



Großes Sängerlexikon. Directmedia Publishing.

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Reviewed by Sharon Krebs

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Singers, Singers Everywhere!

This CD-ROM is one of a large collection of digital libraries spanning such diverse topics as world architecture, German literature from Lessing to Kafka, the complete works of Albrecht Durer, and Who was Who in the GDR. It is a truly amazing series of publications. The *Grosses Saengerlexikon*, the thirty-third volume, is an electronic version of the third expanded edition of an encyclopedia with the same name (published in 1999/2000 by K. G. Saur Verlag GmbH in Munich). It consists of an introduction, the encyclopedia, an appendix containing information about the premieres of operas and operettas (location, cast, etc.), and a bibliography. The main encyclopedia portion provides more than fifteen thousand biographies of singers from the last decade of the sixteenth century to "the present" (July 15, 1999). The articles include information about the singer's country of origin, training, voice type, and significant career milestones (including repertoire performed, places of performance, recordings, etc.). The CD-ROM also contains thirty-three family trees of famous musical families. Numerous advantages accrue within an electronic version of this encyclopedia. Whereas the book version includes a separate supplementary volume with updated information, in the CD-ROM these additions have been inserted in appropriate sections throughout the publication. For example, a singer's activities or recordings during the period from 1997 to mid-1999 may be found at the conclusion of his or her entry, rather than in a separate appendix. Furthermore, the search engines of the electronic version allow

one to easily obtain a great deal more information about a given singer than would the hard copy. Searching a singer's name, for example, yields not only the main entry, but also any opera or operetta premieres in which he or she performed, and any other singers taught, coached, or otherwise promoted or worked with in performance. This wealth of information, which is all but impossible to gather in the printed version, allows one to obtain a valuable insight into the pedagogical influence of particular singers. A wide variety of specific searches, for example, "all the singers who have performed in Hugo Wolf's *Corregidor*" or "all the singers who have toured Australia," can also be done. The production of the printed version of this encyclopedia was already a monumental achievement. But with the electronic format, the amount of information that can be culled from the *Saengerlexikon* and the ease with which it can be obtained have increased exponentially. This resource requires fluency in German, and the search engine has some idiosyncrasies. One cannot, for example, search for "Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau." Entering any of the names separately results in a successful search, but when a hyphen appears in the search box, the search engine balks and informs the user of a syntax error. If the names are entered without the hyphen (e.g., Fischer Dieskau), the search proceeds without problems. (The rejection of hyphenated names seems to be a characteristic of the search engine for all of the Digitale Bibliothek publications. The same error message appears when one tries to search, for example, for Annette von Droste-Huelshoff

on the German literature CD-ROM). In order to locate all information about a singer, it is best to search by surname only (or by first name, if it is a more unusual one). This is necessary because the main entry is listed, for example, under "Schade, Michael" (but do not attempt this search with the comma between the two names, for it will fail!), while any listing of roles in opera premieres would give the name as "Michael Schade." Occasionally, the search engine lands one on the wrong page. When, for example, one tries to find the entry for Jan de Gaetani (which is on page 5,426), but the search engine delivers the user to page 5,425, which is the last page of the preceding entry. <p> The introduction to this resource states that in preparation for the electronic version numerous typos in the printed version were corrected. These must have been numerous indeed, for the CD-ROM would have benefited from another thorough proof-reading. But its sheer size (almost 29,000 pages) likely made that financially infeasible. <p> The lexicon is certainly enormous and admirably comprehensive. Readers will be hard-pressed to identify significant omissions of either present-day singers or those from other centuries (although everyone will no doubt be able to think of at least one favorite singer who was not included—in my case, the Canadian baritone, Kevin McMillan). The information provided about the individual singers should be viewed as a starting point—a source of general information—rather than an exhaustive account. One has only to consider that in a complete discography alone could take up several pages in the case of very active singers, to realize that the editors were unable to include everything. The editors have made an effort to provide references for full-length biographies when these are available. Interested readers thus have direction for further research. <p> The family trees are an intriguing and valuable component of the resource. But these, too, should not be viewed as complete, for only the musical members of the family seem to have been selected for inclusion. Of Josephine Lang's six children, for example, only the two who sang (albeit as amateurs)

appear on the family tree. <p> One very appealing feature of the CD-ROM is that the biographies include the year of the singer's birth. In the case of female singers, such information is otherwise all but impossible to come by. While the biographies on the recordings of male singers often begin with the words: "Born in 1957, he began singing at the age of five," the biographies of female singers coyly avoid anything that could provide a clue as to the singer's age. Once armed with this CD-ROM, however, such reticence can easily be circumvented. All is revealed. In fact, one wonders how the editors ever managed to obtain this information! <p> As appealing as this information is, it is apparently not always accurate. In 2003, the Canadian mezzo, Catherine Robbin, ended a thirty-year career.[1] According to the <cite>Grosses Saengerlexikon</cite> (page 20,498), this career started at the tender age of thirteen years! Conversely, the Canadian soprano, Donna Brown, might well be shocked to discover that according to the <cite>Grosses Saengerlexikon</cite> (page 3,138), she is currently fifty-two years old. It appears that information on non-European singers should not be accepted without further verification. Nevertheless, the editors must be praised for their very obvious efforts to make this truly a lexicon of singers from around the world. <p> A problem with this type of resource is that it is essentially out of date as soon as it is published. One solution might be to put the information on the Internet and sell annual subscriptions to the site, rather than additional CD-ROMs. In the case of a lexicon, this strategy would allow for regular updating of the information, to include new singers, and an ongoing correction of any errors. Subscribers (a group that would doubtless include many of the singers themselves) could provide feedback about the accuracy of the information. Building upon its already very considerable merit, the <cite>Grosses Saengerlexikon</cite>, would then be a dynamic, constantly improving resource that remains current and relevant. <p> Note <p> [1]. See <http://www.scena.org/columns/reviews/030523-JS-Robbin.html>.

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