

WAGNER *Tannhäuser* & • Erich Leinsdorf, cond; Lauritz Melchior (*Tannhäuser*); Kirsten Flagstad (*Elisabeth*); Rose Pauly (*Venus*); Herbert Janssen (*Wolfram*); Emmanuel List (*Landgrave*); Metropolitan Op O & Ch • IMMORTAL PERFORMANCES 1194-3, mono (3 CDs: 204:10) Broadcast: Metropolitan Opera, New York 12/16/1939

& **STRAUSS *Elektra***: Recognition Scene. ***Verführung. Gesang der Apollopristerin.*** Rose Pauly (sop); John Barbiroli, Artur Rodziński, cond; NYPSO. Live: 1937, 1938

By Henry Fogel

FANFARE March/ April 2024

This is another release in Immortal Performances' Heritage Series, preserving from combined sources performances that should have occurred and been recorded but were not. Lauritz Melchior's *Tannhäuser* and Kirsten Flagstad's *Elisabeth* were captured in a Met broadcast from 1941. Previously, in 1939, when Flagstad was given a broadcast of the opera, her tenor was Eyvind Lahom instead (actually an American whose birth name was Jon Edwin Johnson). The reason for this was that Flagstad, whose power at the Met was extraordinary, was upset with Melchior after he implied to an interviewer that Lotte Lehmann was a more interesting singer.

By 1940 Flagstad had gotten over it, and she subsequently appeared frequently with Melchior, but the result of the feud was that the 1939 broadcast was compromised by an inadequate tenor. One might question why Richard Caniell, the proprietor of Immortal Performances, felt the need to take the 1939 broadcast and edit Melchior in from 1941 when that performance already has Flagstad and Melchior together. In his recording notes Caniell explains that the glory of Flagstad's singing in 1939 deserved to be preserved without wincing every time Lahom appeared. Since Erich Leinsdorf conducted both performances, there was a consistency that helped the editing process go smoothly. Listening closely, I did not catch any of the many edits that had to be made in the finished product. When Caniell performs this kind of magic in seamlessly combining elements from different performances, I can do nothing but express my admiration for his technical wizardry and his musically sensitive ears.

If you already own the 1941 broadcast (Immortal Performances IPCD 1101-3) there is no obvious need to supplement it with this hybrid release unless you are an intensely fanatical collector. However, some of us *are* fanatical collectors (let's be honest, that is why *Fanfare* exists), and for us hearing a younger and fresher Flagstad in 1939 paired with Melchior is justification enough.

In the end, what makes this release desirable is the combination of Melchior and Flagstad at their very best. This is the performance that Met audiences and radio listeners should have heard in 1939 if Flagstad had not been petty about some perceived criticism. From her entrance with "Dich, teure Halle," she is glorious. Throughout the role she maintains a warm, sweet tone that perfectly characterizes Elisabeth's nature. As for Melchior, there are hardly words to describe his triumph in this most fiendish of roles. He retains freshness of voice throughout and characterizes the music with

dramatic specificity, combining the virtues of a true *legato* with raw power. The last-act Rome Narrative is as thrilling as Flagstad's prayer ("Allmächt'ge Jungfrau") in the same act is beautiful.

The other principal singers were the same on both broadcasts. Herbert Janssen as Wolfram is a perfect example of *bel canto* singing style applied intelligently to Wagner. The 1939 *Tannhäuser* captures him in his debut year at the Met, and he sounds just as fine in 1941. The same cannot be said, unfortunately, about Emmanuel List's Landgraf. He sounds hoarse and vocally out of sorts here in 1939 while offering much firmer vocalism in 1941.

In a major casting change, Rose Pauly was Venus in 1939, as opposed to Kerstin Thorborg in 1941. Pauly doesn't provide as seductive a performance as Thorborg, but she still offers firm singing, and she triumphs in the Strauss bonuses that Immortal Performances provides to fill out the third disc. The Recognition Scene from *Elektra* conducted with white heat by Rodziński, and the two thrilling Strauss songs led by John Barbirolli, are vivid reminders of the gleaming beauty of Pauly's voice and her intelligent projection of the text.

A special mention must be made of the quality of the recorded sound. It is very surprising to hear a 1939 broadcast with this degree of clarity and presence. As is always the case with Immortal Performances, the booklet is a model of how to present important historical recordings. Included are an expert analysis of the performance by Dewey Faulkner and an essay, also I believe by Faulkner, on Pauly's history and singing. There is much else in addition: an illuminating essay by Anne Woods titled "*Tannhäuser* and Wagner's Artistic Rebellion," a detailed synopsis keyed to tracks on the discs, the previously noted recording notes by Caniell, bios of the performers, and wonderful historical photographs. Recommended to the serious Wagner collector along with anyone who does not own the exceptional 1941 *Tannhäuser*.

