

## "Mene, mene, tekell" auf Deutsch

**I**T WILL be helpful, before directly approaching two recorded versions of Handel's "Belshazzar," to get some of the facts straight. Charles Jennens provided Handel with the text—based, of course, on the familiar story of the handwriting on the wall, from the Book of Daniel. Except for one irritating flaw, it is a superior text, excelling both in dramatic values and in the beauty of its English. (The irritating flaw is Handel's curious dramatic mistake in having the death of Belshazzar occur neither off-stage nor onstage, but only in words printed in the midst of a purely instrumental "sinfonia.") To Jennens's excellent lines Handel composed a magnificently varied score, taking the greatest pains to give characterizing choral passages to the Assyrians, Persians, and Jews, and to create the notable individualities of Belshazzar, Cyrus, Daniel, Gobrias, and Belshazzar's mother, Nitocris.

"Belshazzar" was first sung at Covent Garden, London, on March 27, 1745. Some of the most renowned and popular singers and singing actresses of the time were in the cast; the oratorio was repeated on March 29 and April 23, on which last night a season somewhat disastrous for Handel the impresario reached its close. "Belshazzar" has never been among the most frequently per-

formed of oratorios, though it has long been called—and in reality is—one of the finest. Do not expect from it the brassy Oriental magnificence of Sir William Walton's "Belshazzar's Feast" (it is eighteenth-century music); on the other hand, do not be surprised to find the Assyrian revelry and the handwriting on the wall profoundly stirring. In this, and in the depiction of the noble Nitocris, Handel remains unmatched. He knows what is important and what is not, and he fits music to the shape, weight, color, and flavor of English syllables with a suitability that no other great composer, not even Henry Purcell, ever has quite matched. There are few moments indeed in his "Belshazzar" in which his attention flagged; there are no more in which, hearing an appropriate performance, ours would flag.

But the first requisite of appropriate performance—singers singing the English language beautifully and understandably—is lacking equally from the Bach Guild recording (BG 534/5, \$11.90) and the Period version (SPL-594, \$11.90), both of which are sung in German translation. The German words, besides being poor ambassadors of Jennens's meanings, are difficult to understand as sung, not being the words to which Handel composed—or adapted—his notes. The same lack of reciprocity between text and score occurs when Bach's "St. Matthew Passion" is sung in English, for the flaw is not with a particular translation but with the very act of translation itself, which, however carefully carried out, breaks the fundamentally indissoluble union created by the composer.

Nor does either of the recordings at hand display the second requisite of appropriate performance in so monumentally unified a work as "Belshazzar": completeness. The Bach Guild and Period versions differ considerably in detail: in what is omitted, what included; in the treatment of tempos and volumes; in the kind of voices to which the roles of Daniel and Cyrus are assigned. This last detail is of real interest. In the original Covent Garden production, Daniel was acted by Susanna Maria (Arne) Cibber, Cyrus by a "Miss Robinson," who almost certainly was not the famous Anastasia Robinson. Mrs. Cibber and Miss Robinson were actresses first, singers afterward, and



—Bettmann Archive.

Handel—"handwriting on the wall."

a German tradition has assigned their roles to contraltos, a practice followed by the Period recording, whereas the Bach Guild version has a contralto only as Cyrus, the crucial role of Daniel (who, after all, interprets "Mene, mene, tekell, upharsin") going to a baritone.

It would be both idle and, in the confines of a review, silly to detail which choruses, recitatives, solos, and instrumental passages are omitted from each of these recordings, both of which occupy four twelve-inch LP sides. Suffice it to say that the cuttings, though dealt with apologetically by the writers of the notes accompanying the albums, shatter the continuity in a way to convince unwary listeners that neither Jennens nor Handel was in his right mind. Difficulties for the attentive listener are piled up, too, by the odd fact that the singers do not sing exactly the text as printed in either case.

