

Opera, Dec 03

German Romantic opera on the one side, and Borodin, Rimsky-Korsakov, Lyadov and Stravinsky on the other. (Extraordinary that in *Expectations and Developments* Stravinsky could be so dismissive of 'poor Glinka, who was only a kind of Russian Rossini'. So much of his own music proclaims an entirely different sort of response, and influence.) Act 4, in Chernomor's magic gardens, touches perhaps the peak of exotic musical enchantment; altogether, however, the score is a cornucopia to which one can make endless pleasurable and nourishing return visits.

An uncut *Ruslan* is a mighty undertaking for any company, as in interview Gergiev underlines (this is one of the extra features on disc 2): but the Kirov chorus and corps de ballet rise to it thrillingly. A general feature of the broad style of solo singing on display is its warmth of style and generous phrasing, also a sometimes cavalier approach to pitch and articulation of the 'small notes'. For all their gifts of storytelling the tenors Yury Marusin (the bard Bayan) and Konstantin Pluzhnikov (the sorcerer Finn) are the most obvious offenders in this respect, but most of the cast err at some point or other. This said, there is much beautiful, stirring singing on offer: Ognovenko's noble bass hero and Diadkova in the contralto *travesti* role are the most consistent providers, but Gorchakova in the secondary role of Gorislava is at her opulent, full-voiced best, and, as a heroine of story-



■ Anna Netrebko as Lyudmila

book prettiness, Anna Netrebko—only 23 at the time of performance—gives notice of an important talent now coming to maturity. The sweep, sure pacing and concern for detail of Gergiev's conducting make this Glinka revival one of his great acts of reclamation. I hope Philips is planning to publish a DVD of the contemporary Kirov film of Rimsky's *Sadko*—another such Gergiev act—very soon.

MAX LOPERT

Opera books

Wagner's *Meistersinger*: Performance, history, representation

Edited by Nicholas Vazsonyi. University of Rochester Press. 248pp. £60

In 'The Beckmesser Controversy Revisited'—one of 11 chapters in which Vazsonyi's chosen contributors

stretch their legs about Wagner's comedy under three broad headings—Hans Rudolf Vietgen opines that 'No

opera takes us to the dark heart of the matter that we associate with German history more directly than does *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg*. Crudely restated, this 'dark heart' in respect of Wagner's comedy concerns the issue of the composer's anti-Semitism, its supposed especial influence on the dramatic and musical characterization and actions of Beckmesser, and the extent to which the opera's supposedly nationalistic message (*vide* Hans Sachs's final Act 3 monologue about 'German art') anticipated and/or was taken over by Hitler's Nazi government in the years 1933-45. In terms of the present collection, Vagot might well have written 'no discussion of an opera takes us ...', because the space devoted to the issue—*au courant* though it might be—in these pages threatens to gain a stranglehold on the intellectual debate paraded here.

This loss of balance is a pity. Freed by wise editorial decision of the need to restate basic information about the work's music, text and sources, Vazsonyi's team had the chance to fill a gap in the market by providing a wide-ranging theoretical companion to John Warrack's first-rate (and largely factual) 1994 *Cambridge Opera Handbook*. But well over a third of their new book is taken up with chewing around the bone of Wagner's and the work's proto-Nazi associations. David B. Dennis deserves some kind of award for reading so much turgid prose (mostly from the Nazi newspaper the *Völkischer Beobachter*) to assemble his "The Most German of all German Operas": *Die Meistersinger* through the Lens of the Third Reich'. His conclusions are that Nazi hacks (Goebbels and Hitler included) were very interested in Hans Sachs and Nuremberg as proto-national stereotypes, downplayed the importance of the 'modernist' songster Walther von Stolzing, and took Beckmesser and his treatment at comic face value. Vagot essays an exhaustive but largely inconclusive trail through whether Beckmesser was or was not a

parodied Jew, from Thomas Mann via Barry Millington (in his 1991 Cambridge Opera Journal article 'Nuremberg Trial: is there Anti-Semitism in *Die Meistersinger*?') to the rather *ad hominem* reactions to Millington and others of contemporary Bayreuth programme writers. Even the chapter which purports to be an interview with Wagner himself on the internet—a conceit that has no place in a serious volume, especially not as constructed here—gets bogged down with the issue.

