

“Tristan und Isolde” (NBC broadcast) (March 9, 1935)

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Essay by William Russell (guest post)*



*Kirsten Flagstad as Isolde and Lauritz Melchior as Tristan***

The Saturday afternoon broadcasts from New York’s Metropolitan Opera House (the “Met”) are certainly part of our history. The first broadcasts from the Met were neither regular nor approved. They were experiments by the radio pioneer Lee de Forest of two performances that occurred on 12 and 13 January 1910--Leoncavallo’s “Pagliacci” starring Enrico Caruso and Puccini’s “Tosca” starring Olive Fremstad. But there were no more broadcasts from the stage of the Met until Christmas Day 1931--Humperdinck’s “Hänsel und Gretel.” Saturday didn’t become a fixed Met broadcast day for some years into the future.

Even though the Met broadcasts began in 1931, operas were not broadcast complete. It wasn’t until 11 March 1933 that the first opera was aired in full and that was Wagner’s “Tristan und Isolde” starring Frida Leider and Lauritz Melchior. Nineteen thirty-three is also the earliest year from which any transcriptions are known to survive, usually in excerpts. This broadcast transcription of “Tristan” is remarkable not only for the performance but in that this is one of the earliest complete transcriptions to survive of a complete opera. In addition, this transcription is one of the rare early ones that exists in a more listenable and less fatiguing sound quality than a number of other well-worn acetates that have survived from this period with high levels of surface noise, distortion, worn grooves, and fluctuating playing speeds.

It was the excellence of performances such as these that made Wagner the most popular composer of the period of the early 1930s until the early 1950s. Between 1931 and 1950, for example, “Tristan und Isolde” was broadcast 21 times (Melchior sang Tristan in all but one broadcast), while Verdi’s popular “Aida” was broadcast 18 times. It is transcriptions such as

these—like the one that preserves the great broadcast of March 9, 1935--that let opera fans of today enjoy great performances from the era during which very few complete opera recordings were produced and no other examples of Wagner would appear until the early 1950s.

The greatness of this 1935 performance comes from not just one element but the fact that all on this afternoon's elements were of the highest quality. Persuasive Wagnerian performances require a conductor whose vision, knowledge, and understanding of the complete score is essential as well as a temperament that innervates players and singers to musical and dramatic clarity. Many conductors live for the "big" and dramatic moments while others lose the impetus as well as the musical line. Artur Bodanzky, who conducted Wagner at the Met from 1915 until his death in 1939, was the greatest Wagnerian conductor ever to grace that august house. His passion, feeling, and unfailingly "right" tempi have never been equaled, let alone surpassed. Bodanzky has sometimes been criticized for his cuts in Wagner scores (except for "Parsifal" which was uncut) but he defended them by saying that these were ones from the revered Gustav Mahler (under whom Bodanzky studied) plus, in these days, Wagner was performed more than once every few weeks. In one weekend in 1938, Flagstad, Melchior, and Bodanzky performed three Wagner operas in 72 hours. The orchestra and singers needed the cuts to be made to help their stamina.

The same could be said of Lauritz Melchior, one of the few true *Heldentenors* to live into the recording era and whose equal has yet to be born. His unflinching power and stamina coupled with his beauty of tone made him the perfect Wagnerian hero. There have been--and are--other tenors, then and now, who sing these roles but none with the ease and beauty of Melchior.

Kirsten Flagstad is also an operatic legend for her Wagnerian heroines. Plus she was one of the few soprano partners who could match Melchior's tone, vocal beauty, dramatic sense, and volume. They were the perfect Wagnerian pair until she left the Met in 1941. They would star together in nine broadcasts of this same opera, "Tristan und Isolde."

Friedrich Schorr was one of the great Wagnerian baritones during this period with his rich tone and very human portrayals. His sense of nobility as Wotan and his humanity as Hans Sachs have rarely been matched and never surpassed. Schorr is one of those rare singers who remind listeners that Wagner is more than mere volume but uses *legato*, smooth transitions, and *mezza voce*.

Ludwig Hofmann's King Marke benefits from the singer's rich, vibrant tones, and steadiness that, combined with Bodanzky's tempi, make Marke's Act 2 monologue a movingly dramatic pained plea instead of an endurance contest of self-pity.

Karin Branzell is certainly one of the most musical Brangänes to have sung the role. Her golden tone flows unstintingly and her two offstage phrases "Habet acht" ("Beware") carry conviction and meaning.

While not many Met broadcast transcriptions have survived intact or in acceptable sound quality, some of those that do exist are landmarks of lyrical excellence and allow us to actually hear the

past glories of singers such as these instead of mere words. True, not all of the broadcasts over the past 80-odd years are great but this 1935 performance is certainly one of the greatest.

William Russell is an independent scholar and writer who lives in South Carolina and whose reviews and writings, especially on Wagnerian recordings, have appeared in the UK magazine "The Record Collector." He has also given opera-centered talks in London to the RVAS and his radio programs, "The Operaphile" and "Sunday Opera," have been aired weekly in Chesapeake, VA, over station WFOS-FM since 1989.

* The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent those of the Library of Congress.

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