

JACQUES URLUS



Jacques Urlus was born in 1867 at Hergenrath, a small town near Aix-la-Chapelle, then in Germany now in Belgium. However, he was Dutch by parentage, his father being from Limburg and his mother from Tilburg. When he was one year old the family moved to his mother's birthplace. He went to the Fraterschool until he was 12 years old and he was a boy soprano in the local church choir. His father had a good baritone voice which he exercised with a wide range of operatic arias. The boy, deciding on a career in music, was able to study the rudiments and to buy a cornet, a piano being beyond the family's means, which he was allowed to practice in an outhouse at the bottom of the garden. After school he was apprenticed to a blacksmith and at 15 joined his father at a steel mill in Utrecht. The following year a friend took him to the Fidelio Club where, after only two weeks, he was invited to sing a solo in a performance of Haydn's *Die Jahreszeiten*. After a further year he moved to the choir of the Minnebroeder Kerk, but the fair there was largely Gregorian chant, which did not appeal to him. Hence, a further

move, this time to the Augustinerkerk, where he was able to take part in the great masses of Haydn, Beethoven and Mozart. There being still no piano at home, practice was regulated with a tuning fork.

At 19 military service called him to Zeist. An officer hearing him arranged for him to enter the Brussels Conservatoire, but, fundless, he could not avail himself of the offer. On completion of service he returned to Utrecht and joined five music societies with the informal arrangement that he sang solos in lieu of membership subscriptions, but he still had to find money for outfit and fares. On being asked to sing for the Association of Church Choirs he said that his fee would be 15 Guilders. It was granted. For his next engagement, a cavalry reunion, he asked for 35 Guilders. This also was granted. The cavalry paid him scant attention, but the pianist accompanying him thought him worth recommending to the local opera manager and its leading baritone. Promises were not fulfilled. In 1893 he married Hendrika Jacobs, who remembered him favourably from his days at the Augustinerkerk. Her words of encouragement helped him forward and her work as a dressmaker helped their finances. There were four sons and one daughter. The quality of his singing was again brought to the notice of the local opera manager. This time he was asked to audition for the conductor Kees van der Linden. After some delay a contract resulted for him to sing the roles of Manrico and Wilhelm Meister, but with the clause that he must take lessons.

The counsel of the majority of his acquaintances was that, with a young family, he should stick to his trade. However his wife urged him to accept. He did accept and studied for three months with Hugo Nolthenius. On the basis of a 20 Guilders weekly advance he was then able to move to Amsterdam for three years of study under Antoon Averkamp and Cornélie van Zanten. He took the opportunity of reading and studying intensively at the university library and the state museum.

In 1887 Urlus made his début on the concert platform in Utrecht. His début in opera followed in 1894 when he appeared as Beppo in *Pagliacci* as a member of the Netherlands Opera in Amsterdam. His first real success was an appearance in *Joseph* by Méhul in which he replaced an inadequate tenor. He travelled with the company all over the Netherlands gaining much experience. However, at the end of the season, when the management announced a general cut of 25 %, he auditioned at the Royal Flemish Opera of Antwerp. He was offered 300 francs per month, but could not move, so he said, without consulting his wife. In fact he showed the new contract to his Dutch employers who promptly re-employed him at his previous salary. This sort of manoeuvre became a fairly regular feature of Urlus's career, whilst, be it noted, he never actually broke a contract. Such manoeuvres did not always work; on a later occasion he misplayed his hand thereby losing an important chance to sing in Berlin.

Urlus showed his worth when the company's first tenor, Desiré Pauwels, fell ill he was able to sing *Tannhäuser* at short notice in German. At this time he began to sing on the concert platform and also he was able at last to buy a piano. When, in the following season Pauwels decamped to the French Opera at the Hague, Urlus was given a rise and told to prepare Lohengrin. He also appeared in *Aïda*, *Carmen*, *Faust* and *Die Walküre*. During his fourth season ( 1897/1898) he sang with Sigrid Arnoldson and Francisco d'Andrade. Perhaps becoming aware of their fees, he began to look around.



Urlus made his *début* abroad as Lohengrin at Hanover. Afterwards he and Cato Engelen-Sewing, a colleague in the company, travelled on to Bayreuth to audition for Cosima Wagner. No offer resulted, but on the way home he stopped at Frankfurt-am-Main to sing for the director Claer. He was at once offered a contract for 5 years at 20,000 Marks per annum, but as the director would not agree to leave of three months if invited to sing at Bayreuth, he returned to Amsterdam and much lesser pay. In 1900 he moved to Leipzig with the position of first tenor. The director, Staegemann undertook to arrange guest appearances for him at Berlin, Dresden and Vienna. In his first season he sang Nureddin (*Barbier von Bagdad*), Oberon, Samson, Siegfried, Siegmund, Tristan, and Walther. At this time also he sang the Evangelist in the *St. Matthew Passion* under Willem Mengelberg. He continued to sing in Leipzig well into the 1920s. In his autobiography he particularly recalled singing parts of the Ring Cycle in 1905 with Lilli Lehmann, Nikisch conducting. By then she had silver hair but her voice was still magnificent.

