SYMPOSIUM RECORDS CD 1220

DAVID DEVRIÈS was born in 1881 at Bagnères-de-Luchon and was almost bound to become a musician, for two of his uncles, Hermann and Maurice Devriès, and one of his grandparents, Rosa Devriès-van Os, were all singers of renown. He studied under Alphonse Duvernoy (1842-1907, pianist and composer of *Sardanapale* and *Hellé*) at the Paris Conservatoire. Such was his progress that, his studies completed, the Opéra immediately gave him a contract. However he made his début at the Théâtre Montparnasse before appearing at the Opéra. This was as Gérald in *Lakmé* in 1904. His first appearance at the Opéra was as Leothold in *Guillaume Tell*. He sang only minor roles, which is not unreasonable for a young singer's initial season, but at the end of the season the contract was not renewed. The reason, whatever it was, presumably had nothing to do with his abilities, for he was promptly given employment at the Opéra-Comique which became the centre of his activities until illness forced him to retire. His début there was in 1905 in *Xavière* by Dubois. Over the years his repertoire expanded to some four dozen roles. A number of the works in which he sang, *Astarté* (Leroux) and those of his teacher, are now forgotten or remembered at most for one aria on some recondite label. A few will cause some concern on musical grounds; Ottavio in *Don Giovanni*, for example, was probably outside his idiom. We wonder, too, how his high and light tenor voice coped with Mascagni and Puccini. The gramophone is and is not a secure source of evidence here: on one hand to sing for the microphone one aria from a heavy role is no indication of ability to sustain a complete work and on the other, the records make quite clear that the voice did not deteriorate. We live in an age of noise. True: our forbears heard Tamagno and Fabbri and Ruffo, and the Parisians were familiar with O'Sullivan, but perhaps beautiful production and sensitive musicianship could more than offset a lack of sheer power. Perhaps, too, audiences then restrained their coughing, and refrained from rustling programmes, rattling bangles, unwrapping sweets and eating sandwiches (all of which are now, together with very audible systems of ventilation, in vogue in London's musical centres).

At the Théâtre Gaité-Lyrique in 1909, Devriès sang in *Il Barbiere di Siviglia* and *La Vivandière* (Godard). According to one source, he appeared also in *La Bohème*, not Puccini's opera, but that by Leoncavallo. This is surprising not only, again, for the weight of the role, but also because, according to the notes of a radio performance in 1975, the opera had not then been given in France since 1899. However, most remarkable of his performances in that theatre was his part in the revival of *La Dame Blanche* by Boieldieu. This is verified by his records of two pieces from that work. Devriès did not have a beautiful voice; he did have excellent vocal training, and outstanding taste in French music, commitment to his job and the ability to communicate.

Later the same year he travelled to New York to take part in Oscar Hammerstein's fourth season at the Manhattan Theatre, that in which he had finally to concede victory to the Metropolitan Opera Company.

The Belgian soprano, Gabrielle Lejeune, with whom Devriès left a recorded memento of one of his roles in New York, was the wife of the distinguished baritone, Charles Gilibert. At the Manhattan he added Pelléas to his repertoire and appeared in

Massenet's *Grisélidis* and *La Navarraise*, each with Mary Garden. Perhaps unique in operatic history were the performances of *Le Jongleur de Notre-Dame*, for the tenor role was sung sometimes by a tenor and sometimes by a soprano. Mary Garden had usurped the part for herself, but when she was out of town Devriès substituted.

Devriès was well received at Covent Garden in *Pelléas et Mélisande*, at Monte Carlo in *Thaïs* (with Kousnetsova and Renaud) and at Nice in the world première of *La Vida Breve* (1913).

In 1920 he sang at Brussels in *Lakmé*, in which he was always successful, *Mignon*, *La Bohème* (not Leoncavallo, but Puccini) and *Tyl Uylenspiegel* (not Strauss, but Blockx).

He returned to the Opéra-Comique and added to his repertoire *Werther*, *La Damnation de Faust* and the *St. Matthew Passion*, further works which one would not associate with his type of voice and, again, without apparent damage to its mechanism. This is made clear by the records. From the earliest a pronounced vibrato is heard and the name of a certain much idolised Italian tenor comes to mind. Much idolised by some, that is, for to others such rapid pronounced vibrato is unloveable. In the case of Devriès, however, the attendant matters of style and transposition scarcely occur. The records illustrate almost all of the career. The voice, as has been said, is not of itself beautiful, indeed, it can, without injustice, be described as frequently white. The vibrato remains a constant feature (allowing that the earliest records may accent it); it never moves towards the tremolo or wobble which betoken incorrect or inadequate training or over- or ill-use. The Rêverie de George Brown, with its runs and trills, may well be one of the most breathtaking pieces of singing on record, it certainly is a golden opportunity for an excellently-trained singer of the French school, and tells why such works cannot be satisfactorily mounted at present. But perhaps the Aubade from *Le Roi d'Ys* is in a sense more 'useful' in permitting direct comparison with the many alternative recordings. None is superior and, as is usual with Devriès, the enunciation is excellent.

It would, however, be a mistake to compare Devriès with Richard Tauber in the music of Léhar. As with Mozart, so with Léhar, he is far from any Austro-German ideal. Nevertheless it is a lovely piece of singing. It is also devoid of any Tauberian preparations for top notes; the frisson which that provides for some being a distracting mannerism for others.

The Flower Song has no stentorian, ear-numbing top notes; Devriès, singing within his means, conveys to us the mood of the scene as derived from the text and the vocal line.

On the topic of vocal line: this singer decorates impeccably with many swellings and diminishings of the sound. The excerpt from Fauré]'s Requiem is a perfect example; everything is just right; nothing is to excess. At this stage it is probably unnecessary to add that cheap parlando and sobbing effects are unknown to this singer.

Devriès was at home in oratorio and also much appreciated as a recitalist. On the concert platform he ranged from Rousseau to Nérini by way of Franck, Fauré, Duparc, Debussy and Hahn. Emile Nérini was frequently his accompanist.

Devriès died in 1936 of a disease of the blood.

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