

poetry recited by the poet rather than sung, and there is much to learn from a careful comparison of these three works and how they are rendered.

Cornelius Boot's *Dream of Wheat* is a setting of five excerpts from *Encyclopedia of the Wheat* by Jeffrey Bean. These are offbeat, whimsical musings on wheat and some of its most remarkable qualities, and the composer taps into that sense of play perfectly. The poet reads each of these excerpts before the two wind instruments embark on what feels like their own playful commentary on what has just been said. The music feels utterly fresh and new and it leaves us hungry to hear more from this composer. By the way, Bean's text is included in its entirety beyond what is included in the work, and one can hope that the composer might set more of this fascinating text.

David Biedenbender's "Staying the Night" follows a roughly similar format but toward a vastly different expressive end. Robert Fanning's heart-breaking poem springs from the real life tragedy of his sister's death and what it felt like for him and his family to enter her home and see and touch what had belonged to her. "We're the guests of someone gone," the poet muses, and the stark simplicity and directness of the text ushers us right into the heart of his grief. Once the text has been recited, the flute and clarinet respond in an unaccompanied duet that seems to represent the two siblings in widely varied textures; sometimes they move in spare, parallel lines, while at other times they are intersecting each other with tight intricacy. The moods swing wildly as well, from playful joy to searing pain and everything in between before settling into a reflective final coda. It is a remarkable work.

The third work at hand turns out to be the least effective, at least as it is presented here. Unlike the two pieces already discussed, Marilyn Biery's "Provincetown, August" has the poetry recited over a musical backdrop in the manner of the classic melodrama. Unfortunately, poet Terry Blackhawk recites her wonderful text in a stiff, wooden fashion that feels very unmusical and emotionally unpersuasive. Perhaps it is sacrilege to voice such criticism about a poet reading her own work, and perhaps she was reciting it in this fashion to make some sort of interpretive point, but in the context of Biery's lovely, lyric score it simply does not work.

Biery's other work on this disk, "Protea, in Venice," is one of the most striking pieces in this collection, and its haunting beauty derives in large measure from the composer's assured instincts for crafting expressive and singable melodic lines that mesh seamlessly with the woodwind lines. The supple piano accompaniment lends support without needlessly intruding into the central texture of voice and winds. Terry Blackhawk's enigmatic text is beautifully served both by this setting and by this performance. Jay Batzner's "Word of the Day" is scored just for voice, clarinet and flute, but the spare texture is ideal for Joanna White's intriguing text and gives it new life. Perhaps most impressive of all is Lester Trimble's setting of four extended passages from *The Canterbury Tales*. Putting the words of Chaucer to music presents all sorts of challenges, but Trimble manages to keep the words remarkably clear and discernible. His choice to use harpsichord is an inspired one and it has the effect of taking us into a completely different musical place.

The disk opens and closes with music from two of the twentieth century's most important composers. Aaron Copland's "As It Fell Upon a Day," a rarely heard gem that the composer wrote in the early 1920s while studying in Paris and delving into neoclassicism for the first time. The piece is vintage Copland in terms of its expert craftsmanship. The disk finishes out with Igor Stravinsky's *Three Songs from William Shakespeare*, one of the works in which the composer began to experiment with the tenets of serialism in the early 1950s. This may be the most pungently dissonant music on the disk, yet these songs are remarkably attractive and vocally gratifying.

There is nothing quite like the special chemistry between musicians who are also friends, and that collaborative warmth is at the heart of these impressive performances by musicians who are or have been faculty colleagues at Central Michigan University. Mezzo soprano Tracy Watson and soprano Elissa Johnston sing with unflinching musicality and technical poise, no matter how difficult the music. Flutist Joanna Cowan and clarinetist Kennen White are exactly the kind of sensitive collaborators that this sort of repertoire requires. Pianist Mary Jo Cox and violist Takeshi Abo complete the circle with their own valuable contributions. Full texts are included along with introductory notes on each piece.

