

The Verdi Requiem - A Partial Survey of the Discography by Ralph Moore

The circumspect title of my survey arises from the fact that although over eighty recordings are listed in the Wikipedia discography (see also [MWI Masterwork Index](#)) it is not complete and there are probably many more circulating in the form of private recordings on what used to be called “pirate” labels. For instance, in my own comparatively modest collection of thirty-five recordings are a live Karajan performance from 1970 on the “Gala” label, the Naxos release conducted by Morandi and the LSO Live recording conducted by Colin Davis, none of which is included in that Wiki list. The Karajan recording is superb but, unfortunately, in muddy mono sound and while the Naxos double CD makes a good super-bargain “starter suggestion”, it is not as good as many of the recordings discussed below. Furthermore, I have discarded some dozen or so which I came to regard as “shelf-cloggers”, insofar as I had no desire to play them again, so I am able to venture an opinion and express some preferences but am by no means in any position to make definitive statements about “best” recordings, even if I desired to do so. Besides, individual taste in performers and personal convictions regarding how this work should be approached and sound will govern others’ choices; all I propose to do is provide some assessment of those recordings with which I am familiar.

I have often encountered fellow music-lovers who have no taste for Verdi’s operas but still enjoy the Requiem, which is amusing as the work surely merits what some construe as the derogatory label of “Verdi’s greatest opera”. Linked to that is the crucial question of to what degree it should be performed in a reverentially liturgical style - “spiritual” or “vertical”, if you will - as opposed to a red-blooded drama which is decidedly operatic in character.

My own inclination is for the grand, Italianate style, especially given that Verdi’s own convictions were humanistic rather than conventionally pious but that does not preclude the need for a sense of penitence and supplication, in the same way that Brahms’ Requiem appeals to the deep human need for peace and consolation despite its composer’s atheism. I must here confess that I cannot abide John Eliot Gardiner’s small-scale recording on period instruments; I find it wholly unidiomatic and un-Italian and have not included it among my recommendations. My apologies to those who esteem it.

I want to hear truly large, operatic voices of the kind Verdi required for the premiere in 1874, three of whom sang in the premiere of “Aida”, but that does not mean that an unvaried “can belto” approach will suffice; the singers must be capable of refined pianissimi and the ability to “float a note” as well as pin back the listener’s ears, just as Aida’s soft singing is as crucial to the impact of her role as her declamatory passages. It is significant that Verdi was able to rework music for the King in Act 5 of *Don Carlo* discarded from the original Paris première and include it in the Lacrimosa of the Requiem; the idiom is the same, full of yearning and regret.

The “Messa da Requiem”, to give it its proper title, is, as the first word implies, a setting of the Catholic funeral mass. It was composed as a tribute to the Italian patriot and man of letters Alessandro Manzoni and first performed in the San Marco church in Milan on 22 May 1874 on the first anniversary of Manzoni’s death.

It has become one of the most frequently performed and recorded works of its type. The earliest recording is from 1929, featuring Pinza; the most recent is Gianandrea Noseda’s live LSO recording which will not, I fear, displace anyone’s favourite. There are some superb vintage recordings but I agree with my MusicWeb colleague Bob Farr who, in his brief survey of recommendable recordings of the Requiem in Part 4 of his admirable Verdi Conspectus here on MusicWeb, confines himself to stereo versions on the grounds that the work demands decent, modern sound to be fully appreciated; I am therefore also passing over Toscanini’s four live recordings, one from London in 1938 and three from Carnegie Hall, 1938, 1948, 1951, Serafin’s 1939 recording, de Sabata’s four, two of which feature quite extraordinary soloists, and several of Karajan’s earlier ones, stirring and superbly sung though they all are. I also exclude Fricisay’s three fine, mono recordings, which are suffused with drive and passion but also suffer from Teutonic pronunciation and do not field the best teams of soloists. Many of these

historical recordings are indispensable to anyone tolerant of vintage sound but on balance and for the purpose of a recommendation to the general listener, I favour studio recordings for reasons of sound quality and the avoidance of performers' mistakes, although only around thirty of the more than eighty recordings available are studio productions and a good few live recordings, especially those more recent, are of sufficient artistic and technical quality to merit consideration.

Besides, even some stereo recordings suffer from compromised sound, especially Giulini's classic account- about which I have aesthetic reservations in any case, centring mainly on the cast – which suffers from saturation at the climaxes.

I have accordingly narrowed down my survey to the following recordings, considered here in chronological order:

Serafin (1959, Testament)

Shakeh Vartenissian, Fiorenza Cossotto, Eugenio Fernandi, Boris Christoff.
Rome Opera Chorus and Orchestra.

Despite the fame of the participants in this 1959 recording, this remastering does not seem to have attracted much attention, perhaps because it is expensive. That is a pity, because it is a very rewarding account, typical of Serafin's late work in Verdi but also perhaps evincing just a touch too much of the more relaxed and reflective approach which slightly mars his 1962 *Il Trovatore*. Although it is by no means slow - in fact it is one of the faster accounts on record - this performance places the emphasis more upon spirituality than drama, and just occasionally - especially at the one point where I positively demand a sudden surge in forward momentum, "Quam olim Abrahae" in the Offertorio - one could wish for a more urgent pulse. But the control is masterly and the choral singing an absolute joy. The stereo sound is good for the era and there is little distortion. The soloists are interesting and certainly much more than adequate. For some, the main interest will centre upon Christoff's unique and sonorous bass; I find him riveting, yielding to no rival in artistry and vocal splendour, Siepi, Pinza and Ghiaurov notwithstanding. For others, a curiosity resides in hearing the virtually unknown and otherwise unrecorded Armenian soprano Shakeh Vartenissian. She has a strong, dark timbre, is absolute security of intonation and has the kind of technique that would make her a star today, even if there is something lacking of the individuality and temperament that makes singers truly memorable. She blends beautifully with the young Fiorenza Cossotto, who is also a tower of vocal strength but able to shade her big voice down upon demand. The tenor, Fernandi (Callas' Calaf in the EMI recording) is slightly hard-toned and does not really attempt a true piano or half-voice in the Hostias, but here again is a completely secure, authentically Italianate voice, musical and vibrant. So the relative weaknesses in this set stem mainly from excellent if somewhat routine solo singing of a kind we would appreciate much more were they singing today. There will probably never be a perfect recording of this masterpiece but of the more devotional interpretations I prefer this to Giulini's and it joins a select half-dozen favourite versions of this type.

Reiner (1960, Decca)

Leontyne Price, Rosalind Elias, Jussi Björling, Giorgio Tozzi.
Vienna Philharmonic, Wiener Singverein.

Some are irritated or perturbed by Reiner's marmoreal tempi, signalled by the mysterious expansiveness of the very first opening bars, but I find his pacing to be hypnotically compelling with no sense of stasis. The grandeur of his conception is matched by the sweep of his soloists, a stellar quartet comprising Björling's gleaming tenor, Price's soaring, effulgent soprano, Elias' rock-steady mezzo and Tozzi's saturnine bass. This is a noble, devotional recording which is all of a piece, massive yet thrilling when momentum is required. It has stood the test of time and well over half a century later still represents one of the safest, most moving and engaging recordings of Verdi's masterwork. It also serves as a monument to Björling, being recorded only three months before his untimely death – although you would never guess it from the ease of his tonal emission and the bloom on his tone.

Ormandy (1964, Sony)

Lucine Amara, Maureen Forrester, Richard Tucker, George London.
Philadelphia Orchestra, Westminster Choir.

