

JOHN STEANE SINGERTALK



Wagner-dämmerung? Let's hope not – and Rejoice in a “dream Ring” come true

I sometimes think my Wagner nights are over. Perhaps it is simply a matter of bad luck, but for many years now my trial-occasions have been trials indeed. The singers' voices have not invariably sounded surface-scratched or wobbly, the productions have not every time struck me as crude, unsightly and daft, but there has been enough of that to deter. So records become still more precious as a refuge. I find it regrettable, because when all goes well a Wagner night in the theatre is one of a musical life's great pleasures. When Wagner is respected and his storybook world allowed to open on stage as he directed we can sit with an excited sense of space and time to be filled with greatness: a chronicle of character and event made real and important in a musical score so integral and organic that its yield, to heart and intellect, remains inexhaustible. And in the darkness, without importunate promptings by officious producers, we could think for ourselves. Records, ‘the theatre of the mind’, will in some ways provide ideal conditions to substitute for this. But it's a pity. I liked the view of 16th-century Nuremberg, the overgrown garden of King Marke's castle, the Valkyries' rocks; and the space and atmosphere of the opera house is Wagner's due. And so is the live sound of voices and orchestra, which we delude ourselves if we think modern recording techniques and expensive equipment will reproduce for us in the living-room.

Circa 1955 to 1970 were the years in which I most enjoyed Wagner live. At Covent Garden the conductors included Rudolf Kempe, Reginald Goodall and Sir Georg Solti. Among the singers were Birgit Nilsson, Astrid Varnay, Sylvia Fisher, the now almost forgotten Maria von Ilosvay, an aristocratic Fricka with a finely schooled voice, a towering Ortrud in Rita Gorr, Wolfgang Windgassen, Jon Vickers, the gifted Ernst Kozub (‘Our Tenor’ of John Culshaw's *Ring Resounding*), Hermann Uhde, Gustav Neidlinger, Hans Hotter and the great Gottlob Frick. We didn't do too badly, yet at my back I always seemed to hear Time's winged chariot travelling in the opposite direction. Behind the living sound of ‘our lot’ were the recorded voices of Leider, Lehmann, Flagstad, Melchior, Janssen, Schorr and Kipnis. These were the ones who set the standards for me, and these were the ones I yearned to hear.

And now we come a little nearer to ‘hearing’ them. Complete *Ring* cycles from their era are offered on two labels. The Naxos Historical series, with transfers by Ward Marston, now packages the four operas in a box, *Die Walküre* recorded at the Metropolitan, New York, under Erich Leinsdorf in 1941, the others in 1936 and ‘37 under Artur Bodansky. Guild has the same *Siegfried*, but a 1937 *Rheingold* with Thorborg as Erda, also a *Walküre* (but 1940) under Leinsdorf, and a composite *Götterdämmerung*. The presiding genius here is Richard Caniell, director of the Immortal Recorded Performances Society which operates from New Denver, Canada. The Naxos set is likely to have wider publicity and better sales, in the UK at least. But the Guild version (no box, but separate issues) has a touch of the visionary about it.

Here is a *Ring* resounding primarily with the names of its lead-



Kirsten Flagstad and Friedrich Schorr, reunited in *The Ring* on disc thanks to the “visionary” dream of Richard Caniell as realised on a new set from Guild.

ing singers. Kirsten Flagstad sings Brünnhilde throughout, Lauritz Melchior Siegmund and Siegfried, Friedrich Schorr Wotan. In addition are Lotte Lehmann as Sieglinde, Karin Branzell as Fricka, Kerstin Thorborg as Erda and Waltraute, René Maison as Loge and Herbert Janssen as Gunther. The Mime and Alberich, as vital as their more renowned colleagues, are Karl Laufkötter and Eduard Habich, masterly exponents both. It is called the ‘Dream’ *Ring*, and this is for more than one reason, the first being that no such *Ring* exists.

Two of the operas have had to be compiled. The *Walküre* involved an elision of only two performances, and then only in scenes where Wotan and Brünnhilde appear together. The *Götterdämmerung* is an extraordinary network, drawing on three stage performances, sometimes in rapid succession; there are also two passages where studio recordings have been incorporated. Considering the variations in the quality of recorded sound between 1936, the earliest year of recording, and 1951 (the latest), it is extraordinary what has been achieved. The principal conductors are Artur Bodansky, Fritz Stiedry and Wilhelm Furtwängler — and perhaps it is a misnomer, and a serious one, to call this a *Ring* at all. Yet the fusion gives us the unity of this magnificent casting headed by the most full-bodied, nobly timbred heroic soprano of the century, the most glintingly resilient and renowned of Heldenentors, and, in Schorr, the bass-baritone who best combined authoritative power with beauty of vocal line.

At the end of his labours, which have included the provision of generously ample booklets for each opera, the producer writes that now ‘All that is required is to settle back in your most comfortable chair, turn the switch and enter into what seemed, previously, to be a bygone and unrecoverable world.’ And oh (‘Tread softly because you tread on my dreams’), how I wish it were as simple for the listener as that! It isn't. It's like a journey where the sun is all the time in and out of the clouds. Visions of glory — Schorr entering Valhalla, Melchior invoking the eternal ‘Wälse’, Lehmann's wide-eyed terror in Act 2, Thorborg's sumptuous *Rheingold* Erda, Flagstad's entry for the Immolation — these and their kind are sufficient to light up the whole experience in retrospect. But . . . well, there are many ‘buts’. Melchior and Bodansky aid and abet each other in a manic gallop through the first scene of *Siegfried*. Schorr, near the end of his career, is badly in need of his lost high notes. It seems unlikely that Dezso Ernster would be anyone's ‘dream’ Hagen. And so forth. And yet it's out of such material as this that my own ‘dream *Ring*’ would be fashioned; and therefore, knowing that dreams do not always go where one wants them to, when the poet asks ‘If there were dreams to sell, what would you buy?’, the answer comes sure enough. I'll buy this.