



Portrait Maureen Forrester

aud 21.437

EAN: 4022143214379



[Fanfare](#) (James A Altena - 01.02.2017)

Quelle: <http://www.fanfarearchive.com/articles/a...>

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Without doubt, Maureen Forrester was one of the greatest singers of the previous century. By happy coincidence, three Fanfare critics—Henry Fogel, Paul Orgel, and I—just placed her recording of Mahler’s Rückert Lieder with Ferenc Fricstay and the RIAS Symphony of Berlin in the magazine’s Classical Hall of Fame. (I can’t recall any previous occasion on which three different Fanfare critics were moved to nominate the same recording for that status.) And yet her discography, while not small, is somewhat limited, and does not cover major aspects of her repertoire. There is of course a good deal of Mahler, and some Bach cantatas, and solo roles in major choral works by Beethoven, Berlioz, Brahms, and so on, plus two major operatic parts: Cornelia in Handel’s Julius Caesar and the title role of Gluck’s Orfeo ed Euridice. But remarkably lacking is recorded documentation of the wide array of Lieder and mélodies she sang in her almost innumerable concert recitals over four decades. Hence the appearance of this set, featuring five radio broadcasts in Berlin of vocal recitals given in her early peak years between 1955 and 1963, is a discographic event of the first magnitude.

Forrester was one of the last representatives of a voice type that seems now all but extinct—the true, pure alto, with a deep, vibrant vibrato and voluminous weight and power. As with all such voices, the top was secure but not brilliant, with the weight of projection located in the middle and lower registers. While powerful in projection, she could also scale back and produce delicate, deeply affecting mezza voce and piano effects. Her intonation was rock-solid, and her diction a model of clarity without in the least impairing the legato of the vocal line. The timbre had an innate pathos to it that made it particularly suitable for tragic subjects, and she sculpted phrases in ways that made every word count.

All of her many virtues are fully on display in these five recitals. Although the opening Rückert Lieder falls somewhat short of her aforementioned immortal studio recording with Fricstay, it is a formidable and moving account in its own right, though of course the piano accompaniment cannot match the impact of the orchestral version. After that, Forrester soars. The Loewe songs glow; the Wesendonck Lieder smolder with subterranean longing; the Brahms Zigeunerlieder exult in high spirits. In the Schubert and Schumann Lieder, Forrester demonstrates her ability to scale back her voice for intimate effects (try, for example, “Bertas Lied”) and intense pathos. (Interestingly, she sings the Maria Stuart Lieder in the original French and Latin of the poems rather than in the German translation set by Schumann; Forrester’s regular accompanist, John Newmark, had searched out those versions for her Paris debut, and she stayed with them thereafter.) The third disc brings stylistic shifts that move her into repertoire

both before and after the Romantic period, and initially is somewhat less successful. While the two brief devotional pieces by the obscure Johann Wolfgang Franck (1644–1710) come off well, by modern standards the two C. P. E. Bach songs and the extended scena of Arianna a Naxos by Haydn are highly unidiomatic, almost clumsy sounding, though Forrester invests her singing with deep feeling. In the sets of songs by Britten, Barber, and Poulenc she is back on form, with a good command of French, though her voice is unusually dark and heavy for this repertoire; it is actually amazing how well she brings them all off in spite of that. Her feeling for Poulenc's style is so idiomatic that I wonder if she had any personal coaching by him when she was in France.

Forrester is also mostly fortunate in her accompanists. Michael Raucheisen is of course legendary (the 69-CD set of his comprehensive survey of German Lieder during World War II, with a bevy of that nation's greatest signers, is one of my prized possessions). His successor at RIAS, Felix Schröder, shows considerable sensitivity in the Britten songs and Poulenc's *La fraîcheur*. Hertha Klust is best remembered today as an early accompanist to Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau; I find her acceptable but somewhat heavy-handed and lacking in nuance, particularly in Haydn's *Arianna*. The recorded sound is clear monaural radio broadcast quality of its era. The booklet provides the complete contents of the set and a well-considered essay on Forrester and these performances, but no song texts. This is an indispensable acquisition not only for fans of the great Canadian contralto, but of lovers of great singing in general. Emphatically recommended, and another candidate for my burgeoning 2017 Want List.