

Mahler Rarities, a three-disc release from Immortal Performances (IP), offers the following:

Das Lied von der Erde:

Nan Merriman; Fritz Wunderlich, NDR SO, Hans Schmidt-Isserstedt, cond.
(Hamburg, 1965)

Kerstin Thorborg; Carl Martin Oehman, Concertgebouw O, Carl Schuricht, cond.
(Amsterdam, October 5, 1939)

Lieder eines fahrenden Gesellen:

Elena Nicolaidi; Cincinnati SO; Fritz Busch, cond. (Cincinnati, May 3, 1950) (World Premiere Release)

Heinrich Schlusnus; Hessian Radio Symphony; Winfried Zillig, cond. (April 12, 1950)

Symphony No. 2, "Resurrection"

Maria Stader; Nan Merriman, Toonkunstkoor, Amsterdam, Concertgebouw O,
Rafael Kubelik, cond. (Holland Festival, July 14, 1960)

IMMORTAL PERFORMANCES 1171-3 (3 CDs: 232:15)

Henry Fogel

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Under the title *Mahler Rarities* Immortal Performances has assembled a collection of live performances that have not been generally available, and when they were, the transfers were for the most part inferior. While none of these recordings would be a first choice for their respective works, all are fine readings that will attract Mahler collectors for very specific reasons.

There are two performances here of *Das Lied von der Erde*. The first is famous for one non-musical reason. It was given in the Concertgebouw in Amsterdam on October 5, 1939. Though that was seven months before the German invasion of the Netherlands, there was already plenty of pro-Nazi sentiment in Amsterdam. The German conductor Carl Schuricht was on the podium, substituting for an ill Willem Mengelberg; at a pause near the end of the final song, "Der Abschied," a woman walked up to the podium and shouted, "Deutschland über alles, Herr Schuricht!" Then she turned away and walked out, happy to have made her protest against the Jew, Mahler. Somehow Schuricht and Kerstin Thorborg kept their concentration and concluded the performance. At least one other release retained the interruption. Wisely, producer Richard Caniell's decision was to excise it, maintain the pause in the music at its proper length, and for those who might find this an important bit of history, retained the verbal incident as a separate track at the end.

The performance has much beyond this anomaly to recommend it. Mengelberg had conducted *Das Lied von der Erde* many times, and the Concertgebouw Orchestra surely retained some of his touches, particularly an effective use of *portamento*, with Schuricht on the podium. Because of Mengelberg's devotion to the composer, the Concertgebouw probably played more Mahler in the first half of the 20th century than any other orchestra. There is a confidence and beauty in the playing that is quite special. Schuricht's conducting is dynamic, particularly exciting in the "Trinklied vom Jammer der Erde," and he occasionally underlines dramatic

moments by slowing down for emphasis. Textures are transparent, so we hear everything in Mahler's orchestration in its correct proportion. There is a warmth and naturalness to the phrasing that emphasizes the music's inherent beauty.

Swedish tenor Carl Martin Oehman is a pleasant surprise here. His voice is strong enough for the first, very taxing, song, and he sings words, not just notes. Thorborg, who made a specialty of this work before Kathleen Ferrier, Janet Baker, and Christa Ludwig, is ideal. She learned the music from Bruno Walter and understands it deeply. She does not overstate the emotional content; in fact, Thorborg's simplicity and understatement is just what is needed in "Der Abschied" to prevent it from becoming maudlin. Her evenly produced tone, steady at *fortissimo* and *pianissimo*, is beautiful.

The most obvious attraction of the second recording of *Das Lied von der Erde* is Fritz Wunderlich. That great and lamented tenor is an important factor in the almost universal admiration that Otto Klemperer's EMI recording has won (Christa Ludwig and Klemperer himself are, of course, also factors). There are three live recordings with Wunderlich: two are from 1964, led by Joseph Keilberth on Myto and Josef Krips on DG, the third being this Hamburg Radio broadcast from 1965. The Keilberth and Krips accounts both feature Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau instead of a contralto or mezzo-soprano, not a choice I find appealing even though using a baritone as the lower voice was sanctioned by Mahler. Wunderlich is utterly magnificent here, phrasing and shading with imagination and retaining his uniquely beautiful timbre at all dynamic levels. Wunderlich's participation on its own makes this an almost essential item for Mahler collectors and lovers of great singing.

