

NILSSON COLLECTED

George Loomis surveys the new releases celebrating the centenary of Birgit Nilsson

Birgit Nilsson would have turned 100 on May 17. The Sweden-based Birgit Nilsson Foundation has kept the celebratory spirit going with its award in October of a Birgit Nilsson Prize to the soprano Nina Stemme and by engineering the issuance of the items under review here, a veritable multimedia salute to this incomparable singer: a 12lb coffee-table book¹, an 89-minute documentary², and a 31-CD set of live recordings³. (Not to be outdone, Universal Music has issued *La Nilsson*, a 79-CD set of all her recordings originally issued on the Decca, Philips and DG labels, including her famous studio recordings of Wagner and Strauss conducted by Georg Solti.)

The 711-page book—*Birgit Nilsson 100: An Homage*—published and subsidized by the foundation, includes reminiscences by 26 colleagues, administrators, critics and other professionals; a copious selection of photographs, with special emphasis on her ten most famous roles; and a treasure trove of reprints of reviews, interviews, articles of appreciation and obituaries. The documentary—*Birgit Nilsson: A League of Her Own*—similarly addresses the rise of a farm girl from South Sweden to stardom as one of the most acclaimed singers of her century, but its format and the inclusion of priceless footage of the singer make it complementary rather than duplicative. Overall the picture emerges of a woman who was far more than a vocal phenomenon—an artist of intelligence and musicality (she had perfect pitch and a photographic memory) who was unpretentious in her personal life, knew the value of her artistry, was a dependable colleague, and had a keen, even wicked sense of humour.

Inevitably, one encounters myriad variants as people strive to describe the same thing: her greatness as a singer. As Richard Gaddes put it, ‘the overused clichés seem all too accurate’. (Quotations and other attributions are taken from the book or the documentary.) J.B. Steane’s comment that ‘big’ is not the word to describe her voice may surprise many; he favoured ‘concentrated’, noting that she produced ‘pure, concentrated, shiny tone’. Nilsson, whose phenomenal technique was essentially self-taught, spoke of a need to ‘slenderize’ her voice. This she did by, among other things, varying her repertoire. ‘I’m very thankful to Verdi and Mozart that I could keep my voice for so long. If I had sung Wagner all the time since I started, my voice would have been so big and dark that I couldn’t have lasted.’

In an amusing reminiscence her former publicist, the late Edgar Vincent, supplies factual background for oft-told anecdotes. No, Franco Corelli didn’t bite her for holding

¹ *Birgit Nilsson 100: An Homage*
711pp. \$100. ISBN 978-3-903153-92-9

² *Birgit Nilsson: A League of Her Own*
A documentary by Thomas Voigt and Wolfgang Wunderlich. C Major/Unitel DVD 800008 (89 minutes)

³ *Birgit Nilsson: The Great Live Recordings*
Duke Bluebeard's Castle, Fidelio, Turandot, Salome, Elektra, Die Frau ohne Schatten, Lohengrin, Tristan und Isolde, Die Walküre, Wagner excerpts. Various opera houses and conductors. Sony 88985392322 (31 CDs)