With such an assemblage of performers, you would hardly expect the Verdi Requiem here to be anything other than a blockbuster - and so it proves. Ormandy could indeed on occasion be routine but he is here presiding over a great virtuoso band in its heyday and the soloists are all stalwarts of the Metropolitan Opera also in a golden period; everything comes together to create one heck of an impact. Furthermore, the sound is spectacular for its age; despite being a Verdi Requiem veteran I found myself hearing instrumental lines and subtleties I had not previously registered, so detailed is the sonic picture without sacrificing any of the spaciousness essential to the success of this sublime work.

I was initially concerned that Lucine Amara would not have the heft and spinto thrust to tackle the soprano role especially alongside such big-voiced colleagues but I need not have worried: she is assured and impassioned, riding over the orchestra in the Libera me while still sounding suitably imploring and terrified. Maureen Forrester had a fine, incisive mezzo with a fast vibrato and great vibrancy, despite a little tentativeness on top notes. Tucker is in heroic voice even if his tone can be a little piercing and George London's bass-baritone is impressively saturnine and hieratic. A rarity is to hear all three soloists of whom it is required producing real trills. The Westminster Choir (Princeton, not London) are as superb as the orchestra; fearless and flexible. Despite the weightiness of his interpretation, Ormandy doesn't hang around and this is by no means one of the slower performances available.

Giulini (1964, EMI)

Elisabeth Schwarzkopf, Christa Ludwig, Nicolai Gedda, Nicolai Ghiaurov.
Philharmonia Orchestra, Philharmonia Chorus.

To challenge the much-vaunted supremacy of this recording is asking for trouble but I genuinely believe that this is by no means the paragon it has been held up to be.

First, the recording has peaking and overloading problems inherent in the master tape which will not be addressed by another re-mastering; the 1997 engineering is probably the best that can be achieved. It doesn't bother me much but it's there and will be a more important factor for audiophiles.

Secondly, it may be that Giulini takes the more spiritual approach that some require in this work but for me that results in some loss of excitement and tension in what is undeniably a supremely operatic and histrionic treatment of liturgical music. Again, this is not key but other versions are simply more involving and moving.

Thirdly, the soloists are neither uniformly good nor necessarily aptly voiced for their roles. I exempt Ghiaurov from that observation; he is simply immense, flawless and a model for all subsequent interpreters. Ludwig is very good but sometimes shrieks and sounds far less comfortable than in her later recording with Karajan; she blends far less well with Schwarzkopf than they did in the Böhm *Così fan tutte* from around the same time. The real trouble starts with Schwarzkopf and Gedda; she positively screams in the "Salva Me" of the quartet in the Dies Irae and too often mews and swoons where solid tone is needed. She is too often tremulous and short of breath; she never was a Verdi soprano, although she raises her game for the finale and her floated B flat is good. Neither is Gedda a Verdi tenor; his tone is too plaintive and bleating although he sounds best in the Offertorio - which is taken rather sedately - and gets full marks for his trill.

It is true that the Philharmonia Chorus and Orchestra, Pitz-trained and Klemperer perfected respectively, are superb, and Giulini's grip on proceedings is sound within the constraints of his more refined and restrained vision of how the music should go.

So while I acknowledge its place in the hearts of many as the recording which introduced to them to this astonishing work, I would urge newcomers to sample better versions by Reiner, Karajan, Bernstein, Muti, Solti and even Plasson - but of course, one kicks a sacred cow at one's peril...

Giulini's last studio recording in 1989 has a less than stellar team of soloists. There are three other live recordings from the 60's, two on the BBC Legends label and his first recording on Testament from the Usher Hall at the Edinburgh Festival in 1960; it has great soloists - Sutherland, Cossotto, Ottolini and Vinco - but is sonically substandard.

Leinsdorf (1964, RCA)

Birgit Nilsson, Lili Chookasian, Carlo Bergonzi, Ezio Flagello.
Boston Symphony Orchestra, Boston Pro Musica Chorus.

Leinsdorf, like Solti, had a reputation for being unyielding and sometimes pressing too hard but I certainly do not find him to be so in this recording. True, at 81 minutes, this is one of the brisker recordings of the Requiem, especially compared with the likes of Reiner, Fricsay, Bernstein and even Toscanini, but there is no one way to interpret this towering work and I rate this recording as one of the best. It certainly does not sound rushed and the more contemplative parts of the score are given the space to breathe. On paper, the obvious attractions are Nilsson and Bergonzi but, fine though these two are, the mezzo Chookasian and bass Ezio Flagello, are equally impressive. Flagello, in particular, gives what I think is quite the finest account of the bass role that I have heard: his expressive voice rolls out like thunder and he brings real gravitas to his utterances. Chookasian, while not erasing memories of Janet Baker, emerges as a very fine and under-recorded singer. She does not have quite the ideal lower register heft but she is a force to be reckoned with in this demanding music. It is a real pleasure to hear Bergonzi - such a versatile tenor - caress the *Ingemisco* and still find the steel in his voice for the more declamatory sections, though I would have like a touch more *mezza-voce* and sweetness (à la Pavarotti or Domingo in the early Bernstein) in the "Inter oves" part of the "Hostias".

I have read elsewhere criticism of Nilsson's intonation; the "Gramophone" reviewer goes so far as to say that this constitutes the only serious blot on the set. This prompted me to sit and listen to Nilsson with a pitch pipe and check that out. First, there is absolutely no question of faulty pitch in everything she sings from G up to the two blazing top C's; as in her Wagner they cut through the ensembles like laser beams - and a thrilling sound it is. Suspicions revolve around the middle of her voice but I think is largely a question of her vocal colouring and the lack of vibrato she employs in this area, which can sometimes create an illusion of flatness. It is true that the middle of her voice can sound a little unsupported compared with that surgical top but hers is a performance I can certainly live with. The orchestra and chorus are really terrific in every sense of that word and I rate this with Leinsdorf's *Die Walküre* for excitement. The sound is very immediate with just some slight fizz and hiss and a bit of congestion in the loudest passages.

This Requiem can take an honourable place among other favourite recordings of this inexhaustible masterpiece, in which Verdi uses a combination of his experience as a classically trained church organist and the composer of searingly emotional stage dramas to express the terror of damnation versus the sweet hope of salvation.

Solti (1967, Decca)

Joan Sutherland, Marilyn Horne, Luciano Pavarotti, Martti Talvela.
Vienna Philharmonic, Vienna State Opera Chorus.

I have loved the Verdi Requiem for forty-five years, but for some reason avoided acquiring this for some time. Perhaps I had been put off by untested accusations that Solti's interpretation was all brash theatricality and no vertical sense; perhaps, too, I supposed that Joan Sutherland would be no-one's ideal of a Verdi soprano - but as soon as I listened to it, this version leapt to the top of my list alongside three or four favourites including the aforementioned Bernstein on Sony, the famous Reiner recording, the 1952 Toscanini and Karajan's dream-team DVD from 1967 (also featuring a young Pavarotti).

Apart from the quality of the sound, the fervour of the chorus and the fact that Solti, following Toscanini's model, successfully combines drama with the requisite reverence, the soloists offer an extraordinary combination of qualities: Sutherland's security and amplitude of voice, Horne's magnificent lower register and shining top, Pavarotti's liquid beauty of tone and mesmeric half-voice, and Talvela's rock-solid intonation and resonance; these are all great voices in their prime. Not only that, they combine so well, having sung together quite often by this time. My main criticism centres on pronunciation of the Latin text: I wish Talvela had not employed Germanic Latin; Horne pulls vowels about wilfully; Sutherland, while not as opaque as was sometimes the case, can be indistinct and occasionally falters (as at the start of the "Libera me, domine"); Pavarotti is the only one whose diction shines. But there are many superb moments, such as Sutherland's poised B flats or the thrilling momentum of "Quam olim Abrahae". I found myself swept along by this account - and the spectacular sonics contribute to the excitement of the reading.

