

HEYWORTH'S KLEMPERER

OTTO KLEMPERER: His Life and Times, Volume 1, 1885-1933 by Peter Heyworth. 492 pp. including biographical glossary, Discography: Commercial Recordings by Otto Klemperer (part 1) by Michael M. Gray, bibliography, and Index by Frederick Smyth. Cambridge University Press.

Klemperer gave this writer some of the most vivid concert-hall experiences of his youth during the great man's regular visits to London in the 1950's. Vivid, but, even at that early and impressionable age, by no means always satisfying. Wonderful clarity and steadiness of pulse, majestic force in many a great climax was there; but why, I thought, such intransigent sleep-walking through the Mozart great G minor's finale? Or rather, as I asked my musical mentor, are you sure it should really go like that? Fascinating to hear the Ninth's Scherzo in slow motion with the eccentrically prominent horn part, but why the critical rapture? Thunderous depth of tone in the first-movement climaxes, but why the plodding, po-faced rhythms elsewhere in it and in many another movement of the cycle? Doubts from the very first, then, which by the mid-sixties had hardened into aversion and abstention from attendance at the concerts of the (by then) New Philharmonia Orchestra.

Such doubts never entered Peter Heyworth's mind. Klemperer was for him the all-conquering hero who put everyone else--without exception--in the shade. Reservations such as mine were met with the assurance, in "The Observer" of 17 November 1957, that "complaints that Klemperer's performances are pedestrian suggest a desire for benzedrine rather than music." It would not be true to say that Klemperer emerges without criticism from Volume 1 of this monumental biography. Indeed, Heyworth is properly anxious to present Klemperer as seen, so far as possible, through the varying responses of his contemporaries, and his own full assessment of the Klemperer approach must presumably await Volume 2--alas, another five or six years, so one is given to understand. But the author is convinced that Klemperer was not merely one of the most distinguished practitioners of his generation, but without the shadow of a doubt the one who represented the pinnacle of his art. Many of the book's virtues stem from this devotion; so too do its irritating flaws.

Let me suggest the exceptional virtues. No other conductor has been favored with so detailed an exposition of his "life and times," and Heyworth's researches, on a scale comparable with de la Grange's Mahler (a book which it resembles in many ways, not only in its as yet unfinished state), will surely never be superseded. In the period that it covers, terminating with Klemperer's departure from Nazi Germany, his life was one of Sturm und Drang, and the musical scene on which he left so many indelible marks is evoked with considerable skill and the marshalling of formidable documentation. To give some random examples of revelatory material, few will have realized until now quite how much Klemperer's work was affected by his manic-depressive syndrome which caused his frequent withdrawal to sanatoria, and which in all probability was the cause--in a manic phase--of his extraordinary elopement with

the young, but already married, Elizabeth Schumann. Still fewer will have known of his extensive tours in the Soviet Union between 1924 and 1929, when his mark upon the musical life of that country may well have been stronger than that of any other visitor from the West. How much, indeed, would one give to have heard some of his performances of these years: for example, the Leningrad Brahms Fourth in 1924 described by one overwhelmed observer as "an earthquake." But it is a merit of the book that ample critical quotations from journals, etc. enable (given some knowledge of the pre-Legge Klemperer) a reconstruction in the mind of something of the character of his earlier work in repertoire for which in his latter years he was regarded by some as pre-eminent. How different must have been his first Berlin Beethoven Ninth in 1925 from those which the writer heard: tempi, for some critics, overdriven, and undoubtedly quicker than usual, the whole with a "pulverizing" effect.

Exemplary, too, is Heyworth's guidance of the reader through Klemperer's successive moves culminating in his direction of the Kroll Opera, though here my enjoyment was tempered by some of the book's less attractive aspects, to which further reference must be made, and by some pretty tedious blow-by-blow detail about that opera house's later financial and political tribulations. Others, however, may find this as fascinating as the rest. Klemperer's later years, as with those of so many musical refugees from Nazi Germany, was a search for the post which would allow his talents their rightful expression, and one awaits with impatience Heyworth's completion of a turbulent career.

But it is to be hoped that the second volume will not attempt, as this one does, to enthrone the hero at the expense of some of his contemporaries. The second half of the narrative covers the Kroll years and those immediately preceding, when Klemperer was a candidate for the musical director of the Staatsoper. The successful applicant was, of course, Erich Kleiber, whose Berlin appointment in 1923 unleashed a storm of controversy in the press. Not content with recording this, Heyworth takes Klemperer's part in frequent denigration in these pages of the younger conductor, to whom it is clear Klemperer felt himself superior in talent and claim to the senior post. We read of the Berlin press attacks upon Kleiber's efforts in a context which leaves clear that inference; of Kleiber being of "lesser calibre"; of the allegedly poor reception accorded some of the Lindenoper's productions; of the Lindenoper's general "stagnation" and its "few" attempts to emulate the Kroll in producing new operas; of the failure of Kleiber's concerts with his orchestra; and finally of Kleiber's lightweight stature in pre-1933 Berlin by comparison with that of the eponymous hero.

