

WAGNER Lohengrin • Erich Leinsdorf, cond; Lauritz Melchior (Lohengrin); Astrid Varnay (Elsa); Kerstin Thorborg (Ortrud); Herbert Janssen (Friedrich von Telramund); Leonard Warren (Herald); Norman Cordon (King Heinrich); Metropolitan Op Ch & O • IMMORTAL PERFORMANCES 1107 mono (3 CDs: 173:39) Live: New York 1/17/1942

Review by James Altena

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This is a world premiere release—a point that needs emphasis because of widespread misinformation on the internet. Despite the fact that the Naxos release of the *Lohengrin* broadcast with a very similar cast from January 2, 1943 clearly shows the date on the back tray card, the label's own website has "1942" in large print in its title line for that listing, and this information has been mindlessly copied and posted on a multitude of other websites. (Ironically, listings on Amazon for lesser labels such as Myto and Arkadia carry the correct date.) The point should be emphasized for two other reasons as well. First, the 1942 performance has significantly stronger casting in one of the principal roles, with Herbert Janssen rather than Alexander Sved as Friedrich von Telramund. (The other, lesser casting difference is Leonard Warren rather than Mack Harrell as the Herald.) Second, Astrid Varnay is in significantly superior form in this 1942 release as Elsa, and is the major desideratum for acquiring this particular historic Met performance among the several surviving broadcasts with Melchior from 1935, 1940, 1942, 1943, 1947, and 1950.

As most aficionados of historic opera singers likely already know, Varnay made her Met debut as a substitute on short notice in a nationally broadcast matinee performance on December 6, 1941, as Sieglinde in *Die Walküre*. Although the highly favorable notices were unfortunately completely overshadowed by the attack on Pearl Harbor the next day, her career as a leading dramatic soprano was launched. Somewhat to her detriment, Varnay did not heed the advice that Kirsten Flagstad once gave in a radio address: "Many young singers write to me, asking for advice on how to sing Wagner. My advice consists of three words: Leave Wagner alone." Flagstad then explained that the physical demands Wagner's music placed on the voice, and the corresponding need for physical maturity and extensive experience, meant that singers should not undertake such parts before around age 35. While Varnay did not completely ruin her voice

through premature exposure to such heavy repertoire, as so many young singers have done (Jane Eaglen, anyone?), it did take an early toll. Whereas in her broadcast debut she is fresh and agile, by the time of her broadcast performance as Elsa in January 1943, a bare 13 months later, one can already hear the settling in of a definite thickening and opacity in her vocal timbre, a loss of agility in articulating ornamental phrases, and the onset of her tendency to scoop into pitches from below that would become so pronounced by the 1950s. By contrast, this January 1942 performance from only one month after her debut still finds her voice in pristine condition.

Admittedly, when compared to some rivals on the other Met broadcasts listed above—Lotte Lehmann, Elisabeth Rethberg, or even Helen Traubel (opposite whom Varnay sang Ortrud in 1950, having by then wisely dropped to the role with the lower tessitura)—Varnay is not an ideal Elsa. Her voice did not have the ethereal radiance of Lehmann and Rethberg before her, or Eleanor Steber and Elisabeth Grümmer after her, being instead characterized in the middle and lower registers by the earthier, more contralto-ish sound of many Eastern European sopranos (Varnay was of Hungarian descent). All the same, she is a very fine Elsa, one we would most gladly welcome today. If a bit mature-sounding, she presents the heroine as a strong, formidable presence rather than a wilting wallflower. At this time, she had a definite register break in which her top notes possess a lightness and brilliance they would later lose, which makes her vocally creditable in the role. While she is not yet experienced enough to display the interpretive depth and nuance of the other aforementioned sopranos, she is never anything other than intelligent and expressive.

As the Swan Knight, Melchior is his usual self, as in virtually all of his broadcast performances—which is to say superlative and unmatched by any other tenor in recorded history. While there of course have been other fine Lohengrins on disc (Sándor Kónya, Plácido Domingo, and Jonas Kaufmann among those in more recent times), no-one else has compared to Melchior for effortless mastery of all aspects of his role—sheer beauty of tone, ringing clarion power, secure production and intonation, ability to shade dynamics at all levels, and clarity of diction. Above all, there is a keen interpretive insight that harmoniously integrates all of these into an utterly convincing portrayal of the character. When Melchior sings, one believes that not just the Grail, but he himself, has been brought down from heaven by the descending dove.

