

WAGNER *Tristan und Isolde* • Artur Bodanzky, cond; Kirsten Flagstad (*Isolde*); Gertrude Wettergren (*Brangäne*); Lauritz Melchior (*Tristan*); Julius Huehn (*Kurvenal*); Emanuel List (*Marke*); Metropolitan Op Ch & O • IMMORTAL PERFORMANCES 1146-3, mono (3 CDs: 207:58) Live: Metropolitan Op, New York 1/29/1938

Review by **Henry Fogel**
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It would be reasonable to wonder why Immortal Performances has released yet another *Tristan und Isolde* with Kirsten Flagstad and Lauritz Melchior. This new release is the eighth with those two singers that I am aware of, spanning the period 1935–1941. The 1937–38 Met season offered two broadcasts of the opera with the same principals and conductor. The April 16, 1938 broadcast has been issued by Sony, and the main difference in cast was Karen Branzell as Brangäne instead of Gertrude Wettergren here. You would expect Sony's transfer to be better than it is. More about that later.

The present performance from January 29, 1938, has never been circulated until now. The source for Immortal Performances was a set of 16-inch acetates privately recorded at home by a collector who had two recording machines to preserve continuity through disc changes. The recording quality was good, but the discs were obviously played a lot, resulting in groove wear and surface noise. Listening to this transfer, I would guess that the second act was played the most. Tristan's act 3 delirium scene also suffered from the fact that the recordist kept turning down the volume during climaxes. Producer Richard Caniell has done an excellent job restoring the recording to make clear the excellence of the performance. In his recording notes he explains the difficulties. He also writes in some detail about the inadequacies of Sony's transfer of the April broadcast.

Still, the question might linger. Do we need yet another Flagstad/Melchior *Tristan* conducted by Bodanzky (who leads the already available Met broadcasts from 1935 and 1937 as well as the later 1938 effort)? The answer is yes, mostly for Flagstad's contribution. Everything about her performance here is more dramatically involved than almost any of her other recorded *Isolde*s. (The April, 1938, is similar, but frankly Sony's harsh transfer makes it even less pleasing to the ear than whatever limitations exist on the source for this broadcast.) Dewey Faulkner's superb program notes posit various reasons for Flagstad's greater characterization here, related to both family and professional circumstances. It is fascinating and enlightening to read his thinking, but in the end the listener doesn't care what the reasons are; we just care about the results.

In the first act Isolde's anger at her upcoming marriage to King Marke, her fury at Tristan for having killed her betrothed Morold, her conflicted feelings about Tristan, and then her radiance after they drink the potion—all of these emotions are conveyed with greater specificity of inflection and color than is the case in other Flagstad performances. The *Liebestod* is transcendently beautiful, much more so than all her other recorded performances. The great Norwegian soprano has been accused of concerning herself first with the vocal element of her art, concentrating on producing beautiful sounds, and only secondarily with the dramatic aspects. While the accusation has always been an oversimplification, it does contain an element of truth.

But here Flagstad manages to convey the full scope of the character that Wagner created, while still producing a glorious flood of sound. Indeed, this is as complete a performance of Isolde as I have ever encountered.

Much the same can be said of Melchior. The criticism most frequently levelled against him is that he was a rhythmically sloppy singer. I don't hear it and never did. The authoritative British vocal critic John B. Steane, in *The Grand Tradition*, took it upon himself to follow a great many of the live Melchior broadcasts with score, "deliberately looking for these inaccuracies on Melchior's part, [and] have gathered only the most meager collection." Melchior was a miracle, and in fact there is no other Wagnerian tenor since the dawn of recordings that is in his class. Here, in his prime years, he is all you would want. At the end of the first act he matches Flagstad with glorious tone and emotional fervor in a way that must be what Wagner heard in his head but might never have expected to hear in performance. In the second-act *Liebesnacht* (sadly, given with the cuts Bodanzky always made) Melchior is tender and seductive, using shades of half voice right alongside the demonstrations of stentorian power. In the third act (also with cuts) we hear that power in a completely convincing portrayal of Tristan's agony, desperation, and the joy at his final reunion with Isolde. The unflagging quality of the singing, coming at the climax of such a long and taxing role, makes you feel that Melchior could start the opera all over again.

