

SYMPOSIUM RECORDS CD 1421

AGNES NICHOLLS



Agnes Nicholls (Cheltenham, Gloucestershire 1876-London 1959) was the daughter of a draper who loved music. She went to the Bedford High School, where she had singing lessons from Dr. H. A. Harding. She entered the class of Alberto Visetti on a scholarship to the Royal College of Music in 1894. She sang on three occasions for Queen Victoria whilst still a student. She made her début in opera in 1895 as Dido in Purcell's *Dido and Aeneas* at the Lyceum Theatre and her concert début in 1897. Her début at Covent Garden in 1901 was as the Dew Fairy in *Hänsel und Gretel*. 1904 was an eventful year for her. In that year she married Hamilton Harty (though later they separated) and went on an extensive and successful North American tour. She became known particularly as a Wagner singer. In the English "Ring" cycle of 1908 under Hans Richter she sang Sieglinde in *Die Walküre* and Brünnhilde in *Siegfried*, and in 1910 she appeared as Elsa in *Lohengrin*. She earned great approval as Donna Elvira (*Don Giovanni*) and Nannetta (*Falstaff*). She toured Australia in 1912 with the Quinlan Opera Company. Until well into the 1920s she appeared with the Beecham Company, the British National Opera Company, the Carl Rosa Company and the Denhof Company. Her distinguished career on the concert and oratorio platforms included various works written for her. She was much acclaimed for her performances of the *St. Matthew Passion* and Parry's *Judith*.

THE RECORDS

In 1909 Agnes Nicholls entered The Gramophone Company's studio with her husband Hamilton Harty to make the first six of her many recordings. By 1909 she had been a professional performer for fourteen years and was established as a leading English operatic and concert soprano. She had sung three times before Queen Victoria while still a student of Visetti at the Royal College of Music; she had been the first to sing (in 1906) the part of Mary in Elgar's *Kingdom*; she had inspired new works by Parry and her husband; and had taken the roles of Sieglinde and Brünnhilde at Covent Garden under Richter in the first production of the *Ring* in English. As a popular festival artist she had sung at Cincinnati in 1904, the year of her marriage, while her career in opera had taken her on tour to South Africa and Australia.

Only a handful of Agnes Nicholls' recordings have survived. They are, all but one, of English language settings and give a vivid impression of her beautiful voice and communicative vocal personality. Three remain from the first 1909 group. *The lark now leaves his wat'ry nest*, a setting by the Boston composer Horatio Parker (1863-1919) of a poem by Davenant, may be a souvenir of her American tour of five years earlier. It is notable for the impulsive freshness of her singing and for Harty's characteristically dynamic accompaniment. Their obvious pleasure on making a successful record is audible at the closing chord. *At the mid hour of night* and *A bride song* are by the Jamaican-born Sir Frederick Cowen (1852-1935); both are sung by Nicholls with passion, the warmth in the former and the brilliant high notes of the latter being memorable. A second recording session in July 1909 was occupied by retakes and one new item. None of the five documented sides has survived.

In October 1910 she recorded a group of titles with orchestral accompaniment. *I will extol thee, O Lord* from the oratorio *Eli* by the Neapolitan Sir Michael Costa (1808-1884), a pillar of the mid-Victorian Festival establishment, is sung vigorously. Nicholls' first, published version of *Ocean, thou mighty monster* from *Oberon*, sung in Planché's original English, is very fine. Despite massive cuts necessary for it to be fitted on to a twelve-inch side, the aria is projected with a compelling impetuosity. None of Agnes Nicholls' pre-war records is common, but this is a particularly rare one. It was soon withdrawn possibly because of blasting from the singer's powerful high notes, and was replaced by a very similar version that has become widely available through reissues. Unpublished recordings of *Let the bright seraphim* and a duet from the *Creation* with Robert Radford have not survived. These titles were first attempted at this session and repeated, again without a published take emerging, a month later. Nicholls was never satisfied with the quality of her recordings and was reluctant to pass them for issue. However it will never be known whether the large number of repeat takes and of unissued titles signified her artistic dissatisfaction or the difficulty experienced by The Gramophone Company engineers in capturing such a large voice without blasting.

A fifth session in July 1911 produced enjoyable records of a dull song and of a religious one. Dudley Buck (1839-1909) was connected with the Cincinnati Festival, and his *When the heart is young* may be another memento of Nicholls' American visit. Her vocal commitment and skill are evident in her recording and make something beautiful of Samuel Liddle's *How lovely are thy dwellings*. None of the dozen sides recorded in December 1911 was passed for issue, and no further records were made before the outbreak of war.

During the course of the 1914-1918 war Agnes Nicholls was involved in two large scale recordings. In February 1916 she joined Charles Mott, a successful young baritone soon to be killed on the Somme, to sing excerpts from Elgar's incidental music to *Starlight Express* at Hayes under the composer's direction. This fairy-tale play by Algernon Blackwood had opened at the Kingsway Theatre for Christmas 1915 but had closed after only a month. Elgar had been hurt by its failure, and saw the recording project as a means of preserving a score he valued. It was his suggestion that Nicholls, whom he had long known, should sing the part of the Laugher rather than soprano of the theatre production. Eight excerpts were recorded, three of which included Nicholls. Three takes were needed for the finale. Issued two months later, the *Starlight Express* records were well received, and they undoubtedly secured Elgar's lifelong attachment to the gramophone. Her second wartime recording began in June of the same year and was of the famous song cycle *In a Persian garden* by Liza Lehmann (1862-1918). Nicholls sang the part 'created' in 1896 by Emma Albani (Hilda Wilson, Ben Davies and David Bispham also took part in that performance). As well as four concerted items with Edna Thornton, Hubert Eisdell and George Baker, not included here, she recorded the solo dramatic recitative *I sent my soul through the invisible*. A single take was made at the initial session, followed by another three, the first of which was selected for issue, a month later. The record labels state that the recorded performance was under the direction of the composer, but it may be too much to assume that she was present for Nicholls' short second session in July.

After the war Nicholls' career as an operatic and concert singer flourished. She sang a variety of roles at Covent Garden and was a popular recitalist with her husband as piano accompanist. She became a director of the British National Opera Company, and received the CBE in 1923. Vocal problems, possibly related to her thyroid disease, may have precipitated her retirement in the mid-twenties. That she maintained her fresh purity of tone, directness of expression and vocal control until late in her career is evident from the two little songs and an operatic aria recorded in London for Columbia in April 1922 and surviving as test pressings. They are digitally published here for the first time. *Have you seen but a whyte lillie grow*, an early seventeenth century song to words from Ben Jonson's *The devil is an ass*, is familiar from old recordings of Alma Gluck and Conchita Supervia. Nicholls' singing is finely coloured and controlled, rapt and inward. *Come my own one, come my dear one*, is the fifth in George Butterworth's collection of Sussex folk songs, and - having been published in 1913 - must have been a relatively recent addition to the singer's concert repertoire. Her recording is obviously a test, variation in the proximity of voice to horn being clearly audible. All the same it is an enthusiastic performance, and with Hamilton Harty's exuberant closing chords it echoes her first record of thirteen years earlier.

Nicholls never sang the role of Tosca; it is not known if *Vissi d'arte* was in her concert repertoire. This is her sole recording in a language other than English.

This compilation would not have been possible without the kindness and generosity of the singer's nephew, Robert Baker, the late Dr. Ruth Gipps and Geoffrey Townsend.

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Illustration: Agnes Nicholls as Elsa's in Lohengrin

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Symposium Records, 110, Derwent Avenue, East Barnet, Hertfordshire EN4 8LZ.