*Lohengrin* was an opera which the Met cast from strength in the 1930s and early 1940s (standards faltered somewhat after 1945), and Melchior and Varnay have an excellent supporting cast here. Special laurels go to the magnificent Ortrud of Kerstin Thorborg, who is definitely in superior form here compared to the 1940 broadcast and equal to or slightly better than that from 1943. Her rich contralto with its secure upper extension encompasses all the fiendish challenges of her role's wide tessitura, and she dispatches the full-tilt fury of both "Entweihte Götter!" and "Fahr' heim!" virtually without fault. Only the nonpareil Margaret Klose has ever topped her in this role in my experience, and that by only a little. Baritone Herbert Janssen as Telramund is another major reason to acquire this set. While his soft-grained baritone, with its long experience in Lieder repertoire, is less robust and overtly villainous than many proponents of the role, he instead exploits his unique characteristics to highlight the moral weakness and cravenness so central to his character, and he brings to Wagner singing a rare degree of legato phrasing. As Janssen is in far better vocal condition than in the subsequent 1950 broadcast, his admirers will have special motivation to hear him here.

The two smaller roles are solidly if not memorably cast. Given his rising eminence as one of the century's great Verdi baritones, it is in one sense an embarrassment of riches to have Leonard Warren appearing as the Herald, the only Wagner role he ever sang. But he does not sound quite comfortable in the part; the 1940 broadcast finds him in better voice, and in any case his German pronunciation leaves something to be desired in his inability to pronounce unlauded vowels correctly. Norman Cordon is a suitably rich-voiced King Heinrich but tends to swallow his text in his lower register. Still, compared to the inadequate casting one encounters today, to note such minor deficits savors of nit-picking. As with the 1941 *Tristan und Isolde* I review elsewhere in this issue, Erich Leinsdorf is a dynamic podium presence, moving the action along briskly and with masterly pacing.

The usual performance cuts of the era are taken: from "In wildem Brüten" through "Im Zweifel doch erhebt des Herzens Grund" in the act II closing ensemble; in act III from "Dein Lieben muß mir hoch entgelten" through "muß ich in deiner Lieb' ersehnen" in the love duet, from "Nun so des Reiches Feind sich nahn" through "So sei des reiches Kraft bewährt" in King Heinrich's address, and (most damagingly) from "O Elsa!" through

“des Ostens Horden siegreich nimmer ziehn!” following “In fernem Land.” The sound quality is roughly on a par with the 1940 and 1943 broadcasts—of middling quality for the era, adequate for listening pleasure but not on the level of the surviving *Tristan* and *Fidelio* broadcasts from 1941, even with Richard Caniell’s usual remastering wizardry in play. As always, Immortal Performances provides a lavish booklet with a full-scale essay (an exceptionally insightful one by Dewey Faulkner), plot synopsis, detailed artist bios with photos, and Caniell’s recording notes. This is on all counts a major new addition to the discographies of both *Lohengrin* and the Metropolitan Opera; emphatically and enthusiastically recommended.

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Review by Ken Meltzer

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A new issue by Immortal Performances of the January 17, 1942 Metropolitan Opera broadcast of Wagner’s *Lohengrin*, billed as a “World Premiere Release,” constitutes a major addition to this opera’s discography. This is the fourth Metropolitan Opera *Lohengrin* broadcast restored by Immortal Performances. The previous three are:

December 21, 1935: Artur Bodanzky, cond; Lotte Lehmann (Elsa); Marjorie Lawrence (Ortrud); Lauritz Melchior (Lohengrin); Friedrich Schorr (Friedrich); Julius Huehn (Herald); Emanuel List (King Henry); IPCD 1032-3.

February 19, 1938: Maurice Abravanel, cond; Kirsten Flagstad (Elsa); Karin Branzell (Ortrud); Lauritz Melchior (Lohengrin); Julius Huehn (Friedrich); Arnold Gabor (Herald); Ludwig Hofmann (King Henry); IPCD 1075-3.

