SYMPOSIUM RECORDS CDs 1227 & 1228

MARGARETHE SIEMS VON DER KÖNIGLICHEN OPER, DRESDEN

Margarethe Siems was born in 1879 in Breslau, the German name for the Polish town of Wroclaw. Her father was an architect. She studied piano and violin with Emil Bohn (1839-1909), a distinguished musicologist and musician, and she studied singing with Aglaja Orgeni, herself a pupil of Pauline Viardot. It has been claimed that Siems was taught also by Battistini, but Battistini did not care for teaching and rarely if ever taught. It is quite likely, however, that Angelo Neumann arranged for Siems to receive some advice on the older Italian works from Battistini with whom she was shortly to appear.

Siems, her first name sometimes spelled Margarete, made her début at the Prague May Festival of 1902. The company included Mattia Battistini, Alessandro Bonci and Enrico Caruso. In the autumn she joined the Prague Opera.

Siems was unusually versatile, both as actress and singer. As a coloratura soprano she sang the music of Bellini, Donizetti, Meyerbeer and the Queen of the Night; she sang the heavier Verdi parts: Leonore, Amelia and Aida; and she sang Wagner's Venus and Elizabeth, often both in one evening, and she even sang Isolde.

In 1908, she moved to Dresden to succeed Irene Abendroth as principal dramatic coloratura soprano. For Richard Strauss she was also the ideal soprano. He chose her for the parts of Chrysothemis in the première of *Elektra*, Dresden 1909; the Marschallin in the première of *Der Rosenkavalier*, Dresden 1911, and Zerbinetta in the première of *Ariadne auf Naxos*, Stuttgart 1912. She was also the first Marschallin in London under Beecham in 1913.

In 1920 she moved to Berlin, for an engagement, with a long contract from Max von Schillings. Here she also taught at the Stern Conservatorium. Six years later she moved back to Dresden to teach, but she also gave concerts in Dresden and Breslau, until after the second World War. Her most distinguished pupil was Sigrid Onegin.

Margarethe Siems died in Dresden in 1952.

Her coloratura is astonishingly fleet and her trill, which she clearly enjoys displaying, is amazingly fine-grained. It is a beautiful voice and the enunciation is excellent, so much so that the texts of many passages can be written down as she sings, as if taking dictation. But she is not a perfect singer, and listeners must decide for themselves to what extent kindness permits any failings to be attributed to "microphone" nerves. Some have said that on some records she is insufficiently involved in the music. However, the choice of records displaying insufficient involvement varies from writer to writer.

There are things which today would be criticized. She adds ornaments, for

example, to the one Mozart piece; unacceptable today, normal when she sang them, and, many claim, expected by Mozart.

For most people her most serious and, frankly, undeniable failing is that she sometimes sings off pitch. Some have attributed this to the recording system of her day. This is untenable; it doesn't happen to singers generally and it doesn't always happen to her. The interesting point is that the fault is much more telling in some records than others. On the one hand we may be kind and attribute it to nerves, on the other we may be puzzled that she did not ask to make the less good records again, as indeed other artists did.

All but two of her records are extremely rare, so rare that probably most of them exist in only two or three copies and some are very likely unique. It is thus something of an occasion of note that it is possible to offer such a comprehensive account of her art.

Generally the technical quality of the earliest is typical of their time, though on account of their extreme rarity the listener will forgive the less than perfect state of some copies. These were made in Prague in 1903 and 1906, and they are so rare that only six of them were known to Harold Bauer when he compiled his *Historical Records* 1898 – 1908/09.

The Parlophone records are astonishingly vivid for their time. A recording exists, albeit very primitive, of the cabaletta from *Les Huguenots* sung by Melba; a comparison of this with the version sung by Siems is most interesting. It is strange that neither version of the great aria from *La Traviata* is accompanied by its cabaletta.

