
Sound Recording Reviews

Wagner: *Parsifal* (excerpts).

Berlin State Opera Chorus and Orchestra (a) Bayreuth Festival Chorus and Orchestra (b), cond. Karl Muck. Opal 837/8 (LP; mono).

Prelude (a: December 11, 1927); Act 1—Transformation & Grail Scenes (b: July/August, 1927); Act 2—Flower Maidens' Scene (b: July/August, 1927); Act 3 (a: with G. Pistor, C. Bronsgeest, L. Hofmann; slightly abridged; October 10-11 and 13-14, 1928).

Karl Muck conducted *Parsifal* at every Bayreuth Festival from 1901 to 1930. His immediate predecessor was Franz Fischer, the Munich conductor who had alternated with Hermann Levi during the premiere season of 1882 under Wagner's own supervision. And Muck's retirement, soon after Cosima and Siegfried Wagner died, brought another changing of the guard; Wilhelm Furtwängler came to the Green Hill for the next festival, at which *Parsifal* was controversially assigned to Arturo Toscanini.

It is difficult if not impossible to tell how far Muck's interpretation of *Parsifal* reflected traditions originating with Wagner himself. Muck's act-by-act timings from 1901 mostly fall within the range defined in 1882 by Levi and Fischer, but Act 1 was decidedly slower—1:56, compared with Levi's 1:47 and Fischer's 1:50. Muck's timing is closer to that of Felix Mottl, who had been a musical assistant in 1882, and of Hans Knappertsbusch in his first and slowest Bayreuth *Parsifal*. But in later summers Muck speeded up to the more "normal" timings of 1:50 and 1:47, and the extensive recordings he made in 1927-8, now republished by Opal, show that he could be not only "sehr langsam" but also "bewegt," according to the score's requirements.

So perhaps it is best to put aside the question of authenticity and consider the performances on their merits. Muck's *Parsifal*, or what we have of it (less than 1/3 of the score), is the most complete realization of the music that I have heard. The luminous weightlessness of the Act 1 prelude, so slow that time seems suspended; the firm, confident stride of the knights in the Grail Scene; the sensuous flow of the flower maidens' song; the soft lyricism of the Good Friday music—each has been achieved to some degree by other conductors, but none have encompassed them all so fully and with such dramatic point. There is little of the opera's darker side; Kundry and Klingsor have been excised, as well as the *Amfortas/Titurel* exchange in Act 1. While grateful for what we have, which is generous for the period (no record company was to venture an unabridged Wagner opera until the 1950s), I still want more.

There are faults. The Bayreuth sides, recorded by English Columbia, omit the brief solo parts of *Gurnemanz*, *Parsifal*, and *Titurel* from the passages selected for recording; the orchestra plays on as if in a *Music Minus One* recording (and sometimes the temptation to sing along can be irresistible). Nor was Columbia able to capture the sound and atmosphere of a Festspielhaus *Parsifal*. The orchestra is not in the Mystic Abyss but on the stage, with the chorus ranked close behind it rather than disposed at varying distances and heights as the score requires. Moreover, the chorus sounds short-handed and its tone rather crude, especially in the tenors. But the solo flower maidens are fine, the singing and playing is generally accurate and full of spirit, and the recorded sound is full-toned with plenty of dynamic range. Standards were somewhat higher the next year in Berlin, where the chorus and orchestra were permanent bodies rather than pick-up groups as in Bayreuth, and where HMV's German branch Electrola had much experience with the orchestra and the hall, at the Singakademie, and so was able to make rather more polished recordings. Gotthelf Pistor (*Parsifal*) and Ludwig Hofmann (*Gurnemanz*) had sung their roles under Muck at Bayreuth two months earlier, and if neither is always with Muck's beat, both are fully in character and sing with fine legato. So does Cornelis Bronsgeest (*Amfortas*), a Dutch baritone who never sang at Bayreuth and whose tone and style is reminiscent of Herbert Janssen. Frida Leider, Muck's Bayreuth Kundry that year, was a member of the Berlin State Opera and might have been available—but there's no point bemoaning the missed opportunity. Speaking of missed opportunities, Muck was originally to have recorded the Good Friday scene in Bayreuth, but at the last minute he set Columbia's engineers an extraordinary condition: the music must not be split into three parts, but rather be fitted onto a single 78 rpm side. Of course this was impossible, as Muck knew from his previous Victor recording sessions. Finally, Siegfried Wagner stepped in and recorded both the scene and the Act 3 prelude. But why was Muck so unreasonable? Circumstances make it possible to guess. Less than four months after the last Columbia sessions in Bayreuth, Muck was making his first Electrola recordings in Berlin. Surely he and Electrola must already have discussed the Act 3 project, and I suspect—with no actual evidence—that Muck simply invented his absurd requirement to free himself from the earlier, lesser, but potentially troublesome commitment to Columbia. The Berlin Good Friday scene is broken into *four* parts.

