

---

ST. DAVID'S HALL, CARDIFF  
(April 26, 1984)

ORCHESTRA OF WELSH NATIONAL OPERA

Elisabeth Söderström (soprano). Nicholas Folwell (baritone).  
Richard Armstrong (conductor).

Recordings always lie.

I read a record review recently in which the writer bemoaned the fact that there was no recording of Kirsten Flagstad singing Richard Strauss's *Four Last Songs* so that we might hear how those songs sounded at their première.

Well, of course there has long been available a recording of Flagstad singing these songs, with the Philharmonia Orchestra conducted by Furtwängler. The recording was of the world première performance given at the Royal Festival Hall on May 22, 1950. Or so the label stated. The truth is that the recording was made during the final rehearsal and the applause that greets the conclusion of the 'performance' (the final chord was never recorded) was dubbed in later.

The day of the performance under review here I had played my copy of this Flagstad performance yet again to refresh my memory before I attended this concert given by Elisabeth Söderström and the WNO Orchestra. This concert in fact consisted of the repertoire to be heard on

---

her EMI LP with the WNO under Armstrong — that is *Four Last Songs* and the closing scene from *Capriccio* — so talk of recordings is quite relevant.

I heard again that Flagstad had the effortless power to float the music out over the orchestra, but all in all the performance is lumpy and undistinguished (it should be borne in mind, of course, that this was a rehearsal).

Unfortunately, 'undistinguished' was also the word that came to mind during this St. David's Hall concert. I suppose that I should leave it at that but it would be unfair to dismiss such a distinguished artist so briefly, so let me make the general comments that Söderström seemed to have no message to tell, no point of view concerning the music (take her uninvolved singing of the line, 'Wie ein müdes Kind empfangen'), that the voice was heaved around from note to note with a prominent aspirated 'h' between each one and that twenty percent of the singing was inaudible.

A comparison with her recent recording of the same repertoire and the same orchestra and conductor is most instructive since, compared to the live performance, the record certainly does lie. There is no inaudible singing and the voice, that sounded so under powered in the hall, here rides over the orchestra most comfortably. The word 'Seele' in *Beim Schlafengehen* which was marred so badly by a change of vowel sound and a breath taken right in the middle of that vowel (how could it do that to this transcendent music?) is not to be heard on the record.

No need to go on; such a list is both tedious and pointless. It was a considerable disappointment.

The excerpt from *Capriccio* came off a good deal better, mostly because the lighter scoring required less of an effort on the part of the singer. Nicholas Folwell, Melot on the WNO recording of *Tristan and Isolde*, was a clear voiced and pleasant Major Domo.

The orchestral contribution to the vocal selections were generally under-characterised (may I refer the sceptics regarding not only the orchestral contribution but the interpretation in general to the glorious performance — for those who were lucky enough to hear it — of the *Four Last Songs* given by Margaret Price and the SNO under Alexander Gibson in Edinburgh in 1975).

The concert had opened with a first rate reading of Strauss's *Don Juan* in which this rather tired old warhorse was brought to spirited and colourful life by Mr. Armstrong and the orchestra.

The concert also included a performance of *Till Eulenspiegel* that, when the players were together and playing the right notes (which, truth to tell, was most of the time) also made a powerful effect.

The best news of all though, is that Fonit Cetra have a radio performance, only recently made available, of Flagstad and Furtwängler performing the *Four Last Songs* and I am informed that the sound quality, at least, is first rate and that the recording will be released in due course. I am looking forward to hearing it, but then, I will also have to remind myself that like the camera the recordings always lie.

---