

**LAURITZ MELCHIOR: A Tribute** • Lauritz Melchior (ten); Various artists • IMMORTAL PERFORMANCES 1139-2 mono (4 CDs: 312:54)

**WAGNER *Die Walküre***: Act II (Edwin McArthur, cond; Kirsten Flagstad (*Brünnhilde*); Marjorie Lawrence (*Sieglinde*); Herta Glaz (*Fricka*); Lauritz Melchior (*Siegmund*); Fred Destal (*Wotan*); San Francisco Op O. Live: San Francisco 10/24/1939).

**WAGNER *Die Walküre***: Act I; Act II, Scene 3 (Fritz Stiedry, cond; Helen Traubel (*Brünnhilde*); Rose Bampton (*Sieglinde*); Lauritz Melchior (*Siegmund*); Mihály Székely (*Hunding*); Metropolitan Op O. Live: New York 1/24/1948).

**WAGNER *Tristan und Isolde***: Act II (Fritz Busch, cond; Helen Traubel (*Isolde*); Blanche Thebom (*Brangäne*); Lauritz Melchior (*Tristan*); Mikhail Székely (*King Marke*); Metropolitan Op O. Live: New York 1/3/1948).

& **VERDI *Aida***: *Judgment Scene* (with Margarethe Arndt-Ober). **OTELLO**: *Esultate! Dio mi potevi* (2 recordings). *Niun mi tema*. **PUCCINI *Tosca***: *Recondita armonia*. **LEONCAVALLO *Mattinata***. **PAGLIACCI**: *Vesti la giubba* (2 recordings). **STRAUSS *Zueignung***. **HEIMLICHE AUFFORDERUNG**. **SCHUBERT *Ständchen***. **SEVERRE JORDAN *Høorer du!***. **GRIEG *Ich liebe dich***. **WAGNER *Der fliegende Holländer***: *Mit Gewitter und Sturm*. **DIE MEISTERSINGER**: *Preislied*. (2 recordings). **DIE WALKÜRE**: *Winterstürme*. **LOHENGRIN**: *In fernem Land*. *Mein lieber Schwan*. **PARSIFAL**: *Nur eine Waffe taucht!* (2 recordings). **SIEGFRIED**: *Nothung!*. *Wesendonck-Lieder*: **TRAUME**. *Interview with Melchior*

By **Henry Fogel**

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There are a number of opera singers who deserve the adjective “great.” Each of them brings to the public something unique. I can think of only one, however, whose level of performance is so far above and beyond his colleagues that he occupies his own level in the vocal hierarchy: Lauritz Melchior. At least since the beginning of recordings, in the category of Heldenotenors there has been Melchior and then all others. This is not to denigrate Jon Vickers, Jacques Urlus, Paul Franz, Leo Slezak, or anyone else, but in terms of consistency of vocal production, stamina, distinctiveness of timbre, shining beauty of tone, and dramatic presence, Melchior towers

above them all. In his classic book about opera singers, *The Grand Tradition*, John B. Steane makes the case that Melchior was actually undervalued during his career because he was so taken for granted as the obvious tenor of choice for any Wagnerian performance, particularly at the Met. Additionally, Melchior's appearance in some Hollywood films was frowned upon by supercilious critics who saw it as slumming. Perhaps his image also suffered because he seemed to be an easygoing, non-temperamental opera star, lacking the peculiar kind of glamor that can somehow come from outrageous behavior.

His enormous recorded legacy, which includes many live performances, demonstrates all of his attributes and very few weaknesses. He had a reputation among some critics, and apparently some conductors, for rhythmic insecurity. You can search long and hard for that in hundreds of hours of live broadcasts, however, and you will wonder what this complaint was all about. I love what *New York Times* critic Harold C. Schonberg wrote in 1994 about the carping: "And those who question his musicianship simply do not know what they are talking about. He could sing tenderly, with a melting *legato* line that could spin off into a haunting *pianissimo* as in the second act *Tristan* duet. His consonants were crisp, and every word he sang is clear. Year after year he sang the heaviest of Wagnerian roles with little diminution of authority."

