

WAGNER *Tristan und Isolde* • Fritz Busch, cond; Helen Traubel (*Isolde*); Blanche Thebom (*Brangäne*); Lauritz Melchior (*Tristan*); Emery Darcy (Melot); Joel Berglund (Kurwenal); Mihály Székely (*King Marke*); Metropolitan Op. Ch & O • IMMORTAL PERFORMANCES 1181-3 mono (3 CDs: 195:30) Live: Metropolitan Opera, New York, 1/3/1948

Ken Meltzer

FANFARE March/ April 2023

From Immortal Performances (IP), the January 3, 1948 Metropolitan Opera broadcast of Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde* conducted by Fritz Busch, and starring Lauritz Melchior and Helen Traubel in the title roles. The broadcast performance adopts the numerous score cuts typical of Met *Tristans* of the period. In his Recording Notes, IP's Richard Caniell describes how this broadcast has heretofore been available only in excerpt form. For its part, IP previously issued the second act of the January 3, 1948 broadcast as part of a 4-disc Lauritz Melchior tribute (IPCD 1139-4) (Reviewed in *Fanfare* 44:2, Nov/Dec 2020). Through his searches, Caniell was able to find various source materials sufficient to reproduce a complete broadcast. There is a caveat. As Caniell relates: "Act III had gaps and some unresolvable defects. This required some interpolation from the later Met broadcast in December 1948, with Melchior and with Busch conducting, to achieve a listenable whole, albeit a noisy one in part. This is to say that the private recording we located had an Act III beset with holes, small gaps, ticks, pops, grit and groove defects." Those familiar with Caniell's restoration artistry will not be surprised that the completed product is in quite presentable sound. If that sound is inferior to studio recordings of the period, the recording nonetheless allows full appreciation of the artists' unique and treasurable contributions.

The January 3, 1948 broadcast was the second *Tristan* performance of the Met's 1947-8 season. The first, on November 26, 1947, featured Max Lorenz and Erna Schlüter as Wagner's tragic lovers. Wolfgang Martin conducted. I'm not aware of any recording of this performance. But the contemporary reviews do not make one yearn for such a document. Writing for the *New York Times*, Olin Downes called it "one of the duller performances of 'Tristan' that we recall, with a new Isolde who is certainly, beyond doubt or peradventure, the worst impersonator of the title part in our considerable experience of the opera." Schlüter, an important dramatic soprano who was making her American debut, sang "very badly, explosively, off pitch, with tones that and bearing." But by this stage of Lorenz's career, his voice was a hollow shell of its earlier glory. Schlüter was 43 at the time of the 1947 Met *Tristan*, and Lorenz was 46. When Traubel and Melchior took to the Met stage of January 3, 1948 for the *Tristan* broadcast, they were, respectively, 48 and 57. Both display a vocal freshness that would have been the envy not only of Lorenz and Schlüter, but singers a decade or so younger. I've had the opportunity to write about Melchior's *Tristan* on numerous occasions, thanks to IP's releases of several Met broadcasts that span the years 1933-48. Lauritz Melchior sang his first Met *Tristan* on March 5, 1929, and performed the role for that company a total of 129 times. If Melchior's interpretation changed little over the years, it nonetheless exhibited greatness from the very start. Indeed, no other recorded *Tristan* equals

Melchior's combination of rich vocalism, keen dramatic involvement, and almost superhuman power and stamina. In the January, 1948 broadcast, Melchior is in remarkable voice. Perhaps the Danish heroic tenor cuts off a few high notes a bit more quickly than in the past, and the hushed dynamics may no longer come quite so easily. But those are minor quibbles when one is in the presence of greatness. On this occasion, late in his Met career, Lauritz Melchior remains the finest of Tristans.

