

Era' reissues the Gebhardt label's round-up set of the earliest Bayreuth recordings, put together in 2004. There are uncorrected listing, cataloguing and transfer problems but, unless you're completely allergic to historic sound, this remains an essential purchase.

Lastly, if you consider reissues to be a chance to sweep up what you might have missed before, then Sony/RCA/Eurodisc's 'Great Recordings' does that job superbly. Its mature operas include the first (Dresden) Janowski *Ring*, and a too-soon forgotten, live Karajan Vienna *Parsifal* (1961); there are also important excerpts discs from Kirsten Flagstad,

Lauritz Melchior and Helen Traubel, Waltraud Meier, George Szell and Leopold Stokowski and the stunning piano duo of Yaara Tal and Andreas Groethuysen.

There remains a lot we haven't had. How about a decent reissue of the Edward Downes Manchester *Rienzi*, to date the most complete there is? And on DVD, it would be quite fabulous to have a remastering of the two Wieland Wagner productions aired (and televised) on tour in Japan in 1968—*Tristan* and *Walküre* are both riveting, and the extant bootlegs are poor.

MIKE ASHMAN

## Opera books

### Mein Leben mit Wagner

By Christian Thielemann with Christine Lemke-Mattwey. C.H. Beck. 319 pp. €19,95. ISBN 978-3-406-63446-8

This latest contribution to the Richard Wagner bibliography is of an unapologetically personal nature. Of today's conductors, Christian Thielemann is arguably the one most closely identified with late-Romantic German music in general and Wagner's in particular, and his life seems to have been an uncommonly straight progression from a childhood spent reading Wagner vocal scores to becoming a regular guest and musical adviser at the Bayreuth Festival, and indeed following in the composer's footsteps as Principal Conductor of the Dresden Staatskapelle.

In the book's first, autobiographical section, 'My journey towards Wagner', Thielemann declares himself a 'passionate advocate of the *Ochsentour*', the slow, step-by-step climbing of the ladder recommended by his mentor Herbert von Karajan, as the only way to learn the craft of conducting; once you know how to beat the time, all the rest is

hard-won experience, like 'learning how to "hold" a lost singer with your left hand until you can bring him in again, while you keep the rest going with your right hand'. Wagner—whose music has for Thielemann a 'built-in addiction factor'—loomed large at every stage of the conductor's progress, most notably when he took over a production of *Tristan und Isolde* at Hamburg in 1988; the chapter ends with his Bayreuth debut two years later.

The following section, 'Wagner's cosmos', is the largest and most interesting. Thielemann gives a guided tour of the Festspielhaus and its everyday life, with the late Wolfgang and Gudrun Wagner coming across as the benevolent autocrats of a musical empire (diplomatically, the present regime is not commented upon). I enjoyed Thielemann's thumbnail sketches of the conductors who have appeared in Bayreuth, whose portraits hang in the 'Verbrechergalerie'

(Delinquents' Gallery), the corridor leading to the Festspielhaus's canteen. There are also fascinating insights regarding the suitability or otherwise of Wagner's pre-*Ring* operas to the Festspielhaus's unique acoustics, and on how conductors and orchestra cope with them. Frustratingly, though, when dealing with the individual operas, Thielemann declines to go into much musical detail; for example, he calls attention to the fact that the *Parsifal* prelude begins with a rest, but no explanation—speculative or otherwise—is attempted. When speaking about stagings, the conductor can recall 'just a few really satisfying experiences', and laments that too many producers can't—or won't—work from the score. Interestingly, a recurring Leitmotif throughout the book is Thielemann's

enthusiasm for the German *Spieloper* of Weber, Marschner, Lortzing and Nicolai.

