

FURTWÄNGLER ANNIVERSARY ISSUES: 1. WAGNER

WAGNER: Die Walküre. Martha Mödl (s, Brünnhilde), Leonie Rysanek (s, Sieglinde), Margarete Klose (a, Fricka), Ludwig Suthaus (t, Siegmund), Ferdinand Frantz (b, Wotan), Gottlob Frick (bs, Hunding); Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra, Wilhelm Furtwängler, cond. (Recorded September 28/October 6, 1954) EMI/Electrola 1C 149-00675/9, five discs, mono.

WAGNER: Der fliegende Holländer--Overture (VPO, March 29/30, 1949). Tannhäuser--Overture (VPO, December 2/3, 1952). Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg--Prelude; Dance of the Apprentices (VPO, April 1 & 4, 1949); Prelude to Act III (VPO, February 1, 1950). Siegfried-Idyll (VPO, February 16/17, 1949). Lohengrin--Prelude (VPO, March 5, 1954). Die Walküre--Ride of the Valkyries (VPO, March 31, 1949). Götterdämmerung--Siegfried's Rhine Journey; Funeral Music (VPO, March 8 & 2, 1954). Tristan und Isolde--Prelude (Berlin Philharmonic, February 11, 1938); Prelude to Act III (Philharmonia, June 1952); Liebestod (BPO, February 11, 1938). Parsifal--Prelude; Good Friday Music (BPO, March 15, 1938). Wilhelm Furtwängler, cond. EMI/Electrola 1C 149-01197/9, three discs, mono.

WAGNER: Tannhäuser--Overture (May 1, 1951, concert, Rome). Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg--Overture (December 19, 1949, concert, Titania-Palast, Berlin). Götterdämmerung--Funeral Music (same). Parsifal--Good Friday Music (April 21, 1951, concert, Alexandria, Egypt). Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra, Wilhelm Furtwängler, cond. Deutsche Grammophon 2535-826, mono.

WAGNER: Götterdämmerung--Siegfried's Rhine Journey (VPO, February 23, 1949); Funeral Music (VPO, January 31, 1950); Immolation Scene (Kirsten Flagstad, soprano; Philharmonia, March 26, 1948). EMI/Pathé Marconi 2C 051-03855, mono.

The twenty-fifth anniversary, in 1979, of Wilhelm Furtwängler's death, found the steady flow of his performances, both above and under ground, augmented by several memorial reissues from Electrola and DG. In this, the first of several installments, let me report on the Wagner material that has come to hand in recent months.

The 1954 Vienna studio recording of Die Walküre might be thought now redundant in the wake of general availability of two complete Ring cycles from Furtwängler's hands (La Scala 1950, RAI Rome 1953). Not so; whatever the very real virtues of those cycles, neither comes in anything like as good sound as could be achieved during those years, and in neither is Furtwängler working with a first-class orchestra long familiar with this music. To get some idea of the sheer sound of his Wagner performances, the Vienna Walküre is essential, and the new Electrola edition

is excellent, much superior in tonal richness and weight to the first American edition (RCA Victor LHMV-700). There's a lot of gorgeous playing here (the cello solos in Act I are pure gold), and the solidity and depth of the orchestral tone makes the most of Wagner's carefully planned textural and registral contrasts.

The cast is uneven, ranging from the stupendous Hunding of Gottlob Frick to the variable lot of Valkyries. Suthaus is not a clarion Siegmund, but his delivery of lines and notes has energy and conviction; the lower register of the voice is particularly telling. Despite much dead, hollow tone in her lower register, Leonie Rysanek counts for something in commitment when the chips are down, in all three acts. Martha Mödl is much as she was in the 1953 cycle, her intelligence and fervent musicianship as palpable as the effort that singing this music costs her. In a more antiquated, scoopier style, Margarete Klose remains, at age 52, a forceful, spiteful Fricka. In the abstract, Ferdinand Frantz ranks as a firm, reliable, dry-toned, unimaginative Wotan--but this is not the abstract, and Furtwängler furnishes color and texture, a framework of tempo and momentum, that tangibly vivifies Frantz's performance. The conductor's sense of Wagner's harmonic pulse, his understanding and articulation of levels of structure and local detail, his feeling for transitions of tempo and timbre, is unfailing--or almost so: unfortunately, Wagner's requested single tempo for the Act II Introduction and the subsequent "Battle Cry" is not maintained.

