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The recording(s) of Anna Bahr-Mildenburg

Christopher Kuner¹

The enthusiast for “older” singers soon learns that there is no necessary correlation between the number of recordings a singer made and his or her greatness, as is demonstrated by the case of Anna Bahr-Mildenburg (also known by her maiden name of Anna von Mildenburg). The disciple and lover of Gustav Mahler, and idol of the Viennese public, she was for many discerning listeners the very incarnation of roles such as Isolde, Brünnhilde, and Leonore (in *Fidelio*) in the early 1900s. The eminent musician and musicologist Erwin Stein, who heard her often in his youth, has left a vivid description of her qualities:

She had a big voice, one of the biggest I have met, but with her this was not the main point, though it gave her an enormous range of expression. Her *piano* yielded as much variety of tone as her *forte*, and she could colour or swell the notes at will. Yet whatever her voice was capable of doing, it served the dramatic expression of the music. For she was not only a singer and a fine musician, but—even more important with her—a great tragic actress. Her appearance and movements had the same grandeur of style as her singing. Among the many parts I heard her sing, Isolde was the most outstanding. True, the very top was not her best register and the C’s in the second act caused her discomfort. That was the only flaw. The scope of the part was just the right one for her personality and I have experienced no other singer who could as movingly convey Isolde’s tragic figure and the wide range of her conflicting emotions—her love and hate, gloom and rage, tenderness and spite, passion and despair, jubilation and sorrow.²

Yet the only remaining memento of Mildenburg’s voice is a recording two and half minutes long of (of all things) the recitative to the aria “Ozean, Du Ungeheuer!” from Weber’s *Oberon* made in 1904, and of which only three copies are known to exist.

Documents from Mildenburg’s estate are stored in the Austrian Theatre Museum (*Österreichisches Theatermuseum*) in Vienna, which itself is a veritable treasure trove for opera

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² Erwin Stein, “Mahler and the Vienna Opera”, in Harold Rosenthal (ed) *The Opera Bedside Book* (Victor Gollancz 1965), pp. 296, 300.

and music lovers.³ The Mildenburg archive must be one of the most remarkable collections of documents left by any singer. Besides numerous boxes of letters, manuscripts written by the singer on musical and philosophical themes, and other documents, the archive comprises the singer's diaries (which number in the dozens of volumes), and a card catalogue filling 26 boxes with thousands of alphabetically-ordered cards written by the singer which are cross-referenced to the diaries. The cards are virtually an autobiography in themselves, and contain titles such as "why I do not want children" (from August 1904) or "fear of going mad" (from June 1906); unfortunately the diaries between 1889 and 1905 are missing, including the year in which her sole extant recording was made.⁴ Aside from her huge correspondence and the number of unpublished, hand-written manuscripts, the sheer effort needed to keep these diaries from her earliest years to the month of her death, and to then create an index to them in the form of many thousands of cards, reveals Mildenburg as a woman of enormous energy.

The author has conducted numerous hours of research in the Mildenburg archive over a period of several years, in an attempt to find information about her sole extant recording. This research has unearthed fascinating new information about the singer, and how her sole recording came to light.

I. Her life and career

The details of Mildenburg's life and career are well-known and can be summarized briefly here. Born on November 29, 1872 in Vienna, she died there on January 27, 1947. She studied with the well-known pedagogue Rosa Papier-Paumgartner, and made her debut in 1895 in Hamburg as Brünnhilde in *Die Walküre*. She then appeared in Bayreuth as Kundry in 1897, and became a close confidant and disciple of Cosima Wagner. She debuted at the (then) Vienna Court Opera in 1898, where she was a regular member until 1917, and sang in many of the revolutionary productions under Mahler in roles such as Isolde, Brünnhilde, Donna Anna, and Clytemnestra (in *Iphigenie in Aulis*). She also sang as a guest in houses such as Covent Garden, Frankfurt, and Munich. Her voice apparently began deteriorating around the time that Mahler left Vienna in 1907, and in the later years of her opera career, which lasted until 1931, she was most famous in the mezzo role of Klytämnestra in Strauss' *Elektra*. In 1909 Mildenburg married the modernist Austrian writer Hermann Bahr, and changed her name to Bahr-Mildenburg. She had a gift for pedagogy, and taught in Munich and Vienna; her pupils included Sena Jurinac, Josef Greindl, and Ira Malaniuk. She also gave lessons to Lauritz Melchior and introduced him to Cosima Wagner, who immediately engaged him in the first post-WWI Bayreuth season in 1924.