Melchior's reputation could have been even greater than it was had Edward Johnson, the Met's general manager, not determined that he would not assign any Italian roles to Melchior. The tenor pleaded to be allotted *Otello* and *Aida* performances, but he never got any. One can understand the Met featuring Giovanni Martinelli as Otello, but how wonderful it would have been to alternate Martinelli with Melchior. And after Martinelli came Torsten Ralf and Ramón Vinay—both more than respectable but not on Melchior's level. The *Otello* excerpts in this set reveal what Met audiences missed. More about that later, when discussing the bonus material.

The singing on this set is extraordinary for its consistency of quality over a span of time beginning in 1923 (the acoustical *Aida* Judgment Scene) and concluding in 1960 (an "Esultate" from *Otello* recorded at the age of 70). Throughout, what we hear is a voice with a shining beauty at all dynamic levels, a scrupulous *legato*, and a consistent sensitivity to text and the dramatic situation.

The set begins with the complete second act of *Die Walküre* as broadcast from the San Francisco Opera in 1939 (only the second act was broadcast). Although Immortal Performances previously issued the *Todesverkündigung* scene from the same performance, this is the first release of the entire act. (I say “entire act,” but the performance employed a couple of cuts, perhaps a broadcast length requirement.) There are a number of recorded performances of this opera with Melchior. This one has the advantage of featuring both Kirsten Flagstad as Brünnhilde and Marjorie Lawrence as Sieglinde.

The *Todesverkündigung* scene between Flagstad and Melchior is notable for the range of moods it captures. Siegmund’s refusal to accept Brünnhilde’s announcement of his imminent death is sung with gleaming tone and total vocal authority, and the chemistry between the two is palpable. Add in Marjorie Lawrence’s shining and rich soprano and her skill at shading, and this act receives the kind of vocal performance Wagner lovers today can only dream about. Herta Glaz’s potent Fricka is another asset. Fred Destal’s ordinary Wotan is the one shortcoming, and Edwin McArthur’s flaccid conducting is no asset either. But I would not want to be without the glorious singing heard here. The sound is surprisingly good for a 1939 radio broadcast—clean and natural.

The next major extract is act I plus act II, scene 3 from *Die Walküre* at the Met on January 24, 1948. This broadcast has never been available before. Immortal Performances issued a 1944 Met broadcast with essentially the same cast and George Szell conducting. Fritz Stiedry was a better conductor than his limited exposure on disc might indicate, but here he certainly doesn’t bring Szell’s level of attention to details of balance and color. With so many *Die Walküre* performances with Melchior already on the market, you might think this one is superfluous. However, I would hate to have missed the opportunity to hear this example of the tenor in his final season of performing Siegmund at the Met.

It is incomprehensible for a singer who is a few months shy of 58, and who has been singing Wagnerian roles for a quarter century, to still be performing at this level. What we hear is still the evenly produced voice of the young hero, along with a knowing inflection of every phrase. It is also wonderful to have another example of the important American soprano Rose Bampton as Sieglinde. Her voice has a glowing ring, and it retains its fullness of sound all the way up to the top of her range. Her Sieglinde is somewhat less docile than some, but it does not lack femininity. Mihály Székely’s dark, black bass is perfect for Hunding. In the third scene of the second act we add the gloriously rich soprano of Helen Traubel, here

displaying a freer top than she sometimes did. If you listen to the *Todesverkündigung* scene here and in the San Francisco performance, you can appreciate how Melchior did not fall into routines. He is very specific in his interactions with each soprano; in both cases the dramatic tension of the scene is almost unbearable. Traubel's vocal acting is significantly more generic than Flagstad's in its inflections, however, and one almost gets the impression that Melchior is trying to compensate for that (or perhaps to inspire her).

The final major part of this set is the complete second act of *Tristan* from the Met in 1948. I have never seen this anywhere else and in fact had only heard about it as a "lost" broadcast. Caniell says in his recording notes that the source is a private recording by an American opera lover, and we all owe that person an enormous debt of gratitude. The sound is quite listenable for anyone used to historical monaural broadcast from this era.

