



An American in Vienna

Tanya Tintner relates the story of Jonathan Sternberg's brief but highly significant recording career in Europe at the beginning of the LP era

In these days when the desire to hear almost any piece of music, no matter how obscure, can be gratified instantly at the click of a mouse, it is only the older among us who remember the excitement of discovering even well-known works appearing on LP for the first time. In these days when Amazon stocks almost 30 CD editions and many MP3s of Haydn's Symphony No. 82, it is hard to imagine a time when there was no recording of the work at all – nor of most of its 103 numbered siblings. Yet that time is hardly more than 60 years ago, when the conductor Jonathan Sternberg began making his pioneering recordings in post-war Vienna.

Sternberg was born in New York City in 1919 and, after convincing his doctor father that he was not destined for a life in medicine, studied violin at Juilliard and at New York University. New York was an ideal place for a musical education, where the concert halls were filled with the greatest artists. Sternberg was able to observe them at close range, by turning pages as a teenager for Fritz Kreisler's accompanist (for \$2 a time), and for George Enescu (for \$3). "The playing was unique ..." he recalls. "They all had a personality which was evident even blindfolded. Can you name anyone since with the same capacity?" He also achieved some notoriety as the know-it-all teenager on the WNYC radio quiz show *Symphonic Varieties* (later *So You Think You Know Music*). Sternberg additionally studied conducting, making his debut with a youth orchestra in 1941 with Copland's *Outdoor Overture*. He was drafted into the Army in 1942, eventually finding himself in Shanghai. When the conductor of the local symphony orchestra was discovered to be a Japanese collaborator he was promptly fired and Sternberg took over, learning, by his own admission, on the job.

After some summer study with Pierre Monteux in Paris once the war was over, he moved in 1947 to Vienna to advance his career – "There was no such thing as American conductors in those days". In the small expatriate community there he met H. C. Robbins Landon, who had come to pursue his great love, Haydn, a composer then scarcely known except to amateur choral societies who gave occasional poorly translated airings of *The Creation*. He had set up the Haydn Society in Boston, and his aim was to produce a complete edition of both printed music and recordings, financed at first by an inheritance from an uncle and later by a \$60,000 investment by an Austrian, Erhard Jaeger. The Society's extensive catalogue of recordings was made possible because of black market money, which Sternberg and Landon would acquire on trips to Switzerland. And a little went a long way: according to Sternberg, one American dollar was worth about a month's salary for a musician, and an entire recording with soloists and the Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra could be made for around \$400.



H C Robbins Landon

Searching for source materials

As Sternberg owned a car, he drove Robbie, as he was known, to monasteries, churches and libraries in search of manuscripts and source materials. In 1949 he began recording for the Haydn Society, organising all the details including soloists and orchestra himself. In just one week he and the Vienna Symphony completed symphonies Nos. 1, 13 and 28 (⊙ HSLP-1001, ⊙ HS-9110, Parlophone ⊙ PMA1001 – No. 1 is on Parlophone ⊙ R20616), Nos. 31 (*Hornsignal*) and 34 (⊙ HSLP-1002, ⊙ HS-9111), and 44 (*Trauer*) and 48 (*Maria Theresia*) (⊙ HSLP-1003, ⊙ HS-9112). In the same year they recorded the *Nelson Mass* (⊙ HSLP-2004, ⊙ HS-9016, also Nixa ⊙ HLP2004) – Sternberg suggested they call it the “Lord Nelson Mass” for marketing purposes, which Landon accepted – with Lisa della Casa, Elisabeth Höngen, Horst Taubmann and George London. According to Sternberg, hiring such outstanding soloists was easy. “The Austrian Schilling was practically worthless at the time and so a fee of \$100 was a fortune which nobody refused.” Not only was this the first recording of the work, but it was the first modern performance using Haydn’s original orchestration of strings plus three trumpets and timpani – the wind parts published by Breitkopf & Härtel were not by Haydn.

