

## **CLPGS Northern Meeting 20<sup>th</sup> May 2018: Jim Bostwick “Walter Legge – A Recorded Legacy”.**

Our May meeting saw 15 members present to hear guest speaker, Jim Bostwick, (Secretary of the Federation Of Recorded Music Societies) give his presentation on Walter Legge. As a starter we heard separate spoken opinions about Legge, all extracts from radio programmes. Charles Osborne (Australian music writer / Opera Critic / Arts Council Officer) recalled him as a “ true Impresario”.

Throughout his recording career Legge had been involved with the production of approximately 3,500 recordings for EMI between 1931 and 1964. Jim had done considerable work sourcing, researching, and creating his own transfers for the 13 extracts we heard.

(Harry) Walter Legge was born in London on 1<sup>st</sup> June 1901. He received no formal musical training, however with encouragement from his father he learnt to read a music score and later managed to learn German; both useful skills throughout his working career. Early in his career Legge was employed as Assistant Music Critic for the Manchester Guardian. By 1927 he was an HMV employee part of his work then involving the compilation of album & analytical notes. His potential as a recording engineer was recognised by one, Fred Gaisberg. 1930 saw the onset of the Depression years following the 1929 Wall Street Crash; at which point HMV sales of specialist classical material were not good. Legge suggested that public subscriptions be requested up front, to try and promote sales. Subscriptions were forthcoming and gradually HMV / Columbia improved. He engaged soloist Elena Gerhardt to record one of the first Society Subscription issues, a series of 19 songs by Hugo Wolf including “ *Ich dem Schatten meinen Locken*” piano accompt by Conrad von Bos. By 1934 Legge enjoyed a good relationship with Sir Thomas Beecham; being Assistant to Beecham at the Royal Opera House, Convent Garden. April 1934 saw the recording of a Delius work including “ *Paris – Song of a Great City*” Another Society Subscription Issue. Similarly Beecham was impressed with Legge.

In 1937 Legge visited Germany with the intention of recording an unabridged version of Mozart’s “ *Magic Flute / Die Zauberflaute* “ Unfortunately not all the Jewish / Austrian voices could be engaged due to the political situation at that point so some artiste/s were replaced. Part of the 1937 recording from 1937 was heard, using a transfer my Nimbus.” *Trio – Act 2*”. 1939 saw the start of the Second World War and Legge was involved organising concerts for ENSA, whilst continuing recording work for EMI, some of which was done at Belle Vue, Manchester where Joyce Grenfell, Myra Hess, and John McCormack made recordings. We heard Isabel Baillie’s “ *I know that my Redeemer Liveth – The Messiah*” , a late transfer from her LP “Never Sing Louder than Lovelier”.

One of Legges’ ultimate aims was to create an Orchestra; “ the finest Orchestra in the World”. As the Second World War intervened it was 1945 before he managed to achieve his formation of the “Philharmonica which began as a String Quartet, later a String Orchestra, and gradually a full Orchestra drawing upon musicians from the young RAF symphony orchestra. Part of their early recorded output included film music; films provided employment for many musicians and composers during the austere war years.

1953 saw Walter Legge’s second marriage to Elisabeth Schwarzkopf; also by then he was her personal manager. Throughout the war into the early 1940ies Legge had also been responsible for working with musicians, Dennis Brain (Horn player); his brother Leonard Brain; and international pianist, Solomon “ *Ballade 4 – Chopin, excerpt*”. Over time Legge was to work alongside conductors, Herbert Von Karajan and Karl Ritter. Legge’s early talent spotting searches had led him to Vienna where as elsewhere some people were

“declassified” which thwarted his efforts to recruit musicians, conductors, and soloists. Karajan came into this category and stringent effort had to be made to enable him to work alongside the Vienna Philharmonic. As time progressed Legge could foresee serious opposition to his recorded output for EMI in the form of Decca. Their recordings were emerging as a serious competitor and by around 1951 they were using tape. During any live recordings there was a stipulation made that any strung microphones used had to be out of sight of the audience. Legge was concerned at the quality of the recording equipment he was being provided with. Despite protests to management he eventually upgraded his recording equipment using his own financial resources. EMI’s “Die Meistersinger’s “ version highlighted the inferior quality’ when compared to John Culshaw’s Decca product. At the end of the 78rpm era this had been available as 34 shellac discs/ 68 sides. “The Quintet” was later transferred from 78rpm format.

The early 1950ies saw Schwarkopf record Humperdinck’s “Hansel & Gretel”, with Karajan as conductor. Legge was content with mono/analogue sound recording technique, and would not be pressed into any early exploration of stereo. Karajan had some interest in the technical aspects of sound recording ; and tried to advise Legge to pursue stereo production. This period also saw production of Beethoven Symphonies on vinyl including “ *Symphony 8 – Finale*” ; *Karajan & Vienna Philharmonic* and Wagner’s “Tristan und Isolde”.

We heard a 1955 recording “ *Pictures at an Exhibition*” – *Ravel* which involved using 4 microphones; and a later recording of “ *Minuet – Symphony 41 (Jupiter)*, conductor Otto Klemperer. 1957 saw the tragic loss of Dennis Brain when he was killed in a car crash. Finally we heard an excerpt Verdi’s *Requiem – Dies Irae*” conductor Carlo Maria Giulini, and the Philharmonia recorded in 1955; an astounding recording of its time. Years later it was finally released in CD format. In 1964 Walter Legge and EMI parted. For years autocrat Legge had managed the Philharmonia; and EMI gave him 12 months notice; whilst orchestra members were not served notice. They sought the support of Conductor Klemperer. Legge had unsuccessfully tried his hand at conducting; Karajan had by then gone to work for Deutsche Grammophon. Legge attempted unsuccessfully to disband the Philharmonia ; and it managed to continue as an Independent body without him. After all his efforts Legge eventually suffered heart issues;and eventually died. Elisabeth Schwarkopft lost favour with English contacts; and Legge was buried out of Britain at her request.

Our thanks to Jim for giving us an insight into the career of Walter Legge, one great Pioneer of sound recording during the 20<sup>th</sup> century

John Astin