

I N T E R N A T I O N A L

# RECORD REVIEW

FOR THE SERIOUS CLASSICAL COLLECTOR

January 2010 £4.00

## Elgar's *Crown of India*

Andrew Davis  
relishes a 'lost' work

Conductors Iván Fischer  
and Thomas Fey  
excel in Brahms  
and Mendelssohn

The Leipzig String  
Quartet's virtuosic Haydn

Philippe Pierlot's  
sublime Bach  
*Magnificat*

Beautifully sung rare Schubert  
from Matthias Goerne



IRR Outstanding Recordings



# Obituaries

## Elisabeth Söderström 1927-2009



Elisabeth Söderström

Swedish soprano Elisabeth Söderström, one of the best-loved artists of her time, who brought miraculously interpretative insight to an exceptionally diverse repertoire, died in her native Stockholm on November 20th of complications from a stroke. She was 82.

Always an unflinchingly honest artist in every aspect of her performing, Söderström would have been the first to admit that she did not possess a world-shaking voice; it displayed a notable shine above the stave and warmth in the middle, but also fragility in the lower register and tone that could betray a certain tremulousness. Still, its timbre was highly distinctive and, indeed, when ravishing tone was required, it was Söderström's to command (listen, for example, to Solveig's Song from Grieg's *Peer Gynt* Suite or the final scene of Strauss's *Capriccio*). More important, however, was that Söderström's instrument consistently served a profound expressive capacity that rang true in every conceivable style of music.

Like so many sopranos, the young Söderström originally hoped for an acting career. She quickly settled on opera, however, and studied at Sweden's Royal Academy of Music (under Russian coloratura soprano Adelaide von Skilondz) and Opera School. Her

exceedingly thorough training served her in very good stead over more than four decades.

Her professional début came in 1947 as Mozart's Bastienne at Drottningholm's Court Theatre (Söderström would return there 46 years later as artistic director of the opera festival, serving until 1996). By 1950 the soprano was a member of the Royal Swedish Opera, where she continued to appear for most of her career. At the RSO she

could perform a number of operas that most probably she would have avoided in a larger house (*Manon Lescaut* and *Madama Butterfly*, for example). She also sang the gamut of lyric parts, from Mozart's Susanna to numerous heroines of twentieth-century opera.

Söderström's international operatic career was launched in 1955, when her enchanting Ighino in *Palestrina* was heard in Salzburg. More significant for her future was her 1957 Glyndebourne début as the Composer. At Glyndebourne, which became her second operatic home, her gallery of roles over the next two decades also included Octavian, Susanna, Tatiana, Elisabeth in Henze's *Elegy for Young Lovers*, Countess Madeleine (productions by both Gunther Rennert and John Cox), Christine in *Intermezzo*, and finally Beethoven's Leonore. Covent Garden was not granted quite as full a picture of Söderström's versatility, although her first appearances in the house were certainly notably contrasting: Daisy Doody in Blomdahl's *Aniara* and Morgana in *Alcina*, both in a guest engagement by the RSO. With the Covent Garden company she portrayed Countess Almaviva, Octavian, Fiordiligi and Mélisande.

Had Söderström arrived at the Metropolitan Opera 20 years later, perhaps the company would have presented her in off-the-beaten-track repertoire. Her first period there, however – from 1959 to 1964 – found her in standard lyric-soprano assignments, the Composer excepted. The other roles were Susanna, Sophie, Adina, Marguerite, Rosalinde and Musetta.

Having restricted her activities in international opera houses while raising her children, Söderström caused much rejoicing in the mid-1970s when she felt able to move further afield in her operatic schedule. The heart of her stage repertoire became Janáček, whom she championed in important American and European theatres. His operas were enriched by not only her vocal and musical gifts but also by her extraordinarily subtle physicality onstage. Among the highlights were *Kát'a Kabanová* and *The Makropulos Affair* (in English) for Welsh National Opera and *Jenůfa* (in Swedish) for an RSO production that triumphed at the Edinburgh Festival. In 1980, three years after San Francisco Opera presented Söderström as Kát'a, she returned there to sing an incandescent Jenůfa opposite the Kostelnička of Sena Jurinac, an artist of markedly similar artistic sensibilities.

Söderström's most memorable New York appearance in opera was arguably Fanny in Massenet's *Sapho*, sung in concert at Carnegie Hall in 1979. Her Indian summer at the Met, from 1983 to 1987, included her portrayals of Ellen Orford, Countess Almaviva and an ineffably moving Marschallin. At a time (1999) when New Yorkers never expected to hear her again, she returned to the Met to sing the Countess in *The Queen of Spades* opposite the Ghermann of Plácido Domingo.

Always in great demand for appearances with leading orchestras, Söderström was also heard in virtually every prestigious recital venue worldwide. She presented her matchlessly imaginative recital programmes with abundant spontaneity and palpable joy.

Her comments when speaking to audiences were unforgettable; this writer vividly recalls a hilarious introduction to Mussorgsky's 'On the hobby-horse', every bit as memorable as the song itself.

Sadly, few of Söderström's many televised performances have been commercially released, Glyndebourne's *Fidelio* being a major exception. Her admirers can be grateful for a vast discography, in which operatic repertoire extends from *L'incoronazione di Poppea* (as Nerone) and *Le nozze di Figaro* to *Hänsel und Gretel* (as the Witch), *Pelléas et Mélisande* and on to Delius's *Fennimore and Gerda*, Hindemith's *Cardillac*, Nielsen's *Saul and David* and – under Mackerras's inspired leadership – the Janáček operas mentioned above. Söderström also recorded major concert works of Beethoven (the Ninth under Monteux, the *Missa solennis* under Klemperer), Strauss's *Vier letzte Lieder*, Sibelius's *Luonnotar*, Janáček's *Glagolitic Mass*, Britten's *War Requiem* and Zemlinsky's *Lyric Symphony*.

A brilliant linguist, Söderström can be heard in song repertoire in at least eight languages. There are, for example, Britten cycles in French (*Les illuminations*) and English (*Our Hunting Fathers*), Schubert with Paul Badura-Skoda, and much Scandinavian material. The crown jewel of Söderström's recorded song output, however, is surely her complete set of Rachmaninov. With that project Decca initiated a glorious partnership between Söderström and Vladimir Ashkenazy, eventually encompassing songs of Chopin, Mussorgsky, Tchaikovsky, Prokofiev and Grechaninov.

The soprano wrote captivately about her career in a memoir, *I min Tonart* (1978), published in English translation as *In My Own Key* (Hamish Hamilton; 1979). An honorary CBE, she held the rank of Royal Court Singer in Sweden, among innumerable other honours.

Elisabeth Söderström is survived by her husband of 59 years, Sverker Olow, as well as by their three sons and several grandchildren.

Roger Pines