



St Laurent Studio YSL T-1092

Keene Volume 10

“At the time of his tragically premature death in 1995, Christopher Keene was general director of the New York City Opera, having succeeded Beverly Sills in 1986. Opera was one of his major strengths and a source of vast experience. He had debuted at City Opera in 1970 with Ginastera’s DON RODRIGO. The company could rarely afford to hire world-class singers, and it made its reputation on adventurous repertoire of the kind mostly untouched by its prestigious neighbor across the Lincoln Center plaza, the Metropolitan Opera.

Keene conducted a huge range of composers from Monteverdi to Menotti, but since the Met was one of the world’s major Wagner houses, I doubt he had much experience in that repertoire, which makes this Wagner concert from 1981 all the more intriguing. Keene’s ten-year relationship with the Syracuse Symphony was at its pinnacle, and the program is as ambitious as any that one would find at the New York Philharmonic. But with a surplus of Wagner excerpts on disc, I approached Keene’s interpretations with some wariness. I shouldn’t have. This is Vol. 10 in St. Laurent Studio’s invaluable Keene Edition, and the glowing reviews from me and my FANFARE colleagues for earlier installments have exclaimed over the musicality of this nearly forgotten American conductor and the excellence of the playing he got from the Syracuse Symphony.

Every virtue in this concert is condensed in the Prelude to Act I of TRISTAN UND ISOLDE, with its hypnotic buildup from the mysterious ‘Tristan chord’ to its explicitly erotic climax. Keene’s grasp of the music is flawless - he phrases with instinctive sensitivity or sensuality as the moment requires. The orchestral balance is beautifully executed, the playing confident and committed. Nothing stands between Wagner’s intentions and the listener, which gives this performance, and the entire concert, its immediacy.

Thanks to the vivid recording and Yves St. Laurent’s expert remastering, there is weight and richness in the grave Prelude to Act III of TRISTAN. Apparently not all the available sources rise to this quality, and we get some noticeable wobble and murkiness in Dawn and Siegfried’s Rhine Journey. Luckily this afflicts only the quiet bass line at the start and isn’t evident as the piece unfolds. There is sonic improvement in Siegfried’s Death and Funeral March. In both orchestral excerpts from GÖTTERDÄMMERUNG the power of the performances is startling, and Keene’s sense of drama and pacing rivals some of the most renowned Wagnerians on disc. (To my delight, the heroic solo by the first horn in Siegfried’s Rhine Journey and the treacherous high notes for the first trumpet in the Funeral March are executed without a blemish.)

I had never encountered soprano Linda Kelm, the soloist in the Liebestod and Brünnhilde's Immolation Scene. She turns out to be very impressive. Born in Salt Lake City in 1944, Kelm studied as a contralto before changing to dramatic soprano around age thirty. It was a crucial decision that led to Kelm singing her first Brünnhilde at the Seattle Opera in 1985 and later at the Met. Besides her extensive Wagnerian singing, she had Turandot in her repertoire - in short, a not inconsiderable figure. Her tone in 'Mild und leise' is quite appealing, and the voice is securely supported up to the top register. The real highlight is her dramatic presence and passionate execution in the Immolation Scene. The voice is youthful and thrilling, the soprano's theatrical instincts riveting. Keene's contribution to both vocal numbers could hardly be better.

Despite my initial qualms, this is one of the most successful releases in the ongoing Keene Edition and certainly one of the most exciting from start to finish. First-rate Wagner from Syracuse? Doubters will be as astonished as I was.

I should note that there is audible coughing from the audience, some residual tape hiss, and applause after each major section of the concert. No program notes, synopses, or texts are provided. These are all in the way of minor drawbacks, fortunately."

- Huntley Dent, FANFARE

