Interrupted Melody: Otto Klemperer, Lohengrin, and Budapest

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Every recording of a live performance inherently carries a special significance. It captures the fleeting moment, preserves the work of interpreters giving their creative best (one hopes), and enables listeners to discover, enjoy, assess, hear, or re-hear the performance. Clearly, the historic value of a live operatic recording depends on the quality of the voices and on the work of the conductor, chorus, and orchestra. Going beyond the obvious, some occasions take on a special dimension because of the presence of one or more famous participants and, once in a while, for capturing something unusual.

The live recording of the complete Hungarian State Opera production of Richard Wagner’s Lohengrin conducted by Otto Klemperer in the autumn of 1948 has enough distinguishing marks to elevate it above the ordinary. What give it special importance are the contribution, artistry, and (one has to admit) shenanigans of its conductor. The number of Klemperer’s complete opera recordings—studio or live—are few, and apart from BBC broadcasts of a Covent Garden Fidelio and a Royal Festival Hall concert of Der fliegende Holländer, the broadcasts preserved in the Hungarian capital city of Budapest are the only surviving examples of what this maestro could do in the opera house with Beethoven, Offenbach, Mozart, and Wagner. Even among them, his only complete Lohengrin is an unusual musical document.

Artistically footloose in postwar Europe, Klemperer had no set plans about where to turn next. By sheer coincidence, an unusual opportunity came his way through the Hungarian music critic and musicologist Aladár Tóth. They first met in 1933, soon after Klemperer was forced to flee Germany, within months after the Nazi takeover. Klemperer conducted the three-year-old Budapest Concert Orchestra, both in Budapest and Vienna. In the Austrian capital his soloist was Béla Bartók, performing his recently completed Second Piano Concerto. Tóth interviewed him and, according to his report, Klemperer, looking for an artistic home, hinted that he would gladly take over the orchestra on a perma-
nent basis even without remuneration. Nothing came of the idea, but his per-
formances with the Concert Orchestra laid the foundation of Tóth’s high esteem
for his abilities.

Tóth and his wife, the pianist Annie Fischer, had weathered the war years in
Sweden. They renewed their acquaintance when Klemperer gave a concert in
Stockholm in March 1946. The Bach, Mozart, and Beethoven program “had
proved to me anew,” wrote Tóth, “that the true genius through his trials reaches
new heights in his art. . . . Because, if that was possible, Klemperer’s inner artis-
tic freedom had grown, its deep humanity and elemental force had grown even
more powerful since his illness.” Soon after, Tóth returned to Hungary and, as
a politically acceptable and respected man of music, was appointed director
of the Hungarian State Opera House. His first objective was to attract guest
conductors of international stature, and he invited Fritz Busch, Bruno Walter,
and, remembering the Stockholm concert, Otto Klemperer. Due to other com-
mitments, of the three conductors only Klemperer was in a position to accept
the invitation. Initially engaged for a dozen performances, the offer was
renewed and extended, and in the end Klemperer remained as the principal
guest conductor of the Hungarian Opera House for three years.

Recalling this period, Klemperer wrote to the Hungarian Radio, “My years
in Budapest—from 1947 to 1950 as conductor under the directorship of Aladár
Tóth—belong among the happiest years of my life spent in the theater. Hun-
gary had wonderful voices. In Budapest alone there were three outstanding
orchestras, the Opera, Concert, and Radio Orchestra, [and] I had the oppor-
tunity to conduct all three. The choruses were exceptional as well. But for me
the spiritus rector [guiding spirit] in everything was Aladár Tóth, a Director of
such culture and artistic understanding as I have never encountered before or
since.”

After nearly a decade of illness, convalescence, and resulting unemployment,
the opportunity given him in Budapest was unique, the attraction of the offer
irresistible. In a conversation with his biographer Peter Heyworth in 1969,
Klemperer said, “I was glad to be able to conduct opera, which I hadn’t done
since 1933, apart from Figaro at the Salzburg Festival of 1947 and Don Giovanni
the same year in Vienna. . . . I had three good orchestras at my disposal. . . .
My three years in Budapest were very fruitful.”

