

**WAGNER *Lohengrin*** • Fritz Stiedry, cond; Lauritz Melchior (*Lohengrin*); Helen Traubel (*Elsa*); Astrid Varnay (*Ortrud*); Herbert Janssen (*Friedrich*); Frank Guarrera (*Herald*); Dezső Ernster (*King Henry*); Metropolitan Op Ch & O • IMMORTAL PERFORMANCES IPCD 1187-3 (3 CDs 208:13) Live: New York, January 7, 1950

& **Melchior Interviews. Wagner: *Tristan und Isolde*, Act II excerpt:** Lauritz Melchior (*Tristan*); Kirsten Flagstad (*Isolde*) Covent Garden, London, June, 1937.

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Immortal Performances (IP) presents Lauritz Melchior's final Metropolitan Opera broadcast; a January 7, 1950 performance of Wagner's *Lohengrin*. When Rudolf Bing started his tenure in 1950 as the Met's general manager, Lauritz Melchior had been the company's (indeed, the world's) leading heldentenor for almost a quarter century. When Bing assumed leadership of the Met, Melchior, then nearing the age of 60, was still going strong. Between December 1, 1949 and February 2, 1950, Melchior sang 4 Met performances of Tristan, and 2 each as Lohengrin and Siegmund. In a radio interview with Miles Kastendish, included by IP as a bonus to the complete *Lohengrin* broadcast, Melchior recalled that by December of 1949, he had not received a contract offer from the Met for the following season. This was the time when the Met customarily secured performance date commitments from its artists. Of course, this arrangement benefitted both parties; the performers were then able to schedule their other engagements, and the Met was assured it had secured the singers it wanted. In his history of the Met, *Requiem for a Yellow Brick Brewery* (Little, Brown and Co., Boston and Toronto, 1969), John Briggs explains: "Leonard Warren and Melchior both had the same concert manager. In this way, Melchior learned that Warren's contract had been renewed while his had not. Melchior issued an ultimatum. It was Saturday evening; if Bing did not offer him a contract by Monday morning, he could find himself another *Heldentenor* (p. 280)."

When I first met my friend, mentor, and *Fanfare* colleague, Henry Fogel, he was president of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra. Henry said something that has remained with me: "No one will ever buy a ticket to watch you manage." In those few words, Henry encapsulated the role and responsibilities of music administrators. The finest ones understand that their charge is to serve the organization, musicians, music, and the patrons. Any time the attention shifts from those priorities to the administrator, he or she has failed. In the contract negotiations with Melchior, Rudolf Bing decided to place himself front and center: "'I will not be dictated to,' Bing said in a public statement. 'No doubt I shall make mistakes, but I can assure you that I will attempt to run this house—unmoved by promises or threats—on the principle of quality alone (p. 280).'" Lauritz Melchior's final Met performance took place in a February 2, 1950 staging of *Lohengrin*. His penultimate Met appearance was the January 7, 1950 broadcast issued by IP. As Melchior added in his radio interview with Kastendish, the Danish tenor, who sang almost 500 performances at the Met over a span of 24 years, never again stepped foot inside the theater.