Fritz Busch's conducting is splendid in its balancing of freedom and discipline. There is a complete Busch-led *Tristan* from 1948 that has circulated on the Omega label; the sound is cramped, and the Marke is the less desirable Deszö Ernster. Here Székely gives a deeply moving performance. He manages to convey the complicated mix of anger and disappointment that is integral to Marke's long monologue. Busch also creates a more sensuous and even erotic atmosphere in the love duet than most conductors did, through the application of subtle rubato throughout the scene. This act alone should serve as a rebuke to those who claimed that Melchior lacked a strong internal rhythm; Busch's supple flexibility is matched inflection for inflection by the tenor. Traubel is splendid also, with a big, warm, feminine sound. The top of her range is tight, but it is heard in only a brief passing moment. On the whole she and Melchior blend their two rich voices perfectly.

In assessing the bonus material, it is probably the *Otello* excerpts that one should address first. Caniell has chosen a wonderful cross-section of extracts that demonstrate the degree of loss suffered by Met audiences due to the management's limitation of Melchior to Wagner. Between 1926 and 1950 the Danish tenor sang 519 performances of operas by Wagner at the Met. While he did occasionally sing arias or scenes from operas by other composers at Met galas, he was never cast in a complete opera by any other composer! During the years when Melchior was on the Met's roster, here are the tenors cast as Radamès in *Aida*, a role he sang often in Europe and wanted to sing at the Met: Giovanni Martinelli, Frederick Jagel, Set Svanholm, Artur Carron, Carlo del Corso, Sidney Rayner, Beniamino Gigli,

Ramón Vinay, Torsten Ralf, and Kurt Baum. In case you thought it was Melchior's wish to limit himself to Wagner, the interview included in this set makes clear his disappointment in being pigeonholed.

His case is clinched by the recordings here. The two of Otello's monologue from act III ("Dio! mi potevi") are masterful. The 1927 recording (in German) encompasses all of the qualities one looks for in that scene. The opening sequence on one repeated note requires intelligence and imagination if the tenor is honoring Verdi's purpose in dwelling on the same note. Vickers met this requirement, and in a different way so did Mario del Monaco and Martinelli. But Melchior may surpass them all in the way he varies the color of phrase after phrase, reflecting Otello's inner agony. Then there is the "Esultate!," recorded in 1960 when Melchior was 70! There is a slight loss of shine to the voice, but the tone is remarkably strong and evenly produced. The earliest recording in this tribute is the Judgment Scene from *Aida*, sung in German on a 1923 acoustical recording with the dark-voiced Amneris of Margarethe Arndt-Ober. It is splendid and shows Melchior's mastery of the Verdi style, even when singing in German. Another demonstration of the consistency he maintained over time is "Vesti la giubba" from *Pagliacci*. We get his 1929 studio recording with Barbirolli conducting and a 1950 *Voice of Firestone* broadcast. The later version was sung when he was 60 years old, and yet there is virtually no degradation of tone or vocal technique.

All of the Italian excerpts show a total comfort with the Italian line, even when sung in German. I was particularly taken with Cavaradossi's "Recondita armonia" from *Tosca*, a performance (in Italian) marked by ardor and a broad arching line. One of the wonderful aspects of Immortal Performances releases is the wisdom of Richard Caniell's choices from old radio broadcasts and all kinds of sources. The 23 minutes of interview material is fascinating. Melchior's warmth and humor come across, along with his frustration at the way the Met typecast him.

