SYMPOSIUM RECORDS CD 1412

DAME CLARA BUTT (1872 - 1936)

Accounts of Clara Butt's family history and early years vary in detail. It seems that her father, Henry Albert Butt was a shipyard worker born in 1848 and her mother Clara Hook, born in 1851, was a daughter of the owner of the yard. They eloped and married. They may have lived for a while in Jersey, but at the time of Clara's birth, in 1872, they were living in Southwick, a Sussex fishing village and her father was earning a living dredging for oysters.

In 1879 the family moved to Bristol where her father became a broker and a partner in a shipbuilding yard. There were losses, but the family's financial security was maintained.

Henry Butt was a religious man with a good, but untrained, voice. Thus Clara grew up to sing hymns. This led to her mother, who had also a good voice, and the school music teacher deciding that she should have singing lessons. The headmistress of her secondary school suggested that she should be taught by Dan Rootham, who had a high reputation as a singing teacher throughout the West of England. In 1887 she was ready to join the Festival Choir which enabled her to hear such artists as George Henschel and Lillian Nordica in such works as *Ein Deutches Requiem* (Brahms), *Elijah*, *Messiah* and *Mors et Vita* (Gounod). At the same time she was gaining experience as a performer at church events which involved her father and at parties arranged by her mother.

In 1890 she entered the Royal College of Music on an open scholarship. Her teachers were Henry Blower, voice, and Marmaduke Barton, piano. The College forbad public appearances without express permission and this was given only for a limited number of local appearances at home. However, with or without permission, she did appear at private concerts given by society hostesses. Engagements, including a command performance at Windsor, were arranged for her by Paolo Tosti.

In response to an invitation by Sir Joseph Barnby, Butt sang in *Israel in Egypt* (Handel), *Elijah* (Mendelssohn) and *The Golden Legend* (Sullivan) at the Albert Hall in her third year. This led to a brush with the College authorities, but an accommodation was reached when Butt pointed out that she needed the income. Having given in to the infringement of its rule, the College now allowed her to appear at the end of 1892 as Orfeo at the Lyceum Theatre under the baton of Charles Villiers Stanford. All four performances, particularly the last, were highly praised. Shaw wrote in *The World*, "Miss Clara Butt, a comparatively raw recruit from Bristol, far surpassed the utmost expectations that could have been reasonably entertained. She has a good voice, and went at her work without the least conceit, though with plenty of courage and originality . . . she may make a considerable career for herself."

She was at once engaged for the Triennial Handel Festival at the Crystal Palace and for four appearances in Cincinnati. However, her tutor prevailed on her to reject an offer for opera concerts at Covent Garden for the next three years. Early in 1893 she appeared in *Israel in Egypt* and *Elijah* with such artists as Andrew Black, Belle Cole, Edward Lloyd and Esther Palliser. Her progress was temporarily halted by illness, except for a singular command performance at Buckingham Palace.

The College arranged for her to spend three months in Paris during the summer of 1893 to study with Duvernoy and to improve her French, her scholarship being extended to include this.

On leaving College she gave a recital at Queen's Hall and appeared in several oratorios up and down the country. Her colleagues included Emma Albani, Andrew Black, Ben Davies and Bantock Pierpoint. Her career built up too rapidly and led to her fainting at two performances. She was advised to rest for a year, but she was now, her father's business not prospering, supporting her family. However, an anonymous benefactor provided sufficient funds and she was able to spend six months of further studies in Paris under Jacques Bouhy followed by six months in Berlin under Etelka Gerster. Some years later she was able to discover who the benefactor was and return the money. Her return home in 1897 was followed by a concert tour which included Berlin, Budapest, Paris, Prague and Vienna. She crossed the Atlantic in 1899. Her appearances in North America included concerts in Carnegie Hall and the Waldorf Hotel in New York, and in Pittsburgh and Toronto. Later she sang at the Metropolitan Opera, but in concerts, not opera. Reviews at all these venues were very favourable.

Around 1897, Clara Butt met Kennerley Rumford (1870-1950). He was developing a career as a baritone and they frequently toured together in the provinces. They were a well-matched pair and each well over 6 foot tall. It is said

that he proposed to her on stage. They were married in 1900. There were three children.

