

BOOK REVIEWS

MAX LICHTEGG: NUR DER MUSIK VERPFLICHTET

by Alfred A. Fassbind. Römerhof Verlag, Zurich, 2016. 560 pp. Price: CHF 36, €36. In German. Available from Amazon, the publisher's website (<http://www.roemerhof-verlag.ch>) and a website devoted to the singer (www.maxlichtegg.ch).

One thing is certain: no one will ever need to write another book about Max Lichtegg (1910–1992). Anyone seeking information about the tenor, once enormously popular in Switzerland, yet little-known internationally, need only consult this exhaustive account – or have it translated.

Munio Lichtmann (he adopted the stage name Max Lichtegg in 1934) was born into a Jewish family in Galicia. Orphaned during World War I, he was sent in 1918 by his grandparents to live with the family of an uncle in Vienna. There he gained his first singing experience, as an alto in a synagogue choir, and subsequently studied with Victor Fuchs at the city's Neues Konservatorium. His breakthrough came in 1934, when he was awarded first prize in a competition whose judges included Franz Lehár and Richard Tauber. He was promptly engaged by Oscar Straus to star in his latest work, *Walzerparadies*, and put under contract by the Odeon record company. Within a year he was being hailed as *the* up-and-coming operetta tenor. From the outset, Lichtegg's physical appearance and personal charm played a significant part in his success: he would remain a heart-throb throughout his career. In 1936 he left Vienna to take up an engagement at the Stadttheater in Berne. Henceforth he was in effect (and, from 1949, in fact) a Swiss singer.

In Berne, although under contract as an operetta tenor, Lichtegg was given his first opportunity to appear in opera, singing Narraboth and the First Jew in *Salome* in 1937. He made frequent guest appearances in Basle and over the next few years divided his time between the two cities. In 1940 he joined the ensemble of the Stadttheater (renamed the Opernhaus in the mid-1960s) in Zurich, the city that would be his base for the rest of his life. In addition to operetta, he was soon appearing in parts in opera that ranged from Tamino to Don José and Lohengrin. His essentially lyrical approach to both the latter roles did not meet with universal approval and his lack of vocal heft was noted by critics.

Ever anxious to avoid pigeonholing as an operetta and light music specialist – a reputation reinforced by records made for Odeon, Elite and Parlophone in 1941–44 and by the majority of his subsequent discs, and one that he never really shook off – Lichtegg also began giving song recitals and singing in oratorio. In his early annual recitals he was often accompanied by the young Georg Solti. In 1946 the tenor signed a contract with Decca and the resulting discs (recorded partly in Zurich, partly in London) featured Lieder (marking the beginning of Solti's lifelong association with Decca) and Mozart arias, as well as operetta selections. Some of the latter were sung in English: Lichtegg was obviously being groomed as Tauber's international successor.

In 1947 Lichtegg made his US debut, joining Rose Bampton in four concerts on the West Coast that included Florestan's aria and the last part of Act I of *Die Walküre*. He returned the following year, auditioning unsuccessfully for Edward

Johnson at the Met, but appearing at the San Francisco Opera and elsewhere as Fenton, Don Ottavio and Turiddu. Despite largely favourable reviews (his Ottavio in San Francisco was deemed the best since Borgioli's), his US career proved to be a dead end.

Lichtegg's schedule in the coming years was punishing, involving concerts all over Switzerland every year and guest appearances abroad, most frequently at the Volksooper in Vienna, in addition to his performances as first tenor of the Stadttheater in Zurich. Relations with a new general manager of the Stadttheater were not good and, in 1954, Lichtegg terminated his contract with the house. Thereafter, his activities were perhaps even more extensive than before and are chronicled in almost wearying detail in the present volume. Aside from singing, he wrote the libretto for *Cleopatra*, an operetta consisting of vocal and instrumental pieces by Johann Strauss that was performed in 1963, and, in later years, the music and texts in *Mein tönendes Sizzenbuch* (My Musical Sketchbook), a collection of humorous, gently satirical songs, rather in the manner of Tom Lehrer.

It is clear that Lichtegg was essentially a lyrical tenor. He was, to say the least, a very versatile singer. In addition to the standard operetta repertoire, his roles in opera extended from Tamino and Rossini's *Almaviva* to *Don Carlos*, Turiddu and Lohengrin, encompassed much in between (including Pelléas and both Dmitri and Shuisky in *Boris Godunov*) and did not stop at more modern parts, such as Tom Rakewell in *The Rake's Progress* (in which he was much acclaimed in Zurich, Vienna and Stuttgart) and even Alwa in *Lulu*. In recital, too, he ranged widely, giving the first performance of Britten's *Seven Sonnets of Michelangelo* in Switzerland, for example, and rediscovering the songs of Johann Vesque von Püttlingen (1803–1883), while in oratorio he ran the gamut from Bach's *Mass in B minor*, via Kodály's *Missa brevis* to contemporary works by Paul Ben-Haim, Willy Burckhard and Luigi Dallapiccola.

Such breadth of repertoire testifies to Lichtegg's musicianship and, while his vocal longevity attests to the solidity of his technique (he was still giving recitals in the 1970s, recorded an LP in 1987 and made his last appearance as a singer in 1988), it is difficult not to suspect that he may have sung not only too much, but also too much that was unsuited to his voice. Perhaps that partly explains why his international career never really took wing at the level that he would have wished. Furthermore, he appears to have made some unfortunate decisions, putting too much trust in an unreliable US agent, for instance, and in Decca's notoriously wily, penny-pinching Maurice Rosengarten.

Producing this book has obviously been a labour of love for Alfred A. Fassbind, himself a singer and an experienced author who has written the standard life of Joseph Schmidt and is keeper of that tenor's archive. A pupil of Lichtegg's, he has evidently had access to the singer's papers, though this is not noted explicitly in the book. His subtitle, which might be translated as 'Devoted only to Music', could stand as a motto for a volume that discloses relatively little of the subject's personality. The book is exceptionally well and copiously illustrated (though the images, all in black and white, are printed on the same paper as the text) and, apart from a rather cavalier attitude to accents and some errors when quoting English, there are few typographical errors. An excellent discography (unusual in a German-language publication) and a useful list of Lichtegg's stage roles are said to be complemented by a list of his concert repertory on the website devoted

to the singer (p. 540), yet could not be found there at the time of writing. (The website includes some audio files of Decca 78s dating from 1946 to 1950 and a potted biography in occasionally quaint English.) The fly in the ointment is the lack of an index. This renders the volume virtually unusable. Might the publishers be persuaded to commission at least an index of names and post it on their website? Otherwise the book and its subject are unlikely to receive the attention they deserve.

Michael Foster

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