

Richard Strauss Society Newsletter No. 42 Spring 2010 - Extracts

Visit to Northington Grange for *Capriccio*

A fair number of members of the Richard Strauss Society have signed up for the visit to Northington Grange for Grange Park Opera's performance of *Capriccio* on 17 June. As Editor, it is my hope that it will be possible to devote the whole issue of the Newsletter that follows that performance to Strauss's final opera, and I am pleased to invite any member of the Society to write in to describe the most outstanding performance seen of this opera. It would be appreciated if any such input to the Newsletter could reach me by 31 July 2010 and be limited to around 600 words, i.e., roughly a page of the RSS Newsletter. [Ed.]

Strauss and Opera, 1919-1949

[A survey by Terry Barfoot]

It was in Vienna in 1919 that Strauss's first post-war opera was produced. *Die Frau ohne Schatten* had a gestation across many years, of course, and is one of his most important collaborations with Hugo von Hofmannsthal.

Michael Kennedy has described it as "the writer's most symbolic and intellectual creation, a mixture of fairy tale, magic and Freudian psychology". Perhaps this was why Strauss initially thought the characters were less than wholly human in their personalities, and had doubts about the suitability of the whole project.

The 'woman without a shadow' is an Empress (soprano) who is not wholly mortal and therefore cannot bear a child. Unless she finds a shadow, which is here a fertility symbol, her husband – the Eastern Emperor (tenor) – will be turned to stone. Her Nurse (contralto) takes her to the house of Barak the Dyer (baritone), whose Wife (soprano) is willing to sell her shadow. But the Empress cannot bring herself to cause the childlessness of another and her compassion is rewarded from the spirit world with the shadow she seeks.

Although this complex parable of the mystery of parenthood, in which fertility is given ethical significance, is too intellectual for some tastes, the music is undoubtedly among the composer's finest....

Elisabeth Söderström [1927- 2009]

The Swedish soprano Elisabeth Söderström, born on 7 May 1927, died on 20 November 2009 in Stockholm at the age of 82 after suffering a stroke some years previously. Many moving tributes have been paid to this great singer in the *Guardian*, *Times*, *Telegraph*, *Gramophone*, and *Opera* magazine. She emerged onto the international stage in the late 1950s, and became a favourite at Glyndebourne particularly in *Capriccio* and in Janáček's operas, appearing there for the first time in 1957 as the Composer in *Ariadne auf Naxos*. In 1959, she returned to Glyndebourne to sing Octavian to Régine Crespin's brilliant Marschallin in *Der Rosenkavalier* conducted by Leopold Ludwig, having earlier sung the role in Stockholm. Having played in 1963 the elegant Countess in *Capriccio* for a traditional production of Strauss's opera (see picture opposite), she was memorable a decade later, when the director John Cox updated the work to the 1920s, and then gave what was perceived to be one of her finest Strauss characterisations. This, the perfect opera for Glyndebourne, provided a role for Söderström that fitted her to perfection at this stage of her career. Söderström followed that success by starring in Cox's 1975 production of another of Strauss's domestic comedies, *Intermezzo*....

RSS 2009 Christmas Party

Queen's College Harley Street was the chosen venue for the Society's Christmas party on 11 December when around 50 members and guests assembled to mark the traditional festivities. Wine was dispensed and nibbles consumed as the room for the party gradually filled leading to an enchanting prelude before the main course (the interview with Sir Charles Mackerras) when Father Michael Gill entertained the gathered throng

on the piano with music from *Ariadne auf Naxos*. At its conclusion, David Davidson (the Society's Secretary) welcomed the various guests who had been invited to the party. These were, in no particular order, Lady Solti, widow of the great Georg Solti – a hero to many of us; Livia Gollancz – formerly a horn player who had played at the 1947 concert at the RAH under Strauss's baton in *Till Eulenspiegel*; Professor Raymond Holden, currently Director of Music at the Royal Academy of Music. Vice-President Michael Kennedy, who was to 'conduct' (without a baton) the interview of Sir Charles Mackerras, and Sir Charles himself were introduced and ushered onto the platform.

