

Underground Reiner

Richard Strauss: *Salome*. Ljuba Welitsch, Kerstin Thorborg, Herbert Janssen, Frederick Jagel, Brian Sullivan, Fritz Reiner conducting. (Metropolitan Opera, March 12, 1949). Mozart: *Don Giovanni*, "Ah, del padre in periglio," "Fuggi, crudele, fuggi!" "Don Ottavio, son morta," "Or sai chi l'onore," "Calmatevi, idol mio," "Non mi dir, bell' idol mio." Ljuba Welitsch, Eugene Conley, Fritz Reiner conducting. (Metropolitan Opera, January 6, 1951). Verdi: *Aida*, "Dessa!...Ei si turba," "Alta cagion v' aduna," "Su! dal Nilo," "Ritorna vincitor," "La fatal pietra," "O terra addio." Ljuba Welitsch, Margaret Harshaw, Ramon Vinay, Norman Cordon, Emil Cooper conducting. (Metropolitan Opera, March 11, 1950). Melodram 27042, 2 CDs.

Richard Strauss: *Der Rosenkavalier*. Astrid Varnay, Risë Stevens, Nadine Conner, Endre Koreh, Fritz Reiner conducting. (Metropolitan Opera, February 28, 1953). Wagner: *Der fliegende Holländer*, Act II, "Jo-Ho-Hoe! Tritt ihr das Schiff." Astrid Varnay, Set Svanholm, Fritz Reiner, conducting. (Metropolitan Opera, December 30?, 1950). Melodram 41, 4 long-playing discs.

Verdi: *Messa da Requiem*. Leonie Rysanek, Regina Resnik, David Lloyd, Giorgio Tozzi, Chicago Symphony Chorus (Margaret Hillis, director), Chicago Symphony Orchestra (NOT Chicago Lyric Opera). Fritz Reiner conducting. (April 14, 1958). Melodram 38, 2 long-playing records.

Wagner: *Tristan und Isolde*, Act II. Kirsten Flagstad, Katherine Meisle, Lauritz Melchior, Herbert Janssen, Emmanuel List, Fritz Reiner conducting. (San Francisco Opera ?? 1937) Legato Classics LCD 145, one CD.

Wagner: *Die Walküre*, Act II. Kirsten Flagstad, Lotte Lehmann, Katherine Meisle, Lauritz Melchior, Friedrich School, Fritz Reiner conducting. (San Francisco Opera, November 13, 1936) Legato LCD 133, one CD.

Bartók (arr. Weiner): Two Rumanian Dances; Debussy (arr. Busser): Petite Suite; Ravel: *Le tombeau de Couperin*; Richard Strauss: *Til Eulenspiegels lustige Streiche*. NBC Symphony Orchestra (NOT Symphony of the Air), Fritz Reiner conducting. (January 19, 1952) Music and Arts Programs of America, CD-292, one CD.

All of these recently released recordings by Fritz Reiner originate from various radio broadcasts of performances he conducted over a period of 22 years. As with other conductors of his era, he not only conducted programs especially for radio broadcasts, but also performances at which the microphones might be termed "eavesdroppers." In Reiner's case, the preservation and commercial release of such "underground" recordings is especially valuable for documenting his importance as a conductor of opera which he rarely recorded commercially.

The most important of these six releases is Act II from *Die Walküre*, as performed at the San Francisco Opera on November 13, 1936 with one of the most distinguished casts ever assembled. That same year, NBC inaugurated a series of broadcasts from the War Memorial Opera House, usually of one-hour duration, but expanded here to an hour and a quarter. Even so, the original broadcast cut off the final bars of the Act, just as Wotan dismissed Hunding, "Geh' hin, Knecht!" The broadcast was introduced by Marcia Davenport, then well-known as a doyenne of music appreciation. Her literal reading of

the script at the end of the program, describing the fall of the curtain when, in fact, the Act had not ended, has always introduced a jarring comic note in some of the earlier “underground” records and tapes of this performance, an effect omitted here, although Legato manages to include her effusive introduction to the performance.

Kirsten Flagstad was in her prime, having made her Metropolitan debut a year and a half earlier and sung with Reiner the previous spring in her Covent Garden debut in *Tristan und Isolde*. A year before, she, Melchior, and Schorr had created a sensation in San Francisco in a complete *Nibelungen Ring*. In 1936, Lotte Lehmann replaced Elisabeth Rethberg as Sieglinde, rounding out a cast that never appeared together before or after. Flagstad was in magnificent voice in this performance, singing with effulgent authority and warm sensitivity to the drama. Despite the sonic limitations of this recording, it is easy to understand the acclaim she aroused 50 years ago.