Very fruitful indeed. When he arrived in Budapest in 1947, Klemperer at sixty-
two was still showing signs of impaired motor skills, the residual a
effects of the life-threatening brain surgery he underwent in 1939. In spite of his condition,
his remarkable determination and gradually rebuilt stamina enabled him to
maintain a grueling schedule. Seemingly energized by the opportunities open
to him, in the three years he spent in Budapest from October 1947 until July
1950, he conducted close to two hundred performances of opera, concerts, and
even Mendelssohn’s incidental music to A Midsummer Night’s Dream at the
National Theater. Taking into account the rehearsals, his periodic absences from
Hungary to fulfill concert engagements in many European cities outside of
Hungary, and a four-month tour of Australia, he kept up a pace and sustained workload that would have taxed a much younger, healthier man. He even made good on his promise of a decade-and-a-half before: when the National Theater could no longer pay his ridiculously low fee, he conducted twelve of the thirty Shakespeare performances gratis. Although he spoke not a word of Hungarian, it seems he had too much fun watching the actors to pass up such an opportunity. Tamás Major, actor, stage director, and director of the National Theater, maintained that with his excellent memory Klemperer must have known the entire text of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* by heart, because he always knew at what point the performance was.

On 14 March 1947 *Lohengrin* returned to the postwar repertory in a new production and cast under Maestro János Ferencsik. The Opera being a repertory house, it did not present works in clusters but alternated thirty, forty, or more operas and ballets during the course of a single season. The performance recorded was the fifteenth of the new production, and the fifth conducted by Klemperer. When Heyworth asked him what the singing was like, he replied, “Very good. Budapest had some extraordinary voices at that time.” Although the cast of the live *Lohengrin* recording does not boast extraordinary voices, had it been sung in German and under modern studio conditions, possibly with a different Ortrud, the result could have been competitive.

Heading the mostly young cast is the relative newcomer, József Simándy (1916–1997). He joined the Opera House chorus in September 1940 and, after a two-year provincial detour singing principal roles in Szeged, became a soloist in 1947. In the same year, he sang the first Lohengrin of his career on Christmas Day. Although the recorded performance was only his eighth appearance in the role, thanks to the coaching of Ferencsik and Klemperer his delivery does not betray the beginner. He sings the silver knight with poise and dignity, in a resplendent voice that has the timbre, range, power, and endurance to do justice to the role. He phrases with uncommon sensitivity, making an intelligent distinction between the lyric and heroic, conversational and declamatory passages.

In this traditional production, Lohengrin arrived in a swan boat, in silver armor, with silver-and-gold helmet, sword, and shield, thus recreating the image that had inspired the composer. Because of the great distance to the river Scheldt upstage, the microphone fails to capture fully Simándy’s beautiful Farewell to the swan, but once he walks down to stage front, the fresh and youthful voice with its special sheen projects the image of the mythical knight. The exposed high notes in the phrases “Elsa, ich liebe dich!” and “Durch Gottes Sieg” are hit dead center with thrilling precision and Italianate squillo. He is effective in his warning to Elsa and his confrontation with Telramund; alternately tender, stern, and sorrowful in the Bridal Chamber; and heroic in the last scene, delivering a beautiful Narrative. In fact, he sings the latter so beautifully, it stops the performance. . . . But let’s not get ahead of our story.

Simándy sang every *Lohengrin* and *Meistersinger* performance Klemperer con-
Hungarian tenor József Simándy (1916–1997). (This and all subsequent photos in this article from the author’s private collection.)
ducted in Budapest, and he retained fond memories of the maestro. He claimed one could rely on Klemperer’s instructions from rehearsal to performance, adding, “If we sang *Lohengrin* four times in a row, the tempi of the four performances were the same, but from the point of insight they were not, because he would always add something new. It was awesome how he could hypnotize us, we couldn’t do anything but what he willed. With his eyes and his fantastic musicianship burning in his soul he downright bewitched us.”

