

The VERDI REVIVAL in the WEIMAR REPUBLIC

The five operas featured on this Compact Disc were all written during the years of Verdi's pre-eminence as an operatic composer. Today we tend to think of *Macbeth* as early Verdi, but it was in fact his tenth opera. With age the pace of composition inevitably slowed down and much time was given over to revision. *Don Carlos* received its first performance twenty years after *Macbeth*. Verdi was then in his mid-fifties; in his remaining thirty four years he composed just three more operas.

Four of the five featured works, *Les Vêpres Siciliennes* is the exception, are certainly now regarded as a reasonably central part of the standard international operatic repertoire. However, this was certainly not always the case. By 1914 none of the five had been performed in living memory at Covent Garden and they had never been given at all at the Metropolitan Opera. *Les Vêpres Siciliennes* and *Don Carlos* were both originally written for the Paris Opéra. After the first performances they disappeared from the house repertoire until well into the second part of the twentieth century. By 1850 Verdi was recognized as the leading contemporary composer of Italian opera. Thereafter his works have always been central in Italian operatic tradition, but it is worth noting that between 1874 and 1938 *Macbeth* was not performed at La Scala, whilst there were no performances of *Simon Boccanegra* at the San Carlo in Naples between 1883 and 1929. There is no doubt that there has been a major Verdi revival since the mid-twentieth century. Today there are innumerable performances of most of his operas, and all of them enjoy occasional revivals. Whilst it is obviously difficult, if not impossible, to lay down precisely where and when the Verdi renaissance began, a strong claim can be made for the German Weimar Republic between 1919 and 1933. *La Forza del Destino* offers the obvious starting point.

This opera is a vast sprawling epic spread over a long period of time, and involving the apparently co-incidental transportation of various characters between Spain and Italy. Whilst the main source is an obscure Spanish play, the opera also draws on a totally different work by Schiller. Amongst other changes in Verdi's own revision of 1869, seven years after the première at St. Petersburg, he significantly altered the ordering of Act 3, making it, if anything, even less comprehensible. Performance lore shows that until relatively recently few producers resisted the temptation to tamper with the opera in some way, usually by making cuts.

In his *Annals of Opera* Loewenberg notes a production at Hamburg in 1913, suggesting that this may have been the beginning of the Verdi renaissance in Germany. Interestingly, at round about the same time there were a few performances of *Don Carlos* in Berlin. It is idle to speculate as to whether the Verdi revival might indeed have started earlier were it not for the outbreak of the Great War. In practice the real revival actually started in the mid-'20s with the

publication and first performances of what is often described as a new German version of *La Forza del Destino* by Franz Werfel. An important, rather than a major literary figure, Werfel's large output included novels, plays and poetry. His first real success was *Verdi; a novel of the opera* published in 1924, at a time when there were very few books on the composer. He followed this with a translation of *La Forza del Destino*.

Werfel was, apparently, also the producer when his version of the work was presented initially in Altenburg in November 1925 and then in Dresden later the same month. Werfel made various changes to the ordering of events in Act 3 compared with Verdi's 1869 revision. The first performance at Dresden of the Werfel version was conducted by Fritz Busch with Seinemeyer as Leonora. Whatever view we take of the ethics of altering a composer's intentions, or the quality of Werfel's work, it clearly enjoyed considerable success. His version was widely used on the German stage and was translated into various other European languages. In January 1943 Bruno Walter even introduced it to the Metropolitan Opera in New York.

La Forza del Destino reached the Berlin Staatsoper on 30 April 1927 and by the end of 1935 it had achieved no less than 87 performances. A few months after the above first performance *Luisa Miller* also entered the repertoire of the Staatsoper. Its success is perhaps unsurprising given the enduring popularity in Berlin of Schiller's *Kabale und Liebe* on which it is based. *Les Vêpres Siciliennes* reached the Staatsoper in June 1932, as the Weimar period was coming to a close. Kleiber conducted and the cast included Roswaenge, Schlusnus, List and Hilde Konetzni. As far as Berlin was concerned, during the Weimar years *Don Carlos*, *Macbeth* and *Simon Boccanegra* were the property of the opera company based at Charlottenburg. Until 1925 it was known as the Deutsche Oper, changing its name in that year to the Städtische Oper. *Don Carlos* with Kipnis in the role of King Philip entered the repertoire and was given thirteen times in the 1928-9 season. Andrésen was also in the cast. *Simon Boccanegra* was equally well received during the following season. *Macbeth* was produced in October 1931. According to Rudolf Bing, then assistant Intendant at the Charlottenburg, the performance of Sigrid Onegin played a major part in the huge success of this production, which was given nineteen performances during the season. Andrésen sang the part of Banquo. There is considerable historic significance to this *Macbeth*. The producer was Carl Ebert and the designer Caspar Neher. In 1938 Bing, Ebert and Neher were all involved in the production of *Macbeth* at Glyndebourne. Twenty-one years later the same trio introduced the opera into the repertoire of the Metropolitan Opera.