Traubel is likewise a vocal miracle. In a February 6, 1943 Met *Tristan* broadcast (IP 1102-3) (Reviewed, *Fanfare* 41:4, Mar / Apr 2018), Traubel avoids the high Cs in Act II, and the high Bs of Act I are briefly touched upon. By the time of the 1948 broadcast, both the Cs and Bs are gone. The absence of those few notes aside, Traubel is in resplendent voice, and keenly attuned to the progression of Isolde's dramatic journey. Isolde's fury in Act I is imposingly projected. Traubel and Melchior had a wonderful chemistry, and the two join forces for a glorious rendition of the Act II love duet, by turns passionate and tender. Traubel rises to sublime heights in the concluding *Liebestod*, radiant in vocal opulence and expression. The remainder of the principals are excellent. Blanche Thebom is a strikingly youthful and vibrant Brangäne. Joel Berglund, always an impressive vocal presence, powerfully conveys Kurwenal's loyalty and affection for Tristan. If Mihály Székely does not possess the most opulent bass voice, he is an intense and highly sympathetic King Marke.

I previously mentioned the February 6, 1943 *Tristan* broadcast, also issued by IP. In addition to Melchior and Traubel, the 1943 performance stars Kerstin Thorborg as Brangäne, Julius Huehn as Kurwenal, and Alexander Kipnis as King Marke. I think that broadcast is the more impressive in terms of the singers. Melchior and Traubel are in fresher estate. And Thorborg and Kipnis were among the vocal giants of their time. The sound is also quite excellent, rivaling commercial recordings of the time. What distinguishes the 1948 broadcast from its predecessor, is the inspired conducting of Fritz Busch (1890-1951). Busch, a brilliant conductor who was at the height of his powers when he died at the age of 61, leads a taut performance that seethes with tension and fire. Listen, for example, to how Busch masterfully times the pauses in the Act I Prelude to enhance the portrait of the lovers' desperate passion. Throughout Act I, Busch's masterful pacing never allows the momentum to flag. The buildup to the reuniting of Tristan and Isolde in Act II is among the most ferocious and erotically charged I've ever heard. And through the remainder of the opera, Busch sculpts the narrative in a fashion that while never hurried, has a pervasive intensity and dynamism. Traubel and Busch's collaboration in the ecstatic *Liebestod* is all one could wish for. In the 1943 *Tristan*, Leinsdorf's conducting strikes me, as I wrote in my review, as "expert and efficient". Admirable qualities to be sure. But Fritz Busch is both technically superb and interpretively brilliant.

As I mentioned, Richard Caniell has provided an excellent restoration of this performance. Act III is the most problematic sonically, but even there, the artists may be heard with presence and clarity. Also present and clear, I'm sad to report, is the barrage of coughing that invades the mournful Act III Prelude's English horn solo. Met radio host Milton Cross may be heard as part of Acts I and II. IP's booklet includes William

Russell's extensive notes on Wagner's *Tristan*, its history at the Met, and the January 3, 1948 broadcast. Richard Caniell provides an in-depth plot summary, and his Recording Notes. I think that Busch's contribution, on its own, justifies acquisition of this set. But when you add the all-star cast of singers, the prospect becomes even more tantalizing. Highly recommended.

Five stars: Fritz Busch leads an all-star cast in a thrilling Met *Tristan*

Review by **Henry Fogel**

FANFARE March/ April 2023

A fine-sounding transfer of a 1943 Met broadcast of *Tristan und Isolde* with Lauritz Melchior and Helen Traubel already exists on Immortal Performances (reviewed by Ken Meltzer and me in *Fanfare* 41:4), and this one has some sonic problems. One might well ask, "Why bother?" The answer is on the podium, The 1943 performance is efficiently conducted by Erich Leinsdorf; but efficiency should only be the baseline for *Tristan*, not the goal. From the Prelude to the *Liebtestod* Fritz Busch is inspired, never letting the dramatic tension flag. He seems to inspire the singing, so there is a level of intensity throughout this performance that is anything but common.

