

A METROPOLITAN OPERA DISCOGRAPHY

Frederick P. Fellers, comp. The Metropolitan Opera on Record: A discography of the commercial recordings. Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1984. (Discographies, No. 9.) Pp. xix + 101. \$25.00.

Just what belongs in a Metropolitan Opera discography? A few years back, in anticipation of the company's recent centennial, I pondered possible approaches. Most expansively--and most usefully for the growing field of performance history--one might tabulate all recordings ever made by people who performed at the Met. A mammoth undertaking, that; if it didn't quite do for vocalists what Creighton's census did for fiddlers on disc, it would probably bulk as large, and cost even more to produce. One might reasonably suggest restricting the listings to recordings of music the singers actually sang at the Met, but in practice that would make an extremely frustrating book: nothing less than a vast collection of partial discographies! And, although not as bulky as the first alternative, it would be almost as complex to compile--after all, the research would have to be equally comprehensive, simply to establish the completeness of the listings of Met-role recordings.

Frederick Fellers' Metropolitan Opera discography has, sensibly, a more restricted aim: to list, in the words of the introduction, "all known commercial recordings made by the Metropolitan Opera Chorus and Orchestra, with and without soloists"--in effect, all recordings involving the permanent forces of the company, not merely its transient soloists. (He--I think wisely--doesn't tackle the copious literature of live-performance recordings, which entail different sorts of discographical problems.) Within this central area of Met recordings, Fellers has done useful and thorough work, and--as far as I can check data against my own collection and sources--done it meticulously and reliably. (Inevitably, a few typos have crept through, and the tenor Thomas Hayward is consistently misidentified as "Thomas Haywood," but most such things are obvious; more important, I've found no incorrect numbers other than the Preiser one cited below.)

As most collectors will realize, even thus limited, Fellers must cover a variety of material, offering surprisingly little consistency of pattern or repertory. In the second decade of the century, the Met chorus backed up famous soloists for Victor, and occasionally appeared on its own. The Met orchestra recorded for Columbia in 1918/19 under Artur Bodanzky and Giuseppe Bamboschek, and for Brunswick in 1925 under Gennaro Papi. With the arrival of electrical recording, the chorus returned to the Victor studios and took part in many well-known recordings by Ponselle, Martinelli, De Luca, Pinza, and others. Except for four sides (two of American opera with Tibbett and the orchestra for Victor, two from One Night of Love with Grace Moore and the chorus), the

years between 1930 and 1939 are barren; then followed more Victors, including the Martinelli Otello set.

In 1941, Columbia began to use the Met forces, later signing a formal contract, which after the war became an exclusive arrangement calling for complete operas--the first to be recorded in the United States--as well as further use in aria recitals and orchestral excerpts. But Columbia bailed out in the mid-Fifties; the recordings simply weren't earning back the advances paid to the Met, in part because many names the public expected to see in Met recordings (Albanese, Milanov, Peerce, Bjoerling, Warren, Merrill among them) were making competing sets for RCA, and in part because the costs of recording opera in New York compared unfavorably with what other companies were doing in Europe. Later, beginning in 1958, when RCA had a go at complete recordings with Met forces and starrier casts, even that proved uneconomic, and they eventually settled for a "Selected by the Metropolitan Opera" imprimatur on recordings made in Europe with Met-oriented casts.

In between, Rudolf Bing made a deal with the Book-of-the-Month Club, which set up the mail-order "Metropolitan Opera Record Club," selling abridged or "highlights" recordings using Met forces, but the soloists were mostly from the company's second string and so that, too, floundered. In 1972 DG had its brief and expensive fling with the company, publishing part of the springtime Bing Farewell gala performance and then taking the autumn's much-touted new production of Carmen under Leonard Bernstein into the studios; again, the costs were extravagantly higher than in Europe. (The latest chapters in the story postdate Fellers' book: the commercial publication of laserdiscs taken from live Met performances, and the little-noticed--by reviewers, anyway--soundtrack of Franco Zeffirelli's Traviata film, published by WEA.)