Birgit Nilsson: A League of Her Own: A Documentary by Thomas Voigt and Wolfgang Wunderlich.
(Unitel 800008; 89:00)

The ferocious wave of enthusiasm around the centennial of Leonard Bernstein has had the unintended effect of diverting attention from other

significant landmarks, including the centennial of Swedish soprano Birgit Nilsson, one of the most important opera singers of the twentieth century. She was a towering colossus among the singers of her *Fach*, and during her prime years there was no other singer in the world who was more indispensable in the heroic repertoire in which she specialized. It was simply unthinkable for most major opera houses to mount major works of Wagner or Strauss without vying for Ms. Nilsson to lead the cast. Sadly, too many young singers and music students today have no idea who Birgit Nilsson was or the sterling standard of excellence that she represented for several generations of opera fans. This marvelous documentary film is a terrific way for the uninitiated to learn what all of the fuss was about, while those of us who are already fans of this artist can be reminded of what made her great, and simultaneously learning a great deal about the woman behind Brünnhilde's breastplate.

Many fans will appreciate how briskly the film moves into the prime years of the soprano's career, but more time could have been taken to explore her early life and those forces that helped shape her into the peerless artist she was to become. It is not that these matters are ignored, but they could have been discussed more thoroughly. It is also regrettable that the film includes no samples of Nilsson's singing from the years before she achieved international fame. Recordings exist of her singing from as early as 1948, but their omission from the film means that the viewer can only imagine what the singing of the young Birgit Nilsson sounded like. This is a shame. The closest we come is in a delightful excerpt from what appears to be a Swedish version of

"This is your life" that was done when Nilsson had become world famous. At one point in the program the host announces to Nilsson that they have managed to find and transport to the studio the old pump organ she played in the family home during her childhood. She is thrilled by the surprise and proceeds to sing a folksong while accompanying herself on the organ, vigorously pumping the pedals as she plays. The sight of this renowned opera star (by this point in time a major artist at Bayreuth and beyond) taking such delight in this old pump organ tells us all we really need to know about Nilsson and what was most important to her. It is a delicious and touching moment.

Once the film reaches the years of Nilsson's emergence on the world scene, the story is told with impressive depth and detail, thanks to a combination of performance clips, interview excerpts, and spoken tributes from a number of her admirers and/or colleagues. It is the interview excerpts that are the most enlightening, and they are drawn from at least seven different sources and range from the height of her fame to a decade after her retirement from the stage. Nilsson is unfailingly charming and good humored, but she is also incisive, forthright, and articulate. She is in especially good form in a three way interview that featured her, Astrid Varnay, and Martha Mödl, three of the finest Wagnerian sopranos of the century. (This interview is well worth seeking out and watching in its entirety.) It is here that Nilsson pays eloquent homage to Wieland Wagner, perhaps the most gifted and influential opera stage director of his time. Nilsson describes how thrilling it was to have the role of Isolde molded to her particular gifts and abilities as

though it were a dress tailored specifically for her; she also cites him as the first director that made her feel like she was a great actress. (One can only wish that more of today's opera directors would aspire to do the same for the singers with whom they work.) It is in this same interview that Nilsson spells out what was at the heart of her dislike of the legendary Herbert von Karajan. She calls him a great musician but a small human being because of his arrogant insistence on controlling every aspect of his productions, seemingly oblivious to his own limitations. One has to appreciate how carefully Nilsson outlines the basis of her criticism as well as the genuine sadness with which she voices it. This is not a matter of a superstar grouching about a competitor and taking pleasure in doing so; rather, this is the case of a thoughtful artist talking about another artist with honesty, fairness, and exceptional insight.

Performance clips are generously sprinkled throughout the film, and they offer up a feast of great singing. Sadly, no footage seems to exist of Nilsson onstage as Brünnhilde, but at least there is the BBC footage taken at the recording of *Götterdämmerung* with the Vienna Philharmonic and Sir Georg Solti. One wishes that much more of this footage had been used here because it represents some of the finest singing of Nilsson's entire career. Strangely, the documentary includes no footage—only stills—from the NHK telecast of *Tristan und Isolde* in Tokyo, in which Nilsson and her most frequent Tristan, Wolfgang Windgassen, offer up golden age singing in a scaled down version of Wieland Wagner's Bayreuth staging. There are several concert highlights that are tremendously exciting, plus excerpts from two different *Elektra*

