

SYMPOSIUM RECORDS CD1225

RICHARD STRAUSS conducts RICHARD STRAUSS

Richard Strauss (1864-1949) and Edward Elgar (1857-1934) were the first composers of major stature to leave considerable legacies of their own works recorded under their own direction. Elgar's first recordings were made immediately before the first World War, Strauss's towards the end of it. Many of these recordings were remade, sometimes in fuller versions, when the acoustic process was replaced by the electric system in the mid-'20s, the improvement in sound being particularly marked for the orchestra. Elgar's recorded repertoire was entirely of his own works in which in any case he was considered to be at his best; Strauss, widely respected as a conductor quite apart from being a composer, was asked to conduct for the gramophone major works of his own and of others. Elgar remained faithful to one company and there is evidence of desire in that company to record as many of his large-scale works as could be reasonably done. Strauss was recorded by a number of different concerns so that the extent of coverage of his works was perhaps more by luck than judgement. Strauss, unlike Elgar, was also a fine accompanist and thus his recordings extend into the field of Lieder.

In England a considerable amount of recording continued during the first World War but in Germany the studios were almost idle. In addition recording ledgers seem not to have survived so that there are only pointers to when the records were made:

- a) Labels on early copies of the records of Strauss refer to the orchestra as "Royal" hence the records must have been issued before the Kaiser abdicated in November 1918.
- b) Strauss vacated the post of Generalmusikdirektor in Berlin at the end of 1918.
- c) The session included items from *Burger als Edelmann*, but specifically not any of those which Strauss provided at the end of 1917 for a new extended version.
- d) There was a persistent rumour that Georg Szell, Strauss's assistant at this period, conducted parts of *Don Juan* as Strauss did not arrive in time. This could pass unnoticed on the finished product as Szell would have been fully familiar with how Strauss handled his works. Late in his life Szell was asked about this. His memory was obviously absolutely clear. He confirmed the story, adding that it was the first two sides and in 1917.

Strauss was renowned for having total control of the orchestra with an absolute minimum of physical movement; "The audience should perspire, not the conductor". The clean lines of these performances of the two tone poems and the astonishing amount of detail easily audible despite the age of the recording confirm this. The tension is always built up within disciplined playing.

After the war the German part of the Gramophone Company was not reunited with the English part, to the chagrin of the latter. The matrix numbers of the song recordings are from the old series of the united company but the catalogue numbers are in new series allocated by the unrepentant and newly independent German establishment. Thus, as an estimate, they were recorded in 1920 or 1921. Neighbouring matrices, where identified, do not include any further items by Strauss. (Elizabeth Schumann recalled making records with Strauss whilst in New York, but no copies are known.)

Turning from the disciplined, structured performance of Strauss the conductor we are surprised at the informal manner of Strauss the accompanist. There are many details and divergences from the printed scores that would cause critics to howl if anyone tried

them today. Perhaps we should remember that Strauss himself remarked, "Do anything you like with the music only don't be boring".

Heinrich Schlusnus (1888-1952) was initially employed as a post official but at the same time managed to have some instruction in singing. In 1914 he was conscripted into the army but discharged from active service with a leg injury. He decided to become an opera singer and made his début as a herald in *Lohengrin* the following year. By 1917 he had progressed to the Imperial Opera in Berlin and he remained a member of that house until 1945. He built up a world-wide reputation as an opera singer and as a recitalist. The voice and the manner of its training and use exemplify everything that was finest of the German school of baritones of the first four decades of this century, as heard on records of singers such as Lewandowski, Scheidl, Schorr and Schwartz. And if that age has departed so too the musicianship has changed. Schlusnus, Schumann, Lehmann and Janssen do not seek to edify us in the current manner, by individual inspection of each syllable of a song, detached and isolated from the rest; they consider a song as a unit of music.

In the first of the two sessions at which the records were made, the singer is further back, making the voice less clear but the balance better.

Robert Hutt (1878-1942) worked as an engineer until the conductor Felix Mottl told him he should study singing. Initially he had lessons in Karlsruhe, his home town, and then he worked his way up, as was normal in Germany at that time, gaining experience in a succession of houses, to reach Berlin in 1917. In 1920 during his ten year engagement there, he created the part of the Emperor in *Die Frau ohne Schatten*. He became known primarily as a Wagner-tenor and as such was much acclaimed in Berlin, London and New York.

In these two songs the singer maintains a very nice line, which perhaps is compensation if the voice is not what one might expect for such songs.

Until the latter part of the 1920s, sound in the cinema could be provided only by a pianist or a (usually small) orchestra. Sometimes music was provided, sometimes not; cinema musicians became extremely adept at matching the mood of action from moment to moment, extemporising or using whatever music they knew.

On the one hand the limitations of the silent medium seemed somehow to spur truly great directors; Eisenstein, Griffiths and Murnau, for example, as much as the seeming limitations of, say, a string quartet are no obstacle to a great composer. On the other hand we are surprised today at some of the things which were attempted: silent films of Caruso in *Pagliacci*, of Forbes-Robertson as Hamlet and of *Der Rosenkavalier*.

Before continuing, it may be useful to list the various works of Richard Strauss which come under his Opus 59:

Opus 59 *Der Rosenkavalier*, first performed in 1911.

