

SYMPOSIUM RECORDS CD 1366

An Anthology of Song – Volume 3

LEO SLEZAK [Mährisch-Schönberg (Sumperk), Moravia 1873–Rottach-Egern am Tegernsee, Bavaria 1946] was a German tenor from an area of Czech/German mixed population then in the Austro-Hungarian Empire. His father was a miller, but, unable to make a living, moved his family to Brünn (now Brno), where he worked in a warehouse or store, and his wife, Anna did needlework. At first Slezak did well at school, but, becoming unruly, plans for an army career were abandoned. Thus at fourteen he became an apprentice gardener. When the establishment closed he turned to engineering at which he completed an apprenticeship. In 1893 he became a pupil of Adolf Robinson. Robinson, a pupil of Lamperti, and his wife Anna had retired to Brünn after considerable careers at the Metropolitan Opera. Their daughters, Ada and Luise, also sang. [There is a record of Ada with Hermann Jadlowker.] Robinson, was also the teacher of Rudolph Berger, Friedrich Schorr and Joseph Schwarz. Robinson taught Slezak gratis as he was clearly without means, and Slezak remained ever grateful. Whilst studying he seems to have earned small amounts in the army, as a solicitor's clerk and as a commercial traveller. [Details of his early life rest largely on his own accounts, which seem to suffer from lapses of memory and some embroidery.]

Slezak's operatic début was in Brünn as Lohengrin in 1896. He gained experience in Berlin, largely as an under-study to more prominent artists, and in Breslau. In 1900 he sang at Covent Garden with major artists [His début was spoiled by the announcement *during the performance* of the relief of Mafeking.] In 1901 Mahler invited him to the Hofoper in Vienna. In London Slezak had several times stood in for Jean de Reszke; in 1907 he was given leave to study with him in Paris. He remained in Vienna until 1912 and returned from 1917 until 1934.

From 1909 to 1913 he appeared frequently in North America. At the Metropolitan Opera he worked with Toscanini, whom he found a terror at work, but charming socially, and again with Mahler.

As we hear, Slezak was a complete exception to the widely held notion that opera singers don't make good Lieder singers, that they can't adapt their voices and their emotions to the intimacy of the concert platform, and so forth. We are not assisted in that whilst Slezak's career in opera is fairly well chronicled, there is much less about his concert career. However, as early as 1902 we read that, "The Court Opera singer Leo Slezak is at present on a concert-tour of the major towns of Moravia and Schleswig, which brings the artist everywhere resounding success. In every town the artist shows himself to be a Lieder singer blessed overall with refined taste and sensitivity, and he receives lively ovations for his brilliant artistic performances." If this seems to lean towards hagiography, then Richard Aldrich's more measured tones in 1909 are no less favourable, "Mr. Slezak has an unusual power of giving apt and significant expression to a variety of moods, expression

that is gained by subtle means in the moulding of a phrase, the colour of the voice, the suggestion of a dramatic or emotional motive; and his singing of Lieder is vitalised thereby in a fascinating way. In most things his phrasing is admirable and his enunciation is of unusual excellence and clearness.”

In the early '30s Slezak started a third career, in films. He was generally cast in elderly, genial, avuncular roles, often sending himself up, as, for example, when, he rushes in with, “Quiet everybody, Slezak is on the radio.”

He was married to the actress Elsa Wertheim. Their were two children, Margarethe, a soprano, and Walter, a famous American actor.

The accompanist on tracks 1 and 23 is Bruno Seidler-Winkler on a Schiedmayer-Flügel, and on tracks 7, 9 and 20, Michael Raucheisen on a „Blüthner” Grand; other tracks in these matrix series presumably likewise. Track 21 is probably Slezak’s only recording in French.

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