It should also be mentioned that Simándy, along with most of the principals, has exemplary diction—even if Viktor Lányi’s poetic translation can be appreciated and enjoyed only by native speakers.
Soprano Magda Rigó (1910–1985), a pupil of Giannina Arangi-Lombardi, is the Elsa. She made her debut at the Opera House on 30 January 1935 as Amelia in Un ballo in maschera. A measure of the esteem in which she was held and the position she soon occupied can be gauged by the visitors she was chosen to partner in several performances: Gigli, Pertile, Švahholm, Torsten Ralf, to mention only the tenors. Her concept of the role and projection of the character are admirable, and her inflections touchingly communicate the emotional state of Elsa in each of her scenes. Vocally she has some magical moments, particularly “Es gibt ein Glück” in her scene with Ortrud and “Füh’ ich zu dir” in the love duet. Unfortunately, on this occasion the high notes seem to be a strain and her usually smooth and shimmering soprano takes on a touch of shrillness in the upper register. Also, because she sometimes doesn’t cover the open “e” vowel of the Hungarian language, on some notes her voice turns white. But Klemperer must have liked her Elsa; although he had the choice of two other outstanding sopranos for the role, Rigó sang in all six of his Lohengrins. She commented that Klemperer was “not a tyrannical conductor but a musician” who would willingly follow a singer. “I guard the inscribed photograph he gave me as a farewell present before his departure as one of the most beautiful mementos of my career.”

According to the posters in the kiosks throughout the city, the Ortrud of the evening was to have been young Klára Palánkay, a frequent exponent of the role. Her indisposition must have come late in the day, because the evening’s performance was not pasted over with a cast change, standard practice when time permitted. Palánkay’s replacement was the veteran Ella Némethy (1895–1961). She made her debut at the then Royal Opera House on 16 November 1919 and sang the major dramatic repertoire in the interwar years, ranging from Salome, Delila, and Carmen in her young years through Amneris, Eboli, and Tosca to most of the major Wagnerian roles. She was accorded lifetime membership in the company, a truly high and rare distinction of the period. By coincidence, this Lohengrin was the concluding performance of her long and distinguished career, which included appearances—as De Némethy—in Berlin, Barcelona, the Teatro Colón in Buenos Aires (Isolde and the Walküre Brünnhilde), and La Scala (the Siegfried Brünnhilde). While her Ortrud is a finely crafted impersonation, her voice shows its decline, and the effortful upper tessitura mars an otherwise strong performance. Still, her “Entweihte Götter!” earned the first midscene applause of the evening from her loyal audience. In its absolute prime Némethy’s voice must have been a rich and appealing instrument, and it is fortunate to have at least this, in all probability the only, surviving aural document of her art.

While László Jámor (1911–1995) did not actually “own” the role, in the best years of his career he probably sang Telramund more often than any other singer of the company. His rich, powerful, manly baritone and fine stage presence enabled him to present with great authority the warrior in the first act, and the self-loathing outcast in the second. This performance precedes by one year the
first of many times I saw him in the role, and although his Telramund as conceived and delivered here makes a strong impression, relying on vivid memory, I am struck by the realization of how much he grew in the role in the years that followed.

Bass-baritone György Losonczi (1905–1972), the pillar of the house during his forty-two-year-long career (1928–70), had more than a hundred roles in his vast repertoire by virtue of having performed multiple parts in the many operas. In this instance, he sings the King instead of his customary role of Telramund. While the majority of his unforgettable impersonations were exceptional by their musical and histrionic excellence, all that can be said of his Heinrich here is that it is a competent and fully satisfactory rendition without being memo-
table. Nonetheless Klemperer had a high regard for him, and under his baton Losonczy sang many times Iago, Don Giovanni, Guglielmo, Hans Sachs, Mozart’s Figaro, and Hoffmann’s four villains. He, in turn, appreciated the maestro: “It radiated from him what he will produce in the next measure. It wasn’t difficult to read his intentions, and I must admit this was something I witnessed only with very few conductors.”

And what about Maestro Klemperer? His conducting is characterized by dynamism, vitality, and a relentless forward thrust. Those familiar only with his recordings made late in life at Knappertsbuschian languor will hear the galloping tempi of this Lohengrin with disbelief. Indubitably, he is in full control of the performance — moving, propelling, and occasionally driving the music with uncommon force. Yet he knows how to savor the broad Wagnerian melody no less than any of his confrères of the baton: the thematic dove of the overture descends from heaven and returns only eleven seconds faster for Klemperer than — to cite another beautiful example — for Rudolf Kempe.

