



Hidden depths

SHEILA ROCK

Hidden depths

George Hall asks Semyon Bychkov about his preparations for recording Wagner's *Lohengrin* on the Profil Edition Günter Hänssler record label

It's been 10 years since Wagner's popular 'Romantic Opera' *Lohengrin* last received a studio recording. Now Semyon Bychkov, widely admired for his work in the world's major opera houses as well as in the concert hall, has turned his attention to the piece. Among his substantial repertory – particularly strong in Richard Strauss, the Russian classics, and Italian Romantic works – Wagner looms large, with productions of *Lohengrin*, *Tristan*, *Parsifal* and the first two instalments of *The Ring* already to his credit, and *Tannhäuser* currently scheduled.

As a young musician growing up in Leningrad, Semyon Bychkov initially got to know the overtures and other orchestral 'bleeding chunks' on disc. Indeed, prior to working on Wagner himself, Bychkov had come at it from a largely orchestral point of view. 'At that time the text meant absolutely nothing to me. I didn't have the language and I didn't know enough about Wagner's life, or how his creative processes developed. It was only later that I understood that in Wagner everything happens through the text, because the text came first; then he found how to translate the rhythm of the speech into the rhythm of the music.'

Nowadays, the major Wagnerian roles are acknowledged to be among the most difficult to cast at an international level. How did Bychkov find his cast? 'I was to do a new production of *Lohengrin* in Vienna. When something like that happens, you don't want to confine it to just one place. I wanted to make a recording,

and the ideal place to do that would be Cologne, with my orchestra. [Bychkov has been principal conductor of the WDR Symphony Orchestra since 1997.] So from the very beginning we had the team together. The first time I worked with Johan Botha [*Lohengrin*] was on *Daphne*, in Cologne, then in Vienna on a new production and also on the recording. He is maybe the only person who can sing the piece without cuts at this time.

'Heinrich is a horrible part – it goes so high and so low, and everywhere in between, and if somebody begins to bark, it's a bore. So Kwangchul Youn is ideal. Ortrud is another horrendous thing. There are many magnificent artists working today, but I wanted to consider a younger generation of Wagnerian singers. If recordings were available to the last generation of singers, why not the next one? So Petra Lang came to mind, and I must say that when we first tried it in concert in Spain, with Adrienne Pieczonka, Botha, Lang and Falk Struckmann, it was wonderful. You need a close group of friends with whom everything is discussable, and this is exactly what we have with this recording.' Bychkov's current revival of the opera at Covent Garden, incidentally, features three members of the recorded cast.

Lohengrin comes at the end of an early phase of Wagner's career. How does Bychkov view it in terms of its overall position? 'Well, nothing later on would have happened without *Lohengrin*. Wagner is one of those cases of an

CD feature

individual who could practically see the rest of his life while he was a young man. *Lohengrin* is far more complex than is immediately apparent, because it sounds so tuneful, but behind the tunes there is already the dramatic aspect – the contradictions between how we view the characters and how they view themselves, which is not necessarily always the same. For example, that seeming contradiction where somebody like Ortrud gets the most noble type of music in her duet with Elsa. Something doesn't fit, until you realise that this is also how Wagner viewed himself. You find Wagner himself in every one of his characters. There is a strangeness too, about both Elsa and Lohengrin.'

Lohengrin also has its own special sound-world: 'For instance, everything associated with Elsa is based on oboes. When you think of her first appearance, that scene actually begins with oboes as a way of identifying that "strangeness". Throughout, the different woodwind instruments are not necessarily used in the registers associated with them.'

How does he find the right orchestral sound for such a piece? 'First of all transparency, because there are so many layers in the orchestration. Even though vertically it is very clear, it is essentially polyphonic, so whichever line you play has its own meaning. You also have the idea that because it is German Romantic music it has to be very thick, very heavy, to be important. But it can be important without being thick. Then there is the question of very clearly defined articulation. Because of the continuity of the music, the balance is difficult to strike. Wagner's idea was that voices should become integrated, but they must not be submerged. Every single element in the texture has to receive its space and expression.' Judging by the extracts I have heard from the forthcoming recording, this is exactly what Bychkov has achieved, as well as a remarkable sense of flow.

Bychkov remains fascinated by the complexity of ideas in the philosophical background to Wagner's art. 'In the case of Wagner it is never possible to learn too much about the background, but the sheer quantity of Wagner's own and other people's discussions is convoluted. If you really want to do that, you must stop conducting and stop learning those scores, and you would still not have enough time. But it's very interesting speaking to those who really know and love Wagner. You can have endless discussions, going in all directions, so that nobody knows where they started. It is as vast as the universe itself – which is what makes us all so crazy!' ON

Lohengrin, 23483274897, Profil Edition Günter Hänssler label is released in April 2009