

**KIRSTEN FLAGSTAD** • Kirsten Flagstad (sop); Various performers •  
IMMORTAL PERFORMANCES 1119-3 (3 CDs: 213:10)

**BEETHOVEN** *Missa solennis*: Kyrie, Gloria, Credo (Katherine Meisle (alt), Frederick Jagel (ten), Ezio Pinza (bs); Eugene Goossens, cond; Cincinnati May Festival Ch; Cincinnati SO, 5/5/1937). **Ah, Perfido!** (2 performances: Eugene Ormandy, Philadelphia O, 10/17/1937; Clemens Krauss, cond; Havana P, 10/24/1948). **WAGNER** *Lohengrin: Einsam in trüben Tagen* (Gaetano Merola, cond; San Francisco S, 1949). *Tristan und Isolde: Liebestod*. *Götterdämmerung*: Immolation Scene (Odd Grüner-Hegge, cond; Oslo PO, 6/12/1953). *Wesendonck Lieder: Träume* (Ernö Rapée, cond; NYP SO, 3/28/1937). *Der fliegende Holländer*: Senta's Ballad. *Wesendonck Lieder* (Roberto Kinsky, cond; Teatro Colón O, 10/5/1948). **GRIEG** *En Drøm* (Roberto Kinsky, cond; Teatro Colón O, 10/5/1948). *Fra Monte Pincio. Lys Natt. En Drøm* (Odd Grüner-Hegge, cond; Oslo PO, 6/12/1953). **SCHUBERT** *Dem Unendlichen*, D 291. *Die Liebe hat gelogen*, D 751. *Die junge Nonne*, D 828. *Der Atlas*, D 957. *Der Krähe*, D 911. *Der Musensohn*, D 764 (Ernest Lush, pn, BBC broadcast 8/5/1948). **KIELLAND** *Mot Blåsnø Høgdom*, op. 14. **DØRUMSGAARD** *Sanger under Stjernene*, op. 17. **KVANDAL** *Solokantate No. 1*, op. 10 (Hugo Kramm, cond; Oslo PO, 9/27/1953). **PURCELL** *Dido and Aeneas: When I am laid in earth* (Geraint Jones, cond; Mermaid Theater O, 6/1/1953)

Review by Ken Meltzer  
FANFARE November / December 2019

A new Immortal Performance set (three discs, priced as two) offers a tribute to the Norwegian soprano Kirsten Flagstad (1895-1962). There have been many great singers, but a few stand out for the unique beauty, power, and technical brilliance in the most demanding repertoire. For want of a better term, they were “forces of nature”, and for me, they include such artists as Rosa Ponselle, Francesco Tamagno, Lauritz Melchior, and Titta Ruffo. Flagstad most assuredly belongs in this select company. Like Ponselle, Flagstad possessed a soprano voice of stunning beauty, amplitude, and richness throughout the registers. Both Ponselle and Flagstad had lower voices of uncommon depth and focus. As a result, Flagstad was able to sing a commanding and entirely convincing Fricka in the fabled 1958 Decca stereo recording of Wagner's *Das Rheingold*. Perhaps this mastery of the lower register came at a bit of a price. Both Ponselle and Flagstad were at times insecure about singing their highest notes before the public. A scandal arose when it was discovered that Elisabeth Schwarzkopf sang Isolde's high Cs for Flagstad in the 1952 EMI *Tristan und Isolde*, conducted by Furtwängler. But all this proves is that Flagstad was indeed human, and at least from a vocal perspective, many had their doubts. Flagstad's gorgeous dramatic soprano voice was ideal for a wide

range of repertoire, and indeed, she sang varied roles in Europe. But during her storied Met career, which lasted from 1935-1952, Flagstad sang the music of Wagner almost exclusively. Among her 250 Met performances in the house and on tour, only 14 of Beethoven's *Fidelio*, and 5 of Gluck's *Alceste*, were of non-Wagnerian repertoire. I doubt there were many Met attendees who complained. Flagstad was the greatest Wagnerian soprano of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, perhaps of all time. And her frequent partner happened to be the greatest of all heldentenors, Lauritz Melchior. The new IP set has plenty of Wagner, to be sure. But the numerous featured recordings (many billed as "world premiere releases") document that Flagstad was a far more diverse artist than her Met career might indicate. Further, the glory of Flagstad's voice remained right to the close of her operatic stage career, and beyond.

