

## RECORDINGS OF BRAHMS'

### RHAPSODIE (Op. 53)

by

Martha Lawry

When Brahms' noble Rhapsodie (Op. 53) was first performed in England, a reviewer called it "wild and gloomy music" and held that "Brahms so uses the language of human emotion that emotion responds to it."<sup>1</sup> In our own time, Hans Gal called it a "strange, profound, and in many respects enigmatic composition."<sup>2</sup> Brahms himself, although deeply affected by the Rhapsody, referred to it soon after its composition offhandedly as "somewhat intimate music"; however, he was also reported to have loved it "so much that he had to lay it under his pillow at night, in order always to have it near him."<sup>3</sup> For the most part this music -- variously described as "intimate," "profound," and "emotional" -- has continued, from its first hearing to the present, to receive critical acclaim and popular affection.

The Alto Rhapsody, however, has never become a standard offering on recordings or in symphony programs. The relative infrequency of its performance may well be because its "combination of alto voice, male chorus, and orchestra is unconventional and contrary to ordinary concert-hall usage,"<sup>4</sup> rather than lack of interested performers and listeners. The advent of long-playing records made it necessary to record the Rhapsody in combination with other vocal works (e.g. Gustav Mahler's Lied von der Erde and Richard Wagner's Wesendonck Lieder) or Brahms' symphonic or vocal works.

And which recording of Brahms' Rhapsodie (Op. 53) is considered to be the "best"? Judging from a survey of reviews, consensus, but not complete agreement, can be reached. Most reviews of the Alto Rhapsody have been markedly similar. They look to the "first" recording by Sigrid Onegin as a benchmark for all the rest, and hold that the best since hers have been those by Marian Anderson, Kathleen Ferrier, Aafje Heynis, Christa Ludwig, and Janet Baker. Before Janet Baker's 1971 recording, reviewers generally tended to believe that the "ideal" recording had not yet appeared. This assessment was particularly noticeable in reviews of the three Anderson recordings. For example, in 1955 Philip Miller wrote:

So far, Marian Anderson has had three tries at the Rhapsody, and where she has done herself justice in one recording seems always to be the spot that comes off less well in another. The first, prewar, version, with Ormandy and the Philadelphia Orchestra was

naturally the freshest vocally; the second, with Monteux and the San Francisco, the best interpreted, though the singer was caught short in some of the longer phrases; the third and at present only available performance is the best recorded, but does the artist least credit.<sup>5</sup>

Earlier in the same article, Miller suggested that had Kathleen Ferrier lived longer she might have made the first "completely satisfactory" recording. He added:

As it is, we must be grateful to London for transferring the older effort to LP, for it is, taken all around, the best yet made of this music. The noble voice is magnificent throughout, the patent sincerity apparent in every measure. One feels only that time would have mellowed the artist's conception of the work.<sup>6</sup>

Robert Simpson, in The Music Review, also found Ferrier's performance "right" -- with a few reservations:

In matters of detail this performance is open to considerable criticism, but the overall effect is so emphatically right and so much enhanced by the fine quality of the recording that one tends not to notice the imperfections.<sup>7</sup>

Few if any such reservations were evident in reviews of the Baker-Boult recording (Angel S37032, with Brahms' Symphony No. 2). Abram Chipman in High Fidelity Magazine called it "stark simplicity itself, direct and to the point, with a throbbing urgency from the Boult baton and a warm-blooded, caressing vibrato from the soloist."<sup>8</sup> Trevor Harvey, reviewer for The Gramophone, was even more enthusiastic:

...how can anyone resist Janet Baker's superb singing and vocal colouring, from a wonderfully veiled tone to great, thrilling outbursts, full of warmth and feeling. Sir Adrian knows exactly how to accompany his soloist with understanding, helping her in the more difficult phrases. The choir makes just the right sound. Goethe's words aren't clear but I doubt if Brahms much wanted them to be, for the whole emphasis is on the soloist, whose response to the poem is always superb.<sup>9</sup>