³ Located at Lobkowitzplatz 2 (very close to the Staatsoper), the Theatermuseum has outstanding permanent collections of opera memorabilia on display, as well as interesting special exhibitions and a library that is available for consultation. See <<http://www.khm.at/nocache/en/austrian-theatre-museum/>>.

⁴ Frau Jarmila Weissenböck, who was the original curator of the Mildenburg archive, stated to the author that the diaries from this period may have been withheld by the singer's executors, since they covered the period of her affair with Mahler.

Mildenburg's situation became more difficult following the death of her husband in 1934 and the coming into power of the Nazis. In particular, her financial situation became precarious, her style of teaching was seen as old-fashioned, and she had a prickly personality that did not make things easier. She seems to have had an ambiguous relationship with Nazism; on the one hand she expressed support for Hitler, while on the other hand she was attacked in the Nazi press because of her closeness to Mahler and her marriage with Bahr.⁵ In the end, the most accurate assessment seems to be that the singer was a "Mitläuferin", i.e., someone who was not an ideological Nazi but who "went along" with Nazism both for practical reasons and because certain aspects of it seemed to fit with her passion for Wagner.⁶ It is thus ironic that V.V. Rosenfeld, who (as we shall see) supported Mildenburg financially in her darkest hours right after WWII and acquired her extant recording, was Jewish.

II. Her recordings

The sole extant recording of Mildenburg is of part of the recitative to the aria "Ozean, Du Ungeheuer" from *Oberon* by Carl Maria von Weber, made for G&T in 1904 (G&T 43630), with piano accompaniment. There are apparently three copies of the recording in existence; while one source describes them as "three identical pressings",⁷ another has stated to the author that one is a white label test and two have complete labels.⁸ To take one as an example, the record in the Yale University collection has a black label and reads "German Soprano/Recitativ aus der Ozean-Arie „Oberon"/gesungen von/Anna v. Mildenburg, k.k. Hofopernsängerin/WIEN", and has the number G.C.-43630 and the matrix number 805e.

There has been unanimous agreement over the years that the recording is remarkably successful, and that it reveals Mildenburg in her prime to have had an enormous dramatic soprano, a powerful top, and striking dramatic gifts. Michael Scott has described the record as follows:

It is a striking document, declamation in the grand manner, the attack sure and clean. It is an altogether freer interpretation than we should expect these days, but correct stylistically. The voice is a big and brilliant instrument, as powerful in the chest as it is in the head register. Deprived of the aria itself and cabaletta, we cannot know whether she was equally imposing in legato and coloratura singing. In her artistic commitment there is an echo of [Lilli] Lehmann, though one can scarcely imagine that lady, even in earlier

⁵ Mildenburg's position under the Nazis is explored in detail in Franz Wilnauer (ed) *Mein lieber Trotzkopf, meine süße Mondblume* (Paul Zsolnay Verlag 2006), pp. 460-467.

⁶ This is how the singer was described to the author by Frau Weissenböck. This view is also taken by Wilnauer (n 5), at 464.

⁷ Dr. Harold Wayne describes them thus in the notes to the CD *The Harold Wayne Collection, Volume 6* (Symposium 1085).

⁸ E-mail of December 29, 2002 to the author from Robert Ziering.

days, as profligate vocally, throwing in the optional B flat at the end to such reckless effect.⁹

And David Mason describes it thusly:

Only a pianist accompanies her but she nevertheless gives an impression of commanding power. The first note, on the initial syllable of ‘Ozean’, is projected fearlessly straight at the recording horn but on the second syllable the volume is relaxed slightly and it becomes clear that she has been stood back somewhat from the horn—the voice can actually be heard reverberating from the surroundings. The piece allows little scope for subtlety but there is no doubt of the power and majesty of Mildenburg’s voice: to drive the point home she takes the written F at the ‘Du’ of the final line ‘Stellst Du ein Schreckbild dar’ at what I am advised is B flat.¹⁰

The immense size of the Mildenburg archive means that the author has not been able to review every single piece of paper in it, but following an extensive search he has been unable to find any reference to a recording, aside from the letters discussed later.¹¹ The fact that Mildenburg documented virtually all aspects of her life, but that her archive does not seem to contain a single letter, receipt, or other scrap of paper referring to her recording, in itself suggests that the singer had little or no interest in the subject, and that she regarded her sole extant record as a mistake which was best forgotten.¹² That the record was never put on the market is confirmed by the fact that only three copies of it are known to be extant, and that it was apparently never publicized.

