

J.B. Steane: The Grand Tradition; Seventy Years of Singing on Record.
728 pp. illus. New York: Scribner, 1974. \$25.

Let me begin by emphasizing as strongly as I can that I consider this book a landmark in the growing literature of recorded music and a monument to the incredible industry, perseverance, concentration and penetration of the author. Some of us old-timers may have listened to as many recordings as has Mr. Steane, but which of us has taken the exhaustive notes that must have been digested and integrated into the making of such a study? In the nature of things, each and every one of us will disagree with some of Steane's conclusions--it is a token of his success that one so often feels the urge to argue with him--but I doubt that anyone could question the consistency of his judgements. They are not arrived at casually. His verdicts, favorable or otherwise, are always weighed in the balance; his manner is always gentlemanly. His work, therefore, will be of lasting value not only to collectors, but to all who are interested in the art of singing--to teachers, students, and intelligent listeners.

The temptation in reviewing a book nowadays is to rewrite it in one's own manner. It is only too easy in doing so to overlook the author's stated purpose. Steane's project has been to learn by comparative listening all that recordings can teach him of the standards and methods of singing at the turn of the century, to trace the developments in the years that followed and to compare the older singers with those of the present day. Was there ever really a "golden age"? Steane is limited, of course, by the number and quality of existing records, the circumstances under which they were made, the fact that some famous singers did not record at all and some who did were not "phonogenic" or did not record the right repertory. And vast as is the territory he covers, there are still important records that have not been available to him. No one lifetime is long enough to hear them all.

My personal reaction is conditioned by three considerations: this is a British book, a personal book, and the work of a younger man. Inevitably, the emphasis is on artists well known in England, or on those whose records have been readily available there. I will leave to others to list all the important Americans who have been completely missed or treated as also-rans. Every reader in this country will make up his own catalog. But I must note some confusion in the chapters on our opera companies--the Metropolitan and Chicago operas are the only ones that really figure. Oldsters from the latter city will not be pleased at the idea of singers being "promoted" to New York. Anyone who lived in Chicago in the great days of Garden, Raisa, Muzio, Muratore, Vanni-Marcoux, and the rest will hold up his end in an argument about the qualities of the two companies. These two chapters are run together in a rather casual way, so that the demarcation between the two companies is not clear. Of course, there was some interchange over the years; Chaliapin, for one, was a guest in both houses. The chronology is often vague, to say the least, as is the concept of

Chaliapin, Ruffo, de Luca, Bori, Galli-Curci, Gigli, Schipa, Lauri-Volpi, Muzio, Lehmann, and Kipnis all singing together frequently at the Metropolitan--well, hardly!

Since the book is based on one man's listening, the point of view is inevitably personal. Individual taste is inescapable. Just why does one voice appeal strongly to some of us and not at all to others? We can criticize the singer's use of the voice, and matters of style are fair game for the amateur as for the professional critic, but who can account for the individual quality that identifies a voice? "There are some extraordinary people", Steane finds, "who say they cannot listen to Supervia--she rattles." And he goes on to give his own analysis and defense of the famous vibrato. Now I must confess that to my ears the Supervia voice is a definitely unbeautiful one, and I find many of her records anything but pleasing. (This is surely not unrelated to the fact that I was present at her New York debut in a Town Hall recital, and I found her temperament excessive). But obviously Steane and I hear different things in Supervia's singing. Perhaps the most controversial voice of all is that of Maria Callas; to some of us it is basically beautiful but flawed, while others find it outright distressing. Steane's appraisal is well-balanced and appreciative. Inevitably he has his favorites. To him Pinza's voice was the richest among the basses (I cannot forget Mardones and Kipnis). Souza has "one of the most beautiful voices on record" (with all due respect for the artist I would never have thought that). On the other hand, Steane misses "a sensuous quality of tone" in Schumann-Heink, nor does he hear the beauty (for all the admitted flaws) that to me is irresistible in the voice of Gerhardt. With Gigli it is a matter of style. Who can deny the natural beauty of the voice? But does that cover all his sins against the composers whose music he sang? I concede that his popularity justifies the four-and-a-half pages devoted to him; and I am happy to add that the Gigli style in Mozart and old Italian arias is no more acceptable to Steane than it is to me.

