

WAGNER *Tristan und Isolde* (abridged) • Artur Bodanzky, cond; Leo Blech (cond); Arthur Coates (cond); Lauritz Melchior (*Tristan*); Frida Leider (*Isolde*); Maria Olszewska; Elfriede Marherr-Wagner; Emmi Leisner (*Brangäne*); Gustav Schützendorf; Julius Huehn (*Kurwenal*); Ludwig Hofmann (*King Marke*); Metropolitan Op O; Berlin State Op O; London SO • IMMORTAL PERFORMANCES IPCD 1160-2 mono (2 CDs: 2:21:05) Live: Metropolitan Opera, New York 3/11/1933, 2/8/1936

& Wagner *Wesendonck Lieder: Schmerzen; Traume*. Frida Leider (sop); John Barbirolli, cond; LSO

Ken Meltzer

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A new two-disc release from Immortal Performances (IP), part of their Heritage Series, celebrates the *Isolde* of the superb German soprano Frida Leider. As is the custom for the Heritage Series, the set presents a masterful blending of various source recordings to create as full a representation as possible of the artists and work in question. Excerpts from a March 11, 1933 broadcast of Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde*, conducted by Artur Bodanzky, and featuring Leider, alongside Lauritz Melchior (*Tristan*), Maria Olszewska (*Brangäne*), Gustav Schützendorf (*Kurwenal*), and Ludwig Hofmann (*King Marke*) serve as the starting point. The easiest task involved compiling Act III of the opera, which is presented complete (save for Bodanzky's notorious score cuts). For the opening 16 minutes, IP employs a February 8, 1936 unpublished Met broadcast, again with Bodanzky and Melchior, and Julius Huehn as *Kurwenal*. From *Isolde's* entrance to the opera's conclusion, the 1933 broadcast is presented uninterrupted. For the remainder of the music of act III, the 1933 broadcast serves as the basis, with occasional gaps filled in by the 1936 performance. Acts I and II are a more complex affair. Act II (as represented in this set) begins with *Tristan and Isolde's Liebesnacht*, here via the 1929 EMI commercial recording with Melchior and Leider, with Albert Coates conducting the Berlin State Opera Orchestra and London Symphony Orchestra (the recording was made in two separate locations and times). As that recording does not include *Brangäne's Watch*, IP adds Emmi Leisner's rendition. The 1936 Met broadcast serves as the remainder of the Act to conclusion, but without *Isolde's* music (Kirsten Flagstad sang in that performance). Three Act I excerpts featuring Leider (totaling 1:15, 2:20, and 8:25) survive from the 1933 broadcast. IP opens with the Bodanzky-led Act I orchestral Prelude from the 1936 broadcast. We also hear Leider's 1928 commercial recording of *Isolde's* curse, with Elfriede Marherr-Wagner as *Brangäne*, and Leo Blech conducting the Berlin State Opera Orchestra. All told, the IP set includes approximately 40 minutes of music from the opera's first act. Richard Caniell, IP's producer and guiding artistic force, has processed the various source materials to have as uniform a sound quality as possible.

In the Mar/Apr 2021 issue of *Fanfare*, as part of my review of an IP Heritage Series release of *Götterdämmerung* (1150-3), based upon mid-1930s performances from Covent Garden, I offered this appreciation of Frida Leider: "First and foremost, there is the Brünnhilde of German soprano Frida Leider (1888-1975). I will start by acknowledging

