



HELEN TRAUBEL LAURITZ MELCHIOR

Side 1. *Lohengrin*

1. *Das süsse Lied verhallt*
2. *In fernem Land*

Side 2. *Tristan und Isolde*

1. *Wie lachend sie mir Lieder singen*
2. *O sink' hernieder*

Hollywood Bowl Symphony Orchestra, August 26, 1948

Conductor: Eugene Ormandy

NOTES

Record-buyers under the age of fifty may not be aware that from the late 1920s to the mid 1940s, Wagner's operas rivalled those of Verdi and Puccini in the sheer number of performances given in the United States. The reasons for this millennial parity include a musical conservatism that restricted the Verdi canon effectively to six or seven works, and Puccini to endless repetitions of *Boheme*, *Tosca* and *Butterfly*, with an occasional *Manon Lescaut* or *Gianni Schicchi* thrown in. But even more influential in the continuing presence of Wagner's ten mature operas in the repertoire was the presence of three indefatigable sopranos, Frida Leider, Kirsten Flagstad and Helen Traubel (in chronological order), and one inexhaustible tenor, Lauritz Melchior. In the 1930s the absence of rapid air travel and the solid financial presence of New York's Metropolitan Opera in a turbulent world scene, and in the 1940s the haven of freedom offered by America in a war-torn world, gave the U. S., via New York, a virtual monopoly on the best Wagner voices to be heard.

Thus, at the side of Melchior and his series of sopranos, Friedrich Schorr and Alexander Kipnis could be heard as Wotan, Kurvenal or King Marke; Elisabeth Rethberg and Lotte Lehmann in the lyrical roles of Elsa, Eva, Sieglinde; and young Americans such as Astrid Varnay, Julius Huehn and Margaret Harshaw in a variety of roles; all supported by Bruno Walter, Erich Leinsdorf, Fritz Busch, George Szell, Artur Bodansky and Sir Thomas Beecham in the pit. Living as we do in an age which provides a minimum of true Wagnerian voices, and an international demand, abetted by jet travel, which wears out all but the wisest of them in a few years, to contemplate the golden age (the third such, following the late 1880s, when the Met was exclusively a German-language house, and

the Grau years with the De Reszkes, Ternina and Nordica), is to envy our predecessors their good fortune.

Lauritz Melchior, the Danish tenor who became an American institution, made his debut in his native country in 1913 as a baritone (his earliest recordings, in that key, are available on Danacord LPs). Though his early career was successful, he retired in 1915 to retrain his voice and emerged, at the end of the first world war, as a heroic tenor, whose popularity in Germany and England led to his engagement first at Bayreuth, then in 1926, at the Metropolitan. Though his debut, at a Saturday matinee, was initially eclipsed by the media blitz attending that of Kansas City teenager Marion Talley's that evening, he soon became a mainstay of the Wagner repertoire, singing seven of the ten roles of the composer's maturity in his over twenty seasons in New York. Other cities heard him in the same basic repertoire, though San Francisco in 1936 was fortunate to hear his *Otello*, the Verdi role he long wished to sing at the Met. Following Giovanni Martinelli's successful Chicago *Tristan* in 1940, a more adventurous administration than Edward Johnson's might have allowed the trade of signature roles between the two great tenors, but it was not to be. Aside from San Francisco, his only non-Wagner-roles in his last two decades occurred in London, *Otello* again and the *Fidelio* Florestan.

Melchior sang his first American *Lohengrin* on March 22, 1930, opposite Grete Stückgold. He sang virtually all the Met's *Lohengrins* during his two decades there a total of 69 (54 in the house and 15 on tour), ceding it in the late 1930's to the Belgian René Maison, and at the end of his career to the Swede Torsten Ralf, both of whom possessed a more believable *physique du rôle* than Melchior, though without his unique vocal ability.