Electrola's second set collects most of Furtwängler's Wagnerian excerpts for EMI: missing are the Gotterdammerung excerpts on the Pathe-Marconi recording listed above, and also the second (1952) recording of the Immolation Scene with Flagstad. These are not new transfers; almost all of them can be conclusively associated with the editions long circulating on various EMI labels (and in Unicorn WFS-2/3, which was the first publication of the Meistersinger Act III Prelude). The 1949 Viennese recordings, in particular, are clumsily dubbed from 78s, with extraneous noises (e.g., a low-register thump at the end of the Hollander Overture) as well as coarse and shrill tone. Surely something better could have been achieved by starting over from scratch--and, indeed, Pathe-Marconi has done better with its Gotterdammerung excerpts. Although this Electrola set includes a few pieces not in Seraphim IB-6024, it constitutes no technical improvement over that still-available selection.

The most interesting of these performances remain the prewar Berlin Philharmonic recordings, of which the Tristan excerpts, pregnant and sensual readings, are quite different from the 1952 complete recording. I'm sorry, though, that they are here separated by the Act III Prelude excerpted from that 1952 set, which undercuts the effectiveness of the clearly older-sounding "Liebestod." For all its limitations, though, the 1938 sound does convey a considerable sense of orchestral depth and dimension--it would be good to have a really first-class transfer of these matrices.

The other performances are good, though less revelatory than Furtwängler's work with extended Wagnerian sequences. Perhaps least successful is the Meistersinger Prelude, especially when compared with the Berlin concert performance of nine months later included in DG's selection of Wagner excerpts. (This and the Parsifal piece are also in DG's Furtwängler memorial album, 2721-202, ten discs; the Meistersinger was also previously released in the "Grosse Dirigenten der Bayreuther Festspiele" set, 2721-113, two discs.) Faster, brighter, sharper of articulation, more festive and theatrical, the Berlin performance is not always as well played as the studio version. But one hardly notices the occasional slip when the trombones usher in the recapitulation with such elan (at a point where the 78 side break impedes complete tempo continuity in the Vienna recording). The climactic retardation of the tempo is achieved in exciting fashion, a really positive and bracing plunge upstream. Alas, none of the other DG selections is quite this prepossessing, though the Rome Tannhäuser Overture makes more extreme tempo contrasts than the studio version (this is a brighter transfer, and at higher level, than the one on Discocorp RR-413). In whatever form, don't miss the Meistersinger!

And don't miss the Pathé-Marconi Götterdämmerung excerpts, either. These are the 78 RPM versions of these pieces, not to be confused with the later tape remakes long familiar as Electrola E-90026 and the recently deleted Seraphim 60003; they were once available in the U.S. as RCA Victor LHMV-1024 and LHMV-1049, and in France as Pathé-Marconi FALP-194 (although the later recordings were substituted under the same number at some point), and the Immolation Scene reappeared not long ago in Electrola 1C 147-01491/2, a Flagstad collection (incorrectly billed as "Erstveröffentlichung auf LP!"). Although recorded at different times and places, all three excerpts have been made to sound cleaner and clearer than the later remakes, which are in every case more distant and diffuse pickups of the orchestra. And in all three the orchestra plays more precisely and cohesively in the earlier versions--for example, the 1950 "Funeral Music" is the only one of Furtwängler's four published recordings in which the exposed chord under the trumpet entry in D-flat (with the second half of the Walsung motive) is really attacked unanimously.

The 1948 Immolation was Furtwängler's first work with the Philharmonia Orchestra and also his first postwar collaboration with Flagstad; the 1952 Immolation would be their last work together. In between, they performed the music together a number of times, and her performance became more varied, less plainly proclamatory. She's placed very forwardly in the 1948 version, and there's not much dynamic nuance in her strong, bright, urgent singing--but four years took their toll, and the 1952 voice manifests a palpable beat, less focus, and less certain intonation in the upper register. There is one serious miscalculation of tempo on Furtwängler's part in 1948, where the music of the Rhinemaidens, in the orchestral epilogue, is slower than the preceding pulse (Wagner specifies an equivalence); this is remedied in 1952, when the resumption of the main tempo after "Ruhe, du Gott" is also slower and broader than

before. (The 1950 La Scala performance combines the virtues of both recordings--but, alas, in far inferior sound.)

As suggested, the Pathé-Marconi dubs are well made, though two side-breaks might have been more tightly spliced: at the big entrance of the Rhine motive in the "Rhine Journey," and four measures after Brunnhilde's "In Walhall's prangende Burg," just before Grane's entrance in the Immolation.

Now, if only someone would turn up the La Scala Meistersinger and Parsifal performances in good sound, please!

David Hamilton