

WAGNER *Tristan und Isolde* • Artur Bodanzky, cond; Lauritz Melchior (*Tristan*); Kirsten Flagstad (*Isolde*); Karin Branzell (*Brangäne*); Julius Huehn (*Kurwenal*); Emanuel List (*King Marke*); Metropolitan Op Ch & O • IMMORTAL PERFORMANCES IPCD 1151-3 mono (3 CDs: 211:34) Live: Metropolitan Op, New York 4/16/1938

& **BBC “Vintage Years” Tribute to Kirsten Flagstad - singing Brahms, Grieg, and Wagner**

By Henry Fogel

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Although no recording company got around to making a studio-produced *Tristan und Isolde* with the dream pair of Lauritz Melchior and Kirsten Flagstad, at least eight live performances with both of them have been preserved, many on the Immortal Performances label. This particular Met broadcast from 1938 was issued by Sony in their *Wagner at the Met* box set. I was surprised that Immortal Performances decided to tackle it, but the reason became crystal clear when I compared the new set with Sony’s product. The Sony sounds constricted and harsh, with very compressed dynamics, all being problems I had assumed were the fault of the original source. What producer Richard Caniell has done with the same material proves that there was much more in it than Sony uncovered.

If you are a collector of historical Wagner performances who would be satisfied to own only one of the eight live recordings mentioned above, then the clear choice is Immortal Performances’ version of a 1937 Covent Garden performance conducted by Thomas Beecham. The sound from the source is far superior to all others, largely because it was intended for commercial release and professionally engineered by EMI. You can read details of the convoluted history of that recording in my review in *Fanfare* 38:2. If you are (as I admit to being) a more obsessed collector, there are reasons to justify adding this new set to your collection.

In his insightful booklet notes Dewey Faulkner observes that in 1938 Flagstad’s *Isolde* was a stronger characterization than it had been before, and what it was to become afterward. Her portrayal of *Isolde*’s ecstasy, her outbursts of anger, and above all the tenderness of her singing in the love duet, all exceed even Flagstad’s already high standards. Faulkner raises the not unlikely possibility that the Norwegian soprano was infuriated at an April 1937 article promoting Lotte Lehmann’s return to New York, calling her “prima donna at the Met.” (Faulkner does not specify where the article appeared).

It was Lehmann’s publicist who had placed the article, and she was also Melchior’s publicist, causing Flagstad to argue with him about it. She retaliated by pressuring the Met’s general manager Edward Johnson to hire two additional Heldentenors, Carl Hartmann and Eyvind Laholm, neither of whom was even close to Melchior’s equal. Flagstad also disapproved of the specificity of Lehmann’s acting; when the two met backstage, Flagstad apparently told Lehmann that she did things on stage which only a married woman should do with her husband in the privacy of their

bedroom. In addition, Flagstad was also going through a personal family crisis (described by Faulkner).

Whatever the impact of these heightened emotions on Flagstad's approach to the role, the difference is apparent from Isolde's first entry, and it remains present all the way to the *Liebestod*. The scene referred to as Isolde's Narrative and Curse in act I is shattering in its impact. The heart of the opera is the *Liebesnacht*, the long love duet that makes up the central portion of act 2. It was always a highlight of a Melchior–Flagstad performance but is even more special here. Both singers shade the music with exquisite subtlety, matching dynamics and inflections perfectly. One imagines that this is the way Wagner heard the scene in his head as he wrote it. Where Flagstad's rich voice has always seemed perfectly sufficient, here she adds considerable shading and softening.

The effect is to turn a great singer into a great Isolde. In none of the other recordings do she and Melchior blend so well, and so completely convey the otherworldly sense of reverie that envelops the two lovers. Flagstad seems more willing to soften her tone to blend with Melchior's. Throughout the performance she observes details of inflection and color that she previously tended to gloss over. The stunning hushed *pianissimo* just prior to the *Liebestod* is one example that is easy to point to. The *Liebestod* itself is more rapt, with phrases lingered over in a manner quite unlike Flagstad's other performances. This performance, more than any other from her, portrays Isolde's fragility as well as the character's strength and dignity.