The Pathé discs are, in their own way, also astonishing. They were recorded on special large cylinders from which the sound was transferred mechanically to discs; a process which seems today most primitive, but which, when properly operated, could produce surprisingly good results. A feature of the system was that from one master-cylinder discs of various sizes could be made; the larger the size, the greater the volume and the better the quality of reproduction. However, the larger sizes were both more expensive and more prone to breakage so that they are correspondingly less common. The transfers in this album are all from the large, 35 cm size and, except where sometimes the surface has been spoiled by abrasion, the sound is very good. Towards the end of the aria from *Martha* Siems increases the tempo as if suddenly made aware of the approaching end of the record.

The Parlophone and Pathé discs are generally dated 1911 and 1912 respectively but as they contain nothing from *Der Rosenkavalier*, then the latest "hit", it may be that they were made slightly earlier and released in those years.

An indication of the impact of Richard Strauss on the musical scene is provided by the numbers of performances of his works in the seasons mounted by Thomas Beecham at the expense of his father, Sir Joseph Beecham, out of profits from the famous pills.

In 1910 *Elektra*, *Feuersnot*, and *Salome* received a total of 28 performances; 26 under Beecham and two under the composer. (On one occasion *Elektra* as the matinée was followed by *Tales of Hoffmann* in the evening; one wonders if people came up to

town for the day and did both.)

In 1913 Ariadne auf Naxos, Elektra, Der Rosenkavalier and Salome received a total of 21 performances. Beecham had heard the première of Der Rosenkavalier in Dresden and it became his third Strauss success in London.

In 1914 Der Rosenkavalier was given 6 times.

In the period Beecham also conducted several of the orchestral works; on one occasion *Salome* was preceded by *Ein Heldenleben*. The casts evoke Pavlovian responses amongst record collectors. Siems was the Marschallin for many performances.

Incidentally, on the two last occasions, Claire Dux could not appear so London heard Lotte Lehmann for the first time. She sang Sophie, not Octavian as announced. Many years later she recounted that she was far too shy to go up to Siems or Frieda Hempel, the Marschallins on those two nights.

And of course there is no reason to doubt that the success of these works would have continued but for Mr Asquith's announcement on the morning of August 4th 1914.

Because of the interest in "creator-records" it was felt that collectors would appreciate the opportunity of hearing also those which involve only Sophie and Octavian, sung by Minnie Nast and Eva von der Osten, respectively.

The dates of the Gramophone Company records from *Der Rosenkavalier* are precisely known. The Odeon discs were presumably made at very nearly the same time. The Gramophone Company discs are first on this issue simply to allow the earliest part of the work to be heard first.

It is a pity that these, the last recorded and in some ways the most interesting in this album, are in some ways the least adequate technically. The quiet reflection of the Marschallin's monologue, the lush orchestration, and the simultaneous singing of high soprano voices each present problems for the apparatus. Also the Odeon records are somewhat noisy; perhaps these copies were pressed during the Great War as supplies of fresh material declined and more re-mix was added.

It will interest readers to note that the copy of the Marschallin's monologue used for this transfer is autographed in bright violet ink: "Herzlichst/Mag. Siems". The pressing is early enough for us to think that it may actually have been taken by an admirer to the stage door of the Dresden Opera.

Angelo Neumann

was born in Vienna in 1838.) tenor. He made his début as a tenor in 1859. From 1876 he was an impresario at Leipzig, Bremen and Prague. He also formed touring company, taking Wagner's operas to London, Paris etc. Neumann died in Prague in 1910.

Anna Maria Aglaja Orgeni

was born Anna Maria von Görger St. Jörgen in Hungary in 1841. After studying with Pauline Viardot-Garcia she made her début in Berlin in 1865 and she appeared with great success in many European towns. During the 1880s she settled in Dresden and became a

teacher, and, there, in 1908, she was the first woman to be made a Professor. As the Great War started she moved to Vienna where she continued to teach and where she died in 1926.

Her pupils included Gertrude Förstel, Hedwig Francillo-Kaufmann, Berta Morena, Margarethe Siems, Edyth Walker and Erika Wedekind.

As the label indicates, Siems sings Alabieff's "The Nightingale" in the arrangement of her teacher.