His tolerance of Supervia vibrato is as personal as his reaction to the quality of her voice. In general, he is critical of unsteadiness, and he finds it in voices where it has never bothered me. After a perceptive tribute to Gadski (of which more later), he notes among her faults "a quick vibrato [that] will flutter unevenly every now and then so that one does not have the feeling of security that Flagstad could give." (And here he makes a significant point: "Because of the vibrato, it becomes particularly important that Gadski's records should not be played above the correct pitch.") Neither Lorengar's vibrato nor Merriman's is disturbing to him as they are to me, and of Sills he notes simply that her voice becomes "slightly tremulous under pressure." He criticizes various singers for aspirating runs, yet he does not find that fault in Fischer-Dieskau, who has been guilty of it, especially in some of his Bach recordings.

Steane and I are not concerned in the same way with matters of text. Arias sung in "the wrong language" bother him little, if

at all. Indeed, there are discussions in the book where translation is not so much as mentioned. Sutherland's diction is to him a minor flaw, not a fundamental weakness (and he is not bothered as I often am by the quality of her lower voice). Like most critics he is willing to overlook the sloppiness of much of Lotte Lehmann's delivery, nor does he seem aware of the Russianisms that creep into the generally beautiful German diction of Kipnis.

What is the "Grand Tradition"? Should it not rather be in the plural? In Steane's sense it covers the various schools. But the traditions of Italian opera simply will not do in German; those of French and Russian are quite separate things. That singers sing as they do because of their origins and basic languages is a widely held conviction. But the lines are not too distinct. For well over a century American singers have excelled in operas of all schools. So have the English, the Australians and the New Zealanders. Italians, on the other hand, flourish most successfully in their own language. Tebaldi, for one, has seldom ventured from her home territory. A few have crossed over into German--Amato used to sing *Amfortas* and *Kurwenal* at the Metropolitan, though, regrettably, he left us no recorded samples. Valletti proved himself a fine interpreter of French and German song. But most Italians come to grief in French, though they seem happily unaware of this--to be specific, think of Corelli's *Roméo* and *Werther*. Caruso, as in most other respects, was an exception. His French would never have passed for Parisian, yet who can dismiss his records from *Faust*, *Carmen*, *Le Cid*, *Manon* and *La Juive*? The Russians, too, have difficulty with French; it surprises me that Steane can accept Chaliapin as Gounod's *Mephistopheles*. Germans are, on the whole, more versatile, especially the women. One thinks immediately of Gadski, Rethberg, Destinn (all in the royal line of *Aïdas*) excelling in operas of various schools. The approach may not be that of a native, yet the singing is authentic. Many French artists--Journet, Dalmores, more recently Lubin and Crespin--have sung successfully in German and Italian operas, and of course the Scandinavians are international in their scope.

Steane is fully aware of the shortcomings of early recordings and the allowances that must be made for them. Only by such extensive listening as he has done could he have attempted to fill out the picture. The basic difference between his view and my own is due, I think, to a difference in ages. He must judge many of the singers solely on the basis of recordings, yet they were very much with us in my formative years. I heard most who came to the Met and I spent countless evenings in Aeolian, Town and Carnegie Halls. As we all know, there are some singers in every generation who record magnificently but whose physical presence is an important part of their performance. I think especially of Elisabeth Schumann, whose every New York recital I heard over a number of years. The best of her records present her exactly as she was, but I was one of a group who used to sit in the front of the hall so as to miss nothing of her facial expression or the twinkle of her eye. Steane did hear Schumann in her later days, and he seems to have responded very much as I did. Of course, as already stated,

Steane's project is based on recordings. Still, no one who "was there" can forget the purely physical aspect.

Eva Gauthier used to insist that when she was recording (in the late teens) it was not possible to make a dishonest record. The horn might not catch everything, but it could not fake. Then, recording rarely flattered. If a performer made a mistake there was nothing for it but to start over. It follows, of course, that, generally speaking, a singer whose acoustic recordings are beautiful must actually have been even better in the flesh. With the electrical process amplification became possible, and this could lend a false impression. A voice the size of Bidu Sayão's could be made to match the amplitude of Rosa Ponselle's. With the arrival of tape in the studios, as we all know only too well, it became possible to patch performances. While this fits in with the modern fetish of technical perfection, it does not make for true documentation. W.J. Henderson frequently stated that there was never a perfect singer. Though some of us would rather take them as they are, we are no longer given a choice. We can only conclude that, if Lilli Lehmann, approaching sixty, could come through the primitive recording as impressively as she does, she must have been a very great singer indeed--perhaps the greatest within recorded memory. However, I base this verdict on a handful of inadequate recordings. With contemporary singers we still have the original for comparison, and, with contemporary recording techniques, I am afraid the comparison is necessary.