January 27, 1940: Erich Leinsdorf, cond; Elisabeth Rethberg (Elsa); Kerstin Thorborg (Ortrud); Lauritz Melchior (Lohengrin); Julius Huehn (Friedrich); Leonard Warren (Herald); Emanuel List (King Henry); IPCD 1018-3.

All of these releases are of the utmost importance, each documenting superb performances by many of the greatest Wagnerian artists of the 20th

century. And in every instance, Richard Caniell has done a remarkable job of presenting these priceless documents in their best sonic light. Still, the most direct competition to the new release of the January 17, 1942 Lohengrin is a broadcast from the following year, part of the Metropolitan Opera's *Wagner at the Met* boxed set (Sony Classical 88765 42717):

January 2, 1943: Erich Leinsdorf, cond; Astrid Varnay (Elsa); Kerstin Thorborg (Ortrud); Lauritz Melchior (Lohengrin); Alexander Sved (Friedrich); Mack Harrell (Herald); Norman Cordon (King Henry).

The reason I characterize the 1942 and 1943 broadcasts as the closest competitors is that each is captured in sound that approximates the quality of commercial recordings of the era. The earlier Immortal Performances issues are, by comparison, in more compromised sound, although the sonics are more than adequate to convey the greatness of those performances. For reasons I'll delineate, I think the new Immortal Performances 1942 broadcast emerges as the clearly preferable version of the two.

In each of the releases I've mentioned, the title role is performed by the Danish Heldentenor, Lauritz Melchior. Lohengrin was a mainstay of Melchior's repertoire throughout his Met career (69 performances at the House and on tour). Melchior first sang the role at the Met on March 22, 1930. Twenty years later, on February 2, 1950, Melchior gave his farewell Met performance as Wagner's Knight of the Holy Grail. While Melchior is generally acknowledged as the greatest Heldentenor of the 20th century, there remains some debate as to whether he was ideally suited for the role of Lohengrin. As Dewey Faulkner acknowledges in his essay for the new IP release: "Arguably a lighter, more lyrical sound better suits the son of Parsifal." But Faulkner adds: "Melchior can lighten and sweeten his sound when he wishes." Indeed he can, and he does. To my ears, Melchior is the finest Lohengrin preserved on recordings. It is true that Wagner was a great revolutionary who rebelled against the excesses he perceived in the French and Italian grand opera of his day. But Wagner was also a keen student of those traditions, and he incorporated a great deal of them into his own work, perhaps especially in the title role of Lohengrin.

It's no coincidence that Lohengrin has long been a favorite of great French and Italian tenors, often performing the role in their native languages. And

indeed, Lohengrin demands a singer who, in addition to stamina and heroic reserves, can lavish the kind of beautiful tone, elegant legato, pristine diction, and flexibility of dynamics and phrasing that are equally at home in works by Meyerbeer and Verdi. Between 1929 and 1930, Melchior made London studio recordings (John Barbirolli, conducting) of arias from Meyerbeer's *L'Africaine*, Verdi's *Otello*, and Leoncavallo's *Pagliacci* (currently available on a Nimbus Prima Voce release). Although all the excerpts are sung in German, Melchior proves himself a master of French and Italian grand opera. Indeed, these are among the finest versions of each aria ever recorded. His Lohengrin, for similar reasons, is of a like exalted level. And Melchior is hardly content to rest upon a display of vocal beauty, power, and stamina. He sings the role with great feeling, embodying Lohengrin's heroic, tender, and indeed, very human (even vulnerable) qualities. Lohengrin's love for Elsa is palpable, as is the Knight's heartache when she breaks her vow. In each performance (perhaps the 1943 performance apart), Melchior, through a combination of impeccable technique, and masterful pacing, sounds as fresh at the end as the start (the tenor was 51 at the time of the 1942 broadcast). Melchior's Lohengrins, including the 1942 broadcast, are masterclasses in Wagnerian Heldentenor singing, probably never to be equaled, let alone exceeded.