Barbirolli (1969, EMI)

Montserrat Caballé, Fiorenza Cossotto, Jon Vickers, Ruggero Raimondi.
New Philharmonia Orchestra, New Philharmonia Chorus.

This is by no means a mainstream account in that the presence of Jon Vickers lends a very different take on the tenor part and it must be admitted that recording balances in a big, blowsy acoustic can be too diffuse and swampy. Yet the quartet is made of very starry voices in their prime: Caballé spins ethereal pianissimos and combines wonderfully with Cossotto's ringing, agile, stentorian mezzo in their duets. Raimondi may be heard in several other recordings, notably for Bernstein and sounding very much the same, with the same advantages - noble tone, demonic inflections and a great feel for the text - and the same disadvantages: some swooping and a slight lack of dark heft in the lower reaches of the role.

Vickers is hors concours with his extraordinary range of tone colour and refusal to belt all'italiana. It's untrue that he croons in the soft passages; both his registers are cleanly separated and his mezza voce is too pure and infused with lower register to be called that. He brings new life and meaning to an old warhorse of a part with his careful grading of volume and intensity, really making you listen afresh and anew to the meaning of the text. He often brings a hieratic, unearthly quality to his singing which must surely be worth hearing amongst renderings by so many conventional belters. His easy reserves of power also mean you can always hear the tenor line which is too often lost in the quartets and trios against a big orchestra.

Barbirolli's conducting is massive and majestic; he was always at ease in the Verdian idiom, given his Italian heritage and sympathy with Italianità. William Pitz's chorus is superlative, as you'd expect.

There are two broadly distinct approaches to the Requiem; the grander, slower accounts by such as Reiner and de Sabata and the more driven, theatrical versions by such as Toscanini and Solti. This belongs more to the first camp but has such a splendid quartet that I think any voice aficionado should own and enjoy it, regardless of preference.

Bernstein (1970, CBS)

Martina Arroyo, Josephine Veasey, Plácido Domingo, Ruggero Raimondi.
London Symphony Orchestra, London Symphony Chorus.

This was the recording whereby I was first acquainted with this music and although I readily admit that my adherence to it is partly sentimental, I think it can stand on its own feet as a first recommendation for the novice and captivate him just as it did me. I had the advantage of watching the telecast from St. Paul's Cathedral (although the recording was made in the Royal Albert Hall) and still recall the way Raimondi's eyebrows danced demonically up and down his forehead as he intoned "Confutatis maledictis". Bernstein conducts a broad, spacious, powerful and energised account, sometimes with

extreme tempi but always to great effect. The soloists are absolutely first rate; still, today, very few tenors have managed to intone the Hostias in the mesmeric half-voice Domingo conjures up, emulate the soaring splendour of Arroyo's "Sed signifer", capture the grave intensity of Josephine Veasey - still a much under-rated singer - or match Raimondi's lugubrious menace (despite a bit of his trademark sliding and some approximate pitching). The chorus and orchestra respond to Bernstein's charisma, singing and playing their hearts out. The sound is first-rate for a recording made in the Albert Hall and by no means cavernous considering the venue. This is probably the recording I would save in the event of fire or flood.

Karajan (1972, DG)

Mirella Freni, Christa Ludwig, Carlo Cossutta, Nicolai Ghiaurov.
Berlin Philharmonic, Wiener Singverein.

The Verdi Requiem was one of Karajan's signature pieces; according to his court biographer Richard Osborne, he became acquainted with it first as a child prodigy, then as an apprentice conductor in the Salzburg Mozarteum. He first conducted it in Ulm in 1933 and introduced it at the Salzburg Festival in 1949 - despite disapproving opposition from its director, Joseph Messner - and performed it frequently after he became festival director in 1957. Fittingly, it was also the last work he conducted with the Berlin Philharmonic shortly before his death in 1989.

His approach to the music changed little over fifty-five years: he always managed a judicious balance between the majestically devotional and the urgently dramatic elements, although by the time of this famous 1972 DG studio recording, the overall timing had slowed from the convenient one-CD-fit of just over eighty minutes to the nearly ninety here.

The singing is patrician if just a little careful and smoothed over, matching the conducting; singers ease into notes rather than attacking them. Ghiaurov in particular is massive and Freni soars confidently while Ludwig is utterly secure and trenchant, blending beautifully with Freni. Some might find Cossutta's squeezed tone rather ungrateful and his pronounced vibrato obtrusive but he is technically very accomplished and has the heft you would expect from an Otello. The Vienna Singverein are superb.

Lombard (1975, Erato)

Joyce Barker, Mignon Dunn, Ermanno Mauro, Paul Plishka.
Orchestre philharmonique de Strasbourg, Slovak Philharmonic Choir.

Don't buy this unless you can tolerate very slow, deliberate even ponderous tempi akin to those of de Sabata or the opening of Reiner's famous version - but if you can, you will find a massive certainty and integrity about Lombard's approach, and he still brings some urgency to the Dies Irae passages. The imported Slovak choir bring energy and bite to their contribution and the soloists are of the old school: big, beefy operatic voices happy to milk this warhorse (sorry about that faintly distasteful mixed metaphor).

South African dramatic soprano Joyce Barker had a large, refulgent voice which at its best can sometimes sound uncannily like that of Leontyne Price and is perhaps rather too similar in timbre to that of celebrated mezzo Mignon Dunn, both with some edge in the tone, but they make a fine team, the odd slip in intonation notwithstanding. Ermanno Mauro's typically Italianate tenor is baritone and hefty in the Giacomini mode and his top notes are similarly secure. Paul Plishka had plenty of bite in his bass in his earlier days even if the voice was never large and he sings very expressively within the constraints of Lombard's leisurely beat.

The Strasbourg orchestra covers itself in glory and the analogue recorded sound is excellent for its era; the bonus of Four Sacred Pieces (never music which much interested me) is digital. Hardly anyone seems to mention or even know about this version of the Requiem but its honest passion strikes me

as rather more convincing and better sung than many a more famous account - but don't say you haven't been warned about Lombard's predilection for slowness.

Watch out that you don't buy one of the US issues which offer only excerpts on a single disc; get the bargain-price Ultima double CD.

Solti (1977, RCA)

Leontyne Price, Janet Baker, Veriano Luchetti, José van Dam.
Chicago Symphony Orchestra, Chicago Symphony Chorus.

I revisited this recording after many years and was rather taken aback by some negative reviews which were especially uncomplimentary about Price, Luchetti and Solti's conducting.

It is true that Solti has always gone for the drama of this piece but I don't really see how one can deliver such a red-blooded work as if it were Beethoven's *Missa Solemnis*. It is unashamedly, unabashedly operatic and thus very different from any other Requiem; its closest relative is in fact Mozart's when it comes to the prominence and emotive nature of the soloists' contributions.

The emotions here are so very human: terror, shame and supplication; I have no problem with Solti's approach, especially when it is delivered by such a secure and spirited orchestra and choir; Margaret Hillis's Chicago Symphony Chorus is simply the best I know in this work. Despite some apparent vocal disparity, this is a very homogeneous team of soloists, too: Baker and Price work very well together in the *Recordare* and are at least as unified as Solti's earlier team of Sutherland and Horne. Baker's mezzo should be a size too small but such is the concentration of her tone and the weight of her phrasing - admittedly taking her to the limits of her lovely voice - that she produces a moving and plaintive account of her music; her *pianissimi* are very effective and she has enough power to hold her own in the ensembles.

