

ALEXANDER VON ZEMPLINSKY CONDUCTS. BEETHOVEN: Fidelio: Overture. FLOTOW: Alessandro Stradella: Overture. MAILLART: Les Dragons de Villars: Overture. MOZART: Così fan tutte: Overture (a). Don Giovanni: Overture. Die Entführung aus dem Serail: Overture (a). ROSSINI: La gazza ladra: Overture. SMETANA: Vltava (b). WEINBERGER: Shvanda the Bagpiper: Polka (b). (a): Berlin State Opera Orchestra/Berlin Municipal Opera Orchestra; (b): Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra; Alexander von Zemlinsky, cond. Schwann Musica Mundi MM 4001

Zemlinsky the teacher, associate, and friend of Schoenberg is a significant if peripheral figure in this century's music. Zemlinsky the composer has been rediscovered in the last decade or so as his operas, quartets, and other works have been revived and recorded after long neglect. Zemlinsky the conductor has remained the most elusive and tantalizing. Some aria accompaniments for Electrola (Tosca, Trovatore, Lustige Weiber von Windsor) have turned up on Preiser, but they reveal little, while his few purely orchestra disks seem not to have circulated outside of Germany and have been out of print for half a century. But now, thanks to the growing interest in the man and his music, here they are.

Zemlinsky's first conducting post was as Kapellmeister (principal conductor under the Music Director) at the Carl-theater in his native Vienna, and beginning in 1904 he also conducted at the Volksoper; Mahler, at the Hofoper, accepted two of Zemlinsky's operas for production there, but seems not to have asked him to conduct them, or anything else. (It was during this period that Zemlinsky and Schoenberg founded the Vereinigung Schaffender Tonkünstler to advance the cause of new music.)

Appointed music director at Prague's German [opera] Theater in 1911, Zemlinsky conducted a wide and enterprising repertoire, including the stage premiere of Schoenberg's Erwartung in 1924. One of his performances greatly pleased Stravinsky: "I think that of all the conductors I have heard I would nominate Alexander von Zemlinsky as the one who achieved the most consistently high standards. I remember a Marriage of Figaro conducted by him in Prague as the most satisfying operatic experience of my life." ("On Conductors and Conducting," in Themes and Episodes, NY: Knopf, 1966, p.148).

In those days the German Theater could be a stepping stone to greater things: Mahler had conducted there in 1885-6, and Zemlinsky's successor was George Szell. But Zemlinsky stayed a long time, 16 years, and when he finally did move on in 1927, it was not to a more prestigious post but rather to become Kapellmeister under music director Otto Klemperer at the new, experimental Kroll Opera, in Berlin. The excitement of that enterprise, and its interest for Zemlinsky, may be inferred from his willingness to serve under a younger and far less experienced man.

Despite the respect and deference Zemlinsky enjoyed at the Kroll, he soon realized that the direction of his conducting career was no longer upward: "I lack that certain something that one must have...in order to get to the very top." (Letter to Alma Mahler, c. 1930, quoted in Peter Heyworth, Otto Klemperer: His Life and Times, Vol. 1, p. 250.) And in a city where Furtwängler, Kleiber, and Walter, as well as Klemperer, were based--and with Toscanini having just passed through with the New York Philharmonic on tour--Zemlinsky must have sensed very keenly who and what stood between him and "the very top." Doubtless this explains why, when the Kroll closed in 1931, he turned down an offer to become music director of the provincial opera house in Wiesbaden. Instead he now devoted himself to composition and teaching, first at the Berlin Hochschule für Musik, then after Hitler's rise, going back to Vienna, and finally, after the Anschluss, arriving in America, where he died in 1942.

Zemlinsky said he believed it was a lack of aggressiveness that was preventing him from advancing to the first rank of conductors. His recordings, made in Berlin from 1928 to 1930 for Deutsche Grammophon and Ultraphon, suggest otherwise. Despite an occasional original idea or attractive detail they aren't much to listen to. That he was no mere time-beater is evident in details such as the broad, powerful, atmospheric andante in the Don Giovanni overture, the nicely shaped rallentando at the recap in the rather solemn Gazza Ladra, the theatrical vitality of the Maillart overture. But occasional fine points such as these are usually vitiated by smudged articulation and poor ensemble--too often his various orchestras simply don't play together, even (in a few passages) the Berlin Philharmonic, which at the time was making brilliant Ultraphon recordings under Kleiber. It sounds to me as if Zemlinsky's technique may have been shaky, or perhaps he didn't take the work at hand seriously enough. His brief but disfiguring cut in The Moldau (just after the Vysehrad theme) serves neither the work nor the needs of 78 rpm recording; the remaining 30-40 seconds available on that side would have accommodated the few missing bars.

One may wonder then, why Stravinsky praised Zemlinsky's work so highly, or even remembered it 40 years later. I have no answer, but speculatively, I wonder whether the particulars of Zemlinsky's career--his being a composer, his untiring work in the cause of new music (the music, notably, of Schoenberg and his circle, which Stravinsky had only recently come to value), perhaps even his obscurity and lack of notable success as a conductor--might not have appealed to Stravinsky in retrospect. Indeed, from the rest of Stravinsky's article, it appears that if nothing else, Zemlinsky served as a useful stick with which to beat the likes of Furtwängler, Koussevitzky, Mengelberg, and other "geniuses" of the podium, whose work Stravinsky disparaged throughout his life.

The recorded sound is typical of the two companies' work at the time, with the ambience of a large, empty hall but nonetheless a two-dimensional quality compared with the more refined results that HMV/Electrola were beginning to achieve. The transfers are by Barton Wimble/CONDUCTART of New York and have the judicious noise filtering and the strong bass typical of his work; Schwann's LP mastering and pressing are fine.

Helmut Haack's long note is halved in the English and French translations; most of the biography is gone, and what remains is an appreciation of the records that is full of minute observations and rather grand claims which, I confess, these ears often can't substantiate. Matrix and catalog numbers are supplied, as are plausible recording dates which nonetheless go beyond the evidence usually available from these recording companies.

A worthy project, undoubtedly, and a useful contribution to our knowledge of the past, if only as a corrective. I doubt that many will want to listen to this record more than once, but specialist collectors and sound archives will be grateful to Schwann that it exists, and will want to add it to their collections.

-John W.N. Francis-