

"L'EXQUISE" MAGGIE TEYTE: Nuits d'été, Op. 7—Le spectre de la rose; Absence (Berlioz) (Orch; Leslie Heward); Poème de l'amour et de la mer, Op. 19 (Chausson) (Orch; Leighton Lucas); Shéhérazade (Ravel) (Royal Opera House Orch; Hugo Rignold); L'invitation au voyage; Phidylé (Duparc) (Orch; Heward); Pelléas et Mélisande—Voici ce qu'il écrit; ...Tu ne sais pourquoi (Debussy); Après un rêve; Clair de lune; Le secret; Ici-bas!; Dans les ruines d'une abbaye; L'absent; Nell; Les roses d'Ispahan; Soir (Fauré); Chanson d'Estelle (Godard); Chanson triste; Extase (Duparc); Le temps des lilas; Les papillons; Le colibri (Chausson); Trois Chansons de Bilitis; Fêtes galantes, I, II; Ballade des femmes de Paris; Green (Debussy); Deux Epigrammes (Ravel); La rosée sainte (Stravinsky); Si mes vers avaient des ailes; L'heure exquise; Offrande; En sourdine (Hahn); Heures d'été (Rhené-Baton); Vieille chanson de chasse (arr. Manning); Vieille chanson (Webber); Clair de lune (Szulc); Élégie (Massenet); King Arthur—Fairest isle of isles excelling (Purcell); Now sleeps the crimson petal (Quilter); O thank me not (Franz); The Bayley beareth the bell away; Lullaby (Warlock); Sir John in Love—Greensleeves (Vaughan Williams); Comin' thro' the Rye; Oft in the stilly night (Trad.); Land of heart's desire (Kennedy-Fraser); Still as the night (with John McCormack, tenor) (Goetze); Monsieur Beaucaire—Philomel; I do not know (with chorus); ...Lightly, lightly; What are the names (with Marion Green, baritone) (Messenger); By Appointment—White roses (Russell); Mozart—Être adoré; L'adieu (Hahn); Because (D'Hardelot). Dame Maggie Teyte, soprano; Gerald Moore and Alfred Cortot, piano. EMI RLS 716, 4 discs. (Imported in the U. S. by Peters International, 619 West 54th Street, New York, N. Y. 10019)

"L'Exquise" Maggie Teyte

Dame Maggie Teyte died on 27 May, aged 88; fortunately she herself had collaborated in assembling this impressive program which now must serve as her memorial. At first glance one might think it her entire EMI output, but of course it is not. Any Teyte fan is likely to miss a favorite or two. On the list of contents some fifteen titles are noted as previously unpublished; apparently COLH 138 and the special pressings issued by the British Institute of Recorded Sound do not count, and one of the Ravel songs was included in the Gramophone Shop's second Teyte album. The title of the collection is a quote from Jean de Reszke. The handsome brochure gives complete information, recording dates, catalog and matrix numbers.

Miss Teyte's career was unique. She went to Paris very young for study with de Reszke, whom she credited as her only teacher. According to Richard Bebb's introductory notes, she made her debut in March 1906 in a series of Mozart concerts with Lilli Lehmann, Edouard de Reszke and Mario Ancona, conducted by Reynaldo Hahn. This led to appearances at Monte Carlo, playing Zerlina to Maurice Renaud's Don Giovanni. The next step was the Opéra-Comique in Paris. In the absence of Mary Garden, who had gone to America, she was recruited to sing Mélisande, and for the occasion she was sent to coach with Debussy. She also made concert appearances with the composer at the piano. It was her misfortune

in the opera that her repertoire was largely conventional and easily matched by other sopranos; she seemed always to find that someone else had a monopoly on her best roles. Her American debut was as Cherubino in Philadelphia, 4 November 1911. With the Chicago and Boston companies she was not given the opportunity to sing Mélisande because of Mary Garden; she appeared mostly in the standard operas. In one famous production, however, she sang the title role in Massenet's Cendrillon to Garden's Prince Charming. One can imagine the temperature in the theater that night! After the first world war she returned to England and settled down to occasional operetta and opera performances.

My own memory goes back to the time when the name of Maggie Teyte meant a short list of records and a comely portrait in the old Columbia catalog (I was not familiar with the Edison). The most important song she recorded for Columbia was Hahn's L'heure exquise; the rest of the list was decidedly lightweight. Was this the artist's choice, or did the company select?

