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Walter Felsenstein Edition (review)

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formers other than Toscanini seemed out of place, and unnecessary. The value of this film however is in its intent, to successfully provide rare insight into the life of the Maestro through this unique and personal

source. To that effort, Walter Toscanini might really emerge as the most important character in this film.

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We Want the Light. DVD. Directed by Christopher Nupen. West Long Branch, NJ: Kultur, 2009, 2003. D0909. \$29.99.

We Want the Light, by acclaimed documentary filmmaker, Christopher Nupen, explores the complex relationship that Jewish musicians and German composers have shared for the last two hundred and fifty years. Drawing from a rich menu of interviews with prominent musicians, scholars, critics, and Holocaust survivors, Nupen presents an intriguing investigation of music's power and meaning. *We Want the Light* originated as an hour-long 2003 special for the BBC. The 2009 two-DVD set begins with that BBC special, a well-crafted documentary which falls into three parts: 1) German history and Jewish assimilation; 2) Richard Wagner's influence; and 3) the fallout from Hitler's adoption of Wagner. Nupen tells this story through interviews, musical performances, and primary source readings. Underscoring it all are extended excerpts from various composers ranging from Bach to Brahms to Franz Waxman. Nupen covers a lot of historical ground and manages to find the right balance of scholarly context, musical reflection, and colorful (often heartbreaking) anecdotes from the survivors. The images throughout *We Want the Light* are mainly of the interviewees, but Nupen also incorporates excellent live performance footage, most of which effectively focuses our attention on the music rather than the technique or personality of the performer(s). Also included is a rare clip from a concert in Rishon LeZion, Israel in which the Israel Symphony attempts to perform Wagner's *Siegfried Idyll* over the protests of an angry listener shaking a rattle. Nupen concludes the first DVD by presenting the entire documentary soundtrack

again but without interviews or narration; the images here are drawn almost completely from live performances. As Nupen notes in the DVD introduction, the documentary repeatedly emphasizes music's ability to communicate more vividly than words. The separate music track, recorded in Dolby Digital 5.1, is intended to encourage viewers to return to the music itself and reflect on the context *We Want the Light* has just described. On the second DVD, Nupen presents extended clips from the eighteen interviews he conducted for the documentary. Included is a stunning performance by Evgeny Kissin, whose interview did not make the final cut, but whose playing of the slow movement from Brahms Piano Sonata in F minor, Op. 5 powerfully captures Nupen's overarching point that music, though abstract and imprecise, has the ability to cut deep into our emotional being.

This is Nupen's tenth documentary, all now available on DVD. His earlier projects focused on performers (Segovia, Kissin, Perlman, du Pré, Milstein, Ashkenazy), or composers (Schubert and Sibelius), so *We Want the Light* cuts a new path, and in doing so confirms Nupen's mastery of the classical music documentary. The sound quality and image clarity are excellent. The DVD menus are thorough, clearly organized, and easily navigated. *We Want the Light* is intended for general audiences, but will also be of great use to specialists in Wagner, the Holocaust, German history, political music, and even documentary film production.

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Walter Felsenstein Edition. DVD. Film restoration edition. [Halle an der Saale, Germany]: Arthaus Musik, 2007. 101 345. \$149.99.

Walter Felsenstein, the founder and director of Berlin's Komische Oper from 1947 until his death in 1975, is often cited

as a pioneer by today's proponents of "opera as theater." Unlike many directors of his era, many of his productions were

recorded and his rehearsal process was well documented. He is also one of the only postwar opera directors to be the subject of several scholarly studies (in English, *The Music Theatre of Walter Felsenstein: Collected Articles, Speeches, Interviews, and Others*, ed. Peter Paul Fuchs [New York: Norton, 1975; London: Quartet Encounters, 1991]; in German, for example, Robert Braunmüller, *Oper als Drama: das "realistische Musiktheater" Walter Felsensteins* [Tübingen: Niemeyer, 2002]).

This DVD set (twelve DVDs; Ludwig van Beethoven, *Fidelio* [1956]; Leos Janáček, *The Cunning Little Vixen* [1965]; Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, *Don Giovanni* [1966] and *The Marriage of Figaro*, [1975/76]; Giuseppe Verdi, *Otello* [1969]; Jacques Offenbach, *The Tales of Hoffmann* [1970], and *Bluebeard* [1973]), presents digital restorations of seven of Felsenstein's productions dating from 1956 to 1976. The performance circumstances vary: *Don Giovanni* and *The Marriage of Figaro* are both filmed performances at the Komische Oper, while *The Cunning Little Vixen*, *Otello*, *The Tales of Hoffmann*, and *Bluebeard* are studio films slightly adapted from Komische Oper stage productions. Only *Fidelio* is a film original. The large amount of "extras" include rehearsal footage and interviews with Felsenstein (with English subtitles available); each DVD also includes brief but informative booklet notes.

The constant is Felsenstein's style, which sought realistic, painstakingly detailed performances. The performers are mostly members of Komische Oper ensemble, not international stars, who are dedicated to Felsenstein's time-consuming rehearsal process and precise and ruthless demands (occasionally on display in the rehearsal videos). The settings are traditional and without the grand concepts of the post-Chéreau era; Felsenstein's work lies in the emotional realization of the music and characters, not in radical interpretation. For this reason, with the exception of some kitschy fashions, his work has aged extraordinarily well, and many of these productions breathe with a life rarely seen in opera.