Michael Kennedy gently led Sir Charles through a recapitulation of the early stages of his life...

Letter to the Editor

[From Mr R.P. Taylor]

Love Strauss though I do, I'm sure I'm one of the least knowledgeable members of the Society. Could some kind soul tell me whose idea it was to end *Rosenkavalier* with the brilliant scene where the little negro page scuttles back on to the stage?...

Commemorating the Life and Music of Richard Strauss at the Royal Academy of Music

[An appreciation by David Davidson]

On 26 and 27 November, a number of us enjoyed a rare treat when the Royal Academy of Music presented a two-day festival commemorating the 60th anniversary of Strauss's death. This was the inspiration of Raymond Holden, one of the leading professors at the Academy and an ardent admirer of Strauss's music. His idea was to go beyond the popular works such as lieder, tone poems and operas in order to concentrate on his chamber music and other less well known compositions.

Apart from two evening concerts, all events were free, and were very well attended by the public as well as students. The programme on both days was a mixture of recitals and lectures and this worked very well, so that combined with the fact that there were so many young people involved, a very pleasant atmosphere was created. Indeed, for those with conflicting engagements, it was painful to have to tear oneself away....

Elektra (in concert) at The Barbican, 12 January 2010

[Review by Andrew Neill]

AGAMEMNON! Strauss's mighty orchestra bellowed his name, and we began our journey. Agamemnon, the unseen victim, whose murder of his own daughter (Iphigenia) began the destruction of his royal home and created the bitterness of Klytämnestra which sets in motion the events of Strauss's second operatic masterpiece. Four *Elektras* in 12 months is no doubt excessive leading to the possibility of my own derangement and being chased by the same Furies who would pursue Orest after his matricide and murder of Aegisth. Fortunately, I survived and, following Valery Gergiev's concert performance on 12 January 2010 (repeated two days later), I emerged from the Barbican with an even greater wonder for Strauss's extraordinary score. The 120 musicians of the LSO flawlessly dominated the performance and dispelled my doubts that a concert performance would work. Of course, in many ways, it should not work but, and this is an important word, *Elektra* is as much about what is going on in Elektra's head as anything else. With knowledge, we listeners can allow our minds to break free and enter the corrupt world of the house of Atreus, Elektra's obsession and the haunting presence of the soul of Agamemnon seemingly living again within the orchestra itself....

***Elektra* – Concert Performance at the Barbican**

[Review by Eric Adler]

Many operas performed on stages in countless venues over these many years have been savagely criticized by both reviewer and the public. And rightly so. What has been offered visually has often been ludicrous at best and insulting at worst. Reviews in these pages of the five Strauss operas performed in Berlin in 2009 bear out these comments. Concert performances offer a positive and realistic alternative to staged productions, but in so doing two problems arise. First, the singers appear on a platform with scores and are not called upon to act the roles portrayed, though they are able to offer some body language (sometimes too little, occasionally too much) to augment their vocal delivery. Do they benefit from not having to act as they sing? Secondly, does the audience lose visually but gain aurally? Let me return to these points later....

Genesis of *Die schweigsame Frau*

[From *The World of Yesterday*, by Stefan Zweig]

It was the first time I had worked with Richard Strauss. Hugo von Hofmannsthal had been his regular librettist ever since he wrote the texts for *Elektra* and *Der Rosenkavalier*, and I had never met Richard Strauss personally. After Hofmannsthal's death, however, he got in touch with me through my publishers, saying he wanted to begin a new opera and asking if I would be willing to write the libretto. I was very well aware of the honour of such a commission. Music and musicians had been part of my life ever since Max Reger had set my early poems. Busoni, Toscanini, Bruno Walter and Alban Berg were close friends of mine. But there was no creative musician of our time whom I would more willingly have served than Richard Strauss, last of the great line of German composers of genius running from Handel and Bach, by way of Beethoven and Brahms,...