The set opens with a 1937 Cincinnati May Music Festival broadcast of Beethoven's *Missa solemnis*, conducted by Eugene Goossens. Although the Cincinnati Symphony has long been a first-rate and important American orchestra (their early music directors included Leopold Stokowski, Eugène Ysaÿe, Fritz Reiner, and Goossens), the ensemble's work during the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century is woefully underrepresented on recordings. It's welcome, then, to have this broadcast, featuring the opening three movements of Beethoven's choral masterpiece. All the performers acquit themselves admirably, in a performance in the grand style. The solo quartet comprises Flagstad, Kathryn Meisle, Frederick Jagel, and Ezio Pinza. What a thrill it is to hear Flagstad's voice soaring above the large orchestral and choral forces! Those thrills continue in two performances of Beethoven's concert aria, *Ah! Perfido*. First is the 1937 RCA recording with Eugene Ormandy and the Philadelphia Orchestra. Next is a 1948 broadcast performance with Clemens Krauss and the Havana Philharmonic. Neither the passage of time nor the vicissitudes of live performance engender the slightest diminution in Flagstad's vocal and interpretive mastery. The two remaining discs showcase Flagstad in live performances, spanning the years 1937-1953. The repertoire includes song and opera, the familiar and less so, both German, and from her native land. Again, the consistency of her vocal security and beauty is astounding. For example, in a June 12, 1953 Bergen Festival concert, Flagstad, just a month shy of her 58<sup>th</sup> birthday, soars through the repertoire, including Wagner's *Tristan Liebestod* and the *Immolation Scene* from *Götterdämmerung*, with the radiance of a singer in her absolute prime. Flagstad could have easily enjoyed a triumphant career by coasting along solely on the power and beauty of her unique voice. But Flagstad was a scrupulous and probing musician. And so her song and opera interpretations are marked by elegant phrasing, a

wide range of dynamics and colors, and a constant attention to the text. The featured repertoire, by its nature, leans toward the grand and more sober. But in such moments as Schubert's *Der Musensohn*, Flagstad demonstrates the ability to adjust her approach to communicate a lighter, even carefree affect. There is not a single excerpt in the well over 3 hours of music included here that even remotely suggests the subpar. The sound quality of the excerpts ranges from acceptable to excellent. But in each case, Richard Caniell and IP have taken great pains to assure the music is presented in correct pitch, and with the glories of Flagstad's voice shining through. The final disc concludes with Flagstad's farewell London operatic performance, as Dido in Purcell's *Dido and Aeneas*. After a masterful rendition of "When I am laid in Earth", Flagstad addresses the audience with the dignity, sense of propriety, and humanity that distinguished her performances. It is a lovely, and most fitting conclusion to a marvelous set.

The accompanying booklet includes an extensive and thoughtful appreciation of Flagstad's life and career, as well as the featured music, by Dewey Faulkner, along with Richard Caniell's "Recording Notes" and artist bios. Immortal Performances continues to shine as a concern devoted to preserving the depth and range of artistry of the greatest musicians of the past. Thanks to them; and brava, Madame Flagstad.

Ken Meltzer

5 Stars: Flagstad at the Height of Her Powers

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Review by James Altena  
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This set from Immortal Performances—with three discs offered for the price of only two—brings together a number of Kirsten Flagstad rarities, several being published for the first time. While some items suffer from poor sound quality, they are the only surviving instances of the Norwegian soprano in that repertoire, and hence of considerable intrinsic value. Other items have been issued before, but in seriously defective editions (see, for instance, Marc Mandel's review in 17:1 of a disastrous two-CD set on the defunct Eklipse label).

The first disc is devoted to Beethoven. The initial two-thirds of Beethoven's *Missa solemnis* presented here is from the 1937 Cincinnati May Festival; unfortunately time restrictions did not allow for the remainder of the performance to be broadcast and preserved. The

performance is an uneven affair: Flagstad, Meisle, and Pinza excel, but the always mediocre Frederick Jagel is overparted. Goosens's conducting is sometimes rather stiff and metronomic—not because of him, I suspect, but because such an approach was necessary to keep an inexperienced chorus in line in this treacherous score, though the orchestra does well enough. Next follow two contrasting performances of the concert aria *Ah, Perfido!* The first, a studio recording, has reasonably good sound for its era is limited by the rather staid conducting of Ormandy; the second, a live performance, has the far more fiery and inspired leadership of Clemens Krauss, but not as good an orchestra and much poorer sound. In both versions Flagstad, as with her 1952 studio *Isolde* under Wilhelm Furtwängler for EMI, is more regal and imperious than womanly and impassioned, though she is not lacking in emotional intensity. In both accounts she is in magnificent vocal estate; if not as electrifying in this piece as Eleanor Steber in a live 1949 performance under Bruno Walter, previously released by Immortal Performances, she is still formidable and most impressive, and it is a treat to have her in this work.

The first part of CD 2 is primarily of documentary value for the Flagstad completist. “*Träume*” from the *Wesendonck Lieder*, also in poor sound (perhaps the least felicitous in this set), is the earliest surviving aural document of Flagstad in one of her repertory staples. Later recordings with her of the complete cycle in this orchestral version (there are also piano versions with Gerald Moore in the studio, and Giorgio Favaretto and Bruno Walter in concert) survive in live performances with Thomas Beecham, Øivin Fjellstad, Malcolm Sargent, and Georges Sebastian, plus her stereo studio recording with Hans Knappertsbusch. To those can now be added this one with Roberto Kinsky and the Teatro Colón Orchestra. Once again, the sound is poor, being distant and with much disc wear. Both here, and in Senta's ballad (which has two previous competing versions from 1937 and 1949, also previously released by Immortal performances) and Grieg's *En Drøm*, Kinsky proves to be a sympathetic and supportive accompanist, and Flagstad is in typically radiant voice.