As Brangäne, Wettergren takes a bit of time to warm up, but in the second act she sounds lovely. While one might prefer Kerstin Thorborg or Karin Branzell in for having perhaps more beautiful voices, Wettergren's performance is more than satisfactory. The same can be said for Julius Huehn's Kurvenal. He is not an artist at the level of his teacher, Friedrich Schorr, or even his successor in the role at the Met, Herbert Janssen, but Huehn sings well enough and is dramatically convincing as Tristan's stalwart servant. Emanuel List may be the weakest of the principals as King Marke, but he is still more than adequate. His voice, at age 50, sounds a bit tired, but this helps List to communicate the sad disappointment in Tristan that Marke expresses in his monologue (quite heavily cut by Bodanzky). If your standard is Alexander Kipnis (who was also 50 in the 1941 Met broadcast led by Erich Leinsdorf), List will come up short. But to be the least strong singer in this cast is no dishonor.

Bodanzky's conducting is indisputably exciting, and the orchestra plays well for him. What his conducting lacks is an overall sense of shape for Wagner's massive structure. Conveying the moment-to-moment drama is surely of value, but stitching the whole together seems beyond Bodanzky. His cuts only amplify this lack. The entire performance, however, benefits from the new spark that Flagstad found in Isolde that year, and everyone involved seems inspired.

For comparison, Immortal Performances includes three excerpts from the same April 28 broadcast that Sony restored and issued in a box set of all ten of Wagner's mature operas. Comparing Caniell's restoration with Sony's is a revelation, like having a curtain opened up. Immortal Performances will issue the complete performance in the future. It will be worth waiting for.

For those who might only desire one Flagstad/Melchior *Tristan*, the finest, because of its sound quality, is the 1937 Covent Garden performance conducted by Thomas Beecham, released in a terrific transfer as Immortal Performances IPCD 1042-4. Meanwhile, I can recommend the present release to any committed Wagnerian or anyone with a strong interest in these singers and

a tolerance for less-than-ideal historical sound. There is no question that the sonic inadequacies will deter some. I would expect the April broadcast, when it comes, will be preferable, based on the samples given here. At least one of these 1938 *Tristan* broadcasts is critical to a serious collector because it reveals a side of Flagstad not in evidence in her other preserved performances.

Immortal Performances' usual extras are present and always welcome. The 60-page booklet includes not only Faulkner's analysis of both the opera and this performance alongside Caniell's insightful recording notes, but also a detailed synopsis and some wonderful historical photographs. Excerpts from Milton Cross's radio commentary are included for atmosphere, tracked separately so that you can skip them if you wish.

Review by **Ken Meltzer**

FANFARE March/ April 2021

Immortal Performances presents a Metropolitan Opera broadcast of Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde*, performed on January 29, 1938. IP bills this as a "World Premiere Recording". I have not heard it previously. The source material is a private off-the-air recording. This is my third opportunity to review Met *Tristan* (all courtesy of IP) broadcasts starring Lauritz Melchior and Kirsten Flagstad, and conducted by Artur Bodanzky. The other two are from March 9, 1935 (IPCD 1078-3, *Fanfare* 41:1, Sept/Oct 2017), and January 2, 1937 (IPCD 1040-3), *Fanfare* 39:2, Nov/Dec 2015). In each of those reviews, I had the opportunity to write at great length about this trio of principals. In sum, with Melchior and Flagstad you have two artists who may, with ample justification, be characterized as the finest Wagnerian tenor and soprano of the 20th century (and perhaps of all time). Bodanzky, too, was a great Wagner interpreter, one whose conducting was imbued with an unerring sense for dramatic pulse, Romantic temperament, and a keen appreciation of the beauty of Wagner's writing both for voices and orchestra. However, there was one drawback. This year, I spoke to a prominent American conductor who was preparing for performances of *Tristan*. While looking at the score, he exclaimed: "I can't imagine cutting a single note of this work." Sad to say, Bodanzky possessed such an imagination, and one that he applied with considerable relish and energy. This resulted in draconian cuts to Acts II and III of *Tristan*, even by the standards of Bodanzky's contemporaries, who were hardly pedantic about note-complete performances. Still, what remains is Wagner conducting of a very high level (and therefore, not analogous to the joke about the restaurant where "the food is bad, and they serve such small portions"). The Melchior-Flagstad-Bodanzky Met *Tristans* took place in the 1930s, when the artists were at the height of their powers. As such, at least one of those Met broadcasts belongs in every *Tristan* collection. Both the 1935 and 37 broadcasts have their considerable merits, with 1937 having the better sound. Richard Caniell has restored the 1938 broadcast source material to a state where it is about the equivalent of the 1937 performance. That is to say, while not the equivalent of studio recordings of the era, and retaining the surface imperfections of the original discs, the 1938 *Tristan* emerges in sound that is clear, balanced, and a worthy document of both the beauty and intensity of the music-making. And that is fortunate, for both

