

THE RECORDINGS OF KARL MUCK

Some unresolved problems

Few collectors or students of Wagner style can be unaware of both the quality and significance of Karl Muck's recorded legacy. It is therefore surprising that some of his most important records have escaped full documentation, to the extent that, fifty years after the event, it seems unlikely that some of the problems they raise will be capable of being fully resolved.

Perhaps the most famous, and certainly the most vivid, of his records are the Parsifal excerpts made during the course of the 1927 Bayreuth Festival. Dating of these discs beyond the generally accepted month of August of that year has proved an intractable problem. Columbia "Day Books", in which the recording department (usually meticulously) entered details of matrices when processed, give the date 15 August. So do Columbia matrix cards, which provide fuller details of the processing of the masters. But this is the date given for all of the 1927 series, conducted by Elmendorff, von Hoesslin, Siegfried Wagner, as well as Muck. Thirty matrices, all with at least two takes, some with three, in a single day upon which a performance of Siegfried took place in the venue of recording--the Festspielhaus--all rule out the accuracy of EMI's written sources. The date given in Electrola's Aufnahmebüchern is 18 August, but again the ascription to this date of all the material makes it likely that this is simply a mistaken copy of Columbia's London material.

No details are now to be found in the Bayreuth archives, no member of the recording team is left, and it seems improbable that there are any other private sources which will assist. But several clues survive. From the memoirs of W. S. Barrell who was in joint charge of recording ("The Gramophone" January/June 1959), it is known that the sessions took place over a number of weeks, most, if not all, on days upon which no performance took place in the Festspielhaus. (He also refers to some fifteen recording sessions, but it seems from the context that he is including in this figure some of the Columbia sessions at Bayreuth in 1928). Furthermore, it is evident from the matrix cards that the date 15 August has at any rate some significance. Each card has on it the comment "Recd Bayreuth 23 August 1927". According to a veteran Columbia hand, this means the date upon which the waxes would have arrived at Columbia's factory at Bendon Valley, Wandsworth; confirmation of this is provided by the comment on each card "Secd..." followed by a date variously late in August or early in September. This is interpreted as meaning the date when the waxes had been successfully processed to metal matrices and test pressings were sent for approval. Thus 15 August, just eight days before the matrices arrived at their English destination,

is almost certainly the date upon which the project was completed, prior to being written up in the books.

Performance-free days at Bayreuth in the weeks prior to 15 August 1927 were July 21, 25, 27 and 30, and August 4, 6, 9 and 12, with further free days on 16 and 18 August. These, then, are the most likely dates upon which the 1927 Bayreuth series, including Muck's Parsifal excerpts, were made.

Exact dating is not the only difficulty relating to these sessions. No record remains of the size of the orchestra, nor, it seems, does Bayreuth retain details of day-by-day forces. As for the non-string complement, it may be assumed that as a minimum the numbers specified by Wagner were used: 3 flutes, 3 oboes, cor anglais, 3 clarinets and one bass clarinet, 3 bassoons, one contrabassoon, 4 horns, 3 trumpets, 3 trombones, bass tuba and timpani (with 2 harps for Act 3). This is slightly smaller than the forces for Muck's recording of Act 3 in 1928, where the bassoons were reinforced. In addition, the Transformation Scene requires six trumpets, six trombones and bells. Contemporary Bayreuth programmes listing the orchestral personnel show an uneven number of string desks: 35 violins, 13 violas, 13 'celli etc. Probably the section leaders were alternates; if so, the everyday forces would have been 34 (18 + 16) violins, 12 violas, 12 'celli and 8 basses. Whether the full complement was used by Columbia must remain a matter of speculation, but it will be noted that some of Muck's 1927 HMV recordings used a string band of commensurate size. It seems that there were no reorchestrations to suit the engineers on Muck's matrices; but it is noticeable that in Act 3, measures 705-6 "Ihn selbst am Kreuze" (WAX 3022) Siegfried Wagner permitted the bass pizzicati to be reinforced by the brass.

Figures for the Boston forces are also lacking, but here clues are more helpful. In reference to these recordings, the 1919 Victor catalogue refers to the company's success in overcoming the problem of recording "approximately a hundred men". On 22 October 1917, just seventeen days after Muck finished his recordings, Stokowski and the Philadelphians made the first of theirs in the same venue—and here figures do survive. To record Brahms's Hungarian Dance No. 5, Stokowski's orchestra consisted of 16 first and 15 second violins, 12 violas, 10 'celli, 8 string basses; 3 flutes, 1 piccolo, 4 oboes, 4 clarinets, 4 bassoons; 5 horns, 4 trumpets, 1 tuba, 1 timpani and 2 percussion. Muck's Bostonians were almost certainly present in similar strength, with the necessary addition for the finale of the Tchaikovsky 4th of tenor and bass trombones and a further percussion player—a probable total of some 95 players. The engineers evidently benefitted from their experience with the Bostonians: astonishingly clear as Muck's Tchaikovsky is, the recording horn captured only the first few string desks, while the Philadelphians were

given a more balanced sound.

A final point on the Columbia series. Muck's excerpts were carefully selected to include, for the most part, only concerted passages; thus Titurel and Amfortas, who make only token appearances in the chosen excerpts of the Grail Scene, are omitted from the recording. More seriously, the Transformation Scene omits the more significant exchanges of Gurnemanz and Parsifal in measures 1074-1105. Why? Although no final answer is possible, the likely explanation lies in the relative brevity of the vocal part and the costs involved. Kipnis's Gurnemanz in the Act 3 excerpt under Siegfried Wagner extends over three matrices (WAX 3020-22) but, as he has pointed out to the writer, the vocal contribution in this Act 1 excerpt is "only a few words". Furthermore, the large sums paid to Bayreuth and to each of the artists (see Herbert Ridout, "The Gramophone" April 1943) were probably decisive in Columbia's calculations in omitting the two principals.

Financial considerations also must have played their part in ensuring the issue of a very high percentage of Muck's recordings. Some of the Boston ones remained unissued for non-musical reasons. But of the 1927 Bayreuth series, all of Muck's were issued even though many others were eliminated: all of Elmendorff (WAX 2294-97) and several of von Hoesslin (WAX 2998-99: Siegfried's Funeral Music; WAX 3006-7: Siegfried's Rhine Journey; and WAX 3008: Die Walküre, Prelude to Act 2). Clearly, Muck was too expensive to lose notwithstanding that, as the matrix cards seem to indicate, some of the sides were not considered fully satisfactory on the criteria of tests for wear and absence of extraneous noise. Of the HMV records, only one side, from his last session in November 1929, was not issued and even that was approved. By this time Muck's fees were very high for his day. No doubt this, with the world-wide effects of the Wall Street crash just one month before, helped bring his recording career to a premature end.

For the future, the obvious question is: which shells survive from which new pressings can be made? Yet again, only an incomplete answer is at present possible. Of the Boston recordings, shells of the chosen takes of only the Rakoczy March and Waltz of the Flowers survive, although it seems that a pressing also exists of the first take of the former. The LP transfer (see Discography Part III, note 1) may well have been made from this. Of the EMI recordings, the Columbia matrix cards strongly suggest that the Bayreuth shells survive, while it is likely that some at least of the HMV's also exist. Since, however, it is EMI's policy to treat such information as confidential, no confirmation of this has been forthcoming. It is to be hoped that future commercial issues will be more revealing.

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