for the era, even to providing surround signal for dramatic impact. Camera work is superb, using the immensity of the stage without compromising characterization. While the house and some singers' styles are inappropriate for the work, the performance's many virtues compensate.

Idomeneo
Mozart

Conductor: Haitink
Company: Glyndebourne

Idomeneo: Langridge
Ilia: Kenny
Idamante: Hadley
Electra: Vaness

Broadcast
Italian / English subtitles
Director: Swann

Date: ~1980
Evaluation: Good

PRODUCTION

Reverent live performance. Sets are highly stylized with minimal elements to frame the action. Costumes are brilliant and ornate, identifiable only as elements of an abstract, graphic staging. Action slightly transcends the minimalist but hardly disrupts the mummified atmosphere Nunn has created.

PERFORMANCES

Haitink leads a romantic reading, studiously faithful to the notes. The orchestra and chorus sound larger than they are and far more resonant than Mozart dictated. Langridge is weak in style and voice with excessive vibrato. Kenny is plaintive if empty but sings well. Hadley is fine but makes little of the rôle vocally or dramatically. Vaness shines with fury and plaintive tone. The other soloists are capable but no more appropriate in style.

TECHNICAL COMMENTS

Video is quite good for the era although shadow detail is lost due to lighting limitations. Pre-HiFi monaural sound is muffled, compounding the heavy reading. Camera movement is effective and uninhibited by the presence of the audience. It is odd to see a musical treatment as if preserved in a museum with a completely modern and nearly abstract physical production.

Idomeneo
Mozart

Conductor: Östman
Company: Drottningholm

Idomeneo: Kale
Ilia: Biel
Idamante: Kuebler
Electra: Soldh

Broadcast
Italian / English subtitles
Director: Olofsson

Date: 1991
Evaluation: Very Good

PRODUCTION

Live performance approximating what Mozart might have seen. The court theater is the right size for authenticity and the simple sets (essentially defined by drops) seem appropriate for a court performance. Costumes (for orchestra as well as on-stage performers) are of the period. Action seems just right: stilted as *opera seria* would demand.

PERFORMANCES

Östman's reading is heavier than the forces and the work demand, but is consistent and never offends. The period instruments are played in modern style, losing some of the potential virtues. However, the orchestra and chorus are quite accurate and well balanced and are of appropriate sizes. Kale is adequate vocally with no attempt to ornament his part. Biel's voice is slightly edgy, but she has the knowledge and resources to make more of Ilia than any other current interpreter. Kuebler is accurate and uses a nice instrument with skill; he even provides some ornamentation in appropriate style. Soldh seems to be a local favorite for reasons which are neither visible nor audible; she chews the scenery and lacks many of the requisite vocal resources. The minor rôles are filled capably.

TECHNICAL COMMENTS

Video is consistently dark but sharp and enjoyable. Audio is very fine although the stage image is not projected; it seems likely that the lack of brilliance from the orchestra is a fault of the acoustics, not the engineering. Video direction is good using camera movement sparingly and seeming to suffer few ill effects of the live audience. Of all the Drottningholm efforts to date, this is the most successful.

Mitridate, Re di Ponte
Mozart

Conductor: Harnoncourt
Company: *ad hoc*

Mitridate: Winbergh
Aspasia: Kenny
Sifare: Murray
Farnace: Gjevang
Ismene: Rodgers

LaserDisc
Italian / English subtitles
Date: 1986

Director: Ponnelle
Evaluation: Very Good

PRODUCTION

Another Ponnelle/Harnoncourt film attempting to reawaken interest in classical opera—and another success. The setting is a classical theater which might well have been used for such a work in Mozart's day. There are no sets *per se*, but a few scrims and props augment the beauty of the architecture. Costumes are the stiff formal dress of the middle of the 18th century. Stage action is probably substantially more dramatic than in any previous production, but still static. Lip sync is excellent throughout, although occasional errors can be caught by the critical viewer.

PERFORMANCES

Harnoncourt is more indulgent than in the Monteverdi operas, probably necessarily so given the vocal complexities. The orchestra is impeccable and all but unnoticed in this pure singers' opera. Winbergh is overmatched by the fioriture and the range of the King; perhaps Gedda could have handled the tessitura and technical demands twenty years earlier, but a better Mitridate is unlikely to come along. All four women are outstanding in their roles; if Kenny's and Murray's voices are a bit more flexible than Rodgers' and Gjevang's, they must be to handle the more demanding music.