She took work very seriously; including singing in full voice at all rehearsals. A disagreement with Mahler precluded appearances in Vienna until 1908.

Urlus sang all over Europe, particularly in German and Dutch speaking areas in which he sang the languages accordingly. His Covent Garden début was as Tristan under Sir Thomas Beecham in 1910 and until 1914 he appeared every season in the big Wagnerian roles. He first appeared at Bayreuth in 1911 singing Siegmund with Minnie Saltzmann-Stevens as Sieglinde, Ellen Gulbranson as Brünnhilde and Walter Soomer as Wotan. Siegfried Wagner thought extremely highly of him. Tristan in Boston marked the occasion of Urlus's American début in 1912. Isolde was sung by Gadski. However, a greater impression was made on Urlus by Nordica who sang succeeding performances. Sight-seeing in New York's February weather brought on a cold so that his début at the Metropolitan Opera in 1913 was spoiled. Subsequent appearances, however, gained for him great praise for voice, musicianship and acting. In 1914 the copyright on *Parsifal* ran out allowing Urlus to sing the first performances in Leipzig and Covent Garden. A critic at this time complained that wear was evident in Urlus's voice, but if it was it was not reported or evident elsewhere.

1914. After covering for von Bary as Siegfried in Bayreuth, Urlus collected his belongings from Leipzig and returned home. In October he sailed for New York on a four-year contract with Gatti-Casazza. The list of operas in which he appeared includes: *Fidelio*, *Die Götterdämmerung*, *Lohengrin*, *Die Meistersinger*, *Parsifal*, *Siegfried*, *Tannhäuser*, *Tristan und Isolde*, *Die Walküre* and *Die Zauberflöte*. His concert programmes included, besides Lieder, arias from operas in which he not appear, *L'Africaine*, for example, and also arias from oratorios such as *Elijah*. When the United States entered the war transatlantic travel became dangerous and Gatti Casazza advised Urlus to remain there with his family. Urlus, however, decided to return to Holland. The journey took a month and it became impossible to return to the United States in time for the new season. Gatti Casazza, performances of German operas being cancelled, was doubtless relieved to have an excuse to inform Urlus that his contract was annulled.

In 1918 Urlus began to rebuild his career. He sang *Das Lied von der Erde* in a performance conducted by Willem Mengelberg and he was soon engaged for 20 guest appearances per annum at Leipzig. Next he was asked to appear on the concert platform at Copenhagen, Gothenborg and Stockholm. These appearances led to guest performances as Canio and Lohengrin which he sang in Dutch and German respectively. After the Armistice he sang at the Volksoper, Berlin until inflation took hold. In 1921 Mengelberg mounted a major Mahler Festival in Amsterdam. Urlus was engaged for *Das klagende Lied*, *Lieder eines fahrenden Gesellen* and the eighth symphony.

He returned to the United States in 1923 as a member the German company at the Manhattan Opera House. The takings at the box office were such that at the end of the originally booked three weeks the company moved to the Lexington Theatre for further four weeks. On his return to Europe Urlus sang at Zoppot and the following year he was at Covent Garden for the first post-war Grand Opera season in which he shared Siegmund and Tristan with Melchior and Soot.

At the start of 1926 Urlus was heard by wireless from Berlin and in the 1926/1927 season he appeared at the Berlin State Opera some 24 times; at the age



of 63 he was still singing Florestan, Parsifal, Siegfried and Tristan. After an appearance as Walther von Stolzing in 1932 there were a few concerts, the last including *Das Lied von der Erde*. He was to have sung in Munich in the summer of 1933, but on arrival there was a brush with officials over the position of his name on posters. Apparently the Führer and Minister for Culture were to attend and would expect the names of German artists to take precedence. Urlus got back into his car and drove home.

Urlus underwent an operation in 1934 and he died suddenly in 1935. A square in the town of Leiden is named after him.

Frequent appearances in Wagnerian roles led to Urlus being thought a Heldentenor, but he was equally at home as Tamino, Faust and George Brown (*La Dame Blanche*) and records from *Euryanthe* and *Les Huguenots* suggest, he was perhaps nearer to Slezak or Knotte than to Melchior. Be that as it may, in the big Wagnerian roles he and Lauritz Melchior are generally considered the supreme artists of the twentieth century. If Melchior is now the best remembered it is on account of his making many more records than Urlus and, moreover, mainly by the electric process. Both of them sing; there is not the smallest hint of Bayreuth-bark. (Jean de Reszke and Hermann Winkelmann were essentially 19th-century artists and in any case their recordings are so limited in number and are so unsatisfactory technically that legitimate comparisons are not possible.)

Illustrations: Jaques Urlus as Siegfried. with, Margerethe Matzenauer in *Fidelio* and as Lohengrin.

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