

# *SYMPOSIUM RECORDS CD 1229*

## The Harold Wayne Collection – Volume 32

### EDYTH WALKER & HELENE WILDBRUNN

Both of the artists in this volume sang across the contralto-mezzo to soprano divide; both are examples of the best Wagnerian singing in the period following Wagner's death and both followed careers predominantly in the German-speaking part of Europe.

From the point of view of collectors, of each there is also a paucity of records. Edyth Walker's records were made at the very beginning of the century, at a time when the lower female voice did not reproduce particularly well, and, in addition, the repertoire she selected was not of the most popular. Helene Wildbrunn's career in the studio commenced in the difficult times of the end of Great War, with the ensuing unrest and inflation, and may well have been closed by the rise of Frida Leider.

EDYTH WALKER was born in Hopewell in the United States in 1867. Her voice showed great promise and she studied with the famous teacher Orgeni in Dresden. She also took lessons from Marianne Brandt. After a concert in Leipzig she made her début in Berlin in 1894 singing the role of Fidés in Meyerbeer's opera *Le Prophète*. Her 1894 success was sufficient for her to be engaged at the Imperial Opera in Vienna. She first sang there in 1895 and in 1896 sang Magdalena in the Viennese première of Kienzl's *Der Evangelimann*. Most of her roles in Vienna were small and in the contralto-mezzo range.

Apparently she and Mahler - he came to Vienna two years after her - did not get on very well with each other. Nevertheless, in 1901 she sang in the first performance of *Das Klagende Lied*, and in his productions of the Ring cycle she sang Fricka, Erda, Rossweise and Waltraute. In Vienna, she, Laura Hilgermann and Anna von Mildenburg sang the three ladies in Mahler's production of *Die Zauberflöte*, whilst in the Salzburg Festival of 1901, she sang Donna Elvira with Lilli Lehmann as Donna Anna. Probably Amneris and Brangäne were her biggest parts. In 1903 she left Vienna for New York, where she made her début at the Metropolitan Opera as Amneris on 30th November, in a cast which included Caruso, Gadschi and Plançon. Krehbiel, writing in *The New York Times* said "Miss Walker is comely, familiar with the conventions of stage deportment and the possessor of a voice of lovely quality... In her scene with the priest in the last act she made a most moving manifestation of her dramatic gifts. Indeed her performance of this scene was probably the finest that the patrons of the Metropolitan Opera can recall". In New York she sang Brünnhilde (*Die Walküre*), Leonora (*La Favorita*), Orsini (*Lucrezia Borgia*), Ortrud, Waltraute etc.; in all, 108 appearances in three years.

In 1906, perhaps because the Metropolitan's complement of sopranos mitigated against her desire for soprano roles, she moved to Hamburg, and then, from 1912 to 1917 she sang in Munich.

She made her *début* at Covent Garden in 1900, and in 1910 she was the first London Elektra. *The Times* wrote, "The Elektra of Edyth Walker was a triumph of well calculated restraint, as well as of bodily endurance" and *The Observer* commented, "Incredible as it may seem to those who know the score, it was possible for Miss Walker, never a hair's breadth from the centre of the note, to vocalize perfectly the most trying and strenuous passages".

This great artist also sang Ortrud and Kundry at Bayreuth in 1908 and, although considered to be a high mezzo-soprano, she sang many soprano roles including Isolde and Brünnhilde.

In retirement she taught for some years in America. She died in New York in 1950.

HELENE WILDBRUNN, originally Helene Wehrenpfennig, was born in Vienna in 1882 and studied singing there with the famous teacher Rosa Papier. In 1906 under her original name she sang small parts at the Vienna Volksoper, but she made her real *début* as a contralto in 1907 under her married name of Helene Wildbrunn at the Stadttheater in Dortmund. (Her husband was the tenor, later *régisseur*, Karl Wildbrunn.) During the next seven years she sang the roles of Ortrud, Fricka, Amneris and Dalila with great success and then, from 1914 to 1918, she was engaged at the Hofoper in Stuttgart. There she became a high dramatic soprano and was particularly acclaimed as a Wagnerian interpreter. Other appearances included Brünnhilde in Hamburg in 1917. From 1918 to 1929 she was in Berlin, until 1925 at the Staatsoper and then at the Städtisches Oper.

No doubt the fact that she was Austrian and was singing in Germany during the war years meant that she was unable to travel freely abroad, hence it was only after 1918 that her international career started. Thus, in the 1921-22 season she sang all three Brünnhildes and Kundry at Madrid. She sang in Vienna almost every year from 1919 to 1931, and in 1922 she travelled to South America as a member of a party which included a troupe from the Vienna State Opera, the Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra and Felix Weingartner as principal conductor. In Buenos Aires, São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro complete Ring cycles were given with Wildbrunn again as all three Brünnhildes. In South America she also sang Kundry, a role which she repeated at La Scala, Milan later the same year. She sang Donna Anna in the Salzburg Festival Season of 1924, and came to Covent Garden in 1927 to sing Leonora in *Fidelio* in performances conducted by Bruno Walter.