It seems inconceivable that Mildenburg would have gone into the studio only to record the recitative to an aria, and it is thus probable that at least part of the “Ozean” aria itself was recorded as well; this is supported by a reference in a letter sent to the singer that will be discussed later. Leo Riemens has written that catalogue number 43630 was probably followed by two further ones containing the remainder of the aria.¹³ However, since the time Riemens’ speculation was published, it has become known that the two following catalogue numbers (43631 and 43632) are actually recordings by other singers; what we do not know is what was on matrix nos. 801e-804e before the matrix of Mildenburg’s known recording and on matrix nos.

⁹ Michael Scott, *The Record of Singing to 1914* (Duckworth 1977), p. 183.

¹⁰ David Mason, “Rarissima”, *Classical Record Collector*, number 49, summer 2007, p. 8.

¹¹ A further complication to a search is the singer’s handwriting, which is of legendary illegibility.

¹² The author’s search through her diaries and card catalogues has included looking for German terms that could refer to a recording (i.e., words such as “Aufnahme”, “Platte”, and “Grammophon”), as well as for the opera “Oberon”, and for names such as “G&T” and “Gaisberg”, but to no avail.

¹³ Leo Riemens, in *Le Grandi Voci* (Istituto per la collaborazione culturale 1964), p. 35.

806e-808e after it. Nor are we likely ever to know, because these recordings were made by Will Gaisberg, and there are no recording sheets or other original documentation for the recordings he made abroad.¹⁴

An unpublished manuscript contained in the Médiathèque Musicale Mahler in Paris, written in 1948 by a friend of Mildenburg's, Leonie Gombrich-Hock, suggests that Mildenburg did make at least one additional recording. In it, she refers to a recording from *Die Walküre* which Mildenburg made on an unspecified date but then rejected:

We went together to the Getreidemarkt¹⁵ to a gramophone company that made recordings of Anna's *Walküre*. Anna was horrified (*entsetzt*) by the high notes, and said that she has never sung like that, and that the recording was faulty and should never be sold.¹⁶

These reminiscences were written 44 years after the date of Mildenburg's sole known recording, and it is possible that the author may have confused a supposed recording from *Walküre* with the *Oberon* disc. On the other hand, Gombrich-Hock must herself have been a highly sophisticated musician,¹⁷ and given the overwhelming impression which Mildenburg's singing made on her as stated in her reminiscences, the fact that the recording she heard was from *Walküre* might well have stuck in her mind even decades later. This, together with the likelihood that Mildenburg would have been asked to record more than a single piece from *Oberon* while in the studio, means there is a reasonable chance that the singer may have made a recording from *Walküre* as well. Other sources also suggest that the singer did make more recordings,¹⁸ though inquiries with the EMI Archives, the Yale Collection of Historical Sound Recordings, and various collectors reveal that no one ever seems to have seen any recording by Mildenburg except for the single *Oberon* excerpt. Whether or not Mildenburg did make further recordings, Gombrich-Hock's recollections demonstrate that she was a perfectionist with a highly-strung and emotional temperament who was not willing to accept that the recording process of the day was unable to do full justice to a large, brilliant soprano voice like hers, and that she was not willing to allow any recording of hers to be put on the market.

¹⁴ The author is indebted to David Mason for this information.

¹⁵ The Getreidemarkt is a street in the center of Vienna, not far from the famous Secession building.

¹⁶ Leonie Gombrich-Hock, "Einige persönliche Erinnerungen an Anna Bahr-Mildenburg", 1948.

¹⁷ The Wikipedia entry on her son, the well-known art historian Sir Ernst Hans Josef Gombrich, states that Gombrich-Hock was a "distinguished concert pianist" who had been a pupil of Bruckner, and a friend of Schönberg, Mahler, Brahms, and Rudolf Serkin. See <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/E.H._Gombrich>.

¹⁸ See the biography of Mildenburg contained in the booklet to the CD set *Mahler's Decade in Vienna* (Marston 53004-2), stating "she made two recordings for G&T but rejected them and only one survives in three copies". In the notes to Symposium 1085 (n 8), Dr. Wayne mentions that "other titles have been rumoured".