The 'opera guide' section, 'Wagner's Music Dramas', is apparently aimed at the Wagner neophyte, including as it does synopses and recommended recordings (unsurprisingly, the choices fall more often than not on live recordings from postwar Bayreuth). The book is written in the first person, but Thielemann gives Christine Lemke-Mattwey—a well-known German journalist—credit for 'composing this book from our often convoluted conversations'. Be that as it may, the conductor's notorious directness—his 'Berliner Schnauze', or Berlin beak—is very much in evidence throughout, and his Wagnerian musings make a most enjoyable read. CARLOS MARIA SOLARE

### Tsar Feodor: Chaliapin in America

By Joseph Darsky. Nova Science Publishers. 336pp. £116.99. ISBN: 978-1-62100-413-4

Given Chaliapin's status as one of the truly great operatic artists of the 20th century, the English-language literature is somewhat thin. Aside from 'autobiographies' in various formats, the most recent book is the late Victor Borovsky's *Chaliapin: A Critical Biography*. Well illustrated and with a fine discography, it has to be considered the standard work on Chaliapin. However, given the length and range of his career, it was virtually inevitable that some aspects of the rich tapestry of Chaliapin's life would be dealt with rather cursorily. Joseph Darsky's mission in writing this book was to give a full coverage of Chaliapin's regular and lengthy tours of the USA over a 25-year period starting in 1907. It has clearly required an immense amount of research, especially of reviews in the local press of the many cities in which Chaliapin performed during this time. Of course he also appeared in many other countries: to

keep the story flowing they need some mention even if they are at times presented somewhat parenthetically. Much the same applies to Chaliapin's somewhat complicated personal life.

Drawing on Russian sources, Darsky also gives fascinating insights into the ups and downs of Chaliapin's relations with the Soviet authorities. Given his own background, Chaliapin would have had considerable sympathy with the formal aspirations of the new regime but would inevitably have been irritated by its intent to control and direct all aspects of life. For their part the authorities clearly oscillated between pride in the worldwide renown of the country's most famous musical performer, particularly for his promotion of Russian operas, and fear that he would inevitably be sucked into a capitalist, money-oriented way of life. There was of course a vast disparity between Chaliapin's huge earnings from opera and concerts and the average



### ■ *Chaliapin in 1929*

standard of living in Russia both before and after the revolution. We should also bear in mind that for a half century post-revolution there was virtually no cross-fertilization between Soviet and Western musicians.

Darsky quotes extensively from performance reviews. Chaliapin's singing style and stage histrionics were novel and clearly posed problems for more traditionally-minded critics. Indeed, at times Darsky cannot hide a degree of annoyance with those same critics, given that the watching and listening public was ever more enthusiastic, and Chaliapin would draw huge attendances wherever he performed. Almost inevitably the information about opera performances is more complete than it is for concerts. What precisely did Chaliapin sing in any particular performance? The problem is that most (but not all) printed programmes for his concerts seemingly did not cover such details. Instead the audience were invited to refer to a separately available

numbered book of songs from which the items would be selected. Chaliapin himself might announce a number or the audience might be urged to call one out. I have heard it suggested that in practice only a limited range of the items in the songbook were performed with any frequency. To be fair, there are similar gaps in biographies of other singers even where there is more detailed information in printed programmes. It is not unreasonable to think that some of the reviews might offer details, but for an artist of Chaliapin's stature—a celebrity of his day—the press was often rather more interested in a 'good story'. Darsky quotes some of the wilder stories and in many cases readily debunks them. He makes no particular comment on press speculation in autumn 1931 that Chaliapin was a possible successor to Gatti-Casazza as managing director of the Metropolitan. Given that the Met's problems of the time were at least as much financial as artistic, and bearing in mind the huge fees paid to Chaliapin for his appearances, it is hard to imagine such an outcome.

An extensive appendix offers a chronology of all the US appearances together with various biographical details and brief press notices. There is a good deal of overlap between this chronology and the main text, but this is inevitable when writing about performers. Other useful appendices chronicle Chaliapin's performances in South America and provide a listing of his books, publications and interviews. There is also a good selection of photographs, albeit on plain rather than glossy paper, although the latter would presumably have added to the price of a book that is already quite expensive.

Like Chaliapin's life, this book is multi-faceted and the compilation and presentation must have been quite a challenge to those involved in editing and sub-editing. It is certainly a valuable if perhaps slightly unusual addition to the literature.

STANLEY HENIG