I am mystified by criticisms of that great and under-valued tenor Veriano Luchetti, who seems to me to deliver here one of the very best and most heroic accounts of this very difficult tenor role. He has a lovely tone, is tender and restrained in the *Ingemisco* and the *Hostias* - very far from "leather-lunged", his timbre quite often sounding similar to that of Villazon. Van Dam is noble, steady and beautiful of voice, really showing off the black intensity and sleek legato of his sonorous bass, even if low notes can be submerged.

The real problem is Leontyne Price's swooping and the competition of her younger self for Karajan, in what is for me the best recording of all in the La Scala version for Karajan on DVD. Yes; her voice has become at times a tad screechy and the low notes are cloudy, yet set against modern exponents she shines by virtue of the amplitude of her tone and the fact that she really sounds as if she is imploring the Almighty for mercy. Her "*sed signifer*", her floated B flat in the *Libera me* and her concluding top C are all mightily impressive. There are blowsy moments but she is still in command of both her voice and the role; some of the "swooping" is portamento for expressive purposes and some just sounds a bit laboured but she remains imposing.

Some have found the sound to be dry; I find it superb: the *Dies Irae* bass drums are amplified by the apt acoustic of the Medinah Temple and similarly the trumpets ring out majestically. (Someone drops something metallic 7:21 in the opening *Kyrie* - no matter.) Solti's tempi strike me as just right; for all that I like Reiner's marmoreal approach, Solti keeps things moving better, especially at what is for me the crucial point in the *Offertorio* when "*Quam olim Abrahae*" is introduced and then reprised - that's where the momentum really must pick up fast and Solti knows how to do it. I also love the swing he gives the 6/8 rhythm of the opening of that movement; surely it is a mistake to attempt to sanctify this blood and thunder work by adorning it in priestly robes?

Muti (1979, EMI)

Renata Scotto, Agnes Baltsa, Veriano Luchetti, Yevgeny Nesterenko.
Philharmonia Orchestra, Ambrosian Opera Chorus.

Recorded in the grand and atmospheric acoustic of the now demolished Kingsway Hall, this is a really thrilling and dramatic Verdi Requiem, more in the Solti mode rather than the reverential Giulini style and it certainly fields a better team of soloists than what is for me that inexplicably over-praised recording.

I had hardly listened to this since I had first bought it on its issue, yet on re-acquaintance I found that my reaction to it had hardly altered, except for an increased tolerance for Scotto's mannerisms.

Verdi was not a conventionally religious man, if religious at all, and he stresses the human drama of the liturgical text. The more versions of the Verdi Requiem I hear, the more I side with Muti's approach, which is urgent, propulsive and demonstrative in the Grand Opera style. It is not especially fast or slow at around 86 minutes but it gives an impression of speed. Muti was not yet forty; this is the first of three recordings of this work and while the second La Scala account has an equally starry quartet of soloists, this one remains his best, despite one major caveat.

Its advantages are many: the sound, I have already mentioned; the Ambrosian Chorus in its heyday, the Philharmonia Orchestra reliably superb, the rock-solid, saturnine bass of Yevgeny Nesterenko in his absolute prime - how another reviewer can describe him as characterless escapes me - the splendid Italianate tenor of Luchetti in the first of his two excellent studio recordings of this work; the tangy, plaintive mezzo-soprano of Agnes Baltsa; these are all distinct bonuses that combine to create one of the most immediate and compelling recordings of this oft-recorded masterpiece that I know.

For some, the stumbling-block is Renata Scotto's wobble. She is extraordinarily expressive and committed, capable of wonderful diminuendos and a superbly controlled messa di voce; she lives every moment of the text with an intensity that completely eludes more recent exponents, some of whom might be singing anything - but the vibrato is distinctly intrusive. She has all the notes, even if the top is a little screechy and I for one am swept along by her conviction. True, the voice should not have been in such perilous condition in only her mid-forties but she pushed too much too soon in spinto roles when perhaps she was essentially a lyric soprano. Who knows? She gave us some splendid verismo turns in roles such as Adriana Lecouvreur and Maddalena in *Andrea Chénier* and her singing here is first cousin to those assumptions. It works for me, despite its flaws. Her entry on "Sed signifer" and concluding B flat in the middle section of the "Libera me" are ethereal and the wildness of her subsequent vocalisation in combination with the sheer size of her voice simply adds to the impact.

The Offertorio is invariably my ultimate test for the quality of any recording of the Verdi Requiem; this version certainly delivers and I particularly enjoy Luchetti's contribution to the quartet - the swing with which Muti infuses "Quam olim Abrahae" is just right.

Abbado (1980, DG)

Katia Ricciarelli, Shirley Verrett, Plácido Domingo, Nicolai Ghiaurov.
Orchestra and Chorus of La Scala, Milan.

Neither of Abbado's studio recordings has in general met with much critical acclaim and the later live recording, although in good sound, has casting weaknesses and lacks energy. This earlier studio recording is obviously more strongly cast but emerges as rather anonymous in character; while some complain about the low recording level and a sense of the humdrum. I quote here from the original "Gramophone" review by Hilary Finch, as it neatly reflects my own response and there is no need for me to rehash it:

"The chorus of La Scala is, as AB [Alan Blyth] commented when the LP first appeared, a choir of soloists, and their uneasy blend and heavy vibrato is only emphasized on CD....

.... Shirley Verrett certainly uses all the time and space Abbado provides to maximum effect: this performance, warm and earthy as terracotta, contrasts nicely with Ricciarelli's other-worldly soprano,

who sounds, nevertheless, enervated at times by Abbado's over-indulgence. Domingo gives a faultlessly cultivated, if somewhat chilly performance, but Ghiaurov, for all his sense of real awe, is less at ease, contributing to the blurred edges of this reading with ill-focused, foggy timbres."

Verrett makes the strongest, most vivid contribution with her smoky mezzo but Ricciarelli is rather pallid and has a beat in her tone on high notes. Both Domingo and Ghiaurov are vocally and interpretatively superior in their earlier recordings.

Mehta (1980, Sony)

Montserrat Caballé, Bianca Berini, Plácido Domingo, Paul Plishka.
New York Philharmonic, Musica Sacra Chorus.

The unavailability of this recording for many years had been a source of frustration for fans of the singers featured but it was finally issued in sound which is slightly edgy up top and a bit indistinct in lower frequencies but very listenable given that it was apparently assembled from live recordings over three days in the Avery Fisher Hall in October 1980. However, perhaps that is not the case: my information from a member of the tenor section was that the chorus for those live performances was not the Musica Sacra Choir but in fact the Westminster Symphonic Choir, as could be seen in the telesimulcast "Live from Lincoln Center". It seems that a week before the performances and recording were to take place it was announced that the choral musician's union would not allow the Westminster Choir to take part in the recording because they were not union. As the Westminster Choir were going to and leaving rehearsals at the Avery Fisher Hall, they could hear the much smaller "other" chorus, the Musica Sacra Choir, diligently rehearsing, so certainly the choral sections are assuredly not from the performances and possibly the whole of what we hear in this recording, including the soloists' contribution, was recorded afterwards, which explains the absence of audience noise.

I am further informed that Berini must have been new to the Requiem because she had her nose in the score the entire time she sang and stood quite close to Mehta who gave her more cues than anyone else, while both Domingo and Plishka sang without scores. Caballé paid Berini little notice and breezed through rests - even after Mehta asked her to take them, out of consideration for her colleague; similarly, he conducted the lifts during the performances but she ignored him.