The first mention of a recording by Mildenburg appears in *The Record Collector* of January 1947, in which Mr. V.V. Rosenfeld states that he has been in touch with the singer, and that “she confirms that she made records, and a search is now being made for copies.” Then in September 1947, an editorial by Ronald Phillips reveals that the record has been acquired by Rosenfeld directly from the singer. Two points of particular interest in these early articles is that there is no mention of there being three copies of the record (it is referred to as “the only surviving copy”), and that Phillips mentions rumours that the unnamed pianist for the recording was Mahler himself. However, there is no evidence that Mahler ever made a recording as accompanist to Mildenburg or anyone else, and so these rumours must be regarded as false.¹⁹

Evidently three copies of the record did surface, though the sequence of how they were acquired and by whom is not entirely clear. Dr. Wayne describes the situation as follows:

This, the only known recording by this famed soprano, was discovered in the 1950s in three identical G&T pressings, in the possession of the Mildenburg family; they were acquired by a certain Physician and taken thence to the International Record Collectors Agency, where for a time they were all in the hands of Colin Shreve. Eventually, copies went respectively to Keating (and thence to Larry Witten and Yale), to Dick Alexander, and to Roberto Bauer. Both Bauer’s and Alexander’s eventually came into my possession.²⁰

Presumably the “Physician” referred to here was Rosenfeld (though, as discussed below, he seems to have been a doctor of laws rather than of medicine).

David Mason gives the following description (based on information from Harold Wayne), referring to a single copy of the record which Rosenfeld acquired:

That then was the first known copy and I assume it was one of the three which in the 1950s came into the possession of Dr. Dick Alexander, a celebrated collector. From him they went to Colin Shreve’s International Record Collectors Agency in Newport Court, London, from where they went to the American collector George Keating (then to Lawrence Witten and finally to the Yale University Collection), one went back to (or stayed with) Alexander and one went to Roberto Bauer in Milan. The latter two came into Harold Wayne’s possession: from him one went to Paul Getty Jnr. and one to the US collector Robert Ziering.²¹

And Robert Ziering has given the following account to the author:

The three known copies all came from the Mildenburg estate. The record was not approved after the three copies were made up for her, one as a white label test, two with

¹⁹ Mahler’s only known recordings are solo piano rolls made for the Welte-Mignon company in 1905; these have since been reissued several times on CD.

²⁰ Notes to Symposium 1085 (n 8).

²¹ Mason (n 10).

complete labels...One copy eventually went to Keating in California (white label sample or test)...Of course, it went to Larry Whitten when he purchased the collection...Subsequently, one came into the hands of Harold Wayne...Then Wayne acquired the third copy from the Roberto Bauer estate...I immediately phoned Dr. Wayne and told him I would buy the record at any price. But apparently I did something that no one else had done and that was to offer to buy a package of records, a number of rare duplicates. That did the trick. He said to me that no one need have two of such a rarity, and since my proposal was attractive to him, we would do business...I flew to London (February 1972) and in two days of an unbelievable experience put together the package...I was offered the option of choosing either copy. I examined and played both copies. Both were absolutely beautiful. I finally made the choice...the record from the Bauer collection.²²

The Ziering copy was later sold at auction, with a minimum bid of \$15,000.²³

III. Rosenberg's correspondence with Mildenburg

Untold so far has been the story of how V.V. Rosenfeld obtained the disc(s) in the first place, as revealed in the letters that he sent to the singer contained in the Mildenburg archive;²⁴ unfortunately, the singer's replies to Rosenfeld are not contained there, and a search has failed to turn them up.

Rosenfeld was apparently Viennese, had idolized Mildenburg in his youth, and had emigrated to London before the war. Little biographical information is available on him, but various sources on the Internet help to fill in the gaps: one mentions a "Dr. Valentin Rosenfeld" who was president of a Jewish sports club in Vienna and emigrated to London in 1936.²⁵ And a "Mr. Valentin Rosenfeld", who was born in 1886 in Vienna and died in 1970 in London, is described as "a respected Viennese lawyer, whose extensive library was confiscated in Vienna in 1938. He was a leading functionary of the athletic association 'Hakoah' and edited the organization's publications in Vienna and in London exile. Valentin Rosenfeld was a passionate autograph collector, specializing in Goethe and Richard Wagner".²⁶ He seems to have been married to Eva Rosenfeld, a psychoanalyst who was a member of Anna Freud's circle.²⁷ Eva Rosenfeld's archive is maintained by the Freud Museum in Vienna, but an inquiry with it has failed to turn up any material relating to Mildenburg.²⁸

²² E-mail of December 29, 2002 to the author, quoted with permission of Mr. Ziering.