Once again, in the 1942 broadcast, Melchior is joined by a sterling group of colleagues, all adding a great deal to the performance. Astrid Varnay, only 23(!) and at the outset of her great career, is Elsa. Sweetness of voice and the ability to float tones in the upper register are not Varnay's strengths. The *piano* high A on "Mein Erlöser" (my redeemer) is devoid of the magic other sopranos have conjured. But Varnay is otherwise in superb vocal form throughout, secure and with a warm, focused quality that embodies a more forceful and substantial Elsa than the norm. A compelling actress, Varnay is able to convey Elsa's desperation, coupled with more than a hint of rebelliousness, prior to Lohengrin's arrival and rescue of her. That suggestion of Elsa's headstrong nature plays well into the climactic scene as the young woman, no longer able to contain her fears and curiosity, breaks her vow never to ask Lohengrin's name. All in all, Varnay's Elsa is a vocally secure and powerful interpretation that suggests aspects of the young woman's character all too often overlooked.

No reservations need be applied to Kerstin Thorborg's Ortrud. One of the greatest Wagnerian contraltos of her era, Thorborg throws herself into the

role, both vocally and dramatically, in purely unrestrained fashion. It's quite remarkable that this Ortrud, the embodiment of hair-raising evil, is the same singer capable of such a sympathetic Brangäne or Magdalene. This is a great performance. Herbert Janssen was without question a first-rate Wagnerian baritone. Janssen's gorgeous, warm vocal timbre and abundant humanity made him a near-ideal Hans Sachs and Wolfram. One might question, however, whether he was ideally suited to the role of Ortrud's co-conspirator, Friedrich of Telramund. But on this occasion, Janssen calls upon all of his acting skills, and a Lieder singer's mastery of diction and vocal colors, to create a Telramund that is unusually subtle, but no less fearsome and dangerous. Listening to Janssen's Friedrich led me to conjure tantalizing thoughts of him in the title role of Verdi's *Macbeth*.

Norman Cordon is a solid and reliable King Henry, while the young Leonard Warren is luxury casting as the Herald, pouring forth rich, golden tones from start to finish. Erich Leinsdorf's Wagner conducting, well documented in several Met broadcasts, frequently strikes me as more competent than inspired. There is rarely anything wrong with Leinsdorf's pacing, or his ability to coax precision from the Met Orchestra, but he usually lacks the profile and ability to generate the tension and excitement evidenced by such conductors as Artur Bodanzky, Thomas Beecham, and, at his best, George Szell. This 1942 broadcast is another matter altogether. A beautifully sculpted act I Prelude, proceeding inexorably to a radiant climax, presages the remainder of the performance. Leinsdorf favors brisk tempos (not brisk enough, it seems at first for Melchior, who takes a while to find agreement with the conductor), but he is hardly metronomic, leading a performance of admirable flexibility. Leinsdorf is also masterful in building the ensembles that conclude each act to achieve maximum dramatic and musical impact. Leinsdorf is, on this occasion, a major factor in the performance's overall success.

In many respects, I think that the January 2, 1943 broadcast released by the Met, fine as it is, falls short of the 1942 performance. Leinsdorf's direction in the later broadcast lacks the profile, fire, and drive of its immediate predecessor. Melchior displays some signs of fatigue in the opera's final scene, and both Varnay and Thorborg are in somewhat less secure voice. Alexander Sved, in robust vocal form, is a forceful but glaringly unsubtle Friedrich, hardly the match of Janssen's masterful assumption of the role. Additionally, I very much prefer the sound of the 1942 broadcast (as

restored by Immortal Performances), with its greater warmth and bass response. In fact, I think these qualities greatly enhance the impact of Leinsdorf's conducting. The CD booklet includes essays by Dewey Faulkner (on the performance and opera's history) and Richard Caniell (recording notes), a plot synopsis, and artist photos and bios. The inclusion of brief commentary by host Milton Cross at the conclusion of acts I and III adds to the sense of occasion. Given the quality of the performance coupled with the marvelous sonic restoration, I think the Immortal Performances release of the 1942 Met *Lohengrin* deserves a place in any representative collection of recordings of this beloved opera. Highest recommendation.