Opus 59a Walzerfolgen des 3 Aktes

(Now known as the Second Waltz Sequence because of 59c.)

Opus 59b *Der Rosenkavalier*. Musik zu dem Film.

Opus 59c First Waltz sequence from 1st and 2nd Acts.

Opus 59d Rosenkavalier Suite.

The opera is in three acts; the film is in two parts.

The film extends the plot of the opera by including, for example, the Feldmarschall and the battle, involvement in which provides his wife with the opportunity for her affair with Octavian.

Strauss was wholly uninterested by the suggestion that *Der Rosenkavalier* should be turned into a film, and most, if not all of the work of the arrangement was done for him by Otto Singer and Carl Alwin. Music from the opera is used and re-used in the film. It is used for scenes corresponding to the opera and re-used, more or less appropriately, elsewhere. In addition, music was imported from other works.

It was also only by much persuasion that he agreed to conduct it. Probably, being the person he was, the reluctance did not extend to accepting the fees.

The Gramophone Company, however, clearly regarded the opportunity to record Strauss, using the brand new electrical recording process as a considerable coup.

The album in which these excerpts from *Der Rosenkavalier* were first issued describes them as: *selected passages from the Orchestral Version as prepared for the "Film presentation" of the Opera. Played by the Augmented Orchestras [sic] of the Tivoli Theatre, London, under the conductorship of Dr. Richard Strauss (the composer himself)... Dr. Richard Strauss, himself, came over to London to conduct the first performance of the film-orchestral-version; a performance which attracted tremendous interest throughout the country. This took place on April 12th, 1926, and the next morning Dr. Richard Strauss conducted the specially augmented Tivoli orchestra in Queen's Hall for these records. They are the first records to be made of passages from the orchestral-film-version by the new electrical process of recording.*

The sound is extremely good for its time; the new electrical recording process had itself been in use for scarcely a year. The note refers to the first English performance; the first performance had taken place in Dresden on January 10th, 1926.

At the recording session each side was recorded simultaneously at two different levels, for safety, and all seven sides were issued. (The eighth side in the album was of music by Mendelssohn conducted by Landon Ronald). The order in which the pieces were recorded is indicated by the matrix numbers. A second take was made only of the waltzes; perhaps, as these were recorded first, a need for some adjustment or correction became apparent.

The arrangement of the music for the recording created some problems for the person who wrote the notes for the album. There is a cut in the Introduction to Part I; this was disguised by the side-change. However, the two waltzes were recorded in reverse order, conveniently linked by a few chords for the horns. These chords were not, as one might think, a device to link the pieces for the recording, but are in the score as the introduction to the waltz which concludes Part I. The last side of the set contains two parts from Part I of the film, again in reverse order.

For this compact disc the extracts have been transferred in the order of the film-plot. However, as an orchestral suite the recording seems just as valid, indeed it may even have been intended to be heard thus. If this option is desired, it can readily be obtained by following the original album order indicated alongside the track listing.

In the film the first two sides depict the start of the relationship between the Marschallin and Octavian. In the opera the first side is from the duet which opens the opera, whilst side two comes near the end of the Act as Octavian is told it is time he left.

The Presentation March is played during the Feldmarschall's military doings; it has nothing to do with the presentation of the silver rose. In the film two completely different words are used; it being totally fortuitous that each is correctly rendered by the same word in English. The march is an import; an arrangement of one of an earlier set of marches.

The Waltz Movements are as delightful as any originating from the Strauss family itself.

Theatre orchestras were generally of not more than two dozen players, often considerably fewer. We hear, however, 65 players: Strings 11-10-4-2-3. Tubas, Flutes, Piccolo, Bassoons, Contra-Bassoons, Oboes, Clarinets, *Eb*-Clarinet, Bass-Clarinet, Timpani, Trumpets, Horns, Harps, Trombones, Piano and Celeste. The Augmented Tivoli Orchestra is clearly a fair-sized symphony orchestra; beyond reasonable doubt the London Symphony Orchestra; from the ranks of which doubtless the Tivoli players were recruited.

There is almost no vibrato. Portamenti are appropriate; but not those often heard in English orchestras of the period, especially in Elgar.

The improvements brought about with electric recording allow us to note that the bassoons sound like 19th century French bassoons, which in fact or essence they still were then; and that true French horns of the same period were still in use, rather than the German instruments which came to London orchestras in the late '20s.

Listeners today are often dismayed at the standards of recorded orchestral playing up to the 1930s. In particular, orchestras doing accompanying work are frequently painful to hear, indeed, one might ask sometimes, how soloists put up with them. In England lack of adequate rehearsal time and the deputy system are said to have produced a race of players who were superb sight-readers and that the nervous energy of the players on the edges of their seats transmitted itself to the audience.

Whatever the truth of this, or lack of it, there is no question whatsoever, that men of the calibre of Richard Strauss and Arthur Nikisch knew what they wanted from an orchestra and got it.

Otto Klemperer was once asked if conducting could be taught. "I can tell you in five minutes everything there is to know about conducting. [timing of punch-line worthy of great comedian] Only you won't be able to conduct."

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Illustrations: Michael Bohnen as Baron Ochs auf Lerchenau

Jacques Catelain as Octavian Rofrano

Vienna, street scene in the first years of the reign of Maria Theresia