Caballé may be heard in the Barbirolli studio recording twelve years earlier where she is exceptionally ethereal and delicate. Here she is more powerful with somewhat more acidity in her loudest notes but still able to spin her famous "pianissimi con un fil di voce" and her portamenti are delightful. Domingo is much the same as he was for Bernstein ten years earlier - that is, very fine without being especially individual; very good in his falsetto "Hostias". Bass Paul Plishka is commanding and expressive if a little throaty, with good low notes. The surprise for many will be the powerful and very Italianate mezzo-soprano Bianca Berini, a famous Amneris and clearly a singer to be spoken of in the same breath as her more celebrated coeval, Fiorenza Cossotto. Her lower register is a dream: thrilling dark brown velvet. It is good that she is so clearly distinguishable by timbre from Caballé as too many more modern recordings have two female singers whose voices are too similar, often lacking both a proper Verdian mezzo-soprano or a spinto soprano but substituting instead a capable soprano falcon and an artificially pumped up lyric soprano respectively.

Mehta starts off like a rocket but soon settles down to more conventional tempi. He is in full command without having much of interest or novelty to say about the music. Especially impressive is the Musica Sacra Chorus who are really precise and energised. Unusually, individual voices emerge during the choral passages such as the Sanctus, suggesting that they were a rather smaller group than is normal and closely miked, but their intonation and unanimity are admirable.

From a modern perspective, this is a recording which makes more recent offerings seem like small beer. It has no truck with playing the Requiem as a chamber or devotional work, but is palpably packed

with emotion, reeking of supplication. Verdi Requiem aficionados like me will doubtless want it in their collection, no matter how many they already own.

López-Cobos (1983, LPO/BBC)

Margaret Price, Livia Budai, Giuseppe Giacomini, Robert Lloyd.
London Philharmonic Orchestra, London Philharmonic Choir.

This BBC recording comes from a concert recorded live at the Royal Festival Hall in 1983, during Jesús López-Cobos' tenure as Principal Guest Conductor of the London Philharmonic Orchestra. It is by no means negligible as an account, but there are more recommendable versions than this, despite its merits.

However, there is no doubting the energy, commitment and professionalism of the London Philharmonic Choir and Orchestra; both are superb. López-Cobos has never been the most innovative or adventurous of conductors and he directs a competent and unexceptional performance here which belongs in the reverential, devotional camp; turning to really inspirational conductors like Bernstein or Toscanini will reveal what is missing if you prefer a more urgent, Dante-esque scenario. This performance is around five minutes longer than more dramatic accounts, although there is plenty of weight in the supplicatory sections and the pace lifts nicely in the "Quam olim Abrahae" - always a key moment.

Interest for most listeners will centre upon the team of soloists assembled here. While admiring so much of what Margaret Price does I cannot help feeling that hers is not an ideal Verdi voice: too slim and fluty to fill out those soaring lines amply and somewhat taxed by the expose B flats which she gamely nails rather than floats - yet she is one of a minority of sopranos who succeed in sounding genuinely terrified in the "Libera me", even if she is none too steady in the Lacrimosa.

The mezzo, Livia Budai, is plain ordinary if compared with great exponents of the rôle like Christa Ludwig or Fiorenza Cossotto; she is heavy on the vibrato and rather lumpen in expression, but blends surprisingly well with Price in their joint numbers. For some the sticking point will be a glaring mistake at the beginning of the "Quid sum miser", when she comes in a bar early and has to mark time by holding on to "sum". For repeated listening, this could be very irksome.

Giacomini is blessed with a great voice and lets us know it: his is a stentorian attack on the part - both he and Lloyd pin back our ears in their entries in the "Kyrie" - but he rarely attempts any mezza-voce or nuance in the manner of Di Stefano or Domingo. He scoops a bit and goes flat in the "Hostias" but is a real Italian tenor of the kind all too rare today.

I have a weakness for Robert Lloyd's sonorous, slightly nasal bass; he brings great solidity, gravitas and dignity to his utterances even if he is no Pinza or Siepi.

As a live recording in the Festival Hall, this comes off well, even if the outburst of hacking between the end of the "Requiem aeternam" and "Lux eterna" is disconcerting; the conductor cuts the coughers short by launching quickly into the last movement before they can get into their stride, but it's unfortunate.

Given the plethora of excellent recordings available, I cannot claim that this one is the answer to anyone's prayers. It has merits and will appeal to followers of the singers featured but Budai's error, the spread onto two discs, the live sound and some indifferent singing might be reasons enough to look for a more celebrated studio performance such those by Karajan, Solti, Reiner or Serafin. If it is a live performance you want, Bernstein offers more thrills.

Karajan (1984, DG)

Anna Tomowa-Sintow, Agnes Baltsa, José Carreras, José van Dam.
Vienna Philharmonic, Vienna State Opera Chorus, Sofia National Opera Chorus.

The Verdi Requiem was a Karajan speciality and of the many recordings he made and performances he gave, I am not aware of a bad one - or indeed one that is less than artistically highly satisfying. This one from 1984 is his digital version and is rather more deliberate and ponderous in parts than has previously been the case, but with singers and an orchestra as good as these, that allows details and emphases which can be glossed over in a Fricsay or Solti-style frenzy. Nonetheless, I find the Offertorio a little lacking in momentum, especially at "Quam olim Abrahae".

Carreras occasionally shows signs of the bleat and strain which came to afflict his over-parted tenor as the 80's and illness advanced but he is highly expressive and committed here, more interesting than in his account for Abbado, with an affecting mezza-voce and falsetto in the "Hostias". The other three soloists are stellar, especially Baltsa, who brings the spotlight onto the mezzo-soprano rather as Felicity Palmer and Oralia Dominguez did in their recordings. I love van Dam's bass-baritone and do not find him in the least under-powered as some have complained; he replicates his performance in the second Solti recording made in Chicago seven years previously. Tomowa-Sintow is very fine, not as faceless as can sometimes be the case; she is at the top of her form here and sounds suitably agitated in her big finale where too many sopranos are busy concentrating on getting the notes out. The vibrancy in her tone creates real tension, although just occasionally in the "Libera me" her intonation flags a little.

A fine account, not perhaps in my top five but unlikely to disappoint unless you need more propulsion.

Shaw (1987, Telarc)

Susan Dunn, Diane Curry, Jerry Hadley, Paul Plishka.
Atlanta Symphony Orchestra & Chorus.

For me, the élan of the choir and the excellent recording quality are insufficient to compensate for the comparative inadequacy of the soloists here - with the honourable exception of Jerry Hadley, who sings a stunning, full-throated "Ingemisco".

Muti (1987, EMI)

Cheryl Studer, Dolora Zajick, Luciano Pavarotti, Samuel Ramey.
Orchestra e Coro del Teatro alla Scala, Milano.

This live recording seems to divide critical opinion quite sharply. Like many a previous reviewer, I have always been on the look-out for the perfect account - which of course doesn't exist. I place this version fairly high for a number of reasons but with some inevitable caveats. Some will adjudge it to be the best of Muti's three recordings, certainly way above the recent drab affair with poor soloists and, if they object to the flap in Scotto's soprano and the ferocity of his attack, superior to the 1979 account.

The sound is excellent for a live performance, as is the ensemble and precision, even if the choir are at times urged to be just a little too free and occasionally sound sharp in their abandon - but far better than a dutiful rendering. I always use the degree to which a conductor can create excitement in the opening Kyrie and maintain momentum in the reprised "Quam olim Abrahae" of the Offertoire as my two main criteria for judging a good Requiem - and for me Muti passes both tests with distinction. In fact, I find his pacing and operatic lift perfect throughout. I have never subscribed to the view that this music needs to be that reverential in that I hear it as a spiritual psychomachia - only in quasi-oratorio form.

