TOWARD A REINER DISCOGRAPHY

by

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Nineteen Hundred and Eighty-eight marks the 100th anniversary of the birth of Fritz Reiner, who died in New York in 1963. Although he came late to recording and recorded less than many of his contemporaries, the documentation of his artistry is by no means insignificant, and his last recordings, with the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, have, with the passage of time, increasingly enhanced his reputation as one of the greatest conductors of the mid-20th century. In my work on an authoritative biography of Reiner, an essential part of its "infra-structure" has been as thorough as possible a discography of his recorded performances.

In that, I am immeasurably indebted to the pioneering work of Arthur J. Helmbrecht, Jr., whose Reiner discography was published in 1978 by the Fritz Reiner Society with several addenda.[1] Despite certain misgivings with his format and presentation, Helmbrecht provided a point of departure for my own work on a discography that takes as its model Michael Gray's exemplary coverage of Sir Thomas Beecham, though again with certain deviations.[2]

At the very outset, a discographer must make basic decisions on what to include and how to present his information. I suggest that those decisions be based on providing as much information as possible on the documentation of a musician's performance, in whatever form, with due attention to current availability or accessibility of that documentation. Here I am inclined to part company with Gray, whose Beecham discography generally excludes "underground" and other recordings not explicitly approved by the conductor. At least in the case of Reiner, the interests of scholars and collectors are best served by informing them of all available documentation of Reiner's performance in any form, wherever located for study. Although I appreciate the ethical and artistic considerations involved in the dissemination of unauthorized recordings, my obligation as discographer are a quite different matter. However, I do make clear the circumstances under which a given recording was made and, most important, whether or not Reiner himself approved its publication.

The documentation of Reiner's performance falls in these major categories:

- His strictly "commercial" recordings, made under contracts that explicitly gave him the right to approve or disapprove the publication of a recorded performance, after he

had auditioned it. This necessarily includes most, but not all, of the recordings he made for RCA, Columbia, and British Decca for distribution by them and their international affiliates.

- Commercial documentation of performances of which recording was not the explicit purpose, generally copied from radio or television broadcasts, either off the air or from tape recordings made for subsequent rebroadcast. In such cases, Reiner would have consented in advance only to the broadcasts, but not to their eventual distribution by such entrepreneurs as the late E. J. Smith, for fund-raising by the Chicago Symphony Orchestra or Metropolitan Opera, or by semi-private availability to the dues-paying members of the Fritz Reiner Society. Such distribution involved a public monetary transaction resulting in someone's actually owning a copy of the performance. This documentation originated in radio broadcasts, from concerts or studios, with various orchestras, or with members of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra. Generally, such releases avoid duplicating repertory available on strictly commercial recordings. (I specifically exclude material in private or semi-private collections, including record retailers, from which copies might be purchased as a private transaction.[3]

- The preservation, without publication, of performances in such archives as the Library of Congress, the New York Public Library, and, very important in the case of Reiner, in the Fritz Reiner Library at the Northwestern University Music Library; it also includes documentation in the archives of some orchestras and museums of broadcasting. Such archival materials, useful to researchers and students quite apart from collection for ownership, include broadcasts by the Pittsburgh and other symphony orchestras transcribed for overseas distribution through the Voice of America as well as V-discs for the Armed Forces. Such archives limit access to study purposes and explicitly preclude any kind of copying or publication.

- Finally, and very rare in Reiner's case, the publication or archival preservation of recordings made privately at actual performances strictly for private use and without his consent to distribution.

In my discography, I identify these criteria by indicating non-approved recordings with "[COMPOSER: Title]"; absence of such brackets indicates that Reiner approved the release. For restricted availability I use "[Archive or library]", the absence of which indicates "commercial" distribution. Where such symbols do not cover special circumstances, I make appropriate comment.

Moreover, I am expanding and correcting information on Helmbrecht's discography with data concerning locale of recording

and production personnel where available. The domestic and foreign proliferation of 78 rpm discs, LPs, two (and shortly three) types of tape, and, more recently, compact discs places a considerable burden on the discographer to inform the reader on how to locate a recording in question. First and foremost, a discography must set forth the catalog number(s) of the initial release of a recording, and then list as many secondary or subsequent releases as he can document with appropriate indication of geographic distribution.