It is worth bearing in mind that in Germany, like Italy, there was an opera season in virtually every city or town of any size. There is a fascinating essay entitled *Franz Werfel and the Verdi Renaissance* in George Martin's *Aspects of Verdi*. He claims that in the 1927-8 season there were more than 1,500 chronicled performances of Verdi operas at some 135 opera houses in Germany. He is surely right to claim that a decade earlier such figures would have been considered incredible. Clearly the smaller houses joined in what was almost a voyage of discovery. The total includes the first German performance of *I Masnadieri*,

another opera based on a play by Schiller, in Barmen. The following season a new German version of *I due Foscari* was performed at Halle.

There is something special about creator recordings. There can be none for any of the operas featured on this disc, or which in any meaningful or assured sense link us back to the first productions and the beginnings of a performance tradition. However, there is a parallel interest in the material on this compact disc. Each of the artists had some involvement in the Weimar Verdi renaissance, and there are numerous linkages between the Weimar performances and those which took place later in other countries. Some seventy years on it is not unreasonable to claim that there is indeed something of a performance tradition, where specifically German artists are interpreting Verdi, and that any such tradition clearly began at the time of these Weimar recordings. At this time there was a distinct shortage of earlier reference points. Most of the sung items on this disc are in German, and it seems probable that many were the first versions to be recorded in that language. It would be absurd to place them on a par with creator recordings, but in an historical sense they have an importance of their own.

It is unusual to include orchestral pieces in compilations devoted to singers of the past. However, the theme of Verdi in Weimar cannot be placed in its full historical context without paying attention to the conductors and musical directors who inspired it. The presence of such as Leo Blech, Fritz Busch, Erich Kleiber, Otto Klemperer, Fritz Reiner and Bruno Walter underpinned Germany's contribution to opera in the 1920s, perhaps even more than the many fine singers who participated in performances across the range, from standard classical repertoire to avant-garde. Conductors, rather than producers, were dominant. By modern technical standards the three orchestral recordings from *La Forza del Destino* conducted by Busch may sound primitive. Clearly we are listening to a small orchestra, but the music is performed with conviction, style and panache; the attack is clean, tempi persuasive. It seems almost unbelievable that prior to 1925 the players can have had no familiarity with the score.

Fritz Busch's relatively short life (1890-1951) was dominated by music. His first public appearance was as a child prodigy at the age of seven, playing the piano. By 1909 he was conducting at the opera house in Riga. After a spell in Aachen, he succeeded Max von Schillings in 1918 as Director of the Stuttgart Opera. There he built his reputation particularly on the introduction of new works. In 1922 he was appointed to follow Fritz Reiner as Music Director of the Dresden Opera. Following the production of the Werfel version of *La Forza del Destino*, Busch introduced *Macbeth* and *Don Carlos* into the repertoire. George Martin points out that by the time Busch left Dresden, in March 1933, he was offering seasons with no less than ten works by Verdi. Busch made no secret of his intense dislike for the Nazis. According to Rudolf Bing, Dresden was a hot bed of Nazi support well before the end of the Weimar Republic, so it is perhaps hardly surprising that Busch was promptly sacked when they came to power. His international reputation was such that he had no shortage of work. For some seasons he conducted at the Colón in Buenos Aires.