The soloists make a fine team. For all that Pavarotti is dryer of voice than for Solti twenty years earlier, his singing is still both nuanced and ringing, despite some struggle to keep enough tone in his sound during the mezza-voce ppp passages of the Hostias. I have not always been a fan of Cheryl Studer but hers is a large, flexible voice and she sounds truly terrified in the Libera me. Her top C is splendid and she matches the firm, slightly blowsy Zajick well in their duet - though if anything their voices are slightly too similar and share a tendency to spread. Ramey is gloriously dark and firm and in many ways

supplies one of the best accounts since Pinza, but his voice is one size too small to come through the ensembles with the requisite audible heft.

If you want an authentically Italianate and overtly operatic account, you could do far worse than this. There might not be one performance which ticks all the boxes but there are so many which come close; this Muti recording is very worthy without being at the very top of the list.

Abbado (1991, DG)

Cheryl Studer, Marjana Lipovšek, José Carreras, Ruggero Raimondi.
Vienna Philharmonic, Vienna State Opera Chorus.

Abbado's second studio recording, in excellent digital sound but strangely enervated in character and flawed both by the pronounced beat which had appeared in Carreras's tenor by this stage in his career and by his regrettable tendency to yell; the sap has gone out of his voice and it sounds unsupported; in truth his contribution is painful and unworthy of a formerly great artist. Raimondi, too, is not as rich of tone as he was for Bernstein and his tendency to slide has increased. I find that Studer's white, plaintive soprano lacks the warmth required. Lipovšek is adequate if rather matronly and unmemorable. Not a contender.

Barenboim (1994, Warner)

Alessandra Marc, Waltraud Meier, Plácido Domingo, Ferruccio Furlanetto.
Chicago Symphony Orchestra, Chicago Symphony Chorus.

Very similar in tempi and phrasing to his more recent recording, this earlier one from Barenboim is admirable without quite reaching the interpretative or vocal heights of classic versions. I find his approach slightly staid rather than intense.

On the credit side, the sound is wonderful: spacious and imposing; the soloists are certainly fine but with certain caveats. I particularly enjoy Alessandra Marc's big, soaring sound and she has the Verdian amplitude Harteros lacks in the later recording. However, she sometimes scoops and although I don't think her intonation is as faulty as some critics have maintained, sometimes a certain squeezed and unsupported quality, as in her last B flat on "Requiem" in the "Libera me," is suggestive of flatness. Domingo is excellent as always, especially in his soft singing in the "Ingemisco" and the "Hostias" although he is inevitably slighter drier of tone than he was many years before for Bernstein.

About the mezzo-soprano and bass, I am less sanguine: both seem to offer a facsimile of the real thing required, insofar as Meier has a slightly thin, acerbic voice which is not really ideally rounded - but she certainly acquits herself well within the limitations of her vocal type and she presents a good contrast with Marc, whereas in Barenboim's La Scala recording the two voices sound too similar. Furlanetto is intermittently imposing but I don't like the way he growls and groans, as if attempting to inject a heft into a sound which basses like Siepi and Ghiaurov make without undue vocal manipulation - and he has no trill or even a bluff for one.

In short, a good Requiem but not a great one.

Plasson (1991, EMI)

Júlia Várady, Felicity Palmer, Keith Olsen, Roberto Scandiuzzi.
Orchestre national du Capitole de Toulouse, Orfeón Donostiarra.

This recording comes closer to the ideal - with one major caveat - yet it seems that hardly anyone is aware of it or sings its praises; it was issued by EMI France on the "La voix de son maître" label without making a ripple. Perhaps the provenance and casting do not look starry enough, but Julia Varady is one of the greatest sopranos of recent years, a singer of extraordinary versatility and artistry - and so she proves here. Certainly, the other singers are not top-drawer star names but Felicity Palmer she sings totally out of whatever league I thought she was in - and I have always admired her - with a fearless

bravura that puts her up there with the greatest Verdian mezzo-sopranos. The other interesting thing about her voice is its personality; we are too often afflicted with too many pairings in which you cannot distinguish the soprano from the mezzo. Here, Palmer's rich, tangy caramel is always distinguishable from Varady's light, smooth, creaminess, such that numbers like the Recordare and the Agnus Dei become highlights.

This performance has an indefinably special quality, a sense of occasion. It has something to do with the churchy reverberance of the location, the Église Notre-Dame La Daurade in Toulouse; the long echo imparts grandeur to proceedings. Plasson's manner is similarly grand but also urgent, so that the duration is a brisk 80 minutes without longueurs. Just occasionally, the soloists seem to be edging ahead even of Plasson's impatient beat but that is merely indicative of the dramatic tension which propels the music onward. The Basque choir, the Orfeón Donostiarra, is simply terrific, with especially deep and resonant basses. All the singers, soloists and choir alike, sing with the kind of commitment too often lacking; when they implore "Salva me" they sound as if they mean it and Varady strikes a note of true, desperate terror in the concluding "Libera me". She employs portamento sensitively and her trenchant lower register judiciously, soaring angelically over the tumult and making the ideal, floated entrance on "Sed signifer" in the Offertorio. Her intonation is impeccable and her flickering vibrato imparts tension to her every utterance; what a performance.

Palmer is no less impressive; she is occasionally a tad strident and tends to lunge at high notes, and there is sometimes somewhat of a disjuncture in the crossover between her registers, but she sings with such commitment as to disarm all criticism. The insistence and energy of her attack are extraordinary; on this form, she would have been a formidable Amneris.

Roberto Scandiuzzi here sounds better than I have ever heard him and is certainly caught before his magnificent bass began to sound rocky; he sings with power and assurance in true Italianate style.

Which is where we come to the one drawback: the lack of Italianità in the American Keith Olsen's cloudy tenor. He is a decent singer with all the notes but the tone is wrong and emerges as a blunt instrument in this music. His sound is rather coarse and hoarse without the spinto edge that such as Pavarotti or Veriano Luchetti bring to the part. Nonetheless, he employs a serviceable falsetto for the Hostias and just about avoids letting the Ingemisco sound prosaic - yet I cannot help wishing that a more authentic voice had been recruited for this otherwise exemplary recording.

Celibidache (live 1993, EMI)

Elena Filipova, Reinhild Runkel, Peter Dvorský, Kurt Rydl

Munich Philharmonic Choir, Munich Philharmonic

Marmoreal speeds are usually – although not always - a given with a Celi performance but you can always count on beautiful phrasing, excellent balances and a justifiable purpose in everything he does. That won't convince everyone that this is the right way to play the work and there are certainly times when I just want him to get on with it and provide more drama with less insistence upon grandeur. A total timing of 102 minutes is really extreme for such a dynamic work. The Munich forces are splendid and do his bidding, but the soloists are not the best. Kurt Rydl has the right sepulchral tone but also too broad a vibrato and some husky top notes. Reinhild Runkel struggles against Celibidache's application of the brakes in "Liber scriptus" and the slow speed accentuates both her tendency to scoop and some grittiness in her tone. Dvorský sounds really out of sorts in his first entry, bleating, losing tonal allure and injecting too many intrusive glottal catches into what is supposed to be a proper Verdian line. His "Salva me fons pietatis" in the "Rex tremendae" is embarrassingly hoarse. He is better in the "Ingemisco" but I do not like his essential timbre or manner. By far the best singer here is Bulgarian soprano Elena Filipova – the same as on the Naxos studio recording - huge and secure of voice but her pitch is suspect in the "Recordare" – always a danger in that deceptively simple duet in thirds. Her solo finale is impressive but undermined by the soporific tempo.

