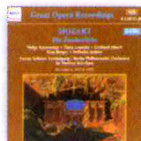


THE TRIAL

Iconic recordings reassessed

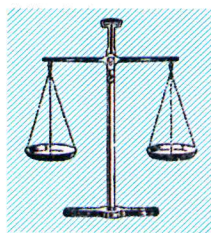


On trial this month, **Mozart's Die Zauberflöte** performed by the Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra and Sir Thomas Beecham, with soloists Helge Rosvaenge, Tiana Lemnitz, Gerhard Hüsch, Erna Berger, Wilhelm Strienz and Irma Beilke in 1937-38

PROSECUTION: TULLY POTTER

'The opening chord is not together and faster sections are pussyfootingly played... Lemnitz, who thinks she is playing the Marschallin, sounds older than her mother!'

The evidence against



Your Editorial Honour, the alleged crimes took place in Berlin in November 1937, with further offences being committed in March 1938. The two miscreants cowering in the dock, Sir Thomas "Pill-Peddler" Beecham and Walter "Leg-Over" Legge, may seem insignificant, deprived of their habitual cigars, but the prosecution contends that in recording

Mozart's opera *Die Zauberflöte*, they committed misdeeds including Artistic Dereliction. We accept the accused's plea that including the dialogue would unreasonably have extended the recording – we are only too grateful not to have the sung recitatives which defaced Beecham's 1914 London production.

The charges relate to the *Zauberflöte* recording which HMV planned to make in 1937 of the well-honed Glyndebourne production under Fritz Busch. Due to Legge's scheming, this project – which could have accommodated Legge's first choices Richard Tauber (as Tamino), Herbert Janssen (Speaker) and Alexander Kipnis (Sarastro) – was cancelled and the contract given to the two accused. It has been alleged that Beecham funded the recording with fees earned through working in Berlin for Hitler's operatic lackeys. And if the story is untrue, it merely makes Legge's plotting look worse. Legge, by his own admission, hired the singers (including the Nazis Hüsch, Lemnitz and Rosvaenge – to hear them sing about "Truth" makes the gorge rise), the chorus (with no operatic pedigree) and the Berlin Philharmonic (the Third Reich's major musical flag-carrier, purged of Jews). Having partly sold the project to HMV on the strength of the BPO, Legge had to replace key players with their superior Staatskapelle counterparts. The Jewish Tauber and Kipnis and the anti-Nazi Janssen were ruled out.

Your Honour will note the opening chord of the Overture is not together – only the first of many orchestral sins – and faster sections are pussyfootingly played. Rosvaenge's voice is too heavy and he emits an

unpleasant sound, not at all like a prince. If a faithful German tenor had to be hired, why not Wittrisch or Ludwig? Hüsch's Papageno sounds more like a prince than a pleb. At "Zum leiden bin ich auserkoren" in the Queen of the Night's first scene we change to a different acoustic, orchestra (the superior Staatskapelle) and conductor (Bruno Seidler-Winkler, who also directs the BPO in the Queen's second aria: no release of the recording mentions these subterfuges). Beecham sets a dandified tempo for the end of the Quintet. Lemnitz, who seems to think she is portraying the Marschallin, sounds older than her mother! The "Boys" are unsurprisingly less than boy-like, as the Third Boy is also the Third Lady: their entry is funereal. Strienz is an inadequate

Sarastro, with a baritone voice and a sketchy bottom register: he sounds like what he is, a radio singer. The chorus is too recessed and its tenors make a sickly-sweet noise.

Act 2 opens with a spongy Priests' March. Strienz is sentimental in "O Isis und Osiris" and makes heavy weather of "In diesen heil'gen Hallen", which Beecham takes too slowly. Sometimes Beecham goes too fast, as in the "Wie? Wie?" ensemble. The "Boys" are

positively coy in "Seid uns zum zweiten Mal". Lemnitz is sentimental in "Ach, ich fühl's". The Priests' chorus starts too slow, then speeds up, and Beecham makes a stodgy meal of it, as he does with the Armed Men's scene.

