

RECORDS

Stephen Wadsworth

A Perfect "Parsifal"

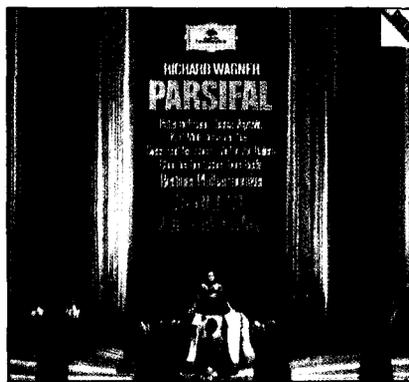
In the last few years the Berlin Philharmonic, under Herbert Von Karajan, has become a monster of technical perfection. These formidable instrumentalists are wildly indulged by their Svengali maestro with the result that their virtuosity is often obtrusive, as on their wrongly smooth *Tosca* and dreary, Mercedes-Benz *Magic Flute*, two recent lemons from Deutsche Grammophon. But on their new recording of Wagner's *Parsifal* (5-Deutsche Grammophon, digital 2741002, \$54.90, cassette 3382002) Karajan, a symphonist first and foremost, is in his element, and he fastidiously structures preludes, acts, and ultimately this whole symphonic opera without forsaking its humanism—whether big issues or little gestures—or indulging either himself or his orchestra unduly.

It is a relief to have such a natural, flowing opera recording from Karajan. His *Parsifal* has all the dramatic weight of Hans Knappertsbusch's two Bayreuth recordings of the work with none of their self-absorbed Wagnerianism. It moves inexorably forward but without the occasionally frantic drive of the Georg Solti version. I like the glassy, cool-stream textures of Pierre Boulez's Bayreuth set, but Karajan's equally delicate reading is deepened by a tenderness Boulez habitually plays against.

In fact, the most engaging feature of this *Parsifal* is its cultivation of frailty. Most of the singers eschew heroics for Lieder-singer intimacy, creating complex private dramas with hushed, warmly diffused tone. And Karajan, also profoundly introspective and searching at key moments, is awesomely articulate when rising lines—of faith and hope—suddenly, nightmarishly, stop rising and turn to fall despairingly. The

essence of Wagner is somehow expressed in this paradox of simultaneous rise and fall.

As Amfortas, José Van Dam does some of the most consistently beautiful singing I have heard on record. He has a soft-grained, cello-like bass-baritone, and a way with the words. He is infinitely human as a character; his one tortured high G makes him human as a singer. Kurt Moll is hardly less good as Gurnemanz. His limitless black bass has the flexibility of a lyric baritone. With seamless bel canto line and perfect diction, he makes the Act I monologue—which can be one of opera's



great snores—positively entertaining.

Dunja Vejzovic is not a major vocalist, but she turns in a major performance, never selling discount craziness as the woman who laughed at Christ on the cross. Her *Wahnsinn* is the real thing, and her moans and shrieks are truly pitiable rather than grotesque. This Kundry works hard for her salvation. The voice runs a little wild (this is entirely appropriate, really), but it is an unusual, haunting, sopranoish mezzo, tellingly inflected. Tenor Peter Hofmann is a better-looking than sounding Parsifal. The voice, bullied about a bit, is not capable of the softening effects

the others achieve; nor does Hofmann seem as perceptive a singer as his colleagues. But he does seem a convincingly sincere and foolish innocent, which is what Parsifal is supposed to be. The Flowermaidens are a distinctive bunch led by Barbara Hendricks, who has a ravishing high soprano but gummy diction. The depth of casting is typical of Karajan and fully justified.

It is hard to say where the Berlin Philharmonic plays best. Certainly the winds are extraordinarily mellifluous—the choir supporting Parsifal's apostrophe to the magic of Good Friday I listened to over and over again, astonished. The violins, too, can sound like one sweet-toned virtuoso, although—and this is nice for a change—they aren't perfect. In at least two crucial spots the strings are quite *untogether*. The DG engineers also seem to be cultivating frailty. Surfaces on a review copy are noisy, and there is some noticeable splicing, but these are humanizing flaws. DG, like the Berlin Philharmonic, is often bloodlessly *korrekt*.

The digital process seems to increase the possibilities of this orchestra in this opera. It might well be that digital captures the sonic properties of voices more faithfully than the old analog process. Here the singers and players sound remarkably natural, the blends remarkably spacious—it's not that opaque canned sound on opera recordings of the Sixties and Seventies. Describing the realm of the Holy Grail to Parsifal, Gurnemanz says, "*Zum Raum wird hier die Zeit*" (Here time becomes space). For all its technical and interpretive glories—and the fraught limbo of spirituality it inhabits—Gurnemanz could have been talking about this performance, the first indisputably great opera recording in some time. ■

East-West Connections

Fifty years of public prominence for **Ravi Shankar**, great master of India's sitar music, came into focus during two New York concerts recently at Avery Fisher and Carnegie halls. That Shankar is inimitable in his art today is beyond contention. What is remarkable is that, though he is only 61 years old, he first performed in the United States 50 years ago!

His American debut took place in the New Yorker Theater on Manhattan's West 54th Street (an auditorium that eventually became the notorious disco, Studio 54). The 1931-32 season saw the first U.S. tour of the extraordinary Uday Shankar. A true prince of India's choreographic culture, Uday danced, with universal acclaim, to a background of ragas performed with equal art by a group of associates.

Performances by the adult members of this troupe were complemented by remarkably graphic character creations, especially of a serpent, by a tot identified as Uday's young brother, Rabrindra. Convert that name (out of Bengali) into Ravrinda, condense it by a few letters, and out comes Ravi—which means "sun."

In those days, the world of music journalism also encompassed the dance, and as a beginner I was assigned to cover an evening performance. The memories are as fresh today as they then were new. The great Uday died in his late sixties, more than a decade ago. But the name of Shankar vibrates now even more vividly, as the world has come to appreciate Ravi's ability to convert a highly private musical impulse into a pulsating, self-sufficient public experience. As he grew older, Ravi Shankar drifted out of dancing into mastery of the sitar under guru Allauddin Khan. Yet he preserves



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Ravi Shankar playing the sitar, with Zubin Mehta and the New York Philharmonic.

something of his past in a flicker of a toe that protrudes from his customary posture seated on the floor, matching the rhythmic pulse of the music he produces.

In his appearances at Carnegie Hall, Shankar announced that the first raga would be Allauddin Khan's masterful *Hemant* one of the six yearly seasons—fall—into which weather changes are divided in India. Shankar's associate on tabla, making his Carnegie Hall debut, was Zakir Hussain, son of the great, long-famous tabla virtuoso, Alla Rakha.

Out of the traditionally slowish beginning, Shankar built the raga into a faster exercise in stops and starts, inputs and outlines. Through Shan-

kar's finger fluency, the tall, good-looking young partner was alerted to a veritable Civil Service examination in percussive bursts and coloristic tappings that proved his hands worthy of the family name. After the razzle and the dazzle of it all exploded into a complex of cross-rhythms that brought thunderous applause, Shankar reached over and rubbed his hands approvingly through the young man's tousled hair in a way that said "Welcome to the club."

This, however, was not all that was indoctrinational about the evening. Following the intermission, Shankar was joined, at stage center, by two tabla players, in a duet of *Jhaptal* (based on a beat of 2-3, 2-3). Here Shankar set the