that among Wagnerian sopranos whose artistry is preserved on recordings, Frida Leider is my favorite. Sad to say, the number of those recordings is not entirely commensurate with her artistry. Leider did not record any complete operas commercially. Her Met career lasted but two seasons (1933-4), ending just before a time when she might have taken frequent part in the Saturday afternoon broadcasts. Leider's operatic career essentially came to an end around 1940, when her Jewish husband Rudolf Deman (concertmaster of the Berlin State Opera Orchestra) was forced to take up residence in Switzerland. There, Leider sang for a few years in song recitals. For a fine cross-section of her acoustic and electrical recordings, I recommend a two-disc 2003 Naxos Historical release (8.110744-45). It documents a singer of extraordinary gifts. Not only did Leider possess a dramatic soprano's requisite power and sterling upper register, her voice is one of uncommon warmth and beauty. In addition to her Wagnerian roles, Leider was an experienced performer in Italian, French, and other German repertoire. Leider's interpretations of that repertoire helped, I believe, to create Wagnerian performances notable for their keen attention to diction, pure legato, and warmth and flexibility of phrasing. Add to this Leider's talents as an actor, someone able to convey fully, without exaggeration or artifice, the dimensions of her characters. To my ears, Leider was the most human and feminine of Isolde and Brünnhildes, but again, never at the expense of authority and power. Although Leider was about 50 at the time of the Covent Garden performances, her voice remains undiminished in power, beauty, and stamina." Leider, a month shy of her 45th birthday for the 1933 Met *Tristan* broadcast, is in resplendent form for that performance, as well as for all the interpolated commercial recordings. Her Isolde is a superb achievement, entirely convincing from a dramatic point of view, without ever sacrificing an ounce of vocal beauty or power. Lauritz Melchior had the greatest respect and affection for Leider, and their recording of the *Liebesnacht* is a masterpiece of vocalism both lyrical and passionate. Leider's rendition of the opera's concluding *Liebestod* masterfully builds to the ecstatic final bars, an astonishing flood of vocal splendor and dramatic intensity. Anyone who loves *Tristan* must hear Leider's Isolde. As a bonus, IP includes Leider in radiant performances of two of the Wagner *Wesendonck Lieder*, with John Barbirolli leading the LSO.

Lauritz Melchior is in representative form as Tristan; that is to say, the greatest of all recorded Heldenentors. In the course of reviewing several IP restorations of various Met *Tristan* broadcasts, I've had the opportunity to write about Melchior's glorious interpretation of Tristan. The Danish heldentenor's vocal power, beauty, and stamina are nothing short of miraculous. All of those talents are aligned to a masterful communication of Tristan's love for Isolde, and his resultant suffering. Bodanzky, too, is a great Wagner interpreter (score cuts notwithstanding), a conductor with a keen understanding of how to pace the music so that the pulse never drags, and the climaxes make the utmost impact. Bodanzky's marked flexibility of pacing, and encouragement of portamento are enchanting and treasurable windows into the past. Bass Ludwig Hofmann is a most impressive King Marke; his richly-vocalized and affecting, noble delivery create a highly sympathetic character. Due to the composite nature of this Heritage Series release, the roles of Brangäne and Kurwenal are divided among various accomplished singers, all of whom maintain the high quality of this production. The recorded sound is below the quality of commercial recordings of the era. But in IP's fine restoration, the individual qualities and excellence of the participating artists are readily apparent.

Listeners with experience in historic recordings from this period will have no difficulty enjoying this set. The booklet includes Dewey Faulkner's excellent liner notes, a synopsis of Act III of *Tristan und Isolde*, artist bios, and Richard Caniell's Recording Notes. There is no question this is a release designed to appeal to listeners with very specific interests and tastes. But as someone who adores Frida Leider and historic performances of Wagner, I was delighted to have the opportunity to hear it. Recommended to those of a like mind.

5 stars: Frida Leider's glorious Isolde shines in an Immortal Performance Heritage Series *Tristan und Isolde*

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Henry Fogel

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This two-disc set comes as close as we will ever get to a performance of *Tristan und Isolde* with the great German dramatic soprano Frida Leider. The idea behind Immortal Performances' Heritage Series is to imaginatively recreate important historic performances that either could have taken place or did take place but were not recorded. Producer Richard Caniell accomplishes this by assembling material from various sources and skillfully combining them.