Helen Traubel came to the Met in much the same way, though without the attendant publicity, as had the coloratura Talley, whose 1926 debut had briefly eclipsed that of Melchior. Both were all-American - trained in the U. S. and without European experience. But Traubel had staying power, over a decade, where Talley lasted but a few undistinguished years before attempting an ultimately mediocre career in film. Traubel came to opera as a mature singer, as she recounted in her autobiography, *St. Louis Woman*. She debuted at the Met in a 1937 spring season dedicated to young singers as Mary Rutledge in Walter Damrosch's *The Man Without a Country*. Engaged for the regular season in 1939 she sang Sieglinde (*Die Walküre*) on December 28. When, in 1940 Hitler's war prevented Kirsten Flagstad from returning to the Met, Traubel became New York's leading Wagner soprano, inheriting from Flagstad, Elsa, Isolde and the three Brünnhildes. Like Melchior, she wished to expand her Met repertoire, and unlike him, was given the opportunity, in Richard Strauss' *Der Rosenkavalier* following the retirement of Lotte Lehmann. But no one can follow a goddess. Traubel's Marschallen was judged "cold" by the critics.

Ultimately, both singers fell victim to the purist (or puritanical, it might be said) outlook of incoming Met general manager Rudolf

Bing, who viewed with disdain their popularity as variety artists. Melchior had been a welcome guest on American radio since the mid-1930s (he had participated, in 1920, in the first international wireless broadcast from London, with Nellie Melba), and had made several reasonably successful films for MGM, in one of which he joined with crooner Johnny Johnson (his son in the film) in a syn-copated "M'appari" from **Martha**. Traubel had been a radio person-ality before her Met debut, and had become a raucous success spoofing the traditional image of the opera singer on the Jimmy Durante radio show. Bing cleaved them from the roster, along with the young Robert Merrill, who had the temerity to make a film entitled **Aaron Slick from Punkin Crick**. Merrill, at the beginning of his career, crawled abjectly back, renouncing the lure of Mam-mon, but both Melchior and Traubel told Bing where he could put his purism (responses not fit for a family record company to re-count). Traubel continued on the Durante show, and played Las Vegas in its early years, while Melchior graced Billy Rose's acqua-cade as a sultan of the **Arabian Nights**. Thus in 1948, they were nearing the end of illustrious careers in opera. Melchior would continue as a grandfatherly figure on American radio and TV, make a dramatic farewell to opera in a Danish broadcast of the **Walküre** Act 1 in 1970, and end his public career conducting the overture to **Die Fledermaus** before an open-air crowd of over 15,000 in San Francisco; Traubel, like General Douglas MacArthur, would gradually fade away, from Durante and Las Vegas though, rather than from defeat in Korea.

Their many collaborations have little documentation. Both were, for a time, Victor artists, and both, for a time, contracted to U. S. Columbia. But Melchior's participation with Flagstad in 1938 recordings of the **Lohengrin** and **Tristan** duets with the San Francisco orchestra under Flagstad's protégé, the barely competent Edwin McArthur, prevented either recording company from pairing them. In the immediate postwar period, Trauble recorded excerpts from **Tristan** with a Met comprimario, Emery Darcy, whose usual role on stage was that of Melot.

Eugene Ormandy, the conductor of this historic concert, was one of the few mid-twentieth century conductors without an extensive apprenticeship in opera. As a young musician he had emigrated to the U. S., initially to Minneapolis, where he became famous for his performances of Mahler's symphonies, then little-known in America; then in Philadelphia, where he replaced Leopold Stokowski, and led that city's orchestra to world fame for over forty years. During the period of the late 1930s - early 1940s, when all three were Victor artists, Ormandy conducted for both Melchior and Traubel in solo recordings, but only later when the two singers joined Arturo Toscanini for an NBC concert of Wagner's music (scenes from **Die Walküre** and **Götterdämmerung**) were they to make what, over twenty years later, would become a commercial recording of their voices in duet. Ormandy, a few months later and at the Hollywood Bowl location, would conduct his first complete opera **Madama Butterfly** with Eleanor Steber and Jan Peerce, and would eventually make his Met debut in Rudolf Bing's arguably "operatic"

Die Fledermaus, its first appearance at the New York house, except for a single gala performance in 1905.

Thus **VOCE** presents a unique document: Melchior and Traubel in a partnership immortalized during the years of the Second World War, directed by a conductor whose orchestral Wagner is renowned, but whose collaboration in extended passages of the Master's work has not previously been documented.

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Cover Design & Layout by: **Ümlaut Graphics**