The recordings were made at the Konzerthaus, using equipment owned by the Vienna Symphony. There was no producer as such; Sternberg and

the recording engineer decided between them on the order of proceedings and what needed to be redone. Sternberg would edit perhaps the next day, sitting with someone “handy with a knife” to work on the tapes – the new medium of magnetic tape.

The beginning of 1950 saw recordings of five more Haydn symphonies, still with the Vienna Symphony: Nos. 82 (*The Bear*) (⊙ HSLP-1008, ⊙ HS-9113, with Symphony No. 85 conducted by Erwin Balzer on Side B), Nos. 22 (*Philosopher*) and 35 (⊙ HSLP-1009, HS-9114), and Nos. 38 and 39 (⊙ HSLP-1010, ⊙ HS-9115). At the same time Sternberg made the first recording (still for the Haydn Society) of Mozart’s *Serenade No. 9 in D, K320 (Posthorn)* (⊙ HSLP-1012, ⊙ HS-9050, Nixa ⊙ HLP1012; later released on Music & Arts ⊕ MACD1050, and now available as an MP3 from Classics Online), but this time with the Vienna State Opera Orchestra – the Vienna Philharmonic, which was not available to record under that name. The soloist was Helmut Wobisch, a trumpeter (and Vienna’s only posthorn player) from the Philharmonic, and an early (1933) member of the Nazi party. There were many such “leftover” Nazis in Austria after the war. “Everybody knew everything”, says Sternberg. “It was not talked about. Performances one hundred per cent Nazi were common.” Did Sternberg, as a Jew, feel uncomfortable in these surroundings? “Nobody talked about it”, he says. “There was more hostility towards Americans.” He recalls paying a visit to the director of Austrian Radio, and overhearing a conversation between two secretaries. “Who’s he?” asked the first. “Noch ein unkultivierter Amerikaner”, replied the other – “another uncultured American”.

Despite Sternberg’s eight LPs for the Haydn Society, and the assistance he provided to Landon in pursuing source material, he is given short shrift in Landon’s memoir *Horns in High C* (Thames & Hudson, London, 1999). They fell out around 1960, when Sternberg let Landon know that George Szell’s response to his suggestion that Szell use the Landon Haydn editions was “over my dead body”. According to Sternberg, Landon thought he was responsible for the comment, and cut Sternberg out of his life, always to remain so. Sternberg has written his own memoir of Landon (*Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society*,

Vol. 155 No. 4, December 2011), a fascinating portrait that pays tribute to Landon's efforts but also casts some light on his editing methods that may have caused Szell's rejection.

Several small recording companies turned up in Vienna in the 1950s, keen to expand their catalogues: among them Period, Oceanic (which made its first recordings in Vienna), Seymour Solomon's Bach Guild (later Vanguard), and Westminster. Sternberg advised all of them, suggesting works and performers, and he recorded for all but Westminster. "Every so often the owners of these labels would show up to see how their money was being spent", he says. "But they never interfered."

The Bach Guild

When Sternberg's Haydn Society recordings reached New York Seymour Solomon contacted him – they were old friends from the days when they had played violin on the same stand in the New York University orchestra. Using Solomon's father's money, they organised the Bach Guild, for which Sternberg recorded five cantatas, all in three days in July 1950: *Ich hatte viel bekümmernis*, BWV21 (⊙ BG501), *O ewiges Feuer*, BWV34 and *Ich will den Kreuzstab gerne tragen*, BWV56 (⊙ BG502), and *Schauet doch und sehet*, BWV46 and *Du Hirte Israel, höre*, BWV104 (⊙ BG503), with Rosl Schwaiger, Lorna Sydney, Hugues Cuénod, Alois Pernerstorfer, Karl Mayerhofer (oboe), Kurt Rapf (organ), the Vienna Chamber Choir and the Vienna Symphony (all five cantatas available on Vanguard two-CD set ⊕ ATMCD12412). It was H. V. Greenough, the Haydn Society's recording engineer, and founder and owner of the minor label Technicord Records, who recommended Sternberg engage Cuénod, "part of Nadia Boulanger's gang in Paris who did all the early music".