This is not a version I can recommend.

Gergiev (2000, Philips)

Renée Fleming, Olga Borodina, Andrea Bocelli, Ildebrando D'Arcangelo.
Kirov Orchestra and Chorus.

I pass over a recording fatally compromised by Andrea Bocelli's contribution.

Abbado (2001, EMI)

Angela Gheorghiu, Daniela Barcellona, Roberto Alagna, Julian Konstantinov.
Berlin Philharmonic, Eric Ericson Chamber Choir, Swedish Radio Choir, Orfeón Donostiarra.

As was increasingly the case as he aged and, sadly, his health deteriorated, Abbado just fails to allow the music to take off precisely where the greatest performances succeed: that is at key moments such as "Quam olim Abrahae", in the Offertorio when the pulse should quicken and a sense of propulsive forward motion needs to take over. Nor is the sound as immediate and rich as it could be - although it is still acceptable. The best thing here by far is Angela Gheorghiu's wholly committed singing of the soprano part; she throws herself with abandon into the desperate pleas for mercy, employing a surprisingly penetrating lower register, colouring words with deep emotion and floating some lovely top notes. She might not actually be a true Verdian spinto, but here she manages to sound like one and her conviction both carries her through and really confirms why Harteros in the Pappano set sounds so anodyne. Alagna, too, is in very much better than I might have predicted; he successfully employs an affecting mezza-voce for the "Hostias" and produces some quasi-heroic sounds with little strain. The weaknesses for me, apart from Abbado's too restrained a manner, are the relatively bland performance of Barcellona, who has a nice voice but a vibrato bordering on a wobble, and the woolly, clumsy bass of Konstantinov, who constitutes the chief defect amongst the soloists, especially if you compare him with predecessors, such as Cesare Siepi, who have real Italianate steel and gleam in their voices. (Rene Pape in Pappano's recording presents a similar problem, although he has a far finer voice.)

Some previous reviewers seem to like this recording more than I do, but one must ask if they really are acquainted with other, earlier and superior performances.

Davis (2009, LSO Live)

Christine Brewer, Karen Cargill, Stuart Neill, John Relyea.
London Symphony Orchestra & Chorus.

I first came to this recording with much lower expectations than I brought to the new Pappano release, which perhaps partly explains why I found myself enjoying it much more than I had expected. You can find wholly contradictory reviews of this live performance: one reviewer find it tepidly "British" in its understatement and Davis' approach uninspired; another rightly complains about the unnatural closeness of the recording, which produces a constricted ambience and, most unfortunately of all, permits us to be constantly on the receiving end of Sir Colin's persistent grunts and groans - an all too prominent feature of all his recent recordings and a right royal pain of a distraction. Yet another review states "This is one of the most driven things I've heard Davis do". So what is the truth of it? For my part, I found much of this performance really satisfying and certainly not so underpowered. It is true that the chorus sounds far from refined or homogeneous at times - occasionally even a bit ragged with too many individual voices obtruding from what should be an imposing mass of sound - and that there is altogether too much vibrato in the soloists' voices, but these features were probably exaggerated by the closeness of the microphone placement and there are many compensations, not least the excellence of Scottish mezzo Karen Cargill, a last-minute replacement for Larissa Diadkova. I was not previously familiar with her voice, but she is quite a discovery and has since progressed to rising stardom: she has a rich, genuinely Verdian mezzo and is certainly far preferable in both timbre and

emotional involvement to Pappano's Ganassi. Stuart Neill has a hefty tenor which he lightens effectively at key points, while Relyea's contribution is really distinguished if not as rich as some of his predecessors, such as Siepi or Ghiaurov. Christine Brewer's soprano proves to be a mixed blessing: her entry in the Offertorio on "Sed signifer Sanctus Michael" is magical and some notes are ideally floated, whereas on other, louder notes she becomes acidic. She is perhaps not a real Verdi soprano but her contribution certainly does not constitute a blot on the set even if she could ideally be more involved - and Harteros in the Pappano set is similarly cool, without quite Brewer's vocal distinction. Brewer certainly leaves a very positive impression with the beauty and security of her delivery of the final slow "Requiem" passage in the "Libera me". Finally, some love the way Davis has his chorus whisper at key points, others find it corny; I think it works - just about.

All in all, I can only suggest that you listen before you buy - although this is very cheap and worth the risk if you think you might like it. I do, even if this is not amongst my very favourite versions and I think it a better super-bargain recommendation than the Naxos.

Pappano (2009, EMI)

Anja Harteros, Sonia Ganassi, Rolando Villazón, René Pape.
Orchestra e Coro dell'Accademia Nazionale di Santa Cecilia.

If you knew no other recording of the Verdi Requiem, this one would be more than satisfactory; indeed, it is very fine. The sound is spectacular, the orchestral playing superb, the choral singing by turns nuanced and powerful - really expressive - and Pappano's direction mostly unerring. One might quibble about details such as the over-emphatic staccati he applies to "ne absorbeat eas" in the Offertorio or a slight lack of "lift" in "quam olim Abrahae" in that same movement - indeed it is only there that I experience some minor disappointment, being used to more impetus and the kind of swagger you get from Bernstein - but by and large tempi and phrasing are admirably judged. My main reservations come with the soloists: each is undoubtedly fine but equally each is definitely surpassed elsewhere and none has a very identifiable vocal personality - Harteros and Ganassi sound very similar, for example and that is mainly because Ganassi is not a true Verdi mezzo; both voices lack the necessary lower register weight and Harteros cannot float and expand a note the way Leontyne Price or Martina Arroyo could. There is also a little edge to Harteros' soprano where more Verdian warmth is required. Pape is suitably black-browed but again, the top of his voice does not bloom and there is a dryness and lack of Italianate bite which a bass such as Siepi evinced in his several recordings. It is good to hear Villazon back in good voice and he gives a really sensitive, beautifully shaded account of his two big "arias" (shall we call them!), but he is no Bjorling or Bergonzi and there is a lack of gleam in his husky tone.

This is still a very fine account and was the first choice of the "Gramophone" survey in 2014. It will give much pleasure; there are almost none of the lapses in intonation so common in recordings of this wonderful music - especially in live ones, such as this - and so much here is right. It's not so much what is wrong, as what is missing which gives me pause. I can imagine other listeners being wholly satisfied with it and perhaps I am being too fussy, but there are at least half a dozen recordings which I prefer over it.

Muti (2009, CSO Resound)

Barbara Frittoli, Olga Borodina, Mario Zeffiri, Ildar Abdrazakov.
Chicago Symphony Orchestra & Chorus.

Despite this being a Grammy award-winner, its inadequate soloists, including a wobbly soprano and a tenor whose singing is execrable, in combination with harsh, bass-heavy sound put this out of court for me.

Temirkanov (2009, Signum Classics)

Carmen Giannattasio, Veronica Simeoni, Alexander Timchenko, Carlo Colombara.
St Petersburg Philharmonic Orchestra, Mihailovsky Theatre Chorus.

That Yuri Temirkanov is a great conductor, and possibly the finest Russian conductor alive today - unless you favour the brilliant but uneven Gergiev - is not much in dispute. Like many of his ilk, and despite an extensive studio-recorded discography, it is generally accepted that his interpretations have been best served and commemorated in live recordings. Most of his recorded output has been of the standard Russian repertoire and forays beyond this have been rare, although his credentials as an established interpreter of Verdi have been enhanced by a special performance of the Requiem in the Vatican and his appointment as Music Director of the Teatro Regio di Parma.