But one day in the mid-thirties The Gramophone Shop imported a couple of English Decca discs, Après un rêve, Si mes vers avaient des ailes and her incomparable Périchole number. I knew Joe Brogan, the proprietor of the shop, well enough to enthuse with him and to be told of his interest in bringing Teyte to this country. They had known each other, as I remember it, in the Jean de Reszke studio. She did come over, but all attempts to interest a manager failed. Who would believe that Maggie Teyte was still alive? I had the privilege of hearing a private recital she gave in the MacDowell Club, but she was singing over a cold and had to rely on artistry and charm rather than voice. When she came again I was in the Pacific and so did not hear the famous Telephone Hour broadcast which Brogan had been able to arrange, and which turned the tide. On my return, however, I heard nearly as many recitals as she gave in Town Hall, and one performance as Mélisande at the City Opera. A new star had arrived, though Miss Teyte was nearing sixty. Back home in England she spent much time in the recording studios. (One set of early French opera airs made in this country for RCA Victor should certainly be revived.) As her singing career came to its natural close she kept herself busy teaching. In 1958 she was created a Dame Commander of the Order of the British Empire.

The two Berlioz songs and the two by Duparc on the first side, all with orchestra under Leslie Heward, as well as the piano-accompanied selections from Pelléas, were made in 1940, especially for the Gramophone Shop. The Berlioz were a real novelty in those days, and the recording set a standard. Absence, in particular, made a deep impression, and it still seems to me one of the very best Teyte records, although the first high F-sharp is a shade below pitch and the tempo is a bit fast. More recently we have had numerous recordings of Nuits d'été, and I have come to know Le spectre de la rose at its proper tempo. At first this meant some adjustment on my part, and even today I find something charming and really quite appropriate in the lilt of the Teyte performance. Indeed, this is the morning after a ball, and Teyte conveys the memory of the dance.

There are more obvious signs of hurry in the abridged Chausson and in the Ravel. Such were the unavoidable sacrifices of the 78rpm era, when to get a longish song onto one side it was necessary either to step up the tempo or to cut.

The two Duparc songs presented no such problem. L'invitation au voyage, indeed, is quite leisurely. As for Phidylé, it may be amusing to recall that, according to Claire Croiza, Duparc took exception to a woman singing this song. Needless to say, this has not prevented performances by many eminent female singers. But I have always regretted that I did not ask Dame Maggie, on an occasion when I might have done so, what authority she had for raising the final phrase. To me this definitely weakens the song, and I have never heard another singer do it.

The Pelléas excerpts are curious, for they give us precious little of her famous Mélisande. Geneviève's reading of the letter is delivered with careful emphasis, and it gives Teyte a chance to display her rich chest tones; still one misses the real mezzo-contralto timbre, most memorable in the Croiza recording. The duet which brings the lovers' avowal is even stranger; a tour de force, certainly, but hardly a souvenir of the opera.

Dame Maggie numbered the best French composers among her friends. Her association with Debussy is well remembered in the songs she recorded with Cortot. But inevitably a question arises when a singer who has worked closely with a composer performs his works long after his death. Just how much of the original tradition stays with her, and how much change may numerous repetitions have wrought? I hasten to add that in the case of Debussy the fact that her interpretations have long been accepted as gospel seems by no means unmerited.

In the case of Fauré, however, I must raise some objections. Here in general Dame Maggie's approach is dangerously free. Fauré, as some of his contemporary interpreters have told us, at least in his later years was almost metronomic in his own performances, and he insisted above all that his songs retain their musical shape. There is room for some freedom in his earlier mélodies, but one must be more subtle if it is to sound right—as can be demonstrated by contrasting Povla Frijsh's Nell with Teyte's. Clair de lune must proceed in its detached unhampered course, without the kind of polishing Moore gives the piano part or the careful singing we get from Teyte. And never is such a ritard permissible at the end.

L'absent, previously unpublished, caused Dame Maggie in later years to wonder why she had never approved its release. It is the first of Fauré's rare dramatic songs and very rarely performed. In the text by Victor Hugo someone arriving at a near-deserted castle asks why everything is in disarray, and where the master has gone. Teyte saves her big effect for the end, and anyone who understands the word cerceuil (coffin) must feel the impact of her powerful chest voice. But the song has been more searchingly sung (by Pierre Mollet in the withdrawn Westminster set

of the complete mélodies, to mention one) with a clearer sense of dialogue.

