

TANNHÄUSER

und der Sängerkrieg auf Wartburg

Opera in three Acts, Text and Music by Richard Wagner

The Metropolitan Opera is unique. It works on a repertory basis, changing the opera each night and often not repeating a piece for some weeks. It has "star" studded casts. It has a long annual season and traditionally it has been privately financed. In the course of a season various artists will be heard in a particular role and sometimes the same combination is not repeated. Such is the case with the performance of *Tannhäuser* of 16 December 1939, preserved on acetate discs, once owned, it is thought, by the baritone John Charles Thomas and made available to Symposium Records through the generosity of Michael Pinner.

Tannhäuser has always featured prominently in the repertoire of the Metropolitan Opera. In the first hundred years it received some 440 performances, exceeded in the Wagnerian canon only by *Lohengrin* and *Die Walküre*. For twenty-four years from 1915 the chief responsibility for conducting German opera at the Met had belonged to Artur Bodanzky. Towards the end of that time he began to relinquish some of his more or less exclusive roles. Thus whilst Bodanzky conducted in total some seventy performances of *Tannhäuser* out of just under one hundred during those years, Erich Leinsdorf first took on the opera in March 1938. Quite who was scheduled originally to conduct the *Tannhäuser* on these discs we cannot be quite certain as Bodanzky died suddenly in November 1939. We do know that soon thereafter Flagstad, not perhaps always as serene as painted, launched a campaign to replace Leinsdorf as chief Wagnerian conductor by Edwin McArthur. Melchior managed to find himself in the middle of the controversy that ensued.

We also know that the Metropolitan management was "hawking" round the role of Venus. They approached Helen Traubel to make her début in the role and were rebuffed. Only later did they think of Rose Pauly who had previously appeared as Elektra. It was to be her only Venus at the Met. Melchior was the dominant Wagnerian tenor of those years and he had already sung *Tannhäuser* that season, but on 16 December he stepped aside for the American born Eyvind Laholm to make his sole appearance in that part at the Met.

The perspectives of contemporary opera management and future record collectors are very different. A series of chance events contributed to making the performance of 16 December unique: the same cast never again appeared together in this work either at the Metropolitan Opera or anywhere else. From this later perspective - over fifty years on - we can be thankful for the series of chances which brought this cast together just once, and for the fact that its performance was broadcast and preserved.

Of the principals, **Kirsten Flagstad** (1895 Hamar, Norway-1962 Oslo) needs the least introduction. She had already been singing for twenty years when she made her Bayreuth début in 1933 in minor parts, returning the following year to sing Sieglinde in *Die Walküre* and Guttrune in *Götterdämmerung*. Her Metropolitan début in 1935 was again as Sieglinde, but soon she moved to the heavier Wagnerian roles. In all she gave 261 performances with the company appearing as Elisabeth on 21 occasions. On this side of the Atlantic, she never quite replaced Frida Leider in the affections of opera lovers, but at

the Metropolitan Opera she had much the longer and more extensive career. Hers is one of the central voices, instantly recognisable, the singing eloquent and untiring, the high notes - certainly at this stage - resplendent and gleaming. Paul Jackson in his book on Metropolitan broadcasts describes her Prayer as monumental and speaks of her absolute control.

Eyvind Laholm (Eau Claire, Wisconsin 1894-New York 1958) gave just two performances at the Metropolitan Opera, both in December 1939, the first as Siegfried and the second as Tannhäuser. This issue of the latter is much the most substantial representation of his singing now available. Otherwise there seem to be just one commercial disc and some off the air snippets recorded at the Vienna State Opera. It is, of necessity, a big voice. There is little doubt that in the early parts of the opera he is suffering from a cold and possible nervousness. But he conquers both and achieves a high point of the performance in a most dramatic presentation of the taxing Rome Narration. Paul Jackson praises his "lovely tone and absolute security".

Rose Pauly (1894 Eperjes, then in Hungary-1975 Israel) also gave only a handful of Metropolitan Opera performances and, as already mentioned, this was her sole Venus. A protégé of Rosa Papier-Paumgartner, who also taught von Mildeburg, Pauly made her début in Hamburg in 1918 and soon developed a major career in Germany and Austria. In 1931 she sang the role of Marie in *Wozzeck* at the Viennese première. Before being forced to leave Germany she had become perhaps the leading exponent of Strauss's roles for dramatic soprano with Elektra her most famous interpretation. Not surprisingly this was her début part at the Met in January 1938 and it also accounted for eight of her ten performances with the company. Pauly made a small number of commercial recordings which demonstrate the power and beauty of her voice. Jackson refers to her darkly coloured timbre and the "concentrated intent of her phrases" in this performance of *Tannhäuser*. Throughout she seems a match for Flagstad and yet within three months her Met career had ended.

