

WAGNER *Der fliegende Holländer* • Fritz Busch, cond; Fred Destal (*Dutchman*); Marjorie Lawrence (*Senta*); Irra Petina (*Mary*); René Maison (*Erik*); Hans Fleischer (*Steersman*); Alexander Kipnis (*Daland*); Ch & O of the Teatro Colón, Buenos Aires • IMMORTAL PERFORMANCES 1215-3 mono (2 CDs: 220:13) Live: Teatro Colón, Buenos Aires, Argentina 9/19/1936

& **MARJORIE LAWRENCE IN OPERA AND SONG** • Marjorie Lawrence (sop); Various artists

By Ken Meltzer

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Immortal Performances (IP) presents its restoration of a September 19, 1936 Teatro Colón broadcast of Richard Wagner's *The Flying Dutchman*. William Youngren previously reviewed a Pearl release of this performance (May/June 1992 *Fanfare*, 1992). While acknowledging the recording's compromised sonics ("surface noise, variable volume, and so on"), Youngren deemed that the 1936 *Dutchman* "should be acquired by anyone who loves this work." In his recording notes, IP's Richard Caniell discusses the various issues with the Pearl issue that, along with the items Youngren mentioned, include wayward pitch, and "a push in the upper register that makes for a spurious brilliance and which imparted a metallic tonality." Caniell has addressed all of these issues in his restoration. The overall quality of IP's version remains below that of contemporary studio recordings, but is eminently listenable. While the recording balance favors the orchestra, the singers may still be heard with sufficient clarity and presence to appreciate the exceptional performances they deliver.

Given the orchestra's unusual prominence in this recording, we're fortunate the conductor is one of the finest of his era. Although Fritz Busch is woefully underrepresented on commercial recordings, there are many broadcasts that testify to his mastery both of the operatic and orchestral repertoire. From the opening measures of *The Flying Dutchman* Overture, it's clear that Fritz Busch is presiding over a rendition of stunning intensity. Typical of Busch's conducting, he favors brisk tempos, but always within the context of flexible phrasing, and a keen sense of collaboration with his singers and orchestra. Bass-baritone Fred Destal sings the Dutchman's challenging music with distinction. Destal's warm and sonorous voice is secure throughout the registers. Destal prefers a subtle approach, avoiding the kind of overemphatic hectoring that some Dutchmans favor. Nonetheless, the Dutchman's loneliness, pain, hope, and final despair are evident in Destal's pointed, expressive delivery. The remaining male singers are impressive. Alexander Kipnis, who possessed one of the most beautiful lyric basses of the 20th century, is a superb Daland. Kipnis manages to sing Daland's music with the utmost nobility and elegance, all the while suggesting the character's earthy, humorous nature. Erik is in many ways a thankless part, both musically and dramatically. But tenor René Maison, a valuable artist in spinto and lirico-spinto roles, sings with authority, a warm tonal quality, and the appropriate romantic desperation. Hans Fleischer is an outstanding Steersman, offering considerable voice and personality in this small but important role.

Marjorie Lawrence sings the Senta not only of the Dutchman's dreams, but mine as well. At her finest (as in this performance), Lawrence possessed a voice of remarkable

range, beauty, and power. And these sterling vocal gifts are aligned with keen musicianship and dramatic insight. Lawrence depicts Senta as a young, headstrong woman whose love for the Dutchman – both from afar and in proximity – is unyielding. If, on a few occasions, a note is slightly below pitch, that is a minor flaw in a radiantly-sung performance. Lawrence, as much as any Senta I've heard, makes the character believable and three-dimensional. In his liner notes for the IP recording, Dewey Faulkner writes that the 1936 Teatro Colón performances were the only time Lawrence sang the role of Senta. We are fortunate that such an unforgettable interpretation has been preserved on recordings. As Mary, Irre Petina offers both a warm voice and lively characterization. There's not a weak link in this performance. And the contributions of Busch and Lawrence are among the greatest I've heard in this opera. I agree with William Youngren that all who admire Wagner's *The Flying Dutchman* must hear this recording, now offered in improved sound by IP.

The bonus material, a generous helping of selections featuring Lawrence in opera and song, greatly enhances this release. The broadcast performances include, according to Richard Caniell, many items never before issued commercially. The Bell Telephone Hour, Metropolitan Opera, Magic Key, and BBC broadcasts span the years 1938-45. Announcer (including Milton Cross) commentary and applause are retained. Lawrence is heard in excerpts from Wagner operas, Purcell's *Dido and Aeneas*, Gluck's *Alceste*, Handel's *Giulio Cesare* (in French), Gounod's *Sappho*, Verdi's *Macbeth*, Massenet's *Hérodiade*, Halévy's *La Juive*, and Strauss's *Salome*. There are also songs by Wolf, Strauss, Ernest Bohn, and Schubert. By any standards, this is an extraordinary range of repertoire, and Lawrence is equal to the task. Singing in German, English, French, and Italian, Lawrence offers is at home both in language and style. Lawrence is as convincing in Dido's Lament as she is in Brunnhilde's Immolation (here abridged) Salome's Final Scenes. And the coloratura in Cleopatra's aria from *Giulio Cesare*, and Lady Macbeth's scene pose no terrors for Lawrence. All of the recordings are in far superior sound to the 1936 *Dutchman*. As such, we are given the full opportunity to luxuriate, not only in Lawrence's artistry, but the unique beauty and power of Lawrence's heroic soprano. And it is a voice to savor.

Dewey Faulkner, who over the years has provided a wealth of insightful commentary for IP releases, is once again the author the booklet notes for the *Dutchman* set. Faulkner recently passed away. My condolences to his family; I am among the many readers who will miss Dewey's valuable contributions to the IP recordings. There are also a full plot synopsis, Richard Caniell's Recording Notes, and artist bios and photos. Admirers of Wagner's *Dutchman*, Marjorie Lawrence, and Fritz Busch will relish this set. Enthusiastically recommended.

Five stars: Fritz Busch and Marjorie Lawrence in a thrilling 1936 Teatro Colón *Flying Dutchman*