more glamorous sound and Boulez’s (DG) more responsive and nuanced orchestral playing, but Naxos’s price will, one hopes, encourage the hesitant to sample this difficult, disturbing and ultimately unsatisfying work. RICHARD LAW

Ainadamar, Golijov
Dawn Upshaw (Margarita Xirgu), Jessica Rivera (Nuria), Kelley O’Connor (Federico Garcia Lorca), Anne-Carolyn Bird, Sindhu Chandrasekaran (Voices of the Fountain), Jesús Montoya (Raúl Alonso), Eduardo Cháma (José Tripaldi), Sean Mayer (Teacher), Rob Askoff (Bullfighter), Women of the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra Chorus, Atlanta Symphony Orchestra, c. Robert Spano. Deutsche Grammophon 00289 477 6165 (one CD)

Osvaldo Golijov’s Ainadamar, first seen at Tanglewood in 2003, underwent a substantial revision (discussed in OPERA, December 2005, pp. 1487-8) for Santa Fe two years later which—with further assistance from Peter Sellars’s powerful production—greatly sharpened its impact. Experiencing the work again on disc reconfirms its theatrical power and allows for renewed appreciation of its structure. The story, involving essentially three people, one of whom never appears, has an intricate but intriguing format. The core event is the murder during the Spanish Civil War of the playwright Federico García Lorca near a well called Ainadamar, or ‘fountain of tears’, in Granada. Lorca’s fate is related in flashbacks by the ageing actress Margarita Xirgu, a close associate of Lorca, who in her prime took the title role of his Mariana Pineda. The unseen personage is Mariana herself, who was garroted fighting for Spanish freedom a century before Lorca and thus helps to supply a life-imitates-art theme.

As the building towards Lorca’s death, it suggests that Lorca’s treatment of Mariana lay behind his demise: ‘He has done more damage with his pen than others have with their pistols,’ says his executioner. In an apotheosis finale Lorca reappears to the dying Margarita, who fled Spain for Latin America and remained guilt-ridden for not having persuaded Lorca to go too. The languid trio for treble voices heard near the end—Lorca is a mezzo and Margarita’s student Nuria also participates—is perhaps the score’s high point. Just how much pleasure one will derive from Ainadamar, however, will depend on how responsive one is to the all-pervasive Latino/Flamenco idiom of Golijov’s score, with its frequent use of hard-driven rhythms (beaten out by characteristic percussion instruments). It is not just that he embraces the style for local colour or to enrich his musical palette—it often is his musical palette, although there are moments of genuine sublety and infectious melodic appeal. On the other hand, there are moments, as in Lorca’s confessional scene, where the music becomes so tranquil it almost seems to come to a halt.

This recording was made in connection with performances by the Atlanta Symphony subsequent to the Santa Fe production but with the same principal singers. In fact, it would be difficult to imagine Ainadamar without the Margarita of Dawn Upshaw, who was there from the beginning at Tanglewood, as was Kelley O’Connor. Upshaw sings with great versatility, bringing a pop-style gutsiness to the more assertive Latin numbers but also the transparency of tone we associate with her in the opera house; her ethereal singing of ‘adios’ at the close of the trio is especially touching. O’Connor’s lower register gets a workout in impersonating Lorca, and she makes a fine moment of Lorca’s haunting song about gazing at a statue of Mariana. Jessica Rivera’s soprano has the right youthful purity for Nuria’s music. And Robert Spano lets the opera’s exuberance soar while ensuring that its introspective moments tell.

GEORGE LOOMIS

Shadowtime Ferneyhough

Nicolas Hodges (piano/speaker), Mats Scheidegger (guitar), Neue Vocalsolisten Stuttgart, Nieuw Ensemble, c. Jurgen Hempel. NMC D123 (two CDs)

Lest it be forgotten, Séan Doran did some worthwhile things at the Coliseum, including picking up and presenting the first British performance of Brian Ferneyhough’s opera after it had been dropped by Sadler’s Wells. That single concert performance on 9 July 2005, following the work’s original staging in Munich in May 2004, forms the basis of the present recording, made by Radio 3.