Alan Sanders and Denis Hall have supplied very clean copies of the 78s from their collections, and Hall has done an excellent job with the transfers. The Bayreuth sides, in particular, have several tricky joins that require overlap segues and some adjustment of volume levels, and most are very successful; that in the Flower Maidens scene should perhaps have been redone, however. EMI's Keith Hardwick might have done still better, but his company has shown little interest in its Muck recordings; apart from an atrociously distorted dub of the Bayreuth material on Italian Columbia 33QCX 10464, issued two decades ago, it has offered only the odd side or two in various anthologies. The cassette reissues by In Sync/Conductart (see *ARSC Journal*, Vol. 16, No. 3 (1984), pp. 63-68) are listenable, though rather bass-heavy, but the side joins are spliced or loose rather than overlapped—and that is simply wrong. The abridged Act 3 has had one previous LP reissue, and a good one too, on Preiser LPV 100, but that disc did not include the prelude. Hall's work is nearly as smooth as Preiser's, and of course the prelude is here. Sanders' jacket notes are informative and interesting, though he seems not to have read Christopher Dymont and Jim Cartwright's "Karl Muck: A Discography" (*ARSC Journal*, Vol. 9, No. 1, (1977), pp. 69-74, with a note by Dymont, pp. 66-68). Discographic

documentation is accurate as far as it goes, but it lacks detail—needlessly so, since the folded jacket has plenty of white space. Those wanting fuller particulars should order the back issue of the *Journal* while it's still available.

All in all, then, this recording is a most important historic reissue, worthily if not quite perfectly done. Highly recommended. *Reviewed by John W. N. Francis*

“From Fife and Drum . . .” (Marine Band Recordings 1890-1988). No date. No issue number. Released in CD and Cassette formats by the United States Marine Band for public affairs use.

This recording (the CD format is reviewed here) was issued by the United States Marine Band (USMB) to celebrate the 190th anniversary of the USMB, “The President’s Own.” Selections range from the earliest cylinder recordings of the band to digital recordings made in 1988.

The first selection, “Washington Post,” which dates from the 1890s, is listed in the liner notes as a Columbia cylinder record conducted by John Phillip Sousa prior to October 1890 and “the earliest known recording of the USMB.” Yet James Smart’s 1970 discography of Sousa states that the earliest catalog supporting data “lead to the inevitable conclusion that [Sousa] conducted no recordings by the Marine Band or by the Sousa Band before 1906.” Sousa disdained studio recordings, coining the term “canned music” and testifying before congressional hearings in 1906 on copyrights of musical performances. The chronology of USMB directorships implies that this is Sousa conducting, but if this fact is not certain, it should be mentioned. Otherwise, the myth that Sousa conducted all the Sousa Band recordings will be perpetuated. The recording transfer of this and the other cylinder selection, as engineered by James R. Wilkins, does not have the quality of early discs transferred by Tom Owen. It would have been nice if Owen could have worked his “audio magic” on these selections.

The second selection, “The Thunderer,” also is taken from a Columbia cylinder. Sousa’s successor, Francesco Fanciulli, is listed as conductor even though he is never mentioned in Smart’s book, which states that recordings were conducted by either Arthur Pryor or Henry Higgins, who shared the assistant conductorship at that time. Perhaps the Marine Band has better sources than the Library of Congress where Smart did his research. The program notes should have clarified whether Fanciulli, as USMB Director, was actually the conductor of this selection.

Next comes “Creanonian Polka” with a cornet solo, taken from a 12 -inch Victor of 1909, along with two 12 -inch Victors from 1914. The final commercial recording is an early electrically recorded Victor from 1927.

The remaining music includes a radio broadcast from “Dream Hour” (a show for shut-ins), a rehearsal from 1969, and live recordings made as recently as 1988. Selections run from two-minute cylinders (actually almost 2 1/2 minutes) to the full nine minutes of Liszt’s *Hungarian Rhapsody No. 14*. Included as a historical document for this 1988 release is a brief message from President Ronald Reagan. The CD ends where it began, with “Washington Post,” this time recorded in July 1988.

The sound quality of this CD is excellent, revealing the evolution of recording techniques. The liner notes contain a fine history of the band and details of the recordings. Except for the misconception about Sousa conducting the first cylinder, they appear to be accurate.