There were, however, no more Sternberg recordings for the Haydn Society after 1950, which he explains thus: "I was making records for too many other companies. Also, the Haydn Society brought in several new people with money who began taking over with their own ideas. Robbie was helpless".

At the end of 1950 he spent a few weeks with the Mozarteum Orchestra in Salzburg, during which time he recorded for Period, with repertoire

selected by himself: Mozart's *Offertorium pro Festo Sancti Joannis Baptistae*, K72 and *Kyrie* for four voices in D minor (*Münchener*), K341, with the Mozarteum Chorus and Orchestra (⊙ SPLP519, later on Dover ⊙ HCR-5244; works by Schütz with the Stuttgart Choral Society conducted by Hans Grischkat are on Side B). Curiously, some pressings of this recording (with the same Period catalogue number) state the second item as "*Kyrie* for five voices in G major (*Münchener*), K89", conducted by Jonathan Sternberger [sic]. Mozart's Oboe Concerto, K314, played by Marcel Saillet and conducted by Bernard Paumgartner is on Side B.

Immediately before the Mozart recording Sternberg also recorded Schubert's Symphony No. 4 for the private Orfeo label (⊙ LP10), but under the alias Wolfgang Freilassing (after a small town near Salzburg). It was the first of three recordings he made using an alias, some under less than ideal conditions; he says he was making so many recordings at the time that he feared over-exposure.

Sternberg then took the orchestra to Paris, its first post-war tour. After the first concert, on 29 November, Louise Hanson-Dyer, the founder of L'Oiseau-Lyre Records, went backstage and asked Sternberg to record for her. Wasting no time, they recorded Schubert's Symphony No. 5 the next day. It was issued on a ten-inch disc, ⊙ OL-LD19. There were concerts on 1 and 2 December, and they made the world premiere recording of Schubert's Symphony No. 2 (⊙ OL-LD18 – also a ten-inch disc) on the morning of the 2nd and on the 3rd. Neither symphony was part of the tour repertoire.

Louise Hanson-Dyer



Brendel's first recording

Back in Vienna in 1951, Sternberg made a number of concerto recordings. The first, on 25 January, was the premiere recording of Prokofiev's Piano Concerto No. 5 for Period, with Alfred Brendel – the pianist's first-ever recording (Ⓞ SPLP527; Prokofiev's Piano Sonata No. 5, Op. 38, with Hans Graf was on Side B). The orchestra was stated as "Vienna State Orchestra", but was in fact the Vienna State Opera Orchestra, which had never played the work before. It was recorded in at most two sessions in the main hall of the Konzerthaus, and Sternberg recalls that was difficult to set up; it took a long time to get the sound right. Although Brendel was "delighted to have the opportunity", according to Sternberg, he later "wiped it from his life, and never gave a reason". The recording does not appear in Brendel's online discography: the pianist himself says that he did not compile the discography, and though he remembers Sternberg as "a very pleasant man ... I do not sorely miss the mention of this recording, as you can imagine from reading the [circumstances], it was not marvellous". The recording, however, had an extended LP life on several labels, including Nixa (Ⓞ PLP-527), Vox Turnabout (Ⓞ TV-S 34543), and Everest (Ⓞ 3385), was included in *Young Brendel: The Vox Years* (Vox six-CD set ⊕ CD6X 3601, currently available only as MP3) and is currently available in *Alfred Brendel: The Complete Vox, Turnabout and Vanguard Solo Recordings* (Brilliant Classics 35-disc set ⊕ 93761).

