Kirsten Flagstad sings Wagner & Strauss

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EAN: 4022143234162

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International Record Review (01.12.2010)

RECORD REVIEW

Walter, Flagstad and Knappertsbusch

Bruno Walter is on coruscating form in Beethoven's Egmont Overture at the start of a Salzburg Festival concert with the Vienna Philharmonic, given on August 24th, 1950. After this incendiary start, the main work is Mahler's Symphony No. 4. This is simply lovely. Walter conducts with infinite affection, injecting the first movement with an underlying animation and producing balance of almost Mozartian lucidity, helped by refined, sensitive playing. The second movement unfolds without exaggeration, while the hymn-like theme of the slow movement unfolds with heart-stopping nobility: it's extraordinarily moving here. Irmgard Seefried brings touching simplicity to the sung finale: nothing is arch or self-conscious, and Walter captures just the right mood of enchantment. The sound of the ORF tapes is good for its age, making this a historical release to cherish (Orfeo C818 101B, 1 hour 3 minutes).

Kirsten Flagstad sings Wagner and Strauss in live performances recorded in Berlin on May 9th and 11 th, 1952. Flagstad is in fine voice, and George Sebastian is an imaginative and dramatic conductor whose experience in the opera-house is put to good use here. In the Wesendonck-Lieder Flagstad sounds more youthful than in her later studio recording with Hans Knappertsbusch – her voice has greater richness here, with few if any signs of age. Sebastian's conducting of the Tristan Prelude is excellent and Flagstad is strong in Isolde's narration from Act I, straining only for a couple of high notes. In the closing scene of Act 3 (not just the Liebestod but the Lament preceding it) Flagstad's feeling for line produces singing that is intense, focused and secure.

The second concert opens with three of the Four Last Songs that Flagstad had created in London with Furtwängler a couple of years earlier; in these Berlin performances the sound is far better. She sails over the orchestra in 'Beim Schlafengehen' and 'September' and 'Im Abendrot' are both sung with the same kind of unforced eloquence. Hearing this great operatic voice in these songs puts them in a different light from those of some of her famous successors. After an impressively dramatic extract from Elektra (the monologue beginning 'Orest! Orest! O lass deine Augen') the concert ends with the Immolation scene from Götterdämmerung. This is an overwhelming treat: Flagstad sounds even more involved than in her studio recording with Furtwängler and the Philharmonia made six weeks later, and Sebastian's conducting is sensitive and exciting. The last chord seems to end too abruptly, but the sound is admirably clear and full. This very satisfying Flagstad collection comes with a booklet that has complete German texts but no translations (Audite 23.416, two discs, 1 hour 37 minutes).

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A set of Knappertsbusch's RIAS recordings with the Berlin Philharmonic includes two performances of Bruckner's Ninth Symphony and Schubert's 'Unfinished', along with the Eighth Symphonies of Bruckner and Beethoven and Haydn's 'Surprise', No. 94. There's also lighter repertoire: the Overture to The Merry Wives of Windsor by Nicolai, the Nutcracker Suite by Tchaikovsky, A Thousand and One Nights, the Fledermaus Overture and Pizzicato Polka by Johann Strauss II and Komzák's Bad'ner Mad'ln. Audite has used original master tapes, so these performances sound as good as they are ever likely to: for 1950-52 it's very acceptable. Knappertsbusch can be quirky in Bruckner: in the Eighth, a variable pulse often saps the music of momentum, especially in the finale, and there's a problem with the edition too: the 1892 first edition, despite the apologia in the booklet, is extensively reorchestrated and somewhat bowdlerized. This wouldn't matter if Knappertsbusch's 1951 performance was more compelling, but it's rather mannered and clumsy. The Ninth is vastly better, both in the studio performance and the live one two days later: the first movement has a powerful undertow, never drags and has climaxes that are visionary, while the finale is both anguished and majestic.

The Beethoven is interesting: while it's all on the steady side, the first movement is particularly well shaped and there's no shortage of geniality. The Haydn is similarly good-natured. The two performances of the 'Unfinished' are surely too expansive in places – so much so that even the orchestral cellos and basses seem to want to get a move on near the beginning. The lighter music is most enjoyable. The Nutcracker is nicely poised and even though the 'Waltz of Flowers' sounds as if it's going to be rather stately, Knappertsbusch whips things up by the end. The Fledermaus Overture that follows is bursting with charm and it's enormously enjoyable, and so too is The Merry Wives of Windsor – these are probably my two favourite performances in a set that is always fascinating, and presented with Audite's customary care (Audite 21.405, five discs, 5 hours 55 minutes).

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