He is paired with Nan Merriman, a wonderful Mahler singer with great experience in this music. Although only 45 when this 1965 broadcast took place, Merriman retired shortly thereafter when she married a Dutch widower whose children she wanted to raise. Her voice was already losing a bit of its tonal richness, however, and Merriman doesn't sound as comfortable as she did in her two commercial recordings (both made with the Concertgebouw Orchestra and tenor Ernst Haefliger, conducted by Eugen Jochum and Eduard van Beinum). Here Hans Schmidt-Isserstedt emphasizes the music's lyricism and Mahler's almost chamber-music scoring. Dewey Faulkner, in his excellent notes for this set, calls the performance "properly understated." The recorded sound suffers from some congestion and occasional incidental noise, but Caniell's remastering has brought it sufficiently to life that one can enjoy the performance without difficulty.

The other major work is Mahler's "Resurrection" Symphony conducted by Rafael Kubelik for the Mahler centenary at the 1960 Holland Festival in Amsterdam. Unlike most conductors who emphasize the score's drama, Kubelik goes after its beauty. Neither the white heat and *angst* of Bernstein, the slashing rhythms of Solti, nor the ecstatic Romanticism and lyricism of Tennstedt is found here. Instead, Kubelik gives a reading of warmth, even intimacy. It is a performance that can captivate you if you are willing to meet it on its terms. The Concertgebouw plays with great beauty and conviction, and the chorus makes an exquisitely hushed entrance in the finale. Here Merriman's voice is fresher than in *Das Lied* from 1965, although her vibrato is a touch heavier than I wish. Still, she sings with complete understanding of the texts and is joined by the lovely soprano of Maria Stader in the finale. The last few minutes of the performance feel overwhelming in their power because Kubelik has held so much back up to that point.

There are two performances here of the *Songs of a Wayfarer*. One is valuable because it adds to the discography of Fritz Busch. The Greek-American mezzo Elena Nikolaidi is the soloist; Busch leads the Cincinnati Symphony Orchestra from the May Festival in 1960. Nikolaidi's singing is not particularly impressive but more than acceptable. Her vibrato is a bit too strong in places, and she brings nothing unique in the way of insights. This is probably the performance in the set I will return to least often.

More important is the 1950 broadcast by Heinrich Schlusnus, with the Hessian Radio Orchestra led imaginatively by Winfried Zillig. For the combination of richly beautiful vocalism and interpretive insight, Schlusnus was one of the greatest baritones of the twentieth century, and one of the very few baritones equally at home in Lieder and Italian opera. (I know that Fischer-Dieskau tries to wear that mantle, but to me he never sounded like a true Verdi baritone, whereas Schlusnus absolutely does). In his authoritative book, *The Grand Tradition: Seventy Years of Singing on Record*, John Steane says, "If [Mattia] Battistini had a successor, that man was Heinrich Schlusnus." Steane goes on to praise the singer's even vocal production, smooth tonal emission, and specific projection of texts. We hear all that in this extraordinary performance. When we one realizes that this is Schlusnus at 62, having made his debut 35 years earlier in 1915, one become aware of what a special artist he was. Anyone who enjoys the *Songs of a Wayfarer* should experience this recording, one of the greatest the cycle has ever received.

The set includes a 44-page booklet with Faulkner's stimulating and informative essay on the music and the performances, along with further notes on Mahler by Caniell and his recording notes. There are also some lovely photos and drawings, bios of all the artists, and the full text and translation of the *Wayfarer* cycle. Overall, a lovely collection of some very special Mahler performances.

Review by

Ken Meltzer

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With the exception of the world premiere release of the Cincinnati SO *Songs of a Wayfarer*, all of the featured material will be familiar to many avid Mahler collectors, as it has been issued on various labels. But the availability of many of the recordings has been sporadic. It's most welcome to have them gathered in this collection, and presented in such fine sonic restorations.

