

WAGNER *Die Walküre* • Paul Breisach, cond; Astrid Varnay (*Sieglinde*); Helen Traubel (*Brünnhilde*); Kerstin Thorborg (*Fricka*); Lauritz Melchior (*Siegmond*); Joel Berglund (*Wotan*); Emanuel List (*Hunding*); Metropolitan Op Ch & O • IMMORTAL PERFORMANCES 1162-4, mono (4 CDs: 4:23:57) Live: Metropolitan Opera, New York 3/30/1946

& **WAGNER *Die Walküre*: Wotan's Farewell and Magic Fire Music** (Five performances by Alexander Kipnis, Marcel Journet, Nazareno de Angelis, Hans Hotter, and Mark Reizen)

& **WAGNER *Die fliegende Hölleander*: Die Frist ist um** (Joel Berglund, bar; Richard Krauss, cond. ***Tannhäuser*: O du mein holder, Abendstern** (Joel Berglund, bar; Leo Blech, cond)

Henry Fogel

FANFARE March / April 2022

Die Walküre was very well served by the Metropolitan Opera between 1937 and 1948 during the Golden Age of Wagnerian singing. Many of those performances were broadcast and thus preserved for posterity. One consistent ingredient was the Siegmund of Lauritz Melchior, heard on broadcast from 1937, 1940, 1931, 1943, 1944, and this one from 1946. I have written before that when it comes to Heldentenors, there was Melchior and then there was everybody else. The beauty of the voice, the stamina, the seamless *legato*, the intelligent characterization, and the sheer intensity of his singing all combine to separate him from the field. Good as he is, however, Melchior is not the reason to obtain this performance, because he can be heard on so many others.

What makes this an important release is the combination of other principal singers: Astrid Varnay's glowing and brilliantly vocalized Sieglinde, Helen Traubel's unique combination of vocal beauty and power as Brünnhilde, and Joel Berglund's darkly colored bass-baritone as Wotan. Add in Emanuel List's gruff, malevolent Hunding and Kerstin Thorborg's dignified and richly sung Fricka, and you have a level of Wagner singing that could not be approached today by any opera house in the world. Finally, the group of Valkyries is also superb (they include Margaret Harshaw, Herta Glaz, Thelma Votipka, and Martha Lipton). The 1946 broadcast sound is richer and fuller than on most of the earlier broadcasts, which adds to the pleasure. This is one of those rare recordings where you can say that there truly is no weak link.

Probably the least familiar singer for most will be Berglund. The Swedish singer is somewhat generalized in his dramatic declamation, but the dark richness of his voice and the power he summons for the last act are extremely impressive. Berglund cannot match the dramatic specificity of inflection and color of Friedrich Schorr's Wotan, but he provides a vocal beauty that brings its own kind of satisfaction. With his voice matching the power of Traubel in their final confrontation, the effect is awe-inspiring. It was logical for Immortal Performances to fill out the third disc with his beautifully sung rendition of the "Song to the Evening Star" from

Tannhäuser, and his quite potently acted version of the Dutchman's great monologue from a 1942 Bayreuth performance.

Astrid Varnay was an extremely important Wagnerian soprano at the Met, as well as at Bayreuth. She was one of the few dramatic sopranos who were equally successful as a heroic Brünnhilde and the softer, more feminine Sieglinde, because Varnay could sing with both power and lyrical beauty. Varnay was always sensitive to the text—she was never guilty of singing only the notes but constantly expressed the meaning behind them. Here she portray the full range of emotions that Wagner put into Sieglinde. Tenderness, valor, strength, anger, and rapture are all present and sung with glorious vocalism.

Helen Traubel's Brünnhilde is also magnificent. On other occasions she might show distress with her highest notes but not here. "Hojotoho" is stunning, and the rich glow of her voice is present throughout. Traubel's vocal acting in this performance is skilled, something that was not always the case with her. She is the subservient daughter when that is what is called for in her duets with Wotan, but she is equally convincing when Brünnhilde shows strength, for example, arguing with Wotan on Siegmund's behalf. Her final scene with Wotan leading to the Farewell is shattering in its power.