This was followed by a recording with the Vienna Symphony of two Mozart E flat piano concertos,

Alfred Brendel



No. 14, K449 and No. 22, K482, with 23-year-old Paul Badura-Skoda, one of the "very talented kids" Sternberg knew from the small and mostly expatriate musical community that congregated at the Café Mozart – "Everybody knew everybody". It appeared on Oceanic (Ⓞ OCS22, later Olympic (Ⓞ 8104; No. 22 was also issued in the UK on Classics Club (Ⓞ CCHNX758. Sternberg also recorded Handel concertos for Oceanic (Ⓞ OCS25, later Olympic (Ⓞ 8119), with the Chamber Orchestra of the Vienna State Opera: Oboe Concertos Nos. 3 and 4 with the Philharmonic's principle oboe Hans Kamesch, and two concertos for organ and strings (No. 13, *The Cuckoo and the Nightingale* and No. 14) with the 23-year-old Gustav Leonhardt. Sternberg made this recording under the alias Ernst Kuyler.

In mid-1951 he recorded the most ambitious work to date, Rossini's *Stabat Mater*, chosen as always because it hadn't been previously recorded. The soloists were Ilona Steingruber, Dagmar Hermann, Paul Schoeffler and Anton Dermota, with the Vienna Academy Choir and the Vienna State Opera Orchestra. It was made for Oceanic (Ⓞ OCS24); it also appeared on Classics Club (Ⓞ X751 and on Olympic (Ⓞ 9108 (the cover of which states the conductor's name as Jonathan Steinberg), and it later enjoyed a long life on Saga XIX5216. Later in the year he recorded Haydn's *Harmoniemesse* (Period (Ⓞ SPLP541), under the alias Alex Larsen (Larsen on the back cover). Two of his soloists were contracted elsewhere and also appeared under aliases: soprano "Ilse Katschinka" who was really Wilma Lipp, and tenor "Hans Loeffler" who was Waldemar Kmentt (the other soloists were Margarita Kenney and Keith Engen). The original LP cover states the orchestra as the Danish National Symphony Orchestra, over which was pasted a sticker reading "Orchestra Society of Vienna"; it was in fact the Vienna State Opera Orchestra.

At about the same time Sternberg recorded the Haydn (in D) and Saint-Saëns (in A minor) cello concertos, with Maurice Gendron, for Oceanic (Ⓞ OCS23, Olympic (Ⓞ 8109]. The musicians were again from the State Opera Orchestra, who showed up at the studio after playing in a (Vienna Philharmonic) concert and recorded from midnight until four in the morning.

Also in this year Sternberg recorded Telemann's comic opera *Pimpinone*, again for Oceanic



Stell Andersen



Teresa Stich-Randall

(© OCS27, Olympic © 9107), with soprano Helen Fuchs, baritone Erich Lassner, and the Salzburg String Quartet. Curiously, Sternberg is erroneously listed on the cover as the harpsichordist – accuracy of LP covers was evidently not a priority in the 1950s.

Stell Andersen

The year 1952 saw fewer recordings, and all were made with (and financed by) the Norwegian-American pianist Stell Andersen (1897-1989), whom Sternberg remembers as “well trained ... She was never a big name though in no way amateur”. Within a few days in April they recorded (with the State Opera Orchestra) the Grieg Concerto, Beethoven’s Concerto No. 5, *A Set of Pieces* by Charles Ives and Milhaud’s *Fantaisie pastorale*, which Andersen had premiered in 1939 with the composer conducting. The latter two works were issued on a ten-inch disc by Oceanic (© OCS31), but the Grieg and Beethoven were never published because other recordings of the works were already available and they were thought to have no commercial possibilities. About 30 years later Stell Andersen authorised putting them on LP for private distribution only, and they were re-engineered by David Beach and Bill McIver and pressed by McIver Recordings.

Sternberg made two final recordings in Vienna, for Le Club français du Disque, both

with the Vienna Academy Choir and State Opera Orchestra: the first was Haydn’s *Nelson Mass* in 1953 (© HF-1, also on Musidisc © RC-603; currently available on CRQ’s own CRQ Editions label CRQ CD29), with Teresa Stich-Randall, Mona Paulee, Rudolf Schock and Gottlob Frick, and the second was Bach’s cantata *Ich hatte viel Bekümmernis*, BWV21 (© HF-31, also Musidisc © RC 674), recorded in 1955, with Stich-Randall, Nathalie Narischkine, “Helmut Loeffler” (Waldemar Kmentt again) and Paul Schoeffler.