²³ Mason (n 10).

²⁴ All correspondence referred to herein is in German.

²⁵ See <<http://www.siegelproductions.ca/filmfanatics/watermarks.htm>>.

²⁶ See <<http://www.freud-museum.at/e/inhalt/aktuellrosenfeld.html>>.

²⁷ See <<http://www.bookrags.com/tandf/rosenfeld-eva-tf/>>.

²⁸ E-mails to the author of January 7, 2003 from Christian Huber of the Freud Museum.

The story of Rosenfeld's acquisition of the recording begins on August 20, 1946, when an Eric O. Feingold wrote a letter to the singer stating that he was forwarding to her a letter from Rosenfeld; beyond the fact that he was resident in Vienna, research has failed to turn up any information about Feingold (perhaps he was a friend of Rosenfeld's from his pre-war days?). On September 12, Rosenfeld then wrote to Mildenburg referring to a package he had sent her, and his letters reveal that he regularly sent her so-called CARE packages (and possibly also money); given that Vienna was in ruins and Mildenburg was in dire straits, this support must have been crucial to the singer.²⁹ It seems that Rosenfeld also arranged for packages to be sent to Mildenburg from the United States; in particular there are several letters to the singer from a Roland Edward Partridge in New York City, who seems to have been a student of hers and also sent her packages with food.

The subject of recordings first comes up in a letter from Rosenfeld to Mildenburg of September 27, 1946, where he asks her the following:

May I ask you again whether gramophone recordings were ever made of your voice? I have begun here a collection specialized in Wagner, including both modern recordings and older ones. My collection includes recordings of Weidemann, Schmedes, Mayr, and many other great singers. It is amazing that one can acquire them fairly easily here in London. You can imagine what a recording of your voice would mean to me. Perhaps you could send me some dates that would allow me to search for one.

Rosenfeld was obviously a serious vocal record collector, and was determined to find out if a recording of Mildenburg existed. In a letter of October 9, he goes on to tell the singer how much a recording of her would mean to him:

[I] played a few of my records, first Weidemann singing Wotan's farewell; unfortunately without the *only* Brünnhilde. How I had your voice in my ear singing "Der frech sich wagte, dem freislichen Felsen zu nahn!", barely hearing "dem freislichen" because everything led up to the final climax, the shining A on "Felsen". Then came Mayr as Hagen; Schmedes in the opening duet from *Götterdämmerung*, again with Lucie Weidt instead of you; and finally a couple of records with Weidemann and Demuth as Sachs and Schmedes as Tristan and Siegmund. What would I give for a *Liebestod* with "Anna"!

Mildenburg had apparently sent to Rosenfeld a paper dealing with the character of Brünnhilde,³⁰ and this gave him the opportunity to plead with her again for news of a possible recording, and to reminisce movingly about his opera-going days in the Mahler era in Vienna (in a letter of October 23):

²⁹ In a letter sent by Mildenburg while Vienna was being besieged by Soviet forces, the singer states that she spent six nights in an unheated cellar, that her flat also had no heat, and that she had frostbite on her hands and feet. Wilnauer (n 5), at 467.

³⁰ In one of his contributions to *The Record Collector*, Rosenfeld states that she sent him two papers she had written, one on Mahler and one on Cosima Wagner, and goes on to say that "The Record Collector has promised to help their publication later on". However, the papers never seem to have been published; what happened to them?

You can hardly imagine how happy I was to receive your paper about Brünnhilde. I am always thinking that it is unfortunate that, as far as I know, your voice has not been preserved; but perhaps a private recording or something of the like exists. Would it not be possible that you could have a song or a few spoken words recorded? There are thousands of people who would be interested in it.

For me you are not only the great Isolde and Brünnhilde, but the sole living representative of a period of the Vienna Opera (we could call it the Mahler period or the Mildenburg period) which in a unique manner spurred artists on to their greatest performances and to serve the works they were performing. If I only think of names like Gutheil-Schroder and Weidemann, or even of names like Demuth (who really just had a wonderful voice but was still sometimes carried away in performance), or of singers like Schmedes (who certainly found his way just by instinct and did not, as you did, understand intellectually what he was doing)—when I think of these names, with you at the pinnacle, then a lost world lives again for me, which is the only thing that steers my memories back to that lost city on the Danube; and for this I thank you just as I do for that which I have experienced artistically through you.