The mark of Klemperer’s work is the way he builds each scene, his ability to

Bass-baritone György Losonczy (1905–1972), seen here as Telramund.
bring out both the lyricism and heroism of the score, but more than anything else, the underlying energy that unites his presentation of the opera. In fact, in some choral passages he propels the music with feverish ferocity. This is very much in the spirit of the action when Telramund’s defeat at the hand of the mysterious knight brings a sudden release to the tension that has been building throughout the act and the finale simply explodes. Even if in spots the pit overtakes the stage ensemble for a moment, the effect is exhilarating. But there is no discernible reason to rush the chorus in act 2 (“Zum Streite sáumet nicht”), just as the gathering of the army in the last scene is so compressed in time that it loses all shape, dignity, and in consequence, interpretation. The soloists are seldom challenged to keep up with the orchestra; however, Klemperer’s pacing gives the Elsa-Ortrud confrontation in front of the Münster an uncommon degree of passion. What a pity, then, that in this scene in particular the high tessitura painfully taxes Némethy to the very limits of her voice.

The orchestra plays well for Klemperer. Even the limited sonic properties of the recording cannot dilute the precision of the violins or the remarkable sound of the brass in the act 3 prelude. The chorus is ample, competent, without any vocal beauty among the men and none to spare among the women. Unfortunately, the recording equipment couldn’t begin to capture the singularly rich ambience of the auditorium. Like the sound-box of a violin, the Hungarian Opera House has an acoustical quality entirely its own that longtime visitors could pick out blindfolded. But the single microphone of the age couldn’t possibly register the overtones that make it so characteristically different from other, equally well-built auditoria. Moreover, the microphone is not truly omni-directional, and it is unable to compensate for distance. Stage movements affect the quality, volume, clarity, and focus of the voices. In the opening scene King Heinrich sits under the giant oak tree far from stage front, and Losonczy sounds like he is singing in another room. When he comes downstage to greet Elsa, the impact of his voice is entirely different, the change for the better. Lohengrin arrives in his swan boat even further back, and his “Nun sei bedankt” is just remote, not ethereal. The one who suffers most is Sándor Reméni, whose Herald deserves more than an honorable mention. In the first act, especially when he is near the apron, Reméni’s voice is overpowering; in the second act he is too far up — atop the high stairway leading from the palace — and he is barely audible! The bridal chorus, on the other hand, after reaching stage front, produces a volume — and a sonic imbalance — not by their number but by their proximity to the microphone. Conversely, this works to advantage when Lohengrin takes his place front center and delivers the Gralszerzählung.

Simándy rises to the occasion in all respects. When he finishes his elegant delivery, modeled somewhat on Franz Völker’s example, the audience bursts into an applause that would not cease. This was an epoch and a city with a musical tradition where audiences could expect and often received an encore. There was nothing unusual about it; by operatic conventions, the demand for an encore was the audience’s tribute to an artist, and granting it was the performer’s
acknowledgment of the celebration. Whether in good taste or not, the custom was part of the culture in Budapest, dating back to a time when someone could hear a piece of music delivered by an artist twice in a lifetime only if the singer repeated it on the spot.

Klemperer would have none of it. He got incensed and, turning to the audience, began to yell “Frehheit (impertinence)!” His resistance was met with derision, so Klemperer put down his baton and headed for the exit. The audience sat in incredulous silence. It was unprecedented for a conductor to call off the orchestra and leave the podium in the middle of the performance. One newspaper reported that Rigo stood pale and immobile, and Simándy later recalled that he “stood motionless on the stage, because I felt if I moved, the order would break up and they would lower the curtain. . . . Afterwards, the chorus and the whole theater praised me. They said if I had moved, everything would have collapsed.”