In Britain Busch is likely to be best remembered for his work at Glyndebourne where he was the first music director. Of course, Glyndebourne established its fame and reputation through performances of Mozart whose operas dominated the repertoire. However, in 1938 it gave the very first professional performance in England of Verdi's *Macbeth*. As already mentioned Ebert, Neher and Bing were all involved; Busch was the conductor. In 1951, shortly before his untimely death, Busch took the Glyndebourne company to the Edinburgh Festival with its second Verdi opera, *La Forza del Destino*. Although this was not the Werfel version, Busch's career had perhaps gone full circle. He has a legitimate claim to have founded the Verdi renaissance in Germany and, in their turn, these two Verdi productions at Glyndebourne helped to pave the way for each opera to win a secure place in the operatic repertoire of British companies from the 1960s onwards.

"Those whom the gods love die young" is a phrase sadly relevant to Meta Seinemeyer. She was born in 1895 in Berlin. In a career of but ten years she established herself as an international artist. A member of the Charlottenburg and subsequently the Dresden companies, she sang also in New York, Buenos Aires, Vienna and London. Her Berlin début was in the title role of Offenbach's *La Belle Hélène*, but mostly she sang relatively minor parts, including three by Wagner. Although this was before the Verdi revival, works such as *Aïda* and *Il Trovatore* were very much part of the repertoire, but the leading soprano roles were the preserve of more established artists. However, early in 1923 Edward Moericke, resident conductor of the Charlottenburg Opera, together with Leo Blech, organised a German company for what has been described as a North American tour. Actually it seems that most of its performances were in New York, first at the Metropolitan Opera and subsequently at the Lexington Theatre. The entry of the United States of America into the First World War had led to an informal embargo on German works and German artists at the Metropolitan Opera; thus to some extent this makeshift touring company met a pent up demand. Seinemeyer sang Eva in *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg* which included Plaschke, Kipnis and Hutt under Blech, and Elizabeth in *Tannhäuser* opposite Urlus. These were her first major performances and it may seem curious in retrospect that on returning to Berlin her assignments remained much as before. However, in Autumn 1924 she was invited to sing Marguérite in *Faust* at Dresden. Her success led to a permanent contract.

Dresden was Seinemeyer's artistic base for her few remaining years. Unfortunately, there seems to be no complete published record of her activity there. We do know something of the highlights. In 1925 she created the part of the Duchess in Busoni's *Doctor Faust*. The following year she sang Leonora in the performances *La Forza del Destino*, the starting point for the Verdi revival. She also appeared a Coigny in *Andrea Chénier* opposite Tino Pattiera. This was followed by a visit to South America. Her Colón operas were *Die Walküre* (Sieglinde), *Tannhäuser*, *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg* and *Der Freischütz*. She repeated the three Wagner roles at Covent Garden three years later. Meanwhile, in 1927 she sang Tosca and *Aïda* at the Vienna State Opera opposite Alfred Piccaver.

It seems that Seinemeyer was already unwell during her visit to London. Details of her illness are sketchy and contradictory, and we do not have details about her relationship with the conductor Frieder Weissmann whom she married shortly before her death. He was the conductor for most of her records.

Given the shortness of her life and career, Seinemeyer's recorded legacy is substantial, over one hundred records made between 1924 and 1929, mainly for Parlophon. A few were unpublished, but most of them sold in very considerable numbers and have always been popular with collectors. Most critics classify Seinemeyer as a lyric soprano, but perhaps the description 'spinto' would be more appropriate. Her records from *Andrea Chénier*, *Lohengrin* and *Otello* contain a great deal of beautiful and moving singing. However, those from *La Forza del Destino* and *Don Carlos* reveal another side to her and suggest that with a few more years she would have evolved into a great dramatic soprano. The phrasing on these records is majestic. Her record of the Act 2 aria from *La Forza del Destino* is reminiscent of that of Celestina Boninsegna, so often considered as *hors concours*; and has the advantage that, spread over two sides, more of the music is given. The three solo items sung by Seinemeyer on this Compact Disc are in Italian, a language which she hardly ever, if at all, had the opportunity to sing on stage, whilst the duets in which she participates are in German.

Seinemeyer's partner in the extensive recorded passages from *La Forza del Destino* is Ivar Andrésen (1896-1940). His debut was with the Royal Opera in Stockholm in 1919, but authorities differ as to which role he sang first, the Landgraf in *Tannhäuser* or the King in *Aïda*. Curiously, Andrésen's career moved in exactly the opposite direction to that of Seinemeyer. He joined the Dresden company in 1925, moving to the Charlottenburg house in Berlin in 1931. He had already appeared there as a guest in the first performance of *Don Carlos* in 1928. Presumably the requirement for three bass voices taxed the company's resources. Andrésen was called in to sing the role of the Monk (the voice of Charles V). Later as a regular member of the company his roles included Banquo in *Macbeth*.

