

**WAGNER *Götterdämmerung* (without Prologue)** • Wilhelm Fürtwängler, cond; Thomas Beecham, cond; Frida Leider (*Brünnhilde*); Hilde Konetzni (*Gutrune*); Kerstin Thorborg (*Waltraute*); Lauritz Melchior (*Siegfried*); Herbert Janssen (*Gunther*); Ludwig Weber (*Hagen*); Eduard Habich (*Alberich*); et al; Covent Garden O & Ch. • IMMORTAL PERFORMANCES 1150-3, mono (3 CDs: 211:08) Live: London, 1936 & 1937

Review by **Ken Meltzer**

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Immortal Performances' excellent Heritage Series seeks to recreate historic performances not preserved in their entirety on recordings. Quite often, this involves the ingenious synthesis of various source recordings, both in-performance and commercial. In the case of the new IP release of Wagner's *Götterdämmerung*, Richard Caniell transports us to London's Royal Opera House, Covent Garden, where, in 1936 and 1937, conductors Wilhelm Furtwängler and Sir Thomas Beecham led performances of the *Ring*'s concluding music drama, with casts including Frida Leider (Brünnhilde), Lauritz Melchior (Siegfried), Herbert Janssen (Gunther), and Ludwig Weber (Hagen). In 2005 for Guild Historical, Richard Caniell restored portions of Act I, and the complete Act II of *Götterdämmerung*, taken from Covent Garden performances of May 14 and 29, 1936, led by Beecham. In the new IP release, Caniell improves upon the sound of the Guild issue, and joins it with other source recordings to fashion a complete *Götterdämmerung* (but without the Prologue). As Caniell explains in his Recording Notes: "As to how this performance came together, the Leider portions all stem from Covent Garden 1936; all those heard appeared in that one performance together. All the other portions are a conflation of various sources, though, aside from Konetzni (Gutrune), they all sang together in performances not recorded. Essentially Weber and Konetzni are from one broadcast; Janssen from a Met and Covent Garden '36 performance; Melchior from Met 1936 and Covent Garden 1936- 1937." In addition, Caniell and IP occasionally make use of commercial recordings, as in the case of Brünnhilde's Immolation Scene, which here is Leider's superb 1928 version, with Leo Blech conducting the Berlin State Opera Orchestra. As is customary with the IP Heritage Series, Richard Caniell has fashioned a consistent and convincing sonic and artistic whole out of the various source material. This *Götterdämmerung* is a release that commands attention.

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 Brünnhilde, 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.

The IP Heritage Series *Götterdämmerung* allows us to hear all of Leider's remarkable qualities, with the further advantage of experiencing her Brünnhilde not just in solo episodes, but interacting with her colleagues. And what colleagues they are. Siegfried is Lauritz Melchior, the greatest Heldentenor of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and at the top of his form and artistry. As I've had the opportunity to mention often in these pages, Melchior was not just a vocal miracle, he was a committed and searching interpreter, a tenor who fully embraced (at least in vocal terms) the qualities and struggles of his characters. Melchior is by turns heroic, playful (in the scene with the Rhinemaidens), and affectingly noble in death. And Melchior's blazing, extended high C in Act III would be the envy of any Manrico or Calaf. The presence of Leider and Melchior alone would justify this release, but the remainder of the cast is sterling as well. Baritone Herbert Janssen's warm and lovely baritone, and affecting interpretation create a sympathetic Gunther. Bass Ludwig Weber brings a dark and powerful vocal presence to his performance of Hagen, notable for its intensity, pointed diction, and variety of colors. Some may find Eduard Habich's Alberich a bit prone to exaggeration and sprechstimme effects, but he is a marvelous actor, and he and Weber are hair-raising in Hagen's dream sequence. Hilde Konetzni is a bright-voiced and youthful Guttrune. Kerstin Thorborg, a great Wagnerian contralto, makes the most of her scene with Brünnhilde. As previously noted, the two principal conductors in this Heritage Series *Götterdämmerung* are Fürtwängler and Beecham. Artur Bodanzky also is occasionally featured, courtesy of Met broadcasts. In addition Leo Blech conducts the commercially recorded Immolation Scene, and I suspect that Robert Heger may make an appearance or two as well. In other words, this *Götterdämmerung*, while not the interpretation of a single maestro, spotlights the work of distinguished, inspired Wagnerian conductors. Throughout, the conducting is notable for its masterful pacing, energy, and gorgeous orchestral playing that revels in Wagner's rich and inventive instrumental writing.

The sound quality is remarkably consistent and in general, approximates that of the era's commercial recordings. This is a release that may be appreciated not just by connoisseurs of historic recordings, but anyone interested in this repertoire. The generous written materials

include Dewey Faulkner's extensive notes on Leider and this recording, Richard Caniell's detailed plot synopsis and his Recording Notes, and artist bios and photos. A marvelous achievement, and a gift to all who treasure great Wagner artists and performances. Highest recommendation.