Candidates for first honors other than Janet Baker have also appeared. Gunter Kossodo, a reviewer for The American Record Guide, found Christa Ludwig's recording to be "the best available ... in fact, the best in memory."<sup>10</sup> Philip Miller considered the 1959 recording by

Aafje Heynis to be the one "first-rate" Alto Rhapsody. His review of Miss Heynis' recording also contained an assessment of some of the earlier recordings. The following excerpt reflects the consensus of many reviews:

The Alto Rhapsody is a veritable contralto paradise, yet only now for the first time are we offered a really first-rate recording of it. If we return to the first attempt, made in 1930 by Sigrid Onegin with Kurt Singer conducting ... we find the singing tonally gorgeous but superficial, the eminent soloist more concerned with placing of tones and with demonstrating her remarkable portamento than with the Goethe text. More recently Marian Anderson tried three times without producing a satisfactory recording. A composite of her three recordings ... might give us the singer's best, for neither the good spots nor the weak are consistent. The no-longer-available recording of Elisabeth Hongen and Ferdinand Leitner was marred by unsteady tone. Kathleen Ferrier and Clemens Krauss had they lived for another go at the work, might have turned the trick; the performance they left us only misses by seeming too slow and careful, perhaps tentative. Monica Sinclair and Sir Adrian Boult gave us a good account of the music without, however, the conviction that they were discoursing of really big things. Miss Heynis ... uses her rich and beautifully controlled voice for the glory of the music. In the recording she is not allowed to swamp the orchestra with tone, but is made a part of Van Veinum's rich but restrained ensemble.<sup>11</sup>

Thomas Heinitz, reviewing the recent Greevy-Loughran recording (Classics for Pleasure CFP 40064) in Records and Recording, reported his pleasure in hearing the work performed by a "true contralto and not, as so often in recent years, a mezzo-soprano."<sup>12</sup>

The following discography lists commercial recordings of the Alto Rhapsody in chronological order by year of issue. Current availability is indicated by an (S) (for recordings listed in the May or Spring/Summer 1978 Schwann catalog), a (G) (for those in the March 1978 Gramophone catalog), and a (B) (for the Fall 1977 Bielefelder catalog). The 1950 U.N. Concert recording by Marian Anderson and Fritz Busch can be purchased through its distributor, Discocorp. One recording, that of Vera Soukupova, Zdenek Macal and the Czech Philharmonic Chorus and Orchestra, appeared in none of the record catalogs, periodical reviews, or recorded music reference works consulted. Correspondence with Supraphon's U.S. distributor elicited only the information "item deleted," while no reply was received from inquiries to Supraphon in Prague. Source for this listing is Bernard Jacobson's The Music of

Johannes Brahms (London: The Tantivy Press, 1977), p. 206.

- 1930 (78 rpm)  
Sigrid Onegin Berlin State Orchestra 7417/8, Victor  
Berlin Doctors' Chorus 1442/3, HMV  
Kurt Singer GR-2158, Angel (Japan)
- 1939 (78 rpm)  
Marian Anderson Philadelphia Orchestra V-15408, V-1919, Vic-  
Pennsylvania University Chorus tor  
Eugene Ormandy DB3837, DA1700, HMV
- 1946 (78 rpm) (recording 3 March 1945)  
Marian Anderson San Francisco Symphony 11-9500/1, Victor  
San Francisco Municipal Chorus Set M1111, Victor  
Pierre Monteux Album SP-13, Victor
- 1948 (78 rpm, recording 1947)  
Kathleen Ferrier London Philharmonic Orchestra 1847/8, Decca  
London Philharmonic Choir LL903, 5098, London  
Clemens Krauss  
1968 re-issue (G) ACL 306, Decca  
(S) R23183, Richmond  
(B) 6.48048DP, Telefun-  
ken Decca
- 1951 (recording 20 October 1950)  
Marian Anderson RCA Victor Orchestra LM1146, Victor  
Robert Shaw Chorale Set 1532 (45 rpm),  
Fritz Reiner Victor
- 1953  
Elisabeth Hongen Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra DL4074, Decca  
Berlin Choral Society  
Ferdinand Leitner
- 1955 (recording ca. 25 Nov 54)  
Monica Sinclair Philharmonic Promenade Orches-WN 18035, Westminster  
tra WN4401, Westminster  
Chorus of the Croydon Philhar-NCL 16002; NCL 16004,  
monic Society Nixa mono; MAL 732,  
Sir Adrian Boult Marble Arch mono;  
1975 re-issue (G) GSGC 15021, Pye Col-  
lector  
"The 'Philharmonic Promenade Orches-  
stra' was the recording name used by Nixa  
for the London Philharmonic Orchestra."<sup>13</sup>