TECHNICAL COMMENTS

Video quality is somewhat better than in the substantially earlier Monteverdi series, although not truly as crisp as one might hope. Lighting is excellent throughout. Audio is fine in most respects, but orchestral sound is a bit muddied and stereo is not well used in locating either orchestra or singers. *Mitridate* is a remarkable musical achievement for a boy of fourteen; while the music may not reach the level of Haydn, it clearly is on a par with any other of Mozart's adult contemporaries. It is not obvious that video adds significantly to the enjoyment of the performance; since no better recording is available in any format, this one can be recommended highly as an historic, if not a dramatic experience.

Nozze di Figaro Mozart

Conductor: Solti
Company: Paris

Figaro: van Dam
Almaviva: Bacquier
Susanna: Popp
Rosina: Janowitz
Cherubino: von Stade
Marcellina: Berbié
Bartolo: Moll

LaserDisc
Italian / Japanese subtitles
Director: ?

Date: 1980
Evaluation: Superb

PRODUCTION

Live performance in the old style. Sets are traditional with simple backgrounds and essential props. Costumes are straightforward and conventional. Fluid acting between the arias contrasts with rigid posturing when a soloist owns the stage. Stage direction is incidental and irrelevant except in emphasizing buffo elements and adding some effects.

PERFORMANCES

Solti leads a slightly heavier reading than usual and seems content to play Mozart rather than his “interpretation.” The orchestra is ragged in slower passages but never unacceptable; the minor choral contribution is acceptable. Van Dam is delicious and far more noble than most; in another version, he would have been an admirable Almaviva. Popp’s Susanna is more efficient and insightful than cute or pert. She sings flawlessly, of course. Janowitz is the finest Rosina recorded, with more richness of sound but the same precision and depth Schwarzkopf offered. Bacquier is heavy handed and more aged than might be ideal, but within the parameters of the production no fault can be found. Von Stade never sang Cherubino better on recording, and lesser rôles are filled to perfection—although with the likes of Berbié, Moll, and Sénéchal to fill them, the parts are smaller only quantitatively.

TECHNICAL COMMENTS

Both video and audio show their age, with less than contemporary brilliance of image and sound and minimal use of stereo. Lighting is sufficient where the spots hit, but they are not always in the right place for the cameras and there are occasional lapses of focus. Direction is excellent, with longer takes than usual so that the singers are always the focus, not the director. Even if the buffo approach to *Nozze* is not your first choice, this recording is so nearly flawless that your preferences may be altered.

Nozze di Figaro Mozart

Conductor: Böhm
Company: Vienna

Figaro: Prey
Almaviva: Fischer-Dieskau
Rosina: Te Kanawa
Susanna: Freni
Cherubino: Ewing

LaserDisc
Italian / English subtitles
Director: Ponelle

Date: 1976
Evaluation: Excellent

PRODUCTION

Ponelle film completely consistent with his *Barbiere*: cinematic and dynamic. This is a movie of the story, with excellent singing to complement natural scenery and realistic costumes. The result is a dramatic delight.

PERFORMANCES

Böhm leads a reading of larger scale than is often encountered, but the anachronistic result is both enjoyable and frequently revelatory. The orchestra and chorus are outstanding (of course). Prey and Fischer-Dieskau are very nearly ideal visually and vocally. Freni is correct, but stodgy. Te Kanawa is correct but superficial; the viewer simply doesn't care. Ewing is correct but so petulant as to eliminate the joy of the rôle. The other characters are well cast.

TECHNICAL COMMENTS

Sound is confined but rich; with its limited use of stereo, it is almost dull. Video is also a bit soft, but not so severely as to interfere with enjoyment of the recording as a movie. Lighting and camera work are impeccable; lip sync is excellent throughout. Overall, the production, performances, and technical realization are excellent though far from brilliant.

