

Wagner  
**PARSIFAL**  
**ACT II COMPLETE**

Lauritz Melchior (Parsifal) Kirsten Flagstad (Kundry)  
Arnold Gabor (Klingsor)  
Vocal Ensemble and Orchestra of the Metropolitan Opera  
Erich Leinsdorf  
Good Friday - April 15, 1938  
Broadcast commentary: Milton Cross

and

Wagner  
**TRISTAN und ISOLDE**  
**ACT II COMPLETE**

Lauritz Melchior (Tristan), Kirsten Flagstad (Isolde)  
Kathryn Meisle (Brangäne), Emanuel List (King Marke)  
San Francisco Opera, 1937  
Fritz Reiner

& **Wagner: Parsifal, Act III, conclusion:** (Lauritz Melchior; Herbert Janssen);  
**Wesendonck Lieder: Träume; Die Walküre: Winterstürme; Lohengrin: In fernem Land** (Lauritz Melchior)

IMMORTAL PERFORMANCES 1186-2, mono (2 CDs: 150:05)

By **Ken Meltzer**  
Fanfare September / October 2023

More historic gems from Immortal Performances (IP), this time in the form of Act II of both Wagner's *Parsifal* and *Tristan und Isolde*. The *Parsifal* Act II is part of a complete Metropolitan Opera (Met) Good Friday broadcast of April 15, 1938. It is the only Met *Parsifal* broadcast featuring Lauritz Melchior as Parsifal, and Kirsten Flagstad as Kundry. In fact, after the 1938 *Parsifal* broadcast, there was not another one of the opera until April 12, 1952. The *Tristan* is from a San Francisco Opera (SFO) performance at the Los Angeles Shrine Auditorium on November 15, 1937. Both are treasures, indeed. The *Parsifal* cast is without peer; in addition to Melchior and Flagstad, the singers includes Friedrich Schorr (Amfortas) and Emanuel List (Gurnemanz). Artur Bodanzky conducts Acts II and III, while the young Erich Leinsdorf leads Act II, allowing the venerable Wagner maestro some rest. This *Parsifal* has previously circulated via Edward J. Smith LPs, and a MYTO CD set. Both are afflicted with horrible sound, and a great deal of omitted music, the result of the recordist having to change disc sides. IP's Richard Caniell has found a different source, in much better sound, but only of Act II. The sound, as restored by IP, is quite fine, with ample presence, definition, and dynamic range. While the results may not quite equal contemporaneous commercial recordings, thanks to IP, this remarkable performance may be fully enjoyed.

As Kirsten Flagstad's career progressed, she increasingly acquired a matronly presence, both in voice and bearing. But in the 1938 *Parsifal* broadcast, Flagstad fully embodies Kundry's energy and internal conflict. Kundry plays many roles in Act II; a tormented soul who is at various times a sorceress, seductress, and a woman who yearns for salvation through Parsifal's love. Flagstad convinces throughout, and her voice is radiant and powerful. The high notes are both secure and thrilling. Melchior, likewise, is sublime in his depiction of Parsifal's transformation from a "pure fool" to a man who keenly understands the nature of suffering and sacrifice. The voice is like no other; from its rich lower register, to a gorgeous middle, to top notes that have the focus and ring that made Lauritz Melchior not just the greatest Wagnerian heldentenor of all time, but a prodigious Otello as well. Arnold Gabor's bright and focused baritone, crisp diction, and intensity of utterance create a menacing Klingsor. Erich Leinsdorf leads a performance that is by turns propulsive, lyrical, and masterfully paced throughout. Radio host Milton Cross's commentary is included at Act's end. As an appendix to Act II, IP includes the closing portion of *Parsifal's* final Act. Assembled from live and studio material, the sequence features Herbert Janssen as Amfortas, and Melchior reprising the role of Parsifal. Janssen, whose vocal timbre bears a striking resemblance to Melchior's, is an eloquent and profoundly human Amfortas. Melchior's voice rings out with all the splendor one could hope for.

The SFO *Tristan* Act II offers a host of glories as well. Conductor Fritz Reiner leads an electrifying performance. The entire sequence of the Act's opening to Tristan's arrival is a masterpiece of proportion and phrasing. Reiner inexorably builds the tension to the breaking point, shattered by Tristan's arrival and the lovers' frenetic, passionate exchanges. The ensuing *Liebesnacht* embodies both a sense of timelessness, and an inexorable progression. Kirsten Flagstad is a passionate and sensuous Isolde. Once again, the high notes ring out with freedom, accuracy, and focus. Melchior is in splendid voice. At this stage of his career, not only could the great Danish heldentenor surmount every test of strength, he could float hushed passages with the beauty of a Gigli or Schipa. Tristan was Melchior's favorite role, and his identification with the tragic hero is palpable. Mezzo Kathryn Meisle is a fine Brangäne, vocally attractive and authoritative in her "Watch" sequence. Bass Emanuel List delivers King Mark's orations with humanity and arresting emotional depth. As Richard Caniell acknowledges in his Recording Notes, the sound for this broadcast is problematic. The results of Caniell's painstaking restoration are below that of the Met *Parsifal* Act II. There is considerable surface noise, some distortion, and the singers are occasionally swamped by the orchestra. There are great rewards to be had in this performance, but effort and patience will be required on the listener's part. No such challenges exist in the bonus material for CD II, in fine sound, and featuring Melchior in "Magic Key" radio broadcasts from 1935-6. The tenor sings *Träume* from the *Wesendonck Lieder*, "Wintersturme" from *Die Walküre*, and "In fernem Land" from *Lohengrin*. Melchior is heard at the peak of his artistry, poetic in utterance, and vocally resplendent.

