



Photo by Allen Warren



Wagner Society of New York  
A Centennial Tribute to Sir Georg Solti  
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**SIR GEORG SOLTI, *DAS RHEINGOLD*,  
AND THE STEREO ERA**

**Joe Pearce**

**President, Vocal Record Collectors Society**

Sir Georg Solti's 1958 recording of *Das Rheingold* is considered to be, even after over a half-century of the most stalwart competition, one of the very greatest operatic recordings ever made. Indeed, for many of us, it has an importance out of all proportion to just its musical and interpretative merits, for it ushered in a new era of operatic recording in a way that perhaps neither Sir Georg nor the set's indefatigable producer, John Culshaw, could possibly have envisioned. To understand its full importance, however, it is first necessary to look at the conditions obtaining for recorded opera in general, and for recorded Wagner in particular, up to the time of its issuance. And in this context we must also briefly examine the tremendous accomplishment of Sir Georg Solti, who not only conducted *Das Rheingold* but over seven ensuing years made possible the completion of the entire RING project: the first-ever complete studio recording of what many consider the greatest artistic masterpiece, musical or otherwise, of the entire 19<sup>th</sup> century. In a survey of critical opinion published by the *BBC Music Magazine* (January 2012 issue), the Solti RING was voted "the greatest recording of all time."

Richard Wagner's music was always a problem for the early recording industry. Unlike, say, Giuseppe Verdi, most of whose operas were easily divided up into arias, duets, trios and the like, (those of a relatively short duration favored by three- to five-minute 78rpm sides), most of Wagner's scores were through-composed and not easily excerptable. And even those portions of his operas that could be so divided depended for their effectiveness to a large extent on their orchestral underpinnings. One can enjoy "La donna è mobile" or "Sempre libera" with a tinkling piano background or an acoustically-recorded orchestral accompaniment much more easily than when those same backgrounds must suffice for a "Liebestod" or an "Immolation scene." Even after the advent of electrical recording in 1925, orchestral backgrounds spent a good while catching up in effectiveness to the voices of the likes of Melchior, Leider, and Schorr. Additionally, and of prime importance, with the exception of *Der fliegende Holländer*, Wagner's operas are long and contain a great deal of music that often doesn't "grab" even Wagnerites when divorced from its original context. The most ardent Verdian may enjoy a good performance of Walther's "Prize Song" or Lohengrin's "In fernem Land" but it is the rarest of Wagnerites who will subject himself to a recording of King Mark's Act Two solo if it isn't following the great passion of the preceding love duet or leading up to Tristan's apologetic, "O König." In a nutshell, this was a problem for the entirety of the 78rpm recording era, but it was even worse than just indicated.

We did get hundreds, perhaps a few thousand, of Wagner excerpts recorded from the very dawn of the 78rpm process (say, 1900) up to its effective end (say, 1950/51), but they were almost always excerptable "arias" or bleeding chunks, sometimes cut to ribbons, and often with hastily composed concert endings. When it came to complete recordings, of all the great nineteenth century opera composers, Richard Wagner ended up as low man on the totem pole. Until the very last year of the dominance of 78rpm discs, when English Decca issued piecemeal (act by act) a completed *Die Meistersinger*, which saw only limited issuance on 78s since it was being issued simultaneously on LP, there was not a single complete studio recording of a Wagner opera to be had. In 1928, Columbia had recorded an "abridged" *Tristan und Isolde* with Nanny Larsen-Todsen, with well over an hour of the opera not included. The nearest thing to a complete Wagner opera recording, therefore, was the 1930 Bayreuth-related *Tannhäuser*, but even that had about twenty minutes of music left out of it. Meanwhile, there were at least two dozen complete recordings of Verdi operas issued during that same half-century period, and over one dozen of the three Puccini mainstays—*La Bohème*, *Madama Butterfly*, and *Tosca*.

