SYMPOSIUM RECORDS CD 1339

ELISABETH SCHUMANN

 $(1888 \sim 1952)$

Recitals New York 1950 & South Africa 1951

Elisabeth Schumann was born in 1888 at Merseburg, Saxony. Her father, Alfred, was cathedral organist and music teacher there, and her mother, Emma, had a beautiful untrained singing voice with which she frequently performed in local oratorio concerts conducted by her husband. As a baby Elisabeth would crawl underneath the piano while her mother was practising, and imitate the notes she sang. At barely four years the child gave her first, impromptu, public performance of four Lieder at a local charity event. Her father realised that she had a musical gift and encouraged her by introducing her gradually to the piano and later to music theory. Thus she became a singer who was musically literate and a musician through and through. Between the ages of fifteen and twenty she had singing lessons privately with Natalie Hänisch in Dresden, then with Valerie Zitelmann and Marie Dietrich in Berlin. During her time in Berlin she also studied Lieder with the répétiteur at the opera house, Dr Walter Krone. Despite her great love of Lieder she knew that to establish herself she must start her career in opera, so by the time she walked into the opera house in Hamburg at the age of twenty asking for an audition, she had studied thirty-five roles. She was immediately accepted. Thus her glittering operatic career began with ten years at the Hamburg Stadttheater, where she soon befriended Lotte Lehmann, also the contralto Helene Jung, who became her greatest and life-long friend. She soon began to have singing lessons with Lotte Lehmann's teacher, Alma Schadow, who was the great teacher of her life.

Schumann's most famous role in Hamburg, and indeed for the rest of her career, was that of Sophie in *Der Rosenkavalier*. She made her début at the Metropolitan Opera in this role and at Covent Garden. She was also famous for her Mozart and operetta roles. Richard Strauss, joint Musical Director with Franz Schalk at the Vienna State Opera, persuaded her to come to Vienna in 1919, here also her début was as Sophie. She became a great star of Vienna, and was both an Honorary Member of the Vienna State Opera, and the first woman Honorary Member of the Vienna Philharmonic Society. It is interesting that in Germany and Austria in those days members of a company were expected to sing large and small roles as required. Thus it chanced that Schumann's last operatic appearance was in Vienna as a Flower Maiden in *Parsifal* on 1st November 1937.

During her time in Vienna she often went abroad, partly to sing at foreign opera houses but also to give Lieder recitals. Her leaving Vienna for a concert tour of North Africa and the south of France in March 1938 happened to coincide exactly with the *Anschluss*. She never returned to her beloved Viennese apartment over the stables of the Spanish Riding School. Difficult times began for her as she gave up opera, maintaining that a portly lady of over fifty could no longer prance around the stage as a soubrette. Thus she had to rely on concert, recording and

teaching fees for a living. Here Lotte Lehmann had the advantage that as a dramatic soprano she could continue for much longer, as she did after emigrating to the United States. Schumann too emigrated there; her then husband was Jewish, and the Nazi regime disgusted her. She lived for the rest of her life in New York, teaching privately, giving recitals there and in Europe, and commuting to Philadelphia to teach at the Curtis Institute of Music. During the Second World War she did very little singing; any concert was a huge mental and physical effort. She "dried up", she said. This was partly due to her constant anxiety about her son, Gerd, who was a transport pilot in the Luftwaffe. He was shot down, and lost a leg.

Once the war was over her recital career in Europe, particularly in England, blossomed. With a maid and a cook she was still living in the style to which she had become accustomed in Vienna, but could ill afford it, so any chance to earn fees had to be taken. By this time she was single again, now three times divorced. (Her marriages and affairs, including the one with Otto Klemperer, are described in *Elisabeth Schumann: A Biography* by her son Gerd Puritz.)

Schumann's recitals in the New York Town Hall had became almost an annual event. Her accompanist was usually Leo Rosenek. She had helped him to emigrate from Vienna in 1938 by insisting that she needed him to accompany her in London for recordings. Late in 1949 she returned from a concert tour in Europe and telephoned Rosenek to decide on their programme for the Town Hall recital on 4th February 1950. To her amazement Rosenek announced that he had no wish to work with her again since she had recently given a recital in Berlin accompanied by the husband of soprano Maria Ivogün, "that Nazi" Michael Raucheisen. No amount of explaining that Raucheisen had been denazified and that nothing had ever been proved against him made any difference to Rosenek, on whom Schumann then slammed the phone down. She was flabbergasted, and greatly saddened to have lost such a gifted friend and colleague.

Having given a successful recital in the first Edinburgh Festival in 1947 with Bruno Walter accompanying, she was delighted when he agreed to play for her on 4th February. She decided that the concert should be entirely of settings of poems by Goethe, her favourite poet, in fact the same programme which she had recently sung at the Wigmore Hall. The songs in question were also not over demanding vocally, for recitals were becoming quite a physical strain. However, she got herself into a painfully embarrassing situation with Bruno Walter regarding the programme. Due to an oversight, for which she was later very apologetic, she did not send him the programme until it was already printed. He was not at all convinced of its suitability and wrote to her, "...I must... tell you that in the long years in which I worked with Lotte Lehmann in such concerts she never fixed a programme before having shown it to me for consultation and approval...". Even so, at their first rehearsal, in her apartment on 29th January, he was won over by the sheer beauty and musicality of her performance. He was meticulous about working through everything carefully. He commented that even if she needed no more rehearsal, he did, as some songs like "Schweizerlied" were quite new to him.