Unfortunately Rosenfeld's suggestion of having Mildenburg record her voice was not fulfilled, but she did apparently hint that a recording of her existed, for on November 11 he writes to her burning with the fire of a record collector on the trail of buried treasure. Of particular interest is the fact that Rosenfeld refers to the "*Oberon aria*", meaning that either the singer mixed up recording the recitative with the aria, or that she did in fact record the aria as well:

And now I come to your last, and to me most important, hint, namely that concerning the recording. Dear Frau Mildenburg, no matter if the record is good or bad, worn or not worn, I beg you for everything in the world to send it to me, I am ready to make any sacrifice for it. We rabid record collectors have ears that are constructed so that we can recognise the singer's true voice under the surface noise, in particular when the voice is that of Anna von Mildenburg, which is kept undyingly in my heart and memory. Too bad that it is not Isolde or Brünnhilde, but the *Oberon aria* will provide the same degree of happiness. If you do send me the record, then please do not fail to use plenty of packing material, straw and a lot of paper, and, if possible, do not use a paper box but a wooden one, the post office is very careless nowadays, and please write on it in English "used record of sentimental value only" and "fragile". God, how wonderful a surprise that would be!

At the end of the same letter, Rosenfeld adds a note by hand:

One more request: do not send me the record if you cannot pack it well and in a wooden box. I would rather wait for such an opportunity rather than assume the risk that it could be broken.

This last comment supports the assumption that the singer never mailed the record to Rosenfeld, but that he must have picked it up in Vienna, either from Mildenburg herself or from her estate, or obtained it through some other source after her death.

In a final letter of December 10, we learn that it is not Mildenburg who owns the record, but an unnamed man whom the singer will have to persuade to part with it. Moreover, here Rosenfeld

refers for the first time to “one of the records” in the plural; this could mean either one of the three copies of the same *Oberon* recitative known to exist, or a recording of some other piece as well (the remaining sections of the *Oberon* aria perhaps?):

And now to the gramophone record: dear Frau Mildenburg, please use the entire charm of your personality to convince the lucky owner to send me one of the records (the more the better!). I am ready to make a great sacrifice for it or to give compensation in any possible way. He wouldn't give it to me since he doesn't know me, but who could refuse you anything?

This is the final letter from Rosenfeld in the Mildenburg archive; thus we never learn who the mysterious owner of the records was (could it have been an employee of G&T in Vienna?), and exactly how Rosenfeld obtained one (or more) of the extant recordings. Significantly, the diary entries from Mildenburg's last months contain lamentations for the destruction of her beloved Vienna, but no mention of her correspondence with Rosenfeld or of her record. Anna Bahr-Mildenburg died little more than a month after Rosenberg's final letter to her, on January 27, 1947.

Confusion is created by the chronology given in *The Record Collector*, where in January 1947 Rosenfeld states that he has confirmed with the singer that she did make a recording and a search is being made for copies, and in September of the same year Ronald Phillips states that Rosenfeld has acquired a copy from the singer, even though this would hardly be possible given her death in January; perhaps Rosenfeld acquired the record(s) from Mildenburg's estate, or from their unknown owner. Phillips' editorial mentions that Rosenfeld has acquired “the only existing copy” of a record by Mildenburg, implying that he did not receive all three copies, and leaving the question of how the other two got onto the market (unless he did obtain all three without informing anyone). However, no matter what the sequence of events, it seems reasonable to assume that, had Rosenfeld not shown the singer that there was great interest in her recordings, they may never have survived.