Apart from Flagstad, **Herbert Janssen** (1892 Cologne-1965 New York) is the best known to us of the singers in this performance on account of his numerous commercial recordings. Like Pauly he developed a major career in Germany, especially in Berlin and Bayreuth. Throughout this period he was a regular visitor also to Covent Garden. However, in 1937 he decided to leave his homeland as he was not prepared to live with National Socialism. He made his Met début in January 1939 as Wotan in *Siegfried*. Between then and 1952 he gave 208 performances. He sang Wolfram on 27 occasions. There is something very special about hearing one of the really great artists in live performance. To quote Paul Jackson again it is he "who most nearly matches the vocal and artistic standard of Flagstad... the voice is incredibly lovely and the style perfection". Indeed the apostrophe to the Star of Eve is perhaps the finest thing on these fascinating documents of a bygone era.

Emanuel List (1891 Vienna-1967 Vienna) intended originally to become a tailor but after singing in choirs and the chorus of the Theatre an der Wien he had his voice trained. After a tour as the bass of a vocal quartet and a spell of vaudeville in London he journeyed to New York where, after a further period of study, he had engagements in

light music. He returned to Austria where he made his début in opera as Mephistophelès in *Faust*. His career advanced rapidly, taking him to Berlin and Bayreuth. However, because of his Jewish origins he could not remain in Germany. He sang at the Metropolitan Opera from 1934 to 1939 and appeared also in many other of the world's major houses. After the war he sang once more in Berlin, but in 1952 retired to Vienna.

Maxine Stellman (Brattleboro, Vermont 1910-) sang at the Met from 1936 to 1950. In addition to a large repertoire as a comprimario singer she was valued for her ability to take on large roles at short notice.

Erich Leinsdorf (Vienna 1912-Zürich 1993) studied at the conservatory of his native town and then became assistant at Salzburg to Bruno Walter and then to Arturo Toscanini. With the death of Bodanzky in 1939, Leinsdorf, at twenty-seven, began a six year term at the Metropolitan Opera in command of all German and Austrian works. In 1957 he returned, after conducting several leading American orchestras, for a further four years. Harold Schonberg (*The Great Conductors* - Gollancz) describes Leinsdorf as "methodical, thorough, demanding". He speaks of "resistance . . . to Leinsdorf's powers as an interpreter but (also of) the technical finish of his work and his serious approach to music".

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References: Fitzgerald: "Annals of the Metropolitan Opera"
Jackson: "Saturday Afternoons at the Old Met"
Kutsch and Riemens: "Grosses Sängerlexicon"

Act I Tannhäuser, a minstrel, has passed a year under the Venusberg engaged in feasting and lust. He has forgotten Elisabeth, the beautiful and saintly maid and true object of his love. But suddenly he recalls that he is also a knight and must leave. Venus tries all her wiles to prolong the dalliance, but by calling on the Virgin Mary he is able to effect his escape to the valley of the Wartburg.

A young shepherd sings and then pilgrims are heard, en route for Rome. Next, horns announce the return from hunting of Landgrave Hermann with his retinue which includes Wolfram, Tannhäuser's closest friend. Tannhäuser is welcomed and on learning from Wolfram. of Elisabeth's sadness during his absence, decides to go back to the Court with them.

Act II Elisabeth, delighted to see Tannhäuser back, sings her greeting to the castle's Hall of Song. She asks about his travels, but he tells her nothing. The knights enter; a singing contest has been announced, the theme, announced by the Landgrave, is love and the prize is his niece, Elisabeth. Wolfram sings elegantly but his song is insipid compared to that of Tannhäuser who, inspired by events of his recent sojourn below, breaks out in rapturous praise of Venus.

In response to this faux pas, the ladies leave, the Landgrave is angry and the knights rush to avenge the dreadful behaviour. Elisabeth, however, stands in front of Tannhäuser to protect him and pleads with them to spare him. Tannhäuser is spared, but banished from Court and advised to join a group of pilgrims just off to Rome.

Act III Elisabeth prays in the valley of the Wartburg. Pilgrims enter, returning from Rome, but he is not amongst them. Elisabeth returns to the castle as Wolfram prays that the Evening Star will protect and guide her.

Tannhäuser enters, weak and distraught, he has learnt from the Pope that there is not much chance of forgiveness unless his staff breaks forth with green shoots. That being the case he reckons he might as well forget his problems with Venus. However, just then, Wolfram, trying to restrain him, murmurs into his ear, "Elisabeth". He prays to avoid temptation and is saved.

Meanwhile, back at the castle, Elisabeth has pined away and died. Just at that moment a funeral procession passes by. There are pilgrims with it, carrying the staff from the Pope. Tannhäuser recognises Elisabeth on the bier, the shock added to his weariness, he is overcome and sinks down beside her. And just at that moment, too, green shoots do spring from the staff, indicating forgiveness for Tannhäuser. Tannhäuser dies at Elisabeth's side. The pilgrims sing of the next world's joys.

Everything which survives of the principals is present, but to accommodate the performance on two discs a few small cuts elsewhere were unavoidable.

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