As shamefully as Bing treated Melchior, perhaps it could be argued that at least there were valid artistic considerations at play. After all, as Bing professed, he made his decisions “on the principle of quality alone.” Briggs argues that even without Bing’s strongarm tactics, Melchior’s tenure at the Met “would have ended soon in any case, since the tenor was in his sixties (p. 280).” To be precise, when Melchior sang his final two Met Lohengrin performances, he was approaching his 60<sup>th</sup> birthday, which fell on March 20, 1950. Thanks to IP releases, I’ve had the previous opportunity to hear Melchior in the final stages of his Met career, in complete broadcasts of Wagner’s *Tristan und Isolde* (January 3, 1948) (Mar / Apr 2023 *Fanfare*, 46:4), and *Tannhäuser* (March 6, 1948) (Nov / Dec 2021 *Fanfare*, 45:2). On both occasions, Melchior is a vocal miracle, singing the demanding roles with the confidence, voice, and artistry of a singer in his absolute prime. Perhaps it could be argued that on a few occasions during these broadcasts, Melchior falls somewhat short of his performances from years earlier. But as I commented in my *Tannhäuser* review: “here, we are talking about minimal variants of greatness.” Even toward the close of his Met career, Melchior reigned supreme over the *Heldentenors* who preceded and followed him. And that is once again the case with the January 7, 1950 *Lohengrin*. Melchior is in marvelous voice, with his rich, heroic, and beautiful timbre always in evidence. The high notes are secure, and his phrasing and legato are exemplary. Melchior was a fine vocal actor, and his portrayal of Lohengrin is most affecting. The knight’s strength of body and character is never in doubt. But his love for Elsa and the heartbreak over her betrayal are convincing as well. I’m not certain I’ve ever heard Melchior deliver a more heartbreaking rendition of Lohengrin’s Farewell. Perhaps Melchior occasionally subdivides long phrases more than in the past. His ability to float a supported hushed tone is suspect. And on this occasion, he seems even more intent than normal on following his own tempo, rather than the conductor’s. But I’m not at all certain I would have noticed any of these issues were I unaware of the late vintage of this recording. In this *Lohengrin* broadcast Lauritz Melchior sounds like a tenor who is nowhere close to the end of an incomparable career. Even Rudolf Bing, if he were listening, could have recognized that.

The rest of the cast is superb. Helen Traubel was 50 when she sang Elsa in this broadcast. It’s true the highest notes are problematic, but those were never Traubel’s strongest asset. The remainder of Traubel’s voice is uncommonly rich and secure, and she sings with the utmost feeling. Astrid Varnay is a magnificent Ortrud, singing with a riveting intensity and electrifying vocal freedom. Herbert Janssen is a brilliant Friedrich von Telramund. In truth, I think Janssen’s lovely baritone was better suited to such roles as Wolfram and Hans Sachs. I prefer a darker, more malevolent tonal quality (Hermann Uhde, for example) for the villainous Telramund. But there is no denying Janssen’s commitment to the role, and he delivers Wagner’s music and text with the attention and care of a great lieder singer. Bass Dezső Ernster is an appropriately dignified and sonorous King Henry, but lacks the ideal steadiness of vocal production. A lovely bonus is the young Frank Guarrera, lavishing his rich and focused baritone onto the role of the Herald. Fritz Stiedry leads a masterful performance, giving full due to both the lyrical and heroic elements of the score. The Act I Prelude, taken at an expansive tempo, is radiantly played. Elsewhere, the performance sizzles with energy. The momentum never flags, even in the problematic Act II. Throughout,

Stiedry is ever attentive to collaborating with his singers, exceptional artists all. IP's release includes a portion of radio host Milton Cross's commentary. The recorded sound is quite fine (comparable to my old Danacord set), perhaps a bit below the quality of contemporaneous studio releases, but fully adequate to appreciate this special performance.

As a bonus, IP includes two radio interviews with Melchior. As always, Melchior is forthcoming, self-effacing, and brimming with life and humor. Melchior's sadness over the way Bing treated him at the end of his Met career is both palpable and heartbreaking. The interview portions conclude with an excerpt from the *Tristan* Act II *Liebesnacht*, taken from the glorious 1937 Covent Garden performances led by Sir Thomas Beecham, previously issued in its entirety by IP. The booklet includes Bill Russell's remarkably extensive and informative program notes, a full plot synopsis, Richard Caniell's Recording Notes, and artist bios and photos. A first-rate *Lohengrin* broadcast, one that should never have been Melchior's last at the Met. That will be a permanent stain on Rudolf Bing's legacy. But those sad circumstances make the performance all the more treasurable. Warmly recommended.

Five stars: Lauritz Melchior shines in his final Met broadcast