With the changeover to the recital of Schubert songs, the sonics improve significantly for the last half of the set. Despite the size of her voice, Flagstad was an intelligent and sensitive Lieder interpreter who knew how to scale back her resources to achieve intimacy. She does so here, and shows herself to be a first-rate Schubertian of the older, pre-Fischer-Dieskau school of interpretation, in which interpretive emphasis was centered in vocal production rather than textual inflection (though the latter is not lacking). The piano accompaniment of Ernest Lush is serviceable but not outstanding; the piano is less well recorded than is Flagstad and sounds somewhat muddy and clunky, particularly in *Der Atlas*. (I'd suggest that

occurred because Atlas Shrugged, but such a comment might seem too Rand-y....) And anyone who thinks of Flagstad as being only solemn or matronly should hear the lightness and gaiety with which she dispatches *Der Musensohn*. There are studio recordings or alternative live performances for some but not all of these songs, so this represents a unique contribution to the preservation of Flagstad's art. As always, Caniell here significantly improves on a previous issue of this material (in this instance, a Symposium issue of some but not all of these songs, a release which also had inexact documentation).

The exact date of this lovely performance of "Elsa's Dream" from *Lohengrin* is not known; a number of concert appearances by various artists were (with permission) excerpted from their original programs for a Salvation Army Christmas concert broadcast. The alternatives for Flagstad in this aria are her late stereo recording under Knappertsbusch and her live 1937 Met performance. (Unfortunately she was partnered in that by René Maison, a fine singer but simply not in Melchior's league. Richard Caniell has created a "dream cast" version by inserting Melchior from other Met broadcasts and a studio recording into the 1937 one—a legitimate move, I think, given that the two of them sang every performance of the opera together that season except for the matinee broadcast.)

Next there follows a decided rarity, the *Mot Blåsnø-Høgdom* (Toward Blåsnø Highland) of Olav Kielland (1901–1985). Kielland was a noted conductor of orchestras in Norway and Iceland, who in 1939 was offered the directorship of the New York Philharmonic but was prevented from assuming it by the outbreak of World War II. After the war he was accused of being a Nazi collaborator; although his name was quickly cleared, his conducting career was seriously hindered for years afterward and he turned increasingly to composing. Like his contemporary, the Swede Hugo Alfvén, Kielland was an unreconstructed Romantic of the nationalist school, and there is not a note in the piece that would have been out of place from a work penned in the later nineteenth century. The work's text is by the Norwegian poet and short story writer Ola Setrom (1895–1946); its three parts, of which only the first two are performed here, are titled "Fjell-lengt" (Mountain longing), "I Tveråsal-hytta" (In the Tveråsal cabin), and "Dagen vaknar" (The day awakens). This is an attractive piece, which makes me curious both to know the text (unfortunately not provided) and to hear other music by Kielland (he wrote four symphonies and concertos for both violin and piano) as well. It is also a unique addition to Flagstad's discography.

Arne Dørumsgaard (1921–2006) and David Johan Kvandal (1919–1999) were two more Norwegian composers who wrote in the same conservative Romantic nationalist strain as Kielland, though Dørumsgaard would live much of his life in self-imposed exile in

France and then Italy after being offended at what he regarded as the country's unfair treatment of Flagstad over her husband (who died in prison in 1946 while awaiting trial as an alleged Nazi sympathizer). While Flagstad recorded Dørumsgaard's song cycle *Sanger under Stjernene* (Songs under the stars) in the studio in 1952, it was in a piano version with Gerald Moore, so this orchestral version is doubly welcome. Dørumsgaard made many arrangements of Norwegian folk songs, and his own pieces are very much in a similar vein. Kvandal's *Solokantate* No. 1 was composed in 1953, so this may well be its world premiere performance. In both works, Hugo Kramm and the Oslo Philharmonic are fully *en rapport* with Flagstad, and a desire to hear more compositions by each composer is aroused. Like the Kielland, this too is a unique addition to Flagstad's discography.

Next there follow the two Wagner excerpts from *Tristan* and *Götterdämmerung*. Although by this time in her career a lack of total ease in Flagstad's higher register is evident, these are still affecting rendition, particularly the *Liebestod*. Conductor Odd Grüner-Hegge and the Oslo Philharmonic provide sympathetic support, and the sound quality for these items and the three Grieg songs (for which studio recordings with piano accompaniment also are extant) is in clear, vibrant mono. These are the best-recorded items in this set, which concludes with Dido's lament (also to be had in the soprano's famous studio recording of the complete opera with Elisabeth Schwarzkopf), and Flagstad's statement after the performance of her retirement from the operatic stage (though she continued to make recital appearances through 1957). The sound quality here is rather distant, though Flagstad's regal dignity still comes through most affectingly.

As always, Richard Caniell spares no effort in creating a first-class presentation. In addition to his usual sonic remastering wizardry, an elaborate booklet contains an informative essay by Dewey Faulkner, recordings notes, artist bios and photos, and a list of previous Immortal Performances releases of Flagstad's art. All concerned are to be congratulated on assembling and presenting this material to lovers of great singing; highly recommended.