Although Schorr was somewhat hoarse in the opening lines of his command to Brünnhilde, he soon confirmed his reputation as a great Wotan in dialogues with Fricka and his warrior daughter. His sharply pointed attention to the words and their meaning was beautifully conveyed musically and with sympathetically alert support from the pit. Both of these scenes suffer from what Reiner once referred to as “the usual Metropolitan mutilation.” (The *Ring* of a year earlier had been conducted by Arthur Bodanzky from the Metropolitan, and the 1936 performances retained his cuts.) Even more devastating to Wagner’s time-scale in this dramatic crux of the entire *Ring* is the abbreviation of the “Todesverkündigung” confrontation between Brünnhilde and Siegmund, in which the warrior maiden’s gradual realization of the power of human love could not be convincingly conveyed so cursorily. Here and in his scenes with Sieglinde, Melchior displayed a tenderness which few truly heroic Wagnerian tenors have been able to project so convincingly. As Sieglinde, Lehmann had little opportunity for the kind of erotic exaltation which she so effectively conveyed in her recording of Act I a year earlier in Vienna with Melchior, but her frantic apprehension was movingly sung. Katherine Meisle, an underrated American mezzo, filled out this distinguished cast.

This was Reiner’s most extended documentation of any portion from the *Nibelungen Ring*, a cycle which he had conducted frequently in his youth in Dresden, but never since; he conducted none of it during his five seasons at the Metropolitan Opera, although he was preparing *Götterdämmerung* when he died in 1963. Because of his renown as a symphonic conductor, many expected Reiner to conduct Wagner operas as if they were symphonic poems. But, as we learn from this and other off-the-air documentation of his Wagner in the theater, he conducted with a keen sense of coordinating the flow of both the vocal and instrumental lines. Reiner’s support of Schorr’s almost conversational monologues in this Act was on a par with his collaboration with Melchior in the Third Act of the 1936 *Tristan und Isolde* at Covent Garden. There, as elsewhere in his Wagner, Reiner respected his singers and united them with the orchestral texture in ways that balanced freedom within the overall texture.

Legato has seen fit to splice in, without acknowledgement, the final bars of this Act from another source. The acoustic ambience is quite different, although the Wotan may still be Schorr. The new Legato CD prefaces the Act with Davenport’s effusive introduction, but of necessity spares us her inept conclusion. Given its age, the recording is surprisingly effective, with a minimum of audience or stage noise and little fading as the singers moved about the stage. Legato’s CD transfer produces better sound, though somewhat bass-heavy, than this reviewer has heard from any other record or tape of this historic performance. The CD has 10 access points; the accompanying booklet concentrates on accounts of the principals’ careers, that for Reiner being

of dubious accuracy. There is no mention of Meisle, but full comment on Emmanuel List, whose contribution is minimal in this Act. This performance has always been one of the indispensable documents among historic Wagner recordings, and the new format enhances that standing.

However, the same cannot be said of Legato's CD release of Act II of *Tristan und Isolde* with Flagstad, Meisle, Melchior, and Ludwig Hoffman, also with the San Francisco Company. Although Reiner conducted *Tristan* there in both 1936 and 1937, there is no documentation of any excerpt from the War Memorial Opera House. The present recording is probably of a post-season performance in the Shrine Auditorium as the opening night of the company's first visit to Los Angeles in the fall of 1937. At best the sound is atrocious, fading to indistinguishable at times as the singers moved about the stage. The 1936 Covent Garden recording, issued at various times on the Golden Age of Opera and other "underground" labels, is a far better example of Reiner conducting a cast that included Flagstad and Melchior in the "complete" opera.

The Welitsch-Reiner *Salome* of March 12, 1949 is an important documentation of one of the greatest productions ever offered at the Metropolitan Opera. The present CDs derive from a Saturday matinee broadcast that followed by five weeks the sensational double debut of Ljuba Welitsch and Fritz Reiner at the 39th Street house. Welitsch combined a voice of penetrating timbre with a fiery temperament and musical understanding of the role that dovetailed with Reiner's conception. The result of this collaboration has been described as musical molten lava. Three years later, on January 19, 1952, Welitsch and Reiner again broadcast *Salome* on a Saturday matinee that the Metropolitan Opera issued in MET 9 with the 1952 performance of *Elektra*, as a fund-raising recording. The 1949 cast was weaker, most notably in the Jokanaan of Herbert Janssen toward the end of his career; Hans Hotter in 1952 was in his prime.