Matrix numbers raise problems somewhat different from their treatment in Gray's Beecham discography and elsewhere. Although alternate "takes" in recording such improvisatory performances as jazz may justify the full listing of matrix numbers, especially with 78 rpm recordings, the introduction of tape recording in the early 1950s generally makes such listing impractical and in fact minimally relevant in the kind of symphonic recordings with which a Reiner discography is concerned. I know of no case in which alternate "takes" from a Reiner recording session are of artistic significance. However, a discographic listing should certainly indicate as precisely as possible whether a recording for Columbia Masterworks derived directly from a 78 rpm "take" or was dubbed from one at 33 1/3 rpm, as was Columbia's practice in anticipation of its development of the LP.

Moreover, the matrix numbers on RCA LP'S and, more recently, CDs are of varying importance, especially in view of RCA's propensity for issuing a given performance under a variety of catalog numbers, which are themselves often imprinted on the disc instead of the customary matrix numbers. Matrix identification may help clarify RCA's earlier practices as regards 45 rpm discs (a few from Reiner's early affiliation with that company), as well as the simultaneous taping of stereo and mono versions of some Chicago performances. Even more confusing is the identification of master sources for RCA's various open-reel ("staggered" and "in-line") tapes, 8-track cartridges, and cassettes, especially since recent cassettes are labeled "Digitally Remastered." Michael Gray's article in Issue 49 of The Absolute Sound goes a long way toward clarifying RCA's recording practice and matrix identification in the "shaded dog" era, but much work remains to be done in the company's archives.[4]

In overall format, my discography is chronological according to the date of the recording session or broadcast, but I supplement this with a summary index by composer/composition.

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With these ground rules in mind, let me review briefly the Reiner documentation to be covered by my discography, following a chronological sequence with appropriate mention of the type of material produced at each stage of Reiner's career.

Contrary to the hopes of some fans, it is quite impossible that Reiner made any recordings during his years at the Saxon Court (later State) Opera in Dresden between 1914 and 1921. Any recordings by Dresden singers at that time were made in Berlin studios,[5] and any orchestra accompaniment was by studio groups under deservedly anonymous staff conductors.

When Reiner joined the Cincinnati Symphony Orchestra in 1922, it had a contract with the Columbia Gramophone Company to record in New York any time it visited that city on tour; Eugene Ysaye had previously conducted it in several recordings during his tenure under this contract. Reiner, however, refused to conduct without extra payment and a projected visit to New York in 1924 was actually canceled for that reason.[6] There is, therefore, no documentation of Reiner with that orchestra; I have seen reports of Gennett promotional literature listing the Cincinnati orchestra as one of its "artists," but have found no evidence of any such recordings in Reiner's correspondence or other papers.

However, he did "conduct" for several player piano rolls of popular symphonies, probably abbreviated, on some of which he played one of the two piano parts. (The writer will welcome any information about these piano rolls, which were apparently offered for sale in 1925 and 1926.)[7]

During the 1931-32 season in the Academy of Music, Leopold Stokowski arranged for the Electrical Research Products Corporation, an affiliate of Western Electric, to make experimental recordings of performances by the Philadelphia Orchestra.[8] According to Mark Obert-Thorn, who assisted Ward Marston in preparing the LP publications of some Stokowski material, excerpts from three Reiner performances with the Philadalphia Orchestra, one of them Lohengrin, also exist in the files of the Bell laboratories in New Jersey.[9]

In 1936 and 1937, at the Royal Opera House in London's Covent Garden, EMI recorded some performances, hoping to release any portions that the singers and conductors might approve; these recordings are the source of "underground" LPs of performances conducted by Sir Thomas Beecham, Wilhelm Furtwängler, and Reiner. The latter's performances of Tristan und Isolde ("complete" as performed in 1936), Parsifal (1936 excerpts), and Der Fliegende Hollander (1937 excerpts) have found their way into the "underground" market; there is no trace of a 1936 BBC broadcast of Der Rosenkavalier, with Elizabeth Rethberg and Tiana Lemnitz. Fred Gaisberg, the EMI producer, sought the approval of Kirsten Flagstad, Lauritz Melchior, and Reiner to release Act II of Tristan und Isolde from the performance recordings. The conductor refused, citing specific mistakes by the orchestra, and Madame Flagstad is reported to have hurled the test pressings into a fjord.[10]

During the three fall seasons, 1936-38, that Reiner conducted

at the San Francisco Opera, one-hour excerpts from some performances were broadcast. Act II of Die Walkure, in what Reiner referred to as the "usual Metropolitan mutilation" and with its final bars cut off, has circulated in a variety of "underground" versions, thanks mainly to a cast that included Flagstad, Melchior, Lotte Lehmann, and Friedrich Schorr, the only occasion on which those two ladies sang in the same production. Broadcast excerpts from Lohengrin (1937) and Don Giovanni (1938) may exist in private collections.

