

BOOK REVIEW

## George Jellinek: My Road to Radio and "The Vocal Scene"

McFarland 2006. \$35.



George Jellinek and Andrew Farkas at the October 2002 JBS conference in New York City. George had just led a panel with Licia Albanese, Lucine Amara, Regina Resnik, Robert and Marion Merrill, Anders and Lars Björling on their favorite memories of Jussi.

The entry in McFarland's sales catalogue of books on the performing arts begins with the statement: "George Jellinek, announcer of the beloved WQXR radio show 'The Vocal Scene'..." For those who have listened to Mr. Jellinek's programs over three decades, the statement could just as well have begun: "Beloved George Jellinek, announcer of the WQXR radio show 'The Vocal Scene'..." That might have been inappropriate in a publisher's catalog, but for his thousands of listeners and fans nationwide, it would seem to be a fair statement. George Jellinek was the moderator of a singers' panel at our 2002 conference

in New York City, and those of you who had the opportunity to meet and converse with him would probably agree with such a description.

Now, nearing the end of his ninth decade, George decided to set down his life story. It could have been at the urging of friends, perhaps prompted by a sense of obligation to his daughter and granddaughter, a desire to revisit his days good and bad, or just the wish to share his experiences. Whatever the motivation, the reader is invited along on a fascinating journey. It is written in his customary easy, elegant, conversational style, the narrative is well paced, the facts and details informative, and

the anecdotes entertaining. If you are interested in George Jellinek, you will be glad to accompany him retracing his steps from cradle to retirement.

The story begins in Budapest where George was born in 1919, at the end of the first world war. The Jellineks were a middle class Jewish family, his father prospered in the restaurant business. By 1939, with the gathering political clouds, the elder Jellinek realized that war was imminent. Not wanting to have his son serve in the army or worse, he made arrangements for George to leave Hungary in April 1939 for Cuba, the country closest to the United States that would accept him. With exceptional luck, George sailed on the last European ship that landed there undisturbed. With the outbreak of war, the United States admitted on the Hungarian quota those already in a Latin American country, and thus with his two closest friends he landed in New York City on March 17, 1941. The family that received them was celebrating their daughter Hedy's 18th birthday with a wonderful Hungarian dinner, and in one of those life-is-stranger-than-a-movie-script twists, the celebrant eventually became Mrs. George Jellinek. In 1942 George was inducted in the U.S. Army and after successfully completing officer candidate school, he was sent to Europe where he had a series of adventures and some significant involvement in the war effort.

Given his exceptional memory for names, places and dates, the narrative of his return to the U.S. and the specifics of his American life are simply too detailed to recount here. Nor is that the objective of the present appreciation of his memoirs. The foregoing brief outline of his background serves mainly to invoke a prospective reader's interest in finding out how an émigré could arrive in the United States, work

hard, succeed, and flourish in the field of radio and music. George's activities and pursuits were richer and a lot more varied than "just" his affiliation with WQXR, even if those years constitute the dominant portion of his career. The fascination is in the range and variety of all he had lived through, all he accomplished, and all he can look back on with justifiable pride. In addition to his radio work, he has been a prolific author of many articles and three books (writing the first full length biography of Maria Callas in 1960); he has made numerous presentations, given lectures and delivered radio essays as part of the intermission features for the Met; participated on panels; was a frequent guest on the Texaco Opera Quiz; received numerous awards and recognition, and so on, and so forth—as Yul Brynner's King of Siam would say. In short and staying with the theme, the book is "getting to know you" George Jellinek.

An online reviewer of "*My Road*" voiced his disappointment that "only on page 132 [of 243] we get to the heart of the matter," adding the infantile accusation that "Mr. Jellinek is an expert at name dropping." The implicit incomprehension of the essence and objective of this autobiographical narrative is disheartening. Were Mr. Jellinek indeed a name dropper, with 1878 "Vocal Scene" programs alone, not to mention his "First Hearing" and other programs, along with his participation on many expert panels and celebratory events in addition to his innumerable social/professional contacts, the names he could have rightfully dropped would exceed a small-town telephone book. Instead, past and beyond the persons who played a key role in his life, he judiciously singles out the memorable subjects of his interviews, focusing on those about whom he has something

special to say. Had there been unlimited space at his command, I am sure he would have mentioned more, a lot more, including direct quotes from the conversations with his guests. The one that comes to mind I wish he had cited is a comment Renata Tebaldi made in her two-part program in 1995. When the discussion turned to her recordings, she said that only now, with time to listen to them, does she understand what all the fuss was about. A priceless statement because it was made not boastfully but in utterly charming sweet innocence.

Well then, gentle reader, if you expect to read one anecdote after another about opera, singers, celebrities and other prominent people, turn elsewhere for entertainment. If, on the other hand you want to gain insight into the remarkably rich, productive, and successful life of an erudite cosmopolite, a dedicated professional who made a name for himself in a difficult field, someone who earned his living in and with his hobby: music and opera, and someone whose life's work is a rich legacy that can be revisited in printed or archived format, then this book is a must. In the process you will get to know a kind and gentle man with strength and determination, character and principles, well aware of his accomplishments yet modest. When the story ends and you set the book down, you will be pleased to know him a lot better.

George has recently become eighty-eight years of age, this past December. Let me lead the line of well-wishers: Happy Birthday George! And thank you for giving us the gift of your life story.

— Andrew Farkas

## CD REVIEW RECORDING OF THE MONTH

# A Worthy *Il Trovatore* Unearthed by Ward Marston

Giuseppe Verdi (1813–1901)

*Il trovatore* (1853)

Stella Roman (soprano) – Leonora;  
Leonard Warren (baritone) – Il Conte di Luna;  
Margaret Harshaw (mezzo) – Azucena;  
Jussi Björling (tenor) – Manrico;  
Giacomo Vaghi (bass) – Ferrando;  
Lodovico Oliviero (tenor) – Ruiz;  
Inge Manski (soprano) – Inez;  
John Baker (bass) – Gypsy  
Metropolitan Opera Orchestra and Chorus/Emil Cooper  
rec. live broadcast, Metropolitan Opera, New York, 27 December 1947  
Audio restoration by Ward Marston  
WEST HILL RADIO ARCHIVES  
WHRA-6010 [68:57 + 61:25]

There still pop up more or less sensational historic documents in the field of recorded opera. This 60-year-old broadcast from the Metropolitan Opera was not unknown—it has even been in circulation for quite some time among collectors but then in such inferior sound that it gave very little pleasure. Now it appears, in more than acceptable sound, where both chorus and orchestra are amazingly well reproduced in a close recording. The solo voices are so life-like that they are almost touchable. Whether new original tapes have been found is not made clear in the booklet but the name Ward Marston appears on the back of the jewel case and in the booklet in small print. Music-lovers