

Recordings; THE ROOTS OF ROMANTIC OPERA

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The most popular and best of Weber's operas is "Der Freischutz," from 1821, which the New York City Opera will present in a new production this fall. The opera is in the repertory of every German opera house, and Birgit Nilsson, who sang it in Sweden in the 1940's, included Agathe's first aria in a recital disk released in his country in 1961 and just re-released on Angel's budget label, Seraphim. The disk (S-60353) also contains arias from "Oberon" and "Fidelio," as well as Beethoven's concert aria, "Ah, Perfido!" and Donna Anna's "Or sai chi l'onore" from Mozart's "Don Giovanni."

It is, to be frank, not a very good record. Miss Nilsson was at her best in more stentorian, extroverted music, and she deepened as an interpreter in subsequent years. There are some brilliant, steely high notes here, but also some considerable awkwardness lower down and a lack of that blend of strength and vulnerability that best defines German Romantic heroines from Beethoven through early Wagner.

"Der Freischutz" itself has been newly recorded by London (OSA 13136, three disks). This becomes the preferred modern version, one that surpasses a rather mannered effort by Carlos Kleiber on Deutsche Grammophon as well as an earlier Nilsson account. In fact, its closest competition dates from early in the stereo era, conducted by Joseph Keilberth.

Rafael Kubelik, the conductor of the new version, reminds one of Mr. Keilberth in his beefy, workmanlike fidelity to the idiom and atmosphere of the score. "Der Freischutz" seems to prosper from conducting of an honest directness, such that the rollicking hunting choruses, proto-Wagnerian lyricism and heavy-breathing melodramatics can shine through unimpeded. That Mr. Kubelik provides, bolstered by London's full-bodied sound and some fine work from the Chorus and Orchestra of the Bavarian Radio.

The soloists are first-class, as well. Hildegard Behrens does some of her best recorded work here, singing with a controlled fullness of tone and an affecting emotionality that recall Elisabeth Grummer's Agathe on the Keilberth set. The tenor part of Max has not been really well served on records; it is a pity that Wolfgang Windgassen, who had just the right vocal weight and interpretive instincts for the part, never recorded it in full. Rene Kollo on the new set has a dry voice, but it is in good shape here, and he conveys an effective portrayal.

The other parts are nicely done, too, by such singers as Helen Donath, Peter Meven, Wolfgang Brendel and Kurt Moll. The result makes a fine case for this seemingly most German of Romantic operas. And the other disks under consideration here help one realize that even the most nationalist of arts can have cosmopolitan roots.