Nozze di Figaro Mozart

Conductor: Abbado
Company: Vienna

Figaro: Gallo
Almaviva: Raimondi
Susanna: McLaughlin
Rosina: Studer
Cherubino: Sima
Marcellina: Lilowa
Bartolo: Mazzola

LaserDisc
Italian
Director: Large

Date: 1992
Evaluation: Very Good

PRODUCTION

Live but less than festive festival performance. The persistent earth tones of strictly conventional sets and costumes add no zest to a most careful reading. Except for Raimondi, the principals are appropriately young; all move easily and act persuasively. Stage business tends to be gimmicky, but it never intrudes on significant moments. Nevertheless, one is bound to wonder why Almaviva's palace is in disrepair, or where the hound and its prey came from or why no exteriors are used—even for the fourth act, set in a garden.

PERFORMANCES

Abbado's interpretation is sound and notably Italianate; it lacks only the comic spirit and wit of the score and libretto. The orchestra is superb; the chorus handles its minute part capably. Gallo is reserved and careful, but sings well. Raimondi is less forceful than usual; otherwise, his Almaviva is remarkably like his Scarpia. Neither McLaughlin nor Studer makes much of her rôle beyond producing pleasant, accurate tones; surprisingly, they offer no ornamentation and seem pressed by even the minimal demands for colorature. Sima and the supporting cast are similarly accurate without distracting from the music by any show of personality.

TECHNICAL COMMENTS

Video is brilliant in its HDTV format (16:9). Audio is superb and both exploitation of stereo and detailing of orchestra and singers are exemplary. Contrasty, generally dark lighting appears unaugmented. Large capitalizes on the widescreen format in framing the ensembles, which are in every respect the finest segments of the performance. It is heretical to ask for a bit of ham in *Nozze*, but even that might generate a spark to fire the performance. This respectful, academic reading will reward the student of Mozart, but not the opera aficionado.

Nozze di Figaro **Mozart**

Conductor: Pritchard
Company: Glyndebourne

Figaro: Skram
Almaviva: Luxon
Rosina: Te Kanawa
Susanna: Cotrubas
Cherubino: von Stade
Marcellina: Condo
Bartolo: Rintzler

Beta
Italian
Director: Heather

Date: 1973
Evaluation: Very Good

PRODUCTION

Intimate live performance in an intimate house. Static elements (staging, lighting, and costumes) are low key. Colors tend to neutral, enhancing the brilliance of the music and action. The best description of stage action may be that it is brilliantly choreographed, with each movement underlining the play. This is an old-fashioned reading of an eternally young opera.

PERFORMANCES

Pritchard leads an old-style, unauthentic, delightful romp through Mozart's music. The orchestra and chorus are small and responsive, but not always together with the conductor; the soloists occasionally lose sync with his reading, suggesting (improbably) insufficient rehearsal. Skram is a joy as Figaro, portraying a clever young man with a passion for his Susanna. Cotrubas is simply delicious as the maid who makes things happen. Luxon is appropriately pompous and mellifluous, though occasionally slightly off pitch. Te Kanawa makes us care about the Countess, a capability she seems to have lost with the stardom of the last decades. Von Stade is delightful, far more convincing and far more joyful than in her many later readings. The lesser rôles become great in the masterful hands and voices of their interpreters. Nothing is exaggerated, nothing is downplayed.

TECHNICAL COMMENTS

Unfortunately, both video and audio show the age of the recording. The sound varies from adequate to poor, with distortion from overrecording and sudden changes of volume. Lighting is insufficient, so images are neither sharp nor adequately contrasty. Camera work is primitive, so a shot from the wings shows furniture appearing to slide down the raked stage. With limited dynamic and tonal ranges of mono sound and primitive imaging, this recording cannot be recommended. Unfortunately, no comparable live performance in modern sight and sound can be offered as an alternative.

Nozze di Figaro Mozart

Conductor: Smith
Company: Sellars

Figaro: Sylvan
Almaviva: Maddalena
Rosina: West
Sussana: Ommerlé
Cherubino: Larson
Marcellina: Kozma
Bartolo: Evitts

LaserDisc
Italian/English subtitles
Director: Sellars

Date: 1990
Evaluation: Idiosyncratic

PRODUCTION

Unique, exciting, and problematic. The setting is moved to contemporary New York City: the penthouse of Trump Tower is made to work, sometimes easily but often by stretching matters. Cast movement is fluid and appropriate throughout, conveying the wit of text and score impeccably. Subtitles are free and highly idiomatic. Overall, this version will inspire sincere love, hate, or both; indifference is impossible.

