



OPERA NEWS: You were at Bayreuth, I believe, between 1954 and 1970. How has the festival changed since then?

BIRGIT NILSSON: It's of course a sad story, because singers are starting out at Bayreuth nowadays. Earlier, you had to be very much prepared, you had to know what you were doing when you came to Bayreuth. Now they call it "Werkstatt Bayreuth" [Bayreuth workshop]. On the other hand, we are living in a time where money speaks. Famous artists don't want to sacrifice themselves for two months for real rehearsals and all the performances, because it pays very little, the fees are very low. So the festival probably has difficulty getting big names. If they get some big names, they will of course come to just the performances, not doing the rehearsals [where] they lose the money.



ON: Is it fair to say you were more comfortable with Wieland Wagner's productions than with Wolfgang Wagner's?

BN: Not really. Wieland Wagner was a genius. You cannot compare Wieland to his brother as far as artists go. But Wolfgang had good sides too. He was a very good director for economical, practical things. I did some performances for him, too. He was good, but he was not Wieland Wagner. Wieland was really fantastic. He [knew] immediately when he saw a singer what he could get out of her or him. He molded the role for them. He was like a tailor. He was not like somebody who makes a hat, and if the hat is not fitting you have to cut off the ears!

ON: There's now quite a lot of turmoil about the changing of festival directors there.

BN: Wolfgang has a daughter with a lot of experience. She has been in the theater. But she does not get along with Wolfgang or speak with his new wife. I guess Wolfgang wants to keep Bayreuth until his youngest daughter can take over.

ON: Some people think it's time for them to do operas by other composers than Richard Wagner.

BN: Why? People are coming from all over the world just to be in the temple, and I think that would take away from the love of Wagner. If you can get stage directors with enough imagination and musicality, I'm sure it can go on forever. But to find those is more and more difficult. Most directors today only want to profile themselves. They have no idea about musicality, about Wagner's music or anything. They put up something that is completely against the author's will, and the composer's, and the music. The first question for one to ask a stage director is that he should follow the composer's will and nothing else. As soon as he wants to profile himself only, say goodbye to him, because it doesn't make any sense. A stage director can never take away from a great composer without making a big damage. And I think there have been so many damages today, they should be sued.

ON: What do you feel should happen?

BN: I think the conductors should put their feet down, because they try very hard with the orchestra to interpret the will of the composer. Then something onstage happens that has nothing to do with the music. I don't know how our conductors are feeling today, it must be horrible. People are too weak, they are afraid they are being looked at as if they were from the Stone Age if they try to say, "You cannot behave like that to composers." Nowadays, normal acting with musical [insight and] penetration, people look at that like old opera, they want something else. That is not accepted anymore.



ON: There's also much less built scenery, much more projections and scrims. Is this a problem for vocal projection?

BN: It could be difficult if you don't have enough backdrop. I remember *Elektra* at the Metropolitan was very difficult, because it was open at the back. The sound went just as much backwards as forwards. And when Karajan was stage director, he had lots of scrims. I remember once I was singing in *Die Walküre* at the Metropolitan, and I had three scrims before me. First the big one, and then in the "Todesverkündigung" I had another one in front of where I was standing. But that was not enough, so I had to have another one hanging over my face. And then, I should compete with orchestra? I did.



ON: Did you say anything?

BN: Sometimes I spoke up. You try as far as you can. I think we singers are much too loyal to our conductors and stage directors. I was. I tried to accept as much as I could. I think the artists get brainwashed. When you work for months with a stage director, and he is charming -- or she, but it's mostly a he -- and nice and gives a lot of compliments, finally they buy it. They gave a *Maskenball* [Verdi's *Un Ballo in Maschera*] in Copenhagen that came from Barcelona originally [directed by Calixto Bieito]. The Amelia was a student of mine -- she's a very talented girl. But the performance was absolutely insane. When the curtain goes up they are sitting, fifteen men, on toilets. I was complaining, I spoke to the chorus, and I said, "That's incredible." And they said, "Don't worry, we have double underwear!"

ON: Like *that's* the problem.

BN: Ja, that's the problem. I hope we are getting an end to this.