Not until November, 1938 did Reiner conduct and approve recordings for which he was paid and which were issued for sale. And then only anonymously! With members of the New York Philharmonic-Symphony Orchestra in Carnegie Hall, he recorded six 78 rpm discs of music by Wagner and Debussy. These two albums were part of a series sold nationally through newspapers at "promotional" prices as low as $1.00 per record, then a great bargain, under the general rubric "The World's Greatest Music." The masters for these recordings are said still to exist at RCA.

Two years after Reiner became music director of the Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra in 1938, he and the orchestra signed contracts with Columbia Records, then newly acquired by CBS and aggressively building its roster of Masterworks artists. With this orchestra, Reiner produced a series of important recordings. In addition to standard repertory of Bach, Mozart, Beethoven, Brahms, Wagner, both Strausses, Debussy and Ravel, Reiner's recordings in Pittsburgh earned great distinction for a number of first recordings: the Bartok Concerto for Orchestra, Mahler's Lieder eines fahrendes Gesellen, Falla's El amor brujo, and the Sixth symphony of Shostakovich.

After he left the Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra in 1948, Reiner still "owed" Columbia several recording sessions, which produced the six Brandenburg Concertos with an ensemble of New York free-lancers and, with the Metropolitan Opera Orchestra, arias frm Don Giovanni and the final scene of Salome featuring Ljuba Welitch. The latter capitalized on their memorable joint debut in that opera at the Metropolitan Opera in January, 1949. None of Reiner's Columbia recordings is currently available, although many of them were at one time reissued on LP and cassette transfers of the original 78 and 33 1/3 rpm recordings.

From the late 1920s until the early 1950s, Reiner appeared extensively as guest conductor with orchestras whose programs were broadcast, including the Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra, New York Philharmonic-Symphony Orchestra, Boston Symphony, Cleveland Orchestra, NBC Symphony Orchestra, CBS Symphony Orchestra, and the Detroit Symphony Orchestra on the Ford Sunday Evening Hour. A number of transcriptions of these programs, some made for V-Disc distribution to the Armed Forces or the Voice of America overseas broadcasts, have been preserved by the orchestras in question or placed in such archives as the New York Public Library or Library of Congress; a few of these performances have

been issued by the Fritz Reiner Society to its dues-paying membership.

During Reiner's five seasons with the Metropolitan Opera, the Saturday matinee radio broadcasts included all of his repertory there except for his 1949 Parsifal, and there is a variety of transcriptions of these broadcasts in circulation in varying forms; the Metropolitan itself has issued a fund-raising LP album containing Salome with Welitch and Elektra with Astrid Varnay. The Museum of Broadcasting in New York now has all of Reiner's radio broadcasts in its archives as well as a portion of a December, 1952 theater telecast of Carmen.

In the fall of 1950, Reiner began to record with RCA-Victor, at first with the NBC, RCA-Victor, or Robin Hood Dell Symphony Orchestras and, beginning in 1954, with the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, which had engaged him as music director in 1953. His pre-Chicago recordings include his only complete opera recording, Carmen, with a cast drawn from the Metropolitan production; it still turns up as a reissue in this country or abroad. (During a disastrous effort to combat Columbia's introduction of the long-playing record, RCA issued a few early Reiner recordings on 45 rpm discs, as well as eventually on LP.)

Reiner's discographic legacy is most brilliantly represented by his Chicago recordings, for they combine first-rate orchestral playing, authoritative interpretation, and excellent reproduction achieved, in most instances, by producers Richard Mohr and John Pfeiffer, working with engineers Lewis Layton and Leslie Chase; all but a very few Chicago recordings were eventually issued in both mono and stereo, the earlier ones having been actually taped in both formats and the later issues mastered from one three-track tape. Under a reciprocal arrangement with European Decca, Reiner also made recordings, eight LP sides in all, with the Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra in 1956 and 1960. For RCA's Reader's Digest series he recorded the Brahms Fourth Symphony in London with the Royal Philharmonic in 1962, and, a few months before his death in November, 1963, he conducted a New York free-lance group in two Haydn symphonies. Most of these recordings have been in and out of print for that last twenty-five years, not only on LP, but also many on open-reel tape, 8-track cassette, and, more prolifically, on standard audio cassettes. In 1982 and 1983, RCA pressed in Germany half-speed LP re-masterings of several Chicago recordings, and has more recently embarked on reissuing many of them on compact discs; early compact discs from Japan are of inferior quality, having been made from RCA tapes licensed for other types of release.