PERFORMANCES

Smith's reading is direct and graceful, but lacks brilliance. The orchestra and chorus are unobtrusive and unremarkable. Sylvan conveys a sound, thoughtful Figaro as chauffeur with sufficient voice, a bit of appropriate ornamentation, and a great deal of spirit. Ommerlé would have been delightful as Susanna a decade or so earlier; many of her lines and some of her movements are unworkable at her age. West sings with uninspired accuracy. Maddalena is gruff but more than adequate; Larson is delightful, an absolutely convincing youth mad with overactive glands. Kozma's Marcellina is admirable and Evitts makes Bartolo viable — both of which are distinct assets in a production where their rôles are pivotal.

TECHNICAL COMMENTS

The best of both worlds is approached here, with a full production filmed live without an audience. Video is crisp and sound is transparent. Lighting and camerawork are impeccable. Do not miss this performance as a counterpart to traditional versions; it may not be your first choice, but it is a fascinating one.

Nozze di Figaro Mozart

Conductor: Levine
Company: Metropolitan

Figaro: Raimondi
Almaviva: Allen
Rosina: Vaness
Susanna: Battle
Cherubino: von Stade
Marzellina: Taillon
Bartolo: Korn

Broadcast
Italian / English subtitles
Director: Large

Date: 1985
Evaluation: Very Good

PRODUCTION

Oversize but traditional interpretation. The Ponelle staging fills the Met's dimensions if not Mozart's. All factors—sets, costumes, and movement—are scaled to the large house. They would probably work better there than on the home screen, but there is little to fault even on a small set.

PERFORMANCES

Levine is lighter in his handling of *Nozze* than in most classical material. The Met orchestra provides the clarity of a chamber group; the chorus is commendable in its small contributions. Raimondi is even cruder than Allen, and neither fits the gentle humor of the score. Vaness reads little into the role, but sings well. Battle is superb visually and vocally. Von Stade's Cherubino is a bit mature and a bit hackneyed, but generally good. Minor parts are handled confidently, and a surprising unity prevails—unusual for the Met and all the more welcome for that.

TECHNICAL COMMENTS

Video and audio are impeccable. Lighting seems natural, though somewhat flat, so that it does not highlight the action. Camera work is unobtrusive and apparently unhampered by the audience.

Nozze di Figaro Mozart

Conductor: Bergenson
Company: New York

Figaro: Peterson
Almaviva: Stone
Rosina: Hynes
Susanna: O'Flynn
Cherubino: Gamberoni
Marzellina: Marsee
Bartolo: McKee

Broadcast
Italian / English subtitles
Director: Browning

Date: 25 September 1991
Evaluation: Very Good

PRODUCTION

Surprisingly intimate feel in a live performance from Lincoln Center. Sets seem scaled to Glyndebourne despite the large theater. Costumes and stage movement are strictly traditional.

PERFORMANCES

Bergeson leads a reading on the light side of conventional. Orchestra, chorus, and soloists are all responsive and careful, but no spark is struck. None of the major soloists is memorable for positive or negative contribution; overall, this is a solid but forgettable performance. Unfortunately, it appears that the cast must enjoy so witty an opera for the home audience to have fun with it.

TECHNICAL COMMENTS

Fine video quality for a live performance. Audio seems lacking in higher frequencies, perhaps contributing to the lack of sparkle as we listen. Camera work is fine, though it appears to have been blocked at Glyndebourne. Nothing in this performance stands out; in a work less frequently performed and recorded, that might be an asset.

Nozze di Figaro Mozart

Conductor: Östman
Company: Drottningholm

Figaro: Samuelsson
Almaviva: Wahlgren
Rosina: Lindenstrand
Susanna: Resick
Cherubino: Biehl
Marzellina: Mang-Habshi
Bartolo: Saeden

Broadcast
Italian / English subtitles
Director: Olofsson

Date: 1987
Evaluation: Adequate

PRODUCTION

The concept of Bergman's "*Zauberflöte*" gets lost in a plodding, pedestrian reading. Sets are candy-box, and costumes are traditional. Stage movement is very light and joyful.