Lucretia West	1958 (recording 1957) Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra Vienna Academy Male Voice Choir Hans Knappertsbusch 1974 re-issue	LXY 5394, Decca LLP 1752, London       ⓐ EGS 701, Decca Eclipse ⓑ 6.4198IAJ, Telefun- ken Decca
Aafje Heynix	1959 (recording 1958) Amsterdam Concertgebouw Orchestra Royal Male Choir "Apollo" Eduard van Beinum	LC 3563, Epic
Maureen Forrester	1960 (recording 1957) Berlin Radio Symphony Or- chestra RIAS Male Chorus Ferenc Fricsay 1970 re-issue	17 199, Polydor      89 857, Heliodor
Aafje Heynis	1962 Vienna Symphony Orchestra Singverein der Gesellschaft der Musikfreunde Wolfgang Sawallisch	A2226-7L (M), Philips 835114-5AY (S), Philips ⓑ 6530 027, Phonogram ⓑ 6780 018, Phonogram
Christa Ludwig	1962 (recording 21-23 Mar 1962) Philharmonia Orchestra Philharmonia Chorus Otto Klemperer	Ⓢ S35923, Angel ⓐ SLS821, HMV; ASD2391, HMV ⓑ 1C063 00826, EMI
Maura Moreira	1962 (1969 U.K. release) Innsbruch Symphony Orchestra Innsbruch Chorus Robert Wagner	STPL 512.320, Vbx ⓐ TV 34281-S, Decca- Turnabout
Mildred Miller	1963 (recording 1961) Columbia Symphony Orchestra Occidental College Concert Choir Bruno Walter	Ⓢ MS 6488, Columbia ML 5888, Columbia ⓐ ⓑ 61 428, CBS
Grace Hoffman	1966 (released on Concert Men's Chorus & Orchestra of Norddeutscher Rundfunk, Hamburg Carl Bamberger	Hall tapes in 1958) Ⓢ HB73003 (S), Nonesuch H3003 (M), Nonesuch

	1967 (recording 1966)	
Helen Watts	L'Orchestre de la Suisse Romande	SET 333-4; MET 333-4, Decca
	Les Choeurs de la Radio Suisse	(S) 1265 (S), London A4265, London
	Ansermet	LP30073-4, HMV Concert Classic
	1973 re-issue	SDD 402, Decca
	1977 re-issue	(G) ECS 798, Decca Eclipse (in Brahms, Choral Works)
		(G) DPA583-4, Decca re- issue of SET 333-4
	1967	
Irina Arkhipova	Russian State Symphony Orchestra	SR-90467 D 012301-2, S 0643/4
	Russian State Academy Choir Igor Markevitch	(USSR)
	197-?	
Vera Soukupova	Czech Philharmonic Orchestra Czech Philharmonic Chorus Zdenek Macal	ST 50772, Supraphon
	1971 (recording 1970)	
Janet Baker	London Philharmonic Orchestra	(S) S37032; S37199 (Q), Angel
	John Alldis Choir	(G) ASD 2746, HMV
	Sir Adrian Boult	(B) 1C065 02758Q, EMI
	1976 re-issue	(G) ASD3260, HMV -- with R. Strauss Songs and R. Wagner Wesendonck Lieder
	1974 (recording 1973)	
Bernadette Greevy	Halle Orchestra Halle Choir James Loughran	(G) CFP 40064, Classics for Pleasure
	1976 (recording 1950)	
Marian Anderson	New York Philharmonic Unidentified Chorus Fritz Busch	RR-397, Discocorp distributor
	(from the 1950 U.N. Human Rights Day concert at Metropolitan Opera House, New York -- on Bruno Walter Society record, Fritz Busch, Vol. 2)	

