

Birgit Nilsson Centenary 2018

Nilsson Autobiography Re-Issued in 2018

Excerpted from the original 2008 Review

By Andrew Farkas



At home in Sweden, 1977

Whatever the actual circumstances under which the text was born—writing, dictating, or taping—the narrative voice of Nilsson is consistent throughout and her well-chosen words read as if captured while relaxing in her armchair. Why did she decide to commit her life story to paper? Among the four reasons she enumerates in the Preface, the most convincing is her third: “I want to forestall the coming of the day when some

nasty little writer will cook up a brew of lies about la Nilsson.”

Predictably and reassuringly, the book is teeming with details: facts, names, stories, incidents, vignettes, anecdotes, quips and comebacks. A list of career milestones, a discography, and a detailed index facilitate pin-pointing information of particular interest. The life story is chronological, but the career is cleverly and quite originally grouped by city, theatrical venue, and on occasion, centered around a key person. We thus have chapters on Stockholm, Vienna, Buenos Aires, Bayreuth, and Italy, along with one each devoted to Rudolf Bing and Franco Corelli. Additional chapters deal with recordings, fans and fanatics, and there is a passing or extended

mention of the large number of colleagues and friends who enriched her life.

The tone is alternately serious, humorous, even tongue-in-cheek, and in recounting incidents pleasant or painful, performances successful or not, colleagues helpful or less so, teachers effective or not, there is an underlying honesty: a conscious absence of self-aggrandizement and a straightforward statement of facts rather than a settling of accounts. She is generous

with praise of others where such compliments are earned, and does not hesitate to recount slights she sustained when they pertain to her career. Especially revealing is the vignette of a critic whose inexcusable rudeness earned him the dubious distinction to be singled out by name.

The book is personable, direct, written in a style of welcome immediacy, the first person singular speaks directly to the reader. At the book’s end, by the time one’s mind keeps returning to the lingering question: “and what about her husband?” Mme Nilsson devotes the closing chapter to her life’s partner, Bertil Niklasson. With that loving tribute, she ends her memoirs on a high note, pardon the pun. Her happy marriage of five decades undoubtedly contributed to the solidity of her career. The security and contentment of domestic happiness must have served as the foundation on which she built an ever-ascending long and successful career of the first order.

...For those with a casual interest in the world of opera during the time span of Nilsson’s career, [this book] will be a source of reading pleasure, and for those who want to know in detail the life story and artistic accomplishments of one of the greatest Wagnerian sopranos of the postwar decades, the book is a must. ■

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Birgit Nilsson: La Nilsson, My Life in Opera Boston: Originally Published in the United States by Northeastern University Press, 2007