In a world hardly short of recordings of this most stirring and human of liturgical works, another Verdi Requiem really needs to be special to make any impact in the established discography. I suppose that I must be familiar with dozens of versions and as such am in danger of being hard to please, but I was initially immediately impressed by Temirkanov expert pacing of the tentative, descending string figure which opens the work, and the tension generated by his careful phrasing in the choir's increasingly assertive interpolations. My expectations were further raised by the firm vigour of the soloists' crucial first few phrases, when each intones in turn a rousing and desperate "Kyrie", announcing the composer's intent to assail God with the urgency of their pleas. This sets the tone for the whole work; a good performance instantly crackles with electricity as the voices spiral heavenwards.

None of the soloists here is either especially famous or even necessarily possessed of a major voice but under the direction of a conductor who knows exactly what he is about, they flourish. Despite leaning towards a large-scale, slightly strident, operatic-delivery, they succeed in evoking more of a sense of spiritual struggle than a dramatic confrontation. With three Italian soloists each producing the required Italianità of tone, the desired impact is there without its descending into an operatic slugfest. About the tenor Alexander Timchenko (previously unknown to me), I remain undecided. As a Russian, he is obviously the odd-man-out and cannot help sounding typically Slavic. There is not much gleam in his grainy, plaintive tenor but he sounds as if he believes what he is singing, phrases musically, and his soft singing in the "Hostias" is really ethereal and moving. A tendency to sing "Kyri-hey" is regrettable, although no less an artist than Carlo Bergonzi is guilty of the same fault in his otherwise estimable performance under Leinsdorf. In addition to my reservations regarding the tenor, I note that there is a little too much vibrancy bordering on a wobble in Veronica Simeoni's mezzo-soprano, and indeed in Carmen Gianattasio's ample soprano, too, but they certainly carry dramatic conviction. Their voices blend compellingly in both the "Recordare" and the Agnus Dei, where Temirkanov adopts quite daringly slow speeds and allows them to indulge in the full operatic panoply of portamento, swoop and glide. Similarly, Colombara is a sincere artist despite his rather soft-grained bass failing to generate the massive authority of say, Ghiaurov or Siepi. He wobbles in the "Oro supplex" and is perhaps the least impressive of all four soloists here despite having a proven track record as the bass in the successful Naxos bargain set recorded as long ago as 1996. Nonetheless, together the vocal quartet makes an impressive team and share a real sense of commitment.

The same commitment shown by the singers is evident in the chorus; Temirkanov has them sing with real passion and abandonment and even copies Colin Davis's trick of having them almost whisper "Quando iudex est venturus", which some find melodramatic. I rather like it. For the most part, I find his direction unerring in its judgement, except for one crucial point: the opening of the Offertorio. Too many conductors begin lugubriously and fail to build the momentum required to ensure that the music takes off and soars when we come to the "Quam olim Abrahae"; once again, it falters and stalls here, thus constituting the only major blot on the set - but, in my judgement, a damaging one, as this movement is to me the emotional centre of this great work. However, Temirkanov makes amends in the last movement, where the soprano soloist and chorus produce a thrilling climax despite the odd clumsy moment from her.

This first of a new series of live recordings from Signum Records was prompted by the refurbishment of the Grand Philharmonic Hall which is of course the home venue of the St Petersburg Philharmonic Orchestra. The advantages of a live performance are much in evidence, despite the odd cough and grunt, and the occasional surprise such as a man's voice muttering during the magical "Sed signifier sanctus Michael" - the conductor, perhaps? - the sound is excellent and was apparently made on new state-of-the-art recording equipment installed in the hall during the renovation.

Subsequent auditions of this set have taught me to appreciate its full-blooded virtues. It is up against tough competition, from sonic blockbusters such as Pappano's new recording on EMI with the Accademia di Santa Cecilia, but the soloists in both these recent versions suffer in comparison with those on classic recordings such as those conducted by Reiner, Bernstein, De Sabata or, above all, Karajan in his La Scala recording (currently available only on DVD) with the incomparable team of Price, Cossotto, Pavarotti and Ghiaurov, all in their young prime. An outright recommendation for this most-recorded of masterpieces is impossible, but Temirkanov's seems to me to be an honest, passionate and very enjoyable, top-second-rank version which will appeal particularly to admirers of the conductor and his St Petersburg forces.

Barenboim (2013, Decca)

Anja Harteros, Elīna Garanča, Jonas Kaufmann, René Pape.
Orchestra e Coro del Teatro alla Scala, Milano.

In the context of six or seven decades of accounts of this most recorded and grandest of choral works, this recording isn't up with the very best.

In some ways, my reaction to this excellent performance is similar to that to the Pappano recording from 2009 with two of the same soloists, but this one is better, not only because Harteros and Pape surpass their contributions for EMI but also because Garanča is preferable to Ganassi. This version also benefits from a really superb choral contribution which breathes new vigour and expressiveness into the old war-horse. Time and again, Barenboim has them delivering the text with real pointedness without their sounding self-conscious; their first "Requiem" really makes you sit up, especially as they are so well recorded, such that we get fullness of sound but also detail. Everything is in focus, from the bass's whispered "Mors" to the cataclysmic choral outbursts in the "Dies Irae".

However, for all that Harteros is fine, she is not, pace one previous reviewer, the equal of the likes of Leontyne Price in her prime; her tone is not absolutely pure and she tends to slide. Thus her "Sed signifier" slides in dreamily but then she spoils the effect with a sloppy A-flat on the ensuing word "sanctus" and her final "Requiem" on another A flat at the end of track 8 is a slight disappointment. She hasn't the amplitude of tone to fill out the great arcing lines; indeed, not one of the excellent soloists here is actually Italianate in timbre - especially Kaufmann, an artist I hugely admire, although I am almost persuaded by the tenderness of his delivery in the "Ingemisco" and the "Hostias"; he also has the heft to thrill the listener when he lets rip. Pape is simply not an Italian bass, although he sounds better than I had heard him in a while. There is little saturnine menace or the trenchant, treacly tone we hear from the likes of Siepi, his top notes tend to blare and he tends to pounce on words in an ungainly, Germanic fashion. Garanča is impressive without effacing memories of really Italianate mezzo-sopranos like Cossotto or Dominguez.

Barenboim's conducting is interesting: detailed and measured, bringing out the beauty, tenderness and spiritual profundity of the music without much tension or drive at key places such as the "Quam olim Abrahae". In a sense, this recording is all of a piece in that it doesn't go for a large-scale, extrovert interpretation but emphasises the pathos of the words and music; Kaufmann's delivery epitomises that approach - yet I still want a little more theatricality than we get here.

You won't hear a better modern performance, however, and this is as good as any we have heard for many a year, not least for its superb engineering.

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Having come to the end of my perusal of so many recordings, I realised that ultimately I was still attached to a small handful of favourites, headed by one which is not available as a CD at all: Karajan's DVD of the performance of January 1967 in Milan, with the stellar quartet of Leontyne Price, Fiorenza Cossotto, Luciano Pavarotti and Nicolai Ghiaurov, with the Chorus and Orchestra of La Scala. The video director was Henri-Georges Clouzot who filmed it studio conditions, in an empty La Scala, during the two days before the first concert to commemorate the tenth anniversary Toscanini's death. The choral singing is sometimes ragged but the solo singing is simply sublime.

There is a CD on the Frequenz label of that first performance on the 16th January but it is in markedly inferior sound to the DVD and thus cannot be recommended.

To conclude, my personal shortlist consists of the following six and obviously excludes worthy historical recordings: Karajan DVD 1967, Reiner, Solti 1967, Bernstein, Mehta and Barbirolli. Beyond that, I leave selection to the reader's own preference.

Ralph Moore