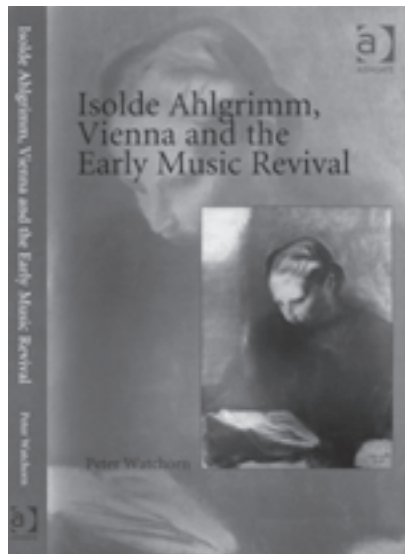


Harpichord News

by Larry Palmer



Book jacket photograph: Portrait of Isolde Ahlgrimm by Josef Dobrowsky (1889–1964)

A Love Letter to Ille: Peter Watchorn's Ahlgrimm Biography

Isolde Ahlgrimm (1914–1995), known as “Ille” to her close friends, was physically diminutive and personally self-effacing. She was also a woman of strong musical convictions, a prime mover in the 20th-century revival of the harpsichord and fortepiano, and one of the outstanding teachers ever to be encountered. Now, after a lengthy gestation period, her life story is available at last in Peter Watchorn's book *Isolde Ahlgrimm, Vienna and the Early Music Revival* (Ashgate Publishing Limited: ISBN 978-0-7546-5787-3). The wait has been worth it! Dr. Watchorn has written a lucid, loving, and memorable prose picture of this pioneering Viennese figure, placing her, correctly, in the forefront of the early music revival, and documenting her contributions as one of the period's leading keyboard artists.

Firmly based on interviews with the great harpsichordist, this is fascinating biography, moving from the Ahlgrimm family's close connection to Johannes Brahms and Isolde's formative study with Austrian composer Franz Schmidt and esteemed pianist and pedagogue Emil von Sauer, to the establishment of an extensive series of house concerts (*Konzerte für Kenner und Liebhaber*) with her husband, the instrument collector Erich Fiala, and the ultimate breakup of their marriage. Particularly moving is the picture of those harrowing years of Nazi hegemony in Vienna, including Ille's account of her husband's incarceration. Career highlights include Ahlgrimm's monumental series of recordings for Philips, comprising nearly the complete harpsichord works of J. S. Bach, and the story, in her own words, of the association and friendship with Richard Strauss and the genesis of a



Ille at a recording session (Larry Palmer collection)

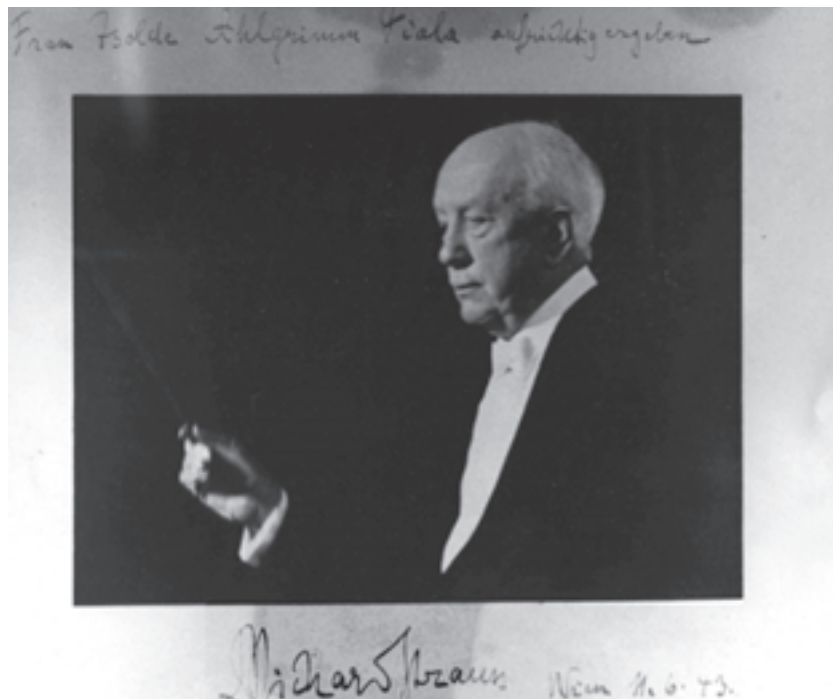
unique page for harpsichord solo, created “for her exclusive concert use” by the master composer.

Additionally, this 264-page book contains Ahlgrimm's complete discography; her own chronology of the concert series (in German, with English translation following); a list of her publications (as well as a complete text of the valedictory lecture “Current Trends in Performance of Baroque Music” [first published in Howard Schott's English translation in THE DIAPASON], re-transcribed by Mahan Esfahani, with musical examples uniformly set by Geoffrey Burgess); and Kim Kasling's 1977 DIAPASON article “Harpichord Lessons for the Beginner—à la Isolde Ahlgrimm.”