Some readers will deplore the absence of record numbers and sources. What good, they will ask, does it do to discuss recordings one has no chance of hearing? It is quite obvious that to have given such information in the text would have increased the already formidable volume to unmanageable size (as it is, a legitimate complaint may be lodged against the publisher for using such heavy paper). But I need hardly remind ARSC members that what cannot be acquired on LP's or from the various dealers' lists we all receive in the mail may be found in one of the archival collections. Still, it would be useful at all times to know specifically what recording Steane is discussing--there are countless examples of an artist's making several versions of the same aria. He speaks admiringly of Farrar's Ancor un passo but fails to identify the take. She recorded the scene three times, in 1907 (just eight days after the Metropolitan premiere of Madama Butterfly), again in 1909 and once more in 1916. A comparison of the three performances is a rather sad study in vocal coarsening and deterioration. In the four lines allotted to Clarence Whitehill (the great Wotan and Hans Sachs at the Metropolitan before Schorr, and by all odds the greatest Amfortas and Golaud in my experience) reference is made to the not too satisfactory Wotan's farewell (in English) in HMV's 1922 Ring series; there are two earlier German versions that do him far better justice. As a longtime dissenter from the "unanimity of critics" on the delights of Boronat's Qui la voce it gives me pleasure to find Steane stating my feelings exactly. Is bel canto a thing of broken phrases, portamentos and sobs? But can it be Steane does

not know that she made two recordings of this aria? I had long been familiar with the ten-inch piano-accompanied 1904 performance when I acquired the British Institute reissue of the twelve-inch orchestral recording of 1908, which is quite another story. Here not only the voice is beautiful, but the style is also quite dignified and restrained.

Another example is Destinn's O patria mia. Steane discusses the Columbia version of 1912; he finds the final note "empty of resonance and ever-so-slightly flat." While I cannot in all conscious hear it in quite that way, I have compared it with the Victor 1914 record, in which that last note has always seemed to me one of the most perfect and exquisite sounds on records. Well, it is a shade more perfect than the Columbia, but rather interestingly, it lasts only ten seconds while the Columbia holds for fifteen. Curiously, too, Destinn alters the word sequence in the Columbia but not in the Victor. Also, the tempo on Columbia is more deliberate and the aria is cut. Speaking of Destinn, Steane mentions her "early decline"--but did she really decline? Having heard her after her return to the Metropolitan (to be exact, Christmas Day 1920), I remember a beautiful warm voice and a very fat body. Was the rumor true that Gatti-Casazza laid down the law to her that she must take it off or else...? This could account for the termination of at least her American career.

In the case of Gadski it seems to me Steane fails to come up with the right answers. It was, we agree, a radiantly beautiful voice, and I have always found its quality exciting. She held her place securely at the Metropolitan against a number of formidable rivals from 1900 until the wartime banishment of Wagner in 1917. Biographers of both Nordica and Fremstad have blamed Gadski for the termination of their careers in the house, and it may well be she was not above intrigue. On the other hand, no one has denied the extraordinary quality of her voice or her competence as an actress. She learned her art from Lilli Lehmann, and there were those who called her a carbon copy. Contemporary accounts leave no question that Fremstad had the greater intellect and imagination, and that she was, indeed, one of history's great singing actresses. But there were flaws in Fremstad's voice which she never altogether overcame in the transition from contralto to soprano. Of course, Fremstad supporters (and before them the Nordica faction) made fun of Gadski for the ways in which she failed to match their idols. This happens in all generations. I have been told, too, that Gadski was one hundred per cent predictable, that she never varied a gesture, a motion or an accent; but I take leave to question this. Compare the variant recordings of several of her arias. Could anything be more different than her four published takes of Ho-jo-yo-ho!? Steane quotes Henderson as denying Gadski "the creative imagination of an interpreter." Yet after Gadski's death Henderson recalled her return to New York in the late twenties with what amounted to her own company. "But the truth is", he wrote, "that her Isolde was better in the autumn of her voice than when she first sang it on February 15, 1907, for the first time on any stage... She had the misfortune to come to New York .

at a time when great singers were numerous and therefore she had to wait till most of them were gone before her merits acquired prominence...". Having a vivid memory of her three Brünnhildes and her Isolde in those last seasons (she was born in 1872, and her records were made years before I heard her) I can deny that, as Steane conjectures, it was her appearance that defeated her. She was a fine figure and bore herself with impressive dignity.

