

Sound Recording Reviews

Schoenberg: *Gurrelieder*. Paul Althouse, tenor (Waldemar); Jeanette Vreeland, soprano (Tove); Rose Bampton, mezzo-soprano (Waldtaube); Abrasha Robofsky, bass (Bauer); Robert Betts, tenor (Klaus-Narr); Benjamin de Loache, narrator (Sprecher); Princeton Glee Club, Fortnightly Club and Mendelssohn Club. Recorded live April 9, 1932. **Scriabin:** *Poem of Ecstasy*; *Prometheus: The Poem of Fire*. Recorded March 15, 1932. The Philadelphia Orchestra, Leopold Stokowski, conductor. Pearl CDS 9066 (2 CDs).

Arnold Schoenberg was twenty-five years old when he began his remarkable *Gurrelieder* in March, 1900. After completing Parts I and II, as well as portions of Part III, he put the work to rest in 1903. He returned to it in 1910 and completed the orchestration the following year. Schoenberg based the work on a German translation of *Songs of Gurre*, a cycle of poems by the 19th-century Dane Jens Peter Jacobsen. Set in 12th-century Denmark, *Gurrelieder* depicts King Waldemar's love of Tove, her murder at the hands of Queen Helwig, the cursing of God by Waldemar, and his subsequent punishment. Although Waldemar the Great's rule of Denmark is historical fact, Queen Helwig was actually the wife of Waldemar IV of the late 14th-century. One of the Waldemars did have an affair with a commoner named Tove, but which one is uncertain. The story, as learned and set by Jacobsen, merged circumstances surrounding the three historical characters with the Danish legend of the wild hunt. The result is an almost Wagnerian synthesis of history, mythology and the supernatural.

Gurrelieder shows Schoenberg in evolution as a composer, combining a lush post-Wagnerian harmonic language and orchestral palate with shades of atonality (a term he disliked) and *sprechstimme* that foreshadow his twelve-tone writing. Music history textbooks often cite *Pierrot Lunaire* (1912) as Schoenberg's first use of *sprechstimme*, but this technique was used for the part of the Narrator in *Gurrelieder* two years earlier (Schoenberg would change the diamond-shaped notation to conventional notes with an "x" through the stems for *Pierrot*, but they represent the same song-speech effect). Viewed as a work which follows Wagner's mature music dramas, spans Richard Strauss' *Salome* and *Elektra*, and leads Schoenberg to the brink of atonality, *Gurrelieder* lends substantial support to Schoenberg's own view that his twelve-tone compositional technique was "evolutionary" rather than "revolutionary".

Despite a stormy relationship with the composer (due primarily to Schoenberg's own belligerence and personal bitterness toward nearly everyone), Leopold Stokowski was an early and lifelong champion of Schoenberg's music. He began studying the *Gurrelieder* score in earnest late in 1929, after giving the American premier of

Schoenberg's Variations for Orchestra, Op. 31.¹ Arthur Judson, manager of the Philadelphia Orchestra, had secured, through proper channels, the legal rights to the first American performances of *Gurrelieder*. Nonetheless, Schoenberg felt that rights to these performances should have been given to him. The correspondence between Schoenberg and Stokowski shows intense acrimony on Schoenberg's part over this issue.¹ Near the end of his life, Schoenberg made harshly critical comments of Stokowski's *Gurrelieder* performances, comments which probably had little to do with the musical qualities of those concerts. It is a credit to Stokowski that he continued his advocacy of Schoenberg's music and gracious treatment of the composer despite Schoenberg's unwarranted abuse. In all honesty, these performances probably would have never taken place if left to a conductor of Schoenberg's minimal abilities.

By the late 1920s, Stokowski had built the Philadelphia Orchestra into one of the finest in the world, rivalled only by Toscanini's New York Philharmonic and Mengelberg's Concertgebouw. The virtuosity and rich tonal character of Stokowski's Philadelphia Orchestra were ideally suited to Schoenberg's score, and, on April 8, 1932 after many months of arduous preparation, Stokowski conducted the North American premier of *Gurrelieder*. Two additional Philadelphia performances followed, on April 9 and 11, with a final performance in New York's Metropolitan Opera House on April 20. Stokowski spared no effort to do justice to Schoenberg's massive score. He augmented the Philadelphia Orchestra to 122 players, and engaged three choruses, five soloists and a narrator. The combined forces numbered 532.¹ All three Philadelphia performances were given in Philadelphia's old Metropolitan Opera house, which offered a larger stage space than the Academy of Music.

