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." In our own time, Hans Gal called it a "strange, profound, and in many respects enigmatic composition." 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." 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," 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 avail­
able performance is the best recorded, but does the
artist least credit. 5

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. 6

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. 7

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." 8 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 em­
phasis is on the soloist, whose response to the poem
is always superb. 9

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." 10 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.11

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."12

The following discography lists commercial recordings of the Alto Rhapsody in chronological order by year of issue. Current availability is indicated by an (for recordings listed in the May or Spring/Spring 1978 Schwann catalog), a (for those in the March 1978 Gramophone catalog), and a (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

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Recording Details</th>
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| 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, Victor  
Pennsylvania University Chorus  
Eugene Ormandy  
DB3837, DA1700, HMV |
| 1946 (78 rpm) | 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  
© ACL 306, Decca  
© R23183, Richmond  
© 6.48048DP, Telefunken Decca |
| 1951 (recording 20 October 1950) | Marian Anderson  
RCA Victor Orchestra  
LM1146, Victor  
Robert Shaw Chorale  
Set 1532 (45 rpm), Victor  
Fritz Reiner  
|
| 1953 | Elisabeth Hongen  
Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra  
DL4074, Decca  
Berlin Choral Society  
Ferdinand Leitner  
|
| 1955 (recording ca. 25 Nov 54) | Monica Sinclair  
Philharmonic Promenade Orchestra  
WN 18035, Westminster  
Chorus of the Croydon Philharmonic Society  
Nixa mono; MAL 732, Marble Arch mono;  
Sir Adrian Boult  
1975 re-issue  
© GSGC 15021, Pye Collector |

"The 'Philharmonic Promenade Orchestra' was the recording name used by Nixa for the London Philharmonic Orchestra."

32
Lucretia West
Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra
Vienna Academy Male Voice Choir
Hans Knappertsbusch
1974 re-issue

1958 (recording 1957)
LXY 5394, Decca
LLP 1752, London

Aafje Heynix
Amsterdam Concertgebouw Orchestra
Royal Male Choir "Apollo"
Eduard van Beinum

1959 (recording 1958)
LC 3563, Epic

Maureen Forrester
Berlin Radio Symphony Orchestra
RIAS Male Chorus
Ferenc Fricsay
1970 re-issue

1960 (recording 1957)
17 199, Polydor

Aafje Heynix
Vienna Symphony Orchestra
Singverein der Gesellschaft der Musikfreunde
Wolfgang Sawallisch

1962 (recording 21-23 Mar 1962)
A2226-7L (M), Philips
835114-5AY (S), Philips
6530 027, Phonogram
6780 018, Phonogram

Christa Ludwig
Philharmonia Orchestra
Philharmonia Chorus
Otto Klemperer

S35923, Angel
SLS821, HMV; ASD2391, HMV
1C063 00826, EMI

Maura Moreira
Innsbruch Symphony Orchestra
Innsbruch Chorus
Robert Wagner

1963 (recording 1961)
STPL 512.320, Wx
TV 34281-S, Decca—Turnabout

Mildred Miller
Columbia Symphony Orchestra
Occidental College Concert Choir
Bruno Walter

1966 (released on Concert Hall tapes in 1958)
MS 6488, Columbia
ML 5888, Columbia
61 428, CBS

Grace Hoffman
Men's Chorus & Orchestra
of Norddeutscher Rundfunk, Hamburg
Carl Bamberger

1966
HB73003 (S), Nonesuch
H3003 (M), Nonesuch
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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Orchestra/Choir/Orchestral Body</th>
<th>Date of Recording</th>
<th>Date of Recording</th>
<th>Reissues</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Irina Arkhipova</td>
<td>Russian State Symphony Orchestra Russian State Academy Choir Igor Markevitch</td>
<td>1967</td>
<td>SR-90467</td>
<td>D 012301–2, S 0643/4 (USSR)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vera Soukupova</td>
<td>Czech Philharmonic Orchestra Czech Philharmonic Chorus Zdenek Macal</td>
<td>197–?</td>
<td>ST 50772, Supraphon</td>
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<tr>
<td>Janet Baker</td>
<td>London Philharmonic Orchestra John Alldis Choir Sir Adrian Boult</td>
<td>1971 (recording 1970)</td>
<td>S 37032; S 37199 (Q), Angel ASD 2746, HMV 1065 02758Q, EMI ASD3260, HMV -- with R. Strauss Songs and R. Wagner Wesendonck Lieder</td>
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<tr>
<td>Bernadette Greevy</td>
<td>Halle Orchestra Halle Choir James Loughran</td>
<td>1974 (recording 1973)</td>
<td>CFP 40064, Classics for Pleasure</td>
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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 Szantho
  - 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

1"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.


4Gal, op. cit., 196.


6Ibid.


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

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

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

12Thomas Heinitz, Record Review in Records & Recording, XVIII/1 (October 1974), 38. In a September 1974 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 thought it is written for a woman."