Fellers includes all these different sorts of recordings: complete operas, arias, choruses, orchestral excerpts, even the non-operatic material. The layout of the book is similar to that of the Cleveland and Cincinnati orchestral discographies that he compiled with Betty Meyers. The principal listing is a chronological one of recording sessions, with indexes by composer and performer. Under each date (sometimes with specific clock times) are listed the titles recorded, the artists taking part, the matrix numbers (as long as this is applicable; issued take numbers are underlined), and issue numbers (with, sometimes, dates of release and deletion in the catalogue).

This is straightforward enough, and presents no problems in principle. More problematic is the inclusion in the main listing of material that doesn't fall strictly under the compiler's own definition of his purpose. "Many other orchestral recordings made in New York

could have used Metropolitan Opera Orchestra musicians in part, but these are beyond the scope of this discography," he notes--and I agree; there's no way of ascertaining specific personnel on these sessions, and they don't belong in this discography. (Richard Mohr, who produced many of the RCA opera recordings of the Forties and Fifties, tells me that the "RCA Victor Orchestra" in those days might have comprised as much as fifty per cent Met men, but the rest were from outside, including many of those who played the "Stokowski and His Orchestra" sessions--Philharmonic or NBC Symphony personnel and freelancers.) Despite this exclusion, Fellers lists a group of recordings that carry no performers' names at all: the complete series of "World's Greatest Opera" recordings made by RCA Victor for the Publisher's Service Company in the early 1940s.

This is done on the strength of the recollection of Rose Bampton (who sang in some of the sets and whose late husband Wilfred Pelletier conducted some of them); according to Miss Bampton, they all took place in New York and used Met musicians. One problem with this theory is that RCA's recording books place four of the sessions in Philadelphia (doubtless using Philadelphia Orchestra players): see the detailed discography by Michael H. Gray, in this Journal, VII/1-2 (1975), 33-55. (As Gray's article shows, the earlier sessions for the "World's Greatest Music" orchestral series had also been split between New York and Philadelphia.) Recording ledgers are not unimpeachable documents, of course; mistranscriptions, omissions, wrong numbers and dates have been known to occur, though they can often be corrected on the basis of internal contradictions, provided the discographer casts his net wide enough. The books may err, but they don't lie; they are, after all, part of the records of a business operation, from which depend contractual and financial obligations.

In an effort at clarification, I contacted another singer who took part in these recordings, Eleanor Steber, who was kind enough to share her recollections: she, too, is certain that all the sessions took place in New York! (According to the recording books, recordings in which Mme. Bampton and Mme. Steber took part were held in Philadelphia.) Despite this, it still seems to me that if one decides, as Fellers has, to prefer the "soft" evidence of memory over the "hard" data of contemporary documents, some sort of plausible hypothesis is needed about why the documents might be wrong--and Fellers offers no hypothesis, nor is it easy to conceive of one. On the face of it, certainly, the supposition that on four different days, accidentally or purposefully, the recording producers listed the wrong city is improbable--more improbable, in fact, than that singers' memories should play tricks after forty years.

In addition, as Gray noted, many of the identifications of soloists in these recordings are merely guesses, based on the list of names given

by Charles O'Connell in The Other Side of the Record--but Fellers omits Gray's brackets around the unconfirmed names, without offering any new confirming evidence. (Mme. Steber is certain that her tenor partner was Armand Tokatyan, except in Pagliacci, when Arthur Carron sang Canio; and that Leonard Warren was the Tonio and the Germont père in Traviata.) But the real question is whether any of these recordings belong here at all; my strong feeling is that, at best, even the New York sessions in this series should be relegated to an appendix, separated from recordings bearing the Met's name; in fact, we don't really know whether the proportion of Met musicians at these sessions was any higher than at the later sessions Mohr supervised--and Fellers completely ignores the latter (quite correctly, as I have said).