Perhaps more than any other factor, the problem with Wagner was sheer length. Assuming a record company's ability to overcome the problems of excerptability, musically-unresolved side closings, never-ending monologues and the like, Wagner's operas were just too long for the 78rpm era and, consequently, too expensive to record, and, even more importantly, too expensive to purchase. The longest of the Verdi/Puccini operas was *Aida*, which took up 20 records (40 sides), but all of the others could be accommodated on 14 to 17 records (28 to 34 sides). By contrast, the much-abridged *Tristan und Isolde* took up 40 sides; complete, it would surely have encompassed about 60. At one dollar per record, that would have come to \$30 for the set. In the 1930s, \$30 was a good *weekly* salary and one could support a family on it! Since all of the major Verdi and Puccini operas popular during this period were recorded, and none of the Wagner ones were, it is obvious that no one saw even a break-even point financially where Wagner was concerned. Think about it: with some 14 hours of music in the RING and an average of about 4 minutes per 78rpm disc side, a complete RING would have taken at least 210 sides, or 105 records at a buck each. \$105 would pay for a college semester back then, so at whom, except the very well-off, could such a set possibly be aimed? But let us now concentrate on the RING.

Towards the end of the acoustical recording era, the Russian-English conductor Albert Coates launched a project to record substantial excerpts from the RING on HMV, these with the London Symphony Orchestra and soloists of the caliber of Florence Austral and Tudor Davies. They were sung in English (but you'd never have known it from listening to the recordings) and were also issued in the U.S. on Blue Label Victors. You rarely got an *actual* title for any piece of music—rather, the titles were descriptive, such as *Siegmund draws the sword from the tree*; *Brünnhilde foretells Siegmund's death*; *Brünnhilde recalls her Valkyrie days*; *Siegfried takes the oath on Hagen's spear*, etc.; if a listener didn't know the music, that one-line description had to suffice. Although these were well done, the desired orchestral prominence could not be achieved even by placing the singers almost within the orchestra as against simply in front of the recording horn. Happily, electrical recording came into being in 1925 and very shortly thereafter HMV restarted the project, in time enlisting not only Coates, but also Leo Blech, Robert Heger, Lawrance [sic] Collingwood and Karl Alwin to conduct substantial excerpts of the RING in London, Berlin, and Vienna, with Austral (now singing in German), Widdop, Laubenthal, Leider, List, Schorr, Ljungberg, Melchior, etc. doing the vocal honors. Altogether, by around 1930, these came to about 90 sides of the RING, a tremendous achievement for those days, and the performances were often quite wonderful (there is nothing even remotely as exciting in Wagner tenor singing, on record or off, as Melchior and Coates in the Act One finale of *Siegfried*), but as a totality, even for what was intended as only representative excerpts, the project was a hodgepodge of conflicting styles, orchestral sounds, dramatic interpretations, vocal excellences, recording ambiances, etc. It was exactly what, three decades later, Solti and John Culshaw were intent upon avoiding in their *Rheingold*, as well as in any other recorded RING operas that might ensue.

Lastly, in the Paris of 1929, yet one more attempt was made to record representative excerpts of the RING, this consisting of 40 sides on the Pathé label, and with consistent casting and orchestral forces utilized throughout. Although several of the singers were, or would become, major artists (Anni Konetzni, Margarete Klose, Ludwig Weber, Ludwig Hofmann, Walter Kirchhoff, and Henriette Gottlieb), the orchestra and chorus were of the semi-pick-up variety (if ably conducted by Franz von Hösslin), the actual recording was abysmal in sound quality, and the set had extremely limited distribution. And that was really the end of any serious attempt to make a studio recording of the RING in the 78rpm era, except for one more try, and this confined to the most universally popular of the RING operas, *Die Walküre*.

In 1935, HMV had decided to take a shot at *Die Walküre*, and launched it with one of the greatest opera recordings in the entire history of the gramophone, a complete Act One with Melchior, Lehmann, List, and Bruno Walter, recorded in Vienna. It was an immediate triumph and plans were started for a recorded Act Two. Unhappily, by this time (1938), political conditions were such that Walter and List could no longer enter Germany and Lehmann would not do so, so the portions of the second act involving Sieglinde and Hunding were recorded under Walter in Vienna, while most of the rest of the act was recorded under Bruno Seidler-Winkler in Berlin, with Hans Hotter, Marta Fuchs, and Margarete Klose as the Gods, and with Melchior, getting to be a much-traveled Siegmund, singing at one moment from Vienna and at the next from Berlin. And at the very end of the act, recorded back in Vienna, Alfred Jerger takes over Wotan's final lines from Hotter! It wasn't as bad as it sounds but certainly not ideal. The plan was to then record the complete Act Three, but World War II intervened and such ideas were shelved. But American ingenuity did, after