PERFORMANCES

Östman leads a competent but poorly disciplined chamber orchestra. The chorus' small contributions are fine. Samuelsson is a mewling, wimpy Figaro; Wahlgren is a dashing blusterer. None of the women can redeem the heavy-handed tone, although Biehl is visually most convincing. Minor roles are handled very well.

TECHNICAL COMMENTS

Video is soft and quite warm-toned with saturated colors and low contrast; the overall effect could be charming, but in practice combines badly with leaden performances. Sound is good but not up to contemporary standards. Camera work is wooden, but keeps the focus on appropriate elements of the scene. Because of the staging, one viewing of this performance can be recommended. However, repeated visits will not reward the viewer.

Nozze di Figaro Mozart

Conductor: Rother
Company: *ad hoc*

Figaro: Domgraf-Fassbaender
Almaviva: Ahlersmeyer
Rosina: Lemnitz
Susanna: Berger
Cherubino: A. Müller
Marcellina: Klose
Bartolo: Fuchs

VHS
German
Director: Wildhagen

Date: 1945
Evaluation: Frustrating

PRODUCTION

Half of *Nozze* as Singspiel on (monochrome) film. Domgraf-Fassbaender and Ahlersmeyer are the only singers who appear as actors. Sets and costumes are conventional and irrelevant. Arias are omitted; ensembles fade out; dialogue (replacing recitative) is butchered to create an alternative play with incidental Mozart music. Lip sync is frequently laughable; enunciation is clear, but given the textual alterations subtitles would be appreciated.

PERFORMANCES

Rother's concept sparkles where the singers permit, but the men overact vocally to distort the line. The orchestra and chorus are solid but cannot be evaluated adequately on the transfer. Domgraf-Fassbaender plays Figaro well despite being older than one would prefer for the rôle; his singing is sufficient. Ahlersmeyer seems unsure whether the Count is Ochs or the Wanderer but never commits egregious error. Lemnitz applies an ideal voice to the Mozart line impeccably, providing as fine a Countess as on any recording. Berger is no less admirable as a vocal artist and has a perfect Susanna voice, though uncharacteristic vibrato distracts; it may be an artifact of the recording and transfer technologies. Müller is over her head in this company (who would not be?); be prepared for a shock when the male actor sings as a light mezzo. Minor parts are solidly filled; the cuts reduce them to vocal insignificance.

TECHNICAL COMMENTS

Monochrome video is inadequate though not truly painful except when it breaks up. Monaural sound is sufficient to appreciate the voices, but not enough to enjoy what's left of the music. Lighting and camera work are sound if unimaginative. Film direction is colorless and irrelevant. Despite the abridgement and the technical limitations, this recording should be sought out for extraordinary singing; in that, it is highly recommended. The waste of this film is exemplified by having Lemnitz as the Countess and dropping both "*Porgi amor*" and "*Dove sono!*"

Re Pastore **Mozart**

Conductor: Marriner
Company: Salzburg

Aminta: Blasi
Elisa: McNair
Alessandro: Hadley
Tamiri: Vermillion
Agenore: Ahnsjö

LaserDisc
Italian / English subtitles
Director: Large

Date: 1989
Evaluation: Very Good

PRODUCTION

Live performance on the small stage of Salzburg. Highly stylized as it might have been at its premiere, this “Serenata” uses props to represent the scene. The single set is of the great hall and the “archduke” is on stage throughout. Costumes are conventional 18th-century dress. The result provides a unique experience of a delightful, extended pastore.

PERFORMANCES

Marriner’s reading is light and fluent, but does not quite dance as Mozart would have wished. The orchestra sounds a bit full, but articulates beautifully. Blasi is quite good, but never convinces dramatically or delights vocally. McNair is lovely to see and to hear, with excellent technique and delicious tone. Hadley conveys the music well but is hard pressed, occasionally sings under the note, and never convinces as the heroic Alexander. Vermillion and Ahnsjö are effective in context and sing well enough, although neither is comfortable with the idiom.

TECHNICAL COMMENTS

Video is soft but well focussed. Audio is surprising: usually clear with good dynamic and tonal range, occasional distortion, and no effective imaging of the stage or the orchestra. Camera work is appropriately tranquil and unobtrusive; Large’s direction ranks with his very best. The result is a unique and delightful musical experience.