It is essential to know in what period of a singer's career a recording was made--and this is a point on which the makers of LP reissues have let us down badly. Occasionally Steane fails to make this clear, though in all justice he is generally informative. But such a singer as Leo Slezak, for whom he has limited esteem, may be said to have had three or more careers--the early days in Vienna; the period after study with Jean de Reszke, to which the American recordings belong; and his final days when he recorded mostly lieder, though he was appearing in films and light opera. Whether the examples Steane discusses (which is to say the examples that were available to him) are always the best will furnish collectors with years of conversation and argument.

To one of my generation the discussions of lieder singers are the most controversial in the book. On one point we must all agree. There have been stylistic changes in the last generation or two. And surely one's reaction to the present day artists must be conditioned by one's earliest impressions. The great lieder singers of the twenties were headed by Gerhardt and Culp. There were, as always, opera singers who were also justly admired recitalists, such as Hemepl (retired from the Met before I heard her), Dux, Rethberg and Onegin (though she was perhaps rather too much the showman). In the thirties came Schumann and Lotte Lehmann, Kipnis, Schlusnus and Ginster--the list is by no means exhaustive. I did not hear Janssen in recital and Rehkemper I heard only in the Munich Opera in 1932. Somehow Steane overlooks the lieder recordings of Bender, especially the incomparable Loewe ballades. All these singers represent the lieder tradition in which I grew up.

Steane is willing to praise Gerhardt only grudgingly. No one can deny the shortcomings in her recordings, but I think this is a prime case where chronology is important. The 1908 records made with Nikisch (whose sponsoring of her early career was an accolade such as few young singers have enjoyed) show a much higher, lighter and clearer voice than the more familiar later discs. Reviewing her first recital in America (10 January 1912) Richard Aldrich said: "Her voice is a soprano, not in itself of the highest type of beauty, yet at its best sympathetic, amply endowed with power and controlled on the whole, with skill and with a keen appreciation of varieties of color and expressive nuance...". Within the next decade, before she made her Vocalion records, the voice had darkened, though she was still described as a soprano. On the HMV label she became a mezzo. We know that the breath support had become a problem, a fact perhaps not unrelated to her expanding bulk. There is improvement to be noted at the time when she made the Wolf

Society records in 1931, and even more, though the voice itself had diminished, in the limited edition of 1939. A sentence or two from a 1926 review by Samuel Langford sums up what was finest in Gerhardt's singing: "It is always song, and never just declamation. It keeps in all a sort of Greek beauty." The verdict of Henderson, written the same year, was: "She exposes the insides of songs by means of a combination of singing and elocutionary effects. This method is highly popular in Germany. When Miss Gerhardt just sings, she does it very well, indeed. When she ejaculates--well, she just ejaculates." (Is this perhaps a foretaste of the "new" lieder singing?) Records provide ample evidence to support both critics. But Steane has a word for the Gerhardt style, and of others in her generation--it is "generalized interpretation".

He has less to say about Julia Culp, whom, unfortunately, I never heard in person, though her voice is to me one of the loveliest of all. Of Schlusnus: "Fine as his song recordings are, they do not leave one thinking about the song, they do not point towards specific musical and literary meaning, and only to a limited extent do they establish a personal contact or create a vivid impression of the singer's own personality...". Can it be that my hearing of these records is so colored by memories of Schlusnus in recital that I get much more from them? Though I know Hüsck only by records I find it hard to understand how Steane can say of his Winterreise: "...little more than a pleasant seriousness can be heard coming from the gramophone." He is more impressed by Janssen (whom he likens to Souzay) but most surprisingly of all, the best he can call Rehkemper is a "thoughtful" singer. If ever a recorded voice could "establish a personal contact" it is that of this great artist.