She was in great demand for music festivals up and down the country, but gradually she reduced the number of her performances, though she continued to appear regularly at the Handel Festivals in the Crystal Palace until 1921. Besides works already mentioned, her repertoire grew to include *Stabat Mater* (Dvorák), *The Dream of Gerontius* and *Sea Pictures* (Elgar), *Redemption* (Gounod), *Samson*, *Solomon* and *Sosarme* (Handel), *Judith* (Parry) and *Stabat Mater* (Rossini). She gave the first performance of the second Elgar work at Norwich in 1899. She sang it again at the Elgar Festival of 1904, but, apparently in Elgar's view, her fees being too high, other contralto parts were given to Louise Kirkby Lunn.

During the Great War she worked tirelessly, both singing and organising concerts, to raise money for charitable causes and her husband volunteered to work at the front with the Red Cross. It is said that she raised over £100,000, a vast sum in those days, and her work was recognised when she was made a D.B.E.

In July 1920, as places of entertainment were reopening after the Great War and the country's musical life was reawakening, Sir Thomas Beecham put on *Orphée et Eurydice* at Covent Garden. The event was built around Clara Butt. Eurydice was sung by Miriam Licette and L'Amour by Madeleine Collins. Clara Butt had not sung on the operatic stage since her student days, indeed, this counted as her professional début in Opera, coincidentally in the same part that she had sung some twenty-eight years before as a student. It has been suggested that, apart from her height, her husband objected to her involvement in such situations as are normal on the operatic stage, but in this instance, with an all-female cast, he felt secure. There were four performances, the last not conducted by Beecham. Her return to the operatic stage, was, compared with her earlier singing of the role, not very auspicious. Her performance was judged by *The Times* to be "tentative", she was thought to be suffering from nerves and she and the orchestra were not always together.

Throughout her career she and her husband went on concert tours throughout the English-speaking world. Whatever the veracity or otherwise of the story of Melba advising her to "give 'em muck", the repertoire, at home and abroad, was wide ranging; there were hymns and popular songs, but also a goodly proportion of music ranging from Bach to Wolf. It is a pity that her recorded repertoire contains much of the former and relatively little of the latter.

The voice ranged over all but three octaves. In power it overcame easily the vastnesses of the Crystal Palace and Hyde Park, but could just as easily be scaled down for "A fairy went a-marketing". Added to this are the trills and fioritura which she had readily available for such pieces as the "Brindisi" from *Lucrezia Borgia*.

Her degree of conscientiousness is suggested by the large number of re-takes and rejected material in the recording studio.

In 1924 she opened a BBC broadcasting station, by remarkable coincidence at Chelmsford, where only four years before Nellie Melba had been persuaded to make the first broadcast by an artist of world status.

Clara Butt's last years were saddened by the loss of a son and troubled by increasing poor health. She died in 1936.

Notes:

Track 4 The record is worthy of consideration on several grounds. Very possibly the singer first encountered the piece as a student exercise. It must have held some significance for her, for over the years she took the trouble to record it on four separate occasions. She shows such accomplishment in very decorated music as is most unusual in a low voice; the trill, for example, could scarcely be bettered. Further, she uses sudden changes into a chest voice totally unblended with the very different upper registers. [Incidentally, a later version was recorded on tour in Berlin well before the First World War, but when it was issued here shortly after the war there was much acrimonious comment as many assumed the recording was contemporary.]

Excerpts from *The Dream of Gerontius*
References are to *The New Novello Choral Edition*

Track 9	Page 60	11 bar 5 to 14 bar 2 then 21 bar 5 to 28 bar 1 transposed down a semi-tone
Track 10	Page 92	55 bar 3 end of 62
Track 11	Page 101	66 bar 10 to 75 bar 1
Track 12	Page 166	126 bar 6 to 134 bar 4 then 136 bar 6 to end

Track 14 & 15 "A youth once loved a maiden" & "The tears that night" are translations of "Ein Jüngling liebt ein Mädchen" & "Aus meinen Tränen sprießen" which are Nos. 39 & 2 respectively of Heine's *Lyriches Intermezzo*, known also as Nos. 11 & 2 respectively of Schumann's *Dichterliebe.*

Tracks 18 to 21 are the first four of ten *Biblical Songs* by Dvorák. The remaining six were not recorded.

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