In 1957 Sternberg met the artist Ursula Hertz in Brussels and married her the same year. After a year in Canada as Music Director of the Halifax Symphony Orchestra (1957-58), he moved to Brussels. He was Music Director of the Royal Flemish Opera (1962-66), while conducting guest performances across Europe, from Oslo and London to Ankara, and (in 1962) with the Orquesta Sinfónica Nacional in Buenos Aires. He gave the European premieres of a number of works, including Charles Ives’s Symphony No. 2 (Vienna State Opera Orchestra, 1952), the Menotti Violin Concerto and the Bernstein *Serenade* (with Fredell Lack and the Berlin RIAS Orchestra, 1962), and world premiere performances of Ned Rorem’s Symphony No. 1 (Vienna Symphony, 1951) and László Lajtha’s Symphony No. 6 (Brussels Radio Orchestra, 1960).



Peter Rybar

There were no more commercial recordings after the Vienna years, however, except for a 1965 recording for Composers Recordings of American composer Leslie Bassett's *Variations for Orchestra* (© SD203, reissued on Ⓛ CD677), which won the Pulitzer Prize for Music in 1966. It was made with the Zürich Radio Symphony Orchestra and financed by the composer.

Several of Sternberg's recordings are to be reissued by the Pierian Recording Society of Austin, Texas, using (amongst other material) Haydn Society tapes to be supplied by Music & Arts Programs of America, the current owner of the rights; sadly, however, not all the tapes are in usable condition. Karl Miller, founder of Pierian, reports that an early reissue will be the *Nelson Mass*. Pierian have already issued a live concert recording (Ⓛ PIR0045, also MP3 format) from Winterthur on 31 October 1956, of Tchaikovsky's Sixth Symphony and the Stravinsky Violin Concerto with Peter Rybar. Stravinsky was the scheduled conductor but he fell ill; Rybar knew that Sternberg was in Zürich at the time and he was brought in to conduct the concert on just one rehearsal. Sternberg recalls, "Nobody told the recording people that Stravinsky was sick, and so it was recorded professionally, and I managed to get a copy of the tape".

The later career

Sternberg returned to New York in 1966 as the Music Director of the Harkness Ballet, in the time of Agnes de Mille, Alvin Ailey and Anton Dolin,

and undertook extensive tours with it in Europe, and North and South America. From there he went to Atlanta as conductor of the Atlanta Opera and Ballet (1968-69), and then he turned largely to teaching. The reason, he says, was because of a conversation he had a party at Erich Leinsdorf's house. Sternberg remarked to Leinsdorf's sons that they must be proud of their father, and they replied that they hardly knew him because he was almost never there when they were growing up. Sternberg, with two children under ten, "certainly [took] seriously their comment and indeed made the choice which I shall never regret".

He became Visiting Professor of Conducting at the Eastman School in Rochester, NY (1969-71) and then Professor of Conducting at Temple University's College of Music in Philadelphia from 1971 until his retirement in 1989. His performances there included several world premieres, including *Music for Chamber Orchestra* by David Diamond (1976), *A Lincoln Address* and *Night Dances* by Vincent Persichetti (1977), and Stanisław Skrowaczewski's *Ricercari notturni* (1978). Following his retirement he was a lecturer at the Chestnut Hill College for several years, and was the Artistic and Music Director of Philadelphia's Bach Festival 2004-08. He also remained active as a teacher at conducting master classes, as a competition judge, and as a raconteur of distinction. From 1991 until 1996 he was vice-president of the Conductors' Guild, which awarded him its Lifetime Achievement Award in 2009 and the Max Rudolf Award in 2010. He was also awarded an honorary doctorate by Philadelphia's Cabrini College in 2012. Now aged 93, Sternberg continues to live in the leafy Philadelphia suburb of Chestnut Hill.

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