

# Classical LaserDiscs: many advantages, and a few caveats

by Kathy Wolfe

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## Macbeth

by Giuseppe Verdi  
conducted by Giuseppe Sinopoli, Deutsche Oper  
Berlin, June 1987, Pioneer PA-91-411

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## Giovanna d'Arco

by Giuseppe Verdi  
conducted by Riccardo Chailly, Teatro Comunale  
di Bologna, 1989, Teldec 9031-71478-6

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## Beethoven Lieder

Peter Schreier, tenor, and Norman Shetler, piano  
Bad Urach, 1987, Pioneer PA-91-347

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## Beethoven: Symphony No. 9

conducted by Kurt Masur  
Gewandhaus Leipzig, 1991, Pioneer PA-91-396

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Just as Thomas Edison's invention of the phonograph has allowed us to keep alive some of the musical traditions of earlier in the century, classical video and its latest technological breakthrough, the LaserDisc, can make great art more available. A LaserDisc, which looks like a compact disc but is almost the size of the old 33 $\frac{1}{3}$  LP records, is a compact disc with video; the better model CD players today play LaserDiscs, too. LaserDiscs have much higher audio quality than video tape, and are permanent, while video tape deteriorates within years. The music can be listened to like a CD, without the television. The Pioneer Corp. of Tokyo and Los Angeles has one of the best classical collections on LaserDisc; to receive a free Pioneer Artists LaserDisc catalogue, call (800) 322-2285.

First, however, a caution. For 400 years, from the Euro-

pean Renaissance through the American Civil War era, in towns across Europe and America, the average person could hear great dramas and musical performances live, and sung by neighbors in church many a Sunday.

The average educated citizen could not only read works of art, and could perform them in community settings such as schools and churches, but could also *create* them. Much as children today are taught to write simple paragraphs in grade school (wherever the Apple computer doesn't do it for them), children used to be taught to read and write poetry, drama, and music. Today, we live in a video culture, which induces such passivity in Americans that my usual response to seeing a TV set is to say, "Turn the blasted thing off!" It is better to simply read, which, because of television, Americans have forgotten how to do. This passivity reaches far into our consciousness. While some today might agree if told to "go read a book," or "go hear a live concert," many Americans would be downright confused if urged to recite a Shakespeare play, or sing a Schubert song. If told, "Go *compose* a poem" or a piece of music, most Americans would think their interlocutor insane.

## Verdi's heritage

We are thus faced today with the death of an entire culture. Public performances of art are only available in a few large cities at astronomical prices, restricted to the wealthy, effete, intellectual snobs. The deterioration in education means performances are often poor. Thus, good recordings become valuable. Two of Pioneer's latest releases, the full-length operas "Giovanna d'Arco" and "Macbeth," give a good deal of insight into the maturation of composer Giuseppe Verdi. They are also the first recordings of these early, rarely performed Verdi operas available in video.

Verdi's later "Macbeth," first composed in Florence in 1847, was rewritten over the next 18 years to produce in 1865 a magnificent rendering of Shakespeare which remained one of the composer's own favorite operas. Verdi was a passionate proponent of Abraham Lincoln in the American Civil War and there is no doubt that this tale of political intrigue and assassination took on a new meaning for him in the wake of Lincoln's murder. Pioneer's 1987 Deutsche Oper Berlin version is superb, featuring the experienced Verdi interpreter baritone Renato Bruson in the title role, and a perfectly wicked Mara Zampieri as the inexorable Lady Macbeth.

Verdi succeeds in translating perfectly into music many of Shakespeare's best scenes, in particular, the famous exchange between Macbeth and his Lady preceding their murder of King Duncan, which Verdi builds into a riveting duet. Instead of wallowing in wickedness, as the New York production had the principals do, Bruson and Zampieri sing fully, but from a mental level above the characters themselves, showing us the passion of the characters without drowning in the hysteria the characters themselves feel.

"Giovanna d'Arco" (Joan of Arc), composed in 1844, was the earlier of the two Verdi operas, based upon Friedrich Schiller's 1801 play "The Virgin of Orleans." Soprano Susan Dunn is terrific in the title role, singing with full Italian roundness, and Riccardo Chailly conducts lyrically, if fast in spots. Schiller's play is the magnificent story of Joan as the messenger of God to France, who is able to rise above all animal passions, a tale that needs telling in these times. Her failing is to fall in love at first sight, i.e., to fall in lust, with the English soldier Lionel, which threatens tragedy by compromising her high standards.

