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The Kirsten Flagstad Museum: A Monument to Vocal Art

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With opera houses in financial difficulty, record stores dying out, and classical music magazines ceasing publication, there is much for the lover of historical singers to be pessimistic about. It is therefore a pleasure to bring to the attention of record collectors and music lovers the Kirsten Flagstad Museum in Hamar, Norway, which should be on the itinerary of anyone who loves music and great singers.

This article will give a brief introduction to the museum and its holdings, and describe why I believe that any reader of this magazine, and indeed any music lover, would enjoy visiting it. In preparing this article I am grateful for the input of the museum's curator, Mrs. Annika Åsen.

Writing this article and listening anew to many of Flagstad's recordings have also motivated me to present a brief, highly personal discussion of her art and place in the pantheon of great singers. This is provided in the final part of this article.

The Flagstad Museum

The museum is located in the town of Hamar, Norway, which is approximately 90 minutes north of Oslo by train. Any visitor to the capital of Norway can easily reach it by taking train line R10 in the direction of Lillehammer from Oslo's Central Station. The train ride is itself a pleasant experience that takes one through the forests of rural Norway. Hamar is an attractive small town of approximately 30,000 inhabitants located on the shores of Norway's largest lake. Upon arrival, the museum is reached by an easy 10-minute walk through the center of town (readers should note that the museum is closed from November through April). A full description of the museum, including photos and relevant logistical information, is available on its excellent web site, at:

<http://www.kirsten-flagstad.no/>

The museum takes up the entirety of a beautiful two-story 19th century wooden house that has been converted into a museum with

much taste and care for detail. Flagstad was born in the house and spent much of her youth there, and it is just across the street from the church where she was baptized.

The museum includes several rooms based on various themes, including a lecture and audio-visual room; a room with numerous artifacts of her time at the Metropolitan Opera; one that highlights her various roles; and a family room with furniture from the time when Flagstad was born, as well as numerous examples of the embroidery and knitting that she was famous for. The museum has also placed numerous rare photographs online (<http://digitaltmuseum.no>), and its large library is searchable on the web, making it a valuable resource for researchers.

Of particular interest to record collectors will be the large collection of Flagstad recordings (studio and live) in the audio-visual room downstairs, which can be played for visitors. The website also has a discography that, while not absolutely complete, contains much interesting information. Hearing Flagstad pour out her voice in the *Liebestod* or “Du bist der Lenz” while one walks around the house where she grew up and learned to sing is a moving and thrilling experience.

The museum also boasts a voluminous archive with books, letters, photos, papers, and other materials, which visitors are free to consult. Mrs. Åsen will gladly answer questions and let visitors spend as much time as they want perusing the museum’s holdings.

Flagstad: a personal appraisal

Having renewed my acquaintance with many Flagstad recordings after my visit to the museum, I would like to add some personal thoughts about her as a singer and an artist. I feel the need to do this particularly because, amazingly enough, she never seems to have been the subject of a major article in *The Record Collector*. In doing so I will concentrate on Flagstad as a Wagner singer, despite her greatness in many other types of music as well.

Appreciation of great singers is not a zero-sum game. Thus, my appreciation of Flagstad does not diminish my admiration for other great Wagnerian sopranos such as Nilsson, Varnay, Traubel, Leider, and others. There are also Wagnerians of the past who were indubitably great but whose singing we will never be able to judge adequately because the recorded evidence is either meagre or non-existent (e.g., Bahr-Mildenburg, Fremstad, Nordica, Ternina, etc.).

Yet I feel confident in stating that Flagstad was the greatest female Wagner singer of the 20th century, and that we have not seen her equal since.

The voice was simply the most beautiful, sumptuous, best-equalized Wagnerian soprano that we know on records. All of the above sopranos are great singers, but from the aural evidence none of them were able to pour out such torrents of firm, beautiful tone in the most strenuous roles over such a long period. Even Leider, who was perhaps her greatest competitor, seems to me to lack the fullness of tone to soar over the orchestra as Flagstad could (though she had other qualities to compensate). The singer who Flagstad always reminds me of is not another soprano, but her great tenor colleague Lauritz Melchior, who was perhaps the only other singer in operatic history who could surmount the fearsome difficulties of the greatest Wagnerian roles with almost nonchalant ease. It seems incredible that she kept her steadiness and beauty of tone to the very end of her career, despite having sung over one thousand performances of operetta and roles such as Aida, Desdemona, Tosca, and others even before beginning her decades-long focus on the heaviest Wagnerian roles in the 1930s.

She also had an instinctive understanding and musicality that allowed her to penetrate to the core of the roles she sang. Lacking Wagnerian sopranos of the quality that existed in the past, we have become used to attempts to compensate for vocal inadequacies by the use of dramatic exaggeration. Flagstad did not concentrate on colouring the text of her roles at the expense of beauty of sound. But the cultivation and preservation of such a magnificent instrument is itself an interpretative act, and one in which she succeeded magnificently. Listening to her recordings, I have never felt any lack of involvement in the music or text.