Most disappointing of the Fauré songs is the early Dans les ruines d'une abbaye, of which she seems to miss the point entirely. (But this is a different take from the long familiar published record, which is even slower and bumpier.) On the other hand, Les roses d'Ispahan is lovely, and best of all Soir, proving that the singer could be free without getting out of line. In the very first phrase of the latter song her pronouncement of the word fleurir still gives me a warm thrill. As I try to account for my disappointment in the Fauré group as a whole, I think, aside from the too great license in the vocal lines, the voice is generally recorded with too much presence, and there is little gradation in the dynamics.

The mixed program that makes up side 4 offers a considerable variety. The Godard song, here called Chanson d'Estelle, was once very popular as Chanson de Florian. I suspect the change was made (by Miss Teyte herself?) to identify it with Florian's Estelle, and for compatibility with the distinctly feminine sentiments. Her treatment is less exuberant, more introspective, than what it used to get, but the song is a wonderfully effective vehicle for her richly poured-out tone. Chanson triste is smooth and flowing, with characteristically Teyte effects on the descending line of de tes bras and the high attack on Tant de baisers. Extase, which Duparc frankly acknowledged as a kind of hommage à Tristan, is almost dangerously slow and sustained, but suggestive in a very special way, as Mr. Bebb points out. Le temps des lilas, already heard as the final section of Poème de l'amour et de la mer, is here done with Moore's piano and a cello obbligato by the same James Whitehead who also plays it in the orchestral version. (One gets the impression from the text-book that the piano version is minus the opening line, which happily turns out not to be true.) Les papillons is rather heavily recorded, and Le colibri moves quite haltingly for a humming bird.

The two Ravel Epigrammes and the Stravinsky song are noted as previously unpublished, but as already observed, the delightful song about Anne at the spinet is familiar to anyone fortunate enough to possess the second Gramophone Shop album. Why the second song about Anne, recorded the same day, was not also included must remain a mystery, for it is only slightly less appealing. The Stravinsky comes through with fine effect; it is unfortunate that copyright restrictions have kept EMI from printing the text.

Of the Teyte-Cortot Debussy set we are given all but the three songs of Le promenoir des deux amants and two of the Proses lyriques. I find it hard to be objective about these recordings, having known them since they were new and the songs were less familiar. I was interested to read Bebb's comment that he does not find all of them equally convincing, and I can only wonder whether he and I would agree as to which are less satisfactory. I have always felt the balance was at fault in En sourdine; the singer is too close to us to create the essential atmosphere. There is no such problem in Fantoches, and this she brings

off with élan. In Clair de lune she is at her best; the way she floats her voice in the high lines, beginning with Au calme clair de lune, still gives me a thrill. The second set of Fêtes galantes—Les ingénus, Le faune and the eerie Colloque sentimental—are talky songs, and she carries them off beautifully. Green also calls for praise; it is interesting to note her tempo, remembering Mary Garden's primitive disc, with Debussy at the piano, which has something of the same spirit. The three Chansons de Bilitis are justly famous. But the Ballade des femmes de Paris seems to me less than successful—it is simply not meant to be sung by a lady of refinement.

The songs of Reynaldo Hahn (here rather downgraded by the use of the word chansons, with its music hall implications) were notably congenial to Teyte, as to so many other singers. As a pupil of de Reszke she must have known Hahn well and often sung to his accompaniment. Here her rather elastic phrasing is well in order, and the voice always sounds its best. Si mes vers avaient des ailes is well remembered as her inevitable recital encore, and she sings it, as always, con amore. Much of the song lies in the low medium register which was so rich and warm in her voice. If this does not stand her in quite such good stead in L'heure exquise, this is another case of too much presence in an essentially atmospheric song. A little too much, but not enough to spoil it.

Offrande and En sourdine are to me quite fascinating because their Verlaine texts were set in such masterly fashion by both Debussy and Fauré. The Debussy songs are here for comparison, the first under the poet's title, Green. But instead of the exuberance, the early morning quality of the Debussy, and the variegated colors of Fauré, Hahn's Offrande is an intimate confession, which Teyte declaims very freely against the indecisive chordal background. Hahn's En sourdine suffers in my ears from a thematic resemblance to a popular song of my younger days, but even forgetting that (if I could) it hardly bears comparison with the unsettling Debussy or the solemnly calm Fauré.