With more than thirty photographs from Ahlgrimm's personal collection, a graceful foreword by Penelope Crawford and short preface from longtime friend Virginia Pleasants, this is a beautiful and indispensable volume, well worth its substantial price (\$99.95; online orders from <www.ashgate.com> may receive a discount). Even the book's type-face (BACH Musicological Font by Yo Tomita) would almost certainly have delighted Ille, who during my student days, often referred to herself as “the Widow Bach” because she spent so much of her time practicing and playing JSB's music.

Richard Strauss: Suite aus Capriccio for Harpsichord (with concert ending) in the arrangement by Isolde Ahlgrimm, edited by Rudolf Scholz. Schott RSV 9049 [ISMN M-50118-000-4] (\$22.95).

Isolde Ahlgrimm received numerous requests from harpsichordists who wished to play this near-legendary single Strauss solo work for their instrument. She was consistently adamant in her refusals: after all, the composer *had* inscribed the two-page autograph of the work's concert ending with these words “Für Isolde Ahlgrimm-Fiala/ als Eigentum und zum alleinigen Konzertgebrauch/ überlassen. [For Isolde Ahlgrimm-Fiala, given as her



Strauss's autographed photograph, displayed with pride in Ahlgrimm's Strudlhofgasse kitchen

own property, with exclusive right of use in concert.] /s/ Dr. Richard Strauss.”

I was one of those who requested such permission in 1986, after she had retired from playing. Through the years she had made it evident that she was not being stingy with the work itself: she sent me a Xerox of the autograph ending, a complete facsimile of the original three-movement dance suite from the opera (as scored for violin, cello and harpsichord), with her fragmentary penciled “arrangement” notated below. She had, additionally, provided a taped copy of her unreleased recording of the work (made for Philips). But, just at the point at which we were discussing legal matters, Ille was overwhelmed by a trio of permission requests from Frau Alice Strauss, Hedwig Bilgram, and Professor Kohler of the Richard Strauss Institute in Munich. Better than upsetting all these important people, wrote Ahlgrimm, is that both arrangement and her ending “sleep the long sleep of libraries.” And that was that.

As an opera devotee and particular admirer of Strauss's music, I determined that the best solution to this impasse would be to make my own arrangement based on the piano-vocal score of the opera, with a hint of the Strauss concert ending: the first four measures (readily available in the Müller von Asow thematic catalog), a brief bridge passage, and a “reminiscence” of Strauss's final four measures (which I had in the Xerox from Ahlgrimm). These measures, as written by the composer, are not completely playable anyway, since they transcend (in two places) the top note found on ANY harpsichord. (Earlier, in measures 19–20 the composer had asked for high G#, A, and B in the right hand, while notating a sforzando/crescendo for the left!)

My solution has worked well for me, and I strongly recommend it to others. Now, with the publication of Ahlgrimm's arrangement (insofar as it could be de-

ciphered) a dedicated player is able to compare individual solutions with those chosen by the Viennese harpsichordist. As for frequently changing registrations, Ahlgrimm felt that it would be of little use to share her choices since they were for a German mass-produced harpsichord with pedals—an instrument, she pointed out, increasingly difficult to find.

Reading through the newly published score, I am struck with the strong feeling that Ille, coming directly from the opera's Vienna premiere performances, attempted a too-literal transcription of Strauss's many notes, thereby making the work both technically demanding and frequently unidiomatic for a plucked keyboard instrument. In her arrangement, many of the cello lines are placed an octave higher than written, creating close duets with the violin part, but leaving an empty stratum below, passages frankly better placed in the piano-vocal score. As for the composer's ending, I long ago came to agree with Ille's idea that “it should live the long sleep of libraries.” These pages do not add to the composer's stature, but serve as reaffirmation for his love of instrumental color (he used harpsichord several times in orchestral and operatic scores). The concert ending shows that he regarded the instrument as a plucked piano—one that definitely suffers from the lack of a damper pedal.

Editor Scholz's task, not an easy one, has been accomplished carefully. For every case in which I thought a note was wrong, comparison with sources proved his reading correct. (However, in the second dance, the *Gigue*, I still think the final soprano A in measure 20 sounds better as a G, even though all scores agree on the A). Perhaps the most interesting observation in Scholz's “Notes” concerns the ending (labeled *Cadenza*): Scholz writes that in bar four Ahlgrimm corrected Strauss's bass line [a-c#-e, b-d-f#] with a penciled notation [a-b-d, c#-d-e]—and that she used this version for her recording.

Isolde Ahlgrimm loved this piece, though she was unhappy about its difficulties (especially prior to concerts in which she played it!). I first heard it as she prepared for a performance at Vienna's Auersperg Palace in August 1964. Several subsequent hearings occurred during her visits to the United States, including several in Dallas; concert performances occurring after 1965 did not make the list printed in Scholz's commentary.

For now, lovers of Strauss's music and admirers of Ahlgrimm's artistry may appreciate having this printed memento, but certainly will continue to hope that the recording of her “own private Strauss” may eventually be made available. ■

Comments or news items for these pages are always welcome. Please address them to Dr. Larry Palmer, Division of Music, Southern Methodist University, Dallas, TX 75275; <lpalmer@smu.edu>.

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