



Igor Stravinsky: Perséphone

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[American Record Guide](#) (Roger Hecht - 2011.07.01)

Igor Stravinsky set *Persephone* (1933, revised 1949) to a French text by poet Andre Gide, which was in turn based on the Homeric Hymn to Demeter. The partnership of composer and librettist was not smooth, mainly because the two disagreed on how to set Gide's text to music. Gide skipped the premiere, while Stravinsky went on to make two rather indifferent recordings of the work. Even today, *Persephone* lurks on the sidelines of his canon. For that and other reasons, the present recording is a fascinating document. Fritz Wunderlich was one of the greatest German tenors before falling down some stairs to his death six years after this performance. This would be his only performance of Eumolpius (Greek for "he who sings beautifully"), and it caught him at the height of his powers. Doris Schade was, and is, as far as I know, a highly respected German actress. Dean Dixon was an American conductor driven by American racism to make a career in Europe. At the time of this performance, he was ending his tenure as Music Director of the Gothenburg Symphony and preparing to take over the Hessian Radio Symphony (Frankfurt Radio). His appointment was resented in some quarters, but this *Persephone* was so well received that any serious opposition was neutralized. Dixon remained Music Director until 1974. The major recordings of *Persephone* are from Michael Tilson Thomas, Robert Craft, and Kent Nagano, with Thomas getting the nod in our *Stravinsky Overview*, Craft a strong second, and Nagano a too soft-textured third. (We don't recommend either of the slower Stravinskys.) All are played in a more or less French style, and all tend to project the work as an airy, refined, and classical exercise. Dixon's take is very different. It does not sound French in any way. In fact, the text is delivered entirely in German, which lends the music earthiness and a powerful dramatic backbone. (It was not unusual for Europeans of that time to perform foreign works—and dub foreign movies—in their native languages.) The German orchestra adds Teutonic flavors of broader brass and woodwind attacks, fuller string textures, and less pungent harmonies. There is also less bounce to the rhythm, less arch to upper melodic leaps, and more melodic lyricism. The choruses sound broad and warm, save for a bit of attractive boisterousness from the children. Wunderlich's Eumolpius is heroic, sympathetic, and to some extent larger than life. I would expect *Persephone* to be seductive and fresh-sounding, not to mention young; but Schade turns in a highly theatrical, perhaps overstated, reading. It may be just as well. A girlish *Persephone* could have been steamrolled by Wunderlich, and that never happens to Schade. Dixon's moderate tempo is faster than Stravinsky's, slower than Craft's, and about the same as Thomas's. The result is a gripping, earthy drama, full of pain, sacrifice, loss, and reconciliation. This is a *Persephone* of flesh and blood people, not gods. It may be just the thing for people who have found the work too effete, austere, or precious. Except for forward placement of the soloists that makes them sound larger than life, the monaural sound is outstanding. Audite's notes supply insight into the participants and the circumstances but inexplicably fail to include a German-English libretto. The German text was produced for this

performance and is not likely to be found in the booklet of another recording. (It is also slightly cut, this being the 1949 version.) Still, it is possible to follow the story with a standard French-English. I point out the obvious when I say that 49 minutes is hardly a generous time. Fans of Wunderlich and Dixon (whose recordings are rare) should find this hard to resist. Admirers of Persephone and even people who have had doubts about the piece should be interested as well.