Now we come to the two booklets that are integral to this set. Immortal Performances' booklets are always important components of their products. In this case they have outdone themselves. One 48-page booklet contains an intelligent and thoughtful analysis of Melchior's art and career, "The Irreplaceable Lauritz Melchior," by Dewey Faulkner, along with plot synopses and recording notes by Caniell. The second booklet is 56 pages, and its two main articles are by Caniell. They make for extremely provocative reading. One is "Lauritz Melchior and Edward Johnson: The Shadow Side of the Golden Age," and the other is "Rudolf Bing: The Final Abuse of Melchior." Taken together, the two articles make the

case that many of us have long believed, which is that both of those Met general managers were more interested in their own egos than the art that they supposedly served. Caniell has done his research and backs up his points with facts. One quote from Bing, “A good administrator must be disliked,” tells us a great deal about the man. In addition to these two articles, Caniell provides a few personal reflections on his experiences of listening to Melchior sing. There is also a complete listing of Melchior performances on the label, along with brief but informative bios of all the major artists heard in the set.

At an average length of over 78 minutes, each disc is packed full. The three major Wagner performances are all released for the first time, giving the set major importance. The transfers are at the high level of quality we have come to expect from this label.

Five stars: A superb collection of mainly unissued Melchior performances.

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Review By **Ken Meltzer**

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The Immortal Performances label is justly acclaimed for its superb (and sometimes miraculous) sonic restorations of vintage recordings originally, both in-performance, and studio. But an aspect of the label’s work that perhaps receives less attention and appreciation is the care it takes to present an in-depth and rounded portrait of featured artists. A new four-disc tribute to the iconic Danish tenor Lauritz Melchior (1890–1973) is a case in point. There are many outstanding aspects of Melchior’s artistic legacy. First and foremost, he was the greatest Wagnerian tenor of his era, and perhaps of any era. For three decades, Melchior triumphed in the fiercely demanding Wagner Heldentenor roles, lavishing upon them a voice unrivalled for its combination of power, beauty, freedom in the upper register, and marathon-worthy stamina. Such a voice would by itself have assured Melchior’s unrivaled status. But Melchior was also a probing and insightful vocal actor, one who constantly sought to portray the essence of his characters, and to improve upon his interpretations. In that quest, Melchior proved himself a master of phrasing, legato, precise diction, and a wide range of dynamics. Melchior was also able to maintain his voice and artistry over an extraordinary span of years, especially in light of the punishing repertoire he sang. Melchior was a month shy of his 60th birthday when, on February 2, 1950 at the Metropolitan Opera, he sang

his final staged opera performance, in the title role of Wagner's *Lohengrin*. But for several more years, Melchior continued to vocalize in splendid fashion, in stage and radio concerts, and in feature films. For all of Melchior's triumphs, there were frustrations as well. Although Melchior excelled in such non-Wagnerian roles as Verdi's *Otello*, and Radamès in the Italian composer's *Aida*, Met GM Edward Johnson never allowed Melchior to sing such operas on NY's premiere lyric stage. Recorded excerpts by Melchior from such works are a bittersweet reminder of what a loss this was both to Met audiences, and to the tenor as well. In the IP four-disc tribute, all of these aspects of Melchior's craft and artistry are masterfully woven throughout, resulting in a set that is of priceless value.

Of primary interest to Melchior collectors will be portions of three performances of Wagner operas, all available for the first time via this IP release. They are: act II of *Die Walküre* (San Francisco, October 24, 1939), *Die Walküre*, act I, and act II, scene 3 (Met, January 24, 1948), and act II of *Tristan und Isolde* (Met, January 3, 1948). Each of these performances finds Melchior in superb vocal and dramatic form, and in the company of colleagues with whom he had tremendous chemistry. In the case of the SF *Walküre*, they are the Sieglinde of Marjorie Lawrence and Brünnhilde of Kirsten Flagstad, likewise in the prime of their careers. Melchior's Sieglinde and Brünnhilde in the 1948 Met *Walküre* are, respectively, Rose Bampton and Helen Traubel. While Bampton may not have had the star power of Lawrence, Flagstad, and Traubel, she was a fine artist. Bampton and Melchior generate ample vocal and dramatic fireworks as Sieglinde and Siegmund. In their own way, Melchior and Traubel fostered a magic that rivaled the prior Melchior/Flagstad partnership. Traubel returns in radiant form as Isolde in the Met's January 3, 1948 *Tristan und Isolde*. For the better part, the remaining participants in these three performances are of a comparable level. Fritz Stiedry and Fritz Busch, the conductors of the 1948 *Walküre* and *Tristan*, were distinguished maestros who bring arresting precision, fire, and lyrical beauty to their interpretations. Sad to say, the same does not hold true for the San Francisco *Walküre*. Edwin McArthur, Flagstad's preferred accompanist, led this broadcast at (according to Dewey Faulkner's liner notes) the soprano's insistence. McArthur delivers a shapeless performance that is redeemed, nonetheless, by its vocal stars. Those stars do not include the Wotan of Fred Destal and Fricka of Herta Glaz, who deliver workmanlike performances, especially in comparison to such contemporary Wagnerian artists as Friedrich Schorr and Kerstin Thorborg. But again, Lawrence, Flagstad, and the *raison d'être* for this IP set, Melchior, win the day (the performance of act II contains substantial cuts in order to fit into the