Verdi had librettist Temistocle Solera condense the dense plot, as opera librettists must, but over-much, so that Giovanna d'Arco falls for the French King instead. The opera itself thus lacks tension, since the element of treason is removed. (Solera did this at Verdi's request; the composer feared that the Italian public, who saw his operas as inspiration for the patriotic movement to drive foreign occupiers out of Italy, would never accept the heroine's falling in love with the enemy.) The video's Bologna staging is overly literal, with lots of hooded figures and dead bodies lying about the stage to show us the gore of the Hundred Years' War.

Musically the best audio is still the 1973 version by miraculous Monserrat Caballe as Giovanna, the young Placido Domingo as the King, and Sherrill Milnes as Giovanna's father, on EMI CD CDMB-63226.

## Beethoven documentaries

Historic concerts and those by artists who rarely visit the U.S. are of special value on LaserDisc. Pioneer's Beethoven Liederabend (evening of song) with German tenor Peter Schreier and pianist Norman Shetler is a concert most Americans will likely see nowhere else, and it should be seen.

Mr. Schreier, alone of postwar singers, has emphasized Beethoven's magnificent, under-appreciated songs, and here are a full 90 minutes of the best. The setting is the intimate concert salon in Bad Urach, East Germany, in 1987. Mr. Schreier shows how he inspired a generation of downtrodden East German citizens with the hope that the greatness of German music must mean better days to come for Germany. Especially fine are Beethoven's song cycle "An die ferne Geliebte" ("To the distant beloved") Op. 98, and the encore, "Bitten," the first of Beethoven's six "Gellert" Lieder Op. 48, in which Schreier answers the audience's applause by pointing out that God is ever with us.

Vocal purists are warned that Mr. Schreier never sang

with *bel canto* technique, and his voice by 1987 shows the strain; the tightness is visible and audible. Still, the best audio recording of Beethoven's Lieder remains Mr. Schreier's 1976 two-volume set on Teldec 6.41997 and 6.42082, when his voice was at its best.

Similarly singular is conductor Kurt Masur's reading of Beethoven's "Choral" Symphony No. 9 in D minor from Leipzig. Masur was one of the leaders who helped bring down the Berlin Wall in 1989. Here we see him in the Gewandhaus, in 1991, the concert hall he built himself under the old East German regime. Even under communism, the superior methods of music education in Germany are evident just by glancing at the soprano section of the chorus, which consists largely of the children of the Gewandhaus Chorus and Leipzig Radio Chorus, singing Schiller's poem entirely from memory.

The inventors of the compact disc at Japan's Sony Corp. said that they determined the length of the CD based on how long it would have to be to contain Beethoven's entire Ninth; little more need be said about the importance of the composition here. Unlike Furtwaengler, who moved little, relying on wrist action, eye contact, and sheer mental concentration, Masur's conducting is unexpectedly energetic, from a visual standpoint. Still, while maintaining fairly brisk tempi, he achieves the necessary long, singing phrases, especially with the orchestra. Masur gets very good differentiation among the orchestral voices. With great clarity, the string basses can be heard versus the violins, and versus the winds, as distinct singing lines. The camera work is terrific in this regard, as the director has mastered much of Beethoven's counterpoint and shows us each of these orchestral sections at just the right moment, although the rapid visual shifts required to accomplish this can become a bit "busy." The sound is technically gorgeous and the disc worth buying just to play the audio.

I also liked the LaserDisc of the Christmas 1989 Beethoven's Ninth from Berlin conducted by the otherwise useless Leonard Bernstein, featuring June Anderson and other fine singers (Deutsche Grammophon 072-250-1). The warmth of the occasion here overwhelmed all concerned to produce a fourth Choral movement which in its breadth of tempo and emotion surpasses Masur's reading. The Berlin soloists are superior to those in Leipzig, whose singing is strained.

A final note: The great thinkers of history, such as Leonardo da Vinci and Beethoven, would be thrilled at today's technology, as a means of spreading art to every family. But while *listening* to a recording is an inferior means of participation in music than singing or playing, audio recordings do leave the mind's eye free to imagine the full extent of the music. Any video, however, is still *television*—and we know the powers of the tube to mesmerize and eviscerate the imagination. So do buy LaserDiscs of Beethoven, Verdi, or Handel—but beware. Use these fine performances as inspiration to attend live concerts, and to learn to perform music yourself. Watch once or twice a week, and then turn off the TV and read, or create something yourself.