When Klemperer returned after a couple of minutes, the audience greeted him with mock applause, whistles, and yells of their own. Since it was a live broadcast, the whole country heard it. Now, half a century later, we can hear it, too. Daughter Lotte Klemperer recounted her father’s recollection of the evening to a friend of mine (who was in the audience), adding an interesting detail: when Klemperer returned to the rostrum, a man directly behind him leaned forward and said, “Spielen Sie doch die Gralszäh lung noch einmal (Please play the Grail Narrative again)!?” After such a crude interruption it would no longer have mattered from the standpoint of dramatic continuity, but Klemperer did not yield; he just resumed the performance from the point where it had stopped.

He did return to finish the opera, but not at his own volition. Timpanist Rezső Roubal recalled that Klemperer had already become angered when the audience applauded Ortrud’s curse in the second act. When the applause would not stop following Simándy’s solo, Roubal remembered:

Klemperer stood up, turned to the audience and yelled repeatedly “Ruhe (Quiet)!” When the storm of applause still would not die down, he became so incensed that he waved at the orchestra: the performance is over — and headed to the exit. My instrument is near the exit, and I had to decide [what to do] in the fraction of a second, as it was a matter of saving the performance and avoiding further scandal. Klemperer had just reached me. I asked him to continue, but he was so upset he refused. I had no alternative, I threw my arms around him and pushed him toward the rostrum. The auditorium grew completely silent. The Maestro looked around, nodded, and continued the performance.

When it was over, he came to me, smiled, and embraced me.

By the accepted standards of decorous behavior in European opera houses, the event ranked as a scandal and was treated as such by the press. For the sake of his position in the musical life of the city, for the sake of his protector Tóth
who so often deflected the consequences of his combative behavior, and for the sake of common decency, Klemperer was obliged to make a public statement, an apology of sorts. In an article published in *Népszava*, he stated that on the previous occasions when he had conducted the opera, the applause that followed the Gralszähnung, “which Simándy sang beautifully,” would usually subside,

but not yesterday. The applause lasted for minutes, so much so that neither the chorus nor the orchestra was audible. Magda Rigo’s line that comes immediately after the chorus did not follow because the unending applause roared over everything. It was my impression the audience wanted to force an encore of the Gralszähnung. . . . In my opinion it is impossible to repeat any part of a Wagner opera because the orchestra continues, and in these operas there are no arias or closed numbers. This is why I directed the orchestra to proceed, and finally because of the big applause I called off the orchestra. I asked Concert Master Garai to take over the conducting and I left the rostrum. At the exit I was asked to finish conducting and I did so. After the performance, contrary to my custom, I came out for curtain calls with the singers, and I was greeted with whistles and cat-calls. That portion of the audience who thus turned against me is mistaken if they assume I am against applause. I don’t disapprove of any manifestation of approval in operas where the arias can be encored. In such works I can well imagine a repetition too, even if I find it inappropriate on artistic grounds. . . . On my part I tried to avoid anything distasteful. I regret that what I regarded as a provocative demonstration disrupted the performance, but I tried to rectify my error by immediately returning to the rostrum and finishing the performance. With my appearance in front of the curtain as well I sought to neutralize the incident. I regret that this is how it turned out.¹⁷

Unfortunately, such public behavior was very much in Klemperer’s manic character. This is neither the time nor the place to enumerate the many incidents in his life when he had proven to be his own worst enemy. Eccentricity such as conducting and taking curtain calls with his pant legs tucked into high rubber boots was one thing; offending audiences, politicians, theatrical administrators, soloists, and instrumentalists was quite another. But there was always the music-making, his uncanny ability to bring out the best in the performers and himself, placing his individual interpretive stamp on the music, and leaving his audiences enthralled. If all was never forgiven, most of it was tolerated for the sake of his genius.

Klemperer developed a large following in Budapest among opera and concert audiences; lines at the ticket office of the Opera House were double or triple long when he was slated to be at the helm. The singers appreciated him even more. In the words of Mária Gyurkovics, coloratura star of the period: “My
vocabulary is too poor to describe Klemperer’s genius, the dramatic power of his performances. . . . He conducted sitting, with small movements, then he would suddenly stand up. This giant man spread out his arms and brought forth a dramatic effect from the ensemble that is impossible to describe. It cannot be explained to those who did not see it, were not a part of the performance.”