The music practically boils over during Isolde's Narrative and Curse, as she relates the story of Tristan's treachery in killing her fiancé. Traubel was sometimes accused of being a bland singer blessed with a rich voice, but here she is inspired. The Met orchestra plays with a concentration and intensity that they rarely exhibited in those days—dynamic shading is carefully graded, accents are razor-sharp where they need to be, and long arching phrases are shaped meticulously and never sag. The moment in act I when the two protagonists drink the love potion and the mood suddenly changes is characterized perfectly by the orchestra. Busch's contribution is at a level of excellence beyond what Artur Bodanzky or Leinsdorf achieve.

In his recording notes producer Richard Caniell details what it took to assemble this performance. It has long been known to exist but with major gaps. The masters of the broadcast aren't extant in the Met's archival holdings. The first two acts had circulated in complete form; the third act had not, but Caniell felt almost certain that some private collectors must have recorded it. He found a "particularly noisy" recording of act 3, which unfortunately still had some gaps and lots of ticks and pops. He cleaned up what he could and inserted a few passages from a later 1948 broadcast with Melchior and Busch in order to overcome the worn grooves in Tristan's "delirium scene." Despite its sonic problems, this is a thoroughly riveting performance from start to finish in Busch's hands. The sound of the first two acts is more than acceptable.

As for the singing, it is at a level we are unlikely to ever encounter again. Melchior is a known quality to *Fanfare* readers, a Wagnerian tenor the likes of whom has

not existed since his retirement. As John Steane points out in his landmark study of operatic singing, *The Great Tradition*, those critics who carp about Melchior's supposedly sloppy rhythm and lack of attention to nuance must simply not have been listening carefully. The voice rings with authority or warms with tenderness as the music requires. At the end of the "delirium" Melchior sounds so fresh, you think he could sing the entire role again.

Traubel has rarely sounded better than she does here. Her high notes, which sometimes sounded forced, are almost entirely free and open on this occasion. Inspired not only by Melchior, with whom she enjoyed singing, but also by Busch's conducting, she is an impassioned Isolde. Her fury at Tristan before drinking the potion is blistering. In the second act, Traubel and Melchior truly seem to be singing to each other, communicating on the level of two lovers rather than singing notes to the audience. The warm glow in Traubel's voice must be what Wagner imagined for this role.

Blanche Thebom was easy to take for granted, because over a 22-year career at the Met she sang a huge repertoire: Amneris, Azucena, Dorabella, Laura (in *La Gioconda*), Baba the Turk, Orlofsky, Fricka, Brangäne, Dalila, Giulietta (in *Les contes d'Hoffmann*), Adalgisa, and much more. She was extremely effective in everything she did, but her Brangäne was special. The solidity of her tone was a match for the Isolde of Flagstad and Traubel, and she also portrayed a character with strength. After all, Brangäne disobeys Isolde's order to prepare the fatal poison, and in so doing she sets the whole plot in motion.

The great Hungarian bass Mihály Székely's King Marke is gorgeously sung and presented with dignity. The hurt he feels is very clearly portrayed without resorting to the exaggerated anguish that spills over into self-pity. As Kurwenal the fine bass-baritone Joel Berglund is also a major asset, adding his tonal richness and dramatic intelligence. Kurwenal's confrontations with Brangäne are completely convincing because Berglund and Thebom are such skilled vocal actors as well as singers.

As Caniell warns, the third act presents the most difficult listening from a sonic perspective. But the performance is so thrilling that you hear past the problems. At the end of the opera comes the great catharsis that Busch and Traubel make of the *Liebestod*, with the heroine's soaring apotheosis fully supported by the richness of the orchestral texture that the conducting elicits.

As usual, Immortal Performances provides a booklet rich with lovely historical photographs, an illuminating essay about the opera and this performance by Wagner scholar William Russell, a very detailed synopsis by Caniell along with his recording notes. Russell calls this 1948 *Tristan* "one of the finest performances of this opera that this writer has heard, surpassed by none, from all viewpoints." Except for sonic quality, I cannot disagree.

Immortal Performances recordings are available from their website, immortalperformances.org.