1977  
 Yvonne Minton           New Philharmonic Orchestra (S) M2 34583 (Q),  
                           Ambrosian Singers                   Columbia  
                           Lorin Maazel                         M34798; QBL 34798,  
   Columbia  
   (G) (B) 79211, CBS

1978 (rec. 21 June 1976)  
 Christa Ludwig         Vienna Philharmonic Orches- (S) 2530 992, Deutsche  
                           tra   Grammophon  
                           Singverein der Gesellschaft  
                           der Musikfreunde  
                           Karl Bohm

1978  
 Shirley Verrett        Philadelphia Orchestra            ARL 1-3001, RCA  
                           Men of the Temple University   (in Schwann, Jan.'79)  
                           Choirs  
                           Eugene Ormandy

In addition, Nathan E. Brown, archivist of Western Sound Archive, El Cerrito, California, has reported to me the following archival recordings on broadcast tapes:

1941 (Broadcast over WABC, Sept. 21, 1941)  
 Janet Busch            CBS Symphony  
                           Schola Cantorum  
                           Sir Thomas Beecham

1941 (Broadcast over CBS Radio, Nov. 9, 1941)  
 Enid Szanthy          New York Philharmonic  
                           Westminster Choir  
                           Bruno Walter

1956 (Broadcast over CBS Radio, April 1, 1956)  
 Martha Lipton         New York Philharmonic  
                           Westminster Choir  
                           Guido Cantelli

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>"Cambridge University Musical Society," The Musical Times (June 1, 1877), 279-80. The Rhapsodie (Op. 53) will be referred to for the most part as the Alto Rhapsody or simply Rhapsody.

<sup>2</sup>Hans Gal, Johannes Brahms, His Work and Personality, trans. Joseph Stein (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1963), 196.

<sup>3</sup>Albert Dietrich and J.V. Widmann, Recollections of Johannes Brahms, trans. Dora E. Hecht (London: Seeley, 1899), 74.

<sup>4</sup>Gal, op. cit., 196.

<sup>5</sup>Philip L. Miller, The Guide to Long-Playing Records: Vocal Music (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1955), 50.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid.

<sup>7</sup>Robert Simpson, "Gramophone Records," The Music Review, IX (1948), 319.

<sup>8</sup>Abram Chipman, "Classical Review," High Fidelity Magazine, XXIV/12 (December 1974), 102.

<sup>9</sup>Trevor Harvey, "Analytical Notes and First Reviews," The Gramophone, XLIX/584 (December 1971), 1036.

<sup>10</sup>Gunter Kossodo, "Other Reviews," The American Record Guide, XXIX/7 (March 1963), 538.

<sup>11</sup>Philip L. Miller, "Only Now a Really First-Rate 'Alto Rhapsody,'" The American Record Guide, XXVI/6 (February 1960), 427.

<sup>12</sup>Thomas Heinitz, Record Review in Records & Recording, XVIII/1 (October 1974), 38. In a September 1976 letter to me, Mildred Miller commented on her surprise at Bruno Walter's wanting her to record the Rhapsody: "My voice is a lyric mezzo-soprano and all previous recordings that had been done were with a very heavy contralto voice. To make sure that Maestro Walter truly wanted me to record it, I insisted that I sing it for him before I sign my contract. When he still insisted, I then requested that on the jacket of the recording my name would be listed as a mezzo-soprano so that the listener would not have a preconceived idea of color and weight of the voice." Mrs. B. Bird, writing to me for Maureen Forrester, November 1976, stated: "Miss Forrester well remembers Bruno Walter saying that one should think as a man, even though it is written for a woman."

<sup>13</sup>Mike Ashman, "Boult Discography," Records & Recording, XVII/7 (April 1974), 17.