Zauberflöte Mozart

Conductor: Ericson
Company: Sweden

Sarastro: Cold
Queen: Nordin
Pamina: Urilla
Tamino: Köstlinger
Papageno: Hagegård
Papagena: Eriksson

LaserDisc
Swedish / English subtitles
Director: Bergman

Date: 1974
Evaluation: Indispensable

PRODUCTION

Ingmar Bergman's almost perfect opera film. The stage is a recreation of an 18th-century Swedish opera house. Every aspect underscores the fantasy of the story and the humanity of the characters. Settings are delectable, costumes seem natural and comfortable. Even the intermission is a delight. Among the innumerable marvels: Bergman's daughter and the rest of the audience reacting to the music; the animals responding to the flute; the singers' diversions between acts; the Swedish-language signboards spelling out each moral as it is sung. There are some dramatically viable reorderings of scenes, which may be even more disturbing than the Swedish text to purists.

PERFORMANCES

Ericson is solid and conventional on the podium, but offers no special insight. The orchestra and chorus are in absolute sync with him and with the production. Each character looks perfect in the part; Nordin, Cold, Hagegård and Eriksson approach vocal perfection as well. Urilla is quite good; Köstlinger sings adequately but no more. The lesser parts are handled superbly. Even with those fine elements, the whole is greater than the sum of the excellences.

TECHNICAL COMMENTS

Produced for television by one of the greatest film makers, no fault can be found with the lighting or camera work. Sound and picture quality are excellent throughout, although the brilliance of some more recent recordings is missing. Lip sync is very good. Without the picture, this would be a competitive recording of the opera's sound; without the music, it would be a fine film.

Zauberflöte **Mozart**

Conductor: Levine
Company: Metropolitan

Sarastro: Moll
Queen: Serra
Tamino: Araiza
Pamina: Battle
Papageno: Zednik

Broadcast
German / English titles
Director: Large

Date: 9 February 1991
Evaluation: Excellent

PRODUCTION

Fantastic live staging directed by Hockney. Simple, colorful, abstract sets define an imaginary Egypt at an indeterminate time. Costumes approximate the conventional with brilliant color to aid in distinguishing the characters. Acting is credible and appropriate. Titles are distractingly above or below the center of the screen, apparently to minimize impact on graphic appreciation.

PERFORMANCES

Levine leads a straightforward, literal interpretation with less joy than one would hope, but with no serious error. The orchestra has occasional lapses as though soloists forced unplanned tempo changes. The chorus is fine. Araiza is at his best, correct in style and precise in voice; if he lacks something of the heroic ring and appearance, one must not ask too much. Battle is an ideal Pamina: plangent of tone and lovely to see. Moll and Serra are both accurate and overcareful, treading delicately around the vocal pitfalls and thereby missing the essence of their characters. Zednik is delightful except in the arias, where his tenor timbre distorts the line. Other solo rôles are filled with style and ample resources.

TECHNICAL COMMENTS

Video is crisp, equalling the best live recording to date. Sound is impeccable as well, lacking only an image of the stage. Lighting appears sufficient at all times; low levels are clearly intended in some places for dramatic effect. Video direction is up to Large's usual standard of excellence. This performance overall is somewhat more restrained than ideal, but it is a worthy live alternative to Bergman's film.

Zauberflöte Mozart

Conductor: Östman
Company: Drottningholm

Sarastro: Polgar
Queen: Frandsen
Pamina: Biel
Tamino: Dahlberg
Papageno: Samuelson
Papagena: Larssen

Broadcast
German / English subtitles
Director: Olofsson

Date: 1989
Evaluation: Very Good

PRODUCTION

Live performance from the tiny Swedish theater. The set is limited to earth-tone drops and a few props. Costumes are essentially 18th-century court dress; peasant characters are in corresponding attire and a few creatures are outfitted simply. Several soloists have difficulty with the language and slip into Swedish phrasing and pronunciation; the effect is curious, but not seriously distracting. Vagaries of production occasionally intrude on the continuity, in part simply by distracting the viewer from the music to the attempt to understand their Significance.