Melodram's CD version offers the best sound compared to other recordings, although somewhat heavy in the bass and lacking in treble, probably a result of filtering out scratches on the discs from which it was transcribed. Melodram has supplied ample access points on the CD. The meager booklet accompanying them includes a photo bearing Reiner's name that is actually the young Eugene Ormandy. May they both rest in peace! Nevertheless, these records are a very important historical operatic document.

Although Welitsch is best remembered for her *Salome*, the "Bulgarian Bombshell" as Reiner called her, had a distinctively wide repertory: at the Metropolitan she also sang *Aida*, *Donna Anna*, *Rosalinda*, *Tosca*, and *Musetta*. As examples of her versatility, Melodram fills out the present CDs with excerpts from *Don Giovanni* conducted by Reiner, and from *Aida* with Emil Cooper directing.

Der Rosenkavalier was the opera that Reiner conducted most frequently at the Metropolitan Opera, 17 performances in the three seasons that the Strauss opera was in the company's repertory. Touring performances included, *Der Rosenkavalier* and *Carmen* tied at 22 performances each during Reiner's five years with the company. For *Der Rosenkavalier*, Reiner had several Marschallins--Eleanor Steber most frequently, Helen Traubel (!) in a few performances, and Astrid Varnay early in 1953. Risé Stevens was the most frequent Octavian, and the Sophies included Erna Berger, Nadine Conner, and Hilde Gueden. Although Varnay's voice and style were somewhat on the heavy side for the Strauss-Hofmansthal heroine, she sang musically and, in the last third of the first Act, quite movingly. Stevens was at this time the Octavian of choice at the Metropolitan, bringing a certain impetuosity to the first Act and genuine ardor in the second. Endre Koreh was no better, or worse, than other basses who assumed the role of the Baron Ochs in the three seasons that Reiner conducted *Der Rosenkavalier*.

Reiner brought to *Der Rosenkavalier*, as he did to *Salome* and *Elektra*, a close musical and personal affinity to the operas of Richard Strauss. Although he did not conduct *Der Rosenkavalier* in Dresden, where he knew the composer well, he heard Strauss guest-conduct it, and knew the singers who had created the opera there three years before his arrival in Dresden. Reiner's performances of the opera displayed his customary mastery of combining the vocal lines and the orchestral texture. Many singers have recalled how "secure" Reiner made them feel. Without neglecting the robust humor and sentimentality of the opera, Reiner avoided the exaggerated "kitsch" to which it occasionally is subjected. And, of course, his mastery of the Viennese waltz comes through delectably.

The eighth side of this set of long-playing records is devoted to Senta's Ballad and the following duet with Erik from the second Act of *Der fliegende Holländer* sung by Varnay and Svanholm. Melodram gives a date of 1951 for this performance, but it probably was the Saturday matinee broadcast of December 30, 1950 with Hans Hotter in the title role, which has circulated in "underground" sources. There is no accompanying text, the single-fold booklet being devoted to an illustrated appreciation of Varnay in German and English.

Verdi's *Requiem* was not one of Fritz Reiner's strong pieces. He had little affinity for religious music generally, possibly because of or in spite of his youthful conversion to Roman Catholicism. As in his Vienna recording of two years later, this April 1958 performance, transcribed from a WBAI broadcast, misses the spiritual quality of the music. In certain respects this performance, with his own Chicago Symphony Orchestra and Margaret Hillis' Chorus (not the "Orchestra e Coro: Chicago Lyric Opera" as stated by Melodram), occasionally has better continuity than the commercial recording made in Vienna; the "Dies irae" hangs together better for instance. The orchestra, too, plays more smoothly, although the chorus, then less than a season old, is no match for the impact of the Vienna group. On the other hand, the Vienna soloists include Leontyne Price and Jussi Bjoerling. Perhaps the occasion for Melodram's release was to honor Leonie Rysanek, whose portrait adorns the front and back of the record jacket, and from whom there apparently exists no other recording of this work. Unfortunately, this was not one of her more impressive evenings. Much of the time she sounds restrained, lacking the open commitment that made her Sieglinde and Lady Macbeth so thrilling on records. The jacket notes include the *Requiem* text in Latin only. This release is only for devotees who must have every record that features Rysanek or Reiner.