In sum, Steane belongs to the generation brought up on Fischer-Dieskau and Schwarzkopf. And they are different. In order to make my own position clear I must again give a little personal history. I believe I was one of Fischer-Dieskau's first American admirers, having heard his voice in Fritz Lehmann's Saint Matthew Passion recording, sent me for review in 1950. Five years later I heard him in Edinburgh in a Beethoven recital with Gerald Moore. The impact on me was enough to send me back to the studios for a few vocal lessons. He was criticized at the time for the disproportionate dynamic contrasts in his singing, but his musicianship and his penetration were generally admired. For many years I reviewed most of his records, and of those not released in this country I tried to acquire at least all the lieder. One can believe he had taken some of the early criticism to heart, for this tendency to over contrast was modified (though on occasion he can still relapse into his old habits); his penetration became more and more a studied thing. I found a personal reaction setting in. After a time I came to realize that this was not a voice of many colors, that Fischer-Dieskau never, like some of the older singers, set a mood by tone quality--perhaps the overdone contrasts are a compensation for a lack of real intensity. And inevitably, with the passing years, the voice has lost some of its bloom.

Increasingly, I have felt that he was so busy extracting the meaning from every word and inflection that it is a relief for me to return to the straight singing of a Gerhardt, a Culp or a Hüscher. One is grateful, of course, for the seemingly endless repertory he continues to make available. But no singer commands the variety its many facets demand. For example, in the great Schubert marathon there are many songs for which another voice would be more appropriate, many in which the only interest is that they are Schubert songs, and others which he may well be reading at sight. There are dangers in too facile musicianship. "Has he ever sung anything," wonders Steane, "without shedding some new light on it?" I will leave the question open.

In the case of Schwarzkopf's recordings chronology is most important. To go back again to first impressions, it was, I believe, in 1948 that her Schaffe können sicher weiden first reached me as an importation. It remains beyond question one of her loveliest records, but the voice is hardly recognizable as the same which one hears in her later releases. The tone is meltingly pure and limpid, the line firm, steady and even. In reviews I wrote during the fifties I find myself referring to her covered tone and "confidential style". Sometimes it is perilously close to crooning. Like Fischer-Dieskau she is more and more concerned with exploring every syllable. Steane concedes that not everyone is as convinced as he, but it is obvious that he rarely finds her at fault. That he finds her much more appealing than the radiant Della Casa in the Strauss Letze Lieder is, to be sure, a matter of taste. He does not, however, mention the fact that there are two Schwarzkopf recordings, the 1955 performance with Ackerman, showing the singer in fresher voice, and the 1956 version with Szell. We must assume, however, that it is the latter recording which is being considered, since he speaks of transposition. And, after some admiring comment about Maria Ivogün's little record of folksongs he concludes: "...but charming as they are they are somewhat pale once one knows Schwarzkopf's performance of them." To my own ears Ivogün's warm and enveloping tone is something beyond the capacities of her illustrious pupil.

There are, needless to say, other distinguished lieder singers today, many of whom legitimately may be labelled, in Steane's words, as "school of Fischer-Dieskau". Certainly the intellectual approach is very much in style nowadays. If not all the best singers work as hard at it as he, it must be admitted that none of them has enjoyed comparable popular success or critical acclaim. The song recital has fallen upon hard times. To be a specialist in lieder without a reputation in opera is very nearly impossible. The truth is, whatever I may have said above, that Fischer-Dieskau and Schwarzkopf have been all but unique in their ability to sell out the hall. More than any other singers of our time they have been responsible for keeping the song recital alive.

The informal style of Steane's book is both its strength and its weakness. Most important is the fact that it makes for readability; one looks up a singer, then proceeds on through the

following pages. It is a hard book to put down. If the sequence of things gets a little confusing at times one can always refer to the excellent index. What conclusions does the author draw? How does the so-called "golden age" compare with the present? Though Steane has praise for many contemporaries and he finds progress in many respects, his heart, he confesses at the very end, really belongs to the older singers.

Inevitably there are occasional slips--textual, factual, typographical--and at least a couple of mislabeled pictures. Rather than submit a list of those I have found (which would seem like carping) I will leave it to my readers to discover them for themselves. I would rather dispatch my findings to the author in hopes of further editions.

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