Melchior, already known as a splendid Tristan, seems to have felt that this was a special occasion. In his long, difficult third act he outdoes himself. It is shameful that conductor Artur Bodanzky made significant cuts in this act. Melchior ranges from hushed and thinned tone to portray the dying Tristan to the hysterical ripping off of his bandages, and then to the glow in the tone when Isolde appears. He does this all with his uniquely beautiful voice along with musicianship and acting skills for which he often does not receive sufficient credit. The simple fact is that when we are discussing Wagnerian Heldenenters of the 20th century, there is Lauritz Melchior, and then there is everyone else. What is particularly astonishing about this Saturday afternoon broadcast is that he had sung Parsifal the evening before!

Karin Branzell is a rich-voiced Brangäne, also displaying considerable dramatic skills in her scenes with Isolde. "Einsam wachen" is as beautifully sung as I've ever heard it. Emanuel List's King Marke is also very fine. Alexander Kipnis in future years would find greater subtlety in the role, but List is persuasive in depicting both Marke's anger and his disappointment in Tristan's betrayal. As Kurwenal Julius Huehn is not at the level of the other principals. He is by no means bad, but neither is he much more than adequate. The voice is an ordinary one, and his dramatic gestures are generic.

Bodanzky's conducting, apart from his regrettable cuts, is quite fine. From the hushed strings that open the Prelude to the dying chord at the end of the opera, he brings the right balance of tenderness and energy. The orchestral sound may be the most significant gain in Immortal Performances' transfer over the Sony. The orchestral sonority is so much richer and more colorful that it is difficult to believe that a major international label like Sony, with all the resources available to it, could take the same broadcast and come up with something so inferior to what was possible. We hear

instrumental textures and details in the Immortal Performances edition that I, for one, had no idea were present.

As a bonus we get a portion of a BBC program produced in 1992 in tribute to Flagstad. In addition to the commentary there is a song by Grieg and two with viola and piano by Brahms, as well as the *Liebsteod* from Flagstad's very first Met broadcast in 1935. As is the norm with this label, the 52-page booklet is a model of how to present historical material. Besides Faulkner's very fine detailed analysis of the performance there are informative recording notes by Caniell, a detailed plot synopsis, and lovely historical photos.

I began this review by positioning this new release as something you might consider as a supplement to the 1937 Covent Garden *Tristan* with Beecham. But I would also say that if great Wagner singing is important to you, this set offers irreplaceable value. The recorded sound is about what you would expect from a 1938 AM-radio broadcast, so it doesn't approach the level of what EMI's engineers achieved, which Immortal Performances restored so successfully, for the Covent Garden performance. But I, for one, would not be without both. Immortal Performances has also issued the January 1938 *Tristan* broadcast from the Met (reviewed by me in *Fanfare* 44:4), with four of the same five principals as here. (The fifth singer is Gertrude Wettergren as Brangäne.) That performance is in many ways similar, but of the two, I would state a firm preference for this April broadcast. I slightly prefer Branzell's Brangäne, but more than that, the intensity of the drama here is simply unparalleled.

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& BBC "Vintage Years" Tribute to Kirsten Flagstad - singing Brahms, Grieg, and Wagner

By Ken Meltzer

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Immortal Performances (IP) brings us a performance of Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde*, broadcast from the stage of the Metropolitan Opera, on April 16, 1938. This broadcast was previously issued as part of the 2013 Sony Classical 25-disc set, *Wagner at the Met*. IP's restoration of the April 16, 1938 *Tristan* is a stunning improvement over the Sony Classical release, and a must if you are at all interested in this historic and stupendous performance. In the Mar/Apr 2021 issue of *Fanfare* (44:4), I reviewed IP's release of the Met's January 29, 1938 *Tristan* broadcast. That performance and the April 16, 1938 broadcast share the same conductor and principal singers, with the exception of the Brangäne of Gertrude Wettergren in the former, and Karin Branzell in the latter.