Gertrude Förstel, k. k. Hofopernsängerin in Wien

was born in 1880 in Leipzig where her father played in the Gewandhaus Orchestra, and there she studied piano at the conservatory making her début as a pianist in 1897. Angelo Neumann heard her singing, and had her taught at his own expense in Berlin by Selma Niklass-Kempner. She then went to Dresden for further instruction under Orgeni. Her début as a singer was in Prague as Amina in *La Sonnambula*. In 1904 she appeared at the Bayreuth Festival and continued there until 1912. In 1906 she moved to Vienna. There her work was very much appreciated and her roles included Sophie in the first Viennese performance of *Der Rosenkavalier*. She moved with great success to the concert platform in 1920, being highly regarded particularly for her singing of music by Mozart, Bruckner and Mahler. Later she taught in Cologne.

Förstel died at Bad Godesberg in 1950.

Minnie Nast, von der königlichen Oper, Dresden

was born at Karlsruhe in 1874 and received her musical education at the conservatory of that town. She made her début in Stadttheater of Aachen in 1897. The following year she moved to the Hofoper of Dresden where she remained until the end of her career, immediately after the Great War. On her North American tour of 1905 she was very well received. She stayed on in Dresden to teach until, with the destruction of her home during the night of February 12/13 1945, she was forced to flee. She died in 1956 at Füssen im Allgäu, Bavaria.

Eva von der Osten, von der königlichen Oper, Dresden

was born in Heligoland in 1881 and she studied with August Iffert in Dresden. She made her début at the Hofoper as the Page in *Les Huguenots* in 1902 and remained there until her retirement. She was married to the baritone, Friedrich Plaschke, also a member of the company, and thus her name appears variously as von der Osten, Plaschke-von der Osten and von der Osten-Plaschke. From 1906 she frequently appeared at Berlin's Comic Opera. She appeared in Dresden's first staging of *Eugen Onegin* in 1907. In 1912 was the first Ariadne, in Stuttgart. In 1913 she joined Siems for London's first performances of *Der Rosenkavalier* and the following year London heard Kundry in *Parsifal* sung by her in Covent Garden's first performance of the work. In 1918 she appeared in the première of *Die ferne Klang* by Schreker.

She and her husband were members of The German Opera Company which toured North America in 1923/24. She retired in 1930 with a performance of *Die Walküre*, in which she sang Brünnhilde and her husband Wotan. However, she stayed on as a director in the course of which she continued her association with Richard Strauss by producing the first performance of his *Arabella*. She died in Dresden in 1936.

Desider Aranyi

Mitglied des königlichen deutschen Landestheaters, Prag was born at Szathmar-Némthy, Hungary in 1868 and he studied in Budapest. He made his début in 1890 as Raoul in *Les Huguenots* in Brünn and remained there for two years. After further studies in Milan with Rossi he continued his career in Berlin, Budapest and Prague. In the last named he sang in the première of *Tiefland* in 1903. Later he taught in Budapest. He died in 1923 at Pesterzsebebét, Hungary.

Desider Zador

königlicher bayerischer Hofopernsänger, München

was born in Horna-Krupa, Hungary in 1873. His first occupation was as a teacher, he then studied singing in Budapest. He made his début in 1898 at Czernowitz as Count Almaviva in *Figaros Hochzeit*. After a period in Elberfeld he moved to Prague. He appeared as a guest-artist at Covent Garden, being asked back a number of times. Later he sang and directed in Budapest. He died in Berlin in 1931.

Acknowledgements: On behalf of collectors Symposium Records thanks Jean-Paul Getty K. B. E. for making available the records for tracks 1 to 17 on CD 1227 and tracks 1-5, 7 and 9-12 on CD 1228; and Marco Contini for tracks 18 to 21 on CD 1227. The portraits were kindly made available by Len Court and the opera house pieces by Stanley Henig. Thanks are due also to Paul Lewis and Adrian Tuddenham for assistance with the production.

Copyright Notice: This compilation with its notes is copyright, it may not be broadcast, copied, hired out, publicly performed or stored in a retrieval system without written permission.