ON: Another thing that has changed since you stopped singing is the amount of crossover. Sometimes in recital, you used to sing "I Could Have Danced All Night" as an encore, complete with high C at the end.

BN: Nobody composed the high C. It was I who put it on.

ON: Well, when you did it, it *belonged* there.

BN: Well, I did it for fun. Nowadays, you are not a well-paid artist if you haven't done a crossover. It has come too far. Many wonderful opera artists should never put a finger on that, because they don't know the way to do it. They think they will sell records. The dollars are so important in our time. I like to earn money, too, but I liked to stick to what I was good at. I read in opera news about a promising tenor [José Cura] who has done his first crossover record, and when he was asked if he was going on tour with the program he put on the record, he said, "Yes, if I could find a manager who would sell me for tours for two years, I would be the luckiest man in the world." He has all the potential for being a good artist, but that is not enough for him. He wants to make a million in an evening. It's a sickness now. Famous artists, they hardly appear anywhere on a stage with less than ten thousand people and big television screens. What is that? I can sit at home and look at them. They have an excuse, they say, "Well, we have to get a public for the opera." Bullshit, bullshit, I say. Because the people who would go and look at these concerts, they don't go to opera at all. And [the singers] know it very well. I seem very pessimistic, but now I have the opportunity to tell what I am feeling, and I cannot stop.

ON: You did some master classes for the Met's Lindemann Young Artist Development Program.

BN: Yes, some very good voices. Every singer is unique; you cannot work with one as you work with the other. They are like my six cats, they are so individual.

ON: What do you feel you most need to give them?

BN: I learn first with the young singers if the technique is o.k. The technique is, first, breathing. Singing is breathing, to put the breathing in the right place and have that function in your cavities and head. If that is all right, you have saved many other problems. Most times, I hear them say, "My teacher says I am pressing too much with my tongue," or "I am putting the voice too far back," but it is because they don't know how to handle the breathing. One should go to the genuine problem. One should never start to repair the blinkers when the engine in the car is not in order. The engine in the car is the breathing in the singer.

ON: You were noted for a photographic memory of your roles, down to where a phrase appeared on the page of a specific edition. Are your roles still up there in your head?

BN: Oh ja, I think they are sitting very well.

ON: If you were singing your roles today, there are some people you no doubt would be working with. Do you know the bass René Pape?

BN: Oh, he's wonderful. I was there in Helsinki when he got his first big prize and nobody knew him -- oh, he's a good artist and a good singer. I had the honor and the joy to listen to him at the Metropolitan in 1999, when he sang King Marke in *Tristan*. Remarkable singer.

ON: Ben Heppner, of course.

BN: Oh yes! He got the first big Nilsson prize in America, in 1988. I chose him myself. I heard him at the National Council Competition at the Metropolitan. I thought, "He's going to get *my* prize!"

ON: When you came along, many people felt you were taking over for Kirsten Flagstad. Do you feel anyone is now taking over for you?



TWO NILSSON SPECIALTIES AT THE MET:
TURANDOT, 1961, AND SALOME, 1965

BN: There are lots of young singers coming up. We have a few here in Sweden now who are starting to sing Isolde, and they are very good, so let us see. But nowadays it's so difficult, because they have to do so much at one time. For instance, we have one young singer who has just finished opera school, and she has I don't know how many offers to sing Isolde onstage. But I think she is too clever and has said no thank you. They wanted me to listen to her, and I said I don't need to. Even if she sings like seven angels, she shouldn't start with Isolde. It is the longest.... The part is not so difficult, it is the strain and the stamina -- to sing the first act [for] seventy-nine minutes, and the second is almost as long. And if you don't have the F-sharp pianissimo at the end, you can go home and shoot yourself.

ON: Do today's singers have things your generation lacked?

BN: They're much more rounded, more knowledgeable than we were. Therefore also they cannot make up their minds. They have two or three different things they want to do. I didn't have so much choice -- either I should be a farmer or a singer.

ON: Do [your students] know that you sang more than Wagner, that you did Mozart and Verdi? Do they ask you to listen to their Mozart?