Given the similar casting and the passage of less than three months between the performances, it's not surprising that they are quite similar in concept and execution. Both Melchior and Flagstad are at the height of the powers that made them the greatest Wagnerian heroic tenor and soprano of the 20th century, and perhaps of all time. Not only do Melchior and Flagstad sing with remarkable tonal beauty, power, and stamina, they prove themselves to be arrestingly involved and compelling actors. In his extensive, informative, and engaging liner notes Dewey Faulkner highlights the superior dramatic intensity of Flagstad's 1938 Met *Isolde* (as well as some personal circumstances that may have been contributing factors) in comparison to broadcasts from prior years. I agree that in the 1938 broadcasts, Flagstad portrays *Isolde's* conflicting emotions and transformation in a more compelling fashion. *Tristan* was one of Melchior's great roles, both vocally and dramatically, and he is in superb form for both 1938 broadcasts. It's a miracle that these supremely gifted Wagnerians walked the earth at the same time, and that we have numerous recorded documents of their joint performances. Julius Huehn is a vibrant and richly vocalized Kurwenal. Emanuel List brings warmth of tone and sympathetic bearing to his assumption of the role of King Marke. Gertrude Wettergren is a fine Brangäne in the January, 1938 broadcast. Karen Branzell's Brangäne is notable for her rich voice (possessing a contralto's color and depth), and keen involvement in the drama. She and Flagstad make the most out of their Act I and II joint scenes. Artur Bodanzky is a magnificent Wagner conductor, an interpreter with an unerring sense of *Tristan's* musical/dramatic ebb and flow, and the ability to raise the emotional stakes to fever pitch. Bodanzky's beguiling flexibility of phrasing and the lovely portamentos he conjures from the strings of the Met Orchestra are treasurable souvenirs of a bygone era. What a shame, then, that Bodanzky made severe cuts to both Act II and III of *Tristan*. Still, what remains is of the highest quality and importance for all interested in *Tristan und Isolde* and the history of Wagner performance.

In his Recording Notes, IP's Richard Caniell discusses at length his dissatisfaction with the Sony Classical version of the April, 1938 Met *Tristan*, the impetus to undertake IP's restoration. Had I never heard the IP version, I would have been beholden to the Met and Sony Classical for making the performance available. After all, we are talking about the opportunity to hear Flagstad and Melchior in their primes, and in a live broadcast that took place more than 80 years ago. Under those circumstances, it seems ungrateful to expect recorded sound quality that is anything beyond tolerable. And that is about what you get in the Sony Classical version. The acoustic has a metallic quality that becomes more strident and unfocused in louder passages. The voices are audible and recognizable, but they lack the presence and color of IP's restorations of broadcasts from the same era, much less studio recordings of the time. And a comparison of the 2013 Sony with the new IP version of the April 16, 1938 *Tristan* places the former in the shade. IP's restoration offers significantly improved warmth and depth, as well as a more natural tonal quality both in the voices and orchestra. The sound is far better equalized throughout, and most certainly in the climactic moments. The beauty of Flagstad and Melchior's voices shines through in IP's restoration. Indeed, on this occasion, I was able to relish their gorgeous, technically

supported vocalism in hushed passages as much as from any contemporaneous broadcast I've heard. The more stentorian moments are impressive, too, perhaps enhanced by the beautiful reproduction of the softer singing. And if pressed to make a choice between the sound of IP's releases of the January 29 and April 16, 1938 Met *Tristan* broadcasts, I would opt for the latter. It impresses me as offering an acoustic that has greater definition and equalization, one that approaches, if not parallels, studio recordings of the time. Still, both IP restorations excellent offer worthy documents of these legendary broadcasts and are well worth hearing.

As a bonus, IP includes excerpts from an October 5, 1992 BBC radio tribute to Flagstad. In addition to commentary, we hear Flagstad's 1948 recording of Grieg's *En svane* (Philharmonia O, Warwick Braithwaite, cond.), and 1949 rendition of Brahms's song for voice, viola, and piano, op. 91, no. 1, "Gestille Sehnsucht" (Herbert Downes, viola, Gerald Moore, piano). The BBC broadcast also included a Flagstad studio recording of Isolde's *Liebestod*. Richard Caniell substitutes her performance from the March 9, 1935 broadcast, available in its entirety from IP. Flagstad sings radiantly in all three excerpts. In addition to Dewey Faulkner's notes, the booklet includes Richard Caniell's beautiful and thorough *Tristan* plot synopsis, Recording Notes, and artist bios. The IP version of the April, 1938 *Tristan* broadcast retains host Milton Cross's spoken commentary, not included on the Sony release. In this instance, Immortal Performances does by far the superior job of preserving one of the great moments in Metropolitan Opera broadcast history. Highest recommendation.

Ken Meltzer

5 stars: A stunning restoration of the April 6, 1938 Met *Tristan* broadcast with Flagstad and Melchior