

BAILLIE MISCELLANY

NEVER SING LOUDER THAN LOVELY: PURCELL: The Blessed Virgin's expostulation; Stript of their green; The Fairy Queen--Hark! the echoing air; ARNE: The Judgement of Paris--O ravishing delight; Where the bee sucks; BACH: Cantata no. 208--Flocks in pastures; Cantata no. 68--My heart ever faithful; HANDEL: Acis and Galatea--As when the dove; Messiah--Rejoice greatly; How beautiful are the feet; I know that my Redeemer liveth; If God be for us; Samson--Let the bright seraphim; Judas Maccabaeus--From mighty kings; Joshua--O had I Jubal's lyre; HAYDN: Creation--With verdure clad; On mighty pens; SANDERSON: One morning very early; CADMAN: At dawning; KJERULF: Synnove's song; OFFENBACH: Contes d'Hoffmann--Doll's song; MENDELSSOHN: On wings of song; TRAD.: O can ye sew cushions; Comin' through the Rye; DIACK (arr.): O whistle and I'll come to you; DELIUS: Twilight fancies; TRAD.: I will walk with my love, Isobel Baillie, soprano. EMI HMV RLS 7703.

I used to think of Isobel Baillie as the quintessential British soprano, for she typified the school to which she belonged. She was first known to American collectors through English Columbia records (imported in the thirties and forties) of music especially of Purcell and Handel. Her voice was pure, clear, and belllike; fluent and flexible, her style always musical. If one is surprised at her longevity (recording from 1924 to 1975) she explains it in the title of this anthology (and of her recently published memoirs). Amazingly, there is not too much difference between the voice of the twenty-nine-year-old and of the octogenarian.

This program is logically grouped, the first side devoted to Purcell, Arne and Bach, the second and part of the third to Handel, the last two bands of the third to Haydn and the fourth to songs. Everything is sung in English.

She opens auspiciously with "The Blessed Virgin's expostulation," one of Purcell's extended monodies, recitative alternating with expressive cantabile. This is Baillie at her best. Arnold Goldsborough provides a discreet background at the organ. "Stript of their green" is more properly a song, attractively sung with Gerald Moore at the piano. And "Hark: the echoing air" is a festive moment from The Fairy Queen, with the Halle Orchestra conducted by Leslie Heward. Dame Isobel is quoted in Bryan Crimp's notes to the effect that there was a "basic incompatibility" between her voice and the microphone, which necessitated turning her head away for all high notes. This may account for a certain pinched quality in the high register, where like most sopranos she has difficulties pronouncing words. A blemish, perhaps, on an appealing performance of "O ravishing delight." "Where the bee sucks" is delightful. I am less enthusiastic about "Flocks in pastures" (Schaffe konnes sicher weiden), complete with recitative, done with two flutes - John Francis

and A. Hedges-- and Gerald Moore. It is not that the tempo is really slow, but it is somehow lumbering; I miss the lift that makes the aria sublime. "My heart ever faithful," a first favorite when it was new, is still beautifully sung if one is not bothered in this day of authentic style by the heavy orchestra. I miss especially the wonderful chamber-music postlude with which Bach crowned the aria.

It hardly needs saying that Baillie was a Handel specialist in the tradition of her day, and working mostly with Sir Malcolm Sargent, she is given a full orchestral background. "As when the dove" suits the singer especially well. She tells us she has no idea how many Messiahs she sang in over fifty years, and obviously she sings the arias as if by nature. "Rejoice greatly" and "If God be for us" were recorded in 1944; "How beautiful are the feet" and "I know that my Redeemer liveth" are extracted from Sargent's complete Messiah, made in 1946. Perhaps one has heard the coloratura of "Rejoice" more evenly sung, but "How beautiful" has the youthful quality that made it for so many years the standard audition piece for boy sopranos. "I know" is sung with strong conviction. Remembering when "Let the bright seraphim" was new, it was my favorite among the Baillie recordings, and it holds its place today. The trumpet obbligato played by Arthur Lockwood poses a challenge which she meets nobly. Not far behind is "O had I Jubal's lyre." "With verdure clad" is notable for its easy grace, and for the rising scale passage so beautifully arched. A couple of high notes are a shade under pitch, but this is momentary.

The last side begins with a test she made for HMV in 1924, pruned down to the second stanza of Sanderson's song because of the condition of the only surviving copy. Recognizably the same voice sings in the final band, "I will walk with my love," recorded 50 years later! Three of the other songs are here released for the first time: the haunting "Synnove's song," the touching "O can ye sew cushions" (with an extraneous violin obbligato), and the Delius "Twilight fancies," which is very like Dora Labbette's well-known performance.

Consistency is one of Isobel Baillie's great virtues, but it imposes limitations. For which reason I would recommend listening to this program in sections.