PERFORMANCES

Östman leads a stodgy, steady reading which does justice to the score but does not inspire. He permits moderate and appropriate solo decoration, but some entrances are sloppy, suggesting rehearsal deficiencies. Both orchestra and chorus are small in size but relatively thick in texture. Polgar's instrument is a fine *cantante*, but lacks the authority ideal for the character. Frandsen is accurate but both shrill and erratic in tempo to make the more difficult lines accessible. Dahlberg and Biel are reasonably attractive in both voice and appearance, though neither turns the aria into a memorable experience. Samuelson sings well but overacts an already overdone contrast of his simplicity with court behavior. The supporting characters are well cast vocally and physically and provide good ensemble acting.

TECHNICAL COMMENTS

Video is reasonably sharp but so badly underlighted that detail is lost. Audio lacks tonal extremes but is adequate to convey voices and orchestral sounds. If the sound is in stereo, the fact cannot be determined by its effect in the home. Direction is excellent, maintaining attention on the center of action, yet supplying variety of angle and field of view. Overall, the style here fascinates and informs the viewer, underplaying the fantasy and emphasizing the maturity of the opera. The singing is always capable if seldom exciting; the production is intriguing; the recording is well worth adding to one's collection as a complement to the Met's Hockney production.

Zauberflöte Mozart

Conductor: Comissiona
Company: New York City

Sarastro: Moll
Queen: Serra
Tamino: Garrison
Pamina: Esham
Papageno: Dickson

Broadcast
German / English subtitles
Director: Browning

Date: 1987
Evluation: Adequate

PRODUCTION

Live staging with good ideas and faulty style. Sets are simple, dark, and nonspecific. Costumes are ornate and grossly exaggerated. Action and ensemble are very nearly absent. Even the subtitles are unduly intrusive.

PERFORMANCES

Comissiona maintains a bright tempo and a transparent sound from an orchestra of full size and little flexibility. Garrison looks the hero and offers good tone and timbre; he misses phrasing and style, but not by much. Esham is farther from Mozart, offering a mini-Tosca instead of a maiden. Stapp is a pleasant surprise, with voice and stature to make a Sarastro if his tremolo can be controlled. Rosales comes close to the problematic Queen, with dramatic timbre and secure top, but uncertain colorature and inconsistent intonation. Dickson has some fun with his rôle and sings well throughout. Other rôles are filled without distinction, but without serious flaw.

TECHNICAL COMMENTS

Video would be sharp if lighting permitted us to see it. Not only is there no boost for television, but the camera angles chosen to keep from interfering with the audience ensure that often we are looking at the shadowed instead of the spotlighted elements. Sound is clear but overbalanced to voices; stereo is not exploited and there is no sonic image of the stage. Video direction is reasonably good but occasionally loses track of the center of attention. There are few gross flaws in this performance, but little to endear it to the viewer.

Zauberflöte Mozart

Conductor: Arena
Company: Montreal

Sarastro: Garrard
Queen: Christman
Tamino: Power
Pamina: Cuccaro
Papageno: Melbye

Broadcast
German / English subtitles
Director: ?

Date: 1988
Evaluation: Poor

PRODUCTION

Live performance rendered almost unwatchable by broadcast engineering. Sets are uniformly dark, giving an impression of massiveness which could not have been achieved in the house. Eighteenth-century costumes combine with fright makeup to create a fantastic image combining fairy tale, children's opera and parody. Acting is minimal and stage business is hopelessly contrived.

PERFORMANCES

Arena leads a studied reading minimizing fantasy and action in favor of precision. Orchestra and chorus are similarly pedantic. Power sings well in Mozart style but hardly looks the part. Cuccaro satisfies the modest vocal demands without musical inflection. Garrard is an asset with voice and demeanor to dominate his scenes. Christman is similarly effective, though she cannot quite manage the colorature in tempo. Papageno sings well and seems uncomfortable with his absurd stage business. The other performers seem more tolerant of the buffoonery that distorts their vocal lines.

TECHNICAL COMMENTS

Video is sharp when visible through the engineers' overmodulation. The severe underlighting muddies what can be seen. The grotesque staging is compounded by the director's erratic camera work and shift of attention to elements of the backdrop or other irrelevancies during arias and ensembles. Stereo sound has little spread but good resolution and unusual clarity. The result becomes a vocally serviceable performance lost to technical and production vagaries.