a fashion, ride to the rescue. In 1945 Columbia was looking for something substantial for Helen Traubel to record, and they realized that the third act of *Die Walküre* was not only substantial but much needed and desired. Acts One and Two having been issued by Victor and remaining in the catalog, what could be more natural and profitable than for Columbia to complete HMV's aborted undertaking by recording their own Act Three with Traubel, Herbert Janssen, and the New York Philharmonic-Symphony under Artur Rodzinski. Wagnerites rushed to buy it and they finally had a complete recording of a RING opera to listen to at home! Ideal? A complete opera recorded over a span of ten years, in three countries, and with three different casts, orchestras, and conductors could never be that, but it served for the next nine years, for in 1954 we finally arrive at the end of our search for a viable studio recording of at least one of the RING operas—viable, but still not quite perfect.

Only three months before his death, Wilhelm Furtwängler, fairly fresh from his success in bringing off a complete recording of *Tristan und Isolde* with Kirsten Flagstad and Ludwig Suthaus in 1952, and an excellent *Fidelio* with Mödl and Windgassen the following year, achieved for HMV (now usually referred to as EMI) the first complete studio recording of a RING opera when he committed *Die Walküre* to disc in Vienna during the summer of 1954, with the terrific cast of Mödl, Rysanek, Suthaus, Frantz, Klose, and Frick. It is a superb performance, it's only fault (not even a consideration at the time) being that it was recorded shortly before the advent of stereo, so listening to it is always a bit disappointing in view of the limited spaciousness of the mono sound and the knowledge that stereo was just around the corner.

And that is a short history of the RING on records until Sir Georg Solti and John Culshaw appeared in 1958 with something of a Messianic glint in their eyes!

Born in 1912 in Hungary, Sir Georg Solti was a prize-winning pianist who wanted to conduct. He made rapid strides in that direction, and by the late 1930s had assisted both Bruno Walter and Arturo Toscanini at the Salzburg Festivals of 1936 and 1937. Back in Hungary, he conducted some performances in Budapest, but was invited by Toscanini to Lucerne to assist in preparations for a music festival to be held there. He left for Switzerland in August 1939, war was declared a few weeks later, and Solti, now a refugee, would remain in that country until 1946. Unfortunately, due to work restrictions on foreigners in effect at that time, except for a handful of conducting opportunities over the radio, his musical activities during these years were largely confined to teaching piano, occasional appearances as a piano soloist, and more numerous appearances as piano accompanist to various singers and instrumentalists. Solti can be heard as accompanist in a number of lieder recordings made around that time by Max Lichtegg, and also as accompanist for violinist George Kulenkampf: his first commercial recordings. It was Lichtegg who went out of his way to bring Solti's extensive musical knowledge as both pianist and conductor to the attention of the Decca management. Thus shortly began an unbroken professional association with that company, both happy and extremely productive, that would last for nearly a half-century, until Solti's death in 1997. Meanwhile, in 1946 he had been offered the post of Music Director of the Bavarian State Opera in Munich, from which he moved on to the same position at the Frankfurt Opera a few years later.

Between the importance of these two positions and his increasingly successful activities on the Decca label as a conductor, Solti finally had a chance to make up for lost time by conducting in both opera and concert in many venues on three continents, and to start building up what would, even only in the 1950s, become a very large catalog of successful recordings through his numerous assignments as one of Decca's most notable young conducting talents. Despite his musical directorships in both Munich and Frankfurt, however, with the exception of an LP of highlights from *Elektra* recorded for DG in 1952, he did not make a substantial opera recording until 1956, when he led Decca's classic complete version of *Arabella* (with Della Casa, Gueden, and London). The next year he would record a complete Act Three of *Die Walküre* and the *Todesverkündigung* Scene from that opera's second act, these with Flagstad, Svanholm, and Edelman. It was the artistic and commercial success of this recording that would put the seal on Culshaw's selection of Solti to lead the first complete commercial recording of DER RING DES NIBELUNGEN, the most mammoth project in the history of recorded opera. But the coverage here is really concerned only with the start of that project: the recording and issuance of *Das Rheingold*, its effect on the subsequent history of recorded opera, and its more immediate effect on opera-loving record collectors (such as myself) in the U.S.A.