Given Andrésen's vocal attributes, an increasing concentration on Wagner was perhaps inevitable. His first performance at the Metropolitan Opera in New York was as Daland in *Der Fliegende Holländer*. He also appeared there in *Lohengrin*, *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg*, *Tannhäuser*, *Tristan und Isolde* and *Die Walküre*. The only non-Wagnerian part in his two seasons there was in Weinberger's *Svanda Dudak (Schwanda the Bagpiper)*. His two summer seasons at Covent Garden in 1930 and 1931 were equally devoted to Wagner. He sang in various festivals at Bayreuth; perhaps the highlight was his Gurnemanz in *Parsifal* in 1931, when Toscanini conducted. Towards the end of his career Andrésen worked again with Fritz Busch who had, of course, been his musical director at Dresden. In 1935 he sang Sarastro in *Die Zauberflöte* and Osmin in *Die Entführung aus dem Serail* at Glyndeboume.

Although the bass voice may attract fewer aficionados than the tenor or the soprano, his records have always had great appeal to discerning collectors. Andrésen's recorded legacy, including unpublished items, is around 113 records.

We hear a large, black bass voice and some wonderful sonorous singing. The records reflect his career on stage. Wagner is pre-eminent, but Verdi is not neglected, duets from *La Forza del Destino*, concerted numbers from *Aïda* (also with Seinemeyer) and solo items from *Emani*, *Macbeth* and the Verdi Requiem.

Heinrich Schlusnus (1888-1952) is probably best remembered internationally as an outstanding exponent of the art of Lieder singing. His operatic career was almost exclusively in Germany. His début in Berlin in 1916 was as Count di Luna in *Il Trovatore*. The following year he joined the company of the Staatsoper where he remained until 1945. He soon developed a wide repertoire, appearing in the first Berlin performances of Liszt's *Die Legende von der heiligen Elizabeth* and Pfitzner's *Palestrina* in a production by the composer, but his prime association was surely with Verdi, and Schlusnus became a major participant in the revival.

In 1924 Schlusnus appeared as Rigoletto in a cast which included Gigli as the Duke. His next Verdi role came the following year as Germont in *La Traviata*, this time with Tauber in the cast. His association with Verdi developed further with performances in *Un Ballo in Maschera* opposite Frieda Leider, and *Otello*. He then participated in the first Berlin performance of *La Forza del Destino* which was given by the Staatsoper at the Kroll theatre. In later performances in the main house he repeated his Don Carlos in a cast which included Roswaenge as Don Alvaro and Andrésen as Padre Guardiano. In 1930 he sang Amonasro in *Aïda*. This time the tenor was Lauri-Volpi. The production of *Les Vêpres Siciliennes* at the Staatsoper in June 1932 with Schlusnus as De Montfort was the last major Verdi revival during Weimar period. As a postlude it is noteworthy that when *Don Carlos* finally entered the regular repertoire of the Staatsoper (there had been four performances in 1913) Schlusnus sang Posa.

In their *Grosses Sängerlexicon*, Kutsch and Riemens give indications of an extensive international career, but as far as can be ascertained most of this was on the concert platform rather than the operatic stage. There was an engagement with the Chicago opera in the late 1920s, but little detail is available. By way of contrast, the recorded legacy is simply enormous, around 370 commercial recordings made between 1917 and 1951, together with a mass of broadcast material. The recordings made in the earlier part of the career are particularly desirable, the voice is beautiful and beautifully produced, and there is plenty of characterization. Verdi is well represented with arias from *Don Carlos*, *La Traviata*, *Un Ballo in Maschera*, *La Forza del Destino*, *Otello*, *Rigoletto*, *Il Trovatore* and *Les Vêpres Siciliennes*. There are also more or less complete radio performances of *Rigoletto* and *Les Vêpres Siciliennes*.