A similar, if lesser, crux of ascription occurs at the beginning of the discography. At the Victor session of February 17, 1911, three titles were recorded with chorus: the Kermesse and Soldiers' Chorus from Faust and a Neapolitan song, "Luna nova," with Scotti; the recording ledger apparently lists the chorus as the "New York Grand Opera Chorus," but the Scotti disc is ascribed, on labels and in catalogues, to the Met forces. Later, at a Met Chorus session on April 4, 1913, "Gli aranci olezzano" from Cavalleria was assigned the same matrix number as a 1906 version of the same piece by the "New York Grand Opera Chorus," and published under the same catalogue number (64068) with the same ascription, while the other three titles were correctly ascribed to the Met chorus. On the basis of these facts, Fellers includes in his main listing all the earlier "New York Grand Opera Chorus" titles, going back to 1906. It's not impossible that some or all were really made by the Met Chorus--but I would suggest that the items for which there is no direct evidence, and which don't bear the Met name, should also be relegated to the appendix.

(Fellers does have an appendix, with three categories of material: (1) the 1945 Columbia Walküre Act III with the New York Philharmonic under Rodzinski, in which the Valkyries are referred to as "Vocal Ensemble of the Metropolitan Opera"; (2) the current Met fund-raising series of "Historic Broadcast Recordings"; and (3) the list, taken from a 1902 Leeds and Catlin catalogue discovered by Steven Smolian, of recordings by the Met Orchestra under Nathan [sic] Franko. The latter catalogue includes a testimonial by Lionel Mapleson, whose own recordings of Met performances are not included in the discography, evidently on the grounds that they were not commercial).

Then there are the "Metropolitan Opera Record Club" issues--not a question of inclusion, but of the level of information. Precise information about these recordings clearly proved hard to come by; not only are the session files missing, but also the master tapes, strayed somewhere in transit among the various parties involved. Consequently Fellers can specify recording dates and places only in cases where they

can be inferred from surviving correspondence or other external sources; here, too, he tends to rate personal recollection (from conductor Max Rudolf) over contemporary documentary evidence. (In the absence of sufficient firm dates, this group of recordings is listed alphabetically by composer rather than chronologically.)

More disappointing--and more frustrating to users--will be the lack of specificity about the content of these recordings, all of which were to a greater or lesser degree abridged. Granted that it's a cumbersome task, I'm sure that many collectors would want to know, for example, how much of the Count's music from Figaro or the three villains' music from Hoffmann Martial Singher actually recorded, or that the Chénier is a virtually complete recording with Richard Tucker in a role he didn't record commercially--and certainly that the Boris set represents the only commercial recording of Karol Rathaus's edition of the original Mussorgsky score (and that it is sung, not in Russian, but in John Gutman's broken-English translation). The files may be missing, but the records can be found and listened to (the Boris, among others, was issued by RCA for general sale).

In addition to original releases, Fellers' discography lists LP reissues--but inconsistently and incompletely, even with respect to those made by the original companies (only some of the Victrola series, for example). And other reissues, especially from Europe, are scantily and imperfectly covered (I noted many missing OASIs, Preisers, Pearls, and Rubinis; the Martinelli titles ascribed to Preiser LV-230 should be listed as LV-220). The Murray Hill "complete Caruso" is here, but not the Olympus. Under items 135 and 136, an Addison Foster 78 repressing is erroneously included among the LPs. The Metropolitan Opera Guild series of "Great Artists at the Met" (with order numbers in the series MET-101ff.) is also only partly represented (among more standard fare, MET-112, a Tucker recital, includes Lenski's aria from the Met Record Club series).

But of course accounting for LP reissues isn't the main purpose of such a discography, and it's a thankless, endless task; reviewers will always be able to come up with omitted numbers. In practice, it is a task best handled by the discographers of individual artists, who should also be in a better position to distinguish among alternate takes (Fellers reports what the company files say, but not the fact that, say, a number of the alternate Tibbett takes that were published in Europe have found their way onto Preiser LV-1314). What probably won't get covered that way are the recordings with no soloists--but, for better or worse, few of these have ever been reissued on LP, so the question hasn't yet really arisen. Users should remember that this aspect of the book is incomplete, and rely on other sources for information about LP availability. In most other respects, however, this is a useful addition to the operatic discography shelf, one that I've recently found

downright indispensable in compiling retrospective Met record anthologies.

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