Zauberflöte **Mozart**

Conductor: Everding
Company: Bavaria

Sarastro: Moll
Queen: Gruberova
Pamina: Popp
Tamino: Araiza
Papageno: Brendel
Papagena: Sieber

LaserDisc
German / English subtitles
Director: Windgassen

Date: Sep. 1983
Evaluation: Good

PRODUCTION

Conventional live performance without the special virtues of Bergman's film. Staging is imitation 18th-century, with contemporary touches such as addressing the audience directly. Costumes are conventional; movement is stilted.

PERFORMANCES

Everding leads a notably light performance, but bends to the soloists' requirements at unfortunate points. The orchestra is superb; the chorus is sound. Moll becomes Sarastro in appearance and voice. Gruberova is far too light and has no menace, but manages the notes well. Popp is adequate; Araiza is strained vocally and ludicrous dramatically. None of the other performers is memorable.

TECHNICAL COMMENTS

Audio is outstanding; video is as fine as 1983's technology permitted. Lighting is harsh but usually adequate especially in longer shots. Camera work is stilted and constrained by the live milieu. It is unlikely that one could find a better performance on any stage today, and therefore this recording is commendable. On technical grounds and for some of the singing, this disc would be recommended more highly if the Bergman film were not available.

Zauberflöte **Mozart**

Conductor: Levine
Company: Salzburg

Sarastro: Talvela
Queen: Gruberova
Pamina: Cotrubas
Tamino: Schreier
Papageno: Boesch
Papagena: Sieber

Broadcast
German / English subtitles
Director: Large

Date: 1982
Evaluation: Adequate

PRODUCTION

Ponelle's idiosyncracies create a confused, single-set non-solution. The massive castle background is used capably, but various devices in front of it are distracting. Overall, sets and costumes are ponderous and ineffective. Stage movement is conventional and does not lighten the tone.

PERFORMANCES

Levine keeps forces together by plodding through the score. Orchestra and chorus seem Wagnerian in scale and sonority. Talvela's tone is hollow, Schreier is surprisingly pressed by the vocal demands. Both Cotrubas and Gruberova would have served the music better a decade or so earlier, though Gruberova's light instrument could never have conveyed the menace of the rôle. Boesch is a moderately bright element, though he cannot lift the production by himself. Other parts are cast beyond their demands and sung very well indeed.

TECHNICAL COMMENTS

Video is marginal, essentially due to inadequate lighting. Audio is acceptable, though the stereo separation is negligible. The precision of the performance makes it suitable for study, but dreariness of staging and singing precludes enjoying the theatrical experience. This is a most unmagical reading.

Zauberflöte Mozart

Conductor: Haitink
Company: Glyndebourne

Sarastro: Thomaschke
Queen: Sandoz
Tamino: Goeke
Pamina: Lott
Papageno: Luxon
Papagena: Coubert

Broadcast
German / English subtitles
Director: Heather

1977
Evaluation: Good

PRODUCTION

Overwhelmingly, Hockney's show to the audience's delight. Sets and costumes are candy-box: brilliant, simplistic, witty, and appropriate. Stage direction seems confused, with many performers occasionally moving against the flow of the scene. This production shows many influences of Bergman's film, though it ultimately lacks the magic of that extraordinary recording.

PERFORMANCES

Haitink is conducting the wrong opera—at least by the production's standards; its wit contrasts painfully and fatally with his solemnity. The orchestra sounds grand in scale, and the chorus is accurate. Thomaschke and Luxon are simply wrong for the rôles, the bass lacking authority of sound, the baritone unable to appear simple. Goeke and Sandoz look their parts and generally sound right, though he drifts into the notes and she is overmatched by the lyric elements of her first aria. Lott is outstanding, looking, sounding, and acting Pamina with apparent ease. The other parts are handled effectively, though not remarkably.

TECHNICAL COMMENTS

Monaural sound is quite muffled on the review copy, which may reflect Haitink's wish for grandeur but does not do the score justice. Video is sharp and effective. Lighting is brilliant and effective, but camera selection is overbusy and concentrates on closeups which lose the fantastic aspects of the production. Neither production nor conducting is wrong, but they are so completely mismatched that the performance cannot be recommended.