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Tennstedt Vol. 37

“The rarest genre in Klaus Tennstedt’s discography is opera, *which makes this inspiring Act I of DIE WALKÜRE from 1981* cherishable. I haven’t run across a complete Wagner opera under him, but a handful of excerpts recordings indicate Tennstedt’s deep personal involvement with Wagner’s idiom, an impression only deepened by this performance. As with Furtwängler, not a bar of music goes by that isn’t considered in its phrasing, tempo, and balance. A decade later Tennstedt led Act I again in a 1991 London Philharmonic concert, and I reviewed its release on the orchestra’s house label (FANFARE 40:4). But in every way, and particularly in the singing, this 1981 version is preferable by a good deal.

What stands out at first glance is the presence of Jessye Norman as Sieglinde. Her commanding portrayal is familiar from the complete WALKÜRE in the Met Ring cycle conducted by James Levine (DG), but here Norman is, to my ears, much better. Her huge, resplendent voice is a given, but in London she has dropped much of her imperious manner. This is her Sieglinde showing more than a touch of vulnerability and tenderness. She shades her phrases with nuanced musical instincts - one recalls Norman’s vast experience in Lieder - and her majestic solo passages ring out in recorded sound that competes favorably with DG’s.

Under Levine she had Gary Lakes, an American tenor who was a stand-in for a genuine Heldentenor, as most Siegmunds are. Lakes had a bigger voice than the German tenor Robert Schunk (b. 1948), but in every other respect Schunk is preferable. Besides native German pronunciation and very clear diction, he has absorbed the role dramatically and has musical instincts to match Norman’s. The timbre of the voice is quite attractive, and up through Siegmund’s cry of ‘Walse, Walse!’ and ‘Wintersturme’, Schunk is exemplary.

Yet clearly this is a lyric-dramatic voice that has its limits of reserve, and Schunk begins to fade toward the end of the Act. The singer realizes that his voice is flagging, but he never shouts or loses his musicality. The only real disappointment for me is ‘Nothung, Nothung!’ which is done without

the ability to ring out or even sing very loudly. The partnership with Norman is satisfying. Overwhelming as she is, Schunk doesn't seem to be the minnow swallowed by the whale, vocally speaking, until the very end.

In 1991 the performance had a genuine Hunding voice in John Tomlinson; this is a role that traditionally requires the blackest of basses. Martin Rintzler doesn't fit the bill, and there are moments, as in Hunding's entrance, where he sounds fairly light. Timbre isn't as important as characterization, and perhaps out of a (misplaced) desire to make Hunding sympathetic, or at least more human, Rintzler downplays the character's menace - he's the only Hunding I've heard who is merely grumpy at finding a stranger in his house. But Rintzler improves somewhat, and a notable unsteadiness in his first entrance is soon corrected.

Because Tennstedt was let down by his cast in 1991, I've reviewed the singers first, but as glorious as Norman is - I like her better here than in a high-profile Wagner program she did with Tennstedt and the London Philharmonic in 1987 for EMI - the chief attraction is the conducting. In many passages Tennstedt brings up memories of Furtwangler in his patient pacing, which he employs to find emotional and musical depth. There is more vulnerability in Siegmund than anyone might anticipate. This marks a somewhat startling change in the character, but Tennstedt's conducting views Siegmund as bewildered and lost rather than defiant. As a result his discovery of his sister has a more human meaning.

The first part of the program is devoted to the Act I Prelude to DIE MEISTERSINGER, which Tennstedt recorded at least twice, and SIEGFRIED IDYLL, which he never recorded commercially so far as I know. Both readings are up to his high standards, and the SIEGFRIED IDYLL, done in the full orchestration, is at once rapt and tender.

This is Vol. 37 in St. Laurent Studio's invaluable Tennstedt Edition. The label doesn't disclose its sources, but there is apparently a BBC broadcast of this concert. Another version I heard online is considerably inferior to Yves St.-Laurent's very clear, clean, full remastering. The balance between orchestra and voices is quite good, even if Schunk is occasionally too recessive. The audience bursts into cheers at the end."

- Huntley Dent, FANFARE