

Music Views and Reviews by Kathy Wolfe

EMI'S Mozart catalogue

"Le Nozze di Figaro," by Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart

Carlo Maria Giulini, 2 CDs
CMS 63266

Otto Klemperer, 2 CDs
CMS 63849

"Requiem," by Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, K. 626

Bruno Walter, CHS 63912

Wolfgang Gönnenwein,
CDZ 67014

Carlo Maria Giulini, CDZ 62518

The Angel EMI Classics recordings catalogue is probably the best in the world, especially for Mozart and other operas and oratorios. It includes the best older recordings on CD of Mozart's "Le Nozze di Figaro" and of his sacred "Requiem." In a day where new recordings often sound as though they've been put through a blender, these older recordings are essential.

EMI (Electrical & Musical Industries Ltd.) is a very British firm, rather like its scientific counterpart, Aldermaston. Just as the Crown's laboratory at Aldermaston is a museum, where the monarchy keeps studies of all the world's scientific works, so EMI collects the best recordings of classical music.

EMI's *éminence grise* Walter Legge practically parachuted into Berlin days after World War II ended. In 48 hours he signed to contract conductors Wilhelm Furtwängler and Otto Klemperer, and Germany's finest musicians. He was so serious about taking the best that he took soprano Elisabeth Schwarzkopf to wife.

Whether Legge's decisions overall benefited postwar music would be a book in itself; his preference for Herbert von Karajan over Furtwängler was reprehensible. But his urge for

completion meant that those recordings he did leave are remarkable.

The Marriage of Figaro

Most postwar productions of "Le Nozze di Figaro" (1786) suffer a flaw: The character of Figaro is sung as an angry peasant. Only that great bel canto Italian bass Cesare Siepi had it right. His Figaro is a figure of the American Revolution, sung from above, whose love, via brains and a Mozartean sense of humor, has the confidence to conquer all. Unfortunately, the Siepi version (London OSA 1402) is otherwise poor, with weak singing and conducting by Erich Kleiber.

While a pirate of a live 1953 "Figaro" by Wilhelm Furtwängler exists, I haven't found it to see how he handled this issue.

Carlo Maria Giulini's 1961 EMI recording of "Figaro" is the best commercial version, although there is the Figaro problem: Baritone Giuseppe Taddei just growls. Tempi are also too fast.

Giulini's poetic phrasing and singing line, however, as with his Beethoven oratorios and Verdi operas, save the overall conception. He brings out the most important counterpoint in the scenes which are points of inflection of the whole opera, especially in the Act II finale, when Susanna and Figaro ask to be married, and the Act IV finale, in which the Count is transformed and repents. The voices are glorious, with Anna Moffo as a bright Susanna, Elisabeth Schwarzkopf as a round, Italianate Countess, and Eberhard Wäcker's fine Count, with as many voices as the Count has moods.

If you like "slow," or if you're a conductor, get Otto Klemperer's 1970 version. Klemperer is a genius with orchestral voices, bringing out every voice imaginable, over time. Pro-

foundly moving in his conducting of Beethoven's "Missa Solemnis," his style takes some humor out of "Figaro." Individual scenes are wonderful, but the whole is missing some of the joy. Except for Elisabeth Söderström as the Countess, the singers can't sustain such tempi.

If the Metropolitan Opera ever releases its Dec. 14, 1985 telecast as a CD or LaserDisc, buy it: It's the best Figaro recorded.

Requiem

No fewer than three fine recordings of Mozart's "Requiem" are on EMI. By far the most dramatic is Bruno Walter's live Paris concert on the eve of war in 1937. Its broadness is impressive, always passionate, but sometimes so slow as to be bombastic. The orchestra is heavily miked, so you can hear everything there, unlike most recordings in which only the soprano choral section is audible. Unfortunately, the horns are totally out of tune and so is the wildly romantic Russian bass soloist Alexander Kipnis. Soprano Elisabeth Schumann and tenor Anton Dermota are heavenly. A drawback is that this is a three-CD Mozart set, and the symphonies and concerti on the other CDs are frenetic and superficial.

My favorite rendition remains the 1966 version by Wolfgang Gönnenwein, featuring Teresa Zylis-Gara and Peter Schreier in glorious voice. The tempi are perfect, the conducting commanding and inexorably contrapuntal. The South German Madrigal Choir had a superb bel canto training which gives transparency even in the most difficult coloratura choral passages. A close second is the more recent version by Giulini (1979). Better miked, it reveals more of the inside chorus voices, but the chorus is vocally a bit breathy.