Rhené-Baton's Il pleut des pétales de fleurs, once a familiar concert song, is the sixth in a set called Heurs d'été, Op. 14. The Manning arrangement and the song by Amherst Webber (accompanist and coach to Teyte and countless other singers early in the century) will be remembered by those who knew Teyte in her Town Hall period. Though previously unpublished they are worthy of her best. Clair de lune is another Verlaine poem on which Debussy and Fauré created mastersongs, already noted above. The Szulc setting is fine in its own right, and there was a time when it was perhaps the best known of the three. What collector does not treasure the Garden and Melba recordings? Teyte, in her own characteristic way, takes her place in that company. And could she go wrong with Massenet's Élégie, complete with Whitehead's cello obbligato?

The seventh side is an English recital. Purcell's lovely near-national anthem is thoroughly British in this performance, sung with infectious fervor; though Teyte occasionally breaks a phrase in an unorthodox way, she does it convincingly. Now sleeps the crimson petal is another old

favorite, treated in Dame Maggie's own manner, quite broadly at the end. Certainly the most disappointing performance in the set is the Franz Widmung, sung in English and adorned with a violin obbligato that recalls many an acoustic record of a popular ballad. Half way through the brief song the violin takes over the melody, then when the voice returns the violin supplies some filigree. And this was recorded in 1948!

The two Warlock songs are welcome on all counts, and why they were not published before would be hard to say. I am not so convinced of the Vaughan Williams Greensleeves, which hardly seems a song for Teyte. Her approach to Comin' thro' the Rye is healthy and genial, with none of the furbelows so often added by prima donnas. For Oft in the stilly night she has a new accompaniment. If one wants to compare, her old acoustic Columbia version was done in the familiar Stevenson arrangement. Land of heart's desire, with Alfred Cave's violin obbligato, has an open-air Gaelic appeal, and the duet with John McCormack has sentimental value, bringing two beloved artists together.

The last side is of mostly documentary interest, showing the singer in her operetta period. Messager, fellow-student and lifelong friend of Fauré, first conductor of Debussy's Pelléas et Mélisande, was decidedly a "light" composer. Monsieur Beaucaire was set to an English libretto, based on Booth Tarkington's novel. First produced in Birmingham in 1919, it had a successful run in London. The four selections, in two of which Miss Teyte is assisted by a chorus, and in two by the baritone Marion Green, are hardly deathless music. Kennedy Russell, who conducts the orchestra, is the composer as well as the conductor of White roses from By appointment. All these would have greater appeal had the singer made the texts more plain, and here the brochure does not help. There is no such problem with the two scenes from Hahn's Mozart; not only is her French of the clearest, but text and translation are given in full. For another contrast it is intriguing to return to the recording of the Adieu by its creator, Yvonne Printemps. Each singer works her own spell.

By way of an encore I welcome Miss Teyte, aged 20, in her first recording. (Can it be she went into the studio to record this one song?) Beginning quite faintly, the sound takes on body and ends impressively enough. The young lady puts her all into the tawdry piece, especially the fervent last line. Under such circumstances one can enjoy Because. But what is most striking is how little the voice changed from this beginning to the final recordings of 1948.

To sum up, Maggie Teyte was an individualist, a singer of great personal charm who rarely ventured out of her own fields of specialization. She was not drawn to German music and rarely sang lieder, although there are a couple of examples on English Decca LTX 6126, an LP program assembled in 1964 and now withdrawn. For those who heard her in recital her diminutive but vital presence is a memory. She was rarely gifted in her ability to hold her audience. The Teyte style was consistent, perhaps too consistent over the length and breadth of her repertoire. But her greatest appeal was in the warmth and roundness of her velvety voice.

This we have faithfully preserved on her records, though sometimes, as I have complained above, we miss the atmosphere she could create in the concert hall. But, perhaps because of the charm of her voice, its closeness on records may be a part of the reason for their popular success. It sometimes comes as a surprise to realize that we are listening to the singer rather than the song.

Philip Lieson Miller