The Great Depression caused a severe curtailing of classical recording activities in the United States, making the circumstances surrounding the recording of *Gurrelieder* all the more remarkable. RCA Victor was persuaded to record not one, but all three performances of this unknown work by an unpopular composer which would probably sell few copies in the best of economic times. The April 11 performance was recorded on twenty-seven conventional 78 rpm sides and issued as set M-127. The fourteen-disc set included one side with a brief "outline of themes" by Stokowski. The April 9 concert was recorded on thirteen 33 1/3 rpm long playing sides (Victor had introduced its LP a year earlier). The LP issue, LM-127, contained an extended thematic outline on the last side of the seven-disc set, and is one of the rarest of all Victor recordings.

Two microgroove LP reissues were produced by RCA Victor, first in 1954 on three discs as set LCT-6012, and again in 1977 on two records as AVM2-2017. These LP reissues were not of the April 9 LP recordings – they were transfers of the 78 rpm set recorded on April 11. RCA's 1977 reissue used the same transfers made for the 1954 set, reedited to fit four sides. The sound was extremely poor – muddy, with dim highs and compressed dynamics. The 1977 reissue also omitted the outline of themes originally included with the 78s.

The Pearl set reviewed here makes the April 9 LP recording, along with the extended outline of themes, available for the first time since the original issue, in an excellent transfer by Ward Marston. The sound quality is surprisingly good, far better than RCA's reissues of the 78 rpm recording. Collectors are well aware of the frustration in tracking down Victor LPs. They are usually found in one of two conditions – unplayed or unplayable. The plastic compound used for the pressings, tradenamed Vitrolac, was too soft to withstand the heavy tracking forces required by contemporary playback equipment. Even a few playings resulted in significant wear. It is remark-

able that Marston was able to find a copy in such fine condition. These transfers contain a surprising amount of high frequency information and inner detail, impressive dynamic contrasts, and generally low levels of surface noise.

The *Gurrelieder* performances are among the glories of Stokowski's tenure with the Philadelphia Orchestra. Few other *Gurrelieder* conductors have even approached the coherence and sweep of his performances. Stokowski clearly had his eye on the long Wagnerian line, and his climaxes are delivered with a clear sense of their relationship to the rest of the musical architecture. Cultivated by Stokowski, the Philadelphia Orchestra was capable of a wide tonal palate. In the orchestral prelude, the Philadelphians play with an impressionistic delicacy and transparency that is incandescent. Yet the tonal weight and impact of the heavily scored passages is shattering. Stokowski's command of orchestral sonority more effectively conveys the sense of atmosphere – so crucial to this work – than any other conductor and orchestra who have recorded it.

In comparing this performance with the April 11 concert, it is clear that the forces were still adjusting to the work's enormous complexities. There are a few moments of tenuous ensemble which were worked out by the third performance. On the other hand, narrator Benjamin de Loache makes his first entrance two measures early in the April 11 concert, but had no such problem on April 9. This is a treacherous spot in the score, since the tympani roll which precedes the narrator's entrance is played twice. It is easy to take a false cue from the orchestra (de Loache, in common with many *Gurrelieder* narrators, was an actor rather than a musician, so his error certainly warrants forgiveness).

Stokowski performances are often remarkable for their flexibility, and minor musical differences between these two concerts reveal the freshness and spontaneity he achieved in each of them. In hearing either of these performances, it is important to remember that they are live, unedited recordings, which makes them all the more remarkable. Nearly all commercial recordings of *Gurrelieder* are from live performances, since it is the most economical way to record this work. A closer look at the dates on most *Gurrelieder* recordings, however, reveals a choice of more than one performance when the issued recording was assembled. This isn't so with the Stokowski performances – each captures a complete, undoctored musical event.