From 1932 onwards she sang many concert performances in Vienna and from 1932 till 1950 she was a professor of singing at the Musikakademie. She died in Vienna in 1972

in her ninetieth year.

Her records, Odeon and Polydor, are all, despite their excellence, unaccountably rare.

## EDYTH WALKER

1 Am Meer (Schubert) These early recordings, made in Vienna in 1902, are major rarities and are valuable as souvenirs of a great artist. In this lovely song by Schubert we can already hear evidence of the artist's beautiful voice, but the recording is too primitive to give us more than a glimpse of her artistry.

2 The lost chord (Sullivan) This was surely an odd choice to record in Vienna for what must have been mainly an Austrian public. There is little to add except to say that she sings the song with good legato and excellent diction.

3 Die Walküre-Walkürenruf Although Edyth Walker was considered to be a high mezzo-soprano it is clear that she was already singing major Wagnerian soprano roles. It must have been very difficult to record this particular passage in 1902 with only piano support, and she was wise to re-make it with orchestral accompaniment in 1907.

4 Love's old sweet song (Molloy) This is another odd choice for an artist whose work was mainly in the operatic field. The reason for its inclusion here is that it may well be a unique copy and record collectors will no doubt be glad to have an opportunity of hearing it, even though, as an exception, the disc was obviously in rather poor condition.

5 Die Walküre-Walkürenruf This is much better than the earlier version and demonstrates Edyth Walker's fine qualities as a dramatic soprano. Wotan has asked Brünnhilde to defend Siegmund in his forthcoming combat with Hunding. With her wild battle cry she shows that she is delighted to do so.

6 Lohengrin-Entweihte Götter This passage from Act 2 of the opera shows how well suited the artist was to purely lyrical soprano roles such as Elsa. The voice is of beautiful quality throughout and her legato singing is a model of its kind.

7 Das Rheingold-Erda Warnung In this passage Erda warns Wotan that he must give up the Ring to the giants Fafner and Fasolt. Reluctantly he agrees. This is one of the best records of Edyth Walker. Although she sang purely soprano roles with great success, she was certainly an excellent Erda, phrasing this famous passage with lovely flowing tone.

8 Tannhäuser-Gebet der Elisabeth Elisabeth kneels and prays before the shrine of the Blessed Virgin for a speedy release from life. The singer maintains great purity of tone and lovely legato phrasing in this fine recording.

9 Die Allmacht (Schubert) This Lied is one long hymn of praise to God, the Lord of

Heaven and Earth. It is admirably suited to the talents of this artist.

10 *Rienzi-Arie des Adriano* Adriano laments the fact that he has deserted the Tribune's party and he tries to heal the feud between his father Orsino and the popular party led by Rienzi. Adriano, although a man, is always sung by a contralto, and is what the Victorians called a "breeches role". It is admirably suited to the talents of Edyth Walker who sings the occasional decorations with agility and accuracy. This is early Wagner and shows a strong Italian influence in the formal shape of the aria.

## HELENE WILDBRUNN

11 *Tristan und Isolde-Mild und leise* At the close of the opera Isolde sings the famous 'Liebestod'. Wildbrunn is in splendid voice and phrases the sublime music with consummate grace. Naturally one misses the richness of a modern recording of the orchestra, but the vocal part is beautifully portrayed throughout.

12 *Fidelio-Abscheulicher, wo eilst du hin... Komm' o Hoffnung* Leonora's great recitative and aria is an ideal vehicle for a voice like Wildbrunn's and, as we would expect of her, she sings it with great distinction. In the final section she whips up the excitement in telling fashion, though the final high note lacks power, probably due to concern not to overload the recording machine.

13 *La Gioconda-So sei es* This is one of the best-known arias from the opera, more readily recognisable as 'Suicidio'. Gioconda is deeply distressed by the death of Laura. Her anguish is so increased when news comes to her that her blind mother is missing, that she considers suicide. Wildbrunn sings very well despite the handicap of singing Italian opera in a German translation.

14 *Oberon-Ozean du Ungeheuer... Die Winde lispeln* Reiza, the heroine of the opera, sings this magnificent aria. It is an ideal choice for the talents of Wildbrunn. She sings it quite superbly and rises effortlessly to the challenge and excitement of the conclusion.

15 *Siegfried-Ewig war ich* As the opera ends, Brünnhilde proclaims her everlasting love for Siegfried. Once again, Wildbrunn sings with passionate warmth in a performance of great distinction.

16 *Tosca-Vissi d'arte* In this aria Tosca laments that despite the fact that she has lived for music, has given her jewels to the church, and has helped the poor, she has become the victim of great unhappiness. Wildbrunn, I was glad to hear, sings the aria in excellent Italian and phrases it with her usual art, but nevertheless, the result is not really outstanding.

17 Die Götterdämmerung-Starke Scheite... Wisst ihr, wie das ward? In the great immolation scene which concludes both the opera and the entire cycle of the Ring, Brünnhilde mounts Grane, her horse, and rides into the flames. It is ideally suited to the talents of Wildbrunn. She sings majestically and tirelessly throughout, and she is aided by a noticeably superior orchestra and better recorded sound than hitherto.

John Freestone

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