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Beyond the Handsomeness: A Biography of Thomas Schippers, by Nancy Spada. Foreword by Steven Monder. Irvine, CA: Universal Publishers, 2023 [review]

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Book Review

Beyond the Handsomeness: A Biography of Thomas Schippers, by Nancy Spada. Foreword by Steven Monder. Irvine, CA: Universal Publishers, 2023.

xxxvi, 128 pp. ISBN 9781627344401 (paper), \$34.95. Figures, discography, bibliography, index.

Back in 1970, music-minded Ohioans like me mourned George Szell's passing, which had ended his brilliant tenure as director of the Cleveland Orchestra, one of America's "top five." But we were equally aware of the future-minded news from nearby Cincinnati: the stylish young couple Thomas and Nonie Schippers had arrived, bringing to the Queen City's orchestra—predating Cleveland's—something of the Bernstein-Kennedy glamor of a decade earlier.

Nancy Spada's new Schippers biography offers the English-language reader a welcome account of the whole of Schippers's career, filling a definite need; its length of perhaps 45,000 words is a great advancement upon a Wikipedia article that's, regrettably, shorter than this review. Her book has an apt title, columnist Leonard Lyons having once described Schippers as "one of the handsomest men in the business." "I've had movie offers," the conductor told *Life* in 1963—reportedly including what became Dirk Bogarde's 1960 Liszt role in *Song Without End*. Schippers headshots appeared on several of his commercial LPs, and the 1969 Columbia-Odyssey reissue of his Mussorgsky *Pictures* with the New York Philharmonic had eleven of them.

Born in southwest Michigan in 1930, Schippers excelled in his youth as a young pianist and organist, leading to teenage enrollment at the Curtis Institute, with studies also at Juilliard and Yale. His work as a pianist-accompanist led to conducting Greenwich Village's Lemonade Opera troupe in the late 1940s. In New York he made a strong impression upon Menotti, and vocal coaching quickly led to conducting for *The Consul* (1950), after which Schippers's conducting career gained steam. His national presence expanded by leaps and bounds upon his appearance as conductor of Menotti's *Amahl and the Night Visitors* as broadcast by NBC-TV for Christmas 1951 and Easter 1952. The opus is said to be the first opera commissioned for television, and it was author Spada's first (video) encounter with Schippers's work. Soon to follow for him were engagements with New York City Opera, where he promptly joined their roster and led the 1954 premiere of Copland's *The Tender Land*. The following year, the Metropolitan Opera took him under contract as its most youthful conductor in nearly 70 years. Early concert-platform engagements included 1952's

with the NBC Symphony and Summer 1953's Lewisohn Stadium appearance, the first of sixty-some with the New York Philharmonic; by 1955 he had joined the orchestra's guest-conductor roster. Soon to follow would be the establishment of the Spoleto Festival with Menotti, and a truly international presence as operatic and symphonic conductor. Schippers led the 1966 premiere of Barber's *Antony and Cleopatra* to open the Metropolitan Opera House at Lincoln Center, and only three years later—still in his thirties—was announced as the new music director of the Cincinnati Symphony.

Musician-researcher Spada's storytelling tone is personal rather than impersonal, reading not at all like a cut-down dissertation. The widow of Italian pianist-scholar Pietro Spada, she recalls in her preface a first meeting and conversation at length with Schippers some sixty years ago in Spoleto. The whole of the book is then informed by their acquaintance, but most of the first-person remembrances are by others—several now deceased—including Earl Wild, Ned Rorem, Jane Marsh and Martina Arroyo, fellow conductors Peter Stafford Wilson and Carmon DeLeone, and then Schippers's brother, Henry, and the conductor's personal assistant. The book's generous foreword is by another who knew Schippers personally: Steven Monder served as the Cincinnati's Symphony's president for more than three decades, and he worked with the conductor during the last years of Schippers's Cincinnati tenure.

The book's organization is not strictly chronological, with its six chapters organized mostly around his professional milestones: (1) Precocious in Portage [Michigan]; (2) Opera; (3) The Ducal Fief [Menotti and Spoleto]; (4) New York Philharmonic; (5) Marriage; (6) Cincinnati. I was especially delighted by this volume's illustrations, nearly forty in number. Most are photographs, with the whole being anything *but* a routine presentation of commonplace press photos. Spada has tapped many institutional collections, the Schippers family, other individuals, and her own collection of images; this is one of the book's distinctions, a real asset. Only a fraction of the *Beyond the Handsomeness* illustrations turn up using Google Image Search, which is arguably today's barometer of well-circulated photographs; that's further evidence of the author's special effort with these fine complements to her storytelling.

When we hear directly from Mr. Schippers in *Handsomeness*, quotes are mostly from interviews rather than letters or writings, and so the one typewritten document reproduced is worth a few minutes with a magnifying glass: Schippers, following his initial two seasons in Cincinnati, is to begin teaching conducting at the conservatory, and this one-page memo to students he'll soon meet in the classroom shares his preliminary aims for the course. It's a welcome opportunity to survey his thinking about the *teaching* of conducting.

A sampling of the book may be read online in the author's recent (also pub. 2023) article, "Thomas Schippers in Cincinnati: A Forgotten Episode in the Life of a Conductor

Renowned for Opera.”¹ The essay’s first pages summarize Schippers’s career; the remainder is a lightly rewritten version of the book’s concluding chapter—though neither essay nor book cite the other. For *Handsomeness* readers curious to learn more, there are more comprehensive discographies online—to which Ms. Spada helpfully refers her readers. For a sense of Schippers in his time, one might consult two essays available online: William Weaver’s “Crescendo from Kalamazoo” (*High Fidelity*, June 1958) or *Opera News*’s “Long Strides” interview (December 1, 1962). The Schipperses’ glamorous life in Cincinnati that Spada describes is preserved in stunning color in “World H.Q., Ohio” (*Vogue*, August 15, 1972). Recordings of Schippers’s work—commercial and otherwise—may be sourced online, and the intrepid YouTube searcher can view a brief clip of Schippers rehearsing with Eileen Farrell (*Die Walküre* in Cincinnati) and listen to the 1960s Angel Records promotional LP where he discusses his recent two-disc *La Bohème*.

Conductors of Schippers’s era had their careers promoted over the airwaves and in print, not online; ambitious conductors had publicists, but not websites. Still, classical musicians weren’t a rarity in the mainstream media, and Johnny Carson’s *Tonight Show* of a different network-TV era brought artists like Robert Merrill, Marilyn Horne, Luciano Pavarotti, Patrice Munsel, Plácido Domingo, Risë Stevens, and Teresa Stratas into America’s homes. The year of Schippers’s passing, 1977, also saw Maria Callas taken too soon at 53, and a reminder of a passing era was the loss of another conductor whose first, twenty-something post had been in Cincinnati: Leopold Stokowski. Had lung cancer not taken Schippers’s life so early, he might have amassed as many decades on the podium as Stokowski, with Cincinnati becoming only the first of several permanent posts.

Nancy Spada has brought her subject—and classical-music’s midcentury doings—to life, both for older readers who can recall the era and for younger (and future) readers, all of whom will benefit from her personal experiences, many contacts in the business, devoted scholarship, and engaging writing. There is apparently no Thomas Schippers Society to preserve his legacy, making this book that much more welcome and important as a study of his life and career.

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1. Nancy Spada, “Thomas Schippers in Cincinnati: A Forgotten Episode in the Life of a Conductor Renowned for Opera,” *Music & Musical Performance*, Issue 3, article 4 (February 2023): 1-20.
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