

PAUL BENDER

was born at Driedorf, Westerwald in 1875. His father, a Lutheran clergyman, wanted him to study for a "respectable" career, thus he went to Berlin to read medicine and to be educated in military matters at the Kaiser Wilhelm Institute. However, he also studied music under Luise Ress, and singing and acting under Baptist Hoffmann; in 1906 Hoffmann sang Jokanaan in the Berlin première of *Salome*. At the same time Bender was gaining experience in walk-on parts and concert work.

His father may well have financed the musical studies as a hobby and been surprised to learn that not only had his son been to an audition, but that he had been offered a contract. Surprise or not, with reluctant agreement the medical and military courses were terminated before completion, and an ensuing liability to several years of military service was avoided.

Bender's professional engagements began in 1900 with a concert in Trier, and at the Stadttheater, Breslau as the Hermit in *Der Freischütz* and as Sarastro in *Die Zauberflöte*.

In 1902 Bender sang for the first time in Munich. His first appearance was in *Lohengrin*, substituting as König Heinrich for a sick colleague, then, after a few guest appearances, Munich became his artistic home for more than three decades.

Shortly after substituting in *Lohengrin* he sang Fasolt in *Das Rheingold* at Bayreuth. This considerable achievement for so young a singer was never followed up. There is no reason to suppose that Bayreuth was dissatisfied with Bender, rather there seems to have been some managerial disinclination to interchange artists.

Bender's London début was as Orest in *Elektra* conducted by the composer during Beecham's first Covent Garden season in 1910. In the same house in 1914 he sang "a superb" Amfortas in *Parsifal* under Bodanzky, London's first experience of the work. (Otherwise he only sang Gurnemanz.) He also sang the title-role in Méhul's *Joseph*, Wotan (*Die Walküre*) and Hans Sachs which "ranked with the finest Wagnerian achievements of recent years". He returned to London in 1924 as a "resonant" Hunding, an "outstanding" Hagen, and "striking the exact balance between the comedy and its musical utterance" as Ochs von Lerchenau. In 1927 he was an "admirable" Rocco.

In 1914 he sang in Paris under Felix Weingartner, and in 1928 under Bruno Walter.

From 1916 to 1935 Bender sang often in Vienna, in both opera houses and in concert.

A high point in his career was his creation of the part of the Pope in the première of Pfitzner's *Palestrina*. This was in 1917 in Munich with Walter conducting.

From 1922 to 1927 he was with the Metropolitan Opera for ten weeks each season, always in New York, but for a few performances in Philadelphia.

He appeared in Salzburg in 1926 and 1939. He seems to have sung in Milan during the second world war, but in only one performance.

On the operatic stage he was much admired for his acting; on the concert platform he was equally admired for doing everything with only the voice.

Bruno Walter conducted in Munich from 1912 to 1922. In *Theme and Variations* [Hamish Hamilton, 1947] he recalled, "... I was fortunate in having Richard Mayr in Vienna and Paul Bender in Munich at my disposal for the role of Abu Hassan.", "I recall with a feeling of deep gratification... Paul Bender's grotesque humour in the part of Polyphemus... in [*Acis and Galatea*]." and "My memory has preserved a glowing picture

of the superb Sarastro of my Munich basso Paul Bender, who looked like St. Francis... ". In a fourth reference Walter mentions Bender's ability as an artists' representative.

A few phrases from reviews are typical and sufficient to be representative, but it should be born in mind that reviews of the period tend to the hagiographic: artistic event; classic interpretation; every word, gesture, note precisely correct; volume, flexibility, balance; (always) something in reserve; strongest impressions... the Loewe ballads... storms of applause; Lieder delivery... smooth naturalness; many sidedness; an artistic giant; powerful voice. And there were, to maintain proper balance, occasional adverse comments. E.g. one review whilst praising Bender for Lieder without a trace of his operatic origins, went on find his style old-fashioned, and the voice itself did not totally please every listener.

In 1935 Bender was informed that his continuing friendship with non-Aryans was incompatible with tenure of a teaching post; he chose to give up teaching. He also ceased to be offered concert work. He continued as principal bass, however, though with increasing age and the exigencies of war, he appeared less often, and in smaller parts. He is reckoned to have sung around 2,500 performances in Munich, the last, as Dr. Bartolo, just a few days before his death in 1947.

Bender's hobbies included cycling and gardening, he had ability both as a painter and a sculptor, and he retained his interest in medicine.

A number of tragedies clouded his life, his wife died (he remarried), two of his children pre-deceased him, and various of his friends, including the sister of his first wife, were deported.

In the first part of his career the entire range of bass and bass-baritone, and certain baritone roles, were possible for him, but later the voice darkened so that, during the '20s, higher-lying parts were discarded. His repertoire of around eighty roles ranged from Handel to Wagner and included a number totally unknown today.

A Note on the Records: For an artist of his stature Paul Bender seems to have entered the recording studios relatively seldom, and only at long intervals; in 1907 and 1908, in 1919, and in 1933. A curiosity is the one disc in 1930 for Telefunken. This company seems to have engaged various "celebrity" artists, such as Cahier, Bender, Rosenthal, Joseph Schmidt and Kleiber, to make just one or two records; perhaps to enhance the status of a young company.

Loewe, born near Halle in 1796, is "famous as the creator of the German ballad as an art-form" (Grove's Dictionary, 1926) His works were frequently included in Bender's recitals. Loewe's setting of Erlkönig was written three years after and published a number of years before Schubert's. Helen Henschel said that her father sang Loewe's setting in preference to Schubert's as the piano part fitted the words much better.

Max Kowalski (1882-1956) was born in Kowal, Poland, from which the family name presumably derived, but of German parents, who returned to Germany when he was a child. He read law and composed. He was interned in Buchenwald, but was released in 1939 and was able to reach London, where he earned an income from piano-tuning and as an organist at synagogue weddings. His *Pierrot Lunaire* is of settings from the fifty poems by Albert Giraud in the translation by Otto Erich Hartleben used also by Schoenberg. Whether Bender recorded more than these three is not known, in any case they were not issued; by mid-1933 the work was no longer politically correct.

Accompanists (where known):

Tracks 10-11 ?Seidler-Winkler; 12-13 Wilhelm Grosz; 14-23 Michael Raucheisen.

Perhaps Bender insisted on choosing the accompanists for his electric records, Wilhelm Grosz in 1930 and Michael Raucheisen in 1933, rather than accept one of the usual house pianists. The artistic benefit is obvious.

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