Throughout his 41 year American career, Reiner frequently conducted for radio broadcasts. There are still old-timers who recall his mastery of Strauss waltzes on that most eccentric of concert music broadcasts, the Ford Sunday Evening Hour in the 1930s. More substantial were his later appearances with the CBS and NBC orchestras. He appeared regularly with the latter, especially during his years with the Metropolitan Opera from 1949 to 1953. Like other guest conductors filling in the gaps of Arturo Toscanini's schedule, he did not enjoy the Italian conductor's generous rehearsal schedule, nor the locale of Carnegie Hall. For the one-hour broadcast, Reiner had a full rehearsal and a final run-through before air time. Moreover, NBC admonished guest conductors to avoid any repertory that would require special rehearsal or involve performance fees for copyrighted contemporary music. Even so, Reiner managed to include in his NBC broadcasts such special repertory as music by Riegger, Hindemith, Revueltas, Bartók, and even the premiere of Aaron Copland's Clarinet Concerto with Benny Goodman as soloist.

The Music and Arts Programs of America CD offers the entire broadcast program of January 19, 1952, a typical though not particularly exceptional example of Reiner's work on the radio at this time. His Bartók "calling card" included the two Rumanian Dances in the orchestration of Leo Weiner (not Tibor Serly, as indicated). He recorded both the Debussy Suite and Ravel's *Le tombeau de Couperin* music two days later with the same orchestra for RCA Victor, and had previously recorded *Til Eulenspiegel* with the RCA Victor Symphony Orchestra, which included players from NBC. The gem of this present CD is the Ravel Suite, a superb reading of that composer's precise timbre and rhythmic subtlety. Possibly for legal reasons, the orchestra is labelled "The Symphony of the Air," a designation that did not appear until after Toscanini's retirement in 1954. Despite minor pitch problems, the CD transfer is acceptable for its vintage, if only because the RCA Victor recordings of the three principal works are no longer available.

Of these recordings from broadcasts, the two most important by far are the *Salome* and the *Walküre* Act II, not only for Fritz Reiner's conducting but also for their exceptional casting. In both releases, the sheer excitement generated by singers and conductor will overcome any sonic limitations. *Reviewed by Philip Hart*

New Reiner CDs

Beethoven: Piano Concerto No. 4 in G major, Op. 58 (Recorded Orchestra Hall April 22, 23, 1963); Piano Concerto No. 5 in E-flat major, Op. 73 (Recorded Orchestra Hall May 4, 12, 1961). Van Cliburn, Chicago Symphony Orchestra, Fritz Reiner conducting. RCA Victor 7943-2-RG, one CD.

Bizet: *Carmen*. Risë Stevens, Licia Albanese, Jan Peerce, Robert Merrill, Robert Shaw Chorale, RCA Victor Orchestra, Fritz Reiner conducting (Recorded Manhattan Center, New York, March, June 1951). RCA Victor 7981-2-RG, 3 CDs.

Brahms: Piano Concerto No. 2 in B-flat major, Op. 83; 5 Intermezzi. Van Cliburn; Chicago Symphony Orchestra, Fritz Reiner conducting (Recorded Orchestra Hall, May 9, 10, 12, 1961). RCA Victor 7942-2-RG, one CD.

Rachmaninoff: Piano Concerto No. 3 in D minor, Op. 30; Sonata No. 2 in B-flat minor, etc. Vladimir Horowitz; RCA Victor Orchestra, Fritz Reiner conducting (Recorded Carnegie Hall, New York, June 4, 1951). RCA Victor 7754-2-RG, one CD.

Verdi: *Messa da Requiem*. Leontyne Price, Rosalind Elias, Jussi Bjoerling, Giorgio Tozzi, Singverein der Gesellschaft der Musikfreunde Wien, Wiener Philharmoniker, Fritz Reiner conducting. (Recorded Sophiensaal, Vienna, May, June 1960). *Quattro pezzi sacri*. Yvonne Minton, Los Angeles Master Chorus (Roger Wagner, Chorus Master), Los Angeles Philharmonic Orchestra, Zubin Mehta conducting. London 421 608-2, 2 CDs.

As the flow of Fritz Reiner reissues continues, it has recently moved toward recordings in which the conductor was collaborator with other artists rather than the central figure on the podium. Three of these reissues bring us the conductor as the collaborator *par excellence* in major concertos, and in two of them he serves as a field marshall, as it were, in large-scale productions involving solo singers, chorus, and orchestra, one an opera and the other a Mass.