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15 Waltraud Meier



Mezzo-soprano
b1956, Würzburg, Germany
International debut
Buenos Aires as Fricka
in *Die Walküre*, 1980.
Has since appeared in
all leading houses.

**Wagner: 'Dich teure Halle' from
Tannhäuser** 5:08 mins

Bavarian RSO/Lorin Maazel (rec. 1996-7);
from RCA Victor Red Seal 09026 68766 2

Tannhäuser takes place in 13th-century Germany. Act II opens with 'Elisabeth's Greeting'. The daughter of the local Landgrave enters the Minstrels' Hall in the castle with overwhelming joy as she learns of the return of her lover, the minstrel Tannhäuser.

Meier has won a reputation as one of the leading Wagnerian singers of our day, with repeated success at Bayreuth as Kundry and Isolde.

16 Ben Heppner



Tenor
b1956, Canada
US debut, Carnegie
Hall, 1988; European
debut, Stockholm in
Lohengrin, 1989.
Respected in Puccini,
Verdi, Janáček, Britten and Wagner.

**Puccini: 'Nessun dorma' from
Turandot** 3:09 mins

Munich RO, Bavarian Radio Chorus/
Roberto Abbado (recorded 1993-4);
from RCA Victor Red Seal 09026 62504 2

Puccini's final opera is set in legendary Beijing. Having answered Princess Turandot's riddles, an unknown prince offers in return to die at dawn if she can discover his name before then. She decrees that no one shall sleep this night, and all shall die if the secret is not discovered. The prince repeats the words 'Nessun dorma' ('None shall sleep'). Confident that his name will remain secret, he bids the night end quickly and his victorious dawn arrive.

Heppner has won acclaim for Wagnerian and other heavy tenor roles, and recently recorded Calaf.

• **Texts and translations overleaf**

Voices on disc: the big wind-up

The way singers have been presented to us has changed over the century, says Roger Pines

Within a decade or two, no living person will have experienced Caruso in a live performance. One must look to recordings to reveal the qualities that gave that voice, and so many others, unforgettable distinctiveness. As recording techniques have advanced over this century to something approaching perfection, it has become increasingly possible to retain in the mind's ear a minutely detailed aural picture of a singer. Fortunately, enough truly individual voices still exist to make listening to recorded singing more than an exercise in nostalgia. At the same time, the bounty of currently available historical CDs makes one doubly grateful for the glories of a bygone era.

In vocal terms, there is much, alas, that records from the early 20th century cannot impart to us. Women in particular suffered from the acoustic recording process, which sucked the natural harmonics out of their tone. The amplitude of many male and female voices was compromised by the need to pull back from the recording horn on high notes. In 'old' records one can certainly discern specifics of personality, intonation, musicality – but what about savouring a special vocal timbre? Some obvious exceptions (Caruso, for one) notwithstanding, that pleasure had to wait for the advent of the electric process. Recordings then took a giant step forward in capturing voices' true colours in all their vividness.

The limited duration of 78rpm discs frustrated singers by frequently forcing them to adopt tempi varying wildly from those used in the theatre. On the positive side, an older recording was a 'real' performance, that is, an aria's 'take' was the complete aria, not a series of moments cunningly patched together by clever engineers. We have progressed (is that the right word?) to a point where, in numerous complete opera

recordings, leading artists have recorded their entire roles separately from their singing colleagues or even the orchestra.

It seems, however, that for opera, live-performance recording is now preferable, financially and often artistically, to studio productions. One sacrifices the technical perfection of studio recording, but the potential gain in immediacy offers ample compensation. The continuum of operatic singing on disc amply demonstrates how our ideas have evolved regarding voices' suitability to particular roles. Monumentally

Monumental voices have been replaced by 'streamlined' ones

scaled voices have vanished, replaced in the same repertoire by a more 'streamlined' quality of tone.

Vibrant-voiced Leontyne Price, who always correctly identified herself as a 'juicy lyric', excelled in Verdi roles that once demanded a dramatic soprano. In Wagner, the unique grandeur of Kirsten Flagstad contrasts with the biting intensity of today's Waltraud Meier. While truly heroic mezzos and contraltos are no more, currently we can boast numerous lighter-voiced, technically brilliant singers in these categories, from Frederica von Stade to Vesselina Kasarova and Nathalie Stutzmann. Currently on disc Plácido Domingo is our Verdi/verismo tenor, Ben Heppner our Wagnerian. While both are essentially lyric voices, each possesses an enviable security enabling it to navigate happily through heavier roles. And finally, the weighty baritone sounds of the Forties and Fifties have given way to

a singing style exemplified by the leaner-voiced Sherrill Milnes, whose strength has always been his spectacular upper register.

Where actual performance is concerned (as opposed to sheer voice), on disc one can trace the gradual ascendancy of a *com' scritto* attitude. Looking back to John McCormack, one finds a tenor considerably more fastidious musically than most of his competition; however, the progress from McCormack to the next generation's Jussi Björling shows a world of difference as regards fidelity to what appears on the page. Björling's thorough, straightforward musicianship pointed the way to other similarly scrupulous tenors, among them Domingo and Carlo Bergonzi. In such cases, this extends not only to opera, but to the 'crossover' material in which tenors have always excelled on disc, from Caruso early on to Jerry Hadley today.

Recordings have documented the rise of historically informed performance practice. Look at *bel canto*: following decades of singers' technical inadequacy and stylistic indulgence, there emerged Callas and Sutherland. They initiated a revival of 19th-century traditions, undertaken by artists with the sensitivity and technical aplomb to command the music. This has extended from the superb Montserrat Caballé to (in a lighter *Fach*) the Nineties' Eva Mei, whose restrained artistry could not be further removed from the extravagance of a Barrientos or a Tetrizzini.

Sampling the recorded history of singing is not simply a pleasure, but a lifelong addiction. One invariably approaches each singer hoping that – through an ineffable combination of tone, musical intelligence, and innate expressiveness – a unique personality, a vocal soul, will impress itself on the memory. Those are moments to cherish, renewing one's eagerness for the next exhilarating discovery. ■