IV. Mildenburg's encounter with Lilli Lehmann

Mildenburg's diaries contain many fascinating glimpses into the singer's life and collaboration with famous colleagues. While it does not relate to her recordings, a particularly interesting example is the singer's account of an encounter she had with another titan of Wagner singing, Lilli Lehmann, in Prague in February 1911. The encounter is remarkable for the insight it gives into the relationship between the two great singers, and Mildenburg's evaluation of Lehmann's singing at a time when she was 63 but still giving concerts. Evidently they met when Mildenburg was singing *Isolde* in Prague but was having some difficulties with the role, Lehmann was preparing to sing in a concert there, and the two singers were staying in the same hotel. Mildenburg's diaries (dated “February 1911”) state:

Lilli Lehmann had written me a few lines in the same evening following *Tristan*—she was happy about my good condition in the first act and was sorry that she had to go home after that act because of the uncomfortable seating. That was fine with me; she would have had too many criticisms in vocal terms. I thanked her warmly with a few lines and flowers and assured her that I was very much looking forward to that evening's concert in

which she would be participating. Just as I was ready to take an afternoon walk she came up to me in the hallway—in a silk dressing jacket—and thanked me for my flowers. When she wants to she can be very kind (and in this case she certainly was), so that I very much fell under her spell. Following a short conversation she went back to her room, with her white hair sparkling as she walked down the hallway...

The two great sopranos had a particularly close relationship where *Tristan* is concerned, as Lehmann had stepped in with no rehearsal (and not having sung the role on stage for several years) to sing Act III of the opera in Vienna on May 19, 1907, with Mahler conducting, after Mildenburg became indisposed.³¹

Mildenburg then explains how she attended a concert that evening at which Lehmann sang Beethoven's concert aria "Ah! Perfido!" (amazingly, the aria was preceded by a performance of Bruckner's Eighth Symphony):

And then Lilli sang "Ah! Perfido!" Her vocalisation is becoming constantly darker, and in her lower register "e", "i", and "a" sound like "u". She is markedly off-key, but it sounded beautiful if one could overlook this aspect. She seems not to use any effort in singing and sounded quite undramatic, but technically she is marvellous and the effortlessness is truly enviable. From a distance she also looks quite beautiful—very striking with her white hair and classically beautiful profile. Only her outfit is always in quite poor taste and the many diamonds and medals gave her the aura of the "stage" in the worst, most superficial sense... The orchestra then played the wonderful *Nachtmusik* of Mozart, and I was quite enthusiastic about it and would have liked to hear it over and over. Then Lilli sang an aria from *Cosi fan tutte*. Wonderful—and this time pure as well. She doesn't have much force left. But I enjoyed it greatly...

Mildenburg goes on to describe how she spoke with Lehmann for an hour the next day in a train compartment:

We gossiped a lot and had many of the same concerns, such as the terrible situation regarding new productions of Wagner operas—then the excessive importance that one gives nowadays to the scenery, the lack of talent among singers of *Tristan*, etc. There were many points of agreement. But then she began to criticize Cosima and I let her know at once that I was of a different opinion, which didn't stop her from trying to convince me by various examples that Cosima had simply gone beyond Wagner's original intentions and had made highly arbitrary and high-handed changes in his works after his death. I tried to change the subject and tried to make the best out of things by asking her to help me a bit vocally and to give me some tips. She was very nice and said that she had often meant to do this, but didn't know if I would like her to. She said she had heard very well where I was having problems in Act I of *Tristan* and knew why some passages were giving me trouble. She suggested that I visit her sometime in Berlin; I would like to do this, since I am always interested in new suggestions concerning my voice and I keep hoping that perhaps I can get things back on track...

³¹ For an account of this famous incident, see Henry-Louis de la Grange, *Gustav Mahler, Volume 3, Vienna: Triumph and Disillusion* (Oxford University Press 1999), pp. 653-654.

This encounter demonstrates that Wagner productions were polarizing opinion even 100 years ago, as was Cosima Wagner's stewardship of her husband's legacy, and that adequate singers of Tristan were difficult to come by even in 1911. It is just one of the fascinating episodes described in Mildenburg's diaries.

V. Conclusions

Among the questions that remain are whether Mildenburg made three sides with the complete *Oberon* aria, or whether the sources referring to this possibility have confused it with the existence of three copies of the single side; why early accounts of the record refer to a single copy, even though three exist; and whether she made any further records. In the author's view, it is likely that she did make other records in addition to the single side now in existence, even if there is no definitive proof of this. The chances that other records may have survived may be more than slim, but hope springs eternal in the record collector's breast, particularly in view of the unexpected emergence of previously unknown recordings by great singers like Tamagno. At least we have one brief memento from the soprano in her prime that gives a good idea of her true greatness, which unfortunately is not the case with some other great singers of the same era (think of Milka Ternina and Jean de Reszke). And collectors owe an eternal debt of gratitude to V.V. Rosenfeld, who helped ensure that Mildenburg's recording was saved for posterity.