Kerstin Thorborg was the Met's leading Fricka from 1936 until her retirement in 1950. Here again we have a singer who lets the dramatic situation and the text dictate her approach to the music. Fricka requires a singer who can persuasively demand that Wotan uphold marital duty without sounding like a harridan. The music is not written to depicts a shrew—it is a dignified statement of moral principle. Thorborg sets just the right tone, and as with the other two female leads, she does it with beautiful vocalism.

We cannot blame conductor Paul Breisach for the unfortunate cuts in acts II and III. They were instituted by Artur Bodanzky, who was in charge of the Met's Wagner wing until his death in 1939. Breisach covered much of the same repertoire from 1941 to 1946, after which he moved his career at the San Francisco Opera. His conducting is impulsive and dramatic, similar to Bodanzky's without being in any way special. The orchestral playing is spotty. In the end, this performance belongs to the singers, and that is more than sufficient, since this is surely one of the most vocally magnificent *Walküre* performances I have ever heard.

The fourth disc, which features five classic recordings of Wotan's Farewell and the Magic Fire Music, is a quite extraordinary addition. Some of those recordings originally ended after Wotan stops singing, and producer Richard Caniell has interpolated the Stokowski/Philadelphia RCA recording of the Magic Fire Music where it was absent. The details are as follows:

Alexander Kipnis, Leo Blech, cond., Berlin Staatsoper Orchestra 1926

Marcel Journet, Piero Coppola, cond.; Unidentified Orchestra 1928

Nazareno de Angelis, Lorenzo Molajoli, cond.; Unidentified Orchestra 1929

Hans Hotter, Robert Heger, cond.; Berlin Philharmonic 1942
Mark Reizen, Vassily Nebolsin, cond.; Bolshoi Theatre Orchestra 1951

Every one of these recordings is worth knowing. Hans Hotter aside, the other four singers are pure basses, and they all offer thrilling, beautiful singing.

Kipnis and Hotter are the most successful at marrying music and text. Journet (captured here at the age of 60) demonstrates an even tonal emission and an elegant approach to phrasing, but less specificity of inflection. Nazzareno de Angelis's version is masterful. Even though it is in Italian, it demonstrates an understanding of Wotan's conflicted feelings, his frustration at what he was forced to do alongside his fatherly love for his favorite daughter. Add de Angelis's full-throated singing, and the result is a great recording. The same can be said about Mark Reizen's version, even though it is in Russian. It is richly expressive, convincingly supporting his reputation as one of the finest basses of the 20th century. Reizen and de Angelis are especially effective in communicating the heartbreak Wotan experiences at this pivotal moment in the *Ring*. Some of these are quite rare, and it was brilliant to add them to this set.

As usual from Immortal Performances, the transfers are excellent, and the 40-page booklet is an important component of the package. Dewey Faulkner's observations on the opera, the Met, and this performance are perceptive and enlightening. For anyone who loves Wagner, this release is recommended enthusiastically.

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Ken Meltzer

FANFARE March / April 2022

A star-studded Metropolitan Opera March 30, 1946 broadcast performance of Wagner's *Die Walküre*, issued by Immortal Performances (IP), is a wealth of vocal riches. Act I focuses upon Siegmund and Sieglinde, here sung by tenor Lauritz Melchior and soprano Astrid Varnay. Melchior was 56 at the time of this performance, and had been singing the most grueling Wagner heldentenor roles at the Met since his debut on February 17, 1926 as Tannhäuser. The tireless

Melchior is in splendid voice, and sounding every bit the youthful hero. All of the familiar Melchior traits are in full force; a remarkably beautiful and powerful voice that shows no sign of fatigue throughout the performance, crystal-clear diction, and total dramatic involvement. Yes, the climactic high notes on “Wälse!” are not held for the superhuman length heard, for example, in the February 17, 1940 Met broadcast. But they are impressive and majestic in their own right. And I think a point to be made is that Melchior knew his voice and technique so well, he was able to judge how long to sing such notes so that no hint of age or strain was perceptible. It’s also interesting to hear how Melchior’s Sigmund is hardly a dramatic carbon copy of the prior broadcast (and other recordings as well). Lauritz Melchior was an involved and creative artist, one who responded to the stimulus and energy of the moment. From time to time, Melchior and conductor Paul Breisach don’t see eye to eye on tempos. But that is hardly unique to Lauritz Melchior’s recorded legacy (at least in live performance)! This is a masterful performance by the greatest Wagnerian tenor of the 20th century, still at the height of his vocal and dramatic powers. As Sieglinde, Astrid Varnay may not possess the ideal warmth and lyrical quality for the tragic heroine. But there is no questioning the power and security of her voice, and the total commitment she brings to the role. And Melchior and Varnay demonstrate a marvelous chemistry; their sympathy, tender love, and passion are all quite palpable. Bass Emanuel List is in somewhat tremulous voice, but he still sings with authority and is a suitably menacing Hunding.