The Bach Guild recording, with Helmut Koch leading the Combined Berlin Chamber Choirs and Berlin Symphony Orchestra, is more alive and much more clearly recorded than the Period version, which has Hans Grischkat conducting the Chorus and Orchestra of the [Württemberg?] State Conservatory of Music. The soloists, all of whose names are unfamiliar to me, vary from adequate to very bad, with perhaps a shade of preference due those (and notably Friederike Sailer as Nitocris) in the Bach Guild Version. But the sad fact is that neither recording is very good in any respect, and that, even if collated and added together, they present a semi-complete caricature of one of the towering masterpieces of eighteenth-century oratorio and of the musical setting of our language in one of its richest periods.

—HERBERT WEINSTOCK.

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# Songs of '76

ASK THE man-on-the-street if he knows a revolutionary song and in these frightened times, you'll probably get the cold eye and the negative response. Ask him if he knows a Revolutionary song and his cold eyes will warm as he answers, "Yankee Doodle." "Yankee Doodle" was written by a British medical officer, and was first heard during the French and Indian War.

There are hundreds of other songs available for study which were created during the stirring days of rebellion and some of these have just been recorded. Folkways has released "Ballads of the Revolution" (FP 48, \$9.50, two ten-inch LP's) sung with rare spirit by Wallace House. And the clear, melancholy voice of Burl Ives may be heard in "Songs of the Revolution," Album 2 of Encyclopaedia Britannica Films' "Historical America in Song." (Each EBF album contains five twelve-inch 78-rpm records—\$10.95 for the album, \$59.50 for the set.)

Comparison is easy since in five instances both singers recorded the same songs. For example, there are two presentations of the great New England war hymn "Chester," written by one of early America's few competent composers, William Billings:

Howe and Burgoyne and Clinton,  
too  
With Prescott and Cornwallis  
join'd  
Together plot our overthrow  
In one infernal league combin'd.

In "Chester" House sings with a gravel-voiced strength that Ives lacks. But Ives emphasizes the spiritual quality of the hymn with his lugubrious choir-boy voice.

Another accomplished composer of the day was Francis Hopkinson, statesman, jurist, and pamphleteer. Hopkinson signed his name to the Declaration of Independence, to some original songs—including "My Days Have Been So Wondrous Free" (recorded by Ives) and "A Toast to Washington's Health" (recorded by House)—and to many a satiric lyric parodying contemporary folk songs.



—Culver.

In fact, the music of the minuteman was, for the most part, of traditional origin. The most virulent anti-British sentiments were sung to ancient British tunes. Four days before his death at Bunker Hill, General Joseph Warren penned "Free America." And both Ives and House can now be heard singing these revolutionary words to the tune of "The British Grenadiers";


Torn from a world of tyrants  
Beneath this western sky  
We formed a new dominion  
A land of liberty  
The world shall own we're mas-  
ters here  
Then hasten on the day  
Huzza, huzza, huzza  
For free America (y).

The events of the war were reflected with minute detail in the folk music of the Colonies. House sings of "The Boston Tea Party," "The Death of Warren," "Bunker Hill," and of "The World Turned Upside Down." Ives adds "The Boston Tea Tax," "The Rifleman's Song at Bennington," "The Battle of Saratoga," and many others. Even "Yankee Doodle" had an opposite number in the Rebel camps. Where the British sang their lampoon with a nasal New England twang, the American answer was chanted in an exaggerated British accent:

At Prestonpans we met with reb-  
els one day  
We marshalled ourselves all in  
comely array  
Our hearts were all stout and bid  
our legs stay  
But our feet were wrong-headed  
and took us away  
We're the old soldiers of the King  
And the King's own regulars.

The Wallace House album is the most satisfactory to appear since RCA Victor's out-of-print "Ballads of the American Revolution and War of 1812." Burl Ives's presentations may lack the sturdy power of the House recordings, but he always sings pleasantly, evenly, and with shrewd understanding. Both make for fine listening, July Fourth and all the year 'round.

—OSCAR BRAND.



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