

“Der Ring des Nibelungen”--Georg Solti and the Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra (1958-1965)

Added to the National Registry: 2003

Essay by Jonathan Horrocks



Sir George Solti



Original album art for “Das Rheingold”



Richard Wagner

The first complete recording of Wagner’s “Ring” cycle conducted by Sir Georg Solti was possible due to a number of recent advances in recording technology. The long-playing record allowed for longer takes and fewer discs, and stereophonic sound allowed a soundstage for opera singers to move around, similar to what they would do in a staged performance. Both EMI and Decca attempted to record a complete “Ring” cycle live at Bayreuth in 1951. But neither company succeeded in capturing a successful cycle from beginning to end, so the Decca producer of those sessions, John Culshaw, became determined to record the cycle under studio conditions that would allow more control over the sound quality and the performance.

During those same years, Decca had developed a relationship with the Vienna Philharmonic, so there appeared the prospect of recording the “Ring” with a world-class orchestra that was also an opera orchestra.

Each opera in the “Ring” was to be recorded separately, and aside from “Die Walkure,” the market for complete sets of the other three operas was uncertain. However, after the success of “Das Rheingold” (recorded in 1958), Culshaw was determined to finish the cycle. Incidentally, RCA had made a complete recording of “Die Walkure” in 1961, so in order to not compete with that set, Decca recorded “Siegfried” next in 1962, followed by “Götterdämmerung” in 1964. “Die Walkure” was finally recorded in 1965.

It was not unusual for studio recordings of opera to be done in segments over many weeks, so conductors had to keep in mind the consistency of the whole. Solti had an even larger challenge making sure all four operas achieved a musical and dramatic unity. In addition, some improvements had been made to the recording equipment used for the last three operas, but Decca insured that the sound was consistent enough so that the operas recorded in that seven year period could be played in sequence without any noticeable change.

The 1950s and 1960s were the golden age of opera singing, and these recordings captured many great singers at their peak, and with the maturity those roles required. For “Das Rheingold,” Culshaw was able to get the legendary Kirsten Flagstad out of retirement to sing the role of Fricka. As Joan Sutherland was a star of the bel canto repertoire, she was chosen to sing the role of the wood bird in “Siegfried.” Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau, a star of German art song, was chosen to sing Gunther in “Götterdämmerung.”

Wagner calls for a number of special instruments in the “Ring” cycle--such as hunting horns and anvils. Whereas other instruments would have been substituted in a live production, Decca sought out the exact instruments Wagner wanted. There were also a number of other effects that proved challenging in live productions, but Decca made sure those effects happened as Wagner indicated in the score. One example is the hammerblow and thunderclap before the rainbow bridge scene in “Das Rheingold” which was achieved using a large anvil, thunder sheet, and bass drums. Decca also made sure the off-stage effects had the appropriate perspective in “Gotterdammerung” by using rooms that surrounded the main recording space.

From a production standpoint, what Decca achieved with the “Ring” cycle was more than just documenting a musical performance, it was trying to create an opera experience in the living room. For these reasons, the Decca studio “Ring” cycle will remain a hard act to follow.

Jonathan Horrocks is a Recorded Sound cataloger in the Motion Picture, Broadcast and Recorded Sound division of the Library of Congress.