Throughout Reiner's years in Chicago, the orchestra played, with sharply reduced personnel, a weekly series of telecasts over WGN-TV, of which Reiner conducted approximately fifty one-hour programs drawn from his concert repertory. A few of his early telecasts were preserved on kinescope film, and a few more, from his latest seasons in Chicago, were recorded on video tape.

Northwestern University transferred to video tape several kinescope films it received from Mrs Reiner, and, by exchange, also obtained copies of the video tapes from the Curtis Institute of Music; each archive now has eight one-hour television programs conducted by Reiner.

Although the Chicago trustees were reluctant to allow radio broadcasts of the concerts in Orchestra Hall for fear of reducing ticket sales, they did permit New York radio station WBAI to make tape transcriptions of the Thursday evening subscription concerts in the 1957-58 season for broadcast in New York only. A few years ago, the orchestra obtained from engineer Steven Temmer copies of many of these tapes, including a generous representation of Reiner's concerts;[11] a duplicate set is at Northwestern University. The Chicago Symphony Orchestra has published a two-LP set of selections from these WBAI tapes, of music that Reiner did not record commercially; it plans to honor the Reiner centennial with another fund-raising recording, possibly on compact disc. Some of this material had earlier found its way into private circulation and thence onto the Fritz Reiner Society membership tapes, which also include some material from the audio transmission of the WGN telecasts. An important performance, of Die Meistersinger during the reopening of the Vienna State Opera in November 1955, has had limited private circulation on tape; since this production was not broadcast in Austria, the original was probably made either by a member of the audience or by the company itself for the archives.

It is a matter of great regret that Reiner recorded but one complete opera -- Carmen for RCA in 1951 -- for he was, throughout his career, a master of music drama. Despite his deep involvement in Wagner in the theater, his "official" recorded legacy included only a very few "bleeding chunks," to borrow Tovey's phrase, of that composer's music; for documentation of Reiner as a conductor of Wagner's and other opera, one must rely almost entirely on unapproved and usually execrably reproduced performances, with forces far inferior to those of his approved recordings.

Reiner's was a vast repertory, embracing not only the traditional symphonic and operatic literature, but also an exhaustive commitment to the contemporary music of his generation. His close affiliation with the music of Bartók, a teacher and friend, is only sparsely documented on records, approved or not. The sketchy representation of his Stravinsky, Shostakovich, Prokofiev, Falla, Gershwin, Rodgers, Copland, and Hovhaness, much of it "underground," hardly does justice to the breadth and intensity of his dedication to the music of his time. In the basic German repertory of Bach, Haydn, Mozart, Beethoven and Brahms, Reiner fared much better, and his mastery of French music from Berlioz to Ravel is reasonably well documented.

Nevertheless, whatever the shortcomings of his representation on recordings, enough of Reiner has been recorded, especially

under favorable conditions with the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, to document his reputation as one of the master conductors of his time. With these records as a foundation, it is then possible, often against considerable audio obstacles, to discern in his unauthorized documentation something of the phrasing, rhythm and control of large forms, especially in opera, that were so much a part of his legendary mastery of orchestra and opera performances.

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1. Arthur J. Helmbrecht, Jr., Fritz Reiner -- The Comprehensive Discography of his Recordings; Chicago, The Fritz Reiner Society, 1978 et seq.

2. Michael H. Gray, Beecham - a Centenary Discography; New York, Holmes and Meier, 1979.

3. Helmbrecht's discography includes a number of items offered for sale by Music Masters in New York and Western Sound Archives in El Cerrito, CA, not included in my discography unless they have also been "published" or exist in public archives.

4. Michael Gray, "Recording Reiner - RCA and the First Stereo Years," The Absolute Sound, Issue 49, Fall 1987, page 45.

5. During a visit in 1984 to the archives of the Dresden State Opera, I received categorical information to this effect.

6. See Louis Thomas, A History of the Cincinnati Symphony Orchestra to 1931, p. 521.

7. Correspondence and a 1928 royalty statement at Northwestern University between Reiner and the Baldwin Piano Company indicate sessions in 1925 and 1926 at the Autopneumatic Action Company in New York.

8. Excerpts from Stokowski's performances were released in 1979 and 1980 by the Bell Laboratories on two LP discs.

9. Letters from Mark A. Obert-Thorn to the Fritz Reiner Society and myself.

10. This project is extensively covered by correspondence at Northwestern University. For Flagstad's reported reaction, see Ethan Morden, A Guide to Opera Recordings, New York and Oxford, 1987, page 9.

11. A few performances, not in the group supplied by Temmer, have found their way "underground," whence some have turned up on the membership bonuses of the Fritz Reiner Society.