Ironically, there is one chapter in this very book in which the entire anti-Semitic issue is so clearly and objectively presented as (surely) to obviate the need for further specialist discussion in such a short volume: Thomas S. Grey's 'Masters and Their Critics: Wagner, Hanslick, Beckmesser, and *Die Meistersinger*'. Grey, the senior 'name' Wagnerian here in terms of research and publications, does justice to the arguments of leading accusers such as Millington and Marc Weiner (in his 1995 book *Richard Wagner and the Anti-Semitic Imagination*), and sets the debate carefully in the context of contemporary reaction to Wagner's republication (under his own name) of his essay 'Jews in Music', Wagner's own complex relations with the critic Eduard Hanslick (supposedly the Jewish critic model for Beckmesser) and discusses, amusingly, contemporary parodies of the opera. Grey acknowledges 'the potentially insidious "doubleness"' of Beckmesser: on the one hand, 'he fulfils his function as a pseudo-historical German mastersinger, town clerk, comic-opera pedant, and foolish, avaricious suitor'; on the other hand, 'none of that prevents one from denoting the ways in which the character and his music may have been designed to embody Wagner's well-documented attitude towards the Jews, and as a vehicle for a kind of semi-private revenge against ... Eduard Hanslick'. He concludes: 'No doubt the hardest truths to accept are those that are fundamentally ambiguous. The role of

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So what is left? Lydia G Dangers of Satisfaction' is but quite rewarding structural analysis of the moments of repetition and rehearsal in Lutz Koepnick, professor of Film and Media Studies at University in St Louis, brings disciplines to bear in a cleverly dispensably lengthy take on 'Community' in the opera. J den Berg handles comedy work—an important topic gets a little distracted (again hunting. Eva Rieger, who published a biography of Wagner's first, forgotten wife, Minna, about the figure of Evchen in the light of Wagner's other his self-identification with characters. Dietrich Fische contributes a taut little monograph (stiffly translated) about the Sachs, especially its peculiar and the pacing of the role of

I Never Walked Alone

By Shirley Verrett with Chris

Its title suggests a diva rescuing the reader's heart from Shirley Verrett's credit—the sentimental autobiography discreetly ghosted by Chris Brooks, is sober. Verrett is tall, straight, avoiding gush or lingering on the mysteries of technique. She knows her own worth both artistic and financial (she is a qualified book-keeper) and bravely admits to mistakes in her personal life and her career. Operatic dirt is dished here but score-settling is kept to a minimum. Her dignity is tempered with the chapter on her 1973 *Ned de force* as both Cassandra and entitled 'Troy meets Shirley', a woman of spirit and integrity

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So what is left? Lydia Goehr's 'The Dangers of Satisfaction' is a difficult but quite rewarding structuralist analysis of the moments of applause, repetition and rehearsal in the work. Lutz Koepnick, professor of German, Film and Media Studies at Washington University in St Louis, brings all his disciplines to bear in a clever but dispensably lengthy take on 'Sight and Community' in the opera. Klaus van den Berg handles comedy in the work—an important topic in which he gets a little distracted (again) by Nazi-hunting. Eva Rieger, who has recently published a biography of Wagner's first, forgotten wife, Minna, writes well about the figure of Evchen Pogner in the light of Wagner's other women and his self-identification with his characters. Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau contributes a taut little monograph (stiffly translated) about performing Sachs, especially its peculiar tessitura and the pacing of the role on stage.

Harry Kupfer makes a good point or two about Sachs's appeal for the preservation of German art in a modern linguistic context, but his comments are inevitably (and limitingly) referential to his own 1998 stage production, pictures from which illustrate the book. Peter Schneider's 'On Conducting ...' does not flow well as written literature, but is fascinating on small details of rhythm and marking.

A frustrating curate's egg then, with some valuable writing that is rather overwhelmed in the context of so much harping on the 'dark' side of the opera. I missed more substantial contributions on the music (and its reception and influence), and on contemporary (i.e. 1860s) German politics. Technically the book is quite well produced, with clear-ish photos, a good standard of proof-reading and indexing, and a useful bibliography. But the cover copy-writer should note that the first postwar Bayreuth Festival did *not* open with *Die Meistersinger*.

MIKE ASHMAN

I Never Walked Alone: The autobiography of an American singer

By Shirley Verrett with Christopher Brooks. Wiley. 336pp. £20.95

Its title suggests a diva resolutely set on warming the reader's heart, but—to Shirley Verrett's credit—this is not a sentimental autobiography. The prose, discreetly ghosted by Christopher Brooks, is sober. Verrett talks pretty straight, avoiding gush or inordinate lingering on the mysteries of vocal technique. She knows her own value, both artistic and financial (it turns out she is a qualified book-keeper!), yet she bravely admits to mistakes in her personal life and her career. A little operatic dirt is dished here and there, but score-settling is kept to a minimum. Her dignity is tempered with humour—the chapter on her 1973 New York *tour de force* as both Cassandra and Didon is entitled 'Troy meets Shirl'. We see a woman of spirit and integrity.

It's worth resisting the temptation to fast-forward to the juiciest operatic bits, since one of the book's more satisfying sections is Verrett's account of her early years. Born in New Orleans to devout but not unworldly Seventh Day Adventists, she was always encouraged to sing. Opera was morally out of bounds, but she later drew inspiration for her Ulrica from her flamboyant spiritualist grandmother. Verrett's African-American identity is important to her, and especially gratifying is her 1960 triumph in *El amor brujo* with Stokowski in Philadelphia and New York. The conductor offered her the dates after a proposed collaboration in Houston had been kiboshed by a racist orchestral board.

When it comes to big names, Verrett can drop them with the best. She turns