telecasts; one is a tantalizing snippet from Swedish telecast of Nilsson's very first performance of the opera while the other is a Met telecast from fifteen years later, in which the soprano is decidedly past her prime, yet still remarkably impressive. We also see a few moments from an Italian television production of Puccini's *Turandot* in which Nilsson is lip syncing to a prerecorded soundtrack; it is better than nothing, but one can only wish that there was video of Nilsson live on-stage in perhaps her greatest role. One of the most intriguing performance excerpts is from a 1964 Stockholm concert in which we hear her sing the treacherously difficult final measures of "O patria mia" from Verdi's *Aida*. Earlier in this same concert, Nilsson had blown the roof off of the auditorium with a stunning performance of "Ozean, du Ungeheuer" from Weber's *Oberon* that generated a gigantic ovation. The *Aida* aria garnered much more muted and even tepid applause by comparison, despite Nilsson's admirable performance of it. In an odd precursor to what occurs in Met HD simulcasts, Nilsson walks off the stage and is immediately confronted by an interviewer's microphone and is asked if such concerts make her nervous. Nilsson's answer includes a reference to the bewilderment that a singer feels when they think they have sung well but are rewarded with only respectful applause. It is a stunningly human moment in which we are reminded of how even the most accomplished and confident superstar is still a vulnerable human being with feelings of inadequacy and hurt just like the rest of us experience.

The film also features eloquent testimony from an array of her admirers, which even include a couple of her collaborators. The most valuable

insights are shared by the legendary Christa Ludwig, who sang Brangäne to Nilsson's Isolde on many occasions. She helps us to better appreciate the Swedish soprano's astonishing consistency even while singing some of the most difficult roles in the repertoire. TV producer Brian Large, stage director Otto Schenk, tenor Plácido Domingo, and conductor James Levine offer up their own reminiscences about working with Nilsson. Nina Stemme, perhaps the leading Wagnerian soprano of the current day, shares a story about meeting her legendary idol, and tenor Jonas Kaufmann rightly lauds Nilsson for wielding her enormous voice with such accuracy and musicality, thanks to her peerless vocal technique. Plenty of singers can sing loudly, explains Kaufmann, but Nilsson's greatness was about so much more than mere decibels.

There are plenty of things to quibble about in this film, including an odd and unpleasant digression on how Nilsson's Decca recordings failed to do her justice. It's clear from the liner notes by Thomas Voigt, one of the filmmakers, that he very much believes this to be the case, but there are plenty of us who own and love these recordings who would vehemently disagree. There is also a whopper of a mistake by

Marilyn Horne (swapping Leontyne Price with Joan Sutherland in a story about the Met's Centennial Gala) that should have been caught by the filmmakers and edited out of the film. Fortunately, the blemishes are minor and vastly outweighed by all that is right about this film. Those wonderful moments include a touching reminiscence by Rutbert Reisch, president of the Birgit Nilsson Foundation, under whose auspices this film was made. In 1968, Reisch was one of three young opera fans from the standing room section of the Vienna State Opera who presented Nilsson with a beautiful ring that they and their fellow fans designed and purchased as a gesture of gratitude and admiration for the soprano's many brilliant performances in Vienna. That backstage presentation was caught on film, as was a moment later that night when she greets some of those same fans to thank them for their lovely generosity. Fifty years after the fact, as Reisch describes the thrill of seeing Nilsson wearing that ring during that night's performance of *Tristan und Isolde*, he begins to cry. It is a breathtaking moment that speaks volumes about the overwhelming impact that Nilsson had on the operatic public of her day and of how much we owe to artists of such unsurpassed greatness.

ANNIVERSARY FACTOID

At the 1951 Chicago NATS Convention, Walter Stults first began the ceremony of the passing of the gavel. He had carved the gavel in 1900 from a tree or block of wood that had some significance to him at the time. Thus, when presented to President Homer Mowe at the beginning of the business meeting, it was already 51 years old. Since Stults was the incoming president, the passing of the gavel that took place near the close of that meeting resulted in considerably merriment.

Harvey Ringle, *History of the National Association of Teachers of Singing*, 33.