Shadowtime is a characteristically complex and ambitious example of Ferneyhough’s art, while Charles Bernstein’s libretto is a highly intricate artefact in its own right. It deals with Walter Benjamin, the German cultural philosopher who, fleeing from the Nazis, was turned back on 25 September 1940 at the Spanish border after an arduous walk over the Pyrenees (especially so for a man with a heart condition) because his papers were not in order. He committed suicide rather than return to the fate he anticipated back in occupied France. The border incident, involving his companion Henny Burland (sung by Janet Collins) and an unsympathetic innkeeper (Angelika Luz), forms the first of the work’s seven scenes, and—even though its narrative is already overlain with earlier conversations, either ‘real’ or imagined, between Benjamin (Ekkehard Abele) and variously his former wife Dora (Monika Meier-Schmid), the scholar of the Kabbalah

Shalom, Gershon.
Gershom Scholem (Andreas Fischer) and the poet Holderlin (Martin Nagy), as well as other material—it’s by far the most traditional part of the piece. Henceforth the work departs much more radically from the norms of conventional opera, with a second scene that is essentially a guitar concerto inspired by a Paul Klee painting that fascinated Benjamin, and later examples that contain choral or vocal music but are more or less meditative fantasies either deriving from Benjamin’s ideas or reacting to them.

Scene 4, the Descent of Benjamin into the Underworld, consists of a Liberace-like performer in a Las Vegas piano bar (Ferneyhough believes Las Vegas to be the main portal to the underworld) speaking Bernstein’s quizzical text against his own accompaniment, which rises to Lisztian heights of bravura. (Nicolas Hodges’s solo turn here falls somewhere between the party trick and the tour de force.) Scene 5 returns to drama insofar as it consists of 11 interrogations, those questioning Benjamin including such diverse figures as Joan of Arc, Albert Einstein, Adolf Hitler (in philosophical mood) and The Two Marxes: Karl and Groucho.

It would certainly challenge any director to make the piece work on stage, though it might be worth the effort. But it came over well in concert at the Coliseum and does so again on disc, even if Ferneryough’s wildly profuse and often fragmented writing will not be to all tastes any more than Bernstein’s opaque text. But as an example of belief in the potential of high art to deal with complex material in a complex (yet also, sometimes, playful) way, it doesn’t come much bolder than this.

There’s an easy confidence about the performance too which, given the minute detail and grand sweep of the piece, is entirely remarkable. The choral and orchestral forces under Jurgen Hempel sound as if they know exactly what they’re doing with all those myriad notes. You’re not, realistically, ever going to see a Zeffirelli staging of Shadowtime at the Met, but it’s well worth encountering on disc—and not just once.

GEORGE HALL

Rigoletto, Verdi

Lina Pagluighi (Gilda), Irma Colasanti (Maddalena), Tilde Fiorio (Giovanna), Ferruccio Tagliavini (Duke of Mantua), Tommaso Soley (Borsa), Giuseppe Taddei (Rigoletto), Alberto Alberti (Marullo), Antonio Zerbini (Monterone), Giulio Neri (Sparafucile), Coro Cetra, Orchestra Sinfonica di Torino della RAI, c. Angelo Questa. Preiser ‘Paperback Opera’ 20045 (two CDs)

In 53 years there has hardly been a performance of Rigoletto to surpass this one; its reappearance is a cause for joy, for it will allow a new audience to savour portrayals and conducting that represent the very best in Verdiian interpretation. As much as anyone, Questa is to be thanked for that. His conducting is at once prompt, vital, unexaggerated and particular in detail.

Heading the cast is that great baritone Giuseppe Taddei, who has now just celebrated his 90th birthday. He may look back on this as one of his most satisfying achievements: Rigoletto’s cynicism, anger and, of course, sorrow and remorse are all portrayed in firm, Italianate baritone sounds and with a lovely feeling for the long phrase, particularly evident in the crucial duets with Gilda. She is sung by Pagluighi, at 47 just past her vocal best—she transposes ‘Caro nome’ down a semitone—but all that is forgiven in her portrayal of a shy, open-hearted, impressionable young girl. She isn’t a dramatic soprano having to imitate a light one: she sings the girlish, bright and finally infinitely sad notes in a natural but very precise way, phrasing everything with point and keen accent. I had forgotten just how good she is.

Tagliavini, in his prime, sings a Duke of infinite variety. How few tenors before or since have started the duet with Gilda and the Quartet with such a beguiling mezzo voce and then expanded to such a virile forte, and given the last-act reprise of ‘La donna è mobile’ such an exquisite, lingering sound. To add to one’s pleasure, all the minor roles are taken by classy singers. Neri’s properly nasty, dark-hued Sparafucile tells us what we lost when he died in his late 40s. Zerbini, the characterful Monterone, sounds as if he could at any time substitute for Rigoletto, and Colasanti is a very positive Maddalena.

Anything to put you off? Well, the sound has a bit of reverberation added, which I don’t care for, and the original Cetra discs were never ones to show off one’s hi-fi, but when the whole, incomparable opera is done with such conviction, who cares? For the record, the Duke gets a verse of his cabaletta, rare in those far-off days. As a bonus, Taddei sings arias from Ballo, Don Carlos and Nesviri and Iago’s Credo with every Verdian accomplishment in place.

GEORGE HALL