Mahler's *Das Lied von der Erde* begins with *Drinking Song of Earth's Sorrow*, scored for tenor and orchestra. In the 1965 Hamburg concert performance, that tenor is the legendary Fritz Wunderlich. In 1964, Wunderlich took part in the EMI recording of *Das Lied*, alongside Christa Ludwig, and Otto Klemperer conducting the Philharmonia Orchestra. It is one of the finest studio versions of the work, due in no small part to Wunderlich's remarkable contribution. But Wunderlich is every bit as electrifying, and perhaps even a bit more so, in the 1965 concert performance. An ideal *Das Lied* tenor should combine the power and beauty of an operatic singer with the sensitivity, and attention to detail and expression, reserved for the best lieder artists. It is that synthesis Wunderlich brings to Mahler's *The Song of the Earth*. Wunderlich is fearless in this challenging music, singing with breathtaking freedom. And throughout it all, Wunderlich maintains the vibrant glow in his voice that made him unique among his contemporaries. He is also attentive to the myriad of emotions Mahler evokes in the three tenor/orchestra songs. Whether it's the feverish outbursts of *Drinking Song of Earth's Sorrow*, the delicate narrative in *Of Youth*, or the Dionysian celebration in *The Drunkard in Spring*, Wunderlich is the master. On September 17, 1966, Fritz Wunderlich died in an accident while on a hunting trip, about a week before his 36th birthday. The irreplaceable loss to the music world is documented in part by Wunderlich's stunning *Das Lied* performance. Mezzo Nan Merriman took part in a pair of *Das Lied* studio recordings, both with tenor Ernst Haefliger, and the Concertgebouw O. The mono recording (Philips) is led by Eduard van Beinum; the stereo (DGG), by Eugen Jochum. Merriman was a superb Mahler singer. Her lyric mezzo featured a pronounced (but controlled) vibrato that may not be to all tastes. But the warm timbre and

Merriman's ability to conjure a wide range of vocal colors are decided assets in *Das Lied*. The mezzo in *The Song of the Earth* is more introspective than her tenor counterpart, a quality that once again suits Merriman's voice and temperament. But in such moments as the passionate episode in *Of Beauty*, Merriman rises to the occasion, with singing of vocal amplitude, and pointed, energetic delivery. In *The Farewell*, Merriman, conductor Schmidt-Isserstedt and the NDR SO maintain the epic finale's hushed tension from start to close. Schmidt-Isserstedt's conducting of the entire score is excellent, relishing Mahler's kaleidoscope of emotions and orchestral textures and colors. It's a reading with ample propulsion and momentum, but one that is never unduly rushed. The NDR SO, a fine ensemble, acquits itself with distinction. The mid-60s mono broadcast may not equal studio recordings of the time, but it allows full enjoyment of this distinguished performance.

The second *Das Lied* on *Mahler Rarities* is a 1939 Amsterdam concert, with Carl Schuricht conducting the Concertgebouw Orchestra. Tenor Carl Martin Oehman and contralto Kerstin Thorborg are the soloists. As Fritz Wunderlich is my favorite tenor in this music, I think it's unfair to judge Oehman by that standard. The Swedish tenor was celebrated for his performances in the operas of Wagner, and Oehman's voice possesses the requisite power and warmth for that repertoire. In a way, Oehman's timbre reminds me of a more heroic version of Julius Patzak (another great exponent of *Das Lied*), but without Patzak's unique genius of characterization. Nevertheless, Oehman's involvement is never in doubt. He sings with appropriate fervor, and is able to lighten his voice sufficiently for the narrative of the pagoda and its visitors in *Of Youth* (Sou-Chong in Lehár's *The Land of Smiles* was another Oehman specialty). A most credible performance of fiercely demanding music. Kerstin Thorborg, another Swedish artist, was one of the vocal glories of her age, a formidable Brangäne to Kirsten Flagstad's Isolde. She was also a sensitive artist; another who, like Wunderlich, combined operatic vocal opulence with a lieder singer's deft touch. Thorborg sings gloriously throughout this *Das Lied* performance. Like Merriman, Thorborg has the measure of *The Farewell*, but is able to lavish greater vocal resources. An infamous moment occurred in that finale when, toward the close of the lengthy orchestral interlude, a woman in the audience stood up and proclaimed: "Deutschland über alles, Herr Schuricht!" Producer Richard Caniell has removed that outburst from the recording. He has placed it as the final track after the conclusion of the *Das Lied* performance. That strikes me as a reasonable compromise. Although the audience member's rudeness and endorsement of unspeakable brutality should not be erased, likewise there is no reason for Mahler's heartfelt musical expression to be soiled. Schuricht's conducting is excellent, more operatic than Schmidt-Isserstedt's in its spotlighting of the work's dramatic narrative. The recorded sound is somewhat inferior to the 1965 Hamburg broadcast. But it is comparable to studio recordings of the 1930s. And it is certainly good enough, I think, to reflect the greatness of the Concertgebouw, both in its precision of execution, and glorious tonal quality.