BN: Most people think I've always been a Wagnerian singer. But I must say that 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 so dark that I couldn't have lasted. When I was singing so much Wagner, the voice lost its shine and ping. So I went back to Mozart. I wasn't contracted for much Mozart to sing, but [I did it] for myself. I was oversinging on "Porgi, amor." With such things I could control the voice, keeping the fine thread in the voice.

ON: Were there operas that you found emotionally overwhelming, or did you have to turn off that part of yourself so you could give the performance you wanted to give?

BN: A few times I've been crying onstage, but one shouldn't do it. It is not when I'm singing, because I'm occupied, but when I listen. For instance, at the end of *Walküre*, it is hard to listen to Wotan. And I cried very much in Bayreuth the first year, when I was singing Elsa in *Lohengrin* and Wolfgang Windgassen sang his farewell to me with the ring and the horn. Wolfgang Wagner had offered me the role of Senta at Bayreuth for the following season, but a few days later he offered it to Astrid Varnay, who wanted to have a new role too, and she should then have the premiere of Senta. I was

asked to sing only three performances, without the premiere, so I said no thank you. So I thought [*Lohengrin*] was the last time I would sing there, and I thought it was so beautiful. And I was so sorry that I didn't think I could come back. And Wolfgang cried, we cried together. And I was so much ashamed, because I didn't want to do it.

ON: For most of your career, you had to spend long periods of time away from your husband [Bertil Niklasson], who stayed in Sweden.

BN: That's right. You cannot take the opera home and be cooking at the same time.

ON: Now that you can finally be together, what do you like to do with him?

BN: I like to spoil him, you know. I cook all the meals, and every dinner he says, "Oh, this is so wonderful. This is the best dinner I ever had." He likes my cooking. We have a good time. In the summers we are living on two farms here in Sweden, and we have lots of things to do here with the garden and the household and listening to singers and making speeches and God knows what. The time is not enough.

ON: One last question. A new generation is getting to know your voice through recordings. Maria Callas said she had a recording that encapsulated what she was. She said if anybody wanted to know what she was about, they should listen to her recording of Act IV of *La Gioconda*, and they would know. Do you feel you have a recording that shows what you were about?

BN: No, because I listen very seldom to my recordings. But I now have to buy a Callas *Gioconda* immediately.

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King Carl XVI Gustaf's Swedish Caviar Soufflé

2 tbsp. onion, finely chopped

1/2 tbsp. butter

4 eggs

4-5 tbsp. Kalle's Caviar (available in Swedish specialty stores)

1 tbsp. cornstarch

3/4 cup sour cream

1/8 tsp. black pepper

3 oz. melted butter for serving

This is an easy-to-prepare appetizer.

Butter one large soufflé dish or four ramekins.

Sauté the onions in butter and let cool.

Separate the eggs. Combine onions, egg yolks, caviar, sour cream, cornstarch and pepper.

Beat egg whites and a dash of salt until stiff but still smooth.

Gently fold into the caviar mixture and pour into dish.

On the lowest oven rack, bake the large dish at 350°F for 40 minutes, or the individual dishes at 400°F for 20 minutes.

Serve the soufflé immediately along with the melted butter.

Bon appétit!

Birgit Nilsson

The diva at home on her farm in West Karup, Sweden, in 1964

Photo credits: Festspielleitung Bayreuth/Siegfried Lauterwasser (Isolde), Festspielleitung Bayreuth/Wilhelm Rauh (with Wagner); *Opera News* Archives (as Brünnhilde, Turandot, 1961, Salome, 1965, on her farm)

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Brünnhilde at Rest

In the '60s and '70s, no one embodied the prima donna role

quite so fully as Birgit Nilsson

.She was a hell of a lot of fun too ----

and still is.

WILLIAM R. BRAUN catches up with the soprano

From left: Nilsson and Grace Hoffman (Brangäne) in Bayreuth's 1959 *Tristan*;

with Wieland Wagner at Bayreuth;

as Brünnhilde in the Met's *Siegfried*, 1972

1975 *Opera News* cover of Nilsson

as Brünnhilde in the Met's *Götterdämmerung* photographed by Hiro

Two Nilsson specialties at the Met: *Turandot*, 1961, and *Salome*, 1965

The diva at home on her farm in West Karup, Sweden, in 1964