Gurrelieder is work which can survive less than ideal vocal forces if it is in the hands of a conductor who understands the work, and an orchestra which can cope with its significant demands. Stokowski and his Philadelphians transcended the limitations of the choruses and soloists. None of the choirs involved were professional groups, and they are clearly strained by both the musical and technical demands of the score. Ideally, the roles of Waldemar and Tove should be cast with *Tristan und Isolde* voices, but this has rarely, if ever, been the case. Lauritz Melchior and Frida Leider, both in their prime when these performances took place, would have made a dream cast. Neither Paul Althouse nor Jeanette Vreeland are ideal in terms of tonal weight or security, yet compared to soloists generally available for *Gurrelieder* performances today, they are at least adequate. Rose Bampton, well before her ill-advised conversion to soprano, is a fine Wood Dove, vocally secure and dramatically perceptive.

In his excellent Stokowski biography, Oliver Daniel wrote that the recording of the April 8 performance has not survived. Ward Marston notes that eighteen 78 rpm sides do, in fact, exist. In his liner notes he mentions "serious performance difficulties" the first night. In a conversation with this reviewer, Marston noted a catastrophe in Waldemar's "So tanzen die Engel" where Stokowski and Althouse were at two com-

pletely different tempi. After the orchestra got lost, Stokowski was heard yelling a rehearsal number to pull it back together! According to Victor's log books, the final eight minutes of the April 8 concert weren't recorded at all.

Pearl credits Artur Rodzinski as being the pianist on the "Outline of Themes." This contradicts the research of Fagan and Daniel, both of whom credit Sylvan Levin as the pianist.³ When asked about this discrepancy Marston said that Rodzinski was listed in error, and that a correction should have been included with the CDs. Four other Stokowski/Philadelphia recordings featured a single side outline of themes, narrated by Stokowski. To set the record straight, Rodzinski is the pianist on Dvorak's *New World Symphony* and Franck's *Symphony in D Minor*, Victor sets M-1 and M-22, respectively. Stokowski himself is the pianist on Brahms' *Symphony No. 1* and Beethoven's *Symphony No. 7*, Victor sets M-15 and M-17. Sylvan Levin plays on both the 78 rpm and 33 1/3 rpm versions of *Gurrelieder*.

Levin plays impressively on the outline, undoubtedly from the difficult piano reduction by Alban Berg (a score really meant for study purposes – parts of it are simply unplayable by any human pianist). Stokowski offers a plot synopsis and comments on Schoenberg's music in his own, inimitable style. *Gurrelieder*, we are told, is "architecture in tone on a vast scale" ("vahst", says Stokowski). The story takes place in twelfth-century "Den-e-mark," with Stokowski adding an extra syllable. Stokowski offers high praise for Schoenberg's unique creativity, and notes stylistic elements in *Gurrelieder* which foreshadow Schoenberg's later works. Musicians will find nothing profound in Stokowski's talk, but every phrase offers a fascinating glimpse at his unique and eccentric personality.

Ward Marston mentioned that he has received some criticism for his decision to issue the April 9 concert rather than April 11, since the 78s offer superior sound. This writer emphatically disagrees with the criticism. For years, admirers of both Stokowski and *Gurrelieder* have been tantalized by the existence of the April 9 recording, in hopes that a copy might someday be found. Collectors should be grateful to Marston and Pearl for making this rare recording available for the first time since it was issued sixty-two years ago, in far better sound than anyone could have heard on the primitive 33 1/3 rpm phonographs of 1932. Nonetheless, there is clearly a market for both performances. Biddulph has begun a series of Stokowski/Philadelphia recordings, transferred by Marston, which complement the performances Pearl has issued thus far. Biddulph should waste no time in hiring Marston to transfer the April 11 concert for commercial release. Stokowski's 1949 Columbia recording of the *Song of the Wood-Dove* with Martha Lipton and the New York Philharmonic would make an ideal coupling.