Sándor Reményi retained similar impressions: “His conducting was, in fact, a creation. . . . His personality, his power of suggestion was awesome. And when he rose in the Commendatore scene of Don Giovanni—like a giant eagle with wings spread wide—we felt as if he were lifting the stage, lifting the entire Opera House. We were witnessing magic.” Klemperer, on his part, was experiencing unprecedented artistic fulfillment, and he never hesitated to acknowledge it in conversation and correspondence. Lotte Klemperer generously shared some of her father’s letters with Attila Boros, author and broadcaster of the Hungarian Radio. In a letter to Aladár Tóth dated 25 May 1957 in Zurich, Klemperer gratefully wrote: “All of Budapest—my stay there—appears to me like a beautiful dream. I believe that in all that you played the principal role, thus I can confess that I have never worked with any of my Directors with comparable enthusiasm as I did with you.”

And the recordings? The sound on Gramofono’s complete edition is very good, superior to the old LP release (excerpts only, Hungaroton LPX 124436). One must be grateful that Klemperer’s Budapest broadcast recordings were rescued from neglect and destruction at the personal initiative of Boros. As long as this version remains the only one available of the complete performance, it can be recommended without reservation as a thoroughly enjoyable recording that will yield much musical pleasure.

Then there are the excerpts on Urania. The sound of that release is so vastly superior that the difference is almost shocking. I don’t know what electronic wizardry has been applied (yes I do: “restored by 24 bit and 96 khz” as per the notes) to extract so much sound from, as it appears, the long-playing record (which must be the audio paternity of the release, as the sparsely chosen excerpts are the same as on the LP, offering only 59’18” playing time). The only difference is that the LP retains the entire “scandal” and closes with the music concluding the Gralserzählung, whereas the CD fades out just before Klemperer stops the orchestra. It is not only possible but quite likely that this is all Urania was allowed to produce in order not to compete with the complete version. But what a difference! Especially when heard with earphones, the voices are forward, orchestra and singers have an in-your-face presence — it is almost like sitting in the theater. Despite the reprocessed sound, some minor pops and crackles remain, and there are a few spots where the sound wavers for a nanosecond, blemishes not long enough to be distracting. But never mind that: Urania should be granted permission to issue a complete version prepared directly from the shellac originals.

All in all, Klemperer’s Budapest Lohengrin may be a less-than-perfect performance, but it is still an exciting one whose musical attributes and historical
interest elevate it far above the level of a mere souvenir or curiosity. It is not the only Lohengrin recording to own, but it is certainly one worth exploring.

NOTES

1. The complete performance of 24 October 1948, sung in Hungarian, is currently available on Gramofono 2000, AB 886/88 (3 CDs). A highlights disc, Urania URN 22.147 (1 CD), is also available (both distributed by Qualiton Imports). The complete distribution is as follows: József Simándy (Lohengrin), Magda Rigó (Elsa), Ella Némethy (Ortrud), László Jámbor (Telramund), György Losonczy (Heinrich der Vogler), Sándor Reményi (King’s herald), Béla Hollay, Géza Lux, Gyöző Mally, Sándor Ilyés (Four noblemen of Brabant); Hungarian State Opera Orchestra and Chorus, conducted by Otto Klemperer.


6. A new musical production in Hungary usually meant a fresh musical preparation, often with a partially or entirely new cast, but not necessarily with new scenery or costumes.

7. Heyworth, Conversations with Klemperer, p. 100.


9. In 1939 Magda Rigó married György Losonczy, the Heinrich of this performance. They often appeared together in Tosca, Faust, Aida, Walküre, etc.


11. I have a complete collection of all the posters of the Hungarian National Opera House, from September 1945 to June 1972.


17. Ibid., pp. 38–39. Klemperer seems to have been mistaken when he writes “Magda Rigó’s line that comes immediately after the chorus did not follow because the unending applause roared over everything.” As the soprano herself recalled, “I sang my line ‘Mindennek vége’ but it could not be heard, so I stopped. It was pointless to continue” (author’s conversations with Magda Rigó in 1978 and 1984).

18. Boros, Klemperer Magyarországon, p. 15.

19. Ibid., p. 16.

“Siegfried, Act 2” from The Studio, No. 1, by Aubrey Beardsley
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