

SYMPOSIUM RECORDS CD 1362

Isidor Georg Henschel was born at Breslau, Prussia (now Wrocław, Poland) in 1850. His father had a business in coal and wool, and there were children of a previous marriage. His parents were of Jewish extraction, though whether they or, later, he converted to Christianity is not clear. Piano instruction started at five in a local class run by Louis Wandelt, who taught eight children simultaneously on eight pianos. This instilled a strong sense of rhythm which never left Henschel. He also studied harmony and singing. He sang "O for the wings of a dove" in public at the age of nine, at twelve he took piano parts in works of Beethoven and Weber in Berlin and at sixteen he made his *début* as a bass in Hirschberg, Silesia. In 1867, he entered the Leipzig Conservatorium. He was taught piano by Ignaz Moscheles, theory by Carl Reinecke and Ernst Richter, organ by Papperitz and singing by Franz Götze. In 1870, his course at Leipzig completed, he moved to Berlin to study singing further under Adolf Schultze and there he was also a student of the composer Friedrich Kiel. He became known rapidly as both concert singer and conductor. In 1874 he appeared and was widely acclaimed at the Lower Rhine Festival, where he met Brahms. Brahms thought highly of his voice and frequently accompanied him, and in 1875 he appeared in Vienna as Christ in the *St. Matthew Passion* and as Odysseus in Bruch's oratorio with Brahms conducting. In 1876 Brahms invited him to join him for a holiday at Sassnitz on the Baltic island of Rügen. In 1877 he was engaged again for the Festival, this time to sing the bass role in Verdi's *Requiem*, the composer conducting. Verdi was sufficiently impressed as to ask Henschel to send him a selection of his music. From 1881 to 1884 he directed of the newly founded Boston Symphony Orchestra. Otherwise, from 1877 the United Kingdom was his home; from 1890 with British citizenship. He appeared as a concert singer (often accompanying himself), in a wide range of oratorio and as a conductor. In 1886 he established the London Symphony Concerts, a winter series in St. James's Hall, which he conducted for eleven years. From 1886 to 1888 he taught singing at the Royal College of Music, succeeding Jenny Lind as professor of singing. Amongst his students, then and later, were Marie Brema, Gervase Elwes, Evangeline Florence, Roland Hayes and his daughter Helen Henschel. From 1891 to 1894 he sang to great acclaim at the Birmingham Festival. He conducted the Scottish Symphony Orchestra from 1893 to 1895 in Glasgow. His compositions include a string quartet, two serenades for orchestra, a *Te Deum*, a *Stabat Mater* (first performed at the Birmingham Festival of 1894), a *Requiem Mass* (in memory of his first wife), stage music for Tree's revival of *Hamlet* in 1902, and songs. There are, besides, three operas, *Friedrich der Schöne*, *A Sea Change* and *Nubia*. At the second performance of the last at Dresden in 1899 Henschel substituted for the baritone Karl Perron, who fell ill. This was his only appearance in opera, though in 1868 he sang in a concert performance as Hans Sachs. He retired when his first wife died, but resumed his career when he re-married in 1907. He received a knighthood in 1914 when he retired again, appearing occasionally thereafter. On the occasion of the Schubert centenary in

1928 he gave the first of a number of recitals on the wireless, the last being broadcast on his eighty-fourth birthday.

Sir George Henschel died at his home in Aviemore, near Inverness in 1934.

In the first year of his stay in Boston he married Lillian June Bailey (Columbus, Ohio 1860-London 1901), a soprano who had studied with Hermine Rudersdorff, Pauline Viardot Garcia and, since 1879, with him. He often accompanied her and sang duets with her in concerts; she, too, was a much respected concert singer. Their daughter, Helen Henschel was a well known concert soprano.

In 1907 he married Amy Louis, from New York, also one of his students. Their daughter Georgia Henschel was a successful actress.

Henschel studied with Moscheles, a friend of Beethoven and Mendelssohn, and he worked with Brahms on both his and other composers' music. He knew Tchaikovsky well and he worked for some weeks with Liszt. Nevertheless, as with other such instances, we must carefully avoid rash assumptions on performing practice in the time of Brahms, let alone Beethoven, for the records were made many years later, the influences and maturing of a lifetime coming between.

The excellently sounding electrical records, duplicate and extend the repertoire of the acoustic records, technically adequate, but not particularly good for their time. The differing characteristics of the two systems make it difficult to assess to what extent the further years have taken their toll on the voice.

The first thing to strike the listener in Henschel's singing is the enunciation; we cannot conceive of any possible improvement. Next we notice the wide range of vocal colours and how emotion lies, as it should, always in the vocal line of the score. And, whatever the pros and cons of self-accompaniment; in the case of this singer there is astonishing coherence and musicality. A German accent to his sung English is audible in his deeply affecting Dvorák song.

Schubert is generally held to be the supreme composer of Lieder. However, on the authority of Helen Henschel, her father preferred Loewe's setting of 'Erlkönig' because the match of the musical rhythm to the text is much superior.

Henschel was more popular as a singer than as a conductor, but Henry Wood long remembered Henschel's fine conducting in his Boston days and it is known that Toscanini thought well of him. Columbia also appreciated his qualities. Indeed, when preparing its prestigious series of Beethoven symphonies for the centenary of 1927 it rated him with Sir Thomas Beecham, Sir Hamilton Harty, Felix Weingartner and Sir Henry Wood. This set of four discs, pressed with Columbia's 'Silent Surface' process and in remarkably good sound for the time, is the sole example of Henschel as a conductor. It demonstrates full understanding of the music and sure command of the orchestra. Henschel asserted that good music benefits from deliberation in tempo, that speed and lightness are compatible with this, and that Italian markings may give the character and mood of a piece, besides tempo. Detail after detail is brought out by refined balance, his sense of humour is almost visible in a symphony abounding in humour and we feel that the pointing of the rhythm, always present, never excessive, has its origin in the class of eight pianos.

<i>Adagio molto</i>	  = 88
<i>Allegro con brio</i>	  = 112
<i>Andante cantabile con moto</i>	  = 120
<i>Allegro molto e vivace</i>	  = 108
<i>Adagio</i>	  = 63
<i>Allegro molto e vivace</i>	  = 88

Henschel's tempi for Beethoven's 1st Symphony

[Helen Henschel-*When Soft Voices Die*]

The only examples of Henschel accompanying another artist are on three recordings of Beatrice Harrison. Two are of his own arrangements from Bach Suites. Each is heavily re-structured so that what was originally a solo part is divided between cello and piano. The Crotchet + Crotchet to Dotted-Crotchet + Quaver emendations are of the period. However unfashionable this sort of thing today, Beatrice Harrison's tone remains long in the mind.

A further cello piece and three songs by Henschel conclude this recital. His weightier and more substantial compositions are yet to be recorded.

All the recordings were made in London except for track 19 in New York.

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