The Scriabin works on the present CD, recorded March 15, 1932, are also reissued for the first time. The impressionistic character of Scriabin's orchestrations provide an ideal vehicle for Stokowski's exploration of orchestral color, and make a fine coupling for *Gurrelieder*. In their original form, these were poor recordings. Between 1931 and 1934 Victor rarely made recordings with the complete Philadelphia Orchestra in the Academy of Music. In order to cut expenses, Stokowski would bring a substantially reduced Philadelphia Orchestra to Camden, New Jersey for recording sessions. The records which resulted are extremely dry and coarse in sonic character, revealing little of Stokowski's rich orchestral sonority.

To compensate for the dry acoustics and small orchestra, Ward Marston added a discreet amount of artificial reverberation to these recordings (he mentions this in his notes). Most purists will shudder at the thought, but comparing the original 78s to

Marston's transfers vindicates his decision. The tasteful addition of reverb (a very small amount) simply makes the Philadelphians sound more like their full complement in a real concert hall. Without the originals for comparison, one would not suspect that anything had been done. The labels on the original 78s credit the Curtis Institute Chorus and pianist Sylvan Levin for their performances in *Prometheus: The Poem of Fire*, though Pearl does not mention them. Suffice to say, this set is a mandatory purchase for all Stokowski collectors. *Reviewed by Gary A. Galo*

Endnotes:

1. Daniel O. *Stokowski – A Counterpoint of View* including the discography of Stokowski's Recorded Repertoire by Edward Johnson. New York: Dodd, Mead & Company, 1982.
2. Fagan T. "Pre-LP Recordings of RCA at 33 1/3rpm", Parts 1, 2 and 3 in the *ARSC Journal*, 1981;13(1):20-42., 1982;14(3):41-61., 1983;15(1):25-68.
3. Daniel and Fagan.

Mengelberg and the Concertgebouw Orchestra – The Complete Columbia Recordings, Volumes I and II. Recorded 1926 – 1931. Pearl CDS 9018 and CDS 9070 (2 CDs each).

Willem Mengelberg's recorded legacy was poorly served by the major record labels during the last two decades of the long playing record. Fortunately, the Compact Disc has given his recordings, and those of many of his contemporaries, a new lease on life. Three years ago, Pearl began issuing a number of Mengelberg's recordings with the Philharmonic-Symphony Orchestra of New York (i.e., the New York Philharmonic), in fine transfers by Mark Obert-Thorne. The first installment (CD-9474) featured short works recorded for Victor between 1928 and 1930, including excellent performances of Beethoven's *Egmont* Overture and the "Forest Murmurs" from Wagner's *Siegfried*. This was followed by a three CD set celebrating the 150th anniversary of the New York Philharmonic (CDS-9922).² That collection featured seven Mengelberg items, including 1925 Victor electrics of Wagner's *Flying Dutchman Overture* and Schelling's *Victory Ball Overture*, plus an unpublished 1924 acoustic Victor of his own *Preludium on the Dutch National Anthem*. His five published Brunswick sides, from 1926 and 1927 were also featured, and include Wagner's "Ride of the Walkyries" from *Die Walküre*, two Strauss waltzes and Tchaikovsky's *March Slave*.

In December of 1928, Mengelberg and the New York Philharmonic made an unsurpassed recording of Richard Strauss' *Ein Heldenleben*. In this writer's opinion, it is the finest performance of this work on record (his 1941 Telefunken recording with the Concertgebouw Orchestra is pale by comparison). RCA reissued this recording in 1992 as part of a two-CD collection entitled *Legendary Strauss Recordings* (60929-2).³ Still waiting to be reissued are complete New York Philharmonic recordings of Beethoven's First and Third Symphonies, both Victor electrics from the late 1920s. Mengelberg also cut twenty-one acoustical⁴ sides with the New York Philharmonic for Victor, including Beethoven's *Coriolan* Overture and the first movement of the Fifth Symphony, a superb performance of Weber's *Oberon* Overture, Liszt's *Les Preludes*, and two abridged movements from Tchaikovsky's *Pathetique*. Ward Marston is currently preparing all of the Mengelberg/New York acoustics for Biddulph. Hopefully, the two electrical Beethoven symphonies will not be far behind.

With the release of the sets reviewed here, Pearl has made available all of the recordings Mengelberg made for Columbia with his own Concertgebouw Orchestra of