Most opera-loving record collectors under the age of about 65 probably have no real recollection of a time when stereo recording wasn't the norm. They may be exposed to many historical monaural recordings, but they weren't around, or were too young to remember, when even the last of these were made. Stereo recording really first came into the public arena for standard commercial issuance only around 1957 and 1958, and it was generally accepted by the record companies that, other than with audiophiles, it was not going to go over big too quickly, so that all recordings issued from the inception of the new methodology were done in both stereo and monaural versions (the stereo version usually priced one dollar higher per disc than the mono issue, a policy which may have been diametrically opposed to the result they were trying to achieve, but a system that nevertheless would endure for close to a decade before mono versions of new recordings ceased to be issued).

Of the major labels, some companies, more forward looking than others, started to record most or all of their classical music in stereo as early as in late 1954 and in 1955, even if they had no plans to issue stereo recordings in the foreseeable future. English Decca and RCA Victor were leaders in this respect, while EMI/Angel, Columbia, and even DG held back for a couple of years. Those first two years of stereo were somewhat "iffy" for people like myself: voice lovers who saw no particular advantage for singers in the process, as voices didn't really need stereo to be effective. Also, while orchestral and chamber music would surely benefit from the new process, the expenditure for anything like decent stereo equipment enforced a wait-and-see attitude on our part: everyone had to buy new equipment to enjoy the stereo effect as up until that time one speaker had usually sufficed even in the most expensive reproductive equipment.

And then, along came the Solti/Culshaw/Decca *Das Rheingold* in mid-1959, and everything changed forever! No new complete opera recording ever had more going for it. It was the first and only recording of the opera available. It had a cast that was just about unbeatable, headed up by George London, a great Wotan in the making; the greatest Wagnerian soprano of the age, Kirsten Flagstad, as Fricka; Svanholm, Neidlinger, Kuen, Kmentt, Watson, Böhme, Wächter, Madeira, etc. It had the most exciting conducting imaginable for what had, up to that time, usually been considered a less-than-exciting opera. And the recording had been produced, under Culshaw's exacting oversight, with the highest and most exacting musical and dramatic standards imaginable, all of it geared to make the stereo recording process such an integral part of the whole that it came over almost as an actual element of the opera – there was the music, the conducting, the singing, the drama, the effects and the sound, all of which were of such a piece that it was impossible to even imagine considering any parts of it individually; it had to be taken as a totality, and it was! Suddenly, every opera lover I knew was raving about this new set, and all the rest of us who heard it demonstrated on decent stereo equipment were planning to convert to stereo at the earliest possible moment. It could truly be said that for a significant percentage of opera lovers and perhaps classical music lovers in general, this one recording, *Das Rheingold*, accelerated the process of conversion from mono to stereo in a most unanticipated manner, and that everybody came up a winner because of it.

Although Solti's star had already been in the ascendant, this solidified his status, making him an almost instant legend in recording circles. He also soon took over the musical directorship of Covent Garden, later of the Chicago Symphony, conducted other important orchestras, and remained one of the truly great star conductors until his passing almost forty years later. The tremendous critical, popular, and financial success of the recording of *Das Rheingold* enabled Culshaw and Solti to continue their RING project, completing it with *Die Walküre* in 1965. Even though it took seven years for the entire project to be realized, it proved once and for all that the RING was viable for commercial recording purposes. Since then, there have been other complete RINGS, almost all of them, however, "live" stage performances or recorded by artists in connection with current stage productions. With the exception of Karajan (whose version suffered from inconsistent casting and perhaps a lack of that purely visceral Solti excitement), no one has had the temerity to attempt it again in the recording studio, at least not on the grand scale exemplified by the Solti/Culshaw/Decca RING. A half-century later, it remains unequalled in its overall greatness, but some of us still give pride of place to that first installment, *Das Rheingold*, which brought a new recording era into being. Long may it reign!