

NIELSEN: Saul and David Boris Christoff (bass), Saul; Alexander Young (tenor), David; Elisabeth Söderström (soprano), Michal; Willy Hartmann (tenor), Jonathan; Michael Langdon (bass), Samuel; Kim Borg (bass), Abner; Sylvia Fisher (soprano), Witch of Endor; Bodil Gøbel (soprano), Abishai; Danish Radio Chorus, John Alldis Choir, Danish Radio Symphony Orchestra, Jascha Horenstein, cond. Unicorn RHS-343/5 (3 discs)

Saul og David (to use its Danish title) was the first of Carl Nielsen's two operas. It was composed to a libretto by Einar Christiansen, based on the Book of Samuel. Nielsen wrote the music between 1898 and 1901, and not long after finishing it he moved on to his next major work, his Second Symphony, "The Four Temperaments". Thus, the opera is a product, perhaps the first major product, of the composer's ripening maturity.

It is a deeply-felt work, if a problematical one. Its action is limited, and its true drama is not in visible theatrics but in the clash of characters and their inner turmoil. In this respect, it is of a piece with the Second Symphony, for in both works Nielsen was probing characteristics of human personality, whether as embodied in portraits of "temperamental types" in the abstract or in portraying given dramatic roles. Such pre-occupation can pose problems in staging, the more so considering the important and extended music given to the chorus. Indeed, the one mounting I have seen of the work in an opera house took the debatable option of only stressing the static elements in a semi-oratorio style of production. Other approaches might alleviate the difficulties, but, clearly, this is an opera which can be savored to particular effect in its score alone, and so the phonograph is an ideal medium for it.

Basically, whatever moments of vividness are given to the other characters--the unflinchingly loyal Jonathan, the breathlessly loving Michal, the sombre, implacable Samuel, the eerie Witch--it is upon Saul that the focus is clearly placed, with David as his foil. The plot is only a grid on which Saul's fate is worked out: the King's disobedience on a technical point of religious protocol wins him Samuel's promise of destruction; the disoriented Saul finds hope in David, but plunges into jealousy; a reconciliation is only blasted by Samuel's anointing of David as the new king; shattered by rage and despair, Saul is driven to sorcery to learn his fate, and, defeated by the Philistines, Saul kills himself cursing God, as David assumes the realm. But perhaps the best appreciation of the character Nielsen creates is that of Nielsen analyst Robert Simpson:

... Saul, especially, is treated with deep insight, emerging as a genuinely tragic figure of considerable stature, instead of the somewhat petulant recalcitrant suggested by the bare facts of the Book of Samuel. One can feel Nielsen's sympathy

for a man with the intelligence and courage to question things which, though he lives in a primitive world of superstition and savage unreason, he yet feels dimly to be a hindrance to the growth of the mind; but the force of circumstances and prejudice are too strong for him. His jealousy of David, the merciless vagaries of his moods, ranging from ferocity to noble magnanimity, and his eventual defiant death are all the result of a frustrated, conscious, and demonstrable superiority to all around him. David, on the other hand, has good looks, a disarming simplicity, physical prowess, and musical gifts: he lacks Saul's intelligence and character, but, unlike Saul, he is a born leader, for he shares without question all the simple superstitions of those who must be led, and he has what more than anything else angers Saul, a belief that the existing order is the best of all possible worlds. Thus the central figure, the real 'hero' is not David, but Saul, and his death has a tragic grandeur that makes David's final triumph fade into the light of common day.

My own experience with this moving and stimulating opera has comprehended three previous interpretations: a staged production seen in Copenhagen in 1965; a Danish Radio taping of a (slightly cut) performance under Nielsen's disciple, Thomas Jensen (dating from the late 1950's, I assume); and a BBC taping of 1959 under Berthold Goldschmidt, using Geoffrey Dunn's English translation. Horenstein's is, now, the fourth, originally made in Copenhagen as a broadcast performance on March 27, 1972. I can say that, quite clearly, his is the musical superior of all its predecessors.

