

**WAGNER *Tristan und Isolde*** • Artur Bodanzky, cond; Lauritz Melchior (*Tristan*); Kirsten Flagstad (*Isolde*); Karin Branzell (*Brangäne*); Julius Huehn (*Kurwenal*); Ludwig Hofmann (*King Marke*); Metropolitan Opera Ch & O • IMMORTAL PERFORMANCES 1207-3, mono (3 CDs: 200:57) Live: Metropolitan Opera, New York 2/8/1936

By

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FANFARE July-August 2025

Immortal Performances (IP) presents the complete February 8, 1936 Saturday afternoon Metropolitan Opera broadcast of Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde*, featuring the immortal duo of tenor Lauritz Melchior and soprano Kirsten Flagstad in the title roles. There was a time when Melchior/Flagstad *Tristan* performances were a regular occurrence at the Met; often broadcast, sometimes even twice in one season. I have reviewed four previous IP issues of 1930s Met *Tristan* broadcasts, all starring Melchior and Flagstad. Artur Bodanzky, then the Met's leading Wagner conductor, leads the quartet of performances. The following is the casting of the Brangäne, Kurwenal, and King Marke for those broadcasts, as well as the *Fanfare* citation for my review:

- 3/9/35 (Karin Branzell, Friedrich Schorr, Ludwig Hofmann) (Sept/Oct 2017, 41:1)
- 1/2/1937 (Kerstin Thorborg, Julius Huehn, Ludwig Hofmann) (Nov/Dec 2015, 39:2)
- 1/29/1938 (Gertrude Wettergren, Julius Huehn, Emanuel List) (Mar/Apr 2021, 44:4)
- 4/16/1938 (Karin Branzell, Julius Huehn, Emanuel List) (Nov/Dec 2021, 45:2)

Apart from Melchior, Flagstad, and Bodanzky, there's quite a bit of duplication in the casting of these broadcasts. And the performances, all superb, are similar in character. Melchior is a vocal and interpretive marvel throughout. Flagstad is in her most youthful voice for the 1935 broadcast. But she sings magnificently in all the performances, and her characterization becomes ever more specific and convincing. Bodanzky made extensive cuts to the score (I specify them in my review of the January 2, 1937 broadcast). But what remains has a marvelous sense of momentum, searing power, and the employment of rubato and string portamentos that are the hallmarks of a golden era. The remaining singers are thoroughly convincing both from a vocal and dramatic perspective.

IP has done magnificent work in its sonic restoration of these treasures. IP's version of the 1935 broadcast is a vast improvement over the previous West Hill Radio Archives release. As I wrote: "At long last, is possible to hear and enjoy, rather than endure, a shining moment in the Met's history." The 1937 and 1938 broadcasts approach, but do not quite equal, the sonic quality of contemporaneous commercial recordings. Best of the lot in terms of sound, is the April 16, 1938 broadcast, once again a stunning improvement over a prior issue, part of the 2013 Sony Classical *Wagner at the Met* 25-disc boxed set. All of the *Tristan* broadcasts as issued by IP are worth hearing, with either or both of the 1938 performances essential listening.

In his *Recording Notes*, Richard Caniell describes the intensive labor involved in restoring the February 8, 1936 *Tristan* broadcast from discs that resided in a private

collection. Certain portions contained “substantial groove defects, heard quite protractedly, and passages of excessive distortion, some the result of the original discs being repeatedly played.” Caniell replaced those portions with other Melchior/Flagstad/Bodanzky *Tristan* broadcasts. The replacements comprise six minutes in Act I, four minutes in Act III, and nine minutes in Act III. As is emblematic of IP’s work, the substitutions are achieved in convincing fashion. The overall sound is better than the 1935 broadcast, somewhat inferior to the 1937 performance, and significantly bettered in the two 1938 versions. As for the performance itself, the exceptional qualities I’ve already mentioned about the other 1930s broadcasts fully apply. Melchior and Flagstad are stupendous in every way, admirably supported by the remainder of the cast. Collectors who desire all, or most of the 1930s Met *Tristan* broadcasts can purchase this with full confidence. For others, this will be more of a specialty item, especially given the existence of the 1938 broadcasts. But make no mistake, the February 8, 1936 Met *Tristan* is an extraordinary document of a unique and glorious era that will never be duplicated.

The booklet includes Dewey Faulkner’s always informative and engaging commentary on the featured artists, performance, and Wagner’s *Tristan*. I do have to take issue with Faulkner’s comments re. Wagner’s *Die Walküre* that “the part of Sieglinde is not among the opera’s main roles (which are Brünnhilde and Wotan...)”. Unlike Brünnhilde and Wotan, Sieglinde appears in all three acts, and is musically and dramatically crucial in each. In addition to Flagstad, other legendary Met sopranos who found Sieglinde worthy of their time and art include Régine Crespin, Emma Eames, Olive Fremstad, Johanna Gadski, Maria Jeritza, Marjorie Lawrence, Lilli and Lotte Lehmann, Maria Müller, Birgit Nilsson, Elisabeth Rethberg, Leonie Rysanek, Helen Traubel, and Astrid Varnay. Richard Caniell provides a detailed plot synopsis of *Tristan*, as well as his *Recording Notes*. All thanks to IP for making this treasure available in sound that allows unimpeded enjoyment of its magic. Recommended.

Five stars: IP’s fine restoration of the February 8, 1936 Met *Tristan* broadcast