

## BIRGIT'S BIRTHDAY HONOURS



▲ Carrying on the legacy: young Swedish soprano Annalena Persson sings Verdi with arresting poise at Birgit Nilsson's birthday celebrations in Gothenburg

Her broad, unmistakable face, stamped on the new 500 Crown notes, now presides over innumerable transactions across Sweden, so that even those who never managed to appreciate her Isolde can at least recognise Birgit Nilsson as a national icon. A sturdy country girl, whose singing lessons were often interrupted to milk cows and harvest potatoes, she remained true to her roots throughout her career, always finding time to come home and delight her compatriots, not only with

performances at opera houses and amusement parks in Gothenburg and Stockholm, but also with her contagious laughter and wicked sense of humour displayed in countless television and radio broadcasts. She died at the farm where she grew up, and if we are going to believe her own words, the last creatures to enjoy her singing were the cats summoned to lunch by her legendary Brünnhilde's Call.

For what would have been her 100th birthday on 17 May this year, eight Swedish singers gathered to celebrate Nilsson's art at Gothenburg Opera

House, with dramaturg Göran Gademan acting as master of ceremonies. Throughout, the excellent house orchestra and chorus enhanced the proceedings under the baton of Kjell Ingebretnsen.

Under Birgit's watchful eyes (projected on the cyclorama), soprano Irène Theorin sang and danced Elektra's first monologue, and mezzo Katarina Dalayman easily reached the high notes of Brünnhilde's immolation. Nina Stemme, winner of the Birgit Nilsson Prize 2018, conveyed Isolde's moving *Liebstd*. Four lesser-known artists equally impressed with their firm and well-projected voices: Annalena Persson performed Lady Macbeth's 'Una macchia è qui tuttora' with arresting poise and well-supported *passaggio*; Christina Nilsson, still in her late twenties, rendered a 'Ritorna vincitor' with a volume and warmth of timbre usually found in singers 15 years her senior; Annlouise Löglund sang Turandot's 'In questa reggia' with a powerful combination of strength and poise. And finally, Elisabeth Strid, a lyric soprano, was able to combine a silvery timbre with poignantly articulated phrasing in Salome's final

monologue. All the singers came back at the end to ride as Valkyries suitably dressed to kill: in cloaks, elegant gala caps, and with prominent Nilsson-style eyeshadow. All of them seemed to share the diva's own definition of singing: '[It's] a lustful feeling. You feel it in your whole body.'

Can this 'feeling' be associated with a Scandinavian way of singing – natural and folkish – which facilitates the tackling of stertorous opera roles? In contrast to the strong national representation of female singers made available to celebrate Nilsson's birthday, Stephen Langridge, artistic director of the Gothenburg Opera, notes the worrying dearth of Swedish male singers to tackle leading operatic roles: 'We need to persuade boys to keep on singing after they have broken their voice and we work hard on this by encouraging male voices to join youth choirs.' Let's hope these endeavours enable the assembling of an all-star cast of tenors to celebrate the centenary in 2025 of yet another Swedish opera icon: Nicolai Gedda.

Agustín Blanco-Bazán

### NEWS IN BRIEF

**Wigmore Hall** and **BBC Cardiff Singer of the World** competition have announced a partnership, which will allow all five of the competition's Song Prize finalists to give a debut recital at the Wigmore Hall. John Gilhooly, director of Wigmore Hall and the new chair of the Song Prize jury, said: 'The competition has

continued to go from strength to strength in recent years, and it is an international force for good in terms of championing the art of the song recital. The artists taking part in the competition are consistently excellent, and I look forward to giving debut Wigmore Hall recitals to the five Song Prize finalists.'

The winner of Bath Opera's inaugural **Bath Opera Isobel Buchanan Award** will be chosen following a competition held on 11 July in the Michael Tippet Centre, Bath Spa University. Applicants will be required to sing two operatic arias in a language of their choice and one art song in

their own language before a panel of three judges. The winner will benefit from 10 one-hour coaching sessions with international soprano Isobel Buchanan, who is sponsoring the programme. She or he will also have the opportunity to perform with Bath Opera.