For this abridged *Tristan und Isolde*, his main sources are Metropolitan Opera broadcasts from 1933 and 1936 (the former survived only in fragmentary form and the latter has never been released), a 1928 commercial recording of Isolde's Narrative and Curse, and a 1929 HMV recording of the "Liebesnacht" with Leider and Lauritz Melchior. Caniell's recording notes explain the wizardry in more detail than is needed here. The result of his work starts with an abridged act I, including the scene between Isolde and Brangäne with mezzo-soprano Elfriede Marherr-Wagner, conducted by Leo Blech. Act II starts with the orchestral introduction, followed by the meeting between Tristan and Isolde, and then the classic HMV recording of the "Liebesnacht" conducted by Albert Coates.

In that recording a disc lost by EMI caused the omission of Brangäne's Night Watch, so Caniell has inserted a great account of it by Emmi Leisner. The "Liebesnacht" ends abruptly with the intrusion of King Marke, which Caniell has connected to the 1936 Met broadcast (Bodanzky conducting) to make a satisfying conclusion to the act. Act III, taken from the 1933 and 1936 Met broadcasts, is complete (except for Bodanzky's cuts). As a bonus, two of the *Wesendonck Lieder* that Leider recorded in 1926 for HMV with John Barbirolli conducting conclude the second disc.

The reason for going through all the difficulties of putting this synthesis together becomes abundantly clear the moment we hear Leider sing. She was a close contemporary of Kirsten Flagstad's: Leider's dates are 1888–1975, Flagstad's are 1895–1967. However, because Leider's husband was Jewish, she effectively had her career ended in 1938. She remained quietly in Germany until the war's end, but when she resumed her career, she devoted it to singing Lieder, not opera. For those reasons we have far fewer examples of her greatness than we do of Flagstad's. This new set demonstrates that Leider was in no way inferior to her illustrious Norwegian counterpart, and in some ways she was perhaps an even greater singer. To Flagstad's vocal power and brilliant high notes Leider added a beautiful, warm timbre that thrills with its sound. It is our loss that the 1934 Met *Tristans* with Melchior and Leider were not broadcast, and only fragments remain from the 1933 one. Dewey Faulkner's superb essay in the booklet goes into great detail about Leider's struggles in the time of Hitler, and her career before, during, and after that period.

It is clear from the outset of this set what a splendid Isolde she was. In addition to the unforgettably beautiful timbre, Leider was also a very skilled vocal actress. Her bitterness in the Narrative and Curse is dramatized through inflection and the addition of hardness to her tone.

In the "Liebesnacht" Leider and Melchior sing with ecstatic beauty, matching dynamic shading and thrilling passion. I have not heard, on records or in the opera house, a more thrilling version, and to finally have it placed in the context of something resembling the complete opera is enormously gratifying. The radiant beauty of Leider's Liebestod will long stay in the memory.

About Melchior's Tristan little needs to be said. I have written before that when it comes to Wagnerian Heldenenters, there was Melchior and then there was everybody else. The power, beauty, and dramatic conviction of his singing is quite extraordinary.

In assembling such a variety of sources, Caniell has made alterations in the sound to more closely match the material, and he has impressively made seamless joins even where the conductors on both sides of the join are different. No, it is not as good as having a complete single performance of *Tristan und Isolde* with Melchior and Leider. However, this is as close as we are ever going to get, and closer than I would have thought possible. The many versions of this opera with Melchior and Flagstad have become synonymous with a great era of Wagner singing. We now learn that there was

another partnership that was every bit as glorious. despite the sonic deficiencies in some of the sources, everything here is unquestionably worth listening.

The two Wesendonck songs are a further demonstration of the beauty of Leider's voice and the sensitivity of her musicianship. I have already noted Dewey Faulkner's valuable essay in the booklet, which runs to 44 pages and includes lovely historic photos, bios of the singers (including those who sing Kurvenal and Brangäne), a detailed synopsis of the opera, and Caniell's recording notes. This release is fairly close to essential for any Wagner collection.