There was a huge amount of publicity for this concert, the first to be given in New York by Elisabeth Schumann together with the great Bruno Walter. The critics were, on the whole favourable. *The New York Times* wrote, "Musically, the event gave the deepest sort of pleasure. The soprano's voice, though naturally

limited by the passage of years, was usually pure and floating in quality, of small dimensions, delicate hues and warm expression. She made little attempt to try for dramatic effect, and was the more successful at projecting a sense of intimacy." Francis D. Perkins wrote: "Her singing yesterday marked her best vocal form in several seasons. While a sense of carefulness was apparent to a slight extent early in the program, it faded out of the musical picture afterward; apart from a few notes hinting at a certain effort, her tone was noteworthy for its clarity, its appealing timbre and well schooled production; there was subtle shading of vocal and emotional colour in her exceptionally discerning and sympathetic interpretations." In a letter to a friend, Winnie Hall, with whom she had been staying in England, Schumann wrote in her broken English: "My dear, the concert on last Saturday was a triumph...I was in a top form, the house sold out and Bruno played very good some thought he was a little loud, but I like better a little more support than too less... I am so happy that I gave this recital, didn't give one last year, and it was high time to show myself again on the platform. The press is very good, and we have also already [further] engagements... I am afraid Walter can't do many—he is too busy [with] orchestra concerts and want to be back in California (his home) the end of March..." This was a great boost to her morale, and she hoped it would be to her purse too. Unfortunately nothing came of these plans, for when at last she and Walter had a suitable date, she was already seriously ill.

1950 had been a year rather empty of engagements, but suddenly there was the prospect of a tour of South Africa in the spring of 1951 with twenty-five concerts in eight weeks. Schumann wrote to Helene Jung, "But Lene, I hardly think that I shall do it. Perhaps it'll be my swan song." However, when the Inland Revenue began chasing her for tax arrears of £2000 she realised she had no choice but to accept. Hubert Greenslade, her travel companion and accompanist, was from South Africa and had given concerts there twice, so he knew the country a little. As soon as Schumann stepped off the plane into the warm, dry climate of Johannesburg, she felt invigorated. The publicity throughout the tour was overwhelming, all the concerts were sold out, and everywhere she went she was fêted, and accommodated in luxury. She was so impressed by the beauty, climate and high standard of living in Cape Town that she even considered coming to live and teach there. One small upset marred the beginning of the tour: she had left her make-up bag with the pep-up pills, which kept up her stamina during a concert, in England and she had to manage without them for her first two concerts. The critic of De Vaderland in Johannesburg noticed her problem: "Towards the middle of her recital she began showing signs of tiredness... but in spite of this a wonderful atmosphere was created... Mr. Greenslade succeeded in creating a beautiful unity between voice and piano and contributed in no small measure to the success achieved by the courageous Elisabeth Schumann..." Her tiredness was hardly surprising, for the disease which led to her last illness must already have been in her, but with her pills she could cope. She wrote, "[I] am up to my 10th concert and am as fresh as a daisy...did you read in the newspaper that Lotte announced after her last concert in February that she wasn't going to sing any more?" Thus she and Lotte Lehmann were born in the same year and gave up singing in the same year.

During the tour Elisabeth Schumann was able to fit in a safari in the Kruger National Park and a visit to recording studios. Only six records could be made due

to a slight bout of tonsillitis; she would not risk more as a big concert in Cape Town was still ahead. After the latter, newspaper headlines wrote of "immaculate" and "consummate" artistry, but the critic of the *Cape Argus* wrote: "Time, inevitably, has touched the voice itself—but how gently. As if to compensate, the serene charm and warmth of the singer's personality has deepened. All the impeccable musicianship remains."

Schumann gave more concerts in England that year and one at the Tanglewood Festival, but the problem of tiredness was ever increasing, and it was not going unnoticed. Thus in the sense that the South Africa tour was the last time that she positively enjoyed performing, it was her swan song. At this time she decided she would leave New York and return to London, where she would start a singing school with, as her assistant, her daughter-in-law, Biddy Puritz, to whom she had already taught her method. She longed to be near to her son Gerd, Biddy and their three children; they had moved to London in 1948. Her last public performance was in Scarborough on 21st November 1951. Three days later she sailed for New York expecting to return to London the following spring. After the stormiest passage she could remember she arrived in New York and immediately became seriously ill. She was tied to her bed, from where she still gave lessons. She was feeling somewhat better and was about to fly to England when, on 23rd April 1952, she died suddenly of a stroke.

In a tribute to Elisabeth Schumann Lotte Lehmann wrote, "I shall remember her always; laughing, stepping lightly over obstacles, living with a song on her lips and in her heart; a generous and utterly noble heart, a heart which beat through her songs like the sound of a silver bell. Hers was not the tragic note of despair, not the dramatic outbreak. Hers was the infinitely fine and perfect glow of purity. Her concerts were a lesson in style and beauty. She was the last great concert singer of noble tradition. Blessed the invention of the recording machine! Many of her Lieder are captured forever and will delight many generations to come. Young singers will try to learn from her, will try to make the clarity of her singing their own. But will they ever learn the greatest secret of Elisabeth Schumann? Her charm? Her delicacy? Her inborn exquisiteness? I hope so..."

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(Joy Puritz is the granddaughter of Elisabeth Schumann)

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Picture: Joy Puritz. Elisabeth Schumann, New York 1939.

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