As the first commercial recording to appear of any Nielsen opera, it is made problematical by the fact that the original Danish words the composer set are replaced with a translation. (Basically, the excellent one by Geoffrey Dunn, again.) This choice was understandable, since the performance was meant for international broadcast use, and English would have broader intelligibility for the audience than Danish. It would also be easier for the international cast assembled. Paradoxically, though, intelligibility is then compromised by the wide range of accents represented in that very international cast.

Nowhere is that problem more acute than with the chief star, Boris Christoff. Of all the exponents of this role I have heard, he clearly captures the intensity of Saul's extremes of emotion better than any others. But his voice is not the rich instrument it once was, and even more damaging, his thick accent and his slurring of diction hamper his credibility. There is, too, a tragic nobility to Saul that eludes Christoff, who veers close to hamminess at times. His is a compelling Saul, but it leaves room for still

other projections.

Fortunately, Alexander Young captures convincingly the purity, youth, and simplistic ardor of David. Elisabeth Söderström makes the most out of the moments of fresh and loving innocence of Michal. Only slightly quavery, Langdon is an impressive Samuel, while Kim Borg, sounding more woolly and thick than one remembers from his earlier vocal estate, is a gruff and serviceable Abner. Of the Danish participants who are participating on their home turf but in an unaccustomed language for their familiar roles, Willy Hartmann is most successful as a sturdy Jonathan. The chorus, fleshed out with the English-speaking Alldis group, is very fine, and the orchestra sounds splendid.

Most important of all, there is Horenstein. Plagued by ill health, and to die little more than a year after this performance was made, he nevertheless brought to this score an unmatched dedication and confidence. The music coheres with a logic and flow that I have heard no other conductor give it, and it emerges in its true grandeur at last. Thanks to Horenstein, this is a performance to live with, one that will lead the listener reliably into the riches of this deeply humane score with repeated hearings.

The recorded sound is thoroughly satisfactory. One only realizes from the applause at the end that an audience was present. As a concert performance, stereo directionality is minimal, of course, but the ambience is nevertheless well-spread. Due to some blemishes in the broadcast performance, a few brief retakes were made subsequently under Horenstein's assistant, Joel Lazar, and these are worked in quite unobtrusively. Unicorn's processing is admirable, and the boxed album is carefully prepared, with a handsome booklet that includes the full English text along with annotations. The entire venture, clearly a labor of love on the part of the company's director, John C. Goldsmith, is a resounding credit to all concerned, and we can welcome it with gratitude.

Above all, we now have a triumphantly important dimension added to the Nielsen discography, within which previously the composer's instrumental (and, especially, his symphonic) music has been so heavily stressed. We now have a chance to get to know one of his great dramatic masterpieces, even if in translation. It is a work for which my own admiration grows and grows with each rehearing. It prompts, too, endless comparisons and speculations. The opera stands up well, for example, when one compares it to its analogue across a century and a half, Handel's great Saul, which shares sensitivity to the King's tragic fate; its scene with the Witch of Endor also compares favorably with Purcell's setting of that episode, as well (as Simpson points out) as with Ulrica's scene in Verdi's Ballo in maschera. It is a work that has interesting

links to both past and present. In the latter vein, I have long been tempted to speculate how much Honegger—who did know Nielsen's music (though whether this work specifically I can't say)—may have profited, consciously or otherwise, from the example of Nielsen's opera in composing his own very different Roi David. On the other hand, though there are obvious differences of generation, style, and temperament, I can't help thinking that, had he ever taken the plunge into lyric theatre, Saul and David is something like the kind of opera that Brahms might have written.

Most of all, though, the availability of "Saul and David" now on records prompts the inevitable follow-up question: When, oh when, do we get a recording of Nielsen's other opera, Maskarade. If Saul and David is Nielsen's tragic masterpiece, Maskarade is his comic masterpiece. A gem, a jewel, a delight! Myself, I'd trade ten Fledermäuse or twenty Barbieri di Siviglia for it—heresy though that sound, such is the measure of my esteem for it. Back to Copenhagen, somebody! If we can have Janáček's operas in their original tongue, why not Nielsen's rollicking opus, in Danish, with the working cast available there? Well, somebody, why not?

John W. Barker