Your Editorial Honour, it is our contention that by perpetrating this farrago, in which Beecham's conducting oscillated between imprecision and preciousness and only Erna Berger, Irma Beilke, Gerhard Hüsch, Heinrich Tessmer, Walter Grossmann and the "Three Ladies" rose to the required level of excellence, the two accused men produced a mere stopgap – and deprived posterity of a permanent record of the acclaimed Glyndebourne production. *Tully Potter has written extensively about historical recordings over the past four decades. His major biography, Adolf Busch: The Life of an Honest Musician, has just been published and was reviewed in the November issue.*



Our review from July 1938

"Technically, the recordings leave little or nothing to be desired... Voices are well balanced against each other and against the orchestra, and details are commendably clear." (HFV Little)

Mozart's Die Zauberflöte

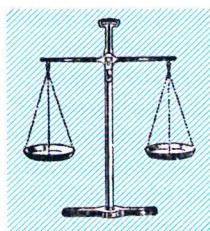
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DEFENCE: MIKE ASHMAN

'This performance holds its head up high for style, wit and beautiful pacing...The conducting is a masterpiece of studio-time work by a class orchestra and conductor'

The evidence for

Your Honour, the defence must first call for no more name jokes about family inheritances and supposed peccadillos – and for some accuracy (that's a cigarette, not a cigar, that "Sir" Walter – as Wieland Wagner used to call him – is craving to smoke in the dock). My clients do not enter any plea about the omission of the dialogue because

the original HMV Mozart Society release contained an 88-page booklet with the full Schikaneder dialogue. And Beecham used sung recitatives he commissioned for *Die Zauberflöte* from Emil Kreuz in 1914 simply in order to gain the forgotten work a place in the hearts of his grand opera audiences.

John Christie and Fritz Busch may have assumed that their Glyndebourne staging of the opera would be recorded by HMV but there was no contract to this effect. The production may have been "well-honed" but in 1937 it was not "acclaimed" by the contemporary press. Legge, who joked about the pressing need for "a Glyndebourne Italian dictionary", was not the only one at EMI to doubt the success on record of Sussex's German Singspiel cast, whose count of nine nationalities included only four native German speakers. Could or would Glyndebourne really have obtained the services of the three singers of Legge's ideal cast? Christie was already making typically snobbish comments about Tauber's "popular" singing, while Busch thought enough of Erna Berger, Beecham's Berlin Queen of the Night, to try to contract her himself.

There is not a shred of evidence that Beecham funded the HMV recording with fees made from his opera work in Berlin. He could not, at this time, have afforded to – see John Lucas's biography (*Beecham: An Obsession With Music*; Boydell: 2008). Moreover, Legge, a fast-rising young record producer, was not "plotting" but spying a chance to make a superior product for the company with "his" conductor, whom he believed was Busch's master in Mozart. Recordings show

that the Berlin Staatskapelle was not a "superior" orchestra to Furtwängler's Berlin Philharmonic – working with whom was the main prize and ambition of the Beecham/Legge project – but a wholly different-sounding ensemble. The story that Legge replaced members of the BPO with players from the Staatskapelle was an imaginative extension on the part of Alan Jefferson (in his 1979 biography of the conductor) to what happened with the Queen of the Night. Every single reissue of the *Zauberflöte* recording on CD has mentioned the perfectly innocent fact that the Staatskapelle substituted for the BPO on the last day's (1938) extra sessions for the recording, when Electrola staff conductor Bruno Seidler-Winkler

conducted them in the used take of the Queen of the Night's first aria. Michael Gray later discovered that he had done the same with the BPO in her second aria (1937) when Beecham was not available (due to a pre-contractual non-availability, as was the case with the orchestra). As mentioned in her autobiography, Berger and Seidler-Winkler were able to orient themselves by listening on headphones in the studio to the "tracks" of the



Legge: smoking

aria that she had recorded with Beecham.

Your Honour, ladies and gentlemen of the jury, I conclude by heaping further praise on a performance which, far from being "a mere stopgap", holds its head up high – even in our age of historically informed Mozart performance that it did much to anticipate – for style, wit and beautiful pacing of ensembles. The conducting is a masterpiece of studio-time work by a class orchestra and conductor. Tags like "pussyfootingly" and "dandified" confuse the prosecution's misunderstanding of Beecham's character with his music-making. Ask the shades of Herbert von Karajan (who listened to it while making his own recording) and Josef Krips, and the very present Kent Nagano, all conductors who have spoken of listening to this *Zauberflöte* to brush up their Mozart style. ☺

Mike Ashman is an opera director, musical historian and Gramophone critic