The new IP release offers performances that will be of great interest to anyone interested in the music of Wagner and its finest interpreters. In his Recording Notes, Richard Caniell shares that Marston Records is planning as a future release the complete April 15, 1938 Met *Parsifal*. According to the Marston

website: “(t)he transfers were made from original discs recorded off the air by a New York recording studio.” Like IP, Marston Records does superlative work in its restoration of historic recordings. I anticipate the sound of the Marston complete *Parsifal* will be competitive with IP’s Act II. As for the *Tristan*, Caniell reminds his patrons of IP’s prior releases of spectacular complete performances of the opera with Flagstad and Melchior; Covent Garden, June, 1937 (Beecham, conducting), and Met, April, 16, 1938 (Bodanzky, conducting). Both are in far better sound than the SFO Act II preserved on this release. And so, as with any purchase, it’s a case of balancing needs, wants, and other available materials. Regardless, all Wagnerians should be indebted to IP’s indefatigable and inspired work on behalf of the composer and his exponents’ legacies. This release (which includes Caniell and William Russell’s extensive and informative written commentary) is emblematic of that achievement. Recommended.

Five stars: Melchior and Flagstad star in the second acts of *Parsifal* and *Tristan*

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Review by **Henry Fogel**

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The fact that there is no complete recording of *Parsifal* with Lauritz Melchior singing the title role is a source of immense disappointment to all Wagnerians. Parsifal was one of Melchior’s greatest roles, and he sang it often enough at the Met that one would think there must be a number of broadcasts. However, the only one was the Good Friday matinee of April 15, 1938, and it only survives in an almost unlistenable preservation issued by Edward Smith on his EJS label. The second act alone survived in a superior version, recorded off the air by a professional service hired by an admirer of Kirsten Flagstad. Therefore, he only requested the act that prominently features Kundry. That private recording, which is excellent for 1938 off-the-air, became the basis of Richard Caniell’s restoration on this Immortal Performances release.

It is a huge loss from that glorious era of Wagnerian singing that so few of his operas were broadcast, while the standard Italian and French repertoire was repeated frequently. In his informative and entertaining notes Caniell blames the Met management, but I wonder if the radio stations were responsible. I know for a fact that in 1956 Dimitri Mitropoulos and the New York Philharmonic were forced to make cuts in the Sunday matinee broadcast of Mahler’s Third Symphony because CBS refused to permit the broadcast of the full work, which would take more than the allotted 90 minutes without a break. It would not surprise me if the Met was often told that they could not broadcast entire Wagner operas.

Instead of mourning what we don’t have, we should be grateful for what survives. While Melchior and Flagstad did make a studio recording of the scene between Parsifal and Kundry, it lacks the electricity and specificity of inflection heard in this live performance. We get some of the most thrilling singing I have heard from Flagstad, encompassing the full range of Kundry’s complex character. She is seductive as she tempts Parsifal and then malevolently overpowering when she curses him. Flagstad conveys this transformation from one extreme to the other with a ringing high B natural as she calls on Klingsor to

claim Parsifal. This performance is a vivid refutation of the frequently heard canard that Flagstad was a great singer but a boring actress.

The same has rarely been said about Melchior's vocal acting, a Heldentenor who had no equal during or after his career. Listen to the power he exhibits as Parsifal suddenly feels Amfortas's pain ("Amfortas! Die Wunde!"), compared with the tenderness as compassion sets in. In addition to the natural beauty and strength of his voice, which seems never to tire, what makes Melchior unique, is his ability to unleash raw power with the same instrument that could depict tender warmth. It is impossible to imagine any tenor closer to what Wagner must have had in mind when he wrote *Parsifal*, making it all the worse that we don't have a listenable complete recording of Melchior's assumption of the role.

The young Erich Leinsdorf conducted only act II of this *Parsifal*, allowing Artur Bodanzky to rest (Bodanzky was scheduled to conduct *Tristan* the next day). Leinsdorf's interpretation is intensely dramatic, with extremes of tempos both slow and fast, but it holds together superbly. The bonus *Parsifal* material is a conflation of a 1937 Covent Garden performance, a Melchior studio recording, and the women's chorus from Karl Muck's studio recording. It makes an appropriate finale to the disc.

At first blush, there seems less rationale for the second disc in the set. There are at least nine complete live performances of *Tristan und Isolde* starring Flagstad and Melchior, including one from Covent Garden in 1936 conducted by Fritz Reiner. Why, one might ask, should we be interested in yet another one of act II? My answer is that Reiner operates here at a level of white-hot inspiration.

Caniell admits in his producer's notes that this recording is "highly flawed." The combination of poor microphone placement, resulting in inconsistent balances, and some scratchiness on some of the original discs, has always limited appreciation of the performance. The sound is still not great, but the improvement Caniell has brought about over a prior release on Legato Classics is significant. Now one can hear the remarkable qualities of the performance.

Reiner demonstrates a degree of flexibility and suppleness in the *Liebesnacht* that may surprise those who think of him more in terms of precision and rhythmic tautness than expressivity. He provides a cushion on which the two lovers express their love with intimacy at first, and then with intense passion. Katherine Meisle makes a rich-voiced Brangäne and Emanuel List a powerful King Marke, despite a cut in his scene. Flagstad and Melchior are as wonderful as you would imagine them to be, bringing all of their unique gifts to the music.

The three bonus tracks on the *Tristan* disc are excerpts from 1935 and 1936, sourced from a radio program called "Magic Key." The three selections benefit from good historical broadcast sound and demonstrate Melchior at his best.

Immortal Performances' usual high-quality booklet accompanies the set. There are very informative notes by Caniell and William Russell, plot synopses, and some marvelous historic photographs.