

Lotte Lehmann, Vol. 2: Odeon Electrical Recordings, 1927-33

The Record Collector, June 2020

Marston has followed its four CD set of Lotte Lehmann's acoustic recordings with a six CD issue of her electric recordings made for Odeon between 1927 and 1933. There is no such thing as an uninteresting record made by this great artist but it was precisely in these years that she reached full maturity as an artist while her gorgeous voice was still close to its peak. Odeon's recording techniques were far from the best of the period and as Ward Marston explains in an informative essay, differ in quality from disc to disc. However Odeon's sometimes overly intimate acoustic was kinder to Lehmann's peachy timbre than some of her later more harshly recorded American discs.

In *The Record of Singing* Michael Scott makes the inexplicable comment that Lehmann's repertoire "remained narrow, increasingly so with the passage of time." In fact, over her long career she sang an astonishing 94 roles on stage. In one season mid-career in Vienna from 1927-8, she sang 17 roles, including the Marschallin and Sieglinde, Manon, Suor Angelica, Fidelio, the Countess, Pamina, Manon Lescaut and Turandot! What singer today would be capable of such stamina and versatility? It was only in the final decade of her career at the Met that she was restricted to a handful of roles by the house policy of type-casting that also robbed New York audiences of Melchior's Otello and confined the versatile Pierre Monteux to the French repertoire. Lehmann's very first electric recording made in February 1927 was of Turandot's *In questa reggia* (In diesem Schlosse) which she had sung in the Vienna premiere four months earlier. This is a recording that has been criticized for the cutting of the final climactic phrases and it has generally been assumed that Lehmann simply couldn't risk the heroic top C. As Michael Aspinall rightly points she throws off an ecstatic top C in *Nel primo pianto* (Die ersten Tränen) on the other side of the disc. So the mystery remains. This was probably the first recording ever made of this great aria and as in the case of Tauber's *Nessun dorma* in which he sings the penultimate top note as written without hanging on to it, there were perhaps no expectations to disappoint. In any case Lehmann's incomparably vivid narration of the woes of Lo-u-ling in the earlier part of the aria compensate for any disappointment at the end. Lehmann was equally at home in German, French, Italian and even Russian repertoire, though all of it was sung and recorded (with the exception of two duets from Tosca) in her native German. Lehmann's beautiful enunciation of the German language is one of the many joys of her singing. Erna Berger who performed with Lehmann in Fidelio, told me that she used to stand in the wings throughout the performance for the pleasure of listening to Lehmann's spoken German. It is a pleasure afforded us in only two tracks in this set, notably in enchanting excerpt from Lehar's *Eva*.

German Lieder comprise nearly half the tracks on these CDs. Lehmann's recordings of Lieder for Odeon have often been dismissed (not least by Lehmann herself) or their "inartistic" instrumental accompaniments. The scratch orchestra put together for Brahms' *Von ewiger Liebe* is indeed truly frightful. This is all the more regrettable as this passionate song suits Lehmann's temperament like a glove and she never recorded it again. In other songs such as Schubert's *Der Tod und das Mädchen* and the cycle *Frauenliebe und Leben* the combination of piano and string quartet strikes me as less terrible and even has a certain period charm.

The rest of the set (some 6 tracks) consists of hymns, folksongs and popular songs of the period. High-minded commentators (including Gary Hickling in the

booklet) have been dismissive of this material. *The Sanctuary of the Heart*, which draws Gary Hickling's ire was a favourite record of the late Richard Bebb and I have to admit there is not one of these tracks I would wish to be without. Lehmann endows the dullest hymns with radiance and uplifts the corniest popular songs with her passionate sincerity. I have a particular weakness for the gloriously louche *Der Duft der eine schoene Frau begleitet* in which she extols the enticing perfume of beautiful women. It is a song that expresses the sexual freedom of 1920s Berlin where it was recorded and perhaps Lehmann's own reputed sexual ambiguity. Despite the womanliness of her timbre was able to undertake songs and even song cycles intended for men with complete conviction.

For the quality of the transfers and in matters of scholarship and production values Marston sets a standard to which all other record companies can only aspire. Michael Aspinall's lengthy analysis of Lehmann's art is as always illuminating and a delight to read.

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