However, the attraction of this set is their grand picture; only a few of the productions would individually be first choices of the operas represented. One major draw-

back is the German translation of the non-German operas (a practice that continues at the Komische Oper today). For a German speaker and for the singers, the communication is admirably clear, but there are musical drawbacks.

The weakest entries of the set are the two Mozart productions, though sensitive and careful, both are musically average and lack the excitement and charm of the others (the *Figaro* was recorded shortly after Felsenstein's death, perhaps the absence of his supervision is a factor). The German text seems to rob the singers of their legato, and the syntax is occasionally convoluted. *Otello* is also only partially successful, despite a heroic effort from tenor Hanns Nocker in the title role, the production is stymied by a less-than-imposing Iago and the constricted space and technical capabilities of the television studio (including a rather dry bargain-basement storm).

Fidelio is the earliest (1956), and most experimental of the group, originating not at the Komische Oper, but as a film in Vienna. The score is cut, particularly the *Singspiel* numbers at the beginning, and in other places rearranged. The result is a strange but fascinating and unique work, described in an unnamed review quoted in Ilse Kobán's interesting notes as a "stark juxtaposition of silent film, cinema . . . and cinematic effects reminiscent of Cocteau."

Felsenstein used the source materials of *Hoffmann* available at the time to attempt the five-act version Offenbach never finished. His version contains a great deal of spoken dialogue drawn from Barbier and Carré's play, eliminates the Guiraud recitatives, and restores the Giulietta act to its rightful final position. The production uses cinematic fades to emphasize the tales as creations of the author Hoffmann's fervent imagination. As well as the traditional quadruple-casting of the four villains and four servants, Meletta Muszely sings all four women, and what can often seem like a gimmick for once makes sense (though on vocal terms she is not entirely convincing as Giulietta).

The highlights of the set are the two least-known works, Janáček's *Cunning Little Vixen* and Offenbach's *Bluebeard*. The Offenbach (the only DVD available of this operetta) is a strange mélange of political satire, metatheatrical tricks, and serious

themes, given an unobtrusive framing prelude by Felsenstein to alert the audience to the games that will ensue. Bluebeard's wives emerge alive, but the many marriages at the ending are a decidedly ironic happy ending. Werner Enders plays the King with vague suggestions of Hitler, but one who never actually managed to kill anyone. The satire, along with elements of *Fidelio*, are the only nods Felsenstein seems to make to his own era; both seem entirely within the characters of the respective works.

Felsenstein's *Vixen* has already been available on DVD. Unfortunately, the picture

remains blurry and the sound distant (the other transfers are exemplary), but this does little to impede this wonderful production. Felsenstein sought for the Komische Oper "a work that expressed what people expected of me." Not only was the production a major success for the company but it shows Felsenstein at his poetic best in this set, translating Janáček's delicate score into a dreamlike sung near-ballet.

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Howard Goodall's Organ Works, The Complete Series. DVD. Directed by Rupert Edwards. West Long Branch, NJ: Kultur, 2009, 1996. D4442. \$29.99.

Howard Goodall's Choir Works, Choirs Perform. DVD. Directed by Anthony Palmer. West Long Branch, NJ: Kultur, 2009, 1997. D4440. \$29.99.

Every once in a while, a passionate person comes along with a tireless zeal for spreading the love of music. Leonard Bernstein, with his Young People's Concerts, filled that role. Now, Howard Goodall seems to be stepping into his large shoes. Goodall, a composer for a variety of venues, including the TV series *Mr. Bean* and *Blackadder*, brings the zany humor of such shows to the music documentary. Three of his TV specials for the BBC are available on DVD: *Big Bangs*, reviewed in this journal in 2009; *Organ Works*; and *Choir Works*.

Organ Works, after a clever introduction at the Chicago Blackhawks hockey rink, whisks viewers through four segments of twenty-plus minutes each that outline the organ's history from medieval times to the present. We see and hear reconstructions of the earliest portative organs, travel across Europe and the United States to find the oldest, largest, and strangest organs, explore the world of harmoniums, Wurlitzers, and Hammond organs, and conclude with the question of whether the organ will be superseded by its electronic equivalents. It is unfortunate that the focus is so narrowly on the instruments that the pieces are never identified, even in the credits. The broad scope also leaves some finer details of these organs' workings under-explained.

Yet, Goodall effectively highlights the sheer power and variety of this instrument. As viewers watch Goodall traipse with glee to Spain to hear Baroque battle music or climb six stories of the inner workings of the organ at West Point Academy, they can hardly help but be swept up by a similar zest for this "king of instruments."

In 2007, the British government appointed Goodall "National Ambassador for Singing." Goodall fits this bill not only because of his choral compositions, but also his contagious enthusiasm for singing of all stripes. One can see this in *Choral Works*, which offers four segments, of approximately twenty minutes each, on: South African isicathamiya; cathedral choirs in Oxford and Salisbury; spirituals and gospel music in Nashville; and Bulgarian and Estonian traditions. Goodall's aim, as he states at the beginning, is to show how choral music is "central to how communities feel about themselves, their aspirations, histories, and politics." In South Africa, we learn how isicathamiya mixed Zulu and Western influences and helped maintain morale and tradition during apartheid. In Britain, Goodall celebrates the community and tradition of a 500-year old ensemble, the all-male Christ Church Cathedral Choir, but also welcomes a challenge to