Act II introduces us to three more superb Wagnerians; Joel Berglund (Wotan), Helen Traubel (Brünnhilde), and Kerstin Thorborg (Fricka). Of the three, Berglund is probably the least familiar to devotees of historic Met broadcasts. The Swedish bass-baritone sang at the Met from January 9, 1946 to April 15, 1949, principally in Wagnerian roles. Rather than go into detail about each of this trio of singers, I’ll note that each possesses sterling technique, and impressive and appropriate vocal weight, color, and stamina. Berglund, Traubel, and Thorborg also well understand the lyrical nature of Wagner’s writing, and each sings with marvelously pointed diction and impeccable legato. They are also fine singing actors, keenly aware of Wagner’s text and the unfolding drama. It’s a shame, then, that the cuts imposed by the Met’s prior leading conductor of Wagner, Artur Bodanzky, mar Brünnhilde and Sigmund’s Act II meeting, and the Brünnhilde/Wotan’s confrontation in Act III. But what remains is Wagnerian singing of the highest level. Throughout, Paul Breisach keeps matters moving, and he understands the ebb and flow of Wagner’s music drama. The Met Orchestra is not in impressive form, somewhat lacking in heft and precision. But on this occasion, the vocalists (including a team of very impressive Valkyries in Act III) take center stage, and make this a *Walküre* I am delighted to add to my collection, and to return to often. The broadcast sound is quite fine. Host Milton Cross may be heard before the start of Act I. As a most welcome postscript to the Met *Walküre*, IP presents Berglund in a live performances of the Flying Dutchman’s monologue, and a studio recording Wolfram’s *Song to the Evening Star*. In both cases, Berglund sings gorgeously, and with arresting emotion.

The final disc comprises five commercial recordings of Wotan’s Farewell from the conclusion of *Die Walküre*. And what a treasure trove of singing this is: Alexander Kipnis

(1926), Marcel Journet (1928), Nazzareno De Angelis (1929), Hans Hotter (1942), and Mark Reizen (1951). Kipnis and Hotter sing in the original German, while Journet, De Angelis, and Reizen perform the music in, respectively, French, Italian, and Russian translation. To begin, I'll note that although Joel Berglund sang his Farewell at the conclusion of a long and grueling performance, his rendition stands up to all these studio recordings made, one most presume, under far less grueling circumstances. The remaining artists all sing magnificently, and complete sympathy with the lyrical nature of Wagner's writing. There is not a "Bayreuth Bark" or unattractive sound to be heard. Which is not to say these interpretations lack dramatic insight and fire. For me, Hans Hotter is the most convincing in embodying Wotan's love for Brünnhilde, and his sorrow at their parting. It's a masterful piece of vocal acting. But all of the other Wotans on this final disc fully embrace the drama as well. Both Journet and Reizen were in their late 50s when they made their recordings, but you certainly wouldn't guess that from the vocal health and energy they lavish upon the music. The De Angelis recording concludes at the moment when Wotan kisses Brünnhilde to sleep. From that point, IP inserts a 1939 recording by Leopold Stokowski and the Philadelphia Orchestra, in which instruments sing Wotan's lines. The Stokowski-Philadelphia O recording is also used for the other featured versions that lack an orchestral postlude to Wotan's sung portion. I listened to these five recordings (all beautifully restored by IP) without interruption, and was enthralled from start to finish. A perfect complement to the superb complete *Walküre* broadcast.

The set's booklet features Dewey Faulkner's in-depth and informative commentary, Richard Caniell's *Walküre* plot synopsis and his Recording Notes, alongside artist bios. An unalloyed pleasure from start to finish, a treasurable document of sublime Wagnerian singing. Recommended with the greatest pleasure and enthusiasm.

5 stars: A gloriously-sung Met 1946 *Die Walküre*, and a treasure trove of Wotan Farewells.