It does not diminish Flagstad's stature to point out the areas where she was sometimes less than perfect. The innate nobility of her tone sometimes seems to put expressive limits on her singing, so that other Wagner sopranos (for example, Martha Mödl) are more adept at expressing emotions such as languid eroticism or savage bitterness. She is also accused of sometimes sounding "maternal" in her singing, which is probably a reflection of the richness of her middle voice and her occasional habit of using small portamenti to slide up to notes. There is also no doubt that although she could sing even the heaviest roles with complete success up to the end of her career, her high notes were less than reliable from the 1950s onward.

Perhaps the most intelligent criticism of Flagstad along these lines was formulated by Vincent Sheean in his book *First and Last Love* (Victor Gollancz 1956). The author, who experienced her many times in the theatre, found that she had “the greatest voice any of us had ever heard” (p. 116), but in the early years of her success in London and New York compared her unfavourably to Leider, stating that “she never frightened, alarmed, or repelled: she was not in the very slightest degree demonic; she enraptured her audiences, and what did it matter about Wagner?” (p. 117).

However, by Flagstad’s final appearances at the Metropolitan in the 1950s Sheean was completely won over, finding that “there were depths and colours in her magnificent voice that had not been there before”, and that “by the time Flagstad finished she had attained a nobility and grandeur which illuminated every corner of the music, touched every single note she sang with heavenly magic and even spilled over onto the other participants and to the orchestra” (p. 281). He finally reaches the following verdict on his three favourite sopranos:

“[M]me. Leider was the greatest Brünnhilde and Isolde and Kundry I ever heard because she truly knew what she was doing and fully understood. Mme. Flagstad was the greatest singer and the greatest voice I have ever heard. Mme. Lehmann [*author’s note: he means Lotte, not Lilli*] (who did not sing any of these roles) was incomparably the greatest artist I have ever heard” (pp. 278-279).

Lucky the operagoer who has the luxury of comparing three such supreme sopranos; where are their likes today?

Three examples of her singing

To illustrate Flagstad’s stature, let me refer briefly to three examples of her art taken from live recordings.

The first is taken from the first recording we have of her Isolde, and was only her second performance in the role at the Metropolitan, on 9 March 1935, with one of those mouth-watering casts (Branzell/Melchior/Schorr etc.) of the time. Here Flagstad’s voice sounds lighter than in later performances, and she colours it to put a great deal of drive into her performance. Isolde’s narration in Act 1 has no lack of expression and venom, though she does not give as much shading to individual words as some other sopranos do. Her tone is almost virginally pure at times (“Er sah mir in die Augen”), lacking some of the dark richness that she will develop later. The

Liebestod builds inexorably to a devastating conclusion, lending credence to those who say that Bodanzky may give us the best idea of how Mahler (under whom he played in the opera orchestra in Vienna) conducted Wagner's operas. The only negatives in this performance are the sound (though the sonics are quite listenable in the West Hill Radio Archives edition, WHRA6001), and the infamous cuts that the conductor makes to the opera.

The second is another *Tristan*, this time from Covent Garden under Beecham, a composite of two performances from June 1937 (Immortal Performances IPCD 1024-4). I can't claim to have heard all the Flagstad-Melchior *Tristans* in detail, but I can't imagine that any of them are better than this one. The sound is surprising clear and full, a testament to the remarkable restoration work done by Richard Caniel, and Beecham's cuts are less grievous than those of Bodanzky. This is Flagstad in her prime, with the voice full and rich and few problems on high. She is always expressive and deeply involved in the role. In Isolde's narration in Act 1 she sings "Nun dien ich dem Vasallen!" with amazement at her plight rather than anger, and this seems to be part of her conception of the role, which is marked by warmth and womanliness. The *Liebestod* is always an overwhelming experience as sung by Flagstad, and by the end of the opera we can only wonder how the audience members were able to go about their daily lives after witnessing such a performance of the most all-encompassing music drama ever written.

The final example is from the *Ring* cycle at La Scala under Furtwängler in 1950, in this case the *Siegfried* Brünnhilde that she sang on March 22, 1950 (Gebhardt JGCD 0018-12). The title role was sung by Set Svanholm, who is usually a reliable Heldentenor, but on this occasion is already at the end of his vocal tether by the time we reach Brünnhilde's awakening and the ensuing final duet. As the 55-year old Flagstad pours out phrases such as "Siegfried, Siegfried, seliger Held!" effortlessly with tone that glows like molten lava, poor Svanholm struggles to make it to the end of the opera. A comparison with the Metropolitan performance of the opera on 30 January 1937, conducted by Bodanzky and with Melchior in the title role (Guild GHCD 2207/9), reveals Flagstad's voice as brighter and more youthful in the earlier account, and warmer and more radiant at La Scala (she avoids the high C at the end of the final duet in both recordings). Otherwise there is no deterioration of voice in the latter account; if anything, she sounds just as fresh, but with an added depth of tone. Bodanzky pushes the tempi hard and generates a good

deal of excitement, but is outclassed by Furtwängler, who knows better how to let the duet build naturally to a rapturous conclusion.

Conclusion

I will conclude by saying that the chance to experience a unique museum and family home of one of the greatest singers in history is not to be missed. All opera lovers are thus urged to head for Hamar, Norway post-haste!