There is also a pair of recordings of Mahler's *Songs of a Wayfarer*. The first is a world premiere release of a May 3, 1950 Cincinnati SO performance with mezzo Elena Nicolaidi, conducted by Fritz Busch. Nicolaidi had a rich and formidable voice, but at least on this occasion, one that is not an ideal match for Mahler's songs. The high tessitura of portions of *Ging heut' morgen übers feld*, for example, are strained. Nicolaidi is at her best in the seething passions of *Ich hab' ein glühend Messer*. Elsewhere, her performance lacks specificity and again, comfort with Mahler's writing. The recorded perspective gives prominence to Nicolaidi. Nonetheless, it is possible to discern the flexible and crisp articulation Fritz Busch elicits from the orchestra. If the 1950 Cincinnati performance is an historical curiosity, the recording that same year by baritone Heinrich Schulnus, the Hessian Radio Symphony, and conductor Winfried Zellig is one of the finest versions of *Songs of a Wayfarer* on disc. Schulnus was then 61, but the great German lyric baritone is in glorious, youthful form. Schulnus sings the music with an

ease of production that is a marvel on its own terms, let alone in comparison to Nicolaidi's more labored effort. The baritone's radiant hushed dynamics throughout the range of his voice, is a marvelous expressive technique. His diction is exquisite, too. Schlusnus was yet another artist equally at home on the concert and recital stages. And it shows in a performance that is among the finest in realizing the beauty and dramatic impact of Mahler's song cycle. The recorded sound here is quite fine.

The July 14, 1960 performance of the Mahler "Resurrection" Symphony is from the Holland Festival, with Rafael Kubelik conducting the Concertgebouw and Toonkunstkoor, Amsterdam. Kubelik's 1969 DGG studio recording with the Bavarian Radio Symphony Orchestra and Chorus is a strong contender in the Mahler 2 discography. The 1960 concert recording makes for an interesting comparison. But for the most part, it is the studio version that prevails. Kubelik's tempos for the live performance are slower than the 1969 DGG (79:37 v. 76:24). I don't find that the slower tempi add to the musical or dramatic impact, at least not in this performance. To be sure, it is always a pleasure to hear the Concertgebouw in the music of Mahler. Willem Mengelberg, the Orchestra's Chief Conductor for half a century, was a friend of Mahler and a great advocate of his music. The tradition of great Mahler performances by the Concertgebouw O continues to this day. And the Concertgebouw O's gorgeous, blended sound, and grasp of Mahler's idiom provide considerable pleasure in the 1960 "Resurrection." But the Orchestra also sounds fatigued. There are more than a few patches of imprecise ensemble, notably in the strings, and numerous brass "clams." Soloists Nan Merriman (in better voice than in the 1965 *Das Lied*) and Maria Stader are superb, as is the Toonkunstkoor Amsterdam. The recorded sound is good broadcast mono, but the DGG stereo recording has far more presence and impact. The Holland Festival performance is by no means a negligible rendition of the "Resurrection" Symphony, and Kubelik admirers will no doubt want to hear it. But for precision of ensemble and a compelling realization of Mahler's epic musical drama, the 1969 Bavarian Radio DGG recording is preferable.

Dewey Faulkner's booklet notes provide extensive commentary on the featured works and performances. Richard Caniell's Recording Notes, as well as the artist bios, provide additional background. This is a valuable and welcome release. The 1950 Cincinnati *Songs of a Wayfarer* and 1960 "Resurrection" Symphony are of historic interest. Both recordings of *Das Lied* and the Schlusnus *Lieder eines fahrenden Gesellen* are superb. Thanks to IP for making these treasures readily available. Recommended.