5 Stars: Frida Leider and Lauritz Melchor star in a glorious Heritage Series *Götterdämmerung*

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Review by **Henry Fogel**

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This is another entry into Immortal Performances' Heritage Series, which are CD compilations from a variety of sources (live and studio) that recreate historic performances in a unique way. These performances were never recorded but could have been. In other words, producer and label owner Richard Caniell has interwoven recordings by artists who did in fact sing together in a particular opera during their careers, but who never made a complete recording of it. The centerpiece of this almost-complete *Götterdämmerung* is Frida Leider's glorious Brünnhilde.

Born in Berlin in 1888, Leider was the greatest Wagnerian soprano prior to Kirsten Flagstad. Her fame today is eclipsed by Flagstad's because the latter's career coincided with radio broadcasts and improved recording techniques that the older singer didn't have the advantage of. Leider did record scenes and arias from Wagner operas but no complete works. What Caniell has done here is merge from live performances and studio recordings a complete *Götterdämmerung* without the Prologue. Most of what is here comes from live recordings made at the Royal Opera Covent Garden in 1936, with the rest, involving the scenes where Brünnhilde doesn't appear, originating from other Covent Garden and Metropolitan Opera performances. The bulk of the opera is conducted by Wilhelm Furtwängler or Thomas Beecham; the Immolation Scene is led by Leo Blech in a Berlin recording.

You would be forgiven for thinking that this amalgam must sound like a stylistic hash, but in fact it all works remarkably well. Caniell's very musical ear and technical knowledge manage to blend the diverse material into something closer to a unified *Götterdämmerung* than I would have thought possible. Granted, it would be even better to have a real full performance, Prologue included, under one conductor. But rather than bemoan what we cannot have, we should treat this synthesis as the extremely gratifying, even thrilling musical experience that it is.

Leider is an interesting contrast to Flagstad. I've heard heated arguments about which singer was better, and I find them pointless. Both artists were great dramatic sopranos and each had something unique to offer in Wagner. Flagstad had an incredible solidity of tone all the way up to the top register and an extraordinary richness of timbre. Leider had a voice that offered less sheer force, though still more than enough, but greater tonal warmth, which infused the characters she portrayed. She also had more of an ability (or willingness) to scale her voice down

when the dramatic situation called for it, to reflect tenderness and intimacy. In this post-Birgit Nilsson era, we'd be immensely grateful to have either Flagstad or Leider.

In his superb notes in the booklet that accompanies this set, Dewey Faulkner points out how phenomenally Leider's vocal shaping combines with Beecham's conducting to create a whole character in the second act. She employs very specific inflections and shades of color to avoid sounding merely like a soprano singing a role, instead sounding like Brünnhilde interacting with other characters in the moment. She does this within the context of a seamless *legato*, spot-on intonation, and generous phrasing.

Leider's greatest single achievement, I think, comes in this act. Brünnhilde goes from numb sadness ("Siegfried does not know me") to enraged jealousy, alternating between pain and rage, all of this communicated clearly through inflection of the words and the color and shading of the voice. The contrast makes Brünnhilde's fury all the more powerful. Her eventual agreement with Hagen's plan to murder Siegfried during the next day's hunt comes forth as an eruption of wounded rage and pain from a real woman.

The beauty of Leider's voice and the excellence of her musicianship are especially treasurable in the Immolation Scene. This version comes from a 1928 studio recording with the Berlin Staatsoper Orchestra conducted by Blech, and it of course lacks the vibrant presence of a stage performance. It also reveals the one shortcoming of Leider's singing: a short top. Her high notes lack the freedom and ring that marked the vocalism of Flagstad and Nilsson. This is a small price to pay, however, for so many other glories.

Much of the rest of the singing is on the same exalted level, especially from Lauritz Melchior. He is stentorian without ever hectoring, his voice filling Wagner's lines completely. Siegfried's death scene, driven by Furtwängler's powerful conducting, is heartbreaking. Kerstin Thorborg's Waltraute is another huge asset to the performance, and Hilde Konetzni's Guttrune, Ludwig Weber's Hagen, and Herbert Janssen's Gunther are also performances of towering dramatic and musical quality.

In his recording notes, Caniell details which portion is led by Furtwängler and which by Beecham. Because the two alternated in the 1936 Covent Garden *Ring* cycle with very similar casts and the same orchestra, there is less difference in the conducting than you might expect. Not quite at their exalted level, but still fine, is Leo Blech's conducting in the studio Immolation Scene.

I referred to the booklet that accompanies these discs, but it is worth underlining that this is one of the distinguishing features of Immortal Performances releases. The historic photos and reproduced artwork, Caniell's excellent synopsis, Dewey Faulkner's notes, and the informative artist bios all add value to this stunning release, and the sonic remastering is particularly excellent. This is Wagner.

Five stars: Thrilling restoration of historic *Götterdämmerung* recordings