

# SYMPOSIUM RECORDS CD 1428

## An Anthology of Song - Volume VII

### LIEDER IN TRANSLATION

Today there is a widely and strongly held conviction amongst audiences that vocal music should be sung in the language of the original score.

In times gone by, however, before the era of air travel and high-speed rail, things were very different. For a start, artists tended to be confined to one language area for a season, or a considerable part of one and broadly, vocal music was performed in the predominant language of each area. For example, at the Opéra Comique in Paris performances were as a rule in French, in opera houses in German-speaking countries German was the norm, though visiting celebrities might perform in their own languages. If Battistini was singing in Vienna then he would sing in Italian and the rest of the cast in German. Bayreuth was an exception; there German was mandatory, which ruled out engagements for many excellent singers. At Covent Garden for many years the majority of performances were in Italian, whilst elsewhere in England there were strong movements for performance in English; even the "Choral" symphony and the Verdi *Requiem* might be sung in the vernacular. However, at Covent Garden after the Second World War the use of English was mandatory. Perhaps oddest of all and all but unbelievable to us today was the situation at the Metropolitan Opera. There it was quite normal to hear multilingual performances, singers using the languages in which they originally learnt their parts or in which they felt most comfortable or whatever.

In the world of Lieder the comic situation of Mimi and Rodolfo sharing their most tender moments in French and German respectively, or the reverse, does not arise, nor the possibility of a quadrilingual *Rigoletto* quartet. So why "Lieder in Translation"? The following conversation was overheard recently during the interval in a Lieder recital at a well-known London venue:

"I prefer Lieder being sung in English so that I can understand what is being sung in immediate relation to the music, the more so when the poet is significant, Goethe or Heine for example."

"Yes, but in a translation the word order imposed by the needs of grammar destroys the intimate relation of text to music in the composer's mind."

"Well, at least one significant composer seems not to have been particularly concerned: Verdi himself seems to have been quite content for *I Lombardi* to become *Jérusalem*, for *Les Vêpres Siciliennes* to become *I Vespri Siciliani* and for the French *Don Carlos* to be reborn as an Italian Opera."

"And another thing, it would be ridiculous to expect of singers the necessary fluency and faultless accent of the language of every country in which they might appear. Indeed, one might ask whether singers need to have close acquaintance with German at all. There are, for example, many exquisite Lieder recordings by John McCormack in German, but it has been claimed by detractors that he spoke scarcely a word of that language."

"Should Lieder singers be allowed simply to choose the language in which they feel most comfortable? I mean, one can hardly imagine that Albani or Melba sang German items in German"

"Come to that, does it matter, how often can you make out the words they're singing anyway?"

"True, we have become very used to broadcasts and records of Lieder made with the singer in an acoustically treated studio and close miked, thus lending a clarity to the text being sung which cannot be expected in the ambience of a hall."

"I suppose ideally one should spend the afternoon before a Lieder recital swotting up the texts. They are mostly readily accessible in bilingual editions."

"Even better: today almost all promoters of Lieder recitals are enlightened enough to provide programme booklets with bilingual texts. If these were made available an hour before concerts started or, better still, on the internet the night before, there would be no problem."

The bell rings for the second half.

## Notes:

Track 1 Also attributed to Mozart

6 & 7 The accompaniments are most noteworthy.

12 Munteanu spoke excellent German; this record, like several others, was probably intended for a local market.

16 Sample inscribed: Cc. 15927-1. 22-2-29  
Selection from "Dichterliebe. part.2.  
Mr. Hugh Cambell (*sic*) (Private)  
W/Piano. in Small Queens Hall

The record contains Nos. 8, 9 & 11 of the cycle.  
Other parts have seemingly not survived.

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