Melchior and Flagstad are in impressive voice, even by their extraordinary standards. As I've written before, Melchior's Tristan was a marvel both for its vocal beauty and stamina, and the keen dramatic sense with which he applied those gifts. I do believe that as Tristan, Melchior was not just a great singer, he was a great actor as well. And in the 1938 broadcast, Melchior has the vocal resources to shine not only in Acts I and II, but to sing the grueling (even with Bodanzky's cuts) final Act with an intensity that is absolutely hair-raising. Listening to that final Act makes me regret all the more that Edward Johnson never allowed Melchior to fulfill his fervent wish to sing Verdi's *Otello* in a complete performance on the Met stage. This assumption of Tristan indicates that *Otello* would have been an overwhelming experience. Likewise, Flagstad is heard at her best. The voice is youthful, rich, and absolutely gorgeous throughout the registers. The high Cs ring out with impressive power and focus. I have never subscribed to the opinion that Flagstad was a bland actress. There was a regal quality about her bearing and singing, but there was heart and intensity as well. The 1938 Met *Tristan* documents Flagstad in particularly incisive form, with the outbursts of Act I being arrestingly powerful. Needless to say, Flagstad has vocal beauty to spare in the Act II Love Duet, and the opera's concluding *Liebestod*. This is one of the finest of Flagstad's Isolde that I've heard. Indeed, I think both Melchior and Flagstad's contributions make this *Tristan* a document of the utmost importance.

The remaining principals are all worthy collaborators. Gertrude Wettergren is a marvelous Brangäne, opulent of voice (but not at all matronly) and a keenly-involved actor. Julius Huehn may not be the most subtle interpreter of Kurwenal, but his rich voice and sturdy bearing count for a great deal. Thanks to Bodanzky's cuts, Emanuel List's King Marke is not left with a great deal to sing. But List delivers what remains with authority and a steady, sonorous voice. As is typical, Bodanzky elicits wonderful playing from the Met Orchestra, including lovely string portamentos that enhance Wagner's aching romantic tale. The set's accompanying booklet includes lengthy and informative essays by Dewey Faulkner on this broadcast (with many insightful comparisons to other performances), and the importance of *Tristan und Isolde* for both Wagner's canon and music history. Richard Caniell's detailed and beautifully written plot synopsis is always welcome, as are his Recording Notes. Typical of IP, Host Milton Cross's broadcast commentary is included. As a bonus, Caniell and IP include three excerpts from the Met's broadcast of April 16, 1938; portions of the Act I Prelude and Introduction to Act II, as well as the *Liebestod* (and some Milton Cross commentary). That *Tristan* broadcast is also part of the 2013 Sony Classical release, "Wagner at the Met". IP plans its own restoration as a future release. An A-B comparison of the IP excerpts with the Sony Classical set indicates that the Immortal Performances version may well be a substantial improvement in terms of the beauty and naturalness of the sonic reproduction. I will look forward to the opportunity to hear it and to make a full comparison. For now, the January 29, 1938 *Tristan und Isolde* is a gem that I will return to with great frequency and anticipation.

Five stars: Melchior and Flagstad in stunning form in a January 29, 1938 Met *Tristan und Isolde*