

WAGNER'S PARSIFAL AND HOLLÄNDER

WAGNER: 100 Jahre Parsifal. Prelude, Act 1. Berlin Philharmonic; Wilhelm Furtwängler, conductor. He! Ho! Waldhüter ihr. Paul Knupfer, basso. Vom Lade kehrt der König heim. Ivar Andresen, basso; Gotthelf Pistor, tenor; Frieder Weissmann, conductor. Transformation music. Berlin Philharmonic; Hans Knappertsbusch, conductor. Nun acte wohl und lass mich seh'n. Andresen, basso; Weissmann, conductor. Zum letzten Liebesmahle. Bayreuth Festival Chorus and Orchestra (1927); Karl Muck, conductor. Des Weihgefässes göttlicher Gehalt. Theodor Scheidl, baritone; Durch Mitleid wissend. Bayreuth Festival Chorus and Orchestra; Muck. Hier! Hier war das Tosen. Flower Maidens; Max Lorenz, tenor; Berlin State Opera Orchestra; Siegfried Wagner, conductor. Komm Komm holder Knabe. Ingeborg Holmgren, Anny Helm, Minni Ruske-Leopold, Hilde Sinnek, Maria Nezadal, sopranos; Charlotte Müller, contralto; Bayreuth Festival Chorus and Orchestra; Muck, conductor. Lasst ab ihr fangt mich nicht. Max Lorenz, tenor; Genia Guszalewicz, mezzo-soprano; Berlin State Opera Chorus and Orchestra; S. Wagner, conductor. Ich sab das kind. Frida Leider, soprano; John Barbirolli, conductor. Amfortas! Die Wunde! Lauritz Melchior, tenor, Paul Breisach, conductor. Seit Ewigkeiten harrs ich deiner. Astrid Varnay, soprano, Hermann Weigert, conductor. Prelude, Act 3. Bayreuth Festival Orchestra (1927); S. Wagner, conductor. O Gnade Höchstes Heil! Ludwig Weber, basso, Issay Dobrowen, conductor. So ward es uns verhiessen. Alexander Kipnis, basso, Fritz Wolff, tenor; Bayreuth Festival Orchestra (1927); S. Wagner, conductor. Mein Vater! Hochgesegneter der Helden. Clarence Whitehill, baritone. Nur eine Waffe taugt. Fritz Vogelstrom, tenor. EMI Dacapo 1C 137-78 174/175, 2 discs.

What we have here is an abridged conglomerate performance, or if you will, a series of highlights in proper sequence. The recordings span a period of 38 years, from 1913 to 1951. At one time or another the singers were all associated with Bayreuth and identified with the characters they portray. The conductors include the three to whom Parsifal was entrusted down the years, plus Siegfried Wagner. The rest may be considered here as "guests." The quality of the recording naturally varies considerably, and the transfers are not the smoothest and best matched I have listened to recently. Occasionally one has to adjust.

After the classic 1938 Furtwängler prelude, the 1913 orchestra accompanying Knupfer comes as something of a shock, and unfortunately the excerpt is largely orchestral. From here we skip to the end of the first scene, where Gurneman decides to take Parsifal to the temple. The original Andresen-Pistor recording was on two sides; here they are separated by the intervening Transformation scene, all neatly spliced together. The Liebesmahle scene is virtually complete but omits the urging voice of Titurel and the response of Amfortas.

Amfortas's long lament (with an unnamed orchestra and conductor) leads into Durch Mitleid wissend. The recording ends after the communion as the chorus (supposedly) dies away. When the original Bayreuth-Muck recordings were issued they were hailed as a landmark; today they leave a good deal to be desired in balance and atmosphere. The 1927 engineers were apparently unable to catch the mystic pianissimi, let alone the final Perdondosi. But these are truly historic recordings.

Chief interest, after all, is in the singing. Four famous Gurnemanzes pass in review. Knupfer sang the part regularly at Bayreuth in the early years of the century, and he must have been impressive, though what we have here is no more than a sample. Andresen at Bayreuth from 1927 to 1936, had a high black voice of fine quality (a little strained at the top) and proper dignity. Ludwig Weber represents the more recent festivals. He too had a fine big voice, more extensive than Andresen's, I would say more noble. But hearing again the famous 1927 Good Friday Spell we realize that there was one Gurnemanz and his name was Kipnis.

As Parsifal we hear too little of Pistor and hardly enough of Lorenz to form a very strong impression. Wolff, singing with Kipnis, is good, and Vogelstrom in the final scene shows a more lyrical voice than most we have heard in the past. But of course it is Melchior, rousing himself after Kundry's kiss, who drives his point home. This is, it should be noted, the acoustic recording made for Parlophon in 1925, not the later Victor version conducted by Ormandy.

Schneidl was the Bayreuth Amfortas in the mid-twenties (he had sung Klingsor before the war). His was a smooth and pleasing voice, and he sings the first act lament with intelligence if not with great depth. Clarence Whitehill in his 1914 recording suggests pain and suffering in the tone of his voice. He was the great Amfortas of his day; singing the part at Bayreuth in 1908 and making his Metropolitan debut in it in 1909. Those of us who remember him find it hard to adjust to another Amfortas.

Guszalewicz gives us just enough of her Kundry to make us wish for more, but she is followed by Frida Leider, one of the great Kundry's, in her familiar recording of Ich sah das Kind. Her narrative is beautifully articulated. Post-war Bayreuth is represented by Astrid Varnay, in top form in Kundry's anguished confession.

This is, then, primarily an historical set with its strong and its weak points, issued to honor the centennial of Parsifal. It is hardly a full survey of the "Bayreuth tradition," for it contains little turn-of-the-century Wagner. But it has something of the later "Bayreuth sound," and it presents some of the finest singers

heard there.

WAGNER: Der fliegende Holländer. Ludwig Weber, bass (Daland); Hermann Uhde, baritone (The Dutchman); Astrid Varnay, soprano (Senta); Elisabeth Schartel, mezzo-soprano (Mary); Wolfgang Windgassen, tenor (Erik); Josef Traxal, tenor (Steersman); 1955 Bayreuth Festival Orchestra and Chorus; Hans Knappertsbusch, conductor. Discocorp 319, 3 discs.

At first glance this looks like a reissue of London XLLA-42, released in this country in 1957. But that performance, reportedly a composite of several in the 1955 Bayreuth Festival, was conducted by Keilberth, and this one is attributed to Knappertsbusch. The notes by Graham Bradshaw explain that this is indeed a different performance, dated 25 July, when Knappertsbusch did conduct and Rudolf Lustig's Erik was replaced by the superior Wolfgang Windgassen. Turning back to ARG for March 1957, I find myself critical of Keilberth, who "somehow never gets off the ground," but with good words for Uhde's Dutchman (with a "striking note of despair in his voice") and Traxel's "Pleasing, light-textured tenor" as the Steersman. Both Weber and Varnay I found showing signs of vocal wear. I do not have the London set by for present comparison, but what I said about Keilberth would certainly not apply to Knappertsbusch, who infuses vitality into the overture and keeps things moving inexorably to the end (remember this is a Dutchman without intermission). Weber's Daland impresses me more this time: I find a note of kindness in his tone to offset his avarice. As for Varnay, she still sounds tired and indefinite regarding pitch. Windgassen, one of the best Wagnerian tenors in memory, makes a person of the unhappy Erik, and Uhde remains, with Hans Hotter, one of the great post-war Dutchman. All in all this live performance comes through well, though there are occasional problems of balance, especially in the choral parts.

Philip L. Miller