The truth was rather different. Kleiber was indeed attacked by the press for his youth and alleged inexperience--but he was the orchestra's own immediate choice for he was without doubt the superior in technique, who enabled an opera house orchestra to give of its best in repertoire conditions. As one wind player put it, he could with perfect ease "beat 2/27 with one hand and 4/64 with the other"--while Klemperer on his own admission was incapable of conducting Le Sacre. This and his personal

magnetism had the orchestra and leading singers, foremost of them Frieda Leider, behind him from the start. And such qualities, together with his intimate grasp of every detail of the score and that "blazing sunshine" (Janáček's word's) in his readings, was inestimably valued by Berg, Bartok, Janáček, Milhaud, and others whose works he presented at the Lindenoper or in concert. The press, faction-ridden and prejudiced to a degree equalled only in Vienna--where the Berlin attacks upon Kleiber were regarded with incredulity--was at times intemperate and certainly did not appreciate, any more than did the public, the remarkably questing and eclectic choice of his concert repertoire. But the comment of Walter Schrenk, a respected critic several times quoted by Heyworth for his appreciation of Klemperer, may serve to put this in perspective. After Kleiber's triumphant Jenůfa in 1924, he wrote that "this dazzling performance was above all the work of one man, and it proved to us once again what a valuable possession we have in Erich Kleiber. In view of the ignorant and incompetent attacks to which he has been subjected it must be stressed once again that since the time of Gustav Mahler only a few German opera conductors have emerged with anything approaching Kleiber's creative power."

Point for point one could controvert Heyworth. Does it matter? In a volume concerned with the "life and times," yes: for one expects a level-headed assessment not only of the central figure but of his important contemporaries. To describe Klemperer's views of others is legitimate; implicitly to adopt them is not. So it is that the whole narrative slews into a somewhat partisan hero-oriented perspective. Did Furtwängler, idol of the Berlin public, always come out second-best in competing for critical favor, which is the impression conveyed here? Toscanini, it is true, emerges reasonably well, but care will have to be taken in Volume 2 about Klemperer's latterday estimate of him. "Did you ever feel his tempi were too fast?" asked Heyworth in one of the broadcast interviews of the early '70's with Klemperer that formed the basis of his earlier Conversations with Klemperer. "Yes, much too fast", obligingly replied the old man and vocalised a caricature of Toscanini's tempo for the trio of the Seventh Symphony--"It's an old song for Austrian pilgrims, an Ave Maria", he continued, intoning it at the true tempo--which turns out to be identical with Toscanini's 1936 tempo!

Heyworth also disappoints in his assessment of Klemperer's recordings of the period: a pity when the first part of Michael Gray's exemplary discography gives all the needed information. This, after all, can corroborate in some degree contemporary descriptions of his early approach. Faded as such recordings may be, one can nonetheless catch the remarkable ferocity and unrelenting drive of his Beethoven Eighth in 1926 surviving in a Concertgebouw tape of 1949 but regrettably absent in the Legge era. Here too is a straight-laced First Symphony of 1924 to give credence to those contemporary critics who objected to his anti-romantic tendencies. Yet when comment is made, for example about his 1928 recording of the Brahms First, a sweeping and tendentious conclusion is drawn from this strangely atypical performance, together with the altogether inaccurate observation that "in the far-ranging change of

approach to the classics that was to occur within the next twenty-five years Klemperer played a greater part than any other conductor with the possible exception of Toscanini." There really is no 'possible' about it: how could Klemperer have played any such part, when he recorded not a note commercially for seventeen of those twenty-five years, and when, a forgotten giant save amongst the cognoscenti, his work only became known on a par with that of Walter and Furtwängler in the 'fifties? In fact, the 'far-ranging change' had already begun years before with the peripatetic wanderings of Weingartner to nearly all the musical capitals of the world, accompanied by his extensive and combative writings and highly influential recordings. But then, Weingartner, Klemperer's senior in Hamburg earlier in his career, is mentioned but rarely in this book.

My final reservations, less serious, relate to miscellaneous shortcomings of layout and editing. For no good reason, footnotes of substance appear at the foot of each page, those considered to be of reference value only being hived off as endnotes. But many of the latter are equally intriguing, and to have to hold one's eye in three places at once is pointless; this should be dropped for Volume 2. Some of the page footnoting has been carelessly edited (pp.150, 314) and in a muddled and inaccurate one on p.169 Heyworth appears not to know that Haggin, not Alfred Wallenstein, wrote The Toscanini Musicians Knew: for shame! Significantly, of Nikisch's comment about Toscanini quoted by Wallenstein--"I have just come from Milan where I heard a performance of Siegfried [Heyworth misquotes it as Tristan, but Wallenstein's memory may have been at fault: works of reference show only Meistersinger at this time] conducted by a man named Toscanini that was the greatest performance of opera that I have ever heard. Remember this name, because you will hear much of it"--the more revealing first sentence is omitted. And while on footnotes, I just don't believe the Dutch Mahler Second timings of the 1920's on p.311: 87 minutes for Klemperer, 110 for Mengelberg. Klemperer's fine Vox recording takes 76 minutes, his diabolic, fearsome Concertgebouw performance with Ferrier just 72½.

Stylistically Heyworth's editor lets him down once or twice: Klemperer's future wife is "generous to a fault" twice within three lines (p.139) and I did not care to be told that Křenek "hit the jackpot" with Jonny spielt auf (p.245). By and large, however, the narrative reads well.

This is an important book which everyone interested in the period and in the formative years of a very distinguished conductor must read. But try to supplement this with other works covering the period from another perspective, such as John Russell's memoir of Erich Kleiber, Bertha Geissmar's recollections of Furtwängler and Walter's autobiography; otherwise you will be left with a distinct impression of one great man and some also-rans.

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