Helge Roswaenge (1897-1972) first appeared as early as 1921 as Don José in *Carmen* at Neustrelitz. During a two year engagement at Altenburg he developed an extensive repertoire, including Alfredo in *La Traviata* and Manrico in *Il Trovatore*. He was a member of the Berlin Staatsoper company from 1929 to 1935 and participated in the production of *Les Vêpres Siciliennes* with Schlusnus. A few months later he opened the season at the Vienna Staatsoper as Radames. Roswaenge's repertoire, eventually of well over one hundred roles, included the

Duke in *Rigoletto*, Don Alvaro in *La Forza del Destino* and the title role in *Don Carlos*. During the 'thirties he sang extensively throughout the German speaking operatic world with a series of performances at both the Bayreuth and Salzburg festivals. In retrospect it is, perhaps, hardly surprising that after the war there was suspicion in his native Denmark over his political loyalties. In fact there is no evidence of any fascist sympathies, indeed, after the war he continued to sing at the Staatsoper, now in East Berlin, and he also appeared in Vienna. At the very end of his career he gave concerts in the Carnegie Hall and even appeared in operetta in Munich to mark the fiftieth anniversary of his first stage appearance.

Roswaenge's records have always appealed to collectors. His powerful dramatic tenor has a bright, cutting edge, and the repertoire reflects his stage career, with a great deal of Verdi and virtually no Wagner. There are arias and duets from *Il Trovatore*, *La Traviata*, *Aïda*, *Rigoletto*, *La Forza del Destino*, *Les Vêpres Siciliennes*, *Un Ballo in Maschera* and *Otello*. He also participated in the 'complete' versions of *Rigoletto* and *Les Vêpres Siciliennes*.

Alexander Kipnis (1891-1978) ranks on any count as one of the great voices of the century. He sang in Hamburg and Wiesbaden before joining the Charlottenburg company. Berlin was his artistic home throughout the Weimar years. As already mentioned, he participated in the first performance of *Don Carlos* at that house. He also sang Ramphis in *Aïda*. By the end of the 'twenties Kipnis was also appearing regularly at the Staatsoper. He remained there until 1935, well into the Nazi era, although he was Jewish. Alfred Frankenstein recalls in *The Record Collector* the very last performance he heard in Berlin before leaving for Palestine: It was *La Forza del Destino* with Roswaenge, Schlusnus and with Kipnis as Padre Guardiano.

Kipnis was developing a major international career before he left Berlin, with appearances at the Paris Opéra, Covent Garden, the Colón in Buenos Aires and, above all, the Chicago Opera. Later, he had several seasons in Vienna, and he was a member of the Metropolitan Opera from 1940 to 1946. He made his first records for Odeon as early as 1916 and his last for Victor thirty years later. They include arias from *Simon Boccanegra*, *Don Carlos* and *Les Vêpres Siciliennes*. Most were recorded before the formal commencement of the Verdi revival on stage.

The career of Wilhelm Strienz (1900-1987) is well documented by Jens-Uwe Volmecke in *The Record Collector*. As a child Strienz had some talent as a pianist, but after school he began to train for a career in commerce. He was called up during the Great War, but hostilities ceased before he saw active service. In 1919, on the advice of Martha Fuchs, he turned to musical studies, in the vocal department under Theodor Scheidl, who did not normally teach. From 1921 his career developed as an opera-singer in Berlin, Wiesbaden and Bremen. However, many German radio stations had ambitious operatic programmes and employed their own ensembles in the same way as they might an orchestra. Thus, from 1926 onwards Strienz's main career was on radio and on the concert platform. In 1933, however, he was dismissed from the radio for holding unacceptable opinions and

was unable to work, but in 1935 he was allowed back. In 1937 he sang the part of Sarastro in the famous recording of *Die Zauberflöte* with the Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra under Sir Thomas Beecham. George Bernard Shaw thought well of him, but when he appeared a few times at Covent Garden in 1938, according to Rosenthal, he met with only limited success. In 1939 he was again called up, but his commanding officer decided he would be more valuable as a singer than a soldier. In 1944 he was again in trouble for his opinions, but, perhaps because of his value as a singer, he was let off with a severe warning. His career continued after the war until his health began to fail in the early '60s. Thus his contribution to the Verdi revival, rather than on the stage, was in wireless and concert appearances, and recordings from *Il Trovatore*, *Ernani*, *Simon Boccanegra* and *Don Carlos*.

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