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By **Ken Meltzer**
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As part of its ongoing Heritage Series, Immortal Performances (IP) presents a restoration of the December 16, 1939 Met broadcast of Wagner's *Tannhäuser*. In the

broadcast, tenor Eyvind Laholm sings the title role. For reasons set out in Dewey Faulkner's booklet commentary, and Richard Caniell's "Recording Notes," Laholm's contribution is replaced by Lauritz Melchior's performance from the Met broadcast of January 4, 1941. IP previously issued that broadcast (IPCD 1101-3), and I reviewed it in the Mar / Apr 2018 *Fanfare* (41:4). In his review of the Heritage Series 1939 Met *Tannhäuser*, Henry Fogel sets out IP's justification for substituting Laholm with Melchior. Henry also describes in expressive detail his approval of the new IP release. I concur wholeheartedly. My review is intended to supplement, rather than duplicate Henry's thorough and insightful analysis.

Both the 1939 and 1941 broadcasts include the following principal artists; Kirsten Flagstad (Elisabeth), Herbert Janssen (Wolfram), Emanuel List (Landgraf), and conductor Erich Leinsdorf. In the 1939 *Tannhäuser* with Laholm, Rose Pauly is Venus. In the 1941 Melchior *Tannhäuser*, that role is performed by Kerstin Thorborg. In my review of the 1941 broadcast, I wrote of Melchior: "You could easily spend a lifetime frequenting opera performances without ever hearing *Tannhäuser* sung with this kind of mastery. And yet, that mastery is what Met audiences of the 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s could rely upon with Lauritz Melchior, who performed this role 70 times during his great career at New York's leading opera house. Melchior is in sterling form for the January 4, 1941 broadcast, a document of a great and unique singer / actor at his best. The fact that Melchior surmounts Wagner's challenges in this fashion, in the context of a live performance, borders on the miraculous. But then again, Melchior was a miracle among tenors." Next to this "miracle among tenors," Laholm, in the 1939 performance, is decidedly earthbound (the original broadcast may be heard on YouTube). Laholm toils mightily over the "Hymn to Venus." Here, the voice is leathery and pushed in the upper register. Laholm does improve over the course of the afternoon. The fiendish Act II finale is credible, and the "Rome Narrative" packs a fair amount of dramatic fire. But it's not really a shock that Laholm's Met career (during the Melchior era) comprised but two performances. Laholm comes in for a fair amount of criticism both from Faulkner and Caniell. I don't think it's unjustified, although I suspect that today, Laholm would have a perfectly respectable career as a Heldentenor. Caniell does acknowledge: "As for Laholm it emerges that he's better than I recall, singing with more clarity and strength than Hopf and Lorenz..." Given Laholm's status here as the operatic elephant in room, I would have liked to have seen IP include at least a snippet of that tenor's contribution to the 1939 *Tannhäuser*. There's precedent for this in prior IP releases, and Act II's 60-minute running time would have allowed ample excerpt space, while still preserving the one act per disc formatting. In any event, Caniell's blending of the 1941 Melchior performance into the 1939 broadcast is seamless; quite the remarkable achievement. And yes, I'd rather hear Lauritz Melchior over Eyvind Laholm any day. But to be fair, I'd rather hear Melchior over than any other Heldentenor, not that I would want to be so limited.

Flagstad is a radiant presence in the 1941 broadcast. But she is in even better form in 1939. The conclusion of "Dich, teure Halle" rings with clarion security, an improvement over the rather opaque finish in 1941 (as I noted, "a rare vocal blemish in this masterfully sung account"). Herbert Janssen is superb in both performances, in marvelous vocal estate, and creating a highly sympathetic, three-dimensional character. Emanuel List is a sturdy and authoritative Landgraf, but not vocally resplendent in

either performance. Rosa Pauly is a dramatically intense and convincing Venus. In the 1939 broadcast, her voice sounds rather nasal and shrewish, lacking the seductive qualities that Thorborg (1941) brings to the role. Pauly sounds much better in the trio of Strauss excerpts that conclude this set. And I found it interesting that when Pauly sings alongside Laholm, her Venus sounds to me far more appropriate. In both performances, Erich Leinsdorf leads a taut and efficient performance. It never lags, but it also doesn't have the ebb and flow I associate with the finest Wagner conducting. Leinsdorf and Melchor don't always see eye to eye, particularly in the "Hymn to Venus," where the tenor clearly wants to move things along.

I would not want to be without the 1941 *Tannhäuser*. But I will also treasure the Heritage Series version of the 1939 broadcast. Like its successor, the broadcast in remarkable sound for the period. And it allows us to hear Melchior, Flagstad, and Janssen in absolute top form. As I mentioned, you may hear the original 1939 broadcast on YouTube. Given the availability of the 1941 *Tannhäuser*, it is of passing interest. But I will return often to this Heritage Series version with Melchior. Recommended.

Five stars: A brilliant Heritage Series restoration of the 1939 Met *Tannhäuser*, now with Melchior in the title role