

ELENA GERHARDT

Elena Gerhardt was born in 1883 at Connewitz near Leipzig. There were six sons in the family, she was the only daughter. When she was very young the father, the owner of a restaurant, retired and the family moved to Leipzig. The children were soon immersed in the rich musical life of that town. She sang at school events and her father was very keen for her to enter the Leipzig Koservatorium. Thus, while she was still 15, she was heard by Professor Karl Rebling, head of the Faculty of Singing. Although classes were already full, such was the impression she made, that she was nevertheless enrolled. After a few months she became a voice pupil of Marie Hedmont.

In 1902, Arthur Nikisch became Director of Music. He instituted a rule that all students at the Koservatorium must perform for him before any public appearance would be sanctioned. She qualified and was thus able to appear in Leipzig at the end of 1902. However, her first significant appearance was a year later when she appeared on her birthday, November 11th, with Nikisch himself accompanying her. Nikisch continued to accompany her whenever he was available and a close personal relationship developed, lasting until his death in 1922, apparently with the full knowledge and acquiescence of his wife and family.

Gerhardt began to develop a concert career throughout Germany. However, in 1905 she appeared at the Leipzig Opera in the title role in *Mignon* (Ambroise Thomas) and as Charlotte in *Werther* (Jules Massenet). These were her sole appearances in opera. Thereafter she devoted herself entirely to the field of Lieder, but she acknowledged that these few operatic appearances added to her confidence in singing and to her dramatic expression in Lieder.

In 1906 Nikisch was asked to conduct the London Symphony Orchestra with the violinist, Mischa Elman. He saw this concert as the right opportunity for Gerhardt to open her international career. And he was correct, in the years leading up to the First World War she sang in Budapest, Copenhagen, Moscow, Paris, Prague and Oslo. She was young and fit, the long journeys by train and by ship did not tire her, indeed she enjoyed seeing new places. In 1912 she first visited America. By 1914 there was some anti-German feeling. It grew to a peak in 1917 at which point Gerhardt and many other artists of German origin returned to Germany.

The war over, she resumed her travels. She returned to England in 1922, uncertain of how she might be received. She was given a standing ovation. In 1924 there were some throat problems. However, in 1926 in the United States she was able to give 28 concerts in 30 days with no recurrence of the trouble.

In London in 1927 Gerhardt began to teach and in 1929 she accepted a teaching post in Leipzig at the Koservatorium, where she had once herself studied, with the stipulation that she would still be free to travel.

In 1928, in the course of preparing a broadcast from Cologne Radio to mark the quarter-century of her début with Arthur Nikisch, she met the director, Dr. Fritz Kohl. In 1932 they were married. Very shortly after the Machtergreifung next year, Germany's radio directors without exception were imprisoned for refusing to become part of the propaganda machine of the New Order. Kohl was fortunate in

his choice of lawyer; he was released, the other directors without exception were found guilty. Gerhardt and Kohl made their separate ways to London where they set up home.

When war came they were still German nationals. They were left at liberty rather than being sent to the Isle of Man, as so many others were, but her Lieder recitals for the BBC were cancelled as public broadcasting of German was forbidden. However, she was approached by Myra Hess to appear in the National Gallery concerts which she was organising. Gerhardt replied that she was not able to sing in translation. Hess countered that she was so popular and respected that from her Lieder in the original language would be accepted. And so it turned out. Gerhardt was very warmly received, as she was also when she resumed her concerts throughout the country, including appearances for ENSA.

Her last two recitals were at the Wigmore Hall in 1946 and in the Liverpool Philharmonic Hall the following year. After Kohl's death a short while later, she devoted herself to teaching. Elena Gerhardt died early in 1961.

Reinhold Gerhardt (Leipzig 1891-?London) baritone, was a younger brother of Elena Gerhardt. He studied under Karl Scheidemantel in Dresden before the Great War and, after military service, with von Zawilowski in Berlin. He had a successful career, lasting until 1940, as a Lieder and oratorio singer. He was well-regarded as a teacher, particularly at Leipzig from 1936 to 1948 after which he probably spent his last years in London with his sister. He was married to the soprano Claire Schulthess.

A Note on the Recordings:

Elena Gerhardt made her first recordings in 1907. They were made by the acoustic process which involved much adjustment of sound levels to suit the early apparatus. She said later that she learned an enormous amount from them.

Tracks 1 to 18 are from an album of eight records, seven 12-inch and one 10-inch, issued to mark the centenary in 1928 of the death of Schubert. They are in the order of the booklet of English texts issued with the album, except for "Abschied", which is missing from the booklet. It seems sensible, however, to place it with the other piece from *Schwanengesang*.

Coenraad Valentijn Bos (Leiden 1875-Chappaqua, New York 1955) studied with Julius Röntgen and at the Hochschule für Musik, Berlin. He decided to specialise in accompaniment and in Vienna in 1896, not yet 21, he accompanied Anton Stermans in the first performance of *Vier ernste Gesänge* in the presence of Brahms. As an accompanist he appeared with Julia Culp, Gervase Elwes, Elena Gerhardt, Frieda Hempel, Alexander Kipnis, Yehudi Menuhin, Raimund von zur-Mühlen, Helen Traubel and Ludwig Wüllner.

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