limited broadcast time). The remainder of the 1948 *Walküre* and *Tristan* casts, comprising Met stalwarts, are of uniformly high quality. The sound for all three broadcasts is quite fine. In the case of the SF and Met *Walküre* performances, we have the welcome addition of broadcast commentary (the venerable Milton Cross for the latter). Although Melchior is already well represented in each of the featured operas preserved in complete form (including on several issues by IP), these performances are a welcome supplement to the great tenor's published recorded legacy.

The remainder of the set documents Melchior in studio recordings and radio broadcasts spanning the years 1923–60 (announcer Milton Cross makes several appearances, as does John Barrymore). Again, the sound of these recordings is quite good throughout. The operas of Wagner are of course well represented. So are songs not only by Wagner, but Sverre Jordan, Grieg, Richard Strauss, Schubert, and Leoncavallo. All are sung with artistry, charm, and where appropriate, an arresting intimacy. Of particular interest are excerpts from Italian operas that Melchior never performed at the Met, including Verdi's *Aida* and *Otello*, and Leoncavallo's *Pagliacci*. No doubt Melchior would have made quite the impression in any of these works. This is particularly true in the case of *Otello*. Melchior did perform the role, and to great acclaim, in other opera houses. And to be fair, for several years, the Met had one of the foremost *Otellos* of the 20th century in the person of Giovanni Martinelli (again, documents of his estimable work in the role are available from IP). But an opera house of the caliber of the Met should be able to accommodate both a Martinelli and a Melchior in Verdi's greatest tenor role. The recordings on this Melchior tribute are testament to a tragically missed opportunity. *Otello*'s brief and clarion entrance, "Esultate!" recorded in 1960 when Melchior was 70 years old, is more a testament to the tenor's longevity than a document of his finest work. But the ensuing act III and act IV monologues, recorded in 1930 in London with conductor John Barbirolli, and sung in German translation, are irreplaceable treasures. Here, Melchior interprets Verdi's music with great attention to detail, glorious vocalism, and heartbreaking intensity. These qualities are repeated in a 1938 broadcast rendition of the act III monologue, now sung in its original Italian ("Dio! mi potevi scagliar"). Perhaps by a miracle, a recording of one of Melchior's complete *Otello* performances may see the light of day. Let's hope so. Another treasure is the inclusion of 20-plus minutes of an interview with Melchior. The tenor is charming, self-effacing, and immensely appreciative of his colleagues. That said, Melchior makes no secret of how shabbily Met GM Rudolf Bing treated

him while precipitating the tenor's departure from the Met, after a career of a quarter century and 500 performances. This travesty, along with the missteps of Bing's predecessor, Edward Johnson, are meticulously documented and ruthlessly (but appropriately) excoriated by Richard Caniell in an extensive article included in one of the set's booklets. Dewey Faulkner's liner notes on Melchior's career and the featured performances make for lively and thought-provoking reading. Artist bios and photos, and plot synopses, round out the printed material. This is a masterful tribute that excels on all counts. And I certainly can't think of a more worthy recipient than Lauritz Melchior. Highest recommendation.

5 Stars: A glorious tribute to the incomparable heldentenor Lauritz Melchior